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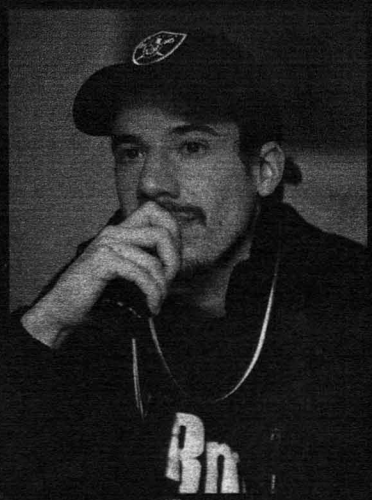

The new auteurs

European filmmakers with a passion for the personal

Europe's new auteurs: filmmakers with a future

by Gareth Harding

Special to The Wall Street Journal

Adel Stanczel and Gergely Trócsányi in György Pálfi's film 'Taxidermia.'

Directors from Spain to Romania bring personal passion to moviemaking

CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN cinema has no shortage of critically acclaimed movies, glitzy film festivals and stars better known for their acting talents than off-screen antics. But in recent years it has been missing something for which it was famous for decades: the director as auteur.

The filmmaker as "author," or dominant creative force behind a movie, was first described in a famous 1954 magazine article by François Truffaut, who drew a distinction between directors like Jean Renoir and Alfred Hitchcock, who sought to "bring something genuinely personal" to their films, and the hack-for-hire directors who had predominated under the Hollywood studio system.

Since then, every decade has had its dominant European filmmakers—from Truffaut himself, Jean-Luc Godard, Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman and Milos Forman in the 1960s and '70s to Krzysztof Kieslowski, Pedro Almodóvar, Lars Von Trier, Ken Loach and Emir Kusturica in the '80s and '90s. These directors were known for highbrow, meticulously made, and sometimes difficult-to-watch movies that made personal, political or artistic statements.

But many critics now say European cinema is in a kind of identity crisis as it attempts to compete against mega-budget Hollywood movies—not to mention the steady supply of art-house or "indie" films from across the Atlantic—while remaining faithful to its tradition of low-budget (and often government-subsidized) auteurship. Some even argue that the age of the visionary, all-powerful writer/director—personified by the likes of Bergman and Truffaut—is over. "The concept of the 'film d'auteur' is nearly dead," says Dominique Jahn, a movie producer and director of the Brussels film festival, an annual event that emphasizes small, art-house productions. "In Europe, directors are becoming less important and producers more so; while in America, star actors are the bosses."

Don't tell that to 24-year-old Swiss director and actor Barthélemy Grossmann, who recently won strong reviews for his debut feature, a thriller called "13m2." If raw talent, artistic adventurousness and unbridled self-regard are harbingers of success, he appears destined for fame and fortune—or at least more critical acclaim. "If I'm not the next generation of European film directors, then I don't know who is," he says, without a hint of irony.

Mr. Grossmann is one of a crop of new European filmmakers, including several from countries in the former Soviet bloc, who prefer to write, direct and produce their own movies rather than hand over control to money-crunchers and pencil-pushers. The subjects explored by these "new auteurs" range widely, from gangster heists to backstreet abortions and from sympathetic spies to championship speed-eating. But the one thing they have in common is the kind of uncompromising yet artistically rewarding grittiness that has long been a hallmark of European cinema.

Mr. Grossmann's film, a claustrophobic look at three hoodlums from a poor Paris suburb who pull off a successful heist only to fall out over how to escape with the loot, is typical of this new wave of edgy European filmmaking. The plot is hardly original—it echoes "Treasure of the Sierra Madre" as well as "Reservoir Dogs"—but the desperate dialogue among the three petty crooks has more in common with Samuel Beckett than Quentin Tarantino.

Mr. Grossmann's filmmaking heroes are American directors like Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola and John Cassavetes, who began their careers as driven iconoclasts working outside the studio system. "I like their attitude and lifestyle," Mr. Grossmann says. "If they didn't make movies, they'd die. All day long I think about film—like those guys. I want people who see two minutes of my films to say 'that's a Barthélemy Grossmann movie.'"

Leonor Watling and Tim Robbins in Isabel Coixet's **'The Secret Life of Words.'**

A similar attitude is evident in the films of a group of Romanian directors with growing international reputations. "There is a Romanian wave breaking now," says Claudia Landsberger, president of European Film Promotion, a trade association that markets European movies around the world. "This generation of filmmakers have so many stories to tell and they are capable of telling them in ways which resonate. They don't make epic tearjerkers but fresh, tight and gripping films."

Cristi Puiu was the first of the new bunch of Romanian directors to achieve international recognition with his film "The Death of Mr. Lazarescu," the story of an old, sick man who is shuttled from hospital to hospital over the course of a night. Mr. Puiu's second full-length feature, it picked up the prestigious Un Certain Regard trophy at the Cannes Film Festival in 2005 and a slew of other prizes in 2006.

Corneliu Porumboiu, a 32-year-old director from the eastern Romanian town of Vaslui, has also emerged as a darling of the international art-house circuit with his biting political satire, "12:08 East of Bucharest." The film tells the story of a television station owner who stages a panel discussion on the toppling of communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu 16 years after the actual events. Mr. Porumboiu's first full-length feature, which becomes increasingly farcical as both panelists and viewers try to piece together what really happened in December 1989, is a savage critique of a "revolution" that merely replaced one communist despot with another Soviet-schooled apparatchik. The film won the Camera d'Or prize (for best first feature film) at Cannes in 2006.

A year later another Romanian, Cristian Mungiu, won the the Palme d'Or—the top prize at Cannes—for his second feature "4 Months, 3 Weeks & 2 Days." The hard-hitting drama also picked up the Film of the Year and Best Director awards at the European Film Awards in Berlin later in 2007.

The title of the film refers to the exact length of time scatterbrained student Gabita has been pregnant. With abortion illegal in communist Romania, she turns to her roommate for help. The backstreet abortionist they hire is as cruel and crooked as the system he works under and the two girls soon find themselves trapped in a web of lies and deceit as they struggle to muster the money to pay for the abortion.

Like the films of British director Ken Loach or Belgium's Dardenne brothers, "4 Months..." is austere and uncompromising. There is no music, little in the way of fancy camera work and minimal editing. The takes are long and the backdrop—Bucharest housing estates in winter—is grim. Set in the twilight years of Ceausescu's rule, Mr. Mungiu's movie paints a bleak picture of life in eastern Europe's most repressive regime. But the boyish-looking director denies its aim was political.

"I never wanted to make a 'Good Bye Lenin!' type of movie," he says, referring to the slick, German box-office hit from 2003 about a son's attempts to create a communist cocoon for his mother after she wakes up from a coma in post-Berlin Wall East Germany.

Still, Mr. Mungiu says enough time has passed since the end of the Soviet era that Eastern European directors have been able to revisit those events with a sense of artistic perspective. "We got to an age when we remembered stories from our 20s, which were the last days of communism," Mr. Mungiu says. "You need some distance to tell stories about what happened to you when you were young."

Many of these filmmakers focus on the grimmer aspects of European life—often heavily influenced by recent history. In "Grbavica," the first feature film by 33-year-old Bosnian director Jasmila Zbanic, single mother Esma lives with her teenage daughter Luna in a cramped apartment in the war-scarred suburb of Sarajevo that lends the

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