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# Close Up

FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES

Academic Journal of National University of Theatre and Film "I. L. Caragiale" – Vol. 4, No. 1, 2020



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FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES

The academic journal of the National University of Theatre and Film "I.L. Caragiale" publishes original papers aimed to analysing in-depth different aspects of cinema, film, television and new media, written in English.

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# **Close Up: Film and Media Studies**

Vol. 4, No. 1, 2020

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# Editor's Note

**Dana Duma**

National University of Theatre and Film "I.L. Caragiale"

Our new issue of "Close Up", written and published in the times of pandemic, is mainly dedicated to diversity in cinema. First of all, we celebrate animation, "the other cinema", so superficially known, on the occasion of the 100 year anniversary of the first Romanian animated film, *Păcală in the Moon* (*Păcală în lună*) (1920), the lost short film signed by Aurel Petrescu. Two articles in this issue are covering animation films, "The Animator's Hand Trope in Romanian Animation" by Valeriu Căliman, mostly dedicated to the work of Ion Popescu Gopo, the first Romanian to win a Palme d'Or, and Dorina Pricop's "Fair Use and Disney's Fairy Tales", which analyses the concept of *fair use*, more precisely the way parodies and pastiches are free to use parts of well-known protected works without the consent of copyright holders, in order to criticize clichés.

This issue continues our efforts to analyze major tendencies in Romanian cinema. The articles dedicated to this constant concern of our contributors are illustrated by the texts "The Atmosphere of the Inter-War Era of the Romanian Village in *The Moromete Family* and *The Moromete Family 2*" signed by Smaranda Cristina Sterian. The profile of Romanian cinema is completed by the reviews of new books published this year on different aspects of Romanian cinema, such as *The Transition Film: Contributions towards a critique of Romanian 1990s cinema* by Andrei Gorzo and Gabriela Filippi, *Romanian Cinema Inside Out: Insights on Film Culture, Industry and Politics* by Irina Trocan, or *Balkan Cinema and the Great Wars: Our Story* by Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, Marian Țuțui and Savaş Arslan.

Diversity in cinema is a topic also covered by Siniša Dragin's paper on the mutual relationship between documentary and fiction film, by Liri Chapelan's investigation of "minority cinema", or in Flavia Dima's piece on home movies, frequently included in other forms of cinema. New tendencies of cinema (better defined as "spreadable content") with huge social influence, are analyzed by Irina Trocan in her text "Analogue, Digital, Computational. Politicized Moving Image's Reincarnation."

I am sure you'll find our chosen topics and articles very interesting.

I would like to seize the opportunity to thank all our collaborators and to invite other authors to publish in our journal open to new tendencies in cinema and media.





# The Atmosphere of the Inter-War Era of the Romanian Village in *The Moromete Family* and *The Moromete Family 2*

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## **Abstract**

In this essay we consider how much of the movie's visual approach depends on the subject. It has been a long debate whether the monochrome or colour picture suits best a historical subject, the era when the story takes place or if it creates the intimate link between the environment and the characters depicted. The ontological structure of analog medium transferred to nowadays digital realm makes this difference much obvious, that is why we make a parallel comparison of the same narrative space captured on two different supports, film and digital. Therefore, the similar countryside space has been illustrated throughout cinema history, when the monochrome or analogous colour scheme has been used versus a black and white reproduction.

## **Keywords**

Moromete Family, Moromete Family 2, analogous color scheme, black and white, Days of Heaven, analog, digital

## **THE VISUAL STRUCTURE OF THE RURAL UNIVERSE OF ILIE MOROMETE**

*The Moromete Family*, the 1987 movie directed by Stere Gulea (DOP Vivi Drăgan Vasile), recounts a universe of the inter-war village which is ideally structured in crowded compositions depicting iconic elements of the community. The landmarks and the relationships within the village are governed by a vague hierarchy mainly structured around monetary farming gains but also on the reactive illustration of the community in the village's agora. An example is Iocan's blacksmith workshop.

The landscapes are dense, governed by a dark atmosphere where the perspective of the daily activities is reversed most of the time. The outdoor spaces are perceived as being highly

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dense, sometimes oppressive, with their visual key decided through the intermediate of the atmospheric perspective. The norms of the geometric linear perspective are contradicted and the contribution of the backgrounds is minimized due to the atmosphere created by the composition. The area where the action takes place is covered by a generous layer of smoke. When it rises, it opens up the composition towards textured backgrounds with big lighting ratios.

The “chromatic” code of this universe is paradoxically colourless, and the viewer is guided by the camera to watch closely the director’s and the cinematographer’s intention in a given compositional context. The shot thus contains a double meaning: that of an aspect ratio (frame limit), and of the composition. The latter one is assembled with actions where the perceived time expands through the interaction with the natural elements of the moments. The screen surface becomes the witness of successive events that affect our expectations, representing the “glow” of both the actors and the movie set, at dawn or dusk when there are sporadic glowing accents present in the frame.

The perception of time is mediated both within the frame as well as by the camera movements. The alternation of the shots or, on the contrary, the breakdown into static shots of moments of possibly temporary transitions are subordinated to an imposed rhythm by the actors’ immobility or by their movements.

In this sense, Moromete’s universe is a “dead end” or futureless space. This feeling tears itself away, especially in the way in which the overall contrast of the composition is treated, an interval that adds density and creates a moody atmosphere.

The composition becomes flexible and adjusts itself to the dramatic moments, whereas the daily life perspective is reconfigured through the creative usage of the visual key. The diegetic structure develops in a dichotomous way, governed by a complementary auctorial point of view. The structural ambivalence of this approach can be interpreted as a reference of an imaginary point through which we follow the story, having the option of a personal conclusion or a direct opinion of the storyteller. Even if the narrative structure is not primarily approached through the POV shots, in which the opinion and directorial intentions are obvious, the compositional perspective is constantly modified to allow expository interpretations, sometimes dichotomous.

Thus, the viewers find themselves in front of a restrictive option from a natural standpoint, whereas the absence of colour and the decision to transform the colourful reality in a reconfigured version becomes beneficial through the acceptance of space and of the narrative relations in the formula imagined by the director.

The colour in this particular case would have created both inevitable interpretations and comparisons with the viewers’ personal images of the rural space. The cultural differences and the educational norms would have generated divergent opinions regarding the representational and narrative roles of the colour. This filter of acceptance of a fictional reality is thus imposed without reservations; the structure and the form of the black and white picture become representative of the illustrated space. The united black and white universe of *The Moromete Family* is questionable from the perspective of the illustrated chromatic codes, of the uniform harmonious/disharmonious representations of the village.

Another production shot in the eve of the 1980's where the colour and the atmosphere can be transferred to a similar story is *Days of Heaven* (1978), directed by Terrence Malick (DOP Nestor Almendros). As a comparative case study, we can assume that the conventional narrative space is that of a rural environment in both cases. The chromatic harmony and the analogous colour scheme of Malick's film reverberate within the semi-tones and the moody atmosphere from *The Moromete Family*, the viewer being able to adapt the macro universe to Ilie's micro universe through a simple effort of imagination. The set elements and props from that period are occasionally introduced in similar repetitive actions. Thus, the thresher scene after the harvest's completion contains convergent valences in both films. Therefore the symbolic structure of the treatment of the anisotropic space from the exterior scenes diametrically separates the two movies. Through the symbiosis of the sky and earth, *The Moromete Family* transcends as a declaration of faith of the role of man in the complex mechanism of the universe; a present, yet minimized connection by Ilie, who, at the end the of the film is faced with a choice within which he invokes the Creator.

The colour codes in the narrative construction are obvious, yet the lack of colour in *The Moromete Family* forces the viewer to accept a convention where the director and DOP egocentrically structure Ilie Moromete's universe. Once accepted, the black and white convention replaces the true structure of a colour representation, where space is configured via compositional clues and the qualitative/quantitative valences of the light.

Thus, the references for a possible harmonic narrative illustration can be assimilated into the "stories" with a universal perfume of classical paintings. An exemplification of this is present in Vincent van Gogh's painting *The Potato Eaters* (1885), in which the situation described and its atmosphere are defined through lighting details.



*The Potato Eaters* by Vincent van Gogh



*The Moromete Family* by Stere Gulea

In *The Moromete Family*, the moment where the family gathers for lunch can be outlined as a possible reinterpretation of the dinner scene. Here, the only source of illumination is provided by the fire in the stove or by the weak top light of a gas lamp.

The single point perspective composition, similar to the dinner scene in *The Moromete Family*, leads to deeper boosters, mainly owing to the static nature of the camera. The moment may seem to be set in stone, however the cut to an over the shoulder shot of the character changes the attention of the viewer towards the background of the composition focusing on Catrina Moromete. The postures and the attitudes of the participants are an example of an evident awkwardness whereas the feeling of solitude in the densely populated room is present in both examples. In his painting, Van Gogh composes “the imagery” of a shabby supper through an evident “inadequacy” of the participants, through their uncomfortable positions, whose contorted bodies resemble a photographic capture.

Comparatively, the characters’ interactions in the dinner sequence of *The Moromete Family* seem to have the same role, illustrating the conflictive issues within the family’s relationships. Catrina is presented in an “unfavorable” position in the background of the frame, while the foreground is occupied by Ilie Moromete and the children who are sitting around the table. Although Ilie Moromete’s authority seems to be undisputed, the importance of this narrative part falls upon Catrina, who is placed in the only illuminated area of the room.

The perfect symbiosis between the visual space and the imaginary, contoured by the illustrated elements, support the transfer of this “staged reality” projected onto the surface of the screen. The iconic elements belonging to Ilie Moromete’s intimate space are placed in a continuous transitory state, starting off from a fragile stability at the beginning of the film, and climaxing in a chaotic stage towards the end, where the element of choice is not what we would have expected as being rational, but rather intuitive.

The symbols of the familial space are subjected to an imposed transformation and assumed by the main character. The acacia, the sheep and, in the end, the claiming of the earned land are transformed via the “sensorial” experience into a tactile one, consisting of the textures transmitted via the acacia or the land to which Ilie Moromete subjects himself. Such transformations are made in the interior of the space perceived by the frame which mediates the transformation of the composition into the story. This isolation creates its own organisational norms, delivering new visual analogical clues. Their elements have become



Stills from *Days of Heaven* by Terrence Malick

an index of the imaginary plane. The imagery and the representation of the acacia as a symbol of family's unity, the house porch or even Iocan's blacksmith workshop become an agora for the family and community as well.

Although there are continuous intentions of isolating several characters in the compositional space, the link with this space is fluid and in constant reconfiguration. The camera movement becomes the linking element between scenes, often pointing out the key moments of the narration. In return, the kinetic gestures integrate themselves in the narrative timeline causing the movement to decide the character's "biorhythm".

The absence of colour gives birth to an ideal dimension where everyday landmarks are reconfigured and gradually integrated within a conventional place.

The imagery of the village in Gulea's film can be compared to that of the farm in *Days of Heaven*. Both are governed by a limited tonal palette (achromatic tones in the former one, and analogical colours in the latter one), illustrating the actions in small contrast intervals as well as the preponderant choice of lower densities within the composition (black). The dynamic range and the interval of the contrast (achromatic vs. singular tone) are grouped in dense areas of the image adding depth to the exterior space. The alternation and the overlapping of these tonal and achromatic areas confirm the three-dimensional construction of the composition alongside the authorial narrative and pseudo-POV perspectives. These examples help the viewer to mentally recompose the visual universe of the main characters. The acceptance of the lack of colour or the usage of a limited chromatic colour palette, impose importance in sending off the message as well as a high emotional transfer.

Both films reflect their auteurs' choice for the right shooting times of the day, where the ratio between contrast and the analogous chromatic palette is obvious. In *Days of Heaven*, the moment depicting the sunset becomes the main feature used by the director-cinematographer team to illustrate the story. The actions and the characters are portrayed most of the time as silhouettes, the lighting effect accentuating the compositional depth, with the chromatic palette being limited to an analogical range, almost uni-tonal. Such codes are seen and successively added, with the intention of integrating the spirit of the space in the structure of the action and the illustrated characters.

The analogous colour approach in *Days of Heaven* and the achromatic illustration from *The Moromete Family* represent two examples of visual approaches, which the auteurs used to build upon the individual and group narrative relationships. In this sense, the universality



Victor Rebengiuc in *The Moromete Family*

of the family's story subscribes itself to the built visual space. Its structure is carried out in ideal parallel plots, whereas the imaginary created by the narrator is defined with the help of sensations transferred via the relevant texts.

By knowing these two aspects, a legitimate question arises when we refer to the visual structure of *The Moromete Family 2* (2018). Is this film just reiterating a transfer of the previously accepted codes, or does it reconfigure them and apply them in a new digital structure? Are there any usual practices treated differently in the two movies? In order to answer these questions we will take a look at the concept of intermediality. In my opinion, from the moment of the introduction of digital technology in the process of film creation, the ontological values of the image are evidently undermined. In digital format, the transparency of the screen and the visual sources are liable to perpetual reconfigurations that create a possible discussion regarding 'reality' and 'realism' when considering analogue versus digital filmmaking.

When viewing a painting or an image, what is reproduced in front of our eyes are the referential valences of a captured 'reality' during the shoot. In this regard, the photographic image from the analogue cinema (in a photochemical system) is revealed to us as an intact mirror of the actions caught in the movie staged universe. The possible image interventions and alteration in the digital format adds a note of overall ambiguity upon the acting, the key visual elements, the composition and the camera movements. Even if these visual elements, as a base of narration, of the image created through the story, are not cumulatively manipulated, there is the presumption of a subtle interference, which can distort the "here and now" taking place in front of the camera and leaving space to accidents – as Walter Benjamin taught about the reality caught by the film camera's



Horațiu Mălăele in *The Moromete Family 2*

automatic reproduction. Therefore, the mechanical reproducibility of the analog film looks like a better representation than the nowadays digital-virtual capture. Boris Groys makes a statement about this difference. “Accordingly, a digital image cannot be merely exhibited or copied (as an analogue, “mechanically reproducible” image can), but always only staged or performed.” (Groys, 2016: 143)

These two examples from above illustrating the character Ilie Moromete in both movies (*The Moromete Family* and *The Moromete Family 2*), strengthen the argument of transparency and interpretation of the digital capture (right frame) in opposition with the organic atmosphere and the texture in the low-density area (black) from the previous movie (on the left).

Unlike Victor Rebengiuc (Ilie Moromete – *The Moromete Family*), Horațiu Mălăele (Ilie Moromete – *The Moromete Family 2*) seems “overlapped” on a projected background, where he doesn’t have a symbiotic belonging. The film texture, the succession of camera angles (where it seems that the dissolution of the edges integrates itself, being mediated by this photochemical version of the story), adds to what seems to be too evident in the digital sequel. The feeling of higher definition or resolution is one of the reasons why these movies are visually different. The threshold of acceptance and empathy is substantially different in these cases. Even if we refer to the discrete, subliminal elements, from a sensorial point of view, the human being is a fully analog structure, where the stimuli are evaluated in the context of continuous perception of time. Of course, there are voices who claim that there are no perceived differences between the analog (photochemical) and the digital. The composition of the image signal is pseudo-identical, and the view in modern cinemas is based on the digital structure of the signal only. The physiological threshold of



The royal public manifestation

perception of a continuous image is exceeded in each of the film versions, however, what separates them is the rigid, exact structure of the digital standing as an opposing force to the grainy and randomly, adaptable structure of the photochemical image. The intermediate between the two discussed early thus becomes a basis for discussion when referring to *The Moromete Family 2*, where we find successive interventions throughout the film. These possible and subtle interventions can be reframes of the initial composition, processes of image stabilisation, gradual alterations of the brightness interval or zooming into the frame. All these are possible due to the high resolution captured on digital technology.

An important scene of *The Moromete Family 2*, which can be analysed in the context of the intermediality, is that of the royal public manifestation from November 8, 1945.

Here, the created space contains important interventions when looking at captured ‘realism’, without reaching the level of reconfigured history of *Forest Gump* (1994), where the hero, played by Tom Hanks, participates in a meeting with President John Fitzgerald Kennedy over 40 years after his assassination. The narrated motivated intervention required an important reconfiguration of the historical “truth” from the implausible situation created by Robert Zemeckis in the remembered scene.

The same degree of implausibility can also transpire in the example described above (*The Moromete Family 2*), where the historical sources of the royal manifestation on November 8, 1945 do not overlap on the ‘imagery’ created in the film, a projection where the fictional hero of Marin Preda’s novel (Niculae Moromete) is overlapped. The involvement or the position of an active observer has been narratively transferred in the idea of introduces in the Morometediegesis, the social dimension of the times displayed in the film. The narrator’s role, which is transferred to Niculae for this scene, is assumed from a “subjective involved” perspective of his in what remains a crucial moment in the modern history of Romania. The intervention on the composition is not reduced to the action of the reconfiguration of the Royal Palace Square in Bucharest, but also the addition of elements that can build on the truthful dimension of the moment. The partial construction of the building from the right side of the frame, which eventually became the Central Committee of the PCR, is overlapped on the present modernised building of the CC, whereas the interventions do not stop here. The most important is the multiplication of the participants (200 extras) to transmit the sensation that the crowd is formed of approximately 15,000 people, a number



floated around by credible historical sources. The overlap in depth of the protestors and the integrity of Niculae in the compositional context brings forth in the discussion the manipulation of the transparency and its closure in the light of digital intermediation.

The fictional intervention in this scene and the paradigm of the recomposed historical truth force us to admit that digital interventions are opportune in the construction of hyper-mediated truth reality. The difference between the two illustrations of *The Moromete Family* consists of accepting the visual key as a Romanian village reality in the first film and a time of historical and social turmoil in the second movie. For both movies the digital or analog tools have been used accordingly with the author's intentions and ideas, creating an acceptable reality within which Ilie Moromete or Niculae play the main characters of the story.

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# The Animator's Hand Trope in Romanian Animation

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## Abstract

This essay examines the way Romanian animation films approach the self-representation of the author/creator through the recurrent trope of integrating the animator's hand into the film. Romanian animation films, mostly helmed by Ion Popescu Gopo, are compared to international films with similar profiles and evaluated in the context of the medium's language evolution and in the context of Romanian animation cinema history.

## Keywords

Romanian animation film, history of animation cinema, animator's self-representation, Ion Popescu Gopo, Marin Iordă, hybrid film

**T**he *Hand of the Artist* (1906) is one of the earliest British animation films signed by Walter R. Booth. Its title underlines the importance of the drawing process in this kind of medium. In his seminal book "Animation: A World History", Giannalberto Bendazzi refers to a typical case of *lightning sketches*, also named *chalk talks*, which were "vaudeville acts during which an artist drew quick caricatures of viewers or modified a drawing while doing his monologue" (Bendazzi, 2016, vol. 1: 25). We watch the hand of the animator/performer sketching a man and a woman who embrace and dance, transforming themselves into animated photos. This method of revealing to the public the method by which animated films are created at the beginning of the new century is also employed by Stuart Blackton in the United States. He is the protagonist of vaudevillesque lightning sketches that have been transposed to the screen, such as the earliest titled *Enchanted Drawing* (1900). Bendazzi remarks its "Méliès style", because the animator's skills are exhibited like tricks, as the drawings made by Blackton himself on a large sheet of paper are the subject of a spectacular metamorphosis. For instance, a drawn bottle changes into a real one.

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Stuart Blackton improves his technique, as we can see in his most famous short animation film, *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* (1906). It includes comic scenes drawn on a blackboard, “portraits of a man rolling his eyes and puffing smoke, a long-nosed character and a dog jumping through a ring”, as Bendazzi describes it (Bendazzi, 2016, vol. 1: 26). He notices a very important detail: “the artist-designer’s presence was suggested by the appearance of his hand on the screen.”

This practice became very popular in the silent animation films made in America or in Europe. Maria Lorenzo Hernández describes their profile in her essay “Through the Looking Glass. The Self-Portrait of the Artist and the Re-Start of Animation”:

Though these films were midway between comedy and documentary genres, the appearance of the draftsmen in their own films soon evolved to become a standardized representation, a stereotype for animated comedy, where the now *fictional* author is embedded in the cartoon universe, as in the Fleischer Brother’s series *Out of the Inkwell* (1921-1927)... (Lorenzo Hernández, 2010: 41)

The recurrent self-representation of the artist is viewed by the same author as a way to establish “a privileged association between the artist and the animated film – a *fabricated* world that depends on its creator”. This representation of the artist’s self-portrayal “is almost exclusively aimed at satisfying the artist’s wishes, representing the author’s explicit mood, or a demonstration of special skills” (Lorenzo Hernández, 2010: 42). She analyses a case of “noticeable self-reflectivity” with reference to a short made by the American Winsor McCay (another famous artist-designer well known as a vaudeville performer) whose title suggests the demiurge-like profile of the animator: *Winsor McCay, the Famous Cartoonist of the N.Y. Herald and His Moving Comics* (1911), better known as *Little Nemo*. It alternates live-action shots, describing the act of drawing the characters with animated scenes depicting the short comic adventures of Little Nemo and his friends – famous characters already familiar to the public from the comic strips published by McCay in the magazine “N.Y. Herald”. By revealing his methods of working and the specific tools (the pencils, the paper, the ink and the Mutoscope<sup>1</sup>), this early film mixes documentary and educational cinema objectives.

*Little Nemo* can be regarded as a stylized “Making Of” or, a selective representation of the animation making process aimed to create even more fascination for the final product. (Lorenzo Hernández 2010: 42)

The influence of the above-mentioned films had a worldwide impact. We find the hand of the animator as an omnipresent element of iconography in many animation films.

In the context of Romanian animation we discover this trope in *Haplea* (1927) by Marin Iorda, the earliest Romanian animation film still in existence (in a 320-meter copy), because previous animation shorts made by Aurel Petrescu, such as *Păcală on the Moon*

(*Păcală în lună*, 1920) and others by the same draughtsman who combined caricature with “frame by frame” film-making techniques had been lost. Sadly, only 240 frames of his work have survived.

Marin Iorda's *Haplea* is very similar to McCay's films: like them, it is based on a comic book (which is presented in live-action shots at the beginning of the film) and it also introduces the presence of the author himself (Iorda is shown drawing his character), followed by animated scenes representing Haplea's adventures in the “real world” (also drawn). In his misadventures he marries a woman, Frosa, who, after the ceremony, becomes a real shrew, humiliating and assigning him difficult domestic tasks. Just like in another McCay film, *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914), *Haplea* shows the relationship between the creator and his creation, a dialogue (emphasized by written inserts) in which Marin Iorda warns his character about the “dangers” of his journey. The opening shots present the author drawing not only Haplea but also his dog, Sdup, who will help his master to escape the domestic inferno. After Haplea asks his creator for “help”, the draughtsman intervenes by drawing the dog's tail longer so that he can climb onto Lindberg's plane, which was flying above. Marin Iorda (1901-1972), well known for his activity as a writer, graphic artist and accomplished comic books author, created this first short animated film under very difficult circumstances, combining different techniques (stop motion, cut-outs and live-action film). He was seduced by the opportunity of revealing some details of this difficult process and the result is enjoyable and funny. However, Iorda did not want to repeat this tiring experience and tried, like many other authors who had started their career in animation, to continue with live-action feature fiction, mainly *That's the Way Life Is* (*Așa e viața*, 1928).

This early practice of revealing “secrets” of the creative process (mainly associated with modernism) remained a familiar reflective tendency of animation film and can be regarded as a characteristic of its profile. Paul Wells stresses it:

Basically, the very artifice of animation requires that the characters, situations, narratives and designs “announce themselves” as different kinds of “phenomena”. This challenges the viewer to both recognize that this is “animation”, and therefore different from live-action film-making, and to invest in engaging with animated phenomena as constructs which may relate directly to the terms and conditions of human experience, but equally may offer more complex meditations on socio-cultural and aesthetic epistemologies. (Wells 2002: 11)

Two decades after the state-regulated production of animation films, after an industrial structure had been introduced, Romanian artists working in this field started to reconsider self-reflective devices such as the representation of the animator's hand. We can discover this trope even in the first part of Ion Popescu Gopo's filmography, the most important (and internationally renowned) Romanian auteur before 1989. With his early and successful activity in graphic journalism (caricature and comic books), Gopo (1923-1989) was involved alongside his father in a modest animation project in 1939 (*Lobodă*), being

especially trained for this new form of cinema only late in the fifties, at the Soviet Studio “Soyuzmultfilm” in Moscow. His first shorts lack a personal touch, being drawn and narrated in an old fashioned Disney style, favouring animal heroes. It was a short indebted to Socialist-Realism called *Marinică's Bodkin* (*Șurubul lui Marinică*, 1954) which marked Gopo's evolution from zoomorphic characters to human ones. This film includes, at its beginning, the animator's hand trope, showing us “the birth” of the character who epitomised the “negative human traits” usually criticised in Socialist-Realist art (laziness, a disinterest in the quality of the products he makes and so on). Marinică is a bad-model of “blue-collar” worker (and of course, a non-typical one). In spite of its “politicised message”, this short develops funny situations with the damaged bodkin, well animated and funny. The self-reflective scene suggests the ironic distancing of the author vis à vis the story, as he whispers to us: “Don't take it too seriously!”.

After this short, Gopo started the *Little Man* short film series, the first among them, *Scurtă istorie / A Brief History* (winning a Palme d'Or Award at Cannes, in 1957), which turned him into one of the most promising animators of the world. Followed by *7 arte / Seven Arts* (1958), *Homo sapiens* (1960), *Alo, Hallo* (1962), the series showed Gopo's need to drastically revise his drawing style and the birth of a personal style, visibly anti-Disney, the genesis of which is so explained by the author himself:

In my first animated drawings, I was trying to imitate Disney. When I realised I could not match his technical perfection, I started to make anti-Disney films, meaning no beauty, no colour, and no tenderness. (...) I have invented a character whose beauty or complex movement were not his major assets. I have made a little man with only a few lines to his form. His eyes are two dots, he cannot roll his eyes nor can he cast amorous glances. I have willingly reduced my possibilities... The only field I could tackle was the subject.” (Gopo: 1983)

Accordingly, the *Little Man* series explores subjects usually avoided in the field of animation: the birth of the Universe (*A Brief History*), the birth of arts (*Seven Arts*), the nuclear threat (*Homo Sapiens*), the excesses of technology (*Alo, Hallo*), etc.

After the *Little Man* shorts stopped generating unanimous admiration and the director turned to live-action, Gopo embarked on the second stage of revising his animation making process. During the first edition of the Mamaia International Film Festival (1966) he introduced the formula of the “pill film”, a short film formula that cultivates “lightning fast expression” backed up by a theoretical text published in the fifth special edition of “Cinema” magazine and also by several other shorts that adhered to this formula. This is how Giannalberto Bendazzi describes this moment:

Meanwhile, Popescu-Gopo concentrated on language problems, developing a theory of expressive synthesis which favoured minimal-length films. He entitled his offering ‘pill-film’ and presented it in a series of lightning-like



Gopo's hand in *You (Tu)*

animated sketches (often no longer than fifteen seconds) which opened the evenings at the Mamaia Festival of 1966... Popescu-Gopo's proposal of making animation the place for cinematographic epigram was certainly prolific. In 1967, the Montreal Expo held a competition with a fixed theme for one-minute maximum films. This confirmed that Popescu-Gopo's revolution had come at the right time, summarising a need – the detachment from standardisation, even in footage – which was greatly felt in the fast expanding world of animation. (Bendazzi, 2016, vol 2: 71)

Even though the films of this period do not offer examples of the trope of the animator's hand, they introduce elements important for redefining specific language in the third revisal phase, one marked by auto-reflexivity. In the first part of the 1980's he created a series of experimental shorts in which he demonstrates, using the "pill film" formula, the expressivity of techniques other than traditional animation. Gopo probably felt challenged by the arrival of younger creators at the Animafilm studio, animators that accelerated the modernisation process, both graphically and thematically, thereby gathering high praise for the 1980's generation, starting with the international success of the short *The Gordian Knot* (*Nodul gordian*, 1979) by Zoltán Szilágyi (later joined by names such as Radu Igazsag, Zeno Bogdănescu, Olimpiu Bandalac, etc.)

This experimental series is made up of a few "pill film" shorts, each demonstrating the expressivity of various animation techniques. They have both educational and experimental film characteristics and are closer to the works of Norman McLaren rather than to Disney. Gopo includes aspects from the background of filmmaking through auto-reflexive passages

featuring the animator's hand – a documentation process always accompanied by his passion for visual spectacle. Ion Popescu Gopo fully takes advantage of the occasion to prove that he can excel in animation techniques other than the ones that established him as an author. This series of experimental-didactic films that Gopo himself had entitled as “research” cannot be reduced to inventing the main techniques and procedures. It sometimes includes principles of *ars poetica*. The first short, *E pur si muove* (1979) begins through a journey in the past of the art form, quoting from both famous and lesser-known pioneers, from French visionary Émile Reynaud to Haplea's parent Marin Iorda. We see Gopo's masterful hand first create a character from wire that he “breathes life into”, then a small Galileo Galilei character from modelling clay that sings (in Radu Beligan's voice) “E pur si muove”, music from the soundtrack of the SF feature film *Steps toward the Moon* (*Pași spre lună*), directed by Gopo in 1963. The film also includes a demonstration of rotoscoping in the dance of a ballerina, inspired by a scene in the musical *The Band Wagon* (1953) by Vincente Minelli.

The following films in the series are also a testimony to Gopo's effort to achieve his didactic objective through narrative ingenuity and an attractive treatment. In *And Yet It Moves / Și totuși se mișcă* (1980) he animates the legend of Vlad the Impaler by means of stop motion using pins on glass. In *Animagicfilm* the animator's hand tells a love story between a bullfighter and a princess on glass using tobacco. The matching musical score (“Spanish Capriccio in A Major” by Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov) greatly contributes toward establishing the atmosphere. The graphical nature of this technique is reminiscent of gravure, such is also the case in *Frame by Frame / Cadru cu cadru*, (1981). The stop motion technique is illustrated in a “pill film” based on a well-timed gag in which the animator's hand anthropomorphises normal forks. This short story satirises the cult of eating by showing how gluttony transforms the forks into crucifixes. By masterfully utilising stop motion, Gopo also brings a boiled egg to life, showing its struggle to not get eaten. Demonstrating a deep understanding of the materials he uses, he tells an anti-war story using ceramic figurines. Two fragile clay figurines clash with devastating consequences.

Perhaps the most accomplished “pill film” from *Frame by frame* is Gopo's retelling of the Grimm Brothers' fairy tale *Cinderella*. The creator's hand creates graceful characters out of gold and silver necklaces that move in a stylised and angelic fashion. The famous ball scene is ingeniously staged creating complex relationships between characters. Gopo shows that he can create a fairytale atmosphere with minimal resources, that a master animator can use techniques alternative to traditional cel animation. Last but not least, he once again proves that he is an excellent storyteller.

The didactic character of this experimental series slowly gives way to cinematic spectacle. Although it belongs to this series, *You (Tu)*, (1983) is an original author film in which strands of hair are animated, a material that has surprising poetic properties. Starting from the pretext of a love letter, the film chains several metamorphoses of lines and shapes that make up an affectionate portrait of a woman. The musical score, “The Death of Isolde”, by Richard Wagner, completes the poetic atmosphere of this short described by Călin Căliman as “a poem to femininity, to love, ‘drawn’ in perpetual motion using strands of hair (blonde and brunette) that was praised on its premiere as a masterpiece.” (Căliman, 2010: 470)



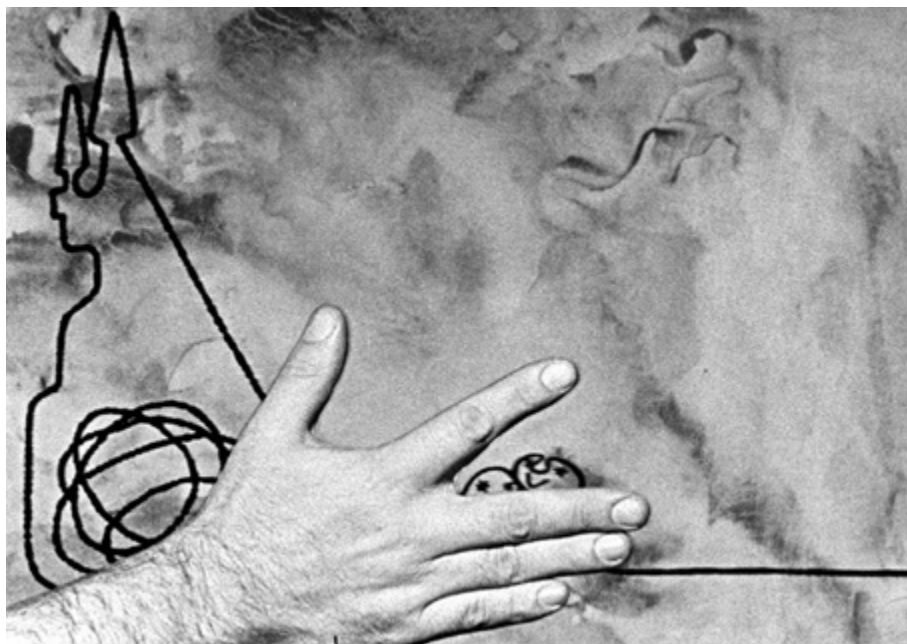


The hand of Galax, the author's substitute in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* by Ion Popescu Gopo

Following this short in which the author's presence is implied by his hand that creates the characters, Gopo made a film with even stronger professional "credo" accents, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice / Ucenicul vrăjitor* (1985). In this self-portrait film, Gopo is shown in his studio at "Animafilm" in relation to his tools but especially with one of his characters – a huge wooden doll. Both the title of the film and Paul Dukas' symphonic poem of the same name that scores the picture suggest that this self-portrait is an attempt to establish an identity that opposes Disney. Dukas' music had been visualised by Disney in his most ambitious feature film *Fantasia* (1940), where Mickey Mouse's creator attempts to distance himself from his traditional image as a children's fairy tale teller by illustrating several well known musical works in a story set in a darker universe.

In his film, Gopo appears in live-action as a master in a creative block, saved by "the sorcerer's apprentice", none other than Galax, the wooden robot in the feature film of the same name (*Galax, the Doll-Man*, 1983). While the director takes a smoke break, the huge doll begins playing with his tools and devices and animates whatever it touches. Specific tools are animated: the *truka*<sup>2</sup>, the studio lights, the desk lamp, pencils, brushes and various other objects of Gopo's. Tea leaves are also animated in stop motion gravure like fashion. The animation is perfectly correlated with the tempo of the music even as we see the "catastrophic" consequences of the apprentice's excesses and the transformations of the lines once again become visual poetry. Dukas' score is a new opportunity for the author to show the musicality of shapes in animation.

Gopo cannot abstain from including humour in the confrontation between creator and creation, reminiscent of the *Out of the Inkwell* series by the Fleischer brothers. The use of irony downplays this homage to the author's almightiness by having the creation take control of some of its creator's power. Still, the film shows Gopo's need to leave his



The hand of Constantin Mustețea in his film *On a Wire*

mark on his films, a personal touch that established him as a respected author both locally and internationally.

We can find similar attempts in the works of other Romanian filmmakers such as Constantin Mustețea (1927-1996), the director of one of the most accomplished films of the 1960s, *On a Wire / Pe fir* (1967). The international buzz created by this self-reflective short was recognised by the Italian Osvaldo Cavandoli that cited Mustețea as the inspiration for his series *La Linea* (1971-1986). In *On a Wire* we see fiction literally being created in front of the audience in the form of a modern fairytale that, at first glance, satirises common stereotypes of this genre such as princesses, dragons and castles by using characters created under the lens by the author's hand. Its author not only creates characters, but an entire world, with the help of a piece of string that is manipulated into shapes in a continuous state of transformation. Although the trope of the animator's hand has been integrated into the language of animation, its original treatment in the shorts of Ion Popescu Gopo or Constantin Mustețea deserves mention especially for having truly emphasised an author's creation which Paul Wells defines as:

“Because in all its forms it creates a distinctive relationship between its creator, its aesthetic self-consciousness, and the discourse it provokes.”  
(Wells 2002: 11)



Gopo and his creature, Galax, in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*

## ENDNOTES

1. Mutoscope is an early motion picture device that only allows one person to view a short film.
2. A device for stop motion animation that allows multiple planes of glass to be combined in order to create the illusion of depth; also known as a multi-planecamera.

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# Documentary versus Fiction Film – Mutual Interferences

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## **Abstract**

This article is focused on the mutual interferences between documentary and fiction film, which leads to the conclusion that a film is, ultimately, (just) a film – whatever its genre and irrespective of other forms of labelling.

## **Keywords**

documentary film, fiction film, Lumière, Méliès, realism, mise-en-scène, Robert Flaherty, Bill Nichols, *The Forest*, Radu Bogdan, Joseph Campbell

I had been directing only fiction films for many years before I had a chance to work at a documentary one, in 2014, due to a particular topic I was concerned with at that period. The first sign which showed me “there was something there” came when *The Forest* (*Pădurea*) was awarded at the Nyon (Switzerland) Documentary Film Festival as “the most innovative film”. I could not tell what exactly was so “innovative” about it. Then professional critics<sup>1</sup>, as well as ordinary audiences started to comment upon what they had seen. They were all pointing at the “bridges” connecting various elements from *The Forest* to elements from my previous feature films (as well as other directors’ films). It seemed that my “fictional” experience fed upon my “adventure in the field of the documentary”.

Naturally, I was not aware of such influences while working on the film. It was only when it was launched on the “market” that I managed to see it objectively and began to gain interest, somehow forced, in the way I had worked upon it. This is the summary of this process: In *The Forest*, reality is mixed with fiction in a manner of fiction becoming a kind of super-reality suggested by various objects – a ringing phone which is hanging from

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**Siniša Dragin.** Director, screenwriter, cinematographer and novelist. Born in Kula, Yugoslavia, graduated from the Academy of Film and Theatre in Bucharest, Romania, in 1991. He works as a cameraman for Reuters International News Agency. With his first short film, *The Sorrow of Black Gold*, he won Main Prize at Oberhausen Film Festival in 1994. His first feature-length film, *Long Journey by Train*, received European Broadcast Union Grand Prize for TV Screenplay at Geneva, in 1998. His second feature-length film, *Every Day God Kisses Us on the Mouth*, received the Tiger Award in Rotterdam in 2002, while *If the Seed Doesn't Die* received Dioraphte award in Rotterdam, in 2011. He makes both fiction and non-fiction films. *The Forest* won the award for the most innovative feature-length documentary film at the International Film Festival Visions du Réel 2014, in Nyon, Switzerland.



*The Forest (Pădurea, 2014)* by Siniša Dragin

a tree in the middle of a forest; a piano keyboard (hanging from the tree in the middle of the same forest) producing sounds without anybody touching it, or an empty frame “floating” in the air (also in the forest). On the other hand, real, concrete (and almost boring) images counterpoint such a super-reality.

Let us leave film critic Alessandro Anibaldi continue his say about the role “fiction” plays in this film:

Dragin succeeds in managing such a complex material, relying on a writing capacity alone, which touches on the sublime. He is not afraid to confront the best examples of fiction cinema and, what is more, he also gives a lesson to American screenwriting gurus. The director uses the voice-over technique to quote from the book about Andreescu that art critic (Radu) Bogdan managed nevertheless to write, making him the narrator of the event. The film pays homage to him, showing his widow during her voyage to the late husband’s grave. Grotesque dialogues (the most obviously fictional element of the film) are voiced-over between the officials of the two countries. Eventually, he contrasts the grotesque and the tragedy – the violent deaths caused by (civil) wars and dictatorships, mutual suspicions, the climate of terror, all going hand in hand, to explode eventually after 1989.

Just by chance, in that period I had come across an article on the way Robert Flaherty directed *Nanook*<sup>2</sup>. Both for the “profane” and for those who “tied” their lives with cinema (filmmakers, film producers and distributors, film critics, and, recently, bloggers who “manufacture” at high speed all kinds of “10 best ever”, “50 for all times”, “100 must-see”), this film represents the ultimate documentary movie. Much to my amazement, I learned that its main hero (whose real name was Allakariallak) did not use a harpoon, but a gun,

whenever he went hunting. It was the director's idea to use a harpoon, as he may have considered its primitive look more photogenic (probably I would do the same). Hardly had I consumed my surprise when, a few paragraphs further on, I learned that Nanook's wife was, in reality, Flaherty's wife. She was, in fact, "playing" the brave hunter's wife! This is how it turned out that "the best" documentary ever is actually (to a great extent) fiction.

Slowly but surely, the initial amazement faded away. In *The Forest* I used elements of fiction, but never did it occur to me the film was not a documentary. I do believe Flaherty thought the same about his film, too. Unlike him, I did not conceal the trick, but does it really matter? And if it does, how it matters anyway? The above-mentioned article finishes with a (great) question: Is it right what Flaherty did? Is it moral to show the audiences something which leads them towards the fake belief that what they see is real, when in fact it has been "staged"?

Answers to all those questions do not come easily. One should, rather, start with answering "more profound" questions: what exactly a documentary film is? Where is the border between documentary and fiction film, how should we define (from this point of view) a fiction film? How should we look at the elements of documentary in a fiction film (and the other way round)?

A possible starting point may be remembering the early days of the motion pictures and its separation in genres, of which John Grierson<sup>3</sup> talked about many years later, as the "documentary", and the "fiction" film. Let us recall the first public screening (the first paid for performance) from December 28, 1895, when *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*<sup>4</sup> made by the Lumière brothers was shown. The first thing we notice is that (nearly) nobody was looking at the camera. Even more, nobody is getting "into" it. Was it accidental? Hard to believe (considering the great number of people present). Rather, the authors, most likely, talked to them and gave them simple, but concise directions (let us remember the basic task of a director when it comes to working with an actor): Do not look directly at the camera, do not knock it down! This is not a big deal, some might say. And they are right: it is not, really. But this is just a first impression. If people know they are supposed neither to look directly at the camera, nor to walk wherever they want, they may neither talk to one another, nor smile or laugh, too. Or if they do, they may push the limit in a rather unnatural manner – to talk or to laugh too much – familiar reactions to any director who has tried to work with so-called "non-professional actors" – namely people who cannot pass over "that" mental step indispensable for any (real) actor – to accept imposed directions (by the script, if it comes to film actors) as if all directions came from within. To set up your mind so that you could say: "Look what I would do if I found myself in this situation". I revealed "the secret of talent" to an actor for one particular reason: to emphasise the hardships a documentary film author has to face when it comes to filming "real" scenes with "real" people. However little a director wishes to get involved in their actions in front of a camera, it is virtually impossible to have any good results without a more or less elaborated *mise-en-scène*. That means the director has to be able to adapt it to a particular situation and to "persuade" the people he is about to film to behave "naturally" so that the final product is credible – all this, in the end, is valid also for a feature film.

Thus, the *mise-en-scène* is one of the elements that organically connects the two film genres. However, the “purists” claim the genuine documentaries are only filmed with a hidden camera, or in a manner as it was filmed with a hidden camera – meaning, usually, to shoot from a considerable distance. The main thing is that the people being filmed should not know they are “acting” in a movie. Unfortunately, the majority of subject matters are impossible to be filmed in such a fashion.

Let us go back to *La sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon* and ask ourselves: how realistic is the scene presenting the workers going out of the factory? The answer is: very (realistic). It *does not differ much* from what anyone would have witnessed, provided he or she had been a living camera on March 19, 1895, unknown time... The key to the answer is that “does not differ much”. The reference, of course, would be the same scene filmed with a hidden camera – so the “protagonists” would be “they themselves” (they had not pretended to be workers coming out from a factory). And now, inevitable, subjective perception “enters the game”: how strong the “director’s touch” is felt and how “manipulative” it is towards each and every spectator in the audience. The above-mentioned “purists” of the documentary genre might well find it “unbearable”. For us, less demanding audiences, on the other hand, it is “acceptable”. We can pretty well figure out (in the end this is what counts) the way workers were coming out from Lumière Factory on March 19, 1895... Since we mentioned the Lumière brothers, does anyone still imagine that the boy trampling on the water hose was accidentally “caught” by their camera in *The Sprinkler Sprinkled*<sup>5</sup> (1985)?

Lumière brothers’ contemporary, Georges Méliès, chose, however, a totally different path in the cinema. He did not avoid presenting “lies”. To him, the effect he was searching for mattered more than the illusion of reality. *A Trip to the Moon*<sup>6</sup> (1902), probably his most representative film, was meant to make its audiences smile and remember they used to be naughty children (like, deep in his heart, was almost certain Méliès himself). Fiction film was “born”. The years (and decades) to follow brought about ever higher degrees of complexity, with authors, in essence, staying loyal to Méliès’ style.

Fiction film started to redefine itself in the middle of the 20th century, when it moved from big dusty studios to streets. One of the most remarkable examples in this respect (is spite of being made some twenty years later), is Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver*<sup>7</sup> (1976).

The reason behind such a metamorphosis is easy to guess: a great deal of the authors felt a strong need to incorporate *real life* into their films, rather than a (more or less successfully) artificial one, on various studio sets in Hollywood. They began to explore *authenticity* together with the audiences, who had been tired of mega-productions of the era (such as *Spartacus*, directed by Stanley Kubrick in 1960). The first place where such “real life” could be found was the so-called “background” – the space behind “foreground”, reserved for actors. Streets began to look on screen the way they looked during the shooting, with ordinary passers-by and their natural behaviour and particular haircuts, outfits, with driving cars and petty current affairs. They all ended up on the screen, with actors who “were doing their jobs” (according, of course, to whatever was written in scripts), and raising the standard of such “symbiosis” to the extent of a superior form of “reality” (much to the audiences’ delight). Such “informal” settings also had a “beneficial” effect on the actors themselves.



Robert De Niro in *Taxi Driver*  
(1976) by Martin Scorsese



Acting became less theatrical, too, unlike the mannerism of the actors cast in movies shot on “controlled settings” (the film studios). Even the scripts were “substantially improved”, with stories about real, ordinary people, caught in their daily routine.

Still, all the changes did not merely aim at doing something else for the sake of getting something “new”. Such hardly gained authenticity was about to stir genuine emotion (the only thing that matters), and through emotion, this, so much desired, *the illusion of truth*. Let us remember William Friedkin, who made the famous chase scene in *French Connection* (1971) under a bridge, as trains were passing above, shot as in a pure documentary style – no extras, no stuntmen, with passers-by unaware they were being filmed. The publicity campaign for James Cameron’s *Titanic* (1997), one of the most expensive movies of all times, was based on authentic and exclusive images of the famous ship lying at a depth of about 4 km under the sea (and on the presence of a woman who had survived the tragedy and was cast in the film). We cannot forget Woody Allen. A part of *Zelig* (1983) was conceived as archives footage, proving that the audiences take for granted images that have been purposely damaged (in order to imitate authentic ones), even if they are obviously fake. Some authors, in their endless search for authenticity, follow, on the first sigh, unexpected and a totally unusual path, with film posters with no stars to catch the eye (and eventually sell the movie) on it. Instead, they cast unknown actors in order to make the audiences accept more easily the grounding convention of any film: I know it is not real, but I don’t care; it *could have been* real.

Apart from using “normal” archives footage (the “radical” one, using the idea itself for archive footage we mentioned above), “explicit” documentary images intercalated inside performed fictional scenes, film authors also use to shoot in “angrily” manner, with a hand-held camera. The result is a series of images “intuitively” associated by the audiences with reportage or documentary film “run & gun”, or “guerilla”<sup>8</sup> style. Such images seem to have been shot in great haste, without a tripod or adequate lighting, giving the impression they are imperfect – therefore authentic. All in all, documentary film aesthetics, once it was integrated within the structure of visual dramaturgy, found its way to the fiction film. And it has kept its place ever since.

All these influences contributed to the birth of various film movements, such as the Italian Neorealism promoted by Cesare Zavattini with cinematic landmarks like *The Earth*

*Trembles*<sup>9</sup> (Luchino Visconti, 1948), *Bicycle Thieves*<sup>10</sup> (Vittorio De Sica, 1948), *Rome, Open City*<sup>11</sup> (Roberto Rossellini, 1945). The French New Wave was represented by leftist authors such as Jean-Luc Goddard and François Truffaut. The English Free Cinema (influenced by John Grierson) was at first represented by documentarists: Tony Richardson, Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz, Lorenza Mazzetti. The French Minimalism at the beginning of the 21st century originated in the works by the Dardenne brothers: *The Son*<sup>12</sup> (2002) or *Rosetta* (1999), which also influenced some of the Romanian directors: Cristi Puiu's *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*<sup>13</sup> (2005), Corneliu Porumboiu *12:08 East of Bucharest*<sup>14</sup> (2006) or *Police, Adjective*<sup>15</sup> (2009).

On the other hand, the same Italian Neorealism influenced documentary filmmakers. Talking about one of its categories, film critic Bill Nichols made these comments:

The resulting footage often recalled the work of the Italian Neorealists. We look in on life as it is lived. Social actors engage with one another, ignoring the filmmakers. Often the characters are caught up in pressing demands or a crisis of their own. This requires their attention and draws it away from the presence of filmmakers. The scenes tend, like fiction, to reveal aspects of character and individuality. We make inferences and come to conclusions on the basis of behaviour we observe or overhear. The filmmaker's retirement to the position of observer calls on the viewer to take a more active role in determining the significance of what is said and done.<sup>16</sup>

This mutual influence (documentary over fiction) can, in some cases, lead to a co-existence in the form of a relatively new genre, called docudrama<sup>17</sup>. Here, the documentary element is given by subject-matter reality (in harmony with largely accepted historical facts as true ones), with the fiction used as a means to express such facts (usually key-moments). The 2017 British series, *Eight Days That Made Rome* is a good example in this respect, with historian Bettany Hughes selecting "eight pivotal days that defined the Roman Empire and its establishment as the world's first superpower<sup>18</sup>".

Finally, the conclusion can be drawn: what really matters is neither the film genre, nor its means of designing it. At the end of the day, it is the artistic truth that counts – our human truth, the truth about our unique essence in the middle of the surrounding world. What should concern us is the extent to which we have approached it, "unutterable" feeling that stays for a while within us when we finish watching a film, whether it be documentary or fiction. We started from considering their mutual interferences, and here we are, ready to admit that their classification in distinct genres is rather a theoretical issue. We should note that the only major difference lies in "pure" documentary images reflecting *real situations*, as opposed to "pure" fiction images based on situations previously conceived by their author. The practicality of such a result can be found in the reasoning which states that documentary and fiction authors should use any means to express their views, without ever thinking in terms of genre, without being afraid they are going "too far". In other words, they should feel free to express themselves in spite of all inner or outer

limits. Joseph Campbell formulated this “creed” as a principle: “The agony of breaking through personal limitations is the agony of spiritual growth. Art, literature, myth and cult, philosophy, and ascetic disciplines are instruments to help the individual past his limiting horizons into spheres of ever-expanding realisation. As he crosses threshold after threshold, conquering dragon after dragon, the stature of the divinity that he summons to his highest wish increases, until it subsumes the cosmos. Finally, the mind breaks the bounding sphere of the cosmos to a realisation transcending all experiences of form – all symbolisations, all divinities: a realisation of the ineluctable void.”<sup>19</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. A rather interesting view on *The Forest / Pădurea* was published by the Italian film critic Alessandro Aniballi in Quinlan, “Revista di Critica Cinematografica”, in 2015:  
<http://quinlan.it/2015/01/22/the-forest/>.
2. *Nanook of the North* (1922)
3. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Grierson>
4. *La sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon*
5. *L'Arroseur arrosé*
6. *Le Voyage dans la Lune*
7. One of the “Greatest Ever” lists places *Taxi Driver* on the 8th position.  
<https://www.thegreatestfilms.com/Film/1976/Taxi-Driver>
8. <https://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/guerilla-filmmaking.htm>
9. *La Terra Trema*
10. *Ladri di biciclette*
11. *Roma, città aperta*
12. *Le Fils*
13. *Moartea domnului Lăzărescu*
14. *A fost sau n-a fost?*
15. *Politiștii, adjectiv*
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# Possible Worlds and the Linear Progression of Lyrical Editing

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## Abstract

This article analyses the way in which the concept of possible worlds is deeply connected to the lyrical formal and structural aspects of narrative film editing, while also creating inside the spectator's cognitive-affective stance a similar reception of multiple narrative possibilities. *Interstellar's* tesseract sequence renders visible the lyrical editing structure through a single continuous scene, bringing all the possible time sheets into a present tense. At this level, the editing cut becomes the creative splitting force of narrative layers.

## Keywords

Christopher Nolan, Daniel Frampton, Nelson Goodman, Thomas Elsaesser, David Bordwell, Gilles Deleuze, world-maker, possible worlds, forking path narrative, mind-game films, puzzle films, modular narrative structure, anachronism.

Film critics and theorists often refer to the possible worlds that films create. Expressions like “the world of Federico Fellini”, “the world of David Lynch”, “the world of Ingmar Bergman” are quite familiar to us all. What grasps our attention here is that the world of each filmmaker's film reflects itself in the singular stylistic world constituted by their togetherness. At the same time, each of these film worlds bears its own specificity and singularity, which include certain unique subjects (characters), space-time particularities, contents and formal aspects. All these singularities work to differentiate a film from any other. In Christopher Nolan's filmography, we can easily discover a great concern regarding both cinematically represented time, story time and the subjective time of spectatorship reception. Nolan works with both the time travel theme (in its entire filmography until *Inception*) and with the representation of time travel within the narrative (starting with *Inception* and *Interstellar*).

When we take into account the singular aspects of a film's world, we must address both their subjective creation and objective existence as works of art and the subjective experience of the viewer's reception. The world inside Nolan's films has two sides of creation and reception. Nolan is fundamentally driven by the psychologically cinematic exploration of

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pain and trauma. He strives for a deep cinematic representation of emotion, but, at the same time, he detaches his subjective view from the affective qualities of his narratives. He thus takes a more clinical standpoint from where he observes his character's behavior and psychology. The narrative structures of *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), *The Prestige* (Christopher Nolan, 2006), *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010) and even his *Batman* series (*Batman Begins*, 2005; *The Dark Knight*, 2008; *The Dark Knight Rises*, 2012) break down the mental architecture of their protagonists. The togetherness of Nolan's filmography is united around the dual structure of human condition, where the emotional and rational halves are in a constant dialogue with each other. All the elements belonging to the world of the film work together to cue the cognitive and affective capacities of the spectator. A concept of cinematic possible worlds<sup>1</sup> cannot be reduced to the conflict between what is fictional and what is real, between what is told and how it is told, as it can neither be reduced to a distinction between content and representation on the one hand, and form and expression on the other.

We must recall here the theoretical views which have strived to liberate the camera and editing techniques from their auctorial intentions. Daniel Frampton considered in his *Filmosophy*<sup>2</sup> what he calls the *filmind*, which favours a world created and constructed by an independent *film-thought*. He stresses the importance of the transfigurative cinematic nature, through which film worlds are separated from our real world. Film worlds become self-enclosed and self-defining worlds. What Frampton tries to configure is an anti-reflexive<sup>3</sup> (Frampton, 2006: 110) standpoint which destroys the mysteries and concealed contents behind the screen image. The fundamental concepts by which a theory of possible worlds can operate must necessarily test the relationship between representation and expression, between the transformative capacity of the cinematic medium and its use in the hands of an author. What Frampton suggests is a new critical and theoretical orientation through which we understand the cognitive and affective effects of cinematic techniques, leaving behind all the auctorial intention and technical aspects of creation. Nolan's *Interstellar* comes close to a pure science fiction genre, but it is also different from most of the time-travel movies. The emphasis lies on the emotional involvement of its characters and the affective engagement of its spectators. The concept of *filmind* is important here with regards to the sequence when Cooper (Matthew McConaughey) arrives in the tesseract<sup>4</sup> space-time. The tesseract offers us an entire active synthesis of time, in which the three classical dimensions of time (past, present and future) are conflated into a single present dimension of co-existence.

There are two ways of interpreting the concept of possible worlds in cinema. Firstly, cinematic worlds can be seen from an external point of view as perceptual and analysable objects (the work of art). Secondly, cinematic worlds can be seen from the inside as experiences with a duration and an affect which are fundamentally irreducible, revealing their intuitive and immersive expression (the story world). We must recall here Goodman's view on world creation (*Ways of Worldmaking* 1984). His theory concentrates upon the act of creation, on the perception and analysis of the worlds as symbolic objects, revealing their generative and ontological aspects. In *Ways of Worldmaking* Goodman suggests that all



languages, sciences and forms of art draw from one another and constitute conceptual and symbolic systems that define a certain world (or different versions of a world), depending on the functioning of their specific categories and referential frameworks. Worlds are then made from symbols that work in connection with larger systems, each system representing a different version of reality, each with a high potential of truth and validity. Given the impossibility to reduce a fictional world from a group of possible worlds to a single set of symbols or concepts, fictional worlds are countless. Retracting a certain world from the system which encompasses it would break the relation to a pre-conceptualized reality.

The basic content from which a story is made is another world's partial or integral content. Creation becomes recreation through Goodman's processes of composition/decomposition (constructing and deconstructing an old world into a new one), weighting (favouring some old-world components through content importance, narrative frequency, etc.), order (the narrative ordering and re-ordering through which a new world is created), deletion/supplementation and lastly, deformation (shedding new light on the selected narrative events and image contents). The process of composition/ decomposition is mostly relevant in relation to the space-time editing assembly of the cinematic discourse. Nolan chooses to compose and decompose a certain narrative timeline not by referencing other arts or movies, but by referencing the possibilities included in the same work of art. In Nolan's *Interstellar*, there are indeed many planets that represent alternatives to our home planet, but we also find in the movie different timelines for the main characters. Each different timeline modifies the parameters of the previously known world status and creates a new possible world.

The process of weighting refers to the redistribution and reinterpretation of elements pertaining to other arts, other movies or aspects of reality, all of which are given a new signification value. A film can extract its theme from another one, but the new way in

which all the cinematic elements are coordinated gives rise to a new world. In *Interstellar*, Nolan does not extract themes and contents from other movies (although similarities with Tarkovsky's *Solaris* definitely exist), but represents all the possible worlds in a self-enclosed manner. Thus, the film takes itself as an analyzable object in a self-reflexive manner and questions its fundamental choice of editing discourse: the editing cut. The cut strives on both deletion and supplementation, it both erases and adds information. It simultaneously sends into the unknown what it chooses to hide and it also brings forth that which it chooses to reveal. Film cutting creates what we might refer to as a sort of parallel editing between the paradigmatic level of narrative (fabula) and the syntagmatic level of narrative (the plot), always present in the minds of the creative team (screenwriter, director and editor), but also at the level of reception, in the minds of the film spectators. *Interstellar* operates with the concept of *filmind* as it delivers us, towards the end of the movie, all the paradigmatic narrative possibilities of Cooper's story.

In Lubomír Doležel's view<sup>5</sup> a monistic conception of the universe, which takes a singular world as real, offers only the basis upon which a realistic fiction can find an outside referent in the real world, for each of its elements. This idea is represented in cinema by the causal and linear narrative of classical Hollywood. But the idea that fiction refers only to imaginary objects, characters and situations reveals the momentary indiscernibility between what is real and what is true in the film's fiction (inside the film), because any film can have a higher degree of imaginary levels. The narration can always prove itself falsifying and can always generate the erroneous hypothesis of interpretation<sup>6</sup>. But the falsifying powers<sup>7</sup> of the narrative can always be attributed to a character, so that the character or the narrator are supposed to be lying and not the author. The reference inside a fiction can and should be understood in intentional terms, from the point of view of circumstantial narrative alternatives. In this context, *Interstellar* raises the question of a predetermined narrative trajectory because, from all the possible narrative timelines, the film chooses to represent cinematically only one. Nolan introduces several planets which have their own physical laws and own logic system. We can see the way realist linear cinema tries to reduce the multiplicity of possible worlds to one single possibility. Is this not the theory which tells us that there can be no other way a story could have been told? That a single change of a single cut would alter the entire movie and tell us a totally different story?

Grounding the narrative linearity in the possible worlds' paradigm, the former tries to resolve the conflictual alternatives, favouring only one. Trying not to force the spectator into accepting two different truths, we must place each one in different worlds. The narrative discourse will ultimately always reveal the one true version which the film favours, by placing it at the end of the film. This is represented in *Interstellar* by the contingent appearance of Plan C<sup>8</sup>. Each elliptical editing cut, which occurs in major plot points (like Cooper deciding to leave his family in order to save humanity, respectively like the choice Cooper makes to detach his Ranger so that the main ship could be slingshot easier with less weight), create, in the multiverse, different actual co-existing timelines. The cut becomes the bifurcating narrative point. This is how we reach the modular narratives and the last expression of the lyrical form of editing<sup>9</sup>.



Modular narratives (Buckland 2014: 31) fundamentally represent a split in the narration, a forking-paths type of narration that determines the appearance of exclusive alternative narrative threads from one specific point in the narrative. These disjunctive narrations have different definitions: David Bordwell names them *forking path narratives* (“Film Futures”, 2002: 88-104), Edward Branigan names the *multiple-draft-narratives* (“Nearly True: Forking Plots, Forking Interpretations. A Response to David Bordwell’s ‘Film Futures’”, 2002, 105-114), Thomas Elsaesser calls them *mind-game-films* (“The Mind-Game Film”, 2009, 13-41). For Branigan, this type of narrative complexity is a common phenomenon that pertains to a majority of, if not all the films. The label Branigan puts on this narration does not refer strictly to the formal properties, but mostly to the inferences, to the expectations, the multiple plots and hypotheses and to every other construct the spectators construe before they elide all of these and overwrite them with a *final mental cut*. *Interstellar* combines the formal aspects of the lyrical editing (shot, sequence, lines of dialogue which are repeated or which create a fragmented narrative structure). We can see how the formal aspects of the narrative temporalities interweaving inside a film’s discourse are not the only aspects of narrative complexity. In our *Interstellar* case, modularity is represented at both formal and inferential levels of creation.

The modular narrative has the merit of transforming the otherwise *repressed* or *implicit* cinematic characteristics into an explicit representation. It shows us a different version of narrative development. It shows us how things might have turned out if the actions taken by characters would have been different. The point of intersection between all the possible worlds and timelines of Nolan’s film is found at the back to back alignment of the blackboard (where Murph (Mackenzie Foy) attempts to solve the equation to save Earth’s population) and the bookcase which delivers the data that resolves the equation. The bookshelf is explicitly rendered as a passage to the history and future of human life. The books visually become the time machine of human existence.

Nolan uses a parallel editing style in which a binary system couples the present time of Murph’s timeline with the present time of Cooper’s journey. This binary system is articulated visually not only through the formal aspects of the editing style, but also through doubled lines of dialogue and character similarities. Cooper is torn between two possible timelines, that in which he pursues the scientific life and the one in which he remains a farmer. His son, Tom (Casey Affleck), reflects the same psychological split. Amelia (Anne Hathaway) is torn between science and her mysterious divine intuitions and Murph reflects her unbalanced state. Each of the character traits and their eventual pursuits leads to a great number of parallel worlds.

Since the early 1990s, many films have presented a return to the narrative complexity, following a path of division in narrative segments and being the subject of some complex narrative articulations. Modular narratives represent the break between the order of the story and the order of the cinematic discourse, referring directly to the dual processes of selection and ordering and to the process of combining the two, which lies at the heart of every story. In its cinematic form, modularity transcends the common use of anachronic elements<sup>10</sup>, allowing the spectator to see a series of disarticulated narrative segments,

arranged not only non-chronologically, but sometimes, almost a-chronologically. The a-chronological effect is usually obtained through the repetitions and destabilization of the relation between past, present and future dimensions of time.

Most modular narratives connect to a crisis of the past in which both memory and history are refigured as a kind of database, both easily accessible and easily erasable: *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), *Eternal Sunshine of a Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004), etc. Other modular narratives have tried to emphasize the important role of contingency and order in shaping a possible future narrative dimension: *Run Lola Run* (*Lola rennt*, Tom Tywyker, 1998), *21 Grams* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2003), etc. Contemporary modular narratives do not adhere anymore to the classical definitions of narrative. Their narrative effect is gained through the structuring of the cinematic discourse in elliptical, repetitive, a-chronological ways. They are characterized by the temporal fragmentation and the juxtaposition of conflictive events through the organisation of the narrative events. In their most extreme cases, modular narratives cannot be reassembled into a coherent linear story. They seem to be more attuned to the theory of possible worlds. Non-narrative space-time systems are modular strictly at the conceptual level, as they are linear in the representation of each module. Each narrative segment is deployed either in a linear fashion or in a bracketed or parallel fashion. The parallel, alternated and bracketed editing shapes are all always reconfigurable and ultimately realigned mentally to the linearity of the story (to the story time). Thus, we can acknowledge that the strive to non-linearity is explicit, but the overall tendency is to represent linearly and simultaneously co-existent possible worlds.

Regarding the modular tendency of modern cinema, Allan Cameron joins Bordwell's opinion:

Recent films that display, as a thematic concern, a fraught relationship between contingency and narrative order, do not constitute a new norm in narrative cinema and follow a structure that is largely traditional and tends toward the chronological. (Cameron 2006: 65-78)

For Allan Cameron the modular complexity lies in the tension between, on the one hand, the linear and irreversible temporalities, and on the other hand, between non-linearity and reversibility. These concepts can be correlated with the tension between order and contingency, between determinism and chaos – a tension which these films seek to resolve. But the modular narrative does not only revolve around the need to resolve the tension between contingency and determinism. Through the dissection of the narrative into their database units or modules and the spatialising and dechronolizing the narrative, the metachronal<sup>11</sup> arrow of time is extracted from the linear paradigm. Since narrations can be conceived as only a type of possible interface from a collection of data, one particular sequence driven by the linear causality of actions and events seems to be an arbitrarily chosen trajectory from such a database. If all narrative timelines are possible, the chosen represented one loses its importance and strength. A database contains data which are simultaneously present with no beginning, middle or end, without no thematical or formal



development endowed to order them into a classical narrative scheme. Consequently, time is absent from such a configuration and appears only as an effect of the ordering of data in a temporal cinematic sequence.

The modular narrative film can be classified into<sup>12</sup>:

## **I. ANACRHRONICAL MODULAR STRUCTURE**

It is the most common type and represents the alteration of the classical anachronical bracketed editing shape. It undermines the traditional hierarchy between the primary narrative temporal thread, and the previous temporal thread which usually intrudes on the first one. Gérard Genette discovered the way in which an anachronical structure<sup>13</sup> departs from the first temporal level, a departure that subordinates the analepsis (flashbacks) and prolepsis (flash-forwards), to the primary temporal level. The primary temporal level connects and establishes any other secondary temporality. It is only in the most extreme cases that two narrative temporalities are conflated into a single one, generating the indiscernibility specific for Gilles Deleuze's time-image. The recent narrative modularity promotes a temporal ordering which, while realising the confusion effect of Robbe-Grillet, also creates a feeling of uncertainty regarding the primacy of a temporal dimension in relation to any other one. The classical temporal hierarchy is thus so destabilized that not one temporal thread can gain a clear dominance. This is the feature that differentiates modern modularity from the classical one. The classical modularity only intervenes in the present cinematic time through past segments or future segments (both diegetically transgressed), which break the normal chronological ordering of time. The repetition of shots or sequences, or of entire editing segments, from an identical or different perspective, are the trademarks of this type of editing. The classical lyrical form uses repetition in order to give enough time for the

spectator to correctly recognise the actual space-time coordinates or to throw the entire temporal structure into uncertainty. The counterpart of the classical lyrical form is the modern modularity. The classical style usually opposes excessive variations and repetitions because the excess will undermine the narrative progression and the unity of the film. These modular structures draw attention upon themselves and become self-reflexive. The narrative events are visited and revisited through a series of juxtaposed narrative segments, they are represented from multiple narrational perspectives.

## II. FORKING-PATHS MODULAR STRUCTURE

It creates disjunctive narrative gaps, not only between the classical temporal dimensions, but also between alternative (and simultaneously) possible worlds. These narrative variations are introduced by means of a narrative bifurcation. The bifurcation overlays the narrative alternatives of a story, the possible outcomes that can take place due to even the slightest and minor changes brought to the narration. While the anachronical modularity refers mostly to the cinematic discourse (syuzhet), the bifurcated structure introduces modularity at the level of the story (fabula). Commonly, the anachronism allows for the spectator to reassemble a linear trajectory from all its disjointed segments. The forking-paths concept, on the other hand, introduces a higher number of narrative threads, that is various alternatives to the same situation. Usually, these alternatives causally contradict each other. They underline the process of some particular data (characters, times, places, settings, etc.) from a paradigmatic database, which are then recombined in order to tell different stories using the same elements. If the ordering of the events can be assigned to the syntagmatic axis, the paradigm refers to the lists of narrative elements available for selection. Where anachronisms rearrange the narrative elements at the syntagmatic level, the forking-paths narratives project a bigger and overlapping part of the paradigm at the syntagmatic level. The paradigm is revealed in such a way that all the narrative alternatives counter each other in the film's body. *The Last Year at Marienbad* (*L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, Alain Resnais, 1961) is the movie that enabled these strong alterations brought to the paradigmatic-syntagmatic relation. It presents a variety of timely indiscernible, possible narrations.

All the movies subject to modularity create an ontological uncertainty between subjective and objective narration. The distinctive line between anachronism and forking-paths is blurred and the spectator cannot be sure that the image he perceives is a memory, a hallucination or an alternative reality. What the anachronism and forking-paths have in common are the following qualities: while the anachronic structure invites the spectator to reflect upon the temporal deployment and experience (in terms of the notions of past, present and future), the forking-paths invite us to rationalise time in terms of simultaneity and causal connection. The latter is the case of *Interstellar*. Once Cooper leaves Earth in search of a new home for the human race, the represented narrative time, only briefly condensed, as almost equal to the story time.

Instead of abandoning the temporal dimension, the forking-paths present us with the opportunity to perceive and experience time both linearly (as a progression from past to



future) and nonlinear (as a selection of possible alternatives, of possible histories). David Bordwell argues that such structures limit the potential for disorientation because they restrict their stories to fewer options (since not all the possible versions are representable and represented) and make no ontological distinction between their characteristics. Maybe that was the case for Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run*, but for Nolan's *Interstellar*, the tesseract sequence gives us, inside the same space of the sequence, the representation of all possible narrative threads. The bifurcated narratives offer a feeling of closure (and do not necessarily belong to the open structures) by privileging the last final situation presented onscreen, the final iteration, at the loss of the other versions priorly shown.

With each new iteration, a small temporal and perspectival difference brings a new possible ending. In *Interstellar* we do have events which are recounted more than one time and which happened only once, events represented by, for example, Murph's repeating actions. Murph repeats in her present time actions from her past. She puts the Apollo modules back on the shelf from where they were pushed down by that which she first thought of as ghosts. What is interesting in Nolan's editing discourse is the use of repeating narration through character's actions, because each shot, considered in its formal aspect, is subject to a singulative narration. We thus have a structure observing the following pattern: the first act of the film is depicted with singulative narration, the second act is depicted with repeating narrative, and the last act makes use of iterative narrative<sup>14</sup>.

The mind-game films and puzzle-films are the origins of modularity and, initially, they have grounded their disjunctive temporality on the unreliable narration. We can further enlist a brief chronological history of such films: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, 1920, Robert Wiene), *Blow-Up* (1966, Michelangelo Antonioni), *Persona* (1966, Ingmar Bergman), *Solaris* (1972, Andrei Tarkovsky), *Stalker* (1979, Andrei Tarkovsky), *Blade Runner* (1982, Ridley Scott), *Sliding Doors* (1998, Peter Howitt), *Fight Club* (1998, David Fincher), *Memento* (2000, Christopher Nolan), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001, Ron Howard),

*Mulholland Drive* (2001, David Lynch), *Secret Window* (2004, David Koepp), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004, Michel Gondry), *Hidden* (2005, Michael Haneke), *The Prestige* (2006, Christopher Nolan), *Atonement* (2007, Joe Wright), *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008, David Fincher), *Shutter Island* (2010, Martin Scorsese), *Inception* (2010, Christopher Nolan), *The Three of Life* (2011, Terrence Malick), *Cloud Atlas* (2012, Tom Tykwer, Lana Wachowski, and Andy Wachowski), *Predestination* (2014, Michael Spierig and Peter Spierig), *Gone Girl* (2014, David Fincher), *Interstellar* (2014, Christopher Nolan).

Every temporal layering of the modular film, the first sequence, the sequences generated by the first and the ultimate one, they all adhere to a linearity based on the causality principle, and thus conform to a narrative editing shape, be it strictly linear, parallel, alternating or bracketed. The narrative branches split from every joint are not equal, as every new sequence is based upon the spectator's reception of the previous ones and on his ever-growing knowledge. Independent of the inner modularity of the filmic discourse in itself and of all the inferences and possible worlds and alternatives being construed in the spectator's interior film, indifferent to the inferences, guesses and hypotheses he makes, the closure effect is generated by the last presented sequence. The last sequence in the classical puzzle film can lead to an open structure, but in the modern strict modularity, the final one brings closure due to the fact that all the alternatives are simultaneous. From all the simultaneous instances, one must always prevail.

In *Interstellar*, narrative modularity represents an ongoing negotiation between contingency and predetermination. The classical cinema is always found under the sign of predestination or predetermination. In modularity we gain the impossibility of change in the character's destiny. But this is a trademark for all non-interactive narratives. The metachronal character of the flash-forwards is a type of knowing. A narrator or the auctorial authority has access to an amount of wider knowledge of the event switch already happened. Since the events already took place, there is nothing the characters can do to change their course. This feeling of condemnation can also be installed by reordering the events, by firstly representing in the discourse the end of the story. This remains a rhetorical choice in the part of the author and does not severely affect the degree of determination and contingency of the events.

The causal inversion specific to narrative modularity develops and reveals a chain of destiny which demonstrates that at every nodal narrative point, at every decisional node, new choices and new opportunities open for both spectator and character, independent of their appearance being generated by a force of contingency or just due to an arbitrary factor. From this point of view, forking-paths narratives, along with their subtypes, represent the filmic counterpart of a virtual history. By this approach we do not seek to look retrospectively to historical facts and events. Instead, we point our cognitive gaze forward and consider the historical alternatives that can be summoned based on evident contemporary elements taken into consideration at the current present time. Past event switches have already happened in the historical human timeline and are followed by multiple branches, available at every historical turning point. The objection to determinism is that we should not entrust into the co-existence of possible worlds and into the existence of virtual histories

in order to critically investigate the notion of causality. Causality represents an existential relation between objects and events, but in both real and fictional worlds it is a mental construct, an inference made by a witness. By assembling different particular data into a cohesive whole, the act of narration configures what would have otherwise been a simple succession of events into a significant whole.

*Interstellar* is a film that combines both the narrative time (and its manipulation) and the dilation and contraction subjected by the personal film experience. What would seem to be an initial epichronical<sup>15</sup> independence of time in a time-travel plot, never allows Cooper to escape the passing of the chronological time. Cooper is trapped into a sort of catachronical chronotope of the road. When he reaches the Gargantua's core inside the tesseract, he will discover only the inexorable quality of the linear narrative. There could have been no other main timeline, despite all the bifurcating alternatives. This entrapment is what motivates Nolan's decision to keep the structure as linear and minimally elliptical as possible. Cooper encounters their reversibility of time. All three classical dimensions of time, past, present and future, are connected in Henri Bergson's temporal moment of co-existence through the tesseract construct.

The tesseract does not only contain a specific moment in time, but it stretches out and represents its infinite potential, its infinite facets gravitating around a single nodal decisional point in the character's arc. But we must not understand it contains just the infinite possibilities for Cooper's choice inside Murph's bedroom. It actually consists of all the multiverses, possible worlds and historical alternatives. What we see here is Bergson's and Deleuze's co-existence of time, represented visually inside the same image. The simultaneity paradox of time's constitution in the depository past, the carnal present and the awaiting future reveal to us the syntheses of time. The first passive synthesis reveals the hyalosis<sup>16</sup> which disconnects the motor linkages and explores the coalescence of an actual image with a virtual one. The first synthesis constitutes lived time, depository past and the awaiting of future. The chronosigns correspond to the second passive synthesis of time. Unlike the hyalosis, chronosigns are revealed at the entire narrative structure, they are not only fragments of images but entire stories. Focal points move in order to integrate a diversity of character's points of view, but their totality is an impossibility<sup>17</sup>. As in the tesseract, all images extend into each other, as differences with repetition. While Nolan does not represent the lyrical modularity at the level of the narrative shapes, he presents it to us in this tesseract sequence. Everything is repetitive, everything is different and what can happen will happen, but in a different timeline.

Nolan's film becomes the linear predestined trajectory of Cooper and it could not have been told otherwise. But seeing all the possibilities inside the tesseract, we can only wonder if there are other timelines in which Cooper stayed, lived his life as a farmer and died by his family. But what exactly fragments and bifurcates all the possible events and all possible outcomes? We could argue that this is precisely the cut (or, if you prefer, the irrational cut). Here in the tesseract, a critical spectator would find the film's grounding on composition, decomposition, ordering, weighting and deformation. *Interstellar* self-references its own world, the construction of its linear timeline through intentional choice.

In conclusion, we can now see how the two passive syntheses of time develop into the first active synthesis of the present time. The flashback is no longer a conventional flashback. Due to time's relativity, Nolan now has the ability to represent it through the messages Cooper receives in the space shuttle. But here time is not in its essence portrayed and deployed as a catachronical factor, a kind of time which destroys temporality and the spiritual aspects of the characters. It is a time which simply passes as its natural existence must do. What we receive is the classical linear narrative, the resurrected form of the lyrical editing process, a visual cue.

## ENDNOTES

1. The "possible world" concept has been established by Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, but it has become entrenched in the development of possible worlds' semantics for the modal logic.
2. Daniel Frampton, in his *Filmosophy*, argues in favour of the existence of a filmworld that is created by what he terms the "filmind". The filmind is the equivalent of the film itself and is a consequence of the film's inner film-thought processes. Frampton tries to induce the idea that all the images of a film and the film's entire discourse are determined by the actions and perceptions of the characters.
3. Daniel Frampton uses the "anti-reflexive" term in opposition with the self-reflexive cinematic configuration in which the presence and intentions of the author are made explicit through various cinematic techniques (voice-over narration, characters addressing the camera directly, excessive and spectacular camera movements and angles, modular narrative structures, etc.). The reflexive configuration has been studied by theoretical figures as Jean Mitry, Kaja Silverman, Edward Branigan, Francesco Casetti, Gilles Deleuze, Stephen Heath and Vivian Sobchack.
4. A tesseract is a hyper-cubic structure used visually by Nolan as a means of communication for the bulk beings to express action through gravity with NASA.
5. Doležel, Lubomír, – *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology*, University of Nebraska Press, 2019
6. Edward Branigan discusses the error hypothesis in the case of the subjective (point-of-view) narrative configuration. He argues that the entire cinematic discourse is constantly being tested by the spectator during the film viewing experience. As in the modular narrative structures, the final interpretation or what the film delivers at its conclusion will always be favored in terms of narrative truth.
7. Gilles Deleuze describes the *powers of the false* as a time structure created by the false matched action cut. This new structure, derived from falsity and falseness, runs parallel with the real line and time of action and finally creates an alternative narrative time-space.
8. Whereas Plan A meant finding a hospitable planet by visiting the first space mission astronauts and Plan B meant populating a new planet, Plan C will reunite a man and a woman on a third planet.
9. The lyrical editing style is represented by the various explicit repetitions of shots and sequences, either in quick succession or in a greater narrative reach.
10. Gérard Genette created a taxonomy of subtypes for analepsis and prolepsis. Analepsis refers to the a posteriori representation of an event while prolepsis anticipates events about to happen.



11. The metachronal time direction represents the constant forward progression of time. It also represents something that will happen in the future or something that has been placed narratively at a late time.
12. Allan Cameron creates, in his *Modular Narratives in Contemporary Cinema*, a typology of the modular narratives in cinema, dividing between anachronic narratives.
13. An anachronical structure is a temporal transgressed diegetic narrative event.
14. The iterative narration style relates one time what happened many times.
15. Epichronical term is used by Gilbert Durand to describe a temporal zone of freedom. It is used in both the spiritual sense of the human inner time propelled towards freedom and as a temporal orientation towards superior narrative timelines (dreams, hallucinations, etc.).
16. The hyalosign is, in Gilles Deleuze's terminology, the direct image of time.
17. In Umberto Eco's terminology, impossibility refers to events and situations which are not mutually possible.

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# Home Movies as Territory and Narration: On (self-)reflections in essay-films

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## Abstract

Drawing upon several theories explored in *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in History and Memory*, one of the few existing volumes that comprehensively study the phenomenon home movies, this paper explores how the concepts of domestic space and narration are explored, unconventionally, in a series of non-fiction films which draw upon various types of “found” material and/or footage relating to the filmmakers’ domestic spaces and lives, with narration being a key element in constructing meaning.

## Keywords

home movie, narration, vernacular, found footage film, screen, space, artifact, Chantal Akerman, Agustina Comedi, Kamal Aljafari, Peter Forgacs, Richard Fung

**A**lthough I am wary of starting such an article on a personal anecdote, I must confess that I began this text – the first such article based on the topic of my PhD research – by postponing it almost indefinitely, as so many others do. For a long period of time, I grappled with trying to understand how exactly the internet has changed the morphology of what is (or used to be) called home movies – films which, for the better part of the last century, but most prolifically in its second half, were shot by people within their own intimate quarters and subsequently consumed in the same places. (The somewhat fateful fact that I’m laying these words down during a pandemic that has confined us to this very space and led to an explosion of such material is not lost on me – and it quite very well prove to be a very fortuitous development, albeit extremely unfortunate due to its underlying causes.)

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After a couple of tantalizing months in which I tried to find exhaustive means of exploring this theoretical conundrum, without simply choosing to part the history of this phenomenon in two reductive parts, analogical (1950s to early 2000s: Super8, VHS, Mini DV) and digital (2000s up to the present time) my readings have brought me to a breakthrough on defining the before and after of home movies, in relation to social media: what fundamentally differs is not just discursive fragmentation, but also their relations with concepts such as the screen and the narrator, their situation(s), objectives and strategies, and, most importantly, with the concept of „filmic attitude“. Moreover, these interrelated concepts and historical factors spill over into a kind of filmmaking that has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary non-fiction cinema (most of them being *arthouse*, festival-fare films), which draws upon both the traditions of found footage film, essay-film and diary-film, as well as caches of personal archives (be they the filmmaker's own, or, as in the praxis of auteurs such as Peter Forgacs, discovered or entrusted to the director by a family): although, as of yet, there is no single denominator which designates this type of filmmaking (or the fact that it's seemingly iterating itself as a movement), these films offer very particular insights into the notion of space, both the domestic one and the ones outside it, but also of the key role which narration plays in the films and their source materials, and are thus operative in their understanding.

Ultimately, the domestic space is the locus (hereby understanding this concept as both space and surface) of the creation and consumption of home movies – which used to be, traditionally, the home itself, where both the narrator (within the recording and outside of it, giving additional details during its viewing), its support (film reel, video cassettes or CDs) and screen (be it a projector, television set or personal computer screen) resided; not unlike in the case of a cinema, one needed access to this space in order to see the images that are screened within – which, in the case of home movies, also implied personal familiarity (or even a given degree of intimacy) with the narrator. On the other hand, contemporaneous, digital recordings operate within a fundamentally different paradigm: many of them are intended to be uploaded online (and are sometimes even broadcast live onto social media), thus changing not just the moments which are being recorded (usually, moments which can be described with affective terms, such as “amusing” or “touching”), but also the intended audience expands much beyond the intimate circle of the narrator (who now also has the possibility of offering extra-diegetic information in texts which accompany the videos on the multimedia platforms that broadcast it).

In between these two postures, the filmmaker who uses home movies as her or his source-material acts as a bridge: as her or his work de-territorializes home movies or other familiar documents from within their traditional spaces and puts them towards an audience that is much larger than their own families, who no longer pertain to their immediate circle of acquaintances, they however gain the unique opportunity, given the specifics of the cinematic / audiovisual medium, to (re)assert themselves as narrators and insert within their films the extra-textual information that usually is relayed while consuming such films. It is a fact that is all the more striking, when one takes into account films which also relate to the concept of space and territory, in relation to that of home: either in relation to a

space that is no longer accessible, to a person that is no longer alive, or of a home that is no longer present or no longer attainable.

As I will discuss in future work, films that draw upon directors' personal cache of home movies and documents, as well as personal recordings (be they recorded by themselves or by other members of their families) intertwine the three modalities of filmic attitude outlined by Jean-Pierre Meunier in his seminal work, *The Structures of Film Experience: Filmic Identification* (recently re-published in a lengthy version accompanied by critical essays, edited by Julian Hanich and Daniel Fairfax), meaning the "home-movie", "documentary" and "fiction" attitudes. For the time being, however, I will set out to summarize some key theories in relation to the home movie's relationship to space and narration, applying this knowledge in the analysis of three films which draw upon such materials in unique ways: Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1977), Agustina Comedi's *Silence Is a Falling Body* (*El silencio es un cuerpo que cae*, 2017) and Kamal Aljafari's *Unusual Summer* (2020).

## NARRATION IN HOME MOVIES: CONNECTING VERNACULAR IMAGERY AND DISCREET CULTURAL ARTIFACTS

A vital aspect in re-utilizing one's own home movies or domestic documents in essay-films is, as previously stated, narration – which brings forth not just additional information beyond what is seen (i.e. captured within the cinematic diegesis of the shots themselves), but also emotional affect and a discourse which highlights and analyses cultural and historical artifacts. To better grasp these notions, I turned to two papers written by filmmakers in their own rights, who use home movies in their own cinematic praxis: Peter Forgacs and Richard Fung.

Visual artist and auteur Peter Forgacs, known for his extensive use of raw home video footage in his films (which he mainly sources from Budapest's Private Photo and Film Archive), reflect what he calls "a vernacular narrative imagery"<sup>1</sup>. By using a very specific term to define the means of storytelling in home video – that is, "vernacular" – Forgacs doesn't just postulate home moviemaking as an argotic expression of cinematic language and vocabulary (since, he indicates, it "is not simply an imitation of professional filmmaking, but an attempt to achieve an aesthetic result" which "not unlike the letter and diary, is biographical"<sup>2</sup>, his choice of comparison indicating in the direction of textuality), but, rather, it is also a way to indicate upon the medium's dependence on orality. "The maker of the home movie acts as the narrator (...) [who] comments on the phenomena taking place in the film, identifying the people, subjects, and topics presented".<sup>3</sup>

As the narrator is oftentimes, Forgacs writes, both the visual and oral creator of the narration, taking into account a phenomenological perspective, he postulates that "the perceptions immortalized by the camera afford important knowledge about the operator" as "the dramaturgy of private film, then, often includes unplanned forms and random sequences, even shifts of time".<sup>4</sup> As such, he also underlines the role of the space itself in weaving the narration: "The original context of the private film is the home screening

rite, the celebration of times past, of recollection, of and of hints of the nonverbal realm of communication and symbols”.

However, he notes that while written diaristic endeavors are, indeed, the result of a conscious process of self-reflection (one might add, of events that have already transpired and, to a certain degree, are no longer a part of the author’s immanent sphere), “film-making is an immediate recording” – which, Forgacs opines, “leads to different results, both semantically and syntactically”<sup>5</sup>, and, arguably, thematically: later on, he describes that “taboo” events are usually absent from such recordings, comparing the staggering amount of marriage video tapes to the absence of recordings of divorces or other possible negative phenomena of domestic life<sup>6</sup>, such as abuse, but rather concentrates on what is “important, beautiful, interesting or funny” even more so than in real life, criteria that are “ever-changing pillars of individualized and cultural meanings”.<sup>7</sup>

There is perhaps no better summarization of the relation between culture and home movie, and of individual meaning and manifest imagery than the one Richard Fung, filmmaker and theorist<sup>8</sup>, makes while reflecting on a cache of his family’s home movies: “The images were almost abstract. Yet each luminous frame opened a successive drawer in an archive of memories.” Fung notes that as his family was established in Trinidad during the time that these reels were shot, meaning they had to be sent to the United States to be developed and thus was an “expensive hobby”<sup>9</sup>, he also notes that the images themselves were predominantly capturing “special occasions”<sup>10</sup>, noting how this also shaped the family’s habits in front of the camera: “If they are not at the beach, they are dressed up in Sunday best. My family usually ate in the kitchen, but the only meals in the movies are Christmas dinners in the dining room”<sup>11</sup>. It should be a given that, as certain areas of the domestic space are designated for certain rituals and usages, this attitude also reflects in the choice of their representation, even if, paradoxically (as Fung points out), their usage is more predominant in the recording than in reality itself; “the camera itself was a prop in the performance of status and class mobility”.

From here on, we can formulate two brief conclusions: first, that the high cost of analogical means of recoding film (especially in second-, or third-world-countries) led to a model of representation that is ever so slightly *fictionalized*. To put it more clearly, it was a type of representation that prioritized certain moments of family life and (social) identity over others, keeping in mind the scarcity and expensiveness of the raw materials, with these priorities ordained by both a wish to create an aesthetical portrait of the self and to perform (socially) desirable traits in this self-discourse. Secondly, we can infer that the democratization of the audiovisual medium through successive technological reforms and advancements has permitted not just the recording of larger amounts of footage (a factor which, keeping Bazin in mind, also ties in with the images’ inherent realism). It also meant that more spaces within the home and more of its activities (including those that are not ritualistic in nature) could be recorded without much care that the footage was “wasted”. And so, the images from within the domestic space slowly started encompassing much more than what was *desirable*, within these schematics of self-representation, slowly, these recordings started to cover more and more terrain.



*News from Home* by Chantal Akerman

### **NEWS FROM HOME: DISJOINTED TERRITORIES, REJOINED NARRATION(S)**

Domestic space(s) was/were a consistent hallmark of Chantal Akerman's (1950-2015) work, a both plastic and thematic leitmotif that can be found throughout the span of her filmography, in her fiction films – ranging from her seminal early films, such as *Je, tu, il, elle* (1974) and *Jeanne Dielmann, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) to her vastly maligned 1996 arthouse rom-com, *A Couch in New York* – as well as in her documentary work, arguably culminating in her very last work, *No Home Movie* (2015), which is constructed around a series of recordings that Akerman shot of her elderly mother within her home, shortly before they both passed away. Akerman's last film mirrors her third – *News from Home* (1977), which marks the first film in which she explicitly draws upon her biography and on the figure of her mother (here, present in the shapes of letters read out loud by the filmmaker) to construct an intimate, personal essay-film which discusses their mutual relationship. (This exploration reaches its apex in Akerman's posthumously published memoir, *My Mother Laughs*.)

*News from Home* is, at a visual level, constructed from images shot by Akerman in New York, in 1976 – a series of long, mostly static and uninterrupted shots from various spaces within the city, that do not follow any certain characters or even a visual narrative, per se: rather, shots of spaces such as subway trains and stations, mostly empty streets, derelict buildings and spaces without many individualizing traits. Akerman, herself, doesn't appear in the film, nor does she engage in any other way with the contents of the voice-over, other than being the one who reads it: a series of letters from her mother, who is back in Brussels with the rest of their family, recounting various events in their lives, her thoughts on certain developments, and, most importantly, her pleas for Akerman to write more

often and to offer more details about her own life.

Akerman's own replies are not included (the only details we find out about her own life are rendered by proxy, within the margin of what her mother comments upon), thus highlighting the increasingly desperate tone of longing in her mother's pleas – "Your last letter was 10 days ago. Write. It's all I've got left."; even more so, the letters are paced at an ever-increasing temporal distance as the film progresses, creating the sensation that they are slowly fading away. This equation between physical absence and emotional presence, in a time that predates instant communication, leads to a picture that inevitably addresses social atomization and alienation – one that is prompted by sprawling urban landscapes and by (physical) disconnection with one's own domestic and cultural background. Ultimately, the film ends on a shot from the Staten Island Ferry, signifying that Akerman is returning to Europe the failure to assimilate into New York, to fully disassociate or extricate herself from her home, while also making a clear-cut reference to the history of European migration to North America.

In *News from Home*, the home appears as a verbal construct whose meanings, both intimate, cultural and historical, spill over into identity and into the subjective perspective (and perception) of the urban landscape. The visual part of the film acts as an antinome to the concept of home, seen as a space of mutual familiarity and habitus, showing everything that *isn't* home – and the fact that the letters indicate that Akerman is changing several apartments while living in New York reinforces this notion. The letters, on the other hand, show the image of a home that is fractured in the wake of one of its members leaving its physical domain, but a home nonetheless, with its continuous flow of private, small-h histories. The ingenious element herein lies at the fact that, rather than also utilizing her own letters, Akerman responds on a purely visual level, thus creating two equally important parallel narratives – her mother's and her own, narrations which serve to complete each other: her mother's longing for access into the immediate life and perceptions of her daughter, and the daughter's confusion as she is separated from her mother and is navigating an unfamiliar space by herself, her only means to structure her immediate experience being her camera.

## ***SILENCE IS A FALLING BODY: UNRELIABLE NARRATION(S), UNFAMILIAR SPACES***

There is one particular recurrent sequence in Agustina Comedi's *Silence Is a Falling Body*: that of an extended family that is enjoying a picnic in an outdoors setting, with a table, exchanging jokes and taking turns in riding a horse. Fragments of the same afternoon are interspaced throughout the film, with one particular image from this being repeated several times: that of a blonde man mounting a horse. As the film progresses, the reason for this repetition of an apparently banal image of a family on holiday, enjoying itself: they are in fact the moments which precede the gruesome death of the rider, Jaime, the director's own father, whose death in a riding accident was in fact recorded on the tape. (The last usage of these images cuts the precise moment in which his accident takes place, but keeps some





*Silence Is a Falling Body* by Augustina Comedi

glimpses of the aftermath: the camera points down as it is apparent that the person who is filming it enters a state of agitation, which is also caught on the sound recording, until the recording is stopped and the image is cut to black.)

In addition to creating suspense, Comedi's repeated usage of these images indicates both the harrowing content of the recording, visually emulating the occurrence of traumatic flashbacks, as well as an interesting narrative element, in relation to one of the film's main thematic points: that of unreliable narration. Years after her father's death, Comedi discovers that he had been, in fact, a gay man who had been active during Argentina's activist LGBTQ+ scene, especially during the dangerous years of the military junta (a point which she uses to explore the community's history in a series of talking heads-style interviews, who also remember her father) – a fact which makes her pore over Jaime's vast cache of home movies, as he had been an avid videographer. As such, the director puts to the test whether Jaime's obsessive recording of his apparently "normal", heteronormative family, in its classical ways (celebrations, trips, moments which show his young daughter growing up or participating in competitions), had in fact been a visual manifestation of his act of repressing his homosexuality and of performing his traditional gender role, as a man and *pater familias*. As such, Jaime himself is an unreliable narrator, and in the light of these revelations, the images gain new meanings – the film opens on a shot that Jaime had recorded in Florence, wherein the camera zooms in, and lingers on the genitals and buttocks of Michelangelo's David; images which gain new meaning, once his sexuality is disclosed.

It's within these revelations and shifting sets of meanings that the familiarity of the domestic space is displaced, and becomes uncanny – for example, a family friend, Nestor,

is revealed to be a former lover of Jaime, whose death Comedi recounts as making him severely distraught – and is revealed as a performative space in the arena of identity construction. But rather than trying to find out, through her father’s cache of home movies (juxtaposed, at times, with candid images of Cordoba’s post-junta queer scene), why he had abandoned his queer identity, through the repeated usage of images of herself, the director seems to ask a much more self-reflexive question: that of the reasons behind her own existence, thus, narrating her own history as well, along with using her narratorial position to offer a more complete image of her late father’s life. As one of her father’s friends confesses in an interview, “When you were born, a part of Jaime died forever” – coupled with the recurrent images of Jaime’s last moments in life, the rationale seems to be that of underpinning the coordinates of Jaime’s two deaths, and mapping out the two lives that were abruptly cut.

### **UNUSUAL SUMMER: SURVEILLANCE VIDEO AS A FORM OF INCIDENTAL HOME MOVIE**

At first glance, Kamal Aljafari’s *Unusual Summer* doesn’t seem to be a film that draws upon home movies: it’s entirely constructed from surveillance camera footage of the street in front of his house. The reasoning behind the existence of these images is made clear at the beginning of the film: seeking to deter someone who’s been constantly vandalizing his car, the filmmaker’s father installs a camera in order to catch the perpetrator. (It’s a device that the filmmaker will use throughout the film to create a state of suspense.) However, Aljafari toys with the *whodunnit* narrative ploy to actually explore how these images – abandoned in a box in a cellar, having never been watched – inadvertently create an image both of his neighborhood, but also of his family: his father has passed away in the meantime (and as such, as Meunier points out, these images become a technique of resurrection), his sister is seen during the time in which her future husband was still courting her (with fragments narrated by her daughter, in the “present” frame of the film), his mother’s daily routine outside the house is deconstructed in fine details. Beyond his family, Aljafari maps out the portraits of some of his neighbors (bike rider Abu Gazaleh, the neighbor’s kids, an elderly lady whom he wonders if she might still be alive – all by using text stills), all the way to moments of strife within the neighborhood – such as people running away from the deadly shooting.

Although the filmmaker does occasionally dabble in purely figurative experiments, mostly exploring the mediality of the camera itself (its pixelated artifacts, moments where glitches occur, the fixed frame, its capacity to record without interruption and the relation of this fact to Bazinian conceptions of cinematic realism), *Unusual Summer* ultimately relates to the terrain of home movies by using both “vernacular” imagery (here, home surveillance video) and an element of biographical narration. Aljafari inserts the latter through his textual observations, most poignantly so in the film’s ending, which closes on a rolling-credits-style poem which ties the imagery to the history of the Occupied Territories of Palestine, in a “personal is political” fashion, which also proves that, beyond



*Unusual Summer* by Kamal Aljafari

the seemingly mundane content of the images, they are fundamentally related to the space and the moment in time in which they were produced, both a reflection of cultural and historical artifacts, and an artifact in and of itself.

By doing so, Aljafari in fact posits an innovative thought: home movies in the age of digital hegemony are no longer necessarily products of conscious recordings, or, at the very least, which are produced by cameras wielded by human agents – they can also result from the juxtaposition of passive footage (in this case, surveillance camera video) with the narrator's voice; it is the narration that is here the definitory element, which transforms a type of image that is usually attributed to more hostile ends (surveillance, punishment, observation of deviationist behavior, and so on) into an affective portrait. „On my father's camera, everyone has a chance to exist”, says one of the text overlays – and so shows that what we are seeing is, in fact, an *incidental home movie* which, in comparison to traditional home movies, don't present special occasion, but rather the purest form of the mundane.

## CONCLUSIONS

All three of the above films bear witness to the importance of narrational techniques in deciphering the contents (and contexts) of home movies, documents and other types of artifacts pertaining to the domestic space, in the same fashion as an oral narrator would offer extra-textual information about a home movie, photograph et. all, while showing them in a private environment. In doing so, these films open up various perspectives on the concept of space and territory within domestic parameters: the space within the home is either destabilized, be it due to the fact that a member leaves it or is revealed to have a much more complex relationship to it, or expanded to encompass adjacent spaces, incidental histories, and subjective experiences situated outside the home itself.

## ENDNOTES

1. Forgacs, p. 49.
2. Idem.
3. Ibid., p. 48.
4. Idem.
5. Ibid., p. 50.
6. Ibid., p. 51.
7. Ibid., p. 50.
8. Fung, p. 29.
9. Ibid., p. 30
10. Idem.
11. Ibid., p. 33.

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# Analogue, Digital, Computational. Politicized moving images’ reincarnation

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## **Abstract**

Since the advent of audiovisual mediums that have abandoned the traditional, photographic base of moving images, several film theorists have discussed their loss of “indexicality”. Post-cinematic audiovisual works would therefore be less privileged in their relationship to reality, as they no longer result from the trace of light through the photographic *objectif* but the result of electronic/computational processes. In practice, however, the continuity of filmmakers’ approaches to analogue and digital imagery, as well as the willingness of audiences to accept digitally produced footage as “real” (provided that it has not undergone untraceable manipulation in post-production), seem to dismiss the change of medium as a radical rupture. They suggest that the mark of authenticity is rather located in ethical production and circulation practices and that moving images’ documentary value is culturally, rather than photochemically, validated. A closer look at a crowdsourced playlist of materials relevant to the #BlackLivesMatter movement should prove the porousness of borders between 16mm and digital, and even between recorded footage and fiction, within audiovisual works with thematic similarities.

## **Keywords**

digital, audiovisual, #BlackLivesMatter, video essays, spreadable media, antiracist media, Ken Jacobs, Henry Jenkins, phone recordings, documentary

#BlackLivesMatter protests are legitimized, beyond systemic racial injustice and an ever-growing list of Black fatalities of police brutality, by a wealth of audiovisual evidence of unwarranted violence accumulated over the past years: passerby’s phone recordings as

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well as policemen's bodycams often show compliant Black men, approached by the police for minor incidents, caught in an escalation of ostensible "law-enforcement" tactics by the police that result in gratuitous injury and death. George Floyd was approached by the police after buying a pack of cigarettes with a counterfeit bill. Rayshard Brooks's offense was to fall asleep in his car on a fast-food drive-through and subsequently fail a breathalyzer test. The emerging footage of the two men's deaths was circulated widely and used to prove that their conduct was non-violent and that the policemen's use of exceptionally cruel control procedures was unfounded, and the effect was powerful enough to spark protests not just in the victims' hometown or the USA, but across the world, denouncing racial oppression. The intersubjective acceptance of such footage by audiences as not just corroborating evidence (as part of the "case", along with autopsy reports, police officers' testimonies and the internal investigations of police departments), but as evidence of a higher order than official reports (especially in the face of generalized mistrust in US police accountability mechanisms) suggests that the indexical function of audiovisual recordings has not weakened in the digital medium.

## DID CINEMA REALLY DIE WITH CELLULOID?

To be fair, debates about indexicality and its correlation with the photochemical base of film stock are almost as old as video. Malcolm Turvey's 2011 essay *Ken Jacobs: Digital Revelationist*<sup>1</sup> is a particularly eloquent polemical stance. Following in the footsteps of Peter Wollen and Mary Ann Doane, Turvey puts forth, quite distrustfully, the argument about locating the link between reality and cinematic representation in the film stock itself and, by implication, withdrawing the Bazinian vocation of being an emanation of the real world to electronic moving images. Although André Bazin's game-changing defense of this privileged relationship was never conceived by its author in semiotic terms, it has subsequently been interpreted as granting cinema an "indexical" value, to use C. S. Peirce's category, due to its contingency on the real people and objects placed in front of the camera. Turvey takes time to explain that Peirce himself, while naming photography indexical, never saw this direct dependence on the mediation of light as essential and, indeed, had a much looser definition of "indexicality": whatever is based in the "predictable causal relationship" between sign and object or the sign's capacity to "focus the attention" to the object (for instance, a pointing finger, which has no proper causal relation to the indicated object, is still, according to Peirce, indexical).<sup>2</sup> Further, Turvey questions Doane's reduction of digital to "the vision (or nightmare) of a medium without materiality, of pure abstraction incarnated as a series of 0s and 1s, sheer presence and absence, the code", since electronic technology does have a particular physical infrastructure and embodiment, though a less intuitive and widely comprehended one than photography.

The most persuasive comparison, however, in Turvey's essay centers on the continuity of Ken Jacobs's practice in structural filmmaking, be it in analogue (pre-1999) or digital. Indeed, the author's enhancement of vintage photography with digital means has been theorized through his desire to "touch" the past (in spite of the ostensible lack of physicality

of digital processes). There is also a remarkable formal similarity between two of his works derived from the same 1905 source material: *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969-71, produced on 16mm) and the digital "remake" *Return to the Scene of the Crime* (2008). The purpose of both is to reveal hidden aspects of a "pre-Griffith" one-reeler, perhaps filmed by famed cinematographer G.W. "Billy" Bitzer and packed with visual detail but definitely naïve regarding what would over the following decade constitute the grammar of cinema, reexamining the footage through Jacobs's more sophisticated, invasive and controlling optic. Although *Return to the Scene of the Crime* "uses effects that have no equivalents in the 1969 film", it is largely a similar endeavor, not just in stretching out to feature-length a short and dense film segment, but also in the specific operations of distorting it: "Of course, the camera is not really zooming, moving or cutting in to closer views in this digital video, as there is no lens, camera, or film to cut. Rather, digital software is emulating these celluloid-based techniques. Yet the function is the same – to make easily overlooked details of the original evident by indexing and enlarging them, and bracketing distracting information."<sup>3</sup> Whether these interventions happen to a literal screen projection of the film or the digital image, the tools do little to alter the resulting bidimensional image offered for our viewing.

In trying to explain away Jacobs's apparent insouciance to medium specificity, Abigail Child's comparison of Jacobs to other structural filmmakers might prove useful: "Neither Brakhage's mountain man nor Bruce Baille's Zen country Buddha, Jacobs remains an urban force: opinionated, relational, commanding every room. Neither an art-for-art's-sake aficionado like Michael Snow, nor bearing the mischievous trickster charm/alarm of a Tony Conrad, Ken remains the quintessential populist, or to borrow from his own film titles, an 'urban peasant,' or better yet, 'The Piper's Son'."<sup>4</sup> While it would probably be fruitless to search for a defined narrative thread or thematic development in most Ken Jacobs's films, the author of the provocatively-titled *Capitalism: Child Labor* and *Capitalism: Slavery* (2006) is never afraid of taboo subjects.

Granted, especially for contemporary videographers who have not yet acquired Ken Jacobs's status of underground genius, there is a significant shift in recent times brought about by post-cinematic media or, to borrow a phrase from D.N. Rodowick, "the virtual life of film". However, this may have far less to do with the physical embodiment of moving images, be it on film stock, video or digital file, than with the disruption of the predictable cycle of production and consumption of the 20th century. The shared expectations that have fueled cinematic spectacle and, in the second half of the century, broadcast television, have given way to a process that is more horizontal (even though perhaps not literally democratic) and fluctuating, especially when talking about online/social media audiovisual content – a revolutionary, albeit particular case of moving image circulation.

## THE NEWFOUND "SPREADABILITY" OF DIGITAL IMAGES

Unlike the rule-driven and monopoly-prone older forms of image dissemination, online audiovisual content is only spread with the help of a great number of individual users (although with the obviously unequal contributions of paid influencers and companies'

and institutions' social media accounts). For an encompassing theorization of how crowd-driven audiovisual dissemination works, and in searching for a better term than "viral" distribution, it is worth noting what Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green define as "spreadable media": "'Spreadability' refers to the potential – both technical and cultural – for audiences to share content for their own purposes, sometimes with the permission of rights holders, sometimes against their wishes. [W]e want to challenge readers to think through the metaphors we all use when talking about how content moves across the cultural landscape – to resist terminology that might distort how we understand these trends and to continue seeking terms that more accurately describe the complexity of how we all engage with media texts."<sup>5</sup>

Even a cursory look at audiovisual works of the past decade shows how media "spreadability" circles back into the works' aesthetics, either as a desirable trait or something detracting from its artistic audaciousness: celebrated director of photography/video artist Arthur Jafa was recently taken aback precisely by the knee-jerk acceptance of his 7-minute installation piece *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death* (2016). A fast-paced found-footage compilation of extremely heterogeneous representations of blackness, it includes recent and historical clips of African American entertainers (plus Drake) and activists, religious imagery, as well as footage of the police assaulting African American men and women, to the beat and lyrics of Kanye West's *Ultralight Beam*. Upon its warm-hearted acceptance by prestigious art institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Jafa began to wonder if this alternation of ecstatic and violent imagery accompanied by a pop star's music is not in fact delivering "microwave epiphanies"<sup>6</sup> that might prevent its white audiences from undertaking more profound antiracist experiences and actions. For Jafa himself, the solution was to abandon exhaustive representations of a racial minority and instead work on *The White Album* (2018), a study of white supremacist manifestations through the lens of a minority essay filmmaker. (Jafa's change of heart notwithstanding, *Love Is the Message*, remains his most widely seen and discussed recent work; it was successfully streamed for free for 48 hours, end of June 2020, through the joint forces of 13 art institutions as part of their remote pandemic curatorship in solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter).

Although the changes brought about to audiovisual images by social media dissemination are far beyond the scope of this essay, it is vital to take note of the modest proposition that it accentuated two already existing trends of early 21st century film viewing: a levelling of formats (16mm, video, digital) conflated by bidimensional digital image consumption and the distracted perception of audiovisual content less as self-standing, finely-crafted works and more like samples of an over-abundant mode of production (be it the television talking-head interview or the Instagram story). For contemporary audiences, accelerated media literacy coexists with many forms of blindness to detail. Of course, it would be ludicrous to describe either of this as something new or caused by social media dissemination since 20th century moving images themselves have a long and complex history of reflexivity. Take Ken Jacobs's quite literal found-footage work, *Perfect Film* (1986), which comprises of news footage filmed on the day of Malcolm X's assassination which the filmmaker reportedly bought for 5\$, after it had lost its immediate commercial function, to reprint





*Perfect Film*

by Ken Jacobs

exactly as discovered as a “Ken Jacobs film”. Two decades after the events, this footage adds little information to the once-shocking news story of the civil rights leader’s violent death and instead leaves us to wonder about incidental details: the difference in rhetoric between the laconic white inspector and the Black eyewitness whose self-consciousness (especially in contrast to the reporter’s dry mater-of-factness) is sometimes endearing and amusing; the curious gazes of the bystanders who form a crowd next to the television camera, etc. Of course, the film is still legible and interesting *because* the murder of Malcolm X was such an impactful event, and yet *Perfect Film*’s historical distance from the date of the images’ recording frees them of their initial function and makes their “semi-conscious” aspects more central.

## A GRASSROOTS, CROWD-SOURCED CANON: THE #BLACKLIVESMATTER PLAYLIST

Arthur Jafa’s *Love Is the Message* and *Perfect Film*, made too far apart to be in the same museum exhibition and stemming from too different filmmaking traditions to be discussed side by side by film/media scholarship, have unexpectedly ended up together on a crowd-sourced playlist: starting roughly mid-June, through the efforts of video-essayists Kevin B. Lee, Will DiGravio and Cydnii Wilde Harris, in what can be called a gesture of media activism in solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter, a collection of over a hundred racially-themed video works was assembled on a Google document (and later uploaded to The Video Essay Podcast website<sup>7</sup>). According to the list organizers, “the basic criteria for ‘video essay’ is an audiovisual work that critically re-appropriates existing works of film and media”, though for the purpose of making marginalized voices and stories heard it extended generously into video art and more conventional documentaries.

Given the moment, the topic and the means most independent video-essayists have at their disposal, some patterns emerging from the video essay list are unsurprising: the prevalence of phone recordings of very recent or not-so-recent #BlackLivesMatter protests; the frequency of a small canon of semi-mainstream Black filmmaking (Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*, *Malcolm X* and *BlacKkKlansman* and Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* figure more prominently, for instance, than L.A. Rebellion titles); a thematic core centered around unacknowledged

structural racism, police violence, white and Black stereotyping (the gratuitous insertion of “white saviors” in mainstream films about Black people; the reflex labelling of “Black men in black hoodies” as probable criminals etc.); the recurrent formal device of the supercut (i.e. grouping of short extracts of similar material) as an accumulation of evidence etc.

It is also unsurprising that an accentuation of the distinct origin of footage (film stock or digital, official or unofficial) is more often than not avoided. For instance, in Ben H. Creech’s *Cicero/Mt. Greenwood*, the video essay draws on audiovisual evidence of two Chicago antiracist protests that are five decades apart (in 1966/2016, respectively) by using a split-screen to group shots with similar compositions. The Cicero March is depicted in direct cinema-style 16mm-printed footage (later digitized and uploaded to the Chicago Film Archives website), while the latter is assembled from phone cameras. Similarly, Alex Johnson’s split-screen video essay “updates” Cuban filmmaker Santiago Álvarez’s 1965 agitational short/Lena Horne proto-music video *NOW!*, which drew attention to the police violence drawn by the US civil rights movement, with graphically similar recent footage in establishing gruesome and perennial patterns of victimization. (It equally overlooks the difference in the sources’ materiality.)

Taking to heart the aesthetic lessons of Third Cinema in a very earnest – and unusually devoid of postmodern irony – actualization, the protester organization Decolonize This Place produced the video *Unsettle Everything*, which in a different decade might’ve been made by someone like Santiago Álvarez in the hope of chipping away at American imperialism. Using bright background colors, the frenzied soundtrack of John Coltrane’s *Olé*, an imposing block of text with names of Black victims of police violence, excerpts linking the founding of the law-enforcement institution to colonial oppressive practices and testimonies framed in close-up of Toni Morrison and Eartha Kitt about police cowardice and the futility of compromise, *Unsettle Everything* is a spot-on film manifesto.

Certainly, the more widely circulated videos on this list are still the ones published online by major media outlets, while the *Unsettle Everything* YouTube video had a grand total of 83 views at the date of this writing. However, the protesters’ guerilla images seeped into these more elaborate productions as well. Washington Post’s *The crackdown before Trump’s photo op* – a video investigation of how the police circled largely peaceful White House protesters, published a week after the June 1st backlash against protesters and fully deserving of the “slow journalism” badge of honor – maps out crowd movements and camera positions around the newly renamed Black Lives Matter Plaza and uses digital enhancements (zooming and circling details, color coding, text-on-screen) to bring out visual evidence in the (digital) footage. The New York Times reconstruction *How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody* uses available video footage and phone recordings, accompanied by textual commentary regarding the police officers’ background, to certify Floyd’s fatal mistreatment. Media and protesters are allies, although somewhat uneasily, in #BlackLivesMatter, with the abundance of amateur footage being used even to verify *absence* (for instance, in the unwarranted claim that bricks were thrown at the police during the White House Protest). As Jenkins et al. put it: “The shift of the dominant means of communication from broadcast to digital may in the process loosen the grip of corporate



*BlacKkKlansman* by Spike Lee

control over many types of content, resulting in the active circulation of a greater diversity of perspectives.”<sup>8</sup>

What is interesting in both these audiovisual investigations is that spontaneous recordings are subjects of forensic operations just like any other important item/person involved – in opposition to the assumed transparency of the professionally-shot direct cinema of, say, the 1966 *Cicero March*, protesters’ and passerby’s recordings are treated by the news outlets as pieces of the puzzle.

Given the importance of online presence for contemporary journalism – and especially in the case of explanatory journalism platforms like Vox Media – on the one hand, and social media users’ aspiration to build personal brands speculating on current trends and events (see for instance the popularity of YouTuber Evan Puschak aka Nerdwriter), on the other hand, it is often hard to make clear distinctions between companies and individuals: “This focus on ‘resistance’ is consistent with language deployed by writers in the critical and cultural studies traditions since the 1980s. Today, academics are much more likely to talk about politics based on ‘participation,’ reflecting a world where more media power rests in the hands of citizens and audience members, even if the mass media holds a privileged voice in the flow of information.”<sup>9</sup> The Vox-produced *Protests aren’t what they look like on TV* most closely fits the label of “resistance” given that its subject is how television turns protests into a spectacle by singling out isolated cases of violence to spark viewers’ anxiety and determine them to keep watching the news. They claim to be observing from the vantage point of a person who was out on the streets. Surely, the willingness to represent

protesters' point of view does not apply to all news outlets, and there is a strong tendency in conservative media – dubbed by Decolonize This Place the “Counterinsurgency-Media Complex” – to ignore underlying causes while playing up the violence and mayhem.

## GRAPHIC IMAGERY IS VIOLENCE TO THE VIEWER

Another tendency apparent from the video essay playlist (and especially the video art category) is to avoid representation altogether and to find new ways of communicating the desired emotion. Ever since the Rodney King trial, where the jurors' continuous re-watching of the tape did not lead them to convict the officers despite blatant evidence, there has been skepticism toward the claim that greater amount of violent images would make the white audience more aware of Black people's oppression. Josh Swartz's four-minute video *Do the Right Thing – Legacy* (2012) is firmly entrenched in the continuous news cycle aesthetic, nodding to Rodney King and Trayvon Martin, citing on-air phonecalls on its soundtrack and borrowing the ABC logo and graphics, but it resorts to fiction as a placeholder for the most spectacular element to hold everything together: Spike Lee's reenactment of a riot on a stifling sunny day illustrates the non-fictional (but definitely stylized) accounts of street protests. Another crucial evidence that supports the implicit white bias of mainstream media is Swartz's inclusion of a marquee of film review excerpts that are basically blaming Lee for inciting young people to violence instead of casually supporting the *status quo*.

Fiction filmmaking is deconstructed by several of the video essays for evidence of racist and paternalistic attitudes, for example through the “white savior” trope. While Insider's approach<sup>10</sup> is conventionally logocentric in listing films with white-audience stand-ins included among their largely African American cast, the Terence Nance-initiated project *WhitePeopleWontSaveYou.org* achieves the same or more through a sometimes amusing, though largely excruciating supercut: it is a compilation of short clips from “white savior” dramas of an indeterminate total duration (Nance joked that, since new clips are added through an “algorithmic” process, it will only end when people stop making white savior movies<sup>11</sup>) accompanied by a chorus that redundantly (and quite poorly) sings “white people won't save you” through fluctuating volume and pathos. An alternation of vacuous uplifting moments and anti-trailers of white people letting Black people down, the mega-supercut includes a large part of Hollywood's most famous white actors and the significantly fewer African Americans awarded equally generous roles (not to mention the large cast of extras from white people's dramas in exotic settings). The ridiculously high legibility of these clips, especially in juxtaposition with other similar plot moments taken from other “white savior” films, is evidence in and of itself.

Talking about the “indexicality” of these fictional fragments in a discussion of racism, though common parlance in an algorithmic sense, is surely stretching Peirce's term to the most expansive possible definition. The *White People Won't Save You* project, as well as *The Usual Suspects: Black Men in Black Hoodies* supercut rely heavily on computational processes in sorting pre-labelled clips, something that would have been hard to imagine in traditional cinematic practice. In Bazin's understanding of the virtues of cinema, which often ground

subsequent theories of its “indexicality”, an image would be all the more praiseworthy for being hard to decode – and thus to “index” in the computational sense. However, I have tried to show why, in the case of antiracist media, this politicized legibility is not inferior for being didactic, it merely abandons the violence of (conflict) representation for the violence of accumulation. One cannot deny the artistic authenticity of the latter examples in trying to grasp the complexity of racist manifestations in contemporary culture. While approaching the same subject, the video essays on the playlist reuse documentary footage, news media and fiction in complementary ways, and while they use widely different means of addressing the contemporary world and culture, varying from unmanipulated documentation to politicized deconstruction and decontextualization of fiction films, in a common effort to expose underlying racist mechanisms, neither of them is to blame for being off-topic.

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# Fair Use and Disney's Fairy Tales

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## Abstract

Fairy tales and especially animated versions of Disney can be basic materials for making parodies or video essays that enjoy the advantage of freedom in the use of fragments of protected works without the consent of copyright holders, this being the essence of the concept of *fair use*.

## Keywords

Disney, fair use, copyright, copyright limits, YouTube, parody, video essay.

**B**y far the most common videos posted on most YouTube channels are parodies: creations meant to humoristically exaggerate and comment on stereotypical aspects of popular cultural genres (such as fairy tales) or famous creators (such as Disney) or even characters (such as princesses). Stanford Professor Carol Vernallis<sup>1</sup> notes:

“Parody and sardonic response occur partly because technology makes it possible; adding a second layer that circumvents, undercuts, or ridicules the original object is one of the easiest things to do. Under the anonymity of the web, YouTube creators are in search of a common ground – your sarcastic point of view immediately places you in relation with a select group of viewers as well as producers and fans or the original material. Your parody, now tied to the original content, piggybacks on an already accrued attention.”<sup>2</sup>

Fairy tales, and in particular the well-known versions of Disney, are perfect materials for parody. Parody is considered *fair use* in almost all national laws and is permitted under the YouTube Terms and Conditions.

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If we analyse these parodies or video-graphic criticism as we find it in the online environment and raise the issue of copyright, the most challenging issues that appear are related to authorship, rights holders, originality and ethics.

The concept of *fair use* in Anglo-Saxon law refers to a number of exceptional situations in which the use of the work is allowed without the authorisation of the copyright holder.

In Romanian law, the provisions related to this aspect are grouped in the chapter entitled *Limits on the exercise of copyright* and are listed in cases where a person other than the author may use the work without the consent and without the payment of any remuneration if the following conditions are met: the work had previously been made public; the use is in line with best practice, the use does not conflict with the normal usage of the work (i.e. the work cannot be abused, for example in the context of denigration) and does not damage the image of the author or the owners of the rights. These are general conditions to which some special requirements that exemplify limitations are added. Other national laws apply the concept of “fair use” differently.

Essentially these concepts are similar, and parody, pastiche, caricature or video essay that transforms a pre-existing work are allowed without the author’s consent in many countries. The differences relate to the conditions that the transformation must meet. Romanian law requires that the result of the transformation does not create confusion regarding the original work and its author.

Like any form of culture that involves the creation of something new from existing materials made by others, video-graphic criticism can represent for practitioners or teachers a justification that this kind of creation does not violate the rights of the original creators.

However, there is always a certain degree of risk and liability of potential litigation on the part of copyright holders if they consider themselves affected or prejudiced.

In the United States, parodies or video-graphic criticism fall under the scope of the doctrine of *fair use*, which is not sufficiently well regulated. Therefore, in order to avoid possible further litigation, there is a possibility for a judge to examine the video essay and issue a declaratory judgment establishing whether or not the rights of the original authors are infringed.

The analysis involves examining four closely related key factors: the nature of use, the nature of the base material, the extent of use and the impact that use may have on the exploitation value of the original work. None of these factors are preponderant and the court assesses a full spectrum of steps rather than admitting or rejecting the application for a finding.

In general, most video essays fall into the category of creations for which the consent of the authors of embedded works is not required, but problems can often arise.

Thus, with regard to the first factor – the nature of use, a video-graphic essay is, by definition, a transformative work, intended to comment on, criticize and / or parody a pre-existing work, which places it within the legal limits of *fair use*. In addition, the essay is often of a non-commercial or educational nature and if, for example, it is distributed in a commercial formula, on DVD, as a supplement to a release, that does not mean that we are dealing with a violation of the principles *fair use*. It is especially important that each



element that makes up the video essay follows these principles. Of all the elements in its structure, the one that can present some difficulties is music.

For example, in a video essay on a report about a public protest, materials from three sources are used without the consent of the authors: sequences from a fiction film, quotes from a literary work and a well-known song. If the first two sources are obviously transformed to be embedded and serve for the purpose of criticism or commentary, the music does nothing but accompanies the others, as with any other audiovisual work. Even if the music is edited, fragmented or even processed, it essentially does not serve the purpose of parody or criticism. For this reason, it can be said that music does not meet the criteria for *fair use*, but this does not mean that, overall, the video essay will suffer from this point of view.

The second factor concerns the nature of the original work used in the video essay without the consent of the authors. Normally, works with a higher degree of originality will benefit from stronger protection but we are not talking about the quality of the work here but rather about a process of intent. A report on a public protest will be less protected by *copyright* than a monologue taken from a fiction film or an original documentary. In this example, three of the sources on which it is based will raise the scrutiny in the evaluation of the factors examined and, if the original music is replaced by a recording of the original sound of the protest, the essay overall will be less severely evaluated than if it had used protected music.

The third factor concerns the degree of use of the original work with an emphasis on the quantity and quality of the portion used. It is a misconception that the use of 5 or 10% of protected material is *fair* and does not require the consent of the authors. As in the case of other factors, a value analysis is carried out that will take into account both the extent of the use and how much this use will take from the “essence” of the protected work. Most video-graphic critics of feature films or television programs use only a small part of the original content. In the example above, suppose the video essay incorporates 30 seconds of a 100-minute film, three sentences of a 20-page literary text and 15 seconds of a 3-minute song, so very small fragments of the original works, well below 10%. Moreover, none of the fragments are essential in the structure of the work on which the essay is based. However, if the video essay is based on a short film or a poem which it uses in its entirety, this is considered harmful to the authors of the original works. Even in these conditions, it will be evaluated as a whole referencing the other three factors and have the chance to pass the test of *fair use*.

The fourth factor considers how the use could affect the operating value of the original, its commercial possibilities. A video essay that offers a negative review of a film could affect its commercial viability in the same way that a negative review of a book that quotes excerpts from the literary text could discourage purchases of the book. However, we cannot talk about copyright infringement. What is important for our assessment is to what extent the transformation would affect the operating value of the original and would lead consumers to prefer the derivative work over the original. This aspect is difficult to imagine for most video-graphic works. In most cases, reuse by transforming fragments of

the original works could inspire viewers to seek out the original film, literary text or song to understand the subject of the essay in context. However, a derivative work similar to one made by the rights holder, such as an analysis of a film scene included on the DVD of the film or a making-of, for example, could be considered as a copyright infringement.

As we have already mentioned, of the *fair use* doctrine is understood as a legal defence that can be used in court if the author of the derivative work is called to account for the breach, in which case the court will consider the four factors listed above. However, this is becoming increasingly rare, since in most cases the author who considers himself prejudiced does not take legal action or the claims are amicably extinguished.

Another approach is to follow the best practices<sup>3</sup> of other video-graphic works, the majority having proven that they do not infringe upon the rights of holders who do not normally oppose transformative reuse. Consequently, almost all video-graphic essays obviously fall within the vision of the doctrine *fair use*.

But just because legal proceedings are rarer does not mean that copyright infringement charges do not take place in the field of video. The most common situation is when someone posts a video work on a platform such as YouTube and receives a notice of withdrawal from the site administrators. Such sites have programs that check new videos and when a similarity is found between images or music from protected works the system will automatically disable the video, music again being the most common trigger for such deactivations.

Of course, there is no procedure in which to consider whether the video complies with the factors we talked about and whether the conditions for *fair use* are met. Several cases in recent years<sup>4</sup> put pressure on the sites to examine the possibilities of *fair use* before removing a video. A person who receives the deactivation notification will be able to challenge the application but will need to go through the legal proceedings with which very few video producers are familiar. Even if the challenge is allowed by the site, it often creates a deterrent effect for video creators to use protected material in the future.

The risks that would arise from posting a video that uses unauthorized copyrighted material are quite insignificant. The most common sanction is the withdrawal of the video from the site. However, there are quite a number of non-profit sites that share videos for teaching and research purposes that do not have an automatic withdrawal system.

Regardless of the hosting site, it is extremely unlikely that legal action will be taken, the advantages that a rights holder could gain from a video creator are minimal and the negative publicity could be more damaging to the original work owner once such an action is launched. On the other hand, the potential fear of receiving a threatening letter from the lawyers of an audiovisual production company is enough for a creator of video essays to stop posting, even if the legal threat is only formal.

One of the most popular parodies released on the YouTube channel is the short film by Eric Faden entitled *A Fair(y) Use Tale* (2007), which deals with exactly this aspect. The director, a professor at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania-USA, along with his students, edited short excerpts from Disney animated films so that, through the lines of the characters, he explains what *fair use* legal doctrine is in the context of the use of copyrighted works.

The animated film was produced as part of a university project by the documentary



*A Fair(y) Use Tale*, a short film by Eric Faden, YouTube, 2007

film department at Stanford University and was intended to help clarify legal boundaries and encourage creative freedom. The mix of clips cut from Disney films attempts and succeeds to explain in simple and very funny terms the true labyrinth of copyright regulations and the doctrine of *fair use*. The author of the mix believes that the materials created by “the very folks we can thank for nearly endless copyright terms” can be used to argue against the continued extension of copyright protection and against attacks by company representatives for unauthorized use of Disney characters and movies.

The warning in the opening of Eric Faden’s 10-minute film is provocative, sarcastic and educational, all at the same time.

The entire film is educational, transforms and integrates only original Disney material and this made the author of the video quite nervous, as he confessed in an interview<sup>5</sup> that he feared repercussions from the company even though he had a contract that somehow sheltered him in the event of a possible dispute.

Disney did not consider it appropriate to attack the unauthorized use of characters so beloved around the world, the decision also being influenced by the fact that the video was intensively viewed and shared from the YouTube channel by countless other sites, popularized as a useful tool to exemplify in this unprecedented manner what *fair use* essentially means.

The preponderance of such parodies highlights the position gained by Disney in popular cultural memory over time as an image associated with fairy tales but also with debates on the authorship of its works compared to the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm or Charles Perrault that Disney did nothing but illustrate, albeit with a lot of talent and originality.

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1. Professor Carol Vernallis teaches in the music department of Stanford University, USA. She is the author of several works including *Experiencing Music Video* (2004) and *Unruly Media* (2013), and is co-editor of *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics* (2013) and *The Oxford Handbook of Sound And Image in Digital Media* (2013).

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# Towards a Minority Cinema: Two approaches

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## **Abstract**

The present article analyses L.A. Rebellion, the first coherent attempt to build a distinct Asian-American cinema, in the light of the criticism directed at it, mainly at its lack of a consistent strategy and its reliance on individual talents to the detriment of collective action. The truth may just lie somewhere in the middle of these two approaches.

## **Keywords**

minority cinema, Asian-American identity, community art, L.A. Rebellion, self-representation, genre film revisited

**T**he designation of “L.A. Rebellion”, which was conceived by film critic Clyde Taylor in order to describe the films made by the African-American students of UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles), was criticised by certain members of the filmmaking community. Haile Gerima, for example, who was one of the most active members of the movement, considered such a name to be reductive: “I’m not crazy about the L.A. Rebellion a lot, because to me it had Chicanos ... I mean, I’m sure revolt is there, but it’s not a copy-written thing of Black people—it’s unfair to Chicanos, it’s unfair to Asians, even some white students; gutsy white students who were there—left wing white students. And so, for me ... I don’t like it personally. I don’t mind people using it, but for me it excludes, strictly becomes a Black thing and excludes the Chicanos, [...] the Asians, there were even Iranian students that were part of that.”<sup>1</sup>

However, from a strictly lexical standpoint, none of the terms that constitute this rather boisterous nickname underestimates the efforts of the other ethnic minorities Gerima mentions and who had tried, alongside African-Americans, to take control of the way they were being represented in American cinema after World War II. It is true that the geographical precision necessarily excluded the similar movements that took place on the East Coast – an aspect which bothered Clyde Taylor himself (“I was concerned that I might have been

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giving too much attention to the Los Angeles filmmakers and not enough to the many filmmakers in New York and other places who were making important films.”<sup>2</sup>) – but at least it condensed in a memorable formula one of the few common characteristics of an otherwise heterogeneous ensemble of artistic personalities. This common feature was the defiance against a system according to which they were nothing more than second-rate citizens who did not deserve accurate representation (“accurate” both in terms of quantity – in relation to the non-negligible proportion of the said minority amongst cinema audiences – and in terms of quality). The rebellion the designation refers to was multifaceted too, as it encompassed open activism, allegiance to US civil rights movements and anti-colonial resistance in Africa and Asia as well as contesting the aesthetical and narrative conventions of the dominant film language.

But the controversy surrounding the name “L.A. Rebellion” may be interpreted as a symptom of the academic and filmmaking communities’ guilt concerning the marginalization of minorities other than the African-American one within the critical re-evaluation of the underground cinema movements of the period. The most successful model is undeniably the African-American one, even if this success owes less to competent strategies or structures able to efficiently organize production and distribution than to individual talents who managed to emerge despite these shortcomings. However, studying the other lesser-known factions may enlighten one who wishes to understand or directly contribute to the functioning of a community that is able to determine both its artistic and political representation. Therefore, in the present article we will analyse the evolution of the project championed by Asian-American filmmakers gravitating around UCLA in the light of the criticism formulated against L.A. Rebellion and examine the validity of their prototype of militant cinema by comparing the two collectives’ activities and some specific films.

As was the case for L.A. Rebellion, the necessary impulse for the establishment of an Asian-American filmmakers’ community that possessed a racial consciousness came from the Ethno-Communication program of UCLA. The department was founded on the advice of an internal commission, which was itself created as a result of the tensions between civil rights activists and police forces (tensions which culminated in the Watts Rebellion in 1965 and even with the death of two UCLA students). Its aim was to amend for the lack of ethnic diversity among students and teaching staff members. The young people who entered the program benefited from material and financial resources and were encouraged to use them according to their own sensibilities. However, some students expressed reservations concerning the content of the courses. Robert Nakamura, who was to become one of the main figures of the Asian-American, UCLA-trained filmmaking community, stated his disagreement with the emphasis put on ethnography – a science generally distrusted by those denouncing imperialism and neo-colonialism: “[The department was] approaching ethno-communications from ethnographic film, which we hated, a lot of us. Some of us didn’t know what ethnographic film was, but once we began to see some of the films, we totally kind of rejected it. [...] The idea was for us to document and present our own communities, and not going into somebody else’s community and portraying them through our own lenses.”<sup>3</sup>

From this disagreement was born Visual Communications, an association founded in the early '70s by four Asian-American students: Robert Nakamura, Eddie Wong, Duane Kubo and Alan Ohashi. It was supposed to instil in the Asian-American community ideas of self-determination, social change and rejection of the stereotypical images circulating in the media. Despite modest beginnings, which saw the group produce posters, flyers and photographs for entities such as the Japanese American Citizens League, Visual Communications evolved into a creative collective which contributed to the conception of a vast array of educational audiovisual materials aimed at the Asian-American community, schools, universities and more generally at any audience confronting institutional racism and opportunity inequality. Its organization was envied by the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, who were facing major difficulties in exhibiting their films once they had left school. In a retrospective text, slightly critical in tone, titled *Threads and Nets. The L.A. Rebellion in Retrospect and in Motion*, Chuck Kleinhans notices that "Chicano and Asian American veterans of the early years were able to establish continuing organizations; [however,] Blacks were not as well organized."<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the varying film movements (such as the Latin-American Third Cinema, one of L.A. Rebellion's main influences, and, up to a point, such as L.A. Rebellion themselves) which associated militant content with radical aesthetics, the works produced by Visual Communications didn't put much emphasis on form. On the contrary, the founders of the group looked for an alternative to the classical model of the individual author – a model that would have clashed with the encouragements to build a collective social and historical consciousness addressed to the audiences of those films. Robert Nakamura defined his position, considered by some as being "anti-art", as follows: "on a larger scale ... it's not that we rejected art, but we really felt, at least some of us, I know Eddie [Wong], and we had long talks or discussions sometimes about art and being a very Eurocentric part of a system of elitism and very irrelevant to community and to what we were. I don't want to say we were philistines, but in our examination, art wasn't very relevant to what we were about, what our communities were about."<sup>5</sup>

Even if the clarity of the message and the efficiency of the call to action were theoretically the most important, the first films made under the Visual Communications banner – Robert Nakamura's and Eddie Wong's graduation films – do betray a certain degree of aesthetic awareness. But it does not fit in the category of *ars gratia artis*, as it springs organically from the selected topics. Such is especially the case in Nakamura's film, titled *Manzanar*, which describes the author's childhood, spent in one of the many detention camps where over 120,000 Japanese-Americans were incarcerated during the Second World War. The lack of synchronicity between image and sound and the amalgam of visual materials coming from different sources reproduce an imperfect remembering process. Nakamura's voice-over explains his artistic endeavour by saying: "I really can't remember anything definite... it's just vague impressions. I think I remember feelings and smells and sounds."<sup>6</sup> The film demonstrates particular attention to recreating an atmosphere that would not only solicit the eyes, but would also evoke the discomfort, the unbearable heat, the lack of privacy, the precarity. The location shooting was a quest for traces of the

Japanese-Americans' internment which would attest the event actually took place – despite the lack of visual documentation due to the *omerta* imposed by the authorities. This lacuna confers weight to the few photographs included in the film, which show the racist banners and inscriptions that flooded American cities after Pearl Harbor. In fact, the vast majority of the testimonies from the camps were produced and administered by white Americans, and that was precisely the situation, reproduced at a larger scale in mass media and in the whole of society, against which Visual Communications rose. And the collective's leading attack strategy consisted of producing narratives that would undermine the official one. Obviously, such an endeavour had no prospect of success unless those films benefited from a strong distribution network and most importantly, from a supportive audience.

One of the main critiques formulated by Chuck Kleinhans against L.A. Rebellion focused on the movement's assumption that they were addressing a homogeneous audience, whose distinctions based on sex, social status, education level and even tastes in film were erased by the common racial denominator. Kleinhans observes that “in critical discourse, the L.A. Rebellion is best known for developing an *auteurist* dramatic-feature Second Cinema for the arthouse and niche market [such as] Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977) and *To Sleep with Anger* (1990), Julie Dash's *Illusions* (1982) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), and Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1975), *Ashes & Embers* (1982), and *Sankofa* (1993)”<sup>77</sup>. Those directors certainly had a personal affinity for such modes of expression, but most importantly, they also had to delimitate themselves from a previous kind of African-American cinema: Blaxploitation. Most of the time, the films belonging to this subgenre came from the fringe of Hollywood and they either reproduced racial stereotypes or provided audiences with easy gratification through explosions of caricatural violence that artificially dissipated the discontent caused by social inequity. Therefore, except for Jamaa Fanaka, who Kleinhans sees as a positive exception to the rule (“Jamaa Fanaka[']s pursuit of action genres was cleverly attentive to community habits and markets”<sup>78</sup>), the L.A. Rebellion group consciously opted for anti-sensational narratives that were deeply anchored in the daily struggles of the community and focused on the authentic rendition of African-American lifestyle, language and mentalities.

Kleinhans adds: “While it is easy to understand the aspiration for university-educated young artists to produce work that is serious and social in intent, often this work fails in the mass media marketplace. Where the educational and communication function can successfully fuse is in a different sector, one aimed at education and community. But this has remained an undervalued, understudied, and undertheorized part of African American media activity.”<sup>79</sup> The Visual Communications artists adopted a similar optic to the one expressed by Kleinhans. Partially due to financial reasons, but also conforming to Robert Nakamura's “anti-art” credo that we have mentioned earlier, during the first years of its existence Visual Communications produced short documentaries which were screened in inadequate conditions and atypical spaces, such as community centres, classrooms, basements of temples and churches. These guerilla methods facilitated direct contact with the audience, including the older generations and those who had turned their backs on movie theatres precisely because of the offensive representation of the community and of



the marginalization of its history. The filmmakers assisted from a privileged position to the awakening of racial consciousness amidst their community, as Nakamura recounts: “We put together this first exhibit [of *Manzanar*] and it was amazing. Actually, we ended up making three of them, which travelled around, but the first one, the unveiling of it—it was amazing, the people’s reaction. You see, you have to imagine there’s no such thing as Asian American studies, Asian Americans; no one talked about the camps at all. [...] So it was probably one of the first, at least in Southern California—well, I’m sure all over—of photos of camps. And I could really see how both Japanese Americans and other people were really moved by that.”<sup>10</sup>

But despite Nakamura’s and Eddie Wong’s statements, their graduation films are the concretisation of an individual author’s creative vision, who places his own experience at the centre of his work. As such, *Wong Sinsang*, Wong’s short film deconstructs the image of the filmmaker’s father – an aging Chinese immigrant who runs a laundry in Hollywood – in a way that mirrors the evolution of his own feelings toward him: from conventional affection that is tainted by an ounce of contempt to a deep understanding of the father’s sacrifice and respect for the cultural heritage – which includes poetry, painting and martial arts – that the old man harbours. Despite the fact that Wong’s father’s experience is presented as being symptomatic for the dehumanization brought about by the fight for survival in the context of a capitalist economy which marginalizes Asian-Americans, the central figure of the film never gets to express himself on his own, but is constantly mediated by the filmmaker. The manipulations of the images and especially of the sounds (fragments of conversation between the launderer and his white clients that play in a loop and are intercut with the director’s commentary) clearly indicate that we are dealing with a biased analysis, not too different from the method of “the hypodermic needle” (which consists of “directly injecting ideology into viewers unable to resist”<sup>11</sup>) that Kleinhans identified as a threat to more meaningful and concrete actions against the evils the respective ideology denounces.

Later, despite not gaining much ideological subtlety, the films produced by Visual Communications have followed the concept of collective work more closely, both in regard to the process of creation and the way of approaching the topics. For example, the next film to confront the issue of the internment camps (*Wataridori: Birds of Passage*, from 1974) doesn’t tackle its subject through the prism of personal experience, but instead tries to present as many different trajectories of *issei* (second-generation immigrants) as possible and fix their struggle first for survival, and then for building a community. The act of filming is not seen as an individual’s (many times the director’s) therapeutic process anymore; it takes the shape of a polyphonic testimony against History in front of a juror that is none other than Posterity. The internment camps are not a vague, loosely-structured memory, but objective, merciless reality which put a brutal end to many Japanese’ “American dreams”.

A visual chronicle made by and for a certain community is what Chuck Kleinhans advocates for as well. He affirms that, despite the relative academic indifference that surrounds them, a number of African-American UCLA graduates have gone down this road, working in parallel with the L.A. Rebellion. The works of people like Don Amis, Carol Parrott Blue or Ben Caldwell emphasized the artisanal dimension of the cinematic gesture,

dimension which undermines the capitalist notion of individual author and the hierarchy inside a film team and which affirms that cinema is a means of expression that belongs to everybody. This potentiality would be confirmed by later developments, mainly by digital technology. But the connection between these works and the Visual Communications productions runs deeper than intentions or distribution strategies: they also intersect aesthetically and structurally. Multiculturalism, which is celebrated in Don Amis's *Festival of Masks* (1982) – and which is also part of the rhetoric of Third Cinema – was already present in *Cruising J-Town* (1972), a Visual Communications project about the fusion-jazz band Hiroshima. The musicians mix the East-Asian tradition with jazz sonorities – after all, jazz was a musical genre whose reception by white Americans mirrored the evolution of the African-Americans' struggle for equality. Moreover, *Hiroshima* is the musical embodiment of the concept of collective authorship that Visual Communications advocated during the '70s. This self-reflexive aspect also characterizes Carol Parrot Blue's *Varnette's World: A Study of a Young Artist* (1979). This short film seems, at first sight, a fairly conventional portrait of the African-American painter and civil rights defender Varnette Honeywood, but her art – which is first and foremost an useful, community-centered type of art, and therefore condemned to only reach a limited audience – is clearly paralleling Parrott Blue's own trajectory.

If the few African-American filmmakers who made community service art never stepped out of the shadow of those fiction film directors who enjoyed international critical acclaim, Visual Communications ended precisely because of its ambition to “bridge the divide”. At the end of the '70s, the collective was torn between its loyalty to the imperfect, *guerilla* filmmaking they had practiced until that point and its desire to reach a wider audience. An urgent need to reform old discursive forms forced itself to their attention because the Asian-American community had been rapidly evolving. Since 1965, the Asian immigrants' profile had changed radically. Before that time, they mainly came from Japan, China and the Philippines, they belonged to lower social classes and, once they reached the United States, they became exploited work forces on farms and construction sites. Moreover, the migratory flux was severely controlled: there were strict quotas according to the country of origin. But in 1965, the immigration act reversed these discriminatory policies and its effects made themselves felt in just a few years. The newcomers arrived from Vietnam, Korea, India, Thailand or the Pacific Island; their income was significantly higher and so was their mobility between territories and cultures. The Asian-American identity had been built upon the isolation of the community which, being disconnected from its roots, had been forced to invent its own hybrid tradition. After 1965, situations that had defined the Asian-American ethos in the past, such as the internment camps during the Second World War and the always belated hope of coming back to the land of origins, lost their distinctiveness.

Aware of these evolutions, the members of Visual Communications discarded the documentary genre and prepared the first feature film produced by and for the Asian-American minority: *Hito Hata: Raise the Banner* (1980). The film is an homage paid to the first generation of immigrants' resilience and courage – a common subject for Visual

Communications projects, but in this new context, also an alarm signal meant to alert against the contemporary attacks directed against the community. This message is incorporated into Oda's story – an *issei* who witnesses the plans for restructuring the Asian neighbourhood of Los Angeles, nicknamed Little Tokyo – plans which are devised by investors who are themselves Asian immigrants, albeit the new type. The film comments on different attitudes towards this threat, from Oda's friend's resilience, as he accepts to move to a peripheral neighbourhood where he is killed by a thief, to Oda's and some younger Asian-Americans' combativity, as they fight to the end against the destruction of their lifestyle, despite the unequal balance of power between them and their antagonists. The outcome of their struggle, which is never reached during the film, is however conveyed by a shot such as the one that shows us Oda leaving the hospital and heading towards Little Tokyo, scrambled at the feet of the towering office buildings that have invaded the city centre. Resistance seems vain in practical terms, but not in symbolical ones, as it strengthens the connection between Asian-Americans and it allows for the reconstruction of their community, no matter where it will be banished.

The ambitiousness of the project (which included, apart from the contemporary narrative strand, the recreation of three quarters of a century of Asian-American history through the different incidents that prompt Oda's remembrance of his adventures on American soil) required much more funds than the 70,000 dollars endowed by The National Education Office. As the film was not meant to be distributed commercially and therefore had no chance of covering its expenses, Visual Communications found itself on the verge of bankruptcy at the time of Ronald Reagan's mandate – a mandate during which cultural subsidies were greatly reduced. Consequently, the organization was forced to convert into a cultural centre quite similar to Ben Caldwell's more modest enterprise, KAOS Network: an education and performance space for minority youth.

Lastly, we will analyse a cinematographic model which proved its viability both commercially and aesthetically in the African-American cultural landscape as well as in the Asian-American one. The two communities' intellectual elite's perspective on genre films was different: the Asians were only customarily skeptical, while the African-Americans rejected them vigorously because they associated them with Blaxploitation, which had contributed to the perpetuation of harmful racial stereotypes. However, both Wayne Wang's *Chan is Missing* (1981) and Jamaa Fanaka's oeuvre have reinvigorated their respective community's cinematic production, addressing a much wider audience than did a standard Visual Communications or a L.A. Rebellion film and even briefly infiltrating the Hollywood system.

*Hito Hata: Raise the Banner* had been made in order to clear a path for more feature films by and for Asian-Americans, but its pioneering status was unexpectedly hijacked by *Chan is Missing*. Daryl Chin, film critic and programmer at the Asian-American International Film Festival, considers the edition of 1981, when both *Hito Hata: Raise the Banner* and *Fire over Water* (the working title of Wang's film) were screened, a turning point in the community's film history, but not in the way everyone expected: "Here, all along these Asian-American media activists thought that something like *Hito Hata* was going to be the

Asian-American ‘breakthrough,’ and it wasn’t, it was that damned quirky oddball personal experimental *Chan Is Missing*.”<sup>12</sup>

Wayne Wang’s film has an unconventional, non-linear narrative; the path it follows is best described as a spiral whose starting and finishing points are not identical so as to draw a perfect circle, but are nevertheless situated on parallel planes. Accordingly, the protagonists – Jo and Steve, two cab drivers that are looking for their business partner, Chan Hung, who has disappeared with 4,000 dollars – are never granted a setup, a confrontation and a resolution. They just start in a certain kind of crisis situation (which springs from Chan’s disappearance with the money) and end up in another (as they get their money back, but they don’t find out much about Chan’s whereabouts and they start questioning – consciously or unconsciously – their own identity). During their investigation in the perimeter of the Chinese neighbourhood of San Francisco, they meet a heterogeneous ensemble of characters that all authoritatively describe Chan in an attempt to delineate themselves from him. Because he is physically absent, Chan becomes not a radical kind of alterity, but a bordering one, which is even more disturbing as it contains the potential for commonality. Criticism directed against Chan varies from his being too Chinese to not being Chinese enough, depending on the speaker’s degree of assimilation to American culture or on his belonging to a different ethnicity.

In the context of the diversification of Asian immigration to the United States following the legislative changes of the mid-60s, Wayne Wang’s attempt to undermine any fixed Chinese-American identity encourages the process of redefining Asian diaspora so as to encompass the newcomers. The aim – that he shares with the Visual Communications projects – is to express not an Asian subjectivity, but an Asian-American one. Peter X Feng highlights the way the anecdote told in the film by George, the director of the Newcomers’ Language Center, regarding the Chinatown-baked apple pie which has “a definite American form [...] and looks like just any other apple pie, but it doesn’t taste like any other apple pie [...] and that’s because much Chinese baking technique has gone into it”, stands in sharp contrast with the reinterpretation of American cultural forms developed in *Chan is Missing*. Instead of placing the Asian-American experience onto the intact structure of the *noir* genre, Wang perforates it in order to allow his ethnic sensibility to pervade; but he is also careful not to modify the source material beyond recognition and therefore risk alienating an important part of the audience. During the film several allusions are made to Charlie Chan, the protagonist of a series of crime novels and later of films which aimed at counterbalancing anti-Asian propaganda with more positive stereotypes, which were unfortunately equally simplistic and even offensive. The existence of such a pop culture figure doesn’t prompt Chan to openly state his disagreement with this type of characterisation; on the contrary, it stimulates him to pick up its traits while simultaneously questioning its method of functioning.

Jamaa Fanaka proceeds similarly in regard to the Blaxploitation tradition. Going against the African-American intellectual elite’s banishing of the genre, Fanaka did not turn a blind eye towards the desire for escapism that defined a large part of an economically disadvantaged population who was craving to forget about its daily worries at least for the

duration of a movie. Through genre film elements, he offered audiences the gratification they demanded, but he also instilled an ideal of racial dignity and of resistance against anybody trying to diminish its freedom of movement, of expression and of taking and giving pleasure. In Fanaka's films, there is no revolution, but a progressive slip from a servile, individualistic mentality towards self-determinism and communal thought. While prominent L.A. Rebellion members struggled to get their films distributed (Haile Gerima had to create his own production company alongside his wife and tour the country with his films like a door-to-door salesman), the Blaxploitation facade of Fanaka's works allowed him to find distributors even for the three features he made while still in school.

African-American identity is not blown to pieces in Fanaka's films, as it happens to Chinese-American individuality in *Chan is Missing*; however, it is not presented as a given of having specific genetic origins, but rather as something that must be won after one's rigorous polishing of one's personal and social behaviour through self-control, community spirit and racial and class consciousness. In *Emma Mae* (1976), for example, the second feature film directed by Fanaka at UCLA, internal feuds between members of the African-American community and the ferocious individuality of a few are the first obstacles to be overcome before contesting the white man's domination. But Fanaka's film trades the experimental form, the characters whose life is sucked out of them by their symbolic dimension and the narratives whose only purpose is the conveying of political positions for a likeable protagonist, vulnerable and humane, but also gifted with almost supernatural power and pugnaciousness (characteristics that reminds one of typical Blaxploitation heroines such as Foxy Brown, Coffy or Cleopatra Jones – minus the hyper-sexualisation). The fight scenes, the intentional and unintentional humour, the authenticity of the locations and of the crowds (the film was shot entirely on the streets of Compton), the emphasis put on the specific cultural forms of expression of the time – from music to fashion and slang – make *Emma Mae* more straightforwardly pleasing to the public than *Chan is Missing*, which retains traces of its initial experimental form.

Anyway, both films prove the intellectual elite's fallibility to predict the audience's tastes and also the direction a cinematographic current may take after an unexpected popular success. During a time when the programmatic inclusion of ethnic minorities has become norm in Hollywood, resulting in uniformization and the levelling of their cultural distinctiveness, revisiting different historical manifestations of minority cinema in the United States may prove beneficial and, one may hope, inspiring.

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## BOOK REVIEW

### *Filmul tranziției: Contribuții la interpretarea cinemaului românesc „nouăzecist”/*

### *The Transition Film: Contributions towards a critique of Romanian 1990s cinema*

by Andrei Gorzo and Gabriela Filippi (eds.)



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### **Reviewed by Oana Godeanu-Kenworthy**

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**T**his edited Romanian-language volume surveys the country's film output during the decade of the 1990s, when Romania abruptly transitioned from communism to capitalism. An impressive collection of work by young scholars, *The Transition Film: Contributions towards a critique of Romanian 1990s cinema* helps readers to make sense of the confusing social, economic and aesthetic trends that characterize the decade, and approaches the 1990s films in relationship to both the prolific Romanian cinema of the communist era, and with the aesthetic and thematic developments of the Romanian New Wave. The book is divided in three units: the first devoted to the larger social and ideological shifts that characterized the decade and how they were reflected in film; the second unit focuses on the changes undergone by the Romanian film industry in the transition period, while the third dwells on the stylistic choices that directors made in their films.

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After communism collapsed, and before any new films were made, censored films were made available again. In “Hidden Treasures,” Gabriela Filippi shows that, during the 1990s, there was an effort to show and discuss the films that were forbidden during Communism, irrespective of the decade when they had been made, under the assumption that the very fact of being censored guaranteed their value. One of the many ironies of the 1990s is that there were still very few directors who knew how to make movies that appealed to the public, so the best-known films Romanian were still the Communist ones. The 1990s emerged as a decade of complete rebuttal of the structures and ideologies that came before, as well as a decade of profound social dislocation and economic trauma. In “The Collective Author” Costi Rogozanu points out that the films of the period demonized communism, and framed this process as the struggle between the uneducated masses (miners, workers, etc.) and intellectuals (engineers, doctors, or teachers). The forced and accelerated privatization that followed the dismantling of the communist economy led to a destruction of the Romanian industrial sector and to a brutal unleashing of the free market; working-class Romanians bore the brunt of the transition, but the old middle-class intelligentsia also suffered. What is more, its members felt profoundly betrayed by the new regime. As Alex Cistelean shows in his excellent essay “History and Middle-Class Consciousness in Romanian Films of the 1990s,” the old Romanian middle class had enjoyed privileges and cultural capital during Communism; the transition years found them impoverished, their worldview irrelevant in the materialistic jungle of the 1990s, and their anti-communist hopes crushed by the realities of the transition period, when former communist technocrats rapidly ascended to positions of power and privilege in Romanian society.

The resulting artistic vision that dominates the decade, Rogozanu writes, reflected “the commercial energy of the age” and chronicled “the rise of an aggressive petite-bourgeoisie.” The unleashing of the market was reflected in film as both the access of ordinary people to commercial good of all kinds, and the commodification of the human body, expressed overwhelmingly in the sexualization of women. Indeed sex is prevalent in the film of the 1990s. Iulia Popovici argues in the essay “I’ve long wanted to f\*\*k you,” the overuse of sexual violence and the sexualization of the female body in the film of the 1990s function as metaphors for the larger forces rending the fabric of Romanian society: the ubiquitous rapes scenes stand for collective and individual powerlessness (in the face of history, of the system, or one’s destiny); the body that is abused is that of society as a whole, the body of the nation in the thralls of brutal change.

The 1990s also saw the reassessment of previous historical paradigms. Raluca Durbacă shows that the Communists’ ultranationalist and anti-Semitic portrayals of World War II and the Holocaust continued well into the 1990s. Some controversial historical figures, like Marshall Ion Antonescu, were rehabilitated and, as a rule, these films continued to play down the reality of the Holocaust, of the Iași pogroms, denying any Romanian responsibility in the incidents; the Legionnaires (a right-wing group that supported the Nazis under Antonescu’s regime) were portrayed as mere foreign imports from Germany, while the decisions of Antonescu and of others were excused wholesale, in the name of saving the country from the Soviets and Communism in general.



This uncritical anticommunism represents a dominant trend across the cinematic productions of the decade, and which also speaks to more enduring cultural and political trends in contemporary Romania. Indeed, as Alex Cistelean argues, the current Romanian middle class still uncritically embraces the neoliberal narrative of the 1990s; they seem to be blind to the responsibilities of the corporate sphere towards society, and continue to argue in favor of less government. Claudiu Turcuș's excellent "Anti-communism: Our secret recipe" demonstrates that the anticommunism became in 1990s Romania a hegemonic, unquestioned discourse and attitude which worked to silenced any criticisms of the neoliberal public interventions of the age, any discussions about their usefulness, or their impact on society. Indeed, to this day, there is no viable center-left political party in Romania today, and the neoliberal paradigm still holds sway. Of the films produced in the 1990s, about a third are anticommunist. Their plots either describe the horrors of communism (what Turcuș calls "retrospective anticommunism"), or they portray the transition period, whose despair, economic struggles, and overall brutality was still construed as a direct consequence of communism ('reactive anticommunism').

Romanian memory politics is still informed by the anticommunism of the 1990s. As Cistelean shows, the Romanian intellectual elites have been unwitting accomplices in this state of affairs. Alexandru Matei's essay "*The Memorial of Pain*; History as Manicheism" focuses on a famous documentary that chronicles Communism in Romania. The series premiered in 1991 under the leadership of respected historian and journalist Lucia Hossu-Longin, and is still running today; yet, as Matei notes, over the years it carefully avoided political controversies in memorializing places and events, and contented itself to make politically convenient commentaries at politically convenient times. In other words, even a high-profile media series devoted to remembering (or exorcising) Communism and exposing its activists, had to tiptoe around the murky realities of former Communists having risen to political prominence and having a hold on Romanian political processes, as much as it forbade any real critiques of Western actors in Romania's story.

Part two of the book turns to the fate of the state-funded film studies after 1989. On the tumultuous background of the decade, the Romanian film industry underwent radical transformations. Some trends and structures inherited from communism endured, however. The two essays by Radu Toderici and Bogdan Jitea show that the same forms of film production and the same directors dominated the film market before and after communism. Indeed, Toderici argues that the image of the director as an *auteur* is one of the central illusions of Romanian film in the 1990s. Using archival sources and data from the National Film Archives, the authors of the two essays demonstrate that the established directors of the 1970s took over the old state film studios in the 1990s as they were reorganized in independent companies, and monopolized the shrinking public funds, thus creating a formidable obstacle in the path of a new generation of directors. Some of the old critical paradigms also endured. As Toderici shows, the film criticism of the decade continued to focus on art films, and assessed films on the spectrum art film/facile entertainment, without ever taking seriously a well crafted, professionally made commercial film—not that there were many done at the time. Mihai Fulger's article questions the emergence of

the concept of “canonical” Romanian film in the 1990s, arguing that the idea of a “canon” was created largely by simply borrowing Western categories, and still devaluing the idea of a popular cinema.

The reconfiguration of the financing structures of the communist era impacted documentaries more than any other genre. Andra Petrescu examines the few documentaries that were made during the 1990s, their sources of financing and their preferred topics. As the film studios of the communist period were organized, many went simply bankrupt and disappeared altogether. Petrescu explains that the communist film industry had functioned in ways closer to Hollywood than to the European model; the production, distribution and movie theaters were all vertically integrated. As these models and this infrastructure collapsed in the 1990s, the system could not simply be hooked onto the European model built around national subsidies and national financing programs meant to protect film industries from American competition. Without the necessary state funding, very few documentaries were still being made. And, surprisingly, despite the upheavals faced by Romanian society in the 1990s, those that were made failed to investigate and to document the ongoing social crises. Rather, they tended to look back to key figures and interwar history (King Michael or Marshall Ion Antonescu), or to reconstitute the stories of Romanian dissidents. This seems to reflect the dominant ideological taboos of the period, which prevented any critical investigation of the challenges of the transition to capitalism and its social impact.

The four essays included in the last unit of the book connect the dominant aesthetic choices of the decade with the ideological changes and with the commercial imperatives resulting from the restructuring of the entire industry. Ionuț Mareș in “The Aesthetics of Despair” argues that the style of these films was a direct response to the social and economic context of the decade, but this makes them unpopular with contemporary audiences. Andrei Șendrea examines three films from the 1990s that failed with the public, and tries to explain their failure and argue for their relevance, while Cătălin Olaru identifies four dominant sources of humour in Romanian comedies made in the 1990s: the connection between humour and eroticism, the use of slapstick comedic devices, the trope of the interaction with foreigners or the West, and the contrast between Communist and post-communist Romania, as a form of social satire. Christian Ferencz-Flatz’s chapter on popular director Nae Caranfil dwells on the sources of humour in Caranfil’s comedies, arguing that his 1990s output functioned as quasi-historical films, which even at the time of their release built upon a shared sense of a time gap between the viewer and the subject matter: the source of their humour is a past that was still recent enough to feel like the present, but still obsolete enough to trigger laughter. Ferencz-Flatz makes the astute observation that the failure of many of these comedies to engage audiences in the 1990s was due on the one hand to the competition with the much glossier Western comedies available to Romanian viewers (and which provided a well-needed source of escapism), and on the other, to the erosion of shared collective identity referents that still make Romanian comedies from the 1970s and 1980s popular with audiences to this day.

A few directors tried to engage the social realities of the day and chose stylistic devices that went against the restrained aesthetics of the communist period; other iconic directors

(such as Mircea Danieliuc, discussed in Andrei Gorzo's essay) failed to produce anything notable in the 1990s, making realist films that still were intended to double as overarching and essentialist morality tales about all things Romanian. Yet, as Gorzo points out, by the end of the decade, new forms of realism were appearing. In 2001 Cristi Puiu's *Stuff and Dough* announced the arrival of the Romanian New Wave. This new trend was, as both Gorzo and Ferencz-Flatz noted, in many ways an intentional departure from the stylistic choices of film-makers of the 1990s, as well as on their generalizing tendencies. These new directors, many of them young, embraced a minimalist realism that brought Romanian cinema back into the global consciousness. The directors of the New Romanian Cinema write against the trends of the 1990s, in their determined unpicking of the recent past and of the Communist past, in their low-fi visual effects – partly due to the lack of funding and the monopolization of the film studios in the 1990s by the “big players” of the communist period – as well as by their commitment to avoid generalization and moral judgements, whether their subject matters are abortion, poverty, immigration, or the health care system.

Well researched, and persuasively written, the essays in this voluminous book provide a much-needed insight into the film of the 1990s and on the decade as a whole – its continuities with the communist period, and the ways in which the rapid social and cultural changes shaped the artistic responses of the directors of the time, indirectly opening the path for the cinema of the New Wave. As such, *The Transition Film* is a useful tool for researchers in film studies, cultural studies, and communist and post-communist studies, in Romania and abroad.



## BOOK REVIEW

### *Cinematic Encounters 2: Portraits and Polemics* by Jonathan Rosenbaum



Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2019.  
ISBN 978-0-252-08438-6.  
320 pp.

#### Reviewed by Călin Boto

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It seems almost inappropriate to consider reviewing Jonathan Rosenbaum's most recent book for an academic journal. Ever since *Moving Places: A Life at the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), his first book as a writer, the veteran film critic has been making it quite explicit that (and why) he finds the academic standards for scholarship and professionalism "dubious". The very first pages of this book reaffirm these uneasy feelings. Yet, his name has been no stranger to the academic publishing presses – University of Illinois Press, University of California Press, University of Chicago Press are among the academic "roofs" that hang over Rosenbaum's books. Compromise? Surely not. I would even call it a victory; a peer-reviewed one. However, he's not the first uncompromising film critic to be published by a university press. J. Hoberman (*Vulgar Modernism*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991) and Jonas Mekas (*Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959-1971*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016 – reprinted and edited) are just leading a personal shortlist of examples. The neoliberalisation of the book market is no news, but its effects reverberate even more now, when J.K. Rowling and Stephenie Meyer (re)took control over all literature-related headlines from the last couple of months. So Rosenbaum is certainly not the last reel rebel to find support from academic presses either, as "unacademic" as he might be. That being said, we can assume by now that contesting

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academic writing/teaching on film is as much part of film culture (hence film studies) as any notable anti-establishment attempt from film history. That's why the speech Susan Sontag made at the University of Chicago's inauguration of its Film Studies Department in 1991 could very easily become a homework, a footnote, i.e. curricula. And one could by now assume that Jean-Luc Godard's polite skepticism regarding film schools, teased by Lionel Baier, the director of the Cinema Department of the ECAL (The University of Arts and Design of Lausanne), during their live discussion on Instagram, will see the light of academic hermeneutics in no time. But the politics of film departments are certainly not the only institutionalised structure of cinema that Rosenbaum finds suspicious.

This volume, the second half of the collection *Cinematic Encounters* (the first one, which I haven't got the chance to read yet, was published in 2018 by the same press), stands for his flair for contrarian thinking, even if, as the author himself notes, not all of the essays included in this volume are explicitly concerned with polemics (p. 4). While the first volume consisted of interviews and dialogues, this one is an anthology of articles and essays about 24 filmmakers; each filmmaker gets his/her share, some less than others (one essay about Chantal Akerman, yet four about Alain Resnais). It may sound messy and uneven, especially since Rosenbaum, keeping his anti-provincialism credo, chose very different filmmakers, among which Guy Maddin, Orson Welles, Jaques Demy, Tsai Ming-liang, Sally Potter and Béla Tarr. On top of that, many articles, written at different times and for different publications, once put together, tend to repeat previous ideas. One might argue that so is cinephilia: uneven, repetitive and, at its best, eclectic; and he/she would be right. But cinephilia, unlike industry-oriented criticism, is most often not open to debate, unlike film criticism. I'd say it's only Rosenbaum's meticulousness that turned this fragile attempt into a solid volume.

What's truly rewarding for a reader who is already accustomed to Rosenbaum's work is the rediscovery of some recurrent arguments of his, applied to names who are already terms for his career. It must be said that this volume contains what I consider to be one of the very best essays on Jacques Rivette's *Out 1s* (*Noli Me Tangere* – 1971 – and *Spectre* – 1972): “[On *Out 1*] Beginning as a documentary that is progressively overtaken by fiction... In contrast to the serial, *Spectre* might be said to begin as a fictional narrative that is progressively overtaken by documentary – the precise opposite of his predecessor.” Alongside Rivette, Rosenbaum goes on with his usual tour de force – Ozu, Welles (and Oja Kodar, which he highlights as a key contributor to many of Welles' films, which reminds of his previous efforts to put a light on Marceline Loridan-Ivens' own merits in Joris Ivens' last film *A Tale of of the Wind*), Tarr, Dreyer –, but he also champions the early films of Sally Potter, the most recent ones of Jim Jarmusch, Jerry Lewis' and, more notably, Ermanno Olmi's places in film history.

Is Ozu slow? Arguably, says one of my favorite essays (in fact a lecture) of his, not included in this volume. But people are quick. They were quick to dismiss Ozu's *Good Morning* (1959), Rosenbaum thinks. Or to consider Alain Resnais a cold formalist. Or to sum up Jacques Demy as a filmmaker who, “uninterested in the formal experimentation of Alain Resnais or the political agitation of Jean Luc Godard, ...created a self-contained fantasy world...”<sup>2</sup> (p. 51). When I say “people”, I'm not referring to the neutral spectator,

but to the individuals who, one way or another, have decisional power – producers, distributors, censors, film critics.

All in all, this volume is far from Rosenbaum's most ambitious titles (*Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons*; *Goodbye Cinema, Hello Cinephilia: Film Culture in Transition*; *Movie Mutations: The Changing Face of World Cinephilia*), but it surely raises the bar for the microgenre of the career piece. Polemic, like (film) criticism, has a certain negative resonance. Rosenbaum is not polemical for polemics' sake. His attempts are corrective, against approximation, or, how he puts it, against "expedient untruths".

## ENDNOTES

1. Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Wind from the East", <https://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/2019/03/wind-from-the-east-a-tale-of-the-wind/>, published on 16 March 2019, accessed on 2 May 2020.
2. The description is no longer available on Wikipedia, 02.06.2020.





## BOOK REVIEW

### *Romanian Cinema Inside Out: Insights on Film Culture, Industry and Politics 1912-2019* by Irina Trocan (ed.)



Bucharest: Romanian Cultural Institute, 2019.  
ISBN 978-973-577-744-9  
295 pp.

#### **Reviewed by Bolesław Raciński**

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With its sudden rise to prominence, contemporary Romanian cinema stormed the gates of academia, quickly becoming the subject matter of constantly growing number of publications devoted to the task of understanding its phenomenon. While most of these endeavors should be considered successful (*Romanian New Wave. An Introduction* by Doru Pop, Dominique Nasta's insightful *Contemporary Romanian Cinema: The History of an Unexpected Miracle*, among others), an English-speaking reader, driven by the desire to explore Romanian cinema far beyond the works of internationally successful *auteurs*, was yet to be satisfied. *Romanian Cinema Inside Out* is a successful attempt on filling this gap: edited by Irina Trocan, the book presents its readers with a variety of topics, ranging from the most recent developments in the Romanian film industry to some of the most obscure and challenging issues.

The editor clearly states the aims of the publication in the introduction: while the English-language criticism is “often auteur-centric and vaguely Orientalising” (p. 8), *Romanian Cinema...* attempts to focus on the subjects previously overlooked. It is a highly welcome premise, as many of the small cinemas are often studied through the lens of various “new waves” that provide them exposition at the prestigious festivals, and mostly by the international scholars, frequently unable to resist the “exotic” appeal. *Romanian*

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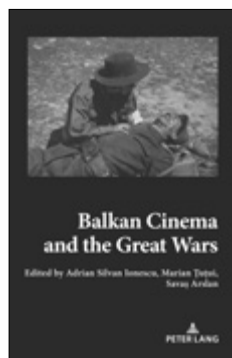
*Cinema...* focuses on historical contexts, trends and shifts, with a “certain anti-auteurist bent” (p. 10). What needs to be emphasized is the fact that the book consists not only of brand new studies but also some that had been previously available in Romanian only.

*Romanian Cinema...* consists of 16 chapters, plainly divided into four sections: “Videograms of a Nation”, “Spotlighting the Peripheral”, “Genre Filmmaking and Visual Pleasure”, and “The Fine Print”. The first section engages in the discussions on various representations of Romania and its history, with chapters focused on such different films as contemporary documentaries or *Romanian Independence*, a historical epic from the year 1912. This section ends with the interview with Dominique Nasta, the aforementioned author of *Contemporary Romanian Cinema...*, who elaborates on New Romanian Cinema phenomenon, discussing its status within the national industry and international reception, among other topics. Chapters included in “Spotlighting the Peripheral” section are focused on people and issues banished to the margins of the representational regime, such as female filmmakers and female-oriented stories, and the ethnographic portrayals of Romanian Roma people. Iulia Popovici follows and analyses the trope of explicit rape in Romanian cinema, while Georgiana Vrăjitoru studies teen films of the ‘70s and the ‘80s, examining their gradual alienation from the assumed spectators. It is the third section, “Genre Filmmaking and Visual Pleasure”, which I find the most appealing. Its authors focus on the popular genre conventions from various periods in Romanian cinema, exploring their relationships with the state and the audience, as well as the filmmakers’ struggle against the lack of production means, best exemplified in Andrea Virginas’ intricate chapter on science-fiction. The final section, aptly titled “The Fine Print”, is, as promised in the “Introduction”, a collection of essays that “have implicitly polemical takes on traditional critical wisdom” (p. 9), including a chapter by Andrei State on various dimensions of realism in the films of Corneliu Porumboiu, which shines a new light on this most intriguing director of contemporary Romanian cinema.

This short overview demonstrates that the book is restricted neither by narrow periods nor by any definite methodological approach, a premise that results in an engaging collection of topics related to different aspects of Romanian cinema. For those who feel compelled to explore these issues further, the book offers a vast bibliography on Romanian cinema. Unfortunately, most of these writings are in Romanian, but one can hope that *Romanian Cinema Inside Out* will pave the way for them to be translated into English. It is also worth noting that the chapters included in the book differ greatly in writing style, ranging from scholarly analyses to sarcastic pieces, nonetheless even the latter do not lose sight of the book’s goal: to offer the window into both the films and various contexts of Romanian cinema through the 20th and 21st centuries. Its readership is likely to include both scholars, interested in small cinemas and avoiding the orientalisising approach, and cinephiles, wishing to expand their knowledge of Romanian cinema.

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Balkan Cinema and the Great Wars: Our Story* by Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, Marian Țuțui, and Savaş Arslan (eds.)



Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020.  
ISBN 978-3-631-80396-7.  
282 pp.

#### Reviewed by Alex Forbes

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**T**he publication of the proceedings of the Third International Conference on Balkan Cinema is the occasion for those of us who were present to reflect on those days in Bucharest, the papers that were read, meetings made, conversations had, and knowledge shared. The book presents a very useful and wide-ranging guide to anyone interested in how Balkan Cinema is being studied at the present time, and an indicator of the breadth and depth of interest that the region's cinema is attracting. There is work here from established scholars in the field, who have been working for years to nurture the kind of transnational scholarship, and the breadth of theoretical approaches, that stand out as soon as one peruses the contents pages of the present volume. It would take many pages of this magazine to summarise and comment on each one of the papers in the book, a job Professor Adrian-Silvan Ionescu in any case does admirably in his foreword to the volume. Therefore, what follows relates my own impressions as a delegate at the Conference two years ago, and as an interested party responding to the appearance of the Conference proceedings in print.

I shall address the remarkable diversity that is on display among the twenty-two papers that comprise the book, but it seems to me that some common strands emerge. In

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**Alex Forbes** has contributed writing to *Studies in European Cinema* (United Kingdom), *Contradictions: A Journal For Critical Thought* (Czech Republic), and *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei. Teatru, Muzică, Cinematografie* (Romania). An independent researcher in Balkan Cinema, his work also takes in conceptual ideas of the European and studies of Ecological Cinema.

his foreword to the volume, Professor Ionescu refers to the “war of affirmation” that the study of Balkan Cinema has had to wage, drawing a parallel with the limited coverage that Balkan history has been treated to. In the contributions present here, I see an underlying conviction that Balkan Film Studies *is* film studies and Balkan Film History *is* film history. The articles of the keynote speakers in this volume confirm as much. Professor Dominique Nasta’s exploration of WWI melodramas acknowledges the indebtedness of Balkan melodramas to source in French and Belgian cinema, with reference to *Duty and Sacrifice* (*Datorie și sacrificiu*, 1925, Romania) and *In God We Trust* (*Sa verom u Boga*, 1932, Yugoslavia). Perhaps even more significantly, however, her paper refers to the early career of the Hungarian filmmaker Kertész Mikhály, who of course went on to become the celebrated *émigré* director Michael Curtis. Specifically, his recently rediscovered film *A Tolonc* (*The Exile*, but currently on DVD/Blu-Ray release as *The Undesirable*), made in the Transylvanian city of Cluj/Kolozsvár in 1914, displays parallel editing, location shooting, and framing techniques that place it alongside the most advanced contemporary developments of the cinematic art on either side of the Atlantic. Therefore, even while acknowledging the development of Balkan Cinema in response to Western European models, the ongoing and emerging study of the archives reflects on, and can rewrite, the history of cinema on a global scale.

Film Studies as a discipline has a strong contribution to make in understanding the history of broader cultural phenomena, as Professor Savaş Arslan’s keynote paper demonstrates. His research into the discussion of the Balkans in the early French film magazine *Ciné-Journal* provides a range of insights into the international spread of cinema through the Balkans, both as a means of recording and commenting on events of note and as an entertainment medium. Central to his argument is the understanding that this research confirms and illuminates the understanding of “Balkanism” as a cultural and historical phenomenon, with reference to Maria Todorova’s groundbreaking work on the subject.

The value of film magazines as a source, highlighted in this keynote, finds a complement in Rosen Spasov’s contribution, which provides a useful piece of archival work contextualising, examining, and commenting on the film magazines that were produced in Bulgaria during the Second World War.

In understanding the definition of the Balkans as region and the Balkan cultural space, external attitudes, including negative ones such as those explored in Savaş Arslan’s paper, are crucial. Professor Marian Țuțui’s keynote paper indicates, however, that it is important to expand the breadth of perspective in studying those attitudes. In making a comparative study of the representation of the Balkans in Australian war films, Professor Țuțui makes the astute discovery of a global cross-current, with, as with a great many of the papers in this volume, the capacity to expand the reader’s consciousness. Balkan Film Studies and the history of cinema in the Balkans exist only in their interconnectedness with Film Studies as a global whole, and the constant reaffirmation of that fact is not the least merit of this volume of conference proceedings.

The transnationalism of Professor Țuțui’s approach, here and throughout the considerable body of work of which he is the author, is a vital characteristic and the insights

and cross-connections to which this transnational approach gives rise are an integral part of the reason for having an International Conference on Balkan Cinema and for naming our approach Balkan Film Studies, where the imposition of the confines of national cinema would foreclose on the possibility of a great deal of interesting work. Examples in the present volume are as diverse as they are interesting. Betül Balaban examines the representation of Turkish characters in the Greek film series about National Service *Loafing and Camouflage*, providing an insight into the expression in visual culture of a deep-seated and long-lasting cultural phenomenon. Elsewhere, Petar Kardjilov illuminates a chapter in Balkan Film History with an examination of filmmaking in the province of Dobruja during its occupation by Bulgarian troops in 1916-18.

Furthermore, the present volume testifies to the breadth of the range of methodological approaches that are in play in contemporary Balkan Film Studies. Most of the theoretical armature deployed by Film Studies as a global discipline is being applied somewhere, by someone working on Balkan Cinema, and the present volume does a reasonable job of reflecting the fact. Animation studies, for instance, is a strand whose importance within film studies continues to grow, and the conference proceedings are enriched by Professor Dana Duma's contribution in this area. Professor Duma's conference presentation was my introduction to the animated film work of Ion Popescu Gopo, Ion Truică, and Radu Igazsag, and I suppose it may well be so to many readers. Augmented by reference to recent work on animated cinema by Maria Lorenzo Hernández, the paper is not only a significant piece of scholarship in its own right, but, like many of the articles in this volume, suggests a direction for further research and study.

Trans-media approaches are another developing strand of theory and methodology at the present time, and here, too, scholars of Balkan Film are finding ways to apply and develop the insights of the approach. Nevena Daković implements Henry Jenkins' notion of trans-media storytelling to discuss the multimedia career of the Serbian novelist and filmmaker Stanislav Krakov. Again, the possibility of re-writing and re-framing the history of cinema as medium as well as that of Balkan Cinema emerges from this study of a fascinating and challenging body of work that runs "the thin and porous line between fiction and fact"<sup>1</sup>.

Feminist theory, in film and elsewhere, continues to be an influential and insightful field of research and its importance to the study of Balkan Cinema is just as self-evident as in any other field. In the present volume, Vesi Vuković contributes a paper on Yugoslav partisan films, with a strong grounding in the theoretical background. The paper incorporates a detailed and strongly handled close reading of scenes in Aleksandr Petrović's classic *Three (Tri)*, (1965), as well as an insightful interpretation of the bleakly beautiful *Morning (Jutro)*, (1967) by Mladomir Džorđević. Its comments on the history of women's evolving role in Yugoslavian society are of equal interest to its bringing to bear of a feminist theoretical armature to interpret a body of cinematic work, the Yugoslav New Film, that, for its technical, thematic, and artistic innovation, deserves all of the scholarly recognition and examination that it receives.

There is plenty of ground to be made up before Balkan Cinema can assume its rightful level of recognition among cinephiles and scholars. Mihai Fulger's contribution, examining

how Balkan discoveries and restorations have been generally snubbed by Europe's leading festival of archive cinema, is an eloquent reinforcement of the point. Nonetheless, the emergent impression from the volume of conference proceedings that is published here, is a strongly positive one. Balkan Cinema is an exciting scholarly field to be working in at present, especially as a young researcher. There are all manner of dialogues and strands to be pursued, collaborations to develop, films to watch and articles to read, and it is hoped that the book under discussion here will have its role in furthering an expansion of the consciousness of Balkan Cinema in the minds of those who are already committed enthusiasts, as well as drawing new attention and recognition to the cause.

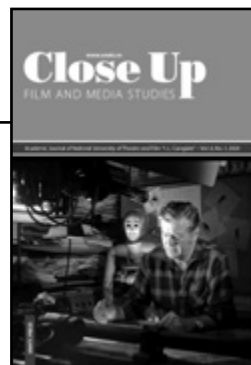
## ENDNOTE

1. Daković, Nevena, "Transmedia Storytelling of the Great War", in Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, Marian Țuțui, and Savaş Arslan (eds.), *Balkan Cinema and the Great Wars: Our Story*, Berlin, Peter Lang, 2020, p. 30

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# Close Up

FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES



## Informations for authors

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- Contributors should submit the articles as an A4 Word document (doc or docx file format).
- Submissions should be between 4.000 and 8.000 words in length, including Notes and Bibliography
- The paper must be written in English, Times New Roman font (12 point), double-spaced
- The text should be accompanied by an abstract (of up to 150 words), key words, a mini-bio (up to 100 words) containing your academic affiliation and your email address. Please, send the pictures separately, in a jpg format.
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- The texts submitted to "Close up" should not be under consideration elsewhere
- In case of papers signed by several authors, we need the permission of co-authors for publication in written.
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Please submit the papers, to the following addresses:

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