East European Film Bulletin

INTERVIEW

Andrei Dăscălescu on *Planet Petrila*

VOL. 76 (SUMMER 2017) BY ZOE AIANO

Documentary filmmaker Andrei Dăscălescu speaks about his portrait of a mining town struggling to resist its obliteration.

How did you first come across the situation in the mining town of Petrila?

It started by accident. I knew Ion Barbu [the film's protagonist – an artist and activist] from a previous medium length documentary that I made. I interviewed him and I ended up starting and finishing the film with him because I found him very charming and he was a good interviewee. He was organizing a folk music festival in his backyard, years ago, so I already knew a bit about the fact that he was doing crazy stuff there, like really underground cultural events. He's popular, he's quite a well known caricature artist in Romania so many friends would join him in his events, and he would bring really cultural people to his backyard in Petrila. I knew all this about him, but I was in the area by accident. I was shooting for a corporate film and it was just before Easter in 2013. My home town is in the North East of the country and normally I go there for Easter and Christmas, but it was too far to drive. So I looked on the map of the nearby Valea Jiului, which is this area with mines where I had never been and was curious about, but saw Petrila, where I knew Barbu was. So I gave him a call and I went there for one night, we spent Easter night together, and then he told me that the following week he was organizing a workshop for architecture students to come and take photos and measure for a survey of the historical mine buildings. Then they would propose alternatives for converting the mining complex into something else.

I think what motivated me is that he told me the mine is 150 years old or something and the mine came first and the town was built around it. So it's a typical mining town that was born purely because of the mine and for the mine. The plan was to take the buildings down and make an empty field where the mine stood. So my initial activist impossible was "no, they cannot fucking do

that, they cannot tear down the very reason for this town existing." OK, the mine is closing since it's not economically viable anymore, but you cannot just take down everything. So the activist in me said, "OK, I'm going to stay for the week and shoot this event to help raise awareness." So I did, and it was then that I realized that Ion Barbu is so tremendously inspiring and creative.

It must have been very intimate shooting with the miners. Did they accept you right away?

I wasn't accepted that easily but I think that's one of the challenges filmmakers have to overcome to make something good. The first time I visited the mine I spoke to the manager, who was a very friendly guy, but unfortunately he was replaced so it became a very hard process to shoot there. In the beginning, the old manager just called a guy and said "give him a tour of the mine." I also befriended this man who was the boss of the men working on the surface. He wasn't working underground but he was very passionate about his job. He really took time for me and stayed extra hours to show me around and explain how it works. He was my first connection and first choice for the main character of the mine, but then he was pensioned. So I lost the character, but then he put me in touch with Cenuşă [the film's co-protagonist]. I found him to be really interesting, and again it was love at first sight, and I think as a filmmaker you need to fall in love with your characters and with your scenery and project as whole.

How about the authorizations? Did you have to pretend it would be a less critical film than it was?

I think they were afraid that it would be a much more critical film than I was interested in doing. A friend of mine working for a TV station made an investigation about the mines, so they were really paranoid. I think with everything getting closed down a sort of Wild West situation emerged, with everybody stealing. The working conditions are also not by the book, so I think they have a lot of things to hide and they were really paranoid about having me there. They couldn't understand why I would need to shoot more than half a day. I really wanted to document the whole work flow and they said "Why? Are you a Chinese spy? Do you want to show the workflow to the Chinese? This is a state secret." Every day they found ways of delaying the shooting permission so that I would either quit or the mine would be shut down. I was not allowed in the actual mining complex.

Going back to Barbu, how did you two collaborate? Was he involved in the creative side?

He's so creative that it was actually difficult to work with him at times. It was

very hard to get the human side of him. He's a showman and whenever I was around he would put on a show. He would come to me and say "hey, I've got this great idea, let's shoot this." And of course this didn't always fit my ideas of making this documentary, so sometimes I shot things just for him. At other times, I felt really inspired, so even if I didn't really like the idea or it didn't fit the idea I had for this documentary, it brought me to another idea, like him walking in front of the walls he painted. So there are things that are staged in the film, which are inspired by him. My previous film was purely observational, and I like this style. Maybe I'm a bit shy when I'm shooting. I like to observe and to document, I don't want to get involved, to provoke or ask questions. I just want to be shooting in a corner. But with him this was impossible, and in the end this is supposed to be a film about his world, which is so full of contrast and post-apocalyptic in a way, but also very colorful. So I thought the film should borrow a bit from his shape and his way of being.

There are a lot of documentaries about mines at the moment that are very abstract and poetic, and sometimes also dehumanizing, so it's interesting to find an example that goes the other way.

I think my instinct was to make a poetic observational documentary about the mine, without Barbu, but there are jokes about directors who don't have sex because it's been done before. It's a joke in Romania, I don't know if it's international. But yeah, I was aware that there are many documentaries about mines and I saw a few that I really liked but I tried to do something different. Also, I must say that this was also good advice from HBO's producer Hanka Kastelicová, who actually wanted a film about art. I wanted a film about the mine and she wanted a film about art, so we compromised and I think it's the best way, even if it's not 100% my way.

How about the reaction from the town authorities?

It's a funny story because when I was trying to shoot and nobody would let me, I was really a pain in the ass and a persona non grata. But then, when HBO got involved and we went to Amsterdam and both national and local press wrote about this, and how it was the only Romanian film in this huge documentary festival. So they started asking "what's happening, what is this?" And then, just last week, we organized the first public screening in Romania, and we held it in Petrila. The authorities couldn't really say no and they offered us the only room available, which is called the culture house, since of course there is no cinema or theater or anything. The funny thing is that somebody gave them the idea – maybe it was even Cenuşă, I'm not really sure – to offer me the title of honorary citizen of Petrila. This was taken to a vote in the local council, and they voted yes but it was a close call. There was 40% against it and 60% for it. So I knew that they voted for this and I knew it was going to happen, so I

suggested that the official ceremony should be before screening the film, because I think if it was scheduled for after then it would put them in a very weird position because they don't come off so well in the film. So yeah, now I am an honorary citizen of Petrila, which gives me some rights, like if I own land then I don't pay taxes. The funniest thing is that it also comes with a final resting place in the graveyard. So now I have a place to be buried in Petrila for free.

What happened to the mayor? He doesn't come off too well…

The mayor changed. This is also good news for the project to save the buildings. The mayor that gets talked about in the film in not very nice words was the mayor since 1988. The official name wasn't mayor during the Communist times, he was party secretary or something like that, but he was basically in office from 1988 to 2016, with a short break at some point. But this all changed in 2016 and the new mayor is maybe a little bit more open and he's definitely younger and hopefully this will give better chances to the project of saving the buildings.

So what's the status of the buildings now?

So basically the happy ending of the film is that the buildings were classified as industrial heritage, so a few of the buildings are now saved and cannot be demolished. But what happens to them afterwards is not known yet. They still belong to the ministry of energy, and they should be transferred to the local municipality so they can access European funds or government funds to convert them into something. This is a very painstaking project and it kind of all depends on the mayor and city hall right now. So Barbu's fight to save them from demolition was successful, but converting them to something that would hold this community together is far from being accomplished.

Is it too early to tell how it will end at this point?

Well, you know, every day smugglers or poor people come and steal iron or bricks from the buildings. Also, the buildings degrade over time and the weather can destroy them in a few years if they are not properly maintained. I think it will take a few years to know if something good will happen to them or not, because if nothing happens after a few years they will probably be ruins, even though they are historical. Romania is full of historic buildings that were destroyed in this way because even though they are not allowed to demolish them, the people who have these buildings but want to build a block of flats instead just allow the building to degrade to such a strong extent that at some point they just collapse. So then they didn't demolish it, it's not their fault, and these heritage buildings disappear every day. So this could happen to Petrila

too.

Well, we need to end on a happier note than that. What’s Barbu doing now?

He’s enjoying his fame with the film. He’s actually in a different festival in Romania now to screen the film, but he’s the only one that went. He’s also enjoying his new girlfriend, who you see at the end of the film. He was kind of a Don Juan while I was shooting, but in the end he met a teacher from a different part of the country during this underground theater festival. She came with her high-school acting group, and that’s how they met. Now they are together and he is traveling between both their towns. In general, I think he’s doing well.

Thank you for the interview.