

## Michael the Brave: the Construction of National Hero Myth in Cinematography\*

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### **Abstract:**

In this article, I will present how the figure of the Wallachian Prince Michael the Brave was transformed into a modern national hero by means of cinematography. I will start with the assumption that the movies are efficient channels for the transmission of information about history and society, values for the promotion and consolidation of political ideologies. The communist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu considered the cinematography as efficient weapon of propaganda. I will show how by means of two movies – Mihai Viteazul (Michael the Brave, 1971) and Buzduganul cu trei peceți (The mace with three seals, 1977) – the Prince of Wallachia was transformed into a modern national hero and the author of the Romanians` national unity dream. Although the myth of Michael the Brave national hero is older, probably the work of 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectual Nicolae Bălcescu, during the communist regime the construction of Michael the Brave`s myth from nationalist perspective was a state policy, realized through the simplification and the distortion of history. The school books and the movies were efficient channels for the promotion of Michael the Brave`s myth from national-communist perspective.

**Keywords:** nationalism, ideology, cinematography, communism, myth

### **Introduction**

Nationalism, the extraordinary ideological force that marked the 20<sup>th</sup> century, assumes that nations are natural components of humanity. The nationalists claim a territory, homeland, and the ideal situation is when the political and the national unit are congruent (Gellner, 1997). For nationalists, nations were formed centuries ago, in The Middle Age or Antiquity. The fundamental themes of nationalist movements are sovereignty, unity, history and universality (Girardet, 2003: 32).

Form of human solidarity, the nation is an imagined community, based on the will to live together, which bounds people that share a

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sense of common history, common values and which share common future aspirations. Researchers like Ernst Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson stressed the constructed, imagined, voluntary features of nationalism. Nations and nationalism are modern and are produced by modernity. However, nationalism generated a new culture and a strong new form of loyalty, the loyalty for the nation. As Eric Hobsbawm best explained, the nationalists “invented” traditions, and the interpretation of history became essential. The Romanian historian Lucian Boia argued that not a certain history built a nation, but in fact the nation, once formed, invented its own history (Boia, 2011: 15). That is why the nationalists are strongly interested in the interpretation of history. Using the national school system, mass media, literature, and art, the nationalists tried to (re)write history from a nationalist point of view, tried to build the Pantheon of national heroes.

Cinematography was strongly used in this effort. Films helped shape identities, consolidated national myths and heroes. The cinematographic discourse is important for shared political, social and cultural values. The promoters of the extreme ideologies – Communism and Nazism – perfectly understood the huge potential of cinematography and intensely used it (Popescu, 2001: 15–40).

In this article, I will analyze the construction of Michael the Brave’s myth in cinematography, from nationalist perspective, in the communist regime. Michael the Brave is the emblematic hero of Romanians’ national unification. The medieval hero was the object of many re-evaluations, in different political and ideological contexts.

#### **Michael the Brave, from medieval figure to modern national hero**

Symbolically, Michael the Brave’s name is associated to the first unification of the three medieval Romanian princedoms, in 1600. He is a strong reference also for other important themes of Romanian historiography: the struggle for independence and the continuity of Romanians in their homeland (Boia, 2005: 37).

Contemporary historians from the 17th century didn’t describe Michael the Brave as the Romanians’ unifier. For the Moldavian Miron Costin, he was a conqueror of Moldavia, who fought in too many battles. *The History of Wallachian Princes*, written at the end of century, appreciates Michael the Brave’s conquests, but doesn’t mention the goal of national unity. The Transylvanian School, obsessed with the history of the Romanians and their national identity, didn’t focus on the figure of Michael the Brave (*Ibidem*: 72–77). The first who interpreted the rule of Michael in terms of national unity was the Transylvanian professor Aron Florian, in 1837, who interpreted the conquest of the two

princedoms as national project, a clear intention of unifying all Romanians in one state.

The most influential work was *The Romanians under the Michael the Brave*, by Nicolae Bălcescu (Pecican, 2002: 173–174). The Romanian revolutionist of 1848 started the work in 1847, but didn't finished it by 1952, at his death. Bălcescu's interpretation of Michael the Brave is marked by the ideals of the 1848 Revolution, as frequent comparisons suggest it all over the work. For Bălcescu, the unity ideal is the strongest element of Michael's strategy and represented an old desire of the Romanian princes. He wrote about "*the Romanians from the old Dacia*" and attributed to prince Mircea the Old the intention of unifying all Romanians in one princedom (Bălcescu, 1998: 178–179). He considered the idea of unity a large spread ideal of the Romanians and criticized Michael because the prince didn't help the peasants and didn't understood the necessity of social reforms (again, a problem of 1848 revolutionists) (*Ibidem*: 283–284).

Nicolae Bălcescu's ideas were rejected by the historians from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and from the first half of the next century, but the myth of the unifying prince remained important for literature. For the nationalist historian and politician Nicolae Iorga, the work of Bălcescu is part of literature, not a history book. For Iorga, Bălcescu's Michael the Brave is "more beautiful", "greater" (Iorga, 1968: 94).

The historians A.D. Xenopol, Dimitrie Onciul, P.P. Panaitescu and C.C. Giurescu considered that political thought of that time did not included the idea of national unity (Boia, 2005: 220–221). Iorga admitted that for the Moldavians, Michael was a conqueror (Iorga, 1919: 10–11). Nonetheless, Michael was "*sent by God to make a single body for Romania*" – not because this was his thought, but as an example for the next generations: the wonder is possible! Once the unifier myth was born, the steps to mystification were easy to make. In the communist age, the historiography was strongly controlled and impregnated by ideology. After the Second World War, the new political power ordered the writing of "true history", according to the new official ideology. Under the surveillance of Roller, historians stressed the importance of class struggle in history. After 1965, the Romanian communism radically changed and focused on nationalism, used as a way to legitimate the political power. The social sciences are dominated by "protocronism", official ideology promoting the ideas of unity and independence, forced-ideas of national history. For communists, Romania meant to be a single and independent state, and finally a communist society. National history was marked by providential

personalities, who led the people on his way. The communist leader Nicolae Ceaușescu was always presented among those exceptional leaders (only the kings were excluded).

There is no wonder the communists rediscovered and used the social and political thought of Nicolae Bălcescu, including the myth of Michael the Brave. There are several ideas of Nicolae Bălcescu used by the communist regime: the unity of the three princedoms as national project, the teleological view on history, the social egalitarian political view. Not only historians promoted those ideas, but the entire educational system. The extreme forms of mystification are the history handbooks, especially those for the first grades. Michael is a national hero, supported by the peasants and betrayed by the nobility (boyars) and foreign powers. The death of the prince is heroic, dedicated to union and liberty.

### **The construction of Michael the Brave's myth in cinematography**

#### **The context**

The make up of *Michael the Brave* movie concurs with Nicolae Ceaușescu's decision to impose a new ideological strategy: the fusion between communism and nationalism. Literature and art, including the cinematography, sustained the effort to reinterpret historical ages and personalities. In 1965-1970, Romania had a relatively wealthy economy, the life of the people improved. When Ceaușescu condemned the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, arguing that every national state should decide its own faith, he reached the top of his popularity.

The Executive Committee of the Romanian Communist Party discussed the problem of national cinematography on 25<sup>th</sup> of June 1968 (Popescu, 2001: 116–133). Sergiu Nicolaescu, the well-known movie director, stated his intention to make a movie about Michael the Brave, who could be seen by “half of the Romanian people” or more, if it were broadcast on TV. Movie directors, script writers and politicians remarked the huge potential of cinematography. The movie was described as an “ideological front”. Ceaușescu himself asked for a “militant” movie, about “*our conception on world and life, about socialist humanism, about the whole development politics of our homeland*”.

#### **Michael the Brave (1971)**

*The movie has two parts, Călugăreni and The Union. It is considered one of the best movies in Romanian cinematography by movie critics.*

*Movie director: Sergiu Nicolaescu. Script writer: Titus Popovici. Actors: Amza Pelea, Ion Besoiu, Olga Tudorache.*

Sergiu Nicolaescu and Titus Popovici created a heroic character, Michael the Brave, and they wanted it to be perfectly interpreted. That is why the actor was Amza Pelea, but with the voice of Emanoil Petruț. The Prince is a character of the Renaissance: he is characterized by greatness, costumes, bravery, frankness (“I don’t know who to ask”, he said). Michael seduces the Italian noble countess Rossana, but Nicolae Ceaușescu opposed to the romance that the movie director wanted, for Hollywood-like box office success<sup>1</sup>. The foreigners were presented in opposition to Michael the Brave: the traders from Levant are greedy, the European Princes are superficial. Michael stands with dignity in front of the Sultan, easily inclines the head as a salute, refusing the usually humble bow, amazing the European ambassadors (“man lives only one time”, he explained). The Habsburg Emperor recognized he was dominated by Michael, he regretted that the Romanian prince wasn’t born Austrian. While the rulers of the great powers act according with “real politik”, Michael feels the responsibility of history, representing the Romanian nation.

From the beginning, the movie presented important themes for the nationalist communism from Romania: the Romanians defended Europe in the Middle Age, the Europeans had the peace to refine their culture. The Romanians had great sacrifices in the name of Civilization. Michael the Brave is clear in his conversation with the Emperor Rudolf II: “*while you build those castles and search for philosophical stone, I burned my country, I lost my child*”. The European help for Michael and for the Romanians arrived always too late. The Hungarian Prince Sigismund Bathory had a party while the Romanians fought against the Ottoman Empire. The theme of the Romanians’ betrayal, left alone by the Europeans was strongly promoted by communist historiography.

The theme of predestination is important: Romanians should be united, Michael is the hero meant to fulfill this goal, and he knows it, he feels it as a duty. Several scenes took place in the Church. The link between the People and Faith is strong for the Romanian nationalists, but not in communists’ interpretation. That is why those scenes were considered courageous and innovative. Nonetheless, Cristian Tudor Popescu (2001: 200) appreciates that the greatest mystification was the absence of religion as the strongest motivation for Michael the Brave’s actions.

The political project of unifying all Romanians in one independent national state is the main idea of Nicolaescu’s movie. The clearest

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<sup>1</sup> Cristian Tudor Popescu, *op. cit.*, pag 204, quoted Ceaușescu, who said that sentimental adventures of Michael the Brave were not important for the national hero.

expression is the answer that Michael gives to the Ottoman Empire's diplomat: *"all those who speak the language of my people live in those three countries. Those who are great and strong divided them, you and the others. That's enough!"*

The final scene, Michael the Brave's assassination, has testamentary value. The last thought of the Prince – *"I want this people to know what he wants, more and more, because I left a legacy"*. Michael understood the symbolic value of his actions, he's a hero who gave his life for the ideal of national state!

The Wallachian boyars are positive characters in Sergiu Nicolaescu's movie, especially the Buzescu brothers. Close to the people and their problems, honest, ready to fight for the country. However they, not Michael, have the responsibility for the decisions against peasantry (the interdiction to move from boyar's land to another boyar's land, criticized by Bălcescu). The movie clearly expresses the Prince's opposition to this decision – following Bălcescu's ideas on social division as the main cause of final defeat.

The peasants are secondary characters in the movie, but they are always in the background, the force behind Michael the Brave. For the communists, the peasantry is the country. The Prince's army is dressed in peasant's clothes, even if the historians agreed the Michael's army was formed of boyars and mercenaries. When Sigismund asked *"what army do you have?"*, Michael answered *"the entire country"*. The Romanians cheering the Union are also peasants. When hard times come, defeated at Mirăslău, Michael is welcomed by simple folks. The landscape is carefully chosen: 'plaiul' (foothill) represents the "mioritic space" described by the philosopher Lucian Blaga, the typical space of Romanians. Michael wonders alone, eats simple food in simple houses. The theme of good and long-suffering people is suggested in those scenes.

In opposition with the peasants are not the boyars, but Transylvanian nobles. They are presented during the ball, eating and drinking. The contrast between modesty – arrogance, austerity – opulence is clear. Sigismund reproached to Michael the sympathy for simple men: *"you awakened the dark power of mod, you, a Prince"*.

### **The mace with three seals (1977)**

*Movie director: Constantin Vaeni. Actors: Victor Rebengiuc, Toma Caragiu*

The new movie was asked by Nicolae Ceaușescu, who wanted a production with more "class conscience" than Nicolaescu's *Michael the Brave*. The movie is focused on the unification: the action starts after the

battle of Călugăreni and ends before the decline and death of Michael the Brave. There are fewer battle scenes and definitely less spectacular, the goal is to follow the “thought” of the hero.

The main themes of nationalist ideology from Nicolaescu’s movie are maintained: the Romanian’s sacrifices on behalf of European Kingdoms, the cynicism and expansionism of the great European Kingdoms, the desire of national unity of the Romanians.

An important change was the role of religion. Ambiguous in Nicolaescu’s *Michael the Brave*, this time it was clearly denied. In conversations with his son, Nicolae, Michael said: “*Religion can not make a country! A country is made on the same lands, with the same language, with the same ancestors, with the same habits from generation to another generation. Moldavia, Wallachia, Transylvania were separated by the roguery of hard times, but we are still a country. Even if instead of Zalmoxis and Jupiter we raised other altars*” In another scene, he said he is not carrying on a religion war, he fights for freedom and his people. The force idea in *The mace with three seals* is the national and social motivation of the hero.

The priests excel in spying and political intrigues, the cope is more like a camouflage. The character Pamfilie (Toma Caragiu) looks like a secret service agent. Michael mock at him: “*Pamfilie, you got drunk last night, that is why God is not listening to you*”. It is clear that not Pamfilie is at stake, but the Church.

Another important change is the image of the boyars. In Vaeni’s movie, Michael is not surrendered by boyars, he has devoted servants. The Prince is presented very close to the peasantry. When his wife warned him that “*the country are the boyars*”, he roughly replied “*No, Lady! The country is the hats which jump in front of strangers only together with the heads!*” And later: “*I didn’t rise up against Turks to became the slave of the boyars!*” Michael is always in contradiction with the boyars, he mistrusts them. The peasants, in contrast, have solid class conscience: “*we and the boyars make cross with the same hand, but not with the same thoughts*”, said one of them.

An obsessive theme is the relationship with the foreign empires (“*I’m sick of great powers*”, he exclaimed). The character played by Victor Rebengiuc is proud, even defiant in front of the Turks, Austrians, Transylvanian nobles. He is described as visionary, he thinks that the course of history should be decided by the right of nations, not by royalties (another anachronistic thought).

The continuity theme, which confers to the Romanians superiority over foreigners, is introduced by invoking ancient Dacians. The prince Nicolae, son of Michael, teaches a history lesson to Sigismund Bathory



and the conclusion is that the Romanians are actually the old Dacians: “*the people did not disappear, they mix, but in substance remain the same*”. The re-discovery and valorization of ancient Dacians by national communism tried to establish deep roots for the Romanian people in their homeland: they were born here. The exaggeration of Dacian element in the formation of the Romanian nation was to bring to the reasoning Dacian = Romanian.

Michael the Brave character has an unusual sense of history. Regarding the past, he visited the grave of Stephan the Great, former prince of Moldavia. The ideological movie ends with Michael the Brave as a winner, cheered by the people at Alba Iulia, where the coronation ceremony took place, with optimistic message for the future: “*The Nation and the Union will live forever, because you will live forever*”.

### **Conclusions**

The Romanian communism tried to legitimate itself by including nationalism in its discourse. Party officials were interested not only in re-writing history, but in promoting heroes and events at large scale, through educational system and mass-media. Cinematography was used in this effort.

Michael the Brave is one the most important rulers in Romanian history. The communist nationalism was interested in consolidating the myth of the first unifier of Romanians` homeland, act with the value of a prophecy.

The movies *Michael the Brave* and *The mace with three seals* created a visionary character, with a strange sense of history, with strong national conscience, close to the nationalists thought of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Michael is not a political ruler – like the emperors of the foreign empires – he is a profound thinker, predestinated to unify the Romanians. He feels that he has a destiny to fulfill. On the background, clearly shaped, is the portrait of the Romanian people: kind and long-suffering, oppressed, poor but dignified, making sacrifices for Western Europe.

The communist ideology minimized or denied the importance of religion in Michael`s thought, but focused on the social or even class relations, on the theme of social conflict. The Romanians should fight against a double oppression: national and social.

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