

ROMANIAN NEW WAVE CINEMA. AN INTRODUCTION (DORU POP, 2014)

Anca Sarau-Vuorinen

University of Turku

Finland

Doru Pop's book *Romanian New Wave Cinema. An Introduction* (2014) is exactly what it promises to be: an introduction to the modern Romanian filmmaking. Between 2001 and 2011, promising young Romanian filmmakers such as Cristi Puiu with his *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (2005), Cristian Mungiu with his *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007), Radu Muntean with *Tuesday, After Christmas* (2010) and Cătălin Mitulescu with *The Way I Spent the End of the World* (2006) emerged as important members of the European cinema. Pop, an associate professor in the Faculty of Theater and Television at Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj, Romania, identifies also a second New Wave in Romanian present day cinema represented by Tudor Giurgiu and *Of Snails and Men* (2012), Florin Șerban and *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle* (2010), Corneliu Porumboiu with *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006) and last but not least the tragic Cristian Nemescu and his unfinished *California Dreamin* (2007).

In his book, divided into eight chapters, Pop tries to find answers to what made the phenomenon of the Romanian new wave cinema possible, what were the causes for its late development. The author also presents what he calls the 'cinematic grammar' of this generation of Romanian film makers, i.e. the main features which glue together the above mentioned films in terms of specific themes, motifs and narratives of the philosophy of this generation. The common subjects of these films are the interest in communism and the Romanian revolution, or the ironic treatment of daily situations. Pop identifies a few major themes: the presence of marginal characters and antiheroes, the use of dark humor, the picturing of troubled father-son relationships, and the rise of feminine issues. Each chapter is accompanied by a thorough theoretical background of the classical approaches in cinema theory be it semiotic, ideological or psychoanalytic methods. This helps a novice in the cinematic art such as the writer of this book review to better understand the miracle of the millennium in Romanian cinema. Yet reading the theoretical background proved at times challenging, nevertheless, for the untrained eye and reader in the field.

The first two chapters of the book deal with formal aspects of what made this Romanian miracle possible, comparing it to what Pop calls ‘the old guard’, i.e. the degeneration of directors during the communist time such as Lucian Pintilie, Radu Gabrea, and the dominant figure of the time Sergiu Nicolaescu with his historical films such as *The Dacians* (1967) and *Michael the Brave* (1971). Pop also mentions the attempts made in early 90’s by directors such as Nae Caranfil with his *Philanthropy* (2002), but claims that the young directors such as Puiu and Mungiu had to rebuild the Romanian film industry from scratch with no father figures and as independent filmmakers. The second chapter of the book identifies Cristi Puiu as the founding father of the Romanian New Wave. The author considers Puiu’s *Stuff and Dough* (2001), otherwise a film without international prizes, but widely discussed in the foreign media, the founding brick of this phenomenon. The third chapter explores one of the major themes of the recent Romanian film industry such as immigration and the typology of characters it generates, the anti-heroes. One such example would be the mother figure in Florin Șerban’s *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle* (2010), who abandons her children in search for work abroad. The fourth chapter discusses the troubled relationship between fathers and sons and the issue of authority. A suitable example that supports the views expressed in this chapter is Calin Peter Netzer’s *Medal of Honour* (2009), which deals with a father who has no own identity and lacks authority in front of his wife and son. The fifth chapter concentrates on visual stereotypes of these films, such as the depiction of the grey and depressing communist-era blocks of flats, as a reflection of the inner state of mind of the characters or the cold hospital environment in Cristi Puiu’s *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (2005), as a picture of the impotence of the Romanian medical system. The following chapter takes a look at the way the young Romanian directors make use of dark humor. Pop identifies the influence of the Romanian play writers Caragiale and Ionesco in the technique used by the directors. Pop mentions in this chapter Porumboiu’s film *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006), and its comical twists in tragic situations. By far the most interesting chapter of the book is the one dealing with the rise of female cinema. The chapter mentions the names of young Romanian female directors such as Adina Pintilie and Anca Damian, but also points out important themes such as abortion depicted for instance in Mungiu’s *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007). Pop points out the emergence of remarkable female characters and actresses, such as Luminița Gheorghiu, a darling of this new generation of directors. The final chapter tries to identify the causes of the lack of popularity box office wise of the otherwise internationally acclaimed films. This young generation of Romanian directors made clear their affiliation to the European cinema with influences from the Italian neorealism, British new wave cinema, or the French Nouvelle Vague and thus their refusal of Hollywood influences. Quality must prevail over commercial success. Pop nevertheless sees a slight improvement in the number of Romanian viewers of these new cinema. The cause of the lack of success of such films could partly be explained by the very

themes they approach, which deal with the daily gloomy aspects of Romanian reality. Perhaps the viewer wants to escape this reality and that is why he or she prefers watching more commercial films such as the comedy *Garcea and the Oltenians* (2001).

I found Doru Pop's book about the Romanian New Wave a good example of an introduction to a subject one does not know much about. The book is easy to read, but at times the otherwise necessary theoretical background in cinema theory with allusions to Romanian literature and literature theory concepts demands an extra effort from the reader. As a film goer and as a person who grew up during the time of the 'old guard' as Pop calls it, I would not be as quick as Pop in dismissing such series as *Miscellaneous brigade (Brigada diverse)* or *Ship Aboy (Toate pânzele sus!)* of the 70's. Most Romanians such as me watch these series, mostly due to their great actors. At least *Miscellaneous brigade (Brigada diverse)* is filled with irony towards the communist Romanian militia, in my opinion. All in all Pop's book is a great excuse for watching Romanian films both old and especially new.

REFERENCES

- Pop, D. (2014), *Romanian New Wave An Introduction*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.