Film and the Romanian as Other. A Case Study

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Résumé: Un des moyens d'expression les plus populaires d'aujourd'hui est le film, qui a un grand potentiel de communication et un impact puissant sur diverses catégories de récepteurs dont l'horizon culturel s'ouvre tant vers l'extérieur que de l'intérieur, tout en facilitant la représentation/re-présentation de la propre identité nationale et du dialogue interculturel. 'Il resto della notte' ne fait aucune exception de cette règle: il 'parle' des Roumains comme 'les autres', recycle les mythes et approfondit les perspectives déjà enracinées dans la mentalité collective de l'Occident. Ses techniques et ses stratégies convergent vers une narration incisive de la crise de l'identité roumaine dans son interprétation occidentale.

Mots-clés: film, culture, représentation, altérité

1. Introduction

Communication across cultures has greatly benefited from the technological progress of recent years. The new hypermedia have opened up numerous possibilities of transgressing old boundaries of space and time, and of delivering verbal and/or visual information reflecting the personal and national self worldwide. In this ever more complex communicative enterprise, film continues to hold a centre front position. It is relatively cheap, apparently easy to decode and addresses an extremely large and varied public. It is therefore a very powerful tool in manipulating the production, transmission and reception of cultural representations.

In other words, filmic language has maximum communicative potential and opens up cultural contexts from within and towards the outside, facilitating the representation/re-presentation of identity and the intercultural dialogue. The particular case of *Il resto della notte* is no exception: it speaks of Romanians as others, recycles myths and deepens perspectives already inscribed in the western collective unconscious, its techniques and strategies contributing to the incisive narration of the present day crisis of Romanianness abroad.

2. Theory in brief

Cultural texts (films included) "are embedded in a social matrix, have consequences in the world" [1], playing an important role in building imaginative geographies or mental maps of that world, where possible new borders are indicated and old ones are either effaced or deepened all the time. This kind of kaleidoscopic cartography that film contributes to leaves invisible but permanent traces which, in turn, determine the way we perceive others and are perceived as others.

The construction of the subject is not only highly dependable on media (filmic) representations, but it is usually carried out in terms of difference, "in a permanent and multivalenced negotiation between material conditions, ideological discourses and social axes of stratification based on class, race, gender, age, locale, sexual orientation, national origin" [2]. It follows that its discussion in cultural terms cannot take place in a depoliticised manner, despite the many criticisms of politics being the centre which holds such analyses together (David Morley, John Friske and others).

Drawn on slippery ground, on which cultural phenomena expose their political relation to truth and power, the mental maps of the world built via filmic cultural texts need to be approached therefore from the perspective of communicative empowerment and of truth controlling apparatuses, observable in the grammar of their language and the structure of their narrative – part of the greater discursive continuum resuming contemporary culture.

In the process of map making, theorists have identified four modelling factors and filters: physiological – universal, but restrictive, our senses limiting the access to the world outside; cultural – which allows for different perceptions of reality, operating selections in keeping with needs shared by communities; individual – which brings about reactions towards the environment that differ from one person to another; and linguistic – the most problematic filter, due to the fact that the linguistic sign is not the thing itself and the mental map is not the territory. They basically shape three levels and models: generalisation – which reduces choice, oversimplifies, imposes viewpoints and lacks specific context; deletion – which involves omission, works on presupposition and generates mismatch of world representations; distortion – which transforms what is real or objectively verifiable so that it fits preconceptions. [3] They will be considered in the attempt at the gradual decoding of the narrative subtext in the case of *Il resto della notte*, chosen for exemplification.

3. Film overview

Il resto della notte, written and directed by Francesco Munzi, it was released on June 20 2008 and soon after nominated at the Cannes film festival. Its cast and its language are a composite of Italian and Romanian, featuring Sandra Ceccarelli (as Silvana Boarin), Aurelien Recoing (as Giovanni Boarin), Stefano Cassetti (as Marco Rancalli), Laura Vasiliu (as Maria), Victor Cosma (as Victor), Constantin Lupescu (as Ionut), Veronica Besa (as Anna Boarin), Valentina Cervi (as Francesca), Ditta Teresa Acerbis (as Eusebia), Susy Laude (as Mara), Bruno Festo (as Luca), Corrado Invernizzi (as Driver), Giovanni Morina (as Davide), Mauritio Tabani (as Vincenzo) and Simonetta Benozzo (as Operator).

The 101 minute drama focuses on the contemporary situation and configuration of the crossroads of international migration, being set in Brescia, Italy [4] (represented by a succession of city centre, elegant suburbs, slums – foregrounded and backgrounded in turns so as to enhance the centre-margin dichotomy and the centrifugal force involved) and emphasising the construction of the Romanian as other from a contaminated and contaminating Western standpoint [5].

4. Filmic architecture

The film is vertically structured on three interwoven levels/stories, whose connector is Luca: that of a wealthy upper middle class Italian family (the Boarins), that of a set of Romanian migrants struggling to get by (Maria, Ionut and Victor), and that of the collision between the Italians and the Romanians. The three layers give the filmic text in-depth and announce, respectively: the complexity of inter-human and cross-cultural relationships; the net (trap) that the broader social context lays out for individuals and individual lives; the clashing world views, politics and aesthetics of the local meeting the global.

Its horizontal patterning is made to bring to attention the manifold collision between worlds and world outlooks, supported by other, numerous functional dichotomies: West/East, Italians/Romanians, (upper) middle class/lower class, rich/poor, man/woman, married/single, good/evil, day/night, young/old, non-violence/violence – all of which induce the notions of split, break, fracture, conflict, opposition and thus define the hard core of the filmic text.

All in all, the scaffolding reveals careful directing and staging plans, political statements that the film formulates for the more culturally aware of its viewers.

5. Plot(ting)

The film's storylines are simple, predictable. After having been "ambushed" by what looked like Romanian gypsy beggars in the street, Silvana Boarin comes home determined to fire her maid, Maria – an immigrant from Romania (that they had, up to that point, considered as a member of the family). Accusing her of stealing a pair of expensive earrings (which actually proves to be true), the Boarins let her go, despite the opposition from their daughter, Anna, Maria's friend. The constant fear (of immigrant intrusion/violence) Silvana is governed by is apparently nonsensical, but takes material shape in the events to follow. It determines, somewhat inexplicably, the film's tragic denouement, as if, through her intense feeling, she brought disaster upon her family.

Two other Romanian immigrants, Ionut (the fiancé Maria had left to find a better life, through honest work, with the Boarins) and Victor (Ionut's teenage brother), live in poverty and promiscuity somewhere in a ghetto. While Victor earns his living by hard labour and daily employment, Ionut is after the easy life; although handsome and charming, he is a thief, a crook, a dealer. Together with the good-for-nothing Luca, his Italian mate, Ionut plans and carries out a burglary at the Boarin residence, based on the information unknowingly provided by Maria. Their action (that Victor witnesses) goes wrong, however. While her parents are away at a concert, Anna entertains a boyfriend, who accidentally gets shot by the burglars, as does her father, Giovanni, who surprises them by arriving early.

6. Narrating

The film is a complex semiotic event, which makes meaning inside its audio-visual textuality, as already suggested, through the use of words, gestures, sounds, music and pictures – all narrating the imaginative, possible world of intercultural conflict. Its cine-poetics lacks linearity (despite its sequential nature), the three layered narrative pattern reflecting on the invisible area of the cultural iceberg more than on its manifest tip (if Edward Hall's model is to be invoked [6]). Otherwise said, rituals, customs and styles, together with action, communication, environment, time, space, power structures and patterns of thought are, paradoxically, more vividly represented than music, art, food and drink, dress, architecture, institutions or visible behaviour.

The physiological filter is not operative therefore (see Silvana's occult premonitions), the cultural, individual and linguistic ones sooner being activated (her sudden fear of Maria actually having been socially constructed all along; her reactions being her own, but metonymical at the same time; her incapacity to verbalise her new state being significantly illustrative in this respect).

The thus built imaginative geography is crippled and small (as Umberto Eco would say [7]), generalisation working to impose standpoints (Silvana's experience – itself fuelled by news of other, similar events nationwide – leads to her concluding that all Romanians are dangerous; at a broader level: all Italians see immigration as a threat, all Romanians are beggars, thieves, criminals), deletion overstating presupposition (Maria joins her low life friends… Ionut is a killer…) and distortion modifying actual happenings to fit prejudiced attitudes (once formed, impressions are resistant to change: the opening scene of the gypsy "attack" builds the fear and reluctance to keep Maria on).

7. Filmic language

The language of film operates primarily at the level of iconography or content of images. Here, its grammar brings together visual signs (streets, buildings, rooms – as the camera

zooms in on significant locations), sounds (incidental, urban and domestic, public and private; music – Romanian folk, popular and Western orchestral), kinaesthetic icons (movement, behaviour specific to social roles), the verbal content (dialogues in formal and informal Italian and Romanian) and ideology (tensions accessed via dichotomies).

Secondly, it discloses the arbitrariness of its system in the moves, the frames, the environment and strategies that the film processes. The sequences dealing with representations of Italianness or Romanianness are characterised by equilibrium, while those featuring the overlap are basically disrupted; so are the sudden moves to and fro, in between the constructed cultures (see the cuts, breaks, flashbacks, close-ups etc). The framing storyboard and character type bring forth: behaviour (what is happening) – a case of theft and accidental murder; identity (who participates, the roles played) – Italians are good, Romanians evil. The events presented and their sequencing narrate the background environment – all part of the film's schema: intercultural contamination. As for the discourse within individual frames, it reveals relationships, being linked to the film's strategies – noticeable in vocabulary, register, mode of address etc

8. Reception

The context of situation and culture of *Il resto della notte* opens up the subtle debate on the interplay of possible, negotiated meanings which emerge as the film is watched by insider/outsider readers (combinations and permutations of 'we want to be left alone' or 'home is sweet, distance is bitter'). Decoding them/reading the filmic text and discovering the dominant or envisaged insider meaning theoretically implies assuming the role of an ideal viewer (one with whom taking sides is avoidable) yet, keeping in mind the deliberate Romanian casting and the international collaboration that the making of this film was based on, one is invited at discerning a certain amount of marketing strategies and political statements directed at hyperbolising, for critical purposes, prejudices about class, race and nationality. Unfortunately however (see the Romanian actress's problems with the Italian police mentioned under [5]), there is always the risk of misreading its text, of misunderstanding its language, of thus having it serve the exact opposite purpose than the one programmed.

This, as cultural theorists have pointed out, is sooner the result of subcultural resistance than of manipulation by elites, and raises the question of whether it is possible to oppose and change widely promoted representations of identity/alterity in a mass-mediated world [8]. With *Il resto della notte*, it becomes clear that, regardless of the artistic enterprise, resistance operates more forcefully than does the desire to change.

9. Final remarks

Communicating Romanianness (or any other -ness, for that matter) through film is not as simple as it may appear, myth and inertia being barriers that are extremely difficult to overcome. Demystifying the negative set of beliefs and attitudes towards the Romanian in Italy (itself constructed by the media) entails retracing the mental map, investing its arbitrary, culture-bound signs with new significance – which needs time, consistency and media support to take effect. In the meantime, images of Romanians remain caught in the net of deliberate misrepresentations and resistant misreadings.

As for our case study, it might be summed up by the following extended syllogism: *Il resto della notte* is a media(ted) cultural text. Cultural texts build mental maps of the world. Mental maps are myths. Myths are truth controlling. Truth control is also specific to film. *Il*

resto della notte exposes the mechanisms of truth control by tackling culturally constructed xenophobia.

Notes

[1] Stam, R., *Film Theory: An Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000, p. 225
[2] Stam, R., *Film Theory: An Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000, p. 226
[3] Katan, D., *Translating Cultures*, St. Jerome Publishing, Manchester, 2004, p. 130-160
[4] The setting is not accidental, but a consequence of the general tendency of recent years for Romanians to look for work abroad, especially in Italy – a place not so far from home and where people speak a language that can be both easily understood and quickly learnt due to its common roots and numerous similarities with Romanian.
[5] Two particular cases come to mind in this respect, one a cause, the other an effect: 1. Nicolae Mailat, a gypsy immigrant with Romanian citizenship attacked and robbed Giovanna Reggiani in a Rome suburb, leaving her to die in a ditch (November 2007); 2. while filming in Italy, the actress Laura Vasiliu (playing Mara in *Il resto della notte*) had her hotel room forcefully broken into by the carabinieri (November 2007), on suspicions of child trafficking (later proven wrong, when the police declared that they had mistaken her for someone else)
[6] see Hall, E. T., *Silent Language*, Doubleday, New York, 1990
[7] see Eco, U., *The Limits of Interpretation*, Greener Books, London, 1990
[8] see Stam, R., *Film Theory: An Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000, p. 227-228

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