

**AVERAGE SHOT LENGTH
IN THE POST-2000 ROMANIAN FILM.
COMPARISON WITH
OTHER MOVEMENTS IN EUROPEAN CINEMA**

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Abstract: Since the 1930s films have become faster and faster in regard to pacing and as a consequence their Average Shot Length has become shorter and shorter. Average Shot Length indicates the average duration of a shot in a certain film. In order to calculate it, the total film run time was divided to the number of shots. The objective of this article is to compare a sample of the Romanian New Wave with other samples from similar movements. These include the Italian neorealism or Dogme 95 and also the works of Michelangelo Antonioni. The intention is to find out how similar their editing rhythm is. Comparing these arthouse movements to data from more mainstream Hollywood films proves that there are big differences related to ASL. In order to make these comparisons data from the Cinematics database (cinematics.tv) will be used, as well as own calculations based on the method described in the article.

Keywords: Average Shot Length (ASL – number of shots in relation with the movie length), Romanian New Wave, Italian neorealism, Dogme 95, Michelangelo Antonioni.

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Average Shot Length

It is an unquestionable finding that the pacing of films has accelerated from decade to decade. Films are edited more and more alertly, as an adaptation of screen time to social time and the speed of daily life. This trend is valid on average for all genres of film, but it is not supported when we refer exclusively to the film d'auteur. The perception of the cinema spectator is influenced by many factors, from personal taste, to education, to the interaction of the individual with the means of transmission of the modern era. And perhaps the most important factor is the contact with the entire multitude of mass transmission of information methods – from the analog era (books, newspapers, mail and the first forms of radio and television) to the digital explosion and the global network that gave rise to the phenomenon of social media. The latter being, therefore, a culmination of mass audio-visual exposure, in which the universal currency is the time that each viewer can invest in a particular product. As a result, as a general rule today: shorter usually means more desirable.

But how can one measure the rhythm of a film? By calculating the Average Shot Length for each film, we can have an overview of the inner rhythm. This calculation is carried out by identifying the number of cuts in a film and relating it

to the total length of the projection. Imagining against all reason that the film in question would have all the shots of the same duration, then the value resulting from the previous calculation would indicate exactly this shot length thus balancing the difference between sequence shots and the more cropped sequences that constitute the entirety of a film. The international terminology for this calculation is *Average Shot Length* (ASL).

James Cutting's study on the evolution of Hollywood film shows that the ASL has been steadily declining since the late 1920s. This trend starts from an average of about 12 seconds and reaches up to 2.5 seconds towards the end of the study. But why does this trend start only then and not from the beginning of cinema? *Celovek s'kino aparatom/Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929) has a 2.3-second ASL, very close to the Hollywood standard calculated by James Cutting. The Russian directors of the beginning of the century used juxtapositioning of shots, mainly for propaganda purposes, and pushed the parameters of editing to extreme values. All this was carried out in the absence of the film sound. With the advent of the latter, a new dimension of message transmission was discovered, with superior efficiency. Shortly after the appearance of the first *talkie* (film with synchronized lines), *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927) we experienced the steepest deceleration of the rhythm of the film editing, probably unrepeatably in history.

In the writings of Roger Ebert, as well as Marcel Martin, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, there are common analyses of the ASL of films. The Cinemetrics website (cinemetrics.tv) is the largest freely accessible database on film ASLs, where we can even find calculations grouped by the categories of shots in the analyzed films. For some of the films cited below this database will be used as the source of the figures. For the rest of the films, own calculations will be used according to the method described below.

Normally, the calculation of the ASL is done through an arduous process that can generate human error – by writing down each cut as the film is scrolled through, which requires a long time and rechecks for the accuracy of the data. For efficiency purposes, I chose to use an automatic cut detection module included in the famous *Black Magic DaVinci Resolve Studio* postproduction software. The version used was 17.2. Being an automated process, false detections of cuts as well as cuts that were not detected resulted, so I decided to refine the results by manually going through the films and solving these errors. False detections were generally caused by sudden changes in the lighting of the shot in situations such as

a light ignition in the frame, a shot, the appearance of a *flare*, or even shots with strobe light. On the other hand, the use of dissolves or *fades* in a film "fooled" the detection algorithm, resulting in fewer frames than in reality. The calculated values obtained were rounded to the first decimal place.

The Romanian New Wave

The Romanian New Wave (NCR) makes its debut ignoring the general trends of shortening the ASL described above. NCR is a movement in cinema that begins in 2001, with the film *Marfa și banii/Stuff and Dough* (Cristi Puiu, 2001). Aesthetically, NCR films are characterized by an austere, realist and often minimalist approach. Very long shots are favored and often the shooting is *hand-held*. Thematically, NCR films most often center on ordinary people and study the social and psychological effects of the transition from communism to an early form of capitalism.

In order to be able to compare the ASL between NCR and other cinema movements, we have selected the top 10 films unanimously accepted as belonging to this movement, in the order of their appearance. The following ASLs result: *Marfa și banii/Stuff and Dough* (Cristi Puiu, 2001) – ASL 21.9, *Moartea domnului Lăzărescu/The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (Cristi Puiu, 2005) – ASL 84.7, *Hârtia va fi albastră/The Paper Will Be Blue* (Radu Muntean, 2006) – ASL 49.1, *A fost sau n-a fost?/12:08 East of Bucharest* (Corneliu Porumboiu, 2006) – ASL 37.1, *4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile/4 weeks, 3 months and 2 days* (Cristian Mungiu, 2007) – ASL 88.5, *Boogie* (Radu Muntean, 2008) – ASL 187.3, *Polițist, Adjectiv/Police, adjective* (Corneliu Porumboiu, 2009) – ASL 72.9, *Cea mai fericită fată din lume/The Happiest Girl in the World* (Radu Jude, 2009) – ASL 64.1, *Felicia, înainte de toate/First of All, Felicia* (Răzvan Rădulescu, Melissa de Raaf, 2009) – ASL 92.2, *Mărți, după Crăciun/Tuesday, After Christmas* (Radu Muntean, 2010) – ASL 171.6.

The ASL average of these 10 titles is 86.9 seconds. The above calculations are part of a detailed study regarding ASL in the post-2000 Romanian film to be published separately, including the titles successful in festivals, as well as those with successful audiences.

Italian neorealism

Italian neorealism was born in the 1940s. The stylistic paradigm in which neo-realistic films find themselves stems largely from the political and social context of the moment.

In 20 years of fascism, free speech of any kind had been stifled, especially in the cinematic field – following Lenin's model, namely that of manipulating the masses through propaganda films, in parallel with a production of edulcorated entertainment films. With Italian neorealism, filmmakers brought to people imperfect, uncensored, sometimes tragic subjects, images and feelings. This movement addressed poverty, social unrest, the events in the life of the ordinary man and, of course, the recent historical events, marked by the Second World War.

Neorealism directors manage to transform common life situations into real emotional performances, by lifting the barriers of prejudice or rigid morality and by awakening feelings of empathy towards simple but sincere characters or conflicts. The expression used by Vittorio de Sica, referring to his neorealist films, was of *reality transposed into the world of poetry* (in his volume *Miracolo a Milano* of 1969).

Some of the characteristics of this movement, related to the logistical part of the creation of a film, were, in large part, the result of the post-war economic and social context in which film directors faced a lack of budgets and even the lack of film sets, since all film studios, including Cinecittà, the great studio founded by Benito Mussolini to execute propaganda productions, had been destroyed by bombing. Therefore, filmmakers resorted to various methods to cope with difficult circumstances, and these methods turned into emblematic elements of the movement; for example, filming outside, most often on the street – in the absence of a set – and hiring amateurs instead of professional actors. Also, most of the time artificial lights, specially designed, were not used, but natural light, and as a style of editing it was opted for long shots and a minimalist editing.

Another important feature is that the dialogues between the characters were not always limited to the rigors of a script, but could be improvised, towards a free and sometimes informal register.

Peter Bondanella wrote in his book, *A History of Italian Cinema*, that the films of Rossellini, De Sica and Visconti, although they do not reflect a coherent programmatic style, are accurately described by film historians as *d'auteur* works – films bearing the unmistakable signature of the individual style or thematic preoccupations of a single director.

The influence of this movement on cinema is undoubtedly a substantial one. From *nouvelle vague*, *cinéma vérité* and film noir, to Martin Scorsese's productions and films by contemporary indie directors (Chloe Zhao, Eliza Hittman, etc.), all cinema cultural movements have, at certain times, paid homage to Italian

neorealism. But the reason for the inclusion of this movement in this work is the major influence it had on the Romanian New Wave at a stylistic level, especially through the aesthetic valences of the sequence shots, emblematic in the construction of these films.

We selected the first 10 films unanimously accepted as belonging to this movement, in order of their appearance, and the following ASLs resulted: *Ossessione/Obsession* (Luchino Visconti, 1943) – ASL 17.2, *Roma città aperta/Rome, Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945) – ASL 9.8, *Sciuscià/Shoeshine* (Vittorio De Sica, 1946) – ASL 7.6, *Paisà/Paisan* (Roberto Rossellini, 1946) – ASL 8.7, *Il sole sorge ancora/Outcry* (Aldo Vergano, 1946) – ASL 7.7, *Ladri di biciclette/Bicycle Thieves* (Vittoria De Sica, 1948) – ASL 22.9, *La terra trema* (Luchino Visconti, 1948) – ASL 17.9, *Stromboli, terra di Dio/Stromboli, Land of God* (Roberto Rossellini, 1950) – ASL 10.9, *Bellissima/Beautiful* (Luchino Visconti, 1951) – ASL 21.2, *Umberto D.* (Vittorio De Sica, 1952) – ASL 7.2.

We obtained the ASL data from the Cinematics database. For a few of the films we found several different ASL calculations so we used their arithmetic mean: *Ossessione* (17.1, 18 and 16.5), *Bicycle Thieves* (6.2, 9.5, 7.2), *Bellissima* (20.4, 22), *Umberto D.* (8.6, 7.8, 7.4, 7.8).

Paisà (Roberto Rossellini, 1946) is composed of 6 episodes, each written by another screenwriter contracted by Rossellini. One of the episodes is written by Federico Fellini himself. To calculate the ASL of this film we calculated the average between the distinct measurements on Cinematics (Episode 1 – ASL 8.7 Episode 2 – ASL 6.6, Episode 3 – ASL 10, Episode 4 – ASL 9.5, Episode 5 – ASL 10.3, Episode 6 – ASL 6.8)

The ASL average for the sample of the 10 films representative for Italian neorealism is 13.1.

Dogme 95

Dogme 95 is an avant-garde film movement that took place predominantly between 1995 and 2005. The movement was initiated by Danish directors Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, who created *the Dogme 95 Manifesto* and the *Vows of Chastity* (Krause, 2007). They set out a set of rules to create films based on the traditional values of cinema narrative, limiting the use of modern technology and excluding the use of special effects. The two were later joined by directors Kristian Levring and Søren Kragh-Jacobsen, forming the Dogme 95 Collective.

The first Dogme film (Dogme #1) was *Festen/The Celebration* (Thomas Vinterberg, 1998). It won the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival that year. Lars von Trier's film *Idioterne/The Idiots* premiered at Cannes in the same edition but was less successful. After the two, other directors also made films based on the principles of Dogme 95. 35 films made between 1998 and 2005 are considered to be part of the Dogme 95 movement.

Dogme 95 has remained in the history of cinema as one of the essential movements and has had an enormous influence on all filmmakers working on a low budget.

If we superimpose the dominant stylistics in the NCR on the Dogme 95 rules we can find a series of definite correspondences. The most visible are: the preponderance of filming in the location (the first rule of Dogme), the exclusion of non-diegetic music, or the predominantly *hand-held* operation of the camera.

Then, at the thematic level both Dogme and NCR refuse or at least depart from the genre film. Spectacular effects – car chases, explosions, firearms – are also avoided.

Finally, both the Dogme 95 films and the NCR films deviate very little or not at all from the principles enunciated in Aristotle's *Poetics* regarding the dramaturgy that must be governed by unity of action, unity of place and unity of time.

For the Dogme 95 selection, the top 10 fiction films as listed by the creators were chosen. I did not include in the selection the number 8 film, *Fuckland* (José Luis Marqués, 2000) because this is a documentary-type film, and the number 9 film, *Babylon* (Vladan Zdravkovic, 2001), because it was never finished.

ASL calculations are as follows: *Festen/The Celebration* (Thomas Vinterberg, 1998) – ASL 6.6, *Idioterne/The Idiots* (Lars von Trier, 1998) – ASL 7.2, *Mifunes Sidste Sang/Mifune's Last Song* (Søren Kragh – Jacobsen, 1999) – ASL 4.8, *The King Is Alive* (Kristian Levring, 2000) – ASL 2.8, *Lovers* (Jean-Marc Barr, 1999) – ASL 28, *Julien Donkey-Boy* (Harmony Korine, 1999) – ASL 6.6, *Interview* (Daniel H. Byun, 2000) – ASL 15.9, *Chetzemoka's Curse* (Collective of Directors, 2001) – ASL 27.4, *Diapason* (Antonio Domenici, 2001) – ASL 9.7, *Italiensk for Begyndere/Italian for Beginners* (Lone Scherfig, 2000) – ASL 4.4. (*Chetzemoka's Curse* is signed by a group of directors including Rick Schmidt, Maya Berthoud, Morgan Schmidt-Feng, Dave Nold, Lawrence E. Pado, Marlon Schmidt and Chris Tow.)

For the *Festen*, *Idiots* and *Julien Donkey-Boy* films the ASL calculations from the Cinematics database were used, and for the remaining 7 films the ASL was calculated according to the method described in the beginning of the article. The average ASL of these 10 movies is 11.3 seconds.

Michelangelo Antonioni

Antonioni made his debut in 1943 as a short film director with the documentary *Gente del Po/People of the Po Valley*, and then, 7 years later, began his feature film series with *Cronaca di un Amore/Story of a Love Affair* (1950). *I Vinti/The Vanquished* (1953), *La Signora Senza Camelie/The Lady Without Camelias* (1953), *Le Amiche/The girlfriends* (1955), *Il Grido/The Cry* (1957), and in 1960, *L'Avventura/The Adventure*, the first film in the *trilogy on modernity and its shortcomings* (Holden, 2006), followed by *La Notte/The Night* (1961) and *L'Eclisse/The Eclipse* (1962). After *Il Deserto Rosso/Red Desert* (1964) followed a second trilogy, the one in English, which included the films *Blow-up* (1966), *Zabriskie Point* (1969), *Professione: reporter/The Passenger* (1975).

Michelangelo Antonioni is one of the most influential film directors of the post-war period. Opening the way to a modern world – which for us has already become far too familiar – his films dared to challenge their original audiences, with complex structural strategies and courageous psychological conflicts. Few spectators experienced such a relentless dissection, not only of human emotions and anxiety, but also of the power of adaptation of man in an era of uncertainty. (Gariff, 2012)

Although Antonioni does not use a directorial technique or imagery in itself, his films are distinguished by an ambiguity of the story and the absence of verbal communication of the facts themselves, precisely because the action takes place in the mental processes of the protagonists rather than in the concrete presentation of the events.

In his book, *Architetture della visione* (2007), Michelangelo Antonioni states the following:

In this way, the technique I use (which, in fact, for me is instinctive – I do not engage in a special project to shoot in a certain way) seems to me to be very closely related to the interest I give to filming the characters until the most hidden thoughts come to light. I self-delusion, thinking that by following them everywhere with the camera, I will make them talk. But I think it's much more cinematic to try to capture a person's thoughts through a common visual reaction, rather than enclosing them in a sentence of verbal, didactic form.

This is also why his frames end up being up to 7 minutes long, like the sequence before the last one in *The Passenger*. In the same film, in a preliminary editing version, there is another sequence that did not reach the final version, also because it was very long. About that sequence, the director recalls:

Thinking now, it is clear to me that I was unconsciously trying to render [the shot] a movement similar to that of our imagination, when it strives to give life to images that do not belong to us but that, little by little, we acquire. We color them, we give them sound – glimmers of color and sound – just like with memories. Or to dreams, which are laconic and out of place, in terms of their content, but very rich in sensations and thoughts. (Antonioni, 2007)

Even though Antonioni's remarks related to a certain sequence from a certain point in the film, this atmosphere is found in several of his creations. For example, some shots in *Blow-up* convey a dream-like state, in which the cognitive, rational part is in the secondary plane, while the ambience and sensory side are more intensely perceived.

Due to the characteristics mentioned above, as well as the declared influence on some NCR directors, such as Corneliu Porumboiu, I chose to compare the ASL of Antonioni's films in relation to the selection of films of the Romanian New Wave in this study.

For the comparative study most of Michelangelo Antonioni's films were selected, using the data from the Cinematics database, as follows:

Cronaca di un amore (1950) – ASL 32.5, *La signora senza camelie* (1953) – ASL 57, *Le Amiche* (1955) – ASL 26.7, *Il Grido* (1957) – ASL 19.8, *L'avventura* (1960) – ASL 17.9, *La Notte* (1961) – ASL 15.8, *L'Eclisse* (1962) – ASL 11.9, *Il deserto rosso* (1964) – ASL 10.4, *Blow-Up* (1966) – ASL 10.8, *Zabriskie Point* (1970) – ASL 8.1, *Professione: Reporter* (1975) – ASL 18.2, *Identificazione di una donna/Identification of a Woman* (1982) – ASL 13.9.

For some of the films I found several ASL results so I calculated their arithmetic mean: *Cronaca di un amore* (32.2, 32.7), *La signora senza camelie* (56.1, 55.6, 59.4), *Le Amiche* (26.6, 26.7), *Il Grido* (19.4, 20.2), *L'avventura* (17.8, 17.9, 18), *Il deserto rosso* (10.2, 10.1, 10.6, 10.7), *Blow-Up* (11.3, 11, 10.6, 10.2), *Zabriskie Point* (8.1, 7.9, 8.3), *Professione: Reporter* (17.8, 18.6).

The average ASL for these 12 movies is 20.3 seconds.

Conclusions

Resuming the ASL averages for each sample above, for the Romanian New Wave we have an average of 86.9 seconds, for Italian neorealism 13.1 seconds, for Dogme 95 11.3 seconds, and for Michelangelo Antonioni's films we have an ASL average of 20.3 seconds. At the beginning of the article, I remembered the general tendency of films as a genre average to intensify their editing pace. All these movements have as an average ASL values higher than the time period corresponding to the study of James Cutting. The closest to the average of those years is Italian neorealism. In this case, we are dealing with a comparison between NCR and selections of films that long precede the Romanian New Wave or that end up intersecting tangentially as is the case with Dogme 95. The difference in ASL averages between NCR and the rest of the selections is particularly large, showing the extreme character in terms of film editing of NCR and places it in a countermovement of the times.

Other findings from this research: NCR is not rooted in terms of the pacing of editing in Italian neorealism. It has in common with this movement, the choice of themes and subjects regarding ordinary people put in difficult situations in relation to society and themselves. NCR has no roots in terms of the pacing of editing in Dogme 95. From this movement it borrows the systematic removal of special effects, non-diegetic music and the freedom of camera movements. NCR has no roots in terms of the pacing of editing in Michelangelo Antonioni's films. However, his influence is recognizable in the frequent presence of periods of silence on screen, as well as in the minimalist play of the actors.

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