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The Author's Voice in Genre Films. *Miracle and Unidentified* by Bogdan George Apetri

Abstract: Romanian cinema after 1989 was mainly oriented towards creations through which directors sought to win critical acclaim and awards at international festivals, but which were not addressed to the general public, as films belonging to a cinematic genre generally do. In this paper we discuss how Romanian director George Bogdan Apetri, now living in New York, represents a distinct voice in Romanian cinema today. In his films *Unidentified* and *Miracle*, he manages to harness his dual cultural perspective (American and Romanian), combining the conventions of the crime fiction genre but also elements specific to the Romanian New Wave, making two films that are pleasing to the audience but at the same time part of the arthouse circuit.

Keywords: George Bogdan Apetri; Genre; Author's Voice; Crime Fiction; Romanian New Wave Cinema; Narrative Techniques of the Detective Novels.

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Introduction. Genre Film versus Art Film in Romanian Cinema after 1989

In the aftermath of the 1989 Revolution, Romanian cinema was for a while in search of its own identity. With *Goods and Money* (d: Cristi Puiu, 2001), a new artistic direction is recorded, known as the New Romanian Cinema. This is opposed to *mainstream* cinema, especially Hollywood, which is popular with the general public. Representatives of this direction showed a predilection for the realism of the image, for long shots and depth of field, postulating a cinema of transparency in the wake of the French theorist André Bazin (1918-1958): "Representatives of the New Wave share, therefore, a set of technical preferences, each of which is indebted to the belief that filmed images should be as close as possible to life-as-it-is, the purpose of the cinematic medium being to record, or to record, rather than to interpret, implicitly, to distort"¹. As Claudiu Turcuș points out, "it can be said that the Romanian New Wave Cinema was assimilated by its pregnant (neo)realist component.

This conceptual filter is meant not only to circumscribe an original/synchronic cinematic poetics in relation to contemporary globalized cinema. By relying on the referentiality card, both the directors and the commentators of these films re-dimension the relationship of Romanian cinema with the memory of recent history in the context of the transition towards a slow, late Europeanization.²² The minimalist aesthetics of Romanian films made at the turn of the new millennium are, of course, the result of thematic and stylistic choices, the need to bring new breath to Romanian cinema, but at the same time they also suit the budget allocated to production, money being very hard to come by at that time due to the lack of public funding mechanisms. Let's not forget that the year 2000 was the only year in post-December history (after the 1989 Revolution) when no Romanian film was released in Romania.

Most of the filmmakers of the following decade adhered to this type of aesthetic, which is close to the observational documentary, especially after it was validated internationally by several important awards won by films such as *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (d: Cristi Puiu), *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, *After Hills* (d: Cristian Mungiu), *The Child's Position* (d: Călin Peter Netzer), *When I Want to Whistle, I Whistle* (d: Florin Șerban), etc. However, this kind of productions proved harder to digest for the general public. Until a few years ago, the few attempts to bring Romanian films to theatres did not have the desired effect. As such, Romanian filmmakers preferred to focus on a niche area, seeking to win over the specialized critics rather than the general public, a phenomenon that Andrei Crețulescu also noted in *New*

Romanian Cinema: From Comrade Ceaușescu to Mr. Lăzărescu, a volume published in 2011: "A State of Fact. The filmmakers of the New Wave are rightly discouraged by the reaction of the general public—they will therefore continue to make personal films, which will only allow them visibility at festivals, and, with a bit of luck, international distribution in countries that have properly preserved the cult of the arthouse circuit."²³ Under these conditions, a vicious circle was created: our compatriots stopped watching Romanian films because they were not to their taste, and Romanian filmmakers became less and less interested in the opinion of the general public, which does not generally go to see Romanian films. Andrei Crețulescu also noted the existence of two camps: "those who deplore the lack of genre films in the environment of the New Romanian Cinema" and "those who don't want to hear about it, convinced [being] that commercial film is a by-product, vulgar, addressed to the popcorn-eating masses – as such they refuse it from the start, firmly, resolutely."²⁴ Despite this, Crețulescu believes that the notions of genre film and auteur cinema are not incompatible, and in support of this idea he offers two case studies: *Polițist-adjectiv* (r: Corneliu Porumboiu) and *Aurora* (r: Cristi Puiu), which he considers "a genre anti-film" and "a genre metafilm" respectively, their common denominator being that the directors are very familiar with the formulas specific to the *detective/thriller* genre and yet choose to circumvent the psychological mechanisms through which the audience could be manipulated and absorbed by the action.

As if to reinforce Andrei Crețulescu's opinion, since 2016 and up to this

moment, Romanian film has offered several productions, especially *thrillers*, that manage to bring together the notions of author and genre, to offer the possibility of expressing the authorial voice, within the limits of established formulas: *Shadows* (r: Igor Cobileanski, Bogdan Mirică) *Dogs* (r: Bogdan Mirică, 2016), *The Trail* (r: Dorian Boguță), *La Gomera* (r: Corneliu Porumboiu), *The Three-legged Goat* (r: Victor Cănaș), etc.

Unidentified. About the Conventions of Police Films and their Subversion

An interesting case in point comprises the films of Bogdan George Apetri, a Romanian director who currently lives in New York, where he teaches filmmaking at Columbia University. After his first feature film, *Periferic* (2010), awarded by numerous international festivals (Locarno IFF, Vienna IFF, Warsaw IFF, Thessaloniki IFF), Bogdan Apetri set out to make a trilogy built on the crime film model, which has so far included *Unidentified* and *Miracle*. His background fully qualifies him to tell stories about cops, as he has had a close acquaintance with both the Romanian legal system and the atmosphere and workings of police stations in Romania, having been a criminal lawyer in his hometown of Piatra Neamt before settling in the US.

The director's double experience, Romanian and American, gives him the opportunity to present Romanian social and cultural issues (especially racism, misogyny, religious beliefs, xenophobia), achieving a formal synthesis between New Wave realism and the conventions of *hard-boiled detective* films. Following the model of Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine*, characters

migrate from one film to another, suggesting a complex web of relationships that are established within the police station of the small provincial town at the foot of the mountains where the films take place.

Both feature films are based on the tradition of the *crime fiction* genre as it has developed in the United States since the writings of E. A. Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle and continuing with Agatha Christie, Dashiell Hammett or S.S. Van Dine. Starting from the narrative techniques of the detective novels popular in America around World War II, films emerged that would later create a new cinematic genre. Their protagonist is a cynical and clever detective with a heroic aura, fighting corruption and injustice. Over the course of a few decades, his figure would change, in the sense that around the 1970s he would no longer be seen as infallible but would sometimes become a victim of the hostile environment in which he worked, being killed, or in turn becoming a killer.

Like any cinematic genre, *crime fiction*, with its subdivisions, *hard-boiled detective film* and *film noir*, is characterized by a series of narrative or stylistic conventions, which over time, through repetition, become classicized. However, as Maria Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis point out, in order to perpetuate itself, any genre needs a constant infusion of novelty. This is why filmmakers have understood that in order for their films not to fall into cliché and become boring, they need to make constant readjustments and variations within the confines of a formula known to the general public.⁵

This is what Bogdan Apetri achieves, linking in an original synthesis aesthetic codes from the culture of origin (panoramic images of the city, emotional manipulation

through music, montage) with others from the adoptive culture (close-ups, long shots, hand-held camera, social and psychological observation).

The first film in the trilogy, *Unidentified*, with a screenplay by Bogdan George Apetri and Iulian Postelnicu, was awarded the Special Jury Prize in Warsaw. The film also won the FIPRESCI Award at TIFF, the Grand Prix at the Anonimul Film Festival, and two major awards at the Gopo Awards.

The film opens in the style of classic American films such as *Dallas* or *The Streets of San Francisco*, with a panoramic shot. The camera flies over the picturesque small provincial town, with its winding roads cutting through mountains and forests. Classical music, mainly compositions by Frédéric Chopin, elevates the subject and creates emotion. The protagonist is police inspector Florin Iespas (Bogdan Farcaș), portrayed at first as a hero fighting corruption and injustice and even the numbness of the system, but during the course of the film, through a subtle shift in perspective, he appears as an anti-hero, a guy with obsessive, masochistic and sadistic behaviour, even capable of murder. The investigation that he is involved in, on his own, because the case was assigned to another colleague, apparently wants to bring justice to the victims who met their end after the burning of two huts belonging to businessman Ilie Dumitrașcu. The main suspect is Georgian Negoită, also known as Bănel, a young Roma man who works as a security guard both at the huts and at a gas station in town. Florin's hypothesis to his boss (Vasile Muraru) is that the owner took the boy as a security guard and had him burn down both huts to collect the insurance money.

Although, by all appearances, the suspect is innocent, the story slowly begins to take an unexpected turn. The investigation turns into a set-up to cover up a crime of passion and the policeman turns from a lawman into his girlfriend's killer. The camera persistently follows the cop in all his actions and gestures. Close-ups predominate, inviting viewers to penetrate the psychology of the protagonist, to understand his disconcerting behaviour and to make predictions about how things will develop. Climbing a hill above the Poiana Izvoarelor car park, Inspector Florin Iespas follows his girlfriend, who has left him to be the mistress of a married businessman. The alternating montage (shot-contraplan), which shows both the subjective perspective of the policeman and the objective perspective of the camera, which captures his figure from different angles, including from behind, reflects the originality of the director, who takes elements of aesthetics from both American crime films and Romanian cinema after the 2000s.

While in Hollywood crime films, the filming process is generally portrayed through subjective shots that allow the viewer to look through the eyes of the cop (see, for example, Hitchcock's films), at the opposite pole of this aesthetic is a film like *Adjective Cop* (d: Corneliu Porumboiu) with a very simple story: a cop in a provincial town investigating the case of a high school student wanted for drug trafficking. As Andrei Gorzo observes, in this film "the fact of waiting is represented in some (if not all) of its temporal weight, which is the weight of the accumulation of dead time [...] No frame [...] is meant to represent the subjective angle of the policeman. The perspective remains observational in

the documentary sense, without access to the subjectivity of the characters.”⁶

Bogdan Apetri’s film does not fully adhere to the American, narrative aesthetic, which aims to keep the viewer in suspense through numerous editing cuts, nor to the realistic, minimalist one proposed by the representatives of the Romanian New Wave. The film creates an original stylistic universe mainly through camera movements, but also through the fast pace of the action, editing and framing.

As far as camera movement is concerned, it is worth mentioning the theory of the “invisible observer”, which, although according to David Bordwell has been around since the beginning of cinema, was not explicitly formulated until 1926 by V.I. Pudovkin in *Film Technique*. According to him, the camera lens can be associated with the eye of a witness taking part in the action, and the editing cuts would be assimilated to the shifting of attention from one object to another, i.e., limited to 180° left-right, Bordwell adds.

Interestingly, the idea of the “invisible observer” has been used both to support a Hollywood aesthetic, with lots of editing cuts and high camera mobility (“the observer” being identified more with an omniscient “narrator”), but also one of “transparency”, theorized by Bazin, and exploited by European films, which, through handheld footage, seek to capture an event in its continuity. Bordwell points out the limitations of the model, noting in particular that the complexity of filming a sequence and the changes in angles cannot be put down solely to the shifting attention of the so-called “witness”, but instead argues for its functionality on a smaller scale, sequentially, not as the poetics of a whole.⁷

Also on a small scale, in *Unidentified one* can see how the model of the “invisible observer” serves both the idea of an omniscient narrator, often found in Hollywood films (many panoramic shots, general shots, especially when the atmosphere in the police station is captured) and of a witness who is present here and now, who gets very close to the characters, carefully observes their smallest gestures, facial expressions, looks, trying to understand and decode the motive of their behaviour. When the policeman is driving to the place from where he is going to do the filming, for a while the camera eye seems to be one with the eye of a witness sitting in the back seat who sees the back of Florin’s head and the landscape through the windscreen of the car, and then the witness sits in the seat next to him, these two angles mimicking the experience of a real companion.

Also very interesting is the side-trip in the final sequence, in which the policeman Florin, waiting for the prosecutor, describes to the chief how his girlfriend was killed, of course falsifying the facts of the matter. The camera focuses on seemingly insignificant details, letting the voices of the two characters and their speeches take centre stage. The camera rotates 360° and the character speaking is seen from behind, while the face of the speaker is seen in the blurred background.

The attention that the camera pays to the characters proves precisely that the stakes of the film are not police intrigue, suspense, nor thriller atmosphere, but rather their psychology, their inner universe, which can be dramatically unbalanced following events that touch sensitive chords, bring to the surface sufferings, egos, obsessions.

Both films, *Unidentified* and *Miracle*, are also a mirror of Romanian society. For the director, who has lived in the US for more than two decades, spatial distance also implies a psychological distance, which allows him to see the shortcomings of Romanian society with much more clarity and objectivity: Ethnic prejudices, the intolerance shown by the entire police station towards Roma citizens such as Bănel, the abuse of power by police inspector Florin Iespas, the under-appreciation of Romanian values compared to foreign ones. The chief commissioner prefers holiday destinations such as Croatia, Bulgaria, Turkey, where it is “much cheaper and ten times nicer.”

The construction of the chief commissioner's character enters an interesting dialogue with that of a possible American film counterpart. Following the American model, we would have imagined him as a model of dignity and professionalism, not lacking in masculine charm and humour. Bogdan Apetri's character, however, is quite the anti-hero. He has his charm, is always in on the jokes (he tells jokes about cops on the job) and doesn't seem to take his profession very seriously, but his portrait is presented in an even more cynical light at the end, when he shows himself willing to cover his subordinate by lying, falsifying evidence and inventing accomplices to murder.

***Miracle* – Drama, Detective Film, Fantasy**

Miracle is the second film in Bogdan George Apetri's planned trilogy. Presented for the first time at the 78th Venice International Film Festival, as part of the Orizzonti section, it was the first

Romanian feature film to participate in a competitive section of the festival for 12 years.

Like *Unidentified*, *Miracle* harmoniously interweaves drama, detective intrigue and the suspense of a psychological *thriller*; moreover, in some respects and in a certain key of interpretation, the realism of the facts can be considered undermined by the intrusion of the supernatural element.

The film is divided into two “chapters”. The first one follows Cristina Tofan (Ioana Bugarin), a 19-year-old nun, a novice nun, at a moment of crisis – judging by the sadness and tears on her face – who sneaks out of the monastery to go to the hospital in the neighbouring town. The visit to the gynaecologist (the idea of a miscarriage is suggested) is followed by a visit to the police station and then to the home of a family, where, after ringing the doorbell and being greeted by an unknown woman, she apologises for having the wrong address and leaves. As an invisible observer⁸ and a little frustrated by the misunderstanding of the causes of her behaviour, the viewer follows her throughout this pretriple through shots that capture her from behind or from the side. On the way back to the convent, however, her suffering will increase exponentially, as the taxi driver, so nice and polite at first, turns out to be a rapist, and perhaps even a cold-blooded killer. As she changes into her monastic garb near a bridge, he, instead of waiting for her in the car, attacks, rapes and apparently kills her. Throughout the five-minute scene, the camera remains objective capturing both the victim-attacker struggle and nature unleashed in a 360-degree sideways traveling.

The second “chapter” has Marius Preda (Emanuel Pârveu), the police inspector

who investigates the case and retraces the girl's steps. For almost half an hour, Marius is watched gathering data, talking to nuns, doctors, colleagues, giving instructions. The audience's expectations are thus geared towards identifying those conventions specific to the *noir* or *hard-boiled detective* genre. The inspector seems very determined to solve the case, follows the logical thread of events and discovers elements that his colleagues had missed (the shards of the taxi's headlight scattered at the foot of the bridge), yet the visit to the bedside of the patient (who miraculously escaped alive) reveals an unexpected dimension to the relationship between the two. It is no longer just about the relationship between a victim and the man who fights to bring her justice, but a love affair between the two, as the meeting in the parlour ends with an unexpected kiss.

So we deduce, by retrospective associations, that the two had had an extramarital affair, that the young woman was still carrying Marius' child, which she had not dared to abort, that he was the one who did not answer her phone, that she had looked for him in vain both at the police station and at home, and that her retreat to the convent had taken place amidst a great emotional turmoil.

Once this information is revealed, the film goes beyond the formula of the detective genre, focusing on the psychology of the characters and their feelings. We now understand that for Marius this is no longer a simple case, a job, but a personal "business". If we were to judge by the conventions of the *hard-boiled detective* genre, the fact of revealing the criminal from the outset, the cop's emotional involvement in the story and the amorous complications constitute deviations

from the genre. They seem to be more than minor variations, which any cinematic genre with rules firmly ingrained in the collective mind has to put up with in order not to become predictable. They are marks of auctoriality, bearing the personal mark of director Bogdan Apetri, who places the inner lives of the protagonists in the foreground, leaving the detective narrative in the background. The proof is in the very tight framing (close-up, close-up), which captures the mimicry of the actors, their micro-expressions, letting emotion shine through. This is the way most often used to suggest inner feelings, because otherwise the characters communicate little of what they feel, and when they do, the dialogue is not accessible to viewers. Such is the case in the scene where Cristina, on her hospital bed, whispers something touching in Marius' ear, culminating in the kiss that reveals the bond between the two.

Unlike detective stories that begin with the discovery of a corpse, followed by the decoding of the "marks" left by the killer, Bogdan Apetri's film begins in the purest neorealist style, in the lineage of the aforementioned Cristi Puiu, Corneliu Porumboiu, Călin Peter Netzer, with long shots and close-ups of the girl's suffering face, which arouse the viewer's empathy.

Like *Unidentified*, the film holds the viewer's breath by employing a few strategies that are the filmmaker's dexterity, firstly, by limiting information about the protagonists, which increases the mystery and arouses curiosity, especially in the first part, where the director skilfully handles the technique of postponement. The viewer expects from moment to moment to discover the cause of the girl's unhappiness, to understand what made her choose the difficult path of monasticism at such a young

age and who she repeatedly tries to contact by phone.

Secondly, by contradicting expectations and frustrating the viewer. The film abounds in false leads: apparently the girl has an abortion (but then turns out to have kept the baby), apparently she is killed by the violence of the blows the assailant inflicts on her (but turns out to have survived), apparently she will be rescued by two lads near the bridge where she is assaulted, but it turns out that they do not hear her screams.

Judging by the profile of the taxi driver (Cezar Antal), at first glance candid and very nice, the rape scene is a real surprise, hard to predict. In his extensive interview with François Truffaut, which resulted in the famous 1967 book *Hitchcock/Truffaut*, Hitchcock explains how he sees suspense, giving the example of a bomb threatening to explode under a table, while those seated at the table have no idea about it. On the other hand, the audience, which is informed in advance of the existence of the bomb, yearns to warn the characters of the impending explosion⁹.

Unlike Hitchcock's example, in Bogdan Apetri's films the time bomb lies in the psychology of the characters, in the unpredictability of human nature in extreme situations, in the viewer's difficulty in anticipating the intentions of the characters, with whom he feels solidarity. The leitmotif of the ticking clock establishes the pressure of time. The police inspector has to release the suspect if he does not get enough evidence against him. The tension builds more and more from the middle of part two. Marius's oath ("I swear on my life I won't let this one get away!") works as a foreshadowing of dramatic events.

Although it centres on a mentally disturbed cop, like *Unidentified*, the film is more emotionally intense and dramatic, probably also because the viewer gets to empathize with the victim in the first part and the cop in the second part. While in *Unidentified* the focus is on the action and the detective process, the viewer being rather disturbed by the bizarre behaviour of the detective Florin, whose plans he seeks to understand rationally, in *Miracle* the pain, frustration, guilt, fear of the characters are very restrained but all the more impressive. Although disfigured, Cristina refuses to complain, and even to identify her aggressor in the photos Marius shows her. The latter, on the other hand, has several reasons to incriminate the suspect: his profession (he is a man of the law), his feelings for Cristina, and then his guilt at having abandoned her, since his rebellion against the aggressor is to some extent also a rebellion against himself. As in the case of the girl, Marius' thoughts and feelings are not expressed, but only suggested by actions.

Bordering between a *detective film* and an *auteur film*, *Miracle* is a film that is not only appreciated by the general public but also by critics, a wish that 10 years ago seemed unattainable for Romanian directors. As for the aesthetics (realistic, seeking to objectively portray the facts, to show the world as it is, offering the viewer a partial knowledge), Bogdan George Apetri denies an explicit influence from the representatives of the Romanian New Wave, describing the film rather as "a spiritual journey", therefore a personal experience:

A lot of people would think I'm going back to the style of so many well-known Romanian directors who

use one shot for one scene, [says the director, in an interview with Matt Micucci after the Venice Film Festival screening]. For me it wasn't a philosophical approach, from outside the film (you could say I like André Bazin or realism), but one from the heart of the film. I wanted the viewer to feel the long passage of time in the long scenes. If it goes from point A to point B I wanted it to be seen on the screen (of course without boring) and at the end all this realism is blown away and a miracle happens. [...] For me it's a spiritual journey. The way I structured the story, the camera is always trying to say that there is something beyond the characters, beyond the story. The camera has a life of its own, it is more objective than in any of my films.¹⁰

As the very title *Miracle* says, the film raises the issue of faith, as seen through the lens of Orthodox Christianity and beyond. From the point of view of the relationship with the church, two attitudes can be identified, which reflect the split in Romanian society: the pro-church attitude (the nuns, Cristina and the police officer Mișu Macarie) and the anti-church attitude (Albu, Dr Ivan and Marius Preda). The general feature that emerges from the dialogue between the characters is the superficiality of opinions, whether pro or con, the clichés of thought, the lack of deep and nuanced understanding of religious issues. The nunnery's abbess (Natalia Călin) defines monastic life as a life of "silence and prayer", untouched by interference such as a police investigation, which is why the nuns also shy away from giving details about the victim. Mother Mina (Nora Cavali) even

commits a sin, lying at first that she had no knowledge of the young woman's departure from the convent, though she had facilitated her departure to the city with the help of her brother, taxi driver Albu (Valeriu Andriuță). In addition, she does not try to stop Cristina from having an abortion, which again goes against Christian precepts. Cristina declares that no one sent her to the convent, it was a personal decision, but given her disappointment in love and unexpected pregnancy, it's obvious that the decision was one dictated largely by circumstances. The cynical and rather misogynistic Albu, a taxi driver, doesn't really understand the Christian evaluation, nor his sister Mihaela's decision to abandon the secular life, and is disturbed by the nickname Mother Mina, the name Mihaela received at the convent. Agent Mishu Macarie exasperates his boss, Marius Preda, with his stereotypical thinking and behaviour (he buys pine syrup from the monastery and is convinced that his life is guided by God's will). The coroner Ivan (Valentin Popescu) superiorly asserts that science and religion are mutually exclusive, and that curing medical conditions is exclusively the prerogative of the former.

The film plays with the viewers, stimulating their imagination and challenging them to find a personal interpretation for the final double of the scene where Inspector Preda and his colleagues take the suspect to the crime scene. In an attempt to scare him into admitting his crime, Marius asks to be called by the secretary, so that he can then pretend to the rapist that he has just received news of the girl's death. Arriving at the scene of the crime, Marius washes his face in the nearby lake, then interrogates the suspect by assaulting him,

and finally, when he admits it, shoots him with the pistol provided. He heads to the lake to wash off the blood, only to then, like *deja vu*, replay the same scene that had unfolded 10 minutes earlier, when the murder had not yet occurred. Marius' phone rings again, but it's not the secretary, but Doctor Mihăescu (Marian Rălea). His only reply is "When?". So we can assume that something unexpected and tragic has happened. Did the girl really die? The viewer again has access to a partial knowledge of the facts. A feminine shadow appears projected on the lake water, like a morgana girl, like a spirit purifying the water, a vision. Marius puts his pistol away, stands up and orders his colleagues to put the suspect in the van.

The last sequence achieves an ample side travelling. The first image is of a white, septic chamber. On a piece of furniture sits a bag and a small tape recorder plays a passionate refrain, *The most beautiful tango in the world*, sung by Gică Petrescu. The room shifts to the right and the viewer is not a little surprised to discover Cristina's body on the dissection table, with the coroner Ivan beside her. The sequence ends even more astonishingly, with a tear leaking from the girl's eye, a small "miracle" with no scientific explanation.

Bogdan Apetri's film begins in a realistic style, then plays with the conventions of a *detective story*, before sliding into fantasy in the last part. What other explanation could we find for replaying a sequence while changing the course of events? Let us remember what Tzvetan Todorov said in his *Introduction to Fantastic Literature*:

The fantastic lasts only as long as the hesitation lasts: the shared hesitation

of the character and the reader, who are called upon to decide whether what they perceive is real or not. At the end of the story, the reader, if not the character himself, makes a decision, opts for one solution or the other, and by this very fact he enters the realm of the fantastic. If he believes that the laws of reality are unbreakable and that they allow the phenomena described to be explained, the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary, he concludes that only by admitting new laws of nature can the phenomenon be explained, he is in another genre, in the sphere of the miraculous.¹¹

If we consider that what we saw the first time was only a projection of Marius, a violent urge to resolve the facts, which he has overcome, suppressed, then we can talk about the strange. If, on the contrary, we consider that it is about an "irruption of the sacred [which] effects a rupture of level, opens communication between cosmic levels (Earth and Heaven) and makes possible the ontological passage from one way of being to another"¹², then the sequence is part of the miraculous, and the title rather leads towards such an interpretation. Both approaching the problem from the perspective of quantum physics (taking into account the theory of multiple worlds, which postulates the existence of several dimensions, of parallel universes, forming a multiverse) and from a Christian perspective, means admitting the existence of a transcendence, of superhuman laws, to which we have no access.

Given that the breach in reality is produced by the gesture of washing one's

face in the lake water, one cannot help but bring up the symbolism of water. In the *Dictionnaire Des Symboles*, Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant point out that “the symbolic meaning of water can be reduced to three dominant themes: source of life, means of purification, centre of regeneration, which meet in the oldest traditions creating a rich and varied imagery in combinations.”¹³ Through its nonfragmentary unity water can take any form, thus being a symbol of potentiality, metamorphosis, change, which would justify the sliding from one reality to another. Water is also a cosmogonic symbol. In the Old Testament (Genesis), the Spirit of God is said to hover over the waters, and in the New Testament it is even identified with the Spirit: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink”, Jesus says to the apostles. In many ancient cultures immersion in water is a sacred ritual through which the body and spirit are regenerated, and in the Christian tradition through immersion in baptismal water and the invocation of the name of the Holy Trinity man is washed clean of ancestral sin and reborn, destined for a spiritual life.

The aquatic metaphor is illustrated in the film not only by the water of the lake, but also by the water in the small basin in Christine’s chapel, where Inspector Marius Preda washes his hands before interrogating the nuns, the same basin of water that appears in the first frame of the film, a very beautiful and ingenious frame with multiple symbolic meanings. The film opens with the image of the novice nun Cristina, in monastic robes, weeping. Her face is reflected in the trembling water in the basin, and the frame of the glass divided into four is also reflected there, a frame which, by intersecting

the horizontal and vertical axes, suggests the idea of a cross. A cross, then, inscribed in a circle, which brings to mind the Celtic cross, combining Celtic symbolism and Christian esotericism. “The intersection of the two straight lines coincides with the centre that it opens outwards. On the other hand, the cross is inscribed in the circle dividing it into four. Lastly, from it one obtains the square and the triangle if one joins its vertices. Like the square, the cross symbolises the earth, being the expression of its subtle and mundane elements. The cross is the most all-embracing of the symbols”¹⁴, as Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant point out in the same *Dictionnaire Des Symboles*. The all-encompassing horizontal axis places man in relation to the world (a kind of embrace of the world) and the vertical axis – in relation to the transcendent, to the divine. “The two axes send us to the flow of time, to the cardinal points of space and the circle to the cycles of manifestation. The centre, however, in which there is no time, no change, is a place of passage or symbolic communication between our world and the Beyond.”¹⁵ In the Christian faith, through the crucifixion of the Son of God on the cross, it is a symbol of salvation, of deliverance from the bondage of sin, of eternal life, of death defeated by sacrifice. Would it be too much to interpret the brutal murder of an innocent girl as a Christ-like metaphor? The film’s suggestions are subtle, but these symbols sprinkled throughout are not incidental. The issue of time is also taken up quite insistently – first the ticking clock in the girl’s cell, then the wall clock in the inspector’s office, which has run out of batteries – which leads us to think that time is seen in a double perspective: a linear time, conforming to the laws of the physical

world, and a “sacred time, as Mircea Eliade calls it, which is “recoverable, endlessly repeatable. From a certain point of view it could be said that it does not flow, that it does not have an irreversible duration [...] sacred time presents itself in the paradoxical aspect of a circular, reversible and recoverable time.”¹⁶ The exit from profane time and the chance to change the course of events could be an explanation for the episode that is resumed with a different outcome.

Miracle manages to harmoniously and surprisingly combine the *detective* genre, drama, *cinéma vérité* and mystical concerns, making it a multi-purpose film, which although it could have explored many themes, prefers only to show the viewer some paths, without fully committing to any of them, thus avoiding becoming theistic, delivering value judgments or a subjective perspective on the world. Like the films of the Romanian New Wave, *Miracle* appeals to the poetics of transparency postulated by Bazin¹⁷, but at a certain point breaks away from it, not shying away from showing its methods, its conventions, even if they are different from those enshrined in Hollywood films. First of all, although it believes in referentiality, the film nevertheless avoids boring the viewer with long, deep shots, and therefore makes great use of close-ups capturing the emotion of the characters. Secondly, the depiction of the facts, although transparent, is still incomplete, which requires more effort to decode on the part of the viewer. And thirdly, through intertextuality, the filmic discourse is self-dramatizing, yet it claims to create a unified and coherent fictional world. Thus, the first two films of the trilogy enter into dialogue, with the main characters in *Unidentified* becoming secondary in *Miracle* and vice versa. Last but not least,

a form of intertextuality can also be seen in the choice of music that accompanies certain scenes. While *Unidentified* is more reminiscent of American aesthetics, the music being mainly extradiegetic, in *Miracle* it is only intradiegetic, coming from the universe represented, more precisely from the radio. The radio almost becomes a character in itself and the protagonists prefer old Romanian music. It is probably not by chance that many of the songs that play on the radio belong to Mihaela Runceanu and Ioan Luchian Mihalea, both artists adored by the public, whose lives were suddenly cut short by murders.

Music, especially in Hollywood films, is known to have multiple meanings. Skillfully manipulated, it gives access to the characters' inner selves, can create dramatic intensity through volume, instrumentation, lyrics, can provide cultural information. Interesting in *Miracle* is the deliberate discrepancy between the moment of action and the music chosen. Only once is the music a commentary on the image, creating a romantic moment, when on the way back to the monastery Cristina listens in the taxi driver's car to the song *Evening Song*, sung by Mihaela Runceanu and Ioan Luchian Mihalea, letting herself dream. In all the other situations, the sentimental and passionate melodies are in obvious disharmony with the context in which they are playing from the radios, whether it is the radio in the car of Marius Preda, who is driving at speed, visibly concerned and affected by the case he is investigating, or the radio in the police van, in which the rapist is taken to the scene of the crime, or the radio of forensic doctor Ivan, who is preparing for a dissection. A melancholic piece like Mihaela Runceanu's *If You'll still*

leave is rhythmically at odds with the agitation and angst of Marius Preda on his way to the scene of the rape, but the choice is understandable if the lyrics are seen as a message from Cristina to emphasise the inspector's guilt.

If Mihaela Runceanu and Ioan Luchian Mihalea died in their prime, Gică Petrescu is one of the longest-lived Romanian artists, and his nostalgic music (*The most beautiful tango in the world*) cynically and totally inconsistent with the viewer's emotion, accompanies the dissection work of Dr. Ivan.

Like *Unidentified*, *Miracle* is also a mirror of Romanian society, often split and radicalized when it comes to issues such as the Orthodox Church, human justice vs. divine justice, the condition of women in a traditionalist society, etc. The eternal conflict between science and religion, between reason and faith, is reactivated in the dialogue between doctor Ivan and Cristina, between Marius Preda and his colleague, agent Mișu Macarie (Ovidiu Crișan), or between Marius and the abbess of the convent where Cristina lived. On the one hand, the taxi driver Albu, Doctor Ivan and Marius Preda are men of fact, who prefer accurate data and are sceptical about church dogma and religious mysticism. Cristina and the nuns, on the other hand, promote forgiveness and put their lives in God's hands. However, they do not hesitate to resort to little lies to protect their peace of mind.

The film also highlights the "sins" of Romanian society such as tax evasion (Dr. Ivan gets upset when the taxi driver starts the clock to record consumption), the large number of welfare recipients who prefer to drink and live on little money instead of working (Albu complains that he can't find

people to mow the grass, although he offers to pay them), misogyny and prejudice (Dr. Ivan's wife had been in a car accident and Albu comments: "But you had the guts, Mr. Doctor, to let your wife get a driving license).

However, in the same interview with Matt Micucci in 2021, after the screening of the film at the Venice Film Festival, director Bogdan Apetri said:

I believe that a director has to start with the characters. If you are very specific (where they come from, what happened to them before the action in the film, and what will happen after that, how they met, how they relate to their family) it's impossible not to make a commentary on society, but I think the sense is the opposite: you start deeply and specifically with the characters and then let the social commentary unfold naturally, because if you start with social commentary you won't make a film, but you will expose some theses about society. So I wasn't explicitly interested in society, but I knew that this commentary would come up in the background.¹⁸

The originality of Bogdan George Apetri's creations in terms of cinematographic language, character construction, atmosphere and themes is certainly also due to his dual cultural perspective (American and Romanian) that allows him to juggle different creative styles, exploiting conventions and rules specific to Hollywood crime films, but also codes from Romanian movies after 1989, so that his voice appears as a distinct and valuable one in the landscape of recent Romanian cinema.

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NOTES

1. *Microphone test. Mircea Daneliuc. A critical study by Cătălin Olaru*, Liternet, 2016. <https://pragulcritic.ro/proba-de-microfon-un-studiu-critic/>.
2. Claudiu Turcus, "The Reception of the New Romanian Cinema and Cristi Puiu's *Aurora*", in Andrei Gorzo and Andrei State (eds.), *Film Politics*, Cluj-Napoca, Tact, 2015, pp. 281-289.
3. Andrei Crețulescu, "Nobody move! New Romanian Cinema, gen", in *New Romanian Cinema: From Comrade Ceaușescu to Mr. Lăzărescu*, Polirom, 2016, p. 60.
4. *Ibidem*, p. 56.
5. Maria Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis, *Film: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd edition, London, Laurence King Publishing Ltd., 2008 [2005], p. 392.
6. <https://andreigorzoblog.wordpress.com/author/andreigorzoblog/>
7. David Bordwell, *Narration in the fiction film*, Madison, University Of Viscon Press, 1985, p. 9.
8. *Ibidem*.
9. François Truffaut, *Hitchcock by François Truffaut*, revised edition by Helen G. Scott, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1984 [1967], p. 73.
10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAXkbRyqV40>
11. Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction to Fantasy Literature*, Bucharest, Univers, 1973, p. 59.
12. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 1992, p. 61.
13. Jean Chevalier & Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire Des Symboles Mythes, Rêves, Coutumes, Gestes, Formes, Figures, Couleurs, Nombres*, Robert Laffont, 1982 [1969], p. 374.
14. *Ibidem*.
15. Jean Chevalier & Alain Gheerbrant, *op.cit.*, pp. 402-403.
16. Mircea Eliade, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-65.
17. André Bazin, "The Forbidden Montage", in *What is Cinema?*, translated by Andreea Rațiu, Andrei Rus, Gabriela Filippi, Andreea Chiper și Andrei Gorzo (ed.), București, Plirom, p. 130.
18. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAXkbRyqV40>, min. 1:14.