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The central argument of Onoriu Colăcel's *The Romanian Cinema of Nationalism: Historical Films as Propaganda and Spectacle* is that in the mid-twentieth century, the Romanian communist state used film as an effective method to craft a narrative of the Romanian nation for internal consumption. This was done for specific propaganda reasons: under the leadership of Gheorghe-Gheorghiu Dej in 1964 and Nicolae Ceaușescu from 1965, the Romanian Communist Party turned the country away from the USSR and its internationalist discourse of class struggle, embarking instead on a nationalist communist project. The fledgling Romanian film industry was harnessed to produce historical films that narrated the nation to the masses of Romanian viewers, legitimizing communism (which in Romania did not have massive popular support before the Soviet occupation) and indirectly casting the current leadership as direct descendants from a long line of Romanian and proto-Romanian rulers. Particularly after Ceaușescu's ascent to power, this type of heritage film or “historical spectaculars,” as Colăcel calls them, became a staple of Romanian screens, becoming the Eastern-bloc equivalent of the Western “commercial” film: lowbrow, reinforcing established hegemonic power structures, dismissed by critics yet enjoyed by viewers (p. 13). Their appeal endures, as these films are routinely rerun on TV and can be streamed on the internet even thirty years after the collapse of communism. Past and present Romanian film critics have generally dismissed this body of work as crude propaganda, devoid of any artistic interest. Colăcel, however, finds value in these films’ ability to explain how a certain idea of Romanian identity and a certain version of the Romanian past came to be the dominant hegemonic paradigm that still shapes Romanian self-images and Romanian understandings of national and global politics.

*The Romanian Cinema of Nationalism* consists of an introduction followed by eight chapters that alternate awkwardly articulated theoretical sections on film analysis with quite astute interpretations of actual films made between 1960 and 1989. The middle part of the book explores the post-communist career of the heritage or historical film (Colăcel uses both labels interchangeably) and finds continuities with patterns established in the decades before 1989. Colăcel argues that Romanian filmmakers of the communist era found inspiration for their historical films in the Hollywood epics of the 1950s, from which they borrowed technical approaches, such as the invisible style, crane shot, long shot, and extra-diegetic voice-overs that drove the plot and clarified for the viewers the connection between disparate historical events. The national grand narrative craft-
ed by these films closely matched that in history textbooks, in which events flowed toward the inevitability of the modern state in 1859 and the making of Greater Romania in 1918. Historical facts were emplotted so that they legitimized the regime change that followed World War II, foregrounding some historical events and actors while omitting the details that did not fit the official arc of Romania’s national destiny, from subservience to foreign empires to national and ethnic self-determination and eventually communism.

The larger political agenda of Romania’s communist regime influenced how the past was to be read in order to explain realignments within the Eastern bloc—Romania’s historical clashes with foreign political entities, primarily the Ottoman Empire and Austria-Hungary, serve in these films as proxies for the tense relationship between the USSR and Ceaușescu’s Romania. To illustrate this point, Colăcel offers a close reading of Tudor, a 1962 film about the early nineteenth-century Romanian revolutionary hero and political leader Tudor Vladimirescu. Colăcel argues that Vladimirescu, a permanent fixture in the Romanian national pantheon, owes his prominence in the national imaginary to this film. Tudor turned the story of an average Romanian-born officer in the tsarist army who fought against the Ottoman Empire for the independence of his country into an allegory of the Romanian communist regime’s struggle to distance itself from Moscow in the 1960s. In Colăcel’s interpretation, Tudor marks a shift away from a filmic support of a cosmopolitan endorsement of proletarian values toward a more nation-centric worldview. Its cinematography owes a lot to the films of Italian neorealism and the French New Wave, which, Colăcel shows, managed to bypass Romanian censorship because they attacked social injustice in the capitalist bloc.

Chapter 3, “Taking Stock of History in Real Time: The Extreme Long Shot of Romanian Historicals,” is a confusingly worded discussion of the editing and filming choices that Colăcel sees as hallmarks of the Romanian heritage movie during communism. A central part of the chapter is occupied by an in-depth analysis of the stylistic devices used by Romanian filmmakers to render “reality on screen,” despite the fact that they are neither unique to Romanian film nor invented there (p. 59). Colăcel seems to agree with film critics that these technical devices prevent these heritage films from being “art,” although his point is not entirely clear.

The book is at its strongest when providing cultural analyses of the films and their function in the complex mobilization of ethno-nationalism by the communist regime. For instance, chapter 4 focuses on three historical films that deal with the Dacian roots of Romanian culture: The Dacians (1966), The Column (1968), and Burebista (1980). The communist regime recuperated the Dacians as proto-Romanians because, “according to the official discourse,... an inherent connection between the natives of the land, the Dacian people, and nation state building should be obvious” (pp. 66-67). Via these three films, the communist regime simultaneously reasserted the Roman pedigree of the Romanian people and the territorial continuity of the Romanian nation-state within the mid-twentieth-century political borders. In particular, the question of whether Transylvania belonged to Hungary or Romania has been contentious for two centuries, and there is no clear archaeological (or otherwise) evidence about what happened to the population of the former Roman province once the Roman troops withdrew from the region in the third century. As Colăcel’s book demonstrates, the Dacian film trilogy effectively filled this gap in historical knowledge with mythmaking, seamlessly integrating into Romanian mainstream culture a version of the past that Romanian historians had been pushing even before World War II.

Chapter 5 looks at the films that narrate Romania’s medieval history, with a focus on the
three key figures of the national pantheon: Stephen the Great, Michael the Brave, and Vlad the Impaler (the model for Bram Stoker’s Dracula). Colâcel shows how in the communist filmography of the nation, the reigns of these three princes are used to foreshadow the existence of an independent Romanian nation-state. These three rulers led provinces that had their own distinct identities (Moldavian, Transylvanian, Wallachian) and had historically been subordinated to other political entities, either the Ottoman Empire or the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. In all three cases, brief moments of military glory against the much larger colonial powers are dramatized in these historical films, highlighted as refigurations of the creation of Greater Romania in the early twentieth century. Unlike the Dacian trilogy, which portrays the Roman invaders in a positive light, the filmic recreation of the Middle Ages features a varied gallery of evil ethnic and national Others plotting across centuries to undermine Romanian sovereignty, usually with the help of traitors from within, although the filmmakers avoid dwelling too much on the role of the Russian Empire in the region. This point in the trajectory of the national epic also marks the emergence of a new master narrative in mainstream Romanian life, one that locates the cradle of the nation in Wallachia (where the capital Bucharest is situated to this day); claims Moldavia as Romanian land (despite territorial claims on the part of the Soviets); and establishes the desire for an independent nation-state as the defining political ambition of all worthwhile Romanian leaders. Colâcel argues that these historical films explore (and teach) Romanian nationalism from above, effectively shaping public discourse about selves and others in the region.

The last three chapters examine the influence of the communist historical epic on Romanian filmmakers who engage in storytelling about the nation after 1989. As in earlier chapters, Colâcel makes sweeping yet unsupported claims about how these films were received and how moviegoers related to the stories they told. The book provides no evidence—either secondary sources, ticket sales numbers, or interviews with actual moviegoers—to support these claims, which occasionally read as projections of the author’s personal take on the films and their message. Chapter 6 compares the Romanian New Wave films with the patriotic epics of the communist era in terms of the latter’s aesthetics and popularity. Colâcel argues that despite being dismissed by critics, these patriotic communist-era films are still widely enjoyed by audiences, while many of the critically acclaimed New Wave films garner multiple awards abroad yet fail to capture audiences at home. This analysis rests on two post-communist historical films, Restul e tâcerile (2007) and Aferim! (2015). Colâcel argues that both films still build on tropes and stylistic choices established by the communist blockbusters but favor the small dramas of everyday lives in the past instead of the grand narratives about the nation and its history. In chapter 7, Colâcel advances the theory that post-communist films about the nation’s past are approaching the topic “from below,” in response to the “top-down” approach of the films from the communist era (p. 157). These post-communist historical films expose war and princes or leaders as selfish and destructive forces in support of nationalism (rather than as proud national heroes fighting for the country’s independence). And, Colâcel astutely notes, their message is still shaped by a political agenda, namely, to expose the blind spots of ethnic and national discrimination in Romanian history (Roma slavery in the case of Aferim!, nationalistic jingoism in Restul e tâcerile) and to provide a more honest portrayal of Romanian history.

Despite its shortcomings, The Romanian Cinema of Nationalism is a timely book, tackling an important topic in Eastern European film studies at a time when nationalism is on the upswing in the region. While using cultural studies approaches to the study of Western film has engendered a rich theoretical apparatus that examines the pow-
er of popular culture and popular film to main-
tain hegemonic power structures, whether racial,
ethnic, or national, there is no equivalent study of
the “popular” film produced beyond the Iron Cur-
tain. Although these films were produced in very
different economic regimes and were shaped by
the censorship and propaganda needs of the com-
munist states in the region, they nevertheless ful-
filled a cultural function similar to that of com-
mercial cinema in the West and moreover consti-
tute a large body of work that audiences enjoyed
and still enjoy today. Furthermore, the relative
openness of Romania to Western popular culture
in the 1960s and 1970s offered new models—aes-
thetic and ideological—that shaped the popular
film produced in the country and generated hy-
brid forms that merged the rhetorical needs of the
totalitarian regime with Western-inspired aesthet-
ic strategies aimed to entertain and sell. Finally,
Colăcel persuasively argues and demonstrates
that this body of film crafted and narrativized a
version of history that is still relevant today and
continues to shape ethnic relations in Romania.
This body of work deserves a more careful exami-
nation, and Colăcel’s book is a welcome starting
point in this direction.

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