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A Spaghetti Western and the Contradictions of Memory

Radu Jude's *Aferim!* (2015) and Ottoman Heritage

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A*ferim!*, Radu Jude's 2015 movie set in Wallachia in the first half of the 19th century, made quite a stir for its take on the enslavement of the Romani people and the role of women in society, especially among Romanian viewers. The comment section on the film's profile on cinemagia.ro,[1] a Romanian version of IMDb, offers an array of negative reviews that either consider the film a waste of time, or a Balkan turbo-folk product (the term "turbo-folk" normally refers to a musical genre viewed as being of poor quality). Some commentators on cinemagia.ro approach the film from a racist vantage point. Comments claim that *Aferim!* succeeds in conveying 'the normal, natural state' of the Roma people, some even going as far as using racist slurs when referring to both Roma and Turkish characters. Serious reviews such as the ones published by Victor Alartes[2] or Christian Ferencz-Flatz,[3] on the other hand, tackle the film's attempt at conveying the realities of Wallachian society in 1835 by emphasizing an alleged artificiality caused by the film trying too hard to be true to the past. Although a necessary, brave, and enticing take on issues that are rarely discussed beyond the realm of academia,[4] I want to argue that Radu Jude's tribute to spaghetti westerns promotes a series of stereotypes of what it meant to live in the early 1800s in an Ottomanized region. It does so by using various tropes borrowed from Western movies, notably posies searching for escaped slaves, civilians acting as deputies of local law enforcement, as well as by using certain characteristic weapons, filming bleak landscapes, etc. A stereotypical feature of the film that I want to focus on is the absence of urban spaces. The movie is supposed to take place in the country residence of a boyar, a member of the land-owning Wallachian and Moldavian nobility. This type of building, a so-called *culă*, has been nationally appropriated and considered specific only to Romanian traditional architecture in various Romanian historical and art historical published works, while its Ottoman features have either been downplayed or outright denied, a tendency that Jude

does little to counteract.

The ending credits of the film list an impressive and diverse array of sources that hints at a thorough research process behind *Aferim!*'s portrayal of early 19th century Wallachian society. This would suggest that Jude is willing to pay attention to what historians have to say on the matter. However, I cannot help but notice his own personal touch on the subject matter with his choice of filming locations with barren landscapes, swamps, and woods that carry the unseen menace of *haiducs* (*haiducs* were initially members of a type of irregular infantry who would later become outlaws feared for attacking carriages and convoys, but useful for local insurrections). Additionally, protagonists Constandin, member of the Wallachian irregular police force (*zapciu*), and Carfin, the escaped slave, are first introduced as antipodes, but as the movie progresses, the antihero Carfin becomes a voice for the injustices in Wallachian society. The violence depicted onscreen is not only physical; the actor's lines include strong wording, racist slurs, as well as some creative curse words. The colorful graphic design of the movie poster, characteristic for the spaghetti western genre, contrasts with the monochromatism of the film, which adds more depth to the portrayal of a backward society inhabited by *boyars* who have traveled across Europe but still own slaves and commit acts of domestic violence. A superficial comparison with films about the Southern States in the US will reveal some similar patterns of portrayal; however, the backwardness here is localized in the region's Ottoman legacy. I view it as significant that the East-West paradigm shift also translates into a generational one, since Constandin still sports the Albanian *Arnavut* type of clothes and weapons, while his son, Ioniță, never misses an oportunity to show the viewer his European sword while donning a military uniform with some Russian elements.

What does the absence of urban spaces tell us about the image the film conveys about 19th century Wallachia? While it is known that there were a number of cities on the territory of Wallachia (along the commercial routes of the Balkans), the film focuses on the countryside boyar residences or in-between places of transit such as inns, local fairs and markets. Could this simply be attributed to the director's choice in conveying a western-style atmosphere? It is tempting to view the *culă* as an urban presence in a rural context, and to some extent, it is true that these buildings were meant to reproduce many of the living conditions a boyar and his family enjoyed in the city. Moreover, some city residences also featured tower structures built for protection, along with high enclosing walls made of stone. However, my research so far on the subject of Ottoman influences in residential architecture from Bucharest and Ploiești has revealed the predominance of another type of house. This house type features a cubic/rectangular structure, centered around a long hallway, with rooms placed on both sides, an elevated ground floor built atop the cellar, and an open terrace (*cerdac)*. Sometimes, such houses would be enclosed with a window-paned gallery known as *camlık*, and a protruding

balcony, a so-called *saknası*. These types of houses have also been subject to appropriation by only being viewed as Romanian traditional architecture, a phenomenon that can also be retraced in Bulgaria, with its Bulgarian National Revival, and Greece, with its Macedonian Greek style, where the Ottoman heritage is downplayed or altogether ignored in a national, indigenous framework. In a recently published interview in news.ro, Romanian architect Vlad Eftenie describes the *culă* as the "quintessence of traditional architectural expression to the north of the Danube River", thus ignoring a significant amount of research regarding the tower houses of the Balkans.[5]

I argue that the act of taking objects and aspects related to Ottoman material culture, produced in a multiethnic and multicultural environment, and simply labeling them as being Greek, Bulgarian, or Romanian, is a form of appropriation, specifically, one that plays on a national rhetoric. Although the film does not make that claim, it does tend to reify certain elements of architecture while ignoring urban architecture from the region, a selectiveness which reflects Orientalist aspects in the film's depiction of the region.

Film critic Peter Sobczynski's opinion succinctly summarizes why Jude's movie has received quite a lot of backlash from Romanian viewers:[6]

> If I were to tell you that the new film "Aferim!" was set in the mid-1800s and followed a couple of bounty hunters as they roamed the countryside in pursuit of an escaped slave, there's a pretty good chance you might assume it took place in America in those grim years before the Emancipation Proclamation and that this movie served as another expose of one of the most shameful aspects of our nation's past. In fact, this smart and occasionally quite powerful drama is set in Romania.

It could, however, be argued that another element of the film is more striking: the Orientalist approach that is implicit in the location scouting, a search that reflects Jude's preference for the picturesque and for the existence of already-established representations that would be both palatable and true-to-the-past. Romanian newspaper Adevărul cites Radu Jude as having chosen the Dobrogea landscapes for their „picturesque, rural villages that have retained the charm of the past".[7] Not only was the search for picturesque landscapes the main leitmotif in Orientalist art and in the representations of foreign travelers and artists, but Dobrogea was a programmatic destination for the Balcic painting school, the classical Orientalist phase in Romanian art.[8]

Of course, another reason for making this choice was the movie's main themes, slavery in the Romanian countries, the treatment of women, and the wide gap between the general population and the local aristocracy (boyars) in terms of

income and living conditions. The movie's strong point is the way it addresses issues such as slavery and domestic violence against women (both in the form of sexual violence and in that of marital conventions). It does however sacrifice other aspects by failing to illustrate a more nuanced and less stereotypical tableaux of Wallachian society. We only catch a few glimpses of Westerners in the scenes from the fair, and in the house of boyar Iordache Cândescu, in which the mixture of Ottoman and Western material culture and domestic utensils is presented as being paradigmatic of late 18th and early 19th century Wallachia. It is this particular transitional mélange of East and West that made English and French travelers place the Romanian provinces on the map as the avant-garde of the Orient – as not exactly European, but not fully Oriental either.

On first viewing, the movie seems to solely play on the backwardness, poverty and related issues commonly referenced in foreign accounts of the Ottoman Empire that were written by a myriad of foreign travelers and artists. Images produced by artists such as Theodore Valerio, Auguste Raffet, Michel Bouquet, or the ones published by Charles Doussault in the famous colonial publication series *Voyage Dans les Cinq Parties du Monde* (1841), were aimed at seeking out and depicting the peculiar. In illustrating indigenous peoples populating some of the world's remote corners, they would place the picturesque in a context of decay and ruin. As Maria Todorova has argued, French, German, English, and Italian travelers, merchants, and officials have been instrumental in constructing the Balkans as a region that is exotic, primitive, and traditional, largely due to its being characterized by extreme an insurmountable gap between the poor and the rich and the prevalence of backwardness and conflict. Narrative accounts such as the one published by Ulysse de Marsillac about mid-19th century Bucharest tend to corroborate the stereotypical visual documents from the time, which depict peasants, shabby houses, and ruins, all of which starkly contrast with the living conditions of the wealthy.

Aferim! could be seen as depicting an episode in the micro-history of Wallachia, the story of an escaped slave from a boyar's court in the countryside, intended to be seen by the spectator as what the Ottoman province might have looked like in the 1830s. The intention behind the movie's subject and filming locations could be seen as a shifting paradigm from the ever-present trope that everything important in Wallachia or Moldavia happened in the capital cities. Radu Jude's option to collaborate with historian Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu, whose research interests include social history and the history of sexuality, is a strong argument in favor of interpreting the film along these lines.

At first, viewers and even captors Constandin and Ioniță manifest a great deal of surprise at the fact that Carfin, a Roma slave, had had the opportunity to travel to cities such as Vienna, Paris, or Leipzig, while accompanying his master on his journeys. Asked how the cities are, Carfin answers, "The world is big and beautiful, not like ours. […] Vienna: is about three of our cities, only with

palaces instead of houses. […] Leipzig is smaller, but still more beautiful than anything we have. […] Paris: is big, master, about ten of our villages, with palaces like in Vienna, paved roads, more princesses and horses than you can see here [in Wallachia] in a lifetime." What is most notable about Carfin's impressions and stories about the three cities is a play on the us-versus-them discourse, with Wallachia being the Cinderella of the story, the one that does not have palaces or enough princesses and horses. However, examples of private residences with Western architectural influences in Bucharest, such as the Suțu Palace, the Știrbey Palace, or the Dinicu Golescu houses in Bucharest, leads to interesting questions regarding Carfin's remarks on the backwardness of Wallachian society. Names such as Vladimir de Blaremberg[9] or Conrad Schwenk, who built the Suțu Palace between 1833 and 1835, which features a series of Neogothic accents, were part of a project of building modern, European residences in Bucharest in the first half of the 19th century. Research regarding residential architecture in the Romanian provinces in the mid-19th century is still fragmentary, and the extent of Ottoman architectural influences is still unknown. Moreover, the understanding of the paradigm shift from Phanariot-Ottoman houses to a Western and European aesthetic is still marred by unanswered questions. In my previous work, I have clearly delineated the influences of East and West, but further research leads me to believe that a more nuanced approach is much more constructive.

Could we view this depreciative discourse regarding Wallachia as a self-orientalist discourse on Carfin's part? Or does it simply mirror a nationalist narrative, according to which the Ottoman Empire is to blame for the economic and political setback of Romania's provinces? The comparison in terms of architecture or urban development, even social status, surprises viewers, especially since it came from the mouth of a slave. The film leaves audiences with the impression that it wants to offer viewers an immersive experience in the historically re-constructed realities of 1830s Wallachia, with a specific emphasis on mentalities and discourse. Carfin's story that exploits the narrative of setbacks in Wallachia, Constandin's discussion with Sultana Cândescu, whom he tells that domestic violence has a biblical, even divine imperative, or the priest's anti-Semitic discourse that outlines the Jewish population as being the Devil's servants, all come together as pieces of a puzzle. A puzzle that, rather than offering an immersive experience, raises questions regarding the attitudes, discourses, and mentalities towards the Ottoman empire in Wallachia and Ottoman influences in the Romanian provinces. In my opinion, going back to the movie and paying closer attention to its scenes, characters, dialogues, and filming locations, uncovers a series of nuances and medallions that play on the relationship between perception and reality or between discourse and action.

One of these puzzle pieces is the significant episode of the meeting between Constandin and the Turkish merchant, an encounter that further emphasizes a paradoxical and nuanced approach towards the Ottoman Empire and Ottoman

material culture. On their journey home, Constandin and Ioniță meet a (supposedly) Turkish official envoy or merchant traveling in a rather luxurious carriage, with *tesbih* beads hanging ostentatiously from his hand. After a conversation in a rather fluent Turkish, Constandin accepts some *helva* (halva) from the merchant, thanking him for his gift, with the general feeling of this being a pleasant exchange. However, as soon as the carriage goes its way, Constandin turns to Ioniță, being proud that he has given wrong indications to the Turk regarding the road he should take to reach his destination and stating that he „doesn't stand the Ottomans, that they are the most insufferable tribe on earth" ("*elbet, nu îi suport pe osmanlâi, cea mai nenorocită semințe de pe fața pământului*"), all the while packing a series of Ottoman weapons and using various Ottoman words: *alîșveriș* (shopping), *mașallah* (praise be), *hüzmet* (job, profession), and so on. Boyar Cândescu's Phanariot-Ottoman attire reflects an Ottoman influence that is still strong in the first half of the 19th century in Wallachia.

As already mentioned, *Aferim!*'s portrayal of Wallachian society in the first half of the 19th century includes architecture. Carfin's comparative discourse of us-versus-them is centered on palaces versus houses as elements of formulating a condescending attitude towards what Wallachia looked like at the time. It is important to keep in mind the intention behind choosing certain filming locations, and especially the fact that there are no cities or other more complex urban structures present in the film. Coupled with the barren or wooded landscapes, Carfin's words convey a stereotypical impression of the region that is also present in artwork produced by foreign artists in the region. As mentioned earlier, the fragmentary state of research on the subject of Wallachian architecture, and the director's choice of using archaic, traditionalist, and allegedly authentic filming locations, point to traces of an Orientalist discourse.

There are three main examples of Wallachian architecture present in *Aferim!*: peasant houses, made from clay and with thatched roofs, an inn that looks more like an enlarged peasant house, and boyar Iordache Cîndescu's country residence, the rather famous *culă* Greceanu. The *culă*, part of the towerhouse architecture of the Balkans, is part of a complex of buildings that also includes the Duca *culă* and the I.G. Duca memorial house. The Greceanu *culă*, with its high walls, a few small windows situated above the level of the entrance, a small door at ground level as the only access point, and a terrace on the upper level, is a notable example of the type of residential-stronghold houses built by various local merchants, local administrators and the nobility across many of the former Ottoman provinces.[10] Moreover, comparing the inn used in *Aferim!* with historical documents, say an image from the Golești Museum that can be dated back to 19th century Prahova county, one begins to question the historical accuracy of *Aferim!*'s representation.

Since the filming locations only provide us with three examples of architecture,

a discussion on the general influences of the so-called Ottoman-Turkish house in Wallachia must take into consideration a very important question asked by Maurice Cerasi: “How much of architectural history’s distinction between ‘cultured’ and ‘vernacular’ architecture is valid?”.[11] This question is significant in the case of the Romanian countries, since there is a significant vernacular component in Wallachian and Moldavian 18th and 19th century architecture. Moreover, Cerasi notes that, with the exception of the houses built and used in the Danube Delta, and Dobrogea I would add, the river is the northern limit of the map of where the Ottoman-Turkish house type appears. While there are still examples of this Ottoman-Turkish in the former Ottoman provinces, it is not per se an architectural style, but more of a diversity of house types that share some common elements. Notably, these are the *çıkma* or *saknası* balconies that are always placed on the top floors, ceramic tiled roofs, small and narrow windows mostly placed on the upper levels, the presence of Ottoman interior furnishings, the segregation of interior spaces based on gender, and so on. The ground floor was either used as a storage room for winter provisions, or else the spaces were allotted to workers if a merchant or artisan owned the house. Both Maurice Cerasi and Machiel Kiel draw the border of Ottoman architectural influence in the Balkans south of the Danube, solely identifying the province of Dobrudja as a place of common architectural heritage. Tchavdar Marinov’s extensive study on the continuous shifts of meaning regarding the presence of Ottoman heritage in the former provinces of the Ottoman empire uses Carmen Popescu’s research as a point of reference, adding that there is an Ottoman component in 18th century Wallachian and Moldavian architecture without going into too much detail.[12] Indeed, aside from a few rather obvious examples in Wallachia, a full inventory and a complete understanding of the extent to which Wallachia and Moldavia were part of the Ottoman-Turkish house’s area of influence remains a work in progress.

We find house descriptions in sale documents from the 18th and 19th century originating both from Wallachia and Moldavia, but they tend to emphasize the existence of certain elements, not their provenance. In addition, the correspondence between merchant houses and their clients can offer more insight into the living conditions and general atmosphere of private properties.[13] Such a description has been published by historian Gheorghe Lazăr of the manor from the Lungi village in Dâmbovița County that belonged to merchant Dumitrake Papazoglu. In this description we learn that the property had “three rows of house: the big house for guests, the servant’s house (casa de feciori), as well as the house for sitting/living (casa de șăzut), the latter one being built entirely with walls. […] A beautiful house, able to compete with the houses of the grand boyars, with four rooms, with locks from Beci (Viena) had în Brașov Mărgărit, the leader of the merchant’s guild, involved in the trade from this Transylvanian town.”[14] Therefore, it comes as no surprise when the film takes us inside boyar Iordache Cândescu’s house, and the camera reveals the inside with a small library in wall cabinets, similar to other Balkan examples, a sofa

covered with some European textiles, and a peacock perched on top. To the left of the sofa, positioned on an octagonal wood and mother of pearl intaglio table, we see a hookah and some candlesticks. The Roma slave offers her master a *çibuk*, propped against a tray with a coffee set. As Iordache Cândescu is asked by Constandin to issue a document attesting to the capture of the slave, viewers are able to see some important traces of Western material culture, even an imitation of a fresco next to the boyar's desk that depicts a landscape as it would have been seen from a window in a fairly naïve manner. The whole ensemble comes together with the addition of some Ottoman *ibriks* (coffee pots), a blanket for camel saddle, a *mangal* (brazier), and a white, ceramic stove.

To conclude, I must confess that my favorite part of the film was a small cameo of a foreign artist, whose Western clothes make such an impression on the viewer. He stands among a sample of Wallachian society – priests, peasants, merchants, boyars -, with an easel, observing and painting them. This particular instance is a very clever and interesting play on what is perceived and what is real, questioning whether the film is just another take on the spaghetti western genre, if through a controversial subject. This particular cameo is also interesting and thought-provoking in terms of whether the film's depiction of early 19th-century Wallachian society is merely a depiction of self-orientalist discourse, or if the nuances and subtleties make it more difficult to pinpoint. My focus on the architectural examples present in *Aferim!* is due to my recent interest in the variety of the Ottoman-Turkish house, and the question of how it relates to the presence of modern, Western influences in the Romanian provinces. Although the examples in the film are based on and concur with some of the sources mentioned in the film's ending credits, new information provided by projects such as *Laboratorul de memorie urbană, Arhiva de arhitectură*, or *Monumente uitate* reveal certain details regarding the architecture of Wallachia in the first half of the 19th century as being more nuanced and in need of a more in-depth inquiry.

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