

Communication Errors in the Film Aferim!

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Abstract: This paper aims to present the analysis of the film "Aferim!", a fictional story about Gypsies living in Wallachia in the early 19th century and that can be compared with other similar productions awarded in Europe. The situation of the Gypsies is illustrated in an original, complex manner in the film "Aferim!", directed by Radu Jude, winner of several important international awards. The historical context plays a major role in the depiction of this minority. Even if the critics, including the foreign ones, appreciated "Aferim!", we found certain aspects related to the film's intertextual and cinematographic construction that can be seen from a different point of view. This paper discusses the various facets of "Aferim!", from history to language and film grammar, also taking into consideration the fact that it is seen as an accomplishment of Romanian cinema.

Keywords: film, audience, history, Gypsies

1. INTRODUCTION

The decision to analyze the film Aferim! it came as a result of some contradictions observed between the prestigious award obtained in Berlin and some press reports that disputed some points of view present in the film. Several chronicles that catalogued the film as a new beginning for Romanian historical film (<https://societatesicultura.ro/2015/03/aferim/>). The film is a Romanian-Bulgarian-French-Czech co-production from 2015, directed by Radu Jude, awarded at the Berlin Film Festival with the Silver Bear for the best director and at the 2016 Gopo Gala in several categories. The description for the promotion is simple: "At the beginning of the 19th century, in Wallachia, a local policeman, Costandin (Teodor Corban), is hired by Iordache, a local nobleman, to find Carfin (Toma Cuzin), a slave who had run away from the boyar's estate after having an affair with his wife, Sultana (Mihaela Sirbu). Costandin sets off in search of the fugitive, beginning a journey full of adventures." (<http://aarc.ro/en/articol/aferim-istoria-ca-ucenicie>)

We will try to further analyze the main positive and negative reviews about Aferim!. We will use the classic elements of film analysis, extratextual analysis, intratextual analysis, the use of montage and sound.

To begin with, let us present some elements of extratextual analysis - the film's relationship with the reality that inspired it.

The action takes place in the year 1835, a year with few notable public events, mentioned by the encyclopaedia of Romania: the Saxons established in that year, in Braşov, the first bank in Transylvania, the "Kronstädter Allgemeine Sparkasse", in Iaşi the Michaelmas Academy was inaugurated, and in Braşov the establishes the weekly magazine "Paper for mind, heart and literature" ("Foaiepentruminte, inimăşiliteratură") under the direction of George Bariţiu (Belu, 2022). Perhaps the most important event of 1835 was the adoption of the leu as the official currency of Romania. But for the action of the film, the legal situation of Romania seems more important to us, which on March 30, 1830 had concluded the elaboration of the Organic Regulations, the first acts with constitutional content on the territory of Romania. These laid the foundations of a new internal organization in Moldova and Wallachia, after the end of the Phanariot regime. At that time, the Romanian Principalities were under Ottoman suzerainty and Tsarist protectorate (Giurescu, 2019). Under these conditions, the application of the law in Wallachia was based especially on customs, on local law,

within which the relationship of suzerainty-vassalage played a very important role. The boyars obtained from the ruler a right of political administration and a right of judgement over the lands they owned; in other words, the right to enjoy a quasi-political independence over the lands, their private property (Curpăn, 2014, p. 86). If we look at it through the lens of the history of law, it was an archaic way of maintaining social order and administering justice which gave the boyars a quasi-absolute power over those who lived on their estates.

Under these conditions, the action of the boyar Iordache from the movie "Aferim!" was totally legal, even if brutal and outside of today's judicial standards, because it fit the customs of the era. The revolutionary year 1848 was still far away. It is to Radu Jude's credit that he turned a banal period story into a drama with racial connotations. If we add the fact that the boyar was led to an extreme reaction by the alleged sexual relationship between his wife and the slave, the action of the film becomes even more unrepresentative of the era. An individual fact cannot be raised to the rank of generality. We consider such an association between a free person and a slave to be unrepresentative also because "mixed marriages were rare and, throughout the Middle Ages, entailed the loss of freedom for the non-gypsy spouse. Prince Constantin Alexandru Ipsilanti (he ruled in Romania and Moldova), in an act from 1804, imposes heavy punishments for such accompaniments - for the slave's owners, for the priests who officiated the wedding and those who dared to marry." (D. Dieaconu, <https://historia.ro/>)

2. BRIEF INTER TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The fascination of directors and creators for the life of Gypsies is not new. Serbian director Aleksandar Petrovic won the grand prize at Cannes in 1967 with the film "I Even Met Happy Gypsies" (in Serbian Skupljači perja), director Emil Kusturica made "Time of the Gypsies" (in Serbian Dom za vešanje). So, we can say that the theme of Gypsies continues to fascinate for their hard, non-conformist life, with distinct customs, which have been preserved over the centuries. For the marketing of the film, we can say that the involvement of a Gypsy character in the action of the film was effective, we assume that attracted the attention of the jury. Today, the European Union has numerous programs to overcome the racial aspects that concern the Gypsies, spread in all European countries.

Another successful film about Gypsies is the film "Queen of the Gypsies" ("Șatra"), by the director from the Republic of Moldova, Emil Loteanu, based on several short stories by Maxim Gorki.

3. INTER TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The chosen title "Aferim!" in Turkish means "Bravo. Very good". The title is effective from a journalistic and communication point of view, it is penetrating, it is easy to remember, but it targets a space that has never had a significant cultural influence in the Romanian Countries, as Turkey's influence was eminently military and political. The Romanian lands were under Turkish suzerainty, but they never had a regime of occupation. Religion was free, the population was not Islamized like in Albania, for example, but could keep their religion. The influence of the Turkish language on the Romanian language was minor, so we appreciate that the title of the film is irrelevant from the perspective of the influence of the Turkish language on the Romanian language. In anempiricalresearch, we asked two sets of students, each of fifty people, if they know what aferim means in Romanian. None knew.

From the very beginning we want to clearly mention that we consider "Aferim!" a good film. What we want to show is the fact that the solutions adopted by the director, such as the excessive simple story, with a chronological way of presenting the action, with a narrative montage in the film construction, with an unjustifiably vulgar language of the characters, create premises, in our opinion, the conditions for the audience to receive an erroneous, aggressive overall message, even if the director intended it.

The director's decision to use only wide shots for filming, especially the long shot and the full shot, conveys an impersonal message. Wide shots are descriptive and are usually used to locate and describe a space. Their excessive use, in prolonged horseback riding, with an overlapping text, leads to the impression of a narrator telling us a story, not of two actors having a dialogue, and the viewer can be associated with an external viewer, not a participant in the action of the film. These fragments seem to belong to a documentary film, not a fiction film. The tight shots, the medium shot, very rarely

the close-up, the extreme close-up shot that is completely missing, are types of shots that emphasize the characters, that give flavour and substance to the story. These frames that transpose the viewer into the film are scarcely used.

The editing of the film is of a narrative type, which aims to create a coherent, chronological but very slow story, with long and tiring shots, seen as if from the omnipresent perspective of the narrator, which gives the film a slow pace, a pace that contrasts with that of most mass entertainment offerings contemporary audiences are accustomed to. Communication studies have shown that the public's attention is currently strongly fragmented, as a result of the exposure of short and very short productions, specific to the Internet, social networks etc. For this reason, the pace of the film is perceived as sluggish, which hardly maintains the audience's attention. The editing, even if we are talking about a slow, narrative one, is a good one - coherent, in accordance with the director's vision of the film.

Another aspect frequently encountered in Romanian films, also present in "*Aferim!*", is related to the film's soundtrack. Dialogues are difficult for viewers to understand due to poor sound processing. Those who work in the film industry know that if viewers do not immediately understand what is being said in the film, there will be a perception delay until they understand the dialogue or will ignore it altogether, which will result in the truncation of the perceived information. Under these conditions, a delay will accumulate between the instant understanding of the dialogues and the moment of the film. The reaction of the public will inevitably be a decrease in attention. If the viewer is at home and watching the movie on TV, he will inevitably change the channel. It is the natural reaction when the eye and the ear come into conflict.

The film's music, which is part of the soundtrack, is well chosen and contributes to the flow of the story. Sometimes it compensates for the neutral tone of the sequences, given by the use of wide shots. The music in "*Aferim!*" gives consistency and contributes to the creation of the film's distinctive style.

An unnecessary scene, which might have been absent from the film without unbalancing the story, is the scene with the priest, with the carriage on the way. At one point, at minute 16 and 15 seconds, the local policeman Costandin and his son, the young Ioniță, meet a "priest in a dress" who has a broken cart wheel. The two stop to help him, and the priest, when he hears that they are looking for a "gypsy slave who ran away and stole the boyar's money", begins a series of invectives against the Roma ethnic group. But the priest does not stop there, asked by the local policeman if "are the gypsies human or do they belong to the Evil One?" he launches into an invective rhetoric towards the Jews as well. At the end of the tirade, he does not omit from his speech other "ethnic groups on earth". The scene does not contribute to the characterization of the characters and is forgotten throughout the film, without any further reference to it. In addition to having been inserted gratuitously, it is also largely historically false. The priest's language is vulgar, and he is presented as illiterate. In fact, priests were among the few educated people in the era. In 1835, when the action of the film takes place, the Cyrillic alphabet was still in force, so the priests were obliged to know this alphabet. The replacement of the Cyrillic alphabet with the Latin one was officially decreed after 1860 by ruler Alexandru Ioan Cuza, although it had been introduced in the schools of Muntenia 10 years earlier, and since 1830 and especially after 1840, a transitional alphabet in which Cyrillic characters were mixed with the Latin ones was unofficially adopted in all territories inhabited by Romanians (Draica, 2010). Paradoxically, the priest in the film attacks the church, the minorities and even the using a contemporary language, specific to the period in which the film was made. The moment is obviously unrealistic and inevitably calls into question the purpose of this directorial approach. It unnecessarily vexes the viewers who have the same religion as the priest and does not bring any additional value to the film. Concerns regarding the status of slaves were at their highest during that period. For example, ruler Grigore Ghica III demanded by a law that the members of the same family of slaves should no longer be separated, a decision supported by the Metropolia, who wrote that they, the slaves, "are made by God, like other people ..." (C. C. Giurescu, 2019, p. 551)

Some critics declared that "*Aferim!*" is a historical film. It is historical only because the story is set in a certain historical period, in the first half of the 19th century. The director using the black and white image wanted to emphasize the historical film aspect to give it a timeless quality. Currently we are used to the black and white image being used in certain sequences of the film where a character

remembers some dreams, it can be in black and white flashback or a person who has some visions of what will follow, flashforward. The respective moments can be marked in black and white to attract the viewers' attention.

Of course, there are well-known examples in which the use of black and white throughout the film is dramaturgically justified, completes the aesthetics of the film, and places us in a historical period when films were black and white: "Schindler's List" (1993), directed by Steven Spielberg, winner of 7 Academy Awards awards, and "The Artist" (2011), directed by Michel Hazanavicius, winner of 5 Academy Awards.

In order to support the false statement of a historical film, the director presents us at the end with a list of old authors who should lend credibility to his approach. Unfortunately, even this brief presentation creates the suspicion of an artifice because the respective authors do not have a work dominated by the vulgar language used in the film, suggested as the language of the era.

If we look at the sequences from the film "Aferim!", we notice a repetitiveness of the film construction. Thus, we find the same horseback ride full of explanatory text throughout the film, interrupted by stops at the monastery, at the gypsy settlement on the river bank, at the house where the fugitive gypsy is caught, at the fair, at the inn and at the mansion.

If we take into account the order and structure of the sequences, we could do an imagination exercise and say that the riding sequences, which are built at a slow pace and based on text, can be associated with the interview component of a docudrama, and the other sequences, where the action takes place, with the moments of "reenactment" from a docudrama. Even the director at the end of the film, by listing the texts from which he was inspired, perhaps suggests this dual approach in the construction of the film. On the one hand, we have long, slow sequences, where the dialogue between the characters is actually a long explanatory text regarding issues that, surprisingly or not, are on the public agenda today; however, replaced in the period in which the filmed action takes place, these lines unsettle the viewers not only because they address today's issues, but also because they employ today's language.

This slow film construction, based on a long and sometimes tedious text, coupled with the film's often gratuitously vulgar language, can distance the audience from the film. The sensitive issues that are addressed, even in a comical key, can create unnecessary confusion and offence.

The fact that the director chose to make the picture in black and white wants to tell us from the beginning that his intention was to make a period film, a historical film. The film also worked in sepia, colour, as the director himself stated in an interview. The fact that at the end he tells us what old texts inspired him again is a clear indication that he wanted to make a historical film. But as we stated before, even if historical films depict a given period of time and try to be as accurate as possible in relation to the context of the period, this prevents us from having reservations about how to convey the filmic message.

4. CAN WE ASSOCIATE IT WITH A DOCUMENTARY?

If we look at the sequences from the film "Aferim!", we notice a repetitiveness of the way of film construction. Thus, we will find the same ride on horseback, which lasts for whole minutes, full of explanatory text throughout the film, interrupted by stops at the monastery, at the gypsy settlement on the river bank, at the house where the gypsy is trapped, at the barns, at the inn and at the mansion.

If we consider the order and structure of the sequences, a repetitive and slow structure, we could do an exercise in imagination and say that the riding sequences, which are built in a slow pace and based on the text, can be associated with the part of interview from a docudrama, and the other sequences, where the action takes place the moments of "reenactment" from a docudrama. Even the director at the end of the film, by listing the texts from which he was inspired, perhaps suggests this dual approach in the construction of the film. On the one hand, we have long, slow sequences where the dialogue between the characters is actually a long, explanatory text referring to issues that are pressing even today, but related to the period in which the filmed action takes place and the sequences that unite this journey on horseback and which seem they come to exemplify, to reinforce what was explained in the previous sequence.

5. CONCLUSIONS

"Aferim!" is a film that won the Silver Bear for Best Director in Berlin. It's a fact. The real strengths of the film for foreign audiences can be defined briefly: an exotic story with gypsies from South-Eastern Europe, with a violent ending.

"Aferim!" is presented to us as a historical film, which addresses a contemporary theme, discrimination against Gypsies, through an example from the 19th century. In fact, the film cannot be a source of study for certain eras, because it is a commercial product, which is sold according to the rules of specific marketing. A recent example of the disputes created around a film which declares itself historical is the film "Napoleon" by Ridley Scott, about which the American critic Stephanie Zacharek writes in her review for "Time": "Your opinion about Napoleon does not depend only on how much history you know, but also by the country you come from: the French see him as a hero, and the English as a possible psychopath". However, critics agree that the film "Napoleon" is not a historical film, it is simply a fictional film based on a historical character. "Aferim!" is also a fiction film.

What must be emphasized is the fact that "Aferim!" received an important international award. The language is vulgar, which can also be found in other Romanian films. The director considers vulgar language an element of attraction for the public.

The film contains a pointless scene in which a priest gives a delirious speech. Using the narrative thread of the film as a pretext, the director introduces this sequence unrelated to the story, just to deliver a personal message about the church. The film "Aferim!" can be considered, through the awards it received, a reference film in Romanian cinema, with a sensitive subject, a film that tried to knock down some old canons of Romanian cinema, with a language that has aroused and will arouse controversy every time it is viewed.

At the European level, France has probably succeeded best in developing a national cinematographic industry. It took over the production methods of Hollywood, dynamic script, alert editing, and also preserved the specifics of European cinema, with subtle dialogues of substance. In Romania, the situation of cinematographic production can be deciphered very well by following the data on the number of paying viewers of Romanian films. If at the beginning of the "new Romanian wave" the films had very few viewers, excelling at festivals, as Constantin Fugașin, the president of the Romanian Film Association (AFR) mentioned, "Until 2013, the film "Nea Mărin Billionaire" directed by Sergiu Nicolaescu, had more viewers (about 7.5 million) than all the almost 200 Romanian films made after 1989". After 2015, there was a change in Romanian cinema. A beneficial change, because the proportion of "festival films" has significantly decreased in favor of independent films, of "audience films". Breakthroughs were the films "Selfie" (2014) with over 90,000 viewers and "Selfie69" (2016) with 150,536 viewers, both directed by Cristina Iacob. They followed: "Oh, Ramona" (2019), directed by Criatina Iacob with over 260,000 viewers, 5GANG: A different Christmas (2019), directed by Matei Dima with over 345,000 viewers, "Miami Bici" (2020), directed by Jesus del Cerro with more than 550,000 spectators, "Camp" (2021), directed by Vali Dobrogeanu with 143,000 spectators, so that from 2022 we will witness the appearance of independent films that easily surpassed the 300,000 spectators: "Mirciulică" (2022) directed by Cristian Ilisuan, "Teambuilding" (2022), directed by Alex Cotet, Matei Dima, Cosmin Nedelcu, "Action pack" (2023), directed by Vali Dobrogeanu, Romina VTM (2023), directed by Paul Razvan Macovei, Miami Bici 2 (2023), directed Jesus del Cerro.

Today, in 2024, we can firmly affirm that Romanian cinematography, after a rather hesitant period of transition after the Revolution of 1989, also generates feature-length artistic films that are "sold out" in Romanian cinemas (<https://panorama.ro/filme-romanesti-comerciale-bani-cinema/>).

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