



# PARAGRAFF

interviu cu

## ADINA VĂRGATU

Programmer and

Board Member of Astra Film Festival

# Astra Film Festival, an Oasis for Documentary Film

When did your collaboration with Astra Film Festival being and in what ways have things changed since then?

It began in the '90s, therefore there was plenty of time and room for lots of changes. On every aspect. For me personally, Astra was a very fortunate event. In those rather confusing years, Dumitru Budrala already had the vision of the entire Astra Film project in his mind - a centre for documentary which was to include film production, archives, training programmes and an international documentary film festival. All this seemed utopian at the time and, as far as I'm concerned, I must confess that during the early stages of my collaboration with Astra film I had no idea whatsoever how far Dumitru's vision was reaching. I was treading on unknown territory and I had to learn as we went along, step by step. It was an opportunity for me.

A key component in ensuring the success of a film festival is the quality and diversity of the participating productions. How do you manage to bring something new for the audience every year and what are your criteria when selecting the films?

The official line-up is structured in such a way that Astra film is able to bring a variety of films for a variety of spectators. We are talking about far-reaching international productions, about films focusing on the ex-communist eastern block and, of course, about national productions and the "Student" section, which connects young Romanian documentary filmmakers to worldwide film school productions and training programmes. The films that make it to the competitive sections are subject to a two-step selection process - the preselection, made by a team of selectionners who assess all the submissions, and the final

selection. Apart from the films enrolled in the competitive sections, the festival also invites productions to take part in special programmes or screenings (which was the case, for instance, with "Google and the World Brain", that opened this year's edition of the festival). Documentaries from and about Romania are closely watched for every year so that they might be included in the "Made in Romania" panorama. In addition, every year brings a focus programme, which is usually thematic. This year, since AFF is celebrating two decades of existence, the special programme is a retrospective, "Retro 20".

Thusly, the films have many ways of making it onto the official line-up, it's a complex process, which - thank God - you don't have to go it alone! I am part of it as member of the board, together with Dumitru Budrala, the director of the festival and Csilla Kato, the artistic director. There are many criteria we take into consideration: the originality of the story and of the manner in which it is illustrated in the film, the cinematic value and, most of all, the genuineness in its approach. In Astra Film, independent productions of more or less modest means are treated the same as big-budget productions and at times they even outdo the latter, because we aren't looking for films to "please" the audience, but rather for films that get people thinking.

From your perspective, why is a documentary film festival like Astra Film of consequence?

Astra film is as consequential as documentary cinema is consequential. They say that documentary film and fiction film should not be separated into different categories, because in either case they are simply both cinema. True as that might be, it is also indisputable that documentary film

enjoys far less exposure compared to fiction film. Fortunately, there are several oases for documentary cinema, and Astra film is one of them.



What are the greatest obstacles and challenges that Astra Film faces each year?

When it comes to obstacles, I'd say there are two kinds: the recurrent ones, which we are inevitably confronted with each year and which mainly, but not exclusively relate to

financing and the unforeseeable obstacles, which spice up our lives as festival organizers.

And as far as challenges are concerned, some we concoct ourselves. This year, for instance, we are introducing a new format for the Eco-Cinematograff section. It's a competitive section so it offers an award and the jury in charge of designating the winner is made up of five high-school students, "shepherded" by Professor Vintila Mihailescu. The project aims high because it intends to involve the younger generations in an educational programme through eco-documentaries. We will have to wait and see how it develops.

Are there any films you would like to recommend to us, films which you hold in high esteem in this edition? What should the Astra Film audience not miss?

The Student section as a wholesome package. There are a total of 13 short- and medium-length films, which take you on a journey through all that is life (and death): adolescents who cannot and will not abide by adult rules, growing-up, the wedding industry, married life as it jades through the years until it reaches a point where the spouses no longer have anything to say to each other, the great passage which is death, dealt with prosaically, as a routine of life, religion between faith and cabotage etc.

And I would highly recommend "Leviathan", which is more than just a film, it's an overwhelming sensory experience.

Seeing how Astra film is celebrating its 20th edition this year, could you tell us a story or an anecdote which stuck with you through the years and which took place during a previous edition?

Starting around 2002, students from surrounding countries have begun to show up at Astra. A unique apparition were the Polish students, who have been coming to Astra for many years in a row. With their rasta hairstyles and huge backpacks, they were an exotic sight for the rather provincial landscape of Sibiu back then. I think it must have been in the autumn of 2006, the festival was about to start the following day and I was in a rush to get to the Centre for Culture where the team was working hard to get everything done in time, when I heard someone comment on the street: "Look, the Poles have arrived! Astra film must be starting."

## essential

## The Made in Romania category

## Rebuilding the portrait of a country

Similar to the past editions of the Astra Film Festival, the selectors have prepared a new series of documentaries, more precisely 12, part of the Made in Romania category. This year's out of competition films part of the special category are, regardless of the origin of their authors, made in Romania and focus on a series of subjects approached from a variety of original points of view.

The plethora of apparently diverse themes recomposes



the portrait of a rather preoccupied Romania, and quite reasonably, with the cliches and pre-conceptions linked almost instinctively to its image both within and beyond its borders. What makes this overall view even more interesting and unmissable is the

fact that the subjective views behind every film are both captivating and different from one another. From Elena Borcea, the 16-year old who, with the help of the Vira Association, made a personal documentary about how the closing of the bearing supplier in Bârlad affected her own family ("My family, briefly" was also present in Cannes, in the Short Film Corner section), to veterans like Radu Gabrea - who is 76 years old -, whose film "Jews for sale" illustrates the obsession of a country to rebuild the historic truth, by telling the story of an unorthodox transaction between Israel and communist Romania, we are dealing in the Made in Romania section with filmmakers from different age segments and professional formations. During the 12th edition, the Astra Film Festival invites you to take a look at the investigations of the filmmakers, linked both to social issues in a country still seen as a rural paradise, and to universal themes, like copyright rights in a digital era or the rejection of popular traditions in a world facing the process of globalization.

Teodora Lascu

## 10 incredible facts about the INCREDIBIL category

From the reality behind the most ambitious intellectual project on the Internet, the obsessive routine of registering thoughts, relationships, memories and even death on the most famous social network in the world to a mind-blowing incursion inside the most closed off political system known to man as well as the horrifying scenarios of 3 death squad members with Hollywood on their minds, the Incredibil category promises to surprise you with stories that have to be seen to be believed.

And if we haven't convinced you yet, here's 10 incredible facts about the "Hell's Angels" of the Astra Film Festival:

▶▶ The Act of killing (2012; d: Joshua Oppenheimer) is the death game reenactment of Anwar and his friends. In 1965, after the Indonesian government was overthrown, the 3 became leaders of the death squads. But their ambitions truly lay in the artistic side of things. In grotesque numbers inspired by westerns, American B-movies and even musicals, the trio reenact their crimes and even take on the role of their victims, placing themselves, for a while at least, in the shoes of big screen heroes like John Wayne and Marlon Brando.

▶▶ The three ex-leaders of the death squads insisted on getting paid a "modest sum" for their "artistic efforts".

▶▶ The co-director and over 20 members of the film crew wished to be credited as anonymous for fear of being hunted down by the old death squads in Indonesia.

▶▶ The films executive producers are 2 of the most important documentary film directors in the world, Werner Herzog and Errol Morris.

**Don't miss "The Act of Killing" on Saturday, at 21:00, in Sala MARSHALL**

▶▶ In 2011, the Australian Prime Minister outlawed "planking", the new extreme craze that had taken over Facebook with more than 300.000 likes, after one enthusiast in search of recognition died. This is only one of the reasons why "Facebook Follies" (2011; d: Geoff D'Eon) is not just the story of those for whom "2000 close friends" is a reality but also a study of the often disastrous implications of the most popular social network in the world.

**Come see "Facebook Follies" on Saturday, at 21:00, in Sala SAUCAN**



▶▶ In April 2012, North Korea, the most closed off nation on Earth, allowed the access of 140 journalists in order for them to witness the over the top 100 year celebration of the birth of Kim Ir Sen. Usually, North Korea allows access to about 4 reporting teams annually.

▶▶ Adelin Petrișor is the only Romanian TV journalist to film in North Korea since 1985 when a team accompanied Nicolae Ceaușescu on his last official

visit to Phenian. The reporter had been trying to get in for 6 years and the result is the "North Korea, Absolutely Unenviable" documentary (2012; d: Adelin Petrișor)

▶▶ 25 million people live in North Korea. The majority have never heard of the Internet, buy food in rations and are not allowed to own property. Only 300.000 people own cell phones, even this having required the Egyptian provider to implement a special net in 2011.

▶▶ "Google and the world brain" (2013; d: Ben Lewis), a documentary about the most ambitious project ever developed on the Internet and its legal and moral consequences, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and received extremely positive reviews. Even so, finding a distributor in the US proved a difficult task, some suggesting that the reason behind it was that the film conflicted with Google's interests.

▶▶ The film was shot on location in China, the USA, Europe and Latin America, containing some of the grandest and most beautiful libraries in the world, such as: the Montserrat Monastery Library, the National Library in Beijing, the Vasconcelos Library in Mexico City as well as the impressive Supercomputing Center in Barcelona, the home of MareNostrum, one of the supercomputers of the world, which is surrounded by the ancient walls of the Torre Girona chapel.

**"Google and the world brain", the movie that opened this year's edition of the festival, can be seen again on Friday, at 19:30, in Sala MARSHALL**

Loredana Ghidancea

Astra Film Festival  
A retrospective in images

In 2006, Cristi Puiu was for the first time part of the Astra Film Festival jury. A premiere is also the presence at the festival of the British director and producer Michael Stewart. This year's main theme was the woman, which is why the portrait of director Kim Loginotto was presented.

In 2007, Sibiu was the European Capital of Culture. The festival receives the Grand Prize for the best cultural project in Romania, within the "Arts and Culture" section, with the occasion of the Civil Society Gala. This year's edition focuses on Transilvania, and directors Michael Yorke and Bob Connolly share the portrait section.

2009 brings the first edition of Astra Film Junior, the small brother of the Astra Festival, presenting documentary films dedicated to children and teenagers. The first publication dedicated to the post-decemberist Romanian documentary film was launched within the special program "20 years of Romanian documentary film", organized by Astra Film Festival this year. Also, 2009 marked the beginning of the Romanian new wave of cinema, and Corneliu Porumboiu and Cristi Puiu, members of the new wave, were present on the stage this year.



The AFF 2006 barrel



## 10+1 things you should know about Eco CinematogrAFF section

8 documentary films are competing in this year's section Eco CinematogrAFF: "Little Country" (director Nikos Dayandas, Greece, 2013), "Drill baby drill" (director Lech Kowalski, France, 2013), "Wasted" (director Anirban Datta, India, 2012), "Horizon" (director Skule Eriksen, Norway, 2013), "The Venice Syndrome" (director Andreas Pichler, Italy, 2012), "The Road to Nowhere Island" (director Kate McNaughton, U.K., 2012), "Tokyo Waka" (director John Haptas and Kristine Samuelson, U.S.A., 2012), "An Awesome Film" (director Andrei Dascalescu, Romania, 2012).

▶ This year is the third edition since the official program of Astra Film Festival includes a category dedicated to eco movie, but the first year when this section was transformed in a competition one.

▶ This year's jury will include students of Gheorghe Lazar National College from Sibiu, under the guidance of Professor Vintila Mihailescu.

▶ Lech Kowalski, director of "Drill, baby, drill" announced his presence at the Q&A session following the film screening.

▶ The name "Drill, baby, drill" was a 2008 Republican campaign slogan first used at the 2008 Republican National Convention. The slogan expressed support for increased drilling for petroleum as a source of additional energy.

▶ Anirban Datta, director of "Wasted" had the premiere of his graduation movie at Cannes 2006.

▶ "Horizon", the only film of this section that has no words, is part of "Landscape" trilogy, besides "Fjord" and "Winter Light", shows spectacular images filmed on the South-Easter coast of Norway.



▶ The documentary "Horizon" had already won "The Best Cinematographer Award" in "Kinolitopys" International Documentary Film Festival in Kiev, Ukraine.

▶ Skule Eriksen, director of "Horizon" won 22 awards in his 35 years of cinematographic career, including "Best Picture Special Award" for "Fjord", at ECO-ETNO-FOLK International Film Festival in Romania (in 2010).

▶ Andreas Pichler, director of "The Venice Syndrome" documentary, won the "Grimme Award" in 2004.

▶ Andrei Dascalescu, the only Romanian director in this section, conceived and organized the "Filmul de Piatra" Festival, at its sixth edition this year.

The directors of all the movies presented in this section gathered together over 70 films and almost 40 awards won at all kinds of national and international festivals.

Corina David

When students get behind the camera

## Student special section at AFF

The Astra Documentary Film Festival invites you this year to watch a series of documentaries made by European and Asian students. The selection, this year, focuses on films which explore impressive personal experiences, such as death, madness, dreams or growing up. We are waiting to see how the young filmmakers will evolve, taking into account that Astra Film Festival is one of their first experiences in terms of film festivals.

The film opening the competition - "As you like it" (2012), made by Paula Onet, is the story, told funnily, of the people who choose the photo for their gravestone while still alive. The documentary is thus trying to prove that the graveyard can become an alive social document. Lefteris Fylaktos explores that same space in his documentary, "Cafe-Finovo" (2013), where we are told the story of the first cafe in Germany opened in a... graveyard! Contrary to what we are expecting, the activities taking place in the cafe are rather alive and artistic.



"If 6 was 9", the documentary Ivana Mladenovic made during the Aristoteles Workshop, makes the portrait of a 50 year old man who is trying to prove to everyone that he is normal. Out of his desire to make films, he manages the acting, the soundtrack and the production of the film, the characters he plays being

dear to him: Saint Nicholas and Stephen the Great. "Kedi" (2012), is the experimental exercise of the German student Stefan Neuberger, in which people from Istanbul are portrayed by their imagination. Together, they create the story of a cat's life!

Taiwanese director Yu-Shen Su chose to explore in his film, "Building" (2012), two deserted cities during a time of rapid urban development in China: a ghost city and a mythical one, belonging to the future.

The sensibility of the students is present in all the other stories as well, which we invite you to not miss!

Diana Voinea



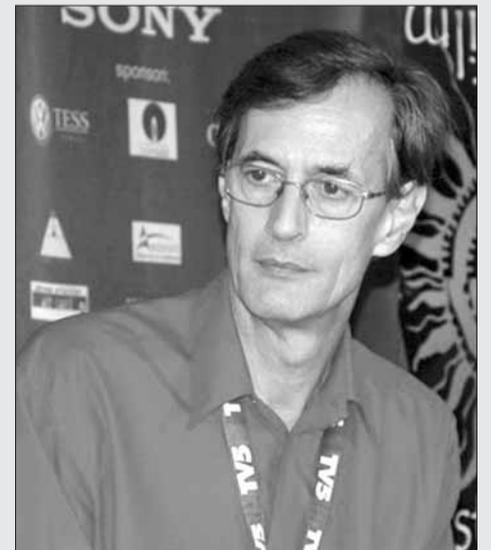
2006 Cristi Puiu and Dumitru Budrala



2006 Michael Stewart



AFF 2006 Huge crowds in front of Casa de Cultură in Sibiu at the AFF



AFF 2006 director and producer Michael Yorke

# Sibiu, the perfect place for a film festival

## in opinion of foreign students

Every day, all kinds of people conquer the stairs of Culture House in Sibiu, always in a hurry to see as much as they can from the festival's program. We are meeting students, old people, actors, engineers or some very good connoisseurs of the documentary film domain, who analyses every frame through their personal experience.

**Ana Vlad**, a film director, tells us her opinion about the last movie she saw: "What intrigued me about the movie «8th of March» was the title, because, in Romania, this day is known as Mother's Day, somehow a socialist holiday and I'm curious why the director chose this title. Then, I'm curious why he chose to use only images from those women's work places and not from their homes, because, for me, 8th of March is a family holiday. Another interesting question will be if the movie was indeed filmed on 8th of March because neither of the women receives any flower and we don't see any of those nice things we know it should happen on such a day".

**David**, a student from Germany said: "What I felt very emotional about in this documentary («8th of March») was the poster on the wall of their work place, which said «Daddy, we are waiting for you at home» although I only some women in film. For me, this is in fact the whole idea of this movie, the fact that these women are doing a man's job. In Germany we have many organizations that fight for women's rights; don't you have something similar here in Romania? I'm asking this because I feel these women would really need such an organization".

In Marshall Hall, a group of teenagers argues about what the movie they just saw,



Marek



Olga



Katarzyna

and we are curious to find out their opinions about the documentaries they saw these days and, why not, about the entire festival. We chat up with them and we find out that they are students of Ethnological and Anthropological Institute in Poland and that they are very enthusiastic about their presence at Astra Film Festival.

**Marek**, was the first to tell us his opinion: "For me, this the first year when I come to the festival and I find it really interesting, especially the fact that there is a variety of films in the program. Unfortunately I can't see all of them, even if I'm here from 12 to 10 pm. It's a question of luck if I get to see a good movie or a bad one, so I don't have a big schedule, I decided to go and see as much as I can".

**Olga**, has already find out the part that interests her the most: "I really appreciate the Eco CinematogrAFF section, where I can see films about recycling, ecology, civil rights, so it's a great opportunity for me to get the chance to watch them. I must say that I have seen only foreign movies on this subject and I'm planning to see «An Awesome Film» which has a Romanian director and will be screening today. From everything I saw until now I liked best the film «Kedi» which is a narration about being a cat, the people are using their imagination to actually feel like a cat, the director is using images from Istanbul, it's very plastic and I liked it".

**Katarzyna**, also a student, tells us "My favorite film until now it was «8th of March»; I liked this idea of showing parts of socialism, like mining or different types of industrial work where women are doing all the hard work. But then, after the revolution, even if there is a

democratic society, we can see that women still don't have any good option, there's still a very big problem with labor rights and the equality between women work and men work so I could see that basically nothing had changed after the communism time collapsed. This was very interesting for me to see and it's even more interesting because the film is made from a man's point of view".

**Marek** gives us a prediction about the winner: "I saw several good movies but I'm still waiting for the best one. I think that the winner will be one of the movies that talk about world problems, about Internet or global issues, because I think is very fancy now to talk about these kinds of things and this could make a movie to win a prize. Off course, it's also very important which topic the film is dealing about, it must be interesting because people like watching films about trendy issues".

Among all these screenings, the students find the time to take the pulse of the city: "Sibiu was a surprise for me, I saw it only in some pictures on Google, it's the first time when I come here and I think it's the perfect place for such a film festival, everything around being so close together, the hotel, the cinema... And I really like the tempo of the city, the fact that nothing happens very fast, it has its own energy", said **Katarzyna**. "I'm a big fan of the Romanian language, I really like the sound of it, it's rough and soft in the same time", ads **Olga**.

Corina David

## PARAGRAFF

THE NEWSPAPER OF  
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AFF: A retrospective in images



2007 Grigore Leșe concert



AFF 2007 Emil Hurezeanu



AFF 2007 premiere of the film Cold waves