Francis Ford Coppola and Mircea Eliade, an exceptional tandem – a view from Romania

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"I see in this film a great opportunity to make popular Eliade's ideas and to advertise him!"
(Mac Linscott Ricketts)[1]

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In a previous conversation with Professor Mac Linscott Ricketts, I asked my distinguished interlocutor if he believed a stage or movie director could accurately capture the shades of meaning in Eliade's texts – especially in the fantastic short stories – if he could transpose them with fidelity onto the screen or stage, so that the text would not be diminished in its meanings and the spectators would enjoy the show in its true dimensions – that is, *really* understand it. I was thinking about the "foreign", television viewers, those of a different language and culture. The well-known professor answered that:

> It will be difficult, but if the director understands the idea itself, he could strive for this to happen. It may also facilitate understanding if before each representation he would offer some explanations about the ideas and intentions of the writer (Scarlat 2003: 27).

I had, at the time of the first interview, as evidence, the example – less fortunate, from the viewpoint of an Eliade film enthusiast – of the film *The Bengali Night*, a motion picture version of Eliade's classic 1933 novel *Maitreyi* directed by Nicolas Klotz, which, diverging far from the original text, offered a commercialized distortion of the love story between a European and a young Indian girl.

At the big screen level, another attempt was that of the director Dan Piţa with the film *I am Adam*...(1996) – a controversial movie (see Scarlat 1996) that was rather a disservice to Eliade's texts (at least this is the conclusion of most people who have written about it).

Now, we believe, the most refined and most successful transposing of a short story of the Romanian writer is the film *Youth without Youth* directed by Francis Ford Coppola, launched in November 2007 and based on the novella of the same name. I subscribe to Grid Modorcea's statement that Mircea Eliade's prose is "one

[1] Referring to the full-length film *Youth without Youth,* directed by Francis Ford Coppola, released in November 2007, screenplay of the novella *Tinereţe fără de tinereţe* by Mircea Eliade. See Scarlat 2006b: 110.

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of the most sensational – cinematographically speaking – short stories in the world" (Modorcea 2005: 169). Eliade's stories can undoubtedly, do a service to the world cinema. The famous director's choice was really fortunate from this point of view.

In a press conference held on 26 January 2005, at the Ion Luca Caragiale National University of Cinematography and Film, Bucharest, Coppola confessed:

> In the first place I came here because I am in a period in my life when I want to be a student and to study again. I read Eliade's autobiography and I wanted to see his native country, to see the places about which he wrote. It's my attempt to find myself as a human being, to rediscover myself as an artist. I want to find the Truth for me (Moldovan 2005: 175).

In another interview he added:

> I was thrilled to rediscover in Eliade's short story the key-concepts that I want to understand better: time, consciousness and fantastic foundation of reality (Ulmanu 2005).

Much was written in the press and presented on the Internet sites about the filming period in Romania, about the choice of the Romanian team of actors, about the teamwork with them. I showed in a former article about the film (written before watching it!!) how the teamwork went, which was the relationship (confessed in the press statements) of the director with the original text and I expected to see, as an Eliade cinema enthusiast – how much of the text would be found in the scenario, how much of the atmosphere created by Eliade in the short story would be found in the movie and, especially *how* (Scarlat 2006a: 71–77). After watching we can confess that the film *Youth without Youth* marks in a happy way the return… of *The Godfather's* author to the director's seat after a ten years' absence. In Coppola's magazine *Zoetrope: All-Story,* Autumn 2007, the number dedicated to the film, the director declares:

> When I read the story, I knew I'd have to learn how to express its themes of time and dreams cinematically. Making a movie is like asking a question, and when you finish, the movie itself is the answer (Coppola 2007: 16).

We firmly assert that through the author of *The Godfather*, Eliade found his Godfather… Coppola not only exceptionally reproduced the atmosphere of the short story, the blending of the action in different time planes being much easier to follow in the film version – flashbacks that accurately express the text's ideas. There is an almost pharmaceutical coherence in approaching the text's cinematic language. We can, again, firmly assert that Francis Ford Coppola is the first director who has treated Eliade's prose with artistic common sense, and with respect for the text and, implicitly, for the author. If in many of the earlier films of Eliade's fiction – about which I have written – the directors have "played around" with the original texts and "embroidered" on them, adding new elements or changing paragraphs (Dan Piţa, Dan Paul Ionescu, Viorel Sergovici, Nicolas Klotz), in Coppola's film we recover Eliade's universe reproduced in a form faithful to Eliade's original. We can take as reference this cinematic version in order to track the bookish blending of the sequences. The director's interventions in the text are minor (related to the original text) – small retorts that do not change the meaning of the short story (e.g., the scene after the accident when Dr. Stănciulescu and Matei have lunch together).

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First of all, Eliade's short story has, through film, the advantage brought by the characters' costumes, makeup, sound track properly wrapped in filmic sequences, the game images, all of them exceptionally blended in a spicy language which maintains the film enthusiast in a continuous challenge with Eliade's short-story universe, with the universe of concepts with which he plays in his fantastic prose and with the issues of the characters at cinematic level. It is not an easy film. It is not a movie to see just *once*, but *several times*. A good literary text challenges at the first reading and at subsequent readings as well. What a writer proposes can be accepted, decrypted and understood by a reader in a variety of ways. As there are levels of reading, so there are levels of understanding. In a work called *Youth without Youth*, Francis Ford Coppola, an "alephic reader" of Mircea Eliade's Texts (Covaliu 2007: 300), Oana Covaliu spoke about Coppola's quality of alephic reader, the alephic reading supposing the preservation in a reading of the infinity of "previous, possible readings identifiable through a subjective, creative approach or/and through a psychological, analytical or critical one". Coppola's contact with Eliade's text, cinematically played, demonstrates its assimilation, understanding and delivering, maintaining its characteristic notes in a different version. The film makes possible the return to the universe of Eliade. Oana Covaliu suggests that "the reading of Eliade's text proposes […] the conversion into a foreign identity, a redefinition of the Self through its relating to the author's universe" adding that, if his prose "is a metaphor of the search of identity, of the infinite transgressable time", then Francis Ford Coppola is "the reader who has experienced the confrontation with the Other, with the infinite time, with Eliade through Dominic Matei […]" (Covaliu 2007: 306). We believe, for our part, that Coppola's film proposes a return to the universe of Eliade, to the essence of his texts, as if after a journey, created through successive readings.

Readings – challenges. Coppola has learnt Eliade's lesson by reading a number of his texts – and not simply the novella *Youth without Youth.* He has penetrated the world in which myths and symbols are blended in a staggering symbiosis, creating a fascinating universe in which the characters evolve, like special marionettes whose movement has to do with mastery, not only of the writer – *the chief marionette master* – but also the reader, whom the *writer-master* attracts with mastery in the universe that he creates and expresses with the help of the puppet-characters. Our role in this respect is the same as the one that Anghel D. Pandele "plays" in *Nineteen Roses* (another of Eliade's novellas), a "marionette" that evolves according to Laurian and Niculina's movements – marionettes, "handled" in turn by Eliade himself. We are at the "hand" of the director and, together, at that of Eliade.

Recurring themes in Eliade's prose: gliding in different time spaces, practicing techniques to escape from the profane space and time, attempts to follow the logic of reality which overlaps the mythical rationality – all can be found in *Youth without Youth.* The cinematic language has enabled the American director to "speak" the language of Eliade's texts. It allowed, for example, by running a series of upside-down images to express the reversal of the normality of time, to emphasize the "division", the break at time level. The frameworks in which the characters evolve, *analeptically* (Dominic recalls the moments of his meeting with

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Laura, regarding old photos – cinematic frames allowing the illustration of the remembering through images) and *anamnetic* (descents, being present during Veronica's trances into primal stages of human language, thus rediscovering mythical ages apparently forgotten) connect in a staggering sarabande between present and past. The film enthusiast is also involved in this staggering periplus, forced to recognize from what is happening on the screen what belongs to the real plane on which the characters evolve and what belongs to their past, where the delimitation is.

Another theme coherently cinematically developed, often met in Eliade's short stories is the overlapping of the real, historical plane over the mythical one. Dominic evolves on two planes. After the accident on Easter night of the year 1938, he "wakes up" during the Second World War, he passes through unusual events – he becomes 30 years younger, his memory is fabulous (hypermnesy), he learns while sleeping, he is helped to "make up" a different identity in order to escape from the Gestapo, for which he had become a case of maximum interest. Ultimately, the ending is precisely in Eliade's style, the hero (a *mutant*, a unique case, the only existing "exemplar") awakes again in his hometown, Piatra Neamț, around Christmas, on 20 December 1938 together with his buddies from the Select Cafe. But on the passport that he has with him, after being found dead, frozen in the street, is written the name *Martin Audricourt* – a new identity, in an attempt to protect him after the accident – born on 18 November 1939!

As the Romanian critic Eugen Simion emphasized, the end of the story offers several hypotheses:

> The writer does this in such a way that the narrative details push our spirit in one direction, then in another. This is not a charade; it is only a narrative technique that is based on the idea of the temporal paradox […]. Eliade does not opt for any realistic solution […], nor does he escape into the zone of the miraculous (Simion 1981: 659).

Coppola reproduces with precision all these narrative "jugglings". Truthful to the text, to the author's ideas, to the construction of the characters, Coppola has ennobled the text through the entire cinematic structure.

The film has two distinct planes, which overlap the framework of the text. The story that takes place on the historic, real plane – during the war – and the mythical, symbolic, unusual, fantastic one in which Dominic lives. A profane plane, that of the correct misunderstanding (decryption at the symbolic level of what Dominic constitutes for the entire humankind: its Ark, the solution for the salvation from the *Terror of History* and the recovery of the origin, mythical ages, the restoration of the primal harmony). A symbolic plane – Dominic (an unique exemplar!) is the exponent of the whole of humankind, the instrument which, correctly used, could, by knowledge repair the fissures that have appeared over the long course of his evolution on Earth, gradually recovers, successively, the primal ages until his complete rehabilitation. The failure of this anamnetic experience, Dominic's return in the time when his spiritual adventure started and the ending *here* (Piatra Neamț), in a modified, dilated, transformed *now* of an individual destiny, his lack of understanding underscores once again the fact that we are not

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prepared, either at the individual level, nor as a group (a nation) to recover the original harmony. Dominic is another counterpart of Dan Piţa's character, Adam – from the controversial film already mentioned – who wanders among *ignorant people* (read *un-connoisseurs*), unrecognized, as bearer of the solution needed by humankind to save it from coming apart: back through myth, to the origins…

An observation – offered for helping in the understanding of the character Dominic Matei, of the situation in which finds himself, with which he tries to accustom himself and which he strives to assimilate. It is the focus that the American director sets on the emergence of the *double*, of the *alter ego* – he develops it as a character. He gives autonomy, consistency. It is the image that accompanies Dominic. Is it his guardian angel, which advises and facilitates him through words of advice, the intermediation with the levels of knowledge, the understanding of what happens to him and to those around him? It is an image apparently reversed, improved, in the mirror. Is it "his astral double of himself, the primary matrix, located outside time and connected to the eternal memory?" (Ruşti 2005: 73). Stricken by lightening, our character evolves in the eternal present of the Resurrection and at the same time he remains in history. The final reverting at the time and history from which he "broke" in the moment of the accident means the *returning home* to live… his death. It is… Făt-Frumos ('Prince Charming') of Romanian popular fairy tales who after a succession of initiating experiences comes back home.

Coppola brings out gracefully and with mastery all the symbols that appear in Eliade's text. *The Double, the mirror* in which he appears – the symbol of the world un-limited by time, *the rose* – a symbol of rebirth (the first two roses appear during the unprecedented experiences through which Dominic passes during his lifetime) but also the symbol of the dead hero (as in the Greek tradition) – (the third rose appears in the final scene, in the moment of the character's death – the opening poster of the film is a beautiful image with roses – the *arc* of rescue – a work that Dominic thinks he missed, the *butterfly* whose story Dominic tries to tell to his friends in the final scenes of the novella/film (Chuang-tze's story who dreams he is a butterfly, a butterfly which dreams in turn it is a man, who dreams he is a butterfly… A wonderful scene that summarizes Dominic's story, as a conclusion, and affords Eliade's reader (who reads the text) and the film enthusiast (who watches Coppola's score) an interpretation of the ending, reducing the choices in the realm of possibilities to a single one.

The reader can choose, of course, if familiar with it, from the universe of Eliade's symbols. Dominic before the accident directs his own death. Living with the feeling of the failure of his own destiny – he has not finished the one book on which he labored a lifetime, about the evolution of the human language – he plans to commit suicide. But not in his hometown, where he is known – rather in Bucharest (the *center* – another term laden with profound symbolism). But the destiny decided otherwise. Symbolically, he lives Jesus Christ's experience – death and resurrection, and because of the "accident" that occurs to him he misses his programmed death, so that caught up in the whirlpool of the events subsequent to it, he has the possibility of fulfilling his work. This is possible through Veronica Buhler. Following an accident similar to that which Dominic has suffered, she has

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extraordinary experiences too. She passes through mediumistic crisis, regressing step by step, with each trance, to unarticulated protolanguages, reconstituting, through her own previous existence, the evolution of human language. Through her, Dominic has the chance to accomplish his Work, his salvation "Ark." However he has to choose between this and Veronica's life, because she suffers a process of "galloping senescence". With each trance that she experiences, Veronica endangers her own life. Her mutation is the reverse of what happened to Dominic. When he realizes the consequences of such experiences and sacrifices his love for her, in order to save her. He gives Veronica her freedom. After the break-up, she recovers and regains her age prior to the accident, her life continuing thereafter in an ordinary way.

Coppola manages, through the characters he created (Tim Roth turned in a magical role as Dominic Matei!) to render the shades of the text and to illustrate what a literary text can only suggest. The wide breath filming in India, the image of the sacred Ganges, the banks full of pilgrims, reconstitutes Veronica's experience, who after the accident, believes she is Rupini, the daughter of Kagabhata of the Indian caste Kshatria. The sound track – score signed by Osvaldo Golijov – stresses the moments of the characters' development, the symbolism of time and space in which they live (*the tic-tock of the clock*, from the beginning of the film, stresses directly the level to which the events will occur - the temporal one, the inherent gliding of the characters' experiences; *the bells tolling* – those underline the sacral moment of the Resurrection, and finally, the moment of Christmas; *the old Romanian songs*, fashionable in the interwar period). "Youth without Youth" – the principal musical theme of the film – "Dominic's Nightmare," "Time", "Malta", "Rupini's Cave" and all the other musical scores supporting the film scenario are a superb thematic accompaniment of the cinematic sequences. The costumes of Gloria Papură and the setting signed by Călin Papură (through locations in Romania – Balcic, Constanța, Brașov – Coppola and his team of collaborators reconstituted the Swiss Alps and Maltese landscapes) render the atmosphere of Eliade's text realistically and artistically (Ionescu 2005).

> Through this film, Coppola gives us a lesson of modern cinema, through a fascinating combination of arts, applied to an area of profound mystery, but also a lesson for Hollywood, about how it can be set free from the European complex (Modorcea 2007).

The combination the musical arts, the settings, the overlapping of images (the mixing of pictograms, hieroglyphs beneath plays of lights and shadows) – remind the film enthusiast of another reference movie, "The Pillow Book" (1996), directed by Peter Greenaway. In "Cahiers du Cinéma", Jean-Philippe Tessé recognizes that Coppola's latest film – the first after an absence of ten years! – constitutes a "summary movie", being "the most coppolian of his movies":

> L'Homme sans âge se présente d'emblée comme une synthèse; presque un film somme, où Coppola semble avoir ressemblé tous ses thèmes en une seule histoire – c'est peut être le plus coppolien de ses films (Tessé 2007: 18–20).

Here we come across recurring themes. Coppola found in Eliade, in turn, The Godfather (!) in *Jack* (1996), *The Conversation* (1974), *The Godfather* (1972–1974,

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1990), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and *Dracula* (1992). In all of these are found themes similar to those of *Youth without Youth*.

At the opening, the film – whose worldwide premiere took place at the Film Festival in Rome, 20 November 2007 – it … was not understood (Modorcea 2007). But this was natural, if those who try to watch the movie do so without reading (and re-reading) Eliade's short story and if they are not familiar with the concepts with which he plays in his fantastic prose. The overlapping of cinematic frames, the almost imperceptible passage from one temporal level to another and the evolution of the characters in several registers, in different spaces, the symbols that appear explicitly in the film and their play of meanings – roses, mirror, texts in extinct languages, actors' sequential speeches in Aramaic, Sanskrit, Babylonian, Dominic's dialogues with his double, the double part of Alexandra Maria Lara (Laura and Veronica) – will certainly hinder understanding and decoding. The rapid running the frames, the characters' responses, the entire cinematic ensemble will lead the movie enthusiast in a dizzying saraband. If this film enthusiast is a versed one, the dance will give him wings. But if not, he will remain only with… the misunderstandings.

Jean-Philippe Tessé, speaks in the place cited above about the narrative depth of the film as "denser" than that of *The Godfather*:

> L'Homme sans âge ressemble à la traduction en cours d'une langue étrangère: un texte bouillonnant; éparpillé entre ses hypothèses. Il y a ici une profunsion narrative plus touffue encore que celle du Parrain – jamais Coppola n'avait tissé récit plus méandreux (Tessé 2007: 18–20).

Reading the reviews that appeared in the press and on the Internet sites we can divide the points of view between those who saw the film but who did not read the novella and those who saw the film and who know Eliade's text. The first ones try to relate the film to the is movies of the director, with the result that the understanding of his most recent film being prejudiced… The others had the revelation of finding the Romanian writer's favorite themes transposed with mastery into a five-star cinematic language.

Speaking about the movie, one cannot overlook the really remarkable performance of Tim Roth. The make-up, the costumes and, above all the perfect empathy with the short-story character provides to film enthusiasts a veracious Dominic Matei. The sequence of the removal from the hospital after the accident, with the new identity, a miraculously rejuvenated seventy-year-old body and the walking of a helpless old man – the remains of reflexes held over from the old identity, but only for a little while – it is truly extraordinary! A character perfectly, rigorously expressed in a "gesture language". The movements, voice modulations, the responses, the shifting from one Dominic (the old man before the accident) to the other (immediately after, the convalescent), and, in the final sequences, define Tim Roth as a mature, structured actor, who fits naturally into the character's personality, even "into his very skin". About co-star, Alexandra Maria Lara, the critics universally have spoken in the superlative. Trying to remain objective, we have to admit that, indeed, she played her part *correctly*. As Dominic's feminine counterpart, however, her performance did not rise to the same heights as her partner's. Also, her empathy with the two characters she plays (Laura and Veronica)

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is not perfect. Still, we cannot ignore the sequences that are indeed well-performed: the moments when the heroine passes through mediumistic trances, the scene in which Dominic decides to set her free… It would be a palliating circumstance which would excuse the play, the interpretation. The real drama, in fact, is that of Dominic: he is the protagonist on who rests the backbone of the film – and of the short story. The spotlights are focused on him, the other characters being satellites that spin around him, remodeling his destiny, correcting it, offering him other options, defining him as character. He is singular and, finally, alone. Nobody could offer him a real counterpart. Nobody can speak or understand his language, his destiny, the turn of events that he himself strives to understand, to assimilate and accustom himself to.

Marcel Iureş is, also, remarkable in the role of Professor Tucci (a sequence to which the director gives more space than Eliade did in the text), academic and serious, just as the character himself.

We expected to find again parallels and connections with Dracula – as the Romanian pseudo myth, falsely interpret and intercept abroad – but it was not the case. This is another proof that Francis Ford Coppola's film is a serious one – even though the same Coppola has produced one of the many films inspired by the imitated story of Dracula. We point out, however, a review article in which a parallel between Dominic and Dracula is made. The author, Stéphane Delorme, considers that what the two have in common is time exploration in order to celebrate the finding of those they have never had time to love (Delorme 2007: 20–22).

As the director himself repeated in numerous press statements, interviews, on the official site of his production house – "American Zoetrope" – and in the magazine especially dedicated to the event: *Zoetrope: All-Story*, he found in Eliade's prose themes he had thought about for years, and he found answers. He intended, through this film, according to his testimony, to reinvent himself. And we believe he succeeded! Like Dominic Matei, Francis Ford Coppola relives the ages of his life, remodeling himself. In a film review in *The New York Times*, A.O. Scott talks about Coppola's attempt to find through this film something of his own youth (Scott 2007). And it is so! Coppola recalls the girlfriend of his youth who helped him to understand Eliade and to find answers to his own questions is Wendy Doniger, currently successor to Eliade's chair at the University of Chicago. And she speaks, in her turn, about the common links between herself, Eliade and Coppola in an article published in the magazine *Zoetrope: All-Story* (Doniger 2007: 22, 23).

Undoubtedly, with this film, a new path opens for Eliade's novellas – clad now in the robes of cinematography. Coppola has done, through his version of this short story,

> [...] an incomparable service to Romanian culture, as no other cinema director has done at home. His film is more important to us than any award, because everyone who watches it will ask about Eliade, will go buy his books, and will read them. With this film begins the great cinematographic adventure of Mircea Eliade's fantastic prose (Modorcea 2007).

Those who have followed the story of the film, from the announcement of its shooting in Romania, its creation, the world premier of the film, the reviews that

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have appeared, and then the viewing of it can only declare themselves delighted. Certainly, this is true of Eliade's fans! The film is magnificent. We are not referring now to the interpretations of the actors only, but to the design of the scenario, to the arrangement of the sequences, to the illustration of the story's passages in such proportions that we were thrilled to discover Eliade in the film, better than he himself could have imagined.

But the emotions don't stop here. We are eager to see the extent to which those who will watch film – persons less familiar with its themes – will assimilate Eliade and his writings. How and what will they understand. And, of course, the journey of the film around the world.

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Francis Ford Coppola et Mircea Eliade, dans une relation spéciale – une opinion roumaine

Le film de Francis Ford Coppola après le texte de Mircea Eliade, *Tinerețe fără de tinerețe* représente, indiscutablement, un moment de référence dans le domaine de la réception de l’œuvre de l’écrivain roumain dans les divers langages : œuvre lyrique, film, art dramatique, jazz, téléfilm. Le film de F. Coppola se constitue dans une vraie réalisation didactique après l’œuvre de Mircea Eliade et, en même temps, dans un point de référence pour tous ceux qui veulent adapter les textes de l’écrivain roumain dans les autres langages.

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