Discursive Practices and Constructions of Womanhood

Alexandru Praisler - SOP HRD Doctoral Candidate
"Dunărea de Jos" University of Galati

Résumé: *Les discours sont des pratiques sociales comportant une dimension politique, qui concernent des faits et des actions, des objets et des êtres et qui, par conséquent, reflètent les divers aspects de la réalité. Cependant, la réalité change toujours, et, de la même façon, les discours changent eux- mêmes. L'objectif de cet article est d'analyser les côtés sociaux et politiques de la (re)construction de la réalité par des pratiques discursives et en même temps le rapport entre la réalité et le discours, entendu comme relation dialectique entre les deux (relation qui implique l'influence de la réalité sur le discours et la modification de la réalité par le discours). Cet article se propose aussi d'analyser le rôle des pratiques discursives dans l'exercice des rapports de pouvoir impliqués par tout échange verbal, avec une attention particulière accordée à la manipulation. Dans ce contexte, l'accent sera mis sur la construction de la féminité dans le film* Occident*, de Cristian Mungiu. L'approche choisie est celle de l'Analyse Critique du Discours (Critical Discourse Analysis). Cette approche combinée permet de mettre en valeur les éléments caractéristiques du système social roumain (par cela on comprend les attitudes, les valeurs, les représentations mentales, les idéologies, l'éducation, le contexte culturel et historique concernant le statut de la femme) et aussi la manière dont tous ces éléments fonctionnent dans le processus de la communication interculturelle.*

Mots-clés: *discours, féminité, (re)construction*

1. Premise. Argument. Method

Problematic as they may be, the concepts of discourse and reality have always been central to the various discussions on and approaches to the world around. Capturing that world into words, having reality acquire a linguistic formulation was deemed impossible by twentieth century thought, which emphasized the relativity, subjectivity, politics even, of representation and mediation. Brought forth were "the linguistic turn", "the turn to discourse" and "the critical turn" [1], which posited that: language should be perceived as a fully fledged meaningful system rather than as expressing meanings which pre-exist their linguistic formulation; representation cannot be taken for a more or less direct reflection of reality, but needs to be understood as a form of signification in its own right; meaning and signification systems are constructed in and by history, society, culture – which also contaminate the analyst and the analysis.

Furthermore, what deserves special consideration is the inner dynamism propelling the modes and manners of representation, in close connection with the modifications at the heart of the historical, social and cultural frames/realities. In short, if one accepts that social reality changes in time, then one also needs to accept that the representations of each reality multiply and change, and that the discourses used for each representation of reality change also.

In view of tackling the aspects mentioned above and of seeing them at work in Cristian Mungiu's *Occident*, one of the interpretative grids of Critical Discourse Analysis [2] will be used in what follows. The choice was motivated by the fact that CDA:

- combines linguistic theory, social theory and cultural studies, focusing on language text (spoken or written), discourse (text production, distribution and consumption) and discursive events (mirroring socio-cultural practices) – in order to examine ideologies and power relations

- provides the researcher with the necessary tools for carrying out "a discourse analysis focused upon variability, change, and struggle: variability between practices and heterogeneity within them as a synchronic reflex of processes of historical change which are shaped by struggle between social forces." [3]

- places "qualitative emphasis on political discourse, mostly media texts and news reports" and interprets "narrative or the construction of reality perspective, the ideological and political functions of the media." [4]

Critical Discourse Analysis is therefore appropriate for developing on filmic discursive practices and their politics of representation, on the artistic act as manipulative communication, on the role and specificity of the multimedial support – in connection with issues of womanhood that emerge from the Romanian context and address the present day situation.

One of the theories supporting CDA and outlining the interpretative grid to be applied in what follows is Michel Foucault's discursive approach to language and representation [5]. According to the French philosopher, discourse is a system of representation, a way of producing knowledge about a particular topic at a particular historical moment, essentially through language, and of influencing social practice, which thus emerges as being of a discursive nature. His thesis is that physical things and actions exist outside discourse, but they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse. Another point he is making is that the discursive formation of social events occurs in history, undergoing changes but preserving a common nucleus, recognisable in the cultural intertext holding them together.

To exemplify this constructionist theory of meaning and representation, Foucault resorts to a concrete case [6], that of the subjects of "madness", "punishment" and "sexuality" – which only exist meaningfully within the discourses about them, and whose analysis should include the following elements: *statements* about them, offering a certain kind of knowledge; the *rules* which impose certain ways of talking about them and exclude others; the *subjects* who are seen as personifying the discourse; how the *knowledge* about the topic acquires authority; what the practices of *institutions* are with regard to the subjects; acknowledging that, at a later time, a *different discourse* will supplant the existing one, producing other truths about these subjects.

The case of the present paper will be tackled along the lines mentioned above, in view of identifying the constructions of womanhood emerging from public discursive practices, with special reference to the filmic ones in *Occident*.

2. Under focus: *Occident*

Due to its complex structure and content of ideas, Cristian Mungiu's *Occident* (2002) allows for a twofold interpretation: on the one hand, the film includes a global perspective, "rewrites preconceived migratory maps" and "subtly dismantles them by negotiating the migrant identity within a border dynamics which shifts the predictable contours of notions like Home and the West" [7]; on the other hand, it focuses on the local context and looks into the reasons having determined the migration. The women it stops to consider facilitate the discussion on the reproduction and subversion of the legitimisation of power by dominant groups and institutions. Socially marginalised and abused on gender bases, they attempt a journey inwards, towards the male governed centre, but are rejected and end up as cultural and national fringes elsewhere.

From the standpoint of CDA, social power presupposes "the control exercised by one group or organisation (or its members) over the actions and/or the minds of (the members of) another group, thus limiting the freedom of action of the others, or influencing their knowledge, attitudes or ideologies." As for social power abuse, or dominance, it is that "legally or morally illegitimate exercise of control over others in one's own interests", which "often results in social inequality." [8] Involved in a mediated relationship with the social reality it represents, the film bears traces of the latter's previous constructions in public discourses (where film now holds first place, together with television), whereby the Romanian situation in general and that of the Romanian women in particular have been portrayed in dark tones. Discursively mediating dominance and inequality, *Occident* at once brings to attention

recurrent patterns of social interaction which give women a secondary role, and avenges those trapped inside.

Set in the years immediately following the 1989 Revolution and Romania's entering its post-communist phase, *Occident* narrates on the social realities of the time, illustrated by two individuals, whose paths cross and whose destinies overlap. [9] The central characters, Sorina and Mihaela, embody opposing prototypes of women, yet are constructed similarly, in terms of marriage, men, money, career and home – that is in terms of "recognisable roles, images, models and labels" which "occur in discourse in response to specific social imperatives". Their filmic construction carries the traces of "dominant modes of ideology" and of "a politics of control that representation both signifies and serves." [10] In short, the *statements* generally made about women in public discourse are reinforced by the film's narrative and converge towards their representation as financially dependent on men, as having a subordinate role in society, as objects of sexual transactions or as inscribed within a domestic environment.

By looking into the inertia governing the historical moment described and thus showing the present as contaminated by the recent past, *Occident* also seems to invite at considering the narrower notion of taboos, which still exist, and of the politically correct, which is still the exception rather than the norm. In Foucault's terms, this sheds light on the fact that the *institutions* regulating women's existence (family, marriage) function according to pre-existing, earlier constructed truths. Moreover, it emphasises that, despite the *rules* dictating the way in which the topic of women and womanhood is approached having changed historically (whereas communist discourses gave women priority in accessing positions in the social hierarchy, while at the same time enforced wifehood and motherhood on them, post-communist discourses posit women on an equal footing with men, but continue to discriminate them on biological grounds), the *subjects* themselves, women, are still struggling to overcome the attributes they are determined by (passivity, acceptance, innocence, frailty, beauty etc). When the lines are crossed, the *knowledge* which has acquired authority is dismantled and replaced with another – carrying the weight of a criticism of outmoded patterns of thought and behaviour, but not necessarily facilitating the expected change in mentality.

Through its central female characters, the film my therefore be taken as both representing a *different discourse* on the topic and as anticipating future ones, opening up discursive formation and producing new discourses with the power and authority, the truth, to regulate social practices in new ways. Dynamic Sorina takes an active stand, opting for painful change instead of deadly acceptance. Apparently happy, with a teaching job and a loving husband, she uses the pretext of improper living conditions to leave everything behind and go to France with a man she had recently met. Passive Mihaela is abandoned by her groom, struggles with unemployment and, at the initiative of her parents, accepts to be married in Italy to someone she has only seen once or, when that fails, to be simply sent to Germany, accompanying a complete stranger.

Featuring Sorina and Mihaela as disempowered by their incapacity to access valued social resources like wealth, jobs or status, the film symbolically empowers them through communicating their situations and through constructing itself as public discourse around the two metonymic characters. At a deeper level, the drama is illustrative of the two women's silence, of their impossibility of accessing discourse. Their decisions are either made by others (Mihaela is under the control of her mother, her father's mistress, her policeman-father) or after consultations with others (Sorina's dead father). They do not speak much and, when they do, they address personal issues, in private circumstances. The "institutionalised constraints which serve to silence women in terms of public speaking" are operative and show that "discursive practices are sites where power struggles are played out". [11] The men are more competitive discursively, and this comes out especially through Mihaela's father talking

his future son-in-law into fleeing from the wedding and, later, using his position to secure his daughter with a companion on her journey abroad.

In the Romanian conservative and patriarchal society, it is difficult for the two protagonists to oppose pre-established gender identities. Presenting Sorina and Mihaela as torn between the communist inheritance of the 'strong woman' and the newer, western emancipatory waves, the film uses the motif of the journey (migration) to suggest their searching for a way out, synonymous with the quest for a more stable identity rendered meaningful by access into discourse. This is, of course, yet another instantiation of the discursive formation of the Eastern mirage of the West and, if the numerous public discourses on the matter are had in view (from newspaper articles, to TV documentaries and parliamentary debates – all centring around individual stories of migration gone terribly wrong and inducing a negative image of Romanianness world wide), announces anything but a happy ending.

The intertext of *Occident* places it, indeed, within the category of discourses which construct "the woman migrant within traditional encodings of femininity which equate it with the passive object, victimhood and sexuality" [12], but it also reveals filmic representational practices governed by the rules of representation characteristic of the genre, thus discouraging interpretations based simply on the idea that what it does is hold up a mirror to the immediate social context having generated it. Apparently conforming to norm and tradition, in its depth structure the drama resists the various forms of power reproduction (from the artistic to the socially induced), obliquely but pertinently opposing structures of authority and rendering (the notion of) control ineffective.

The dichotomic horizontal patterning of *Occident* revisits clashing views, at once underlining and subverting enforced representational moulds: the realities of the East are no match for the fictions of the West, woman is encoded as subjected to man, passivity dominates the few attempts at activity, the private overshadows the public. Supporting the verbal and ideological content, the iconography of *Occident* (forwarding a succession of sordid settings, exploiting sombre visual signs, inserting key sounds of the city and its streets, staging kinaesthetic icons to induce appropriate reactions) communicates non-verbally that which escapes linguistic formulation and remains outside the dialogue, as does its cinematic techniques (the camera moves and frames, the environment and strategies which go into the sequencing, frequency and order of events within the narrative). In other words, the multimodality of the film is used to round up the context of situation (immediate context) and the context of culture (implicit, hidden context). Constructing an intricate interplay of possible, negotiated social, cultural, personal and gender meanings and thus envisaging insider/outsider and ideal viewers, it opens up the discussion on the variables of constructing identities in discourse, produces knowledge by bringing several truths together and, in turn, influences future discursive social practices.

3. Concluding lines

Cristian Mungiu's *Occident* represents and thus mediates a series of changing realities involving women, whose movement westward signifies the historical, social and political changes that Romania has gone through at the turn of the twenty-first century, remaining to be deciphered in future and acquire other meanings as they further shape the evolution of a nation. Resorting to communicative means specific to film, that is complementing language with the visual, sonorous and kinetic, it constitutes itself into a cultural text whose production, distribution and consumption contributes to inscribing it within the chain of truth-building discourses. The discursive events it covers mirror social practices and carry ideological weight, exposing a system where the attitudes towards women are still dictated by traditional values, where education has not managed to produce the break with the past, where the insider

complies with (and thus reinforces) outsider views. The discursive strategies employed serve to disclose the power relations which operate in connection with all these constructions, meaningful objects of knowledge subject to change and determining change.

Notes

[1] T. Locke, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, Continuum International Publishing Group, London, 2004, pp.11-12
[2] Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) emerged in the late 1980s. It was promoted by the Lancaster School of Linguistics through academics like Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, and by a group of researchers in the Netherlands represented by Teun van Dijk and Theo Van Leeuwen among others, revisiting the revolutionary writings in sociology, philosophy, psychology and cultural anthropology of Jürgen Habermas or Michel Foucault. Representative contributions: Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (1992), *Analysing Discourse* (2003); Ruth Wodak, *Disorders of Discourse* (1996); Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (eds) *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (2009); Teun van Dijk, *Discourse and Society* (2006), *Discourse and Power* (2008); Theo van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice. New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis* (2008).
[3] N. Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. 36
[4] O. Feldman, C. De Landtsheer (1998) *Politically Speaking. A Worldwide Examination of Language Used in the Public Sphere*, Praeger Publishers, London, 1998, p. 11
[5] in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* – 1972
[6] in M. Wetherel, S. Taylor, S. J. Yates, *Discourse Theory & Practice*, Sage Publications, London, 2001, p. 73
[7] I. Mohor-Ivan, 'Border-crossings: Representations of Home, the West and the Migrant in Romanian Film', in *Communication Interculturelle et Litterature*, Nr. 3 (11), ed. by Nicoleta Ifrim, 2010, p. 141
[8] T. Van Dijk, 'Discourse, power and access', in *Texts and Practices. Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. by R. Caldas-Coulthard, M. Coulthard, Routledge, London, 1996, pp. 84-85
[9] A young couple, Luci and his fiancée, Sorina, are evicted from their home in the sordid outskirts of Bucharest, leading to their separation. The rest of the story focuses on the young man's desperate efforts to win back Sorina, who has moved with the Frenchman Jerome. Luci is offered shelter by Aunt Leana, whose son had immigrated to Germany during Communism, and is forced to work as a beer bottle mascot, befriending Mihaela, his fellow telephone advertiser. When a policeman arrives with news that Nicu, Aunt Leana's long estranged son, has died in Germany; the old woman dies in shock and Luci runs to tell Sorina that they can move back together in Aunt Leana's flat, only to find that his fiancée has already left for France. On the eve of her marriage, Mihaela, is deserted by the groom. Desperate to find a replacement, the mother visits a matrimonial agency and arranges blind dates for her daughter, while Mihaela gets a job with an advertising agency, where she meets Luci. The two are drawn to each other, but Mihaela decides to leave with Luigi, the black Italian that comes to meet her. Mihaela's father, a retired police officer with old Securitate-style attitudes and tactics, discovers his daughter's groom drunk and scares the young man off both his bottle and the marriage. He is then reluctantly convinced by his wife and his mistress that he needs to set things right for his child by consenting to a foreign marriage. Later on, he meets Nae, returned from Germany to bring news of a friend's death to his mother and requiring police assistance. Shocked by the prospect of seeing his daughter leave with Luigi, he asks Nae to do him a counter favour and take Mihaela to Germany with him. (M. Praisler, I. Mohor-Ivan, 'Film's Historically Situated Discourse. The Case of the Migrant Romanian', in *Interdisciplinarity and Transdisciplinarity in Language, Literature and Foreign Language Teaching Methodology*, Aeternitas, Alba Iulia, 2010, pp. 428-429)
[10] R. S. Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, p. 129
[11] S. Mills, *Discourse*, Routledge, London, 1997, p. 97
[12] I. Mohor-Ivan, 'Border-crossings: Representations of Home, the West and the Migrant in Romanian Film', in *Communication Interculturelle et Litterature*, Nr. 3 (11), ed. by Nicoleta Ifrim, 2010, p. 135

Bibliography

Dijk, Van, T., 'Discourse, power and access', in *Texts and Practices. Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. by R. Caldas-Coulthard, M. Coulthard, Routledge, London, 1996
Fairclough, N., *Discourse and Social Change*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992
Feldman, O., C. De Landtsheer, (1998) *Politically Speaking. A Worldwide Examination of Language Used in the Public Sphere*, Praeger Publishers, London, 1998
Locke, T., *Critical Discourse Analysis*, Continuum International Publishing Group, London, 2004
Mills, S. *Discourse*, Routledge, London, 1997
Mohor-Ivan, I., 'Border-crossings: Representations of Home, the West and the Migrant in Romanian Film', in *Communication interculturelle et litterature*, Nr. 3 (11), ed. by Nicoleta Ifrim, 2010

Praisler, M., I. Mohor-Ivan, 'Film's Historically Situated Discourse. The Case of the Migrant Romanian', in *Interdisciplinarity and Transdisciplinarity in Language, Literature and Foreign Language Teaching Methodology*, Aeternitas, Alba Iulia, 2010

Rajan, R. S., *Real and Imagined Women*. Routledge, London and New York, 1996

Wetherel, M., S. Taylor, S. J. Yates, *Discourse Theory & Practice*, Sage Publications, London, 2001

Filmography

Occident, Dir. Cristian Mungiu, Romania, 2002; DVD: Voodoo Films – W327787