

**“SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?” THE PROMISE OF EUROPE
AND FEMALE IDENTITY IN *FRANCESCA* (2009)**

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Abstract: *Starting from the premise that intra-EU migration has generated a repertoire of representations, narratives and stances in Romanian public imagination, within a transnational context, the present article explores an area that has attracted little scholarly attention to date: Romanian New Cinema films that tackle this theme. The analysis focuses on “Francesca” (Bobby Păunescu, 2009), a film centred on a female character who is on the verge of deciding whether to emigrate or not. It examines how female identity and agency are shaped in connection to symbolic constructions of the “West” as a destination space for Romanian migrants, through modalities of expression specific to the New Romanian Cinema.*

Keywords: *intra-EU migration, New Romanian Cinema, Romanian migration to Italy, symbolic construction, women migrants.*

1. Introduction: Romanian Intra-EU Migration in Public Imagination

After the fall of communism, in December 1989, Romanian intra-EU migration has gradually increased, reaching high levels between 2002 and 2007, and especially after 2007, which marked Romania’s accession to the European Union (Sandu 2010; see also Diminescu 2009). The number of Romanian migrants stood at 3.6 million in 2015/2016 (OECD 2019) and is constantly going up. Important effects of this massive phenomenon include labour shortage

in certain fields (construction, the medical profession), “brain drain”, the creation of vulnerable groups (children or elders left in the country of origin) and demographic decline. At the same time, Romanian society has witnessed the formation of new social relations and practices, shaped through migratory processes and migrant-non-migrant interactions in home and host societies, which situate it within a transnational social field (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Among them are remittance-sending, institutional strategies of engaging the diaspora in the country of origin, ways of living in multiple spaces, and so forth (for these data, see Diminescu 2009; Sandu 2010; Vlase 2013, among others).

Romanian intra-EU migration has been a permanent topic on the public agenda, in the media and political spheres. As such, it has fostered different identifications and evaluations of the actors and practices of migration (for example, good and bad migrants, positive or negative social change), depending on the perspectives and stakes of those involved, and different policy solutions, originating, among other things, in particular constructions of the problems caused by migration (for example, discrimination against Romanian migrants in host countries, exploitation of migrant workers, country image) (Beciu et al. 2018a). Sets of representations, narratives, assumptions, stereotypes and images about intra-EU migration actors and practices have been thus articulated, together with “categories of language”, such as “the orphans of migration”, various types of “exodus” (of young people, highly skilled migrants), “the Romanian slaves”, a category that includes the women care workers who look after the elderly, and many others (Beciu et al. 2018a: 11). At a broader level, this repertoire is shaped and transformed in the course of symbolic interactions among social actors in the Romanian public space, in a range of contexts, constituting a *public imagination* (Asen 2002, among others) on intra-EU migration (see Beciu 2011 on the media and public imaginary on Romanian migration). Collective imaginings of social actors, spaces, practices and so on are processes through which “a shared social world” is constituted, where some are advantaged and others disadvantaged (Asen 2002:347-348), as “imagining engages” “the power [and politics] of representation” (353). In this article, we posit that feature films may be seen to take part in such processes in characteristic ways, as works of fiction. While the construction of Romanian intra-EU migration in the mainstream written press and on television, and in alternative media (diasporic publications and social media) has been extensively analysed in recent years (Beciu et al. 2018b, among others), scholars have given much less attention to this theme in feature films made after the fall of communism (1989), a notable exception being Doru Pop (2014).

In the present article, we seek to address this gap by examining one of the New Romanian Cinema films that focuses on intra-EU migration during post-communism:

Francesca (Bobby Păunescu, 2009). The film brings to the fore the pre-migration period, portraying the characters as they are negotiating their identities in connection to an imagined “West”, which, however, had penetrated the Romanian public culture and social imaginary both through extensive public debates on Europe, in the years leading up to Romania’s EU integration, and through various representations and images of Romanian migrants in the media and political spheres, also reproduced in the private sphere of everyday interactions. *Francesca* is one in a series of films that tackle the topic of Romanian emigration to Western European countries, which will be briefly discussed in the following section. The current research will look primarily at the main female character, Francesca (played by actress and fashion model Monica Bârlădeanu), whose (failed) emigration experience is highlighted in Păunescu’s film, the construction of gender identities within this frame being another major focus of our study. What symbolic resources on Romanian migration and Europe, as a space of destination (“the promise of Europe”), are used and recreated in the film to construct Francesca’s identity, as a prospective emigrant, in relation to family, friends, sending and receiving society? How is the experience of intra-EU migration envisaged from the perspective of power relations between characters? How do the techniques of the New Romanian Cinema position film viewers towards the theme of migration as developed in the construction of the main female character? Our interest lies in how the film construes Romanian intra-EU migration by developing viewpoints and modalities of expression specific to the New Romanian Cinema.

As we noted earlier, we interpret feature films as having the capacity to participate, in characteristic modes and to different degrees, in processes of collective imagining, in this case the imagining of Europe, Romanian migrants, and the identities of Romanian women who go to work in Italy. As such, we believe they could be placed among the sources that “fill” the gaps created in “information and imagination” by the physical and symbolic distance between the country of origin and the country of destination, which also reflect power “asymmetries” between migrants and non-migrants (Carling 2008). Feature films incorporate and creatively transform representations, narratives and images from a social imaginary on intra-EU migration, and produce new imaginings. Occasionally, they may also spark public debates, which was *Francesca*’s case (see below).

The New Romanian Cinema films lend themselves well to this approach, given that they are concerned with rendering a “slice of life” in the transition years of post-communist Romania. As researcher Lucia Simona Dinescu points out, “a decade after the turning point marked by the Revolution, films started to provide their own relative and negotiating answers to [...] socio-anthropological questions” (2013:19, our translation), among which migration

obviously had an important place. A similar line of analysis is opened up by Pop (2014:79), who discusses the “re-interpretation of [mainstream media] stereotypes” about migration in the New Romanian Cinema films and points to the “social relevance” (86) that such films acquire due to their neorealism, among other factors. *Francesca* made an impact in the Italian public space (see also Pop 2014:86), with public figures such as politicians Alessandra Mussolini and the mayor of Verona, Flavio Tosi, strongly reacting to what they interpreted as defamatory statements against themselves and the Italian people, and attempting to have the distribution of the film blocked (Akbar 2009). The film therefore fostered a public debate, which put the co-producer and director, Bobby Păunescu, in a position of stating his objectives and expressing an engaged stance in the issue of Romanian immigration to Italy and of the crisis that broke out in 2007 (see our Discussion section):

What is important about my film is its discussion of the Romanian community. Twenty per cent of the population in the last 10 years have emigrated, the majority to Italy, which has become the ‘promised land’ for many Romanians. Yet at the same time, there is a negative perception about the country. The film is not an attack on anyone. I’m trying to highlight the prejudices. I think the film creates a valid debate. (quoted in Akbar 2009, online)

We believe all this legitimates a look at *Francesca* as engaging with an existing repertoire of representations, narratives and images on intra-EU migration and women migrants in Romanian public imagination (transnationally shaped), in a particular context. In this analysis, we draw upon insights from previous work on Romanian intra-EU migration and the construction of women care workers in the Romanian mainstream and diasporic media (Mădroane 2017, 2018; see also Beciu et al. 2018b) and on film analysis (Baya and Chevereșan 2018; Chevereșan and Baya 2015). We begin by discussing the New Romanian Cinema and its characteristics, and by locating the film we analyse in this landscape.

2. The New Romanian Cinema and the Topic of Emigration

“The Romanian New Wave” in cinema is a term describing a generation of directors that started producing films in the early 2000s using a set of themes, approaches and stylistic features that differed significantly from Romanian films made during communism or the 1990s. Cristi Puiu, Cătălin Mitulescu, Corneliu Porumboiu, Radu Muntean and Cristian Mungiu are among the early representatives of this generation, whose films received a lot of attention at several prominent European film festivals, including Cannes, Berlin and Venice. The term is

sometimes used interchangeably with “New Romanian Cinema”, but, according to several film researchers, the latter refers only to a particular stylistic formula (Gorzo 2012, among others; see also Dinescu 2013).

Long and wide shots, dedramatization, diegetic sound, real-time sequences and minor scene editing are some of the distinctive features that are part of this formula, together with a wider tendency towards “minimalism” and “grassroots mimetism” (Șerban 2009:56-60): small film budget, hand held camera and a simple, strong and straightforward storyline that generally avoids the fictional conventions and artifices of mainstream cinema. This avoidance was often used as an explanation for why most New Romanian Cinema films were a lot better received at film festivals than at home. Not only did they attract little interest from film distributors and the Romanian public, but they were also criticised by a part of the local media for presenting a sordid, pessimistic image of the country, for selling “misérabilisme” as a means to gain attention at international film festivals (Șerban 2009).

Distinguishing between the “Romanian New Wave” (RNW), as a biological generation of directors born during the late 1960s and 1970s, and the “New Romanian Cinema” (NRC), as an aesthetic manner of making cinema, is important because not all films included under the RNW necessarily share the aesthetic requirements of NRC. For example, the directors of two of the most prominent films released in the 2000s on the topic of Romanian migration to Europe – *Occident* (2002) and *Francesca* (2009) – are part of the same generation and yet each negotiates its adherence to NRC. If *Occident*, Mungiu’s debut feature, was described as being “both a film d’auteur and a crowd pleaser” (Șerban 2009:224) with a screenplay based on a “network narrative” structure, often used in mainstream cinema (Gorzo 2018:258), combining “cine-verité realism of location, sound and dialogue” with storytelling relativism and “highly stylized photography (color, filters, fading)” (Ieta 2012:201), *Francesca* bears a closer resemblance to the aesthetic practices of NRC. One of the few feature films directed by Bobby Păunescu, who otherwise is better known as businessman and film producer, *Francesca* was clearly influenced by the presence of Cristi Puiu as part of the production team. Described by many as the actual founder of both RNW and NRC through the release of his landmark film *Cash and dough* (*Marfa și banii*) in 2001, Puiu was the co-owner of the film production company behind *Francesca*, together with Păunescu. This might serve as an explanation as to why the well-established trademarks of his auctorial style can be seen throughout Păunescu’s film: prevalently long and slow-paced shots, wide and medium angles captured by the camera – avoiding the medium close shots and the close ups that Hollywood audiences are used to – and a general commitment to rendering a “slice of life”-type of story. This entails picturing the

characters in their daily routine, at times doing things that are not tightly connected to the storyline. For example, one scene from *Francesca* depicts the heroine's fiancé, Miță (played by Dorian Boguță), going through a long and “disproportionately elaborate ritual” of unpacking and eating a small triangle of processed cheese. The apparently excessive length of the scene has nothing to do with the character's physiological need for food, but is a tool for suggesting the latent tension and suppressed desperation generated by the moral deadlock he finds himself in (Chirilov 2011).

Real-time episodes such as this one are part of an overall commitment to making films that render life as closely as possible to reality, which is widely present in NRC productions and was connected by critic Andrei Gorzo to French theorist André Bazin's views on cinematography. Bazin noticed that the analytical or dramatic editing of shots – a technique perfected in American cinema by the 1920s and still considered a conventional rule in most productions – represents an artificial distortion of reality. Moreover, it encourages spectators to passively receive what the director already selected and interpreted for them from reality, thus destroying creative ambiguities and channelling the public's understanding towards single meanings (Gorzo 2012).

The commitment to render on-screen realism can serve as an explanation as to why the films made by the RNW generation “represent a faithful mirror of the human mutations (sociological and of other nature) known by Romanian society [after 1989]” (Șerban 2009:48)¹. RNW's radical break with how cinema was made by the country's past generations of filmmakers can also be seen as a form of rebellion against the artistic compromises of films released during communism. The lies promoted through cinema by communist propaganda triggered the drastic commitment of this new generation to telling the truth, and, hence, to getting as close as possible to reality in storytelling and filming techniques, thus going back to the famous credo expressed by Jean-Luc Goddard, that “film is truth 24 times a second, and every cut is a lie” (Șerban 2009).

Emigration to Western Europe was a taboo topic for filmmakers during communism, despite several hundreds of thousands of people fleeing the Eastern Bloc between the 1960s and the fall of the regime. The very few films that did attempt to tackle the topic did so in a propaganda-driven manner, picturing characters who realize the mistake of emigration and decide to return to their home country. In *Trecătoarele iubiri* (Malvina Urșianu, 1974) and *Rătăcire* (Alexandru Tatos, 1978), two of the very few notable films on the topic released

¹ All quotes from sources in Romanian (books, chapters, films) are in our translation.

during communism, emigration is pictured as a deeply regretful decision made by characters who act upon a temporary loss of reason and listen to “the call of the West” on an impulse of shallowness, but later on return to Romania filled with shame and remorse (see Corciovescu 2011).

After 1989, several films uncovered the actual obsession connected to emigration to the West during communism, as a late response to the propaganda on this topic. Feature films like Nae Caranfil’s *E pericoloso sporgersi* (1993) and Cătălin Mitulescu’s *Cum mi-am petrecut sfârșitul lumii* (2006) rendered the extent to which many were willing to risk their lives in order to flee from communist Romania. Both films are set in the 1980s and describe how the West was “fetishized” by Romanians during communism and how it was regarded as an indisputable solution to their problems regarding chronic poverty, corruption, lack of opportunities etc.

Post-communist emigration also started to be explored by films released in the 1990s and 2000s, often from the perspective of the connection between emigrants and their families from home or local communities. *Asfalt Tango* (Nae Caranfil, 1996) follows a husband who aggressively disagrees with his wife’s emigration to France, *Fața galbenă care râde* (Constantin Popescu, 2008) and *Nunta lui Oli* (Tudor Jurgiu, 2009) both deal with the tragicomic difficulties that elderly parents face when trying to communicate with their emigrated children via the Internet, while *Italiencele* (Napoleon Helmis, 2004) focuses on the shaming and humiliation faced by two Romanian young women who return home to their rural community, after being forced into prostitution in Italy.

Apart from the dramatic destinies of illegal defectors from communist Romania and the problematic relationship between post-communist emigrants and their home communities, Doru Pop identifies several other sub-themes in Romanian films tackling the topic of migration in the past three decades. These include “the impossible departure”, “the impossible return”, “the painful return and the search for identity”, “the traumatic experience and the psychological consequences of migration”, human trafficking and other migration-related crimes, as well as “self-identity and the relationship with the foreign immigrants coming to Romania” (2014:81-86). The author includes *Francesca* under the sub-theme of migration-related crimes and prostitution, though it can be discussed as part of other categories as well, as our analysis shows.

From a stylistic perspective, Romanian films from the 1990s and 2000s (including those tackling emigration) shifted gradually from Hollywood production norms to neorealist conventions. The turning point here is identified by Andrei Gorzo (2012:257) as the launch of *Moartea domnului Lăzărescu* (Cristi Puiu, 2005), whose narrative and filming style have deeply influenced Romanian filmmakers. A look at the films made before and after this one shows that

analytical editing and non-diegetic sound – typical in mainstream American cinema – had almost completely disappeared in the years following 2005, while the camera started to adopt a predominantly observational stance, adhering more to the principles of a new type of filmmaking that would later be identified as NRC.

Cristi Puiu’s influence over the aesthetics of Romanian films in the late 2000s is so visible that Doru Pop identifies the trademarks of NRC as “the Puiu style of cinema-making”. This implies a predominantly documentary-style camera, focused filming events “as they happen”, with close attention to the grammar of the *mise-en-scène*, thus inciting reflection upon “the imperfections of human beings and the moral conundrums of social existence” (2014:42-43). Our current research focuses on *Francesca*, a film released after the turning point of 2005, which engages with the topic of women’s migration to Western Europe and the way it was perceived in Romanian public imagination at a certain moment in the post-communist period, and shows a close adherence to the norms of NRC.

3. The Symbolic Construction of Europe and Female Identity in *Francesca*. Discussion

Francesca connects viewers with the social reality of Romanian migration to Italy, which took an impetus between 2002 and 2007, when the diasporic Romanian community in this destination country was formed, reaching around one million migrants (a fact mentioned in the film), and which continued, with specific post-EU accession characteristics, after 2007 (Sandu 2010). Sociological studies demonstrate the Romanians’ preference for Italy as a destination country, added, alongside Spain, to the migration trajectories in the previous decade (Sandu 2010; see also Diminescu 2009). An outstanding feature of Romanian migration to Italy is its “feminisation” (Cela and Moretti 2013; Cingolani 2009; Vlase 2013), triggered by the demand for women’s care work in the service of a growing elderly population, a responsibility that the Italian state has transferred to families, the Catholic Church and the private sector (Ambrosini 2012, among others). This demand led to Romanian women migrating to Italy on their own or before their husbands/partners, to role reversals in the traditional family (migrant mothers as breadwinners, fathers as nurturers), to children left behind in the care of friends and relatives, but also to a certain emancipation of women upon their return (Vlase 2013). At the time of the action in the film, particular representations of Romanian women migrants in Italy had been well established in the public debates and the wider social imaginary on this issue, in both home and host societies; among them, the image of the Romanian *badante*, as a figure of heroic sacrifice, but also of despair and shame, the Romanian prostitute, an image that resonates

with an older Italian stereotype of the “Romanian whore”, who tempts Italian men away from their wives and mothers (Capussotti 2010), the Romanian mother who is forced to abandon her children and parents in order to be able to provide for them, and so on (Mădroane 2017, 2018; see also Beciu et al. 2018a).

The film was released two years after a fully-fledged crisis broke out in Italy because of a Romanian Roma, Romulus Mailat, who had robbed and killed an Italian woman from the elite society. The highly mediated murder was followed by an outburst of anti-Romanian feeling in Italy, manifested in the vandalising of Romanian-owned businesses and in a public outcry strategically used by Italian politicians in the 2008 election campaign (Dolea 2018). The seriousness of this crisis affected Romania’s country image and was the reason behind the “first integrated communication campaign of public diplomacy and public relations in Italy and Spain”, intended to counteract “the Mailat case”, as well as the “history of [negative] mediatization” of Romanian migrants in the Italian public space, as thieves, beggars, criminals, which this case brought back to attention (Dolea 2018:96-97). According to Dolea, in Romania, “the Mailat case transformed the very governmental approach towards the diasporic community [...] whose problems and requests needed to be taken into account by the government when formulating public policies” (2018:98). The responsibility for Romania’s country image emerged as an important topic in the public debates at the time, being attributed to the state, but also to the migrants themselves (Beciu et al. 2018a; Dolea 2018).

Bobby Păunescu’s characters are captured as they are negotiating their identities and making decisions about emigration in a context where these representations and images were at the very centre of public attention in the home and host societies, in the wake of the Mailat crisis, as the director himself states in interviews (Akbar 2009; see also Pop 2014). Emblematic for the struggles to situate oneself in relation to the image of Romanians in Italy, but also to the representations and assumptions about Romanian migrant women, is the scene that takes place between Francesca and her father (played by actors Monica Bârlădeanu and Teodor Corban), where she tells him about her intention to emigrate to Italy in order to open a kindergarten for the Romanian migrants’ children. Her father strongly objects, invoking the Italians’ hostile attitude towards and perception of Romanians as “Gypsies, criminals, thieves, you name it”, and taking at face value the news bulletins on the issue: “You don’t watch television or what?”, “Do you want me to end up waiting to get a call to go and identify your body? Or to go and find you in the streets?”. In her turn, Francesca counteracts by taking on the responsibility that, as a future migrant, she would not only make money for her family, but also improve Romania’s image: “I want to change this. I want to change this perception... I don’t want them to believe

about Romanians that they are all...”. In this statement of self-assumed mission, the character constructs her future migrant persona by accepting the burden of the “moral capital” (Gowricharn 2004; see also Carling 2008) that migrants owe to the home society, to changing for the better Romania’s country image, given the weight already placed on this issue in public discourse (Beciu et al. 2018a; Dolea 2018).

The development in the symbolic construction of identities and relations between Romanian migrants and Italians, as citizens of a major destination country, stands out if we compare this scene to a scene in the film *Occident*, released at a time when Romanian emigration to Italy was in its early days (in the year 2002). During lunch with Luigi (played by Nicolongo), the black Italian suitor of one of the main female characters, the school principal played by Tora Vasilescu proudly says that “the Romanian and Italian languages are sisters”, alluding to more than just the language (the meeting is enthusiastically prepared by the family, symbols of Italian culture being displayed around the house as proof of hospitality and multicultural openness). In sharp contrast, in *Francesca*, we witness a dramatic change and a shift of focus on the Italians’ hatred towards Romanians. The dangers lurking behind emigration to Italy also find expression in another scene, in the scenario of the Romanian migrants’ kidnapping for their organs, as imagined by Francesca’s school principal (an element of conspiracy theory).

The father-daughter scene is shot in the small kitchen in Francesca’s father’s apartment, a space that appears frequently in NRC films and that has been described as an ideal device for diagnosing the social condition of characters (Deaca 2017) or as a cinematic narrative device used for uncovering the hidden psychological traits of characters, their beliefs and conflicts (Chirilov 2011). The cramped, impoverished kitchens from the blocks of flats built during communism in Romania are presented on-screen as symptomatic for a particular mentality and way of life, while also providing access to the intimate lives of characters, introducing narrative details that are concealed from public scrutiny. The conversation between Francesca and her father is framed in a balanced composition. The two sit at a small dining table, while behind them, on the wall, the viewer can notice details signalling the socio-religious environment of the father’s family: posters of a Bucharest football club are hung near an Orthodox calendar and a religious icon. The camera movements are almost imperceptible throughout the conversation and the long take is used to “put more emphasis on performance, setting, [...] and other *mise-en-scène* factors” (Bordwell and Thompson 2010:511). As their discussion progresses, Francesca faces her father continuously, in a slightly bent forward position, allowing the camera to capture only the profile of her face, while he faces the camera

several times and sits half turned towards his daughter. Despite the balanced frame, the positions of characters signal their unequal power, i.e. Francesca's inferior, pleading role, as opposed to the more relaxed, slightly disbelieving position of her father, thus confirming his authority in a scene where she basically goes to get her father's blessing for emigrating, like a good, obedient girl (Andreescu 2013).

The interaction between Francesca and her father takes a new turn when the grandfather joins the conversation. Turning to him, Francesca's father exclaims, "She wants to go prostitute herself in Italy", an occasion for the grandfather to evoke collective memories of Italian men coming to Romania "for girls" (see Capussotti 2007 on such representations in Italian popular culture), for whom "they used to buy a ticket to the seaside", and to comment on how times have changed, "Now it's the other way round, you're going to them". His intervention makes an analogy between Europeans and Ottomans, the former being accused of "enslaving us" and "taking our women, as Turks used to do (in the old days)", drops hints at Freemasonry, and dwells upon a stereotype of Romanians as "a people of women" and Italians as "one of men". This stereotype may trigger, for some viewers, associations with the genesis of the Roman people through the abduction and rape of the Sabine women. The relationship between Romanians and Italians is therefore construed in terms of war and conquest, an imagining of the West (and of Italy as a destination country) that situates Romania in a powerless position, historically at the mercy of the great empires. Romania's postcolonial identity is thus taking shape through the analogies and the associations made by Francesca's grandfather, in a manner similar to what Godeanu-Kenworthy interprets, in her analysis of Mungiu's *Occident*, as "the classic effeminate Orient, archetypal Other to the West, forever relegated to the role of the subaltern" (2015:105). Within the interpretive frame created in this scene, as providers for their families, and, ultimately, for their nation, Romanian women migrants are left with little choice but the commodification of their selves (Godeanu-Kenworthy 2015) in a global marketplace where Romania is a second-hand player.

The image of the Romanian prostitute for Italian men is built in different scenes of the film, forcing the main character to consider and negotiate her identity in relation to this negative, widespread representation. When *Francesca* was made, human trafficking had become a recurring theme in the European and Romanian media, and so had the symbolic construction of Romanian women domestic workers who were raped or abused in the households where they went to work. As Mădroane's study of Romanian *badanti*'s self-narratives shows (2017), migrant women in low-skilled occupations are faced with accusations of prostitution in both the host and the home country, with different effects. If, in the host

country, such perceptions expose them to sexual abuse, the accusations made by the men in their family and by the communities back home (friends, neighbours) are intended to control women, restrain their agency as breadwinners for the family or diminish their achievements abroad. At a different level, the interweaving of prostitution with the representation of women migrant workers in the public space also serves the purpose of keeping them in a state of exploitation and deprivation of rights (Ozyegin and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008). Attaching the stigma of sexual promiscuity to women as immoral individuals (“bad girls”) disempowers them and pre-empts any discussion of entitlement to protection and rights (Mădroane 2017). This becomes obvious in the scene between Francesca and the intermediary who finds her the job of care worker near Milan: “I can’t promise anything, because it’s not my family there”, he says, “but what you need to know is that only whores become prostitutes. If a girl is good and gets raped once or twice, or whatever – there were such cases – she can leave, right? No one keeps them there, right?”.

The medium long shot angle of this scene, coupled with the diegetic sound and the slightly asymmetric framing, symbolically focusing the attention on Francesca despite the fact that three other characters are in the shot, contribute to granting a realistic depth to the dialogue and construct this meeting as a key scene in the narrative. The discussion of the problematic topic of prostitution here – and its approach in such an apparently casual manner by the middleman – is prepared in the previous scene via the *mise-en-scène*. On her way to the meeting, Francesca is pursued from a distance with a long travelling shot by a camera that also registers details that portray the surrounding urban context. She walks on the dusty pavement of a narrow street (with occasional holes on it), past decrepit buildings with crumbling paint and graffiti, a taxi half-parked on the sidewalk, a large-sized garbage bin. The grey buildings and the dirty, decayed aspect of the neighbourhood, shot in a sharp natural light, function as visual cues that guide the viewer towards interpreting the socio-economic status of the urban space and add up to the character’s motivation to leave the country in search for “a better life”, despite uncertainty and potential danger.

Another scene where prostitution is highlighted and blamed on Romanian women takes place on the coach to Italy, when another woman, seated next to Francesca, tells the story of how her daughter-in-law, “that whore”, slept with the Italian (elderly) man in whose household she and her husband were working, attracting the rage of the “jealous” Italian wife who set them up as thieves. This story brings together the stereotypical, patriarchal view of the Romanian woman migrant as prostitute with the more recent image of Romanian migrants in Italy as criminals, and, through a narrative twist, points a symbolic finger at the woman “whore”

and exonerates the man. The Romanians' "enslavement" through hard, lowly work, another stereotypical representation of Romanian migrants in public discourse (Beciu et al. 2018a), is also brought up by Francesca's new acquaintance. Coincidentally or not, her story overlaps with Francesca's decision to return home as soon as she hears about her partner's probable injury in a car accident, in an act that fractures her migration narrative and her agency.

The coach scene is juxtaposed with the narrative episode that leads to the death of Francesca's fiancé. In the first part of the scene, Francesca and her new female acquaintance are framed in slight asymmetry, with the main character sitting in the focal centre of the frame. Though not placed in the foreground, the other woman has an implicit dominating position over Francesca while she tells the story of her emigrated son and daughter-in-law, suggested by the placement of the camera below her eye-level, rendering a stance of power and confidence. This angle functions as a reinforcement of her story's relevance and accuracy, later on proving to have decisive influence over Francesca's course of action. As the plot progresses and Francesca receives a phone call announcing what happened to her fiancé, the other woman shifts to a more marginal, faintly blurred position in the frame. The handheld camera and the diegetic sound create a strong impression of authenticity, intensifying Francesca's distress (first due to phone signal problems and then to the news), thus building suspense regarding her future course of action. The gradual escalation of drama coincides with a decrease in scene lighting. Francesca's symbolic movement towards the decision to give up her emigration plans coincides with the gradual setting of the evening, the natural fading of light functioning as a symbolic description of her failure. The scene concludes with Francesca's breaking into tears and subsequently cuts to the moment when she decides to get off the bus.

Up to that point, Francesca had managed to negotiate her future migrant identity and to develop agency by taking the decisive step to leave, which can be interpreted as a moment of empowerment (Mădroane 2017). The coming to an end of her migratory plans and her return indicate a symbolic defeat, which is ambiguously attributed to her partner's tragic fate, but also, we are left to wonder, to an accumulation of negative representations of emigration to Italy, culminating in the coach pre-final scenes, when Francesca is no longer able to fight back. The final scene shows her alone, at night, sitting on a bench in a train station with a pile of luggage nearby, in a *plan-séquence* scene that forces the viewer to ponder on her defeat. The fixed camera registers her quiet, tired, slightly bent figure in a medium long shot with diegetic sound that lingers on the screen, highlighting the loss of aspiration to "a better life" through emigration. A train passes in the background while she sits unmoved, symbolically suggesting

how she failed to catch an opportunity that might have enabled her to see “the light at the end of the tunnel”.

In her trajectory as a prospective Romanian migrant to Italy, Francesca faces opposition from the men in her family, who evoke the Italians’ racist attitudes and the negative representations of Romanian migrants in the Italian public sphere, and seek to control her by implicit (or sometimes overt) accusations of prostitution, repeated and amplified in her encounters with the middleman and with the woman on the coach to Italy. Her sexual objectification by almost every male character she interacts with in the film (Andreescu 2013), with the exception of her boyfriend, sets her on a symbolic path that may well extend to the space of the host country. In this regard, Francesca is disempowered even as she seems to be making progress towards building individual agency. On the other hand, she is supported in her actions (to an extent, even pushed) by her partner and by her mother; the latter remains in a patriarchal mind-set when she encourages her daughter to use her feminine charms as a way of succeeding abroad. In a scene reminiscent of a similar mother-daughter interaction in Mungiu’s *Occident*, she reassures Francesca, “With this hairstyle, you’ll knock the old man off his feet!” (the “old man” is the elder Francesca was going to look after), reinforcing stereotypes about Romanian women migrants’ strategic commodification of their bodies to succeed in destination countries and about their immoral relationships with Italian men.

If Păunescu’s film destabilizes the negative media representations of Romanian migrants in Italy, the main female character does not seem to be able to escape the two roles that, according to Andreescu (2013:105), encapsulate the “female ideal” in post-communist Romanian films: “that of a traditional woman”, here of the “self-sacrificing” type, as Francesca assumes the responsibility to provide for her family, and that of “a prostitute” (2013:119). Neither can she escape the (self)commodification inherent in such roles (Godeanu-Kenworthy 2015) in contexts of emigration, dramatically contrasted with her stated ideal to set up a kindergarten for the Romanian migrants’ children. While the film does present a female character’s struggle for independence and self-affirmation, thus being in line with what Doru Pop identifies as a tendency of Romanian films released in the 2000s to go against the “patriarchal” narrative, it does little to go beyond the representations of women under the archetypes typical to the previous decades in Romanian cinema, among which “The Mother” and “The Whore” are prominent (2014:187-192; see also Andreescu 2013).

4. Conclusions

In this article, we have looked into the ways that a New Romanian Cinema film constructs its main female character and the socio-political context in which she builds her identity, by negotiating it in relation to negative representations, stories and images of the Romanian migrants in Italy, as they have entered public imagination (primarily in Romania, as a home country, but this implies a relationship with the symbolic constructions in the host country). Throughout *Francesca*, the connections between characters and the socio-political context they find themselves in are conveyed through a set of filming techniques that are typical for the New Romanian Cinema. The observational stance of the camera, the “slice of life” narrative made up of episodes taking place “in real-time”, filmed in long shots, with a minimum number of cuts, allow viewers to take in the visual cues of the *mise-en-scène* and reflect upon the characters’ dilemmas.

With the help of this non-intrusive, documentary-like filming style, the film attempts and succeeds, to an extent, to problematise the Romanian migrants’ image in Italy, while, in terms of the symbolic construction of the female character, it may rather be said to reproduce a disempowering identity, as it overlaps migration-related stereotypes with the patriarchal, demeaning, objectified roles assigned to Romanian women in many post-communist films. In this regard, an attempt at problematisation may be identified, perhaps, in the very defeat that the character suffers in the final part of the film, which leaves her suspended in a transition space, the railway station, between two worlds where prospects are different, but not ideal for personal emancipation.

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