

Liviu LUTAS

Weirdness, Feel-Bad and New Extremity in Contemporary European Film: the Examples of Greece, Austria, France and Romania

Abstract. In this paper, I approach the question of the use of provocation based on elements like nakedness, sex, violence and weirdness in a number of contemporary films from Greece, Austria and Romania and compare them to the use of provocative elements in the New French Extremity wave. Indeed, these films seem to share the aim to create a feeling of discomfort in the viewer, and have therefore been labeled as The Greek Weird Wave (Rose 2011), Austrian feel-bad film (Lim 2006) and the New French Extremity (Quandt 2004). Romanian cinema after 2001 has only the label of "Romanian New Wave" or "New Romanian Cinema", but has similar characteristics, both thematically and aesthetically, to the other cinemas mentioned here. Some such characteristics are "awkward dialogue, heightened background noise, sudden violence and emotional breakdown", a "predilection for depicting the banal underbelly of society, which many filmmakers carefully dissect through strong formal agendas and unflinching hyperrealism", or a "crossover between sexual decadence, bestial violence and troubling psychosis".

The aim of the use of provocation in this film cannot be easily established. Admittedly, allegorical interpretations in political directions are possible and relevant, whether those concern the financial breakdown (as in the Greek examples) or the difficult adaptation to neo-liberalism (as in the Romanian examples) or just the movement against the bourgeois society and neo-liberalism (as in the Austrian and French examples). But provocation cannot be reduced to these allegorical interpretations. Its use allows for aesthetic innovation, which is analyzed here by a close reading of some case studies, such as Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997), Ulrich Seidl's *Dog Days* (2001), Yorgos Lanthimos's *Dogtooth* (2009), Cristi Puiu's *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (2005) and *Aurora* (2010), Cristian Mungiu's *3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007) and Călin Peter Netzer's *Child's Pose* (2013). New French Extremity films are only discussed as background examples in order to compare the use of provocative elements.

Keywords: Feel-bad, provocation, New French Extremity, Greek Weird Wave, Romanian New Wave, Haneke, Seidl, Puiu, Mungiu, Lanthimos.

The title of this paper might be slightly misleading, since Romanian film does not seem to be compatible with any of the three

Liviu LUTAS

Linnaeus University, Sweden

E-mail: liviu.lutas@lnu.se

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concepts mentioned there: weirdness, feel-bad and new extremity. Indeed, contemporary Romanian film is rather a concept in itself, also called "The New Romanian Cinema" (for instance by Alex Leo Șerban in 2009 and earlier articles and Andrei Gorzo in 2012) or "The Romanian New Wave Cinema" (for instance by Doru Pop in 2014). One concept which has been used in an attempt to characterize the essence of Romanian cinema between 2001 and 2011 is "minimalism", especially by Dominique Nasta (2014). However, the suitability of this concept has been questioned, among others by Pop (2014: 65) and Claudiu Turcuș (2014).

The three concepts in the title are rather connected to the three other national cinemas. Thus, weirdness is connected to the so called "Weird Wave" in Greek cinema, "Feel-bad" is a characteristic of Austrian cinema and "New Extremity" is reserved for a particular branch of French cinema. But the fact that Romanian New Wave lacks a specific concept that could be associated to it and define it like in the case of Greek, Austrian and French movies does not mean that there is no possibility to pinpoint some characteristics. Pop argues for instance that what defines the Romanian New Wave, if there were such a thing, is its aesthetics. And the roots of this aesthetics are arguably to be found in director Cristi Puiu's cinematic oeuvre. The aesthetics of the New Romanian cinema, claims Pop rightfully, is based on a particular way of viewing and representing reality, not as much as an object of perception that can be mimicked, but as an object influenced by beliefs and knowledge (Pop 2014:50). This aesthetics could be summarized by what Pop calls Puiu's "cinematic Gospel" and its four main rules: the rule of the immediate truth, the rule of truthful naturalism, the rule of involved authenticity and the rule of social responsibility (Pop 2014:45-46).

There are, however, a number of surprising connections, especially from a formal point of view, between Romanian cinema and the weirdness, the feel-bad and the new extremity that characterize Greek, Austrian and French cinema. These connections are not as strong as to claim that these four national cinemas form a distinct transnational study object, but they are sufficiently conspicuous to study together within the framework of provocation.

Indeed, it seems that what Greek weird film, Austrian feel-bad film and New French Extremity (and arguably even the Danish *Dogme 95* films and some Swedish films, as claimed by scholars like Hobbs 2015 and Nikolaidou 2014) have in common is a transgressive and shocking dimension. Indeed, one of their important aims seems to be to create a feeling of discomfort in the viewer. Thus, Greek film, as claims critic Steve Rose, who coined the term "Weird Wave" in 2011 in *The Guardian*, is "the world's most messed-up cinema" (Rose 2011). However, Rose does not base his claim on a clear theoretical definition of the concept of weirdness. The concept has however proved to be useful, and has later been associated to techniques which have usually shocking and destabilizing effects: "awkward dialogue, heightened background noise, sudden violence and emotional breakdown" (V.P., 2011), "challenging aesthetics and unconventional narratives" (Chalkou 2012:259) or a "reclusion in a post-modern

décor", "arrhythmic narration", "warped humor", "weirdness but perhaps too calculated" (Lepastier 2013:66). Films that can be mentioned in this category are *Knifer* by Yanis Economides (2010), *September* by Penny Panayotopoulou (2014), *Miss Violence* by Alexander Avranas (2014), *The Daughter* by Thanos Anastopoulos (2012), *Attenberg* by Athina Rachel Tsangari (2010), *The Eternal Return of Antonis Paraskevas* by Elina Psykou (2013) and especially *Dogtooth* (2009) and *Alps* (2011) by Yorgos Lanthimos.

The provocative element in Austrian feel-bad cinema is located, according to the critic who coined the term, Dennis Lim, in its "willingness to confront the abject and emphasize the negative" (Lim 2006). It is a cinema which deals with highly discomfoting themes, such as collective suicide, physical torture, racism, sexual tourism, and does so by using a strong formal cinematic language, for instance by "blurring the line between the real and the staged" or by an "unflinching hyperrealism" (Lim 2006). Films that can be placed into this category are practically all Michael Haneke's films, but especially *The Seventh Continent* (1989), *Benny's Video* (1992), *Funny Games* (1997) and *Caché* (2005), Jessica Hausner's *Lourdes* (2009), Barbara Albert's *Northern Skirts* (1999) and especially Ulrich Seidl's films, as for example *Dog Days* (2001) and *Paradise Trilogiy* (2012).

Finally, the films of what film critic James Quandt called "New French Extremity" (Quandt 2004:127), which can easily be classified as what Gilles Deleuze called "Cinema of the Body" in contrast to "Cinema of the Brain" (Deleuze 2005[1985]), seem to share "a penchant for provocation, using extreme representations of sex and violence to push the limits of acceptability in cinematic art" (Brinks 2013:2). With roots in art house cinema and horror movies at the same time, films belonging to the New French Extremity have provocation based on the physicality of the human body at their core. Examples of such films are Bruno Dumont's *L'Humanité* (1999), Virginie Despentes's *Baise-moi* (in English *Rape Me*, from 2001), Gaspar Noés *Irréversible* (2002), Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001) or Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* (2008).

The provocative use of corporeality in the New French Extremity is to be found, in slightly less shocking forms, in Austrian Feel-Bad and in Greek weirdness, as some critics have noted (see for instance Hobbs 2015 and Nikolaidou 2014). It is, on the other hand, only one of several provocative elements in these films, whose aesthetics in general is aimed at disturbing the audience. Thus, it is not surprising that the aesthetics of New French Extremity has been associated to the aesthetics of Austrian and Greek films. What is surprising is that Romanian New Wave has not been included in this context. In this paper, I therefore concentrate on provocative elements in some Austrian and Greek films, in the wake of the New French Extremity, before trying to find some connections between these and Romanian films.

It should be emphasized from the start that I mainly focus on formal aspects in the analyzed examples. As a matter of fact, critics have generally tried to find a transcendental meaning behind the use of the disturbing elements such as sex, violence, weird situations and settings and unusual formal traits. Usually, what has

been invoked as an explanation is the political allegory. And this of course is not wrong. Allegorical interpretations in political directions are possible and relevant, whether they concern the financial breakdown (as in Greece), the criticism of the bourgeois society and of neo-liberalism (as in the Austria and France) and the difficult adaptation to capitalism and neo-liberalism (as in Romania). An interesting association from this perspective can be made to films from Argentina, a country that has experienced similar financial breakdown and subsequent austerity measures to Greece. Rosalind Galt argues that Argentinian films work against a neo-liberalist construction of the world, and “their refusal to make sense, constitutes a refusal, in formal terms, of futurity” (Galt 2013:66). Rather than presenting the issues in a familiar way that reasserts the language of the status quo, Argentinian films, claims Galt, promote weirdness in order to destabilize the conventions: “[t]he perverse and surreal is made to feel quite commonplace in these films, yet meaning remains opaque, their lack of sense, here being presented as actively political rather than stylistically superficial” (Galt 2013:65).

However, the stylistically superficial should not be looked down upon, and deserves an analysis *per se*. Indeed, before the allegorical interpretation, the cinematic language of these films is what strikes the audience, and possibly what will survive in film history, thanks to its innovative dimension. Because, it must not be forgotten, this is a cinema of the body, where the sensations are depicted in a highly corporeal, or even visceral, manner.

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I start by analyzing two short scenes from a film directed by Ulrich Seidl, scenes which can be considered to epitomize the aesthetics of Austrian feel-bad films. The term “feel-bad” is used as a contrast to the more accepted genre of feel-good movies, which can be felt as unrealistic and escapist, giving a false image of reality and concentrating mostly on superficial aspects and on rich or middle class people’s insignificant problems. In Ulrich Seidl’s films, it is usually the middle class that is depicted too, but not in a superficial way. Seidl rather depicts the dark underbelly of Austrian society, which can be illustrated with the film *Dog Days* from 2001. The film, which won the Grand Jury Prize at Venice Film Festival, consists of six stories running in parallel, each story depicting violence and unstimulated sex scenes in very naturalistic ways.

In the first scene to be analyzed, one of the most disturbing of the film, a middle-aged man is sexually humiliated by a young man who points a gun at him and makes him sing *La Cucaracha* and the Austrian national anthem, at the same time as he shoves a lit candle light up his bottom. All this is done while he forces the man’s girlfriend, a middle-aged teacher, to watch the humiliation of her boyfriend. Admittedly, the scene, which is a part of the fifth story, is the continuation of an earlier scene of sexual abuse in this story, where the middle-aged man together with the young man humiliated the woman, practically raping her at the same time as they forced her to

sing *La cucaracha*. However, the young man's behavior towards the woman in the latter scene can hardly suggest any kind of apology for his earlier behaviour: it is rather as if he discovered that he actually enjoys harassing others.

What is interesting here is that it is not only the theme that is disturbing. Of course, the seemingly meaningless torture and harassment of the middle-aged man is an unpleasant subject, but its formal rendition is what is really provocative. The seemingly improvisational, amateur acting and the handheld camera make the scene feel uncomfortably banal and commonplace, at the same time as the black humor, especially when it comes to the choice of song (the Austrian national anthem), and a touch of stylization give a feeling of estrangement. The camera does not avoid showing the details, and the documentary style effectively effaces every trace of moral judgement or sentimentality. However, the banality of the scene, its everydayness, is what differentiates Austrian feel-bad from New French Extremity. Indeed, even if the physicality of both would place them in the class of "cinema of the body", there is less sensationalism in Seidl's film, and one could even discern a streak of humanity, of hope in them. No wonder that the third film in Seidl's *Paradise Trilogy* was entitled *Paradise Hope*.

But humanity and hope should not be confused with empathy and sentimentality. There is little in this scene that could arouse sympathy for any of the characters. Especially the two men are depicted as grotesque in their brutality, making it difficult for the audience to identify with them on a shared value system. The woman too is hard to feel sympathy for, since she seems to enjoy her status of sexual victim in a sadomasochist way.

The banality of the perversions together with the detached, unsentimental way in which they are depicted, is one of the trademarks of Austrian feel-bad films. Another characteristic feature is the stylized manner in which the perversions are sometimes suggested. The second scene I choose to analyze is illustrative from this point of view. It is the very beginning of Seidl's *Dog Days*, when the title and the opening credits are interrupted by tableau-like wide-angle, deep focus images of people lying in the sun in the gardens of their houses. These visual compositions are more effective at the formal level than at the meaning level, where they could be a critique of the alienation of middle-class man. Indeed, the most striking detail here is the corporeal grotesqueness of the characters, which will be confirmed in the rest of the film. This formal grotesqueness is highlighted by another formal means, namely by the juxtaposition of the imperfection of the bodies with the perfect rectilinearity of the rows of houses, which function as the perspective lines of a Renaissance painting.

What can disturb the viewer in this second scene from *Dog Days* is thus not the depiction of violence and sex, as in the previously analyzed scene, as much as the fact that reality seems distorted, or rather constructed, despite its everydayness. The unsettling perfection of the milieus of modernist white villas seems to hide something even more unsettling underneath, which is suggested by the fleshy corporeality of the characters depicted in the images.

Something similar is done in the Greek Weird Wave, especially in Yorgos Lanthimos's films. I analyze here two scenes from his film *Dogtooth* from 2009, scenes that are shocking because of their way of representing reality as constructed. Of course, the political allegorical interpretation seems at hand here, in a country where politicians have created an illusion of the country's financial situation (cf Bitel 2010). But the allegorical dimension, I argue, is not predominant in this film, and too much focus on it would make us neglect the complexity of the cinematic language in it, as well as its innovative and provocative aesthetics.

The film is about a rich middle-aged couple who isolate their three children, two girls and a boy in their twentyish but behaving like really small children, inside a country estate, telling them that what is outside the fence is dangerous. The parents do not actually obliterate the existence of a reality outside the fence, since the father actually has to leave sometimes and go to work, which means that the children could access it if only they started to question the rules made up by their parents. But this is not an easy thing to do when the parents somehow fool their children by distorting even the visible reality outside the fence, making it seem as a part of their small bubble. One scene in particular shows how this is done. When one of the girls sees an airplane in the sky, she is told that it is a small toy, and she says that she wants it to fall, so she can pick it up. The mother answers her that whoever deserves it will get it. The children interpret this as if this were a competition, so in a later scene, when the parents throw a toy airplane on the lawn exactly when a real airplane is passing above them, making the children believe that the real airplane had fallen in their garden, they all start running to get it.

Like in the opening scenes of Seidl's *Dog Days*, there is something unsettling about this scene, and about this film in general, where a perfect house hides such bizarre behaviours. What is particularly disturbing is the way in which the parents, maybe like the politicians in Greece, distort reality, and find suitable explanations even for events outside their fictional creation, like the airplane in the sky. Everything becomes isolated, claustrophobic, and no escape is to be conceived. The children are trapped in the estate in a similar way as the characters of the opening scenes in *Dog Days* are trapped in the perspective lines formed by the row of houses or in the cage-like form of their gardens.

Interestingly enough, the possibility of an escape from this situation is suggested in a scene in which reality appears as even more distorted, and where the boundaries between the real world and the represented world are blurred. In this scene, the whole family is sitting, after dinner, on a sofa in the living-room watching a video film of themselves while having a picnic on the lawn. There is something bizarre, something claustrophobic, about this situation, in which even the TV-set only shows the same characters in the same settings. This self-reflexivity is reinforced in an uncanny way through a formal device which I claim to be a narrative metalepsis, which is a transgression of the frontier between representational levels according to

narratologist Gérard Genette's definition (Genette 1983:58). This happens when one of the sisters on the sofa is moving her lips as if she were talking, but without producing any sound. The sounds come instead from the video film they are watching. Admittedly, the girl might only mimic the words which she remembers from the picnic day. The following clip, however, confirms the metalepsis. Indeed, the camera turns from the sofa to the TV-set, and shows the viewer the family sitting on the lawn. But when one of the sisters in the TV scene moves her lips as if speaking, the words uttered are incongruous with the situation. Both the words and the background noise seem actually to come from the people sitting on the sofa and watching. Indeed, the fact that the conversation in the picnic scene from the TV-set is about serving a drink in the sofa, as well as the lack of wind sound and the slight echo give the impression that the sounds come from inside the house. It is as if a metaleptic breach has occurred between the world of the TV viewers, their reality, and the reality represented in the TV screen. Paradoxically enough, this breach of the frontiers can be seen as a sign that there is a way out of the circularity of the situation, and consequently a way out of the fiction created by the parents, and where the children are ontologically imprisoned.

Interestingly enough, metalepsis, a device which can contribute to the weirdness of the represented world, was used in a renowned film from early Austrian feel-bad cinema: Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997). Indeed, the two youngsters who torture and finally kill a wealthy bourgeois family break sometimes the so called fourth wall and address the audience concerning their victims' chances of survival. David Grossvogel called such instances "Brecht's *Verfremdung* technique" (Grossvogel 2007:37), but the more technical concept of narrative metalepsis is much more suitable. Indeed, not only did this techniques exist long time before Bertolt Brecht's theatre plays (it suffices to mention Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Denis Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist* or Friedrich Schiller's theatre plays), but their effect is not always one of *verfremdung* (estrangement). On the contrary, metalepsis can even have an illusionistic effect (cf Klimek 2009).

Scholar Simon Hobbs follows Grossvogel's terminology, and claims that *Funny Games* "employs Brecht's *Verfremdung* technique so as to shock the audience into questioning their role in the consumption of meditated violence by interrogating the formalistic tropes of the home invasion horror template" (Hobbs 2015:41). However, this questioning is only one of effects that these metaleptic breaches could have. One other effect is actually the shock that the viewer can experience because of the illusion of being drawn into the fiction. This is what can happen in the last scene of the film, after the killing of the last family member, when one of the youngsters enters the neighbours' house and stares directly at the film viewers in a wry way, just as the picture freezes, at the same time as a very violent hard rock song accompanies the frozen image and the closing credits. This metaleptic breach of the fourth wall is of course ambiguous, since indeed it can have the *verfremdung* effect mentioned by Grossvogel and Hobbs. It could actually be a way to blink an eye at the audience

and remind them that they are just watching a work of fiction after all. But at the same time, the youngster's look is so threatening, so ominous, that it could actually be interpreted as a direct threat by the viewers, who can get the feeling that they will be the next victim. Whichever interpretation one chooses, it is undisputable that these metaleptic breaches of the fourth wall contribute to the creation of a feeling of discomfort in the viewer, which is the trade mark of feel-bad films.

Devices like narrative metalepses are not frequent in the minimalist realistic style of Romanian New Wave films. However, as Carlos Heredero has observed (2008:22-23), there is a stylized and formalized element in the realism practiced by the Young Romanian directors. Pop notices this too, and draws the attention to the paradoxical use of devices as the crossing of the "fourth wall", theatrical elements and iconographic references in a so called realistic cinema (Pop 2014:38). Even if these stylistic devices are less shocking than in Greek, Austrian and especially New French Extremity films, a comparison with these can emphasize some important aspects of the aesthetics of Romanian films, which are hardly just mimicking reality.

To start with, there are, as Pop notices, cases of breaking the fourth wall, or metalepses, in Romanian New Wave films. Pop puts these on the account of a goal of establishing a "close connection with the viewer, while keeping the unity of time and space" (Pop 2014:38). The moment of the metaleptic breach would thus be the intersection between the storyworld and the world of the viewer, which ultimately would reinforce a realistic effect, not undermine it, as is usually presumed that paradoxical narrative devices as metalepsis do. Indeed, according to some theorists who studied the effects of metalepsis, such as Frank Wagner (2002) or Debra Malina (2002), all metalepses break the realistic illusion. Other scholars, as for instance John Pier or Jean-Marie Schaeffer, are less categorical, and consider that most metalepses are anti-illusionistic (Pier and Schaeffer 2005:12-13), at the same time as they admit that some metalepses might not undermine the illusion of reality. There are scholars, such as Sonja Klimek (2009), Werner Wolf (2005) and Monika Fludernik (2005), who claim that some metalepses can actually reinforce realistic effects (Fludernik 2005:77). As a matter of fact, it has been argued that metalepses epitomize all "fictional immersion", since they put on stage one of its principal characteristics: the duality of the mental state during the act of immersion in a work of fiction. Especially Jean-Marie Schaeffer (2005:325) and Jean Bessière (2005) have emphasized this paradoxical aspect of metalepsis.

Interestingly enough, the metaleptic moment when the storyworld and the world of the viewer meet in Romanian New Wave films is often, as is the case in Haneke's *Funny Games*, a moment of high tension. It is not a moment of bliss and revelation, but rather of discomfort, the acme of the feel-bad feeling for the viewer, since he or she is literally drawn into the existential drama of the characters.

One illustrative example of such a disturbing metaleptic fusion can be found in the last scene of *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, Cristian Mungiu's Cannes Palme d'Or

winning film from 2007. It is a film in which the subject *per se* is disturbing: an illegal abortion done in the final years of Ceaușescu's repressive dictatorship by a very unpleasant male abortionist who in addition to the money also demands sex with the two women, the pregnant Găbița and her friend Otilia, as payment. The bleakness of the subject finds its reflection in the austerity of the settings and in the naturalistic style of the cinematic language, which make the film a relentless ordeal for the viewer, comparable to Austrian feel-bad. In such a context, it is all the more interesting to emphasize that Mungiu's film ends as does Haneke's *Funny Games*: with the character, Otilia, staring directly at the film viewers. However, even if this metaleptic gaze is disturbing, especially in a film in which the realistic illusion prevails, it is in many ways different from the gaze in *Funny Games*. As Pop rightfully claims, the gaze functions rather as a way of "attributing the viewers the position of an accomplice" at the same time as Otilia is "looking into the soul of the spectator" in a way that can be compared to the characters painted in Byzantine icons (Pop 2014:152). Such a look can admittedly be experienced as threatening by an exposed viewer, but the threat is not of the same kind as in Haneke's film, where the character seems to threaten the viewer's life. As Pop concludes, the emptiness of the gaze makes that "the crossing of the screen becomes an expression of despair and of abandonment of humanity" (Pop 2014:152). Therein resides the discomfort of the viewer, made an accomplice by Otilia, who makes him or her experience the same despair as she does.

As I already mentioned, metalepses are not frequent in Romanian New Wave Cinema. One other remarkable example that could be mentioned is Viorel, the main character in Cristi Puiu's *Aurora* (2010), a cold blooded serial killer. Here too, observes Pop (2014:146), there is a resemblance with a character from a Byzantine icon: the famous *archeipropoietis*, or "non-painted by a human hand". Not only does Viorel stare at the viewers, as does Jesus in the icon, but there is even a physical resemblance between them. However, these formal (visual) similarities function as a way to emphasize an essential difference at the content level between the icon and the film. Viorel "is a Christ-like figure", claims Pop, "who does not save anybody, not even himself" (2014:146). On the contrary, he brings death. His actions do not point to God, as did Christ's, but rather to the absence of anything spiritual. His dehumanization is "the reversed function of the humanity of Christ" (Pop 2014: 142). So the faith and spirituality of the icon is turned into despair and lack of faith, which are shared with the viewers through Viorel's metaleptic gaze.

Another aspect which Romanian New Wave cinema seems to share with New French Extremity, Austrian feel-bad cinema and the Greek Weird Wave is the importance of the human body in its physicality. Indeed, none of these categories of films avoids showing physiological acts which would be unthinkable in classical cinema of Hollywood type, the "disembodied" cinema with a term used by scholars Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener (2010), especially since they do not seem to contribute to the narrative development proper: eating, going to the toilet, having

sex, sleeping or other intimate acts. In contrast to that kind of classical cinema, human bodies in these four cinemas are often shown in their nakedness, but never with a pornographic aim: it is either a way to accomplish naturalism, the *punctum* where *l'effet de réel* (the "reality effect") comes into being in the mind of the perceiver according to Roland Barthes (Barthes 1981:26-27), or a way to emphasize the everydayness, the unordinariness and the animality of the characters. Characters are sometimes shown during highly intimate acts, for instance when they examine their own decrepit body (for instance Viorel who is palpating his testicles in the shower in Cristi Puiu's *Aurora*), take care of their hygiene (the middle-aged teacher who trims her pubic hair in Seidl's *Dog Days*), have sex in awkward, unsimulated ways (the parents in Lanthimos's *Dogtooth*) or are being raped (Alex in the several minutes long rape scene in Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible*). One of the most recurrent motifs in the Romanian New Wave Cinema is for instance eating, and practically all the films contain a long table scene depicted in detail (Chirilov 2011:14 and Pop 2014:136).

However, as Pop claims, "physiology is never gratuitous in Romanian New Wave" (Pop 2014:61). This does not mean that it serves symbolic purposes either, since the lack of a transcendental, symbolic meaning and the philosophy of "what you see is what it is" is what seems to characterize these films (Georgescu 2011:137, my translation. See even Pop 2014:60-61). However, things are not as straightforward as they seem in this respect. There are, indeed, many examples of scenes depicting physiological acts or human bodies in their stark corporeality which are more than "slices of life" or *effet de réel*.

To start with, the ubiquitous table scenes have often a descriptive or a narrative function. The long meal scene for instance in Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days*, where only Otilia is framed while the other table guests are only heard, "emphasizes the heroine's discomfort and the feeling that she is caught in a trap from which she cannot escape" (Chirilov 2011:13). This discomfort, created by formal means, is reminiscent of the way in which the row of houses is used in Seidl's *Dog Days*, or of the way in which the airplane scene or the TV set scene are depicted in Lanthimos's *Dogtooth* in order to create a feeling of claustrophobia. The formal device through which Otilia's isolation at the table is suggested reflects her isolation at the content level, Otilia being criticized and treated like an outsider by the other table members, and eventually by the Communist system in general. The similarity that Pop observed between this scene and the paintings of Christ's last supper (Pop 2014:141-142) emphasizes Otilia's isolation even more clearly.

However, the table scenes in Romanian New Wave, including the one analyzed above, are actually depicted as quite vulgar, almost disgusting physiological acts. Indeed, even if the table members are not seen, since Otilia is the only character framed by the camera, we can hear how they chew at the same time as they slander, we can hear how they indulge in gluttony. The whole scene becomes all the more

disgusting when being mediated through the sense of hearing, which is not usually associated with eating more than in the cases when the process of eating is not very elegant. Besides, the involvement of as many senses as possible is completely in line with the classification of such films as “cinema of the body”.

In the same line of thought, it is hardly surprising that there are many examples of disgusting, or even shocking exposures of the human body in its nakedness. I already mentioned the shower scene in Puiu’s *Aurora*, and could mention Radu Muntean’s films *Summer Holiday* (2008, *Boogie* in original), where the main character walks naked on the beach with his son on the shoulders, and *Tuesday after Christmas* (2010), where the nakedness of the two lovers in the opening scene covers the whole screen. In both Muntean’s films, these scenes are so important that they are used in the English posters used for the international marketing of the films.

One of the most interesting examples to study in this context is the final scene in Cristi Puiu’s *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (2005). In this film about an old man who is driven in an ambulance to different hospitals in Bucharest, the human body in its decrepitude and transience is practically the main subject. And just to emphasize that, the last scene is an extreme long shot of the body of the main character, Mr. Lăzărescu, lying naked on a stretcher and being prepared for the operation by two nurses, who eventually cover him with a white sheet. No details are avoided in this shot, in which all wrinkles and all imperfections of Mr. Lăzărescu’s body are exposed during several minutes. Intimate details like the shaving of his hair and the changing of his underwear are shown too. This insistence on corporeality has of course nothing sexual in it, and its grotesqueness can be compared to similar exposure of naked bodies especially in New French Extremity.

However, there is a certain stylization in this last scene, whose relative motionless makes it comparable to a painting. As Nasta observes, it can even be compared to a specific painting: “The stark-naked original man, his body covered by a white sheet, is framed in a frontal medium shot resembling Rembrandt’s figuring of an agonized Christ after Calvary” (Nasta 2013:162). Such a reference to a renowned painting can seem surprising in the context of a realistic film, in which “what you see is what it is”, as film critic Lucian Georgescu puts it (Georgescu 2011:137, my translation). It is however interesting to mention that such unexpected imitations of paintings are made also in the French, Austrian and Greek films mentioned here, despite their seemingly observational documentary style. Bruno Dumont’s *L’Humanité* (1999) alludes for instance to Gustave Courbet’s 1866 painting *The Origin of the World*, an anatomically detailed close-up of a woman’s vagina, in an disturbingly detailed shot showing the body of a murdered 11-year-old girl. The already mentioned opening images in Seidl’s *Dog Days* resemble Diane Arbus’s photograph *A family on their lawn one Sunday in Westchester, N.Y.* from 1968. The aim of such intermedial imitations should be analyzed in each particular case, but a common nominator is that they seem to lift the story from its banality to a more universal level, pointing maybe to

another level of signification. In the particular case of *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, I agree with Pop that “the ordeal of the main character [...] is a metaphoric translation of the ordeal of the Romanian society as a whole. Mr. Lăzărescu is metonymically replacing an entire past; he is a manifestation of a moment in recent history which is slowly and painfully passing away” (2014: 106).

Another interesting case of a shocking exposure of a human body is the renowned abortion scene from Mungiu’s *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*. It takes place when Otilia comes back to the hotel room where she had left her pregnant friend Găbița who had to wait for the sterilized tube to work and to have the foetus expelled. Otilia goes to the bathroom and finds the foetus on the floor. The camera first frames Otilia’s face while she is standing at the bathroom door, then follows her gaze and moves down, until it frames the foetus. It stays there for a long while, even when Otilia leaves the bathroom and goes to Găbița’s bed to help her. It thus offers a tableau-like image during several seconds, forcing the viewer watch the bloody object lying on a towel. Besides the abject of this scene, which of course is shocking and feel-bad, there is the question of how the representation is done. Indeed, the use of a handheld camera, the choice of a focalisation point close to the floor where there is no character who can work as focalizer, the extreme long shot and the motionlessness contribute to a stylized representation, the foetus appearing almost as a work of sculptural art.

Both the scene showing Mr. Lăzărescu’s body on the stretcher and the scene showing the foetus on the bathroom floor can be experienced as provocative, in the same way as naked bodies of ordinary people are used in French, Austrian and Greek films. However, it must be emphasized that provocation is rather secondary here. The insistence on physiology and the weirdness of these scenes are rather strategies used to highlight human dignity.

I will conclude my analyses with another example of a very complex way of representing reality, taken from a recent Romanian film, made after the presumed period of the New Wave (2001-2011 according to many critics, such as Pop): Călin Peter Netzer’s *Child’s Pose (Poziția copilului)* from 2013. It is the final scene, in which the tension is at its top, since Barbu, who killed a child when driving his car too fast, finally has the courage to face the child’s father and take the responsibility for his actions. Indeed, Barbu was taken there by his manipulative and overprotective mother, who first met the parents while Barbu was waiting in the car outside the house. Just before leaving, Barbu finally decides to leave the car and meet the father outside.

The interesting thing is that neither the viewers nor the mother, who stays in the car, hear what is said during this short meeting. The scene is instead represented only visually, and moreover in a way which raises questions about distortion of reality and weirdness. Indeed, the meeting is filmed with a handheld camera, which emphasizes the fact that there is a mediation going on. This is emphasized further by the fact that the scene is first framed through the rear window of the car, and then through the wing mirror. The viewer then does not have direct visual access to the actual

meeting. But this could be a way to remind the viewer of the cinematic illusion, since even otherwise the meeting would have been mediated, by the screen. However, a comparison with the above analysed scenes from Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* and Puiu's *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* highlights the resemblance with a painting. Both framing, soundlessness and motionless are indeed characteristics normally associated to the medium of painting. In the context of a realistic film, this raises questions about the authenticity of the scene. Indeed, stylization creates an effect of weirdness compared to the conventions of realistic film, but in this case it emphasizes the difficulty to represent reality in an immediate way, especially when the event depicted is emotionally loaded.

There is another important parallel to be drawn between this scene and the films studied earlier. Indeed, the representation of a mirrored image instead of the image itself is often used in Puiu's *Aurora*. As Turcuş observes, Viorel, the protagonist, is frequently filmed while looking at himself in the rear mirror of his car, his image reflecting back into the camera. Turcuş thinks that there is an important self-reflexive dimension in this technique, which has become increasingly important in Romanian New Wave cinema. "This image", Turcuş claims, "where Viorel becomes simultaneously subject and object of the observation can be read as a metaphor of self-referentiality, as if his glance towards the world only could send him back his own face" (Turcuş 2014:293-294, my translation). Or not even his own face, I would say, but a representation, a mediation of his own face. It is the same kind of self-reflexivity as in the TV set scene from Lanthimos's *Dogtooth*, where the effect is claustrophobic. In *Child's Pose*, the effect is different. Certainly, the mirrored image has a self-reflexive aim and a claustrophobic effect, but what actually happens here is that Barbu finally frees himself from his mother's domination and possessiveness. The mirror image of him is perceived by the mother, who is the one who is trapped inside the car, and consequently cut off from her son. Admittedly, the viewer finds himself in the car too, thanks to the positioning of the camera, but the fact that the meeting ends by Barbu shaking hands with the father of the killed child is a relief for the viewer. It is probably not the same relief for Barbu's mother, who suddenly loses the control over her son.

...

So what can be concluded after this short comparison of four different cinematographic movements? The main conclusion would be that these films share an element of weirdness, of subversion, generally aimed at having a disturbing effect on the audience. The aesthetic means are, as we have seen, comparable, but the aim of the provocation can be very different between the different examples. In the films of the New French Extremity, the provocation is most clearly based on nakedness, sex and violence, the ultimate aim being probably one of subverting the moral rules of a bourgeois society. In Austrian feel-bad films, especially in Haneke's early films, the scenes of nakedness, sex and violence are comparable to those in New French

Extremity both concerning their formal aspect and their aim. However, Seidl's films introduces a light streak of humanity and hope in his disturbing scenes, which make them lose a little of their provocative edge. In the Greek *Weird Wave*, the disturbing effect comes less from sex and violence than from the weirdness of the represented world and of the way in which it is represented. Paradoxical narrative techniques are for instance used in highly innovative ways in Lanthimos's films with the probable aim of revealing the constructedness of reality. Finally, Romanian New Wave films use the same kind of aesthetic means, but with a much more humanistic aim. Provocation built on nakedness, sex and weirdness is still an important part there, but it is "never gratuitous", as Doru Pop concludes (Pop 2014:61).

To finish, it is important to emphasize what these four cinemas have in common, despite their differences: namely the kind of provocative aesthetics that turns its back to the feel-good aesthetics of mainstream Hollywood production. The main merits of this kind of cinema lies in the fact that it opens towards diversity. Indeed, the whole range of tastes cannot be put to work if only sugar is consumed.

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