

# PARAGR AFF

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## A dream in its prime: 20 years of Astra Film Festival

### Interview with **Dumitru Budrala**, Director of Astra Film Festival

*This year Astra Film Festival celebrates 20 years of existence. How do you prepare every year for AFF, which is a marathon of showings, conferences, masterclasses and concerts? Have you developed any festival specific habits? Do you have a special ritual before the first day of each edition?*

Preparations go on during the whole year. Day by day I work for the festival, as well as other film projects, and that's how it's been since the first edition. Before each festival start, every evening, I listen to music.

*The first and the longest surviving international documentary festival in Romania, the first Romanian festival with Q+A sessions, the first festival in the country to have a website, the first festival with online streaming of films and a travelling film caravan, showings in unusual spaces. In 1993 what would you have said to someone predicting such a spectacular evolution of the festival?*

I'll be honest, back then I had the belief, as I do now, that the humans, that all of us, are capable of doing things which can put into action unknown resources. If we can properly shape a purpose in which to believe, we can

focus our energies in that direction. My dream was to create a space in which films can be shown and we can then reflect about the world in which we live, here in Romania, in Eastern Europe, in the World. And to do this we need to start with films which themselves reflect on these realities. It really did seem a dream back then. How to convince filmmakers around the World to come and show their films here, not Paris or London.

Nobody showed us the way, everything started from scratch, and I was well aware of this. But I thought that if there are no opportunities then I must make them. Basically, I had to pave the way so I can move around properly. In the Sibiu of the 90's there were no cultural events. Furthermore, there wasn't even a thought of somebody initiating such an event. The inertia of the previous system was still strong and all orders came from Bucharest. The idea of financing cultural events through a local initiative did not exist. And let's not forget that we were living in a country ravaged by minerias and by economic and social uncertainties, with no change in view. Let me give you an example: through the

Soros Foundation we obtained financing for a computer, which was a rarity in those times. The money transfer, which occurred through banks, took two weeks, and during the same time the Leu fell, which means we were left with half the sum. Obviously we couldn't get the computer we wanted.

*You are, along with Michael Stewart, the only constant element of this festival. What are the differences between the Dumitru Budrala from 1993 and the present one?*

I am by his side, or rather, he is by my side, since '93. I don't even know how the years have passed like this. I feel the same on the inside, even if the colour of my hair is different.

*You are the founder and the director of the festival, but at the same time you are documentary filmmaker. How do the two sides co-exist? Do you ever think about what choices you would've done, if you had been in the shoes of the directors who take part in the festival?*

Often I regret the fact that I cannot dedicate more energy to my film projects, that the festival is taking up so much of my time. And of course, whenever I watch a film, be it during the selection

period for the festival, or any other film, I always imagine the choices I would have made for that film.

*By founding the festival twenty years ago you put Sibiu on Europe's cultural map. How has your relation with local officials been during these first years?*

The relationship with the officials spreads out on a wide palet, from the first year, when the then-mayor simply kicked me out of his office swearing, to 2004 when the City Hall asked us to register Astra Film Festival in

Sibiu's candidate file for the title of European Capital of Culture, where, together with the Theatre Festival, we were the main internationally renowned cultural events.

*You are also present in the festival programme's "Retro20" section, with the film "The Curse of the Hedgehog". How do you evaluate your 2004 documentary today? What criticism would you give Dumitru Budrala from back then and what do you think you did well and what would you not change for anything in the world.*

I would not do more than

some post-production fine-tuning, which I did not have time to do at the time, having been busy with the festival. As it seems, this year it will be shown just as it was finalized back then, rather in a hurry...

*What are your plans for after the festival? How does Dumitru Budrala relax after yet another edition of AFF?*

The post-production for two films I have to finish is waiting for me. Otherwise, I'm going on a trip to the mountain with my family.

**Interview by  
Cătălin Olaru**

## The documentary film festival, a festival with full shelves

### Interview with Csilla Kato, artistic director of AFF

*You are the main selector of the first and, in the same time, the longest international documentary film festival in Romania. When does your work begin and end? How many documentaries do you have to watch every year, on average?*

At AFF, the films are selected by a pre-selection team, while the final

decision belongs to the festival board, which also contains Dumitru Budrala and Adina Vargatu. I coordinate the activity of the whole team, I suggest special sections and Adina Vargatu is a programmer for the Student and Eco Cinematograff sections. The programmer's work is year-long, he/she must watch the fil-

ms, but also analyse the film projects. I already have in mind films for the next edition. And of course, there are more intense periods. Precisely, I am talking about that time when films are sent to us, when I have to pay attention to the process and make sure that the films we would like to have in the

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# Google and the world brain – there's no such thing as a free ride

In 2002, Google embarked on the most ambitious project the Internet had ever seen: Google Books. Millions of books were scanned in order to be included in a huge digital library that, once completed, would have contained every book in existence.

But Google, in its eternal information adventure, had an even bigger goal in mind: the creation of a higher form of intelligence that had been predicted by HG Wells in his 1967 essay, "The World Brain". But more than half of the scanned books were in copyright and authors from all over the world found their copied books on the net.

What followed was a David vs. Goliath type confrontation, an eclectic group of writers from all over the world on one side and the huge Google conglomerate on the other; a confrontation that climaxed in a New York courtroom, in 2011.

"Google and the world brain" brings to the forefront a conversation we should have had a long time ago; it's a balanced, yet often somber vision of the fantastic promises of the Internet but also of its dilemmas and dangers that remind us that there is no such thing as a free ride, particularly in regards to information.

Ben Lewis' film is a strange yet fascinating combination between the old and the high-tech, with a story that takes us from the classic interiors of the most famous and beautiful libraries of the world to the Google headquarters, mega-computers and animation. But you never register the changes while watching the movie because all these vast locations, physical or digital as the case may be, are treated in a similar fashion, as nervous centers of the symbolic world brain, passage ways to information and knowledge.

"Google and the world brain" is, without a doubt, a cerebral film in which some of the most relevant concepts of the 21st century are being debated: from the thorny issue of internet privacy, copyright and the lack thereof, up to the uncomfortable possibility of information monopoly. Even so, the film is not deprived of the humor Ben Lewis is known for (as evidenced by his collection of communist jokes, "Hammer & Tickle") and the director spends enough time dissecting his subjects, each of them with their own set of advantages and disadvantages.

Once the film had ended, we talked to Ben Lewis since his project, which opened the Astra Film Festival on its long circuit around the world, merited an in-depth analysis. What follows is an honest and revealing discussion about the internet, movie-making and all their inherent dreams and disasters.

If you didn't get a chance to see the film on its opening night, "Google and the world brain" will be screened on Friday, at 19:30, in Sala Marshall.

*First of all, what are the reasons that convinced you to make this film? Was there a personal motivation behind it?*

**Ben Lewis:** I started around Christmas or autumn in 2009. I was trying to work out how to make a film and be critical about the Internet, that's what I wanted to do. Start to think critically about the Internet. Because there have been other movies, like "Remix" („RIP: A Remix Manifesto", 2009, r: Brett Gaylor) or "Steal this movie!" (2006, 2007, r: Peter Sunde, Aaron Swartz). "Oh, it's great, that's this new thing called free culture, you don't have to pay for music or movies, everything can be downloaded for free".. Such utter nonsense. I mean, quite apart from the fact that that music is not free - you pay for it, you pay for your Internet provider, you know, the idea that from now on, all the creatives in the world are going to start to produce things for free .. it's insulting and stupid. So I looked around for a story, to bring that out, and I didn't want to do music and movie downloads, because everyone knows that story and nobody gives a shit. So I was looking around for other stories and the Google books story is a really amazing one, it had many advantages, like - people didn't know about it, I like stories that people don't really know. I mean, it's crazy, they're scanning everything and creating this library that everyone has access to. It's such a psychedelic idea, sort of science fiction. The

other thing is that Google set out to create this library under certain conditions and then there's a bunch of authors that opposed Google and they announce their campaign, you know, there's a campaign of emails, one of petitions, which ended up in the American court and they actually stopped Google from completing their grand plan. Everyone said that you cannot change the Internet, you can't do anything about it. I like the fact that this is a story about people who actually managed - in a small way, to change the Internet, they stopped Google in their tracks, they pulled some kind of change, through quite conventional means and I think people generally think the Internet is some kind of invincible entity that you can't change.

And then, I always wanted to make a film about libraries. And when I said to go into the Google books story I was like.. this is going to work. It's really difficult to illustrate films about the Internet, there's a huge amount of images I could use. I mean, even though Google weren't going to help me, all I'd have to do is film a lot of sexy libraries.

*When dealing with such an inflammatory subject matter as Google, copywriting law and information monopoly, how important is it to keep an open mind when trying to make a documentary?*

**B. L.:** It's not very important, really. It's important to me. My film is quite balanced, as you probably saw. I mean, Google wouldn't cooperate with me. I was always anti-Google, that's why I made the film. But it's not right to say that my film is biased, because I worked quite hard to get all of Google's arguments in, and I think that they got quite to the point. So I think I approached this quite fairly. Some say that I'm making a strong case against Google, but I like having two sides in a film, I think most people will walk away with their own impressions. It's certainly a very complicated issue.

*As an artist, how do you personally view the subject of copywriting in an internet-based world, where everything is just a click away?*

**B.L.:** I think we have to create an Internet based on micro-payments, I think you have to get paid. But it's much more difficult than it was 5 years ago, you can download now lots of music for free and it doesn't have to be like that. There's lots of ways to protect people's copyright on the Internet, but the effort isn't being made, and it isn't made by companies which are quite wealthy to afford to do that. I mean, you cannot get rid of the pirates, but you can make it much more difficult to download stuff, there are lots of things you can do.

*Google refused to give you their view point on Google books in the film. What was their reaction, if any, once the film was released?*

**B. L.:** Yeah, so we went to Mountain View, which is the headquarters of Google, and told them we're making a documentary on Google books and we're not going to screw you, it's gonna be balanced, don't worry. Unfortunately, they didn't want to talk to me about Google Books, because they were still negotiating, it's a whole litigation going on. That sort of excuse you often get, I wasn't very pleased and I don't think it's a good excuse in this case. We told them we're making a documentary about the future of knowledge and they invited us to see the Head of Search, Amit Singhal. Generally, Google were really afraid of what we were going to do, and I think that's really pathetic in the modern world. I mean, there's all the criticism about Google Books on the Internet, what's the big deal? What happened is that, as Google is a really advanced hi-tech company, Google America probably wouldn't pick up the phone to Google Spain, so I had my Spanish producer to get me in touch with the Head of Google Spain and he gave us an interview immediately.

*The end of the film brings us an alternative to Google books: the joint ventures of both American and European libraries in creating their own digital global library. Is this initiative bound to face the same kind of legal and moral obstacles as Google books?*

## Interview with director Ben Lewis



**B. L.:** No, they're not scanning copyrighted books! No way, only out of copyright. They want to make them available on the Internet as a public institution to anyone who wants to use them. They're not selling adverts on their website, it's a bit of a different undertaking than Google's. I mean, not million miles away from Google, but sometimes the small differences are the big differences. I mean, Google has signed lots of deals with publishers, the publishers let Google show 20% of the book and they let Google make the whole book searchable - the tag words, and then they link it to the website, that's not million miles from what Google were doing. But it's legal. They signed a contract with the representatives of the authors, that's a big difference.

*The film is visually extremely cohesive. What were your visual inspirations and how important was it to capture the vastness of the locations you were filming in?*

**B. L.:** Well, first, what I really liked, was to spend months coming up with the ideas right, because I can come up with really really good ideas, but sometimes the really good ones take a lot of time to be made and you get so tired at the end of the editing process. All I wanted to do was to have Google's colors, like green and red and yellow, I wanted to show more scanning, I think these images are pretty powerful, I wanted to do more... But anyway, I knew I wanted to shoot libraries, lots of libraries, because in a good film you have like 3 or 4 different visual themes. I knew that I didn't want to see the outside of the library. Then we found a really good one in Mexico City and I knew I wanted to shoot there with a crane, it looks like in a sci-fi film, that was the idea. To get really disembodied bookshelves hanging around. And then the Chinese one, it was huge, and all the little people with their laptops, it was a very powerful image.

*How do you personally view Google? As a type of Big Brother or an organization working for the public's benefit?*

**B. L.:** People don't really think things through, do they? People who work in big companies, they rarely have a view from the outside. So I think they're trying to make money, but also some good in the world. That's a fairly simple human attitude, it's just vanity. "I'm changing the world and I'm earning a living". But is Google a Big Brother? I think they saw an opportunity, they're not the government, it's not their job to decide what information they should or shouldn't take from you online. But they do whatever they can to make money, it's an incredible resource to find out what people want and they're using that information to sell advertising.

*The music used in the film is very dramatic. What were the reasons behind choosing this score and what effect did you hope it would have on the audience?*

**B. L.:** Well, basically it's a sort of science fiction soundtrack, and I listen to a lot of Kubrick. It's actually the composer's first go. I don't really use other people's music. So he had to see the movie first and then work on the music, as this was his first soundtrack. I needed music to sort of develop very large chunks of the film, to tie everything together. It's difficult to structure the music as well, to follow the peak, the climax, the epilogue.

*Can you tell us anything about future projects you might have in the pipelines?*

**B. L.:** I'm currently developing a documentary about the notorious soviet pseudo-scientist, Trofim Lysenko, it's called "Human nature". It's a kind of study in the evil, if you like, what was Lysenko's nature, but it's also the communists' idea that human nature should obey the laws of Marx. And I'm also working on a comedy, about a bunch of British crooked producers.

By Loredana Ghidarcea and Diana Voinea

# The first days



PARAGR AFF 3

# of Astra Film Festival



The audience and the Press

In 1993, **Dumitru Budrala** founded the ASTRA Documentary Film Festival, initially conceived as an anthropologic and ethnographic film festival, which became today one of the most esteemed documentary film festivals in Europe. The first edition of the festival was an event where participants could watch only Romanian films, both in the Village Museum and in the Astra Film building in the Piata Mica. We can barely believe it too, but 20 years have passed ever since. It is an inheritance which makes us proud! We can see in the photo report below how the first edition of the festival looked like.



Michael Stewart, a friend of the festival since 1993



The building in The Museum of the Village where screenings were held

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selection are submitted. From May to the end of July, there is a very intense period when we coordinate the pre-selection and watch the films. All in all, in the end I get to watch between 600 and 800 films!

*How many films were submitted for the 2013 competition and how many of these were left behind?*

In 2013 we received 1350 films and we left behind 1240. As any festival, AFF too has a limited space for the projection of the films.

*Have you ever had conflicts with the filmmakers who were not selected?*

Of course we had lots of problems with those we did not select. But we also receive complaints from the filmmakers we select, especially if they are not in the desired section of the festival. For me, the period which precedes the announcing of the official selection is the most exhausting time. I happen to remember certain films we couldn't select, because of the lack of space in the program, even years later. I often think about finding a solution so that we can include those films in the program as well. Maybe we'll be able to do that next year!

*If the editor in chief of a tabloid would decide to write an article about the Astra Film Festival phenomenon, would he have subjects to write about?*

I don't know if we would comply to the standards a tabloid sets! (laughs) But surely an observational documentary would capture a lot of relevant aspects of the society we live in, only by paying attention to our efforts to prepare the festival. As it is an intense work, there are lots of written and unwritten rules of functioning of this world we live in that come to surface.

*Which are the documentaries you insisted on having in the AFF 2013 selection? What films in the competition are a must-watch?*

For those who come for the first time at the festival, I would recommend first of all the films from the Incredible section. The film on Google Books, the one on Facebook, „The act of killing”, the documentary on the priest Arsenie Boca are my personal recommendations. For the regular participants of the festival, the public familiarized with what the documentary world means, „Leviathan” is a must, as are all the films in the International section.

*The festival is opened by the film „Google and the world brain”, while during the last day of the festival, the public is invited to find out the story of Arsenie Boca. What is the message this edition of AFF wants to*

*transmit, if there is one?*

It is true, there are a lot of stories in the festival about realities and themes which are of impact, from the Google issue and the story of Arsenie Boca, to stories of people like us, seen in their everyday life. The program of the festival is conceived in order to reflect a variety of subjects and cinematographic approaches.

*As a main selector of the festival, what is the main difference between this year's festival and what can be seen at ZagrebDox, IDFA or DocLisboa, for instance?*

We sure have more Romanian films and Romanian premieres than all the other festivals. The ZagrebDox also focuses on documentaries made in the Central and Eastern Europe, while IDFA is different because of its dimension. If AFF, ZagrebDox or DocLisboa can be compared to a shop, where you can get to know the products and salesmen, IDFA is like a supermarket. I say we need both small shops and supermarkets.

*This edition marks the 20th anniversary of Astra Film Festival. How do you see the festival during the next 20 years, considering that the process of obtaining the resources to make a documentary are more democratic, more precisely - in the context of a more and more powerful influence of the digital format?*

The production of documentary films started to boom 10 years ago. And we are witnessing a very interesting phenomenon, which is still at the beginning. The digital support has already helped a lot: more and more documentary films are being made. This means a greater number of good films, but also an equal number of bad films. But as the distribution conditions have changed - I am talking here about the online environment, many other transformations are on their way. Anyway, these changes are welcome. We use more and more the visual language in order to communicate about what surrounds us, and that can only please us.

Interview  
by Cătălin Olaru



# High-school students, eco version

For the third year in a row, Astra Film Festival official program will include a documentary film section dedicated to environmental issues. The surprise of the 20th edition is that Eco Cinematograff becomes a competitive section, and this year's jury will include students of Gheorghe Lazăr National College from Sibiu, under the guidance of Professor Vintilă Mihailescu. We decided it's time to meet them. And this was good thing to do.

**1.** *You'll be a member of the jury of the Eco Cinematograff section from Astra Film Festival. Why do you think high school students are the ones who will decide the winners of this particular section?*

**2.** *Which one is your favorite documentary, the one that impressed you most and convinced you that documentaries are often at least as interesting as fiction movies?*

**3.** *Have you participated, as a spectator, at the festival in the past? What is the best moment you've had at AFF until now?*

**4.** *If you were to direct a documentary, which subject will you choose to present?*

**5.** *If it were for you to convince your colleagues to come to Astra Film Fest to see documentaries, and not the last 3D Hollywood premiere, which will be your arguments?*

**6.** *A director attending AFF in Sibiu would decide to make a documentary about Gheorghe Lazăr National College. In lack of ideas, he invites you to choose the title. What would it be?*



**Corina-Maria Doican**

**1.** I think high school students represent youth, and youth is the future. We are the ones who should be most aware of the current environmental problems faced by people around the world because our generation is the one that can make a change, that has the pow-

er to impose its views and who has enough imagination to find suitable solutions to these problems.

**2.** I really like movies that address the topic of "cultural diversity" because it helps me to discover, understand and better accept the world around me. One such documentary is "Babies", a film released in 2010, which gives us a perspective on the first year of life of four children from four very different places: Mongolia, Namibia, San Francisco and Tokyo. I was very impressed by this film because I noticed how unusual are people's ways of life and how much their habits differ depending on the environment, history and tradition. However, children are incredibly easy to adapt to these environments and regardless if they wear expensive shoes or are running barefoot through the sand, playing with toys or animals in the yard, they develop equally harmonious and have a happy childhood, wherever they live.

**3.** I remember with a smile that I had a "date" at one of last year films at the festival.

**4.** I would like to direct a documentary about a trip around the world.

**5.** Astra Film Fest presents many educational films that are based on people's experiences. Personally I find it very important to watch a movie that is based on real facts, as it is possible to influence our reality and give us new insights into the subjects. At the same time, many issues of current interest are addressed, that can give us something to think about and that can amaze us, both by the outstanding artistic means and amazing information. On top of this, and most important, members of the public have the chance to discuss with the movie maker at the end of the projection, thus being able to express their views, to clarify misunderstandings and learn more. Can you do this at the cinema?

**6.** "Hundreds of years of tradition followed by today's Lazăr College students"



**Denisa Ștefania Lupu**

**1.** It is said that young minds are the most undisturbed. High school students' purpose is to see the raw truth in these movies and to judge it accordingly. Inevitably, when judging the debated issues, more subjective factors can mix together, influencing the choice of a winner. These subjective factors are missing from our high school experience, as we just start to really see the world around us.

**2.** „An Inconvenient Truth” (r. Davis Guggenheim, 2006).

**3.** I attended in previous years with my class, but the best moment experienced at AFF so far is when they have responded positively to our proposal for collaboration in the "48 for Teens" project..

**4.** My topic would be "Why do people take pictures?"

**5.** If they must be persuaded to come, then they don't deserve to be invited.

**6.** „Lazăr Almighty”.



**Nedelcu Rares**

**1.** I think high school students - and teenagers are generally most appropriate for judging a documentary in this section, especially if it deals with issues like pollution. Young people can change the future because it belongs to them and we know what is best for us to live a happy life.

**2.** A very good documentary that I've seen is "Human Body". I liked it because it presents people's life from birth to death in a number of episodes (in terms of anatomy and biology).

**3.** In the past years I haven't seen so many docu-

mentaries on AFF, but this year I will try to get to see the most.

**4.** I would make a documentary on Romanian rural life, with its advantages and disadvantages.

**5.** A good argument is that documentaries, unlike fiction, provide additional information that you can actually use in life. I'm more drawn to a documentary than a fiction film.

**6.** „Ready for school?"



**Văidian Iulia**

**1.** To be responsible for the environment. If we as young people are aware of the current problems of the environment and learn how to act in their resolution, I think that in the future they will diminish.

**2.** I've always been impressed by the life story of a personality, the backstage, things that can't be seen on TV or read in the press. "Woody Allen: A Documentary" and "Searching for Sugar Man" are the ones I remember.

**3.** I wasn't present as spectator at AFF, but I watched documentaries in other festivals and they are always a subject to think about. The most beautiful moments I've experienced in a festival are these, during AFF, as the jury position is new for me, and the whole experience (watching movies from Eco Cinematograff, the discussion around them, judging) is great!

**4.** Being passionate about cycling, my documentary would certainly be based on this.

**5.** Documentaries present real stories of any domain. By watching them, we definitely enrich our knowledge and worldview. In my opinion, these are the things that young people should be interested in, because it helps their personal development.

**6.** "Lăzăriștii" – high-school students with opportunities.



## ROLLING with the festival!

Only once in a lifetime does a festival turn 20! Maybe not everyone knows, but the festival years are not like the normal years, the ones we people count, before blowing the candles on the anniversary cake. In other words, 20 years is an age that not many festivals manage to reach. More precisely, none, as Astra Film Festival is the first international film festival in Romania!

In order to mark this moment right, we have decided to organize an unconventional event. Our choice - an anniversary tour on bikes! We, the organizers, could not miss this event, so we can talk from experience: it was the most cultural mass ride ever seen in Sibiu!

