

FILM REVIEW: DIAMONDS IN THE DARK, BY OLIVIA LUCIA CARRESCIA, FIRST RUN/ICARUS FILMS, 2000, 60 MINUTES

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In 1993, Yvette Biro described the geographical and psychological terrain portrayed in Eastern European cinema as "a landscape after battle". Such is the Romania depicted in New York filmmaker Olivia Lucia Carrescia's recent documentary *Diamonds in the Dark*, an insightful study of the devastation wrought by the Ceausescu regime and the problems faced in the period of transformation since its fall. As she has done in previous productions about Guatemalan immigrants to the US, Carrescia has chosen in

Diamonds to illuminate textures of human experience rather than attempt to make cinematic sense in less than an hour of a highly complex and even chaotic reality. In terms of Biro's sadly appropriate metaphor, the effect is something like meeting casualties returning from the front. Some are bloodied and bandaged, others intact and hopeful, all moving past with tired eyes and worn faces revealing and concealing to varying degrees the experience of war in the trenches. All are survivors of a struggle that has not ended but just shifted theatres.

The eyes and the faces are exclusively female, more than a dozen women of diverse social and economic backgrounds who reflect on life under Ceausescu's pseudo-communism and the decade of crypto-democracy that has followed. Their words vividly convey the madness of the man, his wife, and their regime, the huge costs they exacted from a people to whom history has never been kind, and the mixture of confusion, disillusionment, and guarded optimism that has followed the 1989 Revolution. Carrescia's primary goal was to make a film about Romanian women and the lives they have forged and are forging for themselves under tremendously challenging conditions. In this she has succeeded admirably. Rural peasants, urban professionals, factory workers, and others speak of what they had to endure during the Communist era: the brutally enforced pro natalist policies; the crushing material deprivation; the Party's distortion of language and truth; the daily humiliation of queuing to buy bread, to bribe, to grapple with

bureaucracy. The varying responses of the women to such experiences defy our American inclination to line up all ducks in an ideologically seamless row, eliminate grays, and find at all costs a solution to the problems of history. Romanian history, as Mircea Eliade has argued, is a "terror" that is endured rather than resolved, the scourge of reason and the happy ending-- be it concocted by Marxist utopians, Disney enthusiasts or wide-eyed venture capitalists.

To represent the terror, Carrescia does not overload the viewer with the now-familiar images of orphanages, street children, and tenements. Rather, she effectively juxtaposes archival shots of a demoralized and impoverished population with surrealistic footage depicting aparatchik and fresh-faced Pioneers singing the praises of wholly illegitimate leaders. These, in turn, are contrasted with contemporary images of revived

Romanian cities, the beautiful Romanian countryside, and the women at work and home with their families. The narrative line is minimal and jumps freely between past and present, sub-regions and speakers. Clearer identification of the latter might have helped viewers to sort things out and see the close connections between individual biographies and overarching social forces. But Carrescia's intention is not to provide an objective socio-political history of Romania but rather to lay bare some of its fundamental problems and contradictions past and present and arrive at issues of universal significance: the difficulties of forging genuine social change and democracy, the control ideology can have over the mind, what constitutes human freedom. These issues are illuminated by quotations from the Croat journalist Slavenka Drakulic, one of the earliest feminist critics of the communist system in Eastern Europe. They help to stitch together the words and ideas presented by the Romanian women who have, like Drakulic, struggled with and survived a dehumanizing system, and yet face enormous challenges ahead.

A Baia Mare factory worker in her forties intimates with a chilling pragmatism her

decision to induce one or two miscarriages a year by techniques undetectable by gynecologists. (Periodical "checks" for pregnancy and illegal terminations of pregnancy were mandatory after the 1966 anti-abortion decree outlawing all forms of contraception.) Her words are juxtaposed with those of a Pentecostalist, among the most persecuted of populations under Ceausescu, speaking proudly of following her faith's directive to produce "as many children as God will give us." Bearing fourteen offspring earned this dedicated enemy of the godless communist state a medal as a "Socialist Heroine"-- just another contradiction wrapped inside the larger paradox of a Socialist Republic that was neither socialist nor republican. Others talk of the double shift borne by women working on collective farms, who also recall the benefits of full employment, cheap housing, and free education under the Ceausescus. The "very good life" experienced then in the relatively few noncollectivized villages is described by a Bixad peasant, who says they "had everything they needed." A retired schoolteacher uses the same phrase about the present situation, though she laments the fact that inadequate pensions require her and her husband to work harder now. These and other contradictions are not sorted out in the film, but left to the viewer to gnaw on and digest.

Underlying the varied experiences of past and present is a common sensitivity derived from the subjects' identity as women who overcame the Communist regime's relentless war upon human relationships. "Pre-Revolutionary" Romania was a society in which private interpersonal ties provided virtually the only dimension on which female social identities could be constructed. Carrescia speaks bluntly and accurately of Romania as a patriarchal nation where women have historically played no public role, and traditional social institutions radically restricted their gaining of political power. Yet the communist regime boasted of an "egalitarian" system in which bourgeois sexism had been jettisoned, and women shared power with males. The reality, of course, was quite different. Everyone knew that the public women of Romania, with one brilliant exception, were forced to be vapid and powerless place-holders, Communist bimboane. It was as if "Mother Elena" had sucked all of the potential power for Romanian women into her own bloated ego, leaving only a desiccated and insubstantial shell for others.

Traditionally restricted to the realm of human relationships, principally family, as the primary source of self-identity, women in Romania were particularly vulnerable to a political regime that sought to devalue and undermine interpersonal ties. The women's comments about this assault on their humanity bring the true horror of two decades under Ceausescu into focus. Life was so very difficult, they repeat over and over, because the daily struggle to stay warm, find enough food to eat, keep body and soul together, resulted in what anthropologist Katherine Verdery has called "the erosion of sociability." People were forced to isolate themselves from each other, to "atomize." The universe of authentic engagement was constrained within the tiny kitchens of tenement apartments where, if one turned up the radio volume and spoke softly enough with the few friends and family members you really trusted, you could express what was really in your heart. Developing anything like a public perspective on the world, a practice of civil engagement, or bonds relating women to each other, was a luxury that only very few could afford, or a risk that even fewer dared to take.

One of the latter plays a key role in *Diamonds in the Dark*: Tea Luca, the long-time Director and Chief Curator of the Museum of Art Collections. Speaking in French, Luca tells of her dangerous tightrope walking without a net over the state's official policies on culture and aesthetics. Since the first few years after the fall of the Ceausescus, however, she has largely withdrawn from the political arena. Other women, including Dr. Lucia Briscan and Madalina Nicolaescu, a university professor, have moved into the front lines of a still embryonic women's movement in Romania. Perhaps one of the most important insights of the film is that women's rights there since 1989 have not so much advanced or regressed, as moved sideways. In the words of Lucia Briscan, women in Romania have become publicly "invisible" since the revolution. While politically expedient bimboane have disappeared from the public eye, patriarchal structures have acted to keep authentic leaders such as Briscan from stepping into positions of genuine political power. The film, however, offers evidence of alternative power-building going on. Nicolaescu is shown teaching a class on feminist theory, and NGOs such as the ProEurope League, which Briscan serves as head of the Women's Department, are depicted as providing pathways for community development and consciousness-raising outside

traditional structures. Looming large, however, are sharp generational and urban-rural lines that inhibit the free flow of information and the making of common cause. The degree to which feminist grass roots efforts and the ProEurope League can help to consolidate a power base for women in Romania also depends on macro-level forces the film does not address: the post-revolutionary government's ability to forestall a descent into economic chaos, the threat of a neocommunist resurgence, and the whims of EU ministers. The dominant ethos in Romania, moreover, remains a self-interested concern with survival for oneself and one's own, with a gap widening between those few who are flourishing in the "jungle economy" and those being slowly strangled by the vines of a modern and unfamiliar capitalism. In the face of the challenge, a withdrawal from the warfare of public policy into the safe confines of affirming personal relationships is held out as a reasonable option. Perhaps the most disorienting voice in the entire film is that of a retired state filmmaker, wearing a headscarf of ambiguous symbolism, who asks rhetorically, "Why would women ever want to get involved in that dirty world of politics anyway, with its turmoil and struggles, battles and plots? Why ride the tumultuous wave that buffets you when you can just sink beneath the waves and breathe easily?"

Diamonds in the Dark does not aim to answer questions about what socialism/communism was or what comes next, or the problems of political economy in this "transformational" era in Eastern Europe. Rather than sorting out the unsortable, the film shows viewers the tangled mess of a failed experiment in social engineering and invites debate, comparison, and deeper investigation into its implications. The title alone is worth several hours of discussion. Carrescia derives it from a comment by a Bucharest translator who survived Ceausescu's regime by turning inward and reading voraciously. She refers to a phrase in one of Arthur Miller's plays, "it is dark here but full of diamonds", and suggests that this captures for her the experience of life in her native country. The words call to mind Polish filmmaker Andrzej Wajdas *Ashes and Diamonds*, and the metaphor of Poland as a phoenix, or even the Jesus Christ of nations, rising again and again from the smoldering rubble of history. The young woman's image conveys the more human scale of the Romanians' experience as victims of history. Ceausescu portrayed himself as a

brilliant sun god bringing "luminosity" to the people of his country, who in reality labored in mines lit only here and there by 40-watt bulbs. Olivia Carrescia's courageous film reveals the diamonds who provided the real source of illumination in the darkness, and their potential to shine when exposed to full and authentic sunlight.