

FROM BIRTHING TO SEXING THE NATION: ROMANIAN HISTORICAL FILM AND ROMANTIC NATIONALISM IN THE SOCIALIST ERA

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Abstract

Using the historical saga *Columna/The Column* (Mircea Drăgan, 1968) as case study, in this article¹ I attempt to show that early socialist-era cinema in Romania (and particularly historical film) endeavored to redefine the nation in the 1960s following the precepts of pan-European romantic nationalist movements proliferated in Romania particularly in the poetry of the 19th century. In the process of turning myth into visuals and film into a history textbook, I identify the ambivalence in which the socialist leadership was caught when attempting to erase the country's colonial past, paralleling the early Roman conquest of Dacia in antiquity with the long history of imperial occupation. This ambivalence, I argue, left an indelible imprint on the film, following which a particular brand of nationalism survived unscathed in Romanian collective consciousness.

Keywords: ethnogeny, national identity, nationalist-communism, colonial past, myth.

In this article I argue that, just as 'print capitalism' helped create nationalities in the late middle-ages,² Romanian historical saga films of the late 60s and early 70s helped construct Romanian nationalism as a result of a premeditated effort directed from the top of the socialist leadership. I look at this effort as represented in the crowd-pleaser *Columna* (Mircea Drăgan, 1968) and I claim that – judged in its temporal context – this resembled any other engineering project initiated by nationalist-communism, that is, by the predominantly nationalistic practices of an otherwise socialist leadership.

Propagandist as this effort may have been, I analyze this historical film from a scholarly angle. Following Aniko Imre who argues that “consumerist” socialist cinema is worthy of research just as much as the works of dissident directors like Andrzej Wajda³, I argue that

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² See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 2016. First edition: 1983.

³ See Aniko Imre, “Introduction”, *East European Cinemas*, ed. by Aniko Imre, New York: Routledge, 2005.

toe-tailing directors like Mircea Drăgan who were constricted by the Party to walk a certain ideological line in their filmmaking, offered a richer perspective of socialist realities in their Politburo-approved films than dissident art-house directors whose productions allegedly subverted the ideological framework.

If auteurist cinema in Eastern Europe presented “fissures of aesthetics” – to use Imre’s expression related to consumerist socialist film – which escaped censorship and thus helped these productions ultimately become iconic through their subversive character, my analysis of *Columna* attempts to show that the entire project of building a national cinema through historical film represents a majestic aesthetic fissure, as it were. What I mean is that cinema that has been later catalogued as propaganda can be deconstructed to reveal the distinct nature of the nationalist project, and for that reason “propagandist” films are worthy of at least as much attention as the works of the canonical auteurs that have become the focus of scholarly writing in the past.

Finally, I argue that in their active mission to represent and define the nation, cinematic works such as *Columna* amounted to altogether *rewriting* history by accentuating the mythical element that would – in Romania’s case – become the centerpiece of nationalist communism from the late sixties until the fall of the regime. Having just emerged independent after centuries of imperial domination, Romanian history of the 20th century was eager to tell a heroic story that it had to partially create through both manufacturing local tales of heroic heritage – as we shall soon see – as well as through glorious acts of resistance to foreign rule, as did many of the surrounding nations. These would later serve as contents for the many literary and cinematic works that mixed the romantic nationalism of the 19th century and the prerogatives of independence offered by the 20th. In an effort meant to wash away the memory of colonial and imperial domination with imagined grandeur, historical cinema acted, I argue, as a model for a new attitudinal stance toward history, and ultimately, as a model for the new nation as a whole.⁴

Birth of the Nation

The story of Romanian identity starts with a millennium-long gap. Even though cursory sources mention the temporary occupation of the ancient territory of Dacia by the Roman Empire from 106 to 274 AD, later sources are conspicuously and mysteriously silent about the intervening 1000 years. Thus, the history of the Romanians proper starts with their being mentioned (under the name of Vlachs) in various medieval sources at the onset of the 11th century. Despite this genealogical obscurity, and possibly in order to demarcate their identity as distinct from threatening and conquering Others who spoke several variants of Slavic languages, Romanian chroniclers writing in the 17th century refused to limit themselves to the found sources, and insisted on ascribing Dacia – the ancient province conquered by the Roman empire in 102 AD vaguely corresponding to the extent of modern Romania – a distinct cultural and idealized role in the formation of the Romanian people.

While historical sources do evidence the fact that the Romans invaded Dacia and colonized it for almost 200 years, references to what happened during the time, but particularly *after* the retreat of the Roman cohorts in 274 AD are mostly absent. Despite the scarcity of

⁴ Olariu Colăcel’s recent book *The Romanian Cinema of Nationalism: Historical Films as Propaganda and Spectacle* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2018) decks out an argument that is similar in nature to mine. However, Colăcel’s project is to primarily forefront the thesis that the nationalism created through what he calls “historicals,” that is period pieces such as *Columna*, survived the demise of socialism in 1989 unscathed and helped redefine the nation during the capitalist era using uniquely socialist tropes.

archeological and historiographical evidence, however, proto-nationalist thought of the 17th century began to routinely refer to Dacia as the cradle of Romanian civilization. Likewise, discontent with their otherwise obscure origins, Romanian late middle-age chroniclers did not hold back from assigning the Roman emperor Trajan the retroactive civilizing mission of matter-of-factly creating the Romanian nation.⁵

Were we to analyze the afore-mentioned historical gap from a linguistic perspective, things appear bleaker still: as no written evidence of Romanian exists until the 16th century,⁶ the task of establishing the provenance of the language as well as that of ethnicity proves dauntingly difficult for the timidly burgeoning métier of enlightenment-era historian. In this context it comes as no surprise that Dimitrie Cantemir (1673–1723), a polyglot scholar and protégé of both sultan and Tsar, driven by the genuine, if somewhat naïve attempt to write the first history of Romanians, falls victim to the later commonplace practice of politicizing language. Betraying an overpowering desire to overcome obscurity and popularize Romanian culture which was “très peu connue en Europe,”⁷ Cantemir lays the basis of what I refer to as ‘Romanian exceptionalism’.⁸ Moreover, by stating that unlike most Europeans who trace their roots back to the barbarian migrations Romanians are the only descendants of the “illustrious Romans,”⁹ Cantemir builds an artificial cult for the Latin language, which becomes central to Romanian political claims heretofore.

The same desire to break with anonymity resurfaces a century later with the militant Enlightenment thinkers of the so-called *Transylvanian School* (*Școala Ardeleană*). Driven less by naïveté than political necessity, this movement of the early 1800s paraded the Latinity argument as a centerpiece in the struggle against Hungarian domination of Transylvania.

A disputed province North-West of the Carpathian mountains which had been under the control of the Hungarian monarchy since the first millennium AD, Transylvania saw a steady growth of the Romanian population over time, to the point where in the 19th century, crossing the 50% benchmark, the Romanian ethnics moved to claim additional political rights to the aggravation of Hungarian authorities. Despite their swelling numbers, Romanians in Transylvania were still perceived until that moment as a “tolerated nation” in the context where real power was shared in a representational system that saw the Hungarian noblemen, the German guild masters, and the Székely minority act as *de facto* rulers of Transylvania.

In the mid-19th century, this domination was beginning to be seen by Romanian nationalists, not without reason, as the personification of the yoke of colonialist oppression, which made the case of Transylvania a winning ticket for anti-colonial movements gaining pace all over the continent. To impress their case more strongly on the French, who were perceived in the epoch as “the champions of the national principle,”¹⁰ and who showed sympathy for the Italian and Polish national causes, the Romanians recurred to the ancestry argument or the right of the first occupant over a given territory. This bode the Romanian nationalists well as, in the words of Romanian historian Lucian Boia again, it seemed that “the invocation of ancestral figures appear[ed] as a decisive argument: stronger than anything that current reality might offer

⁵ The first of the Romanian chroniclers whose oeuvre is extant is Grigore Ureche (1590–1647).

⁶ Romanian scholars agree that this document – the so-called *Scrisoarea lui Neacșu* (Neacșu’s letter) – is dated at 1521.

⁷ Stefan Lemny, *Les Cantemir. L’aventure européenne d’une famille princière au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris: Complexe, 2009, p. 133.

⁸ In some ways this political move is similar to the later-era nation-building effort upon which American exceptionalism was predicated.

⁹ Dimitrie Cantemir, *apud* Stefan Lemny, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

¹⁰ Lucian Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness*, Budapest: CEU Press, 2001, p. 54.

in terms of argumentation.”¹¹ As a result, Transylvania, no less than a coveted jewel in the crown of the poor and quasi-feudal neighboring Romanian monarchy—which acquired a preliminary autonomy from the Ottoman Porte in 1878 after the Russo-Turkish war—became a hotbed of Romanian nationalism, and consequently, linguistic and emancipatory struggle from foreign domination.

Unhappy with their status as a tolerated nation, the group of Transylvanian ecclesiasts making up the Transylvanian School resorted to political action. Endeavoring to prove not only that Romanian was a Romance language, Samuel Klein, Gheorghe Șincai, and Petru Maior – the representative figures of Școala Ardeleană – went more Catholic than the pope, so to speak, claiming that their language was allegedly closest in morphology to its ancient Italian “sister,” which, unlike pure Romanian, was adulterated by the unclean interference of Middle Age poets such as Petrarca and Dante who contaminated the original Latin on which it was based, and therefore destroyed its beauty.¹²

The trio didn’t stop here. Intent on settling the matter on ethnogenesis, they went on to claim that Romanian ethnicity was born following the interbreeding of Roman colonizers with local Dacian tribes in the period immediately following the Roman conquest of 106 AD. As the argument was being developed in response to the centuries-old dispute over the “historic right” of Romanians to rule Transylvania, it came to be known as the “continuity theory”. Pitted against the opposing claim held by various Austro-Hungarian and Slavic scholars such as linguists Jernej Kopitar and Franz Miklošič who maintained that Romanians were a Latinized Slavic people who had migrated to sparsely-inhabited Transylvania only at the end of the first millennium, the theory set off a veritable historiographical war which continued to rage on, in various guises, to the present day.

This drawn-out debate not only shaped the saga of nation-building for the coming two centuries, but acted as primary source for the mobilization of nationalistic sentiment around the Daco-Roman foundation myth. More importantly perhaps, the controversy introduced the politicization of linguistics and the practice of manipulating history for political purposes. Consequently, the belief in Romanian exceptionalism formulated by Cantemir, and, not unimportantly, the use of self-victimization as a tool in international political disputes foreshadowed an era of politically-motivated decision-making in cultural policy.¹³ Moreover, the Latinity argument justified the Romanian claim to classical heritage by appealing to Western Europeans to “show proper reverence for their own Roman ancestors.”¹⁴

In what might be called Herderian practices, the Transylvanian School followers soon started a crusade for the rejuvenation of Romanian culture and purification of the language. Following this, words of non-Latin etymology, which made up a significant chunk of the vocabulary, were replaced with awkward sounding Italianisms, while the Cyrillic script was dropped in favor of the Latin alphabet.¹⁵

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹² Elizabeth Close, *The Development of Modern Rumanian: linguistic theory and practice in Muntenia, 1821–1838*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 19.

¹³ Cantemir’s thesis in his *Descriptio Moldaviae* is that, due to their “noble” origins as descendants of the Romans, Romanians deserve to own their political freedom from the Ottomans (under whose suzerainty the principality of Moldova was at the time). Cantemir played the Russians against the Turks in a war “of liberation”, ultimately failing to gain independence for Moldova, and found refuge at the tsar’s court where he later died.

¹⁴ Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu’s Romania*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, p. 32.

¹⁵ For a good description of the language reforms in the 18th and the 19th centuries, see Elizabeth Close, *op. cit.*

Similarly, in step with routines proposed at the time by the Grimm brothers elsewhere in Europe, folklore collectors rushed to peruse local oral and ethnographic traditions in search for arguments to support the continuity theory. Suddenly, in the middle of the 1800s, Romanian literature (practically nonexistent until the 19th century) saw a flurry of ballads, folksongs, and traditional lore printed and packaged as mandatory textbook material in the hundreds of newly established confessional schools that appeared both in Transylvania and in Romania proper. Using these literary productions to justify its existence, the state apparatus created a multitude of institutions and cultural ministries whose main *raison d'être* became the preaching of emancipation from foreign domination through the theory of Latin descent.

Thus, in an ironic twist of fate publicly hailed as the greatest achievement of Romanian cultural policy – an achievement subsequently condoned by international politics in the midst of the 19th century – Romania shifted gears from being a subdued, wavering Balkan pawn caught in the cultural split between Oriental garb and Western aspirations to being a proud local player in regional politics whose voice was making itself heard in circles as remote as Paris and London. And again ironically, the Romanian language, formerly considered a late-comer in the region, came to be perceived as one of the oldest languages in Eastern Europe, and a beautiful one at that, alone in a “sea of Slavs”¹⁶ eligible to express in colorful poetics the unique nature of the complex and exceptional Romanian soul.

It is important to note lastly that this rebirth is not exclusive to Romania. Post-imperial East Europeans from the Serbs to the Poles and even the formerly colonizing Turks similarly acted to metamorphose vernacular literature into a vessel of nationalistic ideology. The tendency was at play in the former Ottoman Empire itself, where Kemalism in the new Turkish republic similarly created “a people who don’t exist”¹⁷ through the Republican elites who “started a tradition of discontinuity with the past which culminated in a state of amnesia imbued in the psyche of the ‘new Turks’.”¹⁸ Just as in this new state “the old complexity of religions, ethnicities and languages was replaced by the modern and uniform space of the monochrome Republic”¹⁹, the uniformity of a nation defined by its ethnic majority would equally come to describe the new Romanian state.

The Nationalist-Communist Intervention

With the arrival of the socialist leadership in the late forties, new methods of national self-definition became available to the young Romanian state. Here as in the rest of post-imperial/post-colonial Eastern Europe, Romania first saw a proliferation of socialist realist aesthetics echoing the internationalist goals of the former Comintern all over the Eastern bloc.

Despite some views that still equate cinematic history with the proliferation of socialist realism for the entire period of real-existing socialism, however, following Stalin’s death and the thaw, fewer and fewer films promoting a socialist realist approach dotted the screens of Eastern European countries. Due to what was, I argue, a rising identity crisis that seeped in the

¹⁶ An overused metaphor meant by the nationalists to again highlight the exceptionalism of Romanian culture, the syntagma is not, however, entirely accurate as the Hungarians, who border Romania to the West and still make up 8% of the population are not of Slavic but Finno-Ugric descent.

¹⁷ Kevin Robins & Asu Aksoy, “Deep nation: the national question and Turkish cinema culture”, in *Cinema and Nation*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 195.

¹⁸ Ayşe Kadioğlu, *Republican Epistemology and Islamic Discourses in Turkey in the 1990s* (1998), *apud* Kevin Robins & Asu Aksoy, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

¹⁹ Kevin Robins & Asu Aksoy, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

post-war years, the socialist governments of the new Eastern European states started to edge closer towards a nationalist redefinition of Communism – at least in the arts – which was even more pronounced in countries like Romania that experienced increasing political and creative independence following its split with Moscow in 1958. As a result, even though it had previously been part of several multinational empires that left their imprint on the cultural makeup of the country, Romania turned to historical saga films in the early 60s in a move that attempted to define its identity according to an ancient historical substratum that allegedly survived unscathed in the blood of the people that currently inhabited its territory.²⁰

The making of the historical film *Columna/The Column* in 1968 belongs to this early strand of historical filmmaking which started with *Tudor* in 1963 and continued with *Dacii/The Dacians* in 1967. These films were supposed not only to erase what the socialist leadership deemed was the shame of colonial occupation. They also attempted to cement in collective consciousness the myth of Romanianness, projecting backward in time the extended history of an otherwise new nation born proper only in 1918 when, following the end of the First World War and the Versailles Treaties, the Romanian monarchy was awarded by the Entente powers the territories of Transylvania, Bukovina, and Bessarabia which had been previously part of the Habsburg and Tsarist empires, as well as Dobrudja, which was taken from the Ottoman Turks.

The disappearance of socialist realism from Eastern European screens and its replacement with historical sagas didn't only foreshadow the weakness of the socialist nation states, but it announced the future dissolution of the internationalism preached by early Communism, and its irreversible transformation into local nationalism, which is a process that ultimately prefigured the dissolution of Communism itself.²¹ Against theories claiming that socialist cinema was therefore primarily a means for Communist propaganda, such as those promoted by Romanian film critics like Cristian Tudor Popescu, I argue that if socialist-era film was indeed propagandistic, its main dogma was nationalism and not Communism.

Planned as 'visual proof' of the continuity theory in the historiographic war referenced above, as well as a marker of the Romanians' alleged identity, *Columna*, with a success practically guaranteed by the earlier release of *Dacii/The Dacians* (dir. Sergiu Nicolaescu) to a record audience of 13 million,²² promised to go farther than its predecessor in investigating, in postcolonial fashion, the proud, if ambivalent attitude of local Dacian tribes in relation to the colonizing Romans.²³ An important chapter in the rewriting of Romanian history that was already underway in the late 60s, *Columna* acted as a new founding myth that replaced the

²⁰ Again, this is not exclusive to Romania: a contingent of Poles in the 19th century developed a theory according to which their people hailed from the ancient Sarmatians, an ethnicity which spanned the Eurasian steppe from the Urals to the Carpathians; some Russians saw themselves as descendants of the Vikings, while the Romanians started to take particular interest in the Dacians.

²¹ Further research between national cinemas and the development of political events in Eastern Europe would shed more light on the intricate connection between film and politics. However, such research falls outside the scope of this paper.

²² 13 million spectators practically meant that over half of the population of Romania's then 19 million inhabitants saw the film. The statistics is taken from the Romanian Film Center database of country-wide attendance figures since 1943 at <http://cnc.gov.ro/>. As a rule, audience figures usually stayed around 1.5–2 million for films produced in the mid-sixties, with 8.8 million being an exception for the action-packed saga of Dinu Cocea's *Haiducii* of the same year. *Columna* registered 10.5 million spectators, and is thus the 8th most watched Romanian film of all times, while *Dacii* is the 5th.

²³ *Columna* and *Dacii* are among the first movies of what was to become the "national odyssey" ("epopeea națională" in Romanian), a cinematic franchise meant to reinterpret Romanian history from a starkly nationalist perspective. *Dacii* serves as an opener for *Columna*, staging the early conflicts between the proud Dacians and the invading Roman armies. A subplot between a Roman officer and Decebalus' daughter serves as introduction to the main storyline in *Columna*.

Romantic poetry of post-Enlightenment nationalism, and thus quickly found its way into the national canon.

However, despite the straightforward efforts of its makers to re-create the nation, I argue that *Columna* doesn't only represent the quintessential birthing of Romanian national identity: through its controversial tackling of the ethnogenesis myth, this birthing is approached from an ambivalent angle, which throws doubt on the purportedly real historical events depicted in the film despite its creators' determined effort to the contrary.



Fig. 1 – Trajan's Column in Rome.

Even though *Columna* attempted to 'sell its story' as originating in historical fact, the lack of historical sources discussed in the beginning made the film's claims disputable. What is most interesting in *Columna's* case is that the scarcity of these written sources is in fact counterbalanced by the presence of visual ones. As most of our knowledge of the Dacians is derived from the images sculpted immediately after the conquest of Dacia on Trajan's column (still standing in Rome and giving the film's title; see fig. 1), we are led to infer that Romania's founding myth is based (unlike most others) on *visual* rather than literary or archeological evidence. Moreover, the bas-relief scenes depicted in a circular band on the column and telling the story of the Roman-Dacian wars act as a veritable proto-cinematic material, which *Columna* eagerly seized upon when, quite literally, it proceeded to turn stone into moving pictures.

While arguable, this penchant for poeticizing history could nevertheless be seen as favoring visuality over literature in the process of building national identity, and even more, as

favoring a preference for interpretable (therefore doubtful) parables over complex historical research. This, of course, would further increase the chances that film, rather than literature, would be successful at building a cinematic national character to appeal to the so-inclined national imaginary.

Finally, appropriating Trajan's monument to claim authenticity and direct lineage from their former colonial masters, I argue that *Columna* is structured in a way that puts the nation in the ambivalent position of both reacting to colonization as well as reinforcing Romania's own expansive policies of the 20th century, thus foregrounding both a colonial and a post-colonial discourse at the same time. If the end of the Great War saw the doubling of Romanian territory, Romania led a fierce war of re-expansion alongside Hitler's armies to recuperate those same awarded territories it had again lost on the eve of World War II to its ancestral enemies: the Russians and the Hungarians, who in 1940 re-annexed respectively the whole of Bessarabia and parts of Transylvania. The Communist regime both glorified and feared this war-time re-enlargement effort as the temporary territorial gains under the fascist government were made at the expense of other Communist states: Hungary and Soviet Russia.

I argue that this ambivalence – which mirrored Dacian relations to their former colonial masters, the Romans – led to a multi-layered approach to nationalistic heritage. It is the same approach that thwarted the efforts of nationalist ideologues to build the nation through film, so to speak, as doubts relative to both the continuity theory and the veracity of the Romanian ethnogenesis thesis were beginning to seep to the fore in the very act of attempting their promotion. That the goal of the nomenklatura was indeed that of educating audiences in the nation-building effort is observable from large chunks of sometimes hilarious discussions between the crest of the political power and film directors in the planning of ideological film agendas of the 1960s, which Cristian Tudor Popescu quoted from at large in his book *Filmul surd în România mută* (Deaf Film in Mute Romania²⁴). Minutes of such meetings have also been published in *Istoria comunismului din România: Vol III, Documente Nicolae Ceaușescu (1972–1975)*.²⁵ These show how deeply Nicolae Ceaușescu, the Communist head of state, was involved in the decisions related to the editing of certain film scripts that narrated, whether through historical characters or directly, the history of the nation.

As we shall see in the following analysis, through its educative approach, fictionalization of myth, and what Eric Hobsbawm called elsewhere the invention of tradition,²⁶ *Columna* became, I argue, the keystone of what amounts to a visual ethnogenesis of the Romanian nation, and a marker which would influence national identity for many years to come.

Ambivalence

The dichotomy between oppression and civilization personified in the figure of the colonist effectively mirrored modern Romania's identity crisis and the country's historical oscillation between acceptance and rejection of foreign models.²⁷

²⁴ Cristian Tudor Popescu, *Filmul surd în România mută: politică și propagandă în filmul românesc de ficțiune (1912–1989)*, București: Polirom, 2011.

²⁵ Mihnea Berindei, Dorin Dobrinu, Armand Goșu, *Istoria comunismului din România: Vol III, Documente Nicolae Ceaușescu (1972–1975)*, Iași: Polirom, 2016.

²⁶ See Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

²⁷ In the latter part of the 19th century and later on, until the interwar period, there was an ongoing debate regarding the development of Romania: some would have preferred a slow, organic evolution of the society within its own traditions, while others – who eventually proved right – argued that embracing Western values and institutions made possible the creation of the modern state.

The second super-production after *Dacii* to employ foreign actors²⁸ in the recently built Romanian film studios, *Columna* promised not only to pump up the autochthonous ego of a population that from then on could legitimately regard itself as progeny of the Romans, but safely carry the continuity thesis to the West. Hence, the employment of Western actors in key roles in *Columna* was a politicized maneuver attempting to popularize Romanian cinema in Europe in a practice closely mirroring the attitudes of Enlightenment thinkers like Dimitrie Cantemir in the 18th century. As seen earlier, this was of utmost importance, as Western validation of local-bred attitudes to the nation would further legitimize not only a positive self-image commandeered at the behest of historical truth, but justify the nationalist agenda and the World War I territorial expansions that came out of it.



Fig. 2 – Poster for the movie *Dacii*.

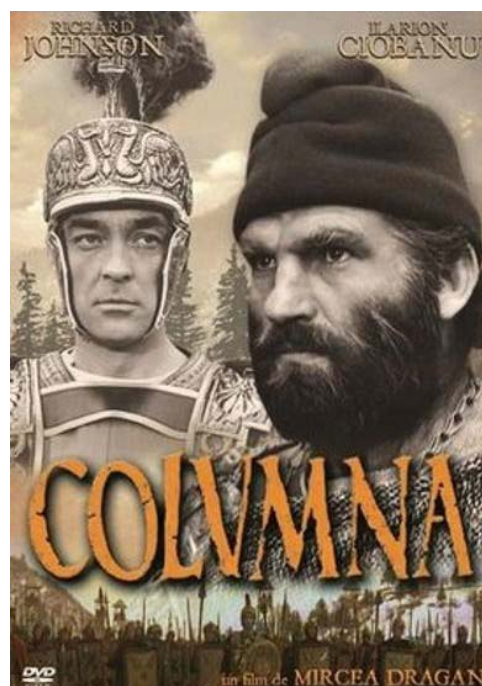


Fig. 3 – DVD Jacket Cover of *Columna*, TVR Media/Romania Film.

Columna was the brainchild of the most prolific writer of the socialist cinema period, Titus Popovici, and director Mircea Drăgan, both at the outset of promising careers in the Romanian film industry. As Drăgan's star was still on the rise after the warm reception of his proletarian and collectivization dramas *The Thirst (Setea)*, 1960 and *Lupeni '29* (1962) at the Moscow Film Festival, he was assigned to direct the ancient history section of the national odyssey initiated by Popovici with *Dacii*, which was turning out to be increasingly profitable business for the Politburo.

The film tells the story of one of the Roman legions sent by Emperor Trajan to conquer Dacia in 106 AD. After a short introduction in which fanatic patriotism as well as kingly honor drive the Dacian ruler Decebalus to commit suicide in the face of Roman defeat, the plot starts to oscillate between two storylines. In the first we witness the awkward attempt to introduce the

²⁸ The Roman general is played by famed British actor of the 1960s Richard Johnson, while Andrada, the Dacian heroine, is portrayed by Italian star Antonella Lualdi.

ethnogenesis myth in the guise of a forbidden love affair between a Roman soldier (Florin Piersic) and a Dacian girl. The affair incurs the wrath of Dacian general Gerula (Ilarion Ciobanu) who is resolved to resist the dismemberment of his tribe standing, of course, for the integrity of the Romanian nation.

The second storyline, which ends up taking center stage, focuses on the marriage between the Roman general Tiberius (Richard Johnson) and Andrada (Antonella Lualdi), a local Dacian woman of apparent noble heritage and member of Gerula's tribe (fig. 4). This relationship is possibly the most interesting, if ambivalent part of the story. Only unwillingly submitting to Tiberius's sexual advances after being overcome with fear, Andrada looks like a good catch for cautious yet infatuated Tiberius, who needs to gorge on several liters of Roman wine before mustering the courage to force his way into her tent. The romantic match between reluctant Andrada and Tiberius is representative, as I argue later, both for the position of the Romanian intelligentsia on foreign intervention in internal affairs, as well as for the centuries-old debate on Dacian versus Roman influence on the makeup of the original Romanians.

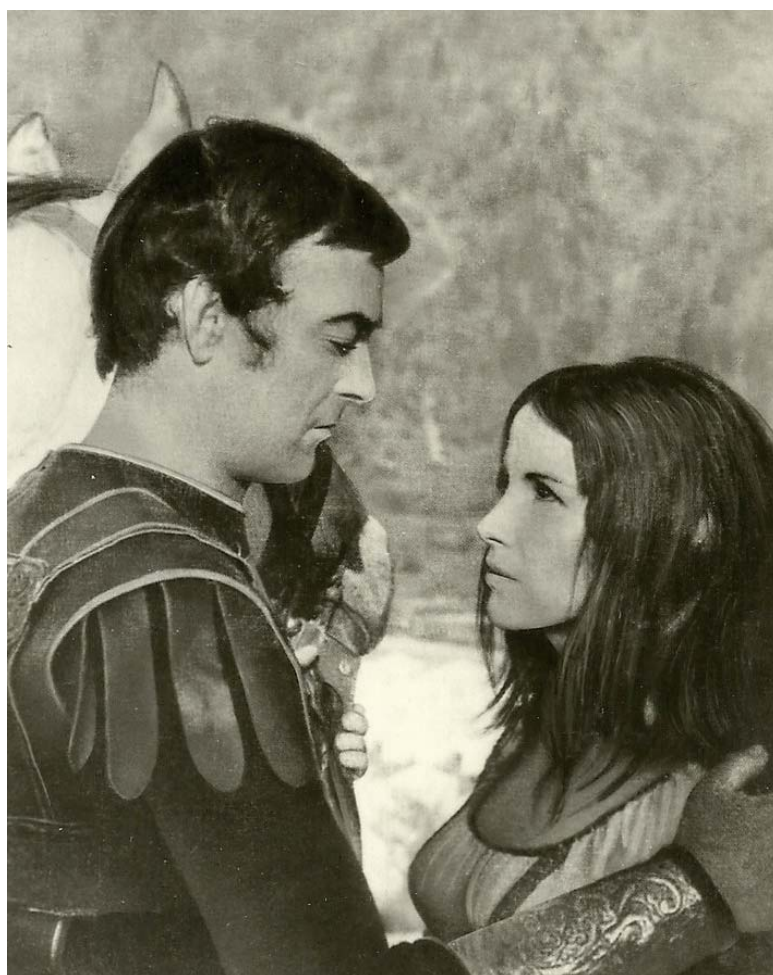


Fig. 4 – Richard Johnson as Tiberius and Antonella Lualdi as Andrada (*Columna*).

With Gerula's father-figure breathing over Andrada's shoulder, and warning her against marrying the enemy, Andrada nevertheless accepts Tiberius's offer if only as an implied gesture

of self-sacrifice meant to appease Roman anger caused by the harassment of Gerula's tribes on Tiberius's armies. In fact, the gesture has the opposite effect: it sparks Gerula's jealousy and his nationalistic fervor against occupation. As if unable to make up his mind until the last chapter whether to condemn Tiberius for trampling over Dacian/Romanian sovereignty or downplay the Dacian contingent in favor of upholding the glory of the Latinity, Popovici finally decides to have Gerula, hurt in his 'national pride,' kill off Tiberius in response to the shameful "selling out" of the "Dacian soul" epitomized by Andrada's unacceptable sexual act.

In a convenient 11th hour compromise, however, Gerula looks endearingly on the child that had previously just come out of the union between the shamed Dacian and the killed Roman, and adopts him as his own. In other words, atoning for Andrada's dishonorable gesture of "selling" the nation, the Popovici/Drăgan team brings resolution to the continuing oscillation of their loyalty by placing Andrada's offspring into "safe" Dacian hands. A facile solution to a manufactured problem, the birthing of the "Daco-Roman race" becomes a metaphorical – if heavy-handed – combination of local strength and invading wisdom. However, the film warns, the glorious people thus birthed will carry the torch of freedom against future threatening Others – the hint to Soviet Russia and Hungary is somewhat evident – who will not be as easily integrated into the local ethnic structure or treated with the same leniency as the Romans.

From Myth to Rebirth: Educating with Images

19th century romantic nationalism didn't only purport to state what the nation was; it tried to find living proof to back up its theories. In her suggestively entitled book *Soviet Heroic Poetry in Context: Folklore or Fakelore*, Margaret Ziolkowski describes the frantic search for literary traditions of 19th century Russian poets. Following in the misguided footsteps of predecessors like James Mcpherson and Elias Lonnrot,²⁹ similar literati in Romania started roaming the countryside in search of traditional songs and folktales that could be used to mythify the past. One such story seeing the light of day in 1840 was an obscure myth which provided a clear source of inspiration for the Andrada/Tiberius relationship in Drăgan's film.

Centering on the pursuit and capture of a Dacian shepherdess by a Roman soldier, the ballad of *Dokia and Trajan* allegedly discovered and published in verse by Gheorghe Asachi in the 19th century,³⁰ was soon turned into an ethnogenesis myth in which the Roman emperor courts the beautiful yet highly defiant daughter of Decebalus himself. Unwilling to succumb to the sexual aggression of the colonizers, Dokia, with only her sheep to keep her company, takes flight into the serene natural landscape from which she expects protection from her pursuer. However, unable to keep safe from an emperor so seduced by her beauty that he follows her into the wilderness, Dokia prefers death to being desecrated by a Roman, and therefore prays to a local god to end her days. The god complies, and Dokia is immediately turned into a block of stone.

Despite the nationalistic push to turn Dokia into an *avant-la-lettre* matriarch of the Romanian nation, what appears likely is that local folklore unrelated to the ethnogenesis was

²⁹ Mcpherson was a 18th century poet that passed off the poetry of the Ossianic cycles as traditionally Scottish, when it was in fact found that he had himself tempered with the products of his research. Elias Lonnrot equally created the Finnish national saga, Kalevala, from dubious sources which he purportedly unearthed in the field before 1835. For more on the subject, see Margaret Ziolkowski, *Soviet Heroic Poetry in Context: Folklore or Fakelore*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2013.

³⁰ Alexandru Madgearu, "Geneza unei legende: Traian si Dochia" (Genesis of a Legend: Trajan and Dokia), *Quaderni di studi italiani e romeni/Caiete de studii italiene si române*, n. 5/2011, p. 110. As stated above, the poem was first published by Asachi in 1840. For phonetic reasons, I opt for the English spelling of Dokia's name which in Romanian is spelled "Dochia."

retroactively molded by the nationalists and turned into a story that fit their political agenda at the time of romantic nationalism. One of the possible sources of the Dokia myth is a popular Eastern European weather myth of probable Slavic or Byzantine origin which tells of a verbally abused young wife, who, in punishment for her mother-in-law's evilness, prays that the old woman be turned into a block of ice while returning with her sheep from the alpine grazing grounds in early March.³¹

Despite versions of the myth existing in Oriental cultures as remote as China, Dokia's story acquired in the romantic period a uniquely Romanian flavor. Popularized as one of the foundation myths of the Romanians by the widely influential critic George Călinescu,³² the myth gave the figure of Dokia an increasingly larger part in upcoming literary alterations, so much so that by the time she became a character in late 19th century romantic poetry, her figure was made to symbolize the entire geographical area of Dacia itself. The writer that helped achieve this apotheosizing of Dokia's figure was Mihai Eminescu, Romania's national poet himself. In *Memento Mori*, a poem written while Eminescu was living in Vienna but popularized in Romanian literature only after 1952 when it was published in its entirety, Dokia becomes a princess who rules from "a palace of gray stonework whose strong pillars are the mountains" over a heavenly Dacia, which is no less than the "eternal dawn bathed in May's cool breeze," and a "kingdom of the gods" in which her body, "white as snowfall in the night," finds a fitting abode and reclines alluringly while "braiding her golden-silk hair."³³

After romanticism prepared the way for nationalism in the poetry of the 19th century, Romanian audiences were so programmed to want to hear the story of Latinization that the filming of *Columna* became the most natural act to engage in. Its success, however, was not due to the dramatic power of visuals alone. Drăgan proved to be the director who had the right combination of drive and naiveté necessary to tell the controversial ethnogenesis saga with the same conviction that the nationalist Communist school book was teaching its history lesson. In fact, his double professional training as film director and professor helped to proliferate the film's dogmatic 'teachings', even if this meant filming the poetic heritage (and later the history textbook) itself.

Same as other materials unearthed by the romantics and later used by the national-communists, the Trajan-Dokia story became a pivotal element in the fictionalization of the continuity theory, and later the central theme of *Columna*. In a move therefore similar to the re-enactment of scenes sculpted in stone on Trajan's column, Dokia is equally brought to life from her stone encasing, as it were, freeing her spirit for its later reconditioning in a new national tale. However, as in other instances when history had to be re-written in defiance or absence of historiographical evidence, Andrada's character in *Columna* as influenced by Dokia acquired a difficult-to-explain ambivalence.

While preserving the same morbid fear of sexual contact as the legendary character, Andrada is placed under Gerula's patriarchal influence. Gerula's warnings against her marriage to Tiberius seem to suggest either a romantic attachment on the patriarch's part, or even a subtle form of abuse, which would justify Andrada's endemic fear of sex. This interpretation is furthermore confirmed by Gerula's own ambivalence toward her: On one hand he guards over the purity of his race, on another he tacitly approves of her union with Tiberius, thus allowing the exceptional transformation of the race to proceed from this union.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

³² Anamaria Dutceag Segesten, *Myth, Identity and Conflict: A Comparative Analysis of Romanian and Serbian Textbooks*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011, p. 140.

³³ Mihai Eminescu, "Memento Mori", in *Poezii* (Poems), București: Herra, 2008 (my translation, L. Ț).

In any case, Gerula's alpha male territoriality and sheer barbaric strength served to upkeep the elements of glory and freedom, which nationalists found close to their heart. On the other hand, the Romans carried the valence of wisdom and intellect. Whether the sexual undertones were noted or not at the time, in the context of rebirthing of Communist Romania, the quasi-racist hierarchical structure deploying Roman superiority as equal to Dacian strength was accepted as desirable to the solitary and isolationist resistance of the Dacians.

As apparent from the transformation of myth into poetry, I argue that, using Eminescu's romantic heritage, the film superimposes the symbolic value of the land of Dacia over the figure of Andrada/Dokia, transforming both the woman and the natural *paysage* into idealized objects which would titillate and ultimately tempt the intruders by means of their beauty and attractiveness. As theorized by film scholar Jennifer Peterson who coined the term "scenic nationalism" in reference to the historical films of the 1950s, land in film became emblematic for the "male imperialist figure" who used it to "stake a claim as far as the eye can see."³⁴ In our case, the Roman claim to the land was the ambivalent, yet tacitly accepted colonialist episode that set in motion the machinery which would later lead to the desired birthing of the Romanians out of a mix between power and beauty. However, as I discuss in the section concerning the sexualization of the concept of the 'nation', this problematic mix didn't come without its own strings attached.

In its mixing of opposing loyalties – the cliché diptych pitting the exalted natural element on one hand and external rationality on the other – as well as in its alternating of propagandistic discourse and questioning self-doubt, *Columna* can only be thought of as an ambivalent mixture – and an artwork in its own right – between the intrinsic fear of commonality discussed earlier and a pressure to prove the supremacy of local exceptionalism. In other words, what Popovici and Drăgan seem to have achieved is to reveal not the purported "truth" of Romanian ethno-national origins, as the film intended, but the didactic underbelly of a quasi-racist, nationalist thesis. This thesis, coming as it were, from "above," desperately sought to prove that, despite centuries of living alongside and intermixing with the ethnicities of the multinational empires, Romanians remained a "genuine" people, that is, their nature went so far as to mix with the Romans alone, but never with the next-door (and much more recent) neighbors who were the Hungarians, Turks, Greeks, Albanians, Russians and Bulgarians of the long-lived imperialist period.

If this meant the death of Drăgan's career as an auteur, it certainly bode well for Romanian nationalism: aside from becoming a visual adaptation, so to speak, of romantic poetry, *Columna* succeeded to educate its public, and act not unlike the history textbooks that were being written at the time. In fact, drawing inspiration from both the romantic poetry that preceded it and the film itself, I argue that a hugely popular illustrated history book written in the 1980s by Dumitru Almaş, *Povestiri istorice* (Historical Tales) employed some of the same motifs found both in romantic poetry and in the film (see fig. 5).

As we have seen, educational materials work best when delivered in the company of visuals. When they are sourced *from* visual imagery, however, they are twice as powerful. If we are to believe a story in Dutceag Segesten's account of the Latinization of Romanian, Petru Maior, one of the founding fathers of the Transylvanian School got the idea that the Dacians and the Romanians are either historically related or an identical ethnicity when, during his first trip to Rome, he noticed on Trajan's column that Dacian warriors wore the same pointed hats as Romanian peasants (see fig. 6). The find so excited him that he surmised, based on visual "evidence," that, since they have the same headgear, these different ethnic groups must be the

³⁴ *Apud* Jane M. Gaines, "Birthing Nations", in *Cinema and Nation*, p. 286.

same people.³⁵ It is our turn to ask: Could it be that an entire theory which later led to the purification of national language and ethnicity causing one of the largest upheaval of cultural values probably known to a peripheral culture in Europe, started with an image? And not any image at that, but that of a traditional hat? And could it be that *Columna*, which doesn't appear in any way in the film, and to which no reference is being made throughout, became one of the first historical textbooks to successfully teach the power of nationalism?

Even though education was, as I argued, their primary concern, as much as they intended to purify the ethnogenesis story, the filmmakers couldn't avoid the good guys/bad guys polarity which they desperately tried to reconcile in the infantile act of Romanian birthing. This became evident as early as the production of *Dacii*, when one of the customary techniques for building a positive image for the Dacian heroes was the inflation of both the natural and the traditional elements. Dressed in "national costumes," the Dacians became rigid signifiers of ideologies anachronistically overimposed on a semi-barbaric people of the first century AD. With a naïveté inherited from the technique of appropriating pointed hats from the scenes depicted on Trajan's column, the Dacian characters were forced to act as walking symbols of traditionalism and purity. Less at ease in their starched white costumes than the Romans in their heavy uniforms, the Dacians in both *Dacii* and *Columna* lack naturalness and conviction, and thus, detract from the very authenticity they were so desperately trying to convey.



Fig. 5 – Trajan and Dochia: Reproduction from *Povestiri istorice* by Dumitru Almaş, illustrations by Valentin Tănase (Bucureşti, 1982).

³⁵ Anamaria Dutceag Segesten, *op. cit.*, p. 142.



Fig. 6 – Scene from Trajan's Column.

Another element which betrays both *Dacii's* and *Columna's* dogmatism is the natural backdrop. With its origin, yet again, in the romantic poetry of Mihai Eminescu – which was influenced in its turn by European Romanticism – natural scenery is used as an identifier of greatness and evidence of stability and belonging during the rise of 19th century nationalism in Europe. As such, romantic painting in the nationalist period turned to grandiose, oftentimes exaggerated natural backdrops that set the scene for the figurative action in the foreground. In fact, a comparative look at romantic nationalist painting and the cinematic nationalism of *Columna* further solidifies the argument that early Romanian historical film directors employed landscapes to underline the grandiosity of the autochthonous element personified by the Dacians (see figs. 7 and 8).

This would further paint the Dacians – again in postcolonial fashion – as both mystical and sentient: If the Romans are the only ones engaged in a constructive activity in the film – they literally build a castrum in the heart of wilderness to solidify their conquest – the Dacian characters are almost invariably photographed against mountains, traditional shepherd cottages in various locales in the high Carpathians, or underground caves. Indeed, the scenography is predicated on the impression that the Dacians – people of nature – don't need conventional

human habitat. Their closeness to the elements is so complete that, as in Eminescu's poetry, their rooftop is the forest, and their natural abode rocks behind a mountain stream.



Fig. 7 – Still frame from *Dacia*.



Fig. 8 – Still frame from *Columna*.

Urban civilization is therefore completely absent in *Columna*. The closest to an administrative form of government the film ever comes is when entering the subterranean caves where Gerula hides in perpetual wait (either for the Romans to retreat or for them to be defeated by the natural environment itself). This comes as a surprise, however, in the ambivalent context in which nationalist back-projected historiography described the Dacian civilization as being the first manifestation of a proper Romanian state only temporarily defeated by the Romans.

Sexing the Nation or How Two Males (and One Female) Birthed a Culture

In the same way that the traditional and the natural elements take center stage emphasizing Dacian belonging and strength, the Roman conquering armies are portrayed as

cerebral and calculated. Far from being on equal footing, however, in the oncoming osmosis, the two are part of an easily recognizable scale of values: When Tiberius's legion is lost in a misty mountain passage on its way to find propitious ground for the building of the castrum, it is the Dacians who offer to lead the armies out of a potentially dangerous situation. In other words, brains mean nothing when nature isn't on your side, and doesn't speak to you through natural phenomena, and when the noble savage doesn't lend a helping hand. The hierarchizing couldn't have been made clearer: the union of origins is not necessarily equal. The essentialized naturalness of the Dacians comes first, awkward as it may appear in ill-fitting 'traditional garb,' while the braininess of the Romans comes second. However, what is important is that they end up making good bedfellows.

This hierarchizing process is implicitly significant for the consequences it would have on the unstable Romanian identity, especially as it included an understated, yet tremendously important ethno-sexual component. In her essay *Birthing Nations*, Jane Gaines highlights the often overlooked role that sexual reproduction plays in nation-building. Looking at sexuality as a tool in the service of melodramatic nationalism, and at nationalism as a mode of transmitting knowledge, Gaines makes the case that film essentializes sexuality and passes it as education, precisely in the way that Drăgan envisioned the birthing of the Romanians. By using the "woman's body as national battlefield," and mixing "blood mythology and a suffering victim,"³⁶ Gaines claims that film re-enacts an ancient ritual which subconsciously targets nationalistic fervor.

To identify this in *Columna* one need only look at the concept of self-victimization. If Andrada indeed "sold her body" to the conquering Romans, she did this only as a sacrifice for the nation. In other words, her submission is explained away through her victimization and suffering at the hand of her aggressor, which justifies the laying of the country to the colonial subject's feet, as it were.

The parallel traced by the film authors is that, just as in unequal sex, nationalism needs a passive or defeated victim in order to perpetuate itself. Moreover, if imperial colonists were allowed to objectify the local Dacians in order to conquer them, current nationalist claims to territory, as well as dominance over other ethnicities, are equally allowed to proceed, and the objectification of 'the enemy' goes without saying.

While seeing the subjugation of women not necessarily as an issue of hatred as one of power, Joane Nagel takes the domination argument one step further, arguing that all institutions connected to state-building, nationalism, militarism, and war have been masculinized in the service of the state³⁷. Finally, when exploring the connection between sexism, racism, and nationalism in *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and the South African film *De Voortrekkers* (1916), Gaines argues that nationalism is the diffusion to large masses of the concept of mythical birth resulting from a hidden sexual act.

What is quite clear by now is that the product of the sexual relation between Andrada and Tiberius represents not only the birth of the Romanian people, but that of Romanian nationalism. Moreover, making the film audience privy to this process of mythified birthing doesn't only impose a subconscious nationalist/sexist ideology, but it genders the very essence of the Romanian "soul," encouraging the nation to see itself as a patriarchal institution whose power lies in the ability to subdue and procreate. Not only is this accepted as a national practice, but, by re-enacting the original alleged birth of the nation, it is ritualistically revered.

More than a battleground between the Dacian and the Roman contingent, Andrada/Dokia also serves as a proxy for avoiding head-on confrontation or the potential (and unwanted) nearing of the two masculine elements in the film. Unable to immediately destroy each other if they were to

³⁶ Jane M. Gaines, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

³⁷ Joane Nagel, "Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 21, 1998, issue no. 2, p. 242-269.

'father' the Romanian nation, both Gerula and Tiberius needed a go-between with procreative powers. However, serving as mere instrument in the birthing process, this go-between needed to be minimized in order for the patriarchal form of both colonialism and nationalism to survive. Thus, as Dokia is quite literally annihilated in the folktale (turned into stone), Andrada is impregnated and disposed of after giving birth to Tiberius's son in the film version, being quite literally relegated to motherhood. In other words, Dokia's folktale annihilation is sublimated and morphed into Andrada's pregnancy only as a means of attaining the higher, nobler goal of masculine cultural osmosis. Biological birth becomes an almost dirty byproduct of the male-dominated ethnogenesis concocted in the minds of the equally patriarchal 19th century heritage of the Transylvanian School, mirroring the way patriarchy acts as an "inner imperialism that [takes] as its territories lands formed from the subjugated nature of female bodies."³⁸

It is equally interesting to note here that the only Dacians involved in erotic relationships in both *Columna* and *Dacii* are the females. Females are invariably portrayed as weaker than men, unable to resist the seductive Romans, and thus, of inferior status. Men, on the other hand, are not only obsessively concerned with the notion of purity, but they pose into saviors of the national 'race': Gerula, upon learning of the Roman soldier's interest for the Dacian peasant girl in the first act, proceeds to blind him, and thus further become a direct enemy to Tiberius. He furthermore never approves of the union between Andrada and Tiberius until after the latter's death, when he in fact values the fruit of the relationship between the Dacian and the Roman element, the miscegenated son. A stereotypical father figure in this sense, Gerula acts to save the Dacians from the shamefulness of "selling their soul" (and their sex) to the advancing, superior Roman element, an act that equally serves as saving (and forgetting) the period of latter-day colonialism. However, as reflected by Gerula's hesitation when confronted with Tiberius's son, this trespassing act is partially acceptable if it furthers the interests of "the nation."

What *Columna* ultimately helps evidence is the fact that the role of the father figure was a point of utmost concern for Romanians at the time of the building of the nation in the postwar years and thereafter. Having internalized wavering doubts about their own identities, the film justifies the existence of a solid father figure to put those doubts to rest. This, of course, becomes actualized through the figure of Nicolae Ceaușescu who, especially in the latter days of socialism, will take this role upon himself, insuring through his nativist policies the perpetuation of the 'race' his ancestors purportedly created.

However, as shown by the confused ending of the film which scrambles to bring order to the inherent chaos, the dilemma of the uncertain father continues to reflect primal doubts as to the veracity of the nation's origin. With two father figures and a defeated mother all vying for prominence over the fate of the fatherless boy, confusion sets in, and hovers over Romania's young identity. Rough around the edges, the myth would live to pose some serious, recurring questions, which did not vanish from the national conscious in the years following the nation's divorce from Communism. These almost invariably had to do with patriarchy, paternity, and patricide, all of which became relevant in postsocialism after Ceaușescu's execution in 1989.

Conclusion

In their referential film on the meaning and making of history, *Videograms of a Revolution*, directors Andrei Ujică and Harun Farocki posit that history is as constructible as it is "real," that is, images don't only *represent* history, they can be counted on to *create* it if

³⁸ Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 323.

necessary. Whether or not the anecdote about the Latinization theory is correct, *Columna* hopes to defend the veracity of its ethnogenesis claims by pointing to still images sculpted in stone. Making these sculptures speak, the film, not unlike the adaptation of a comic strip or the literal filming of the history textbook re-creates reality based on interpreted mythical and legendary material whose authenticity is taken for granted. More than just a historical epic therefore, *Columna* is the fulfillment of a national visual dream, the celluloid creation of an interpretation of history based on phantasm, myth, and legend, whose reach is still too powerful to be justly evaluated today.

The time-tested technique of fictionalization gradually replaced the trauma of the nebulous past which happened to be colonial, and crystalized in the collective consciousness not only as nationalist ideology, but as a survival of the widely preached socialist-era clichés which prophesized – based on the Romanians’ noble lineage and constructed glorious past – an equally enviable future. The myth of self-proclaimed greatness concocted in the thrills of an exalted 19th century Romantic imagination was turned, via Drăgan and Popovici and mass-scale education, into a household (and home-made) brand of nationalist communism. Indeed, far from being a temporary phase in the nation’s past, the history which *Columna* helped create remained one of nationalism’s most lasting ideological achievements to the present day, surviving unscathed the collapse of the socialist regime in 1989, and scapegoating only Communism – while exonerating nationalism – for the ills experienced by the country during the tumultuous 20th century.

So wide were the myth’s ramifications that the story popularized through *Columna* would continue to grow in the national psyche. In time, the images of conquered Dacia/Andrada found not only complete acceptance with a similarly seduced Romanian public, but grew to represent a comfortable locus of pride for moments when the national identity would come under threat. Successfully crossing the 1989 divide, this pride survived socialism itself in the guise of nationalism, and, partly due to the power of the visuals created in *Columna*, continues to have a powerful effect in defining Romanianness for the foreseeable future of postsocialism.

