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Close Up

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Four Romanian Nonfiction Contributions to the Filmography of the Holocaust

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Abstract

In this article, we discuss four nonfiction films released by Romanian filmmakers in the 21st century that represent valuable contributions to the rich and varied international filmography of the Holocaust. *Struma* (2001) by Radu Gabrea, *Odessa* (2013) by Florin Iepan, *The Dead Nation* (2017) by Radu Jude, and *The Exit of the Trains* (2020) by Radu Jude and Adrian Cioflâncă, ranging from standard television documentary to innovative cinematic essay, bravely approach dark episodes, largely unknown or ignored, in Romania’s recent history.

Keywords

Radu Gabrea, Florin Iepan, Radu Jude, Adrian Cioflâncă, nonfiction film, Holocaust in Romania, Struma disaster, Odessa massacre, Iași pogrom, photography

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Starting with the Soviet newsreel film on the liberation of Rostov (*Soiuzkinozhurnal* no. 114), shot in November 1941, released in the following month, and presenting for the first time on screen the Nazi atrocities against the occupied population, including the murder of Jews (Hicks 2012: 47), the international filmography of the Holocaust has extended to several hundreds, if not thousands of titles across the globe over the last eight decades. Until the beginning of the 21st century, Romanian filmmakers almost never tackled such still sensitive subjects. Their silence corresponded to the general silence from the Romanian public sphere:

The main obstacle to recognizing the Holocaust in Romania has been an “asymmetric” mode of tackling memory about the Holocaust: in Romania, political factors have been the driving force pushing the acceptance of responsibility for past crimes, while intellectual elites and the general public have mostly oscillated between indifference and varying degrees of reluctance, if not hostility. (Dumitru 2020: 412)

Fortunately, especially in the last years, the Holocaust in Romania was approached in notable nonfiction films, some of them very original.

Struma (2001) is a Romanian nonfiction film produced mainly for television and directed by Radu Gabrea (a filmmaker specializing in Jewish topics) after a screenplay by Stelian Tănase. The director made two versions of the film. The Romanian version, broadcasted in two parts on Antena 1, the TV network that produced *Struma*, has 82 minutes. The English version, aimed at the international market, is 56-minute long. Unfortunately for Gabrea, in the same year, Simcha Jacobovici, an Israeli-Canadian filmmaker whose parents were Holocaust survivors from Iași, made a documentary feature in English on the same topic. Jacobovici’s Canadian production, *The Struma*, was better received than the Romanian one, earning selections and awards in major international film festivals (Toronto, Istanbul, Portland, etc.).

Gabrea’s nonfiction film is a well-documented reconstruction of an atrocious tragedy: the “Struma disaster”, considered by historians the largest exclusively civilian naval disaster of World War II in the Black Sea. The “Struma” ship sailed from Constanța on 12 December 1941, carrying almost 800 Romanian Jews in terrible conditions (witnesses would speak of “Struma” as a “floating coffin”). The destination was Mandatory Palestine, where, through the Balfour Declaration of 1917, “a national home for the Jewish people” had been established. However, after reaching Istanbul, the ship was anchored in quarantine from 15 December 1941 to 23 February 1942. During this time, Great Britain, mandated to control Palestine after World War I, urged the Turkish government to prevent “Struma” from continuing her voyage (as Romania was a member of the Axis, Britain saw the passengers on “Struma” as citizens of an adverse country), while Turkey, then a neutral country, refused to allow the ship’s passengers to disembark and travel overland. Finally, the local authorities towed “Struma”, with her main engine inoperable, through the Bosphorus strait. Within hours, in the morning of 24 February, following an explosion whose cause



Still from *Struma* by Radu Gabrea

would be revealed a few decades later (“Struma” was torpedoed by a Soviet submarine), the ship sank, killing almost all of the people on board.

The film functions adequately as microhistory supported by official documents, letters, images from the era, and oral history interviews. Gabrea effectively mixes four essential documentary techniques: voice-over narration and commentary, interviews (both “talking heads” and off-screen testimonies), archival footage, and dramatic re-enactments with actors. The authentic documents concerning the history of the Jews on the ship “Struma” transform the nonfiction film into a source of historical investigation. Besides interviewing experts and persons somehow connected to the disaster, the director uses a crucial video document obtained from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: the testimony of businessman David Stoliar, the then-18-year-old only survivor from “Struma”. In the film, this testimony is fundamental to understanding the human side of tragedy.

Gabrea’s *Struma* integrates the story of the Jews refugees eager to reach Palestine in the macabre historical context of the era dominated by the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question” (“Endlösung der Judenfrage”), implemented as a project to exterminate European Jews at the Wannsee Conference on 20 January 1942. The Romanian version of the “Final Solution” was referred to by marshal Ion Antonescu, the country’s wartime dictator, as “land clearing”. This abominable project began with the Bucharest pogrom (21-23 January 1941) and Iași pogrom (29 June – 6 July 1941), and was continued by killing Jews in Moldavia, Northern Bukovina, Bessarabia, Odessa, and Transnistria. It is worth mentioning that Gabrea quotes passages from Emil Dorian’s *Diary* and inserts photographic evidence of

the Iași pogrom. Radu Jude would later use the same sources in *The Dead Nation* (2017) and *The Exit of the Trains* (co-directed by Adrian Ciofâncă, 2020), both discussed below.

Reviewing Gabrea's nonfiction film, Eugenia Vodă asserts: "If the filmmakers do not excel in originality, they excel in tenacity and willingness. The willingness to attack such a topic, with a nebulous and fragile documentary support. The tenacity to research (...) and to try to reconstruct the whole starting from a few bones." (Vodă 2001)

Odessa (2013), a Romanian-German-Ukrainian co-production written and directed by Florin Iepan, is a nonfiction film with a long gestation period. The filmmaker had started his campaign "to bring to surface maybe the most tragic event in our recent history" (as he asserts on screen) in 2009, with the targeted effect to generate the first public debate on Romania's fascist past. In 2011, when he presented a short teaser of his work-in-progress in the framework of the One World Romania documentary film festival in Bucharest, Iepan declared he had some 60 hours of raw footage for the *Odessa* project. In 2013, the final 55-minute version of the film, including a sequence shot during the staged debate held two years ago, had its first official screening at the same festival.

Odessa is a challenging documentary, atypical in Romanian cinema. According to Dana Dumitru, among the recent Romanian films which, "while documenting the Holocaust, depict in parallel the attitudes of contemporary Romanians toward this problematic past", *Odessa* "is perhaps the most daring Romanian documentary of this era". (Dumitru 2020: 414) Iepan seems to have learned a lot from the way Michael Moore provokes his subjects/victims, as well as his audience. Following the American documentary filmmaker's example, *Odessa's* director appears in front of the camera and assumes the first-person subjective voice in a discourse of both accusation and sought-for repentance in the name of the Romanian state.

The film's narrative trigger, simultaneously an epitome of the country's fascist and antisemitic past, is the Odessa massacre of 22-25 October 1941. On the first day, the Romanian military commander's office was blown up by a mine that Red Army sappers had planted in the building, killing around 100 officers and soldiers, among whom the Romanian commander of the city. The local Jews and Communists became instant scapegoats. In retaliation for the bomb attack, during the next days, over 22,000 Jews, including entire families, were shot, hanged, or burned alive by the Romanian troops, following the direct order of marshal Antonescu, in Odessa and the surrounding towns in the Transnistria Governorate. Then, between November 1941 and March 1942, the Jews held captive in the concentration camps in Transnistria were subjected to a regime of mass extermination. Historians estimate that, during the five months, around 35,000 persons died in these "sites of death", of which the most sinister was the Bogdanovka extermination camp.

As Gabrea, Iepan appeals to the testimony of a survivor. Mikhail Zaslavsky, the last survivor of the Odessa massacre (when he was 16-year-old), was brought to Bucharest in 2011, seventy years after the atrocities. However, at that time, Romanian journalists were more interested in the 90th anniversary of King Michael, who, as Iepan suggests via archival footage, was Antonescu's not-so-innocent accomplice. The marshal himself is subject to controversy: many Romanians still perceive this historical figure as a great



Director Florin Iepan and Sergiu Nicolaescu in *Odessa*

patriot and a national hero, not as a monstrous mass murderer. Antonescu was, in fact, the main reason why Iepan had decided to make a film on the Odessa massacre. In 2006, Romanian Television (TVR) had conducted a public poll to find out who are the “100 Greatest Romanians” of all time (a local version of the British TV show “100 Greatest Britons”). Iepan had participated as a director to the resulting series, “Great Romanians” (“Mari Români”), by making a film portrait of marshal Antonescu. Although Iepan, supported by the historian Adrian Cioroianu, addressed the anti-Semitic and criminal nature of Antonescu’s regime, the controversial marshal finished the poll on the sixth position among the “Great Romanians”. The voting results prompted the filmmaker to go even further in revealing Antonescu’s wartime crimes, thus approaching the Odessa massacre.

With or without Zaslavsky, Iepan, always in hand with the “Final Report of the International Commission of the Holocaust in Romania” (presided by Elie Wiesel), obtains face-to-face meetings or abruptly accosts various politicians, including the former president Emil Constantinescu, and decision-makers, insistently asking them to take a stand on the Odessa massacre. The filmmaker gets invited to TV and radio shows, and he organizes an unattended press conference with the survivor. Among others, Iepan meets Sergiu Nicolaescu, the filmmaker-turned-politician who manipulated the production of historical films in socialist Romania through the so-called “Grand National Epic” and who directed *The Mirror – The Beginning of Truth* (*Oglinda – Începutul adevărului*, 1994), a film extremely apologetic of Antonescu, without mentioning the marshal’s involvement in the Holocaust. The octogenarian Nicolaescu listens carefully to Iepan, examines closely the figures in the “Wiesel Report”, and admits he may have been wrong about Antonescu. Moreover, as Iepan claims, Nicolaescu (who would die in 2013, before *Odessa*’s premiere) started collaborating with him on the screenplay of a fiction film tackling the same topic.



Still from *The Dead Nation* by Radu Jude

The Dead Nation (*Țara moartă*, 2017) is Radu Jude's first nonfiction film and, at the same time, one of the most original Romanian documentaries. The 83-minute film, internationally premiered in the "Signs of Life" section of Locarno Film Festival, "shows a filmmaker who has discovered a special way of looking at and behind images". (Holzapfel 2017)

In his "documentary-essay", subtitled "Fragments of parallel lives", Jude puts to excellent use over 500 photos on glass plates from the 1930s and 1940s, selected from the fabulous collection of the small-town photographic studio owner Costică Acsinte. These still images are articulated in an apparent chronological succession.

The soundtrack used by the director to accompany the scanned photographs is meant to reveal what is hidden "behind images". First, there are fragments, read by Jude himself in a blank voice, from the *Diary* kept by the Jewish doctor and writer Emil Dorian in Bucharest. For the period 1937-1946, the diaristic document recounts what Acsinte's photos could not fully capture: mainly the rising of antisemitism, the anti-Soviet war, and the atrocities of the Holocaust, followed by the end of World War II and the beginning of the instauration of Soviet-imposed communism in Romania. Second, there are extracts from sound newsreels and other nationalistic propaganda films produced during the same period by the National Cinematographic Office (ONC), as well as relevant radio recordings and songs. The excerpts from the political speeches of Antonescu and Horia Sima, leader of the fascist paramilitary movement "Iron Guard", the old patriotic songs, but also the legionary ones, are popular discourse structures that introduce the viewers/listeners in the ultranationalist, triumphalist atmosphere dominant during the Carlist, national-legionary and Antonescian dictatorships.

So, on the one hand, the written testimony of an individual belonging to an oppressed ethnic group and trying to make sense of what is happening around him and survive. On the other hand, with Antonescu as a key figure again, the official political discourse aimed at legitimizing antisemitism and violence against Jews.

Irina Trocan summarizes the film's concept:

The Dead Nation can theoretically be framed in the essay film, which works through the reapproaching of elements (a photographic archive, a text written for another purpose than that in which it is quoted) to make critically scrutinized the cultural objects or evidence which we have before our eyes. (Trocan 2017: 75)

Through his “special way of looking at (...) images”, Jude presents the parallel universe, often exotic, of conformist Romanians, indifferent to the social-political turmoil. However, some of the photos shot by Acsinte in his studio and on location summarily but suggestively show the subjects' obedient attitude towards the state authorities.

How can be called a population that is indifferent to the tragedy of the Jews deprived by the Romanian state, by racial laws, of everything they had – citizenship, properties, social decency –, persecuted, and even massacred? Hence, the film's title. Moreover, the juxtaposition between image and text ends up explaining the perception of the Romanian society – a “dead nation” from an emotional perspective.

Jude has managed to choose the most expressive narratives and the most impressive photographs to contribute to a new culture of memory in Romania. The filmmaker's artistic accomplishments have been remarked by foreign critics as well:

The Dead Nation is a disarmingly simple idea, executed with a bold artistic flair that straddles experimental and more traditional documentary techniques; Jude has pulled off that rare feat of crafting a highly accessible but complex, ambiguous and significant work of cinematic art. (Young 2017)

The Exit of the Trains (Ieșirea trenurilor din gară, 2020), written and directed by Jude and historian Adrian Cioflâncă, is the latest Romanian remarkable contribution to the filmography of the Holocaust. The 175-minute nonfiction film had its world premiere in the “Forum” section of the Berlinale. Its title makes obvious reference to Lumière Brothers' *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station (L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat, 1895)*, one of the films that imposed the then-new artistic representation of the human reality through cinema. The film by Jude and Cioflâncă talks not about an arrival but about a harrowing, tragic Exitus. By touching on the history of cinema from its beginnings, the title also suggests the necessity for filmmakers to find new ways of cinematically representing the atrocities of recent history (what Jude attempted in *The Dead Nation*, too).

Another innovative Romanian cinematographic work, *The Exit of the Trains* represents an audiovisual memorial of the victims of the Iași pogrom. On 29 June 1941, the Jewish



Still from *The Exist of the Trains* by Radu Jude and Adrian Cioflâncă

residents of the city in Moldavia were rounded up and beaten, while their shops and homes were plundered. Thousands of Jews, particularly men, were shot or crowded onto “death trains” and deported to Podu Iloaiei, Călărași, and Târgu Frumos; most of them died of asphyxiation in the wagons. The total number of victims is estimated at 13,000. Some Germans took part in the pogrom, but most of the perpetrators were Romanian policemen, military officers, soldiers, and civilians. One of the survivors of the pogrom states: “I think almost the entire Iași population took part in the pogrom in some way. It felt almost like a feast day for the civilians”.

The first part, “Statements and Testimonies”, works as an outstandingly documented “Room of Names” or “exhibition of the dead” (Taylor 2021) and occupies around 90% of the film’s duration. The names of the pogrom’s victims are listed alphabetically, while their photographs from passports and family albums are shown on screen. At the same time, various sober off-screen voices (of both professional and non-professional actors) tell their stories through fragments extracted from the declarations of relatives, eyewitnesses to the murders, and even a few survivors of the pogrom. Through repetition and accumulation, juxtaposed with the faces of the persons referred to, the scale of the pogrom and the number of victims stop being abstractions, they gain concrete form.

The film’s second part, “Images”, provides, at an appropriate pace, photographs of Jews (including whole families) rounded up, arrested, guarded, robbed, maltreated, humiliated, shot, piled up, and left in the street to die, all against a background of grave silence. What else could be said?

The filmmakers’ use of still photos brings to mind Jude’s *The Dead Nation*.

However, here the filmmaker opts for the next degree of purification, which regards the soundtrack: instead of several sources that come from

different discursive contexts and create a complex fabric, the texts from *The Exit of the Trains* succeed each other in a disciplined manner, they are clearly connected to the image and subject to the precise rules of enunciation specific to the type of official communication to which they belong. Moreover, with a few notable exceptions, these testimonies seem to spring from a common wound, from the very being of a paradigmatic figure (a woman, as women were generally the ones who survived the pogrom) who embodies not only the totality of the victims of the massacres against the Jews, but any civilian population hit by the disaster, in any place and at any time. (Chapelan 2000: 24)

As Meredith Taylor notices, the film transcends the limitations of the documentary:

The Exit of the Trains is far more than a mere documentary: it is a witness report of how humans suddenly lose their humanity and descend into depravity. What sort of people put petrol into water bottles, then charge inflated prices to revel in the pain and slow death of their captives. (Taylor 2021)

Across the world and in Romania as well, “the continual arrival of new films on certain subjects which refuse to go away, like the Holocaust” (Chanan 2007: 270) testifies that we still have a lot to learn from the past. The dark episodes, largely unknown or ignored, related to Romania’s participation to World War II on the side of the Axis and to the ethnic cleansing in the country or outside its borders (the Bucharest and Iași pogroms, the Odessa massacre, etc.), cannot be hidden under the carpet anymore. As the filmmakers discussed above prove it, such horrendous events can be approached bravely and innovatively, with emphasize on the human dimension of the tragedy, and the resulted nonfiction films can serve as effective educational tools for the young generations.

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