

Hesitant Histories on the Romanian Screen

(Strausz, László: *Hesitant Histories on the Romanian Screen*. Basingstoke UK, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. ISBN 978-3-319-55272-9, 257 p.)

Zsolt Gyenge
zsengezsolt@yahoo.com

The critical success of the Romanian films produced in the new millennium has generated a wide scholarly interest in what has been called later the New Romanian Cinema. Though László Strausz's book is part of this current, its specificity relies in the fact that he tries to find a conceptual tool for the description and interpretation of the Romanian cinema that is capable to bridge the differences between older and more recent films, and thus he discusses the Romanian films of the past 50 years within one single theoretical framework. *Hesitant Histories* is a theoretical work in the true sense of the word, as it is not one of those film theory studies that simply reshuffle previously existing texts and theories, but rather with a bold move constructs a new theoretical concept, and grounds every interpretation and analysis of the book on that concept.

In the centre of the book we find the complex term of *hesitation*, a term that I see as a conceptual tool with three areas of application. First, it is used by Strausz as an interpretive strategy of individual films – both regarding the explanation of the diegetic characters' motivations and of the representational strategies, formal devices of the films themselves. Secondly, hesitation is used as a common descriptor of strategies of representation of different Romanian screen media texts across time – thus it becomes a tool for a historical approach to moving images, one that argues for a certain national or regional invariant present throughout several decades of filmmaking. And finally in the hands of Strausz hesitation becomes a tool that makes him able to link the discussed media products to Romanian historical and social realities, thus enabling an approach close to cultural studies.

Hesitation in this study – as I understand it – describes a psychic and intellectual attitude of the Eastern European and especially Romanian subject in front of disorienting historical and social realities that resist simple and final explanations. A reality that is being described by uncertainty, impenetrability, ambiguous understanding and evaluation. The most important characteristic of this concept is its hybridity: according to Strausz this attitude is not only perceivable in the behaviour of the characters on screen, but is also integrated in the

design, form of expression and strategy of representation of the Romanian screen media texts themselves. Thus hesitation becomes also the attitude of the viewers of Romanian films, regardless of their origin, as “(...) our meaning making faculties are brought into line with those of the characters.” (Strausz 2017, 2) Thus hesitation is considered to be a central and integral characteristic of most Romanian screen-media texts (Strausz uses this term because beside cinematic moving images he also includes some television broadcasts in the analysis) produced in the past 50 years.

Theoretically Strausz constructs its central concept through a rather eclectic line of arguments. Hesitation seems to be derived from those contemporary re-readings of Bazin that in the past two or three decades re-evaluated the French theorist's body of work. Instead of dismissing him for a supposed naive concept of a transparent realism, several scholars (Ian Aitken, Colin MacCabe, Daniel Morgan, Philip Rosen are being cited) have argued that Bazin's argument was not a normative approach towards realism as a style, but he was much more referring to realism as a (political) goal. In Strausz's view within this approach realism as a political attitude replaces realism as a stylistic category, this definition of realism allowing for many different stylistic sets to co-exist. Thus the concept of hesitation is present in this book “as a cultural-interpretive strategy that stands at the center of several realist theories of the cinematic medium.” (Strausz 2017, 18) At this point it has to be mentioned that, somehow similarly to the revaluation of Bazin's realism, the whole book offers a different interpretation of the realism of the New Romanian Cinema compared to the oversimplifying label of transparent realism that has been attached to it by the critical and scholarly reception. He considers that notions of transparency and immediacy are misleading entry points for understanding the radical novelty that New Romanian Cinema has introduced to world cinema. (Strausz 2017, 19) Despite the rejection of the term of realism, the concept of hesitation is in very close connection with outer social realities: thus the concept and the theory developed from it does not deny the overall impression of realism that everyone has watching contemporary Romanian films. The starting point is thus the unquestionable effect of realism, but Strausz is able to develop a concept that goes beyond its simple acknowledgement, and is also capable to reflect on some theoretical issues related to the (often ideologically charged) representation of reality.

After having acknowledged that, based on contemporary readings, even Bazin's realism can be understood as going beyond simply positing an objective, independent reality,

Strausz supports his approach by Lefebvre's and de Certeau's theories of space. He considers that due to the fact that the ontological questions of realism and space are closely related, the concepts of the production of space, lived space and rhetoric of space could be enlightening to the understanding of the issue of realism. After briefly presenting these two theories, Strausz concludes that, in the same way as for de Certeau, the experienced urban space's everyday uses evade a totalising discourse, the cultural strategy of hesitation is seen as moving, dynamic, as one that evades discursive control. His conclusion is that hesitation in this way becomes a realist-modernist strategy to depict social processes, identifiable throughout the history of Romanian cinema and screen media. (Strausz 2017, 20–26)

A surprising next step in this eclectic train of thought is an analysis of Velázquez's famous painting *Las meninas*, where the multiple and thus mobile vanishing points stay as examples of early strategies of hesitation. For Strausz this painting exemplifies well that images not only represent something, but they also produce it, and it demonstrates the interdependency of political control and its representation. (Strausz 2017, 26–30) In what follows a famous Romanian folk poem, *Miorița* and its interpretation by Romanian poet and philosopher Lucian Blaga is invoked as an example to show how “collective cultural imaginations repeatedly project spatial references onto cultural products.” (Strausz 2017, 31) This also becomes the starting point of a description of the modernist reconstruction of Bucharest that took place in the 1980s. Finally three terms from the postcolonial discourse are invoked in order to further strengthen the argument of the book and to root it in pre-existing theoretical narratives. First Strausz applies Oushakine's term aphasia, then moves to Joshua M. Price's term of bewilderment only to arrive to Homi K. Bhabha's interpretation of enunciation and performance.

Though all these theories and concepts seem adequate individually and Strausz manages to organize them as arguments around his central concept, at first glance they seem coming from too different backgrounds. One might ask, how a 17th century Spanish painting, a Romanian folk poem, Lefebvre and Bazin could be supporting in a coherent way one theoretical concept? The eclectic nature of this endeavour is even realised by Strausz himself when discussing the postcolonial context of his approach. (Strausz 2017, 42) However the conclusion of this train of thought is a clear and enlightening definition of hesitation: “Hesitation as a spatial act, and as such an artistic trope encompassing both narrative and

stylistic spaces, refers to the constant oscillation between the bottom-up and the top-down processes in the construction of social realities.” (Strausz 2017, 38)

In the case of such a concept two issues have to be clarified: its descriptive value and its exclusivity. The first one refers to question if the concept is really describing an essential characteristic of the body of works in question, and if yes, whether this is the case in all, or at least in most of the cases? In this regard I think that Strausz's study is convincing. The second issue, exclusivity refers to the excluding nature of the term: is hesitation an attitude relevant only to Romanian cinema, or can one find similar gestures and attitudes in several other national cinemas or individual oeuvres? This is important because if it is not exclusive, then the descriptive and historical value of the term comes seriously under question – however this issue is not discussed in the book *Hesitant Histories*, which, as its title suggests, also delivers a film and media historical reflection on Romanian Cinema. Strausz considers that hesitation is integral part of at least three types of screen-media texts in the history of Romanian film. Modernist hesitation is typical for the auteur films of the state-socialist era, where a modernist, self-reflective approach on the (im)possibility of true representation was a tactic of resistance in an authoritarian system. Legitimizing hesitation is considered to be relevant for the television broadcast images of the armed uprising of 1989, where the uncertainty and ambiguity of the events shown on screen influenced the events themselves, and more importantly, the dissemination of contradictory images was to the immediate benefit of some political actors, who were legitimized by these broadcast narratives and interpretations. Finally, performative hesitation is used to describe the strategy of the so-called New Romanian Cinema, emerged after the year 2000. The term performativity refers to the active participation of the viewer in the construction of social realities, following the logic of the social construction of space developed by Lefebvre. Hesitation from this perspective is the expression of vacillation between the different constructed versions of social reality. (Strausz 2017, 20)

After having detailed the theoretical position and background of the study, the next chapters discuss screen media texts from three different periods: from the state socialist era, from the 1989 revolution and from the period after 2000, when the group of films known as New Romanian Cinema has emerged. In all cases the discussion of the actual films is connected to the description of cultural, historical, political or even literary debates that shaped the common perception of actual and past events in Romanian society. Thus Strausz is

able to show how history and culture has been produced by different actors and texts, and is able to convey a broader landscape for the interpretation of the films. According to him hesitation as a term helps to map the movement in social space between various discursive subject positions that participated in the construction of the social real. (Strausz 2017, 51, 55–56) The biggest emphasis is of course on New Romanian Cinema, discussed in four thematically centred chapters. One focuses on the image of the state-socialist past; the second on the issue of mobility and the crossing of borders; the third deals with narratives placed in regulatory institutions like hospitals, prisons and convents; and the last one analyses films that focus on the changed/changing image of family, gender roles and the conflicts between generations. The least convincing part of the book is chapter 3 describing the so-called modernist hesitation of four pre-1989 auteur-films. The limited number of films brought into discussion questions the historical relevance of the research, whilst the interpretation of modernist self-reflexivity as being a specific type of hesitation theoretically shakes the grounds of the central concept of the book, as it seems to reach beyond the acceptable meaning of the term. In contrast, chapters 4 and 5 are truly enlightening, and offer a magnificent reading experience even for those who are familiar with Romanian historical events. The former one, dealing with the television broadcast of the Romanian revolution aptly demonstrates that “the chaotic and opaque nature of the events of the revolution was to a significant extent created through television broadcasts” through the hesitant nature of the image of history (Strausz 2017, 109, 111) – a situation that mostly benefited the first new political force appearing on scene those days. In all chapters one can notice the attentive phenomenological description of scenes, images and cinematic devices which are always carefully integrated within a theoretically grounded analysis. Thus the book is informative and helpful even for those who are not interested in the theoretical concept developed, but are looking for detailed, theoretically and historically informed analysis and interpretation of individual films. What seems to be missing from the study is a critical overview of the scholarly discourse on (new) Romanian cinema that is longer than one paragraph and that goes beyond the simple mentioning of some works and labelling them as “under-theorized”. (Strausz 2017, 5) Besides the description of the state of the research regarding the topic, such an endeavour would have offered the possibility for Strausz to position his approach compared to other studies of the field in the same way as he did it with the theoretical background of the central concept. The critical analysis of Dominique Nasta’s book (Nasta

2013), or the discussion of the term Romanian New Wave, preferred by Doru Pop (Pop 2014) compared to the label New Romanian Cinema used by Strausz and accepted by the filmmakers themselves would have benefited the argument. Especially Doru Pop's book could have been a good point of reference, because he – in a somewhat similar way to Strausz – uses a central term (New Wave) as a conceptual tool to assess contemporary Romanian cinema.

It seems important to note that compared to the authors of the above mentioned studies on Romanian Cinema, Strausz is not Romanian, and has never lived there – a situation that benefits his book on at least two levels. Firstly it makes him able to maintain a certain detachment from the events, actors, spaces and media products presented, secondly it offers a reading, analysis and interpretation that is accessible for audiences living far away from the historical and social realities of Eastern Europe or Romania.

Hesitant Histories on the Romanian Screen is a very well written book that contrary to its title is able to reach beyond Romanian cinema, as it offers valuable insight also for readers interested in cultural-historical film and media theory in general.

References

- Nasta, Dominique. 2013. *Contemporary Romanian Cinema: The History of an Unexpected Miracle*. London; New York: Wallflower Press.
- Pop, Doru. 2014. *Romanian New Wave Cinema: An Introduction*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.