

The Image of the Lower Danube between Propaganda and Authenticity

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In Romania they made a lot of propaganda films about the Danube. The first one was made as early as 1911: *The Voyage of the Royal Family on the Danube/ Călătoria familiei regale pe Dunăre* (directed by Gheorghe Ionescu). It is a documentary produced by Venus Studios about a voyage from Călărași to Sulina and Constantza made by King Carol I accompanied by his family in order to inspect the navy equipment.

The first documentary on the Lower Danube valuable not only for being early but also for some impressive images is *The Danube from the Black Forest to the Black Sea/ Dunărea de la Pădurea Neagră la Marea Neagră/ Die Donau von den Schwarzenwald bis zum Schwarzen Meer*. It was made in 1929 for the Institute for Cultural Research (Institut für Kulturforschung) in Berlin by director Hans Cürliş and shot by Walter Türk. The Romanian production partner was the Press Directorate (“Direcția presei”). In its last part the documentary shows the Danube crossing the Carpathian Mountains. The landscape is spectacular but the navigation is very difficult especially at Cazane Gorges (“the Boiling Pots” in translation or Djerdap in Serbian) because of the rocks and due to the strong current as the river is very narrow again as in Ingolstadt, with a width of only 170 m.

After the founding of a governmental studio the number of such propaganda documentaries increased. In 1936 the National Office for Tourism (“Oficiul Național de Turism”) was including a new Cinema Department (“Serviciul Cinematografic”). In 1937 the Cinema Department becomes the Directorate of Cinema (“Direcția Cinematografiei”) of the Ministry of Propaganda. The same year the new sound studio of the directorate is ready. The next year the directorate becomes the National Office of Cinema (“Oficiul Național al Cinematografiei”, in short ONC), a board reopened in 1990 after the French model and existent today under the name of National Centre of Cinema (“Centrul Național al Cinematografiei”).¹

Beginning with 1936, respectively 1940, Romanian cinema began a close collaboration with the German studios UFA and Wien Film, as well as with the Italian Ufficio Nazionale della Cinematografia mainly in order to benefit of technical assistance for sound (Tobis Klang) and even colour image (Agfa). At the same time the Bulgarian cinema was closely collaborating with the Hungarian one², while the Albanian cinema began in fact in 1941 with the Italian- Albanian studio Tomorri Film³. The Romanian collaboration with Germany in cinema was materialized mainly in newsreels and documentary films. Between 1936- 1944 at least 13 documentary films were made in co-production on different topics: gold and oil exploitation, Bucharest, natural and historical monuments of Romania, hunting bears and wolves, the collaboration between Romanian and German air forces and the Danube Delta and its reed, fishes, pelicans and eagles.⁴

The documentary film *Vilcov. The Life of the Fishermen in Vâlcov/ Vilcovul. Viața pescarilor din Deltă* (1937, Germany- Romania, directed by Jupp Rubner) is typical for the time. Vâlcov, nowadays in Ukraine, was the best known place in the Danube Delta as a beautiful and genuine rural Venice where the canals replaced the streets and therefore the inhabitants were moving on bridges or by rowing vessels. The film is mixture of propaganda and touristic film, as well as a mixture of documentary and fiction. The visit of some German tourists (featured by four Romanian actors) motivates the disclosure of the picturesque life of a fishing community.

During communism the number of propaganda films increased significantly. Beginning with 1964 the documentary films showed embankment works, draining ponds in order to obtain fertile lands in the Danube meadows, such as of the Great Brăila Island. They were considered good examples of showing how communism was able to improve the life of the inhabitants and to modify a landscape unchanged for ages.

Reed/ Stuf (1966) is considered today one of the masterpieces of the Romanian documentary. However, in fact the film has been commissioned to director Titus Meszaros in order to promote wood saving and the use of reed in its place. Although in the end the film shows how the reed is processed by machines into cellulose the impression is that the film is in fact a poetical foray into the harsh life of the people living in the Danube Delta. The images shot by DOP William Goldgraber with people skating or driving sledges driven by donkeys at sunrise are both poetical and realistic. Their sledges and skates are primitive therefore the people do not seem to live in the 20th century but in the the 16th century. They remind of the Renaissance peasants from the painting “Winter Landscape with Skaters and a Bird Trap” (1565) by Peter Bruegel the Elder. Obviously, the unmistakable sound of Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana* as music score contributes decisively to such suggestion. By showing less machines and more primitive sledges and skates the director suggested that life in the Danube Delta has not changed for centuries, an idea contradicting the official propaganda which insisted that communism has improved the peasants life. Although he failed to make a propaganda film, Titus Meszaros made a memorable film that the authorities had to accept.

The construction of the hydropower station of Iron Gates 1 and of other facilities meant to improve navigation in the Danube gorges began in 1964 and ended in 1972. The great project became a symbol of the potency of the communist government of Romania and of the Romanian-Yugoslav friendship. Some of the documentary films were made in co-production with Yugoslavia, especially the ones about the hydropower station of Iron Gates 1, such as *The Danube’s Iron Gates Are Open/ S-au deschis Porțile de Fier ale Dunării/ Navigacija* (1972, directed by Mircea D. Popescu and Vladimir Çarin).

Monuments at Iron Gates/ Monumente la Porțile de Fier (1967, directed by Nicolae Otrocol and Mircea D. Popescu) is at first sight a touristic documentary commissioned by the Department of Historic Monuments (“Comisia monumentelor istorice”). The images shot by Constantin I. Teodorescu are spectacular as they are shot from the boat and airplane. One can

see the ruins of the Roman bridge, Ada-Kaleh Island, other medieval fortresses (Drencova, Tri Cule) but also the site of Iron Gates 1 hydropower station. The comments, as well as the images suggest that the hydropower station is another monument, a contemporary one but not less impressive than the old monuments.

Last spring in Ada-Kaleh/ Ultima primavara pe Ada-Kaleh (1968, directed by Petre Sirin, director of photography Liviu Nițu) was filmed in the spring of 1968 at the request of the Commission of Historical Monuments. The film evokes the history of the island using old maps and engravings besides images of the island at the time, inclusively the ones showing dismantling the fortress and Muslim cemetery in order to be built again on Șimian Island. Some images with tourists on the island are shot in the previous years.

Although *...And then the Town Was Built/ ...apoi s-a clădit orașul* (1972) includes a lot of older footage, unlike other directors Constantin Vaeni had the patience to spend several months in Orșova in order to make a film about the demolition of a town and its reconstruction. He witnessed not only the spectacular change but mainly the effect on the local people. Unlike other films the comments and the timbre of the voice over are not proud and cheerful but affectionate. Orșova's inhabitants admit the necessity of the hydropower station, they seem proud to be part of a huge project but some of them have tears in their eyes and their voices are always melancholic. The camera shows the old town during spring, as well as the demolition and it lingers on the graveyard or the cross almost covered by the waters of the Danube. Such images became real symbols of the disappearance of some communities and after Constantin Vaeni's example they began to be used also in other Romanian documentaries. For such images the film is considered today "a poem"⁵.

Reference

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