

## **Franco-Romanian cinema in late Communism: Sergiu Nicolaescu's *François Villon - Poetul vagabond* (1987)**

Gavin Bowd

### **Abstract**

In the late 1980s, against the backdrop of worsening Franco-Romanian relations and internal crisis, Sergiu Nicolaescu, who had established an international reputation for epic films about Romanian history, agreed to make *François Villon – Poetul vagabond* in co-production with TF1 and Cine Berlin, firstly as a television series broadcast in 1987, then as a feature film, released in Romanian cinemas in 1989, the final year of the Ceaușescu regime. This article studies Nicolaescu's film, its production and its reception, drawing on archival documents, the Romanian press of the time, and Nicolaescu's memoirs. To what extent was Villon's story used to criticise the regime? And how far does this co-production mark a watershed in both Nicolaescu's career and in Franco-Romanian film collaboration?

**Keywords:** Romania; France; communism; post-communism; cinema

### **Introduction**

Sergiu Nicolaescu's *François Villon-Poetul vagabond*, produced for western television in 1987, then released in Romanian cinemas in 1989, proved to be the last Franco-Romanian co-production before the overthrow of Nicolae Ceaușescu. The background and reception of this epic portrayal of a rebel intellectual offer insights into the changing nature of the long-standing 'Franco-Romanian friendship' and its expression in cinema. In the hands of an eminent Romanian director, the story of one of France's most legendary poets became entangled with the political and cultural agendas of a moribund communist regime increasingly isolated on the international stage. The film production itself gives an example

of relations between a French ‘centre’ and a Romanian ‘periphery’. Finally, the post-revolutionary careers of Nicolaescu and other directors also, we argue, indicate further shifts in Romanian cinema’s relationship with France.

### **The Franco-Romanian friendship and cinema**

The famous - and contentious - *amitié franco-roumaine* (Franco-Romanian friendship) can be dated back to at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the perceived distinction and refinement of French high society attracted a large section of the elites of what would become Romania. Cultural ties also became political. In the course of the nineteenth century, Romanian nationalists emphasised the people’s Roman/Latin roots over German, Slavic and Hungarian influences. Romanians educated in Paris played a key role in the doomed uprising of 1848, leading Jules Michelet, in his *Legendes démocratiques du nord (Democratic Legends of the North)*, to present the Romanian people as orphans, brutally separated by eastern empires from the spiritual motherland that he claimed was France (Michelet 1980: 251-254). Attachment to France was reinforced by Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte’s role in the unification of the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia in 1859. In 1916-1918, the French expeditionary force, portrayed on screen in Bertrand Tavernier’s *Capitaine Conan* (1996), buttressed Romania’s doomed intervention on the side of the Allies. Luckily for the Romanians, the collapse of the Central Powers paved the way for the creation of Greater Romania. It was a French geographer and passionate friend of Romania, Emmanuel de Martonne, who played a key role in redrawing the frontiers of south-eastern Europe at the Versailles Peace Conference. Writer-diplomat Paul Morand married a Romanian princess, wrote a controversial portrait of Bucharest, and was Marshal Pétain’s ambassador there during the Second World War.

Romanians have made a rich contribution to modern French culture through writers such as Anna de Noailles, Panaït Istrati, Tristan Tzara, Vintila Horea, Isidore Isou and Eugène Ionesco, the artist Constantin Brancusi, the thinkers Emil Cioran, Mircea Eliade and Serge Moscovici, and the film actress Elvira Popescu, who starred alongside Sacha Guitry in *Ils étaient neuf célibataires (Nine Bachelors)*, released in 1939. Franco-Romanian collaboration in the field of cinema began as far back as 1896, when the new art was introduced by Paul Menu and Grigore Brezeanu of the French-language newspaper *Indépendance roumaine*. World War I saw close collaboration between the French and Romanian photographic and cinematographic services. That said, the propaganda film *Roumanie, terre d'amour (Romania, Land of Love)*, released in 1931, was a critical and commercial failure.

Indeed, the strength and depth of this *amitié franco-roumaine* should not be exaggerated. It was essentially an élite phenomenon and did not have the unanimous support of said élite. Even a Francophile like the historian Nicolae Iorga bristled at the quasi-colonial condescension of the French and the craven mimicry of some of his fellow countrymen (Durandin 1995: 205-206). That Bucharest was known as *Micul Paris*, Little Paris, seemed to condemn it to a secondary, peripheral and inauthentic existence. The ties between France and Romania were badly affected by the rise of Fascism, the Second World War, then the imposition of communist rule in 1948. French language and culture were associated with the bourgeois and landowning élites that proletarian and peasant communists like Gheorghe Gheorgiu-Dej and Nicolae Ceaușescu despised. In 1950, the Institut français was shut down. Its last librarian, Roland Barthes, was told to pack his bags, while young Romanian men of privileged backgrounds had the misfortune, on leaving the library with the latest French publications, of being arrested by the Securitate secret police and sent for re-education through hard labour on the Danube-Black Sea canal. Many did not return (Bowd 2009). The

arrival of People's Democracy also had an impact on cinema, though this was not entirely negative: 1948 may have seen the nationalisation of the film industry, accompanied by purges and censorship, but this period also saw the creation of the I. C. Caragiale film school and the vast Buftea studios in Bucharest.

However, French culture remained important for the Romanian intellectual class during the communist period. The teaching of French was widespread in schools, French writers agreeable to the regime were translated and promoted, and French children's and youth publications, such as *Pif*, made accessible. Already, from the late 1950s onwards, détente and the maverick nationalist turn of both communist Bucharest and gaullist Paris led to a rapprochement which culminated in Charles de Gaulle's triumphant visit to Romania in May 1968 and, two years later, Ceaușescu's visit to France. On the cinematic front, already in 1957, Ion Popescu-Gopo had won the Best Short Film Palme d'Or at Cannes for his animation *A Brief History*. During this period, French communist film-makers Louis Daquin and Henri Colpi took advantage of new Romanian facilities to adapt the work of Franco-Romanian author Panaït Istrati. In 1965, Romanian cinema gained further French recognition when Liviu Ciulei was awarded the Best Director prize in Cannes for his transposition of Livie Rebreanu's novel, *The Forest of the Hanged*. The diplomatic thaw led to the signature, in April 1966, of a Franco-Romanian cinematographic co-production agreement, similar agreements being negotiated with other communist countries, including the USSR and Yugoslavia. Such collaboration allowed western film companies to reduce production costs, while their eastern counterparts gained access to finance, expertise and cinema distribution. Fewer than ten Franco-Romanian films were produced between 1966 and 1990, but this constituted a third of Romanian films made under official agreements.

In 1970, the Institut français reopened partially and further agreements were signed on Franco-Romanian cultural cooperation. But the trajectories of France and Romania were

already diverging again. Anne Jaeckel points out that from 1965, the year of Ceaușescu assuming the party leadership, ‘Romanian film-makers started to embark on spectacular historical reconstructions glorifying the heroes who championed the cause of national unification and freedom’ (Jaeckel 2000a: 416). At the same time, what Dominique Nasta calls the ‘bright intervals’ of the 1956-68 ‘thaw’ proved short-lived (Nasta 2013: 17). Hopes for liberalisation of Romanian cultural life, in line with what was happening elsewhere in the communist bloc, were soon dashed: already in 1968-1969, pressures started on artistic milieux, in meetings with writers and cinematographers where Ceaușescu pointed to the need for a greater focus on national creation and local values. Then, during a fateful visit to China and North Korea in 1971, Ceaușescu was inspired to launch his own cultural revolution, which entailed a crackdown on ‘cosmopolitan’, western, particularly American, but also French, influences and called for more nativist and patriotic art. This was accompanied by an increasingly Ubu-esque cult of the personality of not just Nicolae Ceaușescu, but also his would-be world-renowned chemist of a wife, Elena.

Although Ceaușescu made another visit to France in 1980, Franco-Romanian relations were cooling rapidly. The Romanian regime may have been rumoured to have contributed money to François Mitterrand’s successful Presidential campaign of 1981, but the alleged attempt by the Securitate secret police to assassinate by poisoned fountain pen the dissident writers Paul Goma and Virgil Tănase, both exiled to Paris, led to the French President cancelling *sine die* his planned state visit to Romania. As the red calvary of the 1980s unfolded, more voices in France – political, intellectual and diplomatic – were raised in protest at the ‘systematisation’ of the countryside, the destruction of historic villages, and the Securitate harassment of dissidents such as University of Cluj French professor Doina Cornea. While Ceaușescu starved his compatriots of food and fuel in order to accelerate repayment of Romania’s debt –often to French banks – the historic centre of Bucharest was

bulldozed and transformed into a Pyongyang-esque Civic Centre. Through it, the Avenue of the Victory of Socialism led to an enormous Palace of the People, a Ceausist Versailles.

This grave deterioration of Franco-Romanian relations was reflected in the domain of cinema. Franco-Romanian cinema collaborations had already dropped sharply in the late 1970s and 1980s. According to Aurelia Vasile, there was growing resentment during this period: ‘les cinéastes roumains, et surtout ceux qui travaillent sous contrat, ressentent de plus en plus les différences de niveau de vie par rapport aux Occidentaux et les perçoivent comme une injustice’ (‘the Romanian filmmakers, and especially those working under contract, increasingly feel the differences in living standards in relation to the westerners and see them as an injustice’) (Vasile 2011: 213). Political developments in France did little to improve the situation: on assuming the Presidency, Mitterrand insisted that dissident *auteur* Lucian Pintilie return from his exile in Paris to present his film *Carnival Scenes*. However, this caustic satire was shelved after its first showing in Bucharest in June 1981. During the rest of the decade, no films were made under the 1966 co-operation agreement, despite it being renewed in 1987.

### ***François Villon – Poetul vagabond***

This is the context for Sergiu Nicolaescu’s Franco-Romanian TV serial turned feature film, *François Villon – Poetul vagabond* (*François Villon – The Vagabond Poet*). Nicolaescu (1930-2013) had a prodigious career as actor, director and writer. He won popular fame as Inspector Tudor Moldovan in a series of police thrillers situated in the interwar period. He also directed epic films on Romanian history, notably *The Dacians* (1966), *Michael the Brave* (1971) and *War of Independence* (1977). Such an output was hardly in contradiction with Ceaușescu’s cultural revolution: it celebrated Romania’s struggle to become a united and independent State. It also contrasted with the 1960s New Wave of which Pintilie was the

best-known exponent, notably for *Reconstruction* (1969), which pitted wayward youth against the authorities and a hostile society. *War of Independence* was the first communist-era film to give a sympathetic portrayal of a Romanian monarch, in this case Carol I, which was perfectly in line with the emergence of a dynastic communism. Nicolaescu had also contributed to French, German and Italian co-productions, notably adaptations of Jules Verne.

With his international reputation and internal compatibility, Nicolaescu was therefore a logical choice for what turned out to be the last big Franco-Romanian cultural collaboration before the revolutionary events of December 1989. In 1986, he signed a contract with TF1 and the Bucharest Cinema Studio. He remembered feeling apprehensive about making a film on such an iconic French cultural figure as François Villon: ‘imagine a Frenchman making a film about Eminescu’ (Dănălache 1988: 9). The project was also supported by Italy’s state channel RAI and Cine TV Film Berlin.

*Francois Villon - Poetul vagabond* was a lavish production, with a budget of upwards of four million dollars. The film crew was predominantly Romanian, while Romanians designed the acclaimed period costumes. Filming took place in France, notably at the chateau of Angers, and in Romania, at the Buftea film studios, as well as at the castles of Hunedoara and Bran. In September 1986, the journalist Victor Nița visited the film-shoot at Hunedoara, then a heavy-industrial jewel in the regime’s economic crown, and reported in ideologically correct style for the weekly *Flacăra*. The coat of arms of poet-prince Charles d’Orléans now fluttered above a castle transformed into the chateau of Blois. Nița proudly concluded: ‘I had the fortune to meet the people of Hunedoara in their homes, in the enormous steel mill, on the platforms of the steelworkers, at the rolling mill, at the House of Culture, on the street. They have a superb castle and a football team with a great future in front of it’ (Nița 1986: 35).

Thus, the setting for the film-shoot seemed to combine elements of late Romanian communism: industrial modernity, patriotic pride and a fascination for the feudal past.

The film was also shot in the German Democratic Republic. According to Nicolaescu, the GDR was ideal because the production costs were much lower. Also, with his famous work ethic, he felt at home among Prussians. What's more, 'the people's physique was just what I needed. I needed blond boys and blonde girls' (Anon 2009). The main roles in the movie were taken by French and Italian actors, beginning with newcomer Florent Pagny who, soon afterwards, got his break as a pop star with the anti-drugs anthem *N'importe quoi* (*Nonsense*). Lesser roles were played by Romanian actors.

The film script, written by Rose Legrand and Maxime Duval and punctuated by recitations of Villon's work, gives an epic account of the life of the vagabond poet. Born in a Parisian hovel in 1431 (a year of epidemics, famine and the burning of Joan of Arc – the opening shot), François de Montcoubier is adopted by the clergyman and professor Guillaume de Villon. He becomes a student at the Sorbonne, but lives a dissolute life, writing poetry and frequenting taverns and brothels. It is over a prostitute, Marion, that François Villon comes into conflict with his Nemesis, sergeant Perrenet Marchand, both pimp and 'policier de jour et de nuit' ('policeman by day and by night'), known as The Bastard (played by Marc de Jonge, a specialist in baddies). The poet is found guilty of a breach of the peace, but freed on intervention by the ecclesiastic authorities, who are constantly at loggerheads with their royal counterparts. However, The Bastard hits back by coaxing Villon into a clash between students and soldiers, facilitated by an agent provocateur – 'tuez-les tous!' ('kill them all!'), shouts The Bastard, as the forces of order storm barricades and disperse the crowd. But again, Paris's chief magistrate frees Villon and his fellow agitators then publicly disgraces The Bastard.



Villon becomes professor at the Sorbonne, while his reputation as a poet opens the doors of high society. He has an affair with one of the ladies of this exclusive milieu, Marthe, which arouses the jealousy of one Catherine de Vaucelles, who reveals to Villon that his lover is, in fact, bisexual. Meanwhile, Villon is sacked for setting a bad example to students with his verse. In reaction to Catherine's malicious behaviour, he pens a scabrous poem that claims she is having an affair with the bishop's representative, Philippe Sermoise. The Bastard, who is now a police informer, passes the poem to Sermoise, who attacks the author in the street and is stabbed to death for his pains.

The poet is therefore obliged to hit the road, leaving Paris hidden in a cart-load of manure. He and other fugitives form a band of brigands, 'les Coquillards' (an obscure argot term involving shellfish), that attacks and robs royal convoys around Dijon, but, by doing so, also comes into conflict with 'le Grand Coësre, roi des gueux' ('The Great Swindler, king of the rogues'). The latter despatches a posse of masked female followers, led by his daughter Flora, Marthe's lover, to regain their treasure and teach Villon's band of a lesson, an expedition which ends in the death of Marthe. However, thanks to The Great Swindler's merciful intervention, Villon is pardoned by the King for the murder of Sermoise, and returns to Paris, only to unwisely recommence his vendetta in verse against Catherine. His drunken band of delinquents also burgles the prestigious College of Navarre, stealing sacred artefacts. Expelled again from Paris, he makes for Blois, where Duke Charles d'Orléans invites him to write and perform poetry in his château. Happy days of patronage and female company follow. But The Bastard is never far away, and François Villon and one of his last remaining friends, Colin, are caught. Colin is hanged and Villon savagely tortured by the debauched bishop of Orléans, whose Sadean project is to make the poet and other captives literally suffer for art. 'Je ne suis ni votre serf, ni votre biche' ('I am neither your serf nor your doe'), Villon defiantly tells his tormentor. Only the arrival of a new King will free him.

In 1462, at the tender age of thirty, the vagabond poet returns to Paris in precarious health. The city itself is sad and swarming with police. The Sorbonne has lost its privileges and all the brothels are shut. Flora has been executed. ‘Le Roi gouverne ; il n’y a plus de diversité’ (‘the King now governs ; there is no more diversity’), says his mercurial friend Jean le Loup. But on hearing of Villon’s return, students gather to inform him that they have taken advantage of a new invention to print his verse and distribute it throughout the capital. They want the university to regain its privileges and consider Villon a symbol of revolt. ‘Tout va changer’, they promise their hero, ‘nous allons reprendre les franchises’ (‘Everything is going to change. We will take back our freedoms’). A broken and grey-haired Villon appreciates such adulation, but asks to be left in peace: ‘je suis vieux. Je ne suis pas des vôtres’ (‘I am old. I am not one of yours’). Nevertheless, the effect of Villon’s return on the students alarms the royal authorities: ‘demain ils descendent dans la rue !’ (‘tomorrow, they will go down into the streets’). It is therefore necessary to make an example of the vagabond poet. Given carte blanche, The Bastard, who has regained the rank of sergeant under the new regime, organises the murder of a magistrate and finds witnesses to prove the poet’s guilt. He is sentenced to ten years exile. Villon tells the authorities: ‘Maintenant je dérange. Il ne reste que la solitude. Je suis un malentendu qui vous remercie de me chasser de chez moi’ (‘Now I am a source of trouble. There remains just solitude. I am a misunderstanding who thanks you for chasing me from my home’). Villon leaves Paris, but, on his way, The Bastard, who has been promoted head of the Royal Guard, inevitably intervenes to cut off his writing hand. The poet staggers bleeding towards an empty horizon.

## Romanian adaptation and reception

The TV version was broadcast in 1987 in France, Italy and West Germany, to considerable viewing figures and good reviews. However, during late communism, television served up increasingly austere fare. If, in the 1970s and early 1980s, Romanians were entertained by episodes of *Dallas* and the *Onedin Line*, as well as the films of Louis de Funès, in January 1985, Romanian television was restricted to a few hours a day, apparently to save energy. After 1985, TV producers would re-run archive movies using other titles and cutting out the main titles, to avoid paying royalties, although there were also many Soviet, Chinese and North Korean films. Given these restrictions, Nicolaescu's co-production was therefore turned into a two-part feature film for distribution in Romanian cinemas.

Nicolaescu later insisted that he had slipped into the film version echoes of Ceaușescu's Romania in its final years (Anon 2009). It is not difficult to find them: the cold, hunger and darkness, the flagrant gap between elites and the people, arbitrary royal power, censorship and intimidation of intellectuals, pervasive surveillance. The Bastard, whose place in biographies and studies of Villon is peripheral and obscure, seems to embody the heartless, implacable secret policeman. In a possible allusion to communism, The Bastard is often dressed in red, as are other authority figures in the film. Played by Ion Marinescu, The Great Swindler, wearing a crown and borne on a sedan chair by masked bodyguards, bears a striking resemblance to the country's increasingly regal *Conducator* (Romanian equivalent of *Duce* and *Führer*). The criminal underworld portrayed in the film could also be seen by the contemporary viewer as an echo of the black market and corruption that mushroomed in a Romania increasingly wracked by shortages.

Villon, however, is on the side of the people: 'la pauvreté n'est pas le bonheur des gens' ('poverty does not make people happy'), he declaims, while intervening unsuccessfully

to help peasants trying to find refuge in the chateau of Blois after the Loire breaks its banks. For all his violence and debauchery, Villon is the enemy of royal power, defending the freedoms of the university and the church: ‘je revendique les droits civiques’ (‘I demand civil rights’). In his memoirs, Nicolaescu remarked that ‘the final episode, the poet’s struggle with the powers that be, escaped communist censorship’ (Nicolaescu 2011a: 124). On the other hand, Villon could easily be presented as a proletarian intellectual in revolt against the established order, and, indeed, had been championed as such by writers of communist sympathies, from Bertolt Brecht to the Hungarian Jozsef Attila and Romania’s own Tudor Arghezi. In more specifically regional terms, Nicolaescu’s Villon resembles the *haiduc*, whom Eric Hobsbawm (1969) theorised as an example of the ‘social bandit’.

Indeed, the production file of the film adaptation shows that communist censorship was very limited. The Romanian voice-over, written by Romulus Vulpescu, who had translated Villon’s ballads in 1958 and was the last President of the Writers’ Union in the communist period, presents the vagabond poet as ‘only the child of troubled times, of the Middle Ages’ and concludes that this young man, ‘aged by suffering and impotent hatred of his times’, ‘remains an enigma’. The film was not seen by Ceaușescu, who had little interest in foreign culture, while the fact that it was set in fifteenth-century France would also allay any suspicions. On 17 November 1987, the Council for Socialist Culture and Education (CSCE) requested changes to the film, but they reflected primarily the puritanical ‘socialist morality’ of the Ceaușescu years:

1. Eliminate the rape from the sequence of fighting with the girls; shorten the love scene with the barber’s wife; shorten the naturalistic frames from the second brothel scene; eliminate the frame in which Villon is attacked by the Madame of the brothel.
2. Shorten the sequence in which Marion offers herself to a client; eliminate the masked girls from the Blois castle scene; correct through translation the licentious

language used near the church of St Navarre. 3. Shorten the commentary, while making the voice more solemn and slower.

In response to the censors, Nicolaescu successfully demanded the retention of torture scenes: 'these tortures are described by Villon in his own verse'. He also obtained sub-titling rather than dubbing, on artistic and economic grounds (Romanian Film Archives: file 639).

Nicolaescu was therefore not significantly harassed by the Romanian authorities. He later recalled: 'From experience, I can say that the requests from the politruks of the CSCE could be rejected. I did it every time I had the chance' (Nicolaescu 2011b: 17). Instead, without going into details, he claimed that the only serious censorship problems he encountered for the Villon project were with the producers at TF1: 'The socialists were in power in France and everything was political' (Anon 2009). The premiere took place at the Patria cinema, Bucharest, on 3 April 1989. Nicolae Ceaușescu was not in attendance. Nicolaescu had invited the French Ambassador, Jean-Yves Le Breton, but here, the director claims, the authorities intervened.

This was at a time when Franco-Romanian diplomatic relations were nose-diving. The previous month, six veteran Romanian communists, including the former foreign minister Corneliu Mănescu, had published an open letter criticising the regime from a left-wing, pro-Gorbachev perspective. They were immediately placed under house arrest. In protest, the Quai d'Orsay recalled their ambassador to Paris for 'consultations'. In his memoirs, Le Breton wrote: 'Ce geste était un message : il manifestait sans équivoque la réprobation du gouvernement français à l'égard des agissements du régime roumain' ('This gesture was a message : it displayed unequivocally the French government's disapproval of the Romanian regime's activities') (1996 : 79). Although now back in Bucharest, the French Ambassador was not authorised to attend. In protest, Nicolaescu boycotted the premiere of his own film

(Nicolaescu 2011b: 124). But he could be gratified by its success in Romania: nearly one million cinema tickets were sold, which confirmed, in his view, the contemporary relevance of this late medieval tale. This figure for ticket sales should, of course, be taken with a pinch of salt, as there was the practice of selling group tickets to schools and the Army, so that cinemas did not go out of business.

Overall, Romanian critics' reception of the two films was very positive, but showed tensions between nativist and more Francophile currents. In the prestigious and widely-read magazine *Cinema*, Mircea Alexandrescu praised this portrait of an 'enigmatic personality' and 'creator of modern French poetry'. The adventure and exoticism to be found in Villon's turbulent life provided perfect film material. It was not easy, wrote Alexandrescu, for a young man like Villon who 'felt bad in his skin, for whom the times were too oppressive, the city too dark, the world too stupid'. Indeed, when listening to the dialogue between Villon and other characters, you felt you were not five hundred years ago but 'with the Sorbonne students of 1968'. The film was 'a dissertation in images on a poetic universe with echoes of today'. Alexandrescu praised Pagny's performance and Nicolaescu's direction of a 'cosmopolitan' cast. But he gave priority to the Romanian contribution. He only regretted that 'sombre aspects' dominated the film version, leaving the viewers '*sur notre faim*' ('disappointed') (1989: 9).

In *Contemporanul*, Călin Căliman argued that the Romanian's direction of an international super-production was 'a sign of great confidence in him'. As for Villon, who had been considered an 'old friend' by Tudor Arghezi, he was 'a symbol of both creative and destructive forces'. The relationship between the Poet and the Bastard signified the relationship 'between the poet and power'. In relation to episcopal authority, Villon symbolised the 'power of endurance, of resistance to the Inquisition and beyond...' The film captured 'the soul, the fears and the heresies of the Middle Ages'. It had 'a grave tone which

validates the socio-historical quality of the artistic approach'. It also featured, Căliman insisted, excellent Romanian actors (1989: 12-13).

However, in *Săptămîna*, the virulently National Communist weekly edited by Eugen Barbu and one of Ceaușescu's 'court poets', Corneliu Vadim Tudor, Nicolae Ulieriu gave a more negative assessment. The film contained, he argued, both the virtues and vices of superproductions. On the positive side, it portrayed a 'diverse social typology' and massively mobilised human, mechanical and animal forces to produce 'spectacular crowd scenes'. But it failed to artistically transfigure a historical documentary. Its aesthetic model was not *Ben Hur* but Bernard Borderie's underworld adventure movie, *Angélique, Marquise des Anges* (*Angélique, the Marquise of the Angels*) (1964), which had enjoyed huge success in the Eastern Bloc. The development of the characters was not sufficiently deep. Florent Pagny lacked the stage intelligence shown by such actors as the Romanian star Claudiu Bleonț. Finally, the language of the Romanian subtitles was 'artificial' (Ulieriu 1989: 5).

The episode of the boycotted premiere and the possibly subversive content of Nicolaescu's film figure neither in Jean-Yves Le Breton's memoirs nor in documents of the Quai d'Orsay. Coded cultural opposition to the Ceaușescu regime seems to have been expressed by other, less controllable, genres. Official contact with Romanian intellectuals became increasingly difficult: there was no Franco-Romanian celebration of the Bicentenary of the French Revolution, and even the French professors of the University of Bucharest were debarred from attending the garden party in the Embassy, which was surrounded by a police cordon. Many of the artists, writers, actors, musicians and painters invited did not make it. But one guest who managed to breach the cordon was Ion Gheorghe Maurer, the former prime minister who had played a key role in the Franco-Romanian rapprochement of the 1960s (and was married to a French woman). Le Breton informed the Quai d'Orsay: 'L'ancien chef du gouvernement est resté très longtemps avec nous (plus de quatre heures)

s'exprimant avec sa causticité habituelle aux dépens du pouvoir actuel' ('The former head of government stayed a long time with us (more than four hours), speaking with his usual causticity at the expense of those currently in power') (French Diplomatic Archives : 1935INVA/6484).

It was rather at literary evenings and gallery openings that Le Breton and other diplomats liaised with discretely dissident intellectuals. Concerts, the ambassador recalled, could be the outlet for messages of opposition. Not long before the fall of Ceaușescu, the pianist Dan Grigore and the actor Ion Caramitru put on at the Athenaeum a centenary production of Eminescu's poem *Doina* (Fatherland): 'Elle a été reçue avec ferveur comme la réponse de la Roumanie de toujours à la dictature de Ceaușescu. L'Athénée était comble et on sentait dans l'assemblée une attente dramatique, celle de tout un peuple qui espérait avec impatience la fin du cauchemar' ('It was fervently received as Romania's unflinching response to the Ceaușescu dictatorship. The Atheneum was packed and you felt in the assembled audience a dramatic sense of expectation, that of an entire people which hoped impatiently for an end to the nightmare' (1996: 58). Theatre could also provide coded allusions to the deteriorating political situation: 'Ainsi, le *Caligula* de Camus triomphait. Sans doute la censure n'avait-elle pas fait de rapprochement entre les deux dictateurs. *Caligula* au moment où Ceaușescu finissant traitait son chien comme un consul!' (Thus Camus's *Caligula* was a triumph. No doubt the censors had not made the connection between the two dictators. *Caligula* at the moment when the moribund Ceaușescu treated his dog like a consul!') (1996 : 59). On 11 December 1989, the Ambassador reported to the Quai d'Orsay a production by the Nottara Theatre of Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*. This classic satire of bourgeois social climbing and aristocratic snobbery would traditionally have posed no problem to the censor. But in the hands of director Alexandru Dabija, this version, 'd'une singulière audace' ('peculiarly audacious'), directly attacked the President. The packed



theatre immediately recognised and laughed at allusions to Ceaușescu's characteristic gestures, passion for flattery, his lackeys dressed as Securitate officers, and black marketeering. To avoid any equivocation, there was hung on the Bourgeois's living room wall a portrait which resembled that of the Ceaușescu couple. The play was received with thunderous applause. Le Breton concluded that a different version must have been seen by the censor. The production was therefore cancelled then resumed after it was agreed that the actors would show more restraint and stop the allusions to Ceaușescu. It was still unthinkable to outlaw Molière himself (French Diplomatic Archives : 1935INVA/6484).

Ten days later, on 21 December 1989, the CSCE approved a payment to the producers of the film version of *Francois Villon – Poetul vagabond*. That very day, the Ceaușescu regime collapsed under pressure from the street and from the army. On Christmas Day, the dictator and his wife were executed after being condemned by a kangaroo court. In the scenes of the December Revolution, with demonstrations – in which students played a large part – and failed repression by the authorities there could be found echoes of Nicolaescu's film. The director himself, along with Romulus Vulpescu, became prominent supporters of the National Salvation Front led by dissident communist apparatchik Ion Iliescu. Nicolaescu later recounted how, on 22 December 1989, after the Ceaușescus had fled by helicopter, he visited the dictator's office: on his desk was the annotated script of the director's last communist-era superproduction, *Mircea*. Both Nicolaescu and Vulpescu would play political roles in post-communist Romania, as senators respectively for the neo-communist Social Democratic Party and the far right Greater Romania Party.

### **Franco-Romanian cinema after communism**

In his final report on standing down as French Ambassador to Bucharest, Le Breton wrote: 'En matière culturelle, il est manifeste qu'il serait contre-indiqué de décevoir l'attente des

intellectuels roumains. Nous avons déjà dans ce pays un capital immense qu'il faut au contraire conforter' ('In the cultural domain, it is obvious that it would be inadvisable to disappoint the expectations of the Romanian intellectuals. We already have in this country immense capital that we must rather be consolidating') (French Diplomatic Archives: 1935INVA/6477). Indeed, keen to maintain its cultural hegemony, France made a contribution to the reorganisation of Romanian cinema after the fall of communism. There was agreed a new programme of Franco-Romanian cooperation in the fields of culture, education, science and technology. Contacts were promoted between the French and Romanian National Centres of Cinematography and a festival of French cinema was revived. France also created an aid fund aimed at encouraging film co-productions in central and eastern Europe. Between 1990 and 1996, this ECO Fund supported five productions by two Romanian directors who returned from France to make films that gave a bleak portrayal of communism and its aftermath, notably Nae Caranfil's *E pericoloso sporgersi* (1991) and Lucian Pintilie's *Too Late* (1995). It was films co-produced with France which were the most often selected at international film festivals to represent Romania.

However, French aid could not prevent the implosion of cinema in Romania, a country then making the painful transition to parliamentary democracy, market economics and EU membership. During the 1990s, Romanians deserted cinema for the newly uncensored delights of television and video (Jaeckel 2000b: 138). By the end of the decade, Romanian cinema was struggling for finance, while many of its outdated cinemas were closed down. It was a sign of the times that, in 1999, Sergiu Nicolaescu's World War 1 epic, *The Death Triangle*, sold only 30,000 tickets. Indeed, this film bankrupted the production company, RoFilm, because of money owed to the Ministry of Defence for its ambitious battle reconstructions. In 2000, not one Romanian film was released.

Nicolaescu, closely associated with the Ceaușescu years and now an influential part of the post-communist elite, did not benefit from French financial support. His work does not figure among the thirty-five Franco-Romanian film productions made between 1992 and 2017. He also caused resentment because of his access to NCC funding. For example, the application for Cristian Mungiu's *4 months, 3 weeks, 2 days*, a future Palme d'Or winner and brilliant representative of the Romanian New Wave, came a distant second to Nicolaescu's *The Survivor*. According to Ioana Uricaru, 'in the next two decades (...) the continuous financial support from the state for his works generated anger and consternation among film critics, filmmakers, and cinephiles' (Uricaru 2012: 433). Indeed, during what Vasile Hodorogea has called the 'media feast' surrounding Nicolaescu's death and funeral in 2013, the young *auteurs* Mungiu and Cristi Puiu were among the few discordant voices (Hodorogea 2014: 181).

Anne Jaeckel has described Nicolaescu as a great survivor: 'somehow, he managed to always remain in power, no matter what political changes there were' (Jaeckel 2006: 85). However, despite, or perhaps because of, the new post-Communist context, Nicolaescu's cinematic star waned (although he did create controversy with his film *The Mirror*, which contained a sympathetic portrayal of Romania's wartime dictator, Marshal Antonescu). He was eventually eclipsed by the new generation of Romanian film makers, inspired by Pintilie, that stormed Cannes and other film festivals, starting with Puiu's *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu* (2005). It could be said that French-Romanian co-production has helped a wave of *auteur* films whose minimalism contrasts with the epic bombast of Nicolaescu's work. Today, France is the primary co-production country for Romanian films, although their box office performances have been modest.

To a certain extent, the star of *l'amitié franco-roumaine* has also waned, despite Le Breton's exhortations. Investment was certainly poured into the Institut français in Bucharest,

which now has a cinema named after Elvira Popescu who, with great symbolism, received the *légion d'honneur* from President Mitterrand in 1989. Virgil Tănase returned from exile in Paris to become the first post-communist minister of culture. But the ECO Fund was wound up in 1997, to be subsumed by the Council of Europe's Eurimages. Anne Jaeckel also points out that productions under the official Franco-Romanian cooperation agreement, such as Roger Christian's *Nostradamus* (1994) and Bertrand Tavernier's aforementioned *Capitaine Conan* (1996), showed again the unbalanced relationship between the two countries: 'these large-budget films offered few opportunities to Romanian talent, merely taking advantage of the cheap labour and facilities provided by Romania' (2000c: 170). Furthermore, historic French influence has been challenged by the anglosphere in the cultural geography of the younger generations. After all, in one of Cristian Mungiu's most recent films, *The Graduation* (2016), another French-Romanian co-production, a father goes to all sorts of compromising lengths to ensure that his daughter takes up her place at Cambridge University. Whatever the balance of cultural power now between the anglosphere and the francosphere, there still remains a Romanian sense of being on the periphery. Marian Țuțui and Raluca Iacob have observed: 'filmmakers of the New Romanian Cinema have come to accept their country's peripheral identity, which is aptly reflected in the geographical locations and characters of their films' (Țuțui and Iacob 2019: 212).

## **Conclusion**

Sergiu Nicolaescu's *François Villon – Poetul vagabond* and his subsequent career therefore show the diversity of the Franco-Romanian friendship in cinema. These exchanges are not fixed, but develop in changing political and cultural contexts. Nicolaescu's co-production proved to be the last of the Communist period, and the implicit message of the film as well as its domestic critical reception indicate the tensions caused by both a deteriorating internal situation and conflict over Romania's relationship to France. The director and revolutionary

could look back with satisfaction at the subversive nature of his work, but the triumph over tyranny brought with it new challenges. Nicolaescu, an establishment figure, was not a beneficiary of the post-communist Franco-Romanian friendship, while the younger directors who were found themselves in a new situation where the real influence and attraction of *la francophonie*, as well as Romania's place in the world, were put into question.

### **Works cited**

Alexandrescu, Mircea (1989) 'Într-o coproducție europeană, un regizor român face portretul cinematografic al lui François Villon', *Cinema* Vol. XXVII, No. 4, 9.

Anon (2009) 'Nicolaescu a refuzat să meargă la premiera filmului "François Villon-poetul vagabond"', *Jurnalul national*, 4 April 2009 ; <https://jurnalul.antena3.ro/scinteia/special/nicolaescu-a-refuzat-sa-mearga-la-premiera-filmului-francois-villon-poetul-vagabond-503232.html> [accessed 9 August 2019].

Bowd, Gavin (2009) *La France et la Roumanie communiste* (Paris: L'Harmattan)

Căliman, Calin (1989) 'François Villon', *Contemporanul*, 7 April 1989, 12-13.

Dănălache, Ileana Perneș (1988) 'Când pasiunea întâlnește tenacitatea', *Cinema* Vol. XXVI No. 4, 9.

Durandin, Catherine (1995) *Histoire des Roumains* (Paris : Fayard).

Hobsbawm, Eric (1969) *Bandits* (London : Weidenfeld and Nicholson).

Hodorogea, Vasile (2014), 'Death of a celebrity and media feast, the characteristics of a media event. Case study: the death of film director, Sergiu Nicolaescu' <https://astrasalvensis.eu/blog/mdocs-posts/24-vasile-hodorogea-death-of-a-celebrity-and-media-feast-the-characteristics-of-a-media-event-case-study-the-death-of-film-director-sergiu-nicolaescu/> [accessed 16 June 2022]

Jaeckel, Anne (2000a) 'France and Romanian Cinema, 1896-1999', *French Cultural Studies* xi, 409-424.

Jaeckel, Anne (2000b), 'Film policy and cooperation between east and west: the case of France and Romania in the nineties', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 7:1, 131-150.

Jaeckel, Anne (2000c), 'Franco-Romanian Reconstruction is also an Ethical Issue', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* Vol. XXXVI No. 2, 165-178.

Jaeckel, Anne (2006), 'Mihai Viteazul/Michael the Brave', in Iordanova, Dina (ed.) *The Cinema of the Balkans* (London and New York : Wallflower), 75-85.

Le Breton, Jean-Marie (1996) *La fin de Ceaușescu. Histoire d'une révolution* (Paris : L'Harmattan).

Michelet, Jules (1980) *Œuvres complètes*. Tome XVI (Paris : Flammarion).

Nasta, Dominique (2013), *Contemporary Romanian Cinema : the history of an unexpected miracle* (London: Wallflower)

Nicolaescu, Sergiu (2011a), *Recviem pentru adevăr* (Bucharest: Editura universitară)

Nicolaescu, Sergiu (2011b) *Viața, destin și film* (Bucharest: Editura universitară).

Nița, Victor (1986) 'François Villon la Hunedoara'. *Flacăra*, 5 September 1986, 35.

Țuțui, Marian and Iacob, Raluca (2019) 'New Romanian Cinema: Geography and Identity', in Duma, Dana and Stojanova, Christina (eds.) *The New Romanian Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 211-224

Ulieriu, Nicolae (1989) 'François Villon', *Săptămîna*, 12 May 1989, 7.

Uricaru, Ioana (2012) 'Follow the money – Financing cinema in contemporary Romania', in Aniko, Imre (ed.), *A Companion to East European Cinemas* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell), 427-452.

Vasile, Aurelia (2011), 'Le cinéma roumain pendant la période communiste : représentations de l'histoire nationale', Doctoral Thesis, Universities of Burgundy and Bucharest. <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00659394> [accessed 17 June 2022].

## **Filmography**

Borderie, Bertrand (dir.) (1964), *Angélique, Marquise des Anges*.

Caranfil, Nae (dir.) (1991), *E pericoloso sporgersi*.

Christian, Roger (dir.) (1994), *Nostradamus*.

Ciulei, Liviu (dir.), (1965), *The Forest of the Hanged*.

Guitry, Sacha (dir.) (1939), *Ils étaient neuf célibataires*.

Mungiu, Cristian (dir.) (2007), *4 Months, 3 weeks and 2 Days*.

Mungiu, Cristian (dir.) (2016), *Graduation*.

Nicolaescu, Sergiu (dir.) (1966), *The Dacians*.

Nicolaescu, Sergiu (dir.) (1970), *Michael the Brave*.

Nicolaescu, Sergiu (dir.) (1977), *War of Independence*.

Nicolaescu, Sergiu (dir.) (1987), *François Villon – Poetul vagabond*.

Nicolaescu, Sergiu (dir.) (1989), *Mircea*.

Nicolaescu, Sergiu (dir.) (1994), *The Mirror*.

Nicolaescu, Sergiu (dir.) (1999), *The Death Triangle*.

Nicolaescu, Sergiu (dir.) (2008), *The Survivor*.

Pintilie, Lucian (dir.) (1968), *Reconstruction*.

Pintilie, Lucian (dir.) (1981), *Carnival Scenes*.

Pintilie Lucian (dir.) (1996), *Too Late*.

Popescu-Gopo, Ion (dir.) (1957), *A Brief History*.

Puiu, Cristi (dir.) (2005) *The Death of Mr Lăzarescu*.

Tavernier, Bertrand (dir.) (1996), *Capitaine Conan*.

### **Archive material**

*François Villon – Poetul vagabond* production file, 639. Jilava : Romanian National Film Archives.

Reports from French Embassy in Bucharest : 1935INVA/6477, 1935INVA/6484. La Courneuve: French Diplomatic Archives.