

Polaroids from Our Past: Lucian's Pintilie's *Balanța/The Oak* (1992)

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To Ágnes Pethő, for two decades of intermediality

In his 2005 critically informed overview of Romanian film history, Mircea Dumitrescu differentiates between three epochs: the beginnings of Romanian cinema, the socialist era (between 1945 and 1989), and the “post-December” era. *The Oak* clearly belongs to the third phase due to its being produced after the 1989 December revolution, which put an end to Nicolae Ceaușescu’s communist dictatorship in Romania. However, there are two elements that deeply embed this sarcastic, even cynical, often vulgar and shocking film within Dumitrescu’s second, socialist era: the long, troubled filmmaking career of director Lucian Pintilie and the time frame of the fictional world.

Lucian Pintilie started off as a graduate of the UNATC¹, the then sole film academy in Romania, and his first artistic creations were minor theatre plays he directed on Bucharest theatre stages in 1958 and 1960 (Dumitrescu 2005, 56–57). Simultaneously, he worked as an assistant director for leading Romanian cinema industry personality Victor Iliu, whose best rated film was *At the Mill of Good Luck* (*La moara cu noroc*, 1956). Pintilie presented his first feature film in 1964 with the title *Sunday at 6* (*Duminică la ora 6*), the story of a young couple set against communist underground activities in WW2, a film shown at international film festivals (Prague, Cannes, Adelaide) too.

However, his second feature film, the 1969/1970 *Reconstruction* (*Reconstituirea*)/*Re-enactment* did not meet with the approval of contemporary communist censorship, which banned it from public viewing only after three days of screening, trying to destroy all existing film copies (Dumitrescu 2005, 56–58). *Reconstruction* presents the shooting of an educational film which has as a topic the re-enactment of a youth delinquency act, reminding one of British Free Cinema characteristics as presented, for example, in Tony Richardson’s 1960 *The Loneliness of a Long-Distance Runner*. During the re-enactment one of the original

¹ The state institution was established in 1950 under the name Institutul de Teatru ‘I.L.Caragiale’-‘I. L. Caragiale’ Institute of Theatre, re-established in 1954 under the name Institutul de Artă Teatrală și Cinematografică ‘I.L. Caragiale’/ ‘I. L. Caragiale’ Institute of Theatre and Cinematographic Arts’, and currently functions under the name Universitatea Națională de Artă Teatrală și Cinematografică (UNATC) ‘I. L. Caragiale’/‘I. L. Caragiale’ National University of Theatre and Film.

protagonists accidentally dies, and the communist state apparatus's hypocrisy and repressive nature is revealed through the police representatives who are responsible, with the self-reflexive film language adding further layers to the critical stance towards the dictatorship. In 1972 Lucian Pintilie directed a Bucharest theatre performance of Nicolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, which he also staged as "a parable of a totalitarian system" (Dumitrescu 2005, 56), and which was also banned by communist censorship. Thus, during the 1970s this prolific and creative-minded theatre- and filmmaker was not allowed to work in his country, instead he was granted a multiple entry passport on the condition that he stops working in Romania. Pintilie went on directing theatre and opera performances on stages across Europe and the USA, partly helped by his fellow compatriot, émigré Romanian theatre- and filmmaker with a Cannes-trophy, Liviu Ciulei. His sole film in the decade is the 1979 *Salon nr. 6* (*Salonul no. 6*), adapted from Anton Chekhov's short story, and produced by the more open-minded Yugoslavian television. He was granted the possibility of filming in Romania in 1981, but the result – a sarcastic, comical, burlesque, fast-paced film adaptation of early 20th-century Romanian playwright Ion Luca Caragiale's piece *D'ale carnavalului*, entitled *For Whom Do the Bells Toll, Mitică?* (*De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?*) – was again too outspoken and unruly, premiering in front of its national public only in 1990. In the postcommunist period Lucian Pintilie not only returned to Romania, but he was also named head of one of the Bucharest studios in 1990, shooting a film every second or third year up to 2007, and becoming an actual mentor to directors who went on being canonized as the Romanian New Wave. Pintilie's last memorable fictional feature film, the 2003 *Niki and Flo* (*Niki Ardelean, colonel in rezervă*) was co-scripted by the most appreciated scriptwriting duo of the Romanian New Wave, Cristi Puiu and Răzvan Rădulescu. He helped off the ground the first debut feature film that has been retrospectively identified as a Romanian New Wave Film, the 2001 *Stuff and Dough* (*Marfa și banii*) by Cristi Puiu. His death in April 2018 put an end to a rich and diverse filmmaking career which spans over half a century, and has been deeply influencing contemporary Romanian cinema.

As Dominique Nasta presents in her monograph on *Contemporary Romanian Cinema*, published in 2013, *The Oak* had as a source material a novel published by prose- and scriptwriter Ion Băieșu in 1985. Its title was *The Scales* (*Balanța*) and it was immediately banned by communist literary censorship since it presented "the army, the secret police, the priests, the hospital milieu and the atmosphere on packed trains [...] in a sensational, dense, albeit surreal way" (Nasta 2013, 99), urging Romanian critic George Pruteanu to call it "an

encyclopaedia of disaster” (quoted by Nasta 2013, 99). *The Oak*’s fictive story unfolds during 1988, when the Western, capitalist part of the world (called “imperialist” in communist party propaganda) experienced consumer society on a large scale, with video-technology becoming widespread, MTV’s visual aesthetics based on handheld cameras and rapid editing finding its way into film, and internet’s first throes already visible. However, these worldwide, even geographically neighbouring happenings are barely tangible in Pintilie’s film, which takes us, from a short epilogue in the capital city of Bucharest, to the Transylvanian province of Romania. Here exquisite natural beauty and well-preserved rural and folk traditions are mixing in an unsettling manner with the horrible, individual and collective consequences of forced and badly executed large-scale communist/socialist industrialisation. Yet, and interestingly enough for both the fictional story year (1988) and the year of production (1992) of a Romanian film, *The Oak* manages to subtly hint at late 1980s/early 1990s global media transformations thanks to several ingenious decisions concerning the construction of its fictive filmic world.

First, by placing the burden of introducing us and maintaining our interest in its fictive diegesis on an atypical female protagonist: Nela Truică, recently returned from Paris with a psychology diploma from the Haute École des Études. An unusual professional trajectory for an average woman in 1980s Romania, Nela has been in an exceptional position thanks to her father being a former colonel of the frightful Romanian Secret Police (the Securitatea), thus belonging to the communist elite for whom material, intellectual and informational deprivation was not imposed in the monstrous manner it was for the rest of the population. The latter could not leave the country so as not to encounter ways of life different from communist dictatorship; could not have proper education or learn foreign languages since intellectual activities sat low on the communist hierarchy of values which promoted (manual) work; Romanian population not connected to the PCR (Romanian Communist Party) or the secret service could not have access to cultural goods, and only a scarce fulfilment of their basic needs (housing, food, clothing) was allowed.

VCR-technology is hinted at already in the beginning of the film, when Nela lies in an unmade bed with her terminally ill father, and a celluloid Super 8 home movie projector, placed between them on the bed, projects its content on the wall of a cramped little room. The home video is about a long-gone St. Nicholas/Christmas party, with high-ranking communist army and party officials celebrating in an elite communist mansion. These people could identify as Nela’s former entourage, while the little girl taking center stage in the events

seems to be her younger self. Since Nela is the main focalizer character in the narrative, it is her multiple personal and collective traumas that are telegraphically highlighted in this short home video, simultaneously conferring a heightened awareness of various representational conventions and a sense of theatricality, especially when she seems to join the long-gone little girl's image projected on the wall.

Even if they seem to have lost the original communist privileges, Nela and her family not being average Romanians is also signalled by the fact that the small speaking and/or non-speaking roles are cast on amateur inhabitants of the settlements the film was shot in, paramount being the industrial city of Copșa Mică and the train line connecting it to the outside world. These hastily and extensively modernized socialist cities were (usually) villages before 1945, and once the communist system and its ideology ended, they slowly sunk back to that status in the post-1989 era. Therefore, while shooting *The Oak* in 1991-1992 the general living conditions might have been even worse and the people's attitude even more degraded than in the previous, still socialist decade, adding to the end-of-the-world, apocalyptic effect of the film. In contrast to the amateur masses actually on the verge of subsistence (with the Copșa Mică factories and mines fully closing a few years later, making the area ripe for catastrophe tourism), Nela is played by one of the most accomplished Romanian actresses: Maia Morgenstern. She belongs to what Mircea Dumitrescu calls "the glorious 70's generation in Romanian film," (2005) with a rich experience in Bucharest theatre roles, furthermore, Romanian shorts and feature films: actually, her performance as Nela earned her the European Actress of the Year award at the 1993 European Film Awards. She also participated in global film hits, playing the part of Virgin Mary in Mel Gibson's 2004 controversial *The Passion of the Christ*, and is currently listed with 68 acting credits on the IMDb.

Nela's character has a solid professional training which she will try to apply when organizing extracurricular activities for gifted Roma children lacking proper education; she speaks good French, receives foreign glossy magazines (a copy of *Paris Match* appears several times as an object in the fictive world), and more than that, has a portable cassette player as well as a Polaroid camera. The director and the creative team of the film chose to grant these objects – which in a late 1980s American film could have simply denoted the character's hobbies or social status (and they also do the same here) – a further layer/role: that of creatively building the audiovisual texture of the film. We have access to the music Nela listens to, even if that is an impossible gesture, revealing the narrative process as omniscient, capable of intruding into

the characters' inner perceptions. Practically, the film's soundtrack is formed by the pieces of music that Nela listens to, often as a gesture of shielding herself from the brutal, vulgar and threatening outside world, pieces that range from Edith Piaf songs to American rap music. These songs offer us clues regarding Nela's taste and worldview, while linking a hermetically closed communist Romania, where such things were hardly available, to simultaneous cultural developments outside its border.

The Polaroid camera is employed in an even more ingenious manner: it functions not only as an object of characterization suggesting Nela's practical, modern nature as a contemporary woman, but also as a device that contributes to the narrative process. In this respect, the use of the Polaroid camera in *The Oak* may be compared to how Christopher Nolan employs it in the 2000 *Memento* to create the character, as well as the past, present and future of insurance agent Leonard Shelby, whose missing long-term memory is replaced by the photos he takes. Nela also photographs seemingly irrelevant and even absurd details of her life, with the Polaroid photos gaining contour in front of our eyes, and transforming images we saw as moving seconds ago into petrified freeze frames emanating past-ness. Thus, the first thing she photographs is her dead father's face with the *Paris Match* exemplar next to it, but she will take photos of her new acquaintance in Copșa Mică, hospital surgeon Mitică Bostan (Răzvan Vasilescu), juxtaposing Mitică's portrait to that of a calf. Both the glossy *Paris Match* and the ignorant cow's Polaroid photos have the power to symbolically position and criticize the male characters so important in this oppressive patriarchal world.

Nela's journey from the capital city, after she cremates her dead father's body, to the provincial, faraway town of Copșa Mică, where she is sent as a school psychologist by the communist authorities, is what frames *The Oak*. The film is even identifiable as a loose road movie, since Nela's hardships and moving around do not end once she arrives to Copșa Mică. She goes on a camping trip with Mitică, the local hospital's head surgeon, ending up in the middle of an army simulation of an aerial attack over the settlement: a highly absurd idea rather motivated by the collective remembrance of Romanians since the country was a battlefield during both world wars. As the surgeon is incarcerated, defying the secret service's servile representatives, Nela's nightmarish wandering around continues as she tries to free her friend using not exactly orthodox methods; then they both go to the countryside to bury a former patient of the doctor. Their "burial trip" is not a lonely business, as secret service is following them, even giving a helping hand when their car stops, and in the evening they all participate at a huge dinner in the local Orthodox priest's house, with contemporary

Romanian sarcastic social dramas' compulsory "eating together around a big table" while discussing political oppression in half-privacy being played out. Nela and Mitică's last trip takes them through a real hostage drama which recalls the 1989 December revolution's moments, with civilians being shot and low-ranking soldiers joining them in their protest against the system, to finally find some rest and silence under the oak in the title. Here Nela buries the ashes of her father, revealed to have been an accomplice of the communist system of repression, using the words "good father, liar father, tyrannical father." The memorable final freeze frame of the film – Nela and Mitică breaking the fourth wall and looking directly into the camera – recalls the Polaroid photo technique, while also a recurrent visual method used in Pintilie's other films, forcing the viewers to take an ethically informed standpoint concerning the degraded world just seen, as well as ponder the possibilities of a transition towards a different order.

The Oak is a critically acclaimed film made by a Romanian film director, Lucian Pintilie, who embodies through his career and represents in his films the modern(ist) and postmodern(ist) phases and strategies of one of the most peripheral and underdeveloped, also small film industries in Europe, the Romanian cinema. Thanks to its theme and the artistic strategies employed, *The Oak* is capable of a synthesis concerning recent Romanian historical events and Eastern European film stylistic developments in the last decade of the 20th century. The film was met with instant inter/national critical and public acclaim and its cult status has been enforced ever since, not the least by becoming a template for many creations that have been categorized under the label of the Romanian New Wave, and later New Romanian Cinema from 2001 onwards. As for the person of Lucian Pintilie: his significance for contemporary Romanian cinema is signalled by two, apparently trivial events triggered by his death in April 2018. In a commemorative piece in *Variety*, one could read the bon mot: "When asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, director Corneliu Porumboiu answered: Lucian Pintilie" (Tizzard 2018). Finally, a newly established Romanian film fund, backed by a bank (BRD), for first and second features, has been named after Lucian Pintilie (Blaga 2018).

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