



*Doru Pop*

## **Dark Humor and the Imaginary of the New Romanian Filmmakers**

### **ABSTRACT**

The roots of dark humour, absurd comedy and acid comments about society, considered to be characteristic for European movies, give the themes of some of the most important films of the Romanian "New Wave". Here we concentrate on three important sources of dark humor in Romanian films: the laugh-cry endemic in Romanian folklore; the tradition of Caragiale, where laughter is used at the limits of tragedy; the absurd theater of Ionescu, with its criticism of society.

### **KEYWORDS**

Romanian Movies; I.L. Caragiale; Eugen Ionescu; Romanian New Wave; Dark Humor.

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### **The "dark side" of humor**

Dark humor is, in and of itself, a very difficult term to define, as Harold Bloom has noted in his seminal "Introduction" to the topic, "defining dark humor is virtually impossible" (Bloom 2010 xv). There is a large variety of manifestations of the dark humor and since it is a borderline concept, including different notions like acid irony, absurd laughter, strange and bizarre situations and characters, the ridicule of society and human defects, it becomes a too general notion to operate with. Not only that dark humor uses paradoxical situations, it is a paradoxical notion. In the definition provided by one of Shakespeare's characters built upon dark humor, Mercutio, it is "grave", yet is also "serious, but not merry".

Henri Bergson, in *Le Rire*, his classical study on the comic, came up with this basic and fundamental explanation. If somebody is running on the street and suddenly stumbles and falls, we burst into laughter (Bergson 8-9). Laughter is seen as the "intention to humiliate" of fellow humans (93), and by this is inflicting pain on those who are the object of the comic. We laugh at others in a derisive way because this gives us an implicit sense of superiority. Yet Bergson limits the range of the comic to *humanity*, to what



is human and manifested in society. Still, without going too deep in the subject of what laughter is, since there has been a long debate about the nature of laughter in the natural world, it has to be underlined that, as some authors have suggested (Gamble 2001) “having laugh” is not totally a human activity. It was even indicated that chimpanzees and other simians can learn basic forms of humor, and insulting gestures and death threatening movements are among them. So the “dark side” of the humor exists in the very nature of our being. Following this line of explanations, we can extract, from a psychological point of view, another characteristic of “dark humor”, which we can describe as black humor, the kind of comedy with “grotesque or macabre character” (*Introduction to the Psychology of Humor*, 49).

These definitions are narrowing down a form of comic which was always linked to the generally human, and limit it to its specificities. As André Breton, the “father of the French Surrealism”, coined the concept of “black humor”, for his *Anthology of humour noir* (1940), dark humor is a multitude of manifestations. Breton’s *Anthologie de l’humour noir* includes examples from authors ranging from Jonathan Swift to Edgar Allan Poe, and from artists like Hans Arp to Picasso. Black humor becomes a diverse expression of the comic. Not only that, but Breton also found the resources of this type of humor in the early cinema of Chaplin and Bunuel, defining black humor as the “enemy of sentimentality” (xix).

### “Râsu’ plânsu”. Defining the “Romanian” sense of humor

When discussing the Imaginary of groups and the imaginary structures they work with, one key question is if we can identify specificities, in this case a “national” sense of humor. The problem at hand is to establish if there is a “comic imagination”, specific to a given nation, or there is only a common psychological trait, a mental mechanism that all humans share? Is dark humor something we have in common as human beings, or we can describe specificities in different social contexts? It is commonly accepted that various ethnic groups claim to be more “funny” than others, and most of the times different nations ridicule the neighboring nations as not being “humorous” enough. If it is true that some people have “the sense of humor”, also, by extension, nations must have their own “sense of humor”. As Robin Williams, the actor and stand-up comedian has bluntly put it, the lack of humor of some nations, like the Germans, is due to the fact that “they killed the funny people they had” ([http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Robin\\_Williams](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Robin_Williams)).

Although humor is a universal human trait, there are “personalized” elements, some things that are specific to each nation. It was Hegel who, in his *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, has described nations as incarnating specific energies, *volkgeist*, a collective unconscious that we all share as common traits (Hegel par. 1-2). We laugh as individuals and we are having fun in small groups so, first of all, humor has to be linked with its latin etymological root, meaning body liquid (like bile or phlegm), thus an indicator of the temperament (*humorem*) of the individual. Yet, if various characters and various individuals are being determined by the diverse humors flowing their body (as the Greek physician, Galen, has long time ago suggested), then humor



too, is something stemming out of our characteristics. Thus, if humor is a personal trait and group identity if formed by the common traits of their members, than it can be used as a characteristic of the psychology of a given group. More so, since the spirit of the nation is linguistically determined, we can observe that, in order to perceive the sense of humor of a group, one must have an excellent mastery of the language spoken by that group, we must accept that humor is also determined by ethnic traits. The social and cultural role played by humor allows us to say that group identity is determined by the humor the group shares. Of course, there are many more environmental factors to influence the ability to use and understand humor, yet several psychological studies indicate that conservative people are less “humorous”, while liberals are more “funny”, yet, as Gordon Allport showed in his study (1961), 94% of the people believe that they have the “sense of humor”. So “the sense of humor” of a “serious” nation is, consequently, different from another also because the national identity is built by its linguistic and cultural products, and in this understanding, understanding the comedy writers and comedic artists of a culture is most important in defining the “national humoresque”.

Following this logic, one of the concepts used to explain culturally the “Romanian sense of humor” has long been “crying and laughing” (*râsu’ plânsu’*, as the term was used by Nichita Stănescu, *Necuvintele*, 1969). This expression describes a cultural trait that can be found in many other circumstances, from literature, to theater, to cinema – tragedy and comedy manifesting together, that is cryin’ and laughin’, both in the same time. For example one of the oldest Romanian folk tales, reproduced by many writers (Ioan Slavici, *Zâna Zorilor*), talks about a “king who, everybody knew, had one laughing and one crying eye”. *Râsu’-plânsu’* is close to the “tragicomoedia”

of the Ancient theater, in the sense that it entails more than “funny drama”, since this dual determination (pain, anger or rage together with laughter, relief and mirth) provides more than a paradoxical association. As Plautus, who was the first to use the concept in his play called *Amphitruon*, the tragicomic refers to the very nature of the social status of the characters involved (Foster 16). For the Romanian writers and, in this case movie directors, it means laughing about the non-laughable, using the tragical as a source for the comical, but it is also a form of social survival, since it tries to derive laughter from a situation that would normally bring tears. As it was with in ancient theater and in other public representations of the Greek-Roman tradition, when the celebrations of Dionysus took place, the participants used that mixture of death and joy, put together to expunge society’s defects.

As the main negative character in Cristi Puiu’s *Marfa și banii* (*Stuff and Dough* 2000) says from the very beginning: “I joke, but you must know that I am very serious”. Life itself is a “bitter joke” in Puiu’s vision, as is the case with *Moartea domnului Lăzărescu* (*The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*), where the old man’s tragedy is constantly accompanied by derisive laughter.



### The “Caragiale effect” – Death with a comic twist

Ion Luca Caragiale, who was one of the most important playwrights in Romanian literature, is the main source of comedic inspiration for the Romanian cinema in its historical evolution, even before 1948, when the Communist regime nationalized the cinema industry. Jean Georgescu, who was considered to be the most important movie maker before 1948 (Corciovescu 2002), made several movie adaptations using Caragiale’s comic plays. For example *O noapte furtunoasă* (1943) was critically acclaimed as the most important “comic drama” in the cinema of the time, where the tragicomic nature of the Caragiale’s written play was turned into a visual narrative, with critical tones about society. After the Communist regime took over Romania’s cultural production forms, Georgescu continued to make adaptations after Caragiale, and this type of humor, noted by the early Marxist literary critics (Gherea, Ibrăileanu), as social satire, was well integrated in the critique of bourgeoisie of the time. Operating at the limits of the satire and cynical evaluation of society, Caragiale’s comic dramas were used by the Communist ideological machine as forms of derisive presentations of the intimate life of bourgeoisie, and of the “Capitalist society”. Soon Caragiale was integrated in the main public discourse of the Communist regime. It was from Caragiale, as most of the critics have agreed that his main instruments were the ridicule (*bătaia de joc*) of his contemporaries, that this type of humor crossed into the contemporary cinema. Here the defects of personality traits, absurd human behavior and deteriorated social relations were mocked in a derisive way. This was integrated in the cinema of the

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Communist time, where humor was used extensively to ridicule the “upper class”, by ways of constructing ironic “popular heroes”. One of these heroes was Păcală, the typical “folklore Joker”. Păcală was one of the characters developed by Geo Saizescu (*Păcală* 1974), and then, immediately after 1989, used in a sequel entitled *Păcală se întoarce* (*Păcală Returns* 2006) in a movie using a mixture of folk tales and ill developed narratives belonging to the popular sayings (*zicători și proverbe*). Mostly build like a farce, these films were extremely popular, providing about five million viewers for the first *Păcală* installment (according to Căliman 298). Comedy became an instrument for the Communist propaganda, where the rich were ridiculed by this “popular” character, free in spirit and representative of the poor. At some point the writer/ director himself plays a “capitalist”, who is very much similar to the schematic figures in the early movies of Eisenstein, portraying the oppressor in schematic traits. This was confirmed by the subsequent movies made by Saizescu, *Secretul lui Bachus* and *Secretul lui Nemesis*, both social satires designed to illustrate the “defects” of the Capitalist inspired ways of thought. Here the accumulation of capital was the main critical theme of these movies, their “social and political” value being a lesson for the viewers. As a part of the “education” and the “formation of consciousness” of the working class derisive laughter was considered an important tool.

Another “popular comedy” was *Nea Mărin Miliardar*, made by the official director of the Communist regime, a parody treatment of the gangster movies having in its center another “popular character”, already a “classical” joker on various tv shows. The popularity of this movie was even greater, since *Nea Mărin miliardar* reached over seven million admissions.

The B.D. Series (*Brigada Diverse*) was another example of how humor was used



during Communist time as an instrument for social criticism. The three series of the “B.D.” movies (*BD intră în acțiune*, *BD la mare și munte*, *BD în alertă*) were constructed around the classical scheme: “good Militia-men”, who were in charge of arresting the bad guys of the time, and the “bad capitalists”, small crooks, petty thieves and malevolent foreigners. This typology of comedy and comedic was perpetuated after 1989, one of the best selling movies in 2006 being *Trei frați de belea* (*Three stupid brothers* 2006), with 15,650 admissions (the 13<sup>th</sup> most viewed movie in Romania of all times), while *Păcală se întoarce* got 11,861 viewers (according the data of CNC). It was only with the “New Wave” directors, following the path opened by Lucian Pintilie, that another another aspect of Caragiale’s work was taken into consideration. Caragiale used dark humor as deriving from laughter from death. In one of his short stories, “Pastramă trufanda” (*Pastrami firstling*), Caragiale presents an episode where a son is sending his dead father back to the Holy Land as pastrami, while the unknowing messenger is eating the remains of the father. This tragical turn of events as a source of humor is obvious in several productions made after 2000, Cristi Puiu’s *Aurora* being one of the most powerful in this respect, where the mild and almost unnoticeable character of the father ends up killing mercilessly several people.

### Using jokes (bancuri) as social resistance

At another level, humor can be used as a research instrument for cultural studies interpretations. As Arthur Asa Berger has indicated (1993), humor can be put into a framework designed to understand cultural discourses, especially in ideologically filled social contexts. Berger uses a semiotic approach, where the paradigmatic interpretation allows us to analyze the latent content of the comic in a given culture. Here the comedic is put into its political dimension (Berger 8-9), where ridicule is used to indicate the tensions of social relationships in a society or a group, basically describing the power structures and the dynamics of control and subjection in a given political system. Humor, as Linda Hutcheon has put it, is about power relationships, in any “tensioned” critical context the subversive nature of dark humor provides an opportunity of resisting social oppression (1993).

For the Romanians living during the Communist era, humor became a social resistance technique. Joking about (and against) the Communist regime and its authority figures meant expressing a form of political opposition, while accepting the unavoidable domination of the Marxist ideology. This bitter laughing and painful comedy was embedded into the humoresque philosophy of the “banc”. Synonymous to the “Witz”, in the Central European sense, the Romanian “banc” was the typical political joke. As Freud has put it in his seminal work on laughter and the role of the “Witz” (*Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*), (Freud 1905), we can attribute laughter a subconscious function, one that finally reduces the personal psychic tension, and it can be also be a form of releasing the same social tension. The humor plays a



fundamental role in releasing (in a cathartic way) the tensions accumulated in the subconscious, by the pressures applied by the super-ego, that is by the rules of any society. This liberating element of humor was underlined by Freud with an example of a political joke, where a Russian, condemned to the gallows, exclaims: What a way to start a week!

The jokes (*bancuri*) were ways of releasing tension, and mostly during the end of the Ceaușescu period of Romanian Communism, they became widespread forms of political resistance. Of all the categories of “Witz” belonging to the dark humor, the hostile jokes became manifestations of a society “bottled-up” by restrictions and lack of freedom. Călin Bogdan Ștefănescu, who was an engineer during the Communist time, gathered in a very systematic way the most important jokes of this time (by using his personal journal as a log for the current state of the “*banc*”). He later published a consistent book about a decade of joking in Communist Romania (*Ten Years of Black Humour in Romania*) and by simply reading this book, one can say that Romanians were using “*bancuri*” (jokes) to survive. Călin Bogdan Ștefănescu noted in his diary, between 1979 and 1989, all the jokes he heard, and came up with a list of the most important ways jokes were used as “social resistance against the regime”. He structured them into 12 categories (among them bitter laughing, painful comedy, loss of hope laughter) and the top ranking were the jokes about the everyday life, the cult of the Leaders’ personality, and the opposition against the regime. It is relevant that “Ceaușescu jokes”, which remained constant in the rate of creation at the beginning of the regime, between 1986 and 1989, when the toughness of the regime increased, the “Ceaușescu jokes” grew exponentially, as the opposition to the regime grew accordingly.

Here we must underline the difference between a simple joke and “*banc*” – following the definition used by Berger. A joke is “a story with a punch line” (Berger 15), used to provoke the comic and the laughter, while the “*banc*” is a similar story having a rebellious intention. For example, one of the jokes goes this way: “What is the last desire of dying Romanian? To have Ceaușescu die and let Elena live out of chemistry lessons!”. As Andre Breton has put it, humor is used as “the superior rebellion of the mind”.

If we understand national identity as an imagined community, as Benedict Anderson has thoroughly demonstrated, where we elaborate the visual identity of our heroes, the content of social symbols and the entire historical heritage, then joking about these historical realities becomes a part of constructing an imagined identity. The omnibus production of Cristian Mungiu, *Amintiri din epoca de aur* (Tales from the Golden Age) is most representative for this treatment of humor. Constructed as a series of unrelated jokes, where each episode is a visual reconstruction of a “*banc*” known during the Communist time (even if Mungiu describes the sequences as “urban legends”), the movie re-builds in a comedic way an entire part of the national history. Even the figure of Ceaușescu is reinterpreted in a humorous way, the episode dedicated to the “legend of the Party photographer” is a typical political “*banc*”. During the visit of Giscard d’Estaing, the Party official newspaper, *Scântea*, published a photo with the Romanian leader holding a hat in his hands and another one on his head!



### **The Ionesco effect. Laughing about the nonsensical nature of society**

Dark humor is deriving from a form of comedy dealing with indelicate issues and social taboos. In the early theater, dark humor was practiced as a tragical farce or the farcical tragedy, but in modern theater there has been a radical change with the development of the theater of the absurd. One of the most important authors, the creator of the absurd theater, is the Romanian born drama-writer, Eugen Ionesco. His absurd humoresque, with roots in Surrealism, uses one of the key elements widely practiced in the black humor of all times, in the very sense Breton has put it: humor is finally a form of rebellion against the establishment, against what we believe to be “normal”. Black humor is simply a rebellion of the Reason against any forms of social madness. As is the case with Ionesco’s black humor, which can be associated with the “angry” humor, since it stems from the comedy of horrors produced by the collision between reality and absurdity, laughter comes from being exposed to unacceptable social contexts. Although Ionesco was not a Surrealist himself, the influences of Surrealism in his plays are self evident, and since the nonsensical and the impossible are sources of the laughter, in the theater of the absurd the dark humor targets the nonsensical, the void state of the world.

For Ionesco it is absurd that which has no finality ( “Est absurde ce qui n’a pas de but...”), and the meaninglessness of existence is one of the most important characteristics of the theater of absurd. This existential vacuum, the void and the lack of any significance, the emptiness of language (and thus of dialogue), coupled with the emptiness of life (and thus of the action), are the most important ingredients of this approach to the comic. As is the case with the hero in

“Rhinoceros”, Bérenger, who is alone in a world without sense, where pointless discussions are taking place as expressions of the total lack of meaning, some of the most important heroes in the recent Romanian movies are built as absurd figures. Mr. Lăzărescu, in Cristi Puiu’s synonymic movie, is swept away in a series of absurd situations, leading to his death.

Another important technique, used in some of the most important plays of Ionesco (“The Bald Soprano”, “The Chairs”, “The Lesson” and, especially, “Rhinoceros”) is built around this absurdity and nonsensical nature of human relations. It is here that Eugen Ionesco’s absurd theater must be considered as one of the most important cultural resources for the contemporary Romanian moviemakers. It is in this respect that the new Romanian cinema takes from Ionesco’s dramaturgy. This is the case with the “deaf dialogue” from “Un cartuş de Kent și un pachet de cafea” (*Coffee and Cigarettes*) by Cristi Puiu, where the redundant nature of the verbal exchanges between the father and the son is similar with the lines in *The Rhinoceros*. The Father and the son are talking only in identical words, without hearing what each other has to say: “You go home, I go home”, the father: “Nothing has changed, finally. Still the same. With coffee, with cigarettes”, while the son replies: “Well. Haven’t you noticed that is still the same as before? Nothing has changed. It’s all the same, with coffee and with cigarettes”.

As it is the case with Ionesco, two people having a conversation about life and humanity, yet not saying anything but void words, is often practiced in the “New Wave” of Romanian cinema. It is the case in the movie “Fața galbenă care râde” (*The Yellow Smiley Face* 2009), by Constantin Popescu, where a middle aged couple uses the computer for the first time in order to



have a chat with their son, emigrated to the United States. Again the absurd – both cruel and sentimental, later touring to tragic – is putting laughter in face of tragedy.

It is in the dark humor, where death and disaster mix together with the nonsensical humor of social satire that the Romanian “New Wave” moviemakers have found their source of innovation and the global impact of their films is a tribute to their predecessors.

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