



# Don't Come Home this Year

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'Don't come home this year' is a short video about Romanian migrants returning home from Italy during the Covid-19 pandemic. The video uses viral live streamed footage of returnees showing themselves stuck in transit on the 17th of March 2020 at the land border between Austria and Hungary, the Nikelsdorf-Hegyeshalom border crossing. Juxtaposing this footage with reaction videos from the diaspora who remained abroad, and from Romanians at home, the video unfolds as a virtual dialogue that shows how the pandemic engendered a field of contention surrounding the identity of these migrant workers, as diasporic



community and as medium of virus transmission. The video also captures the way in which new media technology and aesthetics are embedded in everyday life.

*The migrants returning home used their smartphones to transform themselves into citizen camera-witnesses.*

I was impressed by how the migrants returning home used their smartphones to transform themselves into *citizen camera-witnesses*, a term used by Andén-Papadopoulos (2014, 754) to describe ‘camera-wielding political activists and dissidents who put their lives at risk to produce incontrovertible public testimony to unjust and disastrous developments around the world, in a critical bid to mobilize global solidarity through the affective power of the visual.’

I started collecting videos made at the border on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March which were becoming viral both on Facebook and on YouTube. Besides these videos, I started collecting also reaction videos that were made prior or in the aftermath of this event. Before the 17<sup>th</sup> of March viral videos of returning Romanian migrants sitting in long queues at the border between Hungary and Romania, at the airports, being escorted into quarantine, or in quarantine were already circulating online, together with reaction videos. I recontextualized some of the latter to appear as direct reactions to the 17<sup>th</sup> of March event because this event, around which the narrative arc of the video is constructed, allowed me to bring in and compress into a single video dialogic footage that would otherwise be temporally and spatially dispersed online. It can be seen as what Jaimie Baron (2015) calls productive misuse of found footage.

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One of the difficulties encountered was in tracking the original source of these



videos. Many of the videos have been downloaded several times and re-posted by Facebook or YouTube users who act as informal channels for Romanian viral video content. This spiral of re-posting made it hard to identify the exact authors of this footage, the dates when these videos were made and, except for the footage shot at the border, hard to identify the exact location where the footage was taken. Related to this was also the difficulty of getting consent for using the footage. In the end I chose not to ask consent from the users that made the footage available online and instead opted for the fair use of the videos (Smith Ekstrand and Silver 2014) . I did so because the videos were created with the explicit intent of being shared as much as possible on social media, ‘to reach Mr. Iohannis in Bucharest’ as one content creator says. In this manner I embodied the role user-channels have in re-posting, and thus disseminate, footage that ends up becoming viral, retaining the logic of internet viral transmission. Moreover, I believe that in the editing process, although recontextualizations were made, the intent of the video creators was not altered, but rather enhanced its dialogism by constructing a conversation space using the aesthetics of online video chatting apps.

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Although I cataloged the videos based on the original user source, social media platform and date of publication, I organized the material during editing following a set of topics that have defined the debates about the Romanian diaspora in the media and everyday life. Thus, the video focuses on attempts at defining the diaspora (Beciu 2012, Trandafoiu 2013), the social categories that constitute it (Cingolani 2016, Moroşanu 2012), and its political (Bucur 2019, Burean 2011, Gheorghita 2011, Gherasim-Proca 2014) and economic agency (Ban 2012, Mădroane 2016). At the same time, the video creators make use of symbols such as ‘the queue’, representing in Romania the state’s oppression or disregard of its



constituent population since late socialism (Câmpeanu 1994), or ‘smashing a TV’, a trope frequently used in cinema and TV productions, associated with rage against the manipulating power of the medium, but repurposed into [an international viral video trend expressing outrage](#) at mainstream media manipulation regarding the existence of the virus or its actual source (as seen most notably in the [UK](#) and [Australia](#)).

*The edit creates a polyphonic narrative by overlapping the different footage so as to complement each other and give the sense of a single homogenous narrative. I use (this) visual grammar to portray (...) multiple, opposing narratives of a shared experience, (...) akin to how online video chats unfold.*

My inspiration for the video’s aesthetic came from Natalie Bookchin’s video artwork [Testament](#) (2009), whose form resembles that of online chat apps everyone has become familiar to since the beginning of the pandemic. In this work she uses online vlogs that she groups according to different topics. Initially conceived as a multi-channel installation, she edited the different footage into one single video that shows the shared experience of losing a job, being on anti-depression medication and trying to come out. The edit creates a polyphonic narrative by overlapping the different footage so as to complement each other and give the sense of a single homogenous narrative. Unlike Bookchin, I use her visual grammar to portray not a single narrative, but multiple, opposing narratives of a shared experience, more akin to how online video chats unfold. It is the divergence of the multiple voices embodied in this dialogic footage which I bring together that I believe ends up defining the collective shared experience of the Romanian diaspora trying to get back home during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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Featured Image: Prudentia, found on [Wikipedia](#).