

The Evolution of the Milicier Film Genre in Communist Romania

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Abstract²: In order to observe the manner in which the image of the Romanian militiaman is perpetuated throughout the movies produced during Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime (1965-1989) we will analyze the most important detective films of that period. This will allow us to recognize a series of characterological and professional attributes present in the protagonists of these narratives which claimed to have come from reality. All of these heroes are shrewd, tenacious and well-intentioned because the official propaganda wanted to deliver a certain beautified image of the Romanian agent, about whom these films suggested having the mental and physical capabilities to be successful against any kind of villain and therefore being able to protect his country with a great sense of duty and commitment.

Keywords: Cultural politics, Film, Nicolae Ceaușescu, Communism, Espionage, Industry, Censorship, Propaganda.

"Milicier" defines the type of police films with law enforcement made during Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime. The term is a combination of the *"policier"* cinematographic genre and the Romanian noun *"milițian"* which in communist countries defined the now globally used *"policeman"* (en) / *"policier"* (fr) / *"polițist"* (ro) / *"poliziotto"* (it) etc.³

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2. Translated into English by Ilinca Hărnuț.

3. I arrived at this term intuitively, but then I found it used by the researcher Bogdan Jitea, in his unpublished doctoral thesis entitled *Dizidență și conformism în cinematografia regimului Ceaușescu* (Bucharest, 2015), where he had the historian Lucian Boia as his scientific supervisor. So I can say that I invented the term *milicier* instinctively, without knowing that someone else had previously thought of it. Because I am not the first to drive it into public space, I need to specify this.

As we comprehend, the original “polis” has Greek origins (“politeia”) and it firstly meant “city” (e.g., “acropolis”: “upper city”). In time, the term obtained more meanings, one of them being “regulation and control of a community”⁴, which in fact refers to keeping order in a certain place by means of police. On the other side, “militia” is a Latin word, which – understood in the way we are interested in – emerged during post-revolutionary Russia, being intended to draw a distinction between the new Soviet law enforcement agencies and the disbanded Tsarist police⁵. In opposition to the western police, the newly-formed communist militia (also written as “militsiya”) was based on repressive principles, being a tool of state ideology, controlling the entire society by means far-reaching functions that touched the life of every citizen⁶.

In order to observe the manner in which the image of the Romanian militiaman modifies throughout the movies produced during Ceaușescu’s regime (1965-1989), we will start with the *Miscellaneous Brigade*⁷ series and we will try to build the portrait of this agent-character, taking into account the following titles: *Adventures by the Black Sea*⁸, *Seven Days*⁹, *The Magic Circle*¹⁰, *The Man in the Overcoat*¹¹, *The Investigation*¹², *A Girl’s Tear*¹³, *Blackmail*¹⁴, *The End of the Night*¹⁵, *To Kill a bird of Prey*¹⁶.

4. Online Etymology Dictionary <http://www.etymonline.com/word/police>.

5. Louise Shelley, *Policing Soviet Society: The Evolution of State Control* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 19-37.

6. Louise Shelley, *Policing Soviet Society*, p xiv.

7. Mircea Drăgan director, *Brigada Diverse* (series of three films) by Nicolae Țic, Studioul Cinematografic București, Buftea, premiered on December 14, 1970, June 26, 1971, respectively December 20, 1971.

8. Savel Stiopul director, *Aventuri la Marea Neagră* by Tudor Popescu, Studioul Cinematografic București, Buftea, premiered on May 29, 1972.

9. Mircea Veroiu director, *Șapte zile* by Nicolae Ștefănescu, Casa de filme Unu, Buftea, premiered on September 24, 1973.

10. David Reu director, *Cercul magic* by Nicolae Mărgeanu, Cora Vulcănescu, directed by David Reu, Casa de filme Patru, premiered on 1975.

11. Nicolae Mărgineanu director, *Un om în loden* by Haralamb Zincă, Nicolae Mărgineanu, Casa de filme Unu, Buftea, premiered on April 16, 1979.

12. Constantin Vaeni director, *Ancheta* by Florin N Năstase, Casa de filme Patru, Buftea, premiered on November 10, 1980.

13. Iosif Demian director, *O lacrimă de fată* by Petre Sălcudeanu, Casa de filme 5, Buftea, premiered on November 3, 1980.

14. Geo Saizescu director, *Șantaj* by Rodica Ojog-Brașoveanu, Geo Saizescu, Casa de filme Unu, Buftea, premiered on February 2, 1981.

At that time, these *milicier* films were made with at least two purposes: political and entertainment. Some promoted, in a veiled manner, the industrialization of the country while drawing a fabricated portrait of Romania and its relations with Western countries. The others simply talked about professional and well-trained agents who are doing their job beyond reproach.

If we watched these films without knowing the context in which they were made, we could easily conclude that Romania's enemies could not have been native mobsters, criminals or traffickers – it is suggested that the system had dealt with them a long time ago – but either Westerners who were trying to steal plans and valuable achievements of Romanian scientists or citizens who did not adapt and were wrong because they did not want to understand the undeniable advantages of communism.

This nationalist double rhetoric (*we won't sell our country and are we exceptional*) has become permanent in the highly popular slogan used by neo-communist politicians. It is a speech that still works; we have to look no further than the December 2016 parliamentary elections¹⁷.

But the position defining this type of slogan was false even before 1989. Romania's economic co-operation with the West had been extended during the Ceaușescu regime; it was just that the authorities kept it secret for ideological reasons.

From 1964 onwards, Romanian advertisements sponsored by the Government of Bucharest started appearing in western newspapers, they were meant to attract western tourists¹⁸. This was the case, in one form or another, in all fields. Constantin Pivniceru, managing director of Buftea

15. Mircea Veroiu director, *Sfârșitul nopții* by Marian Iordache, Casa de filme Patru, Buftea, premiered on May 23, 1983.

16. Iosif Demian director, *Lovind o pasăre de pradă* by Petre Sălcudeanu, Casa de filme Patru, Buftea, premiered on November 7, 1983.

17. "REZULTATE EXIT POLL PSD a câștigat ALEGERILE PARLAMENTARE 2016", *Gândul*, accessed October 15, <http://www.gandul.info/rezultate-exit-poll-psd-a-castigat-alegerile-parlamentare-2016-16020403.html>: in this period of the electoral campaign for the 2016 parliamentary elections, the rhetoric of many parties focused on the nationalist direction, a fairly sensitive trajectory that was adopted both by the "traditional" parties and by new parties that stood out from the very beginning by means of adopting this position. The people who have entered the campaign with this message are PSD, who somehow continue in this manner their speech at the Euro-parliamentary and presidential elections in 2014, when they declared themselves "proud that we are Romanians".

18. Adam Burakowski, *Dictatura lui Nicolae Ceaușescu 1965-1989* (Iași: Polirom, 2016), 88.

during 1970-1989, recalls that in the mid-1980s Romaniafilm bought a whole page in Variety magazine for \$ 5,000¹⁹, to facilitate co-productions with the West.

The favorable opinion Ceaușescu benefited from materialized in mutual visits of high-ranking officials such as the arrival of the President of France, Charles de Gaulle in Bucharest from May 14 to 18, 1968, and, perhaps the most important PR coup of them all, the visit of the US President, Richard Nixon, on August 2-3, 1969. The reception of the American delegation took place one year after Romania's refusal to partake in the invasion of Czechoslovakia.

This positive opinion lasted for a while, as suggested by the Ceaușescu's visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland between 13-16 June 1978, at the invitation of Queen Elisabeth II.

Diplomatic relations helped Romania become a member of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. All in 1971 and 1972, with discreet US help²⁰.

Even after serious misconduct, such as human rights abuses in the Paul Goma affair (1977), or the flee to the West of foreign intelligence deputy Ion Mihai Pacepa (1978), Romania still required and received Western aid. In June 1981, the IMF provided a substantial credit (\$ 1.3 billion), provided it reduced consumption, transferred the bulk of investment from the heavy industry to the agriculture and boosted foreign trade²¹.

Therefore, the muffling of Romania's relationship with the West could only be imposed by the official propaganda of the PCR. Most negotiations with foreign countries were kept secret to the Romanian people in order to promote the idea of *overcoming difficulties with their own forces*²², a slogan promoted by the authorities immediately after the 1975 floods, which emphasized that the country is doing very well on its own account.

This position was also imposed when it came to the cinematographic production, so it was also the case of the *milicier* films. They pointed out that society had long overcome the mistakes of the Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej regime, and well trained people had taken the place of the gross, illiterate and unprepared activists.

19. Constantin Pivniceru, *Amintiri din actualitate 50 de ani de cinematografie în România* (București: Tritonic, 2012), 21.

20. Adam Burakowski, *Dictatura*, 192.

21. *Ibid.*, 284-285.

22. *Ibid.*, 233.

We notice in *milicier* films, like in all now and about films, an embellished world, but where, however, you can notice certain shortcomings and problems of the system. In these police films, ethical and principled investigators skillfully and enthusiastically conquer any offense against the law or the state property. Dangerous elements, few of which still exist, come from outside the country or from some natives who were wrongly trained during the Dej regime. Guilt is thus transferable, outsourced or attributed to the past.

Next, we'll look at the films in chronological order to see more clearly the evolution of the agent's image over time.

The evolution of the agent-character begins with the *Miscellaneous Brigade* series, produced between 1970 and '71. Even if it's seen as a comedy, the story is filled with militiamen and it allows us to include it as a *milicier*. The *Miscellaneous Brigade* squad, marginalized within the militia, is the department responsible for dealing with the smallest illegalities, with petty theft that are rather funny than serious.

There's a dog, a painting, something that's stolen from a shop or a house, but everything remains at the level of a farce. Understanding the derision of the chosen situations, the filmmakers assume a self-ironic attitude: militiamen and thieves always stumble, but the moralizing end makes criminals pay for what they did.

More serious events than these petty robberies happened, however, in Romania, but censorship made sure they did not appear in the press. This censorship is known as "censorship by omission"²³.

Romania was one of the most under-informed countries in Europe and in the former Soviet bloc, and the press was one of the most supervised and controlled national mass information systems²⁴. The *informative role* of the press has been replaced by the *educational role*, the main objective being the propagation of political, ideological and moral teachings by use of the printed word²⁵; The press communicated ideas, not information, the party's representation of the world, not events, the ideological activity of the party, not the immediate reality²⁶. Therefore, more serious deeds than stealing a dog or a painting had to be omitted from public discourse and from a public debate. The ordinary citizen was presented only with the positive aspects of the *new man*, displayed as honest, fair, working, non-polemic, and obedient.

23 Iulian Boldea, "Cenzura și teatrul", *Apostrof*, October, 2009.

24 Emilia Șercan, *Cultul secretului Mecanismele cenzurii în presa comunistă*, (Iași: Polirom, 2015), 15.

25 Ibid., 15.

26 Ibid., 15.

The press omitted not only serious crimes, but also accounts of any form of damage to the “public good”²⁷ or women and minors working in industrial night-shifts, occupational illnesses, and accidents at work, living standards or the hygienic-sanitary situation of the population²⁸.

In this context, *Miscellaneous Brigade* contributes to prolonging censorship through omission. However, the problem of political decision-makers in relation to BD was one of nuance: no matter how likeable, the protagonists were prejudicial to the image of law enforcement. The militiamen were discredited in the public eye, this course of actions being afterwards perpetuated in a post-revolution TV series, aired by PRO TV, featuring the policemen Garcea, an organ dwelling on the shores of idiocy.

This mockery of the authorities led to the seize of the production of the next eight films that the authors of the series had scheduled. Film critic Dumitru Ion Suchianu’s intervention regarding the third BD series – named *B.D In the Mountains and by the Seaside*²⁹ – issues an interesting parallel debate. Suchianu states that he personally would have preferred comic situations to be more of and more consistent, concluding that the unfavorable chronicles of some of the critics will perhaps bring about such improvement³⁰. So we have to ask ourselves if the position of film critics was so significant that their written intervention could change the course of the history of a cinematic project and its degree of popularity. Who read it, how many readers and, in particular, how did the opinions expressed affect the viewers / performers? Another critic, Mircea Alexandrescu also had a negative opinion about the film, saying that we are witnessing a third series of comedic adventures of B.D. with a feeling bordering hopelessness³¹.

Lead actor of the series, Sebastian Papaiani remembered that a certain general Constantin ascertained the parodic nature of the story only after the third film had been released and thus stopped the series: “He was a general.

27. Ibid., 142.

28. Ibid., 143.

29. Mircea Drăgan director, *B.D la munte și la mare* by Nicolae Țic, Mircea Drăgan, Studioul Cinematografic București, Buftea, premiered on December 20, 1971.

30. Dumitru Ion Suchianu, “B.D la munte și la mare”, review of *B.D la munte și la mare* by Nicolae Țic, Mircea Drăgan, directed by Mircea Drăgan, Studioul Cinematografic București, Buftea, premiered on December 20, 1971 *România literară*, January 13, 1972.

31. Mircea Alexandrescu, “Să vorbim cu durere despre comedie”, review of *B.D la munte și la mare* by Nicolae Țic, Mircea Drăgan, directed by Mircea Drăgan, Studioul Cinematografic București, Buftea, premiered on December 20, 1971 *Cinema*, January, 1972.

General Constantin. A smart man stopped the movie. He was sharp as a razor! Brilliant! He stopped the film because he felt we were mocking the militia. It took him three movies but he got it. Do you get how smart he was?! [...] He didn't provide any more uniforms; he didn't provide us any more blank bullets. He didn't allow the militia to come on the set with us"³².

After the well-known *theses of July 1971*, when the stricter control of the ideological direction also influenced the Romanian cinema, the first *milicier* was *Adventures by the Black Sea* (1971). Agent George Martin (Florin Piersic) appears to be a transition character. In his record, a proper instruction is mixed with the fact that he is a womanizer and sometimes unreliable. He is reminiscent of the BD series militiamen, but he is more professional and works at a higher level. He manages to vanquish a whole network of capitalist spies. Their portraits, parodic and unbelievable, can be the delight of an audience favoring action comedies – like BD or the popular Sergiu Nicolaescu's movie *Uncle Marin, the Billionaire*³³. What *Adventures by the Black Sea* suggests is that socialism excels technologically and scientifically, and that capitalism seeks to appropriate its achievements, led by its inability to produce quality inventions. The film critics of the time emphasized that there were still no people trained to make proper police films in the country.

Following this semi-failure, *Seven Days* (1973) begins, in a somewhat atypically manner, the series of *milicier* films meant to change once and for all the image of the law man, (in)voluntarily ridiculed by *Miscellaneous Brigade* and unconvincingly built by *Adventures by the Black Sea*. Mircea Veroiu's *Seven Days* really shows an attentive counterintelligence agent who takes his job very seriously; so seriously that Veroiu, in a work of fiction that claims to have a documentary quality, follows the character for seven days as he tails a band of foreign agents who steal a sample of steel created by Romanian inventors with the purpose of exporting it. Veroiu's suggestion, perhaps imposed by the propaganda, would be that the authorities are working so well that criminals do not even realize that they are under observation. Beyond the subject and the foreseeable resolution in the end (*good* overcomes *evil*), what is surprising about *Seven Days* is the fact that there isn't much talking,

32. "Dezvăluire inedită despre unul dintre cele mai iubite filme românești", *Gândul*, accessed October 15, 2017, <http://www.gandul.info/magazin/dezvaluire-inedita-despre-unul-dintre-cele-mai-iubite-filme-romanesti-15074387>, personal translation.

33. Sergiu Nicolaescu director, *Nea Mărin miliardar* Vintilă Corbul, Eugen Burada, Amza Pellea, Casa de filme Patru, Buftea, premiered on February 5, 1979.

at a time when the Romanian films were over-saturated with slogan-lines. Having the experience of co-directing *The Stone Wedding*³⁴, Mircea Veroiu's feature film debut is an image and style exercise, remarkable first and foremost because of the spectacular quality of the trivial fact.

The Magic Circle (1975) seems closer to the wishes of the propaganda concerning the clarity of the story and the *thoughtful* use of the film. Octavian Cotescu interprets a tenacious militiaman who, alongside his colleague, manages to make the most improbable connections and thus solve the case of a double homicide, a process during which he demonstrates almost magic capabilities. In all respects, this film complies with the Party's demands: agents are serious, good professionals, much more intelligent than criminals, who, in the meantime, completely unjustifiably commit murder, simply because they cannot integrate into the system called socialism. In spite of the obligatory diplomacy of the time, perhaps also forced by the circumstances in which such a film, portraying the good practice of law enforcement, could not be blamed, in film critic Dan Comșa's text there is some reticence over the quality of this project that can be sensed. The author aims more to find mitigating circumstances for the film, rather than unfavorable arguments; it is as if Comșa himself tries to find excuses for the film, saying that, maybe, "the cursed charge" of the conflict is to blame and the slightly vague psychological mechanisms, feeling somewhat morally forced, which are finally the answer to all the questions³⁵.

Perhaps the *milicier* that's best aligned to the rigors of the *policier* genre, as it was produced in France or the United States, is *The Man in the Overcoat* (1979). The film has a solid intrigue and a fluid deployment of action. Judging by his understanding of story building, we can boldly say that Mărgineanu offers a lesson of style to the more tenacious Sergiu Nicolaescu. If at the level of his narrative structure, *The Man in the Overcoat* is beyond reproach, the subject it approaches becomes slightly politicized when the protagonist, engineer Stamatiad (Victor Rebengiuc), brings to light the story of a former friend of his, who used to be in the legionary movement, who is now seeking revenge at any cost. Having returned from abroad, where he had lived for thirty years, this Westerner by adoption, harboring pathological resentment, cannot separate

34. Dan Pița, Mircea Veroiu directors, *Nunta de piatră* by Dan Pița, Mircea Veroiu, Studioul Cinematografic București, Buftea, premiered on January 29, 1973.

35. Dan Comșa, "Cercul magic", review of *Cercul Magic* by Nicolae Mărgineanu, Cora Vulcănescu, directed by David Reu, Casa de filme Patru, 1975 *Cinema*, August 1975.

himself from the past. Even though in this case as well the winner is *the right one*, the militia does not solve the case easily and doesn't establish impossible connections. Things flow naturally, and Mărgineanu almost diverts from the propaganda through the detached and emphatic way he relates to his subject. If we follow *The Man in the Overcoat* and *The Magic Circle*, we can see that it's sufficient if the difference resides in nuance and how one is positioned related to the subject.

Another film that fits the idea of the unprecedented professionalism of the Romanian agents is *The Investigation* (1980). The explosion of a 4300-ton Kauper furnace at a steel mill in Galați triggers the investigation conducted by party activist Ștefan. The film promotes, among other things, the industrial sector as well, suggesting that the people employed in it are willing, ambitious and eager to do their best. This is the source of their involved behavior. All the characters are critical of themselves, even though the explosion is due to bad weather conditions. The implacable, unforgiving destiny, nature claiming it's due, these remain flagships in the world of ideas of communist cinema. Nature seems the only potential obstacle to the completion of socialism. Besides, we can notice in *The Investigation* at least two details which were perpetuated in several films: a) the stories occur all over the country, so that spectators can identify themselves more easily with the characters; and b) major activists living in large, elegantly furnished houses, build during the monarchy in Romania. Although these activists were building up communism and the "new man", they were addicted to bourgeois prosperity, their fight against it taking place only at a declarative level.

A Girl's Tear (1980) shows a Romanian village, where the suspicious death of a young lady is investigated. The militiamen that come from the city discover a patriarchal mentality, which objectifies women. They don't have the same rights men do, they are not allowed to emancipate, it is suggested that they are guilty for any physical or psychological aggression. Demian brings front this attitude, challenging it. The outside intervention coming from an urban, civilizing world is the only one that can penalize the villagers. Alongside Mircea Veroiu and partly Nicolae Mărgineanu, Demian creates a more realistic image of the Romanian agent.

Blackmail (1981) builds a plot around engineers who have fraudulently obtained their diplomas. The topic is delicate because it relates to an issue of the multilaterally developed society. But the film remains just moralizing; it does not aim to solve the problem, but rather punish these impostors. Because the engineers who bought their diplomas have to pay at least from a moral point of view, an unknown man, in a hoarse voice, blackmails them, through

phone calls, asking them to help with industrial espionage for a for a group outside the country. This narrative scheme seems to comply perfectly with the type of *milicier* demanded by the Party. Promoting the industry goes well hand in hand with the spectrum of external danger and the Romanian secret services which impeccably defend the country. Agents are moving fast, they have the making of great detectives and they go straight to the heart of things. They are so precise that their leader corrects her younger colleague who didn't remember correctly the phone number at which a possible illegal call had been made: "57 57 56, not 57 57 57!"³⁶. No matter which of them had been right, this number, too easy to remember, is part of the shaky logic the film is built on. The head of the investigation squad manages to surpass the gender barrier through a humorless and hardworking attitude. In a society as patriarchal as the communist one, whose problems we exposed in a more nuanced manner in *A Girl's Tear*, this agent is the example of an exemplary woman who has to work twice as much to be considered equal to men. 1983 brings along the films *The End of the Night* and *To Kill a Bird of Prey*. Veroiu and Demian continue well, in line with what they had begun in *Seven Days* and *A Girl's Tear*. They do not resort to prefabricated models of events and characters, but instead they try to question the society by interrogating the narrative details they work with. The plot of the two films is similar: a traffic accident, after which a young woman loses her life. We notice that in most films the victims are women. This choice would be interesting to analyze in a separate article.

The End of the Night shows Toma (Gheorghe Visu), a young motorman who has been ill influenced all his life. The escape, for one like him, appears to be a benevolent agent who chooses to neglect even his personal life in order to bring him on the right track. *To Kill a Bird of Prey* also features a goodhearted agent who would be willing to help the guilty provided they would also agree to change.

However, the antagonists won't or can't change and are, therefore, punished rather by nature or by faith than by the system.

After watching these *milicier* films, one can notice two directions: Romanian felons can get a second chance if they will ask for it; but when it comes to foreign agents, the state is merciless. Investigations often function as pretexts meant to highlight the professionalism of the agents, some issues the system is trying to repair, and the idea that *The Party sees everything*.

36. "Santaj 1982 Film Romanesc", Youtube, accessed October 12, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3BcAtLg72A>.

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