

***MMXX* by Cristi Puiu – The 10th Muse and the Dismantling of Attractions**

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*"Nurturing detail, although it may fall into
snobbery,
is nevertheless the first evidence of the presence
of an artistic sense"
(Irzykowski, 1982: 36)*

Abstract

*The article addresses the issue of stylistic and thematic coherence in the work of Romanian director Cristi Puiu, in particular the recurring elements of cinematic language that characterise the Romanian New Wave and the constant thematic motifs presented by Puiu in a philosophical and theological key. Based on the observations of Karol Irzykowski, a Polish precursor of theoretical thought on cinema as art, the article examines how the narrative strategy Irzykowski termed 'fermata', used by him especially to describe extensive film, functions in relation to Puiu's works. This phenomenon is considered as a characteristic feature of Puiu's full-length works, although particular attention is given to the analysis of his most recent picture, 2023's *MMXX*, which tackles the theme of functioning in conditions of social isolation. This film, due to its specific construction, also allows us to look at how the individual components of the film image (episodes) interact with each other*

giving the film work additional meaning at the level of its structure. Whether Puiu continues or breaks with the themes taken up in his previous films, how to read the ascetic form and enigmatic content, constituting a kind of uncompromising 'dismantling of attractions', challenging the audience and potentially hindering the perception of the film – these are the questions the author poses and attempts to answer in this article.

Keywords: The Tenth Muse, Romanian New Wave, aesthetics, cinema, film, art of moving picture, montage, fermata, Karol Irzykowski, Cristi Puiu

INTRODUCTION

Cristi Puiu is a director to whose premiere of a new film critics react with liveliness and heightened curiosity, while most viewers often react with... indifference. Observing the reception of his latest film, 2023's *MMXX* may lead to such conclusions. The Romanian filmmaker, known for meeting high intellectual and artistic standards, this time left even his staunch supporters of the path set 20 years ago by himself and other precursors of the new wave revival with mixed feelings. We will look at the reasons for such observation by starting with the characteristics of the Romanian New Wave (RNW) film universe,

which has been both a fascinating phenomenon and a perceptual challenge from the beginning.

A consideration of the specific components of the Romanian New Wave (Romanian: *Noul Cinema Românesc*) would require a reference to the work of such directors as Cristi Puiu, Cristian Mungiu, Corneliu Porumboiu or Radu Muntean¹, but for the purposes of this article I will make only an artistic analysis of the achievements of the first of them in particular. In view of the discussion on the vitality of New Wave aesthetics (and the sceptical voices on the subject), particular interest is paid to seeing stylistic coherence and thematic consistency in Puiu's work. The purpose is to reveal the constant motifs and themes and the presence of elements of cinematic language that characterise the aforementioned trend in his most recent works – in the case of Puiu's productions, which are additionally realised in the key of philosophical and theological contexts. This reflection will be accompanied by observations from the Polish perspective – starting with the views of Karol Irzykowski, one of the precursors of theoretical thinking about cinema as art. His findings from the early phase of cinema (at the turn of silent and sound cinema) can provide an interesting context for research into the actuality of visual and narrative minimalism and contemporary examples of the strategy of narrative retardation perceived by Irzykowski in some filmmakers, which he termed 'fermata'. We will consider this as a potential common feature of Puiu's works, with particular reference to the conclusions drawn from an analysis of his most recent picture entitled *MMXX*. This film, due to its ascetic form and enigmatic content, invites us to perceive manifestations of camouflaging the author's message through a kind of 'dismantling of attractions' that constitutes a perceptual challenge.

¹ The 'second generation' of the New Wave includes Adrian Sitaru, Bogdan Mustăța or especially Radu Jude from his early stage (Nasta, 2013: 140). It has undergone a significant transformation over time, while it now enjoys considerable recognition and the greatest festival successes among Romanian directors.

The specific construction of the film also allows us to look at how its individual components (episodes) interact with each other, which can give it additional meaning at the level of structure.

RNW AND PUIU'S PLACE

The filmography of Cristi Puiu, the Romanian filmmaker, has so far been a string of festival successes and laudatory reviews which, starting with 2005's *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu*, have elevated Puiu to the title of 'Father' or 'Pope' of the Romanian New Wave (RNW), so every manifestation of his artistic activity arouses understandable interest. Shortly after the landmark year 2000 – the symbolic 'year zero', when not a single new film was made in Romania – the eyes of the film world began to be drawn to a new generation of talented filmmakers (Batori, 2018: 63). Puiu's feature-length debut *Stuff and Dough* of 2001 set the trend, and with it the work of a number of young directors developed dynamically, producing auteur cinema that was surprising in its freshness, simplicity but also intellectually deep with modest means. It is now believed that this trend, which is well recognised in the world of cinema, has reached its apogee, and even its decline, or that at least a certain exhaustion of the new-wave formula has been announced. Film critics have quite unanimously marked the symbolic twilight of its mature phase in 2016 – the year of two important premieres, Puiu's *Sieranevada* and Cristian Mungiu's *Examination*, yet these two names of New Wave pioneers are still to be found among the active and prolific auteurs.²

The aforementioned *Sieranevada* (2016) was almost unanimously proclaimed a masterpiece of

² Puiu and Mungiu are both winners of landmark awards for the resurgence of Romanian cinema in the 21st century - the new trend began with the 'Un Certain Regard' award at Cannes 2005 for *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu*, while the New Wave confirmed its existence with the success two years later of the 'Palme d'Or' for Cristian Mungiu for the moving *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days*. For a list of other awards see Batori (Batori, 2018: 64).

cinema of the highest level, was appreciated both at festivals and in cinephile rankings (as was the previous *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu*, 2005). Puiu's next work, *Malmkrog* (2020), on the other hand, proved a stylistic and thematic twist even for connoisseurs of the far-from-schematic artist. The reason is that he is primarily known for his (hyper)realistic style and aesthetics of radical minimalism adapted to depict the mundane, rather overwhelming Romanian reality. His films show the everyday life of contemporary Romania, a developing country (increasingly dynamically) with the ballast of the communist inheritance from the dictator Ceaușescu, but also with the legacy of the way in which the tyrant and communism were disposed of. Set in the interiors of cramped flats and cars, his films rely on naturalistically recorded scenes (in the spirit of *cinéma vérité* or *direct-cinema*), devoid of illustrative music and filled with ordinary, but also ambiguous, dialogue-rebuses. Meanwhile, in *Malmkrog*, Puiu turned his gaze away from the current concerns and challenges of his compatriots for a moment and directed his gaze to a stylised past, setting the film's action in the intimate spaces of a mysterious manor house in wintry Transylvania. Following the release of *Malmkrog*, taking place on the threshold of Pandemic in 2020, which severely limited its cinematic reach, visual beauty, aesthetic consistency, and discipline in the composition of the frames and the compelling charm of the play with space and characters were pointed out. In this costume and set feast for the eye, the hindering thematic and content sophistication, also manifested through narrative ambiguities, was judged as being more attractive. The plot was based on a novel-testament by Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, completed in 1900, entitled *War, Progress, and the End of History: Three Conversations, Including a Short Tale of the Antichrist*. The Bucharest-based director examines the timeliness of the novel's almost visionary pronouncements in the context of the crisis Solovyov predicted for the turn of the

20th and 21st centuries, which was to affect an increasingly confused, nihilistic world. The Russian thinker's Antichrist is an exemplary pacifist, charming philanthropist and environmentalist, seducing humanity with the promise of peace and justice without God, within the framework of a new, pluralistic and syncretic religion without faith or dogma. The story of a certain philosophical and theological debate embedded in the characters' late 19th and early 20th century musings on morality, religion, politics and war, however, requires at least a basic knowledge of the context of the era and considerable intellectual skill. It also requires patience – the historical drama, which takes place in a Transylvanian manor house and features mostly difficult dialogue, lasts 201 minutes - but this feature of Puiu's work should no longer come as a surprise.

PUIU'S CINEMA – CONTINUATION OR RUPTURE?

The attempt to both associate Puiu's two recent films and to find commonalities in *Malmkrog* and *MMXX* is easily dismissed for a number of reasons, but it may prove to be rather hasty. And it is not just a matter of connecting the two – so stately written in classical Roman numerals – with the year 2020, the year Puiu won an award at the Berlinale for *Malmkrog*. Returning to contemporary costumes and space, the director seems to pick up similar themes to his previous work in *MMXX* – but he does so in a less overt and obvious way, hiding the timeless message in the camouflage of routine observed in the operating conditions of social isolation. The world depicted in *MMXX* is the landscape of the modern Covid-19 pandemic, a quarantine time, omnipresent Covid masks and virus testing. At the same time. it is a world permeated by fear of the other, the ubiquitous need to abide by the rules of isolation (perceived by some as a sign of care, by others as

a top-down restriction), but above all marked by a profound deficit in bonds and interpersonal relations. Nor were apocalyptic associations and scenarios dreamt up by 'false prophets' uncommon at the time. Today, however, although only a few years have passed since the pandemic, it seems like something very distant, an unreal dream. At the same time, we are still very familiar with the mechanisms and rules that the situation imposed, the reflexes and attitudes it provoked. Puiu's film is about, amongst other things, what that time has revealed and mercilessly exposed. However, knowing the potential of this author, we should try to find out more.

The art that Puiu has possessed to the highest degree is the ability to show on screen 'something more' than what is *explicitely* shown. True to the intuitions of the French film critic and theorist André Bazin, he radically advocates a 'cinema that believes in reality'. Exploring the deceptive ontology of film, Bazin believed that only through the natural ambiguity of reality can the intangible, the mysterious, the transcending be revealed (not shown). Hence, amongst other things, he was sceptical about the excessive use of the montage technique. In ambiguity and intertextuality, however, it is of no small importance that the author's intention is subjected to the viewer's attempt to read it (constantly actualising the three-part relationship between reality, its cinematic image and the viewer who watches this image). There are many indications that, in the case of *MMXX*, this test does not quite work out in the filmmakers' favour.

The sceptical voices of the audience, as well as a reading of the not very complimentary comments and reviews (not that many again), indicate that this is often also the case for the more informed part of the audience – experts and connoisseurs of cinema with refined tastes, as well as audiences already familiar with Puiu's demanding and engaging style. What is most often pointed out in these reviews is the indigestible form, the sketchiness and superficiality of the

story, the incomprehensibility of the message and the unclear reasons for the author's use of characteristic, extremely long takes (the first episode was shot in one take). Entire scenes filled with long, tedious and (seemingly?) banal dialogues did not facilitate the reception. Some reviewers – including those accustomed to the minimalist and naturalistic New Wave strategy in its pure form – simply pointed out the overwhelming boredom felt during the screening.³

It seems that *MMXX*, as a story, indeed lacks narrative colloquialism, 'nerve', but also a clear plot foundation – a central core in the story presented that would bind the individual episodes together. This was a virtue of *Sieranevada*, which, after all, also abounded in multi-minute sequences based on conversations 'about nothing important'. However, there, on the solid soil of the family *panichida* (religious commemoration) celebrations for the deceased ancestor, the numerous 'accompanying' stories – like branches or even creepers winding around this trunk – rested firmly. The viewer was able to get a clear sense of what the side plots referred to and, even if they did not all immediately form a clear whole, they allowed for reflection and the search for the key in intriguing ambiguities. This is not the case in *MMXX*, in which the first three episodes link the main characters; in the fourth and final parts, however, the sense of coherence is already lost, as various hypotheses are advanced about the connection between the stories (or, discouraged, we soon discover that there is none). The search for an interpretative key is not helped by a literal reading of some of the director's statements, often taken out of context, suggesting the idea of a dispassionate recording of a 'chronicle' of a time

³ In Poland, one can cite, for example, Stanisław Sobczyk's – already quite favourable and balanced opinion about 'an exceptionally inaccessible film and a tiring experience' (Sobczyk 2023), or the not very favourable comments of film critics on the Filmweb internet portal (filmweb.pl), for example, Michał Oleszczyk, enthusiastic about Puiu's work so far. Not much better is the status of *MMXX* on IMDb internet service. Even on Rotten Tomatoes – although the film received a score of 86%, it has only seven reviews and ratings from critics, with not a single rating from viewers (rottentomatoes.com).

of global epidemics. The descriptions that advertise the 'wandering of souls at the crossroads of History' (a reference to Mircea Eliade's reflections?)⁴ are also of little help. Puiu's image, firmly attached to the symbolic year 2020, the contemporary *annus horribilis*, and thus read mainly in the key of the 'year of the plague', seems, however, to lean well beyond the current horizon, not only in a geographical sense.

ROMANIAN CINEMA AND POLISH FILM CRITICISM

Films from the Romanian New Wave, or more broadly – The New Romanian Cinema (NRC)⁵, for at least a decade have been considered in Poland as exemplary works that should be made by... Polish directors about Poland. One can hear voices – not always uttered in jest – that 'the best films about Poland are made by Romanians'. This statement has recently been particularly true of the cinema of Radu Jude, whose 'cinematic double' in the country on the Vistula River is currently being dreamt of by many Polish critics (including Michał Oleszczyk in his podcast 'Spoilermaster'), and viewers too are warmly receiving his fresh, feisty, though sometimes controversial pictures. Sobczyk, comparing the reception of recent Puiu and Jude premieres, confidently proclaims: 'It was definitely overshadowed by the success of another Romanian film – *Do Not Expect Too Much From the End of the World* by Radu Jude' (Sobczyk 2023). However, the paths to the hearts of Polish audiences were blazed by *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu* and then *Sieranevada* – Puiu's films were the first examples of admiration for how a story should be told about a society functioning in a phase of transition just after the transformation, still searching not only for its identity and place on

the geopolitical map, but also for this axiological one⁶. The huge and shocking impression made (among others on the author of the text) by Mungiu with his 2007 drama *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* cannot be overlooked. Nowadays, Romanian cinema, represented by an increasing number of creative authors, is for Polish cinephiles unquestionably synonymous with a solid brand and film quality.⁷

However, this was not always the case – one could say that in the previous century, it was Polish cinema, created by such recognisable filmmakers as Wajda, Zanussi and Kieślowski, that was the object of the sighs of their Romanian colleagues. Although the historical foundations of cinema are similar in both countries, the cinematographies of both countries went through the post-war period of communist rule diametrically differently. While in Poland the struggles of, for example, the above-mentioned directors against the realities of socialist realism and censorship within the framework of the nationalised art of filmmaking resulted in several internationally recognised masterpieces, in Romania the strict control of the state most often effectively limited the artistic and intellectual potential of its filmmakers. The filmmaking of Romania before the fall of Ceaușescu was associated in the artistic world with the Buftea label, which was attractive to Western directors and producers, rather than with the work of the few auteurs attempting to operate with a degree of independence from the regime, such as Liviu Ciulei (e.g. *Forest of the Hanged*, 1964) or Lucian Pintilie (e.g. *Reconstruction*, 1968). Those Romanian works that have managed to break through into the consciousness of the European

⁴ 'Different portraits, four short stories, four moments in time capturing the wanderings of a few souls, stuck at the crossroads of History' - claims trailer of the film.

⁵ The term 'The New Romanian Cinema' (NRC) that I invoke is broader than the 'Romanian New Wave' (RNW), characterised by more strictly defined themes and styles. The differences are insightfully explained by Anna Batori (Batori, 2018: 65).

⁶ It should be noted that there are also voices sceptical of the numerous analogies being drawn between Romania and Poland, as a result of the fact that, unlike their Romanian colleagues, Polish filmmakers have not engaged in a similar process of coming to terms with the times of communism and transition in their stories (Walczak, 2021)

⁷ An increasingly intensive promotion, e.g. through cyclical reviews of new and classic Romanian film pictures organised in cooperation with the Romanian Cultural Institute, has had an impact on sustaining this opinion.

spectator, however, have always required a certain amount of receptive effort and a readiness to unravel ambiguous content. Hence, the historical spectacles, the communist cinema of spectacle produced by Sergiu Nicolaescu (e.g. *Dacii*, 1966; *Michael the Brave*, 1971) were relatively the most popular, also in Poland. The scant interest in communist Poland in the ‘brotherly’ Romanian cinema is evidenced by the fact that the only major work devoted to this area's cinema was published in 1983 – a valuable, albeit modest, compendium of knowledge from the origins of Romanian cinema to the works of the early 1980s inclusive, by Oskar Sobański (Sobański, 1983).

While we remain in the key of anniversaries, symbolic numbers and round dates, it is worth recalling Karol Irzykowski (1873-1944), who counted amongst the narrow circle of pioneers of theoretical reflection on the new medium of film as a fully-fledged art, writing about ‘the Tenth Muse’ exactly one hundred years ago. His thoughts concerned both commercial and avant-garde cinema, Polish cinema as well as world cinema, which he followed as a regular consumer of films and reviewer⁸. In 1924, his *The Tenth Muse: Aesthetic Issues of Cinema* was published in Kraków – one of the first monographs in the world devoted entirely to the art of filmmaking, analysing its peculiarities and its specific language and aesthetics, which are separate from those of literature, theatre or painting⁹. The Polish writer, literary, theatre and film critic gave his famous definition of cinema as ‘the visibility of man’s

dealing with the matter’ early in his book (Irzykowski, 1982: 7). Irzykowski wrote of the initially suspicious and at the same time socially hypocritical attitude towards cinema as a ‘fair show’: ‘The modern European uses cinema, but is ashamed of it’ (Irzykowski, 1982: 15). At the same time, he stood up for the new form of art, and elevated it above the shallow spectacle many considered it as such at the time, stating that ‘Cinema poses aesthetic and philosophical riddles’ (Irzykowski, 1982: 15). Putting forward the thesis that this was why the world did not appreciate the full possibilities of the new way of making art, because it was not yet ready to see the artistic potential of cinema (still silent cinema), Irzykowski asked the intriguingly topical question: ‘How many other unknown arts, then, can sleep in the womb of time?’¹⁰.

Paradoxically, Irzykowski saw the greatest danger for the emerging new art – especially in view of the emerging technical possibility of combining image and voice – in ‘too close connection with the art of the word’, which, in his view, was the domain of the theatre. He later admitted that his fears and predictions of the ‘death of cinema’ (Irzykowski, 1913), which would come with the appearance of its sound version, turned out to be exaggerated (he wrote with concern about the inventions of Thomas Edison and, working independently, Kazimierz Prószyński, who combined sound with film images). He devoted a lot of space to the notion of ‘movement’¹¹, which constitutes the specificity and uniqueness of cinema, but he also noticed a primitive schematism, dictated by financial projections, in the deliberate selection by filmmakers of particularly attractive ‘movement

⁸ Malgorzata Radkiewicz notes: ‘The issues he raised ran through the writings of early theorists, from Hugo Münsterberg and Jean Epstein (to whom, incidentally, he refers) to Dziga Vertov and Germaine Dulac’ (Radkiewicz, 2023: 258). Earlier, in 1903, Irzykowski published the novel *Paluba*, about which Paul Coates writes: ‘His *fin-de-siècle* anti-novel *Paluba* (*The Hag*) ironically bared the processes of its own making in a manner anticipating Proust and Gide, and was to be a powerful influence on Gombrowicz in particular’ (Coates, 1987: 113).

⁹ Irzykowski wrote the first chapter of this book in 1913. According to Radkiewicz: ‘In the title of the first edition, the number ten was written in words on the title page and in Roman numerals on the cover (as X)’ (Radkiewicz, 2023: 242). Marek Hendrykowski writes about the reception of the book: ‘Irzykowski’s elevation of cinematography to the elite class of the Muses constituted an intellectual provocation that many could by no means accept’ (Hendrykowski, 2022: 146).

¹⁰ Weronika Szulik wrote about Irzykowski as a film screening enthusiast and frequent visitor to cinemas (Szulik 2018).

¹¹ Hendrykowski wrote: ‘The concept of Movement (montage and succession of shots, rhythm, construction, projection, transmission, optical pantomime, acting, etc.) occupies a particularly prominent place in the pages of Irzykowski’s book’ (Hendrykowski, 2022: 150).

themes' (fights, races, catastrophes)¹². In movement, corporeality, Irzykowski saw the undeniable potential and element of cinema, stating: 'The cinema has opened the Kingdom of Movement to us' (Irzykowski, 1982: 18). It can be assumed that today Irzykowski would rather be an admirer of Radu Jude-style cinema, this representing for some time a film strategy different from the New Wave one, which – referring to Eisenstein's idea, which is now a hundred years old – could be described as the 'neomontage of attractions'¹³.

In time, Irzykowski, exposing himself consciously to the accusation of inconsistency, began to notice the value of 'contemplative scenes', and to appreciate directors (he mentioned Paul Wegener) who placed passages in films that seemingly contributed little to the story – what he called 'endurable scenes'. He wrote: 'The director gives these scenes without haste, rounds them off where necessary – even with fermata¹⁴; it is evident that he enjoys them, that they are not just a piece of content that he needs to show for continuity as well' (Irzykowski, 1982: 36). It is this aspect that seems interesting in the context of Puiu's cinema, particularly his latest film. This anticipation and protracted tension, omnipresent in *MMXX*, Puiu portrays in his familiar style – presenting us with an insight into the most mundane, even uninteresting aspects of everyday

life, which he seems to affirm in such a celebration on digital film. He does this sometimes with a wink, a tinge of irony and other times quite seriously. His retardation, however, is often devoid of the anticipated fulfilment – rather, it is extreme *slow-motion* stripped of its aesthetic equivalent, a persistent and consistent 'dismantling of the attraction'. Despite our fears and preconceptions, let us return to this cinematic fermata and Puiu's collection of 'endure scenes'.

MMXX - FOUR LETTERS, FOUR EPISODES

MMXX is made up of four novellas (episodes) introduced through short shots – inserts as if from outside the diegetic world – that have various subtitles and tie together the different parts of the film. Fragments of a few seconds structure the whole film, maintaining visual coherence as they gradually unfold, continuing with a panorama of increasingly less pristine greenery and returning to us in a longer shot in the finale. Before the proper face of the film is revealed to us, the filmmaker makes us contemplate the vegetation and the coils of tape entangled in it up close (as in Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, by the time we are ready to look up at the sky, our eyes are fixed on the surface of the earth increasingly scarred by the traces of human/non-human presence). Anyway, the focus on objects, devices and accessories (furniture – branded Poltrona Frau armchair, flowers, pens – necessarily BIC!, pieces of paper, mobile phones, inconvenient masks, virus tests, lost keys, sought-after kitchen device equipment, rum for a birthday cake, inappropriate clothes for a funeral, a cushion and, of course, a car, or rather its interior – to name just the most important roles manned by material artefacts) will, from time to time, divert our attention from the essence of the thing to the thing itself¹⁵.

For a while, it was objects and avatars that

¹² Irzykowski constructively but also sharply criticised his contemporary Polish film productions of mediocre quality. Kamila Kuc believes that his 1908 play *Man Before the Lens, or Sold Suicide* is 'a satire on the state of Polish cinema at the time' (Kuc, 2016).

¹³ In the key of 'neomontage of attractions', Kamil Walczak analysed *Bad Luck Banging Or Loony Porn* of 2021 (a Radu Jude film about Pandemic time). He recalls that Eisenstein '(...) used the theory of montage of attractions, which he developed, to create images not constrained too strictly by plot contacts. He wanted to free art (referring initially to the theatre) from the strictures of representational narrative, which sought to represent reality but was only a disguised imitation of it. Eisenstein's approach - as well as that of other Soviet theorists - was ideological and avant-garde' (Walczak 2021).

¹⁴ Fermata is a term from the world of music, an area to which Irzykowski often drew. Fermata is a pause of unspecified length on a note or rest - see more https://www.m5music.hk/en/dictionary/fermata/?srsltid=AfmBOoqFK_S3bGG2hC8L94LoZ6MDqW_InKOWPvs9dBDZ3I35GLQQ634R [31.10.2024].

¹⁵ A reference, whether intended or not, and perhaps a humorous *easter egg*, is the fish tank in the third episode, reminiscent of the opening scene of Mungiu's *4 months, 3 weeks, 2 days* (2007).

tried to replace the presence of another (living) human being for us during the pandemic. The names of more or less well-known production brands appear, as easily recognisable to the characters as to the audience. Perversely, contemporary globalism is revealed to us here – as a universalism not of values or ideas, but of markets, familiar brands and the 'necessary' objects we so readily surround ourselves with, and whose proximity gives us a false sense of security, comfort and status. At the same time, this still life representing the atypical world of used props decays as waste abandoned by unknown owners, somewhere in a meadow far from human gaze. The tape (film tape, cassette tape?), winding its way through the bushes like a snake, evokes associations with tape securing a construction site or a crime scene from the very first shots. In this simultaneously warning, protective and repulsive function, the prop appears in the final part as a yellow barrier hanging in the air, separating the authorised from the unauthorised, as if separating the called and the uncalled, the sick and the healthy, the living and the dead.

The motif of extreme experiences, of final matters, is constantly present in Puiu's work. It could be the personal apocalypse of the ailing Mr Lazarescu (*The Death of Mr Lăzărescu*), it could be the traumas of Lary, celebrating with his family the death of his father (*Sieranevada*). But it could also be Viorel, lost in his new reality, bringing about the deaths of more people close to him for unclear reasons (*Aurora*). The end of the known world, in social, political and spiritual terms, and in a surprising scene-vision also in the form of physical destruction, also pervades *Malmkrog*. Temporality, the end of the familiar, a radical breakthrough, the invisible but so strongly present opposition of life/death - these are favourite themes that Puiu approaches again and again, from a different angle. In *MMXX*, the subject appeared on an almost pandemic, or perhaps one should

even just say apocalyptic scale¹⁶. In the circumstances of a widespread epidemic, it is easy to trivialise or profane an intensely exploited theme and view of death, as Flawia Dima has written about (Dima 2023). Let us leave the views or opinions allegedly propounded by Puiu about the 'hidden' sources and aims of pandemic hysteria aside and stay with trying to read the content of his film works. And what emerges from them is a highly ambiguous picture, as only the potential of the Romanian reality shown without embellishment allows.

The very opening shot of *MMXX* brings to mind a world turned upside down: therapist Oana (Bianca Cuculici), waiting for her patient, is browsing the internet on her smartphone while lying upside down on a large armchair (is it just a coincidence that her legs, spread upwards, form the letter X?). This is the frame used to promote the film (Oana's legs are additionally wrapped there with yellow caution tape – one of Puiu's favourite props, known for example from *Sieranevada*). The situation also seems to be reversed in the relationship between Oana as psychologist and the client filling in the questionnaire with her. Oana loses her guard several times, and it is her interlocutor who has to pay attention to which question in the questionnaire they are discussing. The session takes place in a flat, although online meetings have become the norm. It is a bit of a world upside down, in which many obvious things have been challenged, questioned, taking us out of our sense of apparent equilibrium. Our weaknesses, distractions and inconsistencies were more clearly revealed, starting with the fact that masks imposed for mutual security were willingly taken off as soon as our interlocutor agreed to it. Social roles were shaken – for is the psychotherapist free from

¹⁶ Emiliano Jiménez Hernández explains the images recorded in the *Apocalypse of St John* as follows: 'The rider riding the corpse-pale horse of the fourth seal has a name of his own: Death or Plague. It is a contagious disease bringing death to the multitude (Ez 14:21). Also for this fourth horseman a limit has been set that he cannot cross (...)' (Hernández 2021; 83).

the anxieties of lockdown time? In the phone conversation that takes place in the meantime, some tension is revealed due to misunderstandings between her and the man she is talking to (as we will find out further on, it is her husband, the self-centred and overworked doctor of the subsequent episodes). It is perhaps to Oana that the subtitle 'Sempre Libera' from the aria from Act I of Verdi's opera *La Traviata* that accompanies the first frames of the film refers, meaning 'stray' – a woman who has strayed from the right path.

In general, it seems that the silent protagonist of the whole film is a woman – in each part it is the woman who is the focus of the story, and even if men come to the fore (parts three and four), the female protagonist is ultimately the axis of events. More often than not, small-minded attitudes of men are exposed, treating women quite objectively, involving them in fulfilling their requests and expectations (Oana's brother, the concerned husband of a pregnant colleague), unwilling to help (the husband). At the same time, the woman is always portrayed as causal, strong, although clearly tired, because she is entangled in routine and left to her own devices. The physical attractiveness of women is also their burden when treated as an object of sexual attraction (the story in the third episode), they are exploited and forced to live in the slavish status of a prostitute and mother of children destined for despicable practices (Consuelo's 'story-confession'). The figure of the child is also strongly present in the film, although the child does not physically appear in any of the parts (except in the final shot, to which I will return). This is also a common feature of Puiu's cinematic world, which shows the value of their presence by deliberately marginalising it. Always, however, the child is in the background of events, whether as a memory of childhood – often a source of problems in adulthood, a child born and taken away from her mother in a Covid hospital, Oana's daughter in the care of her grandparents – whose reception requires the rearrangement of a busy daily schedule, or sold to

the shocking practices the child of Consuelo, a woman broken down by her life so far.

THE RIGHT OF MOVEMENT –

INTENSIVE VS EXTENSIVE FILM

In one of the last chapters of *The Tenth Muse*, Irzykowski distinguished between intensive and extensive film. 'Above all – he wrote, cinema satisfied the hunger of the eyes – it is sometimes an art, but it, which allows all the elements to pass through itself, has already become an element itself' (Irzykowski, 1982: 237)¹⁷. After all, the cinematograph – as Kwiatkowska states – 'corresponded to the habits and perceptual needs of the viewers of the time, who wanted to watch movement in the image in all its uniqueness, dynamism, multiplication and dispersion' (Kwiatkowska 2011: 52). Irzykowski, while being an enthusiast of the cinema as the 'art of movement', matter, pace, dynamics, at the same time notices that 'there are few profound artistic impressions to be gained from cinema today' (Irzykowski, 1982: 237). Intensive cinema is dominated by movement itself, whereas extensive cinema, he writes: 'In place of movement, it gives facts – almost the same thing, but seen and framed differently' (Irzykowski 1982: 239). Although, as he states, such cinema has been contemptuously called theatrical, he wrote:

(...) this enormous number of wholes (scenes from change to change), which an extensive film can produce, ultimately also falls under the laws of movement, but in a different way: it is no longer a question of the movement of arms, legs, faces, trees, carts in individual scenes, but of the invisible movement of scenes among themselves, the movement of the matter of events, of life, of fate. The analogy with musical rhythm does not give a sufficient idea of this 'movement', taking place in the

¹⁷ 'Element' in the sense of an element, such as fire, wind and water.

fifth dimension of the imagination, according to the will of the author, who can shape this fluid mass for himself even against the regularities of reality. The author then makes the cinema an instrument of his subjectivity, and can give a fillip to the dynamism of his heart (Irzykowski, 1982: 239).

The Polish critic seemed to intuit the power of montage, which was about to dominate the language of cinema, or rather which contributed to 'the transformation of the cinematograph into cinema' (and sometimes the transformation into an efficient tool of propaganda). How the construction of the cinematic image influences its perception was written about in later years in the context of the French New Wave by Gilles Deleuze, commenting on Bazin's views on Italian neorealism, which the founder of *Cahiers du cinéma* opposed to other realist aesthetics – verism and naturalism (Kwiatkowska 2011: 55). Deleuze's reflections on the crisis of the image-movement or image-action are part of the reflection of his time on the crisis of film's relation to reality, permeated by the traumatic experience of the Second World War, undermining the certainties of the past. Meanwhile, Irzykowski (who himself would die from a wound during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944) was himself admitting his own inconsistency. He perceives and recognises a principle different from the movement going on inside the frames that fascinated him, as he himself notes in a rather unusual conclusion: 'I see this principle precisely in the movement of entire scenes between each other. I admit that it is strange' (Irzykowski, 1982: 243).

TWO SPEEDS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Marek Hendrykowski saw some parallels between Irzykowski's and Marcel Duchamp's fascinations, if only in the concept of the

surrounding world as a provider of 'material'. He wrote: '(...) the idea of "ready-made" material – drawn from the reality (and mundanity) of the environment and from everyday life – which is common to both of them' he found in many pages of *The Tenth Muse* (Hendrykowski, 2022: 153). Puiu's predilection for the poetics of realism, but also for the arbitrary treatment of time, for the use of extended dramatic pause, for the fermata – as Irzykowski would say – has already been written about sufficiently in the context of his previous films¹⁸. In the work of the director of *MMXX*, a fixed strategy becomes apparent, only confirming the observations of his earlier achievements – for Puiu, it is an invariable canon of his stylistic craft, a distinctive trademark, his stamp of authorship. He himself decides how long a film, a shot, a scene or a character's dialogue will last – and it does not matter how much this is justified by the logic of economics, profit calculations or the cinematic expectations of the audience. Critics' and audiences' opinions seem to be the last thing Puiu intends to worry about¹⁹. Whether he does so consciously, or whether his work reveals something unplanned, one way or another one can perceive a certain rhythmic arrangement in it, bringing a sense of order. This manifests itself in the perspective of the entire work, in its structure and in the order of its components. This is all the more important because Puiu, in accordance with the rules of cinematic realism, makes sparing use of montage and avoids time ellipses. It is not only the order that matters, but also the rhythm, determined by the way the camera works (steady or in motion – often 'hand-held'), the

¹⁸ In Poland, for example, Wojciech Tutaj in the context of *Malmkrog* (Tutaj, 2020).

¹⁹ Puiu, in interview on the occasion of a festival organised to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the Stockholm Institute of Culture in 2021, states: 'I used to teach for nine years in the film school in Bucharest and I told them the best way to express your respect to the spectator is not to take spectator into account while you making your film. Because it is an act of love, of expressing your love. You are going to put on the table what you are assuming the all risks, risk of being hated by the spectator. But this is you and this is the best way to express your respect to the spectator?' (Interview with Cristi Puiu, 2021).

predominance of further plans over close-ups, the use of the potential of natural light and colours²⁰. We can see this quite easily from the structure of *MMXX* – the dynamics of the second episode is in stark contrast to the slow pace of events and the steady, almost motionless camera work in the first. From the perspective of the whole, the rhythmic cyclicity – as if alternating – with the visually extremely muted third episode (immobile vertical and horizontal positions of the framed figures), which in turn passes again into the most dynamic and compositionally open fourth episode, is more clearly revealed. This dichotomy – signalling a world divided in many ways – is 'stitched together' by these short, initially easy to disregard interludes.

This alternation also applies to space – after Oana is parted in the first episode, we meet her in the next one, entitled 'Baba au Rhum' (cupcake in rum), which focuses on the domestic chaos of Oana and her loved ones. The space of Oana's flat is diametrically opposed to the studied sterility of the premises in which she receives her patients. One might even associate it with Barbu Bălăsoiu's way of filming the micro-world of a Bucharest family inside a cramped flat in *Sieranevada*, and with the POV (point-of-view) perspective used for metaphysical references (POV as the perspective of a deceased family elder). Admittedly, here we are no longer in the world of the apartment blocks, moving among the well-to-do middle class, but the technique of observing family realities is similar. In this space, the aspect of almost slavish attachment to the objects, appliances, equipment and accessories embedded (lost) in it becomes most apparent. A mixer module misplaced somewhere can put the whole family on alert as effectively as a lack of parking space. The right kind of rum for a birthday cake can prove as important as helping a quarantined colleague giving birth in a Covid hospital.

The third episode, entitled 'Norma Jean

Mortenson' (which is Marilyn Monroe's proper name), is a turning a circle and alludes to the metaphor of therapy – we listen (for there is not much to see either) to the confessions, spun as if on a therapist's couch, of an erotic adventure and an ecstatic night spent with, it turns out, a mafia-connected beauty. The moment of passion is almost paid with man's life, and the story is patiently listened to by the doctor on duty (Oana's husband). The memories of the intoxicating night are still alive in the mind of the Moldovan ambulance driver (along with the question about the Nokia charger, Puiu's auto-thematic nod to the time of *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu*), and both of them spend their time in the Covid hospital on call, measured by the successive threads of the lengthy story and the virus tests. Until they are called out of their atmospheric room for an urgent trip to a patient in need of help. There is an interesting point of contact between this story and the next shot that immediately follows it - the dimming of the image at the scene of reading on the smartphone a promotional offer from one of Romania's electronics stores turns into a gradually brightening image of a meadow where a dilapidated radio and abandoned ampoules of medicine lie. The trap of consumerism and the illusion of wealth? – once useful objects now in a state of decay, dying alone in nature... If this is the message, it may be a bit banal, but at least it is quite readable.

VOYAGE TOWARDS DEATH

In the final, fourth novella, plot-wise unconnected to the previous ones and the only one, according to Flavia Dima, for which the script was written by Puiu himself (Dima, 2023) and not by the private film school students mentioned in the credits, the action moves more briskly again. But it is not the fast pace or the interrupted and resumed threads of conversation that make it difficult for the viewer to connect the facts. Like in *Aurora* Puiu, here we are witnesses

²⁰ Cinematography in *MMXX* is by Ivan Grincenco and Silviu Staviã.

to events whose logical succession remains obscured to us; our natural need to perceive logic and cause-and-effect relationships will not be satisfied. Similarly, our capacity for perception and synthesis is challenged. This is another hallmark of this artist that stems from his personal convictions – in an interview from 2021 he stated: ‘If you think you understand what is going on around you, from a philosophical point of view, you are wrong’ (Interview with Cristi Puiu, 2021).

The final episode begins with a long scene of a journey and a hands-free conversation filmed from inside a car. This part of the film clearly picks up the pace of the action just by going beyond the previous space confined to four walls, somewhere in the Romanian capital hidden from our eyes. The change concerns not only the narrative style, but also the intensity of the plot – while for three of the four parts of the film we are locked up in a quarantined house or a Covid ward of a hospital, the final part of the film takes us on a journey into the unknown, in an episode reminiscent of a classic *road movie*. Perhaps it is just the protagonist's strenuous, routine business trip, but perhaps it is an opportunity for the protagonist to escape the cramped and Covid-paralysed lockdown of the city. In contrast to the climate of the naive exodus of the NRC protagonists twenty years ago, fleeing the reality of a crisis-ridden country and rushing *bona fide* to the West in the illusion of finding 'happiness' (Georgescu, in Gott, 2015: 153), it now becomes apparent that there is mostly evil lurking beyond the country's western border, trading women and children as if they were living things. This is a somewhat simplistic conclusion, anyway, the latest instalment of *MMXX* turns out to be a trip to meet death. The physical one, but also the moral or spiritual one – in a world that seems full of cynicism and nihilism²¹.

Death is, as we have said, Puiu's favourite subject, touching on its corporeal-spiritual dimension in his every work. In *MMXX*, the commissioner Narcis-Valentin (Dragoş Bucur) already carries the shadow of death with him under those circumstances, on the road, of the suicide of a colleague who, instead of a farewell letter, left behind a book with a poem by the poet Nichita Stănescu, ending with the words 'Hello. We die.'. He himself suffers from some kind of chronic illness (diabetes?) and, together with Giani (Dorian Boguţă), investigates an unspecified location, in an enigmatic case and unusual circumstances. Here, preparations are underway for the funeral of two deceased people and for a meal after the funeral in accordance with Orthodox customs. At the centre of the atmosphere of reverie and farewell prayers, there are tense conversations and an increasingly poignant interrogation of a pregnant woman (Consuelo) dressed in mourning clothes. We are given only the scraps of information needed to put together a coherent story – we only guess that an international human trafficking ring, also involved in female and child prostitution and the sale of organs, is being investigated. The interrogator turns out to be a victim of wanted criminals profiting from prostitution, but also a pimp and mother who sold her own child. The motif of the separation of mother and child corresponds intriguingly with the events of the previous parts of the film, but the vision of demonic traffickers in the mouth of a pregnant woman takes on an almost biblical tone, and evokes apocalyptic associations. Meanwhile, in the background, funeral preparations are being completed, the mourners gather, the priest arrives to conduct the service, and a voice from outside urges people to join in the funeral celebrations because 'God has been angered enough'. *The panichida* rites begin. The chanting of the celebrant, familiar to *Sieranevada* viewers, the prayers of the gathered people can be heard, which are also joined in by the woman being interrogated and the police

²¹ In the aforementioned interview, Puiu candidly confesses that, due to a certain painful transition in 2020, he has 'become an incurable misanthrope' and that he would like to make his next film about a time when 'people were closer to the earth and nature' (Interview with Cristi Puiu, 2021).

commissioner.

Through the names of the deceased mentioned by the priest in the funeral rites – Fevronia and David Petru – Puiu evokes the figures of the saints of the Orthodox Church, mentioned in the liturgical calendar on 8 July (perhaps it is they who are depicted in the Orthodox icon hanging on one of the walls, not far from the wedding photograph and the picture of the Holy Family)²². This is also the date – written in Cyrillic – that forms the title of the latter part of the film²³. According to a 16th-century legend from the apocryphal 'Story of Peter and Fevronia of Murom', both spouses prayed to God that they would die on the same day, which is what happened. The legend, characterised by long dialogues, combines the tale of a fiery serpent and a wise village girl²⁴. The girl was supposed to heal a man wounded by the serpent – a dragon, a tempter to the sin of promiscuity – who, healed, was to marry her, so that at the end of their years, as David and Euphrosyne, they would live in separate monasteries, asking only that they be buried in a common tomb after death. They are well-known patrons of conjugal love and family in the Orthodox world. And it is in this perspective that the final shot of the film can be read – the camera finally rises from the ground towards which it has been gravitating and, slowly looking over the littered vegetation, shows a group of people heading towards the bright open sky²⁵. In

them can be recognised the two men questioning the woman – now wandering slowly in the company of two women and children²⁶. The second and final musical excerpt appears in the background – it is a song by 'Wishbone Ash' music band with the notable title *The King Will Come* (Argus album, 1972), the lyrics of which include such words:

'In the fire, the king will come
Thunder rolls, piper and drum
Evil sons, overrun
Count their sins, judgment comes
The checkerboard of nights and days
Man will die, man be saved
The sky will fall, the earth will pray
When judgment comes to claim its day'

CONCLUSIONS

The ambiguity and interpretative possibilities of both the content and structure of the film are the main strength of *MMXX*. Many names, surnames and pseudonyms are used – perhaps too many, however, to be remembered or easily related to. For we do not learn the details of the characters' histories, so that the protagonists often remain too anonymous for the viewer. If Puiu – as we are assured in the film's trailer – creates a contemporary human comedy, consisting of four (like the four letters that make up the title) parts of human stories ("4 life stories"), he does not overload us with information. Balzac, in his *The Human Comedy*, did not spare his readers descriptions of reality – he reached into the past of his characters in order to bring it effusively closer to us, allowing us to look deep into their psyches. What the 'father' of the realistic novel did two centuries ago with flair, Puiu, as the 'father' of the

²² Some researchers identify Peter and Fevronia with the Murom prince David Yuryevich and his wife, known from the chronicles.

²³ It may be considered a subversive yet amusing association that *MMXX* begins with a shot of Oana relaxing in a head-down position - while 8 July is also known as National SCUD Day (*Savor the Comic, Unplug the Drama Day*). As we read "National SCUD Day's history can be traced back to 2007 when Stephanie West Allen founded the day. As an author and lawyer, Allen was also studying psychology and was keenly aware the many people were far too stressed out. Her hope in establishing National SCUD Day was to encourage folks around her to forget being so serious, relax a little bit and infuse some humour into their lives!" - (daysoftheyear.com; n.d.)

²⁴ The girl in the legend, a simple peasant woman called Fievronia, was supposed to weave linen at home - in Puiu's film, the woman interviewed sits on a sofa and holds a cushion in her lap, which she constantly plucks with her hands.

²⁵ Irzykowski saw in the avoidance of an obtrusively optimistic ending in films a sign of the superiority of European over American cinema: in the

case of *MMXX*, the director seems to strike a certain balance between the tragic nature of the characters' situation and the optimistic punchline.

²⁶ Actor Dragoș Bucur carries one of the children on his shoulders in a shot that is a kind of reverse cliché from another film starring him, *Boogie*, by Radu Muntean (2008).

new Romanian cinema, recording the next crossroads of history ('at the crossroads of history'), is more selective, pointillistic. This film questionnaire - a witness to a common condition - is only seemingly detailed. In fact, many of the questions are left unanswered, as is the dialogue with the client of the distracted Oana, through whom the meaning of the questionnaire sentence: 'I feel like I'm standing against the whole world' is reversed to read 'I would rather say that the world is against me'²⁷. Could this be a statement of the director himself put into the protagonist's mouth? He presents his cinematic world to us in a way that is increasingly hermetic and thus inaccessible to many, risking persistence in post-pandemic isolation. Puiu's proposed radical 'dismantling of attractions' may serve as a warning sign to many (and too many?) not to cross the cinematically protected terrain of uncertainty, which seems at times unsupervised. Or, at the very least, to think carefully about whether we have – much more – than three hours for reconnaissance.

The analysis of film *MMXX*, although equally time-consuming, allows us to see a stylistic and thematic continuation rather than a break in Puiu's work. The Romanian director's latest work contains many recurring motifs, such as loneliness, the identity crisis of the individual and the community, the challenges of a family threatened by mutual incomprehension, the limitation of human cognition and the possibility to understand the surrounding reality. And ultimately the fragility of an existence permeated by the awareness of living in the shadow of death. Often, the dilemmas are presented in a deeply philosophical and religious key of oppositions: life – death, good – evil, grace – sin (and again grace), eternity – temporality, salvation – condemnation. Puiu does not shy away from touching on the meaning of religion and belief in God in the modern world, and often involves

Orthodox rituals in the plot. For Puiu, contemporary or historical costumes are just two sides of the same fabric, which man wears by reaching back through the centuries to the same questions and seeking a new answer to them again and again. It is also confirmed that the erudition affecting the ambiguity of Puiu's cinematic work is a double-edged sword – it can be read as both its advantage and its weakness.

In turn, the conclusions emerging from Irzykowski's former reflections today reveal his reflections on the element of movement and the dynamics of the image as a primary source of the cinema audience's viewing expectations that is difficult to ignore in all times. In the context of a study of *MMXX* as a work exemplifying visual and narrative minimalism, used alternately with episodes full of restless activity (both of the protagonists and of the manner in which the narrative is conducted), the need – also reported by Irzykowski – to associate with 'endurable' or 'contemplative' scenes proves surprisingly persistent. The Polish critic's association of unhurried scenes with the notion of the 'fermata' allows us to see the bright side of Puiu's strategy, even if it sometimes comes dangerously close to a conscious and radical 'dismantling of attractions'. The ability to compose a film by means of rhythm and changing dynamics visible in the structure of the fabric of the work as a whole can constitute an additional level of communication with the spectator, as well as allowing for the problematisation of the definition of cinema according to Irzykowski, expressed in the sentence that 'cinema is the visibility of man's dealing with the matter'.

In conclusion, if we were hoping to get an engaging and readable diagnosis of contemporary Romania from Puiu – be it the metropolitan environment or the Romanian province (or perhaps as *pars pro toto* of the whole of Europe, the global world, planet Earth?) – all the indications are that there is still nothing to it. But this is not necessarily bad news. If we wish, we

²⁷ The film is not (at least at present) widely available, so I also refer to the content of the film's trailer - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBVNiz6FvTk>.

can, along with the characters, independently and painstakingly answer questions from a questionnaire prepared by the director. And it may turn out to be a confusing puzzle, or it may happen that we do not understand the question, and conclude that it is their author's fault. Meanwhile, there is much to suggest that the viewer is being quizzed by Puiu over and over again on the same questions, repetitive as the Roman letters that play the digits in the title, so ancient and classical, yet contemporary and new in the next instalment of the continuing march of civilisation. *MMXX* as a symbol of the year 2020 is certainly a cinematic monument to everyday life constrained by the dictates of pandemics, rules that challenge our habits, taking away our hitherto seemingly obvious rights. However, it is also an enigmatic affirmation of the potential present in us, of the still unfulfilled dream of what another person, a loved one, a family, a child – our world – can be. And at the same time a testimony to human transience and impermanence, as common and necessary as knowledge of the Roman alphabet.

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