

# **The role of media in shaping the social imaginary: films as social documents.**

## **The case of gender and genre in the sense making through film**

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# What is film?

- Bidimensional, oral/visual re-presentation of the world via a set of mechanical, optical and electrical instruments, and a codified set of practices (plus the institutions, roles, etc.).
- The strip of film itself (extinct or almost)
- The narrative underlying such a production
- A product of cultural industries (the outcome of specialized work by a team of specialist, destined to be watched by an audience)

# Cinema and the real

“Bernardo Bertolucci once said in an interview that the cinema ‘is the language through which reality expresses itself () to create the language of the cinema, more than with any other form of expression, you have first to put your camera in front of reality, because cinema is made of reality’. He also said that every film is a documentary, including fiction films, for every film carries within it an archival record of the period in which it was made, expressed in terms of lighting style, set design, camera work, make up, and even the behavioural gestures and acting techniques of the performers.”

(“Memory, history and digital imagery in contemporary film,” Robert Burgoyne, p.220, in *Memory and Popular Film*, Paul Grainge, 2003)

“In the present day, however, the imprimatur of reality that once stamped the cinema has been replaced by the doubt and uncertainty that accompanies computer generated imagery” (idem)

“Future generations, looking at the history of the 20th century, will never be able to tell **fact from fiction**, having the media as material evidence. But then, **will this distinction still matter to them?**” (ibid., 223)

“The increasing use of computer generated, artificial visual environments in the movies that we see today appears to threaten not only the **certitude and authenticity** that we associate with photography, which is often described as a ‘visual record’, but also the **loss of the ethical and moral dimension** that Bazin associated with film” (ibid, 220-221)

...for the digital revolution in cinema changed forever those assumptions about the relationship between ‘cinema’ and the ‘real’ .

- Vivian Sobchack: ‘spatial and temporal grounding of the photo-realist cinema that up until now has been indexically related to human physical existence as it is daily experienced in space and time’

(Vivian Sobchack, “‘At the Still Point of the Turning World” Meta-Morphing and Meta-Stasis’, in *Meta-Morphing*, p. 138).

- Also see, *The Address of the Eye, a Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Vivian Sobchack, 1992, Princeton University Press, for the dialectics of film

# Film and its relationship with reality

- Rudolph Arnheim, 1930, asserts that film mechanically imitates nature (its take on silent film).
- Andre Bazin sees filmmakers as people who „want to put cinema in the service of a fundamental faith in reality” (*Ontological Realism of the Photographic Image*, 1945)
- For Bazin, film is a response to the need for realistic representation of humanity.
- A film’s credibility stems not from its verosimilitude, but from the identity between the photographic image and its object.
- The *transparency thesis*: film is a medium transparent to true reality, Kendall Walton



# Cavell and realism in film

Stanley Cavell: film „displaces people and object from the world onto the screen”.

*(The World Viewed, 1971, The Pursuit of Happiness, 1981)*

Realism in film was used as a dialectic tool by the USSR, and Hollywoodian film industries, during the Cold War, to support their respective views of the world, in ideological terms.

Cinematic realism was seen as a means of „cutting through the artifice of standard cinema”; yet this does not mean realist film makers (be them communist, sovietic or simply representatives of Italian neorealism, French Nouvelle Vague, etc.) would have such a thing as a privileged access to truth.

In a ideological (Western/Eastern) perspective, **realism** wants to show those aspects of reality that the highly standardized western, commercial cinema tended to push out of the screen (Cavell)

Even when using ordinary people as characters, the Hollywood industry employs its showbiz frame (famous actors, highly standardized esthetical means) which would push the film into the predictable esthetical categories called film ,genres'.

Sovietic or communist film, however, following Lenin's famous remark on the tremendous power of the media, is ideologically oriented and not left to develop freely, on an authorship basis or on market considerations.

# REpresentation

- “But part of the force of narrative cinema as generally theorized is precisely its insistent disavowal of the mortality inscribed in **representation** through its attempted repression of and compensation for ‘the actual discontinuities between representation and the world, and between the self and the image’ .” (Felleman, Susan, *Art in the cinematic imagination*, 2006, University of Texas Press, p. 15)

# What do we study when we study film?

- Film studies are concerned with **the film production practices and the economics, the narratives, the culture** within which films appear, the currents and schools, and the political, cultural and economic implications of film production and viewing.
- Approaches: theoretical, critical, historical and social.
- Can we see film as creator of media representations (usually considered as stemming from the journalistic genres)? To what extent these representations are also social, as in shared by the public? When do they become widely shared?
- Or they are merely transpositions of the individual author's view?
- Or rather politically crafted narratives put in the service of some form of ideology (communist, in our case).

# Approaches to studying fiction film

- From the cultural studies perspective, film can be seen as the battle ground of class and ideology. As such, they can be analysed in terms of ‘differences’ and dominance, power and power relations (the question of identity and its representation through film)
- Another perspective stresses on the way **film grammar** is used by the creator to convey a certain auctorial meaning, regardless the ideology.

# Film theory

Film theory is interested in identifying and analysing the conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between film and reality.

Film theory explores also the societal frame in which films are made and viewed, its other artistic forms of expression, etc.

We could not analyse film *per se*, but only in relationship with the cultural setting they were produced and consumed.

# Some of the film theories

- Apparatus theory
- Auteur theory
- Feminist film theory (gender, identity)
- Genre studies
- Marxist film theory
- Psychoanalytical film theory
- Structuralist film theory

# Who is making the sense of film?

- The constructivist paradigm sees cultural industries and their outcome as generators of social meaning and thus sense-making.
- Some researchers pinpoint that these products (films, music, TV series, etc.) are only “making sense” when they encounter the viewer/reader/listener. It’s not in the film itself, but in the way film is seen and ‘decoded’ (Hall et al.)
- Meaning ‘is in the eye of the beholder’



# Film grammar

- Grammar as in:
- - morphology (elements: lenses, camera angles, camera movements, light, sound, editing – like nouns, verbs, adverbs)
- - syntax (the combination, often prescribed and ascribed, of such elements)
- - semantics (how syntagms are used to convey the message)
- - pragmatics (fixed form, genre films)

# Romanian feature film produced in communist times

- Approx. 800 films were produced between 1948-1989, while the state owned the production means and thus controlled the film production (nationalization in 1948).
- Five production houses and Studioul de productie Bucuresti for fiction films
- Production of film could be divided in a few periods, but globally they could be fitted into the 'socialist realism' current.

# The realist socialism

- Glorifying the regime, the communist party, its exploits and its leader(s), as an effort of raising the revolutionary (sic!) conscience of the communist people and mobilize them towards the communist goals.

See Schwartz, Lawrence H., *Marxism and Culture*. Kennikat Press, 1980

Juraga, Dubravka and Booker, Keith M. *Socialist Cultures East and West*. Praeger, 2002

- V.I. Lenin is quoted having said that cinema (film) is most important medium for educating the masses and informing them about the ways, means and successes of communism. This was replicated as an axiom in all the Soviet states and also in the communist states in Europe, who financed film making and tried to use it to this purpose, mingling massively in the production practices.

# Romanian case

- “Tezele din iulie”, 1971, when Ceausescu, after a visit in China, tightened the screw, after a decade of relative liberalization of the cultural world
- The Mangalia discourse (Faleze de nisip)

# My initial research question

- Was the Romanian cinema during the Communism gendered? And if so, how?
- Was the portrayal of men and women unbalanced? It depended on what: gender of director, subject, genre, production plan?
- Were there any “production recipes” favoring a certain socio-professional identity for women, respectively, men characters, according to the film genre?
- What is the media representation of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ as reflected by the feature film?

# Other research directions of the gender-and-film matter

- Bechdel Test (oversimplified; can such a test devised for commercial cinema and for films produced in a Hollywoodian system be applied for films whose production rigors were different, i.e., communist?)
- Polygraph research (based on variations to Bechdel test) – how much screen time and dialogue has one character in a Disney film?
- 2,000 Screenplays: Dialogue Broken-down by Gender, Only High-Grossing Films: Ranked in the Top 2,500 by US Box Office





# Corpus

- I chose the 1975-1984 period (after the July Thesis and before the Mangalia/Neptun outburst of Ceausescu following the release of *Faleză de nisip*) and the fiction feature (long) films produced, representing the present
- Period dramas and other genres, such as fantasy, were screened out of the research, as I was interested in the gendering of the Romanian films on and of the present, rooted in the communist present.

# Methodology

- A content analysis on 234 films, produced between 1975-1985, based on the informations in the **Dictionarul filmului romanesc de fictiune** (Romanian Film Archives, 2004) and viewing of the films.
- Two data bases: one for the films where the first woman appearing in the credits was on the first/ second position and one for the other films (positions from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> or with no actress on the film credits or in the dictionary entry that usually respected the prominence of the character in the narrative and not the prominence of the actor/actress).

# Content analysis

- The research counted: the position of the first woman in the credits, whether the woman was first credited, second or third,
- The film's genre, as announce in the dictionary,
- Director's and screenwriter's gender,
- The socio-professional identity of first female and first male character in the credits: if they are defined by a profession or rather relationally; if defined by actions, dialogues with peers, in the working environment or only by discussing their profession or attributes with others, in external settings, etc.

# Women on the third or lower position in the film credits (DB1)

- 104 films out of the 234 (slightly less in the second 5-year period analyzed)
- Women's position: mean: 4,96, median: 4.
- 5 occurrences of no woman among the actors credited
- 30 on the 3<sup>rd</sup> position, 34 on 4<sup>th</sup>, 13 on 5<sup>th</sup>
- 8 on the 6<sup>th</sup> place, 6 films with the first woman on the 9<sup>th</sup> position, among the 104.
- In 5 films there were no women credited among the actors; there's one film where the first woman/actress was the 16<sup>th</sup> mentioned.

|       |          | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|----------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | 0        | 5         | 4,8     | 4,8           | 4,8                |
|       | 11       | 2         | 1,9     | 1,9           | 6,7                |
|       | 12       | 2         | 1,9     | 1,9           | 8,7                |
|       | 13       | 1         | 1,0     | 1,0           | 9,6                |
|       | 15       | 1         | 1,0     | 1,0           | 10,6               |
|       | 16       | 1         | 1,0     | 1,0           | 11,5               |
|       | 3        | 30        | 28,8    | 28,8          | 40,4               |
|       | 4        | 24        | 23,1    | 23,1          | 63,5               |
|       | 5        | 13        | 12,5    | 12,5          | 76,0               |
|       | 6        | 8         | 7,7     | 7,7           | 83,7               |
|       | 7        | 3         | 2,9     | 2,9           | 86,5               |
|       | 8        | 4         | 3,8     | 3,8           | 90,4               |
|       | 9        | 6         | 5,8     | 5,8           | 96,2               |
|       | colectiv | 4         | 3,8     | 3,8           | 100,0              |
|       | Total    | 104       | 100,0   | 100,0         |                    |

Male, female writer. Male, female director.

Women first character.

- Among the 104 films, 4 were directed by women directors (with the first woman on the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> position) and one was co-directed (m-f), with the woman character on the 6<sup>th</sup> position.
- Five of the 104 were written or co-written by women, with the first woman character on 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> position.

# Film genre x position of the first female character

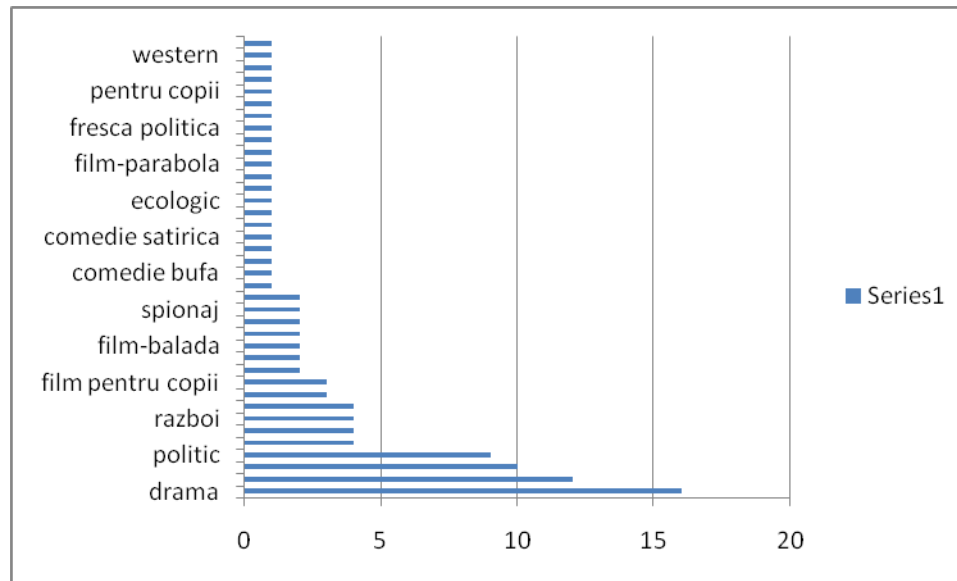
- Woman on 3<sup>rd</sup> position: drama (6 times), policier (4), comedy (3), social (3), children film (2).
- First woman on 4<sup>th</sup> position: drama (6), political (5)
- In historical films, women could even not be credited or be on 12<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> position. The same for the war films, policiers and political films.

# Director/screenwriter x position of first female character

- For the films **directed** by a woman director, the first female character was on 3<sup>rd</sup> position (3 times) and 4<sup>th</sup> position (once). Co-directed films (w-m) – 9<sup>th</sup> position.
- For the films **written** by a woman writer, the first female character was on 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> position (each, once).
- Co-writing or co-directing, correlated with the films genre (historical) leads to a lower position of the first female character than the mean and the median.



# Film genres (out of DB2, 104 items)



# DB1: first female character is on first or second position/credits

- Out of 130, in 80 of the films analyzed the first female character was defined relationally and not professionally, while only 49 (35%) were defined professionally. 10 were subjects to negotiation or transitional professional status (O lumina...)
- The most common professions for women characters were:
- - medical doctor (3), medical nurse (3), TV reporter (2), painter/artist (2), singer (2), primary school teacher (2), presedinte CAP (2).

# DB1: male professions

- Out of the 130 films, 87 presented the main male characters as a professional or having a precise job, mostly defined as such both in dialogue and at work. (film production conditions as such)
- In 10, they were engineers, in 10, officers, in 9, workers, in 4, doctors, 4 professors, 4 drivers, in 3, directors, in 3, aircraft pilots, 2 lawyers, etc.

# Relationally,

- Most of the main female character which were not defined professionally were wives (35 out of 130), fiances (3), girlfriends (13), mother (6) or daughters (8) of other male characters and defined as such, being confined to a family role.
- Male characters were also defined (only) relationally, but in a smaller number.

# First female vs. male character: socio-professional status

- Among the 130 films analyzed, in 49 the main female character was defined professionally (while the main male character was thus defined through a precise profession in 87 of them).
- In 80 films the main female character was defined relationally (in only 35 of them the man was not defined professionally).
- In a few films, main characters' professional status was changing or being negotiated (10, women, 8, men)

# Main female character defined professionally x director's gender

Count

|          |   | status of first female character |             |            | Total |
|----------|---|----------------------------------|-------------|------------|-------|
|          |   | defined                          | not defined | negotiable |       |
| director | f | 7                                | 6           | 0          | 13    |
|          | m | 42                               | 74          | 1          | 117   |
| Total    |   | 49                               | 80          | 1          | 130   |

# First male character status – director's gender

|          |   | First male character – profession defined |    |            | Total |
|----------|---|---|----|------------|-------|
|          |   | yes                                       | no | negotiated |       |
| director | f | 9   | 4  | 0          | 13    |
|          | m | 78  | 31 | 8          | 117   |
| Total    |   | 87  | 35 | 8          | 130   |

# Furthermore questions

- Is this gendering a mere stereotyping or the particular way the film production processes integrated ideological stances towards social roles (given the fact communism instrumentalized socio-professional identity of the citizens as a means towards achieving a higher social purpose, with its blaming & rewarding aspects)?
- Mangalia thesis



# Discussion

- The ideological stance and representitiveness of the Romanian feature cinema as sense-making of that period
- The subversiveness or compliance of the film makers
- Realism as a direct result of – scarcity of resources of an intention of depicting ‘reality’ (our socialist reality)

# challenges

- Methodological issues: qualitative vs. quantitative
- Coding (boyard, domnitor)
- Dictionary work or seeing all the films?
- Can one rely on memory of films seen prior or films have to be seen after having established the research instrument?

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