

“A STAR IS BORN”: GENDER, SOFT POWER AND BIOPICS IN COLD-WAR ROMANIAN CINEMA (*DARCLÉE*, 1961)

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ABSTRACT. *“A Star Is Born”: Gender, Soft Power and Biopics in Cold-War Romanian Cinema (Darclée, 1961)* Obsessively interested in life writing from the periods of 20th-century dictatorships, Romanian post-communist culture has been dominated, with very few exceptions, by male authors. However, shyly, yet steadily, in this large-scale attempt to retrace and understand the traumatic past, there has been an opening in recent years towards women authors. Although few by comparison, these personal narratives are memorable. In terms of biographical novels and biopics, the most striking feature is the absence of such female representations. Departing from this context of gender oblivion and inequality, and considering the specificities of the life writing genre and its filmic representations, the current paper focuses on *Darclée* (Mihai Iacob, 1961), one of the very few biopics in Romanian cinema that revolves around a famous woman. Aside from being a rare, female-centered exception among Romanian biopics, the film is also noteworthy for its politicized content and therefore interesting to discuss in relation to the political context, the totalitarian regime present at the time in Romania and its cultural discourse. Despite dealing with a turn-of-the-century figure of aristocratic and bourgeois origins, the film (with the wife of a communist leader in the leading role) is politically appropriated by the communist regime and announces National Communism in Romanian culture. The analysis will thus consider the political discourse employed in *Darclée*, with its unexpected nationalist emphasis, as well as the film's strategies of representation as it covers, in a rare occasion, a female figure.

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REZUMAT. *„S-a născut o stea”: Gen, Soft Power și film biografic în cinematografia română a Războiului Rece (Darclée, 1961)* Interesul pentru genul biografic și autobiografic, aproape excesiv în privința dictaturilor din secolul XX dar nu numai, a caracterizat în mod particular cultura românească post-comunistă. Și acest gen, ca și altele, a fost însă pentru multă vreme dominat de autori și protagoniști masculini, cu prea puține excepții. Mai recent, oarecum timid dar constant și convingător, au apărut în publicațiile memorialistice și diaristice vocile feminine, completând un efort concertat de a recupera un trecut traumatic. Cu toate că numeric aceste publicații feminine sunt mai puține, ele sunt contribuții memorabile. În privința romanelor biografice și filmelor din aceeași categorie, cea mai izbitoare caracteristică este absența reprezentărilor și protagonismelor feminine. Textul de față pornește de la acest context al inegalității de gen și marginalizării figurilor femine. Articolul analizează, în contextul specificității genului biografic și autobiografic, unul dintre puținele filme biografice din cinematografia română care au ca protagonistă o femeie celebră. Pe lângă raritatea sa ca film biografic centrat pe o figură feminină, *Darclée* (regia Mihai Iacob, 1961) este notabil și pentru elementele de politizare, în contextul politic al momentului (regimul totalitar) și discursul cultural al vremii. Cu toate că protagonista era o figură din *Belle Époque* cu origini aristocratice și burgheze, filmul este apropiat politic de regimul comunist, de la distribuție (soția unui lider comunist în rolul principal) la anunțarea național-comunismului în cultura română. Textul analizează discursul politic așa cum se întrevește în film, cu accente naționaliste neașteptate, precum și strategiile filmului de a reprezenta, într-o ocazie rară, o figură feminină de „patrimoniu”.

Cuvinte-cheie: *gen autobiografic, biografie, probleme de gen, cinematografie, filme biografice, Războiul Rece, film muzical*

1. Introduction

Life writing in Romanian culture was nearly extinguished with the imposition of Communist rule after 1947. From then until 1990, a national system of total control and strict censorship, with some variations as the party line changed over time, directed the production of all forms of creative expression. Life writing was considered especially dangerous given its inherent focus on individual

experience, thus biographies, memoirs, diaries, and biopics were almost entirely banished unless they served the regime's political education agenda².

Romanian cinema after 1947 developed in tandem with the new regime. The regime grasped the fact that cinema had the potential to be a very efficient medium for propaganda through entertainment. Also, cinema viewers required less education than did readers of literature. Romanian cinema offered the regime Communist soft power, and biopics became one form of life writing that could provide efficient political education. The historical biopics that dominated the 1960s-1970s cinema stand out, being most illustrative for Ceaușescu's National Communism.

The regime's offerings in this genre combined myth and legend that aimed to build loyalty to Communist Romania and reinforce national identity. Historians participated in reconstructing these historical biographies according to the political instructions (see, for instance, the work of mainstream Romanian historians of the time Constantin Daicoviciu, Ștefan Pascu, and others). Remarkably, the regime also approved a biopic that neither featured the usual male national heroes nor promoted Communist myths. This was *Darclée* (Mihai Iacob, 1961), a film that focused on a Romanian opera singer who earned worldwide fame at the turn of the nineteenth century. While *Darclée* was not free of political undertones, it also announced a change of direction in propaganda. Romania cinema continued to function as a major soft power tool for propaganda, but it did so while at the same time it insisted on distancing Bucharest from Moscow and focusing on Romanian national identity, pride, and heroic Romanian figures. *Darclée* (1961) is forgotten today³, but it deserves attention because it contributed to the regime's strategy after 1960 of reinforcing national identity and pride by focusing on the lives of famous Romanian figures. The film is also noteworthy because it is the first Romanian biopic of a woman, followed by just one more prior to the revolution of 1989, *Ecaterina Teodoroiu* (1978), a much-masculinized figure of a war heroine⁴.

² They would be reassessed and promoted in the post-Communist decades, the Romanian culture having been since overwhelmed with life writing documents, although not with so many biopics as expected. Following the most recent ones, focused on Romanian royalty, we can however anticipate a re-ignition in this area as well.

³ Perhaps a nuance is necessary here: although the film has not been promoted as much as the historical epics or light comedies made during the 1960s-1970s, the protagonist and her cultural legacy have not been forgotten. An annual international opera competition organized in Romania (Brăila) was named after her and a silver coin was issued in her honor by the Romanian National Bank in 2010.

⁴ For an analysis on this film see Grancea & Grădinaru 2020, also revealing a recent interest in the Romanian women biopics.

2. Cultural Policies, “Soft Power” and Cold-War Romanian Cinema.

Totalitarian regimes have always used extensive propaganda to project the desired “image” of the party and its doctrines, thereby bolstering the regime’s legitimacy and popularity. Romania after 1947 was no exception. The Romanian communist regime organized the cinema system from the very beginning as a political propaganda apparatus. It controlled everything, from funding to casting, also including censorship editing. The cinema sector of the centralized cultural production system began “in an extremely modest manner (in 1949, only one film, [...] in the following years two films per year; only in 1960 we reached ten films per year” (Oproiu 11, my translation⁵). During Ceaușescu’s National Communism era (the 1960s-1989), the regime’s efforts reached a propaganda climax with a series of historical narratives, most of them male biopics focusing on politically correct representations of selected venerated ancestors.

Since propaganda was aimed at both the Romanian society and the West, party leaders invested considerable financial and human resources in the so-called “cinema sector”. Alert to the danger of trying to impose an industrial approach to cultural production in cinema, the regime sought to ensure favorable impact on cinema audiences. Given the regime’s goal of creating the New Man (*Homo Novus*, *Homo Sovieticus*) in the service of the state, influencing audiences’ mentalities became a major criterion for assessing the cinema sector and culture generally.

The institutions related to culture were reorganized, culture was assigned a ministry solely for itself, including specialized committees for theatre, music, arts, cinema, book publishing, and distribution etc. (A. Vasile 116) More attention was paid to the institutional and financial support for culture, with ‘massive investments in education and culture’ (117), including, in time, besides patriotic education, aesthetic formation (117). The cinema was part of this program, especially addressing the rural areas – cine clubs, cinemas, film festivals, as the regime acknowledged that ‘the film represents an ideological front for any era’ (Popescu-Gopo, *apud* Popescu 121). By the early 1960s, we witness an ‘intensification of the campaign of cultivating the people and the diversification of the types of manifestation’ (A. Vasile 116).

The regime controlled the cinema sector by means of institutions such as ROMFILM (1949) and the Committee for Cinematography (1950), that aimed to monitor the degree of success in implementing cinema-related ‘ideological work’ and ‘activity.’ This meant constant organization and reorganization, which became the norm in the Romanian communist regime’s ‘search for the best

⁵ Unless otherwise stated, the translation from Romanian or French of the paragraphs employed as quotations belonged to the author of this paper.

institutional formula' (Duță 39). Sometimes the changes were merely formal, sometimes they mirrored party political shifts, and sometimes they followed the fall into disgrace or the rise to favor of certain members of the political elite.

In a country in which achieving literacy for the majority of the population was still on the agenda at the end of the 1940s, an attractive visual medium such as cinema entertainment was definitely an important soft power tool for political propaganda.

'Addressing films as vehicles and carriers of politics, we can see more clearly how concepts of the nation, the state, *women*, the collective self, and the other are constantly reinforced through the film narratives circulating within a society, narratives that construct a cohesive worldview that further reinforces the idea of a national community and of a certain national common sense. This exposes films as far from being politically neutral [emphasis added]' (Andreescu 24)

At its beginnings, the film sector focused 'openly, [...] as a necessity, imperatively' on propaganda (Oproiu 11). After this first stage, a second phase, a regime-ordered Thaw occurred, and, later, an explosion of epic cinema took place in the 1960s with Ceaușescu's turn towards National Communism.

The first phase was that of Sovietization. The content of cultural propaganda had to follow the Soviet model, because Romania was a country under military occupation until 1958 and it was subject to Sovietization at all levels⁶. Cultural production, including cinema, experienced 'informal colonization' (Fătu-Tutoveanu, "Soviet cultural"); continual monitoring of creative expression took place by agents of the USSR in local institutions and leadership.

'The Soviet materials were strengthened by their local carbon-copy imitations – articles or books copying the ideas and wooden language of the 'metropolitan' center ... At the cultural level, the massive and well-organized mechanism and infrastructure of implementing (at a large scale) the Soviet 'blueprint' or model justifies the association between this complex process of domination (in its mechanisms of acquiring and generalizing control over culture and all other social areas) and a process of specific cultural (informal) colonization.' (Fătu-Tutoveanu, "Soviet cultural" 88, 91)

⁶ 'As an actual representative of the Soviet Union in Romania in implementing Zhdanov's cultural model, Leonte Răutu made, in the late 1940s, numerous trips to the Soviet Union or 'pilgrimages to the Mecca of international Stalinism' (Tismăneanu and Vasile 41). Răutu himself declared before his death in the early 1990s that 'Communist Romania was entirely built following the Soviet model' (qtd. in Tismăneanu and Vasile 37).

Identity molding, however, was achieved only on the surface, as testified to by post-Communist documents (and especially life writing accounts). In Romania, as in Poland, the Western model was far more influential than the regime wished, and Sovietization was a simulacrum that led to a schizoid, Orwellian type of existence.

In the 1960s, a shift towards distancing from the Stalinist cultural paradigm began to be perceived as necessary even from within the apparatus. The latter acknowledged that before the Thaw, the situation had been dramatic, as an episode from an official plenary meeting from 1953 quoted by Cristian Vasile (2011) explicitly emphasizes:

‘M. Novicov expressed his opinion in favor of revising the censorship filter: ‘I think the exigency, sometimes exaggerated, needs revision. ... *We reached a situation in cinematography in which practically, in a great proportion, the scripts are written there [at the Committee for Cinematography.]* How can we actually attract the writer when he doesn’t have the satisfaction of his work? The writer must be helped to finish the script himself. Since the Committee for Cinematography substitutes himself and does this itself [the rewriting of the script] ..., this cannot attract the writer’ (239).⁷

Paradoxically, this ‘relaxation’ of propaganda was also indicated by the leaders of the Soviet Union, so it was not as genuine as it may appear. However, an actual distancing from the Soviet propaganda and cultural policies, and even a questioning of the actions of the USSR, took place later in the 1960s. The changes underway are illustrated by the experience of Paul Cornea. He left a valuable account on how the system worked and about the pressures regarding his appointment to the cinema sector (C. Vasile 42-43). Cornea was in charge, between 1958 and 1965, of the film studio (named *Studioul București/Bucharest Studio* at the time), precisely the period relevant for our analysis. His life writing account, structured as a dialogue with D. Cristea-Enache, explicitly focused on clarifying the ‘truth’: *Ce a fost, cum a fost* [approx. translation *Things as they were*]. The book discusses both the cultural Sovietization and the

⁷‘La ședința de prelucrare a Hotărârilor Plenarei din august 1953 cu oamenii de creație, ținută la Secția de Literatură și Artă probabil în septembrie 1953, M. Novicov s-a exprimat în favoarea relaxării filtrului cenzorial: “Cred că trebuie revizuită și exigența, cateodată exagerată. Cred că este foarte pozitiv [sic!] faptul că Comitetul pentru Artă a lărgit chingile în artă; și în domeniul cinematografeii trebuie să slăbim chingile exigenței. Noi am ajuns la cinematografie că, practic [subl. n.]², în mare măsură, scenariile se scriu acolo [la Comitetul pentru Cinematografie]. Cum [se] pune practic atragerea scriitorului, când el nu are satisfacția lucrării lui? Scriitorul trebuie ajutat să finiseze el scenariul. Din moment ce Comitetul de Cinematografie se substituie și face aceasta [rescrierea scenariului] în bucătăria sa, aceasta nu [il] poate atrage pe scriitor.’ (C. Vasile 239).

cinema system and specifies that the new system (“coherent..., imported from the Soviet Union”, 307) was not implemented at once but gradually, through successive pieces of legislation, institutional reorganization, and creation of new structures and mechanisms. While started in 1948 (which is obvious in the major shift visible in the time’s media), it had reached full speed in 1951-1952, only to be shaken by Stalin’s death in 1953 (see Cornea 307). Cornea also narrates how this was visible in the making of certain films, especially the political negotiation concerning the cast, certain changes in the script or even the ban of a certain production. Paul Cornea’s life writing account represents testimony of a very delicate period in the history of Romanian cinema, a time of difficult equilibrium and modest attempts to infuse the official propaganda with creative energy outside the regime’s constraints.

3. *Darclée*: Biopics, the Thaw and the National Narrative.

Most likely the restrictions and a saturation of Soviet-style propaganda were also contributing to the awareness of the intellectuals⁸ involved in the film-making process towards the need to move away from the ‘exaggeratedly grim cinematography of the beginnings, gaining nuances, colors, ‘humanity’” (Oproiu *apud* Mazilu 14-15). The thematic diversification that took place after 1960 included the so-called ‘actuality movies’, comedies, musicals, detective movies, historical etc. (A. Vasile 122). This diversification was not accidental, as explained above, and it comes with what even during the Cold War was acknowledged as a quality upgrade.

In this context, the making of the film which is the object of the current paper, *Darclée*, was possible and, moreover, can work as a barometer for the changes that were occurring still discreetly in the film sector and propaganda apparatus in general. The film comes as a surprise, and it is exceptional on several accounts: it is a musical biopic (a first for the Romanian cinema), its protagonist is a woman and, more unexpectedly, someone who was famous internationally (in the Western world, which was usually a forbidden reference behind the Iron Curtain). This gender focus can also be considered a first, having been preceded only by a feature documentary, *Amintirea unei artiste* [*Remembering an Actress*], a 1957 film whose protagonist is a woman stage actress. Moreover, in terms of

⁸ In an interview, Ecaterina Oproiu, editor-in-chief of *Cinema* magazine between 1965 and 1989, speaks of a transition and diversification of means and genres in the late 1950s: The idea (I could even say the ambition of the magazine) was (across its entire existence) for the magazine to be read (and-if possible-appreciated) by all those who loved film. *The effort of those who were writing it – permanently – was to spread the love for the 7th art with added intelligence, culture and-if possible- scholarship*, but an experienced scholarship expressed not in a hermetic language but in a less soporific way. [emphasis added] (Oproiu *apud* Mazilu 40-41)

novelty, *Darclée* was a film shot in color and following the visual code of Hollywood Golden Age costume drama (yet, with the necessary loud patriotic insertions to compensate the influence of a foreign film industry). The costume drama is, on the other hand, part of the convention of the historical narratives. It is also a necessary part of the Romanian propaganda paraphernalia and also appeared in the later, male-dominated cinema of heroic-epic nationalism.

On the background of a trend towards diversification, new genres appeared, the biopic among them, with *Darclée* as a start. A few years later, historical male figures would make the center of cinematic efforts. The history of Romanian cinema records this act of birth of the biopic, unjustly abandoned into oblivion later (even for specialists, the film sounds obscure and exotic).

'Genres with a very limited presence within our film production. First of all, the biopic, a genre that worldwide has led to often valuable achievements ... until recently, this genre was represented in the Romanian cinema by one title, *Darclée* (1960). Besides the difficulties of depicting the figure of a great singer by using an excellent prose actress, dubbed on the soundtrack, by a remarkable soprano, the film has received a well-deserved appreciation from the audiences. From the point of view of the topic, it has to be given credit for evoking the efforts of the pioneers that founded the Romanian opera' (Cantacuzino 56)

Darclée (1961) was therefore made possible by the political context and can be best understood in relation to this background as otherwise the patriotic undertones are slightly incongruous with the topic. It seems that the screenwriters attempted to include *Darclée*, despite being a musical biopic about a bourgeois diva, in what can be classified now as the 'heritage movies' (Colăcel's formula about the historical films, 12) and emphasize the patriotic aspects not so apparent if one considers the topic. The film focuses on the "road to fame" – the international career – of a turn-of-the-century opera singer who is the protagonist of the biopic. I would label the film as 'between Soviet propaganda and the American blockbuster', to use a phrase employed by O. Colăcel in another context, when writing about historical narratives (9), a formula yet easily applicable here. Featuring turn-of-the-century Hollywood-style costumes and extravagant hats (an invisible accessory in Stalinist Romania in which it would have appeared as a dangerous bourgeois stigma), the film can be considered a brave sign of change. The ambitions were numerous and yet the film remained almost forgotten in the memory of the audiences and studies on Romanian film: one of the first color films, the first musical film and the first biopic about a woman.

Darclée earned "well deserved appreciation from the audiences" (Cantacuzino 56) despite, or perhaps because it also contained politically

compliant patriotic overtones. Most likely, however, audiences warmed to the film's "road to fame" narrative that featured the success story of a glamorous heroine in Hollywood style costumes boldly wearing "bourgeois" extravagant hats. As the first musical film and the first biopic about a woman, the movie also defines a moment when we see "the art of cinema gaining a self-consciousness . . . not independence but, on the contrary, the film aims to prove it is connected with the other arts. ... It is a time when the film courts the stage.' (14) *Darclée* represents a sign of modernity and emancipation, both from traditional gender norms and from a politically compliant nationalist point of view. Not surprisingly, the cast included a new generation of young actors who had just graduated, were less theatrical, and who brought a more natural attitude to the screen (Silvia Popovici, the protagonist, among them).

The movie is based on the biography of a turn-of-the-century international diva with an exotic name, Hariclea Haricli (from Gr. Charikleia, changed in Paris to the stage name Darclée). She can probably be best remembered as the first Tosca, because she collaborated and rehearsed with Puccini during the writing of the opera and singing at the 1900 premiere. She was also as the first protagonist of Mascagni's *Iris*, and Catalani's *La Wally*. Her career reached the most famous international opera stages, and in 1903 she was considered an opera equivalent of Sarah Bernhardt ('*Mme Darclée est lyriquement, en Tosca, l'équivalente de Mme Sarah Bernhardt*'⁹).

The first biography dedicated to Darclée in 1938 labels her life story as "an epic destiny", comparable to great *men* known worldwide (17th-18th century figures like Dimitrie Cantemir, Nicolae Milescu Spătarul) (Carandino). As in Hollywood star-making musicals (e.g., *Funny Girl* and *Star!* [1968], which were actually made later), *Darclée* 'deal[s] with ambition, the dialectic of public and private, the meaning of celebrity, motherhood, the successful woman in the world, and the nature of stardom' (Codell 260–61).

The film is highly significant for its innovations in gender representation; it was the first of the only three ever made Romanian biopics focusing on women (the third, *Marie of Romania*, was released in 2019). The second biopic, *Ecaterina Teodorescu* (1978), fits into the National Communism heroic cinema genre, with the only variation that the military hero and great patriot is female. Notwithstanding, *Darclée* is valuable from a gender point of view, especially considering the typical marginalization in Romanian cinema of the time but also in general ('Women are rarely the main character or protagonist, with a few exceptions', Andreescu 108), as well as on the life writing book market (until recently, at least).

⁹ *Le Matin: derniers télégrammes de la nuit*, 3 April 1903, p. 4. Retrieved 1 July 2020 – via gallica.bnf.fr.

When *Darclée* begins, we see a young late 19th century bourgeois woman who moves to Paris for her musical education. After struggling years, it is there where she begins her career as an opera singer. She arrives in Paris with her husband, but reluctantly separates from him because he is a reckless gambler who ruined their fortune. She bravely raises their child on her own and refuses to follow him back to Romania. Her decision is vindicated in a later confrontation scene, where she is famous, while he is bankrupt and humbly asks for financial help from a still modest and generous Darclée.

The film struggles to maintain the balance between her as a paragon of fame and success and a portrayal of her as a prototype of modesty and patriotism. Evident in the film is the transition away from Socialist Realism of the late 1940s and 1950s. In that period the protagonists were not strongly individualized but instead following the New Man pattern of a hard-working, simple and generous person laboring for the state-defined common good. In *Darclée*, however, the heroine is to be sure humble and modest, and she is indeed striving to overcome difficulties. But she is making choices in the service of her talent while not ignoring her desire to proudly represent Romania abroad. She performs at La Scala and in Paris not because she regards Italy and France as the pinnacles of culture, but merely because there was no Romanian opera at the time. She would have preferred to sing in Bucharest, of course. The film offers a happy ending from this patriotic point of view: an elderly Darclée revels in celebrating the opening of a Romanian opera house with a sense of accomplished duty. These national pride insertions, as well as the cast choices reflected the political dynamics that made the film possible and – despite the slightly disturbing notes of nationalism – spoke of the legacy of this important soprano. Silvia Popovici, who played the protagonist, which was actually her first main role, was married to a Communist Party leader, which in the logic of the time was probably one of the reasons for her casting as a leading actress in this film and in other important productions of the time.

In addition to pushing back against Socialist Realism, the film actually omitted Russia from the story despite the fact that the actual Darclée began her career with a tour to St. Petersburg in 1889. Although it was her first and also a major tour, the film ignores the episode, making us wonder about the omission at a time when Romania was in the Eastern bloc and a satellite country of the USSR. The film only mentions Russia among the many countries she performed in as part of a scene that summarizes her international success. The omission most likely reveals a distancing from the Soviet Union that was underway (Soviet troops left in 1958) and it also anticipated by almost a decade the pro-Western turn taken by Ceaușescu after the Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Political and financial restrictions made it impossible to actually shoot the film on location in Paris or in the other featured capitals, and the sound quality was poor, but the film stayed close to historical accuracy, and the acting improved on the theatre-like performances in the previous Romanian movies.

‘This representation of the past remains important. ... a characteristic of historical films as a genre is historical verisimilitude and, as a consequence, audiences ‘expect [them] to be accurate;’ (Freeman) what is more important, historical films, unlike other media genres, (Warner) do not commonly address historical theory issues, and yet remain ‘the primary medium by which people learn about the past.’ (Freeman) (Prieto-Arranz 54)

Critics would later acknowledge *Darclée* as marking the birth of the Romanian biopic. The film entered the 1961 Cannes Film Festival¹⁰ and was definitely well promoted at the time, but we lack details about audience reception. Twelve years were to pass before a new biopic appeared based on the life of a musician (*Ciprian Porumbescu*). ‘Both *Darclée* and *Ciprian Porumbescu* can be classified in the same time in the musical film genre, a very successful and widely spread genre worldwide but which, unfortunately, is a rarity in our cinema landscape’ (Cantacuzino 56).

4. Life Writing in the Romanian Cultural Landscape after 1989.

Life writing by Romanian men has outstripped that by Romanian women in the Post-Communist era since 1989, and women’s voices remain somewhat marginalized from the standpoint of feminist priorities. Radu Pavel Gheo and Dan Lungu pointed out in 2008 that life writing has “passed slowly from the horrors of the prisons to the retracing of the grey, everyday life, from history of the elites to common everyday history, from politics to domestic life. [...] Yet somehow our memory has remained so far insensitive to the gender experience. (9)”

In literature, a virtual ‘inflation’ of Romanian life writing took place in the decades following the December revolution of 1989, and readers’ interest

¹⁰ Other films made in the same year: *Celebrul 702* (Mihai Iacob), *Post Restant* (Gheorghe Vitanidis), *Omul de lângă tine* (Horea Popescu), *Poveste sentimentală* (Iulian Mihu), *Avalanșa* (Gheorghe Turcu), *Vară romantică* (Sinișa Ivetici), *S-a furat o bombă* (Ion Popescu-Gopo), *Porto-Franco* (Paul Călinescu). Although diverse in terms of genres, revealing a concern in offering some variety to the audiences, perhaps only the last two are notable, besides *Darclée*. *Porto-Franco*, an adaptation of an interwar novel, shares with *Darclée* some openness towards cosmopolitanism which was previously a banned topic.

has not waned since. Publishers discovered the enormous market potential of life writing, from biographies of famous historical and political figures¹¹ (at first in very poor-quality editions, in the early 1990s) to memoirs¹² (especially popular in recent decades).

Memoirs featuring post-traumatic quests for personal and collective identity provided writers an opportunity for reflection, self-questioning, and even self-justification. Also, life narrative literature in the post-1989 era moved well beyond the constraints of the Soviet or post-Soviet occupation regimes' agendas for facilitating the creation of the New Man. The new personal narratives after the revolution aimed to retrace lost (or at least disguised) individuality and to explore what 'was not supposed to be there.' This new work delved into the actual people and experiences behind the veil of propagandistic notions of Stalin's or Ceausescu's 'more joyous life' models. Thus, the 'inflation' of life writing sought to accomplish a complex process that aimed at recovering the personal emotional pieces of a recent history jigsaw puzzle.

The explosive output of life writing in literature has not been matched by a similar development in cinema. Post-Communist Romanian cinema has developed in a different direction, a direction characterized by creating distance from the mental straightjacket that restrained creativity in filmmaking before 1990. Auteur films, innovative and sometimes experimental, called the "miserabilist" films, the "new cinema", or the "Romanian New Wave" cinema (Pop 61), have won important awards at Cannes and Berlin. Most significant, perhaps, was the 2007 Palme d'Or awarded to Cristian Mungiu. Mungiu's film, *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, explores Communism with a gendered focus, and many of these Post-Communist productions, this film among them, aim to recover Cold War traumatic experiences, although in fiction and not life writing. There are some recent exceptions, such as the recently released biopic *Queen Marie of Romania* (2019), or *Carol I – Un destin pentru România/ Charles I: A Destiny* (2009), both focusing on the Romanian royal family. They may set a trend for future projects, especially under the influence of British royalty-focused cinema, which is noticeable in *Queen Marie of Romania*. A possible explanation for this – besides the likely influence of the recent "royal family" productions in British cinema and television – is the fascination with the pre-communist past, as a forbidden and idyllic past. Besides being inaccessible to

¹¹ For example, life-writing accounts related to the Romanian royal family or other members of recent history political elite (i.e. members of the Brătianu family).

¹² The number of such publications is significant and to rank such numerous and diverse accounts is a complicated task, in some cases the experience, in some others the literary value (or in other cases both) making them relevant to the life-writing genre. However, we much mention among the ones with a major impact the accounts signed by Ion Ioanid, Alice Voinescu, Lena Constante, Monica Lovinescu and many others (some published abroad and later translated to Romanian).

discuss or study during communism, the interwar period with extensions towards “la Belle Époque” were seen as a sort of Golden Age in Romanian culture and therefore approached with nostalgic fascination.

5. Conclusions

The 1961 movie *Darclée* offered Romanian audiences a cultural departure of significant dimensions. A beautiful opera singer seemingly plucked right out of a Hollywood musical costume drama achieves stardom on the screens of early 1960s Cold War Bucharest. This unexpectedly bourgeois opera star is appropriated by a regime that was transitioning from obedience to a levelling Soviet model towards National Communism. *Darclée* was politically instrumentalized in order to enhance national pride, suggesting that she seeks stardom in order to follow the call of her talent and contribute to the glory of the motherland. *Darclée* was thus used by the propaganda and yet, through the Hollywood style and gender issues promoted, it shattered conventions in a cinematic regime that had been and would remain for over two decades carefully managed according to the dictates of the central committee of a single-party totalitarian regime.

Forgotten by the Romanian public today, the film marked an opening, a crack, in the Iron Curtain; cinema then began a lengthy period of de-Sovietization accompanied by gradual infusion of Hollywood and other external influences during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The first biopic (among other pioneering characteristics), and the first to focus on a woman and the star-making process, *Darclée* also reflected the shift from Soviet informal colonization to Romanian National Communism. This study of *Darclée* suggests why life writing and biopics can be a fruitful area of investigation into the cultural history of Romanian life in relation to political regime policy analysis since World War II.

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