

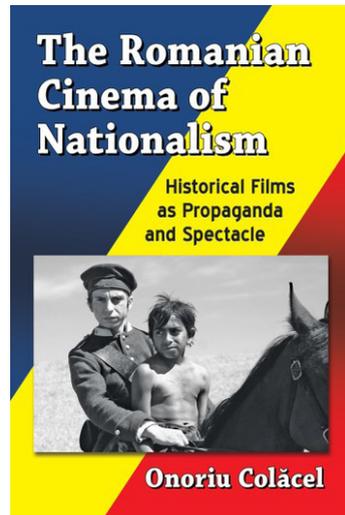
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Propaganda, Spectacle and Nationalism

Review of: Onoriu Colăcel, *The Romanian Cinema of Nationalism: Historical Films as Propaganda and Spectacle*, McFarland & Company, 2018.

Onoriu Colăcel's book, *The Romanian Cinema of Nationalism: Historical Films as Propaganda and Spectacle* (McFarland & Company, 2018) provides a sweeping and most useful coverage of the historical saga films produced in socialist Romania, but also of the more complex relationships between filmmaking and the spread of nationalism in this country. Furthermore, once the reader accepts Colăcel's initial propositions, that "communist cinema" refers to socialist-era films produced by Romania's state-controlled studios or that the idiom "historicals" refers to the better-known English concepts of "historical epics" or "peplums" or "sword and sandal" films (an explanation that arrives in the book late, on page 21), the work is on its way to deliver an intriguing premise.

The most valuable idea presented by Colăcel's arguments is that a continuity between the socialist and the postsocialist periods in Romania's history should be reestablished, despite the intervening rupture between the recent capitalist evolutions and its past. The author contends that this is due to an equal dedication to the promotion of nationalist values in



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both periods, and that an intervention in the historiography of Romanian cinema is much needed. As such, the author claims that even though the state abandoned and condemned what he calls the “the self-congratulatory period movies of the communist regime,” in postsocialism “the trend changed...”, although “history on film has been used to reaffirm the same political commitment to the nation.” (9)

Taking a chronological approach to the evolution of what he calls the “historicals,” Colăcel traces the development of an essentially Hollywood-inspired genre, which ended up infusing patriotism but also jingoism in Romanian audiences starting with *Tudor* in 1962; continuing with *Dacii* and *Columna* of 1967 and 1968; the Ceausescu-legitimacy-vehicle *Burebista* of 1980; and finally, the postsocialist “reevaluation” of nationalism of Nae Caranfil’s *The Rest is Silence* and Radu Jude’s *Aferim!*. Although this is an odd choice for representations of the concept of the nation onscreen, Colăcel successfully argues that a movie like *The Rest is Silence* evidences the alterity-bashing version of nationalism that Romanians embraced since the inter-war years.

The representations of the Other on the Romanian screen in fact motivate much of the author’s writing, as he correctly observes that the Roman empire was portrayed in a positive light ever since *Dacii*, to the detriment of all other subsequent “invaders” such as the Ottomans and the Greeks (71), who provided Romanian historiography with a national self-definition predicated upon the negation of the non-Romanian ethnic element. However, the author does not explore the deeper ramifications of this observation for Romanian nation-building, especially in the postsocialist period, which would have provided an even more interesting conclusion.

Even though the author occasionally uses references to the larger Eastern European context, as he does when pointing out that Romania (just as Bulgaria or Yugoslavia) didn’t practically have a cinematic industry prior to WWII (8), Colăcel continues to treat the history of Romanian cinema as separate for its context. More references to surrounding cinemas such as the Bulgarian one which equally thrived on historical sagas produced during the socialist period would have enriched his argument.

Another weakness is the author’s approach of Romanian history from the current framework of the European Union project. It is important to remember that even though Europe persisted as a trope in the Romanian imaginary since the Enlightenment, contentions about the country’s belonging to a “pure” Western or Eastern cultural sphere were indeed abundant until the middle of the twentieth century. Indeed, there is a running obsession with European integration (seen in fact in the writings of a multitude of postsocialist cinema theorists from Dina Iordanova and Dominique Nasta to Doru Pop), who insist on linking the post-communist cultural life of the country with various European movements. If Colăcel correctly argues that Romania’s propagandist historical sagas of the socialist period act as projections of the nationalist-Communist present onto the past, the author’s treatment of Romanian history as a continuing extension of that of Western Europe amounts to the same projection of present political agendas into his scholarship.

Because of these agendas, an inferiority complex is unfortunately evident. However, this becomes interesting when used to defend the quality of Romanian “spectaculars” in the face of what is perceived as the almost threatening (and definitely domineering) position of Western historical epics over what he calls Romania’s status as a minor culture. In this, Colăcel goes in fact one step farther than other film historians: Aside from pointing out the common origin of Romanian historical epics and Hollywood peplums, he makes surprisingly effective references to Soviet propaganda, which few Romanian scholars (of film or any other field) attempted in postsocialism.

Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* also gets a welcome nod. Colăcel argues that film—just as Anderson’s print capitalism, and historical film in particular—created in some sense the community the author correctly identifies as ethno-nationalist. However, if such was his intent and references to *Aferim!* and *The Rest is Silence* are well-placed, inclusion of certain Corneliu Porumboiu films such as his iconic *12:08 East of Bucharest* which similarly explores the essence of Romanianness through the intervention of an ethnic Chinese character in the narrative could have strengthened the argument.

Cultural historian Alex Drace Francis and David Bordwell are brought together surprisingly seamlessly. The poststructuralist argument that film as text is surpassed by the uses made of text (Bordwell) help Colăcel defend his main thesis, namely that the purpose of Romanian historicals was “to foster national cohesion.” (11) He is equally right to point out that it is the “structure of phantasy” (13) as related to the national self-image—an idealistic image of pluriethnic cohesion created in large part by socialist-era historical film—that continues to inform the self-definition of the nation after the fall of Ceaușescu’s nationalist-communist regime.

As stated earlier, the exploration of the problematic of self-definition invites a more culturally relevant approach, one that considers the implications of the ethno-national imaginary, but Colăcel’s intervention is both timely and honest, as it is predicated on what he states is the creation of Romanianness by cinematic discourse: “I find that Romanianism and Romanianness are brought together by such movies and, importantly, by their reception.” (15) This take on nationalism expiates some of the blame directed toward the so-called propaganda cinema of the Ceaușescu era. By distinguishing between art cinema and “spectaculars (that) conveyed a sense of belonging,” (17) Colăcel refutes some of the arguments with which directors like Sergiu Nicolaescu, Lucian Bratu, and Mircea Dragan are “indicted with.” (ibid.)

As stated earlier, one of the book’s fortes is the acknowledgement of Soviet influence (or response to such influence) in Romanian films of the era. When discussing *Tudor*, the opening film of the historical franchise, the author correctly identifies the historically misplaced blame for the failure of a nationalist revolution with the Greeks, whom Colăcel calls “Kremlin phanariots” (33) and reading *Tudor* as a divorce bill from Soviet Russia is an interesting statement. However, there is a

lack of any treatment of international Communism in films prior to Tudor. Even if not historical epics, films about internationalism and antifascism such as *Viața învinge* or *Alarmă în munți* should have been considered as they constituted the background upon which nationalism-communism on screen was later created.

Although this book is not a translation, the elimination of minor mistakes such as the overuse of the definite article “the,” as well as the restructuring of prolix and oftentimes muddled sentences (particularly in the introduction) would have rendered the text more user-friendly for English audiences. If the prestigious publishing house McFarland had actually taken the time to alter, explain or contextualize some of the terminology created by the transference of concepts from one cultural context to another, and if the introduction had benefited from a slightly more caring and dedicated editorial hand to render the stacking of the argument more fluent, Onoriu Colăcel’s book would have appeared from the very first pages just as important and timely as most of its contents is. The analysis of Romanian historical epic films in the context of the changing self-definition of nationhood from the socialist to the postsocialist periods did not receive such attentive and careful treatment elsewhere in the English academic publication before. In that sense, it represents a significant contribution to the field of Romanian film scholarship as well as nationalism studies.