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FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW:

Transylvania International Film Festival 2025
Cluj-Napoca, 13.06-22.06.2025

Between June 13 and 22, 2025, the 24th edition of the Transylvania International Film Festival, or TIFF, as all film lovers know it, took place in Cluj. As every year, the program was rich in events and films, from which everyone could choose something to their liking. Between the special awards that distinguished the work of filmmakers, critics and actors such as Maria de Medeiros, Andrei Ujică, Emilia Dobrin, Valerian Sava, and Florin Piersic, concert performances, debates, book launches, and special screenings in the presence of the production teams, it was difficult to choose, and the city lived to the rhythm of the festival for about ten days.

Somehow in tune with broader concerns in the cultural world, one of this year's main themes was Artificial Intelligence. Several films featuring and about AI, or films with dystopian themes, were presented in the section intitled *Tomorrow is Fear*. Debates were organized, questions were asked, and answers were sought. Between fear and hopes, Artificial Intelligence is about to fundamentally transform the practices of creation and distribution in the film world, without being able to replace scripts with authentic human vibrancy, quality acting, or directorial genius for the time being.

Among dystopian films, I had the opportunity to rewatch Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner* on the big screen, and it was as if I were seeing it for the first time. Inspired, like many other dystopias, by literature, Scott's film is based on Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*? The question raised in both the novel and the film is whether a form of artificial intelligence, in our case an android, is capable of developing emotional responses

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and how these arise and settle into what we call consciousness. In Ridley Scott's film, set in a dystopian 2019 Los Angeles, police officer Rick Deckard (played by Harrison Ford) returns to action to hunt down several androids, referred to here as replicants. They are considered dangerous because of their strength, but especially because – if allowed to live for more than four years – they are capable of developing emotions. Throughout his adventure, Rick falls in love with Rachel, the only android of the Nexus 7 generation, characterized by the memory of emotional experiences, even fictional ones, with which she is "loaded." Also, in the final sequences, defeated by the replicant Roy (Rutger Hauer), Deckard realizes firsthand that non-humans can think ethically and be overcome with compassion when, instead of being killed in cold blood, he is saved by Roy. The director's cut version of Ridley Scott's film depicts a world that leaves a strong impression on the audience. Filmed entirely at night and in an atmosphere dominated by black, brown, and gray, with endless rain falling over the city, streaked with neon lights, *Blade Runner* marks a milestone in the history of dystopian films. Fortunately, 2019, the year in which the film is set, did not look quite like that, but we must remember that it was still the year when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, a phenomenon that was not far from cinematic dystopias. The 1982 film also has a sequel, *Blade Runner 2049*, made in 2017, directed by Denis Villeneuve and produced by Ridley Scott himself, which curious viewers can watch on Netflix. Between the two films there is a continuity of atmosphere, story, and questions about the ontological distance between humans and androids, starting from the emotional capacities that each can manifest. With a lively narrative and some interesting narrative surprises, along with its high-quality special effects, Villeneuve's film is worth watching alongside Scott's atmospheric *Blade Runner*.

There were, of course, other films I saw at this year's TIFF. Among the different styles, few stood out. The Slovenian-Italian-Croatian-Serbian co-production *Lucia and Sin* (2025) failed to offer a sufficiently profound meditation on the serious theme of sin. Another co-production, this time between India, the United Kingdom, and Sweden, *Sister Midnight* (2024), is an unfortunate hybrid between a social film about forced marriages in India and a vampire comedy. However, this film is saved by a few efficient gags that make the audience laugh heartily.

As every year, the documentary selection at TIFF was very interesting. The audience had the opportunity to watch several films that raised serious questions about life. I would like to mention just three, which addressed different but equally pressing issues for contemporary society. *După cioate* (*Tooth and Nail*), directed by Mihai Dragolea and Radu Mocanu (2024), is a film about the timber mafia in Romania and, above all, about the risks faced by people of good faith who fight against it. I believe that every responsible citizen of this country should see Dragolea and Mocanu's film. Another shocking documentary is entitled *Les sacrifiés de l'IA*. Released in 2025 by French director Henri Poulain, the documentary shows that promoting these cutting-edge technologies comes at a social and environmental cost that is difficult to imagine. Huge data centers, which will grow even more with the spread of artificial intelligence, are energy-intensive, consuming unimaginable amounts of electricity, fossil fuels, and water, which comes with consequences that are difficult for humanity to bear. The third documentary I would like to mention is *2000 Meters from Andriivka*, by Ukrainian director Mstyslav Chernov. Composed of raw footage filmed directly on the front lines of the Russian-Ukrainian war, often with cameras mounted directly on soldiers' bodies, the film forces us to confront the tragic reality of war, unflinchingly showing fear, suffering, hope, and even death. Every time they have the opportunity to say something to a Russian, Ukrainian soldiers ask a question that we cannot help but agree with: "What are you doing here?" Chernov's film also shows something essential, in my view, namely that – although peace is always preferable to conflict – it should not be paid for at any price, and certainly not at the convenience of the aggressor...

In the Romanian film category, besides *După cioate*, I was also able to check off a catastrophic, pretentious, and incoherent film, namely *Interior zero* by Eugen Jebeleanu, based on a novel by Lavinia Braniște. This film fails in terms of social criticism, meta-cinematic discourse, and directing, and is drowned in clichés, each more hackneyed than the last. Things are different with *Pădurea de molizi* (*The Spruce Forest*), the latest film by director Tudor Giurgiu, which is more interesting. Starting from the historical tragedy at Fântâna Albă in 1941, when thousands of Romanians from Bukovina, which had been ceded to the Soviets, were brutally shot, the director offers a complex reflection on how history can be relived. The film is based on documents,

especially oral testimonies and some archive images (photographs, film footage), which are woven into the structure of the present and presented in a docu-fictional pretext. Since most of the survivors of those events are no longer alive, actors Coca Bloos and Mircea Andreescu impersonate the trauma they experienced, bringing to the audience the story of a couple, Minodora and Gheorghe, separated in the turmoil of history. He fled to Romania, escaping with his life *in extremis*, while she was deported to Siberia, where she lost her two daughters. This raises the implicit question, especially since Coca Bloos plays the role of an actress who has to play a role, under the baton of a theater director played by Ionuț Caras, of how authentic the tragedy is when reenacted on stage or in images, how much of the suffering of those people can still be a lesson for us, those of today, and how we are still touched by the pain of people who are no longer with us. On the other hand, it is suggested that, despite the limitations and imperfections of a historical reconstruction, the film has the power, through a few simple elements, namely a well-spoken line, a close-up of a suffering face, a soundtrack that emphasizes emotion with carol notes, or a certain rhythm of the filmed sequences, to help us not forget. An instrument and even a kind of model of contemporary human memory, film can bring the past into the present in thousands of ways: this is precisely what Tudor Giurgiu's *The Spruce Forest* is about.

But the masterpiece of the 2025 TIFF festival – in my opinion – was *The Return*, a 2024 film by director Uberto Pasolini, inspired by the myth of Ulysses. The story of the film can be started with a piece of verse from a sonnet by the Renaissance poet Joachim du Bellay, which tells of how happy is the one who returns home after a journey full of adventures, to live the rest of his days close to his loved ones, full of common sense and wisdom: "Heureux qui, comme Ulysse, a fait un beau voyage…" We do not really know how wise and sensible Ulysses was when he returned from his wanderings at sea. What is certain is that *The Odyssey*, one of the greatest texts in world literature, has never ceased to inspire poets, novelists, and filmmakers throughout the centuries.

There are countless adaptations, complete or fragmentary, of Homer's *Odyssey* for cinema or television. We find films inspired by Homer all over the world, but especially in Europe and the US (in Hollywood), which proves the enduring impact of the founding myths of European culture to this day. Among cinema films, we can mention: *L'Île de Calypso*, *Ulysse et le géant*

Polyphème, by the founder of fiction film, Georges Méliès (1905), or *Ulysses* by Mario Camerini (1954), an international co-production with Kirk Douglas and Silvana Mangano in the leading roles. Among television films, there is an eight-episode miniseries, co-produced in 1968 by several European countries and directed by Franco Rossi, with the assistance of Mario Bava, and *Odysseus* from 2013, a series produced for Arte by Frédéric Azémar and Stéphane Giusti. This series attempts to rejuvenate the cinematic presentation of the Odyssey, focusing on the events in Ithaca, in a deeply political key, almost devoid of supernatural interventions, which adds many details to those taken directly from Homer's text.

Uberto Pasolini makes a similar choice, except that – unlike the series broadcast by Arte – the Italian-British director tries to stay as true as possible to Homer's epic, keeping extra details to a minimum. The film opens with an image of Ulysses, washed up unconscious on a beach in Ithaca. The events are familiar to the audience: picked up by the swineherd Eumaeus, Ulysses hides his identity from everyone he meets, until he is recognized by the old and dying dog Argos. There is nothing supernatural here: just the story of an old and hesitant man, full of questions about the future and gnawed by feelings of guilt about the past. Telemachus and Penelope recognize him with some difficulty, and the son harbors some natural and deep resentment toward the father who has been absent for so many years, while the wife is both happy about the wanderer's return and tormented by uncertainty.

In this simplicity, without any presence of the gods who appear in Homer's *Odyssey*, it is clear that – when watching Uberto Pasolini's film – the audience focuses heavily on the acting, which only stands to gain from the director's choices. It is true that the legendary Odysseus-Penelope family is brought to the screen by a famous couple of actors with great talent: Ralph Fiennes and Juliette Binoche. With beautiful and expressive faces, though marked by the sufferings of life, the two manage to convey the finest psychological nuances: anguish, anticipation, suffering, confusion, desire, hope, and dreaming.

In keeping with the authenticity it embraces as a fundamental aesthetic choice, Pasolini's film does not resort to special effects, with one major exception. In the famous sequence of the bow test and the killing of the suitors, CGI was used so as not to endanger the physical integrity of the

actors. This sequence, even without direct reference to reality, is wildly intense. On the other hand, what real archer could shoot an arrow through the twelve axes lined up, if not the legendary, skilled, and invincible Odysseus? In the absence of special effects and the particular pleasure they would have generated, one that has to do with the surprise in the face of the extraordinary, in the case of *The Return*, the audience is focused on the harsh and refined beauty of the landscapes, on the trees and waves, on the whistling of the wind, on the sky that sometimes opens up endlessly, the blinding glare of the sun, and the stone fortress that dominates the sea from the dizzying height of a cliff. Filming in natural settings, in Corfu and the Peloponnese, or in Italy, is one of the great advantages that supports the story of Odysseus, because it places it back in the settings where it could have taken place, not in some mere studio reconstruction or in a setting created entirely virtually by Artificial Intelligence.

In terms of maximum results achieved with simple means, the film's chromatic poetics, dominated by black, brown, red, and gold, should also be mentioned. The cloth that Penelope weaves, tearing it apart every night so she doesn't have to pick a new husband from among her suitors, is red, like a symbolic reference to violence and blood, but especially to the passionate love that's consuming her. Very often, sunlight or ambient night lights bathe the sequences in a flood of golden rays that envelop the characters. The night sequences resemble paintings by Georges de la Tour or Rembrandt, with skillful chiaroscuro harmonies caressed by candlelight. In broad daylight, there is a memorable shot with Ulysses, in which his head is flooded with sunlight, as if to tell us, thanks to the position of the camera and the dominant gold, that the king has returned and will resume his rule over the island of Ithaca. The characters' costumes, simple and without accessories, just colorful cloths wrapped around their bodies, leave a lasting impression on the audience, especially in terms of color. Penelope wears no jewelry or other expensive accessories, except for some sumptuous bracelets and a wide gold necklace, which she wears at the end, in harmony with a black cloak edged with gold, which seems to create a kind of aura around her head. This black color can also refer to mourning, as it follows the massacre of the suitors, among whom – as Uberto Pasolini imagines – Antinous loved her to

some extent, even though he meditated on killing Telemachus, and toward whom she herself felt a certain vague attraction. The exceptional quality of the imagery in this film is undoubtedly due to the outstanding contribution of Romanian cinematographer Marius Panduru, whose refinement in visual composition happily complements the director's choices.

Uberto Pasolini's film captivates through its simplicity, by reducing Ulysses' return home to its essence and focusing on the psychological and existential stakes of this legendary story. There are few spectacular moments, but instead, there is the intensity of deeply authentic human experiences. *The Odyssey* that director Christopher Nolan promises us for July 2026 will be completely different: a blockbuster, the most expensive film in the career of a director who has made three *Batman* films, as well as *Inception*, *Interstellar*, and *Oppenheimer*. Nolan's *Odyssey* will focus on the spectacular episodes of Ulysses' sea adventures, it will be full of superstars and grandiose special effects, but will it be more effective than Uberto Pasolini's *The Return*? We will only find out the answer next year. Until then, however, there will be another edition of the Transylvania International Film Festival!

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