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# Close Up

FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES

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**National University of Theatre and Film “I.L. Caragiale”**

# **Close Up: Film and Media Studies**

**Vol. 1, No. 1, 2013**

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FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES

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# Nae Caranfil and “Maximalist” Aesthetics

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## Abstract

This study has a dual aim: to identify in Nae Caranfil’s movies the beginning of the renewal of filmmaking in post-communist Romanian cinema, and to evaluate how his personal aesthetics are placed vis-à-vis the creative methods of the New Romanian Cinema. Relying on scrutiny of his movies through the prism of the *auteur* theory, the paper refers to Caranfil’s aesthetic principles formulated in a surprising “statement of intent,” written when he was 23 years old and restated in recent interviews. The director’s “maximalist aesthetics” (as he defines them<sup>1</sup>) are finally confronted by the “minimalist” paradigm of new realistic Romanian movies.

## Keywords

Nae Caranfil, *auteur* theory, film history, film aesthetics, Romanian comedy, self-reflexive cinema, post-communist cinema, New Romanian Cinema

Inspired by Nae Caranfil’s own description of his cinema aesthetics, the title may suggest the author’s style is radically opposed to the frequently evaluated “minimalist” style of the New Romanian Cinema. Of course, if we look closer, both concepts tend overly to reduce the comparison between two important “watershed” moments of our cinema, but the forced opposition offers a possible starting point for a broader discussion, which may reveal, in fact, that they share more than a few common objectives and modes of operation. They all end by destabilizing the idea of *auteur* cinema.

Nae Caranfil epitomized, during the first decade after the Revolution, the idea of young Romanian cinema itself. He was the first young director who tried to shake off the “aesthetic stillness”<sup>2</sup> of the filmmaking of the 1990s. He confirmed the expectations created by his student films (especially *Venice in September / Frumos e în septembrie la Veneția*, 1983) with his feature movie debut *Don’t Lean Out the Window / E pericoloso sporgersi* (1993). His *opera prima* legitimized by an enthusiastic reception abroad (after being presented in the Quinzaine des réalisateurs selection at Cannes), Caranfil became (as did Lucian Pintilie) a Romanian film director to remember. The film critics’ favorable comments were accompanied by flattering statements from famous actors such as Charlotte Rampling (who starred in his movie *Asphalt Tango*, 1996), who has frequently been quoted as describing Caranfil

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as "the Woody Allen of the East." With each new film, Nae Caranfil developed distinctive ways of structuring narratives and a recognizable style. His works confirm the *auteur* film definition given by George Littera, as recognizable "by the force of creating a distinctive poetic universe, based on the coherence of philosophical and expressive substantiation, by his personal message and mythology, a crystallized style."<sup>3</sup>

In the new millennium, Caranfil reached a new status: the director who managed to reconcile the *auteur* film with audience expectations, especially after *Philanthropy / Filantropica* (2002) topped the Romanian box office. His fans learn the lines from his movies by heart, while film critics prize the originality of his scripts. They all recognize his signature. At first glance, his situation seems a paradox. Caranfil's work asks to be examined through the prism of the *auteur*, in spite of his constant approach to a popular genre, comedy. His profile is also distinctive owing to the distance he takes from the Romanian *auteurist* cinema, valued before and after the Revolution. Before 1990, the *auteur* status presupposed (in Eastern European cinemas, including Romania) a modernist perception of the medium (as High Art), a metaphorical or allegorical expression, not without a grain of subversiveness. Caranfil's dissenting option is tied to the influences he assimilated during his student years, a time when the Tarkovsky model was embraced by most students and recent graduates of the University of Cinema. Recalling his student days, he muses:

"Not to be bored while watching *Stalker* was proof you were being accepted into the elite, and besides that, you belonged to the kind of people who secretly opposed the Communist regime. Student films (and many others) were filled with skinny white horses carrying their sadness through crepuscular swamps, everything was so bloody silent, they often shot images reflected in mirrors."<sup>4</sup>

Nae Caranfil admired and assimilated other models, as he confesses in the same interview:

"In this context, I assumed, somewhat imprudently, less elevated sympathies: the American cinema of the 1930s, 1950s and especially of the 1970s, the Czech school of filmmaking and the Italians from Cinecitta, not primarily the neo-realists, but comedy directors such as Mario Monicelli, Dino Risi, Pietro Germi. Besides, I was interested in the American career of Milos Forman. And above everyone was Billy Wilder, the European who conquered Hollywood. My theory was, by this time, that it's better to become a good craftsman, a perfect professional, than to expect ineffable inspiration to visit you, a better position than running sweaty and ridiculous to abstract and unreachable heights."<sup>5</sup>

This admiration for directors who had "less prestige but more public" invites comparison between Nae Caranfil and the young directors and film critics of the French journal *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1950s, the arduous cinephiles turned directors of the French "New Wave." They created a precedent for the debut of articulate filmmakers, who stated their principles in writing before they began to make films. Although he hasn't exactly published a manifesto of a future aesthetic movement, Caranfil wrote a text that sounded something like a personal creed when he was still a student, taking the opportunity presented by a symposium dedicated to film director Jean Georgescu (it was later published in the *Noul cinema* magazine in 1990<sup>6</sup>.) The text, entitled *Caragiale's Tradition (Traditia Caragiale)*, is relatively unknown, overlooked in the context of the radical (and often political) statements of post-Revolution Romanian film directors. But from the perspective of the time, it seems to be a precious key to a better reading of the author's body of works. Without exaggerating, we may say that the

ennobling of comedy belongs to an early aesthetic program stated by Caranfil in *Caragiale's Tradition*. No doubt, his essay has a say in the director's evolution and anticipates his aesthetic strategies.

### A KIND OF MANIFESTO

As Nae Caranfil's filmography invites examination through the prism of *auteur*, the discovery of a personal "plan" of evolution, grounded on polemical statements regarding most Romanian comedies (and Romanian cinema of any kind) is significant. The ideas and the tone reveal the author's need to break with the "old" mainstream (and art cinema) Romanian filmmaking practice. Although it has no ambitions to be a manifesto, like Truffaut's articles, which attacked the academic French cinema of the 1950s, (such as *A Certain Tendency of French Cinema / Une certaine tendance du cinéma français*, published in *Cahiers du cinema* no 31, January 1954) the article *Caragiale's Tradition (Tradiția Caragiale)* provides a critical view of Romanian comedy from its beginnings to the 1980s. Sketching the particular profile of Romanian comedy, Caranfil ironically emphasizes its inconsistency. He criticizes the screen adaptations of Ion Luca Caragiale's theatrical work: "Some of them were merely a pretext to immortalize stage productions of Bucharest theaters. In other cases, we had adaptations which were conventional or, to use a more appropriate term, cautious, with no other ambition than to crowd onto the screen the greatest number of famous actors."<sup>7</sup>

He comments more ironically on the so-called contemporary comedies, in which he sees only "sentimental troubles placed in fancy resorts, feel-good movies with merry romps, girls and boys living shy and happy in the fairytale world of Romanian cinema. The temptations of satire, the tragicomic vocation, incisiveness were other cinemas' priorities. We preferred snowball fights."<sup>8</sup>

He mentions two happy exceptions in developing Caragiale's legacy, the two adaptations by Jean Georgescu: *A Stormy Night (O noapte furtunoasă, 1943)* and a contemporary comedy whose polemic vigor and satirical character places it in Caragiale's vein, *Our Director (Directorul nostru, 1955)*. According to Caranfil, he was the only director who really perceived the cinematic dimensions of the great dramatist's oeuvre, recognizing his generosity in offering the model of a perfect structure and comic composition, a bright technique of developing situations and, moreover, a caustic spirit of profoundly national essence.

Mastering the basic notions of the nature of the comic genre, he notices:

"In Caragiale's work, the structure organizes a plot, and its remarkably logical development gives birth to a satirical protest so conspicuous that the comic relief is directly determined. The sense is not added, it emerges naturally from the development of the situations itself. In the struggle between a villain and an imbecile, the winner is a third one, an imbecilic villain (*The Lost Letter / Scrisoarea pierdută*). The fable has, at the same time, comic substance and critical virulence (...) Look at how, each time, the essential thing is the COMIC STRUCTURE saturated with the substance of life."<sup>9</sup>

### A POPULAR VERSION OF THE AUTEUR

Supported by a committed cinephilia, Nae Caranfil's profound knowledge of comedy brought remarkable results after he improved his writing techniques during the screenwriting courses he attended in Belgium in 1988 and in France in 1998. Concern for solid screenwriting becomes a key characteristic of the author.

We do not have to look any further for an explanation for the international support he received from Western financing sources, from his very beginnings. Caranfil became the darling of European

producers because he proposed projects based on well-written scripts, promising personal movies with strong entertainment value. We should not forget that his first two films, *Don't Lean Out of the Window* (titled in France *Dimanches de permission*) and *Asphalt Tango* were financed by the ECO Fund, set up by Culture Minister Jacques Lang in 1989 to support the development of film production in Central and East Europe, as Anne Jackel highlights in "France and Romanian Cinema 1896-1999."<sup>10</sup> When the function of this fund was taken over by Eurimages, Nae Caranfil got financing from there as well. His success may be tied to his personal aesthetics, which he defined in an interview. He describes them using a tongue-in-cheek analysis of the relationship between the scriptwriter and the film director of the same name, Nae Caranfil:

"I can't say that I forced onto myself a sort of "maximalist agenda". But, on the other hand, when I'm writing a screenplay and I'm trying to create high-quality entertainment, austerity and excision are not two of my favorite tools. "Kitchen sink drama" is far from being my specialty. Consequently, it may happen that I'm writing huge, cinematically spectacular crowd scenes, well aware that I'm opening the door to a huge pile of production problems and that one day, Caranfil the director will silently curse Caranfil the writer for throwing at him that crazy, mind-bending scene."<sup>11</sup>

Having identified the aesthetic treaty written by Nae Caranfil long before his debut, we could conclude, by exploring his filmography, that it was an efficient "self-development plan," which brought him not only box-office success, but also the honorary title of author, a status acquired mostly by American standards. Once again, at first glance his films are closer to entertainment than to art house, but after the Cahiers du cinema critics established their canon this did not prevent him from being an *auteur*.

Although it was born in Europe, the idea of *auteur* cinema had influential supporters in the "New World". It was film critic Andrew Sarris who reworded the *auteur* theory in American terms and defined it for the first time in close relationship with the movie industry. According to him, a director could not obtain this qualification if he did not confirm his "technical abilities": "Obviously, the *auteur* theory cannot possibly cover every vagrant charm of the cinema. Nevertheless, the first premise of the *auteur* theory is the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value."<sup>12</sup>

Although he values the mastering of technique, Sarris borrows from French filmmakers and critics of the *Cahiers du cinema* magazine the important "personal criterion" and highlights: "The second premise of the *auteur* theory is the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value. Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature. The way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way the director thinks and feels. This is an area where American directors are generally superior to foreign directors. Because so much of the American Cinema is commissioned, a director is forced to express his personality through the visual treatment of the material, rather than through the literary content of the material."<sup>13</sup>

Although many critics consider the *auteur* theory somehow passé, it is still effective in analyzing many directors' oeuvre. The Thai Apichatpong Weerasethakul, the Iranian Abbas Kiarostami, the American Quentin Tarantino invite, with each new film, a reading within the context of their body of work. If examined in the context of this theory, Caranfil's movies seem to fulfill the criteria, from "technical competence" to some "recurrent characteristics of style," but we could have problems pushing an analogy with the status of the American film director, "forced to express his personality through the visual treatment of the material, rather than through the literary content of the material." Sarris needed

to underline the personal efforts of the Hollywood directors to avoid the standardization presupposed by the commissioned scripts of the big studios. In Caranfil’s case, this effort is unnecessary, because he is always the author of his films’ scripts. The screenwriter and the director are not in a position to dispute their superiority. Even when he accepted a commissioned project, such as the French-Italian co-production *Dolce far niente* (1998) he did it only after being assured he would script it.

Film critics and viewers generally agree that the strongest part of Nae Caranfil’s movies is the script. Long before the screenwriting manuals written by Robert McKee or Syd Field became available to each young Romanian dreaming of becoming a filmmaker or screenwriter, Caranfil did everything to improve his natural ability to write for cinema. But his highly-crafted scripts manage always to mark his presence, an operation further accomplished by his directing tools.

Nae Caranfil is an *auteur* by European standards as well, mostly by Jean-Louis Comolli’s definition:

“No matter the origin or the sources of inspiration, the film director always talks about himself. When he stages characters, we find out less about them than about him, even if there are things which are extraneous to his own experience.”<sup>14</sup>

Nae Caranfil’s films are not openly autobiographical: he always tries to dissolve autobiographical details into agreeable, well-articulated stories. His *auteur* vocation is recognizable thanks to his autobiographical touch, starting with his debut movie *Don’t Lean Out of the Window*, a nostalgic-ironic comedy which tells stories about the Communist “golden age,” avoiding the usual furious “denouncing” tone of the Romanian films from the beginning of the 1990s. Like Akira Kurosawa in *Rashomon*, Caranfil experiments with the embedded stories technique, a little bit before Quentin Tarantino also used it in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and this “mosaic narrative” turned into an epigonic phenomenon. The stories of the Student, the Actor and the Soldier bring to the screen characters whose destinies cross in a small, suffocating town. In the vivid description of the milieu, full of details relevant to the last bleak years of Communism, we detect autobiographical suggestions in the high-school atmosphere, with the vaguely erotic teasing of the teenagers and the silly farces, or in the army episodes, with bathroom jokes and vindictive superiors. Caranfil’s movies always provoke the viewer to discover the author’s avatar.

In this comedy, which speaks with humor about the despair that pushed people to risk their lives by swimming across the Danube, hoping to continue their journey to the West, we detect themes and motifs that would recur in the director’s next movies: the motif of escaping from a suffocating place, or the obsession of representing the world of show business.

Some of the themes/motifs reappear in *Asphalt Tango* (1996). Built on the road movie formula, this comedy, with its extravagant situations and witty dialog, depicts the anarchic and socially polarized landscape of the Romanian transition from Communism to capitalism.

The movie tells the story of eleven beautiful young women recruited by a cynical French woman (Charlotte Rampling) to perform in a sex show. After boarding a bus, they cross the country, followed by a desperate husband (Mircea Diaconu), who is trying to recover his wife. *Asphalt Tango* develops into a high-speed chase, accumulating funny adventures which confront local and sexist mentalities with Western ideas of women’s emancipation. Billy Wilder’s lesson seems very well learned by Caranfil in developing hilarious situations and funny lines. Like other bitter comedies of transition from ex-communist countries (such as the big international hit *Kolya*, directed by the Czech Jan Sverak in 1996, or the German *Goodbye Lenin* of 2003 by Wolfgang Becker, *Asphalt Tango* grounds its humor more in the national obsession with migration, trying to avoid Western stereotypes in the representation of “Romanian issues”.

The ironic approach to topics like "the communist nightmare," or "the dreadful transition" encouraged in Caranfil's movies a new attitude of debut films in representing the past, welcomed by the Romanian public. As I wrote before, in the early 1990s, "the movies approaching these topics were generally avoided by the public because of their ethical didacticism and schematic plots. There are a few exceptions, such as *Balanta (The Oak)* by Lucian Pintilie and *E pericoloso sporgersi* by Nae Caranfil, the first internationally-celebrated Romanian movies after the Revolution."<sup>15</sup>

After *Asphalt Tango* the director continued to approach ironically the consequences of transition, going even more in depth into the theme in *Philanthropy (Filantropica)*, 2002), the bright and popular comedy that proved a Romanian box office hit (attracting 113,000 viewers), which turned Nae Caranfil into the sweetheart director of the young Romanian public. Mircea Diaconu, his habitual cinematic stand-in, gives life to Ovidiu, a high-school professor who, humiliated by the students' indifference and his poor salary, tries to recover his dignity by writing novels in his spare time. Having sold only three copies of his first book, he faces writer's block with the second one. After falling in love with a young model with pretensions to luxury, he desperately tries to make easy money and offers his services to an exotic crook, Mr. Pepe, the head of Philanthropy, a foundation whose aim is to transform poverty into a profitable business. Pepe's major gift is writing texts for the beggars and staging situations that activate people's sense of pity. His sophisticated strategy always proves his theory: "The begging hand which doesn't tell a story does not get anything."

If *Philanthropy* rests its *vis comica* on its solid narrative structure, powerful characters and quick-fire lines, the film directing strategy is equally efficient in providing intelligent humor. Staged in depth, the beggars' casting scene, where Mr. Pepe improvises a different text for each case, is a subtle meta-cinematic moment that lets us follow the birth of a theatrical performance within the frame of a cinematic one. On this occasion, Caranfil brightly exercises his "maximalist" style, which does not avoid high angles and visual stunts, brilliantly executed by the director of photography Vivi Dragan Vasile.

In her review in "Film International," Oana Chivoiu offers a good explanation of *Filantropica's* critical success, by emphasizing the subtle scriptwriting and directing:

"Caranfil's comedy flirts with drama, stays away from sentimentalism, and loves the raw humor of farces. The commitment to excellent screenwriting seen in Caranfil's previous comedies *Sunday on Leave* (1993) and *Asphalt Tango* (1996) is taken to a higher level of narrative and psychological sophistication in *Philanthropy*. The plot is seasoned with brilliant dialog, quotable lines and numerous twists."<sup>16</sup>

The author is not only an entertainer, but also an observer of the Romanian reality of the transition to capitalism, with *nouveaux riches*, impostors, grotesque imitations of Western models and moral confusion depicted realistically, in a sarcastic, Caragialesque tone. His ironic description never aims to reach the dimensions of a parable, an attitude that is shared by the directors who made their debut in the 2000s.

## SELF-PORTRAITS AND SELF-REFLEXIVITY

Watching *Filantropica*, we are tempted to believe that, in a self-reflexive impulse, Caranfil includes a reflection on the scriptwriter's condition. The representation of the writing process (and the occasion to find other avatars of the author) can also be found in *Dolce far niente*, the international co-production (Italy-France) rooted in Frederic Vitoux's bestseller *9 Days at Terracina*. The book imagines a meeting in 1816 between French writer Stendhal and Italian composer Giacomo Rossini in an isolated inn, during the troubled days that followed the Napoleonic wars.

Caranfil takes the novel's narrative as a pretext to develop personal themes, such as the artist's relationship with the idea of action. “The character I created is Nae Caranfil,”<sup>17</sup> confesses the director, who ironically depicts Stendhal as an anti-hero. *Dolce far niente* turned into “an *auteur* film with a 5 million dollar budget” (Mihai Fulger, 2006, p.14). Distinguished with a prize for the subtlety of the script at the Namur film Festival, the movie proposes an interesting narrative device:

“A binomial: the one who tells his experiences, Stendhal, and I, who tell the movie and am an omniscient narrator. I created a conflict between the one who apparently tells the events, but tells them badly, because he cannot understand anything, and the events themselves, brought on screen by the film director: what you see denies what the storyteller understands.”<sup>19</sup>

This proves it is impossible to avoid speaking of “self-reflexivity” in analyzing Nae Caranfil's movies, whether he uses its techniques to refer to the writer's condition, or to interrogate the relationship between cinema and life. Like the American directors of the 1970s he admires, Caranfil can be included in the category of *auteurs* constantly needing to make film references. He represents the trend that David Bordwell argues became mainstream in the 1990s: “The tradition is now free-standing, and allusions to old movies are expected in virtually every project.” (David Bordwell, 2006, p. 24)

This awareness of modern cinema was named by the French scholars Gilles Lipovesky and Jean Serroy as “the distance-image”. They claim it is a “form of cognitive distancing, (...) to provoke a reflection on cinema” (Gilles Lipovesky, Jean Serroy, 2006, p. 119). Although all the movies authored by Caranfil are rich in allusions and references to recognizable authors and movies, sometimes their entire narrative substance is nurturing itself with a particular case.

The most relevant example in this regard is *The Rest is Silence* (*Restul e tăcere*, 2008), which revolves around the making of *The Independence of Romania* (*Independența României*, 1912) the first Romanian feature film (by Grigore Brezeanu and Aristide Demetriad). Inspired by the book<sup>20</sup> his father (the well-known film historian Tudor Caranfil) wrote on the making of this movie, Nae Caranfil proves himself seduced by the myth of the young director, Grigore Brezeanu, who was only 19 years old when he started to fight to bring to the screen the 1877 war against the Ottoman Empire and the Romanian victory.

Although Tudor Caranfil claims, in his book, that the true director would be, in fact, the mature actor Aristide Demetriad (co-scriptwriter and co-director), Nae Caranfil prefers to identify Grigore Brezeanu as author:

“I didn't like this interpretation of events, because I wanted to explore this artist-mogul opposition and I needed a strong and contrasting binomial: the artist had to be a kid and a dreamer, not a prestigious actor of mature age; Grig's youth is a vital element because it burns in its confrontation with money, more precisely with Leon Popescu.”<sup>21</sup>

The relationship between the artist and his patron, with its complicity, euphoric and conflictive moments, includes details from the real case, but follows the traditional love-hate director-producer relationship which inspired movies such as *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952) by Vincente Minnelli, *The Barefoot Contessa* (1955) by Joseph Mankiewicz, *The Last Tycoon* (1976) by Elia Kazan and *Hollywood Ending* (2002) by Woody Allen.

By re-enacting scenes and sequences from the historical movie, *The Rest is Silence* places itself in the “distance-image” of the modern cinema of awareness. It also includes ironic allusions, such as the

insolent line by the young director who, invited by King Carol I along with the crew of the movie, claims "he is the king on set".

As the director of photography Marius Panduru confesses, "Nae Caranfil aimed to use a classic American formula of the 1960s-1970s, with respect to the photography and the story (...) he proposed to himself to bring various quotes, some of them taken from the early years of production – the Hamlet excerpts, for instance, or the first movie screenings; he wanted to quote the whole history of cinema."<sup>22</sup>

Caranfil approaches self-reflexivity in a different way in *Closer to the Moon* (2013), an international production (his highest budget production) inspired by the so-called "great communist-era robbery" of 1959. The attack on a National Bank car when a sum equivalent to 250,000 dollars was stolen is investigated in the documentary *The Great Communist Robbery (Marele jaf comunist, 2004)* by Alexandru Solomon. It incorporates footage from *Reconstruction (Reconstituirea)*, the educational film made by the Alexandru Sahia Studio in 1960. Watching this documentary, Nae Caranfil was intrigued by the curious "good mood" of the hold-up's perpetrators, arrested and forced to re-enact the genesis and the unfolding of the heist. It seems they agreed to perform for other reasons than the investigators' bogus offer to reduce their sentence if they co-operated. Caranfil decided to transfer the incredible event into fiction and, thanks to the quality of his script about the six Jewish intellectuals who staged the robbery, he won a grant at the national CNC projects contest and, later, the support of the American producer Michael Fitzgerald. Entirely shot in English, *Closer to the Moon* is tailored to the international audience, as the director confesses:

"I was still aware that it was a film for an international audience and, consequently, I had to work around the topic in a way that could offer more than one key of understanding the Romanian reality of the communist era, so that the uninformed viewer could enjoy the film without the film sounding too much like a history lesson."<sup>23</sup>

Caranfil is aware that his approach "will raise all kinds of controversy, especially because of its topic, but also because it is treated with an unexpectedly "light tone", perhaps too light for its more tragic aspect." The distancing attitude could, however, make the viewer accept the adventure movie conventions and involve him or her in the author's reflection on the manipulating powers of the cinema media. With an international cast, led by Vera Farmiga (*Up in The Air*) and Mark Strong (*Syriana, Zero Dark Thirty*), *Closer to the Moon* has not yet been released (as of March 2013).

### NAE CARANFIL AND THE NEW ROMANIAN CINEMA: A MILD OPPOSITION

Returning to the intended comparison between Nae Caranfil's aesthetics and the aesthetic strategies of the New Romanian Cinema (or the Romanian "New Wave"), I have to remind the reader what is internationally understood by this label. The American critic A. O. Scott provides a good definition of it:

"Though they might be reluctant to admit it, the new Romanian filmmakers have a lot in common beyond the reliance on a small pool of acting and technical talent. Because of the stylistic elements they share – a penchant for long takes and fixed camera positions; a taste for lighting and everyday décor; a preference for stories set amid ordinary life – Puiu, Porumboiu and Mungiu are sometimes described as minimalist or neo-realist. But while their work does show some affinity with that of other contemporary European *auteurs*, like the Belgian brothers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, who make art out of the grim facts of daily existence, the realism of the Romanians has some distinct characteristics of its own."<sup>24</sup>

With these specifications in mind, we can better understand the differences that separate Nae Caranfil’s movies from the generation of new directors:

“The directors of the “New Wave” are not claiming their films are derived from my work and I don’t have the feeling I influenced them. The aesthetic program is different: I look for structure, they linearize; I push the situations to their limits, they deliberately undramatize; I write styled dialog, they look for naturalism; I use music, they don’t. I’m trying to seduce; they, to rape, but unlike the penal code, the artistic code can legitimize both approaches; one does not exclude the other.”<sup>25</sup>

The difference between the New Romanian Cinema style and Caranfil’s aesthetics is also underlined in foreign film critics’ comments such as, for instance, in Derek Elley’s review of *The Rest is Silence*: “*The Rest is Silence* comes like a breath of fresh air at a time when it’s easy to assume, from festivals’ picks, that (currently “hot”) Romanian cinema is all grungy, DV-shot, miserabilist dramas.”<sup>26</sup>

Yet, we cannot ignore the existing common agenda of Caranfil and the directors of the New Romanian Cinema. His work virtually started the symbolic abandonment of the Aesopian language preferred before 1990, and initiated the first strong opposition to this metaphorical cinema, acquisitions further developed by the “New Wave”. Caranfil and his younger peers make efforts to depict more realistically the Romanians and their issues; they all try to write dialog that sounds more natural and to avoid pompous parables. They all avoid openly political statements, being aware this may reduce the emotional impact of their movies. Beyond the specific directing strategy that characterizes each filmmaker, we cannot ignore the visible similarities; for instance, taking an ironic approach to the Communist past, initiated by Caranfil with *Don’t Lean Out of the Window*. Cătălin Mitulescu also includes comic episodes in *How I Spent the End of the World* (*Cum mi-am petrecut sfârșitul lumii*, 2006), a nostalgic and slightly ironic description of the last years of communism. The Cristian Mungiu-supervised omnibus-film *Stories from the Golden Age* (*Amintiri din epoca de aur*, 2009) makes us laugh at the urban legends from the time of Ceausescu, while Gabriel Achim’s *opera prima Adalbert’s Dream* (*Visul lui Adalbert*, 2012) shows us how artsy movies and propaganda slogans co-existed in a communist factory *cinéclub* of the 1980s. Also recalling Caranfil’s style of tragicomic evocation, Tudor Giurgiu’s movie *Of Men and Snails* (*Despre oameni și melci*) was resonant enough to turn it into the Romanian box office champion of 2012. The disappointments and difficulties of the transition are also approached in a light tone by Cristian Mungiu’s debut feature *Occident* (*West*, 2002) a movie based, like *Don’t Lean Out of the Window*, on the triptych narrative form, being “a delightful contribution to this mosaic mode,”<sup>27</sup> as Christina Stoianova notes.

Caranfil’s obsession with the well-written script might have influenced the creative methods of the New Romanian Cinema: although they prefer simpler stories, the new directors develop their scripts with minutiae, with a solid structure. The “New Wave” counts on the ongoing contribution of gifted screenwriters, such as Răzvan Rădulescu. He has scripted (or co-scripted) movies including *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (*Moartea domnului Lazarescu*, Un Certain Regard Award, Cannes 2005), *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (*4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile*, Palme d’Or 2007) and *Child’s Pose* (*Pozitia copilului*, Golden Bear, Berlin 2013). The new directors avoid emphasizing meaningful moments through camera and sound techniques, while Caranfil uses them. Caranfil’s movies benefit from the participation of big international stars (Charlotte Rampling in *Asphalt Tango*, Giancarlo Giannini in *Dolce far niente*, Vera Farmiga in *Closer to the Moon*), while the new directors’ movies use new names (Dragoș Bucur, Anamaria Marinca, Vlad Ivanov, Bogdan Dumitrache etc.) We can try to chart what is similar and what is dissimilar in their agenda:

Nae Caranfil	Directors of the New Romanian Cinema
Prefers non-linear/experimental narrative	Prefer linear narrative
Refusal of metaphorical expression	Refusal of metaphorical expression
Use of non-diegetic music	Use of diegetic music
Post-modern strategy	Realistic strategy
Based on good screenwriting	Based on good screenwriting
Styled dialog	Natural dialog
The characters' goals are clear	The characters' goals are not obvious
Visual beauty, camera stunts	Hand-held camera, avoid beautiful image
Classical, dynamic editing	Long-takes editing
Chronicles exceptional events	Chronicle everyday life
Avoids emphasis and sentimentalism	Avoid emphasis and sentimentalism
Avoids overt political statements	Avoid overt political statements
Uses international stars	Discover new actors

## CONCLUSIONS

This chart serves to back up my claim at the beginning of this article: Caranfil and the directors of the Romanian “New Wave” share quite a few objectives. They also have similar strategies in approaching some themes (the legacy of the communist past, the identity crises of the transition) and the diagnosis of social issues.

In spite of the differences in their aesthetics, the directors of the “New Wave” (with different styles inside the “movement”) have managed to destabilize, as has Nae Caranfil, the *auteur* image, leaving it with a smaller ego now in Romanian Cinema. Cristi Puiu claims:

“The *auteur* status does mean something, but it shouldn't be taken for granted. It doesn't mean what most people think it means, some demiurge sitting in an ivory tower, whose genius, isolated from the world, creates a universe on film strip picked from his own brain; things are slightly different (...) A filmmaker will tell you what the world looks like from his window, through the means of cinema.”<sup>28</sup>

In other words, the main figure of the Romanian “New Wave” shares Nae Caranfil's ideas on authorship. Neither for Cristi Puiu nor for Caranfil does the *auteur* cinema have an elitist aura. They constantly undermine this view, by different means, but with remarkable results for the renewal of Romanian cinema. Caranfil and his younger peers have managed to create a cinema “saturated with life substance”.

### NOTES

1. He talked about his "maximalist" style in the interview "From the Earth to the Moon," with Andrei Cretulescu in *APERITIFF*, Special edition 2012, p.65.
2. The expression "aesthetic stillness" was used by Pierre Billard to characterize the state of French cinema in the fifties, before the movies of the New Wave appeared, quoted by Michel Marie in "La nouvelle vague," Ed. *Armand Collin*, 2007, p.32.
3. George Littera, "Autor de film," *Cinema*, no 9/1978, p.12.
- 4-5. From the interview with Andrei Rus and Gabriela Filippi "Nae Caranfil Și jucăria numită cinematograf," published in *Film Menu* no 9, February 2011, pp. 24-25.
- 6-9. Nae Caranfil, in "Tradiția Caragiale," *Noul cinema* no.2/1990, p.10.
10. Anne Jäckel, "France and the Romanian cinema 1896-1999," "French Cultural Studies" 2000. <http://frc.sagepub.com/content/11/33/409.citation>.
11. From the interview "From the Earth to the Moon," by Andrei Crețulescu in *APERITIFF*, Special edition 2012, p.65.
- 12-13. Andrew Sarris, *Notes on the Auteur Theory 1962*, "Film Culture," Winter 1962-1963, p.3.
14. Jean Louis Comolli, in *Cahiers du cinema* nr 172, Nov 1965, p.51.
15. Dana Duma, "Are We Still Laughing When Breaking with the Past?" *Kinokultura*, 2007, [www.kinokultura.com](http://www.kinokultura.com).
16. Oana Chivoiu, *Film International*, vol.10, no 1/2012, p.80.
- 17, 19. From the interview by Andrei Rus and Gabriela Filippi "Nae Caranfil Și jucăria numită cinematograf," *Film Menu* no 9, February 2011, p. 35.
20. The book "În căutarea filmului pierdut" (*In Search of the Lost Film*) by Tudor Caranfil, Ed. *Merdiane* 1988, which investigates the making of the first Romanian feature film, *The Independence of Romania* (1912).
- 21, 26. From the interview "Nae Caranfil Și jucăria numită cinematograf," by Andrei Rus and Gabriela Filippi, *Film Menu* no 9, February 2011, p.29.
22. From "Interviu cu Marius Panduru," by Andrei Rus, Gabriela Filippi, *Film Menu* nr 11, July 2011, p.37.
23. From the interview "From the Earth to the Moon," by Andrei Cretulescu in *APERITIFF*, Special edition 2012, p.65.
24. A. O. Scott, "In Film, the Romanian New Wave Arrived," *New York Times*, January 19, 2008, [www.nytimes.com/2008/01/19/arts/19th-fromarian.1.9340722.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/19/arts/19th-fromarian.1.9340722.html).
25. Iulia Blaga, *Dosar 10 ani cu filmul românesc: Episodul 1: Cineaștii noului val nu se revendică de la mine.Eu caut seducția, ei violul*, Hotnews, 2011, November 14, [www.hotnews.ro/stiri-film-10688949-dosar-10-ani-filmul-romanesc-episodul-1-nae-caranfil-cineastii-noului-val-nu-se-revendica-mine-caut-seductia-violul.htm](http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-film-10688949-dosar-10-ani-filmul-romanesc-episodul-1-nae-caranfil-cineastii-noului-val-nu-se-revendica-mine-caut-seductia-violul.htm).
27. Derek Elley, "The Rest is Silence," *Variety*, August 19, 2007, <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117934457>.
27. Christina Stojanova, "My Romanian Cinema," in *Kinokultura* "Special Issue New Romanian Cinema," 2007, [www.kinokultura.com/specials-6/stojanova/html](http://www.kinokultura.com/specials-6/stojanova/html).
28. In the interview "Portretul lui Cristi Puiu" by Andrei Rus and Gabriela Filippi, *Film Menu* no. 8, December 2011, p.27.

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*The Independence of Romania* (1912)  
directed by Grigore Brezeanu and  
Aristide Demetriade (still)



Marius Florea Vizante in *The Rest is Silence* (2008)  
directed by Nae Caranfil (still)