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CHERCHEZ LA FEMME! LOCATING THE WOMEN IN EARLY ROMANIAN CINEMA, ARCHIVAL FRAGMENTS AND THE CASE OF MARIOARA VOICULESCU

Ana Grgić

Abstract

Through an analysis of primary archival materials, early press, and personal archives, this article aims to understand the contribution of the Romanian theatre actress and director Marioara Voiculescu to early attempts at local filmmaking in Romania and to reconstruct her filmmaking activities in 1913. Given that all films from this period are now lost, this article engages in a methodology of “cinema archaeology”, and studies archival ephemera and the cultural context of the time to provide a fresh perspective on these early filmmaking endeavors. By shifting the focus to Marioara Voiculescu, I reflect on the experience of conducting archival research in the face of material loss of women’s film histories, and more broadly on the spaces and roles that women were able to occupy with the growth of popular culture and media.

Keywords: early cinema, archives, women film pioneers, cinema archaeology, Romanian cinema, popular culture.

“Of the seven films I worked on with Leon Popescu’s company, six burned to my satisfaction, and I can only express my regret that the seventh still exists.” – Marioara Voiculescu (*Cinema*, 16 November 1926, p. 912).

While conducting research in archives across the Balkan countries for my book-length study on the development of early cinema and visual culture in the Balkans (Grgić 2022), I came across the names of several women involved in early filmmaking practices. Although there is very little information available and further research is necessary to elucidate their roles and contributions, secondary sources and early press I consulted

at the university library in Sarajevo revealed that Paulina Valić and Maria Goller were the owners of the first permanent cinema theatres in the city prior to the Great War. Similarly, the film scholar Dijana Jelača (2017) brings to light the film work of Marija Jurić Zagorka, the first Croatian woman journalist, writer and author of two silent feature film scripts through an analysis of early press, film advertisements and scripts. In Greece, Eliza Anna Delveroudi (2015) examines the writings and contribution of Irida Skaravaïou, the first Greek woman film critic and journalist to the development of early film culture. At this time, while researching the beginnings of Romanian cinema, I also came across the mention of Marioara Voiculescu in secondary sources, who may have authored or co-authored eight screenplays, and directed or co-directed six fiction films sometime in 1913 (see Mihail 1967: 16–22; Căliman 2000: 33–35; Rîpeanu 2004; Rîpeanu 2013: 604; *Istoria Filmului Românesc* 2014; Mitarca 2015: 526). At first sight, this preliminary evidence pointed to the fact that Voiculescu may have assumed the role of director and scriptwriter on these early film projects, which would make her the first woman to direct a film in Romania and the wider Balkan region. Yet, these secondary sources were incomplete and fragmentary, and the majority did not make recourse nor direct references to primary archival materials. Her role seems to have been neglected and diminished, whether due to historiographic ideologies or the predominance of patriarchal narratives.

I was confronted with an arduous task ahead, that of locating and collating available archival materials scattered across several collections and archives which might hold more clues to Marioara Voiculescu's role and involvement in these early filmmaking endeavors. For early cinema researchers, an archive represents both a space of infinite possibilities and Herculean endeavors, which more often than not becomes a tedious and painstaking task of searching through piles of documents for countless hours in the hope to come across a serendipitous discovery. Among the first findings was an interview with Marioara Voiculescu published in the specialist film magazine *Cinema* in November 1926, more than a decade after her involvement in these filmmaking activities, which, to my disappointment, hardly included any details about her film work during this period, and to my surprise and dismay, revealed her bitterness surrounding the film collaboration with Leon Popescu. In this interview, Voiculescu states: "I personally made small attempts without knowledge and without a director. Of the seven films I worked on with Leon Popescu's company, six burned to my satisfaction, and I can only express my regret

that the seventh still exists." (*Cinema*, 16 November 1926: 912). Although at first sight this statement may represent a dead end and a closure, it also opened up a rich space for hypothesis and further research. Firstly, the collaboration resulted in a dispute, but what had led to this? Secondly, it seems that one of the films may have survived the fire in Leon Popescu's theatre which housed the film negatives, and was still preserved in someone's collection in 1926. Thirdly, there was no director at the time Voiculescu was working on these films, which opens the possibility of collective authorship and direction, given that she was a theatre director and her troupe was engaged to provide the script and creative means for the film projects.

In what follows, I unpack my archival findings in order to shed more light on the three hypotheses mentioned above, and to provide a novel perspective on this particular moment in history through a comparative reading of primary archival materials. Before doing so, I provide an overview of recent scholarship at the intersection of early cinema studies and feminist history, and a brief context of early cinema development in Romania, in order to situate this case study of Marioara Voiculescu and to acknowledge her role as a Romanian woman film pioneer.

Lost and found women film pioneers

Recent cinema and media scholarship suggests that women were not only present, but also influential in early cinema across the world, yet historical knowledge of their activities remains fragmented and elusive. This is due to the overwhelming material loss of early cinema heritage, the tendency to focus on auteurism in the writing of film history,¹ the lack of funding and interest to study early cinema history particularly in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, and finally the difficulty of accessing institutions and archives. Therefore, contemporary researchers need to reckon with such material challenges and acknowledge the methodological limitations, when attempting to study women's roles in and contributions to the growth of early popular culture and media. Feminist film and media scholars, such as Giuliana Bruno (1993), Jennifer Bean and Diane Negra (2002), Lauren Rabinovitz (2005), Jane Gaines (2018) and many others have increasingly employed new historiographic materials and methods, which move beyond textual analysis and readings, in order to adequately acknowledge the contributions of early cinema women pioneers and creatives to the

development of the medium. These feminist historiographies chart new avenues for research in the field of early cinema scholarship and expand the existing debates on nationalist ideologies, stardom, authorship, visibility and identification in cinema and media studies. However, the majority of recent enquiries studying contributions of lost and marginalized women cinema pioneers and creatives are mostly limited to North American and Western European contexts. In the scholarship on local and national silent cinema histories of the Balkan countries, very few women appear and are relegated to the footnotes of history (see Mihail 1967; Kosanović 1985, 2000; Slijepčević 1982; Škrabalo 1998; Sava 1999; Căliman 2000; Rîpeanu 2004, 2013; Țuțui 2008). An exception is a monograph dedicated to the internationally famed Slovene actress Ita Rina, which focuses on her onscreen performances and star persona (Nedić et al. 2007). More recently, new research has emerged on diverse aspects of film spectatorship, film culture and women's contributions to early cinema in the Balkans (see Balan 2015, Delveroudi 2015, and Jelača 2017). Yet much work remains to be undertaken to understand the complex relationship between the new visual medium, the modernizing processes, visual culture and gender dynamics in the region. Though often invisible in the majority of film historiographies and absent from film canons, visible traces of women creatives persist in archives, and even when women are strikingly absent from archives, the traces of their presence and role in society survive in the press.

Although Marioara Voiculescu achieved considerable success and recognition in the theatre world, she received the "Emeritus Artist" award by the Romanian state, founded her own theatre company in 1912 and was considered one of the best stage actresses of early 20th century,² described as "sacred monster", frequently compared to famous European performers Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonora Duse (Berzuc 2009: 13), her film activities remain under-acknowledged. Her contribution to early Romanian cinema has received scarce attention in local film historiographies (Mihail 1967; Sava 1999; Căliman 2000; Rîpeanu 2004, 2013) and almost none internationally.³ This is likely due to the fact that all of the films she had worked on are lost,⁴ but also because a more systematic and comparative reading of available archival materials pertaining exclusively to her theatre and cinema activities have not been undertaken. My aim was to understand the context surrounding Voiculescu's involvement in early Romanian cinema and establish connections between the world of theatre and cinema, the development and reception of the new visual

medium and the socio-cultural context through a comparative reading of available primary sources. To this end, I have consulted the following documents: the press of the time, the journal dedicated to theatre and arts *Rampa*, and several daily newspapers (*Seara*, *Viitorul* and *Adevărul*), the specialist trade press *Curierul cinematografic/Cinematographic Courier* from 1916, Marioara Voiculescu's collection preserved at the Library of the Romanian Academy, archival documents at the Romanian Film Archive and the Romanian National Archives, and photographic collections of the National Theatre in Bucharest. By shifting the perspective from Leon Popescu as the key to the reading of these early filmmaking endeavors to Marioara Voiculescu, in particular her agency as a theatre star and her professional experience as a theatre director, may shed new light on this moment in Romanian film history.

Collective authorship

Marioara Voiculescu was an adored star and dominated the Romanian theatre scene in the first decades of the 20th century (Berzuc 2009: 13). At the age of 14, she entered the Conservatory of Dramatic Art in Bucharest and trained under the veteran Romanian theatre actress Aristizza Romanescu and the head of the National Theatre, playwright, writer and poet, Alexandru Davila. She debuted on stage at the National Theatre on 13 January 1904 in the main role of *Casta Diva* (*Chaste Goddess*), written by the well-known poet and playwright Haralamb George Lecca. Theatre critics and audiences admired Voiculescu's passionate and frantic temperament, which matched the dramatic intensities of the heroines she played and commanded attention (Berzuc 2009: 13).

With the dissolution of the "Modern" theatre directed by Alexandru Davila, Marioara Voiculescu assembled her own theatre company in the summer 1912, bringing a group of talented actors, such as Tina Barbu, Ion Manolescu, and Bebe Stănescu, under her wing. This initiative was followed closely by *Rampa* and a front-page article which appeared in mid-July 1912, written by M. Gheorgiu demonstrates Voiculescu's fame and reputation as an able manager and very promising future director:

I saw Mrs. Voiculescu at work, on stage, in the last days of Mr. Davila as manager, that is after the return from abroad, and I was surprised by the fact that now shows me perfectly well the other face of her qualities: the

stage director. They were rehearsing *Frou-Frou* and since Mr. Davila was busy in another part of the stage, Mrs. Voiculescu was leading herself the actors' play with a self-confidence that amazed me back then, a thing of proof for her future endeavors. Another fact that adds weight to her future theatre is her ascendant over the other actors. I have seen more than once the actors from Mr. Davila's company going to "Marioara" (as they intimately call her) first, to complain about any doubts they had. In our country, her attempt to make theatre is unprecedented, and, I believe no other European capital can brag about a woman-manager, except for Paris where the famous tragedian Sarah Bernhardt and Rejane built themselves a theatre each, immediately after leaving La Comedie Française, theatres that are most visited by the art lovers of Paris. (*Rampa*, 16 July 1912, trans. Paula Mahalean)

News of rehearsals for the company's first production, *Fedora*, made the front page of *Rampa* and were accompanied by a full-figure image of Marioara Voiculescu, and "a talk with the distinguished director of the troupe" (*Rampa*, 5 August 1912). Here the journalist, writing under the pseudonym Fulmen,⁵ expressed her admiration for Voiculescu's theatre work and having been invited to the rehearsals, highlighted that: "I promised not to miss them from two reasons: the great sympathy I have for the first Romanian theatre company woman manager and the wish to keep our readers informed on the current interesting events from the backstage and details from the venue which prepares future nocturnal triumphs." (*Rampa*, 5 August 1912) A month before the season opened, a column follows the preparations for the opening and the theatre company's repertoire, noting that: "The young director is so hardworking and so beloved that the artists have never rehearsed more fondly than under her direction" (*Rampa*, 14 August 1912). On 20 September 1912, a week after the opening of the play *Fedora* by Marioara Voiculescu's theatre company, *Rampa* announced the publication of the "elegant" and illustrated volume *In the Spring of Life*, written by the "great playwright" Voiculescu, in which she recounts memories from the beginning of her career. The same advert appeared in each issue of the newspaper until the end of September, and confirms her notoriety and status as a stage actress and writer, and now a theatre director who commands attention.

The initial film productions across Europe and the Balkans were often collaborations between ardent entrepreneurs, film lovers and theatre professionals. For example, in neighboring Serbia, the initial film productions were result of a collaboration between a wealthy restaurateur,

cinema theatre owner and producer Svetozar Botorić, and a well-known theatre actor, writer and director Ilija Stanojević and a troupe of actors from the National Theatre in Belgrade (Grgić 2022: 223–226). A few years earlier, in 1909, Voiculescu had performed a season at Leon Popescu's theatre "Liric" in the play *Stane de Piatra*, by German dramatist Hermann Sudermann, with another young actor Ion Manolescu (Voiculescu 2003: 35). Thus, it is quite likely that Popescu and Voiculescu were well-acquainted by 1913, both were extremely active within the Bucharest theatre scene, Popescu as producer and owner, and Voiculescu as a star performer.

A lot has been written about the founding of the production company *Filmul de artă Leon Popescu* and the attempt to create a functioning film studio for the production of Romanian films, while Voiculescu's role in the filmmaking process was diminished (Mihail 1959; Mihail 1967: 15–23; Cantacuzino 1965: 14–18; Fernoaga & Cantacuzino 1971: 60–63; Țuțui 2010: 91–104; Țuțui 2011: 16–19; Rîpeanu 2013: 456–457). Voiculescu's astonishing theatrical career, critical acclaim of her performances and her extreme popularity among the audiences, as well as her strong business character certainly contributed to the decision to be involved in the making of first Romanian films with the producer Leon Popescu.

Leon Popescu and Marioara Voiculescu signed an agreement to make Romanian films, in which Popescu would ensure the technical means, that is the film studio and the laboratory and the technical crew, while Voiculescu would furnish the creative means – the script, directing and the actors –, receiving a fixed amount for this contribution, calculated per meter of film shot (Mihail 1959: 12; Mihail 1967: 17; Căliman 2000: 31–32). A handwritten document written by Marioara Voiculescu conserved in the Voiculescu collections at the Romanian Academy, donated by her son, confirms that she signed a contract with Leon Popescu to make seven films. In addition, this testimony reveals that Marioara Voiculescu had travelled to Paris and met with the representatives of the Pathé production company, and hired French photographers-chemists, a cinematographer and young actor.

A typed manuscript preserved at the Romanian film archive, written by the film scholar and director Jean Mihail in 1959, also corroborates this alternative perspective on the beginning and development of the film studio and the attempt to make local films. This oral testimony recorded by Mihail points to more involvement by Marioara Voiculescu:

Once in the French capital, Marioara Voiculescu proposed to Gaumont, a world-renowned company, to install a film studio in Romania. Having succeeded in convincing one of the main directors of the studios to come to our country to find out about the talent of our actors, the charm of the Romanian landscape, Marioara Voiculescu returned to Bucharest, accompanied by that director, also bringing an experienced technician, the camera operator Chenier from Gaumont, and a young French film actor who performed in Paris under the pseudonym of Jean Barnier, both under contract. After driving through the picturesque countryside of the Olt, Jiu and Prahova valleys, and attending a series of shows from the French theatre repertoire, the Parisian company representative showed delight in what he saw and accepted the proposal made by the Romanian actress, especially since French cinema was widely shown on cinema screens in the country, but made a condition – which was natural – that the financial contribution of the Romanian state be equal to that of the French company. The conditions set by Gaumont – Marioara Voiculescu told us – were so reasonable that any country in the world would have accepted them without hesitation. But the bourgeois-landlord regime had until then shown its indifference to the making of a national cinema, as it had shown this indifference in other fields: literature, Romanian music and painting, and true – Romanian artistic values. Therefore, the grim official of the time had not accepted offers from the Parisian company. In this atmosphere of disinterest, distrust, patronized by the governors of the time, Leon Popescu and ‘Marioara Voiculescu Theatre Company’ still started the preparations for their first film ... (Mihail 1959: 13–14, my translation)

The above passages were completely omitted from the published book, which underwent revisions and redactions by another Romanian film scholar, Ion Cantacuzino in 1967.⁶ From the above passages, we can infer that Jean Mihail had interviewed Marioara Voiculescu about these filmmaking activities, likely between 1957 and 1959, and while the above information cannot be verified, it furnishes a more nuanced picture of this collaboration. It also demonstrates that Voiculescu, who was frequently travelling between Paris and Bucharest for research and acquisitions for theatrical work, was a lot more involved in the attempt to establish a viable film production company and studio of Romanian films. Though a possibility remains that Voiculescu may have embellished the story, it is also as likely that given that she had a reputable and prolific theatrical career already, she would have invested just as much energy and time to make this attempt in cinema a success. According to secondary sources, although neither had any previous film experience, the direction would

be assured by Marioara Voiculescu, a fellow actor Constantin Radovici (who achieved success earlier at the Burgtheater in Vienna) and the writer Haralamb Lecca, who had also worked as a theatre director at the National Theatre in Iași (Mihail 1967: 18; Căliman 2014). Therefore, both the primary and secondary sources point to these initial film productions resulting from collective authorship among the theatre directors and actors from the Romanian stage, with Marioara Voiculescu likely in the leading role, given her previous experience as a stage director.

The film studio was constructed in the courtyard of Leon Popescu's theatre "Liric" situated on Walter Măărăcineanu square in Bucharest. Although there are only plans conserved in the archives of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, which Popescu deposited to obtain permission for the film studio (Figure 1), there is a short description written by a journalist who visited the set at the time: "It is a real modern factory for making films, with the necessary workshops, with an operator, a developer, painters and so on. A special stage for cinema, with sets, props, furniture, costumes, etc. Finally, everything that makes up a 'movie factory' [...]" (cited in Mihail 1967: 17). Yet, Jean Mihail noted that a technician Tudor Posmantir, whom he interviewed after the return from a film stage in Berlin, visited Popescu's studio and described it as a rudimentary improvisation with inadequate technical means for film production, and without experienced technicians and a film director (1967: 18). Similarly, Marioara Voiculescu declared that she had suggested to Leon Popescu to hire a foreign director at her expense and he refused (*Cinema*, 16 November 1926: 911).



Figure 1. Plan of the “Factory for cinematographic films”,
The Archives of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

The available archival documents preserved at the Ministry of Commerce and Industry reveal some details about the creative and technical staff employed at the film studio following an inspection in March 1913. The report stated that the film studio had been in operation since January 1913, and that it employed seven people: four foreigners (a French workshop supervisor, a French and an Italian mechanic, and an Italian specialist worker), and three Romanians (two functionaries and one specialist worker). This much seems to be corroborated by secondary sources. A French cinematographer, Franck Daniau (who had previously worked on *Independența României/ Independence War* in 1912), and two more assistant camera operators – Alphonse Chagny and an Italian by the name of Demichelli⁷, and a French editor, Paula Cambon – were hired (Mihail 1967: 18; Caliman 2000: 32–33). Mihail noted that a French technician called Indigue was hired to install the film laboratory (1959, 12) though no other details are known, as well as a Romanian chemist Gh. Ionescu-Cioc, who already had a laboratory for making intertitles, to

complete the installation of a film laboratory and be responsible for filming newsreels for the “Leon Popescu Journals” (Mihail 1967: 17). Mihail also added that another Romanian technician hired for the job, N. Barbelian, had no filming experience (1959: 13).

Though most of the Romanian scholars have argued that there were few qualified cinema operators and technicians, the quality of Franck Daniau’s cinematography is visible in the surviving copy of the *Independence War*, an earlier collaboration with Leon Popescu (Grgić 2022: 230–233). Romanian film scholars argued that it was precisely because of the success of the *Independence War* that Popescu invested in the creation of a film production company and studio (Mihail 1967: 15; Căliman 2014). The majority of early cinema activities in the region were transnational and cosmopolitan endeavors, such as the case of the Manakia brothers who travelled and worked throughout the Ottoman Empire and Romania as photographers and cinematographers, or the Hungarian cinematographer and entrepreneur Louis Pitroff de Beery, who worked on first Serbian fiction films, and edited a weekly film magazine in Bulgaria as the Pathé representative (Grgić 2020). In the Romanian case, given the connections between Paris and cultural circles in Bucharest, in particular theatre personalities, it was not unusual for cross-border collaborations to occur and for the local entrepreneurs to hire foreign cinematographers and technicians who had filming experience, given that in the region filmmaking activities were sporadic and inconsistent.

There is little information about the production of the seven films, except for a semi-anecdotal account in *Rampa* of how the actors of the Marioara Voiculescu theatre troupe were seen walking around various parts of the city center dressed elegantly (Mihail 1967: 19). Following the screening of *The Sins of the Fathers* starring the Danish star Asta Nielsen, Marioara Voiculescu stated in a brief interview that she was in the process of working on a film adaptation of *Fedora*: “[i]f we manage to create a work of art, the film will be shown.” (*Rampa*, 30 April 1913, trans. Paula Mahalean). Aside from this brief account in 1913, I did not come across other interviews or columns about Marioara Voiculescu’s work on the film projects in the press. However, this small fragment illuminates on several fronts: Voiculescu was writing screenplays for films in 1913 and she was in the process of adapting a theatre play for the screen which she had performed earlier on stage.

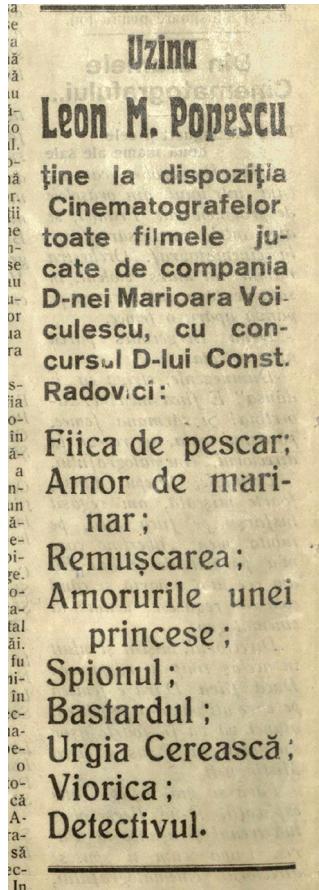


Figure 2. The Cinematographic Courier, Issue 1, 4 January 1916.

What can film fragments narrate?

Early cinema scholarship has increasingly employed methodologies advanced by New Cinema History and Foucault-inspired *media archaeology*, in an effort to move beyond textual analysis and readings of film-works, and instead focus on studying the film's context, specifically, the spaces of cinema production, circulation and reception. Indeed, the Early Cinema movement, which has roots in the 1978 FIAF conference

in Brighton, rediscovered pre-1906 cinema and marked a historical turn in cinema studies, by challenging cinema's origins and "firsts", and acknowledging forgotten film pioneers and films, but more importantly shifting the emphasis from textual analysis to a non-text approach.⁸ Giuliana Bruno's work on the Italian woman film pioneer Elvira Notari (1993), where only film fragments have survived, employs an interdisciplinary and intermedial approach to map Notari's contributions to early Italian cinema, and in doing so it addresses the challenge posed by feminism to the study of film. In her work, Jane Gaines acknowledges the *unknowability* of the past, as well as the "methodological disillusionment" and limitations of historiographic projects when studying women's contributions to early cinema (2018: 1–15).

Although none of the films have survived today, according to secondary sources, the Popescu-Voiculescu collaboration resulted in the production of several films in 1913: *Amorurile unei prințese/The Loves of a Princess*, *Pacostea* (also known as *Razbunarea/Revenge*), *Spionul/Spy*, *Viorica*, *Detectivul/Detective*, *Dragostea marinarului /Love of a Sailor*, *Fiica de pescar/Fisherman's Daughter*, *Remușcarea/Remorse*, *Studentul/The Student*, *Zapaciă se însoară/The Marriage of Zapaciă* and *Voiaj pe Dunăre/Journey on the Danube* (Căliman 2000: 32–35; Rîpeanu 2004: 23–27). Two issues of the *Cinematographic Courier* published on 4 and 18 January 1916 corroborate the fact that several films produced with the Marioara Voiculescu theatre troupe and Constantin Radovici were available to cinema theatres for screenings: *Fiica de pescar*, *Amor de marinar*, *Remușcarea*, *Amorurile unei prințese*, *Spionul*, *Bastardul*, *Urgia Cerească*, *Viorica* and *Detectivul* (Figure 2). These were all productions of the "Leon Popescu Factory". Even though the exact film titles or number of films which were produced, developed and edited during this period cannot be confirmed with absolute certainty, the *Cinematographic Courier* offers some visual evidence of their existence, content, and mise-en-scene.



Figure 3

Alongside announcements of the latest foreign films, large photographs and drawings of international film stars, articles on different aspects of film art, the same publication reproduced several small, grainy images from the films *Viorica*, *Detectivul* and *Amor de pescar*, in an effort to showcase and market the films. Judging from the size of the reproductions, these are likely images reproduced from actual film frames. Unfortunately, the photographic reproduction and printing on newspaper has visibly affected their quality and legibility. All of the captions accompanying the image reproductions mention the name of Marioara Voiculescu, which points to the use of her stardom in the promotion and marketing of the films. This is particularly evident in the image of Marioara Voiculescu in full frame, with her head leaning slightly to the side as she holds what appears to be a mirror to her face, under which the caption reads: “Our great artist, which starred in the series of films produced by the Leon Popescu Film Company” (Figure 3).

The four images which illustrate the film *Viorica* show: an interior scene of a couple embracing in a dramatic fashion – the woman is played by Marioara Voiculescu as noted under the image (Figure 4), an interior group scene of elegantly dressed people from high society surrounding Voiculescu in the salon, a bedroom scene with two characters (Figure 5), and another salon scene with Marioara Voiculescu and Constantin Radovici in the foreground, as the caption highlights the names of the

protagonists (Figure 6). The interior scene with the couple embracing provides some clues: the set design was lavishly decorated to resemble a living room of a wealthy family, while the main characters were dressed elegantly in European fashion around this period. Playing the lead role, Marioara Voiculescu is passionately embracing the man, while he turns away, which points to a sentimental drama.

On the other hand, the views from *Amor de pescar* are all of exterior locations, near the sea, with the story unravelling in natural landscapes rather than interiors of city dwellings. This film is illustrated by four evocative images: a couple embracing on the shore against the sky and the sea (Figure 8), the lead actress Marioara Voiculescu in abandonment in a boat on the shore, a dining room or restaurant scene with the protagonists and other characters sitting or standing, and another imaged of Marioara Voiculescu in the foreground standing next to a man and a couple of fishermen in the background (Figure 9). Here the protagonists are working class, fishermen in a small village, perhaps on the riverbanks of the Danube, a typical and highly recognizable Romanian landscape. Based on Mihail's notes (1959), this film is also a sentimental drama, and tells a forbidden love story, between a fisherman's wife and a young sailor.



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

The singular image taken from the film *Detectivul* is an exterior shot of two policemen framed by an arching gate with what seems the main action unfolding in the background (Figure 7). It constitutes a sort of voyeuristic image, typical of detective or crime film genre, where the spectator observes from the detective's perspective. To heighten its visibility and marketability, this image is placed alongside an article on detective novels and their representations written by Jean Rosen. According to secondary sources, the *Detective*, starring Marioara Voiculescu and Constantin Radovici, includes scenes of climbing and acrobatics, tells the story of

a good-natured maid who forced by her lover, an adventurous burglar, helps him gain access to her rich employer's house to steal; this film was released by the Cipeto company which had merged with Leon Popescu Art Film at the end of 1914 (Mihail 1959: 19–20; "Detectivul (Detectiv și apăs) (1915)").

Based on the genres of the films produced, an adventure and detective film (*Detective*), two dramas adapted from plays (*Fedora*, *Revenge*), a comedy (*Journey on the Danube*), two melodramas (*Spy*, *Viorica*), we can conclude that Voiculescu and her collaborators were familiar with the taste of audiences in Bucharest, and aspired to compete with popular foreign films. Indeed, the production of these films was accompanied by several columns discussing popular film genres in *Rampa*, such as detective and adventure films, art films, and comedies, and the growing popularity of cinema as well as the local audiences' taste for certain types of films (*Rampa*, 18 May 1913, 19 May 1913, 21 May 1913, 24 May 1913). Moreover, during this period, other columns point to the presence of a growing female audience such as the one published in the daily newspaper *Seara* by a film critic writing under the pseudonym Pinkerton (1 September 1913), which accompanied the screening of the film *A Woman's Passion* (directed by Alfred Brillat). Though difficult to ascertain, given that the films have not survived, it is possible to assume that given the subject and the themes of the above-mentioned films feature women protagonists, the story of *Viorica*, or the fisherman's wife in *Amor de pescar*, it is likely these targeted a female audience in Bucharest.

In the absence of the films themselves, and scarce surviving visual material which documents Voiculescu and Popescu's filmmaking endeavors, the press constitutes a valuable source. The first film in the series to be screened, *The Loves of a Princess*, had an avant-premiere on 11 June 1913 at the cinema "Clasic". The details of the evening and reception of the film were described in "The projection of the first Romanian movie" in *Rampa* (14 June 1913):

On Tuesday evening, after the screening of the last series of the "Clasic" cinema's program, in front of a limited number of people, formed by journalists, artists and a few guests, in the presence of Mr. Leon M. Popescu, the owner of the eponymous cinema theatre and the initiator of Romanian cinema, was the screening of the first movie ever conceived and played by Romanian artists, the artists of Modern theatre, led by their very manager, Mrs. Marioara Voiculescu.

The audience was very anxious to finally see the screening of this first movie which also meant the accomplishment of an idea dear to all Romanian people. The four acts of *Loves of a Princess*, written by Mrs. Voiculescu were presented in an atmosphere filled with curiosity and restlessness because each member of the audience was afraid it would fail and everything depended on the favorable or unfavorable impression it left.

Everything went well, nonetheless, for the general satisfaction and the satisfaction of the one who had the fortunate idea. The artists of Mrs. Marioara Voiculescu's company, even though they lack the experience required in movies, played their parts very well, particularly Miss Bebe Stănescu who left a good impression with her acting and expressive mime. [...] (trans. Paula Mahalean)

The Loves of a Princess was not the first Romanian fiction film to be produced nor shown, this enthusiastic reception reflects the eagerness of the journal's editors and the Bucharest audiences for this initiative to develop a local film industry. *The Loves of a Princess* was written and directed by Marioara Voiculescu, and starred actors from her theatre company: Gh. Storin, Ion Manolescu, Bebe Stănescu, Elena Crissenghi, Maria Vecera, Radu Popea, Alexandru Economu, Florea Simionescu and others. This sentimental drama was co-written with Haralamb Lecca, shot in April 1913, and developed at the film lab in Popescu's theatre "Liric", while the film was not shown to a general audience until March 1916 due to legal disputes (Rîpeanu 2004: 23). Though the film has not survived, it may have been inspired by the Romanian Queen Marie's fairy tale *The Lily of Life* (published in 1913), which in turn is considered to have been influenced by Loïe Fuller's dance performances (Lenart 2019: 347). Loïe Fuller befriended Queen Victoria's granddaughter, the British Princess Marie, who was extremely impressed by her dance performance at the National Theatre in Bucharest in 1902, which had electric power required for the dancer's "electrical dances" (Lenart 2019: 347). Another source suggests that Voiculescu may have adapted the script from Victorien Sardou's play *Fedora* ("Fedora (1913)" 2014), which is not unlikely given that this drama was regularly performed by her theatre company. Whatever the case may be, Marioara Voiculescu was credited as the scriptwriter on this film and it is very likely that she acted in the role of co-director, given that she was the director of the theatre company engaged to furnish the creative means. We can deduce that Voiculescu must have given acting directions, which include movement and choreography within a scene, on this particular film.

Another film resulting from this collaboration, *Pacostea*, was advertised in *Rampa* the following day (15 June 1913), highlighting the stars of the film – Marioara Voiculescu and Ion Petrescu in the main roles – with supporting roles interpreted by actors of theatre “Modern”. The film, shot in May 1913, was a rural drama adapted from the noted Romanian author Ion Luca Caragiale’s piece *Năpasta* (1890) by Haralamb Lecca, and though it was originally announced under the title *Pacostea* as above, it was shown on 24 June 1913 at cinema “Clasic” under the title *Răzbunarea/Revenge* (Căliman 2000: 34–35; Rîpeanu 2004: 26; “Răzbunarea (1913)” 2014). According to some sources, the film was poorly received by the critics (Căliman 2000: 35), though the actors, such as Ion Iancu Petrescu of the National Theatre, praised the film for “splendid scenes of nature” and actors who were “wonderfully disguised” giving natural performances in an interview (*Rampa*, 19 June 1913, trans. Paula Mahalean).

A bitter end

Despite the enthusiasm expressed by the press after the screening of the first film which resulted from the collaboration, *The Loves of a Princess*, disagreements broke out between Leon Popescu and Marioara Voiculescu a few months later, which ended in prolonged and strenuous trials (*Rampa*, 9 October 1913; Căliman 2000: 34–35). News of this dispute appeared in the journal *Rampa*, stating that the lawsuit was brought by Leon Popescu against Marioara Voiculescu, following a dispute regarding her commitment to play in his “cinematographic films” (*Rampa*, 9 October 1913). Due to these trials, the remaining films were released with great delays at the cinema theatres, although well received by the press and the audiences (Căliman 2000: 35). *Spy* played on 7 September 1914 at cinema “Clasic”, *Viorica* on 2 February 1915 at cinema “Eforie”, and *Detective* on 2 March 1915 at cinema “Clasic”.

This article sought to map the filmic work of the Romanian theatre actress and director Marioara Voiculescu, whose role, like that of many women involved in silent cinema, has been relegated to the footnote of film history and moreover obscured by the patina of time. Similar to Michel de Certeau’s definition of knowledge as “that which endlessly modifies itself by its unforgettable incompleteness” (cited in Farge 2013: 54), the archives in this case remain forever incomplete and fragmentary. Although all of the early films Marioara Voiculescu had worked on are

considered lost today, and the available archival sources are incomplete and at times elusive or enigmatic, a slightly different narrative emerges when re-examining the extant non-film materials, such as images printed in trade journals, unpublished manuscripts or handwritten memoirs. These archival fragments shift the perspective to Marioara Voiculescu's role and agency in this early filmmaking endeavor, which goes beyond celebration of a single auteur but rather highlights how early cinema productions were not only transnational undertakings, but above all the result of collective work and authorship.

Endnotes

- ¹ Jane Gaines explains how the focus on *auteurism* in early cinema considers the author as a romantic celebration of founding fathers and the illusion of solitary creativity, which has diminished women's participation and agency in a variety of roles within the industrial process of filmmaking practices (2002, 88–94).
- ² On the front-page column dedicated entirely to Marioara Voiculescu, the Romanian writer and dramaturg A. Orna-Galați writes in view of her theatre company opening: "[...] Marioara Voiculescu is the quintessence of our artistic life. She will represent the epoch for Romanian theatre. [...]" (*Rampa*, 10 August 1912, trans. by Paula Mahalean)
- ³ For instance, the short film produced by the EWA Network titled "Women Pioneers" in 2018 does not include Romania on the map of women pioneers and early cinema activities (<https://www.ewawomen.com/ewa-network/ewas-team-presents-women-pioneers-in-european-cinema/>), nor is there an entry on Marioara Voiculescu on the Women Film Pioneers Project website (Gaines, Vatsal and Dall'Asta, 2013). The only mention of Voiculescu to date is the entry on "Romania" in the *Women Screenwriters: An International Guide* (see Mitarca 2015).
- ⁴ The producer Leon Popescu's film lab and all of the film negatives were destroyed when the warehouses in the courtyard of his "Liric" theatre caught on fire in December 1917 (Căliman 2000: 36; Ripeanu 2013: 457). Though Voiculescu states that one film survived the fire in an interview for the *Cinema* journal in 1926, none of the films have been located to date.
- ⁵ Under the pseudonym Fulmen, the noted Romanian feminist activist and writer Ecaterina I. Raicoviceanu frequently wrote about Marioara Voiculescu's theatre company in *Rampa* with the latest news, rehearsals, acting talents and the theatre program.
- ⁶ In the foreword to the published book *Filmul romanesc de altadata* by Jean Mihail (1967), the editor notes that: "Following a wish expressed by Jean Mihail, I requested the expert collaboration of Dr. Ion Cantacuzino, an old and passionate supporter of Romanian film. The interventions were made with special care to respect the author's intentions. Our contribution consisted in operations of stylization and systematization of the material, in the verification and enrichment of some data and information by comparing the press of the time and eyewitness account, and the elaboration of the artist's filmography."
- ⁷ This reference is in Mihail 1959.
- ⁸ Ian Christie explains: "... what began as a movement to study these [pre-1906] films empirically – to look at them as archaeological objects – soon became an exploration of their context – of production, circulation and reception – and thus necessarily a study of what no longer existed – namely

the vast bulk of these film texts and their places and modes of screening" (2006: 66). Furthermore, Richard Maltby notes how "new cinema history" moved from the analysis of film-texts, genres and authorship "to consider the circulation and consumption of films, and to examine cinema as a site of social and cultural exchange" (2011: 3–4).

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