



LITERATURE, JEWISHNESS, AND PERIOD DRAMA IN RADU JUDE'S *SCARRED HEARTS*

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Abstract: The article offers an in-depth discussion of Radu Jude's 2016 film *Scarred Hearts*, adapted from Max Blecher's autobiographical novel with the same title (1937), as well as other of his writings. The article is structured in four parts. The first references André Bazin's celebrated essay on Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*, bringing it to bear on a discussion of the unorthodox relation between Jude's film and its literary sources. The second section of the article discusses Jude's decision to foreground the protagonist's—and the novelist's—Jewish identity. Set far from home, in France, in an isolated sanatorium for tuberculosis, Blecher's novel was unconcerned with public events such as the rise of the anti-Semitic far right all over Europe; they didn't intrude—not even as background noise. Transposing the story to a Romanian sanatorium, Jude decided to have the young Jewish protagonist go through his experiences with terminal sickness and literature, with love and friendship, against an implied background of rising anti-Semitism, of increasingly widespread support for the local Iron Guard, as well as for Hitler. In its third section, the article discusses Radu Jude's approach to period drama, analyzing his mix of period detail and anachronism. The fourth section discusses Jude's intermedial game-playing and general artistic playfulness.

Keywords: Radu Jude, *Scarred Hearts*, Max Blecher, Jewish identity, intermediality, literary adaptation, anti-Semitism, period drama.

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The Relation between the film and the literary text

In its opening credits, Radu Jude's *Scarred Hearts* describes itself as a film "freely adapted from Max Blecher's literary works." It is worth trying to establish more precisely what kind of adaptation we are dealing with. The homonymous novel, published by Blecher (1909–1938) in 1937, is a partly autobiographical, partly fictional account echoing the experience—the bodily and psychological torments—of a young Romanian writer diagnosed with spinal tuberculosis at the age of 19 and forced to spend the rest of his short life in several European sanatoriums, bedridden and captive in a plaster cast. One thing about the film that should be

immediately striking to Blecher readers is that writer-director Jude doesn't make the slightest attempt to filter his presentation or staging of the narrative events through the subjectivity of the main character: in other words, he doesn't do anything to construct a cinematic equivalent for the "exacerbated perceptions," "the out-of-the-ordinary sensorial acuity" that Romanian literary critics (Dinu Pillat, Adrian Marino) had traditionally deemed so central to Blecher's writing.

One example should suffice: the scene in which the doctor subjects young Emanuel to a puncture for the first time. In Blecher's *Scarred Hearts*, the narration is in the third person, but at the same time it is tightly wrapped around Emanuel's subjectivity. Here is a passage:

“Around him he saw his wardrobe, the books and the table, the old familiar things, the well-known things, but now they came unstuck, indecipherable in their murky lucidity, like the chaotic words shouted by an unknown voice in a throng of people crowding out an assembly hall.

‘Anaesthetic,’ said the doctor laconically.

The only thing Emanuel could see was the assistant approaching the bed with a large glass tube. The doctor covered Emanuel’s face with his shirt and told the concierge to take hold of his hands. The big test-tube gave a sudden hiss and Emanuel felt, in a place just above the abscess, an ice-cold gush of liquid on his skin that stiffened the flesh around it.

A metallic box opened and closed.

‘Needle,’ said the doctor, as the assistant approached once more.

‘The needle... Now he’s going to stab me with the needle...’ thought Emanuel. Each second throbbed terribly in his temples.

(...)

He opened his eyes a crack and through part of the shirt he spied the assistant pumping something into a bottle; he couldn’t make out anything else.

(...)

The concierge lifted the shirt off his eyes. The doctor was swabbing ether onto a little spot that bled a little. The bottle on the table was full of thick yellowish liquid.

‘What’s that?’ Emanuel asked, worn out of the strain and agitation.

‘Pus, my friend! Pus!’ replied the doctor with his usual joviality.¹

This passage could very easily be turned into a cinematic *découpage*. Basically, Blecher has already done the shot-by-shot-breakdown, complete with descriptions of camera angles and sounds, and also with suggestions for small ‘special effects’—expressionist distortions of visual and aural reality (the surrounding objects coming unstuck “in their murky lucidity,” the throb in the temples), a reality which Emanuel, in his pained and troubled state, is perceiving distortedly. But, of course, a lot of the Romanian art cinema which emerged after the year 2000 is resolutely anti-expressionist: it refuses to subjectivize the events it shows, favoring instead a clinical, external presentation. Jude’s film of Blecher’s *Scarred Hearts* is no exception: it is a film constructed of fixed shots, mostly long takes, all of them objective views—none of them represent Emanuel’s (or another character’s) optical point of view.²

Jude doesn’t attempt to ‘translate’ in cinematic terms the inner life that we’re plugged into while reading Blecher. He does something else with that inner life: he transcribes it on the screen just as he finds it on the page—he lifts chunks of Blecher’s prose (not only from *Scarred Hearts*, but also from his other novel, *Occurrence in the Immediate Unreality*, published in 1936,³ as well

as from his sanatorium diary, *The Illuminated Burrow*, published in 1971) and showcases them as intertitles. These fragments have different lengths—from just a few words to long, complex sentences. Just as no excerpt ends with a full stop, the first word is never capitalized; as a matter of fact, most often it is not even the first word in a sentence—most of Jude’s excerpts start in the middle of Blecher’s sentences. In this way, the excerpts wear the marks of their extraction from bigger blocks of prose; they are chips or splinters. And, especially in the first part of the film, there is not always a direct or obvious relation between what can be read in these intertitles and what can be seen in the sequences preceding or following them. (Romanian film scholar Doru Pop has described the intertitles as “textual duplicates of the visual narration,”⁴ but most of them are—emphatically—nothing like that.) For example, one of the first intertitles reads: “Immense new hopes and expectations were born in me.” Jude doesn’t try to make us see the hopes and expectations in the sequences flanking this bit of Blecher’s prose; he doesn’t try to express them through either dialogue, staging or acting. And, because he doesn’t do that, he brings out the mutual alterity of the two media—the literary and the cinematic.

Writing in 1951 about Robert Bresson’s *Diary of a Country Priest*, which Bresson had adapted from Georges Bernanos’s 1936 novel, André Bazin remarked that Bresson had neither contented himself to illustrate the novel, nor attempted to construct a film equivalent. Instead he had chosen to treat the novelist’s prose as a “cold, hard fact,” a brute fact, a hard reality, limiting himself to filming—to documenting—that reality: the fact itself of the existence of Bernanos’s prose.⁵ What Jude does in *Scarred Hearts* could be described in similar terms. As Blecher scholar Doris Mironescu has put it in an insightfully appreciative review of the film, “Jude doesn’t want to speak in Blecher’s name or in his place; he doesn’t claim access to that place in the name of his intimate knowledge of Blecher’s manuscripts.”⁶ He brings the literary in his film only to invite the viewer to examine it as—in the words of critic Christian Ferencz-Flatz—“a foreign body.”⁷ Of course, Jude’s film also resembles Bresson’s in a more obvious way: both films portray sick young men during the last months of their lives.⁸

Another Bazinian observation which is also relevant to our case is that, although Bresson’s literary source abounds in moments and images which read as if they’re waiting to be filmed, as if their impact on screen were guaranteed (Bazin’s example is the moment in which the priest’s eye meets the dead stare of a rabbit, one in a bloodied furry bundle of dead rabbits thrown in a game-bag), Bresson ignores most of them.⁹ Blecher’s novel is full of striking images and macabre details: a scene in which Emanuel’s horse-driven carriage gets stuck on the muddy beach; the image of a woman



patient's amputated leg, which her servant (seeing it carried out of the operating room by a nurse) takes for a bouquet. Like Bresson before him, Jude leaves most of these promising images unfiled. Even when he uses a visually suggestive Blecherian description of a dream (taken not from the author's *Scarred Hearts*, but from his sanatorium diary)—about being trapped inside a room which is really the skull of a dead horse, with the horse's empty orbs as the windows—Jude doesn't attempt to film it; he simply has the protagonist describe it.

Bazin noted that, of the two versions of *Diary of a Country Priest*, Bernanos's and Bresson's, it is the novel that seems more "cinematic" (more suspenseful, more powerfully visual, etc.), while the film seems more "literary"¹⁰. This observation also holds true for the two *Scarred Hearts*, Blecher's and Jude's. First, there is more dialogue in the film than in the novel. Second, the protagonist, Emanuel, comes across as much more bookish on screen than in the novel: he talks about books more, while quoting and reciting from them (most often in a mocking, parodic manner) at the slightest provocation (when he's not quoting or mimicking radio and newspaper advertisements).

Not that he would only be interested in books: he's also interested in discussing the current (1937) Romanian and European political situation—the anti-Semitic far right's ascension to power. Such exchanges are completely absent from Blecher's literary writings and almost impossible to trace even in his letters. At a certain point, Jude (who in his previous film, *Aferim!*, had provided his characters with dialogue which was in large part a collage of literary texts from many different sources) borrows some famous lines from Romanian Jewish writer Mihail Sebastian's polemically autobiographical essay *How I Became a Hooligan* (1935) and makes Emanuel voice them, thus endowing Emanuel with an acute consciousness of his Jewish identity: "I have never had a conversation with someone without asking myself whether that person knows I'm a Jew and whether, knowing that fact, he or she forgives me for it."¹¹ Neither Blecher's Emanuel, nor Blecher himself ever makes such a confession.

The Jewish identity

So, taking a decisive step outside the purely literary frame, Radu Jude includes in the film the historical context of the experiences described by Blecher. Should this maneuver be regarded with a certain suspicion? It is clearly motivated by the opposite of anti-Semitism, but couldn't it be seen as somewhat analogous to the anti-Semite's always identifying a Jew as *The Jew*? After all, judging from his writings and from everything that is known about him, Blecher himself never grounded his personal identity on his Jewishness.

It is difficult to establish whether the absence of Jewish references in Blecher's writings is directly significant or

not—whether it was indifference or a form of resistance to the intrusion of his anti-Semitic environment. In the case of Jude's film, however, the decision to emphasize the matter of Jewish identity amounts to a straightforward acknowledgement of the fact that the film—unavoidably—looks at Blecher's life and work from the vantage point of a later era; from this vantage point, ignoring the political context—ignoring how anti-Semitic history was gathering momentum as Blecher was dying—can look more like a guilty truncation of the past rather than an objective or neutral representation of it. In fact, pointing out that the anti-Semitic context can't be overlooked may have been one of the reasons why this film was made. Increasingly, in 1930s Romania (and later during the war), an individual's identification as a Jew ceased being a matter of personal preference or choice: the identity of a Jewish citizen (or ex-citizen, after the Goga-Cuza government—in office between December 29, 1937, and February 10, 1938—stripped the Jewish population of its citizenship) was inevitably produced by the state, with concrete (not only symbolic) consequences on the citizen's life. In those circumstances, claiming that identity was still a matter of personal choice, or trying to pursue art and literature as practices that were universal, autonomous, and not tarnished by politics, would have amounted to no more than a disconnection from—or avoidance of—a pressing reality.

Incidentally, it is worth looking at how the enforced marking of Jewish writers as Jewish is linked to various pronouncements insisting on the autonomy of aesthetics from politics. In his 1941 *History of Romanian Literature* (published at a time when Romania, as an ally of Nazi Germany, had adopted an anti-Jewish legislation), literary critic G. Călinescu dedicated a coda to the question of the specifically national in literature. An enormously influential critic of Romanian literature, Călinescu (1899–1965) would later be credited with playing a major role in establishing a Romanian literary canon based on the principle of aesthetic autonomy (even though his doctrinal development was in fact more complex). In 1941, he was known as a (somewhat ambiguous) supporter of several Jewish writers. In the 1941 coda to his *History*, he uses literature produced by Jewish authors in order to emphasize Romanian "national specificity" by contrast. The literature of Jewish writers proves too ethnically marked so as meet the requirement of disinterested creation: "The Jews, few for reasons of natural proportionality, and present in our literature just as they are in all others, remain a factor from outside the racial circle, constituting a bridge between the national and the universal. [...] In literature they are always well informed and given to propagate all manner of novelties. They are anti-classical, modernist, agitated by all sorts of problems. They counterbalance the inertia of tradition, forcing tradition to revise itself. Their sincere humanitarianism modifies a spirit of self-

preservation which could otherwise degenerate into obtuseness; they nudge this spirit towards an elevated Christian vision. Virtues like these come hand in hand with their typical irritating faults: the lack of any interest in creation as an end in itself, the obsession with ‘lived experience’ and ‘the authentic’, the negation of criticism (which we—being a constructive race—are in need of), humanitarianism pushed to such extremes that it starts impinging on our national rights and traits. Because of this tactlessness, the Jews—here as elsewhere—regularly bring everybody’s wrath upon themselves.”¹² Or this passage about writer F. Aderca (1891-1962): “Like almost every Jewish writer, F. Aderca is obsessed with humanitarianism, pacifism, and all the others aspects of internationalism. [...] The anti-national fanaticism of the Jews (who in fact are nationalistic for themselves) leads them to tactless manifestations which are really errors of judgement, and apt to irritate even the most unprejudiced mind. [...] In fact, this curious mentality belongs to the Jews and to them alone, and herein lies their tragedy. They don’t understand that national interest is a fundamental coordinate of our soul (together with the territory we live on). Their point of view is that of a nomadic people, indifferent to and contemptuous of all other peoples.” G. Călinescu finds that in Aderca’s work “the national ideal is contested and ridiculed”; the reason for this is that the Jew is, secretly, “a Jewish nationalist on foreign territory,” sworn to resisting any affirmation of national specificity and denying the existence of a Romanian essence.¹³

G. Călinescu also insists that identifying specific ethnic traits—either Jewish or Romanian—has nothing to do with politics: politics and pure literary creation must be separated. Or, to put it differently, anti-Semitic persecution and praise for Jewish writers can peacefully co-exist in the universe of a critic like G. Călinescu (who is clearly free of anti-Semitic hatred). This is why his *History of Romanian Literature*, which played a fundamental role in the emergence of the Romanian postwar literary canon, can be seen as a bridge between the explicit anti-Semitism of the interwar and World War II years (through Călinescu’s “ethnic” readings of particular novels and his postulation of “essential” Jewish features, supposedly incompatible with the Romanian character), and the aesthetic ‘autonomism’ which, from the 1960s onwards (after pushing socialist realism to the margins), would serve as the reigning principle of the local literary field.¹⁴ The post-1960 depoliticization of Romanian literary criticism included a tendency to keep completely silent about the matter of Jewish identity—including the history of anti-Semitic persecution and the major responsibility of the Romanian state and its citizens. This tendency was strengthened not only by the aesthetic conservatism of the postwar literary canon (which implicitly and to a certain degree marginalized the interwar avant-garde movements to which many Jewish

writers had contributed), but also by the elements of nationalism and (both latent and explicit) anti-Semitism which were and are present in Romanian communism and post-communism. In these circumstances, Radu Jude’s adaptation of *Scarred Hearts* involves both a historical contextualization of Blecher’s moment and, in its subtext, a cultural contextualization of Blecher’s posterity as a (no-matter-how-reluctantly) Jewish writer.

This departure from the internal logic of the novel opens the possibility of questioning another clichéd approach: identification with the main character by virtue of the ‘universality’ of his suffering and his humanity. In fact, Emanuel was one of those to whom such universality was denied at the time, because of his belonging to a “race” with ostentatiously specific and hostile characteristics; his experience and horizon of expectation were radically different from those of the contemporary non-Jewish reader. It can be argued that, by not making any attempt to convey the subjective, internal, phenomenological slant through which someone afflicted with bone tuberculosis views the world and feels his or her own body, Jude makes precisely that political point. Or the point may be larger—it may have to do with the very experience of extraordinary suffering, physical paralysis, and imminent death itself; without depriving the spectator of a strong emotional involvement, Jude’s approach limits the possibility of illusory identification with such extreme pain. His Emanuel is not ‘man in general’, he is not ‘everyman,’ or ‘any of us’.

The problem of the “historical” or “period” film

In a way that may appear paradoxical, Jude’s work of historical contextualization is also the mark of a relativization, of a distantiation from the film’s subject matter. Jude is far from believing that building a perfect replica of the past is either possible or desirable—at least in cinema. Playfully foregrounding the artificiality of its historical reconstruction by blatantly deriving a lot of its dialogue from literary sources, *Aferim!* (2015) had signaled his skepticism about the possibility of accessing the past other than in a very partial, approximate, distorted, and culturally informed manner.¹⁵ The conventionality of the historical film, based on partial representations of the past, is acknowledged in *Scarred Hearts* through the refusal of detailed historical reconstruction (“meticulously detailed” being a cliché used for expressing indiscriminate admiration for cinematic reconstructions of the past).

Scarred Hearts does transpose us to a reconstructed 1930s setting, but the reconstruction is clearly not driven by an obsession with fidelity, nor by a desire to fill the frame with as much 30s paraphernalia as possible, producing a certain kind of satisfaction through the sheer density of period objects. The reconstruction here consists of a combination of historically accurate elements, intentional anachronisms, and continuities between the



1930s and our own era, the latter potentially inducing an almost strange feeling of familiarity. This familiarity is not like witnessing the past ‘come alive’ before our eyes: apart from shooting them in the old square-shaped Academy Ratio that was being used in the 1930s (scholar Ágnes Pethő also mentions “the rounded corners added as a further gesture of cinematic calligraphy imitating the cropped edges of old photographs”¹⁶), Jude avoids giving his images any historical patina, anything to do with that image of the interwar period as an elegant, nostalgic piece of china—an image which has sadly become commonplace in Romania; this is one period film which doesn’t really look like an album of old, yellowing photographs, although it has been compared to one. The feeling of familiarity arises from the marked presence of anachronistic elements and from the continuous leaps to non-familiarity, then back again, and so on. As in *Aferim!* (though sometimes more difficult to perceive), there is a permanent play between closeness and distance, recognition and estrangement from the characters and the historical period, so that the viewer is not allowed to be captivated completely, without dissonances, by the reconstructed past.¹⁷

At first, what is most visible to us is, of course, what’s most ‘historical’: the horse-drawn carriages, the straw hats, the chests or trunks of wood and leather, the costumes worn by the medical staff, the stretcher-beds on which the patients lie. Immediately after, strange and striking, comes the medical equipment: the X-ray contraption with its funnel; the huge, scary syringes; the small sacks tied to the patients’ feet for extending their atrophied legs; the patients in the background, tied to devices which look as if they were designed for torture; the patient uncomfortably spread on a wooden grate while waiting for his plaster cast to dry; doctor Ceafalan jovially telling a nurse about some experiment conducted around 1870 on convicts, involving their being fed rotten polenta and leading to their becoming sick with pellagra (“Served them right, too!” doctor Ceafalan adds). The medical equipment, with its retro-sci-fi air, looks so violently intrusive to the bodies of the patients and to our eyes—in contrast to those elements of the period costumes and sets that are soft on the eye—that it doesn’t so much add to the authenticity of the historical reconstruction as it lends it a playfully macabre dimension.¹⁸

The strangeness generated by Jude’s use of the ‘period’ elements is amplified by their immersion in the often very modern air and language of the film’s dialogue. There is a moment when Emanuel utters a word that is no longer in use today—a Romanianized version of a French word for “slut,” *salope*—and the familiarity of the surrounding language brings out the antiquarian resonance of this isolated word in all its quaintness, while the isolated word, in its turn, breaks the spell of familiarity. Even the ‘period’ music and (most of the) clothes can be easily

transplanted to the present. The ‘period’ quality of the clothes is generally toned down: with the exception of some of Solange’s costumes (which are thus rendered even more striking), they don’t anchor the film strongly in a historical era and they don’t fuel fantasies of vintage fashion. As for the period songs, a number of them are heard on the radio, which suits a present-day audience’s habit of relating to them as museum pieces.

Elements of continuity between Emanuel’s and the viewer’s era—a traffic incident with angry drivers swearing at each other (there is a similar episode in *Aferim!*), the care and comfort provided by the sanatorium, envious talk of the politicians’ corruption, of the sybaritic opulence in which they live—are seamlessly integrated with anachronisms (or elements which feel like anachronisms). Some of the latter have to do with language—someone talking about having to write a “text” for a newspaper, characters referring to menstruation or to the lavatory in the modern colloquial way. Others concern relations between characters. For instance, sexual relations seem free of hierarchies and patriarchal reflexes (this may have something to do with the fact that the characters, being gravely ill, don’t have much to lose in the crass materiality of their condition). Emanuel’s relation with his father is affectionate in a way which seems very modern; the warmth is close to the surface and they have a common language: when bidding farewell to his father, Emanuel quotes to him in a clownish voice from Mateiu Caragiale’s 1929 cult novel *Rakes of the Old Court* (in the eyes of a Romanian audience, the literary reference also helps establish the youth as a dandy¹⁹); at another moment, he jokingly informs the older man that he would kill him if he fell sick and needed filial care. Overall, in this complex weave of accuracy and anachronisms, some of the latter are there to ease the immersion of the viewer, to spare him or her the asperities of the historical differences, or to highlight historical rhymes between past and present; on the contrary, others are designed to block the immersion and to spark a playful light of artifice and modernity, as a reminder of Walter Benjamin’s notion that there is no past for us outside its permanently recreated relation to the present, that the present controls the past, if only to make itself vulnerable to its eruptions.

Jude’s farcical macabre

One of the surprising things that Jude and his main actor, Lucian Teodor Rus, do to Blecher’s protagonist is that they turn him into a portrait of the artist-intellectual as—partly—a young clown. For the most part, their Emanuel lives in the world of books, arts, and words, but he doesn’t live there solemnly; he plays with them, he uses them as materials for his clowning and his flirtations, he is a parodist and a puckish ham. His comic imitations of various voices from radio advertisements (“Cure drunkenness before drunkenness

breaks the law!,” “The devil is black, but not as black as ‘Vultur’ boot polish!”) become a trademark of his character and a motif in the film. While flirting with another patient, Isa (Ilinca Hărnut), he quotes to her an advertising slogan for a champagne brand called Mott, but he changes the name of the brand with the name of his affliction—“Pott’s disease”; of course he doesn’t lose the opportunity to remind Isa that the Mott advertisement was written by famous poet Tudor Arghezi. He treats literature as a permanent source of inspiration for such frolicking. To Solange (Ivana Mladenović), with whom he has a romance, he quotes from a famous folk poem about Master Manole—a mason who walls his wife in a monastery he’s constructing—playfully comparing this sacrifice with Solange’s fate of being embraced by a lover who’s encased in plaster. To Dr. Ceafalan (Șerban Pavlu) he quotes from *Richard III*, while (switching from literature to painting) comparing another doctor with the inquisitor painted by El Greco. The doctor and Solange can be quite histrionic themselves: for instance, she amuses Emanuel by mixing two Mihai Eminescu poems and reciting the results to him, while the doctor is given to parodically declaiming pompously phrased orders like “Out of my sight!” And such inclinations or élans are shared by others living in the micro-society of the sanatorium or in its margins as well. For instance, there is a patient who does Hitler impersonations. There is also Emanuel’s father, marvelously played by Alexandru Dabija, who at various points in the film tells a Jehovah joke, sings a well-known children’s song in approximate German, and calmly recounts a practical joke that he played on a friend, causing him a serious accident. In the last part of the film, when Emanuel’s energy level gradually diminishes to a zero, the loss is very striking: it fell from great heights.

The literary-jester streak is, of course, not the protagonist’s only dimension. Apart from giving ample space to his preoccupation with Jewish identity and with politics in general, the film sketches several coordinates of his (and Blecher’s) literary sensibility: his affinity with the poetry of George Bacovia (a major Romanian Symbolist), his debts to literary decadentism and surrealism. But it is important to stress that this sensibility is not one that Jude is attempting to emulate in his film. The spirit of the film is different—closer to that of Jude’s earlier films than to that of Blecher’s writings.

There is a lot of playfulness in Jude’s work. Although *Scarred Hearts* is a film about a dying young man, set in a sanatorium and consisting almost exclusively of fixed shots, which add their immobility to the immobility of the afflicted patients—a description which can make the film sound doubly punishing to the viewer—it is not a particularly austere film from a stylistical point of view. On the contrary, the shots (with art direction provided by Cristian Niculescu and lighting by Marius Panduru) are rich in gags and playful touches: from the stuffed

boar which Dr. Ceafalan keeps in his office (and which looks towards the camera, although from the margins of the frame), to the tied patients in the backgrounds of some shots (looking like fodder for diabolical tortures and evil-doctor experiments); and from the grouping of the medical staff around Emanuel, at a certain point, in a tableau parodying Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*,²⁰ to a scene in which Emanuel visits Solange in a nearby town and, as she opens the door, we glimpse behind her, out of focus, a strange man on all fours, with one of her furs around his neck, doing something that is never elucidated. (The strange man is played by film critic Andrei Rus, whose 2014 essay “Farsele macabre ale lui Radu Jude” [“The Macabre Farces of Radu Jude”] was one of the first substantial pieces of writing on the director.²¹) The presence of such gags and touches is a reason why, no matter how artfully composed the film’s shots—whose design often brings out geometric patterns, and makes use of doorways, window frames, mirrors, and other reflecting surfaces—formalism never takes over. Another reason is that the compositional schemas used by Jude are rather diverse—the same schema is not repeated too often.

When Emanuel is first wrapped in his plaster cast, he is made to lie face down on a wooden grate, with his chest and his abdomen hanging out, and there is something comical about this position. For the sake of good taste, of decorum, of preserving a solemn unity of tone fitting the film’s subject matter, many directors would have chosen not to confront the viewers with such potentially comic sights. On the contrary, Jude highlights aspects like these—as the patients lie face down on those grates, the doctor jokingly refers to them as meatballs on the grill. The potentially comic element in Emanuel’s physical position is part of the complexity of the scene, as is the doctor’s near-euphoric joviality (he has put on a romantic song on the gramophone and, while working on Emanuel, he is telling the nurse about the bacteriological experiment involving convicts and rotten polenta), which Emanuel is making efforts to match. Fitting Emanuel with the plaster cast is visualized by Jude with no recourse to cliché and, therefore, without any cues whether it is ‘correct’ for the viewer to laugh (and, if so, then up to what point) or just be horrified. The bad taste of some of the characters’ jokes and declamations is not something that the film keeps at arm’s length, attributing it to the characters exclusively and affecting an ethnographic-descriptive stance towards it. It is something that Jude takes an obvious, amused, playful interest in.

Jude’s audacity is nowhere more evident than in the fact that he is willing to visualize scenes from the patients’ sex lives—Emanuel with Solange, Emanuel with Isa—and do so in a manner which is neither solemn, nor euphemistic, acknowledging the discomfort and the technical difficulties (even catastrophes) produced by the lovers’ condition, and not shying away from



reminding viewers (not comfortably in this particular case) that erotic awkwardness is also a venerable source of comedy.²²

Idiosyncratic, richly intertextual, full of verve and substantial ideas about literature, film, and history, *Scarred Hearts* confirmed Jude as an innovator of Romanian cinema. And, even more than in the case of *Aferim!*—a film whose critical engagement with

national literature was not easily translatable from the Romanian language, but, nevertheless, a film capable of touching, through its story, an international political nerve—the density of *Scarred Hearts*'s references to Romanian culture, the depth of its immersion in it, were all the more remarkable for being difficult to export and translate culturally in an international idiom of festival cinema.²³

Notes:

1. M. Blecher, *Scarred Hearts*, translated from the Romanian by Henry Howard (London: Old Street Publishing, 2008), 18–9.
2. For a discussion of the New Romanian Cinema's rigorously anti-expressionist commitment to observational externality, see Andrei Gorzo, "In the Name of 'The Ambiguity of the Real': Romanian Cinematic Realism after the 2000s," *Film Criticism* 41, no. 2 (2017): <https://doi.org/10.3998/fc.13761232.0041.206>, last accessed on October 11, 2022. It is worth noting that in some of the defining films of the NRC—Cristi Puiu's *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (2005), Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007)—this commitment to a no-comment style of presentation goes hand in hand with an interest in medical procedures.
3. See Max Blecher, *Occurrence in the Immediate Unreality*, translated by Alistair Ian Blyth (Plymouth: Plymouth University Press, 2009).
4. Doru Pop, "The Essay as Mode of Expression and the Essayistic Practices in Radu Jude's Cinema," *Ekphrasis*, no. 2 (2021): 174–192, <https://www.ekphrasisjournal.ro/docs/R1/12E26.pdf>, last accessed on July 3, 2022.
5. André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, vol. I, translated from the French by Hugh Gray (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1967), 136.
6. Doris Mironescu, "Inimi cicatrizate de Radu Jude și problema biografiei," *Cultura*, January 2, 2017, <https://blog.revistacultura.ro/2017/01/02/inimi-cicatrizate-de-radu-jude-si-problema-biografiei-o-analiza-de-doris-mironescu/>, last accessed on July 3, 2022.
7. Christian Ferencz-Flatz, "Trei șanse ratate. Despre *Inimi cicatrizate* al lui Radu Jude," *Vatra*, no. 3 (2017), posted online on February 12, 2017, <https://revistavatra.org/2017/02/12/christian-ferencz-flatz-trei-sanse-ratate-despre-inimi-cicatrizate-al-lui-radu-jude/>, last accessed on July 3, 2022.
8. Jude's 2013 short film *Shadow of a Cloud* is more obviously Bressonian: it is a sympathetic study of a priest struggling to keep his dignity in a secularized, yet superstitious late-capitalist world (contemporary Bucharest) of supermarkets and undertaker services with names like "Stairway to Heaven," a world in which a priest is just a provider of services. Jude makes the homage explicit by having his protagonist utter in passing the words "All is grace," which (while being somewhat unusual in the mouth of a Romanian Orthodox priest) are, of course, the last words of Bresson's country priest.
9. Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 127–128.
10. Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 128.
11. During Romania's first post-communist decades, anti-communism rapidly became the new dominant ideology, especially among intellectuals, who more often than not referred to the communist regime by metonymically reducing it to its last stage—touched by senility, degradation, severe austerity, paranoia, flagrant violations of human rights, etc. The anti-communism shared among Romanian intellectuals contributed to the rationalization of a whole range of right-wing economic and social policies, to privatizations, to the destruction of the welfare state, the liberalization of the economy, and not least to an influential rhetoric of contempt towards the popular "masses," associated with the basest of needs and considered to be impervious to abstract ideals such as the aspiration for freedom. For the intellectuals, anti-communism was also a rich source of self-legitimation, articulated into a system of simplistic oppositions: between the enlightened elites and the masses, who had been morally and spiritually damaged by living in a dictatorship; between good capitalism and bad communism; between the ages of freedom and the ages of oppression. See Mihai Iovănel, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990–2020* (Iași: Polirom, 2021), 36. An early corollary of anti-communism, especially in the 1990s, was nostalgia for an imaginary "golden age of the spirit," the interwar period: "In a primitive reversal of axiological polarity, everything that the communist regime had deemed positive became negative, and vice versa. The fascists and the reactionaries of the interwar era were thus reembraced, their problematic sides included." Iovănel, *Istoria*, 37. While the communist regime had eventually come to criticize the errors it had made in the 1950s, it had chosen to keep silent about the massive Romanian participation in the Holocaust. Ironically, despite its unyielding indictment of the recent past, post- and anti-communist intelligentsia shared the communist regime's reluctance to confront the infamous pre-communist state politics and the shameful allegiances

- of 1930s intellectuals. One of the first important cracks in this mythmaking, breeding a progressive disenchantment, was the discovery of Mihail Sebastian's *Journal (1935-1944)*, published in 1996. Ironically, the same publisher, Humanitas, had massively sponsored the uncritical rediscovery of interwar writers, thus shaping the Weltanschauung, the ideas, and affinities of Radu Jude's generation. Sebastian's *Journal*, reporting from a decade of escalating anti-Semitic persecutions and intense political radicalization (mostly to the far right), is the testimony of a young Jewish intellectual witnessing the disturbing, politically unequivocal transformation of his Romanian intellectual friends. The impact of its publication was powerful. Our main reference here is Mihai Iovănel, *Evreul improbabil. Mihail Sebastian: O monografie ideologică* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2012).
12. G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*, second revised edition (Bucharest: Minerva, 1988), 976. In the 1988 edition, these comments seem to have been left unaltered.
 13. G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române*, 790-792.
 14. The main contextualizing reference and most important monograph for understanding the complex evolution of G. Călinescu—a truly towering figure in Romanian culture—is Andrei Terian, *G. Călinescu. A cincea esență* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2009).
 15. Veronica Lazăr, Andrei Gorzo, "Aferim! Ceva nou în cinema românească," in *Politicile filmului. Contribuții la interpretarea cinemaului românesc contemporan*, eds. Andrei Gorzo and Andrei State (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2014), 301-311.
 16. Ágnes Pethő, *Caught In-Between: Intermediality in Contemporary Eastern European and Russian Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 8.
 17. For an analysis of the tactics deployed by Jude in *Aferim!* in order to make the viewers' involvement in his reconstructed past as dialectical as possible, see Andrei Gorzo and Veronica Lazăr, "... and Gypsies get many a beating...: On the Significance of Radu Jude's *Aferim!*," *Transilvania*, no. 6-7 (2022): 1-11.
 18. It may also put some viewers in mind of the Nazi doctors and their crimes. In Christian Ferencz-Flatz's reading, the monstrous rotten-polenta experiment so cheerfully evoked by the doctor in Jude's film is an example of the "medical nihilism" that Walter Benjamin, writing in the late 1930s, detected in the literature of Céline and Gottfried Benn. Benjamin suspected a strong correlation between this "medical nihilism" and fascism. See Ferencz-Flatz, "Trei șanse ratate. Despre *Inimi cicatrizate* al lui Radu Jude."
 19. As historian and essayist Sorin Antohi writes, "a real cult of the novel and of its author developed shortly after the book's publication." Sorin Antohi, "Romania and the Balkans," *Tr@nsit Online* no. 21 (2001), <https://www.iwm.at/transit-online/romania-and-the-balkans>, last accessed on July 9, 2022.) Antohi quotes from G. Călinescu's appraisal of Mateiu Caragiale's novel (in Călinescu's *History of Romanian literature*): "Mateiu Caragiale is himself a promoter (maybe the first) of literary Balkanism, that greasy mix of obscene phrases, lascivious impulses, awareness of an adventurous and fuzzy genealogy, everything purified and seen from above by a superior intelligence." Antohi continues: "Mateiu Caragiale's heroes, as well as their fictional Bucharest, are shaped by a logic of ambivalence. On the one hand, they epitomize a Balkan universe of decay, misery, promiscuity, failed Europeanisation, Oriental dishonesty, lack of (work) ethic, vice. [...] But, on the other hand, Mateiu Caragiale transfers all this on the level of the sublime, by means of a *fin-de-siècle* discourse which is the Romanian avatar of the most influential Western glorification of decadence: dandyism. [...] Baudelaire's aesthetics of the ugly and his explicitly dandy works (such as *La Fanfarlo*, 1847) are only two of Mateiu's inspirations, as he was equally fascinated by Huysmans, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Barbey d'Aurevilly."
 20. This component of intermedial game-playing is the focus of Ágnes Pethő's and Doru Pop's writings on the film. They emphasize the play between film, literature, and painting, while Christian Ferencz-Flatz is particularly astute on the role of radio and advertising.
 21. Andrei Rus, "Farseele macabre ale lui Radu Jude," in *Politicile filmului*, 119-127.
 22. American critic Jonathan Rosenbaum picked *Scarred Hearts* as one of the three best films from 2016 lacking at the time a U.S. distributor but didn't review it. See Jonathan Rosenbaum, "My Lists for *Indiewire*, 2016," posted on the author's blog on December 20, 2016, <https://jonathanrosenbaum.net/2016/12/my-lists-for-indiewire-2016/>, last accessed on July 16, 2022. The first Jude film that he reviewed at length was the 2021 Golden Bear Winner *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn* (Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Dangerous Sex and Scattered Focus, Fifty Years Apart: *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* and *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*," posted on the author's blog on June 11, 2021, <https://jonathanrosenbaum.net/2022/06/dangerous-sex-and-scattered-focus-fifty-years-apart-wr-mysteries-of-the-organism-and-bad-luck-banging-or-loony-porn/>, last accessed on July 16, 2022). Rosenbaum's review is a substantial contribution to the critical literature on Radu Jude's films. One of Rosenbaum's many interesting comments concerns Jude's inclination to view sex as farce, an inclination that the critic views with circumspection rather than complacency. To Rosenbaum, it can look like something of an easy way out, indicating a discomfort on Jude's part with the representation of erotic passion or tenderness: "A certain cinematic cliché about depicted sex infects [*Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*]—an association of vitality with speed and frenzied music that rejects tenderness entirely. Recall the sped-up motion and the Wilhelm Tell Overture accompanying Alex (Malcom McDowell) having sex with the two teenyboppers in Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* for the *reductio ad absurdum/ad nauseam* of this attitude—a form of



Victorian hysteria masquerading as celebration. [...] [T]he frantic sex of schoolteacher Emilia Colibiu (Katia Pascariu) with her husband, periodically interrupted by the offscreen demands of a babysitter, may not be accompanied by jaunty music, or music of any other kind, unlike the film's final lurid fantasy sequence (Emilia as Wonder Woman performing a massive rape on all her accusers). Yet the association of kinkiness and/or sexiness with speed and force is no less pronounced. This also raises the vexing issue that one can't always distinguish between Jude's denunciation of Romanian vulgarity and his own apparent vulgarity in drawing our attention to it—an issue that hovers over all of this film's depictions of sex [...]. I'll concede that [*Bad Luck Banging* sees itself] as being at war with puritanism, which makes fast-motion and bouncy music weapons of cheerful defiance. Even so, it's worth recalling that defiance is only one kind of pleasure, and not necessarily the most pleasurable kind." Rosenbaum's comments about *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn* chime in with our own sense of what makes Jude's stage adaptation of Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (produced in 2016 for the independent Bucharest theatre "Apollo 111") a less than outright success. Unlike Fassbinder, Jude is unable or unwilling to present the lovers' intimacy with any pathos or conviction, to allow it much dignity. His discomfort with the romanticism of Fassbinder's couple, his inclination to deflate it, can be difficult to distinguish from an urge to ridicule the couple's physical mismatch and age difference. For a more extended critical discussion of Jude's theatrical production of *Ali*, see Andrei Gorzo and Veronica Lazăr, "...and Gypsies get many a beating...": On the Significance of Radu Jude's *Aferim!*," *Transilvania*, no. 6-7 (2022): 1-11.

23. Even more than *Scarred Hearts*, Jude's next feature-length fiction, "*I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians*" (2018), would abound in allusions to strictly local (and often ephemeral) cultural and political debates, mixed with no less numerous references to international cinema, literature, historical research, etc. For a discussion of this artistic strategy, see Veronica Lazăr and Andrei Gorzo, "An updated political modernism: Radu Jude's 'I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians,'" *Close Up* 3, no. 1-2 (2019): 17-18. Jonathan Rosenbaum also comments on it in relation to *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*: "Jude remains stubbornly and exclusively within his own country, refusing to step outside apart from his use of literary quotations, which come from a wider geographical spread. (This is a film that, in Godardian fashion, lists twenty-five cited authors in its final credits, including such familiar international standbys as Benjamin, Brecht, Cioran, Malraux, and Woolf.)" Jude's refusal to make his Romanian references less local is certainly brave in terms of his films' prospects of international sales, but for Rosenbaum it connects with the fact that "at times [he is] discussing social problems that are shared around the globe as if they were specifically or even exclusively Romanian." See Rosenbaum, "Dangerous Sex and Scattered Focus, Fifty Years Apart." What Rosenbaum detects in *Bad Luck Banging* is a vestigial no-country-is-as-terrible-as-ours Romanian exceptionalism that we also identify, in a forthcoming article, as an element of Jude's intellectual formation (shared by many Romanian intellectuals and artists of his generation).

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