

Romanian Migrantscapes in Contemporary Filmic Texts

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Resumé: *Par les représentations visuelles qu'ils transmettent, les films sont un des sites les plus accessibles où la dynamique que la création des images implique au niveau interculturel peut être mise en évidence. Les images visuelles illustrent des structures mentales qui sous-tendent les perceptions de soi-même et de l'autre, et construisent ou déconstruisent des cartes conceptuelles à l'aide desquelles un certain group intériorise les coutumes et les expériences quotidiennes. Tout en prenant comme point de départ ces prémisses théoriques de l'imagologie, cet article se propose d'analyser la forme et la fonction des représentations récentes de l'émigration et des expériences de l'émigrant telles qu'elles sont traitées dans quelques films roumains, français et italiens contemporains. Tandis que tous ces textes essayent de reconstituer dans l'imagination un espace culturel réel où l'émigrant conteste ou brouille les hiérarchies établies entre moi et l'autre, l'indigène et l'étranger, l'espace national et la déterritorialisation, le centre et la périphérie, l'Ouest et l'Est, leurs contextes différents apportent des articulations ambiguës et souvent contradictoires des dichotomies mentionnées ci-dessus.*

Mots-clés: *migration, représentation cinématographique, ipséité/altérité, centre/périphérie, l'Ouest/l'Est*

Image, Stereotype and Film

Though a specialism rooted in the field of Comparative Literary Study, the technical neologism referred to as *imagology* in many languages has come to transcend the field of literary analysis and to provide “a viable and fruitful approach to neighbouring specialisms (from cultural studies to postcolonial studies, and from social psychology and anthropology to art history)” (Beller & Leerssen, 2003: xv). What accounts for the open-ended outlines of the field is its interest in the study of different forms of cultural representation, i.e. the ways in which perceived national/ ethnic/ racial/ cultural characters and identities – both one’s own and that of others – are expressed in a wide range of discourses, including literature, film and the media. Because stress is laid on perception and not on the “truth” or accuracy of an image, the aim of *imagology* is to understand the structures of images and demonstrate their conventional nature, by focusing on the intersection between linguistic (aesthetic/rhetorical) and historical (ideological/socio-cultural) aspects of discourse (Moyle, 2004: 9).

In recognizing the ideological character of images and drawing attention to their socio-cultural differences and similarities, *imagology* considers this mode of reciprocal characterization as pivotal in understanding national perception and representation in terms of the self/other dichotomy, which also underlies the dialectic of identity and alterity (Voestermans, 1991: 219). As the identity of a human develops along the line of differentiation between (what is considered to be) the ‘self’ and everything which is not the self, the two are thus mutually dependable, investing each other with meaning. The same dialectic characterises the articulation of cultural and national identities, because “all human cultures articulate, situate themselves by categorizing the world [...], a predicative act [which] involves a distinction between that which is allowed into the sphere of culture and that which is excluded” (Corbey & Leerssen, 1991: vi). “Otherness” is thus created as both the contrastive as well as the cognitive background against which a cultural or national identity is circumscribed.

Image, the main working concept in the field, is “the mental or discursive representation or reputation of a person, group, ethnicity or ‘nation’” (Beller & Leerssen, 2003: 342), closely resembling a cognitive “knowledge structure” or schema that controls our opinion and behaviour towards the “other”. When an image remains constant despite of historical changes, it turns into a stereotype or cliché, i.e. a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgement about a person or an entire group of people. As such, stereotypes play an important role in identity building: if an individual’s sense of self is

closely related to the group to which he or she belongs – which may extend from school affiliation to race and nationality, identifying with this ‘in-group’ means internalizing its own stereotypes. The dialectic between auto-stereotypes (evolved at ‘in-group level) and hetero-stereotypes (relating to ‘out-groups’, i.e. the other groups to which the individual does not belong or identify with) is often based on contrastive stereotyping, because the tendency is to assign negative characteristics to the out-group in order to create positive auto-stereotypes. Ethnocentrism, i.e. the “view of things in which one’s own group is the centre of everything, and all others are scaled or rated with reference to it” (Berg, 2002: 14), transforms thus neutral categorization into a prejudicial practice, at the same time at which stereotypes become a key component “in the ideological construction of otherness.” (Homi K. Bhabha in Berg, 2002: 15). If stereotypes are simplified generalizations that assume out-group homogeneity, one should not forget that stereotypes hugely simplify “that out-group experience by selecting a few traits of the Other that pointedly accentuate differences.” (Berg, 2002: 16) In this way, the complexity of any group history is dispensed with, as stereotyping flattens, homogenises and generalises “individuals within a group, emphasising sameness and ignoring individual agency and variety” (Berg, 2002: 16).

Through the visual representations they transmit and mediate, films become one of the most powerful texts able to reveal patterns of national characterisation, since they function as the structured expression of mental constructs and stereotypes. Visual images carry ‘mental’ schemata that underpin the interplay between perception of the other and self-perception, mediated to both in-group and out-group members alike. As such the leap is made from a theoretical mode of representation to a concrete image with a concrete signification, “an agreed-upon vision and a shared sign of the Other in precise and material form” (Berg, 2002: 36). And yet, as cultural texts, films remain embedded in a recognizable social matrix, in keeping with the inner dynamics and outspoken ideals of the given communities, revealing thus the construction or deconstruction of the ‘maps’ of meaning through which a particular group of people makes sense of everyday practices and experience.

Identity, Place and Deterritorialisation

In “The poetics and anthropology of national character (1500-2000)”, Joe Leerssen was noting that *difference* has been the key-word to connote uniqueness for European nations starting from the mid-seventeenth century onwards: “nations will come to see their character, their individuality, in those aspects in which they differ most from others” (Leerssen, 2003: 69). However, in the context of the contemporary world, culturally marked by globalisation and spatially reordered into a geopolitical collective subsuming multiple nationalities, the major challenge brought to the national imagining has been that of rethinking the imagological coordinates upon which essentialist interpretations of identity rested.

The post-1990 changing geographical borders, the new transnational mobility and the ensuing cross-cultural melting-pots have called into question the mental division of Europe along the West/East, or Centre/Periphery coordinates, though the countries of the post-communist East-European area have continued to share an ambivalent and floating sense of an identity which is “no more Eastern, but not yet Western”. This proves the persistence of power and mental structures which sustain the condescending attitude behind Eurocentrist thinking, which for long has tended to divide the world into two cultural fields, “the West” and “the rest” (Shohat & Stam, 1994), and which has tended to place Eastern Europe in a ‘nesting orientalist’ discourse (Todorova, 1997) as the “lesser”, or “the Other” Europe.”

One means of ‘unthinking’ Eurocentrism is to acknowledge the shifting and expanding nature of a European space where multiculturalism and migration restructure intercommunal relations within and beyond the nation-state, transgressing thus embedded

hierarchies established between self and other, native and foreign, home and deterritorialisation, centre and periphery, West and East. As Dina Iordanova states, “a culturally significant space is constituted by the members of the new community of migrants [...] overcoming the trademark atmosphere of lost homelands and rising above destabilizing discourses of shattered identities, to occupy an expanding universe, a universe which receives its meaning through its perpetual dynamism.” (2001: 262). To this it adds the importance of electronic mediation, because “in a world where images, sounds, peoples and goods circulate globally, the impact of the media on national identity, and on the feeling of group-belonging, is very complex. As it facilitates the interaction with far-off nations, the media ‘deterritorialises’ the communities’ process of selfimage construction, often altering their cultures.” (Palacios Cruz, 2008: 16).

Migrantscapes and Cinematic Images

The dynamics of cross-cultural image making unravelling in the post-1990 context of shifting interpretations of place and national identity is best revealed by contemporary filmmaking, which displays an articulate interest in exploring migration and the migrant’s experience in multiple culturally significant imaginative worlds. One such case is provided by the analysis of the form and function of representations of post-communist and post-integration Romanian migrant experience as they are mediated by recent Romanian, French and Italian filmic texts. While all these films attempt to imaginatively figure an actual cultural terrain in which the migrant tests traditional notions of self, home and belonging against the complexity of unknowable reality, when placed in the perspectival context of the representing text (home vs. host), the group becomes heterogeneous, revealing itself as multi-accentual, conflicted and conflicting with discourses on migration privileged in a particular milieu.

In order to delineate the representational patterns involved in the dialectal process of identity formation in terms of the oppositional pairing of auto- and hetero-images/stereotypes, the chosen filmic corpus should thus be further subdivided into three distinct subcategories: five Romanian productions, including *Occident* (*Occident*, 2002) – *O* [1], *Italiencele* (*The Italian Women*, 2004) – *I* [2], *Schimb valutar* (*Exchange*, 2008) – *E* [3], *Legiunea străină* (*The Foreign Legion*, 2008) – *FL* [4] and *Weekend cu mama* (*Weekend with my Mother*, 2009) – *WM* [5]; two foreign ones, the French *Je vous trouve très beau* (*I Find You Very Nice*, 2005) – *TB* [6] and the Italian *Il Resto della Notte* (*The Rest of the Night*, 2008) – *RN* [7], and an in-between category exemplified by *Asfalt Tango* (*Asphalt Tango*, 1996) – *AT* [8], which is a joint Romanian-French production.

The films in the first sub-category foreground migration as an in-group experience, engaging with topical issues in the wider context of communicated concepts and interpretations of the post-communist and post-integration Romanian context, always depicted in a state of transition (communism vs. capitalism, collectivism vs. individualism, localism vs. globalisation, rural vs. urban) and fractured along economic, spatial, and generational lines. Unemployment, marginalization, impoverishment and the continuing dominance of patriarchal mentalities and hierarchies at both domestic and public level testify for the characters’ decision to leave, in the hope of achieving a better life (be it in term of money, career or status) elsewhere.

As such, all these films focus on the interplay between notions of home and the mirage of the West in order to probe the migrant’s ‘stay-or-leave’ dilemma. In all of them ‘home’ emerges as an un-idealised landscape of contrasts between traditional certainties (community ties and the knowledge of place) and the unforeseeable pressures of modern-day existence. This applies both to the cityscapes of *O*, *WM*, *E* in which the transition from a

collectivist to an individualist society is visualised through an abrupt juxtaposition of shots of communist-style squalid tenements and fancy urban developments (ironically, the name of the city store in *O* is “More and More: A Life Philosophy”), as well as to the rural ones in *I* and *FL* in which the peasant culture has become a mere commodity, being commercialised like folklore (the “călușari” dance in *I*) and the traditional communal activities have been replaced by training in Spanish or strawberry-picking (in *FL*). Characteristically, the atmosphere is permeated by desperation, and the films’ protagonists find themselves displaced at home and morally-frustrated in a society in which traditional concepts of normality and deviance seem to have become confused. It is significant that it is the “deviant” ones (the bullying, the deceitful, the corrupted, the delinquent) that know how to make their way through this uneasy landscape, while the “normal” ones are either forced to leave, led astray or left behind, chained to a home that has lost its substance. In all the films the metaphor of death is employed to refer to the loss of traditional meanings of home. In *O* the protagonists’ paths intersect in a cemetery and it is the news of a death that precipitates the denouement of the stories. In *I* the death of the father marks the end of the village life as it was known to the sisters. In *WM* the death of the daughter and the disappearance of her child disintegrate the meaning of home. In *E*, the notion of home dies with the murder of Streche, while in *FL* Mitu’s death abroad induces Aurel’s at home.

Of the two foreign films included in the corpus, only *TB* localises Romania as “home” in its vacillating setting. Nevertheless, here it is a Western perceiving eye through which the realities of present-day Bucharest are captured by the camera. From Aymé’s descent from the plane, the city is assembled in photographic snapshots that fit into his tourist’s album: the embankment of the Dâmbovița river, Ceaușescu’s palace, the urban monster that, from a futile communist undertaking has been turned into a trademark of the city, a wooden bench surrounded by carefully trimmed trees, a fancy restaurant which serves not only traditional Romanian food, but also traditional dances in which today’s youngsters [sic] readily join. Even the two scenes that do not conform to this sanitised view of a “Romanian” home (the hotel lobby in which the girls parade in front of the foreigner who offers them the dream of a life abroad and the melodramatic one in which Elena hardly finds her way to the curtained bed of her and her young daughter through the squalid and overcrowded one-room apartment that hosts the entire family) are in accordance to Western stereotypes regarding the readiness of Romanian women to sell their looks in return for a passport to happiness and the poverty characteristic of East-Europeans.

AT, as joint Romanian-French production, correspondingly draws on both sets of representations, as ‘home’ glimpsed through the bus windows fluidises the scenery otherwise made up of disparate oppositional pairs (the picturesque versus the derelict, urban versus the suburban, the urban versus the rural, the new and the old) suggesting the social and economic cleavages in the local culture and inviting at the reconsideration of Romania’s margins and Romania as margin.

Host societies (Spain, Italy, France, Austria, or the more distant Australia) are backgrounded in the Romanian feature films where the characters either intend to set out for or return from them, but emerge as dominant in the foreign ones – either as a rural, tradition-bound but aging French community (in *TB*) or, conversely, as an urban, prosperous but class-ridden Italian family (in *RN*). The latter one foregrounds the destination culture, showing the Romanians as occupying a secondary, if not tertiary position in society and revealing all possible relationships: the natives are reluctant or outright opposed to the immigrants (Silvana Boarin vs. the Romanian gypsy beggars, Silvana vs. Maria), only few cases of friendship between the two sides being possible (Ana Boarin and Maria); the migrants themselves do not seem to get along or have similar life principles (Maria and Victor vs. Ionuț). In *TB* it is France that becomes the main partner in the dialogue on migration, but with a reversal of its traditional encoding as an urban space in the West-ist cultural map-

making. Elena sets on an East-West journey which is typically perceived as progressive, while, at the same time, she exchanges an urban with a rural space – generally perceived as a regressive cultural trajectory, which she, nonetheless, accepts as the only alternative to her home situation. The film does not aim to critically analyse the emigrant's experience in the host society, as Elena's relationships with the villagers are construed along stereotypical patterns of interaction.

In the case of the Romanian films, there are two strategies at work used to represent the host societies. One means is oblique, decentring their assumed hierarchical positioning by dispersing their representations in the stories within the stories that the films tell: Luiza's husband (in *WM*) keeps calling her asking when she will be back (assumed is a civilised marriage and relationship); Lilica's Spain (in *FL*) seems to have helped her become richer than anyone else in her village (but people know the source of her well being: prostitution); Lili too (in *E*) earns more than most from prostitution in Romania as host country. Another strategy is to elaborate on the destination society through metonymical characters: Marion, the self-possessed, elegant and sophisticated business-woman, embodies both the civilised and the mercantile aspects of the French society (in *AT*); *O* sketches a larger European map which both validates traditional assumptions about West-East hierarchical positioning (Jerome, the French 'benefactor', and Van Horn, the Dutch 'official') and points to composite hierarchies within Europe itself in order to conceptualise articulation of what is European from below (Nae, the Romanian illegal migrant turned 'German' and Luigi, the Italian of African origin).

The West as constructed by the migrant's imagination is justified by the power of the cultural myth. As sets of signs which imply extremely familiar and influential structures of thinking, or naturalised codes of social meanings and values, or sets of beliefs and attitudes that the viewer is invited to accept as true and natural, myths reflect normality. All the feature films start from this premise, but gradually revisit the myth of the rich, almighty West, a land of all possibilities. The pursuit of a distant idealised West looms large over the characters' decisions to emigrate (in *AT*, *O*, *I*, *TB*, *E* and *FL*). If *WM* adheres to it through suggestions of an accomplished life abroad, the open endings of *AT*, *O* and *E*, though not overtly reversing it, cast doubt on its truth-value, while *I* and *FL* tear it apart by the tragic outcome of the migrant's dream.

Central to the iconography of the two foreign films, the "West" remains nonetheless an elusive space. In *TB*, which focuses on the emotional trajectory of Elena's integration within the provincial French farming community, plays upon traditional assumptions of the 'rich' Western Europeans vs. their 'poor' Eastern neighbours, the myth is sustained by its Cinderella-type plot and fairy-tale resolution. Moreover, the films apparently adheres to the traditional mapping of migration in the gendered dichotomy of the masculine West (Aymé and the patriarchal French community) and the feminine East (Elena and, beyond, an almost exclusively feminine cast in which Romanian-ness is embodied), but subverts correlated oppositional terms by having Elena move from the urban centre of a culture to the peasant periphery of another.

By focusing on the actual migrant experience in the destination culture, *RN* deconstructs and reconstructs the myth from the point of view of the West itself. Memorable dichotomic images re-inscribe traditional West-East hierarchies of power in gender terms: Maria cooking in the kitchen upstairs/Silvana putting on her jewels in front of the mirror upstairs; Romanian gypsy girls begging in the pouring rain/Silvana, scared but comfortable in her expensive car. Furthermore, Silvana's premonition and sudden fear of Maria holds the filmic narrative together. But, unlike its French counterpart, the film reverts the conventional East-West gendered borders, by counterpoising a feminine West (Italy as metonymically foregrounded through the upper-class and highly refined Silvana Boarin) against an

anthropomorphous East in which gender (Maria vs. Ionuț), ethnic (Romanians vs. Roma) and class distinctions (workers vs. lowlifes) are effaced in the stereotype of the threatening and criminal Romanian Other. This strategy metaphorically associates the different assault's on Silvana's body (and, by extension family and household) with images of rape, treated both within the discourse on gender – the West as innocent victim of an exploitative, devious and violent East, and the wider one on home, territory and belonging, because rape is also another dimension of issues related to power and dominance.

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 negotiation between material conditions, ideological discourses and social axes of stratification based on class, race, gender, age, locale, sexual orientation, national origin. A migrant's identity is built at the intersection of these coordinates. Nevertheless, public perception seems to resume it in order to fit preconceived frames which often negate each other. To the traditional types used to subsume a migrant's identity (the adventurer vs. the exile – in the home culture; the adapter versus the alien – in the destination culture) other types have been identified of late: the prodigal son/daughter (in the home culture); the illegal worker, the criminal and the trafficked prostitute (in the destination culture).

The Romanian migrant identity which results from the films chosen is constructed in a more complex way that both abides by the general conceptions and subtly dismantles them by trespassing their typological and cultural borders: the feminine character as adventurer and victim of trafficking in *AT*; Elena, as exile and adapter at the same time in *TB*; Mihaela and Sorina in *O* and Emil in *E* as adventurer-exiles; the illegal worker-adventurer and trafficked sisters in *I*; Luiza as the prodigal exile in *WM*; Mitu as adventurer-victim and Lilica as prodigal-criminal in *FL*; Ionuț and Maria, the criminal illegal workers and Victor as the illegal-worker exile in *RN*. In addition, Romanians are presented as: having succeeded abroad and either forgetting about family at home (Nicu in *O*), returning too late (Luiza – in *WM*) or only to exploit the unknowing, unsuspecting native communities (Lilica – in *FL*); gullible, honest turned dishonest to attain the goal of emigrating (Emil – in *E* or Mitu, Aurel, Stelica – in *FL*); crooks, thieves, lowlifes (Ionuț – in *RN*) or cheap work force (Jeni and Lenuța in *I*; Maria, Victor – in *RN*).

In addition, if these films attempt to focus on the differential experience of migrant women and men in the context of a gendered world, they often revert to traditional encodings of masculinity and femininity which conform to societal expectations fostered by their respective cultural and historical location. Hence the subjectivities of their protagonists are construed in accordance to societal role models which change within the 13 year span that the films cover, but are in fact variations on general gender stereotypes, becoming thus sub-stereotypes in themselves. From *AT* (produced in 1996) to the most recent *WM* (2009), the woman migrant has been represented as: young and beautiful, ready to sell her looks/talents in the promise of material fulfilment in the West (the girls in *AT*; Sorina and Mihaela in *O*, even Elena in *TB*); young and innocent, the victim of malevolent traffickers who lure them into migrating abroad (the sisters in *I*); the supporting, credulous and caring wife, passively acquiescing her husband's wish to migrate (Ana in *E*); the professional prostitute (Lilica in *FL* and Lili, the Moldavian student in *E*); the mother who has abandoned her child in search of material fulfilment abroad (Luiza in *WM*). Such images tend to place the characters within the traditional representation of womanhood that equates the feminine with the passive object, victimhood, sexuality, domesticity and motherhood. The films' narratives are generally convergent with the representation of femininity as devoid of agency, because male figures invested with patriarchal authority either set in motion, deceive into or direct a woman migrant's journey. Bullying fathers (in *I* and *O*), husbands (in *AT* and *E*) or imperfect lovers (in *O*, *WM* and *RN*) more or less openly instigate the plot; public agencies (fake

impresarios in *AT* and matrimonial agents in *O*) or individuals (human traffickers in *I*, a delinquent husband in *E*) forward and supervise it, while other male figures ordain its resolution: the last shots of *I* focus on the American soldier, arrived by car in the remote southern Romanian village to look for the girls he saved in Kosovo, with the implication that he would perform the role of the rescuer once more, taking the sisters to a more distant (and 'respectable') West; the male-dominated interloper world to which both her daughter and her granddaughter fall prey set the course of Luiza renewed departure to the west, the only route that allows an escape from home as entrapment and vicious circle.

As far as the films attempt representations of the male migrant's experience, their narratives are more ambiguous in the codification of masculinity, because here, both in the characters of Nae and Nicu, the pre-1989 illegal migrants from *O*, as well as in those of Mitu, the soldier who dreams to serve in the Foreign Legion from *FL* and Emil, the unemployed set to depart to Australia from *E*, the boundaries of their masculinity are transgressed by having them cast in the feminine role of victims: victimised by the communist regime and its Securitate male authoritarian figures (Nae's reminiscences of colonel Vișoiu's brutal interrogatories in *O*), victimised by devious crooks at home (Emil being cheated out of his money by Streche in *E* and Mitu, Aurel and Stelică falling prey to Maricel's machinations in *FL*), or victimised by the very West that they covet (Maricel's imprisonment and death in an Austrian prison in *FL*). Nevertheless, the male narrative of victimhood is interwoven with a narrative on criminality (Emil's transformation into a dishonest, adulterous delinquent and a criminal by chance in *E*; likewise, the three friends in *FL* steal an old woman's burial money to be able to pay off their dream) that confirms Western stereotypes about the Eastern European migrants.

Instead of Conclusions

All texts are systems of representation that attempt to express in a structured way the mental software of an individual, group or entire culture. Since in today's world, images tend to carry more persuasive weight than writings, filmic texts become one of the most accessible sites where one can trace the mechanisms through which a particular group of people constructs or deconstructs a series of maps of meanings to make sense of everyday practices and experience.

As Dina Iordanova once noted, "although moving around inevitably brings disquieting experiences, staying in one place is no longer possible ..." (2001: 276). Indeed, unsettling as it may be, migration has become one such major experience, if not a way of life for many in post-communist Romania. Given that images are means of 'mapping' experience, the surveyed films have built a imaginative geography of the Romanian migrant, underwriting his trajectory to other cultures and societies and registering thus the dynamic interplay of cross-cultural perceptions which 'moving around' entails.

Retrieving their kaleidoscopic cartography through the lenses of imagology, the representational terrain of the Romanian migrantscape has emerged as multiple, vibrant and always slippery in the interstice between auto- and hetero-images, signalling thus changes in the perception of both in- and out-groups as markers of historical/ political/ social relativity in inter-cultural relations.

Moreover, by critically dissecting the role and function of the films' images and stereotypes within given discursive contexts, embedded hierarchies of place were transgressed, inviting to a recognition of the fact that, when studied as a multicultural phenomenon, dichotomic coordinates like those established between the pragmatic North vs. the sensuous South, the backward periphery vs. the modern centre, or the masculine West vs. the feminine East become nationally unspecific, helping us realize that identity should no

longer be restricted to particularism, but define one as part of, and not in contradistinction to, humanity as a whole.

Notes;

[1] *Occident* is a bitter comedy about the lure of emigration and the responses this triggers in those left behind. Its three parts tell basically the same unrequited tale by focusing on a different story. Nevertheless, the three happen at the same time, their plots intertwine, the same events are shown from different angles as main characters from one story are cast as secondary in another one, in order to prove how their actions unknowingly influence each other's destinies. A young couple, Luci and his fiancée, Sorina, are evicted from their home in the sordid outskirts of Bucharest. While in cemetery waiting for otherworldly guidance from Sorina's dead father, Luci is unexpectedly hit on the head with a flying bottle. The rest of the story focuses on the young man's desperate efforts to win back Sorina, who has moved in the meantime with Jerome, the Frenchman who helped hospitalize Luci. Being offered a shelter by Aunt Leana, the old frail mother of his former friend who left for Germany during the Communist times, Luci is forced to become underemployed as a beer bottle mascot, befriending Mihaela, his fellow telephone advertiser. Things precipitate when a policeman arrives unexpectedly with news that Nicu, Aunt Leana's long estranged son, has died in Germany, the old woman apparently dies in shock and Luci runs to tell Sorina that they can move back together in Aunt Leana's vacant apartment only to find that his fiancée has already left for France with the elder suitor. On the eve of her marriage, Mihaela, a romantic girl who thinks she has a gift for poetry, is deserted by the groom. Desperate to find a replacement, the mother opts for a foreign husband that will help her daughter establish not only a prosperous life abroad but also one unencumbered by the shameful incident at the wedding. While the mother visits a matrimonial agency and arranges blind dates for her daughter, Mihaela gets an employment with an advertising agency where she meets Luci. The two are drawn to and confide in each other as they are kindred spirits in their mutually wounded hearts. But the news come that an Italian suitor intends to visit them. In the midst of the excitement of the family's preparations there appears Luigi, who is young, handsome, well-to-do, a poetry-lover, but black and Mihaela's parents are desperate once again as their daughter voices her decision to leave with him, anyway. Mihaela's father, a retiring police officer with old Securitate-style attitudes and tactics, discovers his daughter's groom drunk in the nearby cemetery and scares the young man off both of his bottle and of the marriage. Afterwards he is reluctantly convinced by both his wife and his mistress that the only means of setting things well for his child is to consent to a foreign marriage. Then, he meets Nae, who has returned from Germany to bring the news of a friend's death to his mother and needs assistance in fulfilling his task. Shocked by the prospect of seeing his child leave with a Black Italian, the officer asks Nae to do him a counter favour and take Mihaela to Germany with him.

[2] Set at the time of the Kosovo conflict, *Italienele* tells the story of two Romanian sisters, Jeni and Lenuța, who decide to leave their small village community in Oltenia, leaving behind an unrequited lover (Gigel) and a drunken uncaring father in order to go and work (illegally) in Spain as strawberry pickers. A year later, they return home with a victorious smile and a western attitude, having supposedly gone rich not in Spain, but working in Italy. However, the truth will come out when Jeni decides to stand up to Giovanni's (her former lover and escort to the girls on their way out of the country) attempt to run for the village Mayor's Office. As the villagers are gathered at the local hall and shown a porno film in which the two sisters are the recognisable protagonists, Lenuța bursts in with a terrible confession: a shocking denouement which lays bare a brutal and horrific experience. The two sisters were in fact trafficked and sold to be exploited as prostitutes in Kosovo by Giovanni and his companion, Fane, to be released only with the arrival of the American troops. The confession works like an exorcisation of guilt and trauma, and the film ends on an image of hope: as the two sisters try to mend what has been left of their family goods, an American soldier drives through the village heading towards the house of the two. The main narrative related to the two sisters includes three related stories: the story of Gigel's desperate efforts to convince Jeni to give up the mirage of Spain and remain in the village, marry him and lead a poor but honest existence; the story of the girls' illegally migrating and its consequences; the story of the sisters' return to their native village and their attempts to reintegrate in the community's life set against the background of the local fights for political power.

[3] Emil is a worker in a town in the Prahova region, supporting his wife and son from his wages. When he is left unemployed, he starts looking for jobs, tries to earn a living helping his father in law in agriculture, but everything is in vain. Eventually, after consultations with his wife, Ana, he decides to sell their flat, and goes to Bucharest to change the money into American dollars in view of emigrating. Cheated by Streche (who gives him worthless counterfeit money for the Romanian lei he got for the flat and furniture), Emil is ashamed to return home and decides to stay on in Bucharest to look for money while, all the time, he lies to his family that he is in Germany, doing well, earning reasonably and waiting to make something of himself before asking them to join him. Homeless and hungry, led on by the police, he finds daily jobs that are badly paid, but which help him survive. One day, he meets Lili (a law student living on prostitution money), who takes him in, helps and advises him as best she can. Emil gradually turns into a crook and a criminal who, having learnt the lesson the hard way, now ruthlessly cheats others out of their life savings. When he finally has enough or, better still, when he is afraid that he might be taken to prison, Emil bribes the police officer who had failed to help him, obtains fake passports for himself and his family and plans to emigrate illegally. He is about to get on the plane to freedom (that his wife and son are also booked for), when he is recognised by one of the men he has stolen from, his fortune is blown by the wind, his son's attention is caught, he is exposed but, deformed by money, he pretends not to know the people dear to him and embarks on his journey westward to the promised land.

[4] While bird flu is ravaging a small village in northern Moldavia, various lowlifes start thriving businesses: Maricel (an investor in scrap iron) – who makes a profit from frozen chicken imported from Holland, from bird flu disinfectant and from selling dreams (signing men in for the French Foreign Legion); Lilica (returned from Spain, where she had emigrated and allegedly made money from prostitution) – who participates in the Dutch chicken business alongside Maricel and who trains villagers at a profit to pick Spanish strawberries; the colonel of the military base nearby – who smuggles petrol and sells German chicken to the peasants left without their

poultry. Three friends fall prey to Maricel's machinations, although very alert at the scams of others: Mitu – a soldier carrying out his military service in the village; Aurel – married, with a pregnant wife and no money to his name; Stelică – one of the local policemen. They plot to have Mitu steal the burial money that Stelică's grandmother has saved so as to make the 600 euro deposit (that Maricel's men collect), they work out to be fit for legionnaires, they dream of leading better lives abroad. When no news comes in of the Foreign Legion, Mitu decides to leave in advance. He makes it to Austria, where he is caught, imprisoned and shot trying to escape. Aurel is summoned to the post office in the neighbouring town, where he hopes to pick up some parcel that Mitu has sent, but discovers that he is given a coffin containing the remains of his friend. At the morgue, where he takes the dead man's body to, he is told that all of Mitu's organs have been removed. Affected, incapable of spreading the news, Aurel returns to the village, but instead of going home, goes for a swim and falls asleep, half naked, only to be found by someone next morning covered in leeches that have drained him of his blood.

[5] When Luiza left Romania for Spain 15 years ago, she left her daughter Cristina behind, to be raised by her aunt, Elena. Luiza now has a new family and lives in comfort in Spain. She returns to Bucharest to be with Elena, who has suffered a stroke and is paralysed. Another reason for her return seems to be that of seeing her daughter once more. She ends up convincing reluctant Cristina to spend the weekend with her. The Cristina Luiza gradually discovers is metonymic and symptomatic for the situation focused upon. She has run away from home, accusing her stepfather of having molested and abused her (a relationship which has resulted in a child, now in an orphanage) and is living with Glonț (Bullet), taking high risk drugs, dealing and stealing for the money that presupposes. She rejects Luiza, refusing to get to know her, but is bribed into accepting to spend a few days with her, at her grandfather's, in the countryside. The weekend proper informs Luiza on the dark side of Cristina's existence and makes her do her best to salvage the last shreds of normality. Mother and daughter rebuild their relationship, Luiza invites Cristina to join her in Spain (together with her young daughter) and Cristina accepts to undergo detox treatment. All seems to go perfectly until Glonț shows up again asking for more money and kidnapping the little girl the two women had just taken out of the orphanage. Going after her daughter, Cristina discovers that she had been stolen by a network of human traffickers who sell children abroad to medical centres specialising in organ 'donations'. Her attempts to recuperate her child go wrong and she ends up at the morgue, where Luiza is summoned by the police to identify her.

[6] *Je vous trouve très beau* presents Aymé, a balding middle-aged farmer who unexpectedly loses his wife in an accident, seeking a new wife to help him with work on the farm. Not having time to socialize, he goes to a marriage agency that arranges for him a trip to Romania, where numerous young women are eager to find a French husband and escape thus the hard, grim life at home. Growing more and more confused with each new candidate who thinks she would make the perfect match due to talents like acting, singing or dancing, Aymé is relieved to encounter Elena, a young, beautiful and clever woman who immediately understands what the Frenchman needs and pretends to be interested in farm work. The two leave for France, Elena hiding the fact that she leaves a 6-year old daughter at home whom she hopes to be able to help escape the misery in which they live with the money saved abroad. The comic arises out of the various (cultural, ethnic, gender, generational) clashes between the two main characters, who gradually learn to accommodate their obvious differences and start to care for each other. But despite Elena's charm and her openly displayed affection, Aymé continues to pretend coldness and self-sufficiency, realising too late, after Elena has made her decision to return home, that he himself cares for the young woman as a person and not just a housekeeper. But to ensure the happy denouement, an accident makes Elena, who is now back in Bucharest where she runs a ballet school, realise that there were Aymé's savings that have enabled her return and the financial security of her present life and the film ends back in the French fields where a changed Aymé comes across Elena and her young daughter who have returned to be reunited into a happy family.

[7] 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, Ionuț (the fiancé Maria had left to find a better life, through honest work, with the Boarins) and Victor (his teenage brother), live in poverty and promiscuity somewhere in a ghetto. While Victor earns his living by hard labour and daily employment, Ionuț 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, Ionuț 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.

[8] Set in the immediate post-communist decade, the film is a burlesque comedy involving a group of eleven beautiful Romanian girls who are persuaded by a French agent (Marion) and a dubious Romanian impresario (Gigi) to embark on a bus that would lead them to Paris and future glory as cabaret dancers. This East-West journey, which involves crossing Romania from Bucharest, through Brașov, Cluj and Oradea, to reach the Hungarian border and beyond, is complicated by the desperate efforts made by Andrei, the husband of the opera ballet dancer Dora, to stop his wife from embarking on what he strongly believes to be a life of prostitution, and to persuade her to return home to the safety of their marriage. Within the framework of the group's journey through the winding (at times picturesque, but more often desolate and dusty) Romanian landscape, a number of stories are embedded: the story of Dora and Andrei's marriage set against the social and economic cleavages characterising post-revolutionary Romanian society; the story of Felicia, with a bourgeois background and cultural aspirations that collide with the aberrant behavioural codes of a society in transition; the story of Graziela, who has embarked on this trip as punishment to her Italian fiancé, who has ceased returning phone calls.

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