

From Mircea Eliade to F.F. Coppola and back
Cristina Scarlat: F.F.Coppola & *Mircea Eliade*. Youth Without Youth, A View from Romania, Eikon Publishing House, Bucuresti, 2018

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In 1938, Dominic Matei, a 70-year-old professor of linguistics, pining after the love of his youth, Laura, travels to Bucharest, the city where he and she met at university. Feeling that his fruitless search for the origin of human language has condemned him to a miserable life, Dominic plans to commit suicide after this one last journey. However, while crossing the street, he is struck by lightning. In hospital, doctors inform Dominic that the lightning appears to have rejuvenated him. Soon after, while residing at the Professor's home, Dominic also discovers that he possesses strange, psychic capacities.

As Romania is invaded by Nazi Germany, a Nazi spy known by him as the Woman in Room Six plays sex with him and discovers during their nights together that he has developed a talent for speaking in tongues. Meanwhile, an alternate invisible person presents itself to Dominic as his “Other” from outside space and time. Then the “Other” brings him two roses, while Dominic ask himself, “Where do you want me to put the third rose?”. Understanding the Nazis' obnoxious designs, Dominic escapes from Romania.

In Switzerland towards the end of the war, Dominic, who manifests paranormal powers, refuses again to cooperate with the Nazi. Subsequently, Dominic returns to a normal existence and resumes his linguistic research. Having realized that the lightning strike has lent to him clairvoyant faculties, he develops a secret language for his audio diary.

Several years later, Dominic encounters in the Alps a woman named Veronica, apparently the reincarnation of Laura. He rescues her from a thunderstorm and gains her trust. Then Veronica identifies herself as “Rupini”, one of the first disciples of the Buddha. Suspecting she may be afflicted with a condition similar to his own, Dominic plans to find the cave in India where Rupini did her last search for Enlightenment. Finally, the expedition, monitored by Italian leading Orientalist G. Tucci, succeeds in finding the cave, and Veronica becomes herself again and falls in love for Dominic.

After a short period of happy love in Malta and some medium-ship experiments leading her to regress ever further in time and speak previously unknown tongues, Veronica's health begins to decline from exhaustion, and Dominic declares that he cannot continue these sessions, or even being close to Veronica, since his proximity to her is devouring her age. To rescue her health and preserve her youth, he decides to leave for good.

Despairing, Dominic returns to Piatra Neamt where he taught as a professor. His alter ego

appears in a mirror and reveals secrets about the future of mankind. Outraged at the idea of sacrificing millions of lives in the name of evolution, Dominic shatters the mirror, causing the “Other” to vanish, yelling incoherently in an unfamiliar language. In the morning, townsfolk find Dominic's body, lying dead at the bottom of a staircase. As Veronica's voice is heard echoing “Where do you want me to put the third rose?”, the rose appears in Dominic's lifeless grasping hand (the *three roses* are a free masonic symbol, known as the *three roses* of St John, symbolizing light, love and life).

I was at the premiere of F. F. Coppola's movie “Youth without Youth” on the 20th of October 2007. And when I saw the final scene with the apparition of the third rose my heart was flipped upside down. I cannot even describe how important this vision was. My emotional world was in upheaval. Here in fact Coppola was baring his soul, he made a film he would have wanted to see, with energy borrowed from his heroes who embody Eliade's genuine authorial intentions. This film is an answer to the question he asked to himself. The entire film swings through the possibilities afforded to us through study and research, only to confess that without love (eros), without compassion (agape/bhakti), you're as good as dead anyway (cf. Cor. 13, 2). And perhaps it was that idea that drew me to Eliade and Coppola more than anything.

I love this uncanny story about a professor who was struck by lightning that rather than killing made him superhuman. And he was reborn as a new breed! This was one of the most thought-provoking novels I ever read. “Youth Without Youth” is so touching, subtle and inspiring. How might anyone have not loved this? Instead, professional critics and common people in great majority hated this film. Really, they hated or ridiculed it.

When I viewed and reviewed Coppola's work, however, I somewhat understood why the movie had received so many negative reviews: it was not the adventurous and romantic movie that its plot and setting might have lent itself towards. Instead, and in true fashion to Eliade's work, the movie dealt primarily with the metaphysical, spiritual, and even paranormal possibilities lurking behind every person, by introducing the case of the Romanian professor Dominic Matei struck by lightning and suddenly rejuvenated, not just physically but with an hypermnesia that allows him to know anything he desires.

As far as Eliade's novella, there is perhaps even less action and drama, and more focus on the action of ideas, unlike some other famous stories. It also seems possible that as this was written at the end of his life (1976) he may have been more concerned with getting the ideas down rather than developing them. In terms similar to Chuang-tzu's butterfly parable, Dominic Matei, perhaps Eliade himself, is an old man dreaming that he is a young man dreaming that he is every man, eventually falling into the vortex of the Eternal Return, bringing the still youthful Matei to die where he had originally desired to commit suicide, having still not completed his life's work but learned to love life during his dreamlike journey.

Cristina Scarlat's work is the ideal guide to the interface between Eliade, Coppola and the reader or viewer of this complex story. Here is a work nourished by dedicated passion, painstaking erudition and balanced judgment. I cannot refrain from indicating the high points of this brief but dense essay. These are the theoretical discussion of semiotics of arts/media and intertextuality, the reconstruction of the interplay between the narrator Eliade and the filmmaker Coppola (who most often speaks in first person), the vast (quasi exhaustive) survey of the critical reception in the (French, Italian, Romanian, American) press and in academic scholarship (Ricketts, Kripal, Biles, Garzilli, Calinescu, Simion, Groza, Glodeanu), not to mention a series of personal vivid and convincing *interpretations and explanations*, especially frequent in the final part. I cannot but share the conclusive remark (quite similar to my own conclusion in a February interview given to “Mama Studio”): “Finally, the meaning of the text can be recovered moving backwards to the film adaptation”.