The Romanian New Wave: Witnessing Everyday Life in the Ceausescu Era and Understanding Post-Communist Dilemmas

The so-called Romanian New Wave of cinema began in the mid-2000s, when several Romanian directors received international recognition for their independent films. Although the filmmakers themselves firmly reject “New Wave” as a superficial label created by journalists, they do acknowledge that their films represent the same generational struggles, in addition to incorporating similar themes and stylistic techniques. Much like the new wave movements of France, Britain, and Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, the new Romanian cinema addresses the nation’s shift in identity during an era of monumental social and political changes. Romania still struggles with the specter of its recent history, particularly with regard to the 1989 student revolts and subsequent overthrow of the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. After the fall of communism the country faced a difficult transition, which was fraught with political turmoil and economic instability. In order to confront these historical and contemporary problems, the directors of the Romanian New Wave concentrate on personal struggle to cope with changes in everyday life, both before and after 1989. As a result, their films are considered more authentic, easier to relate to, and more innovative than mainstream Romanian cinema.

The Romanian New Wave films focus on two eras—the final years of Ceausescu’s regime in the late 1980’s, which was characterized by increased government control over the public and private lives of Romanian citizens, and the post-communist period, in which the country’s experiments with capitalism and Westernization left citizens scrambling to keep up with the accelerated pace of change. Richly layered with visual nuances and details of everyday
life under Ceausescu, the films of the Romanian New Wave are brutally honest in their
depictions.

Whereas the new wave movements of the 1960s were characterized by their unity under a
shared ideology, the Romanians made their films independently, as a response to the perceived
lack of authenticity in the mainstream cinema of their time. Romanian New Wave director
Cristian Mungiu describes this frustration with post-communist films in an interview with the
New York Times:

> Nothing like this ever happened in real life. And you got this desire to say: ‘People, you don’t know what you’re talking about. This is all fake. This is not what you should be telling in films. I could do way better than you.’ I felt this way, but I think this whole generation had that feeling. Those movies were badly acted, completely unbelievable, with stupid situations, lots of metaphors. It was a time when, you know, saying something about the system was more important than telling a story (Scott 2008).

The films of Mungiu and his peers commented on the corrupt political system while also
providing a powerful storyline without any trace of sensationalism or sentimentality. These
directors chose to avoid the self-indulgent tendencies of the auteur and instead presented
strikingly realistic, detached, and consuming works. Commenting on Mungiu’s film 4 Months, 3
Weeks and 2 Days, which received the Palme d’Or at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival, Ion Martea
notes the significance—and the uniqueness—of the Romanian director’s approach:

> The film shares so much of the old French New Wave’s appeal—showing things as they are, free of any moral vision—yet it proved that the likes of Goddard or Truffaut were probably too selfish to go further and give themselves a break. Mungiu is arguably achieving a cinema in which the director is literally ignored (Martea 2008).

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1 The Palme d’Or is the highest prize awarded at the Cannes Film Festival. It is presented to the
director of the best feature film.
The Romanian New Wave films set in the 1980s all demonstrate, from various angles, Ceausescu’s vast control over daily life. For example, Mungiu’s *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* features the themes of constant surveillance, lack of privacy, and a pervasive culture of fear. The film captures the suspense and uncertainty of a thriller while depicting an illegal abortion as necessary for a young woman’s survival (Lorena 2006). On the other hand, Cătălin Mitulescu’s film *The Way I Spent the End of the World* (2006) portrays the punishment of a young high school student while representing the socialist education system and party propaganda found in a typical Romanian neighborhood. Mitulescu’s film articulates the dynamics between Securitate² officers, dissenters, and other citizens who remain silent. Although the directors of both films utilize a quasi-documentary film style that forces the audience to reach their own conclusions based on personal yet unbiased narratives, the films represent distinctively different aspects of everyday life under the totalitarian dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu.

*4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* is ostensibly a film about abortion, but in fact it is a detailed study of the necessary survival skills of an average Romanian citizen during the 1980s. It depicts the legal and personal risks of performing, receiving, or aiding the illegal operation of abortion. The moral implications of an abortion or emotions of the mother are never conveyed; instead the issue of illegal abortion is the lens through which the director explores the relationship of the individual to the state. Ceausescu’s 1967 Decree No. 777 abruptly made all forms of contraception and abortion illegal under the pretext of promoting birthrate and family values. In actuality, the dictator was attempting to create a nation of laborers. In Ceausescu’s public opinion, reproduction was an obligation to the state. He stated the following:

> The fetus is the socialist property of the whole society. Giving birth is a

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² The Securitate was the secret police agency of Communist Romania.
patriotic duty. Those who refuse to have children are deserters, escaping the law of natural continuity. (Hord et.al. 1991: 231).

Furthermore, sex education did not exist, and any literature on the subject was censored. The role of Romanian women was first as workers, and second as mothers. Ceausescu gave perfunctory titles to women with a certain amount of children, but the standard of living was so low that maintaining a healthy pregnancy and a large family was nearly impossible.

The opening sequences of 4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days follow two college roommates, Otilia and Găbița, who prepare for a trip without any particular destination or purpose. They do not tell their colleagues about the trip, and the film only slowly reveals that they are travelling to obtain an abortion. Instead of the larger issues at hand, the camera focuses on the mundane details of the young women’s lives, as they discuss their upcoming exams, a toothache, money, and shampoo preference. Packing for the trip, Otilia seeks out specific products among the miniature black markets of her classmates’ dormitory rooms. In this environment, cigarettes are the most universal and popular form of currency. Once Otilia learns that her professor remarked on her repeated absences from class, she knows the key to appeasement is obtaining the teacher’s favorite brand of cigarettes.

Desperately in need of a private location for her friend’s abortion, Otilia spends a considerable amount of time and effort attempting to rent a hotel room. Two different desk clerks question Otilia on why she needs a room, since her identification card proves that she is a local resident. She offers to pay a heightened rate for a larger room, and the clerks accept her money. The film then shifts to a shot of Găbița sitting in the hotel room with Otilia and a man they have hired to perform the illegal abortion. Găbița is careless and meek, and she constantly lies about her situation for her own self-interest. The abortionist, Mr. Bebe, asserts that the three of them will all face jail time if the authorities learn of the abortion. He stresses that Găbița cannot go to
the hospital if she encounters complications after the operation, since it would be too risky.

Through obtaining an illegal abortion and utilizing the dormitory black markets, both girls find outlets to escape the oppressions of everyday life and the regime, but these small and large acts of dissent also further escalate their likelihood of facing prosecution.

Throughout the film, Mungiu keeps the camera at a considerable distance from the characters’ main actions. For example, Găbiţa smokes a cigarette on her bed while the viewer faces her from the opposite wall. Then she sits on a bed with a blank stare as the viewer’s perspective comes from another bed across the room. The first close-up shot is of Mr. Bebe, who declares that the girls will not trick him. The close-up shots of the girls’ faces depict only blank expressions, denying the viewer any access to their inner thoughts or emotions. Lorena Anton’s essay captures the shared fear of Romanian women:

The memory of the everyday life during Communist Romania, in relation with the prohibition of abortion, seemed to be characterized by the dominating presence of the daily fear: the fear of not getting pregnant, the fear of not succeeding in having an illegal abortion, the fear of death and, of course, the fear of the Party’s reprisals. The life of every (or every possible) socialist mother during Ceauşescu’s Romania was dominated by a “basic culture of fear,” which alienated the woman from her own body, seen as a possible enemy. Sexuality was generally perceived as a burden, because of its reproductive aspect, the only perceived as necessary and thus admitted for the socialist mothers.

Anton also interviewed several Romanians who provided their personal histories of coping with the abortion laws. One woman stated that making abortion illegal did nothing to promote life, as the standard of living was so low. Nearly all of the women shared their experiences without any outpouring of emotion. Perhaps this lack of emotion can be interpreted as an acceptance of what had to be done; the Romanian women, like Găbiţa, had nowhere else to turn for assistance other than to black market abortionists. Today, the legacy of Ceausescu’s policies live on, as women continue to lack access to abortion and sex education and therefore continue to live in fear of
unwanted pregnancies. According to a 2005 report by the British Medical Journal, the average Romanian woman will have three or four abortions in a lifetime, creating Europe’s highest abortion rate (Leidig 2005).

While 4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days deals with the constant fear of potential punishment, The Way I Spent the End of the World begins with the punishment of its young protagonist, Eva, who is expelled from high school after knocking over a bust of Ceausescu and failing to show any remorse. In truth, she accidentally commits the crime with her boyfriend, Alex, but he escapes punishment thanks to his father’s position in the Securitate. A judicial committee of her peers unanimously votes for Eva’s immediate expulsion, since anyone who voted for clemency would face a similar fate for siding with a dissenter. Eva is then sent to technical, or alternative, school, which consists of fellow dissenters, juvenile delinquents, students who failed the high school entry exam, developmentally disabled students, and ethnic minorities such as the Roma.

One of the film’s most revealing scenes depicts Eva’s music class preparing for graduation. Eva plays a song for the teacher, who states that the song is “pretty but won’t do,” since it lacks patriotism. Instead the teacher chooses the national anthem to be played at graduation. Additionally, a Roma student offers to contribute to the school band, but the teacher quickly dismisses him. At the graduation ceremony, Eva is recognized for her scholastic efforts, as well as her contribution to the patriotic musical performance. Despite her song’s content, its folksy acoustic style strikes a chord with many of the students, prompting them to sway along to the music. Eva also plays her parents’ record player at home and receives an album from a friend who defected from Romania. Thus, music proves to be one of the only outlets of escape for Eva and her peers.
Eva puts on an apathetic act at school, but she cares deeply for her family. The film establishes a warmer, more humanistic tone than *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*. According to *Variety* reporter Deborah Young’s review of the film, the bond between Eva, her parents, and her seven-year old brother, Lalalilu (nicknamed Lali) “suggest how humor, love and imagination kept people human and alive within such a dark, strait-laced society” (Young 2006). Eva’s parents urge her to reconcile with her estranged boyfriend Alex, as her mother fears the perils of “getting on the bad side” of the neighborhood Securitate. This point is enforced in an article by Daniel McLaughlin, who suggests that Romanian citizens’ obligations to the government consisted of telling “their Securitate handlers about their friends’ and families’ opinions on the Communist party, and whether they listened to western radio stations, had contact with foreigners or made jokes about Ceausescu” (McLaughlin 2006). Eva’s mother therefore has a good reason to fear the Securitate, since her family privately engages in such those prohibited activities.

Whereas *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* constantly keeps the viewer at a considerable distance from its principal characters, *The Way I Spent the End of the World* is highly personal. The film is often shown from the perspective of Eva’s young brother Lali, who devises a plot to assassinate Ceausescu in order to “make everyone happy.” Lali plans the assassination on the eve of the dictator’s televised speech in Bucharest on December 21, 1989, four days before the dictator and his wife Elena would be executed by command of the provisionary government (McNeill 1999). During the December 21 speech, the crowd begins to jeer at Ceausescu, and the dictator incoherently attempts to subdue the “youngsters” until he eventually leaves his balcony. Eva and various neighbors watch the broadcast together, and at first they are stunned by the events. When Eva’s father returns home with Lali, he rejoices: “You know what’s going on?
We’re free at last! May the devil take him!” Soon the entire neighborhood celebrates in the streets chanting, “Down with Ceausescu!” Eva’s grandfather lights his car on fire, and declares his newfound sense of freedom and independence: “It’s mine! I’ll do what I want!” The dictator and government no longer own him, or any of his property. The television screen reveals images of students claiming victory.

The following scene cuts to nighttime, as the neighborhood undergoes a shift from the initial thrill of the revolt to uncertainty and confusion caused by the revolution. To this day, Romanians continue to debate whether it was students or self-interested politicians who actually instigated the events of 1989. During the revolt portrayed in the film, Eva’s former boyfriend Alex dies. A neighbor notes that he is buried in Bucharest’s Heroes’ Cemetery, in an area dedicated to the demonstrators of December 1989. His actual role is unclear, but his death as a revolutionary—and as the son of a Securitate member—represents the overall lack of concrete truth and coherence behind the revolution. The Romanian New Wave films that deal with contemporary life often address these questions of validity, and the Romanians portrayed in these works frequently appear to be in the same state of uncertainty since the eve of the revolution.

Throughout the film, a painting of a decadent steamship in the ocean fascinates Lali, and he is particularly interested by the sky’s expansiveness. In one scene of the film, Lali’s neighborhood fantasizes of traveling to the West as he operates as the submarine conductor. Although the film’s perpetual forecast is overcast and dreary, the final scenes depict Lali writing to Eva as the sun shines on his desk. Eva reads the letter while on board a steamship to an unspecified destination nearly identical to the one depicted in her brother’s beloved painting. The film’s conclusion represents the hope for the future given to young people such as Eva and Lali.
Both *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* and *The Way I Spent the End of the World* adhere to an aesthetic of a quasi-documentary film. In her review of *The Way I Spent the End of the World*, Young writes that the “cluttered, old-fashioned sets” and “retro costume designs” emphasize the historical accuracy of the film. To this end, both films also share unadorned lighting techniques and an almost perpetual gray, overcast color scheme. Martea writes that nearly all the Romanian New Wave filmmakers use “long-takes with little camera movement or close-ups; quasi-documentary techniques augmented by minimalism in *mise-en-scène* and dialogue.” Many Romanian filmmakers are graduates of Bucharest’s National University of Drama and Film. Scott (2008) writes that its current students identify more with Western society than their predecessors simply due to their age; a twenty-two year old filmmaker today would have been only one or two years old during the events of 1989. However, the university still adheres to traditional and rigorous requirements, such as producing two films with a 35-millimeter camera in order to graduate. The neo-realist and minimalism behind the Romanian New Wave films are also rooted in limited funding. Many of the buildings depicted in the two films—such as the dormitory, hotel, and suburban homes—serve as bleak communist reminders of Romania’s former regime.

From 2005 to 2009, Romanian New Wave films have received critical praise and success at Cannes, particularly *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*. Although the initial media coverage of the movement has faded, Mungiu, Mitulescu, and their peers continue to make honest films dealing with the past, present and future of Romanians. Whether or not a Romanian New Wave ever existed, its beginnings mark a new turn for its national cinema. Not only did these films allow foreigners a glimpse into Romania’s history, but they also addressed issues of national
identity before and after the fall of communism and furthermore provided the country a sense of closure for those who lived through Ceausescu’s reign.
Works Cited


Leidig, Michael. “Romania Still Faces High Abortion Rate 16 years After Fall of Ceauşescu.” British Medical Journal (November, 5 2005). http://www.bmj.com/content/331/7524/1043.2


Filmography
