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# Reframing History, Trauma and Crisis



Screenshot from Radu Jude's *The Dead Nation* (Țara moartă, 2017).





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# Narratives of Historical Memory and Their Touristic Function: The Case of Sergei Loznitsa's *Austerlitz*

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**Abstract.** This article discusses a documentary film, *Austerlitz* (2016), by the Ukrainian film director Sergei Loznitsa. The film shows massive flows of tourists visiting Sachsenhausen and Dachau concentration camps, therefore, it is interpreted through the prism of dark tourism. The article argues that by functioning as a piece of virtual dark tourism, *Austerlitz* is constructed as a re-enactment of a collision with places of death. By refusing to moralize or condemn bored concentration camp visitors, Loznitsa enables the viewer to understand how radical experiences of mass destruction and death are being recorded in tourism practices in today's society. The French semiotician and philosopher Roland Barthes argues that death is most clearly perceived when it opens up as an act that has already taken place in the past, but at the same time will also take place in the future – *this has been* and *this will be*. The article concludes that exactly this is the effect of the documentary film *Austerlitz*. By showing crowds of visitors walking in the empty spaces of concentration camps, Loznitsa opens up a tragedy of mass destruction and death that has already taken place, but at the same time will also happen.

**Keywords:** dark tourism, concentration camp, documentary film, Sergei Loznitsa.

## Introduction

This paper is part of a larger research which looks at the interpretation of the embedded war forms and their visual exposition in film, photography and video art.<sup>1</sup> In interpreting the ways in which the Holocaust is portrayed in cinema, there is a clear tendency to depict outright crimes, mass destruction, and victim suffering, and also the traces that all these have left in the daily life of today's

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1 The research is supported by the Research Council of Lithuania and is part of the project *The Everyday and the Representation of War Trauma in Late Modernity* (MOD-17007).

society. One of the most controversial cases is when the threshold between everyday practices and the signs of war memory is blurred by the incorporation of war and other memorial sites into the tourist routes as attractions.

The combination of war crime memorials and tourist routes may seem contradictory, morally unacceptable, or even blasphemous. However, the fact that the sites of the Holocaust and other mass atrocities have become an integral part of tourist routes is obvious in modern society. In the description of the research John J. Lennon and Malcolm Foley carried out while visiting a number of memorial sites, they emphasized the proliferation and intensification of dark tourism, and the way it transformed the relationship to death: “in labelling some of these phenomena as ‘Dark Tourism’ we intend to signify a fundamental shift in the way in which death, disaster and atrocity are being handled by those who offer associated tourism ‘products’” (Lennon and Foley 2000, 3). In describing the relationship between dark tourism and society, Lennon and Foley notice that contemporary society creates favourable conditions for the prosperity of dark tourism, as much as dark tourism creates and forms new circumstances for contemporary society. Therefore, dark tourism is not a peripheral side effect of contemporary society, but a complex phenomenon intertwined with existing memory modes and their visualization methods.

As they summarize the scale of dark tourism, Lennon and Foley call it a symptom of late modernism – an era that makes everything, including places and images of mass destruction, part of consumption. It is worth noting that the end of the Cold War provided an additional impetus to the flows of dark tourism. Therefore, dark tourism can be considered a symptomatic phenomenon not only of late modernity, but also, as Rudi Hartmann argues, of the post-Cold War era that opened tourist routes to the places where the Cold War demarcation lines were previously drawn (Hartmann 2014, 168).

Taking into account the scale of dark tourism and the place of this phenomenon in today’s society, the tactics of the Ukrainian film director Sergei Loznitsa’s documentary *Austerlitz* (2016) to depict the Holocaust by capturing tourist flows in Sachsenhausen and Dachau concentration camps becomes visible. While at first such a choice might seem marginal and peripheral, he brings us to the very epicentre of consumer and post-Cold War society. Therefore, when interpreting Loznitsa’s film *Austerlitz*, the aims of this paper are twofold, first: to reveal the artistic features of this documentary about the Holocaust experience in today’s society; and second: to look at what the exposed dark tourism experience shows about today’s society and its relationship to death and mass destruction.

In order to achieve these goals, it is necessary to look at the slightly broader context of dark tourism and cinematic representation. What is striking at first is the fact that cinema may not be a passive documentation form of the dark tourism phenomenon, but in itself it may adopt a form of virtual dark tourism.

## **Cinema as Virtual Dark Tourism**

According to Kathryn N. McDaniel, virtual dark tourism not only reflects “real” dark tourism, but it is itself one of the variations of dark tourism (McDaniel 2018, 3). While virtual dark tourism functions as one of the forms of dark tourism, not only that it intertwines with memory practices, but it is also influenced by the commercialization laws of capitalist society.

Of course, as one of the varieties and forms of dark tourism, virtual dark tourism – literature, cinema, the Internet, computer games – has its advantages and disadvantages. Virtual dark tourism, as McDaniel summarizes different views, not only has no physical expression (it is possible to travel physically without moving from place to place), but it often lacks the virtual traveller’s own intention (McDaniel 2018, 4). On the other hand, to compensate for the lack of direct presence, virtual dark tourism uses different aesthetic and artistic means which must ensure the persuasiveness of visual representations. In addition, virtual dark tourism undoubtedly democratizes the experiences of death by involving much larger masses in the flow of tourist trips than those of physical travellers (McDaniel 2018, 6).

In the age of virtual media, images of virtual dark tourism in many cases precede and form models through which the contents of physical dark tourism experience can be perceived. The fact that each person already has some virtual tourism experience before physically arriving in a dark tourism destination surely determines the dynamics of the dark tourism experience. It is obvious that someone who has had some radical experience (imprisonment, coercion, murder) through their own history or that of their loved ones, will experience a visit to the location of such experience as a radical re-enactment. At a closer look, however, it must be acknowledged that the re-enactment is also experienced by those who relied solely on images of virtual dark tourism prior to visiting the dark tourism locations. Therefore, the experience of re-enactment alongside travel is another key component that operates in the experience of dark tourism.

According to Joram ten Brink, documentary cinema has long used the technique of re-enactment as a way to relate to the past (Brink 2012, 180). He argues that

a distinction needs to be made between the cinema that simply shows the re-enactment of a historical event and the cinema that uses re-enactment as a creative method. The fundamental difference, according to Brink, lies in the relationship between the present and the past. While the depiction and re-enactment of historical events undoubtedly privileges the past, and can therefore be judged by how carefully history is recreated and depicted, re-enactment as a creative method recreates the past in order to question the present (Brink 2012, 181–182).

But what kind of past is associated with the present? What is the impact of the dark and traumatic past on the present? How does the present deal with the trauma of the dark past? Certainly, at least some of the answers to these questions can be found by specifying the conditions which define to whom and under what circumstances these questions are addressed, whose past and present are meant. John E. Tunbridge and Gregory J. Ashworth, who distinguished death camp tourism as a subtype of dark tourism, ask precisely – how dark, and for whom and what (Tunbridge and Ashworth 2017, 22). Like genocide tourism, death camp tourism is a highly polarizing activity that divides potential visitors into the camps of potential victims, potential perpetrators and witnesses. Alongside these main camps there is a mass of visitors who do not associate themselves with any of these groups, but can adopt their feelings and mindset. According to Ashworth and Tunbridge, visitors gravitating towards the camp of victims may adopt the feeling of “this could have been me,” and, for a variety of reasons, visitors who feel the perpetrators’ guilt maintain the feeling of “I could have done that” (Ashworth and Tunbridge 2017, 74).

Participants and viewers of cinema as a form of virtual dark tourism that exploits re-enactment as a creative method are not a unified mass either – they can gravitate towards different camps, which provide respective models for experiences of places of mass destruction, death and suffering. The re-enactment of experience realized in cinema may begin to unfold along an unpredictable trajectory that is the opposite of the expected. However, despite the attractiveness of the form – or perhaps precisely because of it – the re-enactment of dark tourism in cinema is likely to remain at the original point of the *status quo*. As Ashworth and Tunbridge point out, the inhabitants of the occupied territories of fascist Germany resisted, collaborated, or simply did nothing during World War II. Therefore, post-war Europe – as well as the West – adopted deliberate heritage amnesia as a form of social cohesion (Ashworth and Tunbridge 2017, 18). It goes without saying that such amnesia does not have to be absolute – it can go well with moderate forms of commemoration.

This is the starting position of Loznitsa's film *Austerlitz*: by using a slightly curious or even somewhat indifferent tourist as a creative tool, Loznitsa offers to embark on a death camp tourism trip. What the tourists portrayed in the film do physically, the viewers of the film experience virtually. Because, as mentioned above, the virtual tour inevitably functions as a re-enactment of the relationship with the sites of death and genocide, the spectators of *Austerlitz* recreate their relationship with the Holocaust, mass destruction, and death by repetition. What will the nature of this recreation be? It is the biggest intrigue in Loznitsa's film.

## **Touristic Experience as a Target and Device for Criticism**

As Loznitsa mentions in his film trailer, he is amazed – or even astonished – by the situation of a tourist in the concentration camp. However, it would be wrong to assume that Loznitsa superimposes himself on a concentration camp tourist or unequivocally condemns them beforehand. On the contrary, Loznitsa takes the stance of a tourist, at least initially, and turns into one himself. “This is the place where people were exterminated; this is the place of suffering and grief. And now, I am here. A tourist. With all the typical curiosities of a tourist. Without any notion of what it was like to be a prisoner in the concentration camp having a number, every day waiting for death, clinging to life. I stand here and look at the machinery for the extermination of the human body. Traces of life, sometime ago, long ago, here and now. What am I doing here? What are all these people doing here, moving in groups from one object to another? The reason that induces thousands of people to spend their summer weekends in the former concentration camp is one of the mysteries of these memorial sites. One can refer to the good will and the desire to sense compassion and mercy that Aristotle associated with tragedy. But this explanation doesn't solve the mystery?” (Loznitsa 2016.)

As it can be seen, Loznitsa identifies himself with the tourist experience, poses a whole range of questions and even provides the primary suggestion as to what answer to these questions should not be satisfying – it is an attempt to describe and legitimize the experience of the tourist in terms of Aristotelian components of tragedy. In *Poetics*, Aristotle states that the tragedy arouses pity and fear in such a way as to culminate in catharsis. The possibility of catharsis in particular redeems the cruelties the perceiver has to go through. Loznitsa deprives the viewers of one of the most evident keys for the interpretation of the film by stating that the Aristotelian paradigm of catharsis falls short in describing the

experience of the memorial site visitors. Once he does that, the director invites the viewers to look for answers together with him while observing the trajectories of the concentration camp memorial site visitors instead of just using one theory that is supposed to explain everything.

Nevertheless, it is certainly not easy to say what the visitors of concentration camps think while being filmed. In the film *Austerlitz*, they are walking around individually or in groups and transforming the process of memorial site exploration into a museum experience. The wave of interest, as usual in the mode of sightseeing, exchanges with the wave of tiredness and boredom. Individual visitors struggle to resist it. Organized tour groups, however, are guided by professionals who, in addition to informing the visitors, ensure that the visitors keep sufficient level of interest, focus and attention.

At the premiere of *Austerlitz* in Vilnius, Loznitsa admitted that the stories of the tour guides were recorded separately and of course with special preparation, but not on site in the concentration camps. It is possible that the tour guides, being aware of the use of their narratives in the film, have consciously emphasized the breathtaking components of their stories. It leads to paradoxical and even macabre results – the tour guides in *Austerlitz* begin a sort of competition as to who would be the most frightening, imaginative and thus entertaining in conveying the suffering of tortured and murdered victims. One of the most important imperatives of tourism industry is to create “unforgettable and breathtaking” impressions. However, while racing for the most shocking account of already horrible atrocities, the guides reach a dangerous threshold. The process of building something “unforgettable” in this case results in the opposite consequences – the tour guide narratives are being formatted as if they were media products.

As much as the tour guide narratives are constructed like media products, they also imply a corresponding relationship to history. In her work *Scenes from Postmodern Life*, Beatriz Sarlo states that a specific form of memory prevails in the flourishing television culture: “some image fragments manage to establish themselves in our consciousness with the weight of iconicity, and are recognized, remembered, and cited, while such other fragments are passed by and can be repeated infinitely without boring anybody because, in fact, nobody sees them. These latter images are padding, constituting a gelatinous tide in which other images float and sink, and from which those that have established themselves as recognizable icons can emerge” (Sarlo 2001, 52). According to Sarlo, memorable icons interact with the mass of non-memorable images as if with “a contrasting medium.” Therefore, as long as the mass of non-memorable images highlights the



memorable icons enough, the appropriate ratio between what is passing by and is not remembered, and what stays in memory and is remembered exists. As soon as the contrast is violated and destabilized, a new space for zapping – attention and channel switching – occurs. Sarlo foresees that the viewer would switch attention or channel when there is a lack of memorable iconic images to keep the sufficient attention (Sarlo 2001, 53). However, it is possible to see how a similar result – the switch of attention – can be caused by an opposite tendency. When everything is highlighted as iconic and meaningful, nothing forgettable remains, i.e. there is no more “contrasting medium.” In that case iconic images overlap and create friction. The sequence of unforgettable images surpasses the viewer’s capability to perceive it. This is why the sequence of equally unforgettable or equivalent images turns against itself and allows the zones of “relaxation” or “wandering” within it.

The most symptomatic illustration of this paradox and one of the most controversial moments in the film *Austerlitz* is when the visitors of memorial sites forget themselves where there seemingly is no space for forgetting – hence the ongoing posing for photographs and selfies. [Fig. 2.] The process of photography is said to be time-breaking and “eternalizing,” and for a reason. However, photographs and selfies on the site of mass extermination of people do not bear any witness, they rather ignore that fact. The visitors create a kind of “contrasting medium” for themselves, which would allow the shift from a binding to a non-binding and relaxing mode. In this case the attention of a visitor becomes a transmitting element, which helps the transformation from the iconic to the insignificant to happen.

Of course, Loznitsa is not the first artist to notice the paradox that occurs when the process of photography (or filming) itself pushes aside what is being photographed (or being filmed). John J. Lennon and Dorothee Weber, who have studied the commercialization of the town of Dachau and its concentration camp, note that taking pictures in a concentration camp in literature and cinema is often portrayed as one of the most inappropriate behaviours. At first, Lennon and Weber draw attention to *The History Boys*, a play by British playwright Alan Bennett, in which photographing each other eating sandwiches, holding hands and smiling at each other are included in the list of inappropriate behaviour through the perspective of one of the characters (Lennon and Weber 2017, 39). However, no matter how obvious the parallels between Bennett, or other similar authors, and Loznitsa may seem, it is impossible not to notice the obvious difference between them. Taking pictures in a concentration camp environment can be directly or

indirectly described as an extraneous activity that has nothing to do with this environment. Loznitsa, on the other hand, without any moralizing burden, shows that for a tourist figure, such self-capturing against the background of places of death is an essential and inevitable procedure. From here arises the paradox of every visitor who uses places of death as a sequence of sights – by capturing themselves against the backdrop of “significant” places of death, these visitors desensitize and downplay such places. The process of self-photography or self-filming begins to erase what is being photographed or filmed.

Susan Sontag has described travel photography and emphasized that taking photographs not only certifies the experience, but also refuses it, as it converts the experience into an image, a souvenir (Sontag 2008, 6). How this procedure of erasing experience is taking place in the age of digital photography has been well illustrated by Grant Bollmer and Katherine Guinness in their text *Phenomenology for the Selfie* that focuses on selfie technique. Bollmer and Guinness focus on the technical aspect of selfies – when a person makes a selfie, the photographer focuses not on the environment but on his or her image on the phone in which the selfie is usually taken (Bollmer and Guinness 2017, 164–165). Although the end result of a selfie is different – a person against the backdrop of a particular environment –, the experience of taking a selfie itself is focused on forgetting the immediate environment and reducing the person’s relationship with the environment. As Bollmer and Guinness observe, such an effect of environmental erasure is paradoxically noticeable even when a selfie is taken not for the sake of amusement but to neutralize a terrifying environment. By photographing themselves against a background of a terrifying environment and focusing on their image on the phone, a person anaesthetizes the environment and thus separates themselves from that environment (Bollmer and Guinness 2017, 172–173).

This attitude of the tourists eventually inflicts a doubt about the fact that the concentration camp visitors, the documentary filmmaker and the viewers of this film should definitely have the same experience visiting the concentration camps. It is clear that not all of the memorial site visitors have the lack of attention and focus, not all of them and their attention is formed by the logic of iconic and insignificant events, and not everyone becomes thoughtful only when, according to Watkins, the reflection is triggered by specially prepared “oases” for silence and thinking.

The figure of a concentration camp memorial site visitor is multifaceted and diversified. It splits into different, often incompatible identities, attitudes and views. This diversification becomes even more evident when the spectators stop

merely observing the migrating flows of concentration camp site visitors and start asking themselves about the relationship between these memorial site visitor flows and the title – *Austerlitz* – given to the film by its director.

## **Auschwitz and Austerlitz: The Paradoxes of the Mistake**

Although it is macabre, it is very likely that some viewers initially do not even notice that the film about concentration camp memorial sites, without a particular reason, is named *Austerlitz* and not Auschwitz. Both names sound similar, but refer to completely different memorial sites. Austerlitz is a place primarily known for the battle of December 5, 1805, when the French army led by Emperor Napoleon defeated the much greater forces of Russia and Austria. Whereas Auschwitz is the place where the Nazis ran the largest concentration and mass extermination camp in the twentieth century during World War II. From a linear historical perspective, nothing in common is possible between Austerlitz and Auschwitz. The probability of mixing them up and mistaking one for the other can be explained only in one way – the focus here is on the memory of a contemporary individual who often manipulates various historical facts freely, and not on the linear sequence of historical facts.

The level on which the viewer becomes capable of mistaking Auschwitz for Austerlitz essentially corresponds to the level where the curious, but also distracted tourist thrives. It is difficult to get rid of the impression that the confusion between Auschwitz and Austerlitz is the intention of the film director, who foresees the initial lack of focus not only in the tourist he portrays, but also in the figure of the spectator. By naming the film *Austerlitz*, Loznitsa confuses the viewer and provides them with a clear hint which leads beyond the topos of tourist experience. *Austerlitz* is not a direct reference to a physical place, but to a novel of the same name written by the German writer Winfried Georg Sebald.

After reading the novel it becomes clear that the protagonist, architectural historian Jacques Austerlitz, dives little by little into the depth of his own memory. Brought to Wales before World War II as small child from Czechoslovakia which was threatened at that time by Nazi Germany, he loses contact with his parents. Many years later, after gaining the classical education and becoming an architectural historian, Austerlitz meets a friend of his parents, who helps him to recollect the scraps of memories – first of all, Czech and French idioms that he once knew. The friend tells Austerlitz that his mother was brought to Theresienstadt concentration camp. While watching the Nazi propaganda

documentary, which shows peacefully working Jewish people in Theresienstadt camp, Austerlitz thinks that he has seen his mother. Although the mistake becomes evident shortly, the range of vision of the architectural historian has already embraced the field of personal family history.

It is pretty clear where this relationship between the film and Sebald's famous work leads to. As Loznitsa says in the aforementioned quotation, he identifies his first experience with the experience of a tourist, and emphasizes that he does not know what it means to be a prisoner in a concentration camp, have a prisoner number, and live in the anticipation of death every day. More than seventy years have passed since the Second World War and the Holocaust tragedy, but almost all of the visitors in Sachsenhausen, Dachau, Auschwitz and other memorials share the same experience the film director described. Nevertheless, there are plenty of other ways to individualize the form of relationship to the tragedy of Holocaust, even in the absence of the direct experience. Sebald's *Austerlitz* represents an outstanding example of such individualization – the search for traces of the protagonist's mother, who was imprisoned and perished in the concentration camp. There are many other examples, alongside this particular one, which prevent the mode of touristic consumption of memorial sites. After all, even artworks such as Sebald's *Austerlitz* may serve as a suspending factor for the touristic mode.

It is this suspension of the touristic mode of consumption of places of death and the individualization of experiences that could pave the way for a radical transformation of attitudes towards places of death, which some authors equate to Damascene conversion (Tunbridge and Ashworth 2017, 13). Just like Saul converted to his own opposite and became Paul on the way to Damascus, so can visiting places of death – in some cases – lead to a radical change in the primary intention with which one enters such places, to a conversion.

Loznitsa starts at the level where the viewer is still able to mistake Austerlitz for Auschwitz, then moves to the level where Sachsenhausen, Dachau, or Auschwitz acquire their own, unique contours. However, the memory that breaks, forgets, operates in a long distance and returns, increases sensibility not only to something that was experienced a long time ago and forgotten, but also to that which is not yet experienced and invisible at large. The architectural historian, in one of the defining moments in Sebald's *Austerlitz*, admits that the dead are more alive than the people living in concentration camps. In Loznitsa's *Austerlitz*, the viewers observe the concentration camp memorial site visitors, but imagining the contours of killed victims is inevitable in the intervals between the filmed visitors.

## Genocide: Has Already Happened and Is Yet to Happen

The people who are no longer alive can become visible in the photographic or cinematographic image. A notable photograph in this respect was taken at the beginning of the twentieth century and was included in Daniel Lenchner's found-photograph collection.<sup>2</sup> It depicts graduate students at one of the Lakota schools in North Dakota. There is nothing extreme about the photo at first sight – a couple of rows of students and teachers. There are thousands of pictures like this around the world. All of them belong to the same genre and the seemingly minor differences between them are defined by the region, time and context of local traditions. However, according to Lenchner, the most macabre highlight of this photograph lies not in what is depicted, but in what is absent in the image. After taking a closer look at the student rows, it becomes evident that there is not a single indigenous American from the previously flourishing community which was based in the area. As Lenchner notes, "it looks like a class portrait, but you could also say that this is a picture of genocide" (Lenchner and Morin 2014).

Thousands of similar photographs emerged after the war in the territories previously controlled by the Nazi regime. Like in the photograph of the Lakota school, not only what is present is important; it is also important what is absent from the image – thousands of Jewish young people who did not survive to see their graduation. The photographs made in the period of peace, years before the war, show the changing, maturing faces of students. The genocide during the war destroys thousands of people. However, while looking at the students in the after-war photographs, it becomes clear that the murdered students are not erased, because it is impossible to erase the intense absence of the murdered people from the image.

One of the most important privileges of visual media is to bear witness of what does not exist anymore. Roland Barthes established two famous factors, *studium* and *punctum* of a photographic image, and states that visual media such as photography has a "collective" *punctum* intrinsic to the whole realm of photography and that is – death. The specific time framework is essential in the phenomenon of death as the *punctum*. Barthes uses the photograph of a prisoner sentenced to death taken in 1865 to argue that the overlap of past and present is one of the main characteristics of the *punctum*: "the photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the *studium*. But the *punctum* is: *he is going to die*. I read at the

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2 See: [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/5gkyk3/nazi-era-snapshots-and-the-banality-of-evil](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/5gkyk3/nazi-era-snapshots-and-the-banality-of-evil). Last accessed 28. 01. 2022.

same time: *This will be and this has been*. I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (*aorist*), the photograph tells me death in the future” (Barthes 2000, 96, italics in the original).

Barthes connects the photograph of the sentenced prisoner to the photograph of his mother as a small girl, which essentially inspired him to think of photography and the phenomenon of its relation to death. When looking at the photograph of the small girl, the overlap of future and past time – she will die and she is dead – seems even sharper and even more painful. It is symptomatic that Barthes did not include the photograph of his mother, which inspired the book, into the book, leaving it in the invisible but actively implied space.

It is this invisible but actively implied zone that is, after all, the most intense attention capturing plane of Loznitsa’s *Austerlitz*, the Barthesian *punctum*. Like in the photograph discussed by Lenchner where the Lakota school graduates stand in rows, and which at first sight does not represent anything horrible, the traffic of people in Loznitsa’s *Austerlitz* does not seem exceptional and looks similar to the traffic of visitors in other museums. Moreover, the visitors taking photographs at the entrance gate of the concentration camp bring to mind the visitors who take photographs at the entrance of a recreational zone or an entertainment park. [Fig. 1.] Only the inscription on the gate Arbeit Macht Frei [in English, Work Sets You Free] turns these images upside down and reveals that their meaning is defined by something that is not present in the shots of these sauntering streams of visitors. It is defined by thousands of victims killed in the premises of this concentration camp. These victims and the bodies of killed people that are invisible on the screen transform the loitering visitor streams with photo cameras into something exceptional and special. Essentially the killed people are the condition for the visitors – if there were no victims, there would be no memorial with its distracted or attentive visitors. This is why, like in Lenchner’s case when the simple photograph of the graduate students represents the sign of genocide, also in this case hundreds and thousands of visitors, distracted or attentive does not matter, manifest the traces of genocide of unthinkable scope. In her work, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, Marianne Hirsch notes that photographic images stand out in an effort to reanimate the lost or brutally destroyed past, but they also represent the consciousness of impossibility to bring it back (Hirsch 2012, 36–37). It is also impossible to recover the past because, paradoxically, the lost past has not completely passed, and this is what the slow, almost static, animated photograph-like images of the visitors of the Austerlitz concentration camp refer to. The visitor streams affirm – the mass

extermination of people has already happened and the references to the lives of future victims who were still alive at that time suggest that mass extermination of people is yet to happen. Like in the aforementioned case in Barthes, the fusion of the past and the future, when unthinkable tragedy which happened in the past is still awaiting in the future, strikes us with its inevitability and irrevocability.

Once this directly invisible space, which organizes and defines the meaning of the film *Austerlitz* is exposed, there is a kind of a return to the beginning – to the question what could be the driving factor of both the memorial site visitors and the film that captures them. If the motivation of visitors cannot be explained by the Aristotelian wish to experience pity and compassion, as Loznitsa states, then it would be impossible to draw the conclusion that the aim of the film *Austerlitz* is the enlightening and purifying Aristotelian catharsis.

## Final Remarks

The unthinkable tragedy of the genocide should serve as a lesson that is impossible not to learn. Nonetheless, selfies taken in the locations of the gas chambers witness such memorial site visitors behaving as if nothing special has ever happened in that location. As mentioned above, Loznitsa does not attack the touristic practices in the memorial sites of mass extermination but observes them through a neutral gaze without an intention to moralize. The visitors, experiencing mass extermination sites in touristic mode, are obviously not monsters of any kind, but their “banal” boredom in the concentration camp premises macabrely connects with the mass extermination of people, which took place there some time ago and was hidden under the idea of the “banal” duty.

Perhaps this is the darkest result of *Austerlitz*: if even evil cannot teach anything, that leaves no hope. Nevertheless, alongside the action on the screen there is also the figure of the spectator. While looking at the visitors who look at the mass extermination sites, the viewer enters an area of the highest danger. There is a probability that the viewer of Loznitsa’s *Austerlitz* will get bored, in the way some of the concentration camp visitors portrayed in the film do. The boredom of the spectator in this case would testify a larger atrophy and ignorance than that of the visitor, as while observing the visitors the spectator is not able not to reflect. In her work *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology*, Malin Wahlberg points out that documentaries – including Loznitsa’s *Austerlitz* – are often characterized by isochronal representations in which real time coincides with film time. Such isochronal representations are often perceived as specific

meta-elements of cinema, because the extended shot and static camera make the viewer feel their own gaze (Wahlberg 2008, 21). Placed into a real-time situation, where static long shots are slowly replaced by other shots of visitors walking around the concentration camp, the spectators of *Austerlitz* are forced to feel their gaze and their potentially arising boredom.

It is this dangerous zone which witnesses the crossroad between ignorance and decline, on the one hand, and attentiveness and reflection, on the other, that is the essential gift of the film *Austerlitz*. It is much more precious than the gift of promised and convenient catharsis. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the phenomena of virtual tourism are superior to the phenomena of physical tourism. It just means that by giving the viewer the opportunity to observe people attending concentration camps, *Austerlitz* also provides an opportunity to look at the conditions in which today an individual perceives confrontation with death beyond imagination.

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**Figure 1.** *Austerlitz* (2016). Tourist groups at the entrance to the concentration camp.



**Figure 2.** *Austerlitz* (2016). People filming and photographing themselves and one another in a concentration camp.





# Spectres of War in Deimantas Narkevičius's *Legend Coming True* and Sergei Loznitsa's *Reflections*

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**Abstract.** This text discusses Deimantas Narkevičius's *Legend Coming True* (*Legendos išsipildymas*, 1999) and Sergei Loznitsa's *Reflections* (*Отражения*, 2012), two films by contemporary artists and filmmakers that revisit war traumas – the Holocaust in Lithuania and the Siege of Sarajevo in Bosnia – indirectly, without narrative reconstruction of the events or use of the archival images to display their atrocities of these two tragedies. Instead, these two experimental films, I argue via Jacques Derrida, evoke spectres of the war in the contemporary urban setups to activate the half-mourning in the present. Aesthetic strategies used to expose the haunting past are closely scrutinized and compared in order to demonstrate the films' aesthetic potential of walking the spectator through war traumas without departing the present.

**Keywords:** trauma and film, Jacques Derrida, hauntology, mourning, half-mourning, artists' cinema, documentary film, spectres, Sergei Loznitsa, Deimantas Narkevičius.

## Introduction

The relationship between modern technologies, new modes of visibility and altered perceptions of temporality has been widely discussed by the critics, theorists and philosophers within the framework of studies of modernity and the everyday life.<sup>1</sup> Mary Ann Doane, Murray Pomerance, John Orr, among other scholars, remark that in the nineteenth century questions about time, memory and subjectivity were relocated from the realm of religion to the realm of science and technology (see Doane 2002; Pomerance 2006; Charney and Schwartz [eds] 1995, Orr 1993).

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Cinema, too, can be regarded as an outcome of industrialization, urbanization and technologization – the processes that were taking place at the time of the rapid modernization and colonization of the world (Doane 2002). Emerging as a unique apparatus for recording and repeating images in time, early cinema did not only portray the processes of the mass modernization of the everyday and the expansion of capitalism, but also provided by means of its ability to reproduce the photographic images a new means to reconsider the past in the present. That is, early cinema allowed modern imagination to speak to its own time.

Since the invention of the cinematograph, film viewers and critics have been discussing cinema's capabilities to complicate habitual divisions between visibility and invisibility, appearance and disappearance, living and dead. The observations of Maxim Gorky, the Russian writer who in 1896 described cinema as a soundless spectre and an art of phantoms, have remained pertinent (Gorky 1896). On the one hand, depictions of various kinds of unnatural or supernatural figures have been continually employed in films to tell the stories about the afterlife intruding our quotidian. All the way up to the present, audiovisual motifs and figures of phantoms, ghosts, spirits, apparitions and other spectral occurrences have been repeatedly used to entertain viewers around the world. On the other hand, the history of cinema's spectrality cannot be exhausted by the scrutiny of popular representations of fictionalized ghosts. Cinema's eerie duplication of the real also characterizes a ghostliness that surpasses depictions of the afterlife. From Ricciotto Canudo, Jean Epstein and Béla Balázs through Sergei Eisenstein, Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin up to Maya Deren and Laura Mulvey, cinema's mechanical reproduction of photographic images inspired a number of thinkers to discuss various ways in which films can either regain time or mummify change. Conceived as a medium capable of re-exposing the viewer to the past, cinema has often been discussed as a spectral medium that can alter memories of historical events. With a focus on two works by contemporary filmmakers that attend to collective war traumas, I will explore in what follows cinema's spectrality by putting Jacques Derrida's thoughts on hauntology into dialogue with contemporary forms of creative filmmaking.

## **Derrida and Spectrality: From Marx to Film**

The book *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* marks the ethical turn in Derrida's scholarly work (Reynolds and Roffe 2004, 49). The French philosopher proclaims that the hope of a righteous

future is dependent on the willingness “to learn to live with ghosts” (Derrida 1994, xviii). As he writes: “no justice [...] seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppression of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism” (Derrida 1994, xix).

With these words, Derrida puts forward his theory of hauntology, which, first and foremost, presupposes the ethical importance of being considerate toward all those who have already passed away or who are yet to be born, learning to host both the past and the future in the present.

To haunt for Derrida is neither to be present as a ghost nor to represent a ghost (Derrida 1994, 202). Instead, as Katy Shaw points out, his hauntology “gestures toward the ‘agency of the virtual’” because the spectre is never fully here and now, “yet is capable of exercising a spectral causality over the living” (Shaw 2018, 2). The neologism itself is composed of two words, haunt and ontology. Contrasting hauntology and ontology – the latter denoting fixed being and referring to a stable identity moored to the present –, Derrida implies the ever-changing identity full of spaces to be haunted in each and every moment of the fleeting present. According to Derrida, being half-present and half-absent, spectres do not have a fixed identity, their ontological status is indeterminate (Derrida 1994, xvii–xviii). Hauntology, therefore, has nothing to do with mysticism, supernatural forces, mythology or religious dogmas, nor can it be reduced to pragmatic teleology.

“The time is out of joint” – the phrase that originated in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, is in *Spectres of Marx* redeployed to define the functional principle of hauntology, i.e. the persistence of “a present past or the return of the dead” (Derrida 1994, 126). To put it in simple words, being in the present for Derrida is always overshadowed by the temporal trace of the past. The present, he suggests, is never contemporaneous to itself, but rather is always comprised of elements coming from the past. Calling into question the linearity of time, Derrida draws attention to the ephemeral nature of the divide between present and past in order to unbalance a progressive flow of history. In his ethico-political project, which is oriented towards alternative (and more righteous) futures, Derrida questions the simultaneity of time and history to reveal the presence of spectral spaces, gaps between the perceptions of and reactions to historical events, otherwise ignored by the logic of linear temporality and the quantitative separation between now

and then rooted in the Hegelian understanding of history. It therefore does not surprise that the theory of hauntology is considered as a method for exploring the situations characteristic of simultaneously knowing and not being able to explain, and as such, it is often brought up in the studies of collective traumas and their representation.

Before examining the question of the representations of war traumas in the films of the abovementioned filmmakers, I want to focus on the fact that apart from a number of academic and literary employments of Derrida's theory of hauntology, it has not been stressed enough that Derrida extended his ideas to the realm of cinema. Given the entire tradition of thought about cinema as a shelter for ghostly appearances, it is no surprise that it found a place in Derrida's theory of hauntology and his attention to the unsteady boundaries separating past, present and future. Arguing that the present is constantly haunted by spectres exposing us to the potential path towards alternative futures we might have missed in the past, Derrida was of course aware of the fact that cinema makes it possible to capture temporally elusive events and ensure their spectral return. Though Derrida was by no means the first person to write about the ghostly nature of cinema, he attends to cinema's spectrality in a unique way, defining its two registers and connecting them to the discourse of psychoanalysis.

Derrida discusses the connection between cinema and ghosts for the first time in his onscreen dialogue with French actress Pascale Ogier while playing himself in one of the scenes in *Ghost Dance* (1983), a film by the British film director Ken McMullen. One year after the scene with Ogier and Derrida was shot, the actress died in a car accident. Derrida recalled the tragic event years later while elaborating his thoughts on the hauntological nature of cinema in his conversations with another French philosopher, Bernard Stiegler, first shown on TV and later transcribed and published in book form as *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews* (Derrida and Stiegler 2002). However, Derrida's interview on the "thoroughly spectral structure of the cinematic image" entitled *Cinema and Its Ghosts*, published in the famous French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 2001, still remains the most comprehensive elaboration of his ideas on cinematic hauntology (Derrida 2015).

To be haunted while watching film is not merely a metaphor for Derrida, nor is it a concept that can be narrowed to a fixed definition of simply seeing ghosts onscreen. Consistent with his general theory of hauntology, Derrida defines filmic spectres as equivocal and ambiguous. According to him, the spectral presence in cinema can be perceived only approximately, there is no definitive description

of the process of hauntology as it presents itself onscreen. And yet, Derrida elaborates his thoughts on cinema as a distinctive medium for the manifestation of spectres. In his conversations with Stiegler, he expatiates on spectres' ability to introduce an element of heterogeneity into our perception of reality. Among other themes, Derrida also refers to the spectre of Pascale Ogier, which, as he puts it, haunts him every time he re-watches McMullen's film (Derrida and Stiegler 2002, 120). This illustrates how film medium allows one to experience the presence of phenomena that simultaneously are and are not present at the place and time the film is being watched. Thus, through connecting the viewer to non-corporeal ghostly images of reality, cinema provides an opportunity to exceed habituated modes of perception by subjecting the film viewer to the "apparition of the unapparent" and casting a fundamental doubt on the perception of the linearity of time and the solidity of one's subjectivity (Derrida 1994, 156).

How do ghosts from the past and the future make their way to the screen and what is involved in this process? In the interview published in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Derrida delineates two different registers (degrees) of cinema's spectrality. "Elementary spectrality" is the name Derrida assigns to the first register of the filmic apparition of the unapparent. For him, the first register is guaranteed by a default aspect of the film apparatus. Cinema's ability to mechanically or electronically reproduce indexical (to certain degree) images makes it, according to Derrida, elementarily spectral (Derrida 2015, 27). In other words, through technological reanimation of the screen traces of reality that has passed, each and every film gives rise to a series of spectral connections because of the way the viewer's perception functions. The second register of spectrality is more idiosyncratic. It depends on particular aesthetic techniques consciously employed by filmmakers in their films to make one "see new spectres appear while remembering the ghosts haunting films already seen" (Derrida 2015, 27). Alongside the first register, the second register of cinema's spectrality is able to produce critical and self-reflective perceptions of the past.

Although throughout the past century the technological nature of the film apparatus has radically altered, manifestations of the second register of spectrality in fiction and non-fiction films remain pivotal for explorations of contemporary society and its connection to the past. Given the unprecedented proliferation of digital images and the heated ethical and political debates over representation that this proliferation has caused, an analysis of film's spectrality can be conceived as a critical way to concentrate on representations of the past in the image-saturated present. Thus, I contend that considering hauntology in the



name of doing justice to the past and to the future will provide a valuable ethico-political method for researching filmic representations of historical traumas. For, as Derrida demonstrates, spectrality is intrinsic to the film medium itself. Posing challenges to the separability of past, present and future, cinema should not only be understood as the mechanism for the mimetic reconstruction of past events, but also as a space where the past can return in unpredictable forms over time and even interrupt the present. In what follows, I will show that Derrida's ideas on cinema's spectrality can be used to expand contemporary discourse on ethics and politics vis-à-vis representations of historical traumas. To do so, I will explore as case studies Sergei Loznitsa's Ukrainian film, *Reflections* (2012) and Deimantas Narkevičius's Lithuanian film, *Legend Coming True* (1999).

## Representation of Traumatic Events

As Mary Ann Doane has put it, the etymology of the word catastrophe is based on the conjunction of the Greek words over and turn. The traumatic experience of a catastrophe of any sort "overturns" everyday thought and behaviour, exposing one to what lies beneath the visible layer of a seemingly solid and ceaseless reality, namely contingency, discontinuity, and rupture (Doane 2001, 275). Cathy Caruth, meanwhile, writes how trauma designates "the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge" and which takes the form of recurrent hallucinations, dreams and pathological thoughts (Caruth 1995, 153). An overwhelming encounter with a sudden catastrophe exceeds understanding, occupying a space to which "willed access is denied" (Caruth 1995, 151). Caruth further suggests that trauma is a temporal event, always experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully predictable and is not accessible to one's consciousness until it returns to haunt the victim later.

Dissociation caused by a split in the psyche's symbolic function, which often involves a delay in attention to the traumatic event, is one of the main post-traumatic symptoms first diagnosed by Sigmund Freud. As Joshua Hirsh writes, due to dissociation, in post-traumatic memory, as opposed to narrative memory, linear chronology collapses. Temporal coordinates change and time becomes fragmented, felt either too remote or too immediate (Hirsh 2008, 105). Trauma, therefore, is not easily locatable through chronological reconstruction of the horrific event precisely because its spectral location mirrors its own very unassimilated nature (Caruth 1996, 4–5). Despite its perceptual strangeness,



the narrativization and representation of personal and societal traumas is often considered to be a necessary step in understanding post-traumatic breakdowns of the personal or collective psyche. However, the common strategies of linear narration cannot truthfully respond to the traumatic experience.

In *Work of Mourning*, Derrida takes issue with some points of Freudian psychoanalysis vis-à-vis attempting to mourn in order to reconcile with the death of a loved one. For him, mourning – in the Freudian sense – results in a conscious wish to dismiss the traumatic event without allowing its ghosts to return. In other words, mourning, according to Derrida, is often based on the attempt to ontologize the remains of the deceased phenomenon – the attempt to identify and localize the dead, thereby seeking to represent it as it was. This representation turns the lack and scarcity of information into a desperate attempt to re-construct the event of death and horror, which has almost never appeared in the form of figurative image. Instead of accepting common practices of mourning, Derrida therefore proclaims the necessity of an interminable mourning or a “half-mourning,” which distinctly differs from the Freudian definition of the normal mourning treated as a teleological and rational process towards reconciling with the loss that must involve the full withdrawal of libidinal attachment to a deceased person. Derrida’s concept of half-mourning lingers between the successfully resolved normal mourning and the pathological melancholia, the two opposed reactions to traumatic experiences originally delineated by Freud in his *Mourning and Melancholia*. As is well known, for Freud, to fully recover from a trauma, one has to remember and “relive” the repressed memories of the traumatic event. Mourning is considered to be completed when the subject of a traumatic experience successfully manages to accept the grief. Melancholia, however, according to Freud, results from a lack of mourning and is conceived as a form of pathology caused by an unconscious refusal to deal with trauma (Freud 1957).

In contrast to both: mourning and melancholia, the Derridian concept of half-mourning keeps mourning and melancholia in an enduring state of tension (Derrida 1986, xvii). Half-mourning means only partial forgetting, securing some virtual agency for traumatic memories to haunt the subject. As Alessia Ricciardi writes, half-mourning significantly differs from the Freudian conception of mourning because it “does not pretend to achieve a successful ‘dismissal’ of the lost object, but instead adopts an inconclusive psychic rhythm of oscillation between introjection and incorporation” (Ricciardi 2003, 36). In other words, in the case of half-mourning, the subject is perpetually re-exposed to the spectres of their traumatic history rather than having forgotten them. By employing the

notion of mourning against its Freudian use, Derrida connects the process of mourning to the dismissal of trauma. For him, mourning in the Freudian sense makes one unable to imagine the horror and results in a conscious wish to dismiss the traumatic event without allowing its ghosts to return. Derrida thus proposes to think about half-mourning as an alternative, as a never-ending process of working-through the enigmatic and ghostly past. This understanding of mourning resonates with Derrida's thoughts on hauntology inasmuch as they both rely on the need for ethically- and politically-informed spaces welcoming to spectres.

Therefore, I suggest to treat Derrida's hauntological concept of half-mourning as an indirect answer to some impossibility of mimetic attempts to represent trauma. As opposed to either the subconscious repression of trauma or the conscious overwriting of it, hauntological cinematic half-mourning can be treated as a third way to attend trauma, as a non-representational and more affective cinematic attitude towards historical events. In what remains, I will apply Derrida's hauntological insights to an analysis of the apparitions of war traumas in Sergei Loznitsa's *Reflections* and Deimantas Narkevičius's *Legend Coming True*, two contemporary creative non-fiction films.

## **Double Imposition of War and Everyday in Loznitsa's *Reflections***

A tension between the desire for reconciliation with the historical wound and the impossibility of representing the atrocities of the traumatic war is inherent in *Reflections*, a film by Sergei Loznitsa, the noted Ukrainian filmmaker, whose original cinematic excavations of the complex historical events of the twentieth century have secured him an exceptional place in contemporary Eastern European cinema. *Reflections* is not the first creative documentary in which Loznitsa examines the horror and absurdity of the historical events that have resulted in a collective trauma. *Blockade* (2005), one of the most renowned documentaries by the Ukrainian filmmaker, was his first attempt to expose viewers to the atrocities of war by re-working the archival footage documenting the siege of Leningrad during World War Two. In *Austerlitz* (2018), a more recent film, Loznitsa approached the traumatic past in a different way. This time, the Ukrainian director did not consult the archive of the genocide and instead remained in the present in order to change its relation to the past and to Auschwitz, a site haunted by past trauma and which has now become a Holocaust memorial, a place of dark tourism.

Seeking to reactivate the collective trauma, *Reflections* employs a similar strategy to *Austerlitz*. The film was produced for the anthology of audiovisual works entitled *The Bridges of Sarajevo* (2014). Presented in cinemas and released as a DVD, the anthology explores the history of the city of Sarajevo from the outset of World War One to the present. What makes the Ukrainian director's contribution distinct from the other twelve films included in this collection is that *Reflections* never leaves the present and does not attempt to tell the stories of the turbulent history of the city by recreating or staging them, but instead bridges (echoing the title of the anthology) the traumatic memories of the Bosnian War with the peaceful urban quotidian of the present day.

The extremely bloody war began after the collapse of Yugoslavia and took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995. The ethno-nationalist conflict escalated between the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and those of Herzeg-Bosnia and Republika Srpska, proto-states led and supplied by Croatia and Serbia. The conflict included the Siege of Sarajevo, a prolonged blockade of the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina that lasted longer than the infamous siege of Leningrad. In May 1992, the Serbs blockaded the city with approximately 70,000 troops. With poorly equipped Bosnian soldiers unable to break the blockade, a total of 13,952 people, including 5,434 civilians, died during the siege, which lasted 1,425 days (Bassiouni 1994).

The conflict ended after the NATO intervention, which forced the Serbs to lift the blockade. But the conflict left a deep mark on the collective psyche of the ethnically diverse city.

The Bosnian government reported a soaring suicide rate by Sarajevans, a near doubling of abortions and a 50% drop in births a few years after the siege began (Bassiouni 1994). Human casualties were followed by the destruction of the fabric of the everyday. Obviously, then, the trauma experienced during the siege of Sarajevo left a mark on the city and its inhabitants. On a surface level, however, Sarajevo has made a full recovery. In terms of the functioning of the urban fabric and the ongoing everyday activities, one can scarcely conceive the horrific events the population of the city experienced in the 1990s. The past haunting the seemingly peaceful present of the city is precisely what interests Loznitsa. Without giving much information about the traumatic event of the siege, the Ukrainian director's film re-activates the spectre of a trauma in a purely cinematic way.

Throughout the film, we see a number of wordless photos of young Bosnian fighters who died in the war. The photos that were taken during the siege of Sarajevo in 1992 by photographer Milomir Kovačević are superimposed on

the film footage shot in various contemporary spaces of today's Sarajevo. The mundane scenes including children playing in the street or young people having dinner in an outdoor restaurant were recorded by the cinematographer, Oleg Mutu for Loznitsa's film. At first sight, Loznitsa's film looks like an attempt to bring the traumatic past into the present à la Freud, who in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* states that trauma should be understood as both an external event and an internal psychological process. From a Freudian perspective, traumatic experiences are usually "forgotten" because the conscious mind cannot make sense of them at the time of their occurrence and, as a consequence, it develops a "protective shield" against distressing memories, such as memories of war atrocities (Freud 1920). The photographs of the participants of the Bosnian war, the external signifier of the source of the collective trauma, are highlighted as if they could simply break this Freudian protective shield. However, Loznitsa has a more complicated take on the trauma of war that surpasses a simple attendance of repressed memories, and resonates with Derrida's ideas about half-mourning and its spectral potential.

Against the mainstream historical documentary strategies that frequently rely on the documentation of the stories told by witnesses which are often illustrated by the archival material, the reflections of the past in Loznitsa's *Reflections* are based on close-ups of the young and handsome soldiers who died during the war super-imposed on the present-day urban sites. Significantly, this double imposition was achieved by filming the images from the reflective surface of a specially-constructed booth filled with the archival photographs of the fighters. Such a material setup makes the film a mirror for the images of a peaceful urban quotidian viewing its traumatic past: the frame of urban panoramas populated with people walking the streets, sitting in the coffee-shops with their families and playing games with their children suddenly haunted by the portraits of the soldiers makes one simultaneously remember and forget.

In his aforementioned interview in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Derrida directly links his theory of film's spectrality to psychoanalysis. According to him, it was psychoanalysis that taught us that the dead can become more powerful, more frightening and even more alive than the living. This is also consistent with the definition of the Derrida's spectral spaces that one experiences while watching a film. In response to the question "Do you believe in ghosts?" in *Ghost Dance* Derrida suggests a formula: "cinema plus psychoanalysis equals a science of ghosts" (Derrida 1983). What links the two constituents of the formula? According to Derrida, the spectre is what one imagines, "what one thinks one sees and which one projects – on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see" (Derrida

1994, 125). As this quote elucidates, the philosopher distinguishes film images as physical manifestations from imagination as mental activity, and, consequently, equates the film experience with the psychoanalytical session (*séance*). As has been pointed out by James Leo Cahill and Timothy Holland, the French term *séance* for Derrida means both the process of the film projection (“une séance de cinéma”) and the psychoanalytic session (“une séance de psychanalyse”) (Cahill and Holland 2015, 6–7). As Derrida himself explains, “you go to the movies to be analysed, by letting all the ghosts appear and speak. You can, in an economical way (by comparison with a psychoanalytic *séance*), let the spectres haunt you on the screen” (Derrida 2015, 27).

Moreover, in the interview in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Derrida elaborates even further that the film medium does not only project things to viewers, it also absorbs the projections of viewers (Derrida 2015, 29). There are thus structural similarities between seeing images on the screen and working through traumatic memories in the mind. According to Derrida, the film experience can be compared to a psychoanalytic session precisely because both are based on mediated encounters with spectres. And yet, due to the two registers of spectrality at work in cinema, cinematic encounters with the past are different from psychoanalytical sessions, and in a way that is mirrored by the difference between Derrida’s and Freud’s conceptions of mourning. This particular difference can be extrapolated into broader thinking about the spectral functioning of films that deal with war traumas.

Creating a double imposition of images representing two different times, Loznitsa does not provide a lot of hints as to their broader context, maintaining instead a cinematic neutrality towards the siege of Sarajevo: the film does not re-enact the actual war nor does it represent the atrocities. On the contrary, by employing the material techniques to record the images of the everyday mirrored on the surface of the reflective booth filled with the photographs of Bosnian soldiers, Loznitsa creates a spectral place for the ghosts of the war to haunt present-day Sarajevo. The horrifying and forgotten Sarajevo meets the peaceful and melancholic Sarajevo. The black-and-white background blurs the distance between the two temporalities. The ghosts of the dead soldiers and the people who used to kill or tried to escape the killings face each other in this illusionary and yet purely cinematic space, allowing the viewer to reflect on the presence of the post-traumatic city haunted by its traumatic past.

Loznitsa’s film is therefore not only capable of enlarging the traumatic images but also of facilitating the experience of the heterogeneity of space and time (the attributes of cinematic spectrality identified by Derrida). Making the

photographic past visible within the reflective booth mirroring the durational present, Loznitsa creates conditions for an encounter with the traumatic past not unlike a psychoanalytic session (Derrida 2015, 26). This is to say that through the material construction of the double imposition, the trauma of the Bosnian war in Loznitsa's film is returned in a non-representational way to activate new pathways of dealing with the past. In this respect, sound is an important technique in the procedure of half-mourning the killed Bosnians. A few unexpected gunshots intruding into the diegetic layer of sounds recorded in the streets of present-day Sarajevo are heard throughout the film. They strengthen the hauntological experience and remind viewers that the present is always haunted by the past, even if the latter is barely visible or ignored. In other words, although the city's inhabitants appear to have successfully overcome the past (their daily activities look as if the traumatic past has been forgotten), the gunshots on the soundtrack make it so that the viewer is routinely awakened from the fantasy of forgetting.

Through the material implementation of the double imposition and the application of the experimental matter-image-sound montage, Loznitsa does not only remind about the societal trauma and invite viewers to walk through the hard memories of the recent history of Sarajevo, he also reassesses the audiovisual system through which traumatic memories acquire cinematic sensibility. What Derrida names a first or elementary register of spectrality is present in the footage of the quotidian life of the city and is inherent to the photos of the soldiers. However, the secondary register of spectrality is what matters the most in this film. The reflective booth made specifically to mirror the reality of war can be understood as a device to call the present-day Sarajevo inhabitants (and, consequently, the film's viewers) to meet head-on the war spectres that have been preserved from being forgotten without having been represented.

## **Aural Evidence and Ghostly Space in Narkevičius's *Legend Coming True***

The essayistic and personal films by Deimantas Narkevičius, one of the most consistent and widely recognized Lithuanian film and video artists, have been exploring the paradigmatic historical shifts in his own country and the entire post-Soviet region. Renowned for his *Once in the XX Century* (2000), a reversed video documentation of the removal of the communist statue of Lenin that took place in Lithuania in 1991 designed as an ironic gesture pointing to the repetition of history and the longing for or denial of certain political and economic

ideologies, Narkevičius's body of work exemplifies an original examination of the relationship between personal memories and political histories.

*Legend Coming True*, Narkevičius's third film, is a non-fiction reflection on the memory of the Holocaust that took place in the current capital of Lithuania and the actions of resistance undertaken by Vilnius's Jewish population. The film refers to the traumatic past of the Holocaust in Lithuania that resulted in the killings of almost the entire community of Lithuanian Jews. The Vilnius ghetto was established in September 1941, a few months after the Nazis occupied Lithuania. It was a key move in the Nazi-led process of separating, persecuting and ultimately killing the Lithuanian Jews. During the two years of its existence, starvation, diseases, street executions and deportations to concentration and extermination camps reduced the Vilnius ghetto's population of Lithuanian Jews from an estimated 40,000 to almost zero. Only a few hundred managed to survive, either by finding shelter among locals living outside the territory, hiding in the forests surrounding the city or joining partisan resistance troops.

The history of the Jewish Holocaust in the country, which was silenced by the Soviet regime in the post-war period to the advantage of the national discourse, is still very often ignored in contemporary Lithuania, which regained independence from the Soviet Union more than three decades ago. Without a public discussion, the trauma of witnessing and participating in the Holocaust has affected multiple generations of Lithuanians. In the late 1990s (when *Legend Coming True* was made), its recognition was not common in the public discourse, thus Narkevičius's film can be seen as a timely and much-needed reaction to this situation. Narkevičius's one-hour-long film superimposes and edits together sounds and images in order to re-activate the spectres of the most traumatic event in the history of Lithuania. At the beginning of the film, a teenage girl appears in front of the camera and retells, in Lithuanian, the founding legend of the city of Vilnius. Afterwards, the screen turns dark and her voice gives way to the voice of an elderly woman speaking in fluent Russian. The girl's recitation of the widely known legend about the establishing of Vilnius creates a sense of time being out of joint. We hear about the prophetic dream of the iron wolf howling on a hill where the town should be built, of the dream that famously encouraged Gediminas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, to build the town in 1333 and of the letters that he sent to the leaders of different European countries inviting people from all around the continent to come over and live in the new town. Contemporary Lithuanians tend to link the foundational myth of the Grand Duke's letters to an idea of Vilnius's inclusivity, diversity and tolerance, yet this entails a convenient



forgetting or ignoring of the fact that despite such aspirations a large number of Vilnius's inhabitants passively or actively participated in the Holocaust and the slaughter of Lithuanian Jews.

In contrast to the girl's voice, the subsequent monologue of the older survivor of the Holocaust unfolds in monotonous yet hypnotically rhythmic fashion. At times dramatic and horrific, but always sad, the story of Fanja's life in the 1940s covers a lot of ground from Vilnius to Germany, Israel and even Australia. However, a visual layer, which the aural story is superimposed on, is constituted by only four shots filmed in four empty locations situated across the present-day city of Vilnius: the street where Fanja spent her childhood, the exterior of her secondary school, the yard of Vilnius's Jewish ghetto and the unspecified location in Rūdninkai forest, where the Jewish partisan headquarters used to hide during the Nazi occupation.

The film ends with Haisa, another survivor of the Holocaust, a Vilnius resident who played an important role in the resistance movement. Looking directly into the camera, Haifa sings, in Yiddish, *Never Say (Zog nit keynmol)*, the vital song of resistance, written in 1943 in the Vilnius ghetto by Hirsch Glick, which became the anthem of the Jewish partisan movement. The title of the song derives from the beginning of the lyrics: "Never say that you're going your last way/ Although the skies filled with lead cover blue days/Our promised hour will soon come/Our marching steps ring out/'We are here!'" The song straightforwardly contrasts the words of the foundational myth of Vilnius read at the beginning of the film with the all-too-real horrors of the Holocaust. Indeed, in an interview, Narkevičius referred to the girl as a "representative of the present that has not yet been reconciled with the past" (Timofeev 2015).

Beyond the two short scenes that frame the film at the start, Fanja, who is the main storyteller, remains invisible during the whole film. The woman's voice is heard as the screen is filled with imagery of the four sites that recall her and Vilnius's past trauma. Notably, in each of the four locations, Narkevičius set his 8mm film camera to shoot for twenty-four hours at a speed of one frame a minute. As a result, when the film is played at normal speed, the viewer experiences four sequences of so-called time-lapse footage. Each provides a compressed time recorded in the four spaces. Thus, in contrast to Loznitsa's *Reflections*, in which the editing of images from the reflective booth, of photographs and sound carefully juxtaposes past with present making the trauma of the war haunt the quotidian life of the present-day Sarajevo, in *Legend Coming True*, Fanja's testimonials recorded in the present day are exposed on places in Vilnius which



look the same as they did during the time of the Holocaust. Only through Fanja's voice does the history of the past resurface and re-enter the empty historical buildings of Vilnius – which, unlike the majority of the city's Jewish population, survived Holocaust.

Although the time-lapse imagery looks like it could designate a present time (the sites of Fanja's memory were recorded from sunrise to sunrise), the four empty places signify the absence of their present time as well as a virtual future and seem as empty as the rehearsed foundational myth of the city. Reverberations of Fanja's testimonies turn these sites of Vilnius into spectres of the past. Paraphrasing Derrida, while listening to her voice, one feels that the ghosts have survived, they are re-presentified, they appear in the whole of their speech, transforming the urban materiality – the bricks and mortars that constitute the present of Vilnius's Old Town – available to Narkevičius's camera into a spectral space populated with the ghosts of the past that, through this register of spectrality, finally re-enter the viewer's everyday (Derrida 2015, 32).

Describing the strategy he used to shoot in the places that were important for the history of Vilnius's Jewish community, Narkevičius calls the time-lapse a “very strange visual effect that simulates the architectural point of view rather than a human perspective.” According to the artist, “combined with the narrative of the fate of people that have suffered under inhuman conditions, this effect creates a different sense of time, a sense that the past is not something unattainable. That the past can be entered and exited” (Timofeev 2015). Thus, in line with the filmmaker's thoughts and with Derrida's ideas that the recording of speech in films “gives living presence a possibility, which has no equivalent and no precedent, of ‘being there’ once again,” I suggest that the superimposition of voiceover and images as well as the spatially cleared and temporarily compressed urban images exemplify another kind of the spectral presence characteristic of a capacity for a “‘quasi-presentation’ of the world whose past will be, forever, radically absent, unrepresentable in its living presence” (Derrida 2015, 32–33).

The multi-dimensional spatio-temporal structure in *Legend Coming True* exemplifies the film's spectrality at work, exposing the spectator to the traumatic event that haunts them by being visually absent. This absence of the images that are being spoken about puts one into an active imaginative encounter with the unrepresentable events of the Holocaust which took place in Vilnius. As Derrida writes, the films “that have represented the extermination can put us into relation only with something reproducible [and] reconstitutable, [something] that is” (Derrida, 2015, 32). *Legend Coming True*, however, remains (as does *Shoah*) at

the same time where the tragedy has taken place and within the impossibility that “it has taken place and can be representable” (Derrida 2015, 32). The film restores the traumatic event without reconstituting it. By refusing to represent the images of Holocaust, Narkevičius’s film by no means weakens the intensity of re-experiencing the trauma. Quite the contrary, by re-exposing and re-temporalizing the sites of Vilnius that normally lack visible traces of the Holocaust, Narkevičius counters the common state of forgetting it. Thus, by acknowledging the spectral status of the memories of the Holocaust in contemporary Lithuania and respecting the trauma’s unrepresentability, Narkevičius pushes the viewer into the state of half-mourning of the killed, which perfectly illustrates how the spectral images can be, in Derrida’s words, “the testimony itself and a trace of the forgetting, [a] trace of something without trace” (Derrida 2015, 31).

## Conclusions

The “spectral turn” in memory and trauma studies has only recently been linked with film studies. As Caruth, Kaplan and Wang among others write, haunting is often understood as the return of repressed trauma, in the sense that “to be traumatised is to be ‘possessed by an image or event’ located in the past” (Blanco and Perrier 2013, 11). Spectres of the past, therefore, can be seen as a symptomatology of trauma as they become both the objects of the present and metaphors of the future.

Film is the perfect medium for temporal impositions, or, in Derrida’s words, for the practice of cinematic conjuration (Derrida 1994, 120–121). As traumatic images are continuously undone by the impossibility of exhausting the limit experiences of catastrophe, filmmakers as well as film scholars are searching for a language that could allow traumatic events to be conceived ethically and comprehensively in such a way that viewers can access the painful past rather than forget or dismiss it. As I showed, Loznitsa’s and Narkevičius’s films both create spectral places where different temporal dimensions meet. In so doing, they showcase the influence of the traumatic past not just on how one lives in the present, but also on how one conceives of the possibility of living “more justly” in the future. Attempts to ignore, conceal or forget traumatic events, whether the Bosnian War in Sarajevo or the Holocaust in Vilnius, invite potentially intense hauntological effects. Without aiming at a filmic reconstruction of historical atrocities, Loznitsa’s *Reflections* and Narkevičius’s *Legend Coming True* create spectral spaces in order to invite the ghosts of the past to manifest themselves in

the present. In seeking to create spaces of possibilities for new futures, Loznitsa and Narkevičius do not rely on the conventional connection between mourning and representation; rather, they connect mourning with the imagination. While all films enable viewers to see the world, Loznitsa's and Narkevičius's works offer reviews of the past from a reflective stance, and they refuse to reconstruct the past as if it was an untroubled image simply needing the proper representation. By superimposing the past on the present (Loznitsa) and the present on the past (Narkevičius), both filmmakers refuse to place images of the past within a determinate context, as if they were incapable of haunting the spectators from more than one place and more than one time. As Narkevičius has explained: "Although my work deals with topical issues, the underlying problems usually come from the past [...]. The new political situation has brought us back to the revolving circle of history, which inevitably requires a vision. But when we began to create this vision ourselves, the past began to creep in, phenomena that had previously been hidden behind the surface of ideology. They led us into unmarked, unwanted, unpleasant territory, clouding our vision of the future" (Narkevičius, 2020).

The filmmakers' efforts to explore the spectrality of film is a critical task in the process of understanding how today's media-saturated societies deal with trauma that is situated in the past but haunts the present and threatens to haunt the future. "To learn to live with ghosts" – even for Derrida himself the task was by no means a simple one. To complete this task requires that one rethink ethics, politics and aesthetics of representation vis-à-vis trauma, time and memory in hopes of being able to learn and remember "more justly" (Derrida 1994, xviii–xix). Mourning without dismissing the loss, coming to terms with a complicated past without erasing it, mourning just half-way – these are the tasks proposed by Derrida and cinematically enacted in the films by Loznitsa and Narkevičius.

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# The Exquisite Corpse of History. Radu Jude and the Intermedial Collage

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**Abstract.** The article argues for the relevance of intermediality in the interpretation of Radu Jude’s films made after 2016: *The Dead Nation* (*Țara moartă*, 2017), *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians* (*Îmi este indiferent dacă în istorie vom intra ca barbari*, 2018), *The Marshal’s Two Executions* (*Cele două execuții ale Mareșalului*, 2018), *To Punish, to Discipline* (*A pedepsi, a supraveghea*, 2019), *The Exit of the Trains* (*Ieșirea trenurilor din gară*, 2020), *Uppercase Print* (*Tipografic majuscul*, 2020), *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn* (*Babardeală cu bucluc sau porno balamuc*, 2021). Instead of framing Jude’s aesthetic in terms of the Eisensteinian montage, as many reviewers have done, the article addresses the way in which these films insist on the tensions between media, on creating an ontological collage, not only a cinematic montage. The collage effect of the films materializes in sensuously and intellectually layered permutations that connect different media and shares some traits with the Surrealist play of the *cadavre exquis*. The mixture of heterogeneous materials becomes a strategy (informed by the ideas of Walter Benjamin) to reflect on history in the conditions of postmemory as well as a way to explore the relationship between media and reality through various positions of spectatorial engagement and the affective metalepsis between reflexivity and immersion.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Radu Jude, affective intermediality, postmemory, collage in film, photography and cinema.

“History decays into images, not into stories.”  
(Walter Benjamin [1982] 1999, 476.)

## Collage Effect and Intermediality

Although never in the frontline of discussions about contemporary Eastern European cinemas, the poetics of intermediality (i.e. an aesthetic highlighting

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the moving images' relationship with the other arts and the media complexity of moving images) has actually emerged in a variety of forms, and has proved highly effective in registering how the cultures of the region perceive themselves after the fall of the Iron Curtain caught in-between East and West, past and present, emotional turmoil and more detached self-awareness. Radu Jude's 2016 film, *Scarred Hearts (Inimi cicatrizate)* epitomizes one of the most relevant strategies of such a poetics of in-betweenness: a pictorial stylization displaying a fascination with the arrested, *tableau vivant*-like pose perceptible on the border of stasis and movement, in-between photography, painting and moving image.<sup>2</sup> This kind of stylization that we find in the works of a wide range of Eastern European authors, is usually enhanced by scenes in which, signalling an adherence to a cultural tradition, some of the great paintings of Western European art history are recreated or alluded to,<sup>3</sup> often in images that can be considered "cadaverous *tableaux vivants*," as they display a live body as if it were a corpse. These tableaux confront the mortality of the body with the immortality of art, and intertwine the sensation of corporeality with the distancing effect of a conspicuous artificiality and aestheticization. They are capable of conveying a wide spectrum of tensions between the experience of transitoriness and a feeling of paralysis, and open up the image towards multiple philosophical interpretations.<sup>4</sup> Belonging to the so-called second wave of New Romanian cinema (the first wave making themselves widely known with a series of award winning films marked by a kind of austere realist style in the early 2000s), Radu Jude's latest experimental works propose a radically different approach to reality and a media-conscious reflection on history. They also explore intermediality as an "art of in-betweenness" even further, moving from what I have distinguished earlier as a "sensual" mode of intermediality (that brings forth impressions of other arts through such painterly images as mentioned before) to experiment with strategies based predominantly on a "structural" mode that unravels the world on the screen into pieces and layers of media forms and representations (Pethő [2011] 2020, 93–163). Thus, metaphorically speaking, Jude moves from the pictorialism of the "cadaverous *tableau vivant*" to a construction that resembles more the mashup of the *cadavre exquis*.

2 See more about this in the introductory essay to the volume, *Caught In-Between. Intermediality in Eastern European and Russian Cinema* (Pethő 2020, 6–11).

3 Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp* reproduced in Jude's *Scarred Hearts* was therefore chosen as an emblematic image on the cover of the book, *Caught In-Between. Intermediality in Eastern European and Russian Cinema* (2020).

4 See more about this in: Sándor 2014, Király 2016a, Pethő 2016 and 2020, 6–10.



The *cadavre exquis* or *exquisite corpse* was originally a parlour game practiced by the Surrealists and used as a form of artistic creation (similar to the Dadaist cut-ups) in which each participant added a segment to the finished artwork, taking turns in writing or drawing, sometimes cutting and pasting pieces of photographs onto a sheet of paper.<sup>5</sup> The resulting text or picture (or a mixture of the two) was a collage composed of incongruous elements, each taken from different contexts, connected to different authors, styles and sometimes media. Although there have been cinematic experiments that aimed specifically to adapt the concept of the *exquisite corpse*, like Apichatpong Weerasethakul's film, *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000), blending documentary, collaborative storytelling and fiction, in Jude's case, I am using the term more loosely to highlight the mixture of fragments offering glimpses into different worlds, the elements of contingency, the multiplicity of authorial voices, discourses and media, as well as the *exquisite corpse's* paradoxical invocation of both life and death. All of these apply to Jude's films made after the sensuously intermedial period dramas, *Aferim!* and *Scarred Hearts* (2016), which already prefigured this change in poetic strategy through the abundance of literary and pictorial quotations.<sup>6</sup> *The Dead Nation* (*Țara moartă*, 2017), *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians* (*Îmi este indiferent dacă în istorie vom intra ca barbari*, 2018), *The Marshal's Two Executions* (*Cele două execuții ale Mareșalului*, 2018), *Punish and Discipline* (*A pedepsi, a supraveghea*, 2019), *The Exit of the Trains* (*Ieșirea trenurilor din gară*, 2020), *Uppercase Print* (*Tipografic majuscul*, 2020), *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn* (*Babardeală cu bucluc sau porno balamuc*, 2021), all draw on various archival sources and/or different types of representations in creating a fragmented and medially layered cinematic texture. In what follows, I would like to unravel this composite style, and bring into focus the inherent tensions woven into its fabric.

In interviews, Jude speaks of Eisenstein's montage technique and the kind of modernist political cinema represented by Jean-Marie Straub's and Danièle Huillet's films in which montage is a means for delivering powerful messages.<sup>7</sup> Along with this undeniable legacy, however, the heterogeneity of the materials and the manner of their combination can also be framed from another perspective:

5 Apparently, the name originates from a phrase composed when they first played the game, "le cadavre exquis boira le vin nouveau"/ "the exquisite corpse will drink the new wine" (Breton and Éluard 1938, 6).

6 See Pieldner's analysis of *Aferim!* (2016).

7 See, for example: <https://www.ziarulmetropolis.ro/radu-jude-simt-nevoia-de-cat-mai-multe-reactii-negative-violente-fata-de-filme/>, and: <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/tipografic-majuscul-este-un-film-de-montaj-in-sensul-stabilit-de-eisenstein/>. Last accessed 12. 01. 2022.

as an intermedial collage, i.e. a collage exploiting the rich connotations and sensations ensuing from the juxtaposition of different media. Although they are partially overlapping notions, some differentiating traits between montage and collage are worth noting. Montage is most generally defined as the technique of editing, i.e. piecing together discrete sections of films to form a continuous whole. Sergei Eisenstein's theory emphasizes the dialectical collision of images and sequences, their rhythmic, affective and intellectual impact unfolding in time. Accordingly, montage is described as something essential in creating meaningful sequences of moving images. The notion of collage is more frequently used to denote a technique in the visual arts, in which different materials are assembled on a pictorial surface, heightening a sense of tactility, texture and simultaneity. The key issue is how the parts relate to each other. Montage is a process of adding up elements in conveying meaning, assimilating the parts into a continuum, into an autonomous artwork, even when contrasts are involved, or when image and sound are edited together in what Eisenstein describes as a vertical montage. As he writes, "there is no difference in principle between purely visual montage and montage that embraces different areas of sensory perception" ([1940] 2010, 329). Even in a most heterogeneous form that Eisenstein calls the "montage of attractions," in which there are "arbitrarily chosen independent [...] effects (attractions)" and unexpected junctions between the arts (e.g. theatre and cinema), the aim is for building a construction allowing for the convergence of intellectual, sensual and emotional impact, mathematically calculated through "the sum of stimulants," "to produce specific emotional shocks in the spectator in their proper order within the whole," leading to a particular ideological conclusion ([1923] 1988, 34–35).

Collage, on the other hand, is based on fragmentation in which the pieces that are "torn" from their original "place" retain their relative independence within the new context, and pose a powerful challenge to the "aesthetic 'autonomy' of the painted surface, and to the principle of organic composition, the integral relationship between part and whole" (Arthur 1998). Departing from the ideas of Eisenstein, Jacques Aumont writes that the "montage of attractions" is "like a fireworks display, a dazzling spectacle in which each 'sequence' (in fact there is nothing very sequential about them) stands on its own, like an 'aggressive moment.' [...] Within this overall effect, however, each apparition loses its singularity" (2020, 49). In contrast, the diverse elements in a collage "are subjected to an overall artistic logic, but by virtue of their separate strengths preserve their heterogeneity" (2020, 49). Unlike montage which is ubiquitous and essentially cinematic, Aumont

considers collage an “inherently odd model” in cinema. Comparing film to “a work of art which combines elements of diverse origins: drawings, photographs, prints, sections of newspapers and even fragments of objects, all arranged in an inconsistent manner,” is paradoxical, he affirms, “because a collage appears in one space while montage occurs over time, thereby bringing memory (both short and medium term) into play. In addition, apart from a few exceptional cases [...], the filmic material is always materially homogeneous. It can only be heterogeneous in its origin, in cases where the film is made up of pieces of film taken from ‘elsewhere’– found footage” (2020, 49). Although Aumont makes a germane observation, it is conceivable to go even further and reflect on a whole range of other possibilities in which the “separate strengths” of “elements of diverse origins” come to the fore in cinema. Other media (or images resembling or representing other arts) may disrupt the unity of the cinematic discourse and introduce connotations and sensations that are never fully absorbed by the Gesamtkunstwerk-like principle of montage<sup>8</sup> or a “self-effacing”<sup>9</sup> narrative flow of moving images. They may demand the viewer’s distinct attention and ability to perceive interactions, frictions or breaks between them, i.e. they may act self-reflexively as instances of intermediality. This can happen not only at the level of the image (undoing the amalgam of its palimpsestic layering), but also on the profilmic level of the *mise-en-scène* (emphasizing embedded representations), at the level of the vertical montage of sound and image, or the sequence of scenes. There is therefore a correlation between the concepts of collage and intermediality, in as much as the perception of heterogeneity that is essential in a collage is also a prerequisite of intermediality, just as a focus on intermedial relationships always highlights the relative autonomy, semantic complexity and dynamics of the parts involved in a collage. With the rare exceptions of certain experimental practices in which there are literally other materials glued on the film stock (e.g. in Stan Brakhage’s *Mothlight*, 1963, that Aumont mentions, or *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1981), the term is, of course, used as a metaphor. When we are speaking of collage in film, we are actually speaking of a collage effect, much in the same way as Jaimie Baron (2014) conceives the “archive effect” in terms of a specific audiovisual experience produced in the context of experimental, documentary or fiction films.

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8 One of the most important sources of inspiration for Eisenstein’s ideal of the “synchronization of senses” (1957, 69–113) and the organic synthesis of arts was Richard Wagner’s concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk. See a detailed elaboration of this connection in Finger (2006, 136–140) and Somaini (2016).

9 This is a term introduced by David Bordwell to describe the perception of the so-called classical narrative style, which “typically encourages the spectator to construct a coherent, consistent time and space for the fabula action” (1985, 163).

However, while “the archive effect” is based on the perceived temporal disparity of fragments, collage in film is a form of intermediality that hinges on perceiving medial otherness and the “separate strengths” of the media involved.

With the aim of looking more closely at the intricate forms and effects of collage, a media phenomenological approach to intermediality and, as I will argue further on, considering specifically the affective impact of media is more useful than an abstract, semiotic frame of reference, because it enables a more nuanced observation in the spirit that W. J. T. Mitchell has recently demanded, “allowing theory to emerge as sensuous, articulate experience” (2017, 12). In view of this, it is not just “the three great orders of media” that Mitchell mentions, “images, sounds, and words” (2017, 12) that we can take into account, but, speaking of cinema, also all kinds of moving images, as they engage our senses and interact, “producing the double signification of ‘sense’ as feeling and meaning” (2017, 13). Thus, we can speak of a “sense” of intermediality (i.e. a noticeable and meaningful media difference and interplay) coupled with a collage effect occurring through the perception of the admixture of any media form that is deemed uncinematic in cinema, as well as through diverse technical formats (analogue or digital film, varying resolutions, etc.), or even styles (i.e. certain well-established patterns attached to historically distinct types of films), which, placed side by side, throw into relief their own unique affordances in mediation, in carrying specific meanings, sensations of quasi-materiality and affects within the otherwise elusive substance of moving images.

A paradigmatic example of this is Alain Resnais’s famous documentary about the Nazi concentration camps, *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brüllard*, 1956), which pieces together black and white archival footage and photographs with new sequences filmed in colour, exploring the sites of the camps in the present. There has been much debate around the ethics of showing the gruesome pictures of corpses and emaciated bodies in the film, but leaving this debate aside, I would only like to point out its blending of the principle of montage with collage and an impression of intermediality, as it provides a relevant counterpoint to what we see in Jude’s cinema. The film relies on the disjunction and incommensurability between the archival images and Resnais’s recurring tracking shots scanning the landscape around the former camps and the deserted buildings. Past and present are associated with two kinds of images in the film, i.e. the photo-filmic archive, with each individual picture and sequence recognized as both imprints and remainders of a palpable reality that was there before, contrasting with Resnais’s shots that are seen as images made in the present, as images of a movie, recording

the sites of historical events, signifying an absence. Document and documentary are connected not only to different time frames, but they appear on ontologically different planes. Nevertheless, Resnais constructs a quasi-homogenous discourse, stitching into its narrative fabric the essentially non-discursive archival material. He does this by bridging the gap both between media (i.e. photography and film, by combining them in smooth transitions, in a manner that seems to infuse movement into stasis) and between these planes, through the accompanying musical score and voice-over commentary which also provide emotional and intellectual cohesion to the poetics of the film, wrapping up the interstitial collage into a montage. Gilles Deleuze's claim that Resnais "creates a cinema which has only one single character. Thought" (1989, 122) captures a similar impression. Furthermore, the film's vantage point is clearly anchored in the present, as the viewer's gaze is carried around the sites. It is the gaze of the living looking at the dead, invited to confront the past.

In comparison, Jude's films dealing with past and present atrocities offer a multiplication of viewpoints without a single definite anchor, through a collage strategy that is reconfigured in a different way in each of his subsequent films. I will examine Jude's films produced between 2016 and 2021 through a few discernible conceptual clusters. First, I will look at the films that reveal the epistemological values and limitations of collage as a means of reflection on history, then I will try to chart the affordances of the intermedial relations of words and images in his photofilms, and lastly, I will address issues of affectivity, performativity and metalepsis in the films that deal with a historical perspective projected over both the recent past and the present.

## **Postmemory and the Angel of History**

In *The Marshal's Two Executions* Jude uses a minimalist collage form, a mirror structure, placing side-by-side fiction film and archival footage. The short film shows the execution of Ion Antonescu, Romania's leader and Hitler's ally during the Second World War, recorded in 1946 by cameraman Ovidiu Gologan, and compares it to the scene as it is rendered in the biographical film directed by Sergiu Nicolaescu, *The Mirror (Oglinda)*, (1994). The correspondences are striking, as Nicolaescu remakes almost shot-by-shot the original film. Despite these parallels, however, the comparison works towards the perception of a similar disjunction and incommensurability as we see in Resnais's film, but without the organizing principle of a montage. Jude is not interested in constructing a narrative but in

deconstructing the images through their association.<sup>10</sup> Nicolaescu's sequences are immediately decoded as fiction, even before we can observe the subtle, manipulative changes in the reconstruction. The imitation of the colour palette of old movies and the vigorous voice-over introduction, the steady camera, the dramatic dialogue enhanced by the surging music and the close-ups create an image shaped by clichés of cinematic imagination in stark contrast with the silent, black-and-white footage of the execution, which is opaque, unsteady and uncanny. Nicolaescu aims to rehabilitate the marshal, the scene's resemblance to the original footage serves a rhetorical purpose, the differences in framing, and the alignment of the camera with the executioners and their guns point to the victims presented as heroes. The original footage concentrates on the people who are executed by the firing squad; it is filmed for the most part by a handheld camera and makes us feel the tension of the eyewitness of a horrible act, the abjection of the dead bodies, thus allowing a glimpse into something that is very hard to see. Nicolaescu constructs a fictionalized account, an unflinchingly sutured vision of the historical event with the familiar devices of narrative cinema, fabricating a rhetoric of objectivity through its connection to the source material and documentary style voice-over in order to deliver his own unequivocal interpretation of the events.

In this manner, the sequence from Nicolaescu's film clearly supports Jacques Rancière's contention that the essential feature of fiction is "not a lack of reality but a surfeit of rationality," an ordering of events according to "consequences of a chain of causes and effects" (2020, 1). Whereas the original footage – with the flickering images partly fading into mist and the lingering on the gaping eyes and mouths of the corpses, with the wavering and jumpy camera movement – allows a sense of subjectivity to seep both into the recording of the event by a mechanical device and into our present day perception of the fragile archival material, opening up the image into an abyss. It appears as something outside the rational order of fiction, what is more, in Julia Kristeva's words, "it jettisons the object into an abominable real" (1982, 9). [Figs. 1–4.] Alternating between these two kinds of moving images (and implicitly, between two different points of view), Jude cuts up the original succession of the shots in both films, resulting in a series of fragments spliced together as distorted mirror reflections. The jarring discordance of this heterogeneity along with the experience of repeated ruptures

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10 See this idea emphasized in this interview: <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/cele-dou%C4%83-execu%C8%9Bii-ale-mare%C8%99alului-compara%C8%9Bie-radu-jude-interviu/29826508.html>. Last accessed 12. 01. 2022.

in the mashup goes beyond the rhetoric of the proposed intellectual exercise (“a comparison,” as announced by the film’s subtitle). It amplifies the affective-performative qualities inherent in any collage, i.e. the unresolved tension both between the different sources of the images and between the sensuous features of each sequence ripped apart.

The short film is actually a kind of by-product of the feature film, *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians*, which invites the viewer to plunge headlong into the abysmal depths and spirals of history. The title is a quotation from Deputy Prime Minister Mihai Antonescu, who was speaking in the summer of 1941, before the start of the ethnic cleansing on the Eastern Front (and who was later executed together with Marshal Ion Antonescu in 1946). The film is about a young woman’s political art project staged in the centre of Bucharest, consisting of a re-enactment of the massacre of Jewish people in Odessa in the autumn of 1941, and making a film about it in order to raise awareness of the atrocities committed by the Romanians. The synopsis of the film, published in the official press leaflet, is a mere list of keywords thrown together in a manner suggesting a cut-up, fragmented text, indicating a clear engagement with the principle of collage.<sup>11</sup> The director’s statement from the same official leaflet includes a quotation from Walter Benjamin’s essay on the philosophy of history. The fragment is a philosophical ekphrasis of a painting that Benjamin owned, *Angelus Novus* (1920) by Paul Klee [Fig. 8]. In Benjamin’s compelling poetic interpretation, the painting “shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward” (2007, 257–258).

11 “Military reenactment – Hannah Arendt – show – 1941, “the year that keeps returning,” as seen from 2018 – quotations – firearms – archive footage – the Odessa massacre – 16 mm and video – the Military Museum – negationism – videomapping – burlesque – dialogues – fanfare – Isaac Babel – fragmented narrative – Wenn die Soldaten durch die Stadt marschieren – trivialization by comparison – script by Marshal Antonescu – fire – directed by Radu Jude – featuring Ioana Iacob, Alexandru Dabija, Alex Bogdan – barracks jokes – ordinary people – nunca más! – the present past, the past present.” ([https://www.betacinema.com/index.php/fuseaction/download/lrn\\_file/175689.pdf](https://www.betacinema.com/index.php/fuseaction/download/lrn_file/175689.pdf). Last accessed 12. 01. 2022.)



The film is in fact a vision of such a “pile of wreckage” or “debris” of history assembled for the most part according to the principle of *mise-en-abyme*, i.e. a vortex structure of superimpositions of narrative layers, images, texts, objects and theatrical *mise-en-scène* in which all the embedded layers reflect one another. We may see an allusion to this in the segment in which the protagonist is holding up an old photograph against the building in front of which it was taken, and captures the building again in its present state in a joint picture with the historical photograph, replicating its point of view on her mobile phone, while the scene itself (showing the act of taking a photo of a photo) is constructed as another version of the same shot [Fig. 5]. This multiple mirroring also reveals how such a *mise-en-abyme* construction overlays not only a series of representations, but connects past and present, mediation and immediacy, inviting the viewer to reflect on all these juxtapositions.

Jude frames the movie self-reflexively, starting with a film within a film, showing in a kind of prologue a fragment of archival footage on a digital monitor. As the screen goes blank, the title appears on the same monitor hinting both at the historical origin of the quotation that takes the place of the archival images, and at the film in the process of being edited. The film then shows a film crew at work in a museum among glass cases filled with guns. The film’s clapperboard appears in close-up, identifying this to be the shooting of a Radu Jude film, *Is This What You Were Born For?* (*Pentru asta te-ai născut?*), which, as we learn from several sources,<sup>12</sup> was the original, provisional title of the film. Thus, the two titles are connected to objects belonging to different phases of a film production (editing and shooting), and have divergent connotations: the final version closely linked to the evoked historical time and the embedded provisional title linked to yet another time frame and to a mere idea of a film preserved, encapsulated within a work that has already surpassed this incipient stage. Jumping from the archival images to the museum as a shooting location, the film conflates a reflection on history with a reflection on the means of reflections on history, as well as a preoccupation with its own history, with the recording of its own progress both as an act of physical creation and as a thought process. This latter is also made explicit by the gesture of the protagonist turning to the camera and introducing herself as the actress, Ioana Iacob, playing the role of Mariana Marin in the film and saying a few words about what differentiates the fictional character from

12 E.g. <https://www.filmneweurope.com/news/romania-news/item/114423-production-radu-jude-preps-is-this-what-you-were-born-for>. Last accessed 12. 01. 2022.



the real person who embodies her.<sup>13</sup> This reflexive frame is then doubled by the actual narration in which we see the preparations and staging of the public performance. Additionally, this narrative includes a further reflexive frame in which a town hall official supervising the project, Mr. Movilă (played by one of the director's recurring actors, Alexandru Dabija) and Mariana continuously discuss ideas connected to the spectacle. The performance itself is then shown to be recorded in (live) television style, with multiple cameras placed around the square. And when we notice the familiar figure of the director, Radu Jude, in the crowd as an extra, vociferously reacting to the performers in the square, in the company of people casting glances at the camera and thus breaking the so-called fourth wall of the screen [Fig. 6], we see the film gesturing again, as in the beginning, towards its audience, playfully acknowledging its constructedness.

Self-reference of this kind, which invites the viewers to watch a film being made in front of their eyes, creates the illusion of reality around the embedded fiction that is meant to expose the concrete, tangible world in which a work in progress unfolds through various means of mediation. As such, it has the ambivalent potential to present art both as an artificial construction and as a straightforward depiction of reality. It is through this intertwining that film's main questions emerge for the viewer. These questions do not only concern the understanding of history despite all the explicit debates addressing it in the film, but also the relationship of media and reality, which is in fact a central issue in all of Jude's collage films. Can media actually mediate? Can there be a leap from representation to presentation, and thus, can the use of media in a film (archival footage, photography, music, theatre, etc.) become an effective strategy to create artificial "passages" to the real?<sup>14</sup> Can the past be excavated and revived from pictures, objects and texts, so that it has a perceptible, emotional impact in the present?

The show directed by Mariana is not a realistic docudrama, but a spectacularly stylized multimedia performance with scenes recreating archival photos, involving

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13 The explicit acknowledgement of the double identity of the woman (actress and fictional character) may remind us of Jean-Luc Godard's heroine in *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (*Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*, 1967), and there are also other similarities with Godard's political cinema (including stylistic features like the use of vibrant, primary colours in clothes and objects), as noticed, among others, by Lazăr and Gorzo (2019, 10). For Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* pointing out the double identity of the heroine becomes the start of a more complex and universal philosophical inquiry into the nature of images. Jude's brief scene is perhaps no more than a nod to Godard, but it does anticipate that this will be a film that explores role-playing, media reflexivity, the duality of fiction and reality, attempting to add more layers to each of its scenes.

14 Lúcia Nagib (2020) has proposed the idea of such "passages" as a strategy to forge a cinema deeply committed to reality through intermediality.

amateur actors, theatrical sets and props, military marching bands, accompanied by today's fashionable and state-of-the-art video mapping technology, the projection of images over the surrounding buildings in one of Bucharest's most iconic squares. [Fig. 7.] The performance staged in this square is also uncannily resonant with the grandiose public pageants of the Ceaușescu era, and the place of the re-enactment is saturated with several layers of historical memories. The square as we see it today is a historical palimpsest. It is the Revolutionary Square (formerly named the Royal Palace Square), where a pro-monarchist and anti-Communist protest was violently crushed in 1945, and which later became symbolic for marking both the apogee of Ceaușescu's dictatorship (as a place where he openly condemned the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968) and the fall of the regime after the disastrous mass meeting held in the same location in 1989. The re-enactment show, as a multimedia event embedded in this specific site, augmented by digital visual effects, spotlights the multiple superimpositions that appear both on the level of the self-reflexive cinematic narrative and on the level of pro-filmic reality, where an obscure and deliberately obscured past looms below the visible surface of the present.

The film's multi-layered *mise-en-abyme* construction becomes a double-edged device, one that both uncovers and reproduces the mechanisms leading to this obscurity. In one of their conversations with Mariana, Movilă dismisses the uniqueness of historical events and the reliability of historiography, arguing that history tends to repeat itself, and that historiography is nothing but texts quoting other texts, one writing incorporating the ideas from another, thus suggesting their ultimate disconnection from reality. The part in which we see an excerpt from Sergiu Nicolaescu's film *The Mirror* is perhaps an ironic reflection on this. Nicolaescu's movie is rewriting the past, and (as the film's companion piece, *The Marshal's Two Executions* demonstrates), in one key section, it is rewriting another film (i.e. the original footage). Displayed on a small, old-fashioned TV in Mariana's room, and inserted within a contemporary domestic setting, a piece of history is then wrapped into a boxed-in fragment of fictionalized history within a fiction film about history.

The immediate context of this sequence is symptomatic for the way in which Jude attempts to counter the infinite regress effect distancing the film's multiple *mise-en-abymes* of representations from physical reality by repeatedly inserting intellectual debates into shots with locations engaging the senses (featuring loud music, people in hectic movement, bright colours, overcrowded frames, etc.), staging a clash between mind and body, abstract thought and raw emotion. The movie quotation is embedded in a postcoital scene that flaunts the naked

bodies of Mariana and her lover, with the images of flesh, skin and hair.<sup>15</sup> The carnal relationship shown in this scene is a clandestine affair kept secret from a husband who is away, and with whom Mariana is only seen talking via the computer screen. There is an unplanned pregnancy and the protagonist reflects on the possibility of its termination from a feminist point of view, retorting to the lover's cautious inquiries by reminding him of a woman's right over decisions concerning her own body. In this way, while Mariana is now grappling with the issue of collective responsibility over lives brutally taken in the past, at some point she will also have to ponder the fate of her unborn baby. The tangibility of the present, the sense of corporeality foregrounded in the scene with her lover, enhanced by the prospect of life-altering personal decisions, is in contrast with the distant, intangible past and the historical events, but it also points to the precariousness of human existence that ultimately connects them.

There are also other resonances between past and present. Mariana denounces the naivety and misinformation of people that lead to the massacre, and is infuriated by the argument of relativism voiced by Movilă that such events are not unique in history. Yet the pattern of repetition germinates in Mariana's zealous project itself. Some of the people participating in the re-enactment prove that xenophobia is just as entrenched in the present as it was in the past, and physical violence springs easily from situations of confrontation. In her passionate desire to condemn the barbarity of the executions, facing the ignorance and indifference of her peers, Mariana herself becomes aggressive and attacks a man who angers her, starting to beat him in a frenzy. The past is both dead and buried, and paradoxically present and alive, ingrained not in memory but in our human vulnerability and weaknesses. The message may not be much of a revelation, and the execution may even be fairly didactic, just as the show within the film does not even try to be subtle in its means (as the fictitious director admits to her supervisor). Nevertheless, the complex *mise-en-abyme* structure creates scenes of truly mordant irony that subvert its simplistic reading. Mariana's final political art performance – also bringing to mind the golden years of communist mass spectacle extravaganza – communicates the same impression described by Walter Benjamin, that of history conceived not as a linear succession of events but as “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage” in front of us.

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15 The scene has shocked some of the viewers who saw the display of the non-erotic naked bodies as gratuitous nudity. Andrei Gorzo, on the other hand, considers it as an instance of Jude making fun for fun's sake, by filming the actor, Șerban Pavlu “from a very unflattering angle,” reminiscent of his previous films in which he repeatedly placed him “in undignified, ridiculous postures, as if he were the butt of an extended directorial joke” (2019, 17).

In Boris Groys's interpretation, "Benjamin uses the image of *Angelus Novus* in the context of his materialist concept of history, in which divine violence becomes material violence [...] Benjamin does not believe in the possibility of total destruction. Indeed, if God is dead, the material world becomes indestructible. In the secular, purely material world, destruction can be only material destruction, produced by material forces, and any material destruction remains only partially successful. It always leaves ruins, traces, vestiges behind – precisely as described by Benjamin in his parable" (2016, 35). Jude's vision of history as a "single catastrophe," although informed by a similar materialist view (signalled at the very beginning of the film by Mariana's remark of being an atheist), is clearly adapted to our times. It is a vision shaped not by the memory of the horrible events of the Holocaust but constructed in the condition of so-called postmemory (see e.g. Hirsch 2012, Frosh 2019), when the traumatic past is recalled not by people who experienced it, not even by the generation whose parents experienced it, but by the third generation of survivors. This generation only has material vestiges, objects, museum exhibits, texts, archival photographs and films, historical sites augmented by media representations through which memory can be performed and consumed. As Victoria Aarons and Alan L. Berger describe in their book, "the third generation must navigate with an inexact, approximate map, a broken narrative. Theirs is a 're-created past,' a matter of 'filling in gaps, of putting scraps together'" (2017, 4). For Resnais, the memory of the Holocaust was still a past perceivable in the present (and therefore an intensely painful subject), for Jude this memory can only be a product of "putting the scraps together," what is more, in a context marked by the challenges imposed by an age obsessed with the present<sup>16</sup> and with immersive, hypermediated forms of entertainment.

As a postmemory exercise, the film is therefore packed on the level of text and image with "scraps" both as concrete objects (books, fragments of films on laptops and editing monitors, photographs, artworks, costumes, guns, various items used for the re-enactment, etc.), and in the form of intellectual references and allusions (quotations from philosophy, literature). Mariana's efforts provide a daring mixture of pathos, absurdist comedy and the macabre, and culminate in a collage-show that is hence as much an attempt at a political act of commemoration as a reflection on today's popular culture. Benjamin's "angel of history" is not

16 According to Boris Groys: "our contemporary age seems to be different from all the other historically known ages in at least one respect: never before has humanity been so interested in its own contemporaneity. The Middle Ages were interested in eternity, the Renaissance was interested in the past, modernity was interested in the future. Our epoch is interested primarily in itself (2016, 137).

just evoked, but thrown into the jumble as a large poster reproduction of Klee's *Angelus Novus* painting (which is relatively tiny in original, 31.8 by 24.2 cm) hanging on the wall of Mariana's living room. [Figs. 8–9.] Without ever being brought into full view or close-up, hovering in the dark background, hidden in plain sight, it is an ominous, silent reminder of Benjamin's tragic vision underlying Jude's cinematic collage. Its use remains purely intellectual, spotted only by more attentive and knowledgeable spectators, the blown-up picture does not have the unsettling radiance of the original painting that could somehow permeate the cinematic image. However, in the morbid *tableau vivant* of the dummies staged in the final show, and based on an archival photograph of corpses dangling from the gallows [Figs. 10–11], Jude creates a powerful, contemporary response to Benjamin's angel of history. With their heads turned down towards the people standing below (who are re-enacting the massacre, commenting or just cheering the performers), these life-size puppets seem to embody the same feeling of horror by "fixedly contemplating" both past and present "wreckage" at their feet, unable to "make whole what has been smashed." The source of this horror, however, this time is not just humanity shattered by the Holocaust, but also the impossibility of connecting to the past. If we accept Eva Hoffmann's claim that the second generation "has inherited not experience, but its shadows" and thus "has grown up with the uncanny" (2005, 66), then the third generation's difficulty is that it can only recreate this shadow, the uncanny. Accordingly, the grisly and somewhat vulgar props of the dummies "reviving" an image of the dead are also, paradoxically, mere uncannily materialized shadows of Benjamin's and Klee's *Angelus Novus*.

## Words, Images, and the Blind Spots of History

The evocation of a world through its uncanny shadows is also the key to Jude's *The Dead Nation* (as indicated already by the film's title, which in the Romanian original is actually slightly different, meaning *The Dead Country*). Unlike Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), film history's perhaps most famous incursion into a world of the dead by means of a series of still photographs arranged in a cinematic succession, and accompanied by a voice-over narration, there is nothing cinematic in the construction of Jude's photofilm. In *The Dead Nation* we do not have an arrested, fragmentary flow of images in which photography evokes or morphs into cinema, as we see in *La Jetée*, instead we have a kind of slideshow of individual pictures preserving the autonomy of photography. Each photo appears not just as

a still image, a photogram constructing a film, but also as a unique photographic object displayed within the cinematic frame offered to be looked at individually. There are no cinematic close-ups of details either; we always behold the pictures in their entirety. What binds them together is that the images originate from a single collection of photographs preserving the work of a photographer whose handiwork and idiosyncrasies we learn to recognize by the end. Not being placed in cinematic succession, these pictures do not convey a single narrative, but encapsulate their own, multiple and enigmatic narratives which are not elucidated by the voice-over speaking of events happening elsewhere. The film consists of two parallel layers of image and sound. What we see is a series of photographs taken in the 1930s and 40s by Costică Acsinte, a professional photographer from a small, South-Eastern Romanian town, Slobozia, and what we hear are excerpts from the diaries of a Jewish doctor, writer and poet, Emil Dorian, living in Bucharest, commenting on current historical events and speaking of his own experiences in these dark times, read by Jude as a voice-over, and interspersed with fragments from contemporary propaganda songs and radio broadcasts.

This polyphonic texture of media and multiple points of view is meant to represent the “fragments of parallel lives” implied by the film’s subtitle. On the one hand, we have the rural or small-town Romania portrayed in endearing group photos marked by a kind of naïve aestheticization showing people of varying social strata from middle class downwards. Butchers, bakers, tailors, cooks, shoemakers, seamstresses, soldiers, musicians pose with the tools of their trade, farmers and townspeople are photographed with their family and domestic animals, sometimes captured at leisure in the company of friends gathered for social occasions. [Figs. 12–17.] Presented in chronological sequence, the series of photographs record not only the bucolic country life of the petty bourgeoisie but also the widespread and deep poverty of the lower classes. Cars, motorcycles, or tractors appear after a while as prized possessions, and there is an uncanny fascination with weapons and manliness, we see children performing the Nazi salute [Figs. 18–21], all naturally incorporated in the compositions. On the other hand, in stark contrast, we listen to original recordings of political speeches and military marches. The voice-over narration reads Emil Dorian’s succinct notes on all the major political changes of the day, on the surging wave of antisemitism leading to the escalating humiliations and destitutions of the Jews, the atrocious procedures of torture and mass executions. In the excerpts from the diary, Jude brings into focus an authentic personal reflection on the emergence of the Romanian Holocaust, which has been a blind spot of history for such a long

time, but avoids showing any pictures about it, offering instead a photo album documenting life in a small town. The ambivalent approach may even ironically reiterate the suppression of Romania's contribution to the genocide by official historiography insisting on detailing other events.

As a whole, however, the film becomes primarily a meditation on the wider context of historical events, on how they relate to the ordinary lives of people. On the one hand, Dorian's diary unspools as a series of terse observations which occasionally turn into bitter commentary and lively anecdotes of particularly affecting cases (like the excursus about the orphaned little girl, Clara, sent from Transnistria to Bucharest before being shipped to Palestine, whose tiny body bears "the stigmata of malnutrition," and who speaks of death, of walking over dead bodies "with petrifying nonchalance"). On the other hand, the country photographer's shots encapsulate everyday reality in the changing seasons of the year, and in different stages of life, while the radio speeches and songs provide the general background of the political atmosphere. Jude's cinematic canvas populated by scenes and figures evoked through text, sound and image, encompassing a multitude of characters and situations depicted in minute details, recalls the technique of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, who – in paintings like *The Procession to Calvary* (1564), *The Conversion of St. Paul* (1567), or *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1558) – paints the heroes of Biblical or mythological stories as miniature figures, lost somewhere in the centre of crowded compositions, surrounded by a flurry of people preoccupied with their daily activities. Bruegel weaves the grand stories defining our culture into the texture of everydayness, of the unexceptional stories of people going about with their lives, their own private suffering regardless of the cataclysmic events taking place amongst them.

In spite of their separate approaches, both Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*, alternating archival materials and new footage, and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), using exclusively testimonies filmed in the present, build on a similar contrast between the ordinary enveloping the extraordinary. In both cases, however, there is a distinct temporal gap between the two. As Laura Rascaroli remarks, Resnais's "method throughout focuses on showing how the apparent normality filmed by the camera in the now of the narration conceals a horrifying past" (2017, 49), or, as Georges Didi-Huberman states, the whole challenge of *Night and Fog* "rested on a shake-up of *memory* caused by a contradiction between unavoidable documents of *history* and repeated marks of the *present*" (2008, 130, italics in the original). In Jude's film, this is not contemporary normality reclaiming the space of past horrors, suggested by the images of grassy



lands shown at the sites of genocide in the films of Resnais and Lanzmann, it is the routine of ordinary life of the country occurring simultaneously with the dreadful events described in the voice-over. So we have to wonder: are these people who pose in these pictures of the “Foto Splendid” studio from Slobozia, oblivious, insensible, or complicit to what is going on? The fact that they do not live at the centre of historically significant events, does not mean they are not part of the reality of their day.<sup>17</sup> The juxtaposition of the time frames of the sounds and images makes Jude’s wide-angle perspective clear: these lives may not be directly connected, but they are part of the same world that gestated the Holocaust. This colourful mosaic of human life also includes unimaginable anguish, darkness and even inhumanity. These people are all potential victims, but also potential perpetrators. They will all suffer or die in the war. It is possible that some of them will also go and massacre their fellow humans and commit incomprehensible acts of cruelty. The flow of images enfolds this “terrible *human possibility*” that Didi-Huberman (2008, 28, italics in the original) quotes from Georges Bataille, who wrote about those responsible for the Holocaust not in terms of what makes them exceptional, but in terms of what makes them “similar, fellow human,” and insisted that “Auschwitz is inseparable from us” (2008, 27–28).

Whereas *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians* is all about remembrance as a political act and the challenges of political art in our postmemory condition, *The Dead Nation* does not attempt a “shake-up of memory” in the same vein that Didi-Huberman mentions with regard to Resnais. There is no present vantage point over the past, only the past made present through both the diary and the photos. There is no gap in time, only the gaps between words, sounds and images. The sounds are imageless and the pictures are silent. They are both highly revealing, yet merely lacunary representations of a reality we do not know and cannot remember ourselves, opening up the frames for the viewer’s imagination. The descriptive qualities of the pictures make them invaluable resources for historical anthropology, but their referents are identified only by the date the photos were taken. Excluding the abundance of pictorial details of their physical existence and environment, we actually

17 One could argue that *The Dead Nation* is comparable in this respect with Corneliu Porumboiu’s *12:08 East of Bucharest* (*A fost sau n-a fost?*, 2006), which debated whether people living in a small town in the Eastern part of the country actually had anything to do with the revolution of 1989, or they merely reacted to the news of what happened in the country’s capital when Ceaușescu’s regime collapsed. Nevertheless, while Porumboiu’s satire clearly sets the periphery in contrast with the centre, Jude’s film speaks of “parallel lives” implying no hierarchy between the two, and the duality in his film has more to do with the dialectic of the singular and the universal.



have no information about these people as individuals. Who are they, what did they think or feel, what happened to them? As Siegfried Kracauer writes, “in a photograph a person’s history is buried as if under a layer of snow” (1993, 426), the picture contains only “the residuum that history has discharged,” “if one can no longer encounter the grandmother in the photograph, the image taken from the family album necessarily disintegrates into its particulars” (1993, 429). Similarly, Dorian’s meticulous notes on what is happening in the world around him betray very little directly about himself. There is an excess of particulars that masks many blind spots in this superimposition of text and photography, and brings forth an interplay of the visible and the invisible.

Words and images are in a tense, competing relationship to capture the attention of the viewer, who is constantly forced to move in between and fails to absorb both at the same level of intensity. The powerful impact of the photographs overturns the conventional dynamic between text and image in documentary films, in which verbal narration usually takes the lead as the main source of information, guiding the viewer in the interpretation of the images. The dominance of an “intelligent text” in voice-over is also the way in which many of the essay films “think” (Rascaroli 2017). André Bazin observed, for example, that Chris Marker’s *Letter from Siberia* (*Lettre de Sibérie*, 1958) is actually an “essay documented by film:” the image appears as a mere support of the “verbal intelligence,” connected directly to what is said, and thus “the intelligence flows from the audio element to the visual. The montage has been forged from ear to eye” (2003, 44). In contrast to such films, in *The Dead Nation* the dominance of the text is continuously thwarted. The deadpan delivery of Jude’s voice-over comes across literally as an act of reading a text and not as a direct, verbal recollection that would address the viewer. Despite the shocking content of the narration, which counterpoints the picturesque quality of the photos, and despite the fact that the slow pace of the slideshow does allow the audience time to grasp the weight of the information conveyed by the words, the text does not have the same affective charge as the images, or at least, it does not work in the same way. The director’s personal intervention places Emil Dorian’s prose within Brechtian quotation marks. It preserves the parallel autonomy of the soundtrack and even enhances the distantiation effect of Dorian’s intellectual reflection (which is thus filtered through the mediation of another authorial voice), while Costică Acsinte’s photos fill the screen with mesmerizing effect, immersing the viewer into a fascinating world. This is no longer a montage “forged from ear to eye” or even from the eye to ear, but a collage in which text and image lead indeed to “fragments of parallel

lives” conjured up from long ago. The two, quasi-autonomous and incongruent mediums, which are connected to different viewpoints, are constantly eroding and overwriting each other. As Melinda Blos-Jáni’s refined analysis has pointed out, this is “a film about shifting, fluid meanings” (2020, 142), in which the indexicality of the photographs is weakened in the context of the diary, “images cease to point at the unique reality of Slobozia from the 1930s and 1940s, instead they become signs of possible realities from that era” (2020, 142). Grotesque contrasts and semantic resonances emerge, a series of allegoric associations are created by the coincidences of text and image (e.g. all the slaughtered animals, several photos of people posing with calves and brandishing their knives, the image of people butchering a pig in a partially damaged plate in which their heads have been erased, all appear as ironic parallels to the slaughterhouse effect of the war, etc.). [Figs. 22–23.]

This mutually corrosive and transformative overlay of literature and photography also fills an enormous void in the film, the lack of images of the actual Holocaust, considered by many as “the invisible and unthinkable object par excellence” (Didi-Huberman quoting Gerard Wajcman 2008, 27). Jude seems to allude to this invisibility in the sequence in which the screen goes completely dark while the voice-over is speaking about gas used as a special weapon for the extermination of the Jews. In the photograph shown just before this, we see a group of people surrounded by a sinister halo of blackness seeping into the picture from the margins. The blank screen as a temporal break (and as such, a minimalist and performative cinematic intervention) in the succession of still images lasts for about 35 seconds followed by an extra 15 seconds in which the sound also stops and there is complete silence. This erasure of image and sound is counterbalanced by the following photo of the small-town jazz band posing in the photographer’s studio playing their instruments in a crowded, uncanny, and silent tableau. [Figs. 24–25.] While acknowledging in this way the unfathomable barbarity of what happened in Auschwitz, overall the film contests the radical unrepresentability of the Holocaust by insistently stimulating and testing the imagination through the interaction of word and image, photography and film. Thus, the film supports both Giorgio Agamben’s assertion that one can only speak about the Holocaust by admitting “an impossibility of speaking” (1999, 164), and Didi-Huberman’s claim that “we are bound to imagine, as a way of *knowing it in spite of all*” (2008, 162, italics in the original). Jude’s collage technique foregrounds both the limits of mediation and the productive, liminal spaces of perception, cognition and imagination.

At the same time, the film's photographic tapestry of Bruegelian life, the visible, quasi-palpable layer of the film unfurls on its own a photogenic "mortification" of history, where – as Didi-Huberman comments on Kracauer's criticism of photography – in the opaqueness of the images, history is "rendered impotent, and reduced to 'indifference toward what things want to say'" (2008, 173). The photographic texture of Jude's film weaves life and death together and positions the subjects in an impossible space of in-betweenness. Beside the disjointedness of image and sound leading the viewer into fragmentary, parallel lives of an all-encompassing humanity envisaged by Bataille, the photos also open up multiple paths leading the viewer, more than anything, to parallel associations with death.

In Jude's cinema, death has always been an important topic, even before his collage films. In *A Film for Friends (Film pentru prieteni, 2011)* a man records a video-message ahead of shooting himself in the head. *The Shadow of a Cloud (O umbră de nor, 2013)* presents a priest called to assist a woman on her deathbed and contemplates the perspective of death hanging over all of us. In the short film *It Can Pass through the Wall (Trece și prin perete, 2014)* we see a young girl being unsettled by the news of a neighbour committing suicide. *Scarred Hearts* documents the last months of a terminally ill poet committed to a sanatorium prior to the outbreak of World War II. In *The Dead Nation*, however, death is more than a topic addressed in the film, or a recurring narrative motif; it penetrates the very fabric of the film, becoming the most compelling connotation of the photofilmic images.

The photographs effectively dissect cinema's "body" into pieces, making Jude's film exude "death 24 times a second," in Laura Mulvey's words, as "the still, inanimate, image is drained of movement, the commonly accepted sign of life" (2006, 24). The photographs themselves are all stained by physical deterioration: the coating peeling off the glass plates, corrosion seeping into and erasing parts of the frames, creating new, abstract images of their own disintegration, and gravitating towards the Bataillean *informe* (1985, 31), towards a "formless abstraction striated with fractures."<sup>18</sup> [Figs. 26–27.] Yet even this sensuous texture of decomposition is ultimately erased by the digital conversion of the analogue photographs. The ultra-high resolution scanning glosses over the imperfections, lifts the images from the base materiality of putrefaction on the glass surfaces and (re)casts their formlessness into crisp, poster-perfect *tableaux*, eerily magnified on the cinematic screen. In connection with Resnais's use of archival footage,

18 Excerpt from George Bataille's poem, *I Throw Myself among the Dead* (Botting and Wilson 1997, 105).

Emma Wilson (2011) writes about the heartrending frustration of the desire to touch which enhances the spectral quality of the cinematic image and exposes the ungraspable disappearance of loved ones through images bearing the fleeting photographic traces of the dead. In Jude's cinematic appropriation of Costică Acsinte's remediated images, we are confronted with the double spectrality of digitized photography, which places not only its subjects forever out of reach, but tears away the pictures themselves from our hands and from their fragile materiality as objects, and makes them immaterial and indestructible within the realm of the convergent scopic mediums of film and digital photography, in which "touch" can only be mediated by technology. In these digitized images, the formlessness of decay appears neither as a disruptive process acting against form, suggested by Bataille's concept, nor as a self-reflexive mark of their status as a "visual event" like the mass of blackness in the Sonderkommando photos interpreted by Didi-Huberman (2008, 36), but as a pattern redrawing the visual representations into icons of death.

All the images refer to a world that is gone, in each image we see people who are long dead, while Jude lends his own voice to read out a literary text of a writer speaking from beyond the grave. Looking at the men in uniforms, we cannot shake the impression that in the context of the war, these young men are all potentially marked for death. There are also many pictures of dead children, photographs taken at funerals with open coffins, with their lifeless bodies embalmed by Acsinte's camera [Figs. 28–29].

None of the pictures were made in haste, as in the case of the Sonderkommando photos from Auschwitz that Didi-Huberman (2008) analyses, but composed with attention to detail and in most of the cases, in good humour. The photographer's evident gestures of picture-ness are superimposed onto the gestures of life within the frames, congealing them as visual forms and compositions, generic portrayals of families, craftspeople, soldiers, etc. often arranged in front of the same blanket used as a background in the ramshackle studio. Every now and then, this superimposition accidentally fails. In one of the photos, a calf that cannot stay still and makes a sudden move to leave the carefully arranged scene, and the surprised look and blurred movement of the head of one of the boys disrupt the fixity of the image [Fig. 30]. In another group photo showing the newspaper boys in front of the bookshop, a young lad stands all translucent behind the others, while one of the bystanders also has a ghostlike double in the frame [Fig. 31]. These instances show the uncontrollable movement of life inscribed onto the stiff compositional designs intended to preserve the world in an inanimate form. Setting aside such

incidents, this is not candid photography; all the people strike a pose, some even in an artificial manner as *tableaux vivants* enacting a picture for posterity [Figs. 32–33]. As such, they are all already abstractions of themselves even before the photo is taken. By standing in front of the camera, people consciously halt the flow of life and solemnly acknowledge the process of their objectification as an image, and thus become, by dint of the “mortiferous layer of the Pose,” according to Barthes, “Death in person” (1981, 14–15). Moreover, in the predominantly frontal compositions, most subjects look straight into the lens, with a fierce, fixed stare [Figs. 34–35]. In these uncanny, penetrating gazes, we may feel that it is not us looking at them, but it is the dead (like the ghastly dummies in Jude’s previously analysed film) who are insistently watching us without actually being able to see.

The film has two companion pieces in Jude’s oeuvre: *Punish and Discipline (A pedepsi, a supraveghea, 2019)* and *The Exit of the Trains (Ieșirea trenurilor din gară, 2020)*. The short film, *Punish and Discipline*<sup>19</sup> uses a selection of images from the same archive of Costică Acsinte’s photographs edited together this time with a fragment from the memoir of Colonel Grigore Lăcusteanu, an officer in the Romanian army who actively participated in the violent crushing of the 1848 revolution. The diary was discovered and first published in a heavily truncated form in 1935; however, in 2015 it produced a small-scale literary sensation when the whole text was finally made available in a new, annotated edition. A conservative Russophile, who also joined the service of the Turkish invaders of the country, and a person with a choleric temperament, Lăcusteanu, represented a previously absent voice in historiography (that of the oppressor who stood against the revolutionaries extolled by communist propaganda).

The film is constructed almost in the manner of a true *cadavre exquis* with a simple joining of two, unrelated historical documents, literary text and photography. Part One, entitled *Major Lăcusteanu Arrests Some Revolutionaries* displays a couple of pages of the book, and we hear an excerpt from the memoir in the suggestive interpretation of the actor, Șerban Pavlu. This shorter segment speaks of a violent attack and the Major boasts about his reputation among Armenian children who are scared even by the simple mentioning of his name. The text that fills the screen is not entirely in synch with its audio dramatization, and it materializes as a distinctly different type of visuality compared with the vivid, verbal account that captures our imagination (although the image of the

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19 Unfortunately, until now this film has only been screened at a documentary film festival. I would like to express therefore my gratitude to Radu Jude, who generously made his film available to me at the time of writing this essay.

page replicates in a way the protagonist's aggressive stance with someone having marked it up in ballpoint pen) [Fig. 36].

Part Two is longer (about nine minutes of the total of little over twelve), and it is entitled *Pictures of a Country Policeman, approx. 1950–1980*. This consists of a similar slideshow of photographs as we saw in *The Dead Nation*, only without sound, music or voice-over. This time there is nothing to distract us from looking at the pictures. We see photos of the same man posing with his wife, family, and dog, having fun while drinking with friends, or showing off his gun [Figs. 37–38]. All the photos are printed on paper, which makes them very different from the delicate glass plates digitized for *The Dead Nation*. The images are not as sharp and full of depth, some are partly faded out or sepia toned, the compositions are less aestheticizing, many of them are actual snapshots, showing, for example, the policeman feeding his hens in his backyard, mounted on a motorcycle [Fig. 39], bicycle, or trotting down the country road on a horse. These are no longer *tableaux vivants* fashioned according to the slightly kitschy taste of a small-town photographer aspiring to appeal not just to a lower class but also to a petit-bourgeois clientele. They reflect the change in history and taste. The efforts of beautification are resumed to a few modest attempts at group arrangements, colourizing one of the photos, and the use of the popular deckle-edge photographic papers of the day (the cheap residual traces of the erstwhile connection of pictorialist photography to the visual arts). Both parts of the film end with a few seconds of a military march, written for the Romanian army by Eduard Hübsch, who was a contemporary of Lăcusteanu, and whose music was also indispensable from the military parades demonstrating the power of the Ceaușescu regime.

The title alludes to Michel Foucault's work, *Discipline and Punish* (1995), which traces the evolution of society's ways of punishment from the extreme brutality of public executions and torture to the elaboration of the prison system and the emergence of more refined ways of surveillance. Through the century gap in time between the two parts, Jude confronts in a similar manner two distinct stages in Romania's history of enforced discipline. The adventures of the belligerent 19th-century officer are in contrast with the seemingly uneventful, ordinary life of the country policeman in the second half of the 20th century. However, this opposition between violence and peace is deceptive. The banal photos were taken in an era when the communist state employed the most insidious methods of surveillance to control people. The policeman was a privileged and much feared member of society whose presence among people never failed to remind them of the threat of constant observation and potential persecution (either by the "ordinary" police or by the state

security agents working with a network of collaborators). The idyllic photos hide the larger picture and the true mechanism of discipline and punishment in communist Romania. Thus, the film becomes yet another meditation on the relationship between the visible and the invisible, and on the epistemic limitations of media. The first part shines a flash of light into a distant past through a tiny window opened up by a literary text, while the second part presents us with rather opaque images of life stamped onto photographic paper. The film exhibits what Didi-Huberman (2008) considers the “dual system of the image,” its simultaneous capacity for truth and obscurity, and compares this with the multimedia phenomenology of the literary text. The colourful archaic language heard over the text-as-image in the book and the captivating particulars of the photos inevitably intervene as screens that never allow for a full view of material reality.

*The Exit of the Trains* addresses the blind spots of history more directly. Based on an extensive archival research and created in close collaboration with the historian Adrian Cioflâncă, the almost three-hour-long film documents in yet another slideshow of photographs the pogroms that took place in Iași in June 1941. During this pogrom more than 13,000 Jews were killed. First they were taken to the Iași police station by the Romanian army, assisted by German troops and mobs of civilians, they were beaten, tortured and some of them murdered on the spot. The surviving men were then packed in the infamous death trains of sealed freight cars where the majority died in the infernal conditions of heat, lack of water, air and food. Those who made it alive to the destinations of Podu Iloaiei and Călărași were deported to concentration camps. The Iași pogrom was similar to the Odessa massacre that inspired the metareferentially framed multimedia project of *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians*, and it was one of the shocking events that remained out of sight in the picturesque tableaux of *The Dead Nation*. During the first two and a half hours, entitled *Statements and Testimonies*, Jude catalogues in alphabetical order the photos of the men who died, while their story is told in a voice-over by the surviving family members (mostly the wives), neighbours and friends [Figs. 40–45]. The texts gathered from private diaries, official testimonies at the post-war trials and interviews are read by Jude, Cioflâncă, their friends and regular collaborators in a humble political act of memorialization. The final, approximately fifteen-minute-long segment, entitled *Images*, concludes with a series of photographs that document the pogrom as it happened and the subsequent events: the round-ups, the dead bodies lying in the street, the loading of the “death trains,” the heaps of bodies falling out as the doors of the wagons are opened and piled up alongside the railway [Figs. 46–51.]



Although some reviewers have argued that due to its austere minimalism and evidentiary value, the film belongs to an exhibition in a museum and not in cinema,<sup>20</sup> *The Exit of the Trains*, is actually more cinematic than *The Dead Nation*. With its title alluding to *The Arrival of a Train (L'arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat*, directed by Auguste and Louis Lumière, 1896), one of the first moving images to be shown in a movie theatre, Jude's film ostensibly promises to leave the realm of cinematic spectacle for a more direct look at the photographic archives and historical documents. Perhaps the viewer cannot miss the coincidence either that in one of the most memorable photos retrieved from the archives [Fig. 48], the image of the train is framed from a similar (albeit lower) angle and reverses everything else that we saw in the Lumières' shot: instead of the wonder elicited by the strong sense of liveliness of the moving image we have an impression of petrifying stillness and immobility in the photograph, instead of living people meeting the train along the platform, or descending from the carriages, we have the empty carriages with their doors flung open and the corpses stacked up in front of them. Thus the gesture of leaving behind the kind of cinema that began emblematically with the Lumière brothers' film may perhaps echo the much-debated idea of the capitulation of art facing the barbarity of the Holocaust. A movie attempting to express the inexpressible has to renounce all that is typically decoded as "a movie," which in fact Jude has already done in *The Dead Nation* by conceiving it through the divergence of text and image, and the lacunae of representation. Unlike its preceding photofilm, however, *The Exit of the Trains* assembles a coherent archive and a seamless narrative by weaving together text and image. In some cases there is no narration to accompany the pictures (probably because nobody survived to relate their fate), while some stories are told over a blank, black screen (in the absence of photographic sources), but for the most part Jude restores the authority of the text over the image, as is the genre convention in documentaries. Text and image are complementary. This is no longer an intermedial collage, but a highly effective cinematic montage. The testimonies add up as a powerful choir of individual voices. The spoken words are closely sutured to the images, which then serve as illustrations and anchors for the harrowing stories we are told. This semantic unity also compensates for the lack of movement in the succession of photographs. The final silent compilation punctuated with cinematic close-ups corroborates and completes

20 See, for example, Marko Stojiljković's review published at the time of the film's premiere at the Berlin Film Festival: <https://ubiquarian.net/2020/02/film-review-exit-trains-2020-adrian-cioflanca-radu-jude/>. Last accessed 12. 01. 2022.



the verbal testimonies. The intermedial tensions of the film are thus considerably alleviated by the montage effect of text and image, yet the two series of photos also manage to impose their own media characteristics over the film, bringing forth specific meanings that destabilize the narrative concentrating exclusively on the annihilation of a large group of people.

While death emanates from each frame of *The Dead Nation* on multiple levels of connotation, here death no longer haunts the images, it is a certainty: it is recounted, shown, and explicitly confronted with the photographic evidence of the living (the portraits of the victims in the first part are taken from their identity cards and other official papers, or from family albums, certifying their existence). This is a film about identification as opposed to the dehumanizing facelessness of genocide, the killing of individuals set against the Holocaust as a crime against humanity. The series of portraits subverts the horrendous tableaux of anonymous corpses that can no longer obliterate what we have seen before, and makes the ending all the more difficult to watch. These are no longer anonymous victims, each picture points to a life cut short with all the affordances that the indexicality of photography can provide. Kaja Silverman reminds us in her book, *The Miracle of Analogy*, that “discussions of photographic indexicality [...] always focus on the past; an analogue photograph is presumed to stand in for an absent referent – one that is no longer there” (2015, 2). Barthes has further nuanced this view by associating the image with a future perceived in the past. Looking at a picture of a person who was photographed while awaiting his execution, he writes, “the punctum is: he is going to die. [...] I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose [...], the photograph tells me death in the future [...] I shudder [...] over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe” (Barthes 1981, 96). In an essay written in 1931, *Little History of Photography*, Walter Benjamin, remarks, on the other hand, the allure of presentness in photography, and the emergence of “sparks of contingency” with which reality “has seared the subject” (Benjamin [1931] 1999, 510) even with the assumed poses. He finds that unlike the subjects portrayed in painting with whom we lose direct connection in time and see them subordinated to the mastery of the whole artwork, those of photography never cease to speak to the viewer who feels a strange co-presence with them. “The pictures, if they last, do so only as testimony to the art of the painter” ([1931] 1999, 510), he writes, whereas, speaking of a photo of a Newhaven fishwife, Benjamin is filled “with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there,

who even now is still real, and will never consent to be wholly absorbed in ‘art’” ([1931] 1999, 510).

The long procession of photographs in the first part of *The Exit of the Trains* imbues cinema with all these conflicting temporalities: we see them as definitely belonging to the past, as stand-ins for people who are no longer alive, and also pointing to a future-in-the-past, recognizing the certainty of death as the invariable punctum of each image, but most importantly, we feel the ambivalent co-presence of past and present which reverses the uncanny signs of death-in-life inscribed in the photographs, making us literally face the dead as still living, looking all dignified and enigmatic. Likewise, people portrayed in the quasi-autonomous photographic objects may enter the tragic narrative aided by the voice-over text, but they are not fully “in” it or substituted by it, just as their life stories are not being exhausted by the chronicle of their deaths. These frames preserve, beside the catastrophe of their imminent demise, also, indelibly, the “sparks of contingency” of life itself resisting absorption into images. Kracauer, thinking along the same line as Benjamin, noted that, even in a staged portrait, a photograph tends to suggest infinity, its “content refers to other contents outside that frame, and its structure denotes something that cannot be encompassed – physical existence” (2012, 210). Visually and affectively the film draws on the unresolvable incongruence perceived in the photographs of the two parts: on the affirmation of this visible uncontainability of life in the photos of the first part defying its dreadful counterpart in the formlessness of the entangled corpses shown in the pictures at the end.

The second part is more than an appendix to the narrative of the first, it is a montage that strips the photographs from words and allows them to “speak” for themselves. We see Jews marching with their hands raised and looking straight at the camera [Fig. 46], while civilians watch them from open windows. There are random passers-by staring at the corpses in the street [Fig. 47]. In one of the photos, passengers of a regular train lean out of the windows to have a peek at the mound of corpses near the railway [Fig. 49]. Soldiers collect the dead bodies and load them up on a truck. In a horrifying pit stop, men wallow in the mud and cast glances at the anonymous photographer. The close-ups reframing parts of the photos mimic the gaze of the viewer browsing the archives and lingering on details. They emphasize not only the documentary value of the photos (exposing what actually happened), and draw attention not only to elements that make us pause (by capturing moments of a reality that should never have happened and that we should never see), but also to their overall, abstractifying pictorial qualities

emerging on the flat surface of photographic paper, transforming the accidental into universal. The isolated fragment revealing a “group composition” of people [Figs. 50–51], for example, who survived part of the journey and jostle in the open door of a cattle car, appears just as forceful as any detail of Michelangelo’s staggering vision of people clinging to each other while falling towards Hell in his fresco of *The Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel.

The life stories in the first part are thus followed by images of “bare life” that make us behold the sites where people ceased to have individual lives, and where they became disposable *homines sacri* in the sense Agamben described (1998), i.e. viewed only in terms of “population,” cast beyond divine and human law, allowed to be killed by anybody with impunity. Highlighting the sense of vision in these essentially unwatchable sights through the act of photography perceived in the snapshots left without words, as well as through a multiplication of gazes (directed both inside and outside the frames), these final images also draw the viewer relentlessly into a realm beyond language, into an abject world where “meaning collapses” (Kristeva 1982, 4). Jude’s film becomes in this way also a cinematic journey of photography departing from a fragmented but narrative space of words and images into a space for which we have no words.

## **Affective Incongruities and Metaleptic Leaps**

The identification of individuals caught up in the destructive, dehumanizing gears of history continues in Jude’s *Uppercase Print*, which leads us to another era, a more recent past, the communist Romania in its final decade. The poster of the film showing a white chalk mark of a capital M on a black surface reminds us of Fritz Lang’s famous film made in 1931, *M (A City Searches for a Murderer)* [Figs. 52–53], which was about a serial killer of children hunted down both by the police and the criminal underworld. The allusion is morbidly ironic, as Jude’s film is also about a manhunt, only this time, we have a young boy, not a criminal, hunted down by the secret police and informed on by almost all the people he knew. The film presents a true story, that of a Romanian teenager, Mugur Călinescu, who, emboldened by the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland, wrote graffiti messages in chalk over a wooden fence (all in capital letters, hence the title of the film) protesting against the lack of freedom and the misery of people standing in interminable queues for food, at the beginning of the 1980s. He was quickly apprehended and repeatedly interrogated by the agents of the Department of State Security, the notorious “Securitate.” Not long afterwards, in

1985, he died of leukemia, and was rumoured to have been poisoned. Thus, the capital M in the poster could be interpreted as pointing, in fact, to the murderous Ceaușescu regime.

Even though this narrative is at the core of the film, its presentation is somewhat similar to the Bruegelesque concept of *The Dead Nation*, which foregrounds a mosaic of bucolic country life camouflaging the tragic historical events happening at the same time. Jude breaks up the scenes revealing this typical personal tragedy, unknown to the public in its day, and mixes them together with a series of unrelated samples from diverse television shows that filled the small screens in everyone's homes in those years, each clip telling a different story and most of them oozing a propaganda of happiness. The whole film relies on the expressivity of fragmentation. The subtitle announces that we are going to see "histories," in plural, already clearly signalling an allegiance with the collage principle of *The Dead Nation* and *The Exit of the Trains*. The piecemeal structure alternates between the selection of archival TV footage and the dramatization of documents referring to Mugur Călinescu's case: surveillance reports and depositions recovered from the archives of the Secret police. These have already been the sources of a docudrama written by Geanina Cărbunariu,<sup>21</sup> who discovered them and created a successful multimedia performance that she directed at the Odeon Theatre in Bucharest in 2013.<sup>22</sup> Jude's film uses the same texts as Cărbunariu (adding a few more excerpts from the archival documents), but devises a completely new dispositif for their presentation. Even though this is a not so distant past and witnesses are probably still living and available, there are no direct interviews to offer further testimonies or comments, which would have been customary for a documentary film. The story of Mugur Călinescu is told in a Brechtian frame of conspicuous theatricality where actors appear in an artificial space put together on a soundstage resembling a TV studio, its circular form perhaps even alluding to the panopticon Foucault described in *Discipline and Punish* [Fig. 54]. The camera usually reveals only one slice of the circle at a time, where actors recite the official statements and reports standing in front of plywood panels, with just a few symbolic objects attached to them as props (e.g. a giant cardboard TV or tape recorder). The compositions are frontal and symmetrical, most of the time the actors look straight at the camera [Fig. 55–58]. Everything is contrived, and as such, effectively echoes the duplicities of the

21 Cărbunariu had a cameo appearance in *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians* in the audience gathered for the open air performance, and was possibly a real life inspiration for creating the main character in that film.

22 See excerpts from this show here: <https://youtu.be/3bzjlcOiANQ>. Last accessed 12. 01. 2022.

communist era, and even the cheap designs of the TV variety shows of the time (which, in turn, were crude transpositions of theatrical effects onto the small screen). A kind of oratorical style prevails throughout these sequences, enforcing text over the image, abstraction over reality (in an uncanny resemblance to the propagandistic recitations staged repeatedly in televised shows of the day), while also breaking off the present stylized performance from life in the past.

However, paradoxically, the past does come alive both in the theatrical recitation of the documents and in the patchwork of television clips, in a unique affective-performative manner, in a way that provokes the spectators' "dynamic and fluid engagement" with cinema that Vivian Sobchack (1999, 242) has pointed out. In a ground-breaking essay in which she rethinks the concept of documentary, Sobchack describes the experience of nonfiction films based on the shifting perceptions between the three basic modes identified originally by Jean-Pierre Meunier. These modes are distinguished by the degree they "tend to bracket, rather than posit, the 'real' existence of what we see" (1999, 243). In the fiction film we behold an autonomous, imaginary or dreamlike world "differentiated from the spectator's life-world and existing only in its mediated presence or perception" (1999, 244), the documentary makes us comprehend elements of reality existing outside the frame of which we already have partial knowledge but are "unknown in their existential specificity" (1999, 243), and the primary role of the so-called *film-souvenir* (i.e. the home movie) is not to inform us (as we already know more about this world than the images show us), but to recall memories. Depending on the permeability of the screen towards our experience in a lived world, however, "one viewer's fiction may be another's *film-souvenir*, one viewer's documentary, another's fiction" (Sobchack 1999, 253). When considering film as experience, one should take into account many different spectators and different viewing positions. In more general terms, although "films are designed to cue similar affects in spectators" (Plantinga 2010, 99), each film may be received differently by an audience divided by age, gender, race or culture, and films that connect more closely with specific contexts (e.g. a concrete material reality of a certain time and place, or a certain frame of references) polarize their viewers more, creating divergent positions for an affective spectatorship. The collage of the two kinds of sequences feels heterogeneous not only because the theatrical staging and the clips assembled from rummaging the television archives involve different mediums (both other than cinema) and carry a polyphony of narrative voices, but because it radically challenges a "holistic affective experience" (Plantinga 2010, 86), it mixes up the modalities described by Sobchack and elicits incongruent and even contradictory affects.

We learn about Călinescu's case not in a documentary mode, but framed reflexively as a piece of political art performance. Although the presentation of what happened is based on authentic documents, the panopticon-like circular set on the soundstage literally brackets off what we see. The devices of Brechtian theatre, the texts quoted from archival documents, the excessive artificiality of the scenes create a world "existing only in its mediated presence." The reconstitution of the events appears surprisingly lifeless, in a typical Brechtian fashion, this type of presentation does not allow for empathy with the protagonist of the tragic story, renouncing emotional closeness for intellectual distance. Throughout the sombre "re-enactments" we remain outside observers of a world made extremely strange, and experienced more and more like a bad dream in which all the people seem to look at us. The viewing position of detached reflection is also continually eroded by the humdrum repetition and monotonous delivery of the scenes. Even if we know nothing of the Ceaușescu era, we watch the claustrophobic space of the grossly simplified theatrical set-up and the wooden acting style with the same growing discomfort (and/or tedium) that people experienced with the unnaturalness of what was broadcast in the public media of the time. We may not be able to identify with the protagonist who remains a cardboard figure matching the props, evoked only indirectly by way of the texts, but we do share in the experience of a poorly furnished and strictly controlled world.

While the narrative segments mix documentary with fiction and emotional disconnection with affective immersion, paradoxically, the excerpts from the TV shows – assembled seemingly randomly, but in fact carefully curated to cover a wide range of programmes – provide the real-life context for the narration.<sup>23</sup> [Figs. 59–64.] The images preserve the detailed imprints of a past physical reality: while we listen to the praises of the rapid urbanization of Bucharest and the inventive ways in which people beat their carpets in the new socialist housing estates, for example, we can learn a lot about the physical environment where people lived. In the mosaic of musical numbers we see what kind of shows they watched for entertainment on Saturday nights in the comfort of their homes, or for the lack of other entertainment. The outlandishly exuberant festivals celebrating the superiority of communism and the genius leadership of

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23 Some connections between the texts of the police interrogations and what we see in the clips also emerge in this apparent randomness creating counterpoints and ironic resonances in meaning. This montage effect, however, does not challenge the overall impression of heterogeneity, merely provides an added incentive for a search for meanings, reinforcing the satisfactions offered by an intellectual, reflexive interpretation of the film balancing the feeling of immersion into this past reality.

Nicolae Ceaușescu, or the dictator's visits in the country were part of everyday life not just as images appearing on TV but as common experiences in those days, for many people were either (bored and exhausted) applauding spectators or (stressed out) participants in these events. The propagandistic overtone of the materials filmed for the TV may have offered a skewed perspective, but it was an authentic part of the reality in those years, providing a ubiquitous "white noise" that no one paid much attention to.

Catherine Russell specified that "the complex relation to the real that unfolds in found-footage filmmaking lies somewhere between documentary and fictional modes of representation" (1999, 238), what is more, "the appropriated image points back to the profilmic past as if it were a parallel universe of science fiction" (1999, 241). This all seems to be true with a peculiar twist in this case in which we have filmed materials from an era when fictionalization was a key strategy of the party ideology enforced by a strict censorship, and when contemporary viewers already saw the "reality" screened on their TVs as mostly fiction. Jude's previous films used archival photographs, films and texts that unequivocally belong to a more distant past that is no longer retrievable as a personal memory. This is not the case with the TV clips of the 1980s in *Uppercase Print*, which may seem like an absurd, alternate reality to people who did not know this world, an eclectic collection of cinematic *bric-à-brac* displayed on the screen as in a curiosity cabinet. Yet this collection may also conjure up genuine memories for those who grew up watching them and who therefore experience it literally as a *film-souvenir*. In this sense, Jude entangles the viewers in a complicated temporal and affective scheme, inviting a more refined understanding of the processes through which the temporal disparity in films using archival footage produces not only an epistemological, "archival effect," but also an emotional one that Jaimie Baron calls the "archival affect" (2014, 109).

For the knowledgeable spectators past and present can be bridged by remembrance, and the experience can be informed by all kinds of emotions. D. N. Rodowick (elaborating on Stanley Cavell's ideas) speaks of the way in which photographic representation makes us "ontologically restless," because we are subjected to "a paradox of temporal perception" (2014, 18) by seeing in the present a world that is past and which, although present in space, is screened from us by its absence. In Rodowick's view, the image is a "complexly temporal" "space past," in which we feel our own absence from the frame, and which encourages "us to reflect on our own ontological situatedness in space-time" (2014, 19). Archival footage, in addition, "implies a profound sense of the already-seen, the already-



happened” (Russell 1999, 241), as such it is a kind of ready-made that is not only a piece of the past, it may also be something already-seen in the past (by a spectator-in-the-past who is also absent from the frame, but remembered in the present). When viewers who lived in Romania in the last decades of communism look at the clips selected from the archives of the state TV, they do not only recognize the places, the actors, the political festivities (if not the exact same materials, then the type and style of shows), and watch them all as the uncanny images of a “world past” that Rodowick refers to, but they also recall themselves watching or ignoring them, together with their erstwhile emotions (e.g. the amusement at the clumsy special effects of musical shows, the disgust with the shameless flattery of sycophants and with the lavish displays of Ceaușescu’s cult of personality, or the satisfaction of occasionally seeing poetry and art screened on TV, etc). Television was a medium valued for its domesticity in communist times, which provided with its kaleidoscopic range of image consumption an illusory counterbalance to the all-pervasive panopticism. Despite its ideologically tainted and limited content, it was consumed in one’s private space and amid the daily routine of family life, offering the possibility for viewers to comment on the programmes while being relatively safely hidden from public scrutiny. Although these are not home movies, they trigger a home movie kind of spectatorship, as each frame recalls a whole world outside that frame (including one’s own personal lives) that people knew so well, and enable a cinephile-type nostalgia even if they harbour no feelings of actual nostalgia for the age. Personal memories and cultural memories blend together, and make them reflect on how memories of a “lived experience” are always “interlaced with mediated experience,” i.e. with “the active choices of individuals to incorporate parts of culture into their lives” (van Dijck 2008, 74), including, in this case, the complex feelings ensuing from the frustration over the restriction of choices and access to culture. Yet, this ambivalent spectatorial position (of affectively immersing certain viewers in memories whilst making them aware of their own “ontological situatedness” connecting past and present) is precarious and it will inevitably disappear in time along with the passing of a generation. This precariousness is a constitutive element of *Uppercase Print*, which employs in the evocation of the past not the memorializing and evidentiary potential of photography, like Jude’s photofilms, but the “amnesia of TV culture” (Russell 1999, 271), materials which are defined by multiplicity, redundancy and ephemerality, the kind of media content that implies familiarity while it is inevitably predestined for oblivion. In stark contrast with the compilation films using archival materials that push the documentary mode towards fiction



(by focalizing our attention on an autonomous world other than our own), the fragmentation of Jude's clips – even when decoded not in a *souvenir* mode but with a predominantly documentary consciousness – will always retain the analogy with the jumbled bits and pieces usually preserved in our memory.

Additionally, the footage will always strike us with the paradox of showing too much and too little, of both transporting us back in time and withholding essential details from that time, of offering a multi-perspective, generic view of the communist era and eliding the full context for the many particular instances. In fact, the whole alternation of the two kinds of segments plays once again with the visible and the invisible, with what we know, what we imagine and what we feel. We are being told a lot of information, but we never see what really happened to the protagonist. Nonetheless, we have the sensation of being thrown into the world in which he lived. In working through the mixture of recycled and remediated texts and images, the film engages us in complex strategies of identification oscillating between critical distance and emotional proximity. We feel that the film pushes us away and pulls us in. We continually step out of the world on the screen (reflecting on the theatrical stylization and the noticeable artifice of the television footage) and step into this “alien” reality (through the direct address and the haunting effect of the panopticon-scenes, as well as being placed in or reminded of the position of the TV spectator of the day) in a kind of affective metalepsis.

Intermediality in film is often used metaleptically to signal an ontological leap either from diegetic reality into the world of imagination/pure fiction, or from reality (the illusion of immediacy) to the visible presence of mediation (hypermediacy).<sup>24</sup> Jude's film makes the opposite move possible, in which the conspicuous intermedial interventions in cinema manage to establish an affective dissolution of the distance from the real, profilmic world through the shifts from the spectatorial positions of reflexivity to immersion. The emphasis on this strategy is made clear by specific instances of metaleptic transgressions of boundaries which in fact frame the entire film. The prologue of the film, for example, is an outtake fragment of a political propaganda show in the Romanian TV of the 1980s, preserving a mistake that occurred during the recording. We see three actors, a woman and two men, arranged in a symmetrical composition in front of a fake wall covered by a picture of pink flowers, looking at the camera and praising, in free verse no less, the wonderful life provided by the dictator. After a few enthusiastically delivered lines, the teleprompter breaks down and the actors

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24 See more about the possibilities of intermediality as metalepsis in Pethő ([2011] 2020, 373–397).

become hesitant and self-conscious, the camera shakes, the image glitches. [Figs. 65–66.] The actors disconnect from the rosy picture of the surreally blissful fiction and connect to the reality of the TV studio with unease. Their anxiety is justified, as they are keenly aware that the state security police is watching them (just like the mechanical gaze of the camera pointed at them), and that any mistake can be misconstrued as defiance. This introduction appears as the reversal of the famous opening scene of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Mirror* (*Zerkalo*, 1975) in which we see the starting up of an old-fashioned TV, the noise and stripes on an empty screen, then a young man appears struggling with a severe speech impediment and is helped by a therapist to overcome his disfluency. With the image emerging from a blur and articulate speech prevailing over stutter, Tarkovsky alludes to his own quest for an uninhibited flow of a deeply personal and authentic cinematic poetry that he will follow in the rest of the film. In contrast to Tarkovsky, Jude begins with this found footage of a deceitful image of perfection being disturbed by a technical error, and rapturous, poetic declamation collapsing into silence as an appropriated and reframed gesture that may also point to the impossibility of free speech and to the truthfulness of the faltering, fragmented voice in the context of a seamless, artificial universe of lies. Besides being incisively symbolic and self-reflexive, however, this is also an emphatic, affective implosion of the fourth wall, in which we suddenly plunge into the real, unscripted world beyond the artificial façade, and, empathizing with the actors, we are directly confronted with an awkward situation that we feel instantly to be more serious than a mere technical glitch, even if we do not know much about those times.

To bookend the film, Jude wraps up the film with a series of scenes in which the screen opens up again towards the profilmic world. The camera leaves the venue of the Brechtian docudrama to roam the present-day Bucharest and to reveal (not without a touch of irony) its changed physical reality, i.e. the streets littered with foreign advertising labels applying another type of fake gloss on the panorama of a postcommunist patchwork city. [Figs. 67–68.] Intercut with this city symphony, and as a reversal of the actors' gesture in the prologue inadvertently "falling out" of their role, we see three actors from the re-enactment scenes in the studio, seemingly accidentally "falling into" another role. They become parts of a makeshift *tableau vivant* of Leonardo's *Last Supper* constructed from the elements of the soundstage with the buffet table of the crew, in a manner reminiscent of Giuseppe Arcimboldo's paintings in which vegetables or inanimate objects compose allegorical portraits [Fig. 69]. By using in this clumsily contrived composite picture the actors who played the policemen earlier (this time quoting

lines from interviews made after 1989), Jude makes a tongue-in-cheek comment on the supposed death yet all too real resurrection of the secret police. The tableau does not only emerge as an Arcimboldian visual joke but also as a self-reflexive allegory pointing to the mobility of the spectator's position between proximity and distance, and to the processes of making sense both of the autonomous parts and the "bigger picture" in the collage construction of the film.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, it anchors the image in reality (both as a metaphor of the current political situation and by showing the people shooting the film in the actual studio space).

If this scene brings some buffoonish levity as a counterpoint to the apprehension of the introductory footage, Jude makes sure the film does not end on this playful tone and brings us back to a grim reality. In another intermedial and metaleptic leap, we step out of this double meta-narrative frame of actors playing a role (and re-enacting a picture reflecting on that role) and we look at the black and white photos of the original chalk graffiti texts and at a portrait of the real Mugur Călinescu placed on a flat wooden surface painted in red [Figs.70–71]. After the excess of theatricality and the mishmash of clips from the eerily sugar-coated 1980s television shows, these appear paradoxically as unmediated remnants of the past that we can observe in the form of concrete objects collected as evidence in a police file. In a gesture that reminds us of the minimalism of *The Exit of the Trains*, the final images pinning these archival pictures to the screen also engage the evocative power of photography in the sense indicated by Barthes, "there is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past" (1981, 76), "what I see has been here [...], it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred" (1981, 77), as a final memento of the things people did not actually see of this reality.

In all of his films made between 2017 and 2021, Jude handles the epistemological challenge of reconstructing the past through the multiple perspectives offered by the heterogeneity of different types of documents. The films delve into the dialogues between media, i.e. they bring out the semantic interactions and specific sensory and cognitive affordances of words and images, or photography and film. *Uppercase Print* widens this media spectrum to include interferences between theatre and television, while – dealing with a period that many people still remember – it also confronts the diverging positions of the viewer's intellectual and affective engagement. Jude's next film, *Bad Luck*

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25 Roland Barthes identifies in Arcimboldo's pictures a similar dynamic of the viewer's positions that is at play in Jude's technique. He writes: "Arcimboldo's painting is mobile: it dictates to the 'reader,' by its very project, the obligation to come closer or to step back. [...] it implies a relativization of the space of meaning: including the reader's gaze within the very structure of the canvas" (1985, 142).

*Banging or Loony Porn* (subtitled *A Sketch for a Popular Film*), is set in current reality, and offers a fervent social-political satire combining an even more radical collage construction with a topic that elicits visceral emotions both on and off the screen. The film presents the story of a history teacher, Emi Cilibiu, who becomes embroiled in a scandal and risks losing her job after a sex video filmed with her husband and uploaded onto a private internet blog is downloaded and reposted on a public porn site for everyone to see. The outrage of the fictional parents in the film has been matched by the outrage of many real-life critics at home who denigrated its perceived vulgarity both in content and style. This kind of reception proved to be something Jude deliberately aimed for. In an interview published shortly before the film won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 2021, the director spoke about the performative value of films, the necessity of violent, negative reactions to his work in order not just to depict but to effectively bring to light narrow-minded preconceptions. What is however more relevant for the purposes of this essay, is that he also defined this as “a historical film about the present,”<sup>26</sup> interpreting it within the same frame as his previous works. The quotation from the Mahabharata placed on the title card of the film, referring to “a world sinking in the deep ocean of time” is a subtle hint at this wide-angle view of history over our immediate, transitory world. Shot in the summer of 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic in Bucharest, the film connects along these lines the perspective of a recognizable here and now with the distantiating effect of irony and abstraction, and in an attempt to “reconstruct” the present, once more it straddles the line between Sobchack’s phenomenological categories of documentary, home movie and fiction film, as well as the affective metaleptic divide between immersion and reflexivity.

The film begins with an unusual experience of immediacy in which we may feel we are reliving the situation of X-rated spam videos popping up on our computer screens. We find ourselves in the position of unwitting voyeurs watching images of hard-core amateur pornography, we see the protagonist and her husband filming themselves while having sex, with Emi donning a carnival mask and a pink wig in a titillating role-play. Screening such a film within the film appears as an act of multiple transgressions: it strikes us not only as a recording that shows something that should remain invisible for the outside gaze but mainly as something that is out of place, a porn sequence inserted into what

26 Ionuț Mareș: Radu Jude: „Simt nevoia de cât mai multe reacții negative, violente, față de filme,” [“I feel the need for as many negative, violent reactions to movies as possible”] *Ziarul Metropolis*, 5 March 2021. <https://www.ziarulmetropolis.ro/radu-jude-simt-nevoia-de-cat-mai-multe-reactii-negative-violente-fata-de-filme/>. Last accessed 12. 01. 2022.

is expected to be a highbrow fiction film. The shooting of the scene itself exceeds sheer pornography (i.e. staging the impersonal, physical encounter of bodies) and veers towards the more intimate, mischievous improvisation of a home video. It also calls attention to what remains off screen, i.e. the camera, on account of which this goes beyond a sexual encounter and becomes an interaction with the eroticized technology itself that emerges as the real object of fascination here (“Look, how hard I get just from turning on the camera,” says the man while we see the woman looking straight into the lens and fondling her breast, making us understand why the couple will later upload the footage onto their computer and the internet) [Fig. 72]. The scene thus captures the way in which technological mediation penetrates the most private areas of our lives, and in which we do no longer aspire to behold images but to become images. Another off-screen presence, the voice of the mother-in-law banging at the door of the small bedroom and interrupting the act, provides yet another transgression by shattering the frame of the amateur porn/home video enacting a sexual fantasy and by re-framing it in the spirit of the realism and dry humour familiar from the fiction films of the Eastern European New Wave.

This prologue introduces not only the main story inspired by authentic events picked up by newspapers, but is highly indicative of Jude’s continued interest in the intersection of media and reality. The film is conceived as yet another exploration of our manifold involvement with images, and an interrogation of the potential of various media to portray and reflect on our world, this time through expanding on the idea of obscenity which is the catalyst of events in the film. The etymology of the English word “obscene” is similar to the word “obscure” being derived, according to many sources, from the Greek *ob skene* meaning off-stage, something that is not fit to be seen on-stage, that which should be hidden, kept out of public view (see Mey 2007, 6). Correspondingly, the film addresses even more explicitly the duality of the visible and the invisible (the leitmotif of his earlier films), also touching on what should or should not be made visible.<sup>27</sup> Beyond the indictment of contemporary society’s own obscenities, i.e. its hypocrisy, intolerance, ignorance, aggressiveness, and bad taste, which culminates in the final theatrical scene of the assembly of the parents who debate in a mock trial the scandalous behaviour of the “porn teacher” (and in the three endings provided for the film), this gesture of taking something that

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<sup>27</sup> This theme is somewhat ironically underscored by the variety of masks in the film: from the one worn by Emi in her sex video to the mandatory face coverings worn by everyone during the pandemic, and to the superhero mask in the conclusion to the film.

is usually off-screen and displaying it on-screen is evident in the two separate middle parts of the film, too.

In between the narrative sequences, Jude inserts two symmetrical segments (of around half an hour), each suspending the advancement of the story in order to offer glimpses “outside,” into the wider context of the film. Yet, these should not be seen as deviations, as, according to the director, this was never intended as “an attempt to make a film ‘about’ something, but merely ‘around’ something.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, even though we see the protagonist, the first part effectively turns the camera towards the profilmic world, focusing on the concrete, physical reality which inspired the film. The second part is a sort of dictionary of ideas gleaned from this reality and the various “obscenities” of history, a collage within the collage structure of the film, consisting of a string of short scenes and still images accompanied by a series of definitions and eclectic quotations, among others, from Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Virginia Woolf, and André Malraux [Figs. 74–75]. In the first part, we see Emi on a lengthy walk across the streets of Bucharest before the meeting at the school. On her way she crosses a marketplace, visits the headmistress of her school, stops for coffee, enters a bookstore, talks on her phone, bumps into cars parked on the sidewalk, gets into petty arguments and tries to buy some pills to overcome her anxiety. As an homage to Walter Benjamin, this section unfolds under the subtitle *One-Way Street*, and together with the subsequent cinematic album of words and images, entitled *Short Dictionary of Anecdotes, Signs and Wonders*, betrays a deep affinity both with Benjamin’s vision of the quotidian, evanescent scenery of urban life, and with the paratactical<sup>29</sup> style of his prose (also from his *Arcades Project*), with his preference for writing in aphorisms, quotations and constellations of fragments, in which “mutilated” sections of larger wholes live on “like lower animals” (Benjamin 2016, 81). The sequence of the seemingly unmediated and uneventful long walk across the city privileges again, similarly to the prologue, the presence of the camera which performs here its own *flânerie*.<sup>30</sup> [Figs. 76–81.] It does not track

28 See: <https://www.filmneweurope.com/news/romania-news/item/122014-fne-at-tiff-romanian-days-2021-bad-luck-banging-or-loony-porn>. Last accessed 12. 01. 2022.

29 Parataxis is derived from a Greek word that means “to place side by side.” It can be defined as a rhetorical term in which phrases and clauses are placed one after another independently, without coordinating or subordinating them through the use of conjunctions. It is also called “additive style.” (See: <https://literarydevices.net/parataxis/>. Last accessed 12. 02. 2022.)

30 The camera performs what Benjamin indicated (quoting the words of Pierre Hamp) in *The Arcades Project* to be the mission of the contemporary artist, namely to set out and discover “the world in which you already live” as if “you have just arrived from far away” and “have never seen your own doormat” ([1982] 1999, 437). Jude cites this passage at length in the *Dictionary* part of the film.

Emi's movements, but merely follows her in a sensuous documentation of a city with its hustle and bustle and vulgarity (with people shouting obscenities both at each other and directly at the camera), with its hotchpotch of advertisements, walls full of graffiti, and its architectural heterogeneity juxtaposing processes of constant refashioning and picturesque decay. Yet, this natural collage of the street in which the camera surveys the photogenic details and browses the city for us, to paraphrase Benjamin's words from *One-Way Street* (2016, 78), as if it were a book in our hands, also mixes the present with the past. Beyond the recognizable snapshots of familiar sites for Romanians and of an already past summer marked by the pandemic, or beyond the presence of old, ruinous buildings, it opens up the realistic perception of the city towards the imaginary, the ephemerality of memory, and once more, much like Jude's previous film, divides its spectators.

Fiction seamlessly merges with the documentary when Emi is suddenly approached in the street and gallantly offered a rose by a character stepping out of a popular TV series from the 1970s, *Full Sail* (*Toate pânzele sus*, 1977, directed by Mircea Mureșan), i.e. by the actor Ion Dichiseanu, dressed for the part in a white naval officer's uniform [Fig. 81]. The metaleptic reference to this beloved Sunday morning adventure show, an exotic, escapist family entertainment in communist times, will probably bring back similar memories as the collage of TV clips from *Uppercase Print* (and prompt a comparable home-movie like spectatorship), while it will be missed both by younger and foreign viewers, who have not seen the old TV film. Marina Voica, a pop singer of Russian origin, who was a frequent protagonist of the kind of variety shows that were included in *Uppercase Print*, appears as a customer in a pharmacy with the same effect, being recognized only by a certain generation of moviegoers. Likewise, not many will realize that the white-haired gentleman in the headmistress's apartment is in fact Costel Băloiu, who as a teenager played the titular role in *Freckles* (*Pistruiatul*, 1973, directed by Francisc Munteanu), the first Romanian coloured TV series, a popular but also cringe-worthy communist propaganda film of fake history. He is called upon to impart a piece of behind-the-scenes information symptomatic for the absurdities of those times, telling Emi that his canine co-star was not only given the status of a secret service officer but actually outranked its trainer [Fig. 82]. The whole scene at the flat of the headmistress is a palimpsest of past and present, and an assemblage of objects with cultural references. The cluttered flat with the clamorous family (including a cameo of Jude's recurring actor, Șerban Pavlu), recalls recent Romanian films like Cristi Puiu's *Sieranevada* (2016) or Jude's own *Everybody in Our Family* (*Toată lumea din familia noastră*, 2012).



The cheap, photographic reproduction of Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson* hanging on the wall (next to that of El Greco's *St. Veronica Holding the Veil*, a mirror, and a large-screen TV playing a reality show) is not just a characteristic mixture of questionable taste and genuine longing for European high art displayed in Eastern European middlebrow intellectuals' homes, but can perhaps be seen as an allusion to Jude's *Scarred Hearts*, which recreated it in a memorable *tableau vivant* [Fig. 83]. The image of Constantin Brâncuși's *Infinity Column* sculpture, imprinted on a dress hanging in the background of the couple's amateur porn shoot in the prologue of the film [Fig. 73], points to the same cultural context and discreetly frames the film, returning ironically in the last part in an even more kitschified version, as a small-scale replica painted in the colours of the Romanian flag, and placed in the hallway of the school [Fig. 84].

This oscillation between the incidental and the emblematic, as well as the metaleptic crossovers between immediacy and multiple levels of mediatedness, reality and art, are carried over to the final scene in which, approximating the acerbic wit of the plays of Ion Luca Caragiale (which clearly informed this part), Jude parades a menagerie of stereotypes embodied by actors from his previous films (Gabriel Spahiu, Andi Vasluianu), current pop singers (Adrian Enache), comedians (Florin Petrescu stepping over from the awkward, boorish TV sitcom *Vacanța Mare/Big Vacation*), and cultural personalities (the queer activist and performance artist Paul Dunca/Paula Dunker in full drag). [Fig. 85.] To top it all, in the concluding fantasy scenario the protagonist steps out of this "reality" into another cinematic universe altogether, parodying today's popular superhero movies. In this way, the director seems to be sifting through the media "archive" of the present in the same way as he did with the historical documents of his previous films. He combines the collage of a multisensory reality (the rooms and streets jam-packed with people amidst an eclectic mix of objects and buildings), a selection of images and citations of philosophical texts with the collage of memory (switching between reality and fiction). Jude's Benjaminian technique of speaking historically about the present not only revitalizes the intermedial practices entwined with the realism of contemporary Romanian cinema (see Király 2016b), it also balances the heterogeneous compilations viewed from the perspective of irony and reflexivity with an immersion into a cinematic experience of physical reality and an affective engagement of viewers beyond the provocative topic – for specific segments of its home audience – through familiar sites, faces, and cultural references.



## **History, Collage, and Jude's Strategies of Affective Intermediality**

At the conclusion of this series of analyses, there are certain aspects that need to be emphasized regarding Jude's vision of history and the collage techniques employed in the films. Most importantly, we have seen that in Jude's films collage is not merely a stylistic choice of joining words and images of different provenance (photographs, archival footage, quotations from texts, etc.), but an epistemological concept – informed by the writings of Walter Benjamin – connected to how we make sense of the world, both past and present. In *The Arcades Project* Benjamin famously remarks, “to write history thus means *to cite* history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its context,” and specifies that “history decays into images, not into stories” ([1982] 1999, 476, italics in the original), prophetically anticipating in this way our current postmemory condition. Today history takes the form of a kind of “ready-made,” belonging not to the realm of memory but to the archives, and subjected to the practice of “(re)collection, one that curates materials in fragmented form from different media. The past is literally a matter of found footage [...] delinked from the authoritative or authorising claim of a prior reality” – writes the cultural critic, Rey Chow (2016, 199–200). She adds, “what renders the past ‘ready-made’ is precisely this phenomenological condition or quality of being recognisable, of having-been-looked-at: the past is given to view as what has been cut into countless times already, by processes and apparatuses of (audial, visual and narrative) recording” (2016, 200). The same idea is stressed by Anton Kaes, who claims: “the past is in danger of becoming a rapidly expanding collection of images, easily retrievable but isolated from time and space, available in an eternal present by pushing a button on the remote control. History thus returns forever-as-film” (Kaes 1984, 198). Catherine Russell warns however that “it is tempting to think of archival practices as a kind of archaeology, and yet what is immediately evident in these films is that found footage is a discourse of surfaces” (1999, 241). Consequently, notwithstanding all their documentary value, Jude's films remixing various archival materials are primarily not about history, or about a past reality, but about the challenges posed to the viewer confronted with such decontextualized fragments and “surfaces.”

These challenges correspond not only to our postmemory age, but also to Benjamin's conception of history. For Benjamin saw history not as a chain of events but as a pile of catastrophes, laid out in front of us in shattered pieces, with our

own reaction transposed onto the gaze of the angel of Klee's *Angelus Novus*. The point of view uncannily embodied by the fixed, horrified glare of a painted angel is, however, located not in a concrete here and now, but beyond our own ontological realm. Beside adopting Benjamin's ideas (and explicitly referencing the painting in *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians*), Jude also appropriates almost literally this ambivalent Benjaminian vantage point materialized in a (lifeless) picture, thus deflecting and even reversing Alain Resnais's paradigmatic stance from *Night and Fog*, which summoned the gaze of the living to face the dead. These films excel in the use of pictorial representations, literature, theatre, television, etc., for contemplating the horrors of history and for creating heterogeneous cinematic textures redolent of death. They insist on looking at vast panoramas of ordinary life from the perspective of the dead and the abject (see in this respect: the cadavers in *The Marshal's Two Executions* confronted with their fictionalized versions, the bodies represented by dummies on the gallows in the mass re-enactment spectacle of *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians*, the images of death and decomposition in the Bruegelian photofilmic world of *The Dead Nation*, the concluding heaps of corpses reinterpreting the previous long string of statements and photographic evidences of the living in *The Exit of the Trains*, the retrospective unravelling of the story of the young victim of the panopticism of communist times in *Uppercase Print*, the abjection of pornography and the social abjection of the "porn-teacher" providing an angle for a wider inspection of contemporary reality in *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*).

Moreover, Jude's films allow us to revisit the interrelated terms of montage and collage both theoretically and historically. Using examples from experimental films recycling found footage, Aumont argues that the term collage is justified for "that kind of montage in which the only relation between the film's shots (or its 'fragments' [...]) is established by and for the film, as they have no relation with reality or an *istoria* (a fiction)," collage is therefore a way to "push the principle of montage to its limit" (2020, 50, italics in the original). Then again, Jude's films, demonstrate that a collage effect in film involves complex relations to profilmic reality (questioning the role of mediation) as well as to narrative possibilities of media (often multiplying narrative voices through verbal testimonies confronted with the elliptic, condensed expressivity of visual representations/presentations). They explore alternatives both to the type of avant-garde experimentation identified by Aumont, on the one hand, and to the feature length compilation films piecing together archival clips, on the other. If the essence of montage is defined by an Eisensteinian rhetoric that creates "a form that thinks," according to Aumont

(2020, 62; quoting Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, 1988–98), then collage, as a form of intermediality, allows each medium involved and fragment “to think” for themselves, to bring forth their own sensuous, affective and cognitive qualities and not just to “rethink” and subvert each other (see the rich connotations of texts and photographs perceived both interactively and autonomously in the photofilms, or the contrast and association of theatre and television in *Uppercase Print*). Furthermore, each medium that becomes self-reflexively visible, and is not incorporated through existing conventions, brings into play tensions between the cinematic and the uncinematic that can reinforce, or at times oscillate and blur the distinction between collage and montage (see the way photographs are inserted into the film in *The Dead Nation* compared to *The Exit of the Trains*, in which photography first enters then leaves the narrative space of film).

Seen in a historical perspective, Jude's aesthetic of intermedial collage initiates a dialogue with a long tradition in art. Frankenstein's monster, stitched together from lifeless fragments into an organic whole and brought to life, was a powerful symbol for the God-like potency of the Romantic artist, a potency that was sought to be reclaimed by auteur-centred modernism (in conjunction with a drive to demolish pre-existing models), and that was simultaneously mimicked and questioned by the postmodern relativism of viewpoints. The Surrealist collage, on the other hand, shifted the emphasis from authorship to a highly performative “art of practice, dissolving objects into the processes which produce them” (Cohen 1994, 46). The *cadavre exquis* (along with other Dadaist collages), a bizarre entity whose existence hinged on contingency was conceived symbolically “between battlefield and fairground” (Adamowicz 2019) as a ludic and politicized reaction to both the absurd horrors of war (echoed in the monstrosity of the cut-ups) and the new cult of consumerism and functionalism pervading every aspect of life (see Laxton 2019, 271). It was also an art transcending the limitations of the fragment and gesturing towards the infinite, which provided an inspiration for Walter Benjamin's idea of “profane illumination” ([1929] 1999, 209) emanating from “the revolutionary energies that appear in the ‘outmoded’ – in [...] the earliest photos, objects, [...] the immense forces of ‘atmosphere’ concealed in these things to the point of explosion,” ([1929] 1999, 210) and for his own eminent collage texts in *One-Way Street* and *The Arcades Project*. Jude's strategies reconnect with the Surrealists' and Benjamin's practices, rediscovering “energies” in filling the screen with “outmoded” media and enhancing their “forces of atmosphere” through leaps between Brechtian reflexivity and intense affective immersion, enabling divergent positions of spectatorship.

In addition, perhaps in the spirit of the exquisite corpses' procedure of pouring volatile content into a fixed order, the distinguishing trait of Jude's films is the co-presence of fragmentation with clearly identifiable structures (using photos belonging to a single archive in the photofilms, the organizing principle of *mise-en-abyme* in *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians*, the parallelism of *The Marshal's Two Executions, To Punish, to Discipline* and *Uppercase Print*, the symmetry of *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*, and continued in the frame of the filmed photo album in his subsequent short film, *Memories from the Eastern Front / Amintiri de pe Frontul de Est*, 2022). The frequent use of mottoes, quotations, allusions, and variations also contribute to creating structural and semantic patterns and guidelines managing the contingency of the fragments. This reconciliation with structure and containment may be Jude's response to what has recently been claimed as the exhaustion of the subversive potential of montage or collage. In today's digital culture free reinterpretations through fragmented mashups are common practice and no longer count as rebellious acts. "As capitalism reorganized itself and became more open to 'networking, creativity, intuition, and difference,'" montage in itself "reduces politics to a matter of subjectivity" and "becomes the naturalized expression of late capitalist ideology" (Sarah Hamblin 2019, 365, 366). Advocating not for subjectivity but for sensibility, in Jude's films patterns are not decomposed or subverted by fragments but reaffirmed through repetition as firm anchors for processes through which the collage persistently leans into the jarring sensations of media differences, the lacunae, and the interstices. The images gravitate towards liminal areas where representation meets the unrepresentable, the visible folds into the invisible, the sensuous gives way to abstraction, and we can also contemplate our own position facing a Benjaminian exquisite corpse of history constructed from images "propelled" from the past towards the future.

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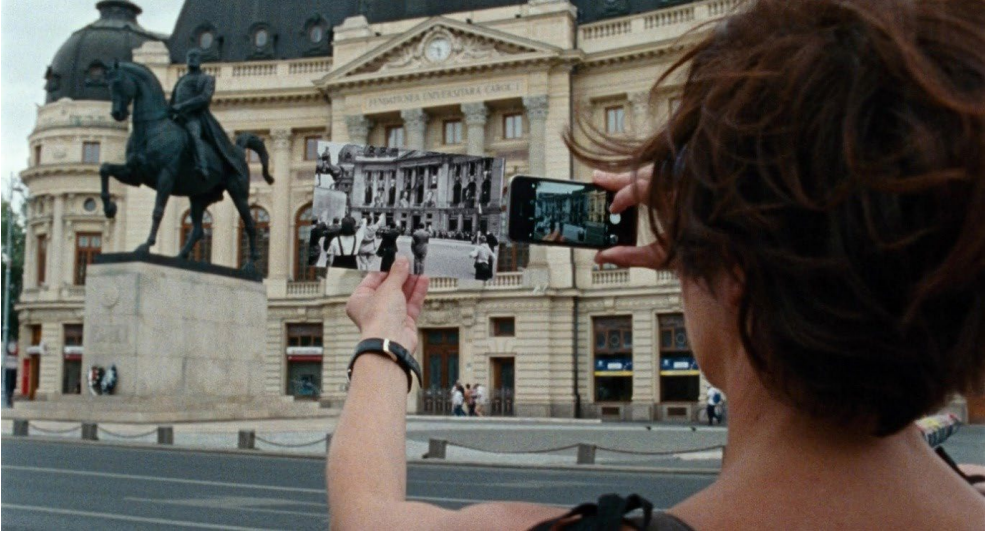


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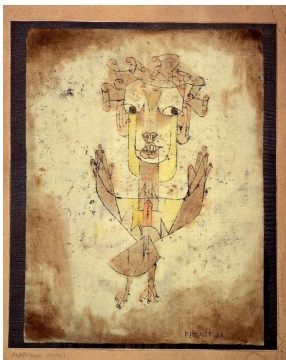
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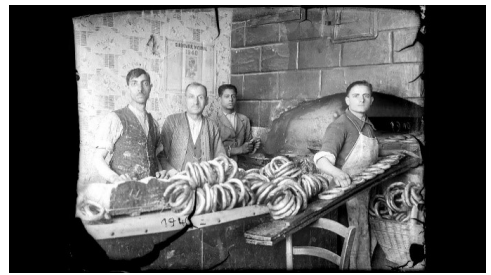




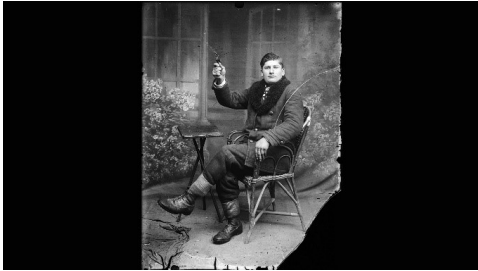
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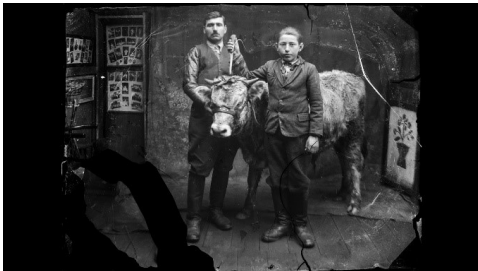
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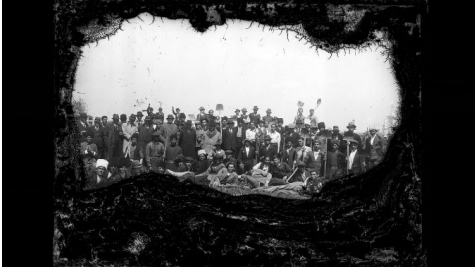
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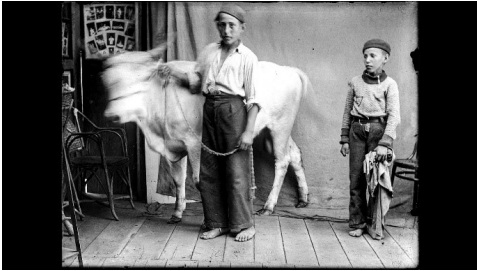


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Era o zi frumoasă în ziua aceea și armenii ședeau afară pe bănci cu cafeaua și ciubucurile lor. Întrebai unde este locuința acelor doi armeni. Îmi răspunseră, cu dispreț, că Hagi... nu știe unde șade, iar cel de al doilea zise : „Eu sînt, ce-mi vrei ?” I-am zis : „Dumneata ești arestat, și să poțtești să mergi cu cazacu la geșnerălu comandant?”

— Ce fel, îmi zise, pe jos ?

— Ba nu, o să-ți aduc o caretă ?!

Afînci toată armenmea se opuse, strigînd că nu vrea să-l dea. Unii mă întrebau : „De unde ai dumneata porunca să-l ardici ?” Alții, să meargă la Fuad și Omer pașa, să-l dea de știre. Alții, pe la consulatole lor, că sînt suđiți străini...

Apoi, vîzînd că izvorîsc armenii de prin toate uđitele, am strigat la cazaci : „Katai !<sup>14</sup> (Leagăni-!) și au început cazacii cu girbacele să-i croiască, iar ei au rupt-o la fugă țîpînd, iar eu strigam cazacilor să-i croiască meruu !... Tată și o patrulă de husari. Le-am strigat :

— Săbiile afară ! Șand they started to whip them.

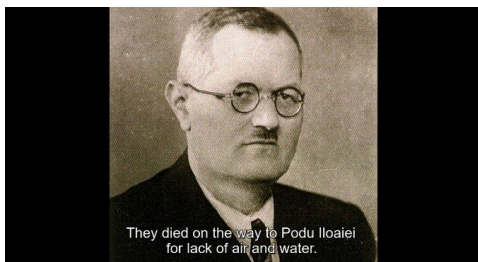
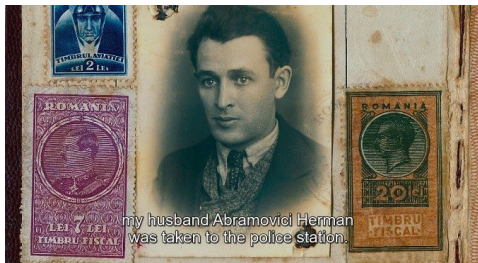
Astfel că această scenă înspăimîntătoare le-au rămas multă



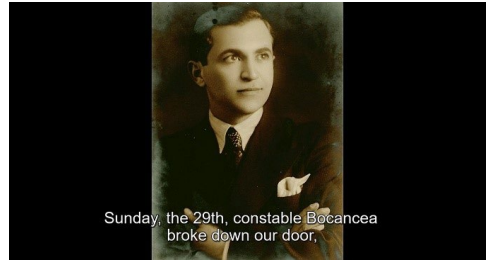
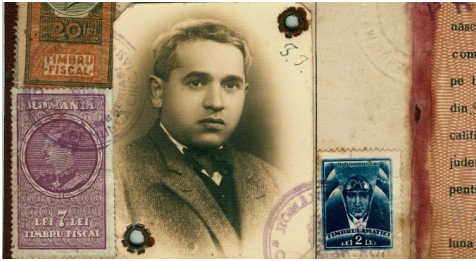
Figures 38–39. *Punish and Discipline*: photos from the life of a country policeman.



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Figures 46–51. *The Exit of the Trains*: photographs that document the pogrom as it happened.



Figures 52–53. The poster of *Uppercase Print* (2020) reminiscent of Fritz Lang's film, *M* (*A City Searches for a Murderer* / *Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder*, 1931).

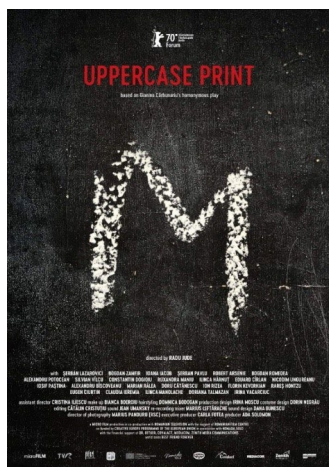
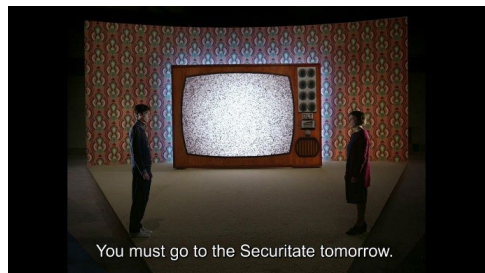


Figure 54. *Uppercase Print*: the panopticon-like set arranged in a circle on a sound stage resembling a TV studio.



Figures 55–58. *Uppercase Print*: actors reciting official statements in frontal and symmetrical compositions.



Figures 59–64. *Uppercase Print*: excerpts from various TV shows broadcast in the 1980s.







Figures 65–66. *Uppercase Print*: a glitch occurring during the televised recording of a political propaganda show.



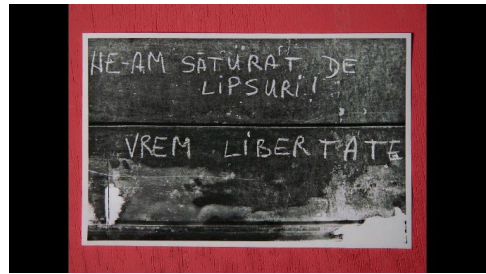
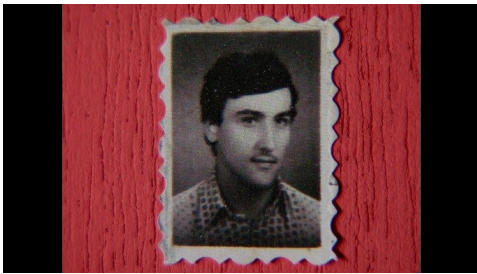
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Figures 74–75. *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*: a dictionary of ideas with illustrated quotations from Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Virginia Woolf, André Malraux, etc.



Figures 76–81. *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*: *flânerie* through contemporary Bucharest.





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**Figures 84–85.** *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*: the *Infinity Column* as nationalist kitsch object placed in the hallway and the scene of the mock trial at the school.









# In the Captivity of the Present. Approaches to *Son of Saul* by László Nemes Jeles

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**Abstract.** *Son of Saul*, the Hungarian director, László Nemes Jeles's film about Holocaust was released in 2015 with great international success: Grand Prix of the Cannes Film Festival, the Academy Award and Golden Globe for best foreign-language film. In my essay, I approach the film from a variety of perspectives. First, by analysing the visual and aural level of the film I intend to show how – in a very original way – *Son of Saul* is capable of depicting the understandably limited perspective and numb state of mind of the protagonist, a member of the Sonderkommando. In the second section, I compare *Son of Saul* with the Nobel Prize winner novel, *Fatelessness* (1975) by Imre Kertész. I argue that these two works show strong similarity in their storytelling and staging of the Holocaust. Both works miss a looking back in hindsight and the historical perspective, confining their protagonists to the present. Thirdly, I examine the relation between the absurd mission of Saul saving the dead boy and the problem of remembering and commemorating the Holocaust. Finally, I try to map the traces of popular genres in *Son of Saul*. I recon the film applies – on the one hand – the audiovisual techniques of the POV-horror genre while – on the other hand – the media and presentation tactics of first-person-shooter video games. The application of well-known media procedures can thus bring the historical event that can be hardly visualized or verbalized closer to the younger generation. With the Holocaust fading away in the past and the number of survivors and witnesses radically decreasing, this is certainly becoming more and more important.

**Keywords:** Holocaust, contemporary Hungarian Cinema, *Fatelessness*, *Son of Saul*, László Nemes Jeles, Imre Kertész.

The amazing success of *Son of Saul* (*Saul fia*, 2015) by László Nemes Jeles (Grand Prix at Cannes Film Festival, Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film, Best Foreign Language Film at the 88th Academy Awards) can be primarily attributed to its depiction of the seemingly indescribable and incomprehensible

historical trauma of the Holocaust in an original and novel way. What makes the international success of the film somewhat surprising however, is exactly these novel and distressing cinematic images. In fact, *Son of Saul* cannot be considered a viewer-friendly piece of art; on the contrary, its powerful impact results from its shocking and horrifying effects. According to Judit Székács-Weisz, *Son of Saul* makes us face the trauma of the Holocaust at an elemental, visceral level by forcing the viewer to “enter the all-out, absolute world of body and mind experience and totally eliminates the possibility of personal exclusion” (Székács-Weisz 2017, 45).<sup>1</sup> Reviewing the movie, Zsolt Gyenge also refers to and highlights the essential physical atmosphere of the film. According to him, *Son of Saul* “shows us mercilessly the harrowing experience of extreme uncertainty” (Gyenge 2015). Georges Didi-Huberman (2020) calls the movie a “monster” which seizes the viewer violently and makes them face the nightmare of the Shoah.<sup>2</sup> There are countless other examples that describe the experience of watching the movie as a set of torturous physical and mental ordeals. These also identify the role of the viewer with the position of the unwilling witness.<sup>3</sup>

In the following, first I will attempt to answer the question what cinematographic and thematic tools are deployed by *Son of Saul* to force the viewer out of the external viewing position and into the uncomfortable role of the witness. Second, drawing on the uncovered specificities, I will analyse Nemes Jeles’s film, on the one hand, in the context of Imre Kertész’s influential novel *Fatelessness* (*Sorstalanság*, 1975) arguing that the film stages the Holocaust similarly to the novel in many aspects, and, on the other hand, I search for related instances or, if you will, precursors of the major cinematographic procedures of *Son of Saul* in the context of contemporary film and media history.

## Images that Cut into the Flesh

The most striking visual feature of the film by Nemes is the positioning of the camera, which is almost constantly fixed on the main character, Saul, showing either directly him or (him and) what he sees. This results in the predominance

1 Quotations from texts in Hungarian are all my translations in this article.

2 Cf. “the images and screams in your film left me defenseless, unprotected by knowledge. They seize me violently in several ways. First, I must confess, I felt as if I were seeing right there before my eyes something of my earliest and most harrowing nightmares” (Didi-Huberman 2020, 150).

3 The use of the word witness is, of course, figurative as the aesthetic experience of the viewer lacks the real, physical participation and bodily menace.

of close-ups and medium close-ups throughout the film. In the case of the former, the background is regularly hidden behind Saul's face, whereas in the latter case, there are multiple obstacles to the clear view of Saul's environment. Moreover, actions in the background are practically invisible due to the shallow focus rendering the surroundings blurred and out-of-focus. Sometimes parts of the picture are simply too dark to make out, or often our depth vision is obstructed by strong counter-light, or, occasionally, by a cloud of ashes [Figs. 1–2].

Another feature that constantly stymies our visual input is the highly restricted picture frames that exclude most of the actions (we do hear or at least assume) happening around the characters.<sup>4</sup> It is the result of this limited filmic representation that we never actually get to see the main location of the film, we never get a view of the death camp (and, consequently, of the Holocaust in general), but have to resort to fragments of pictures and sounds to presume the context of the events happenings in such a narrow frame. The lack of establishing shots and the film's radically elliptic structure makes the audience experience the surroundings as a frightening labyrinth or maze, rather than a clear, understandable space. As Zsolt Gyenge puts it, "due to the aspect ratio and lack of depth, we are simply deprived of perspectives, we are claustrophobically closed into the frame, we can barely make out what is happening in the background and we are always surprised when somebody or something enters the frame from the side." Like Saul, we too are "rambling vertiginously along shallow corridors, through dim-lit halls and amongst dilapidated barracks" (Gyenge 2015). Since the distance between the constantly threatened main character and the knowledge of the viewer is minimized, the filmic language of *Son of Saul* "creates an unreliable and chaotic epistemological structure that baffles us by being fragmented, elliptic and scrappy and entices the viewers constantly to watch out for clues and signs that assist interpretation" (Kiss 2016). As such, it both requires a high level of activity on the viewer's part and it makes the audience "experience" the chaotic world of the camp together with Saul, the main character; the viewer's experience here being strictly understood as an aesthetic experience.

In her exceptional essay *The Phenomenology of Trauma*, Teréz Vincze applies the concepts of Laura U. Marks of haptic and optic visuality to the phenomenological analysis of *Son of Saul*. In the case of optic visuality, there is sufficient "distance" between the observer and the observed object (on the screen) to be able to identify the object seen, whereas in the case of haptic visuality, there is no such distance

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4 As several critics mention, the 4:3 aspect ratio used for *Son of Saul* also limits the available visual information as this aspect ratio can frame less information than, for example, 16:9.

so the identification of objects is encumbered.<sup>5</sup> The distance should be (partially) understood metaphorically as we do not actually sit farther or closer in the former or the latter case, since we are talking about the screen (in the movie theatre). Here, distance is rather taken to mean that the haptic experience limits severely the function of vision to identify objects for various (visual) reasons, whereas in the case of optic visuality, the observer sees and identifies objects from the omniscient position that masters the view. As during the former experience the identification of objects is seriously obstructed, the eyes focus on the surface and texture and try to “scan” it. According to Marks, “in haptic visuality, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch” (2000, 162). The “sense of touch” joining the sense of vision, or, to put it differently, haptic visuality scanning the surface is triggered, in this case, by changes in focus, graininess, under- and overexposure, wrong perspectives; or, simply put, the “defects” of the image (Marks 2000, 172). (Marks explains facetiously that it is possible to activate haptic visuality if somebody who has impaired vision goes to the movie theatre and takes off their glasses [2000, 170].) The defective, reduced filmic image, full of absences inspires the viewer to engage in a more active, interpretive work of completion in such a way that, in the meantime, the other senses are also “switched on” and the viewer is pushed towards a multisensory perception. It is fairly obvious to see that *Son of Saul* engages a whole host of haptic images from blurred backgrounds to blinding counter light, from smoke that erases depth of field to extremely narrow frames. Teréz Vincze also highlights the overwhelmingly haptic character of the filmic images. She emphasizes that it can already be seen in the beginning scene as “haptic images are often blurred, which makes their recognition difficult. *Son of Saul* opens with an image that looks exactly like that: the first image is a greenish blur that fills the screen [...]. After some time, it turns out that the picture is produced by shallow focus and as the hero approaches the camera, finally his face becomes sharp while his surroundings remain relatively blurred” (Vincze 2016, 111). So, the first images activate the multisensory perception related to haptic visuality, and the narrow field of vision throughout the film works against optic, overview-like, “distancing” visuality. As a result, the film does not allow its viewer to take a seat in the master position of an all-perceiving subject. It is exactly this feature of the

5 “Haptic visuality is distinguished from optical visuality, which sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space: in other words, how we usually conceive of vision. Optical visuality depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze.” (Marks 2000, 162.)

film and Marks's concepts that help Vincze reason with compelling force about the unusual position of the viewer of *Son of Saul*. "The repositioning of the audience, by eliminating the all-perceiving position and the controlling knowledge, makes them more vulnerable in the perceiving situation, and makes the experience more effective. The viewer's suggested 'physical' closeness to Saul makes the perceptive identification more accentuated. [...] All of the haptic qualities present strengthen the possibility that the viewer could be drawn not only into the subjectivity of Saul but also into his environment, perceptively." (Vincze 2016, 112.)

To summarize briefly, this is how the visuals of *Son of Saul* minimize the difference between the visual perception of the viewer and the protagonist and thus "coerce" the spectator into haptic visuality and epistemological uncertainty. This filmic feature contradicts all understanding and insight, or, subsequent historical interpretation. Nonetheless, it should not be forgotten that the movie, in fact, relies heavily on what the audience is presumed to know about the Holocaust, i.e. they do have previous knowledge about the history of concentration camps and how they operated. Without this, the viewers would not be able to understand what happens in the gas chambers after the doors are closed, or even infer that the prisoners were in fact ushered into gas chambers. For this is *not shown* or revealed by the camera. Nor is it revealed that the remains of people are incinerated and that they turn into ashes in the crematorium. We, however, do see the flames and the smoke, and we do hear the banging, but these audiovisual cues could never be accurately interpreted without our historical knowledge about the Holocaust. Moreover, the lifeless and blank face of the protagonist – seen while we hear the faint cries and screams through the massive iron doors of the gas chambers – does not reveal anything of the horrors happening inside [Fig. 3].

## ***Son of Saul and Fatelessness***

I wrote in detail about the similarities of the narrative structures in László Nemes Jeles's film and Imre Kertész's Nobel Prize winner novel, *Fatelessness* (*Sorstalanság*, 1975) in a Hungarian-language essay entitled *Son of Saul and Fatelessness* (Sághy 2015). The most conspicuously similar feature between these two is that the description and display of the events of the Holocaust are tied to the limited point of view of the protagonists. Saul (and the viewer of the movie) does not have a comprehensive understanding of the entirety of the death camp and the events taking place there, just like György Köves, the protagonist in Kertész's novel, who does not have a grasp on the events he has experienced and suffered through. The

14-year-old protagonist is approaching Auschwitz without having the slightest idea that it is the Holocaust that is happening to him. To be able to fathom that, he would need to be in possession of historical knowledge in the present which is, to use the key expression of the novel, “naturally” not available as this horizon can only come into being while looking back at it, i.e. in hindsight. In the novel, the time of narration and the time of the narrated story seem to be overlapping (Köves, the narrator is narrating what is happening to him), so looking back in hindsight and making judgements are absent from the greater part of *Fatelessness*. The hero of Nemes Jeles’s film, Saul, like Köves, acts in the present of the events depicted without any interpretative distance. Having returned from the camp, Kertész’s hero spells out himself (reflexively) in the final chapter of the novel what seems to be the problem with the (overarching) perspective of looking back. He explains to the two elderly neighbours, Fleischmann and Steiner that it is only “now, and thus after the event, looking back, in hindsight, does the way it all ‘come about’ seem over, finished, unalterable, finite, so tremendously fast, and so terribly opaque. And if, in addition, one knows one’s fate in advance, of course. [...] Except that whether one looks back or ahead, both are flawed perspectives, I suggested. After all, there are times when twenty minutes, in and of themselves, can be quite a lot of time. Each minute had started, endured, and then ended before the next one started. Now, I said, let’s just consider: every one of those minutes might in fact have brought something new. In reality it didn’t, naturally, but still, one must acknowledge that it might have; when it comes down to it, each and every minute something else might have happened other than what actually did happen” (Kertész 2004, 258). It is not the bird’s eye view of the historical perspective that allows Köves to experience the Holocaust in a tangible way but the passing of minutes, hours or days. Similarly, *Son of Saul* ignores (historical) panorama pictures and, at the same time, the cinematographic procedures of the film, laid out above, also aim at expressing the minute-by-minute, fragmented perspective of the protagonist. Contrary to this, the actual film adaptation of *Fatelessness*, released in 2005, a Hungarian production directed by Lajos Koltai (its screenplay was written by Kertész himself) lays out Köves’s story through the filter of posterity, that is from the position of retrospection. The most conspicuous methods of this approach are the sweet-and-sad soundtrack by Ennio Morricone, the enticing, gold-tinted pictures of Budapest and the terrifying, dark hued images of the camp as these directorial measures and decisions evaluate and judge (with music and with stylized lights) the events staged.<sup>6</sup>

6 I wrote in detail about this adaptational relationship and Imre Kertész’s novel *Fatelessness*, and the screenplay published in 2001 in the article *A Sorstalanság Hollywoodba megy, avagy arról:*

Apart from stating the similar features, it is important to mention that Köves's perspective in the book is still wider than that of Saul in the film. We can only access what the latter perceives visually and, to some extent, what he hears, while Gyuri Köves describes with naiveté and rich details all the things he perceives. On one occasion he is musing at length about the prisoner who helps their settling in. He is wearing striped clothes and is speaking to them in Hungarian. Köves ponders what offense he might have committed to have been sentenced to such a miserable prisoner existence: "I immediately felt a bit sorry for him too, for I could not help but notice and be forced to admit that despite his being a rather young, intelligent convict, the man had a charming face, and I would dearly have liked to have found out from him where, how, and for what offense he had been imprisoned" (Kertész 2004, 92). The irony is palpable in the difference of the protagonist's interpretation and the reader's knowledge, as the reader knows what Köves did not know in the moment of his arrival: soon he is going to become a "convict" even though he has committed no "offense." He does not seem to have access to the real historical context, whereas the reader does. The difference between the two understandings will create the baseline for the dark humour of the novel. The limited perspective of Köves, on the one hand, deconstructs Holocaust stereotypes, and, on the other hand, builds on those from the beginning, as the bitter irony of the novel would not work without the reader's superior knowledge. As explained above, *Son of Saul* also draws on the viewers' knowledge when it steps away from the traditions of depicting the Holocaust and deconstruct them through cinematographic innovations. It keeps most of the events and objects of the death camp outside frames and in haze (or, out of visibility). But, drawing on our previous knowledge, we can still complement (partially) the fragments within the frames (the soundscape of the movie greatly facilitates this). To summarize briefly, *Son of Saul* and *Fatelessness* (the novel) are similar to each other in that both depict the events from the limited point of view of the protagonist, none of them build on the (evaluating, judging) perspective (camera angle) of hindsight, and both works of art – with differing aesthetic and rhetoric objectives – build on the previous knowledge of the audience about the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup> It is undoubtedly true, however, that the perspective of György

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*miképpen csúszik ki a túlélők mindinkább gyengülő kezéből Auschwitz emléke* [*Fatelessness Goes to Hollywood. How the Memory of Auschwitz is Slipping away from the Weakening Hands of Survivors*] (2012).

7 This procedure is highly unusual in films about historical events as it is a central characteristic of historical movies to foreground those (temporal) signifiers that help the spectator authenticate historical fiction. Cf. Tóth (2008).



Köves is limited due to his lack of information and childish naiveté, while Saul's perspective is restricted as a result of his horrendous experiences.

## In the Embrace of Horrendous Sounds

While the predominant visual feature of *Son of Saul* is the limited perspective (and the simultaneous maximization of the interpreting activity from the audience), the aural level shows the very opposite, namely, the overwhelming and alarming torrent of sounds. The audio track of the film mostly transmits the noises, orders, ushering and yelling of the chaotic everyday world of the concentration camps, and, of course, the shots, cries and screams. The horrors of the concentration camp are thus most strongly perceived on the aural level rather than on the visual, which severely restricts the viewer's sense of space by employing tight frames and lack of depth of focus. This audio level, arriving mostly from outside the tightly framed pictures, however, serves to complete the limited perspective offered by the visuals, so it does – in the end – succeed in creating the imaginary space of the film and is no less terrifying than the visible horror.<sup>8</sup> These sounds reach the audience from multiple directions (a feature of Dolby Surround sound), filling the whole space of the movie theatre and thus embracing the audience. But since these sounds are those of intimidation and terror, what embraces the audience is in fact the sounds of horror.

Looking at the mechanism of hearing from a perceptual psychological perspective, sounds are more likely to trigger more direct experiences than visual stimuli: while the transmission of light (i.e. the triggering of visual stimulus) does not require a transmitting medium, the transmission of sounds is impossible without it. In fact, the medium of sound, i.e. the air around us, does not only move but also surrounds us. According to Edward Branigan, the sound “achieves a greater ‘intimacy’ than light because it seems to put the spectator directly in touch with a nearby action through a medium of air which traverses space, touching both spectator and represented event” (Branigan 1997, 99). The more intimate, more physical experience is mainly due to the Dolby Surround

8 Mary Ann Doane on the spatial quality of the voice-off: “The voice-off deepens the diegesis, gives it an extent which exceeds that of the image, and thus supports the claim that there is a space in the fictional world which the camera does not register. In its own way, it *accounts* for lost space. The voice-off is a sound which is first and foremost in the service of the film's construction of space and only indirectly in the service of the image. It validates both what the screen reveals of the diegesis and what it conceals” (Doane 1999, 368). The extent of “lost space” is considerable in *Son of Saul*, therefore the voice-off is even more significant than in other cases.



sound system of modern contemporary cinemas, which “practically wraps up the audience and creates an unbreakable cohesion by placing vantage points in the real space, facilitating the physical understanding of the plot on the screen” (Dragon 2017, 47). Another key aspect of our perception of sound that explains its visceral nature and effect is the fact that the audience is more capable of “identifying” with sounds than with pictures since light is only perceived while sounds are produced as well. “Our ability to hear sounds *being made* exists in parallel with our ability to *make* sounds (which we then hear) whereas light can only be sensed, *not* made by us. Again, lightness seems to have a distant quality, ‘outside’ and apart from the human body whereas sound seems to be part of us and our movements” (Branigan 1997, 101). Sounds, therefore, are easier to experience, since they surround us and belong to us. As a result, the audio track of *Son of Saul* is all the more dreadful. First, the horrors missing from the pictures are perceived in the audio, constantly intimidating both Saul, as he is trying to find his way in the claustrophobic visuals, and the viewer, who is co-experiencing and visually identifying with him. Second, the overwhelming nature of the audio, as explained above through perceptual psychology, indeed gets “under the viewer’s skin,” both surrounding and overwhelming the audience to a significantly greater extent than the visuals ever would.

The film’s sounds, which consist mainly of orders, threats, shots and death cries, can, on the one hand, potentially trigger the previously mentioned dreadful suspense, and, on the other hand, can strengthen the epistemological uncertainty imposed by the pictures through the turmoil of the audio, that is, the overwhelming and chaotic nature of sounds of various intensity, direction and content with no discernible source in sight. Likewise, some of the dialogues between the characters are often difficult to hear or understand since they are in other languages. The film features eight different languages, some of which remain untranslated in the subtitles (at least in the Hungarian version). The unintelligible utterances stay in the realm of “noise,” and due to their incomprehensibility (or poor sound quality), they intensify the chaos and pandemonium so typical of the concentration camps depicted in the visuals (and perceived in most of the audio as well).

## **Saul’s Mission and Memory**

As already mentioned above, the limitations of the visual plane primarily stem from the contemporaneity of Saul and the spectator experiencing the world of the death camp since the camera does not leave him for a second. Consequently, the

claustrophobic visual world of the film seems to represent the limited perspective of Saul's narrowed consciousness. The connection between the visual limitations of the film and Saul is all the more apparent in several scenes where depth of focus fades away, thus making the background blurry, when Saul enters the picture. As if perspective was actually tuned onto and cleared away by his point of view [Figs. 4–7]. The mechanical behaviour of Saul and his desensitized mind to the stimuli of the outside world is far from being surprising; he is a member of *Sonderkommando*, a group of prisoners operating the gas chambers and the crematoriums, and, as such, he is an accomplice in the mass murder, which can only be tolerated by a mind which is dull and focused solely on the present. His role excludes the possibility of creating future plans; the only realistic survival strategy for Saul and his fellow inmates is to survive the present moment. The claustrophobic filmic representation of the movie thus suggests that “the prisoners confined in space are also stranded by the hopeless and horrific present” (Gyenge 2015).

Interestingly enough, the first moment with depth of focus in the film is when Saul is observing an SS officer who is suffocating a boy who has survived the gas chamber [Figs. 8–9]. This visual representation seems to suggest that his mind opens up for a moment and his catatonic soul is touched by something. As it turns out later, this is the moment of his decision to save the boy's corpse, so, in a way, he plans ahead and looks into the future as Saul “interprets the miracle of the boy surviving the gas chamber as a sign for him to do something in order to save his own humanity” (Vincze 2016, 119). This mission of his, however, to save a corpse from incineration and to provide the boy with a proper funeral does seem, under the circumstances, somewhat absurd. What's more, his action to save a dead greatly endangers his peers who are plotting an escape and a breakout (in fact, it indirectly causes the death of two of them: the rabbi, who is shovelling the ashes and the boy, who is designated to be his companion when they go to procure gun powder). In the light of this, his desperate mission seems all the more questionable. Nonetheless, the cinematographic language that practically fixes the camera on Saul forces the viewer to face his motivations and odds, however absurd and irrational these may seem at first sight. The fact that we experience the death camps through the eyes of Saul does offer a special situation, since, according to Gyenge, “we do not necessarily have to agree with or feel the same way as him, but are certainly made to rethink and experience his options and then ponder about our own” (2015).

But what exactly is the camera fixed on Saul making us contemplate? Why does the saving of a dead person seem absurd in the crowd of many who are alive and want to survive?

Saul is a member of the Sonderkommando, the body of prisoners who (obviously under coercion) collaborated with the German SS, and, as such, he becomes an accomplice in the extermination of his fellow Jewish sufferers. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman talks about this collaboration in his book *Modernity and the Holocaust* saying that this coerced collaboration and the creation of the “collaborating victim” was necessary for the operation of death camps. Without the Sonderkommando, *judenrats* and *kapos*, it would have been difficult to get the victims to enter the gas chambers (Bauman 1989, 117–150). This coerced collaboration came at an exorbitant price: it meant the loss of humanity or human dignity. Saul’s mechanical manners and his blank face void of emotions could in fact be interpreted as if his collaboration, coerced by his survival instinct in the camp, has turned him into an undead, a living dead, lacking human nature. Many survivors of death camps have spoken about these “undead,” who were called *Muselmans*. Similarly to Saul, they renounced their motivation to stay alive and whose (mental) death has started before their corporeal extermination.<sup>9</sup> It is by no coincidence that Abraham accuses Saul in the film of “having left the living for the dead,” to which Saul briefly answers, “we’re all dead by now.” This is why it becomes significant that when Saul sees the SS officer suffocating the boy (and the frame simultaneously receives some depth of focus), he appears to come alive again and seems to look into the future for a moment (even if he does not harbour any hopes of survival). His plan, however, is not aimed at reclaiming his lost human dignity (if such a feat was even possible), but at a righteous funeral for the dead boy. In other words, what he wants is not to save himself from incineration but the boy.

It is at the same time important to see that concentration camps deprived people not only of their humanity, but also of their human death, since the primal aim of death camps was total extermination including the corpses, hence the use of crematoriums working around the clock. Death in death camps “cannot be called death. Not only because it makes no sense and because it bears no meaning to the victims, but because this death is not one’s *own death*: ‘*Auschwitz-death*’ as Améry calls it. People did not die in Auschwitz; they were exterminated. They were deprived not only of their dignity of life but also, which may be even more

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9 Imre Kertész writes about being a Muzelmann as a stage on the way to physical and mental disintegration: “I can remember the physical pain, but only with my mind, not with my senses; it is actually impossible to recall it. I remember, at a certain point it ceases as well, just like being hungry or cold. We no longer register what is going on around us. Our nose is runny, our eyes well up; our excrements are being produced without hesitation, anytime, anywhere. Anyone who got to this stage was called a Muzelmann. His mind slowly falls asleep and sinks into the confused concepts of his memories. The Muzelmann suffers no more. He enjoys magical inner experiences, unknowingly” (Kertész 1989, 35).

gruesome, as Adorno puts it, of the dignity of death. Even death was disparaged” (Pintér 2014, 74). Saul’s aim could be seen in fact as a way of wanting to give back the boy his *own* death by means of a proper funeral, for the lack of anything else to give the boy or himself. In a world where total physical and mental annihilation is the ultimate aim, honouring the corpse of the boy with last rites could signify the honouring of death itself or of the memory of the dead boy. “This absurd mission of providing a decent funeral for the dead boy is a story of honouring the memory of the victims, or, the story of our attitude to Auschwitz. What the film makes us realize is that the only thing we could do is to properly honour the memory of the victims.” (Pintér 2017, 52.)<sup>10</sup> In short, Saul’s actions are symbolic and they aim at reclaiming our own death and at saving the right to a proper funeral and to honour the memory of the dead since nothing more could be achieved under the circumstances.

Investigating the issue of commemoration is also interesting in the scene where Saul and Katz are taking pictures of the incineration. They are documenting how the corpses are being obliterated as if the two of them were building the visual “memorial” of the dead [Fig. 10]. While it is the latter who is taking the pictures, Saul is the one who is hiding the camera in the drainpipes to protect the images from the guards who happen on them and to send a “message” to the future. Compared to his catatonic and single-focused state, Saul shows a surprising drive in the documentation of the death camp, which proves that being a witness remains the last important thing for him. When he thinks that the funeral and the memory of the dead boy is more important than those who are alive, Saul, in a way, intimates that the only valid attitude to their desperate situation in the concentration camp is remembering and reminding. A proper funeral means the act of remembering. Making a grave means the creation of a space for memory. At the same time, the scenes of the photos being taken in the camp refer reflexively to the same function of the images of *Son of Saul*: as they tell the story of how that particular camera got into the drainpipes, they fulfil Saul and Katz’s hope in the *present* of the reception of the film. Actually, there were photos taken in the camps, surviving to this day, by Alberto Errera, a member of the Sonderkommando in 1944 in

10 Didi-Huberman also interprets Saul’s aims as a fight against one’s own death: “[he is] trying to wrest the dead child from an anatomical dismemberment, whatever the cost, to spare him the atrocious den of the crematorium and the anonymous scattering of his ashes in the Vistula. Out of the dark here means resisting the nonexistence of death – whence the necessity, *for the dead to exist*, of a ritual, an appropriate prayer, a rabbi, and, especially, a dignified burial” (2020, 160–161, emphasis in the original).

Auschwitz-Birkenau. The artistic images in Nemes Jeles's film commemorate the victims, bereft of their own death.

In my opinion, the scene where Saul smiles can also be linked to the idea of remembering and reminding [Fig. 11]. He smiles for the first time in the film, and, as they are executed a couple of minutes later, for the last time in his life. Knowing that beforehand no emotion has ever registered on his face, this facial expression is highly unusual. It is triggered by a Polish teenager who glances into the shed in which the fugitives from the camp take refuge [Fig. 12]. Saul's smile might be a response to this glance when he sees the boy: the glance sees their group as *living people*, not (dead) souls. What is more, this glance is a *witness* to the last minutes they are spending on Earth and it will survive and keep all of them in his memory.

"For me the Holocaust is a face, a human face; let us not forget this face," said Nemes Jeles in his acceptance speech at the Golden Globes.<sup>11</sup> This remark can, of course, refer to the film's attempt at offering (again) a "face" to a distant and, therefore, over-generalized (or faceless) past event by showing the fate of an individual victim and a personal perspective instead of a generic Holocaust story. At the same time, Nemes Jeles's words can also be taken to mean that Saul's desensitized, dead face comes to life again by taking on the mission of providing a funeral for the dead boy. When he takes on this impossible mission, he tries to break free from a state of inhumanity in order to reclaim his human dignity. As Pintér puts it, "as a result of his mission to reclaim the face of the dead boy, his face is returned to him, if only symbolically: the flesh and blood face remains blank and mechanical practically throughout the whole film" (Pintér 2017, 55).

## **The Effects of Different Genres in *Son of Saul***

The cinematographic procedures in *Son of Saul* described above are truly original among films depicting the Holocaust; they are, however, not unprecedented in cinematography. Gergő Nagy V. (2015) and Dan Kagan-Kans (2016) both draw comparisons between Nemes Jeles's movie and the opening scenes of *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) based on the point of view attaching itself to or identifying with the perspective of the protagonist. Due to the intensified physical effects affecting the viewer, created primarily, in the way mentioned above, by the sound track and haptic images, *Son of Saul* can also be likened

11 See: <https://budapestbeacon.com/hungarys-son-of-saul-wins-golden-globe-for-best-foreign-film/>. Last accessed 02. 06. 2022.

to the genre of horror. A well-known procedure used by horror films is the use of a limited (claustrophobic) visual universe, which allows the filmmakers to intimate the constant proximity of an impending force which seriously menaces the protagonists' lives even if we cannot actually see it in the narrow frame of the image. Based on the imitation of the (narrow and limited) perspective of the protagonist, *Son of Saul* can be compared to a certain subgenre of horror films: Point of View Shot (POV) horror films. In this genre, the events are depicted in the movie from the point of view of a character as if that character was filming the movie with their hand-held camera. An early example (or prototype) of POV horror films is *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez), released in 1999 with great success. According to the fictional story, we see some found footage left behind by three university students after shooting in Black Hills about the mysterious phenomenon known as Blair Witch. The footage, shot by handheld cameras (recorded from the point of the view of the protagonists), is frequently out of focus, has a bad angle, is under or overexposed, and the extent of its flaws often prevent us from making out what the images actually depict. The murderous evil force makes the protagonists disappear one by one but is never actually in the frame. The hazy, narrow, night shots recorded often in haste create tension because the recipient never knows what horror is going to be revealed in the next shot, just like in *Son of Saul*. And even though we never actually see any evil, the ghastly sounds, the cries for help, the shrieks which come from outside the frame are all evidence of the presence of a lethal, evil force. Therefore, based on the cinematic procedures (both in terms of visual and audio), *Son of Saul* and *The Blair Witch Project* can be considered to function very similarly.

In the late nineties, around and after the time *The Blair Witch Project* was released, several successful POV horror films and (mainly action) films inspired by the esthetics of found footage were released.<sup>12</sup> POV movies have gained considerable ground in the film industry in the last two decades even though before that stories told from the (subjective) point of view of one of the characters in the film were not necessarily very successful, and therefore they used to be

12 Let me mention a couple of recent successful POV horror or action movies (frequently with sequels) from the last two decades: *Paranormal Activity* 1–4, (Oren Peli, 2007; Kip Williams, 2010; Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman, 2011; Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman, 2012), *[REC]* 1–4 (Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza, 2007; Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza, 2009; Paco Plaza, 2012; Jaume Balagueró, 2014), *V/H/S* 1–3 (Adam Wingard and others, 2012; Adam Wingard and others, 2013; Justin Benson and others, 2014), *Cloverfield* (J. J. Abrams, 2008), *Home Movie* (Christopher Denhan, 2008), *Grave Encounters* 1–2 (Stuart Ortiz And Colin Minihan, 2011; John Poliquin, 2012). A Google search for the queries “POV horror movies” or “found footage” results in a list of 50 to 100 hits.



scarcely made. As Linda Hutcheon describes this phenomenon, attempts “to use the camera for first-person narration – to let the spectator see only what the protagonist sees – are infrequent. Despite the well-known example of Robert Montgomery’s 1946 adaptation of Raymond Chandler’s *Lady in the Lake* (1943), in which a camera was positioned on the protagonist’s chest, first-person point-of-view films are often called ‘clumsy, ostentatiously and even pretentiously artistic’” (Hutcheon 2006, 54). Telling stories from the point of view of one of the characters was neither successful, nor popular in the 20th century while in the 2000s, POV films produced in a similar fashion, increased in number and in popularity. Therein lies the question: what happened at the end of the 20th century? What brought about this change in the evaluation of first-person camera narration in the 80s and 90s?

To put it concisely, the very end of the 20th century was the era of the revolution of digital media, and this process, especially the appearance and evolution of video games exerted a major impact on the language and perception of films. Digital media (particularly video games) obviously influenced cinematography in multiple and complex ways but reviewing all of them would exceed the limitations of a single essay. However, it might not even be necessary to explore all the complexities of the impact of digital media on films when studying the reasons behind the acceptance of first-person camera narration.

In terms of the perception and cinematography of visual content, what novelty did digital video games introduce?

With the spread of personal computers, new forms of narration (new media narratives) appeared. They are mainly related to video games, artistic installations or projects and are usually called interactive narratives, or, less frequently, simulations. The concept of the interactive narrative can be applied to any and all piece of art which is created through a digital medium, and the experiencing of which requires the active participation or interaction of the recipient. The interactive narratives and other structural features of video games are studied by *ludology*, or game studies. An important claim game studies scholars make in connection with video games is that during the experience of the game the frontier between the world of the game and that of the player is not as sharp as the frontier between the world of a piece of art of a traditional narrative (e.g. novels or films) and that of the recipient. For example, on the new enjoyment of experiencing video games Jesper Juul claims that “the player inhabits a twilight zone where he/she is both an empirical subject outside the game and undertakes a role inside the game” (2001). Moreover, taking into consideration the subject of the player,

Alison McMahan claims that in “interactive narratives the differentiation between character subjectivity and that of the constructed spectator are blurred” (1999, 151) because the player is able to change the course of the scenes (they can decide for example which path they will take next) and the actions of the character (as they themselves control them), and their executive and active possibilities mean the highest degrees of interactivity and involvement. Identification with the fictitious character under the gamer’s control creates the experience of a first-person singular adventure. This train of thought leads us to another important claim by game studies researchers, namely, to the idea that the primordial story-experience of video games is related to the perspective of the first-person singular because the path a story follows is controlled by the motoric activity of the player. Torben Grodal argues that by “providing an ‘interactive’ motor dimension to story experience, the computer adds a powerful new dimension to the possibility of simulating first-person experiences” (2003, 138). Elsewhere, writing about first-person shooter games, he asserts that “for first-person shoot-em-up games or some types of virtual reality are even closer to our core consciousness, because not only are we able to see and feel, we are even able to act upon what we see in light of our concerns, our (inter)active motor capabilities allow us to shoot at what frightens us or approach what activates our curiosity. Thus, video games and some types of virtual reality are the supreme media for the full simulation of our basic first-person ‘story’ experience because they allow ‘the full experiential flow’ by linking perceptions, cognitions, and emotions with first-person actions. Motor cortex and muscles focus the audiovisual attention, and provide ‘muscular’ reality and immersion to the perceptions” (Grodal 2003, 132). Therefore, interactivity, the blurring of the line between the player and the game, the first-person singular experience and immersion are all interconnected and are related to each other. In fact, this is true in the case of all interactive narratives, even though the most striking examples of this “interconnectedness” are those shooter, fighter or racing games that offer the first-person perspective.

Returning to the universe of films, I believe the unprecedented success of POV movies was chiefly due to the fact that video games had already instilled in gamers the experience of a first-person singular narrative. One of the most prominent examples of the interconnection of the perspective of first-person shooter games and cinematic representation is *Hardcore Henry* (Ilya Naishuller, 2015), the plot of which is experienced by the viewers from the (action hero) protagonist’s perspective as if it was a game. Presumably, but probably not so strikingly, the success of POV horror movies can also be largely attributed

to the fact that their young audience grew up in a video game culture; they therefore have a primary experience with the reception of first-person singular (interactive) narratives. This cultural change, the influence of video games on film is characterized by Zoltán Dragon in the following way: while “beforehand there used to be an obvious tendency in video games to adopt cinematographic procedures in order to create an even more enjoyable gaming experience, the tide has turned and it is cinema that needs to turn to the visuals of computers. This drives the experimental but growing body of work of those feature films that use the FPS (first person shooter) perspective: presumably the younger generations (Millennials, probably, but Generation Z and Alpha for sure) would regard the historically significant, unique, experimental subjective camera position of *Lady in the Lake* [...] as a completely normal, everyday choice” (Dragon 2017, 48).

Having established this and returning to *Son of Saul*, we can claim that if POV horror film procedures did have an impact on Nemes Jeles’s film in question, then the procedures of (mostly first-person shooter) video games must also have influenced it indirectly, since the formal techniques of POV horror films owe a lot to the visual strategies (media tactics) of video games. It is highly interesting to note that numerous critics and reviewers of *Son of Saul* mention the direct influence of video games on films several times. Kagan-Kans, for instance, in his aforementioned article *The Holocaust Feeling* writes that “anyone who in the last fifteen years has played a first-person or near-first-person shooter, adventure, or horror video game (that is, a game where the player’s perspective is that of the character he is controlling) – some of the best known are *Call of Duty* (set in World War II), *Halo* (set in space), and *Bioshock* (set in an underwater utopia) – will recognize what *Son of Saul* is up to. Immediate perspective; the use of sound to signal the presence of enemies and environmental factors outside the scope of that perspective” (2016). Erika Kiss and Dávid Venyercsán also associate Nemes Jeles’s film with video games because of characters popping up unexpectedly in the limited field of vision. The latter claims that “Nemes Jeles’s film and its utterly narrow visual universe focused on the characters creates a claustrophobic effect through the elimination of the surroundings, and, it is able to call forth distressing and suffocating feelings like a horror game working with similar methods. I believe it is possible to draw comparison between the so called survival horrors of the 90s and Nemes Jeles’s film” (Venyercsán 2017). Kiss refers to the parallel in question this way: “Nemes’s style has been likened to video games as the faces and dangers pop up seemingly out of nowhere in our (extremely restricted) field of vision” (2016). The most important reasons for associating *Son of Saul* with

video games are the narrow angle, a radically subjective point of view and, thanks to these, an immersive experience of reception.

The origins of the most important cinematographic (and, at the same time, immersive) procedure of *Son of Saul* can thus be found primarily in contemporary video games and POV horror films. So, Nemes Jeles did not do anything else but alloy the “old” topic of the Holocaust with the techniques (tactics) of contemporary, popular movie and video game culture. Most people actually attribute the success of his film to this amalgamation; in other words, how he managed to draw close a fading though fundamentally important historical event, the Holocaust, with his immersive methods, sinking the spectator into the screen. This commendation includes a moral value judgement: drawing close and bringing to life both advance the remembrance of the Holocaust trauma, both foster the collective memory of humankind, and, at the same time, contribute to the avoidance of such events in the future. That is why outcrossing is vital especially for younger generations in terms of the Holocaust because they actively consume video games and POV horror films. Or, exaggerating quite a bit, we could also say that *Son of Saul* speaks to them in their own language. And if this is true, Nemes Jeles achieved one of his noble artistic goals (he elaborated on this in an interview): he mostly wanted to “speak intelligibly to a younger generation about the Holocaust because they do not have the means to get the truth from survivors” (Nemes Jeles 2015). That is why they have to be taken back 70 years and to be led back to the past with immersive methods they know and like.<sup>13</sup>

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13 Or, in the director's own words: “Our goal was to take the viewer back to the present of 70 years ago and to try to make it possible to experience the past, even if for only two hours. We tried to conjure up a feeling of ‘I-am-there.’ This was our goal” (Nemes Jeles 2016, 49).

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## List of Figures

**Figures 1–12.** Framegrabs from *Son of Saul* (2015) directed by László Nemes Jeles.













## Recontextualizing *Son of Saul*: Masculinity in Totalitarian Spaces in Hungarian Film History

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**Abstract.** As a result of its radical approach to the topic of the Holocaust, as well as due to the long list of prestigious prizes it won, *Son of Saul* (*Saul fia*, 2015, directed by László Nemes Jeles) has put the relation between Eastern European societies and totalitarianism in the centre of public and academic discourse. Though most reviews and articles placed the film in the history of Holocaust-representations, this is not the only context in which the film can be understood. In the present article I argue that *Son of Saul* can also be read outside (or at least at a distance from) the context of a Holocaust-film, as it also belongs to another, quite different and internationally much less known local cinematic canon. There is an unclaimed heritage behind Nemes Jeles's controversial masterpiece, a trend in Hungarian cinema that explores the crisis of masculinity in totalitarian political regimes, thereby performing an allegorical critique of modernity and modern subjectivity. My recontextualization of Nemes Jeles's work indicates the ways it is influenced by a local, Eastern European filmmaking tradition (which includes the work of his own father, the filmmaker András Jeles as well), and is supported by three interrelated conceptual focus points: a post-Foucauldian understanding of cultural and cinematic space, an awareness of the workings of modern cinematic allegory, and finally the use of male protagonists as prime sites for the inscription of social crisis and historical trauma.

**Keywords:** *Son of Saul*, Hungarian cinema, totalitarianism, masculinity, allegory.

Due to its radical approach to the topic of the Holocaust, as well as because of the extensive international critical recognition, László Nemes Jeles's *Son of Saul* (*Saul fia*, 2015) has put the relation between Eastern European societies and totalitarianism in the centre of public and academic discourse. The film tells the story of the last day in the life of Saul, a member of the Sonderkommando in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Extermination Camp during the Second World War, a man

who one day (mis)recognizes a young boy as his own son, and determines to give him a proper Jewish burial. *Son of Saul* can definitely be seen as the latest turn in the history of cinematic Holocaust-representations, a film that “reopens the debate around the Holocaust and its cinematic thinkability” (Bradshaw 2016, 1), as the latest and bravest (or most outrageous) attempt to tell yet another story about the most traumatic event of European history, to form cinematic meaning at the site of the “Ground Zero” of post-war European identity. Understandably, most reviews, articles, and round-table discussions placed the film in the history of Holocaust-representations, and called it “a devastating and terrifying film” (Bradshaw 2016, 1), pointed out its “staggering audacity” (Bradshaw 2016, 3) and “uncompromising vision” (Scott 2015, 6), as well as the innovative ways “the filmmakers invented and successfully realized a peculiar film form in order to tackle the heroic task of showing the unwatchable, representing the unthinkable” (Vincze 2016, 107).

However, the history of the development of the Holocaust-film is not the only context in which the film’s radical representational strategies may become meaningful. In this paper I will argue that *Son of Saul* can also be understood outside (or at least at a distance from) the traditions of the Holocaust-film, as it also belongs to another, markedly different, yet internationally much less known local cinematic canon. In this article I will demonstrate the significance of an unclaimed local heritage behind Nemes Jeles’s widely recognized masterpiece. There is a trend in Eastern European cinema that focuses on social issues within an authoritarian or repressive political regime through the (potentially allegorical) story of a (typically male) protagonist. Films that belong to this trend explore the ways people, typically men “devoid of political power [...] come to terms with their diminutive position” (Mazierska 2010, 27). Regarded from the point of view of gender, such films can also be described as commenting on the crisis of masculinity in totalitarian political regimes, exploring masculinities under circumstances when men are deprived of such qualities as power, knowledge or agency. This is a well-recognizable tradition encompassing several decades, which can be associated with such well-known directors and titles as Jiří Menzel’s *Closely Watched Trains* (*Ostre sledované vlaky*, 1966), Miloš Forman’s *The Firemen’s Ball* (*Horí, má panenka*, 1967), Emir Kusturica’s *Underground* (1995), András Kovács’s *Cold Days* (*Hideg napok*, 1966), as well as much of the oeuvre of Miklós Jancsó and Béla Tarr. Though *Son of Saul* meets the above mentioned qualities, I will further narrow the focus of my investigations and place the film in the context of Hungarian film history and the specific cinematic practice that I have defined elsewhere as the labyrinth principle (Kalmár 2017).

This tradition, as I will outline in more detail in the context of Jancsó's *The Round-Up* (*Szegénylegények*, 1966), tends to depict the lives of powerless, confused, agency-deprived men under authoritarian political regimes by creating labyrinthine, maze-like spaces, and (at least in crucial moments) by relying on a continuously moving, disorienting camera work (Kalmár 2017, 1–20; see also Kovács 2007, 331). The insights one may gain from such recontextualization may show the ways Nemes Jeles's work is embedded in and influenced by a local, Eastern European filmmaking tradition, and may put some of the recurrent paradoxes of Holocaust-film criticism in a new light.

The film analyses below are based on three more general, more theoretical, mutually interconnecting concepts that need to be clarified briefly before I delve into the details of this local cinematic tradition. These concepts are: (1) cinematic space as a sociocultural construct that serves as a reservoir of local historical memory, (2) modern allegory as a trope expressing the dark underside of modernity, and (3) masculinity as a key site for the inscription of social crisis and historical trauma.

In order to grasp the relevance of the use of space, the characters' bodies and the camera in this cinematic tradition, first one needs to understand that both the identities of characters and the stories told in films are inseparable from the spaces and places where they take place, in other words, that cinematic space always operates as an active meaning-forming element of film language. Contemporary conceptualizations of space, in contrast to traditional empirical geography, assume that space, whether cinematic or not, is always a social construction, the operation, structure and form of which are inseparable from the economic models, power relations, cultural functioning, values and practices of the given society (Lefebvre 1991; Foucault 1995, 201; Warf and Arias 2009, 1). In order to understand these local cinematic practices and traditions, it is important to realize that within this theoretical perspective one may distinguish between historically and locally specific productions of space, which, in turn, enable identity-formations, narrative patterns or conflict types specific to them. In his formative study of cinematic space, Stephen Heath also defines the narrative space created in films as a social construct, closely tied with issues of power, knowledge and identity (Heath 1981). Remembering Heath's reconstruction of the roots of cinematic perspective in the monocular perspective established in Renaissance painting and the modern concept of control over space becomes especially significant when one encounters such films as *Son of Saul*, which seem to deliberately alter and criticize this entire cultural tradition. Indeed, *Saul*, as well as the other three films

discussed on the following pages, critically re-evaluate this notion of controlled modern space, as well as its cinematic manifestations, based on the “identification with the camera as the point of a sure and centrally embracing view” (Heath 1981, 30), together with the kinds of subject-positions this cinematic practice creates for both protagonist and spectator (Kovács 2002, 305–306; Vincze 2015). Such major film theoreticians of the post-1960s era as Christian Metz, Stephen Heath and Laura Mulvey have established a closely tied network of meaningful associations between the new sociocultural order of modernity, its emphasis on spatial and social control (epitomized by Bentham’s panopticon, famously analysed by Foucault), modernity’s tendency to create totalized social, political and cultural systems, the monocular perspective of Quattrocento painting, the established camera work and editing strategies of narrative cinema, active heterosexual desire, the desiring-controlling male gaze, and certain constructions of hegemonic masculinity. One of the key questions to keep in mind when evaluating the cinematic trends discussed below is how this kind of Eastern European cinema (typically made not by the victors, but by the losers of the battles of history, and made not in thriving liberal democracies but in suffocating authoritarian regimes) reshapes and implicitly criticizes the world view, identity-formations, cinematic tendencies and general assumptions about history formulated in the cinema of the victorious West. This context proves the point (that film scholars know since the time of Eisenstein’s political cinema) that cinematic space is always more than pure space: it is associated (in a potentially figurative or even allegorical fashion) with a whole range of wider social and cultural issues.

The cinematic spaces created in the films that belong to the filmic traditions discussed here often allow for (or even invite) allegorical readings. Indeed, in the state-socialist period, as the reception of *The Round-Up* clearly demonstrates, such films were often read as allegorical texts commenting on sensitive social or political issues in covert ways. Interestingly enough, it was also in the context of allegory that Walter Benjamin laid out his influential account of an alternative view of history, associated with the losers of historical conflict. In *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin links allegory with a de-idealized view of history, where destruction and suffering do not serve any higher purpose (as in Hegel for example), with history as meaningless disaster without redemption or salvation (Benjamin 1998, 166; Xavier 2004, 333, 345; Kalmár 2017, 52). As Ismail Xavier points out, modern allegory, as opposed to didactical, totalizing, classical and neo-classicist allegories, has become “a key notion in the characterization of the crisis of culture in modernity” (2004, 333), and is “taken as the primary

expression of the temporal dimension of human experience when seen as separated from God and condemned to natural decay” (345), a trope expressing the volatile, shifting, non-natural qualities of signifying practices (and therefore of meaning as such). Benjamin’s seminal study calls attention to the way modernity, throughout its history, has been haunted by a sense of crisis, by the idea of history as catastrophe and civilization as an ever growing pile of ruins (see Xavier 2004, 346). In the context of this paper, it is crucial that Benjamin associates this view (and critique of modernity) with “the point of view of the defeated” (Xavier 2004, 346). The potentially allegorical spaces of the Eastern European film discussed in this paper suggest that in the cinematic practice I define as the labyrinth principle this dark underside of modernity and this idea of history as catastrophe appear in the spatial figuration of the maze, which successfully embodies the sense of crisis, disorientation and the loss of totality (of meaning).

It is important to note that this use of allegory can in no way be regarded as a uniquely Eastern European cultural phenomenon. Fredric Jameson, for example, has famously associated it with third world cinema in general (Jameson 1986), and it seems to appear not only in third world literature and film, but also in American cinema at times of crisis (Silverman 1992), as well as in films that follow a modernist aesthetic, in which the preoccupation with social and political issues and a critical view of modern societies are regularly connected with non-illusionist representational strategies, for example with evidently artificial (and figurative) spatial settings (Vincze 2015; Kovács 2007).

In an overwhelming majority of Eastern European films that belong to this tradition we see male protagonists in hostile social or political circumstances, experiencing disorientation, entrapment, as well as the lack of power, knowledge or agency. I would argue that the gender bias of such cinematic figurations can be traced back to (at least) two factors. First, as several film scholars have noted, in the conservative sociocultural setting of Eastern European societies male characters tend to bear the burden of the representation of the community or the nation (Imre 2009, 168; Mazierska 2010, 74). This also means that these male protagonists simultaneously stand for the universally human (following the well-known patriarchal signifying traditions with their allegorical tendencies), and for the particular, that is, for men under such and such historical conditions. The second cause of this gender bias is somewhat harder to formulate and perhaps politically more contentious. It seems that there are numerous cultural traditions (the modern novel and cinema included) in which male bodies are prime sites for the inscription of social crisis or historical trauma. There seems to be some



kind of special dramatic power to the representation of men in critical times and to the spectacle of the male body suffering due to external (social or historical) circumstances: as the dead, wounded, mutilated and traumatized soldiers of post-First World War painting and novels point out, as the veterans of post-Second World War American films analysed by Kaja Silverman in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* indicate, as the lost and disenfranchised male protagonists of Eastern European cinema (both state-socialist and post-regime change) reveal, or as the male protagonists of the 21st-century “cinema of crisis” seem to show (Silverman 1992; Kalmár 2017; Kalmár 2020; Austin and Koutsourakis 2020). Though several films, including Nemes Jeles’s *Sunset (Napszállta, 2018)*, indicate that similar representational strategies and allegorical figurations may also work well with female protagonists, it does seem the case that the above mentioned closely tied links between a certain concept of hegemonic masculinity, narrative desire, control over space and victorious modernity make male characters in crisis especially potent cinematic tools for revealing the unfulfilled dreams and unaccounted-for horrors of modernity.

My examination of the specific local cinematic influence behind *Son of Saul* starts out from the recognition that Hungarian cinema during the state-socialist period, similarly to much of socially engaged European arthouse cinema on both sides of the Iron Curtain, actively participated in the social dialogue about social and political issues, including that of totalitarianism (Kovács 2002, 288–290, 302, 306, 319, 338). Apparently, several influential thinkers and filmmakers shared Hannah Arendt’s view that highlights and seeks to understand the similarities of various totalitarian systems (such as fascism, communism or imperialism), rather than considering these as antagonistic forces in conflicts where one is to take sides (Arendt 1976, 470–471; Vajda 2005, 9). Though the Party attempted to repress the memory of the Holocaust almost as much as that of the 1956 uprising, this dialogue could not be entirely silenced either in academia or in film and literature (Gyáni 2016, 217). As Thomas C. Fox also notes in his *The Holocaust under Communism*, Budapest was the only place in the Soviet Bloc where a conference was organized on the 40th anniversary of the Holocaust (Fox 2004, 432), which led to numerous publications on the topic (Gyáni 2010, 336). Moreover, the related work of such outstanding Hungarian historians as György Ránki was published at major publishers and sold in numbers unimaginable today (Gyáni 2010, 336).

The trend in Hungarian cinema in which I wish to place *Son of Saul* is intimately linked to this active engagement with the past. It started in the sixties, when

János Kádár's post-1956 regime finished its cycle of retaliation and attempted to establish a new legitimacy for state-socialism by way of re-branding itself as semi-welfare "goulash-communism" or "the happiest barrack" in the Eastern Bloc with more relaxed censorship policies and more open forms of social dialogue (also about issues such as totalitarianism). Significantly, this was also the time of the beginning of the Hungarian New Wave in filmmaking, the young directors of which "felt that they were doing important social work with their films" (Benke 2015, 135). As Attila Benke argues, at this time "the regime [...] even encouraged artists to create so-called 'questioning' or 'active' films dealing with the problems of the recent past or the present. Of course, the limits were clearly defined: one had to avoid such taboos as the Soviet occupation of the country or calling 1956 a revolution" (Benke 2015, 135).<sup>1</sup> As a result of the new cultural policy, the issues concerning various forms of totalitarianism were often brought up by literature and film, often in displaced or allegorical ways (Benke 2015, 137). Thus, coming to terms with the disturbing and traumatic memories of the past, as well as initiating a social dialogue about these was a cultural role that many filmmakers saw as their own (Murai 2008, 88–124; Czirják 2009, 66). The most important works that belong to this trend include *Twenty Hours* (*Húsz óra*, Zoltán Fábry, 1965), *Cold Days* (*Hideg Napok*, András Kovács, 1966), *Ten Thousand Days* (*Tízezer nap*, Ferenc Kósa, 1967) and of course *The Round-Up* (*Szegénylegények*, Miklós Jancsó, 1965). This tendency of Hungarian film to re-investigate past events and/or address critical social issues suffered several waves of disillusionment, but continued throughout the state-socialist period and after the regime change as well, when "the lid on formerly repressed social memories was finally removed" (Murai 2008, 191) and "the past became accessible in new ways" (Murai 2008, 178). As film historian Gábor Gelencsér argues, the most important films of the New Hungarian Cinema of the 2000s also focus on the ways the past influences the present (2012, 327). In the following pages I will map some of the reasons indicating that *Son of Saul* can be regarded as a film following (and reinventing) this long tradition of socially committed cinematic memory politics, relying on several well-recognizable cinematic strategies established there.

Thus, in line with the above outlined context of Hungarian film history, in the present article I will analyse the ways three earlier Hungarian films in particular can be seen as predecessors of *Son of Saul: The Round-Up* (*Szegénylegények*, Miklós Jancsó, 1965), *Little Valentino* (*A kis Valentino*, András Jele, 1979) and *Just the Wind* (*Csak a szél*, Bence Fliegauf, 2012). All three films focus on masculinities

1 All quotations from Hungarian sources are my translations (György Kalmár).

in crisis, in threatening, disorienting or suffocating situations, all emphasize the political-ideological context of this situation, and, as we shall see, all rely on representational strategies and cinematic solutions that clearly foreshadow the taboo-breaking strategies of Nemes Jeles's outrageously original piece.<sup>2</sup>

## Setting the Paradigm: *The Round-Up*

Miklós Jancsó's masterpiece is a key work of the Hungarian film canon, and one of the classics of the 1960s modernist European cinema (Kovács 2002, 301; Varga 2009, 36). It tells the story of a group of suspected outlaws after the defeat of the 1848–49 Hungarian uprising against the Habsburg Empire. The men are rounded up in an army fortress in the middle of the Hungarian Great Plain. The soldiers do everything to find out which one of the men is the famous outlaw (*betyár*) Sándor Rózsa, and who his companions are, and thus apply all sorts of sadistic and cunning methods to break the men, and make at least one of them speak. Almost the entire film is set within the fortress, a maze-like, intricate space, in which the prisoners are constantly grouped, separated, lined up, regrouped, locked up, relocated, blindfolded, made walk in circles, questioned, blackmailed, and sometimes hung or shot dead.

There is a number of meaningful similarities between *The Round-Up* and *Son of Saul*. First, both focus on men in confining situations that clearly endanger their lives, and definitely both can be seen as films exploring the effects of totalitarian regimes on people (or men in particular). The protagonists of both films are deprived of their freedom, locked up in institutions guarded and run by hostile military personnel. Both films present men deprived of the qualities traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinities: control, power, sexual conquest, agency, knowledge, competence, the ability and will to act, or being a master of one's fate (O'Brien 2009, 412). In *Son of Saul* this stems from the diegetic situation, it seems like the self-explanatory state of the prisoners of the concentration camp. Similarly, the position of the captives in *The Round-Up* is explained by the historical background of the depicted events (which are summarized at the beginning of the film). Yet, I would argue that Jancsó's film clearly works as a

2 The concept of the present article took shape in me during and after a round table discussion I participated following the screening of *Son of Saul* in Debrecen, Hungary in March 2017. I owe thanks to the other participants, Beatrix Kricsfalusi, Zsolt Győri and Teréz Vincze for their inspiration and comments. It was also the latter two film scholars who first called my attention to the way *Son of Saul*'s ending cinematically rephrases the last shot of *Little Valentino*, the 1979 film by Nemes's father, András Jeles.

modern spatial allegory: it wishes to explore a situation more general than the specific nineteenth century events, a fact that may call attention to the similarly more general (ethical, psychological, existentialist) layers of Nemes Jeles's film. The *Round-Up*, made about a decade after the 1956 Hungarian uprising against communist dictatorship, was often read as an allegory of 1956, or as a study of totalitarianism in general (Kovács 2002, 306). In other words, the 1965 study of post-1849 Habsburg oppression also served as a mirror to the communist and/or state-socialist dictatorship. It was obviously the claustrophobic state-socialist regime that inspired the suffocating and disorienting spaces, composition and circular narrative of *The Round-Up*. The masculinities created by Jancsó's film partly find their explanation in the state-socialist 1960s, "which could not even find tragic heroes in Hungarian history, not to mention successful ones" (Kovács 2002, 303; see also Győri 2014).

Jancsó's film is often listed as a key piece among Hungarian films carrying out "historical self-analysis" (Varga 2009, 38), films that initiate a social dialogue about contested issues of the past (Czirják 2009, 66). I would argue that *Son of Saul* definitely belongs to this trend, applying Jancsó's "disillusioning," "anti-romanticising" attitude (Czirják 2009, 64–65) to the study of men oppressed by totalitarian regimes.

It is worth noticing how much *Son of Saul* owes to the compositional principle developed by Jancsó (and Antonioni before him). As András Bálint Kovács argues, "turning characters essentially into 'terrain features' within a landscape composition is usually considered to be Jancsó's innovation. According to this approach, characters are not only, or not primarily parts of a dramatic action, but are basic structural elements of the image, which can be moved around the same way as one moves a chair" (Kovács 2002, 305).

Kovács's description of Jancsó's (and Antonioni's) method could stand for the treatment of characters in *Son of Saul*. In the latter film, as the director mentioned in several interviews and talks, the placing and movement of the extras (including the dead bodies) were first arranged, and it was in front of this blurred, off-focus, ever-moving backdrop that the main action was later composed. The story of Saul in Auschwitz is told among human-beings-turned-into-terrain-features in a manner clearly echoing *The Round-Up*. The main difference in this regard is that *Son of Saul* focuses on one single character's one single pursuit (to bury the young boy), while Jancsó's film lacks any real protagonist and deprives their characters of any clear, achievable goal. Though Nemes Jeles does not go this far in the modernist dismantling of cinematic storytelling, his protagonist is also far

from being the typical active male protagonist of mainstream cinema. Saul finds himself a goal worth struggling for, but he is pushed around through the whole film by forces (and people) stronger than him.

This somewhat disorienting arrangement of cinematic space associates *Son of Saul* with what I have attempted to define as the labyrinth principle in certain trends of Hungarian cinema. This tradition tends to focus on disoriented and powerless protagonists in maze-like social and spatial settings (such as the fort in *The Round-Up* or the camp in *Son of Saul*), often employs disorienting camera work, shows a conspicuous absence of establishing shots, and investigates the relation of the confused individual with the hostile social context (Kalmár 2017, 8). The labyrinthine spaces of such films are usually not just mere motifs: they also work as an epistemological trope (expressing the impossibility of adequate knowledge), confuse and undercut narrative desire, determine the kind and shape of stories told, define character types as they undermine the protagonists' sense of knowledge and direction, and therefore critically re-examine some of the key conceptual and ideological cornerstones of victorious modernity and its hegemonic subject-positions. In the state-socialist period, this cinematic tradition often came to express the claustrophobia felt by the inmates of the "happiest barrack" trapped behind the Iron Curtain, as well as the profound moral and epistemological disorientation experienced in real-existing state-socialism.

The influence of the labyrinth principle is not only detectable in the above mentioned organization of cinematic space and the way the characters' bodies are placed in it. This disorientating and frustrating situation is enhanced in both films by the camera work: one may notice, for example, the conspicuous (and often disturbing) lack of establishing shots. The spectator never has a chance to map either the army fortress or the extermination camp, we do not know how the different locations of the film relate to each other, the spectator could never draw a map of the main sites of the events. Both films tend to use several-minute-long shots during which the camera moves with the characters, constantly reframing them in dizzying ways. This treatment of space and cinematography creates a viewing experience similar to that of the disoriented characters, moreover the spectator's spatial disorientation may also express the epistemological and moral confusion of the depicted characters. *Son of Saul* seems to apply Jancsó's strategy quite consciously and consistently: the film uses 4:3 aspect ratio, which "emphasises the claustrophobia of the story and the setting" (Scott 2015, 1), and literally narrows the visual field to suffocating dimensions. The constant lack of depth of field also strengthens this effect (Bradshaw 2016, 6). As Teréz Vincze

notes, “the consistent use of shallow focus and the narrowing down of the field of vision by aspect ratio and shot size work against optical vision in general throughout the film” (2016, 111). Optical vision, as theorized by Laura U. Marks, would stand for the more traditional cinematic operation that allows for the spectator’s control and mastery over the cinematic space (Marks 2000, 162, 184). In case of these labyrinthine films, optical vision would be the way the masters of these institutions see the events, yet that is a perspective one never gets in either of them: both Jancsó’s camera work and constantly shifting frames, as well as Nemes Jeles’s narrow, continuously moving, anxious images work against such mastery in order to create the feeling of uncertainty and disorientation (Scott 2015, 5–6).

The cinematic spaces of *Son of Saul*, as those of *The Round-Up*, are not only disorienting, but also “exceptionally closed” (Czirják 2009, 65) and confining. Most of the events take place within the fortress and the camp, which the characters leave only for a short while before they are killed. This conscious delimitation of the cinematic space for these institutions of power, cruelty and death may highlight their allegorical potential: both can be seen as phalansteries where fundamental human dramas are acted out and explored for the sake of the spectator. The method, again, was developed by Jancsó in the historical situation of state-socialist dictatorship, but the resulting compositional principles are easily applicable to fascism or any other totalitarian regime. Kovács’s description of the handling of space in Jancsó’s work can shed light on some of the key cinematic features of *Son of Saul* as well: “only in the shadow of dictatorship could someone grasp the significance of the possibility to ‘absorb’ action in space so as to create a film in which cinematic meaning is not carried by dialogues, psychological flutters and gestures that can be translated into words, but rather by silent movement within space and by the constant changes in the articulation of space. In situations where one cannot create radical forms with narrative storytelling and open enunciation, the importance of modes of expression devoid of words and verbalizable narrative storytelling increases” (Kovács 2002, 306).

Though cinema history has proven that the labyrinth principle, as well as the above described strategies concerning the use of space, bodies and camera work may retain their expressiveness outside the shadow of dictatorship (see Kalmár 2017), the connection between the social context of a totalitarian, inhuman dictatorship and these kinds of labyrinthine operations does seem prevalent and productive. It can be detected in several other canonical Hungarian films from the state-socialist period, such as *Cold Days* (*Hideg napok*, András Kovács, 1966) – about the 1942 racial cleansing in Subotica (Szabadka), or *The Prefab People*

(*Panelkapcsolat*, Béla Tarr, 1982) – about everyday life confined in a housing estate of the state-socialist period.

The last similarity between *The Round-Up* and *Son of Saul* to be mentioned is the mixing of traditional historical roles in both films. As a member of the Sonderkommando, the team of Jews doing all the dirty work that comes with the extermination process in the camp, Saul is simultaneously a victim, a witness, a traitor and a perpetrator. This confusion and mixing of ethically so different roles is present in *The Round-Up* (and several other films showing signs of the labyrinth principle) as well. Though Jancsó's film has no single protagonist, the captive with the most screen time is a traitor spying for the soldiers. This often abused, threatened and blackmailed man can be regarded as an allegorical character embodying the tortured and compromised subject of authoritarian regimes. Similarly to Saul, his background is never revealed, nor are his motivations, the spectator only guesses that these characters made morally untenable compromises with the regimes that torture them simply to save their lives. Both characters become servants of the oppressive systems threatening their lives, both sell their former identities and companions, and as a consequence both become "lost souls," morally destroyed in this transaction, detestable and abject for both the perpetrators and the victims, yet neither of them manage to save their lives by their treacheries.

## **Entrapment in the "Happiest Barrack:" *Little Valentino* (András Jeleš, 1979)**

*Little Valentino* tells the story of a day in the life of a nameless teenager (Opoczki János) living in state-socialist Hungary. At the beginning it turns out that he did not post a larger sum of money that he was supposed to (as a part of his job), and the rest of the film narrates the ways he tries to spend it before he turns himself in. The film that is considered today to be an "innovative masterpiece" (Kovács 2002, 202), received mixed reviews when it came to cinemas in 1979. Showing state-socialism from the point of view of someone who decides to steal from his workplace, live the day and enjoy the money as long as it lasts, ignoring all the usual social and moral considerations, was regarded by most critics to be immoral and scandalous. The film was only canonized after the fall of communism as one of the key pieces of Hungarian cinema of the 1970s (Kovács 2002, 202). Ironically, today it is praised mostly for some of the same qualities that it was blamed for earlier.

The similarities between *Son of Saul* and *Little Valentino* are much less obvious than the ones shared with *The Round-Up*, and the direct influence may



have gone unnoticed had not Nemes relied on the same technical solution for the resolution of his film as his father in 1979. At the end of *Son of Saul*, our protagonist notices a young boy outside the barn in the forest where he and his companions hid for a while during their escape from the camp. We see the two characters looking at each other, and a faint smile appearing on Saul's face. Then the camera cuts to the boy again, and (after faithfully following Saul through the entire film) it suddenly decides to tail the boy into the forest, where he meets the soldiers who are just about to kill the escaped men. In *Little Valentino*, Jeles applies the same technique: after following the protagonist throughout the film, recounting the futile ways in which he attempts to enjoy the money he stole, the camera follows him into a police station. At the corner of a corridor the camera stops for a while, we see him walk away, while another young man passes by him and approaches us. When this young man walks by the camera, we start following him as he leaves the building and gets on a tram. Thus, we never see what happened to the protagonist after this day.

As *The Round-Up* could recontextualize several cinematic aspects of *Son of Saul*, *Little Valentino's* ending can also contribute to a more refined understanding of the latter film. In *Little Valentino*, the ending indicates that the protagonist could have been anybody (Kovács 2002, 203), that we could pick up any number of stories like this in the street, that the film we have seen simply "formulates the fundamental experience of the seventies" (Gelencsér 2012, 218) so as to offer a general view of how life goes on in state-socialism. Thus, for spectators who know Jeles's film, the ending of *Son of Saul* is more than a poetical ellipsis when the death of the film's protagonist is told through the sound of distant gunshots: it calls attention to its allegorical layer, Saul's role as an everyman.

However, there are several other similarities between these two, stylistically very different films. They both focus on morally ambiguous male protagonists living under oppressive political systems, who find something special one day that temporarily lifts them out of the monotony of their previous lives (the money in the first, and the young boy in the second film). State-socialist existence may lack the physical, visceral cruelty and horror of the death camp depicted in *Son of Saul*, but it also seems dreary, pointless and painful. Life is limited and meaningless here, and most characters are odd, corrupt, with mental or health issues, or all of these combined. As opposed to *Son of Saul*, in *Little Valentino* there is no physical violence on the part of the perpetrators, though the police appear several times. The suffocating, claustrophobic and disorienting nature of the political system is created without any of the constant physical and

verbal abuse characteristic of *Son of Saul*, which gives the film a distressing existentialist edge.

Though neither the space of the film, nor its camera work emphasizes entrapment the way *The Round-Up* or *Son of Saul* does, the story is repetitive and circular, and clearly suggests that there is no other, better life to be reached, no way out of the “nothingness” of the system (Gelencsér 2012, 218). Spectators get the impression that the lad turns himself in at the end of the film simply because he has realized that there is nothing he could do in that world, with or without money, nothing that would make a difference. The film’s characters, similarly to those in *Son of Saul*, seem already dead, though they are still moving, which can be even more distressing as in *Little Valentino* this is not limited to a special place (the death camp) from which one could escape, but stands as a description of life as such.

The main aesthetic qualities of *Little Valentino* are not those of tragedy or horror (as in *Son of Saul*), but rather satire and bitter irony, the unnerving pointlessness, mental deprivation and existential nothingness gradually discovered behind ordinary life in the System. However, the pointlessness of life in both films is expressed partly by the creative distance between the protagonist and the minor characters in the background. As Kovács points out discussing *Little Valentino*: “the minor characters participate in this film as pieces of furniture, yet the film is virtually teeming with them. Moreover, they bear a great responsibility for creating the imagery of the film. The individual frames are built in a way that never leaves the background empty, something must always be going on, yet this is usually something that has nothing to do with the story” (Kovács 2002, 203).

This strategy may recall the structure of several scenes in *Son of Saul*, where we see Saul in close-ups, pursuing his burial-project, while in the background we see the (blurred) operations of the death camp. It emphasizes in both films the alienation of the protagonist, his distance from the world in which he is trapped, thus the spectator gets the feeling of detachment and alienation as well. This effect is further enhanced by the affectless acting: though both protagonists take part in actions that would normally evoke intense emotion both on- and off-screen (as the acting in most crime cinema and Holocaust-films shows), their faces almost never reveal any of these.

This strategy of distancing the protagonists from the other characters also turns the films into apocalyptic sight-seeing tours of their respective totalitarian landscapes. The strategy of *Son of Saul* is easily discernible: though Saul works only in one team responsible for one phase by the conveyor belt of the Auschwitz

death-machine, his “mission” makes him move to several other places. Sometimes willingly, sometimes because he is simply grabbed and thrown somewhere, he visits most parts of the camp, which allows the film to give a complete tour of horrors to the spectator. *Little Valentino*’s method is very similar to this. The stolen money makes the protagonist move to places that he would not have visited otherwise (the lakeside resort, the posh restaurant, the taxi, the casino by the theme park), which gives the film the opportunity to create a full tableau of contemporary society.

It is worth noting that in both cases there is a special motivation (the burial and the money) that initiates the journey which, on its turn, is capable of depicting the oppressive regime wherein the protagonists are imprisoned. These special events or motivations create the illusion of a more traditional goal-oriented, desire-driven cinematic narrative, however the spectator may sense that both are merely desperate attempts on the part of the protagonists to change their miserable lives, chances that they stumble upon. One may argue that it is the very futility of these “stumbled upon missions” that reveal the desperation of the characters. The protagonist of *Little Valentino* has no grand plan to follow, he just decides to spend the money by himself, regardless of the consequences. He was asked to post the money, people know that he has it, there is no way to get away with the crime. However, apparently one day of a different life is worth risking his future. Similarly, in *Son of Saul* we never learn for sure whether the young boy is really the son of Saul or not (Vincze 2015, 108), yet the way he watches the boy’s death without emotion seems to suggest that he is not. In other words, Saul’s encounter with his fictional son in the death camp appears to be a “chosen trauma” (so as to give Vamik Volkan’s term a new twist), one willingly taken up as one’s own so as to establish some sort of meaningful identity or simulation of redemption (Volkan 2001; Zembylas 2008, 39).

Furthermore, these journeys turn out to be futile and unsuccessful in both cases, failing to change anything. The burial in case of *Saul*, of course, has more metaphysical resonances: it evokes the story of Antigone, who decided to bury his brother despite the order of the tyrant Creon, thus opting for ethical choices, family ties and obeying the cosmic order instead of worldly powers and tyranny. The story of *Little Valentino* lacks such noble or metaphysical resonances. The protagonist simply tries to break out of a meaningless existence in the only ways he can imagine, by following hedonistic ideas: he buys quality cigarettes and western magazines, travels by taxi, eats in expensive restaurants. Yet, his journey is no less depressing than that of Saul: he does not get anywhere, he

does not seem to enjoy anything he takes part in. Instead, he gets gipped off, beaten, abused and injured in each and every turn. His journey only exposes the futility of his dreams and fantasies. As *Son of Saul*, *Little Valentino* suggests that there is no way out of the system: there is no victory, no happy ending, and not even a heroic, tragic resolution awaiting them. I would argue that when *Son of Saul* chooses this ending in which the protagonist does not manage to reach his goal or change anything, and his futile actions even bring more misery to others (most notably to the rabbi killed because of his intervention), the film follows a pattern not necessarily learned from Holocaust-films, but rather from a cinematic tradition characteristic of the Hungarian canon that *The Round-Up*, *Little Valentino*, *Cold Days*, *The Prefab People* and many others belong to.

### **The Post-Communist Maze: *Just the Wind***

Bence Fliegauf's 2012 *Just the Wind* is another example of a local cinematic tradition that aims to represent vulnerable men imprisoned and threatened by hostile political environments. While *The Round-Up* focuses on nineteenth-century history (and allegorically criticizes the communist regime's post-1956 retaliations), and *Little Valentino* shows the desperation and claustrophobia of the 1970s' "consolidated" state-socialism, *Just the Wind* explores a more contemporary topic: the life of ethnic Romany people threatened by racist hate-crime. The film is motivated by a criminal case in 2008–2009, when a group of racist men carried out a series of attacks against Roma families in rural Hungary. The perpetrators, whose sole motivation was probably racist hate, used shotguns and Molotov-cocktails. Though the events, in which several people died and some women and children were also injured, were clearly condemned by the vast majority of the Hungarian population, Fliegauf's film effectively calls attention to the heightened importance of ethnic belonging in recent Eastern-European identity politics, as well as to the ensuing decline of tolerance. *Just the Wind* tells the story of the last day of a Roma family before the fatal night when they are attacked and murdered. "Relentlessly tracked by the director's roving camera" (Mintzer 2012, 7), the characters (played by non-professional actors) take the spectator through the ordinary events of the day. Though we encounter several critical issues in the life of the Roma in Hungary (such as poverty, truancy, the racism of whites, unemployment, Roma mobsters abusing fellow Roma people), nothing truly dramatic happens through most of the film. However, due to its "consistently menacing and strikingly realistic" atmosphere (Mintzer 2012, 5) as well as the persistent threat overshadowing these

ordinary events, the film creates a heightened sense of vulnerability and anxiety gradually growing throughout the film.

As Gábor Gelencsér notes, *Just the Wind* can be seen as an important step in post-communist Hungarian cinema in the sense that with this film “one of the most characteristic trends of pre-regime-change Hungarian cinema” was re-awakened. “Since the new wave of the sixties – as a series of films attest to it from Jancsó’s parables, through Szabó’s historical tableaux to Tarr’s apocalyptic visions – Hungarian cinema was able to move beyond local provinciality by representing specifically Eastern European issues of life in ways that can claim universal significance. The filmmakers of “young Hungarian cinema” walk the same path when they set out to explore regional and contemporary issues. Their strong stylization makes these films universal.” (Gelencsér 2012, 327.)

Furthermore, Gelencsér argues that for some time “young Hungarian film” rejected the direct social engagement of the state-socialist period, and distanced the films’ social commentary through strong stylization (Gelencsér 2012, 323). Nevertheless, at the time of the release of *Just the Wind* (2012) one could sense “the growing need to evoke the events of the world around us in immediate and dramatic ways, which make these experiences accessible to the spectator not only intellectually, but also emotionally” (Gelencsér 2012, 328). I would argue that this is precisely the role that both *Just the Wind* and *Son of Saul* play in the narrative of Hungarian cinema outlined by Gelencsér: to initiate social dialogue about distressing social, cultural or historical situations in more direct, emotive and sensuous cinematic languages.

This affiliation between *Just the Wind* and *Son of Saul* is recognizable in several aspects of the films. First, both focus on people belonging to threatened ethnic minorities. The Roma family lacks a protective father figure (he moved to Canada for work), which heightens the sense of vulnerability. The family members sharing the little, dilapidated house in the outskirts of a little village are all small or physically weak. The family member with the most screen time in *Just the Wind* is the son Rio (Lajos Sárkány), who is in his early teenage years. The film uses him as a distanced witness, who walks the forest, peeps into other people’s lives, trespasses and steals from the house of another attacked family. The boy, not unlike Saul or the nameless protagonist of *Little Valentino*, lives on the margins of human society. His truancy and acts of stealing make him morally slightly ambiguous too, thus, to some degree, he mixes the roles of witness, victim and perhaps that of the small time crook known from *Little Valentino* as well. Rio’s moral ambiguity, however, is much less pronounced or pervasive than

that of the other films' characters: after all, he is just a child, and nothing he does triggers the moral indignation of the spectator.

The fact that *Just the Wind* focuses on a young boy seems to change a key ingredient in the above seen operations of the labyrinth principle: here the sense of danger and entrapment, the allegorical potential of the spatial and social setting, as well as the critical view of dysfunctional modern societies are not accompanied by a morally compromised, adult male protagonist. This may very well be due to the clear moral message the film wishes to communicate: at a time of social polarization, post-2008 sense of global crisis, rising ethno-nationalism, and growing hostility towards ethnic minorities throughout Europe, *Just the Wind* understandably wishes to denounce destructive tendencies, distinguish perpetrators from victims, and emphasize the vulnerability of its protagonist. Unlike the key characters of the other films discussed above, Rio is not complicit, not part of the inhuman system that threatens him. This, however, does not diminish either the allegorical potentials of his character (our ability to see him as a threatened, disoriented, abandoned everyman in a disintegrating, post-crisis Europe), or the basic operations of labyrinthine figurations. After all, as the last sequence of Kubrick's *Shining* also shows, the maze with a monstrous Minotaur in it is even more frightening when seen through the eyes of a young boy.

There are significant similarities in the two films' use of space too: *Just the Wind* is also set in a very limited space, the only scenes outside the village are set at the school where the mother and the daughter go every day (to work as a cleaner and to study, respectively). This narrowness of space, similarly to *Son of Saul* and *The Round-Up*, heightens the allegorical potential of space: we understand that through this particular story unfolding in a small place much larger social issues are explored.

This by now well-recognizable cinematic situation of a vulnerable male protagonist put in a limited, suffocating, hostile space is accompanied by a much similar camera work. *Just the Wind*, as *Son of Saul*, uses hand-held camera, several-minute-long shots in which the camera moves with the character in disorientating ways, as well as shallow depth of field. Throughout most of the film, the camera simply walks with the protagonist, going wherever he goes, showing his naked upper body most of the time, creating a feeling of closeness. Rio gets less close-ups than Saul, but since the camera usually looks downwards on his small body, the film seldom allows the spectator to have an overall view of the surrounding space, thereby creating a sort of embodied, sensuous identification, and effectively strengthening the sense of vulnerability. This sense of closeness,

conspicuous lack of long shots and optical vision results in the lack of control in *Just the Wind* in a manner most similar to what we have established above about *Son of Saul*. Teréz Vincze's analysis of the haptic strategies of *Son of Saul* could well describe the visual space of *Just the Wind*, too. "The repositioning of the audience, by eliminating the all-perceiving position and the controlling knowledge, makes them more vulnerable in the perceiving situation, and makes the experience more effective. The viewer's suggested 'physical' closeness to Saul makes the perceptive identification more accentuated. All of the haptic qualities present strengthen the possibility that the viewer could be drawn not only into the subjectivity of Saul but also into his environment, perceptively. Identification can be processed on the intellectual but also on the perceptual level." (Vincze 2016, 112.)

This haptic camera work plays a major role in turning the spaces of *Just the Wind* into a maze-like place full of potential dangers, where one never knows when a lurking Minotaur may attack our protagonist.

The last two scenes of *Just the Wind*, which depict the attack against the family, and then the preparation of the dead bodies for the funeral, reveal a series of other commonalities between the two films that indicate direct influence. This is the time in *Just the Wind* when from suspense and anxiety (Gelencsér 2012, 332) the film turns to the horror of the murders, to the inferno in which the entire *Son of Saul* is set. When the family is attacked (while just about to go to bed), Rio is the first to run from the house, and the camera follows him. He turns back for a moment from the nearby bushes, but we only see the flash of shotguns in the dark. Only these shots and the terrible screams inform us about what is happening to the others. The execution of the family is narrated in precisely the same way as the death of the protagonists in *Son of Saul*: from the distance, through off-screen sounds (Vincze 2016, 119). Thus, Rio takes the camera away from the murder scene in a manner similar to the way the young boy does at the end of *Son of Saul*. Rio is followed for some time by one of the killers, we even see the sparks of a shot from the distance, but we do not learn about Rio's fate till the last scene in the morgue.

This last scene of *Just the Wind*, in which the dead bodies are being prepared for the funeral, foreshadows the death camp scenes of *Son of Saul*: there is no music, only the cold, distanced horror created by the close-ups of the bodies that used to be our characters.



## Conclusion

The above thematic and formal analyses of these three films indicate a long-standing cinematic tradition in Hungarian cinema that aims at revealing the dark underside of dysfunctional modern societies (or that of modernity's general cultural logic), initiating social dialogue about key problematic or traumatic social issues, and exploring the effects of totalitarian power, abuse and terror on people. These goals are achieved in this trend by putting male characters in disorienting and claustrophobic spaces that call for allegorical interpretations, and present their stories with a recognizable set of cinematic techniques that undermine the modern idea of control over visual space (as described by Heath). The affinities between the films studied call attention to the deeper historical, social and cultural factors at play behind the country's long and tragic engagement with various totalitarian political formations. The above readings of films have hopefully highlighted the basic characteristics of this long-standing trend in Eastern European cinema that is clearly visible in *Son of Saul* as well. The way Jancsó's appropriation of Antonioni's treatment of space, bodies and camera gained a special significance in the context of Eastern Europe's troubled history, is definitely a topic worthy of further research. Regarding modern allegory, such studies as the present one may indicate the ways this trope, which usually stands for fragmentation, alienation and de-idealization characteristic of modernity, can nevertheless create recognizable trends, shared understanding and a continuous tradition in cinema history (exploring historical discontinuity and fragmentation).

The most striking and unnerving result of such analyses as the present one is probably the recognition of all the intricate and interlocking ties between totalitarian social imaginaries, various constructions of social space, formations of masculinity, narrative patterns (influential both on- and off-screen), as well as several forms of social dysfunction that keep haunting Eastern European societies. Understanding these interlocking, mutually influential factors may map out some of the reasons why the democratization of the region proves such a bumpy project. Hopefully, the above analyses have also shown why regional or national cinemas cannot be adequately comprehended without detailed knowledge of the local social, historical and cultural context. As my reading of the above films have indicated, it is this context that fills up their constructions of space, time and identity with a rich cluster of figurative meaning.

Although I have focused only on three Hungarian films and the ways they foreshadow the cinematic solutions of *Son of Saul*, similar analyses could be carried out with regard to other Hungarian or Eastern European films about the various forms of totalitarianism and their character-distorting effects. In his book about the memory-politics of Hungarian cinema, András Murai also calls attention to the boom of such Eastern European films in the 2000s: only in 2006 three such important films were made, *White Palms* (*Fehér tenyér*, Szabolcs Hajdu), *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck) and *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (*4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile*, Cristian Mungiu) (Murai 2008, 172). Other prominent examples (among dozens of relevant post-communist films) would include the Polish film *Ida* (Pavel Pawlikowski, 2013) or the works of the Russian filmmaker Aleksandr Sokurov, such as his *Russian Ark* (2002). The study of this wider canon of socially engaged, remembering, Eastern European post-communist cinema, as well as the various cultural, social and gender-related patterns operating in them is still awaiting thorough and comprehensive critical analysis.

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# Crisis, Sociology and Agency in 1970s Hungarian Documentary Cinema

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**Abstract.** This article explores synergies between Hungarian critical sociology in the 1960–70s and the documentary films made in Balázs Béla Stúdió in the same period. It treats the rationalization of social phenomena as a battle ground for meaning and claims that both representatives of the social sciences and filmmakers, on the one hand, called upon deficient social mechanisms and the inner contradictions of existing socialism and, on the other hand, pointed to the discrepancy between ideological and empirical perceptions of reality as the root cause of the crisis characterizing the consolidated Kádár regime. Adopting Clifford Geertz’s conceptual matrix of the experience-near and the experience-distant production of social meaningfulness, the article explores how sociologists and makers of sociographic documentaries alike resisted the prevailing epistemic regime, more specifically how they punctured and undermined the ideological meanings of such concepts as maternity, the Romani, and cooperative democracy.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** crisis, Kádár-regime, sociology, Hungarian sociological documentary cinema, episteme, agency.

## Introduction

The etymology of the word “crisis” goes back to the Greek *krinein* which translates to English as “to separate, decide, judge” and came to be used in the 15th century to designate a “vitally important or decisive state of things,” “a turning point in a disease” for example. Crisis was associated with uncertainty, the moment of silence, of being silenced by metaphysical and divine powers (if you believed in them) as these judged the worth of a human being. Crisis also refers to a juncture and the people at the juncture awaiting judgement. For long centuries,

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crises were perceived as the silent drama of being overpowered, as a paralyzing experience that forced the mind to its limits. In short, it was associated with the lack of agency. From the late 18th century, however, at around the time modern philosophy, politics and industry was born, crises was increasingly perceived as the hour of action, an opportunity to actively forge history. Crises came to mark decisive points where decisions were not beyond people's control, when forward-thinking was required.

The Greek *krinein* is also the origin of the Greek *kritikós* (capable of judgment), the Latin *criticus* (a judge, a censor, an estimator) and the French *critique* from which the English noun *critic* evolved. The modification of the meaning of the etymon urges us to think about the often torturous task of judgement as a human affair and no longer a divine examination. A critic not only judges his/her fellow men but also lays out facts and tests them against individual and social experience in hope of change, thus criticism is the precursor of action. Etymology teaches us that there is a critical dimension to any crisis that urges us to launch intellectual inquiry into what past actions have led to, the emergency at hand, and why.

This paper argues that the systemic crisis of the Kádár regime was suggested first not by a single film, but a manifesto, demanding the establishment of a Sociological Film Group in 1969. While films made earlier in the decade clearly illustrate that cinema reflected upon the underbelly of socialist modernization, these efforts were neither concerted, nor focused. Hoping to create a shared platform for dispersed documentary filmmaking, the manifesto for sociological cinema (hereafter Manifesto) urged filmmakers to carry out empirical research specific to the film medium, to translate sociological thinking into documentary filmmaking, to employ social scientific methods in collecting and processing visual data, to make these available for projects pursued by filmmakers affiliated with studios and to advance the analytical methods of documentary cinema. (Grunwalsky et al. 1969, 96.)

While the Manifesto does not offer an outspoken critique of the regime, I claim that its unprecedented appeal to social inquiry gave it a strongly critical edge. I make this claim in the face of scholarship according to which documentaries in the wake of the Manifesto never managed to live up to their own proposed standards and failed as an agency for systematic social inquiry. Voicing the sceptics, Ferenc Hammer regards the Manifesto as a self-consciously utopian program, which failed to deliver sociologically relevant representations (2009, 267). According to the author, it missed the target of producing visual facts devoid of stylization, dramatization and other forms of unscientific interference



(2009, 268–269); films lacked a shared methodology, therefore could not cover sociological problem areas in a structured manner, but remained isolated case studies (2009, 269), consequently were closer to social reportage than sociology (2009, 270). Disqualifying the sociological credibility of films on poetic grounds, Hammer expects more scientific rigour from a documentary deserving of the sociological label. Recognizing some of the shortcomings of the completed films, but lacking a normative definition of what sociological documentaries should look like, this article regards the relevant cinematic output in the wake of the Manifesto as a coherent addition to 1960's Hungarian sociological research.

I build my case in three steps. First, I claim that, in the most general sense, thinking about social structures involves making known the tensions, contradictions, inequalities, the unbalanced distribution of resources and knowledge existing within the societal system, in short, recognizing the state of crisis. Social aware documentaries, just as much as the social sciences stem from this shared interest. In technocratic-authoritarian states, like Hungary during the Kádár regime, sociology was expected to rationalize symptoms of the crisis without questioning the ideological tenets of social policies. In order to understand crisis-oriented Hungarian documentary cinema of the 1960s and 70s, I contend, we need to comprehend the social awareness and the constraints of such awareness in research initiatives of sociology. Accordingly, the first part of this article explores the rise and official marginalization of critical sociology in Hungary as a means of building up the interdisciplinary historical framework within which the increasing interest towards sociographic documentaries in the period will be examined. As part of this, I differentiate between the social commentary and critique of mainstream feature and documentary films, arguing that the latter aspired to make the crisis known as part of lived reality.

The second part of the article discusses how anthropological models of understanding lived experience can help conceptualize the crisis which, I assert, took the form of a dual social consciousness, a symptom of the widening fissure between experience-distant and experience-near perceptions of the social field. The short excursion into relevant theories of Clifford Geertz and James C. Scott is necessary to explain why the factual portrayal of ordinary life and the subaltern voices captured by the documentary camera were sociologically relevant. In fact, anthropology helps us understand why documentaries could acquire a critical and political agency identical to the diagnoses of critical sociology and how both depleted official concepts designed to ensure ideological-hegemonic interpretations of social phenomena.

In the third section, the article offers what I call – quoting the title of a documentary by István Dárday and Györgyi Szalai – “anatomies of unique cases,” films which stage the crisis of the epistemic regime of the consolidated Kádár-era by revealing how the experience-distant conceptual field systematically misrepresented and suppressed experience-near epistemologies, social perceptions and self-awareness. My case studies cover different problem areas – ethnic minorities, the lack of autonomy, and rural poverty – state socialist governments claimed to have successfully identified and resolved, thus proving their commitment to humanizing the system. Pál Schiffer’s *Cséplő Gyuri* (1978), Judit Ember and Gyula Gazdag’s *The Resolution (A határozat, 1972)*, and the Gulyás brother’s *There are Changes (Vannak változások, 1979)* offers proof of the opposite. Calling for the social integration of Romani people, depicting cooperative democracy as an instable and politically corruptible form of group-autonomy, and, in the case of *There are Changes*, revealing the dehumanizing practices of forced modernization, these film, as I shall argue, punctured official discourses and evinced the blindness of ideological concepts towards social facts. My analysis of the films is by no means exhaustive and only aims to accentuate the critical horizon they share with the sociological research of the day and, more specifically, the mutual insight that to understand the crisis, understanding needs to steer clear of being simply a technology of (ideological, hegemonic) power and to begin the cartography of reality as a social, lived, and experience-near construct.

## The Rise of Critical Sociology in Hungary

The eagerness of contributors to the Manifesto to engage with social structures in a critical-empirical manner was symptomatic of the late 1960s intellectual climate. Those willing to revise their support for dogmatic communism shared the urgency of András Hegedüs’s claim from 1968: “in order to develop socialist society, it is not enough to raise the level of GDP, the permanent development of a social fabric is of equal importance [...]. At this moment, everyday life, at least a longer period of it, is a more compelling “mentor” than the best teacher” (Hegedüs 1968, 497).<sup>2</sup> The scrutiny of the social fabric by both sociologists and filmmakers concentrated on signs of crisis, like the numbness and apathy of people and the deepening fissure between state and citizen especially after events of the Prague Spring.<sup>3</sup> Due to their shared interest in understanding social

2 This and all the following quotes in Hungarian are my translation.

3 Hegedüs’s own research called for the comprehensive humanization of social relations,

crisis, cinema – either consciously or unconsciously – came to translate the scope of inquiry specific to social sciences which, as Hegedüs contends, “have come, for the first time, to present problems in a sociologically valid manner, and, on the one hand, sought to confront numerous theoretical propositions with real conditions, while, on the other hand, allowed to draw up overarching patterns based on facts” (1968, 499). Satisfying these requirements, sociology would confirm that the ideological mind-set of political decision-makers led to incorrect conceptualizations of social phenomena.

To a large extent, social scientific research during the Kádár era was spearheaded by András Hegedüs, head of the Sociological Research Group. Hegedüs believed that “Marxist sociological knowledge has to have the vocation to critically intervene in order to adjust to each other the needs of socialist regime and society” and even after repeated warnings from ideological bodies, he was unwilling “to stop interpreting the economic and social effects of the reforms in proper sociological and political terms, nor did he ever seriously try readjusting his ideas to the required ideological standards deriving from the doctrine of the Party’s supremacy” (Takács 2016, 255). Hegedüs and colleagues steadily argued for the correlation between social alienation and bureaucratic decision-making and pointed to the internal paradoxes of ideological Marxism, calling for pluralism within Marxism. For Party hardliners including János Kádár, such political arguments were undesirable and so was the return of social sciences to Marx’s core arguments, a move that regarded state socialism as an illegitimate heir to the politico-philosophical foundations of Marxism. According to Ádám Takács, for Hegedüs it was essential that “the administration’s bureaucratization tendencies [remained] subordinated to humanization,” consequently “he reasserted the need for imposing “social supervision” on administration and management” (2016, 258). It is along these lines that we can grasp why sociology with an outspoken task to scrutinize social reality and as a scientific framework for the internal analysis of socialism was treated with suspicion by those party members who dreaded the sociological supervision of “the political.” Hegedüs’s strong faith in Marxism fed his conviction that critical social sciences would not only have to rationalize the crisis but resolve it by proposing solutions as to how socialism might exist for the benefit of society.

According to Iván Szelényi, “critical social sciences have two non-contradictory yet competing but also complementary branches: one offers the ideological

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the hierarchical ordering of which, he asserts, inevitably “hinders the development of the personality, the unfolding of individual abilities and capabilities in the various strata of society” (Hegedüs 2009, 102).

critique of socialist society, the other offers the (empirically founded) critique of the socialist ideology” (2015, 14). If Hegedüs was a key representative of the first branch, Szelényi belonged to the second and, as a value-neutral critical sociologist, “had no expectations for socialist society, only hoped to make sense of the system... to map out the inner ideological contradictions of society and critique the socialist ideology” (Szelényi 2015, 14). Making sense of the system involved the adoption of an empirical approach, but one not biased towards Marxist theories of social stratification and inequality. In his work with György Konrád, the Weberian framework of sociological inquiry proved useful to the study of Soviet-style society,<sup>4</sup> which – given its value-neutral stance – seemed to conform with the technocratic branch of the political elite. Before his fall from political grace, Szelényi could become an officially celebrated and supported young scholar because his novel framework of inquiry introduced fresh insights into technologies of social engineering, thus well suited forms of technocratic socialism.

Szelényi’s distinction between the “immanent critique” of Soviet-style society, his own value neutral approach founded on empirical and statistical research, and its alternative version, Hegedüs’s “transcendental critique” that found justification in critical Marxism and the social-democratic belief in humanizing the system, needs to be complemented with a third approach Takács explores through the sociological achievements of István Kemény. Adopting the sociological approach strongly reliant on statistical surveys, life interviews, extended field work and other empirical methods, Kemény’s arguments were based on hard data. It was less the methods, than the researched phenomena – social stratification, poverty, the Roma minority group, state bureaucracy – that made Kemény politically unwelcome. This third path of critical sociology combined the scientific rigour of Szelényi’s early research with Hegedüs’s more confrontative approach. Kemény’s heretic stand was already reflected in the research on working-class communities and his reluctance to talk about poverty as a real condition in existing socialism. Despite loud criticism from the Party, Kemény would use empirical scrutiny to expose the blindness of his critics towards as in the case of the research project focusing on executive level corporate decision making practices. Here, Kemény

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4 Szelényi fell from grace after de-emphasizing empirical research and applying a more politicized framework for the understanding of systemic inequalities. This is the case in *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* (1979), where he and Konrád describe the rational–redistributive system “as a *dichotomous* class structure in which the classical antagonism of capitalist and proletarian is replaced by a new one between an intellectual class being formed around the position of the redistributors, and a working class *deprived of any right to participate in redistribution*” (italics in the original, Konrád–Szelényi 1979, 222).

called attention to the co-existent, yet contradictory nature of informal/personal goals and formal/authorized goals. Once again, the crude reality revealed via survey data undermined ideological narratives of how state socialist industrial units worked. Kemény's empirically founded sociology was no less heretical in his research project on the Roma population as he declined to regard them as a culturally backward developed ethnic community whose integration into majority society would resolve problems. As opposed to the official-culturalist perception, Kemény concentrated on social factors. Pointing to their underprivileged status as far as the labour market, living conditions, education, and access to quality housing was concerned, the research concluded that the "Roma-problem" would only be resolved by eliminating socialist poverty.

Beyond doubt, Takács is right to describe Kemény's position as unique. If Hegedüs rejected orthodox Marxism/ideological socialism on political grounds, while Szélényi did the same on theoretical grounds, Kemény's critique was primarily empirical. As Takács contends "[Kemény's] sociologically orchestrated disinterestedness was grounded in the very methodology he employed in most of his research. The combination of social-statistical quantification with deep interviewing offered empirical findings and a ground for social categorization which were substantial proof of the purely apologetic nature and scientific inadequacy of official Marxism-Leninism" (Takács 2017, 877). Questioning the legitimacy of social policies on grounds of objectivity was the hardest blow to ideological hardliners whose much-propagated successes in this field were revealed as a Pyrrhic victory.

Such a brief introduction cannot account for the state of social sciences as a whole, however, it draws up contours of both the framework of sociological interrogation of the time and the politics of such interrogation. Hegedüs's ideology-focused inquiries and Szélényi's and, to a greater degree, Kemény's empirically-grounded explorations depended on each other and secured a healthy dialogue between the study of social macro- and the microstructures. Ideally, these would have allowed social policies to be evaluated based on their actual social effect and would have likewise enabled local observations to modify procedures of global planning. The impossibility of this to happen made intellectuals, amongst them filmmakers, aware of the strategy to accurately capture the crisis of the consolidated Kádár-era. Sociographic documentary cinema dwelled upon this impossibility in the sense that filmmakers understood that the political elite, more precisely its technocratic branch, would only tolerate value free films serving the demands of ideological and not social policymakers. In light of

this, the Manifesto shared with critical sociology the impossibility of having its proposed program officially accepted or of making a widespread impact. What I call impossibility was, nevertheless, not a failure. On the contrary, it was a significant leap forward resulting in intellectual (self-)empowerment. The task was no longer to ensure the sociological control of the political but to undertake the sociological vivisection of the political which in the case of sociographic documentaries, as I shall discuss later, involved the visual documentation of social microstructures under the hegemony of ideological concepts.

## **Social Reflection in Narrative Cinema**

Sociographic documentaries took advantage of cinema's natural ability to capture empirical reality and rationalized the crisis by documenting the fracturedness of the social body along the ideology vs. reality binary. To achieve this aim, they would not settle for a vantage point that transcended social reality, even if many regarded such a position as being uncinematic. While there is a strong normative element in the term "uncinematic," it is fair to state that as films came to master (technically, stylistically, and ethically) the first-person social experience, they drifted away from what was regarded as "cinema proper," mainstream and narrative cinema. Not that films had been blind to the social field before their first contact with social sciences. In fact, there is a social layer to any cinematic representation, especially in the case of narrative cinema, the creators of which – just as social scientists preparing new research projects – pick topics ridden with anomalies, tensions, and conflicts. This appeal for conflicts was especially strong in state-socialist Eastern Europe, where awareness towards crises became integral to the politics of cinematic authorship.

Niche audiences all over the region, but more specifically in Hungary, welcomed each new social drama release as a moment of truth and clarity in the face of state propagated falsities. Gábor Gelencsér regards these cynical and disillusioning social reflections about society, human relationships, and generational ideals the cinematic "mainstream" of the 1970s (Gelencsér 2002, 18). It is telling that Gelencsér himself puts the word mainstream into quotation marks, since political cinema was not especially popular in the period and there is little to prove that there was outstanding social demand for such films. Yet there they were, being dominant without being popular– a rather contradictory situation. Anyhow, the crisis of cinema was itself a symptom of a more global social crisis, the growing sense of apathy and disinterest in political activism. It is no wonder that

filmmakers with a sense of artistic purpose failed an audience lacking political purpose in their lives, and, consequently, started looking for meaning elsewhere, often turning away from public capacities and retreating into the private sphere. Even though, directors with the heritage of the previous decade's activist cinema might have justly felt that their integrity as political aware artists was proven by both their commitment to this sense of purpose and their defiance to make entertaining, popular films apathetic audience much demanded. Having to exist in a vacuum, however, was not a hindrance but the necessary precondition for films to acquire their voice as narratives of crisis. This also illuminates why these films could be dominant without being popular. What might seem as an economically irrational and contradictory position, made absolute sense in terms of *la politique des auteurs* and also explicates why the representation of crisis was regarded as the precondition of credible and legitimate social cinema.<sup>5</sup>

In light of the above correlation between credibility and social critique, there was a strong preference, or even compulsion, on the part of art cinema to use crisis narratives. Socio-dramas turned to literature for inspiration, but even in cases when they did not, films employed scripted dialogues, preconceived dramatic structures, formulaic situations, and skilled actors who often sounded as plain illustrations of social types. In response to the threat of credibility posed by repetitiveness and the proliferation of clichés, filmmakers adopted new aesthetic forms. In fact, Gelencsér's impressive taxonomy of 1970s "mainstream" cinema takes stock of the manifold strategies striving to reinvent conventional narrative devices and identifies the docu-dramas of the cinematic Budapest School (epitomized by directors such as István Dárday, Györgyi Szalai, Pál Schiffer, Judit Ember and Béla Tarr amongst others) as examples of non-abstract, "authentic" and "true-to-life" cinema (2002, 17). Putting these adjectives in quotation marks gives recognition to the ambiguities realistic representation in feature cinema, a narrative format that employed aesthetic ideologies (like realism) and translated social conflict into a poetic experience that appealed to sensitivities of art cinema

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5 Extensive research has been conducted on the "mainstream" cinema of this period. The aesthetic and stylistic approach, Gelencsér argues, "can be productively applied to those periods of Hungarian cinema when ideological and political control of the industry was less direct" (2002, 9) and his seminal volume *A Titanic zenekara* [The Band of the Titanic] illustrates how crisis narratives differed from each other not as much in content and social commentary but in their presentation of dramatic material. Another research at Eötvös Loránd University (OTKA 116708) explored the social history of Hungarian cinema while offering insight into the different layers, patterns and historical trajectories of the crisis narratives. A content-based approach takes into consideration individual features like age, gender, profession, education, social position and milieu, place of residence, cultural preference, etc. and also examines how narrative combinations of these render legible different types of crises.



audiences eager for symbols, allegories, parables, satire, grotesque, etc. While I believe no representation can fully free itself of such ambiguities, sociographic documentaries are closest to shaking off these quotation marks.

## **What Do Documentaries Do When They Claim to Offer Sociological Representations?**

Discussing Hungarian sociographic documentaries, Andrea Pócsik makes reference to Clifford Geertz's distinction between experience-near and experience-distant concepts used in anthropological understanding. Geertz describes anthropological interpretation as a perpetual oscillation between the two sides, between the immediate experience embedded in the natives' perceptual, mental, and affective horizon and the general form/feature of their lives—between the point and the pattern: “hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts which actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole which motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another” (Geertz 1974, 43). The anthropologist needs to be present to record the informant's throwing oneself into the symbol system that will only disclose its patterns, as well as the modality of the native's self-expression, after having been brought into an “illuminating connection” (Geertz 1974, 29) with global patterns, with concepts of social life that make expression socially meaningful.

Can such a model of anthropological understanding be compared to sociological understanding? More precisely: how do cinematic sociographies incorporate elements of both anthropological and sociological interpretation? Visual anthropology teaches us that while choosing and directly approaching an informant might be the easiest way to study natives, mutual acceptance, fellow feeling, and communality between parties is essential. The human factor might be less important in sociological surveys, yet the right choice of informants, people willing to speak their minds, is not a marginal factor. Anthropological fieldwork, if impatient, may lead to nothing more than mechanical data recording, whereas sociological long interviews might create opportunities for communality to evolve. The first lesson for a visual anthropologist is to observe without rushing the native, yet to always be prepared for the moment when the native submerges into the symbol system and comes to articulate experience-near concepts. The case of sociological surveys is somewhat similar, as their credibility, to a large extent, depends upon the ability to ask questions relevant to the informants' reality. Existing power

hierarchies between the observer and the observed will commit the native to acting in front of the camera, to perform and enact the native as native, and express those elements and configurations of the symbol system, which she/he presumes will prove meaningful for the anthropologist. Respondents of sociological survey may experience a similar discrepancy between the reality they regard their own and the one referenced by questionnaires. In such cases, the survey will either paint an irrelevant, false, distorting picture or the respondents will give answers they believe would please the researcher, and make sense according to the interviewer's sense of reality.<sup>6</sup> In this latter case, and in much the same manner as in the previously outlined anthropological scenario, sociology becomes a technology of power, the agency of normative knowledge, of an oppressive "will to truth."

In a period guided by orthodox political ideologies, the above challenges become even more real. By realizing these challenges, however, both critical social sciences and documentaries inspired by them came to possess a vantage point onto the founding element of the crisis. Having understood that the symbol system exists as a dual sphere of experience-near concepts, they could present how at official rituals, state-organized events, and other instances of public-use, people wore, what James C Scott calls the "public mask of deference and compliance" (Scott 1985, 285). This performative mode of expression (the mimicry of the politically active proletariat) on the public stage and according to the rules of the public transcript, as Scott calls it, was supplemented by a hidden transcript: a form of resistance to hegemonic power relations that allowed for the "creation of autonomous social space for assertion of dignity" (Scott 1989, 56). The existence of a dual social consciousness was pronounced in the texture of everyday life, from cultural preferences and consumption through physical appearance and dressing to recreation activities to name just a few significant areas.<sup>7</sup> Should we regard the public transcript – the tactical deference on the part of subordinate groups in situations where a person feels "not being oneself," situations that require mandatory and not voluntary participation – to be a universal reaction

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6 The fear of dishonesty was already recognized by the sociologist of the Kádár period: "research experience of the past decades have proven that direct questions about emotions and the motives of action rarely result in answers we can take without reservation" (qtd. in Majtényi 2015, 104)

7 While there existed clear thresholds between the public and the hidden transcript these were permeable and, as time progressed, these would be guarded less strictly. I would argue that the survival of the Kádár regime (in specific) and Soviet-style societies (in general) depended on the increasingly negotiable nature of these thresholds. In view of Scott's claim that "hidden transcripts may be pictured as continually testing the line of what is permissible on-stage" (1989, 59) also explains why maintaining the line and with it, dual social consciousness was likewise essential for the survival of the system. Yet another paradox of state socialism: what was a great threat to the regime's credibility was also its greatest asset of survival.

to state socialist rituals,<sup>8</sup> it needs to be treated as a vital symptom of the general disinterest towards the official discourse. The public/hidden binary of transcripts punctured not only ideologically orchestrated (communal) events and the formal structures of daily practices, but also depleted the political meanings of concepts.

It is in this context that we need to return to the question what sociographies did when they rationalized the crisis and emphasized the empirical understanding of reality. In Zsolt K. Horváth's assertion "increasing interest in the documentary mode of address was fed by the erosion of confidence in the official, primary public sphere of socialism where information was lacking, making people mistrustful towards the outside world, its realness and credibility. Documentaries played an unquestionable ethical role in unravelling certain problems and claiming that a hidden reality existed" (2009, 282). In my understanding, the unravelling of a hidden reality meant capturing the dual expression of experience-near concepts. Such staging of the depletion of ideologically coded practices and concepts explains why sociological cinema was never without a poetic dimension.

Had these films been made in a manner to fully qualify as scientific research, they would probably have altogether eluded the audience. Documentaries that outlaw poetics run the risk of stripping everything to the bare bone. In doing so, the filmmaker is degraded to the position of a data collector and the screen becomes a display of raw facts. Herein lies the danger of sociology-driven visual documentation becoming a statistical pool of data. Statistics in itself is essential to social sciences but only as a tool for drawing up patterns. Representation as data-generation not only dehumanizes the human sphere but sacrifices filmic-ness on the altar of fact-ness. Put differently, it avoids being ideological at the cost of partially compromising the social meaningfulness of cinema. While film as a purely scientific agency is certainly not without a politics, this aspect of it remains clandestine. Gusztáv Schubert emphasizes that the political aspiration of sociographic documentaries was proven not by facts but its insistence on factuality: "these directors accepted the trivial truth that the completed work is itself the message of the authors, thus it is not important to openly articulate one's opinion" (2005, 239).<sup>9</sup>

8 Alexei Yurchak illuminates how playing along rituals was an essential way to be acknowledged as person capable of acting in a social meaningful manner. Participation in these rituals proved that one was "the kind of social actor who understands and acts according to the rules of the current ritual, with its connection to the larger system of power relations and previous contexts of this type" (Yurchak 2003, 486).

9 Horváth makes a similar assertion: "The language and methodology of unravelling reality insisted on the empirical in order to clearly differentiate reality from ideology and because it managed to stay clean of even the suspicion of being ideological, it was not seen as counter-ideology" (2009, 286).

The sociographic cinema proposed by the 1969 Manifesto wished to create an agency for this insistence on factuality, for socially meaningful yet non-ideological expression. Recognizing the political and ethical stakes of this agency, some commentators, including Vincze Zalán, urged directors to take a conspicuous position: “sociographic exploration, the visual presentation of factual reality has been a significant step forward for Hungarian cinema...In order to make further progress along this path, it cannot settle for simple documentation and the exploration of reality needs to encompass the viewpoint of the filmmaker in a more robust manner” (Zalán 1974, 19). On the one hand, if such a request urged filmmakers to find their own voice, it was certainly fulfilled in the more artistic minded socio-dramas of the Budapest School. Examples of distinctive authorial touch include the withdrawn, observant camerawork in the films of István Dárday, the dramatic silences in Judit Ember’s work, and the heated, explosive quarrel-sequences in those of Béla Tarr. On the other hand, if Zalán is suggesting filmmakers to make their political critique more personal, I believe he is mistaken. The agency realized in sociographic documentaries was most unique and powerful when it did not pit the individual (the dissident artist and intellectual) against the system, but rendered legible the unavoidable depletion of the ideological regime.

Let me as proof a brief analysis of Ferenc Grunwalsky’s *Maternity* (*Anyaság*, 1974), a documentary about an unnamed teenager mother in a poverty stricken gypsy colony. Only vague information is given about the protagonist, the setting, or the events surrounding the recent birth of his second child, not least because the filmmaker’s questions about her childhood and her dreams are met mostly with silence. When reciting the events of giving birth and how she moved away from her husbands’ family with the infant, she mainly uses single word sentences. Instead of a long interview, viewers get long silences as the camera zooms in and out of her perplexing, timid, and dreamy face and, on two occasions, cuts to a longer sequence showing a group of young children passing time in the company of pigs and dogs.

Given the teenager mother’s reluctance to talk and the intimidating presence of the camera, *Maternity* might be regarded as a failed documentary, the documentation of failure. Even so, it is a sociologically credible documentation of failure, a factual encapsulation of the subaltern voicelessness and its helplessness against the camera. The adverse social conditions of the underprivileged come across in the sequence showing half-naked children, barefoot and filthy wandering near a pigsty, joylessly caressing and indifferently playing with puppies. The apathetic tone of these images, reminiscent of news reports from third world countries, frames the girl’s unemotional words and the mechanical

recitation of her situation. The title of the film may have made a promise to talk about the solemn experience of giving birth and the hope the arrival of a new life symbolizes, yet the film fails to deliver heart-warming moments. On the contrary, it presents stray and self-abandoned souls. In fact, *Maternity* is a word for word portrayal of the social reproduction of poverty, what Kemény's early 1970s Roma research proved, beyond doubt, to be the chief challenge for rural gipsies.<sup>10</sup>

Undoubtedly, Grunwalsky's film lacks all the essential features of empirical social research: it could have been shot anywhere in the world. The only reference to its country of origin, apart for Hungarian being used in the minimalist conversations, is Sarolta Zalátnay's popular song *Trees, Flowers, Light* (Fák, virágok, fény), which children sing loudly out of frame in one scene. The contrast between the upbeat lyrics and the apathy of the protagonist, underpinned by the mobile frame (the zooming camera) as the stylistic marker of existential instability, eludes becoming the aestheticization of poverty by juxtaposing maternity with subaltern muteness. The agency of language is not only curtailed by the girl's reluctance to speak, but her possible dishonesty about being the victim of domestic violence: when asked about a scar above her lips, she claims it was an accident and not a result of disorderly family life. When she does speak, her words are purely descriptive and emotionally mute, with the act of giving birth receiving no prominence in the monotonous recital of events: "I went to bed in the evening... there wasn't anything...I went out...I sent him to call an ambulance...it happened...I felt OK...He came in...He looked at him." The cold and declarative verbal formula "it happened" as the experience-near concept of giving birth carries a negative accent, saturated not with joy but the shame of being stuck in intolerable conditions and perpetual disempowerment. A more precise title of the film would have been "Maternity in Poverty," where the second part would not only have located the protagonist in a destitute socioeconomic environment but punctured the normative meanings of the concept of motherhood. Zalán might have found such title useful in making the filmmaker's political stance more pronounced, yet it would not really change much. The grim images of child poverty and the linguistic poverty of the protagonist deplete the idealized concept of maternity through the empirical truth-seeking of sociological representation.

Using the explanatory power of a grim reality, sociological cinema achieved its critical and political agency to the fullest when it treated facts as crisis symptoms and pointed to the emptiness of experience-distant concepts that defined social meaningfulness in the official discourse. Uncovering such

10 For details of the research see: Kemény (1979, 2002).

depleted concepts was made possible through insistence on factuality and the heightened perceptiveness towards the ritualized element of reality, including verbal statements, silences, gestures, unconditional body language, and any photographic and sound proof of interviewees feeling uncomfortable or secure during social interactions. As such, cinema did not as much objectify people but a deeply fractured public sphere and the efforts people made or did not make to live up to its ideological expectations.

Before exploring cinematic agency as realized in other sociographic documentaries, we need to recapitulate some general patterns. Those films represented the crisis in the most comprehensive manner which pointed both to the fissure between social meaning and ideological meaning and the castigation of the former by the latter. Thus, the insistence on factuality served not only cognitive realism but an oppositional political agency.<sup>11</sup> Horváth defines cognitive realism as “the language of intellectuals used as an ethics-driven praxis of problematizing and counterbalancing the official ideology pursued by non-conformist people working in different genres and media” (2009, 285) and claims that it should be understood as a concept more embedded in the sociology of knowledge rather than in epistemology. Along these lines, I briefly examine other documentaries of Balázs Béla Studio from the 1970s and the manner in which these contested the ideological production of social meaningfulness and concepts.

## **State Socialist Episteme in Crisis**

To understand the crisis one needs not only to understand reality but the conceptual logic governing reality, the dismantling of which was carried out, to a large extent, through a persistent visual documentation of real life incidents. *The Anatomy of a Unique Case*, the title of a film by István Dárday and Györgyi Szalai about the events inspiring their feature film titled *The Prize Trap*, is a lucid description of the task makers of socially-invested documentaries volunteered for. During the anatomy unique, specific, and actual events served as local cases of the prevailing epistemic regime, a set of symptoms available for study. What exactly were these unique cases?

*The Long Distance Runner* (*Hosszú futásodra mindig számíthatunk*, Gyula Gazdag, 1969) was inspired by an article in a local daily paper; *Selection* (A

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11 Zsolt Kapás Zsombor arrives to a similar conclusion with regard to the socio-dramas of the Budapest School, claiming that “being on the lookout for real events with reference to social problems by its very nature bears witness to the political attitude of filmmakers” (2013).

válogatás, 1970) also by Gazdag, was spurred by an announcement on national radio recruiting music performances; and *The Resolution (A határozat, 1972)*, a collaborative work of Judit Ember and Gazdag, reconstructs the removal of an agricultural co-op director from his position by members of the local party bureau. The incentive of György Szomjas' *Honeymoon (Nászutak, 1970)* was news coverage of a traffic accident which cost the life of an Italian sex tourist. Gyula and János Gulyás's *Reality – With Whistle and Drums, Through Thick and Thin (Valóság – síppal, dobbal, avagy tűzön, vízén át, 1968)* originated from a sociography published by Antal Végh about Penészlek (a poverty-stricken village in eastern Hungary), and the filmmaker brothers would return to the same topic in *There are Changes (Vannak változások, 1979)*. Sociological inquiries, this time the research of István Kemény, stimulated Pál Schiffer's short documentaries *Houses at the End of the Village (Faluszéli házak, 1972)*, *What do Gipsy Children do? (Mit csinálnak a cigánygyerekek?, 1973)*, and, most notably, the feature film *Cséplő Gyuri (1978)*.<sup>12</sup>

Although the above list is by no means complete, it clarifies the intentions of filmmakers to engage themselves with real and actual social experience. The way documentaries covered unique incidents differed distinctively from news reportage, the ideological bias of which made news coverage an agency to maintain discursive hegemony in the public sphere. State-run newsrooms, editorial offices, record labels (and virtually every media outlet under the party's control) extended such control over the distribution of information. In its privilege for ideological concepts, news coverage covered up alternative conceptualizations of the social and political field, as opposed to which documentaries aimed to recover sanctioned layers of concepts and to salvage their empirically grounded meanings. The similarity of the unique cases explored in the above list of films was established by both the curiosity towards (immanent) social meanings hidden beneath (transcendental) prescriptive narratives and the shared objective to contest the ideological concepts these narrative rested upon.

In a convincing case study about the discursive production of Roma as a concept, Andrea Pócsik explores three films – the television adaptation of Márís

12 The documentary features of the Budapest school would continue on this path and many film would dramatize real events in a self-reflective manner. István Dárday's feature film *The Prize Trap (Jutalomutazás, 1974)* was complemented by a documentary entitled *The Anatomy of a Unique Case (Egy egyedi eset természetrajza, 1975)*. The documentary draws up the background of the story and contains interviews with the actual participants of the incidents depicted in the feature film. The same logic prevails in *Style of Fighting (Harcmodor, 1980)* based on incidents Dárday and Szalai first documented in *Részvénytársaság Külsővaton (1973)* and Judit Ember's *Mistletoes (Fagyöngyök, 1978)* with its documentary companion piece *Educational Story (Tantörténet 1976)*.



Halasi's popular juvenile fiction *The Bench at the Back* (*Az utolsó padban*, dir. Márta Kende, 1975), Katalin Macskássy's short animation *I Like Life Very Much...* (*Nekem az élet teccik nagyon...*, 1974) and József Csőke's television reportage *Albeit...!* (*Pedig...!*, 1975) – as examples of how the official image of Roma people circulated between different (audio-visual) genres. While this image showed awareness towards social prejudices against and the underprivileged status of this ethnic group, it expressed untarnished optimism towards their acculturation, their ability to develop personal integrity and upward mobility through cultural assimilation. Portraying integration as the model of social survival, Pócsik argues, urged Roma populations to renounce, or at best, weaken ethnic elements of their self-image, that is, to repress the most familiar, experience-near concepts when identifying as Roma: “in Macskássy's animation, the visual placement of children – who talk about major social deprivation while narrating their drawings – in the neat school environment; the transformation of Kati [in *The Bench at the Back*], her being washed, hair neatly combed, and told to change her Roma attire for a dress more appropriate for the school celebration; and the filming of the doctor at Visznek in her white lab coat are all representations of the Hungarian Roma population's symbolic sanitization through strongly performative images, representations performing the correct ideological reading” (Pócsik 2017, 240).

According to Pócsik, Pál Schiffer rejects the official logic of representations and their erasure of the most immediate experiences that defines being a Romani. Relevant part of his oeuvre, most notably *Cséplő Gyuri*, presents upward mobility through integration as an unachievable quest. Portraying the odyssey of an agile and hard-working male arriving from an underdeveloped gipsy colony to the capital with a desire “to understand his destiny and even more so, that of his community” (Schiffer 1977, 86), the film calls attention to an impenetrable glass ceiling that repeatedly exhausts attempts of status advancement. *Cséplő Gyuri* proves that not even someone possessing all the necessary qualities prescribed by the official concept of “socially valued Roma” can prevail under state socialism. Nevertheless, this failure does not erase the protagonist's efforts to understand the “larger picture,” in fact, it both helps to redefine the concept of Roma and lays forth a different path of empowerment. Having seen the film, Pócsik claims, “the useful Romani will not be someone who joins the ranks of Hungarian workers, but someone who thrives for emancipation as a Romani and uses available support to fight his own battles” (2013).

Pócsik's thorough research on the production history of *Cséplő Gyuri* highlights the annoyance it caused amongst authorities, especially the scene shot during

the visit of a local council official to the working quarters of the brick factory where Gyuri is employed. The scene features agitated tenants complaining about inhuman housing conditions, at the end of which the protagonist remarks quietly to the camera that he has only seen such deprivation in gypsy slums and has always believed that tenants here were not Hungarians but Roma people. Not only did this observation resonate with the “heretic” conclusion of István Kemény’s Roma-research – identifying economic and not cultural factors behind the social marginalization of gypsies –, it made the equally heretic claim that poor Hungarian workers also lived under a glass ceiling. In short: the ideological construction of the proletariat was just as misguided as the official concept of the Roma.

Similarly to his sociographic documentaries, Schiffer did not simply recover socially meaningful layers repressed in official discursive practices but presented them as more meaningful than ideological representations. The discursive production of the Kádár era’s epistemic regime demonstrated numerous similar contradictions and crisis symptoms which documentaries were well suited to debunk. A notable example was *The Resolution*, a documentary about the politically motivated removal of the director of a cooperative farm and, at the same time, a unique anatomy of administrative strategies aiming to construct the concept of the incompetent executive.

At the time the depicted incidents took place, Ernő Lupán published a conceptual overview of cooperative democracy describing it as a practical principle that should govern every aspect of operating a co-op (Lupán 1971, 1024), emphasizing the symptomatic connection between democratic practices of agricultural cooperatives and those of political democracy (1971, 1025), and calling attention to the necessary harmonization of national and group interest for the healthy operation of agricultural businesses as part of national economy (1971, 1026). Later in the essay, Lupán identifies self-management and autonomous decision-making as the cornerstones of but also the challenges to cooperative democracy. These include incompetent managers and disagreement between members, scenarios which can easily erode engagement in the life of the coop and undermine the idea of self-government. Yet, the most imminent threat the author mentions is the scenario when “the management of the cooperative and, even more so, the county cooperative association or the local branch of the administrative power ignores the economic-organizational autonomy of the agricultural cooperative, [in case of which] the scope of both managerial powers and cooperative democracy are narrowed” (Lupán 1971, 1026). *The Resolution* gives full credit to such fears by portraying members of the local branch of the

party as saboteurs of cooperative democracy not for lack of understanding its principles, but for the very opposite reason. Realizing that a well-functioning economic organization, the largest employer in the area, with a consensus-oriented, accountable, responsive, and effective leader (József Ferenczi) might weaken their influence on local matters,<sup>13</sup> they launch an ideological smear campaign, claiming that Ferenczi privileged cooperative interests over the economic interests of the state. As such, the film not only demonstrates how the concept of cooperative democracy becomes corrupted in practice, but that already the canonical form of this concept carries in itself, as an embedded element, the agency of ideological control. Similar to the notion of Roma that imposed self-limitation on the subjects it made meaningful, cooperative democracy comes through as a notion prescribing ideological conformity onto its referent.

Both *Cséplő Gyuri* and *The Resolution* identified concepts constructed in the ideologically controlled public sphere as agencies of disempowerment by proving their uselessness, their inability to benefit people in conditions of really existing socialism. Had these case studies failed to address the discrepancies between the (f)actual and the conceptual understanding of society, one could easily claim that they were isolated, atypical cases and, that, despite their upsetting assessments, the official narratives remained valid: the Roma would gain status through acculturation, and the public dishonouring of competent business managers by party functionaries could not happen in Hungary. However, as Hegedüs's own views on the power-obsessed local administration<sup>14</sup> and Kemény's Roma-research demonstrate, the anatomies rendered legible systemic pathologies instead of local deformities: they were not exceptions but the general rule. Furthermore, if the proposed diagnoses were proven false and

13 The conflict between the progressive director of an agricultural cooperative and members of the local party organization is at the centre of László Vitézy's *Time of Peace* (*Békeidő*, 1980). This fictional documentary borrows a lot from Gazdag and Ember's anatomy of human relations, conflict types and argumentative logic, nevertheless, and as a result of its preference for a dramatic structure reminiscent of feature films, it presents its protagonist as an active and invincible hero. Some contemporary reviews questioned the optimistic tone of the film and suggested that it "attempts to transform the false, the deceptive and the hypocritical into reality, truth and authentic through stylisation" (Orosz 1981, 50). According to István Orosz, Vitézy's choice to feature of the active hero is deceptive since it ascribes the values of self-betterment, autonomy and responsibility in a single character leaving people dependent on paternalism, despite creating an illusion of empowerment.

14 From the mid-1960s Hegedüs was a supporter of economic pluralism and expansion of activities in the second-economy, especially the agriculture. In conversation with Zoltán Zsille, Hegedüs (1989, 376–377) described his chief professional interest between 1965–1975, the harmonisation of economic reform and political revisionism, and identified the unwillingness of party bureaucracy to acknowledge grassroot initiatives as the greatest obstacle.

the crisis of the system exposed in the documentaries discredited by everyday experience, why would Schiffer be forced to cut some scenes from *Cséplő Gyuri*? By the same token, why was *The Resolution* shelved for two decades? Not only were sociographic cinema's diagnoses valid, they confirmed what people could only articulate as hidden transcripts, as biting critiques of a political elite either blind to reality or feigning blindness.

Audiences were not blind and saw behind every local case the emergence of a general pattern. Péter Tóth Péter explains this in the context of the Gulyás brothers' *There are Changes*, "it was impossible not to realize the parallel between the fate of the village [Penészlek] and that of the country" (Tóth 2017, 99). He later elaborates on the sweeping consequences of such comparison: "the conditions documented and exposed in the film carried meanings applicable to the private life of every Hungarian citizen. Anyone who saw the film would realize his/her being an insignificant element of the same system that disallowed dignified human existence in Szabolcs-Szatmár county...This was settled and solidified communism unable to improve due to qualities which were inalienable part of its nature" (Tóth 2017, 101).

The Gulyás brothers' film was a "sequel" to their 1968 *Reality – With Whistle and Drums, Through Thick and Thin*, a short documentary that originated in a sociology published by Antal Végh. Although authorities tried to discredit the fulminatory claims of Végh, Penészlek became a national shame and even inspired a stage play by the title *Not on the Map* (*A térképen nem található*, József Darvas). According to János Berta, the publicity and transmedial reception history of the original Végh-article demonstrated the openness of intellectuals towards sincere representations of social conditions and realized the objective of the Manifesto to make films "not only to raise public attention, but to prompt positive changes in society" (Berta 2016, 102). Even so, *There are Changes* is not a self-congratulatory film, as the unveiled changes in the village leave little room for celebration. Interviewing inhabitants, including those who also spoke in the 1968 film, newcomers to the village, and the county party secretary who was removed from his position amidst the nationwide publicity Penészlek received, the film puts the whole community under scrutiny not in order to judge it, but to understand how it comprehended its negative image, how social dynamics were altered as a result of political pressure by state apparatuses, and how residents negotiated between hidden and public transcript when addressing the camera. Discussing the social microcosm explored in the film, Berta claims that "we are presented not only with lies, but the shame of those prejudiced

by the community, the manipulations of political leaders, the distortions of professionals who fall short of the responsibility invested on them, or the simple human desire to present facts in a brighter light” (2016, 104). In the cacophony of voices – each burdened with self-censorship, compromised personal integrity, the lack of agency and autonomy –, the film emphasized the collective nature of disempowerment that is not a result of a tyrannical and abnormal regime, but an “enlightened,” technocratic system functioning normally.

In fact, the fate of *Penészlek* was sealed by the urban and territorial planning framework developed during the 1960s and accepted as a final concept in 1971. The plan aimed to decentralize and bureaucratize decision-making in the field of urban and rural development, but more importantly to optimize the redistributive system and ensure that scarce public finance are spent to achieve maximum economic and social benefits. Based on available demographic data, the engineers of the framework were convinced that depopulation in many villages was an irreversible process, thus the document introduced the concept of “settlement without prior function.” Essentially, the regulation subordinated rural development to the economic priorities of industrialization and agricultural modernization that, as Pál Juhász succinctly argues, left traditional settlement structures not just obsolete but a hindrance: “losing traditional peasant culture is regrettable, but this is the cost of development, it supports cultural integration within the country and creates equal chances for every citizen” (1988, 5). Villages regarded non-viable by the framework were deprived of development funds and were burdened with diminishing educational, health, and social infrastructure, public services and a local council. Paradoxically, 1971 also saw the passing of the third council law in Hungary that set out to develop local democracy and advance the socialization of decision-making processes. According to Milián Pap, the obvious political rationale behind passing this piece of legislation “was to extend the process of normalization that took place from the late 1950s to early 1960s and successfully integrated and represented the societal will in the highest level of the political system, an extension which meant putting into motion similar mechanisms at the micro levels” (Pap 2018, 204). Still, the democratization of the countryside proved largely illusive as decentralization principally meant taking direct control over areas and mechanisms previously not consolidated. Juhász (1988, 4–5) lists the following reasons that support this claim: the competency of people who would represent local communities was decided at central offices, the administrative hierarchy was solidified through the process of reshuffling local bodies, and political agendas were camouflaged as policy areas. This was

certainly the case for villages deprived of self-representation, and being treated as nuisance (or even expendable) by county level bureaucrats.

With all these in mind, it may seem awkward why the Gulyás brothers chose to talk about changes in the title of the film instead of stating their absence. Well, because *Penészlek* manifested the self-defeating essence of the experience-distant notion of change in the state socialist episteme. The title succinctly captured contradictions between the power elite's cherished ideals of social progress and their use of administrative technologies of modernisation. *There are Changes* explored these as systemic contradictions and claimed that being subordinated to orthodox ideological principles, the conceptual framework designed to improve social lives was destined to achieve the opposite goal. It was not the lack of changes that forced the residents of *Penészlek* and the dwellers of hundreds of other Hungarian villages into precarious existence but their very success. Crisis was the only logical outcome of state socialist modernisation founded on the structurally coded alienation of politics from policies, of the urban from the rural, of the leaders of men from the people.

## Conclusions

The consolidated Kádár regime was never fully consolidated but this cannot be the main explanation for its permanent crisis. After all, crisis served as an essential condition for its survival, it allowed the regime to exist in a constant ideological mode as it reluctantly identified new areas to be stabilized and created moments when people could be told promises and offered assurance that their troubles will be resolved. By maintaining a sense of urgency to handle crises, the power elite managed to evade a crisis more threatening and rooted deeper. This I described as the insurmountable fissure between abstract concepts and concrete facts, experience-distant and experience-near rationalizations of reality. Although both sociology and cinema were regarded as the elites' strong allies, as technologies of power to be exploited for the pseudo-consolidation of problem areas, from the late 1960s they spoke with increasing reluctance and sincerity about the fracture. The manifesto for sociographic cinema was one among many signs of the reluctance to address the crisis. This article identified the Manifesto not as a call for the design and elaborate construction of a documentary format with an infallible methodology to generate scientifically valid knowledge but the shared belief that non-hegemonic and non-ideological forms of understanding can be equally powerful. Or rather empowering, as it enriches our awareness of the crisis.

I described above how sociology offered inspiration for cinematic to represent social phenomena without validating the prevailing epistemic regime and, as such, to puncture official concepts in local and unique settings. Films either uncovered suppressed, experience-near layers of social meaningfulness or performed the anatomy of concepts that ensured ideological control of social agents. While presenting such cases, I relied heavily on previous scholarship which offer clarity as to the dissident social diagnosis offered in specific films. I only wished to accentuate that the dissident status of documentaries with different stylistic and thematic priorities is captured in its full vigour when social micro-fractures – the individual experiences of being culturally rejected, publically ostracized, shamed for living in economic deprivation – are linked to the more severe “tectonic dislocations” of the state socialist episteme, when such instances of suppressed agency are revealed to be central to the survival of the system. Sociographic documentaries verified and elaborated on the diagnoses offered by critical sociology and, additionally, allowed intellectual circles beyond the borders of the academia to understand the comprehensiveness of the crisis. Focusing on the destabilisation of epistemic technologies of power should not be limited to the study of Soviet style “democracies” and may be usefully adapted to any political system anxious to stimulate public awareness and alertness towards crises of all kinds as a strategy to disown its own.

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## Singularity and the Open-Ended Crisis

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**Abstract.** The study aims at investigating the phenomenon of crisis in the intersection of three areas: simulation, singularity and temporality. The argument develops a theory of the singular crisis whose instances are demonstrated and proved by the American thriller, *Take Shelter* (2011, Jeff Nichols). The applied concept of crisis is based on the argument that any critical period is treated by models derived from earlier crises. The theoretical background to the simulated operating mechanisms of the crisis is Jean Baudrillard's and Gilles Deleuze's appropriations of simulation and simulacra. In case the simulated problem-solving patterns fail in a critical period, the singular characteristics of the crisis can be observed. Based on examples taken from the film, the article argues that reaction to any given crisis is essentially built up by both hyperreal patterns governed by simulation and singular elements that simulation cannot account for. The description of the temporal nature of crises is heavily dependent on interpretation, thus their temporal span is observed from the vantage point of their singular characteristics. The study argues that crises are characteristically open-ended but their endpoint is predominantly designated in hindsight to render the crisis as a finished time period for the sake of manageability.

**Keywords:** singularity, crisis, simulation, open-endedness, thriller.

The general term of crisis has been characterized as a “vague term” (Moffitt 2015, 189) or an “imprecise” means of scientific investigation (Moffitt 2015, 193). However, crisis seems to be a phenomenon overarching versatile fields of human existence and including a plethora of cultural (Alcoff 1988; Navone 1996; Taggart 2004), economic (Münchau 2009; Turner 2008), political (Weaver 2017; Moffitt 2015), psychological (Horgan 2016; Parker 1989) etc. areas. Although defining the essence of crisis is practically impossible due to the elasticity and ubiquity of the very nature of the phenomenon, crisis can be characterized as a change that upturns or rearranges the traditional ways and means of understanding. This aspect of crisis renders its applicability an extremely fluid concept capable of

finding its way to a vast variety of areas. On a wider scale, crisis is a means of interpretation aiming at the understanding of change of the given state of affairs, thus crisis is seen as a transitory phase between two more or less stable, structured and understood periods, which is formed into a historical narrative by rhetorical means (White 1973, 7). If this historical approach built on the linear succession of events is considered, crisis is a necessary liminal territory between assumingly known time periods, systems or regimes of human history. Reinhart Koselleck narrows down this historical approach to the very concept of modernity and identifies crisis as the “structural signature of modernity” (2006, 358), while Jean Baudrillard sees crisis as the symptom of modernity “linked to a historical and structural crisis” (1987, 63). Both arguments indicate that crisis has a “regulatory cultural function” (Baudrillard 1987, 64) characteristic to any historical period seen as the oppositional traits of tradition and the modern as well as the “supreme concept of modernity” that is “elastic in time” (Koselleck 2006, 376).

The nature of crisis is established by a binary structure inasmuch as it is considered to be a transitory phase between a known traditional past and a commencing new order experienced after the crisis is over. The wide-ranging use of the original Greek root, *krinein*, results in a “relatively broad spectrum of meanings.” The Greek equivalent of crisis amalgamates a variety of meanings: separation, divorce, judging, choice, measuring oneself and quarrel (Koselleck 2006, 358). This broad spectrum emphasizes the exact way crisis is generally understood as having the function of a link between the constituents of the binary structure of old and new, or the known and the hitherto unknown. The transitory phase of crisis marks the beginning of an uncertainty that follows a period associated with certainty, knowledge, routines, models and an overall sense of security that derives from the available models based on which the emerging problems can be handled. This paper argues that the transitory phase of crisis is a singularity that cannot be described by the available models, i.e. by means of simulation, consequently the length of the temporal span of crises depends on interpretation carried out in hindsight; crises are mostly open-ended until their singular nature is discovered, their characteristics understood and until new models of conduct are developed in order to create new simulations that can tackle the problems raised by these. The interdependence of simulation, singularity, crisis and the resulting open-endedness will be demonstrated by the thriller movie, *Take Shelter* (2011) directed by Jeff Nichols.

*Take Shelter* is an American psychological thriller that follows the actions of the protagonist, Curtis LaForche. The construction worker Curtis is haunted by

horrible visions, which lead him to rebuild a shelter in the backyard of his family house to prepare for a menacing natural catastrophe. His efforts gradually distance him from both his family and the community around him: in order to finance the shelter, Curtis raises a loan on the house and gets fired for unauthorized use of heavy machinery. The inhabitants of his home town, LaGrange, Ohio, also conclude that Curtis is psychologically unstable after the man is easily provoked into aggression at a community meeting. After a regular tornado hits the town without much damage, Curtis and his wife, Samantha, are persuaded by a psychiatrist to go on their planned vacation to the seaside, where the expected devastating catastrophe finally finds the family unprepared. The film ends with a cliff-hanger beach scene, when the family sees an enormous set of tornados approaching the land. The narrative and the thematic characteristics of the film make *Take Shelter* ideal for demonstrating the interplay of the simulation-based routine protocols and the singular nature of the crisis, while the portrayal of the extended, never finished climax raises questions about the possibility of properly assessing the time span of a particular crisis.

Both the evaluation of crisis and the assessment of the pre-crisis and post-crisis periods are based on a variety of models. Koselleck's usage of the metaphors of illness and the related concepts of health, death, diagnosis etc. are those basic building blocks or models that help delineating the difference between crisis and non-crisis. This differentiation serves as the basis of interpreting a given state of affairs as a period of crisis distinct from other non-crisis periods: "crisis only becomes a crisis when it is perceived as a crisis" (Moffitt 2015, 189). Even the evaluation of crisis as a critical period is quintessentially based on pre-existent models governing the rhetoric of the argument: "the concept of crisis assumed a double meaning that has been preserved in social and political language. On the one hand, the objective condition, about the origins of which there may be scientific disagreements, depends on the judgmental criteria used to diagnose that condition. On the other hand, the concept of illness itself presupposes a state of health—however conceived—that is either to be restored again or which will, at a specified time, result in death" (Koselleck 2006, 361). Objective conditions stand for models that can be put to motion in order to return to accessible and reliable solutions crystallized by earlier crises. The flawed state of crisis that is labelled as "illness," however, is singular in nature, i.e. it is new, never hitherto seen and thus there is a lack of available models to diagnose or solve the newly emerging set of problems.

Crisis pose a threat to the established order of simulation that organizes the world into a comprehensible unit. Simulation is a process through which the

meaningful modern signs that consist of a signifier and a signified collapse into simulacra, which are self-referential signs that have lost their binary structure (Baudrillard 1994, 6). Simulacra are built up by an array of models of reality that precede and form a hyperreality (Baudrillard 1994, 13). Sometimes the models can still be traced back in simulacra, as they produce only a “mirage” or a “double illusion” (Deleuze 2004, 314), e.g. decaf, which is consumed in agreement with the social, cultural and behavioural patterns that also govern the consumption of regular coffee with actual caffeine content; on other occasions, these models are mostly untraceable, e.g. in the case of automatic gear shifting in cars. Regardless of the successful traceability of the vast variety of available models, the attempt of interpreting the simulacra endow them with certain core models that can be identified or traced back, thus the hyperreal images can be interpreted and reverted into a sign consisting of signifier and signified, consequently the modern concept of meaning is restored temporarily. However, the reversion of the simulacrum into signifier and signified is dependent on a subjective point of view that attempts to access the simulacrum and make meaning of it. “Such is the logic of simulacra, it is no longer that of divine predestination, it is that of the precession of models, but it is just as inexorable. And it is because of this that events no longer have meaning: it is not that they are insignificant in themselves, it is that they were preceded by the model, with which their processes only coincided.” (Baudrillard 1994, 38.) Signification is dependent on the interpretational access to simulacra, while the self-referential, third-phase simulacra “have no relation to any reality whatsoever” (Baudrillard 1994, 6), and their operation is based on preliminary models that make signification possible in the case of second-phase simulacra, which “mask the absence of a profound reality” (Baudrillard 1994, 6), inasmuch as the models can be isolated and identified.

The threat that the imminent tornado poses is based on models that necessitate a simulated protocol to be followed in *Take Shelter*. The members of the community are all aware of the general danger of periodically returning natural disasters, thus their behaviour and reactions to the environmental particulars of the region are ruled by models that proved to be effective earlier. The houses have safe places to hide in time of tornados, and the city dwellers routinely follow the protocols that were crystallized during their earlier experiences of hard times with nature. The LaForche family also knows what to do when the blaring sirens wake them up from their sleep. Hearing the sound of the tornado alert, they follow the routines learnt from earlier experiences and immediately rush to the shelter and wait out the storm. When the family resurfaces from the shelter in



the morning, they see that the ongoing outside activities are also governed by models. The neighbours are gathering the debris the storm left behind, and the couple's calm movements show that they are accustomed to the consequences of harsh weather. The LaForche family sees how people are routinely clearing away the broken tree branches, the electricity company workmen are also busy repairing the power lines and the regular road traffic has resumed. These are the models that transmit the message to the family that the storm alert is over and everything is back to normal.

Living in the Tornado Alley, the city-dwellers are aware of the fact that, in case of a storm, their survival is based on how successfully they can simulate the earlier models that helped them stay unharmed. However, the narrative also offers other instances of simulation, which are not related to the weather conditions. Curtis works for a construction company, which is practically based on the setting up and employing models. Keeping the safety instructions, using heavy machinery or drilling are some of the numerous models that govern the company and make up a matrix of simulated behaviour patterns. Curtis and his wife, Samantha, regularly visit sessions with their deaf daughter, and the family members learn how to speak the American Sign Language (ASL) to be able to communicate with Hannah. ASL consists of signs that stand for words or concepts and makes up a hyperreal system of signifiers which is based on either mimetic or metaphoric hand movements that need to be perfectly copied – in other words, simulated – to convey meaning. This simulated means of communication is so pivotal that when Curtis drives his colleague home, the co-worker's wife communicates her annoyance with gestures that Curtis understands as signs of disapproval. In another instance, Samantha chooses the holiday resort for the family from a travel booklet which is a classic example of the “artificial accelerator” that boosts demand (Baudrillard 1998, 72).

The handling of recurring crises is based on models whose simulation offers a way to react according to protocols established earlier. However, crises are notorious for not giving in to already existing solutions, their very nature is rooted in their volatility. They are predominantly informed by change that give their essence: if the available models fully account for the solution of a crisis, the crisis devolves into a quickly passing phase that can successfully be treated by already existing protocols. Thus any crisis contains singular elements which are demarcated by those already familiar areas that simulated protocols or the hyperreal series of applicable models cannot account for. The essential feature of crisis is its singular, unique nature that does not yield to simulation.

Consequently, the singularity of crisis is the most important characteristic that needs to be addressed.

Singularity is a term overarching versatile fields of science. Mathematical singularity marks the point beyond which mathematical objects cannot be defined or they become highly unstable (Kubrusly 2016, 45). In natural sciences, singularity is generally the marker of the end of the known and knowable cause and effect relationships; the gravitational singularity describes an area in space-time where the energy density of the gravitational forces is infinite and does not depend on a coordination system (Weatherall 2014, 1077); the Penrose-Hawking theorem is a generalization of the general theory of relativity attempting to describe the formation of black holes (Kriele 1990, 451). In the area of technology, engineering defines mechanical singularity as a mechanism or the operation of a machine that cannot be predicted (Okada 2008, 1735). The technological singularity constitutes probably the most widespread usage of the term singularity, as it refers to a self-conscious technological advancement when technological innovations take place independent of human control (Vinge 1993; Moravec 1990). The possible emergence and the application of artificial intelligence also have severe effects (Kurzweil 1999), for example in legal singularity, where the outcome of all legal decisions can be predicted (Alarie 2016, 443) because of the interaction of artificial intelligence.

The general features of singularity are based on the unavailability of pre-existent models and the impossibility of simulation. The intensity of the crisis is due to the factor of its resistance to simulation and hyperreality, thus the singular nature of crisis becomes a marker of intensity. The more limited the amount of readily applicable problem solving models is, the more severe a crisis grows. The existing theories on singularity have one common characteristic: human control, which is equal to the manipulation of accessible simulacra and hyperreality, reaches its limits in prescribing the probable outcome of a process, thus any interaction with the critical situation has to be conducted by finding new solutions to the problems faced within the crisis. If the problems are successfully solved, new protocols are formulated and these models will be the bases of simulation in a recurring crisis. However, the types of singularity above show that singularity and crisis complement each other. Singularity is the exact point where the hyperreal ends, as third-order simulacra “are founded on information, the model, the cybernetic game – total operability, hyperreality, aim of total control” (Baudrillard 1994, 81). Since singularity disempowers simulation, control becomes the core of the problem in case of a crisis. Models make control possible, and if they cannot function properly, the state of technological, scientific or cultural crisis sets in.

*Take Shelter* gives account of the analogously developing psychological and environmental crisis the protagonist has to face, and the presented critical period is predominantly singular. There are factors that may help Curtis in tackling the situation, but he has a limited range of available models that could offer solutions to his problems. Although his mother was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia in her early thirties, nearly the same age as Curtis is, her position in the family she left behind is entirely different. The woman is also unable to give a precise account of what happened twenty-five years earlier, when her mental state deteriorated overnight to such an extent that it forced her into permanent care at a psychological facility. Curtis wants to protect his wife and daughter and leaving them cannot function as a model solution in his case. Extending the rudimentary, mainly dysfunctional storm shelter in the backyard and building an oversize one equipped with running water, electricity supply, air ventilation and even a sewage system proves that he is determined to save his family members from the looming natural disaster. Similar to the lack of available models in treating the menacing signs of his mental breakdown, Curtis envisions the strike of a huge tornado hitherto unseen, and the scale of the natural disaster urges new, untested ways of treating the crisis.

The delusions of the protagonist serve as a groundwork to the singularity of the crisis. Curtis experiences a series of visions and nightmares that rock the foundations of his belief in his own psychological status and the reliability of the reality around him. In work, he hears a roaring thunder, but there is no sign of rainclouds around, which he cannot interpret due to the lack of available cognitive models. He also has a hallucination in which he sees birds swarming abnormally in the sky. As he knows that birds do not fly in such a formation, he is assured that he sees something exceptional and impossible, or – in other words – singular. The regularly recurring nightmares also ensure him that the reality around is atypically fragile because he is unable to interpret these events. The bad dreams continue: he is bitten by his own dog and experiences a lingering pain throughout the next day. This dream makes him question the ontological boundary between sleeping and being awake to such an extent that he explicitly mentions this singular pain to the doctor whom he visits for sedatives. He is so insecure in his own interpretation of reality that he locks up his dog behind fences in the backyard. In addition, the nightmares continue: he is covered in oily rain that has the colour and the viscosity of motor oil; he and Hannah suffer a car accident ending with strangers breaking the side window of the wreck and kidnapping his daughter; the family home is lifted from the ground to the degree

that the furniture is floating around in the air. When the house crashes down back to its regular place, Curtis wakes up and finds that he involuntarily urinated into the bed. The singular nature of the overly realistic dreams, which are so lifelike that they have an effect on the reality of the awakened state, leave Curtis without any models that could offer a rational explanation for these experiences: "It's hard to explain because it's not just a dream, it's a feeling. I am afraid, something might be coming, something is not right. I cannot describe it." The indescribability of the event and the vague feeling of a menacing threat are responsible for the singularity of the protagonist's anticipation of crisis.

As the metaphysical doubt of his apprehension culminates, Curtis realizes that the present crisis is different from earlier ones and this compels him to take singular measures. The unparalleled nature of the crisis requires Curtis to find new solutions or models which will assist him in coping with the singularity. Ignoring the advice of his acquaintance at the bank, he applies for a home improvement loan despite already having a mortgage on the house and multiple loans on two cars. The money is invested into a storage container and other equipment needed for enlarging the storm shelter and he resorts to the unauthorized use of heavy machinery owned by his employer, Jim. As a result, Curtis is fired with only two weeks' benefits and Samantha moves to his brother with Hannah, but finally the storm shelter is finished. The tornado shelter is as singular as Curtis's dreams and psychological state: it has all the regular necessities and supplies that a shelter usually has, but – among many other uncommon features – it is equipped with running water, a functioning toilet, gas masks, oxygen tanks and a ventilation system. The shelter, which has reinforced metal doors that can also be locked from the inside, slightly reminds of a fallout shelter built to withstand the harsh environmental conditions and the possible breaching attempts for weeks.

Curtis anticipates a crisis that will end at a certain point in time and takes precautions against a tornado of exceptional magnitude, although the narrative suggests an open ending to this crisis with an immense storm that is shown approaching but never hitting inhabited areas. Curtis believes in the rationality of the preparations that might seem exaggerated for the city dwellers. These precautions are simulated, based on models derived from earlier experiences with regular tornados. When he breaks down at a community meeting and starts a fight with his former boss, his words imply a future tornado that is both simulated and singular at the same time: "Listen up! There is a storm coming! Like nothing you have ever seen and not one of you is prepared for it!" The designation classifies the impending natural phenomenon as a storm, consequently the

audience can relate to the model the word implies: residents of the Tornado Alley are familiar with the referent of the expression. However, Curtis's words also propose a singular crisis, threatening the community that employing the usual protocols are going to fail because of the singularity of the event. Although the city trusts the simulated precautions and the people feel secure, they are fearfully and suspiciously listening to Curtis burst out warning them that the impending crisis is open-ended, as it is not going to end according to the earlier models. He threatens people with an apocalyptic event that rejects the models formulated by earlier tornados, whereby the security of the controllable and thus finished crisis generated by models is opened up into a singular crisis beyond simulation.

The closure of the crisis depends on the diagnosis of the critical period offered (Koselleck 2006, 372), in other words, the available models derived from earlier crises help the formation of the definition and characterization of the nature of the given crises. When the diagnosis is clear, the unresolved crisis situation makes it clear what measures to take and which action proves insufficient because of the emergent singular problems. As the temporality of the crisis is due to interpretation, its finished or progressive nature is also dependent on how the temporal span of the crisis is evaluated. In case the new models churn out new solutions to the singular characteristics, the singular nature of the crisis evanesces and the resulting models of crisis management can be used in further crises that are familiar on their next emergence and can be tackled by simulation. If the crisis persistently keeps its singular nature, because, for example, no temporary solutions are found and thus there are not any evolving models that can be used later, the crisis remains open-ended and transitory until solution is found.

The temporality of the crisis depends on the proportion of its simulated and singular elements. First, the crisis has to be identified as a crisis (Moffitt 2015, 189), in other words, its singularity has to be recognized. Second, validity has to be tested, as the mere sense of crisis has to be differentiated from the objective reality of crisis (Taggart 2004, 274), which is carried out by testing the available models in the handling of the crisis and the realization of its singular features. If the crisis is recognized as a simulation "reaching a crucial point that would tip the scales" (Koselleck 2006, 358), it needs to be "conceptualized as chronic" (2006, 358) or singular that can "also indicate a state of greater or lesser permanence, as in a longer or shorter transition towards something better or worse or towards something different" (2006, 358). Crisis can also "announce a recurring event, as in economics" (2006, 358), where the singularity of the ever returning crises is mixed with the already existing models in a "historically immanent transitional

phase” (2006, 372), but their combination finally results in a permanently singular nature, as it can be seen in the case of interacting economic models used in Marxist theory: crisis is “nothing but the forcible assertion of the inner unity of phases of the productive processes that externally have become autonomous from one another” (Marx 1968, 531). The scarcely available models in the handling of the crisis first highlight the reality of the crisis, whose singularity might deepen to the point where the simulated crisis management options entirely fail: “what started as a financial crisis turned into an economic recession, and in some countries even into a full-fledged depression” (Münchau 2009, 6). Karl Marx in the *Theories of Surplus Value* is critical of the models used in the discourse on crisis, which fails when the actual singular crisis strikes: the “constant recurrence of crises has in fact reduced the rigmarole of Say and others to a phraseology which is now only used in times of prosperity but is cast aside in times of crises” (1968, 500). Consequently, the singular nature of crises opens up the assessment of their temporal characteristics, and makes extrapolation impossible: the most essential feature of crisis is singularity, which is beyond comprehension by already existing models.

In *Take Shelter*, the interaction of singularity and simulation make the precise temporal interpretations of the ongoing crisis ambiguous. The tension of the tornado alert makes it clear that Curtis was right about the approaching crisis. He converted the imaginary crisis to a hyperreality based on already existing models and the survival of the family was secured by the simulation of all the necessary protocols or models that “are immanent, and thus leave no room for any kind of imaginary transcendence. The field opened is that of simulation in the cybernetic sense, that is, of the manipulation of these models at every level (scenarios, the setting up of simulated situations, etc.)” (Baudrillard 1994, 82). Curtis successfully manipulates the available models of constructing a protective shelter, so the family survives the storm and Curtis, seemingly, achieves the status of the hero. If the film ended here, the narrative would resort to the repetition of multiply used models and the successful simulation of the lone hero who carries through his will and saves the day. However, when the alert is over, everything is back to normal in the city, and Curtis achieves the anti-hero status as his sanity is questioned by the lack of reality that underlies his delusions. The narrative makes it clear that what was depicted during the tornado shelter scene was simply simulated, and technically it was generated by filmic and narrative models. Nevertheless, Curtis feels that the visions are not in proportion to the scale of the tornado and disbelievingly draws the conclusion

and, at the same time, calls attention to the fact that a singular crisis has an open temporal characteristic: “What if it’s not over?” The film ends with the family traveling to the beach house. The psychological and natural disaster is about to take place, as the psychiatrist’s words diagnose the psychological crisis that, based on the available psychological model of the disorder of Curtis’s mother, will most probably be an unresolved one: Curtis has to leave his family after the holiday and, as the doctor’s words indicate, start the “therapy at a real facility” with “serious commitment to some treatment.” The singularly devastating, long awaited, unrivalled tornado is about to strike down on the beach and find the family away from the shelter, leaving them unprepared for the apocalypse; they see a set of approaching tornados forming a gigantic storm “as an epochal event,” “marking a breakdown in the ‘normal’ course of accumulation” (Clarke 1990, 448). Eventually, the crisis stays unfinished, as the nearing destruction remains hanging in the air.

In sum, *Take Shelter* portrays how the comfortable strategies of simulation are suspended by the singular elements of an impending natural disaster and how the crisis is non-narratively expanded into a menacing and open-ended one. Despite the protagonist’s financially and existentially heroic efforts, the crisis finds him unprepared for the imminent catastrophe, which reveals how all the formerly known solution models fail. Crisis prompts numerous strategies of simulation, which are based on protocols and models that previously proved to be successful coping mechanisms. Simulation – as the organizing principle of a hyperreal, operational world rebuilt by already existing, either retraceable or untraceable building blocks or models – cannot cope with the newly emerging problems of a given crisis. The models mainly synthesized by earlier crises fail to describe the unknown, unexpected and unique factors of a new crisis, thus the singular characteristic and the resulting instability of the crisis, as well as its liminal nature is revealed. Simulation, the process of creating a hyperreal composing and composed of simulacra, might offer temporary or impartial solutions for some factors, but the complexity of any crisis also contains a variety of singular traits that hyperreal solutions cannot tackle. As the duration of the majority of crises is prone to interpretation in hindsight, not only the measures to be taken but the very temporal nature and the resulting inconclusiveness of the ongoing crisis become factors of singularity.



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## Finance Film on Must-See Lists: A Tale of Positivation

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**Abstract:** The article shows the way must-see film lists hosted by financial publications positivize, after the 2008 crisis, the message of feature and documentary films representing finance. Here positivation refers to the detouring or softening of the critical edge of the message of a film in the interests of the hosting website and the profession of finance in general. Emphasis falls on financial literacy and on a film's artistic prestige and entertainment potential. The author argues that positivation is a semantic strategy indicative of a neoliberal business ontology that informs the interpretation of cultural artifacts. It instrumentalizes signification processes in order to foreground exchange value and present film reception as an investment in human capital.

**Keywords:** must-see film lists, finance films, financial blogs, positivation, film reception.

My article delivers a study of the hermeneutic process of positivation. The process affects the critical intervention of cultural artifacts, detours their original public use value, and emphasizes exchange value (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 128–130). I trace the way positivation alters the public intervention of fiction and documentary finance film, and I reflect on the way this intervention is remembered in the public sphere. The concept of finance film is used here as defined in the collection *Global Finance on Screen* and refers to films representing finance and its political and social impact from a critical perspective, denouncing financial crime and economic and social injustice (Parvulescu 2018b, 2). I approach positivation as an instrument of global capitalist corporate power and as an effect of the hegemony of an exchange principle and business ontology that informs and instrumentalizes signification processes. Positivation turns film into a cultural medium subservient to economic exchanges in a “ubiquitous tendency towards PR-production” and generation of exchange value (Fisher 2009, 21, 48).

More specifically, the following analysis studies the positivization of Anglo-American finance films. These films have presented finance-related economic and social phenomena, as well as the financial industry's villains and heroes, organizations, values, wealth, emotional culture, sustainability, and most importantly, fraudulent practices (Parvulescu 2018c). A consistent body of such films has emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, and their intervention targeted both wrongdoings of certain individuals and the corporations that caused the crisis, as well as broader dysfunctions of the global financial system. These films include Oscar-awarded or nominated features and documentaries such as *Inside Job* (Charles Ferguson, 2010), *Margin Call* (J. C. Chador, 2011), *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Martin Scorsese, 2013), and *The Big Short* (Adam McKay, 2015). However, the positivization of some pre-crisis films, such as *Trading Places* (J. Landis, 1983) and the influential *Wall Street* (Oliver Stone, 1987) will be also considered.

I study the way positivization is practiced in a particular reception format—the must-see film list. This format is highly popular in the digital public sphere because it delivers authoritative answers to superficially informed users in search for quick updates. It also delivers an illusion of structure among the vast quantity of film commentary on the Internet. The digital public sphere hosts several such must-see lists of finance films. The lists juggle a common archive of 20-30 titles and are updated to score high on search engines. The lists bear attention-grabbing titles such as “The 8 Best Finance Movies” (*thebalance.com*) “7 Movies that Tell the Real Story behind the Financial Crisis” (*fortune.com*) or “The Best Movies About Money and Wall Street” (*finance.yahoo.com*).

I analyse in detail a few lists that appear among the highest on google searches and whose film commentaries are the most relevant. One first evidence of positivization and of the business ontology that informs the digital public sphere is provided by the profile of the domains proposing the lists cited above. The highest ranked lists by google searches are hosted by neither cinephile websites nor movie aggregators, neither consumer rights groups nor newspapers and magazines serving the public good. Rather the staple hosts of these lists are high-traffic financial blogs and the PR sections of investment portals. These websites publish posts on finance film with the goal of neither promoting cinema nor persuading audiences to access finance film libraries. Rather, their commentary on film is impacted by the interest to instrumentalize finance film's message. The positivized interpretation of film serves the economic priorities of the website. Depending on its profile, these priorities include monetizing traffic, attracting

advertisers, boosting the domain's prestige and trust among finance amateurs and professionals, selling financial services, and more generally advertising Anglo-American financial culture to broader audiences.

English language lists attract global audiences. The ones studied here are hosted by four types of service providers: an investment platform, Stash (*stashinvest.com*); a provider of financial educational services and consultancy, The Chartered Financial Analyst Institute, short CFA Institute (*cfainstitute.org*);<sup>1</sup> a popular financial literacy blog and trusted simplifier of information, *Investopedia* (*investopedia.com*, i.e. an internet encyclopaedia); and a business and finance blog, *The Balance* (*thebalance.com*). My analysis traces positivization on three main elements of a list. The first element is the selection, which includes heading, ranking, ordering, or grouping of titles. Selection also serves to introduce the categories used in the resignification of the message of the film and in the generation of the exchange value of the titles.

For example, *The Balance's* list includes eight films, and its title promises to reveal the names of finest movies offering the "the best [...] drama [to enjoy] on the big screen." Each movie on the list is a champion at something, either literacy or entertainment. The champion status also serves to organize the list. For literacy superlatives, there are headings such as "Best Focused on One Company" or "Best for Understanding the Housing Bubble." For entertainment superlatives, there are "Best drama," "Best comedy," or "Craziest."

The second element is the prologue of the list, sometimes completed by an epilogue. It provides a rationale for the utility of the list for its readers. For example, the prologue of the list on *The Balance* continues the strategy of emphasizing that the list is designed to offer access to titles that provide viewing experiences that are both entertaining and educational. The prologue assures the reader that the selected films "will keep you on the edge of your seat, make you jealous for a crazier life, or even teach you a thing or two about the wonky and complicated equations that form the backbone of the world of finance."

A third signifying element is the short pitch of each film, further detailing their prestige, entertainment, literacy value, as well one aspect of a finance film's exchange value: its making of the world of finance seem exciting. For *The Balance*, *Wall Street* proves to be the "Best Classic" because it has coined phrases such as "greed is good." The "Best comedy" on the list, *Trading Places*, is presented as "not only hilarious" but also a "surprisingly accurate, albeit dramatic, example of a

1 The Institute's blog is a corporate governance publication that promotes finance and investing. The business of the Institute is to provide broker training and certificates.

commonly misunderstood topic: short selling.” The “craziest” title on the list, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, is both “a fun film” and one “that might leave you craving, if only for a moment, such an otherworldly lifestyle [of a financier]” (Belbridge 2019).

## Highlighting Informational and Educational Value

Selections, prologues and pitches serve to detour the critical message of finance film by foregrounding its literacy value in the detriment of its critical intervention. This way, a film originally critical of Wall Street becomes, on such lists, one that helps its viewer to understand the business’s secrets and prepare him or her for a career of a professional or amateur investor. Positization also takes the form of emphasizing the cultural capital of a film: more exactly its entertainment value (drama, visual pleasure, hilariousness) and its prestige (awards, accolades, stars).

The purpose of this process is transfer. The lists transfer the cultural capital and educational value of the films on the list to the products and services their host websites market or advertise, and to the websites themselves. Values such as prestige and entertainment become attributes of the services advertised or delivered by the domain. Let us look at “The 10 Best Movies about Finance & the Stock Market,”<sup>2</sup> hosted by Stash, an investment portal presenting itself as “investment made easy,” and claiming to be trusted by five million people for its financial convergence services that “unite investing, banking, saving, and learning into one seamless experience.”<sup>3</sup> By reading the prologue of its must-see list, one quickly realizes that, according to this domain, finance films are worth watching neither because they unravel financial crime and shed light on the arrogance, narrow-mindedness, cronyism, recklessness, and callousness with which financiers in the real-existing industry invented bogus financial products and scandalously treated other people’s money, nor because all these aspects of the financial industry triggered economic events with disastrous consequences such as the 2008 crisis and the Great Recession. Instead, the prologue and the individual film pitches present finance film as a source of entertainment and especially as a learning material for future investors. Moreover, even if sometimes wrongdoings are mentioned, the learning value of the selected titles is neither ethical nor jurisprudential, but rather technical. Thus, the films have made the list because they best serve an aspirant investor’s understanding of the practices and the culture of finance. At their critical best, the films help the aspiring investor to

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2 See: <https://learn.stash.com/best-movies-wall-street-stock-market>. Last accessed 30. 03. 2022.

3 See <https://www.stashinvest.com/about>. Last accessed 30. 03. 2022.



learn what mistakes not to make.

No surprise then that the list of the portal is published in the “Stash Learn” section, allegedly designed to initiate aspiring investors into the trade.<sup>4</sup> Heading this list is *The Big Short*. It is followed by *Wall Street* and *The Wolf of Wall Street*. *The Big Short* is a satire of the finance industry ridiculing its mythology of smartness and efficiency. However, on the list provided by Stash, the message of *The Big Short* is positivized as one teaching aspiring investors *how to make money*. *The Big Short* is worth watching, its pitch argues, not for the critical reasons mentioned above, but because it presents the practices of brokers who “saw an opportunity to profit by betting against the real estate market” (Ten Best Movies 2019).

This presentation is not untrue, but it does not focus on the most relevant aspects of the film. A comparison of these presentations with reviews of the film in publications closer to serving the public interest highlights the detouring work of the former. According to reviews, *The Big Short* is first and foremost a satire. Reviews foreground the film’s sharp sarcasm and the outrage it triggered among viewers. The influential blog *Slate* argues that the most relevant contribution to the understanding of finance delivered by *The Big Short* is that of showing “the murky process by which a housing-market bubble somehow turned into a global financial catastrophe” (Stevens 2015). In the same vein, *The New York Times* introduces the film as a “crime story” that “will affirm your deepest cynicism about Wall Street” (Scott 2015). *The San Francisco Chronicle* emphasizes that it delivers the sharpest possible blow to Wall Street’s “arrogance and crookedness,” and that it reveals investment banking’s biggest secret: its “colossal and contemptible stupidity” (La Salle, 2015).<sup>5</sup>

Positivization by emphasizing the educational value of film can also be found on the lists of other high-audience blogs, such as the blog of the CFA Institute, bearing the title *Enterprising Investor*. The educational aspect is even more strongly highlighted here due to the services offered by the host website. Thus, according to the blog’s must-see list, titled “Top 20 Films about Finance: From Crisis to Con Men,” finance film teaches the person interested in investing anything from forex trading, community banking, and option pricing to the use

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4 The section’s intro insists it contributes to the portal’s emancipatory mission to “create financial opportunity for all Americans, no matter their income.” More on this spurious emancipatory mission in conjunction with finance film see Parvulescu 2018a, 115.

5 I quote the most positive reviews (100% on metacritic.com) and use information taken from the opening paragraph of the text because it emphasizes what the reviewer believes to be the most important aesthetic and cultural contribution of the film.

of alternative monetary systems. For example, *Trading Places* offers information on commodity futures transactions; the romantic dramedy *Working Girl* (M. Nichols, 1988) initiates viewers into mergers and acquisitions, the television movie *Barbarians at the Gate* (G. Jordan, 1993) into leveraged buyout, and the post-crisis documentary *The Warning* (M. Kirk, 2009) into securities regulation.

The list has not been updated since 2013; however, it still appears high among google search results, which is due to the respectability and longevity of the blog. The mission of *Enterprising Investor* and of its must-see list is to protect the image of bankers and of the banking industry. The Institute sells training for brokers and organizes brokers' licenses exams. Thus, the blog practices positivization more explicitly as it needs to defend the worth of the profession. Finance films, especially fiction films such as *Wall Street*, are approached as persuasive public interventions, but also as misleading testimonies about the financial profession. The prologue of the blog's list argues that if fiction films were a guide to the financial world, it would be obvious that "financial professionals, particularly those working on Wall Street, have a serious public relations problem." This observation is even more sobering, the author of the list continues, because this negative image, which he considers unfair, dates back from before the 2008 crisis (Hayat 2013a).

The author of the list supports his claims by arguing that he was able to identify only one quality finance film that depicts the profession in a positive light. It is *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946). Thus, alongside praising finance film for initiating viewers into financial operations, the post also argues that finance film does not teach viewers much about the people in the profession and the financial system in general. An example is the *Wolf of Wall Street*, which should not be included on the list. The author articulates his decision in a comment to readers' comments on August 18, 2014. He explains that, for many of the public relations reasons mentioned above, *The Wolf of Wall Street* is not a movie about finance, but rather one about excess (Hayat 2013a).

*Enterprising Investor's* list also sheds new light on positivization by presenting itself as a discussion starter. Unlike the other lists mentioned here, it allows users to comment, and the author explicitly emphasizes that he is interested in what his readers have to say about "finance's public relations problem." As expected, the comments, perhaps trimmed by the editors, further positivize the message of finance film or defend the image of the banking industry against the exaggerations and sensationalism sought by filmmakers. Comments also include viewing recommendations and span over four years from the initial publication of the list, updating it.

In reaction to the high number of comments and to survey and mobilize the readership of the list, the blog organized a poll. Published ten days after the list, the results of the poll further gesture toward positivization. The poll asked readers to name their “favourite finance-themed film” (Hayat 2013b). The inquiry proved to be popular. The author claims to have received 1200 answers. The post publishing the results includes a prologue, a graph ranking the most liked films and indicating vote percentages, and a brief commentary on the results, which further elaborates on finance’s public relations problem and on the perspective of the readers of the blog.

At first glance, the poll reveals that financiers expressed an overwhelming preference for films made before the crisis and whose presentation of finance is either cosier or redemptive. A good finance film is, for finance professionals, one that mediates a less uncomfortable encounter of the viewer with the world of banking. Only two among the voted films are post-crisis films and their combined score is only 12%. In contrast, the three most-valued films, securing more than 70% of the votes, do not address the embarrassing moment of 2008, and only one of them is overtly critical of finance. It is *Wall Street*, whose message, as we shall see, has already been intensely positivized since its release. In addition, the fact that none of the more critical films of the pre-2008 era such *Rogue Trader* and *Boiler Room* have two-digit scores delivers a partial reply to one of the concerns expressed at the end of the post regarding “What we as financial professionals can do to improve [our] perception?” When it comes to the influence of film, the implicit answer provided by readers seems to be that the best strategy is recommending films that contribute to the rationalization and forgetting of the 2008 crisis.

Figure 1 shows that “The favorite film of finance professionals” is *Trading Places* (29.5%). It is a comedy, whose depiction of finance would qualify as cosy in comparison to *Margin Call’s* – a post-crisis film with only 8.3% popularity. The second ranked is *Wall Street* (28.2). Even more indicative of the principle of cosy that guides the agenda of professionals is the presence, on third place, of *It’s a Wonderful Life* (14%). Staging a good banker-bad banker conflict, this film is nowadays rerun as a family feel-good Christmas movie – the holiday context reinforcing its harmless impact on the image of bankers.

Completing the picture of positivization by means of highlighting educational value is the contribution of the highly visited finance and business blog *Investopedia*. The blog hosts both a feature and a documentary film list. Positivization is practiced here slightly differently because *Investopedia* does not sell financial services like Stash or the CFA Institute. Positivization serves to sell to advertisers the blog’s traffic, the blog itself as a one-stop educational

tool, and the attention and interest in finance of its users. Compared to the list on Stash, on *Investopedia*'s list Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* stands first, *The Wolf of Wall Street* fourth, and *The Big Short* tenth. In comparison to a list that serves to draw attention to a dynamic tool, connected to the latest movements of the global markets – I refer to the list on Stash – the list on *Investopedia*, with the domain's claim to become an encyclopaedia, can afford to place on top of its list an older film, with the status of uncontested classic.

The positivization of *Wall Street*'s message follows this line of argument. Its status as a classic, the fact that it has stood the test of time, creates the context for a straightforward altering of its legacy. The presentation of the film on the list claims that, while indeed *Wall Street* was originally crafted to “show the excess and hedonism associated with finance,” its actual and most important impact has in fact been to persuade thousands of college graduates to choose a career in finance. The pitch further smoothens the contradictions surrounding the reception of Stone's film (and of finance film in general) by arguing that while, indeed, the film warns of “the dangers of insider trading,” it also makes the world of finance appealing. “Let's face it,” the pitch continues, “who wouldn't want to be Bud Fox or even Gordon Gekko (legitimately, of course) and indulge a bit in our greedy side; after all, as Gekko would say, ‘Greed is good’” (Tun 2020).

The blog also offers a list of “20 Must-Read Books for Financial Professionals.” A brief look at it further indicates the way positivization operates on film lists as a mode of controlling the ambiguities inherent to an artistic or entertainment product. In contrast to the film list, the selection of books includes only “serious” non-fiction how-to or textbook material, except for *Liar's Poker*, which will be discussed in the Conclusion. This type of literature doesn't need to be positivized because its medium, the book, that stands on the desk of a future investor is by default approached as educational. Additionally, how-to books or textbooks are only secondarily critical and further serve to promote the financial industry.

In terms of educational value, in between books and feature films stand the documentaries. *Investopedia* offers a must-see list of them, “10 Must Watch Documentaries for Finance Professionals” [Fig. 2]. I will not reproduce the titles it includes. It is enough to notice that the practice of recommending documentaries is closer to that of recommending fiction films. However, since documentaries are not as popular and as entertaining as features, the prologue of the list even stronger emphasizes their educational value and puts this value above that generated by features. In this sense, it argues that documentaries are significantly more truthful and less sensationalistic than their fictional counterparts. The

latter tend to fail to “provide an accurate depiction of what it’s really like to be a professional in the world of finance” (Traver and Howard, 2021).

Obviously, these derogatory remarks at the representation of finance in fiction film are not included in the list dedicated to them. But it is important to highlight these remarks because they gesture again toward the contradictions that the PR-actions of film lists are designed to sublimate. I have previously mentioned this effort in the presentation of *Wall Street* on the same blog. In the case of pitching documentaries, the makers of the list must criticize and downplay the educational value of the blog’s own must-see fiction movie list.<sup>6</sup> The prologue of the list of documentaries argues that, while fictional representations can teach the reader about Wall Street drama (i.e., make it look exciting, but not much more) the educational and exchange value of watching documentaries can rise to the level of attending an expensive seminar on investing.

While producers of documentaries would feel flattered by the words above, they might feel less at ease with the way individual films are pitched. Even if the positivizing process is similar to the presentation of fiction film—that is, educational value is foregrounded in the detriment of critical intervention—it is worth taking a brief look at the presentation of a title because it reveals the way meaning can be manipulated even in the case of the less polysemic genre of documentary. While public media reviews present *Inside Job* as a “true-life heist movie,” showing how “thieves not only got away with their billions [but are] still doing business” (Corliss 2010), *Investopedia* softens the language and suggests that the film is worth watching for other reasons. The business and money-making ontology of publications like *Investopedia* detours *Inside Job*’s account of the crisis to teaching aspiring financiers and those who want to invest their savings into the stock market “to learn from past mistakes, to foresee when something like this can happen again and prevent it from happening” (Ten Best Movies 2019).

## Highlighting Cultural Capital

The phenomenon of appropriating the message of cultural artifacts for PR purposes indicated by Fisher is even more perceptible when positivization actions emphasize cultural capital in the detriment of critical intervention. Cultural capital refers here to prestige – awards, especially Oscars – to the participation of star actors and

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6 Similar derogatory comments at fiction films can be found on LinkedIn’s list of documentaries. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/10-must-watch-movies-finance-professionals-thanh-nguyen>. Last accessed 30. 03. 2022.

directors in a film, and to a film's entertainment value. By hosting lists and making buzz about finance film, the prestige of a cited and commented title is turned into an endorsement for the hosting domain, for its products and, more generally, for the industry. The entertainment value of the film indirectly stands for the value of the services provided by the host and for the excitement their usage could provide, for example, the excitement of investing into the stock market.

That cultural capital is important is proven by the fact that browsing for must-see films on the Internet reveals that feature films are given more attention than documentaries (though all sites agree that one can learn more from the latter). Further evidence is given by the fact that even if a must-see list mixes feature films and documentaries (the case of CFA Institute's list) the generic term to designate selected titles remains "movies." Another proof is that the highest ranked films are American, overwhelmingly high budget, awarded, and star driven. Association with high budget titles grants big player status to the host website and to its services. It also makes a broader statement about finance as being an elite industry that circulates high volumes of value. Independent cinema, which was quicker to respond to the crisis than Hollywood, is hardly referred to on the studied lists; again *Enterprising Investor*, the less commercial blog, being the only one whose list includes such titles.

To better understand how positivization further contributes to the commercial instrumentalization of the message of a finance film and exploits its memory, one should contrast the endorsement provided by titles and by movie buzz on a list (prologue, pitches, comments) with the more common celebrity endorsements used in ads. Thus, when a list highlights the awards received by films or their entertainment and even educational value, the association is not as conspicuous as when using a film star to advertise one's product in a commercial. However, the goal of both procedures is remarkably comparable. References to film and stars on lists are employed to suggest that investing is legitimate, easy to master, and gripping. Lists also draw the attention of the user's eyeballs to the right-hand corner of the page. Displayed there is the link to a financial product, an investment app, the email of a broker, or the poster of an expensive seminar that will help the user become more knowledgeable about finance and implicitly richer.

Stash's list samples the names of many movie stars from various generations in order to associate its services with prestige. Included are pre-crisis actors Danny de Vito (*Other People's Money*, Norman Jewison, 1991) and Michael Douglas (*Wall Street*), as well post-crisis ones, Leonardo DiCaprio (*The Wolf of Wall Street*) and the ensemble of the *The Big Short* headed by Ryan Gosling and Christian Bale.

With the same purpose of selling its app as valuable and fun to use, the platform emphasizes that the selected movies have won or have been nominated for Academy Awards and that they are entertaining (Ten Best Movies 2019). Figure 3 shows the way Stash's movie talk serves as a link between users and the "Get the app" tab in the upper right-hand corner. The prologue of this list includes specific keywords and phrases such as "drama" and "to get excited about," referencing and transferring entertainment value; and "cream of the crop," "Academy Award winners" and actors names to refer to and transfer prestige.

In order to better understand the use of positivization, one should notice that Stash's procedure of instrumentalizing its positivized presentations of film is not so different from that employed by an investment portal such as Etoro, which uses commercials to promote its services. Etoro does not host lists and movie talk to associate its app with prestige and riveting consumption experiences but uses the memory of finance film in its ads. Its most disseminated ad of 2019–2020 features Alec Baldwin, the star of another famous finance film, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (James Foley, 1992).<sup>7</sup> In December 2020, *Glengarry Glenn Ross* was ranked 7 on *Investopedia's* list, being pitched as an "infinitely quotable" learning tool and as a great lesson in "underhanded sales tactics" and life under corporate stress (Tun 2020).<sup>8</sup> Baldwin, who in the film plays the role of a cutthroat sales guru, overtly endorses the Etoro's app in the commercial. His prestige is used similarly as the prestige of Danny DeVito or of the Oscar-awarded *The Big Short* on Stash's list.

Ranking on almost all lists is sensitive to Oscar and Golden Globe nominations and awards. All the top three films mentioned on Stash are Oscar nominated or awarded films (*The Wolf of Wall Street*, *Wall Street* and *The Big Short*). This aspect is highlighted in the prologue of the list. *Investopedia's* selection is headed by *Wall Street* and includes several other Oscar and Golden Globes laureates or nominees. To get a better sense of this transfer of prestige, let us look at the entire list of *The Balance*, titled "The 8 Best Finance Movies."<sup>9</sup> It includes only films that transfer award prestige. From bottom to top, they are *The Wolf of Wall Street* with 5 Oscar nominations, an Oscar-awarded lead actor (Leonardo DiCaprio) and an Oscar-awarded director (Martin Scorsese); *Barbarians at the Gates* (Glenn

7 On Baldwin's endorsement see Etoro's 2019 commercial: <https://youtu.be/4FQGWofJfOg>. Last accessed 30. 06. 2022.

8 Moreover, the pitch highlights Alec Baldwin's lecture about succeeding in the realm of cutthroat competition. Baldwin plays a sleazy Manhattan executive, whose "motivational speech," according to *investopedia.com*, "steals the whole movie, and brings to light the absolute best and worst faces of working under enormous pressure."

9 The website also includes another list titled "The Greatest Movies for Stock Market Investors" <https://www.thebalance.com/best-movies-for-investors-3140805>. Last accessed 30. 03. 2022.



Jordan, 1993) a television film with Golden Globes for best film/ television mini-series and Emmy awards; *Inside Job* with an Oscar for best documentary; *Margin Call* with one Oscar nomination for best screenplay and a cast of Oscar-awarded actors such as Kevin Spacey and Jeremy Irons; *The Big Short* with an Oscar award and four nominations; *Trading Places*, a comedy, thus less Oscar nominations, only one, but with two Golden Globes nominations for best film and lead actor (Eddie Murphy); *American Psycho* (Mary Harron, 2000) with no Oscars but having Oscar-awarded Christian Bale in the male lead. Opening the list is *Wall Street*, already discussed above, Michael Douglas earning both an Oscar and a Golden Globe for his performance in the film, which also happens to be directed by an Oscar-awarded director, Oliver Stone.

## Conclusion

Positivization is not a post-2008 phenomenon. Rather, it is probably more indicative of the increasing hegemony of a business ontology that informs cultural consumption. It also gestures toward the proclivity of neoliberalism to turn immaterial value into exchange value and as such to approach consumption of cultural artifacts as an investment in human capital (Brown 2015, 22; Jameson 1992, 263). Watching finance film increases one's financial literacy and turns one into a better investor. As a cultural phenomenon, positivization is not limited to the reception of film, even though the Gordon Gekko phenomenon, i.e. a fictional character treated as a real-life person by the business media, is the most striking. In fact, positivization could be also called the "*Liar's Poker* phenomenon."

Written in 1989 by Michael Lewis, *Liar's Poker* is a highly critical insider's depiction of Wall Street. The book sold millions of copies. However, over the years its reception turned it into a testimony about how to succeed in the world of finance. Lewis acknowledges the process of positivization to which the message of his *Liar's Poker* has been exposed in the "Prologue" to one of his next books, *The Big Short* (2011), which was adapted for the screen in the eponymous film discussed above. Lewis argues that he hoped his account of the world of finance would dissuade bright students from the temptation to work for Wall Street firms. However, the author confesses, six months after the publication of *Liar's Poker*, he was "knee-deep in letters" from such bright students who wanted to know if Lewis "had any other secrets to share about Wall Street" (2011, 3).

That *Liar's Poker* became a must-read for finance professionals and is included that it is included in *Investopedia's* book list confirms its further positivization.

Its inclusion, as well as that of films such as *Wall Street* or *The Wolf of Wall Street*, shows that the main cultural and economic function of positivization is to prepare the instrumentalization of the message of cultural artifacts. Thus, positivization should be regarded as an intermediary step, generating exchange value, and turning the memory and message of a film into an unobtrusive and functional medium, suitable to be used in PR and advertising actions.

In this article, I have briefly indicated that the positivized presentation of a film on a list mediates between the attention of the viewer and the financial services advertised on the website hosting the list – a typical case of instrumentalization. However, the object of a subsequent study should be the tracing of the way in which this mediation is completed in various other instances. Such a study would analyse in detail, for example, the way references to film are employed to create the illusion of financial expertise among the users of a blog or a platform. This would be an important study as most of the users of online platforms are social investors (and not professionals) and the odds of earning money via a financial app like Etoro's or Stash's are less favourable than those of a slot machine in a casino (Liu et al 2014).

Another important research path that can evolve from the study of positivization is one that highlights that positivization and instrumentalization are practiced not only on must-see lists on finance blogs. Other formats hosted by various types of publications can perform the same or related operations on the memory of finance film and are also worth studying in order to better understand the business ontology of cultural production. Such a study would show that trimmings and detouring of meaning can go in different directions. Film-buff blogs or film-fan compilations can also generate insightful appropriations of meaning. Also, worth investigating are other audiovisual formats, such as viewers' comments, broader fan activity, as well as the way in which producers and distributors of finance film have decided to present their films to audiences.

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**Figure 1.** *Enterprising Investor’s* poll indicates the film preferences of its readers. <https://blogs.cfainstitute.org/investor/2013/09/30/poll-what-is-your-favorite-finance-themed-movie/>. Last accessed 30. 30. 2022.

### Which one of the following is your favorite finance-themed movie?

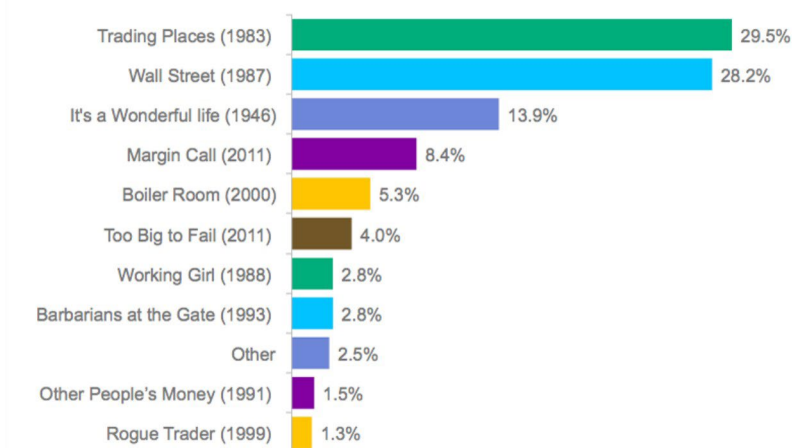


Figure 2. Investopedia’s documentary film list.

https://www.investopedia.com/articles/professionals/100215/10-must-watch-documentaries-finance-professionals.asp. Last accessed 30. 03. 2022.

The screenshot shows the Investopedia website with the article title "10 Must Watch Documentaries for Finance Professionals". The page includes a navigation menu with categories like EDUCATION, MARKETS, SIMULATOR, YOUR MONEY, ADVISORS, and ACADEMY. A sidebar on the left lists various resources for advisors. The main content area features a "TABLE OF CONTENTS" with a list of 10 documentaries, including "Inside Job" (2010), "Trader" (1987), "25 Million Pounds" (1996), "Breaking the Bank" (2009), "The Ascent of Money" (2008), "Commanding Heights" (2002), "Life and Debt", and "Other Frontline Documentaries". Below the list, there is an introductory paragraph about the common themes of these documentaries and a paragraph discussing their entertainment value versus accuracy.

Figure 3. Selling the app on Stash. https://learn.stash.com/best-movies-wall-street-stock-market. Last accessed 30. 03. 2022.

The screenshot shows the StashLearn website with the article title "The best movies about finance and the stock market". The page has a navigation bar with "Teach Me", "Money News", "Learning Center", and "Stash". The article text discusses the drama of the stock market and lists ten recommended movies. The visible text includes: "The stock market has always had its fair share of drama. Whether it's wild stretches of volatility that have gripped the markets over the past year, or new and exciting companies preparing to go public, there's almost always something to get excited about. No wonder Hollywood likes to tap Wall Street for inspiration. There are dozens and dozens of films about finance and Wall Street—some of them have been Academy Award winners ("The Big Short", for example), and others total bombs (such as "Supercapitalist"). But if you want to take the time to watch the best, here's a list of ten that many people consider to be the cream of the crop." The article title is "The best movies about finance and the stock market" and the section heading is "10. 'Other People's Money'". The text continues: "'Other People's Money' is the story of 'Larry the Liquidator' (Danny DeVito), a corporate raider who

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