

DER KUSS DES GRASHÜPFERS

The Kiss of the Grasshopper

Director Elmar Imanov

Germany, Luxembourg, Italy | 2025
128 min. | German with English subtitles

Screenplay Elmar Imanov. **Cinematography** Borris Kehl. **Editing** Beppe Leonetti. **Music** Kyan Bayani. **Sound Design** Jascha Viehl. **Sound** Arnaud Mellet. **Production Design** Mariam Iakobashvili, Marie Schäder, Mira Laczkowski, Giorgi Karalashvili. **Make-Up** Ina Chochol. **Casting** Susanne Ritter. **Producer** Eva Blondiau. **Co-Producers** Adolf El Assal, Marta Zaccaron. **Production company** COLOR OF MAY (Köln, Germany). **With** Lenn Kudrjawizki, Michael Hanemann, Sophie Mousel, Rasim Jafarov.

Synopsis

Bernard, a stoic, middle-aged writer with a sheep for roommate, leads an obsessively structured life in a lavish penthouse overlooking the city of Cologne. When his father Carlos, with whom he shares a knotty relationship, suffers an assault and falls ill, Bernard's volatile reality grows even more shaky. He is hurled into a series of surreal, enigmatic encounters featuring his drifting girlfriend Agata, a neighbour defying gravity and perhaps time, unconcerned cops, overconcerned functionaries and even a six-foot grasshopper.

In his second feature, **THE KISS OF THE GRASSHOPPER**, Elmar Imanov forges a dark, progressively mysterious odyssey through loss, grief and unexpected compassion. His nakedly psychoanalytical film unfurls like an arcane tapestry, a symbolic minefield overflowing with displaced figures, events and objects whose specific meanings may feel elusive, but whose potency and personal quality are unmistakable. With a rigorous, highly stylized *mise en scène*, Imanov engineers a visually arresting world governed by dream logic, where the rational casually coexists with the bizarre. The result is a work that never ceases to surprise, confound and provoke thought. (Srikanth Srinivasan)

Elmar Imanov was born in 1985 in Baku, Azerbaijan. He has lived in Cologne since 1998. His first graduation film from 2012 was shown at more than 120 film festivals and won 41 awards worldwide, including the Student Oscar® for Best Foreign Film. His next short film **TORN** (2014) premiered in the Directors' Fortnight section in Cannes. Both films were produced by Eva Blondiau, with whom Imanov founded the film production company **COLOR OF MAY**. His feature debut **END OF SEASON** (2019) premiered at IFFR Rotterdam and won the FIPRESCI Prize. **THE KISS OF THE GRASSHOPPER** is his second feature film.

Films: 2012: *Die Schaukel des Sargmachers* / *The Swing of the Coffin Maker* (short film). 2014: **TORN** (short film). 2019: *End of Season*. 2025: *Der Kuss des Grashüpfers* / *The Kiss of the Grasshopper*.

Director's Statement

Memories

How my father, an architect, marked my view of the world

I was born in the summer of 1985 in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, as the son of an architect father and an artist mother. I spent my childhood in one of the most difficult chapters of my country's history. The Nagorno-Karabakh War reached its peak, police officers earned protection money, the crime rate exploded and my father worked as an architect day and night to feed us. I spent a lot of time with my grandparents and on the streets.

I have a strong memory of my father once picking me up from school. It was around 2 pm in the summer of 1993. I was happy to see him. He took my hand and we left the school. He told me we needed to pass by the bread factory, which was right next to my school, to buy bread. When we got home later, it was already dark out. We had stood in the massive queue at the bread factory all day and were afraid not to make it home before the curfew. Whenever we were together, we talked a lot.

As an architect, he had since my childhood sharpened my senses of the space around me. The idea that the space around us is often constructed and thought out has accompanied me since early on. He also showed me how reality can be rearranged, for example, by positioning walls or through the organisation and sequencing of trees and spaces.

In 1998, we immigrated to Germany. From my family's perspective, our time here was much more peaceful and beautiful. We travelled a lot and spent markedly positive years in our apartment in the neighbourhood Ehrenfeld in Cologne, where I grew up. I graduated from high school and had to struggle with bullying. We were all happy about my admittance to film school, my student Oscar and my participation in Cannes. I travelled around the world with my films and sometimes I did not manage to get all the way home. Then my father would bring me a fresh white shirt, that he had ironed, to the train station, where we smoked a cigarette and drank a coffee together before my trip continued.

Until the winter of 2014, when the crushing diagnosis changed everything: small cell carcinoma. Late-phase lung cancer. We all knew it: he would die within 12 months. It felt so unfair and overwhelming. I knew nobody could understand him now; from now on, he was alone with death. A world collapsed around me. This expressed itself in different ways: sometimes in tears, sometimes hyperactively at a party. I fell into the abyss and was like a ghost.

When my father died ten months later, I began a slow journey back to life. When I re-awoke from my numbness one year after he died, I wrote the script. Today, when I look back, I am another person.

Elmar Imanov

Interview

Change and Vulnerability

Elmar Imanov and Eva Blondiau talk to Christiane Büchner and Barbara Wurm about restlessness, symbolism and TV references in their film and the shooting process in Georgia

Barbara Wurm: I'm really glad, Elmar, that your rigorous, poetic, and extremely imaginative film, a film on other realities, if you will, is premiering in Forum: THE KISS OF THE GRASSHOPPER – how did you come up with that title?

Elmar Imanov: For quite a while, the working title was RESTLESS, because that was the feeling with which I started writing. Each time I write something new or when the film starts to exist, different reasons, thoughts, or inspirations combine with style, language, colour, and so forth. It develops almost like an organism. Like a kid that already has a hair colour – you don't know yet if it will be curly, but you do know the hair colour. After my father died of lung cancer – that was my first time experiencing such a loss – I rented a rather dark apartment in Berlin for six weeks three months later. Every night, I would turn out all the lights and sit in front of my laptop, before an empty document. I didn't know what it should be about or where it should go. There was just a feeling, which I'd probably had my entire life, but which grew in power in this period. A restlessness that I couldn't appease. And I thought that was the right title for this film. And then everything changed. A kiss is something that can change a person. Here, it is a farewell – from yourself, an earlier self, since you will never again be the way you were before losing a parent. The kiss greets the change when you suspect you are shedding your skin like a snake, and then getting new skin. I thought to myself that this title symbolises this, since the film is not only gloomy, there is also a bit of slapstick, a bit of comedy and poetry. And beauty, like in a kiss. It's more poetic than RESTLESS. Not so absolute.

Eva Blondiau: It was incredibly hard for us to find a title, which could grasp or sum up the film. On this film, starting with the feeling Elmar described, we went on a trip on which it was never clear what exactly this film is. It's about grief. Processing grief. Then more about loneliness. Then it was about growing up, and how you are only really grown up when you don't have your parents anymore and break away from the things you received from your parents, surpass those things and define the world for yourself.

Christiane Büchner: I found it fascinating that the film has so many different states. There are influences from Cologne, something Soviet, something from German silent film, in addition to police procedural shows like TATORT and TV series. It's unbelievable how much the film draws together and I'd love to know more about that.

El: Normally, I don't like talking about the subject matter, about the meaning of my films. Even when I'm at festivals: People always want to know why this or that is the way it is? But I think I have to with this film. Otherwise, there will be no dialogue with viewers. For instance, we had the footage of the falling birds from Euronews. I'd seen that as a student and it totally fascinated me: 'Wow, is this real? Are we surrounded by inexplicable violence?' Then we looked for footage to portray the other reality, the father's altered dream past. We looked into the archives of the film's television co-producer, WDR. There were different news reports and one caught my eye – a report about disturbances of the peace. A disturbance of the peace by birds, who gathered and nested near people. But it was so poetically shot, so uncanny and mystical. In the middle of this news report was the line: 'And now the night falls.' And the narrator goes silent for a whole minute. Nowadays people would say: 'Are you crazy? We can't broadcast this.' I thought: 'Okay, that fits the entire film.'

CB: And the Soviet part? Childhood?

El: Yes, the Soviet part, the doll... Lenn Kudrjawizki, who plays Bernard, and I have similar backgrounds. We were both born in the Soviet Union and he also lost his father early on, and his uncle, who was close friends with my father. The doll reminded me of my childhood. In the early 90s, we had no money, which is why I played with the remains of what was there. Every kid in the Soviet Union had a doll just like that. Mine was missing its lower body, but it still stared so insistently happily. And in the scene with the bin lorry, this doll dies in his hands. We only have the chance to be kids when our parents are still alive. Siblings don't give you that feeling. Only parents, no matter how old they are. But when they die, childhood becomes a memory, and you can't really live it. That's what I wanted to show, that childhood slips out of his hands with his father's illness.

CB: And police procedurals?

El: Yes, police procedurals – I think that when you make a film anywhere in Germany, then the TV crime series TATORT is somehow always just around the corner, either through a police station or even just through the aesthetic of architecture in Germany. You can't avoid that. When we talked about the set design, we asked ourselves: 'How do we visualise this police thing and the whole criminal strand?' – 'Okay, the costumes have to fit!' And then we decided to shoot in the style of the 1990s. So, a real homage.

BW: When did you start working on this project?

El: I wrote the script in 2016.

BW: You started then and put it aside in the meantime?

El: I work on each project differently. As I was sitting in front of that blank screen in the apartment in Berlin, I thought, okay, there is a feeling here... The script has to come out of this feeling and not out of an idea, a plot, or something. And then I started writing and wrote the 85 pages without looking up once. I wrote the script in six weeks and treated myself to a long pause before coming back to it. I thought: 'Okay, it will definitely take a while to finance this project. And I want to maintain the feeling it started from.' I knew it would never get old because it's about something timeless. I knew I would also change in this time; my perspective on certain things in it would change. So I said, I'll work in larger intervals and very concentrated on it when I do.

BW: It's interesting because what you're describing is very similar to the temporality and timelessness of this film, which constantly develops the plot, but then finds really wonderful ways to branch off and, in fact, these become the film's core. They are visual worlds somewhere between memory and dream.

El: It's good you say that, it's a kind of experimental dramatic structure, a doubled dramatic structure. There's the narrative layer: The father is struck, then he gets the diagnosis, does he die or does he not die? That is one dramatic structure, which is actually enough. But the point is much more the dramatic structure behind it. A little like in the film LA DOLCE VITA. I've always used that as an example. That you follow someone and show how he lives at a certain point in his life. Bernard has a girlfriend, then he has to go to his father, then he goes to a bar, then he has a problem with himself, and so on. It's kind of a ride through society, but at the same time through his emotions, through the past.

CB: Can you talk about the visual design? Because the film keeps re-starting there too. It brings in the pans through camera movements that are very clearly arranged, but which then disappear again, never to be repeated.

El: At some point in the beginning, I told Borris Kehl, the one-of-a-kind cameraman and person: 'You have total freedom.'

Of course, we decided on the kind of light, how bright or dark, and the colour palette. But while working on this film, each department constantly had to reinvent something. They could not use what they had already done. Not effects, not set design, not camerawork. Even the actors. And I like that. For scenes that were about understanding something, there was a dramatic concept: If someone is saying something or a dialogue is taking place, if the plot is advancing or relationships are being explained, then the camera is not allowed to look away, it has to be as classical as possible. – Shot, counter shot, maybe a close-up. But as we move forward more freely in the film, anything is possible.

BW: The crime scene nicely represents the challenge this film poses to festival audiences who see something that makes them think of TV experiences, without them actually receiving any. Aesthetically, the film doesn't make it easier on itself by looking for some levels of abstraction, instead it goes straight into classic film business. In this regard, I found your work with the actors absolutely exciting and crucial, precisely because we know them from a TV and series context. What was your concrete work with them like?

El: I was lucky to find them. Working with the actors is different on each film. I improvised my earlier films with actors. On END OF SEASON, for instance, we didn't know at the start of production how the film would end. The case here was that the language played pivotal role, that a particular melody was created, in what I had written and how the actors interpreted it. I heard that and said: 'Okay, this is how the film has to be.' In general, we give our films an English-language identity so people know they are meant for everyone; the film is not local. But here it was important to me that all the Äs and Üs of the German language are in the credits. It was important to us to say: This is a German film.

BW: It is nevertheless a very international production. Have there ever been so many Georgians involved in a German film before?

EB: From the start, the film was a German-Italian-Luxembourgian co-production. We did half of the shoot in Georgia because we financed the film over several years in which the price for everything went up enormously. We started before the pandemic and at the end we were under a lot of time pressure so that we were also unable to adjust the budget to what the film's actual financial needs. And that was our creative solution, how we could still make this film with a budget that was actually too small for this kind of film without having to forfeit on quality. Elmar and I were totally happy with that because we've already shot many films in Georgia, but had not yet made any in Germany. So we were happy to be able to collaborate with people there who we already knew. That had a decisive influence on the film because the Georgian crew really brought a very different energy. There were really creative artists involved who contributed all kinds of things.

El: And in Georgia, historically, the best people are all young, between 20 and 35. Quite unusual in the film industry. After the collapse, they rebuilt the film industry themselves. You run into people who can do unbelievable things... For instance, the scenes on the train. I said: 'Okay, we need a train.' And they said: 'We'll find a train.' And showed me a totally broken Soviet underground carriage: 'We'll make you this!' And then they completely renovated the carriage and, for the long shots at the end, simply sawed open the side and devised a rope device for the camera. The scene is very grey and metallic, and the people all wear grey things. People always thinks it's a filter. For that kind of effect, you would normally need another two million. But these people knew that they could do all this.

CB: I had another question about the character 'The Face' – a trigger for the story. But the man also appears earlier. He is unpleasant, somehow dangerous. What kind of a character is this?

El: Earlier in the script, 'The Face' was a very different character. As we came up with the concept together, the Georgian set designers Mariam Iakobashvili and Giorgi Karalashvili painted a face like that at some point, a bit Francis Bacon-esque, 'just as a suggestion.' And I thought: 'Yes. That is exactly the character. That is The Face.' When the costume designer asked me: 'What does The Face wear?' we knew the answer right away: He wears the most inconspicuous clothing there is, because he is already conspicuous. On the one hand, he is a real person like in any big city or neighbourhood. Somebody who is a little deformed... Guys who are everywhere, but who nobody notices. For instance, when a group is standing outside a convenience store drinking beer and talking, a guy like that is always standing somewhere alongside them – always. He is standing there and somehow belongs, but he never speaks. He laughs along when everyone laughs and wears a hoodie. But at the same time, for me, 'The Face' was always a cancer as well. 'The Face' is the trigger, the shock, and also the tumour, which can also develop something like teeth and hair. As we were in the editing room, I said to Beppe Leonetti (editor): 'Here, "The Face" is on the train and is driving it. You can interpret it that way, that he is driving the train of life into death. But what is he doing there? He is like a metastasis in a place where he is not expected, where he doesn't belong. He has to show up just as much by chance and unexpectedly as a metastasis. To disturb the flow of the film.' You forget him and go further. Rasim Jafarov played him. A fantastic actor. He asked me: 'What kind of guy is this?' And I said: 'You do have to be afraid of him. Sometimes when his gaze is so strange. But he has to be afraid himself.' And so he is: You want to accept him, but he is also a little evil. You want to accept it, that's life, but it is also evil – this kind of illness and death in general. It's not intended to be romanticised.

BW: In what way did you think about masculinity? Do you see this as broken masculinity here or are these categories that don't play any role for you?

El: Yes, sure. We talked about that again and again while looking for funding. You write texts again and again and have to explain yourself. It was important to me not to tell the story of a simple character, but rather one which lives in the film. He himself doesn't know who he is. That's why he is always different, too. It depends on where he is. For instance, when he is with other people, he is very severe and provocative because he knows society doesn't accept him. At least, he acts like it. But then he has a kind of physicality, a closeness, a silent love with his father (Michael Hanemann). At one point, he even states it: considerate distance, cool feeling of security. And Agata (Sophia Mousel) is like a magnet. He can't live without her. He's very vulnerable, above all when he is alone. An on-again off-again relationship. It was important to me to show his vulnerability too. Especially when he is alone. He can't cope with himself and then he tries to keep himself busy, works on this machine. The machine is like a suicidal thought that materialises itself. Another reality in which he tries to organise his screws and, at the very least, to fly – enjoy the sadness.

BW: One of my favourite scenes is the one with the 'other' Carlos or maybe even the same Carlos, the father (only younger) – we don't quite know. I'm also unsure how important that is in this film, which oscillates so much between realism, symbolism, and magical realism.

El: Yes, Carlos is a real neighbour, but also a path. If you go down this corridor, then you see that the wallpaper keeps falling down and at some point children's things are lying around. Bernard moves almost gradually back in time to the neighbour, but also back into his father's past. And we experience his father with his mother. That's the topic of transgenerational trauma. Then he comes in, but the father looks completely different because in dreams there is always this censor which makes things look different – in fact, they mean something particular, but it is changed so you don't recognize it. This scene has different

layers. It's also a dialogue between those with and those without souls. In the scene with Carlos' parkour – or dancing – it was important to me that it look real, that we feel that he is going over furniture... there is that one moment when he swings from the painting, when you think: 'This isn't real, he has to fall. He can't do that. This can't be real.' If you can feel all the things around you, that is, the painting, the table, if you were to touch everything yourself, then you would immediately feel much more comfortable in a strange room. And Carlos more or less does this for Bernard and makes him relax. He says: 'Look, you're safe here, this all yours.'

CB: Could you talk a little about the music?

El: The music came about on its own. I think I heard it in a coffee shop in Istanbul and saved it somewhere. I couldn't have built it now the way it came together. It was unconscious in a way.

BW: The music in Carlos's dance scene is amazing and fits so well, the way the scene itself fits into the film. It's a redemptive hug that suddenly brings this insecure person, Bernard, back into a community. An extremely touching scene. How many times did you shoot it?

El: I don't think it was so complicated. The most complicated thing was hanging the painting in the old apartment because the walls were so rotten. But we rehearsed the scene. It was important to me that somebody do it who can do parkour, but who also has an aesthetic sensibility. Thank God we found Felix Schnabel, who is actually a dancer, and very athletic and trained. Then he came in, very professional, and said: 'Will this hold?' And: 'Okay, I need ten minutes.' I think we shot it in two takes. He choreographed everything in his mind beforehand. That was important so that this physical security is emitted.

BW: Between formal security and human insecurity, that's nice – that's where this film moves. Traces have been laid, new story threads about which it is worth reflecting.

El and EB: Thank you.