# A New Wave within The New Wave of the Romanian Film Industry?

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**Abstract**: *A film can depict a country's profile as well as a book, an art collection or a traditional dance does. Analyzing South-Eastern Europe in her book,* Imagining the Balkans, *Maria Todorova gives a definition of national identity to the effect that the most valuable aspects of identity are portrayed by that people's leading intellectuals (Todorova 38). This is our starting point here in examining Romanian cinema, with a particular focus on* Charleston*, directed by Andrei Crețulescu, a successful young director and fine intellectual. This paper aims to describe the quest for our true inner self, for our Romanian identity, especially the new one, shaped and reshaped so roughly after the fall of communism, which Crețulescu's film illustrates.*

*As Dominique Nasta has pointed out in his book,* Contemporary Romanian Cinema: The History of an Unexpected Miracle*, the Romanian film industry is going through a very flourishing time, its productions being awarded many international prizes. Many films tackle the topic of communism and its consequences from a psychological standpoint, a trend which has been called The New Wave of Romanian film industry. The questions that arose immediately after having watched Crețulescu's film were quite a handful, and the present paper will try to answer some of them. Can we bury our communist past once and for all? Can we overcome our collective fears, expectations and painful memories? How could a love story, a story about betrayal, regrets and unpredictable events, be accountable for the mindset of a generation? Our aim is to prove that it could be and that it can definitely become the trigger to be pulled for a remarkable change in the industry and, not in the least, in our mentality*.

**Keywords**: *film, Romanian, New Wave of Romanian Film, New Romanian Cinema, identity, communism*

## 1. Introduction. What is the Romanian New Wave?

It is not much of a surprise to assume that a culture is visible in narratives. People from all over the world like stories, which they have always tried to pass on to the next generations, in different manners, be it in writing, painting or through performing arts. Given the number of stories told, can we still find the desire to produce more stories, on the one hand, and to relate to more tales, on the other? A psychological survey on humankind as a species would definitely prove so, that we are still longing for stories, as if they were in our blood. Mircea Eliade had long debated the aspects of myths and the way they actually lead to modern story-telling: "I am what I am today because a series of events occurred before I existed … events that took place in the mythical times and therefore make up a sacred history" (Eliade 13).

We should take into account that no stories are innocent, which is to say they produce meaning only through a specific context, an ideology, an approach to

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life, in other words they are "ideologically complicit" (Lapsley 130). Films are no exception to this rule, especially those that come to fruition mainly as an outpouring for the frustrations and the sufferings caused by the communist regime, as was the case of Romania and of Romanian film producers and directors.

The political implications of films cannot be denied as they render meaning to a certain type of reality, a recognizable one, at least for the citizens who have survived to tell its story – for us, Romanians. We should also consider that realism is not simply a mirror or a window through the external world, but it is built on a set of conventions, ideologies, convictions which turn it into a plural form, enabling us to talk about realisms because there are "as many realities as there are concepts of it" (Lapsley, Westlake 167). The connection between painting one type of reality or another awaits just one step around the corner due to the fact that "any realist work, therefore, and none more so than films, with their remarkable power to effect belief, in their constructions, has political ramifications" (Lapsley, Westlake 156-157). Back in the 1970s, a text was realistic if the viewers validated it as such; as Lapsley and Westlake put it, "the realistic effect was produced or not according to whether the representations of the text matched or failed to match the beliefs of spectators" (169).

Considering all of the above, the main inquiry that we are trying to undertake along this paper is whether or not art in general and films in particular could provide a knowledgeable insight into the real society, namely the Romanian post-communist society.

Dominique Nasta, a well-known film critic, would argue that we can. Admitting that, we need to look at the roots of things by analyzing our heritage, for example our folk culture. Nasta starts her *Contemporary Romanian Cinema* by discussing the historical and the cultural landmarks that shaped our identity up to a point. One of the best case studies in this respect would be Romania's archetypal tale, *Mioriţa*, an anonymous folk ballad which tells the story of a young shepherd being envied and eventually killed by his fellow shepherds for his flock, his only fortune. His attitude towards his almost impending murder could be shocking to most people because most cultures would praise the action of defending oneself, one's life and belongings. It seems that in our folk tradition, things function otherwise. For our culture, such a motionless, Nirvana-like attitude might be a trademark. An attitude that may have become a burden as it programs us not to react, just to accept what fate has to give, as if given from God, it has triggered a chain reaction. So, in full accordance with such a perspective, *Mioriţa*'s shepherd does not try to prevent his death, but accepts his fate as it is. What he does is to turn his most loved lamb into a messenger for his mother to comfort her by telling a fantastic tale having him as a happy groom to wed a princess and to be witnessed by the stars and the moon; the tale thus pictures him integrated metaphorically into a different dimension. As an undeniable result, as many researchers of humanities such as Mircea Eliade or Lucian Blaga have demonstrated, our mindset cannot



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escape the fatalism of *Miorița*. So does Dominique Nasta believe, and then she concludes: "fatality is indeed at the core of the Romanian psyche, precisely counter-balanced by a lot of black humour, spontaneity and ironic wit" (Nasta 3). It is rather difficult not to take such a legacy as a challenge, so this could be why, moving on from the initial fatalism of communism and its marks, many young Romanian directors would reconsider their positions and start adopting a more international, fatalism-free approach.

The story of everyday life is the most difficult to tell, in films or by any other artistic means. As beauty is in the eye of the one contemplating, so "realism sometimes resides in the eye of the beholder" (Ieta 23). And it does indeed, considering that the main trait of the New Romanian Cinema is to be found in the theme of the "communist past markedly haunting the present as well as the current state of social problems without solutions" (Ieta 23). It might be a different story to digest for the foreign viewers, especially those that had not experienced communism as such or its consequences to the present day. At the same time, curiosity might push spectators from abroad to watch and, possibly, understand Romanian film productions, as cultural manifestations of the others, the strangers. Anthropologists such as Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage* have looked into the matters of primitive groups relating to strangers:

> Some peoples kill, strip and mistreat a stranger without ceremony, while others fear him, take great care of him [*sic*], treat him as a powerful being, or take magico-religious protective measures against him…. For a great many, a stranger is sacred, endowed with magico-religious powers, and, supernaturally benevolent or malevolent. This fact has been pointed out repeatedly, especially by Frazer and Crawley, who both attribute the rites to which a stranger is subjected to magico-religious terror in his presence. These rites, they maintain, are intended to make him neutral or benevolent, to remove the special qualities attributed to him. (Van Gennep 26)

Attributing special qualities to a stranger could also be the reason why the Romanian New Wave has been so popular with its foreign spectators, who are more willing to pay for their tickets in theaters than their Romanian counterparts are, as Monica Filimon stresses out. Against all odds, "the box-office is on the rise, but there are not enough viewers to support the industry without extra funding" (Filimon 33). While plenty of Romanians may argue that they do not want to watch a film about the cruel reality they have already experienced or are still experiencing (that is to say, the results of the communist past), many foreigners may be delighted to get a glimpse of something that they are total strangers to. Dominique Nasta makes a similar point: "Despite its international recognition and its effectively used production facilities, Romanian cinema is still faring poorly at home. Audiences inevitably prefer US box-office hits to national productions and



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cinema attendance rates have not progressed as expected" (Nasta 234). It has happened with books telling the Western world the horrid story that went on behind the walls of the communist block (we can mention Milan Kundera's novels, for instance). Now, it is happening with films, many of which are of Romanian origin. As surprising as it might be, the Romanian New Wave, with its minimalist means, with its impressionism, "has no manifesto, no backing of a school, generation or mentors… although the majority of young directors refer to Lucian Pintilie as their model" (Ieta 26). Still, its success has been tremendous and at the same time suspicious for it seems to be appearing from nowhere, as a miracle, to astonish many and to unwind painful memories.

The fact that we are not comfortable with revisiting our past, be it in an artistic manner, could stand as an argument why the New Romanian Cinema did not have any substantial support from the national authorities, while it had from abroad, following its recognition. To such recognition have contributed several international prizes such as Cristi Puiu's Cannes in 2005, *Une certain regarde* for *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*; Cristian Mungiu's Palme D'Or in 2007 for *4 Months 3 Weeks and 2 Days* and his Cannes prize for the best screenplay in 2012 for *Behind the Hills*; Cătălin Peter Netzer's Telia Film Award at the Stockholm International Film Festival in 2013 for *Child's Pose*; or Corneliu Porumboiu's Cannes in 2015, *Un certain talent* for *The Treasure*.

The popularity of the new Romanian films has increased overseas alongside the diversification of their audiences. Somehow predictably, the interest of the Romanian public in films tackling the communist past and its impact on the present has been less considerable than the interest of Western viewers. Lately, though, there has been a shift in interest shown by the Romanian public as well, as the number of cinema goers has seen a major growth. According to Dominique Nasta,

> The worldwide acclaim of the press, which, thanks to the film's wide circulation in festivals, lasted for more than a year, was followed almost concomitantly by numerous side effects on the domestic level. The most salient was Mungiu's *The 4, 3, 2 Caravan*, a documentary on a travelling cinema crew trying to breathe new life into deserted movie theatres across fifteen Romanian towns … there are less than fifty cinemas … Romania having the lowest percentage of movie goers in the EU. (198)

Still, with no extra funding and no support from the institutions, the danger of destroying such a young industry is coming to a close. The solution is to be sought in the international scene which might be even more involved if a change happened. The topic of communism, together with its heritage, has been exhausted, so the need for variety builds up faster than ever.

The widening of subjects in Romanian films has actually started with short films rather than with feature films because the former were "less interested in



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recuperating the truth or searching for the authentic ... may be more attuned to young audiences' global sensibilities and expectations" (Filimon 33). Can Romanian filmmakers add anything fresh, updated to global affairs, to the recipe of our cinema, besides communism, trauma, unsuccessful present and future, common broken destinies, and still keep it within the Romanian frame of film making? We strongly argue that they can. Thinking about the industry in gastronomy terms, because it stimulates all your senses, we cannot refrain ourselves from stating that fusions are actually better than the specific cuisines themselves. Why not become international with a twist of Romanian flavour on top? It might be the right mixture for an even wider success!

## 2. Exposition. A new wave?

As numerous other young directors, Andrei Crețulescu started his career with short films, *Bad Penny* in 2013, *Kowalski* in 2014 and *Ramona* in 2015, breaking the tradition in order to express it differently, from the Romanian New Wave, and changing both the contents of his productions, as well as the form of expression. He has declared in some interviews that his main focus is love, having as role models international screenwriters such as Aki Kaurismaki or Wes Anderson, the renowned director of *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014).[1] Romanian directors are still a cornerstone for the director in question. When asked who is the colleague that he would take out for a drink, Andrei Crețulescu answered, with no hesitation, that his choice would be Cristi Puiu, not for the drink itself, but for the amazing conversation about films and, of course, about film-making to accompany it.

*Charleston* is Andrei Crețulescu's first feature film (both as a director and as a screenwriter). The production had its premiere at Tiff Film Festival in 2018, in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The assembly has also toured internationally throughout Turkey, Poland, Korea, and South America. The public has requested additional projections on numerous occasions, a satisfactory outcome which demonstrates the public's interest worldwide for authentic local products with a twist.

The film stars Ana Ularu[2] as Ioana, Șerban Pavlu[3] as Alexandru, her husband, and Radu Iacoban as Sebastian, Ioana's secret lover. The narrative basically consists of a love story, more precisely, a love triangle, that questions the ability of a human being to love two complete opposite people at the same time. Ioana loves both her husband, the macho type symbolized in the film by the image of an American icon from the 1960s-70s, the actor Charlton Heston, and her boyfriend, the romantic shy guy, the sensitive man type that any woman would consider for the role of her confidant because he knows when to listen and when to

[1] *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, for instance, is a magnificent production grounded on a medley of surrealism, colour, outstanding characters and, not least, romance.
[2] Ularu is an internationally well-known Romanian actress.
[3] Pavlu has played in many of the New Wave films and he can easily be considered a leading figure.



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comfort her. The title could also be decoded as a reference to a dance dating back to the beginning of the 20th century, a very vivid and dynamic one, also named Charleston, where the first rule is that the dancers need to change partners.

The story actually records the grief of the two men after having lost Ioana in a stupid car accident. The female character only appears at the beginning of the film with no line, to disappear minutes later because of her unexpected death. Thus, the love story celebrates the absence of the object of love and investigates, profoundly, the masculine emotions, hidden or shown, as exemplified by the two male characters. No communism, no collective trauma, no politics, just a normal love story that could have happened anywhere, in every corner of this planet. And still, the Romanian touch is to be recognized when a more detailed analysis unrolls over the events.

The genesis of the film is to be found in real life, as Andrei Crețulescu himself makes it clear in an interview. The film, as we can discover by researching the testimonies connected to it, sprang out of a traumatic experience, so it is partially biographical. The director's mother left home for another man when Andrei was a child and then she returned to Andrei's father trying to explain to her son that she loved two men simultaneously. This episode stuck with the future director just to be turned, years later, into a film questioning the nature of human beings, the way they manifest, the bondage they have with their culture, traditions, conceptions and misconceptions.[4]

Thus, the story on the screen, born out of a personal trauma, is a story about love, about how it is felt by different people, rather than being a classical love story. The account of events shown on the screen is neither too comical, nor too pathetic, but it stands somewhere in between, trying to keep the balance by offering an equal amount of hilarious scenes and deeply emotional interludes.

While the front narrative plan articulates the events after Ioana's death, the focus being on the encounter of the two men she loved,[5] the second narrative plan is kept mysterious towards the end of the film and maybe beyond it because it really makes us wonder and reflect on new meanings. Alexandru, the macho husband who refuses to mourn and finds a refuge for his mixed emotions in the abuse of alcohol and cigarettes, seems to be taking part into some kind of a monkey business. He goes to a nearby bar on a regular basis, he communicates in codes with the bartender and other men who look suspicious as if members of a gang. At first, the viewers cannot make much sense out of these meetings as they do not understand what is going on, what the relationship is between the widower and these Italian mafia lookalike individuals. There is no exaggeration to argue that the

[4] For example, the misconception regarding masculinity as a tough outburst of power, always emotionless and fearless, is deeply engrained in Romanian culture.
[5] We use the word *encounter* to refer to something akin to a revelation because both men realize what they had missed and discover themselves at the same time.



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background story, the mysterious meetings at the bar, can be seen as a kind of enlightenment, a huge revelation.

This is where the Romanian flavour that we have mentioned before comes into light. All Alexandru and his partners are trying to do is to save an old theatre from demolition. The building is situated at the heart of Bucharest and thus it really bears a symbolical value. Through their attempts which remain, unfortunately, unsuccessful, the men under discussion raise a different topic for further analysis and debate: the nostalgic look at a better, brighter past which they would love to freeze for future generations, the interwar heritage of the capital of Romania, not only because of its architectural profile, but for everything else involved in the period such as the lifestyle, the hopes and dreams of the Romanian petit bourgeoisie in the first half of the 20th century.

As a matter of consequence, the past, as Andrei Crețulescu suggests, does not have to be a burden, but can be a celebration. While our communist past might be erased for our minds as a way of gaining freedom, our cultural heritage dating a century ago when Romania had its golden age of wealth and recognition may probably be our salvation. Yet not all things are meant to be saved, not even good old things such as the period old theatre we are considering here, in the story. The cruel reality Alexandru and Sebastian learn about is that one can turn back neither the big history of ages and flourishing eras, nor one's personal history with all its moments of joy or sadness. The lesson to be learned might be that the only salvation possible, the only acceptable one is to embrace the future and its multiple opportunities for a better outcome, a better understanding of life as it is.

Considering all the above, if one were to look into establishing the connection between this film and the New Wave of Romanian film industry with its brutal reality, one would have to take some time to decipher the second narrative plan where the message encoded suggests that it is impossible to hold on to the past, be it a marvellous one or one less fortunate. The only thing one should do is move on, continue with life's challenges, receive them as gifts, not as heavy weights to be lifted on one's shoulders. This is an optimistic message after all, speaking about the power of rebirth that lies deep within the majority of us. No fatalism here, none taken, in the shape of philosophy for life, just *carpe diem*! The fatalism of *Moriță*, which some researchers might say is engraved on our mind, has seen better days.

Otherwise, there is little to no comparison between the New Wave films of Mungiu, Puiu or Porumboiu and Crețulescu's first feature film, *Charleston.* To make things even more distant from the pattern we have been used to with gloomy Romanian films about communism and its influence on people and mentalities, we could also bring into discussion the scenography, the filming techniques, the colours employed, the decor itself. All of these factors establish a major breakthrough from the way the films of the New Wave were conceived. Crețulescu's whole film feeds on a retro touch, leaning on a colourful, yet cold



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background that gives the events a certain improbable, cloudy atmosphere, still, inviting feeling. The dominant colours are dark green, red, grey, dark blue and brown as in the works of the American painter and etcher Edward Hopper, whose masterpieces have inspired Crețulescu a lot as they have other artists, amongst whom the well-known Spanish film director Pedro Almodovar.

Still, when we first see the images passing one after another in front of our eyes on the screen, the most striking of all is the influence of Edward Hopper, the painter, which carries us across the ocean. We can recognize the preference for shades of green and red, the narrative of empty enclosed spaces haunted by weird, yet seductive characters that seem to be struck by nostalgia, forgotten by others in this modern and dazzling world, a Western world, far away from the Balkans.

Edward Hopper's perspective on reality is a selective one, the same as Crețulescu's. For them, realism does not mean copying the reality, but selecting it, interpreting it in endless possibilities. The rendering of reality cannot be otherwise but partial, fragmented and misleading as beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. The majority of Hoppers' paintings, such as *Early Sunday Morning*, *Gas* or *Nighthawks*, to mention just a few, depict deserted small settlements, solitary figures in frozen spaces, sad hotel rooms, bars or houses. If we were to analyze the key scenes in *Charleston*, we would be convinced by the great number of similarities with Hopper's paintings. Both creators play with light, uncertainty and revelation, concealment and fascinating discoveries, and they both tell stories of romantic encounters. Take Hopper's painting *Nighthawks* (1942), for instance, one of his most remarkable masterpieces, whose features we recognize in the majority of Crețulescu's film shots. Hopper's *Nighthawks* sustains a lot of scenarios: people sitting on bar stools, at night, alone with their thoughts, even though, in the company of others – random encounters – are still unable to share emotions, facing a massive breach of communication. The background of the deserted city adds melancholy. It stands for a giant bus stop, a transit location where old wounds cannot be healed. Hopper's vision is cinematic, providing an excellent ground for feature films and the like.

The language of music is to be interpreted, too, if we are interested in recomposing the meaning of *Charleston* as loyally as possible to the director's vision. The music of the film mostly expresses the preferences of Crețulescu himself, as he has mentioned in the media. His playlist encompasses diversity and at the same time it revolves around a couple of major obsessions: exotic sounds from faraway lands that trigger unexpected dynamics (with *Dengue Fever*), melancholy (with *Noir Desir*), decadence (with *Get Well Soon*), and psychedelic experiences (with *Pretties for You*). It points out to feelings felt by people from all over the world such as in the scene where the two men dance together in the memory of the deceased loved one, Ioana, the wife and the mistress, respectively, and a mixture of them both. The moment is hilarious and sensitive at the same time. It emphasizes the idea that the reality, the prototypes and clichés depict



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conventions meant to be broken. The most durable of the misconceptions that this film seems to argue against is the inability of men to show their emotions, to express their vulnerability and sensitivity in a society where the patriarchate dictates the norm.

Music becomes poetry in Crețulescu's film in order to teach us that stereotypes have to be demolished for the sake of us becoming creatures who primarily feel, above all, above reason, above prefabricated codes of conduct. Music is poetry here as loud and as scandalous as in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, where we witness a similar dance scene starring Uma Thurman and John Travolta in an unforgettable match, unleashing all the energies of the universe that one can think of, and mostly, the energies of destruction. Music is poetry as it is also in David Lynch's films, with their unexpected blend of surrealism, nightmare, dream and the cruellest of worlds as in *Blue Velvet*, *Twin Peaks* or *Wild at Heart*. The resemblance between the two directors, Lynch and Crețulescu, should be regarded as a flattering remark for the latter. David Lynch is an artist like no other, and Crețulescu might evolve a similar profile. Only his future productions will be able to confirm or invalidate our prediction, but the beginning undeniably promises a lot.

## 3. Conclusion

The obsessions of the New Romanian Wave have been, from the early 2000s until now, the corruption of Bucharest (the seat of power), the misery of prostitution, at home or elsewhere, the mass depression of youth because of lack of opportunities for a decent living, all wrapped into one, the "bleak, vulgar and violent reflection on the tragic consequences of the post-communist transition in the domestic sphere" (Nasta 203), with little to no stylistic innovation, just a sheer preference for minimalism and hyperreality. Now, the wind of change has brought new ideas along, reconsidering all the shades and colours of the art of film-making. The new perspective seems more dynamic, more comical, more international regardless of oppression times, dictatorship and Freudian memories that would require serious medical treatment.

The topics that are tackled within this Wave of the New Wave have long set aside communism or anything else related to it. Rather, the "stylistic and thematic choices of other newcomers go beyond the previously inescapable paradigm of the 1989 revolution, allowing audiences to become familiar with previously taboo storylines" (Nasta 204). On top of that, the aesthetics is oriented towards the American pop culture of the 1950s, leaving minimalism behind, towards the private lives of characters, circumventing the notion of common destiny as a datum. Young directors such as Andrei Crețulescu have started to create a different mindset, which is to be viewed as more contemporary, more global and modern than our old fatalism embedded in the story of a shepherd who would rather die and philosophize than take action to save himself from a cruel destiny. The modern



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individual does not believe that fate is given at birth and thus has to be blindly obeyed. This view might have been successful with the ancient Greeks and the admirers of Greek tragedies in antiquity, for whom fulfilling their destiny must have been the sole reason to walk the earth, to populate it. Under no circumstances can such an approach be valid today, in the 21st century, when we are expanding our horizon day by day, learning that we can be the mighty gods of our own fate.

The phenomenon emerging in such a small country as ours is to be celebrated as a cinematic "miracle":

> Mutatis mutandis, through featuring interesting films and filmmakers, Romanian Cinema lagged behind its older and more experienced neighbouring Eastern European film industries for quite a while, striking back and catching up with most of them when least expected. This Cinematic Cinderella clearly chose a narrow path, the minimalist vein, to prove her originality and clearly looked for her main inspiration amidst the ashes of the Communist past. (Nasta 232)

Now the time has come to widen the path and to turn a blind eye to the past, welcoming the future, instead. This is why we celebrate the change that *Charleston* brings, hoping to open new doors, new means of expression for the Romanian film industry.

The New Wave within The New Wave of the Romanian film industry cannot be regarded as just a metaphor of speech. It does have all the necessary ingredients for a real revolution, a softer and a more international one, this time, but still a revolution that needs to confirm its profile, to be reinforced by similar productions.

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