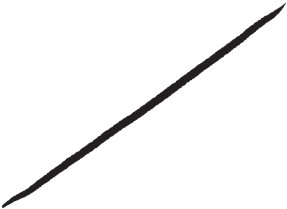


BRECHTIAN FIGURES OR STEREOTYPICAL CHARACTERS? CHARACTER CONSTRUCTION AND MINORITY REPRESENTATION IN RADU JUDE'S *KONTINENTAL* '25

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Abstract: Brechtian character development rejects individualized psychological traits, as a polemical response to Stanislavski's realist character development, which Brecht criticizes for grounding characters in a fixed "human nature" and claiming to present the world "as it is". Such representations leave little room for spectatorial agency, situating the spectator instead as a passive receiver of truth. To remedy this, creating an active mode of spectatorship oriented towards social change, Brecht recommends the use of figures, which embody recognizable social positions, class relations or ideological functions, which foreground the characters' social determination and ultimately the possibility for change. Stereotypes also reduce characters to recognizable traits, naturalizing social hierarchies and essentializing identity. They erase individual agency and complexity, reinforcing prejudice. This raises a critical question: what happens when a character developed according to Brechtian principles belongs to a national minority? The paper argues that such representations can be misread as stereotypical precisely because audiences interpret them through a realist lens. Through a case study of Radu Jude's recent film *Kontinental '25* (2025), the paper discusses whether Brechtian character development reproduces prevalent stereotypes regarding the Hungarian minority or sets out to accomplish something else entirely.

Keywords: Brechtian figures, realist acting, minority representation, stereotypes, Radu Jude, contemporary Romanian Cinema.

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Introduction

The primacy of realist acting has shaped contemporary understandings of performance to such an extent that "good acting" is almost automatically equated with psychological depth, complexity, emotional authenticity and the seamless illusion of a coherent inner life. This aesthetic lineage, crystallized in Stanislavski's method and later adapted to film by Vsevolod Pudovkin, expanded through various strands of method acting, dominates both popular and professional expectations in contemporary cinema. Its prestige rests on verisimilitude: an actor who appears to *become* the character, and who invites the spectator into a shared emotional world. Yet, as Brecht repeatedly warns, the very transparency of realist acting (the sense that the performance is not constructed but simply *true*) carries a powerful ideological effect. By hiding its constructed nature, realist acting naturalizes the world it represents, transforming structural social issues into personal struggles and turning spectators into passive recipients of "truth".

Brecht's work emerges as a systematic refusal of this aesthetic and ideological regime. For Brecht, theatre is not a vehicle for producing empathy but

an instrument of interventionist thinking. It is a space where the mechanisms of social life can be examined and reconfigured. Instead of the immersive continuity favored by psychological realism, Brecht proposes epic or dialectical theatre, a form built on historicization, disruption and contradiction. Its purpose is not to reveal a character's soul but to expose the socio-economic structures that shape human behavior, structures that are transformable rather than immutable. Brecht explicitly opposes the Aristotelian objective of catharsis and the Stanislavskian objective of identification, both of which work against the spectator's capacity for critical distance. Conversely, dialectical theatre "doesn't synchronize the emotions, thoughts, feelings and attitudes of the spectator with those of the actor" (Schwarz, 2024, p. 20), creating the distance needed for analysis and self-reflection.

At the same time, it is important to note that Brecht does not deny emotion in general. Rather, he aims to restructure the emotional economy of performance so that feelings emerge from reflection, contradiction, and recognition. Estrangement effects, *Gestus*, *Haltung* and the practice of *historicization* all serve this purpose. They reveal the constructed nature of the performance, disrupt social relationships' apparent inevitability and illuminate the decision-making moments of the characters where alternative outcomes are conceivable. Brecht's actors show how historically specific social structures influence human behavior and how these structures are subject to change.

Thus, Brecht's actor does not *become* the character but *shows* behavior in a specific situation, while also showing their own critical position toward the role. The result is a kind of theatre that transforms spectators into co-investigators of society's contradictions. If psychological realism aims to perfect the imitation of life, Brecht's theatre aims to make life's unbearable contradictions intelligible, and therefore open to transformation.

I argue that the character construction and acting strategies in *Kontinental*²⁵ are frequently misread as poor or exaggerated—and, at a more implicit level, as potentially stereotypical—because they are evaluated through a reception framework shaped by realism. While reactions describing the film as superficial, didactic, or poorly executed can be observed in discussions of the film, they rarely appear in sustained academic or professional film criticism. Rather, such responses are most visible in informal reception contexts. An overview of user-generated reviews on platforms such as IMDb, Cinemagia, and Letterboxd reveals recurring descriptions of Jude's direction as "superficial," the dialogue as "expository" or "didactic," and the performances as "unnatural," "exaggerated," or, in some cases, even "woeful," typically grounded in expectations of psychological realism.

Although these comments do not constitute rigorous critical analysis, they are symptomatic of dominant spectatorial norms through which Brechtian

character construction is often misrecognized. The interpretation of such figures as stereotypical, however, operates less as an explicitly articulated critical claim and more as a potential misreading generated by the same realist framework that privileges psychological depth and individual complexity. This tension is not without precedent in the reception of Radu Jude's work. In a critical essay on *Aferim!* (Pop, 2015), Doru Pop critiques the film for its overtly ideological construction, arguing that it relies on schematic representations, political oversimplifications, and at times caricatural stereotyping. Such an assessment can be situated within the aesthetic expectations of the New Romanian Cinema and its emphasis on psychological realism. Regardless of subsequent shifts in critical perspective, such readings point toward a broader interpretive framework through which Brechtian strategies may be perceived as excessive, didactic, or insufficiently nuanced.

Hypotheses and research methods

- Stereotypes concerning the Hungarian minority focus on their questionable loyalty, irredentism, refusal to integrate, their rigid, cold communication style, depict them as hard-working but stubborn, inflexible.
- Brechtian figures foreground social determinism: a character's behavior is the consequence of belonging to a certain era, context or social class.
- Psychological realism's primacy influences the way spectators interpret Brechtian performance as "bad acting," reinforcing normative standards of cinematic authenticity and delegitimizing alternative acting conventions.
- Psychological realism's primacy influences the way spectators interpret Brechtian character construction, encouraging them to perceive such characters as stereotypical rather than as critical, historically situated figures.
- Psychological realism's primacy influences the way spectators interpret the representation of minority characters, creating the conditions for readings of ethnic stereotyping where the film instead mobilizes Brechtian typification to foreground structural relations.

The hypotheses will be tested in a case study, a formal analysis of Radu Jude's *Kontinental* '25. Stereotype analysis will be conducted based on the DuVernay test. After a brief overview of the key concepts of Bertolt Brecht, the paper will identify Brechtian devices by conducting a formal analysis on two key scenes: Orsolya with Dorina and Orsolya with her mother.

A brief overview of Bertolt Brecht's fundamental concepts

Bertolt Brecht was concerned with contributing through his theatre work to the transformation of the world, pledging allegiance first and foremost to the

oppressed classes. For Brecht critical attitude is vital for change, calling this process *interventionist thinking* (*eingreifendes Denken*).

Theatre for Brecht, then, is like a microcosm of society where the most important questions of political philosophy are debated, through allegories of social structures and relations. (Schwarz, 2024, p. 6) Throughout his life, Brecht was dedicated to creating and refining the methods of this kind of research, whose goal is the investigation of interpersonal relations to better them or to change them altogether.

Dialectical theatre

Dialectical theatre seeks to reveal the hidden or unspoken elements of our social structures that are often overlooked in everyday life. As Professor David Barnett notes, it can “point to the political in the most apparently unpolitical of situations” (Barnett, 2015, p. 32), reminding the spectator that even these conditions could be different in a transformed society. To achieve this, dialectical theatre demands a rethinking of both character and dramatic structure.

Rather than centering drama on individual characters, their inner desires, conflicts, and personal victories or failures, Brecht shifts attention to situations and the ways they shape human behavior. Characters are not treated as psychologically fixed individuals but as participants within a “potentially changeable, unstable system” (Barnett, p. 31). Differences between characters arise not from innate traits, but from the distinct social and material conditions under which they live, conditions that produce different attitudes, decisions, and patterns of behavior.

This emphasis on situation over character is reflected in the structure of dialectical drama. Instead of a linear, causally driven plot, the play is composed of relatively autonomous episodes placed side by side. These episodes are often arranged in ways that appear unpredictable or even contradictory, highlighting how varying circumstances generate conflicting responses in characters. As Barnett explains, the focus is on “how contradictory situations provoke contradictory responses” (Barnett, p. 28). In this way, the sense of inevitability typical of psychological realism is replaced by an emphasis on choice, underscoring the idea that human actions - and the social conditions that shape them—can be changed.

If the evolution of the plot seems inevitable in psychological realism, in dialectical theatre the contingent juxtaposition of episodes primes the viewer for active spectatorship by shifting the focus away from the unquestionable affective life of the characters and toward “representing human beings as objects of study, under transformation and as capable of change” (Schwarz, 2024, p. 17). Dialectical theatre thus provokes a critical response from the viewer: the

stage leaves dialectically posed questions unanswered, foregrounded social contradictions unresolved, and situations presented only insofar as they reveal the social conditions that produce these contradictions. Consequently, this mode of presentation requires spectatorial engagement structured not through emotional identification, but through distant, self-conscious observation that enables critical analysis rather than empathic immersion.

Thus, Bertolt Brecht's concept of dialectical theatre is first and foremost a critique of Aristotle's definition of the dramatic genre, a form of mimesis that represents human actions through performance aimed at provoking pity and fear in the spectator, seen as cathartic - the purification, clarification of emotions aroused by the spectacle; more than emotional release, a recalibration of judgment, through which the spectator learns how to feel appropriately in response to human suffering and moral conflict. In opposition, dialectical theatre focuses on the narration of situations, instead of mimesis, distancing itself from the Aristotelian device of catharsis.

Brecht's critique of catharsis concerns mainly the problem of emotional manipulation of the spectators through empathy. For him empathy is problematic because it is value-neutral, it is a universal human process, immune to change of context or class. And because it is a natural process, one can align with another person's point of view, emotional experience, without "understanding *why* he or she holds it" (Barnett, 2015, p. 65).

Brecht's main argument against empathy stems from a strong analogy he puts forward in one of his essays, *On the Theatricality of Fascism* (Brecht, 1939, in Kuhn and Giles, 2003, pp. 193-201) in which he "draws a forceful analogy between the demagogic abuse of audience identification and the manipulative effects of Aristotelian theatre" (White, 2013, p. 291). Brecht observes that emotional identification and empathy can function to bypass rational judgement and generate passive, unquestioning responses in audiences—a process he associates with the affective mobilization of crowds at the Nuremberg Rallies (Barnett, 2015, p. 66).

Therefore, in dialectical theatre the spectator is not encouraged to identify with the emotions, feelings, or attitudes of the characters, and is thus able to question them and engage with them in a critical and analytical way. This is not to say that emotions don't have any place in Brecht's theatre. As put forward in his play *Buying brass* through the words of the Philosopher, Brecht doesn't negate emotions, but tries to provoke different ones from the ones which stem from the spectator's identification with the characters, ranging "from fury or dissatisfaction to righteousness and the pleasure of knowledge" (Schwarz, 2024, p. 23).

Historicization

Historicization (*Historisierung*) is an umbrella term which encompasses all of Brecht's dramatic devices. It defines the act of studying any event or character through the lens of its' structural causes, circumstances which provoke it. Brecht, being a materialist, believed that the character's attitude is the consequence of belonging to a particular era, context and social class. Historicization produces an estrangement effect, because events shown in their particular structuring contexts will appear as bizarre, unusual.

Another objective of historicization, besides showing the specific context which make these events possible, is highlighting that social relations and conditions are created and reproduced by humans, thus they can also be changed by them. In this sense the not-but (*nicht-sondern*) concept becomes relevant, which basically means highlighting the moment of decision-making in the figure, presenting the action and decision in such a way that its' opposite could also be possible, thus making the audience conscious of the fact that the figure choses a particular option from multiple possibilities, in opposition with Aristotle's theatre, where characters act in a certain way because they have no other choice, because "it is in their nature" to do so.

Estrangement effect

Estrangement effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) is a device of interruption, by which the spectator is made conscious of the constructed nature of the representation, and whose function is the denial of spectatorial identification with the character, so that he/she can position himself/herself in a critical attitude. This is not to say that the denial of identification equates with the absence of emotions. "Estrangement effects shouldn't generate distance or absence of emotions, but rather should provoke, according to the principles of epic theatre, emotions which don't overlap with those of the characters. When the actor is crying, the audience has to laugh." (Schwarz, 2024, p. 31) This also means that the actor has to distance himself from the role, rather *citing* it, than *living* it in this case.

The analogy which Brecht uses to explain this mechanism is that of the bystander. When a bystander recounts an accident which he has witnessed, he may temporarily enact different roles from the story, not at one point wanting to be perceived as being the person he/she interprets, but only to tell the story in a convincing manner. The acting style of dialectical theatre ought to be the same, simultaneously playing the character but also showing him from outside. This doesn't mean that the actor ought not to experience strong emotions in regards to the victims or the culprits of the accident, but these emotions should not overlap with those of the spectator.

Estrangement implies that the spectator is first immersed in the spectacle. Thus, Brecht “advocates for a structure which alternates between moments which generate empathy, even identification and which are then interrupted by estrangement effects, which provoke critical distance.” (Schwarz, 2024, pp. 32-33) Estrangement effects highlight the circumstances in which social contradictions are developed and maintained. “Once the system’s contradictions are revealed, the spectator is thus challenged to actively participate in this transformative process” (Schwarz, pp. 36-37).

Fabel

In Brecht’s conception, the *Fabel* or *Grundgestus* does not refer simply to the storyline of a play, but to an analytical construction that brings together a series of historically grounded, detailed examinations of the relationships between characters. Through this process, the dramatic subject is interpreted dialectically, with the aim of exposing the underlying social and ideological contradictions embedded in the plot. “These contradictions ought not to be resolved, but should only be highlighted and developed throughout the plot” (Schwarz, p. 65). The unfolding of the plot thus serves to sharpen and elaborate these contradictions, encouraging critical reflection on the forces that produce them, instead of offering narrative closure or reconciliation.

Gestus

Gestus refers to a specific gesture or set of gestures performed by a character that expresses their attitude toward other characters or situations, shaped decisively by their historical development—that is, by their social position and accumulated experience within a given context (Schwarz, p. 62).

Haltung

Haltung in German can refer either to a mental state (attitude) or a physical situation (a stance). Brecht uses the term to describe both the actor’s attitude toward the role and the stance of a character within a given situation. In Brechtian theatre, during the preparation of a production, the actor is expected to embody a critical attitude toward the role, the situation, and the material as a whole. This critical attitude is essential to achieving the estrangement effect, in which the actor simultaneously portrays the character and comments on it. *Haltung* therefore signifies a politically engaged position.

In an instruction written in the early 1940s, Brecht recommends that actors memorize their first impression of a role. He explains that during rehearsals an actor may become overly familiar with the character, transforming initially

surprising or contradictory behavior into something understood and accepted. This process risks losing the sense of astonishment that originally made the figure compelling. By consciously preserving first impressions, the actor can maintain feelings of wonder, shock, or surprise, allowing these qualities to remain present in a fragmented, discontinuous performance (Barnett, 2015, p. 61).

The other meaning of *Haltung* referring to the stance of the character in a given situation, presupposes the foregrounding of how stances of characters “change according to the situation and interactions of the characters.” (Schwarz, 2024, p. 63) This device proves important in demonstrating one of Brecht’s core arguments, that “humans and society are changeable and in ongoing transformation” (idem).

Against Stanislavski’s method

Stanislavski’s method marks one of the biggest influences on modern film acting and has become ubiquitous with what is discussed as memorable performances. Its’ objectives of truthful, believable performances, psychological realism have become principles which mostly satisfy the expectations of widespread audiences and which grant A-list actors prestigious prizes in major film festivals.

Brecht’s dissatisfaction with Stanislavski’s method and realism (Brecht preferred the term naturalism) in general is that it is concerned with imitating reality, presenting it ‘as is’, as unchangeable. Behavior is naturalized, as emanating from universal human nature and not contingent of social conditions. “Naturalism is content merely to copy while Brecht’s realism acknowledges that it must stylize reality in order to understand it properly” (Barnett, 2015, p. 105). Although it sets out to reveal truth, to convey things as they are in real life, Stanislavski’s method, is actually manipulative, because it hides the fact that it is an artistic construction, a device, rather presenting itself as truth. The ambition of total mimesis through art in naturalism, actually hides its constructed, ephemeral nature. Muffling the spectator’s critical attitude and imposing a passive mode of spectatorship.

Thus, Brecht constructs his method in direct opposition to Stanislavski’s method as put forward in his landmark text *Estrangement Effects in Chinese Acting*, where he compares the acting style of the European actor (who identifies with, *becomes* the character) with that of the Chinese actor (an euphemism for Brechtian actor) who narrates, is self-conscious of being watched and who positions the spectator as well in a self-conscious stance. At the same time, Brecht acknowledges Stanislavski’s qualities like his “meticulous study of interpersonal relations, his emphasis on the characters’ psychological contradictions, the rejection of schematism and moralism and the analysis of characters and situations based on circumstances and context” (Schwarz, 2024, p. 27).

During the second part of his life, Brecht would gradually recognize other merits of Stanislavski's method as well, (allegedly using exercises from Stanislavski's *An Actor's Work* in his rehearsals), while also acknowledging the actors' fidelity to the truth of social relations and to the specificity of their characters, and recognizing Stanislavski's sustained interest in experimentation. Furthermore, Brecht would acknowledge the interventionist potential of realist theatre as well, noting that the "techniques of persuasion of this kind of theatre are 'even recommended' when the injustice represented in the show is widespread, already acknowledged and understood by the majority of the audience" (Schwarz, p. 28). At the same time, Brechtian theatre aspires to go beyond the mere representation of problems already recognized by the audience. Unlike Aristotelian or Stanislavskian theatre, which internalizes the objective contradictions of socio-economic processes as individual psychological experience—thereby masking their structural character, dynamics, and causality—Brecht's theatre foregrounds these dimensions explicitly.

Consequently, Brechtian theatre does not seek to resolve contradictions but to expose them as historically produced and therefore changeable. It presents unresolved problems and unbearable tensions, representing the world not *as it is*, but how it *becomes*. This means "retaining the surface of reality while probing the ways in which it is constructed" (Barnett, 2015, p. 106). Grounded in opposition, friction, and paradox, Brecht's theatre mobilizes these disruptive elements to both educate and entertain, generating pleasure while opening up the possibility of social transformation (Schwarz, 2024, p. 29).

Stereotypes or Figures

In a 2016 article for The New York Times, film critic Manohla Dargis coined the DuVernay Test, an adapted Bechdel test for the representation of people of color in cinema, which got its name from film director Ava DuVernay, director of the critically acclaimed film *Selma* (2014). Ment as a kind of qualitative diagnostic tool, the DuVernay Test evaluates whether marginalized characters are well developed individuals, with personal desires, agency, subjectivity, who exist not only in relation to white characters and who participate in dialogue which deals not exclusively with their ethnicity and is not centered on defending a white person. Adapting the DuVernay Test to characters from the Hungarian minority generates the following criteria:

1. At least two ethnic Hungarian characters, who have complex lives, and who exist not solely in relation to Romanian characters.
2. Ethnic Hungarian characters must be given names.
3. Ethnic Hungarian characters must have dialogue, and their discussions must not center on defending a Romanian.

In other words, an ethnic Hungarian character should be as well developed as Romanian characters, with complex subjectivity, individual desires, agency and should not be reduced to signaling their ethnicity or the reproduction of prevalent stereotypes, like their questionable loyalty, irredentism, limited proficiency of Romanian language, their rigid, cold communication style, stubbornness or hot-headedness. These kinds of diagnostic tools are based on a number of biases grounded in realism, which aim to create complex, believable characters. These principles are upheld by creative writing pedagogy and screenwriting manuals as well.

Although appearing historically in the literature of 19th century Realist and Naturalist authors like Gustave Flaubert, Lev Tolstoy or Émile Zola, the principle of conveying meaning through observable behavior, detail, situation, not moral explanation would become de-historicized normative advice through the slogan *show don't tell*, common in Creative Writing handbooks like E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) or John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction* (1983) and screenwriting handbooks like Syd Field's *Screenplay—The Foundations of Screenwriting* (1979) and Robert McKee's *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1998).

These principles are reproduced today unquestioned, naturalized by film practitioners worldwide. Because of realism's primacy in contemporary film spectatorship, the lack of ambiguity (legibility of social function of characters) is read as didacticism, lack of psychologization (not embodying the character's emotions, motivating action socially and discursively, not affectively) as bad acting, and lack of empathy (negation of identification with the character) as artificiality. This tension becomes particularly visible when contrasting professional criticism with informal audience reception. While the former rarely frames Jude's work in terms of "woeful acting," the latter frequently mobilizes precisely this vocabulary. The discrepancy suggests not a failure of performance, but a clash between aesthetic regimes: Brechtian strategies of estrangement are evaluated through the criteria of psychological realism, producing the impression of inadequacy. In short, the Brechtian intention of making social contradictions and social scripts legible are interpreted as poor execution, figures are misread as stereotypes, thus clarifying the distinction between stereotype and figure is essential to the article's argument.

A stereotype can be defined as a representational mechanism that essentializes social groups by attributing fixed, naturalized traits to them, treating historically and socially produced characteristics as inherent properties of identity. Rather than explaining social processes, stereotypes function as familiar clichés that invite immediate moral judgment or affective response, relying on pre-existing cultural imaginaries. Their primary function is identificatory rather than analytical,

stabilizing interpretation by presenting behavior as an expression of who a character *is*, rather than as a contingent effect of the structural positions they occupy. The distinction between figure and stereotype does not lie in the use of recognizable traits, but in their function: while stereotypes naturalize identity, figures render it contingent upon social conditions and therefore open to transformation.

According to Professor Barnett, in Brecht's work the notion of a unified, psychologically coherent character is rejected in favor of a relational and situational understanding of performance. As Brecht's assistant, Käthe Rüllicke, notes:

Brecht hardly ever gives directions that relate to the "character" of the figures; on the contrary their characters emerge from their behavior. Thus, no figure is a figure "in itself", but rather in relation to someone else; something different in relation to every other person. If Brecht ever does say anything about a figure's "character", then he derives it from their social situation. (Rüllicke, apud Barnett, 2015, pp. 58-59)

Professor Barnett highlights Rüllicke's distinction between *figure* and *character* as central: while a figure is unfixed, mutable, and defined through relations to others and to events, a character implies stable, enduring qualities independent of context. For Brecht, characteristics are not innate or psychological traits but are constituted through observable behavior enacted in relation to others. Consequently, actors are encouraged to work *from the outside*, analyzing behavior within concrete social situations rather than exploring inner psychology. The audience, in turn, should not perceive a stable character essence, but rather a series of context-dependent behaviors that shift with changing social and environmental conditions.

Figures on stage thus exhibit a form of typicality; they behave in ways that can be connected to their place in society with respect to the situation in question. Typicality is another word for "realistic" in Brecht's vocabulary: spectators recognize action and behavior on stage as credible. (Barnett, 2015, p. 106)

A figure is defined not by fixed personal traits or psychological interiority, but by the social, economic or institutional role it occupies. Unlike stereotypes, which essentialize identity and operate as familiar clichés, figures do not present behavior as an expression of who a character *is*, but as a contingent effect of the role they occupy (one that could be assumed by another subject under the same

conditions). Behavior doesn't derive from individual psychology, but from social relations, thus figures resist clear moral judgments and instead direct attention toward the systems and conditions that produce certain actions, functioning as a critical device rather than an essentializing one.

Orsolya and Dorina

Orsolya (Eszter Tompa) recounts to Dorina (Oana Mardare) how she discovered Ion (Gabriel Spahiu), the man who hanged himself. The two characters are sitting on a bench near the St. Michael Church in Cluj, sipping on a coffee from a nearby coffeeshop. The sequence is constructed based on the principles of historicization. "Like now, I bought a coffee and after I finished the coffee, I don't know, we went back, and when we arrived, we knocked and we saw him hanged by the radiator." Orsolya tells this story a number of times throughout the film and she's always met with the same confused reaction. Instead of empathy towards her and the man's death the spectator is amused by the weird choice of words which stem from verbatim translation of Hungarian specific idioms to Romanian, while the recollection of the situation and the absurd way in which the man took his own life (hanging himself while on the ground with a wire wrapped around his neck and fixed to the radiator) drives the point home.

Dorina recounts a similar situation she had with a homeless person who spent the winter in front of her apartment building. The situation is retold in full detail, Dorina insisting on his body odor and unkempt appearance, describing how she could smell him every time she would open the windows, how she would avoid the area where he was sitting and how she was secretly hoping he would die. Jude highlights Dorina's performative frugality: "I would stay in bed, I was cold because we set the thermostat to 18 degrees to save a bit of money, and I was thinking what is he doing out there in minus 18 degrees..." Dorina sips on her specialty coffee and her golden bracelet becomes visible on her wrist. Rather than necessity, frugality operates here as socially learned attitude, which reconciles wealth with norms of responsibility and restraint.

Repeatedly Dorina describes the smell in great detail. The moment highlights how disgust has a boundary-making effect, drawing borders between what is considered pure/impure, inside/outside, human/non-human as put forward in Martha C. Nussbaum's *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law* (2004), where she links disgust to authoritarian and exclusionary politics. Dorina recounts how at one point after throwing up from the thought of his smell she called the police and insisted for them to come and take the homeless man away. By recounting in detail, the mental process which led to her decision of calling the police, Jude highlights the specific context which makes the event possible.

Later in the scene, Dorina suggests to Orsolya for them to visit a poor Roma family in Pata Rât, whom Dorina regularly supports through an NGO. Orsolya initially agrees, but subsequently withdraws, suggesting instead that she would rather donate money—preferably via a telephone-company service that automatically deducts a fixed monthly amount (“for example 2 euros”) along with her subscription fee.

The moment can be read as foregrounding Orsolya’s *Haltung*: as an upper-middle-class bailiff in late capitalism, she adopts a stance that regulates her relation to social suffering by keeping it at a functional distance. This tendency is visible not only in her preference for mediated forms of charity, such as automated monthly donations, but also in her discursive strategies. When confronted with the situation, Orsolya repeatedly invokes procedural and legal justifications, insisting that she is “legally sound,” that she has “allowed him to stay longer,” or that she does not participate in evictions during the winter. Through such statements, moral responsibility is reframed in terms of rule-following and institutional compliance. However, this stance does not indicate a stable bureaucratic identity, but rather a response to discomfort. Orsolya does care about social suffering, yet remains unable to confront it directly, resorting instead to mediated forms of engagement that minimize personal involvement. In this sense, bureaucratic reasoning appears as a socially learned strategy for managing guilt rather than an intrinsic character trait. At the same time, the scene also foregrounds Dorina’s hypocrisy, whose past actions reveal a more explicit form of exclusion. The juxtaposition does not establish a clear moral hierarchy, but instead stages different, equally limited ways of negotiating responsibility within similar social positions.

The two meet out of guilt, hoping to be absolved by the other. Orsolya insists that she has followed procedure to the letter, while Dorina highlights the ways she gives back to the needy, while also admitting to be ashamed of historical injustices: “It’s clear that we took Transylvania unjustly in 1918. Spoils of war... (...) Every time people tell me that Transylvania is Ancient Romanian Land, I respond ‘Look around, doesn’t it look like Wien or Budapest?’” The lines recall familiar arguments in the never-ending debate of who is the rightful owner of Transylvania, Dorina internalizing a fantasy of an ideal response in the eyes of most ethnic Hungarians.

While dialogue belongs formally to the level of writing, in *Kontinental* ’25 it functions as a performative mechanism that structures character as a discursive and ideological position rather than as a psychological subject. Characters articulate positions, not feelings. They explain, accuse, justify, quote or perform ideology. The dialogue functions as social speech, it feels discursive rather than expressive. Although it sometimes externalizes inner states, it is rather a collection of citations of different popular opinions, clichés, anecdotes and historical quotations.

Orsolya and her mother

An analysis of a scene focusing on two ethnic Hungarian characters sheds light on whether the film gravitates toward ethnic stereotypes or upholds Brechtian character construction for minority figures as well. Using the adapted DuVernay Test can be misleading, as it appears to indicate that character construction in *Kontinental* '25 is stereotypical.

In a following scene, Orsolya recounts Ion's death to her mother, played by Annamária Biluska. The conversation focuses on defending Ion, a Romanian national. The mother remains unnamed (or at least her surname is never disclosed), and the two discuss at length the situation of ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania.

The mother's irredentism, questionable loyalty towards the Romanian State is soon revealed, her changing the subject abruptly from how Ion was a sad man, and how the State forgot about him to the fetish subject of Transylvania: "That's what they deserve. They stole Transylvania. For what? They made fun of it. That's all they're capable of, the Romanians... To make fun of everything they have." While Orsolya tries to argue, the mother drives the point home: "No, no... But they stole Transylvania. And they are not even capable of preserving what's valuable in it. Jerk peasants."

Next, she recalls how she suggested to Orsolya for her to move to Hungary but she refused. Orsolya explains how Viktor Orbán's Hungary is Europe's shame, and the mother responds: "Ok, then stay here so that you can be called 'filthy *bozgor*', by these... gypsies." The mother's hostility toward Romanians stems from firsthand experience of the anti-minority policies of the Ceaușescu regime. In its final decade, Hungarian-language education in schools steadily declined, territorial radio stations stopped broadcasting in Hungarian by the mid-1980s, and place names and first names in minority languages were banned. (O'Grady, Kántor and Tarnovschi, 2001, p. 9) This fostered a deep mistrust of state authorities, which ultimately culminated in the Ethnic Clashes of Târgu-Mureș in 1990.

At one point in the conversation, Orsolya specifically brings up the former city mayor, Gheorghe Funar, known for painting benches, curbs, and even trashcans in the national colors, whose right-wing policies and chauvinistic views contributed to inter-ethnic tensions in Cluj-Napoca during the transition period. Thus, any failure of the Romanian state to address social issues is perceived by the mother through a lens of deep mistrust and fear of renewed oppression of the Hungarian community. However, identification with the character is prevented by the jarring incongruence of her behavior, the absurd development of the dialogue, as a compilation of irredentist slogans, and her vulgarity.

The mother concludes that Orsolya should not complain if she decided to live here, that she should have some integrity, explaining to Orsolya how complaining is a Romanian gene and teasing her that she got infected by it. Orsolya rushes to the door, and out of nowhere the mother yells to her back “Then don’t come here again. You bitch!”, slamming the door on her leaving daughter. The sequence feels exaggerated, theatrical, the mother encompassing every Hungarian stereotype, viewed through a realist lens that is.

In fact, Jude’s approach to the characters remains consistent across the entire film and is not limited to the Hungarian characters. When considered within the appropriate theoretical framework, their function is rather that of Brechtian figures, as they highlight social determination. What Jude really accomplishes is highlighting the processes by which double standards are created (the mother being simultaneously against Romanian nationalism, while also pardoning and supporting Viktor Orbán’s government), and which are difficult to balance by national minorities whom in the name of ethnic consolidation gravitate towards nationalism, while at the same time also highlighting how minorities recreate exclusion towards more marginalized communities, like the Roma community.

Conclusions

This article has argued that accusations of superficiality or bad acting—and, more implicitly, the potential reading of characters as stereotypical—directed at *Kontinental* ’25 stem less from the film’s representational strategies than from the dominance of psychological realism as the normative horizon of contemporary film spectatorship. Notably, such accusations are largely absent from academic and professional criticism, appearing instead in informal reception contexts such as user reviews on IMDb, Cinemagia or Letterboxd, where performances are frequently judged against the criteria of emotional authenticity and psychological depth. When character construction is evaluated primarily through expectations of complexity, psychological depth and empathy, Brechtian figures are easily misconstrued as schematic, exaggerated or reductive. In the case of minority representation, this misreading acquires heightened political stakes, as typification risks being equated with ethnic stereotyping.

Through a close analysis of two key scenes (Orsolya’s conversation with Dorina and with her mother) the article has shown that Jude’s film mobilizes Brechtian devices in order to foreground social determination rather than psychological depth. The performances refuse affective immersion and identification, instead articulating ideological positions, habitual discourses and contradictory attitudes that circulate within specific historical and social contexts.

Dialogue functions not as an expression of inner life but as social speech: a collage of citations stemming from social media comments to anecdotes about Bertolt Brecht, that expose how ideology speaks through individuals.

Seen through this framework, the Hungarian characters in *Kontinental* '25 do not function as stereotypes that naturalize identity or negate agency. On the contrary, they operate as Brechtian figures whose very rigidity makes visible the contradictions they embody: the coexistence of minority grievance and exclusionary nationalism, of critique of Romanian state power and complicity with authoritarian politics elsewhere, of solidarity claims and bureaucratized distance from more marginalized groups. What realism would read as exaggeration or lack of nuance becomes, in Brechtian terms, a strategy of legibility, focusing on the visibility of structural relations rather than emotional identification.

The application of an adapted DuVernay Test further clarifies the limits of diagnostic tools grounded in realist assumptions. While such frameworks are invaluable for identifying patterns of exclusion and underdevelopment, they presuppose a model of character built around psychological interiority, individual agency, and empathetic access. *Kontinental* '25 deliberately suspends these criteria, not to diminish minority subjectivity, but to relocate it from the realm of personal depth to that of historically situated positions and choices. The film thus exposes how the demand for “positive”, “complex” or “relatable” representation can itself function normatively, rejecting aesthetic forms that refuse realism’s emotional economy.

Ultimately, Jude’s film does not ask whether minority characters are authentic or sufficiently individualized. It asks what social functions they perform, what ideologies they reproduce, and under what conditions those ideologies become thinkable. By staging moments of decision, the film foregrounds not character essence but social process. In doing so, it aligns closely with Brecht’s insistence that the task of politically engaged art is not to mirror the world as it appears, but to reveal how it is made, and how it might be changed.

Repositioning *Kontinental* '25 within a Brechtian theoretical framework thus allows us to move beyond expectations grounded in psychological realism and toward a more precise understanding of how acting styles, dialogue, and character construction shape the politics of representation. More broadly, this analysis suggests that contemporary debates on minority representation must remain attentive not only to *who* is represented, but to *how* representational forms themselves are historically situated, ideologically charged, and unevenly legible within a cinematic culture still governed by the primacy of realism.

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Filmography:

1. *Kontinental '25* (2025) Directed by Radu Jude [Film]. SAGA FILM.

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