

In-Between Histories: Intermedial Configurations in Radu Jude's Collage Film "The Dead Nation"

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Intermediality is nowadays subject to sometimes conflicting (and other times circular) definitions, while remaining at the core of several distinct academic fields. At the same time, it is active in some of the most astonishing artistic performances today, placed at the intersection of various media, genres, aesthetic traditions and forms. In a broad sense, "intermediality may serve foremost as a generic term for all those phenomena that (as indicated by the prefix *inter*) in some way take place between media" (Rajewski, 2005, p. 44). As Irina O. Rajewski also notes, this general definition leads to numerous possibilities of wording and to semantic permutations resulting in competitive notions such as: "multimediality, plurimediality, crossmediality, infra-mediality, media-convergence, media integration, media fusion, hybridization and so forth" (Rajewski, 2005, p. 44). Such theoretical elusiveness demands a cautious handling of the concept, especially in literary and film studies, where similar instruments are at hand. I am thinking here of concepts coming from (post)structuralism, namely narratology and the theory of intertextuality. Not only literary studies, but also film studies (see Pethő, 2010, p. 53) still benefit from these approaches. But intermediality is indispensable to analyzing artistic forms of medial hybridization, such as graphic novels, cinema adaptations of literary works and, obviously, films.

In this article I look at *The Dead Nation. Fragments of Parallel Lives* (2017), the collage film directed by Radu Jude, through the lens of intermediality theories. The first part of the article briefly discusses the main taxonomies of intermediality, by differentiating between a processual and an "ontological" (Schröter, 2011, p. 2) understanding of the concept. In this section, particular attention is given to the analogical relation between intermediality and intertextuality. However, one must have in mind that intermediality as such remains a tricky concept, since it always begs for further contextualization. The second part of the article analyzes the intermedial relations established at various levels in *The Dead Nation*. The 83-minute collage film delivers a multilayered narration of a period in Romanian history, from 1937 to 1947, when authoritarian regimes led to full-blown anti-Semitic dictatorships, in the broader context of the World War II. In the movie, audio fragments from a diary of Emil Dorian, a Romanian writer with Jewish origins, interspersed with pieces of wartime propaganda, are superposed on a succession of black-and-white photographs of daily life scenes from the same period. The photographs are screened one by one for the entire duration of the film, each of them creating its own *mise-en-cadre*, often contrasting with the voice-over. My aim is to show that the intermedial tension in *The Dead Nation* does not rely primarily on montage, but on the spectator's capacity to comprehend and respond to the media hybridization in the film and to its political implications.

In academia, intermediality is approached either from a historical, disciplinary, *medium-oriented* perspective (intermediality in photography, film, and, lately, literature), or from a

media-oriented perspective (the study of digital intermediality). While the impossibility of an integrative and universally-operative definition has become a disclaimer in almost every synthesis paper, a general distinction can be made between two major ways of delineating the concept and its various actualizations in contexts of medial convergence. In this respect, one can differentiate between a dynamic and a static understanding of the notion, i.e. between a process-oriented and an „ontologically”¹ oriented definition. In what follows I draw primarily on Rajewski’s and Schröter’s taxonomies, since both authors construct their typology of intermediality theories from a metacritical perspective. Rajewski first discriminates between (1) *intramedial* and (2) *transmedial* phenomena. While the first category includes various types of relations between different (mainly artistic) media, such as literature and film, painting and photography, etc., the second one refers to attributes which are common to a variety of media (Rajewski, 2005, p. 46). Schröter mentions in this second category attributes like fictionality, rhythmicity, narrativity, and at the same time draws attention to the limited functionality of the transmedial model, since it operates with non-specific, universal units (Schröter, 2011, p. 3). This is why Rajewski’s intramedial model is more useful for applicative analysis. The author distinguishes between the following intramedial phenomena: (a) medial transpositions (film adaptation, novelizations), (b) media combination (theatre, film, comics, performances), and (c) intermedial references (for instance, cross references between different arts, like painting and film) (Rajewski, 2005, pp. 51-52).

One must note that the approaches to intermediality are at least partly informed by literary theory, especially by formalist and (post)structuralist ideas. Rajewski mentions Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism and Julia Kristeva’s intertextuality (Rajewski, 2005, p. 48), but the Russian formalists should also be reminded here, especially due to their contribution to the field of film poetics (see Eikhenbaum, 1982; Pethő, 2010, pp. 52-53). Nevertheless, Gérard Genette’s structuralist approach to transtextuality from *Palimpsests* (1982) and his typology of intertextual rapports remain a key reference on the topic of intermediality in literary and film studies (for the latter, see Pethő, 2010, p. 53). The very concept of (textual) transformation is indebted to the French theorist. For instance, what Rajewski calls “intermedial references” (citation or indirect evocation of a film in a literary text) echoes to Genette’s definition of intertextuality, while “the representation of one medium by another”, which Schröter defines as “transformational intermediality” (Schröter, 2011, p. 3) echoes to Genette’s hypertextuality (see Genette 1997, p. 5). However, intermediality remains an elusive concept, since its component parts, the core-word “medium” and the prefix “-inter” are much too wide notions and request further disambiguation and contextualization. In my view, *medium* is an even vaguer concept than *text*, since medium may refer – simultaneously or concurrently – to the channel of communication, to the message, to the context, and to the material form. Such semantic expansion of “medium” has recently led to its assimilation in the field of literary studies, where it sometimes replaces the term “text”. For other theorists, however, “medium” is a concept as dead as “text” is. Drawing on Sven Lutticken’s notion of “undead media”, Ágnes Pethő stresses that “now that the term ‘medium’ has triumphed, the actual media ‘are already deceased’” (Pethő, 2010, p. 46), since the digital revolution has turned traditional media in “phantoms of their former selves” (Lutticken apud. Pethő, 2010, p. 47). Pethő also observes that, with the emergence of digital cinema, “film as we know it” tends to be transformed into a historical artifact. In this context, Radu Jude’s postmodern return to the black-and-white film (in *Aferim!*) or to the silent-film (in *Scarred Hearts*) signals his awareness of the historicity of this medium. Given the “death” of traditional media and their transformation into digital simulacra (the e-book and the online paper are the most

¹ I borrow the term from Jens Schröter (Schröter 2011, p. 5). In his ontological model of intermediality, the latter is seen as an aprioric condition for the media formation.

common examples), a wider application of intermedial theories to literary studies seems imminent, straying from the more usual path of researching phenomena of media hybridization (comics or graphic novels) or intermedial referentiality (the actual insertion of images representing photographs, maps, etc. in literary texts). Literature very often engenders media hybridization not through the actual co-presence of text and image, as in films, but through the representation of other media exclusively by linguistics means. While Rajewski takes into account this type of medial simulacra when she draws her classification of intermedial processes (Rajewski, 2005, pp. 50-51), literary studies in Romania are reluctant to adopt it, despite the widespread presence of such phenomena in postcommunist literature. After 1989 both film and literature enter a fierce media competition especially with the press and television, and the impact is documented in countless movies and novels, especially after 2000. Corneliu Porumboiu in *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006) or Andrei Ujică in *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* (2010) are only two of the directors who make use of intermediality and multiperspectivism to create reconstructions of the national past.

Another important issue in the theoretical debates is whether film is intrinsically an intermedial art form. B. M. Eikhenbaum and other Formalists were among the first to point out the syncretic nature of film. In his “Problems of Cine-Stylistic” (1927), Eikhenbaum notes that modern cinema “has impinged on the whole system of the old, separate arts” (Eikhenbaum 1982), and this holistic vision of film influenced its reception as an *intermedium* pure and simple. More recent authors, however, draw the attention to the trap presented by the model of “synthetic intermediality” (as Schröter calls it), since the concept of *intermedium* should represent „more than the sum of its parts” (Schröter, 2011, p. 2). In this respect, Schröter convincingly argues that such “synthesis” or “fusion” between different media into a distinct, new configuration “lies less in the intermedium itself, but rather in its perceptive and cognitive assimilation” (Schröter, 2011, p. 3). In other words, the tension specific to *intermedium* and to intermediality is more an effect of reception than a condition intrinsic to a particular work of art, like a film, a theatre performance or an art-installation.

I will now proceed to an analysis of Radu Jude’s *The Dead Nation*, in order to show that the intermedial tension in the film is not produced by media mixing, but by implicating the spectator in a game of historical and political representations. Radu Jude (b. 1977) is a film director belonging to the so-called “new wave” (Pop, 2010, pp. 20-23) of Romanian cinema. However, as many have already noticed (Pioldner, 2016 and Popovici, 2017, among others), Jude’s last three works – *Aferim!* (2015), *Scarred Hearts* (2016) and *The Dead Nation* (2017) – are atypical films, in theme as well as in construction. In each of these, Jude goes beyond the traditional conventions of an established film genre. *Aferim!* is a pseudo-historical, black-and-white film, narrating a story of Roma slavery from the early 19th century Romania. As Judith Pioldner sharply observes, *Aferim!* polemically distances itself from both heritage films, and western movies (Pioldner, 2016, p. 90; 96) by treating ironically the thematic and structural conventions of the two subgenres. Jude’s next work, *Scarred Hearts*, is inspired by the homonymous novel of the Romanian-Jewish writer Max Blecher (1909-1938). The movie is not just a literary adaptation, but an intermedial transposition, since Blecher’s novel works as its hypotext (Genette, 1997, p. 5), and not as an authoritative model. *Aferim!* and *Scarred Hearts* both make use of intertextual and intermedial techniques as the movies’ main construction devices. While in *Aferim!* the characters’ speech is almost exclusively made of quotations from classical Romanian writers, in Jude’s next film the quotations refer to fragments of interwar mass-media jingles, on the one hand, and to Blecher’s literary work, extending far beyond the novel which inspires much of the film, on the other hand (cf. Mironescu, 2016). The encounter between literary text and the cinematographic medium leads to powerful figurations of intermediality: the action is repeatedly interrupted by “blackout” sequences which project on the screen excerpts from Blecher’s books describing „sensations,

impressions, very confuse or very abstract feelings of anxiety” (Mironescu, 2016) that cannot be represented through indexical images. These silent frames interspersed between the scenes also function as intramedial references, evoking early silent movies. Finally, with *The Dead Nation*, Jude challenges the conventions of documentary film. In an interview, he emphasizes that his latest work is rather a collage film than a documentary *per se* (Vasiliu, 2017), although in international festivals *The Dead Nation* was screened in documentary film sections. What differentiates Jude’s movie from a documentary *stricto sensu* is the radical questioning of the documents it presents: authentic photographs, fragments from a personal diary of a Romanian-Jewish intellectual, and pieces of political or propaganda discourses².

Jude collates historical testimonies in this film in order to create a succession of insights in Romanian and European 1930s-1940s history, and these testimonies belong not only to diverse media – photography, memoir writing, radio –, but also come from diverse archives. These documents were created, stored and disseminated with different purposes, so that each of them reflects history in its own fashion. The first layer of the film is based on black-and-white photographs from the collection of Costică Acsinte (1897-1984), a Romanian photographer who owned a studio between 1930 and 1960 in the town of Slobozia. Acsinte took an impressive number of photos in the studio and around Slobozia, mainly portraits, family snapshots, collective scenes of rural and urban life, from professional and school activities, etc. He took the photographs as a passion and as his daily work, so his snapshots are – at least apparently – neutral and objective insights into the daily life “just as it was” in the timeframe of the movie. Jude works with the digitized version of these photos, obtained through scanning Acsinte’s glass plates³. In the digitization process, the glass plates, which had deteriorated in various degrees, were scanned without being retouched or “repaired”: the spots, the blurred or missing portions became, as a result, part of the images, lending them a surplus of antiquity and “authenticity”. In the film, the photos are projected one by one, without using *zoom in* or *-out* techniques, and instead increasing or reducing their time of exposure on the screen. They appear to Romanian spectators as “material objects” (Edwards and Hart 2004, p. 1), thus enabling them to be perceived as historical vestiges, testifying to the national past, and not as mere private, family-owned objects, as they originally were. Once the medium changed from photography to film, the reading of the images in the photos also changed: what was earlier associated to the private sphere became, through filmic exposure, an image-document.

²Apart from media mixing, which is typical to any type of artistic collage, the main difference between the documentary and the collage film is the expulsion of the director’s voice from the *diegesis*, while the documents presented are let to speak by themselves. This impression is, obviously, a carefully constructed one; still, the absence of the authorial point of view urges a plurality of interpretative perspectives.

³ Starting with the year 2013, the Acsinte photo collection was digitized on initiative by Cezar Popescu, in collaboration with the Museum of Ialomița County. The archive can be accessed openly at <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/costicaacsinte>>.

At the same time, Jude's film undermines the documentary usage of photos and their function of attesting the reality (Barthes, 1981, p. 87) through the superposition, on the mute succession of images, of a "spoken" narrative. The second layer of the film is also based, like the first one, on an act of remediation, as Bolter and Grusin (apud. Pethő, 2010, p. 51) call the process through which a medium is represented by another medium: it is the recording of the director's voice reading fragments from an old diary which covers the timeframe between 1937 and 1944. The diary belongs to the writer and medical doctor Emil Dorian (1893-1956), who was also a member of the Jewish community from Bucharest⁴. Dorian's notes cover the period of Anti-Semitic policies and legislation adopted by several Romanian governments prior to and during World War II. The diary was first published in English translation in 1982, at the end of a long and adventurous process, after his family and friends managed to hide the manuscripts from the authorities, copy them on thin paper and eventually smuggle them across the border. Jude selects from the diary entries where Dorian's ethnic and religious identity is openly assumed. Even though he could have chosen the much more famous *Diary* of the notorious Romanian-Jewish writer Mihail Sebastian (1907-1945), whose publication in 1996 sparked lively debates and moral soul-searching in Romania, Jude sets up, by turning to this less known document, a new edition of the "lost manuscript" literary motif. Just like the photos discovered in the Costică Acsinte virtual archive – a *found footage*, as Iulia Popovici suggests (Popovici, 2017) – Dorian's diary is a document that escaped the archives of official history. But the diary, as well as the photos, functions as a medium that reflects the epiphenomena of history, as they manifest themselves in social life, in the attitudes of groups and individuals. At a time of militarization and nationalist radicalization, such as the period preceding and during World War II in Romania and Europe, ordinary people⁵ strike poses performing the Nazi-inspired Roman salute or the signature Hitler moustache⁶.



Picture 1
Photo from the Costică Acsinte archive used in Jude's film
 Source: <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/costicaacsinte>>

Finally, the film's third layer is represented by audio documents from official state archives: fragments of political speeches broadcast on the radio, sound footage from propaganda films or mobilizing political anthems. They were once widely circulated and

⁴ Dorian is the author of a number of poems, novels, translations, articles and brochures published between 1912 and 1954. His diary appeared in Romania after 1989, in three volumes: *Jurnal din vremuri de prigoană* [Diary from the Years of Persecution] (1996), *Cărțile au rămas neterminate* [The Books Are Left Unfinished] (2006), *Cu fir roșu de arnici* [Sewn with a Thick Red Thread] (2012).

⁵ Although the ethnic and religious identity of the subjects is rarely evident in photos, it is in no way neutral, as those featured there all belong to the "autochthonous" majority population, in spite of differences of statute, social class, job, gender.

⁶ In this respect, Iulia Popovici states that "the photos are testimonies to the mindless social mimetism" (Popovici, 2017), which prompts her to conclude that *The Dead Nation* is a film about collective responsibility. In my view, this kind of ethical approach to the film, although legitimate, is only one of multiple possible interpretations of Jude's movie.

assisted the instauration of authoritarian regimes, so that their documentary function is strongly altered by ideology.

Between these three layers several intermedial relations are forming, some of which are stable, formal in nature, while others are only provisional configurations occurring as a tension between the montage and its reception by spectators. Many have noted the plurimedial and polysemantic character of Jude's film, employing metaphors such as the "drawer cabinet" (Cioflâncă, 2017) or "book-installation, [...] a book device against the power devices that make up society" (Ghiu, 2017). At the formal level of montage, going beyond the media-superposition, one notices the internal referentiality towards photography, the "originary" medium of film. As Eikhenbaum observes, for whom the photograph-film relationship was much more evident than it is nowadays, „the minimal units” of film, “the technical basis of cinema, without which it could not exist” are individual frames imprinted of the celluloid strip (Eikhenbaum, 1982). By turning to black-and-white photography and by decomposing movement into static frames, which the eye of the camera rests on as the sound keeps flowing, Jude achieves an impression of technical “primitivism”. He does not film moving scenes, but photographic glass plates that have previously been scanned and digitized, thus capturing a sequence from the chain of intramedial transformations that make up the history of cinema. Drawing on Genette's notion of “urtext” (the prototypical realization of a text), we may say that in *The Dead Nation* Jude returns to the “urmedium” of the film, which is the photographic snapshot.

Another aspect of the intramedial tension in Jude's film comes from the relationship between frames and montage. In his study of cine-stylistics, Eikhenbaum observes that frames are “a mechanical and in that sense abstract (not perceivable on the screen) set of *divisions*, and not *articulations*” [emphasis mine] (Eikhenbaum, 1982). One could say that, by slowing down the succession of frames and by the camera's focusing on photos, in Jude's movie the snapshots become themselves scenes. But in cinema, just like in literature, the scene is built around a narrative nucleus, while the frames are merely formal divisions that cannot make up semantic articulations. Considering the action units from a narratological perspective, the scenes are much better outlined at the level of sound, where a scene is composed of reading a diary fragment that functions as a micro-narration. A lag results between frames (the photographs displayed on the screen) and scenes (the entries in Dorian's diary), which fractures the internal coherence of the movie both semantically, and formally. The scenes and frames are constituted at the levels of different media, and switching between media in order to re-capture the meaning and the “story” is switching between perspectives. Of course, most of the times the semantic of photographs conflicts with Dorian's notes, and different types of relationships are established between the diary entries being read aloud and the images accompanying it. These relationships can be either (a) *referential* (when the photograph illustrates what the text says), which are the least frequent; (b) *oppositional* (when narrations of aggressions toward Jews are superposed on scenes of *leisure*) or (c) *ironical* (when, for instance, a photo of youths clad in traditional garb, among them a child-soldier, illustrates a Jewish anecdote playing on the 1940 Romanian law of racial “purity”).



Picture 2 Photo from the Costică Acsinte archive used in Jude's film

Source: <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/costicaacsinte>>

In an interview, Jude explains the syntax of his film through the concept of simultaneity: “Most times, the viewer is asked to do a series of simultaneous tasks: to analyze the photographs they’re seeing, to analyze what they’re hearing on the soundtrack; make a connection, if they can, and accept that there is no connection between these elements and that the only thing that exists is their simultaneity” (Vasiliu, 2017). This simultaneity presupposes not only the co-presence of different media, but also their continual lagging and the establishment of rapports of reciprocal reflection, as well as oppositional rapports. Concluding her diachronic study of the methodologies of intermediality and their application in film studies, Pethő states that “intermediality is often viewed as having the ultimate goal of ‘figuring the infigurable’, the incomensurable” (Pethő, 2010, p. 65)⁷. In *The Dead Nation*, the figurations of the infigurable take place in the interstices between media which encode and transmit, each of them, different representations of daily life in the 1930-1940 and different representations of national history. In my view, Bogdan Ghiu best resumes the intermedial tension in Jude’s film by including the receiver in the complex intermediality model: „[the] film proposes a virtual encounter that will have to lead, triangularly (i.e., in an oblique, indirect fashion), in the spectator’s mind” (Ghiu, 2017).

By addressing the problem of the representations of history and of the media whereby they are circulated, Jude made a film on the plurality of the modes in which national history and documents of the past are interpreted. He integrates the ethnographic photos from the Acsinte archive in a film on Romania’s participation to the Holocaust and, in the process, achieves a radical transformation in the regime of reading the photographs, which “range from the indexical to the symbolic” (Hirsch, 2012, p. 38). Talking about family photos from before the Holocaust, Marianne Hirsch claims that they act as “media of postmemory” for the second and the third generation (Hirsch, 2012, p. 36). Unlike official historic images, personal photos of the time „facilitate identification and affiliation” (Hirsch, 2012, p. 38) between the one who watches them and the subjects of the images. This type of identification can take widely different aspects which may or may not involve ethnic and cultural identification. The reception of Radu Jude’s film in Romania by the “wider audience” exemplified the nationalist model of identification, as the director was accused on the movie’s Facebook page of being anti-Romanian in a perceived attack on national identity⁸. A radically different model of affective identification with the subjects photographed by Acsinte is promoted through a project called *Dancing with Costică* by Australian photograph and artist Jane Long. In 2015, Long created a series of compositions by processing photos from the Acsinte collection through colorization and digital collage (see <<http://janelong.fotomerchant.com/dancing-with-costica>>). In several interviews, Long declares she sees the people in Acsinte’s photos as characters from a remote world, both geographically and temporally, and she translates this impression by placing them in timeless décors, verging on fantasy. The meaning of her act of artistic remediation, Long suggests, originates in an affective identification with the people in the photos, as the artist tries to decipher their emotions and express them through the technique of collage, erasing some parts of the original photographs and adding other elements.

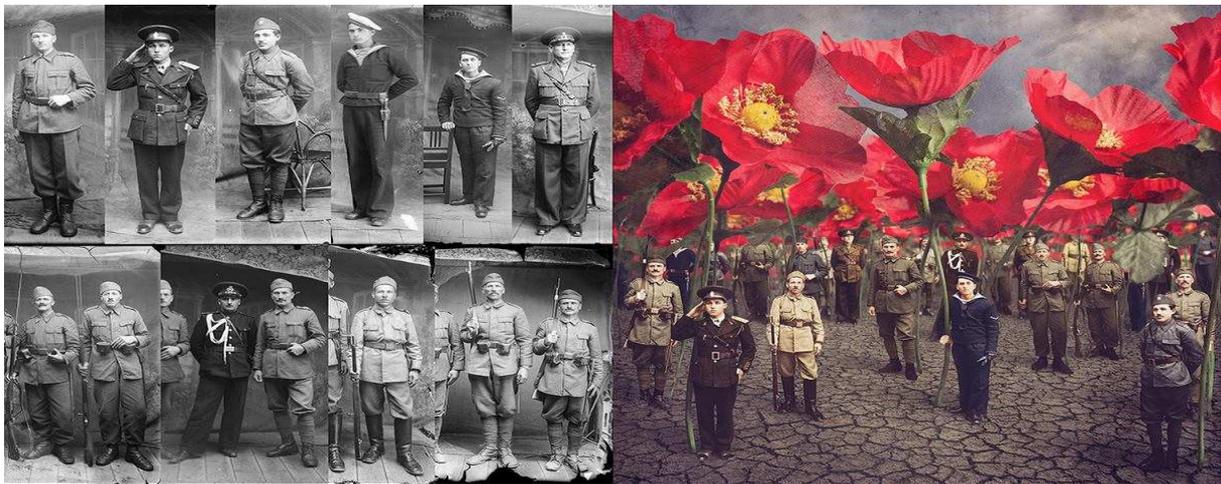
One of the pieces of the project, *Tall Poppies*, collates several photos of uniformed soldiers that Acsinte made in his studio, and places them in a décor, among gigantic red poppies. The resulting picture is ambivalent and it may be interpreted in various ways: through composition and the nuances of the colorization, it may reference a scene from Tim

⁷ Pethő is adapting here Jean-François Lyotard’s definition of *sublime* from *Discours, figure* (1971).

⁸ Actually, the Facebook comments (<<https://www.facebook.com/taramoarta/>>) as well as those on other social networks were formulated in more violent terms, including personal attacks, bouts of xenophobia and racism.

Burton's 2010 movie *Alice in Wonderland*, where the Red Queen's soldiers enter a field of poppies. Another possible reference is the remembrance poppy, used especially in Australia to commemorate the soldiers fallen in World War I. Also, for people from the ex-communist countries, the giant red poppies call to mind the Soviet red star from propaganda images. In Jude's film, the studio photos of soldiers in uniform, but especially those of children and young men imitating the Roman salute, when superposed on the entries in Dorian's diary, become symbols of absurd violence against helpless groups of people whose right to a voice and a public image is being denied.

Jude's and Long's reworking of Acsinte's photos show that the conflicting possibilities of reading these pictures and integrating them in intermedial artistic projects go beyond the inherent "polysemy" of any image (Barthes, 1987, p. 38). As the French semiologist states in his essay *Rhetoric of the Image*, the variations in reading a picture always depend on "the different kinds of knowledge – practical, national, cultural, aesthetic – invested in the image" (Barthes, 1987, p. 47). From the many possibilities of seeing, the act of reception can bring to life a plurality of perspectives, engaged in a complex play, or it can select a single possibility: an informed and culturally deformed look, influenced by the superposed identities of the persona, and by the moment and context where the exercise of looking takes place.



Picture 3 Jane Long, *Tall Poppies*. Based on several images from the Costică Acsinte archive
Source: <<http://janelong.fotomerchant.com/portfolio/dancing-with-costica/ui/DXTK2QRK5Y-DFT-F>>

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Summary

The first part of my article briefly discusses the main theories of intermediacy by differentiating between “processional” and “ontological” understanding of the concept. Despite inherent differences (especially terminological), many theorists (from the Russian Formalists to the 21st century researchers of the topic) tend to consider film as the intermedium *par excellence*, due to its syncretic and multi-medial nature. However, intermediacy remains a tricky concept, since both the “medium” and the prefix “inter-” need further contextualization. The second part of the article considers Radu Jude's collage film *The Dead Nation. Fragments of Parallel Lives* (2017) by focusing on the intermedial relations established on various levels in the movie. In the 83-minute film, old photos representing everyday life scenes overlap with fragments from a Romanian-Jewish writer's diary and pieces of propaganda discourse from the late 1930s-till early 1940s in Romania, the time of war, political turmoil and racial persecution. My aim is to show that the intermedial tension in *The Dead Nation* does not rely on montage, but on the spectator's capacity to comprehend and respond to the media hybridization in the film and to its political implications.