

ALEXA VISARION AND THE CARAGIALIAN TEXTS – ESSENCE AND EXPRESSIVENESS

ALEXA VISARION ȘI TEXTELE CARAGIALIENE – ESENȚĂ ȘI EXPRESIVITATE

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Ion Luca Caragiale is a national playwright, and is considered a symbol of Romanian society, and more than 100 years have passed since apparently we have not separated psychologically and behaviourally from the template (pattern) in which Ioan Luca Caragiale had set the Romanian society. We believe it's even worse that students at the Faculty of Theater, in the absence of anthropological study, play dramatic texts literally, which increases the risk to stereotype Caragiale's opera in school.

*In this article we intend to present Alexa Visarion's¹ films, based on Ion Luca Caragiale's short stories, as well as the play *D'ale Carnavalului* (Of the Carnival) directed by him, as a guest professor, at the National Theatre Art Institute from Reykjavic, Island (1989). The movies we refer to were the result of some performances played almost with the same distribution for a decade: *Năpasta* (The Scourage), after the short story with the same name, a movie directed in 1985, starring Dorina Lazar, Florin Zamfirescu and Dorel Visan; *Inainte de tacere* (Before silence, directed in 1978, after the story *In vreme de razboi* (in time of war) novel starring Valeria Seciu and Liviu Rozorea. Our demarche aims at highlighting the universality of Ioan Luca Caragiale by essentialization and expressivity.*

Keywords: Ioan Luca Caragiale, Alexa Visarion, film, theatre

Ion Luca Caragiale este un autor dramatic național și este considerat emblema societății românești, împlinindu-se mai bine de 100 de ani de când pare că nu ne-am desprins psihologic și comportamental de matritza în care dramaturgul a fixat societatea românească. Ni se pare grav faptul că, studenților la Facultatea de Teatru li se întâmplă ca, în lipsa studiului antropologic, să joace textele dramatice ad litteram, fapt ce riscă mult șablonizarea operei caragialiene în școală.

*Intenționăm ca în acest articol să prezentăm opera filmică a lui Alexa Visarion², bazată pe nuvelistica lui Ioan Luca Caragiale, precum și spectacolul *D'ale carnavalului*, montat de domnia sa la Institutul Național de Artă Teatrală din Reyk-*

1 Alexa Visarion, director and screenwriter. Professor at the National University of Arts in Bucharest and *Doctor Honoris Causa* of the University of Arts in Iasi place where he teaches public lectures and courses in the doctoral school. He received the Romanian Academy Award for the whole Theatrical and Cinematographic creation and UNITER award for the entire artistic activity.

2 Alexa Visarion, regizor și scenarist. Profesor universitar doctor la Universitatea Națională de Arte din București și *Doctor Honoris Causa* al Universității de Arte din Iași, spațiu în care susține conferințe și cursuri publice în cadrul școlii doctorale. A primit Premiul Academiei Române pentru întreaga creație teatrală și cinematografică și premiul UNITER pentru întreaga activitate artistică.

javik, Islanda în calitate de profesor invitat (1989). Filmele la care ne referim, au fost rodul unor spectacole jucate aproape în aceeași distribuție vreme de un deceniu: Năpasta, după nuvela cu același nume, film regizat în 1985, avându-i în distribuție pe Dorina Lazăr, Florin Zamfirescu și Dorel Vișan; Înainte de tăcere, regizat în 1978, după nuvela În vreme de război, cu Valeria Seciu și Liviu Rozorea. Demersul nostru are ca scop reliefaarea universalității lui Ioan Luca Caragiale prin esențializare și expresivitate.

Cuvinte-cheie: Ioan Luca Caragiale, Alexa Visarion, film, teatru

On the 30th of January 2012, Alexa Visarion was invited to Romania Cultural Radio, to talk about Ion Luca Caragiale. Given the 160 years celebration since the writer's birth, that particular year was declared the "Ion Luca Caragiale" Year. Designed and coordinated in two halves by the hosts of the "Vorba de cultură" (An Accent on Culture) show, Alexa Visarion's presence developed the subject into an honest dialogue with Ema Stere and Attila Vizauer, under the triple state of theater director, film director, and professor. Although it took place in 2012, the meeting remains, at any times, a valid testimony, creating over time a deciphering of Alexa Visarion's filmography, based on Caragialian texts and, equally, an understanding of the way in which he reads the work. For the director, the necessity of an existential dialogue with the work he wants to represent on stage or on tape is required, so that it uncurtains itself step by step, in a unique manner. It is impossible to approach a common view against a great work (in this case, Caragiale's texts) when making way to meeting it. The risks of trivialization or of "novelty" for the sake of the form only occur when the director is guided by the performative encounter of that particular work. Alexa Visarion differentiates between Caragiale's thoughtfulness regarding the theater and the written work of the great classic. In representation, uniqueness becomes possible, even inevitable because the writing is alive, and the living of the writing may become creative, to the extent that it meets the living of the director. Hereby, the existential dialogue with the work gives birth to a unique encounter, both on the representation (director – work) and the perception level (spectator – performance/film and spectator – work) Thus, the possibility of a unique encounter between director and work exists in as far as in each era, without risking to distort or to adapt itself, the Caragialian universe acquires new meanings by way of re-reading.

Accomplishing his director work through film and theater, we can see in Alexa Visarion the power of this poetic approach of a classic Caragialian text in two movies carried out at a seven years interval, and linked between them by the life of a show whose script he has written according to the short story *Năpasta (The Scourge)*. Objectively speaking, it can be said that the presentation of *Năpasta* has generated both films. It was the director's debut on the stage of the Piatra Neamț Theatre in 1970, after having been noticed during his Theatrical Art Institute studies with the same text; after that, it meant a remarkable success at Giulești Theatre in 1974, the representation being held for nine years until 1983, with many tours abroad (in Italy, Portugal, Russia, Germany, Austria, Hungary) and obtaining the ATM Prize for Caragialian Exegesis Through Drama and Film in our cultural area (1979). Abroad, the representation has been seen as the continuation of a text of universal value as, along with the updated translation, at the level of scenic expression, the director has used an austere key, plain and expressive for both playing and mise en scène. For those who have not seen the representation, *Năpasta*, the movie, is fairly faithful to this utmost staging. "What was interesting for the Western world was the fact that we have not created a drama for the peasantry, we have not brought up a rural universe: a tavern, a tavern owner and a revenge story. We have brought up a tragedy. So the focus has shifted on the tragic, on the tragic element that, suddenly, has made this representation to be about human destinies living a moment of syncope, of explosion, a moment that has happened to ransack the past and mark the future, although a classical unit, and not a representation about a place. As you know, the whole action takes place within 24 hours. In other words, we had managed to link the ancient tragedy (the tragic essence of the ancient Greek theatre) to a Romanian story. We have made, thus, an opening of the work through work (*O făclie de Paște (An Easter Torch)*, *Păcat (Sin)*, *În vreme de război (In Time of War)*), but also from *Miorița (The Little Ewe)* and *Meșterul Manole (The Master Builder Manole)*. Caragiale can be

read through speech out of Caragiale, through current expression, but he can be read through himself, by way of what he suggests. For the first time, we talk about an author who never goes to a formal reading. He is an author of many mysteries. Their revealing is carried out in willingly or unwillingly stages of the work, but always supported by artistry. Caragiale is a mastery author. His virtuosity has always imposed revelations. The work always goes beyond its content. It is a stylized expression.“

It is this very styling of expression that embodies Alexa Visarion's work manner, the bridge between his theatre and film, the theatricality dose within the film, the charging of the film images with multiple meanings so that the speech evolves simultaneously on many levels: on that of the gestures, on the deontological one, on the level of thoughts and ideas, opening itself into the realm of the spirit.

Analyzing the two films rooted in the Caragialian universe, a shade merges; a shade that we believe it approaches Alexa Visarion to Emil Cioran's thinking and that reveals him as a true creator, faithful to Caragiale through the tragic sense – such a necessary component of the enthusiastic Romanian thinking, from Cioran's point of view and of the satirizing/ humbug type, in Caragiale's perspective. “Foremost, the director must be a thinker”, writes the author of the two films in an autobiographical volume, for which the purpose of the representation is to confess, not to fascinate. In his films, chasing one's inner truths explains the austere expression; however, these personal truths equally offer the individual an opening towards identical truths, belonging to humanity. Through this, the film director Alexa Visarion becomes the authentic bearer of the author he screens and a thinker who enters our cultural heritage: “Since caducity anchors me, irritability leaves my thoughts and my heroes are the stances of my inner feelings.” This personalization of events told through images makes him bear a resemblance to Emil Cioran who, after having exhausted his interest for pure philosophy in his youth, left the systematic thinking and abstract speculation, in order to devote himself to some deeply personal thoughts: “I have invented nothing; I have only been the secretary of my sensations.” Cioran's writings are not actual confessions, even though they are self-referential.

By screening *Năpasta* (1984), we move past the meaning of affliction (in the short story bearing the same title) in the register of tragic guilt (in the script). The disastrous destinies of the three characters (Anca, Dragomir, Gheorge) come from within, as temptation. Thus, we can talk about the ancestral guilt of this world: Adam's expulsion as fruit of temptation.

The characters, who receive outside blows, are out of this world order: a mad man (Ion) and a hieratic presence translated in the material world by candle light consistency (Dumitru). The external blows vary in intensity, from a touch on the shoulder (Dragomir puts his hand on Dumitru's shoulder while the latter dances with the wife, to ask a dance for himself. The same kind of touching precedes Dumitru's hitting with the ax, from behind) to Ion's systematic beating in the pit, Anca's imaginary hitting by Dragomir's ax, George's wine cups collision at the Priest's Tavern, inverting the meaning of friendship in ambush and attack, in order to bereave him of Anca.

Temptations block the characters in a pointless struggle. Anca loves Dumitru, Dragomir loves Anca and kills Dumitru. Persecuted by passion, Dragomir allows crime to tempt him and believes that, in the end, running will set him free; however, the getting away frenzy makes him want to also save Ion, whom he had staged the murder of Dumitru. Destiny, as superior resort, temporarily overlaps Dumitru's run with Ion's calling for the other world; a calling that has led his running away from the pit through Anca's house, to the tree next to which Dumitru had been killed.

After the crime reconstitution, Anca looks on the last scene of the fugitive from the hilltop, standing like the spectator in the Greek theatre; she sees how divine justice intervenes by Ion who, committing suicide, makes the real crime perpetrator seem an apparent effecter.

What turns Anca into a tragic heroine is her own inner struggle that she feels when, like Ifigenia carrying her brother to bury him, drags Ion home, to offer him a Christian burial: Anca: “What are you waitin' for? Run!” Dragomir: “Come along!” Anca: “It's impossible!” or the battle between crying out Dragomir's name after handing him over to the gendarmes and the utterance of the revenge ver-

dict. Shrouded by suspicion for nine years until finding out the truth, Anca, as witness of divine justice, oscillates between love and justice, between her duty as a wife to both her husbands, the living and the one passed away...

Gheorghe and Muta from *The Priest's Tavern* continue, on a straight horizontal, Anca's and Dragomir's destinies. Gheorghe, the one who indecently picks up the prayer candle and uses it to lit the lamp so he could better see the woman of his desires, the one who interrupts Dragomir from raping Anca, not to save her, but to assume the position of her partner, who clears chippings and lime after Anca and Dragomir's conjugal scandal, Gheorghe, who impetuously enjoys chasing Anca daily and who ties Gheorghe hand and foot, to send him to trial. At the other end of the line is Muta, who finds herself in an impossible love upsurge for Dragomir. Equally, she is the upside down symbol of Dragomir's love for Anca. And, because while asking her to pour him some wine, all cry to Dragomir to ask his "lover" to sing for him, Muta is a character who can be simultaneously read as the voiceless tongue of a sole woman among men – Anca.

Muta from *Năpasta*, the movie, continues a space of silence outlined by the director in his *Înainte de tăcere* (*Before Silence*) film (1978), fathered from another work of Caragiale, *În vreme de război* (*In Time of War*).

In this first film, Alexa Visarion altered silence, creating the connection between characters. Or took seconds of silence – the living time in theatre and captured them in images or developed silence as part of the anthropological theatre, as stated by Caragiale in filmic language. Either way, he did it in a manner that transformed the film into a cinematographic gem. It is difficult to forget the eloquence of this film, in which words are so scarce, in relation to the subtle speech of the image: "Being the primary language, silence is the *mise en scène* and the language of being. It infers and contains within itself all possible words; it is the infinite reservoir of the words. Thus, silence is the ultimate language, God's language. [...] Silence is not only the matrix, the giving birth womb and principle of the word. Silence is not only the existential condition and the supreme way of the being, but the truest and the most burdensome part of the critter. [...] Silence is more than the beginning, the mystery, and the canon of the being; it is the creature's meaning and fulfillment. It is silence that gives being force, and not the spoken word."

As the director has said on various occasions, in *Înainte de tăcere* we recapture characters from the universe of the *Năpasta* presentation, the principle being that of opening the work through the work itself: the mad man, the elongation-loving woman. In the script signed by Alexa Visarion, we also retrieve reflections of the short story *Păcat* (*Sin*): sin as destiny (Stavrache, to Ana: "I am not guilty. The sin was in us"), the bad lot grafted in man from birth (marked in Stavrache's brother); here, the incest between siblings from *Sin* becomes an original sin (Stavrache, to Ana: "Woman, you are the temptation!").

The speech of silence is complete, containing the other pole, the wasted words (the noise) and it can be tracked down in the carousel frames.

In *Înainte de tăcere*, the carousel frames are the parable of the world, as perceived by Caragiale, or the film of the modern and postmodern world: "The world is a carousel, a realm of nothingness. Deprived of personality, the now anonymous man, the man subject to verbal tyranny and exasperation, lives. The play is no longer known; it is a lame bungle of the world, of us, the viewers. Tragedy makes you laugh, comedy makes you cry. But how can a theatre with such background, with a considerably and bright scenery and big drums work? You blind the eyes, you deafen the years, so no one cannot pretend to understand."

The architecture of the scenario organically includes Chekhovian scenes. It seems that Ana, as imagined by Alexa Visarion, embodies the beautiful and lazy Elena from *Unchiul Vania* (*Uncle Vanya*). The dialogue between Ana and Petre, the stray peasant taken by Stavrache to serve and the inn for food, resembles the dialogue between Elena and Ivan Petrovici: "Ana: Life is gone. What for?"

I have grown old and I have never gone passed the hogback. [...] So much bleakness. Petre: It is because you sit here and do not feel the world... Ana: What could be on the other side? Petre: All people and troubles.”

Another burdened Chekhovian catchword, but in the context of Stavrache’s story is his cry: “I have to live!”. In *Unchiul Vania*, Sonia soothes him, after Elena’s departure: “What can you do, you have to live. We’ll live a long, long string of days, of endless evenings [...] and we’ll toil for others [...] without knowing rest and, when time comes, we’ll die obediently.”

The fundamental theme of the two movies, *Năpasta* and *Înainte de tăcere*, is sin. The Caragialian texts are opened through film in a Dostoevskian key. Can this make Alexa Visarion a less original film author?... Caragiale would answer: “The later the artist or the thinker came into the world, the more he needs to be original by far, and to possess a greater power of design, in order to surpass the increasingly capital of the human thinking and to find a new form”.

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