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## 'The Empire Means Order': Images of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in Romanian Fictional Films About the First World War

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# “THE EMPIRE MEANS ORDER”:<sup>1</sup>

## IMAGES OF THE AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN MONARCHY IN

## ROMANIAN FICTIONAL FILMS ABOUT THE FIRST WORLD WAR

*Enikő Dácz*

This paper focuses on Romanian cinematography about World War I, which Radina Vučetić regards as the richest in feature films in southeastern Europe “in not only the variety of the themes but also the topics they covered.”<sup>2</sup>

First, a chronological overview of Romanian films about World War I will be given, guided by the question how they present the 1914–1918 catastrophe, with special emphasis on the role of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Just as in Western Europe,<sup>3</sup> in

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1 Quotation from the film *Pădurea Spânzuraților* [*The Forest of The Hanged*] (1964).

2 Radina Vučetić, “Film/Cinema (South East Europe),” in *1914-1918-online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel et al., issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Dec. 18, 2014, accessed July 8, 2015, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10520>.

3 Geert Buelens, “‘They wouldn’t end it with any of us alive, now would they?’: The First World War in Cold War Era Films,” in *The Great War in Post-Memory Literature and Film: Media and Cultural memory/Medien und kulturelle Erinnerung*, ed. Martin Löschnigg et al., vol. 18 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 365–383, here: 367.

Romania films on this topic came in waves; the productions in the communist period mostly followed the regime's ideological line, where only a few works managed to create their individual filmic language and solutions. The second part of the paper concentrates on a milestone production in Romanian cinema, which shaped collective memory in the long run and was chosen by forty critics as the second best Romanian movie ever.<sup>4</sup> The adaptation of the novel *Pădurea Spânzuraților* (*Forest of the Hanged*) by Liviu Rebreanu is the best-known Romanian World War I film for which, in 1965, Liviu Ciulei won the award in the category "Best Direction" in Cannes.<sup>5</sup> The press reviews in this period mirror a warm reception on the national (including the media of the minorities) and international level.<sup>6</sup> *Pădurea spânzuraților* was presented at several festivals, in Romania, Bulgaria, Germany, France, Canada, the USA, Israel, and even Mexico, among others. The paper analyzes the cultural schemes underlying the film and shows national discourses and their reflections.

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4 Marian Țuțui, "Pădurea spânzuraților [Forest of the Hanged]," in *Cele mai bune zece filme românești ale tuturor timpurilor stabilite prin votul a 40 de critici*, ed. Cristina Corciovescu and Magda Mihăilescu (București: Polirom, 2010), 25–42.

5 The film received some further awards: three prizes at the Romanian Film Festival in Mamaia in 1965 and the Prize of Excellence for the quality of the images (Ovidiu Gologan) in Milan in 1964; Virgil Petrovici, *Pădurea spânzuraților: Un film de Liviu Ciulei* [The forest of the Hanged: A Film by Liviu Ciulei] (Bucharest: Editura Tehnică, 2002), 15.

6 The author thanks Helga and Thomas Ciulei for giving her access to the personal archive of Liviu Ciulei (Film Vol. III-IV, F-Padu) that, among other things, contains a collection of the film's press materials (F-Padu Press).

*Images of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in Romanian Fiction  
Films*

The first Romanian World War I feature film *Datorie și sacrificiu* (*Duty and sacrifice*, 1925) was produced for soldiers by the Photo-Cinematic Service of the Romanian Army. The movie includes earlier newsreels, establishing a long tradition in the Romanian cinema, and presents in a moralizing manner the story of two rivals who love the same girl, but because of the war have to fight together on the front. *Vitejii neamului* (*The heroes of the nation*, 1926) applies the same pseudo-documentary style and plot of two boys loving the same girl. In a media scandal, the movie had become famous before the premiere, as German diplomats protested against its anti-German character. Due to the prohibition, it appeared on the screens in a slightly cut version. In the next production, *Lia* (1927), the war serves only as the background to a romantic plot. These early feature films depict no images of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The enemy is usually identified as German, another characteristic that lived on in the following decades.

The most popular World War I movie in the interwar period was *Ecatarina Teodoroiu* (1931), also because it was the first sung and spoken war film in Romania. Although critics considered it qualitatively inferior to similar Western productions,<sup>7</sup> it owes its fame to its topic and the handling of notions regarding the national identity. The romanticized biography of the Romanian heroine Ecatarina is based on a real story<sup>8</sup> and depicts how, in the face of

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7 Manuela Gheorghiu, *Filmul și armele: Tema păcii și a războiului în filmul European* [The Film and the Weapons: The Topic of Peace and War in the European Film] (Bucharest: Editura Meridiane, 1976), 231.

8 That was first applied (among other stories) in the documentary film *Evocațiuni eroice* [*Heroic Evocations*] produced in 1921.

social prejudices, a young girl succeeds in becoming a soldier after her brother dies. The tragedy and the heroism of the protagonist is amplified by her death. Another important part of the plot is the love story between a spy and a Romanian soldier. The use of earlier newsreel montages, as well as the fact that the film was shot in Ecatarina's native village and that her mother acted her own part, strengthen the realistic documentary style. The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy is no central reference point; the Germans again are identified as the enemies. However, the fight for national unification with Transylvania—one of the main topics—implies the presence of an oppressive Habsburg Empire, a motive that was a constant cliché in later productions.

World War I seemed to disappear from Romanian films in the coming decades, a period when the country still did not have any significant cinematic output.<sup>9</sup> In 1957, *Viața nu iartă* (*When the mist is lifting*), a film inspired by Alexandru Sahia's literary sketches, picked up the topic again. Although the movie is set in World War II, it is the first production focusing on the traumatic consequences of World War I. The son of a former teacher tries to clarify the causes for his father's psychic collapse after his return from World War I. In flashbacks that invoke the French New Wave and melt the different temporal dimensions (present, past, and future), the father is portrayed as a man obeying the rules even in extreme situations; so, for example, he shoots a pacifist violinist who tries to desert. Being unable to live with the moral consequences of his deed, he flees into insanity. Just as his father, the son is not able to make a decision. He wants peace and is killed in World War II. Again, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy is not present as a point of reference:

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9 Cf. Dominique Nasta, *Contemporary Romanian Cinema: The History of an Unexpected Miracle* (New York: A Wallflower Press Book published by Columbia University Press, 2013).

In general, the two world wars are the setting for moral conflicts. Finally, the production pleads for peace policy.

In 1964, as already mentioned, the most representative film, *Pădurea spânzuraților*, was produced. Beginning with the seventies, a series of movies was produced that—in the words of Radina Vučetić—“use war as the setting in which any atrocity becomes possible in order to emphasize the meaninglessness and absurdity of war.”<sup>10</sup> In 1975, the list opens with *Prin cenușa imperiului* (*Through the Ashes of the Empire*), which already in its title features the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The film is based on Zaharia Stancu’s novel *Jocul cu moartea* (*A gamble with death*). The fact that the film project began in 1968 is a sign of a gradually growing interest in the topic. Andrei Blaier’s production won the Special Jury Prize in the youth section of the 1977 Cannes Film Festival and, in addition to Romanian awards, also the Best Actor Award in the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in 1976.<sup>11</sup>

The plot of *Prin cenușa imperiului* is based on the motif of travel and operates with such emblematic figures<sup>12</sup> as the anti-imperialist, the villain, the artist, and the dreamer. The movie presents

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10 Vučetić, “Film/Cinema (South East Europe).” The exclusively state-paid cinema of the communist regime reached its peak in the eighties, producing about thirty long feature films annually; in the same period, the number of cinema theaters increased even in rural areas so that a much wider public could be reached; Marian Țuțui, *O istorie a filmului românesc/A history of Romanian cinema* (Bucharest: Balkanski Proiect, 2004), 24.

11 Bujor Râpeanu, *Filmat în România: Un repertoriu filmografic* [Filmed in Romania: A Filmographic Repertoire], vol. 2 1970–1979 (Bucharest: Edituar Fundației Pro, 2005), 119.

12 Marilena Ilieșu, *Povestea poveștii n filmul românesc (1912–2012)* [The Story of the Story in the Romanian Film (1912–2012)] (Bucharest: Polirom, 2013), 81.

occupied Bucharest in 1917: Men are accidentally taken hostage in the street by German occupants. They are sent by train to an unknown place, where they are supposed to work as shepherds. The dissolution of Franz Joseph's Empire is predicted at the beginning. The anti-imperialist discourse is only briefly contradicted by a young protagonist who longs to see the world: For him, Serbia, Hungary, and Austria promise adventure at this point. The main figure is not individualized: Darie is unwilling to reveal his second name, remaining a symbolic traveller born as a peasant who cannot influence historical events, while history influences his life. According to the common traveller narrative, he is shaped by the experiences on the road, a continuous balancing between life and death. The film applies several symbols belonging to the same formula, such as the snake or the hedgehog. According to the same traveller scheme, nature shelters and protects the protagonist.

The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy is staged at different levels. The evergreen topos of the empire as a prison appears in variations: Nationalities are literally hunted by authorities, so that they can hardly leave their home. People are imprisoned and killed—often hanged. One of the hostages, who trusts Darie, turns out to be a Romanian Transylvanian and a deserter of the Austrian-Hungarian Army. He wants to join the Romanian Army and to contribute to the liberation of Transylvanian Romanians. However, the former soldier is betrayed by another hostage, the “diplomat”—the emblematic figure of the villain—and is executed in the name of the Emperor. This way, the Monarchy's theoretically debated credo that small nations have to obey without being given rights is proven by an example. Nationalistic stereotypes are also remembered when the officers speaking exclusively German reproduce nationalistic clichés, calling the hostages “dirty *Wallachs*.” Having the chance to visit a city, Darie faces the soldiers' cruelty: There are hanged peasants awaiting him, and a Serbian woman has to save him from being shot. According to

the prevalent ideology of the seventies, all peasant figures are positive and morally impeccable; they help each other irrespective of their nationality, although German or Hungarian peasants do not appear at all. In the hostages' dialogues about war and killing people on the front, Germans and Austro-Hungarians are hardly differentiated.

As Darie and the "diplomat" can flee, that earlier wanderlust no longer motivates the young man; his only wish is to return home. Their way is marked by symbolic encounters with partisans and peasants. Back in Bucharest, they are accidentally arrested again, but the possibility that the (his)story might repeat itself is obliterated by Darie's act of throwing away the gold coin of the "diplomat" that might have guaranteed freedom. The main topic of the previous discussions between the hostages is a future without empires (and a "Kaiser"), "where people are free." It is repeated by a new comrade who remembers the former Transylvanian deserter.

Adopting the new ideological expectations, in 1978 a new version of *Ecaterina Teodoriu* was shot in a somewhat similar glorifying style as earlier. Using the well-known motifs of the soldier who is killed while trying to flee the Austro-Hungarian Army or the dream of "Great Romania," the Monarchy is depicted as the Romanians' oppressor. As previously, the enemies are identified with the Germans in general without any further specification, and the "enemy is not human," Ecaterina concludes. Heroic patterns dominate the movie: Transylvanian Romanian soldiers who managed to desert from the Austro-Hungarian Army fight for national unity in the Romanian Army. Pathetic scenes propagate patriotic feelings, quotations from a poem by the famous poet and politician Lucian Blaga are reflected.

Ecaterina Teodoriu is the only woman in Romanian war cinematography about World War I who joined the army and was actively engaged in fights. Women mainly appear in the background and make sacrifices at home. Ecaterina's courage is underlined by the music that emphasises her almost religious devotion to the national cause,



overcoming any difficulty (German captivity, injuries, and disease) except death. A romantic thread presents Ecaterina's love for an officer and that of a Transylvanian Romanian for her. The doctor from Blaj (symbol of national unity in the Romanian collective memory) is the voice of the Transylvanian problem, while his death resembles his compatriots' martyrdom. Disease is visualized as a constant threat, as Ecaterina has to learn that her native village was devastated by typhus, and her mother died. In *Prin cenușa imperiului*, the same disease was only a marginal topic.

The movie *Ultima noapte de dragoste, prima noapte de război* (*The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War*, 1930), based on Camil Petrescu's famous novel set in World War I, is in the tradition of French existentialism. The novel, which has two film adaptations and is part of the Romanian curriculum, first inspired the movie *Între oglinzi paralele* (*Between facing mirrors*, 1978), which focused on the social dimension of war and avoided battle scenes. Even inheriting a great fortune, the main character cannot develop any interest in material goods. Although he is a member of the high society, especially because of the ambitions of his wife, he remains faithful to his philosophy and to his friend Gore, an active socialist. He finally joins the army, as he considers the war an existential experience he does not want to miss. The psychological drama involves the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy only on the level of topics discussed in conversation.

Sergiu Nicolaescu's adaptation of Petrescu's novel, *Ultima noapte* (*The last night*, 1979) concentrates on the individual tragedy of Tudor Gheorghiu, who is destroyed by his jealousy and is eventually executed. The sentimental war movie displays long battle scenes, and reflects the social differences of the time, but avoids any references to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.<sup>13</sup>

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13 It is noteworthy that all these movies were awarded at least one time by the Romanian Association of Filmmakers, a fact that implies the importance of the topic for the communist regime.

Iulian Mihu's *Lumina palidă a durerii* (*The Pale Light of Sorrow*, 1981) is one of the rare works of the time that managed to develop a complex symbolic language. As the plot takes place in the period of German occupation in a small settlement in Buzău County, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy does not play any role in the depiction of the rural milieu.<sup>14</sup>

*Capcana mercenarilor* (*Trap of the hired guns*, 1981) mirrors the intensifying nationalistic tone of the regime. The narrator explicitly claims to reflect reality, emphasizing that the story is inspired by facts and the characters are only partly fictional, which is also underlined by the newsreels integrated. In accordance with the mainstream political discourse, the bourgeoisie is blamed for social conditions in Transylvania. The story of a baron taking revenge on a village for having devastated his castle—which the villagers clearly deny—follows the motto that "the bourgeoisie is responsible for the tragedy." Although the social dimension of the topic is of primary importance, the nationality question cannot be overlooked. It is the Hungarian baron who recruits people to kill peasants and demonstrates pure barbarism. The three Hungarian and five Saxon peasants, unlike the Romanians, need to be explicitly accepted as helpers against the baron, which strengthens the national connotation of the class fight.

The image of the Austro-Hungarian Empire is dominated by the oppressive upper class with solely negative connotations. The plot begins in Vienna, where men are hired for an unclearly defined task; these scenes present a decadent world and society. Arriving in Transylvania, (dominated by the pure white of the snowy landscape), the mercenaries who refuse to execute peasants are shot. Cruelty is increasing continuously. After a Hungarian peasant succeeds in escaping, he informs

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14 Ilieșu, *Povestea poveștii în filmul românesc*, 166–170.

a Romanian community about the event. The baron is immediately recognized as a cruel former officer in Galicia, and a Romanian major assumes the task of confronting him. The reminiscences highlight the moral decadence of the upper class, underlined by the fact that the military leadership is reluctant to help. Besides the narrative about the oppressed Romanians in Transylvania, further nationalistic slogans are reproduced and only sporadically refuted in the case of peasants. The heroic fight for the liberation of the village ends with the expected victory of the Major, who loses his corporal integrity, thus paying for his former moral decadence. The Western-style music emphasizes the heroic narrative that intends to be didactic and entertaining at the same time, but falls back on the sheer reproduction of schemes and stereotypes.

Regarding World War I films in Romania, Radina Vučetić concludes that in the communist period these productions “became more anti-war than patriotic, emphasizing the absurdity of war. Romanian cinema of the time,” Vučetić continued, “generally avoided spectacular and grandiose battle scenes with the deployment of troops, while emphasizing individual sacrifice on the dramas of those who bore the brunt of battles on their shoulders.”<sup>15</sup> Clichés, schematic representations of soldiers, as shown above, served nationalist mobilization and partly contradict Vučetić, who seems to disregard some central aspects of the movies to which *The Handbook of Soviet and East European Films and Filmmakers* also refers. *The Handbook* states that Romanian cinema during the communist period was in general “aesthetically insignificant, adhering rigidly to the somehow formulaic necessities imposed by the film’s illustrative and ideological functions in a totalitarian regime. For these reasons Romanian cinema has not gained the

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15 Vučetić, “Film/Cinema (South East Europe).”

world stature of other East European cinemas."<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the 1949–1970 period is the phase in Romanian cinematography in which the filmic language and grammar are consolidated.<sup>17</sup> Thus a few significant individual works, such as those of Liviu Ciulei, Andrei Blaier, or Iulian Mihu, should be excluded when speaking about the rigidity and formulaic necessities<sup>18</sup> dictated exclusively "by political prescriptions."<sup>19</sup>

After a longer break following the system change—which can be partly explained by the difficult situation of the Romanian cinema in the nineties, when filmmakers found it hard to adapt to the new economic situation, and partly by the diminishing interest in the topic—the next World War I feature film were produced in two parts in 1999. The already named Sergiu Nicolaescu, who during communism earned his fame for producing a long series of historical films that followed the ideological line, directed *Triunghiul morții* (*The Death Triangle*). This film preserves the nationalistic ideas and discourse of the former regime. As Romania's most famous nationalist politician, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, co-wrote the screenplay, the collection of notions of national identity is imposing. The feature film offers a narrative of World War I, embracing almost all the topics and motives listed: enthusiastic young soldiers fighting for the unification of the nation, the heroine Ecaterina Teodoroiu, Transylvanian deserters,

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16 Judith Roof, "Romania," in *Handbook of Soviet and East European Films and Filmmakers*, ed. Thomas Slater J. (New York: Weatport, 1992), 309–342, here: 309.

17 Ilieșu, *Povestea poveștii n filmul românesc*, 37.

18 Lutz Haucke, "Rumänische neue Welle?," in *Nouvelle vague in Osteuropa? Zur ostmittel- und südosteuropäischen Filmgeschichte 1960–1970* (Berlin: Rhombos, 2009), 424–437, here: 424.

19 Roof, "Romania," 313.

and honest peasants. Austria-Hungary is also included at the level of discourse, as the enemy mentioned even in the narrator's closing remarks. Based on his own memoirs, the portrayal of Marshal Alexandru Averescu is one-dimensional: He is a hero. In contrast to earlier movies, the King and the Queen appear as figures active during the war. The narrator, the long battle scenes, and the newsreels all depict a heroic army. This one-dimensional picture is disturbed only by a part of the elite trying to cooperate with the Germans.

Although Sergiu Nicolaescu's historical documentary *Carol I - Un destin pentru România* (*Carol I: A Destiny for Romania*), made in 2009, does not strictly belong to our topic, it is noteworthy because it combines archival newsreels with feature film scenes and operates with some central topoi of earlier works. It also continues the tradition of monumental historic productions meant for mobilizing people rather than critically reflecting the event.

*Pădurea spânzuraților* (*The Forest of the Hanged*)

Liviu Ciulei's adaptation of Liviu Rebreanu's novel is a "landmark of innovation" in Romanian cinematography.<sup>20</sup> The literary text—part of the national curriculum—served as the starting point for a modern actualization that focuses on the main character's mental torments, and the destruction of certainties and conformities that in his youth Apostol Bologa took for granted. In Ciulei's interpretation,

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20 Marian Țuțui, "Pădurea spânzuraților" [Forest of the Hanged], in *The Cinema of the Balkans*, ed. Dina Iordanova (London: Wallflower Press, 2006) 33–41, 34. See also: Nasta, *Contemporary Romanian Cinema: The History of an Unexpected Miracle*, 21–23. Screen adaptations of novels were very common in the Romanian cinema of the communist period; the best-known authors in this respect include Liviu Rebreanu, Marin Preda, Mihail Sadoveanu, Ioan Slavici, and Camil Petrescu.

the protagonist is the victim of his wrongly chosen isolated path of individualism.<sup>21</sup> Besides the novel, the short stories *Catastrofa* (*Catastrophe*) and *Ițic Ștrul, dezertor* (*Ițic Ștrul, the deserter*), both by Liviu Rebreanu, also served as sources for the film and led, among other things, to the creation of a new figure, Johann Maria Müller,<sup>22</sup> a Viennese antiquarian and hardcore antimilitarist soldier. At the same time, Bologa's youth, which Rebreanu depicted in great detail, is fully missing. The film has a baroque structure and is a "perfect circular story" beginning and ending with execution scenes that prove the absurdity of war.<sup>23</sup> In the opening scene, soldiers disappear in the fog heading for an unpredictable and unknown place, with mud dominating the image; the topography displays a complexity which is continuously amplified.<sup>24</sup>

To reproduce the atmosphere of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, several scenes were shot in Transylvania. The ruins of the baroque Bánffy castle in Bonțida, where the Austrian General von Karg has his headquarters, are a metaphor for the decaying empire, just as the rich breakfast reflects the preference for luxury, building a contrast to the poorly equipped soldiers fighting in the trenches. In the same way, nationalist issues are handled in all their nuances: the actors' accents, including both ethnic Hungarians and Germans (for example., Ilona played by Anna Széles, Karg by György Kovács, Emmerich Schäffer by Johann Maria Müller) suggest the population's and the army's linguistic diversity without making it difficult for viewers to appreciate the plurality of languages.

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21 Petrovici, *Pădurea spânzuraților: Un film de Liviu Ciulei*, 30.

22 Ibid., 29.

23 Țuțui, "Pădurea spânzuraților" [Forest of the Hanged], 26.

24 Țuțui, "Pădurea spânzuraților" [Forest of the Hanged], 37; Ilieșu, *Po-vestea poveștii n filmul românesc*, 62.

In this context, the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Army stands for all repressive systems, but the desperate situation of the troops repeatedly questions nationalist schemes. Despite the national dividing lines, there is a high degree of human solidarity between the officers, which is manifest in their conversations. The Hungarian officer Varga, who claims the perfect internationality of the Austro-Hungarian Army, points at the representatives of the nationalities in the officer corps and voices the popular belief: "The empire is order." He is apparently incapable of understanding his comrades' moral struggles, but remarks in a debate that, if they continue the discussion, he might accept fleeing as a solution. Varga also apologizes to Bologna after cursing the Romanian enemy because of the death of Czerwenko, a pacifist unwilling to hold a weapon. Although Varga does his duty in the end and arrests Bologna for deserting, he cannot resist showing his feelings.

The topos of the national martyr, often connected with the figure of the Transylvanian Romanian soldier in World War I, is missing. Bologna's inner battle begins when he is supervising the execution of a Czech deserter in whose sentencing he previously took part. He later tries to avoid fighting against his kinsmen by destroying an enemy searchlight, thereby risking his life. In spite of Bologna's heroic deed, General von Karg refuses his request to be sent to another front. However, Bologna is wounded and hospitalized while trying to escape. Thus, he is given leave of absence and can visit his mother and fiancé, whom he subsequently leaves without an explanation. Returning to his comrades, Bologna falls in love with the Hungarian peasant girl Ilona, and they get engaged. Now the ethnic dimension of the story gains in complexity. Bologna's happiness comes to a sudden end when he is in a court martial that has to convict Hungarian and Romanian peasants who tried to work in the field next to the frontline. As a last desperate attempt,

he wants to desert, but is caught. After harsh inner struggles, Bologa accepts his fate and does not plead madness in order to save himself.

The plot is only of secondary relevance when compared to the symbolic narrative Ciulei develops a second level of the story:<sup>25</sup> that of Bologa's confrontation with himself. Actually, several figures "seem to be in different phases of the same crisis," and therefore already on the verge of deserting.<sup>26</sup> Several other officers or soldiers could find themselves in a similar situation to Bologa or Varga; it is the contingent geographical position of the front that decides one's individual fate. Almost all figures lose their faith and hopes, caught in the middle of a mass of people and faced with events they cannot influence anymore; all they are left with is their fear.

Mass scenes of soldiers, in which mud and fog penetrate everything, and dialogues between Bologa and Müller, for instance, alternate, elaborating two central themes emphasized by the producer himself and several critics: the search for happiness and fear.<sup>27</sup> According to Irina Coroiu, the film gains symphonic dimensions through suddenly changing the narrative style between inner depictions or comic moments.<sup>28</sup> The figures are emblematic: Ilona represents pure innocence and dignity, while others personify frivolity. In the scene of the last meal, Ilona reaches the greatness of classical characters,<sup>29</sup> becoming a widow in mourning who

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25 Ilieșu, *Povestea poveștii în filmul românesc*, 65.

26 Ibid., 64.

27 Petrovici, *Pădurea spânzuraților: Un film de Liviu Ciulei*, 212.

28 Ibid., 209. Anyway, some critics e.g. George Sadoul reproached Ciulei because of the length and slow development of the film; Țuțui, "Pădurea spânzuraților" [Forest of the Hanged], 34; Richard Roud, "The Knack of the British," in *The Guardian*, May 29, 1965, 6.

29 Petrovici, *Pădurea spânzuraților: Un film de Liviu Ciulei*, 29–30.



adapts to reality. Not only Ilona, but peasants in general, appear as embodiments of normality (wanting to plough the field). Morality is shown also through another key figure: the Romanian peasant Petre, who is supposed to eliminate Müller for spreading his anti-militaristic views that threaten to undermine other soldiers' morale. Petre allows Müller to escape and is punished by Bologa, who sends him in the first line to his certain death. Bologa later learns from Petre's son that Müller managed to escape, while Petre died. As an officer and philosopher, the main character tries to justify his behavior in the same way as he always does evoking his duty to the Austro-Hungarian state. In contrast, Petre as an emblematic peasant is led by his feelings and duties to humanity. Finding his real self in the end, Bologa symbolically transforms into a peasant. His metamorphosis is represented in the closing meal, one of the most lyric scenes of the film. The eating ceremony demonstrates an inner harmony reached by accepting fate as the unavoidable order of life. Bologa seems to regard his death as a punishment for the lies in his life: falsely interpreted duty, honor, pride, and hesitations.

The detailed depictions of the unspectacular aspects of life are central in the movie: breathing and swallowing assume an expressive function, and the surroundings reflect Bologa's inner state. The objects characterize the figures: Karg's palace is luxurious but at the same time deserted, suggesting cruelty. Similarly, the soldiers are more often shown in their dirty clothes fighting against the mud rather than the enemy. Frozen faces express the soldiers' fear not only in the opening scene, when the deserter is hanged, but keep returning as leitmotifs during the whole film.

Ovidiu Gologan's black and white camera work operates with contrasts and close-ups that reflect the figures' inner state and visually present their psychological motivations. The expressivity of

the looks is remarkable.<sup>30</sup> According to Gologan, the eyes convey a wide range of feelings: sometimes Bologa's harshness, sometimes his goodness, his remorse, his calm, or resignation; sometimes Ilona's innocence or Karg's cruelty.<sup>31</sup> The light metaphor, which Marilena Ilieșiu perceives as a character on its own,<sup>32</sup> also belongs to the repeated elements continuously gaining and lending new meaning, expressing in the end the euphoria of Bologa's love for Ilona. The returning white could be interpreted as a kind of reconciliation with fate, which is suggested also by Theodor Grigoriu's minimalist music, sharing some similarities with Alban Berg's *Wozzek*.<sup>33</sup>

### Conclusion

Marilena Ilieșiu describes the history of the Romanian film as a road from primitivism, in terms of its technical solutions and plot constructions, to postmodern configurations.<sup>34</sup> This development has not occurred in the field of World War I movies, as the topic nearly disappeared from the screens because World War II is more vivid in the collective memory.

Regarding the question of historical representation and national stereotyping, several of the discussed war films helped "implant, strengthen, and nurture stereotypes."<sup>35</sup> German barbarism, imprisoned nationalities, and Transylvanian martyrs belonged to

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30 Ibid., 19.

31 Ibid., 87.

32 Ilieșiu, *Povestea poveștii n filmul românesc*, 62.

33 Petrovici, *Pădurea spânzuraților: Un film de Liviu Ciulei.*, 79.

34 Ilieșiu, *Povestea poveștii n filmul românesc*, 5.

35 Michael T. Isenberg, "The Friend: The Image of the Ally," in *War on Film: The American Cinema and World War I, 1914–1941* (London: Associated Presses, 1981) 161–175, 161.

the reiterated motives of mostly ideologically underpinned films. However, outstanding individual artistic performances were also created during the communist period. Besides the most significant exception, *Pădurea spânzuraților*, or Iulian Mihu's *Lumina palidă a durerii*, Andrei Blaier's *Prin cenușa imperiului* succeeded only in part, as although the film displays a high degree of dramatic sensibility and has numerous masterly scenes, it does not exclude national narratives and ideological undertones.

Thanks to its multi-layered nature, *Pădurea spânzuraților* could gain international attention both through its peasant figures and its artistic complexity and satisfy the ideological expectations of the time by raising current social problems.<sup>36</sup> Since desertion was a frequent theme of European WWI films at the time, Liviu Ciulei took up a common topic that *pars pro toto* demonstrated "this conflict's quintessential cruelty and injustice."<sup>37</sup> *Pădurea spânzuraților* resembles films like Joseph Losey's *The Servant* (1963), but Ciulei has also been compared to Alain Resnais, Lewis Milestone, or Michelangelo Antonioni.<sup>38</sup>

Explicit denunciations of Austria-Hungary as oppressive and imperialistic were ideologically welcomed in the communist period, but mainly remained at the discourse level. Only a few

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36 Emphasized in the press of the time, mainly in 1964-1965, among others in: *Contemporanul*, *Făclia*, *Scânteia*, *Săptămâna Culturală a Capitalei*, *România liberă*, *Infirmația Bucureștiului*, *Viața culturală*, *Luceafărul*, *Tribuna*, *Utunk*, *Előre*, *Művelődési Élet*, *Új Élet*, *Neuer Weg*, *Fáklya*; Liviu Ciulei's personal archive: F-Padu Press. An overview through selected quotations of the reception in the media is given by Petrovici; Petrovici, *Pădurea spânzuraților: Un film de Liviu Ciulei*. 206-228.

37 Buelens, "'They wouldn't end it with any of us alive, now would they?': The First World War in Cold War Era Films," 369.

38 Țuțui, "Pădurea spânzuraților [Forest of the Hanged]," 34.

films reflect more accurately the complexity of the topic. *Pădurea Spânzuraților* offers many scenes where ethnic Czech, Romanian, Polish, Ruthenian, Hungarian, and Austrian soldiers and civilians deal with one another in respectful, caring, and even loving ways. But even here, the military system, represented by the Austrian General von Karg, shows no mercy."<sup>39</sup> This production was "successful by addressing the difficult issues of Austria-Hungary's dissolution at the end of World War I and in exploring its intricate Transylvanian dimension, while staying away from propagandistic patriotic leanings. Ciulei's stylish adaptation of Rebreanu's novel is a memorable historical fresco that addresses complex Balkan confrontations and reinforces the importance of this early analysis of Balkan history."<sup>40</sup>

The scheme of ethnic vs. imperial nationalism was propagated in several of the films, such as *Ecatarina Teodoroiu*, *Prin cenușa imperiului*, or *Capcana mercenarilor*. The formula of exceptional heroes with a historical mission was also repeatedly used (*Ecatarina Teodoroiu* or *Capcana mercenarilor*). "In the whole period of communism, and also after the fall of communism, the most representative Romanian World War I films violently attacked the institution of arms; they have a tragic outlook, focusing on the despair of individuals caught up in the war-machinery."<sup>41</sup> Even if some specification is needed, as Vučetić does not talk about post-1990 productions—and her description only partly fits the films analyzed above—the horror and brutality of the war can be regarded as a consistent thread, and pacifist ideas were indeed promoted as part of the official ideology. In this sense,

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39 Buelens, "'They wouldn't end it with any of us alive, now would they?': The First World War in Cold War Era Films," 374.

40 Țuțui, "Pădurea spânzuraților" [Forest of the Hanged], 41.

41 Vučetić, "Film/Cinema (South East Europe)."

bodies hanging at the gallows in Pădurea spânzuraților represent the “absurd fruits of the war,”<sup>42</sup> while at the same time the film stresses the fact that everybody’s behavior is understandable—though resulting in tragedy and death.<sup>43</sup>

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42 Țuțui, “Pădurea spânzuraților” [Forest of the Hanged], 40.

43 Ibid., 37.