

## **The Limits of Film within the Limits of Theatre, in Two Examples** *Spectacular identities from the Communist and present era*

Emanuel Alexandru PÂRVU •

**Abstract:** Using conventional procedures involves, regardless of the art form, knowing their distinctive elements, how the particularities of that art form works in its ideal parameters – can't play a song on a brush – and, most importantly, knowing where the limit is between the experiment and the conventional product. The latter has no negative connotation – on the contrary, I believe we are sorely lacking well-made conventional products (in both theatre and film), created not necessarily after a recipe (which could be interpreted as commercially-oriented), but at least with a coherent slalom through style and aesthetics. Still, it is the experiment (and most of all the cross-disciplinary experiment) that gave birth to the arts we are discussing (theatre and film), discovering new forms of expression. In this piece, we will discuss the identities of Radu Jude and Lucian Pintilie, in their form of cinema expression in which they use all the elements specific to theatre, from the conventionality of the space to the present indication, from the formal props to the intent lighting, from the melding of specific technical elements to the spectacular editing.

**Keywords:** Film; Theatre; Acting; New Wave; Technique; Procedure; Analysis; Lucian Pintilie, Radu Jude, Communism, Creativity, Arts, Aesthetics,

### **Introduction**

Henri Delacroix mentioned in his *Psychologie de l'Art* that “to the artist, life is expressed in art the way sentiment is expressed in science” (1), only it is the very dialogue between the surrounding world – between nature, God and art (as an imitation of Divine Creation) – that reveals to us the two artistic directions of man: structure and creation. At first sight, they may share common features, but they are related to completely different things. One is subjective (structure), while the other is objective (creation). Think of all the examples we know of talented people who don't express their gift in the most resourceful aspect of their talent. A sales agent with a talent for acting. An attorney with an actor's charisma.

Artistic structure as defined through psychology has intuitiveness, fantasy, expressiveness and talent. Artistic creation, on the other hand, starts with preparing the work, inspiration, invention and execution – in other words, it requires concrete

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• Faculty of Arts, Ovidius University of Constanta

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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action, regardless of whether the creator is active in their professional sphere or not (a corporate employee who paints).

However, artistic structure defined through scientific aesthetics has different forms of expression: the scientific and the artistic. (The distinction is not paramount, as in the first one the subject uses abstract values, while in the second the creator makes use of artistic images reflecting, as much as possible, in dimensions apparently similar to reality, aspects of society that are emotionally transfigured in their work of art).

In both cases (Radu Jude and Lucian Pintilie, both of whom have an artistic structure), the particularity of creation was used to the fullest, by blending distinctive elements of both arts – theatre and film – to generate spectacular, unique audio-visual products in a distinctive style, to national and international acclaim.

### **1. Dramaturgy and screenplay**

Gianina Cărbunariu's play staged at Odeon Theatre in Bucharest is a theatre event abundantly using elements typical of cinema – filming, projection, screen. The text is based on the case of a 17-year old pupil from Botoșani, Mugur Călinescu, who in 1981 wrote on walls and panels in his town inscriptions meant to elicit in the population a reaction to the state of the economy at the time and the infringement of all civic rights and freedoms by the Ceaușescu regime. After being caught, he was repeatedly summoned to the Secret Police headquarters and, before long, was diagnosed with a suspicious leukaemia and died in 1985.

Gianina Cărbunariu's dramaturgy uses actual texts from Secret Police files to create a "different theatre", a document-play, in which the artistic interrogation of such an ample subject appears to be the most effective way to confront the unspoken and, most importantly, unacknowledged truth – in fact, a modification of historic truth.

The script by Radu Jude (co-written with Gianina) finds its visual expression in a film that invites us (due to the chosen cinematic aesthetics and the method of interpretation) to an exercise in sincerity, an abrupt method of plumbing our social conscience, a comparative debate between our post-Communist present (see the Cambridge Analytica scandal) and the methods of the past – as a warning for the present times. Radu Jude turns the words in the script against themselves, the even intonation with which the actors speak their lines makes de-humanising effects stir to life (effects currently discussed in our society, in the sense that interrogation techniques should no longer be used) in the bureaucratic jargon. The repression of any individual who rebels or has a different opinion than that of the regime is translated as „the reformation of the objective”, surveillance codes are „methods of protecting our youth”; the script makes abundant use of dry euphemisms extracted from the Inquisition-like shorthand transcripts of the Secret Police. Just as “technical skill

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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partly explains the artist's manner (2), Radu Jude's audio-visual style reflects, through the absurdity of the text-picture / documentary-fiction binome, an illogical, inhumane past which, above all, was locked inside its own ideologies.

From the beginning, Lucian Pintilie uses a theatrical procedure (a play within a play), aiming to select his audience – by using the procedure in which direction intrudes into the audio-visual product, Pintilie relies from the onset on the fact that his public knows what this is about. Many years before Radu Jude, Lucian Pintilie acknowledges the theatrical dimension of his characters and their text, in a very visually and audibly violent way.

If we go beyond the morbid “morality” (targeted by both authors) as a general form of living under that regime (again, in a spiritual analysis, the two films have something very important in common: Radu Jude's discusses an event from 1981, while Pintilie's film was made in 1981), we will see that, in fact, we waddle around in mud, in spiritual promiscuity, in lies and petty compromise.

The theatrical metaphor is only made apparent by Pintilie in the beginning and end, while throughout the rest of the film the spectator remains captive in the delirious interpretation, as the acting lends itself to this manner – a manner which in film (particularly for Pintilie, who had recently made *Duminică la ora 6* [*Sunday at 6*] and *Reconstituirea* [*The Reenactment*]) has everything to offer, except for minimalism. If you miss the beginning, Pintilie's film may be hard to chew – given its stridence (everyone yells or speaks very loudly), its negligent staging (everything is covered in mud), its sexual patriotism (political talks at the public baths, with everyone naked, love scenes bordering on the tragic) and the constant mockery (through the integration into the script of other works by Caragiale – see **Mitică**). Pintilie returns at the end, which is made in the same type of procedure – the director's audible indications, the appearance into the frame of the crew and Pintilie himself, giving instructions through a loudspeaker – and makes everything explicable.

Unfortunately for the film and even more so for Lucian Pintilie, its comments on the regime were considered far too offensive, which shelved the film from the time when it was finished, in 1981, to its launch in October 1990. The final lines (Pintilie's indications to the Candidate, interpreted by Florin Zamfirescu) – “Open your eyes, Pufi, close your eyes, Pufi... no need to enlighten them” – brought about a second exile: “Always furious, cynical, subversive, disturbed and never willing to accept compromise, whether in politics or art, Pintilie chose a self-imposed exile when the Romanian regime found no other way to silence him.” (3)

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

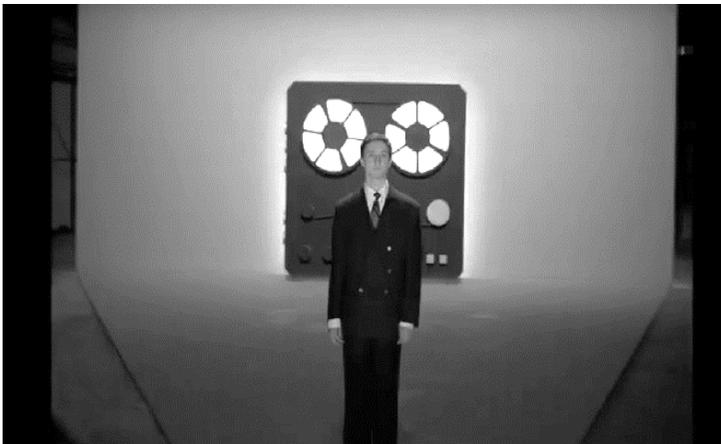
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1. *De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?* (script Lucian Pintilie based on I.L. Caragiale's Carnival Scenes, dir. Lucian Pintilie, prod. Casa de Filme 5 (*Carnival scenes*) released – 1981/1990 (Cinemaraton)

### 2. Style and aesthetics

Relying on the sense of montage in the form created by Eisenstein (joining two images in editing may lead to a third image being generated in the mind of the audience), Radu Jude works with juxtapositions which, in turn, engender diverse feelings (particularly in those in the audience who have experienced the period the film discusses), most often resorting to visual poetics. The particular style of the images in *Tipografic majuscul* [*Uppercase Print*] relies first of all on chromatics and only then on composition, delivering not only the story of Mugur Călinescu (the main protagonist), but also other small histories and connections. The entire theatrical staging is aesthetically supported by the framing, which contradicts the idea of theatre – though the whole composition could put us in mind of a filmed play.



2. *Tipografic majuscul* (script Radu Jude & Gianina Carbuariu, dir. Radu Jude, prod. MicroFilm (*Uppercase Print*) released 2020 (Youtube)

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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The truly innovative thing about Radu Jude – and it is this particular type of provocative cinema that keeps its distance from mannerism – is the abundance of close shots in conjunction with the background chromatics. The knowing audience will say they have noticed the same type of strident colour choices in Wes Anderson’s films, only there they are integrated, while Radu Jude declares it conventionally and, most importantly, uses it to distinguish between shots, having no qualms about acknowledging the theatrical convention of a background. The noticeable, even accentuated background (which can look like a stage cyclorama) is the main conventional feature – which Radu Jude acknowledges from the very beginning, without looking for masks or cinema principles to tone down the feeling of conventionality.



3. *Tipografic majuscul*  
(script Radu Jude& Gianina  
Carbunariu, dir. Radu Jude,  
prod. MicroFilm (*Uppercase  
Print*) released 2020  
(Youtube)



4. *Tipografic majuscul*  
(script Radu Jude& Gianina  
Carbunariu, dir. Radu Jude,  
prod. MicroFilm  
(*Uppercase Print*) released  
2020 (Youtube)

Lucian Pintile uses a completely different approach in his *De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?* [*Carnival Scenes*]: either because of the times, the censorship or the desire to dissimulate conventionality as much as possible, he only uses the theatrical procedure in the beginning and the end. However, he maintains the feeling of convention

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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throughout the film – through the sound background and the key shots reminiscent of theatrical procedures – see the play within a play. The two shots in which Pintilie remains a willing prisoner to his theatre roots are the one at the ball and the one at the barber's, with the show staged by Iordache and Nae Girimea. Often using the stage in the literal sense of the word, Lucian Pintilie shows he does not want to cover up his theatrical style choices. From time to time, the presence of a theatre stage in different instances (from the empty one before the ball to the one populated by the French cancan) makes the theatrical dimension omnipresent. The costumes at the ball – obviously, present in Caragiale's original text, *D'ale carnavalului* [*Carnival Scenes*] flatten the convention by the fact that Pintilie also uses the costumes in the characters' real lives. The metaphor of their similarity to characters (some burlesque, other grotesque – again, elements of theatre) even in their day-to-day lives once again shows Pintilie's willingness to create a stratified work, an in-depth composition, to avoid appearances.



5. *De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?* (script Lucian Pintilie based on I.L. Caragiale's *Carnival Scenes*, dir. Lucian Pintilie, prod. Casa de Filme 5 (*Carnival scenes*) released – 1981/1990 (Cinemaraton)



6. *De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?* (script Lucian Pintilie based on I.L. Caragiale's *Carnival Scenes*, dir. Lucian Pintilie, prod. Casa de Filme 5 (*Carnival scenes*) released – 1981/1990 (Cinemaraton)

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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The visual manner, however, is not complementary but rather antagonistic, as Pintilie makes full use of editing and detail shots. The chromatic he chooses is bland, from the ochre and grey tones used in the costumes to the heavy atmosphere generated by the lighting and props: the interior shots (barber's, public bath, gambling basement, ballrooms) all have dark-coloured walls and dim lighting. The exterior shots are also poorly lit (due to the choice of filming in a particular time of year – a late autumn with muddy earth – and a particular time of day – mostly afternoon).



7. *De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?* (script Lucian Pintilie based on I.L. Caragiale's *Carnival Scenes*, dir. Lucian Pintilie, prod. Casa de Filme 5 (*Carnival scenes*) released – 1981/1990 (Cinemaraton)

From a metaphysical point of view, however, the journey in style proposed by Lucian Pintilie does not express hopelessness – quite to the contrary. The film begins with a dark shot in a basement, suggesting the starting point of a world he despises, a world steeped in moisture, gambling with loaded dice (the outline of a sick society), with characters huddled together – again, metaphorically – in a horse-drawn wagon, which gives a hint of hope laced with doubt about the direction this society is heading to: for better or for worse, in the wagon they stay together, but are heading nowhere.

Though highly subtle in its choice of style, the film did not go through the fine comb of censorship. It was considered a cultural manifesto, with the explanation that “society is falsely represented in this film, which does not bring to the foreground the triumphs of Socialism”. It brought to the forefront dirt, mud, people with no clear occupation – and this was the early '80s, when Socialism had already entered its darker phase. Before long (1983), Ceaușescu would make a public appearance (his “Mangalia Manifesto”) with a speech that lashed at theatre and cinema, which, in his opinion, failed to depict the society he wanted shown on screens or stages. Starting 1983, the only films made in Romania were those in which the figurehead of society was the worker; they had to include at least a few shots illustrating the (literal) construction of Socialist society. The only exception were historic propaganda films.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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8. *De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?* (script Lucian Pintilie based on I.L. Caragiale's Carnival Scenes, dir. Lucian Pintilie, prod. Casa de Filme 5 (*Carnival scenes*) released – 1981/1990 (Cinemaraton)



9. *De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?* (script Lucian Pintilie based on I.L. Caragiale's Carnival Scenes, dir. Lucian Pintilie, prod. Casa de Filme 5 (*Carnival scenes*) released – 1981/1990 (Cinemaraton)

### 3. Acting and means of expression

In *Uppercase Print*, Radu Jude employs the principles of neutrality of means, with a clear reference to shorthand transcripts and informative notes of the Secret Police, and the use of a phonetic manner similar to that of a metronome or typewriter. What he avoids doing, however, is to use the facial neutrality that would parallel that of the means of expression in the New Romanian Cinema. In the NRC's key films, the theatrical dimension of the means of interpretation has been completely annihilated (which is beneficial for a movement in cinema), regardless of the age of the actors.

The observational principle of the NRC has been structurally modified here to obtain an active archive of sorts (if we can call it that), a type of phonetic document with visual highlights. The minimal nuances which became the particularity of the NRC were cut out by Radu Jude, in a completely different approach which carefully cuts a cross-section through a time period, steering towards the metaphysical and

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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abruptly entering a convention which the audience must accept to be able to plunge into the universe that the Romanian filmmaker proposes.

With Lucian Pintile, things are a little different. Several decades before the New Romanian Wave, he makes use of the full arsenal of theatre to be able to sustain the proposed convention. The actors are garish, the text is often yelled out, the characters' universe is motley, shot through with violence. Grimaces are pushed to the extreme, gestures are broad, and silences are marked by intentionally extended beats, the better to underscore the theatrical effect. At the same time, the parallel planes proposed by Lucian Pintilie are clearly outlined, as the acting means are one of the advantages of a theatrical film.

Structured as an avowed history (due to Caragiale's texts), Lucian Pintilie's characters reach absurd extremes (of course, an intended approach in the principle brought forth by the text), using as means all the means and mechanisms of the theatre – repetition, dual tonality in lines, double takes. The fascinating thing about Lucian Pintilie's greatness is how it integrates the theatrical dimension as a means of transferring a theatre text into a film medium. In theory, in order to be able to move away from a theatre text (one that was written for the stage), one makes full use of all cinema mechanisms. That is exactly what Lucian Pintilie relies on; in a way, he uses the “hair of the dog” principle, doing spectacular flip-flops on a highly risky tightrope: when you are so conventional, there is a major risk that you will only be perceived as a mannerist yourself, with no access to the symbolic and metaphysical themes the artwork proposes.



10. *De ce trag  
clopotele, Mitică?*  
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Pintilie, prod. Casa de  
Filme 5 (*Carnival  
scenes*) released –  
1981/1990  
(Cinemaraton)

### Conclusions

In these two spectacular identities, Radu Jude and Lucian Pintilie, we see the particularities of two filmmakers who spectacularly wield a dual art. As they have made both theatre and film, they fruitfully exploit this migration from one art to the other, relying on complementary elements – both in style and in aesthetics.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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In the present cases – *Uppercase Print* and *Carnival Scenes* – the theatrical aesthetics proposed, as a semiotic mechanic related more to the image-concept relation than to the gesture-symbol one, transcends the art in question (theatre) to become a new visual style, a successful dualist experiment *avant la lettre* – an art film in the literal meaning.

The style means used become recognisable, but not repetitive (the two filmmakers did not resort to this kind of storytelling in their other works), and the choice of manner makes them unique for their day and age. Lucian Pintilie managed to make a memorable film, a landmark for local cinema, blending two arts (theatre and film\_ and two means (convention and realism) into the same product. Almost forty years later, another representative Romanian filmmaker uses the same methods, but adopts a different aesthetic. Also, both directors question what we know about film and cinema, challenging the audience to ask questions, to launch metaphysical themes through a conjugated manner in arts that most people consider different.

The feeling of spectacular, of spectacle, is taken to the extreme, the sensation of inappropriateness is cancelled out, the feeling of theatrical convention or realism is turned on its head and debated from all possible angles, to the point that the audience wonders how such a medley can work so well.

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#### Media

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1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 – screenshots “De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?” (script Lucian Pintilie based on I.L. Caragiale’s *Carnival Scenes*, dir. Lucian Pintilie, prod. Casa de Filme 5 (*Carnival scenes*) released – 1981/1990 (Cinemaraton)