

Consciousness and Spirituality in the New Romanian Cinema¹

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The defining of the “Romanian (Pop, 2009: 244-259)¹” identity and Romania’s place within Europe has known a tumultuous debate in the last two centuries, although a national “Romanian” state has existed for a little over 150 years. Intellectuals have tried to define a Romanian consciousness or identity ever since the 17th century, with such discussions intensifying after the 1918 country’s unification with Transylvania. The enlarged state was about twenty years old when the first aggressions of the WWII started, so it did not gain extended experience. Lucian Blaga, a well-respected philosopher, affirmed that the natural development of Romania was stopped a number of times; as a result, the only possibility of integrating modern structures and achieving a rapid advancement was imitating other European models (1969: 238, 257). In his opinion, imitation could alter the stylistic matrix², but not in its main traits. Eight decades later, in *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness*, historian Lucian Boia, on a similar position with many other intellectuals insists that, in its essence, the Romanian state and the national consciousness are widely based on imitation of the Western models, mainly French, followed by German, Italian and others (2001: 155-168).³

This desire to and insistence on imitating Western models could only be understandable in Romanians’ or other Balkan ethnicities’ situation, not only because successful socio-economic models tend to be imitated (Turkey, an Islamic state, chose the successful French model⁴), but also because a nation implies an independent entity, an ideal all ethnicities occupied by the Ottoman or Russian Empire aspired to. The Western socio-economic model represented consequently a position of resistance against the Ottoman or Russian colonizer. The mythologizing of Western nations became a mythologizing of one’s national achievements as soon as Balkan states accomplished independence and/or unification. Andrei Roth summarizes

¹ The term “Romanian” has been introduced only in the 19th century. However, the observation of being of Roman descent and sharing the same language took place earlier and came from Western travelers to the Balkans. Dimitrie Cantemir mentions it too in his writings after visiting Timisoara in a mission for the Ottoman government (Pop, IA (2009) *Romania and Romanians in Europe: A Historical Perspective* In: Boari V and Ghergina S (eds) *Weighting Differences: Romanian Identity in the Wider European Context*. Newcastle upon Thyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 244-259).

² The stylistic matrix represents the sum of traits specific to a cultural space. See the sub-chapter “The Stylistic Matrix” in the *Trilogy of Culture* (105-118).

³ Boia insists on the big difference between the imitation / borrowing that took place between the 1820s and 1940s: Romanian culture slowly assimilated (and rejected at times) the borrowed material. The first orientation towards the West was cultural and responded to a deep spiritual need, while the socialist and post-socialist orientations were commercial and financial (167).

⁴ Spohn specifically affirms that the French revolutionary form of a secular nation-state and nationalism “served as a model for most modernizing European nation-states” (Spohn W (2003) *Multiple Modernity, Nationalism and Religion: A Global Perspective*. In: *Current Sociology* 51 (3-4): 265).

that “All the nationalisms emphasize the specificity, the uniqueness, non-repeatability, and the excellence of their own nation, of mentality and spirituality” (1995: 9). He continues:

The nationalist views of today, elaborated from very diverse political ideological positions in Romania as in all the countries of the Eastern area (with the exception of Russia, of course), are characterized, amongst other things, by the over-evaluation and embellishment of the economic-social and political estates from the respective countries in the inter-war period. (1995: 12)

The inter-war period offered the only collective (national) memories the young East-European nations could return to, not only because of their short history as states, but also because enough time has passed to erase from memory old shortcomings and elevate that past to a position of dignity in comparison to the compromised socialist era.

But the shortly lived socialist state (1947-89) became one of the most mythologizing periods in the history of Romanian consciousness. As Boia and other historians reveal, it elaborated on aspects such as the expansion of the national myth of the Dacian state; the existence of national consciousness before national unity; the (re)writing of Romanian history as victimized nation; the creation of a heroic image of “resistance” in conditions of repeated occupations/colonization; the continuous unity of national consciousness and Latinity of the language, and many other aspects.⁵

Collective identities rest, in general, on collective experiences and memories which tend to be sacralized into myths when a nation establishes the grounds for its distinctiveness. All human collectives create and rely on an ideal body of references to which it can return for re-evaluation and correction. Historic circumstances in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when national states took shape, did not allow Romanians to steadily build on such collective experiences since the territories inhabited by Romanians were under various occupations until the first Romanian state (made up of Moldova and the Romanian Principality, 1859) obtained its independence from the Ottoman Empire (1877). While survivors of the 1930s idealize(d) the first decades of the “Greater Romania”, the more numerous survivors of the socialist era inherited a very divided identity, ranging from complete rejection of the past to nostalgia. Some even wished to bring back former socio-economic and administrative structures considering the former socialist system more secure. In 2010, Adrian Marino (*The Life of a Lonely Man*) observed that political and economic elites were still functioning within a system of knowledge and understanding reflective of the former socialist ideology; the deep ideological change required to enter the European and global structures had not been achieved by 2010, in the short two decades after 1989.

But Romanians reached two long held dreams within one century (1918 - 2018): they became a sovereign united nation (1918) and they were accepted into the big family of European states (2007). How did Romanian consciousness evolve over a decade after Romania’s entrance

⁵ Lucian Boia proceeds in *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness* to a demythologizing of all historic approaches to the present. He reveals how historical facts were forged or manipulated into to a constructed vision of idealized Romanianess. For instance, the work and image of many pre-war authors first forbidden was later restored, although often published in censored format that eliminated undesired passages.

into the European Union? What are some of the major spiritual and ideological concerns? How are older and younger generations integrating into a fast-moving Europe and even a faster mundialization?

A post '89 critique comes from Nicoleta Ifrim who rightly observes that discussions on “‘Romanian cultural identity’ [are] organized around certain minimal cultural topoi which define dichotomies that are sometimes excessively artificial: these include simple ruralism versus urbanism, culturally focused localism versus Eurocentrism, a questioning of narrow cultural nationalism versus the cult of the ‘national’ writer, exaggerated ‘cultural patriotism’ versus an acute consciousness of Romania’s marginal location” (2013: 27).

However, such stereotypical perceptions are increasingly replaced, especially among intellectuals and educated youth, with more flexible and more appropriate views of our realities. Vast global economic and political migrations and continuous processes of hybridization have changed and continue to change the overall understanding of the concepts of national bodies and identity. Scholars and intellectuals agree nowadays that “the nation is not a unified subject. It is a sum of scattered subjectivities, therefore of scattered identities, therefore of scattered bodies” (Hayward, 2011:50).

Similarly, Stuart Hall affirms that “identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to radical historicization and are constantly in the process of change and transformation” (in Ifrim, 2013: 29).

In the Eastern-European context, due to former inter-ethnic wars over territories, one could argue the presence of a still great resistance to accepting other ethnic groups as equal citizens on one’s national land (therefore, the diverse or ‘scattered identities’ nation) and that stereotypical views may still remain strong. Yet, despite ongoing conflicts (Kosovo or Transylvania are a few examples), a difficult yet necessary dialogue has entered public life and has already altered perceptions. In light of these tense dialogues, but also visible signs of ideological transformations, we focus on the representation of consciousness and spiritual identity in the new Romanian cinema.

Cinema has been part of the nation building, not only at the service of fascist or socialist states which used it for propagandistic purposes, but it has been a powerful mean of self-reflection and representation for all national states. Susan Hayward goes as far as considering that “national identity is an integral component of cinema, necessary to its survival” and that cinema and identity have a “symbiotic” relationship (2011: 49). Today there is no doubt that the Romanian socialist state built its identity using film to aggrandize its image. In its need to expand its ideology, it bought movie caravans and projectors from the former Soviet Union, in order to reach every village, even in the most remote locations. Very different from this propagandistic tradition, the new Romanian cinema was perceived at first a-political and non-ideological, but critics quickly realized its role as a discreet witness of social events on the home

grounds. Stories of everyday people revealed to be intense reflections on major life aspects, on nation, identity, love, relationships, memory and/or the nature of subjectivity.

In its most essential representations and testimonies, the new cinema brought to screen Romanians' dual relationships with the West (*West* (Cristian Mungiu, 2002), *The Italian Girls* (Napoleon Helmis, 2004), *California Dreamin'* (Cristian Nemescu, 2007), *Boogie* (Radu Munteanu, 2008), *Of Snails and Men* (Tudor Giurgiu, 2012)); the more or less overt critique of the socialist era and its aftermath (*4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days* (Mungiu, 2007), *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (Puiu, 2005), *12:08 East of Bucharest* (Porumboiu, 2006)); the detachment from illusions and the increased awareness of one's abilities and possibilities (*Police, Adjective* (Corneliu Porumboiu, 2009), *Morgen* (Marian Crisan, 2010), *Of Snails and Men* (Tudor Giurgiu, 2012), *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle* (Florin Serban, 2010)); and the ongoing search for alternate ideological approaches (*Beyond the Hills* (Cristian Mungiu, 2012), *Graduation* (C. Mungiu, 2016), *Aurora* (Puiu, 2011), *Sieranevada* (Cristi Puiu, 2016)).

***Sieranevada*: Social Consciousness and Collective Identity**

Cristi Puiu's latest film, *Sieranevada*, is a complex story centered on a family gathering that commemorates 40 days since the passing away of the father. The narrative complexity of the film attracted a lot of critical attention. Dan Fainaru sees in it "not only a masterful portrait of the contemporary Romanian middle-class but also a whole set of smart, perceptive reflections on the relativity of truth, on the failings of memory, the interpretation of history, the significance of religion and much more."⁶ José Sarmiento-Hinojosa thinks it depicts "the social issues of a nation via the intimate issues of a family."⁷ Boeyd van Hoeij affirms that it "is about constantly navigating obstacles while still finding a way to belong or gain entry into the subsets of humanity that are important to you or expected of you — and that, when all taken together, define who you are."⁸

As one of the most complex films of the Romanian "new" wave and, one can safely say, of the entire Romanian cinema, *Sieranevada* is all of the above and more. At the center of patriarchal societies, *family* has often served as social metaphor for the nation through its organizational pattern, the established social hierarchy among its members and pre-determined power positions within family and the community. Family has remained one of the most resilient social institutions despite global pressures and changes in its structure; consequently instabilities within the family are often perceived as patriarchal crises and are reflected as crisis of the male character. In *Sieranevada*, the family lost its patriarch, Emil, and as the immediate family and friends gather to commemorate him, other patriarchal figures and possible future patriarchs are

⁶ 'Sieranevada': Review (2016). In: *Screen Daily*. Available at: <https://www.screendaily.com/reviews/sieranevada-review/5103729.article> (accessed July 20 2018).

⁷ The Matryoshka Doll of Laughter and Uncertainty: Cristi Puiu's *Sieranevada* (2016) (2017). In: *Senses of Cinema* 84. Available at: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2017/cteq/sieranevada/> (accessed July 20 2018).

⁸ 'Sieranevada': Cannes Review (2016). In: *The Hollywood Reporter*. Available at: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/sieranevada-cannes-review-892724> (accessed July 20 2018).

introduced. Of the two older men present at the event, Tony (an unfaithful husband everyone dislikes for aggravating his wife's emotional state) and a neighbor (professor of mathematics whose calm, measured advice remains unimpressive) do not hold the same level of authority as Emil, the deceased. The escalating disputes Tony creates suggest that the presence of an authority figure is vital for the balance of the family, as well as society overall.

Without a strong patriarch (or leader), society loses its "rightful" direction and falls victim to 'bad fathers', such as the mafia businessman in *Stuff and Dough* (Cristi Puiu, 2002), the rude, careless doctors in *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*, the compassionless policemen in *Police, Adjective*, the mediocre TV presenter in *12:08 East of Bucharest*, or the father who asks his daughter to cheat at the graduation exam (Cristian Mungiu, *Graduation* 2016).

Communal experiences, especially good ones, are, as a result, central to the construction of identity, the formation and affirmation of 'good fathers'. Every narrative device in *Sieranevada* – plot, dialogues, moments of silence, camera angles, etc. - emphasizes the characters' construction as social figures and reveals their (possible) status within the social hierarchy. The neutrality of the camera eye in *Sieranevada* is only superficial; the spectator soon distinguishes between Lary's position of trust within the family, his brother's (an army officer) lack of masculinity (he insists on his fear of things repeatedly), his brother in law's inability to establish a mutually respectful relationship with his wife, and his cousin's ridiculous obsession with conspiracy theories and googling.

Identity construction takes place within the narrative collective experience and it functions itself like a narrative, going through the ups and downs (or 'sierra') of more or less conflictual interactions, exchanges, motivations or goals. Events and characters in a narrative interrelate in various ways, sometimes collide, contributing to storyline development. With every event, a reaction that will evolve to some outcome is generated. The sum of these reactions and events contribute to the advancement of the story.

Similarly, the individual identity takes shape with a social context, usually narrative in nature, since made of multiple events. Glynis Breakwell in *Coping with Threatened Identities* (1986: 19) mentions that "individual identity is 'fluid, dynamic, and responsive to its social context'" and that "one's identity typically change[s] over time as a result of developmental dynamics and social influences" (in Seul, 1999: 556). Interactions between individuals and event collisions or encounters lead to change from an original position to a new, modified one. *Sieranevada*'s social microcosm reveals these mechanisms of identity formation within a group and, by extension, a nation: family members and friends have more or less intense exchanges that advance the narrative, impact relationships, alter perceptions and in this process, power hierarchies are created. Individual and collective identities are therefore interlinked and consist "of the members' shared 'conception of its enduring characteristics and basic values, its strengths and weaknesses, its hopes and fears, its reputation and conditions of existence, its institutions

and traditions, its past history, current purposes, and future prospects” (Kelman 1998: 16 in Seul, 1999: 556).⁹

Through brakes in these mechanisms of narrative and identity construction, *Sieranevada* exposes the roots of patriarchal crisis: a social imbalance occurs when male figures are either deeply corrupt and/or are unable to secure authority and respect. In *Sieranevada, the bad father*, Tony, is despised by his son, disrespected by his daughter and wife, and undesired by everyone else. While the deceased Emil seems to hold the position of *good father*, it is revealed he had heavily cheated on his wife and lived his life in lies and deceit. Emil’s older son who grew up lying is now a shallow individual who speaks in clichés; Lary’s brother-in-law lies to Tony about his wife’s medical condition to scare him; Ophelia lied to her sister-in-law about Emil’s (her brother) numerous affairs. Finally, Lary also admits to his wife to having lied sometimes. The “fathers” are not deserving of their children’s (or society’s) respect, and the children in turn end by behaving like the fathers. Sadly, almost everyone is a cheater or accepts cheating. Collective lying leads to collective deceit, a conclusion that points to Romania’s collective memories of its socialist past permeated by lies. In his review, Peter Debruge observed that “deception and the hopeless search for truth is judged both on the micro level (as in extramarital affairs) and a more global scale (which is where questions of Romania’s Communist past [...] fit into the picture)...”¹⁰

Central to the theme of deceit is Lary’s revelation to his wife of the family’s façade of happiness: while his father Emile was having numerous affairs, and his sister Ophelia lied to his wife about the situation, Laura, the wife, knew all about it, but chose to ignore the situation rather than confront her husband. In spite of the past, she insists on abiding strictly by traditional rituals as sign of respect for her husband’s memory.

In light of everyone’s exposed complicity, Jordan Cronk’s conclusion seems appropriate: “as a microcosm of communist influence and the communal ideology it fostered only to eventually betray, the film is a potent portrait of lingering disenchantment and nationalist anxiety.”¹¹ Reasons for anxiety are not only memories of socialism which victimized everyone, but also the collective complicity through which deceit was disseminated and maintained for generations. *Sieranevada* seems to suggest that the responsibility for the past falls on everyone and it is everyone’s responsibility to put an end to dishonest practices. Hopefully, Oleg Ivanov’s comment that “Puiu’s intent is to show the nihilism that lies at the heart of contemporary

⁹ Kelman, HC. (1998) The Place of Ethnic Identity in the Development of Personal Identity: A Challenge for the Jewish Family. In: Peter Y Medding (ed) *Coping With Life and Death: Jewish Families in the Twentieth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 3–26.

¹⁰ Film review: ‘Sieranevada’ (2016). In: *Variety*. Available at: <https://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/sieranevada-review-cannes-cristi-puiu-1201771205/> (accessed July 20, 2018).

¹¹ *Sieranevada* (Cristi Puiu, Romania/France/Bosnia and Herzegovnia/Croatia/Republic of Macedonia) (2016). In: *Cinema Scope*. Available at: <http://cinema-scope.com/spotlight/sieranevada-cristi-puiu-romaniafrancebosnia-herzegovniacroatia-republic-macedonia/> (accessed July 20, 2018).

Romanian society, where nothing is sacred because there's nothing left to believe in"¹² is a changing reality.

Sieranevada represents, in this respect, a promising alternative: Lary's crying and confession are both cathartic acts through which he unburdens himself from the past and reveal a change in consciousness. Unlike his parents, or uncle Tony and aunt Ophelia, he has opened a dialogue with his wife (also aware of his lies) suggesting the need to establish their relationship on truth. Through his refusal to accept deceit and live in deceit, Lary indicates the possibility of other positive transformations, his wife (willing to think about it and continue the conversation) and others being next to alter their moral values.

Aunt Ophelia's revolt against her cheating husband comes too late to change his ways, but it sensitized her son and nephew, preparing a generation of patriarchs with a different sense of responsibility.

Sieranevada's intrinsic didactic aspect focuses not so much on judging and condemning the past and/or its residual influences; it rather insists on becoming aware of it, admitting one's flaws and working towards correcting them. It is a discreet way of approaching a sensitive aspect in Romanian society: the change in social consciousness must start with self-awareness and the cathartic act of liberating oneself from deceitful behavior and practices. Sartre affirmed through some of his most memorable characters in *No Exit* that the value of an individual is comprised in the sum of his actions. In a similar manner, the wellbeing and status of a nation are built on its citizens' acts and indirectly are reflective of the fabric of their social consciousness.

Beyond the Hills and Sieranevada: Religion and Collective Identity

Religion, among other cultural markers is "significant to the nation [...] to the degree to which [it] contribute[s] to this notion or sense of the group's self-identity and uniqueness" (Connor 1994: 104 in Seul, 1999: 565).¹³ Religious beliefs permeated the thinking of numerous Romanian Orthodox and Catholic intellectuals before and after the WWII, both in the principalities and Transylvania. The role of religion in defining the Romanian national character was revealed in the pre-WWII decades through intense debates among intellectuals and academics. Lucian Blaga affirmed that the European space marked by three Christian religions, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, was shaped into nations divided first of all along the line of religious beliefs. Almost one century later, reiterating many other scholars, Spohn also affirms: "national identities in Europe were generally shaped by Christianity, though in different institutional forms and cultural contents according to its main religious types" (2003: 272). Blaga insisted that the national space acquired its characteristic from religious differences that superposed over existing ethnic traits. While the catholic religion imposes its beliefs and sense of order from above, the protestant

¹² *Sieranevada* (2016). In: *Slant*. Available at: <https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/sieranevada> (accessed July 20, 2018).

¹³ From Connor, W (1994) *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

religion acts from inside the individual who considers himself free to choose and therefore bound to the duty of respecting that choice; finally, the orthodox religion is perceived as “organic” or bound to the earth as manifestation of God in the world (1960: 132-154).

In “Religion, Nationalism and National Identities,” Payton also emphasizes the historic background of East-European ethnicities organized, under the Ottoman Empire, in *millets* or religious groupings, a structure that “shaped their understanding of self and others” (2009: 54). Just as Catholicism was and remained (in many respects) very much a national trait for most of the West-European states, the insistence on one’s Orthodoxy was essential in defining the Romanian ethnicity and nation, even if this aspect created at times dissensions between Catholic and Orthodox intellectuals. Ethnicity was likewise very important; Romanians were considered different by some to the point of being perceived as a different *race* (George Calinescu) and some even divided them into “Romanians” and “good Romanians” with the “good” ones being the Orthodox ones (Nae Ionescu in Boia, 2001: 147).

Rogers Brubaker in “Religion and Nationalism: Four Approaches” emphasizes that “religion does not necessarily define the boundaries of the nation, but it supplies myths, metaphors and symbols that are central to the discursive or iconic representation of the nation” (2011: 12). He also states:

In the realm of Orthodox Christianity, especially in southeastern Europe, the nationalization of Christianity involved the fragmentation of Eastern Christendom into a series of autocephalous national churches, which provided a key institutional framework for nationalist movements and promoted a strong symbiosis of religious and national traditions. (2001: 16)¹⁴

If religion was and continues to be such an essential trait of the national character, what role does it play for the Romanian nation, almost one hundred years later and after forty years of consistent marginalization by the former socialist government? In what forms did it regain its place into national consciousness and what role does it play?

The ideological void that opened after the 1989 fall of the socialist state allowed the reintegration of religion into public life and state school programs, giving the church a more central place than it has at the present in the secularized West. Scholars have remarked (this turn of events being for some against expectations) the coming back of religion, and Spohn also stressed that “with the collapse of the Soviet empire in the second world as well as the demise of socialist and Communist movements in large parts of the third world, the parallel development of nationalism and religion has spread on a global scale” (2003: 265). The spread of both nationalism and religion around the world is explained by Seul, among others, through the fact that religion “maintains a sense of psychological stability” promoting “the stabilization of [...] individual and group identity” (1999: 558). The bond it creates within a collective group and the importance given to the communal aspect is invested in general with great value. As a result, relationships between individuals may be stronger since the respective ideology stresses the

¹⁴ Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/wrb/30/> (accessed July 20, 2018).

value of loyalty to the collective and gives positive reinforcement to every member who abides by and promotes it.

Beyond the Hills by Cristian Mungiu (2012), winner of both the Best Screenplay and the Best Actress awards at Cannes (2012) and nominated among the first ten films of 2012 by film magazine *Sight & Sound*, brought to screen the Tanacu exorcism case (2005) offering insights on the meaning of religion in post-'89 Romania. The film depicts a patriarchal society organized around religious rituals and practices. As a collective microcosm, the small monastery is exclusively inhabited by women led by a male priest who gives advice and instructions, and also admonishes members when mysticism, such as beliefs in ghosts, the inhabiting of humans by the dead and other supernatural phenomena, takes over faith. The small monastery is involved in various aspects of the public life and institutions where it receives widespread respect and trust to the extent a doctor affirms that a patient could recuperate better at the monastery and prescribes: "Make her [the patient] also read from the Bible. It helps."

This permeation of the public space with religious beliefs and practices may emphasize a need for moral and spiritual guidance. For the everyday citizen, religion may also offer a most necessary 'psychological' stability in times of uncertainty, especially that in one century Romania went from industrial capitalism to totalitarian socialism to technological-global capitalism. The instability of world markets combined generally with a high degree of material discomfort at home, not to forget a lack of viable ideological alternatives, made religion a very attractive alternative. Spohn believes that the proliferation of religion is rather "in reaction to the former worldwide imposition of state secularism either by western liberal or eastern socialist regimes" (2003: 267). Although all these reasons may be valid in a number of possible combinations, most important is Romanians' shift from one totalitarian-utopian ideology, socialism, to another utopian-totalitarian ideology, religion. Although the two are in different realms, a first visible distinction is that the latter has offered for millennia the hope and motivation the former failed to provide even within a short period of time historically. The strong return of religious beliefs should not surprise, since the Christian foundations of collective identities have been in place for a long time and they only partially and temporarily regressed or changed, depending on socio-cultural and political contexts. As Brubaker states, religion and nationalism combined over time in different forms, borrowed each other's language, and the former "provided a model for and matrix of the congruence between culture and polity that is at the core of nationalism" (10). Seul also affirms that "in times of social crisis, when identities are most vulnerable, religious norms and institutions may provide ready, alternative frameworks for governance..." (1999: 562).

The *Beyond the Hills*' religious social microcosm offers, at first, to the outside viewer an exemplary model of governance and appeals to the rest of society because of its sense of unity of purpose, functionality, efficiency and general happiness. Its overall image is so enticing that a group of teenagers insistently ask the nuns to take them in since they have nowhere to go and nothing to do. Considering the success of such efficient collectivities, one contemplates if religion could take a nation successfully into to 21th century and beyond? Could it continue to

provide, and in what ways, indispensable guidance, moral support and psychological stability to individuals and the nation overall?

In several interviews, Mungiu emphasized that he tried to portray the events from a neutral perspective and to provide a balanced account of events. Yet, the suggestion of a negative or unhealthy social body is present in repeated sequences portraying the nuns as a flock of black birds. They often walk between buildings in a compact group, almost square or cubical in shape, the black of their clothing coming in sharp contrast with the white of the snow. They are also towering, as a black body, over the main character who struggles while being roped to be immobilized. The clear-cut limits of their bodies within the environment could represent metaphorically the limits of their relationship to the world around them, in this case a world in black and white, and possibly the confines of their ideology.

Their strong belief in being of help through violent intervention, when necessary, comes in contrast with the desperate screams of the young woman and her struggle to free herself. The collective actions of the nuns could stand for indoctrinated groups or communities as they perform like a totalitarian body, determined to fight and overcome that which they perceive as deviation from their dogma. The monastery's strict rituals and illogical or absurd requirements are not that different from expectations and impositions under communism. Religion provides "'models of authority' and 'imaginings of an ordering power'" but it is also a "totalizing order" (Friedland, 2002: 390 in Brubaker, 2011: 18).¹⁵ 'The character of the outsider can join the community only if she internalizes convincingly its beliefs and donates all her possessions; her "surrender" to the community has to be total.

The nuns manifest a similar lack of comprehension for the outsider's need to understand everything logically. Moreover, the young visitor's inability to comprehend and accept their beliefs is treated as sickness of the mind, or presence of negative unnatural forces. One could conclude that this religious society lives as much in an imaginary world at odds with reality as the former socialist society since it is not the realm of intention that offers the best interventions or responses, but rather the ability to communicate beyond doctrines. Within this religious totalitarian microcosm, the dogma and ideal wellbeing of the community are above the individual, who needs to adjust his/her view of the world accordingly. Collectivities with isolationist views are efficient only as long as they do not come into conflict with the surrounding world, an aspect that considerably reduces their overall efficiency. Unlike communist governments, Christianity's politics of tolerance and/or its mechanisms of order restoration (such as the confession and forgiveness of sins, or the selling of indulgences) insured its survival for millennia despite periods of totalitarian management.

Mungiu appears to suggest that considering the limitations inherent to most ideological systems, the presence of multiple ideologies could represent a better answer for large scale collectives or nations. Significant in this sense is the last sequence showing the police van (with

¹⁵ From Friedland, R (2002) Money, Sex, and God: The Erotic Logic of Religious Nationalism. In: *Sociological Theory* 20 (3):381-425.

the arrested nuns and priest) coming from the monastery in front of left and right intersection signs, both pointing the route to local monasteries. *Beyond the Hills* seems to emphasize the dilemma confronting a society that offers no alternate ideologies. Considering Romania's socialist past, which generated a similar socio-ideological crisis due to the promotion of a one political party - one economic system, the disastrous consequences of the Tanacu case are a reminder of the dangers down the road if the nation chooses to follow a similar pattern.

Unlike *Beyond the Hills*, *Sieranvada* portrays religion within a social microcosm almost at the opposite end: besides older folks, none of the younger generations seems to take religion seriously, although the only time every person in the apartment is in the same room, together and touching one another, happens during the religious ceremony. Everyone sings the songs, follows the ritual and shows respect to the priest, revealing at least one role the institution of the Church still retained: by bringing everyone together, it strengthens the bond among individuals while establishing, at the same time, a sense of togetherness as a community. Seul underlines:

Religious texts and oral material embody, among other things, myths, lore, songs, and prayers that contribute to identity construction in various ways. They are, in part, repositories of community memory, often providing individuals and groups a crossgenerational sense of belonging in time, as well as a sense of belonging with others in distant places. (1999: 561)

Even in circumstances when younger people do not understand the rituals very well, such as the symbolic presence of the deceased through another man's impersonation of him, they faithfully follow every step of the ritual, repeating the dialogs after the matron and performing it as directed. Through the enactment of the deceased's entrance in the room, they re-confirm their relationship to him and their belonging to the same kinfolks. The overall detached attitude of the group members seems to have positive outcomes: it allows very different individuals to inhabit the same space in spite of various unfolding dramas, even absurd exchanges of opinions and beliefs.

But the visit of the priest is essential in more than one way: it marks a focal point through a tale of faith. He tells the story of a taxi driver wondering if Christ may have come without being recognized, just as he was not recognized by many when he first came. The priest narrates how he cried at first, but later overcame his sadness and fear of misrecognition when realizing the story was a challenge sent to try his faith. This narrative is essential and different from all other narratives from multiple perspectives. First, it places Christ, as good father and savior, and Christ as faith and hope at the heart of *Sieranvada*, which is a story about the Father's absence and the dilemma of a society in need of guidance. Secondly, it reiterates that the good father exists; one only needs to have faith and hope and wait for him patiently. Finally, it could also mean that by rejecting the truth, the priest and all those like him, will continue to live a lie: the good father can never be welcomed because of misrecognition.

But the priest also offers answers by throwing in the seed of reflection and through restating his faith: everyone can doubt their purpose in life, but to succeed one should choose the side that best serves her/his goals and sense of wellbeing. In the end, there is positive meaning at

the heart of *Sieranevada*: collective memories, rituals and kinship bonds bring people together, test and transform them, and eventually generate alternate narratives and options.

Conclusions

The new Romanian cinema continues to remain an intellectually strong cinema that appeals to audiences through a deep sense of reflection and powerful representations of Romania's contemporary society. It is a cinema that contributes to the social dialogue about nation and the shaping of national consciousness through direct observation and depiction of social events, the raise in awareness of past and present events, the need to overcome individual and collective flaws, as well as the need to adopt and abide by strong moral values.

The discussed films reveal the need for a plural system with ideological principles anchored in different sources. While religion can provide guidance and psychological support to individuals and collectivities, additional ideological principles should be in place to lead the nation. *Beyond the Hills* suggests indirectly that doctors are qualified to prescribe medical treatments, not healing through scriptures, and state employees should be guided in their work by established constitutional laws, not religious belief. No system of ideas is exhaustive, and errors of the past could become sources of learning and advancement in the present. In this sense, the spectator could relate to Lary's sadness when contemplating the deep social deceit everyone seems to accept and perpetuate.

The everyday space of the common individual who inhabits the new Romanian cinema is permeated by intense contemplation, as well as dense metaphorical representations. While the former socialist state with its heavy propaganda compromised political principles creating a deep crisis that still engulfs the Romanian society, the focus of social reformation moved from the state to the individual, from the nation to the family, from political to moral debates, from the intellectual to the private sphere. Shifting the source of discussion opens other necessary public spaces of interaction and dialogue, placing the possible center for social transformation within individual and collective realm. Lary, Tony, or any first name may carry a connotation of anonymity, but they do not have the same political and neutralizing charge as "comrade," the term used in socialist times to infer equality and the sharing of collective experiences. The new Romanian cinema offers a degree of identification that allows subjective individuality to manifest itself and to participate in social interchange.

On the other hand, the range of discussions among younger generations testifies to individual integration within global structures, the debates in *Sieranevada* extending from Thai cooking, to vacations in Greece or Asia, to European terrorism and U.S. internal disputes, or shopping at Carrefour. Subject familiarity and degree of involvement in argumentation expose a sense of global belonging and participation. Other shared experiences, such as an Anderson tale in Disney interpretation, attest to a hybrid cultural background common to cultures across the world. These transnational tales and stories represent individual and group involvement into a supra-statal international consciousness. Sharing with or rather borrowing from other cultures does not seem to raise concerns of cultural colonization or alteration of the national character.

Contemporary national identity became inclusive of international experiences and influences: the emphasis falls on the characters' familiarity with a world that feels next door and reveals multiple levels of possible collective identity – family-based, national, European, and/ or global. The post-'89 European generations are depicted as confident and determined, in spite of the many issues inherited from the past or the challenges raised by the present.

Critics and academics have questioned the longevity of the new Romanian cinema, while some have doubted its ability to survive much longer. Yet, its potential resides in its contemporaneity with the events, in representing the evolution of the Romanian society while proposing an intellectual dialogue to its spectators. Due to the dual positioning of being non-political, yet socially engaged, the new cinema manages to keep audiences involved and to remain relevant in its topics, narrative and social approach.

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