

“Living in exile helped me to find my roots and understand who I am. The suffering of exile was an opportunity: it taught me to become more human and understand diversity. The meeting of different cultures is a laborious pro-

Mihaileanu: our children need the cinema

CULTURE 1

a cura di Claudia Stanila

cess, but it will give rise to a better culture for us all”. In this interview, the great director of *Train of Life* tackles the major issues being debated in Europe today and talks about cinema as a form of artistic expression

Radu Mihaileanu, the Romanian director, screenwriter and producer who shot into the international limelight in 1998 with his film *Train de Vie* (Train of Life, which won an Oscar nomination, an award at the Sundance festival, the Fipresci prize and the David di Donatello prize), subsequently gained acclaim for *Va, vis et deviens* (Live and Become, winner of the Cesar award for best screenplay) and has a new film, *Le Concert*, scheduled for release shortly, is an unusual filmmaker. He fled Ceausescu's Romania in the 1980s and absorbed the influence of various cultures (Romanian, Jewish and French) into his poetics, breezily surpassing the idea of a single ethnic identity. Constant elements in his poetics are a preference for characters that have been humiliated or treated violently by history and an irresistible attraction for humour and tragicomedy, both characteristic traits of the Jewish and the Romanian ethos.

Where do the tone and the irony of his films originate? From his ancient and beloved native country, he explains. “A kind of blend of the Slavic soul of the north and the Byzantine and Turkish-Arab soul of the south, with its *joie de vivre* and festive spirit

deriving from the old civilization that came to us from the west through the Austro-Hungarian culture, plus the vital energy and desire to celebrate life so typical of the gypsies and the Jews, form the specificity of the Romanian ethos and a particular sense of humour that we can find in the works of playwrights such as Eugene Ionesco and Ion Luca Caragiale”, says the filmmaker.

We sit in a Parisian café enlivened by the rhythms of Arab music and talk about the success of Romanian cinema, which has increasingly fascinated and stirred people's sensibilities in recent times; the value and democratic potential of audiovisual expression; the enriching power of exile; identity, racism and the ineluctability of intercultural dialogue.

You left Ceausescu's Romania when you were 22 years old.

I wanted to run away, like many others in that hellish era of dictatorship. I found it suffocating to live in that context. When I left I had no idea that there would be a revolution one day. I simply thought I would never be able to express myself the way I wanted to and make the films I wanted to, and that therefore I would not be



able to exist. I was continually afraid that I would end up saying something stupid or doing something that would classify me as “an enemy of the people”, which often happened back then, and go straight to jail.

Was your experience of exile synonymous with alienation or enrichment? (I ask him the question thinking of Primo Levi, who wrote, in reference to a character in one of his books: “He was forced to emigrate; it was his fate to be torn apart”.)

Although it was painful, since I had to leave my friends, my family and my culture, the experience of exile was essential for my life and artistic production. Without this phase I would not be who I am today; I would not make the films I make, I would not have my vision of life, humanity and history.

To paraphrase the title of a splendid book by Vintila Horia on the virtues of being uprooted and how revelatory it can be of our inner truth, would you also say “God was born in exile”?

Yes, living in exile helped to me to find my roots and understand who I am. The suffering of exile was an opportunity. It taught me to become more human, and what it means to be different. The meeting of different cultures, which is so laborious today, will lead to a new, superior culture, richer and more human.

What do you think of the current success of Romanian cinema?

Romanian cinema today is very fertile today from the artistic point of view, and one of the most interesting in the world, even though it lacks sufficient funds considering the excellent quality of its directors, actors and producers. It is hard to classify into a single genre. One might call it cinema with a very social paradigm, like the work of the Romanian director Lucian Pintilie or the English filmmakers Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, but Romanian films are actually much more wide-ranging.

Where would you place yourself: in the Romanian new wave, or closer to French or American cinema?

I'd like to consider myself part of the Romanian new wave, but we don't make the same kind of films. I'm of Romanian origin



but I live in France; I have travelled a great deal and as a result I have been strongly influenced by filmmaking and culture from all over the world: African, South American, Asian, Russian. I would be flattered to be likened, in terms of humour and tragicomedy, to highly creative directors such as Lubitsch or Billy Wilder.

A keen sense of humour is also a significant characteristic of the Romanian ethos. How important is humour in your films and your life?

For me, humour is life itself. And it is also a form of decency, a way to describe tragedies more eloquently.

What was the origin of *Live and Become*, that extremely moving story of the lead character Schlomo's positive imposture?

I was fortunate enough to meet an Ethiopian immigrant who told me his story. Although it is not the plot of the film, his experience really struck me; it found an echo in something in my own life.

You found yourself on familiar terrain from the emotional point of view.

Yes, emotional and in terms of references. I know the way someone who is different looks at a different society; I know what it means to suffer separation from one's mother, one's family, one's near and dear ones, even if I have never lived in a hunger camp in Africa, I'm not black and therefore have not suffered all the discrimination and the problems of the Schlomo character.



Grazia Neri_AFP

_The Romanian director says that he got the idea for the movie *Live and Become* from the story of an Ethiopian emigrant he met by chance. "His story found an echo in something in my own life"

In *Live and Become*, you present Israel as a land of welcome and simultaneously as a land of rejection. Non-Jewish Ethiopians are sent back to their country.

Yes, like any other country, Israel has its imperfections and its fears. Israel is the Promised Land but, at the same time, it is a normal country. We ask it to be an exemplary country because it is the land of all the religions, but unfortunately it is like all other countries, with perfect and imperfect people.

How did you get the idea for the extraordinary *Train de Vie*, a work of lyrical fantasy with Jews disguised as Nazis? What alchemy do you generally use to choose a certain theme: is it research or fate?

An old friend had told me about a similar event that had apparently taken place between Poland and Russia. It was untrue, because a train cannot go through a station without being seen, but his story gave me the idea for the film. Then I turned the story around with Jews who organise themselves into two fake teams: the Nazis and their deportees. That time, as with so many other times, it was the plot of the film that came to me... yes, probably it's fate.

Moni Ovadia coordinated the dubbing into

Italian for *Train de vie*. What was it like to work with the Italian actor?

He is an exceptional person. We are on the same wavelength; we have the same acute vision of Jewish culture and the Jewish religion and the current problems. He is a special person, an extraordinary person.

You have a similar empathy with Goran Bregovic, who has produced the music for your film.

He too is a fantastic character, a real poet. It is not always very easy to work with him because he's in his Balkan dream off in Belgrade, but he is a genius, a very great composer. Meeting Bregovici and Moni Ovadia were great opportunities. And that's what the films are: a thousand chances that find themselves together.

You have described yourself as a political filmmaker. What is your view of cinema?

Cinema and the audiovisual media have become more than art; they are now such strong elements and vectors of education and reflection on society that they are sometimes even opposed to them. I am frightened by the strength that the image has acquired. The audiovisual has become a supra-national, political, force and hence we as filmmakers all have a huge responsibility – a responsibility that creates problems for us: how to "do" art, how to address an audience of millions and millions of people, how to influence their social and political decisions. This responsibility aside, cinema remains an art and we creators must preserve the innocent and naive part of ourselves, without which we cannot create.

What is your view of the very topical theme of identity? What do you think of the strong tendency in Europe to judge entire ethnic groups as homogenised blocs?

Fortunately, our identity is perpetually changing. The encounter with the Other, who gives you energy and knowledge and helps you to grow, is essential. Racism is an old and unfortunately permanent illness. There was widespread fear not only of the poor person but also of the foreigner, the different. We live in a civilization in which there are still signs of racism. And it happens everywhere, not only in Italy, where the most sensational events have

happened. The problem in Italy was very specific, and unfortunately followed “classic” patterns: simplistically identifying Roms and gypsies with people who break laws, steal and kill. According to this aberrant reasoning, “A black person committed murder, so all blacks are violent”.

This automatic inference does not work in the case of an American who goes into a bar and shoots ten people.

Of course it doesn’t work, because you are talking about an American citizen, a white person who is part of the so-called superior race. Generalising in the case of poor immigrants or minorities, the different, is typical of racism. Our civilization has to grow. We have many years to go to become truly civilized. Unfortunately we Romanians in Romania are the first to be racist: we do not treat the gypsies much better. Without the acceptance of difference, there cannot be progress and democracy.

How do you see the future of European cinema?

Good, provided the Americans don’t “gobble us up”. I see it as good if we are able to defend ourselves, not so much from the cultural point of view, because in this sense the Americans have a lot of interesting things to say, but from the financial and market point of view: if we exploit all the organisms and criteria of financing, production and – to use a word I do not like – protection of national filmmaking. I am fond of Turkish, Romanian, Hungarian and Russian films too, and I cannot imagine them all turning into a kind of “McDonald’s” cinema. Every time I go to see a movie from a European country, I want to find its cultural and national specificity. It is only by preserving their specificity and identity that cultures can dialogue and mutually enrich each other.

What are the dangers for European cinema?

If there were a risk of cultural dictatorship, it would be because of a lack of financing and not because of a lack of themes or because of an ideological ban. The reigning ideology today is money. Those who no longer have the money to make



...A scene from the film *Train de Vie*. Mihaileanu says he has a great deal of professional and personal esteem for Moni Ovadia and Goran Bregovic who, like him, are intellectuals without borders

films will no longer be able to open their mouths. We are facing the threat of a dictatorship of money and image. People who have the financial means have Internet, television, everything; they have strong opinions. There has to be a democracy of audiovisual expression – this is a battle we are currently fighting in France – so that our children can have access to different forms of expression and then form their own opinions.

You have made some splendid films on a modest budget. How do you finance your films?

I get most of my financing in France. It’s different with *Le Concert*.

Your latest film got the largest chunk of financing –1.6 million leis – at the second competition organised by the Romanian National Centre for Cinema.

It is the first film of mine to which Romania is making a significant financial contribution: a co-production in which Romania will no longer be a minority financial partner. I am delighted that Romania has taken this position: it is proof that Romania has made an authentic entry into the European Community from the filmmaking point of view as well.