

Interview with Anca Damian



By Tara Karajica
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Trained as a D.o.P. at the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts in Bucharest, Anca Damian began her directing career with live action feature films, but rose to international fame in 2011 with her first animated documentary feature "Crulic – The Path to Beyond", a mix of documentary and animation techniques that premiered in Locarno where it received a special mention before accumulating a few more wins on the festival circuit. After "The Magic Mountain", another successful opus in 2015, Damian is now working on her new film, "The Fantastic Voyage of Marona" which received Eurimages support, an animated co-production between Romania, France and Belgium about a female dog trained to give everything out of love for her masters. Tara Karajica talks to Anca Damian about Marona, her trailblazing work as a (female) filmmaker in Romania and women in film today.

"The Fantastic Voyage of Marona" was inspired by an event in your personal life. Can you share it?

Anca Damian: While I was working on my film "The Magic Mountain" and splitting my time between Afghanistan, France and Poland, I crossed paths with a female dog that seemed lost. She followed me to my car and jumped on the passenger seat by herself. I started looking for a foster home in order to try to save her. Then, for several weeks, the small dog travelled from one family to another, from one foster home to another, following the hazards of life. I noticed that the dog had an influence on her various hosts, changing them deeply through the empathy she felt for them.

"The Fantastic Voyage of Marona" is the story of a girl – embodied by a dog – who knows the world through the empathy that she reflects, and who is prepared to give everything out of love for her masters. Empathy is therefore at the heart of your film. Can you elaborate on that? How will animation amplify it by playing on anthropomorphism?

A.D.: I believe that our society, as it is built now, has forgotten the need for empathy. We are not educated to care for others. Love as empathy – that asks for nothing in return – is one of the feminine powers. I think that women are closer to having it as they learn it through motherhood, and this deep feeling we need to protect and develop, as it is endangered by the ego-tic self. In my film, I chose a "she" dog. Dogs live "here and now", and in their connection with their owner, they make a deep link. They feel empathy in a pure, organic way.



Still from "The Fantastic Voyage of Marona"

When the idea of making this film came to me, I felt that under the guise of a "family film" I could reach a deep topic, one that is neglected nowadays. I opted for a "she" dog as a main character. While using animation, a technique that allows me the freedom of creating a unique reality in which, in a playful way, I can change the perspective of the audience and try and reach their hearts. From the dog's design (she has a vest and socks) to her thoughts that we hear through the dog's voice, we can say that she borrows features from humans, but she does it just to help us understand!

The film also questions our humanity through Marona's point of view as an animal as to her fate and deals with the anthropocentrism deeply rooted in Western culture. Does it also take a critical look at society by questioning her role as a pet in it and within the family home?

A.D.: I was born in the city of Cluj-Napoca in Transylvania, and, luckily, I spent the holidays with my parents in Romania's mountains and countryside. There, you feel that humans are just one part of the world, and the other part – nature – is just perfect! Changing the point of view and seeing through the eyes of a dog is just giving us a mirror to see the truth, so we are not able to deny it. And, of course, anthropocentrism deserves a critical look.

Would it be fair to say that your two previous feature documentaries, "Crulic: The Path Beyond" and "The Magic Mountain", both award-winning films, have expanded the potential of the documentary genre through animation?

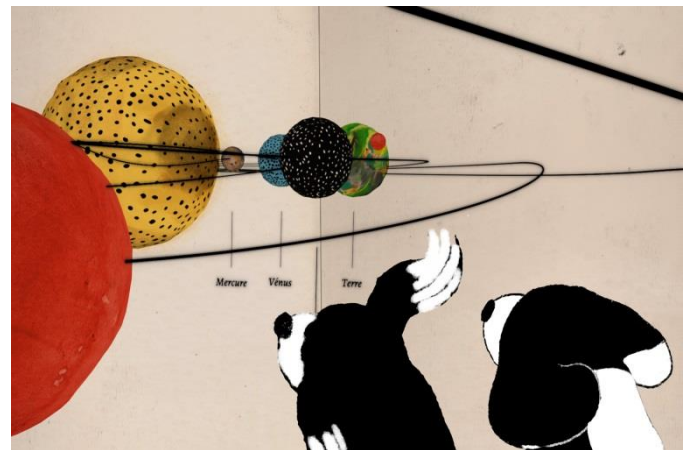
A.D.: Both my previous feature documentaries use the language of animation in a more unusual way than other animated documentaries. The use of a real character's voice with animated illustrative images following the narration is the genre's usual set-up. I did use animation to combine real images with drawings, using all the techniques inherent in animation in order to recreate a new reality that helps us see the story, and make the invisible visible. I am interested in expanding the language of cinema to the lines between genres; and anything that limits the approach to fresh and true storytelling, I consider a useless burden.

Your work has carved the path to animation in Romania. Why did you choose to work in animation?

A.D.: When I did "Crulic", it was the first long feature animation in the last twenty years. In Romania, there was no tradition in animation, no school of animation. I did two years of fine arts and my visual approach to cinema felt an attraction to animation as a language that allows the power of surrealism to make the true heart of reality visible. The freedom of animation is, for me, cinema in its best language.

Speaking of freedom, how much of it do you give your animation team?

A.D.: I think that a film is accomplished if the creative team goes together in the same direction and each member adds his/her input. My animation team must first understand the project and the concept as it is in my head, and then they are free to add their artistic touch. I guide them and push them to go further, to do things that they didn't think they could do, and I am very happy when they add a creative touch in their work. My way of working has an objective in keeping the creative process alive during the entire production, and never entering the stage of mere execution.



Still from "The Fantastic Voyage of Marona"

What can you tell us about your days as the only female cinematographer in Romania? How has your work in that field opened doors for Romanian female filmmakers?

A.D.: Romania was and still is a "macho" country. Being a man is much more important than being a woman. I started working as a cinematographer despite all the opinions that told me that was an impossible task for a woman. Up until last year, I was the only female cinematographer for long feature films in Romania. When I started directing, I encountered the same opposition, but, at the same time, I considered that if I had something to say in art, I should say it, and I finally did. An artist is an artist – not a man or a woman. I hope things are changing nowadays, and women will follow their paths more easily.

In that sense, you are the screenwriter, director and producer of all your works. Do you feel you are a strong and independent female voice in cinema, especially after having carved paths for so many women in various fields in the film industry?

A.D.: Yes, I feel I am strong; I do my projects by being their heart and engine, from the idea to the final print. I have a passion for cinema, and I have arrived at the mature point of having something to say about the world; I feel inspired artistically, I am hardworking and all this makes me strong!

How do you see the situation of women in the European film industry today? Can you share some anecdotes?

A.D.: I think that the situation of women in the European film industry is improving more and more. We should not forget that in Europe, our parents' generation needed the approval of their husbands to take a train, or were not allowed to have bank accounts. In Romanian law, if a woman does not cook enough, her husband is entitled to a divorce. Women, as well as men, should make art if they have something to say. This is the only thing that is important, and as male society is about to fail, women's voices become louder.

What about women in animation?

A.D.: There is not much difference, much as in other professions: the main issues, the focus and the determination to overcome the biological condition – motherhood. I think that one of the most important things in the life of a woman is having a child. We should not miss it. So, we need more determination to evolve in our profession, to have continuity.

Going back to Marona's story; it is the story of a girl. According to you, how important is the portrayal of (strong) girls in animated and/or children's films for their social and cultural growth, especially in the frame of mind of today's society and the current fourth-wave feminism?

A.D.: I believe in feminine values – intuition, care, empathy, giving life and nurturing it. The feminine point of view is closer to life values, and, here, I find it important to give them a voice.