

The Specificity of Film Acting in the Actor's Art and Craft

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Abstract: *The leading discussions on film acting versus theatre acting are centred around the outer forms of inner thoughts. Just like theatre, film – or, rather, one's interaction with the camera – includes many types of such thoughts. There are (much like in theatre) various approaches, depending on the type of audiovisual product the actor is generating. The concrete similarity between film acting and real life lies in the expression "one hides what one contains". The difference lies in the fact that in real life one's route is "involuntary" and subject to circumstances, while in acting it is "voluntary" and subject to constraints (whether from the playwright or director).*

Though starting off from similar premises, film and theatre acting grow immensely far apart through their means of expression, or at least make it necessary to run a complex analysis of them.

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Introduction

Mainly, of the many things others have said about acting technique and how acting could be learned (Stella Adler – *The Tehnique of Acting*, Stella Adler: *The Art of Acting*, Stella Adler on Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov, Sanford Meisner – *On Acting*, Michael Chekhov – *On the Technique of Acting*, Lee Strasberg – *An Evening at the Actors Studio*, Uta Hagen – *Respect for Acting*, Konstantin Stanislavki – *Building a Character, An Actor Prepares, Creating a Role*), the ones that come closest to film acting are the statements of Meisner and Stanislavski – regardless of the forms of expression, the truth contained in them is one of the primordial conditions for the actor to be able to connect to the emotion.

Of course, if we take this to be a "craft" (and if it is, then it functions according to techniques, procedures, means and mechanisms), before getting to its subtleties (whether we refer to a young actor, an experienced actor, an acting student or a non-professional), I believe there has been a time in each of our lives when truth made a "receiver" (public – voluntary transmission/ watchers – involuntary transmission) experience an emotion. Regardless of the pole of emotion (laughter – mechanical, or crying – composite), I doubt there is anyone who has never in their personal life done something faithfully in the presence of others and thus elicited a genuine emotion.

1. Film acting

One of the subjects widely debated in local filmmaking is the fact that Romanian films make use of a limited number of actors, mostly the same ones. "Why do they keep using the same actors?" is one of the pivotal questions often heard at most film festivals.

One of the possible answers could be the interpretation method. The actors so often used in the New Romanian Cinema have similar modalities of interpretation and working, much

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sought after by casting directors, producers and, most of all, directors. Minimalism and realism – two of the main directions of Romanian cinema – are mostly eluded by acting schools, which consider (sometimes excessively so) that the form of outer expression should “transmit” things – an idea with which Romanian film directors don’t quite agree.

Approaching a film role in its contextual conditions is structured into several chapters – text analysis from a realistic, non-formal perspective, methods of neutrality through contextual shot – reverse shot processuality, methods of speaking by the paraverbal decryption of interpunctuation marks in the script. Obviously, such things are discussed with the director, but I personally believe the actor should be acquainted with them – first as a method of study, then as a practical approach during the learning process (for students) and, most importantly, in their direct work with the director.

The applied study of how to cultivate interest is first exercised by analysing film scenes, in which the methods in the Actor’s Art and Craft can be partially recognised, at least from the point of view of phonetic particularities (at which point the study turns rather musical). Naturally, this can only work in one’s mother tongue, where the actor is in full control of the nuances of the language, of the bivalence of semantic forms, which turns the technique of the actor’s art and craft into a melange of sensory and intellectual input, meant to inform the receiver (the spectator) of the objective particularities of the work being viewed.

The development of filmic phonetics in the actor’s art and craft exists in close correlation to music. The sounds emitted by a piano or a violin (stringed instruments) are different from those of a reed or percussion instrument, though they all play the same note. The same goes for film acting. A line delivered in a whispered tone has a different effect than the same line spoken normally or the same line screamed, or the same line shouted. The same string will make a different sound if the musician presses down on it more or less, when playing the same note, or if they perform a vibrato. The same thing happens to phonetics in acting. A suspended vowel generates a different intentionality than the same word uttered without a suspension.

1.1. Specific differences in the audiovisual product through the means of filmic expression and the New Romanian Cinema

In the many types of audiovisual product there are two categories which preponderantly use the actor’s art and craft – television (with its subdivisions – sitcom, telenovela, series, show) and film (commercial or film d’auteur).

In television, things may appear simpler, but it is only a matter of appearance. Given the pressure of time and money, the standard in pre-production often drops below expectations. In general (except for those production with a more generous budget), the text reaches the actors very late, usually on the day of filming or one day ahead, if not directly on set. This makes any talk about underlayers, nuances, subtleties become rather hilarious. The idea is to manage to say your text if at all possible – and if not, you don’t have to stick to it to it, it’s the idea that matters. Which at the opposite pole, that of the film d’auteur, is unimaginable – there, the text must be obeyed down to the last comma and understood in all its layers, assimilated and interiorised to the point of “being” rather than “acting”.

Something out of the question for TV productions but essential for films d’auteur (to once more follow the example of these polar opposites) is musical intelligence – as filmic phonetics involves knowledge of the various possibilities of delivering a line, with all its options, depending on sound volume, pauses, vowels, word endings and multiple tonalities. Through detailed analysis (during rehearsals – unlike theatre, where actors learn their text

during rehearsals, film rehearsals require you to have already learned your text) of each individual option, tweaked cognitively, not affectively (in other words, in full knowledge of why you are making any given change – in film, it is not preferable to say “It just felt right”), the actor develops their control in the operative aspect of thinking of the scenic process (after all, film is an art with roots in theatre) and, through rehearsals, makes the transition from interpretation to interiorisation.

Addressability in cinema – to underscore the difference between films d’auteur and commercial films – has to do above all with the subject and continues through aesthetics, style, acting, symbolism, being connected more than anything to the message being transmitted.

The New Romanian Cinema, which first appeared in the mid-2000s, is a term applied to a series of films which brought to the international stage a specific aesthetic movement, a particular type of subject and, first and foremost, a certain type of realism.

The forerunners of the New Romanian Cinema (in what concerns realism) began their work in the Romania of the 1960s (Mircea Săucan – *100 de lei, Meanders*, Liviu Ciulei – *The forest of the hanged*, Lucian Pintilie – *The reenactment*), but only exploded on the local scene in the 1980s (Mircea Daneliuc – *The cruise, Fox hunting, Glissando*, Dan Pița – *Paso Doble, Sand Cliffs*, Iosif Demian – *A girl's tear*, Alexandru Tatos – *Red apples, Scenes*).

While initially an alternative in the local film production, which after the Revolution was heading towards sensational mediocrity, the NRC had as its main principles interpretation, aesthetics, and significance.

The film realism of the NRC (exhibiting an explicit denial of the commercial) aims to debate – not necessarily in their explicit form, though they tend to be omnipresent – certain clear criteria relating to the fundamentals of art: emotion, form in opposition to content, narration in opposition to ideology, and realisation in opposition to approach. The camera - a cognitive concept- separates from the narrative, which makes the important part to happen off-camera.²

The aesthetics of films has changed radically in the Romanian cinema of the last two decades – the filming style, editing style, lighting or composition have all transformed over the years to the point of returning (partly) to the observational-compositional aesthetic.

Beginning with the short films *A Kent cartidge and a pack of coffee* (Cristi Puiu, 2004 – the Golden Bear), *Liviu's dream* (Corneliu Porumboiu – 2004), *Traffic* (Cătălin Mitulescu, 2004 – Palme d’Or),³ *Marilena from P7* (Cristian Nemescu – 2006), *Megatron* (Marian Crișan, 2008 – Palme d’Or) and continuing with features, which have actually been the starting point of the NRC, like *Stuff and dough* (Cristi Puiu – 2001), *Occident* (Cristian Mungiu – 2002), *Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (Cristi Puiu, 2005 – Un Certain Regard, Cannes), *12.08 East of Bucharest* (Corneliu Porumboiu – 2006, Caméra d’Or, Cannes), *The Paper will be blue* (Radu Muntean – 2006), *California Dreamin’* (Cristian Nemescu, 2007 – Un Certain Regard, Cannes), *4 months 3 weeks 2 days* (Cristian Mungiu, 2007, Palme d’Or, Cannes), *Policeman, adjective* (Corneliu Porumboiu, 2009 – Un Certain Regard, Cannes), *Aurora* (Cristi Puiu, 2010 – Un Certain Regard, Cannes),

Beyond the hills (Cristian Mungiu, 2012 – Best Screenplay/Best Actress in a Lead Role, Cannes), *Sieranevada* (Cristi Puiu, 2016 – Cannes), *Graduation* (Cristian Mungiu, 2016 – Best Director, Cannes), the NRC is perceived as a stage in the evolution of art films, which brought to the international stage a certain realistic effect, with sophisticated methods for outlining defining elements in aesthetics, screenwriting, and interpretation – with equal weight being given to each, characters not entirely identifiable with their point of view, the cliché of the

² Deaca, Mircea. 2013. *Cinematograful postfilmic*. Timișoara: Editura Brumar. p. 263

³ Kaceanov, Marina. 2008. On the New Romanian Cinema. Danish Journal of Film Studies. no. 25, p. 83

“victim” in relation to the other characters becoming blurry and guilt being carefully distributed, while the meaning of what has happened is often left up to the spectator’s interpretation.

The premise of objectivity is often substituted for the narrator, as the concept of “realism” is only a point of departure towards various forms of film realism and particularly the forms under which it has been understood throughout the history of cinema.

Quite often, the “realism” of the NRC overlaps with the “realistic concept” of the 1930s (Edmund Hussler, Siegfried Kracauer), developed in film by representatives of the New German Cinema (Fassbinder, Herzog, Kluge) or European names of the 1970s (Akerman) who sometimes step beyond realism and into naturalism.

What the NRC did differently from its predecessors is precisely the contradiction of a “realistic intention” – which, for Kracauer, has nothing to do with the believable or the familiar, but refers precisely to the capacity of images to resist against familiarity, the automated way in which we are used to perceiving reality – through an entirely “un-artistic” interpretation of characters, be they conceptual or formal.

The visible nuancing of the idea of filmic realism in the NRC involves nothing short of a “betrayal of the convention” established by realism, of the problematics of time and space, the nuance of movement and rhetoric, the forms of the believable and, more than anything, the a priori rejection of the ellipsis, as style variations are not seen as cultural touches that may contain meanings foreign to the authors’ intentions.

Paradoxically enough, though they say “new cinema never lasts long”, the NRC has lasted for over fifteen years and is still going. The one chance to be exploited in this movement is the awareness of the cliché, since it is very difficult to slip down that slope (elements we encounter in most productions that can classify as NRC are built on a minimalistic foundation: restrained dialogue, the entirely unexceptional situation within which the emotional poles move, the depth of characters, the cramped spaces, the austerity).

The socialist realism is a generator of artificial worlds, having mere connections with reality⁴ which makes the psychology typical of contemporary Romanian society is regarded not through analysis, but through observation, and the inner ethical judgments on injustice going unpunished acquire nuances also seen in Iranian or Japanese cinema – direct guilt acquired through an indirect process (often via screenplay journeys involving third parties or their actions), navigating from the social sphere to the personal.

The connections between other films (European or not) that gained visibility on an oversaturated market and those of the NRC are mostly aesthetical. These diverse forms that have managed to push filmmaking forward in a century much abused by technology have become “influential” precisely through the directions they undertake, through nuance (whether aesthetical or acting-based), and through the strength of their message – a tradition in films d’auteur.

From the point of view of the “ticket buyer”, the people who traditionally go to the cinema for entertainment, these tendencies are judged harshly and, in my opinion, insufficiently accepted – probably because of the low cultural level or the saturation of day-to-day life.

Average life in Romania transpires every day in dark, grey tones, with people burdened by worries, with tacit or explicit forms of violence, from the rural environment to the urban-intellectual one (where violence gains deeply multilayered linguistic subtleties).

It is, indeed, rather hard to imagine that after a day’s work in this grey society one would still be willing to pay for a cinema ticket to see the exact same thing. But that (the lack of spectators) cannot be a criterium. We all know great authors have rarely been appreciated during their lifetime. Without giving examples from other spheres or countries, if we limit

⁴ Popescu, Cristian Tudor. 2011. *Filmul surd in Romania mută*. București: Editura Polirom. p. 273

ourselves to the Romanian film authors, before the Revolution we see that films like *Microphone testing*, *Fox hunting*, *Scenes*, *The race*, *Orienteering* or *The reenactment* – to name only a few examples – were also not appreciated in their time, as people tended to prefer productions with a lighter mood – *Brigade Miscellaneous*, *Hello, grandma landing*, *A midsummer day's smile* or Sergiu Nicolaescu's films.

Though examples can continue all the way to colossal authors (great names of cinema like DeSica or Tarkovsky) who gained international recognition more in specialised festivals than from ticket payers, we see the same tendency in modern Romanian society, as illustrated by a few "audience-oriented" films that have attracted a number of spectators seven or eight times bigger than the average for films d'auteur.

It is likely that, in the Romania of today, the proportion is a little off. The cornerstone of production – financing – is secured by criteria that force the author into a niche, which implicitly leads to a saturation of the film d'auteur market.

The NRC films have managed to draw attention to Romania not only through their results, but first and foremost through their subjects. Their themes and aesthetics themselves have been strongly underpinned by exceptional acting – which had its own defining features, present only in the NRC: neutrality, tone, and minimalism.

From the point of view of acting, the NRC continues to represent a great advantage for the evolution of the actor's art and craft in our country. The tradition of interpretive art, in conjunction with the social and political stage our country is traversing and with propaganda, has brought to the screen many films – perhaps too many of them mainstream, from certain points of view. After the Mangalia Conference (1983), where Nicolae Ceaușescu declared that "from now on there must be no film that doesn't portray the worker", the cultural and intellectual turning point was very clear. Except for small notable exceptions like *Glissando* (and others which only made it on screen after the Revolution, like *For whom the bell tolls*, *Mitica?*), most films between 1983 and 1989 were made for a broad audience and for the type of Communist propaganda that ruled over the art of filmmaking.

After the Revolution and up until the 2000s, Lucian Pintilie (with his four films that gained recognition in the world's greatest festivals, Cannes and Venezia, *The oak*, *An unforgettable summer*, *Too late* and *Terminus Paradis*), Mircea Daneliuc (*Conjugal bed*, *Snail's Senator*), and Dan Pița (*Luxury Hotel*) were more or less the only representatives of the film d'auteur, as mainstream films in the post-Revolution era were mostly hilarious, failed attempts at mainstream comedies with coarse aesthetics, deplorable photography and hamhanded acting.

With the coming of the NRC, the style of acting underwent a fundamental change. Silence and introspection reappeared (after films ignored by the public before the Revolution, like *Glissando*), as did that type of phonetically essential rhetoric, with low tones, and most importantly interpretive neutrality, which generates contextual importance, and regained the place they so well deserved.

Conclusions

The principle behind the NRC brought up for discussion a problematic which is fundamental to its essence – that of evil from the perspective of positive characters. However, the aesthetic approach puts this problematic (obviously discussed by other Romanian filmmakers before) in an entirely different perspective – that of the observational. The two types used most often by NRC filmmakers are observational (the subjective and the objective). This type of aesthetic puts the spectator in a peculiar situation. The first would be that in which the camera stands in for a character whom the director imagines telling the story, but who is not

directly involved in the actions of the other characters (subjective observational – *Sieranevada*, Cristi Puiu, 2016, in which the camera only has one, realistic filming angle, defining the space for that character). The second is that in which the camera becomes omnipresent, but still limited to human, non-supernatural powers, presenting the story from a few possible angles (objective observational – *Beyond the hills*, Cristian Mungiu, 2012, in which the camera observes the action, though from two angles when necessary, allowing for the natural accrual time).

This internationally recognised movement continues to exist, but its aesthetic and stylistic forms are in a constant state of change.

For a study, it would be essential to view the films in the New Romanian Cinema, then undertake a solid analysis to observe the means of expression (in both directing and acting) used in them, the way they use the long take (the essence of filmmaking method in what concerns the art of the film actor) and, quite importantly, the phonetic particularities in their neutrality, with nuance so fine they become a lesson in acting with each subsequent viewing.

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