

English version

Dafina Halili: Hello, I am Dafina Halili, a journalist at Kosovo 2.0, and thank you for joining us for Kosovo 2.0's podcast. This podcast is part of a two-year series of podcasts by Kosovo 2.0, in cooperation with the Humanitarian Law Center Kosovo, with the financial support of the European Union. This time, we will explore various aspects of transitional justice in order to cover as many angles of the issue as possible.

Transitional justice covers a wide range of processes and mechanisms related to a society's attempt to deal with the legacy of large-scale conflict — places with a legacy of war, repression, transgression and abuse in the past — in order to ensure accountability, justice and to achieve reconciliation.

These processes may involve judicial and non-judicial mechanisms, including truth-seeking, prosecution initiatives and reparations. But we rarely talk about the role of art, how transitional justice can actually be explored through cultural and artistic projects.

Today we will have a different conversation about how cultural interventions, such as film and documentaries, contribute to transitional justice by making the experiences of individuals more accessible, more present, and provide survivors and victims intimate spaces to discuss human rights abuses.

I am honored to have today, here with me, Leart Rama, the young Kosovar director, whose creativity has gained much attention, applause and admiration and who has even traveled to well-known film festivals.

Leart, thank you so much for taking the time, especially knowing that you are very busy with filming during this period.

Leart: Thank you very much for inviting me, always a pleasure to be part of these conversations, and to be part of this show.

Dafina: Leart, for those who haven't heard about him before, was born in 1997 in Rahovec, and is one of the youngest generation of Kosovar directors. He finished high school in his hometown, and began his artistic journey at the age of 15, when he directed his first film. Since then Leart has attended the documentary film school, held by Dokufest, where he had the opportunity to make his first two documentaries. In 2018, he finished studying Film Directing in Tirana.

Some of his documentaries are "The Station" done in 2017, "A Call From Yesterday" in 2019, "Return" in 2020.

His latest film, "Four Pills at Night," is a short version of an upcoming feature film which is in the development stage.

While another and more recent film, which I had the pleasure to see and has not been released yet, is "Water and Candles." It centers around Bekim Gashi and Jasmina Živkovic, who are both relatives of missing persons after the war in Kosovo.

In fact, the main topic of the conversation that we will have with Leart mainly relates to this documentary.

Leart, you founded Catharsis Films, your film production company, your film house, in 2018. I have had the opportunity to see all of your documentaries and feature films that you have made so far, and to me it is very clear that you do very important psychological and social exploration of the characters in almost all of your films. There also seems to be a great insistence on discovering their truth, their mentality, precisely through that exploration I mentioned. So, let's start with the production company's name, Catharsis.

For those who are familiar with the term catharsis, it immediately connotes ancient tragedies, the ancient theater, and I believe this is by no means a coincidence, as it relates to the great emotional exploration you do, that is Catharsis. The same as Aristotle sought, seeking the release of emotional tension, after a very dramatic, overwhelming experience, which results in a kind of emotional purification, an emotional clarity, both for the audience after leaving the theater, after the show, but also for the actors who participated. I wanted to start right here, what is catharsis for you, in relation to your audience?

Leart: When I decided to open the film house, after finishing university in 2018, it was very clear to me, and I knew the whole time, how I wanted it to be named, because during all my studies, even before them, I had a dream that after learning more skills, I would open my own movie house, which is more alternative, not mainstream, but more underground, and I knew that I would name it Catharsis, because for me throughout my studies, one of the things that always interested me has been taboos, human emotions, what makes us humans, and what distinguishes us from other living things.

Why do we talk so much about emotion, why have so many people written books, made movies, done different things, which have changed the world of emotions and feelings? So, the moment I graduated from university in 2018, I decided to make a movie house, which is completely alternative, that the main focus, the primary focus, would be human emotions, to cover taboos. What does a normal person think? What seems abnormal to a person? Why can a phenomenon or a problem seem abnormal to someone? Who are we to create social constructs that didn't exist before? So, from 2018 until today, all the projects we have done, within Catharsis Films, have all had the same theme from different perspectives, with different characters, fiction or

documentary. As long as we continue to do projects with Catharsis Films, there will always be themes that touch on human emotions.

Dafina: You were born in 1997, you were a year and a half, or two years old during the war, you don't have any memory of the time immediately after the war. Despite this, you are very interested as a director in exploring sensitive, big, traumatic themes and various tragedies, this is clearly evident in some of your films. But the greatest tragedy that has happened to Kosovar society so far and as a period, as a time, wasn't part of your memory, your youthful or childhood memories. What pushed you towards this project, when you saw the call from Kosovo 2.0 and the Humanitarian Law Center for a documentary project? And if I am not mistaken, the synopsis, the concept of the documentary was completely flexible for whoever wanted to apply.

Leart: When the call from Kosovo 2.0 to create a documentary was made public, I saw it and I thought about it briefly, and then I moved on, without looking at it further, meaning that in the beginning, I didn't want to apply. And during the whole week or rather, from the moment the call was opened until the moment we applied, people, endlessly, sent me the call through social networks, texted me telling me "Hey, apply here," " You can make a very good film," and similar things, and I started thinking about it, because up to this point, I had been open to making all kinds of films, many stories, except to films related to the last war in Kosovo.

This was due to the fact that there are many good films from Kosovo about the war. There are a lot of good documentaries, and I didn't feel prepared enough and I didn't feel like the right person to work on a documentary or a film about the recent war in Kosovo. Since I was only one year old during the war, it seemed to me that it wasn't necessary to be another person who makes films about the recent war in Kosovo.

When I saw that so many people were sending me the link and suggesting that I should apply, I started thinking about it, and I spent a lot of time with myself thinking about this option, whether to apply or not. For me, aside from the fact that it posed a challenge in my career, I decided to apply because I saw that during all these years that I have been making other films, I had the urge to open a door or another road for myself, of addressing a topic I thought I would not address, until now. So, we gathered with a team, and decided to apply for the film.

During the research, during the film production process, we thought and discussed a lot, because the topic is very sensitive, and in the end we had a script, a treatment, of the documentary, which was liked a lot by the jury, and then we continued to do the rest...

Dafina: We often have spoken with colleagues, even with friends, who are human rights activists and who work with the relatives of missing persons from the war. How difficult it has been for many family members, to speak on television, to speak in front of the camera, to speak in front of the voice recorder, to speak to journalists, to speak to anyone who is asking for their story, knocking at their door, because in fact, a great fatigue is seen, towards the media, even towards the people who approach them seeking their story. How was this process for you, when you were doing fieldwork looking for characters for your documentary?

Leart: Yes, this was one of the biggest challenges during the making of the documentary, and since the beginning I knew that this would be the biggest problem throughout, because all the people who we talked to, were really tired of the media, of the attention, they are also tired of the endless hope they carry every day. Even this hope, that has started to fade away, is being used by the media and many others in Kosovo, even outside Kosovo. I know that in the eyes of these people I was just one more, only one out of the many others who wanted to use their story and to make something out of it.

I knew that this would happen and as a group we were prepared to face such difficulties. We had many difficulties, we talked to many people, many people who shared their story with us. We have encountered people who immediately said no, also people who took some time to think and then refused. There were also those who accepted, and we got ready to start shooting the film and then they changed their mind. We even had to deal with those that, until the last moment, just right before the shooting, after we had planned it all together, by the end, they decided not to be part of the documentary. This was until we talked to Bekim and Jasmina, both of them were very open to be part of the documentary and share their story, once again, for another team. Plus one more team that consisted of Luca, Redon and I.

It felt like a liberation for me and I felt like I achieved something, that I had found the idea for the documentary and that this film would not be just one more number, but we would try to research about their lives, too. Who are they as characters? My main goal, from the beginning to the end, making the film, was that Jasmina and Bekim be treated like Jasmina and Bekim, and not as the relatives of missing persons. The main concept was this, meaning that, because the concept itself that we have tried to talk about, to show, has been to resolve around their lives and to not treat them only like two people who are relatives of missing persons.

After that, we continued together with these two, we met very often, we talked a lot, until the film was realized.

Dafina: It seems a lot like an attempt to regain their subjectivity that often, is probably not put in the spotlight, and we, as journalists, as media, organizations, prosecutors, investigators, lawyers, activists and others, have important relationships to the relatives of missing persons, mainly because of their work, their profession. But, otherwise, these persons, these individuals, would not have had this importance, this great social weight, if they had not been relatives of a person who was killed during the war, or disappeared during the war... one civilian that went missing as a victim of the war. So, on your part, the treatment seems like a way to return their subjectivity to them, and dealing a lot with their lives, despite the weight and importance they have, as seekers of justice and to find the fate for their loved ones. Has this been easy, do you think you have achieved this? Because I believe that for them, it is still most important to talk about their loved ones that they lost during the war.

Leart: Yes, when we started to work on the script, when we started talking to them, I noticed that Bekim and Jasmina, and the many other people that we didn't have the opportunity to have in our documentary, have developed a pattern of telling their story. For example, every time I

tried to direct the conversation towards their life, automatically, the conversation changed direction towards the story, to the day the tragedy happened.

I put a lot of thought into this, for a long time, and I noticed how much these people are tired of talking about this topic almost every day, and how they have created this framework to tell the story from the very beginning to the last events, everything that occurred during the day when the tragedy happened. It was very difficult, we spent many hours talking, I tried to get them out of their comfort zone of retelling their story, even directing them towards long-term memories, back to their childhood, even though they are over 40 years old.

For me, it was a pleasure to talk with them, because, no matter how many tragedies happen to a person, tragedies happen to everyone, we experience good days and difficult days. But especially when a tragedy happens to someone such as the loss of a family member or having one of your relatives killed, during the war, yet, once upon a time, you had your happy days, when you laughed, when you were very happy.

And I was very interested in this part especially, to listen to the stories and listen to their previous memories, how they were with their whole family, before this tragedy happened to them, until today, where they are and how they live with this memory, with the memory of the day when the tragedy happened, even how heavy it still weighs after 22 or 23 years have passed and to what extent this stops them from living a normal life. How do they see themselves? As a normal person or as a person who is always a family member of someone who went missing during the war?

Even during our conversations, I found out many things from them, I learned a lot from them. When I was in the process of editing the movie, getting ready to complete it, I always learned a lot from talking to them. I also think that even though I thought I was mature enough to make this film, now that it is done, I think I have become more mature, and I see things differently than I did before.

Dafina: What more about the war did you learn during the process of making this documentary?

Leart: What I learned during the documentary process is that things have happened, and after a lot of years have passed, people continue to live their life. They live a normal life, and time pushes people to forget things and to change their priorities. But some people still live in 1999 or 2000. They are still there, and they are around us. Meanwhile, we go on with our lives, even in 2022, without being aware enough that some people around us are still living in 1999. They are still waking up with that memory and going to sleep with it on their mind.

This should be discussed, this should be made more widely known, especially to the younger generation, although we want to continue our lives, to move forward, to try and develop our country beyond the war, and beyond what has happened. Still, I think we should be very aware of this situation, even for people who still live with the memories of 1999. Because before I started this documentary, I did not have this information and I did not have the opportunity to know this, I wasn't aware of all these things.

And now I see things differently, even though people are constantly speaking up to seek justice, still we have to work even harder, especially the state institutions, to do more for these people. We should not leave them to be dependent on a hope that has begun to fade away, leaving them in the past, as they are in their memory.

Dafina: Jasmina and Bekim, both characters from the documentary, still don't know the fate of their loved ones. Jasmina still has no information about what happened to her father, who was killed in the post-war period, while Bekim still has no information about what happened to the bodies of his four sisters and his mother, who were killed in the Tërreja massacre, in a village outside Suhareka, on March 24, 1999, if I am not mistaken.

Often, these stories, for those of us who deal with journalism, documentaries, as you mentioned earlier, we use their stories for our work. Where is that border, or did you feel, especially during this documentary, that you are in danger of exploiting their stories? Where do you think is the limit of how far you can go exploring personal stories, to tell, to document, a truth?

Leart: I always liked the idea of going completely out of ethical frameworks, not always being politically correct, maybe trying to push the film or the story one step further. But there are some moments, or some circumstances where you cannot do this. I have done films and documentaries with this state of mind, which I have always risked going beyond those frameworks, beyond those ethical frameworks that man has created.

In cases like this recent one, you should always be one step down from the characters you have in your film, because you are using someone's life, and you are using a story that is very sensitive, and that it is not just someone's personal story but a whole national problem, a country's problem, even though all that we see at the end, in front of the camera, is a single character.

During the filming process, probably, was the first time that I felt uncomfortable and that I didn't have enough voice and or have enough space for what I wanted, like 100%, because I felt like I was entering their personal space, because I visited their home, I went inside, and I noticed that they could feel embarrassed, I noticed that they didn't want for their distant family members to see that people are still trying to use their story to create a movie.

I tried so much to read their eyes to see how far I could go, in order for them to not feel embarrassed, in order to not violate their privacy. They never told me, no, this shouldn't be done, like 100% or this should be done another way, because since the beginning they agreed. When they agreed to be part of the documentary, both Bekim and Jasmina were all in, but in their eyes I read it very often, when they felt embarrassed or uncomfortable, then I always took a step back, to not disturb their comfort, as much as they have, for a documentary.

Dafina: Leart, thank you very, very much. It was nice talking to you, about you, about your documentary, but also beyond your documentary. I wish you many, many successes!

Leart: Thank you very much for the invitation, I feel much appreciated for the invitation to talk about this film.

Dafina: Thank you!

