

Rape and Sexual Violence in Contemporary Romanian Cinema

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Abstract

This article analyses the functions of sexuality in contemporary Romanian cinema, focusing on films made after 2000 by auteurs like Cristi Puiu, Cristian Mungiu and Cătălin Mitulescu, while contrasting their work with the previous generation of filmmakers like Mircea Daneliuc, Mircea Mureșan or Lucian Pintilie. Given that in a patriarchal society women are often represented as sexual victims, this article examines the ways in which New Wave Romanian Cinema deals with narratives describing rape and male aggression. Discussing the differences between Romanian New Wave Cinema, Communist propaganda films and ‘Romanian Miserabilism’ (which is similar to the French New Brutalism), this study invokes concepts like sexuality and exploitation, the cinema of cruelty, social brutality in film and the gratuitous representation of sex acts. It also describes those recent films which deal with

female and male homosexuality, issues of sexual control in contemporary families, and the principal stereotypes of male and female sexuality in contemporary Romanian society.

This study explores sexual violence (be it verbal, physical or visual) in the cinema in relation to its significance at the cultural and political level, as a means to understand the deep changes Romanian society have undergone during this period.

Keywords: Romanian cinema, rape, sexual violence, ideology, power and social aggression.

Introduction: Sexual Violence and Social Relations in Contemporary Romania

In Romania, it has been suggested that a rape is reported every 10 hours, and police records show that there are many violent acts which are never even officially recorded. A national research launched in 2003 by the Partnership for Equality indicated some dramatic figures regarding violence against women: in Romania during the course of one year (2002-2003) over 800,000 women (out of a total female population of approximately 11 million) suffered domestic violence – that is over 7% of women in the country. This violence comes in various forms: 695,000 women were insulted, threatened or humiliated and more than 70,000 women were abused, in many instances sexually. Government statistics indicate that about 2,500 rapes are reported yearly,¹ with many more never disclosed,² while more than a quarter of the cases result in a mutual agreement with the aggressor.³

Both Romanian and international media have showcased shocking situations which indicate not only an increase in aggression directed

towards women in contemporary society, but also a lack of awareness of this violence on the part of ordinary citizens. For example, in August 2012 a serial rapist abducted – and subsequently killed – a Japanese student from the Bucharest international airport, without anyone noticing that something was amiss. Similarly, in September 2013 a young female journalist was raped in plain sight, in the middle of Bucharest not far from the Government building; none of the passers-by intervened or reacted to what was taking place. A third example highlighted by the media was that of a 13-year old girl who was raped and abused by her mother's life-partner for over two years, with the abuse only being reported when she turned up pregnant in a local hospital.⁴

Statistics made public by the National Agency for Family Protection (Agenția Națională pentru Protecția Familiei) show that the number of cases of domestic violence in Romania increased throughout the period 2004-2009, with about 60,000 cases recorded nationwide, of which 778 resulted in death.⁵ Records show that one in three women in Romania considers herself to

have been the victim of physical or verbal abuse by a male, while 138 women died from domestic abuse in 2006 and 2007. Romanian police studies on domestic violence show that 45% of Romanian women have suffered verbal abuse, 30% physical abuse and 7% sexual abuse during their lifetime. Nearly two-thirds of women have been subjected to coerced sexual intercourse by current or former partners, while 15% have been raped by a friend or former friend and 12% by an acquaintance or a person they recently met.⁶

Human trafficking and the sexual exploitation of women are even more alarming phenomena in contemporary Romania. Data concerning the exploitation of women shows that during the first semester of 2010 almost 100 girls between the ages of 14 and 17 and over 75 women

between the ages of 17 and 25 were the victims of sex trafficking; 74% of these women were subsequently sexually exploited in clubs, brothels, homes or on the streets. Figures show that, for the first time in over two decades, in 2010 sex-trafficking within Romania outpaced sex-trafficking to foreign destinations.⁷

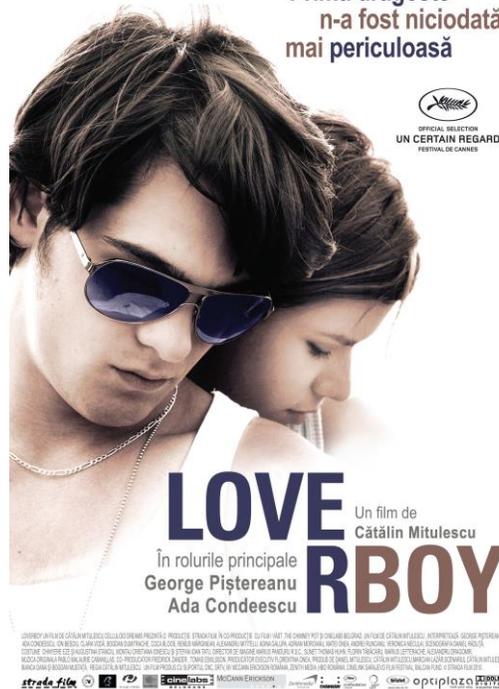
Conversely, as Mihaela Miroiu, one of the most important theoreticians of female activism in Romania, has pointed out, during the same period the development of feminist movements in Romania indicates clear progress and increased impact in the mobilization for political and social rights.⁸

Cinema and the Representation of Sexual Violence

Strada Film prezintă

Prima dragoste
n-a fost niciodată
mai periculoasă

OFFICIAL SELECTION
UN CERTAIN REGARD
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New Wave Romanian traumas: sexual violence explored as contemporary national drama

It is fitting that Romanian New Wave Cinema – and by that I am referring to films produced after 2000 – has taken rape and male-on-female aggression as one of its most recurrent narrative tropes, as can be seen in such internationally acclaimed films as Cristian Mungiu’s *4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile*/*4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007), Ruxandra Zenide’s *Ryna* (2005) and Cătălin Mitulescu’s *Loverboy* (2011). Such films raise the question of whether the representation of sexual violence (be it at a narrative level, through dialogue, or through

physical or visual displays) has deeper cultural and political significance. They also invite us to reflect on whether such texts can be used as critical tools to interrogate the profound changes taking place in post-communist Romanian society.

Before addressing these questions through an analysis of films produced by the latest generation of Romanian filmmakers, it is necessary to consider two key issues. First, we must describe the theoretical and conceptual

framework underpinning contemporary cinema and explain how the use of violence against women is turned into a discursive practice. Secondly, we must search for the roots of such ‘rape narratives’ in Romanian patriarchal culture, outlining a brief history of the representation of women as sexual victims in the films of earlier Romanian filmmakers by way of contrast. It is also worth clarifying at this point that the subsequent discussion will focus exclusively on Romanian filmmakers working in Romania, and thus will not address films such as the classical Hollywood rape movie *Johnny Belinda* (1948, Jean Negulesco) or the Romanian-set rape-revenge drama *Katalin Varga* (2009), which was written and directed by the British filmmaker Peter Strickland.

The Narrative Functions of Rape in the Cinema

Representations of sexual violence, rape and sexual exploitation in the cinema follow a similar logic to the classical depictions of rape in art, where violence against women was often depicted heroically, as an instrument of instilling male power. As Diane Wolfthal has eloquently

put it, there is an “aestheticization of rape” and “sanitization of violence”,⁹ which is beneficial primarily to the dominant masculine discourse engaged in constructing a positive perspective on the existing power relations in society. As can be seen in a number of paintings by almost all the ‘Masters’ of European art (the most common example being *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, as depicted by artists from Giambologna to Rubens and Poussin), there is a form of legitimization of social and political aggression. The raped women, who become respectable matrons accepting of their social condition, are part of the process of validation by which abuse is legitimized by its victims.

Later, the narratives of rape and murder were integrated into popular discourse and,¹⁰ as Jane Monckton Smith describes, there are indications that a profound link exists between these stories and deeper cultural and social beliefs. Analysing rape narratives can be a means of dismantling the process of signification, deconstructing meaning formation in various social contexts. This allows for an understanding of how patriarchal power is expressed through

stereotypical representations of male/female power and the shifts in focus to and from the male point-of-view result in the potential for social criticism. Since the perspective of rape victims is traditionally ignored or imbued with negative political connotations, reading this violence as a cinematic function becomes a critical act. Fundamentally rape is a cinematic phantasy of males,¹¹ and sexual aggression against women is usually represented with a male spectator present.

In discussions of contemporary cinema, the representation of rape naturally remains one of the most important topics in feminist critiques of capitalist cultural products.¹² As Sarah Projansky has demonstrated so eloquently in her study on the relationship between popular culture and the representations of rape,¹³ the cinema traces a lengthy history of sexual violence against women, which is often depicted as acceptable or even desirable. Rape has thus become a staple of the main cinematic genres like crime and revenge films and Joanna Bourke has counted one rape for every eight Hollywood movies.¹⁴ Rape remains both one of the most complex

forms of dealing with our humanity and an instrument of de-humanizing the Other.

We can identify four main functions of rape narratives in the cinema: 1. Rape as cinematic phantasy of the implied male spectator; 2. Sexual violence as social criticism in society; 3. Sexual violence as a tool for creating brutal realism; and 4. Rape as a manifestation of the 'politics of hate', one means of dehumanising the 'Other'.

Rape and Ideology in Communist Cinema

As we have seen, throughout history rape may also be considered effectively to be a political gesture and the political dimensions of violence against women often reveal something about the level of control exercised by men, either as a reinforcement of their role in patriarchal societies or as a projection of social dynamics. The mythology of Communist regimes, founded on an illusion of equality, promoted a fake representation of gender roles. In official propaganda women were depicted as an integral part of the 'new society' in which, unlike in previous exploitative political systems, they

were allowed to fully express their identity. In the communist symbolical order women were supposed to be 'equal comrades' of their male counterparts, and conceptions of sexuality were projected within this new social order. Yet these representations were instilled with preconceptions: female partners were simply men's 'little helpers', marginalized as housewives or second grade citizens. Furthermore, in Romania under Communism women were subjected to social abuse and repression, mostly through the control of their sexuality.¹⁵

This is why the few representations of sexual violence – and even more rarely, rape scenes – in Romanian films produced under Communism always served a political purpose. Sexual violence in the Communist cinema served this ideological function of expressing symbolically the exploitative practices of the Capitalists (represented as violent men) on the working classes (represented as female victims). From the very beginning, Communist propaganda cinema understood that rape was a political gesture. In one of the first Romanian films to

depict a rape scene, *Râpa dracului* [*Devil's Pit*] (1957, Jean Mihail), a wealthy land owner rapes a poor peasant girl as an extension of the process of exploitation inherent in their social positions. The beautiful Anica's comrades take revenge for this action and she finally re-marries (happily) the Party Secretary of the timber factory. This schematic conflict becomes a trademark of Communist propaganda films, as in the case of historical movies like *Răpirea fecioarelor/ The Kidnapping of the Maidens* (1968, Dinu Cocea), in which rape is transformed into an expression of the Capitalist/ imperialist exploitation of Romanian society.

In one of the first Romanian movies to be critically acclaimed in European film festivals, *Răscoala/ The Uprising* (1965, Mircea Muresan), the rape dynamics are reversed, yet still serve as a symbolic expression of class conflict. The story is set during the peasant revolts of 1907 and the narrative climax includes the rape of the boyar women, in the form of the beautiful 'exploiter' Nadine. During a sexually intense scene, the noblewoman is pursued and sexually molested by the leader of the rebellion.

This rape sequence, set to extra-diegetic music similar to that of *Psycho* (1960, Alfred Hitchcock), is constructed in such a way that it generates pseudo-sexual tension from frame to frame. Everything is leading up to the depiction of this violent sexual act as a form of retribution for the social violence perpetrated by the ruling classes against the exploited. “You mocked us,” the rapist says, “so why shouldn’t I defile you?”, thus creating a connection between the spectator and the ‘positive’ perpetrator of the violent act. The scene’s conclusion is even more stereotypical and ideologically loaded, since the victim is seen to be enjoying the sex act, pleasurably caressing the hair of her aggressor.

Post-communism and the Cinema of the ‘Transition’

In the context of the cinematic freedom acquired by the Romanian film industry after the fall of Communism in 1989, most filmmakers pursued an inverted ideological path, criticizing Communism by means of similar narrative tools to those employed by the old ideology. The new social order imposed on Romania by the Soviets was easily projected as a historical rape, and

thus rape became one of the narrative metaphors by which a bad society (Communism) compelled a victimized nation (Romania) to accept abuse. In one of the rare homosexual male rape scenes in Romanian cinema, in *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni/ The Earth's Most Beloved Son* (1993, Șerban Marinescu), an intellectual prisoner is shown being sodomized by one of his fellow inmates. This episode, presented as the final degradation of his human condition, depicts sexual intercourse in an abject fashion, with the main character coerced to accept the violence silently, since he is captive and lacking alternative options; just like Romanian society as a whole, he must either consent and survive, or protest and die. Other films about the Gulag, like Nicolae Mărgineanu’s *Binecuvântată fii, închisoare/ Bless You, Prison* (2002), follow heroic stories like that of Maria Valeria Grossu, who emerges from the maze of aggression perpetrated by Communist officers only to discover the power of mysticism and religious belief. Again, the victimhood of one individual serves as a projection of the historical ordeal of an entire nation.

Lucian Pintilie's *Balanta/ The Oak* (1992) is among the best films of the transitional period and, although still centered on a narrative about Communism, it constitutes a remarkable example of how the inheritance of the past can be transcended. Pintilie deals with rape both as a symbolically charged form of social criticism and as a depiction of human debasement under Communism. Surrounded by violent and abusive men, a young teacher, Nela (played by Maia Morgenstern), ends up in a remote town only to be raped by unknown workers at an industrial facility. This rape, which the authorities never solve or prosecute, moves from being a reference to the social rape practiced by the Communist regime to become a central narrative tool which allows for the main character's growth. The rape allows Nela to meet the only 'real' man in her life (a rebellious doctor, Mitică), who offers her the possibility of eluding the terrors of an absurd society. While the element of class struggle is still present in the rape scene (since it depicts a violent act perpetrated by the 'working class' against an independent, intellectual woman), the brutal proletarians are an integral part of the world

depicted.

Another more brutal example of the use of violence as a symbolic function was practiced by the 'Cinema of Misery', or 'Miserabilism', which developed after 1989 in the films of Mircea Daneliuc. Over the last two decades, his films obsessively used sexual aggression as a means of describing a violent and debased society; over and over again the director turns to harsh and atrocious representations of violent sexual acts in order to convey his message. In comparison to the French New Brutalism and the 'Cinema of Cruelty', the obsessive rape scenes of Daneliuc, who was previously one of the most important directors of the Romanian cinema under Communism, are often gratuitous. Unlike *Baise-moi* (2000, Virginie Despentes and Coralie) or *Irreversible* (2002, Gaspar Noé) in which violence is manifested as a form of self-expression, the Romanian director uses horrific representations of human degeneration as part of a brutal cinematic attempt to convince his viewers of the horrid nature of 'real life' in contemporary Romanian society. Daneliuc is notorious for creating some of the most violent

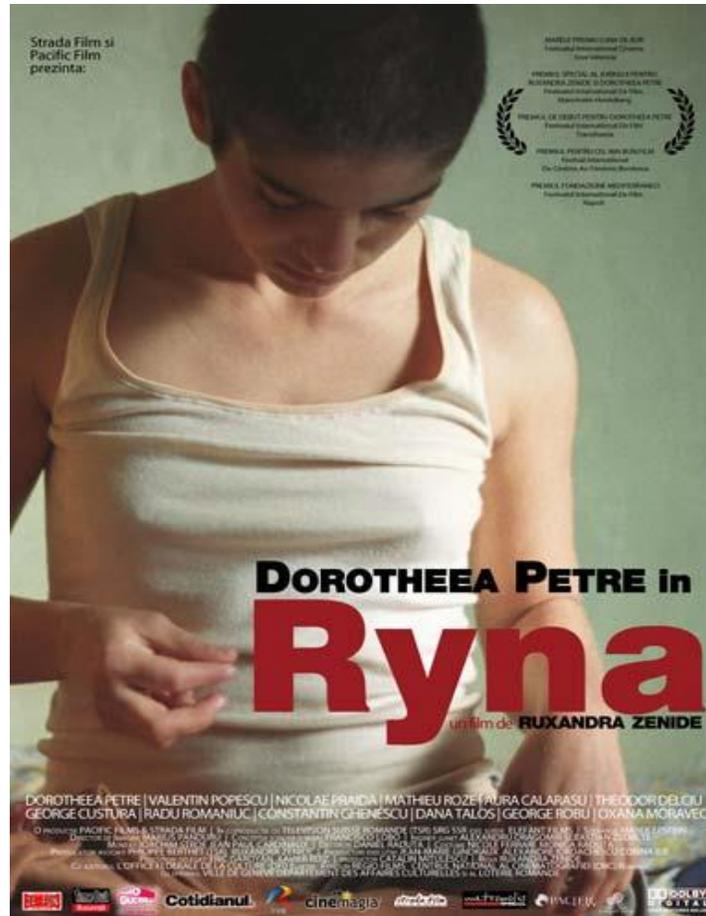
and senseless scenes of sexual violence in the history of world cinema; for example, in his *Patul conjugal/ Conjugal Bed* (1993) we witness how a pregnant wife is stabbed by her husband, who also puts nails into her head, while he asks her for clean shirts.

This brutality against women recurs in other films Daneliuc produced after 1989, such as *Senatorul melcilor/ Snails' Senator* (1995) in which a Romanian Senator (symbolically called Vârtosu – ‘Virile’) ends up raping one of the villagers gathered in a celebration to welcome him into their community. After 2000, in a series of similar films Daneliuc uses rape as a narrative form to express human degradation (*Ambasadori, cautam patrie/ Ambassadors Seek Country*, 2003; *Sistemul nervos/ The Nervous System*, 2005; *Legiunea straina/ The Foreign Legion*, 2008; *Marilena*, 2009; *Cele ce plutesc/ Those Who Float*, 2009). In *Marilena*, the miserabilist representation of reality quickly turns into the brutal expression of degraded

human relations; after being raped by her work manager, Marilena, a single young woman with an infant child, leaves the baby girl with her rapist. Throughout the movie she is raped repeatedly and indiscriminately and, at the end of her ordeal, she suggestively exclaims: “Oh God! How ugly this world is!” This focus on the misery of life recurs again and again in Daneliuc’s films, as in *Those Who Float*, in which the main character, Avram, has a love affair with his daughter-in-law, who is in turn raped by the Gypsy villagers living next door, as part of an absurd and ludicrous depiction of appalling human bonds.

Representation of Sexual Violence in New Wave Romanian Films

One of the first films of the New Wave Romanian cinema to deal explicitly with rape and abuse is *Ryna* (2005), significantly the only film of the movement by a female director, Ruxandra Zenide.



Social critique and gender oppression are marked in Ruxandra Zenide's film *Ryna*

Ryna (played by Dorotheea Petre) is a young girl living in a remote village in the Danube Delta who is raised by her father as a boy. This patriarchal need for a male heir projects a false gender identity onto the young girl, who we see performing traditionally masculine activities in her father's garage. Abandoned by her mother and living in a world dominated by men in which poverty and exploitation dominate human

relations, Ryna's destiny is socially determined.

In one of the most powerful and emotive rape scenes in contemporary Romanian cinema, Ryna is abused by the village mayor; she cries out for her father, but as the violent act takes place, he lies drunk and unable to react outside the van in which he was supposed to drive her safely home. This horrific act takes place off-screen and we

return to the scene only in the morning, with the father frantically searching for Ryna. When her grandfather takes her to the hospital, everybody tries to cover up what happened; while the Mayor bribes her father in return for his silence, it is Ryna who saves face for all involved. With its depiction of the trauma of rape victims, Ruxandra Zenide's film demonstrates how the representation of aggression and social oppression can move beyond social criticism to raise important questions about sexuality, power and female/ male identity.

A similar narrative can be found in *4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile/ 4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2009, Cristian Mungiu), perhaps the most internationally prominent film of recent Romanian cinema. Mungiu presents the story of

two young women who are raped and emotionally traumatized by the so-called doctor whose services they engage to perform an illegal abortion. As in *Ryna*, the rape scene is never actually depicted; instead the film manifests a dialectical relationship between men and women by which men are represented as fundamentally degraded and lacking in strength, while women are forced to support each other in order to act from a position of strength. At the beginning of the film we see Găbița, the subject of the proposed abortion (and subsequently victim of the rape which precedes the procedure), waiting for her father who never shows up. Similarly, the initial assurance of Otilia, her friend and a collateral victim of the abuse, is contrasted with the infantile attitudes of her boyfriend.



Political regimes and regimes of violence in *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*

The two young women are alone; although they allow the rape to take place, and apparently accept their role as victims, they remain the only humane characters in the film. In this powerful film, which describes one of the most difficult decades of the Romanian Communist regime, the de-humanization of femininity and the degrading of womanhood is not simply brutal, or miserable; rather, it is a realist portrayal of society, a disenchanting recognition of reality as it was and not as it was projected by the official propaganda. Although the act of rape is never actually shown on screen, the director instead concentrates on the morally appalling nature of the rapist's actions. In both *Ryna* and *4 Months,*

3 Weeks and 2 Days violence is more than just a representation of social dysfunction; it becomes a manifestation of the emptiness of prescribed social roles.

Some recent Romanian films use the representation of men incapable of acknowledging their capacity for sexual violence as an expression of the failure of individuals to make sound social decisions. This is the case with one of the films that tackles the early years of Communism, *Caravana cinematografică/ Kino Caravan* (2009, Titus Muntean), in which the sexually abusive 'comrade' Tavi is placed in an ambiguous relationship with the young

female teacher of the village, who gradually falls in love with him. At the end of the film he rapes her in a primitive and symbolic sequence in which, once again, the reference to the Soviet 'rape' of an innocent world becomes both explicit and non-realist.

When dealing with rape as a social phenomenon, the problem of the sexual exploitation of women becomes crucial, and this exploitation constitutes another key theme in recent Romanian cinema. Unlike stories which take place in Romania but are produced by Western filmmakers, such as David Yates' *Sex Traffic* (2004), the Romanian directors directly address the notion of violence as forms of social control. In Cătălin Mitulescu's second feature, *Loverboy* (2011), we are presented with a story of human trafficking; however, this story takes place in a context in which intimacy and subjectivity assume greater importance than the direct criticism of exploitation. The film thus questions the fact that aggression against women has become socially acceptable. Here, the young man who rapes (and allows to be raped) his girlfriend, introducing her to sexual promiscuity

and selling her into sexual slavery, is not simply described as a negative character. Instead, rape again becomes again a manifestation of familial decline, since the girl's father is also not only incapable of protecting his daughter, but is himself actively abusive. In New Wave films which use sexuality as indicator of social order, such 'bad fathers' become narrative projections of the dissolution of the father figure in society. As in *Aurora* (2010, Cristi Puiu) or *Poziția copilului/ Child's Pose* (2012, Călin Peter Netzer 2012), *Loverboy* depicts a world in which the dissolution of traditional social dynamics – with the family as a 'fundamental cell of society' – has reached a tipping point.

Conclusion

Since traditional relations in society do not function anymore, New Wave directors have moved from the metaphorical depictions of social rape – with Communism as 'bad' assailant – towards an exploration of the profound issues of social control and of sexuality as a defining element of human relations. As in one of Cristian Mungiu's most recent films, *După dealuri/ Beyond the Hills* (2012), in which latent

homosexuality and institutional abuse constitute key themes, the representation of sexual violence in New Wave Romanian Cinema is part of the investigation into the transformative forces that are influencing female identity in contemporary Romanian society. In contrast to Peter Strickland's *Katalin Varga* (2009), in which the British writer-producer-director recounts a typical, female-centered "rape and revenge story",¹⁶ recent Romanian filmmakers articulate narratives in which the victims of sexual abuse are mostly depicted as accepting of their condition. Yet rape in the recent movies is not a form of destruction, a means of dehumanizing femininity (as it was the case with the miserabilist cinema); instead it becomes an expression of the inherent power of the victims and a manifest declaration of an awakened social conscience.

² Anon. (2003) "Cercetarea națională privind violența în familie și la locul de muncă", Centrul Parteneriat pentru Egalitate, available from: http://www.fundatia.ro/sites/default/files/CPE%20CercetareViolenta%20domestica%202003_0.pdf, accessed 20 June 2015.

³ Anon. (2012) "Incredibil: româncele violate 'se împacă'. Două din trei violuri nu ajung în instanță", available from: www.evz.ro/radiografia-violurilor-in-romania-175-de-cazuri-in-trei-luni-981259.html, accessed 18 May 2015.

⁴ Anon. (2013) "IADUL de acasă. O copilă de 13 ani urmează să NASCĂ după ce a fost violată vreme de doi ani de concubinul mamei sale", available from: <http://www.antena3.ro/romania/iadul-de-acasa-o-copila-de-13-ani-urmeaza-sa-nasca-dupa-ce-a-fost-violata-vreme-de-doi-ani-de-concubinul-mamei-sale-234541.html>, accessed 18 May 2015.

⁵ Data from the Romanian National Agency for Family Protection, available from the site of the Romanian Ministry of Work, http://www.mmuncii.ro/pub/imagemanager/images/file/Statistica/Buletin%20statistic/2009/familie1_65.pdf, accessed 7 July 2015.

⁶ Anon. (2003) "Cercetarea națională privind violența în familie și la locul de muncă", *Centrul Parteneriat pentru Egalitate*, available from: http://www.fundatia.ro/sites/default/files/CPE%20CercetareViolenta%20domestica%202003_0.pdf, accessed 20 June 2015.

⁷ Anon. (2009) "Evaluarea situației traficului de persoane în România în anul 2009", available from: <http://anitp.mai.gov.ro/ro/docs/studii/evaluare%202009.pdf>, accessed 20 June 2015.

⁸ Miroiu, M. (ed.) (2015) *Mișcări feministe în România (1990-2014)*. Iași: Polirom.

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¹⁰ Smith, J. M. (2010) *Relating Rape and Murder. Narratives of Sex, Death and Gender*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 151-152.

¹¹ Horeck, T. (2004) *Public Rape. Representing Violation in Fiction and Film*. London: Routledge.

¹² Wolfthal, 1999.

¹³ Projansky, S. (2001) *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 95.

¹⁴ Bourke, J. (2007) *Rape. A History from 1860 to the Present*. Lancaster: Virago.

¹⁵ For more on this notion, see Gal, S. and Kligman, G. (eds.) (2000) *The Politics of Gender after Socialism: A Comparative-Historical Essay*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹⁶ Heller-Nicholas, A. (2011) *Rape-revenge Films: A Critical Study*. Jefferson: McFarland. 3-4.

¹ Ring, Z. (2011) "Asta da statistică: În România o femeie este violată la fiecare patru ore", available from: www.libertatea.ro/detalii/articol/statistica-violromania-patru-ore-341639.html#ixzz3aaIy7s00, accessed 18 May 2015.