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Romanian and Hungarian film cultures at the Transilvania International Film Festival

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An arguably late arrival in the film festival circuit (first organised in 2002), the Transilvania International Film Festival[1] has been a significant date on the FIAPF calendar since 2011. The medium-sized and competitive Romanian film festival has its focus on first and second feature films by filmmakers from virtually all around the globe while also paying homage to acclaimed personalities of European cinema. Furthermore, it serves as a hub for all things related to Romanian cinema and as such has become a staple in the Central and Eastern European region for both local audiences and interested film professionals.[2]

A confusion surrounding its acronymic abbreviation is rather telling: at the regional or country level most people refer to it as 'TIFF', irrespective of the language they speak – though this acronym by and large is reserved for the Toronto International Film Festival. Therefore, in this essay 'Transilvania IFF' will be used. Another linguistic issue relates to its official naming, where instead of 'Transylvania' the Romanian spelling of the region has been preferred – reminiscent of a national (i.e. Romanian) component which reasserts, in my view, its country-affiliation and thereby denigrating any confusion related to both the historical region and the festival concept as well.

Transilvania IFF takes place in Cluj, now a regional university/education and business center. Being the second biggest city in Romania, with a population around 350.000 consisting of a Romanian majority and a significant Hungarian minority, the festival organisers chose Cluj as the main festival location largely because of its relatively well-maintained movie theaters in operation since the beginning of the 2000s and the fact that the town has had the highest audience numbers at the country level. The festival prides itself with ever-increasing attendance and sold-out screenings – the post-festival

press release mentioned over 79.000 tickets sold at the 2016 edition, which took place between 27 May-5 June and featured almost 250 films. Festival venues include, in addition to the three refurbished traditional movie theaters located in downtown Cluj, a neighbourhood movie theater and also a few multiplex cinema halls. It is worth mentioning that each year after the festival free screenings of a selection of films are organised in Bucharest (the Romanian capital) and also in other cities across the country.

In terms of curatorial selections/programming Transilvania IFF offers a plethora of events: films are screened in various sections and other art forms loosely related to cinema are also part of the programme, such as concerts, fine arts and photo exhibitions, and theatre performances. In a sense it has been acknowledged that the festival crowd is not only constituted by avid cinephiles and, at the same time, that cultural consumption preferences may extend beyond cinema. However, at the local level the festival's biggest appeal lies in the evening open air screenings held in the town's largest historical square. Moreover, historical castles under restoration in villages nearby serve occasionally as festival locations. Here the participation of many hundreds of foreign guests is to be noted, ranging from journalists to professionals involved in festival entrepreneurship and filmmaking or talent accompanying their creations to the festival. Further daytime points of interest are the Romanian Film Days section which offers a compact selection of new Romanian films. The festival's Industry Days serve as a platform for various film industry initiatives in which the festival organising entity or its members have been involved both at the national level and abroad. Those in the know and sponsors are also lured by other entertainment events or parties held in various exclusive locations.

Ahead of any conclusion there are two observations to be made which in a way counter simplistic reviews. Although the Romanian Film Days section may be overarching other yearly shifting focuses on distinctive (small) national cinemas (Switzerland, Lithuania, Libya to name a few, with the neighbouring Hungary being a stable guest) might be just as relevant for certain audiences. What I want to emphasise is not just that festival experiences are ultimately contingent upon the attended festival programs but also that most film festivals consist of events that run in parallel and cater to different audience categories. So the task remains to untangle various festival events in order to determine what makes Transilvania IFF stand out.

By drawing on participant observation and festival politics in the context of the 2016 edition I suggest that we cannot quite do away with so-called festival highlights. As an obligatory ingredient or a stand-alone pillar of the festival is the Special Gala Screening, an event in which each year a well-known actress or director is given a lifetime achievement award. Previous editions of the festival had been attended by the likes of Nastassja Kinski, Jiří Menzel, Geraldine Chaplin, Wim Wenders, Jacqueline Bisset, Catherine Deneuve, Udo Kier, and Vanessa Redgrave; last year's anniversary edition (the 15th) was honored by Italian actress Sophia Loren. We may note that Jameson Cinefest, a smaller festival taking place in Hungary, also has such an award. For film festival research it is significant that the well-aged oeuvres of European cinema's accomplished personalities are deployed to confer 'added-value' to relatively young festivals within the Central and Eastern European region.

Focusing on the Romanian film festival's acknowledged success/popularity in terms of festival highlights or events requires first paying attention to the *mediation effects* within the film festival circuit,[3] leading us to consider the significance of certain filmmakers and creations of the Romanian New Wave for the festival itself. Finally, as an attempt to place the festival in its manifold localities I will refer to another added element – the smaller thematic block called Hungarian Day which, although having a lesser impact on the festival image, may shed light on both an interdependence in terms of film production and film consumption within the larger or extra-national Central and Eastern European region and also on the ways to individuate the festival.

Although one may take specific festivals as points on the circuit research on the topic has observed the primordial role of underlying mechanisms activating that circuit.[4] While positing any film festival's own ecosystem we should recall that the film festival hierarchy is still setting the backdrop. It can be noted that the already recognised Romanian New Wave directors target A-list festivals where they are usually selected for the competition and usually receive awards; eventually most have their Romanian premieres later at Transilvania IFF. Both Cannes and Berlin bear luck to Romanian New Wave films and the historical origins of such practices are certainly relevant. The festival circuit has been acknowledged as setting current interests for particular auteurs, styles, or trends,[5] so that the rise of the Romanian New Wave is closely linked to festival recognition – Cristi Puiu's *Moartea domnului Izarescu* (*The Death of Mr. Izarescu*, 2005) and Cristian Mungiu's *4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile* (*4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, 2007) are to be noted here.

Both of these filmmakers remained protagonists within the unfolding of the 2016 festival calendar – at least in terms of Romanian references. Moreover, the specific timing of Transilvania IFF – it begins every year during the week following Cannes (from the end of May until early June) – means that the 2016 edition was not immune to the happenings in Cannes either. First there was the premiere of *Sieranevada* (2016), a three-hour melodrama by Puiu. His new work was praised by critics in Cannes and was featured in the competition for the Palme d'Or. Eventually Mungiu was honored with an award for directing *Bacalaureat* (*Graduation*, 2016). Puiu returned somewhat disappointed from France. In an interview he likened his Cannes performance to the unfair second place won by Brazil at the 1982 World Cup).[6] In parallel *Căinii* (*Dogs*, 2016), a noir thriller by young Romanian director Bogdan Mirică, received the FIPRESCI award at Cannes and was included in the main competition of Transilvania IFF where it was awarded with the main festival prize (called the Transilvania Trophy). *Sieranevada* did not fit the award profile (as Transilvania IFF prizes debut or second works) but nonetheless during the ceremony the festival organisers came up with a sort of sympathy/surprise award for Puiu as a recognition of his artistic values and his general support of the festival. Both awards were in sync with how the audience reacted to and received these films, with both also appearing in the post-festival press release among the festival's outstanding sold-out events.

We may note that the cultural columns of Romanian mainstream media reported about how well Romanian films performed in Cannes, so domestic celebration was imminent. Ultimately the anticipation 'at home' for the Romanian movies was partly indebted to the buzz generated by their reception in Cannes. It needs to be mentioned that Transilvania IFF has become an audience festival which also attracts most Romanian film industry professionals from the country's capital. Thus the recent festival successes earned by Romanian filmmakers resulted in an appeal en masse among the festival audience (not irrespective of the fact that most of them were of Romanian ethnicity) which led to a somewhat overt celebration of both individual and collective national accomplishment beyond the 'trickle down-effect', meaning that what goes on at major festivals exerts significant influence on how films are received.[7]

Although different from each other in most aspects both films have been acclaimed as Romanian New Wave creations, and by looking diachronically it can be observed that the festival has awarded the internationally distinguished new Romanian works almost each year since its first edition – either

the main award was offered to a film bearing the Romanian New Wave label or the award for the best director went to a young Romanian filmmaker. Thus we may posit the festival's involuted relationship with the particular trend known as the Romanian New Wave: (regional) art cinema defined by a specific visual aesthetic and narrative choices, mostly minimalism and realism.[8] However, my interest lies not so much in the poetics of either a specific way of filmmaking or those of singular films but in seeking out the role of the festival vis-a-vis the Romanian New Wave.

The fact that the evolution of the festival has been attuned to acknowledging and prizing films of the Romanian New Wave as well stems from the small(er) size of the Romanian film industry, which in the last decade saw the emergence of both transition-era and post-transition generations of filmmakers, among them the organisers of Transilvania IFF and those recognised by critics as Romanian New Wave auteurs. The entity behind Transilvania IFF – the Association for Romanian Film Promotion – was established and has been managed by Tudor and Oana Giurgiu, who are active as producers (including the production of *Sieranevada*). They have also directed a few documentaries and feature films as well. Former film critic Mihai Chirilov has been credited with programming the festival; the Romanian Film Days section was only later introduced – in 2005, which coincided with the breakthrough and critical acclaim of the Romanian New Wave. While the festival circuit does single out certain filmmakers and works displaying alleged features of Romanian New Wave obviously not each film made currently in Romania/by Romanians could be classified as belonging to that specific trend. The festival context is both translating 'national' success obtained on the festival circuit and grabbing a hold of Romanian film content in general as its primary currency. In terms of awards the position of Transilvania IFF is also strengthened by the fact that although the Romanian film industry has its own awarding event called Premiile Gopo (Gopo Awards), though the latter's retroactive awarding procedure and domestic context lack the international appeal in the 'now' which characterises the sphere of film festivals.

If location matters we should recall that choosing an area is also significant for film festival entrepreneurship. Regarding the Hungarian Day, including screenings of recent Hungarian films as well as Q&A sessions and public meetings, this thematic section highlights significant aspects concerning the film cultures within the larger region. It serves to acknowledge the

Hungarian minority living within the Transylvanian town as part of the audience. However, the redressed majority-minority relationship comes with a slight twist due to the fact that it features mainly films and filmmakers from the neighbouring country of Hungary, since the minority filmic output is rather scarce. While Romanian Film Days is also popular among local Hungarian cinephiles the Hungarian Day remains for many a conceptual oddity, as the town's Hungarian cultural and architectural legacy is rather unknown for the majority and non-Hungarian audiences. Furthermore, restrictions related to international distribution and the uneven film content of the Hungarian Day – in spite of the fact that each festival edition features an awarded Hungarian film – make it less appealing to foreign audiences. Also, the relevance of the Hungarian Day is given by the transnational dimension of film projects involving professionals from both countries and/or ethnicities, to which Transilvania IFF provides a significant context.

As of today the festival is engaged in the cinematic education of the increasingly cosmopolitan film culture(s) in the region; an awareness of its positioning on the festival circuit also favours the enduring presence of new Romanian cinema in the international film market – though the precise outcomes of such endeavours may reveal varying interests. The multiplicity in terms of both programme and participation is being filtered by a politics focused on securing a positive festival experience for everyone, thereby confirming a tendency for caring how people and things relate to each other.

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Notes

- [1] www.tiff.ro
- [2] A fact also mentioned by Benoit Ginisty, FIAPF Director General. <http://tiff.ro/en/tiff/stiri/transilvania-iff-accredited-fiapf>.
- [3] On the practice of mediation within the film festival context see DeValck 2007, pp.125-160.
- [4] In this regard DeValck points to the 'relational interdependence' between film festivals. See DeValck 2007, p. 40.
- [5] Elsaesser 2005, pp. 82-107.
- [6] *Aperitif* festival journal, 4 June 2016.
- [7] More recently, Cristi Puiu's *Sieranevada* was submitted as Romania's nominee in the best foreign language film category for the 2017 Oscars.
- [8] For scholarly overviews on the emergence of the Romanian New Wave see Nasta 2013 and Pop 2014.