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A Case of Spectatorship as Visual (Un)Pleasure : *Moartea domnului Lăzărescu* (*The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*)

Abstract: This paper approaches Cristi Puiu's 2005 film Moartea domnului Lăzărescu from the perspective of spectatorship theory: in order to obtain a response from the spectator, the film appeals to a number of film devices (camera movement, mise en scene and editing) that the director uses in order to draw the viewer into a particular relationship with the screen. Moreover, as a realist film and conventional narrative, The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu is an unpleasurable cinematic product, since it presents an unpleasurable reality (an impaired medical and human system in Romania) and a non-eludible existence.

Key words: Spectatorship theory, cinematic pleasure, conventional filmic narrative, the absurd.

The Romanian cinema after 1989 has faced a slow, strenuous process of rebirth, accountable for not only the natural process of diachronic maturing and unraveling, but also for the need of an old and especially new generation of directors to rewrite history after December 1989 as well as to impersonate a new social dimension that became a defining part of our "Romanianness" after 1989.

Historically, the Romanian cinema, like all cinemas, includes a range of films that contain a few archetypes, which are "core" stories embracing "basic experiences, values, beliefs of the culture" (Phillips in Nelmes 171). Mythologies are a way in which the Western or Eastern culture fathoms its own meaning, and the most common myths relate to national identity and key events that have forged and reinforced that identity at various moments in the history of that culture. From this perspective, Romanian cinema can be approached in terms of national myths of "Romanianness" and of the way in which the features embodied in this concept are visible at defining historical moments – such as the 1989 Revolution or the decades of transition that followed. In Romania, mythologizing the last decade of the 20th century or the early years of the 21st century has produced and is still producing in the mind of the audience a frame of thought which contains fundamental beliefs and values, social, economic and political facets of our nation, of the current years we are living in. We could venture to state - therefore- that we are witnessing the writing of history.

Retelling such “hard times” through different cinematic endeavors has been the concern of a new generation of directors who started writing a new age in the history of Romanian cinema with films that acquired visibility, prominence and awards at Romanian and International film festivals. Some of these would dutifully include Nae Caramfil’s *Filantropica* (2001), Cristian Mungiu - *Occident* (2002), [we feel compelled to mention here his latest success *4 luni, 3 saptamani si 2 zile* which was awarded the Palm d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2007], Cristian Nemescu’s *California Dreaming* (2006) and Cristi Puiu’s *Moartea Domnului Lazarescu* (2005) honored with the award "Un certain regard" at the Cannes Film Festival in 2005 as well as other 12 national and international awards. All these films are stories that witness in subtle, ironical stances the absurd, ineffective work of institutions – police, adoption, publicity, medicine, education, the abnormal relationship involving people, friends, society and the never-ending economic transition. All these are caricatured, ridiculed, and the norm and the ordinary in some situations sometimes generate a grotesque dimension and humor of a special kind that already forge an auteur quality about these directors. The focus of many of the movies produced in this era is on the dark side of a country in transition, on a miserable Romania, full of paralyzing bureaucracy, of garbage, mud, stray dogs, beggars.

The first in a series of six related films entitled “Stories from the outskirts of Bucharest” and based on a real case, Cristi Puiu’s film *Moartea Domnului Lazarescu* (*The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*) tells the story of a 63-year old widower, Dante Remus Lazarescu, who lives all alone in a block of flats with his cats as sole companionship. Feeling sick, he calls the ambulance and the paramedic suspects he has colon cancer. What seemed at the beginning a mere formality, the examination of an old man who has repeatedly thrown up and has a strong headache, turns into a nightmare, with the paramedics driving throughout Bucharest taking their patient from one hospital to another, hoping they will find a hospital to accept him, despite the fact that his state gets alarmingly worse and worse.

Bizarre enough, against this plot background, director confessed that the film is “a love story, a comedy, a film about old age, about the medical system, but above all, it is about the self-destructive indifference, about carelessness, about the lack of communication.”¹

When it comes to approaching the movie from the perspective of the viewer’s response, we have to mention that film studies operate a distinction between the collective response of social groups, the audience, and the individual response of the spectator. Much developed since the 1960’s, spectatorship theory has crystallized three assumptions, as Patrick Phillips summarizes in his chapter devoted to the film spectator:

- 1) spectatorship has to be discussed in traditional cinema auditoria
- 2) the audience do not exist for the individual spectator for the duration of the film
- 3) spectator study focuses on “popular films” that offer cinematic pleasure: “spectacle, emotion, plot, resolution within conventional narrative and generic forms” (Phillips in Nelmes 130)

¹ http://www.cinemagia.ro/movie.php?movie_id=11273&what=article&article_id=11882 (my translation)

With a view to this, assessing the cinematic pleasure the films brings along, we could judge whether or better said to what extent *Moartea Domnului Lazarescu* (*The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*) is a popular film.

In order to obtain a response from the spectator, the director has a number of devices at hand which draw the viewer into a particular relationship with the screen through control exercised by camera movement, *mise en scene* and editing. All these are going to be assessed in the scene at the Filaret Hospital which lasts for 16 minutes and 5 seconds.

- camera movement towards and away from the subject: in this scene a hand-held camera maintains the feeling of confusion and emergency alert for the viewer and the eye-level medium shot gives them a greater sense of involvement and authenticity;

- camera position nearer or farther from an object: most of the takes are medium shots, directing the attention to the paramedic, the doctors in the ER, and especially on Mr Lazarescu who is lying on a stretcher and is increasingly aphasic. These medium and close-up shots enhance engagement with the emotions of characters;

- mise en scene opens a rather small Emergency Room populated with irritated nurses and doctors looking for a Nokia battery recharger to make a private call, letting pitiful outbursts of vanities go out, with screens that allow simultaneous investigations to be carried with little or no sense of privacy for the patients;

- the frame of the mise en scene keeps the focus of attention on the patient and doctors but the conflicting parties [paramedic and hospital doctors] are taking opposite sides in the frame and are placed in asymmetrical compositions, thus underlining the imbalance, the abnormality and the absurd of the whole scene;

- editing: this rather long 16-minute scene contains only 4 uninterrupted filmed shots, of approximately 4 minute each, which is extremely rare in terms of editing decision, imparting the spectator the feeling that times is dragging and that, despite the gravity of the situation, the physicians are taking their time, hiding their indifference and unwillingness to take action behind the guise of complying with the legal procedures: “He hasn’t signed the paper, so I have no responsibility or obligation” (MDL 2:11:50).

In terms of spectatorship response, there are various kinds of pleasure: emotional, lying in our empathy with the characters and events; physical, as in the response our senses receive; cognitive, lying in the complexities of plot, form, theme. Needless to say, these responses vary according to each spectator’s cinema culture and social practice. These three responses can be further alternative ways of responding at different levels:

- A** of character and the emotions generated by their circumstances (an affective response);
 - B** of genre / form in which characters and situations are understood in relation to the acquaintance with patterns of different types of cinema (an automatic response)
 - C** of the film as “construct” which obviates the filmmaking process (a cognitive response).
- These can be mapped against pleasure (1) and unpleasure (2) as in the diagram below.

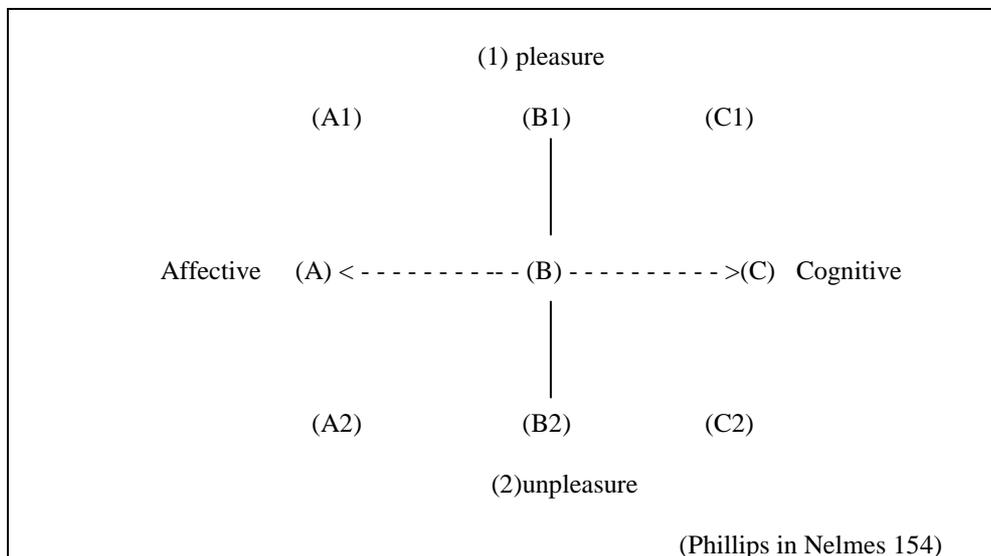
Starting from this diagram, there are different kinds of possible responses:

A1: Intense concern for Mr Lazarescu who is almost dying and for the paramedic Mioara Avram who has shown compassion for the suffering of her patient, and who has her own health problems

B1: Enjoyment in the blend of comedy with tragic tones, which ascribes the film to a tragi-comedy

C1: Delight in the skillfulness of Cristi Puiu who doses dramatic intensity and blends it with tragic issues [the patient terminal disease]

A2: Distaste for and sharp disagreement with the unprofessional behavior and inhumanity of the doctors at the Filaret Hospital



B2: Confusion and disorientation at the insertion of black comedy in a scene of profound gravity coming from the protagonist’s imminent death prospects, a situation extremely tragic at its deepest.

C3: Indignation at the inappropriate way in which the director mixes tragedy and black comedy.

The film’s running time is unusually long, two hours and a half, which almost equals the story time, another rare feature of fictional films; this choice is by no means done at random: the spectator stays alert and is open to the states that movie exposes him to, from irony to mercy or seething with anger, frustration or helplessness. The slow-going pace of the film coming from the slow-cutting includea consecutive shots unusually long, which opens a sense of paradoxical calm in such a desperate circumstance of life and death, giving time to the viewer for a critical reflection, and obviating to the spectator that the running time of the film is actually the last two hours and a half from Mr. Lazarescu’s life.

When he leaves this world, Mr. Lazarescu is left alone, surrounded by the blockages of an old medical system, by the carelessness of the people populating this system and by his own loneliness. The end of the movie leaves Mr. Lazarescu alone on a stretcher ready to enter the operating theater for a brain surgery which comes too late. He is left actually to await death

and the unexpected unanticipated final cut of the film brings forth once again the irony pervasive along the film, which is the irony of unexpectedly occurring death.

At first sight, the hurried unannounced end takes the spectator by surprise, but the film's subtext and the film's title are explanatory, making up for this small technical detail. The film is about death and this is explicitly foregrounded in a realist manner from the very title; therefore, the physical death of Mr. Lazarescu onscreen would have been a mere conventional, redundant detail.

Similarly, we could state that Mr. Lazarescu has been sentenced to death not only by his own disease, not only by the medical system, or the political or the social one, he is sentenced to death by the human system, which is a collective portrait of selfishness, vain pride and incompetence. The crude realism of the film's epic, the stylistic non-conformity of the director make the picture of human inattentiveness double the impotence of a whole system.

Dr. Ardelean (Florin Zamfirescu) constructs one of the most contemptible representation of the medical staff for whom the brutal, humiliating behavior towards his patients is just a call of duty. At the same time, the grotesque gallery of physicians is completed by Dr. Mirica at the Filaret Hospital: here, in a manner resembling a Kafka story in what stands as the climax of a seemingly anti-climactic movie, Dr. Mirica is indifferent to the urgent investigations that his patient needs, is buried in routine and amplifies his proud drives by a cynical presentation of the legal procedures in front of a patient who is very close to dying, and his excuse is even more disproportioned: "He hasn't signed so I can't operate on him." (MDL 2:11:40). The tension between nurses and doctors, between different types of medical services (paramedics and hospital doctors) is no longer latent. They drink coffee during their night shifts and at the same time have to examine the never-ending incoming patients in the ERs; they cannot afford being kind or caring or merciful.

All cinematic devices are handled artistically in a hyper realist manner: Mr. Lazarescu's dark cramped and dingy flat, the overcrowded Emergency Rooms at the hospital, the characters' clothing, their mannerism, their patterns of behavior, the dim lighting of scenes, the fractured movement within the frames form a code of inaestheticism that add up to the dutiful unpleasure of the film's text. This inaesthetic code is enhanced by the sound track that embraces the film narrative during the opening and ending credits, a joyful sound track talking about love, naturally seems at odds with the subject matter of the movie. The film music during the opening and ending credits actually auditorily announces and even reinforces the bitter irony of the entire film.

In point of elements of cinematography, the director goes against the rules and lends his camera the power to render life spontaneity by means of lighting and camera work. The film was shot by night and most of its scenes are filmed in dark frames making heavy use of shadows, with scarce back light, bottom light, side light and no main, frontal light. All these render the movie a Dantesque touch and "Dante", the Ion Fiscuteanu character's name, is symbolic in this respect, an obvious reminder of Dante's Inferno, which is the hospital maze the protagonist has entered. The same disordered chaotic atmosphere is visually predicted through a slightly panning shaking hand-held camera shooting at constant times in the film.

Approached from the perspective of filmic narrative dual division regarding mainstream cinema and counter cinema, the film would fall into the class of conventional filmic narratives belonging to a mainstream cinema through a number of features:

a) Narrative transitivity: there is a cause-and-effect chain of events Mr. Lazarescu is ill and taken to hospital, but he cannot fit into a diseased system because of various factors [human-/system-related];

b) Identification: the leading protagonists draw the viewer into the film / tell the story from their point of view; the director rather draws the spectator into an identification with the protagonist Mr. Lazarescu as in any conventional film;

c) Transparency: the filmmaker hides film production work, which is the case of Cristi Puiu's film

d) Simple diegesis: the film has a single coherent story line which absorbs possible disruptions / flashbacks, scene changes; as to the soundtrack, only the vocals and silence for the actual duration of the film story is compatible with visual images within the film's diegesis;

e) Closure: the resolution solves all the issues raised in the film; the film has an ironic unavoidable resolution, with Mr Lazarescu gradually painfully taken to the point announced in the title . Also, the filmic narrative is a self-contained world;

f) Pleasurable / Unpleasurable fiction: despite all the above features, *Moartea Domnului Lazarescu (The Death of Mr. Lazarescu)* is an unpleasurable cinematic product, since it presents an unpleasurable reality [an impaired Romanian medical and human system] with a non-escapist world, whose absurd, excruciating contradictions have to be resolved in real life. The resolution will be the logical, announced death of just another dot in the system which Mr Lazarescu is.

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