

ParagrAFF



interview

Lech Kowalski
director of
"Drill Baby Drill"

Documentary film as a quest for truth

Q: Could you tell us a little bit about the early stages of making "Drill, Baby, Drill"? How did you find the communities you filmed with?

L.K.: The one in Poland is the place where I made another film, called "Holy Field, Holy War" and it's about farming, agriculture, the farmers for me are the last underground, it's something that I'm interested in. I'm Polish, I've made a lot of films in Poland so I drove around Poland for almost a year looking for a place to make that film and I found this spot in Eastern Poland which is not far from the Ukrainian border and I spent a long time there filming with farmers and as I was filming them we discovered together another problem that they had to deal with, which is fracking and they knew nothing about it in the beginning. It wasn't even fracking so much, it was seismic testing and this big company coming to their area and essentially treating them like they were, I don't know how I would describe it... not important and not really to be dealt with and they were treating them as if they were pawns to be moved around and the farmers were not very hip to this, this kind of manipulation, you know? And they were very upset by it, no one was telling them the truth about what's going on; they started reading about it on the internet and they learned about what fracking is. These are people who are farmers, they're educated in agriculture, they know what's going on with the environment, they're far ahead of people who are in urban areas. So I was filming this with them so that's how I found it. And Pennsylvania was quite easy, I lived in New York for many years and Pennsylvania borders New York so I just drove there and I looked around and I spent a long time there and I met people and I sort of became very involved with those people and what they are fighting with. So there was just a sort of natural evolution of things, you know?

Q: So why specifically these two places?

L.K.: In the United States, this kind of fracking has been going on for almost ten years and Pennsylvania is one of the places where it's been going on intensively and they have over ten thousand wells there, so I didn't have to search for it. What I wanted to show was what it looks like in the United States and what it could potentially

look like in Poland and that was the whole purpose of going there. Because the thing is that in the Polish story it's kind of a theoretical problem. The idea was to show in the film that what these people were concerned about was a real problem. And since the technology is mainly American, because it was invented in America, it was kind of a nice balance, you know? And Chevron is American and many of these energy companies are American based, some are Canadian, German, but America is probably the biggest force behind it.

Q: A few of the farmers in your film mention that they weren't really against the procedure in the beginning because it seemed like a good potential financial resource for Poland. Is that something that is being said through the media?

L.K.: Every government sells that propaganda. I mean you have to look at it globally. I don't want to get into global politics, but the thing is that every country needs energy, right? So most of it coming from certain places in the world. America has decided to become energy independent and they always say "well let's make America independent., let's make America into this independent power, let's make it sustainable." So all these countries like Poland, Romania, are concerned about energy sources and they also connect energy with a certain kind of weapon to allow them to be independent from, you know, let's say Saudi Arabia or that kind of thing. But it's the same companies, you know, this is a kind of trick. I mean in Poland and in Eastern Europe the independence is really aimed towards the Russians. So they use this as a way to sell this idea that yes, allow the foreign companies to come to our country and to extract these resources. But the thing is at first they said Poland said the largest amount of potential shale gas in Europe, like 300 years, so the idea was that "aha, we have so much energy here that if we exploited that, then every Polish person will be able to retire on the money that is being earned on this." And a lot of these projections were made by American companies because they have the power and the technology to extract that. So it was not like a question of independent testing and looking at the big picture, so first it was 300 years, and then it went down to 200 years and now the projection is Poland

maybe has 30 years of supply of gas. Which is really extraordinary because it's not a long time when you think about it, compared to the danger and the damage that it can cause to the environment, you know? So the other thing is that this gas will not necessarily be used in the country, it will be exported. In all of these countries, no one ever said, yes this gas will come out of the ground and yes it'll be used in this country; they also don't talk about the price of that gas, that will become open market price.

Q: Did you try to set up a meeting with Chevron and present their side as well?



L.K.: Yes, I tried to talk not only to Chevron, but to a lot of different companies, both in Poland and in the USA and they all refused. I mean I had exchanges with e-mail, I called them. It's very ironic cause we live in this sort of "1984" kind of reality where certain things are labelled but they actually mean the opposite. So in most countries that I've looked into the people that are in charge of shale gas for instance are the ministries of the environment, or the Environmental Protection Agency in the US or in England it's called the Environmental Agency and in all these agencies they're responsible for something which really they shouldn't be. But what they really are is a kind of middle man, not to protect the environment but to sell it in a certain way. I've come to this realization recently. So all these people who are involved with managing this, they don't want to talk to me and I mean I know that I'm not going to get the truth from them. They'll have a special thing to say which is to

promote their product or their process or whatever they're doing.

Q: Your film would fall under the umbrella of activism, but you seem to have a very personal approach in making this documentary and it seems to draw its inspiration from the unembellished style of direct cinema. Is this a conscious choice?

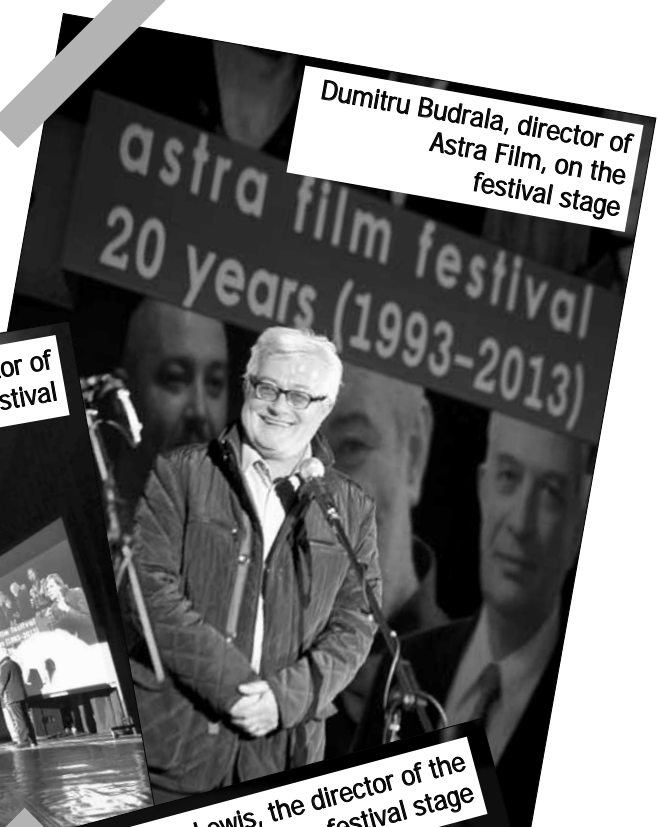
L.K.: I'm not an activist and I don't want to be an activist, it's a very dangerous word around the world. These people are put into a category and after a while people don't pay attention to what they are saying. Making a film about an issue is very dangerous because you start making kind of a lecture or a polemic and then the audience starts getting suspicious, so there is sort of a rule in journalism which I find really boring, but it's been kind of a rule for many years, which is that you have to show both sides of the story and a lot of these stories, there is none, the other side is hidden, it's very hard to understand the other side because because the other side is, for instance in this situation the gas companies; they have an objective, which is to make money so their objective is to make sure that the general population is comfortable with them being in a certain area or doing certain things that they've been doing for a long time and to extract the resources from the ground in as quiet way as they can so as to make as much money from it and satisfy the people who own the company. So these are very powerful entities creating a fake picture of who they are and in some instances they even try to stop people from doing stories about them, whether it's filming or journalism or whatever. It's kind of a war, you know? So I tried to not be a person who falls into their trap and to sort of expose them in a different kind of way and the way that I do it is by trying to make the story personal, you know what I mean? Instead of journalistic. Now, this was a real problem with this film because the film was made for prime time television in France and Germany at 8 o'clock and I think this was the first time that I made a film for prime time audience and in the process of making the film I discovered what the real problem is in making a film for the prime time and that is that - and I had many discussions with the commissioning editor about this, he said that people who were sitting at home at 8 o'clock A. want to be entertained and B. they have the power of changing the channel so you need to keep pulling them into the film every minute or two cause as soon as their attention flags then they will change the channel so it was a challenge to make a film that's my style and also deals with the really crazy issues of prime time television so I created a way of making the film using my voice over and my style that is not exactly how I make my other films but I experimented with this so I made the film that I made, but I decided to make the film in a way that is not the normal kind of film where you show two sides or the journalistic kind of thing. The problem in making this kind of films is to try to show a truth without being too obvious about it. And what I'm interested in is to try to be a storyteller and I'm not interested in being an activist because I think most cinema can't change the world but a few films can have an impact and the whole idea is to get a dialogue place. And a lot of cinema now is getting so obviously dialectical, like propaganda for either this side or that side."

(to be continued)

By Teodora Lascu

picture report

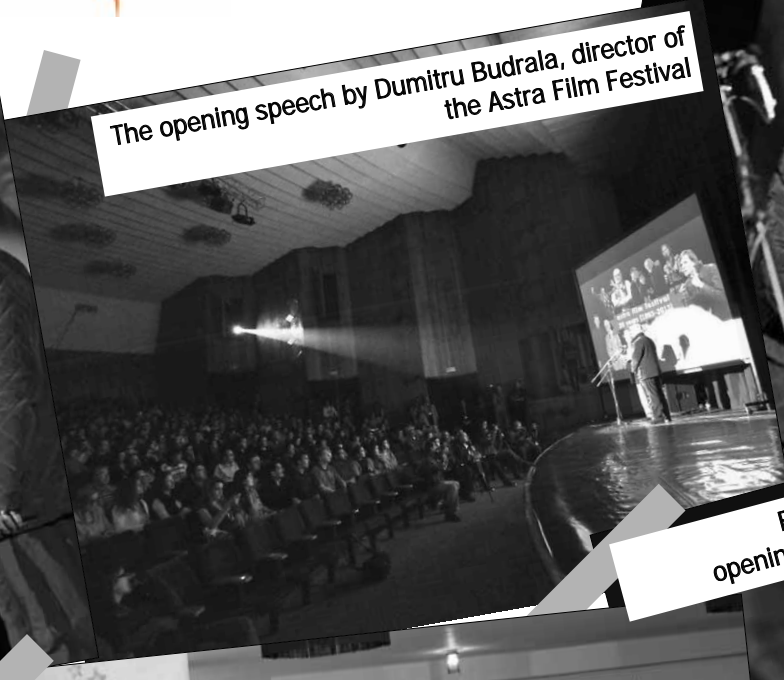
Opening Day



Dumitru Budrala, director of Astra Film, on the festival stage



Film politics at its best. Dumitru Budrala with Ioan Cindrea, president of the Sibiu City Council



The opening speech by Dumitru Budrala, director of the Astra Film Festival



Ben Lewis, the director of the opening movie, on the festival stage



Ben Lewis (Google and the World Brain), with Adina Vargatu, Astra Film Festival programmer



It is only the first day, but the press cannot get enough of Astra Film Festival



The whole country follows Astra Film Festival, an event 100% made in Sibiu



Director Ben Lewis answering questions from the audience



Ada Milea in action



You can rarely see such enthusiasm from the audience! Unless, of course, we are talking about an Ada Milea concert...



In the foyer of Casa de Cultură a Sindicatelor, the audience is getting ready for the Ada Milea concert



The Ada Milea effect

Power to the people The public from Astra Film Festival has the floor

A long haired teenager, Radu Pisica, enters the foyer laughing with his friends: "I only came to see Ada Milea's concert, I don't want to see any movie tonight".

Two young bloggers, Manuel and Anne Marie, are debating about a movie in front of the Culture House, and one of them came to tell us his opinion about the film he just saw.

"We came to Sibiu to meet the local producers, to see how they support the local economy and of course we included Astra Film Festival in our visit".

His colleague enters the conversation:

"I heard about Astra Film but this is the first time I came and I'm glad I did because I loved the opening movie, it was really impressive and it confused me a little. I thought "Should I get off Google books?" or... "

"No, it's about the modern era tendencies and you need to keep up to what's going on, to know everything and to ride the wave. You have to figure how you can use the insight in your best interest..."

And the conversation started to get really passionate, so our presence was already forgotten.

A local teenager shares his opinion about the festival with us:

"I want to see movies and I can find good films at Astra Film Festival each year. I mean some interesting documentaries that can change something at least at level of perception or some new ones, that I haven't seen anywhere else. The festival is very relevant because it opens your eyes. I can watch documentaries at home, but I like it here because I can watch it together with many other people".

We could not ignore the fact that meanwhile, on the top of the stairs from the building's exit, a solid and numerous group of young people formed by students of Film University Bucharest, talking full of verve. We started asking them all kind of questions. Ioana told us: "I came to Astra Film Festival because we study documentary at school this year and this festival is a good source of research and inspiration. We want to find out how a documentary it's made, this is all about. It's our first year here and we cannot wait to see all the films. We just saw this Google documentary, which captured my attention when I read about it, but I lost it while the film was showing. I figure it out in the first 20 minutes, and the information keeps repeating afterwards."

Neither Andrei, also a student at Film University in Bucharest, was impressed by the opening movie. "It's

only my personal opinion, but I understood that Ben Lewis is a good documentary maker who took a small subject and, without any emotion, shoot it... an hour and a half. Hmmm, I don't know what to say. I mean, if it didn't had all the HG Welles theory in background, which is all fiction, this documentary could not have been existed".

Simona, Film University student, takes advantage of the festival's education: "Honestly, I have to do research for the documentary class in school and I thought that this is the perfect place for me to find helpful information".

Cristian, doctor in philosophy at Cluj, came for the third time to the Festival. "First time I came because some friends of mine recommended it and I was interested in a documentary film festival. Second time I came because I like the first time very much and now I think I made a tradition out of that. I pick the films based on suggestions I get from my sociologist and documentarist friends. I saw many important movies this way; an example will be "Fox Hunters". The opening film from tonight seemed to me a little too commercial for Astra Film Fest. It looks like a Discovery Channel documentary and I didn't expect that. But I think it is connected to the story of 20 years of Astra, to its analogical beginnings and the festival's director must be fascinated by today's digital era."

Mitru, an IT programmer, was very impressed by the Ben Lewis's film. "Very well documented movie, I liked the fact that it presented many different stories. I thought it was insightful and very deep. I feel smarter than how I was before the movie and this is very important for me". His delight extended to the whole festival: "Honestly, I have always liked it's idea but I don't come here daily for movie-hunting. This year, Sibiu seems more electrified to me. The festival was very well organized each year; everyone is giving it the right importance, except the town management. The opening speeches seemed too artificial to me. But, anyway, I appreciate a lot what Dumitru Budrala is doing and I think he is the soul of this festival. So, from my point of view, Budrala is a public institution who makes things happening. I loved the anniversary documentary, I really didn't know the story and it's nice for us to find out what is really happening in our city".

Alina and Maria, from marketing an human resources domains, keep interrupting each other to tell us how much they love the opening movie and the whole festival.

M: "I didn't expect that a movie about copyright to be this interesting"

A: "I was over my expectations also. I expected something boring but it was fascinating. I couldn't imagine how many implications could have this project and that it could affect us all. Regarding the festival, my schedule this week is made around the movies. Saturday and Sunday we are here all day. As you could see in the anniversary movie, this festival is an icon for Sibiu. Because of it, our city and the rest of its festivals (jazz, theatre) grew in 20 years and we are very proud of that".

M: "Yes, it's a festival which grew in spite of all the obstacles that appeared over the years. I remember it was a time when the festival's director was forced to take everything from the beginning. This proves tenacity and I think we should be proud that we have such character strength in Sibiu".

A: "I want to see «Drill, baby, drill». It's the perfect time for this movie with everything it's happening. We have to be well informed, to know which steps to follow"

M: "For me, «Google and the world brain» was the main film, the one that I really wanted to see, because the theme is very up-to-date and not very exploited. I mean, I think of Google Book as of a useful application, not a threat".

A: "In the past years we saw all kind of anthropological documentaries from Cambodia, Philippines with very interesting subjects and I realized how lucky we are. Even if we are still living some transition years, it some parts of the world it could be much worse".

M: "Because I like to watch documentaries about communism, Romanian prisons from that time, I noticed such a documentary will be screened at this year's edition of Astra Film Festival and I really want to see it. Besides that, I want to see many anthropological films about Africa, Oceania, and other areas, exotically for us, and I really want to learn new things about these cultures and civilizations".

Andra Matzal, journalist at Think Outside the Box, told us that she wants to see a tone of movies this year. "I saw < < Drill, baby, drill > > a long time ago. I'm not interested in a particular section, because each year I was surprised by the sections I didn't give much importance at the beginning. I liked a lot the opening movie, it subjec-



tively activated me. For my newspaper edition, I had to write an essay about 20 years of documentary films, applied to films made by television journalists. I was forced to see dozens of documentaries and I realized that history is written also through documentaries. The fact that they are not very easy to get, I mean you cannot simply find them on the Internet, cuts off a big part of the information you can have about the world around you. Astra is one of the few places where you can come and catch up with social, ecological and political news. Regarding the comparison with other festivals, TIFF is a hedonistic experience, for film fans... while Astra is for civically involved people, for the ones who want to get actively informed about all kind of perspectives, not necessarily the esthetic ones".

The same enthusiasm was showed by Gabriela Garlonta, former actress in Sfantu Gheorghe, who said: "First of all, Budrala deserves all the applauses, because he is a dreamer and all the films brought here are very good. Nota bene, it must stay an art festival!. For example, you saw, the director of the opening movie said that his film was a premiere not only in Sibiu, but in entire South-Eastern Europe. So, come to the festival! Because you, young people, coming to this festival, you learn more in these few days than in a few years of school. This is also what director Cristi Puiu was saying!"

Ciprian says that he has many open questions after opening movie. "It was a very well done film. I have never been to this festival. I think only a month ago I realized how great a documentary can be, when I attended a book launching at Astra Center where there was also a very interesting documentary screening, something about pride and altruism".

Alain, a young bohemian Frenchman works as a volunteer at the Astra Museum and he says: "I want to stay here in Romania for one year. I came to the festival because I heard about it at the place I live in the Astra Museum. I really liked the movie. I like books so it was disturbing for me to see that we can make an industry of ebooks. I don't like the concept of digital books."

Loredana Ghidarcea, Mihai Kolcsar and Diana Voinea

Astra Film Festival photo retrospective

Astra Film Festival became international starting 1994. Although foreign participation wasn't so numerous at this second edition, we can note the fact that it represents an important start in building the connections between documentary film centres in Western and Eastern Europe. Asen Balikci, documentary film maker, professor and anthropologist and Vivi Dragan, well known Romanian cinematographer, founder of Visual Arts Foundation were only two of the most important people seen at the 1994's edition.

Starting 1996, Astra Film Festival focused around the dialogue between East and West. This was the year of the first Q&A section organized for public, as part of a film festival in Romania.

Romanian movies were categorized in a special section starting 1998th edition of the Astra Film Fest. Another novelty of this year was the first portrait of a documentary film director present in the festival, starting with Mirceau Saucan. 1998 is the first year when director David MacDougall, the most important representative of Anglo-Saxon anthropological cinematography, took part in the festival.



Astra Film Festival 20 Interview with the bloggers invited at the festival

Q: What is, in your opinion, the importance of a documentary film festival like Astra, bearing in mind the more and more uncertain context (socio-political, but also environmental)?

ANCA DUMA (anca.duma.ro): Astra is a cultural ambassador regardless of the actual social, economic or political context. I am really glad that it is one of the festivals which put Romania on the map, at least in the domain of cinematography. Astra brings another opinion, another perspective on film and I find it really beautiful that there are many directors who came to Romania in order to get familiar with the country and do a documentary here, trying to build a story about what they've seen here.

ANNE-MARIE CHELARIU (theannemarie.ro): I really enjoyed the film which opened the festival, the one about the festival's history. I like Astra because I think it focuses on emotion, unlike other festivals - I was a volunteer for Next and TIFF, for instance. I am, personally, not so easily impressed by a short film, as I am by the story of two grand parents, for example. I think that is the main difference between Astra and the other film festivals in Romania. That and its 20-year history.

Is there a certain kind of subjects you are interested in during this year's festival?

ANNE-MARIE: Seeing the first film, I realized that I'd like to see old films. Black and white films with people wearing na-

tional costumes, dancing popular dances, their gatherings, because I don't know much about this subject, I haven't been in contact with this world and I'd like to know more about it.

ANCA DUMA: I too am interested in subjects that are approached from an anthropological point of view, such as traditions, history, the way the peasants lived, things which are lost. Unfortunately, people don't know these subjects or refuse to know them. But I'm also interested in films talking about the Internet, like the Google film, because we activate in the online environment, we are bloggers and activists of the online.

If you were to make a documentary, what would be your subject of choice?

ANNE MARIE: I even started a similar experience. A sort of documentary about my grandpa's life and how he met my grandma, who's German, and about how they live in their village.

ANCA DUMA: I don't know if I'd go that far, to make a film. But I want to start drawing my family tree.

VLAD DULEA (vlad.dulea.ro): I'd make a documentary about the idea that the online is different from real life. There is a general perception that the online environment is different from the offline, which is totally wrong, if you ask me. It is not a normal premise and that would be an interesting theme to tackle in a documentary. The fact that there is no difference between these two worlds.

ALINA MASSIER (alina-massier.ro): It's not about Internet VS reality. It's about people. Otherwise, I also manage a shop selling bride dresses and maybe I'd make a documentary about the wedding industry and the way they evolve.

CRISTIAN FLOREA (cristianflorea.ro): I'd like to talk about how the Romanian sports federations don't get involved in the sports they support and I'd compare our situation with a foreign federation.

ALEXANDRA PALCONI (alexandrapalconi.info): I'd like to make a documentary about the German peoples from Banat, because I am currently studying their history and I have noticed that I don't know many things about them.

VLAD DULEA: I'd also make a documentary about the life of the cover bands which perform at weddings. During the 2006 - 2013 period, as it was different back then. There have been some changes which affected the industry and I think there is a concept of pre-cover bands and post-cover bands.

ISTVAN BERTALAN (istvanbertalan.blogspot.com): I'd make a documentary about the changes in people's lives caused by the discoveries in science and technology.

What do you think about Ben Lewis' film, Google and the world brain?

ISTVAN BERTALAN: I liked its approach a lot and first of all, they cannot just ignore our right to copyright, regardless of their reason. They have

transformed this whole thing in a sort of communism where if you build a small house for yourself, they come and take it away from you and transform it in a museum.

ANCA DUMA: More than anything, we must not forget that the Internet is a source of profit. And it is important to be aware of this. We are talking about a phenomenon which is expanding in Romania too. I often see people with a small smartphone using it to surf the Internet and find things and stay connected. It was inevitable that things would not happen like that and it is true, capitalism, the corporations - we all know very well what they are trying to do.

VLAD DULEA: I liked it too! It got my attention and I think it's well done. As for the subject of the film, I am on Google's side!

ANNE-MARIE: I know the Internet is risky, but for the moment it is the only way in which I can leave something for the posterity, so I'm ready to take the risks!

Do you think that you are responsible to your public in the same way a documentary filmmaker is responsible to his public?

VLAD DULEA: We, as every author, and just like a filmmaker or writer, have a responsibility to our public, in general. You asked us if we're responsible for our public. Here we have a difference. I, personally, treat in a different way my public - I mean, the public I expect to read my

articles, than the general public. So, yes, I am responsible for my public.

ANCA DUMA: It depends on how you are as a person and what are your perceptions regarding your reality. Because my reality is different than yours. It is important to be balanced in every context so that the reader of your blog will be better informed.

ANNE MARIE: I will give you an example, mine. As long as I respect what I do, I assume the things I say and from that on, after the article is released, there's nothing I can change. There will always be people who will criticize you, but that's my opinion and that's that.

CRISTIAN FLOREA: I think that, when you decide to make a documentary or even a blog, you start with the idea that you are going to have a subjective approach and that being said, one cannot expect the others to always agree.

Interview by Diana Voinea and Teodora Lascu

ParagrAFF

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