



A SLIGHT UNEASE ABOUT CAPITALISM: RADU JUDE'S THE HAPPIEST GIRL IN THE WORLD AND THE NEW ROMANIAN CINEMA

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Abstract: The article discusses the aesthetics and the politics of the so-called New Romanian Cinema (a major post-2005 sensation on the international art-cinema circuit), succinctly assessing its novelty in both a national and an international cinematic context. It then proceeds to discuss Radu Jude's debut feature, *The Happiest Girl in the World* (2009), as a NRC film, typical in some ways, atypical in others. The paper highlights the film's critique of advertising and the nuclear family.

Keywords: Radu Jude, New Romanian Cinema, post-communism, capitalism, advertising, the nuclear family, Cristi Puiu, Lucian Pintilie.

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Radu Jude's first feature film, *The Happiest Girl in the World*, came out in 2009, when a so-called "New Romanian Cinema" or "Romanian New Wave" was already established as a force on the international film-festival and art-cinema scene.¹ It was immediately recognized as belonging to this quickly expanding group of films which included Cristi Puiu's 2005 *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (the Cannes critical hit that had started the film-festival Romanian sensation), Corneliu Porumboiu's 2006 *12:08 East of Bucharest*, Radu Muntean's *The Paper Will Be Blue* (also from 2006, and somewhat lesser-known internationally), and Cristian Mungiu's 2007 *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (a Palme d'Or winner and consequently the NRC's biggest worldwide hit). Apart from *The Happiest Girl in the World*, 2009 saw the release of Porumboiu's widely admired *Police, Adjective* and Bobby Păunescu's *Francesca* as well. What made *Happiest Girl* recognizable as an example of this "New Romanian Cinema" (NRC)? What were the features it shared with these other films?

These films featured either contemporary Romanian urban

settings or were set in the recent historical past – the late 1980s or, in other words, the last phase of Romania's state socialist era (1948–1989). They were photographed (by DOPs like Oleg Mutu, Marius Panduru, Tudor Lucaciu, or Andrei Butică) in a style which suggested the absence of artificial lighting and connoted raw, gritty realism or naturalism by virtue of its associations with "observational" documentary filmmaking or amateur (video) footage. The stories they told tended to take place over a very short period of time – usually no more than a few hours (in other words, not much longer than the films' screening times). The narration tended to follow or observe (in a manner suggesting a somewhat personified camera – the camera as invisible witness) a single protagonist or a single group of characters as they were attempting to negotiate a crisis, to pull through an ordeal, or to meet some kind of deadline. There was little or no cross-cutting between actions occurring simultaneously at different locales, little to no narrative jumping around in space or time.

The crisis faced by the protagonist or by the main group of

characters could be a matter of life and death. This tends to happen especially in the early films of the NRC. In *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, the man who meets with endless obstacles in being admitted to a Bucharest hospital for diagnosis and treatment, may be very seriously ill. In *The Paper Will Be Blue*, which is set during the violent 1989 events that overthrew Nicolae Ceaușescu's communist regime, a young soldier deserts his platoon to join the fighting in the Bucharest streets, and his commanding officer goes looking for him in the gunshot-filled night; if he doesn't find him before dawn, he'll have to report him missing and suffer the consequences. In *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, which is set in 1987, two young women try to arrange an abortion – an illegal act in Ceaușescu's Romania.

Radu Jude's *The Happiest Girl in the World*, which came after such defining films of the NRC, doesn't concern itself with such life-and-death matters. (Neither do Corneliu Porumboiu's first two features, *12:08 East of Bucharest* and *Police, Adjective*). The ordeal that Jude's heroine is trying to endure is simply the shooting of a commercial for a soda drink over the course of a scorching summer day in Bucharest. It so happens that this high school girl from a provincial town has won a car from the soda company; appearing in the commercial is the price she has to pay for it. She must have woken up in the early hours of the night (if she went to sleep at all) to travel all the way to Bucharest with her parents, who won't let her use the car anyway, having decided to sell it and use the money to convert her grandmother's house in a boarding house for tourists. Apart from the disappointment, the disorientation, and the heat, she has to put up with being patronized and humiliated by the people working for the soft drinks company, those from the advertising agency, and the film crew, while also being drawn between takes in an intergenerational conflict with her parents, in which sulking and insolence are her only weapons against the emotional blackmail and threats they shower her with. It is not a life-and-death matter, but it is certainly another ordeal story, designed by Jude (just as much as *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* and *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* had been conceived by their directors) as an experience to be endured by the viewer in sympathy with the heroine.

Another feature shared by all these films is that, no matter how exceptional or unexceptionally quotidian their plots are, a high degree of attention is paid to mundane details. The first exchange we hear in *The Happiest Girl in the World* has to do with the heroine's car sickness; immediately afterwards, the family car having pulled at a gas station, mother and daughter talk about menstrual pain as they change into better clothes in a public toilet. Jude's investment in ordinariness, as writer-director, feels almost militant. In a Romanian film from 2009, this was immediately recognizable as a mark of the "new wave" that had been ushered in by Cristi Puiu's first two features (both co-written with Răzvan Rădulescu), *Stuff and Dough* (2001) and *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*. In this New Romanian Cinema, the prosaic ordinariness of day-to-day exertions, objects, and language is freed from the burden of oversignification it had been indissolubly associated with

in the Romanian cinema of the 1990s; in other words, the commonplace and the humdrum are exempted from their old moral and almost metaphysical links to the vulgar, the ugly, and the debased, and rendered as the neutral, indifferent, and sometimes dull texture of life.

As acting in a commercial involves a lot of waiting around, interspersed with the repetition of a few words and gestures, the heroine's distress has an element of tedium, and Jude's direction emphasises the heaviness of time. This also happens in the other films of the NRC – not least in those which, unlike *The Happiest Girl in the World*, show us characters caught in the midst of life-and-death situations. For purposes of 'de-dramatization' and realistic effect, the Romanian filmmakers tend to include chunks of time in which nothing of great dramatic importance happens. This preference for 'real time' is generally synonymous with a preference for long takes – sometimes keeping close to the characters (as in Puiu's first two films), sometimes combined with long shots (as in Porumboiu's *Police, Adjective*), often hand-held. This shared aesthetic is also characterized by a reduction of expressive and spectacular resources: there is no use of expressive music, no effort to convey character subjectivity through visual or aural distortions, or even through point-of-view shots; there is no great multiplicity of camera angles, there are no elaborate crane shots, etc. (Sometimes, especially in the early phases of the New Romanian Cinema, this aesthetic has been called "minimalist,"² although the term hardly seems suitable for Cristi Puiu's images from *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, which, simulating documentary shots of busy, overcrowded Bucharest hospitals, are always teeming with human activity and rely on an intricate choreography of camera and actors).

But where exactly resided the novelty of the NRC? Did it bring anything new to international cinema (or to Romanian cinema, for that matter)? After all, some of the stylistic features outlined above – the use of long takes for a realistic effect, the emphasis on 'real' duration, the accommodation of the contingent and the undramatic, of inconsequential incidents, the militant investment in the unglamorously quotidian – had been around at least since Italian neorealism (and its influential theorization by André Bazin). The emergence, in the 1960s, of documentary film movements like "direct cinema" and *cinéma vérité* had inspired a new style of scripting, staging, acting, and shooting fiction, aiming at an effect of life caught unawares, as in the films of John Cassavetes (often cited as a model by NRC catalyst Cristi Puiu) or, later, the early films of Béla Tarr. In the 1990s – an age of ubiquitous video images, some of them documenting world-historical events like the fall of the Ceaușescu regime in Romania or the wars in ex-Yugoslavia – a new urge to compete with this degree of rawness, of grit, of apparent 'realness,' seemed to seize art cinema. The films of Dogme 95 made quite a stir at the time, as did Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne's *Rosetta*, which won the Palme d'Or in 1999, a couple of years before Romania started producing its own somewhat similar-looking films. (The Dardenne brothers would go on to co-produce films by leading NRC director Cristian Mungiu – *Beyond the Hills* [2012], *Graduation*



[2016] – while clearly stating their affinity with Romania’s “new cinema”.³) So, if a number of new Romanian films from the 2000s shared a number of features, as described in the previous paragraphs, they also shared many of these features with non-Romanian films going back as far as *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and culminating with *Rosetta*. Hence the question: what were the elements of novelty, if any, brought by NRC to world cinema in the mid-2000s?

The novelty of the NRC within world cinema

First and foremost, it contributed with Romanian subject matter. To the extent that it takes the Romanian health system as its subject – built in the state socialist era and supposedly continuing to offer medical attention to everybody for free, but increasingly underfunded and perceived by Romanian citizens as inadequate and corrupt – *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* can be said to be, very broadly, about the legacy of Romanian state socialism. *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* is about the grim consequences of the pronatalist policies implemented by Ceaușescu and, more generally, about the late, terminal phase of his regime, characterized by drastic economic austerity (shortages of food, heating, electricity, and consumer goods), and consequent popular frustration. *12:08 East of Bucharest* and *The Paper Will Be Blue* are both oblique looks at the violent events of December 1989 (internationally televised at the time) which brought an end to the state socialist era.

What other elements of novelty could the NRC be said to bring? According to the director of *Mr. Lăzărescu*, Cristi Puiu, his emphasis on medical procedures and processes – on the processing of an individual by state institutions – was indebted to Frederick Wiseman’s documentaries about American institutions, but it could also be seen as something more specifically Romanian. *The Paper Will Be Blue* and *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* – two films which, following in the footsteps of *Mr. Lăzărescu*, did a lot to establish a NRC formula – both excel at scenes of difficult, tense, somewhat absurdist negotiation between the protagonists and various representatives of the crumbling pre-1989 state (from officers in the army to hotel receptionists); just as they both display a *Lăzărescu*-like sensitivity to social and professional hierarchies and castes (the medical, the military etc.), and their adjacent tensions. Puiu’s co-writer on *Lăzărescu*, Răzvan Rădulescu, also co-wrote *The Paper Will Be Blue* with Alexandru Baciu and director Radu Muntean, and he consulted on Cristian Mungiu’s script for *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*. Rădulescu would go on to co-write key films of the New Romanian Cinema – Muntean’s 2010 *Tuesday, After Christmas*, Călin Peter Netzer’s 2013 *Child’s Pose*, and his own directorial debut from 2010, *First of All, Felicia*, co-directed with Melissa de Raaf; he would also co-write the 2009 *Gruber’s Journey*, a partly conventional, partly interesting historical drama by the veteran director Radu Gabrea, and the first fiction film dealing with the Romanian participation in the Holocaust. Every one of these films exhibits at least some of the stylistic features and thematic interests outlined so far.⁴

Anyway, even if the figure of the idiotic and/or authoritarian official was, of course, neither new, nor specifically Romanian, scenes with state functionaries of one sort or another, both before and after the fall of the communist regime, displaying rudeness, corruption, authoritarianism, absurdity, exhausted irascibility, etc., would become almost a signature motif of the New Romanian Cinema. And at the origin of all such scenes, of all Romanian cinematic spectacles of individuals being processed by shabby, creaky structures of authority and power, it is perfectly possible to place a legendary Romanian film from the Ceaușescu era: Lucian Pintilie’s *The Reenactment*, shot in 1968 and then suppressed for a year before being granted a limited release in 1970. Puiu, Porumboiu and Radu Jude, among other directors associated with the post-2000 NRC, have cited this landmark film as an inspiration (a distinction they have extended to no more than a handful of other Romanian films from the state socialist era).

The Reenactment tells the tragic story of two young men who, having got into a drunken fight while celebrating their graduation from high school, are forced by the authorities (a prosecutor, a policeman, a teacher, and a film crew) to reenact the incident for the benefit of an educational film. With the two boys being forced to do something repetitive, faintly absurd, and more and more ordeal-like, in the course of a single day, when not having to simply wait around and kill time, *The Reenactment* can be said to anticipate the tribulations of Mr. Lăzărescu, those of the two young women in Mungiu’s *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days*, and especially those of Radu Jude’s heroine in *The Happiest Girl in the World*. For doesn’t *The Happiest Girl* also concern a film crew and a non-professional actor forced to do take after take – to repeat the same actions and the same words again and again – until she (nearly) falls off her feet? *The Happiest Girl in the World* can very well be seen as the post-communist Romanian world’s *Reenactment*. But more about this later. Italian neorealism is also an obvious reference point, and thus can be used to take a tentative measure of the New Romanian Cinema’s novelty. As Lúcia Nagib has written in a 2017 essay, what is now labelled “World Cinema” started

“in Europe, more precisely with Italian neorealism in the 1940s, which, on the basis of a documentary approach to the real, offered fertile ground for the development of art and auteur cinema. Turning its back on Hollywood fantasy and standing on the grave of the Nazi-fascist propaganda machine, this new realist cinema unveiled on screen the gritty reality of a poverty-stricken, devastated Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. As we know, the raw aesthetics and revelatory power of this foundational movement inspired a flurry of subsequent (social-)realist schools in the world, such as Indian independent cinema in the 1950s, Brazilian Cinema Novo in the 1960s, African post-independence cinemas in the 1970s, the New Iranian Cinema in the 1980s, Danish Dogme 95 in the 1990s and many other new waves and new cinemas, remaining influential up to today. Neorealism was moreover the touchstone of André

Bazin's concept of cinematic realism, the world's most revolutionary and most enduring film theory ever written, albeit in the form of short magazine articles."⁵

Echoes of Italian neorealism are discernible in some of the early films of the New Romanian Cinema – and especially in a couple of early Radu Jude films. In Jude's Sundance Award-winning short *The Tube with a Hat* (2007), a small boy from a village (Marian Bratu) and his father (Gabriel Spahiu) – an iconically neorealist couple – undertake an arduous day-long journey to the nearest town and back, carrying a very old and heavy TV set which they hope to be able to fix. Two years later, the New Romanian Cinema would produce a Palme d'Or-winning short with a very similar subject: Marian Crișan's *Megatron*, in which a village boy and his mother once again undertake a seemingly long journey, so that the boy can get the chance to eat McDonald's on his birthday. Once again, the pathos of the journey is in the classic neorealist tradition.

What's absent from Romanian films (especially Jude's) is that luminous, seemingly natural dignity with which the Italian neorealist filmmakers used to endow their downtrodden heroes. André Bazin has long ago remarked upon "the nobility and extraordinary dignity that Visconti's *mise en scène* [in *La Terra Trema*] injected into this reality [of the lives of poor fishermen]. These fishermen were not dressed in rags, they were draped in them like tragic princes. Not because Visconti was trying to distort or simply interpret their existence, but because he was revealing its immanent dignity."⁶ *La Terra Trema* may be an extreme case – the ragged-princes effect described by Bazin surely having to do with Luchino Visconti's appetite for grand theatricality – but this quality of luminous dignity is common to nearly all the characters of Italian neorealist cinema, ambiguously poised as that cinema was, in the immediate aftermath of World War II, between Communist humanism and Christian humanism. On the other hand, the brand of Romanian neorealism represented by *The Tube with a Hat* finds its emblem in actor Gabriel Spahiu's comically wretched look: there's little place for his character to reveal his immanent dignity as he stumbles through the mud, cursing his fate in the rain, with a plastic bag on his head and the TV set on his shoulder. Sensitivity to what it means to be underprivileged – in this case, to the fact that the underprivileged have to spend most of their energy on things that the more privileged take for granted – no longer translates into an uplifting aesthetic, celebrating 'the nobility of the poor'.

Some of the themes of Jude's *Happiest Girl in the World* – the theme of provincials in the big city, as well as that of a girl presented by her ambitious parents to a film crew and its camera (somewhat like the little girl in Visconti's 1951 *Bellissima*) – also have neorealist roots (as does Jude's predilection for casting non-professional actors in some of the major roles).⁷ And, once again, the differences are suggestive. In *Bellissima*, the mother (played by Anna Magnani) isn't scheming to exploit her own child only for the sake of material gain; she's genuinely screen-struck, and her infatuation with the movies is presented satirically, but also lyrically. Whereas the parents

in Jude's film – the father (Vasile Muraru) an engineer, the mother a teacher (Violeta Haret) – do not care about their daughter (Andreea Boșneag) being the star of a TV commercial any more than they care about her desire to actually be allowed to drive the car she has won. All they care about is selling the car the same day and investing the money in their boarding house business. The daughter's pleas for being granted at least some time with the car – if not to drive it (she doesn't have a license yet), at least to show it off – are met with the question: "How would that benefit you?" The people in this film – and, more generally, in the New Romanian Cinema – are more insensitive, thicker-skinned than the people in the classic Italian neorealist films; at the same time, they are touchier, more irritably reactive, more easily offended. They often look both battered and hungry, exuding a sort of sullen corruption. *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* and *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* are very much investigations into the possibility of decent impulses and feelings in the light of all-pervasive cynicism and self-interest.

It may be relevant to note that the major NRC filmmakers came of age either in the last decade of the Ceaușescu era or in the first post-communist decade. Puiu was born in 1967, Mungiu in 1968, Rădulescu in 1969, Muntean in 1971, Porumboiu and Jude somewhat later, in 1975 and 1977, respectively. For the great majority of Romanians (including the socialist bourgeoisie to which the families of the future filmmakers more or less belonged), the 1980s were years of material discomfort and cynical disengagement from the triumphalism of official communist discourse, most of which consisted in the cult of Ceaușescu's personality by then. Cynical individualism increased. The fall of the Ceaușescu regime at the end of 1989 may have brought a moment of communal euphoria, but it was short-lived. Society very quickly became polarized. A small portion of it fostered a romantic anticommunism which turned to bitter disillusionment in regards to what was perceived as a continuity between pre- and post-1989 structures of power. And, in the second half of the decade, when the right came to power, replacing those it vilified as continuators of the Romanian Communist Party, it damaged large sections of society with its brutal economic measures, while also alienating some of its anti-communist supporters by failing to fulfill its promise of purging pre-1989 elites. It was a time of severe general impoverishment, of get-rich-quick schemes, of widespread ruthlessness and despair. This atmosphere may be relevant to the pungently unsentimental humanism of NRC films like *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* or *The Happiest Girl in the World*, as well as to the callousness of many of the characters in these films.

The novelty of the NRC within Romanian cinema

What if we regard the NRC strictly in the context of Romanian cinema? How was Romanian cinema renewed in the 2000s? The answer is that it wasn't just renewed; it was reborn. By the end of the first post-communist decade, Romanian cinema had literally died: if, in the last decade of state socialism, the



local film industry was averaging 25 releases a year, the number of Romanian films released in cinemas over the course of the year 2000 was zero. How did that happen?

For the time being, let us ignore the fact that, during the last phase of the communist regime, the film industry had been far from healthy; we will come back to that. As it was reorganized immediately after communism's fall, this industry consisted in a handful of film studios, each run by a renowned film director and each spending its share of the money, which continued to be provided by the state, as it had in the state socialist era. Hopes that this post-communist film industry would soon draw massive private investments from solid local businesses proved unrealistic. Notwithstanding a few co-productions with France (difficult to set up at a time when Romania was not yet a member of the European Union), most film money kept coming from the Romanian state. In a few years, snowballing inflation shrank those funds. Again and again, the big-name film directors who had meanwhile become studio chairmen made bad choices regarding which films were getting made at their studios. Even before 1989, Romanian cinema had never enjoyed a really good reputation among film consumers at home⁸, and its reputation only worsened in the 1990s: it became synonymous with technical backwardness, repellent shock tactics, hysterical anti-communism, narrative ineptitude, dated artsy touches, cheap sexual titillation, cheap jokes – general out-of-touchness.⁹ The pauperization of large sections of the population, the proliferation of commercial TV stations providing cheaper options for entertainment, the shutting down of cinemas throughout the country and their transformation into bars and bingo halls – all of these contributed to the dramatic decline of filmgoing in Romania and to the death of the Romanian film industry, which happened by the year 2000.

Institutional changes at the end of the 1990s created the possibility of revival. The rather feudal system of studios run by directors-turned-moguls and financed by the state with no questions asked was replaced by a system of open competition in which film production firms submit screenplays, with directors contracted to shoot them. This system, which is still the one in place today, is hardly free from criticism: from the very beginning it was suspected of being rigged for the benefit of assorted 'old hands' of the Romanian film industry, in a way that left newcomers with scant access to the meager financial resources. The 2004 competition became especially notorious, for this is when Cristi Puiu's project *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* was deemed unworthy to be financed; that film – whose international critical success from 2005 and vigorous emulation by other filmmakers would start the NRC phenomenon – wouldn't have been made in 2004 without the personal intervention of the Minister of Culture in answer to the director's petition.¹⁰

Still, *Lăzărescu* and other films got made. Some of them found major festival success and international distributors, thus generating more emulation in the small Romanian film world. Financing became easier, especially after Romania joined the European Union in 2007. Puiu's first two features, *Stuff and*

Dough and *Lăzărescu*, had been purely Romanian productions. Same case with Muntean's 2006 *The Paper Will Be Blue*. But Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, which came out in 2007, was already a Romanian-Belgian co-production. Jude's *Happiest Girl* was a co-production between Romania and the Netherlands. And by the end of the decade, with Puiu's *Aurora*, a French-Swiss-German-Romanian co-production, we already find ourselves in a totally different era from that of *Stuff and Dough* and *Lăzărescu*. This financial internationalization was followed in the next decade by a cultural internationalization of the New Romanian Cinema, which eventually made the label itself inadequate and outdated.

It is unquestionable that, for more than 15 years, filmmakers like Puiu, Mungiu, Porumboiu, Muntean, Jude, Răzvan Rădulescu and others have been bringing unprecedented international prestige to Romanian cinema, which before them – before this "new wave" – had been, for many decades, one of the most obscure European cinemas internationally. It is no wonder that few pre-1945 films have survived, since "the early Romanian film industry was a crazy jumble of eccentrics, conmen, and would-be moguls. Government agencies produced a few patriotic spectacles, but most motion pictures seem to have been produced by one-shot companies under extremely primitive circumstances."¹¹ It was only after World War II, under Soviet supervision, that a nationalized film industry started to gain solidity. Progress was fairly swift, especially once de-Stalinization began, and for a while, in the 1960s, things looked promising. By the end of that decade, large-scale historical spectacles were being mounted regularly at the Bufta film studios (the local Cinecittà, as it was affectionately known at the time). Some of these lavish productions were French, West-German, or Hollywoodian, but some of them were mainly Romanian productions heroicizing local history. At the same time, a Romanian cinema of personal expression, of directors capable of stamping their films with very particular sensibilities and stylistic signatures, was also struggling to be born. In 1965, Liviu Ciulei won an award for Best Direction in Cannes for *The Forest of the Hanged*, and Lucian Pintilie made his first film in 1966, followed by his second – the epochal *Reenactment* – two years later.

Eventually, the possibility of "radical aestheticism" (as Claudiu Turcuș has called it), of stylistic boldness in the Romanian cinema, was snuffed out by the authorities¹²: there was to be no Miklós Jancsó in this cinema. Artistic mediocrity set in, later aggravated by poverty.

Documentary cinema was allowed to develop almost exclusively as a marginal, short-length form, to be squeezed in a limited (usually ten minutes) time-slot before the feature ("the real film", as far as the audience was concerned) began. There was a studio dedicated to it (named after Communist writer Alexandru Sahia)¹³, but documentary-making was often regarded as apprenticeship for young filmmakers who were expected to graduate to the supposedly superior form of feature-length fiction; it was also sometimes regarded as punishment for filmmakers who had erred.¹⁴ This amounted to a stunning indifference and lack of perceptiveness on the

part of a regime which, having taken upon itself, as an act of political will, the historical mission of generating massive social transformation, now didn't seem to be all that concerned with the documentation of the old disappearing world, of the newborn world, or of the interesting, evanescent transition between the two. At the same time, official policy required that a significant number¹⁵ of the total fiction films deal with contemporary topics and, moreover, reflect contemporary social life, with its hardships, its dilemmas, and its heroes, regardless of how boring this agenda might have been for the general public and no matter how unstimulating it was for writers and directors. In other words, 'social reality' was an object of interest chiefly when processed and packaged as educational fiction.¹⁶ Reviewing what was a rare feature length documentary at that time, *Black Buffalo Water/Apa ca un bivoli negru*, a film about the catastrophic Romanian floods of 1970, critic George Littera stressed the singularity of its attempt to restore the "fundamental dignity as a witness"¹⁷ to the film camera. Even if Cristi Puiu would dedicate himself to fiction and not documentaries, the reassertion of this fundamental dignity would be the starting point for him and the post-2000 NRC. A film like Jude's *The Happiest Girl in the World* has a strong documentary component: Jude is staging a fiction, but at the same time he is documenting an iconic Bucharest location, right in the middle of the city, during a hot summer day, with real passers-by going about their business in front of his camera, mixing with his fictional characters, staring at their fictional film shoot. Jude shares Puiu's respect for the real-world geography of his urban settings, refusing their transmutation into a generic topography, their "anonimisation in the name of universal recognizability."¹⁸

There was another flurry of political non-conformity and artistic vitality in the early 1980s, with films by Mircea Daneliuc (*Microphone Test*, 1980; *The Cruise*, 1981), Alexandru Tatos (*Sequences*, 1982), and a few others, before the general state of Romanian film worsened. Apart from the deadening political regimentation, there was a pressure to save money (according to historian Aurelia Vasile, the authorities even contemplated the possibility of reverting to black-and-white for most films¹⁹) and, at the same time, a pressure to produce more films, to raise the yearly number of releases, and thus sell more tickets. Production values declined. The technological backwardness afflicting many Romanian films became obvious: for example, the quality of the post-dubbed sound – the badly lip-synched dialogue, the sparsity and dullness of the ambient noises, the lack of any sound design worthy of this name – lagged behind 1980s festival cinema and Western commercial cinema alike. Even at the time of *The Forest of the Hanged*, not even the best Romanian films had found many buyers abroad. Later, with the suppression of stylistic and thematic boldness, corroborated with the technological stagnation and general impoverishment of the industry, Romanian films became piteously undesirable. And not only in the West, but also (according to Aurelia Vasile) in other socialist countries (Vasile quotes a Czechoslovak film magazine which, after a "Romanian Film Days" event organized in 1986, found that some of the films were "too naïve and

schematic even for our humble standards"²⁰) and eventually in their own country, too. Even if it was common for a Romanian film to sell 1,000,000 tickets on the domestic market during the Ceaușescu era (Romania's population in 1989 was 23 million), the industry never became financially profitable: for example, investments between 1976 and 1978 amounted to 611 million lei, while profits only amounted to 414 million; in other words, the Romanian film industry lost almost 200 million lei – around 40 million dollars.²¹ Truly profitable were the films imported from non-socialist countries – from the West, but also from India. When these imports stopped – and they stopped completely in the 1980s – filmgoing declined. That's when the degradation of Romanian film theatres started. It was not entirely a post-communist phenomenon. Many of them were already crumbling or shutting down by 1989.²²

All this only accelerated the deprofessionalization of Romanian filmmakers during the twilight years of state socialism while ironically also increasing the material and symbolic stakes of participating in international festivals and receiving distinctions in prestigious competitions. Furthermore, while the authoritarian professionalization of the Romanian filmmakers under the Soviet regime of the immediately postwar period had responded to a logic of immediate concerns and constraints – starting a whole new cultural industry from scratch, building the cinematic infrastructure from the ground up, creating an immediately efficient propaganda medium, becoming part of a common Soviet film culture –, the deprofessionalization of the '70s was shaped by about the same kind of delusionary convictions fuelling Romania's gradual political self-isolation and economic austerity. The party leadership piloting vitally important cultural sectors like the film industry seemed to believe, in the '70s and more seriously in the '80s, that, with a serious deal of will and effort, significantly more could be done with significantly less financial resources and a higher impact in terms of propaganda could be attained with ever less sophisticated artistic and narrative means.

It is this deprofessionalization that Cristi Puiu would start raging against after 2000 (even writing articles about it²³). And it is Puiu's own brand of cinema, as represented by *Stuff and Dough* and especially by *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, that would provide the Romanian film industry with an antidote. Although it sold few tickets in Romanian cinemas (less than 30,000), *Lăzărescu* provided Puiu's colleagues with a model of international success and with a model of artistic discipline. Its self-imposed stylistic constraints (long takes instead of analytic editing, no point-of-view shots, use of delayed exposition, etc.) amounted to a formula which could be replicated. This led to a fetishization of stylistic rigor which was new to Romanian cinema, where the possibility of radical estheticism had been durably stifled in the early 1970s.

By 2007, after *The Paper Will Be Blue* and – especially – *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, a "Romanian aesthetic" had been firmly established. More NRC films were coming out each year. 2008 saw the release of Radu Muntean's *Boogie (Summer Holiday)*, with another script co-authored (like *The Paper*



Will Be Blue) by Alexandru Baciu and Puiu's former writing partner, Răzvan Rădulescu. 2009 brought us Porumboiu's *Police, Adjective*, Jude's *Happiest Girl in the World*, Călin Peter Netzer's *Medal of Honor*, and Bobby Păunescu's *Francesca* (co-produced by Puiu). In 2010, another of Puiu's disciples, Ana Lungu (she had been the continuity person on the set of *Lăzărescu*, where Radu Jude had been an assistant director) made her first feature, *The Belly of the Whale* (co-directed with Ana Szel). Răzvan Rădulescu also made his debut as a director with *First of All, Felicia* (co-directed with Melissa de Raaf). Radu Muntean was back with *Tuesday, After Christmas* (with Baciu and Rădulescu co-writing once again). Puiu himself made *Aurora*. Additionally, there were also the films of Marian Crișan (*Morgen*), Constantin Popescu (*Principles of Life*, with a screenplay by Rădulescu and Baciu) and Bogdan George Apetri (*Periferic/ Outbound*), all of them partaking, to one degree or another, in the NRC esthetic. 2011 was the year of Adrian Sitaru's *Best Intentions* and Florin Șerban's *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle*. Cristian Mungiu was back in 2012 with *Beyond the Hills*. In 2013, Călin Peter Netzer contributed to the NRC with *Child's Pose* (co-written with Rădulescu) and Marian Crișan contributed with *Rocker*, while Corneliu Porumboiu premiered *When Evening Falls on Bucharest or Metabolism*. There was also *Shadow of a Cloud*, a strong short film from Jude, who would premiere another in 2014, *It Can Pass Through the Wall*. And there were further typical NRC films – from Muntean in 2015 (*One Floor Below*), from both Puiu and Mungiu in 2016 (*Sieranecada* and *Graduation* respectively), and more recently from Andrei Cohn in 2019 (*Arrest*) and Muntean again in 2021 (*Întregalde*).²⁴

None of these set the Romanian box-office on fire, but, given the general state of post-90s cinema attendance in Romania, some of them performed respectably, especially Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (which sold almost 90,000 tickets) and Netzer's 2013 Golden Bear winner *Child's Pose* (which sold more than 110,000). Present-day Romania sorely lacks arthouse and repertory cinemas, although its decimated network of film theatres has been restored to a certain degree after 2000 (in the bigger urban centres exclusively) through the proliferation of multiplexes, which led to a rise in cinemagoing figures after a long period of post-communist stagnation. However, few of the films released in Romania nowadays sell more than 300,000–350,000 tickets, and those that do are in most cases Hollywood productions. Still, despite the failure of the New Romanian Cinema to draw huge domestic audiences, it is unquestionable that its international prestige and sales have revived the Romanian film industry, which is once again releasing around 20 feature films each year. (These figures, of course, date from before the 2020 closing of the cinemas as a result of the Covid pandemic.)

Starting to move beyond the NRC

At the time of its release in 2009, Radu Jude's debut feature, *The Happiest Girl in the World*, felt in some ways like a typical NRC film. But, like Porumboiu's *Police, Adjective*, which also

came out in 2009, it signalled a turn towards self-reflexivity. Porumboiu's twist on the observational aesthetics of the NRC was to make observation the subject of his film, inviting the audience to observe a protagonist who, as a policeman, is himself a professional observer. As for Jude, he chose to make a film about a film crew.

Like other NRC filmmakers (Muntean, Puiu), Jude had been supporting himself by making commercials. But, unlike the others, Jude didn't keep silent about this side of his activity – about the work for hire that was paying for his privilege of making art films, or, to put it more generally, about the less than dignified social conditions sometimes required for creating art (in the case of the NRC, personal work dissecting subtle ethical issues). Jude made this film in which he acknowledged an unease about it.

In *The Happiest Girl*, the NRC's interest in ethics (medical ethics in *Lăzărescu*, the ethics of police work in *Police, Adjective*) is turned on filmmaking itself. But this is filmmaking's underbelly (consisting, for these NRC directors, of their commissioned work shooting commercials), not its prestigious side. (After exploring his self-reflexive preoccupation with language, with its semantics and its nesting of power relations in *12:08 East of Bucharest* and *Police, Adjective*, Corneliu Porumboiu would follow Jude in delving, with his 2013 *When Evening Falls on Bucharest, or Metabolism*, into the subtle perversities of the relationship between a film director and his lead actress during the making of an art film.)

In *The Happiest Girl*, the director shooting the commercial (played by Șerban Pavlu, who would become a Jude regular) is sometimes behaving as if the work he is doing there is beneath him – as if he's doing it purely as a favor to the advertising agency and the soft drinks firm, taking time away from more important things. But, of course, he is complicit with the agency and soft drinks firm in their consolidation of social stereotypes, in their contempt for viewers or consumers, in their callous, patronizing, humiliating treatment of this particular non-professional actress. The severity of Jude's implied critique of his own practice and his own milieu made Romanian critic Alex. Leo Șerban dub him "the most self-flagellating director in the world"²⁵ at the time.

Jude's willingness to probe and question capitalism, however timidly, was also somewhat new to the NRC. This "new wave" of Romanian filmmakers had preferred to train its inquisitive, coolly critical eye on the legacy of state socialism or on its brutal end. There had been but few exceptions to this rule (like *Cigarettes and Coffee*, Puiu's short film from 2004, depicting a confrontation between a pensioner who feels lost in the post-communist world and his businessman son). It is not very outlandish to see *The Happiest Girl* as a reworking of Pintilie's classic *Reenactment* for the capitalist world, as we already argued, as both films show non-professional actors submitted to an excruciating film shoot – for the sake of a communist educational film and a capitalist commercial, respectively. *The Reenactment* is about the production of morally edifying images and about the use of those images by the state for coercion into a certain model of good citizenship.

The Happiest Girl in the World is about the production of images of desirable things, which is another instrument of social control – a capitalist one.²⁶

The NRC, as defined by films like Puiu's *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, *Aurora* and *Sieranecvada*, Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, and *Beyond the Hills*, Muntean's *The Paper Will Be Blue* and *Tuesday, After Christmas*, was a cinema characterized by rigorous observational aesthetics, strong 'present-tenseness', and an avoidance of explicit political commitment. Mungiu insisted in interviews that, in making *4 Months and Beyond the Hills*, he had tried to keep his position on topics like abortion or religion out of the films.²⁷ Puiu insisted on "witnessing" and "confession" as the supreme functions of art, opposing them to what he dismissively called "propaganda".²⁸ *One Floor Below*, Muntean's 2015 film about a man who decides not to share a possibly relevant piece of information concerning a neighbor's violent death with anybody, was sometimes interpreted as a film concerned with the post-communist hypertrophy of individualism and concurrent loss of communitarian values, but Muntean declared himself indifferent to such interpretations and interested only in the protagonist's moral dilemma.²⁹ (Left-wing critiques of NRC films would start appearing after 2010, castigating the filmmakers for their lack of political awareness and for not being interested in social criticism targetting post-communist capitalism.³⁰) As we will detail in forthcoming articles, one of the ways in which Jude would help Romanian cinema move beyond the NRC would be by helping invent a more politically committed Romanian cinema.

Jude, who served as an assistant director on *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, started out as a filmmaker under the influence of Cristi Puiu, and his early films fit easily within the aesthetics of the NRC, as defined above. However, if the NRC aesthetics are rather 'purist', Jude has given early signs of being willing to draw on other traditions as well – for example, the vaudevillian strain which runs through the pre-1989 popular cinema of Romania and to which Jude pays homage in *The Happiest Girl in the World* (where the girl's father is played by a beloved revue comedian), *Everybody in Our Family* (where three of the actors are also popular revue comedians), and especially in *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn* (2021). *Aferim!* (2015) is a knowing, polemical contribution to the genre of the "historical" adventure film – one of the most popular genres in Romanian "communist" cinema; it is also filled with allusions to Romanian classic literature, both folk literature and canonical works. *Scarred Hearts* (2016) is a costume picture and a 'prestige' literary adaptation, albeit a highly unorthodox example of both genres. *The Dead Nation* (2017) testifies to Jude's interest in avant-garde cinema – particularly in films constructed from "found" audio-visual materials. As for *I Do Not Care if We Go Down in History as Barbarians* (2018), it is a complex attempt of rethinking the strategies of late-1960s "political-modernist" cinema (which had no manifestations at the time in Ceaușescu's Romania) within a 21st century context.

As early as *The Happiest Girl in the World*, there is a flash of historical self-awareness in Jude's moral self-reflection as a

director of video ads. In Visconti's *Bellissima*, the confrontation with the cruel and cynical face of the dream industry could still leave the fundamentally optimistic humanism of that film's moral universe intact. The advertising industry in which Jude's protagonist, Delia Frățilă, dives for a day is a world in which dreams and fantasies are in themselves corrupt, cynical, and vulgar in their content, their aesthetics, and their profit-making rationale: there is nothing dreamy, romantic, or noble in letting yourself be transported by commercials, and everyone in Jude's film knows it only too well; Delia's reasons for engaging with the world of commercials are themselves pragmatic.

This lack of intrinsic appeal on the part of those epitomes of consumer culture which are the commercials, their easily acknowledged falsity, hint at a slight but significant deviation from the main road of the NRC's general views on Romanian post-communist history and society. NRC directors like Puiu, Muntean, and Porumboiu had incorporated everyday Romanian objects and sights into an aesthetics of ordinariness that was new at the time in Romanian cinema. They didn't use them as symbolic or dramatically significant props; they used them to connote everyday life. The off-screen experience of such sights was further normalized by their on-screen use. As the exacerbated signifying powers they had previously enjoyed on screen were deflated, these figments of ordinariness settled into a passive inertia and anonymity³¹. (Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* is an exception. Set in the Ceaușescu-ruled 1980s, it is a historical film in which all the material objects crammed in the frame signify and oversignify; their allusions to authentic utility items and communist brands are meant to stir memories and emotions in the audience.) Commercials and commodities, too, became ordinary visual objects like any others, especially in the later phase of the NRC, inaugurated around 2010 (the year of Radu Muntean's *Tuesday, After Christmas*, which constitutes a good example). This happened not only because ads had by then become ubiquitous, unavoidable in the urban landscapes of those big Romanian cities where most of the prominent NRC films were shot, but perhaps also because, by including them in their images, the NRC filmmakers were reacting against descriptions of their early films as "miserabilist" – as narrowly concerned with the precarity and squalor of late communist and post-communist life. "Miserabilism" had been a key term in descriptions of 1990s Romanian cinema – a cinema from which NRC filmmakers had been trying from the very beginning to distance themselves. Nevertheless, in the early days of *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* and *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, the NRC had been associated by Romanian audiences with sordid subject matter as well. This perceived continuity with the "miserabilist" cinema of the '90s³² was an impression that, by 2010, filmmakers like Puiu and Muntean were eager to rectify. By the end of the decade, the characters in at least some of the NRC films were living more comfortably middle-class lives. Thanks in part to the mid-2000s having been years of economic growth and increased integration into the global market for Romania, the urban landscapes through which



those characters were passing in their cars had also changed, filling with brand names, billboards, and banners. Anyway, the presence of such objects (like the presence of radio ads broadcast between news and music hits in car scenes) was almost never something to be inspected or interrogated by the camera; it was simply accepted as contemporary urban scenery.

Almost paradoxically, the NRC drew on some unexamined assumptions from the 1990s about market economy, capitalism, and the transition towards them. In the first post-communist decade, veteran directors like Mircea Daneliuc and Dan Pița had made films sarcastically exploring the dummy-like mimicry of Western institutional forms by the eclectic and primitive Romanian ‘transition’ society³³. The underlying assumption in such ‘90s films was that the market economy and market liberalisation were the quasi-natural forms of existence of liberal democracy, and that it was only the remnants of some barbaric national or Balkanic cultural essence, ridiculousness, or incompetence that could hijack an ex-communist society from this natural path towards democracy, capitalism, and civilisation. This was at the time an almost universal consensus among Romanian intellectual and political elites.

This Romanian ‘exceptionalism’ was not something that was just passed on to the next generation – to the NRC filmmakers. In fact, the NRC filmmakers rejected its “hysterical” and apocalyptic staging in the cinema of the 1990s; the NRC was a reaction against the aesthetics of the 1990s just as much as it was a rebuke to the “lies” and “compromises” of “communist” cinema.³⁴ (Still, as we will explore in another article, the quintessentially ‘90s theme of ‘Romanianess’ would remain a constant preoccupation and a source of uneasiness in Radu Jude’s work). However, the NRC left the teleological narrative of the necessary transition from communism to market capitalism untouched. Hence the left’s suspicion that the NRC was a class-blind – and self-blinded – art form from its very inception, as suggested by some early symptomatic readings of this Romanian “new wave”³⁵.

Whereas the characters in Muntean’s *Tuesday, After Christmas* are already well settled in the universal cosmopolitan cynicism of the world of commodities – brand names popping up in family conversations, displayed in supermarkets, or scattered in middle-class living spaces³⁶ – commercials, popular magazines, and brands are a no less ‘natural’ part of the streetlife seen in *The Happiest Girl*. The difference is that commercials are under examination here – advertisements as a device and reflection of market society, with its emptiness and brutality. Paradoxically, as its echoing of Pintilie’s *Reenactment* seems to suggest, *The Happiest Girl in the World* intercepts an element of continuity between communism and post-communism. The continuity implied has nothing to do with the standard anti-communist reaction to post-1990 disappointments with capitalism – an answer insisting that capitalism in itself is great and that any flaws in its Romanian rendition stem from its corrupting implementation by the old Communist political elites (not properly dislodged by the fall

of Ceaușescu)³⁷. The very logic of the structured exercise which is the shooting of the commercial, the unpleasant discipline of bodies and movements, their wearying repetitiveness, and the inexorable functionality of their final result – this logic, commanding over the fluctuant subjectivities of everyone involved, discloses a rhyme between state coercion and compelling capitalist seduction. *The Happiest Girl*’s examination of commercials departs both from the anxiety of 1990s cinema – the fear that Romanian exceptionalism might miss the entrance lane on the capitalist highway – and that blasé resignation with the market society emanating from later NRC films like *Tuesday, After Christmas*. Instead, Jude’s debut feature depicts a segment of the processing of one individual by consumer society.

The family connection

The Happiest Girl in the World (co-written by its director with Augustina Stanciu) belongs to a succession of features and short films (to be explored in another article) in which Radu Jude consistently conducts another kind of self-reflection: a socio-psychological investigation of the subjectivities shaped by toxic family relations. The family – the ‘Romanian family’ – is one longstanding cultural obsession shared by many NRC productions: these films meticulously depict domestic spaces, family dinners, or family conversations taking place in personal cars; hence the popular perception that these films are mainly set in the cramped kitchens of those gray blocks of flats.³⁸ This obsession is also shared by popular TV programmes or vaudeville shows in which humor stems from the play with – and usually the confirmation of – the expectations of stereotyped gender roles. In the NRC, family scenes are frequent occasions for the strategies of ‘de-dramatization’ customarily deployed in these films to give way to tension, noise, and even paroxysmic insanity.

In *The Happiest Girl in the World*, the parents try to persuade their daughter – who has just won a car after participating in a promotional lottery and would soon be the proper age for driving it – to sell it and ‘lend’ them the money to invest it in a family business (and in her promised future welfare). She prefers to think of it in terms of use value, even if the monetary value of a used automobile might rapidly decrease. Delia’s parents have something of the gender clichés from popular TV shows about them: the mother is a nuisance, bothersome, obsessed with small details; the father looks harassed, sloppy, authoritative; they both seem grumpy, discontent, and they lack respect for each other. But there is also a strong ethnographic interest in Jude’s depiction of this morose provincial family, somewhat greedy, with their avid desire to make it, and the aspirational gap between the parents and the daughter. They do not understand her desire to move to the capital city to study and live after finishing high school. They make her feel as if she is dependent on them, but want to keep her dependent (“Who will pay for the driving school? Everything costs money!”). In their quasi-patriarchal sense of entitlement – the children’s goods ultimately belong

to their parents – one can detect a generational gap specific to the families in Jude's films, a moral and psychological fracture between parents and the children whose lives they emotionally manipulate and abuse. In a mixture of love and hate, pathologies are created and reproduced in the family environments, but the responsibilities are not equally shared: not only are the parents the masters of passive-aggressive mind games; they are also resorting to emotional blackmail to get what they want. In order to make Delia change her mind and sell them the car, they go through a whole set of tactics, from cajoling to brutal verbal repudiation ("You are no longer our daughter, you shitty TV pseudo-star!"). The parental self-sacrifice is invoked by both mother and father to the point of grotesque caricature: even the three sodas bought by the girl to participate in the promotional lottery were supposedly paid with great effort by her heroically self-denying parents.

One of the subjects of Jude's psychodramas is the language in which family negotiations are conducted: speaking and language are corrupted, deceitful, childish, and abusive ways of testing the limits of authority or masking authority, of dealing with neurosis or faking parental wisdom. The performative virtues of the parents' language, its power, are in direct proportion with its flexibility, slipperiness, and conspicuous sentimentality. But speaking is a necessary

superstructure for concealing and easing authority. In Jude's family scenes, the recurrent precepts and sayings parents rely on to give some weight to their words are empty ludicrous dictums, conveniently adaptable to the context of the exchange: they usually bring in the authority of secular wisdom and age-old tradition in order to advance some petty requirement. "You cannot do all you want in life," says the mother, invoking cosmic fatality in order to persuade her daughter to sell the car. In fact, the business is already settled: while the commercial is being shot, the father is arranging the sale of the car to someone else, and now he only needs Delia's signature to complete the deal, as if she had already agreed to it ("But haven't we talked it over already, my child?"). Everything is supposed to be for the girl's ultimate good, and also for her grandmother's, whose house they prepare to transform into a boarding house – and she will certainly agree, for who would like to die alone, "like a dog"?

The functionality of the regular family seems to depend on this kind of casual deception, on passive aggressiveness and small farcical insanities. But the casual deceptions and farce will run amok in Jude's second feature film, *Everybody in Our Family* (2012), as the parents there lose control of language and everyone goes wild.

Notes

1. For a general discussion on Radu Jude's connection to the New Romanian Cinema see also Andrei Gorzo and Veronica Lazăr, "The New Romanian Cinema and Beyond: The Films of Radu Jude," *Transilvania*, no. 3 (2022): 1–9.
2. See Dominique Nasta, *Contemporary Romanian Cinema: The History of an Unexpected Miracle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
3. As quoted by Romanian film journalist Iulia Blaga in 2012. See Iulia Blaga, "Cineastii Jean-Pierre si Luc Dardenne la Bucuresti," *HotNews.ro*, March 5, 2012, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-film-11672955-cineastii-jean-pierre-luc-dardenne-bucuresti-avem-multa-admiratie-pentru-filmul-romanesc-dar-nivelul-salilor-cinema-aveti-mult-lucru.htm>, last accessed on June 2, 2021.
4. To date, the most comprehensive critical work on this key figure of the New Romanian Cinema remains Andrei Gorzo, "Rădulescu," in *Politicele filmului. Contribuții la interpretarea cinemaului românesc contemporan*, eds. Andrei Gorzo and Andrei State (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2014), 9–25.
5. Lúcia Nagib, "Realist Cinema as World Cinema," in *The Routledge Companion to World Cinema*, eds. Rob Stone, Pam Cooke, Stephanie Dennison, and Alex Marlow-Mann (London: Routledge, 2017), 310.
6. André Bazin, *Bazin at Work: Major Essays & Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*, translated from French by Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 161.
7. As noted by Gabriela Filippi in her study of Jude's film, *The Happiest Girl in the World*, CinEd-Institut Français, 2016, <http://event.institutfrancais.com/uploads/956877db375a2c376d993ecbcaed3d3e.pdf>, last accessed on May 27, 2021.
8. As shown by Aurelia Vășile in her excellent PhD dissertation *Le cinéma roumain dans la période communiste. Représentations de l'histoire nationale*, University of Bucharest–University of Bourgogne, 2011, 257–58, 279.
9. The Romanian cinema of the 1990s is investigated from many angles in Andrei Gorzo, Gabriela Filippi (eds.), *Filmul tranziției. Contribuții la interpretarea cinemaului românesc „nouăzecist”* (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2017).
10. These events are recounted in Monica Filimon, *Cristi Puiu* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 59.
11. J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film between Two Worlds* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 83.
12. Claudiu Turcuș, *Împotriva memoriei. De la estetismul socialist la noul cinema românesc* (Bucharest: Eikon, 2017), 124.
13. Adina Brădeanu, who has conducted seminal work as a historian of the Sahia studio, writes: "The work of the documentary film-makers was shaped after the official model of work in socialism. They were full-time employees, unlike their counterparts at the 'București' (Buftea) fiction film studio, who after 1970 were permitted to work freelance. The activity of the studio was routinely assimilated with industrial production: 'Sahia – the reality factory' and 'Sahia – 24-hour production' were just two of the slogans associated with it. The so-called 'July Theses' (the name given to a speech delivered by President Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1971) marked the beginning of a period of re-dogmatization after the modest liberalization of the 1960s and a turning point for documentary practice. Around the mid-1970s, the work of documentary



- filmmakers started to revolve around the annual quota of films assigned to each filmmaker and the quota of film stock allocated per film. While filmmakers experienced a gradual tightening of ideological control, the studio was praised in the press for achievements that were often expressed in quantitative terms: an article in the *Contemporanul* weekly remarked that ‘in the twenty-fifth year of the Socialist Republic of Romania [1989], the Sahia studio produced one hundred and seventy documentaries, which means approximately one short film every two days’. The production culture of the studio was seen in the same light as that of the country’s other industries. An internal report produced at Sahia in the early 1980s stressed the ‘emphasis placed on quantity’, the ‘tendency to assimilate film production mechanically with other types of material production’, which resulted in a ‘steady increase in film quotas.’ (From the website *Vintage Sahia*, <https://sahivintage.ro/studio/?lang=en>, last accessed on July 11, 2021.)
14. Aurelia Vasile, *Le cinéma roumain dans la période communiste: représentations de l'histoire nationale* (Bucharest: Editura Universității din București, 2011), 194-195.
 15. Out of 123 films produced between 1960 and 1970, 61 dealt with contemporary subjects, while 52 were historical pictures. Vasile, 167.
 16. Hence the element of irony in the rejection of the NRC by many Romanian viewers for being “too realistic”: as the complaint usually goes, people’s everyday lives are already chock-full of ‘realism’, so movies should be allowed to be an escape. In the case of post-communist Romanian audiences, it could be tempting to see this escapist predilection as partly a reaction to the overabundance of contemporary-themed films produced during the communist era: too much communist reality, too much politics, too many muddy construction sites, workers’ caps, and rubber boots. But the Romanian communist cinematic project also entailed a preference for the moral and ideological transfiguration of contemporary social reality. It is not impossible to trace a link between its marginalization of the documentary in the proper sense and post-communist audiences’ repulsion for the documentary-like textures of the NRC. On a not unrelated note, cinema’s function as a social critical tool seems to have been understood in a very restricted sense during the communist era (which is stunning for a film culture committed to the socialist education of the Romanian people). In *Le cinéma roumain dans la période communiste*, Aurelia Vasile quotes a report on the 1983 Cannes Film Festival, written by prominent film critic Ecaterina Oproiu. Oproiu expresses her disgust at what she perceives as the predilection of Western cinema for immoral, socially debased figures like prostitutes, drug addicts, unemployed people, homeless people, gangsters, “parasites”, “marginals”, etc. For Oproiu, interest in such figures is a symptom of moral sickness – only morbidity and commercialism can explain it; the possibility of this interest also having something to do with some praiseworthy artistic mechanisms of social self-criticism is never raised in Oproiu’s report. Vasile suggests that such limited views on what could count as legitimate artistic subjects may also have had something to do with the fact that, by 1983, Romania no longer had the economic means to import new films from the West; representatives of the Romanian film industry – including ‘establishment’ critics like Oproiu – were finding themselves at the time in a difficult and frustrating position, having to accommodate and justify, in practice as well as in discourse, the conditions of economic austerity imposed on the whole sector. (See Vasile, 274-77) On the other hand, even in the relatively liberal late ‘60s, Romanian press reports about Western hippies and dropouts had tended to be hostile – prone to petty bourgeois moralizing about “fake rebellion” and “social parasitism”.
 17. George Littera, *Pagini despre film* (Bucharest: UNATC Press, 2012), 168.
 18. Christian Ferencz-Flatz, *Incursiuni fenomenologice în noul film românesc* (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2015), 154.
 19. Vasile, *Le cinéma roumain*, 270.
 20. Vasile, *Le cinéma roumain*, 273.
 21. *Ibid.*, 258.
 22. *Ibid.*, 272-279.
 23. Cristi Puiu, “Despre contribuția regizorilor la betșugul cinematografeiei,” *Dilema*, no. 540, August 8-14, 2003, <https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/dileme-on-line/articol/despre-contributia-regizorilor-la-betesugul-cinematografeiei>, last accessed on January 12, 2022.
 24. This list does not aim to account for all the major Romanian releases post-2005; it only covers films that adhere in recognizable ways (though not without occasional – and sometimes significant – departures) to the aesthetic template set by *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*. Romanian films from that period that do not conform to our model of the NRC, but are nevertheless important for all sorts of reasons, include Cătălin Mitulescu’s *How I Spent the End of the World* (2006) and *Loverboy* (2011), Tudor Giurgiu’s *Love Sick* (2006) and *Of Snails and Men* (2012), Cristian Nemescu’s *California Dreamin’* (2007), and Nae Caranfil’s *The Rest Is Silence* (2008). Other scholars’ accounts of the Romanian New Wave (accounts emphasizing the generational aspect of the phenomenon) do not leave out Mitulescu, Giurgiu, Nemescu, and Caranfil: Mitulescu (born in 1972), Giurgiu (also ‘72), and Nemescu (born in 1979, tragically dead in 2006) certainly belong to the same age group as Puiu, Rădulescu, Mungiu, Porumboiu, Muntean, or Jude; born in 1960, Caranfil somewhat stands out, but in the early days of the NRC he was often described as either an anticipator of that phenomenon or a transitional figure (Dominique Nasta dedicates a separate chapter in her *Contemporary Romanian Cinema* to his oeuvre), although his aesthetic commitments are completely different.
 25. Alex. Leo Șerban, “Berlin 59: Umbre politice și umbre personale,” *Dilema veche*, no. 262, February 24, 2009, <http://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/cinema-acolo-sus/articol/berlin-59-umbre-politice-si-urme-personale>, last accessed on May 13, 2021.
 26. In the 1960s, critiques of bureaucracy and state oppression did not exclusively target Communist regimes. Notions of power, totality, rationalization were pivotal in postwar Western critical theory – sometimes with an existentialist, neo-Romantic, or Marxist-Weberian touch. Moreover, the abstract, totalizing, and rationalizing logic of capitalism in the West was often seen to have its Eastern equivalent in the totalizing logic of the socialist states, political and ideological differences fading before what was seen as the common oppressive, individual-crushing core, their equally monstrous world-historical dynamics. After the historical turn that begun in the 1970s, with the

- neoliberal war against public expenditure and services, the meanings and directions of the criticism of state “bureaucracy” shifted as well: especially in the post-communist East – where for a long time there was no great fear of the consequences of neoliberal policies, although budget cuts and privatizations did play a major role in the destruction of public services – discontent with public institutions went from denouncing the efficient oppression of the bureaucratic iron cage to an ambiguous condemnation of the inefficiency, structural failure, perhaps even inutility of public services. For decades, the increasingly conspicuous shortcomings of the Romanian state bureaucracy were associated more with the unfortunate legacy of the Communist regime than with post-communist policies of coping with the “transition” towards market-based economy. Criticizing bureaucracy often implied calling for neoliberal reforms. In left-wing Romanian critiques of the NRC, the critical eye turned by this cinema on the post-communist state was taken as indication of complicity with neoliberalism.
27. See the interview with Karin Badt, *Film Criticism*, December 22, 2010, <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Interview+with+Cristian+Mungiu.-a0232465995>, last accessed on May 13, 2021; see also the interview with Boyd van Hoeij, *Cineuropa*, July 1, 2007, <http://www.cineuropa.org/en/interview/78507/>, last accessed on May 13, 2021; interview with Harlan Jacobson, *Film Comment* vol. 48, no. 6, 2012, <http://filmcomment.com/article/cristian-mungiu-interview-beyond-the-hills/>, accessed on May 13, 2021; interview with Michael Zelenko, *The Fader*, posted on March 11, 2013, on the website of the magazine, <http://www.thefader.com/2013/03/11/interview-christian-mungiu-director-of-beyond-the-hills/>, last accessed on May 13, 2021.
 28. Quoted in Andrei Gorzo, “In the Name of ‘The Ambiguity of the Real’: Romanian Cinematic Realism after the 2000s,” *Film Criticism* 41, issue 2, October 2017, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/fc/13761232.0041.206/--in-the-name-of-the-ambiguity-of-the-real-romanian-cinematic?rgn=main;view=fulltext>, last accessed on January 12, 2022.
 29. Radu Muntean interviewed by Cristina Hermeziu, “Un film despre morală, fără morală finală,” *Dilema veche*, no. 615, November 25–December 2, 2015, <https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/film/articol/un-film-despre-morala-fara-morala-finala-interviu-cu-radu-muntean>, last accessed on May 10, 2022.
 30. Of course, big NRC films like *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* and *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* had been discussed in political terms from the very beginning – but not from a left-wing perspective. Mungiu’s *4 Months* had been widely praised locally for its indictment of the Romanian communist experience, while Puiu’s *Lăzărescu* had provided rhetorical ammunition to Romanian propagandists calling for the privatization of the healthcare system (an example among many: George Mioc, “Câți trebuie să mai moară în spitale până când dr. Arafat ne dă voie să schimbăm sistemul de sănătate?,” *Contributors*, posted on December 14, 2015, <https://www.contributors.ro/cați-trebuie-sa-mai-moara-in-spitale-pana-cand-dr-arafat-ne-da-voie-sa-schimbam-sistemul-de-sanatate/>, accessed on May 10, 2022). Both Mungiu and Puiu had been displeased to see their work reduced to such single-minded terms; Puiu, for example, insisted that his concerns had been more philosophical, that he had conceived the film as an investigation of the push-pull between fellow-feeling and selfishness, between love-thy-neighbour and life-is-for-the-living. There are many articles at the time in the Romanian press, quoting him on these matters. An example: “Cristi Puiu câștigă Premiul BBC”, *Ziare.com*, January 26, 2007, <https://ziare.com/stiri/frauda/comentarii-cristi-puiu-castiga-premiul-bbc-4-59567-ordonare-data>, accessed on November 8, 2020. Apart from such political oversimplifications, NRC filmmakers also faced a more general mistrust on the part of Romanian audiences. This mistrust often took the form of accusations that they were cynically selling pictures of Romanian misery abroad. Cinephile film critics tried to counter these widely shared perceptions by insisting on the films’ aesthetic sophistication and on their reach as moral interrogations. Left-wing cultural criticism – which was still something very new in post-communist Romania – did not intervene in the debate until 2010, when Florin Poenaru published a path-opening article “Râs, lacrimi și priviri coloniale”, *CriticAtac*, November 15, 2010, <http://www.criticatac.ro/ras-lacrimi-si-priviri-coloniale/>, last accessed on May 6, 2021. Poenaru’s article described the NRC as the product of a self-colonized post-communist middle-class which reflected the West’s exoticizing gaze back to the West. The local debate regarding the NRC was thus re-politicized from a new perspective – new in that it was left-wing and largely hostile to the films themselves; the theme of Romanian-misery-sold-to-the-West-as-exoticism also found itself reformulated in left-wing rather than nationalistic terms. Romanian cinephile critics (those who took notice) were initially incensed by what they saw as the return of a critical tradition which sees artistic products purely as ‘reflections’ and ‘symptoms’, ignoring their specificity, the shaping role of artistic form, etc. For an early response to Poenaru’s article, see Alex. Leo Șerban and Andrei Gorzo, “Critica de stânga față cu ‘reacțiunea’ din cinema,” *Dilema veche*, December 3 and 10, 2010, <https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/dileme-on-line/articol/critica-de-stinga-fata-cu-reactiunea-din-cinema-dialog-intre-alex-leo-serban-si-andrei-gorzo-1> and <https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/dileme-on-line/articol/critica-de-stinga-fata-cu-reactiunea-din-cinema-dialog-intre-alex-leo-serban-si-andrei-gorzo>, accessed on November 8, 2020. Polemical exchanges continued. The 2014 edited volume *Politicile filmului* (put together by Andrei Gorzo and Andrei State) was an attempt to bring together cinephile criticism and ideological analysis.
 31. The fact that commercials quickly became ubiquitous in post-communist society did not immediately neutralize their mesmerizing power over Romanian audiences. Rather, they were consumed as commodities themselves, as suggested by the long-lasting popularity of an event like *The Night of the Ad Eaters* (an all-night festival of commercials).
 32. Representative for this perception is Ruxandra Cesereanu, “Dystopian Reminiscences in the Romanian Contemporary Film (Miserabilist Stances in the Films of Mircea Daneliuc, Lucian Pintilie, and Cristi Puiu),” *Caiețele Echinox*, no. 29 (2015): 344–352.
 33. Filippi, *The Happiest Girl in the World*, 22.
 34. Ferencz-Flatz, *Incursiuni*, 151.
 35. Poenaru, “Râs, lacrimi și priviri coloniale.”
 36. Christian Ferencz-Flatz has a slightly different opinion: for him, the NRC directors feel somewhat compelled to tone down the presence



of the billboards in order to prevent having their cinematic images hijacked by the seductive power of commercial imagery; Ferencz-Flatz, *Incursiuni*, 156. On the other hand, one might notice a special focus on brand names in Puiu's short film *Cigarettes and Coffee* (*Un cartuș de Kent și un pachet de cafea* – the Romanian title is more evocative of this interest). Here, an aging man who lost his factory job when the factory closed asks his more professionally successful son to help him get a job for the two remaining years separating him from the mandatory retirement age. In their rather tense conversation, the numerous commercial brands listed by the socially integrated characters (the son, the waiter) highlight the historical gap between people like the father (who, as a driver for the factory canteen, used to transport “potatoes, peas, and noodles”) and the new capitalist universe embodied by his son, wherein goods have precise commercial names and mineral water comes in eight different commercial versions (“Perla, Dorna, Vittel, Perrier”, etc.).

37. The view that Romanian capitalism's original flaw resided in its implementation by the old Communist elite (amounting to a corruption of 'true' capitalism) was very influential. Monica Filimon embraces it in her book on Cristi Puiu. For a documentary film that enshrines this narrative, see Alexandru Solomon, *Kapitalism: Our Improved Formula / Kapitalism – Rețeta noastră secretă* (2010).
38. There are many jokes on the Romanian Internet disparaging the NRC as a cinema basically consisting of soup-eating scenes. This perception involuntarily echoes the long-established use of terms like “kitchen-sink realism” and “kitchen-sink aesthetics” in English-language critical discourse on art, theatre, literature, and film. There are no equivalent critical terms in Romanian. However, scenes of families eating together (often in the kitchen) were recognized as typical NRC motifs early on – see Mihai Chirilov, “Stop-cadru la masă”, in *Noul cinema românesc. De la tovarășul Ceaușescu la domnul Lăzărescu*, eds. Cristina Corciovescu and Magda Mihăilescu (Iași: Polirom, 2011), 11–31. Scholar Mircea Valeriu Deaca has even written a book with the title *O bucătărie ca-n filme. Scenotopul bucătăriei în Noul Cinema Românesc [A Movie-Movie Kitchen: The Scenotope of the Kitchen in the New Romanian Cinema]* (Cluj-Napoca: Mega, 2017).

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