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Style, Affect, and Subjectivity: An Introduction to "Readings of The Romanian New Wave"

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The 2016 Cannes Film Festival confirmed the continued success of Romania's unexpectedly vibrant national cinema. After English and French, Romanian was the most spoken language among the 22 films in competition for the top prize, the *Palme d'Or*. This comes a decade after the success of both *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (2005) and *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days* (2007) at international film festivals effectively put Romanian cinema on the map as a prominent minor national cinema.

Such success is surprising given that Romania is neither economically nor historically established as a national cinema. Despite the enthusiastic scholarly and popular criticism that the Romanian New Wave (RNW) attracted, the expectation has been that its prominence would soon wane. [1][#N1]. This assumption is understandable: all cinematic waves have a limited life span; furthermore the demanding austere style and subject matter of many RNW films, which often feature slow-paced storytelling, a minimalist aesthetic, and a preoccupation with the grim realities of communist and recently post-communist life may come to exhaust audiences and directors alike. [2][#N2]. Yet, as Alexandru Leo Șerban observed in his 2010 assessment of the RNW, "critics may be capable of seeing more clearly, but they are not clairvoyants." [3][#N3]. Since *Film Criticism's* first special issue on the RNW in 2010, Romanian directors have continued making films in the New Wave aesthetic, garnering further international recognition. Andrei Ujică's *Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* (2010) extended the RNW's preoccupation with the past to documentaries; Cristi Puiu has made two more features, *Aurora* (2010) and *Sierranevada* (2016); Cristian Mungiu won two Cannes Film Festival awards: best screenplay for *Beyond the Hills* (2012) and best director for *Graduation* (2016); Cătălin Peter Netzer's *Child's Pose* (2013) won the Golden Bear in Berlin; Radu Jude was awarded the Silver Bear for Best Director for *Aferim!* (2015).

This special issue brings together new critical voices that analyze Romanian cinema's endurance and evolving interests. The contributors innovate discussions of the RNW as a film movement. They tackle newer films that have not yet received scholarly attention and situate these films internationally, suggesting analogous social-political milieus for fruitful cross-cultural analysis. These scholars locate their readings of Romanian films among film theories, movements, and genres beyond the national context. While this issue is unique in its emphasis on Romanian cinema in a broader, international context, many of our contributors still root their analyses in critical cultural scholarship on communist and post-communist Romania, analyzing how past and present coexist in the worlds that Romanian New Wave films co-constitute.

Chris Robé's essay most directly asks questions about the relation of present and past. He explores RNW films as exemplifying and interrogating a "communist structure of feeling" that still lingers in present-day Romania. Reading communism as a technology of power whose affective and embodied residues cannot be quickly erased, he maps how films such as *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days*, 12:08

East of Bucharest (2006), and *Police, Adjective* (2009) still dramatize residual, communist-era “structures of feeling.” For instance, he reads a fearful immobility often manifested as indifference as the affective substratum of social interactions that has been cultivated by the communist politics of homogenization. This is dramatized in the emphasis on uniform architecture, the scripting of repetitious ideological language, and frequently static camerawork.

If Robé reads the logic of indifference that permeates formerly communist societies in the filmic use of architecture, scenography, and cinematography, Jennifer Stob and Raluca Iacob bring spatiality into the spotlight by opening up another social problematic inherited from authoritarian regimes: delinquency. In comparative studies with the French New Wave (Stob) and the Argentinian New Wave (Iacob), these contributors establish delinquency as a central preoccupation of Romanian cinema.

Jennifer Stob analyzes exemplars of the Romanian and the French New Wave for their capacity to both “reinvigorate debates on what constitutes or dissipates the social” and to participate through representation in those processes. She skillfully interlaces D.W. Winnicott’s developmental psychology on delinquency with sociological literature on social space and habitus to reveal the deep connection between social-material environment, political power, and individual subjectification. Her article provides an incipient theory of self and civic development as predicated on the ability to appropriate shared social spaces and language. From that perspective, *Police, Adjective* (2009), examined comparatively with *The 400 Blows* (1959), reveals the difficulty of the emergence of “a social sense of agency” in the authoritarian environment of post-communist Romania. Raluca Iacob also approaches delinquency comparatively, analyzing Cristi Puiu’s road film *Stuff and Dough* (2001) alongside Argentinian New Wave road movie *Pizza, Beer, and Cigarettes* (1998). She studies the tension between movement and entrapment, where mobility belies a narrative of development, discovery, the liberal notions of self-realization. Iacob is interested, by contrast, in more confined and controlled spaces. Mobility such as it is in these films, is the movement of the dispossessed: its aim is stability, but it results only in further precariousness.

Both Stob and Iacob unpack the subtle yet deep embeddedness of delinquency in a post-authoritarian context with a keen awareness of historical circumstances of instability and precarity. As such, they follow the lead of new wave directors in not simplifying delinquency as either a personal or regional issue. This is, importantly, in contrast to the tendency to situate delinquency or backwardness as an inevitable or essential feature of the Balkans and Eastern-Europe, visible for instance in Emir Kusturica’s films and in the “miserabilist” Romanian films of the 1990s. [3]. [3]. Iacob and Stob, by contrast, treat delinquency not as an a-historical Balkanist spectacle, but as a complex psycho-social dynamic developed in relation with material, legal, and political environments that (dis)engage their subjects.

While Robé, Stob, and Iacob examine communist structures of feeling directly, Anca Caramelia does so obliquely through her interest in the aesthetic choices of the Romanian New Wave, namely the spare use of music. As analyzed by Caramelia, anxiety and alienation—as the affective states that permeate moments of personal crisis in these films—are cultivated largely in the absence of music. The somber and lucid emotions that are fostered by silent long shots are occasionally and deliberately bookended by communist-era songs that accompany film credits. Caramelia’s article draws critical attention to a scrupulous realism that largely avoids non-diegetic sound along with the bold presence of communist-era hit songs used as framing devices. Studying sound as a key aesthetic element, Caramelia’s article foregrounds this understudied stylistic dimension as a crucial aspect of the RNW’s realism.

The realist style of the Romanian New Wave is approached by Andrei Gorzo from a different angle: the meta-discursive commentary of critics and the directors themselves. Gorzo positions Cristi Puiu’s film

philosophy as embodying the Bazinian ideals of cinema as a reflection of reality that should limit the director's editorializing and the actor's expressiveness, in favor of capturing "the ambiguity of the real." Gorzo reads Puiu's *Aurora* (2010) as stretching to the limit "the obscurity of the real." In the context of the personal-social-political realities that the films dramatize, Gorzo's article meticulously follows and questions the ethics of a purported aesthetic neutrality.

The preoccupation with the productive tension between aesthetic choices and the broader socio-political contexts in which these films circulate also informs Chris Cagle's and Marie-Louise Paulesc's articles, which focus on documentary filmmaking. Chris Cagle approaches Romanian documentaries as an important development of this national cinema. While he clarifies that these productions "have not cohered into an identifiable documentary New Wave," he traces how they parallel both the preoccupations of the fictional New Wave films, as well as the generic conventions of international documentary filmmaking. Cagle sees three directions that the new Romanian documentaries take: "the popular art cinema documentaries," observational and character-driven films, and experimental documentary. He reads the communist-chic aesthetic of films like *My Beautiful Dacia* (2009) and *Chuck Norris vs. Communism* (2015) as departing from typical popular documentary formulas and, instead, paralleling aesthetically a global art film style in the combination of popular and art elements. While he acknowledges the role of the film festival circuit in bringing these films to prominence, Cagle's article does not reduce the Romanian documentaries' success to a neo-Marxist interpretation of them as solely functions of the festival circuit, modeling scholarship that does justice to the specificity of such films.

In an innovative reading of Andrei Ujică's *Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* (2010), Marie Louise Paulesc combines analytic scholarship with the memoir, integrating both to follow how Ujică's documentary engages with the genres of documentary and (auto)biography to mirror and challenge the fluctuations of personal memory, collective, and official memory. Thus, this reading suggests a connection, also, to the Bazinian "ambiguity of the real" (studied at length by Gorzo). Paulesc's article is, effectively, a performative instantiation of how that ambiguity manifests in the experience of the critic—in ways both open and specific to the personal history of the viewer. As a subject of communism and post-communism, Paulesc brings her experience of these temporalities and geographies to bear in a work that is both personal and critical.

In summary, this special issue exemplifies two modes of analyzing the subject: one, focusing more on the specific social context of communist and post-communist Romania and another more multi-national, comparative perspective. These two-type (often overlapping) frameworks match the position that Romanian cinema finds itself in: addressed, always, to a native audience and to broader international film circuits. Our contributors explore both new problematics and deepen established paths of inquiry—from post-communist subjectification and historical memory to attention to film style, spatial aesthetics, and performative writing. The breadth of approaches included here, along with the continued production of award-winning films, signals that scholarship on the Romanian New Wave (like this New Wave itself) remains a rich field of inquiry.

Author Biographies

Alina Haliliuc is Associate Professor of Communication at Denison University. Her scholarship examines how public language is implicated in subject-formation under conditions of socio-political change, such as post-communist Romania. Her publications on Romanian New Wave films include "What Is So Funny about *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*?" *The Journal of Popular Culture* (2015) and "The Performance of Silence in Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days*" *Text and Performance Quarterly* (2011, with Valerie Palmer-Mehta).

Jesse Schlotterbeck is Associate Professor of Cinema at Denison University where he teaches courses on Film History, Film Aesthetics, and Film Theory. While his research mostly focuses on U.S. film genres—in particular, film noir, biopics, and musicals—he has been interested in the Romanian New Wave since seeing *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days* (2007). His most recent work appears in *Film Noir: Light and Shadow*, *Howard Hawks: New Perspectives*, and the *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*.

Notes

1. Doru Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema: An Introduction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 221. [↩\[#N1-ptr1\]](#)
2. Steven Zeitchik, "Romania continues an unlikely cinematic domination at Cannes, with a pair of rival directors," *Los Angeles Times*, May 25, 2016. [↩\[#N2-ptr1\]](#)
3. Alexandru Leo Șerban, "Romanian Cinema: From Modernity to Neo-Realism," *Film Criticism* 34.2-3 (2010), 14. [↩\[#N3-ptr1\]](#) [↩\[#N3-ptr2\]](#)
4. Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema*, 57.

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