

Delia ENYEDI

Short, Sharp, Shock!
The ClujShorts International Short Film Festival
at Its Second Edition

A Woodwose begging to be saved from the bark trap of a secular tree trunk, bouncy flakes of winter storm invading the empty school halls, workshops and barns of put to execution peasants, stills of a tormented family lurked by fire in their home, a garden of metallic can flowers swirling in the dusty wind of a postapocalyptic scenery, a cartoon Death waiting patiently for the hospital elevator while carrying the soul of a car accident victim, those were some of the images that unrolled on the screen of the century old cinema that hosted the gala ceremony of the 2014 edition of the ClujShorts International Short Film Festival. Held between 27 – 30 March, in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, the event stood under the promise of a “Short, Sharp, Shock!” cinematic experience. More or less willingly, it conveyed a distinct sense of all these three ingredients.

Shortness being the self-explanatory criterion of any film festival of its category, ClujShorts also related to the “short”

tradition, rather than only to the shortness in length of the projected films. Since its fragile first edition, it has succeeded in attracting a growing attention within the international film festival circuit that translated this year into over 600 films being submitted, out of which 125 were selected and 52 entered the final competition. However, on the local cultural scene, the same objective had to comply with contradictory circumstances.

Counting a population of about 300,000 inhabitants, significantly augmented each year by more than 100,000 students, Cluj-Napoca has strived for the,

Delia ENYEDI

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca

E-mail: delia.enyedi@ubbcluj.ro

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in the meantime already won, title of European Youth Capital of 2015. In the process of becoming a worthy competitor, the cultural aspect played a significant role in portraying a city that boasts of an extensive array of artistic landmarks, from the two century old institutional theatre tradition up to the more recent appraisal gained by the so called "Cluj School" of contemporary painting, acknowledged through the works of such artists as Adrian Ghenie.

With the competition for the title of European Capital of Culture 2021 currently ongoing, Cluj-Napoca is not yet ready to abandon the festival fever it has inherently entered. At a first glance, all odds seemed to be favor of the Persona Association, the organizer of ClujShorts, seeking to rely on more than just independent funding. But this NGO's activity, that began more than a decade ago, proved not to be a sufficient guarantee in the eyes of the local authorities to financially support the event as a relevant addition to developing film festival portfolio of the city. Against the collapsing network of active cinemas and discouraging statistics of film consumerism in Romania, Cluj-Napoca can loosely be defined as a cinema-goer city, home to the largest film festival in the country, the Transylvania International Film Festival (TIFF) that has counted this last June its thirteen edition, as well as to Comedy Cluj that marks this fall its sixth edition. Hopefully, the joke that bitterly flavored the closing evening speeches, that we might be witnessing the second and last edition of ClujShorts, will remain nothing more than a joke and not a prediction of the future.

Fortunately, along the four days of the festival, any such internal tensions remained behind closed doors. The "shock" component, or to be more indulgent the surprise, was delivered by the comparison of the information contained in the leaflet program against the movies it described as the indicated genres often missed the actual content of the short films. Whether it was the producer's proposal or the occasional fail in artistic vision, the delineating lines seemed to dissolve as some dramas furnished more humor than announced comedies, or dramas and horrors actually took the form of thrillers. The best samples came from the selection of the third evening when several such "shocks" were delivered to the hall packed with audience.

One of them was *Click* (Dir: William Prince, UK, 2011), a short film that follows five bored but curious children along their urban exploration of a deserted warehouse. Although signaled as a drama, the film generously weaves into the narrative all important thriller motifs. There's a hostile environment that seems animate as it shuts the door behind them, there's the growing tension as one by one the children go missing while playing an improvised dare game with the use of the electric switch and, ultimately, there's the speculation of the phobia of darkness that swallows everything, from the increasingly panicked voices of the protagonists to our final quest for an answer buried into pitch dark. So rather than being a drama about five missing children, *Click* stands as a thrilling account of their actual disappearance into one of the most frightening childhood fears.

Less determined to restrain from exaggeration was *Check* (Dir: Pablo Accino, Spain, 2012) that was presented as nothing less than a horror. Programmed immediately after *Click*, it inevitably fell victim to the freshly clarified set of thriller conventions. This time the protagonist is not a child but a young woman named Ari, but there's the same menacing space she fails to escape from, that takes the form of an infinite spiral staircase of an apartment building. Immediately after she leaves her boyfriend's flat, all tenants seem to have vanished, attempts to use her cell phone are futile, messages she writes on the walls mysteriously fade out as her desperate efforts to exit continuously bring her back to the same middle floor. While her fate is not hidden from the eyes of the audience, nor is the menacing human embodiment of the terror that reigns, the lack of a gory or at least of a visually disturbing scene makes it harder to determine whether we can actually talk about a horror or an efficiently constructed thriller. As the dilemma has been constantly argued in film theory, one of the most concise approaches of the problematic division between thriller and horror comes from Devendra P. Varma who narrows it down to the difference between "the smell of death and stumbling against a corpse". Just like in the case of *Click*, *Check* also plays the smell of death card, distinctive mark of a thriller, in order to manipulate the viewer's emotional response.

As far as the "smart" ingredient of the festival was concerned, it remained the most faithful to its basic meaning as intelligent and provocative short films could be found even outside the category of the winners. For example, the diverse animation section opened with *Monkey Symphony* (Dir: Maxime Baudin, Mélanie Fumey, Julien Gauthier, Samuel Gonon, France, 2013) setting the bar high for all animated shorts following in the program of the festival. A product made by students of ESMA (École Supérieure des Métiers Artistiques, Montpellier-Toulouse-Nantes), it brilliantly doubles the sensitive narrative with a demonstration of animation and sound craftsmanship. Thank to it, the opening credits of other ESMA shorts, such as *Forward, March!* (Dir: Pierrick Barbin, Rimelle Khayat, Loïc Le Goff, Guillaume Lenoël, Garrick Rawlingsonwere, France, 2013) and *Beyond the Lines* (Dir: Chloé Bonnet, Séraphin Guery, Elodie Houard, Baptiste Lebouc, Pierre Tarsiguel, France, 2013), were greeted by the audience with enthusiast expectations. However, the award for Best Animation went to *Dji. Death Fails* (Dir: Dmitri Voloshin, Moldova, 2012), an unconventional portrait of Death as an unlucky character that exasperatedly faces mundane obstacles along the task of taking the soul of a dying driver.

The rest of the thirteen prizes that were awarded covered diverse genres and sophistication levels, from semi-animated fantasy to documentary and from student film to ambitious production. The jury acknowledged the work of Tony Marioni and Benoit Fontenelle for *Tempo* (Belgium, 2012) naming them Best Directors, while the *Portrait of an Urban Beekeeper* (Dir: Steve Ellington, USA, 2013) was recognized as Best Documentary "for the ability to infiltrate in a man's life and humanely portrait his passion through artificial means". With respect to the encouragement of film school productions, Cluj-Napoca having two such institutions, a prize was given for the Best

Student Film, this year's winner being *30 Ways to Attract a Man* (Dir: Nikita Chisnikov, Russia, 2013). When it was time for the audience to choose a favorite, it was the pragmatic mixture of football fan mania and morbid prank that set the tone of the comedy *Border Patrol* (Dir: Peter Baumann, Germany, 2013) that it resonated best with.

The recipient of the prize for Best Cinematography deserves special attention for the manner it aims the camera at the core of a delicate subject. The acclaimed short drama *Red Snow* (Dir: Luca Popadić, Serbia/Switzerland, 2013) revolves its storyline around the infamous "100 for 1 act" that was applied in Serbia during World War II, stating that for every German soldier killed, one hundred civilians must be executed. Lieutenant Michael Berg (Jörg Koslowsky) is ordered to force prisoner Petar (Vuk Jovanović) to betray his comrades involved in the murder of a soldier so that the villagers escape the heavy repercussion. The merit of the film stands in the balance between the exquisite composition of shots and the "pas de deux" type of dynamic carried by the two main characters. The heavy atmosphere of the interrogation room alternates with open air bucolic scenes, all while the facile temptation of observing the story from a Manicheist perspective is cleverly eluded. Anguished Berg hopelessly grasps the redemption of everyone involved, while peasant Petar gradually unveils the layers of his educated self underneath which lays the dismay of being regarded as a traitor. However, the historical details and statistics that are featured at the end of the film, as disturbingly dramatic as they are, slightly diminish by their redundancy the meditation on the absurdities of armed conflicts the story lays bare.

Finally, the Trophy of the festival was awarded to *Moritz and the Woodwose* (Dir: Bryn Chainey, Germany, 2013). What set apart this deeply impressive drama from its competitors was the lyrical assault of shape, color, movement and sound which penetrates a childhood set at the conjunction of life and death. As an older brother of a sick child and still a child himself, Moritz's apprehension of the duality of existence partially resorts to fantastic imagery similar to some extent to that of Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*, but orients it towards a Dantesque-like descent into underground, all against a brutally realistic setting. The resulting experience of the main character is that of simultaneously breaking from all connections with reality while forcefully embracing them.

In this ambivalent note, the second edition of the ClujShorts came to an end and with it the demonstration of the visual and narrative force a short film is still able to undertake. From its early silent days, throughout the apparently menacing advent of television and up to the present Hollywood era of large scale feature film blockbusters, this Romanian festival contributed with its personal voice to the message that the short film is not dead, so long live the (Cluj) short!