

STERE GULEA'S "SUNT O BABĂ COMUNISTĂ": PERFORMING THE (POST-)COMMUNIST NATION AND THE CHALLENGES OF GLOBALIZATION

Sorina Chiper, Assist. Prof., PhD, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

*Abstract: Stere Gulea's recent adaptation of Dan Lungu's novel *Sunt o babă comunistă* moves forward the action in the book from the late 1990s to the late 2000s. This move allows the director to thematise issues of communist and post-communist nationalism within the context of international migration and globalization. Although the film, just like the novel, focuses extensively on the leading female character, it makes forays into the construction and performance of national identity, intercultural dialogue and the challenges posed to the nuclear family by the global economic crisis. The present article retraces these forays and argues that the film dramatizes the translation of national identity in intercultural dialogue.*

Keywords: adaptation, post-communist cinema, nationalism, family, globalization.

Introduction

Recent Romanian cinema has enjoyed increased popularity with the film critics. This can be seen in the ever expanding range of prestigious prizes that Romanian films have received in international festivals. The list is impressive, and if we consider the entire post-communist period, it ranges from *Luxury Hotel*, directed by Dan Piza, which was awarded the *Leone d'argento* Prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1992, to Cristian Mungiu's *Occident* - winner of the great prize of the jury in the First Film Festival in 2002, his multiple award-winning *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (Palme d'Or and FIPRESCI at the Cannes festival, the European Film Award for the Best Film and the FIPRESCI prize at the San Sebastian film festival in 2007), and the more recent *Beyond the Hills*, winner of the Best Script and Best Actress Award in 2012, to Cristi Puiu's *The Death of Mister Lazarescu* and Cristian Nemescu's *California Dreamin'*, both winners of the "Un certain regard" prize at the Cannes festival in 2005 and 2007, respectively, and to Calin Peter Netzer's *The Child's Pose*, winner of the Golden Bear award for the best film and of the FIPRESCI award in the 2013 Berlinale.

2013 was also the year of the premiere of Stere Gulea's *I am a Communist Hag* (*Sunt o babă comunistă*), adapted after the eponymous novel written by Dan Lungu and already translated in ten languages and staged in the Netherlands and in Romania. Though it has not received international recognition, the film was much waited for, as a significant cultural event at national level; on the one hand, given its status as an adaptation, fans of Dan Lungu's books were curious to see the main character on the screen, and to savour the richness of the novel's humour. On the other hand, for those who had no previous knowledge of the book, the premiere was designed as an appealing media event, one that recast myths and symbols from the communist past into the mould of contemporary commercialism and marketization of discourse and of the everyday life.

Recontextualizing the communist past

The opening night of the film was carefully staged: the 23rd of August – the date chosen for the occasion – used to be Romania's national holiday under Communism, a day

marked by parades and propaganda, manipulated cheers and tightly controlled displays of public affection for the then political leader, Nicolae Ceaușescu. In other words, the 23rd of August was a day of performance: the performance of Romanians' bond to the nation, to the Communist Party and to the ruling couple. At the same time, as part of the same orchestration of the event, Polirom – Dan Lungu's publisher – issued a new edition of the novel which, in an act of ironic re-enactment, features Luminita Gheorgiu – the leading actress – on the book cover, dressed in a white T-shirt which reads, in red, "I ♥ PCR" and wearing a proletarian red scarf that covers her head. The communist past, thus, is contextualized as a foreign country – a place of otherness, that has its attractions and fans, of whom Emilia, the main character in the novel and in the film, is one.

The overt avowal of the film's status as an adaptation, as well as the use of the leading actress' picture on the front cover of the new edition of the book, and of the last cover as a poster for the opening of the film in cinemas, shows how the film tried to build on the aura of the text to advertise itself and to capitalize on the cultural capital of a best-seller; in parallel, the new edition of the book used the extra spin of success that comes with adaptations¹ to address its public and to lure them into purchasing (or re-purchasing) the book as a cultural capital of increased cachet.

The above mentioned elements from the film's paratext highlight some of its thematic concerns: nostalgia for the communist times, and performative nationalism. Other elements, which are present in the film only – Stere Gulea's contribution to the plot, characters and issues that the book raised – add the challenges brought to the traditional nuclear family by globalization and transnational migration.

The film starts *in media res*, with a phone call that interrupts Emilia (the main character) from gluing old photos in a family album, and that announces the arrival of Alice (Emilia and Tucu's single child, currently in the United States), together with her boyfriend, Allan. The prospect of hosting an American in their home compels Emilia to visualize her immediate surroundings through the eyes of a foreigner, and she finds everything lacking: the block of flats in which they live has not been maintained in years, the neighbours abuse the public areas around it and do not mind the litter that they leave behind; the TV set is too old and needs to be replaced; Emilia herself needs new clothes and a hairdo. An estimated budget of the projected expenses would be as much as what they could get if they could sell their old Dacia car – presuming that there were any buyers. Eventually, Emilia borrows some money from her younger sister, Sanda – a saleswoman of impractical gadgets that she advertises as must-haves.

The arrival of the "Americans" occasions cultural learning: Alain – the "stranger" and the visitor to a foreign land is introduced to Romanian food and drink culture, to Romanian patterns of socializing, to the local and national history and cultural heroes. This is Tucu's task; the two men bond through drinking together and playing music, with Tucu as a Romanian flute teacher. Through Alain's photos, Tucu also learns a few things about Alain's family and about the institutionalization of children with physical disabilities in the USA.

While Emilia is depicted, throughout the film, as being entrenched in private memories, Tucu is the guide to and through collective, national memory. The city tour that

¹ It is usually successful novels that are screened, not minor ones.

they offer Alain is an incursion into Romanian history via the gallery of public statues representing princes and kings from the dawn of the 17th century, when Michael the Brave united the three Romanian principalities for the first time, to the time of King Michael, who had to abdicate during World War Two. A high-angle shot from behind the shoulder of Michael the Brave's statue dwarfs the four characters in the frame; the film seems to imply that macro-history, the history of national heroes, national myths and national symbols presides over and incorporates, in its gaze of stone, the micro-histories of family relations, loves and arguments, gifts and self-sacrifices.

The absent hero from the gallery of mythic figures that still inhabit public consciousness is Ceaușescu; though not cast in stone, he enjoys even more cultural visibility than the towering founding fathers of the nation. The story of Ceaușescu's visit in Great Britain, when he was given a ride by the Queen in her carriage, gets told twice and is quoted, as moving images, in Emilia's black and white recollections of the time when she nearly shook Ceaușescu's hand. Much to Emilia's despair, Tucu even tells Alain what Ceaușescu and the Queen spoke about during the private ride, as if he had witnessed the conversation.

Ceaușescu's ghost silences all diners during the welcome meal prepared in honour of Alice and Alain: a news reporter, on television, covers the un-burial of the former ruling couple, a procedure that was undertaken so as to test whether the interred bodily remains really belonged to the dictators. The camera focuses on Alice, set in the center of the frame, who is dumb-stricken by the fact that, "twenty years, seven months and twenty seven days" after the (alleged) fall of communism, the images and figures of the dictators have not been put to rest. Echoing opinions from the city's agora – the market place – Tucu argues that if the communists were to run during the upcoming elections, they would get 50 % of the votes plus one – his wife's. This is shocking news for Alice, who is baffled not so much by what is remembered as by what has been forgotten: the long lines for food, the lack of freedom of expression, and the few hours of broadcasting on the national television, monopolized by party propaganda.

The scene is of central importance in the film; it is during this table conversation, occasioned by the news report, that Emilia candidly avows "I'm an old communist hag" – an identity status that she proclaims as fate ("What can I do about it?"). Challenged by Alice to tell what good things communism did for her that she regrets it, Emilia argues that under Communism, they led a decent life, in which nothing was missing: the fridge was always full, everybody had a job and a place to live, and for her, personally, it meant the chance to live in the city.

While Sanda's fervent nodding shows that she shares the same opinion, Ms. Rozalia's retort stands in counterpoint to Emilia's version of what it meant to live under communism. For her, Communism was an absurd system and a utopia that encroached upon individual freedom and property, and prevented her from pursuing art education and a career as a painter, because of her presumed "unhealthy origins". Instead, as she had mentioned upon Emilia's visit, she had to make a living as a seamstress of drab, colourless clothes, a trade that she had learnt from her father, who used to have a tailor's workshop before the communists came to power. What is more, she resents the fact that in her attempts to regain her father's property, she has to struggle against the same mentality and to deal with the same people from the previous regime, with their sons or relatives. For Ms Rozalia – Emilia's neighbor and

Alice's former teacher, communism is not gone; it permeates the human fabric of state institutions and it resists being overturned.

This scene brings together the old generation (Tucu, Emilia, Sanda, and Ms Rozalia) and the new generation (Alice, Alain, Catalin – Alice's cousin and his girlfriend, Celina) and pits nostalgics against progressives, and good memories against bad memories. Later in the film, at Sanda's place, a reunion of former co-workers, initiated by Emilia, occasions the retelling of other alternative, conflicting memories. Aurelia – now a small entrepreneur who struggles hard to keep her convenience store on the market, undoes Emilia's high opinion of their former communist boss – a genius when it came to finding contracts and raw materials – by revealing that, quite contrary to Party morality, he was a womanizer. In an ironic reversal of allegiance to systems of morality, the former secretary of the Communist Party, at factory level, is now a monk at Ghighiu monastery; and Mutu, whom they could have taken for a dissident on account of the jokes that he was cracking at work about Ceaușescu, was revealed to have been, in fact, an informer to the communist secret services. These casual revelations – in indication of the fluidity of identities in communism and post-communism – challenge Emilia's view of her past as a haven of blissful sociability.

The scene is interrupted by Sanda's announcement that the results of a survey on the Ceausescu's was being broadcast on TV, and everybody – except Emilia – rushes in to see what they were. Ceausescu's name and picture punctuate several other moments in the film: it pans on the screen when the camera captures the public announcement that a film about Ceausescu is going to be made in the city, for which extras are needed; it flickers when Emilia, a perfect candidate for such an extra and a rich source of information on the communist period, visits the factory where she used to work, and which is now used as the site where the film is being shot; it features in flashbacks, as broadcast images of Ceausescu's official visits or as placards prepared for the visit that he was to pay to the factory; and it reoccurs in the final scene, when the results of the tests performed on the unearthed bodily remains are revealed.

Nationalism under socialism was performed by an inflation of images of symbolic figures: the portraits of the ruling couple, who identified themselves with the party, and which, in turn, identified itself with the nation, and portraits of the new heroes such as Nadia Comaneci, whose picture is pinned to the wall of Emilia's workplace. It was also enacted by recourse to folk traditions and the symbolic wearing the national costume for special events, such as when welcoming the dictators on their official visits. The recourse to folklore and traditions is carried over in post-communism. What is more, the banal nationalism of post-communism is performed, in Emilia and Tucu's family, in acts of consumption: home-made brandy, home-made cheese, home-made pie, and eggs from free-range chicken from the country-side.

The multiple ways in which Ceausescu's ghost inhabits public speech and the privacy of homes, as well as the appetite that the characters have for their communist memories, shows that twenty years after the alleged fall of communism, it is still strongly present in people's lives – an issue that seems quite unsettling.

Globalization and challenges to the nuclear family

The communist times of Emilia's nostalgia were an age of industrialization. In a gesture of restorative nostalgia² she would like to open a production unit in Sanda's yard, using the machines that they operated on, at the time when the factory was running, and that are now waiting to be sold off as scrap iron. However, the present time of the film is not a time of industrial production but of de-industrialization. It is the time of the service industry, of entertainment and of more or less legal financial deals, involving global capital. It is also a time when globalization and international migration have displaced what used to be the nuclear family across continents, thousands of miles away.

Emilia had hoped that Alice would work with her, in the factory, should the Communists have remained in place. Alice, however, chose to migrate to Canada. During the visit, while Tucu acts as a cultural mediator, himself in need of linguistic mediation, Emilia is more concerned to find out – or to guess, when there is no direct confession – how her daughter is doing and whether she is happy. She realizes that Alice is pregnant and that the quarrels that she overhears between her and her partner are connected to their financial impasse: due to the global financial crisis, the Canadian branch of the firm that they were working for has closed down, and they had to relocate to America. Neither of them has a job, and the bank threatens to take their house unless they pay \$ 15,000 mortgage.

In order to prevent the foreclosure, Tucu and Emilia borrow the amount from a Chinese money-lender, under very strict conditions: unless they return it plus 50 % interest within 6 months, or plus 25 % within three months, they lose their own flat, used as collateral for the loan. The final episode in the film shows Emilia and Tucu in their old car, packed with familiar objects, driving to the countryside, where they will resettle in what has been, until then, the summer house where Tucu would make his frequent visits, to tend to the garden and see his sister, Catrina. For Emilia, who had never been enthusiastic about life in the countryside (as a child, she had run away from her village in order to escape the hard work and the smell of fuel patties), this could be a dramatic change. Yet the mildly humorous tone on which the film ends dilutes the drama of the situation.

“Parenthood shows people for what they really are” – argued Emilia when Alice challenged her to state her opinion on Alain. By pawning their own flat to save their daughter's house, Emilia and Tucu act by the principle of parental self-sacrifice that is implicit in Emilia's precept and thus, with the clear consciousness of having done their best, they can start a new life in the village. Though she was not particularly nostalgic of village life, the end of the film, ironically, brings her back to the *nostos* of her “healthy” origins.

Judged through the prism of plot, the film is about family relations and about the challenges brought to them by globalization. It is a story of the post-communist mirage of the

² Svetlana Boym, in her ample study of nostalgia, argues that this phenomenon has two manifestations: *restorative* and *reflective nostalgia*. The former highlights *nostos* and attempts to achieve a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost “home;” the latter emphasizes *algia* – the longing, loss and imperfect process of remembering. Restorative nostalgics fail to acknowledge their yearning as emotion, and argue that they are concerned with historic truth and tradition, in projects that characterize national and nationalistic revivals worldwide and that find their concrete manifestation in the reconstruction of monuments and the re-shuffling of national symbols. Reflective nostalgics, on the other hand, dwell more on personal and cultural memory; they can be ironic and humorous and they cherish shattered fragments of memory (Boym 2001: 41-50).

West, exemplified in other Romanian films such as *Occident*, *Asphalt Tango*, or *Francesca*, to name just a few. But, whereas in these films, the West is an unknown destination of predictable, but not actually experienced dangers, in *Sunt o babă comunistă*, the dangers are acutely perceived by the characters: joblessness, and the risk of losing one's house to the bank.

Asked by Alice what she thinks of Alain, Emilia argues that he is a good boy and that, ultimately, what matters, in a family, is how the family comes together when children are involved. Acting on this principle of the primacy of the children's interest, it comes as almost no surprise that Emilia and Tucu choose to risk their own safety for the sake of Alice's. Ironically, the financial problems of a transnational family are solved at local level, by resorting to global capital provided by a Chinese dealer.

The local, the global and the transnational are articulated at personal level, and in ways which radically impact the structure of the traditional nuclear family. Emilia had hoped that Alice would work with her, yet the spirit of freedom after 1989 drove her to Canada, whence the secondary effects of the financial crisis moved her to the America. Neither Canada, nor the USA is a promised land. After failed attempts to redress himself financially, Alain naively hopes to make money in Eastern Europe, in Poland or in Romania. But, as the film shows, except for the Chinese money lender, locals struggle to survive, let alone to make a profit. The market is in a process of stagnation – nobody buys, nobody sells, they are all waiting, powerlessly. I would argue that this feeling of powerlessness is experienced by spectators as well, caught unawares, in their passivity, by the camera of the photographer who has come to take pictures of the flat that Tucu and Emilia have lost to the Chinese money lender.

***Sunt o baba comunistă* – itineraries of reception**

As I have intimated in the Introduction, *Sunt o baba comunistă* enjoyed the status of a media event. It was much waited for not only in Romania, but also in the Romanian communities abroad where it was shown³. Some critics judged the film on its own terms, admitting not having read the book (Cristina Zaharia, port.ro). Others (Iulia Blaga, for instance), who did read the book, resented the fact that the director moved the plot forward in time, from 1996 – the year when Romania held Parliamentary elections, to the summer of 2009, after the onset of the global financial and economic crisis. This change, which allows the film to tackle contemporary issues and to make it more relevant to an international audience, implies that nostalgia for the communist times is, twenty years after the Romanian Revolution, as permeating in the Romanian society as it was in the late 1990s.

Iulia Blaga argued that “the film would have been more suitable for the 1990s, from all points of view.”⁴ In her reading, the film is, like the book, about transition: from communism to capitalism, from one professional stage to another, from one nostalgia to another. Echoing the usual criticism brought to film when it comes to the construction of

³ To give just an example, the film was part of the Week of the Romanian Film in Israel, and it was sold out in all four cities that hosted the event.

⁴ <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-film-15431604-video-cronica-unui-film-mult-asteptat-sunt-baba-comunista-tragi-comedie-despre-oameni-care-regreta-sau-nu-comunismul-dar-incearca-faca-fata-prezentului-mizer.htm>

character⁵, Iulia Blaga claims that the adaptation lacks intensity, and that the script fails to explore the depth of nostalgia and the dark side of it (what is “hideous” and “terrifying” about Emilia’s nostalgia), to the effect that ultimately, Emilia is rather a *passéist* than a nostalgic character. The fact that, at points, the film seems to be hard to pin down in terms of its time framework – argues Iulia Blaga – makes it unrealistic. Andrei Plesu, on the other hand, takes issue with the fact that a poor Romania family pawns their flat in order to save their daughter and her American partner from losing their house to the bank. Poor Romanians save the Americans – another unrealistic element – in Plesu’s mind⁶.

Concluding remarks

The film has been rather controversial in its reception. Yet, in my opinion, the controversies come from a long tradition of pitting films against the books that inspired them. The main issues of criticism – temporal undecidability, nostalgia brought dangerously close to our times and Emilia and Tucu’s radical self-sacrifice – find their justification if we judge the film on its own grounds, according to its internal logic. Comparisons between the film and the book tend to look for faults in the former and for virtues in the latter. The issue of fidelity has bedeviled this field since its early days. Adaptations, however, need to be understood as artefacts on their own, that stand in a relationship of *entanglement*, not of *enslavement*, to a text taken to be a source.

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- Asfalt Tango (Asphalt Tango)*, directed by Nae Caranfil, 1996.
- California Dreamin’* directed by Cristian Nemescu, 2007.

⁵ Gabriel Miller, for instance, in *Screening the Novel: Rediscovered American Fiction in Film*, argued that “film is not very successful in dealing either with complex psychological states or with dream or memory, nor can it render thought” (Miller 1980: xiii).

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