

THE ARTIST AS REALIST: JEAN MIHAIL AND THE DE-ALIENATING EFFECTS OF SOCIALIST FILM

Bogdan POPA

Department of Literature and Cultural Studies, Transilvania University, Braşov
E-mail: george.popa@unitbv.ro

THE ARTIST AS REALIST: JEAN MIHAIL AND THE DE-ALIENATING EFFECTS OF SOCIALIST FILM

Abstract: This article offers a discussion of the aesthetics of realism, which represents a central analytic category in post-socialist debates about Romanian cinema. While many disagreements have concentrated on realism as a technique for either documenting reality or disenchantment, I deploy realism as a dialectical method to understand the work of a pioneer of Romanian cinema, Jean Mihail. In criticising current models of realism, I draw on Georg Lukács' Marxist theory to argue that realism offers not only a strong account of historical changes but also that it provides the basis of an anti-capitalist critique. Because a materialist method can illuminate shifts in film aesthetics in their social context, I concentrate on Mihail's evolution from his 1925 social realist film *Manasse* (Romania) to his corporatist works at the end of the 1930s to his 1949 socialist realist documentary *Oraşul nu doarme niciodată* [The City That Never Sleeps] (Romania). Also, I argue that realism goes beyond rethinking cinema as a technique of defamiliarisation by insisting on the de-alienating effects of cinema. In contrast to recent reformulations of realism (Christian Ferencz-Flatz) inspired by Walter Benjamin, I show that Mihail's films constitute an important starting point to rethink a socially conscious realism.

Keywords: Jean Mihail; Georg Lukács; Walter Benjamin; Romanian cinema; socialism; realism; materialism; Marxism; alienation; socially conscious cinema.

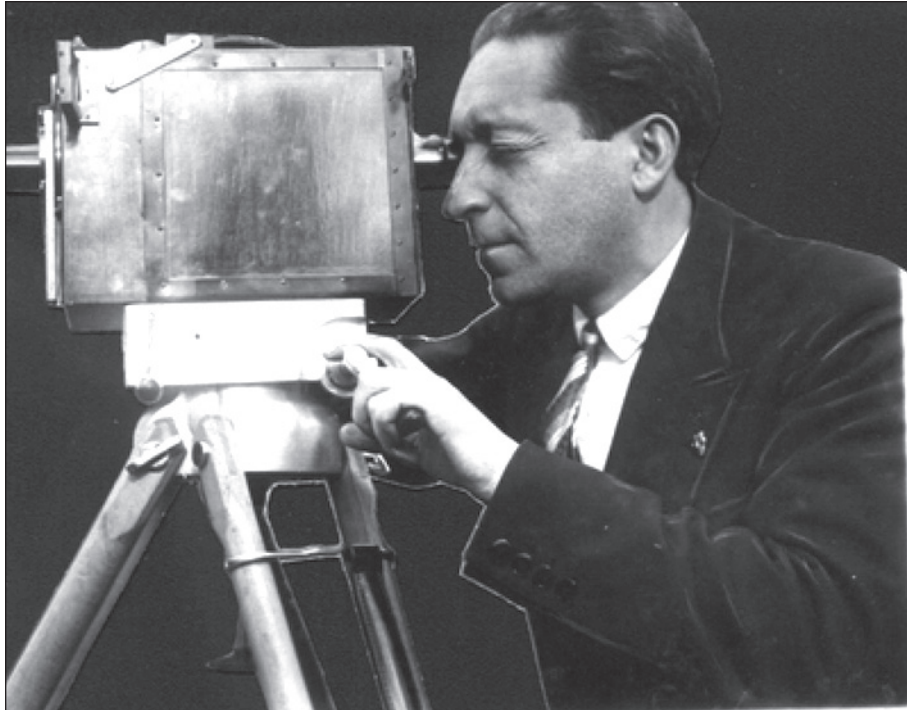
Citation suggestion: Popa, Bogdan. "The Artist as Realist: Jean Mihail and the De-Alienating Effects of Socialist Film." *Transilvania*, no. 10 (2022): 78-89.
<https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2022.10.10>.



Mihail, Lukács, and Realism

Jean Mihail (1896-1963) is not only one of the most influential directors of silent cinema in Romania, but also a figure that has been discussed in recent debates about Romanian film history. Like other pioneers such as Jean Georgescu and Paul Călinescu, he is one of the few who sought to become a professional art film director after the First World War. Călin Căliman (1995: 5), an influential historian of Romanian cinema, argues that Jean Mihail "is the first on an honorary list" of national directors. Although Mihail did not leave masterpieces, Căliman (1996: 5-6) acknowledges that "he laid down an important brick" to build Romanian cinematography. Working largely within a social realist aesthetic, his films in the 1920s discussed sensitive political questions such as sexuality and the role of the Jewish people in Romanian culture. *Păcat / The Sin* (1924, Romania, Austria) adapted

a short novel by I.L. Caragiale and focused on the scandal of incest. *Manasse* (1925, Romania) was an important vehicle to represent Jewish life in Romanian theater. The original drama was written by Ronetti-Roman and was adapted to screen by Isaia Răcăciuni and Scarlat Froda. In 1905, *Manasse* was attacked by various nationalist and right-wing political groups for its daring depictions of social relations among Romanian Jews, becoming a central point of ideological contestation for right-wing activists at this time (Lovinescu 1973: 49). In his revival of the play in his 1925 film, Mihail engaged with the right-wing attacks openly. The character Zelig Şor, a trickster with a long tradition in local theatre, gives voice to many bold observations about antisemitic discrimination and the complicated relation between poor and rich Jews. The film was an instant success and offered an important contribution to the rising democratic culture in Romania.



Jean Mihail during the interwar period as he shoots a film scene.
Caption from the Jean Mihail's profile at the site istoriafilmuluiromânesc.ro.



Romald Bulfinsky playing the role of Mannase Cohen, a small shop owner who is caught between the Jewish orthodox tradition and the changing social attitudes about inter-ethnic marriage. Caption from Manasse.

After films such as *Lia* (1927, Romania) and *Povara / The Weight* (1928, Romania, Austria), Mihail returned to his interest in documenting reality. *În CFR-o simfonie a muncii / CFR- A Symphony of Work* (1938, Romania), Mihail's goal is to classify and introduce workers in specialised categories to describe an ideal of social harmony between workers and the managerial class. This description emerges from specific conditions of colonial backwardness in the Romanian economy. It reflects the aspiration to a capitalism that sought to achieve high economic growth and end a period of economic downturn through state investment. Eleven years later, Mihail changed gears in *Oraşul nu doarme niciodată / The City That Never Sleeps* (1949, Romania). His socialist realist film emphasises joy, productivity, and the factory as a model for social life. The new aesthetic, which became dominant during the Stalin era in the Soviet Union, stems from a debate with capitalist forms of economic development and proposes a new model of political empowerment. In continuing to create a socially informed cinema, Mihail's socialist productions in the 1950s were received as important benchmarks to the formation of a strong national cinema.

This article concentrates on the topic of realism and debates about its aesthetic programme in Romanian art theory. By centering my analysis on Mihail's evolution from *Manasse* to *Oraşul nu doarme niciodată*, I theorise a dialectical realism by drawing on Georg Lukács's theory. Lukács was a Marxist art philosopher who was central to the development of art theory in Romanian socialism. Căliman introduces Mihail as a Romanian director who not only had a predilection for realist cinema, but who also displayed modernist and humanistic views on human relations. Although historically oriented critics have prefer to read Mihail only as an early pioneer and enthusiast who inspired interest in the art of cinema, Căliman's views on Mihail remained persuasive for a newer wave of film scholars. While some appreciate Mihail's productions because of their documentary qualities, others underscore the modernist potential of his work. For Gabriela Filippi, Mihail's work helps illuminating the historical and political context of the time, while Andrei Rus introduces Mihail's productions in a modernist structure that is situated "at the border between documentaries and avant-garde cinema". This conversation is part of a broader debate regarding the artistic potential of socialist productions in Romania between 1948 and 1989, prompted by arguments investigating the function of art in socialist modernism and social realism (Goldiș 2011; Terian 2019; Borza 2021). In building on this conversation, I argue that the beginnings of socialist films in Romania serve as an important theoretical model to rethink the role of realism as an aesthetic category. Scholars such as Galin Tihanov (2020: 2) have revisited Lukács' theory and argued that realism as a theory is a product of its time: a historicist

orientation that "places the doctrine of realism and thinks of it as part of the past". In turn, my intention is to revive materialist realism in a Lukácsian vein because it can restore two important themes that have been sidelined by recent arguments about Romanian cinema. Newer theoretical ideas about realism focus either on the question of representing marginal groups or denaturalising conventional perceptions of the world. In contrast to these aesthetic positions, I argue that realist films can capture historical transformations, which are mostly elided in discussions about representing minorities. Realism also offers a strategy to mitigate the effects resulting from the current ideological dominance of private property, which is much too often taken for granted in contemporary discussions about artistic representations.

To offer an illustration of the advantages of Lukács' theory, I take Jean Mihail's work as representative of a type of realism that promises an engaged and materialistic art. I concentrate my discussion on two arguments. First, I show the importance of understanding films as a device to capture social transformations. I primarily discuss the political background that underpins the transition from Mihail's 1938 work to a 1949 socialist film that concentrates on the factory as the example of a communist society. Mihail's 1949 film continues his earlier interests in socially conscious cinema, which were articulated in the 1920s when he described Jewish life and Jewish discrimination in Romanian society. Unlike his *CFR-o simfonie a muncii*, Mihail's *Oraşul nu doarme niciodată* presents a socialist aesthetic that offers an alternative to corporate fascism. In the post-1945 Romanian communist cinematography, the theme of the social cohesion of corporatism is replaced by the idea that workers transform cities into productive areas that fulfil the needs of all. Second, I explain that Mihail's films bring back a conceptualisation of the documentary that situates cinema as part of the material transformation of the world. In doing so, I argue that *Oraşul nu doarme niciodată* seeks to criticise the alienating effects of capitalism. While various theorists draw on a technique of defamiliarisation to argue that films offer an ideological critique, I deploy Mihail's work to show that materialist realism is better situated to address the deeper effects of capitalism.

Debates over Realism

I coin the concept of materialist realism to challenge newer aesthetic orientations that discuss the relationship between art and social reality. I understand by this concept not only a commitment of the aesthetic of realism but an effort to capture social changes in the world. In particular, by realism I understand an aesthetic orientation in film that seeks to capture significant social and historical transformations. After 2000, one



of the most important changes in Eastern European art theory has been the rise of the model of the artist as an ethnographer. According to this model, the artist researches a culturally different site with culturally different people and limited access to reality. As an example of this approach, the film *Acasă* [My Home] (Radu Ciorniu, 2020, Romania, Germany) focuses on a poor Roma family that lived in the Văcărești park in Bucharest. The production team of the documentary chose the subject because the family challenged their conventional notions about childhood and widened their understanding of reality. Had the director and actors been ethnically Roma, according to this logic, their access to reality would have been even greater. This aesthetic orientation is currently very influential. Critics such as Andrei Gorzo and Veronica Lazăr have analysed the rise of this theoretical orientation, arguing that “younger filmmakers like Ana Lungu (in her *One and a Half Prince*, from 2018), Ivana Mladenović (in her *Ivana the Terrible*, from 2020), and Bogdan Theodor Olteanu (in his *Mia Misses Her Revenge*, from 2020) seem content to use film to document (often in the guise of fiction) the micro-cultures they belong to, and to proclaim group identities (Gorzo and Lazăr 2022: 5). In a different vein, realism has value because it de-alienates the viewer from a conventional perception of reality. This theoretical perspective, which was put forward by Christian Ferencz-Flatz (2015: 61), deploys Walter Benjamin’s work to rethink the realism of New Wave directors such as Cristi Puiu and Corneliu Porumboiu, while at the same time arguing in favour of realism as a modality of stimulating misunderstanding. In Ferencz-Flatz’s reconstruction of what realism can produce, film has the capacity to deploy an apparatus that helps us modify our cognitive habits by which we apprehend the relation between human beings and their environment (2015: 60–61, 68–73).

My argument is that neither art as ethnography nor a theory of defamiliarisation/de-alienation can offer enough resources for a robust critique of capitalism. I appeal to Georg Lukács to revitalise a theoretical tradition that proposed a materialist aesthetic. His theory of realism, articulated in his 1938 *Historical Novel*, was an intervention in debates in Marxist and social democratic conversations about art and its politics. To show that art can lead to human emancipation, Lukács’ theory drew on the promise of a dialectical understanding of social contradictions. In his rendition of Marx’s historical materialism in art, Lukács (1970: 56) argued that “every artistic form is the outgrowth of definite social conditions and of ideological premises of a particular society”. Only by drawing on a social reality “subject matter and formal elements emerge which cause a particular form to flourish” (Lukács 1970: 56). The philosopher wanted to revive a realist tradition that criticises both the present and the past while offering a historical account of social

contradictions. In Lukács’ theory, an account of social contradictions had to be located in a broader historical framework in which the theorist interprets a particular artwork as part of an emancipatory process.

Lukács’ theory of realism serves as a theoretical counterpoint against leading aesthetic models that shape the debate about realism in Romanian films. His understanding of materialistic realism is an important perspective on socially conscious art that is not only historical, but which also can lead to a less alienated life. The realist artist, as it emerged in the dialogue between Walter Benjamin and Lukács, was a figure who understood and advanced the forward movement of history. Benjamin’s essay “The Artist as a Producer” (1999, 780), proposed that artists can find the aesthetic means to contribute to the defeat of fascism. In this 1934 paper, which was strongly influenced by Soviet and German debates about Marxist art, Benjamin identified the problem in leftist art that “has made the struggle against poverty an object of consumption” (1999, 776). Accordingly, he wanted intellectual artists to help the work of the proletariat destroy bourgeois society. While Benjamin and Lukács disagreed on the potential of the avant-garde, they both sought to advance the work of social progress by creating specific aesthetic tools. In Lukács’ view, alienation is created by the idea that art can show reality without mediation, and he therefore proposed a materialist response to this problem.

The outcome of an aesthetic without mediation is that it misconceives art as part of reality, rather than deploying it as an instrument to challenge the alienation produced by capitalism. Flawed artistic models assume that one can have access to reality if one documents a marginal group’s representation of reality. Instead, for Lukács the role of an artwork is to contribute to the dis-alienation of the world by showing not only the process of estrangement from human relationships, but also by underscoring its potential opposition to capitalist relations. According to the art as ethnography model, the cultural other (who is understood either as the worker, the cultural subaltern, or the discriminated) is the site that serves the artist as a means to criticise the cultural and economic inequalities of Eastern European societies. *Acasă* was framed by the producers and director not only as an ethnographic description but also as an artistic intervention advancing a pro-Roma progressive vision. On the positive side, works such as Ciorniu’s have brought to film theory a more detailed and complex perception of reality. For instance, Harry Weeks (2010: 60) noticed that documentarists de-flatten and inform on the new realities of the post-Soviet space. Rather than describing a flat terrain, art as ethnography shows the postsocialist space as a distinct and culturally diverse landscape. In a more critical key, scholars such as Ewa Mazierska and Renata Sukaityte (2020: 67–81) have argued that a post-communist documentary

is interested in poverty as an exotic issue under the umbrella of pathology. Differently put, when the cultural post-socialist other is poor, it is poor because it is either deficient or unwilling to become an entrepreneur in the new capitalist world. To unpack the critique of the artist as ethnographer, the art critic Hal Foster articulated three observations regarding the tendency for artists to practice ethnography:

“First, there is the assumption that the site of artistic transformation [...] is always located elsewhere [...]. Second, there is the assumption that this other is always *outside* [...]. Third, there is the assumption that if the invoked artist is *not* perceived as socially and or culturally other, he or she has but *limited* access to this transformative alterity, and, more, that if he or she *is* perceived as other, he or she has *automatic* access to it.” (Foster 1996: 173; original emphasis)

Foster’s incisive analysis was primarily directed at the binary thinking that operates with oppositions such as cultural insider/cultural other and inside versus outside. In contrast with a model borrowed from ethnography, Foster suggested that a better theory would dismantle false oppositions between the artist and the social other, given that politics primarily happens in the present. Differently put, not only the subaltern’s politics is real politics, but artists and subalterns can also co-create various sites of artistic and political critiques in order to bring about a progressive transformation of the world. Rather than imagining sites that are culturally different, Foster wanted to draw attention to all spaces as potential political spaces. While this critique is sharp and insightful, it emphasises the artistic present by leaving aside the question of history. In Lukács’ theory of realism, aesthetic productions can capture the social contradictions of capitalist societies and provide a better understanding of their historical transformations. While previous scholars have articulated important shortcomings of the artist as ethnographer, realism advances a Marxist model of an artist who not only works together with the social other, but also creates a material basis for a society that could fulfill everybody’s needs.

In addition to the influential theory of the artist as an ethnographer, other models in film theory argue that artworks provide a device of representation that captures social reality. Debates about realism in Romanian cinema, as Ferencz-Flatz (2015: 68) argues, touched on the question of the type of realism, either observational or expressive, deployed by Romanian directors. An important premise of this critique was that realist film explores reality, a premise supported by assertions, such as Cristi Puiu’s that realist films “investigate reality”, or that they constitute “anthropological instruments” to research reality (Ferencz-Flatz 2015: 69). Puiu’s theoretical approach seems to be plagued by a tension, which is that it simultaneously intensifies reality and at

the same time seeks to capture it as it is, “untouched” (ibid.: 118). In turn, Ferencz-Flatz (ibid.: 61) offers his own Benjamin-influenced theory of realism which advances the idea of defamiliarisation, which is based on the argument that the historical mission of films is to stimulate the interrogation of familiar conventions about reality. Yet both Puiu’s account and Ferencz-Flatz’s theoretical intervention elide a materialistic understanding of reality. According to the Marxist model of realism (Chukhrov 2020: 205), one can argue that Puiu’s idea of intensifying reality – that is, of a direct presence of the reality in his own films – is spiritualistic and engages in sorcery. As opposed to direct contact to reality, the realist image is not immanent to life but becomes a second reality because it reflects “the objective reality in a general sense” and “can be universal and truthful” (Chukhrov 2020: 272). Ferencz-Flatz’s approach also elides a key insight of materialist film theory because defamiliarisation is empty of a real critique without challenging the pernicious effects of capitalism. The realist work, as described by Lukács’ theory, is engaged in thought as labor and can counter the effects of alienation by dialectically describing the world.

In his criticism of Ernest Bloch’s defense of montage as a preferred technique for Surrealists, Lukács observed that formalistic devices without an anchor in the life of society are merely empty devices for representation. In returning to a materialist realism, he argues that artistic modalities of representing reality need to be connected to the totality of life, so that “thoughts and feelings grow out of the life of society” and “experiences and emotions are part of the total complex of reality” (Lukács 1987: 36). By naming naturalism and surrealism as “modern literary schools of the imperialist era”, Lukács (ibid.) notices that reality is not only “what manifests to the writer and the characters it creates” but also represents “modifications in the reality of capitalism”. In this account, changes in the class structure bring about “the swift succession of literary schools together with the embittered internecine quarrels that flare up between them” (ibid.).

Unlike recent methodological frameworks such as the artist as an ethnographer, Georg Lukács’ theory of realism offers an important materialist alternative. While the theory of the artist as an ethnographer seeks to empower the subaltern, the theoretical anchor of the realist model is a materialist view of reality that stems from social and economic contradictions. For Lukács, the art of realism provides a rich account of a perceived reality based on the assumption that such reality is organised by its social transformation. For him, modernist art has two defects: on the one hand, it can immerse in real life and on the other, it can merely seek to describe and decode it. Bourgeois art is threatened by an immersion in, and insistence on immediate reality,



because it does not seek to objectify what it represents. On the contrary, it seeks to become the reality itself. By skipping objectification, bourgeois art intensifies the process of alienation. While objectification is the externalisation of an object, alienation is the process by which man's essence becomes antagonistic to capitalism (Lukács 1968: xxiv). Not only do the immersion and insistence on reality have alienating effects, the isolation of material reality from its reflection brings a failure to transform it and change its meaning. Unlike modernist art, a materialist realist theory de-alienates by constructing a device that captures social reality while guiding it on a progressive path. As such, the documentary as a formal device represents the highest abstraction, "or the highest mode of condensation of content" and serves well the intentions of realist art (Lukács 1970: 46).

The artist as ethnographer offers a model of progressive art by emphasising the capacity of culturally marginalised sites and people to embody social inequalities. Yet, ethnographer artists can easily fall victim to the flawed perception that artists need to suspend their narrow perspective and learn from the cultural other. Here is how one of the screenwriters of *Acasă*, Lina Vădovii, explains her interest in filming Roma people in the Văcărești park:

"Growing up in the Delta offered the children certain freedom and a lack of inhibitions, which inspired me a lot. Everything they feel, they say it out loud, and act as such, without any constraints or self-censorship. They don't relate to society and its norms as we do, we were raised in residential areas and taken to school. That, for me, was the most important lesson: to open my mind and get out of this box that my parents and all the people from different systems I interacted with have built around me."

In this quote, we see the main tenets of the theory of film as ethnography articulated. In this account, poor Roma children in the park have something that "we", "the artists", "the majoritarian Romanians", do not have. The assumption is that the filmmaker can get in touch with the cultural other. The upshot is that one's preconceptions can be challenged and a better, truer account of reality can be offered to the public. This model is both ahistorical and non-materialist, however. Lukács' theory wants to locate the artwork in its historical development and thus to counteract the incapacity of a theory to transform what it seeks to describe. The model of the artist as ethnographer is not unlike a theory of performativity in its basic assumption, that is, it starts from the idea that the immersion in reality can change reality itself. In queer affect theory, performativity and visceral reactions are modalities by which social and political transformations are conceptualised. For theorists of the novel like Eve Sedgwick, the impact of the text over the reader can be traced at the level of affects, but in Afro-

American literature the performativity of blackness has served as a model for understanding resistance, agency and emancipation. Yet Lukács' theory of realism suggests that artistic productions do not merely dive into reality, they also can change it by objectifying and producing an account of it. In this account, affects should therefore be the means of understanding reality, rather than interventions in it. Realism is a fictional device that serves to describe reality and offer a better explanation of its emancipatory potential. Unlike an affective reaction, which remains a part of reality, the realistic device serves as a de-alienating tool to humanise a world in which one has a difficult time living and feeling at one's full potential.

A Materialist Alternative

Lukács' model provides a fertile theoretical ground to understand Jean Mihail's documentaries. I argue that a materialist realist model captures Mihail's change from a neutral, classificatory stance in his 1939 *CFR- O simfonie a muncii* to a socialist-realist film in *Orașul nu doarme niciodată*. Mihail had been interested in socially conscious cinema since his early films *Păcat* and *Manasse*. The opening shot of *Manasse* has a strong documentary quality, plunging the viewer into the world of the 1920s Jewish neighborhood in Fălticeni. We have access to the poorest part of the town, which later serves as a counterpoint to the wealthy Jewish Romanianised family in Bucharest. The film describes the contradictions between a newer Jewish generation that seeks to integrate with the new Romanian ruling class and an older Jewish small bourgeoisie that insists on marrying within their own religion. The new generation has not only a much more open understanding of sexuality and art, but they also see themselves as transgressing the boundaries of traditional Jewish life. The director uses this contrast to offer an insightful and touching portrait of Manasse Cohanovici, a Moldovan Jew who wants to preserve traditional Jewish ideas about marrying one's own kin. Lelia, Manasse's niece, falls in love with Matei Frunză, a Romanian man, and wants to marry him. Zelig Șor serves as a comic counterpart to this dramatic conflict, making provocative commentaries about the discrimination that Jewish people face in the new post World War I Romanian state. Mihail's insightful perspectives on social life were noticed by Gabriela Filippi (2022), who argued that "Mihail included in his films, and not only accidentally, close ups with people from the periphery of life, although some of his choice today appear problematic given the strengthening of ethnic stereotypes, such as the case of depicting a Roma as a bandit".

Securing funding for films became much more difficult in the 1930s compared to the 1920s. Because of severe underfunding, Romanian film production

was dependent on small private financial donations (Mihail 1967: 196-199). While Mihail worked as a film director under precarious economic conditions, his documentary work emerged during the state's effort to create propaganda for its tourism business. His first documentary, *Romania* (1935, Romania), was designed as part of a broader project of creating a national cinematography (Mihail 1967: 199). Mihail's 1938 film, *CFR- O simfonie a muncii*, like corporatist films such as Paul Călinescu's *Uzinele Malaxa* [Malaxa's Factories] (1940, Romania), received funding from the Ministry of Propaganda, newly created in 1938. Mihail's approach to documentaries was not the product of an independent artist but a vision shaped by the government's investment of money in public relations, and his documentary is an example of this political economy. *CFR's* entire approach to the question of labour is to mitigate class conflict and propagate the corporate doctrine of social harmony. The film is intended to depict the worker as part of an organic corporate body and starts by showing a train arriving at the station and a worker from the railway company raising the flag to signal the train's appearance. From this initial moment, *CFR* moves into a register where the worker is depicted as part of a broad industrial organisation. It is structured as a handbook of various classifications such as medical, technological, quality control, and financial operations. The factory is run by a managerial class that ensures that all workers occupy their designated places. In Călinescu's *Uzinele Malaxa*, one of the highly technologised factories of the Romanian industrial class is depicted as an example of social harmony and effective administration. A corporate aesthetic is reflected through the clean lines of the buildings, the gigantic furnaces, and the focus on supervising managers. In Mihail's *CFR*, the supervision aspect of the technological production is depicted by highlighting the specific role of various departments. In the quality control section, a functionary signs a paper that says "checked" ("verificat"). In the research department, we see an engineer drawing lines on a project, while in statistics a group of women are typing without looking at various charts that they copy. In financial services, we see a functionary in a uniform handling money. In the law and maintenance departments, we see people who expertly fulfill their roles as administrative bureaucrats.

The world that Mihail shows us is located right before the beginning of the Second World War. At that time, Romanian industrialists were considering their position within the future world conflict and were engaged in a balancing act. Their corporate ideology fluctuated between the support of right-wing national parties such as the *Iron Guard*, which derived their ideology from economic nationalism and a critique of foreign dependence, and the adherence to German national socialist politics, which required the approval of overt colonialism. As an example of this ambivalence,

Mihail Manoilescu's theory of corporatism was caught between economic protectionism and a straightforward endorsement of the politics of Nazi Germany. Manoilescu was an influential economist whose 1934 *Century of Corporatism* was widely read in the industrial circles of right with European politics before the Second World War (Love 1996: 77-79). His corporatism emerged from the German post-World War I emphasis on planned economy and a rising tide of economic nationalism derived from industrialisation and exacerbated by the Great Depression's flight of foreign capital (Love 1996: 79). Manoilescu was not only elected to the Senate on the ticket of the *Iron Guard* in 1937, but he was also the president of the National Industrialists Association in Romania (UGIR). Fascist leaders such as Mussolini and Salazar were impressed by his economic arguments and sought to put some of his theories into practice (Love 1996: 77-78).

Mihail's *CFR* film is often read as an avant-garde production that anticipates his later socialist work, such as the 1949 *Oraşul nu doarme niciodată*, but it can hardly be detached from its social-historical context. For some film scholars, Mihail's films are part of the international successful genre of urban symphonies like Dziga Vertov's *Chelovek s kinoaparatom* / *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929, Soviet Union) and Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* / *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*. This interpretative lens underscores the continuities between his 1930s films that focus on industrial labour and his later socialist films after 1948 that highlight the worker as a leading character. Yet Mihail's *CFR* film thoroughly embraces its corporatist politics. His films deploy different economies of emotion to make sense of the material he describes. In 1938, the focus of the film on the relation between a managerial class, highly technologised machines, and the people who handle them. The affect of the film is neutral, classificatory, and alienating. It aims to show the worker as an organic piece in the highly technologised industrial production. The movement of the camera illustrates the harmony between the managers and workers in the industrial factory. In turn, in his 1949 film, Mihail changes his affective techniques and the representation of the workers. His film makes way to a new productivist eye. Unlike his early corporate films, *Oraşul nu doarme niciodată* seeks to combat worker's alienation by showing how the workers themselves were producing a new society. Enthusiasm and joy are the central drivers that take the camera to the heart of the working class.

The late productivist model in Mihail's work is a response not only to the economic underdevelopment of Eastern Europe's periphery, but also stems from the Eastern European Marxist solutions that sought to address the problems raised by Romanian corporatism. The historical space between 1938 and 1949 is illustrated by the contrast of clashing affects. Whereas the affect



of a corporate push to productivity was neutral, in *OT* joy is the dominant emotion. In the 1938 film, cold boredom is the affect behind Mihail's philosophy. The classification starts with a medical investigation: the worker's heart and lungs are checked by a doctor. We shift to new areas of investigation such as technological development: state functionaries help to smooth the mechanics of the railway factory; in a laboratory, chemists are laboring on chemical substances; and in a psycho-laboratory, two functionaries are investigated in the psycho-tehnic service to see whether they can fulfill their duties with success. They enter the lab and salute by raising their hands while in the back we see the portrait of Ion Antonescu, a general who allied Romania with Nazi Germany. The drivers are given tests to see whether they can use their feet for driving and hands for controlling the movement of toy trains. Also, their hand mobility is tested at the level of rotating a knob in circular movements. We move to the inside of a room where various sophisticated industrial machines are handled with precision. We understand that the workers produce shells for the army. In the next shot, the camera moves outside the room, and we see the silhouette of an Orthodox church as part of a broader picture. The industrial production of the workshops is situated in a political context, and we understand that the target is the production of weapons that will be needed for the future war.

The plot in the 1938 film highlights the efficient management of the production process. Corporatism combines the protection of the nation with a vision of industrial growth. The corporate ideology of productivism required industrial leadership to push for lower labor costs in the name of efficiency and rational organisation

(Love 1996: 79.). The managerial class in Mihail's film is a response to the perceived 'backwardness' of 'peripheral' societies such as Romania. For Manoilescu, moving along the path of industrialization meant restructuring the economy according to the imperatives of industrial production. National policies were key for Manoilescu to raise economic productivity because he believed that a protectionist economy would lead to accelerated development. He also wanted for a socialism of classes to be replaced by a "socialism of nations", so that proletarian nations could be organised to fight against plutocratic nations (Love 1996: 84). Additionally, Manoilescu emphasised social harmony and the elimination of class struggles as intrinsic to corporatism. UGIR, the union of industrialists in Romania, adopted a doctrine of social harmony that actively fought against measures such as the introduction of an eight-hour workday and sought to suppress communist "discord" (Love 1996: 85). In Mihail's film, social harmony is depicted as a well-organized industrial body where workers are happy under the leadership of managers.

After the end of the war, socialists brought their version of Marxist-Leninism to advance the modernisation of Eastern European countries. Communists relied on Marxist economics as a solution to the lack of success of corporatism in Southern and Eastern Europe. Marxist strategies for leading a 'peripheral' country out of economic colonialism were central to communist politics after the Communists took power in Romania in 1948. They emphasised increased industrial production as their most important ally in the fight against Western colonialism. They insisted not only on industrial labor as a path out of economic dependence but also on development of heavy industry such as tractors, engines,



An animated working class man selling the newspaper *Romania liberă* on the streets.
Caption from *OT*

and electric motors to open a route out of economic backwardness (Montias 1967: 15). Their economic efforts, which overlapped with corporate ideas like Manoilescu's, were nevertheless drawn from a Marxist political economy that was at odds with corporatism.

In the new Marxist-inspired model, workers were leading the fight against imperial interests and powers not only economically, but also aesthetically. Productivism was a model that factories and artists embraced in socialism. The affect of the new era of socialist production had to replace the surveillance and control of corporatism. Under these new revolutionary conditions, Mihail changed his techniques. *OT* was intended to capture the life of Bucharest in its socialist dimensions.

While in *CFR* the factory is part of a classificatory system run by experts, Mihail's socialist films reverse the cinematic perspective. The factory becomes the entire city. It is run by its workers who are themselves part of the machine that rotates its wheels, an analogy to the new socialist regime. The leading figure of the film is no longer management, but rather, the worker who animates the entire city. In the film's initial shots, the worker turns on the lights on the street. Youths run to catch the trams in the morning. A young woman looks at her watch, and the audience can see that it is only 7 am. Mothers are bringing their children to the kindergarten early, in order to hurry to their place of work. Gigantic wheels are turning in factories. We understand that the

buzz and hum of the production wakes up the entire city. In contrast to *CFR*, there is no classificatory system that introduces various areas of work and no management that supervises production.

The soundtrack guides the spectator on a tour of a socialist Bucharest from early rising to the end of the working day. Socialist slogans are everywhere in the film. One worker produces bearings, and the slogan at his workplace says: "do not chat with us" ("nu ne țineți de vorbă"). We see from a camera shot from ceiling level that the various people below are moving around and discussing the production process. People shake hands and talk about their work. Another slogan encapsulates their activity: "One target: To exceed the state plan in 1949". A supervisor approaches one of the workers to discuss his activity. They smile at each other, shake hands, and look very happy with the product. The contrast with the managerial aspect of the corporatist film is striking. In the world of 1938 Romania, there is hardly any interaction between workers and managers. The cinematic sequences that show secretaries typing charts on their machines exemplify the corporate attitude regarding work. The workers neither interact nor talk to each other but are completely focused on their one task. In the 1949 film, by contrast, production is depicted as a collective endeavour that is not limited to the factory, but on the contrary, represents the life of the city as a whole.



An enthusiastic working class woman selling newspapers with titles written in Romanian, Russian and Hungarian. Caption from *OT*



The Marxist idea that the collective mode of production is the starting point of a new society is at the heart of *OT*. The fast movements of the machine are accompanied by communist activists who urge workers to exceed their plan. The end of the shift is very animated. Workers talk as they encounter problems and seek solutions from each other. They are filmed even when they are turned away from the camera. They gesticulate, and their hand gestures show that life in the factory is not essentially different from life inside it. The whole city is transformed, and part of this transformation is the understanding that the entire city is a worker's factory. The city is in an ongoing productive activity and illustrates the arrival of a new world.

The Advantages of Materialist Realism

I have suggested in this article that Lukács' theory of realism offers an important vantage point to rethink the aesthetics of realism. I have claimed that Mihail's films bring back a distinct conception of materiality that deeply connects class-conscious politics to aesthetic concerns. Mihail's *Manasse* is a study of the contrast between poor Jewish families in poor Moldovan towns and rich Jewish families in Bucharest. His *CFR – O simfonie a muncii* shows the setting of industrial production under a corporate philosophy, while *OT* is deeply immersed in a productivist model of workers' politics that centres on the process of building a new society.

I have argued that Lukács' theory of realism presents two main strengths in relation to competing aesthetic ideas in Eastern European cinema. First, it offers an interpretation of the historical transformations in film aesthetics. By contrast, the current theory of art as ethnography sidelines history in favour of focusing on the cultural other. In this account, social transformations can be achieved by those who are deemed subalterns in the hierarchies of the art world. In contrast, the aesthetic of realism is better able to interpret historical and material shifts in aesthetic productions. In *Manasse*, the focus on Jewish life was a political choice that responded to right-wing calls for the cancellation of realist descriptions of poverty and discrimination. In *OT*, the film's socialist goals represented an answer to a corporatist philosophy. The realist artist does not verify the progressive character of artwork by the identity of the subject but by understanding its historical effects. Objects do not exist in Mihail's film to look at, but as pieces that are part of a historical and materialist evolution. The nude that Şor discovers in *Manasse* on the walls of the rich Jewish family's home embodies the contrast between poor and well-off Jews. In *OT*, the violin created by the violin master will be later shown as an object that is used by artists in an orchestra. This artistic production is broadcast from State Opera on National Romanian Radio. The main characters of the play *Harap Alb* lose

their chains to join others in building socialism. The film captures the movement and the material transformation of objects, which provides a window into understanding the role of material items as representing social reality.

For Lukács, film can also function as a weapon against processes of alienation. In his view, socialist realism can change a film audience from a passive group that merely contemplates the inhumanity of capitalism to an active, socially conscious audience. In *OT*, Romanian workers are watching *Vstrecha na El'be* [The Meeting on the Elbe] (Grigorii Aleksandrov, 1949, Soviet Union), a Soviet Cold War film set before the Cold War which celebrates the friendship between Soviet and American armies in 1945. Mihail shows how workers themselves are looking at their own cinematic representation. This process of self-representation is not about showing the life of a marginalised group. In contrast, Mihail's materialist realism not only reveals the social conditions of production but also shows the active role of the proletariat as the leading class. A theory of realism offers a de-alienating model than proposes art as a mediating tool, in contrast to theories that are based on affective and performative effects of the artwork.

A serious drawback of newer films in Romanian cinema is that their directors see them as interventions into reality. Theories of performativity withdraw from offering a realistic understanding of the social contradictions of their time. The alienation is a result of trying to perform reality rather than offering a materialist perspective on it. A concentration on older models of art production, such as the historical conditions of producing socially realistic films, serves as an important alternative that can generate a less alienated art. For Lukács, the fictitious composition is "a more truthful rendering of reality than any direct, affective, naturalistic reproduction or reenactment of it". In socialist realism, the films reflect reality and reality creates the aesthetic of film production. Rather than filming subjects who live an alienated life, Mihail shows how workers lead their audience to a less alienated world. Likewise, affects are his windows into understanding the described reality and less performative interventions that seek to change it. In this dialectical method, the goal is to create images that seek not only to capture reality but also to produce an emancipated world.

Finally, Lukács' materialist realism is important because it highlights the dangers in film criticism in focusing primarily on aesthetic subjective choices. Mihail's films *Manasse* and *OT* function as devices that reflect reality and orient it toward social emancipation. They serve as important mediations that describe the social contradictions of their time. Materialist realism captures the relation between form and content as an objective relation and provides some independence from the subjectivity of the documentary filmmaker. In Ferencz-Flatz's interpretation, directorial choices

such as Cristi Puiu's or Corneliu Porumboiu's are key to understanding realism. Puiu offers the transgression of a conventional perception in *Aurora* (2010, Romania) by proposing a realism that seeks to disenchant a predictable way of seeing the world (Ferencz-Flatz 2015: 72). In *Politiștii, Adjectiv* [Police, Adjective] (2009, Romania), Porumboiu intends to provoke failures of comprehension with the same goal of defamiliarising the world (Ferencz-Flatz 2015: 72). This model of interpretation takes the subjectivity of the artist as the primary window into reality. In turn, materialistic realism concentrates on the capacity of the artists to describe the social world and the role the artist takes in this process. To realistically describe reality is to offer an objective account of the relation between form and the social conditions of film's production.

This article is a call to re-evaluate an aesthetic that has been central to Eastern European socialist cinema, which was intended to fight on the side of human

emancipation. In my Lukács-based interpretation, *Manasse*, *CFR* and *OT* bring to a post-socialist audience a dialectical mode of reflecting reality that is elided in newer theoretical orientations. As I argue elsewhere (Popa 2018), an important tendency in contemporary Romanian cinema is to unreflectively celebrate educated middle-class values. One of the effects of such an orientation is to strengthen, rather than challenge, the alienation effects engendered by late capitalism. The artist as realist may constitute an aesthetic model that can have a future in film production under new social and political circumstances. It suggests that films can contribute to a materialist production of reality because they are engaged in a progressive transformation of the world.

Acknowledgement: Denise J. Youngblood offered important revisions and comments to this article. I am grateful for her help.

Bibliography:

- Aitken, Ian. *Lukácsian Film Theory and Cinema*. Manchester, 2012.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Author as Producer". In *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, 1931-1934, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith, translated by Rodney Livingstone and Others, 768-782. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Borza, Cosmin. "The Faces of Rural Modernity in the Romanian Novel of Agricultural Collectivization." In *Beyond the Iron Curtain. Revisiting The Literary System of Communist Romania*, edited by Ștefan Baghiu, Ovio Olaru, Andrei Terian. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021.
- Căliman, Călin. *Jean Mihail*. Bucharest: Meridiane, 1997.
- Chukhrov, Keti. *Practicing the Good: Desire and Boredom in Soviet Socialism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020.
- Filippi, Gabriela. "Jean Mihail, Un cineast in contratimp". *Cine Club*, 2021. <https://cineclub.sahivintage.ro/2021/12/01/jean-mihail-un-cineast-in-contratimp/>.
- Foster, Hal. *The Return of the Real, The Avant-garde at the End of the Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.
- Fulger, Mihai. "Jean Mihail, Lia și Lilly." *Film 1* (2020): 68-71.
- Goldiș Alex. *Critica în tranșee. De la realismul socialist la autonomia esteticului* [Criticism in Tranches: From Socialist Realism to the Autonomy of the Aesthetics]. Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2011.
- Gorzo, Andrei, and Veronica Lazăr. "The New Romanian Cinema and Beyond: The Films of Radu Jude." *Transilvania*, no. 3 (2022): 1-9.
- Love, Joseph. *Crafting the Third World, Theorizing Underdevelopment in Brazil and Romania*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.
- Lovinescu, Eugen. *Istoria literaturii române contemporane*, vol.1 [1926]. Bucharest, 1973.
- Lukács, Georg. "Preface to the new edition (1967)". In *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, ix-xli. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968.
- Lukács, Georg. *The Historical Novel*. Lincoln and London, 1983.
- Lukács, Georg. *Writer & Critic and other Essays*. New York: Grosset & Dunlop, 1970.
- Matei, Alexandru. "Realism socialist—înapoi la locul crimei." *Observator Cultural* 890 (2017). <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/realism-socialist-inapoi-la-locul-crimei/>.
- Mazierska, Ewa, and Renata Sukaityte. "Representation of Poverty in Polish, Lithuanian, and Latvian Documentary Films of the Postcommunist Period." *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 11, no. 1 (2020): 67-81.
- Mihail, Jean. *Filmul Românesc de altădată*. Bucharest: Meridiane, 1966.
- Montias, John Michael. *Economic Development in Romania*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967.
- Popa, Bogdan. "What's Wrong with the Romanian New Wave? Auteur Cinema, the Communist, and the Production of the Violent Working Class." *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 9, no. 1 (2018): 89-102.
- Sedgwick, Eve. 2003. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Performativity and Pedagogy*. Durham, NC.
- Szel, Ana, and Andrei Rus. Introduction for "Jean Mihail-programul 3." *Cineclub*, 2022. <https://cineclub.sahivintage.ro/programe/>



[programul-3-jean-mihail/](#).

Szel, Ana, Andrei Rus, Gabriela Filippi, and Mihai Burcea. "Jean Mihail și filmul Documentar în perioada 1935-1949." *CineClub*, 2021. <https://cineclub.sahiaivintage.ro/2021/11/15/jean-mihail-si-filmul-documentar-in-perioada-1935-1949/>.

Terian, Andrei. "Socialist Modernism as Compromise: A Study of the Romanian Literary System." *Primerjalna književnost* 42, no. 1 (2019): 133-147.

Tihanov Galin. "Revisiting Lukács' Theory of Realism." *Thesis Eleven* 159, no. 1 (2020): 57-63.

Vdovii, Lina, Radu Ciorniciuc, and Mircea Topolean "Acasă, my home." Interview by Laura Mușat, *Films in Frame*, 2020, online at <https://www.filmsinframe.com/en/interviews/interview-acasa-my-home/>.

Weeks, Harry. "Re-cognizing the post-Soviet Condition: The Documentary Turn in Contemporary Art in the Baltic States." *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 1 (2010): 57-70.

Filmography:

Aleksandrov, Grigorii. 1949. *Vstrecha na El'be / The Meeting on the Elbe*. Mosfilm.

Călinescu, Paul. 1940. *Uzinele Malaxa / Malaxa's factories*. ONC.

Ciorniciuc, Radu. 2020. *Acasă / My Home*. Manifest Film, HBO Europe, HBO Romania, Corso Film, Vle to 1 Finland.

Lungu, Ana. 201. *Un prinț și jumătate / One and a Half Prince*. Mandragora

Mihail, Jean. 1923. *Țigăncușa de la iatac / The Gypsy in the Bedroom*. „Spera Film” (Berlin), „Rador Film” (București-Haga).

Mihail, Jean. 1924. *Păcat / The Sin*. „Național Film” (Vasile Gociu - Jean Mihail - George Aurelian).

Mihail, Jean. 1927. *Manasse*. „Național Film” (Vasile Gociu - Jean Mihail - George Aurelian).

Mihail, Jean. 1927. *Lia*. Indro Film București.

Mihail, Jean. 1928. *Povara / The Weight*. Panfilm, Sapho-Film.

Mihail, Jean. 1935. *România 1934*. Indro Film București.

Mihail, Jean. 1939. *CFR- O simfonie a muncii / CFR- A symphony of work*. Căile Ferate Române.

Mihail, Jean. 1949. *Orașul nu doarme niciodată / The City That Never Sleeps*. Oficiul Național Cinematografic.

Mladenović, Ivana. 2020. *Ivana cea groaznică / Ivana the Terrible*. MicroFILM, Dunav 84.

Olteanu, Bogdan Theodor. 2020. *Mia își ratează răzbunarea / Mia Misses Her Revenge*. Tangaj Production, SUB25, Papillon Film.

Porumboiu, Corneliu. 2009. *Polițist, Adjectiv / Police, Adjective*. 42 Km Film.

Puiu, Cristi. 2010. *Aurora*. Mandragora, Bord Cadre films, Coproduction Office, Essential Film Produktion.

Ruttmann, Walter. 1927. *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt / Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*. Les Productions Fox Europa, Deutsche Vereins-Film.

Vertov, Dziga. 1929. *Chelovek s kinoaparatom / Man with a Movie Camera*. VUFKU.