

# INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR ALEKSEY LAPIN

*By Hugo Emmerzael*

**Can you describe your connection to the setting, to this village on the Russian-Ukrainian border where KRAI was shot?**

I'm not from there, but it's a place where I have a lot of ancestors. I used to spend a lot of time there, visiting on holidays in the summer for instance, and I have a lot of relatives that still live in these parts. I live in Austria now, which somehow means I don't really have a homeland of my own anymore. I basically grew up everywhere and nowhere. I have this feeling of a lost homeland, something that maybe doesn't really exist, but is somewhere within me. I think this film is my journey to this non-existent place.

**In what way has that process of searching informed the filmmaking process? It seems that the film is also actively looking for a way to depict what this place means.**

I tried to make a film in which you'll find multiple realities that are variations around the things that I'm looking for. Mostly, it's a film with the emphasis on the process. I wanted the film to be like a continuous birth, a living work that continuously evolves.

**Where did the idea come from to implement a semi-fictional casting process in what's essentially a documentary?**

I didn't set out to make the film like this. But for me, the subject or plot is all pretext, or maybe an excuse, to approach reality. I was not interested in making a meta-film that deconstructs the filmmaking process. It just seemed like a natural approach to the film. Because to be frank, we were so present in this town that we had to become part of the film. We somehow needed to be in the picture ourselves, in order to reach some form of sincerity. So, it was not really a choice.

**How did that decision change the relation between fiction and reality for you?**

We used this very big camera, meaning we were very visible. But in doing so, we became just another person there, so we actually became more invisible in the process. Everybody simply accepted us and forgot about us as well. Meaning we could capture some pieces of what you can call truth. It allowed us to play with reality and redesign it for our film. For me, the reality informed the fiction and the fiction informed the reality.

**What was it like maintaining a balance between fiction and reality? Because for you there's the play with fiction, but for the people that you depict you are simply part of their reality.**

At the beginning, it was quite difficult, because we created an absurd situation. But at some point, while filming, everything became its own reality so there were no borders anymore. There was a screenplay that I developed, but I had to rewrite it every morning before a shooting day, because I had to adapt it to real people and situations. I used to wake up every morning and write the plans for the day. It was nice, because in the

summer you have very long days, meaning we had a lot of light. It allowed us to experiment and find what I was looking for. The problem always was: how to find and then capture the things I wanted?

**How would you describe what you were looking for? What did you need to find in the process of making KRAI?**

I didn't want to make a typical documentary-style film, where we film everything and then trim everything down in the edit with jump cuts. I wanted to capture something real. You can see the result in the film: there's not a lot of cutting. I tried to create situations and provoke discussions. I employed a lot of small strategies to trigger reactions and capture them.

**There's this inter-generational awareness in the film, as if you're trying to at once grasp the history, present and future of this place. What role does the passing of time play for you in the film?**

I think this film is not about a single subject, but is rather a collision of various subjects. I catch these various moments and compose them and this composition is the film itself. What I was interested in, was to not create a reproduction of something that I already knew, but to produce something new for me too. And to produce something, you need building blocks and the concrete that holds them together. I was building a house, which you can look at from various angles, but at the beginning I couldn't see it as a whole yet. I could only see the individual parts.

**So, what was the editing like then? That's often the moment in the process where the building blocks become a solid structure.**

I already started editing after every day of shooting. At the end of the production, I had a raw cut of approximately four hours. I had quite strong ideas about how I should edit it down. For example, I already mentioned my repulsion for jump cuts. It's not that I dislike them in other films, but I didn't want to destroy this flux of time that I captured. So, it became important for me that the editing was going to be the thing that would unite my material. It's the clay that unites the energy in the scenes, rather than something that dictates its rhythm. I mostly want to conserve the rhythm that we captured with our camera. It was key not to break this original experience of time. That was the dogma that we accepted, to not hide or censor anything.

**There's a cyclical movement in the film, an undercurrent that ties the film together. What was it specifically about the passing of time that you wanted to capture?**

I guess that the film triggered a discussion about time and the way we perceive it. I think film allows us to show how time is truly a subjective phenomenon. It's something that you can't measure with a clock. Instead, it's connected with our emotions. I think it's a beautiful possibility to design time and to deform it. I believe that this is something precious for the audience: to go to the cinema and to experience your entire lifetime in one sitting. That layer of film is very interesting for me to work with.

**In the film a filmmaker, played by you, waxes philosophical about the need to return to a naïve, pre-industrial cinema. What does this mean to you?**

Of course, there's an irony in this, but it's also something that I deeply feel. To go to an innocent kind of cinema that steers away from all of the tricks you'd expect from the movies. And that's really difficult. I had the idea before starting this film that maybe there was a cinema that was pure and somehow innocent, but I really don't know if that cinema really exists. Maybe there never was an innocent type of cinema in film history, but I would love to think that there was something like it, a type of art that doesn't try to tell you something, or to pitch or sell you something.

**How have these ideas progressed throughout your trajectory as a filmmaker? This is your first feature film, so I presume it has set you on a different course.**

This film is very important for me in getting a deeper understanding of the things I want to explore in cinema. I have studied film in Austria, Michael Haneke was my teacher. It was always this quest to go against the grain of how film works. Conventional cinema tries to shock or attract us. It employs tricks to grab our attention, which for me seems like the films are trying to somehow rob us of our attention. You could see KRAI as a reaction to that, an exploration of how film can work in another direction or with other ideas. I believe that there's meaning in everything. I even believe in a sense of predestination, that, somehow, everything has a place in this world. If you give things enough time, you'll eventually capture something truthful and I think the truth is what makes us emotional.

**I really like the expression of giving time to something, because that is a very generous thing to do. Often, things in life and even in the arts need to be rushed. Could you say that in a sense, you see filmmaking as an act of generosity?**

It's a gift that you're giving. But it's not only generosity. Because you take gifts from other artworks too, so it's an act of giving back, in order to inspire the actions of others. This mutual taking and giving is how culture should work, I think. The final task is always to make a gift to the audience, a gift that they are free to use however they like.

**The people that you filmed have already seen the end result. What was that screening like?**

In the film I promised that I'd show the final result, so I did. I think they were overwhelmed by the experience. For example, my grandma told me that she liked the film, but that I should use more music next time. I think they were mostly overwhelmed with the form. I don't think they're too familiar with these kinds of films, but they were really touched and moved by it, which was beautiful to me.

**I can assume that they're not really used to black-and-white cinema shot in the 4:3 frame. What informed that stylistic choice?**

It's like a canvas that a painter chooses to paint something on. But there's also a bit of playing with the historical film as a genre and the history of cinema itself. And with black-and-white I don't have control over the colors in reality. People wear all kinds of colorful clothes and I want to avoid the symbolic qualities some colors might have.