

**Migration and romanian identity in
Angus Macqueen's *The Last Peasants. Temptation* (2003)**

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*Résumé: Présenté au Festival International du Film Documentaire et de l'Anthropologie Visuelle de Sibiu, Astra Film Fest, la trilogie **The Last Peasants** (2003) d'Angus Macqueen a été beaucoup appréciée par le public et par les critiques. Les films valent par la sincérité et la sympathie que le réalisateur anglais éprouve dans sa représentation de la vie des paysans roumains du village de Budești, dans le Maramureș, dramatiquement marquée par le déclin de la culture rurale traditionnelle et par le mirage de l'Ouest auquel la jeune génération ne peut pas résister. Cet article se propose d'analyser un des trois films de la trilogie, à savoir **Temptation**, afin de mettre en évidence l'art du documentaire qui, à l'aide des modes d'expression cinématographiques, construit une image de l'identité des émigrants roumains qui échappe aux stéréotypes négatifs dominant la mentalité des sociétés occidentales d'accueil.*

Mots-clés: film documentaire, migration, identité, stéréotypes.

The 1989 change of regime in the Romanian society brought about radical changes at all levels of life. Constrained for years by the restrictive policies of the Communist authorities to refrain from travelling abroad, as migration for political reasons, in particular, was much resented by Ceaușescu's dictatorship¹, most Romanian citizens welcomed the post-1989 liberalisation of passport administration and international travel as a 'breath of fresh air.' Over the following decades, the main reasons for migration became mainly economic (rather than political, as used to be the case), and the ensuing migration flows evolved between permanent and temporary, legal and illegal limits. In the absence of European-initiated visa-granting programmes to stimulate the migration of persons holding certain qualifications required in the receiving countries (like those developed by the USA, Canada, Australia or New Zealand²), and given the scarcity of bilateral agreements for temporary legal migration to the European states, at the turn of the millennium (at least until 2007), many Romanians affected by the economic decline of the Romanian society in transition chose illegal circular migration to different European destinations³.

The exodus of the Romanian migrants that raised problems for both the sending and the receiving communities became then a subject for debate in the media. The reasons and consequences of migration for labour were largely presented especially in the written press and on television, but filmmakers also started taking interest in this multifaceted phenomenon, essentially implying cross-cultural encounters that caused the reshaping of constructions of national identity and alterity in various European cultural spaces. Assuming an active part in arousing public awareness of the transformations in the contemporary society and shaping the viewers as public actors, certain documentarists took aspects of Romanian migrants' life at home and/or among their European hosts as the raw material out of which they could weave narrative structures that, owing to their equally compelling and truthful nature, would become powerful instruments of "reality-shaping communication"⁴. Angus Macqueen was one of them.

Having long crusaded against the indifference of the West-European neighbours towards the Eastern societies after the fall of Communist regimes (with a special stress on "the Russia that was emerging from the break-up of the Soviet Union"⁵), the British filmmaker set out to examine the stories of Romanian illegal migrants in a series of three documentaries brought together under the title *The Last Peasants* (2003) (*Journeys, Temptation* and *A Good Wife*). In explaining the educational function⁶ of his work, he stated that:

“With *The Last Peasants*, I set myself the task of making an audience fall in love with an illegal immigrant. In Britain, they are usually the subject of lurid headlines about invasions and scroungers. Yet these are the people who clean our houses, dig our gardens, and generally do the jobs we no longer want to. I wanted to understand what drove them from their own homes to the urban squalor that so many live in on the edges of our cities. [...] So documentary has become the way I have found to talk about that world out there.”⁷

Following in the footsteps of an entire generation of ethnographic documentarists⁸, Angus Macqueen proposed an unavoidably subjective view on the lives of ordinary Romanian peasants from the village of Budești, in a remote corner of Maramureș, with an aim at drawing his viewers’ attention to the fact that there is more about Romania than just children with disabilities, beggars, stray dogs, traffickers, or illegal migrants crowding in miserable slums outside many West European towns. Rejecting the negative stereotypes in terms of which many foreign TV channels and newspapers represented Romanianness, he sought to uncover for the world the dramatic stories of Romanian peasants trapped between their centuries-old rural culture and the mirage of the consumerist society of the West, in order to involve the audience emotionally and to thus help them see migration in a different light and perhaps change their attitudes towards it. To be more specific, his films foreground, empathically, characters who desperately wish to make a better living, despite all the (financial, legal, etc.) hardships that attaining this goal might imply, and the filmmaker seems to have “faith in the absolute relevance of his subjects’ remarkable lives, faith in the ability of his audience to absorb the subtlety and import of the experiences they relate.”⁹

Vacillating between observational/direct cinema filming, that attempts to represent the life of the other with a minimum of intervention, and participatory/cinema-vérité sociological investigation with the encounter between the anthropologist and the subject becoming a critical element of the film¹⁰, the trilogy ethnographically glances at events of a more or less conflicting nature that sustain the main themes of the dissolution of the rural community, internal and external migration, in general, and illegal labour migration across national borders, in particular. In *Temptation*, for instance, the dichotomic oppositions that underlie the filmic text – old/young, experienced/unexperienced, man/woman, married/single, rural/urban, East/West, legal/illegal – are particularised in the stories of two families – Opreș and Bud – from Budești.

Gheorghe Opreș and his wife Irina have been for years some of the most respected and well-off members of the local community. They own large stretches of land, orchards and a threshing machine which allows them to benefit from 10% of the corn harvest of the village every year. Unfortunately, they do not have their sons’ support: the eldest left to the USA and settled there, while the youngest, Laurențiu, who is still in Romania, is not interested in his father’s business, but wants to make his own way in life, either as a migrant (he had been trying to illegally migrate to the USA but he was cheated by an illegal visa provider), or as the manager of his own business (he works in the forest, cutting logs to be subsequently sold). The father is not happy about the way in which Laurențiu (who is more of an artist, a member of a local folk music band) runs his business in the forest, anticipating his failure. Within a few months, Gheorghe Opreș is, unfortunately, proven right, as his son becomes subject of a police investigation as a result of his disastrous affairs with the mayor’s office. Though the father pays the son’s debts, Laurențiu seems determined to be ungrateful, so he leaves for a small town in the neighbourhood, where he gets involved with a woman that he knows his parents will never accept because of her past: she is said to have been involved with a married man and has an illegitimate son, whom Laurențiu loves very much. Furthermore, he carries on with his plan of migrating to the USA supported by his girlfriend. That causes an irremediable separation from his parents whom he avoids visiting or inviting for Christmas, because, every time they meet, they end up offending each other. (Laurențiu even wishes they would die

sooner, while Gheorghe and Irina threaten to disinherit him and to adopt a child who would cherish and preserve their values.) Gheorghe and Irina are eventually abandoned by their second son as well, to go through the hardships of life on their own. Irina is to be operated on for hernia and Gheorghe is very tired and worn with care and shame.

As for the Bud family, for three generations, they have owned a mill on the mountain river. But the father's health has worsened and the son, Lorinț, left for London as a migrant; as he has got a job and makes a good living, he intends to stay in London for two more years to learn English better and to make more money. Thus, the three women in the family are left in charge of the house and of the family business. Under the circumstances, Florica, the daughter, is supposed to continue the family tradition, getting married in the village and settling at the mill. Yet, Florica has other plans: she wants to get married abroad, or at least to find a well-paid job there, to be independent. And she does her best to fulfil her dream. At first, like most of the Romanians who illegally migrate for labour, she contacts, at her brother's recommendation, an illegal visa provider (Sorin), but she eventually gives up because she realises she will probably be cheated on. Then, she plans to migrate to Italy and from there to find a way to join her brother in London. She starts learning English to be prepared for migration to the UK, but soon she finds out about an opportunity of migrating to Belgium as an unskilled worker (housekeeper or care-taker). She travels to Bucharest in the company of another woman from the village and she goes to an interview where she discovers that, unfortunately, she is not fit for the job (her only skills relate to housekeeping, she has no computer skills and no knowledge of French). She returns home very disappointed and tries to cope with the frustrations that life in the countryside presupposes.

The two stories somewhat intersect only once at the end of the film when the entire village community – including Gheorghe and Irina Opriș, on the one hand, and Florica Bud, on the other – attends the public performance of a Nativity play by the few young men still in the village and a few young girls.

Without sacrificing the journalistic integrity of the mostly observational approach characterising this part of the trilogy, Angus Macqueen made the best of his creativity in arranging the details of these lives that lie at the heart of his story in an artistic framework allowing him “to refer to reality symbolically”¹¹. Thus, *Temptation* seems to be conceived on an allegorical pattern. It starts with establishing shots of an idyllic, paradise-like summer landscape in the fields, while the voice-over of the priest speaks of the genesis, the fall of man and the mortal condition that man has hence assumed. Similarly, the film presents the decline of a way of life, which the filmmaker seems to find “fascinating in its uniqueness”¹², because of the gap between generations and of the radical changes in the Romanian society that make migration to the West a more appealing perspective than modest life in the Romanian countryside. Corresponding to the main agricultural seasons, the three parts of the documentary metaphorically suggest different ages of man: summer reminds of man's life in God's Eden Garden, autumn, with the apple harvest, parallels the temptation and man's eating from the tree of knowledge, while winter, with its gloominess and ensuing sense of loneliness and isolation, calls to mind the breach between God and man, between parents and children who are doomed to pay for their original sin (which they assume) wondering across the land. That lends the film a rather elegiac touch since, as the director emphasised, what Communism, with all its constraints and deprivations, could not destroy is ruined by less than twenty years of democracy.

The endurance of the traditional way of life in the Romanian village throughout the Communist years may be accounted for by certain similarities in the patterns underlying life in the community, namely large power distance and a preference for collectivism in a masculine type of community that tends to high uncertainty avoidance¹³. In other words, the rural community appears as a rather ‘closed’ in-group in which children are required

unconditional obedience and loyalty to their parents, where there is a very strict sense of hierarchy in the role distribution within the family (the father is the head of the family and mostly in charge of the family business, whereas the mother is confined to the domestic sphere) and where members of the in-group are suspicious of what is new and different. This is best illustrated in Gheorghe and Irina Opreș's rejection of Laurențiu's girlfriend, a woman from town, who had an affair with a married man the result of which was an illegitimate child, as well as in father and grandmother Bud's advice to Florica to get married in the village and to settle there. The post-1989 period of transition has brought about, especially for the younger generation, a change in mental 'software' with a re-orientation towards small power distance communities, characterised by individualism and weak uncertainty avoidance. Thus, Laurențiu stubbornly tries to develop an independent business; he is not afraid of going through new experiences (even if they end up disastrously) and he speaks his mind in front of his parents when he defends his dreams of migrating and his desire to marry the woman he loves, even if his parents will not accept her. In turn, Florica wishes she could make the best of the knowledge she acquired in school, find a good job, make her own living even if that means leaving abroad, and only afterwards get married and, perhaps, return (if ever) to the village. If her brother Lorinț made it in London, she is convinced she will too.

As a matter of fact, Florica's case is all the more interesting as it raises issues of gender roles in the contemporary society and points to how migration contributes to (re)shaping women's identity. Forced by the patriarchal order that dominates life in her rural community to move exclusively within the domestic sphere as a would-be peasant's wife, Florica hopes that crossing borders (to town/abroad) for work will be empowering and will offer her opportunities to challenge the established gender norms. What she does not seem to be aware of is that finding employment in precarious, low paid jobs – like housekeeping or care – which are “often not visible or not recognised as ‘work’ especially if they are performed outside the legal framework” will not lead to a full disruption of gender hierarchies, but, on the contrary, to reproducing and even intensifying them: “The preservation of hierarchies of class and gender means that – whatever the gains that may be achieved by immigrants – they are offset by the loss of status, overwork, declassing, and exploitation. Depending on the context and the sector of work, there is also a high risk of being confronted with experiences of extreme humiliation and violence...”¹⁴ *Temptation* does not provide, however, an in-depth study of the potential consequences of the intersection of gender and migration-generated hierarchies for migrant women workers: as Florica fails to find work abroad, such aspects are not further explored.

The stress that the filmic text lays upon the dramatic effects of the clash between the archaic rural culture and the progress promised by the consumerist society, between the East and the West, on the lives of the inhabitants of Budești is also supported by the opposition deliberately established between the rural, idyllic, though somewhat primitive landscape of the Maramureș countryside, presented in its gradual transformation from summer to winter, and the urban scenery that bears the marks of civilisation, whether in a small town in Maramureș or in cities like Bucharest or London. There is an obvious contrast between Gheorghe and Irina Opreș's old-fashioned house decorated in the folk style, with woven carpets on the walls and old black-and-white pictures of Gheorghe and Irina as a young couple, on the one hand, and Laurențiu's flat in town with modern furniture, but with barely any personalising markers – like photos – to suggest the owner's emotional attachment to it, on the other. Several sequences of the film hint at the same disparity: the Bud family are shown gathering on cold and wet autumn/winter nights in the poorly-furnished living-room to watch TV programmes or a tape sent by Lorinț from London on a small screen while sitting in a row on wooden chairs; yet, no one crowds on the large and comfortable sofa in Laurențiu's flat to watch films on the widescreen TV; the same sense of emptiness emanates from the

presentation, by means of a surveying pan, of Lorinț's small room in London, which he shares with another Romanian migrant, and which proves a kitschy mixture of stereotypical identity markers of the Romanian, Christian illegal male migrant, i.e.: walls covered with paper posters containing ads in both English and Romanian, showing football players and naked women, a clock, an icon, a messy couch, a small bowl of food, a pack of cigarettes and a mobile phone.

Open-air sceneries are equally subject to dichotomic treatment: the natural landscape of the Maramureș hills – narrow unpaved paths winding down the slopes among tall-grass meadows full of mountain daisies, haystacks and rich orchards, beautiful forests and the fresh mountain river – as well as the village roads and courtyards that autumn and winter weather causes to appear muddy and less charming provide a strikingly different image than the paved streets (in Budești, there is only one paved street that crosses the village) and the blocks of flats in both small towns and cities, the railways in Bucharest and London, the public phone booths, the lights and the cheap but flashy shop boards and windows in London.

Other key visual elements serve either to lend complexity to the temporal frame or to lend substance to the symbolic representations of identity. Thus, the changing phases of the moon, the water falling noisily over the mill wheel to set it in motion, are indicative of the passage of time, while the rocks washed by the rapid river stream seem to evoke the endurance in time of the rural traditions which are threatened with 'erosion' in the present-day changing society. As for the differences in the dressing style of the main categories of characters, they are defining for identity construction or, on the contrary, for the loss of identity. The middle-aged and the elderly members of the rural community – but also the young men and women who settled in the village – have remained faithful to the traditional folk costume: men wear hats – Gheorghe Opreș, in particular, is very fond of his "clop" which he wears until late in winter time – while married women always cover their hair with scarves. A typically ethnographic sequence essential for the representation of the sense of identity of the local rural community is that of the Nativity performance, that impresses through the grotesque of the masks and the sound of the cattle bells, as well as through the beauty of the folk costumes worn by both the 'actors' and the spectators, followed, within a short while, by the Christmas service in the small wooden church of the village. At the other extreme, the young people who have denied their connection with the rural world and its traditions and who are attracted by the mirage of town life in Romania and especially abroad choose to wear more practical, casual clothes (sports clothes, leather jackets, trousers for women, etc.) with no specific identity-defining markers, which causes Romanian town-dwellers and Romanian migrants in London to look very much alike.

The soundtrack of the film skilfully combines live sounds and voice-over with folk music specific to the Maramureș area that varies in tone, from gay and vivid dance music, to rather melancholic clarinet alternating with tense and alert dulcimer-dominated tunes, or, ultimately to sad, lamenting songs. More often than not, the voice-over is attached to a narrator who speaks in English and who, as it usually happens in mostly observational documentaries, intervenes relatively rarely to fill in informational gaps and to help thus the story advance. This does not necessarily denote lack of involvement on the part of the filmmaker: refraining from engaging in explicit dialogue with the subjects of the documentary and from commenting upon their actions does indicate that the ethnographic perspective is that of an outsider who does not share the same values and sense of identity as his subjects, but, at the same time, it signals the filmmaker's "constant desire to let the voices speak for themselves"¹⁵.

All in all, the film is sustained by an implicit agenda that the audience is left to decipher from the creative selection and arrangement of images and sounds. Judging by the ratio of sequences that present life in the Romanian countryside, with its good and bad

moments, at once idyllic and hard, teaching people to remain attached to their identity-defining traditions and values, to those that reveal the failures of the rather gullible young people who hope that displacement to town and to a foreign cultural space will improve their lives, but who lose their identity in the process of migration, one might interpret *Temptation*, in particular, and the whole *The Last Peasants* trilogy, in general, as a kind of *ubi sunt* meditation on the dying culture of the Romanian village that is threatened with extinction by globalization and migration. “Recording in elegiac detail a pastoral way of life that was once of all (...) European histories”¹⁶, Macqueen’s documentary deplores the loss of a cultural heritage that belongs not only to the Romanians but to all Europeans, as well as the loss of a sense of national pride and identity undergone by the Romanian migrants ensnared in the web of seductive hopes and dreams of the Western consumerist societies. At the same time, reminding the audiences that “the present immigration is no different to that from countryside to town over a century ago”¹⁷ in cultural spaces like Britain, for instance, it invites them to ponder on the need for change in the European attitudes towards migrants, urges for tolerance and hopes to raise awareness of the ways in which cultural diversity and migrant mobility could enrich European societies.

Notes

[1] Nicolescu, L. and D. L. Constantin, “Romania’s External Migration in the Context of Accession to the EU: Mechanisms, Institutions and Socio-Cultural Issues”, in *The Romanian Journal of European Studies*, No. 4, Editura Universității de Vest, Timișoara, 2005, p. 55 and Horváth, I., “Romania”, in *Focus Migration*, Country Profile no. 9, September 2007, p. 2. Expanding on the subject of migration under the Communist regime, one might add that legal permanent emigration was allowed to continue at relatively high rates mainly if motivated ethnically and controlled by the state:

“Ethnic minorities (Jews, Germans and Hungarians) were clearly over-represented among the groups of people who legally emigrated from Romania during the Communist rule. For example, although ethnic Germans represented only 1.6% of the population in the 1977 census, they constituted 44% of the emigrant population between 1975 and 1989.’ (Horváth, 2007: 2) The Jews were an equally representative category of legal migrants, leaving mainly for Israel and the USA (Horváth, 2007: 2 and Baldwin-Edwards, 2005: 2), but the case of the Hungarians was slightly different, as most of them chose irregular and illegal migration strategies (crossing the green border illegally, staying in Hungary without residence permit, etc.), since their migration was not approved by the Romanian authorities. (Horváth, 2007: 2)

As for temporary migration for studying or working abroad, it was equally controlled by the state which allowed for it on the basis of inter-governmental agreements with other countries (for labour activities, especially countries from the Middle East, the Persian Gulf area). (Horváth, 2007: 2 and Nicolescu and Constantin, 2005: 55)” (Colipcă, G. I. and I. Ivan-Mohor, “Context Analysis and Methodology Review Report WP2”, *Ge.M.I.C.*, 2009, p. 3, available at <http://www.gemic.eu/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/wp2romania.pdf>)

[2] Nicolescu, L. and D. L. Constantin, *op. cit.*, p. 56; Simina, O. L., “Next in Line – Romanians at the Gates of the EU (emigrants, border control, legislation)”, in *SISEC Discussion Papers*, No. II, Issue 1 (February), Universitatea de Vest, Timișoara, 2005, p. 9, and Colipcă, G. I. and I. Ivan-Mohor, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

[3] Colipcă, G. I. and I. Ivan-Mohor, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-8.

[4] Aufderheide, P., *Documentary Film – A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2007, p. 5.

[5] Macqueen, A., “Angus Macqueen by Angus Macqueen”, *The Second Annual Seattle International Documentary Film Festival*, 2004, available at <http://www.sidff.org/macqueen.html>. Among the most appreciated documentaries produced by Angus Macqueen about the legacy of the Soviet past and about Russia after the collapse of Communism, one could mention: *Second Russian Revolution* (1991), *Gulag* (1999), and *Vodka* (2000).

[6] Since the early days of documentary, filmmakers and theorists have emphasised the function of this art form as an instrument of education. See Hayward, S., *Cinema Studies. The Key Concepts*, 3rd edition, Routledge, London and New York, 2006, p. 106.

[7] Macqueen, A., *op. cit.*, available at <http://www.sidff.org/macqueen.html>.

[8] See Aufderheide, P., *op. cit.*, pp. 106-113 and Hayward, S., *op. cit.*, pp. 120-121.

[9] Adams, T., “Angus Macqueen by Tim Adams”, *The Second Annual Seattle International Documentary Film Festival*, 2004, available at <http://www.sidff.org/macqueen.html>. The above mentioned elements that make Macqueen’s stories work fall, roughly speaking, into the pattern of *dramatic storytelling* as described David

Howard and Edward Marbley in their book, *The Tools of Screenwriting*. (qtd. in Curran Bernard, S., *Documentary Storytelling: Making Stronger and More Dramatic Nonfiction Films*, Focal Press, Burlington and Oxford, 2007, p. 23)

[10] Nichols, B., *Introduction to Documentary*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2001, pp. 99-138 and Hayward, S., *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77.

[11] Aufderheide, P., *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[12] Longin Popescu, I., “Angus Macqueen – documentarist de televiziune la BBC și Channel 4, Londra. Câștigătorul Premiului Special al revistei *Formula AS* la Festivalul filmului documentar de la Sibiu”, *Formula AS*, Anul 2004, Nr. 642, available at <http://www.formula-as.ro/2004/642/spectator-38/angus-macqueen-documentarist-de-televiziune-la-bbc-si-channel-4-londra-5522>.

[13] For a detailed presentation of Geert Hofstede’s four-dimensional model of differences among national cultures (based on power distance, collectivism/individualism, femininity/masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance), see *Cultures and Organizations. Software of the Mind: Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival*, Harper Collins Publishers, London, 1991.

[14] Morokvasic, M., “Migration, Gender, Empowerment”, in Lenz, I, C. Ullrich, and B. Fersch (eds.), *Gender Orders Unbound. Globalization, Restructuring and Reciprocity*, Barbara Budrich Publishers, Opladen, Farmington Hills, 2007, p. 70.

[15] Macqueen, A., *op. cit.*, available at <http://www.sidff.org/macqueen.html>.

[16] Adams, T., *op. cit.*, available at <http://www.sidff.org/macqueen.html>. As a matter of fact, Angus Macqueen repeatedly referred to the decline of rural Romania paralleling it with that of the rural Britain in the 1850s. See Macqueen, A., *op. cit.*, available at <http://www.sidff.org/macqueen.html> and Longin Popescu, I., *op. cit.*, available at <http://www.formula-as.ro/2004/642/spectator-38/angus-macqueen-documentarist-de-televiziune-la-bbc-si-channel-4-londra-5522>.

[17] Macqueen, A., *op. cit.*, available at <http://www.sidff.org/macqueen.html>.

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Filmography

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