CRISTIAN MUNGIU, AUTEUR-DIRECTOR 'TWENTY YEARS AFTER': STRATEGIES OF TRANSLATING THE PAST ON SCREEN (*4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* and *Tales from the Golden Age*)

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***Abstract**: This paper aims to identify common stylistic elements in 4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days (2007) and Tales from the Golden Age (2009), two films under the camera-pen signature of Cristian Mungiu, one of the directors belonging to the Romanian New Wave. Following the 'theory of auteurs' that advocates the director as the true author of a film, the current approach is meant to enumerate the elements that crystallize Mungiu as an 'auteur', exploring three levels of enunciation: narrative and character representation, film techniques and the ideological dominance of the filmic perspective.*

***Keywords**: Cristian Mungiu, Romanian New Wave, auteur, film perspective, Tales from the Golden Age.*

The *politique des auteurs* and auteur cinema

The myth of the film creator crystallized in the concept of 'auteur' in film studies was rooted in France in the 1950s on the initiative of several French intellectuals, who debated on the weak points of the French cinema after the Second World War and praised the grandeur of American film regarded as THE citadel of film under the guard of prominent figures like Orson Welles, John Ford or Alfred Hitchcock. In a context in which American productions had been prohibited during World War II in France and no American movie was allowed in the French cinema halls during the war, the post-war evolution was one of opening the French screen to American films. In an ambitious competitive drive, French directors and producers hoped to compete and overcome the artistry of American films. Reluctant to this desideratum, big names in the French cinema like Jean-Luc Godard, Francois Truffaut blamed the platitude of the seventh art in France, praising and taking as a model the stylistic mastery of the great American directors. Thus, this new generation of film critics of the 1950s in France headed by Andre Bazin, co-founder of journal *Cahiers du Cinema*, and later Andrew Sarris in the US in the 1960s founded film studies as a distinct area with a double academic and critical status. From the perspective of the two critics, the new approach to film criticism emphasized the role of the director in the filmic discourse and in several consecutive filmic fluids that bear the signature of the same name. Under the lens of film auteur criticism, the director is actually the author / 'l'auteur' of a movie beyond the anonymity of mass production cinema that major American studios thrive on and beyond the effort of an entire team that is actually involved in the complex process of film production.

For Andre Bazin, auteur criticism represents "choosing the personal factor in artistic creation as a standard of reference, and then assuming that it continues and even progresses from one film to the next" (255). The purpose of critics writing for *Cahiers du Cinema* that founded the concept of 'cinema of auteurs' was polemical rather than theoretical, and may be regarded as an attempt to identify new patterns that film directors proposed to the audience in a French cinema full of conventions and hierarchy. Auteur cinema was also a means of appreciating fresh exceptional art forms, full of creative extravagance and personal vision. The rise of semiotics and

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structuralism in the 1960s enriched the referent 'film writer' with certain codes and recurring structures in the films by the same director. Thus, auteur structuralism postulated the film auteur as a "latent structural subconscious in the work of a particular director" (ibid), and the authorship principle, known as the auteur theory in Anglo-American film criticism, is based on the principle that the director is the dominant force designing the construction of a film.

In "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962", Andrew Sarris considers that the director's control has three prerequisites:

1) the auteur-director must have 'technical skills' able to allow him to understand and use film techniques in an expressive manner;

2) the auteur-director must possess a certain consistency in terms of personal style, must explore and develop a set of visual and narrative markers easily recognizable from one film to another; a director must offer certain recurring stylistic features which will turn into a signature easily recognisable. The director's personality is expressed in the film's visual style rather than in the textual content. In this way, certain directors may manifest a preference for certain high or low camera angles, for long shots or short sequences, for fast or slow tempos, for subjective cameras and points of view, for certain types of light that might encode the director's perception into a particular formal meaning on screen.

3) the auteur-director must have a consistent view of the world, a compact set of attitudes and ideas, vision, philosophy or own 'inner sense', which will crystallize in a dominant narrative and ideology or in recurrent variations on a set of narrative and ideological conventions.

Andrew Sarris created a version of the auteur approach primarily designed to evaluate directors. Sarris's criteria are meant to determine whether or not an individual director is an auteur and where a director ranks among all auteurs. According to him, another criterion for an auteur is technical competence, since a director must be capable of creating a well-made film. Moreover, the director must demonstrate a distinguishable personality. Finally, Sarris argued that the films in an auteur's body of work share an interior meaning, defined as an underlying tension between the director's vision and the subject matter. Sarris did not give a definition to this last criterion, but it can be thought of as the continuing elaboration of a director's perspective on the world through the treatment of themes. An example of interior meaning would be Stanley Kubrick's ironic view of imperfect human beings and the flawed technologies they create in their own image. Many of his films satirize the desire for control and transcendence through technology, but they also reveal a grudging respect for the creative potential of human beings.

Despite its popularity with the French critics, the auteur theory seems to be flawed to critics of different perspectives. Auteur criticism implies that the director possesses conscious intentions and, perhaps, unacknowledged ideas, all of which combine to produce a film, and, eventually, a body of work. The approach views the director as the primary source of meaning. However, film theorists such as Peter Wollen argue that the meaning of any text, whether it is a film, novel, short story, television show, or a billboard, may exceed the intentions of the person or people who created it. To Wollen, a strict auteurist approach may ignore the complexity inherent in any text by insisting that the only authorized readings should be linked to some notion of what a director meant to convey. Wollen warns against limiting interpretation "since there is no true, essential meaning there can therefore be no exhaustive criticism, which settles the interpretation of a film once and for all" (Wollen 462). A simple example illuminates Wollen's concerns. It is well known that Orson Welles was intrigued by the idea of making a film based on the life of newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst. Although pursuing this branch of research may prove useful when analysing *Citizen Kane*, to focus the film analysis on

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this single aspect would exclude several of the many other ideas the film generates about American culture, aging, and the nature of human relationships, as well as other meanings that Welles may or may not have intended. Yet, beyond these shortcomings, the auteur approach remains central to film criticism and the powerful notion of film authorship exerts an influence on filmmaking as a cultural practice.

In this theoretical framework, Cristian Mungiu's films chosen for the current analysis may be placed under the analytical lenses at three levels: narrative and visual markers, character construction, film techniques, and the ideological vision of the filmic space.

Cristian Mungiu's visual stylistics

4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days
Original title: *4 Luni, 3 Săptămâni și 2 Zile*
Genre: drama
Director: Cristian Mungiu
Screenplay: Cristian Mungiu, Razvan Radulescu
Cinematography: Oleg Mutu
Producer: Cristian Mungiu, Oleg Mutu
Cast: Anamaria Marinca (Otilia), Laura Vasiliu (Gabriela), Vlad Ivanov (Mr. Bebe)
Time: 113 min.
Plot: In the late 1980's, a student (Otilia) is helping her roommate (Gabriela) to find somebody (Mr. Bebe) willing to perform an abortion in order to terminate her pregnancy.
Release year: 2007

Tales from the Golden Age /
Original title: *Amintiri din Epoca de Aur*
Genre: comedy
Directors: Hanno Höfer, Razvan Marculescu, Cristian Mungiu, Constantin Popescu, Ioana Uricaru
Screenplay: Cristian Mungiu
Cinematography: Oleg Mutu, Liviu Marghidan, Alexandru Sterian
Producer: Pascal Caucheteux, Cristian Mungiu, Oleg Mutu
Cast: Diana Cavallioti (Crina), Radu Iacoban (Bughi), Vlad Ivanov (Grigore), Tania Popa (Camelia), Alexandru Potocean (The secretary – The Legend of the official visit), Ion Sapdaru (Policeman Alexa)
Time: 147 min.
Plot: Six tales describing rural and urban legends during the Communist dictatorship of the 1980s, an age that Communist propaganda used to call 'The Golden Age'
Release year: 2009

More than 20 years after the fall of Communism in Romania, new names have become vocal in Romanian cinema, creating what some call, some bring under dispute, the Romanian New Wave, a new surge that borrowed stylistic elements from Italian Neorealism, the French New Wave or the British New Wave. Confirmed and awarded prizes at several international film festivals, Cristian Mungiu belongs to the Romanian New Wave school, sharing directions with directors like Cristian Nemescu (*Marilena from P7/ Marilena de la P7*, 2006; *California Dreamin*', 2007), Cristi Puiu (*Cigarettes and Coffee*/*Un cartus de Kent si un pachet de cafea*, 2001; *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*/*Moartea Domnului Lăzărescu,* 2005), Corneliu Porumboiu (*East of Bucharest*/A fost sau n-a fost*?*, 2006; *Police, Adjective*/ *Poliţist, adjectiv*, 2009) or Tudor Giurgiu (*Love Sick/ Legături bolnăvicioase*, 2006). The dominant background setting in these films is the 1980s, the end of the totalitarian regime or the first years of transition towards a market economy in the early 1990s. In terms of aesthetics and content, the Romanian New Wave films are marked by a minimalist thematic concern (people's freedom or lack of freedom, moral imprisonment,

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censorship, resistance to an alienating dictatorship); simple, austere and realistic compositions in which the black humour is a stylistic means of anchoring the theme(s); roles cast by little known young actors or even complete beginners. Such directors proclaim a filmic style that refuses any conventional clichés ingrained by their predecessors from Romanian classical cinema and foreground instead a young iconoclastic mentality. At the same time, the editing techniques they favour lack sophistication and are full of naturalness, meant to support the visual realism of the subject matter depicted.

Cristian Mungiu originally conceived *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* as part of the series *Tales from the Golden Age*, an intertextual ironic title that takes the audience back to Ion Creanga's canonical text *Tales from Childhood* and back to the period 1965-1989, an era called the 'Golden Age' by Nicolae Ceaușescu's despotic rule. Although the two films belong to antinomic genres (the former is a drama while the latter is a comedy) there are areas of intersection between them that offer an accurate canvas of the communist regime and a guide to the 'Golden Age'.

Narrative and character construction

Based on a true story, *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* is anchored in 1987 and tells the simple story of a student (Otilia - played by Anamaria Marinca), who helps her roommate (Gabriela – played by Laura Vasiliu) to find someone (Mr. Bebe) willing to terminate her advanced pregnancy. For the subject matter to be even more monstrous, Mr. Bebe (Vlad Ivanov) does not require money in exchange for his service, but sexual favours from the two protagonists who have requested help. An omnibus film consisting of six segments, *Tales from the Golden Age* is more light-hearted at the surface owing to the genre vehicle of comedy and black humour; at a deeper level, it is a cynical postulation and an accurate critique of the repressive regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu. The opening graphics disambiguate the film's intended mission: "The films in this series screen urban legends during Ceaușescu's regime, called 'The Golden Age' by communist propaganda (*TfGA*, Part 1, 0:00:52)[1]. The six segments of the movie do not intersect in terms of narrative content or characters and are entirely disconnected from each other. The titles are in compliance with the plot or the character typology that is focused on in that particular segment: 1) "The Legend of the party activist in inspection"; 2) "The Legend of the official photographer"; 3) The Legend of the zealous politician"; 4) "The Legend of the greedy policeman"; 5) "The Legend of the air seller"; 6) "The Legend of the hen driver". Each tale ends with a *nota bene,* a bitter reminder of the harsh life patterns despite the sarcasm and black humour, which emphasizes the absurdity of the small plot that the tale has just narrated. Thus, morals such as 1) "The legend says that in the morning, when the official motorcade passed, they were still going round" (*TfGA*, part 1, 00:19:11); 2) "The legend says that was the only time when *Scînteia* did not reached the factory workers early in the morning "; 3) "The legend says that at the end of the year 99% literate people were reported in the village of Adîncata" (*TfGA*, part 1, 00:51:24); 4) "The legend says that despite the explosion, the family collected and used the animal residues for the winter holidays" (*TfGA*, part 1, 1:13:59); 5) "The legend says that in

[1] *Tales from the Golden Age/Amintiri din epoca de aur*. Dir. Cristian Mungiu. Mobra Films, 2009. All subsequent references are parenthesized as '*TfGA* h: min: sec' within the text.

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the last years of communism there were people who could buy a Dacia by selling empty glass bottles and jars (*TfGA*, part 2, 00:36:24); 6) "The legend says that, just like Avicola drivers, most Romanians were able to survive in the 1980s by stealing products from work and monetizing them after" (*TfGA*, part 2, 1:07:31) might appear inconclusive to the expected closure of each plot but are efficient means of enriching the viewer's experience with life patterns from the 'Golden age' twenty years after.

A notable feature of both movies is the thin scheme of character construction that performs a cross section of urban and rural Romanian society under communism. Yet, there are several dissimilarities between the two films. *4 months 3 weeks and 2 days* rebuilds an entire communist class ideology which divided society into 'working class people' and 'intellectuals': a remarkable scene in this respect is the visit Otilia pays to her boyfriend's home, where his parents emphasize the distinction between the "educated university graduates and those without a university degree" (*4m3w2d*, 1:27:50)[2]. This sequence of 8 minutes uninterrupted shooting, purposefully the longest in the film (1:16: 35→1:24:16), reiterates at a compositional level the central position of Romanian intellectuals in the social texture of the time. The favourable position of these prominent people, Otilia's boyfriend's parents and their coterie of friends are university professors and physicians, is marked by a vertical and horizontal symmetrical frame composition, in which the family sits at the table surrounded by guests. The background of the frame is a huge collection of books in desaturated colours, a visual brand of Romanian intellectual elitism during the communist dictatorship. As for the two protagonists Otilia and Gabriela, they are mainly characterized by means of indirect strategies like dialogues or body language as realist depictions of pre-1989 students living in a social iron cage. In *Tales from the Golden Age*, the characters are more lightly built in compliance with the genre conventions of comedy and descending into the middle-class gallery, away from any sophistication and refinement of the upper class from *4 months 3 weeks and 2 days*. This time Mungiu insists on dominant stock characters and achieves the typologies of the communist age with thriving realism: the party activist, comrade mayor, the driver, the official photographer, the policeman, the husband and wife dominated by low frustrations, the smuggler who goes to prison.

Mise en scene, cinematography, editing, sound

The visual style of the movie consists of a complex set of techniques, including the mise en scene (the setting, character construction and composition), cinematography (types of light, colour, types of shots, frame, camera angles, camera distance) which all control the perspective provided to the audience. In *4 months 3 weeks and 2 days*, the setting is Bucharest in the last years of Ceaușescu's dictatorship in Romania. The film's opening scene is placed in a student hostel and is deliberately shot as a very long take (2'24"), a rare exception to filmic conventions in which an average scene has approximately 15 seconds. This exhibition, which presents Gabriela preparing her luggage, is recorded with a portable camera and results in a shaky picture, whose function is to transfer the feeling of insecurity, tension, concern from the protagonists on the viewer. This mobile camera creates an atmosphere of suspense and enhances the ambiguity of the topic. In fact the word 'abortion' is postponed for several scenes. The dialogue of the two girls merely hints at Gabriela's condition and this postponement has a cumulative effect in

[2] *4 months 3 weeks and 2 days /4 luni, 3 saptamani si 2 zile*. Dir. Cristian Mungiu. Mobra Films, 2007. All subsequent references are parenthesized as '*4m3w2:* h: min: sec' within the text.

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increasing the tension. The portable camera, dominant in many scenes, supports the realism of the film and formally confirms an atmosphere of fear and insecurity, which becomes an extrapolation of the dominant sentiment of the entire Romanian nation in the 1980s. Mungiu brings to the attention of collective memory several social and economic dominant issues from 'the golden age': the practice of forbidden abortion punishable by jail, the smuggling of 'luxury' products in student hostels (Western brands of cigarettes, soap, deodorant were not available on the free market during Communism), the system of job distribution after graduation, when most university graduates were forced to get a job in the countryside: "The Polytechnic University has its advantage: you don't have to go the country" (*4m3w2d*, 0:28:15).

At a visual level, the opening sequence in *4 months 3 weeks and 2 days* is designed in desaturated shades of grey, blue, red and green; the ancient architecture of buildings in Bucharest is represented in the same cold desaturated colours in compliance with the despicable plot. The mise en scene is central to the reconstruction of the Communist era: from the austere dorm room the camera moves into a modest hotel room, whose design and furniture are visual reminders of an era 30 years ago. The still life painting above the bed (a ubiquitous element in hotel rooms at the time) has a proleptic-predictive function by warning the spectator about the barbaric act that is to be consumed. The bathroom setting has the same old pattern: the floor has square light-blue tiles, allowing a sharp contrast with the red foetus discarded towards the end of this climactic sequence. In terms of cinematography, Mungiu chose to use mobile shooting cameras or stationary cameras: the scene in which Mr. Bebe (the sarcasm in this name choice is obvious) carries out the medical procedure (*4m3w2d*, 00:58:05→00: 01: 09) is an eye-level shot meant to allow the viewer a personal response due to the depth of space favoured by this angle; a different shooting angle (high, side, low) would have resulted in a different field for viewing and manipulated the viewer's perception. In *4 months 3 weeks and 2 days* Mungiu chose only the objective camera as a strategy of filmic narration, which again gives the audience the chance to keep their own perception unaltered by any subjective camera (this could have rendered a character's focalization and thus guided the spectator's perception). The lighting of the film is low, Mungiu's film being dark and gloomy, speaking of the age in question. The scenes are shot using natural lighting or in the 'night for night' system for sequences with a nocturnal time anchor. A memorable scene is the one where Otilia must get rid of the bag containing the dead foetus (*4m3w2d*, 1:38 : 51→1: 44: 59). As a dominant element of composition, the shots are short frames that again allow the spectator the space required for an interaction with the plot, an interaction uncontrolled, not mediated or manipulated by the camera. The film hardly has any extreme close-ups: the only ECU, that of the foetus expelled in a white towel, triggers a forceful response from the viewer and has complex semantic eloquence.

In the second film, *Tales from the Golden Age*, the colorization is similar to that of the first film, the same washed-out cold colours, claiming the austerity of communism. The rhythm of the film is more alert, since comedies are always dominated by short-paced sequences compared to dramas. In *Tales from the Golden Age*, the editing is not as simple as in *4 months 3 weeks and 2 days:* Mungiu uses mobile cameras and cranes that allow high camera angle shots: in this way, the spectator becomes distanced from the narration, and is allowed the subtlety of the Mungiesque satire.

In terms of editing, Mungiu shows a preference for the simple cut in both films, which highlights the obtrusive realism of the scenes. In *4 months 3 weeks and 2 days*, the pace of the film is slow, with long sequences of 2-8 minutes, an extremely rare choice in filmic practice that supports the drama and tension of the filmic narration.

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Since they belong to different genres, the two films have different sound registers: in a mainstream cinema where films without any musical compositions are so atypical, *4 months 3 weeks and 2 days* chose the absence of any soundtrack, which amplifies the dramatism of the narrative). With Cristian Mungiu, the drama told on screen without any fragmentation or disruption of the filmic discourse is emphasised by the very absence of music; beyond the meaningfulness of dialogues, the sound of the film is complemented by sound effects (the street sound in the background) that add distress to the atmosphere and confirm the realism of the scenes. The only musical composition is extra diegetic, the end credits being accompanied by two Romanian voice brands of the 'Golden Age', Angela Similea and Cornel Constantiniu, in two tunes emblematic of 1980s music. The sound in *Tales from the Golden Age* is better conducted and speaks of an age past: the former Romanian anthem, the music score and jingles from TV news bulletins before 1989, the slogans and patriotic songs well-known and despised by an entire nation "The people, Ceaușescu, Romania", or traditional folk music – all these provide an accurate picture and support the narratives of the six plots of either urban or rural setting. The soundtrack in *Tales from the Golden Age* achieves a distinct referential level, complements the narrative, and anchors it in history.

Communist iconography and discourse

Besides the actual film techniques, the realism of the *Tales from the Golden Age* is owed to its visual and lexical anchoring. Apart from the social, political and cultural icons of the Golden Age enlivened in the film, Mungiu reactivated with accuracy specific syntagms of the time. Part of a communist iconography are the red flags of the Romanian Communist Party, pictures of president Nicolae Ceaușescu in all institutions, *Scînteia* (the official newspaper of the communist party), the school uniforms of the pioneers, Communist placards with slogans reverently praising the ruling of the great leader and the red pioneer scarf. As to the lexicon specific to that age, the dialogues are suffused with the well-known communist jargon: "working visit" (Tale 1); "Comrade Secretary", "party activist", "party committee", "normative" (Tale 2); "Dear Comrades, I take the pledge," "It's an order from the county." (Tale 3); "Comrades, life is beautiful! (Tale 4); "The People, Ceaușescu, Romînia" (Tale 5); "Miliția" (the Communist police force) (Tale 6). The six plots rewrite bitter truths well concealed by the ideology of the Communist Party: the 'visits' paid to villages by party officials turned the entire village upside down as everything was supposed to look perfect (Tale 1); the media's role was manipulative of the public opinion with regard to the picture of the "General Commander" (Tale 2); villages lacked electricity, schools or medical care (Tale 3); the shops were empty before the winter holidays – thus, the population had to pursue the illicit risk of buying a pig before the holidays; the word 'Christmas' is not uttered in the film as it was banned at the time) (Tale 4); smuggling eggs before Easter under the punishment of prison; the middle class had to find various means to raise money for a Dacia [the car of the Romanian middle-class before 1989] (Tale 6).

Conclusion

Both films accurately reconstruct the austere reality of the '80s during Ceaușescu's dictatorship. The scenes of the two films are truthful in their realism, especially through their mise en scene and cinematography dominated by long takes, or stationary or mobile camera, eye-level angle shots, poor lighting or slow editing, elements that give them an indexical realism. The plots tend to be under-developed, usually focusing on a particular event in the life of a character.

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Characters lack complexity and depth, their main interest being 'symptomatic', that is, they are 'symptoms' of some broader type of human predicament or behavior pattern which they represent. Despite the volatile character construction, both films achieve a strong portrait of urban and rural Romania's 'Golden Age'. The human emotions displayed by the characters allow the audience to identify with the feeling of each dramatic situation" (Phillips 26): *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* is more moderate at aformal level in terms of cinematography and editing, but deeper at a narrative and semantic level; on the other hand, *Tales from the Golden Age* rewrites a faded pre-1989 age with equal efficiency and accuracy at two distinct levels: at a visual level with the help of the mise en scene and at the level of sound – through patriotic songs and a number of communist musical specifics. All these visual and thematic elements provide social relevance and realism to filmic representation, as well as vraisemblance to the human typologies and social conflicts marked in the filmic space. Although formally polarized by different genres, both films are actually dramas at a deeper structure of significance. Although the formal vehicle for *Tales from the Golden Age* is a comedy, the film communicates the tragic destiny of an entire nation beyond the characters' irony and the satire of the filmic discourse.

Cristian Mungiu's films are symptomatic of the perspective contoured by the several other Romanian New Wave directors, since they displace an entire set of thematic and visual conventions dominant in the Romanian cinema before 1989. His films constantly address once-tabooed subjects of great interest today. His style is not a mere decorative tool, but an emotional, ideational, cognitive palpable filmic manifesto. For the auteur-director Cristian Mungiu, all these turn into filmic intelligence able to offer a truthful and honest perspective on recent history.

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