

Film review *Moromeții 3* [*The Moromete Family 3*], directed by Stere Gulea, 2024



Stere Gulea's latest film, *Moromeții 3* [*The Moromete Family 3*], released on November 22 in Romanian cinemas after being screened for its premiere in the prestigious Romanian festival Tiff, concludes in a remarkable way a trilogy started in 1987 and proves the persistence of a dialogue between the art of film and one of the great novels of our literature, signed by Marin Preda.



If the first movie of the trilogy was based on the first volume of the novel and if the second part, in 2018, focused on the second volume and on *Viața ca o pradă* [*Life as a Prey*], this third movie in the series does a pirouette and turns Niculae (played by Alex Călin) into the very author of *Moromeții*, trying to draw the precise context of the genesis of the novel. Moments from the process of collectivization of agriculture, from the life of writers subject to the Communist Party, or from Marin Preda's love affairs, which become those of the fictional character he himself invented, are accurately re-created. The most significant affective inclination of Niculae/Preda is the relationship with his future wife, Aurora Cornu (played by Mara Bugarin), who plays a key role in the writer's life, through her constant encouragement in the second part of the movie to print the manuscript of the novel.

In Stere Gulea's film, the socio-political context of the fifties is accurately rendered, whether we are referring to the historical events and conflicts in which the characters are caught up, but also to those elements that give life to the characteristics of an era, namely the scenery, props, clothing, roads, architectural elements, landscapes marked by human beings. The well-placed inserts from newsreels of the fifties, where Gheorghiu-Dej appears accompanied by the party apparatus, or from Soviet films of the period are meant to lend an even greater authenticity to the whole.

The film also recreates the atmosphere of a cultural house [*cămin cultural*], from those tours in which writers obedient to the regime were sent to the villages to read to the peasants lame poems about collectivization and motivate them to join the collective farms with their small private properties. In a very interesting meta-narrative and meta-filmic game, Niculae Moromete goes on tour to the home village of the prose writer who invented him, Siliștea-Gumești, where the film *Desfășurarea*, directed in 1954 by Paul Călinescu on the basis of Preda's novel of the same name, is being screened for the peasants. The reaction of the peasant Ilie Barbu to his fictional double is one of suspicion, because he – in reality, unlike in the film – is not in favour of collectivizing agriculture.

Collectivization is, in fact, a central issue in the film and the one that triggers the crisis of conscience of the writer Niculae Moromete. During his trip to Siliștea-Gumești, he also passes through the village of Râca, where he

had relatives on his mother's side, and discovers that the peasants, who had first revolted against the abusive quotas imposed by the regime, are now also voicing their opposition to collectivization. To prevent unrest, the communists intervene brutally, with soldiers brought in trucks and firing on the population, resulting in human casualties. This tragic event triggers a deep anxiety, feelings of insecurity, confusion about the relationship between good and evil, a desire to forget the shocking scenes that the main character has seen, but also an attempt to redefine oneself in the contemporary world. It made Moromete question his role as a writer in society, but also the practices of a regime that was portrayed in propaganda material as just, but in practice was ruthless and criminal.

Niculae Moromete experiences first hand the suspicions and pressures of the communist regime, as he becomes *persona non grata* and is targeted by the repressive apparatus of the Securitate. His lack of class consciousness, as the jargon of the time had it, was aggravated by meeting a former schoolmate, Dobrinoiu, who had come to experience deep religious faith during his imprisonment in the Romanian gulag. He gives Moromete *Ultimele sonete închipuite ale lui Shakespeare în traducere imaginară de Vasile Voiculescu* [*Shakespeare's Last Imaginary Sonnets in an imaginary translation by Vasile Voiculescu*] and the *Imnul Acatist al Rugului Aprins* [*Akathist Hymn of the Burning Bush*], works later confiscated by the Securitate. The interrogation of Niculae Moromete by a comrade officer shows, in a few short sequences, all the arbitrariness, psychological violence, manipulation and capacity for twisting reality that existed in these false judicial proceedings directed against people who were most often not really guilty. For those who would like to delve more deeply into this sinister aspect of the recent past, an extensive study by Ioana Diaconescu, *Marin Preda. Un portret în arhivele Securității* [*Marin Preda. A Portrait in the Securitate Archives*], published in 2015, is available...

In Stere Gulea's movie, Niculae Moromete experiences a rupture between the desire to impose himself as a writer, cultivating the fashionable creative formula of socialist realism, and the need to tell as clearly as possible the truth of the historical moments he is going through. His question is whether a writer or an artist can lie when confronted with abuse, injustice, and coercion in the name of false ideals of building the "new man", of redressing

social inequalities and building a classless society. Stere Gulea's film also shows debates at the Writers' Union, in which those who do not sharpen the class struggle, those who fall prey to bourgeois aestheticism and imitate decadent American literature at the expense of Soviet literature considered healthy, are incensed with proletarian anger. The autonomy of aesthetics, a fundamental principle of art and artistic creation, is treated with the same crass irony by the representatives of the Romanian Workers' Party as it is today by those who claim to belong to the neo-Marxist left.

In *Moromeții 3*, as I said, there are many traces of the times. Some of them suggest how oppressive the claw of the Soviet bear was in Romania in the 50s. At the entrance to the cultural house in Siliștea-Gumești, a poster proclaims: "Long live the Great Soviet Union". Party-approved writers read below the portraits of the four ideological monsters equally guilty of the crimes of communism: Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. Lenin's shadow is everywhere: on posters, in propaganda pictures, in speeches, in the form of a statuette on the desk of the all-powerful commissioner for culture, or in people's brainwashed heads. Through these visual or discursive signs, Stere Gulea's movie reminds us – and I think that nowadays we still need it! – of the fact that first the Tsarist Empire, then Soviet and contemporary Russia were the most aggressive and nefarious state entities towards their neighbors, including Romanians.


While Niculae is the main character in *Moromeții 3*, a central figure remains the father, Ilie, with whom the son finally reconciles after the conflicts of the previous movies (1987, 2018). Masterfully played by Horațiu Mălăele, the old Moromete seems a shadow from another world, harsh but clean, whose spectral presence perhaps says more than the words he utters that what the communist regime is doing "is not right". His irony, which is directed with subtlety against stupidity and demagoguery, is no longer as sharp as in the two previous films, but Ilie Moromete remains characterized by a deep psychological insight of his fellows.

In addition to its documentary, socio-historical and cultural interest, Stere Gulea's movie has undeniable technical and purely aesthetic qualities. The high elegance and resonant black and white aesthetics, thanks also to the experience of cinematographer Vivi Drăgan Vasile, serve to evoke the

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1950s with precision and help direct the audience's attention towards the essential. Black and white are declined in an infinity of different shades of gray, matte or shiny, very complex, which implicitly refer also to the impossibility of Moromete, and therefore of us, to judge without nuances and transitions. After all, *Moromeții 3* is a delight for true cinephiles, many of whom have considered or consider that black and white, through its rigor, essentialization, simplification, complex nuances, can sometimes be preferable to a film in color.

To conclude, it must be said that it is absolutely necessary for today's audiences to see Stere Gulea's three movies in series: watching them carefully would be a wonderful antidote for many evils that could happen to us.

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