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Bitter honey

David Reu, film director, 60 years old
Interview done by Ioana Daia
and Daniela Alexandrescu



I met film director David Reu in the spring of 2001. We were instantly taken with his incredible energy, with his charm and funny stories, as well as with his gentlemanly manners. I then discovered a man who, apart from his impressive career as a documentary film-maker (we will only mention here “Țuculescu”, “Calea Moșilor – trecut și prezent”), also manages several other different projects both editorial and in the field of the cinema.

Much to his amazement, instead of discussing his films, we challenged him to tell us about an episode which many would deem unimportant, but which may be representative for the crucial moment of the 1990s. However unusual and singular it may appear to us now, back then it was not at all uncommon that a film maker should become a professional beekeeper or that a film studio should start out as a bee entrance.

What we found very difficult during the transition period from the 1990s onwards was finding a job that would suit your interests and your education. And in the cultural field this was all the more difficult as various domains were disappearing and others became more and more prominent. For instance, press and television

which were liable to help solve the current social conflicts got the upper hand, while documentaries became less and less important. You had to have the strength and the energy young age gives you in order to make yourself known in this new context. I was already getting old, I was already older than 55 actually, and I was beginning to ponder more serious matters. I wrote a film script about the transition period, which I called “Un zid părăsit și neisprăvit” (*The Unfinished, Abandoned Wall*), hinting at the fact that everything was about a group of people gathered in one of the abandoned and unfinished “hunger circuses”¹, Ceaușescu’s pet project.

Let’s talk about the transition period ... For us, documentary film-makers, the transition is a little more special because people have given up this cinema genre altogether. Nobody planned or meant for this to happen. It happened because of the carelessness and sheer stupidity of those in charge of this field at the time, to which I may add the desire to have smaller or greater personal benefits or something... The general managers who kept coming and going at the time, although fellow film-makers, pursued their own interest and ruined the documentary genre entirely.

¹ Grocery department stores meant for the working-class people, in the form of grand buildings which were left unfinished after the Revolution.

“Sahia” Studio¹ released theme films. Then they all got started: this can’t be done, that is impossible, he should be kicked out because of this and that; I had a history of making films about young pioneers and about the Pioneers’ Palace, and I kept out of the dispute because Liiceanu had stated very clearly: those who had done this and that should stay out of business for five years! Let’s stay out for five years, then ... But I’ve been doing that for fifteen years now and I’ve realized that the right things are still not done. But I’m still out of this business ...

It was a difficult period. By 1989 I had already made a film about the Getae-Dacians and their science. In fact, it was about their calendar system. Then I managed to make a sequel of the film in foreign languages. Around 1992 I made another film about the village of Săpânța, “Viața în credință” (*Life through Faith*). At the time the village was facing problems caused by some personal interests, which proved petty in the end, of a bunch of wise guys who are now living comfortably in France, in ... And they were destroying everything. There I managed to get a film that would speak about the need for faith to keep the whole society together, and not just as petty interests. I made the film during those street protests ... I went with them, the mayor included, for a drink of palinca (traditional alcoholic drink made from fruit) and all that... I realized then what the deal was with them. And in my film I stressed not only their faith and traditions and that cemetery of theirs and all that. I was still working for “Sahia” Studio and I took the UNESCO guys with me there.

During the same year I made “Nepotul str?zii” (*The Grandson of the Street*). He was the first grandson of the street because he was the child of two street children who lived in the area near Gara de Nord (*North Central Station*), among the pipelines and in the underground of the same station. I put a lot of love in this film

about these unfortunate children and I took the footage of the street baby at a time when I was still hoping that more efforts could be made to help them. To this day I live with the regret that so little was actually achieved. In time and on different occasions, I also contributed to a certain relief of their situation, at least in the case of those living around Gara de Nord. I made friends with the general manager of CFR (*Romanian Railway Service*), as well as with the ministers, but my powers as a film director were rather limited.

Most of my colleagues from “Sahia” Studio took to jobs where all they had to do was to warm up a chair and destroy the field of documentary films in order to get a salary ... But I can’t name a single one that actually kept making documentary films. One female colleague got a high position with the Ministry of Culture: she was in charge of filling the bosses’ glasses with sparkling mineral water... Another fellow director, turned general manager, became a businessman in God-knows what television department ... The script writer I worked with for my “Probleme personale” (*Personal affairs*), banned by the Second Cabinet², was elected prefect at Cluj. All these happened during the years 1990 and 1991, after the Revolution. And he asked me to come to Cluj for a film, a monograph on the city. How clever the new prefect is and how splendid his organization methods! ... He continues the methods used by the former chief party-secretary. And I continued the tradition imposed by “Sahia Film” studio and its own chief party-secretaries ...

Before 1989, there used to be a time when people at “Sahia” Studio would talk about a Romanian school of documentary films. At that time, I used to have teams of 10-15 people who would finish the production of a film in a week. I took a team with me, I was the director, I felt the joy of setting the limits of footage-taking, of

1 Documentary film studio.

2 The department led by Elena Ceaușescu.

decided how they were to be edited, and so on ... But after 1989 I stopped doing all these things, I simply couldn't do them anymore. But the urge to work is still a human characteristic. What else am I good at apart from making films? I know how to keep bees. Oh, these bees do allow themselves to be exploited ...

Beekeeping instantly became my trade in 1992-1993, when I felt that making other films for "Sahia" Studio was not an option anymore. And I had to have an income, a steady job of some sort ... I started off and, while waiting for another opportunity to make films, I took to the road with my beehives, camping near one false acacia in the field or another one on the hills ... I would take them in sunflower fields and I would then sell the honey. I don't think that this whole beekeeping business was a sad story, although it actually was. It was a bitter story. I had no choice. What was I supposed to do? Later I started developing things and went back to my trade. But at that time nobody needed documentary films. They were all pulling in different directions; they all wanted a television station ...

It wasn't easy for me then, meaning that it was all so sad, but I'm not in the least ashamed because I kept working. I had to get over that period when there seemed to be nothing one could do to earn one's living. And I need money even for as little as a camera. It was then that I remembered about my hobby, bees, and I used my knowledge of them working together with a colleague who had more beehives. I too built some five or six, and finally ended up with ten of them. Using beeswax, propolis and mastic resin, all mixed up in certain quantities, I prepared a depilatory wax and managed to burn my legs and those of my wife. And I would take the thing to the local fair, actually to that Dâmbovița bazar, and we arranged the cubes one next to the other ... We would shout: "Don't shave with an axe, use beeswax!" And there was another former colleague of mine, a film director, who sold shoes, clothes she had received from Israel. She sold these things, and, right next to her, I sold my de-

pilatory wax and made some money that I used to get sometimes a new lens, some other times a new tripod and that is how I set up a studio of my own and got back in business.

I used to have beehives scattered around, but in time I started collecting them from my friends and taking them away. Where to? I had my place in one friend's bee garden, at "Sahia Film". A friend had only one of my beehives. I collected that one too, and managed to gather ten of them. He owned around 70 or 100, and a big lorry where he had set the beehives. Each time I went over to help him I was happy because it was an opportunity to get out of Bucharest to the wonderful forests and fields surrounding the city. My beehives were in his bee garden. We would travel to the Danube Delta where we could find wild flowers and the first yellow rape flowers. Then, twice a year, we would search for the false acacia flowers, first in the fields around Bucharest, then over at Drajna de Sus, where we found the false acacia blooming for the second time. And I got some honey from him, as he couldn't sell it all. I knew people, some rather wealthy, who would buy honey from me. And I sold his honey and a little of mine to them. I also made the depilatory wax myself. It was virtually brain surgery. I remember I used to add four measures of mastic resin and one measure of beeswax, and the compulsory ingredient, namely 100-200 grams of propolis, as it has aseptic properties. There was another substance that I would use, some mineral oil product resembling wax. But it's not of the same quality as genuine beeswax ... Use Reu Davy depilatory wax!... I did a responsible job, I gave it a pharmaceutical aspect and I also tested it to see if it was good, if it peeled off. And there were times when I and my entire family burnt our skins – yes, the family were called to participate in my experiments. I would also prepare syrup bottled in special containers. I added honey from lime tree blossom, from wild flowers and so on... I recommended that it should be taken in the evening, against fatigue. One small glass of lime tree honey to be

taken in the evening. The same kind of honey can be added to lime tea and you sleep like a baby ... Sometimes I would laugh my head off and there was no one around to take shots of that. Of course, I had labels too. Check this out, colour labels: *Davy Apicultor* ... I would stick this on the depilatory wax. "Depilatory wax – a recipe from the Pharaoh's Egypt" ... The labels were for the 100 and the 200 grams containers. Look, from 1992 ... "Validity 2 years. It lengthens the time period between depilation sessions." And I had all the necessary documents. One can tell that mine was a legitimate business. I was authorized by the state ... "Production and selling of food and beauty products prepared from bee honey and other derived substances. Arrangement services and facilities for hygienic comfort, agro-tourist camping import-export." What do you think?! I have a certificate for agricultural production activities ... I didn't need it to sell my stuff at the local fair. Anyone can go and sell anything they please there.

I used to tell the story about the propolis to the people who gathered around my camp. They asked why I added propolis to the composition ... Well, let me explain! I told them all about propolis, about the poplars outside villages, about the little mouse who dared to enter the beehives ... I would make up a story of some sort. And they would buy one or two chunks of the thing, and I earned yet another two or three thousand lei from the long story.

I know one thing, namely that, if you make one think or another, you can't be sure who's going to sell it. I had to sell it somewhere. I took it to a stand in the old city quarters, in Lipscani Street where there was some big department store. Some times people bought it, sometimes they didn't ... So I said to myself: why don't you take it to the local fair. And there I took it. I had heart from this colleague of mine that she went there to sell clothes. So, I went along ... She would go there and recite her little "poem", something with a "hat" and "this and that" ... And I went there with her to find a place ... And

a nice little spot we found and people there sold used tires, old tools, rusty cooking machines ... And there I was, with my goods. The passage from art and documentary films to depilatory wax is not an easy one. So I found a method of selling my stuff.

The local fair took place on Saturdays and Sundays. In fact, on Sunday mornings I would go there and meet all sorts of people looking for the things they needed. For instance, one of my first photo cameras was bought there, at the fair. I traded all sorts of things and got more equipment for my studio. I got myself a Smena 8 camera, as I liked black and white films a lot. I used a whole film in black and white on the days of the Revolution. I bought them and developed them myself, I did everything myself. I got another interesting camera from the fair. That's how my studio started. I sold my depilatory wax on a box left from an old piece of editing equipment, a player. I used to put the box on the ground, take the depilatory wax from inside the box and display it. I bought this Smena 8 camera with the first money I made there. Later I started using more compact cameras, and then modern professional ones. I used to meet former colleagues there but I wasn't at all ashamed. They had come there for cable and other stuff... For instance, there was a former cameraman there, who boasted that he once had a camera and that he had sold a film he had made during the Revolution, for which some Americans paid 15000 dollars. A small treasure, I used to say to myself back then... At the time I sold a cake of depilatory wax for 2000 lei, if I'm not mistaken. If I managed to sell ten cakes, I got 20 000 lei and I considered myself rich! I had enough money, so I suppose I could have got back home. But it didn't last for too long, the whole business ended within a year or so. I would also sell honey there. I had a firm of my own, *Davy* ... The firm had a bank account and a certificate from the city hall ...

There, at the fair, I met guys who, poor devils, sold the little they had left ... If memory

serves I got a nice knife there. Sometimes I had to add some money, but I always got what I wanted. This is how I became familiar with the fair because I hadn't had many previous experiences of that place. But it's true that it was at the fair that I sold the first Trabant; I had become braver. I sold that car there to get a new one. Later I reluctantly got myself a Dacia.

They had given me a place for my beehives where the Korean Embassy is nowadays, right next door from the Chinese Embassy. And, silly me, I went to see the place: 250 square metres it was ... They were supposed to allot it to me, it was as good as mine, but I was stupid enough to say no. I had to buy that land then ... Now the land in the vicinity of the Chinese Embassy is worth a thousand... What am I saying? It's more like several thousand euros per square metre. I would have been a little Becali¹ now. We joke about these things, but that's how it was back then ...

It was a difficult period. I couldn't get out of Bucharest for an entire week and couldn't film anything ... And then I would take the beehives and leave the city one way or another. Do you have any idea what a beautiful feeling you have spending time with them? During the day I gathered two or three carrots, one or two onions and some other spring roots, I added some leaves from I don't know what plants, I boiled all together and got a soup. It tasted absolutely delicious! It was our soup. We had a pavilion where we slept; it was so huge you could park half a lorry underneath it... I was playing the servant. In fact, we used to say that we actually helped each other, that I had no other place to keep my beehives. I let them with him, I took them back and go with them in the fields ... And we spent the night under that half-a-lorry pavilion. I had a tent and a family with me. And we lit up the fire. There were a lot of mosquitoes there, and I suffered like a martyr because of them. I swallowed all over. On the other hand, you had the feeling

that you did a nice and profitable job. I gave it up when things with my former trade began to improve.

We dearly remember the old beekeeping days ... We didn't squander out time. For me and for my former colleague it was a matter of surviving that tough period ... Each of us was struggling. Some people wanted to make a film with somebody who was selling images showing the misfortunes the country was plagued by at that time, and wanted to take part in the footage for documentary films on wretched children, asylums, the Romania of the handicapped. Others wanted a position in television, and they are still holding it. Some others were looking for jobs: manager, assistant manager, warehouse supervisor, doorkeepers and public clerks. There were many cameramen and directors who did nothing and lived off the money they got from renting the buildings.

I was in the beekeeping business in 1992 and 1993. In 1995 I realized that I could set up a firm and start getting orders. I retired in 1995, so as not to be competition – I would have my own business and that was that.

I had orders for traditional films, not only for digital films, from CFR. The history of the railways ... The Saligny Bridge, the Teodorescu Bridge, the one next to it. And back then, I took the footage on traditional film ... My firm was first called Publiferom and then Reu Studio.

Later on I tried to diversify my business. I got into publishing. I published "Din porunca lui Zalmoxe. Pietrele dacilor socotesc" (*As Zalmoxe Commanded. The Computations of the Dacian Stones*). I also began publishing photo albums... In time, I took a greater fancy to photography, greater than the one I had for film making, because film making after 1990 involved a lot of money. You had to be young and have enough energy, too if you wanted to struggle to get that money. I had orders for documentary films on technical matters, meaning

¹ Businessman who is heavily contested by the media.

films on the production process at Automatica and other orders from the former scientific advisors I had worked with at “Sahia Film”. But these orders were limited by the low budget invested in making documentary films by those who thus wanted to advertise their products.

The money I needed for my studio I got by doing all sorts of jobs and by working for instance at weddings and baptism parties. I made films on both occasions and managed to earn my money in an honest manner. “Hey, boy, you with the pictures, come over here!” And I went. I had a Smena from before the Revolution and I had recently bought a common compact camera which I used to take photos in Herăstrău Park and at wedding parties. “Here you are, sir ... ” “And how much would this be?” “Nothing, sir, the groom pays for them.” I was somewhat ashamed. I can’t afford it. If I accept money for my photos, I’ll have to charge the poorer client too. My profession is my profession. It’s one thing to take a picture at a wedding party, and another to take pictures for your client. I mean I didn’t accept money for it. It’s professional ethics. That’s how I managed to get money for my equipment. I wouldn’t have pulled it through otherwise.

I thought of setting up my own firm because I knew a lot of people in the technical and economic fields who managed factories and plants, like Automatica and so on, where I could get some solid orders. Thus I went on with my plans. I worked with rented equipment and with cameras that were only half paid for ... I worked in the field of bank restoration, then I worked for the construction company in charge with the bank restoration. And orders kept coming in during a considerable period of time ... The restoration of the Romanian Commercial Bank, of Exim Bank ... I filmed the restoration procedures, meaning mending the interiors of the banks, broadening and transformations, the ex-

teriors ... I took footage of the stages of these repairing procedures. This was how the construction company managed to get new orders. I had already worked with them on other films at “Sahia” Studio and now they invited me to film the bank restorations for them. There was a whole series of buildings done by reputable companies for the International Bank of Religions and other banks as well. People knew me already and called for me whenever they needed.

I got more orders, I made some films for CFR, and one for the Museum in Deva ... I mean I went on making films. And I also handled other things. I tried to accumulate money like a bee would honey ... I learnt the lesson my bees had taught me.

I also worked for the electoral campaign of PSD¹ because I had seen the mistakes the coalition, the CDR² had made before ... When I saw the stupid, utterly idiotic things they had done, I said to myself that the others would win the elections and maybe they had got smarter since they last lost political power. And I worked for this electoral campaign and I even supported the former mayor of District 1 who looked like a very serious man to me. I thought that better times would follow. I have no regrets about it because I did my job in earnest and I praised nothing of what was not praiseworthy. It’s true that one of the films showed Iliescu saying that we shouldn’t replace their corrupt people with ours and I approved of what he said. I allowed myself to include the statement in a film I made. Perhaps that was what Iliescu thought, but facts must have been different. And so they were. When their corrupt people started pouring in from all over the place, I was a little ashamed of myself, but there was nothing I could do. That’s how things were and unfortunately I was part of what happened. I think I also worked for the Democratic Coalition back in 1996 ...

In the field of documentary films one is

1 The Social Democratic Party.

2 The Romanian Democratic Convention.

happy with one's work if the film is truthful, meaning that things are as they really are ... You start being unhappy when you see that things will get exactly as ordered ... But you say to yourself, hey, he's the client, I do as he tells me to do. The documentary I would have loved to make would have looked very different, but I couldn't make it. The documentary films I used to make were actually very different because then I would do as I pleased.

Documentary films teach you to know and especially to be willing to admit that this country is beautiful precisely because of its people. You

cannot make a documentary without including people in it. And these people are and must be beautiful. You have to understand them. And your understanding of them influences your mind too. You can't live your life begging and asking for mercy, you can't lie to people unless you yourself are superficial and eager to climb the social ladder as quickly as possible. God kept me somewhat safe from such things ...

Translated by Alina Popescu

