

'Loverboy': Seduction in the Times of the EU

FILM

For Romanian police, a "Loverboy" is a man who seduces young women, becomes involved with them, only to later push them into prostitution and eventually turn them over to sex traffickers. • Acclaimed director Catalin Mitulescu, a leading figure in Romanian's so-called new wave movement, became fascinating with the human dynamics of such situations.

The "Loverboy" of his new film must decide between playing out his seducer and middleman role and defending a woman he believes he's fallen in love with. •

by Cecilia Ferrara

Luke heads into the lineup room wearing white vest, a look of disdain, and a split lip. Wearing a number on his chest, he stands beside a number of other men. On the other side of the police station glass is a very young blonde woman, a victim of human trafficking. She looks straight at him. Luke just dabs his lip sensually. "No," says the girl, "I don't see my 'Loverboy' here..." Caught in a love-hate relationship, Ana refuses to finger Luca, even though he lured Italy and made her work as a prostitute.

"Loverboy" is the nickname Romanian police have given to male recruiters who pick up local woman and then ship them West, into prostitution rings. "Loverboy" is also the title of the second feature film by director Catalin Mitulescu, a "new wave" Romanian filmmaker whose first effort, "The Way I Spent the End of the World," was entered into the "Un certain regard" section of the Cannes Film Festival in 2006 and won top honors for actress Doroteea Petre. The 39-year-old, Bucharest-born Mitulescu is no stranger to Cannes success. In 2004, his Romanian slice-of-life film "Trafic" won Cannes' top prize, the Palme d'Or, in the Best Short Film category.

"east" saw a screening of "Loverboy" at the Sarajevo Film Festival (SEE BOX), where co-star Ada Condeesco won the "Heart of Sarajevo" for Best Actress.

The story follows tattooed 20-year-old Luke (George

LEFT "Loverboy" director Catalin Mitulescu speaking with actor George Pistereanu.

FACING PAGE The film's two lead actors, George Pistereanu and Ada Condeescu.



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Pistereanu), who works as a mechanic in a village near the Danube. He's a poor man's Jimmy Dean side, and that side of him leads to work as a seducer on the side. He seduces local village girls and procures them for a man named Constance, who runs a sex trafficking ring that dispatches the women westward. But one of Luke's conquests, Veli (Ada Condeescu), seems different. He falls for her and tries to make amends.

"east" spoke to Mitulescu. These are excerpts from the conversation.

What was the genesis of your film?

I learned of the "Loverboy" figure thanks to a documentary produced by Strada Film (a production studio founded by Mitulescu in 2006). The movie was by, "Life in Squares," was by Ivana Mladenovic, and it interested me immediately. I started doing research into the subject.

As it turns out the seducing figure isn't a protector. He's a kind of procurer used by bosses. He gets involved with the girls, gets deeply involved with them, and then uses that leverage to push them toward prostitution. But all this requires a significant personal investment on the part of the man. It's an interesting social phenomenon. The role of protector or pimp isn't about love but money. The

"Loverboy" scenario, by contrast, involves a major emotional involvement on both sides. In a way, the girls, who think they're in love, "choose" to be prostitutes without being aware they're headed into trafficking. Typically, they work as prostitutes for couple of months in Romania, and then are sold to foreign groups, including those run by non-Romanians.

Where do the young women usually end up?

Mostly Italy and Spain, at least according to police said. But it's hard to know exactly where they land.

Investigators have traced the trafficking network into Holland or Norway, but these are mostly transit and "sorting" countries.

It's a new phenomenon, partly the result of increased policing of human trafficking since Romania entered the European Union in 2007.

But it's since become widespread. According to police, 80 percent of Romanian streetwalkers in Europe were recruited by "Loverboy" figures.

But it's very hard to prove a crime; since the girls don't want to take down the man they're in love with. It makes you feel for both the victims and the perpetrators. The other legal difficulty is that in Romania you need at least



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three witnesses to start criminal proceedings, plus the legal system itself is incredibly slow. As a result, most of the girls who choose to come forward eventually recant the charges.

But my movie doesn't set out to be a documentary or social statement. What interested me was game that the youngsters create. The "Loverboy" figure is the first in a chain of exploitation. The boy himself is usually a teenager. So he seduces the girl, pretends to fall in love with her, and then gradually convinces her to have sex with his friends, until her gives her up to the industry.

The game gets progressively more dangerous and exciting at once, culminating in the separation between the "Loverboy" and the girl. There's an emotional intensity on both sides, and for the "Loverboy" going through with the process can become like an addiction. I remember a remarkable comment by a former "Loverboy" I met while researching the film. "Remember that behind every girl who prostitutes herself in Europe there's a love story."

Looking at the numbers, it seems that human trafficking rings based in Romania have met with some success, both as a result of the country's EU entry Europe and the abolition of visas. According to a recent study by the anti-AIDS agency Tampep, having surpassed both Russia and Ukraine.

LEFT
Pistoreanu and Condeescu in a scene from the film.

CENTER
Pistoreanu plays a procurer of women.

RIGHT
A scene from "Loverboy," which deals with sexual trafficking.

What are the social causes of this phenomenon?

No doubt there are very specific social reasons. Romania has always had an abundance of street children, mostly abandoned male kids who have run away from their families. For some, becoming a "Loverboy" can be a way of honing their talents as con artists. They get to play at seduction while earning money. Even young women can harbor certain rebelliousness toward their families, or against the rules of village society. Romania isn't an easy society to explain. For decades, it was run by one of the toughest regimes in Eastern Europe. So far, there's been no real return to normalcy.

Romania's filmmakers have done extremely well at international festivals. You won the short subject Palme d'Or in Cannes in 2004 and two years later "The Way I Spent the End of the World" earned best actress honors for Doroteea Petre in the "Un certain regard" section. Corneliu Porumboiu's film won the 2006 Cannes Camera d'Or for best first film

LEINA

This year's edition of Sarajevo Film Festival will be remembered for Angelina Jolie's tears. Jolie, who arrived in Sarajevo with husband Brad Pitt, received the festival's "Honorary Heart," in part to assuage her disappointment after Bosnian authorities decided to block the domestic release of her first writing and directing effort, "In the Land of Blood and Honey," a love story set during the Bosnian Civil War and due out at Christmas. The Bosnian decision came after victims' associations complained about Jolie's interpretation of wartime events. The film focuses on a young Serbian man (played by Goran Kostic) and a Bosnian-Muslim woman (actress Zana Marjanovic) who begin a romance before the ethnic war of 1992 pulls them apart. The Sarajevo Film Festival, now in its 17th year, assembles regional cinema from Poland to Turkey. It's also a gathering place for international distributors eager to see new films from the Balkans and new EU states. The festival got its start in the summer of 1995, during the final months of the city's historic siege. It represented an act of cultural resistance. Since then, it has developed into one of Europe's major festivals, drawing more than 100,000 participants annually. This year's festival saw the screening of 220 films screened from 44 countries. More than 2,500 guests attended, including 800 journalists from 34 countries.

with "12:08 East of Bucharest," about characters who reflect on the 1989 revolution. Then there's Cristian Mungiu, who took the 2007 Palme d'Or with "4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days," about illegal abortions under communism, and Florian Serban's "If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle," which was awarded the 2010 Jury Prize at the Berlin Film Festival. That's just a sampling. Is there really such as thing as what critics label the Romanian New Wave?

I prefer to say that there are independent directors who separately make auteur movie. While they may be popular at international film festival, they're hardly seen at home. I honestly don't know if there's such a thing as the Romanian New Wave, at least in any organized way. I really think we haven't finished with the thread that started about a decade after the fall of the Nicolae Ceausescu regime, namely a certain kind of confessional filmmaking based around our recent history.



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Only when we begin producing films that are more universally artistic we see what's what with Romanian cinema. Look at Italian Neorealism. It was based around a few central figures, Visconti, De Sica, Rossellini, and fundamentally tied to historical circumstances, World War II and its aftermath.

Our industry faces immense problems, foremost in distribution, both at home and abroad. The approach of the Romanian public would also have to change. At this point they're accustomed to Hollywood stuff, not auteur material.

The critical point is financing. In Romania, there's National Commission for the Cinema (CNC), which is in charge of allotting public funds for filmmakers. But whatever its good intentions, it's a highly bureaucratic and dysfunctional agency.

Has EU entry changed the life of Romanians? How was the event lived out?

We lived it with great joy. But in the years that followed, we began to realize that being part of the EU wasn't so simple, that in order to enjoy the benefits of membership that we'd have to acquire new skills.

It became clear that our lives wouldn't be radically changed just by snapping our fingers. The economic crisis has made everything even more difficult, of course. For now, Romanians are Euro-enthusiasts, but I don't know how long that will hold up.