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Staging Encounters with Estranged Pasts: Radu Jude's *The Dead Nation* (2017) and the Cinematic Face of Public Memory of the Holocaust in Present-Day Romania

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Abstract: This article provides a close analysis of Radu Jude's *The Dead Nation* (2017), a documentary film essay that brings together authentic archival sources documenting the persecution and murder of Jews in World War II. The sources include a little-known diary of Emil Dorian, a Jewish medical doctor and writer from Bucharest, a collection of photographs depicting scenes from Romanian daily life in the 1930s and 1940s, and recordings of political speeches and propaganda songs of a Fascist nature. Through a careful framing of this film in relation to Romanian public memory of World War II, and in connection to the popular new wave cinema, I will contend that Jude's work acts, perhaps unwittingly, to intervene in public memory and invites the Romanian public to face up to and acknowledge the nation's perpetrator past. This filmic intervention further offers an important platform for public debate on Romania's Holocaust memory and is of significance for European public memory, as it proposes the film happening as a distinct and innovative practice of public engagement with history.

Keywords: public memory; post-1989 Romania; Radu Jude; Emil Dorian; cinematic intervention; dialectical montage; public reception

1. Introduction

Since the fall of the Communist regime in 1989, Romania has cautiously started to investigate its totalitarian past. Although the Romanian state has officially acknowledged the country's "dark past"—by adopting the recommendations of the report of the Elie Wiesel International Commission for the study of the Holocaust in Romania (2004)—this acknowledgment has been imposed from above and is not mirrored at the grassroots level of the society. Romania's public memory of discrimination and the murder of Jewish populations is currently stimulated not by public debates stirred by national memorials or monuments (as in Germany or Austria), but by independent art happenings, in this case, by film screenings designed as social interventions with a participatory and active public. The practice of raising historical awareness by means of the documentary film has existed since 2008, being sustained, for example, by the annual [One World Romania International Human Rights & Documentary Film Festival \(2018\)](#). This article focuses on one case study that is illustrative of this practice—the documentary essay by Radu Jude, an acclaimed filmmaker of the new wave cinema genre. I will start with an overview of Romania's history and memory of World War II. This serves to contextualize Jude's film in relation to past and current public discourse around the Holocaust. Taking Sergei Eisenstein's "dialectical montage" as a conceptual reference point, I will then offer a close reading and analysis of sequences of associative and dissociative montage which construct the film's structure and content, connecting these strategies to the film's public reception. I will further show that

this intervention offers a platform for public debate about Romania's Holocaust memory. Alongside the One World Romania Festival, Jude's work innovatively proposes the film happening as a distinct social practice for raising public awareness of difficult histories. Furthermore, *The Dead Nation* acts to remind contemporary audiences of the importance of public engagement with perpetrator memory, and of coming to terms with the country's estranged past.

2. A Brief Account of Post-World War II Memory of the Holocaust in Romania

Romania's collective memory of the crimes perpetrated against Jews and Roma in the 1940s has been overshadowed by the more recent memory of the totalitarian state repression of the Nicolae Ceausescu regime. Romanian public memory of the Holocaust, like its neighboring Eastern European countries, is a phenomenon of the post-communist era. In World War II period, Romania shifted positions several times from a fascist state collaborator with Nazi Germany to joining the Allied camp, and finally to embracing communism, as an ally of the victorious Soviet Union. The trials of Romanian war criminals of the immediate post-war years (1946–1947) were carried amidst growing public indifference. In the subsequent decades, Romania was subservient to the Soviet Union and was headed by general secretary Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej (1947–1965), whose politics were continued by Dej's successor and protégée Nicolae Ceausescu until 1989. The regime of forced labor and terror, implemented since the end of World War II, involved a total obliteration of political opposition and the consolidation of an aggressive totalitarian regime based on a system of institutionalized structural violence made up of infamous torture prisons as the ones in Pitești, and in Sighet, and a wide network of labor and detention centers. The horrors of the regime have been documented in the important, though not uncontroversial, "Tismăneanu" report named after political scientist and sociologist Vladimir Tismăneanu who headed the commission appointed by president Traian Băsescu in 2006 to produce a comprehensive report on the Communist regime (Tismăneanu 2007). The regime is also known for the controversial agreements to sell Romanian Jews in the 1960s and the 1970s who could leave the country in exchange for monetary fees and even livestock paid to the Ceausescu regime by Israel (Ioanid 2015). The aggressive propaganda and terror led to a fundamental negation and rewriting of the fascist past, the obliteration of any expression of ethnic difference, of ethnic exploitation and persecution, and a denial of public access to factual knowledge of the country's World War II history. Romania's sins for the crimes of the past were symbolically redeemed by the execution of its former leader, Marshal Ion Antonescu. For more than four decades, the violent totalitarian rule based on propaganda, surveillance, and terror had extricated other dark chapters of violence from the historical record and from public consciousness. The obliteration of the past is a complex phenomenon with ramifications on both how Romanian fascism and communism are understood and remembered. This phenomenon of obliteration deserves a fuller examination elsewhere.

Suffice it to say that, the structural forgetting of the historical crimes committed by the fascist government, army and civilians during World War II was so successful that more than twenty years since the fall of communism, 67 per cent of Romanians continue to assign responsibility for the mass crimes committed in Romania to Nazi Germany alone.¹ The decade following the Romanian revolution of December 1989, the 1990s, was one of transition to a democratic state organized around a narrative of heroism and sacrifice. The Christian ethos emergent in the inter-war and World War II period gained in popularity in the 1990s. The military dictator responsible for the systematic murder of Romanian Jews and Roma, Ion Antonescu, was rehabilitated and regarded as a national hero and a pragmatist who took the country's interests to heart and made strategic decisions, which eventually led to the recovery of lost territories of Northern Transylvania (Shafir 2002). The post-communist political leadership

¹ This research was conducted by the Elie Wiesel Research Centre for the Study of Holocaust which opened in 2005 in Bucharest. To access the results of the survey research please visit http://www.inshr-ew.ro/ro/files/proiecte/Sondaje/Sondaj_opinie-INSHR-iunie_2015.pdf (accessed on 20 February 2018).

focused on constructing a positive national image for a people undergoing a process of recovery from the traumas inflicted by Communist dictatorships. Heroic and religious forms of nationalism emerged in speeches by the revolutionaries: a group of rebellious intellectuals, dissidents, and former members of the Communist party establishment. Post-communist nationalism brought with it old prejudices, racism and antisemitism. Figures like Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and Horia Sima—the leaders of the Legionari movement, Romania’s fascist paramilitary group—became symbols of national heroism, despite the atrocious acts of persecution, and violence committed against Jews and Roma (Fischer-Galati 2006). In the early 2000s, the young democratic state made known its wish to join NATO and form partnerships with former Allies in Western Europe and the USA. When in 2001 then Romanian president Ion Iliescu, attending a commemoration of the Jewish victims of the pogrom of Iași, 28–30 June 1941, declared that “no matter what we may think, international public opinion considers Antonescu to have been a war criminal”, international pressure mounted and the government was advised that in order to join NATO, it must face its past and put an end to the hero cult surrounding Antonescu (Shafir 2018, pp. 97–8). In response to international pressure, in October 2003, president Iliescu convened a Holocaust Commission, headed by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel and Jewish Romanian historian Jean Ancel, to investigate and to develop an expert account of Romania’s roles and responsibilities in World War II. In 2004, the Commission published a report on the crimes perpetrated by the Romanian state independent of Nazi Germany, crimes which became known as the Romanian Holocaust. It concluded that between 280,000 and 380,000 Jews and over 11,000 Romani people were murdered or died because of the deliberate ethnic cleansing policies implemented by Romanian civilian and military authorities (Friling et al. 2004, pp. 69–87; Kelso and Eglitis 2014). The insights of the report and its recommendations led to an official acknowledgment of the Romanian Holocaust, to the adoption of a national day of commemoration on 9 October in memory of the beginnings of Romanian-managed deportations from Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia to labor camps in Transnistria in October 1941. It also led to the creation of a government-funded research center for the study of the Romanian Holocaust in Bucharest. The commission further advised the development of history textbooks to teach the Holocaust in Romanian schools, and the creation of a public national memorial dedicated to the victims of persecution (Friling et al. 2004, p. 387). All these recommendations have been duly followed up. Since 2004 Romania observes the National Holocaust Memorial Day by organizing state commemorations accompanied by statements of Romanian presidents. The year 2005 saw the opening of the Elie Wiesel Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Bucharest whose research team tests opinion polls, supports original research and academic publications (see <http://www.inshr-ew.ro/>). Since 2006, the Holocaust has been taught in year 10 in the high school curricula in public schools (Bărbulescu et al. 2013). Since 2008, several textbooks have been dedicated to the teaching of the Holocaust in Romania as an optional History module (Petrescu 2005). On 9 October 2006, Romanian president Traian Băsescu laid the stone for the creation of Romania’s memorial to the Holocaust, and in 2009, the government unveiled the 7.4-million-dollar memorial designed by sculptor Peter Jacobi, in central Bucharest aimed to raise public awareness of the historical atrocities. In 2017, the Bucharest City Council showed interest in funding a Museum dedicated to the history of the Holocaust in Romania. Academic institutions in Cluj, Iași and Bucharest have pursued the study of the Holocaust in Romania. Romanian publishing houses have printed historical studies authored by Romanian historians, as well as the wartime diaries of Mihail Sebastian, testimonial works by Elie Wiesel, the prose of Aharon Appelfeld and poetry by Paul Celan. Research into the history and memory of the Holocaust is currently led by the Elie Wiesel Institute in Bucharest. Despite these efforts, and unlike other perpetrator countries’ belated, yet extensive public debates around the memory of the Holocaust, in Romania there are no sustained debates involving Romanian shapers of public opinion: intellectuals, academics, writers, artists and journalists. The recommendations of the Holocaust commission, diligently implemented by the government, suggest an official willingness to acknowledge the past but are also driven by political agendas such as the pressure to integrate in NATO and the European Union. It is fair to say that this recognition is of a top-down nature, it is underpinned by a political

agenda, and does not involve authentic grassroots processes of coming to terms with the past which can be observed in connection to the Communist past. The absence of rigorous public discussion around Romania's criminal fascist past remains a striking omission, despite the ample scholarly studies published by Romanian and Jewish historians (Anceal 1986; Shafir 2002; Ioanid 2006; Dumitru 2016). Public memory of the Holocaust in Romania is informed by two inconsistent stances, the official stand which acknowledges this part of history but is stimulated by external pressures, and public disinterest in this chapter of history.

This contribution does not aim to investigate the historical or social reasons of this marked absence, but to raise attention to how, in recent years, some members of the Romanian artistic milieu have started to take notable steps to address this silence. Beyond the official measures to mark the past in visible ways in the public space and to integrate Holocaust education in the state-run educational system, there are now notable civic led initiatives of engagement with this past which deserve consideration. So far greater attention has been given to textual narratives of the Holocaust, while the treatment of the Holocaust in Romanian visual culture, though existent, has largely been neglected, despite the worldwide influence visual culture (e.g., Spielberg's *Schindler's List* 1993) has had in raising public awareness of this history. This article will discuss the popular genre of—film—as a preferred cultural platform for self-expression of younger generations of Romanians; and suggest that the “Romanian new wave” cinema, as dubbed by critics, has had a fundamental role to play in giving birth to a critical perspective on the Romanian Holocaust, likely to foster a lively public engagement with past events.

3. Cinematic Interventions Serving a Critical Memorial Function

Prior to dealing with the history of the Romanian Holocaust, the new wave cinema had served a critical memorial function. It invited public reflection on Romania's heavy communist legacies, by touching on the sore wounds of the dictatorship regime, or by addressing past and present injustices and crimes of the Romanian social state led system which, decades after the fall of communism, continues to be a fertile ground for institutional corruption, neglect and abuse. Cristi Puiu's *The death of Mr Lazarescu* (2005) provided an insight into the neglect and cruelty of the Romanian state run hospital system. Cristian Mungiu's *Four months, three weeks and two days* (2007) shed light on the traumas associated with the system of illegal abortions in the 1970s, which entrapped, exploited and brutalized women whose traumatizing experiences of abortion had been kept secret. Films like *12:08 east of Bucharest* (2006) and *The way I spent the end of the world* (2006) dealt with the legacies of the Romanian revolution and with the painful transition to a post-communist consumerist society. *Police, Adjective* (2009) extended a biting critique of the endemic corruption of the police establishment, and *Beyond the Hills* (2012) revealed the criminal outcomes of the superstitious and irrational Romanian orthodox monastery world (Pop 2014; Popan 2014; Gorzo 2016).

Among Romanian directors and producers some individuals have looked beyond the communist past for sources of inspiration. Other dark historical moments of, for example, racial discrimination have been addressed in Radu Jude's *Aferim!* (2015)—an exceptional attempt, valued both nationally and internationally, to excavate the past of enslavement of the Roma people in 19th-century Wallachia (Scott 2016; Pieldner 2016). Given the ongoing discrimination of the Roma people in Romania, this subject touched on a sensitive chord. Jude had to justify his interest in the topic despite not being a Roma himself. His next film *Scarred Hearts* (2016) spoke about disability, another manifestation of what society regards as different, in this case, by drawing on the autobiographical writings of an acclaimed Jewish author of Romanian origin, Max Blecher, whose suffering from Pott's disease is painted in endearing terms in Jude's film. It is fair to say that Radu Jude is among the most outstanding Romanian filmmakers of the “New wave” movement whose thematic interests include hidden aspects of Romania's history: the slavery of Roma, antisemitism, the massacres of Jewish population (Mares 2017).

Prior to *The Dead Nation*, however, the Holocaust and the Romanian history of World War II have been addressed, albeit to various degrees and in problematic ways, in documentary films among which *The fate of Marshal Antonescu* (Felicia Cernăianu, 2009), *The persecutions in Bessarabia* (Natalia Ghilașcu, 2012), and *Odessa* (Florin Iepan, 2013) and in several feature films including *Train de vie* (Radu Mihăileanu, 1998), and *The beheaded rooster* (2007), and *Gruber's Journey* (2009) by Radu Gabrea. Laura Degeratu's study of these films concluded that the treatment of the subject is varied and includes minimizations of the Romanian army's role, partial representations of the historical narrative, as well as full acknowledgments of the crimes (Degeratu 2016). Film critic and activist Alexandru Solomon has offered an insightful critique of the treatment of the Holocaust in documentary film (Solomon 2016). Stimulated by the Commission's report filmmaker Florin Iepan's documentary entitled *Odessa* (2013) is the most daring of all. It tackles the massacres perpetrated in Odessa by Romanian armies, including the setting on fire of 11 wooden barns with Jews trapped inside, a chilling reminder of the Jedwabne massacre in Poland. The film captures the disbelief or indifference of ordinary Romanians at the news that "after Germany, Romanian people killed the largest number of Jews", and the reluctance of former president Emil Constantinescu, and of King Mihai of Romania to speak about this topic. The history of Romanian racism and crimes against minority populations, although acknowledged in the official state narrative, has not constituted a subject of interest for the established artistic community. A cherished figure of Romanian film, Sergiu Nicolaescu, avoided mentioning the term "Jew" altogether in his film *Mirror* (1997), depicting the period of Antonescu's rule. Romanian press reported on Iepan's film for having stirred controversial reactions from a historian who accused the filmmaker of historical manipulation (Both 2013). Public reactions to this film were short lived. The testimony of one of the last survivors of the massacres in Odessa Mishka Zaslavsky, included in the film, did not appear to convince viewers of the scale of the Romanian army's involvement (Erlich 2018). Iepan's attempt to intervene and activate historical consciousness revealed a Romanian public who responded with disbelief and indifference at the news of their country's perpetrator past.

For Jews of Romanian background but who found a home elsewhere like Olga Ștefan, film also has been a means to combat and resist forgetting (Ștefan 2017). Her initiative, the grassroots memorial initiative *The Future of Memory* aims to develop a platform for raising public awareness by means of film projections throughout the country. These include autobiographical film projects by Ștefan *Fragments of a Life* (2016), *My Illusions* (2017) and the video art *The wild child of Yassy* by Daniel Spoerri, 2017. The mission of the initiative is manifold: "reactivating memory through contemporary art and media, connecting the past to the present, documenting the last witnesses, personalizing history through oral narratives, creating connections between people and opening up public spaces for debate and mutual understanding" (The Future of Memory 2018). Several of these goals have already been accomplished. A series of exhibitions, public viewings and discussions have been organized in major cities in Romania: Bucharest, Cluj, Oradea, and Iași, and in Chișinău in the Republic of Moldova. The initiative has also received governmental financial support from the National Administration of Cultural Fund of Romania (AFCN).

Since its inception in 2008, One World Romania International Human Rights & Documentary Film Festival runs every year under the direction of Alexandru Solomon and is supported by a dedicated team of cultural partners (see "Team", www.oneworld.ro). This festival has provided a venue for both Iepan's *Odessa* and for Jude's *The Dead Nation*. The festival is inspired by a similar initiative in the Czech Republic and is dedicated to the memory of Vaclav Havel. Its mission to develop and raise historical consciousness among younger generations, is explained as follows:

Using documentary films followed by free debates, we aim to create an active community, formed by the young public, open to everything that is new, and curious, young people who wish to know

and to get involved in the difficulties other people face, people like you² (retrieved from One World Romania Facebook page 2018). In Romania, documentary film is therefore perceived as a tool to raise public consciousness, and as a form of memory activism (Solomon 2016). *The Dead Nation* is representative of a socially engaged documentary genre. Because of the purposeful way in which it has toured the country's cinemas, shown in 19 towns and often followed by Q&A sessions led by the film director himself, I would like to approach this film as an artistic intervention with a social impact, a dimension which I shall explore in further depth in the remaining part of this essay. Critic Jessica Kiang too locates the film in the sphere of public art stating:

Not so much a film in the classical sense as an art project built at the crossroads of 20th-century history and personal testimony, this photo-montage traces the fate of Romania's Jewish population through the turbulent years immediately prior to and during World War 2. (Kiang 2017)

In what follows I shall have a look at the film's formal elements and the ways in which they are assembled to create encounters with Romania's estranged pasts.

4. Staging the Historical Archive

This section analyzes the dynamic production of meaning achieved through the directorial editing and staging of three disparate historical sources which are juxtaposed in different ways to construct the content of the film: the wartime journal by Emil Dorian, a Jewish doctor and literary man from Bucharest, the collection of family photographs created by Costică Acsinte, a local photographer from Slobozia, and the audio recordings of war propaganda songs and speeches held at the National Archives in Bucharest. In all three cases, a process of excavation and of serendipity has led to the inclusion of these archival sources in Jude's film, as explained below.

4.1. Emil Dorian's *The Quality of Witness. A Romanian Diary 1937–1944*

Unlike the more accomplished Jewish literary figure Mihail Sebastian—whose novels are well known to Romanian readers, and whose wartime diary *Journal 1935–1944: The Fascist Years* published by Humanitas in 1995 drew public interest—Emil Dorian's journal, published in 1996, remains little known to Romanian and international lay readers. Dorian has served as a physician in World War I, and as a literary intellectual he was an active member of Bucharest's literary circles.³ His diary notebooks spanning several decades from 1937 to 1956 (the year of Dorian's death) are mentioned in specialized literature.⁴ The 1982 English translation was published by the Jewish Publication Society in Philadelphia at the initiative of Dorian's daughter Marguerite Dorian. The original titled *Jurnal din vremuri de prigoană. 1937–1944* (Journal from times of persecution) was printed in 1996 in a limited edition by Hasefer, a Jewish publishing house from Bucharest.⁵ While researching for his film

² Translated from Romanian by the author. The original can be retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/pg/one.world.romania/about/?ref=page_internal (accessed on 18 April 2018).

³ Dorian is known among Romanian literary scholars for his poems *Cântece pentru Lelioara* (Songs for Lelioara, 1923), and translations of Yiddish poets into Romanian language. His popular medical writings include provocative titles such as *Adevărurile sexualității* (Truths about sexuality, 1932), *Femei și doctori* (Women and Doctors, 1932).

⁴ Dorian's journal is referenced by Jewish Romanian historian Jean Ancel 1986; and recently in David Cesarani's monograph (Cesarani 2016). A biographical note has appeared in (Patterson et al. 2002); and a passage from Dorian's diary can be found in (Garbarini 2011). Jude has come across the author's name while reading Jean Ancel's study. Jude's approach has followed the historical narrative outlined by historians. His selection of diary passages appears to be informed by the intention to record the harshest historical crimes as recorded in the journal, and leaves out Dorian's numerous references to local, cultural or political contexts, or passages recording in fine detail the author's emotional states. Further to this, there are several inconsistencies between the Romanian original version and the English translation edited by Dorian's daughter. As a general approach, Jude focuses attention on selecting those passages which present the progression of historical events and isolates some events from their broader context as provided by Dorian.

⁵ In 2006 Compania House released Dorian's journals covering the period between 1945 and 1948 with the title *Cărțile au rămas neterminate* (The books have remained unfinished), and in 2012, the diary notes for the period between 1949 and 1956 were published under the title *Cu fir negru de amici* (Woven with a black loosen cotton thread).

projects, Jude chanced upon Dorian's journal in a second-hand bookstore in Bucharest. Touched by Dorian's lucid account of this historical period, Jude felt compelled to develop a film project. Keeping to the chronological narrative of the diary, Jude selected those notes which illustrate the unfolding of anti-Jewish measures culminating in episodes of extreme cruelty and torture; and leaving out numerous informative passages on the changing local cultural and political situation, and the many passages which document Dorian's emotional state of mind. Because of these omissions (justified due to the time constraints specific to the film genre) the powerful emphatic connection established when reading Dorian's diary is somewhat marginalized in Jude's filmic rendition.

4.2. Costică Acsinte's "Foto Spendid," Slobozia

Upon return from World War I where he served as a war photographer Costică Acsinte opened a photo studio "Foto Spendid" in his hometown Slobozia, a town in south-east Romania. During his career as a commercial photographer, Acsinte gathered a collection of over 5000 glass plate negatives and several hundred prints. After his death in the early 1980s, his son donated the collection to the Ialomița Museum Archives. In 2008, a local photographer, Mario Cezar Popescu, came across it and, enthralled by the beauty of the photographs and historical value depicting several decades of Romanian social history, convinced the museum to allow him to digitize the collection and make it available on Flickr.⁶ The photographs soon drew the attention of the Museum of the Romanian Peasant in Bucharest, and of international photography editors. For example, Eugene Reznik, from the *Time Magazine* photography section *Lightbox* tantalizingly wrote:

Beyond the psychedelic swirls of their shrinking, peeling emulsion, next to nothing is known about the subjects of the photographs [. . .]. The greater part of their allure comes not from the information revealed, but from what is obscured and denied to the viewer. (Reznik 2014)

The haunting aesthetic quality of the photographs, their contemporaneity with Dorian's journal and the notable exclusion of experiences depicted by Dorian, inspired Radu Jude to bring these seemingly incongruent worlds side by side. Jude selected more than 500 pictures covering the years of Dorian's journal from 1938 until 1946. In strike contrast to the Jewish perspective offered by the journal, the selected pictures depict fragments from the lives of Romanian women, men and children of the period. While the realities of war are present in these pictures, depicting an increasingly militarized society, there are no signs that the pictured individuals are other than Romanians. The world inside the photographic frame and the world represented in narrative form construct "parallel lives" (the subtitle of the film). This disconnect constitutes the core structure of the film.

4.3. Archival Sound Recordings

The third component of *The Dead Nation* comprises of audio materials documenting the rise of Romanian fascism, a radical nationalism characterized by a racial superiority based on religious belief which regarded minority groups including Jews and Roma as enemies of the "sanctity" of the national endeavor for unity. Jude selected sound clips which include speeches by King Carol II, and by Marshal Ion Antonescu, radio news reporting the heroic deeds of the Romanian army, the conquest by Romanian and German troops of Odessa, and many patriotic songs aimed to mobilize the Romanian army in the national war against what Antonescu viewed as its worst enemy, Russian Bolshevism. Several of the chosen songs contain racial slurs against Jews and Roma. These archival sources were retrieved with great difficulty from the film collections stored at the National Film Archives.⁷ Jude was refused access to the sound collections of the National Radio Archives which

⁶ The collection can be viewed at the webpage <https://www.flickr.com/photos/costicaacsinte/>.

⁷ Romanian historian Adrian Cioflâncă speaks about how inaccessible these collections are to a wider audience. Archivists rigorously limit access to historical materials by imposing high fees, and outmoded technology makes access to the visual materials extremely time consuming.

remain largely inaccessible to the wider public.⁸ Jude has put together these disparate sources within a coherent chronological narrative, taking on, perhaps unwittingly, the role of a public historian who curates archival materials and brings them to the attention of a lay audience. But, how do these seemingly incongruent and inaccessible sources work together in Jude's film?

5. Performative Unsettlements and the Dialectical Montage Technique

Jude's film has been described as an example of a "new radical and political cinema" showcasing an "experimental style, and an acute political consciousness", as "the most radical and anti-spectacular documentary post-2000", and as "an ambitious cinematographic oeuvre because of its formal attributes and its polemic subject matter" (Mares 2017). The fact that the filmmaker, and not an actor, reads Dorian's diary notes indicates a wariness not to spectacularize the historical past. The intention instead is to remove elements of mediation, such as the actor's voice, which can fictionalize Dorian's account. Jude's reading out appears to be unprofessional and unassuming for a reason: "the perspective from which I made the film is of someone who belongs to the Romanian community" (Mischie 2017), and to a generation of Romanians aware of having been lied to⁹, and whose access to historical truth has been denied.

The film is constructed through juxtapositions of two or more conflicting shots. This method reminds of Sergei Eisenstein's approach to film which involves a dialectical montage: "the collision of independent shots-shots even opposite to one another" which create a "dramatic principle" (Eisenstein 1977, p. 49). Tellingly, this technique is thought to "generate new political insights in audiences" (Oxford Index 2017). *The Dead Nation* encourages viewers to make inferences of various kinds. The associative, dissociative as well as arbitrary juxtapositions of images, of diary entries, and of sound recordings work together to produce tension and conflict within viewers. The ability to maintain the tension between immediacy and estrangement is one of the most remarkable achievements of Jude's directorial insight.

How is the dialectical montage achieved? I would like us to examine this process more closely in what follows. Firstly, let us have a look at the film's visual support. The entire visual field is taken up by over 500 black-and-white photographs. Except for a few landscapes, most photographs depict portraits of individuals, of groups of women and men and of children from all walks of life. The individuals face directly into the camera so that their eyes can meet the eyes of the spectators. Their facial expressions denote a range of emotions. Some individuals adopt unassuming, familial, humorous poses, others take a more serious stance. A wide range of life events are recorded including key religious festivals like Easter and Christmas, and life cycle events such as baptisms, weddings, birthday celebrations and funerals. Many photographs portray an increasingly armed society made up of individual men, or of groups of men dressed in military uniforms who carry shot machines, guns or knives. Several photographs depict children posing with their arms raised in the "Roman salute", the local variant of the Nazi Heil Hitler. The photographs are paced out unevenly throughout the 85-minute-long film. Each photograph or groups of photographs is/are accompanied by selected readings from Dorian's diary. Interspersed with Jude's readings are recordings of speeches by historical figures. Viewers can hear the voices of complaisant crowds, the upbeat ceremonial music, and mobilizing propaganda songs.

6. The Chapters of *The Dead Nation*: The Barbaric Is Imagined, the Everyday Is Seen

Secondly, the film narrative consists of dated diary entries. The entries are grouped in 10 chapters, starting in 1937 and ending in 1946; and are matched with photographs from the same period. Passages

⁸ These obstacles are mentioned by Jude in the public event following the preview of *The Dead Nation* at the Museum of the Romanian Peasant in Bucharest, on March 2017. A recording of the discussion is available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=20BpVimxvJg> (accessed on 20 January 2018).

⁹ Jude mentions this in the Q & A session attended by the author at the British Film Festival, London on 9 October 2017.

describing scenes of extreme cruelty against Jews are accompanied by images of armed young men dressed in military uniform. Associative editing technique is not applied in a consistent way. At other points in the narrative, viewers are challenged to observe scenes from leisure or festive events against the background of diary descriptions of street violence and torture.

Chapter “1937” opens with a photograph projection dated “14 November 1937” depicting family members gathered for a festive event. The image is followed by a short moment of silence, and then the script: “at the end of 1937, in Bucharest, Dr Emil Dorian starts keeping a journal”. Against the black-and-white photograph of a dead badger, the spectator hears the first diary entry dated “30 December 1937”:

An explosion which has stirred bewilderment and fear: the victory of Goga’s government. In the insane tension caused by the elections, nobody anticipated such an outcome . . . the Jews fear worse persecutions to come. Prepared and then fostered for so many years now by all the political parties, nationalist antisemitism in this country has borne fruit at last . . . Goga and Cuza have vehemently announced their intention to carry out the racist principle. Immediately following the news, the newspapers *Dimineata*, *Adevarul* and *Lupta* were suspended [. . .]. The majority foresees anti-Jewish measures directly patterned on the ones adopted in Germany after the Hitlerist takeover. (Dorian 1982, p. 3)¹⁰

Two perspectives are introduced abruptly: the national ethos guided by racist convictions and the perspective of the Jewish individual whose very existence is under threat. This reading is followed by an associative montage of a photograph depicting a young man holding a gun. Throughout the film, textual depictions of violence are juxtaposed with portraits of armed men wearing military clothing. Importantly, there are no graphic depictions of violence, although the archival record includes a small number of photographs from the pogroms in Bucharest and Iași. Such aggressions are alluded to by the figures of armed military men. As the film progresses, the disconnect between the photographic representation and the diary narrative deepens. The violence depicted in narrative form remains outside the frame of the photographs. The photographic record performs in an inverted way, making known the absence of the Jewish experience from the sphere of visibility. The juxtaposition of image and of sound intensify the feeling of unsettlement resulting from the viewers’ proximity to what fundamentally are “parallel lives”.

The more one looks at the visual record, the more one becomes aware of the theatricalized character of the depicted scenes of everyday life, of the fabricated studio quality of the images, of the unnatural poses of those photographed, and of the pronounced aesthetic quality crafted by Acsinte according to the fashion of the times.

The diary page from “14 January 1938” offers insight into the growing fascist conviction that the Antonescu regime’s anti-Jewish legislation and enslavement are an inherent part of the fight for securing national purity and unity. A passage from “25 January 1938” depicts the harsh realities of a local antisemitism at work:

Filaret, the TB hospital, has only one Jewish patient, a young man who has been fighting the illness for several years. The gentile patients, at the suggestion of a former clerk of the newspaper *Universul* have revolted and signed a petition to the chief physician demanding the immediate discharge of the “tubercular kike”. (Dorian 1982, p. 15)

Following this reading, a photograph depicts three young men, the middle boy holding an issue of *Universul* newspaper, as the boy on his left points his finger at a piece of news on the front page. This juxtaposition suggests the popularity of this newspaper among young men, many of whom

¹⁰ All excerpts are taken from the English translation of Dorian’s journal (1982) and not from the film’s occasional inaccurate English subtitles.

we see posing in military garb in other photographs. While most associations cast a shadow of doubt upon the pictured individuals' involvement in the persecution, there are a few image-narrative appositions which disrupt this structure. For example, a picture showing a large group of armed officers is placed against a passage informing about Dorian's experience as an army doctor in World War I. On "15 August 1938" Dorian writes:

Twenty-two years ago, on August 15, the sea of time parted and never have the two halves come together again. I wandered through the forests and fields of my country devastated by warfare, at the very time when I myself bewildered and harassed by personal problems, had just emerged from an adolescence ridden by material hardships and torn between poetry and reality. I have often thought about those times; whose echo lingers to this day. (Dorian 1982, pp. 37–38)

In this case, the young people in the photograph are not perceived as potential aggressors but as visual substitutes for Dorian himself. Although portraits of Dorian are available, (for example several appear in the English version of his diary) they are not included in the film. Arguably, this insertion would have broken the visual structure of the film based exclusively on one source of archival materials.

Most passages from Dorian's journal narrate the progression of events and document episodes of historical importance. Because of its historiographical approach, the film does not insist on establishing an affective connection between Dorian and the viewers—a connection that is immediately achieved when one reads Dorian's diary. On the contrary, it works to counter and even to frustrate the viewers' desire to create such connections. Because of Dorian's stark descriptions of extreme violence, viewers cannot establish an empathetic link with the people in the photographs either. The narrative foregrounds the full scope of Romanian antisemitism, persecution and systematic mass murder of its Jewish communities. For example, a diary passage dated "28 June 1940" notifies the loss of Bessarabia and of Northern Bukovina to the Russians. The political speech associated with this note informs that, while the nation is weeping, "there are the sons of Juda [anti-Semitic reference to Jews who betrayed Jesus] whom we raised too kindly, rejoice in the streets. See them laugh, while the Motherland bleeds" (*Dead Nation*, min 19:40). At a later point in the film—against the background of a cheerful folk tune accompanied by photographs depicting large groups of young workers, and of a young boy in civilian clothes holding a knife pointed towards a bull—Jude reads out Dorian's account of the massacres committed in the summer of 1941 in Moldova. In this case, the animal threatened by the boy's knife is associated with a passage depicting Dorian's utter despair. Later, a photograph of a young girl cheerfully waving a Romanian flag in her hand is superimposed on a news broadcast about the victory of Romanian troops who entered Bessarabia. Images of women in bathing suits by the lake are followed by a reading dated "15 August 1941" which gives account of acts of unimaginable cruelty:

Again I stopped writing, unable to touch this notebook. In this short time, it seems to me, I have lived twenty years. From the young man returned from forced labor, his hand haemorrhaging, whom gentile doctors refused to treat—worse, they even undid his bandage, only to send him away, wound exposed, spurting blood—to the Jewish family drowned in the Bistrița River just the other day, horrifying things have happened during this war, illustrating the tragic Jewish condition. . . . then the order came for the deportation of all Jews from Bukovina and Bessarabia to Transnistria. The small towns were emptied in a few days: old people, women, children, left not knowing why and where to, with bundles containing a handful of their belonging and with the small amount of money the authorities allowed them. How long before our turn comes, here in Bucharest? (Dorian 1982, pp. 168–69)

A marked moment of silence follows this passage. The next photograph depicts a soldier dressed in uniform pointing a gun towards the frame of the photograph. The following sequence of photographs constructs associative meanings between the aggressor male soldiers and the visually absent victims. On "20 October 1941" Dorian's diary notes that:

Romania has occupied Odessa, which has now become the capital of Transnistria . . . “We gave Cluj away and got Odessa in return”, a man said to an officer on the sidewalk in front of the Bavaria Café. Headlines clamoured that Romanian Troops “were enthusiastically welcomed by the citizens of Odessa” the second page reported fighting in the streets”. (Dorian 1982, p. 170)

The next montage of photographs reinforces the festive mood in response to the Romanian occupation of Odessa. This associative sequence is however interrupted by a sequence of image and sound illustrative of the dialectical montage technique. Dissonance is produced by juxtaposing a photograph depicting a couple smiling and Dorian’s diary note from “14 November 1941” stating:

There is again panic among Jews. Again? The fear of deportation to the Ukraine has not stopped for a minute. Nothing is absurd any longer. News from Jews in Transnistria drives you insane: traveling on foot in the rain, through mud, women and girls raped, starvation, one bread a day for ten people, suicides, other agonising tragedies. Today I recoiled when I saw B, his faced ravaged, as if emerging from a pile of ashes. Tortured by the rumour of Jewish deportation from Bucharest, he grew indignant at the sight of two Jews chatting and laughing. How can Jews laugh? (Dorian 1982, p. 176)

Several chapters ahead, the passage from “26 May 1943” is staged against a black screen. The viewer hears Jude’s voice:

Poison gas, the most horrible of all the weapons prepared for this war, has not been used to this day. None of the many belligerents dared to unleash it, however tragic or desperate their military situation. It seems it has been reserved for one enemy only, the Jews. But despite confirmed reports and testimonies people refuse to believe that such things are possible. (Dorian 1982, p. 282)

This reading is followed by a long silence. For the first time, the darkness of the screen and the prolonged silence work in unison to underline the gravity of the historical events.

Importantly, Jude chooses to include a diary passage from 1944, in which Dorian—sheltered from the violence recorded in the diary—gives voice to a nine-year-old girl named Claruța, a child survivor of the Romanian administered ghettos and camps in Transnistria. Against the portraits of well-disposed young women, Dorian’s description from “14 April 1944” creates dissonance:

Perhaps Claruța will write her memoirs someday, in Hebrew, no doubt. . . . She speaks about death with chilling detachment: what’s the difference, life or death? Every day when I woke up I saw dead little boys and girls I stepped over corpses. I don’t know how I escaped. (Dorian 1982, p. 308)

This dissonance is then replaced with an associative passage. The above reading is followed by a photograph depicting a middle-aged couple, and a passage about Claruța’s fear of Christians:

What is really terrifying is her hatred of gentiles, to whom she reacts with physical terror. A friend came to visit Marguerite, Claruța saw him go to her room and suddenly ran to us, screaming: there’s a gentile there. Quick! Throw him out! (Dorian 1982, p. 309)

Later, several photographs depicting aggressive looking men, and soldiers carrying guns are linked to a passage dated “24 June 1944” mentioning Romanian patriarch Nicodim’s letter to the Archbishop in Canterbury, and which speaks about the generosity, tolerance and kindness of the Romanian people who “never oppressed those of other faiths or origins” (*Dead Nation*, 1:10:17). The passage exposes the religious political character of the fascist movement in Romania. Surprisingly, this note appears only in the Romanian version used by Jude and is missing from the English

translation.¹¹ For the present-day Romanian viewer, the inclusion of this incriminating passage resonates with a shameful campaign led by church officials to gather popular support among congregations around the country to oppose new laws conferring rights to homosexuals.

The next sequence of journal notes records the bombings of Bucharest by the allied forces, the return of King Mihai as a successor to the throne on 23 August 1945, and the repossession of Transylvania from Hungary. Images of funerals of young people are juxtaposed with notes documenting the trials of Romanian war criminals. A note from “10 April 1945” gives account of the continuing anti-Jewish sentiment despite public knowledge of the genocide committed by Romanians and Germans in Transnistria:

Why do Jews go to the People’s Tribunal for political revenge? The wheel could turn someday”; “our agreement with the Allies includes punishment for war criminals. The people’s tribunal was not formed by and of Jews. It is fatal that Jews are invited to prosecution because many Jews were subject to Romanian cruelty in Transnistria. (*Dead Nation*, 1:14:05)

The final sequences announce Romania’s alliance with Soviet Russia. A news broadcast about a Romanian delegation’s return from a visit to Moscow is heard against the background of a photograph of men and women in military dress. The communist prime minister Petru Groza’s voice can be heard stating: “we come from the house of our great neighbor, the Soviet Union,” followed by the crowd chanting “Stalin, Stalin” and “USSR” (*Dead Nation*, 1:19:15). Dorian notes that communism continues the fascist narrative of scapegoating Jews: “Soon we will hear that Jews took over democracy, which will justify the new antisemitism . . . sadly there is no way to react, nowhere to write”, and “sticking together means being silent and swallowing it all together” (*Dead Nation*, 1:19:40). This passage anticipates the censure and denial of crimes of the later decades. The execution of Ion Antonescu and of a few other army captains in June 1946 put an end to the trials of war criminals. Dorian also notes Romanians’ lenience towards war criminals (e.g., “It’s too late, Romanian people are too kind, etc.”), and the collective indifference: “A few more will be sentenced among general indifference. Then the elections will arrive, and we will continue rebuilding the country and re-educating the people” (*Dead Nation*, 1:20:30). The film ends with a patriotic communist song which sounds very similar to the fascist songs heard earlier.

As I hope to have shown, the selected passages from Dorian’s diary create an incremental chronological account of the Romanian Holocaust which is now the country’s official narrative. The contrasting spheres of visibility of the Romanian society pictured in the photographs, and of the Jewish experience revealed via Jude’s reading of Dorian’s diary entries lend the film a critical and pedagogical dimension. This dimension aligns with the mission of One World Romania Festival. As spectators take in Dorian’s perspective, the faces of the people in the photographs cannot be regarded but through an ethical frame. They constitute the face of a nation implicated in the violence described outside the visual frame. Doubt settles in about the nature of their involvement in the army, and about their own beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. As younger generations of Romanians watch this film, uncertainty about their grandparents’ beliefs and actions settles in. If the pictured individuals represent the grandparents of today’s younger generation, then their implied antisemitism or criminality present the Romanian public with a moral dilemma. How to respond to this historical legacy? Do the grandparents’ deeds obligate younger generations to assume moral responsibility for this past? How can the feeling of being morally responsible be manifested in real life? Does

¹¹ In the English version, the diary note dated “24 June 1944” gives an account of the Jewish persecutions in Hungary, the burning of books in Budapest, and the Hungarian violence against the Jews. This is followed by news about Jews from Romania preparing to embark on ships from Black Sea city port of Constanta heading to Palestine. In this text Dorian mentions the “dirty commercial deals” which allowed wealthy Jews to buy tickets on the ships, at the expense of Jewish orphans like Claruța who were left behind in Bucharest.

this necessarily involve confronting prejudice and discrimination when it happens? Does it obligate one to pay homage to the victims? Although answers to these questions are yet to be articulated, Jude's film offers a public platform where such questions can at least be formulated. Jude's masterly alternation of associative and dissociative image and sound has triggered distinct reactions from Romanian audiences that are worth examining more carefully.

7. "Breathless" Encounters with an Estranged Past

Since its launch on 25 August 2017 the film has received considerable national and international interest. In Romania, the author has counted more than 30 news items in the mainstream press, and several television talk shows with Radu Jude. The film was screened in over 19 towns across Romania, drawing over 5000 viewers ([Dragomir 2017](#)). Although it is difficult to gauge the number of viewers for each screening, one can assume attendance has been relatively low. This is due to the film being shown in small size art film venues, and not the more popular and commercial mall cinemas. The audience members of these venues tend to be well informed middle and upper-class individuals. Many audience members participating in Q&A sessions after the film's viewing belong to generations born in the decades before and after the fall of communism. They are an eclectic audience consisting of university students, young professionals, cultural critics, journalists, academics, and members of political parties. Importantly, One World Romania Festival attracts viewers sympathetic to its thematic focus on human rights, and, therefore willing to engage critically with the dark chapters of the nation's not so distant historical past. While it is unlikely that documentary film will reach large segments of the Romanian society, it is fair to say that it can influence the most politically and socially active groups of people, those likely to take a stand, and to express opinion on social media and in the press. It remains noteworthy that both Romanian national and local press praised Jude's film as "daring and provocative" ([Patean 2017](#))¹², "a poetic testimony of the tough realism of the last century" ([Mischie 2017](#)) and "one of this year's most intelligent and provocative film essays" ([Proca 2017](#)), "the most successful documentary of 2017" ([Ivan 2017](#)). Jude was commended for his "guts to confront the long history of racism, antisemitism and fascism of our people" ([Popescu 2017](#)). Journalist Cristina Foarfă noticed that people, including herself, left the cinema hall in tears. She further noted her friends' reactions of disbelief stating: "it cannot be, it cannot be possible that us Romanians have killed so many Jews" ([Foarfă 2017](#)). During a public event organized by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant, before the film's official launch, one audience member remarked the "the deep silence in the cinema room in reaction to the moment in the film when there was no image or sound" adding "This says a lot" ([Țara moartă, Q&A cu Radu Jude 2017](#))¹³. Another audience member called the film "earth-shattering", describing the silence in the room as a kind of breathlessness. Someone else confessed that, while she came as a "spectator", "the discourse made me feel guilty, this is the emotion. I focused on the story, I could not focus on the photos, but on the narrative" (*Ibid.*). One other viewer reinforced the importance of "the audio" compared to images. The film was deemed "shocking" by another spectator, as it was meant to raise public concerns over the meanings associated with national patriotism, and to increase awareness of this period of history. Some spectators could not agree on the Romanian public's knowledge of this history. A few argued that they knew this history well, while others mentioned that little is known about this chapter of history. Someone recommended that Jude should sharpen the educational value of the film by adding images from the Iași and Bucharest pogroms. Other viewers recognized that the lack of graphic imagery "makes it more provocative" (*Ibid.*). One spectator was led to acknowledge the relevance of the historical account as follows:

The narrative is absolutely worrying, and absolutely contemporary, and if we believe that this chapter in history belongs to the past, we are wrong. The most worrying is also the

¹² All translations of excerpts from Romanian press belong to the author.

¹³ The quotes are translated from Romanian into English by the author; the Q&A session is available to view on YouTube.

realization of what your neighbor can do in a certain context, and those images of our forefathers seem strange, and makes us ask who they were, and also who we are. (Ibid.)

This remark resonated with a comment from a journalist who stated elsewhere that: “the documentary has the merit to make us face in an abrupt and uncompromising way that which the collective mentality wishes to avoid and to forget. And it is by no means a comfortable thing” (Mares 2017). While some viewers responded with a heavy and “breathless” silence, others retorted against the film and Jude himself, and enacted some aspects of the same antisemitism which Dorian had recorded in his diary.

8. “Who Does the Film Address? I Do Not See a Link between Image and Sound”

Critical reactions can be retrieved from comments sections on the film’s Facebook page (see <https://www.facebook.com/taramoarta/>) and from the Cezar Popescu’s webpage dedicated to Costică Acsinte’s collection of photographs (see <https://www.facebook.com/costicaacsinte/>). Strong anti-Semitic slanders included Jude being accused of having betrayed the Romanian nation, of being sponsored by George Soros, and of being involved in Judaic masonic conspiracies, expressed in comments like: “it is all a Jewish conspiracy” (Jews control the film industry), and “it is Soros’ fault” (Popescu 2017). These allegations are not unusual among members of ultra-nationalist fractions who “insist that Romanians are a saintly/innocent people who never did anyone any wrong, and who were eternal victims of history” (Ibid.). Other reactions included attempts to (a) relativize Romania’s historical responsibility by comparing the number of crimes committed by Romanians with those committed by Germans as in the example “others committed worst crimes than Romanians” (Ibid.), to (b) trivialize the subject matter by invoking excuses for not dealing with the topic of the type: “yes, Romanian killed Jews, but global warming is killing people” (Ibid.); and to (c) unjustly place guilt on younger generations: “a bad habit, to victimize the young generation for the sins of their forefathers” (Ibid.). Some comments illustrated wishes to avoid discussing the topic altogether for the sake of preserving a positive national image: “one should not remember crimes before the centenary anniversary of Romania’s national existence” (Ibid.). Someone else condemned Jude of “making money by slandering the Romanian people” (Ibid.). In the “Țara moartă Q&A with Radu Jude” mentioned earlier, a member of the audience wondered: “maybe Jews too have done something” to which Jude replied, “do I need to answer you?” Another asked “who does this film address?” rebuked by Jude who stated that the question was “illegitimate”. Another viewer wondered whether the director was not afraid of being accused of “partisanship”. When asked by Jude to clarify what “partisanship” meant, the viewer referred to “the discourse of revisiting our responsibility in the face of how we behaved towards the Jews”. To this Jude retorted “we cannot talk of personal responsibility from a legal viewpoint, my responsibility is to acknowledge and accept this difficult aspect of history” and stressed “there is no partisanship”. The Q&A session revolved around the question of moral responsibility for historical racism leading to savage mass murder, and the question of the film’s aesthetics, its formal construction and the historical relevance of Acsinte’s photographic collection. The past represented by the pictures was not recognized by some audience members, as “our past” or “our nation”. Historian Adrian Cioflâncă, invited to take part in the discussion, explained this distance as representative of a biased visual representation of the past, one that is tainted by the communist regime’s falsification of history. Ironically, Romania’s World War II past as a perpetrator country was made inaccessible and erased during the communist era at the end of which the Romanian nation emerged as the victim.

The practice of memory activism led by Jude—by touring the film throughout the country, each screening followed by Q&A sessions with the director and other guests—demonstrates that, film can act as an important catalyst for public debates in Romania. Documentary film essays like *The Dead Nation* and *Odessa*, and memory projects reliant on documentary film such as Olga Ștefan’s, reveal a sustained interest of younger generations of filmmakers to address the gap between public knowledge and scholarly research, and to counter what historian Simon Geissbühler, quoting Paul

Ricoeur, had called the Romanian public culture of “not wanting to know”. This refers to “an obscure will not to inform oneself,” “a wanting-not-to-know,” “a strategy of avoidance, of evasion, of flight . . . an ambiguous form of forgetting, active as much as passive” (Ricoeur 2006, p. 449). Jude, like other younger Romanians, questioned the notion of inherited guilt. Although he does not feel guilty for crimes of the forefathers (as stated in the Q&A session). Jude opposes the wish of not wanting to know of his peers, and its extreme forms of Holocaust negation and denial. In a similar vein, Geissbühler argued that, while current and future Romanians are not guilty of the crimes their predecessors have committed, they have a special responsibility to “want to know” (Geissbühler 2018, pp. 151–73). The media attention *The Dead Nation* has received denotes a certain readiness to engage in a non-defensive manner with this historical past.

9. Conclusions

Notwithstanding the official acknowledgment of Romania’s historical guilt and the annual state-run commemoration stimulated by the findings and recommendations of the Holocaust commission headed by Elie Wiesel, Romanian civic society’s interest in this chapter of history has started to grow and gain visibility only in the last decade. This article has documented an activist cinematic practice that has developed independently of state sanctioned memory in post-Communist Romania. Jude’s *The Dead Nation* alongside Florin Iepan’s *Odessa*, and Olga Ștefan’s *The Future of Memory* as well as the annual activities of raising historical awareness by means of film led by One World Romania Festival suggest that cinematic expression has become a favored media for debating unsettling and difficult historical and social questions. As Jude takes on the role of mediator, reading out Emil Dorian’s diary pages, he symbolically assumes the obligation to raise awareness of a historical narrative made inaccessible. Public reactions to Jude’s film suggest a readiness for moments of “breathless” silence, which illustrate that the weight of history can be genuinely and responsibly dealt with through moments of quiet awareness. Critical reactions, including threats directed at Jude, also expose the persistence of an “us versus them” mentality, and the continuation of antisemitism recorded in Dorian’s diary. The film’s use of associative and dissociative montage generates a political energy of its own. The absence of graphic imagery is especially powerful, as it allows viewers to imagine and construct their own images for the horrors narrated in the diary. Poignantly, the visibility of the historical subjects—the men, women and children in the photographs—the collective portrait of the Romanian nation facilitates an act of witnessing the past. The scenes of innocent daily life captured in the photographs is undermined by the barbaric emerging in the diary pages.

The encounter with this barbarism of the everyday at best produces “breathless” silence, and at worst rejection, denial and the rekindling of old prejudices. The significance of *The Dead Nation* relates to its activist intentions to bring the Romanian public closer to a history which has been estranged from them and made obscure by decades of effective communist propaganda and violent repression. Jude’s commitment to give public visibility to this history, through the effective media of the documentary film, is continued by his most current film provocatively titled *I don’t care if we go down in history as barbarians* statement which belongs to Marshal Ion Antonescu—the historical figure Jude turns his attention to. Lastly, *The Dead Nation* shown at One World Romania Festival, is of further significance due to this festival’s mission “to create an active community, formed by young people who wish to know and to get involved in the difficulties other people face, people like you”. Unquestionably, younger generations are the main addressees, and those who are invited to reflect not only on the difficulties other people have faced, and continue to face, but also on what mediated encounters with estranged pasts demand from them.

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