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by Denise Roman

(I) Fears are colorless and odorless in the dim light of a Romanian winter. Gabita and her fellow student, Otilia, who wants to help Gabita end her unwanted pregnancy, know this well. They know how dangerous it is to escape the vigilant, panoptical eye of the Ceaușescu regime. They find a man, Bebe—not a doctor—eager to help them. They rent a room in a hotel. The man comes and asks for a shocking price in order to perform the terrifying procedure. (I am not talking about money here....) This is not a hospital, and the only things available in the sordid adventure are a probe, an ampoule



of ampicillin, a plastic bag, and towels for the possible hemorrhage and to wrap up the dead fetus and dispose of it in a garbage chute.

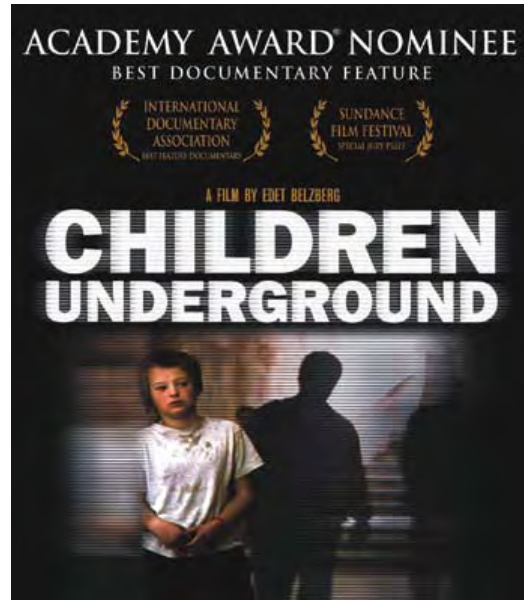
We see it all, and the merciless light of the hotel room cuts into the senses like a knife. There is no escape. The long takes and real-time scenes are devoid of melodrama. We enter into the lives of these women via light, an odorless and colorless light, a light that penetrates through to the heart of a closed regime.

The body is at the center of Cristian Mungiu's film, *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days*, winner of the Palme d'Or at the

4 months, 3 weeks, & 2 days
(2007), Cristian Mungiu,
Mobra Films

Cannes Film Festival in 2007. It reveals a recentering on corporeality that has to do with Ceaușescu’s pro-natalist, anti-abortion politics, which, for the some 24 years of communism (starting with 1966, when abortion was generally banned), succeeded to limit women’s freedom of choice and the individual’s ability to control her own body and life, thus pushing her toward subversive practices of body resistance through such illicit abortions. It is no wonder that in the years following the Revolution of 1989 (when abortion was legalized), Romanian women saw abortion as a legitimate sign of liberation, making the efforts of pro-life groups futile.

The general banning of abortion in Romania is also responsible for engendering an entire population of street children, who spend their time living underground in the sewage system, or gathering in railway stations. They live under the effect of hallucinatory substances, mainly a local chemical originally designed to clean the parquet. Called “Aurolac,” this substance lends its name to its young consumers; Romanians call street children “Aurolaci.” Edet Belzberg’s Oscar-nominated documentary *Children Underground* (2000) addresses the issue of street children, a topic



Children Underground (2000),
Edet Belzberg

the Romanian citizens and authorities are still uncomfortable to talk about.

The same corporeality is the focus of a predecessor of Mungiu’s film, Cristi Puiu’s *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*, winner of “Un Certain Regard Award” at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival. Puiu’s real-time drama is to follow the travails of a sick old man who waits for his illness to overtake him, as a concerned paramedic shuttles him among hospitals that are reluctant to admit him as a patient. This is a movie of



The Death of Mister Lazarescu (2005),
Cristi Puiu

social “black hollows,” as the medical and social services are proven not to reach the ordinary citizen; they are rendered ineffectual. Private lives and the human body become public, while people’s cynicism and sarcasm surmount paramount levels in a Romanian post-communist society of survival.

The body becomes devoid of the signification of a human body, and turns into a mere embodiment of blood vessels, bones, muscles, and skin, standing outside the

notion of a human being endowed with human dignity. The film shows the pettiness and gloominess of everyday life, disrespect vis-à-vis women, the infantilization of the patient and of seniors, the feminization of people who do not have the “right connections,” and their transformation into apparently faceless, shapeless bodies. Insults and dictatorial mannerisms shown throughout the movie seem to have pervaded everyday social relations, as they dominate the main discourse in this highly personalized, macho culture. No wonder the main character’s name is Dante, which suggests Dante’s *Divina Commedia* and its depiction of Hell.

(II) During Romanian communism and its prevalent aesthetics of social realism, one of the major discourses that pervaded the field of arts, including film, was “belonging” as national history. Such discourse typically foregrounded narratives of national identity, the epic heritage, the proliferation of history into a fantasized and idealized socialist future of socialist hero-workers, and the burden of history both as legitimating nationalist voice and a bourgeois past that needed to be tran-

scended. Movies such as Sergiu Nicolaescu’s *Mihai Viteazul* (1970) or Mircea Dragan’s *Stefan cel Mare* (1974) epitomize the melodrama of national heroics during Romanian communism.

Unlike other countries from Eastern Europe, Romania, a one-time ally of the Nazis in WWII, never assumed responsibility for its share in the Holocaust during the communist years. The tragedy of the Romanian Jews was hidden from history manuals, and films praised only national heroes, starting with the Dacians and Romans and ending with Ceaușescu, “the Great Leader.”

Only after the Revolution of 1989 and the fall of the Ceaușescu regime, did the narrative of the Holocaust slowly come to light to a new and skeptical generation that knew nothing about it. This is why, in film, the Holocaust came out only in a diasporic voice, that of Radu Mihaileanu, the Jewish-Romanian émigré to Paris, where he studied, and presently lives, writes, and directs his movies.

A Romanian, French, Belgian, and Israeli co-production, Radu Mihaileanu’s *Train de vie* (1998)—won twelve international film awards. The film was honored at the Venice Film Festival with the



Mihai Viteazul (1970),
Sergiu Nicolaescu

Critics Prize and an award for Best First Work, and at the Sundance Film Festival with the Audience Award. For the first time in Romanian cinema, belonging as history was seen through the lens of a minority, the Jewish minority.

In the film, the village fool of a small Jewish community during WWII warns his brethren that the Nazis are coming. His idea? A fake deportation train will take them across the Russian border and get them to Palestine. The train encounters real Nazis, communist revolutionaries, and Roma/Gypsy refugees, in this surrealist voyage that does not seem to end.

Mihaileanu’s is a genuinely anthropological movie. In its documentation of life in the shtetl, the film is reminiscent of Ben Hokpins’s *Simon Magus* (1999), which shows life in a shtetl in Germany. In *Train de vie* we have close-ups on social and family relations, with the enticing



Train de vie (1998),
Radu Mihaileanu

music of Goran Bregovic, klezmer music, Jewish traditional shtetl clothes, religious rituals, cuisine, architecture (the houses and the synagogue are made of wood because of the wandering, diasporic nature of the Jewish community), Yiddish language, relationships with Romanian neighbors—in a word: a universe of the Eastern European shtetl à la Marc Chagall.



Simon Magus (1999),
Ben Hopkins

Belonging and corporeality in the new wave of Romanian cinema also bear stylistic influences. The movies made in Romania after 1989 are cinema vérité, documentary, real-life style (*The Death of Mister Lazarescu; 4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days*), which represents a reaction to previous historical-nationalist melodramas, or fake social realism of proletcultist values.

The movies created in the diaspora tend to follow the style of the country of cultural production (in this case, France), for Radu Mihaileanu's *Train de vie* reminds one of the work of French director Jean-Pierre Jeunet with his focus on the detail, surrealism, and comedic in people's lives, even in the midst of real or imagined tragedies.



Denise Roman is a CSW Research Scholar. She is the author of *Fragmented Identities: Popular Culture, Sex, and Everyday Life in Postcommunist Romania* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003). She is currently working on an article titled "The Body and Corporeality in the New Wave of Romanian Cinema."

LINKS

4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt032846/>

Death of Mr. Lazarescu: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0456149/>

Train de vie (Train of Life): <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0170705/>