

# FILMS BY LUCIAN PINTILIE: MODERNISM, POLITICAL SATIRE AND POST-COLD WAR ISSUES

WANG YAO\*

## Abstract

This article analyzes the films of the world acclaimed Romanian film director Lucian Pintilie both as artistry and ideology. In terms of international recognition, his work can be divided into two periods: before and after the end of the Cold War. In terms of style, he remained faithful to clear modernist film methods and to political satire by constructing absurd circumstances. Especially in his post-Cold War works, he directly pointed to the reckoning of problems left over from the recent history and the complex situation of the post-communist society. In addition, this paper places his works in the context of international art films, analyzes the reasons why he became a representative director in Romania since the 1960s, gaining worldly fame especially after 1990, and discusses his important influence on Romanian New Wave filmmakers.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Romanian Cinema, post-Cold War, international film festivals, political satire.

*“Why do you film, Lucian Pintilie?”*  
*“I think, I film to survive. It’s the most efficient way to survive. I know*  
*no other way to survive without filming.”*  
– Lucian Pintilie, interviewed in *Lumière et compagnie* (1995)

When Lucian Pintilie died during the 2018 Cannes Film Festival, almost all the important international media for films published his obituary on front pages, including *Screen International*, *The New York Times*, *Variety*, *The Guardian*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Sight & Sound*, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, etc., and honored him as the “godfather” of Romanian New Wave, which set off from Cannes then swept the international art film circle, heaping countless posthumous honor upon him. Since then, a series of international film festivals have held commemorative activities or special screenings for him. The 2019 Beijing International Film Festival also selected his masterpiece *Reconstituirea* (1969) as a memorial screening; it was the first time when this movie was screened in mainland China.

---

\* Dr. Wang Yao is a Faculty Member at Beijing Film Academy. E-mail address: grimlock9z@163.com.

<sup>1</sup> This article is supported by The National Social Science Fund of China, Art Project, 2017/No.17BC058, “The history of China-Romania film communication, 1949-2016”. Published in the special memorial issue of the Chinese journal *Contemporary Cinema*, June 2019.

## LUCIAN PINTILIE AS A ROMANIAN FILM DIRECTOR

Pintilie's works could be clearly divided into two stages by the Romanian Revolution or the end of the Cold War. The first creation stage includes four films: *Duminică la ora 6/Sunday at Six* (1965), *Reconstituirea/Reconstruction* (1969), *Paviljon VII/Salonul nr. 6/Ward Six* (1973) and *De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?/Why Are the Bells Ringing, Mitică?* (1981); the first three films were selected in different sections of Cannes Film Festival. Because his films and theatre plays had been repeatedly prohibited, Pintilie left Romania in 1972 and worked as a director of theatre and opera, mainly in France and in the United States. *Paviljon VI* is a TV movie produced by the Belgrade Television in former Yugoslavia. *De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?* was produced when he briefly returned back to Romania between 1979-1981, then it was banned immediately after its completion, to be released only after the Romanian Revolution in 1990.

Since the 1990s, after returning to Romania, Pintilie had finally entered the heyday of his creation. *Balanța/The Oak* (1992), *Un été inoubliable/O vară de neuitat/An Unforgettable Summer* (1994) and *Prea târziu/Too Late* (1996) have been successively selected in Cannes Film Festival, and the latter two were selected in the main competition. *Terminus paradis/Next Stop Paradise* (1998) and *După-amiaza unui torționar/The Afternoon of a Torturer* (2001) have been finalists for the main competition of the Venice Film Festival, and the former won the Grand Jury Prize. His last feature-length film *Niki Ardelean, colonel în rezervă/Niki and Flo* (2003) was selected in the Directors' Fortnight of Cannes Film Festival, and his last mid-length film *Tertium non datur* (2005) has been shortlisted for the Forum at the Berlin Film Festival. Dominique Nasta suggests that *După-amiaza unui torționar* "clearly appears to be one of the harbingers of what will be later labelled the Romanian minimalist trend", so it could be recognized as another period ("marked Pintilie's entrance into the new millennium in a very significant way"<sup>2</sup>).

It is difficult to investigate the position of Romanian films in the world cinema without two contexts: of the Cold War/Post-Cold War's international situation and the international film festivals. In the Cold War era, Romanian films had little success at the international film festivals, although several award-winning works were kind of influential, such as *Scurtă istorie* (1957, dir. Ion Popescu-Gopo, the Golden Palm for best short film in Cannes Film Festival), *Pădurea spânzuraților* (1965, dir. Liviu Ciulei, the Best Director Award of Cannes Film Festival), etc. But until *Un été inoubliable*, no Romanian film had been shortlisted for the main competition of Cannes Film Festival for 23 years. In Romania during the Cold War, apart from epics, costumed films and policiers that were popular in socialist countries (such as in China during 1970-1980s), the international influence of Romanian films was very limited. Because of the political climate and the emphasis on the creative methods of socialist realism (or "Zhdanovism"),<sup>3</sup> art films with strong authorship were even more difficult to survive. At the same time, the international film festivals had not yet implemented the curator system as it is today. The films of socialist countries had to be officially presented to attend the film festivals. Regarding the films in the Eastern bloc – Soviet film during the thaw, The Polish Film School and Cinema of Moral Anxiety in Poland, Czechoslovakian New Wave, New Hungarian Cinema, Yugoslav Black Wave, the "Underground Films" of Eastern Europe, and even the fourth and fifth filmmaker generations of China –, all obtained worldwide influence through (Western) international film

---

<sup>2</sup> Dominique Nasta, *Contemporary Romanian Cinema: The History of an Unexpected Miracle*, New York: Wallflower Press, 2013, p. 110.

<sup>3</sup> The official renouncing to socialist realism had been expressed by Nicolae Ceaușescu himself at the congress of writers in 1968, when he mentioned "the diversity of styles". See Marian Țuțui, *O scurtă istorie a filmului românesc*, Noi Media Print, 2012, p. 53.

festivals under relatively relaxed political and artistic conditions. As to Romania, Liviu Ciulei gave up making films in the mid-1960s and concentrated on theatre, while directors of “Generation 70”, later involved in the film industry, such as Dan Pița, Mircea Veroiu, Mircea Daneliuc, Alexandru Tatos, Radu Gabrea, Stere Gulea, etc., met a harsher censorship environment. In addition, the authority at that time did not send their best works to film festivals, so these directors and their outstanding works failed to have an international impact.

Lucian Pintilie gained some international reputation as “an artist persecuted by political censorship” during the Cold War. In the book *A Short History of Romanian Cinema*, Marian Țuțui mentions Pintilie’s two banned films and the reasons for banning them: *Reconstituirea*: “a remarkable satire of the communist program of civic education”; *De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?*: “the director replaced the dramatist’s humor with his own sarcastic perspective on the characters”<sup>4</sup>. Among the more than a few films which were censored or banned in Romania at that time, *Reconstituirea* brought Pintilie international fame for its artistic achievement. This movie became a direct inspiration for the later world claimed Romanian New Wave, which also demonstrates that *Reconstituirea* has a perennial value.

After the end of the Cold War, in the 1990s, the international film festivals paid greater attention to the films of the former communist countries. A number of banned films were selected for various important international film festivals and won important awards. Pintilie’s three consecutive selections at the Cannes Film Festival during this period, was the direct result of this trend. At that time, however, Polish, Czech and former Yugoslav directors caught most attention on the central stage of film festivals. Among Romanian directors, besides Pintilie, only Mircea Daneliuc had been selected for the main competition in Cannes, and Dan Pița won a Silver Lion in Venice. It was difficult for other Romanian works to be shortlisted for the main competition of the three major film festivals. Therefore, Pintilie was known as the only “world-class” director in Romania. But back to the Romanian context, a more important thing is that Pintilie was appointed as director of the Cinema Creation Studio of the Ministry of Culture (Studioul de Creație Cinematografică al Ministerului Culturii)<sup>5</sup>. This newly established film studio was independent from the Romanian film industry system and was specially funded by the Ministry of Culture. In this position, Pintilie not only continued his creation, but also supported a number of important Romanian films of other directors. Besides his own films, the major films produced or co-produced by the studio are Stere Gulea’s *Vulpe vânător* (1993), Nae Caranfil’s *È pericoloso sporgersi* (1993), Mircea Daneliuc’s *Senatorul melcilor* (1995), etc. But more important, during the most difficult period when Romanian film industry fell to the bottom, Pintilie chose to trust the young director Cristi Puiu and supported Romanian New Wave film *Marfa și banii* (2001).<sup>6</sup> In this sense, it can be said that without Pintilie, the Romanian New Wave wouldn’t have existed...

Of course, the rise of the status of Romanian films in the international cinema circuit is the result of the combined effects, not only the international film festivals aesthetic trends, but also various politic, economic and cultural factors.<sup>7</sup> As for Lucian Pintilie, he was both a forerunner and a “mentor”: his films indeed exerted an extremely important impact for latecomers, especially for Romanian New Wave directors. In the following pages I will analyze his films from two aspects: artistry and ideology.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> See **Hotărârea nr. 600/1990** privind înființarea Studioului de creație cinematografică în subordinea Ministerului Culturii, București, 24 mai 1990.

<sup>6</sup> Lucian Pintilie, *Bricabrac. De la coșmarul real la realismul magic*, București: Nemira, 2017, p. 673-674.

<sup>7</sup> See Wang Yao: “Ostalgia, or the politics of Nostalgia: From “Goodbye Lenin!” to Romanian New Wave”, *Literature & Art Studies* (文艺研究), 2018 (08), p. 99-108. The English version will be published soon.

## THE ARTISTRY: MODERNISM

For the research and commentary on Pintilie, the relatively important thematic literature contains the chapter *Through a Glass, Darkly: Lucian Pintilie as Past and Present Role Model* – written by Romanian-born Belgian scholar Dominique Nasta for one of her books,<sup>8</sup> and Olivia Maria Hârșan's article for *Senses of Cinema*.<sup>9</sup> Romanian film review online journal *All About Romanian Cinema* ([www.aarc.ro](http://www.aarc.ro)) includes numerous film reviews and interviews on Pintilie's works by domestic film critics.<sup>10</sup> Besides, important critics such as Michel Ciment, Roger Ebert<sup>11</sup>, A.O. Scott<sup>12</sup>, etc. have written reviews of his films. Pintilie's work has attracted more attention in France: the magazine *Positif*, for example, has published several interviews and reviews on all of his films except *De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?*, while his works were also analysed in other periodicals, such as *L'Avant-Scène Cinéma*, *Image et Son – La Revue du Cinéma*, *Jeune Cinéma*, etc.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, *Balanța* was selected as the top ten films of 1992 (tied for 10th) by *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

Limited in length, this article does not focus on Pintilie's work in theatre, but it must be pointed out that his concepts on film have been strongly influenced by several playwrights: Gogol, I.L. Caragiale, Chekhov and Eugène Ionesco. Great writers such as Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Milan Kundera have exerted great influence on him as well.<sup>14</sup> Pintilie's works undoubtedly could be classified into the category of "modernist film". In *Film History: An Introduction*, David Bordwell summarizes the characteristics of postwar modernist films or international art films as follows: the filmmakers 1) "sought to be truer to life", "toward episodic, slice-of-life narratives that avoided Hollywood's tight plots", "prefer an open-ended narratives", use "long takes" and "new acting styles", "a minute reproduction of the acoustic environment"; 2) "sought to represent the *subjective reality* – the psychological forces that make the individual act in particular way", use "flashback construction", "revealing dreams, hallucinations and fantasies"; 3) use the "author's commentary" to turn the narrative commentary into "*reflexive*", "pointing up the film's own artifice".<sup>15</sup>

With Pintilie we can also notice modernist cinematic artistry and a kind of auteurism consisting of the following aspects: 1) self-reflexive structure; 2) creative use of the sound; 3) emphasis on alienation effect in the performance; 4) creation of absurd situations and surrealist moments; 5) the exploration of psychology and consciousness of the characters.

### The structure

One of the greatest features of Pintilie's films is its reflexive structure. Relatively important examples include taking the shooting process of "educational film" as the main narrative in *Reconstituirea*. The film begins by exposing the cinematic mechanism to refer to its

---

<sup>8</sup> See Dominique Nasta, *op. cit.*, p. 85–119.

<sup>9</sup> Olivia Maria Hârșan, "Pintilie, Lucian", in *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 71, June 2014, available at: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2014/great-directors/lucian-pintilie/>.

<sup>10</sup> Articles & Interviews, <http://aarc.ro/en/cineasti/cineast/lucian-pintilie>.

<sup>11</sup> Roger Ebert, "An Unforgettable Summer", published on [rogerebert.com](http://rogerebert.com), February 10, 1995. See <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/an-unforgettable-summer-1995>.

<sup>12</sup> A.O. Scott, "Examining Romanian Fault Lines: 'Niki and Flo', a Film by Lucian Pintilie", *The New York Times*, Feb. 29, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/01/movies/niki-and-flo-a-film-by-lucian-pintilie.html>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://calindex.eu/actreal.php?op=listfilm&nar=4755>.

<sup>14</sup> See the interviews titled "A cinema lesson" in DVDs published by MK2. Pintilie mentioned in the interviews that he was influenced by the figures above.

<sup>15</sup> Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, McGraw-Hill Education, 2nd edition, pp. 357–358.

story (the title *Reconstituirea* could also be translated into *Reconstruction* or *Reenactment*, the latter one representing the main plot of the film). The running time is almost the same as the story, and it also matches the length of the football game which appears on the audio track, on TV and at the end of the film (we can see the crowd of spectators leaving after the game). The football game has also become an intertextuality element to the shooting process of the “educational film”: the process of “reenactment” happens in a valley resembling a stadium, and there is also an intermission in the shooting process just like in the football game. In particular, a set of footage of audiences of the football game is used to point to the mass media and the behavior of “watching”, which both lead to the film (and the film in the film) itself. In *De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?*, Pintilie exposed the cinematic mechanism more thoroughly. At the beginning and the end of the film, he personally showed up in the frame, directing the actors’ performance and camera movement with a loudspeaker. The track, lighting equipments and crew members – all appeared in a few scenes. In *Un été inoubliable* he revealed its literary adaptation (memoir) characteristics by the voice-over. The family video in the beginning of *Balanța* not only reminds of *Reconstituirea*, but also consists a pre-narrative of the kidnapping and gun battle scenes at the end of the film due to similar scenes. Nela, the heroine, takes a large number of Polaroid photos in the film, and often juxtaposes photos and subjects in composition, forming a self-reference and a “frame in the frame”. *După-amiaza unui torționar* exposes the narrative mechanism by focusing on the behavior of “narrative”, lead to the meta-cinematic approach. The reflexive approaches pointing to cinematic and narrative mechanism are undoubtedly influenced by Jean-Luc Godard. More obviously, they are often accompanied by a (Godard-style) “travelling shots” or dolly shots.

### **The sound designing**

In sound processing, Pintilie frequently followed Godard’s style as well, using music ironically or as an auteur’s commentary – such as in *Balanța*: the scene when the father’s corpse is cremated (while viewers hear the music of *L’Internationale*), as well as the scenes in which Nela is almost raped (on a background of pop music), the scene where she swallowed a lot of pills (on a background of symphonic music), etc. Also we find this touch in almost all the scenes with the string quartet in *Prea târziu*. Another example is the same cheerful harpsichord music used at the beginning and the end of *Un été inoubliable*, with the whole story, so that the same piece of music (a kind of parallel structure) at the end produced a very sad mood and a completely different meaning with the repetition and contrast.

His more distinctive way for sound designing is to insert or add a piece of somehow irrelevant sound on the soundtrack, as his “commentary”, such as the most typical use of sound from the football match in *Reconstituirea*, and the use of music and sound effects from TV programs in *Reconstituirea*, *Prea târziu*, *Niki Ardelean*, *colonel în rezervă* and others. In some of his films, the sound designing is very characteristic, for example, the sound structure in *Duminică la ora 6* is applied to represent the memory of characters, similar with the films of Left Bank Group such as *La Pointe Courte* (1955, dir. Agnès Varda), *La jetée* (1962, dir. Chris Marker) or *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959, dir. Alain Resnais). On the whole, Pintilie is an adept of using sound to suggest off-screen space. Almost no emotional music was used except in his debut work *Duminică la ora 6*, while he always creates an ironic or critical effect via music in screen.

### **The acting**

Since engaged in works related to theatre and opera for a long time, Pintilie tended to use plenty of theatrical means during the film direction. According to *Filmare/Filmage* (1992, dir. Gabriel Kosuth), the making-of documentary for *Balanța*, Pintilie often demonstrated himself to

the actors how to act, and he was highly involved in the guidance of the actors' acting (as he was while directing theatre plays). What's more, he put particular emphasis on the "pause" of performance as well as the construction of dramatic effect. The actors' performing way in his films is not of the Experience or the Method acting; on the contrary, it is quite similar to the performing style of the Distancing/Alienation in absurd drama. In this sense, it can be said that Pintilie did not pursue the "reality" or "authentic" in the sense of film acting. The performing way directly pointing to drama forms a way to break the illusion of films, which is highly consistent with the self-referential structure commonly used in his films.

### **Surreal moments or absurd situations**

In *Paviljon VI, De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?* and *După-amiaza unui torționar*, the overall acting style and the actor scheduling are very close to stage plays, but at the same time Pintilie uses highly cinematic approaches, making his works not simply presenting as a record of dramatic performance. Especially in *După-amiaza unui torționar*, the main scene focuses on the home and doorway of beekeeper Țandără, formerly a torturer in the communist prisons, where approximately one hour of the 76 minutes film takes place, and the main content is the (impossible) confession that Țandără made to the victims and journalists in those days. Although its mise-en-scène and acting way are similar to stage plays, Pintilie's cinematic approaches include interrupting dialogue with gradual fade-in and fade-out, creating alienation effect by travelling shots (without a visual fulcrum), creating surrealistic scenes through line-of-sight match cuts and the compositions – mainly around the "Tree of Life" in Țandără's yard, where appear characters that only emerge in Țandără's narrative and imagination, such as the white-dressed boy in the tree, the white-dressed girl on the swing, the dwarf woman knitting the sweater who died and came back to life, etc. The display is very close to another performance area which is used to present other time and space on the theatrical stage, internalized in Țandără's subjective shots, showing his distorted personality and abnormal mental state. In the meantime, Pintilie also allows actors to look directly into the camera, as well as to speak to the camera in a large number of shots, and even made 180 degree editing on the axis. This technique of "breaking the fourth wall" also complements the exposure of cinematic mechanism.

Another excellent example is *Terminus paradis*. The film can be divided into two parts, taking Mitu's enlistment as the dividing line. In the first part, the photo on the wall of Mitu's apartment has the same scenery with the church where he and his girlfriend Norica got married – the editing way presents as: 1) a panoramic view of the landscape (with Norica's voice-over: "Mitu, you make me scared", then Mitu's continued narration); 2) Norica holding a telescope; 3) Norica looks at the landscape picture on the wall and walks up to the balcony, then looks forward and down through the telescope (the latter two shots are accompanied by unknown music and confusing dialogues, maybe the neighbor's family was watching a movie). These three shots are suddenly inserted in the scene of Mitu's work in the pig farm (with the narration of Mitu), forming an effect which seems to be "Norica had seen her future destiny". This "pre-narrative" setting not only produces self-referential effects, but also brings some kind of surrealism effect when the scene similar to the photo appeared. The further effect is that the "reality" of the second part is somewhat eroded by the early appearance of this photo. It is possible that Mitu's rebellion and killing in the military camp, revenge and escape are all from Mitu's imagination. There are some surreal situations in the second part. For instance, Mitu crashed Dorina's boyfriend Gili's grill shop by driving a tank; Mitu was taken to a military prison then found the room full of snakes and frogs after the flood; Mitu shot into the air when ride on the Giant Stride with Dorina, etc. This last scene could also be explained (also in the first part, there is no other scene that could be considered as genuine surreal moment).

The absurd scenes are common in Pintilie's films. For instance, in *Balanța*, Nela and Mitică<sup>16</sup> wake up at night by artillery fire from the army maneuver when camping in the wild, since the place they had chosen was the maneuver area, even though no one stopped them before their entering. They even flew back to the city the next day in a helicopter from the army. Other examples: Nela seducing the prosecutor and taking nude photos of him; Nela and Mitică caught in a car accident and asked the secret police who followed them for help, on their way to transport Titi's corpse; while all were eating and drinking at the priest's house, a paratrooper fell and ruined the priest's greenhouse; in the kidnapping and gun battle, a soldier even made time to eat watermelon during the confrontation. Pintilie described his artistry as grotesque, and often calls his characterization "caricature". The surreal scenes in his films are often of absurdity. The most famous example is in *Prea târziu*, where the former coal miner, now a millionaire, rents a helicopter formerly owned by the secret police to hand out invitations of his daughter's wedding. The scene when the bride, the groom and the team board the helicopter in the football field was also photographed by Pintilie using Lumière's camera, included in *Lumière et compagnie* in memory of the centenary of the birth of cinema, as a representative section of his own style.

### **The exploration of psychology and consciousness of the characters**

In the analysis of Pintilie's modernist film artistry the last thing to talk about is his exploration of the characters' inner and subjective consciousness. *Duminică la ora 6* involves a non-linear narrative edited according to the logic of characters' memory and psychology. The constant return to trauma (corridors and elevators) is admirable. Therefore, the film is considered to be the first Romanian film to implement the aesthetic principles of modernism. Another example is, most of the characters in *Ward no. 6* are mental patients who have their own discussions of abnormal physical-psychological state, mostly completed through their dialogues and actions. Representing the mental state of the protagonist, the doctor, similar to *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (1951, dir. Robert Bresson), Pintilie used the voice-over (not as much as Bresson) and dialogues of characters. Moreover, a large number of travelling shots and commentary sound effects (the frequent crashing sound on the track, probably from the construction site or the train) are used to reveal the doctor's mental world.

It is also worth mentioning the scene of Nela's visiting her seriously ill mother in *Balanța*. Mother told Nela that her father was not a hero (on the contrary, he was a secret policeman fierce of mind but faint of heart). Near the end of their conversation there is a complete "commentary" of tracking shots. At the same time, the soundtrack is subjectively processed so that the enhanced reverberation and slurred dialogue from Nela's memories of childhood (without subtitles) are supplemented based on the environmental sound, echoing the initial home video and representing Nela's psychological activity of this time.

Pintilie's portrayal of characters' psychology reaches its peak in *După-amiaza unui torționar* and *Niki Ardelean, colonel în rezervă*. The approaches in *După-amiaza unui torționar* to represent characters' psychology through surreal situations have been analyzed above, while *Niki Ardelean, colonel în rezervă* is very particular. This film is directly related to the future Romanian New Wave. The script was co-written by Romanian New Wave filmmaker Cristi Puiu and the important screenwriter Răzvan Rădulescu. Plenty of Pintilie's artistic approaches also inspired the creation of Romanian New Wave directors in the days to come. When talking

---

<sup>16</sup> Mitică is a name often given to the main character in Pintilie's films; he is a smart and eloquent character considered typical for Romanians and 'borrowed' from Caragiale's work. Pintilie even regarded him as his own incarnation in the film. ("I Close My Eyes and I See", interview with Lucian Pintilie by Mihai Chirilov, in: *Lucian Pintilie*, Romanian Cultural Institute, New York, 2012, p. 7.)

about the conception of *Niki Ardelean, colonel în rezervă*, Pintilie quoted Milan Kundera's paragraph in *The Art of the Novel*<sup>17</sup> :

*Indeed, it's important to understand what a novel is. A historian tells you about events that have taken place. By contrast, Raskolnikov's crime never saw the light of day. A novel examines not reality but existence. And existence is not what has occurred, existence is the realm of human possibilities, everything that man can become, everything he's capable of. Novelists draw up **the map of existence** by discovering this or that human possibility. But again, to exist means: "being-in-the-world." Thus **both** the character and his world must be understood as **possibilities**.*<sup>18</sup>

According to Pintilie, *Niki Ardelean, colonel în rezervă* talks about "iceberg", "banality of abyss" and a crime "whose actual witnesses will never understand it", but "was is the only logical and moral solution." This film reveals how retired colonel Niki has lost his dignity step by step through a series of apparently random events. The inquiry into his heart is carried out through a near-naturalistic attempt conducted by exterior "presentation" to explain the character in the course of events. Victor Rebengiuc, the actor who played Niki, used a very restrained way to perform, sometimes near to "zero acting". This way of performance highly matches the script, making the last scene of murder to seem completely unexpected but plausible.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Pintilie also uses intertextuality. In this respect a typical example is the characterization of Mitu in *Terminus paradis* that points to *Madame Bovary* ("the restless love that cannot find time to contemplate."<sup>19</sup>). Mitică's characterization in *Balanța* points to Alexandru Tatos's film *Mere roșii* (1976), which adapted the same novel "Balanța" (1985) by Ion Băieșu. While in *Terminus paradis*, the scene where prosecutor Costa (also called "Mitică" in the film) lets the miners in baths line up to be identified by the witnesses, in which the travelling shots and the way actors look directly into the camera point specifically to *Kárhozat* (1988) by Béla Tarr. Besides, there are carnival scenes pointing to Federico Fellini (*De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?*, and (crazy) wedding scenes pointing to Emir Kusturiča (*Prea târziu*), etc.

## POLITICAL SATIRE AND POST-COLD WAR ISSUES IN PINTILIE'S FILMS

The political satire in Pintilie's films is often combined with absurd situations, which are related to the Romanian or Balkan black humor, also directly related to the ideology of the former Eastern Bloc countries. *Duminică la ora 6* and some films considered as Czechoslovakian New Wave (such as *Démanty noci*, 1964) could be considered similar; they were all highly influenced by French New Wave. By choosing "not to praise", Pintilie turned to discuss betrayal and memory, and kept quite a distance from the political rhetoric of socialist realism in form and style, whose effect dissolved the stereotypical narrative of resistance organization. It was a courageous action in the political environment at that time.

In *Reconstituirea*, two drunk young men fight were asked to make an "educational film" of their drinking riots by the endless "reconstruction/reenactment". The absurd drama resembled shooting process is the political satire directly of "civic education" and bureaucracy at that time.

---

<sup>17</sup> See: *Niki and Flo: A cinema lesson*, in the *Niki and Flo* MK2 DVD, also included in the DVD box set "Pintilie Cineast".

<sup>18</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, translated by Linda Asher, Grove Press, 1988, p. 42.

<sup>19</sup> See: *Next Stop Paradise: A cinema lesson*, in the *Next Stop Paradise* MK2 DVD, also included in the DVD box set "Pintilie Cineast".



Constantin Pârvulescu<sup>20</sup> believes that *Reconstituirea* “represented a major step toward a Romanian auteur cinema” (“underscores directorial authority”) and political dissent on the theme (“conflicts with state censors”) has led to the success and the subsequent ban of *Reconstituirea* after its small-scale release, as well as its great reputation in the world of international art films.

If aimed to seek metaphors for politics, it would be easy for film critics to find expressions like “the only normal person in a madhouse” or “the whole society is a madhouse” in *Paviljon VI* and *De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?*. After the Romanian Revolution, Pintilie no longer needed to use tortuous metaphors. In *Balanța* he set the story directly in 1988. Two rebellious protagonists confronted the ubiquitous surveillance and interference from the secret police, which was the typical story “expose the dark side of socialist history” that was most frequently told by the filmmakers from Romania and the entire Eastern Bloc right after the end of the Post-Cold War. Yet Pintilie’s dispose is very subtle and characteristic. Shortly after the film begins, there is an extremely absurd scene: Nela wanted to satisfy her father’s wish to donate his body for medical research and went to find a doctor, yet she was told that “we don’t lack corpses but refrigerators and electricity” so that she could only cremate her father. In the end Nela buried her father’s bone ash under the oak while burnt her students’ photos, which symbolized the burial of both the past and the future. Her narration goes straight to the theme: “Rest in peace, good father, tyrannical father, cowardly father, dear, dear father. Rest in peace.” It clearly points to Romanian people’s complex attitude towards the dictator Ceaușescu. What’s more, the international title of *Balanța*, “The Oak”, actually points to Ceaușescu. Because in Romanian personal worship of Ceaușescu at that time, he was praised as “the oak of dreams, impetus and humanity” (stejar de vis, de-avînt, de omenie)<sup>21!!!</sup>

On the other hand, *Balanța*, *Prea târziu*, *Terminus paradis* and *Niki Ardelean, colonel în rezervă*, all have clear references to the Romanian Revolution or “the moment of upheaval”. The appearance of helicopters in the first three films definitely points to the helicopter Ceaușescu used to flee. At the end of *Balanța* and the beginning of *Terminus Paradis*, there are scenes of military and police shooting each other and causing casualties, clearly referring to the bloody conflicts in the Romanian Revolution. The mine explosion at the end of *Prea târziu* is undoubtedly a metaphor for the Romanian Revolution’s “long-standing resentment, short and violent explosion”. And this narrative dynamic structure becomes an implicit narrative clue in *Niki Ardelean, colonel în rezervă*. Pintilie set the character Florian as “a caricature of dictator”. The whole story is about how the dignity of retired Colonel Niki was stripped of by Florian step by step: from his son’s funeral, daughter’s wedding, daughter and son-in-law’s going abroad, decorations in Niki’s house to Niki’s birthday party (the specific dates are carefully chosen for the satire), are all manipulated by co-father-in-law Florian. The most absurd thing is that Florian bossed around at the funeral for “perfectly” filming the funeral process, and even requested a “reenactment” of the nailing process (allusion to *Reconstituirea*). Step by step, Niki lost control of his own life, lost his children (his son died in an absurd accident, his daughter married Florian’s son and went to America). He even his lost faith as a soldier, and finally lost control of his own image (be put on Mickey Mouse’s headdress). The long process ends with a “sudden violence”: Niki killed Florian with a hammer. This is highly consistent with the process and internal motivation of the Romanian Revolution and “a soldier killed a dictator” has become the clearest reference to the Romanian Revolution. The narrative dynamic structure and ideological process of these kind of films also inspired a number of Romanian New Wave films.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> C. Pârvulescu, “Opening Titles and Authorship in Romanian Socialist Film”, *ILUMINACE*, Volume 26, 2014, No. 3 (95), p. 21–36

<sup>21</sup> See [https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultul\\_personalității\\_lui\\_Nicolae\\_Ceaușescu](https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultul_personalității_lui_Nicolae_Ceaușescu).

<sup>22</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis, see the close reading and author studies part in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, Wang Y., *Romanian Cinema in 21st Century: New Wave, Minimalism and Ostalgia*, doctoral thesis (in Chinese), Beijing Film Academy, 2015.

If we refer to the context of 1990s a common theme of Eastern European films is the way they consider the legacy of socialist history. What is special about Romania is that the upheaval took place in a really bloody way, not only because the dictator Ceaușescu couple fled and were quickly arrested, executed after a formal trial; but also, because the chaos at that time caused massive casualties. And furthermore, the Romanian revolution was “globally broadcast on live”, which made this part of dramatic history not merely the traumatic memory of the Romanian people, but actually a key factor in defining Romanian international image. This is also an important reason why most of Romanian New Wave films are related to socialist history, especially the upheaval moment in different ways. Undoubtedly, Pintilie is an important character who firstly built up the style with his superb artistry, treating this period of history as a kind of internal narrative dynamic structure and metaphor with clear implying. But more importantly, through the historicized analysis of reality, he tried to capture and grasp the chaos of the Post-Cold War society.

*Prea târziu* is just such a work that not is merely a film directly discussing Romanian social problems in the period of political transition, but also one of the extremely rare films in Romanian cinema about the “The Mineriads” (Mineriadă) that shocked the world in 1990. The plot is about prosecutor Costa who investigated the deaths of coal miners in Valea Jiului. As the investigation unfolded, state-owned enterprises were privatized, former Communist Party officials and secret police become the “new rich”, corruption prevails, whereas the reality of workers’ poverty and unemployment were gradually revealed. At one time, the prosecutor thought the suspect was a former secret police officer who participated in the Mineriads. This clue brought out the question of “where the secret police went after the fall of the communism?”, and simultaneously indicated that the new government was still using the secret police to control society, revealing the tragic fate of the workers being exploited then ruthlessly abandoned by politicians. The film is desperate and sharp, following the approaches of political films initiated by Costa-Gavras and Francesco Rosi. At the end, in order to catch the murderer, the ventilation equipment was stopped for the first time during more than a hundred years, which also indicates that the mine would eventually be shut down. The prosecutor survived the explosion and left Romania (“Leaving is the only way out”). The serial killer of miners is a former miner hiding in an old closed mine (again, implied the legacy of socialist history), who kills miners only to get the food they brought down the mine (an allegory of the state-owned enterprise workers’ condition). The killer’s brother escapes from the psychiatric hospital and wanders around Europe with a package of explosives, which was Pintilie’s warning that Romanian society was not only on the verge of collapse, but also a potential threat for the whole Europe.

Pintilie’s extreme disappointment and anger towards the society after the upheaval developed into the really straight, absolute and resolute rebellion in *Terminus paradisi*. and the refuse to any possibility of historical reconciliation in *După-amiaza unui torționar* after exploring historical violence. Apart from paying attention to social problems, Pintilie has also dealt with another more ambitious proposition: the construction of national identity. He addressed this crucial issue in Post-Cold War Romania through two historical films *Un été inoubliable* and *Tertium non datur*. After the end of the Cold War, when reckoning on the problems left over from socialist history, nationalism and national identity became a very complex issue, because one of Ceaușescu’s governing strategies was “nationalist communism”. *Un été inoubliable* sets the story in Southern Dobrudja (obtained by Romania from Bulgaria in 1913 and ceded to Bulgaria in 1940) occupied by Romania during the interwar period, and is actually aimed at “post-communist nostalgia after the interwar period of the majority of Romanian intellectuals eager to find historical and cultural landmarks”<sup>23</sup>. Pintilie holds a

---

<sup>23</sup> Marian Țuțui, “The Subtle Recipe of the Movie *An Unforgettable Summer: Refusal of Melancholy*”, *Contemporary Cinema* (当代电影), 2019, pp. 97–100, Chinese version translated by Wang Yao.

negative attitude towards this ideological trend, reflecting on this post-Cold War narrative by presenting the violence (Romanian garrisons execute innocent Bulgarian farmers in the film) in this disgraceful phase of history.

In his final work *Tertium non datur*, a trace of optimism was brought in a rare departure from Pintilie's historical reflections and criticism of nationalism. The story took place in the Ukrainian grassland by the end of World War II, when Romania joined the Axis and participated to the military invasion of Soviet Union. The film revolves around "the world's only two aurochs head stamps": one was in the hands of an American collector, and the other was obtained by a Nazi German officer of complex descent traveling through the Romania, Ukraine and Moldova war zone. The stamp was almost lost during the dinner, after the Germans left, Tomuț, a Romanian lieutenant who refused to be searched, told the truth that he had "the third" aurochs head stamp which was regarded as an amulet and inherited from his aristocrat Moldavian mother. This story is undoubtedly a complex fable pointing to Romanian national identity and history. The respect for French culture and lifestyle (everyone speaks French at the table, sings French songs, drinks champagne), the secret "third" stamp which equaled to the ones belonged by the American and German, and the routes the Nazi officer traced in obtaining the stamp (the long list of locations he quoted had geopolitical implication at the moment), the old general's suspicion on the Romanian officer in the process of the stamp's regain at the table and his admiration for captain Tomuț; as well as Tomuț's refusal to be considered as a hero, his confession of his weakness, and his eventual action of burning the stamp worth "5 million marks" ("There's no third possibility!"), all could be considered as a series of complex code of the historical context. The famous saying by Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran's, quoted by captain Tomuț in the film: "I want Romania to have the population of China and the destiny of France!" reveal the theme: this famous quotation, with a fascist background, was spoken in such a ironic way, which is a profound irony of Romanian nationalism both inside and outside the film. Captain Tomuț, who got rid of his heavy burden (burning the stamp), jumped out of the window in high spirits to hunt hares for all. This unusual and optimistic ending has also become a touch of rare bright color in Pintilie's works.

## CONCLUSION: THE POSITION OF LUCIAN PINTILIE IN FILM HISTORY

When it comes to Lucian Pintilie's position in film history, Dominique Nasta believes that Pintilie is a key figure throughout the brief "Thaw" and "Post-Revolution" periods in the history of Romanian cinema. But perhaps we should quote from Michel Ciment, the famous critic who admired Pintilie the most, to illustrate this question:

*...[It happened] in the grand decade of the '60s, the years that saw the realization of Eastern European cinema that revealed the Russian Andrei Tarkovski, the Hungarian Miklós Jancsó, the Czech Milos Forman, the Pole Jerzy Skolimowski, and the Yugoslav Dušan Makavejev. Indeed, over the next forty years, Pintilie came to embody Romanian cinema almost by himself, before a young generation – which he helped hatch – started drawing the attention of the world....It offers a very rare combination of moral reflection, visionary power and a sense of the grotesque. One can feel it is generated by a force that refuses to accept a mere lucid gaze that rejects illusion and is in constant search for the truth hidden behind appearances.... Pintilie is not more indulgent with the post-communist regime and the reign of the mobs than he was with the totalitarian system that preceded it. His entire cinema is carried by the refusal to forget, by the need to question history.... And the greatness of his art comes from the alliance of opposites: an*

*anchorage in the most material, even teratological reality (the frequent presence, like in Buñuel's films, of the animality) and the philosophical speculation, the tragic thrill, and the burst of laughter, the assumed theatricality, fluidity or syncopation specific to cinema. Pintilie: an essential contemporary.*

Michel Ciment positions Pintilie as a core character of Eastern European cinema in the 1960s, mainly because of his admiration of *Duminică la ora 6* and *Reconstituirea*. But as to David Bordwell, neither Pintilie nor Romanian films of the whole socialist period are worth to be mentioned in his *Film History*. Pintilie's career could not go well since the 1960s for various reasons (in fact, he had also encountered the common situation of immigrant/exiled shared by a number of Eastern European directors). Pintilie gained his international reputation mainly from his works during the 1990s which concerned the post-Cold War Romanian society, and the topic of these films could be considered as the direct reason of his successive enlisting for the main competitions in Cannes and Venice.<sup>24</sup>

Back to the Romanian context, Pintilie has profound impact on a generation of Romanian New Wave directors. Many of the directors listed in Romanian New Wave worked with him, such as Cristi Puiu, who worked in the crew of *După-amiaza unui torționar* (as a "consultant" in the opening credit), as well as Napoleon Helmis, Andrei Gruzniczki, Doru Nițescu, even Paul Negoescu from the younger generation worked as his assistant directors. Silviu Stăvilă, an important Romanian New Wave photographer who shot *Marfa și banii*, has also collaborated with Pintilie beginning with *Terminus paradis*.

More important, Pintilie's works also provide a reference for a series of important Romanian New Wave works in artistry and ideology, like the accidental shooting and injury in both *Terminus paradis* and *Hîrtia va fi albastră* (2006, dir. Radu Muntean), revealing the violence in the history through narrative behavior itself, or the "discourse" in both *După-amiaza unui torționar* and *A fost sau n-a fost?* (2006, dir. Corneliu Porumboiu); also the discussion on "reenactment" in *Îmi este indiferent dacă în istorie vom intra ca barbari* (2018, dir. Radu Jude). Furthermore, in "*Barbari*", the historical period of the reenactment show and the discussion of the nationalism or identity, are both similar with *Tertium non datur*. As to his last work *Niki Ardelean, colonel în rezervă*, however, it has set the tone for a series of Romanian New Wave films in the years that followed. For example, Puiu made *Aurora* (2010) with the same concept ("iceberg", the murder can't be understood by outsiders). The dynamic structure of the stories and the metaphorical expression which are both implying the Romanian revolution, also extend to a series of films by Răzvan Rădulescu and Radu Muntean, such as *Boogie* (2008) and *Marți, după Crăciun* (2010). Naturally, in the framework of Cinema of Small Nations, the influence of Pintilie's works is still very limited. It can be expected that through the spread of Romanian New Wave, Pintilie, as the pioneer and the mentor, will get a more accurate status in film history.

*Translated from Chinese by Wang Yao and Ren Yutian*

---

<sup>24</sup> Another important reason is: his films since 1990 are all coproduced with France, and supported by Aide aux cinémas du monde fund from French CNC.