

“Funny” Naturalism in the Romanian New Wave

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RÉSUMÉ

La Nouvelle Vague roumaine s'inscrit dans une tendance minimaliste. Pourtant le minimalisme n'est qu'une façade qui recouvre une attitude naturaliste par excellence, même si celle-ci est plus ambiguë que celle de son original. Ce naturalisme filmique est, par certains côtés, plus proche de l'idée, de la théorie mise en avant par Émile Zola que ne le sont les romans de l'écrivain. La complexité de ce naturalisme ambigu qui se cache sous la surface du minimalisme fait partie intégrale de l'histoire du cinéma de la région, et offre un moyen de réfléchir et réagir aux développements socio-économiques et politiques de la Roumanie des trois dernières décennies.

Following in the footsteps of the literary trend of the second half of the nineteenth century, naturalism resurfaced in several other time periods and in various other artistic media. In cinema, for example, Italian Neorealism or the work of Robert Bresson are both naturalist to a certain degree. A contemporary example is the Romanian New Wave.

According to its style, the Romanian New Wave is part of a “minimalist trend,”¹ which at first glance is the opposite of naturalism. But minimalism is only a façade hiding a par excellence naturalist attitude, albeit a more ambiguous one than its original counterpart. This cinematic naturalism, interestingly, is closer to the *idea*, the theory promoted by Émile Zola than the writer's own novels are. This complexity, an ambiguous naturalism lurking under the surface of minimalism, is an innate development of the history of filmmaking of the region, and the perfect combination to reflect and react to the socio-economic and political developments in the Romania of the last three decades.

Literary naturalism

To reveal the naturalist aspects of the Romanian New Wave, we must first examine the “original” naturalism, which had a theory and a practice that fail to overlap entirely. The *theory* championed by Émile Zola² consisted of two defining aspects: an understanding that hereditary, biological, and social factors *determine* human life; and a “scientific method”³ whereby the characters are immersed in an experiment conducted by the writer with an ostensibly neutral detachment. The *practice* of literary naturalism was somewhat informed by these “rules.” It also had specific traits that contradicted

¹ Dominique Nasta, *Contemporary Romanian Cinema: The History of an Unexpected Miracle* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2013) 155.

² Émile Zola, *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*, trans. Belle M. Sherman (New York: Cassell Publishing Company, 1893).

³ Zola, *The Experimental Novel* 1.

the theory, such as the use of irony, which was not a “scientific” attitude by any means. As David Baguley explains,⁴ some of the main characteristics apparent in the naturalist literature of the times were a subject matter that could have been (and often was) taken from tabloid journalism; a plot that followed the continuous frustration, disillusionment, resignation or slow degradation of (often female) characters; the emotionally detached but aestheticized description of sordid details; and an ironic and satirical attack on society. These novels exposed “a certain jaded promiscuity, a sense that in bourgeois society there is a permanent adulteration of values and ideals”⁵ in order to “shock and discompose the reader while pretending not to do so by being a mere representation of reality.”⁶ In other words, naturalism had a boys’ club immaturity and nastiness in playing the doctor and smirkingly exposing the underbelly of the human condition in general (and of the female characters in particular) for the pure joy of shocking the audience. Compared to this practice, the statement about the “scientific method” seemed just part of an advertising strategy that called attention to how up-to-date (that is, science-based) the *new* literature was compared to the *old* literature of Victor Hugo and others.

A short pre-history of the Romanian New Wave

In order to understand the style and intentions of the Romanian New Wave, we need to have a look at the history of Romanian cinema. Although the first Romanian fictional film was produced in 1911, there was no film “industry” to speak of in Romania in the first half of the twentieth century, for several reasons, including the lack of private and public capital, low number of movie theatres, etc. The cinema of state socialism (1948-1989) propagated a nationalist mythology mainly through historical films. As Monica Filimon explains, these films promoted a special brand of nationalism. Especially the “super-productions [...] overemphasized the figure of the leader and encouraged the cult of personality”⁷ helping the communist dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, to maintain control. The films dealing with contemporary subject matter “proceeded to create a national mythology glorifying the socialist citizen.”⁸ The handful of films of “contestation,” exposing the political and social failures of the regime, were usually banned after a short period of theatrical presentation – if they made it to the theaters at all. According to Doru Pop, some filmmakers “took refuge” in a version of symbolic realism, “avoiding any references to social reality, and were trying to make aesthetically beautiful films.”⁹ After the revolution of 1989, when Ceausescu was executed, the 1990s were a period of transition. This was the time when Romanian cinema, suddenly liberated from censorship, overindulged in sex and violence. The “miserabilist” films of the ‘90s were “dominated by free sex scenes and political parables about the void of identity, full of grotesque and coarse language, profanity and scatology, and built around primitive heroes.”¹⁰ Miserabilism had a foot in naturalism but the other one was more firmly planted in a stylized and grotesque antirealism.

⁴ See David Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁵ Baguley 154.

⁶ Baguley 176.

⁷ Monica Filimon, “Popular cinema in late 1960s Romania,” in *Cinema, State Socialism and Society in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, 1917-1989: Re-Visions*, eds. Sanja Bahun and John Haynes (New York: Routledge, 2014) 96.

⁸ Filimon 97.

⁹ Doru Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema: An Introduction* (Jefferson, USA: McFarland, 2014) 95.

¹⁰ Pop 57.

As French literary naturalism was an inherent response to its predecessors in literature (romanticism and realism), the Romanian New Wave is a reaction to the romantic mysticism and the poetic realism of the socialist cinema and to the “miserabilism” of the films of the 1990s. Hence, the Romanian New Wave is defined by its minimalist style; a minimalist plot – usually populated with middle-class characters in a contemporary setting – that meanders slowly and ends with an unsurprising negative turn of events; a downplayed acting, the use of irony and dark humor, and a certain ambiguous complexity of meaning.

Minimalist style

All-encompassing minimalism, such as in the documentary/abstract film *Empire* (dir. Andy Warhol, 1964), is quite impossible to achieve in fictional film, which requires a plot with characters. Thus minimalism could only *partially* surface in the form of a simple plot with few dramatic events and few characters; or it could be apparent in formal/stylistic elements such as a static camera, lack of musical score, and so on. Examples of minimalism are the films of Carl Theodor Dreyer (Denmark), Robert Bresson (France), Yasujiro Ozu (Japan), or – from a closer geopolitical region to the Romanian New Wave – *the œuvre* of the Russian filmmaker Alexander Sokurov.

Sokurov’s *Mother and Son* (1997) is a film about a grown-up son and his dying mother’s last hours in a house in the countryside. The film is minimalist in its stripped down plot, the number of characters, in the use of camera movement and blocking – but not in lighting, picture composition, and color, which are richly impressionistic. Bresson’s *Mouchette* (1967) is minimalist in storytelling. In short scenes, we see Mouchette hurrying to school late, then Mouchette being humiliated by her teacher, and finally Mouchette leaving school and throwing rocks at her schoolmates. The use of camera is also minimalist: we see only the close-up of a hand holding a school bag where the rocks fall, but not the reaction of the person holding the bag. The sparse dialogue illustrates Bresson’s idea that a good film “sets tactics of silence” against “the tactics of noise.”¹¹ Bresson, on the other hand, is not minimalist when he adds a subplot to the main plotline or when he uses recurring motifs, like that of trucks, buses, tractors, and cars passing by, which clearly become a metaphor for life leaving the protagonist stranded in loneliness and despair.

The Romanian New Wave is more minimalist than the films of either Sokurov or Bresson. Here, as in Sokurov’s films, the most obvious formal stylistic characteristic of minimalism is the slow pacing realized in long takes. Often, not only the camera but the characters as well are stationary throughout a scene. Even if a handheld camera follows the characters, the camera favors the long shot with deep depth of field. Close-ups, a staple of mainstream filmmaking worldwide, are very rarely used. There are no point-of-view shots that would allow the audience to see the world from the perspective of the characters. These techniques support a naturalist *approach* towards the subject matter by examining the characters in their environment with a “scientific,” documentary-like detachment called for by the theory of Zola. Thus, minimalism can serve as a vehicle for naturalism.

At the same time, this detachment is the opposite of the naturalist *style*, as practiced by Zola, since it lacks the exploration and aestheticization of brutal details such as these found in *Germinal*: “He walked with long strides, shivering in his threadbare cotton jacket and his corduroy

¹¹ Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (Copenhagen: Green Integer, 1997) 63.

trousers. [...] He [...] thrust both hands – *numb, chapped hands lashed raw by the east wind* – deep into his pockets”¹² (emphasis added). Because of the lack of close-ups and insert shots, this type of intimate, aestheticized and, at the same time, brutal visual naturalism is missing from the Romanian New Wave. Hence, the visual style of these films is closer to Zola’s theory than to his practice.

The use of sound is also minimalist largely because of the lack of non-diegetic musical score and sound effects. The sound seems to come directly from the location microphone as in a low-budget documentary. We are much more *close-up* to the characters in sound than in the picture. The audience is very much situated in the middle of the characters’ raw environment. Therefore, sound is at the same time minimalist and naturalist, hiding a complexity in its simplicity.

Minimalism working hand in hand with naturalism is not unique to the Romanian New Wave. Bresson’s unassuming storytelling, camera use, and sparse use of music work together to emphasize the poverty and desperation of the protagonist. In *Mouchette*, this naturalism, in turn, helps bring to the surface a tolerant Christian spirituality, which becomes obvious as Monteverdi’s *Magnificat* plays a sort of “amen” after the suicide of the protagonist. Here, minimalism helps define a naturalist worldview, but this naturalism functions as a vehicle for redemption.

Italian Neorealism, with its style and practices – black and white footage of poverty in real locations, use of non-actors, minimalist plots moving toward defeat – is also a cinematic descendant of Zola’s naturalism. But using all the traditional visual techniques of large-budget sound films (shot-reverse shot, point-of-view and insert shots, dolly shot), Italian Neorealism does not attempt to detach its focus from the characters; exactly the opposite, it tries to pull us in, so that we feel the plight of the characters and want them to succeed. In *Umberto D.* (dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1952), we gain insight into the protagonist’s thoughts and emotions as the camera looks down from the window with a zoom shot into the pavement; this clearly suggests Umberto has become suicidal. This type of “empathic naturalism” characterizes Bresson’s film as well, where we see *Mouchette* in close-up crying several times.

The Romanian New Wave does the opposite; the camera looks on from a distance and stays away from any pandering to the emotions of the audience. The documentary-like shooting recalls the fly-on-the-wall approach of direct cinema as it supposedly documents without intrusion the reality unfolding in front of the camera. The lighting is realistic and the color is rarely manipulated (if it is, usually it is desaturated). The gaze is impassioned, “scientific.” Filmmaker Cristi Puiu explains: “For me, cinema is less an art form than a technique for investigating reality.”¹³ This matches Zola’s ideas about the “experimental novelist” who is “only one special kind of savant, who makes use of the tools of all other savants, observation and analysis.”¹⁴

Minimalist plot

The minimalist style creates in the audience a palpable estrangement from the characters. The storytelling, the unfolding of the plot at snail’s pace has an opposite function since it draws the audience back into the diegetic world. Hitchcock defined drama as “life with the dull bits cut

¹² Émile Zola, *Germinal*, trans. Roger Pearson (New York: Penguin Books, 2004) 5.

¹³ Mark Cummins, “Interview: Cristi Puiu,” *Filmcomment*, Film Society of Lincoln Center, May-June 2006. Web. 15 August 2015 <<http://www.filmcomment.com/article/a-painful-case-cristi-puiu-interviewed/>>.

¹⁴ Zola, *The Experimental Novel* 50.

out.”¹⁵ For the Romanian New Wave drama includes the dull bits. The long takes drag on for minutes when nothing of importance happens. People wait for the doctor, for the ambulance, for the police, for each other, in other words for any kind of release from their problems. As Christina Stojanova points it out in her critique of *Aurora* (dir. Cristi Puiu, 2010), “the experiments with a cinema of process, that is with time,” have the intention “to let us see the world the way he [the protagonist] perceives it, infinitely bland.”¹⁶ But the tedium is always tense like the monotony of life on death row. Usually, time is not going to solve things, at least not in a positive way. Similar to literary naturalism, “time is presented as a process of constant erosion”;¹⁷ and the plot explores a “process of deterioration”¹⁸ that often ends in the physical or psychological defeat of the characters.

Several protagonists lose their agency as the plot unfolds. A good example is the protagonist of *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (dir. Cristi Puiu, 2005), who falls ill at the beginning of the film and for the rest of the time is transported by ambulance from one hospital to another until presumably, he dies. Voichita, the young woman in *Beyond the Hills* (dir. Cristian Mungiu, 2012), visits the monastery to convince her friend to go with her to work abroad, but she ends up dying during an exorcism. In *Police, Adjective* (dir. Corneliu Porumboiu, 2009) the police officer is forced by his superior to act against his own better judgment for fear he might lose his job. Consequently, he arrests a high-school student for smoking pot knowing well that the teen’s life will be destroyed by a long prison sentence. The characters of *The Paper Will Be Blue* (dir. Radu Muntean, 2006) become lost and finally killed in the chaos of the 1989 revolution.

Even when the protagonists achieve their goals, the price is so high that it may not be worth the effort. Silviu, in *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle* (dir. Florin Serban, 2010), becomes a criminal and is in prison as a consequence of his mother abandoning him when he was growing up. Now, he wants to prevent his mother from making the same mistake with his younger brother. By attacking a guard and taking a young female volunteer hostage, he achieves his goal: his mother promises not to leave the country and not to abandon his younger brother. The price: Silviu had only a few more days to serve when the plot started; now he will spend decades more in jail. *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 days* (dir. Cristian Mungiu, 2007) ends with Gabita surviving an illegal, hotel-room abortion, but the squalor of the situation, the humiliation and degradation of the main characters is so complete (they are both raped in lieu of payment for the procedure), that neither they nor the audience feels there is reason to celebrate. The protagonist of *Ryna* (dir. Ruxandra Zenide, 2005) is set up for rape by her abusive, alcoholic father. In the end, she escapes to an uncertain future. Similar to the reader’s feelings after finishing a naturalist novel, the viewer has the urge to denounce the filmmakers for abusing the characters.

Characters

The construction of characters is also minimalist since often they undergo no development. The characters’ emotional range is usually limited to resignation, frustration, and occasional outbursts of anger – which again leads us back to naturalism.

¹⁵ Robert Robinson, “Interview with Alfred Hitchcock,” *Picture Parade*, BBC, 5 July 1960. Web. 31 Oct. 2015 <[http://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Picture_Parade_\(BBC,_05/Jul/1960\)](http://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Picture_Parade_(BBC,_05/Jul/1960))>.

¹⁶ Christina Stojanova, “The New Vicissitudes of Auteur Cinema in Central and Eastern European Cinema: Karlovy Vary 2010,” *KinoKultura* 30 (2010). Web. 23 August 2015 <<http://www.kinokultura.com/2010/30-stojanova.shtml>>.

¹⁷ Baguley 222.

¹⁸ Baguley 95.

Although in naturalist prose all characters are potentially “beasts,” women are held in especially low esteem. In *Germinal*, Zola uses the point of view of Étienne to emphasize the wild ferociousness that is even worse in the women than in the men: “[...] he gazed in astonishment and growing horror at these brutes he had unmuzzled [...] It was the women especially who scared him, [...] every one of them in the grip of a murderous frenzy, baring tooth and claw and snarling like dogs [...]”¹⁹ In *Nana*, Zola explicitly creates the title character as a *femme* literally *fatale* to men: “All of a sudden, in the good-natured child the woman stood revealed [...] with all the impulsive madness of her sex [...] Nana was still smiling, but with the deadly smile of a man-eater.”²⁰ These female characters usually all perish by the end of the novel.

In the Romanian New Wave, the characters in general are not beast-like. They are usually the opposite – cool and composed –, brought to life with underplayed acting style. But as the naturalist writers, the Romanian New Wave filmmakers are also a male club (with the exception of Ruxandra Zenide, the director of *Ryna*) and this has an impact on the films. The Romanian New Wave is as anti-feminist as literary naturalism. Of the twenty movies this article is based on, only four have female protagonists and in only two do they manage to achieve their goal: terminating an unwanted pregnancy in *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* and leaving an abusive parent and community in *Ryna*. In both films the road to success is through humiliation, abuse, and rape. In the other two films, the plot is nothing more than the slow disempowerment of the female protagonists, ending with the torture and murder of Voichita in *Beyond the Hills* and with Delia succumbing to her parents’ wishes in *The Happiest Girl in the World* (dir. Radu Jude, 2009) by selling her car and forfeiting the money to her parents. In the other films, if they play a somewhat important role, the female characters suffer because of the deeds of the male characters. In *Loverboy* (dir. Catalin Mitulescu, 2011), they are sold into prostitution; in *Summer Holiday* (dir. Radu Muntean, 2008), the husband frolics with his friends and a prostitute while his pregnant wife takes care of their toddler at a hotel during a short vacation, for example.

Truth

Science’s concern for truth makes truth an important concept of literary naturalism as well. In Zola’s opinion, in order to be truthful the writer has to accomplish two tasks: observe reality and truthfully reproduce it. “You want to paint life: [...] see what it is, and then give its exact reproduction. [...] [If] it is not firmly founded on truth – it has no reason to be.”²¹ Despite the clear theory, truthfulness in the sense of “scientific objectivity” is questionable in the practice of literary naturalism. Zola claims that “the excellence of style depends upon its logic and clearness,”²² but the naturalists aestheticize reality both in impressionistic and in expressionistic and rather brutal manner. This style is the opposite of a scientific, clear, and logical style; it is purely artistic.

In contrast, evidence of aestheticizing is missing from the Romanian New Wave films; there are no beautiful shots. As director Cristian Mungiu stresses in an interview: “I had some spectacular shots in the film but I took them out in the editing.”²³ He explains: “I want to have things as true as possible. [...] I want to get rid of metaphors and things which are not *direct*, that

¹⁹ Zola, *Germinal* 359.

²⁰ Émile Zola, *Nana*. trans. George Holden (New York: Penguin Books, 1972) 45.

²¹ Zola, *The Experimental Novel* 214.

²² Zola, *The Experimental Novel* 48.

²³ Nick Roddick, “Eastern Promise,” *Sight and Sound*, British Film Institute, October 2007. Web. 1 May 2015 <<http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49399>>.

want to signify something else”²⁴ (emphasis added). By eliminating certain potentially manipulative techniques (“spectacular shots” produced with a constantly tracking, craning, swooping, flying camera; fast-paced editing of a variety of shots of different sizes and angles; music that cues the audience’s emotional response, etc.) the films of the Romanian New Wave strive to reproduce reality as is. Even the shot-reverse shot, which has been ubiquitous in cinema worldwide, is missing from the cinematic vocabulary of the young Romanian filmmakers, since it may be considered a cinematic trick that could cheat the reality in front of the camera.

This understanding of “direct” cinema recalls the intention of Italian Neorealist filmmakers: “A starving man, a humiliated man, must be shown by name and surname; no fable for a starving man, because that is something else, less effective and less moral. The true function of the cinema is not to tell fables [...] The moral, like the artistic, problem lies in being able to observe reality, not to extract fictions from it.”²⁵ As Pop argues, for the young Romanian filmmakers “naturalism is not just a visual [and all over cinematic] tool, it is [...] an instrument against narrative artificiality.”²⁶ This is a reaction to the constant use of metaphoric language, symbolism, and parables in Romanian cinema from the movies of the Ceausescu era to the miserabilist films of the ‘90s.

Irony

Not only aestheticized and metaphorical language but tone also could prevent the delivery of truth. Humor and irony are untruthful because they reveal the voice of the filmmaker, thus they interpret reality instead of letting the “facts” speak for themselves. This contradiction, using irony and humor while aiming at objectivity is apparent in both literary naturalism and the Romanian New Wave.

In literary naturalism, the irony is usually situational. In *Germinal*, the miners are on strike and literally dying of hunger. Meanwhile, the mine manager’s family and friends are having lunch, and the discussion goes like this: “‘And they [the miners] lived well [...] too and started developing expensive tastes.’ [...] ‘Won’t you have a little more trout...’ [...] ‘We’ve been just as badly hit as they have. [...] That’s what the workers refuse to understand.’ There was silence. Hippolyte was serving roast partridge...”²⁷ Another striking example of irony, this time as an aside by the narrator, is when Mr. Hennebeau realizes his wife is cheating with his nephew. After the nephew’s fiancée is killed, Mr. Hennebeau is content: “This tragedy solved everything, for he would rather keep his nephew than fear that the coachman might be next.”²⁸

In the Romanian New Wave, situational irony is also prevalent (Lazarescu possibly dies because of a shift change of nurses and doctors in *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*). There is also dark humor here. Even the films with the darkest tone may have moments of strange comedy. Just a hint of slapstick ends *Beyond the Hills*. The situation has the priest and some members of his monastery arrested for killing a young woman during an exorcism, and the film ends with the main characters sitting in a police van (the camera is also inside) while a truck passing by splashes mud all over the windshield and blocks our view of the street. In *Aurora*, when Viorel

²⁴ Ramona Mitrica, “Interview with Cristian Mungiu, young Romanian film director,” Romanian Cultural Centre London, 30 September 2006. Web. 1 May 2015 <<http://www.romaniaculturalcentre.org.uk/post.php?id=75&v=1>>.

²⁵ Cesare Zavattini, “Some Ideas on the Cinema.” *Sight and Sound* 23.2 (Oct.-Dec. 1953): 53

²⁶ Pop 60.

²⁷ Zola, *Germinal* 209-10.

²⁸ Zola, *Germinal* 499.

confesses killing his ex-mother-in-law, there is an untranslatable pun in the dialogue. Viorel explains to the police: “Rodica is my mother-in-law.” Then he corrects himself, “my ex-mother-in-law.” In Romanian, the word “ex” is expressed with the word “was,” so Viorel actually says, “my was-mother-in-law.” The police officer writing down the confession comments, “of course she *was*.” This final bit is one of the “oddly funny, touching exchanges that waver between the ridiculous and the tragic.”²⁹ This is true of the other films as well. Tragedy hovers over the characters as a dark cloud in a strange shape.

In Romanian culture, humor has an important position. Sardonic black humor is the trademark of one of the most well-known and celebrated authors, Ion Luca Caragiale (1852-1912). For example, in the sketch “Pastrami Specialty,”³⁰ Aron makes pastrami from his father’s dead body in order to send it to Jerusalem for burial, which pastrami is subsequently eaten by another character. Tamara Constantinescu points out the great influence Caragiale had on the absurdist Ionesco, who reinvented some of Caragiale’s characters and situations in his own work.³¹ In Ionesco’s analysis of Caragiale it is easy to recognize the roots of naturalism:

Caragiale is really a critic of all men and any society. [...] Indeed mankind, as it is presented to us [...], does not seem to deserve to exist. His characters are samples of humanity so degraded that they leave us with no hope. A world in which all is base and ridiculous can only give rise to the purest and most pitiless comedy.³²

As Pop argues, Caragiale’s characters, like Mitica, “the quintessential antihero, an ironic personality,”³³ live on in Romanian culture and have been brought to life many times in films such as Lucian Pintilie’s *Why Are the Bells Ringing, Mitica?* (1981). Mitica is killed at the end of this film, staying true to the vicious dark humor of Caragiale. Pop explains that Pintilie is a sort of father figure for the younger generation of filmmakers who started the Romanian New Wave. Not incidentally, in the *Filmcomment* interview, Cristi Puiu also mentions Ionesco as one of his literary influences.³⁴

Hence, there is a straight line from Caragiale through Ionesco and Pintilie to Puiu. In this vein, *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*, the story of an elderly sick man who dies because of lack of treatment, can be seen as darkly funny, grotesque, absurd. The larger structure of the film is based on repetition and the film is full of grotesque moments: Mr. Lazarescu is being transported from one hospital to the other; he is repeatedly denied adequate treatment; he is continuously blamed by the healthcare professionals who are supposed to treat him; etc. The film critic Peter Bradshaw wrote that this is “blacker-than-black, deader-than-deadpan comedy.”³⁵ Mike Dawson asserts, “*The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* will either have you howling with laughter, screaming with

²⁹ Manohla Dargis, “Following in the Shadows of a Very Shadowy Man,” *The New York Times* 28 June 2011. Web. 1 May 2015 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/29/movies/cristi-puiu-stars-in-aurora-from-romania-review.html>>.

³⁰ See Ion Luca Caragiale, “Pastrama strufanda,” in *Pastrama Strufanda: Nuvele si povestiri* [*Pastrama Strufanda: Novellas and Stories*] (Bucharest: Orizonturi, 2011).

³¹ Tamara Constantinescu, “Catavencu si gastele Coanei Pipa” [“Catavencu and Ma’am Pipe’s Geese”] *Colocvii Teatrale* 13 (2012): 5.

³² Eugene Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes: Writings on the Theatre*, trans. Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, 1964) 139.

³³ Pop 166.

³⁴ See Mark Cummins, “Interview: Cristi Puiu,” *Filmcomment*, Film Society of Lincoln Center, May-June 2006. Web. 15 August 2015 <<http://www.filmcomment.com/article/a-painful-case-cristi-puiu-interviewed/>>.

³⁵ Peter Bradshaw, “The Death of Mr. Lazarescu.” *The Guardian* 14 July 2006. Web. 1 May 2015 <<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/jul/14/worldcinema.comedy>>.

rage, crying in pity, or all three, which speaking frankly is what makes the film so extraordinary.”³⁶ This complexity of tone under the seemingly simple and uncomplicated surface of faux-documentary is one of the sources of ambiguity emanating from the films.

Ambiguity

The aestheticization and irony, which contradict the detached “scientific” observation, are the main source of ambiguity in literary naturalism. Ambiguity is an even more important concept in the Romanian New Wave. Here there is no aestheticization, but irony and black humor undermine the cool detachment. Additionally, the minimalist style itself creates an ambiguous space. In *Tuesday, After Christmas* (dir. Radu Muntean, 2010), the first scene starts with a couple naked in bed – *après sexe*, we assume – bantering, playing, and talking. The whole seven-minute scene appears in one mainly static long shot that makes us feel that we are invading the characters’ privacy. This invasion of privacy as the camera lingers in homes, hospitals, hotel rooms, etc., could be considered a naturalist device to give a sense of “scientific detachment,” but also the main agent for the creation of ambiguity.

As André Bazin expounds: “depth of focus reintroduced ambiguity into the structure of the image [...] The uncertainty in which we find ourselves as to the spiritual key or the interpretation we should put on the film is built into the very design of the image.”³⁷ If the filmmaker is only a kind of “cinematic eye” without a filter, a witness who testifies to the best of his or her knowledge, then interpretation is the task of the audience and not the filmmaker. A great example is the scene in *Aurora*, when Viorel, after killing four people, gives himself up. He is seated in a small room at the police station and the camera looks on from the other room where some other police officers discuss a car repair. The banality of the foreground discussion takes the audience’s attention away from the protagonist (since the other characters pay him no heed either) and creates a strange ambiguity that reflects the *ennui* of daily life, possibly one underlying reason why Viorel committed the crime.

The unfolding of the plot, with situational irony or a touch of black humor, complements the style in creating ambiguity. As we have seen, in the films where the protagonists achieve their goal, their situations remain bordering on desperate; and, in the films that end tragically, irony and humor lighten the mood. Although a certain pessimism or gloom usually lingers on as bad breath, the films stagger on with rich ambiguity presenting the audience with a gift of emotional complexity. This ambiguity reflects the filmmakers’ approach to the social and political reality they experience in Romania.

Social and political background

French naturalism developed and thrived in the fertile environment of the uncertainty of the Second Empire (1852-1870), the Franco-Prussian War, including the Siege of Paris (1870-71), the Parisian Commune (1871), and the first decades of the Third Republic (1871-1941). This was a time of contradictions, a reality which is evidenced by the fact that the emperor who seized the

³⁶ Mike Dawson "The Romanina New Wave," in *Mapping Romania – Notes for a Journey*, ed. Ronald Young, publicadminreform.webs.com. Web. 22 May 2015 <<http://publicadminreform.webs.com/key%20papers/FINAL%20Mapping%20Romania.pdf>>.

³⁷ André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, USA: University of California Press, 1967) 35.

power with a *coup d'état* gave the workers the right to organize and strike. The succession of wars, the power struggle between the Traditionalists and the Republicans, the social and political battles of the workers' rights movements, the decades-long demolishing and rebuilding of Paris – all contributed to an understanding of the world as a place where individual human agency cannot possibly bloom.

The naturalism of the Romanian New Wave is also rooted in social, economic, and political realities. In order to understand this, one has to revisit the changes of 1989. From a static, extremely controlled, censored and self-censored, fear-based daily life, people suddenly found themselves in a free but extremely confused and confusing, continuously and rapidly changing, dynamic world. A position of helplessness in an oppressive dictatorship was replaced by the helplessness in a world where the events seemed to be out of control. In the twinkling of an eye, the country was transformed from an officially classless, socialist, and egalitarian society to a new one with a wealthy “one percent,” and a struggling mass of people living between middle-class levels and poverty. The change was shocking to any person living through it. Romania became a country where the whole society suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and this became apparent in the violent clashes between the Romanians and the Hungarian minority in Transylvania and between the protesting students and the miners in Bucharest (both in 1990).

Since then, Romania has been in a state of flux, where social and political life has been influenced and manipulated by post-communist, left-wing governments, by ultra-nationalist demagoguery, by ethnic strife with the Hungarian minority, and by conflicting foreign policy manoeuvres promoting the interests of the European Union, the United States, and Russia. At the same time, the economic situation in the country has been volatile. The privatization of state assets helped the former Communist leaders become the economic upper class. The market was opened to global capital that allowed the international conglomerates to buy up and close factories in order to streamline the global industry and stop competition. This caused massive unemployment in a country where unemployment had been non-existent. Additionally, Romania has been one of the most corrupt countries of the European Union, subsisting historically as an extended bureaucracy. Social, political, economic, and bureaucratic constraints debilitate the lives of millions and even the rich and powerful are limited in various ways (by lack of quality infrastructure and the burden of complex bureaucracy, etc.).

This is what filmmakers see and this is what they examine with aplomb. Some of the major characteristics of the Romanian New Wave, such as the detachment, the pessimism, the ambiguity, the irony, and the dark humor, mirror well the chronic uncertainty and disillusionment that pervade the country and the region. These are tools of a necessary distancing effect that enables the filmmakers to avoid committing to an ideological perspective. But, as Cesare Zavattini declares, “in this attitude there is a strong purpose, a desire for understanding, for belonging, for participating – for living together, in fact.”³⁸

Social criticism

A social critique of society with the aim of promoting change is not the goal of naturalist literature, with very few exceptions, like *Germinal*, when, at the end, the narrator clearly suggests that a well-deserved revolution would soon be on its way. With a detached pessimism and often cheerful irony, the writers focus not on the type but on the person as “specimen,” as “a singular

³⁸ Zavattini 52.

form of humanity,”³⁹ that lives outside of strict historical specificity. Despite this, class distinctions may be brought into focus. The middle and upper classes are examined with irony. The poor working class and the characters of non-French origin are treated with palpable contempt. The striking miners are depicted this way in *Germinal*: “Here was old Flemish blood at work, thick, placid blood that took months to warm to a task but then sallied forth with unspeakable savagery, deaf to all entreaty until the beast had drunk its fill of terrible deeds.”⁴⁰

In the Romanian New Wave, the characters are usually from a vague middle class without any defining lines, reflecting the reality of post-Communist Romania, where a middle class family may live in a small apartment in a suburb full of run-down apartment towers. Many of the films have no ambition to address the general problems of society. A good example is *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle*, where the mother character is the root of all evil because she leaves her children behind and goes to work in Italy. The issue of hundreds of thousands of people, many of them parents, leaving to become guest workers in other parts of Europe is a huge social problem in Romania, and this film would have had the opportunity to examine this phenomenon. Instead the film follows the usual naturalist trend of looking at the characters as individuals unconnected to larger societal issues.

At the same time, there is also a clear category of the Romanian New Wave films that is more socially committed. *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* examines the state of contemporary health care in Romania and reveal the absurd dysfunctionality of the system. In *Behind the Hills*, Voichita’s fate points to the backwardness of the Orthodox Church. *Police, Adjective* demonstrates the oppressive nature of the criminal justice system. The filmmakers show no emotions and they do not manipulate the audience to identify with the characters, but the “scientific experiment” leads to a tacit condemnation of society and its systems.

Conclusion

French literary naturalism was a response to the socio-political and economic milieu of France, to romanticism and realism in literature, and to positivism, determinism, and Darwinism in the sciences. It cleverly connected the literary to the scientific, creating an anti-romantic and *über*-realist vision of a new literature based on scientific exploration of human society understood as ruled by social Darwinism. Literary naturalism is “a product of the scientific age,” but it turns the optimism of the sciences upside down: “Naturalist writers assume the prevalent scientific vision of man, but demonstrate the degrading, dehumanizing implications of that vision.”⁴¹ The Romanian New Wave, although using a minimalist style, is first and foremost a naturalist cinema, which – while trying to wipe clean the slate of Romanian cinematic traditions overburdened with metaphors and parables – reacts to the optimism of global capitalism affecting Romania with a great deal of ambiguity.

The instinct of scientific exploration and the impulse of storytelling have something in common: the goal of creating a better world by making sense of the existing one. The intentions of storytelling in the Romanian New Wave are clearly stated by director Calin Peter Netzer: “It’s the experience of the country. You face these things and they are getting into you. [...] It’s like

³⁹ Baguley 83.

⁴⁰ Zola, *Germinal* 359.

⁴¹ Baguley 217.

therapy, you have to pull it out of yourself, to escape from these things.”⁴² In this sense it matters little if one watches *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* as a comedy or a tragedy. It is a tragicomedy, bringing attention to the problems of society and this focus, in turn, gives the film a healing power for the filmmakers and for the community alike.

⁴² Larry Rohter, “Romania’s Overlooked New Wave,” *The Carpetbagger Blogs*, The New York Times Company, 18 December 2013. Web. 1 May 2015 < http://carpetbagger.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/12/18/romanias-overlooked-new-wave/?_r=0>.