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► **To cite this version:**

Aurelia Vasile. The Classical Antiquity in the Romanian cinema. Ancient Rome: a precious enemy. Anuarul Institutului de Cercetari Socio-Umane "C.S. Nicolaescu-Plopsor", 2008, IX/2008. halshs-01553008

HAL Id: halshs-01553008

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01553008>

Submitted on 3 Jul 2017

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The Classical Antiquity in the Romanian cinema.

Ancient Rome: a precious enemy

Aurelia Vasile

Résumé français :

L'Antiquité, mais particulièrement la Rome Antique fut un sujet très important dans le cinéma roumain pendant le régime de Nicolae Ceaușescu. Certaines périodes de l'histoire romaine sont connectées à la civilisation dace et par conséquent, beaucoup de produits culturels roumains sont focalisés sur la relation entre les Romains et les Daces. Le régime de Ceausescu confère une importance particulière à cette période qui devient le berceau de la nation roumaine. La signification de l'histoire antique évolue d'une acception modérée dans les années 60, caractérisée par la synthèse de deux composants ethniques (le Daces et les Romains) à l'une radicale, pendant les années 80, lorsque l'élément romain est amoindri, tandis que l'autochtone est muni de tous les symboles fondateurs. Le but de ce travail est de révéler le rôle de Romains dans cette logique nationaliste et les moyens cinématographiques mis en œuvre pour leur donner vie.

Keywords:

Romanian cinema, peplum, communist rule, nationalism

The Classical Era and especially the Ancient Rome was a very important subject in the Romanian cinema during Nicolae Ceaușescu's rule. Certain periods of Rome's history are connected to the Dacian civilization and consequently, many Romanian cultural products are focused on the relationship between the Romans and the autochthons (the Dacians). Ceausescu's regime attaches an ideological importance to this period which becomes the cradle of Romanian nation. The significance of the antique history evolves from a moderate interpretation in the 60s, characterized by a melting of two ethnic components (the Dacians and the Romans) to a radical one, during the 80s when the Roman element is minimized while the autochthon is endowed with all the foundation symbols. The purpose of this work is to reveal the role of Romans in this nationalist logic and the filmic means to give them life.

After a transition period following the WWII, the Romanian cinematography was nationalized in 1948 and therefore, the production, the import, the distribution of films as well as the organization of cinemas' network are managed by the State institutions (The Committee of Cinematography, The National Center of Cinematography, *Centrala "Româniafilm"*, or the ministerial institutions like the Committee State for Culture and Art (in the '60s) and the Council on Socialist Culture and Education (from the '70s), etc) in an extreme centralized way, following the political and ideological directives of the Communist Party. During the first decade, the organization of cinema and conception of films are dependent on the Soviet system and its vision of art. The topics, as well as the film aesthetic approaches come within the theory of "socialist realism", conceded to the rank of artistic criterion by Andrei Jdanov, the leader of the agitprop in USSR. Consequently, films made during the first years of the communist regime in Romania are characterized by a dogmatic rigidity and a simplistic and Manichean vision of the society. The privileged genres are especially social contemporary dramas, as well as war films. For this reason, the first socialist productions are constituted by austere films depicting and glorifying the proletariat's struggle toward socialist progress and communists glorious exploits during the war.

It is only from 1962/1965, in a climate of international thaw, that the party releases the pressure on filmmakers, but also on the conception of film and allows for the first forms of entertainment. In this context, the entertainment is at the same time a way to calm the protests and to gain support from the population, but also a financial source. At the beginning, the most exploited popular genres are the comedy and the musical, but thanks to the technical and economic means and especially to the explosion of the coproduction system during the '60s,

the new blockbusters are “cape and sword” films and historical reconstitutions. After he became the leader of the party in 1965, Ceausescu pursues the mixed orientation “ideology and entertainment” and pleads for cultural diversity.

The interest of the Romanian cinema in classic period has a double meaning. On the one hand, the historic film is a form of integration in the world cinema in which a real leaning for peplum is to be noticed since the ‘50s. On the other hand, the reconstruction of the Antiquity is the result of the ideological thaw characterizing the Romanian politics and culture in the 1960s. For the first time, directors are authorized and even encouraged to abandon the eulogy of Soviet Union and to approach the Romanian past.

Classical Era in Romanian cinema and the ideological stakes

Three feature films of major importance for the Romanian cultural policy mainly constitute the filmic representation of the Classical Era: *The Dacians* (*Dacii*, Sergiu Nicolaescu, 1967), designating Dacia's inhabitants, the antique territory of a part of Romania, *The Column* (*Columna*, Mircea Drăgan, 1968), name indicating the column built by the emperor Trajan (98-117) to celebrate his victory against the Dacians and *Burebista* (Gheorghe Vitanidis, 1980), the name of a Dacian king between 82 and 44 BC. These films are a part of a new genre invented in the 1960s: “the national film epic”. Made during the golden period of coproduction in Rumania, the first two films were the result of international collaborations with French and West-German producers. The casting is the visible proof of this cooperation. In *The Dacians* (Sergiu Nicolaescu, 1967) the audience can identify the French actors Pierre Brice, Marie-José Nat and Georges Marchal. In *The Column* (Mircea Drăgan, 1968), the foreign performers are also very important: Richard Johnson in the role of a Roman general, Antonella Lualdi, known for her roles in historical productions, acts here as a Dacian woman and Amedeo Nazzari, the romantic male lead of the Italian cinema during the fascist period, specialized in the international spectaculars in the ‘60s, interprets the role of the emperor Trajan.

The Dacians (Sergiu Nicolaescu, 1967) and *The Column* (Mircea Drăgan, 1968) tell the story of the Dacian people and their conflicts with the Roman Empire. Both films were conceived in a narrative continuity. The first one focuses on the Dacians' resistance and depicts Domitianus' campaign in 87 A.D. in Dacia, against the army of local king Decebalus. The Romans lose the battle, but not the war. The following history was told by the second film. The Dacians were defeated and the story insists afterward on the relations between Romans and Dacians after the conquest of Dacia by the emperor Trajan in 106 AD. Dacia is

transformed into a Roman province, while the autochthonous people hesitate between cooperation and resistance. The resistance lasts until the arrival of the barbarians who are even more threatening than Romans, and therefore, the Dacians becomes allied with their first enemy.

As for the film *Burebista* (Gheorghe Vitanidis, on 1980), the events are more ancient and present the story of Burebista, the Dacian king, who unified for the first time the Dacians tribes. He represents the same symbol as Vercingétorix for the French history, Boudicca for the English history, Ambiorix for the Belgium history or Arminius for the German history.

Although they had a spectacular audience (5 million spectators for *The Column*, 7 million spectators for *The Dacians*, 2.5 millions for *Burebista*), their importance is more ideological than artistic and commercial. These films are produced and distributed in different ideological contexts. The first two correspond to a period of recovery of the national values, while the third, *Burebista*, made in 1980, is a purely nationalist project answering the leader (Nicolae Ceausescu) legitimization need. The film was commanded to join the series of festivities dedicated to the celebration of 2050 years since the creation of “the unified and centralized State” of Burebista¹.

The essential purpose was to represent the origins of the Romanian people anchored, according to the Romanian collective imaginary, in Antiquity time of Dacians and Romans. The origins' problem enhanced a lively interest especially in the political and cultural debates from the end of the 18th century². Both Dacians and Romans were constantly, sometimes alternatively, sometimes concomitantly, endowed with the founders' role they had to assume for the last two centuries³. The nationalism characterizing the second half of the communist period fully exploits this theme. During 25 years of the Ceausescu's reign, the history view changed twice in a significant way. Starting from 1965, when he became the party leader, and until 1971, year of publication of the “July Theses”⁴, the ideological orientation of the party was favorable to a recovery of the national values occulted during the previous period.

¹ An analysis of this phenomenon to Florentin Dragoș NECULA, «Comunism in Dacia : Burebista contemporanul nostru » in *Analele Universității București*, istorie, XLII-XLIII, Bucuresti, Editura Universității București, 1993-1994, pp. 37-51

² Antoine Roger, *Les fondements du nationalisme roumain (1791-1921)*, Genève, Droz, 2003

³ The role of the two founders people in the Romanian imaginary, during the last two centuries was analyzed by Lucian Boia, *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească*, Bucuresti, Humanitas, 2002, (1997 for the first edition), pp. 135-179 (English version *History and myth in Romania consciousness*, Budapest, New York, Central European University Press, 2001)

⁴ *Scînteia* 7 July 1971, “Propunerile de măsuri prezentate de tovarășul Nicolae Ceaușescu Comitetului Executiv al CC al PCR, pentru îmbunătățirea activității politico-ideologice, de educare marxist leninistă a membrilor de partid a tuturor oamenilor muncii”. [Exposition made by comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu on the Program of the RCP for the improvement of ideological activity, for raising the general level of knowledge and the socialist education of the masses, for grounding the relation in our society on the principles of socialist and communist equity.]

Dacians and Romans, forgotten for a long time, make their reappearance on the historic scene as founding fathers of the Romanian nation.

This is the context of release of *The Dacians* and *The Column*. The Dacians, as inhabitants of the territory of Romania, represent the ethnic basis and benefited from a more favorable glance, compared to the Romans who represent the conqueror. The autochthonous is an element much more important for this period than the nobility and the glory of the winners, or the migratory population⁵. The national ideology of the last two centuries facilitated this type of foundation, anchored in the oldest roots, to the detriment of the traditional one, embodied by a character that came from elsewhere⁶.

Furthermore, the expansionist attitude was condemned by Ceausescu during the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and his success leads to the proliferation of this type of speech even toward the past. In this way, the role of Romans loses of its greatness, and this is replaced by the autochthons' simplicity. Nevertheless, they are conferred certain missions and functions with an oscillated evolution during the communist period. Thus, the situation is different in the '80s, the period of Thracomania current, because the official ideology becomes more and more nationalist and the historical theories stress the agedness of Dacians, their advanced civilization. In that case, the Roman is strictly an enemy, without any concession for his contribution on the foundation of Romanians'.

The Roman: the conqueror

The filmic image of the Roman is mainly associated with that of the "conqueror". The Romanian cinema invents nothing with respect to the universal image of the "conqueror", which is diffused and reproduced in a multitude of speeches. Some major figures of generals, politicians or emperors (Julius Caesar, Scipio Africanus, Trajan) are good enough to illustrate this idea. But the point of view can change. Thus, the term "conquering" has a double meaning, because it indicates at the same time a virtue and a vice. The Roman of many Italian or American peplums is a remarkable conqueror, a model of bravery. In the Romanian film, this value has negative connotations and from this perspective he joins the type of representation conveyed in the French film about the same subject, such as *Vercingétorix* (Jacques Dorfmann, on 2001) or the popular series *Astérix*.

⁵ For the relation between "Autochthonous" and the "Migratory Populations" see Gheorghe-Alexandru Niculescu, "Nationalism and the Representation of Society in Romanian Archaeology" in *Nation and National Ideology. Past, Present and Prospects*. Bucharest, New Europe College 2002, pp.209-234

⁶ The problem of the Origins in the imaginary of the modern and traditional societies was treated by Mircea Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour*, Paris, Gallimard, 1949; idem. *Nostalgie des origines : méthodologie et histoire des religions*, Paris, Gallimard, 1971

The film *The Dacians* focuses from the beginning on the Roman power. Produced during a very favorable period to the pageant, economically, artistically and politically, the film benefits from important financial advantages. The film direction is given to Sergiu Nicolaescu who is going to become, afterward, the specialist of spectaculars in Romania. He wants to impress from the beginning of the film. Before even the credit titles, the Roman army submerges the screen. A succession of static shots, presented gradually, beginning by a long shot of the army and until a close-up on a detail of the Roman uniform creates the image of crushing, invincible and especially uncountable strength. This sensation is highlighted by the orderly alignment of the soldiers in the field, by the low-angle shot of their commander and by the jerky music of brass band. This is taken over, at the linguistic level, by a verbal exchange between the two opposite camps, the Romans and the Dacians, showing the arrogance of the first ones and the determination of the second ones: “Open the door. We give you the life and the freedom / Who are you? / The masters of the world. / You will succeed, only if we die”. (*The Dacians*, 1967).

Furthermore, this vision is evoked by Decebalus, the first character-king of the Romanian peplum. He dreads the strength of Romans: “they lost battles, but they were never defeated. They are stubborn, powerful, numerous, rapacious” (*The Dacians*, 1967). This approach exceeds the frame of the simple conflicting relationship between two opposite strengths and contains a mythical dimension. The Roman is not any more a common rival, he is the absolute enemy.

The same image is transmitted in *Burebista*. The description of Caesar as ambitious and invincible consolidates the portrait of the Roman invader. He is represented in front of his soldiers after the victory against the Gauls. Lacking financial means, the film only briefly evoke the strength of the Roman legions and their conquest ambition in a sequence where Caesar speaks to the army. The scriptwriter Mihnea Gheorghiu attributes to Caesar a sentence that summarizes in few words his international strategy: “My future book will be called *De bello Dacico*” (*Burebista*, 1980). From his part, the director uses his expression means, to bring his tribute to the conquerors. A low-angle shot of Caesar pedestrian puts him on a pedestal of invincibility. His parade in front of the army is supposed to show the greatness of the winner, but the director chooses to suggest the power and the monumentality of the Roman army by the cheering of the soldiers. The audience is forced to content itself with this substitute and to imagine their number by the frequency of the sound. The final result was a cheap ridiculous scene. We can assume that the cause of this disappointing result was the very poor film budget, the effects of which are obvious throughout the film. Nevertheless, the

intention to present the Roman Empire as a powerful, invincible force counts more for this study than the technical success.

This picture is completed at the narrative level by an atmosphere of Dacia as a besieged estate, a permanent target of the Roman attacks. So, the council of the State is on alert. Some characters, gladiators and soldiers in the Spartacus' army found refuge near Burebista with the aim to avenge the death of their leader. Burebista organizes war preparations in training fields in case of a conflict with Romans. The war seems threaten constantly the Dacian civilization. The main problem of the directors was the absence in the history of a big battle between Dacians and Romans, and therefore the impossibility to build a dramatic framework around the fight and the impossibility to show Dacians' skills. In absence of an important military conflict, the directors invent a permanent state of alert within the Dacian population, ready at any time to resist the enemy attacks: the farmers train for battle; the manufacturers make weapons; the Council of State stays vigilant. By all this details, the film reaches two objectives: first, it shows the qualities of Dacians, with whom the public was supposed to identify itself and second, indirectly, it hints at the dimension of the Roman threat.

The image of the conqueror is often accompanied with the cruelty, the frivolity, the cowardice and the arrogance. Several sequences insist on these aspects, and present them as inevitable. For instance, the report of the military and political situation of Romans underlines the barbaric nature of the offensive: "Romans rise towards us with envy for slavery and for plunder" (*Burebista*, 1980). Their presence in the Greek towns of the Black Sea is shown as a permanent aggression against the inhabitants.

This collective image of the Roman is doubled by the individual characters. Clearly, the emperor Domitian and his general, Cornelius Fuscus in *The Dacians* or Gaius Antonius Hybrida proconsul of Macedonia and Julius Caesar in *Burebista*, are the main negative characters of the stories. In *The Dacians*, the emperor Domitian and his Praetorian Guard Cornelius Fuscus hold the role of frivolous and cowardly Roman leaders. This typology results from the information selected by the scriptwriter, Titus Popovici, from the biography of these two personalities. The reign of Domitian was one of the most controversial subjects, but the choice of the authors went to the dark aspects of his career. Thus, the emperor in *The Dacians* is an ambitious, vain, immoral, treacherous and cruel person. The origin of this representation is without no doubt *The Lives of Twelve Caesars* by Suetonius who depicts Domitian in very negative colors, which was the perfect occasion for the scriptwriter to stress the antithesis between the wrong reasons of Romans enterprise and the defensive approach of Dacians.

Less than his master, Cornelius Fuscus reinforce the dark iconography of the Roman leader. It is likely is that Titus Popovici used the few notice about Fuscus in the work of Tacitus, *Histories* (“Finding his pleasure not so much in the rewards of peril as in peril itself, to assured and long acquired possession he preferred novelty, uncertainty, and risk” Book II, 86) and in a Juvenal *Satire* (“Fuscus who planned battles in his marble halls” *Satire 4*, 112), he adds some dramatic situations illustrating and exaggerating the comment of classic authors, creating a despicable character. In the film, he is presented like an incompetent coward and ambitious commander.

This description of the Roman leader in *The Dacians* equally applies to the characters presented in *Burebista*. Hybrida, mentioned by the historical sources as a cruel military and politician (Quintus Tullius Cicero, *De petitionis consularibus*, 2; Dion Cassius, *Roman History*, XXXVIII, 10) is the key character of the film. He was the perfect alibi to accuse the Romans and in the same time to build a credible and truthful intrigue, based on the antic sources. The scriptwriter, Mihnea Gheorghiu catches this opportunity and creates around him one of the essential intrigues of the film. He supplies the perfect model to embody the evil. One of the characters qualifies him as “looter and killer of the Gets of Scythia Minor” (*Burebista*, 1980). Moreover, he proves it himself afterward. His frivolity is revealed during the orgies organized in his residence and the indecent comments to the leader of the city: “The games for Dionysus could convince your women to be more kind with my soldiers after so many days of fasting” (*Burebista*, 1980).

But after all, the image of Romans is only a way to highlight the qualities of Dacians. Unlike the other two films, the authors of *Burebista* reduce the Romans to the role of a reverted mirror, to bring to light the place and the importance of Dacians and their king, which reveals the personality cult, encouraged in Romania and arrived at its highest limit in 1980.

The Roman: the civilizing

If the first cinematic attribute of the Roman is linked to his victories and to his political and territorial domination, to which the filmmakers added a filter of condemnation, the second one, as paradoxical it may seem, concerns the same characteristics, except they are glorified. Representing the Roman in a dual way proves his importance in the historiographical view of the formation process of the Romanian people. From this point of view, the war between Dacians and Romans does not constitute any more a completely tragic event. Nevertheless, the balance between the two parts was never even. During the regime of Ceausescu,

considering the official historiographical speech which privileged the autochthonous roots, the weight of Dacians was more important than that of Romans.

Moreover the filmic representation of the Romanian antiquity helps illustrating the official ideology. The Dacians are presented like a people endowed with unlimited virtues, which demonstrates the sympathy of the filmmakers towards them, in disfavor of the Romans. Nevertheless, the later ones are not excessively demonized because they represent the other half foundation of the Romanian people. As ancestors of the Romanians, they do not accomplish the function of "the bad guy" up to the end. This one is well-balanced, toned-down, improved.

The characters of Severus in *The Dacians* and Tiberius in *The Column*, are the perfect models. Result of a dramatically-heroic combination made by the scriptwriter Titus Popovici, both Romans weigh heavily in the balance between "good and bad". Severus and Tiberius are presented being very cultivated and educated, with a high sense of morality, which determines sometimes the audience to feel inclined towards "the enemy".

The perfect model to illustrate this idea is *The Column*, almost completely dedicated to Romans. The accent is put on the possibilities of cohabitation between Dacians and Romans. While Dacians accepts with difficulty the defeat and the death of their king, their rivals want peace. The emperor Trajan declares it from the beginning of the film, as answer to a suggestion of his generals to exterminate the population: "I conquered Dacia to have peace in this place of the world, and it will be peace. A Roman peace. With them. Together." (*The Column*, 1968) For the first time, Romans hold the role of peacemakers, whereas Dacians leads a campaign of resistance against the occupants. Moreover, a part of the Dacians community work with their conquerors for the construction of the roman fort, which is a mark of their friendship and the pacifist cohabitation after the war. Completed by the love story between Andrada, a Dacian woman and Tiberius, the Roman general and followed by the birth of their child, the idea of cohabitation symbolize the emergence of a new people, the Romanians.

Besides, in *The Column*, the Romans illustrate for the first time the idea of civilization. Tiberius defines himself not only as a soldier, but also as a man with a noble education. The Romans embody the civilizing mission and bring, once Dacia conquered, new technologies: aqueducts, trenches of defense around the roman fort. They suggest typically Roman cultural events. In the end, even vanquished Dacians are obliged to recognize their defeat and the importance of the military and cultural experience of their opponents.

Approximately ten years later, in *Burebista*, the perspective of Romans changes fundamentally. They are almost eliminated from the diegetic space, whereas narrative, they get the status of the absolute enemy without any concessions. They become “nations' looters and the conqueror of the universe” (*Burebista*, 1980). The time of the syntheses between Romans and Dacians is over and the new political and cinematic view insists on the ancient local roots, on Dacians' superiority on Romans, enforced despite the professional historians' warnings⁷. This phenomenon is widespread starting from the end of the 70s, when is launched the concept of *protochronisme*⁸.

In conclusion, the embellishment of the conquerors' image has two main objectives. On the one hand, the few virtues of Romans are natural, taking into account their representation as an important ethnic component of the Romanian people. On the other hand, this technique is meant to bring to light, once again, the qualities of Dacians. As far as the official historiography identifies the Romanians mainly to Dacians, this procedure allows, while praising or stigmatizing the “other”, to describe itself⁹.

It still remains that the representation of the Roman Empire is more than a reconstitution of battles and costumes or the *mise en scène* of some classical quotations. The Romanian peplum is a manifesto for identity in the communist period that evolved from a double root in the 60s to a single root in the 80s. This change reveals at the end the ideological conditions of film making, the rediscovery of antique origins and a moderate treatment of historical values and the sliding towards extreme nationalism of Ceausescu in the 80s.

⁷ National Archives of Film (ANF), File of production “Burebista”; Constantin PREDA, “Report in the scenario *Burebista*”, 18 June 1980 : “We cannot assert that in Rome it is used wooden plows, whereas geto-dacian would have had iron superior plows”

⁸ For a detailed analysis of this phenomenon see Verdery (1994:) *Compromis și rezistență. Cultura română sub Ceaușescu*. Transl. by Mona Antohi and Sorin Antohi. Bucharest: Humanitas 1994, pp. 152-204. (First published as *National Ideology under Socialism. Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991)

⁹ This technique is also available for the filmic representation of the next historical periods and its own enemies: the Ottomans and Western Europe. For a detailed analysis, see Aurelia Vasile, « L'étranger – un ennemi nécessaire. Représentation de l'Autre dans le cinéma roumain pendant le régime national-communiste de Nicolae Ceausescu » in *Sciences Humaines Combinées*, Revue électronique de l'ED LISIT, nr.2 *Identités, images et représentations de l'autre*, Dijon, 2008