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Interview Hanno Höfer – Often on the Road

Hanno Höfer is a musician, film director and producer of German origin born in 1967 in Timișoara and now living in Bucharest.

Ioan Buteanu: Hanno Höfer, the current number of *Ekphrasis* is dedicated to migration, borders and “meeting points” close or across the borders. You are born in Timișoara, a city inhabited by several ethnic groups and close to the Serbian border. You soon moved to Bucharest with your family, and, after a while, returned to Banat. Please describe the spiritual heritage you bear from that period, underlining the main events of your childhood and adolescence.

Hanno Höfer: Yes, I was born in Timișoara, a city close to the then Yugoslavian and the Hungarian border. Indeed, Timișoara was and still is, to a certain extent, populated by many ethnic groups which all left their mark on the development of the city. When I was a child, I used to have friends from all known ethnic backgrounds of the city, and we did not care at all. In my opinion this spirit still lives on in Timișoara. At school we switched between German and Romanian, but German was the main language in our school, being a German school, where most of the children had German background, but there were also Romanians, Hungarians, and of course children from mixed families. I always envied the kids from German-Hungarian families, because they grew up speaking three languages from the start (Romanian, German, Hungarian). My family from my father’s side also spoke Hungarian, but, unfortunately, I did not learn it because I moved to Bucharest.

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I.B.: You lived in Romania most of the communist period, and you have directed one episode from *Tales from the Golden Age* (*Amintiri din epoca de aur*, 2009) [a Romanian “omnibus film” containing several short films about urban myths of the era; IB]. Can you think of another “urban legend” that you find representative for the atmosphere of those times?

H.H.: There are many urban myths and political jokes about that period, some of them circulating in the whole Eastern Block, while others were typical Romanian. A Romanian one that did not make it to the film was about Ceaușescu going hunting – he was a passionate hunter – but whenever he would go hunting, everything would be prepared by his staff for weeks in advance. The perimeter was secured by the army, the bears (that is what he liked to shoot most) were fed at the same spot and time of the day for weeks in a row so that they would show up right on time to catch the bullet from Ceaușescu’s rifle. They built a little wooden shelter where the hunters would be hiding, and even an outdoor water toilet with a seat and everything, strictly for Ceaușescu’s use. It turns out that one of the soldiers guarding the perimeter had diarrhea, so he just went to use Ceaușescu’s toilet, not knowing it was forbidden. After using it, he flushed it, leaving it without the only charge of water it had, just minutes before Ceaușescu arrived. Ceaușescu of course wanted to use the toilet before hunting, and after he did, complained about the lack of water, and, so the story goes, the poor soldier was court-martialed for flushing a toilet.

I.B.: As many Germans born in Romania, you left Romania along with your family during the eighties. Can you describe, please, your life as a German immigrant in Germany? How did this period mark/enrich your life? Why and how did you return to Romania?

H.H.: My life as an immigrant was quite short. The first year I had to go back to school to graduate because Romanian educational credentials were not recognized by German authorities. That school was in a small town and I did not quite get to know the local people there, because most of the time we socialized with immigrants, from Romania or other Eastern Bloc countries. After that, I moved to West Berlin to study. West Berlin attracted me for many reasons: it was a big city and, because I lived in Bucharest, I was used to big cities. Many different peoples lived there, a lot of Turks for example, and cultural life and universities were good. Also, you could not be drafted to the army if you lived there. Not that I was in danger of being drafted during the first years of being there because I was an immigrant from the East, and they would leave us alone for a while, to check if we were spies or something. I studied ethnology [what today corresponds to cultural anthropology, MS] and Southeast European history, and three years later I was back in Romania.

I.B.: The fall of communism represented an important landmark in the European history of the twentieth century. How have you managed to cross this symbolic border?

H.H.: I was in Berlin when the Wall came down. I could see people climbing on top of it; they were happy, crying, and laughing, and they just could not believe what was

happening. It was a huge moment, but somehow everybody was expecting it, even if not so fast. But I could not really enjoy the moment because I could not help thinking of Romania, wondering when it would happen there, too. Then it happened, but unfortunately in a much harder way.

I.B.: As I know, the first language you spoke was German. How and when did you “cross” the “border” towards Romanian language? Are there any funny events in your life related to this “crossing?” Your films are spoken in Romanian, you sing in English and Romanian. Did ever you feel Romanian culture as something that was across a certain “border” you had to cross? How have you managed to do this?

H.H.: Like I said before, I grew up with both languages, I was exposed to both right from the beginning. While living in Timișoara, I spoke more German, in Bucharest more Romanian. The only time I had any difficulties was when I moved to Bucharest after spending four years in school in Timișoara where we spoke mostly German. So when I started school in Bucharest, we happened to have a very strict Romanian teacher, an old lady who really gave me a hard time so that I had to get private lessons in order to get through the class. And it was not about the spoken language: writing was the problem.

I.B.: Crossing borders seems to be one of your favourite “recipes” in films as well as in music. Please comment about the artistic concept developed by “Nightlosers,” the band you founded in 1994? What do you consider to be the landmarks in the existence of “Nightlosers” till now? How does your experience as a film director influence the promotion of this band?

H.H.: Soon after we started as a band, we tried to blend our different musical influences and backgrounds together. The blues and Romanian folk music have a lot in common: rhythmical patterns, chords and sometimes even melodies. We thought that if we could blend them without forcing things, it might work. And it mostly did, in my opinion. When a piece would not sound the way we wanted it to, we would just let it go and try something else. With “Nightlosers,” doing this blend of blues and Romanian, Hungarian and Gypsy music we got to play around the world at different world music and/or blues festivals. My experience as a film director did not influence my activity with the band, maybe only when I was directing the music videos we have, but otherwise it is a different cup of tea.

I.B.: Now, talking about your career in film, how did you get to make films? Was it a passion from childhood? Were you impressed by some films then or later? Is it related to the professions of your parents who were journalists at some point? What do the films you directed bring to your life?

H.H.: It was not a passion from my childhood, not at all. When I was younger, I always thought that being a film director must be the hardest job in the world, blending all the arts together. Later, yes, I was impressed by some films, but not to the extent that I wanted to become a film director. That came mostly by chance, when some friends tried to go to the

film school where, at that time, it was hard to get admission. I decided to go along, just to see how difficult it was, and to my surprise, I was admitted, and I am sure it was only because I did not want it that bad.

I.B.: The first film you made is *International Phone Call* (*Telefon în străinătate*, 1998). It is a film about a father trying to communicate with his son across many, many borders, from Romania to the United States. Can you tell us more about the period you worked at this project? The film notes a little considered consequence of the immigration of the young generation: the discreet sadness of their parents. Do you agree with this way of understanding the film? How did you choose Constantin Opriță, who is not a professional actor, for this role? Which role did the city of Bucharest play in this plot?

H.H.: That film was made when I was still in film school. Yes, I can agree with this way of understanding the film, the sadness and loneliness of old people, but it is also about the world changing around them in a way they no longer seem to understand. Constantin Opriță was a retired worker, living not far from the film school, and that is how I met him. When I talked to him, I had him in mind for *On the Other Side* (*Dincolo*), a film I made a year later, but I decided to work with him for *International Phone Call* too, because I appreciated his openness to the idea, and I also liked working with non-professional actors, who in certain situations can be better than professionals. Bucharest does not play that much of a role in this film. It could have been any Romanian small town, but it is true that I did search around for a while to find this old working class neighborhood from the 1950s.

I.B.: If *International Phone Call* portrays you as a connoisseur of Bucharest. *On the Other Side* unveils you as being a Banat Swabian [Banater Schwabe; an ethnic German from Central-Southeast Europe, MS]. You chose the same Constantin Opriță to play the main role. What is the meaning of the border here?

H.H.: In this one, for a good reason, it was important that the main character was overweight, so that is what I was looking out for a guy like Constantin Opriță when I was looking for an actor. First of all, the border here is physical, because it is about people from the last Romanian village before the Yugoslavian border [Yugoslavia was not part of the Eastern Bloc, and it was a migration route to the West; MS], which at that time meant freedom. And then it is about temptation, about lack of freedom leading to lack of life experience.

I.B.: *Humanitarian Aid* (*Ajutoare umanitare*, 2002) depicts a meeting moment and a meeting point of Western and Romanian mentality. The gifts given by the Romanian locals exceed by far the value of the old dental chair brought as a “humanitarian aid” by the three Westerners. What do you think about these meeting moments and meeting points?

H.H.: This one is a two-way story. It is about being human, being naïve, being good, basically. This goes for both sides. It is about a new beginning which, as we see now, in the end went wrong.

When the Wall came down in Berlin, at first there was great enthusiasm on both sides, but a week later, when West Berlin was flooded by East Germans and you could no longer use the subway, because it was too crowded and there were long queues in front of every supermarket, you could hear West Germans using heavy words against [what they considered; MS] the backward Easterners. It only took a week.

I.B.: As already mentioned above, you directed an episode from *Tales from the Golden Age*. Are you able to look at the communist period only with humour? Or was such an approach a project requirement? Didn't you feel any anger? What do you feel about those times?

H.H.: Not only me, but everybody in Romania looks at communism with humor. The harder the dictatorship, the better the jokes. In my opinion, the best jokes stem from that period. Of course, there is anger and revolt about that time, especially because some politicians from that period are still around. However, in hindsight, I am glad I lived through those times. It is a life experience that has shaped me, regardless if I wanted it or not.

I.B.: You were one of the founders of the Mobra Films Production Company. Are you involved with the company now? What can you tell about this side of your cinematographic activity?

H.H.: I left Mobra years ago because I did not really like being a producer. However, I still do it from time to time when I have to.

I.B.: What plans and artistic projects do you have for the near future, if they can be revealed?

H.H.: I am working on my father's collection of historical photos and I am trying to put them in order. It is a collection of photos mainly from Transylvania, from the 1860s to the 1940s, in the form of glass negatives, paper, etc.

My father was a photographer for the German newspaper in Romania, who collected photos during his travels. His approach was more aesthetic than historiographic: he collected what he liked, so now I am trying to add the historical side to it. I am also working on a script for a documentary.

I.B.: Hanno, maybe because of your career of a musician performing across the country and internationally you seem like somebody who is always ready to hit the road. Is that right? Do you find pleasure in being so frequently on the road? What have you learned from this sort of existence? Do you consider road as one of your homes? Can you identify yourself with circus artists appearing in one of your music videos, a migrant by nature?

H.H.: I like being on the road: vans, trains and planes are my second home. I got used to it. I am not really a travelling artist in a sense that circus artists are. They are of a different caliber, and they take their homes out on the road. But I hear about myself from time to time that I am unsettled, even if I think that I am not.

I.B.: Does Hanno Höfer have a home? If “yes,” where is it? Your music? Your films? Your family? Your many, many friends?

H.H.: All of those are my home, but I must get away from them from time to time. Just joking.

Filmography

- 1997 *Telefon în străinătate/The International Phone Call*, 8 min, 35 mm, b/w – director.
 1998 *Dincolo/On the Other Side*, 18 min, super16 mm, colour – director.
 2001 *Ajutoare umanitare/Humanitarian Aid*, 17 min, 35mm, colour – director.
 2007 *Nadia*, documentary for the TV series *Great Romanians* on Romanian National TV – director, producer.
 2009 *Amintiri din epoca de aur/Tales from the Golden Age*, feature film – co-director, producer.
 2010 *Cod roșu/Code Red*, short film, 9 min, 35mm, colour – director.
 2011 *On Men and Irons*, ethnographical documentary, 30 min – director, producer.
 2012 *Meserie Scriitor*, TV series – director, producer.
 1999–present: music videos, commercials.
 2006 coordinator of the Roma antidiscrimination project *Chiar diferiți – același sânge*.
 2000–2012, producer for Public German Television ARD in Romania.
 2012–present, producer for Public German Television ZDF in Romania.

Awards

- Participation at the *Cannes Film Festival*, 2009, *Un Certain Regard* section with *Tales from the Golden Age*.
Audience and critics' awards at the *Mediterranean Film Festival*, Montpellier, France, 2002 for *Humanitarian Aid*.
 Participation at the *Kodak Showcase* of the *Cannes Film Festival*, 2002 with *Humanitarian Aid*.
 Canal+ award at the *Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival*, 2002, for *Humanitarian Aid*.
 Main award of the *DAKINO Short Film Festival*, Bucharest, 2001, for *Humanitarian Aid*.
CINE CINEMA award of the *Mediterranean Film Festival*, Montpellier, France, 2001 for *Dincolo/On the Other Side*.
Award of the Film Critics Association of Romania, 1999, for *Dincolo/On the Other Side*.
Best Director award at the *DAKINO Short Film Festival*, Bucharest, 1999, for *Dincolo/On the Other Side*.
Best Director award offered by *CILECT*, *The Association of European Film Schools*, Munich, Germany, 1998, for *The International Phone Call*.
Award of the Film Critics Association of Romania and the *main award* of the *CINEMAIUBIT Student Film Festival*, Bucharest, 1997, for *International Phone Call*.