

## A Diffractive Approach to Archive Film Performativity

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### Abstract

This article explores the performativity of archival footage and reframes the archival feminist cinema in Romania through a diffractive methodology inspired by Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, and Judith Butler. Focusing on Vlad Petri's *Between Revolutions* and Maryam Tafakory's poetic cinematic works, it examines how archival footage, voiceovers, and subtitles disrupt linear narratives and reconfigure history. Rather than comparing the films thematically, the analysis reads them through one another to trace how meaning emerges from material-discursive entanglements. The study foregrounds the political agency of filmic elements such as sound, image, and text while also considering how translation, censorship, and female voice shape feminist ways of seeing. Through layered montage and citation, these films are positioned not as representations of the past but as performative acts that imagine new temporalities and relationships. A diffractive reading reveals how history and memory are not fixed but continuously reshaped in the space between revolutions.

**Keywords:** feminist cinema, diffraction, performativity, archival film, subtitle agency, poetic montage, feminist epistemology.

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This article explores the performativity of archival footage through a feminist diffractive lens, focusing on Vlad Petri's *Between Revolutions* and Maryam Tafakory's cinematic practice. I examine how these films use found footage, fragmented narratives, and poetic voiceovers to challenge the boundaries between past and present, fiction and history, self and other. Drawing on Karen Barad's concept of *diffractive*, Judith Butler's *performativity*, and Donna Haraway's *situated knowledge*, I propose that these films do not merely document history but actively reconfigure it. They do so by *cutting together-apart*, both assembling and disrupting meaning. They foreground the politics of looking, the instability of identity, and the entangled nature of historical memory.<sup>1</sup>

*Between Revolutions* premiered in 2023 in the Forum section of the Berlin International Film Festival, where it was awarded the FIPRESCI prize. Its subsequent festival trajectory included both major documentary festivals (Ji.hlava, ZagrebDox, Camden IFF, MiradasDoc, DocAviv), mixed-format festivals (Valladolid IFF, FIPA, Tbilisi IFF), and fiction-oriented events (Montpellier Mediterranean FF, Trieste FF, Sarajevo FF, Festival du Nouveau Cinéma, Transilvania IFF). The film received more than ten international awards for Best Documentary and Best Film, highlighting its hybrid nature between documentary and fiction. Locally, reception was mixed: while Irina Trocan (Lettre Internationale, 2023) and Ionuț Mareș (*Ziarul Metropolis*, 2023) praised its poetic montage, Flavia Dima, a feminist film critic (*Films in Frame*, 2023) emphasized the structural contradictions in the representation of women.

Dima noted that archival footage overwhelmingly depicts men, while women appear only marginally, and Zahra's voice remains underdeveloped compared to Maria's. She also questioned the decorative use of poems by Nina Cassian and Forough Farrokhzad. A diffractive reading does not dismiss these limits but reads them through Tafakory's frame as rather productive forces that make the alternation between absence and silence act meaningfully.

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<sup>1</sup> This article draws on an artistic research framework, informed by feminist practice-as-research methodologies. While the format here is discursive and analytical, the interpretative lens has been shaped by the author's prior performative presentations and visual research processes that emphasize layered meaning-making through voice, image, and temporal montage. For more on artistic research and performative epistemologies, see: Borgdorff, H. (2012). *The conflict of the faculties: Perspectives on artistic research and academia*. Leiden University Press.

In the Romanian cinematic landscape, archival-based films have gained prominence, especially since the digitalization of state archives. Canonical works by Andrei Ujică (*Videograms of a Revolution*, *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu*) and Radu Jude (*The Dead Nation*, *The Marshal's Two Executions*, *The Exit of the Trains*, *Memories from the Eastern Front*) set the tone for critical engagements with official archives. Alongside them, a growing number of women filmmakers such as Nora Agapi (*Timebox*), Mona Nicoară and Dana Bunescu (*The Distance Between Me and Me*), Alina Manolache (*I Am Here*, *Lost Kids on the Beach*), Raluca Durbacă (*The Certainty of Probabilities*), Ana Lungu (*Triton*), and Andra MacMasters (*Bright Future*) have worked with personal, familial, or neglected archives to problematize memory, visibility, and gender. In this context, *Between Revolutions* positions itself at the intersection of these two traditions: between the dominant male-authored archival essays and the feminist re-appropriations of domestic and personal archives.

In this article, I adopt a diffractive methodology in the sense proposed by Karen Barad and further developed by Orianna Calderon-Sandoval and Adelina Sánchez-Espinosa<sup>2</sup>, who argue in their analysis of Spanish feminist documentaries that diffraction provides a way of moving beyond the barrier between patriarchal cinema and counter-cinema. The documentary, they suggest, is not merely a system of signification but also part of the material processes that co-create the real.

My approach does not involve comparing *Between Revolutions* (2023) and *Nazarbazi* (2021) in terms of thematic similarity or structural parallelism. Instead, I read them through one another in order to trace how each film generates meaning via different material-discursive intra-actions. The focus lies on how differences matter, and how each cinematic strategy enacts distinct temporal, affective, and political configurations. This diffractive approach is not a critical stance in the evaluative sense but an attunement to emergent entanglements between archive, form, and reception.

To clarify, this method of reading across films involves tracing how visual, aural, and narrative strategies in one work reverberate through the other, not through mirroring, but through productive interference. For instance, Tafakory's poetic practice, marked by visual ellipses, intertitles, and the performativity of

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<sup>2</sup> Calderon-Sandoval, O., & Sanchez-Espinosa, A. (2019). Feminist documentary cinema as a diffraction apparatus: A diffractive reading of the Spanish films, *Cuidado, resbala* and *Yes, We Fuck!*. *Social Sciences*, 8(7), p. 206.

ensorship, sheds light on the ways in which *Between Revolutions* constructs the imagery of women as fragmented, unstable, and resistant to fixation. The poetics of absence in Tafakory's *Nazarbazi* illuminates how *Between Revolutions* cultivates its own gaps and silences as sites of affective resonance. Diffractive analysis, here, allows the two films to speak to and through each other, generating a layered field of aesthetic and political inquiry.

Rather than developing a linear argument or comparing the films thematically I propose a textual montage that brings together film dialogue, subtitles, theoretical references, and interpretive reflections. Elements are not aligned to illustrate one another but are allowed to interfere, overlap, and produce new resonances. The writing reflects this logic by letting theory and cinematic material speak through each other. Filmic moments do not serve as examples for theory, and theory does not dominate the reading. Instead, both move together, shaping and reshaping meaning in a continuous process. This approach treats writing as an active part of the analytical method, where citation, memory, and interpretation unfold relationally. Writing thus becomes an active component of the methodology, namely a performative practice of thinking-with rather than looking-at.

A diffractive analysis of Vlad Petri's film, engaging with Maryam Tafakory's cinematic practice, shows that the contribution of Lavinia Braniște and the women poets no longer appears as mere "decorative insertions" (as Dima suggests), but as acts of intra-action between text, image, and personal memory. Flavia Dima points out the risk that the film might reproduce the absence of women from archives, despite its declared intention to do the opposite. The tension between the critique of representation and the aesthetics of absence is nevertheless maintained, not by transforming lack into an aesthetic virtue, but by working with the lack of women in archival footage and making it a historical symptom legible diffractively.

"The river and the moon are splitting me in two  
And the night is like blood flowing from my mouth"

(Nina Cassian, *Mă taie în două* [Poem excerpt, translated], as cited in *Între Revoluții, 2023*)



Figure 1. *Între Revoluții*. Still from Petri, V. (Director). (2023). *Între Revoluții* [Film still]. Activ Docs.

Every cut simultaneously connects and separates images. A cut does not just join two shots, it also produces meaning through their differentiation that becomes obvious through juxtaposition allowing distinctions to emerge through intra-action, rather than being pre-existing divisions.

Cutting together- cutting apart  
 cutting the apart together  
 cutting together apart

“I used to be one  
 I used to be one”

Maria's voice over articulates in Romanian *I* while the subtitle reads *We*. The subtitle text on the screen becomes performative, gains agency over the meaning. This disjunction between spoken voice and subtitle is more than a stylistic or poetic device. It performs subjectivity as fractured and relational, in line with Butler's theory of performativity.



Figure 2. *Între Revoluții*. Still from Petri, V. (Director). (2023). *Între Revoluții* [Film still]. Activ Docs.

From a diffractive perspective, this moment materializes the intra-action between sound, image, and viewer. The viewer is not just decoding meaning but is entangled in the conditions of its emergence. In this sense, the voice-over becomes a site where feminist theory, cinematic technique, and archival disruption converge.

The binarity of subject (viewer) and object (film) disappears. Watching a film is not a passive act—meaning is produced through the intra-action of the film, the viewer, and the surrounding conditions (time, space, technology), *the space time mattering*.

The boundaries between the real and the virtual, the past and the present are blurred.

The text on the screen creates a we as the voice pronounces the I.  
the I, the other, cutting together apart  
the censored "we"

The archival materials assembled by Vlad Petri and his team construct a fictional history of a very possible friendship between Zahra and Maria, colleagues in the 70s at the university of medicine in Bucharest, framed by the two revolutions, the 1979 revolution in Iran and the fall of communism in Romania in 1989, the story centered around a series of letters (written by Lavinia Branîște) exchanged between the two university friends, Maria (voiced by Victoria Stoiciu) and Zahra (voiced by Ilinca Hărnuț).

Accompanying the soundscape and largely following the narrative and the gaps between the letters, are archival images reflecting the historical context of that time. The archives, gathered from rich and various sources both from amateur sources and the official archives become a substitute for the reality in which Maria and Zahra live, in Romania and Iran, respectively, during those years.

The fictional correspondence between two women, serves as a narrative bridge across time and space. Their letters are not just personal reflections but function as an entangled dialogue between two historical moments. Like Barad's quantum entanglement, where particles remain connected despite being physically apart, the women's voices are in constant interaction, even though they exist in separate political realities.

For me, their voices brought together a mental montage—a diffractive overlay of visual fragments from the works of Maryam Tafakory, Mona Hatoum, Chantal Akerman, Mona Nicoară, and Dana Bunescu. These layered themselves across my own memories and family archive images: most vividly, a photograph of my mother sunbathing. This internal montage was not just associative; it enacted a relational logic, where personal and political, historical and imagined, bled into one another. Their words, spoken over fragmented images, become a way of both maintaining and breaking connection, just as *cutting together-apart* suggests that relations and distinctions surface simultaneously. Furthermore, images of women alternate on the screen never repeating themselves, a multitude of faces of gestures. Either of them—possibly Zahra or Maria. The film seems to reject a singular, knowable *woman* by fragmenting her representation. Instead, the woman is both seen and unseen, fragmented and resistant to a conclusive portrait since she can never be fully contained by the image. Consequently, such a woman can never be fully captured by the narrative.

A collage of propagandistic images of women, as well as informal ones, alternates on the screen, while the intimate space of the correspondence between

the two women performs a triple somersault (un triplu salt mortal), expressing their private world, creating space.

Petri's use of found footage includes state propaganda, revolutionary fervor, and suppressed dissent. By repurposing these images, the film doesn't just document history but actively *re assemble* it. Censorship itself becomes a form of *cutting together-apart*: what is shown and what is hidden co-produce meaning.



Figure 3. Collage. *Între Revoluții*. Still from Petri, V. (Director). (2023). *Între Revoluții* [Film still]. Activ Docs.

Like Maryam Tafakory's work, films edited poetically merging shots from Iranian films, text and sound (*Nazarbazi*, which means change of glances), the absences in *Between Revolutions*, whether in state-controlled footage or in the personal stories of women erased from revolutionary narratives, are not passive voids. They act as active forces shaping how history is perceived and remembered. The alternation of the women images on screen turned into a contemplation of how Images regularly function: not as representations but as instructions in the codes of

public appearances and disappearances, teaching the intricacies of how one must present or efface oneself in order to survive.

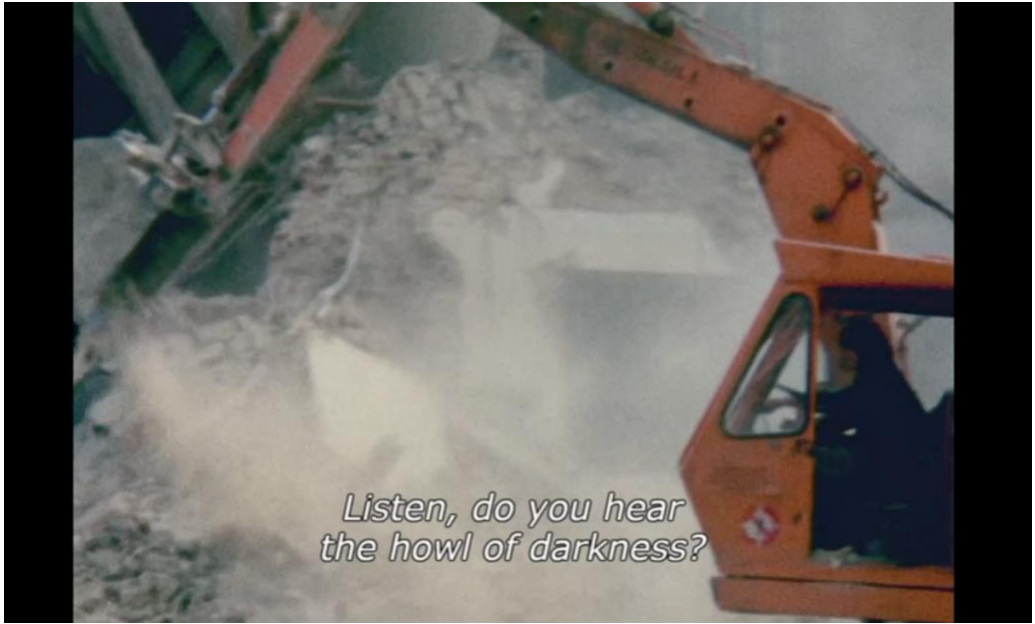


Figure 4. *Între Revoluții*. Still from Petri, V. (Director). (2023). *Între Revoluții* [Film still]. Activ Docs.

Lavinia Braniște texts are interwoven with Nina Cassian poetry as well as verses from Forough Farrokhzad:

“Alas, in my little night  
the wind has a tryst with the leaves of the trees  
In my little night, there is the dread of devastation

Listen  
Do you hear the gusts of darkness?  
Excluded, I watch this happiness  
I am addicted to my despair  
Listen  
Do you hear the gusts of darkness?

the wind will carry us”

(Forough Farrokhzad, “*The Wind Will Carry Us*,” trans. E. T. Gray Jr., 2022)

In translation, the voice of the female subject resists containment. In *Between Revolutions*, the subtitle reads: “Do you hear the howls of darkness?” instead of “gusts”, of the official translation of the poem. “Howls” introduces a visceral, haunting presence. The subtitle does more than convey meaning; it resonates. It becomes a voice of its own, carrying affect and agency. *Gusts* arrive as sudden interruptions, fractured pulses of air that redraw the contours of space. The *howl* stretches these ruptures into resonance, a visceral vibration that inhabits the body and the landscape alike. And breath, *suflarea*, from the Romanian voice over, binds them together: the intimate exhalation of a single body becoming the shared respiration of humankind, a reminder that every fragment and every cry unfolds within a common atmosphere. In this moment, text on screen does not follow speech but speaks alongside it. It is the wind, the gusts of historical and political events that carried the two friends through the challenging times. Zahra’s father disappears, leaving her to carry his voice and beliefs despite the regime, in a country torn apart by war, while Maria must finally settle down and marry in order to survive in an unstable and harsh economic environment.

The letters between Maria and Zahra merge fact and fiction, their emotions and the historical realities are entangled rather than strictly separate. The film’s use of the archive does not aim for objective history but performs history as an unstable, ever-changing field.

The ending of *Between Revolutions* cuts together scenes from different moments shown throughout the film. The past and the present and everything in between become simultaneous. A Mary go Round. Rather than a linear unfolding, time is a dynamic process where past, present, and future are constantly interacting, reshaping one another in an ongoing entanglement.

Maria's voice:

"I look at our photographs,  
I want to zoom into them because they are fading  
when do people start to fade away from paper. "

This moment embodies Barad’s assertion that the present is always already entangled with past and future, not as linear time, but as spacetime mattering. The

fading photograph does not merely signal loss; it activates a diffraction pattern where memory, materiality, and affect intra-act.



Figure 5. *Între Revoluții*. Still from Petri, V. (Director). (2023). *Între Revoluții* [Film still]. Activ Docs.

The sound overlaps on a frame of a woman sunbathing (memory or imagination), a frame that struggles to resist the darkness, of memory, of the times...

This recalls Hito Steyerl's notion of the *poor image* which resists disappearance not in spite of its degradation, but because of it. As she writes in her essay "In Defense of the Poor Image": "(a) poor image, (a) degraded trace, (a) flicker of history that remains," In this context, the archival images in Petri's film do not seek clarity or fidelity to the past; they flicker, distort, and haunt, suggesting that historical transmission is always partial, precarious, and mediated. If Steyerl's "poor image" resists disappearance through digital decay, Haraway's diffractive vision offers a way to read such remnants not as loss, but as active inscriptions of historical entanglement.

From a linguistic standpoint, Butler conceptualizes performativity as the power of language to bring realities into being. Applied to documentary, this suggests that film not only reflects the world but generates new conditions and

social effects through its performative nature. Barad builds on this by emphasizing the agency of matter, positioning documentary film as an apparatus that both frames and transforms reality through its entanglement of human and non-human elements.

Performativity involves this iterative *intra-activity* where the discursive and the material are constantly intertwined and mutually influencing each other. This interaction generates not only different descriptions of the world but also different material configurations. Simply put, things and physical realities are shaped by the way we think and act in the world.

Speaking of archive material opens a discussion about the right of looking. Only by recognizing the power that comes from the privileged position of the one who has the right to look does the possibility emerge for opening conversations about power—conversations that lead to contestable and contested knowledge rather than fixed, categorical knowledge (Haraway, 1988; hooks, 1992).

By embracing the embodied nature of all vision, a shift from the marked body, Haraway states that "vision is always a question of the power to see—and perhaps of the violence implicit in our viewing practices" (Haraway, 1988, p. 583).

The way to assume and apply this *situated knowledge*, whether in the interpretation of a theoretical or artistic work is, above all, through the acknowledgment of the limitations in our ability to observe and understand. This is best achieved through a *methodological apparatus of diffraction*, a framework that assumes, from the outset, that the instruments through which we perceive are neither neutral nor passive in relation to the observed phenomena. Instead, they are active participants with agency, co-producing new phenomena. As Karen Barad states, they "stage what matters and what is excluded from mattering." (Barad, 2007, p. 394).

Haraway offers a compelling reconfiguration of optics as an epistemological model when she states that diffraction becomes an option for thinking about light, a way of thinking that becomes about history, setting aside the metaphysics of identity and the metaphysics of representation. It is not about identity as taxonomy but rather about recording the process on the projection screen (Haraway & Goodeve, 1998, p. 104).<sup>3</sup> This shift is crucial in understanding diffraction not merely

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<sup>3</sup> Donna J. Haraway describes diffraction in these terms in conversation with Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve: "As a metaphor it drops the metaphysics of identity and the metaphysics of representation and says optics is full of a whole other potent way of thinking about light, which is about history. It's not about identity as taxonomy, but it's about registering process on the recording screen." See: Haraway, D. J., & Goodeve,

as a visual metaphor, but as a performative and historical apparatus. It invites a mode of attention that privileges process over fixed position, resonance over representation.

“Diffraction involves reading insights through one another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge: how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how those exclusions matter” (Barad, 2007, p. 30). In this sense, cinematic form itself becomes a method of feminist thought, where the ethics of montage mirrors the ethics of attention. Not an attention to sameness, but to the contour of difference. This is not critique as correction; it is critique as co-creation. A mode of thinking with, not looking at.

Furthermore, the concept of responsibility becomes essential: *what matters and what is excluded from mattering* in these processes of intra-activity have ethical and epistemological implications. Therefore the viewers are summoned to accept the responsibility to think in terms of what is included and excluded from these interactions, as they shape reality and have real effects on the world. These films, *Between Revolutions* and *Nazarbazi*, do not just document history; they question it. They also reassemble it and they perform it anew.

While the images of protagonists may fade, return, dissolve, the voices of Maria and Zahra survive—letters that are both real and imagined, histories that are both remembered and rewritten. Domitilla Olivieri (2012, p.8) reminds us that feminist documentary cannot be reduced to female authorship or subject matter; an impactful, thought-provoking, and mind-changing feminist documentary is “haunted” by feminist concerns like power, inequality, representational politics. *Between Revolutions* is feminist in precisely this sense: by exposing the invisibility of women in archives, it unsettles historical narratives.

This article’s diffractive approach does not aim to resolve historical or representational tensions but to remain with them. It observes how films enact memory and subjectivity through layered temporalities and relational aesthetics. Rather than stabilizing meaning, the method foregrounds interference, resonance, and partial connections. It repositions feminist film analysis as a practice of co-emergence, in which image, theory, and viewer generate knowledge together in ways that are situated and contingent.

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T. N. (1998). *How like a leaf: An interview with Donna J. Haraway* (p. 104). London & New York: Routledge.

"You need imagination in order to imagine a future that is not there" says the quote from *Azar Nafisi* in the opening of Vlad Petri's film, making us question what futures are possible. What images, what stories, what shapes the way we see, the way we remember?

This 'beginning', like all beginnings, is always already threaded through with anticipation of where it is going but will never simply reach and of a past that has yet to come. It is not merely that the future and the past are not 'there' and never sit still, but that the present is not simply here-now. Multiply heterogeneous iterations all: past, present, and future, not in a relation of linear unfolding, but threaded through one another in a nonlinear enfolding of spacetime mattering, a topology that defies any suggestion of a smooth continuous manifold. (Barad, 2007, p. 244)

Meaning is never fixed at a single temporal point. Rather, it emerges from an entangled process of becoming. This nonlinear enfolding of time invites us to consider how our ways of seeing, thinking, and telling shape not only memory, but also the futures we are able to imagine.

Because it matters.

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories (Haraway, 2016, p. 132).

The past is not gone. The future is not yet written. In cinema, in memory, in the space between revolutions, everything is still unfolding.

To stay with the cut is to stay with possibility.

To cut together-apart is to remain attuned to the entanglements that shape both history through the stories we recount and the future dreamt to from the moments of historical silence.

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