

## *Navigating the Middle Ground: The Necessity of Middle Films for Audience Engagement in Romania*

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**Abstract:** In the contemporary digital landscape, audiovisual consumption patterns and film marketing strategies have undergone significant transformations, strongly influenced by the proliferation of social media and streaming platforms. Audiences now engage intensively with personalized and interactive content across diverse digital channels, prompting distributors to rethink traditional marketing approaches. Particularly in territories like Romania – categorized by the EU as *low-capacity* in film production – the lack of *middlebrow* cinema that effectively bridges artistic and commercial appeal poses substantial challenges. Historically dominated by internationally acclaimed auteur films, the Romanian industry now confronts a critical disconnect with local audiences, who perceive these films as inaccessible and overly intellectual. Conversely, influencer-driven commercial films have surged in popularity but frequently compromise artistic quality, highlighting the urgent need for balanced “middle” productions. Drawing on expert insights from leading Romanian film professionals and case studies of recent local successes such as *Două lozuri* (*Two Lottery Tickets*) and *Anul Nou care n-a fost* (*The New Year That Never Came*), this paper analyses innovative marketing campaigns leveraging targeted social media strategies, influencer engagement, and community-driven promotional efforts. It argues that developing middlebrow cinema accompanied

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by sophisticated digital marketing can enhance audience diversity, support sustainable growth of the Romanian film industry, and reconnect domestic viewers with locally-produced content, bridging the persistent gap between international critical acclaim and genuine public interest.

**Keywords:** Romanian films, *middlebrow cinema*, audience reach, digital era, marketing.

One of the biggest questions in nowadays film industry is if the spectator still holds the capacity and desire to watch films as we were used to since the beginning. And this question stems from how films are perceived today. A film is not just a “film” anymore, but a product that is linked to millions of other products, in “real life” or online. An array of films, series, vlogs, reels, merch and other derivative products or content have enabled us to live in a “multiverse” due to the huge expansion of digital technologies and Hollywood trend. Two main events have changed irreparably the paradigm of film development, production, distribution and especially consumption, over the last decade.

Firstly, the widespread popularity of social media platforms has significantly increased, boosted by greater internet accessibility since its popularity and first wave of accessibility from the 90’s. Long gone are the days when films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) did incredible performances based on a unique strategy to use the internet as a main platform. Today, not only that it’s very much expected to use internet as the main tool – particularly social media platforms – but it has offered the perfect landscape for billions of people to become the *auteurs*. Nowadays, particularly notable are short-form video formats like Instagram reels, YouTube shorts, and TikTok videos, which have captured the public’s attention more strongly in recent years. It is assumed that everybody has an alternative life that is being lived online, and this has forever impacted the way in which we see, think, create, share films.

Secondly, the socio-cultural landscape was dramatically influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic and an overwhelming influx of content delivered via streaming platforms, alongside pre-existing online materials such as vlogs, reels, or “day in the life” videos. These factors have collectively reshaped

consumption patterns, notably elevating the popularity of serialised content after Covid-19. Audiovisual formats have consequently become increasingly difficult for mainstream audiences to differentiate clearly. Drawing from my experience as an active practitioner in the European film industry, I frequently notice considerable confusion regarding traditional audiovisual categories. Netflix's business model has particularly driven this shift toward an intensive consumption style, ironically one that even Netflix began to criticise several years ago. This problematic consumption model – which is both producing massive amounts of content and sharing it all at once – contributed to other media giants such as HBO deciding to shut down original content production in most Central and Eastern European countries, including Romania.

Serialised content is now regularly consumed similarly to “traditional” feature films, blurring distinctions between formats originally intended for distinct mediums. Such viewing habits affect how these audiovisual products achieve their intended market goals and diminish the specific cultural and economic value traditionally attributed to each format. Many viewers now commonly refer to most audiovisual content simply as “movies”, demonstrating an eroded capacity for critical and nuanced differentiation. Consequently, there is limited understanding of the distinct identities of auteur-driven cinema, commercial feature films, serialised streaming content, or traditional “TV drama” formats, as the British call it. Miniseries, for instance, are often viewed as elongated films, illustrating a prevalent belief among audiences that they are merely “longer movies,” without recognising their unique narrative structures and distinct production contexts.

My practice experience is solely based on film production, as I have been professionally activating in the industry for the last 12 years. So one relevant step ahead in my career was to educate myself about the new landscape, while developing a series project so it would be beneficial on both ends. In this sense, during 2023-2024, after several rounds of pre-selection processes, I was selected to participate to a project development programme supported by the EU (MIDPOINT Series Launch)<sup>1</sup> with focus on offering a strong networking platform for professionals that have a series in development. Second program,

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<sup>1</sup> Midpoint Institute, 2023 <https://www.midpoint-institute.eu/en/project/vertebrae-9ffCeR>

supported by both the EU and by Netflix Fund for Creative Equity, was EWA Series Accelerator<sup>2</sup>, more inclined to career-driven classes, lectures and network to be offered. Besides managing to properly develop the series project, together with the author-writer who participated as well for the first programme – I could finally see and get the insights. My reasoning was that by understanding what is happening on that “side of the world”, would offer the perspective to understand the changes that are happening where I felt like “at home” – respectively in the film industry.

The development and production of serialized content is currently undergoing significant transformations, especially regarding the creative aspects of these projects. Due to the oversaturation caused by the hybrid formats offered by streaming platforms, two primary creative trends have emerged, as identified within the lectures attended in the previously mentioned programmes. These insights were particularly emphasized by experts such as Gabor Krigler, who brings over 25 years of industry experience, including eight years as a development executive at HBO Hungary, and Steve Mathews, whose similar extensive expertise includes nearly a decade at HBO UK as a script consultant and executive for scripted content, and who presently serves in a senior position at Banijay Group, a major French entertainment conglomerate.

Firstly, at the European level, there is a deliberate return to the narrative structures and dramatic formats typical of iconic TV series from the “golden era”<sup>3</sup> of television in the 1990’s. This trend became evident through the specific selection of case studies and compulsory viewing material, where, instead of choosing very popular contemporary series but often considered ephemeral, examples like *The Wire* or *X-Files* were preferred to illustrate enduring dramatic serialised excellence. Secondly, streaming platforms aim for deeper penetration into Eastern European markets, where traditional television networks still hold significant influence in producing serialized content and maintaining viewer engagement. This strategy is primarily motivated by economic expansion; however, it typically involves creating original local-language content, which

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<sup>2</sup> European Women’s Audiovisual Network, 2024 <https://www.ewawomen.com/ewa-netflix-series-accelerator/>

<sup>3</sup> McGrath, Charles. “The Triumph of the Prime-Time Novel.” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 22, 1995, 22-25

has the potential to foster valuable cultural productions. Nevertheless, the key challenge identified by regional industry representatives – despite the inherent difficulty of generalizing such an observation – is the frequent duplication of successful television formulas and formats, merely transposed to streaming platforms.

This phenomenon is clearly exemplified by Netflix's first Romanian Original series, *Subteran*. Based on private discussions with representatives from ProTV/Voyo, there is a consistent strategic effort to produce scripted formats targeted at an audience predominantly composed of males aged 45-50 and older, with lower to mid-level education. Consequently, Netflix's approach with *Subteran* appears intentionally aligned with popular local shows such as *Groapa* or *Clanul*, inevitably leading to similar creative content. Clearly platforms have significantly altered media consumption patterns, resulting in both market and production processes becoming increasingly dynamic compared to the period preceding the Covid-19 pandemic.

Given all the above, it becomes obvious that the last few years marked significant changes in digital marketing, driven primarily by evolving consumer behaviors and substantial transformations within online platforms. AI-generated content has rapidly proliferated on streaming services, consumer engagement has become increasingly challenging to secure, and social media algorithms have shifted to prioritize authentic interactions over mere content reach.<sup>4</sup> Consumers now spend nearly 141 minutes daily on social media, using an average of seven different platforms each month.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, companies can no longer rely solely on a single-channel approach – customized presence across multiple networks has become essential for maximizing consumer reach and activation. At the same time, audiences, particularly younger generations, have grown intolerant of traditional intrusive advertisements. Over 52% of Americans currently use an ad-blocker, significantly up from 34% in 2022, while 99% of Generation Z consumers skip video ads at the

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<sup>4</sup> Sprout Social. "29 Influencer Marketing Statistics for Your Social Strategy in 2025." <https://sproutsocial.com/insights/influencer-marketing-statistics/>

<sup>5</sup> Sprout Social. "Social Media Statistics You Need to Know in 2024." <https://sproutsocial.com/insights/social-media-statistics/>

earliest possible moment.<sup>6</sup> Such a consumer environment has compelled distributors to reevaluate traditional marketing strategies; unilateral, generalized advertising no longer yields satisfactory results, necessitating more innovative approaches. Social media remains a cornerstone of contemporary promotion, and the year 2024 has further solidified this trend. A global survey indicates that 91% of marketers utilize Facebook for advertising purposes, 86% use Instagram, and 66% rely on Twitter (X).<sup>7</sup> Each major social media platform – Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), TikTok, and YouTube – features distinct demographic attributes and unique content formats, requiring marketers to tailor messages carefully for optimal audience impact.

So in this global context, how can one create and market an auteur film, coming from a low-capacity European territory, as Romania is labeled by the EU when it comes to film production? The same as it's being done for the so called "commercial films", especially when it comes to targeting the right audience. Personalization targeting involves leveraging data to segment audiences and deliver content tailored to each group's specific interests and needs. For instance, marketing campaigns on platforms like Facebook or Instagram can showcase products based on a user's previous searches or views. Interactivity, on the other hand, encourages audience participation through methods such as Instagram Stories polls, live Q&A sessions, contests, or challenges that allow consumers to contribute their input.

Modern consumers are adept at identifying fabricated or exaggerated content and tend to place greater trust in genuine opinions over promoted advertisements. A study by Nielsen revealed that 92% of consumers worldwide trust recommendations from friends and family above all other forms of advertising. This preference for authenticity has led to a notable rise in influencer marketing and niche content creators, including in regions like Romania. Budgets allocated to influencer partnerships have increased substantially; as of February 2024, 26% of marketing agencies and brands globally have dedicated more than 40% of their marketing budgets to influencer

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<sup>6</sup> New Digital Age. "Gen Z Don't Want to Watch Your Ads."

<https://newdigitalage.co/advertising/gen-z-dont-want-to-watch-your-ads/>

<sup>7</sup> Hootsuite. "33 Social Media Statistics Marketers Need to Know in 2024." Hootsuite Blog 2025. <https://blog.hootsuite.com/social-media-statistics/>

campaigns.<sup>8</sup> The internet serves as a “democratic” form of mass media due to its participatory nature and its ability to provide rapid access to commercial, cultural, and entertainment information. Unlike traditional mass media, which primarily follows a one-way communication model, the internet facilitates multidirectional, personalized communication, enabling direct user involvement in content creation and distribution. But first, they have to hear about the film, be engaged to watch the film, then talk about the film.

In the film industry, the current revenue generation model relies on “distribution windows”, a staggered system where movies are initially released in theaters, followed by availability on streaming platforms, then cable or pay-per-view services, and eventually free-to-air television. While this traditional sequence is common, there are numerous exceptions, such as films produced exclusively for streaming platforms (straight-to-VOD), which follow a distinct strategic approach. Film exploitation strategies often vary by region. Territories with a strong historical performance in theatrical film consumption, like the United States or France, tend to adhere to the traditional model, as box office success enhances negotiating power with streaming platforms and television networks after the theatrical releases. The interest and licensing fees from these secondary channels often increase when a film performs well in theaters. Typically, the theatrical release window continues to generate the highest profits for commercial films or those with significant audience potential. Subsequently, films are distributed through secondary channels – ranging from digital on-demand services to television broadcasts. The physical sale of DVDs or Blu-Rays has become less common or it’s not even a practice anymore. These secondary channels usually yield lower profits based on single licensing practices rather than performance-based revenue. However, they offer extended exposure and a longer monetization period, as strong streaming performance can lead to additional television broadcasting opportunities within a next window of release.

Auteur films often begin their journey on the festival circuit, generating revenue through per-screening licenses. Despite differences in initial

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<sup>8</sup> Statista. “Share of Marketing Budgets Spent on Digital Worldwide.”  
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/268641/share-of-marketing-budgets-spent-on-digital-worldwide/>

distribution, the exploitation models for various film types share similarities. Distribution windows can be exclusive or non-exclusive, which significantly impacts distribution strategies and licensing costs. Theatrical releases typically involve exclusive screening rights, followed by exclusive secondary windows on streaming services or pay-TV channels, which offer higher licensing fees compared to non-subscription television channels. The principle of territoriality applies, meaning that various distribution models coexist throughout a film's lifecycle. So the whole strategy of making the films visible for the audience – besides the actual action of *finding* the right audience – is to exploit each distribution window by coupling it with marketing and communication tools before each “new” release.

Over the years, major film studios and cinema chains have continually clashed over the timing and approach of movie releases, particularly due to the rise of digital streaming platforms, which have introduced alternative models like straight-to-VOD strategies. Large studios argue that transitioning films rapidly onto streaming services – or bypassing theaters altogether – helps combat piracy and enhances the effectiveness of early-stage marketing investments. Yet, the ascension of streaming platforms, coupled with an expanding array of consumer choices, has fundamentally altered the cinema industry, a transformation amplified by the growing influence of social media.

Before the advent of social networks, motivations behind media consumption were primarily explained through the uses and gratifications theory. According to Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch,<sup>9</sup> people engage with media to satisfy various psychological and social needs. These needs aren't met in isolation but rather through interactions within broader social contexts. Thus, media consumption naturally involves social interactions that shape perceptions, behaviors, and interpersonal relationships. In the social media era, the phenomenon known as Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) has gained increasing attention. FOMO manifests as anxiety experienced by individuals who fear missing enjoyable social experiences others are having.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch. “Uses and Gratifications Research.” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 37, nr. 4 (1973): 509-523.

<sup>10</sup> Hephzibah Cohen. “FoMo: Do You Have a Fear of Missing Out?” *The Telegraph*, 17 mai 2013. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/10061863/FoMo-Do-you-have-a-Fear-of-Missing-Out.html>



Primarily triggered by events and activities shared via social platforms, FOMO compels users – particularly younger demographics – to frequently check their accounts, even when this habit may negatively impact their well-being.

Beyens, Frison, and Eggermont noted that the urge to belong and the desire for social popularity significantly fuel the FOMO phenomenon, thus increasing social media use.<sup>11</sup> This insight is particularly valuable when studying moviegoer behavior because it underscores the effectiveness of social media-based marketing campaigns. Cinema audiences are deeply embedded in digital cycles of social validation, enabling film marketers to strategically exploit this tendency. Individuals derive meaningful satisfaction when sharing collective experiences – whether it's a popular TV show, a trending meme, or a newly released film. Such collective experiences, disseminated across platforms like Facebook and Twitter, enable users to validate their movie preferences and feel part of a shared online community. Moreover, widespread acceptance of constant connectivity and deep technological integration into daily life, emphasizes the pivotal role social media now plays in influencing audience emotions, cultural preferences, and consumption patterns.

Among social platforms, TikTok stands out as particularly influential in engaging young audiences due to its dynamic, brief, and easily shareable content format. The current content paradigm heavily depends on active user participation, as viral successes now stem from both targeted promotional investments and the collective creativity of user communities. TikTok and similar platforms allow film producers and distributors to interact directly with their target audience ahead of release dates, fostering anticipation and generating early excitement for upcoming films.<sup>12</sup> The highly interactive nature of this platform fundamentally shifts the traditional relationship between producers and viewers, enabling users to actively contribute to promotional narratives.

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<sup>11</sup> Ine Beyens, Elien Frison, and Steven Eggermont. "'I Don't Want to Miss a Thing': Adolescents' Fear of Missing Out and Its Relationship to Social Needs, Facebook Use, and Facebook-Related Stress." *Computers in Human Behavior* 64 (2016): 1-8.

<sup>12</sup> Dingqi Xue. "A Study of Evolution of Film Marketing in the Digital Age." *SHS Web of Conferences* 193 (2024): 1-5.

While influencer-driven marketing and digital platforms like TikTok offer considerable advantages, they also bring specific challenges and potential risks. Despite their overall effectiveness, these approaches need a certain limitation of narrative control given to content creators, who may intentionally or unintentionally alter official messages.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Xue highlights that excessive exposure can lead to audience saturation, consequently reducing interest and diminishing campaign effectiveness. Therefore, digital marketers must maintain a clear, up-to-date understanding of audience engagement with promoted content, carefully balancing authenticity, creativity, and narrative oversight to maximize campaigns' viral potential on platforms such as TikTok. In conclusion, the rise of streaming platforms and social media has significantly reshaped cinema distribution strategies and audience interactions. Traditional models involving sequential theatrical releases have increasingly faced disruption as studios embrace alternative, digital-first distribution strategies. Social media, driven by concepts like FOMO, has created fertile ground for targeted promotional campaigns that capitalize on collective digital experiences. Yet, digital marketers must navigate this landscape with precision, balancing user-generated creativity and authenticity against the risks of overexposure and message dilution. Effective cinema marketing in the digital era demands nuanced strategies, adapting to continuously evolving consumer behaviors while leveraging social media's unique potential to cultivate audience engagement and anticipation.

Launching a film theatrically involves complex marketing strategies that must be carefully tailored to a relatively short window of audience attention. To maximize impact, major studios typically initiate promotional activities well before filming commences, adjusting tactics continuously based on evolving market dynamics and public response. Social media platforms have become indispensable to film marketing due to their unique benefits compared to traditional media. These advantages include real-time interactions with audiences, the simultaneous sharing of multimedia content such as text,

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<sup>13</sup> Renira Gambarato Rampazzo, and Geane Carvalho Alzamora. "Evidence from the Official Spider-Man Movie TikTok Account." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 30, nr. 1 (2024): 1-14.

images, and videos, and the ability to receive instant feedback. Such interactive engagement allows users to influence others through reviews and personal recommendations, significantly enhancing promotional effectiveness.

European cinema is now implementing similar strategies, encouraged by the Creative Europe MEDIA Sub-program,<sup>14</sup> which promotes innovative techniques – including intensive social media campaigns – to attract younger, more diverse audiences. This strategic shift reflects ongoing challenges faced by European cinema, such as fierce competition from Hollywood productions, limited budgets, linguistic barriers, and the necessity to articulate and disseminate a coherent cultural identity. Most European governmental film funding bodies now require producers, right from the application phase, to demonstrate clear strategies for production, distribution, and marketing. This mandatory practice has compelled many producers to rethink how they position auteur films, as our practice as auteur film producers shows us a disconnection between these films and their target audiences.

For instance, the Creative Europe MEDIA Sub-program initiative demands comprehensive marketing strategies within funding applications, clearly defining primary and secondary audience segments, detailing methods for engaging “digital” audiences, specifying digital outreach tools, outlining distribution channels, and describing how European values will be communicated transnationally. Similarly, Eurimages, the Council of Europe’s<sup>15</sup> cultural fund supporting co-productions among its member states, mandates detailed plans for production, distribution, and marketing. It further requires filmmakers to highlight how their projects reflect European principles, such as diversity, anti-discrimination measures, and sustainability practices. Social media’s usage in European cinema can significantly enhance a shared European identity, helping to overcome obstacles posed by rising nationalism and Euroscepticism. Initiatives by principal European funds like Creative Europe and Eurimages advocate for a unified European cultural identity while recognizing and preserving distinct national traditions and social contexts. Film festivals and other industry stakeholders actively explore new

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<sup>14</sup> European Commission. “Culture and Creativity.” <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/>

<sup>15</sup> Council of Europe. “Eurimages.” <https://www.coe.int/en/web/eurimages>

approaches to promote universal values, utilizing innovative digital strategies to reach transnational audiences effectively. Therefore, communicating a shared European identity through social media has become both a challenging and crucial task, essential for strengthening Europe's global competitiveness in cinema.

Today, successful film campaigns rely not solely on significant financial resources but also on the creativity and strategic insights of marketing teams capable of developing original, engaging messages that can rapidly gain popularity across social media channels. Production companies, distribution companies, and marketing agencies collaborate closely to build anticipation and stimulate public interest surrounding film launches, often by actively involving viewers in the promotional process. Such participatory approaches have gained considerable importance in the current digital era, where personalized recommendations and vibrant online communities profoundly shape audience behavior. For independent films produced with smaller budgets to achieve commercial success, leveraging digital platforms efficiently is critical. By adopting robust strategies and adhering to innovative marketing principles from a project's early development stages, film producers and distributors can significantly improve a film's visibility and commercial potential. This strategy ensures that independent cinema remains relevant and competitive in an increasingly crowded market.

Historically, Romanian films did not perform well commercially and Romanian audiences start with the premise that most Romanian films are auteur films, "boring", "unreachable", "obscure", "too social" films. The Romanian New Wave (Noul Val Românesc), also referred to as the Romanian New Cinema (Noul Cinema Românesc), is a cinematic movement that emerged in Romania in the early 2000s, characterized predominantly by minimalist aesthetics, realism, and a focus on social and historical issues of post-communist Romanian society. Prominent filmmakers of this generation, including Cristi Puiu, Cristian Mungiu, Cătălin Mitulescu, Radu Muntean, and Corneliu Porumboiu, achieved significant international recognition between 2000 and 2015, winning prestigious awards at renowned festivals. Films such as *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, and *12:08 East of Bucharest* quickly garnered critical acclaim abroad, leading publications like *Positif* to identify

this as a “New Wave.” However, the reception of these films domestically differed substantially from their international success. Romanian audiences exhibited a persistent reticence towards “festival films,” perceiving them as inaccessible, overly complex, and disconnected from entertainment value, despite their notable artistic achievements.

As part of a wider reasearch that I conducted, I discussed with several national experts in the marketing and communication field. One of them being Anca Macoviciuc, a cultural communication expert with a wide experience, more recent being the promotion of the festival acclaimed and commercially successful Romanian film *The New Year That Never Came* directed by Bogdan Mureșanu. Macoviciuc notes: “In the last 10, 15, 20 years, in Romania, the number of spectators watching Romanian films – part of the first wave, second wave, and subsequent wave of Romanian cinema – has decreased alongside the number of international awards these films have received.”<sup>16</sup> So paradoxically, international recognition fostered an expectation of success domestically, yet failed to convert into actual viewership.

Marketing and communication expert Cătălin Anchidin – the communication guru of very successful films like *Child's Pose* by Călin Peter Netzer, *Aferim!* By Radu Jude, *Sieranevada*, by Cristi Puiu – describes this paradox further, emphasizing that festival selections and international accolades became a form of cultural expectation, thus diminishing the impact it has on audiences: “The thing is, we used to think that if a film was selected at some festival, it was, wow, something incredible. But once you stepped outside this bubble, there was this reaction – which still persists in public perception – that festival films are heavy, unwatchable, you know. And it also became somewhat expected that every Romanian film had to go to a festival. So basically, everything I’d done up to that point had turned into a kind of curse. Because if you had a Romanian film that didn’t get selected for a festival or didn’t win an award, it was automatically considered bad. Yet if it did get into a festival, it was still seen as inaccessible and indigestible for

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<sup>16</sup> Anca Macoviciuc: “În ultimii 10, 15, 20 de ani, în România, numărul spectatorilor care au văzut filme românești – parte din primul val, al doilea val și următorul val al cinematografiei românești – a scăzut odată cu numărul de premii pe care acestea le-au obținut în străinătate.”

audiences. This perception existed back then, and honestly, I don't think it has changed much, if you ask me."<sup>17</sup>

Cristi Puiu is frequently cited as initiating this cinematic trend, beginning with *Stuff and Dough* (2001), acclaimed for its realism and naturalistic acting, although domestically it had minimal audience reach (1,919 viewers).<sup>18</sup> His later film, *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (2005), widely recognized internationally and recipient of the Un Certain Regard prize at Cannes, had comparatively strong domestic box-office performance (25,000 spectators),<sup>19</sup> aided by strategic marketing focused on its Cannes success. His subsequent film, *Aurora* (2010), however, exemplified the disconnect, reaching only niche audiences domestically despite international acclaim. Cristian Mungiu's films reinforced the global presence of the Romanian New Wave. His Palme d'Or-winning film *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007) attained unprecedented international exposure, grossing over \$10 million worldwide and drawing significant Romanian audiences (70,900 spectators) due to strategic promotional campaigns highlighting its international prestige.<sup>20</sup> His later films, including *Beyond the Hills* (2012) and *Graduation* (2016), sustained critical acclaim, though audience engagement varied domestically, influenced heavily by controversial themes or cinematic styles deemed demanding by mainstream viewers.

Other prominent filmmakers such as Cătălin Mitulescu and Corneliu Porumboiu further diversified the New Wave, integrating poetic realism and absurdist humor respectively. Mitulescu's films like *The Way I Spent the End*

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<sup>17</sup> Cătălin Anchin: "Povestea este că nouă ni se părea că dacă un film merge la un festival, este mamă, ceva *wow*. Dar când ieșea în afara acestei bule, era această reacție, care în continuare se păstrează la nivel de percepție a publicului, că filmele de festival sunt filme grele, de neconsumat, mă rog. Și era cumva și un dat, că părea că orice film românesc trebuie să meargă la un festival. Și cumva tot ce făcusem eu până atunci devenise, practic, un blestem. Pentru că dacă aveai un film românesc care nu mergea la un festival și nu lua un premiu, era, implicit, un film prost. Dar dacă mergea la festival, era oricum un film de neconsumat, de nedigerat pentru public. Această percepție exista în momentul respectiv și nu cred că s-a schimbat foarte mult, dacă mă întrebi pe mine."

<sup>18</sup> Cinemagia. "*Marfa și banii* (2001)." <https://www.cinemagia.ro/filme/marfa-si-banii-10/>

<sup>19</sup> Cinemagia. "*Moartea domnului Lăzărescu* (2005)." <https://www.cinemagia.ro/filme/moartea-domnului-lazarescu-11273/>

<sup>20</sup> Cinemagia. "*4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile* (2007)." <https://www.cinemagia.ro/filme/4-luni-3-saptamani-si-2-zile-18011/>

*of the World* (2006) received international accolades but modest local reception. Porumboiu's satirical approach to historical and social themes, exemplified by *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006) and *Police, Adjective* (2009), solidified his international profile, yet his domestic box-office numbers remained modest. Ultimately, despite international success, the Romanian New Wave faced persistent challenges domestically, including limited cinema infrastructure and public skepticism towards art cinema. Nonetheless, these filmmakers established a significant international reputation, transforming Romanian cinema into a recognized global phenomenon characterized by strong authorship, realism, and social critique, even as it struggled to reconcile international prestige with domestic popularity. While films of this movement brought significant international prestige to Romania through critical acclaim and awards at festivals like Cannes and Berlin, domestically they were met with limited enthusiasm and even skepticism. As observed by *The Guardian* in 2013, despite substantial critical acclaim abroad, Romanian films consistently performed poorly in terms of domestic box-office revenues, capturing only a marginal share (around 2.5% in 2010) of the national market. This lack of support from local viewers raised concerns about the sustainability of this cinematic movement, encapsulated succinctly by *The Guardian's* headline: "Romania's new wave could dry up if it doesn't get home support."<sup>21</sup>

This paradoxical situation created tension within the film community: internationally celebrated filmmakers felt frustrated at their inability to engage local audiences. While international recognition through awards and prestigious festival appearances increased Romania's cultural visibility globally and attracted funding from European partners, domestically these successes did not translate into public interest or attendance. A split in Romanian cinema soon became evident: films that succeeded commercially in Romania rarely gained international acclaim, while festival hits were largely ignored locally. Commercial films like *Minte-mă frumos* (2012) and *Selfie* (2014) found domestic audiences, whereas award-winning New Wave films struggled to achieve even moderate local attendance. This raised critical questions about the future of Romanian

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<sup>21</sup> Phil Hoad. "Romania's New Wave is riding high – but for how long?" *The Guardian*, March 12 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2013/mar/12/romanian-new-wave-after-hollywood>

cinema and whether the industry could sustain these two divergent paths. The debate then broadened to whether Romania could even claim a genuine “film industry,” given its relatively low production output compared to other European countries such as France or Germany. From 2007 to 2016, Romania produced fewer than 400 films – far fewer per capita than its European counterparts.<sup>22</sup> This statistic highlighted a serious shortfall in creative and commercial diversification essential for a fully functioning film industry.

Another significant shift emerged with the rise of influencer-driven commercial films that targeted mainstream audiences, successfully exploiting social media and digital marketing. Films led by influencers such as *Teambuilding* saw unprecedented box office success domestically, reflecting public appetite for entertainment films, though their artistic quality often remained questionable. Producers and industry insiders acknowledged the market’s need for commercial cinema but expressed concerns regarding quality and oversaturation. Producer Anamaria Antoci, well-known for producing films like *Illegitimate* by Adrian Sitaru, *Fixeur* by Adrian Sitaru, *Men of deeds* by Paul Negoescu – mentioned in our discussion: “It’s good that this trend emerged. I think it was necessary after many years – perhaps twenty years – in which arthouse films earned a very significant place in global cinema and revitalized the Romanian film industry. However, I believe there wasn’t enough attention given to audience perceptions or preferences. As producers and filmmakers, we should also try to offer audiences something different. The initial success of a small number of films, like *Two lottery tickets*, was simply due to their novelty, and they naturally resonated with viewers. I didn’t expect this phenomenon [*films made by influencers*] to expand so rapidly, with so many films being produced in such a short span of time. Unfortunately, if you start releasing two films a week, it’s not impossible for audiences to struggle to keep up. To me, the quality of these films remains questionable, and I believe it’s time to move forward by paying more attention to storytelling, execution, and cinematic details overall.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Julio Talavera. *Film Production in Europe: Production Volume, Co-production, and Worldwide Circulation*. Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory, Council of Europe, 2017. <https://rm.coe.int/filmproductionineurope-2017-j-talavera-pdf/1680788952>

<sup>23</sup> Anamaria Antoci: “E bine că a apărut acest curent. Cred că era nevoie după mulți ani. După 20 de ani, poate în care filmul de autor și-a câștigat un loc foarte important în cinematografia mondială. Și a restabilit și industria de film din România. Cred că nu prea s-a ținut cont de



Anchidin offers a different perspective, suggesting that the trend of influencer-driven films is already declining. His conclusion draws on the previous experience with arthouse films – once the public repeatedly encounters the same type of discourse and positioning, attention inevitably shifts towards what the market currently lacks, namely the *middlebrow films*: “It seems to me that right now we’re squeezing the sponge until the very last drop – squeezing it until there’s nothing left. That’s exactly what will happen with commercial films, because if we look at what’s currently happening in cinemas with the latest releases, despite having all the right ingredients – top influencers, a storyline, whatever you want – they barely manage to surpass 100,000 viewers. If we compare this with *Teambuilding* or *Miami Bici*, films that attracted more than half a million or even over a million viewers, it becomes clear that the appetite just isn’t there anymore.”<sup>24</sup>

Currently, discussions within the Romanian film community revolve around the need to bridge the gap between purely artistic festival films (*highbrow*) and commercial influencer-driven movies (*lowbrow*), by developing so-called *middlebrow films*. These films balance artistic integrity with accessibility and broader audience appeal. Examples cited include *Men of deeds*, *Two lottery tickets* and *Libertate*. The term *middlebrow*, from which *middlebrow films* originates, was popularized in the cultural and intellectual context of the

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percepția publicului, de ce își dorește publicul. Și noi ca producători și realizatori de filme să încercăm să le aducem în meniu și altceva. Succesul acelor foarte puține filme inițiale, de genul *Două lozuri* – pur și simplu erau altceva și automat au funcționat. Nu mă așteptam, poate, să ia așa amploare în sensul în care să se producă atât de multe filme într-un timp foarte scurt. Dacă începi să le servești două pe săptămână, din păcate nu e imposibil ca publicul să nu poată să țină pasul. Calitatea lor rămâne pentru mine chestionabilă. Și cred că ar fi momentul să facă un pas înainte către mai multă atenție la poveste, la realizare, la detalii ce țin de cinematografie, în general.”

<sup>24</sup> Cătălin Anchidin: “Mi se pare că în momentul de față, stoarcem buretelele până la ultima picătură. Stoarcem până nu mai rămâne nimic. Cam asta se va întâmpla și cu filmele comerciale, pentru că dacă ne uităm acum la ce se întâmplă în cinematografe cu ultimele lansate, care au toate rețetele date, influenceri de top, poveste, ce vrei tu, abia reușesc să depășească 100.000 de spectatori. Dacă ne uităm la *Teambuilding*, la *Miami Bici*, filme care au trecut de milioane sau de jumătate de milioane, constăți că apetitul nu mai e acolo.”

United States during the 1920s, although its definitive usage was established by Russell Lynes.<sup>25</sup> In his article “*Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow*,” published in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1949, Lynes introduced a detailed classification of cultural tastes: highbrow (consumption of sophisticated visual art, avant-garde literature, and experimental, elitist cinema, generally rejecting popular culture as superficial), lowbrow (the opposite of highbrow, characterized by appreciation for popular culture, accessible entertainment, and rejection of cultural elitism), and middlebrow (defined by aspirations toward cultural understanding, yet expressed in a more popular and accessible manner, thus constituting a cultural product situated “in the middle”). Lynes subtly employs satire to criticize snobbishness and highlights the arbitrary nature of social constructs. These terms were later adopted into cinema discourse, especially middlebrow (films situated between art cinema, often considered highbrow, and commercial, mainstream films typically viewed as lowbrow). Ultimately, the future sustainability of Romanian cinema depends significantly on its ability to develop and support middlebrow films that can bridge the gap between artistic and commercial demands, thereby creating a balanced, culturally rich, and commercially viable national film industry.

A notable example is Paul Negoescu’s second feature who fits exactly this middle segment which reached audiences by building up on the power of its cast, organically reaching its audiences through a strong word-of-mouth, but also using smart marketing tools by making use of what was back then the “go to” platform – Facebook. *Două lozuri* (*Two lottery tickets*), directed by Paul Negoescu, is a Romanian comedy released in 2016, starring Dragoș Bucur, Dorian Boguță, and Alexandru Papadopol. The film humorously depicts the misadventures of three friends from a small provincial town who win the lottery but lose their winning ticket, embarking on a chaotic journey to recover it. Loosely inspired by I.L. Caragiale’s classic novella *Două loturi*, it presents a contemporary take rather than a direct adaptation, updating the original theme with modern comedic situations and characters. Produced

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<sup>25</sup> Russell Lynes. “Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow.” *The Wilson Quarterly* 1, nr. 1 (1976): 146-158.

independently with minimal budget and without support from Romanian Film Center, the film unexpectedly became a sensation within Romanian cinema, bridging the gap between commercial and art-house films. In this polarized landscape, *Two lottery tickets* emerged as an independent outsider that successfully combined commercial appeal with artistic merit. Created by the main actors through their own production company (Actoriedefilm.ro), following earlier collaborative films such as *Love Building* (2013), this production marked a turning point in Romanian cinema by reintroducing accessible yet artistically conscious comedy.

The year 2016, in particular, saw a rise in diverse genre films such as *Câini*, *Afacerea Est*, *Sieranevada*, and *#Selfie69*, reflecting a shift away from exclusively realist dramas. Premiering at the 2016 TIFF, *Two lottery tickets* cleverly capitalized on this growing appetite for accessible entertainment among local audiences. Its recognizable stars, previously associated with New Wave dramas, transitioned effectively into lighter roles, embodying middlebrow cinema – films designed to engage broad audiences while maintaining subtle artistic and cultural references. Thematically, the film humorously explores everyday failures, absurd luck, and naïve dreams of quick wealth. The three protagonists, Dinel, Sile, and Pompiliu, embody relatable, endearing failures caught in absurd situations triggered by losing their lottery ticket. Comedic scenarios mock small-town superstitions, conspiracy theories, and irrational optimism, delivering light-hearted commentary on societal attitudes towards effortless success. Critics praised the film's accessible humor and likable characters, although there were some predictable gags reminiscent of TV sketches. Nevertheless, this straightforward, feel-good comedy resonated strongly with audiences seeking relatable humor. Aesthetically, Negoescu intentionally departs from the bleak minimalism typical of Romanian New Wave films, instead favoring a vibrant, colorful visual style (cinematography by Ana Drăghici), highlighting provincial settings and the comic juxtaposition with urban chaos. Its simple yet effective cinematography and brisk editing enhanced accessibility, contributing significantly to audience engagement.

The film's innovative marketing strategy further amplified its success. Without extensive financing, the production team leveraged the personal popularity of its stars and direct community engagement through promotional tours and unconventional publicity stunts. Notably, they launched humorous initiatives such as "We'll give your money back if you don't laugh," which encouraged skeptical audiences to reconsider their aversion to Romanian cinema. Additionally, a widely popular promotional contest featured a restored vintage Dacia 1300 car as the main prize, directly tied to the film's narrative and cleverly blurring the line between marketing and entertainment. Interestingly, even attempts at negative publicity, notably online trolling campaigns targeting specific casting choices, were cleverly turned into promotional opportunities. These controversies sparked public curiosity and media attention, ultimately boosting ticket sales and transforming potential scandals into marketing triumphs. Commercially, *Two lottery tickets* exceeded expectations, becoming the highest-opening Romanian film in over two decades, drawing more than 27,000 viewers in its debut weekend and ultimately surpassing 100,000 spectators – a remarkable achievement for local cinema. Awarded the Audience Prize at the 2017 Gopo Awards, its success indicated both popular acceptance and critical recognition.<sup>26</sup>

Internationally, the film participated in festivals and achieved distribution in the United States, reflecting its broad appeal beyond Romania's borders. Its success prompted a sequel in 2023, *Another lottery ticket*, though it did not replicate the original's triumph. Nonetheless, the original film remains significant as a successful middlebrow cinema exemplar, bridging popular entertainment and artistic credibility in contemporary Romanian film culture.

*The New Year That Never Came* (2024), directed by Bogdan Mureșanu, is a significant Romanian film that successfully bridges the gap between festival prestige and public popularity. As Mureșanu's debut feature, the film expands upon his acclaimed short *The Christmas gift* (2018). Set during the chaotic final days of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime, it weaves the interconnected stories of six characters navigating the absurdities of life

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<sup>26</sup> Cinemagia. "Două lozuri (2016)." <https://www.cinemagia.ro/filme/doua-lozuri-1072073/>

under a collapsing dictatorship. Combining historical drama with satire, the film offers a humorous yet emotionally profound depiction of a pivotal moment in Romanian history.

Premiering internationally at the Venice Film Festival in the prestigious Orizzonti section, known for innovative cinematic expressions, the film earned significant recognition. It secured four major awards: the Orizzonti Prize for Best Film, the FIPRESCI Award for Best Debut, the Bisato d'Oro for Best Screenplay, and a Special Mention for cinematography (for Boróka Biró). Such acclaim placed the film prominently within the international festival circuit, eventually leading to screenings at over 35 international festivals and accumulating 19 awards. This culminated in a nomination at the 2024 European Film Awards, further elevating the film's international profile.

Unlike many Romanian films praised internationally but ignored domestically, *Anul Nou care n-a fost* resonated strongly with Romanian audiences. Distributed by Forum Film – a company traditionally associated with mainstream blockbusters – the film was strategically marketed to attract both arthouse audiences and mainstream moviegoers. It opened in Romania with impressive numbers, drawing over 20,000 spectators during its first weekend and eventually grossing more than 2.4 million lei,<sup>27</sup> becoming the most successful recent Romanian film on the topic of the 1989 Revolution, surpassing comparable films such as *Libertate* and *Metronom*. At the 2025 Gopo Awards, Romania's most prestigious film honors, the film received an impressive 13 nominations, highlighting its industry-wide recognition.

The film's domestic success was significantly boosted by an innovative marketing campaign that emphasized both its critical acclaim and its broad accessibility. Leveraging the film's historical relevance and satirical tone, the campaign targeted various age groups through tailored messaging. Promotional strategies included special screenings at prominent cultural events like Noaptea Alba a Filmului Romanesc, along with regionally targeted showings featuring direct interactions between filmmakers, actors, and the audience.

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<sup>27</sup> Cinemagia. "Anul Nou care n-a fost (2024)." <https://www.cinemagia.ro/filme/anul-nou-care-n-a-fost-3314975/>

Furthermore, partnerships with influencers, particularly in digital and gaming communities, were effectively employed to reach younger demographics unfamiliar with traditional Romanian festival films.

The ensemble cast, featuring prominent Romanian actors such as Adrian Văncică (famous for the popular TV series *Las Fierbinți*), Iulian Postelnicu, Nicoleta Hâncu, Mihai Călin, and seasoned performers Marian Râlea and Tora Vasilescu, significantly contributed to the film's appeal. This diverse and widely recognized cast attracted different audience segments, helping to bridge the gap between the arthouse film and mainstream entertainment. Despite its success, *Anul Nou care n-a fost* also encountered criticism, particularly around its satirical treatment of sensitive historical events, which some argued trivialized the seriousness of the 1989 Revolution. Nonetheless, its balanced approach – both accessible and thoughtful – illustrates the growing trend in Romanian cinema towards middlebrow films, which successfully combine artistic merit with popular appeal. In this sense, Mureșanu's debut is not only a landmark film in its own right but also signals a broader shift in the Romanian film industry, demonstrating that artistic films can find significant domestic audiences without sacrificing critical acclaim.

Romanian filmmakers are gradually acknowledging the critical role middlebrow films play in establishing a sustainable and diverse cinematic industry. An industry, after all, is more than merely the sum of its procedural operations, stakeholders, institutions, and professional actions – it is fundamentally defined by its ability to reflect diversity, creativity, and an active connection to its audience. For many years, Romanian cinema has been polarized between internationally acclaimed auteur films, often perceived locally as inaccessible, and purely commercial productions with limited artistic ambitions. This polarization has hindered the development of a fully functional industry capable of both artistic expression and commercial viability. The rise of middlebrow films, which blend thoughtful narratives with accessible storytelling, marks a crucial step towards bridging this divide and achieving long-term industry sustainability.

In an era dominated by intense digital transformation, heavily influenced by social media dynamics and the overwhelming volume of serialized content provided by streaming platforms, filmmakers face unprecedented challenges.

Audience consumption patterns have evolved significantly, with attention spans shortened and viewer expectations raised by personalized, algorithm-driven digital experiences. Hollywood, through expansive franchises and cinematic universes and multiverses, has further set a high bar by successfully combining artistic branding with massive commercial appeal, reshaping audience engagement standards worldwide. For Romanian cinema to remain competitive and culturally relevant, it must strategically adapt to these evolving dynamics without compromising its core values and artistic identity.

Consequently, Romanian filmmakers must carefully reconsider their approach towards development, production, and marketing strategies to better navigate this complex digital landscape. Personalized digital marketing campaigns, strategic leveraging of social media platforms, and understanding nuanced audience segmentation have become essential tools. Authenticity, originality, and targeted audience engagement should underpin every aspect of film creation – from conceptual development to promotional campaigns – ensuring visibility amid a crowded media environment. Maintaining authorship and cultural specificity remains equally vital, allowing Romanian cinema to assert its identity distinctively amidst globalized digital consumption. Ultimately, the deliberate cultivation of middlebrow films provides Romanian filmmakers with the best opportunity to build a robust and dynamic national industry. This pathway offers not only economic resilience and cultural relevance but also fosters greater diversity in content and form. Embracing this middle ground encourages filmmakers to preserve their unique narrative voices while simultaneously reaching and resonating deeply with their audiences.

One of my all time favourite quotes comes from film critic A.O. Scott who was writing about *Avengers: Infinity War* after its release. Scott was suggesting in his article from 2018 – “It’s Marvel’s Universe. We just live in it” – that Marvel’s superhero-universe penetrated so well our “universe” since it generated a complete madness for the spectator to even imagine a life without experiencing what Marvel was offering. This was coming one year earlier of Marvel releasing the last film of the “Infinity Saga” which lasted more than 10 years and spectators were going mad because of the uncertainty of not knowing what will happen next. Scott concluded the article by saying:

"This universe is coming to an end. And then where will we be?"<sup>28</sup> I believe it encompassed the exact state of that pre-pandemic world, and it inspires me to ask the same question about the current Romanian industry: our cinema is very well established as an auteur cinema, but after this big infusion of commercial films which came as a reaction to the auter films – "where will we be?"

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<sup>28</sup> A. O. Scott. "Avengers: Infinity War: It's Marvel's Universe, We Just Live in It." *WRAL.com* (from *The New York Times*), April 26, 2018. <https://www.wral.com/-avengers-infinity-war-it-s-marvel-s-universe-we-just-live-in-it-/17508746/>



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