



“REANIMATING THE SPIRIT OF THE AVANT-GARDE”, BUT WITH IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE: MONTAGE IN SOLOMON AND JUDE’S FILMS

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Abstract: In dialogue with studies about montage in Romanian cinema, I argue that films such as *Kapitalism: our improved formula* (Solomon, 2010) and *Do not expect too much from the end of the world* (Jude 2023) offer a dialectical technique that is structurally different from “intermedial collage” (Pethő 2022, 39). While such dialectical technique has abandoned three key elements that were part of Sergei Eisenstein’s conception of montage (totality, qualitative changes, and contradictions), it provides an aesthetic that anchors montage in an ideology critique, which is based on a political standpoint. I argue that the new montage deploys cuts that gesture to a partial perspective (against totality), delays and dead time (rather than qualitative changes) and works with inherent self-blockages as a condition of possibility to cinematic transformation (as opposed to contradictions). Given their interest in literature and new media, this experimental orientation constitutes an alternative not only to traditional forms (avant-garde collage or Soviet dialectics) but also to the New Romanian Wave’s focus on the essence of cinema (Solomon 2016, 48).
Keywords: montage; Eisenstein; dialectics; Romanian cinema; living dead; Jude; Solomon

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“To determine the essence of montage is to solve the problem of film as such” – Sergei Eisenstein

In his classification of types of montage, Gilles Deleuze distinguishes in his *Cinema 1* between a North American version from other three: dialectical montage in Soviet Marxism, the quantitative French form focusing on sublime and mechanical devices, and the German intensive form, which is articulated in their expressionist techniques.¹ The American, as exemplified by D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of Nation* utilizes binaries (such as North and South, good and bad, men and women) to recuperate

an organic unity that is threatened by various internal and external threats.² By contrast, the Soviet montage as represented by Sergei Eisenstein replaces the lost unity with a real source of conflict, which is class conflict, and derives the principle of montage from creating contrasts to realizing a spiral, which advances from one state to a better position. The triumphal drop of water in the famous scene with the butter separator in *Old and New* is the qualitative jump, which ensures that a society will pass from one state to a qualitatively superior state.³ In Soviet Marxism, montage is not a *cut and paste* of various empirical elements (as D.W. Griffith seems to theorize in

his parallel montage), but the capture of an organic whole where elements are determined by each other. Montage seizes reality not simply as a process of development, but as a development where contradictions constitute its internal engine and qualitative changes appear gradually.

Soviet montage, as deployed by key authors such as Sergei Eisenstein, Esfir Schub and Dziga Vertov, has become a key reference in studies analyzing Romanian experimental films, starting with Andrei Ujică's film *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu*.⁴ In responding to the general emphasis on Soviet montage, Pethő proposes the concept of „intermedial collage”, by which she understands “the mixture of fragments offering glimpses into different worlds, the elements of contingency, the multiplicity of authorial voices, discourses and media, as well as the *exquisite corpse*'s paradoxical invocation of both life and death.”⁵ While I agree with Ágnes Pethő that the new montage is different from Eisenstein's, I seek to emphasize the political perspective of the authorial voices who offer esthetic answers to social questions.⁶ Simply put, rather than multiplicity of voices and merely an underlining of contingency, I argue that a concept such as dialectical montage is better able to capture the structure of films such as *Kapitalism: our improved formula* (Solomon, 2010) and *Do not expect too much from the end of the world* (Jude 2023). I engage in a rereading of Žižek's psychoanalytic Marxism to theorize three key elements of dialectical montage (cuts, delays and dead time, and self-blockages).⁷ At the same time, while scholars such as Raluca Iacob have seen continuities between the Romanian New Wave and montage techniques, I draw on Alexandru Solomon's argument that his work falls outside of the New Romanian Wave, which was for him concerned primarily with the essence of cinema.⁸ For practitioners such as Solomon and Jude, montage is better placed to productively alienate viewers from a capitalist reality to engage them in a philosophical critique. If in the New Romanian Cinema we got to reality by unveiling the real state of things (in the cinema of the essence), with the new wave of Romanian directors the form itself (montage) constitutes the answer to the social problems of reality.

First, the new montage is not about capturing the whole but a distinct element, a partial view that offers a one-sided view of a problem. For Žižek, “truth is not balanced and objective, it is subjective, ‘one-sided.’”⁹ I translate this formula into a new one, such as “Instead of searching for the whole, *cut!*” Solomon's conception in *Kapitalism* is that we understand capitalism better if we go back to the figure of Ceaușescu, which is similar to an elementary frame. We cut to Ceaușescu's figure if we want to capture Romanian capitalism. By contrast, Jude's *Do not expect* use of montage seems to be rather broad: it is focused on the dialogue between the past (the Angela in a socialist film), the present of current

exploitation (Angela in contemporary Bucharest) and the future Angela (a *Tik-tok* obscene character), who speaks like an alien Andrew Tate. While Jude is not interested in totality like Eisenstein, he takes us back to a key problem, which is the relation between capitalism and death. Unlike Pethő who rejects “a single anchor” as a viewpoint, I argue there is “a primary cut” in the film since Jude's montage circulates around the question of death.¹⁰ Such concern circulates from the anxiety that Angela could die from an accident on the streets of Bucharest, to the corporation stealing a death place of her family, to the image of the multinational CEO (Nina Hoss) hovering over a Romanian TV crew, which shows how corporations steal workers their history and puts their life in danger.

A dialectical montage is not, however, simply a cut, because it involves the production on screen of elements such as history and the unconscious. Such elements are also articulated in the practice of quotation (the past is actualized by replaying old forms in a new setting). Quotations function as mechanisms of estrangement in relation to our current understanding of political and cultural economy. In *Kapitalism*, the main contradiction that the film evokes (class struggle) can not be directly indicated by appealing to late Stalinist figures like Ceaușescu, nor by invoking a workerist aesthetic, which focuses on workers defending their workplace. What remains is the juxtaposition of archival footages (film quotations) with footages in the present, so that we grasp the continuities and differences between late Stalinism and neoliberalism. In *Do not expect*, most elements in film function as quotations, from actual quotes deployed by Angela, to footages from the 1981 socialist film *Angela moves on* (Bratu, 1981) to Žižek's jokes. They have the function to comment on the reality of the present and to point to its points of breaking down.

Second, rather than engaging in revolutionary leaps, dialectical montage focuses on delays and dead time, because we do not seize a described change when it happens. Social transformations happen either too early or too late to be captured on screen. The formula of this new montage is: “A change takes place when we notice that it already has taken place.”¹¹ In the avant-garde cinema there is no abrupt, qualitative evolution like in Eisenstein, but a permanent struggle to adjust to what changed. Solomon's *Kapitalism* asks the viewer to realize that we live in a time of being stuck. The talking heads at the end of the film, which represent the new money, provoke the viewer to understand that we'll live in the reality of a new social and economic inequality. Also, Solomon captures the streets of Bucharest in frames that resemble dead-time, because he follows people in their walks in Bucharest. However, the voice-over reconceptualizes images because we understand that the contrast is between Ceaușescu's rituals of power and the new banality of broken streets and buildings, a



stand-in for a decadent Romanian infrastructure. Unlike Solomon, Jude is much more explicit in his use of delays and dead time, which he literally captures on the screen. For instance, he slows down the movement of the taxi in the 1981 film, with the explicit intent to call the viewer to function as a detective and find buried elements of a lost archive. Also, he offers us a literal cinematic “dead time”, with his four minutes montage of crosses on a Romanian highway, which tell us that the apocalypse has already taken place.

Pethő is right to show that there is a tension between fragmentation and structure in Jude’s films, but an author is still editing with the purpose of offering a vision, which includes aesthetic solutions to political and social questions.¹² Instead of putting two elements in oppositions (such as Eisenstein’s *General Line* use of contradictions between the old and the new, or the old traditional peasant life and a new communist life), the new montage shows how things appear out of their impossibility. For Žižek, a parallax is exemplified by how inherent self-blockage becomes the condition of new elements in the film. In *Kapitalism*, Solomon uses a voice-over to signal that we need to move on from the apparent contradiction between Ceaușescu’s Stalinism and the new capitalists. From this blockage, such as old Stalinists vs. new Capitalists, he creates a montage by using voice-over. In his film, Solomon impersonates Ceaușescu who talks to the Party as he would talk to current capitalists. Rather than berating them from being untruthful to communism, Solomon’s Ceaușescu congratulates them for their current successes. An inherent blockage is abolished when we move to a new terrain of conceptualizing the past and the present, such as that Stalinists and new money are not in direct opposition but aligned in Romanian capitalism. In Jude’s *Do not expect*, the contradiction between exploitation and the need to make a life under current capitalism appears in two forms. The first form is the obscene Tiktok persona, “Bobiță”, who intervenes in moments such as the final scene, where the workers seem to be in an impasse, since they are ruthlessly exploited. Yet, by introducing allegorical stories such as the story of a soldier during the Second World War, Jude uses Angela’s speech to bypass a simple contradiction between workers and the capital.

In the second part of the paper, I argue that a dialectical use of montage can offer a response to some of the impasses that we face in current capitalism. The obscene master has emerged as a fantasy figure that concentrates on the desire to live outside law, in a space of unmediated access to commodities, power and sex. In TV shows such as the *Spy/Master*, Ceaușescu has returned as an obscene figure that has unlimited access to power, not unlike a corporate boss that lands in Romania to exploit its workers in Radu Jude’s *Do not expect*. Against Deleuze’s celebration of montage as an

“inhuman eye”, I argue that dialectical montage deploys the living dead to challenge the fetishism of figures such as Ceaușescu and multinational CEOs.¹³

1. Experimentation in contrast: from the early masters to Romanian productions

Breaking the deadlock

Kapitalism and *Do not expect* are different from films such as Adam Curtis’s *Hypernormalization* (2016), which seek to show how capitalism changes historically. The intention of Curtis’s documentary is very broad, because it aims at detailed descriptions of capitalism’s transformations. In many respects, it aims at making sense of the totality of capitalism. Yet, Solomon and Jude’s films are better at focusing on key aspect that they seek to discuss, which illuminates our current problems in capitalism. In *Kapitalism*, the key angle is to understand Romanian’s late Stalinism in its relation to new capitalism. To do so, Solomon introduces us to three elements, which describe our relation to the past, present and future. First, we have future possibilities, which are exemplified by children who play with Lego figures and want to build a new society. Second, other two elements are central to the story: the past is represented as Ceaușescu and the present is actualized by the current moguls. If we want to understand capitalism, Solomon urges us to understand the relations among these three elements. For him, *the cut* is a montage that starts from an opposition, like in Eisenstein’s *General line*, but gives birth to a third element, which becomes the driving element of the narrative. As such, the director offers the viewer access to a parallax, by which an object (such as capitalism) can be better understood if we move it in a different light. Capitalism is not primarily about the relation between postsocialist children and Stalinism, but between postsocialist children and the new present masters, the capitalist bosses. A similar parallax appears in *Do not expect*, as a mode of moving beyond the opposition between Ceaușescu and capitalism. We start with images contrasting Angela in 2023 with Angela in 1981, but gradually we notice there is also Bobiță, a trickster Angela that functions at a different level than the other two. We perceive reality not only as a contrast between old socialist films and new capitalism, but we focus our attention to the obscene Angela, the one that recenters our attention to the key object, the relation between global corporations and the exploitation of workers.

In the first part of Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest*, the main character Roger Thornhill is obsessed with discovering who wanted to kill him by accident. However, in the second part, he wants to save the girl as part of a national mission to fight in the Cold War. The object of our attention has been displaced, so that what we wanted to understand (such as, who is the mysterious

killer, Philip Vandamm?) becomes a search for winning a geopolitical war and a woman's heart. The crime has no meaning if we do not see it in a different light, which is the concern for national security. A parallax is when in the same narrative we start with changes its dimensions and significance in the second part of the narrative. Likewise, *Kapitalism* and *Do not expect* urge the audience to shift their attention from a first understanding of a capitalist elite, which may seem an impediment in the transition to a better, much more humane capitalism, to a second, which is that the capitalist elite is an inherent part of our political system. The elite can not be easily peeled off from the authentic object, real capitalism, because it is basically the substance and medium of a new entity, which is actual capitalism. In *Kapitalism*, we shift from the contrast between children playing and the execution of Ceaușescu (Stalinism on its deadbed) to a new setting where children are invited to dine with capitalist talking heads. The new elite is here to stay for the future. Similarly, by showing a conversation in the car between an overworked production assistant (Angela) and her German boss (Doris Goethe), we shift our perception from Stalinism vs. present times. Angela and Doris Goethe are the equivalent of kids being invited to dinner by millionaires in Solomon's film.

How does Eisenstein's method of working with contradictions is changed by the new montage? In *Kapitalism*, Solomon's three elements (kids playing a lego game, the figure of Ceaușescu and the current boyars of capitalism) are not unlike our psychic apparatus. The kids are the imaginary (the children are playing a game in which they image a possible society), Ceaușescu is the real (the living dead that remains unsymbolized) and the symbolic (today's capitalism, which is actualized by the capitalist elite). These three elements are organized throughout the film in stark contrasts, so the film begins with an image of the kids playing and Ceaușescu's couple is executed on a tv screen. The film juxtaposes the two elements to give us a sense of the contradiction. The movement in the film is to create strong oppositions: the kids and Ceaușescu, Ceaușescu and the Capitalists, the children and capitalists. The force of this opposition is to draw a clear contrast, which might signal the intention to work in the manner of Eisenstein's dialectical montage. Yet, Solomon shifts our focus to a new type of montage, where we abandon the previous contrasts. Throughout the film, Ceaușescu becomes a capitalist vampire, capitalist bosses become Ceaușescu, so that we shift from Stalinism and capitalism as opposites to the complexities of our new exploitation. The deadlock offers the possibility of a new appearance (kids facing capitalist bosses), which changes our previous understanding of the past.

Likewise, Jude works with three elements: Angela in late Stalinism (the past), Angela in neoliberalism (the present), and Angela in a virtual space where she

behaves obscenely (the future). These three dimensions are different in many respects from Solomon's, but one of them stands out. The real is not a function only of the past (as in Solomon, where the unconscious is represented as Ceaușescu—the past that went away), but part of Angela's three persona. The socialist Angela is the unconscious as part of the past (the superego), the neoliberal Angela is the unconscious as part of the present (the ego; doesn't she make a Freudian slip when she introduces the warehouses of the corporations as the whorehouses?) and the Tiktok Angela is the obscene id that lives in a future-to-come. It may be one of the most exemplary renditions of the tree Freudian agencies that I have seen lately, similar to what Žižek called the three agencies that are represented in the three Marx brothers: the ego (Chico), the superego (Harpo) and the id (Groucho).⁴ The final scene, where the obscene Bobiță, the present Angela and the old Angela (Dorina Lazar) get together, could signal a deadlock, but the deadlock is already undone by the technological means which Jude deploys to present the film.

What are such techniques? Jude moves away from the opposition between corporation's theft of cemeteries in Bucharest and Angela's fury (as exemplified by Bobiță) by overlapping images with Bucharest in 1981 with current Bucharest. A different history, a history that is not erased, can be emerged in the process of what seems like an irreconcilable contradiction (such as workers vs. capital). Second, the use of jokes deploys a different depth to the image. For instance, Doris Goethe tells Angela a story about the novelist and poet, which is recirculation of a Žižek joke. The joke is that Goethe on his deathbed did not actually say *Mehr licht* (more light), as the tradition goes, but *Mehr nichts* (more nothings). The joke serves as a commentary to the actual role of a CEO in Romania which is here to offers workers nothing. As we can get from this anecdote, the entire Enlightenment project that was aimed at human emancipation ends more or less in a nihilist project, where one can aspire to the *nichts* of the corporations. The final scene where workers hold empty placards, or signs filled with nothing, is the gift that they get from Miss Goethe and the corporate capital: *nothing*. The use of an indirect commentary functions as a breakdown between the two locked binaries (capital vs. workers) so that we understand the possibilities which are deployed by Jude's use of montage. In working through the conflict, Jude also signals that the contradiction less absolute and totalizing, as it seemed to be in the beginning.

“Reanimating the spirit of the avant-garde”, but with ideology critique

In this section, I argue that Solomon and Jude deploy avant-garde techniques, which are relegated to the past of film history, but which they use very effectively in



new productions. Yet this redeployment is only partially captured by intermedial collage, which “allows each medium involved and fragment ‘to think’ for themselves, to bring forth their own sensuous, affective, and cognitive qualities”.¹⁵ Rather than a celebration of frames, which echo Deleuze’s famous “bodies without organs”, I claim that the new redeployment of avant-garde techniques is asking the viewers to interrogate their own fantasies and ideologies that produce them. In short, Solomon and Jude engage in an ideology critique by using elements such as superimposition, quotations, and poetic and subjective responses to burning political questions.

The first element is superimposition, which is brilliantly employed in *Napoleon*, Abel Gance’s film about Napoleon’s rise to power. In Gance’s history, there is a teleological trajectory so the change from the Reign of Terror to the Directory and to Napoleon’s era is the function of a predetermined history. From the first scene we understand that Napoleon is predestined to be a great leader. In the battle of snow in college at the beginning of the film, Napoleon’s discipline, vision, and tenacity are put in contrast with the foul play of his comrades. To give us a sense that history has already been determined, Gance, like later the Stalinist leaders of state socialism, will locate Napoleon at every key moment of historical progression. For instance, when *La Marseillaise* will be played for the first time in the National Assembly, Napoleon was not only there but he also predicted that the song would save many soldiers in the future. The transition to a new moment in history is signified by Gance’s idea of simultaneous montage. When Gance seeks to show how everything is predestined to lead to Napoleon’s glory, he uses the superimposition, that means he puts over the snow battle the figure of Napoleon the child. Second, he uses a rapid montage to show how Napoleon reacted to the Reign of Terror, so Napoleon looks very saddened at the excess of the revolution while an image with the Declarations of the Rights of Man appears on the screen.

Montage, in this pre-Stalinist 1926 French production, signals that change happens because of a particular direction of history. Superimpositions and simultaneous montage are created to show that history has one trajectory, which is determined by geniuses. This how Deleuze comments on superimpositions: “Gance relies on an effect of all these superimpositions in the soul, on the constitution of a rhythm of added and subtracted values, which presents to the soul the idea of a whole as the feeling of measurelessness and immensity.”¹⁶ Like in *Napoleon*, Jude’s *Do not expect* draws on a hovering head (Doris Goethe, the corporate CEO) which organizes the production of television and life in Bucharest. Doris Goethe is a large specter on Zoom who presides over how workers are exploited for their own benefit. She does not even seem to be aware of her role in exploitation, which is somehow mirrored by Angela’s own fetishism

(while acting as Bobiță, she also seems to believe that “I know that capitalism is not working, but what can I do?”, which is the definition of fetishism). Angela’s use of irony and obscenity, however, shows us that she is aware of what is happening in her world. For instance, in her conversation with Doris Goethe, she suggests that she is still working in her regular hours, although we understand that it is late night in Bucharest. Unlike Gance’s *Napoleon*, the predestined direction of history in Jude does not lead to the providential leader anymore. In an ironic twist, it leads to the giant hovering head that belongs to a marketing director of an international corporation.¹⁷

Not only superimposition is part of the new avant-garde, but also quotations as direct references to previous texts and films. In his description of his method, Solomon sees himself as part of filmmakers who seek to reanimate memory and bring it differently to the present.¹⁸ His work with citations represents a key technique, which he borrows from Dadaists and Surrealists.¹⁹ He explicitly defines his early work as an effort “to reanimate the spirit of the avant-garde”.²⁰ Like Jude who actively draws on Walter Benjamin’s thinking, Solomon uses quotations to reinsert the past in the present.²¹ We know from Benjamin that a quotation behaves like a wayside robber so as to “relieve a stroller of his conviction”.²² This is a technique that Solomon deploys for instance in his film *Arsenie* (2023) where he asks a curated group of tourists to impersonate and reenact elements from the history of a key religious figure in Romania, Arsenie Boca. This performative reenactment is put in contrast with passages from the socialist militia’s reports, which have described him as a charismatic conman. Quotations, which are read aloud, are part of the experience of touring Boca’s sainthood places. The group is invited to talk about their new understanding of the past, once they have been exposed to two opposing versions about who Boca was.

In *Kapitalism*, Solomon guides the viewer to realize that our actual system was made and did not emerge as a product of an invisible hand. A few selected people, the capitalist elite, understood how to make serious money in the system while others have to resign themselves to poverty and a daily struggle to pay the bills. Neither Solomon nor Jude deploy traditional representation of the class conflict, which was imagined either as a strike or a workers’ fight against the boss. Instead, we find techniques of juxtaposing footages: Solomon overlaps official propaganda with current visits to factories by billionaires; Jude juxtaposes the taxi driver in socialism with the new production assistant in neoliberalism. Both juxtapositions refuse Eisenstein dialectic: there is no abrupt change, no step forward, no moment of transformation from milk to water to firework to numbers. In Solomon’s film, there are no mass gatherings and no citizens’ love for their leaders, yet

talking heads on screens interpellate us. In Jude's film, the symbolic space is defined by the corporate desires, from the emptying of local graves to the extraction of fantasies from local workers. Angela and the workers that she talks to share something in common: their fantasy is already defined by the Other's desires, which take the shape of nationalistic desires or the little money that one hustles to death. In a powerful scene, one of the old actors in the 1981 film *Angela*, Angela's husband, has become a Victor Orban fan. The new Angela's response to such situation is to deploy a Žižek joke, as a commentary to her audience. In this joke, a fisherman is asked to demand something by the genie in the bottle, on the condition that the neighbor will receive twice what he gets. The fisherman asks to have one of his eye taken out. This critique of chauvinism, which we have encountered in *Aferim* and other documentaries about the Romanian Holocaust, points to the fantasies that rule our life in actual capitalism.

Kapitalism and *Do no expect* actively work with an understanding that they articulate not just the position of an artistic work, but also of the director behind it. They are not didactic works where you hear the sermon of the creator, but rather poetic works which use situations to create a voice that can be heard through images. To confront traditional history and make us see new things is the drive of new avant-garde filmmakers. They expose us to the unseen elements of the past, such as the 1981 Bucharest, to which Jude draws our attention in *Do not expect*. Solomon's montage functions not unlike what Pasolini theorized as a "free indirect" subjective standpoint, which is the unique manner of a modernist cinema to create its own cinematic language. Pasolini developed his idea by drawing on a method that he finds in Antonioni: in *Red Desert* the director stops giving us his view on alienation by utilizing the entire film and is able to express his vision by filming the world from the body of his main character (a hysterical Monica Vitti).²³ In doing so, Antonioni finally was able to represent the world through his eyes, so that he replaces the view of a character (a hysteric) with his own view on an alienated world. The indirect free subjective has the capacity to be intoxicating, because it is exhilarating; it frees one to say what one desires about the world that he comments upon.

The same exhalating and powerful mechanism we see in *Kapitalism* when Solomon uses his character, Ceaușescu, to tell us what he thinks about the world that we live in. To do so, he super-impresses his voice over Ceaușescu's voice, and more than that, he talks like he *is* Ceaușescu. What is articulated in the scene where Ceaușescu congratulates new capitalists for their achievements is a breakthrough scene. It is a moment that functions as a joke, but one that, like a quote from the past, articulates a truth that has the stylistic structure of joke, which could have circulated during late socialism:

"Dear friends and comrades, continue what you have started. You chose the right path when you betrayed me. This way you have reserved yourself a place under the sun of capitalism. And you made it, unlike our Czech, Polish and Hungarian comrades, who have lost power after 1989. Of course, you abandoned the most advanced ideology, but you kept the principles of the Party: pile, cunoștințe și relații (PCR, your network, your know how to do business)."

An indirect free subjective is for Pasolini a manner of conceptualizing a new language, which has been poorly explored so far by cinema directors. This attempt at forming a new language can take place under two main conditions. The first can be summarized in a trivial injunction such as "make the camera seen". This injunction is the opposite of a previous injunction which became a part of a decalogue for any director, which is that once the viewer can see the camera, that's ruining a film. In this scene, the voice of Solomon who speaks as Ceaușescu, as embodying a ghost that he said he would resurrect to reflect on current capitalism, is powerful device because the commentary is not that of a director who has to hide his politics around formal ideas, but one who clearly expresses his vision of the world. This is why to see the montage is what Adorno has articulated clearly as a paradox of our human condition: "the more the machine makes his presence known, the stronger the presence of the human presence".²⁴ A second element that is important for Pasolini is that this return to formalism is very important in creating a new poetic language for film directors.²⁵ If for Pasolini this technique is a step forward for the bourgeoisie, for Solomon is an embracement of risky strategy: he cites from Marx and engages in provocations when he speaks like the detested dictator. The return to "free indirect standpoint" is an important step back from the assumption that only the documentary has to speak, but not the person behind it.

2. An alternative to obscene fathers and fetishism?

In this second section, I argue that if I am right (namely, that Solomon's and Jude's work is informed by ideology critique), then montage politically responds to what Žižek calls the rise of obscene fathers and widespread fetishism. To challenge the new resurrection of authoritarian leaders, dialectical montage provides not only a description of the symptom of our current predicament (which is the intensification of class conflict), but also a formal strategy to the rise of Stalinist *uber-fathers*. As a powerful alternative, the dialectical montage evolves around themes such as repetition, history, the confrontation with death, and the impossibility of reviving a pre-Oedipal situation.

In Žižek's explanation, in our current capitalism, we live the fantasy of resurrecting obscene fathers who are fathers that live in a pre-oedipal stage (have



unlimited power and access to all women).²⁶ When he told the story of the notorious Austrian criminal Josef Fritzl, Žižek noticed that from being a kind and polite man, he suddenly changed into „a monstrous neighbor”.²⁷ Like Fritzl, in Žižek’s explanation Ceaușescu saw himself as a caring paternal authority, a father protecting his nation from foreign decadence – „as in all authoritarian regimes, the basic relationship between the ruler and his subjects was, whatever else it might be, one of unconditional love.”²⁸ A return to figures that represent absolute authority (from Putin and Trump to Mussolini and Ceaușescu) is abundantly clear in current representations in cinema. In the HBO TV show *Spy/Master*, we are presented with a Ceaușescu who is hysterical and uncontrolled, the precise opposite of spies. The ex-president is irrational, loud, vulgar, pathetic, none of the qualities that we see in spies, who are cold, calculated, and extremely smart. This binary inadvertently creates a figure of rebellion, an obscene master which we envy for his lack of castration. The montage in *Spy/Master* derives from a binary structure, which is authenticated by images of real history, since we are called to imagine ourselves living in the time of Ceaușescu. The risks of working with the format of a period piece is that the viewer does not have space to interrogate that things were historically “like that”. Instead, the advantage of montage is that it actualizes it brings history in the present, rather than allocating it to a time of real events. The main difference between *Spy/Master* and *Kapitalism* is forcefully actualized by Walter Benjamin’s argument about historical reconstruction:

“The true method of making things present: to imagine them in our own space and not to imagine ourselves in their space”.²⁹

The obscene master that appears *Spy/Master* is a not new phenomenon in current representations about politics in Romania. If in the 1990 communism was described as a product of paranoid Securitate masters (in *Fox: Hunter*, Gulea, 1993), the situation has currently changed. The limits of democratic capitalism have been prominently brought to our imagination, particularly after several financial crises and growing social inequalities. In response, the Freudian fantasy of the obscene master offers us a living dead, a master who has not been killed, who haunts the politics of the band of brothers who agree to rule equally the city. In *Spy/Master*, Ceaușescu articulates a critique that has become a powerful line of argumentation from leaders such as Vladimir Putin: the west is corrupt, liberal democracy does not work, and one must rule by force. The appeal of such figures resides in the seduction of transgression:

“Let us recall the case of the ‘leader caught with his pants down’: the solidarity of the group is strengthened by

their common disavowal of the misfortune that laid open the Leader’s failure or impotence – a shared lie is an incomparably more effective bond for a group than the truth. When, in an academic department, members of the inner circle surrounding a famous professor become aware of some flaw of his (he is addicted to drugs, a kleptomaniac, a sexual masochist pervert, he has stolen a key line of argumentation from a student, etc.), this very knowledge of the flaw – coupled with the willingness to disavow this knowledge – is the true feature of identification which keeps the group together ...”³⁰

My contention is that precisely the danger of this fantasy is what informs Solomon and Jude’s work. The execution of Ceaușescu in *Kapitalism*, as well as the destruction of the Uranus neighborhood in Bucharest (which Jude discusses in his *Do not expect*) point to our need to take seriously the death of the authoritarian Romanian leaders. To respond a traumatic event, Žižek offers two alternatives:

“Let us take the case of the death of a beloved person: in the case of a symptom, I “repress” this death, I try not to think about it, but the repressed trauma returns in the symptom; in the case of a fetish, on the contrary, I “rationally” fully accept this death, and yet I cling to the fetish, to some feature that embodies for me the disavowal of this death.”³¹

The first frame of the film *Kapitalism* starts with an image that gestures towards death: we see the Ceaușescu couple in their process in December 1989, and we know that they will die. Following this introduction, we hear Solomon’s voice who comments ironically that in post-communist times we live in a space where sex and money become the new desires around which our lives evolve. The death of authoritarian leaders has made possible a life that can not fulfill its narcissistic fantasies. For instance, to be able to circulate in cities, we need an infrastructure that we lack since the growing inequality has differentiated between those who have (huge cars) and those who have not. Then, Solomon asks the viewer to entertain a rather strange premise, that is, Ceaușescu returns as a spectre and talks to the new leaders of Romania. Like in the father in *Hamlet*, the living dead Ceaușescu, returns to haunt us.

What we see in the film is the transformation of Ceaușescu from a figure of trauma into a figure that can be easily coopted in a capitalist canon. Ceaușescu would berate his ex-comrades for buying and consolidating their new feuds but then he would also end up congratulating them for managing to use the secret formula in socialism (as exemplified by the acronym *PCR*). What Solomon tries to do is to show us how Ceaușescu can move from his physical death to a potential symbolic death. During this process of putting him to death, Ceaușescu is actualized in two different

entities: the narcissistic moguls, surrounded by mirrors, and the director's disembodied voice, who warns us about the dangers of embracing our new leaders. In his new physical presence on screen, Ceaușescu behaves like capitalism itself. Marx described capitalism as "an automatic subject", which makes capital an automatic presence, not a living one.³² Solomon's intention is not to extend Ceaușescu's automatic life, but to eliminate it. He resurrects the automaton Ceaușescu potentially put him to sleep, so as to lose his undeadness. But Ceaușescu does not only returns as a symptom, because he is to a certain extent fetishized in Romanian society. As one of the moguls that is called to talk about Ceaușescu argues, if the Romanian communist had a talk show and if he had known how to operate such as popular talk-show, he would still be president today. Ceaușescu, like the capitalism, is the fetish that some people in society need to preserve their power.

If symptom is the exception that disturbs a surface, the fetish is the embodiment of an idea that allows us to deal with our reality. In *Kapitalism*, Ceaușescu is both symptom (in the beginning) and fetish (at the end of the film), while in *Do no expect* (Radu Jude, 2023) Doris Goethe is the mother-death, the figure that ensures that our world does not collapse around us. Fetish has also a constructive function: it allows one to believe in something, such the reality of the Stalinist fantasy or the world of corporate life, which cancels the impact of economic injustice. Fetishism is not only on the side of those who are ignorant, but also, we, those who see the flaws in capitalism, act to perpetuate it. The main characters' relation to the boss is fetishistic. Angela knows that everything is rotten and knows that corporations are responsible for exploiting her. She tells Doris Goethe that other firms exploit her, and not this one that she works for. When she is asked whether this firm is exploiting her, she says that the firm does not, while it is obvious that this is not the eight hours programs that she is hired to work on. Angela drives the car at 11 pm at night. Of course, the corporate boss seeks to brush off that information very quickly. This is the classical example of a fetishistic disavowal. "I know that everything is terrible, but I continue to do what I do". This is also the case with a director of the corporate film that justifies his work morally as a way of defending them. He also lives in a reality where he knows that what he does is not ethically justified, that the corporations are ruthlessly exploit people, and still he does it.

Rather than thinking about their method as a form of collage, Solomon and Jude deploy their own form of ideology critique to warn us about current troubling phenomena. Pethő's argument about Jude's method is that he draws on "Surrealists' and Benjamin's practices, rediscovering 'energies' in filling the screen with 'outmoded' media and enhancing their 'forces of atmosphere'".³³ While this is true, the result is not only

the enabling of "divergent positions of spectatorship".³⁴ Pethő's critique is informed by Deleuze's observation that although Eisenstein's montage offered an alternative philosophy to Griffith's attempt to re-establish an organic unity, the Soviet director sought to retain the idea of an organic composition.³⁵ Solomon and Jude draw on an avant-garde montage which refrains from wanting to re-establish a unity to the world they describe. They deploy quotations from films, books, and historical documents; seek to cut to a main problem which can be paradoxically approached with deadtime and delays; and find in inner deadlocks the possibility of moving beyond a stark opposition. Yet, my argument is that their intentions are deeply informed by a tradition that can be called ideology critique. The danger of the resurrection of the living dead of authoritarian corpses is what drives their artistic productions. Their warning about fetishizing capitalist figures as well as descriptions of our part in consolidating a current widespread ideology is powerful and timely.

Final remarks about the philosophy of dialectical montage

I conclude by gesturing to the philosophy behind this ideological critique in Solomon and Jude, which questions traditional conventions of representing subjectivity and history on screen. "Show not tell" has become a clear principle for film makers seeking to talk about reality. Period pieces or films addressing history tend to hide montage, since they function under the assumption that immersing the viewer in history is the recommended strategy for understanding. Yet, dialectical montage responds by privileging the technique rather than the illusion of either history or subjectivity. Old artistic devices such as the parallax (in Hitchcock), superimpression (in Gance), the free indirect subjective (in Passolini) have the capacity to reveal a subjectivity that appears only in the form of a lack. Montage is an instrument by which we are reminded that there is something beyond perfection, such as human imperfection, which can emerge in the presence of technological devices, which take the front stage. Žižek comments on "The Curves of the Needle," a short essay on the gramophone from 1928, that Adorno understands the fundamental paradox of recording: "the more the machine makes its presence known (through obtrusive noises, its clumsiness and interruptions), the stronger the experience of the actual presence of the singer".³⁶ The lesson of this interpretation is that the more humanity is removed, once the technological device is at the forefront, the stronger the effect that we are dealing with something "inauthentic". The direct implication is a philosophy that we see in both *Kapitalism* and *Do no expect* matches Žižek's observation about the nature of subjectivity, which "is not the immediate living



self- presence we attain when we shed the distorting mechanical reproduction; it is rather that remainder of ‚authenticity‘ whose traces we can discern in an imperfect mechanical reproduction”.³⁷

The question that I left unaddressed is if montage, as a technique that offers human subjectivity a marginal place, does not have troubling implications. What if montage, the technique that Solomon and Jude use, is not only human but also has a non-human component, like a living dead which is a parasite upon humanity?³⁸ Isn't the montage, another form of circulating ideas, like an undead presence, a living dead that does not want to die? While dialectical montage is an automatic device which relegates human presence to a secondary position, it also represents a device that is able to make *present* human subjectivity. Without montage that brings back history and the unconscious, our fantasies seem to be colonized by obscene fathers and fetishistic capitalist bosses. *Kapitalism* presents us with moments that could potentially bring together three elements that are considered hard to co-exist (Ceaușescu as the past, the current capitalists as the present, the children's play as the future). Such formal exercise can happen only in the mediated form of non-human presence, which inscribes all these three elements as allegorical in a game with Lego figures. *Do not expect* brings together the three elements (the 1981 Angela as Dorina Lazar, the new Angela and the obscene mask, the Tiktok futurist Bobița) in the final scene, when Bobița comments on the ruthless exploitation of corporations. The moment when all three elements appear in the same image are rare, but they signal a breakthrough in our understanding. In Solomon's film, the non-human is actualized by the Lego figures, who act without being instrumentalized by human agents; in Jude, we engage with his reflection about images and their role in current capitalism. Both exercises suggest the diminished power of representing humanity on screen, as a response to current obscene figures. Yet only by these activating non-human devices a deeper reflection about our humanity can be produced.

Both Solomon and Jude have learned the lesson of Freud and Marx that the secret of dreams and capitalism does not reside in their content, but in their form. If our world of fantasies is populated by obscene fathers and fetishistic CEOs, Solomon and Jude urge us to understand the mechanisms behind their production. The form of presentation is the mechanism that helps decipher our current condition. In Solomon's film, we understand the growing gap between ordinary citizens and the wealthy. In Jude, we see that the exploitation of workers can lead to either various forms of nationalism or highways filled with dead bodies. Through montage, we can perceive that the real problem, class conflict and its production of fantasies, is not adequately dealt with. What Solomon and Jude show is not all avant-garde fantasies need to be embraced. The new techniques are not simply the reproduction of old devices, but creations that seek to dispel the desire for totality and powerful transformative changes. In a parodic rendition of Dziga Vertov's philosophy of the *Kinoeye*, Žižek wants to challenge Deleuze's fascination with an avant-garde automaton who is able to grasp the entire reality of our life. To offer a parodic example of a completely liberated gaze he tells the story of Martin, the legendary idiot from French fairy tales, who believed such as fantasy „when his mother, worried that he will never find a wife, told him to go to church and cast an eye over the girls there”. Žižek tells us that what Martin does „is go to the butcher first, purchase a pig eye, and then, in the church, throw this eye around over the girls at prayer— no wonder he later reports to his mother that the girls were not too impressed by his behavior”.³⁹ This is what revolutionary cinema should not be doing, and what Solomon and Jude refuse to engage in.

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Notes

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I, The movement-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986), 29-56.
2. Deleuze, *Cinema I*, 30.
3. *Ibid.*, 35.
4. Raluca Iacob, „Authoring from the Shadows: Creativity and the Film Archive in *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu*.” *Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures of Central and Eastern Europe*, no. 7 (2018). Andrei Gorzo and Veronica Lazăr, „Radu Jude's Montage Experiments with Documents of Oppression and Mass Murder,” *Transilvania*, no. 9 (2022): 8-9.
5. Ágnes Pethő, „The Exquisite Corpse of History: Radu Jude and the Intermedial Collage.” *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies* 21, no.1 (2022): 38, 42.
6. My reading seems to be partially supported by Andrei Gorzo & Veronica Lazăr, who read Jude's *Do not expect* as an anticapitalist film. Given that Angela acts rather as an anarchist (she does not see a common struggle at her workplace; she seems to despise

- everyone in the production company), the question is what kind of anti-capitalism is at stake in the film. My suggestion is to conceive Jude's anti capitalist film as part of a broader Hegelian psychoanalytic tradition. See Andrei Gorzo and Veronica Lazăr, "Radu Jude's Intertextual Network in Do Not Expect Too Much from the End of the World," *Transilvania*, no. 7 (2023): 1-8.
7. Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 3-5. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Boston: MIT Press, 1992), 91. has started his reflections on the nature of montage primarily in relation with the inherent self-blockages. He understood them as surpluses which change our understanding of previous elements that were in contradiction: montage, which is „the transformation of fragments of the real into cinematic reality”, produces a certain leftover, „a surplus that is radically heterogeneous to cinematic reality but nonetheless implied by it”.
 8. Iacob, "Authoring from the Shadows," 8; Alexandru Solomon, *Reprezentări ale memoriei în filmul documentar* (Iași: Polirom, 2016), 48.
 9. Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 4.
 10. Pethő "The Exquisite Corpse of History," 42.
 11. Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 4.
 12. Pethő, "The Exquisite Corpse of History," 81.
 13. Deleuze, *Cinema I*, 20.
 14. Žižek 2006.
 15. Pethő, "The Exquisite Corpse of History," 80.
 16. Deleuze, *Cinema I*, 47-48.
 17. In contrast with Jude, Solomon does not use Ceaușescu as a hovering specter to talk about capitalism. Ceaușescu is mobilized as a spectre, but his spectrality is not a function of dominating the screen but of being present as a contrasting site to current capitalism.
 18. Alexandru Solomon, *Reprezentări ale memoriei în filmul documentar* (Iași: Polirom, 2016), 21.
 19. Solomon, *Reprezentări*, 42-43.
 20. *Ibid.*, 43.
 21. Bogdan Popa, "Revisiting the Uses of Nostalgia in Post-socialist Cinema: Radu Jude's Cinema and Dialectical Images", *Transilvania*, no. 1 (2023): 74; Pethő, "The Exquisite Corpse of History," 44.
 22. Walter Benjamin, *One-way Street and other writings*, translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NLB, 1979), 95.
 23. Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scriseri despre literatură și artă* (Bucharest: Tracus Arte, 2022), 279.
 24. Cited in Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), 44.
 25. Pasolini, *Scriseri despre literatură și artă*, 288.
 26. For obscene fathers, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), x.
 27. Žižek, *The Plague*, vii-x.
 28. *Ibid.*, x.
 29. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 206.
 30. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Boston: MIT Press, 1992), 55.
 31. Žižek, *On Belief*, 13-14.
 32. Slavoj Žižek, *(Surplus Enjoyment: A Guide for the Non-perplexed)*. London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 37.
 33. Pethő, "The Exquisite Corpse of History," 80.
 34. *Ibid.*
 35. Deleuze, *Cinema I*, 33.
 36. Žižek, *On Belief*, 44.
 37. *Ibid.*
 38. As Žižek (*Surplus Enjoyment*, 64) comments on this idea of a living dead in Lacan, the drive and enjoyment constitute a part of humanity that is not only human but also non-human: "enjoyment itself is something that parasites upon human pleasures, perverting them so that a subject can draw a surplus-enjoyment from displeasure itself."
 39. Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies*, 137.

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Films:

- Kapitalism: our improved formula* (Alexandru Solomon, 2010)
- Arsenie. An amazing after life* (Solomon, 2023)
- Do not expect too much the end of the world* (Radu Jude 2023)
- Hypernormalization* (Adam Curtis, 2016)
- Napoleon* (Abel Gance, 1927)
- North by North-West* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959)
- Fox: Hunter* (Stere Gulea, 1993)
- Spy/Master* (HBO, 2023)
- Angela goes on* (Lucian Bratu, 1981)
- The Pervert's guide to Cinema* (Slavoj Žižek, 2006)