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CENSORSHIP AND MYSTIFICATION IN THE ROMANIAN DOCUMENTARY DURING THE COMMUNIST ERA

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyse the impact that the communist regime in Romania had on documentaries and on the way film directors were influenced when doing a documentary. It is well known that before 1989 this genre was used mainly for the propaganda, but there were filmmakers who tried to overcome barriers imposed by the censors, using different subtle methods in order to freely express their ideas. Laurențiu Damian and Copel Moscu were two of them, but their films did not pass the test of censorship and were either drastically modified, or banned, while they were relegated. The reasons were multiple, but were all connected to the way those films would directly or indirectly affect the image of the regime. However, there was also a different category of directors – those who had their homework done even before starting to shoot for a film. This category would sacrifice truth and authenticity in order to have a film that would look good in front of the censors and of the leaders of the regime. In any of those three cases, the result was similar, as the documentary loses its main role – to inform, to analyse, to challenge the wiever.

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INTRODUCTION

Prior to the 1989 Anticommunist Revolution, the Romanian documentary was used mainly for the propaganda of the unique party. The work was praised, the system was glorified, and the filmmakers were forced to capture on the film a faded reality that did not exist in the Socialist Republic of Romania. Everything had to look triumphant in order to be approved by the party's censors. On the screens were only allowed beautiful people, workers were compulsory dressed in bibs and wearing protective gears and they were filmed in full swing of building the socialism. Extreme situations appeared, such as the famous top-model cows, washed with shampoo before filming, in order to use the pictures to illustrate documentaries about the achievements of that era. The interdictions aimed at everything that could have touched in any way the communist system: from the crosses, the church towers and the tombs, to the dust, the stray dogs and the poor neighborhoods. Images of printed jerseys, plastic bags, bearded men, or women wearing short skirts were also forbidden. Creative directors intentionally introduced such elements that did not matter in the economy of the film, being aware that they will be eliminated, but with the intention to draw censors' attention from the deep sense of the film. Even so, dozens of documentary films from the communist era have fallen prey to the drastic constraints of the regime, which has influenced them either by modifying reality, or by censoring or even forbidding them.

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THE PARTIAL CENSORSHIP OF THE DOCUMENTARY

In 1986, director Laurențiu Damian started a project whose aim was to create the portrait of Maria Tănase, through the eyes of those who met her. It all started from the lack of video recordings about and with the famous artist. There were made interviews with several friends and acquaintances of Maria Tănase, from various categories, from her driver to guild colleagues, actors and relatives. The result was the documentary *Maria Tănase,* lasting 43 minutes. But only eight minutes got on the screens. What happened between the first finished product and the broadcasted one? The film has been watched over 50 times in just six months by the regime's censors. Out of zeal excess, each has intervened in one way or another over it. Each time he has the opportunity, the director tells that the film had so many cuts, that one could not even stick it with adhesive tape. But what was the official motivation of censorship? "They said that the film brings out damage to the memory of the Romanian artist, showing a degraded image of it. It's a ghastly film, with old and sick people talking about Maria Tanase, instead of presenting wheat fields and green grass over which nightingales sang"[1],,says Laurentiu Damian.

Not only the film has suffered from censors' intervention. The director was relegated for six months, and he was offered an electrician position at Sahia Studios. The original film was preserved by Laurentiu Damian, who transposed it on DVD after 1990. There is a series of clear elements that differentiate the original from the final version accepted by the Communists. A comparison between the two films points out the positive light in which the director placed

[1]Cobuz, Dana, *Film uitat,* Jurnalul Național, 16th of July 2008. Retrieved from: http://jurnalul.ro/editie-de-colectie/maria-tanase-16-iunie-2008/film-uitat-315607.html

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the singer in the original version. Interviews (then removed altogether) are elloquent. On the one hand, there are the direct praises for Maria Tanase: "She was a young woman of extraordinary distinction. She was beautiful. He had a very interesting voice "(Gică Petrescu - musician); "When she was singing, she was no longer earthly" (Natalia Gorcea - girlfriend of the artist); "Many girls came to me to ask me to give them lessons of Maria Tanase. She is formidable as a phenomenon. What does Maria Tănase mean? All! For them it meant everything!" (Harry Brauner - composer, music teacher). Under the conditions of a strict regime in which any eulogistic words publicly spoken about other personalities except Ceausescu husbands were considered almost blasphemous, this last part could have been interpreted as an affront to the two tyrants.

On the other hand, the film contained criticism of how artists as Maria Tănase had been treated. "It was an extremely poor quantity of what Maria Tănase sang that was kept", explains the composer Henry Mălineanu, who also narrates an attempt to censure the artist at the Concert of the Peoples in 1953, on the occasion of the World Youth Festival: "She was singing the song *Dragi mi-s cântecele mele*. They announced that Maria does not have the right to sing that night, because that song was not allowed. 100,000 people stood there for 45 minutes, and until Maria Tanase came, the concert did not begin." The tone is also used by the interpreter Ioana Radu, considered "The Lady of Romance", but also a rival Maria Tănase: "Why was so little filmed about Maria and me? I asked myself the same question. I'm surprised that our old directors did not remember. They do not know what I did for Romanian music, neither me, nor Maria ... What was the reward? There are not even two meters of film with us. You're gonna have a deal with the world! The world will ask you... "

But perhaps the most difficult thing to digest by the censors was the interview with priest Dan Nasta. In the original film there is a statement whose

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end would have surely disturbed the regime's rulers: "When she burst into her voice, she was loaded with the aura of the spirituality of a people who were raped by injustice." Adding to this the closed attitude that the communist regime had for religion, it is understandable the decision to remove it from the film. In fact, any reference to Christianity and spirituality was censored. This is why dissapeared from the film the images with the painting of Jesus Christ, from the dome of a cathedral, as well as the the inside images from the church, the candles lit, the cross in the background, the sounds of the drawn bells, the name of Maria Tanase written on the grave cross, etc. Even the photos of young Maria Tănase were removed, as well as the pictures with the singer's house, which was demolished by the Communists, to the dissatisfaction of the people (publicly unmanifested at that time). The 50 views made by the censors also eliminated the metaphors used by Laurentiu Damian. In the original production, it stands out the contrast between the Obor market in Maria Tanase's days, with a lot of people, joy and feast; and the images then used with the same place but during the days of film making – a naked, deserted, dark, and sad one - just like the perceived difference between the previous and the current regime.

The original film, somewhat dramatically, but abounding in testimonies and information, is radically transformed. The new version is based only on a part of Maria Tanase's letter, read by a voiceover, and, along with the soundtrack built on the artist's songs, it brings a poetic mark to the film, but eliminates the strong aura originally generated. The difference between what the director did and what communist censorship kept was so big that one would hardly mistake if ventured to say that we are dealing with two different films.

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FORBIDDING THE DOCUMENTARY

If Laurentiu Damian was able to see his film in cinemas before 1989, not the same can be told about Copel Moscu and his production Va veni o zi (*A day will come)*. Made in 1985, at the command of a poultry farm in Bacău County, the film was originally called *Într-o zi ca oricare alta (A day like any other)*. I order to have his scenario approved, the director used a summary that "spoke in wooden language about the great achievements of socialist agriculture, about bird farms that exceed the plans."[2] The film had to show the development of socialist agriculture, as a modern and competitive one. The final result was totally different. Copel Moscu alternated sequences filmed in the farm with pictures from the kindergarten of the factory, projecting his vision on the reality of a Communist Romania segregated by gender, a world of violence and absurdity, in a 12-minute film. His work is practically an analogy with the Romanian society of the time. The selection of the interview fragments, their placement in a certain context, in a certain order, and overlapping with the illustration generates subversive effects.

The film is made 17 years after the famous 770 decree that banned abortion. Not by accident, Copel Moscu inserts the sequences with sexing, accompanied by an employee's explanation: "We separate the chicken, the male from the female. Female chicken is used for eggs, while males are used for middlings, or sold to the population in the summer." The parallel with the contemporary society, where the obligatory role of woman is maternal, is obvious. It is not the only dramatic allegory in this sequence. With subtlety, Copel Moscu also refers to the condition of disabled children, unwanted by the state, and sent to orphanages of horror or to real extermination centers, such as

[2] Moscu Copel, în Lucian Ionică, *Documentar şi adevăr,* Bucureşti, Institutul European Publishing House, 2013, p.65

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the one in Cighid; But this may also be a reference to the infant mortality rate in Romania, the largest in Europe at that time. The parallel chicken-children appears more than once during the film. The images of the shining eggs in the incubators alternate with those of the farm's kindergarten, where the children kept throughout the week and left home only on weekends, so that their parents can focus on raising hens and turkeys. The director thus provokes the viewer to a meditation on the human condition, in a society in which it is desired man's artificial creation according to the requirement and the project of the leader. The absurd is transposed with the help of the director of the farm, who says he even brought hairstylists "specialized in giving a childhood note ... by a hair that expresses a good living. "

The metaphor continues in the same way, because the purpose of the system is extended to the macro level, and the ideology taught in the kindergarten goes beyond the boundaries of the farm: "they began to become authoritative in the family, starting asking for discipline, educating their brothers in a certain note and requesting a certain order at home. " No interviews appear in video format during the film. Each such fragment is illustrated with metaphoric images. For example, the story of the education and formation of children after the model of *new man* is illustrated with the grimaced faces of babies who cry, are scared, seem lost... and with a cartoon about a man who tries to model a dog, pulling on his body, elongating him, deforming him.

Although almost half of the film's sequences are with turkeys, the documentary is not about birds, but about human destiny, about human condition. Copel Moscu explores the statements made by the director of the farm about the "social behavior" of the turkeys, about the conflicts that arise when a hierarchy is disturbed and the need for a leader capable of ensuring "the

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evolution or the advance of that population. Someone has to make sure they are going in the right way." The "man-turkey" analogy is also created by overlapping the images with the employees in uniform, always in an ordered group, with the sound produced by hundreds of turkeys in the hall. The metaphor goes beyond the boundaries of the farm, also through the discourse of an employee in the institution: "In larger shelters, social conflicts can lead to more serious problems. It is very important for a specialist to intervene and stop this advancement. "'

The regime would certainly have been disturbed by the negative remarks of simple employees on the way they were working. In a system where production was more important than anything, people's performance in the factories had become robotic: "All these feelings, do not think about anything, stay focused ... Make 8 moves in 4 seconds, in a flash! That's at least 800-900 chicken an hour!" The description of the procedure of separating the chickens, one in which the movements must be accurate and fixed, without leaving room for thinking, is just a pretext, as it can be extrapolated at the macro level. Work without perspective described the society in which Romanians were living, one in which "You entered but you did not know if you were able to come out". In fact, this metaphor of the system that wants a man as similar as possible to a tool that produces almost robotic, without letting him use too much of his own thinking, without letting him the freedom to choose a set of values, is also the one that concludes the film, with the image of the chicken hanging just like human-shaped headless profiles.

With a grandeur and lucidity that makes you think deeply, Copel Moscu creates not only a documentary, but a true manifest of his generation. His subtleties would have brought a serious touch to the image of the regime. However, the reason given by the censors committee for banning its film was another - one related to the immense amount of meat and eggs that appeared in

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the film, but it was totally absent from the stores, which could have generated questions or even riots among the population. The film *A day will come* resisted, however, because with the remains of the first montage, another film, with the same title, was created at the request of the Sahia studio director, who asked for it in order to have it for the inventory. The film passed the barriers of the ideological commission, it was put in a box with the mention "do not play" and so the original was saved. Even though the film did not receive any broadcasts before 1990, the director did not escape unpunished for his "daring." For a while he was only allowed to make commanded films.

DISTORTION OF REALITY IN DOCUMENTARIES

The film *Nunta Pădurenească,* directed by George Derieţeanu in 1978, is the example of "custom" production, one in which reality is falsified on the one hand in order to avoid elements that contradict the regime, or for introducing details that would please the superiors from the unique party; and, on the other hand, according to the personal interests of the director or of an important man in county's governance. The film was produced by the Romanian Television, following the winning of the 1st prize at the Festival *Cântarea României (Song of Romania)* by the folkloric ensemble of Dăbâca, Hunedoara County, for the adaptation of the custom on the stage. Contrary to the definition and basic concepts of the documentary, this film has deeply lacked authenticity, and the presentation of the ceremony has undergone changes to the actual version. In fact, the documentary does not even contain scenes from an authentic wedding, but it is a reconstruction of the wedding ritual, made after two weeks of filming, with 130 villagers fulfilling different wedding roles.

The ethnologist Rusalin Işfănoni, who led the folk ensemble of the village at that time, was the scientific consultant of the documentary. He offered

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the filmmakers all the information about habit and rituals, and according to him, there was no prior documentation of the director and no prospecting in the field. Besides, there was no dialogue with the other locals, who could have offered precious information on what a traditional wedding involves. The film was made on the basis of what was staged at *Cântarea României* Festival and based on a script written by Rusalin Işfănoni. However, this scenario was harshly modified by the shooting team. It has resulted in a film that is abundant in ambiance but lacking key moments, and the concrete information is too few, leaving questions to the unfamiliar viewer.

The film suffers from not having any linearity and even the average viewer can see leaks from one scene to another without any link between them. The filmbegins with a two-minute assembly that contains short sequences from the most important moments later on in the movie: bride's preparation, groom's group heading to the bride's house, the duo dance, the bride's dance, the bride's tree, the ritually wash on hands – all those, while in background can be heard *Brâul Pădurenilor,* a traditional group dance, the specific to this area, and also to the wedding ritual. We are witnessing a first intervention on the traditional habits, because the song, as described in the book *Pădurenii Hunedoarei: o viziune etnologică*, has a slow rhythm. "It is the most captivating and, at the same time, the most relaxing dance, having a therapeutic function."[3] In this case, however, the rhythm of the song is much more alert, at the request of the filmmakers, who have ignored the reality in order to show on TV a cheerful people whith a beautiful life.

This is not the only form of manipulation introduced into the film. Communist propaganda has also felt its presence in other sequences. For

[3] Rusalin Işfănoni, *Pădurenii Hunedoarei: o viziune etnologică*, București, Mirabilis Foundation, 2004, p.330

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example, presenting the traditional religious wedding song *Nunta în Cana Galilei* was avoided, and although the filming took place in the summer, men were not allowed to wear the hat on their head, as they used to, but they were asked to wear a fur cap (a fashion object they only wore in winter), because it was specific to the Dacians. Moreover, the first information provided in the form of text read by the voiceover refers to the Dacian origins of the Romanian people, to the geographic proximity of this land to the area of Dacian fortresses, but also to the similarities between the traditional clothes of the locals and the ones Dacians used to wear, visible on Trajan's Column , in Rome.

The complexity of the shooting equipment, its size, as well as the low capability of filming under difficult conditions have created a hindrance to the authenticity of an important part of the film. Many moments that were happening inside were omitted because of the difficulty of filming, or they were moved outward. It is the case of the sequence of evening sitting in which girls and women prepare the bride's dress, while she was working on the groom's shirt in the meantime. Here are also two songs, one specific to the ritual, performed by the women's choir and a second, introduced at the request of the shooting team.

The last part of the film is dominated by ambiances with songs and shouts specific to that area, with *Ardeleana* and *Brâul*, sang and danced, as we mentioned from the beginning, in a faster rhythm than the traditional one. A new song performed by another singer brought by the filmmakers is introduced here. This is another falsification of reality, because the presence of the soloists was not specific to the weddings in this area, and people used to dance only on instrumental music.

The aesthetic changes, made due to director’s aim to build an attractive film combine with the influences of the communist regime on the way of

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presenting the custom. Due to their desire to appear on television, at a time when the TV program was only two hours, the locals have overlooked the counterfeiting of reality.

CONCLUSIONS

The documentary refers, as its own name says, to the *document*, that is, a testimony that serves to know a real or actual fact in the past; but also to *documentation*, that is somehow similar to *information* – the basic element that is used when making such a film. The aim of the documentary is not only to inform, but also to analyze: "It is an exploration behind the obvious, because it investigates not only the happenings, but also the reasons behind them, the attitudes and feelings of those involved, the interpretations of the experts."

In communist Romania, the purpose of the documentary film is changing - it is no longer a form of journalism, or of art, but it becomes an instrument, like a lathe, a plow or a tractor - a tool of the state. Under these circumstances, it has to reveal his usefulness, so it becomes the way of projecting *the new man*, carved by regime with the director's hand and put on TV screens so that the people can see him and follow his example. It's a time when directors are trying all sorts of strategies in order to tell what they want to say, in a deafening battle with the committees that were formed by more and more censors so that the viewer will no longer get the possibility to interpret or think beyond what he sees on the screen.

However, apart from the hundreds of kilometers of film on which the propaganda of the regime was recorded, there remained courageous innovations of the directors of the time, testimonies of the communist period, awarded after 1990 at national and international festivals. Regardless the way there were made of their note of subjectivism, they do not devalue. And each of them retains its

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quality of witness of time, "remains a testimony of an age, no matter how it is done. [...] Documentary remains valuable through its very own quality as a document and can even be reused, because the images remain forever."[4]

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