



REVISITING THE USES OF NOSTALGIA IN POST-SOCIALIST CINEMA: RADU JUDE'S CINEMA AND DIALECTICAL IMAGES

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Abstract: Scholars of Romanian cinema (Parvulescu & Turcuş 2021) explored the topic of nostalgia in post-socialism, but they stopped short of analyzing why directors such as Radu Jude refuse to draw on a melancholic view of the past. Similarly, film critics (Gorzo & Lazăr 2022a; Ferencz-Flatz 2017) analyzed the importance of the Jude's attunement to contemporary cultural forms, but they did not engage with his reluctance to discuss positive aspects of Romanian state socialism. By putting two apparent opposite readings of Radu Jude's films in conversation, this article investigates Jude's philosophical technique which I conceptualize as "the construction of a dialectical image". I draw on films such as *I do not care if we go down in history as barbarians* (2018), *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn* (2021) and the short film *The Potemkinists* (2021) to distinguish between a dialectical and a nostalgic use of the socialist past. I concentrate on three main topics: Jude's interest in capturing the materiality of the present, which he borrows from Siegfried Kracauer's cinematic materialism; the differences between Walter Benjamin's dialectics and Jude's cinema; and the use of comedy in *The Potemkinists*. My article adds to previous work on Jude's cinema (Parvulescu & Turcuş 2021; Gorzo & Lazăr 2022; Ferencz-Flatz 2018) a discussion about the uses of nostalgia in Romanian film, a subject that has not been discussed in relation to experimental and avantgarde productions.

Keywords: Radu Jude; Walter Benjamin; comedy; nostalgia; dialectics; socialism; film theory; Romanian films

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Introduction

This article investigates the Romanian director Radu Jude's relation to history and cinema in the context of his ambivalent relation to socialism. Although Jude has made films that draw on anti-communist tropes (*Uppercase Print*, 2020), he is not an anti-communist director. As Ţion argues, he is one of the few Romanian directors interested in the fascist tendencies of the postsocialist culture.¹ He directly discusses figures that were associated to historical communist parties such as Sergei Eisenstein, Isaac Babel and Radu Cosaşu. I locate

Jude in the company of Marxist-oriented theorists of film such as Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, two authors who are key references in his work. Kracauer is an important theoretical source not only because of the importance he assigns to material history but also because of his conviction that history can be transformed through art. Benjamin is a key author for Jude because he offers descriptions of reality which point to a new and dialectical relation between the past and the present. While Jude is sensitive to economic inequality and the rise of the new Romanian right, I start from the premise that he has no interest in revisiting

Romanian socialism in a positive key, unlike other film directors such as Stere Gulea. Such attitude articulates not only a refusal of nostalgically reading socialism but, more importantly, an interest in inventing new aesthetic forms to make sense of the past. But can an artist realize compelling accounts of the past without having some sort of melancholic attachment to its loss?

Recent scholarship discussed the use of nostalgia and its formidable impact in the post-socialist reception of Romanian films such as the *Brigada Diverse* series or the reruns of films on television.² In the analysis of Constantin Parvulescu and Claudiu Turcuș, a scene in Jude's film *I do not care if we go down in history as barbarians* is indicative of a post-socialist high culture.³ According to these scholars, a representative of elite post-1989 culture, Mariana, the main character in the film, ignores how "socialist-era practices inform imaginaries and modes of remembering". In my reading of their article, they argue that Jude's film introduces a divorce from the socialist past, which does not allow for the work of mourning socialist ideas in current neoliberal times. For Parvulescu and Turcuș, nostalgia has a specialized meaning, which is different from its other conceptualizations: socialist nostalgia in post-socialist Romania recaptures "the entrepreneurial ambition and high cultural stakes specific to the grand ambitions of state socialist-era policies".⁴ Although nostalgia is a product of postsocialist ambitions, Mariana rejects it while it is successfully recuperated by new cultural formations and factions. In a different tone, the film was considered highly significant because it suggests an artistic interest in the forms of the present, such as new cultural media and changes in film industry, that makes him a key director who's attuned to both past and present. For other scholars of Romanian cinema, the film is a "highly original and robust attempt at rethinking the strategies of late-60s 'political modernist' cinema".⁵ In addition, Jude's use of humor was perceived by Andrei Gorzo and Veronica Lazăr as displaying a much-needed fresh take within a New Romanian Cinema. The uses of humor have also been a concern for theorists of aesthetics in Romanian film, which centered on their dialectical modality of representing the past.⁶

The main question in this article is whether other forms of aesthetic critique, which do not draw on nostalgia, are able to function as powerful critiques of the present. Previous films deployed nostalgia to criticize the current conditions of post-socialism because, as in the case of the historical re-runs, their contemporary success is primarily related to the present-day deficiencies within Romanian film culture.⁷ In contrast, while Jude's films engage dialectically with the past, they stay away from remembering socialism in a nostalgic key.⁸ Jude's films such as *I do not care...*, *Bad Luck Banging...*, and *The Potemkinists* offer an important view of the present, provided that, as Gorzo and Lazar have argued, such

films illuminate changes in post-socialism from the use of the video to the speed of urban life.⁹ In discussing Jude's cinematic references, I will claim that he is interested in transforming the present on screen, which is a view closer to Kracauer's view of cinema. Yet the Romanian socialist times, with its architecture, monuments, and forms of protection against market economy, seem to be ignored in Jude's treatment of the past. His ambivalent relation to socialism is theorized through his appeal to Jewish Marxist thinkers, which are circumscribed to a Jewish communist world before 1948. In *I do not care...* and *The Potemkinists* the capacity for revolutionary thinking is found in the period that has given us Isaac Babel's novel *Red Cavalry* (1924) and Sergei Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925).

Jude's modality of utilizing dialectical images can serve as a counterpoint to certain forms of art that re-deploy melancholia to generate a new entrepreneurial culture. Given their close engagement with the present, Jude's aesthetic forms are in far much better position to offer a critique of contemporary capitalism, rather than the current redeployment of socialist cinema which aims to build a new national-capitalist culture.¹⁰ The crisis of the global Left was analyzed by Wendy Brown's in her *Resisting Left Melancholia* where she argued that in neo-liberal times what emerges is a Left that operates neither with a substantive critique of the status quo nor a substantive alternative to it: perhaps even more troubling, it is "a Left that is thus caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past, whose spirit is deathly, whose structure of desire is backward-looking and punishing".¹¹ Instead of preserving a melancholic attachment to the past, Jude's films criticize the problems of Romania's society such as the underfunding of public education and the underlying antisemitism of many public discussions. In doing so, Jude's attunement to the present signals a capacity to understand the utilization of film on phones and social media which can serve as a springboard for a novel form of critique. In contrast to a Leftist desire that is backward-looking and punishing, a dialectical image is a mode of recapturing a revolutionary moment which reinscribes the past into the present. Yet, Jude's capacity for critique is limited by his unwillingness to see any positive potential in the legacies of Romanian socialism. Part of this limitation is given by his theoretical sources, since as Slavoj Žižek points out, the Frankfurt School (including here authors such as Kracauer and Benjamin) was marked by an "almost total absence of theoretical confrontation with Stalinism . . . in clear contrast to its permanent obsession with Fascist anti-semitism."¹² To not reflect on the good and critical parts of Stalinism can lead to a complete rejection of the socialist legacy. In addition, the recent past is the material that can provide a film director with a window into a popular mindset.¹³ Dialectical images should not be confined only to socialist authors before the Second World War, but it can strongly engage with a more



recent past that is available to a broader audience.

In the first part of the article, I explore what Jude has taken from Siegfried Kracauer's cinematic materialism and the differences between Benjamin's materialism and Jude's use of a dialectical image. In the second part, I analyze how his film *The Potemkinists* offers an artistic attempt to re-evaluate obscure socialist monuments such as *The Youth Monument*, which are located on the Danube-Black Sea canal. I conclude that Jude's films suggest that modes of articulating politics such as revolutionary Soviet enthusiasm and anti-communist martyrology are not only dated but also incapable of functioning as adequate modes of aesthetic representation.

Jude's dialectics between Kracauer and Benjamin

"Films come into their own when they record and reveal physical reality [...] Street crowds, involuntary gestures, and other fleeting impressions are its very meat. Significantly, the contemporaries of Lumière praised his films—the first to be made—for showing 'the ripple of the leaves stirred by the wind.'¹⁴ In Jude's recent films, history is filtered through a montage of elements that de-familiarize a conventional perception of history. His technique is to juxtapose disparate elements to create a novel object. For example, the opening sequences of *Odessa in I don't care...* are followed by a mockumentary presentation, where the main character, the filmmaker, speaks directly to the audience about the film she will make. The juxtaposition seeks to achieve a sophisticated perspective on both Romanian and Ukrainian past by putting them in direct contact. The history of the Romanian imperialist rhetoric, which reaches its climax with the conquest of Odessa, is denaturalized and shown as a product of war propaganda. The techniques of defamiliarization are put to innovative use to challenge the nostalgic view of Romanian war nationalism.

In his modality to work with history, Jude draws on Kracauer and Benjamin, who appear in his cinematic references in *I don't care...* and *Bad Luck Banging...* From Kracauer, Jude takes not only an interest in the description of the present but also its potential transformation on the screen. At a first level, cinematic materialism means that film needs to capture the materiality of the present. Because of his interest in urban materiality, *Bad Luck Banging* appears to have incorporated some elements of Kracauer's theory, according to a demand that the German theorist has put on theoretical productions: "intellectuals must be engaged in theorizing the unnamed aspects of contemporary reality and record them in their material and multiple density, read like indices of the making of history."¹⁵ In the first part of *Bad Luck Banging*, Jude offers a material investigation of Bucharest. This material interest in urban life is part of Kracauer's broader project to determine the place of the present in the historical process. For this endeavor, his

work entails what Hansen calls "a materialistic inquiry into the meanings and directions of modernity."¹⁶ In his utopian moments, Kracauer believed that the cinema could offer self-representation to the masses who were exposed to the process of industrialization.¹⁷ Like him, Jude focuses on marginal subjects, such as a high-school teacher in *Bad Luck Banging* and describes her reaction to the city and her surroundings. In doing so, Jude takes at heart Kracauer's lesson that cinema engages with the contradictions of modernity at the level of the senses. This is the level that Kracauer thought the impact of human technology is felt most strongly and irreversibly.

Kracauer's interest was not only phenomenological but also political because he thought that cinema can have an emancipatory orientation. Films can offer a historical map of the restructuring of the perceptive senses in the direction of including popular masses. Cinematic materialism is not only reflective, but also transformational. In Kracauer's view, films transform the elements of materiality shown on the screen. In *Bad Luck Banging*, Jude draws on an explicit quote from Kracauer, in which the theorist talks about the situation of cinema after the Holocaust. In the section "Medusa's Head" of his *Theory of Film*, Kracauer argues that Nazi films about concentration camps show to the audience horrors impossible to discuss. He quotes from Kracauer's formulation: "cinema is the polished shield of Athens."¹⁸ Because we cannot see the horrors of the crimes in their full force, the film functions for Kracauer as a shield of Athena that speaks obliquely to the horror of Nazi crimes. Jude takes Kracauer's idea and makes it a statement about art's engagement with reality. Art has the role of redeeming a reality that is hard to bear. By becoming a shield that protects us from horrors, there is a possibility to salvage images from moments of private fear and horror.¹⁹ Seeing the reflection in the mirror is more important than letting the horror affect us. Film has the capacity to transform the horror, and in doing so, it insists on an engagement with unspeakable tragedies.

Whereas Kracauer is attached to cinematic materialism, Benjamin's historical materialism deploys history to use it against hegemonic historical accounts. These are two key differences that unfold as a tension in Jude's own work. Kracauer theorizes films in their capacity to transform cinematically the material objects that are filmed. A methodology that draws on Benjamin deploys the past as an intervention in the present to re-create revolutionary situations. For Benjamin, a historical materialist needs to go back to the past to stir up its revolutionary potential for changing the present. Differently put, the role of the past is to help overcome the dominant narrative that the victors have imposed over revolutionary struggles:

"To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.

Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes."²⁰

Reconstructing history is an effort to see what the past is telling us in contrast with an attempt to see it primarily as a lesson for us. He makes clear that the past is important in the long history of capitalism, which is a thesis that challenges progressive accounts that are interested only in the present.²¹ But this is not how Kracauer thinks about history. He was an early critic of Benjamin's interest in historical reconstructions of the past which run the risk for him of turning away from the present. In a review of Benjamin's work, Kracauer's objection to Benjamin's method comes to the fore: "Yet Benjamin hardly takes into account the very life he intends to stir up... He neither records the impressions of any form of that immediacy nor ever gets involved with the dominant abstract thinking. His proper material is what has been: for Benjamin, knowledge arises out of ruins."²²

Kracauer argues that the problem of history can be so overwhelming that the meaning of the present is lost in a work of art along with its materiality. Jude can be not held guilty of a shortcoming such as Benjamin's, because the present is at the heart of his artistic concerns. Differently said, Jude seems to be much closer to Kracauer in his interest in the present and immediacy. The reluctance to engage with the recent past of socialist Romania makes him, however, less aware of its continuous material and symbolic legacies.

For Jude, the past and the materiality of urban life exists primarily regarding the present. The first section of *Bad Luck Banging...* is a phenomenological exploration of the city as generator of Emi's perceptions and reactions, while the second one connects to a past that is generally traumatic and ugly. The ugly past, along its material infrastructure, is important in *I Don't Care...* The traumatic past has an overwhelming role in understanding the Romanian present. In its form of unspeakable and reenacted crimes against Jews in the Second World War, it represents an important burden that must be discussed, criticized, and understood. The past appears as history only if it a modality by which Jude gets to say something important about immediate concerns. In the end, Romanian state socialism has also experienced times of high modernization under an ideology that was supposed to work for everyone. Another area where historical materialism can be better articulated is urban history. The first part of *Bad Luck Banging...* engages in an archeology of the city to discuss a present-day history of sexual language and material objects.

Bad Luck Banging... film begins with an anecdote, just like *I don't care...* Yet the anecdote is meant to tell his audience what to expect: this a film that has a particular public in mind, which is interested in the role of racism

and liberated sexuality. If the anecdote in *I do not care...* introduced the writer Radu Cosașu and gestures at his political past as a Jewish communist, in *Bad Luck Banging* we begin the story with Emi, the main character, where she has a conversation with a Roma florist in a flower shop. The anecdote gives the comedic tone of the film. The joke is that an employee took things too *literally*, that he *literalized* them, but not in Brecht's sense, that is, he transposed them into the play as slogans, but that he drew on them without thinking. He deployed them without being aware which is the part to quote and which is the part where the author speaks. Taking a requirement to write an inscription on both parts of an object, a florist put up an obituary that read "Rest in peace and on both sides." The history of Bucharest's material changes is, however, left outside of this interrogation. Urban objects are filmed as they are in a phenomenological description and, in this respect, there is a lack of historical investigation about how they came about. A stronger historical method would not let this presentism take over the film. Immediacy is important, but as Benjamin argued, the past is *the* territory that a historical materialist can take his battles to.

The role of dialectical images and nostalgia

Radu Jude sidesteps a nostalgic view of the past because he appeals to a dialectical treatment of history. A dialectical image is product of juxtaposing an image in the present with the intention of creating a new aesthetic object. This strategy aims to bring back the revolutionary possibilities of a lost historical moment. In *I don't care...*, Jude uses the quote from Isaac Babel, along the *found footage* from Odessa, to introduce history into the narrative flow of the present. His intention seems to make history material on the screen. In such manner, the audience would be exposed to its distinct and special nature. Jude's work seeks to establish a material relationship between a document and the history we live today. Mariana reads Isaac Babel's text with a representation of Klee's Angel of History on the wall, which produces a special effect in the film. The lights placed to the right of the character make the reading a kind of séance, in which Babel, the former socialist writer killed by Stalin, is invoked to illuminate the history of the Holocaust in Transnistria. Due to the setting in which Mariana is placed, the heroine of the film seems to tell her audience that she has the power to invoke the dead. Like Benjamin's angel of history, "her coming was expected, and like every generation that preceded her, her generation was endowed with a weak messianic power, a power to which the past has claims."²³ In this scene, we understand that the past makes demands on Mariana, and especially on her ability to restore a connection with a forgotten history of the victims. The victims, in the present case, are Jewish



writers and anti-fascists like Benjamin and Babel, who in turn challenged Stalinist communism. Since the past demands a re-actualization in the present, Jude calls its audience to face the dangers of fascism that are emerging within the Romanian society.

In his recent interviews, Jude seems to give a more prominent role to Benjamin than to Kracauer. A Benjaminian aesthetic seems to acquire an outstanding dimension in his thinking. Jude's reading of both *One-way Street* and *The Arcades Project* shows that he is deeply interested in the work of the German historical materialist:

"You mentioned Walter Benjamin, and of course, and of course, mentioned in the title of this part is *One Way Street*, a book by Benjamin. He wrote the book using the street as a metaphor for a book, so I thought, what if I take Benjamin's book literally and go back to the street and turn it into a street again? Of course, he influenced me a lot, not only because of his concept of history and his insistence on the connection between past and present, but also because Benjamin is someone who is extremely attentive and caring. He looked very carefully at every little detail around him, like what was happening on a street. He wrote texts about cartoons, radio shows, toys and all kinds of things like that. So yes, there is an influence here, and perhaps a sociological drive, if I may call it that. A kind of question: if we look at the surface of things, in this case a small line in the city - that of a street - can we see something deeper? More hidden, maybe?"²⁴

Whereas Jude reads Benjamin's work as insightful because it discusses the relation between the past and present, he does not comment on its historical materialism. Differently put, Benjamin's demand "to seize the hold of a memory" does not seem to be that important to his cinematic art, while it is key to Benjamin's project.

The Arcades Project is a materialistic and historical exploration of Paris's infrastructure to revive the conditions of revolutionary potential. With regard to the *The Arcades Project* (still not translated into Romanian), here is what Jude has to say in an interview: "What Benjamin is doing there is taking the intellectual garbage of 19th century France and using these quotations from all kinds of sources, organized in a specific montage logic, to create a portrait of society using only the quotations."²⁵ Jude seems to draw primarily on a sociological understanding of the past and less of Benjamin's revolutionary aesthetic, which has as its target a deterministic view of the future. In the conception criticized by Benjamin, which was shared by Marxists around 1930s and was a key part of the ideology of the Popular Front in France, the progress can not derive from the past automatically. For the communist parties the struggle is to impose the celebration of the working class as an achieved victory. In contrast, to Benjamin this victory of the progress is an illusion which has very detrimental effects for our understanding of the past.²⁶

While Jude privileges the present, his conception of history is part of broader understanding of how post-Marxists scholars should engage with the past. It is thus closer to Frederic Jameson's understanding of history, to whom history is not a material history that would lead to an objectification of the world, in the sense of Georg Lukács's theory, but rather to its redeployment in new material conditions and social. Let's recall Jameson's passage where he comments that history is "that which hurts":

"Conceived in this sense, History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its 'ruses' turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention."²⁷

In Jameson's conceptualization, history is an effect of something unknowable. History is neither the locomotive moving forward (for example, how the image of the communist parties was constructed in Stalinist times), nor that of the brake that the revolution offers to its inexorable advance (as in Benjamin's dialectical image). History is an implacable necessity that produces alienating effects and offers unexpected reversals of our intention to subject it to our desires. For Jameson, history has the role of escaping our desire to control it.

In my reading of Jude's understanding of history, it seems that he locates it in the past, provided that has unconscious effects on the way we relate to each other. Totalitarianism, either communist or fascist, still hurts because it puts a barrier in front of our attempts to live a better life. Drawing on diverse theoretical sources such as Isaac Babel, Hannah Arendt, Radu Cosasă, and Walter Benjamin, Jude suggests in *I don't care...* that history is no longer the inexorable force of some events, but their destabilizing effect on us today. Jude's interest in history makes him bring to stage not only text or *found footage*, but also real material objects such as a tank. This object has a highly affective and political value because soldiers died during the 1989 events that overthrew Nicolae Ceaușescu. The camera focuses on the physical presence of this machinery, which is touched and looked at for a long time by Mariana (Ioana Iacob). It is deployed as way for us to question the relationship that traumatic history has with the present. Faced with the simple attitude of naturalizing objects as what they are, Mariana reacts affectively to the presence of material objects. She quotes Marx in English, from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* who famously remarked about the role of heroic figures in history, from Napoleon the first to Napoleon the third: "first as tragedy, then as farce".

The quote has the role of providing a framework for the historical reconstruction. It shows us that the director is pondering about the problems of transferring history into the present. The insistence on the historical object is demonstrated by inserting photos of the massacres on the screen, which are complemented by the

voiceover of the characters. History does not only hurt in an abstract way because it leads to Romanian nationalistic phantasies. It can also be felt materially, in the texture of the tank destroyed in December 1989. The scene in which the heroine touches the tank with the sensitivity of the artist who wants to understand its wounds and traumas is exemplary for a vital cultural direction in Romania, which interrogates the role of traumatic history on the present. Jude's films are thus part of broader cultural front, which is exemplified by Adina Pintilie's *Touch me not* (2017), which explores the question of psychological trauma and healing, but which leaves aside the problem of history.

Is Radu Jude's Mariana a materialist historian, as Walter Benjamin had in mind when he wrote *Theses on History*? She is presented to us as an artist who seeks to reflect on history. She seems to fit Jameson's definition according to which a materialist wishes to identify the alienating experiences of the present. But is Mariana, as Benjamin understood it, a researcher of capitalism and its chronic phases of fascism? Is Mariana interested in a material experience, that is of how objects have been transformed by the evolution of capitalism into commodities? Does she want to unbury the past to challenge the history that the victors are giving to us? Is Mariana, as Benjamin asks from a historical materialist, a presence that "interrogates all the victories, present or past, of the conquerors?"²⁸

The danger of fascism is at the heart of Jude's artistic concerns in this film. In this sense, Mariana takes possession of the memory of the Holocaust, so that she illuminates it when an imminent danger manifests itself in the present. For Jude, there is a fascism that has become powerful and perhaps ubiquitous, and the film challenges a predominant public indifference to its danger. In this sense, Jude interrogates the great history of the triumphant Romanian nation by counterposing with the history that Isaac Babel offers us in his literature. Jude brings us to a state of urgency in which we feel that we must be aware of a danger: the danger is that fascism is already here in our lives. Yet does the film allow us to take what Benjamin calls a "tiger leap into the past"? Does it recreate a revolutionary moment?²⁹ There are moments in his films when that possibility is raised. When Jude touches on the question of fashion, such moments could constitute an entry to talk about the redeployment of the past in new clothes. Because Mariana is depicted with an old rifle at the beginning of the scene, such appearance gestures to the theme of a revolutionary rupture. Later, however, Mariana has no fashion-related interest in the figures from the past. The actress is mostly depicted in modern dresses or jeans without major historical references. In another scene, while walking to find an adequate costume for his characters, Mariana finds old clothes used in a "zombies versus Wehrmacht" movie. This scene hints at the possibility that Mariana could dress up as a zombie coming from the past to fight fascism. She ends up, however, dressed in a Nazi military coat. This

is why Mariana's orientation as a historical materialist is not fully articulated. When Benjamin's angel appears on the wall of Mariana's room, he is not re-enacting a revolutionary moment from the past. In turn, the scene deploys a much narrower understanding of a materialist method, which is concentrated on processing the traumatic history of the past.

Comedy as a Revolutionary genre

In the third section, I want to reflect on Radu Jude's dialectical method that rejects a melancholic view of the past. As opposed to a much more didactic film such as *The Exit of the Trains* (2020), his *Bad Luck Banging...* and short *The Potemkinists* suggest a deeper reflection on comedy as a genre. He is not alone in thinking about the privileged role of comedy in relation to our social circumstances. Comedy appears as a privileged modality that can seize the current historical transformations, which are difficult to articulate in other artistic forms. Also, the advantage of comedy, as Marx argued, is that it signals an important historical shift, when one regime of representation is replaced by another one.³⁰ In Marx's succinct prose, the comedy "carries an old form to the grave."³¹ This conceptualization opens the conversations about new modes of representation that come after the previous ones have slowly disappeared. It is particularly significant that this discussion takes place during a context where various scholars engage with the question of what comes next in Romanian cinema. In the formulation of Gorzo & Lazăr, "The present moment is difficult to describe, apart from its being post-NRC. As for the Romanian cinema of the future, there's less certainty about it than at any time during the past 15 years."³²

Jude's turn to comedy can be analyzed in relation to his refusal to produce nostalgic films about the past. A broader historical view can help unpack the importance of comedy in today's cinema. In *Left Wing Melancholia*, Enzo Traverso traces the transition from revolutionary films (*October*, Eisenstein 1925) to melancholic productions (Chris Marker's *The grin without a cat*, 1977), which analyze the disappearance of the old left after May 68 in Western Europe. The historian's argument is that his book captures a current historical mood centered on leftist films that mourn the disappearance of the revolutionary past. While in the 1920s, the production of art is a revolutionary goal in *October*, film essays at the end of the 1970s such as Marker's *The grin without a cat* mourn the disappearance of revolutionary utopia. Although Traverso describes historical aesthetic moods that have a beginning and an end, his argument seeks to capture where we currently are (as part of melancholic leftism) and less where we might be going. Yet I want to go back to a different revolutionary tradition that investigates Marx's interest in comedy as a "world-historical form."³³ To add a different dimension to Traverso's argument, I



look at comedies as having a dialectical form and thus pointing towards the future. As Walter Benjamin told us, there is the birth of a new world in Moliere's plays, provided that the main character "undoes what has been done before without destroying it".³⁴ In *A critique of the philosophy of the right*, Marx argues that "history goes through many phases when carrying an old form to the grave. The last phases of a world-historical form is its *comedy*."³⁵ A tradition of Marxist reflection on cinema identifies the special role that comedy has in producing a new aesthetic form, which better captures the contradictions of our present time.

In his short film *The Potemkinists*, Jude discusses Eisenstein's reconstruction of the sailors' capture of a major ship of the Imperial Russian Army.³⁶ In his rendition of Eisenstein's film, Jude gives us a sense of how comedies are better at capturing the collapse of historical aesthetic forms. Comedy as a genre seeks to bury the dead "cheerfully"³⁷. *The Potemkinists* discusses two histories. First, Jude touches on revolutionary history. The revolutionary past with its October revolution ends in a bid to take a Bolshevik's head and place it on an ignored Romanian socialist monument, *The Youth Monument*. It is a humorous attempt to make history matter, but it moves in the territory of parody. The second history is anti-communism, which is an account of how religious martyrs have fought with communists and were punished by being sent to the Danube-Black Sea channel. This narrative is important for shaping many of the present choices about how to represent socialist history. In Jude's film, the anti-communist opposition to any rendition of a positive side of a socialist project is striking. As a result, the person who represents the funding agency requires the artist to show the martyrs of the Canal on the new sculpture.

Jude suggests in this short production that various forms of representing the past do not function anymore as credible accounts. He, along the public, seems to be laughing at both histories. The laughter works to bury these two artistic forms simultaneously. Eisenstein's dramatic enthusiasm about the October revolution seems to be a dated form, particularly under the conditions where we are confronted with Putin's rhetoric about the Great Patriotic War in Ukraine. But another form that can have a dated existence is the martyr aesthetic that pervades artistic attempts to talk about the past (as represented by *Între chin și amin*, Enache, 2019). In this sense, Jude's film gestures toward a specific future where anti-communism can be laughed at and seen as an outdated modality to talk about the past. Like Benjamin's dialectical image, the film gestures both to an end of a period and perhaps the beginning of a new one. It might demonstrate what Benjamin calls "a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim." For Benjamin, the laughter has the capacity to transform the spectator into a collective body and "awakens life by

innervating the sleep organs of the masses".³⁸ In Adriana Bontea's reading of Benjamin's commentary of Moliere, the comedy as a form may open the realization that there is a striving to penetrate the past:

"In Moliere's comedy, the diminishing light penetrates the theater in the night scene. Yet the dialogue, music, and dance exhibit, while exaggerating the features of the comic character, a striving to penetrate the darkness. This breakthrough retrieves its positive meaning when understood as a gesture to undo what has been already done and reform it afresh."³⁹

Not unlike this ending of Moliere's play, *The Potemkinists* gesture towards a possibility that is merely suggested by the film director. The anti-communist mode of understanding a past will have an end. In the meantime, we are encountering the possibilities of a historical transformation, which needs to be captured by filmmakers. Such transformation was gestured in a film such *The March to Rome* (Risi, 1962), which presented the viewer with the possibility that fascism can be buried. In the film, two confused working-class men join the fascist Italian Party. The director seeks to tell us how they gradually understand the gap between Mussolini's promises and actions. The film asks the viewer to bury the fascist past by laughing at the fascist's march on Rome. Also, it shows that various forms of address such as "comrade" and "romans" are laughable and dead, as a result. The Romanian martyrology might go the same path of being considered a relic of history, but in Jude's film we barely see the beginning of this possibility.

For Benjamin, laughter was an important tool against the fascist dangers of the present.⁴⁰ As Benjamin made us aware, film has access to a vast optical unconscious and is in a better position to have access to the contradictions and unconscious of our social life. The eccentric is a figure that can ensure a therapeutic release to counteract the fascistic tendencies to psychosis and repression.⁴¹ The sculptor in *The Potemkinists* (Alexandru Dabija) works as Chaplin-inspired figure which ensures that the spectator can laugh about the present. The character seeks to undo what has been done for the audience to at least imagine the possibility of a new political beginning. Comedy has the role not only of preserving old forms, like Christian Ferencz-Flatz (2017, 336) seems to suggest, in his analysis of the aesthetic of Romanian films in the 1990s.⁴² He intimates that Nae Caranfil's films offer a topical view of the past because the laughter that the director deploys in his films does not erase the social tensions of 1990's cinema. The actuality of Caranfil's films resides in the fact that the social tensions have not been overcome and replaced by a social formation that surpassed the period called transition. Yet, if we take Benjamin's insight at face value, comedy has also the role to release the tensions that are stored by the pressures of our fascistic present. In this light, Jude's use of comedy points to a different

possibility of forging new aesthetic forms, which asks the public to laugh at the old artistic forms. While such possibility is rather intimated than fully explored, Jude is an artist that is keenly aware of the necessity of creating a dialectical and comical view of past.

Conclusion

This article explored Jude's use of dialectical images to criticize the present and avoid a nostalgic view of Romanian socialism. His engagement with the problem of representing history raises the question of the uses of melancholia in art. Walter Benjamin investigated the drawbacks of using melancholia in art because "in its tenacious self-absorption [melancholy] embraces dead objects in its contemplation".⁴³ Benjamin's understanding of melancholia is that it is "loyal to the world of things," because it displays "a certain logic of fetishism – with all the conservatism and withdrawal from human relations that fetishistic desire implies – contained within the melancholic logic".⁴⁴ In the critique of Kastner's poems in which Benjamin first coins the term "Left melancholia," feelings have become the focus of the Left melancholic who "takes as much pride in the traces of former spiritual goods as the bourgeois do in their material goods".⁴⁵ Left melancholy is what Brown calls "Benjamin's name for a mournful, conservative, backward-looking attachment to a feeling, analysis, or relationship that has been rendered thing-like and frozen in the heart of the putative Leftist".⁴⁶

In the popular re-runs of popular socialist cinema, the critique of the present is captured by a frozen relationship to the past.⁴⁷ While highly popular, these reruns have the potential to bury the contradictions within socialism and as such, they take any revolutionary goals out of its representation. Parvulescu and Turcuş insightfully draw our attention to the commodification of socialist nostalgia, which is rerouted to a different entrepreneurial ideal. In this climate, Jude's use of dialectical images and comedy can show a different direction to Romanian cinema. By discussing Jude's engagement with Kracauer and Benjamin, I pointed out that he sees the role of cinema not only as functioning

as redemptive device in the face of a tragic history but also as a dialectical tool that reutilizes the past in new present conditions. Like Benjamin, Jude seeks to awaken the audience to the current dangers we face. However, Jude's cinema focuses rather on history as trauma and less on the revolutionary possibilities of bringing it in the present. This orientation does not allow the Romanian director to take a stronger interest in the history of the urban settings, which are filmed as they are, not as Benjamin would have asked us to do, in connection to a process about they came about.

Both *Bad Luck Banging...* and *The Potemkinists* display characters that are playful and entertaining, which suggests that Jude places his work at distance from the past he draws upon. In contrast, in other works of Romanian cinema, the main characters of Puiu's and Gulea's films allow the audience to feel sorry for a particular historical situation, which is a modality to revisit socialism in its positive aspects. While Jude's theoretical orientation invalidates such possibility, it opens a conversation about a different dialectic regarding the past and the present. One of the advantages of this approach is that it preserves the social contradictions of the present.⁴⁸ By enacting modes of representations that center on comedy, Jude's films are part of a historical process of mediating reality. This device that offers a reflection on the present is not simply descriptive, because it also has an emancipatory orientation. Rather than producing a logic of fetishism, as Walter Benjamin insisted in his analysis, Jude's films gestures to a vision of the future which is still not born yet. Walter Benjamin defines imagination as the "the awareness of the deformation of the future", which is in contrast with a prophetic vision, where one "perceives the forms of the future".⁴⁹ Radu Jude is not a visionary and does not seek to prophesize about the future. His films rather function in the regime of a diminishing light that penetrates the night scene, and in doing so, they signal how old aesthetic forms can be carried to the grave.

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Note

1. Lucian Țion, *Pentru Prostie: Mic îndreptar de culturologie estică și cinema (post) socialist* (Bucharest: Tritonic, 2022), 71.
2. See Alice Bardan, "Remembering Socialist Entertainment: Romanian Television, Gestures, and Intimacy," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 3 (2017): 341-358; Constantin Parvulescu, "Faces of Nostalgia: The Performance of Dem Rădulescu in the BD Comedies as a Medium of Revisiting Romania's Socialist Past," in *Comedy in the Balkans*, ed. Marian Tutui (Bucharest: Noi, 2014); Constantin Parvulescu and Claudiu Turcuş, "Afterlives of Romanian Socialist-Era Historical Film: Reruns, Story Universes, Reception," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 63, no. 1-2 (2021): 50-71.
3. Parvulescu and Turcuş, "Afterlives," 51.
4. *Ibid.*, 52.
5. Andrei Gorzo and Veronica Lazar, "The New Romanian Cinema and Beyond: The Films of Radu Jude," *Transilvania*, no. 3 (2022): 6.



6. Christian Ferencz-Flatz, *Filmul ca situație socială: Eseuri fenomenologice* (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2018).
7. Parvulescu and Turcuș, "Afterlives," 53. In Cristi Puiu's short *Cigarettes and Coffee* (2004), the treatment of the past is articulated through a sharp critique of neoliberal times which have created new types of relation within a post-socialist family. The father (Victor Rebenciu) is interviewed by his son (Mimi Brănescu) in a heartbreaking attempt to find him a job as a guardian in a factory. In *I Am an Old Communist Hag* (2013), Stere Gulea creates a different image of the standard Romanian family, where the emigrated daughter who lives in the United States needs financial help from her parents, who have been making economies in poverty-ridden economy. These two films find something positive in socialist times, be that a traditional form of kinship (father-son) which seems to be destroyed by capitalism, or a familial bond that ensures that emigrants have some sort of support after they leave Romania. Also, the main character of Gulea's film reminds the public about some of the advantages of living in socialism, such as strong friendships, the possibility of moving up the social ladder, and the respect that at least rhetorically the state gave to the working class.
8. See also Andrei Gorzo and Veronica Lazăr, who argue that Jude's dialectics in *Aferim* is designed to „scourge” a desire for a melancholic view of the past. The film „addresses the nostalgia and feeds the appetite while refusing to indulge the escapist urge that comes along with it—the desire to see the national past in purely aesthetic, ornamental terms, as a safe region of fantasy.” Andrei Gorzo and Veronica Lazăr, „...and Gypsies get many a beating...”: On the Significance of Radu Jude's *Aferim!*,” *Transilvania*, no. 6-7 (2022): 2.
9. Gorzo and Lazar, “The New Romanian Cinema.”
10. However, even TV channels such as *Cinemaraton*, which replay socialist films on a regular basis, are sites of contradiction where the redeployment is never one-directional.
11. Wendy Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy,” *boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (1999): 19-27, 26.
12. Slavoj Žižek, “Georg Lukacs as the Philosopher of Leninism,” postface to Georg Lukács, *A defense of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic* (London and New York: Verso 2000), 157.
13. Parvulescu and Turcuș, “Afterlives,” 52.
14. Miriam Hansen, “Introduction,” in Sigfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), xlix.
15. *Ibid.*, x.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, xi.
18. Sigfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 305.
19. Hansen, “Introduction,” 306.
20. Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, eds. H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003 [1940]), 389-401.
21. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. IV (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2006), 64.
22. Sigfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (London UK: Harvard University Press, 1995), 263-264.
23. Benjamin, „ On the Concept of History.”
24. Per Morten Mjølkeræen, “The Historical Gaze of Radu Jude,” *Seventh Row*, January 17, 2022. Online at <https://seventh-row.com/2022/01/17/radu-jude-interview-bad-luck-banging-or-loony-porn/>.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Benjamin, “On the Concept of History”: “Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren.”
27. Fredric Jameson, *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 102.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*
30. Marx, Karl. *Early Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 247.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Gorzo and Lazăr, “The New Romanian Cinema,” 1.
33. Marx, *Early Writings*, 247.
34. Adriana Bontea, “A Project in Its Context: Walter Benjamin on Comedy,” *MLN* 121, no. 5 (2006): 1063.
35. Marx, *Early Writings*, 247.
36. For a discussion that illuminates Eisenstein's relation to the event and Jude's approach to it, see Andrei Gorzo and Veronica Lazăr, “Radu Jude's Montage Experiments with Documents of Oppression and Mass Murder,” *Transilvania*, no. 9 (2022): 1-14.
37. Marx, *Early Writings*, 247.
38. Bontea, “A Project,” 1068.
39. *Ibid.*
40. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* vol. III, 117.
41. *Ibid.*, 118: “Collective laughter is one such preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis. The countless grotesque events

consumed in films are a graphic indication of the dangers threatening mankind from the repressions implicit in civilization. American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies. Their forerunner was the figure of the eccentric. He was the first to inhabit the new fields of action opened up by film—the first occupant of the newly built house. This is the context in which Chaplin takes on historical significance.”

42. Ferencz-Flatz, *Filmul*, 336.
43. Brown, “Resisting,” 21.
44. *Ibid.*
45. Benjamin, “Left-Wing Melancholy,” 28–32.
46. Brown, “Resisting,” 21.
47. Parvulescu and Turcuș, “Afterlives,” 2021.
48. Ferencz-Flatz, *Filmul*, 336.
49. Benjamin, *Selected Writings* vol. I, 282.

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Îmi este indiferent dacă în istorie vom intra ca barbari, Radu Jude, 2018
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Babardeală cu bucluc sau porno balamuc, Radu Jude, 2021
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