



FILM: **COLLECTIV**

FDG RATING: 4.6 ☺☺☺☺☺  
Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Alexander Nanau: *director, writer, produce, editor*

DATE: June 20, 2021

## DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **COLLECTIV**

**Collective** (Romanian: Colectiv) is a 2019 Romanian documentary film directed, written, produced and edited by Alexander Nanau. Nominated for 2021 Oscar, best documentary and best film, in the opinion of one discussion participant, it is the best documentary, ever! Another commented that *Collectiv* is a masterpiece, an incredible documentary with so much integrity.

This powerful, emotionally devastating, film revolves around a journalist, Catalin Tolontan, editor-in-chief, with a reputation for being relentless in uncovering corruption in sports and publishing the exposés in the sports publication where he works. He learns that the tragic 2015 fire at the Colectiv nightclub in Bucharest, initially killed 27 people and injured 180. But 64 burn victims with non-life threatening wounds, died in the hospital, raising the question, why? Definitely not a story for a sports publication, but Tolontan gathers a skeleton crew to dig deeper. We witness their horrifying discoveries as they probe-interview-investigate, uncovering an infestation of corruption.

Captured on a cell phone video, we watch a metalcore band end their set at the night club with a small pyrotechnics show, which immediately leapt to the backstage walls, then ignited the ceiling. The entire club was engulfed within seconds resulting in chaos, mass pandemonium (the club had no fire exits, no sprinkler system) Families want the wounded transferred to Germany, with its state-of-the-art burn trauma centers. But the government and Health department assured the public, in typical “news speak”, that the victims were being well taken care of, all medical needs being met, there was no reason to transfer patients.

What Tolontan and his team uncover is a horribly corrupt health care system tied to political interests within the Romanian government at every level, top to bottom, and sideways, too. They discover that the disinfectants provided to the hospitals by a pharmaceutical company have been diluted, rendering them useless. This revelation is front-page news for months as this small team of journalists track down the who, what, why of it all. If disinfectants are diluted, then that means no Romanian is safe in the hospital. Tolontan traces many of the deaths to Hexi Pharma, a company that sold deliberately diluted disinfectants to Bucharest hospitals. Soon after his story appears, Hexi Pharma's owner kills himself - or so it seems - and the minister of health suddenly resigns. A new minister of health, Vlad Voiculescu, takes over offering more transparency and seems willing to fix the broken system. An impossible task. Especially when the ruling party doesn't want any interruption to their system of lining their pockets through bribes.

The film's pace is fast, suspenseful with some aspects of a thriller as crimes are uncovered. A published critic said it starts as a walk, then speeds to a jog and finally a race. We watch the all too familiar clashing intersection of government, press, and public. One resident reviewer, praised the film saying it was an amazingly cohesive, spectacular story. Unfortunately, we become aware of how Romania is a culture of corruption with a system so ingrained in bribes that there is no way to clean it up. As the film shows, it is the integrity and dedication of good journalists taking huge risks to at least expose it with the help of brave activists and whistle blowers. Nicolae Ceaușescu (Romanian communist politician and dictator, general secretary of the Romanian Communist Party from 1965 to 1989, and the second and last Communist leader of Romania) is never mentioned, but his presence is still felt, as is the memory of living under that totalitarian regime, the most stifling in all of Eastern Europe.

The most memorable person in the film is a disfigured young woman, Tedy Ursuleanu a 29-year-old architect, whose beauty still radiates despite her scars and artificial hand. Her image is imprinted on our memory. She survived, despite having burns over 45 percent of her body. (Notably, she wasn't treated in Romania.) Her appearance is almost uncomfortably stately, wearing very fashionable attire. One published critic described her as having regal, punk-rock-queen bearing. She is a voice for the victims as we see her posing for avant-garde

photos—naked, on the floor, covered in what appears to be ashes, her arms sometimes spread like she’s making ash angels. She refuses to let the tragedy define her, instead transforms it into art. Her resilience elevates the film adding a perspective of hope.

Collectiv is a testament to the importance of authentic political documentary that is not calibrated to support a predetermined message, but rather points at a target and lets the truth unfold. We rated the film a rousing collective score of 4.6 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best.)

*Footnotes: Ion Iliescu deposed Ceaușescu, resulting in the adoption of Romania's current constitution in 1991. Klaus Iohannis is the incumbent president of Romania as of Dec. 21, 2014. Iohannis is of Transylvanian Saxon descent, making him the first president from Romania's German minority.*

*In 2021, the film’s director, Alexander Nanau, rejected the Cultural Merit presidential medal from the country’s president and slammed the government for failing the cultural sector during the coronavirus crisis. “Unfortunately, given the unprecedented crisis of the entire cultural sector in Romania, I cannot accept this distinction,” Nanau said, thanking president Klaus Iohannis and culture minister Bogdan Gheorghiu for the nomination. Collective, was Romania’s proposal for the 2021 Oscars. It received the European Documentary prize at the 2020 European Film Awards. The medal was to be awarded on January 15, the country’s National Culture Day.*



See you at the movies!

Adriane Dedic, [adedic@pacbell.net](mailto:adedic@pacbell.net)

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