

## **The Chronicle of Slavomir Popovici**

*Iaromira Popovici, Dilemma magazine, February 3-9, 1995*

”In the work of the Romanian director of Serbian origin the films dedicated to ethnography (the cycle Signs) and to old Romanian art (the cycle Faces and Icons) prevail. His creations surpass, though, the limited frame of any classification or labeling, communicating, through image illustration, a symbolical-poetic philosophy of the existential cycle.

Art and ethnography were not, from the beginning, the fields that the director has chosen to decipher and interpret: at first there was the scandal, the Romanian reality of the 60s, when Slavomir Popovici tried, in *The Plant*, to express abstract notions in an experimental formula. The film lost its initial significance because of the censorship (his official approval had lasted for a year). The same happened to *Harsh Romances* (1966), an imagistic illustration of elapsing of time: through the ulterior added comment, the placing into a general abstract was replaced by the concrete-useless reference to the changes in the Romanian society after the Second World War. Fortunately, besides this version, which the director refused to sign, another one was kept, without a text and closer to the initial one. The elapsing of time remained a theme the director approached, from other perspectives, also in his ethnographic and art movies, in which he later took refuge.

Slavomir Popovici opened the way of deciphering some symbols – painting, embroidery, furniture, knot-shaped bread or the whole ritual – until then not codified. The main events of life are transposed in the static nature of the world of objects he’s surrounded by. These are far from being merely utilitarian –they make a parallel world of *”ornaments and signs”* that accompanies the ceremonies of the *”Great Passing”*. The signs are the ones that establish the connection between the ephemeral and the eternal: *”Moulded in a perishable matter, they give proof to the persistence of a beauty, wisdom and over*

*generation communication science*". Representation of man over generations (*The sign of Man*, 1978), of the sun (*As Good as Day*, 1974, *The Romanian round dance*, 1979, *Wheat*, 1980) or of the fir tree (*The sign of the fir tree*, 1971), the ornament transcends the figurative and enters the area of the ideal. Once initiated, you are able to follow the director's analogies, who discovers the same mark on a peasant's skirt, on a round bread, a peasant's chair or a stick.

In the compact roundness of the bread, as well as in the moving circle of the round dance, we can identify, for instance, the solar symbol. The fir tree, the tree of life, is present at weddings as well as at funerals, which it both equalizes, becoming "*an expression of continuity*". The messages of the ornaments cannot be nevertheless simplified, but they merge between themselves (the sun-man, the humanized star, which „equalizes man with the wholeness of the white world", expressing man's yearning towards wholeness, "the longing for no matter where and everywhere" appears, for instance ). Man, with his ages, remains a central sign also in the cycle *Faces and Icons*. Generally filmed in churches, in a time when churches were demolished and it was forbidden to film crosses, even more descriptive films, such as *Word to teach* and *Votive painting in Brîncoveanu's time* are valuable. The director returns, in *Three families*, to the density of symbols from *Signs*, in which the three ages of man are marked through painted images, but also through the objects in which the portrayed peasants are reflected; and also in *Lady Despina and Toma's Floarea*, film in which the departure of their child from the white world and his entrance into the third age (death) is the theme of two mothers' grievances, the wife of the king and that of a shepherd (mirrored in the mural painting of the churches in 18-19 centuries in Oltenia). The theme of grievance is also dealt with in *The Black Sun* (1968, not belonging to the cycle *Faces and Icons*): medieval Romanian embroideries are presented, almost dramatized, from the perspective of the three chants (of the mothers, the men and the women).

The shinning of the gold and silver faces, emphasized in turns, is an unusual, contradictory means of thinking about the other, black world. The heroes in *Stop, passer-by* (1981), the faces-voices from the crosses in Săpînța or from the Roman metopes, are already in the other world; part of the same kind unaltered by the elapsing of time, they dialogue, through their epitaphs, with us, the ones still living in this world. *Hrib's Chronicle* returns from an encoded, poetical communication, to a descriptive-epical one. The author of the journals, Toader Hrib, peasant from the Arbore village, makes a distinction between two worlds: "in the village" and "in the wide world". The parallel is ironically made through adjoining the village scenes with the frescoes of the Arbore monastery - a lot of them out of The Last Day of Judgement - the local committee' meeting – the saints' gathering. Even Hrib's village external events are measured through the rhythms of the life cycle, but their degrading is ironically dealt with: even the madness of meeting preparations is seen by Hrib as the organizing of a wedding.

About Slavomir Popovici's films there still are lots of things to say and to understand; I will never be able to conclude with Hrib's cue: "I have tackled all the issues".

*Iaromira Popovici*