

Films Inspired by Actuality from the Communist Period as Historical Documents

Book Review: Ion Indolean, *Opinie, prudență și cenzură: Filmul de actualitate în România comunistă (1965-1989)* [*Opinion, Prudence and Censorship: Actuality Cinema in Communist Romania (1965-1989)*], Cluj-Napoca, Mega Publishing House, 2023



This solid, comprehensive book deals with a topic of great interest for film studies in Romania from an original perspective. It is about the “actuality cinema” during the Ceausescu regime, a theme that is quite frequently addressed



in Romanian academic and non-academic research, but rarely treated convincingly and from truly innovative perspectives.

In terms of content, Ion Indolean's book succeeds in providing a wealth of unpublished factual information, well systematized in three parts of three chapters each, framed by the *Introduction* and *Conclusions*, and put into a convincing network of meanings. *Part I. Film Production during the Ceausescu Regime* focuses on the issue of creation, *Part II. Films Produced during the Ceausescu Regime* focuses on cinematographic works of art in their specific structures, while *Part III. Promotion and censorship of films during the Ceausescu regime* focuses on the issue of public reception of films after the obligatory stage of censorship commissions. As we can see, Ion Indolean borrows a classical structure of the discourse on film and art (creation-work-reception), but nuances it, adapting it to the specificities of cinema, especially to the context so characteristic of Romanian cinema under communism.

First of all, the author carefully defines the central concept of his work, namely that of "actuality cinema", starting primarily from official Party documents. Ion Indolean shows that, as Romanian communist officials wished, this type of film – as opposed to the historical, "national epic cinema" – was intended to illustrate the glorious transformations of the "multilaterally developed" socialist society in all its compartments. In this respect, Romanian fictional films anchored in the strict contemporaneity of the Ceausescu years served the regime's propaganda about the creation of the "new man", the need for industrialisation or the cooperativisation of agriculture. Of course, such considerations do not essentially differentiate Ion Indolean's study from others by researchers such as C. T. Popescu, Ioan-Pavel Azap, Călin Căliman, Tudor Caranfil, Marilena Ilieșiu, Bogdan-Alexandru Jitea, Lucian Maier, Bujor T. Rîpeanu, Valerian Sava and many more.

The essential difference brought by Ion Indolean's work is represented by the interpretation of films inspired by actuality from the communist period as historical documents of the first order. This poses a number of specific problems, which the author solves effectively, as I will try to show briefly below. Communist films inspired by actuality are not pure propaganda, despite what most of the scholars listed in the previous paragraph have believed or seemed to believe. Ion Indolean points out that often, despite the

vigilance of the censors, the camera inadvertently recorded aspects of communist reality that the authorities did not want the public to see as such. On the other hand, some filmmakers built a creative-director project out of sneaking in “snatches” [șopârle, lizards] to show the dark side of the communist regime. *Sequences* by Al. Tatos, for example, manages to talk effectively about food shortages, about the corrupt system based on “nepotisms, acquaintances, relations” (*pile, cunoștințe, relații* = PCR/ Romanian Communist Party), about the staging of the big public events of August 23 full of dirty propaganda, etc. The communist films inspired by actuality, Ion Indolean points out, document the societal transformations Romania went through – especially the destruction of the old classes and social structures – much better than any other kind of objective record could do.

The author’s outstanding interpretative skills should be noted here. Ion Indolean almost never proposes a linear analysis of the subject matter, but rather a cross reading that always puts historical phenomena in the most appropriate analytical light. Several types of sources are brought into dialogue: first of all, the films themselves (over 100), which Ion Indolean knows in detail. The analysis of the content and form of the films is linked to the way in which they are reflected in public documents of the period (Communist Party directives, film reviews published in magazines), but also in private documents, with more or less mediated perspectives on the facts (these are the so-called “egodocuments”, especially memoirs and filmmakers’ diaries).

Ion Indolean’s film analyses are sometimes real case studies, extensive, precise, well-founded, designed to illustrate theoretical considerations. I would cite, for example, the excellent and rich historical analyses of *Power and Truth* by Manole Marcus and Titus Popovici (pp. 285-307), a film well promoted by the Party’s propaganda machine; *Reconstruction* by Lucian Pintilie (pp. 313-316), a film that was “obstructed” because it showed the absurdity of the communist system; *The Saturday Night Ball* by Geo Saizescu, a film that had a “normal” trajectory, to quote Indolean’s own terms, and ended up being seen by hundreds of thousands of viewers (pp. 329-338).

The Romanian material in the book is extremely well analysed and presented, but sometimes it lacks a comparative dimension. Ion Indolean’s approach would only have benefited from more extensive comparisons with

cinematic or social phenomena in former communist countries, led by the awful Soviet Union (they are sketched out, but not taken to their ultimate consequences). However, these comparisons could be undertaken by Ion Indolean in future, autonomous publications, which will have their point of departure in this book, born of high-level doctoral research.

The quality of Ion Indolean's style and writing are a guarantee of an enjoyable and fluent reading of an otherwise extensive work full of many accurate factual information. The author's notations are always precise, clear, the sentences are well formulated and well architected, and there are no unnecessary digressions in the book.

Ioan POP-CURȘEU 

*Prof. Habil. Phd., Faculty of Theatre and Film,
Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca
ioan.pop-curseu@ubbcluj.ro*