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Identities in the New Romanian Cinema

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Intense preoccupation with identity among Romanian intellectuals started in the 17th century, culminating between the two world wars, after the stabilization of the 1918 political and geographic unification of Romanian territories. Among them, Lucian Blaga, a local philosopher inspired by Spengler and Kant, defined the cultural "stylistic matrix" of a group or nation as essential to its identity as culture is determined by concrete historical, geographic and political circumstances. His original approach explains the Romanian stylistic matrix based on the village culture and the rich folkloric expression. Although Blaga acknowledged that mutual influences can take place between liminal cultures and one could often find common traits in both, he insisted on the unicity of each culture due to numerous factors that shape over time a cultural matrix.

Similarly, today's critics emphasize that identities "[…] are shaped by shifting boundaries between cultures, religions, and other places of belonging," and are often based on comparisons with a real or imaginary 'other.' As complex processes of negotiation, identities (individual or national) "seek to authorize cultural hybridities," thus to create a space for "tolerance and pluralism." (Petrunic 2005) On the other hand, as dynamic constructs involving time and spatial coordinates, identities are built on numerous layers of overlapping differences and/or similarities, often based on socio-political orders that arrive from the outside (Bjelić *Balkan as Metaphor*, 3).

The result of such complex multiple processes, the overall locus of identity is always an in-between or constantly shifting place, although within the global frame, national and/or cultural identities cannot be denied significant differences, or authenticity. Hence, liminality may, in some instances, such as the Balkan space, be the only way to analyze and theorize local discourses on national identity. Although most nations experience(d) intense territorial, political, ethnic and cultural debates, Romania, as territory of transition between Eastern and Western Europe, due to a long history of colonization and territorial division among other states, as well as to the struggle for recognition not only as nation, but as a Romanic population surrounded by Slavic cultures, requires to be analyzed within both Balkan and European contexts.

The Bulgarian theorist Alexander Kiossev has affirmed that East European nations, "on the periphery of civilization (Imre 2005, 18)," came into existence and have survived through a process of "self-colonization." These nations voluntarily accepted the superiority of European Enlightenment ideas of rationality, progress, and racial hierarchy (Imre, 18). Kiossev manages to express, not without a grain of irony, the complexly close, but challenging relationship between Eastern and Western nations within the European continent. Within this ongoing dialectic, the Western European nations, perceived historically as "superior" since they established nationhood early and were at the forefront of industrial and technological developments, were and still are in a position to exert pressures under the form of ideological and cultural exports, as well as cultural criticism. As scholars have observed, Eastern Europe's positioning on the gates of Europe, between east and west, makes it an in-between space repeatedly claimed or rejected by Eastern (The Russian and Ottoman empires) or Western powers (the Austrian, Hungarian or later, Austro-Hungarian empires). The lack of political stability in the area generated by diverse economic and political interests created intense confusion, divisions and disputes in and among local populations on many levels.

As a space of "whiteness" between two worlds-the West and the (former) Ottoman East-the Balkans are, in Bjelic's opinion, subject to different representational mechanisms. Within this duality West-East, different ethnic groups define each other as the East of the others, while thus Occidentalizing themselves. Part of this process originates in the position of the Orthodox Church that defines itself as West in relationship to Islam, and as East in relationship to the Catholic and Protestant churches. (Bjelić *Balkan as Metaphor* 2002, 4)

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In addition, as Bjelic mentions, the Ottoman Empire did not apply the same politics of assimilation used by Westerners in the colonized areas (locals were allowed to rule), while the Hungarian or Austro -Hungarian empires imposed their socio-economic and cultural structures, gave their language(s) official status and acted through politics of more or less gentle assimilation. Under Ottomans occupation people experienced both the indignity of being "colonial subjects" under a foreign ruler, and the position of rulers. Consequently, Balkan identity "meanders between Orientalism and Occidentalism" being in two places at the same time, concludes (*Balkan as Metaphor,* 5-6). The meanings of "East" and "West" continued to remain unclear and unstable in the Balkans; as a result, in the repeated and consistent effort to (re)define and distinguish the East from the West, the Balkans became the permanent Other.

Describing the Balkan nations'position, Bjelić wonders if the term "Orientalism" could be used as a subsidiary for Balkanism (*Balkan as Metaphor*, 3), but scholars such as K.E. Fleming strongly insist on using Balkanism as a more appropriate theoretical concept (2000, 35). The Balkan nations' "status as an "inside other," their own claims to European primacy, their geographical location (on the borders of but nevertheless within Europe), Western Europe's uncertainty as to where to place them" reflect a very different frame of mind compared to Said's theorization of the Orient (Fleming). A door between continents, the Balkan region was for a longtime and still is a melting pot of cultures.

Linguists studying the Balkans affirm the existence of a strong hybridizing convergence among ethnic cultures up to the 18th century, followed by the divergence of regional cultures during the 19th and 20th centuries. (Detrez 2009, 1) The linguistic argument shows that ethnic groups of very diverse origins such as Albanians, Bulgarians and Romanians share similar grammatical structures and common myths. These phenomena would not be possible unless such groups had strong relationships over a long period of time, and shared closely linguistic structures and mythical beliefs. (Jenej Kopitar in Detrez, 2)

However, collective memory, as expressed in oral literary productions over many centuries, reflects the locals' awareness of differences between various ethnic groups, as well as themselves and the Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian presence, politics, and cultural practices. The mythical essence of such data could be challenged due to the unreliable nature of social memory. However, in spite of the idealizing aspects common to oral productions, they reflect identity formation through oppositional processes and comparisons, as well as through reflection upon one's historic status in the region. Besides offering an insight into the surviving psychological processes in these populations, they became sources of inspiration for literary productions, arts, and even politics, offering an existing self-projection as foundation for (re) defining local identities.

A cinematic production that illustrates the role of collective memory in the process of self-representation is *Nemuritorii* (*The Immortals*, 1976) by talented actor and director Sergiu Nicolaescu. Produced in the best years of socialism (its period of relative freedom and economic prosperity), this artistically accomplished cinematic work served the socialistic regime's populist goals. Centuries of oral folk literature representing the national aspirations of the Romanian majority inform an appealing visual portrayal of local heroism.

Influenced stylistically by the American Western, the film presents a group of former soldiers roaming throughout Europe. Their leader Michael, called the Brave in Romanian folklore, tried to unify the Romanian territories, but was betrayed and killed. Ten years later, his loyal soldiers are looking for someone to take over Michael's mission: they carry the unity flag and a chest full of what they believe to be Michael's gold. Although the group leaders know it contains rocks, the truth is not revealed to the others, since the chest represents the group's hope in finding a leader capable of using the money for future unification of the country.

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The soldiers' circular trip within Eastern Europe and their nomadic way of life represents what is considered to have been the life of Romanian ethnics forced to take refuge in mountains, move away temporarily, or hide every time the country was invaded by various empires or migrating populations. The territorial division of the Romanian-speaking populations is depicted as the undesired consequence of foreign politics, local rulers' corruption, and the difficulty of finding skillful leaders.

The East in the form of the Ottoman presence is represented as parasitic and inescapable. Outnumbered at one point by the Ottoman army, the small group is forced into accepting the Ottoman commander's invitation: guests in their own territory, they are robbed of their hope, the chest (symbol of their dream for national unity), and tortured to reveal its secrets. In spite of this, the group seems to share closer connections with the Ottomans (who learned their language and customs) than Austrians or Hungarians from whom they are separated not only linguistically, but also physically, by an impenetrable fortress. If the Ottoman army caught them in an inescapable circle, Austrians do not allow them in their proximity. Approaching their fortress is deadly, the distance and the walls between the Austrians and the soldiers being symbolic of the separation between themselves (this time the East) and the West.

In the only instance when the soldiers enter a fortified castle uninvited, they are out of place in the refined society, and their efforts to imitate local manners turn into parody. The hosts send secretly for armed help, proving one more time that their common past, as well as present is one of mistrust. The manners and refinement of the civilized Westerner are portrayed as a hypocritical mask: local people and territories are simply means to wealth and a life of luxury.

In spite of individual traits and differences, the characters (Ottomans, Romanians, Austrians, Hungarians) consistently revert to their imaginary collective identity. Ana-Maria Petrunic rightly observes that "Boundaries do not physically limit the existence of one's being and the extent of one's dwelling within the sphere of one's identity and acts of identification. […]; ethnic, religious, cultural, racial and other affiliations are present for individuals as long as other individuals share similar affiliations expanding or delimitating the *boundary of presence*." (2005)

However, sharing is also determined by the context of willing or forceful sharing. Petar Ramadanovic considers that Balkan languages failed to recreate the past in stable, rational ways because trauma was incorporated in discourses for the production of reality. Consequently, discourses of resistance are based on reinventing identity as often as historical conditions changed. Vlaisavljevici (Bjelić *Balkan as Metaphor*, 17) emphasizes that in war (which is a form of trauma) the ethnic self operates as an imaginary symbolic body that invents its entire subjective reality. Furthermore, in spite of co-existence within the same empire (Byzantine, Ottoman, Austrian, Austro-Hungarian), a shared Balkan identity based on a common religion was rejected in favor of an identity based on ethnicity, and cultural hybridism was rejected in favor of "an imaginary ethno –national pureness." (Detrez, 5) A number of scholars agree that while ethnicity became the core of national organization (a trait shared with Western European nations), religion became the second most important identifier. The Balkan nations shared their Christian religious beliefs with the rest of the Europe, a strong identifier that created a permanent and powerful ideological separation from the Eastern Ottoman Empire.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, with the development of national states in the Balkans, Romanians (similarly to its Balkan neighbors) proceeded to the cleansing of language (words of Slavic and Turkish origin were replaced with Romance terminology), and architecture (Turkish architecture was declared typically local), and to (re)writing its national history. An additional wave of Westernization took place in the 20th century as the socialist state continued on an existing trend of modernization, its efforts being successfully supported by new developments in industry. To document this processes, cinema was used as a means of propaganda. As Romania did not have an established national cinema before 1949, and film production was not funded in any organized way, the socialist state employed the film industry for the education and creation of the "new socialist" individual.

Popular culture and oral literature became sources for romantic figures such as Robin Hood type of heroes (*Haiducii/The Outcasts*, 1966; *Razbunarea haiducilor/Revenge of the Outcasts*, 1968; *Haiducii lui Saptecai/The Saptecai's Outcasts*, 1970; *Pintea/Pintea*, 1978; *Iancu*

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Jianu, haiducul/Iancu Jianu, the Outcast, 1981, etc.), or local charismatic leaders. Like the *Immortals* these productions create the portrayal of a victimized population whose dreams and aspirations were repeatedly threatened and stolen by selfish foreigners. Eventually, the theme of sacrifice for one's national ideals underlines the main theme of heroism. However, *Dacii* (*The Warriors*, Sergiu Nicolaescu, 1967) reconstitutes in a positive light the Roman occupation, a colonizing experience Romanians tried to re-internalize as foundation for local identity formation.

In "The changing face of the Other in Romanian films," Florentina Andreescu considers that in founding myths such as *Trajan and Dochia*, the Roman colonizer represents Europe, therefore the place of truth and purity. The colonized defined themselves in terms of dependency of the colonizing other. In a process of inversion meant to veil the lack of freedom (a form of castration) due to colonization in this case, the pleasure of the oppressor (colonizer or occupier) is claimed by the oppressed as his own. The oppressor is also the law maker or father figure, and the oppressed strives to obtain his approval. As a result, Romanian cinema portrays numerous types of authoritarian figures to whom the protagonist(s) submit(s) in a process that often requires pain and suffering in order to resolve the conflict. This could explain why the dichotomy primitive-civilized, native-foreign, popular-elite in *The Warriors* is depicted constructively through the skillful reconstitution of complex historic circumstances: the Roman colonizing experience is internalized as positive authentication of Europeanism. (2011, 80-81)

Epic historic dramas, *Mihai Viteazul* (*Michael the Brave*, aka *The Last Crusade*, Sergiu Nicolaescu, 1971), *Stefan cel Mare* (*Stephen the Great*, Mircea Dragan, 1974), *Vlad Tepes* (*Vlad the Impaler*, Doru Nastase, 1979) deal with the theme of unity, the constitution of a Romanian national state, as well as themes of historic victimization and betrayal. These re-enactments of national history benefitted large audiences over a decade of relative socialist prosperity (12 million viewers for *Tudor* (Lucian Bratu, 1962); 9 million for *Dacii* (*The Warriors*), 9 million for *Mihai Viteazul* (*Michael the Brave*), etc. out of a population of 20 million), proof of a wide approval on the home market. They answered a need for self-recognition, and especially for a self-congratulatory discourse that would acknowledge the meritorious efforts of those who persisted in patriotic endeavors.

Although socialism pursued a strict separation of state and church, religious images were used to invest imaginary historic reconstitutions with dramatic appeal, and to endorse them with ultimate authority. Such is the case of *Michael the Brave* whose betrayal scene is closely modeled on Jesus and his trusted disciples (here, Western allies and rich local rulers) around the table. Michael's allies, however, abandon him and witness in collective approval his assassination. He becomes a Christ figure betrayed by all those he believed to be close supporters. Native distrust, consequence of repeated experience of abandonment (by the West), is presented as the cause of ethnic segregation and mistrust of the West. The theme of mistrust in the West sporadically resurges in Romanian literature and cinema, especially in times of political difficulties or, as it was the case during socialism, when the government was heavily criticized for its ideological standing. Representing oneself as victim of Western betrayal was a winning strategy in the popular oppositional imagination since both East and West were perceived (and portrayed repeatedly over the centuries) as intruders.

At the beginning of the 20th century there was an extended agreement among Romanian intellectuals about possessing a different spirituality than the West. Some intellectuals (Nicolae Iorga, Nechifor Crainic) openly promoted a return to the Romanian culture and traditions, to the rural world and Orthodox spirituality, and the Byzantine culture. Peasants were perceived as authentic Romanians and possessors of real values, a point of reference often adopted in Romanian politics in crucial times. Other respected local intellectuals (Lucian Blaga, Nae Ionescu) sided either with modernism and a moderate rejection of the West, or strong anti-Western and anti-modernist ideas. Mircea Eliade studied in India at a time when a gen-

eral philosophical and intellectual adoption of mystic doctrines created an association of Romania with the East and the Orient. (Andersen, 12-13)

Said insisted that "the Orient has helped Europe to define itself in opposition to a contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Bielić *Balkan as Metaphor*, 2). Similarly, at certain historic periods, Romanians defined themselves in opposition to an incompatible, decaying, capitalistic West (Spangler in Andersen, 16), seeing their culture as superior to Western Europe, since they inherited and were the continuators of Roman Byzantine traditions. Although resistance to assimilating Western elements was not absolute, the infusion of intellectual thought with "irrational and mystical ideas" (Hitchins in Andersen, 12) positioned Romania in the West as oriental, mystical, and backward.

The socialist national cinema used film among other forms of art to rewrite both its 'anti-capitalist' and 'anti-orientalist' identity not as a defense discourse of local values, but rather as re-creation or re-interpretation of national mythology. Socialist democracy supported at the time by popular success was projected as effective progress in front of failing capitalist democracy. The backwardness of the Romanian nation "was" (since socialism modernized and industrialized the country) considered therefore the consequence of repeated wars with Ottomans, a fight for freedom that also protected a selfish and ungrateful West.

The dichotomy East-West as socialism-capitalism, re-emerged even more intensely during the last years of dictatorship (1980s) fueled by (re)new(ed) perceptions and criticism of Romania's regression manifested through oriental despotism in form of dictatorship, and lack of human rights. Even recent Westernization of the Balkans takes place under the perceived danger of reverting to Balkanism in the form of ethnic wars and divisions. Constrained by such real or imaginary threat of regression, and afraid of being left outside the Western world again, Romanians embraced unconditionally the European Union, McDonald's, Auchan and Aldi's, American pop culture, the 60+ hours working week, a large choice of contraception, Chinese food, high-sugar soft drinks, Mexican soap operas, and many other realities of capitalist consumerism in a short amount of time. The leap from Balkanism to globalization via Westernization, transforms the Romanian society into a space more exotic than ever.

New Romanian Cinema: Identities in Times of Transition

The post '89 Romanian cinema is less focused on the redefinition of nationalism, as the shift to European integration and the pressures of globalization require (d) a re-assessment of the recent past. Moreover, many contemporary films directly or indirectly reflect the world and/or consequences of former socialist dictatorship. Highly charged emotionally and ideologically, works by young directors like Nae Caranfil, Cristi Puiu, Cristian Mungiu, Corneliu Porumboiu, Catalin Mitulescu, among many others, question the status of a society in transition, the place of old and new ideals, and indirectly the nation's transformations and representations at crucial moments in history. Consequently, the obsessive return to a specific past relates to the need to assess the present and (re)build an identity often challenged not only by sudden ideological shifts within short periods of time, but also by consistent internal and external criticism of its socio-ideological and cultural structures.

Maybe the most powerful cinematic work on the last years of socialism, *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007) by Cristian Mungiu has not been sufficiently analyzed and assimilated. While Romanian audiences largely ignored it since they had no desire to contemplate a traumatic past, Western audiences could not get enough of it. Anikó Imre believes that through distribution of prizes and prestige at various film festivals, Western European countries continue to make their own values central to a so-called 'European society' (Introduction, XII), celebrating at

the same time the victory of capitalism over socialism. A bleak film like *4, 3, 2* could easily cater to self-congratulatory feelings and attitudes; however, the lack of reaction at home, in spite of a Romanian movie earning the first Palme d'Or since 1957, speaks as much or more about the post-socialist state of mind than the triumph of capitalism.

At first, its style and apparent lack of moralistic message puzzled festival audiences and opened a global interest in a small cinema industry which had hit ground zero (when no film was produced) in 2000. The simple story of two students pursuing an illegal abortion for one of them, and the degrading encounter with a male nurse who asks for sex in addition to the original payment, became a powerful metaphor for Ceausescu's dictatorship. The climax of the film, the sexual act to which both the pregnant student and her friend submit, usually labeled as "rape" by scholars and reviewers, is in fact negotiated and freely performed in spite of its psychological rejection by the women. The male nurse as patriarchal figure represents dictatorship (imposes his will) and the degrading father-Law (abortion is illegal) through which a woman's body is socially controlled and abused both legally and illegally at the same time. The act is even more dehumanizing since the victims are vulnerable women, longtime second class citizens, now reduced to the minimal status of submissive bodies.

This sequence raises key questions: Why did the pregnant young woman wait until the last moment? Why did the friend accept to participate in the act? Why did not they consider a different option? Since the two young women stand for the victimized Romanian society of their time, these questions become: Why did an entire nation allow things to go that far? Why did not the nation abandon its dictator before it was too late? Why did 20 million people accept social "prostitution" in the form of illegal abortion, dehumanizing orphanages, humiliating food queues, collaboration with Security, tyranny of corrupted elites, etc. rather than fight, demand changes, or explore different options?

Mungiu's film questions heroism and national mythologies, re-writing history and national identity from an unforgiving critical perspective. The final framing of the two girls behind the restaurant's large window contemplates the dead end of a society, as well as the feeling of defeat and gravity after undergoing an unspeakable (collectively self-inflected) trauma. The repeated affirmation that the new Romanian cinema has no agenda is contradicted by the strong critical content of various cinematic works belonging to the new wave.

Criticism through the intermediary of a social mirror has also been explored by Corneliu Porumboiu in his first feature *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006). The film's main subject is a television show with guests discussing whether or not the revolution of 1989 took place in their city. While the guests and callers quarrel, the truth is lost in confusion and accusations. The cameraman consistently tilts the camera, creating a metaphor for the distortion of reality: heroism is not possible in a world where memories do not contribute to the creation of History; this process requires archiving material in the form of collective memories that create the basis for national identity. The end result is a grotesque fresco of a society that lost its focus, ideals and direction in a process that did not bring the fulfillment of fantasy.

For Meta Mazaj *12:08 East of Bucharest* represents failed attempts at stabilizing a national identity (2010, 201). If this artistic product does not contribute to a national discourse, in what kind of discourse does it participate? In the case of "post-conflict spaces," Petrunic speaks of "negotiation space" or "dwelling" (7) and Detrez of a "crossing space" or "bridge" (7). They both suggest that changes in these situations are transitional and open to negotiation over conflicts. However, even welcome change produces trauma, and new cultural conventions could be perceived as imposed or alienating (Andreescu, 88). In this complex process, loss of hope or lack of desire may take place, as well as loss of social orientation.

Revealing from this perspective is *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (Cristi Puiu, 2005) where too rapid social change leads to profound loss of humanity. In great need of urgent medical attention, Mr. Lazarescu is being transported for an entire night from hospital to

hospital, verbally insulted for his drinking habit, submitting to absurd pressures to sign documents he cannot fully understand, and allowed to physically degrade while vital surgery is postponed indefinitely. Although the medical personnel are professionally well prepared, their unprofessional behavior translates into an almost generalized lack of compassion. Sick and dying, Mr. Lazarescu has no chance of living with dignity his last moments of life. The more helpless he becomes, the more those in a position to assist insult and abuse him, their irresponsible decisions leading to his rapid deterioration, and possibly an early death. Narcissism, arrogance, self-righteousness, and especially individual dictatorial attitudes (manifested as lack of social responsibility and abusive personal initiative) are some of the traits of this post-socialist, post-dictatorial society. Although the ambulance nurse does not abandon Mr. Lazarescu, the overall picture of this society remains terrifying.

Social disorientation also affects generational communication and interactions. *Medalia de onoare* (*The Medal of Honor*, Calin Petre Netzer, 2009) explores the difficult relationships between a retiree and his family; his bond with son and wife was irremediably altered by a past decision to turn his son in to the Securitate when intending to defect the country. Incapable to admit the truth or apologize, when presented with a medal of honor for merits in battle during Second World War, he hopes to gain his family's respect back. Unfortunately, the medal belongs to a veteran with a similar name. Faced with the option of telling the truth and endure shame, he decides to buy a similar medal which passes as his own. A heroic version of the past was forged, just as he created a politically correct version of his collaboration with the communist police to disguise an act of betrayal. The medal does not restore the much-hoped affection or the dialogue between him and his son in a visit from abroad. His painful efforts to recuperate it from his grandson, who speaks no Romanian, emphasize the loss of the most basic human relationships: affective and linguistic exchanges.

Socialist dictatorship manifested, among others things, the confinement of citizens within the country's borders. This created a wave of defections, as well as massive migration after the regime's fall in 1989. Families were separated, and later encounters revealed enormous generational gaps between those adapted to Western ways of living and a local dysfunctional population. Such is the case in *Felicia inainte de toate* (*First of All, Felicia*, Melissa de Raaf, Razvan Radulescu, 2009). Although father, mother and daughter speak the same language, they are engaged in parallel conversations, miscommunication resulting in a series of unfortunate events. Felicia is engulfed in a distressing relationship with her mother, a well-intended father who believes he can still call old Communist friends to alter airport timetables, and airport employees who threaten her with total lack of regard. Between past and present, East and West, Felicia cannot find a personal space of accommodation or a stable identity. Tense relationships with both her family and Dutch ex-husband mark her alienated status in both countries and societies. The West, in addition, is to blame for the estrangement of the grandson (as in the *Medal of Honor*) who is left behind because of the inability to communicate with his grand-parents, or to understand the culture and society.

The re-entering of former socialist states within the larger Europe attracted, at first, increased migration to the West, and soon after, disappointment with a Western Europe that not only disrupted the original family configuration, but also proved incapable of fulfilling fantasy expectations. *The Italian Girls* (Napoleon Helmis, 2004), *Occident* (*West*, Cristian Mungiu, 2002), *Boogie* (Radu Munteanu, 2008), and *California Dreamin'* (Cristian Nemescu, 2007) are some of the cinematic works dealing with the subjects of separation, alienation and nostalgia. They portray desperate individuals who renounce love in order to find illusory happiness in the West, as well as those who experienced the West, but live in nostalgia for their past lives in a faraway native land (*West*). Others find themselves unfulfilled and, like Felicia, lost between cultures (*Boogie*); and finally, some hope the West will solve their problems (*The Italian Girls*), in spite of numerous warning

signs about putting one's faith in money and capitalism.

In this sense, the new cinema is not less metaphorical in its illustration of the alienating effects both dictatorship and migration had on a population little prepared, psychologically, economically or ideologically, to enter the global world. Depicting the uneventful encounter of three former high school friends, *Boogie* presents the spectator with a 'before' and 'after' (the fall of the dictatorship) perspective. The three friends meet by chance at the Black Sea over the Labor Day weekend of May 1st, and comparisons between a past spent in parties, women and drinking and the "boring" present are generated. Places (various beaches, resorts, as well as Ceausescu's seaside villa), cold weather and people do not rise to former glory. The better-off friend of all three, a small business owner, is married and has a child he barely sees and with whom he cannot communicate. While he blames it on long work hours, his inability to understand child play and repeated tentative attempts to impose his own rules are symbolic of a generation corrupted by narrow viewpoints and totalitarian principles. The other two friends have no particular achievements, although one lives in a Scandinavian country. His relationship with a Scandinavian woman is based on a need to survive, rather than love or respect. The West is both openly cursed and despised, and the conveniently absent girlfriend, a substitute for the Westerner's general image, is both mocked and debased, but also praised for her hospitality and generosity. In spite of an embarrassing situation never fully admitted (his job as a cleaner), he chooses to marry the woman rather than return to a country where only memories of the past generate meaning. The friends' attempts to revive 'old times' through dinking, mutual insulting, sharing a prostitute, and revisiting old places reveal the gap between then (the past) and now (the present), and here (the East) and there (the West). Home or abroad, the men are not fully adjusted to their adult lives and social obligations. Significantly, their last meaningless walk brings them by Ceausescu's villa. The peacocks are missing and they 'replace' the birds by imitating their calls. The effort is pathetic and overall joyless: the peacocks as symbols of the past are gone and, in spite of their best efforts, they cannot become/replace the peacocks. Recreating the past is a hopeless illusion.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, due to its involvement in the European World Wars, rise to economic supremacy in the world, as well as cultural dominance, especially through Hollywood's strong appeal, the United States became a powerful extension of Western Europe and Western type of civilization. As a result, the image of the "West" became more desirable and intimidating at the same time. "America" grew to be the new universal myth, an object of desire, as well as envy, a powerful ally every nation wanted to befriend, but in terms based on one's idealized image.

The West as America is central to *California Dreamin',* the saga of a train with American soldiers going to Kosovo via Romania. The film depicts the story of a missed cultural encounter caused by World War II's unfortunate events. The Americans prove in the new circumstances an illusory ally, the locals' unrealistic hopes being empty fantasy projection(s) over another culture. Closer to the spirit of carnival and filmed in a style very different form the minimal realism of the new Romanian cinema, *California Dreamin'* mocks the locals who invite outsiders to help solve their internal conflicts. The film stands as a metaphor for the entire Balkan region where crucial ally interventions eventually do not take place, while uninvited ones only pretend helping: the US abandoned Eastern Europe at the end of the WWII, insists a resentful character, but showed up (uninvited) for a conflict in Kossovo, creating additional ethnic divisions and misunderstandings. In fact, after over five decades of living in different types of societies (socialist and capitalist), the US and Eastern Europe are as far apart as one could imagine: linguistic translations for the aim of communication, mostly misunderstood and corrupted by intentions, interpretations, and assumptions are symbolic of the distance that separates East and West.

Although these cinematic works on the East-West relationship focus on "the transitional phase of a post-totalitarian chaotic society whose longing for the 'western paradise' [is] so strong that it [breaks] all existing barriers, overtly neglecting personal identity

and integrity," (Georgescu 2012, 32), one cannot ignore that lies, deceit and prostitution are strong themes that, besides loss of direction, suggest the betrayal of old values of loyalty and patriotism in favor of suspect capitalistic gain. The West and capitalism exert a strong fascination, but remain questionable. Hence the tendency to criticize, take one's distance or (in)directly condemn Western promises and/or interventions in the East.

Imitating the West-a historically common reality in the Balkans-causes suspicion, as in Corneliu Porumboiu's *Police, Adjective* (2009). A character insists that Bucharest used to be called "Little Paris" and that Brasov's Black Church should be re-covered in gold, as it was in the past, to claim Prague's title of the "Golden City." Competition goes, however, only so far as claiming attention for reproducing similar realities. The character embodies Romanians' submissive attitude to Western Europe and the comparison of their achievements with West European (or anything West of Romania) accomplishments. This obsession with copying the West comes from a self-placement in the East and a desire to conform to Western European notions of culture and statehood (Ravetto-Biagiolli 2005, 183).

The cult for imitating and following standardized models finds ultimate criticism in the usage of a dictionary as supreme reference. A lesson in understanding and applying the law given by a superior to two young policemen transforms the disembodied written word into an absurd 'absolute:' literal definitions are applied literally to human situations without regard for the destructive consequences on a helpless teenager. The struggle between a young policeman and his boss on behalf of the teenager emphasizes the serious need for this society to find its humanity.

In spite of a strong feeling of social and ideological disorientation, the new Romanian cinema supports strong humanistic messages in favor of a new social consciousness liberated from the traumas of a former dictatorship and engaging in the adoption of better-quality social standards. In addition, as Deltcheva observes, there is a "new sense of East-Europeans' awareness that their lives validation need not be mediated via Western cultural and social markers." (2005, 203). Like all former socialist nations, Romania has to deal with complex realities that require, besides rapidly learning the functioning of market economies, an adaptation of local specifics to global pace and management.

Unlike the bigger-than-life historic figures and the populist tone specific to socialist productions, the new Romanian cinema focuses on everyday individuals, their daily anxieties, and especially an insignificant routine life. In the transition from the mythical to the mundane, from the extraordinary to the ordinary, from exhilarating to monotonous, the new cinema provides a mirror for the Romanian viewer to recognize oneself and adjust to its humane destiny. The consequences of the past and their end result, a dysfunctional present, call for the acceptance of collective responsibility. Georgescu believes that the New Romanian Cinema reflects the nation's difficulty in finding its current identity and in the end "giving up" on finding it (26). One cannot ignore, though, the presence of positive, determined characters: the young policeman's fight to save a teenager or the determination of an ambulance nurse to help a dying patient could be interpreted as possible paradigms of changes to come.

In Place of Conclusions: The Road to Normalcy

An especially significant work by young director Marian Crisan, *Morgen* (2010), depicts the unfortunate delay in Romania of a Turkish immigrant who misses his truck to Germany. A local man hosts him in his cellar until a chance to cross the border to Hungary occurs. The two speak little, share work and chores, play cards and billiards at the local pub, and go fishing together. Although under threat by the police and his brother-in-law, an unspoken friendship ties the local man to the Turkish transient. In the process of depicting the setting on the border with Hungary, Crisan creates a metaphor for the entire Romanian territory as a transit space: a bridge of hope for illegal refugees expecting an occasion to cross the border to the West; a rigid limit for Hungarian patrols and border

officers; or a familiar territory for the main character who drives across to fish. Far from reminding of the past Ottoman occupier, the Turkish man, a father with a dilemma (he searches for his son), finds understanding in a sympathetic individual who does not care about History, the East, the West, or immigration laws and politics. Even a reluctant brother-in-law gives the man temporary work in his factory, and transports him by car while comically wondering why he is doing it. Concern over the fate of a migrant in transit, rather than the possible threat he could represent because of illegality, becomes the main theme.

Demystified of its traditional aura of exoticism, the East, represented by an ordinary man in need of help, or by invisible refugees behind bushes, is not a threat to anyone. Besides transitory illegals largely ignored by the Romanian border patrols, no locals seem concerned with the West, but rather with solving their everyday problems. The only time people go west is to have a football match with their Hungarian neighbors or to fish in waters across the border.

Morgen represents the West as a mirage place for easterners, and Romania as space of transition between the East and West. Passive spectators to the migration of others, locals lead modest lives, dealing as well as they can with economic hardships. The only visible authority, the border patrolman, only pretends to do his job. Threats are a formality since the law is not applied; in fact, the patrols abandon the Turkish man in the middle of the road to find his own way to some unknown refugee center. The apathetic reaction of villagers to the presence of foreigners in transit over their territory is highly significant: historically, their territory has always been a transit space for migrant populations (Slavs, Huns, Goths, etc.), conquerors advancing West (Hungarians, Ottomans), and lately, illegal transients.

Georgescu considers *Morgen*'s characters incapable of leaving their "enclosure," and affirms that 'journeys' in Romanian cinema "end up with the inevitable conclusion that it is impossible to reach other realms, both physically and spiritually (29)." Analyzing the Romanian cinema of the 90s, Anna Jackel observes that "negative images" (orphanages, miners' demonstrations) became representative for the entire country (2000, 108). A similar tendency to analyze the minimalist realism of the New Romanian Cinema in negative terms dominates the academic and critical analysis today. A man helping a transient foreigner, a police officer trying to save a teenager from prison, or an ambulance nurse not giving up care of a dying man demystify traditional cinematic heroism confronting the viewer with the everyday action as act of responsibility and self-worth. The willful camera focus on people's resilience and will to fulfill their duty, or simply go on with their lives is significant: finally free from invasions and dictatorship, they can re-start to re-build their communities, as they had done for centuries.

Accustomed to traditional images that celebrated "the exotic authenticity of the Balkan Other" and with people who exhibited a "prodigious lust for life" (Žižek in Bjelić *Balkan as Metaphor*, 21), traits common not only to socialistic productions, but to the nineties movies of Kusturica and other East-European productions, audiences, critics, and academics were taken by surprise by the minimalist style of the new Romanian cinema. The features of the new realism (lack of non-diegetic music, long takes of [almost] static scenes, contained emotional reactions, common spaces, ordinary characters, few or no spectacular episodes, etc.) created wide puzzlement and questioning. "There is almost no didacticism or point-making in these films […]. There is an unmistakable political dimension to this kind of storytelling, even when the stories themselves seems to have no overt political content" affirmed film critic Anthony Scott (3). Roddick also remarked the "striking naturalism" of details that makes *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* look like a documentary; "The result is cinematic humanism in its purest form." (*Sight and Sound* 2012)

In spite of its novel formal style, the contemporary Romanian cinema continues a local tradition of (self) representation and self-contemplation through such elements as the absurd, the grotesque, and/or the carnivalesque. Subtle dark humor highlights a reflection

on contemporary realities, as well as new emerging identities. Through processes of cinematic reconstitution and reflection, as well as innovative approaches to realistic cinematic conventions, the New Romanian Cinema gave voice to an authentic imaginary.

Although this cinema has no unified ideology, its persistent close up on the contemporary individual and his/her immediate surroundings creates a detailed portrayal of the present-day psychological behavior and transformation. It is without a doubt a deeply political and didactic cinema, a carefully crafted social mirror aimed to expose and dispose of an offensive past, opening avenues to new identities. In this context, one can understand the wide festival success of the Romanian cinema abroad: its faux documentary style allows a glimpse into unusual social phenomena and changes. People could finally "see" the internal metamorphosis of a nation physically invisible for almost half of a century.

Although at home many of these films remained largely ignored, nevertheless they show the concern of a generation of young filmmakers determined to do their duty: reveal the gaps in the social fabric and subtly point to new aspirations. The lack of didacticism and ideology is only an appearance: while a new ideology is still to be defined, the didacticism and symbolism are present through deliberate exclusion. The cinema of this former socialist country did not lose its normative and educative function; it only changed its approach.

Notes

1. On December 1, 1918 Romania, Transylvania and Bessarabia created one state inhabited by a majority of Romanians. A tentative to unify all "Romanian" territories took place in 1599-1600 under Michael the Brave.
2. A good summary of Blaga's philosophy of culture, although without direct references to the Romanian cultural space, is given by Michael S. Jones in "Culture as Religion and Religion as Culture in the Philosophy of Lucian Blaga." (*The Journal for the Study of Religions and Philosophy*, Nr. 15, Winter 2006).
3. A short summary of Blaga's discussion of the Romanian stylistic matrix can be found in Catherine Lovatt's "The Mioritic Space: Romanian National Identity in the Work of Lucian Blaga" (In *Central Europe Review*, Vol. 1, No. 18, 1999). http://www.ce-review.org/99/18/lovatt18.html.
4. A direct translation for "haiduc" would be "outcast."

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