

Documentary Films with Ecclesiastical Themes in the Works of Pavel Constantinescu Ben-Iosef from the “Alexandru Sahia” Studio

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Abstract: Pavel Constantinescu Ben-Iosef (1922-1997), a film director of Jewish origin, lived a life as captivating as his films. In his youth, he was an activist in the Zionist organization “Dror Poalei Țion”. Later on, embracing communist beliefs and dreaming of justice, happiness, equality and human dignity, he volunteered for the Soviet army, eventually becoming an officer. Upon returning to Romania, he held the position of commander at the Bumbăști-Livezeni National Construction Site and he continued his studies in film directing at V.G.I.K. in Moscow, Soviet Union. He had the privilege to direct films even in distant countries, including America in the 1970s, and served as a war correspondent in the Vietnam War. He also held numerous significant positions in the Romanian administration.

With such origins, beliefs and social position, the following question arises: why did Pavel Constantinescu become one of the few directors from the Sahia Studio who explored ecclesiastical themes, particularly at a time when films on religious subjects were generally viewed with skepticism by the authorities? (even though his films focused solely on the artistic value of churches, rather than their spirituality or religious purpose).

In our article, we aim to investigate three essential questions related to the proposed theme. Firstly, how was he able to produce so many films centered around church art during the period of 1964-1968? Secondly, what was the director’s personal motivation behind creating these films? Lastly, we will delve into the factors contributing to the high aesthetic quality of his works and their significance within the production of the “Alexandru Sahia” Studio.

Keywords: Pavel Constantinescu, Sahia, documentary films, V.G.I.K. Moscow.

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Rezumat: Pavel Constantinescu Ben-Iosef (1922-1997), regizor de origine evreiască, a trăit o viață la fel de captivantă ca filmele sale. În tinerețe a fost activist al organizației sioniste „Dror Poalei Tion”; ulterior, adoptând convingeri comuniste și visând la dreptate, fericire, egalitate și demnitate umană, s-a înrolat voluntar în armata sovietică, ajungând ofițer. După întoarcerea în România, a deținut funcția de comandant al Șantierului Național Bumbesti-Livezeni și a continuat cu studii de regie de film în cadrul V.G.I.K. din Moscova, Uniunea Sovietică. A avut privilegiul de a regiza filme chiar și în țări îndepărtate, inclusiv în America anilor '70, a fost corespondent de război în conflictul din Vietnam, a ocupat numeroase și importante poziții în administrația românească.

Având astfel de origini, convingeri și poziție socială, devine pertinentă întrebarea următoare: de ce tocmai el, într-o perioadă în care filmele cu tematică bisericească erau în general privite cu reticență de către autorități, s-a numărat printre pușinii regizori de la Studioul Sahia care au explorat aceste teme? (chiar dacă filmele sale se concentrau doar asupra valorii artistice a bisericilor, nu și asupra spiritualității sau destinației religioase a acestora).

În cadrul articolului de față ne propunem să investigăm trei întrebări esențiale pentru tema propusă: în primul rând, cum a reușit să producă atât de multe filme axate pe arta bisericească în perioada 1964-1968; în al doilea rând, care a fost motivația personală a regizorului pentru realizarea acestor filme; și, în final, care au fost factorii care au contribuit la înalta calitate estetică a operelor sale și care a fost importanța lor în producția Studioului „Alexandru Sahia”.

Cuvinte cheie: Pavel Constantinescu, Sahia, filme documentare, V.G.I.K. Moscova.

Introduction

The Alexandru Sahia Documentary Film Studio was the only producer of documentary films in Romania during the communist period. However, few know that at Sahia, alongside other films, hundreds of documentaries were made about art from various fields – visual arts, architecture, music, theater, opera, ballet, etc. – which constitute the least politically involved part of the studio's production. However, due to the unfavorable times for the church, very few of the Sahia productions were dedicated to ecclesiastical art. Generally, films with church-related subjects were ignored, being very

few in number, and during stricter periods, it was not even permitted for icons or crosses to appear in films, even for a few moments. Nevertheless, even under these conditions, Sahia's production includes dozens of films with ecclesiastical themes, some of which could even be described as religious films.

What piqued our interest was the fact that between 1959 and 1971, at Sahia, one of the few directors who created films with ecclesiastical themes was Pavel Constantinescu (1922-1997). Although his films focused almost exclusively on the artistic value of churches, this endeavor seemed surprising given that the known details about him appeared to contradict such an interest.

We knew that Pavel Constantinescu was Jewish, a convinced communist who voluntarily enlisted in the Red Army and fought against the Germans for six years. After demobilization, he returned to the country and obtained the highest positions in various institutions, being among the few filmmakers who filmed in all corners of the world. From the interviews conducted with his former wife, Marion Ciobanu¹ – who was not only his life partner but also a college classmate and collaborator at the Sahia studio, where she served as an editor² – we learned that Pavel was not raised in a religious environment and did not practice any religion later on. We wondered what prompted him to create even more films about ecclesiastical art when this did not bring him any political, social, or material benefits. Why did a communist Jew make films about Orthodox monasteries when not even the Romanians rushed to make them? What were the factors that contributed to their realization, and what explains the artistic excellence of these films?

In the following sections, we will attempt to find answers to these questions. However, before addressing the main subject, it is necessary to mention that the most representative films made at Sahia, which can be classified as religious, are undoubtedly the documentaries by Slavomir Popovici; and if we had to choose the most remarkable documentaries from Pavel Constantinescu's filmography, we would likely select the series of films about Brâncuși rather than those with ecclesiastical themes. Why, then, did we choose to discuss these films? We are intrigued by the political context in which they were filmed and the apparent discrepancy between the director's

¹ Marion Ciobanu, interview by the author, May 18, 2023, author's personal archive.

² Pavel Constantinescu, *Fapt divers* (1963).

biography and his documentaries. By researching the factors that motivated the making of these films, we will shed light on lesser-known aspects of how documentaries about churches were produced at the Alexandru Sahia studio.

We will not analyze the films but will investigate the influence of the political and cultural context on them. We will present different stages of the author's life, highlighting aspects relevant to our theme, with particular emphasis on his professional and ideological formation period at V.G.I.K. We will take into account that both his films and those of the studio are the result of collective work, where the role of consultants was enormous in terms of the accuracy of information and artistic quality. Even though the director had decision-making authority in many respects, the final result was the creation of the entire collective.

Dror Poalei Țion, Red Army

Pavel Constantinescu (1922-1997), son of Kalman and Debora, was born on April 10, 1922, in Odobesti, and later moved with his family to Focșani. Coming from a poor Jewish family, he and his family members faced significant persecution, and at the beginning of World War II, they were in imminent danger of being deported. His father passed away when Pavel was very young, and his brother fled to France, leaving the rest of the family in the country.³ In Focșani, Pavel first joined the Zionist organization "Dror Poalei Țion,"⁴ which focused on preparing and emigrating Jews to Palestine with the aim of establishing a Jewish state there. The youth in this organization sought better opportunities and refuge from discrimination and anti-Semitism, while also holding patriotic goals from the perspective of Jewish national identity. Although Pavel was active in the organization, he did not emigrate to Palestine.

Like most Jews at that time, Pavel sought a force, a support that would fight against Nazism. Since the communist parties were among the most vocal and organized in the struggle against Nazism, at just 17 years old, he decided to wholeheartedly join the liberating army and enlisted in the Red Army.

³ Marion Ciobanu, interview by the author, May 18, 2023, author's personal archive.

⁴ Iosif Petran, 'Puternic, nesupus,' in Pavel Constantinescu Ben-Iosef, *Un cineast în față cu lumea contemporană*, (limited edition, not for sale, Rodica Brunhis, 1998), p. 7.

He was tall, strong, and powerful; he felt the need to fight. It was a matter of life and death.

He was filled with romantic ideas about what communism meant: equality among people, freedom, fraternity; and coming from a very poor family, he fought for the rights of the poor and the rights to life for the Jews. Through Galați, in 1940, he crossed the Prut River, left Chișinău, crossed the Nistru River, and joined the Red Army as a simple volunteer soldier. He left without documents to avoid rejection, lying about being 18 years old.⁵ He participated in some of the bloodiest battles on the front, including the fights at Stalingrad.⁶

From his journal, we know that in the winter of 1942, during a period when the Germans were attacking even more intensely on all fronts, and desertions, especially those of Ukrainians, were rampant, he lost contact with the rest of his unit one night.⁷ It was only at dawn that he found a nearby military unit in Morozovskaia. He reported the situation and requested help, but for several days, he was grouped with deserters and was nearly executed. After many interrogations, he was eventually sent back to his unit, likely due to a journal he had found on him. After a day of recovery, he returned to the front. He fought until the end of the war, achieving the rank of officer.⁸

High-ranking positions in various institutions

Returning to the country after demobilization, probably because he served in the Soviet Army, he benefited from certain privileges and political advantages, especially in the early years of the communist regime, when proximity to the U.S.S.R. symbolized loyalty to the new regime. Starting in the 1950s, when purges and various internal struggles within the Communist Party began in Romania, the favorable position of many Jews with connections to the Soviet Union changed. Nevertheless, those with a history of military or political collaboration with the Soviets were often spared the harshest reprisals.

⁵ Marion Ciobanu, interview by the author, May 18, 2023, author's personal archive.

⁶ Petran, 'Puternic, nesupus,' in Pavel Constantinescu Ben-Iosef, *Un cineast în față cu lumea contemporană*, (limited edition, not for sale, Rodica Brunhis, 1998), p. 8.

⁷ Constantinescu Ben-Iosef, *Un cineast în față cu lumea contemporană*, 65-66.

⁸ Petran, p. 9.

Pavel Constantinescu was appointed commander of the national youth construction site at Bumbești-Livezeni, where he proved to be very effective in managing the site. After Bumbești-Livezeni, lacking any qualifications, he was appointed deputy Minister of Construction, and from construction, he was transferred to cinema.⁹ In 1949, with the nationalization of the film industry, the Committee for Cinematography was established, and Pavel Constantinescu was appointed vice president, working closely with the first president, Nicolae Bellu. Starting in 1952, any new film production had to receive approval from the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, which transformed this institution into the main censorship body for films in Romania. In this context, Pavel Constantinescu continued to play a prominent role, ensuring that films adhered to the ideological standards imposed by the party. At the end of 1952, the Committee for Cinematography was integrated into the Ministry of Culture and renamed the General Directorate of Cinematography, and Pavel Constantinescu remained a key player in the leadership of this institution, with Nicolae Bellu as his superior and collaborating with Mihai Novicov, another cultural activist with connections in the U.S.S.R.¹⁰ Pavel Constantinescu was the general director of the Buftea Studio from 1954 to 1955.

In the immediate post-war period and throughout the 1950s, Pavel, like many others who held important positions in the state apparatus and within the party, did not have advanced formal education. Most of these individuals came from working-class or peasant backgrounds and reached leadership positions due to their loyalty to the party and their involvement in the class struggle. For instance, on February 28, 1952, during a conference with security and militia commanders, the Minister of the Interior, Teohari Georgescu, stated that loyalty and devotion to the regime were more important than professional knowledge. He emphasized that just as workers and peasants in Russia built the Soviet state without political or professional training, Romanian cadres would acquire this knowledge over time, and their initial lack of education was not an obstacle for those who supported the regime.¹¹ Later, as the communist regime solidified, there was a growing need for these

⁹ Marion Ciobanu, interview by the author, May 18, 2023, author's personal archive.

¹⁰ Bogdan Jitea, *Cinema în RSR. Conformism și disidență în industria românească de filme*, (Iași: Polirom, 2021), p. 15, p. 30.

¹¹ C.N.S.A.S., F. D. d. nr. 199, f. 87.

individuals to legitimize their positions through formal education, in accordance with the new bureaucratic requirements of the state. Thus, many party leaders and senior officials were “guided” or almost forced to attend university courses.¹²

V.G.I.K., Moscow, professional training

Thus, at the age of 35, Pavel was sent to university, where he chose cinematography.¹³ He had to take an entrance exam for film directing at the Sahia studio, where the jury consisted of Ion Bostan, Mircea Popescu, and Mirel Ilieșiu,¹⁴ who were then the leading figures in documentary filmmaking. Following this exam, he was sent to the U.S.S.R. Although a major event in 1958 was the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Romania, signaling a certain political distancing from Moscow, Romania continued to be closely linked to the Soviet Union in educational and ideological terms. Sending Romanian cadres to study in Moscow remained a common practice until the 1960s, even as Soviet influence over Romanian politics began to decline. Of the 46 Romanian students trained at V.G.I.K. known at the time of writing this article,¹⁵ 43 had started university before 1960.

During the period when Pavel was a student in Moscow (1957-1961), the Soviet Union experienced significant artistic ferment. Film critic S. Freilikh noted that only six feature films were made in 1951, while the number increased to over a hundred in 1957, indicating a revival of cinema after a period of stagnation.¹⁶

The XX Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (C.P.S.U.) and N. S. Khrushchev’s speeches had a profound impact on Soviet society, including on the students at V.G.I.K., who were facing various issues related to the quality of education and the cult of personality. They decided to send

¹² Viorel Patrichi, *Ochii și urechile poporului. Convorbiri cu generalul Nicolae Pleșiță*, (București: Ianus Inf, 2001), p. 153.

¹³ Marion Ciobanu, interview by the author, May 18, 2023, author’s personal archive.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Р.Г.А.Л.И. (R.G.A.L.I.), 2384; 2900; 2944; 3160.

¹⁶ С. Фрейлих, ‘Знамение времени,’ in *Вопросы киноискусства. Ежегодный историко-теоретический сборник* [Questions of Film Art. Annual Historical and Theoretical Collection], vol. 3 (Москва: 1959), 87.

a telegram to Khrushchev requesting an evaluation of the situation at V.G.I.K.¹⁷ The group that drafted the telegram was composed of students from the directing faculty, including R. and Yu. Grigorievich, Yu. Kavtaradze, T. Meliava, G. Poloku, and V. Shushkina.¹⁸

Additionally, the students published an article in *Komsomolskaia Pravda* titled “In Front of the Empty Screen,” in which they expressed their grievances.¹⁹ They emphasized that in order to fulfil the task imposed by the party and government to produce 120 feature films per year, there was a need for an increase in the number of specialists, especially since the film industry was also facing shortages of film stock. They required modern equipment and a laboratory for processing colour film. They lacked a cafeteria, and the V.G.I.K. building was not yet completed, although the decision to construct it had been made back in 1939. Generally, the students complained about the overcrowding of their schedules with theoretical courses and the unsatisfactory living conditions, as well as the lack of adequate financial support.

The students’ request to complete the institute’s building came at an opportune moment, as from July 28 to August 11, 1957, Moscow hosted one of the largest international youth events in the post-war period, the VI World Festival of Youth and Students. The organization of the festival took place in the context of the Cold War and was promoted by the Soviet Union as part of the efforts to present a positive image of the country and the communist regime to the international youth. The festival occurred during a period of relative openness known as the Khrushchev Thaw. This large-scale festival turned V.G.I.K. into a meeting place for filmmakers from Soviet republics and around the world; thus, the students’ request coincided with an important moment for international cinema. The telegram from the V.G.I.K. students to the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. and the article in *Komsomolskaia Pravda* acted as a catalyst, accelerating positive changes in the training of professional personnel for cinema. These events significantly contributed to improving study conditions and revitalizing the Soviet film industry.

¹⁷ О. Г. Герасимова, ‘Кузница кинокадров — ВГИК. 1950–1960-е годы’ [O.G. Gherasimova, ‘The Film Talent Factory — VGIK. The 1950s–1960s’], *Historical Journal* 4 (16) (2013): 441, (https://nbpublish.com/library_get_pdf.php?id=25227), accessed October 15, 2024.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Комсомольская организация ВГИК, ‘Перед пустым экраном’ [The Komsomol Organization of VGIK, ‘In Front of a Blank Screen’], *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, April 13, 1956.

From that year, V.G.I.K. also began publishing a widely circulated magazine, *The Path to the Screen*.²⁰

Shortly after the festival ended, student Pavel Constantinescu arrived at V.G.I.K. He was drawn to the field of documentary filmmaking due to the opening of a class led by the renowned director Ilya Petrovich Kopalin (1900-1976), an exceptional documentary filmmaker and educator of Jewish descent, considered one of the most important documentary directors in the Soviet Union during the 1930s and 1940s. He was awarded six Stalin Prizes and received prestigious titles such as Honoured Artist of the R.S.F.S.R. (1956) and People's Artist of the U.S.S.R. (1968); he was one of the first Soviet filmmakers to receive an Oscar awarded by the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. He had been a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union since 1940 (VKP, PCUS) and of the Union of Cinematographers of the USSR since 1957.

Kopalin produced numerous propaganda films that promoted socialist ideology in communist Romania, collaborating with Romanian filmmakers. He was also the teacher who guided Mircea Săucan in developing his graduation thesis.²¹ Pavel Constantinescu was admitted to this professor's class, engaging with the Sahia studio in 1960, and in 1961, he defended his graduation thesis in Moscow with the film *Cântecul Bârzavei* (*The Song of the Bârzava*).²²

For his students, Ilya Petrovich was important both as a person and as a teacher, dedicating himself to them with a rare level of attention. He was a gentle yet demanding individual, offering students a great deal of creative freedom.²³ He loved theatre²⁴ and knew how to inspire his students to create originally, not just to fulfil tasks but to do so creatively.²⁵ Most of his students completed their projects in collaboration with film studios, Pavel Constantinescu at the Sahia studio.

²⁰ В.Г.И.К., (V.G.I.K.), <https://vgik.info/publishers/path/>, accessed on 10.15.2024.

²¹ Р.Г.А.Л.И., R.G.A.L.I., 2900-2-951.

²² Constantinescu Ben-Iosef, *Un cineast în faţă cu lumea contemporană*, 64.

²³ Усков Валерий Иванович, 'Илья Петрович Копалин - режиссер, учитель, человек...' [Uskov Valeriy Ivanovich, 'Ilya Petrovich Kopalin - Director, Teacher, Man...'], September 26, 2000, (<https://www.film.ru/articles/ilya-petrovich-kopalin-rezhisser-uchitel-chelovek>), accessed on 10.15.2024.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Litvyakov Mikhail Sergeevich, Ibid.

Although cultural freedoms experienced a slight expansion after March 1953, the communist regime continued to exert strict control over filmmaking, aiming to promote propaganda and reinforce official ideologies. This duality created a complex environment in which students struggled to navigate between creative freedom and the demands imposed by the regime. Abandoning traditional themes and means was often perceived as hostile to the regime or even immoral. To obtain their diploma at V.G.I.K., students often found greater success by creating films on heroic-revolutionary themes rather than trying to persuade the committee to accept their innovative works, which were often drastically modified. Some graduation projects were harshly criticized for ideological inconsistency, but there are also many recorded instances where these works were defended by professors due to their professional qualities.

The K.G.B. documents suggest that students at V.G.I.K. were under close surveillance by the authorities, reflecting the climate of distrust and pressure that students faced during that period.²⁶ In some cases, students were expelled or even arrested, and those who defended them also faced severe reprisals and threats of exclusion.²⁷ Expulsion could mean the end of their careers forever,²⁸ or they could return and finish their studies with reduced attendance only after 5-6 years,²⁹ depending on the case. To understand the atmosphere in which Pavel spent his student years, we will recount an incident with dramatic consequences between students and authorities, which also involved a Romanian student from Bessarabia, Emil Lotianu.³⁰

On November 30, 1956, the institute held a meeting where communist students alerted the leadership that deviant ideological attitudes had manifested

²⁶ Фомин В., *Кино и власть. Советское кино: 1965–1985 годы. Документы, свидетельства, размышления* [Fomin Valeriy, *Cinema and Power: Soviet Cinema: 1965–1985. Documents, Testimonies, Reflections*] (Москва: 1996), p. 88.

²⁷ Р.Г.А.С.П.И., Ф.М.—1. Оп. 46. Д. 192. Л. 232. [R.G.A.S.P.I., F.M.—1. Op. 46. D. 192. f. 232].

²⁸ Валерий Васильевич Шорохов, Д. Смирнова, Р.Г.А.С.П.И. Ф.М.—1. Оп. 46. Д. 220. Л. 135. [Valeri Vasilievici Şorohov, D. Smirnova, R.G.A.S.P.I. F.M.—1. Op. 46. D. 220. f. 135].

²⁹ Trifonov, Ivanov, Natalia Vaysfeld, Vova Valutski, Р.Г.А.С.П.И. Ф.М. (R.G.A.S.P.I. F.M.), 1. Оп. 46. Д. 220. Л. 135.; О. Г. Герасимова, 'Кузница кинокадров — В.Г.И.К. 1950–1960-е годы' [O.G. Gherasimova, 'The Film Talent Factory — V.G.I.K. The 1950s–1960s'], *Historical Journal* no. 4 (16), 2013, (https://nbpublish.com/library_get_pdf.php?id=25227), accessed on 10.15.2024.

³⁰ Emil Loteanu (1936–2003), director and screenwriter, a representative figure of Moldovan cinema, known for both fictional films and documentaries.

themselves among the students. Krivtsov reported that a first-year scriptwriting student, Zlatoverov, was engaging in anti-Soviet discussions of a counter-revolutionary nature, using insulting expressions towards the leaders of the Chinese and Mongolian people, and rejecting the study of the works of V.I. Lenin.³¹ On December 15, 1956, the Minister of Culture of the U.S.S.R., N.A. Mikhailov, also reported to the C.C. of the C.P.S.U. that articles denying the necessity of party and state leadership in literature and art had appeared in the institute's press, praising examples of bourgeois democracy.³² Reports from the City Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union noted the inappropriate behavior of several students, including Zlatoverov (V.M?), who allegedly referred to the reaction in Hungary as "a breath of fresh air" and believed that the famine in the U.S.S.R. in 1933 was specifically orchestrated to extract gold. When asked by a professor why he was not taking notes on Lenin's works, he reportedly cheekily responded that "if they are fed cakes every day, they will get sick of it."³³

The students divided into two camps: some condemned Zlatoverov, while others discredited Krivtsov for his denunciation. After consulting with the leadership and professors, they decided to expel Zlatoverov from the institute, which was somewhat expected; however, what surprised the students was that on December 12, both Zlatoverov and his colleague Kafarov were arrested in the student dormitory.³⁴

The students at V.G.I.K. were profoundly shocked by the arrest of their colleagues, especially Kafarov, who had expressed his desire to volunteer in Egypt. During a break, approximately 300-350 students spontaneously gathered in the institute's auditorium, demanding explanations about the recent arrests and discussing the actions of the authorities. Voices such as

³¹ Российский государственный архив новейшей истории (РГАНИ), Ф. 4. Оп. 16. Д. 1098. Л. 5–51 // Цит. по: Студенческое брожение в СССР (конец 1956 г.) // Вопросы истории 1997, №1, с. 18. [Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI), Fund 4, Op. 16, File 1098, Pages 5-51 // Quote from: Student Agitation in the USSR (late 1956) // History Issues 1997, No. 1, p. 18.]

³² Р.Г.А.Н.И., Ф. 4. Оп. 16. Д. 1098. Л. 56–58 // Цит. по: Кинематограф оттепели (R.G.A.N.I., Fund 4, Opus 16, File 1098, Sheets 56–58 // Quoted in *The Cinema of Détente*, Moscow, 1998, pp. 212–213.).

³³ Р.Г.А.С.П.И. Ф.М–1. Оп. 46. Д. 192. Л. 234. [R.G.A.S.P.I., Fund M-1, Opus 46, File 192, F. 234.]

³⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 226.

V. Kurmanov, the Romanian E. Lotianu, and L. Golubkina criticized the brutality of the methods, which seemed reminiscent of those from the recent past. They believed that the authorities should have informed the students about the reasons for the arrests beforehand, and only if those reasons were convincing, should they have taken appropriate measures. Some of the students decided to support Zlatoverov and Kafarov and requested documents from the K.G.B. to better understand the situation. They even wanted to send a letter to high-ranking leaders like Khrushchev and Bulganin in defence of their colleagues. Mila Golubkina, the secretary of the Komsomol organization at the faculty, organized all opposition forces to ensure that the protest did not appear merely as a student rebellion. M. Golubkina, along with Iu. Perov, V. Lorentz, E. Lotianu, G. Bekarevici, T. Shevchenko, T. Meliava, and A. Gubin formed a group to gather signatures and draft the letter, in which they demanded a thorough investigation of the case and permission for students to attend the trial of Zlatoverov and Kafarov.³⁵

On December 14, the party bureau of the institute convened a meeting where officials discussed with the students, and at the end of the meeting, the students announced that, following the discussions, they had decided not to send the letter. We do not know the reason for their withdrawal, but we do know that the secretary of the Komsomol committee in Moscow, N. G. Korolkov, reported on the consequences of the incident:³⁶ even though the students ultimately did not send the letter, Iu. Perov, E. Lotianu, and V. Kurmanov received a severe reprimand, with a warning of expulsion.³⁷ We wonder if Pavel Constantinescu was aware of these incidents. We have no direct information in this regard, but since so many students were involved, it is unlikely that he was unaware.

There were cases where students' works were considered ideologically nonconforming. For instance, Vladimir Trifonov wrote a study about an abstract artist living in Leningrad, which was besieged by fascists. Natalia Rizaņeva described an important party activist who commits suicide due to the desire not to live blindly according to others' dictates. Other students presented characters deemed "moral ugliness, wretches, schizophrenics, or

³⁵ О. Г. Герасимова, 'Кузница кинокадров — ВГИК. 1950–1960-е годы' [O.G. Gherasimova, 'The Film Talent Factory — VGIK. The 1950s–1960s'], *Historical Journal*, no. 4 (16), 2013.

³⁶ Gherasimova, p. 449.

³⁷ Gherasimova, p. 449.

criminals.”³⁸ All of these were severely criticized by the party leadership; however, there are cases where some professors, like E. I. Gabrilovici and N. V. Krucicenikov, instead of criticizing these works, defended them, considering that they were good in terms of “craftsmanship and execution technique.”³⁹

The films of students from the countries of people’s democracy were evaluated with the same severity as those of Soviet students, with no allowances made for “ideologically inappropriate” cinematic works. For example, at the party bureau meeting on May 14, 1957, the situation of the Polish student from the directing faculty, Eji Ziarniak, was discussed. As his graduation project, he presented his documentary film *The Little Town* (Городок), a film that was essentially realistic but did not inspire optimism; it depicted the failures of the Polish economy and, more broadly, issues related to socialist ideology. The V.G.I.K. commission assessed the film as “hostile,” “an ideological defeat,” and “not only anti-Soviet but also anti-Polish.” However, some professors from the directing department, such as L. V. Kuleshov and B. G. Ivanov, considered Ziarniak a “very good, honest, and disciplined student.”⁴⁰ In conclusion, we can say that both artistic and documentary films at V.G.I.K. were heavily dependent on the political context and the needs of totalitarian propaganda, but there were certain freedoms and exceptions.

Despite all the difficulties faced by students in the 1950s and 1960s, V.G.I.K. was professionally recognized as the top film school in the world, attracting students from all corners of the globe. Many graduates later became the pride of the film industry in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Poland, Hungary, Germany, Romania; and undoubtedly, studying at V.G.I.K. had a significant impact on their artistic careers.

We have already discussed Pavel Constantinescu’s mentor, Ilya Petrovich Kopalin, but let’s see who the other professors were from whom Romanian students learned during that period. Besides Sergei Eisenstein, with whom they had fewer but significant meetings, all the other professors

³⁸ Gherasimova, p. 449.

³⁹ Gherasimova, p. 449.

⁴⁰ ЦАОПИМ, Ф. 2948. Оп. 1. Д. 18. Л. 97, 99. [Т.А.О.П.И.М., Fund 2948, Opus 1, File 18, Sheets 97, 99.]

we will mention served as mentors for the graduation projects of Romanian students.⁴¹ Many of these students, upon returning to their country, worked at the Sahia and Buftea studios.

Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948) was an innovative genius in montage, redefining how films convey emotions and ideas as a professor at V.G.I.K. from the 1930s until 1948. Micheil Chiaureli (1894–1974) dedicated his career to Stalinist propaganda, and after Stalin's death, his films were criticized for excessive propaganda. Sergei Konstantinovich Skvortsov (1904–1983) taught at V.G.I.K. from 1938 and was honored in 1944 for his contributions to Soviet cinema during the Patriotic War. Alexandr Galperin (1907–1995) revolutionized filming techniques as a director of photography, studying under Karl Freund. In 1945, he was assigned to Germany, where he launched the newsreel "Witness." Returning to Moscow in 1946, he taught at V.G.I.K. and published scientific and educational works. Boris Izrailevich Volchek (1905–1974) frequently collaborated with M. I. Romm and taught at the State Institute of Cinematography of the Soviet Union from 1943.

Yuri Evgenievich Genika (1893–1965) focused on producing scientific films at the Sovkino studio. Since 1934, he taught at V.G.I.K. and served as prorector from 1947 to 1949 and again from 1952 to 1957, mentoring young filmmakers such as Ali Hamraev, Iskra Babich, Pavel Liubimov, Valentin Kozachkov, Mark Tolmachev, and Natalia Velichko.⁴² Manevich Iosif Mikhailovich, an influential screenwriter and theorist, shaped generations of filmmakers as a professor at V.G.I.K., leading creative workshops. Renowned students such as Valeriy Priymeikov and Eduard Topol studied under his guidance, and he published important works on cinematography.⁴³ Lev Vladimirovich Kuleshov (1899–1970) is famous for the "Kuleshov Effect," a crucial contribution to the understanding of montage, demonstrating that an image can change its meaning based on context. He was also a co-founder of the first film school in the world, located in Moscow.⁴⁴ Evgeny Iosifovich

⁴¹ П.Г.А.Л.И (R.G.A.L.I.), 2384; 2900; 2944; 3160.

⁴² 'Biography,' Kino-teatr (<https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/screenwriter/sov/43300/bio/>), accessed on 10.15.2024.

⁴³ 'Biography,' Kino-teatr, (<https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/screenwriter/sov/29204/bio/>), accessed on 10.15.2024.

⁴⁴ Peter Rollberg, *Historical Dictionary of Russian and Soviet Cinema* (Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2009), pp. 379–383.

Gabrilovich (1899–1993) was an influential screenwriter, playwright, and writer who began teaching screenwriting at the Soviet Cinematography Institute in 1948. He led screenwriting workshops from 1960 to 1967 and again from 1974 to 1976.

Another giant of Soviet cinema was Sergei Apollinarieвич Gerasimov (1906–1985), a director, actor, and screenwriter. As a professor at V.G.I.K., he guided the careers of prominent filmmakers, including Andrei Tarkovsky, solidifying socialist realism as a dominant style in Soviet cinema. Although initially avant-garde, his directing was predominantly influenced by socialist realism. We cannot conclude without mentioning Grigory Vasilyevich Alexandrov (1903–1983), known for his collaborations with Eisenstein and his musical comedies. His films infused Soviet cinema with humor and optimism, bringing vibrant characters and accessible stories to the big screen.

Alongside the guidance of professors, peers also play a crucial role in the professional development of a student. Interactions, collaborations, and even competition among them can be stimulating. Pavel Constantinescu developed strong relationships with both his Romanian colleagues and those of other nationalities, having the privilege of being among the students from the same period as illustrious figures of cinema, such as: Andrei Tarkovsky (1955–1960), Sergei Parajanov (1954–1959), Gleb Panfilov (1960–1966), Marlen Khutsiev (1952–1958), Otar Iosseliani (1955–1961), and Andrei Konchalovsky (1958–1965). In his memoirs, Pavel nostalgically recalls these formative years. When he returned to Moscow in 1967, making a stop on his way home from Vietnam, he was eager to reunite with former classmates and professors; to revisit the classrooms and creative laboratories that, in his opinion, played an essential role in defining his career.⁴⁵ At the same time, he passionately admired the works of great directors of Soviet cinema – Vertov, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Alexandrov, Dovzhenko, and many others from the gallery of great talents. However, his fascination extended beyond cinema; music, ballet, opera, and classical Russian theatre were also rich sources of inspiration for him.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Constantinescu Ben-Iosef, *Un cineast în fața cu lumea contemporană*, p. 64.

⁴⁶ Constantinescu.

Films with ecclesiastical themes

Upon returning to his country, he filmed various documentaries, including a report that captures in real-time the heroism of a Romanian helicopter crew rescuing 22 Turkish sailors;⁴⁷ three war films in Vietnam,⁴⁸ where he risked his life again, filming in the intervals between American bombings that targeted not only military infrastructure but also civilian objectives, such as industrial areas and transport centres, causing significant civilian casualties and massive destruction. He also made films about ecclesiastical art and the Brâncuși cycle.

Pavel was not part of the so-called bourgeois-landlord elite; he had the appropriate background, and all his films about churches were made during a period of relative “thaw” between 1964 and 1968. However, films addressing religious themes or depicting churches were not encouraged. The representation of religion in cinema was extremely limited, with the state being the sole producer of films.

To highlight how rare films about churches were, it is useful to analyse the available figures. It is important to note that these data are approximate, as there is no complete and public list of all the films made at Sahia. We will rely on our own list, which was compiled based on the inventory from the National Film Archive (A.N.F.), information obtained from the Sahia Film studio, former filmmakers, and various publications.

Throughout the active period of the studio as a documentary producer, from 1950 to 2000, approximately 8,000 films were made at Sahia. Out of these 8,000, a total of 58 films were produced with themes related to religion, of which 48 can be classified in the category of art and culture – barely or not at all conforming to party interference – and 10 in the category of popular science, or various. Today, we might consider these last 10 more as anti-religious propaganda films. If we calculate the percentage, including these 10 films, we can say that approximately 0.7% of Sahia’s production relates to ecclesiastical art, religion, or religious beliefs, and this number includes those made after 1990.

⁴⁷ Constantinescu, *Fapt divers* (1963).

⁴⁸ Constantinescu, *Copilărie furată* (1967), *Hanoiul de la răsărit la apus* (1967) și *Între două bombardamente* (1968).

Between 1950 and 1990, 30 films were made in the category of art and culture, as well as 10 films in the categories of popular science and various, totalling 40 films. During the period when Pavel Constantinescu worked at Sahia, from 1959 to January 1971, only 12 films were produced, all categorized as art and culture. Of these 12 films, 5 were directed by Pavel Constantinescu.

Ion Bostan, one of the pioneers of art documentaries in Romania, filmed a movie in 1957 about the painting *The Massacre of the Innocents* by Pieter Bruegel, titled the same as the painting. He later created three documentaries on ecclesiastical art, focusing on religious painting and architecture: one in 1962, another in 1964, and the third in 1965. However, being aware that the period was not favourable for such subjects and wanting to avoid political implications,⁴⁹ Bostan retreated to the Danube Delta, where he made dozens of documentary films about nature. After the fall of the communist regime, he returned to ecclesiastical themes and directed eight films about church art in just three years, thus demonstrating his deep interest in this subject.

Another important director is Slavomir Popovici (1930-1983). As the son and grandson of an Orthodox priest, this Serbian director with extraordinary literary talent was perhaps the only one who made religious films in the true sense of the word, creating superb essay documentaries. His films capture the mysterious meaning of churches and convey profound Christian spirituality; they are not merely documentaries about their architectural and pictorial values. He worked alongside his wife, screenwriter Gabriela Ionescu. He transitioned from social films to those about art, ethnography, and folklore, precisely so that the message he wanted to convey to the audience could bypass the censorship filters.⁵⁰ Of course, these films were also heavily censored and modified; the director faced censorship issues throughout his life but bravely continued to work according to his own principles. He often resorted to a symbolic language with a rich semantic substratum, not only for artistic reasons but also for practical ones, to help his films somehow pass through censorship. We also mention Petre Sirin, with the film *Byzantine Triptych* (1970).

⁴⁹ Marion Ciobanu, interview by the author, May 18, 2023, author's personal archive.

⁵⁰ Iaromira Popovici, 'Cum se făceau documentarele la Studioul "Sahia" – câteva mărturii', in *Dilema Veche*, nr. 610, 22-28 October 2015, (<https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/societate/cum-se-faceau-documentarele-la-studioul-sahia-592285html>), accessed on 17.08.2022.

After witnessing such experiences from his colleagues, we wonder how Pavel was able to make five documentaries about churches. Two of them won awards at international festivals in Italy and Poland and were praised in contemporary press outlets, including *Cinema*⁵¹ and *România Literară*.⁵² He directed *Comori de artă românească* (*Treasures of Romanian Art*) (1964),⁵³ *Excursie la mănăstirile Moldovei* (*Excursion to the Monasteries of Moldavia*) (1965),⁵⁴ *Mănăstirea Dragomirna/Crimca* (*Dragomirna Monastery/Crimca*) (1966), *Biserici din lemn*, (*Wooden Churches*) (1968),⁵⁵ and *Cântece în lemn* (*Songs in Wood*) (1968).⁵⁶ His films capture the artistic beauty of the churches, particularly the painting and architecture, but do not focus on their spiritual dimensions. They were made within the limits accepted by censorship, emphasizing the party's concern for the renovation of these monuments, as exemplified in the film *Biserici din lemn*, (*Wooden Churches*) (1968) (Appendix 1). Even though many other churches were being demolished in the meantime, this was the obligatory rhetoric used to show the Western world that the state was taking care of its historical and cultural heritage.

To understand how Pavel managed to create these films and why it was precisely a Jew who did so, it is essential to familiarize ourselves with the atmosphere at the Sahia studio, to know the limits of filmmakers' freedom of expression, and the role that Pavel Constantinescu had within this studio. Many Jews and Hungarians were employed at Sahia, and the director Aristide Moldovan, who led the studio for 34 years, came from a mixed Romanian-

⁵¹ *Cinema* No. 3, (1969), p.14.

⁵² *România Literară*, no. 28 (July 12, 1973).

⁵³ Pavel Constantinescu, *Comori de artă românească*, Commentary: Eugen Schileru, Film made at the request of the Directorate of Historical Monuments. It presents five leading works of Romanian architecture and painting: the monasteries of Moldovița, Sucevița, Humor, Arbore, and Voroneț.

⁵⁴ Pavel Constantinescu, *Excursie la mănăstirile Moldovei* (1965) (Grand Prize, Golden Minerva, San Remo, Italy), *România Literară*, no. 28 (July 12, 1973).

⁵⁵ Pavel Constantinescu, *Biserici din lemn*, at the fourth edition of the International Festival of Museum Films in Kielce, won the award from the General Directorate of Museums and Historical Monuments under the Ministry of Culture and Art of the Polish People's Republic, Scînteia, October 22, 1971.

⁵⁶ Pavel Constantinescu, *Cântece în lemn* (1968) Concentrated version of the Wooden churches, a faster montage but with the same documentary richness.

Hungarian family. There are numerous testimonies indicating that he did not tolerate any form of discrimination, especially based on ethnic criteria.⁵⁷

Despite being established for overtly propagandistic purposes, the Sahia studio was undoubtedly the freest creative environment of its time when compared to other studios or other fields of art, such as literature or the arts. In an era when every profession had to offer its share of victims, no one from Sahia was arrested, unlike Magda Mihăilescu from Buftea,⁵⁸ Mihai Andricu in music, Ana Novac in literature, and Militza Pătrașcu in the arts, and the list could go on.⁵⁹ Moreover, it was a refuge for those who had problems at Buftea; many of them were employed under contract and continued their work at Sahia.⁶⁰ Those who applied for emigration were allowed to work until the very last moment, receiving a salary, but they did not have their names on the credits.⁶¹

This relatively relaxed atmosphere, compared to what was happening around, was largely due to two important figures of the studio: the studio director Aristide Moldovan and the film director Virgil Calotescu.⁶² Aristide led the studio for 34 years (from 1954 to 1988), while Virgil Calotescu was the party secretary and had numerous connections in the highest political circles, intervening multiple times to protect his colleagues from harsh sentences, even in difficult situations.⁶³ Thanks to the influence of both him and Moldovan, no one was subjected to severe penalties, nor were they fired or imprisoned for their expressed opinions. Pavel Constantinescu had good relations with both of them, and they likely did not forget that Pavel had once been their superior.

⁵⁷ Árpád Pünkösdi, *Egyperces Fischerek: A szökött filmes életei* (Noran Libro, Budapest, 2011), p. 85, p. 132.; Marion Ciobanu, interview by the author, May 18, 2023, author's personal archive; Patakfalvi Ferenc, interview by the author, May 19, 2023, author's personal archive.

⁵⁸ Magda Mihăilescu, *Aceste gioconde fără surâs. Convorbiri cu Malvina Urșianu* (Curtea Veche, București, 2006), pp. 27-29.

⁵⁹ Jitea, *Cinema în RSR. Conformism și disidență*, pp. 15, 33.

⁶⁰ Mircea Săucan, Ilarion Ciobanu etc.

⁶¹ Marion Ciobanu, interview by the author, May 18, 2023, author's personal archive.

⁶² Virgil Calotescu, a member of the party bureau leadership of the studio, vice-president of the Association of Filmmakers, and producer of hundreds of short and feature films until 1989.

⁶³ Marion Ciobanu, interview by the author, May 18, 2023, author's personal archive.

Of course, there were informants at Sahia, but not many. Most of them were from the auxiliary staff, particularly drivers. We know from a report from the Department of State Security in 1985 that at Sahia and Animafilm combined, there were a total of 15 sources, including only 3 directors and 2 production managers; before '85, there were even fewer.⁶⁴ The Sahia file at the Security Service contains 137 informative notes, most of which are almost laudatory about them. Most filmmakers are described as "serious, respectful, kind, calm" and "a bit unsociable, not very communicative."⁶⁵ – these qualifications probably served as a justification for the source not reporting more information about those individuals. The most serious accusations in this file are against a production manager who "no longer gets along with his wife; they have arguments and fights."⁶⁶ Thus, there were indeed plenty of informative notes, but they reported things that were so insignificant that no one was ever in real danger because of them. About several filmmakers at Sahia, truly incriminating information can be found in Mircea Săucan's file,⁶⁷ but these date back to the time he worked at Buftea and relate mainly to his film *Meandre* (1967). The good atmosphere and safety at Sahia were largely due to the fact that a large percentage of the employees were related; the Sahia studio was, both literally and figuratively, a big family.

Another argument presumed by his colleagues explaining why Pavel Constantinescu might have allowed himself more than others is that he may have been an undercover security officer. In his book, he neither confirms nor denies this, but he does bring up the subject. With much humour, he recounts an incident in America where a Romanian there asks him how he managed to travel alone to the United States, given that shortly before, he had encountered another individual who was escorted by three security agents – suggesting to Pavel a lack of trust. To this, Pavel responds with a striking proposal to his conversation partner: they will assume that he is a Security agent, sent on special assignments among Romanian-Americans, and that

⁶⁴ Jitea, *Cinema în RSR. Conformism și disidență*, p. 15, p. 360.

⁶⁵ C.N.S.A.S., D 000208, Vol. 8, "Referitor la creație cinematografică, 1. Studioul "Al. Sahia" mat. Verific. A-Z, f.2.

⁶⁶ C.N.S.A.S., D 000208, Vol. 8, "Referitor la creație cinematografică, 1. Studioul "Al. Sahia" mat. Verific. A-Z, f. 51.

⁶⁷ Nina Behar, Silvia Armașu, and Virgil Calotescu are accused, C.N.S.A.S. I 234060, f. 43-48.

the film project he was working on there is just a subtle camouflage. The conversation partner should forget his suspicions about him, while Pavel will forget this individual's doubts.⁶⁸ With the subject thus left open, the reader can believe what they want.

What is certain is that he travelled extensively, filming in America, France, China, and Vietnam; we know that not everyone was allowed to travel and film abroad. However, on the most recent lists published by the National Council for the Study of Securitate Archives with the officers, non-commissioned officers, and collaborators of the Security Service, Pavel Constantinescu does not appear.⁶⁹ Of course, these public lists represent only a part of the documents, but neither in his surveillance file nor in the criminal file is there any note in this regard, nor in his quite extensive correspondence intercepted by the security organs. In the document in which he is condemned, he is listed as holding the rank of military lieutenant.⁷⁰ Therefore, we will also leave this subject open.

Emigration to Israel. Memoirs and film projects

Pavel Constantinescu, like most filmmakers with initially communist beliefs, also went through the drama of disillusionment. He, who in his youth dreamed of justice, happiness, equality, and human dignity, who risked his life daily for six years for these ideals, came to understand that the communist regime would never provide these to society, the situation was worsening day by day. He was terribly disappointed. He decided to emigrate, and through these films about churches, as well as his unparalleled films about Brâncuși, he prepared for his retreat. He chose to make films that did not involve a political stance.

In 1970, based on a filming contract, he travelled to the Federal Republic of Germany. He requested successive visa extensions until December 1973, at which point he ceased to maintain contact with the Romanian authorities and did not return to the country.⁷¹ Consequently, a criminal case was

⁶⁸ Constantinescu Ben-Iosef, *Un cineast în față cu lumea contemporană*, p. 112.

⁶⁹ C.N.S.A.S., (http://www.cnsas.ro/fosta_securitate.html), accessed on 10.15.2024.

⁷⁰ C.N.S.A.S., P114879; C.N.S.A.S., I234985.

⁷¹ C.N.S.A.S., I 234985.

opened against him, in which an aggravating factor was his request for political asylum in Switzerland. He was sentenced to six years in prison, of which he was supposed to serve five.

In Israel, where he emigrated, Pavel Constantinescu was forced to start everything from scratch. He couldn't break into television because he was not well-known⁷² and did not master the language well; at first, he didn't even have a passport. This was why he sought political asylum in Switzerland, in order to obtain the necessary documents for employment in Israel. His first job was picking oranges, but gradually he managed to create short films funded by television and other government institutions.⁷³ Eventually, he was hired by the Ministry of Education, where he produced hundreds of educational documentary films covering all levels of education.

Although testimonies from his ex-wife, friends, and colleagues confirm that Pavel Constantinescu was not a practitioner of any religion, we cannot ignore a constant inner aspiration toward moral and aesthetic values such as beauty and truth, values he found in the church. I do not intend to present him as a believer, but his journal reveals how profoundly he was impressed by Russian culture. He was captivated by Russian ballet, theatre, music, and classical literature, the latter two in particular having strong roots in the Christian tradition.

We know that the film *Comori de artă românească* was made at the request of the Directorate of Historical Monuments, and regarding the film *Mănăstirea Dragomirna/Crimca* (1966), the director recounted in a 1967 interview how he was drawn to the miniature paintings at Dragomirna. He stated that from his first visit to the monastery, he was deeply impressed by the artistic treasure there, and although he was initially only interested in the artistic value of Atanasie Crimca's work, as he deepened his knowledge, he became fascinated by the history of the place and the personality of Crimca, the founder of the national miniature painting school.⁷⁴

From the same journal, it is evident that, in addition to the films he completed, the director was working on at least three projects with religious themes. In 1967, in Beijing, he expressed his desire to film Buddhist temples,

⁷² Constantinescu Ben-Iosef, *Un cineast în față cu lumea contemporană*, p. 281.

⁷³ Constantinescu, p. 282.

⁷⁴ Oltea Tănase, "Interviul nostru cu regizorul Pavel Constantinescu despre noul său film documentar", *Informația*, 1. Dec. 1967, in Constantinescu Ben-Iosef, *Un cineast în față cu lumea contemporană*, p. 272.

comparing them to the painted churches in northern Moldova. In 1984 in Venice, he noted that the theme of the Last Judgment had long preoccupied him, and he would like to film a small church from the seventh century where he discovered a new form of this famous composition, the Last Judgment.

Another project is a film entitled *Tehina*,⁷⁵ which is a prayer of deep repentance for Yom Kippur. It was written by Yehuda Halevi, a Jewish poet and philosopher recognized as one of the most remarkable figures in medieval Jewish literature. Unfortunately, there is no clear information about the realization of this film, leaving open the question of whether it remained only at the project stage or not. However, undoubtedly, it would have been his most profound film spiritually among all his documentaries. This is not only due to the text itself but also to the direction.

The entire film is dedicated to the spiritual aspect of prayer. It is a profound meditation on the human condition, reflecting on the personal relationship with the Divine, mortality, and the inner struggle with sins and weaknesses, expressing a strong desire to lead a virtuous life according to divine will. The author explores existential questions, seeking reconciliation with oneself and the Creator; the central themes are the search for divine mercy and a close relationship with God, emphasizing the need for spiritual guidance. The spirit of this prayer, the tone, structure, form, and language all remind us of the Psalms of David. The film is an emotional appeal, an invitation to reflect on the meaning of life and the passage of time.

The film project successfully captures the contemplative atmosphere of the text, constructed in a lyrical manner without becoming sentimental or overly emotional. It appears almost complete, having established the structure, locations, and filming techniques, with only a few minor details missing, including a note: "To consult Noica."⁷⁶ It is particularly interesting that the themes addressed in the film, as well as the overall atmosphere, closely resemble a letter that Pavel sent to Aurora Roșca⁷⁷ in 1972, where he sincerely expresses his concerns about the meaning of life, consciousness, freedom, goodness, beauty, and happiness, similar to the reflections of Yehuda Halevi. The letter does not provide concrete details about his life at that time but accurately describes his inner state and existential concerns.

⁷⁵ Constantinescu Ben-Iosef, *Un cineast în față cu lumea contemporană*, pp. 235-238.

⁷⁶ Constantinescu, p. 238.

⁷⁷ C.N.S.A.S., P 114879, f. 8-11.

Another text from his journal (Annex 4)⁷⁸ reflects a profound reverence for Jerusalem, recalling its sacred history and spirituality. Pavel evokes images of the holy city, suggesting that his personal experience in this place reinforces his belief that the person of Jesus was real, not a myth. The text suggests a certain belief, even if the author does not explicitly express himself as a religious practitioner. The contemplative tone and his appreciation for religious values indicate a sincere quest for a higher meaning in life. The author seems emotionally anchored in religious traditions, even if he does not formally practice them. We believe that this text goes far beyond a purely aesthetic admiration of church values.

Conclusions

As a result of our research, we believe that Pavel Constantinescu directed these films with ecclesiastical themes because he could, and because he wanted to.

He had the necessary courage, talent, social position, and culture – albeit accumulated later – than if he had not spent six years on the front lines. He greatly appreciated art and knew many high-quality art critics who influenced him (such as Barbu Brezianu, Militza Pătrașcu, a former student of Constantin Brâncuși, etc.). He knew how to choose his consultants and listened to their opinions. He had influential friends and connections everywhere, and from a political standpoint, he was terribly disappointed.

By analyzing the situation of the three filmmakers who made films about churches between 1959 and 1971, we can affirm that, in general, even though films about ecclesiastical art were not well-regarded by the authorities, they could still be made. There were periods of strictness and others that were more permissive, influenced by the severity of the censors and the editors' ability to trick the censorship. However, it seems that those who had the courage and interest in such themes managed to produce their works. Sahia, being a permissive environment compared to other institutions and a studio where most filmmakers were dedicated to culture, allowed for many things that were not possible in other institutions.

⁷⁸ Constantinescu Ben-Iosef, *Un cineast în față cu lumea contemporană*, p. 136-137.

The quality of his films is primarily due to his talent but especially to his exceptional intelligence and his ability to adapt to any environment he found himself in. The years spent in the U.S.S.R. were decisive in his professional formation, as he learned from the greatest filmmakers in the world and had colleagues who themselves became renowned filmmakers. Even the years spent on the front lines were significant because he gained rich life experience here, which was essential for a documentarian and war reporter. Additionally, it was during this time that he learned the Russian language, without which he certainly could not have accumulated so much knowledge at V.G.I.K.

Although he was not a religious practitioner, Pavel consistently showed a genuine interest and aspiration toward values deeply rooted in religious traditions, particularly in Judaism and Christianity. Pavel Constantinescu was and remained “an incorrigible idealist”,⁷⁹ as his friend Amir Rotem characterized him, “a rebel who always did only what he wanted”,⁸⁰ as described by his wife, and “a tough, unruly, and extraordinarily intelligent Moldavian Jew”,⁸¹ as Iosif Petran said.

Pavel Constantinescu’s achievements in the field of cinematography are not just works of art. In today’s world, as it faces an increasingly acute moral crisis and a sense of meaninglessness, the significance of churches and ecclesiastical art stands out more than ever, what gives Pavel Constantinescu’s films a unique value, in addition to their professional merit.

⁷⁹ Constantinescu, p. 285.

⁸⁰ Marion Ciobanu, interview by the author, May 18, 2023, author’s personal archive.

⁸¹ Constantinescu Ben-Iosef, *Un cineast în față cu lumea contemporană*, p. 9.

APPENDIX

All the texts in the appendix were translated by Prof. Ph.D. Maria-Silvia Crăciun

Pavel Constantinescu, passage from the film's text *Wooden Churches*

1.

"Placed within the landscape, on hills and on the edges of the woods, on the wide valleys of rivers and streams, or within the confines of villages, wooden churches, modest, in similar ways to peasant houses, or imposing, like true Gothic cathedrals are spread across the entire country.

In time, many of these fragile monuments have disappeared. For those which have survived today, long-lasting autumn rains and the snows of rough winters have been fierce enemies.

With knowhow and infinite care for the preservation of ancient of olden forms rotten beams are replaced, the scaffolding of the spears is completed and the tall wooden roofing is refashioned.

Restored, these splendid monuments stading on the edge of their existence will be able to face again decades of autumns and rains, of winters and snow. Enjoying all the care in the world, salvaging from destruction the most representative wooden churches has gained significant momentum during the last few years."

Pavel Constantinescu, *A cinematographer facing the contemporary world*

2.

p. 17

Budhist processions were, doubtlessly, spectacular. I would wish to film something. To juxtapose, face to face. Budhist temples and the painted churches of norhtern Moldavia. Two types of architecture, two forms of expression sealed off by geographical distance and the two completely different religions. Would the Chisnese allow us to film?

3.

p. 127

Reading the message, I address the One Above: „Many and unfathomable are your ways, My Lord! Allow me to ask you, although I know you are not in the habit of answering: What new twists of fate are you devising on my account?"

4.

pp.136-137

At one of the crossroads, we turn, climbing Golgotha... at the end of the climb, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the primordial monument of Christianity, unveils itself to our gaze. I recall to memory images of the life of Christ, as they appear in the famous frescos of Voroneț, Humor, Arbore, Moldovița, Sucevița. It seems like yesterday, when by the light of the spotlights we were filming with the team, the immortal creations of the anonymous virtuosi from the time of Ștefan cel Mare. The film came back from San Remo with the "Golden Minerva", the first prize of the great festival.

Looking at the place and the people who gravitate towards the monument, I have a feeling that Jesus was not a myth, but a true man, made of flesh, bones and blood, and perhaps no other like him had left such a profound impression on mankind. Preserving for centuries the values of the great religions of the world, this city wears with justice in the consciousness of mankind the name of Holy City, with a great, unique and unequalled history.

Yes, in these places, as nowhere in the world, one has the feeling that one slips along the invisible wheel of fortune, that one rises and falls (ascends and descends) dizzily, across generations, over the times that always fulfill eternity. The picture of a succession of long-gone civilizations and of the ones on the verge of becoming is truly fabulous, fascinating.

Making our way among the walls of the old fortress, we leave the town... how many events and how many undeciphered secrets continue to live in the serene silence of the old walls as I pass them unknowingly, full of impressions, of deeply felt reverence and an unknown fear. The sun is setting ... the heat of the day is extinguished in the towers and old buttresses. I will come back, Jerusalem, I repeat in my mind, I will come back to you always, beloved and holy city.

5.

p. 144

A little church from the seventh century, in full process of restoration under the aegis of UNESCO, where I discover a new form of the famous composition „The Last Judgement”, one of the possible subjects for a film that has preoccupied me for ages, that I wish not to remain – just- a project, like many others.

Acronyms

C.N.S.A.S. – National Council for the Study of Securitate Archives

C.P.S.U. – Communist Party of the Soviet Union

PCUS – Communist Party of the Soviet Union

R.G.A.L.I. – Russian State Archive of Literature and Art

R.S.F.S.R. – Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic

V.G.I.K. – All-Union State Institute of Cinematography

V.K.P. – All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)

V.L.K.S.M. – All-Union Leninist Young Communist League