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INTERVIEW

Andrei Butica on Filming Sex

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We spoke to Romanian cinematographer Andrei Butica on the occasion of our sex-themed issue (October 2017). Butica, whose credits include Netzer's sexually explicit "Ana, Mon Amour", speaks about the challenge of filming sex, sexuality's aesthetics, and its awkwardness.

So, in honor of the sex-themed issue of EEFB, I wanted to talk to you today about your experiences of filming sex scenes. Which one stands out the most for being interesting, challenging or inspiring?

I would say the most inspiring was *Back Home* (2015), a film by Andrei Cohn. It's a drunken sex scene where they don't get very far. The sex scenes I made are all interesting and funny from my point of view. I think humans having sex are funny. And the way they behave and the poses they make – I don't know what their idea of sex is. It seems very funny and very false. So, for example, the sex scene in *Ana, Mon Amour* (Cãlin Peter Netzer, 2017) was not so difficult for me, but it was all on the actors. They need to be very sure of themselves and very sure of the people around them during the shooting. This one in *Ana, Mon Amour* is interesting because we had some prosthetics – there was no actual contact between them. We used latex to seal the actual body parts, and we used prosthesis. A wonderful penis! And some hair. It looks very realistic in the film, but we tried to avoid actually showing it. In person it looked like Frankenstein's creation or something! It was horrifying. Cãlin and I rehearsed it with the make-up girl [Dana Angelescu], who was the one who created the prosthesis and actually put them on. We rehearsed everything and we chose the angles we wanted to shoot from, according to exactly how much we were going to see and how much we would allow on the screen. There was semen coming out, which came from a small pump that you had to squeeze.

So it was a combination of lighting and careful choice of angles…

Yeah, because the actors were nervous about it. Of course they were. The first time we shot it, it was me, Cãlin and the other camera man, Sandu [Constantin], who was operating the second camera, plus the actors. So all five of us were together in a room, and we were like, “OK, let’s take it all off.” They didn’t need that, they didn’t need us to be like them, but they were nervous and we started to improvise, to see how we could do it. Cãlin would tell them, “you will be leaning on your back, you will be over her, so try to change the position.” Me and Sandu were just trying to catch the angles, and we spent somewhere around four or five hours just trying to find our way through this scene. After that I think they lost some of the pressure that had been put on them. When we shot for real, in the real location, with the real cameras, there was something that they wanted from us – they didn’t want the focus pullers in with us, so we did the focus on our own, and I think it was just me, Sandu and the sound guy in addition to those two. Cãlin was connected via a monitor that was off-limits for everybody else, of course. And we shot it over the course of half a day, I think. Everything was prepared before – the lighting, the camera, the lenses and all that. And in the end we actually did what we rehearsed, but with a bit more participation from the actors. But it was very funny.

What did you think of the scene when you saw it in the final film?

It was good, and I think it’s not too showy but it’s not a shame to show either. But I still find it funny. Actually, as Cãlin was editing and I went to visit a couple of times to see how things were going, I was talking to Dana [Bunescu] and Cãlin about the sex scene. At the beginning, when I read the script and Cãlin told me that he wanted to shoot this scene as realistically as possible and he would get a fake penis and all that, I said, “OK, but why? Why do you actually need this scene?” Before shooting it I had this idea that it was sort of an artifice to give you a feeling of reality. When you go into details that are so intimate, then you say ok, this is really real. And afterwards, after seeing it in the film, it wasn’t used like that. It works, but it wouldn’t have if it had been used in that way.

I felt that the scene actually told you a lot about the relationship between the characters.

They did not fit together, and you can see it in this scene. Of course it depends on what you think about having sex and how you relate to it, and I think they were on character with that. They were alone, each one was minding their own business and their own satisfaction. And I think it works in that way. I didn’t understand that from the beginning, but after we rehearsed it I understood what it was all about. It’s not more real than real, and I think the humor works well.

Have you noticed any trends in the portrayal of sex in film at the moment?

There is a sort of trend. There is a movement towards porn going into cinema, towards this kind of showy sex. I don't know what the actual reality of sex is. It's not like having sex with someone brings you to the most inner part of a relationship. And you don't necessarily understand anything from seeing other people having sex. But people want this. They say, "OK, we're going to be very intimate, we're going to show you everything." And you end up shooting two actors who are pretending to have sex, and sometimes going even further, using prosthetics or not – having real sex – and you end up with nothing.

Is this something you've noticed in Romanian cinema or cinema in general?

I'm talking about film in general. In Romanian cinema, it isn't happening. This is a more conservative country, and this is slow to develop. *Ana* has one of the first showy sex scenes. There is *Boogie* (2008) by Radu Muntean that is almost explicit about sex and shows a penis or something. Then there is *Tuesday after Christmas* (2010), which is quite explicit at the beginning, and it's also by Radu Muntean. He's clearly interested in this. He's trying to use it in the sense of providing you with a certificate of truthfulness. But otherwise these trends are more abroad than here.

Did it ever happen to you that you refused to film a sex scene because you felt it went too far or did you ever ask to change the approach?

I talked with Cãlin about Ana and I asked, "do you really want to do it?" I had my doubts at the beginning, and he was very insistent. "Yes, yes, yes, let's do it. Imagine how fun it will be with a fake penis!" If there is something I feel isn't right inside the script, inside the film or inside the structure then I communicate it right away. Because then I give the other guy the chance to actually explain it to me and I don't get stuck with this in my head. I need to have it explained.

What about the other film you mentioned, Back Home?

It's a movie about a guy who is from a village in Romania, Doi Mai, it's a village at the seaside, very close to the Bulgarian border. He's coming back home from the city, where he lives now after having left home when he was little. He comes back to his father, and his mother died three years before. He's a sort of a literary figure. He writes poetry and he's a journalist, but he's a little bit of a loser at the same time. But everyone in the village regards him as the village promise who made it in the big city. When he comes back he meets with a

childhood friend who is the exact opposite of him, and he also meets his high school sweetheart. After a whole night of drinking and reminiscing he ends up at home and they try to have sex, but it goes very badly because he's abusing her in a way. Or rather he tries to abuse her but she stops him. It's a very good sex scene, but it's so dirty and you feel so ashamed of watching it. It's incredible.

Did you also feel that way when you were filming it?

Yeah. It was me, Andrei Cohn, the director, and Alexandru Papadopol and Ioana Flora, who were the actors. It was just the four of us. It was something like 3 o'clock in the night when we started shooting it and everybody else was asleep. The four of us there were trying to make it as horrible as possible, and slowly, slowly we got there. At first Ioana didn't want to take off her panties, so we tried it with her panties on, using some special skin colored ones. But after an hour and a half we said, "no, the panties need to go." And she was okay with it. Actually, there were other things besides panties that were much worse. The scene isn't showy though, you don't see anything, but it's so embarrassing for the guy, who is so drunk.

Are there any sex scenes from the history of cinema that have stayed with you particularly?

Not in particular, but I think what's interesting is that it's a question of arousal. That's what you need to play with, it's a game of arousal, the arousal of the viewer.

And how do you deal with that through the camera?

Of course it depends on the film. I can hide behind all this theoretical bullshit about "we need to shoot it handheld to move it along…" When I'm shooting, I'm mostly ashamed, I think. Why should I be? I don't know, but I am. There is a sort of modesty that affects me, and the only thing that saves me from this is saying that they are not really doing it, it's fake. It looks fake to me at the time, but when I see it on screen it works. But when I'm shooting I'm ashamed, they're ashamed, everyone is ashamed. But it's an interesting subject and it's worth going into. Why do we film sex? In the end, it's a dirty trick.

Thank you for the interview.