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The Essay as Mode of Expression and the Essayistic Practices in Radu Jude's Cinema

Abstract: Like most European national cinemas, the Romanian film industry has developed a strong tendency towards authorship, with many contemporary filmmakers using various forms of expression that represent their personal views about the world, society and humanity. While Romanian cinema did not fully develop its own version of the essay genre, most often using more traditional modes of expression to highlight the subjectivity of the moviemaker in the cinematic discourse, a moviemaker like Radu Jude provides illustrative exceptions, showing how various modes of expression provided by essay films can be used. This contribution explores the modalities practiced by Jude in his recent productions, mainly in the highly awarded film *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn / Babardeală cu bucluc sau porno balamuc*, but also in several other works where this filmmaker uses cinema as an implicit essayistic instrument, from the early attempts in *Aferim!* to more experimental productions as *Uppercase Print / Tipografic Majuscul*, or a politically charged film like *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians / Îmi este indiferent dacă în istorie vom intra ca barbari*. This paper does not propose a re-evaluation of the theories about the essay film, instead is a reflection on the existing theoretical premises proposed among others by David Montero (2012), who argues that the essay films is a form of thinking and links this type of film with the traits of European cinema (strong authorial presence, open-ended narratives and the explicit social and artistic drive of these movies). While following Timothy Corrigan's (2011) explanations about the essay films, understood as self-reflective and subjective narration forms, these basic forms of expression that make up the "essay genre" must be further explored in the specific modes in which other arts are transformed into cinematic manifestations. The essayistic practices developed by Jude and predominant in his discourse can be related to Nora M. Alter's definition of the essay film as a form of critique (2018). This analysis overviews the particular practices in which contemporary cinematic expressions are moving away from the classical meanings of the essay genre, and explores the hypothesis following Adorno's powerful insights, that the essay has a transgressive power, and operates in a non-conformative way. Last but not least, as

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EKPHRASIS, 2/2021

THE ESSAY FILM
AS SELF-REPRESENTATIONAL MODE
pp. 174–192

DOI: 10.24193/ekphrasis.26.12

Published First Online: December 15, 2021

Laura Rascaroli suggested in her book on how the essay film thinks (2017), when trying to understand the qualities of the essay film and the role of the moviemaker, it is the interstice, the in-between, that generates diverse essayistic modes of expression. Showcased by the films made by Radu Jude, the purpose of this article is to attempt a classification of the essay modes of expression in which the social and political refusal of in-difference can make a difference in the production of cinematic meanings.

Keywords: Romanian cinema, essay film, essayistic practices, visual essay, essay genre, Radu Jude.

My analysis of the essay practices starts with the premise that we can identify three major forms of manifestation of the essayistic practice: the image-essay (the cinematographic-visual essay), the text-essay (or the commentary) and the cinematic-essay (including the essayistic editing practices and other cinematographic experiments). Such characteristics, which focus more on the modes of addressing the viewers than on the modes of authorial expression (i.e., the content of the films rather than their cinematic dimension) could give the erroneous impression that there is a stable understanding of the essay as a film genre. Nevertheless, identifying the manifestations of the essay in cinema remains a relatively unstable effort, mostly because the explanations cover a wide variety of phenomena that may be qualified as essays, while others are only essayistic. I consider that any author combining the experiments with cinematic implements (editing, framing, music) and using atypical narrative practices (irony, textual interventions such as printed text inserted into the film) can be identified as an essayist.

Raymond Bellour, describing the essay films in the broadest possible sense by using an all-encompassing definition, considers essay films as a specific way of thinking (2011). Besides its innovative dimensions, the essay film functions as a method of thinking. It allows the gaining of knowledge through cinematic instruments (Tode 29), and thus several reflexive practices can be placed in the essay film category. By extension, any cinematic experiment in which the filmmaker expresses any form of subjectivity can then be characterized as essayistic. Obviously the connection between the essay film and all cinematic thinking practices is based on a too large criterion of selection, one that is pushing our understanding about this type of movie making towards an unstable dimension. Laura Rascaroli, in her book dedicated to identifying how the essay film thinks (2017), reached the conclusion that the essay film could even become a future philosophy of cinema. This hypothesis, illustrated with the works of authors like Resnais, Marker, Varda and other Rive Gauche filmmakers who were exploring unconventional modes of expression in cinema, opens the essay film category to a wide variety of productions. From Dziga Vertov to the Third Cinema proposed by Solanas, from Passolini to the Iranian poet-filmmaker Farrokhzad, any *philosophical, metaphysical* and, more importantly, *speculative* contribution in cinema becomes part of the essay film genre.

We can describe another major definition of the essay as *hybrid* form of expression. Many theorists are following Bellour, who argued that the essay film was fundamentally a

contaminated form, its variations and constant mixtures with other media and expressions making film essay a hybridized art practice that cannot be rigorously described. With the arrival of post-media cinema (Kim 2016), the essay film became a crossbreed, since it allows the integration of media that modern cinema was not able to use previously (for example in installations, mixed-media and so on).

The evolution of a Romanian Cinematic Essayist —from *Auteur* to *Critic*

The following interpretation is based on the evolution of Radu Jude, the Romanian filmmaker awarded the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 2021. By overviewing several of his works one can illustrate how an essayistic mode of expression can be developed. This study includes the awarded film *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn / Babardeală cu bucluc sau porno balamuc* (2021); an adaptation of a stage play, *Uppercase Print / Tipografic Majuscul* (2020); a re-enactment film, called *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians / Îmi este indiferent dacă în istorie vom intra ca barbari* (2018); and a literary adaptation, *Scarred Hearts / Inimi cicatrizate* (2016). The diversity of these fiction films is complemented by a documentary titled *Țara moartă / The Dead Nation* (2017), all disclosing some of the most important essayistic modes and practices in cinema today.

Radu Jude is representative in this debate due to the fact that his directing style evolved from the conventional mainstream to the essayistic. He made an unremarkable debut in 2002 as a TV series director for *In the Family / În Familie*, a daily soap opera produced by Prima TV (one of the Romanian mainstream stations). After this his style changed, as he started following the model of the New Wave (cf. Pop 2014). After working as second unit director for the already veteran auteur Cristi Puiu (contributing to the masterpiece *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu / Moartea domnului Lăzărescu*, 2005), Jude made his first short film (*The Tube with a Hat / Lampa cu căciulă*, 2006) which was produced by HI Film Productions, managed by one of the power couples in the new Romanian cinema, Alexandru and Ada Solomon. After winning more than a dozen awards, including the Sundance Film Festival prize for short films, Jude made two feature films, *The Happiest Girl in the World / Cea mai fericită fată din lume* (2009) and *Everybody in Our Family / Toată lumea din familia noastră* (2012) in which he developed realistic storyworlds, narrated in a compressed time and space frame, mostly following the narrative and cinematic rules of the New Wave. Jude was appreciated as a second generation filmmaker, specialized in in-depth examinations of everyday life, providing nuanced explorations of the relationship between fathers and his sons (his 2006 short film, an adaptation of a novel written by Florin Lăzărescu), distraught daughters and their families (*The Happiest Girl in the World / Cea mai fericită fată din*



Figure 1. In *Scarred Hearts* (2016) Jude uses the reenactment of a classic painting as a tableau vivant intended to provide meanings through the visual essay technique. Screenshot

lume, 2009) or a father and his daughter raised by another man (*Everybody in Our Family / Toată lumea din familia noastră*, 2012). Such concise depiction of troubled family life established Jude as a subtle investigator of the psychological tensions in contemporary Romanian reality. However, starting with *Aferim!* (2016) Jude abandoned this approach and headed towards a more politically charged and essayistic cinema. His following feature films continued to explore and experiment, and after *Scarred Hearts* (2016) his style radically shifted both in the techniques used and in the innovative and personalized practices, fully manifested in *Bad Luck Banging...*

Like most European cinemas, Romanian films are characterized by a high level of authorship. Many contemporary filmmakers (from Cristi Puiu to Cristian Mungiu) use various forms of expression representing their personal views about the world. Even though the Romanian film industry remains underdeveloped, these filmmakers created their own version of the New Wave cinema, introducing the subjective presence of the film director in the cinematic discourse, although preferring a more traditional form of expression. Yet this does not function as an implicit pathway to the essayistic film practices. The case of Radu Jude shows that auteurism is not enough to tap into the resources of the essay genre in cinema. Actually, when overviewing the transformation of his cinematic implements and the purposeful re-evaluation of the filmmaking practices, one can observe the differences between the essay genre and arthouse cinema.

In order to understand this distinction, we must discuss an important theoretical premise advanced by David Montero (2012), who argues that the essay film is predominantly a European form of cinema. This theory, which assigns to European cinema three major characteristics—a strong authorial presence, an open-ended narrative and an explicit social

and artistic drive (Montero 18)—links the auteuristic practices to essayism. Analyzing several productions which are considered to be illustrative of European auteurs such as Chris Marker or Harun Farocki, Montero concludes that the essayistic discourses are integral part of continental filmmaking.

Once again, as noted before, we are confronted with another layer of fuzziness. Bringing together the notion of authorial subjectivity and the essay, coupled with the general definition of what makes a European film, the result is an even wider predication for what makes an essay film. The ways in which a film director articulates his or her subjective intentions and the particular explorations of the limits of the cinematic medium are not automatic certificates for the entire essay genre. This is basically a labelling problem, with the film essay as a genre being described as such in the terminology used by the European cinema institutions, such as the French National Center for Cinema or the Italian General Directory for Cinema, as opposed to mainstream American cinema. Any form of quality films, identified either by their experimental dimension or by their cultural and artistic functions, are included in the so-called category of “*cinéma d’art et d’essai*” (art and essay cinema). As a matter of fact, typology is more heterogeneous and sometimes the films belong to different categories, as illustrated by Jude’s career which includes art films that are not essayistic and essay films which are not auteurist. For an in-depth understanding of the essayistic mode and the practices of the essay film, as they are explicit in Jude’s most recent films, we must go beyond the overlapping between the European cinema, art cinema and the essay film.

Basic Forms of Essay: Quotations and other Textual Devices

Scarred Hearts (2016) marked Radu Jude’s reorienting towards an impure style of filmmaking, which ultimately directed his entire career from the essayistic forms of cinema towards the purest essay film. In the earlier form, Jude adapted several source texts from Max Blecher, himself a writer who integrated the artificial and the theatrical in the workings of his prose. The starting point for Jude’s cinematic fiction are two written works. *Scarred Hearts*, which was published in Yiddish in 1938, and *The Enlightened Lair* published posthumously and revolved around the trauma of a sickly Jewish writer living in an anti-Semitic Romania. Blecher, who suffered from a rare form of tuberculosis, wrote these autobiographical books using a poetic, surrealist and experimental style. Jude’s purposeful choice of this particular writer is already a commentary on history and society, since Max Blecher’s life and work provide the necessary context.

More important for our understanding of the essayistic practices, the union of the cinematic and the literary generates a hybridity which functions as essayism, by simply

crossing the boundaries between two different media. This type of cinematic hybridity is amplified in his following productions. Naturally cinema is an *impure* art form, since its inner mechanics includes elements from theater, codes from literary storytelling and the pictorial, with the photographic apparatus representing its principal technology. *Scarred Hearts* shows how Jude embraced hybridity, dealing with the cinematic artificiality and gradually abandoning realistic style, renouncing neorealism and authenticity for a borderline form of expression. Here the Romanian filmmaker transforms hybridity into a commentary on the nature of cinema, by exploring the multiple dimensions in which the cinematic art is inherently impure, however without a clear cinematographic experimental goal.

The film is constructed at the crossroads of painting, literary quotation and theatrical intervention. An illustrative scene is the *tableau vivant* reconstructing the famous painting *Anatomy lesson of doctor Nicolaes Tulp* by Rembrandt, where the filmmaker subjects Emanuel, the author's alter ego, to an investigation that functions as a pictorial reference. This type of abrupt intervention into the cinematic structure is more radical when Jude uses black intertitles that break the coherence of the narrative film. Here he inserts long quotes from the literary texts of the adapted prose writer (*Incidents from immediate irreality* or the *Enlightened lair*). These textual duplicates of the visual narration, and the intermittent interruptions of the unfolding cinematic experience they cause, become essayistic resources

While the relationship between image and text remains an important issue in visual studies, we must return to Roland Barthes (1977) and his important study about the image-music-text relationship. The French semiologist observed, among other things, that the filmic is a continuous experience, linked with "obtuse" meanings. Once interrupted, the fragmentation of the filmic continuum generates significations which are produced and can be understood only in this intersection between various media. In Jude's filmic discourse, the visual-textual experiments, the "text cards" intercalations reminiscent of vintage silent films, and the overall uncertainty between the verbal and the visual created by the theatrical settings, produce an experience distinct from the typical cinematic encounter. At the juncture in which the painterly, the theatrical and the textual meet with the filmic the most vulnerable relationships between the art forms can create an essayistic space. Once the intermedia barrier is crossed, it makes way to a hybrid condition in which the filmmaker as essayist can instantiate himself. While not many Romanian filmmakers exploited this possibility, Jude explores the hybrid dimension of cinema by constantly marking the visual narration so that the viewer can have access to his intended meanings. Other resources are used, such as radio announcements, clippings from newspapers and ads of that time, by which Blecher's textual material is "interpreted" by the filmmaker, acting like a literary essayist.

The hybrid universe that Jude manages to build in this “free adaptation” from several literary texts is not only a reconstruction of a narrative world turned into a cinematic version, a “personal interpretation” of a filmmaker who also wrote the screenplay. The real purpose of this hybridity becomes clear when the “adaptation” is not only a transposition, but becomes a political commentary on history. Blecher’s sanatorium journal as a source text is not set in a Romanian context, the sanatorium where Emanuel was treated was located in France. Thus the “historical” rewriting of the novel into the film is an exclusive interpretation of the filmmaker. By changing the location, he is able to make multiple commentaries on Romanian national history, which was deliberately obscured by official historians. Here the historical interpretation cannot be missed, because the references are direct and explicit. A relevant character in the film is Emanuel’s father, who subtly mentions the participation of many Romanian citizens of Jewish origin in WWI. The tuberculosis salon also allows discussions about controversial figures like Nae Ionescu and Emil Cioran, debates about the development of the Fascist movement, and considerations about the evolution of Nazism in Europe. The filmic storytelling has a persuasive intentionality which leads to a political commentary, as the “adaptation” of the literary source makes possible the rewriting of contemporary history.

Scarred Hearts is a multimedial film, a mixture of different artistic expressions, from the literary to the theatrical and the painterly, or the cinematic reproduction of authentic photographs, the end of the movie highlights yet another layer when a final pseudo-documentary style replaces the fictional one. This points the direction towards which Jude’s essayistic commentary will evolve: the video style shot takes the viewer to the “authentic” tomb of the prose writer, and the home video and amateuristic style becomes a final interpretative key. Blecher’s relative marginality and the decrepit nature of the cemetery is a comment about our own cultural inability to understand history. The video camera marks the personal presence of the filmmaker into the adapted literary text and is an overt instrument of the film essayist.

Ultimately, as noted by Elsaesser (2004), any presence of the “fingerprints” of the author in a film, any “signature” of the director present in the cinematic becomes an indication of the fact that the filmmaker acknowledges his involvement in the meaning making process (26). The level of this implication and the justified personal intercessions are still relatively low in *Scarred Hearts*. Here the filmmaker as essayist uses the resources as interpretations of the literary and the historical material in its most basic mode. However, with his next films Radu Jude manages to improve his implements and put into place new essayistic devices.

The Filmmaker's Cinematic Resources for Social and Political Criticism

One trait of the essay film, or “le film d’essai” in the French terminology, “*cinema d’essai*” in the Italian one, has always been its political engagement. Following the arguments advanced by Farocki and Blümlinger (2017), the film essayist is cinematic experimenter and a cultural essayist in his or her purpose. This divide is visible in the evolution of Jude’s filmography. From intimate films about family issues to strong essayistic messages, cinematic forms carry different social and political dimensions. In fact, the essayistic filmmaker must explicitly operate as a critic of society, sharing similarities with the traditional political commentary. In *Aferim!* (2015), which is a costume drama openly dealing with slavery and anti-Semitism in 19th century Wallachia, and in *Scarred Hearts* (2016), a story that takes place during the rising of Fascism in 20th century Romania, Jude used cinematic storytelling for political purposes. While *Aferim!* remains a relatively traditional narrative film, constructed as a father-son travelogue, with the political issues placed in the background, his following production, *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians* (2018) allowed the filmmaker to emphasize his political intentions. Using a highly controversial subject of recent history, the Odessa massacre effected by the Romanian army during WWII, when tens of thousands of people were murdered in 1941, Jude creates a narrative environment in which the essayistic commentary is brought to the forefront.

Timothy Corrigan (2011) argues that any self-reflective and subjective narration forms must be linked with the three basic types of expression that make the essay genre: the meditation on the human condition, the role of the artist, and the critical evaluation of society. By applying his definition, one can clearly qualify *Barbarians* as an essay. The three fundamental essayistic practices are fully developed in this film, and provide illustrations for the basic “essayistic” mode. *Barbarians* is particularly important as it shows how crucial it is not only to have a critical perspective on society (since *Aferim!* was also critical about Romanian history and culture), but to simultaneously meditate about the condition of the filmmaker (and of artists in general), coupled with a metaphysical exploration on the limits of cinematic resources. As Farocki (2017) acknowledged, when the ideological criticism is purposefully practiced by the essayist filmmaker, he or she must apply the specific implements of film in a political or critical way.

With Radu Jude this political predisposition is meticulously built into the cinematic discourse. In *Barbarians* the filmmaker uses a metanarrative device, framing everything in “film within film” technique. After the movie ironically opens with archive propaganda materials about the positive presence of the Romanian army in the Soviet Union, the frame is broadened by the main actress addressing the viewers directly, commenting on the identity of actors and inviting them to a re-enactment of a re-enactment. The plot revolves around



Figure 2. The political essay characterizes *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians* (2018) as the reenactment of a historical event is a commentary on the real meanings of history itself.
Screengrab

a public event, in which this young female theater director is charged with re-creating a historical event. These postmodern narrative devices allow Radu Jude to use the main female character as an alter-ego. Mariana Marin, an ironic subterfuge for Jude's own presence within the narrative, is not only a character confronted with reality; she confronts the reality of the spectators from within the story. As she documents and prepares her work for the public event, intended by the officials as a "homage to the national heroes," she discovers the awful truth about history, which also makes her the viewers' conscience. While conducting research on the subject at the National Museum of History, Mariana discovers photographs from WWII depicting atrocities perpetrated by the Romanians against the Soviet Union.

Throughout the movie Jude transforms his characters into "*raisonneur[s]*," voicing his point of view in the larger debate related to controversial issues. Once more anti-Semitism, Fascism, the genocide of the Roma communities, or negationism are brought to light, yet, unlike in *Aferim!*, Jude is now constantly challenging the boundaries of cinema as an instrument of expression and produces a true essay film. Either by contesting the format of film (through the introduction of still shots or freeze frames of drawings), by using audiovisual intertextual inserts (television screens showing scenes from *Oglinda* [1994], a movie about Antonescu), or by making extra-cinematic references (screenshots from a laptop, archive materials from the trial of Romanian fascists) the director is breaking the conventions of classical cinema and thus introducing new meanings and commentaries.

The film itself is a mixture between a public event, a theatrical reenactment, a movie shot as a documentary; and everything is fragmented by found footage images, commentaries

and quotes. Sometimes the theatrical dialogues are broken by external intrusions, the actors deliver explicit quotations from classical philosophers (e.g., the theater director quoting Wittgenstein). In some situations, this type of commentary is clearly marked, as is the case with the director of the re-enactment quoting Marx (first time as a tragedy, the second time as a farce) or when she reads about Hannah Arendt. The film functions as an essay not by providing a political commentary, nor by coercing the viewers to consider justified moral issues, but by creating a cinematic environment for such thinking.

As Corrigan (2011) observes, essayism has to be manifested in the film practice as a mode of expression in which the filmmaker questions the narrative structures of his or her own art, by pushing the limits of the existing rules about cinematic storytelling and, more importantly, filmmaking (181). With Jude, essayism does not manifest simply as a self-reflexive form of expression, rather it is what Corrigan labeled the “refractive essay” (190–91), in which the essayistic filmmaker operates as an experimental storyteller. The transformation of the narrative texture and the challenging of the traditional narrative structures of cinema are not in and by themselves essayistic. Many filmmakers use non-linear storytelling or intervene in the structure of the storylines, which does not make them “essayistic.”

Found Footage, Archive Materials and the Essay Film

In 2017 Jude produced a video essay titled *The Dead Nation* (*Țara moartă*), using archival materials: photographic plates made during the 30s and the 40s by a modest army photographer named Costică Acsinte. This unknown author from the provincial town of Slobozia, who had a private studio called Foto Splendid Acsinte, recorded a reality which in *The Dead Nation* was combined with other archival materials from the National Film Archive and soundtracks provided by the Romanian Radio Broadcasting Society, all of it everything mixed with the digitized photos and quotations extracted from the diary of a Jewish doctor. The voices of Fascist leaders, songs and speeches, together with Emil Dorian's daily notes about his experience during 1937–1944 (a book first published in English in 1982 and only later printed in Romania) allows the reconstruction, from bits and pieces, of a larger historical narrative. The same background used in fictional films like *Scarred Hearts* or *Barbarians*, is now presented as a trip down memory lane, straight back into the everyday reality of Romanian Fascism. These found materials (either visual or textual) serve a purpose which can only be described as “mimicking forms” (Turner 48). The unstaged recordings and the captured reality provide the viewers with an illusion of a direct experience.

Jaimie Baron (2014) identified this as “the archive effect,” a moment in the evolution of audiovisual media in which the repurposing of found footage materials is able to transform documents and even history itself through reformulation. Of course this approach to cinema,

by which reworked archival material is processed into new meanings, is not innovative. Other film essayists, like Chris Marker and Harun Farocki used archival images and found footage for cinematic experiments. A remarkable example is provided by Farocki, who considered Marker as his role model, and who created a film about the 1989 Romanian revolution by using only found footage. In his conversations with Christa Blümlinger, Farocki (2017) acknowledged that the archival materials present in his films (from TV programs to video installations) represented a pathway through which the essayistic commentary could become a cinematic resource. As the film director uses an existing image, this in turn becomes a commentary on another image, thus producing a chain of images commenting on other images.

Farocki practiced this technique in *Videograms of a Revolution / Videogramme einer Revolution*, his 1992 film made together with Romanian filmmaker Andrei Ujică, where home videos shot in December 1989 are turned into an eyewitness account of the tragic events leading to the fall of communism. The film is not created on site by the filmmaker, instead it is the result of an editing process in which the archival materials are recut into a new visual object. The importance of editing is discussed by Farocki in a 1995 video installation titled “Interface.” Here the Berlin-based director plays with the German word *Schnitt*, which in German can mean both to section or to separate and to connect. In this video installation we see the filmmaker writing a journal and watching a television set showing Ceaușescu’s last speech while a television monitor is flickering; the overlapping of all these materials at the editing table are the overt tools of the visual-essayist.

Jude also processes his archival material as a reflection on reality; the photographic devices do not preserve time, they offer the possibility for reflexivity instead. The reprocessed images are part of a *time-space*, a chronotope belonging only to the filmmaker and intended for changing the perspective of filmgoers about historical time. As the film director intervenes on the materiality of the existing images and documents, he generates a subjective experience, which in turn functions as a commentary on the past, changing the perceptions of the present. By saving photographs from their derelict nature, by collecting and re-authoring archived materials, history becomes a reanimated reality. Jude is “essaying the past,” in the formula used by Jim Cullen (2017). The essay genre is producing a relevant revision of our understanding about historical events otherwise falsified by official historians.

I consider this to be a type of *montage-essayistic* approach. It is practiced also by Andrei Ujică in his film about the communist past, in which he uses propaganda records from the Ceaușescu regime to create an imagined “autobiography” of the socialist leader, it allows the filmmaker to comment while re-cutting the existing materials. The technique is even further explored by Jude in *Uppercase Print* (2020), a more radically hybrid film in which the director reconstructs documentary style images, edited together with real documents. Based on a stage play written by Geanina Cărbunariu, itself a dramatized show using archival documents found in the surveillance files of the former secret police, Securitatea, this multimedia combination

is intended as a political commentary about the past. Set on a theatrical stage, the film intertwines several types of sources, from theater reproductions, found footage recorded by the Romanian Television during socialism, reports and other random journalistic programs, even banal scenes shot in traffic, accidents or entertainment, black and white Xerox images from the dossiers of the Secret police, and theatrical monologues of actors reciting from these Securitate files in the style of the propaganda television shows. Everything accumulates into a large commentary about society at that time. Like in *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu / Autobiografia lui Nicolae Ceaușescu* (Andrei Ujica, 2010), in *Uppercase Print* official images are often ironically intercut with scenes from other archives. This is the case with the parade of the pioneers during communist celebrations, which is like a *contrapunctus* with the reality of high schoolers subjected to the abuse of the regime.

This type of montage commentary generated at the editing table is coupled with more common essayistic procedures, such as the textual-essayistic intercalations. The film begins with quotes from the French philosopher Michel Foucault and from Ion Stratan, a Romanian poet who was banned by the authorities during the 80s. The association points to the moral dilemma of the entire story: what is the impact of one word in the lives of ordinary people? Unlike in the voice-over commentary, which is an authorial intervention practiced by many other filmmakers, here the intradiegetic voice-over is the preferred instrument for the essayistic presence. The narrative about the culprits who wrote “Freedom” on the protection panels of a building site in the city of Botoșani and then other writings “in uppercase prints,” interpolated with the accounts of those involved, is based on a real story. The Securitate files called “The Panel” and “The high school student” provide the filmmaker the opportunity to go against the cinematic apparatus, incorporating into the filmic discourse other forms of expression that are clearly non-cinematic. In turn, the theater monologues or the mechanical recitations from the original files of the Securitate, are manifestations of the film-essayist into the signification making process.

Cinema as Contrarian Mode —Essayistic Sketches of a Defiant Filmmaker

Laura Rascaroli (2017), using Adorno's insightful explanations about the essay form, explores an important element of the essay films, their manifestations as transgressive expressions. The essay provides more than an explanation about society, it represents a “non-conformative” way of seeing the world. As noted before, the *essayistic practices* in cinema always go beyond and against the existing cinematic categories, by refusing canons and rules. Similarly to *critical practices*, the *essayistic mode* of generating meanings must transgress common beliefs and opinions. As Nora M. Alter (2018) properly observes, at its core the essay film remains “a form of critique” (10). Striving to induce a reaction the essayistic

filmmaker criticizes the society, the political and ideological framework. At this level, the essay film is not simply a “minor” genre, it is fundamentally part of a larger “contrarian” attitude, a manifestation of subversive thinking (Stam *et al.* 216). Provoking responses from the viewers through shock and outrage, this dimension of the essay becomes explicit in Jude’s most recent approach to cinema.

In his most awarded film, titled provocatively *Bad Luck Banging*, Jude puts into action a large variety of contrarian forms. From the very beginning of the film the viewers are exposed to an outrageous *Denkbilder*, a “thinking image.” “Part I” of the film opens with a pink screen, quoting the Mahabharata and identifying the production as an “esquisse for a popular film.” Then the viewers are presented a home with a video shot in real time, which illustrates the premise of the story. Instead of the promised “popular cinema,” the Romanian moviemaker exposes the moviegoer to an explicit and pornographic recording, shot as an amateur film. This transgressive and outrageous opening is indicative of the paradoxical nature of the film essay. This mode of addressing the story discloses a deep “allergy to form.” manifested through a form-contesting attitude. The repulsion towards dogmatism and the inclination to criticism, which Adorno (153) considered fundamental to the essay, take the artist to radical gestures.

For me as a viewer this vulgar home video is more than a non-cinematic commentary on the pornographic nature of cinema and our visual culture. The *mise-en-scène* devoid of any artistic cinematic value prepares the viewers for their frontal contact with the *Denkbildere*, the “thinking images” that can generate social meanings. The main character, a female school teacher whom we see in the opening performing in a pornographic film, is transformed into an urban *flâneuse*, wandering through the streets of a lewd Bucharest, allowing the viewers to see the true pornographic side of the city and of modern life. Outdoor advertising offers the promise of happiness, shop windows are filled with happy faces, marriage limousines and other items are constantly alluding to consumerism and are purposefully placed in the picture as counterpoints to real existence. Even when the camera pans away from the main character, it shows us billboards with body builders which are coupled with extra-diegetic music and nationalistic graffiti with a Dacian white wolf. In one of the scenes the camera movement halts for a brief moment only to then stop on an icon depicting Saint Veronica holding the veil of Christ, conveniently projected in a mirror. Everything is a pretext for social commentary, from the broken leg of a mannequin, to a small tree growing out of nowhere in the concrete of the sidewalk.

Obviously, these film essay practices are not identical to those used by Montaigne, but their basic functions are similar. This atypical film is an *essay* because the filmmaker acts as a moralist and uses some of the most important techniques that the essay writers of our culture have inherited from the French moralists and which are now further explored with the help of cinematic implements. By creating a morally-charged event, a story presenting

the moral and institutional dilemma of the main character, it induces the spectators to think about this particular situation. More importantly, it deals with ample issues which are morally challenging. Evidently, films are part of the evolution of a moralizing tradition, moralist narrations have existed from the Latin Antiquity to the early modern essayists, who understood the difference between moralizing and moralized stories (in French: “*récit moralise*” and “*récit moralisant*”). Even though not all forms of moral discourses can be included in the essay category, as Philip Gillett argued (2012) film and television as dominant media are the main instruments today having the power to raise such moral issues and to have humans think about morality and immorality. Ultimately all films can perform moral and ethical functions when exploring complex issues. By placing the characters in ethically-charged situations and by creating “thought experiments” (Sinnerbrink 5) other Romanian filmmakers (like Cristi Puiu or Cristian Mungiu) already explored the relationship between film and morality. As a matter of fact, this is a trait of many European filmmakers who use cinema as an instrument of social moralizing. Yet here the *mode of moralization* is different, and Radu Jude as film-moralist illustrates the difference.

The particular form of conveying morality in *Bad Luck Banging* is not limited to the moralizing story; *cinematic moralism* is not induced simply by generating a moral experiment. Clearly the dilemma of this school teacher confronted with being publicly exposed after shooting a home porn film provides the central narrative stimulus. With the title of the film clearly connecting us to issues related to pornography and with the opening sequence exposing us to images of a female high school teacher performing oral sex on her male partner, all expectations are diverting from the real object of the movie. This is not about the morality of creating and uploading a private film online. Shot in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, the film creates a narrative framework allowing the filmmaker (who is also the screenwriter) to deal with larger issues related to sexism, misogyny, and other social prejudices. Working like a new *moral philosopher* Jude uses cinema as an essayistic tool, building expectations only to create the environment for complex problems.

The second part of this film represents the true dimension of the *essayistic form* in cinema. In a series of individual sketches, covering the entire middle section of the movie, Jude activates an entire arsenal of essayistic practices. First and foremost, here the sketch must be considered as one of the most important forms of the essay genre, and this sketchy style of filmmaking illustrates how this essayistic instrument functions. This second part is separated from the previous section by a pink intertitle, amusingly titled “Short dictionary of anecdotes, signs and miracles.” This must be understood as more than a collection of funny illustrations. Actually Jude is fulfilling here Eisenstein’s project, who intended to create a new form of cinematic expression, even a “new form of cinema” which could function as a “collection of essays on a series of themes” (Eisenstein 1927 [1976]). Jude splits his film into fragmented pieces which accumulate into a massive *heteroglossic* discourse.

The combinations include found footage recorded during the Ceaușescu era with racist photos showing white men and naked female Aborigenals. Recent television programs with military parades alternate with stereotypes and “jokes about blondes.” Famous figures of the Romanian literature (like Eminescu) and dictionary entries about historical heroic leaders (like Stephen the Great) are mixed with cheap images from various media or video recordings with urban and rural Romanian landscapes overlapping. The intertwining of vulgar scenes, such as the elevator door are combined with stitched wall covers prescribing the role of women in the kitchen, or references to fake intellectuals like the nationalistic politician and writer Vadim Tudor. This type of essayistic puzzle makes this part of the film a typical postmodern construction.



Figure 3. The use of visual sketches, as is the case with *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn* (2021), allows a critical essayistic experience, denouncing the excesses in society. Screenshot

Jude deals here with multiple issues, from pornography and sexuality to death and the Church, from fascism to consumerism. While there are several recurring themes, these sketches are created with the same instrument. The embedded textual captions include “dense” notions (such as Truth), global problems (like global warming) or represent neutral terms (like “bookshelf”). Through editing, the filmmaker then contextualizes these terms and provokes the thought processes of the viewers. One relevant example is a video recorded in a shopping mall. By eavesdropping on a religious song, the intonation of the “Christ has risen” refrain echoing among the shelves with produce becomes an intranarrative irony to the toxic assortment between consumerism and mysticism. Sometimes the subtitles are direct commentaries inserted in the images, as is the case with the criticism of the Romanian army, presented through a pompous parade only to be exposed as a repression instrument throughout history. Often the commentary is purposefully graphical and shocking, as in the sketch showing an apparently innocuous mantelpiece decorated with

wooden toys representing the nativity scene, while ironically displaying two Shogun books in the background, a with subtitles evoking the Einsatzkommandos in Russia which killed thousands of Jews and Romani on Christmas day. The commentary cannot be understood without a broader cultural explanation as the visuals are not always explicit to an uneducated eye. Another scene using archival materials, a record showing an Orthodox monk celebrated by a group of singing nuns, uses a combination of home videos, music and edits to point to the meanings. This elderly and mild man is surrounded by friends, yet this endearing moment is broken when we realize that the nuns are in fact chanting a legionary hymn. Here the insertion inside the visual narration has the shocking effect of reality setting in. Many essayistic references need more than an educated spectator, as is the case with the iconic description of Jesus, shown in a traditional Byzantine ornamentation with decorative mosaics, mockingly accompanied by a quote from Monseigneur Quélen, the Archbishop of Paris, who has claimed that Jesus came “from a good family on his mother side.”

The arsenal of essayistic implements is completed by the use of various media, such as photographs depicting deported children during WWII or, as is the case with the sketch titled “Montage,” which couples two war time photos, one of “brave” Fascist men going to war and another with the victims of their atrocities. As two neutral images are juxtaposed without any commentary, their very juxtaposition becomes a comment in and of itself. Other brief commentaries are ironic forms of criticism, as in the association between found footage images (Ceaușescu preparing his speech for the national television) and a contemporary graffiti mural in which the former dictator says “I will return in 5 minutes.” Such mocking commentaries are recurrent. For instance, under the title “social distancing” the director shows us a home video with three drunken men dancing while holding a stick, having fun with folk music, while an off-screen voice of a woman shouts “Emergency lockdown! Keep your distance!” This overlapping of contrasting situations can be done through intradiegetic titles—we see a Nonstop sign attached to a funerary home logo, next the intertitle “Efficiency” followed by the camera panning to the building next door, which is an emergency hospital. The essayistic commentary can be activated either by dialogues or by the absence of spoken words. In one instance, under the heading “Family,” we see a beaten body of a young boy, his back completely covered in scars and blood marks indicating he was hit hard with a stick. In another sketch the shot displays several pig heads in a butcher’s shop, while a father explains to his son, in a loving voice, that God has given us, humans, the animals to eat. Sometimes the essay is using amusing stories, like that of the paralyzed German elderly man who was not able to move his arms, yet when the psychoanalyst treating him shouted “Heil Hitler!” the muscles of the impaired man are suddenly activated. The anti-fascist comment overlaps an ominous scene, with water flowing from a hydroelectric plant; this total lack of connections ultimately induces thinking.

The heteroglossic commentaries include a large variety of sources, from journal entries taken from Aleksander Blok’s diary, who expressed his happiness about the sinking of the

Titanic, to statistical data, as in the sketch called “Rape,” showing information about the fact that 55% of Romanian citizens agree with the perpetrators and not the victims. The source material can include tattoos and children’s toys (like the fishing of the frog) or culturally relevant forms, as in the shot composed like a still-life painting in the *vanitas* style, titled “Intimacy” and captioned with a reference to Elon Musk’s Neuralink company. The critical commentaries also cover the cinema devices, as is the case with an apparently meaningless wintery scene which is coupled with mythological references to Medusa and Perseus, allowing the director to hint to the freezing nature of the cinematic art. Next we see the famous Muybridge horse, running without moving, as yet another indirect reference to the frailty of cinema.

One of these sketches, shot like an amateur film, depicts a naked blonde woman chased by a man dressed as a bull, in a scene with a pink flamingo in the background illustrating the nature of the essayistic commentary. After running for a while, this totally naked woman stops in front of the camera and tells the viewers: “I would rather have a calf, than a heart attack.” By staging a politically incorrect joke (in Romanian “banc,” as a connotative anecdote), Jude is disclosing one of his preferred techniques. Just like in the crude scene at the beginning in which we see a blow job, we are once more exposed to other gratuitous pornographic episodes, right in the middle of the film. Using the heading “Muie” (the Romanian vulgar term for beejay) we see a close-up of male genitals. Then, under the intertitle “Pulă” (the Romanian vulgar term for dick) we are presented black-and white films of an orgy, which includes explicit lesbian cunnilingus, followed by watch an uncensored scene from a video-chat room, where the host is performing a dildo penetration in front of her laptop. We might ask if the accumulation of pornographic references makes this filmmaker an artist, a creator of art-cinema, or an auteur of European quality films?

As noted by Alain Bergala (2006) in his book promoting the uses of films in scholarly contexts, the filmmaker must be a pedagogue before anything else, coaching his viewers in the complex issues of social interactions. Ultimately Jude is placing the *moralizing* effect of this comedic premise in the context of a social satire. In the final part of the film, captioned as “Part III. Practice and hints (A sitcom),” he gives his viewers the opportunity to choose their own versions of the end. Not only does the filmmaker use a very personal approach to cinema, presenting his own perspective about a wide range of issues and providing us with insights, he encourages us to build our own particular vision about the world we live in. And this marks the difference between cinema and the *essayistic film*. This type of filmmaking is not simply a “filmed essay” in which the commentary of the film director as essayist is the central purpose, intent to convince the audience about a given truth. The essay film does not have to convince the viewers, instead it provides pathways for an author like Radu Jude to fully manifest his own “essayistic” explanation about society and humanity overall.

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