



# RADU JUDE'S SATIRICAL STUDIES OF MALE RAGE AND SELF-PITY

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**Abstract:** The article discusses four Radu Jude films – the shorts *Alexandra* (2008) and *It Can Pass Through the Wall* (2014), the never released, 60-minute long *A Film for Friends* (2011), and Jude's official second feature, *Everybody in Our Family* (2012) – grouping them together as satirical studies of male rage and self-pity, with elements of psychodrama.

**Keywords:** Radu Jude, New Romanian Cinema, toxic masculinity, farce.

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The New Romanian Cinema (NRC) can be described, to a certain extent, as a cinema of (somewhat precarious) middle-class individuals (especially men) worried about toxic parental legacies – the harm inflicted on them by their parents and the harm they could themselves unintentionally inflict on their own children.<sup>1</sup> Films like Răzvan Rădulescu's *First of All, Felicia* (2010, co-directed with Melissa de Raaf), Călin Peter Netzer's *Child's Pose* (2013), Constantin Popescu's *Principles of Life* (2010), Cristian Mungiu's *Graduation* (2016), Adrian Sitaru's *Fixeur* (2016), Radu Muntean's *Boogie* (2008) and *Tuesday, After Christmas* (2010) are partly – sometimes mainly – about this. So are three of Radu Jude's features, *The Happiest Girl in the World* (2009), *Everybody in Our Family* (2012), and *Aferim!* (2005), as well as a couple of his short films, *Alexandra* (2008) and *It Can Pass Through the Wall* (2014).

Actually, Popescu's *Principles of Life* was also a project originated by Jude. It concerns a smugly prosperous Bucharest man (Vlad Ivanov), always going on about his strong, enlightened principles, who ends up savagely beating his teenage son (from a previous marriage) whom he had planned to take to the seaside over the weekend. After trying to develop this story with screenwriters Răzvan Rădulescu and Alexandru Baci, Jude instead chose to expand his own earlier short film *Alexandra* into what became his second feature, *Everybody in Our Family*.

The 25-minute long *Alexandra* is about an incident involving a divorced man (Șerban Pavlu), his small daughter (Alexandra Pascu), whom he is only allowed to see occasionally, his ex-

wife (Oana Ioachim), her new partner (Mimi Brănescu), and her mother (Cristina Ivan). Although everybody is officially on good terms with each other, it only takes a word from the child for her father to explode with paranoid rage at his ex-wife. The conflict is resolved before escalating into something more serious, but not before offering the viewer a glimpse into this obscene male rage seething close to the reasonable – we-are-all-civilized-grown-ups-putting-the-child-first – surface. Reworking this material for *Everybody in Our Family*, Radu Jude (together with novelist Corina Sabău as his co-writer) allows the conflict to escalate – into something that, viewed from the outside, looks like a hostage situation and is downright domestic violence. But the truly bold artistic move in *Everybody in Our Family* is to play everything as all-stops-out farce.

The year before, Jude had written and directed *A Film for Friends*, an ultra-low-budget, never commercially released, one-hour-long film about another enraged and self-pitying father and ex-husband (played by Gabriel Spahiu) who feels his life has entered a downward spiral following his divorce. This one-shot film presents itself as a video recording made by the character himself: his suicide video, to be exact. Made at a time when the New Romanian Cinema directors were preoccupied with a realism understood partly in temporal terms – film as canned 'real' time, as André Bazin's "time embalmed"<sup>2</sup> – *A Film for Friends* is something of a culmination of this interest: it comes up with a diegetic justification for itself as a recording that has ended up in front of our eyes<sup>3</sup>. It is also (as Romanian

critic Andrei Rus was among the first to describe in detail<sup>4</sup>) a wild, macabre comedy which keeps a cruelly satirical distance from the middle-aged, lower-middle-class male failure, anguish, and self-pity that it depicts.

The actor Gabriel Spahiu has a remarkable face: it suggests the archetype of the tragic clown; it can also suggest poverty and unremitting unhappiness on all fronts. His character faces the camera, addressing a number of relatives and ex-friends who have abandoned him; it quickly emerges that he is saying goodbye. His rambling speech indicates that he used to be a geography teacher who went through a sort of breakdown after divorcing his wife, followed by losing his job and undergoing a social decline. He now lives alone in a rented room. He has a teenage son. He feels that he has been shoved aside, that his existence has been cancelled, which fills him with resentment. At the same time, he believes that he has brought all this upon himself, therefore he is full of violent self-loathing. Frequently losing his voice, grimacing, and furiously running his hand through the little hair he has left, he blames himself for not being able to earn money and to be successful. Society's verdict, as he perceives it, is that he is a piece of trash, and he accepts this verdict. Then, as he keeps talking, self-hatred transforms into self-pity. The blame is turned outwards, towards his family and all the others who have deserted him: now he wants them to feel guilty for not having loved him enough. He then returns to self-hatred – to how he did not deserve to be loved in the first place. Then self-pity again. Then back to self-hatred. And again, and again, in an endless cycle. These oscillations are orchestrated so as to provoke a complex, volatile mixture of emotions in the viewer, somewhat different from one viewer to the next, gradually culminating in a nauseated impatience for him to get it over with.

Yet his farewell-cruel-world speech drags on, featuring the same cycles of self-hatred and lachrymose resentment, with flourishes of grandiloquence (“I leave this stage where no one wants me,” he announces at one point, self-importantly) and mundane irrelevancies (at some moment he mentions some stuffed peppers he intended to cook, as well as his son's kendo lessons). Then, after 30 minutes of laments, he shoots himself on camera – which, by the way, is a VHS camera, no less outdated (as Christian Ferencz-Flatz has noted<sup>5</sup>) than the suit he has chosen for the occasion. He falls off screen. The camera keeps recording the empty room – an ugly brown sofa, a closed door, a mirror with a religious icon stuck on it (or reflected in it), a wardrobe with three bottles of cleaning solution like trophies on its shelves – and the sound of traffic from outside. For a while, there is nothing else. Then the man who has shot himself in the head starts moaning off-screen. He keeps moaning – increasingly louder and more horribly. He reenters the frame, dragging himself on the floor, throwing himself around. As in a cruel, ghoulish joke – which this film is – the stereotypical abject failure has failed to properly kill himself. It would appear that dying with dignity is just as impossible as living with dignity. (This is often the case in Jude's films.)

The rest of the film is macabre slapstick comedy, with more

and more people coming into the room, alerted by his now incessant screaming: neighbors, then ambulance people – the room gradually filling up like the ship cabin in the Marx Brothers' *A Night at the Opera*. Footsteps squeak from the blood on the floor; people even start slipping on it. The sofa, too, becomes drenched in blood, as they try bandaging the atrociously suffering man – with toilet paper.

*Everybody in Our Family* is less extreme, but it, too, is over-the-top farcical, fueled by the same inclination towards the paroxysmic. It is a wonder that the label attached to Jude at the time – by the Romanian popular press and by many casual Romanian filmgoers as well – was that of “minimalism,” a term used at that point to describe all the directors associated with the New Romanian Cinema.<sup>6</sup> It is true that Jude's second feature (like his first, *The Happiest Girl in the World*) fits within the NRC formula, emphasizing long takes, ‘real time’, mundane subject matter, and an ‘observational’ narration consistently depicting the characters from the outside. On the other hand, there are early signs, inserted by the writer-director as a nod towards his Romanian audience, that *Everybody in Our Family* also possesses a streak of vaudeville. This time, the divorced man (Șerban Pavlu basically replaying his character from *Alexandra*) starts his day by visiting his parents, played by beloved actors Stela Popescu and Alexandru Arșinel, well-known to Romanian audiences of nearly all ages as a revue comedy duo; their sketches were often about bickering spouses – a staple of all vaudeville and also the subject of Jude's film. An actor with a particularly broad style, Arșinel plays the father as a man with a comically short fuse, who alternates between a jovial demeanour and apoplectic rage. In the course of the film, we discover that his son resembles him to a certain degree.

Pavlu's character, whose name is Marius, has visited his parents in order to borrow their car. As it turns out, he needs it because he wants to take his six-year old daughter, Sofia (Sofia Nicolaescu) – with whom he is allowed to spend one weekend every month – to the seaside. It is still early in the morning of a very hot Bucharest summer day (the intensifying heat plays a crucial role here, as it does in other tales of regular citizens going crazy – *Dog Day Afternoon*, etc.) when he presents himself at the door of his ex-wife's apartment, with a large toy octopus for Sofia and a flower pot for his former mother-in-law (Tamara Buciuceanu-Botez, another beloved veteran of Romanian revue theatre strengthening this film's vaudeville pedigree). He finds Sofia still sleeping. She has just returned from a Greek island the night before, together with her mother (Mihaela Sîrbu) and her mother's new partner (Gabriel Spahiu). She may have a slight fever, although she is energetic enough – she sings (accompanied by her grandmother's yodelling) while they all sit and wait for her mother to return home and give her permission. She is clearly not eager to leave with Marius (though she does not seem unhappy about it either); maybe spending two nights in a tent on a Romanian beach cannot compare to Greece; and it may be that her father's student lifestyle does not help much. (He earns money – as he is a dental technician – but his apartment



seems to have just one room, exceedingly small in comparison to the larger apartment the daughter lives in together with her mother and her mother's new partner, and which Marius had to leave after the divorce.) Anyway, it is clear that Sofia has a life with her mother, grandmother, and father-substitute, to which her real father does not really belong anymore: he has become a distant visitor. It is also clear that Marius can feel the estrangement, while also being utterly unable to fix it. Sofia calls him by his first name rather than "dad." Waiting for his ex-wife, Otilia, to come back and grant him her indispensable permission to take their daughter out for (what remains of) the weekend, he starts boiling with resentment. It's not long before he loses patience and, grabbing the little girl, tries to leave. Otilia's partner, Aurel, tries to stop him and accidentally gets a door slammed on his head. This is when Otilia returns home and things get really bad.

At this point in Radu Jude's artistic development, it is fair to say that he is still indebted to Cristi Puiu (Puiu's 2005 *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* – on which Jude had been an assistant director – has its own substantial comedic underpinning) and, in addition to him, to one of Puiu's declared models – the cinema of John Cassavetes, full of histrionic people behaving terribly in society. Jude's characters are histrionic as well: little Sofia and her grandmother have their home theatrics, while Marius is a compulsive clown; he does all manner of accents and funny voices to amuse his daughter and everything to annoy his ex-wife, quoting grand-sounding verse and improbable haikus, battering her with old Roman adages (*Fiat justitia, pereat mundus*) and highbrow cultural allusions (accusing her and Aurel of projecting a façade behind which they are actually ill-treating little Sofia, he pompously compares that façade with a Potemkin village).

But Jude's comedy is broader and more explosive than Puiu's, more manic, physically dynamic, and determinedly excruciating than anything in the New Romanian Cinema. When Otilia calls the police, Marius is childishly defiant. Five minutes later, he finds himself on his knees on the kitchen floor, begging her to call them again and tell them not to come. (The dialogue hints at the fact that he has behaved crazily before.) When Otilia shows herself inflexible, he starts manhandling her and Aurel. "I'm not doing anything to him!" he ludicrously cries out as he is tying up and gagging Aurel. He eventually ties them up together, back to back, using the cable from the electric drill, having the appearance of a tabloid psycho. (At this point he has blood on his shirt.) His desperate and risible plan is to wait the police out. Meanwhile, he is also trying to keep up appearances for Sofia (who has started to ask questions such as "Why is mommy on the floor"?) and her grandmother. He pauses from his psycho exertions to kiss the child and assure her that everything is a game (it actually looks a bit like some far-out, crazed extension of the home theatrics we saw earlier), although it is clear from the way he absent-mindedly kicks her other toys while handing her the stuffed octopus that he is incapable of doing the smallest fatherly gesture without inflicting her a potentially severe trauma. As for the grandmother, he lies to her that he is using the

bathroom – he has locked himself there with Otilia, who can be heard screaming. Later, while taking another pause from tying people up as if about to disembowel them, he pays a quick visit to his ex-mother-in-law, appealing to her as confessor or therapist. He then returns to tying them up, now using scotch tape and high-mindedly calling Aurel an "usurper," while accusing Otilia of having betrayed Jesus Christ himself when she betrayed him. On a more tearful note, he asks them (a little out of breath from all the work with scotch tape and electric drill cable), "Why can't we just get along?"

This spectacle of paranoid, childish, pitiful masculinity breaking down, orchestrated by Jude with tremendous gusto, culminates with Marius attempting to make his escape through a window overlooking an empty backyard. Stranded on top of a wall, perched on all fours, he vainly tries to strike up a conversation with a neighbour who's disapprovingly spying on his pathetic acrobatics. By now, Marius has come to suggest one of those cartoon characters who bring endless punishment upon themselves. (He unsurprisingly falls off the wall.)

It is interesting to remark once again that the film's manic quality, its slapstick and its vaudeville histrionics, went largely unnoticed in 2012 by Romanian critics and audiences alike.<sup>7</sup> By that time, a certain preconception regarding what a New Romanian Film should be was firmly in place: this cinema was associated with slice-of-life dramas, with rigorous, austere, de-dramatized narration, and with a certain style of acting – involving mumbling, absent-mindedly talking while chewing, maintaining a preoccupied, somewhat sullen, somewhat low-energy, yet prickly look, a look battered by life's daily chores and vexations – an acting which connoted everydayness. Early NRC films, beginning with Cristi Puiu's 2001 *Stuff and Dough*, had been saluted in Romania mainly for what was often called the "naturalness" – i.e., this effect of everydayness – of their performances; this was set against a somewhat unjust caricature of pre-2001 Romanian films, uniformly defined by stilted dialogue and stilted acting. (A blunt statement of this commonplace is offered by Monica Filimon in her 2017 book on Cristi Puiu: "For the first time, the people on screen look, behave, and talk exactly like the people in front of the screen."<sup>8</sup>) The association of NRC "natural" acting with a certain sulky, somewhat stupefied look is also a caricature: in Puiu's *Stuff and Dough* and *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, characters have various energy levels, various emotional registers, while in other classic examples of the New Romanian Cinema, like Radu Muntean's *Tuesday, After Christmas* and Răzvan Rădulescu's *First of All, Felicia*, strong emotions are alternately reined in and allowed to overflow. Still, this cliché can be said to fit a number of prominent NRC films: for example, in Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* and *Graduation*, nearly everybody on screen can be said to look somewhat tired and harrassed, their demeanor uniformly stunted. Overall, with its clowning and its links to popular styles of performance, Radu Jude's *Everybody in Our Family* should have registered a stronger contrast in 2012 with the general tone of seriousness of the NRC.<sup>9</sup>

Jude would return to the theme of bad breakups, of spouses

unable to let go, in his first stage production – an adaptation of Ingmar Bergman’s *Scenes from a Marriage*, which premiered in 2016 at the Timișoara National Theatre. The production had obvious links with *Everybody in Our Family*, with Jude revelling in dialogues rich in expressive insults (wife to husband: “I could buy a lay from anyone just to wash you out of my genitals.”), while dialing up the levels of ludicrousness and grotesquerie. However, as the show progressed, the endless role reversals between husband and wife – alternately dominator and dominated, dispassionate tormentor and abject slave – ultimately seemed schematic, suggesting a lecture on the difficulty of separation, methodically illustrating all the possible scenarios and permutations. *Everybody in Our Family* remains a richer approach of this theme.

Radu Jude would also return to the theme of children – whose parents or guardians are neglectful or worse – witnessing and hearing things they shouldn’t witness or hear. In his 2014 short *It Can Pass Through the Wall*, based on a Chekhov short story (*In the Coach-House*) and set in present-day Bucharest, a little girl (Sofia Nicolaescu from *Everybody in Our Family*) is left by her parents in the care of her grandfather

(Ion Arcudeanu) overnight. *It Can Pass Through the Wall* is a one-shot film lasting 17 minutes, with the camera lingering in the grandfather’s stuffy apartment for the entire duration, its eye roaming around, but never straying far from the little girl, who – we quickly realize – is absolutely terrified.<sup>10</sup> A man has committed suicide across the street. We hear his mother’s piercing cries from off-screen – or from what, considering Jude’s self-consciously theatrical direction, we might call “the wings.” The grandfather is playing backgammon with two friends, idly commenting on the suicide, their commentary a mixture of gossip, ghost stories, and folk wisdom either callous or trite. They never stop to ask themselves about the state the little girl could be in and do not consider sparing her their cynical or macabre comments, as they are totally oblivious of her presence. Jude’s sardonic use of folk wisdom sayings, in a way which points out their inappropriateness, anticipates his next feature, *Aferim!* (released the following year), where the majority of the characters express themselves in proverbs most of the time, and where the question of bad education – of what someone is forced to witness at an impressionable age – also returns with an added social dimension.

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#### Note:

1. For a general discussion of the NRC’s stylistic and thematic features, see Andrei Gorzo and Veronica Lazăr, “A Slight Unease About Capitalism: Radu Jude’s *The Happiest Girl in the World* and the New Romanian Cinema,” *Transilvania*, no. 4 (2022): 1-14. For an overview of the critical literature on the NRC, see Andrei Gorzo and Veronica Lazăr, “The New Romanian Cinema and Beyond: The Films of Radu Jude,” *Transilvania*, no. 3 (2022): 1-9.
2. For the relevance of Bazinian theory for the New Romanian Cinema, see, for instance, J. Dudley Andrew’s discussion of Cristian Mungiu’s 2007 NRC hit *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, in J. Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is!: Bazin’s Quest and Its Charge* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 54-56. See also Andrei Gorzo, “Police Adjective: The Words and the Things,” *Close Up* 2, no. 2 (2018): 21-27.
3. Rarely screened at festivals due to its in-between length (too long for a short, too short for a standard feature), *A Film for Friends* works best – as Christian Ferencz-Flatz has suggested – on YouTube, where the convention that we are looking at a leaked video attains maximum suggestiveness. Christian Ferencz-Flatz, *Filmul ca situație socială* (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2018), 191.
4. Andrei Rus, “Farsele macabre ale lui Radu Jude,” in *Politicile filmului. Contribuții la interpretarea cinemaului românesc contemporan*, eds. Andrei Gorzo and Andrei State (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2014), 119-127.
5. Ferencz-Flatz, *Filmul ca situație socială*, 189.
6. It is also the key term in scholar Dominique Nasta’s discussion of the NRC aesthetic. See Dominique Nasta, *Contemporary Romanian Cinema: The History of an Unexpected Miracle* (Columbia University Press, 2013).
7. The film’s critical reception in Romania was less than enthusiastic, with critics tending to miss its kineticism, its madcap energy. A clear example: writing in the popular Romanian press, experienced critic Tudor Caranfil found Jude’s second feature merely derivative of superior NRC works by more established filmmakers like Cristi Puiu, Radu Muntean, and Cristian Mungiu. See Tudor Caranfil, “Un film înșăilat din prefabricate de nou Val,” *Cațavencii*, April 12, 2012, <https://www.catavencii.ro/un-film-insailat-din-prefabricate-de-nou-val/>, last accessed May 23, 2022. In his 2013 *Romanian New Wave Cinema: An Introduction* (McFarland), academic critic Doru Pop is even wider off the mark, mistaking *Everybody in Our Family* for a failed thriller and a Haneke imitation (224-225). On the contrary, the originality of the film’s farcical charge was usually not lost on the international reviewers who saw it at film festivals. For instance, Polish critic Michał Oleszczyk perceptively wrote for *RogerEbert.com* that “[w]hat makes the movie work is the consistent, comical self-pity of Marius, who at one point even professes mad love for Otilia and says they should get back together again. [...] In this moment, the film almost plays like a kitchen-sink version of *His Girl Friday*, with madcap Marius trying to save Otilia from a lifetime of boredom with Aurel the fuddy-duddy.” See Michał Oleszczyk, “To the moon, Alice! – in Romanian,” February 27, 2013, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/everybody-in-our-family-2012>, last accessed May 23, 2022. The first substantial piece of critical writing about Jude in Romanian was Andrei Rus’s aforementioned essay from 2014, “Farsele macabre ale lui Radu Jude,” which, as its title indicates, was particularly sensitive to the filmmaker’s daring brand of comedy.
8. Monica Filimon, *Cristi Puiu* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 49.
9. One can sense Jude’s taste for disharmony and his pleasure in making the viewer uncomfortable, even embarrassed, in the way he indulges



Sofia's tone-deaf singing of a children's song. The almost hysterical dissonance of her song is reworked in one of the film's trailers, like an omen of a nervous breakdown.

10. Or, as László Strausz has put it in his analysis of the film, "the camera is glued to the confused Sofia, who tries to make sense of what is going on around her." László Strausz, "Realism under Construction," *Short Film Studies* 7, no. 2 (2017): 149-152.

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*Toată lumea din familia noastră*, directed by Radu Jude, 2012. Copyright Hi Film Productions  
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