



ON WHAT LACKS IN CURRENT FILM THEORY¹

Pagini despre film

By **George Littera** (Author)

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Preface to the second edition: **Lucian Georgescu**.

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Abstract: The review does not make the case that the recent republication of George Littera's work is relevant for today's film criticism. On the contrary, it suggests that contemporary film criticism might not stand very well in the light of Littera's work. In particular, it shows how his writing is concerned with the idea of value and contradictions, which is less investigated in new work concerned with subjects of history such as the working class. First, it details Littera's assessment of Soviet avant-garde cinema. Second, it compares his book with the work of one of his UNATC colleagues such as Florian Potra. Finally, it briefly investigates a mode of production and essay writing which has disappeared as technique.

Keywords: George Littera's essays (1964-2000), film criticism, film history, the structuralist wave of the 1970s, Florian Potra.

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The second edition of George Littera's essays does not offer earthshattering surprises about film theory as it was practiced at UNATC between 1960 and 2000. We discover, however, from the engaging preface signed by Professor Lucian Georgescu that Littera might have liked to have a conversation on *Deep Throat* (1972) rather than talk about *Oh Ramona* (2019). This remark opens new horizons for rethinking Littera's essays for a new generation. His research can be truly fascinating and serve as a starting point for important findings. His solid investigation about how the literary avant-garde has engaged with film (from Benjamin Fundoianu to Geo Bogza and Ion Călugăru) shows an on-going interest in the relation between film and experimental techniques. I found new references, such as Mihai Sebastian's comments about the Soviet film *Ceapaev*, which can speak to specialists interested in the old and new avant-garde. Sebastian (p. 127) writes about a well-known Soviet production, *Ceapaev*, that it remains "a film with a real epic force, where politics is left in the shadow so that the facts can shine through". It is truly a surprise to read Sebastian's observation that *Ceapaev* has little political force since the film has become a benchmark for the genre of socialist realism cinema in the Soviet Union. The difference between what one contemporary observer sees (a film without a clear political orientation!) and how the film remains for specialists a hundred years later (a film that inaugurates Stalinism in cinema) is indeed staggering.

Also, in another masterful investigation („Dictators and the film"), Littera looks at films that did not pass Stalinist censorship, from potential and actual masterpieces of Eisenstein to Barnet and Pudovkin. Such exploration was not only an important interest in the 1990s but can also serve as a point of reference

for new specialists who discover the field of the Soviet avant-garde. Interestingly, Littera reads why such films could not get through censorship. For *The Way of Enthusiasts* (Ohlopkov, 1930), the film is banned because of its connection to the avant-garde, which did not align with the new socialist realism. Kuleshov's 1934 film was banned because it failed to show an appropriate level of anger towards *the kulacks*. And so on and so forth! Littera's fascinating perspective reads such films not because they were "communist" but because of their value as historical and aesthetic documents. Littera's readings are very important because they broke at the time of their writing (1998) with a general anti-communist narrative about the value of Eastern European films. While his opinion was aligned to a wave of new research in cinema theory and history, his judgment was overlooked by local critics and curators. Only in hindsight we can appreciate how much Littera was ahead of his time in his observations when one compares them with a local anti-communist consensus.

What is truly fascinating in this book is what is *not* actually there, what is *not* part of our current understanding of film theory. What is enigmatic is our *misunderstanding* of the historical context, which can emerge as symptomatic in new debates about film and aesthetics. In 2010, critics who had a neo-Marxist orientation (such as Costi Rogozanu or I) have been challenged by more form-oriented critics (such as Andrei Gorzo), who were not necessarily opposed to looking at politics in film, but who were deeply worried about ideological lenses of interpreting films. It is indeed enigmatic how similar debates were part of film theory, if we look at the polemics between George Littera and Florian Potra in the interval preceding these arguments. It is only our misrecognition that can facilitate and block a better grasp of such polemics (perhaps a future researcher can be better at understanding them!). For instance, Littera's readings of Soviet films would have been an important counterpoint either to critics who praised such films as totally emancipatory or attack a neo-Marxist bent as pure dogmatism.

In my view, Littera's own trajectory as a critic is a powerful reminder about how film criticism depends on the ideological background of one's writing. Littera's essays from the 1960s are rather political and align with a Marxist humanist direction of film theory (his theoretical references are Guido Aristarco, Bela Balázs, Umberto Barbaro and Jean Mitry). In the 1970s they are concerned with the question of structuralism and its use of rhetorical figures, while in the 1980s they are oriented towards rethinking national cinema, which can be interpreted as a strategic withdrawal to historiography (I owe this observation to Lucian Georgescu). In the selection of the essays, I noticed that the 1990s are rather about his notes on film festival, which focus on avant-garde and experimental films in Locarno and Venice. Littera's ideas become rather a critique drawing on

an immediate response, rather than a systematic reflection on genres and themes (such as he practiced before the 1990s). Perhaps other documents will challenge this impression, which emerge from the selection of current texts in *Cinema* and similar venues.

Littera's method engages the question of the fundamental structures of film. As a structuralist, he sees the metaphor and metonymy as vehicles to understand images, which need to be classified as part of the history of film genres. Historicization and contextualization are basic elements of his method, which are not different from the more explicit Gramsci-oriented method of Potra's film analyses. Here is how he is able to capture the importance of rhetoric for film theory:

“the wave/the torrent/the storm constitute central metaphors for the revolutionary idea (p.90)”; “in the mastery of filmmakers like Eisenstein and Pudovkin, the cinema is able to replace the banal idea with a fundamental expressivity” (p.91); “the suggestive power of the part for the whole (metonymy, my clarification) is the basis for the rhetorical structures that were experimented by the classical school, from representations of the object (...) to the montages that were arborescent which were dear to Eisenstein and Dovjenko” (p. 91).

Both Littera and Potra were thoroughly embedded in the structuralist wave of the 1970s. There might be, however, key differences between the two. I am concerned that a masterpiece such as Florian Potra's *The Gold of Cinema* (1984, 1987, two volumes) will not find a new editor and life, like Littera did. Potra's book does not only analyze the avant-garde but *is* an avant-garde book in its method of presentation (and not far from Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* in some of its intentions). While *The Gold of Cinema* offers compelling analyses of genres and styles in film, it is also articulated as a compilation of large quotes, which tend to take over the book (they can be as long as five pages!). For instance, to comment on *Citizen Kane*, Potra deploys quotes from Brecht, Adorno and Borges, which illuminate the film in surprising ways. In addition, the book is an exercise in free association, like you can hear Potra talking in front of an audience of students. It is about thinking on the spot, which is a different approach from our current ways of showing a *PowerPoint* with discoveries that we have already made. In contrast, Potra *thinks as he talks* about his object of investigation (this teaching method is similar to how Lacan's *Seminars* took place; we only have his first seminar translated into Romanian). This type of lecturing, which has almost disappeared, focused on how quotes, free association and speculation were vital

elements of producing theory. It is true, this method was possible because film professors could not show films in their classes and had to narrate them. In our world of immediate access to film, such technique highlights words, wordplay and free speculation, which is a loss that we have to confront with today in film criticism. In republishing new editions of old texts, I find it extremely important to focus on illuminating a mode of production which seems defunct. We read such texts not because we are nostalgic, but because they tackle similar problems that we face today. Both Littera and Potra respond to the question about how to make a national cinema universal, and their answers engage with the question of *Weltliteratur*. They are both interested in how to identify future masterpieces from the current film productions. They both combine a deep structuralism with a keen interest in political film.

In our current film criticism, the activist-oriented mode of interpretation seems to be dominant, in a deep accord with a Gramsci and Lukács-oriented model of the proletariat as the engine of history (in the new criticism, the subjects of history have changed their names and are either women, queer and trans, and other subaltern people, like immigrants or Roma). Littera and Potra work with this idea of new subjects of history as well, which they insert in their analyses. For them, there is value in thinking about the contradictions of our history along subjects that *make* history. However, they are also fundamentally interested in finding deeper patterns of film value, which indicate why certain films are masterpieces. The problem of value is not only articulated by *who the agent is*, but what the structure of the film is and the contradictions they reflect on. It is extremely important that this type of film critique will offer the tools to think about films, and not just ally the critic with a temporary instantiation of a progressive advancement of history. We should start to re-consider Littera and Potra's work from their manner of conceptualizing relations around form, content and history, which is a less and less discussed question in film analysis. In that manner, we could understand, as Lucian Georgescu intimated, why 1970 pornography can offer more insight into our present condition than a film that was made to be forgotten (such as *Oh Ramona*). At least in a pornographic material we find a structure with its rules and transgressions, which are much more interesting to analyze than a film made to generate at best some chuckles.

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George Littera (1941-2000). After graduating the Faculty of Romanian Language and Literature within the University of Bucharest (1964), he became a professor at the Institute of Theatre and Cinematographic Art (Department of Film Studies) in 1965, and, in 1990, he began teaching the *History of Universal Film* course at UNATC I.L. Caragiale, Bucharest. Author of numerous studies, articles and film chronicles, he also signed the volume *Victor Iliu. The Fascination of Cinema* (in collaboration with Bianca Sofia Iliu). He was a constant presence of professional expertise in radio and TV programs dedicated to film analysis. Participant, with lectures, conferences, and debates, in the programs of the Romanian Cinematheque and active member of various cineclubs in the capital and the province; member of the Romanian Film Critics Association and its president in 1995; member of the Management Board of UCIN (The Romanian Filmmakers Union); member of national and international juries, FIPRESCI member since 1990. He received the *Award for Excellence for Lifetime Achievement* in 1999.
