

INTERVIEW WITH MILA TURAJLIĆ



Mila Turajlić on set

**DIRECTOR OF “THE LABUDOVIC REELS”,
A DOCUMENTARY SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES**

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“THE LABUDOVIC REELS” IS YOUR SECOND VENTURE INTO CINEMA LINKED TO TITO, FOLLOWING “CINEMA KOMUNISTO”, WHICH WON MULTIPLE AWARDS AND WAS WIDELY DISTRIBUTED. YOU BEGAN “CINEMA KOMUNISTO” WHEN YOU FOUND AN OLD AD THAT CALLED FOR SCRIPT SUBMISSIONS FOR A FILM ABOUT RAILWAY WORKERS. WAS THERE A SIMILAR INSPIRATION FOR “THE LABUDOVIC REELS”?

I feel that there is a fundamental feeling that underlies my desire to make a film and, in the case of “Cinema Komunisto”, it was definitely a kind of rage – anger at watching a place being destroyed and our cinematic heritage being thrown away. Afterwards, during research and filming, I found things like the old ad in which the state commissioned scripts about topics aimed at building “national solidarity” and solidifying a particular narrative of public memory. And from there came the idea to use an abandoned film studio as a metaphor to explore how a country was created in fiction.

In the case of “The Labudovic Reels” the feeling is hard to describe, but I would call it a particular kind of political dignity, which I felt the first time I travelled to

Algeria. There, at a festival of engaged cinema I met filmmakers from Vietnam, Senegal, Cuba and Egypt and realised that we speak a common political language and share a common world view, in which we understand the position of our respective countries in a global balance of power. This re-activated a desire I had had for a long time, which was to tell the story of the Non-Aligned Movement, in which Yugoslavia had played an instrumental role. The next step was meeting Stevan Labudovic (1926-2017) who, as President Tito’s cameraman, had been in a position to film from up close the encounters of the non-aligned leaders, and had been sent on missions by the President to support liberation movements in Africa (notably Algeria, but also in Tanzania and Angola) by filming their struggle.

“CINEMA KOMUNISTO” AND “THE LABUDOVIC REELS” ARE BOTH ARCHIVE-BASED. “CINEMA KOMUNISTO” EXPLORES “THE RISE AND FALL OF THE CINEMATIC ILLUSION CALLED YUGOSLAVIA” WITHIN YUGOSLAVIA, AND THE LABUDOVIC REELS IS “AN ARCHIVAL ROAD TRIP WITH STEVAN LABUDOVIC, CAMERAMAN TO YUGOSLAV PRESIDENT TITO”, OUTSIDE YUGOSLAVIA. ARE THEY INTENDED AS A PAIR? DO THEY ALSO CON-

CONNECT TO YOUR SECOND, ACCLAIMED FEATURE “THE OTHER SIDE OF EVERYTHING”, ABOUT YOUR MOTHER AND YOUR FAMILY’S HISTORY?

I actually initially hesitated to make “The Labudovic Reels” because I didn’t want to make “Cinema Komunista 2”, and it felt that in some ways the two films might cover overlapping territory. But as the project developed I realised it was inviting me to examine themes I hadn’t worked through before, and that in



Ladubovic on the right, during break while filming in Algeria, 1959

scope it was going to take us much further than Cinema Komunista because Yugoslavia was only the starting point for the story.

I don’t relate one film to another when I am making them, as I really want each one to take me somewhere new creatively. However, recently, I had the chance to witness my first two films screened back to back (at the Magnificent 7 Festival in Belgrade), and I realised they were taking the audience on a connected journey, that the two films spoke to each other in ways I hadn’t necessarily been aware of, so now I can say that I do feel that for a viewer the three films might work as a trilogy of some sort, but this is a dialogue that arrives after the fact.

YOUR EDUCATION WAS BROAD AND DEEP, YOU HAVE A SIGNIFICANT HISTORY AS A DEBATER, YOU ALSO WORK AS AN INSTALLATION ARTIST AND YOU MADE A VERY CAREFUL DECISION TO MOVE FROM POLITICAL ACTIVISM INTO FILMMAKING. WHAT’S THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND YOUR FILMMAKING?

Robert Frost wrote that a poem starts as a lump in the throat and that is where my films begin for me. I don’t

have a philosophy of filmmaking and, indeed, when I left academia, politics and debate to make films, much of the process for me was to come at it from the gut, not from the head. So for me it was about learning a new grammar of expression, one that is less about theory and frameworks and more about getting under the skin of storytelling, and accepting cinema as a way of being in the world. Speaking about influences, they range from directors as varied as Agnès Varda to David Lean, poets, painters, visual storytellers who work with rhythm.

There is no pre-applied notion to any of the films that I do. Each time you are in that humbling starting position of not being sure how to scale that particular mountain and then you open yourself up to the adventure, and eventually the film shows you how to make it.

HOW DOES YOUR PROCESS WORK?

I would describe myself as an archive junkie and definitely going to archives is one of the most exciting parts of the process for me. And I do it in various stages of the project – in development, during shooting, towards the end of editing, so they are constantly informing the direction of the film. It is in many ways detective work, as the archives are never easily accessible or well-indexed or there where you think they are. For me it is essential to do this work myself, as so much depends on serendipity and just the luck of being there and randomly seeing the label on a reel of film, that leads you in a direction you never anticipated. Days spent in the archives are as much shooting days as those I spend in the field – in both cases I am gathering images to use to tell my story.



Mila Turajlić with Ladubovic during shooting, in his home in Belgrade

The choice of the footage is really led by what role it will perform in my storytelling, narratively and stylistically. For me archives are not indexical documents, evidence to be presented in some kind of “court of facts”, but really images to be re-appropriated, re-activated in the service of a new story, in which they will acquire a new reading.

In parallel, I do a casting for characters and I tend to seek out witnesses, people who were actually in the thick of things in events, rather than experts who have an analytical distance. I will meet with dozens of people when developing the film, and often even during shooting, and it generally happens that there will be those that I shoot who don't end up in the final film. But people will usually have their personal collections, letters, photos and other artefacts, and I love incorporating this in the film, because when they handle archives their recollections become more specific and that tactility transports both them and the viewer into the moment we are evoking.

I don't tend to write detailed scripts, but am constantly sketching out potential structures and paths through the story.

WHAT CHALLENGES DO YOU FACE ON BIG PROJECTS LIKE “CINEMA KOMUNISTO” AND “THE LABUDOVIC REELS”?

The logistics of films like these are huge because you are piecing together a story that hasn't been told before. And this requires finding the relevant characters, persuading them to participate (which is never easy), scouting and obtaining access to locations that in a way also tell the story, and bringing the two together to create moments of cinema.

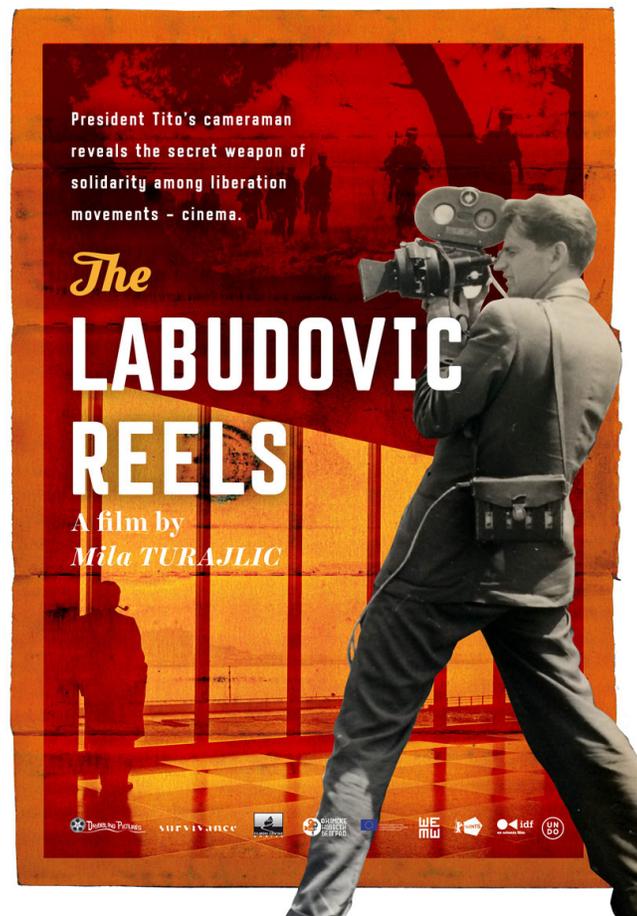
Where it's also tricky is telling a historical story in an ahistorical way, and the editing is always a challenge of finding the balance between the personal layers, the dramaturgy of events and the historical background, which can't be reductive but must necessarily be reduced. For there has always been a challenge of telling a story that speaks to two audiences – one that is local, which in some ways knows the story, or in the case of older generations has even lived through the historical events we are evoking, and making them feel the film is truthful in the way it evokes the past. At the same time, there needs to be just enough information for a foreign audience that doesn't even know that Yugoslavia existed to be able to follow the story and make what is universal in the themes and questions the film explores speak to them in their own contexts and be relevant for their own experience.

ARE THERE ETHICAL CHALLENGES TOO?

For me the ethical challenges are really related to the use of archives – what you choose to show, in what context, for what reason and to what effect.

HAS FUNDING GOT EASIER NOW YOU'VE BEEN SO SUCCESSFUL?

I can say that in terms of funding, nothing is a given, as with each film, narratively speaking, you are essentially starting from square one, with no guarantees that it will come together. But yes, with the visibility of my previous films, I could say that doors open more easily, but that doesn't at all mean we will be invited to walk through them. At the same time there is growing pressure, with each film you feel expectations rising, so the fear of failing to meet them grows.



HAS YOUR GENDER EVER BEEN AN ISSUE FOR YOU IN YOUR ARTS PRACTICE AND YOUR FILMMAKING, ESPECIALLY YOUR FEATURE FILMMAKING?

On a general note, my feeling is that the social position of women in countries that went through socialism is different from the way they entered the workplace and public space in the West. The Second World War and the ensuing modernisation during socialism was in many ways quite emancipatory for women, and I personally grew up in an environment where gender differences were not accented. Hence, I can't say that I felt disadvantaged when choosing filmmaking as a career.

But it's true that documentaries compared to fiction films have significantly lower budgets, which means the barriers to entry are lower too, as one is less dependent on the "politics" of the industry and how conservative the decision makers are. I shoot myself, which means that I am a one-woman crew, with my producer, Carine Chickowsky, assisting me in the practicalities of working in such a reduced way. But this also means that I don't have film crew dynamics to deal with, as I know that for some of my female colleagues this is sometimes an area in which they, as directors, feel they need to assert their authority.



Ladubovic on board of the Presidential ship "Galeb"

Having said that, people sometimes react to my being the one carrying all the gear as being somehow "undignified" for a woman. Camerawork is seen as a technical thing, so I guess some jump to the conclusion that it is more suited to men, which I find quite funny, above all because in Serbia today, there is an incredible generation of female directors of photography (such as Jelena Stanković, Tatjana Krstevski, Maja Radošević and Bojana Andrić), who are crafting the visual look of our most established auteur filmmakers and our most prestigious films.

"The opinions expressed in this interview are those of the director concerned and in no way reflect the official position of the Council of Europe or the Eurimages Film Fund."