

The Art of Acting, Integrated into the Film's Aesthetics: Victor Rebengiuc in four films directed by Liviu Ciulei, Dan Pița, Stere Gulea, and Lucian Pintilie

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Abstract: *Victor Rebengiuc (b. 1933) is one of the most renowned Romanian theatre and film actors. During his 68-year-long acting career, he contributed decisively to the success of remarkable films directed, among others, by Liviu Ciulei (1923-2011), Dan Pița (b. 1938), Stere Gulea (b. 1943), and Lucian Pintilie (1933-2018). Rebengiuc played Apostol Bologa in Ciulei's Forest of the Hanged (Pădurea spânzuraților, 1965), Tănase Scatiu in Pița's Tănase Scatiu (1976), Ilie Moromete in Gulea's The Moromete Family (Moromeții, 1987), and Niki Ardelean in Pintilie's Niki and Flo (Niki Ardelean, colonel în rezervă, 2003). All of these portrayals became iconic roles in the history of Romanian cinema. The research paper investigates how Victor Rebengiuc managed to masterfully embody four extremely different protagonists, under the guidance of four directors with distinctive styles, in an attempt to understand how the art of acting can be integrated into the film's aesthetics.*

Keywords: *film acting; film adaptation; film aesthetics; film directing; Liviu Ciulei; Lucian Pintilie; Victor Rebengiuc;*

Introduction

What is the place of acting into a film's style and aesthetics? A crucial one, we can instantly answer: without the right actors, a film cannot be successful, no matter how good its screenplay, cinematography and lighting, image and sound editing, music, art design, costumes, and makeup are. No good acting leads to failure.

Film scholars reunite under the umbrella concept "mise-en-scene" four general areas in which the directors can exercise their power of choice and control: "setting, costumes and makeup, lighting, and staging (which includes acting and movement in the shot)"². In other words, acting is just a part of a film's aesthetics, but one of the utmost importance. To reach maximum potential, a gifted actor must have a good script with remarkable dialogues, be well conducted by the director, well placed in the frame, lightened and filmed, his voice must be professionally recorded, the art, costume, and makeup design must help create convincingly the world of the character, etc. For the whole to function properly, each and every part must work. And the main responsible for all this is the film's director.

The great Romanian actor Victor Rebengiuc (b. 1933), as well as the major directors Liviu Ciulei (1923-2011), Dan Pița (b. 1938), Stere Gulea (b. 1943), and Lucian Pintilie (1933-2018), discussed their collaboration in various interviews and memoirs. Through a thorough examination of the four films subject to analysis and comparing the public statements of the five above-

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² David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson & Jeff Smith. 2024. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw Hill, 13th edition, p. 115.

mentioned Romanian arts personalities to their on-screen accomplishments, we can endeavour to explain the symbiosis between the art of acting and the art of directing, as it shapes the film's aesthetics.

In an interview from 1987, taken by Eva Sîrbu after the premiere of the film *The Moromete Family* (*Moromeții*), Rebengiuc asserted that all the notable film roles of his career had been in adaptations³. Three of the four films discussed here are adaptations based on classical works of Romanian literature: Ciulei's *Forest of the Hanged* (*Pădurea spânzuraților*, 1965) on the homonymous novel written by Liviu Rebreanu (1922), Pița's *Tănase Scatiu* (1976) on the first two novels from Duiliu Zamfirescu's literary cycle focused in the Comăneșteanu family, *Life in the Country* (*Viața la țară*, 1894-1895) and *Tănase Scatiu* (1895-1896), while Gulea's *The Moromete Family* (*Moromeții*, 1987) is a screen adaptation of the first volume of Marin Preda's novel bearing the same title (1955). Only Pintilie's *Niki and Flo* (*Niki Ardelean, colonel în rezervă*, 2003) is based on an original screenplay written by Cristi Puiu and Răzvan Rădulescu.

As Rebengiuc stated on several occasions (including the above-mentioned interview by Eva Sîrbu), when working on film adaptations, resorting to the book, particularly one that is a remarkable work of Romanian literature, substantially helped him build his character (Apostol Bologa, Tănase Scatiu, or Ilie Moromete). However, even when working on an original screenplay, under the guidance of an outstanding director such as Pintilie, Rebengiuc was able to create a powerful protagonist such as Niki Ardelean.

Examining chronologically the four iconic roles, relevant for different stages in the Romanian actor's career and the filmographies of four important directors, taking into account the public statements of Rebengiuc, Ciulei, Pița, Gulea, and Pintilie, can shed some light on the manner in which the act can be integrated into the film's aesthetics.

1. Apostol Bologa

When constructing the protagonist of his psychological novel, Liviu Rebreanu was partly inspired by his younger brother, Emil, an officer in the Austro-Hungarian Army during World War I, who was hanged for espionage and desertion in 1917. Apostol Bologa, an ethnic Romanian from Transylvania, volunteered into the Austro-Hungarian Army to impress his fiancée. He proves his bravery on the fronts of Italy and Galicia, being promoted to the rank of lieutenant and decorated three times. However, when he is sent to the Romanian front in the Eastern Carpathians, Apostol becomes obsessed with the thought of desertion. Finally, after being forced to take part in a military tribunal and judge a Romanian peasant for espionage, he tries to desert, is caught, and hanged, as the Czech officer he had helped condemn.

The film's screenplay, written by Titus Popovici (1930-1994), condenses Apostol's moral transformation – the awakening of his conscience – over a period of a few months. The plot is chronological, there are no flashbacks, and, except for one extended sequence (whose source is not the novel *Forest of the Hanged*, but an earlier war novella written by Rebreanu⁴), the film continuously follows the protagonist's external arc, echoing his internal journey.

³ Eva Sîrbu. November 1987. "Victor Rebengiuc: If only Moromete existed in my career, and I would still be satisfied for the rest of my life" [„Victor Rebengiuc: Dacă în cariera mea n-ar exista decât Moromete și tot așa fi mulțumit pentru toată viața”]. *Cinema* XXV: 11 (297), p. 11.

⁴ *Ițic Ștrul as a Deserter* (*Ițic Ștrul dezertor*, 1919).

Victor Rebengiuc was not the director's first option to play Apostol Bologa. In fact, production started with the eight-year-younger Șerban Cantacuzino (1941-2011), but Ciulei soon realized that the role was too much for the unexperienced actor. In 2011, the director declared: "I originally had someone else in the cast, but it didn't work out. We shot for about two weeks and he wasn't responding. He was a good guy, but too young. Then I chose Rebengiuc"⁵. Ciulei had previously worked with Rebengiuc on several shows staged at the "Bulandra" Theatre in Bucharest, so he knew the actor's potential well. His decision proved to be correct.

Liviu Ciulei demanded a lot from his actors, not only on stage, but also on screen: "In cinema, the specificity of interpretation involves the use of millimetrically dosed external means, chosen with a more pharmaceutical weight, I would say, than those of the stage. The film actor must know himself very well, to know the result on film of each mini-reaction, to master, within the limits accepted by the screen, the externalization of his inner, psychological movement. And to relate all of this to the camera angle, to the lens used while filming, to know the effect of the different focal lengths of the lenses (for each one, the performance must be different), and, finally, to tune his play according to the camera movement. (...) But, as in any artistic profession, regarding these laws, specific to cinema, you must know them and forget them – or, at least, seem to have forgotten them. Knowing them is no more than a painter's knowledge of colours. Until the painting, many others interfere"⁶.

The director was pleased with the performance of his lead actor, as he praised Rebengiuc every time he talked about *Forest of the Hanged* (which would unfortunately be Ciulei's last feature film, although it won the Award for Best Director at the Cannes Festival and was generally very well received nationally and internationally). The manner in which the actor captured his character's transformation, from the first to the last scene (both related to a hanging), is truly remarkable.

2. Tănase Scatiu

The adaptation made by Mihnea Gheorghiu (1919-2011) after the two novels by Duiliu Zamfirescu, whose stories are placed in the last years of the 19th century⁷, opposes the old boyar families to the nouveau riche, represented by the former land tenant Tănase Sotirescu, nicknamed "Scatiu" ("The Siskin"). The ruthless Tănase, who would become a successful politician, marries Tincuța, the daughter of the indebted landlord Dinu Murguleț, to accumulate wealth, while maintaining an affair with a servant. After his wife dies, Tănase tries to keep the boyar Murguleț under his control, only to end up being beaten to death by the peasants on his estate revolted against his injustice.

Dan Pița recalls that several major Romanian actors, such as Ion Caramitru, Ovidiu Iuliu Moldovan, and George Motoi, auditioned for the part of Tănase Scatiu, before the director chose Victor Rebengiuc to play the role. According to Pița, at that time, one decade after *Forest of the Hanged*, Rebengiuc tried to escape being typecast as a romantic lead in theatre and cinema,

⁵ Adrian Filimon. 2011, February 10. "Liviu Ciulei, on: Rebengiuc, Al Pacino, and *Forest of the Hanged*" [„Liviu Ciulei, despre: Rebengiuc, Al Pacino și *Pădurea spânzuraților*]. *Ziarul Ring*. Retrieved May 15, 2025, from <https://ziarulring.ro/liviu-ciulei-despre-rebengiuc-al-pacino-si-padurea-spanzuratilor/>.

⁶ Eva Sîrbu. December 1971. "Liviu Ciulei: The Actor as Politician" [„Liviu Ciulei: Actorul – om politic”]. *Cinema XIX*: 12 (108), p. 20.

⁷ The screenwriter decided to push back the plot to the 1860s, according to the explanations inserted at the beginning of the film.

following his success as Apostol Bologa. He wanted a change, and “Tănase Scatiu offered him a different kind of acting fulfilment”⁸.

The director goes on to assert that the entire cast of the film was chosen to be consonant with the lead actor Rebengiuc. In his confessions, published in 2005, Pița explains his vision: “I wanted a present-day story that relied on strong and believable characters, so that the viewers would have the feeling that they are watching a story that could take place today, that is, in 1975”. Rebengiuc supported this vision by adapting the 19th-century dialogues, together with the directors and other actors, so that they did not seem outdated, and suggested contemporary actions (for example, Tănase inspecting his lands on horse-driven carriage looked like a modern-day aristocrat driving his Mercedes). Pița adds: “In all respects I got along perfectly with Victor. The dialogues had become modernized, and the acting relationships were updated. We understood each other from the looks, and we consulted each other at length when we changed something. All costumes were made according to my instructions, pants, hat, boots, and cape, they all fit his body perfectly. And I think they helped him decisively portray the character”⁹.

The director was so pleased with their collaboration that he would cast Rebengiuc in several other films, most notably *Sand Cliffs* (*Faleză de nisip*, 1983), which was banned by censorship after its premiere.

3. Ilie Moromete

The director Stere Gulea wrote himself the screenplay inspired by Marin Preda’s well-known novel. Before World War II, in a village on the Wallachian Plain, Ilie, the head of the Moromete family, struggles to keep his land, while his sons from a previous marriage plan to run to Bucharest, his daughters want to find husbands, and the youngest son, Nicolae, dreams of going to school in the city. The protagonist’s world – and the ordinary peasant family living in general – will come to an end, as Ilie is forced to sell a part of the land, after the older boys run away with the family horses. In the last scene of the film, the carriage with Ilie and Nicolae is lost in the fog. Their future is more uncertain than ever before.

As for *Forest of the Hanged*, made over two decades earlier, Victor Rebengiuc was not the first choice of the director to play the protagonist. In his memoirs, Gulea asserts that his first option was another important Romanian actor, Gheorghe Dinică, who initially accepted the part of Ilie Moromete, but subsequently, told the director he did not want it anymore. Gulea tried hard to make the actor change his mind, but it was useless. The director notes: “After Dinică’s refusal, I resorted to Victor Rebengiuc. Victor’s casting made some people raise their eyebrows, but later they said that he was the ideal performer for Ilie Moromete”¹⁰.

For Rebengiuc, *The Moromete Family* brought the chance to play a character on screen “almost as I wanted to”. Observing that Gulea had him in mind initially for another character (Dumitru lui Nae, played by Ilie Gheorghe), Rebengiuc reveals how he approached Ilie Moromete: “Of course I was surprised, but I was also pleasantly impressed. I accepted on the spot. That was too good to be true! Then, the problems began: I thought that he was a peasant, a social category that I had never played before, and nothing is more hateful than ‘acting like a peasant’, trying to

⁸ Dan Pița. 2005. *Cinematic Confessions* [*Confesiuni cinematografice*]. București: Editura Fundației Pro, pp. 145-146.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 147.

¹⁰ Stere Gulea. 2024. *Letter to My Granddaughters: A Director’s Notes* [*Scrisoare către nepoatele mele. Însemnările unui regizor*]. București: Editura Humanitas, p. 100.

appear peasant without being one. The difficulties grew, as I thought he was a mountain peasant, so I could not even cling to a picturesque note of language. Things are like that. I took refuge in the thought that, peasant or not peasant, after all he was a man. His feelings, thoughts, and life are generally human and valid. And I will have to rely on this generally valid one in order to be able to realize him. To make him credible, believing in his problems, in his philosophy, in the difficulties he has in life and that he seeks to overcome...”¹¹.

4. Niki Ardelean

In 2003, discussing what would prove to be his last feature film, *Niki and Flo*, Lucian Pintilie described as follows the two eponymous characters, written by Cristi Puiu and Răzvan Rădulescu, but brought to the screen by Pintilie, with the contribution of the actors Victor Rebengiuc (Niki Ardelean) and Răzvan Rădulescu (Florian “Flo” Tufaru): “Who are Niki and Flo? Niki is a career soldier, retired, recently mourning the absurd death of his child, in danger of losing his second one, a girl who is married to Flo’s son and who will both leave Romania to go to America for good.

Flo is a bohemian remnant of the ’70s, a ‘*touche à tout*’ great video amateur, a repressed dictator, without room for manoeuvre, who descends upon Niki.

The history of the film is the history of the unfolding of a complete dispossession, which one man executes on another man. From the beginning to the end of the film, Flo dispossesses Niki of absolutely all the physical, moral and spiritual values that constitute his system of reference – the self-image or the consciousness of his own dignity, as Dostoevsky calls it”¹².

In another text, “Rebengiuc’s Toenails”, included in the same volume, Pintilie mentions that his collaboration with the actor went not very smoothly, although they started working together excellently, for television and theatre. “We didn’t create any role, any important spectacle together”, the director adds. When Pintilie was able to escape from the rigours of socialist realism, and staged his greatest Romanian theatre shows, Rebengiuc was not a part of them, as he was not a part of the director’s first films. “Victor was a savage, and so was I”, says Pintilie. When he was invited to return to socialist Romania and he was apparently given a free hand to make a film adaptation of I.L. Caragiale’s play *Carnival Scenes (D’ale carnavalului)*, the director offered Rebengiuc the part of Pampon, initially conceived for Toma Caragiu (another important Romanian actor, who died during the 1977 earthquake)¹³. The film should have been released in 1981, but it was banned by censorship and had its premiere only after the change of regime, in 1990. Later, Rebengiuc played secondary roles in Pintilie’s feature films *The Oak (Balanța)*, 1992), *Too Late (Prea târziu)*, 1996), and *Next Stop Paradise (Terminus Paradis)*, 1998), before obtaining the role of the former army man Niki Ardelean. After *Niki and Flo*, Rebengiuc collaborated also to the last film directed by Pintilie, the medium-length *Tertium non datur* (2006).

As Niki Ardelean, the actor, now a sexagenarian, had a very difficult task, under the guidance of a director who presents himself as “an absolute dictator”. Rebengiuc had to convince

¹¹ Eva Sîrbu. November 1987. “Victor Rebengiuc: If only Moromete existed in my career, and I would still be satisfied for the rest of my life”. *Cinema XXV*: 11 (297), p. 11.

¹² Lucian Pintilie. 2017. *Odds and Ends: From Real Nightmare to Magical Realism [Bricabrac. De la coșmarul real la realismul magic]*. București: Editura Nemira, pp. 661-662.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 668-672.

the audience that an “ordinary” old man, seemingly harmless, can be driven to the point where he can take someone else’s life. And the viewers had no problem believing that.

5. Conclusions

When interviewed by Eva Sîrbu în 1987, Victor Rebengiuc stated: “And I have always sought, and will continue to seek from now on, if my health permits, to be as authentic as possible. In fact, this is what concerns me: the truth of the character. I am a realistic actor. I like to show the character. I try! I try to convince the viewer of the authenticity of the character, to convince him that he [the character] is a man who lives here, next to you, next to me, and next to us. I am not interested in showing how I am. This is how I consider myself, a realistic actor, and a character actor as well. However, the composition I resort to is not external (except when the role requires it), but of character (...). In other words, I try to differentiate each character by using various character traits. And I do not impose it, the character requires a certain way of treatment from a characterial point of view. The way he treats the other characters, himself, the way he thinks, speaks, forces me to place him in a world: his world...”¹⁴.

The actor did indeed manage to find the truth of his four above-discussed characters and to convince his viewers of the characters’ authenticity. The challenge was probably greater in the case of *Niki and Flo*, whose screenplay was not an adaptation, so Rebengiuc could not resort to an accomplished novel to decipher and construct his character. If Tănase Scatiu does not change much during his character arc, the other three protagonists (Apostol Bologa, Ilie Moromete, and Niki Ardelean) undergo a profound transformation. They gradually realize that the perfect world they had imagined for themselves and their close ones (his fiancée, wife, or children) is irreparably falling apart. After this cruel realization, the apparently inoffensive Niki Ardelean even resorts to killing the person who came to embody for him all the evil in the world. Victor Rebengiuc is so convincing in all these roles, that we can assert that, in Romanian cinema, he is the ideal interpreter of characters represented in the midst of metamorphosis.

According to James Naremore, “star performances in movies are often structured so as to give the audience a chance to appreciate the player’s physical or mental accomplishments. Film problematizes our ability to measure these effects simply because it allows for so much manipulation of the image, throwing the power of ‘conducting’ meaning into the hands of a director; nevertheless, one of the common pleasures of moviegoing derives from our feeling that an actor is doing something remarkable”¹⁵.

Victor Rebengiuc, a star of Romanian cinema, impresses the viewers of the four films analysed here not only through his physical, but more his mental accomplishments. Thus, his remarkable performances convey the director’s message to the viewers, integrating perfectly into the film’s aesthetics.

¹⁴ Eva Sîrbu. November 1987. „Victor Rebengiuc: If only Moromete existed in my career, and I would still be satisfied for the rest of my life”. *Cinema XXV*: 11 (297), p. 11.

¹⁵ James Naremore. 1990. *Acting in the Cinema*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, p. 26.

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