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Aarhus Universitet

p.o.v.
A Danish Journal of Film Studies

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The principal purpose of p.o.v. is to provide a framework for collaborative publication for those of us who study and teach film at the Department of Information and Media Studies at the University of Aarhus. We will also invite contributions from colleagues in other departments and at other universities. Our emphasis is on collaborative projects, enabling us to combine our efforts, each bringing his or her own point of view to bear on a given film or genre or theoretical problem. Consequently, the reader will find in each issue a variety of approaches to the film or question at hand – approaches which complete rather than compete with one another.

Every March issue is devoted to short films.

Submission of articles is by invitation only, and all articles submitted to p.o.v. are anonymously peer-reviewed.

p.o.v.

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Kitchen Sink

(New Zealand, 1989), 14 minutes, 35 mm, b/w



Production credits and cast

Writer/Director	Alison Maclean
Producer	Bridget Ikin. Hibiscus Films
Photography	Stuart Dryburgh
Art director	Grant Major
Editor	David Coulsen
Sound design and mix	John McKay & Chris Burt
Music	The Headless Chickens

The Woman	Theresa Healey
The Man	Peter Tait
Schoolgirl	Annagreta Christian

Festivals and awards include:

Selection for competition at the Cannes Film Festival, 1989
Certificate of Merit, Melbourne Film Festival, 1989
Audience Award for Best Short Film, Sydney Film Festival, 1989
Sitges International Film Festival, Spain, 1989
Best Short Film, Listener Film & Television Award, New Zealand, 1989
Best Short Film, Oporto International Film Festival, 1990
Special Jury Award (Short Narrative), Golden Gate Awards, San Francisco, 1990

Alison Maclean on *Kitchen Sink*

The story came to me in much the same way as events unfold for the woman in the film. I could see this hair sticking out of the plughole and on closer inspection, the story began to emerge and to transform itself in quite a surprising way. It's a dark little fable about fear and desire – about a woman who re-fashions a monster into a man, and finds herself falling for her creation. In some sense I see it as a Pygmalion-type story, with the genders reversed.

Alison Maclean

Born in Ottawa in 1958, Alison moved from Canada to New Zealand in 1972, where she made a number of shorts, including *Kitchen Sink*, which won eight international awards. Her first feature *Crush* (1992), starring Marcia Gay Harden, was an official selection at Cannes. *Jesus' Son* (1999), starring Billy Crudup and Samantha Morton, won the Baby Lion and OCIC Catholic Awards at the Venice Film Festival. Alison has directed TV episodes of *Subway Stories*, *Sex and the City*, *Carnivale*, *The L-Word* and *The Tudors*. Her first documentary, *Persons of Interest* (2003) – co-directed with Tobias Perse – was selected for the 2004 Sundance Film Festival and the International Human Rights Watch Festival. She has lived in New York City since 1992.

Filmography

Kitchen Sink (short) – director, writer – 1989

Crush (feature film) – director, writer – 1992

Jesus' Son (feature film) – director – 1999

Persons of Interest (documentary) – co-director, producer – 2004

Intolerable (short) – director – 2006

Director of television segments and episodes

Seven Deadly Sins, mini-series, one segment (“Greed”) – 1993

Subway Stories: Tales from the Underground, one episode (“Honey-Getter”) – 1997

Homicide: Life on the Street, one episode (“Birthday”) – 1997

Sex and the City, two episodes (“Valley of the Twenty-Something Guys,” “Models & Mortals”) – 1998

Carnival, one episode (“The River”) – 2003

The Tudors, two episodes – 2007

Director of Music Videos

Torn by Natalie Imbruglia – 1998

Big Mistake by Natalie Imbruglia – 1998



An interview with Alison Maclean on *Kitchen Sink*

Richard Raskin

NB. It is in connection with a visit Alison Maclean's was scheduled make to the Department of Information and Media Studies in March 2008, as part of the 13th International Short Film Symposium, that a portion of this issue of p.o.v. is devoted to Kitchen Sink. Unfortunately production on a new feature film prevented her from taking part in the symposium. Nevertheless, articles written about Kitchen Sink are included in this issue, and the following interview with Alison Maclean, which originally appeared in p.o.v. Number 13 (March 2002), is also reprinted here.

You stated in an earlier interview that the story for Kitchen Sink came to you little by little, and I know that you wrote a detailed screenplay for the film. But did the story change at all along the way? Does the film depart in any significant ways from the original concept?

I came up with the idea in response to a kind of brief on the New Zealand Film Commission. They were asking for ideas for 13-minute shorts. It was a set budget and a set length. And I literally sat down one day and tried to think of a story that could work for that kind of scale. And I thought: something involving a woman, basically alone at home, where something might happen to her. And then it really kind of came very quickly in sequence and I saw the whole film. But the part that stumped me, that took me a long time to solve, was actually the ending. The rest was very clear to me, I could see the whole thing, right up to when this creature wakes up as a man, but I really didn't know what to do from there. And that probably took about four months or so, and I was mulling it over and trying out different ways of ending it – like having him speak, and making it kind of complicated – and then I finally thought of the final image, that seemed to bring the story full circle. But that took a bit of time.

Can you tell me anything about the casting of Theresa Healy and Peter Tait in the main roles?

Peter Tait was an actor I had used in another film I did called Talk Back. I just loved his face and his presence. Actually, in that other film, he had played a kind of ex-con and so was a very different kind of character – a bit more aggressive in a way. But then he came in and did an audition for me for Kitchen Sink, and he just had this amazing quality – like someone who had just been born. A certain kind of innocence that is at odds with his appearance. He just has such a very

strong, physical presence. So that was a very clear decision.

And then Teresa – I hadn't known her but I saw her photograph in a magazine. She was looking over a man's shoulder and straight out at the camera. And I decided when I saw that photograph that she would be perfect.

Can you give me any details about the shooting, working with Stuart Dryburgh?

We had worked on another job together when he was the d.p. [director of photography] and I guess I was a first a.d. [assistant director] or something. I knew him, from a couple of jobs actually. We worked pretty closely on the storyboard together. So we spent quite a bit of time working together and he storyboarded the whole film with me. He was great to work with.

Probably more than anything that I've ever done, it was a very charmed experience making that film. Everybody who was involved just rose to the challenge and came up with something that was beyond what I'd imagined. The whole was greater than the sum of its parts. The people who did the special effects, and Stuart's work, everybody's work hit a level that I hadn't imagined. It was really a very special experience. Of course I thought that filmmaking was always going to be like that after that – but it hasn't been so much since [laughter].

I noticed that in one of the descriptions of Kitchen Sink, the film was described as a "minefield of metaphors," which I thought was quite appropriate. I'm usually reluctant to interpret films in Freudian terms but in this case, it's simply unmistakable. That there is birth symbolism seems fairly clear: a little creature is pulled up out of a hole, with what resembles an umbilical cord coiled up beside him. Do you see it that way?

But to me the story was about metamorphosis, so it was like a metaphor that kept changing – it was birth, and garbage... It just kept changing through all the different stages of that creature's evolution, and of her relationship with him. That's what I was having fun with. And I kept thinking about it as a strange, *Pygmalion* kind of story. That was the main idea I had.

O.K. So not so much the birth part...

Oh that's absolutely there, of course. That's definitely part of it but it's not the only part of it. It goes from a birth thing to a lover thing, so it totally changes.

Hair is of course very central. The story starts with hair in the drain, then the woman shaves off the creature's hair, and he touches her hair, and she pulls at hair on his neck at the end. Does hair in this story represent the animal part of human nature?

Maybe. I wouldn't have described it that way. It's funny. Hair seems to come up for me quite a bit. I'm not quite sure why that is. I honestly couldn't say. Because the first image I had was of a hair, and so everything came from that. And then it just seemed to be about continuing that image throughout and having it evolve. One of the visual references I had and thought about a lot as I was making *Kitchen Sink* is a film called *Woman of the Dunes*. Very sensual textures of skin and hair and sand.

There's a shot where a King Kong poster is visible. Is that a joke?

Yes. Just the idea of a big, hairy creature. And the sexual overtones of that. Yeah, it was a joke [laughter].

One of the things your film was praised for was that it combines art film with horror movie. Can you say anything more about that combination?

I guess that tends to be the territory that I'm interested in generally. I am quite interested in genre and those kinds of narrative structures and playing with people's expectations, in terms of thriller or horror. I am quite attracted to that. But then, it's never a pure genre. It's almost just like a kind of framework to look at other more psychological things.

You know, I was quite inspired also by *The Fly*, which also does that. It's a horror film, but it's also quite a tender love story. I love the collision of those two dimensions...

Doesn't the guy in The Fly also have hairs growing out of his back?

Yeah, he also has little bristles.

Your film has also been described as replacing "female gothic" with "feminist fantastic." It's the word "feminist" that I'm especially interested in. Do you see Kitchen Sink in feminist terms?

I'm not quite sure what it means any more. I think it meant something in the 70s, in the earlier stages of the women's liberation movement, but now I'm not sure what it means. Only in the sense that it's about female subjectivity and an interest in stories about women that haven't been told... If you turned the *Kitchen Sink* story around and made the main character a man – like the *Pygmalion* story, falling in love with a

statue that he created, that kind of classic story – you wouldn't think it was a male story, you'd think it was a kind of mythical, universal story. It's funny that Kitchen Sink is called feminist, when it's just that the gender is the other way around.

Can you tell me a little bit about what you've been doing since 1989?

Well, I made *Crush* in 1992-1993 in New Zealand, which is the only feature I've made. That was something I had spent two or two and a half years writing, with another woman, Anne Kennedy, but largely alone. By that stage, I had already moved to Sydney and I just came back to make that film. Only about a year after that film was finished, I decided to move to New York. I came over here because I had some opportunities. I actually had a development deal for a while with Touchstone Pictures and was developing a script with them – which didn't work out, but that brought me over here and I ended up staying. Since I've been here, I've really concentrated on writing. I can't believe that I've done it, but I've written close to three feature scripts, and if someone had told me that I was going to do that before I got a chance to make another film, I would have felt like giving up. I've spent most of the last four or five years writing these scripts and trying to set them up, and for one reason or another being quite frustrated in that. Two films that I thought were almost certain to happen, haven't happened and are quite stopped for a variety of reasons. It just seems to be the nature of the business and the kinds of films I want to make. It's not easy. They're perceived as risky and they're perceived as a little more idiosyncratic, so it's harder to get them financed. So I've worked on those three scripts, and I've also been involved with the development of a couple of others, and one which I didn't write and which is based on a book called *Jesus's Son*, it looks like I'm going to do in September. So I'm now in early pre-production for that.

I know you've also been doing some music videos.

Yeah, that's something that came my way recently, at the end of last year. And it's actually been really good for me. I've just finished my third one for this one woman who's an Australian girl called Natalie Imbruglia.

Torn is shown ten times a day in Denmark.

I know [laughter]. She's phenomenally successful, and this has all happened very quickly. It all happened after I made that video, because she was completely unknown then. It's been a blast. It's been great for me, because it's gotten me back into directing and making short pieces. Also I've gotten to try out some things that I've never done before.

What I did with that first video with her had a kind of formal concept to it. But within that, there was a lot of freedom and a lot of improvising and play, and that's quite different from what I've done before, and I've always wanted to push myself in that direction, so I feel like I've given myself some confidence in just kind of working things out with actors on the spur of the moment and seeing them come to life. And that was really exciting to me. So it's actually been really rewarding. It's not that I want in any way to make a career of music videos. So now I've just made my third, and in a strange way, they're kind of a triptych, one develops from the other. So it's been good.

On one of MTV's "pop up" video programs, they said that you didn't let the singer know when you were filming. Is that true?

Yes. It was sort of odd because the idea was to film in all the in-between parts. I got the idea from hanging out on the film set and watching the monitor. Just watching all those incredible "chance" things that happen when people don't think they're being filmed. Those were the moments I was interested in. So I gave them a script that was actually a re-written version of a scene from *Last Tango in Paris* that they were doing, and we were kind of working out the scene together, as you would with actors and a director, and then I had the shutter control and I was just turning it on and off. And any time I saw something interesting in front of the lens I would turn it on. And then any time I would go up to work with them or explain something to them, the d.p. would film me without me knowing it. And after a while we were all completely confused about when it was on and when it was off. It was a lot of fun.

What sort of time frame is involved in making music videos?

It varies. It basically depends on the budget. That was a simpler idea and we did it in one day. The second one, called *Big Mistake*, we shot in Barcelona. Natalie is walking down the street in Barcelona, and the camera just keeps moving through the entire video, from right to left. It's just one continuous move basically that's cut up. And so you cut between her walking and singing, and she passes various people and disturbances that she just walks past without them stopping her. And then there's a man following her and he gets snarled up in all of these things. Things fall on him, and a fight breaks out around him. The camera just keeps moving on her and on him, so the whole thing moves constantly from right to left. It's sort of inspired by that traffic accident scene in *Godard's Weekend*.

And then this new one was a three-day shoot and a bit more ambitious. It was done in a theater, and was much more colorful and theatrical. And actually inspired by Hindu musicals.

What about the editing phase. How long do you spend on that?

This last one will probably take a week. There's quite a lot of work. It's surprising. You have a lot of choice. To make it work with the song. I've loved that part of it too, because music is one of my favorite parts of the whole process of making a film. Working with a composer, or finding music, or seeing how that works with images. Music was a big part of my life when I was younger. I played the cello and guitar. I love that about doing these videos, that you're working with music, and it's rhythmical. The other thing that's fun is that it's like I'm exploring ways – like with this last video – to be more abstract, more stylized, and yet to still have emotion there, and some truth in the performances. Yet within a form that's really quite artificial. Those are things that it's hard to do in a feature film. And yet I think that you can also bring that experience into narrative films in a way that can really energize them. It's experimentation. It's good.

You were born in Canada but you moved to New Zealand when you were fourteen. Considering the size of New Zealand, I think it's quite remarkable that so many internationally important short films come from there. Do you have any way of accounting for the innovative quality of New Zealand short films?

I don't know. I guess it's partly the funding structure, which has been very supportive of short films in a way that just isn't possible here. If you're trying to make a short film here, you have to do it with your own money, pretty much. And there's no way of showing it. Whereas in New Zealand... Actually, it's a combination of things. There were a group of us back in the late '80s, who were making short films, and we lobbied together to create the short film fund. We were there at the inception of this fund. Also a group of us, including Gregor Nicholas, we were organizing our own screenings of short films, and advertising them and plastering the city with posters. And finding that there was a really big audience for them. But we sort of created it ourselves. That's a factor. And sometimes I think it has to do with the isolation that in some ways allows a space for originality, that you don't feel overwhelmed with the competition, the weight of all those other filmmakers out there or influences. You just feel a little bit removed.

And there have also been a few really important directors, like Vincent Ward and Jane Campion, who have been very inspiring to me and to many other filmmakers, because they have succeeded in making very

strong, singular films that are uncompromising and that have at the same time been very successful internationally. So that sort of gives you confidence or courage that you could do that too.

Jane Campion I know but who is Vincent Ward?

He's really extraordinary. His features are *Vigil*, *The Navigator*, then he made *Map of the Human Heart*. He made a number of shorter films before that, that won many awards. He made an extraordinary documentary called *In Spring One Plants Alone*, about an older Maori woman and her handicapped son, who live in a very remote community in the North Island. He lived with them. He also made an incredible film called *State of Siege*, based on a Janet Frame short story that's really devastating. He's an inspiration.

I'd like to ask a more general question now about the art of the short film. Do you think that storytelling in the short film is essentially the same as storytelling in the feature film?

No, I think it's very different. There are only certain kinds of stories that can work in a short film. It's so much about compression, and it can't be as psychological. It has to somehow suggest those things while having a simpler trajectory or story line. It's actually hard to find a story that can work in fifteen minutes. It's about compression, it's about suggesting things as opposed to developing something over time. That's one of the things I find exciting about it.

What advice would you give to student filmmakers who were in the process of designing their own short films?

I guess the main thing is: keep it really short. I've seen a lot of short films in my time and occasionally I've been a judge for short film festivals, so I've seen a large number, and my main criticism of at least half of them is that they are too long. The shorter the better. [laughter] Under fifteen minutes is good. Even ten. Other than that, it's hard to say. Studying short films that really work. And keeping it simple.

New York, 11 April 1998

The return of the repressed

Brian Dunnigan

An idea for a film comes first out of the mind like a very fine piece of thread. One thinks and perhaps it becomes a piece of string.

Federico Fellini

An uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now thought imaginary.

Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*
(2003), p. 150

That terrible thing which is in every photograph: the return of the dead.

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*
(1984), p. 9

The narrative of *Kitchen Sink* is simple: a woman discovers a thread that turns into an umbilical cord. She pulls on the cord and is shocked to discover a strange foetal creature emerging from her kitchen sink; then with a mixture of fear and disgust puts it in a bag as if it were some kind of abortion. Later, unable to dismiss the memory of what has happened she retrieves the bag and empties it into a running bath where the tiny creature grows into a hairy man. In her bedroom she lays the apparently dead or comatose man on her bed, shaves and caresses him, sleeps with him through the night but the next morning he is again rejected; sealed inside a plastic bag and left in the hall. For the first time however he has begun to breathe and struggle into life; the woman frightened but determined, takes an open razor and slashes the bag, apparently intending to harm the man who breaks free and wrestles the razor from her hand. She retreats to the kitchen where the man creature approaches her and in his turn caresses the

woman. She responds at first tentatively then with real loving passion until she finds a thread on the man's neck. Her passion interrupted by her curiosity, she pulls the thread: the man screams as she continues to pull. The film ends abruptly on black as sound effects take us back down into the void from where it all began.

What is going on here? We are clearly in the realm of the surreal and the fantastic: babies do not emerge from kitchen sinks nor grow into instant adults by immersion in water. A normal woman confronted with such disturbing marvels would react quite differently: yet we know it cannot just be her subjective imaginings because when she leaves the kitchen to answer the door we are shown something in the drainage pipe that is objectively real and *moving*; we are gripped by the uncertainty of what is real and what is imagined and drawn into a strange world that feels too real to be simply allegorical or poetic.

Nor is this a retelling of a literary fairy tale or classic myth: though there are thematic traces of Beauty and the Beast, Cupid and Psyche, Orpheus and Euridyce – hairy men, curious women, the power of love, the presence of death – there is also something more primitive and atavistic at stake; an unsettling ambiguity of meaning refracted through a fractured narrative and expressionist imaginary.

The everyday world is a suburban kitchen but in reality this is the world of the *uncanny*: a crisis of the natural; something foreign in ourselves and our home; the psychic underworld of wishful fantasies and fears and a nagging, constant uncertainty of what is being experienced and who is doing the experiencing; a shifting hesitation between the psychological and the supernatural shaded by Gothic motifs of doubling and the return of the dead. The film style contributes to the uncanny effect through its use of slow tracking shots, low and high angles, black and white photography, deep shadows, eerie sound design (including the rumble of appropriately gothic thunder) and an

elliptical narrative that keeps us trapped in the claustrophobic domestic world of kitchen, bedroom and bathroom: a safe familiar world now invaded by an alien presence.

And at the centre is the Woman; disgusted, determined, impulsive but never overwhelmed by the occult events; always acting as if they are natural: her belief making us believers. And there is the Man, erupting from an alchemical bath of mud (blood), dragged through the house (home), laid out on the bed, cleaned and dressed like a corpse (but unlike a corpse he bleeds), the woman sitting patiently by his side then lasciviously leaning in close to his face, breathing over his closed eyes and mouth. Film can do this: depict the fantastic as natural and reveal for an audience the Mystery that is the everyday.

The boundaries of this mysterious world are however marked by three intrusions that also double as framing devices for the fantastic kernel of the story and offer a possible explanation for the real reality of a woman who is mad, depressed or traumatised. At the door of her house a young girl asks her if she would like to buy a “mystery” envelope to which the woman declines. Ironically of course she is already colluding in her own mystery and framed in the darkness of the doorway the woman seems from the perspective of the outside world, nervous and withdrawn into a world of her own. Later when she is running the bath into which she has dropped the foetus creature the telephone rings and she tells a friend or family member that she is “fine” suggesting that she has not been well. And after she dresses the newly shaved man we realise we are seeing a mirror image of her looking at herself (and us); a moment of self-consciousness for the woman (and the viewer) that hints at the double (fantasy) life she (and the audience) are leading and knows she is leading but she can’t stop. She can’t stop herself pulling on the threads and drawing up images from the dark past; or she can’t stop herself falling into the vortex of

madness. (Nor can we resist the lure of following unravelling mysterious plot threads). These moments combined with the razor, the suitcase of male clothing and especially the photograph (itself a ghostly presence from the past) of the woman with two men, one of whom is prominent in the foreground - are the only clues to her *backstory*, her life before new life appeared from the kitchen sink. The photo is especially resonant: the structural still centre of the story and the existential core of reality around which the fantasy revolves.

In narrative terms we are given no other information about who she is or why she might be hallucinating or why she has conjured up this experience from her unconscious. Is she in mourning? Has she lost her man and the possibility of making a life and a baby with that man? Has he returned to haunt her in a disturbing distortion of what might have been? Or has she been abandoned and now her desperate longing for love has set the film and her fantasy in motion? The film asks questions to which there are no definitive answers. The root meaning of "mystery" comes from the same root as myth: derived from the Greek verb "musteion": to close the eyes or mouth. (Karen Armstrong 1999, p. 244). Both words like film itself and our sense of the uncanny are rooted in an experience of darkness and silence.

In other words, rather than narrative answers we have narrative enigma: a dreamlike tale of primal desire and dislocation creating a palpable sense of growing unease. In a state between sleeping and waking a secret encounter is taking place; a woman discovers a foetus that she turns into a man and brings him to life. She dresses him; rejects him; attacks him; loves him; unravels him. Adam now springs from the touch of Eve and Pygmalion is a woman who sculpts a less than perfect man to love. A personal myth of the creative process linked to gothic fantasies of power and domination, primitive fears of sex and death, danger and doubling: two threads that produce two

births and two deaths; two slow tracks into the silent woman's back: the other side which cannot be seen but is always there, always present, waiting its turn to unravel everything; the compulsion to repeat keeps Death at bay but he is always waiting to return. Our lives are strange and uncanny always shadowed by the ghostly double of our final disappearance. The fantastic is in a very real sense our reality: without the imaginative faculty there is no life as we know it: yet we pull on the fantastic thread at our peril.

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Pandora's kitchen

Niels Weisberg

In Richard Raskin's interview with Alison Maclean, published in p.o.v. 13,¹ in which they discuss themes and references in *Kitchen Sink*, the short film is described as a "minefield of metaphors," prominent among which is "a Pygmalion-type story, with the genders reversed." Though only 14 minutes long and almost without any dialogue, *KS* certainly has an abundance of metaphors and references. Other articles I have found on the short have references to e.g. "the atmosphere and mood" of *Eraserhead*,² the motifs of "hair, water, eye and razor" in *Un Chien Andalou*,³ a "home-alone horror" variation of the Kiwi Gothic,⁴ and finally *Psycho*'s foregrounding of "the loneliness and pathology of domestic space."⁵

To the list of references may be added a few of my own: *Touch of Evil* (having been pulled laboriously out of the pipe-system, the baby-like monster in *KS* lands on the table looking down over the edge at the frightened female protagonist (Theresa Healey) lying on the floor; these shots are quite similar to the shots of the strangled Akim

¹ p.o.v. 13, March 2002, p. 99.

² <http://www.horrorphile.net/movie-review-of-kitchen-sink/>

³ Roger Horrocks. "Alternatives. Experimental Film Making in New Zealand" in Jonathan Dennis & Jan Bieringa (eds), *Film in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Victoria University Press, 2nd edition 1996, p. 78.

⁴ Ian Conrich. "Kiwi Gothic: New Zealand's Cinema of a Perilous Paradise" in Steven Jay Schneider & Tony Williams (eds), *Horror International*. Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2005, p. 124.

⁵ Kirsten Moana Thompson. "Experiments with Desire. The Psychodynamics of Alison Maclean" in Ian Conrich & Stuart Murray (eds), *New Zealand Filmmakers*. Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2007, p. 309.

Tamiroff's head, tongue sticking out, leaning on the bedpost above the frightened Janet Leigh coming out of her sedation), *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (the KS monster in the bathtub surfacing menacingly while Healey talks on the telephone), the myth of Pandora (everything in the world was fine until Pandora absolutely had to open the lid, i.e. pull the hair at the back of the now rather likeable monster's neck in KS) – and anachronistically, Takashi Miike's *Audition* from 1999 (when Healey in KS with a razor in hand sneaks in on the plastic sack in which the monster is struggling for air, we are reminded of Eihi Shiina about to do excruciatingly horrible things to men wrapped up in sacks or paralyzed, not with a razor, but with acupuncture needles and cheese wire).

Noël Carroll

The most important reference is, however, to Siegel's horror/sci-fi film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, 1956, which nobody to my knowledge has referred to so far, and for this reason I want to line up a few similarities and differences between the two films. But let me start out by indicating how nicely KS fits Noël Carroll's definition of horror:⁶ The monster, a necessary condition for horror, is disgusting and culturally impure as it transgresses cultural categories: we, the audience, as well as Healey, the protagonist, are uncertain of what this unknowable, slimy and hairy exotic semi-human piece of (vegetable/animal?) garbage really is. Carroll operates with a twofold hypothesis: a "universal," and a narrower – but still very broad – "general" hypothesis. According to the "universal" thesis – universal because it applies to all manifestations of "art-horror" – we find monsters at the same time both disgusting and fascinating, both emotions arising from the fact that monstrosity is grounded in categorical confusions. The

⁶ Noël Carroll. *The Philosophy of Horror*. Routledge, New York, 1990.

“general” thesis, meanwhile, argues that many (perhaps all) horror fictions are structured by a “drama of disclosure,” in which the enigma posed by the monster is gradually revealed, investigated and solved.

Both Carroll’s universal and general horror theories are confirmed seeing that we and the woman react with disgust as well as fascination (the two feelings are co-existent, according to Carroll’s theory, and the horror is “the price to be paid” to watch the monster/the enigma being investigated/solved). We, the audience, let our fascination rule by watching the short film to the very end, and Healey is thrice ruled by her fascination: she takes the creature out of the garbage bin, later on she opens the plastic bag in which it is struggling to get air, and at the end of the film she starts kissing the accommodating monster.

However, we are cheated out of the actual solution of the enigma as the woman’s Pandora-like curiosity forestalls a real disclosure by her “pulling the plug out of the sink” again as it were. We are left with the presumption that the monster will die – and possibly give birth to a new baby monster. Other endings are possible as the monster by definition transcends categories, but the closing shots of his black rounded mouth, corresponding to the opening shots of the black hole of the kitchen sink and the pulling of the hair, accentuated by the iris-in closure, may indicate a new birth of something *unheimlich*.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers.

Like most horror films from the 50s *IBS* is rather a hybrid between horror and sci-fi, most frequently interpreted as a political allegory, either anti-communist or pro-McCarthy, whereas *KS* seems to be without political references (yet, the color of the monster-man’s face

while lying on the bed is noticeably dark and might possibly be interpreted as Maori – or a sign of death/putrefaction – in a short film otherwise void of national, political or racial references?)

Where the pods in *IBS* arrive from outer space to land in a rather isolated small town environment in the USA, the *KS* monster comes from if not the ground, then mysteriously arisen from the sewage system. And having landed on the kitchen table it looks like a mixture of vegetable and animal matter.

Just as the pods gradually develop more and more human-like features, the monster in *KS* (albeit furiously fast) grows into an adult living, but oddly lifeless human being who – in spite of the woman's loving care (bath, shave and clothing) – apparently has not reacted in a satisfactory manner in bed. In *KS* the monster in the plastic bag closely resembles the pod which the pod-replicant does not break out of until the transformation has been completed. And where the pod people promise exemption from pain, the monster offers the woman "bliss" (sex/human contact) – something she may not have had for a long time seeing that she has isolated herself from others (not responding to the little girl at her door, the telephone call) possibly left by the man in the photo whose clothes and razor are still in the house. Where *IBS*'s hero (Kevin McCarthy), who is driven by curiosity as well as by a desperate search for escape, allows himself to be lured away by the song of sirens from a distant radio, thus sacrificing his exhausted girlfriend (Dana Wynter), Healey herself, by submitting to her curiosity, sacrifices the common future of the couple. Where Dana Wynter's dead face and kiss devoid of feeling, produce the most horrible moment in *IBS*, the *KS* man's surprised, stiffening and fearful face (the only – and last time we see him express feelings –thereby giving the audience a possibility of identifying with him!) proves to be the climax in *KS*, underlined by the final thud on the soundtrack when

the screen has turned black. Our fear, though, becomes mitigated by silent amusement at the thought of the woman's lost (erotic) opportunities – making love to a sort of punctured inflatable sex doll must be a rather flat experience, I imagine.

Style

The short film is in black and white with a skilful variation of close-ups and medium shots to underline the claustrophobic environment, as we never leave the house, and the occasional use of the wide-angle lens makes the house seem even more claustrophobic. The most prominent camera movement is a slow eye-level traveling shot towards Healey's back and head, which is used twice. The first time she is sitting on a chair in the kitchen, and we get an eerie feeling that it may be the monster's p.o.v. even though it is lying in the garbage bin. This kind of shot we know from the opening sequences of films like *Peeping Tom* and *Halloween* (the most famous precedents). But here we do not have a p.o.v., rather an intimation of the woman's troubled thoughts: what to do about the thing in the bin?

The second time – towards the end of the film after the monster has taken the razor from her – we do not believe that what we see is a p.o.v. shot and we consequently become a little surprised on noticing the soundless monster's right hand appear in the frame, however only to caress her hair. After some hesitation they embrace and sweet music arises. The chilling music, obviously inspired by Carpenter, which off and on has been used in the film – together with actual sounds, often enhanced to become strange effect sounds – now sounds enticingly romantic, only to become immediately threatening again when the hair is pulled.

With *Kitchen Sink* Alison Maclean has created a brilliant horror short film, faceted and filled with cinematic references which have

been used in an independent, original and integrated way – with a nice twist of humour.

A real pleasure to watch.

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<http://www.horrorpile.net/movie-review-of-kitchen-sink/>

Everything but the kitchen sink

Andreas Kakiou Halskov

Perhaps more than anything else, the kitchen sink remains to us a symbol of the quotidian, denoting such broad concepts as 'normality', 'sanity' and 'order'. It is an emblem of everyday life, and – in all its clinical anonymity – a site for 'the generic' rather than 'the individual'. A faithful reminder of the objective and of the real.

Even in cinematic terms the kitchen sink appears to us as a signifier of the commonplace, known in the fifties and sixties for its depiction of everyday working-class life (a British genre fittingly named "kitchen sink realism") and also acknowledged as a site of the quotidian in recent Danish cinema. (Bordwell & Thompson: 454-55).

However, in Alison Maclean's much acclaimed short film, curiously entitled *Kitchen Sink* (1989), the sink referred to in the title signifies neither normality nor classical realism. Here the sink – around which the film's narrative is spun – rather serves as a vivid site for the subjective, the symbolically charged, the perverse, and the grotesque. In short: the surreal.

At once a fantastic Pygmalion-like tale (about a woman falling in love with her own creation) and at the same time a densely layered collection of pseudo-Freudian images and expressive noises, Maclean's film is as difficult to comprehend as it is aesthetically pleasing. *Kitchen Sink* is flooded with potential meaning – touching upon such general dichotomies as man/woman, human/machine, life/death – all of which seem equally and simultaneously pregnant.

Two types of short film

In all its ambiguity, Maclean's film can (perhaps dubiously so) be described as a bastard child of the classical narrative and that which Tom Gunning has famously coined 'the cinema of attractions'. (Gunning: 826-27).

Thus, at the risk of oversimplification, we may envision two different general modes of short film, one of which can be described as a 'condensed classical narrative', and another one defined as a series of loosely connected shocks (or *curiositas*), as seen most explicitly in experimental films. Never definitive, these two modes (of the short film) may interchange in different ways and appear in various mutations. To be sure, these modes are best described as binary opposites in a continuum – one condensed from the classical *three-act structure*, another seemingly derived from the early attractions of the silent era (displaying circus acts, exotic animals, dramatic stunts etc. as opposed to dramatic storytelling *per se*).

An example of the first category, the Danish short film *Valgaften* (1998) essentially resembles a condensed version of the classical drama – with a brief establishment of the plot and the protagonist (Act 1), followed by a dramatic development (the main character's frenetic wish to get to a voting place), eventually leading to an "irrevocable act" (our main characters' unexpected display of racism) (Act 2,3). (Bordwell: 28-29). Here – as in *many* short films – the entire stretch of film is comprised of the central elements of the second and third act in a feature film, reducing the establishment to the utmost important information, and completely eliminating the lengthy resolution of the feature.

Compared with Anders Thomas Jensen's award-winning short film, *Kitchen Sink* can hardly be described as a condensed classical drama. Indeed, the film is not without a certain dramatic structure (a cyclical

narrative, as it were), but the nature of Maclean's narrative is so illogical and surreal as to completely evade classical narrative transparency as well as viewer identification.

Instead Maclean's film forms a loosely *narrativized* version of the jumbled, irrational aesthetic known from different experimental films, most evidently Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's surrealist masterpiece *Un chien andalou* (1929) and later films by such directors as David Lynch (*The Grandmother* [1970], *Eraserhead* [1977]), Shinya Tsukamoto (*Tetsuo* [1989]) and David Cronenberg (*The Fly* [1986]).

"A minefield of metaphors"

Whereas as the classical film forms a causal chain of logical set-ups and pay-offs, Maclean's film rather forms a shocking 'disruption of the commonplace', by having a monstrous fetus materialize from the drain pipe in our main character's aforementioned kitchen sink (not unlike *Eraserhead*).

Unlike the fixed, transparent meaning of the classical (short) film, *Kitchen Sink*, in fact, displays a vivid complex of potential meaning.

Thus, in an interview made by Richard Raskin in 1998, Maclean herself describes the film – in almost Kafkaesque terms – as "a story about metamorphosis", essentially envisioning the film as a "minefield of metaphors". (Cited from Raskin 1998).

Not unlike the infamous "eye" in George Bataille's grotesque, surrealist *Histoire de l'oeil* (1928) – whose potential meaning shifts throughout the novel – the different physical objects in Maclean's film become *floating signifiers*.

The drain in the kitchen sink – at first a concrete physical object – soon changes into an abstraction of an evident vaginal character (as the hairy man is 'delivered' directly from the sink). The hair in the sink, in equally Freudian measure, closely resembles an umbilical

cord. And the garbage can, into which the fetus is originally thrown, thus becomes an obvious abortion motif.

Certainly, even the surreal, Pygmalion creature (that evolves from the fetus) also takes on an abundance of potential meaning: is he an Oedipal son-turned-tragic-lover, a Frankensteinian monster, a cybernetic creation, or merely a mental projection of our main character?

Such questions are never answered by Maclean's film, and instead they serve as disorienting, complex images (or cinematic moments of *dépaysement*, as it were). These polysemic phenomena are endlessly disturbing, yet realised as independent moments of *astonishment* through Maclean's vivid low-key-lighting, her grainy (almost tactile) black and white images, and the visceral, pseudo-organic clanging on the soundtrack.

Eventually even the hair on the strange creature's (Peter Tait) neck becomes a complex, polysemic image. Or, 'a hair of an abstraction', to put it in almost Lynchian terms.

As the woman (Theresa Healy) – indeed, known to us only in such vague, generic terms – grooms the hairy, man-like creature, she stumbles upon a neck hair somewhat different from the rest. Intrigued or repulsed by it, she touches the (now strangely phallic) hair ever more intensely, eventually killing the creature in an eerily orgasmic resolution (certainly, 'orgasm' is called the 'little death' in French).

The *heterogenous* – final remarks

In this way Maclean's film is a vivid, surreal display of what Bataille has coined *the heterogenous* – that which has no fixed meaning, that which cannot be entirely assimilated, and which is therefore normally rejected by *homogenous society*.

If the classical film is a structured, homogenous sequence of events, in which every object serves a fixed dramatic and narrative purpose, Maclean's film is about those elements and images that are not easily understood according to any strict, narrative logic.

In her attempt to cultivate the hairy creature – in order to make him more man-like and less heterogenous – the woman decides to eliminate a neck hair from the male creature, which ironically turns out to be necessary for his very survival (reminiscent of scenes in Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo* [1989] as well as Cronenberg's *The Fly* [1986]).

The ending of Maclean's fantastic tale is, therefore, tragic, but its shocking imagery and vivid use of lighting and noises may be an infinite source of *astonishment*. Or, as Bataille would say: "sometimes attraction, sometimes repulsion" (Bataille: 142).

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T-Shirt / Tričko

Czech Republic, 2006, MiniDV, 11 min.



Principal Credits

Director: Hossein Martin Fazeli

Screenplay: Hossein Martin Fazeli

Dramaturg: Biba Bohinskà

Director of Photography: Tomáš Sabo

Editor: Matej Beneš

Sound Recordist: Martin Hejl

Singers: Zuzana Stirská and Gospel Time

Production: Pavel Simbartl, Raffo Tatarka, Igor Brossman

Cast

The Shopkeeper – Tomaš Dubček: Marián Mitaš

The Customer – Mark Pollack: Andrej Kováč

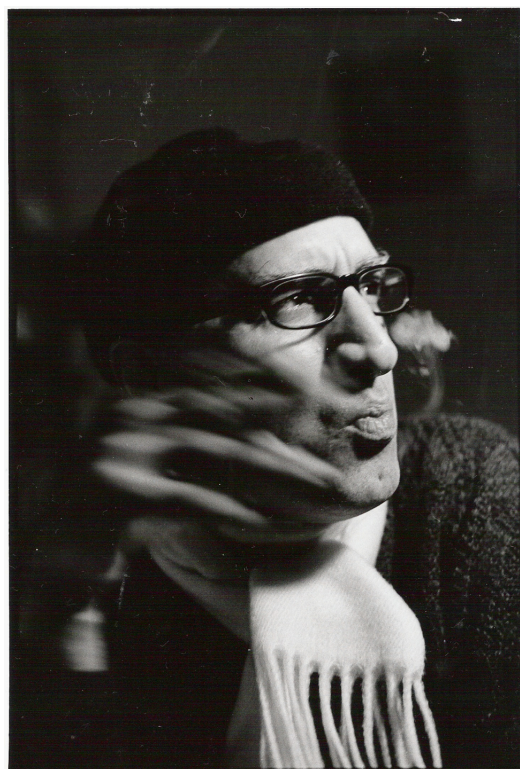
Synopsis

An American man walks into a small store in Slovakia. At first he's happy to find a fellow fan of baseball and the Stars and Stripes on the wall. On his way out, his eyes fall upon the t-shirt the store clerk is wearing and his mood changes dramatically.

T-Shirt has to date won 33 awards, including:

International Jury Award, Bristol Short Film Festival, 2006;
Media Award and Audience Award, Tirana International Film Festival, 2006;
Best Screenplay, Leicester International Short Film Symposium, 2006;
Best Screenplay, Santiago International Film Festival, 2006;
Best International Short Film, Cape Town World Cinema Festival, 2006;
Best Short Film, Izmir International Film Festival, 2006;
Best Live Action Short, Kara Film Festival, 2006;
Best International Short Film, Cape Town World Cinema Festival, 2006;
Audience Award, Barcelona Independent Film Festival, 2006;
Youth Jury Award, Clermont-Ferrand, 2007;
Excellence in Storytelling, Aarhus Festival of Independent Arts, 2007.

Hossein Martin Fazeli www.fazelifilms.com



Hossein Martin Fazeli, born in Iran in 1966, now lives in Vancouver, Canada where he makes short films, documentaries, and public service announcements.

Selected filmography

2006: T-Shirt

2005: The journey

2004: A foreign poem

2003: Who is Sahraa?

An interview with Hossein Martin Fazeli on *T-Shirt*

Richard Raskin

How did this project begin? Do you recall how you first got the idea for telling this story?

I wrote the script in 2003. A year later I took it to Berlin and showed it to a successful short film producer, who read it and said it was the worst script he had ever read! You can imagine what a blow that was! So I went back to Slovakia, where I was living at the time, and forgot about it until a year later, when by chance I read it again. This time I thought the opinion of that German film producer was quite unfair. So, I showed it to a screenwriter friend of mine, Biba Buhinska, who read it and thought it was great, but needed some editing. She beautifully edited the script and then showed it to her boyfriend, who happened to be a high profile film producer in Slovakia. He loved it and decided to finance it with his partner. Six months later I was on the set shooting it.

How did I get the idea? Well, when I was going to college in the 90s I was into Nietzsche. Once I was discussing his famous quote "God is Dead" with a friend and we came up with this funny idea for an actual t-shirt with two slogans on it. On front "God is Dead. Nietzsche" and on the back "No, Nietzsche is Dead. God." I had a lot of fun with the idea then, but I didn't know that one day I would base one of my films on it!

Can you tell me anything about your choice of Marián Mitas and Andrej Kováč for the two main roles?

I loved Marian because of his acting skills and his innocent yet proud face. And I loved Andrej because he looked like a combination of Middle Eastern and Caucasian.

I would not want to reduce this film to a political statement – it is far more than that, and the characters are not mere cardboard cutouts. But it is a politically meaningful film and I was wondering how you would personally describe the politics of T-Shirt – including the film's various evocations of American culture.

Well, I care about politics, particularly in this polarized world. I was in London when the bombings happened. I have friends who lost relatives in that terrible event. I was born in Iran and I have lost friends and relatives to the firing squads of the Islamic Republic too. So, politics is something I have lived with and thought about most of my adult life.

You're right that *T-Shirt* is a politically meaningful film. Actually when I finished the work I wanted to put a sentence at the end of the film and it would be: "This film is a contribution to the war against terror"! But then I decided not to. I thought it would be too much. Anyway, there is a political layer in *T-Shirt*, but I think it's a secondary layer. It is there and it shows itself first, but it's not really what the film's about. I think the film is, first and foremost, about the absurdity of human conflict.

I have seen references to humor in this film but don't know exactly what aspects of T-Shirt might be thought of as humorous. Do you personally see humor in the film?

Yes, I do. I think the whole story is somewhat funny. If you think about it, the film is actually absurd. Not tragically, but comically. There is also some humor in the dialogues and the situation with the second customer in the end is funny too.

Here we have a film set in Slovakia, produced in the Czech Republic, made by Persian-born director who is living in Canada. Any comments on this particular mixture of nationalities in relation to the story you have told?

I think the mixture has helped me to stay away from the stereotypical. It's easy to fall into the trap of anti-Americanism when you make a film like *T-Shirt*. I didn't have to make an effort not to fall into that trap. It was rather easy to avoid, and I think part of the reason was due to the fact that I'd lived and worked in many different cultures. The experience modifies the hard-core and the extreme in you!

When I was writing the script I knew that I loved America, but MY America. The America of Benjamin Franklin and Martin Luther King and Jerry Lewis! That I cherished. What I disliked was the arrogance and ignorance of America. I tried to put these mixed feelings into the film by creating Tomas' character. He's a guy who loves baseball and has an American flag on the wall, but at the same time doesn't let an American intimidate him.

T-Shirt has done exceptionally well at many festivals. What do you

personally feel are the film's greatest strengths? And is there anything at all that you now wish you had done any differently?

The strongest point of the film, I think, is the script. When I was going to film school my professors used to tell us "with a good script you can make a bad film, but with a bad script you cannot make a good film." That's true! But I'd like to take this one step further: I think the script is the foundation of the film. With a good script even an average director can make a pretty good film. But with a bad script not even a John Ford or Akira Kurosawa can do much.

And yes, there is something I wish I had done differently. I wish I had done a better job as a director!

You make public service spots as well as short films. Do you see those two very different types of narratives as having anything in common with regard to storytelling strategies?

The thing that connects these two types of narratives for me is the length, or the shortness of the length. You know, the shorter it gets, the harder it gets to make. I find this time limitation fascinating. In a PSA you've got to put across an idea in 30 seconds. In a short you tell a story in 10 or 15 minutes. That's a real challenge. You've got to think economically, and avoid mental masturbation because there's no time for it! Now, that I find very healthy and educational. I'm allergic to films that are not made economically!

The short is a specific animal with specific needs and characteristics. I think the mistake a lot of short filmmakers make is to approach their short with a feature mentality. You can't do that. It's like looking for a novel in a poem! A short is a short, a feature is a feature. Not that I have anything against feature films. As a matter of fact I'm writing my second feature right now. But I think we have to treat the short format with the respect and recognition it deserves, and not think of it as just a calling card.

Where do you go from here? Anything you can tell about present or future projects?

Three months ago I was short-listed to participate in Live Earth, an event put together by Al Gore on the environmental crisis. They only wanted 60 directors from all over the world. So, it was heart-warming that I was approached too, particularly because I care a lot about the environment. Two weeks ago I was also picked by Sundance Institute

in the US to take part in their 2008 Sundance Filmmakers Award, which is basically a high-profile feature script competition, with winners getting up to 3 million bucks to make their first or second features. This all is happening, I think, because of the success of T-Shirt. Here I have to say that my producer, Forward International, and my distributor, Future Shorts, have done a fantastic job in promoting me and the film.

My plan for the next few months is to finish my feature script, write a couple of shorts and finally get on the plane and go to some of the festivals that are inviting me! You won't believe it, but I have not yet been to any of the 51 festivals that have invited me! Quite a shame!

Is there any advice you would give to student filmmakers about to make their own first short films?

If I want to be blunt I would say: write a great script, make sure you love it, and then make your film using the KISS formula: Keep It Simple Stupid!

6 August 2007

Defending one's patch: on *T-Shirt*

Mark Le Fanu

As film-making becomes an increasingly available option across the educational system in general (and not just in film schools) so the number of shorts that get made every year increases exponentially; no single person can possibly keep up with the output, and it must be true that many fine apprentice films disappear under the radar – sent to the wrong festival or to no festival at all; condemned to be seen merely by the film-maker himself or a restricted circle of his acquaintance.

So festivals are important; they help to give some shape to the map; they sort out – or help to sort out – the wheat from the chaff. Hossein Martin Fazeli's *T-Shirt* has won a number of prizes and one can see why. It has the extra 'something' that most shorts don't – a shape, an authority, an objectivity. Yet what actually are we responding to when we state our intuition that a film has 'authority' and 'objectivity'? What quality or concatenation of qualities combine to allow us to judge such a work to be above the common run?

We may note first of all that Fazeli's drama limits itself to a minimum of locations: essentially, a few establishing shots inside Mark's car as he's driving through the Slovakian countryside; then an exterior of the shop he stops at, followed by our moving into the shop itself where the meeting takes place and the story unfolds.



Along with this unity of *place* goes a unity of *time*. The film describes a single incident as it plays itself out from beginning to end, in all its ramifications. In making these preliminary script choices, the film-maker seems to pay homage to what a short film can, and what it can not, do. It can't, I think, have a multiplicity of locations and time-frames if the effect aimed at is one of intensity and coherence. The 'necessary minimalism' observed here by Fazeli in turn allows him space for the things that really are important – in this case, for the acting of either principal to smolder and catch fire. To say there is 'real

acting' in *Tričko* is another way of noticing how relatively rare this is in the short film genre as a whole – not, primarily, because of the inexperience of the actors involved (who in the nature of the enterprise are generally not professionals) but because, most often, there simply isn't *space* for it – the film-maker's attention lying elsewhere (elaborating his plot, or honing his camera angles).

So it is intense, then, and 'real', this psychological confrontation between Mark, our young 'tourist-revisiting-his-motherland', and Tomas, the shopkeeper of roughly his age into whose territory he happens to stray one fateful day. At first all is as calm and friendly as one would hope for. The two men exchange the standard civilities that pass between customer and service-provider. Mark, of Slovakian parentage, has been brought up in the United States; while Tomas, the shopkeeper, his contemporary, is indigenous. The young men belong to the same generation, and they may be expected to share some of the cultural attitudes that go with this. For example: 'internationalism', of sorts – the internationalism of travel, of sport, of pleasure taken in jokingly-captioned T-shirts – is a good in itself. Is it not?

Maybe not, it turns out. The dialogue recording the gradual change of temperature between the men as an 'incident' brews up out of their initial pleasant banter, is masterfully extended. In substance, it is the film itself, and it allows the viewer to remark that if, as we have agreed, the film is extremely well-acted, it is because (another 'quite difficult' thing to pull off in shorts) it is correspondingly extremely well *written*. There is body and depth and subtext in the icy exchanges about patriotism and God that suddenly flash up between the two. The mutual ripostes are eloquent without being stagy. The least you can say about this central confrontation in the film is that the person who imagined it knows – in an impressive, serious and adult way – how to write *dialogue*.

Yet I am tempted to think it is rather more than this: for what Fazeli has pulled off here is the one thing that *has* to be pulled off for a short film to make sense: a *peripeteia* in miniature – I mean by this a turn, or transformation, whereby what we *thought* we were watching turns out to be another thing altogether. It takes us by surprise – this sudden change of temperature in the movie when violence leaps up out of nowhere. At one moment, everyday banter; the next moment, a glimpse of the abyss.

The ‘turn’ I am talking about here is to be distinguished from another species of turn that belongs characteristically to the short film genre: I mean the punch-line or ‘twist’. Certainly *T-Shirt* also possesses such a feline sting-in-its-tail, nicely sly and sardonic. Just to remind the reader: the quarrel has flared up between the men because of the caption on the front of Tomas’s T-shirt, which reads, in Czech, ‘God is Dead – Nietzsche’. According to the now-revealed right wing ideology Mark, it is an ‘insult’ to sport such a message while standing beneath an American flag. Baseball-mad Tomas disagrees, and says so, with some of the eloquence I have attempted to intimate. Events take their course and when it is all over (Mark lying comatose on the floor) we see from another angle the *other side* of the offending T-shirt: ‘No: Nietzsche is dead – God’. An excellent joke in its way (Tomas’s even-handedness in giving God the last word ‘proves’ his liberalism, of course) – and all the better for being understated. (No importunate close-up: you catch the allusion or you don’t.)



Yet thinking about this specific case allows one to reflect on punch-lines in general and whether their appearance, in short films, is 'desirable'. The best shorts, I think, have a habit of ending where they will: they don't need punch-lines because they are confident that what has transpired can stand by itself without the aid of an artificial closing device. The problem with punch-lines (admittedly, not everyone thinks there *is* a problem) lies in the unavoidable glibness which enters the aesthetic equation when the integrity of the story is thrust aside in the interest of demonstrating, or upholding, the film-maker's self-evident cleverness. Cleverness, surely, is *never* the ultimate criterion where drama is concerned. (In comedy, on the contrary, it may be everything.)

These last observations suggest, I suppose, that I have certain qualifications about *T-Shirt*. Does it package its message too neatly? Does it wear its liberal heart too blatantly "on its sleeve"? I suggested above that one of the great qualities of art is objectivity. The audience

doesn't want to know what a film director's social views are. In Carl Th. Dreyer's *Vredens dag* (1943) the 17th century Lutheran church is attacked for its benighted confusion about witches – a confusion that is not so different from wickedness. But the church itself, *qua* institution, has power and dignity and eloquence, and Dreyer does not make the mistake of painting it in the uninteresting colours of caricature. (That mistake is reserved for a later luminary, Lars von Trier. In *Breaking the Waves* the portrait of the reactionary Presbyterian Church in Northern Scotland is boringly facile and undifferentiated.) *T-Shirt*, of course, is clearly an 'anti-fundamentalist' document. It speaks out against religious intolerance, and that is something that we, as citizens, may all agree about. Yet maybe Mark's right-wing fanaticism is 'given' too explicitly? Seeing the film for a second or third time is to note how naked its signifiers are from the outset: the crucifix dangling from the car's windscreen; the photograph of Mark's brother in military uniform attached to the dashboard (along with the printed legend 'God bless America'); the Texan number plates (Bush's territory); the fierce, Travis Bickle-ish stare of Mark in profile; the gospel music on the soundtrack. Certain responses are designed to be 'triggered' here.

The song, not the t-shirt caption is in fact the film's punch-line. We hear its words picked up again over the final credits, by which time they have taken on a quite direct explicitness. 'Will Peace ever get found in this world when Love gets lost on the way?' wails the singer (Zuzanna Stirska). That, of course, is the film's 'message'. Yet, after all, we reflect, it is a *question* not a *statement*; and the song itself has a raw power – a seriousness – which may be allowed to absolve Fazeli from indulging, at the conclusion of his elegant short movie, in a too facile post-modernist irony.

Notes on a T-shirt: fact and fiction with no time to think

Daniel Alegi

surface is not what it seems Nothing one-sided can provide solutions. To the contrary: unawareness, ignorance and biased first impressions can – and will - escalate conflict. *The T-Shirt* in the end reveals both sides. There is a hidden dimension to explore, shadows to fill with honest curiosity. Purpose, meaning and truth may just lie in expanding one's visual, spiritual horizons. The design of the story is apparently plain, as is the monochrome cinematography, but the premise of the film has multiple dramatic, structural, storytelling, life-like layers to look at.

audience position The opening sequence puts the audience in the passenger seat of a speeding Jeep, hitchhiking with a silent stranger. A dangling cross, a soldier's picture and a slogan in English not only delimit the mental perimeter of the driver, but make the audience an active witness, a participant in the film.

opposites Is the audience riding with a villain or a victim? This is the first of several polarities the filmmaker creates and exploits. Urgent choice between opposite sides of an argument (about a symbolic world of prejudiced paradigms) is both a powerful narrative development device AND a reflection of the polarization of spiritual, philosophical and religious positions in the world out there.

What does your T-Shirt say As the stranger's SUV reveals its Texas license plate and pulls up to a store, the audience enters a space which contains experience, pain, hope as well as many brand name products. It is not clear until words are spoken what country we inhabit. Symbols and signs are, if anything, global common ground, identical, well known superficial references to generic needs. Inside the store another human has set and lives by different rules, images, fetishes, obsessions, and dreams of hitting fly balls over some center-field fence. Both the storekeeper and the stranger share a devotion to America shaped by their own distance / engagement to it, their subjective positioning. Not surprisingly, the flag in the store hangs tilted, and the stranger hates the "God is Dead" T-shirt the storekeeper is wearing.

narrative escalation towards head-to-head conflict is deceptively simple. The stranger's archetype, in a way, is the freedom to notice, criticize and question the habits and details he sees others live by daily. The storekeeper, open yet protective of the legitimacy of his own convictions, stands his ground – politely at first – against perceived aggression. The stranger's attack is a defense of his adoptive country, which will be disrespected by blasphemous and ignorant associations. Sound familiar in the fact vs. fiction domain?

catalyst is a T-shirt with slogans on two sides, but readable only one at a time. The metaphor is plain to see. Which one? There are so many. The argument about the use of the US flag in connection with religion degenerates. Patronizing comments and offers of money to fix the store spark into violent threats. As in any TV cop serial or reality show, we face the barrel of a gun. For the bearer justifies it as a legitimate defensive act against unequivocal (if only verbal)

aggression. Perception drives misunderstanding. Yet, he claims, it's nothing to worry about, "it is just an argument". On one level: violence comes easy. On another: the hero can become a villain in a split second.

Timing reaching first the violent climax, then the ironic flip-side conclusion without succumbing to the force of its obligatory premise is one of this short film's merits. The urgency of choice permeates the Now – the narrative real time – without pause. I – as audience – do not feel manipulated into the obligatory violent finale. The choices the stranger faces are immediate. He must act in the moment and in so doing reveal his deeper nature. He chooses not to accept the behind-the-back offense murmured by the storekeeper. He does so not because the story dictates it, but because the moment forces a sudden, unintellectual choice upon him. No time to think. Deep character is nested below the surface of predictable standard convictions, one-sided allegiances, cultural conditioning, prejudice, stereotype. Film characters, no matter how tall the premise's orders, can never be only a sketchy summation of their pre-existing political religious beliefs. They must choose fast.

straddling the fading border between fact and fiction, the film asks about the world's personal set of beliefs. Tolerance vs. Intolerance, Openness vs. Paranoia, Fear vs. Forgiveness. The film develops an unpredictable event (based on the sudden encounter of two different sides, two uncompromising and confident POVs) and asks urgently how would anyone else react, think, comment. When alternatives grow into outright polarities, what ground will be worth defending? What role does righteousness play in conflict resolution? And forgiveness?

salt on open collective wounds years of meaningless military devastation and loss of life, a gap between pain driving the stranger, desire for freedom and positive change powering the shopkeeper's batting practice. This gap is filled by action, violent confrontational action. Is violence the only way? The questions in the layers below the T-shirt's surface are abundant. No one-sided answers are exhaustive. In the gap between right and wrong, hero and villain, good and evil, there exists only personal choice, awareness. Character motivation must find its way. The film asks these questions, and they resonate as urgent. We have no more time to think.

showdown in the store is richly metaphorical. The store environment is pregnant with product, sales, price tags, magazines, appearance, modernity, globality. Every object is charged with layers of polarized symbolic meaning but the film does not succumb to its overuse of symbols because they are never one-sided. They are contradictory, debatable, conflict-ridden: a multi-cultural hieroglyph so familiar to audiences already saddled with overdoses of high-voltage media. Can all meaning be manipulated with partisan eyes? Has it become impossible to avoid arbitrarily selecting one of two sides of a conflict for personal gain?

misunderstanding Does the filmmaker set out to slant the story-map a priori, in a Lajos Egri sense? The storekeeper does not show the back of the T-shirt although he holds the power to stop the madness. The violent narrative trajectory seems determined by the imperative to go all the way. Why does the filmmaker ignore the option of peaceful settlement? To show that ignorance is deadly? Surprisingly, neither of these two devices (premise-based story, predictable final

confrontation) has an overall negative impact on the film because of the power of the Now, of the moment-to-moment development of character through urgent choice.

ideas are many and at play together, thus creating the multiple layers I refer to, and yet never cutting away to other story strands, forcing attention undivided to the moment. The film bears multiple viewings better and better, the best compliment I can offer to a short film and a testament to the force of its ambition, design and execution.

characters the shopkeeper can still dream the American dream, from the safe distance of story, sporting heroes and myth. For the stranger, flag and country are no longer a dream but money, blood, without mental escape. He is proudly engaged in a participatory experience of defending his own commitment and sacrifice, no matter what other-side of the debate (or T-shirt) is beyond his view. What if that stranger were America itself, wounded and aggressive, incapable of going beyond its own dominant paradigms? As I said, the layers of interpretation beneath the surface are endless, because it is fact that this fiction wants us to discover, by using story to catalyze an inescapable moment of reckoning. God vs. Nietzsche is an imaginary debate. Of course both are dead. No, wait...

One-sided defensiveness, voyeurism and passivity are for real. The drama of daily life without forgiveness goes on, and I am thankful for this short film, as it gives us 10 minutes to think, with focus, about it.

The writing on the T-shirt – or, Who sets the rules in the waste land?

Henrik Bødker

The t-shirt is a highly American and democratic piece of clothing. It is democratic because it is affordable, somewhat generic, accepted and therefore levelling, but also because it can be used to proclaim a point of view. These two uses of the t-shirt clash in the short film *T-Shirt* from 2006, written and directed by Hossein Martin Fazeli. Both protagonists in this eleven-minute film wear a t-shirt, one which is generic and one that bears the imprint “‘God is ... dead’, Nietzsche”, and (on the back) “‘No, Nietzsche is dead’, God”. The gradual and partial disclosure of this imprint to the other protagonist constitutes the main structure of narration. The larger context for this, and the reason that it holds any worthwhile significance, is the exacerbated fissures between places, (religious) values and American positions in general but more specifically in the long aftermath of 9/11; that the film is set in the present while held in black and white certainly seems to underline its more general references. And so does the use of the T-shirt and its uses as a main prop, which points to an ever-present tension between repressive conformity and difference within the public culture of the US.

At the opening of the film, we follow a lone driver in a four-wheel drive cruising through rolling hills accompanied by gospel-leaning music whose lyrics state that travelling “through this world we leave a trail behind of suffering and sorrow”; and as we cut from a shot of the driver in profile to a cross dangling from the rear-view mirror the female singer intones: “I think about the people that I’ve wronged, hurt and scarred” after which the next shot presents us with

a photo of a soldier glued to the glove compartment underneath a sticker that reads "God Bless America".



A mixture of visual and aural clues thus coalesce personal, national and religious trajectories, emotional and physical violence, and – not least – temporal and spatial movements through which a reminiscing viewer, (driver/nation?) is hurled into the future; with the images of the dangling cross against the blurred movements of the oncoming cars and landscape the car leaves the viewer behind while the singing develops into fully-fledged gospel call and response wondering "whether peace will ever found this world". We somehow know where he, they (us?) has/have been – but we do not know what is coming.

Almost everything in the iconography and music suggest that this is, so to speak, an internal affair, i.e. a delving into some of the domestic consequences, perhaps even doubts, related to America's military engagements. And when the soundtrack pulls us onto an attendant in a roadside shop watching baseball on TV while practising with his own baseball bat this seems not only confirmed but underlined by the American flag on the wall behind the counter as well as the Texan license plates of the car when it pulls up at the store. Yet there have been and are also signs that contradict this impression, signs that may suggest tension and incompatibility in addition to tensions already introduced.

First of all there is the road sign saying “Bratislava 22”, which we see as the car is propelled away from us into the landscape. Although there surely is a small town of that name somewhere in the US, the style of the sign seems different from American road signs.



And then there is the lack of outdoor advertising as we approach the roadside shop as well as the very subdued storefront. This is not the brazen public imagery of America! And this is somehow underlined by the indeed very sparsely furnished shop, whose lack of merchandise and commercial imagery is ambiguously underwritten by the presence on the counter of a book called *Pustatina*, the Slovakian translation of T.S. Eliot *The Waste Land*.

Through the conversation between the shopkeeper and the driver it is soon revealed that we are in fact in Slovakia – which explains the Slovakian flag next to the American on the wall behind the counter. That there in fact is a place not far from Bratislava called Pustatina Stara Guta, and linking the scarcity of this region with an American poetic universe, the *Waste Land*, swiftly transforms the narrative’s intertwining movements presented at the beginning of the film to (also) concern America as an ideological and physical force outside its own territories, which – as much as anything else – makes this a story about the role of religion within intercultural relations.

As such, this seems the beginning of a beautiful friendship. It turns out that the driver is an American of Slovakian heritage living in Houston, who is currently back visiting Slovakia. It also turns out that

the two men share an interest in baseball and the driver encourages the shopkeeper to look him up if he ever gets to Houston, and the driver also proclaims that he will “be shopping here more often if only for the flag and the T-shirt” – of which only the “God is ...” visible.



Encouraged by this the shopkeeper pulls aside his jacket to reveal the whole imprint. This is where things start to go wrong, and a re-emergence of aspects of the social, emotional and physical violence suggested by the lyrics, the photo of the soldier, and the baseball bat beneath the counter seems imminent.

The ensuing tension had, however, been anticipated by the divergent interpretations of the Slovakian region referred to by the visitor as his “mother-land”, a comment swiftly and fatalistically countered by the shopkeeper sneering “The Wasteland!” “No”, says the visitor, “it’s a beautiful country. Really beautiful”. What is opposed here are on one level somewhat polarised materialities and linked perspectives, i.e. the American four-wheel drive from which the region simply is beautiful and the actualities of making a living in the region. This split between a somewhat globalized tourist gaze and a view grounded in necessity is somehow paralleled by the double-ness of the Pustatina reference, which links materiality to notions of faith, and its questioning, an opposition mirrored in the Nietzsche quote and the “God Bless America” sticker. Confronting each other are thus

material conditions as well as ensuing and contradictory perspectives on Christianity, faith, morality and direction.

Initially, however, the visitor merely objects to the T-shirt being exposed together with the American flag. Those signals are, he asserts, incompatible since “most Americans believe in God and the flag at the same time”. “[B]ut, this is not America”, answers the shopkeeper. The visitor does, however, strongly advise him to remove the flag “so people like me wouldn’t feel insulted when they come to your store”. Instead, replies the storekeeper, I should “post a sign on the door that says: ‘Intolerant people do not enter!’” This is my territory”, he says, and “I can do whatever I want in it”. Caught in a difficult situation and apparently lost for arguments, the Slovakian-American resorts to solve the crisis through money: he throws a large bill on the counter and asks the “kid” to get a new shirt. As pointed out above, a lack of faith seems here somehow correlated with material scarcity; but the attendant does not “need a new shirt” and under his breath he calls the visitor a “fucking asshole” as he is about to leave the shop. In the heated exchange that follows the shopkeeper likens the visitor to the Taliban in their essentialistic approach to symbols and intolerance of others’ point of view. It turns out, however, that the photo in the car is of the driver’s brother just killed in Afghanistan. The enraged visitor finally pulls his gun and forces the shopkeeper to take down the flag and hand it over. As this is happening another customer enters the shop, picks up a few things, and turns toward the counter where the shopkeeper still has the gun pointed at him. Seeing this, the customer drops his things and turns towards the door. “This is not a robbery”, says the visitor, “We’re just having a discussion”, and he thereafter tells the customer to relax and finish his shopping but the customer remains hesitant. The driver turns around and points his gun at him and exclaims “I SAID SHOP”!

In the brief interval before he turns back towards the counter, the attendant has managed to pick up the baseball bat and hits the driver, who collapses on the floor. The attendant phones an ambulance, takes off his jacket, lights a cigarette and walks out the door and thus exposes the back of his T-shirt that says “No, Nietzsche is dead”, God”, while gospel singing returns with the claim that only the Lord can give meaning to your life. The opening and closing lyrics match the T-shirt’s front and back – the impossibility of not leaving behind a trail of sorrow and suffering but also of a world where we might need something to believe in. This is a manifestation of the need for faith at the same time as its impossibility, and it is certainly also a comment on the role of faith in intercultural relations.

The American attempt to control cultural events, to enforce a religious and democratic tolerance through soft and hard power, i.e. money and guns, is certainly exposed as a failure in the condensed closure of the film; and so are the implied links between materiality, faith and development. This comes out very clearly in the scene where the driver points his gun at the customer and shouts “I SAID SHOP!”, and also in the irony of calling the exchange at gunpoint a discussion.



The central point, however, concerns the T-shirt. Its failure to takes sides, its relativity or fatalism, is, however, not the central issue – the point is rather who decides and where. The imprint in the back may have appeased the driver somewhat; but the attendant chooses

not to show it – arguably because he welcomes the confrontation with the Slovakian-American as an opportunity to assert his independence. If the store looks somewhat empty, the Slovak's certainly has his arguments stocked up and ready. He might be living in a waste land, but at least it is his; if the price of material wealth is an increased conformity, he is not interested. What is ultimately at issue here are different and opposing means through which territories (or communities) are construed and/or sought upheld, i.e. citizenship, heritage, (religious) symbols, money, guns or other types of violence. No clear answers are presented here; what is certain, however, is that these struggles also are played out in everyday processes, which may include both burkhas and T-shirts. Although the acting may seem a bit stiff at times, the film's ingenious use of narrative structure, iconography and *mise-en-scène* manages, through modest means, to turn this into a timely exposure of some of the ironies and ambiguities of the American notion of a world mission as it has been played out in the post-9/11 world.

The depth and universal span of a short fiction film

Lisbeth Overgaard Nielsen

The humorous and well-acted short fiction film *T-Shirt*, by Hossein Martin Fazeli, is a fine example of the potential that the short fiction film holds. Despite its short format, it unfolds a story which achieves great depth and scope.

In the film we see an American man entering a small store in Slovakia. He is happy to find an American flag in the store and a shopkeeper who is not only a baseball fan but also wears an open shirt with a T-shirt underneath that reads "God Is." Their common interest brings about a mutual sympathy until the shopkeeper's shirt slides open and shows all the words on his T-shirt: "God Is... Dead. Nietzsche". This revelation brings the customer (who is from Houston, but was born in Slovakia) to accuse the shopkeeper of blasphemy. The accusation results in the following dialogue:

CUSTOMER

Don't get me wrong, but you can't stand under
the American flag with a shirt like that.

SHOPKEEPER

Why not?

CUSTOMER

Because most Americans believe in God and
the flag at the same time.

SHOPKEEPER

This is not America.

CUSTOMER

Look, I have nothing against your shirt... and I
wouldn't, if you were not standing under the flag.

SHOPKEEPER

Then maybe I should get rid of the flag?

CUSTOMER

Maybe you should do that, so people like me
wouldn't feel insulted when they come to your store.

SHOPKEEPER

Or maybe I should post a sign on the door that says:
"Intolerant People Do Not Enter!"

[...]

People who mix up flags with God and God with
their opinions are called fanatics. We had them in
Afghanistan. They were called the Taliban.

CUSTOMER

Are you saying I'm like the Taliban?

SHOPKEEPER

Yes...but you're not Afghan. You're American.

The dialog results in the customer pointing a gun at the shopkeeper, commanding him to take down the flag. When another customer enters the shop, the American, still pointing at the clerk with his gun, verbally points out that "this is not a robbery. We're just having a discussion." When the clerk gets the chance, he knocks down the American with a baseball bat. He then calls an ambulance and walks out, leaving the unconscious, bleeding man, who therefore never got to see the words on the back of the clerk's T-shirt: "No, Nietzsche Is Dead. God".

Political associations

The scene with the above-quoted dialogue carries many associations to political topics and current conflicts around the world (the conflict over the Danish Mohammed cartoons, the conflict in the Balkans, international terrorism, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). However, whether this is a political film nor not depends on the eye of the beholder. There are no specific statements or actions which can be

directly applied to political conflicts; therefore, the film can be characterized as an open work in the sense used by Umberto Eco.¹ However, the film actually directs its viewer down certain paths while dealing with topics like faith, God, the question of intolerance, national allegiance and misunderstandings. These topics are part of, or central to, many current and ongoing conflicts between fellow citizens or across national boundaries. The crisis in the film isn't based on a specific existing conflict, and it arises between two men who seemingly have a lot in common. They are from Slovakia (the customer has moved to Houston, Texas) and both obviously like America, so their conflict isn't sparked due to differing opinions on citizenship, but to basic differences in their way of dealing with life. These different outlooks on life, combined with misunderstandings and intolerance, are universally known seeds of conflict existing at many different levels, whether local conflicts arising from two men meeting in a store, or national or international conflicts, kept alive by political, historical/national and/or economic interests.

The presentation of the meeting and the conflict between two opposing outlooks on life is thus not nationally rooted – it is universal. People meet, do not understand each other, will not understand each other, misunderstand each other, and a conflict arises. It happens all over the world, at all times, and in many forms. And when the gospel singer who accompanies the film asks, “Will peace ever be possible in this world?”, the rather pessimistic answer from the film must be “probably not”. At least as long as humans think they know all there is to know – and they think they have seen *all* there is to see.

¹ Due to such different effects as non-transparent narration, suppressed information or the poetic visuality of the pictures, a work can appear open. This openness gives the viewer ‘exceptional freedom’ for individual readings, which is why particular understandings and perceptions of an open work can be very different. Cf. Eco (1989).

It would, however, be reductive to confine the film to being a political film. In Richard Raskin's interview with Hossein Martin Fazeli in this issue of *POV*, the director says that he thinks there is a political layer in the film, but it's a secondary layer. He points out that first and foremost it's a humoristic film about the absurdity of human conflict. The humoristic tone is primarily a result of precisely those absurd situations which are both recognisable from everyday life and extremely grotesque, because the dialogue is allowed a kind of "Erasmus Montanus logic,"² which interrupts the dialogue, time after time. The dialogue follows an illogical structure which changes the threatening situation to a humoristic story – in spite of the violent moments. Had the film told its story without humour, the result would have been a dark and frightening film with a pessimistic outlook. With humour as the foundation for the story and dialog, the film achieves a humane look at the tragic situation. The seriousness of the film is still present, but by means of humour the situation is made comical and the film points out the, at times, absurd aspects of human behaviour. The humour loosens the grip of politics on the film and lets it deal with something more generally human.

Compact Stories

The concentrated form of the short fiction film creates a different type of narrative than the one known from feature films. In the short fiction film there is no time for narrative detours or idle stories. It is this economical storytelling Richard Raskin describes in one of his seven parameters for story design in the short fiction film. But even though "the ideal short fiction film is ruthlessly economical in its storytelling [...] at the same time, the film is experienced by the viewer as a

² What I call "Erasmus Montanus logic" is a logic used in Ludvig Holberg's play *Erasmus Montanus* (1723). This logic is not logic at all, but concludes in a satirical manner without any connections between argumentation and logic.

complete and entire whole, teeming with life and richly textured”.³ It can be compared to poetry and its ability to create stories with great volume in a concentrated expression. In this way the short form is an artistic means and a potential rather than a limitation. In *T-Shirt*, the economical filmic articulation and aesthetics do not offer the viewer a poetic, free response; rather the humour and the absurdity of the film open its world and let the viewer reflect the film’s political overtones as well as the universal span of human experience.

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³ Raskin (2002), p. 170.

The Tube with a Hat / Lampa cu căciulă

Romania, 2006, 23 min.



Principal Credits

Director: Radu Jude
Screenplay: Florin Lazarescu
Director of photography: Marius Panduru
Editor: Catalin Cristutiu
Sound design: Andrei Toncu
Producer: Ada Solomon

Principal Cast

The father: Gabriel Spahiu
The son: Marian Bratu

Awards include

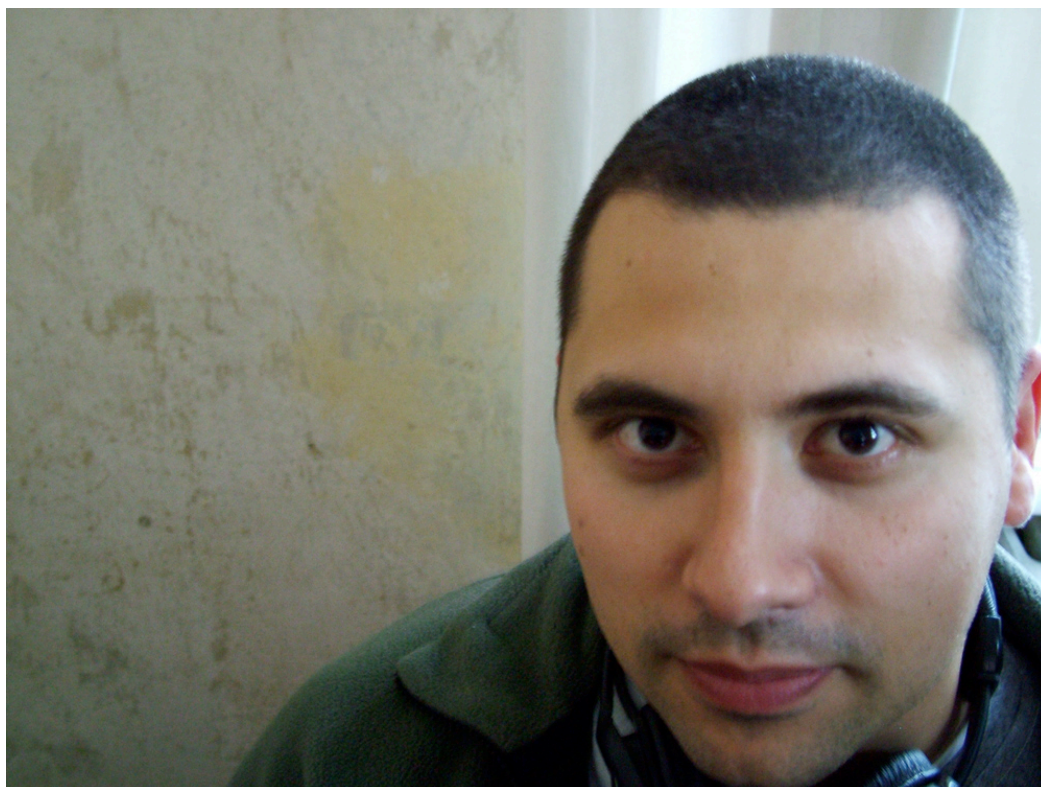
Jury Prize for Best Int'l Short Film, Sundance Film Festival, 2007
Golden Gate Award, San Francisco Int'l Film Festival, 2007
Best Narrative Short at Los Angeles Int'l Film Festival, 2007
Best Short Film at Huesca Int'l Film Festival, 2007
Golden Moon at Valencia Cinema Jove Film Festival, 2007
Grand Prize at Int'l Festival of Documentary and Short Film of Bilbao, 2006
Best Short Film at Montpellier Int'l Festival of Mediterranean Film, 2006
Best Short Film and Audience Award at Trieste Int'l Film Festival, 2007
Best Short Film at Cottbus Festival of East-European Cinema, 2006
Best Short Film at Indielisboa - Lisbon Int'l Independent Film Festival, 2007
Grand Prize at Brussels Int'l Film Festival, 2007
Best Short Fiction Film at Mediawave Int'l Film Festival (Gyor), 2007
Special Jury Prize at Aspen Shortfest, 2007
Main Prize at Dakino Int'l Film Festival, 2006
Award for Artistic Vision, Aarhus Festival of Independent Arts, 2007.

Synopsis

Very early in the morning, Marian, a 7-year-old boy from a small and poor Romanian village, wakes up his father and persuades him to go to the city in order to fix their old TV set. Despite the bad weather, the father finally agrees. Marian and his father start the trip, carrying the TV set, with the hope that they will succeed.

Radu Jude

Born in Bucarest, Romania, 1977, and a graduate from the Filmmaking Department of the Media University in Bucharest. He worked as assistant director for feature films shot in Romania, such as *Amen* by Costa Gavras, *Vacuums* by Luke Creswell & Steve McNicholas, *The Rage* by Radu Muntean and *The Death of Mr Lazarescu* by Cristi Puiu (2004). He directed the short fiction film *Wrestling* which was selected by more than 20 international film festivals, and approx 100 advertising spots.. He recently finished two 30-minute films: *In the Morning* (made for Romanian television) and *Alexandra*.



An interview with Radu Jude on *The Tube with a Hat*

Richard Raskin

I see that the screenplay for The Tube with a Hat was written by Florin Lazarescu. Did you and the screenwriter approach the producer, Ada Solomon, to get this project rolling or did things happen in an entirely different way?

Well, it's quite a long story. While a student in a Romanian film school (a terrible school, actually), I started working as an assistant director. I had the luck to be on the set of some interesting films, like *Amen* by Costa Gavras and, even more important for me, *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* by Cristi Puiu. I met Ada Solomon, the producer, while working on an American feature film shot in Romania – she was the production manager from the Romanian side. After a while she created her own small production company and when I had the project ready, I invited her to be the producer. She accepted and we tried to find the money for the film. It was very difficult, we couldn't find private investors and our national film center rejected the project. A year went by, and I was ready to make the film by borrowing money from some people, but finally we won in another round of the film center contest.

What was it in particular that appealed to you in the screenplay? And did you make any major changes, either before the shoot or at a later point?

In 2004, I read the script by accident and I loved it. What I loved about it is that the screenplay is about many things at the same time, without being confusing. I think it's a story about poverty, about hope, about sacrifice, about everyday life, about parenthood, about communication. The screenplay also made me remember a lot of things from my own childhood, when I was living at my grandparents, in the countryside. Then I met Florin Lazarescu (he's a young writer living in Iasi, a city far from Bucharest, where I live) and he told me that the story is autobiographical, it happened to him as depicted now in the film, more or less. Because we didn't find the money for the film, we had a lot of time. So I was working on the script, alone or together with Florin. Finally, the script changed a bit, we added some scenes, we took out other ones and I changed some of the dialogues in the shooting process.

Which were the scenes that you added in the film – scenes that were not present in the screenplay? And can you say a word or two about why these extra scenes were needed?

We made some small changes in many scenes, mostly regarding the dialogue. We added a few scenes and we did this for different reasons. For instance, there's a moment when the characters are taking the bus. That wasn't in the original script. But we found out that even the most isolated regions of Romania have bus shuttles. Not in every village, maybe, but there are some main roads around villages that have shuttles. So, in order to be truthful regarding the actual reality, we added the bus scene. The other added scene was the one happening in the TV repairs shop. The reason was that, if we didn't show the inside of that shop, it would have been like an intention to hide things. It would have been "too cool" not to show that place. And since we didn't want to provoke the viewer in a shallow way, we decided to shoot that scene. So the main reason here was that we wanted to show everything, not to hide some things in order to get some artificial dramatic effect.

Can you tell me anything about your casting of Gabriel Spahiu and Marian Bratu in the two main roles?

I was thinking of Spahiu to be the father in the first place. I gave him the script, he liked it, so everything was fine. After I got the financing in place, I said to myself that I have to be serious and professional, that I should do a real casting and not take the first actor that comes into my head. So I told Spahiu that I'm sorry, but I decided to make a casting. He was a gentleman, didn't get upset and agreed to come to the casting. I saw a lot of actors and finally realized that my first choice was still the best. All that casting was just a waste of time and energy.

Marian, the kid, is another story. I have seen, probably, around 600 kids from the countryside schools. I noticed Marian somewhere in the process, but he was very quiet. He was extremely shy, looked down all the time, and barely spoke. Then I found out he has a terrible situation at home, he's from a very poor family with millions of problems. But still, I liked his obvious sensitivity and I liked his eyes. I showed the casting tape to some people and everybody said it would be crazy to take Marian, because he seemed unable to speak. So I started meeting with him often and little by little, he became more open and I discovered a very intelligent and sensitive kid, with an incredible sense of humor. Meeting him was actually, for me, the best thing from this film. I still try to help him. I cast him in a commercial and I will

cast him again when I'll have the chance.

There is an interesting discussion of The Tube with a Hat by Anca Mitroi in Lingua Romana, and some of my questions will take statements she made as a point of departure. I would like to quote a beautiful sentence in her piece and ask you to comment on it: "If the ugliness of the landscape and the vulgarity of the language are shocking, The Tube with a Hat is nevertheless a delicate, sensitive and ironic film, in which a subtle beauty fleetingly emerges from the mire of a mindless world" (my translation from the French). Would you agree with this characterization of your film?

I agree with any positive characterization of my film! Well, I think human beings are the same everywhere and, despite the background of our lives, we all are a mixture of beauty and ugliness. And if love is a part of the beauty, then it means that showing the mechanisms of love between a boy and his father equals expressing some of this beauty.

Another important point Mitroi makes is that your film is free from pathos. Yet it is also moving. I am thinking in particular of the shot in which the boy – who has just been told that Bichescu didn't have the necessary tube – turns away from his father and leans his forehead against the wall, with the back of his head toward the camera. No tears to film, no pain in the boy's face for the camera to catch. And yet all the more moving for the visually understated way in which the boy is filmed. Your comments on that point?

Well, it was a quick decision taken at the shoot. The boy could cry, but when I saw a rehearsal I discovered that the face of a kid crying, at least in that particular situation, was too much. It was pure pornography. So Marius Panduru (the director of photography) and I found this solution of filming him from the back. And in this way the scene not only became more honest, but I discovered that it became more subtle: it's not very clear if the kid really cries or if he's making a scene like a spoiled boy.

Mitroi also drew a parallel between The Tube with a Hat and Polanski's Two Men and a Wardrobe. Were you at all influenced by Polanski's early masterpiece and do you agree that there are some parallels between the two films?

Honestly, although the comparison could be flattering, I think it's a shallow parallel. Indeed, both films show two people carrying a heavy load. But I think the parallel stops here, because the style, the story, the intentions of the authors are very different.

If I were to reveal some influences I would point to the Italian neo-realist films, with their desire to “show life as it is,” as Zavattini put it. I’ve been also influenced by Cristi Puiu, for whom I worked as assistant director. I consider my main influence the work of Yasujiro Ozu, although I know I am very far from being that good. What I love in all of Ozu’s films is not only his style and his stories, but above all the melancholy tenderness expressed towards his characters, towards life actually. And I think this attitude, pessimistic and hopeless, but at the same time calm and distant and humorous, reveals some kind of truth about our life.

I was very impressed by a statement you yourself made about The Tube with a Hat: “Directing this film, my main concern was to tell the story as honestly as possible. I didn’t make any moral judgment about the characters, their actions and the world they live in. I only wanted to understand them, and to reveal their humanity.” Could I ask you to elaborate a bit more on the absence of a judgmental perspective within the film?

I think that cinema has this quality, to see things from a certain distance, a quality which can offer to a viewer the possibility of looking at something told in an objective way and to form his/her own opinion. I also think this applies to all cinema, documentary and fiction. So when the world or the people inside the film are judged by the author, the freedom of the viewer is more limited and he can reject the film, because if he is observant he can feel that he is being cheated, he can see that somebody wants to force him to have a particular feeling, an opinion, etc. That’s why I think it’s necessary, in a narrative film at least, to be honest, to put yourself in the position of somebody who wants to understand the world in the film, not in the position of somebody who knows everything and teaches the viewers like a professor. As a side note, I must add that it’s obvious that there’s no real objectivity in film, or in any other art. Any decision carries with it the potential to manipulate. What I am saying applies more to the attitude that the artist should have when doing his work.

The Tube with a Hat is extremely successful, picking up numerous festival awards. Is there anything, despite this amazing track record of your film, that you now wish you had done any differently in making this film?

There’s maybe an interesting thing about the success of this film. When I finished it, I started to send it to film festivals. First of all, because for a short film this is the way it can be seen. Secondly, because I received money for the film from a public fund, so I felt responsible for spending that money and I thought that festival expo-

sure would prove that the money was wisely spent. But the first six or seven festivals rejected the film. I felt very depressed, I thought I had made a film that nobody wanted to see. Then, little by little, the film was selected by approx. 100 festivals, some of them considered very important, and received around 30 awards until now. What's funny is that some of the festivals who rejected the film a year ago are inviting it this year, pretending that the rejection was caused by administrative problems.

Success is good, but it shouldn't be the engine for wanting to have this profession. I always remember that the films of Ozu were never selected by important festivals. And he's a huge artist.

I cannot conceive of making the film once more. I wouldn't do the film again even if, let's say, all the copies and tapes, etc. were lost. The experience of making the film is, for me, more important than the finished film. If I were to do it again, I wouldn't make it better, that's for sure, because the mistakes in the film are, in a strange way, a part of the film. They shouldn't be removed.

Is there any advice you would give student filmmakers about to make their own first short films?

Well, I'm not really in the position to give advice to others. I still need advice myself. But I was in a film school, and after the experience of making some bad films there, I can try to say what I think somebody in that position should do. First of all, to be honest, to make films he believes in 100%, to have the courage of making the films he wants to make, not what others expect of him. Then, not to think of success or failure. If what you do is honest, it doesn't really matter if the film has success or not. I think Cassavetes said that one should expect failure, not success, because the probability of making a bad film is much bigger than that of making a good film. So relax and have fun and try to learn something from the experience of making a film.

24 August 2007

An interview with Ada Solomon, producer of *The Tube with a Hat*

Richard Raskin

How did you first become involved in the production of The Tube with a Hat?

I met Radu during the production of an American feature called *Vacuums* of which I was the Romanian line producer and he was one of the assistant directors. This was in 2001. In that connection, we spent two months of intense "production life." But also, as it happens during film production, it was a very good time in terms of discovering people, ideas, wishes. We stayed in contact afterwards and became good friends. Radu came by one day with the script of *Tube* and it was for me like re-discovering a whole magic world of childhood, yet at the same time so simple and human. I felt in love with the script at first sight and I knew that Radu had the capacity to turn it in a great film. It took us a while until we got the money to do the film. (It was first rejected by the Romanian film fund, then it took one more year when we could again apply for funding.)

*What exactly was your own role during the various phases of the production?
And how do you define your producer role in general?*

This is hard to define. I was close to the project, trying to understand Radu's vision at its best, supporting him, sharing ideas on how I saw the characters but never interfering with his own vision, just supporting him.

I think a creative producer has to find ways to understand the director and the crew and supply them with everything they need at the best level. Creativity should be used in terms of finding solutions to serve the film within the existing budgetary limitations. I don't believe that a producer should interfere with the vision of the director but to deeply understand and support it. In a way, the producer should be like a parent, guiding a child, offering him all the means to best succeed in life but not by imposing things. For me producing is a kind of motherhood. And there is one more thing that is a key to success in the relation of the producer with the film crew: it is called respect – for the film, for the people, for the work.

How do you feel about the casting of the two major roles in the film?

I can't see any other kid more suited for this role than Marian. It took a lot of work to find him. Anitza, the assistant director and Radu saw hundreds of kids from schools around Bucharest. Marian was very shy

and his family wasn't very interested [...], but Radu won their confidence for life and they are now very supportive and close to us. For the father I had in mind Gabriel Spahiu from the first minute but Radu again wanted to see almost all the actors of his age who were available. It was an extensive casting and it was good because it convinced us that we were making the right choice. Funny enough, for the final final casting of the father we had two choices: one was Gabriel Spahiu and the other one was Vlad Ivanov – the actor who plays Mr. Bebe in Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*. Just a few weeks ago Marian told us that he would've gone for Vlad Ivanov to be his father but now he feels comfortable with Gabriel Spahiu.

The film is picking up one prize after another at international festivals. What in your own opinion are the reasons for its success?

I think is mainly the honesty of the storytelling. Otherwise I really don't know. It is like a never-ending wonderful dream.

This seems to be something of a golden age for Romanian film. Would you agree, and if so, why is this happening at present?

Yes it is, indeed. I don't have an explanation for this. I think we had things to say, to show, to offer to the viewer but we weren't ready to express them before. Now I think Romanian filmmaking has been reborn and grown up, matured.

Is there anything else you would like to add at this point?

No, it's really hard to speak about this subject. I don't have a logical theory about this. I'm only more than happy to be part of it, here, in Romania, now. And I have to say that now we are very busy preparing new Romanian films, hopefully as good as the ones that have already received recognition around the world. We have this challenge to keep staying "on the wave". There are voices that are already saying: "yes, it is here now, but after one or two more films Romania will be forgotten. It can't last any longer." We have to do our best to prevent this.

Is there any advice you would give to student filmmakers about to make their own first short films?

Believe in what you do. If you are not sure that a subject is really what you have to say, than don't do it. It doesn't have to be "trendy", it doesn't have to be "original", it has to be yours. Entirely.

December 6, 2007

A father and son: On *The Tube with a Hat*

Niclas Gillberg

On a rainy Sunday morning 7-year-old Marian and his father takes off to the city to repair their TV set. Living far out in the countryside they have to walk through the terrain carrying the heavy TV set all the way to the closest road to catch the bus. They have a long journey a head of them and they bump into many problems on the way. The chances to be home in time for the Bruce Lee film in the evening seem smaller and smaller for every step.

Sensitive and pure

Lampa cu căciulă is a sensitively told story about the love between a father and a son. The director Radu Jude approaches his characters carefully and always leaves enough room to make them interesting and ambiguous. The camera follows the events from a distance and never gets too close. It always leaves a certain personal space for the characters. Jude has chosen a very pure way of telling the story. Not unlike his compatriot Cristian Mungiu in the equally successful Romanian feature *4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile* / *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*. Instead of using music to underline the emotions, the soundtrack in *Lampa cu căciulă* is composed by atmospheric sound. There is the crow of a rooster at dawn and the sound of raindrops falling on the roof. The sound composition provides the story with a realistic background and it is through this that the film succeeds in telling us much with very small means. The plot is merely what happens on the surface while the story of the film is much deeper and far more complex.

True feelings

The love between Marian and his father is not the love usually portrayed in films. There aren't any close-ups or romantic music. It's not that kind of banal love story where the characters express their love for each other by saying "I love you". The feelings in *Lampa cu căciulă* are rather displayed and proven throughout the film by the actions of the characters. This is the kind of real and every-day love that all of us can relate to. Jude depicts the love between father and son in a more subtle way which makes it more believable. Judging from what is said in the dialogue between the father and the son we would perhaps say that their relationship is not a very healthy one. But when we look beyond the surface we discover what the father actually does for his little boy and the picture changes. It is obvious from the setting of the story that this family is not very well-off. That makes the action of the father even more significant. He should probably earn money for the family or do something more important with his time, but he chooses to spend a whole day travelling to the city to repair the TV set. He basically can't say no to his little boy. In the 23 minutes of the film the dimensions of this truly beautiful act just grow and grow. Radu Jude uses this strikingly beautiful picture to depict the feelings of the father toward his son.

Known/unknown-interplay

A part of the success of *Lampa cu căciulă* at festivals all over Europe and the USA could be the interplay between something we easily recognize and something unknown or exotic. A key line in this interplay is when the boy says that they have to be home in time for the Bruce Lee-film in the evening. It is an unexpected line from someone from a poor family in the Romanian countryside. It brings the boy closer to a European or American audience. Who hasn't seen a

Bruce Lee film? And who hasn't adjusted life after a TV schedule at some point? On the other hand not too many people in this part of the world wake up in the morning with the roof leaking. And most of us haven't carried our TV set through the countryside to get it repaired. The film provides many examples of this kind of interplay where something we as an audience know well (in the example above represented by the film on TV) is placed in an unknown environment (the Romanian countryside). The strategy of placing something familiar in the film is used to make it easier for us to identify with the characters and to relate to the things that are not as familiar. Through this the film can appeal to a broad audience all over the world.

Neo-realist inspiration

Radu Jude has said that one of his sources of inspiration is Italian neo-realism. This inspiration is easy to trace in Jude's work, not least when looking at the atmosphere of the film. It is not a wild guess that one of the biggest inspirations in telling this story was Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* / *The Bicycle Thief*. *Lampa cu căciulă* bears many similarities to De Sica's masterpiece. The most obvious similarity would be the father and son relationship. Both films portray the love between father and son in very beautiful ways. In both films the father is the one acting against his own will or character to do something good for the son and the family. In *Ladri di biciclette* it is more a matter of life and death, but this doesn't make the actions of the father in *Lampa cu căciulă* any less significant. They are both acts of love displayed in a powerful and direct way. Another quite clear parallel between the two films is that both are told with an object in the center of the plot. In a way you could say that the object is what carries the story onward. In De Sica's case the bicycle plays an important role and in Jude's case the

TV set pushes the story onward. In both cases the objects could be mistaken to be the very reason why the story is being told. Both filmmakers use totally different objects in their films and on the surface they use them in completely different ways. But in a deeper sense the use of the objects are similar, because they share the same function as objects within the stories. The objects become accelerators of events that reveal the inner feelings of the fathers and they also evoke the feelings of the audience. In the end *Lampa cu căciulă* is not a story about a TV set that needs to be repaired; it is a profound story that goes much deeper and ultimately says something about true emotion.

Lampa cu căciulă is without a doubt one of the best short films made over the last years. The film is well balanced and told with a sensitivity rarely seen. It is really impressive that someone can tell such a poignant story in such a short time and with so small means. In his short Jude is able to express more than most directors do in a feature film. It would surprise me if this is the last we will see of Radu Jude.



Watching TV in the dark: On *The Tube with a Hat*

Anca Mitroi

The sun is not yet up. And the way things have been going in Romania, it may not come up at all, leaving the entire country to wade blindly through the muddy, rutted streets. Yet, in the darkness, we know the geese are awake from their muted honking. A bit later, small birds begin to chirp. Finally, at the edge of the green field, where the drab tenements announce “the city,” dogs can be heard barking. Each space is identified by its familiar sounds. But beyond these localized and gentle sounds, expletives begin pouring out, penetrating like the driving rain that passes through the roof, the boots and the second-hand coats. In *The Tube with a Hat*, the profanity and blasphemy come in all forms, mumbled in low voices and shouted at the top of one’s lungs, whispered with complicity, pronounced with condescendence, spewed with venomous scorn, articulated voluptuously. Through this swamp of obscenities, vulgarity and threats, a child advances with a vague smile, walking calmly but cautiously, as if he were crossing a minefield. He must reach his goal: he wants his family’s television repaired so he can watch his favorite show. This apparently banal task becomes the subject of Radu Jude’s film – winner of more than a dozen international awards, including the Jury Prize at the Montpellier Film Festival, the Jury Prize for best international short film at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival, and the Grand Prix at the Uppsala International Short Film Festival.

If the ugly landscape and vulgar language shock us, *The Tube with a Hat* is nevertheless a delicate and sensitive film, with authentic feeling and playful irony, and in which a subtle beauty briefly emerges

from the muck of a world stupefied by cheap alcohol, reduced to animal-like baseness or buried in misery and poverty. Jude, a young and talented filmmaker at just thirty years old, has already made other films that have received international recognition; he was also the associate director for Cristi Puiu's successful *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*. His name thus must be added to the growing list of young Romanian filmmakers, such as Radu Muntean, Cristi Puiu, Corneliu Porumboiu or Cristian Mungiu – representatives of a new generation of directors to whom the critics have been paying increasing attention. Having broken free of the older generation of communist filmmakers and the feeble and indecisive vision of the "transitional" period, this "new wave" of Romanians have found their way.

Yet for all that, Romanian viewers would not be wrong to ask exactly what the various international juries have appreciated in this film. Only a native viewer is able to decipher the familiar signs of daily existence and to see them as sources of the famous "reality effect" discussed by Roland Barthes. For nearly everybody else these details probably go unnoticed or they are completely devoid of meaning. For Romanian viewers each sign/element is arranged in its proper place in order to evoke the image of daily misery – a sort of never-ending end of the world. In the film's twenty-two minutes no detail is left to chance: rain dripping through the ceiling, the missing bridge, the mud, the checkered plastic sack, the fuzzy blanket with a hideous blue pattern used to carry the television, the repairman's sign scribbled on the wall of the tenement by the same hand that scribbles political slogans, obscenities or the names of football teams. The background music, the connotations of untranslatable expressions and even bits of conversation muffled by the background noise and invariably lost in the subtitles – all of these elements reconstitute an obviously unbearable world. But it is a world that has become so

normal for Romanians that its horrible predictability feels strangely reassuring, somewhat like the catastrophes, monsters or horrors so familiar to us in fairy tales.

Utterly remarkable in this film, given the minutely detailed construction of this world of ugliness and poverty, is its complete refusal to evoke a cheap and pathetic feeling of sympathy or to collapse into what we might call the “documentary picturesque.” This is the trap that many of the “transition” filmmakers fell into when trying to “sell” themes and images considered more internationally marketable. Too eager to please, such filmmakers could not go beyond clichés and platitudes, such as the plight of street children, shifts in social classes or the dog-eat-dog world of post-communist Romania. Jude’s attention to authentic detail works to flesh out the contours of the characters, giving them depth and rendering them distinct. And this is precisely the point where the film becomes “visible” for the spectator. I am referring to the insatiable curiosity of the child who insists on asking questions although he receives only angry grunts or threats instead of responses. For example, when he tenderly observes an ant, well-meaning adults, who can only imagine bad intentions, threaten him with a slap in the face. He is nonetheless obstinate in his verbal precision – careful to always use the correct word and names: insects, for example, have antennae and not horns, as “all-knowing” grown-ups tell him. He may even apply a tender and thoughtful metaphor such as “the tube with a hat” or “the little barrel,” to identify the various TV tubes inside their television set, although he also knows their technical names. On the other hand, his elders, whose restricted lexicon seemingly includes only swear words, simply repeat the same four-letter obscenities.

The camera’s perspective is that of a child’s: it stays close to the ground as if to mimic the gaze of the little protagonist who scarcely

lifts his eyes and who does not seem to pay attention to his surroundings whereas in reality he quietly observes everything. The point of view is narrow and restricted, even when it's a question of exterior shots. And the darkness is overwhelming. At the same time, in a few exceptional moments, the camera opens onto vaster spaces in order to incorporate an unexpected sort of beauty. At one point, we see the father, hunched over and burdened, and the son, wrapped up in his hooded raingear, in a game of tug-of-war with the blanket protecting the television – now a kind of third character. They suddenly appear as tiny specks, lost in the immense green field where the birds are singing. Bright yellow, the child's raincoat shines through the grey morning fog like a touch of glistening light. At other moments, we see the screen fill with a tree of white blossoms that brilliantly reflect the sun's pale glow. Or we notice a dull light passing through a lampshade like the unmistakable *chiaroscuro* of Georges de la Tour's paintings. These moments of beauty are, indeed, rare but they are captivating and memorable.

The characters' psychology is sketched with a few precise traits – pertinent perhaps only for Romanian viewers who can recognize all of the nuances of the cleverly constructed dialogues of Florin Lazarescu. This is no doubt because they are actually a collage of nonsense and obscenities that Romanian spectators have heard all too often. At the same time, the many altercations are also suggestive for the entire audience because they embody the discursive strategy of the coward who always looks for weaker people to humiliate. Nobody misses the chance to degrade and insult another who, by accident or by social class, finds himself on a lower rung. Drivers try to see who among them can produce the most abjectly detailed insult and, at the bar, the drinkers don't hesitate to humiliate – even in front of the child – the father who, just like them, is sitting at a dirty little table guzzling the

same cheap beer. The father brutally scolds the child as if to remind himself who's in charge; the city-dwellers mock the villagers. The television repairman descends majestically among his intimidated clients with the pomp of a mystical healer, and spits with impunity on the old televisions awaiting repair and on the apologetic father and son, who explain that they could not get there earlier. For Romanians, the scene obviously alludes to a famous story by the realist writer Liviu Rebreanu in which the characters, also a father and son, miss their train and are accused of sleeping late, although they were up before everybody else. As this image is repeated here as a leitmotif one hundred years later, we might assume that Jude sees unjust accusations and insults as a permanent feature of the lower rungs of social existence.

The child negotiates his way wisely through this storm of obscenity and stupidity; he perseveres in his goal: to see the Bruce Lee movie at 18:00 hours. At the end of his trek, once he has returned home, the child will watch for a few minutes a documentary on the beauty of the Pietrosul mountain range. The clear voice of the narrator, to which nobody is listening and which exalts in the glories of nature can be ironically contrasted with the dirty and depressing world of the protagonists. In the final scenes, only the television will remain to illuminate the little room and, in perfect diction, continue to praise the wonders of the Romanian landscape.

In spite of the precise references, and in spite of the abundance of details worthy of a documentary, *The Tube with a Hat* is not a "slice of life"; and it goes far beyond the films that want to discuss "Romanian realities" to an international audience. One might also add that the film speaks in a low and subtle voice, unlike much of the other film festival fare that often wears its politics on its sleeve. In *The Tube with a Hat*, goodwill and irony, bitterness and resignation make

themselves felt through a viewpoint that finds its way through the cataclysmic cityscape of debris, the large and muddy potholes and the dilapidated buildings. These contradictory feelings make us reflect generally on human relations, on fragility and strength, on fear and courage, on ugliness and beauty.

In this sense one might compare the short film of Radu Jude to one from a half-century ago: Roman Polanski's *Two Men and a Wardrobe*. Visually similar in the depiction of two men carrying an unlikely object in unlikely places, both films are about the evolution of characters in a violent and crass world and about their astonishingly different perceptions and sensitivities. Although both films depict gloomy and fatalistic lives, they nevertheless hold out hope – even if it is only a tiny glimmer.



On the New Romanian Cinema

Marina Kaceanov

The notion that Romania could emerge as one of the most vibrant and exciting filmmaking centres in Europe, if not the world, would have seemed far-fetched a decade ago. And yet, in four short years a generation of remarkably talented young Romanian directors have produced an impressive body of films that have consistently landed at the top of international critics' polls and in the coveted top tier of film festivals from Cannes to New York.

This spectacular revival of Romanian cinema - from this most ignored and downtrodden of Eastern European nations that had an almost invisible film culture for decades - has been welcomed by critics and cinephiles the world over. Some call it a "New Wave," others dispute the title, but everyone agrees that recent Romanian filmmaking is now perceived as the hotbed of a fresh, expressive, and pertinent cinematic renewal. This development was inconceivable, especially considering Romania's poverty and totalitarian past. The new Romanian cinema is very much concerned with this past, with the historical conditions an entire nation had lived through for half a century.

Of all the Communist bloc countries, Romania had the worst social and cultural conditions. Paradoxically, those very conditions work in its favour today. For clearly propaganda purposes with respect to culture, the communist leaders manipulated the people's minds, but in significantly different ways. While the Romanian government limited all film production to pure propaganda in the service of communist ideals, Russia and especially Bulgaria developed

their film industry at the highest level possible for that period. They built state-of-the-art production studios; they gave enough funding for making films with good production values; they supported the education of young people; they even paid to accustom the public to go to the cinemas; and they published film magazines with professional reviews by international critics. All of these practices undertaken for ideological purposes, resulted in the creation of a community of filmmakers and film critics, a few of whom were even granted access to international film festivals, thereby allowing them to communicate beyond the "wall" between the socialist countries and the rest of the world. And this ideologically well-educated community grew year after year. However, this very process prevented new thinking during the post-communist period. This large community of seasoned filmmakers could not immediately accept new views on cinema. They were not prepared to think differently. And the Hollywood money invested in recent years in the industry, will not help until a new open-minded generation is on the scene.

Romania did not experience such privileges at all. Their roster of directors remained the same during all these long years, featuring persons like Sergiu Nicolaescu from the age of 30 to 78.

The Romanian Revolution of 1989 ended decades of oppressive rule by the Communist despot Nicolae Ceaușescu, but it took another dozen years before a group of young (30-something) Romanian filmmakers finally found their voice and vision, made a name for themselves and turned the nation into a synonym for fresh cinema on the international scene... much like the Iranian filmmakers did before them.

Thanks to the Revolution, the Romanian government relaxed the censorship laws. However the cultural institutions, led by The National Centre for Cinematography, still have a reputation for

favouring old era veterans who apparently exploit their status for all it's worth, and bring nothing new to the fast-growing local film scene.

But, one should never underestimate the historical gravitas that comes with generations of brutal dictatorship, the effects of its violent overthrow, the demise of an obsolete and corrupt system, the years of silence and the presence of unrealised talents. In Romania there were troubled years of transformations, socio-economical problems, and constant battles with the bureaucracy of the National Centre for Cinematography; and the growing conflict between past and present finally exploded into a cultural revolution... The present requires its own chroniclers, and the younger and more in touch they are with reality, the better. When there is no room, funding or support for younger people, an opposition is born.

Let us forget for a moment about the recent successes and look back at what we actually know about Romanian Cinema. Some fifty years ago, a Romanian short entitled *Short History / Scurta istorie* (1956, 10 min) by Ion Popescu Gopo won the Palme d'Or at Cannes for Best Short Film in 1957. It was the first and, until 2004, the only Romanian film to be known on the international scene. The rest may be silence, despite some outstanding works by the controversial director Lucian Pintilie – especially his *Reconstituirea / Reenactment* (1968) that was banned by Romanian officials who forced the filmmaker into exile in France where he became *the* Romanian auteur for the world public.

After the revolution, film treasures that had been gathering dust in archives, such as Radu Gabrea's *Beyond the Sands* (1973), Dan Pita's *The Contest* (1982) and of course Lucian Pintilie's *Reenactment*, finally came off the shelves and inspired a handful of talented directors who have literally had to fight entrenched traditions and stand up to the national funding bodies. The result came in 2001 when Cristi Puiu's debut feature *Stuff and Dough (Marfa si banii)* was premiered at Cannes

and received the FIPRESCI award at the Thessaloniki Film Festival. This successful and detailed portrait of youth in present-day Romania was the first sign of a refreshingly new Romanian cinema that gave the critics hope for the future.

Director Radu Jude, whose *The Tube With a Hat* won the Sundance International Short Film Award in 2007, says Romanian cinema never had a neorealist period; the new wave is making up for lost time. And, yes, the following years show a unique mix of works satisfying both the Italian Neorealist and French New Wave requirements. They form an auteur cinema that does not have an inherent political message but is set among the poor, is filmed in long takes on location, frequently using non-professional actors (as with Italian Neorealism); and at the same time it is a cinema that rejects classical form and propagates a spirit of youthful iconoclasm, selling well, collecting awards abroad, and inspiring critics (as with the French New Wave).

Each of the years 2002-2004 brought promising feature debuts for two filmmakers – Cristian Mungiu with *Occident*, Radu Muntean with *Fury* in 2002; Titus Muntean with *Taxi a.k.a Limousine*, Calin Peter Netzer with *Maria* in 2003 (especially *Maria* got wide attention and received awards at Locarno and Rotterdam); Napoleon Helmis with *Italian Girls* and Catalin Saizescu with *Weekend Millionaires* in 2004. However despite bright flashes during this period, these films could still be defined as merely honest exercises in portraying Romanian society in transition.

The real revolution came in 2004 and remarkably it came with shorts. Following the festival circuit for many years, I just can't remember so much attention and so many major awards given to five short films, made in the same year from the same country in just one festival year. *Cigarettes and Coffee* (13 min) by Cristi Puiu - Golden Bear for Best Short Film in Berlin; *The Apartment* (20 min) by Constantin

Popescu - Grand Prize in Venice; *Liviu's Dream* (38 min) by Corneliu Porumboiu - Filmmaker Association Award in Helsinki; *C Block Story* (14 min) by Cristian Nemescu – Prix UIP Angers (European Short Film), and finally *Traffic* (15 min) by Cătălin Mitulescu – Golden Palm, Cannes.

In what ways were these shorts different and revolutionary? The answer could be both difficult and at the same time very easy to understand: while continuing to reflect a specific social reality, these directors extended their artistic curiosity to a contemplation of the general human condition. These shorts demonstrate an enormous talent for making films out of nothing, using a universal language and a very specific style – realism with an almost documentary style of editing and a great sense of suspense. This might be called a new school of filmmaking, a new way of cinematic thinking and this is what we love short films for – their ability to challenge and inspire by using incredibly minimal means.

It is disputable how long Cristian Nemescu's *C Block Story* will remain in people's minds. However those who were lucky enough to see the film will never forget this brilliant line: "Excuse me, could you please tell me what I could do with a girl in an elevator?" Just hearing this line had an amazing effect on audiences.

Almost all of the directors of these shorts returned the following years with their first or second feature, where they deepened their remarkable stylistic freedom and aspiration for renewal, offering a number of unusual and exemplary films with great originality.

After *Cigarettes and Coffee*, Cristi Puiu returned in 2005 with an extremely successful feature, *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, that continued to tell the stories of simple people, yet this time in a much sharper, almost grotesque form. An old lonely man gets sick and calls for an ambulance, but the problem is that he has cancer (which he knows

nothing about), and the paramedics cannot 'save' him: the ambulance just takes him here and there, from one hospital to another... and nothing more happens. The miracle was in the way in which the viewer was kept breathless (the film runs a little over two-and-a-half hours) in an obstacle course, racing against the clock and against Death. A plethora of feelings from impatience to guilt emerges during this agonising black comedy with its painful precision of details. *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* had its debut at Cannes in 2005, where it won the "Un Certain Regard" award, and elsewhere picked up another fourteen prizes as well, including best director at the Transylvania International Film Festival in 2005. The film was nominated for the Independent Spirit Award in 2006 and was released in a number of countries, including France, the UK and the US, to wide critical acclaim, which made it the most highly profiled Romanian film ever.

In the following year, 2006, world attention was once again drawn to a number of remarkable Romanian films. Corneliu Porumboiu picked up the Camera d'Or for his riotous *12:08 East of Bucharest*, Catalin Mitulescu's nostalgic *The Way I Spent the End of the World* won Best European Project at Sundance and the Best Actress award at "Un Certain Regard" in Cannes, and Radu Muntean's gloomy *The Paper Will be Blue* won the Special Prize at Cottbus. While these three features returned to the Communist past, offering three different takes on the revolution of 1989, an absolutely outstanding second short by Cristian Nemescu - *Marilena from P7* – created a buzz on the short film scene.

This 45 minute film tells its story in exactly the time it needs, keeping viewers glued to the screen and savouring every second. Though the synopsis sounds like a simple love story – a 13-year-old teenager, living on the outskirts of Bucharest, decides one day to steal a tram in order to impress Marilena, a prostitute he has fallen in love

with – the film is much more than this. Nemescu's talent brilliantly unfolds, showing horrible conditions in a Bucharest ghetto, a Gypsy impersonator who sings “Love me Tender” in Gypsy, the dirty facades of the Ceausescu era buildings, and the people who inhabit them all remind one of a nightmarish reality no one would ever want to come close to. Nemescu's gift is in rendering that reality not only accessible to everyone, but actually attractive and interesting.

Yet in 2006 the unknown first-time director Radu Jude, 29 years old, just began his victory march with the 23-minute short *The Tube with a Hat*. Even when he won the Grand Prix in Bilbao and the Cottbus Short Film Prize, it was impossible to imagine that this simple story about father-son relationship would go on to become the most highly awarded short film in the history of Romanian cinema. No one could even dream that this Romanian short would win the Best Short Film Award at Sundance in the beginning of 2007. It was the only Romanian entry accepted at this prestigious festival in Utah. Winning at Sundance automatically brought the film forward for an Oscar nomination. Since then it has been shown at virtually every known film festival all over the globe, proving over and over again that simplicity is a very effective quality of Romanian films.

Radu Jude had previously worked as assistant director with Radu Muntean on *Fury* in 2002 and Cristi Puiu on *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* in 2005. It is therefore not surprising that the film speaks the same naturalistic and humoristic language, or that it captures ordinary people in situations that at first glance appear simple, exploring human behaviour when the situation becomes more complex. Yet it is also a kind of road movie, as were both *Fury* and *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*. But at the same time it is Radu Jude's own unique film, with its light and open humour in contrast to the much darker humour of *Mr. Lăzărescu*.

A seven-year-old boy, somewhere in an isolated Romanian village, wakes his father early in the morning to take their aging TV set to the city to be repaired. His father had promised that they would have it fixed before the afternoon movie. Here their comic misadventure begins. The village is not only remote, but a long way from life as most people know it in the 21st Century; if it rains, water floods the house and in order to cross the river, one has to improvise a foot bridge. Of course rain starts making carrying of the heavy TV set wrapped in a blanket even more difficult, but the father and son move forward – one because he wants so much to see the movie with Bruce Lee and the other because he promised his son that he would help to make this little pleasure possible. In the city, the father and son go to a specialist, Bichescu, who after a couple of unpleasant situations finally repairs their TV set and they both return happily home and in time to watch the boy's favourite film.

For me, originally coming from the Communist bloc and living in Moldova (a Romanian border-neighbour) for 15 years, the situation was so familiar and the characters so recognizable that I didn't doubt for a second that the story was simply taken from real life and shot on camera. However when I told of my reaction to this film to some of my Western colleagues they disagreed, arguing that many of the troubles faced by the father and son were exaggerated and that the director used them to dramatise the little family's relationships and to heighten little victories in our life. They also insisted that tube TVs could only be found in museums, even in Romania. Neither of us was right or wrong. The whole story is fictional and the film was shot on the basis of a script written by Florin Lazarescu, based on the novel *Sunday Story*. Only one character in this story is real – Mr. Bichescu lives with the same name and repairs TV sets somewhere in Romania. And tube TVs are still in use in Romania as they are in Moldova, Russia and

many other post-communist countries. But these facts are of no importance, because what counts in this film is its tribute to life's little pleasures that we all need so much and so often forget.

It is a joy to have a father who will sacrifice his Sunday to getting the TV fixed just because his son wants to see a movie; it is a joy to have a son who will go to all this trouble to help his father and to make his own wish come true; it is a joy to return home to the mother who is waiting with a warm dinner and dry clothes; it is a joy to give pleasure to someone you love and to enjoy it together even if the rain still leaks into the room. Having this pleasant smile on a face, who cares whether or not tube TVs are still in use in Romania?

The Tube with a Hat is a great example of universal cinema – still very national and at the same time understandable for any other nation in the world without any references to the country of origin or characters. It is a breath of fresh air even in the context of the successes of New Romanian Cinema.

Radu Jude has stated: “Directing this film, my main concern was to tell the story as honestly as possible. I didn’t make any moral judgment about the characters, their actions and the world they live in. I only wanted to understand them, and to reveal their humanity.” To tell the story honestly and openly without any subjective or moral judgment is a common quality of recent Romanian films – both shorts and features – the main quality appreciated by film critics and rewarded by film festivals at any level.

Cristian Mungiu with his new film, *Four Months, Three Weeks, and Two Days* (*Patru luni, trei saptamâni si doua zile*) took the Palme d'Or in 2007. It was the third year in a row that Romanian films topped in Cannes. Cristian Nemescu’s first and last feature (he was killed in a car accident in August 2006), *California Dreamin’* won the “Un Certain Regard Award” in Cannes and the FIPRESCI Prize also in 2007.

Did they find a secret formula for success that other filmmakers might easily adopt? There is no formula, but some filmmakers could probably learn a thing or two from these models of narrative focus and invention. These directors create memorably idiosyncratic characters and incidents while following specific events as they unfold, usually disastrously, often comically. Social issues raised by this unusual approach to storytelling become even sharper and more challenging. These directors, most of whom write their scripts as well, don't exploit drama with their minimalist means, though their stories and settings have a common and recognizable style (long takes, hyper-naturalism and hand-held camera) which is not solely an aesthetic choice – it's also a result of low budgets and poor financing. If they have a common denominator that can explain such a "community" success, it is a wish to make a sincere cinema - to focus on familiar characters in recognizable circumstances, in which Romanian audiences can see themselves. Tragedy, irony, and satire are all part of these young filmmakers' moral and aesthetic arsenal.

Being teenagers and film-school students they all witnessed the old regime, and a "new democracy" made the country like so much of the Third World, on the outskirts of legality, poverty, and social order. They all learned from the older oppositional generation, utilizing the best they found in the work of their predecessors yet turning it into their own creation. Thanks to Ceausescu's ideological lack of foresight, they weren't as heavily brainwashed as the Russians and Bulgarians had been and were able to skip the "wiping-the-slate clean" period. No surprise then that the films are similar in style and offer a glimpse into a society that's gone through all the promises, disasters, and turmoils of past and present conditions. They have largely avoided the easily digestible model of an affectionate and sentimental look at those good old/ bad old days of communism – prevalent in several

recovering Central European countries. While Bulgarians are still putting the puzzle of national history and culture together - sentimentally and in a decadent fashion, the Romanians rely on shocking imagery that is almost proudly austere, yearning for that crude realism of desperation and the ability above all to laugh at it.

It is remarkable that all of these directors started by making short films as a first attempt to explore a taboo-theme that would later be extended in a feature film, often by another director as for example with the theme of banned abortion, started by Corneliu Porumboiu in *Liviu's Dream* (2004) and brilliantly deepened by Cristian Mungiu in *Four Months, Three Weeks, and Two Days* (2007). A kind of collective development, but still each of the directors managed to follow his own path, telling stories in his own individual fashion.

Radu Jude has succeed with *The Tube with a Hat* to take yet another step forward – from a dark, tragic and grotesque contemplation of the past to a universally meaningful depiction of human nature; from death-rattle humour to open and light-hearted laughter. Still it is hardly a cinema of mindless or merely clever entertainment. It is rather a cinema that makes people squirm, think and feel not only with their brains but also with their hearts.

Radu Jude will return to the Sundance Film Festival in 2008 with his first feature, *The Happiest Girl in the World* (following the proven path: make a short then return with a feature). The film, which is a family drama (unfortunately not as light as *The Tube with a Hat*) is already nominated for Sundance/NHK International Filmmakers Award. Aarhus is fortunate to be hosting Radu Jude, who does not travel much, at the International Short Film Symposium on March 12-15th 2008.

It is not easy to predict whether, in the long run, the New Romanian Cinema will fulfil the requirements for success. What

remains certain is the cyclical apparition of the creative spirit, periodically bringing energy and brilliance to Romanian cinema. This time around the invocation of the spirit is much more forceful than ever before. But if these young directors are to meet all of our expectations and expand their body of work beyond its promising beginning, they need to diversify and this requires another level of financial support.

Indeed, the milk factory logo in the opening credits of the *Caméra d'Or*-winning *12:08, East of Bucharest* will look at least unserious in the future. Until now, Porumboiu has admitted to relying almost entirely on the financial and logistical support of his wealthy father, as well as local businesses. And it's hard to believe that Mungiu will continue to use personal belongings as he did to decorate *4 months, 3 weeks and 2 days*.

Here begins another challenge – how a higher level of funding could be possible when Romania produces only two movies per year (Bulgaria produces five to seven) with the support of the National Centre for Cinematography. If the health of a country's film industry were measured by the number of annual productions, Romania's would have been pronounced dead by now. International co-productions seem to be the only way out. After all, Martin Scorsese produced Mitulescu's *The Way I Spent the End of the World*. Runaway Hollywood productions, such as Miramax's *Cold Mountain*, have done a world of good for the local industry; while the privatized Castel Film and Media Pro Studios served as training grounds for a number of now successful filmmakers who later went on to found their own production companies. Still, having only 38 movie theatres in the whole country and almost zero audience, Romanian cinema seems to thrive only in the rarefied environments of world film festivals, and like Iran's cinema, to be almost totally ignored at home.

On Adrian Sitaru



Born in 1971, Adrian Sitaru received a Computer Science degree before receiving his degree in Film Directing in 2004 from the Media University in Bucharest. He has directed several short and medium-length films, and one feature film, *Angling*, to be released in 2008. His short, *Waves*, presented at the Sundance Film Festival in 2008, was awarded the "Pardino d'Oro" at the Locarno Film Festival in 2007, the "Heart of Sarajevo" at the Sarajevo Film Festival, the "Bayard d'Or" in Namur, and special mentions at the Milano Film Festival – short film competition, Filmini Festival

in Sofia, Bulgaria, and DaKINO (Romania). He worked as an assistant director for *Vacuums* (Luke Cresswell and Steve McNicholas) and with Radu Jude, for *Amen* (directed by Costa Gavras).

Filmography

FEATURE FILM

Angling (2007, 80 min.)

TV FILMS INCLUDE:

2006 *I want to Feel* (47 min.)
 2006 *Love Sick* (47 min.)
 2006 *Wake Up* (57 min.)
 2006 *The Liar* (35 min.)
 2006 *The Second Chance* (40 min.)
 2006 *The Revenge* (57 min.)
 2006 *Too Late* (42 min.)

ESSAY

2000 *An Easter Day* (5 min.)
 2000 *The Kitchen Bug* (5 min.)
 2001 *Christmas's Eve* (12 min.)

SHORTS - FICTION:

1999 *Death, my girlfriend* (5 min.)
 1999 *The Eclipse* (4 min.)
 2000 *The Title of this Film Appears Later!* (1 min.)
 1999 *The Soap* (3 min.)
 2000 *My Little Pleasure* (2 min.)
 2000 *f* (3 min.)
 2001 *Biju* (5 min.)
 2001 *Last Kiss* (3 min.)
 2002 *Fun Fan* (7 min.)
 2004 *About Biju* (12 min.)
 2007 *Waves* (18 min.)

EXPERIMENTAL

1999 *Tom Waits – Live in My Room* (3 min.)
 2004 *A Very Bad Day* (20 sec.)
 2004 *Printing – Job Description* (20 sec.)
 2004 *Theodora's Life* (5 min.)
 2004 *The Title of this Film Appears Later (2)!* (30 sec.)
 2004 *The Title of this Film Appears at the End* (1 min.)

An interview with Adrian Sitaru

Anca Mitroi

You have made many short films, and you're here at Sundance with Waves, which is also a short. Do you have a preference for short films?

Well, when I applied at the Romanian National Council for Cinema for funds for another short film, somebody said: "Short again? Come on boy, it's time to move on, it's time to make a feature film". But to me, this aspect is not relevant: I just want to film interesting stories, and if they take one minute, or ninety minutes, or five hundred minutes, this does not matter to me. What I am interested in, as director, is to tell a nice story. Now, of course, there is the financial aspect, but this a catch 22: you can make a short with little money, but a short film will not attract a huge crowd, it's not a "money maker" as feature films can be. So it's a choice you make from the start. Fortunately one can make short films relatively easy, and we know that there are some really great shorts out there. But one knows that you can't make money with that. I just hope I'll do both shorts and feature films, and I'll enjoy making both, if I like the story.

Well, you like the story, but do the Romanians like these stories? Do they like the new Romanian movies that everybody has been talking about? Aren't they too much into all the Hollywood kind of movies?

I think that's the case everywhere in the world. Unfortunately, the Romanian general public had a very vague, lukewarm reaction to all of these Romanian movies receiving prestigious prizes at international film festivals. Maybe it would be an exaggeration to say it's just a lack of interest. There are other aspects too: there is no decent distribution network. I was told that in Romania there are only 34 real and functional cinemas (excluding the Cineplex movie theaters). I am from Deva, which is a small town. It has one cinema, but it's worse than if we were in some village in the middle of nowhere: you can't understand what the actors are saying because the sound is bad, and that matters, of course, for the Romanian audience. I've seen Mungiu's film in France, and in Sarajevo, and I could hear perfectly and understand the dialogues. But in Deva, you couldn't understand a thing. The image quality was also bad, and the movie theatre was stinky.... One can't attract viewers with such conditions. In a way, it's not just their fault if they seem to ignore the new Romanian movies. It would

actually be interesting to see, statistically, how many Romanians have watched such Romanian films, not just in movie theaters, but from the internet, even as pirated copies, or on DVDs.

Would you be interested in making a crowd-pleasing movie? That's not something you seem to be into.

I would never say no to a project if I like the story and I think the viewers may like it too. We make movies so that people see them. That's why we go to festivals, that's why we're here. I was also very happy in France, where I went with my feature film. I had a great audience there...

We talk about how accessible all the new Romanian films are. People say that it is hard to find the new Romanian films on DVD: you can still find the old ones, like those made in the 70's and in the 80's, but not that many of the recent films of this new generation of filmmakers.

It is true that the new ones that got recognized at international film festivals are not easy to find, but it's because generally they don't come out right away: they need to go through all the distribution process, and that takes about one year. And then, there is another aspect: in Romania, most of the people don't have this idea, that "I really have to see this movie now!" – they just think "Why bother? I'll see it later, when they show it on TV."

Talking about TV, some say that many of the recent Romanian movies, including yours, have grim, gory, or depressing topics, recalling in some way the Romanian media, of the 5:00 TV news that seem to look for anything that may shock: accidents, abortions, murders, drug addiction, domestic abuse or death bleak hospitals. What do you think about that?

I think it is true that the media are looking for horrors and anything that may scandalize and shock, because this is what sells well nowadays in Romania. That is probably the case in many countries. I don't know exactly what it is like in the US, but in Romania, unfortunately, these kinds of topics sell very well. But I don't think that in my movies or in other new Romanian movies we have this gross and grotesque way of insisting on horrors or accidents. It is true that, for instance, my short, *Waves*, involves an accident, and so does my feature film, and that the plot of my other short films is rather somber. But I think one needs to see beyond the mere facts. I am trying to say something more complex, more profound, and that's why one should not stop at the surface, at the anecdotal level.

But this need to “decode” means that the movie is, in a way, metaphorical—and this idea seems to go against what most of the critics in Romania and in the US seem to agree upon: that is, the new Romanian movies, unlike those of the communist period, are very direct and as non-metaphorical as they can be. How can you explain that?

Well, I think that to a certain extent, any good story that carries a meaning going beyond the “plot” can be seen as a metaphor. Even a good joke can be a metaphor. At the same time, it’s not like the films before 1990, when everything was built around metaphors. Now, the metaphor is there, but more discretely and definitely not central.

*The movies before 1990 were often built around a metaphor because of censorship, and that’s something we can see in many Eastern European productions of the communist era. However, several Romanian writers said that in a way, censorship was a productive challenge for them. We may even think of Alexandre Dumas the son, who, after all the trouble and trials and scandals he had because of his *La Dame aux camélias*, still praised the positive role censorship had for a writer. Now, you were not directly affected by the communist censorship, since you’re too young. However, since you were born in 1971, you know about censorship at least as a spectator, and you know about the movies made in Romania during that time. What do you think of the effect of the lack of censorship on the new Romanian films?*

Actually, there are various ways of seeing censorship, not just as a mechanism proper to a totalitarian regime.

That is true: Kieslowski talks about the different kinds of limitations that he experienced both in Poland and in France.

Right. And seeing censorship as somehow beneficial is not a paradox. If we see it as some sort of limitation, then any restriction, whether it is a technical or thematic limitation, makes you think more about what you want to say and how you can say it. So this way it becomes something productive.

*We talked about the stories of your films. While it is true that sometimes they involve rather violent or disturbing incidents, most of them also examine couples: *Waves*, *I Want to Feel*, *The Liar*, *Love Sick*, *Wake Up*, they are all about couples that seem functional and happy but are falling apart, that seem well balanced but are deeply dysfunctional. Or, in your feature film, you have this surface that seems so neat and then*

there comes an element that triggers a crisis, and reveals all the troubles beneath this appearance. Isn't this a lot like in Polanski's Knife in Water. What's the reason for the omnipresence of this theme?

Actually, I don't know. I've never deliberately intended to film stories about couples, but maybe I'm sort of unconsciously obsessed with that. I've also read many ethology books that study human and animal behavior and, of course, couples. Human beings are animals too, and we live in couples, and as we are not perfect, couples are not perfect either, so in these stories we try to understand human nature through the problems within couples.

Now, some of these stories, by violence of the characters' feeling, by an quasi-pathological psychology, remind of naturalism, like Zola's naturalism (I'm thinking of The Human Beast, for instance), or—to give a Romanian example—like in Rebreanu's novels. Are they among your favorite writers?

No, unfortunately neither Zola, nor Rebreanu are among my favorite writers. At a certain point, a few years ago, I liked Cochinescu, a Romanian contemporary author. But lately, I've been influenced a lot, I would say, by an American writer, Raymond Carver. I found in Carver's prose a way of talking about people that I liked very much, and that deeply resonated with what I was interested in and with what I was trying to say in my movies. There is something fascinating in the way he makes the reader perceive the mystery of human behavior, and it's also interesting that it's a kind of story where you don't have a regular "plot".

That's true: we can't say that there's a lot going on in Carver's story, but actually, there are small things that trigger tragedies, and yet everything remains so subtle...

Yes, he doesn't make a big drama out of it. You have to look for small details. And I think, in a way, that's what I'm trying to do in my stories. I'm trying to bring forth the fact that the difference between good and evil, between various human beings, lies in small details, in small things, and not in obvious, dramatic differences. You can't just say: this is a good guy and this is a bad guy. And you see that in Carver too. There's something definitely Chekhov-like in Carver. Chekhov has the same approach.

You sound like a big Chekhov fan. What plays do you have in mind?

I was mainly thinking of his short stories, all of them...

Since you talked about the writers who have influenced you, the Romanian film critics have pointed out that another difference between the new Romanian productions and those made before 1990 is that now, there are no more films based on literary works. Why is that?

I think my generation has tried to talk about our current problems and issues, and for that, we tell our own stories. Not that this may always exclude the possibility of basing a film on a literary work. But there are few texts that say "our stories". At the same time, we're still at the beginning, and I assume there will be some new short stories that may be more meaningful to us. The Romanian classics, I think they had to say other things that are not so pertinent for us. There are definitely some gaps between our generation and older generations. I guess that's the case everywhere. But then, who knows?... I think at a certain point our generation may make movies based on literary works. But for now, there is also another aspect: in Romania, we make about 10 to 12 feature films a year. That's way fewer than in other countries, so this may be another reason.

Now let's talk about filmmakers that have influenced you: any prominent Romanian or foreign directors?

There are many who have influenced me. Those who have truly affected me, about 15 or 16 years ago when I knew I wanted to be a film director, are the classical trio, that may seem like a cliché to many: Tarkovsky (I'm thinking mainly of *Solaris* and *Stalker*), Bergman, Fellini... Then, I think I was deeply influenced by Lars von Trier, I could say Lars von Trier opened my eyes and made me realize that one could make film without any money, without fancy equipment. One just needed a good idea, a good story. I also like Mike Leigh, the British director, and Gus Van Sant. There are many others, of course.

How about Romanian filmmakers?

I like Mungiu, and I like Cristi Puiu very much and I think he is the one who started this "transfiguration" of the Romanian cinema, with his peculiar way of seeing the world in his *The Dough and the Stuff*.

No older Romanian directors?

Well, I like Pintilie, and Daneliuc...

No directors from the "beginnings" of Romanian cinema?

Not really: I think there are many other directors who had a stronger impact on me before we get to somebody like Jean Mihail or Jean Georgescu...

Now, to get back to your work, what do you think is your most important accomplishment?

The fact that around 2003-2004 I decided to make an independent feature film basically on my own, and I did it. I got this idea from the fact that I had already made some short films with my parents, my friends. The idea was not an accomplishment in itself, of course. But I was able to find some production houses to help me with the camera, with the sound, so that I didn't have to pay, and then I found some friends and actors who liked the script, and we actually had to shoot in just seven days. That was really hard. A film takes longer than that, but we were able to it in ten days, which is still good. After that, I hoped I could find a real producer who would like my movie and who would invest money and passion in my work. And this happened: when I showed my movie in Paris a French producer liked it very much. Things didn't happen very quickly, but in 2007 I got the necessary funds to put it on 35 mm, and I guess sometime it will be ready. Once again, it is not a commercial film, it will not be a blockbuster, but I would be happy if we just could recuperate the money we invested in it, and if after that there is still enough so that can buy ourselves a beer, that would be great! It's a great challenge for us, it is also a great hope, because it means, once again, that one can make movies in Romania, even without lots of characters, even without special effects.

Then, of course, another accomplishment for me is the fact that I am here, at the Sundance Festival with my *Waves*, which is the only East-European short film in this category.

Now this is something that everybody has been talking about, that is, to paraphrase Porumboiu's original title (A fost sau nu a fost): is there or isn't there a new generation, a consistent new trend in Romanian cinema? Do you all have something in common, you and Radu Jude, and Corneliu Porumboiu, and Mungiu, and Puiu, and others?

Yes and no. To see myself in the same category as Cristi Puiu or Mungiu, that's too much, I still have to prove that I can accomplish something that can compare with what they have done. Maybe I can compare with Radu Jude, I've worked with him, we were even classmates, and we've done some good things together. But I think one can talk about us as a coherent group or generation because we do have something in common. Maybe not much, but something that has to do with our way of relating to stories, producers, material problems of moviemaking. But, once again, I would be happy if Radu Jude and I could prove that we can belong to the same category as Puiu and Mungiu. We also belong to a generation who has realized that, thanks to current technology, it is relatively easy to make a movie. It's almost unbelievable, compared to the way things were in the past. All you really need is a good story that talks about life...

Well, isn't that's what Aristotle said a while ago?

And I guess he was right, the good old guy...Even now, in 2008, when you can make amazing things so easily, you still need a good story.

Park City, Sundance Film Festival, 19 January 2008



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