National Minorities in the Contemporary Romanian Cinema: From Cheap Exotism to Self-Representation

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Abstract: This study aims to map the representation of national minorities in Romanian fiction films from 1990 to 2021 and to highlight the main mechanisms employed by local filmmakers to portray the local multicultural landscape. Starting with the films of the transition period and the approaches of directors like Lucian Pintilie and Mircea Daneliuc in reflecting on the minority-majority relationship, the study offers a comparison with three fiction films where authors from ethnic minorities themselves take control of narratives about their own communities. By doing so, these filmmakers—Radu Gabrea, Toma Enache and Alina Șerban—shape the discourse generated about their communities. Thus, the study seeks to shed light on both the transition toward self-representation of ethnic minorities in contemporary fiction films and the differences between these moments of self-representation and former cinematic depictions of local ethnic minorities.

Keywords: minority, ethnicity, transition, Lucian Pintilie, Mircea Daneliuc, Radu Gabrea, Alina Șerban, self-representation

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The study at hand endeavors to uncover the dynamics behind the presence and representation of ethnic minorities in contemporary Romanian cinema, specifically post-1990, tracing the significant journey from the harmful discourse of communist-era films towards the emerging trends of self-representation in recent local cinema. The transition process from the exoticized gaze on national minorities in contemporary cinema is extremely complex, strongly influenced by deeply rooted cultural stereotypes in the Romanian space, the access of members from various ethnic communities to cultural production means and gaining control over their self-representation, and, finally, by the dominant authorial and cultural policies in recent years. To uncover some of the tectonic shifts that have brought about changes in recent Romanian cinema, this study is limited to fictional films released in Romania between 1990 and 2021, that are Romanian productions and address, either as a primary or secondary theme, the relationship between minority and majority in contemporary Romania, and that develop a discourse on local multiculturalism. Naturally, an extraordinary area for further investigation would involve exploring documentary or experimental films that tackle the same themes and their potential influence on the refined themes and discourses found in fictional films.

In the past 10 years, the shift from external to internal representation of minority communities has become increasingly prominent, often influenced by Romanian directors' interest in reforming outdated methods of exploiting ethnic differences on screen. One such example can be found in the connection between the short films *Written/Unwritten* (dir. Adrian Silișteanu, 2016) and *Letter of Forgiveness*

(dir. Alina Șerban, 2020). Both films prominently feature Roma protagonists and involve the actress and director Alina Șerban. Silișteanu's film, which garnered numerous international awards, isolates a credible situation affecting a Roma family compelled to confront the bureaucratic dimensions of the world around them, particularly when one of their nieces becomes a teenage mother and has to be discharged from the hospital. The director swiftly addresses highly debated public issues about the Roma community at the time of production (the lack of education, sexism, patriarchalism, the importance of tradition, administrative unpreparedness, etc.). Importantly, he manages to avoid reinforcing stereotypical images and even undermines them through the extensive use of the Romani language and by casting actors whose ethnic identity overlaps with that of the characters they portray, thereby avoiding the questionable acting stereotypes prevalent in the local stage and film. After 2016, Alina Șerban's trajectory increasingly focuses on cultural programs aimed at highlighting Roma culture in Romania, culminating in her recognition in 2024 as 'the first Roma director in Romanian theater'[1], after her 2020 film *Letter of Forgiveness* was presented by her director as 'the first film about Roma slavery from a Roma perspective.' This time, the most readily apparent dialogue was with the most renowned film on Roma slavery in the Romanian Principalities, *Aferim!* (2015) directed by Radu Jude, which is still the most well-known Romanian feature on this subject[2] due to its revisionist perspective on local history and attempt to counter the mythmaking machine of pre-1989 historical film.[3] After portraying the role of a mother who, due to family pressure, abandons her children in *Written/Unwritten*, Șerban is cast in Marta Bergman's Belgian film, *Alone at My Wedding*, and she receives numerous awards for her portrayal of a young Roma woman married online to a Belgian man, and thus exploring the cultural differences between the worlds they come from. Shortly thereafter, the actress accepts the role of a single mother immigrating from Romania to Germany, who turns to boxing to care for her children in *Gypsy Queen* (dir. Hüsseyin Tabak, 2019). Very shortly after, her directorial debut, *Letter of Forgiveness* confronts head-on the issue of Roma slavery by looking at a mother's sacrifice for her son while serving a boyar family in Moldova. The fore-mentioned article in Scena9 states triumphantly: 'Everything Alina has ever done, she has done on her own,' trying to establish a landmark for the visibility of Roma artists in the national landscape.

In essence, this study critically examines the evolving portrayal and societal engagement with ethnic minorities in Romanian cinema, highlighting a feeble but significant shift towards more authentic and inclusive representations.

Looking for the Other

One of the starting questions of this research has dealt with the visibility or invisibility of different national minorities in the analzyed feature films as compared to place particular communities hold in the demographic structure. Based on the analysis of Romanian fiction films released after 1990, it becomes evident that there are clear distinctions between the demographic presence of ethnic communities in recent years and the frequency with which stories involving characters from these communities appear in local cinema. According to official census, the largest ethnic minority in Romania is that of the Hungarians, followed by Roma, Ukrainians, and Germans. Jews, whose presence in Romanian film is greater than that of other communities, are positioned, in recent census, below Lipovan Russians, Turks, Tatars, Serbs, Slovaks, Bulgarians, Croats, and Greeks. Therefore, as stated before, to claim that there is a direct proportionality between the size of an ethnic group and its representation in local cinema is completely invalid, as there are communities that rarely appear in fiction films, while others are completely absent (such as Lipovan Russians, Ukrainians, Turks, Tatars, Armenians, Chinese, etc.). The tension between a mostly represented community and the concealment of other, results in 'significant resonances and secondary effects that shape affective intensities in

1. Ioana Pelehtăi, "Alina Șerban: Vreau o revoluție culturală!," *Scena9*, March 13, 2024. https://www.scena9.ro/article/alina-serban-actrita-roma-teatru-film.
2. *Aferim!* received more than 20 awards in international film festivals, including Berlin International Film Festival's Silver Bear for best director. The film gathered a record number of viewers during its premiere week in Romania, surpassing any Romanian film released until then.
3. Andrei Gorzo, Veronica Lazăr, *Beyond the New Romanian Cinema: Romanian Culture, History and the Films of Radu Jude* (Sibiu: Editura ULBS, 2023).

relation to ethnicity and race.'[4] And this comes from counting a much stronger presence of Roma (especially in contemporary-themed films) compared to other ethnic communities. The other working hypothesis considered was related to the geographical dispersion of ethnic communities in Romania, that could have provided the explanation for the much more frequent presence of Roma, as a defining part of the contemporary local sphere, as well as that of Hungarians or Germans in conjunction with the intra-Carpathian space. In fact, it is very interesting that apart from Roma, local film directors and screenwriters have primarily focused attention on the Jew and German communities, both seen as dispersed populations[5] and on the Hungarians, regarded as a localized ethnic group.

All these observations must also be considered within the context of Romanian auteur cinema post-1990, a trend that has been and will remain defining for a long time. This is because it is here that the most relevant mechanisms in the game of representation and self-representation come into play. The director or the director-screenwriter seem to be vital in the dynamics of reflecting the multiethnic landscape of contemporary Romania, as their own identities (as it happened for Alina Șerban, Toma Enache or, more famously, Radu Gabrea), or their own points of intersection with various ethnic communities become crucial to the decision-making process in giving voice to different minority groups.

Another interesting phenomenon that comes to attention deals with giving voice to the Jewish characters and stories in local cinema, as nor the numbers or the space distribution of this national minority function as an argument. Due to the small number of Jews in Romania (merely over 2.000 persons in the latest census) their absence from film fictions that deal with the present is quite explainable. Nevertheless, this absence is addressed through the process of remembrance and of destroying the myth of the Romanians' ethnic tolerance. And this is a point in some of Radu Gabrea's or Radu Jude's revisionist work, that the Jewish community has been reduced to the memory of its own existence due to the extreme and under-acknowledged antisemitism which have marked Romania in recent centuries. Very recently, Andrei Cohn presents a new exploration of 19th and 20th-century Romanian antisemitism in *Holy Week* (2024). This adaptation of Ion Luca Caragiale's novella *O făclie de Paște* [*An Easter Torch*] (1889) aims to dismantle the illusion of ethnic tolerance and harmonious coexistence.

In the complex equation regarding the likelihood of certain ethnic minorities receiving visibility from Romanian filmmakers, the general attitude of the majority group towards specific communities, or a so-called "hierarchy of xenophobia,"[6] undoubtedly plays a significant role. This hierarchy operates bidirectionally concerning the most persecuted local ethnic communities. Consequently, their image is more likely to be subjected to cultural and artistic production mechanisms, reaching a wider audience. The ambivalence of this endeavor lies in the potential for visibility to both provide a platform for the perpetuation and cementing of stereotypes and provoke their deconstruction and interrogation. In either of these positions, like any other type of cinema, Romanian cinema actively positions itself as "that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects,"[7] considering the fluid nature of cultural identity. The issue at hand is what type of subjects contemporary Romanian cinema proposes in relation to the nowadays cultural and ethnic mosaic, and the ways in which it distances itself from past practices and embraces highly contemporary perspectives.

Mapping the transition

The analysis of ethnic identity representation in Romanian cinema today must consider the lingering effects of past ideological practices and the ongoing efforts to redefine and broaden the scope of national identity through film. This examination reveals the dynamic interplay between cultural production and political influence, highlighting the evolving nature of identity construction in cinema. The representation of ethnic identity in contemporary Romanian cinema is deeply intertwined with the public and cultural policies prior to 1990, during which the national-communist ideology was propagated through film. This period saw the creation of a homogeneous and nearly monolithic depiction of the

4. Ipek A. Celik, *Permanent Crisis: Ethnicity in Contemporary Cinema and Media* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 17–18.

5. Panikos Panayi, *Outsiders: A History of European Minorities* (New York: Bloomsbury, Hambeldon Continuum, 1998), 3–5.

6. Felix B. Chang, Sunnie T. Rucker-Chang, eds., *Chinese Migrants in Russia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), 210.

7. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Framework. The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989): 81.

ethnic composition of the Romanian population. Grand national epics and a plethora of historical and adventure films aimed to promote and reinforce a set of identity markers favored by the political regime, as they effectively established a direct and unyielding connection between grand historical figures and the Romanian identity. In these narratives, ethnic minorities were consistently excluded or, more detrimentally, symbolically assimilated into ethnic groups with whom the protagonists were in conflict. The portrayal of Romania as a multicultural space was seldom employed, and when it was, it served primarily as a pretext to highlight and support the fundamental qualities attributed to the Romanian ethnicity: tolerance, hospitality, and pacifism.

This ideological framework was instrumental in shaping public perception and contributed to the creation of a national identity narrative that marginalized ethnic minorities. The historical films of this era, such as *Tudor* (dir. Lucian Bratu, 1963), *Michael the Brave* (dir. Sergiu Nicolaescu, 1971) or *Stephen the Great—Vaslui 1475* (dir. Mircea Drăgan, 1975), provided a platform for the state's ideological agenda, presenting an idealized vision of a unified national identity that overshadowed the diverse ethnic realities of the country. Consequently, the cinematic exclusion or negative portrayal of minorities reinforced societal biases and perpetuated a narrow understanding of what it meant to be Romanian. The attitude towards national minorities depicted in the films of this period reflects the broader Romanian public policies post-1945. The trajectory of the Hungarian ethnic group during this time is particularly illustrative: from the freedoms enjoyed until the mid-1950s and the creation of the Hungarian Autonomous Region, to the closure of Hungarian-language schools and the division of the region into three distinct counties during the Ceaușescu regime, as part of broader assimilation measures.

As Bogdan Jitea notes in his study on historical films from the communist era, Romanian filmmakers employ a series of markers associated with distinct ethnic groups. Examples from films like *Michael the Brave* and *Frații Jderi* (dir. Mircea Drăgan, 1974) illustrate the aggressive potential attributed to the Other, while also depicting strategies for his acceptance within the Romanian community. These strategies often involve characters renouncing their own community and denouncing its practices.[8]

The transition after 1990 has significantly influenced the policies of ethnic minority representation in Romanian cinema, navigating between retaliatory and demystifying attitudes towards the cultural constructs of the communist past, and the European direction questioned by many directors who either continue their careers or make their debut during this period. Some of the films directed by key figures of the transitional period such as Lucian Pintilie and Mircea Daneliuc (especially *An Unforgettable Summer* and *The Snails' Senator*) directly problematize the coexistence of multiple ethnic groups within the same space and articulate the image of a failed community project at various stages of its construction. The high number of interethnic conflicts that emerged right after the beginning of 1990, starting with the Romanian-Hungarian clashes in Târgu Mureș, that were followed by attacks against Roma in Hădăreni in 1993, become direct or implicit reference points in the endeavors of these two directors.[9] This attempt to rewrite, through film, the history of inter-ethnic relations in the Romanian space, which includes both dismantling the false impression of cultural homogeneity and questioning the stereotypical portrayal promoted by nationalist propaganda in defining Romanian identity, has been also further pursued recently by Radu Jude in his films addressing Romanian antisemitism (*I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians*, *The Dead Nation*, *Scarred Hearts*), as well as the issue of Roma slavery and implicit local racism (*Aferim*!).

A distinct but not very numerous category is that of directors and screenwriters who make their endeavor one of self-representation, building part of their career around the mission of bringing their own ethnic community to the forefront. This serves as a corrective gesture aimed at reducing the imbalance created between majority and minority through ethnic representation policies. The efforts of filmmakers such as Radu Mihăileanu, Radu Gabrea, Alina Șerban, and Toma Enache not only hold significance in the artistic world but also constitute a political act aimed at restoring a "parity of esteem." that in the long term can contribute to "diminishing intergroup tensions" and creating "more inclusive identities and narratives."[10] In the following pages, we will discuss external perspectives on

8. Bogdan Jitea, *Cinema în RSR. Conformism și disidență în industria ceaușistă de filme* (Iași: Polirom, 2021), 241–242.

9. For a more detailed view on Romanian ethnic conflicts in the 1990's, see Ben Fawkes, *Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict in the Post-communist World* (London & New York: Palgrave, 2002).

10. Mark Howard Ross, *Cultural Contestation in Ethnic Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 327.

national minorities, focusing on three components that emerge as relevant in the analyzed cinematic fictions—space, body, and voice—since it is here that we can observe how these points reiterate, question, or dismantle commonplaces in Romanian artistic representations.

The Other's Eccentricity

The initial step in this analysis involves examining the physical spaces occupied by characters described as belonging to various ethnic minorities, as well as their relationship with the places they get in contact with. A notable pattern in the geographies of fictional worlds within Romanian cinema is the frequent positioning of these characters on the periphery, at a significant distance from what is defined or understood as the center. For instance, in the seminal project *An Unforgettable Summer* (1994), director Lucian Pintilie, drawing from the second volume of Petru Dumitriu's novel, *Family Chronicle*, reconstructs a borderland near Bulgaria, far from Bucharest, the Romanian capital after the First World War and the end of the unification process. This is a place where authority manifests in the absence of rules, where everything is possible, permissible, and justified by immediate interests. The space is barren and empty, amplifying the sense of vulnerability felt by the main character, Marie-Thérèse Von Debretsy. The only object she brings from the salons she previously frequented is a Venetian mirror, which stands in stark contrast to the mudbrick dwellings, much like Captain Petre Dumitriu's family contrasts with the Dobrogea's landscape.

Unlike the newcomers, the residents along the Danube are depicted as a natural extension of the frontier space, always caught between worlds and never truly integrated into any of the major communities with which they interact. Thus, by these spatial dynamics, Pintilie highlights broader themes of marginalization and the ambiguous status of ethnic minorities. By situating these characters on the periphery, the filmmaker not only underscores their physical and social isolation but also critique the power structures that maintain these divisions that lead to the precarious position of ethnic minorities and emphasize their struggles for visibility and acceptance within the dominant cultural narrative. In addition to being caught between Romanians who mistake them for komitadjis threatening the borders of the new Romania and the Bulgarian resistance movement, Bulgarian and Turkish peasants fall victim to violence from all sides. Their status as a minority within the new ethnic architecture of interwar Romania, on a fluid border, resonates only with that of the film's protagonist, who is also isolated due to her ethnic identity. Marie tries to offer them respect and humanity in a context where anyone different is treated as an enemy, but she fails in the face of Romanian military authority. Pintilie's perspective on this failure is not necessarily forgiving, as his main character is attacked by the wives of the men she helped ease towards the tragic fate she was aware of. Thus, in the final scene, it is not the aggressor who is condemned, but rather the one who did not heroically resist ethnic aggression. The eccentricity of minority characters or communities is an image Pintilie revisits in his films after 1990, where protagonists leaving the urban area often encounter Roma people, thus marking their exit from the bourgeois world they typically inhabit and entry into the real world. For Pintilie, however, this portrayal is not tied to the transition period, but rather a depiction of reality that he also employed in his communist-era films, such as *Sunday at Six* (1966) or *Carnival Scenes* (1981).

Mircea Daneliuc employs a similar spatial logic in constructing the multicultural village, which shares characteristics with Hădăreni, in *The Snails' Senator* (1995). Senator Vârtosu, himself originating "from the center," occupies the former villa of Nicolae Ceaușescu, now state property allocated to members of post-communist institutions. For Daneliuc, the villa serves as the outpost of the new political authority, given its considerable distance from the village where interethnic conflicts are set to occur, and its surrounding fences, that make it inaccessible to those not welcomed into the senator's select circle. In the village and on the hills where the community collects snails for Vârtosu and the French journalists he aims to impress, Daneliuc delineates distinct spaces for Roma, Romanians, and Hungarians, with the latter two groups allied against the former. Moreover, he creates a direct relationship between the house and barn where the Roma are attacked and the one where the grieving mother mourns her son, who was killed during the altercation with the Roma. By paralleling these two places, which ultimately merge into a single unified space through images captured through windows and doors during the extremely violent attack, the director effectively portrays interethnic relations steeped in racism, hatred, and the erosion of norms and authority. This spatial analysis highlights how Daneliuc's film critically engages with themes of marginalization and interethnic conflict, using the physical distance and separation of spaces to underscore social and racial divides. The villa's inaccessibility symbolizes the exclusionary practices of the new political elite, while the distinct and segregated village spaces

reflect broader societal fractures.

The discourse on the relationship between the center and the periphery in transitional films that address the issue of multiculturalism can also be viewed as a response to the discourse on the primitivism of Eastern Europe, tested by the mechanisms of Europeanization. This phenomenon has often been discussed as a strategy employed by filmmakers from the Balkans and Eastern Europe to capture Western audiences' attention by presenting them with the comfortable image, they hold about this part of Europe,[11] and by highlighting "poverty and profound social problems" as part of the self-colonizing attempt.[12] Even when not situated in a geographically defined periphery, characters associated with ethnic minorities are frequently placed in economically or socially marginalized spaces. Lucian Pintilie illustrates this in a brief scene from *Terminus Paradis* (1998), where the protagonists purchase their engagement rings from a Roma vendor at an amusement park. Similarly, actor-director Horațiu Mălăele creates an almost fantastical setting in Bucharest for the fortune teller's caravan, which foreshadows the death of the protagonist and his friends in *Funeralii fericite* (2013). The setting includes an open-air fire, a secluded area arranged around a caravan, where men play cards and guitars, and women tell fortunes. Mălăele creates a space that exists outside the world, which ceases to exist the following day, depicting a form of contemporary nomadism that is almost entirely absent from Romanian fictional cinema. All the above examples rightly prove Dina Iordanova's observation that "exploring the Roma serves as a means of self-representation,"[13] a metaphor for—in this case—Romania's marginality in the European context it faces post-1989.

The Other's Body and Voice

If many films from before the Romanian New Wave adhered to stereotypical and exoticized portrayals of ethnic minority communities, the discourse has significantly evolved in recent years. This shift is attributed to the increasing presence of these communities in the local cultural and political arenas, as well as the popularization of corrective measures or attitudes concerning the representational strategies employed by Romanian directors. The most readily identifiable are the sexualized perspectives on the bodies of Roma men and women, frequently depicted as involved in seductive games. This tendency not only follows the direction of Eastern European and Balkan cinema but also aligns with Western European trends, significantly contributing to the bohemian image associated with the Roma community. As Ian Hancock notes, the exoticization of non-white women's bodies was a sustained cultural practice within colonial empires, particularly through the production and public or private distribution of nudes (whether in paintings, photographs, or, later, films).[14] Furthermore, as Radu Jude hints in *Aferim!*, this practice, given the strongly patriarchal structure of the societies that created it, underscores the differential (including legal) treatment of non-punishable relationships between a white man and a non-white woman versus the criminalized ones between a non-white man and a white woman.

Like in many other European cultures, Romanian artist frequently eroticize the bodies of ethnically or racially different individuals. For example, in the local painting of the 19th and early 20th centuries, there are numerous instances where portraits of Roma women are depicted in ways that amplify the sensuality of the models. Notable examples include *Țiganca din Ghergani* and *Ursăreasa din Bolduri* by Nicolae Grigorescu, as well as *Țigăncușa cu basma roșie* by Octav Băncilă. Grigorescu combines the inviting attitude of the young Roma woman through her almost frontal body position and gaze that meets that of the viewer, with an open shirt that accentuates her breasts—an approach he does not use when portraying Romanian women, regardless of their social status or professional background. In contrast to Grigorescu, the artistic career and political activity of Băncilă do not confirm a tendency to exploit this type of imagery.

Romanian cinema, both before and after 1990, is not devoid of highly sexualized images of Roma

11. See Dina Iordanova, "Balkan Film Representations since 1989: the quest for admissibility," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 18, no. 2 (1998): 262–280.

12. Florin Poenaru, 'Noul val din perspectivă colonială' în Andrei Gorzo, Andrei State, *Politicile filmului. Contribuții la interpretarea cinemaului românesc contemporan,* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Tact, 2014), 166.

13. Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of the Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 215.

14. Ian Hancock, "The 'Gypsy' Stereotype and the Sexualization of Romani Women," in *„Gypsies" in European Literature and Culture*, eds. Valentina Glajar, Domnica Rădulescu (London & New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 184–186.

women, who are thus associated with a form of sexual freedom that contrasts with the conservatism of the majority. Possibly the most eroticized portrayal of a Romani woman in post-communist Romanian cinema belongs to director Mircea Mureșan. In the mid-1960s, Mureșan had already provided Romanian audiences with one of the most sensationalist scenes in communist cinema up to that point (the infamous rape scene in *Răscoala*, 1965). He returned in 1990 to exploit nudity and popular comedy, genres he had initially embraced with films like *Miss Litoral* (1991) followed by the over-orientalized *Sexy Harem la Ada Kaleh* (2001). In his last film, *Vrăjitoarea Azucena – Îngerul de abanos*, Mureșan constructs the premise of an erotic thriller in which a border guard enters a destructive relationship with a young Romani woman. He imbues her with an almost mystical presence in a world where the Romani are otherwise depicted solely through the lenses of poverty and criminality.

To systematize the theories that explain the fascination with alterity, Stuart Hall gathers under the title *The Spectacle of the Other* four distinct approaches. The first two are drawn from linguistics and revolve around the essential connection between difference and meaning ("without difference meaning could not exist") and the dialogic relationship between the two ("we can only construct meaning through the dialogue with the Other"). The latter two are drawn from anthropology ("the marking of 'difference' is thus the basis of that symbolic order which we call culture") and psychoanalysis ("the Other is fundamental to the constitution of the self, to us as subjects, and to sexual identity").[15]

All the directions described by Hall revolve around the attraction to the Other, coupled with the inherent fear of the danger it poses to our own efforts to position ourselves in the world, to define ourselves, and to dominate. This can be seen, for example, in the altercation that opens Lucian Pintilie's *An Unforgettable Summer*, which takes place in the brothel across from the elegant house of the Voroveanu family, precisely on the night of a sumptuous reception. The attempt to close the establishment is defiantly resisted by the young Erzsi, whose sense of moral ownership of the space is argued through its connection to the girls' occupation. Her words, half in Romanian, half in Hungarian, dominate—through the chosen staging—the extension of Romanian authority. While attempts are made to temporarily close the brothel, the frantic cries of the women instigated by Erzsi ("We won't leave from here!") are heard, aiming to be hidden from the judgmental eyes of the local Romanian aristocracy. Initially, the woman's protest is treated with superiority by the soldiers, who rebuke her with one of the most severe ethnic slurs ['boanghina dracului']. However, from the moment the women use their bodies to undermine the self-image of the men at the top of the power structures, the attack on them becomes brutal, launching the film's main themes. ["That's Erzsi's ass. Get it down," commands the general, interrupting the officers' lustful gazes.] In Pintilie's construction, the attack in response to the uninhibited superiority of the young Hungarian woman becomes an act of interethnic violence, manifested both physically and verbally. "Well, Béla Cur, eh? Can you believe it? Why aren't you...? So, if we have a nice ass, we defy the Romanian army? Isn't that why we made Greater Romania? So, you could mock it?" Moreover, as Andrei Gorzo also notes, what happens to Erzsi is linked to the attitude towards the film's protagonist, Marie-Thérèse, and to the Romanian-Hungarian military confrontations of the early 20th century.[16]

The ethnic body is also a political body in Mircea Daneliuc's *The Snails' Senator* though not in the sense of sexual exploitation (the director constructs this aspect more along class lines than ethnic ones). Instead, it is through the defiance of the symbolic order maintained by the Romanian majority. This is exemplified by Cireșica, who is frequently chastised for her relationship with a Romani man and her flirtatious attitude with other men. During the snail gathering, a young Romani man tries to flirt with her, and her response is playful rather than rejecting ["What's wrong with you, have you gone crazy? The children are watching"]. Furthermore, in the next scene, Cireșica is attacked by her own brother due to the thefts committed by "her Gypsies." The earlier playful interaction takes a grave turn when two Romani men attempt to rape her, an incident that exacerbates interethnic tensions. Thus, in Daneliuc's film, the violent attack on the only local character open to relationships with the Romani community becomes the climax of the territorial and economic conflict of the post-1990 era. Notably, the discussion about the rape between the senator and his secretary does not focus on the victim but on the alleged indifference of the Romani people towards the land during the reappropriation process. [Vârtosu: How do they rape right in front of you? / Secretary: They do whatever they want, senator.

15. see Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997), 223–290.

16. Andrei Gorzo, *O vară de neuitat. Un studiu critic* (Bucharest: LiterNet, 2017), 8.

They're the masters here. Look at the state of their houses... look at the land. They scream for land, take it from the Romanians, and leave it fallow. You say something, they pull a knife.]

The body is the site of violence and abuse in *Aferim!*, the film with which Radu Jude significantly shaped the discourse on the historical roots of Romanian racism and xenophobia. Guilty of the most serious violation of the symbolic boundaries between the boyar authority and their slaves, the Roma character Carfin is publicly emasculated by boyar Cândescu for engaging in sexual relations with his wife. The boyar's violent act,[17] visually intensified by the extended shot of the naked body writhing in pain and the tandem cries of both the slave and his wife, serves as the ultimate demonstration of the infamous property rights over the lives of Roma people in the Romanian Principalities, which both the aristocracy and the clergy exploited. At least two earlier scenes highlight the connection between the bodies of Roma slaves and local authorities: the sale of the child slave Țintiric at the market and the encounter with Zambila, a woman whom the innkeeper offers to customers for sexual services. In the first scene, Jude traces the entire process of the sale of slaves, from the fear of ending up with a violent master, to the shame of being scrutinized and treated like objects, to being weighed, physically inspected, and bargained over. A similar objectification occurs with Zambila, whose body is also subject to transaction and assessment in plain view. Just as with Carfin, her body feeds the sexual fantasies of the Romanian men, yet none have the freedom to refuse the purchase. Even the fugitive slave admits to the zapciu that, even if he had wanted to, he could not have refused his mistress' sexual advances. One of the most visible transformations in the portrayal of national minorities in contemporary Romanian cinema is the freedom to use the language of each community, not as a marker of insurmountable boundaries between communities, but to highlight the multilingual dimension of the Romanian multicultural landscape.

In Romanian cinema of the 1990s, lines spoken in Romani, Hungarian, German, or Yiddish were very rare. The simplest explanation for this is that characters belonging to national minority communities almost never appeared in scenes without at least one Romanian with whom they interacted, and who, explicitly or implicitly, through their belonging to the majority community, imposed the use of the Romanian language[18]. The most significant proposal in this regard from the early 2000s came from Radu Gabrea, whose films reflecting the history of the German community in Transylvania extensively used the German language. More recently, important contributions have come from directors such as Florin Șerban and Ana Lungu, who gave space to the Hungarian language in *Box* (2015) and *A Prince and Half* (2018), respectively, as well as from Adrian Silișteanu and Alina Șerban in *Written/Unwritten* and *Letter of Forgiveness*.

Moments of self-representation

A new direction in the representation of ethnic minorities in contemporary Romanian cinema is marked by films focused on self-representation, where the narratives are controlled by members of the communities being portrayed. Although the number of such films remains limited, particularly in the realm of fiction, three notable examples open new perspectives on the politics of minority representation in Romania. The first significant figure in this regard, post-1990, is Radu Gabrea. After the fall of communism, Gabrea dedicated much of his work to addressing the fragile and violently oppressed ethnic minorities in Romania over the past century. Alongside his films and documentaries about the Jewish community in Romania (*Goldfaden's Legacy*—2004, *Itzik Manger*—2005, *Gruber's Journey*—2008, *Jews for Sale*—2012), an important portion of his work is focused on the Transylvanian Saxons and Germans (*The Beheaded Rooster*—2007, *Red Gloves*—2010, *A Love Story, Lindenfeld*—2014), with two of these films being adaptations of the autobiographical novels by the Saxon writer Eginald Schlattner. Returning to Romania after his self-imposed exile in Germany, Gabrea lamented the failure of the multicultural project in post-Revolution Romania, attributing this failure to the majority's fear of losing its own identity. As he explained: "This belief led me to focus on wounded

17. For an in-depth analysis of the systemic violence in *Aferim!* see Andrei Gorzo and Veronica Lazăr, "*Aferim!*—ceva nou în cinemaul românesc" in *Politicile filmului. Contribuții la interpretarea cinemaului românesc contemporan*, eds. Andrei Gorzo and Andrei State (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Tact, 2014), 301–311.

18. For very interesting research on how the words used in *Aferim!* to reflect the socio-linguistic identity or Roma people disclose the purpose and the targeted audience of the film, see Crina Neacșu, "Celălalt în Aferim! al lui Radu Jude: dimensiunea lingvistică a rasismului", *Transilvania*, no. 7 (2023): 10–16.

identities in my films, whether they are communal or individual."[19]

In *The Beheaded Rooster*, director Radu Gabrea portrays the fall from grace of a multicultural community, where the Saxons are torn apart by their varying attitudes—sympathy, antipathy, or indifference—towards Nazi policies. The coming-of-age of an entire generation is forced through the anti-Semitic policies of World War II, particularly symbolized by the traditional *exitus* being corrupted by political pressures. However, in *The Red Gloves*, Gabrea offers a more complex narrative on identity and the destruction of the Saxon community during the early years of communism. The protagonist, Felix Goldschmidt, undergoes a transformation, as repeated physical and psychological abuses in the communist prisons of the 1950s strip him of his ethnic identity, replacing it with a political one. In one striking moment, at the end of his hellish journey, when a prison guard asks, "Wait a minute, what are you? Saxon or Jew?"; Felix responds, "I am a communist!" Set in the late 1950s, the film highlights the deportation of Transylvanian Saxons to Soviet labor camps, the protests and resistance movements among Saxon youth against the Soviet communists, their subsequent imprisonment, and the forced betrayals of their peers. Some of the most intense moments in the film are the repeated encounters between Felix and Major Blau, the man responsible for severing Felix's ties to his community and erasing his ethnic identity. Blau is the only character in the prison with whom Felix converses in German, discussing literature, politics, and catharsis. Here, language becomes a tool of closeness as German is the language of Felix's family, his Saxon community, and his personal artistic creation. However, even his artistic output succumbs to the tragic fate of the young writer, reduced to a love poem for the Communist Party, forcefully translated into Romanian in front of his torturers.

Gabrea emphasizes the linguistic dimension in the construction of Felix's character. German is the language of his most intimate relationships, his familial ties, and his creative endeavors. Gabrea incorporates elements of Felix's "Germanness" throughout the film—he dreams of Leonore, a gothic ballad by Gottfried August Bürger, and hums Lili Marlene. Yet, each time Felix tries to assert his linguistic identity, it is suppressed by the prison interrogators and guards. At one point, an interrogator demands, "Speak in Romanian! We are in the Romanian People's Republic!" Romanian thus becomes the language of authority, and even Major Blau switches to Romanian when trying to interrupt one of Felix's crises, triggered by the slow realization of the "death by installments" suffered by the Saxon community in Romania. This use of language not only symbolizes the erasure of ethnic identity but also reflects the broader political and cultural suppression experienced by minority groups under the early communist regime. Gabrea's depiction of Felix's identity shift from ethnic to political highlights the profound impact of historical forces on individual and communal identities, marking *Red Gloves* as a powerful exploration of the destruction of the Saxon community and the coercive power of the state.

In *I'm Not Famous, But I'm Aromanian*, director Toma Enache brings to light a community largely absent from Romanian cinematic fiction—the Aromanians. Enache's approach is more expository than restorative or polemical, situating the narrative in the present time while introducing a fantastical element tied to the ethnogenesis of the Aromanian people. The protagonist, Toni Caramușat, embarks on a journey aimed at uncovering the great mystery of this dispersed community, represented by the character Armânamea. The name of the female protagonist, whose allure is timeless, symbolizes the entire Aromanian community, spread across the world, from the Balkans to Hollywood. Armânamea carries the symbol of this scattered group—a map of the territories inhabited by Aromanians—emphasizing their dispersed existence. Language plays a crucial role here, serving as a fundamental marker of unity for this globally dispersed group, one with a distinct position within Romania's cultural mosaic. No matter where Toni travels, he encounters Aromanians ready to assist him in his quest to become "famous and wealthy." To underscore the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the Aromanian community, the director incorporates brief ethnographic scenes. However, these scenes tend to exoticize the community rather than deepen an understanding of its complexities. In contrast to Gabrea, Enache seems to be more anchored in an extension of the "red boots multiculturalism," (term coined by Audrey Kobayashi),[20] through the celebratory tone he imparts to his film and the commercial form he employs. Enache's film, by focusing on language and community symbols, emphasizes the persistence of Aromanian identity across different geographies, while subtly contributing to discussions about the representation of minority groups in Romanian cinema.

19. Călin Stănculescu, *Radu Gabrea: biografia unei opere* (Bucharest: NOI Media Print, 2012), 136.
20. For a larger debate on this concept, see Gerd Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic and Religious Identities* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 121–134.

The efforts of artists who create narratives about their own ethnic communities and, moreover, contribute to the multilingual and polyphonic landscape using language are essential in the recognition of different communities. Coming back to the opening of this article, the release of the short film *Letter of Forgiveness*, directed by Alina Șerban, marks an important moment for the representation of minorities in Romanian cinema. This is the first fictional film directed by a Roma woman in Romania and presents, in a simple yet powerful way, a complex and difficult story drawn from the reality of Roma slavery in the Romanian Principalities in the mid-19th century. The film follows Maria, a servant in the Cantacuzino-Pașcanu household, as she attempts to secure her son Dincă's freedom by offering her own "letter of forgiveness" in exchange. Although the setting of the aristocratic house initially appears much less grim than that depicted by Radu Jude in *Aferim*!, with the action unfolding almost entirely inside the house during a festive moment, Șerban establishes the condition of the main characters in the opening scenes. The first scene connects the Roma with labor, as the kitchen—where we first see Maria—and other spaces like the laundry and stables are almost exclusively populated by Roma servants. The second one shows the relationship between the servants and authority, when Grigore Al. Ghica, the ruler of Moldavia, arrives. The servants line the hallway leading to the entrance, heads bowed, avoiding eye contact with the man as he enters and moves through the rooms.

Touching the masters, even with a glance, seems to be part of the series of forbidden transgressions for the subjugated minority. This scene is further developed by Maria's attempts to speak with the ruler of Moldavia, carefully orchestrated by the director, who also plays the lead role. In her first attempt, the woman's words fade quickly, while her final intervention is marked by repeated utterances of "please" and "forgiveness," betraying the fear that accompanies her transgression. More than the sacrificial figure of the Roma mother, attention is drawn to the liminal status of her son, Dincă, a result of another boundary-crossing act—he is the illegitimate son of the high-ranking official Dumitrache Cantacuzino. Like the real-life story that inspired the film, the young man is a prisoner of Profira, Dumitrache's wife, whose attitude toward him reflects the ambiguities of the period leading up to the emancipation of the Roma, doubled by her own paradoxical behavior. Though at one point, Profira raises the boy almost as an aristocrat's child (he travels with her to France, where he studies French and political science, and learns to read and write), she ultimately denies him the freedom to control his own destiny. His emancipation is abruptly halted when the woman decides that he cannot be more than a mere cook. The dialogue between Ghica and Profira reveals Profira's authoritarian reflexes, closely tied to her access to resources and her position in managing them. ["Ghica: This slave has sucked from the milk of civilization! / Profira: That milk you're talking about, I gave it to him"]. Both lines frame the possibility of emancipation and the attainment of equal rights for isolated or exploited minorities as something managed exclusively from the outside, by leaders representing the majority.

This exchange underscores the notion that the fate and progress of marginalized groups, like the enslaved Roma in this context, are portrayed as being controlled and dictated by the dominant class. Profira's response reflects a possessiveness over the "civilizing" process, as if the opportunity for education and cultural exposure is something she grants at her discretion, rather than a fundamental right. Similarly, Ghica's comment suggests that any advancement made by the enslaved is not inherent but rather a result of external intervention, reinforcing the power imbalance between the majority and the minority. In this light, the dialogue emphasizes a paternalistic view of emancipation—one in which the ruling class retains control over both the resources and the narrative of progress, leaving little room for the agency of the oppressed. The struggle for equality is thus framed not as an inherent right but as something that can only be bestowed by those in power.

Conclusions

The three examples mentioned above offer a different perspective on the stakes and outcomes of representing national minorities in contemporary Romanian cinema. All three are the result of processes in which members of the represented communities played a major role (as authors) in the production process. These moments complete the picture of multiculturalism portrayed in post-1989 Romanian cinema, which was initially marked by indifference toward ethnic communities or, worse, by the exoticization or denigration of their members. After 2010, this picture has been enriched by critical and revisionist perspectives. An element not explored in-depth in this study, but whose importance cannot be denied, is the contribution of Hungarian, Roma, and German actors, among others, who have been involved in recent film productions and have thus added depth to the characters they portrayed.

Although unequal in their aims and complexity, the three films discussed in the second part of this

article serve as models for the paths toward self-representation that members of national minorities can take to gain control over shaping their own place in Romania's multicultural landscape. Two of the examples (films by Radu Gabrea and Alina Șerban) approach ethnic communities without exoticizing them, instead highlighting the markers necessary for understanding their position within the historical contexts depicted. Toma Enache's film, while following a more commercial formula to spotlight the Aromanian community, takes advantage of their marked absence from the Romanian cinematic landscape. At the conclusion of their 2014 study on *Aferim!*, Gorzo and Lazăr questioned whether Romanian audiences and cinema would be ready for "a fantasy of racial revenge," akin to Django Unchained for American audiences. What is clear, however, is that this has not yet materialized—neither through the work of Romanian directors nor through the voices of ethnic and racial minorities that have been victims of racism and xenophobia throughout local history.

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