

www.unatc.ro

# Close Up

FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES

Academic Journal of National University of Theatre and Film "I.L. Caragiale" – Vol. 2, No. 1, 2018



UNATC PRESS

# Close Up

FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES

The academic journal of the National University of Theatre and Film "I.L. Caragiale" publishes original papers aimed to analyzing in-depth different aspects of cinema, film, television and new media, written in English.

You can find information about the way to submit papers on cover no 3 and at the Internet address: [www.unatc.ro](http://www.unatc.ro)

**Editor in chief:** Dana Duma  
[dana.duma@unatc.ro](mailto:dana.duma@unatc.ro)  
[duma.dana@gmail.com](mailto:duma.dana@gmail.com)

**Deputy editor:** Andrei Gorzo  
[andrei.gorzo@unatc.ro](mailto:andrei.gorzo@unatc.ro)

**Managing Editor:** Anca Ioniță  
[anca.ionita@unatc.ro](mailto:anca.ionita@unatc.ro)

**Copy Editor:** Andrei Gorzo, Anca Ioniță

**Editorial Board:**

Laurențiu Damian, Dana Duma, Andrei Gorzo, Ovidiu Georgescu,  
Marius Nedelcu, Radu Nicoară

**Advisory Board:**

Dominique Nasta (Université Libre de Bruxelles)  
Christina Stojanova (Regina University, Canada)  
Tereza Barta (York University, Toronto, Canada)

**UNATC PRESS**

ISSN: 2343 – 7286

ISSN-L: 2286 – 4466

**Art Director:** Alexandru Orian

**Photo cover:** Vlad Ivanov in *Dogs* by Bogdan Mirică

**Printing House:** Net Print



This issue is published with the support of  
The Romanian Filmmakers' Union (UCIN)

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

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

Vol. 2, No. 1, 2018

**UNATC PRESS  
BUCUREȘTI**

# CONTENTS

---

**Close Up:** Film and Media Studies • Vol. 2, No. 1, 2018

CHRISTINA STOJANOVA

Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Evil in New Romanian Cinema **7**

---

DANA DUMA

Hypothesis on *Tararira*, Benjamin Fondane's Lost Film **19**

---

ANDREI GORZO

Making Sense of the New Romanian Cinema: Three Perspectives **27**

---

ANA AGOPIAN

For a New Novel. Alain Robbe-Grillet. Screenplay versus Novel **43**

---

IRINA TROCAN

The Protagonist in Essay Cinema **57**

---

WANG YAO

Re-politicization of Space, or Spatialization of Ostalgia:  
Big Cities as a "Fold" in Recent Balkan Films **65**

---

RADU NICOARĂ

The Hero Paradox. An Introduction Toward Hero Morals **75**

---

ANCA IONIȚĂ

Greek Tragedy and the Films of Cristian Mungiu. A Comparative Analysis **89**

---

## **BOOK REVIEW**

*Feminist Film Theory and Pretty Woman* by Mari Ruti  
Reviewed by Iulia Voicu **101**

---

# Hypothesis on *Tararira*, Benjamin Fondane's Lost Film

**Dana Duma**

National University of Theatre and Film 'I.L. Caragiale' Bucharest  
*duma.dana@gmail.com*

## Abstract

This paper examines, through the prism of cinema – politics links, the circumstances in which the feature film *Tararira* by Benjamin Fondane was produced and then mysteriously disappeared in Argentina. Academic studies dedicated to the history of Argentine cinema reveal the political and economic context which would have determined the producer, Miguel Machinandiarena, to destroy the negative.

## Keywords

Benjamin Fondane, film history, cinema – politics links, Romanian cinema, Argentine cinema, Dadaist film, transnational cinema

The history of cinema is full of 'cursed' titles, lost or destroyed films, not only by ignorance or accident, but also mutilated or burned by their own producers. *Tararira* (1936) directed in Argentina by the Romanian-French Benjamin Fondane seems to be one of these cases: it was never released and none of its copies were found, in spite of historian's and researchers' efforts. It was listed among other lost movies signed by great directors, and brought back into attention in 2012 when avant-garde artist Guy Maddin presented in Paris at Centre Pompidou a series of 17 shows inspired by lost films. Maddin invited the visitors 'to assist in the shooting of an outstanding film', screening short films vaguely inspired by mythical titles, such as *Lignes de la main* by Jean Vigo, *Poto-Poto* by Erich von Stroheim, *Resurrection of love* by Kenji Mizoguchi, *Ladies of the Mob* by William Wellman, *The Blind Man* by Alfred Hitchcock etc. *Tararira* was one of them and its presence on the list raised the curiosity with regard of it.

---

**PHD Professor, Dana Duma** is currently teaching at the National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest. Member of FIPRESCI, she is a regular contributor to mainstream and specialized film press in Romania and abroad and a frequent member of international festival juries. She published the books *Self portraits of Cinema*, *Gopo*, *Benjamin Fondane cineaste and Woody Allen*, a bufoon and a philosopher and edited critical anthologies such as *Cinema 2000*, *Tendencies in European cinema*, *The Personality of Latin-American cinema*. She is the director of the *FILM* magazine.

## A 'CURSED' FILM

Mostly known as Benjamin Fondane<sup>1</sup>, the author, poet, columnist and philosopher Benjamin Wechsler, born 14 September 1898 and tragically killed in Auschwitz – Birkenau camp (1944) is also one of the few Romanians with an international career in cinema. Quite rarely mentioned, Fondane's cinematic activity was better known and appreciated in France, where he immigrated in 1923 and made his debut as a screenwriter and film critic.

Arrived in Paris when Dadaism was fading, Fondane approached the Surrealist group and admired the influence of the current in cinema, as we can see reading his article on *Entr'acte* (1924), the famous short signed by René Clair, published in the Bucharest issue of the new journal *Integral*. Fondane started to publish on cinema in periodicals from Brussels and France or later in Buenos Aires. In the French capital he also started to study philosophy, fascinated by Léon Chestov, whose existentialism will influence his thinking (and films).

In Paris he becomes a real *cinophile*, does not miss the films of real important authors, reads the leading French theorists of the time and starts to publish reviews and essays on film. Very interested in the major changes brought by the advent of the talking pictures, he devoted original and profound essays to the crisis provoked by wrong decisions in the use of this new cinematic tool, as he demonstrated mostly in the article 'Du Muet au Parlant. Splendeur et décadence du cinéma' (*Bifur*, Bruxelles, no 5/1930).

Fascinated by the idea of 'pure cinema', very dear to the French avant-garde of the 1920s, he experienced the formula of *cine-poèmes*, a species situated midway between poetry and film, which accumulates poetic images using Dadaist and Surrealist principles in a cinematic storyboard, rich in technical details. Fondane makes his debut in screenwriting with *Trois scénarios* (*Three scenarios*), his first book published in French (1928) which includes, along with the *three cine-poèmes*, an introduction which sounds like a manifesto. From 1929 he works in the screenwriting department of the French division of Paramount, in the Parisian suburb Joinville-le-Pont. There he writes dialogues or adapts novels such as *La Séparation des races* by Charles Ferdinand Ramirez, filmed in 1933 under the direction of Dimitri Kirsanoff and entitled *Rapt*.

As he was dreaming to direct a film of his own, he was encouraged to pursue his instinct by Victoria Ocampo, a rich lady from Buenos Aires whom he met in Shestov's house. Protector of great European artists, Victoria Ocampo also tried to help Sergei Eisenstein when he was shooting *Que viva Mexico!*<sup>2</sup>. Unfortunately, his American experience with an unhappy end was very similar to Fondane's attempt to make his debut as film director in Argentina. Victoria Ocampo invited Fondane to Argentina for the first time in 1929 and organized a series of conferences: he lectured at the Buenos Aires University on philosophy and on avant-garde cinema, conferences followed by the publication of the essay *Presentacion de filmes puros* (*The Presentation of Pure Film*), in the journal *Sintesis* (Fondane 1929). He also gave another talk, *Signification of Dada* where he described the Dada spirit as follows:

'Dada was the first known manifestation of the spirit to proclaim itself catastrophic, reject all finality and proclaim scandal, while hiding (or perhaps being unaware of) the obscure idea that pushed it there, which refused to be taken for an Event or be pigeonholed



Final scene of *Tararira*



Benjamin Fondane on set with the Aguilar brothers and John Alton

as either an artistic or spiritual act and which, for the first time ever, refused the beautiful role.’ (Fondane 1999)

This statement anticipates his film project supported by Victoria Ocampo, who managed to convince a producer, Miguel Machinandiarena, owner of Falma Film, to finance his film, *Tararira*, penned and even directed by Fondane. He came back in Buenos Aires to start shooting in 1936.

The project intended to be a comedy, which was so described in a letter to his sister from 19 May 1936: ‘It will be a caricature of society today, a world in which art no longer exists. The Aguilar brothers, talented lutists, will be hired to give a concert only because they are taken for famous bandits. In the end, they will smash out the living room of an old duchess while playing Ravel’s *Bolero* without instruments.’ (Fondane 2007). Paco Aguilar, the group’s most popular member wrote the musical score, a possible attraction for the future film.

The film would materialized Fondane’s old dream: ‘If I was free, really free, I would make an absurd films on an absurd topic, to satisfy my taste for freedom.’ (Fondane 1933) The script exhibits a continuity between Dada inspiration in poetry and Fondane’s films. As Ramona Fotiade remarks, ‘cinema was a mode of thinking rather than a new language to Artaud and Fodane. It opened up an irrational dimension of thought and a new realm of being: it revealed the arbitrary, absurd nature of reality under the species of silence.’ (Fotiade 1997)

Interpreting the tragic destiny of the film, she continues: ‘The producer of the Buenos Aires Falma Film refused to distribute *Tararira* probably on account of its daring critique of morality and its sarcastic portrayal of religion and of the clergy.’ (Fotiade 1997)

It is hard to believe Fondane was not aware of the provocative and subversive nature of the Aguilars humour. In *Tararira* The Aguilar quartet (Ezequiel, Paco, Pepe and Elisa) who play the parts of the weird musicians (Cleo, Agapito, Perico and Curo) are to remind of the Marx Brothers, being involved in absurdist-comic adventures and crazy actions meant to shock and offend the bourgeois spirit and norms. Although during the shooting process Fondane received some critical remarks from the producer, the two screenings of

the version edited in his presence were mostly well received, as testified the writer Gloria Alcorta, present at a private presentation in 1937 (according to Eve Griliquez)<sup>3</sup>.

Fondane left Buenos Aires on October 1936, having been assured that he would receive a copy in Paris to improve the result. Unfortunately this never happened and the messages exchanged between the author of *Tararira* and the producer cannot clarify what really happened to make Machinandiarena decide not to release the film. Although Fondane's letters to Fredi Guthman (Fondane 2007) show the poet/director tried to recuperate a copy to work on it in France and attacked the 'chopped' editing version realised by John Alton<sup>4</sup> (the director of photography) at Machinandiarena's orders, the producer did not step back. He first answered by accusing Fondane of leaving Argentina before finishing the film, but later he kept silent. It is hard to believe that aesthetic disagreements are the real reason.

## ART VERSUS MONEY

To better understand how *Tararira* 'was lost' (only some production photos and fragments of the script were left) we should look closer at the situation of Argentine cinema by this time, very relevant for what happened later with this feature film. We should remember Jean Mitry's proposal for cinema history as *histoire totale*, of its approach that would be 'a history of its industry, its technologies, its systems of expression (or more precisely, its systems of signification), and all bound together by the forces of the economic, psychological and cultural order' (Mitry, 1973:115) Although there are opinions (mostly on the site of the Societé d'études Benjamin Fondane) encouraging the idea that the irreverent, provocative and sophisticated humor of *Tararira* influenced the producer's decision, because he was expecting a popular musical comedy, this was not the main reason of the film's disappearance<sup>5</sup>. More convincing is the theory according to which the film jeopardized the tight links between Machinandiarena and the politicians and Argentinian rulers. Machinandiarena was close to the conservative Governor Manuel Fresco, who granted him the running of provincial casinos

A study published by the Argentine historian Hector R. Kohen, 'De Fresco a Perón: la aventura cinematografica de Miguel de Machinandiarena' on the so called Golden Age of Argentinian Cinema suggests the reasons for the disappearance of *Tararira*, the film directed by Benjamin Fondane in Argentina and the role of the producer, Miguel Machinandiarena in these events. As the author Hector R. Kohen claims, 'between 1933 and 1942 a steady and accelerating development process in film production held out hope of building an international reaching film industry'. (Kohen 1999:22) But he also stresses the fact that 'this Golden Age coincided with one of the most obscure periods in the history of Argentina: la Decada Infame (the Infamous Decade). The links between cinema and politics are illustrated throughout the significant case of Miguel Machinandiarena, founder, and owner of Estudios San Miguel and, in the same time, owner of provincial casinos in Mar de Plata.

The political social context is dominated by the absolute power of a pro-fascist government which took advantage of corruption. An emerging film industry is encouraged by decrees that apparently bring the investors some financial advantages. But, beyond the



Benjamin Fondane surrounded by the actors

cultural façade, there were cynical pragmatic interests which, unfortunately, influenced the content and the circulation of film production.

In his attempt to clarify the 'case Machinandiarena', Hector R. Cohen claims: 'I think it's impossible in a political study on Argentine cinema's development, to ignore the basic data such as the origin of the capital of each company, the people who founded them and the ideology they supported.' (Kohen 1999:10)

He further states that this 'Golden Age of Argentine cinema' could better be called 'the Golden Age of fraud... The Governor of the provinces Córdoba and Buenos Aires was its champion and theorist.' Manuel Fresco (installed in 1935 after rigged elections, according to Kohen) made an ambitious project of urbanization of the famous spa Mar del Plata which was planned to become a big touristic centre. One of its major attractions were to be the casinos. The licences for them were given in exchange for a consistent tendering security (15 million pesos) which could be replaced with investments in public works.

Miguel Machinandiarena was the 'lucky winner' of the faked tenders, without paying any money. Kohen believes that Machinandiarena shared the benefits with the Governor. He founded his first company Falma for this advantage and *Tararira* had to be its first production, shot in the Studios Rayton in Buenos Aires. Machinandiarena was never interested in cinema as art, he just invested in it for his business agenda. We can understand better why he sacrificed so easily *Tararira*. It was created in an international context when the pro-fascist profile of the rulers in Argentina became more and more evident. Fondane was a Jew and his name on the film's credits could irritate the anti-semitic government. On the other hand, the names of the Aguilar brothers also became a problem, since they supported the Republicans when the Civil War started in Spain in 1936, while the Argentine rulers were pro-Nationalists and admired the fascist-oriented Falange. Machinandiarena decided then to get rid of *Tararira*, because it was too risky to release it.

He continued, however, his activity in the cinema business, maybe for the same reasons: using the tax exemption advantages. Although the casinos were an ongoing scandal issue, nurturing press and governmental inquests, Miguel Machinandiarena continued to control casinos up to 1944. Thanks to the huge amount of money made in this business, he founded, in 1942, a big corporation of companies linked to cinema: San Miguel Studio,

Distribuidora Panamericana, Artistas Argentinos Asociados. The first company, Falma Film, produced only *Tararira*, never released and very probably destroyed by the producers' (secret) decision. Narciso Machinandiarena, cousin of Falma Film's owner stated in a TV report (1974) that he insisted to release the film, but this didn't happen because it was in advance of its time'. (Kohen 1999:13)

The historian Héctor R. Kohen's conclusion is without doubt: 'Our interpretation of the episode is that Miguel Machinandiarena decided to withdraw *Tararira* for reasons of political compromise, tightly linked to the negotiation for the casinos' control. To release a film directed by a Jewish Surrealist poet, performed by the Aguilar brothers and Orestes Caviglia, prominent activists in organizations of support for the Spanish Republic, could at least irritate the openly fascist Governor Manuel Fresco and senator Marcelo Sanchez Sorondo, his ideological counsellor in cinema issues.' (Kohen 1999:13)

The nature of the films produced afterwards by Miguel Machinandiarena proved his servility in attempting to please the regime. *Petroleo* (1940) directed by Arturo S. Mom approaches the Spanish Civil War from an 'almost Nazi' perspective (according to Narcis Machinandiarena). The Studio San Miguel also produced *Melodias de America* (Eduardo Morera, 1942), *El viejo Buenos Aires* (Antonio Moplet, 1943) and *Prodiga* (Ernesto Arancibia, 1945), all unreleased.

After the election of president Juan Domingo Perón, the Government initiated a credit line to support national cinema based on project competitions. Machinandiarena, who lost the casino's control and the associated privileges, had to accept the collapse of his cinema companies. The fall of this cynical mogul cannot bring any consolation for the loss of Fondane's feature, a missing film of the diasporic production in the history of Romanian cinema.

## ENDNOTES

1. Benjamin Fondane's first pen name was B. Fundoianu. He published, under this name, poems (since 1912) and articles, mostly in such magazines as 'Rampa', 'Contimporanul', 'Adevarul literar și artistic'.
2. The extraordinary documentary on Mexican history and culture *Que viva Mexico* that S.M.Eisenstein shot in Mexico between 1930-1931, produced by the Mexican Film Trust, was also the victim of the political context and of 'the art versus money' dynamics. Eisenstein never had the opportunity to edit the footage after the production was stopped for exceeding the planned budget, and he was recalled in Soviet Union by a menacing message from Stalin. The Mexican Film Trust took the footage and hired Sol Lesser to realise two documentaries on Mexico and one on Eisenstein (*Thunder over Mexico*, *Death Day* and *Eisenstein in Mexico*) released in 1934. Later, the Fund permitted two other versions based on the original footage, *Time in the Sun* (1939) by Mary Seton and *Que viva Mexico* (1979), assembled by Eisenstein's assistant, Grigori Alexandrov.
3. Eve Griliquez interviewed Gloria Alcorta for 'Cahiers Benjamin Fondane' no 1.
4. John Alton, *Tararira's* director of photography of Hungarian roots, collaborated in Argentina with several fledgling studios (for films such as *Los tres berretinos/The Three Whims*, 1933 or *Caminito*

*de la gloria/ Little Path to Glory*, 1939). He will become later famous in Hollywood for the refined black and white photography of films like *T-Men* (1948) or *He Walked by Night* (1951) and his popular book on film photography, *Painting with Light* (1949).

5. I myself was tempted to believe 'artistic reasons' could influence the decision of not releasing *Tararira* in my monograph on Fondane published in 2010

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Duma, Dana, *Benjamin Fondane cineast*, Ed Artprint, Bucharest, 2010
- Fondane, Benjamin *Entr'acte ou le cinema autonome*, "Integral", Bucharest, 1th of May 1924
- Fondane, Benjamin, *Presentacion de filmes puros (The Presentantion of Pure Film)*, 'Sintesis' no 3, Buenos Aires 1929
- Fondane, Benjamin, *Du Muet au Parlant. Splendeur et decadence du cinema*, 'Bifur', Bruxelles, no 5/1930
- Fondane, Benjamin, *Cinema 33*, 'Cahiers jeunes', Bruxelles 1933
- Fondane, Benjamin, *Presentacion de filmes puros (The Presentantion of Pure Film)*, 'Sintesis' no 3, Buenos Aires 1929
- Fondane, Benjamin, *Signification of Dada* in 'Fundoianu/Fondane a l'avant-garde', ed Petru Răileanu, Michel Carassu, Bucarest, Fondation Culturelle Roumanine, Paris Mediteranee, 1999
- Fondane Benjamin, *Ecrits pour le cinema*, ed Michel Carassu, Verdier, Paris 2007 Fotiade, Ramona
- Pictures of the Mind: Artaud and Fondane's Silent Cinema*, in 'Surrealism. Surrealism Visuality', ed by Silvano Levy, New York University Press, 1997
- Kohen, R. Hector, '*De Fresco a Perón: la aventura cinematografica de Miguel Machinandiarena*', 'Secuencias: revista de historia del cine', no 10, 1999, pp 8-22
- Mitry, Jean, *De quelques problèmes d'histoire et de l'esthetique du cinéma*, 'Cahiers de la Cinemathèque', no 10-11, 1973, p. 112-141