# From Folklore to Modernity: A Historical Overview of Romanian Cinema



A shot from the film “Independenta Romaniei”
Source: Cultura (Image for reference)

While cinema is a medium that has a history stretching more than a century, Romanian cinema stands out with one of the richest histories in the domain. The history of Romanian cinema is worth exploring, along with the diverse content emanating from the country. The roots of Romanian cinema history can be traced back to the screening of the Lumiere brothers' film, “Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat,” in 1896. This screening happened in Bucharest, the capital of Romania.

Within a year of the first screening, Romanians made their own film, “The Royal Parade.” This film also has a connection with the Lumiere brothers, as it was made by Paul Menu, an employee of the Lumiere brothers' company. The first feature film made in Romania was the 1912 film “Independenta Romaniei” (Romania’s Independence). The initial films made in Romania were greatly inspired by the Lumiere brothers' style of filmmaking, characterized by short scenes capturing everyday moments. Their films were like short documentaries, each lasting only a few seconds. For example, there were videos of workers leaving the Lumiere factory. Another interesting video depicts a train arriving at La Ciotat train station. These films focused on simplicity and realism (Parvulescu, 2017).



A royal dining scene from the film “If I Were Harap Alb”
Source: If I Were Harap Alb(Image for reference)

The Lumiere brothers' style of filmmaking was initially fascinating to the audience. However, over time, people began to lose interest in the repetitive, realistic, and simple visuals without a creative story. Recognizing this, filmmakers started exploring diverse ideas. One of the main concepts from this period was the fusion of folklore stories with cinema. Romanian filmmakers drew inspiration from local myths and traditions, creating a landscape deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of the country. The 1965 film “If I Were Harap Alb” is a perfect example of this. This film is also known under the title “The White Moor” and was directed by Ion Popescu-Gopo. Based on Romanian folk tales, Harap Alb is a young prince who embarks on a quest to fulfil a set of challenging tasks to regain his rightful place as the heir to the throne. The narrative in the film intertwines storytelling, with a woman reading the tale of Harap-Alb to children. This includes the three sons of the Red Emperor. This 1965 film is captivating with its imaginative effects, engaging narrative, and colourful cinematography (Grunes, 2011).



A traditional costume from the film “Haiducii”
Source: Haiducii (Image for reference)



A beautiful shot from the film “The Forest of the Hanged”
Source: MUBI (Image for reference)

As the films became more familiar to citizens, the communist government became more interested in the film industry. The government recognized the potential of films and used them as a tool for their propaganda. One of the important films from this era was “The Forest of the Hanged” (1965), directed by Liviu Ciulei. The film emphasizes nationalist and patriotic themes by portraying the protagonist as a hero who sacrifices himself for the country. Ciulei, also a prominent figure in Romanian theatre, brought a distinctive visual style to the film. His background in theatre helped him seamlessly integrate intricate details into the film's visual language and effectively frame scenes. This work won him the Best Director award at the 1965 Cannes Film Festival. (Eastern European Movies, n.d.). The government also supported films like “The Dacians” (1967) and “The Column” (1968), which aimed to spread the notion of nationalism among the people. These historical epics were popular, with narratives celebrating the resilience of the Romanian people in the face of external challenges. The communist government was very conscious of creating a positive image for the nation through the films. The government's ban on the 1968 film "Reenactment" (Reconstituirea) and the 1973 film “The Stone Wedding” were acts to maintain the fabricated image. However, the production support from the government acted as a catalyst for the technical evolution of Romanian Cinema (The Romanian Film Industry, n.d.).



A shot from the film "The Death of Mr. Lazarescu"
Source: Slant Magazine (Image for reference)

The year 1989 witnessed the end of the communist era in Romania. This event paved the way for the birth of a new era in Romanian cinema. Despite being technically evolved, the only factor that kept Romanian filmmakers down was the limitation on the freedom of the subject. Filmmakers utilized the newfound freedom to explore diverse themes and engage with a broader range of artistic expression. This transformative period led to the emergence of films like "The Death of Mr. Lazarescu" (2005). The film, "The Death of Mr. Lazarescu" employs a documentary-like visual style, using handheld cameras and natural lighting to create a sense of realism. Directed by Cristi Puiu, the film delves into the complexities of the healthcare system, offering poignant commentary on societal issues (Hamid, 2017). Such films inspired other filmmakers to tackle social issues, leading to the creation of films like “4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days.” This film became the first Romanian film to win the Palme d'Or award at the Cannes Film Festival. The success at the Cannes Film Festival attracted an international audience to Romanian Cinema. The 2016 film "Graduation" (Bacalaureat) is another brilliant piece of art from the Romanian industry. The film's narrative unfolds as a moral puzzle, examining the compromises individuals make for the sake of their children's future. It delves into the complexities of morality and societal corruption (Pulver, 2017).




A shot from the film “Graduation”
Source: Time Out (Image for reference)

In a sense, the evolution of Romanian cinema can be seen as a butterfly effect. Folklore narratives played a crucial role in popularizing film among a wider audience, seamlessly intertwining culture and entertainment. This familiarity opened the possibility for the communist governments to use film as a tool for propaganda. The government invested funds in films, which helped filmmakers to explore the technical possibilities of the medium. After the communist era, the acquired technical expertise became a crucial asset for filmmakers, enabling them to intertwine sensitive subjects and creative narratives. In this sequence of events, the influence of folklore emerges as a guiding force that steered the evolution of Romanian cinema into its modern form.

Romanian cinema has evolved from its humble beginnings, drawing inspiration from folklore, traveling through the challenges of political ideologies, and finding its own voice. From an industry that used to produce propaganda films, Romania's film industry now stands as an inspiration to the international audience and filmmakers. As this cinematic journey continues, it is evident that the intricate blend of cultural authenticity, technical expertise, and creative courage has positioned Romanian cinema on the global stage

# References:


- Forest of the Hanged (Pădurea spânzuraților) 1964 in English Online. (n.d.). Eastern European Movies. Retrieved February 14, 2024, from https://easterneuropeanmovies.com/melodrama/forest-of-the-hanged

- Grunes, D. (2011, December 25). IF I WERE THE WHITE MOOR (Ion Popescu-Gopo, 1965). Retrieved February 14, 2024, from https://grunes.wordpress.com/2011/12/25/if-i-were-the-white-moor-ion-popescu-gopo-1965/

- Hamid, R. (2017, September 20). The Death of Mr. Lazarescu (Cristi Puiu, 2005) – Senses of Cinema. Senses of Cinema. Retrieved February 14, 2024, from https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2017/cteq/the-death-of-mr-lazarescu/

- Parvulescu, C. (2017, November 9). Romanian Cinema. Oxford bibliographies. Retrieved February 14, 2024, from https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199791286/obo-9780199791286-0156.xml

- Pulver, A. (2017, March 29). Cristian Mungiu: 'We were called the sacrifice generation – and so were our parents'. The Guardian. Retrieved February 14, 2024, from https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/29/cristian-mungiu-romanian-film-maker-cannes-4-months-3-weeks-graduation

- Romania - Film Studies: National Cinemas - Research Guides at Dartmouth College. (n.d.). Dartmouth Libraries. Retrieved February 14, 2024, from https://researchguides.dartmouth.edu/nationalcinemas/romania

- The Romanian Film Industry. (n.d.). Romanian Film Industry During the Communist Era. Retrieved February 14, 2024, from https://thromanianfilmindustry.weebly.com/the-communist-era.html

## Image Links:

- https://culturaladuba.ro/110-ani-de-la-premiera-primului-lungmetraj-romanesc-independenta-romaniei/
- https://youtu.be/gsZ7GbV3r-E?si=NoaDEhIFFI6qEy2H(0:51/1:24)
- https://youtu.be/QVf9Js64COI?si=t_7YByZtm5yPqUu7(2:19/1:54:21)
- https://images.mubicdn.net/images/film/2041/cache-9202-1570735158/image-w1280.jpg?size=800x
- https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/the-death-of-mr-lazarescu/
- https://media.timeout.com/images/103315627/750/422/image.jpg