

**Through Whose Looking Glass?
Postcolonial Resonations in the Production and Festivalisation Processes of
Contemporary Romanian Non-fiction Cinema**

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Abstract: This article analyses a group of contemporary Romania-located non-fiction human rights films (Edet Belzberg's *Children Underground* (2001), Mona Nicoară and Miruna Coca-Cozma's *Școala noastră [Our School]* (2011), Alexandre Nanău's *Toto și surorile lui [Toto and His Sisters]* (2014) and the ways in which a postcolonial theoretical reading of these films' and their makers' engagement in transnational production and international festivalisation processes assists in cementing the global divide between centre and periphery. In situating my argument along the centre-periphery binary, I will, therefore, employ a postcolonial perspective because it is within postcolonial studies that the practices and discourses of the subjugation of other, peripheral, or eastern bodies by a central, all-knowing, or western subjugator has been most fervently investigated and theorised. In my analysis, I will use the signifiers of the so-called central and the peripheral rather than the geo-specific and proven problematic 'East' and 'West'⁴ to acknowledge that there *is* a separation between global mass knowledge and culture producers and the locally suppressed, and at the same time to divert from the common colonial binary. As Hamad Dabashi writes, "[t]he point is not to dismiss but to overcome the myth of 'the West' as the measure of truth" (Dabashi 2016).

Keywords: postcolonial, Romanian non-fiction film, postcommunist, humanitarian gaze, festivalisation, transnational

After the fall of communism⁵ and the end of Nicolae Ceaușescu's rule in 1989, the Romanian film production sector underwent drastic modifications. Prior to 1989, the majority of the country's non-fiction⁶ film production occurred through the state-run studio Sahia Film

⁴ See: Benita Perry (2016), <https://www.zedbooks.net/blog/posts/fuck-you-zizek/>; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988).

⁵ I borrow from Liviu Andreescu, author of "Are We All Postcolonialists Now? Postcolonialism And Postcommunism in Central and Eastern Europe[.]" the definition of terminology where he claims, "I employ the term 'postcommunist' to refer to former Soviet client states in Central and Eastern Europe; and 'postsoviet' to refer to former Soviet republics (such as the Baltic states, Moldova, the Caucasus republics etc.)." I do not use postsocialism in this analysis as a majority of the works I make reference to use postcommunist (or post-communist) so for the sake of clarity, I coincide with the majority's choice of terminology. See: Liviu Andreescu, (2011, 58).

⁶ I use the term "non-fiction" rather than "documentary" for I find the term more inclusive of the actuality behind the filmmaking processes at hand. The term documentary holds various contesting definitions with each often revealing the "fundamental ambiguities" of the film form. Thus I employ the term non-fiction, as defined by Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, to refer to the films at hand as "works of narrative prose dealing with or offering opinions or conjectures upon facts and reality." See: Robert Sapino (2011, 5).

(previously Alexandru Sahia Studio) but the fall of communism resulted in the collapse of the studio which caused a cessation in the non-fiction film production industry. This lapse in production became known to those in the industry and the average Romanian consumer as the “death of documentary” and was referred to as such for the better part of the past 10 years (Bradeanu 2007). This ‘death’, however, offers an opportunity to study Romanian non-fiction film’s afterlife.

In the investigation to follow, I will argue that analyzing contemporary Romania-located non-fiction films from a postcolonial perspective, specifically human rights oriented works with a thematic focus on children in strife, provides a thorough understanding of the complex politics of cinema-making”⁷ many Romanian non-fiction filmmakers are obliged to engage in to receive international acclaim and publicity. I will argue that Romanian non-fiction cinema is “located in positions marginal to the economic, institutional, and ideological centres of image making” (Iordanova, Martin-Jones, and Vidal 2010, 5). By establishing Romanian non-fiction cinema as peripheral to the filmic productions made in the centre, such as those from the U.S., Germany, or France, I will be able to more accurately analyse the distribution, production, and presentation processes with which Romanian non-fiction cinema is engaged. I will rely on a 2016 article by Veda Popovici and Ovidiu Pop, *From Over Here, in the Periphery: a decolonial method for Romanian cultural and political discourses*, to hash out the ways in which the centre-periphery dichotomy permeates within the Romanian cultural sphere.

Thus, the “complex politics of cinema-making” for Romanian non-fiction films arises in the way that the filmmakers from the peripheral country of Romania symbolically or discursively migrate to central countries to establish professional networks and return to Romania to make films about their native country; obtain foreign funding to produce their films; pursue international acclaim from film festivals held in central countries before returning to screen their films at the domestic level; and depict the subject matter of Romanian children in strife via a problematically distanced aesthetic to satiate the gaze of distanced (often non-Romanian) viewers. These processes mirror a certain postcoloniality

⁷ I refer here to the phrase used by Doru Pop in *Romanian New Wave Cinema: An Introduction* (2014) in which he writes, “we must describe the connection between their [the filmmakers’] biography and their movies, not simply because they are of the same age, or because they are dealing with problems related to a certain period in communism [subject matter], or just because they share common motifs, also linked to specific historical facts...but because they follow the same ‘politics’ of cinema-making” (25).

where self-exoticization becomes a methodical process as the “postcommunist subject” is urged to mimic the dominant cultural production forms established in the centre which both affirms and perpetuates the socially and politically constructed “central” and “peripheral” division of Europe (and abroad) (Ștefănescu 2012, 16).

When searching for contemporary (2001-present) feature-length (70-90 minutes) Romanian non-fiction human rights-oriented films with a thematic focus on children in strife, I found the following pool: Liviu Tipurita's *Gypsy Child Thieves* (2009), Teodora Mihai's *Waiting for August* (2014), *Children Underground* (2001), *Școala noastră [Our School]* (2011), and *Toto și surorile lui [Toto and His Sisters]* (2014). All films in this pool were made possible in part by funding from either the U.S., the U.K., France, Germany, Switzerland or Belgium. I selected *Children Underground*, *Școala noastră*, and *Toto și surorile lui* to be closely analysed as these three films were most accessible to a non-Romanian speaking international spectator due to their having been screened at a high number of international film festivals. These three films received the most publicity both at the local and the foreign level and each was nominated for their native countries' most recognizable film award; for *Children Underground* it was an Academy Award and for *Școala noastră* and *Toto și surorile lui* it was a *Premiile Gopo* (the Romanian equivalent). Additionally, the linkages between the Romania-located human rights-oriented non-fiction films in my case study surface through the crossovers in consultants, editors, and producers whose presence dominates the thematic field (see Table 1.0).

		Film Consultant	Producer	Editor
<i>Children Underground</i>	2001	Mona Nicoară	Mona Nicoară Jonathan Oppenheim Edet Belzberg	Jonathan Oppenheim
<i>Școala noastră [Our School]</i>	2011	Edet Belzberg	Mona Nicoară	Jonathan Oppenheim
<i>Toto și surorile lui [Toto and His Sisters]</i>	2014	Mona Nicoară Jonathan Oppenheim	Mona Nicoară Alexandre Nanău	Alexandre Nanău

[Table.1.]

I do not claim that a film oppositional to the type I will analyse does not exist, but rather that when searched for, the Romanian non-fiction films of the criteria I have outlined available to

an international audience follow the trends that I will present throughout this essay as exemplified by the case study.

In the following section I will analyse the advent and progression of non-fiction film within Romania in relation to the country's communist control in order to provide a deeper understanding of the medium's turn toward the international market. In analysing how Sahia Film and the Communist regime utilised non-fiction film to be a propagandist tool for the state, I will provide evidence for the decline of Romanian spectatorship and its effect on Romanian non-fiction film's shift to satiate the desires of audiences abroad.

A brief unpacking of Romanian non-fiction film's post-1989 trajectory

1950 marked the founding of Romania's first non-fiction film production studio, Sahia Film (then Alexandru Sahia Studio) which was an ideological institution that aimed to strengthen the Romanian nation as a whole through the presentation of propagandist media at the local level. Sahia was responsible for producing an immense amount of films and at its peak the studio produced nearly 300 films a year (Uricaru 2012, 430).

Corresponding to Sahia's overt monopolization and the various governmental limitations on the industry, early Romanian non-fiction film remained a largely domestic cultural production with inconsistent international outreach as, under Ceaușescu's rule, there was little to no circulation of Romanian non-fiction films outside of the so called Soviet Bloc. Additionally during this time, both non-fiction and fiction foreign films were heavily regulated, censored, and more often than not banned which created an incredibly controlled perspective towards the medium within the country's general public by the early 70s.⁸ As censorship heightened and foreign language broadcasts diminished, there was a drastic increase in the production of propaganda films via Sahia and the number of Romanian film viewers in both the home and the cinema halls dropped significantly (Bradeanu 2007). This disassociated public attitude towards non-fiction film carried on after the fall of communism in 1989 with Alexandru Solomon, a Romanian filmmaker, stating in 2004:

⁸ Though it was no simple task to see foreign films in Romania during Ceaușescu's rule, Romanian translator Irina Margareta Nistor, who started working for Romanian National Television in 1980, spent four years between 1985-1989 secretly and illegally dubbing more than 1,000 banned foreign language films. These dubbed films were then covertly distributed among specific circles for private screenings. For an article on Nistor see: Kit Gillet, 2014.

Nobody wants to legitimize himself professionally as a documentary filmmaker in Romania. The genre has a low status and the term documentary triggers an array of negative memories which do not fit the prestige attached to the practice elsewhere (Bradeanu 2007).

Thus, from the beginning of the post-communist period, the maintenance of non-fiction cinema was mainly to be provided by the drive of filmmakers, independent production companies, and private funding sources as the newly autonomous Sahia was unable to maintain the country's film production and the interest of the country's viewers had been diminishing for years.⁹

It wasn't until 2004, however, that Romanian non-fiction films started to enter the international scene through a spur of production within the country by independent filmmakers funded in part by non-Romanian sources.¹⁰ Alexandru Solomon's *Marele Jaf communist [The Great Communist Bank Robbery]* (2004), Florin Iepan's *Născuți la comandă: Decreșii [Children of the Decree]* (2004), Dumitru Budrala's *Blestemul ariciului [The Curse of the Hedgehog]* (2004), and Ileana Stănculescu's *Podul [The Bridge]* (2004) all screened at the 2004 International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) paving the route to success for other Romanian non-fiction filmmakers to follow (Voinea 2012, 44).

Andrei Voinea, a historian who writes at length on this surge of productivity, claims that the directors of these four films achieved success due to their acquirement of Bourdieusian cultural capital through various engagements with "European institutions" which disrupted the hierarchy of the Romanian non-fiction film industry (Voinea 2012, 46). For Voinea, the Romanian directors screened at IDFA in 2004 attained a specifically Western European cultural capital through receiving education, training, thus establishing a professional network and personal life abroad. This turn to the European market and transnational production, as well as the pursuit of international acclaim in places other than Romania stems largely from the Romanian non-fiction film industry's complicated state-operated past.

⁹ In 1991 two independent film production companies were established outside of the Ministry of Culture: one led by Lucian Pintilie and the other by the film critic Bujor T. Răpeanu. However, neither made large waves in the non-fiction sector. (Voinea, 2012, 29).

¹⁰ In 1991 the 41st Berlin International Film Festival [Berlinale] held a "A Retrospective of Romanian Documentaries from 1898 to 1990" but none were in competition as the selection ran as a panorama.

See:

https://www.berlinale.de/en/archiv/jahresarchive/1991/01_jahresblatt_1991/01_Jahresblatt_1991.html

Thus, these Romanian non-fiction filmmakers followed an obligatory route away from Romania and toward Western European countries whose production companies and institutions would afford them the ability to reach markets with an already established demand. In other words, Romanian non-fiction cinema did not enter the international market coincidentally, but rather did so compulsorily. It did so with Amsterdam and IDFA as a point of *central* infiltration; with the co-production amongst non-Romanian European institutions as a necessity; with Romania's problematic past as a forced guide; with the fall of communism and Sahia studio and the non-fiction sector as a path paved to a place of elsewhere, to a place other than Romania. The argument to follow is that this path set by the films and filmmakers that breached the international market in 2004 has been similarly followed by the Romanian non-fiction filmmakers of the case study at hand, Alexandre Nanău, Mona Nicoară, and Miruna Coca-Cozma, who represent a more current Romanian non-fiction engagement with transnational production and international festivalisation. The question for us now is how the shift from a state-run industry to a global market system, i.e. Romanian non-fiction film's inter/transnationalization, was governed by the autocratic relationship between the central and peripheral spaces.

Interpreting Romania between Posts

It is necessary next to understand Romania as a nation peripheral to those at the centre in order to employ a postcolonial theoretical lens with which we may read the production and festivalisation processes of *Children Underground*, *Școala noastră*, and *Toto și surorile lui*. Since the early 2000s, various investigations from Rodica Mihăilă's "Crossing Borders/Exploring Boundaries: American Studies and the Question of the Post-communist 'Other'" (2003) to Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans* (2009) to more recent anthologies such as *Postcolonialism/Postcommunism: Intersections and Overlaps* (2011) and *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures* (2015) have attempted to hash out whether or not (post)communism¹¹ should be included in postcolonial studies and on the ways in which postcolonial thinking contributes to a richer understanding of various postcommunist contexts. I contend that the application of postcolonial studies to certain non-

¹¹ The parenthetically demarcated (post) here signifies chronology in that both the communist era and its aftermath have been studied and discussed in the literature listed.

colonised spaces can provide meaningful insight, thus, I will now consider the case of Romania, and more specifically its non-fiction cinema's shift from domestic to transnational film production, as causally related to Romania's (post)communist present and past.

The distinction of Romania as a peripheral country from France, Germany, or the U.S. is deep-rooted and has been analysed by Romanians from a multitude of perspectives including philosophical, literary, and economic since early in the 19th century.¹² Authors of *From Over Here, in the Periphery: a decolonial method for Romanian cultural and political discourses*, Veda Popovici and Ovidiu Pop, claim that "Through internalization, [the fashioning of a Romanian national culture] contributed to the mass diffusion of the stigma invented by thinkers from Western Europe, and ever since generation after generation of Romanian intellectuals, to name the clearest case, have been engulfed by the obsessive question: are we really European or not?"

This question has circulated for more than a century throughout Romanian literature, news reports, journalistic pieces, and EU commissioned studies. The concept of "Europeanness" and "Europeanisation" are crucial to the understanding of Romania as marginalised from Western Europe. It is through this marginalization that certain negative stereotypes of Romanians, as "beggars," "gypsies," "corrupt," or of a "backward culture" have been both constructed and maintained (Rohozinska 1999, n.p.).

Romania's "Europeanness" was a point of scrutiny long before the question of Europeanisation and the country's entrance into the European Union came into play. I borrow a question posed by British historian Tony Judt in his 2001 article titled *Romania: Bottom of the heap*: "Where, then, does Romania fit in the European scheme of things?" What complicates Romania's various attempts to achieve a 'European' status is that

[t]here are no generally acceptable criteria of 'Europeanness' on which such judgements could be based. History, culture and identity, and appeals to these supposed 'inheritances' from the past, have divided Europeans far more than they have ever been able to unite them (Center for the study of the imaginary 2002, 35).

This division among Europeans is most easily drawn in the context of their native countries and often used to separate the European cultural forerunners such as France, Germany, and

¹² For a list of contributions in the varied approaches to studying Romania and other Eastern European countries as "caught between empires" see: Costica Bradatan (2012) and Mária Kovács (2010).

the UK, with those of the “other Europe.”¹³ Nonetheless, “Europeanness” is fluid and conceivably unattainable unless a country, like the concept, remains perpetually in transition. And often times national cinemas of countries “at the edges” follow suit. As the editors of *Cinema at the Periphery* write, “The cinematic periphery is a constantly shifting constituent in a dynamically evolving relationship. It is elusive and intangible, as the centre to which it relates keeps redefining itself” (Jordanova, Martin-Jones, & Vidal 2010, 6). Though not included in Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie’s *Cinema of Small Nations* (2007), I argue that Romania’s non-fiction cinema behaves as that of a small nation, as one that is of the cinematic periphery.

According to Hjort, small national cinemas are defined by limitations on domestic markets and a shortage of domestic audiences and are thus forced into a compulsorily dependent relationship with external powers “by the neo-liberal economic and political pressures of globalization” (2007, 15). In this way, the marginality of Romanian non-fiction cinema and the question of the nation’s “Europeanness” only enhanced the plausibility of Romanian filmmaker’s reliance on external established themselves as the centres of European cultural production.

As the necessity of co-productions continued within the Romanian film industry, the concept of a “national” cinema began to be challenged in light of the more accurate “transnational” production label (Jordanova et al. 2010). Given Romania is a cinematically “small nation”, with its non-fiction cinema peripherally marginalised, its filmmakers are “compelled precisely by a self-colonizing competition for European/Western recognition and, more blatantly in recent decades, economic investment” (Imre 2012, 8). Romanian non-fiction filmmakers are essentially obliged to be in dialog with the funding and distribution sources of more profitable nations and their respective film industries in order to produce cinematic works. This relationship at the level of the industry and film production is also present at the individual level in the way that Romanian filmmakers try to bridge the gap between Romania as peripheral and other central countries through their own personal migratory behaviour.

¹³I refer to the “other Europe” in reference to the Eastern European countries that Phillip Roth included in his four-volume set publication *Writers from The Other Europe*, (1977-1999). The labelling of Eastern Europe as the “other Europe” is also in reference to *European Cinema after 1989: Cultural Identity and Transnational Production* in which it is described that after WWII “Eastern Europe became the “other Europe,” comprising the satellites of the USSR in Eastern Europe, as well as the USSR itself.” See: Luisa Rivi ed., *European Cinema after 1989: Cultural Identity and Transnational Production*, (2007, 13).

Migrating Between the Centre and the Periphery or Establishing Oneself as “European”

The filmmakers of *Children Underground*, *Școala noastră*, and *Toto și surorile lui* all move(d) through various countries for education, workshop opportunities, and for general residence. Nanău, Nicoară, and Coca-Cozma are émigré directors who hold a citizenship or residency status in a foreign but central country. Nanău has German citizenship, Nicoară has lived on and off in the U.S. for nearly 20 years, Coco-Cozma lived and earned her higher education in Switzerland, and Belzberg was born in the U.S. Jordanova describes that instead of trying to draw funds to Eastern Europe, it is easier if the directors themselves move out of their native peripheral countries to attain funding from better financed countries’ film industries (2002, 526). A tracing of Nicoară, her co-director Miruna Coca-Cozma and Nanău’s course from Romania to the countries where they ultimately settled provides evidence of their establishment of the mobile identity between centre and periphery.

Nicoară was born in the Transylvanian town of Timișoara, Romania. She started working as a human rights activist after 1989 and was initially focused on LGBTQ rights. As a human rights activist, Nicoară has been thoroughly engaged with the problems of Romania’s political situation and the various humanitarian efforts regarding Roma inclusion in Romania. Though in 1995 Nicoară moved to New York to attend Columbia University, she stayed engaged with Romanian human rights activism. Nicoară’s interest in the non-fiction film scene started in 2001 while she was still in New York. She says, “I didn’t get hooked on documentary filmmaking until I started to work with Edet Belzberg on ‘Children Underground’” (“Our School Directors” 2011). After living abroad for two decades, she remained connected to her home country and its politics and helped shape multiple films featuring Romanian children.

Nicoară’s co-director, Miruna Coca-Cozma was born in Bucharest, Romania. Coca-Cozma worked for Romanian national television for five years as a journalist and moderator for Antena 1 and TVR (“La Televiziunea Din Elvetia” 2004). In 1999 she moved to Switzerland and began working in radio broadcasting with *Radio Suisse Romande* and became involved with Swiss national television and the Journal of the TSR. While in Switzerland, she attended l’Ecole de Français Moderne [The School of Modern French] in Lausanne. She is a graduate of the BBC School of Journalism as well as the Romanian Academy of Theater and Film. Her

first film, *Omar Porras, Wizard of the Stage* is a Swiss production and was released in 2008. Nanău was born in Bucharest, Romania, but at the age of 10 he and his family of Transylvanian Saxons (a cultural minority of German descent) emigrated to Germany. Nanău went on to study film direction at Deutsche Film und Fernsehakademie Berlin (DFFB) and filmed his first feature documentary, a German and Austrian co-production *Zadek inszeniert Peer Gynt*, in 2006. The following year, Nanău was a scholarship holder at the Academy of Arts in Berlin (UDK). His next feature documentary and first Romanian production, *Lumea văzută de Ion B. [The World According to Ion B.]* (2009), is about the struggle of contemporary collage artist Ion Bârlădeanu to receive recognition while living on the streets of Bucharest. The film was produced by HBO Romania, an affiliate of the U.S. based multinational corporation HBO, and received an International Emmy Award in 2010.

Based on the movement that Nanău, Coca-Cozma, and Nicoară made prior to their first productions, it is evident that the filmmakers' or their families' choices to move abroad directly influenced their access to non-Romanian funding. Both *Toto și surorile lui* and *Școala noastră* relied upon the connections that the filmmakers had made in their time abroad with each film's funding coming from the filmmaker's respective place of non-Romanian residence. In an efficient summary of this phenomenon Iordanova writes:

The way European film financing is set up, in practical terms, urges filmmakers from Eastern Europe to migrate to the West and obtain some sort of status (domicile, residency, citizenship) in a Western country. A simple migratory move, which may be unrelated to any creative considerations, sometimes proves of utmost importance, as fewer possibilities are available to those who chose not to migrate. The movement of people is increasingly becoming a key aspect in the contemporary process of co-producing culture, and in the case of East Europeans establishing oneself in the West becomes a creative imperative: move or perish (Iordanova 2002, 519).

While the bridging of the financial gap present between the Romanian film industry and funding in Western Europe and the U.S. may be made possible by moving from Romania to a central country, this trend has some crucial political implications. As Romanian directors move elsewhere and gain citizenship or residency, they, like their films, become transnational hybrids. Thus, an active participation in a space central to cultural production not only influences these Romanian filmmakers' access to funding, but also alters their positionality toward the creative process in shaping the way they approach their subject matter for an international target audience.

The Influence of International Film Festivals on the Film Production Agendas

Children Underground, *Toto și surorile lui*, and *Școala noastră* all premiered at international film festivals (IFFs) and followed specific festival routes that were largely focused in central countries prior to the films' respective screening in peripheral countries. In this way, the films circulate in a way that sanctions them to attain value from renowned centre-located IFFs. I will argue that these festivals and their audiences have a key role in shaping the canon that films produced in the periphery seeking international festivalisation ought to follow.

As Marijke de Valck, co-founder of the Film Festival Research Network and author of *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (2007), rightly notes, film festivals began as a largely European phenomenon in an effort to bypass the Hollywood system hegemony. Film scholar Thomas Elsaesser affirms that “[t]he annual international film festival is a very European institution (2005, 84).” According to Elsaesser, the main function of IFFs is to “categorize, classify, sort and sift the world’s annual film productions” (2005, 96). However, this sifting is not just into categories of genre, theme, or nation specificity but also into selections of “what’s hot” and “what’s not” that is, what audience members typically want to see and what falls below the standard line of consumption interest. It is through the gaze of international audiences that the shaping of a festival film canon begins to occur. As Elsaesser puts it, “films are now made for festivals” (2005, 96). Mark Peranson furthers this idea in his cynically titled “First You Get the Power, Then You Get the Money: Two Models on Film Festivals,” in which he argues that IFF’s shared selection agenda results nurtures a specific festival film model that attempts to “replicate the success of more talented precursors” (2008, 41).

In this way, IFFs both add and detract value, be it economic, cultural, or artistic, from the films screened in regard to their placement in (or out) of competition and their reception by jury members, film critics, and audiences. Elsaesser argues that festival films are first “offered to the gaze of the international press and visitors, whose response in turn can be fed back into the national public debate, in order to shape the perception a specific country has of its national cinema,” its filmmakers, and itself (2005, 88). De Valck similarly claims that films from cinematically small nations often must be screened at IFFs to seek affirmation and

critical prowess “before they [can] be considered as having any cultural value at home” (2007, 209). This becomes of great importance when considering the ways that cinemas from the periphery, such as Romania-located non-fiction films, are screened first in central countries before returning home. In this way, IFFs are not just venues or events but entities that assert their presence in the global film market, acting as legitimization gateways and “tastemakers” for films and filmmakers (De Valck 2016, 109).

Children Underground follows the daily lives of a group of Romanian children who are living in the metro underpass of Piața Victoriei, in Bucharest, Romania. The film won the Special Jury Prize at its Sundance Festival premiere in January, 2001. It was also selected at independent film awards events following its premiere including the International Documentary Association's Documentary Award, and the Gotham Awards' Documentary Achievement Prize. Most notably, the film was nominated for an Academy Award in 2002. It was screened at IDFA in the Netherlands and also at the International Film Festival Karlovy Vary in the Czech Republic but the film is still yet to screen at a festival in Romania. In a 2001 interview with *Variety*, Belzberg claimed she was trying to get it shown but that the Romanian community didn't want it to be screened and that the Romanian Cultural Center in New York also refused to screen the film. Thus, *Children Underground* circulated outside of Romania and mostly within IFFs predominantly in the U.S.

Școala noastră also premiered in the U.S. at a screening for Tribeca Film Festival in New York City, New York in April of 2011. The film follows the lives of three Roma-Romanian children from a small Transylvanian town, Târgu Lăpuș, during its EU-funded ethnic integration process. In June, 2011 the film was screened at the Silverdocs festival in Silver Spring, Maryland. That same month the film screened in Romania for a large audience at the Transylvania International Film Festival [TIFF] in Cluj-Napoca. However, for the film's first screening in Bucharest, Romania – the nation's capital – not a single member of the crew was present which is starkly different to their presence at the various other screenings surrounding the film's release. When the film screened at TIFF, which takes place in a city 1.5 hours away from Târgu Lăpuș, the film crew bussed Dileu's residents to the festival. Nicoară said in an interview that the film's screening at TIFF is where the children really realised the film's impact yet the film continued to circulate more actively abroad than in Romania. Later in the summer of 2011 the film screened at a Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival (Jihlava IDFF) in Jihlava, Czech Republic and was nominated for the Best Eastern European

Documentary during the festival's Silver Eye Awards. Still, it was not until the following year that the documentary received mass recognition and an award from a Romanian-based festival. In March, 2012 the film was nominated for the Premiile Gopo [Gopo Awards], the Romanian equivalent to the U.S. Academy Awards.

Toto și surorile lui follows the lives of three Roma-Romanian children living in Bucharest, Romania awaiting their mothers' release from prison. The film premiered at the San Sebastián International Film Festival on September 24, 2014. Just a few days later it won the Best International Documentary at the Zurich Film Festival. In October 2014 *Toto și surorile lui* "gripped Warsaw" at the Warsaw Film Festival in Poland (A. Andreescu 2014). In 2014, *Toto și surorile lui* also screened at Jihlava IDFF and it won the Silver Eye Award. In November, 2014 the film won the Prize of Ecumenical Jury at Dok Leipzig in Germany. In September of 2015, *Toto și surorile lui* was screened in competition at the Budapest International Documentary Film Festival in Hungary. The film began 2015 by winning the Grand Prix at the Premiers Plans festival in Angers France. It went on to win Best International Documentary at the Luxembourg City Film Festival in March of 2015. In April, the film was nominated and won the 2015 Premiile Gopo and in this same month, the film was screened in Romania at TIFF.

Through the mapping of the festival careers of *Școala noastră*, *Toto și surorile lui* and *Children Underground*, I have made evident the ways that IFFs' power of value addition determines the festival circulation that films from the periphery often follow to receive critical acclaim in the centre that will then affirm their significance at the domestic level. However, what remains to be scrutinised are the ways in which IFFs also create and cultivate a unique kind of audience that is both "mutually self-confirming and self-celebrating" similarly to the festivals themselves (Elsaesser 2005, 102). I will now analyse the ways in which IFF audience members are not merely passive spectators but also play a substantial role in the festival film production scheme.

Watching Back Familiar Scenes at International Film Festivals

Film festival attendees have the means to 'participate' in the film industry not only at the economic level via consumption, but on the production level in the ways that film producers

seek to make films that will satisfy the demands of festival audiences. According to a 2015 study completed by Jan Elise Stambro, film festival attendees tend to be well-educated individuals who earn a high income and are not affiliated with the film industry. In desiring a certain type of film, festival goers have a role in the creation of the canonical festival film structure as it must follow a universally accessible narrative or theme. Therefore, filmmakers are inevitably in the position to “calculate” the spectator, proposing a precise calibration of [their] film in relation to a desired emotional response” (Gaines 1999, 88). Just as filmmakers have a target audience in mind and IFFs seek out a collectively defined ‘festival film,’ festival goers desire a certain screening experience. However, as various film categories and their associated festivalisation processes develop different modes of desired spectatorship or ‘ways of looking,” I will now scale down the scope of my IFF investigation to Romanian human rights oriented non-fiction films to speak of the specific desire and gaze associated with this cinema.

In regard to my case study, I will mobilise the concept of the “humanitarian gaze” as developed by Sonia M. Tascón in her 2015 book *Human Rights Film Festivals*. Tascón begins by defining humanitarianism as both a practice and a discourse of “intervention in other’s troubles” established through an unequal dynamic between giver and receiver of aid (2015, 34). Tascón uses this well-established and often assumed relationship between those in the periphery who ‘need aid,’ – in my case study Romanian children in strife –, and those from the centre who offer help – in my case study these are the EU institutions or foreign funded education centres that provide assistance to the children depicted. She extends this to explain the specific ‘ways of looking” developed from the dynamic between those who are most often watched as peripheral and other, and those who watch as central and hegemonic. Tascón considers this combination of the politics associated with watching human rights oriented films as the “humanitarian gaze.” She writes,

The humanitarian gaze, as I conceive it, organizes what we may expect to see when viewing others’ troubles, and seeks to find it. I call it a gaze because it is constitutive of a way of looking, of expecting to see, as well as being reproduce-able. It organizes who we will expect to see in these (humanitarian) circumstances, and includes who is not permitted into such a frame (2015, 35).

The gaze is established through the system of global inequality by which the world is divided “into zones of Western [central] comfort and safety and non-Western [peripheral] need and

vulnerability” (Bruce 2016, 288). The humanitarian gaze allows for a disidentification¹⁴ on behalf of the viewer from the marginalised others depicted as squalid, vulnerable, and without hope. The feelings of self-righteous pity evoked from these kinds of images can derive a sort of pleasure in the viewer as well as a sense of gratification in that the images presented reaffirm their privilege and separation from the suffering presented on screen.

Tascón describes the “reproduce-ability” of the humanitarian gaze as a product of how human rights work has been limited to making certain claims that are reproduced by a majority of films and human rights film festivals in regard to those seeking help and those in the position to offer it. She writes of how the ubiquitousness of the images and discourses continually presented in human rights films “simply reinforces that only certain parts of the world ‘suffer,’ while others do not” (Tascón 2015, 37). This relates directly to the ways in which *Școala noastră*, *Toto și surorile lui*, and *Children Underground* were received by festival audiences at their respective premiers. Each film received praise for the ways they depict the “grim milieu” and “squalor” of “desperately homeless” Romanian children. The films’ respective reviews call for distributors and other festivals to take up the films for further screening and marketing. The language each review uses to describe the living conditions and lives in general of the Romanian children depicted evidences both the humanitarian gaze’s way of looking at Romanian children as well as its “reproduce-ability” as each film is reviewed in an extremely similar way.

In a 2014 review on behalf of the San Sebastián International Film Festival, where *Toto și surorile lui* premiered, Neil Young writes for the Hollywood Reporter:

Well-received on its San Sebastian bow in the eclectic New Directors section, the fly-on-wall eye-opener looks set for a long festival life with small-screen play also assured in the wake of Nanău 's International Emmy award for *The World According to Ion B* (2010). And while such grim milieu, afflicted with drugs, disease, garbage and general squalor, aren't going to be to all audience's tastes, there's also humor and moments of genuine, hard-won uplift here, suggesting that edgy distributors in receptive, social-minded territories like France, Germany and Scandinavia should at least check it out (Young 2014).

The review speaks of how *Toto și surorile lui* should expect festivalisation specifically from “social minded territories” that are of no coincidence, central rather than peripheral

¹⁴ Disidentification in this context is defined as “the recognition that the subject on display is economically and socially other.” See: Caitlin Frances Bruce (2016, 286).

countries. In a similar manner, a review of *Școala noastră*'s premier at Tribeca Film Festival written by Eddie Crocker for *Variety* states that the film ought to experience festivalisation and television due to its admirably restrained depiction of the “sad yet resilient journey” of Romanian children. Crocker writes,

Exercising admirable restraint in its expose of ingrained racism in the Romanian educational system, absorbing docu “Școala noastră” follows the sad yet resilient journey of three Roma children over four years as they grapple with prejudice and stereotyping. Unveiled at Tribeca before Silverdocs, where it won the Sterling Award for top nonfiction feature, [this] even-keeled pic carries echoes of Michael Apted’s groundbreaking “Up” series and should enjoy fest, tube [television] and ancillary enrollments (Crocker 2011).

Yet again, a 2001 review of *Children Underground* by Robert Koehler for *Variety* assures the film’s festivalisation for its depiction of the “desperately homeless” Romanian children who have “slipped into oblivion” at the hands of an unforgiving Romanian society. It reads,

[T]his vérité look at desperately homeless children surviving on the streets and in the subway tunnels of Bucharest will stir debate and emotions. Belzberg’s unsparing camera sometimes portrays a level of cruelty that tests viewers’ tolerance, but her fearless aesthetic is also a measure of the film’s brilliant indictment of any society that can allow its most vulnerable to slip into oblivion. Along with an assured potent life in fests, this tough-minded account should be embraced by a bold micro-distributor (Koehler 2001).

The humanitarian gaze present in the reviews speaks on behalf of the festival goers at large. The reviews reward the films for their investigative work of the Romanian other and recommend a centrally located circulation of the films so they may find distributors. Due to the presence of the humanitarian gaze at the level of reception it is feasible that the gaze is present at the film production level as the filmmakers set out to make films with ‘good narrative arcs,’ characters that appeal to audiences, and stories that can be understood universally. A 2013 article on the social impact of humanitarian films states “[t]here is power in engaging [audiences] through a language that we know, through tropes we are used to, through allowing us to feel good about the work we do – and when done well, it’s both good business and good storytelling” (“Poverty Porn”).

Accordingly, *Children Underground*, *Școala Noastră*, and *Toto și surorile lui* are filmed and structured so that IFF audiences may *watch* “the world back into what they already

know.”¹⁵ The films participate in cultivating the humanitarian gazes’ reproduce-ability and satisfies IFF audiences’ expectation of watching humanitarian work within the circumstances they are familiar with. Thus, when filmmakers from the periphery, such as Nicoară and Nanău, stand in a relationship of dependency with the IFF market to grant their film presentation, affirmation, and further distribution both on the global and domestic level, the images within their films can be read as constructed for this exact market. This dependency contributes to the construction of Romanian children as the watched and troubled other and permits those from the centre to ‘watch themselves’ come to the children’s aid.

It should be noted that this aforementioned subject–other separation is no necessarily exclusive fault of the filmmakers, but rather a learned positionality one that a peripheral country must often take in order to produce a non-fiction film capable of the international outreach that *Școala noastră* and *Toto și surorile lui* have achieved. I do not mean to say that every filmmaker and their filmic product from every peripheral space engages in these processes. What I do mean is that in tracing the festivalisation processes of Romania-located human rights-oriented non-fiction films, certain trends arise that reflect the subject–other opposition between the filmmaker and the filmed and that, seemingly, regardless of any background – Romanian or not – perpetuate a hegemonic perspective and politics of cinema-making.

Conclusion

Viewing Romanian non-fiction film’s death as a platform from which a complex rebirth occurred, brings forth a multitude of crucial relationships between the fall of communism, thus Sahia Film, the resurgence of Romanian non-fiction film in 2004, and the film sector’s turn toward the international market. Romanian non-fiction film’s post-1989 turn toward co-production funding sources from central countries invites an investigation of trans- and

¹⁵ I use this phrase here in reference to how scholar Hamid Dabashi accuses Slavoj Žižek and his “fellow” European philosophers of consistently “read[ing] the world back into what they already know.” See: Hamid Dabashi “Fuck You Žižek!,” last modified July 26, 2016, <https://www.zedbooks.net/blog/posts/fuck-you-zizek/>

international relational patterns between Romania, as peripheral, and the central countries upon which its filmmakers are often forced to rely.

Thus, an understanding of Nanău, Coca-Cozma, and Nicoara's movement from Romania to central countries as necessary to attain a specifically "European" cultural capital, encourages a critical and inquisitive approach to the constructedness of the centre-periphery dichotomy. It is a self-affirming paradigm. Peripheral filmmakers, such as Nanău, Coca-Cozma, and Nicoara must "move or perish" (Jordanova 2002, 519). Their films must follow suit in order to receive the critical prowess at international film festivals that will award their makers the prestige and opportunity required to continue filmmaking. Nations whose cinemas are rendered "small," such as Romania's, have an incredibly difficult time fighting back against the push of the transnational. This is why *Children Underground*, *Toto și surorile lui*, and *Școala Noastră* relied on American, German, and/or Belgian funding and largely circulated in central countries at A level festivals to be consumed by international festival audiences.

This type of transnational production and international festivalisation produces a specific kind of knowledge about the Romanian children in strife that the films depict. What this means is that Romanian non-fiction films that depict impoverished Romanian children are most easily marketable and festivalised, even enjoyably consumed by a distanced spectator specifically when the Romanian children depicted "are positioned as victims and objects of aid, not subjects of their own future" (Bruce 2016, 293). Thus, *Children Underground*, *Școala noastră*, and *Toto și surorile lui* present their subjects according to a sensationalist framework established by a pre-determined humanitarian gaze.

The power dynamic that constructs the humanitarian gaze is the same one that pushes Romanians to question their "Europeaness," that forces Romanian non-fiction filmmakers to outsource in order to receive critical prowess, that positions Romania as peripheral to countries at the world's economic, political, and cultural centre. The issue here lies in the prescribed articulations that international festival goers, jurors, and festival committees seek to display and see which, therefore, pushes peripheral filmmakers to produce. I refer again to this watching back into what we already know. In his 2001 publication, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Hamid Naficy asserts, "Can the subaltern speak?" will have to be reworded to ask, "Can the subaltern be heard?" I would argue that this be pushed further to include: can the subaltern be seen, and if so, through whose looking glass?

Thus, a postcolonial reading of Romania's non-fiction film production sector provides a unique understanding of the complex power relations nestled in the cultural production of and between the centre and periphery. The movements of both the films and their makers work to perpetuate the constructed notions of centre and periphery and contribute to Romania's continued categorization within the latter.

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