

A Documentary that Invites a Sequel:
The Distance between Me and Me (Dana Bunescu, Mona Nicoară, 2019)

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The Distance between Me and Me is Mona Nicoară's second documentary and Dana Bunescu's first directorial project. Both filmmakers came into this partnership with impressive expertise. Nicoară, after co-directing *Our School* with Miruna Coca Cozma (2011), a civil rights documentary focusing on the integration of Roma children in the Romanian education system, changed gears and approached documentary-making in a more innovative manner that combines the most resonating feature film aesthetics with a somewhat fractured storytelling. Bunescu, on her part, adds co-directing to her portfolio of 43 credits for sound design and 43 more for editing. Taking on Ada Solomon's idea to tell the story of the prolific poet Nina Cassian, Nicoară and Bunescu created one of the most entertaining and informative documentaries dedicated to the life of a poet. Some documentaries chronicling poets' lives and works include the Oscar winning *Robert Frost: A Lover's Quarrel with the World* (1963) by Shirley Clarke; *Polis is This: Charles Olson and the Persistence of Place* by Henry Ferrini (2007); *Rita Dove: An American Poet* by Eduardo Montes-Bradley (2014), or the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) awarded *Al Purdy Was Here* by Brian D. Johnson (2015). In comparison to these works, *The Distance between Me and Me* is an ingenious portrayal of a complex personality for whom the camera functions as an *aide-memoire*. Sitting in front of the camera, watching archival excerpts from the Romanian television footage of the late 1940s through 1970s and reading Securitate informants' notes on her activity, a 90-year-old Cassian recalls political choices and events, late friends, husbands and lovers, poems and songs, official meetings and private parties, with a paradoxical attitude that I would call "engaging nonchalance." The title suggests some detachment on the part of the New York-based Cassian in 2014 from her younger version in faraway Romania, as well as vivid recollections that are constantly punctured with self-sanctioning remarks, self-ironical smirks, as well as cigarette puffs and whiskey sips.

The documentary opens with Cassian's Securitate file in which she is portrayed as a woman who evades understanding. Informants' declarations, surveillance orders, blueprints of her Bucharest house (meticulously assembled in order to decide where to plant the bugs) introduce Cassian before the viewers see her. No matter how detailed those descriptions are, no matter how casually Cassian explains her transformation into an "ugly duckling" during her teens, nothing prepares the audience for the close-up that follows. It is an unexpected encounter with a charismatic, sharp-witted, young-at-heart woman. From this point on, the dialogue between the past and the present begins. The black-and-white archival films, mostly propagandistic, disclose an ideologically imbued reality that looks fake in its perfect order, making one wonder how it was possible for an intelligent woman like Cassian to persist in believing in such a utopian project. The visual register then changes: the sharp colors of high image resolution capture a lively interior of an authentic mess in the living room of her New York apartment. It is this representation of freedom that goes very well with her biting comments on old political beliefs and ideals, demystifying memories of two 20th century Romanian literary giants (Ion Barbu, Marin Preda), and her blunt statements about her stupidity.

The contrast between black-and-white and color sequences is less of an artistic choice and more of a reality reflecting the different film sources (35 mm film and the more modern digital images); nevertheless, the shift adds an aesthetic statement to the fortuitous critical gaze at the protagonist's two-part life, namely before and after her defection to the United States. The black-and-white episodes become an implicit criticism of the poet's political regimentation and activism. Involuntarily, but quite adequately, the archival footage (not as black-and-white as the generic term suggests, but rather various shades of gray) is wonderfully edited in order to imply that there is more to read into the images of a totalitarian society than just simplistic dichotomies, such as "us and them;" party activists with their acolytes and the old bourgeoisie tagged as "enemies of the people;" working-class and intelligentsia; or the Securitate's apparatus of surveillants and those under surveillance. Each category has its degrees of support and contribution. Out of these shades of gray, the ideologically engaged, militant poet Nina Cassian takes shape, only to be reprehended, moments later, by a Nina who learned her lesson the hard way as an expat. Out of the rich spectrum of colors, another Nina emerges: judging but not apologetic, contextualizing but unflustered.

Two aspects of her overwhelming presence recorded on these gray-shaded segments stand out: the impulse to take a stand and (a subversive) non-conformism. She takes a stand verbally in the scene in which famous poets of that time engaged workers in an industrial plant in a debate over poetry. Next to poet Adrian Păunescu and other party bards, Cassian faces a room full of men. In the first row, a cross-legged Marin Sorescu is watching her answering a party activist who complains about contemporary poetry that does not have a clear message, does not rhyme, and does not "speak" to workers. Nina, who had abandoned the Proletarian Culture formula by then, defends a freer (poetic) expression, smashing the provocateur's claim. More subtly, her very appearance is subversive. In a sea of dark gray and black suits, she is a spot of light-grayish elegance with her pearls, which visually places her in opposition to the crowd. Her appearances in archival clips gradually accrue the meaning of non-conformism precisely due to the juxtaposition with her old image, which becomes a visual point of reference. The back-and-forth leaps between two histories draw the viewers' attention to the young Cassian's unexpected changes. A detail like her hairdo, which changes once too often and even hides her beautiful golden locks under ugly wigs, makes a statement about a subversive form of non-conformism. It is not much, but it is still relevant, as is her "unacceptable" love life, according to socialist standards.

The visual dialogue between the two Cassian does not chronicle her life accurately, although viewers can put together Cassian's progression from her socialist-realist years to her liberal phase that ultimately led to her exile. It is rather Cassian's multilayered dialogue with a complicated past, with the ghosts emerging from two totalitarian eras in Romanian history, fascism and communism, and, in the end, with the viewers, who are transformed into witnesses to her confession. The masterful handling of the camera, which literally stares at the old Nina Cassian, at times zooming in on her face to an almost unbearable close-up, defies space and time by visually suggesting the teleportation of each and every one in the theatre into her living room. The staging in the New York apartment, mostly dictated by the space itself, seems to be used with extreme care in order to avoid conveying any meaning other than the minimalistic surrounding of a character larger than life. Few objects make it into the frame: an ashtray with

butts and a glass, sometimes a landline phone and stacks of folders and newspapers on the left, stacks of books on the right, which come into the frame and create an awkward feeling of claustrophobia. Only toward the end of the film does her husband, Maurice Edwards, enter the frame and sit next to Nina on the couch. Both the segments in which Nina's face is in the sole focus and those in which camera allows a bit more to be seen are of surreal clarity. She is trapped in front of the camera, allowing it to examine her at close range for the benefit of full disclosure and to be judged with no attempt to defend herself or to embellish her story.

Released at the beginning of 2019, almost five years after her death, the documentary *The Distance between Me and Me* gives viewers a glimpse into the life of a multitalented artist who was also a painter, illustrator, and composer. The film, however, does not explore her achievements in other arts apart from literature, although they are mentioned in passing. At one point, Cassian talks about her classical music training and the fact that she composed music. Commenting on censorship, she presents music as the only art which defeated censors: as she said, C major or C minor could mean many things, and nobody could make a clear-cut case justifying the banning of a music composition. Without knowing upfront that the original soundtrack is in fact compiled from Cassian's compositions, the viewers may disregard these comments on music as superfluous. For those who are patient enough to wait and read the credits at the end of the film and for those who know that she was also a decent visual artist, the portrait of this complex author remains incomplete. However, the most problematic issues regarding Cassian's career are raised by her socialist-realist poems, while her music and visual art seem to have been unsullied by Stalinist ideology or later by the Communist Party directives. *The Distance between Me and Me* is about the stylistic estrangement that followed Cassian's reinvention as a poet and about acknowledging that "a perfect society is a fairy tale." Warm and informative, Nicoară and Bunescu's film does not shy away from challenging and provocative issues. The documentary is an homage, as some film critics have said, as much as it is a critical investigation of a controversial artist's legacy.

The Distance between Me and Me is more than a skillful and enjoyable piece of filmmaking; it is also a great resource for teaching film studies, as well as twenty-century history, political science, and world literature with a focus on communist Romania. While a film studies class may explore the masterful editing and appropriation of some signature features of the New Romanian Cinema to a documentary storytelling from a formalist point of view, the rest may transform the content, e.g. visual representation of propaganda and surveillance, into topics for debates over artistic freedom, cultural activism, and censorship. As Andrei Ujică, the director of the famous *Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu* (2010), put it: "The determining medium of an era has always marked history, quite unambiguously so... [History] was influenced by theater, from Shakespeare to Schiller, and later on by literature, until Tolstoy. As we know, the 20th century is filmic." Even more so, a good documentary has the power to trigger reflection and change preconceived ideas.