

## *The Romanian Filmmakers' Union: Between an Ambiguous Past and an Uncertain Future*

Among the multitude of institutions that framed Romanian cinematography in the past, the Romanian Filmmakers' Union (UCIN) of is one of the few that still exist after the fall of the communist regime. The very complex role of this institution in the field of cinematography was somewhere between political control, professional support, recognition authority and artistic guidance.

Reconstructing the genealogy of such an organization allows us not only to realize the depth of its links to the past, but also the changes that marked Romanian cinema after 1989 concerning the social actors, the institutional practices involved and the role of the state. Among these, one of the most important was the replacement of ideological constraints with economic ones. The appearance of a Romanian New Wave and of a new generation of young professionals determined the reconfiguration of 'art worlds'[1] where two different views of the film industry have come into conflict: one turned towards the past, nostalgic about the disintegration of the domestic community and the loss of state protection; the other, individualistic, turned in the direction of transnational cooperation and private funding.

It is therefore useful to ask how relevant the Filmmakers' Union remains today, what values remain from the past and how it was forced to reconfigure itself. Did it manage to reinvent itself? How has it faced the competition from similar professional organizations? What does the Union mean to its members nowadays, compared to the past? These are some of the questions we would like to answer, relying upon interviews, archive documents and ethnographic observation.

A number of scholars who have studied similar literary institutions have highlighted the complicated connections between artists and power revealed in these forms of professional organizations. Thus, the emphasis has been on the transnational, yet Eastern European character of these Unions,[2] on the Soviet influence and the construction of the national autonomy,[3] or on bureaucratic control and their monopolistic character.[4] As an institution whose cre-

[1] H.S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, Berkley 2008.

[2] L. Dragomir, *L'Union des Ecrivains. Une institution transnationale à l'Est: l'exemple roumain*, Paris 2007.

[3] P. Negura, *Ni héros ni traîtres. Les écrivains moldaves face au pouvoir soviétique sous Staline*, Paris 2009.

[4] J. and C. Garrard, *Inside the Soviet Writers' Union*, London 1990.

ation was encouraged by the state, the Filmmakers' Union was the only one to organize the professional life of its members in a direct manner in a context where the communist regime discouraged other forms of free association. Although political subordination was not explicit, the association mainly functioned as an interface between the filmmakers and political power. As I will show further on, this ambiguous mission determined from its very beginning a fragile and contested organizational identity that had an indubitable impact on the Union's cohesion in the post-1989 period.

Being one of the structures with a large member base, approximately 900 today, the Romanian Filmmakers' Union is one of the few forms of professional organizations that managed to overcome the collapse of the Communist regime. If its past existence is revelatory in terms of the autonomy from which the creators of the period benefited, its existence after 1989 is interesting in regard to the reconfiguration of the cinematographic field and of the professional identities. In order to emphasize the dis/continuities between these two periods, I will further opt for a contrastive analysis of some items that I consider relevant to the understanding of these changes.

Before doing so, I would like to remind briefly the context in which this research took place. During the summer of 2011, I had the chance to spend a few months at the Union's headquarters while searching for documents that would help explain the trajectories of filmmakers during and after the fall of communism. It was very disappointing to realize that the poor and chaotic archive of the institution would not offer me the fantasized key to its past. Instead, I was surprised to notice that the informal discussions from within the offices of the Union revolved around very few topics that need deeper scrutiny: the nostalgia of belonging to a large and esteemed community in the past, the feeling that the events of 1989 divided the cineastes into 'losers' and 'winners', and a defeatist attitude regarding the merits of the new generation of filmmakers and their importance for the consolidation of a national cinematography.

The headquarters of the Union, located in downtown Bucharest, are a vivid museum of communism that surprises the visitor through the visual connection to the recent past: the old-fashioned furniture, the 'Persian' carpets and the purple velvet chairs. The sumptuous meeting room, named for obvious reasons 'the marble room', is still a source of pride for the Union's members. The Council room exhibits a corner with diplomas and trophies, together with images of the former presidents, filling the place on the wall where the compulsory picture of Nicolae Ceausescu used to hang. Even the selection of film posters along the hallways is reminiscent of an out-of-date and occult hierarchy of prestige. The association also runs a cinema theatre (*Studio*), which now aims to promote national films and whose 'communist style' managed to become 'cool' to the young, ironic-nostalgic generation of Romanian 'hipsters'.

Besides this journey back in time, a more significant sign of how deeply the Union is still rooted in the past are the small changes that occurred in its administrative structure. The Romanian Filmmakers' Association[5] was founded in 1963[6] through the initiative of some prominent figures in Romanian cinema. The General Assembly which took place in 1990 decided to transform the Association into a Union, which has since run on the basis of a new statute. From that moment on, the UCIN opened up to other technical professions – not only creative ones as in the past – accomplishing something often strived for since the transformation, that is, a more representative and more influential structure. This symbolic baptism looked to assert a solid identity under the new regime, but the actual configuration of political priorities seems not to give major consideration to Unions or other cultural actors.

The first presidents of the Union were Victor Iliu and Ion Popescu Gopo, both internationally awarded film directors. Since 1990, Mihnea Gheorghiu was repeatedly re-elected as president, a notable performance for a person who was not a film director. A prominent figure in the communist regime, he held numerous leading functions before 1989.[7] His name is connected to film scripts that are part of the 'national epic' category, a theme which was highly privileged by the communist regime and which contributed in a certain manner to the mystification of the country's history. Although his cineaste identity was precarious because of this, Mihnea Gheorghiu was "one of the best Shakespeare translators", as the Union's secretary declared to me, and "a person with many contacts" who "knew how to lead". In 2005, as the only candidate, he obtained a four-year term instead of the customary three-years, with the justification that it should pass the year of the EU integration. Being contested by solitary voices accusing him of conservatism, perpetuating old, communist 'back-stage' work tactics, Mihnea Gheorghiu seemed to represent the binding element of a community, disintegrated by the shock of change.

The present organizational structure inherited the formal and rigid hierarchy of the recent past. It is led by a president, a vice-president, a general secretary and a few other secretaries who together form the Union's Bureau. The Council, comprised of members elected once every four years, chooses the Bureau by secret vote, elects commissions and summons general assemblies. The association is being organized on the basis of "creative sections" (directors, scriptwriters, stage

[5] *Asociația Cineaștilor din România (ACIN)*. I will refer to it hereafter as *Uniunea Cineaștilor din România (UCIN)* or as *The (Romanian) Filmmakers' Union*.  
 [6] This was later than other Unions, such as the *Writers' Union*, which was founded on a pre-existent structure in 1949.

[7] Gheorghiu was editor-in-chief at *Scanteia Tineretului (Young People's Spark)*, president of the *Academy of Social and Political Sciences*, and a member of the *Romanian Academy* as a writer. He passed away in the winter of 2011 at the age of 92.

designers, etc.) and designates commissions which in the past used to give awards, manage external relations, supervise the cine-clubs movement or the admission of new members. The constant re-election of the same management team after 1989 determined a strong migration, especially among the most prestigious branch of the Union, the director's section. Meanwhile, new members are mainly recruited from among film critics and technical professions, which is rather a sign of the precarious state of these professions and of the lack of alternatives on the cultural market.

A significant transformation occurred in the Union's financial management. The Union received state funding only for a short period of time at the beginning of its existence. Among the sources of income, such as member fees and revenues from cinema tickets, the largest slice came, surprisingly, from the sale of celebrity pictures. The money allowed for the constitution of a cinematographic fund from which pensions, loans or help in case of infirmity or sickness were offered to members. Currently, most of the earnings come from space rentals, and these are far from assuring a bright future, especially because they are the object of political and other, obscure interests.

In the past, Union membership meant, first and foremost, professional recognition. In order to be accepted as a member, a filmmaker had to make a large number of films, to bring a biographical record and to receive recommendations from existing members. Besides recognition, membership also meant a privileged status, as well as material and other, non-financial rewards. The association initiated cultural exchange with other socialist countries and sent delegations to different missions abroad. Not all members could reap these advantages in the same way, so they tended to criticize this system based on friendship, rivalry and internal fights. Regarding the supporting role for the creative process, the association offered a certain number of activities, such as film projections and professional discussions, which compensated for the lack of information and international circulation.

In the 1980s, because of economical problems and the internal tensions, some of the cineastes formed an opposition group that tried to bypass the Union's Council, which did no longer function as a dialogue partner, in order to expose their problems directly to Nicolae Ceausescu. Among the dissatisfactions were: a lack of film stock, small budgets, the presence of censorship and the discretionary privileges assigned to some directors. The Union itself was perceived as a dysfunctional bureaucratic machine, unable to protect the interests of its members anymore. Most unsatisfied were the young directors, known as 'the 70's generation,'<sup>[8]</sup> considered to be 'individualists' by their older colleagues.

[8] For further details on the specifics of this generation, see C. Caliman, *Istoria filmului românesc (1897-2010)*, Bucuresti 2011, pp. 287-383.

In the 1990s, the crisis that affected Romanian cinema was first of all related to production. During the first Union meeting under the new regime, some filmmakers wondered what the purpose of the Association was if film production no longer existed.[9] During a period marked by diminishing state support, Romanian directors struggled to keep production houses[10] and structures like the Sahia Studio[11] alive. In this context, the core purposes of the Union, consisting in creative support or professional recognition, quickly became obsolete. What became even more obvious after the 1990s were the divisions that separated filmmakers since the Communist period, not only the gap between the generations but also the divisions that arose due to difficulties in reconciling personal interests. The '70's generation' tried to claim a series of positions in the new institutions in the name of artistic prestige, while others invoked the legitimacy given by commercial success. For a short period of time, the old relationships, even though conflicting, assured a few directors access to leading positions and to resources for their own projects.

But this model was fragile and contestable, and did not last long. Some directors decided to create new associations, feeling they were not represented by the Filmmakers' Union.[12] The young directors who started their carrier after 1990 especially accused the UCIN of idleness and perpetuating old habits. In contrast, some UCIN members are characterizing these directors as 'individualists',[13] as people who do not appreciate the benefits of the collective in the creation process. I was told in an interview: "Mungiu did not even come to pick up his award. Young people don't need to have their script read by someone, don't need an opinion, they do everything on their own."

The field of cinema started to grow up gradually, as Romanian New Wave directors entered the international market. They displayed strength and competence in summoning up new resources, such as private funding or European financing. The result was the configuration of new *professional worlds* around the *making of a movie*,[14] more adapted to a competitive economical context. Their strategic actions, such as legislative pressures,[15] highlighted the split between two parallel cinematographic worlds, no longer based on common

[9] Malvina Ursianu says: "As long as there is no cinematographic production, the Union has no purpose, which belongs to the past, not so much to the present and not at all to the future", Filmmakers' Union Archive, Stenograph record of the General Assembly of the Filmmakers branch, 11 March 1996.

[10] There was even an attempt to create a production house within the UCIN, but the initiative was incompatible with the new statute.

[11] A large part of the Union's members came from *Sahia Studio*, which used to be the only state institution to produce documentaries during Communism.

[12] It is the case of Mircea Daneliuc, Sergiu Nicolaescu and also of young directors such as Cristi Puiu; an (incomplete) list can be found at [http://www.cncinema.abt.ro/Vizualizare-DocumentHTML.aspx?html\\_ID=htm-327](http://www.cncinema.abt.ro/Vizualizare-DocumentHTML.aspx?html_ID=htm-327) [accessed June 15, 2011].

[13] Ironically, these same terms were used to characterize the '70's generation' in the past.

[14] As a matter of fact, many of the young directors are involved in the production, distribution and promotion of their films.

[15] See for instance the letter Cristian Mungiu addressed to the Minister of Culture in 2009, conte-

professional values or on state implication. In this context, the fact that the Union remained faithful to its original values of 'collective art creation' proved to be rather a burden, totally unappealing to the young generation.

Nowadays, the UCIN has an aging member base. Once when I went to their office, efforts were underway to organize three simultaneous funerals. The members, mostly retired people, rarely stop by, and when they do, it is to pay their dues, to drink a cup of coffee and to meet old colleagues and friends. Some time ago, they still organized parties, but it became harder and harder to plan gatherings. The main feeling they invoke is nostalgia for a 'family' and the loss of a place in the new configuration of the cinema, where, as someone once said to me, 'no one applauds them anymore'.

After 1990, the association has had a few legislative initiatives, among which the most valuable one was connected with pension's regulations. There was even an attempt to create a rest home, but the idea failed. Members can still benefit from some social assistance. The past prestige of the Union is no longer obvious today in any way other than through the awards they offer. Even those, however, compete with other local festivals, and are not without scandals.[16]

Perpetuating the inherited conflicts, the rigid management and the professional values of the past, the Filmmakers' Union failed to become representative for the entire cinematographic community and has had difficulties creating a strong and positive contemporary identity. Unable to attract young people, the very purpose of its existence is becoming anachronistic. The Union's existence is also threatened by the entry of new associations and cultural manifestations on the domestic market, but for the majority of its remaining members it continues to represent the guarantee that a 'life dedicated to film was not in vain'.

sting the functioning of the National Center for Cinematography, <http://www.jurnalul.ro/film/scrisoare-deschisa-cristian-mungiu-ii-scrie-lui-paleologu-146299.htm> accessed June 15, 2011].

[16] The UCIN Awards (*Premiile Uniunii Cineastilor*) used to be a prestigious recognition. Nowadays, their

importance is threatened by festivals such as the Transylvania International Film Festival (TIFF). In 2002, the Grand Prize was not awarded, although widely acclaimed films, such as *West (Occident*, Cristian Mungiu) and *The Rage (Furia*, Radu Muntean), were part of the competition.