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**Beyond the New Romanian Cinema:
Romanian Culture, History, and
the Films of Radu Jude**

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Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu Press

2A Lucian Blaga, Sibiu, Romania 550169
<https://editura.ulbsibiu.ro>

Proof Editor: Daniel Coman

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Still from "*I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians*," directed by Radu Jude.

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Beyond the new Romanian cinema : Romanian culture, history, and the films of Radu Jude / Andrei Gorzo, Veronica Lazăr. - Sibiu : Editura Universității "Lucian Blaga" din Sibiu, 2023
Conține bibliografie

ISBN 978-606-12-1959-9

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Chapter 1

“The Most Self-Flagellating Director in the World”

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

The films deemed part of the NRC either featured contemporary Romanian urban locations, or they were set in the recent historical past – the late 1980s or, in other words, the last gasp of Romania’s state socialist era (1948-1989). These settings were photographed (by Oleg Mutu, Marius Panduru, Tudor Lucaciu or Andrei Butică) in a style which suggested the absence of artificial lighting and connoted raw, gritty realism, or naturalism, by virtue of its associations with “observational” documentary filmmaking or amateur (video) footage. The stories they told tended to unfold over a very short time span – usually no more than a few hours (in other words, not much longer than the films’ screening times). The narration tended to follow or

observe (in a manner suggesting a somewhat personified camera – the camera as invisible witness) a single protagonist or a single group of characters, as he, she or they were attempting to negotiate a crisis, to pull through an ordeal or to meet some kind of deadline. There was little or no cross-cutting between actions occurring simultaneously at different locales, little or no narrative shifts in space or time.

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

Radu Jude's *The Happiest Girl in the World*, which came after such defining films of the NRC, doesn't concern itself with such life-and-death matters. (Neither do Corneliu Porumboiu's first two features, *12:08 East of Bucharest* and *Police, Adjective*). The ordeal that Jude's heroine is trying to endure is simply the shooting of a commercial for a soda drink, in the course of a hot Bucharest summer day. It so happens that this high school girl from a provincial town has won a car in a sweepstake organized by the soda company; appearing in the commercial is the price for it. She must have woken during the night (if she went to sleep at all) to travel all the way to Bucharest with her parents, who wouldn't let her use the car anyway, having decided to sell it and use the money to refurbish the girl's grandmother's house

and turn it into a boarding house for tourists. Apart from the disappointment, the fish-out-of-water disorientation, and the heat, she has to put up with being patronized and humiliated by the representative of the soft drinks company, the advertising agency team and the film crew, while she keeps returning between takes to a teenager-versus-parents fight in which sulking and being insolent are her only weapons against their barrage of emotional blackmail alternated with threats of punishment. It is not a life-and-death matter, but it is certainly another ordeal story, designed by Jude (just as much as *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* and *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* had been designed by their directors) as an experience to be endured by the viewer in sympathy with the heroine.

Another feature all these films share is that, no matter how exceptional or unexceptionally quotidian their story events might seem, a high degree of attention is paid to mundane details. The first exchange of dialogue we hear in *The Happiest Girl in the World* has to do with the heroine's car sickness; immediately afterwards, the family car having pulled at a gas station, mother and daughter talk about menstrual pain as they change into better clothes in a public toilet. Jude's investment in ordinariness, as writer-director, feels almost militant. In a 2009 Romanian film, this stylistic choice was immediately recognizable as a mark of the "new wave" that had been ushered in by Cristi Puiu's first two features (both co-written with Răzvan Rădulescu), *Stuff and Dough* and *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*. In this "new wave" cinema, the prosaic ordinariness of day-to-day exertions, objects, and language is freed from the burden of oversignification that had been indissolubly tied to it in the Romanian cinema of the 1990s; in other words, the common and the humdrum are freed from their old moral and almost metaphysical associations with the vulgar, the ugly and the debased, and rendered as the neutral, indifferent and sometimes dull texture of life.

As acting in a commercial involves a lot of waiting around, interspersed with repeating a few words and gestures on and on, the heroine's calvary has an element of tedium about it, and Jude's direction emphasizes the heaviness of time. This also happens in the other films of the NRC – not least in those which, unlike *The Happiest Girl in the World*, show us characters caught in life-and-death situations. For purposes of 'de-dramatization' and realistic effect, the Romanian filmmakers tend to include chunks of time in which nothing of great dramatic import happens. This preference for 'real time' is generally synonymous with a penchant for long takes – sometimes keeping close to the characters (as in Puiu's first two films), sometimes combined with long shots (as in Porumboiu's *Police, Adjective*), often handheld. This aesthetic they share is also characterized by a reduction in expressive and spectacular resources: there is no use of expressive music, no effort to convey character subjectivity through visual or aural distortions, or even through point-of-view shots; there is no great multiplicity of camera angles, there are no elaborate crane shots, etc. (Sometimes, especially in the early phases of the New Romanian Cinema, this aesthetic was called "minimalist,"²¹ although the term hardly seems appropriate for Cristi Puiu's images from *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, which, simulating documentary shots of busy, overcrowded Bucharest hospitals, are always teeming with human activity and relying on an intricate choreography of camera and actors.)

All things considered, where exactly did the novelty of the NRC reside? Did it bring anything new to international cinema (or to Romanian cinema, for that matter)? After all, some of the stylistic features outlined above – the use of long takes for a realistic effect, the emphasis on 'real' duration, the accommodation of the contingent and the undramatic, the space granted to inconsequential incidents, the militant investment in the unglamorously quotidian – had been around at least since Italian neorealism (and its influential the-

orization by André Bazin). The emergence in the 1960s of documentary film movements like "direct cinema" and *cinéma vérité* had inspired a new style of scripting, staging, acting and shooting fiction, aiming at an effect of life caught unawares, as in the films of John Cassavetes (often cited as a model by NRC catalyst Cristi Puiu) or, later, in the first films of Béla Tarr. In the 1990s – an age of ubiquitous video images, some of them documenting world-historical events like the fall of the Ceaușescu regime in Romania or the wars in ex-Yugoslavia – a new urge to compete with this level of rawness, of grit, of apparent 'realness' seemed to seize art cinema. The films of Dogme 95 made quite a stir at the time, as did Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne's *Rosetta*, which won the Palme d'Or in 1999, a couple of years before Romania started producing its own somewhat similar-looking films. (The Dardenne brothers would go on to co-produce films by leading NRC director Cristian Mungiu – *Beyond the Hills* [2012], *Graduation* [2016] – while clearly stating their affinity with Romania's "new cinema."²²) So, if a number of new Romanian films from the 2000s shared a number of features, as described in the previous paragraphs, they also shared many of these features with non-Romanian films going back as far as *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and culminating with *Rosetta*. Hence the question: what were the elements of novelty, if any, brought by the NRC to the stage of world cinema, in the mid-2000s?

The Novelty of the NRC within World Cinema

First and foremost, the NRC brought Romanian subject matter on screen. To the extent that it takes the Romanian health system as its subject – built in the state socialist era and supposedly continuing to offer medical attention to everybody for free, only increasingly underfunded and perceived by Romanian citizens as inefficient and corrupt – *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* can be said to tackle

very broadly the legacy of Romanian state socialism. *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* is about the grim consequences of the pronatalist policies implemented by Ceaușescu and, more generally, about the late, terminal phase of his regime, characterized by drastic economic austerity (shortages of food, heating, electricity, and consumer goods), and consequent popular frustration. *12:08 East of Bucharest* and *The Paper Will Be Blue* are both oblique gazes at the violent events of December 1989 (internationally televised at the time) which brought an end to the state socialist era.

What other elements of novelty could be identified about the NRC? According to the director of *Mr. Lăzărescu*, Cristi Puiu, his emphasis on medical procedures and processes – on the processing of an individual by state institutions, namely – was indebted to Frederick Wiseman's documentaries about American institutions, but it could also be seen as more specifically Romanian. *The Paper Will Be Blue* and *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* – two films which, following quickly in the footsteps of *Mr. Lăzărescu*, did a lot to establish a NRC formula – both excel at orchestrating scenes of difficult, tense, rather absurdist negotiation between the protagonists and the motley representatives of the collapsing pre-1989 state (from officers in the army to hotel receptionists); just as they both display a Lăzărescu-like sensitivity to social and professional hierarchies and castes (the medical, the military etc.), and their built-in tensions. Puiu's co-writer on *Lăzărescu*, Răzvan Rădulescu, also co-wrote *The Paper Will Be Blue* with Alexandru Băciu and director Radu Muntean, and he was script consultant for Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*. Rădulescu would go on to co-write key films of the New Romanian Cinema – Muntean's 2010 *Tuesday, After Christmas*, Călin Peter Netzer's 2013 *Child's Pose*, and his own directorial debut from 2010, *First of All, Felicia*, co-directed with Melissa de Raaf; he would also co-write the 2009 *Gruber's Journey*, a partly conventional, partly interesting historical drama by

the veteran director Radu Gabrea, and the first fiction film dealing with the Romanian participation in the Holocaust. Each and every one of these films exhibits some, if not all, of the stylistic features and thematic interests we have outlined so far.³

Even though the figure of the idiotic and/or authoritarian official was, of course, neither new nor specifically Romanian, scenes with random state functionaries, from both before and after the fall of the communist regime, displaying rudeness, corruption, authoritarianism, absurdity, exhausted irascibility, etc., would become almost a signature trait of the New Romanian Cinema. The root of all such scenes, of all Romanian cinematic parades of individuals being processed by shabby, creaky structures of authority and power, can be legitimately traced back to a legendary Romanian film from the Ceaușescu era: Lucian Pintilie's *The Reenactment*, shot in 1968 and then suppressed for a year before being granted a limited release in 1970. Puiu, Porumboiu and Radu Jude, among other directors associated with the post-2000 NRC, have cited this landmark film as an inspiration (a distinction they have extended to no more than a handful of other Romanian films from the state socialist era).

The Reenactment tells the tragic story of two young men who, having got into a drunken fight while celebrating their graduation from high school, are forced by the authorities (a prosecutor, a policeman, a teacher, and a film crew) to reenact the incident for the benefit of an educational film. With the two boys being compelled to do something repetitive, faintly absurd, and more and more harrowing, in the course of a single day, when not having to simply wait around and kill time, *The Reenactment* can be said to anticipate the tribulations of *Mr. Lăzărescu*, those of the two young women in Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days*, and especially those of Radu Jude's heroine in *The Happiest Girl in the World*. Does not *The Happiest Girl...* also concern a

film crew and a non-professional actor who's rudely steered to do take after take – to repeat over and over again the same actions and the same words – until she (nearly) falls off her feet? *The Happiest Girl in the World* can very well be seen as the post-communist Romanian world's *Reenactment*. But more on this topic later.

Italian neorealism is also an obvious reference point, and thus can be used to provide a rough estimate of the New Romanian Cinema's novelty. As Lúcia Nagib has written in a 2017 essay, what is now labeled "World Cinema" started

"in Europe, more precisely with Italian neorealism in the 1940s, which, on the basis of a documentary approach to the real, offered fertile ground for the development of art and auteur cinema. Turning its back on Hollywood fantasy and standing on the grave of the Nazi-fascist propaganda machine, this new realist cinema unveiled on screen the gritty reality of a poverty-stricken, devastated Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. As we know, the raw aesthetics and revelatory power of this foundational movement inspired a flurry of subsequent (social-)realist schools in the world, such as Indian independent cinema in the 1950s, Brazilian Cinema Novo in the 1960s, African post-independence cinemas in the 1970s, the New Iranian Cinema in the 1980s, Danish Dogme 95 in the 1990s and many other new waves and new cinemas, remaining influential up to today. Neorealism was moreover the touchstone of André Bazin's concept of cinematic realism, the world's most revolutionary and most enduring film theory ever written, albeit in the form of short magazine articles."⁴

Echoes of Italian neorealism are discernible in some of the early films of the New Romanian Cinema – and especially in a couple of early Radu Jude films. In Jude's Sundance Award-winning short *The Tube with*

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

However, what is absent from the Romanian films (especially from Jude's) is that luminous, seemingly natural dignity which the Italian neorealist filmmakers used to bestow upon their downtrodden heroes. André Bazin has long ago remarked upon

"the nobility and extraordinary dignity that Visconti's *mise en scène* [in *La Terra Trema*] injected into this reality [of the lives of poor fishermen]. These fishermen were not dressed in rags, they were draped in them like tragic princes. Not because Visconti was trying to distort or simply interpret their existence, but because he was revealing its immanent dignity."⁵

La Terra Trema may be an extreme case – as the ragged-princes effect described by Bazin surely has to do with Luchino Visconti's appetite for grand theatricality – but this quality of luminous dignity is common to nearly all the characters of Italian neorealist cinema, ambiguously poised as that cinema was between two versions of humanism, the Communist and the Christian ones, in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Whereas the brand of Romanian neorealism epitomized by *The Tube with a Hat* finds its emblem in actor Gabriel Spahiu's comically wretched look: there's little place for his character to reveal his immanent dignity as he stumbles through the mud, in

the rain, with a plastic bag on his head and the rotting TV set on his shoulder, cursing his fate. Sensitivity to what it means to be underprivileged – in this case, to the fact that the underprivileged have to spend most of their energy on things that the more privileged take for granted – no longer translates into an aesthetic of uplift, celebrating ‘the nobility of the poor.’

Some of the themes of Jude’s *Happiest Girl in the World* – the theme of provincials in the big city, and also the theme of a girl brought by her ambitious parents in front of a film crew and its camera (somewhat like the little girl in Visconti’s 1951 *Bellissima*) – also stem from neorealist sources (as does Jude’s predilection for casting non-professional actors in some of the major roles).⁶ And, once again, the differences are suggestive. In *Bellissima*, the mother (played by Anna Magnani) isn’t scheming to exploit her own child only for the sake of material gain; she’s genuinely screen-struck, and her infatuation with the movies is presented satirically, but also lyrically. Whereas the parents in Jude’s film – the father (Vasile Muraru) an engineer, the mother a teacher (Violeta Haret) – do not care about their daughter (Andreea Bășneag) being the star of a TV commercial any more than they care about her desire to actually be allowed to drive the car she’s won. All they care about is selling the car the same day and investing the money in their boarding house business. To the daughter’s pleas for being granted at least some time with the car – if not to drive it (she doesn’t have a license yet), at least to show it off – they keep replying: “How would that benefit you?” The people in this film – and, more generally, in the New Romanian Cinema – are more insensitive, thicker-skinned than the people in the classic Italian neorealist films; at the same time, they are touchier, more irritably reactive, more easily offended. They often look both battered and hungry, exuding a sort of sullen corruption. *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* and *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* are very

much investigations into the possibility of decent impulses and feelings in the light of all-pervasive cynicism and self-interest.

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