

cinewomen

women's cinema & performing arts



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tanja balac

Citizens (Macedonia, 2015)

The Birth of A Nation (Macedonia, 2016)



Women Video. Independent Cinema. Avant- Garde. Filmmakers. Cahiers

**independent
cinema**

THE OBSERVER ACTS AS A WITNESS OF A GALLERY OF FACES-THE FACES OF ORDINARY PEOPLE; INDIVIDUALS WHO WITHOUT A WORD, WITHOUT A GESTURE OR ANY OTHER MIMIC SILENTLY TELL A STORY OF THEMSELVES, THEIR PROBLEMS AND THEIR FEARS, THEIR DESIRES AND THEIR DREAMS... WITH A DOCUMENTARY APPROACH, ARTISTIC AESTHETIC, AS WELL AS SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS, I HAVE ATTEMPTED, IF ONLY FOR A MOMENT, TO ENTER THE INTIMATE STORY OF EACH AND EVERY INDIVIDUAL INCLUDED IN MY PIECE.

A remarkably hypnotic and immersive film, *Citizens* goes back to the degree zero of cinema. With her characteristically clever attention to detail, Tanja Balac pushes the limits of fiction and documentary, gently engaging the viewer in cinema's process of transforming reality. Using a simple camera style reminiscent of Bartas's recent films, Tanja Balac initiates her audience into a heightened sensory experience. Poetic in its vision and realist in its expression, *Citizens* is a minimalistic

film that pushes Tanja's interest in sound to an expressive extreme. From the first time we watched this short film we were fascinated by its poetics of close-ups, gestures and sounds. We are pleased to present Tanja Balac for this year's CinéWomen Edition. •Tanja, tell us about your trajectory as a filmmaker. What inspired you to express yourself in this medium?

I would agree with your classification of my film as going back to degree zero of cinema, because the film "Citizens" is truly made with minimal finance, as well as minimal technical means. I think that at the end of the day the financial means are not the most important aspect when it comes to artistic expression. It can be said that in general, each idea can be expressed through any art form; however, I am convinced that certain artistic concept are best conveyed with the correct usage of certain techniques. In other words, I believe that form is dictated by content. In this era when the digital



image is ever-present to the visual artists, it is of great importance that they resist the “seduction” of modern technology and its possibilities.

By profession, I am an academic painter, but I also work with installations and video art. In my opinion, it is very important that an author maintains their desire to experiment and research as long as possible, and it is exactly this that video art gives to me as an artist. However, I have quickly realized that I do not wish to use short films as a medium to simply visualize, but with the aid of a camera, I attempt to express my attitude towards the reality that surrounds us. I have learned that way, that when it comes to film expression, a blend of documentaristic and artistic is what suits my aesthetic feeling in the best way

possible. I use the term “artistic” as way to open the gates to the intimate world of the protagonists, with which I enhance the regular documentaristic objectiveness. In reality, the gate must always be a little bit open, just enough to summon us to enter that interspace between reality and fiction.

We have been deeply impressed by your visionary approach to cinematic time and space. How did you come up with the idea for *Citizens*?

The inspiration for “Citizens” did not come by watching films made by other authors, but it was conceived as a result of the search for the answer to the following question: *How can i paint portraits of the people I see every day, without using neither a brush nor paint? Can I make a*



short film portrait of the citizens of the city I live in, and have it not be a simple presentation? The answer was conjured in the form of a series of short portraits of individuals from different age, ethnical, religious, gender and social backgrounds. You are able to see a gallery of faces who without mimics or gestures, silently tell a story about themselves.

The basic idea was to create profiles of the citizens that live in my city, Skopje, by using minimal technical means and authorial intervention. The individuals were set in an environment which felt unnatural, but which required following a set of rules that I was aware they would not be able to completely fulfill. Therefore, the final result largely depended on the individual input of

each participant in my film. I would like to mention that the director of photography is the famous photographer Boro Rudic with whom I have had the pleasure to work on other projects and the assistant, the young Sergej Sarchevski, making the entire experience a blend of experience and youthfulness.

Throughout the film you brilliantly use sound and image to lead audience into a deep subjectivity. How did you conceive the sound design of *Citizens*?

The sound is composed of a variety of selected music backgrounds, as well as the bobbling of the people present in the backstage during the filming.

“ *The Birth of a Nation* presents only one character- a pregnant woman, as a metaphor not only of the present, but also as a representation of the future of my country, Macedonia, which is currently going through a very turbulent period engulfed with deep oppressive divisions which are becoming greater and greater with every passing day.

”







The indistinguishable voices do not have the purpose to complement the city noise, but to enhance the personal nature of the individuals who silently stare into the camera. In short, the sound functions as a support to our personal interpretation as viewers as we follow the characters that rapidly change on the screen.

With its emotionally resonant imagery and laconic camera work, *Citizens* discovers mystery within the everyday. • What do you want people to remember after seeing your film?

I am deeply impressed and impacted by those people who are "special" and different in some way, the people who with certain characteristics, maybe even some veiled traits, snatch our attention at first sight and stay in our memory for a long time. In the film "*Citizens*", 58

persons appear within four minutes of the film's runtime, which means that the viewers have merely 4 seconds to get an impression for each and every one of them. Either way, I believe that a viewer with a rather developed sense of empathy, will be able to feel the characters' spirits. The problems and difficulties of those people from poorer backgrounds, whether they like it or not, are written in their faces and in a traitorous way they are visible in their eyes and their poorly hidden mimics. This is what makes them very interesting to observe. They appear to be the ordinary people that we meet and see every day, but we rarely notice and we might never even get the urge to wonder who they are, where they are going, what they think, whether they are sad or happy...? Keeping this in mind, I am convinced that such powerful portraits would not be as easily made in a different, (dare I say)



wealthier environment in which the citizens are taught to hide away their inner world from the eyes of other people. Nonetheless, there is a variety of cultural, social, and even civilization differences and no matter how hard we try to avoid and suppress them, they will always be able to swim back to the surface.

By minimizing external actions, Citizens offers a heady mix of documentaristic and fictional techniques, featuring at the same time• the intimate feel of a documentary and the texture of an experimental film.• How did you conceive the structure of the film?

That my approach is documentaristic is immediately clear to any viewer because of the simple fact that the participants do not play a role. They appear on the

screen just as they are in their real, everyday lives.

The structure of this short film is based on the idea that the “actors” are shown to the viewers as unknown individuals taken out of the context of their private lives and natural intimacy. In our contact with other, unknown people, all of us define ourselves primarily through the “roles” we play in the daily life.

By contrast, in the film the space decontextualization does not mean loss of privacy. Entering the private sphere of ordinary people, in my view is the reason why documentary films are so appealing to a large number of viewers. As I have previously mentioned, I attempt to enrich the documentary technique with film technique, in order to spark the viewer’s imagination, because the gift of imagination, more than anything, defines



not only an artist but also every other art appreciator.

From a visual point, • what technical aspects do you mainly focus on in your work?

Technically, "Citizens" was not extremely demanding. The static camera and lights were part of a minimalistic approach. The film I am currently working on, on the other hand is much more demanding. I have set it in the space of a theatre, keeping their existing equipment and infrastructure in mind; however, it turned out that I am obliged to deal with some technical issues, as well.

In my view, a film camera is the "eye of the viewer" which is why I mainly focus on the technical aspect; on what stands in front of the camera. What is more, I am

a supporter of the idea to intervene as little as possible in the editing process and the post production.

What has been the most challenging for you on *Citizens* ?

It might sound banal, but the most challenging thing to me during the filming was to soothe the participants' "Balkan temperament", not only among the younger individuals, but also among the older ones. The main issue was finding a way to make and convince the people, who commonly express their inner self through gestures and mimics, to introvert their feelings only if for a moment. I used *method acting* with people who are not actors in their private lives.

We have previously mentioned •Bartas, yet your filmmaking style is far from



what is generally considered 'academic'. In particular, your brilliant use of temps mort, as well as your expressionist use of sound effects reminded us•of Philippe Grandrieux's films. Can you tell us your biggest influences in art and how they have affected your work?

Indeed my academic background is painting. In the aspect of visual aesthetics, I am certainly excited by the films made by well-known directors such as Lech Majewski and Peter Greenaway. On the other hand, in the sphere of the experimental film expression, I would say that Sharunas Bartas and his close-ups, together with his dark aesthetic of an introverted character are very close to my own aesthetic. I would moreover mention the anthological films made by Pier Paolo Pasolini, Alesandro Jodorowsky and

Godfrey Reggio. In the sense of openness to influence,

I must emphasize that I do not limit myself only to film and visual art. Quite the contrary, I am interested in many other art forms, because I consider the consumption of various different art forms as a prerogative for my own creativity. For instance, the German puppet artist, Ilka Schonbein in my opinion is one of the greatest, characterizing her work with a powerful artistic expression, despite the fact that she is rather unknown.

It is pitiful that such important artists remain unknown to the public eye as well as to the art connoisseurs. This is an issue that is very common in the sphere of art, even more so if the quality comes from a little known part of the world. In this case, the possibility to have the piece be *seen* are brought to a minimum.



How did you approach editing this film?

The post-production process is a very sensitive stage of the film making process that requires good collaboration. I mostly refer to the technical experts, but also the people with whom you share same aesthetic taste are an enormous part of this stage too. While working on "Citizens", I put a huge amount of emphasis on harmonising image and sound, even though none of the participants utters a word.

As I see it, the process of editing represents a sense of attention to details that have to fit in one final entity. The film editing was signed by the young Tode Kocev.

We want to catch this occasion to ask you to express your view on the future of women in cinema. For more than half a century women have been discouraged from getting behind the camera, however in the last decades there are signs that something is changing. What's your view on the future of women in cinema?

Surely, if we take a look at any book about art history, we will be able to see that they are mainly about feature film as a dominant form of film, but we will also notice the fact that among all those film-makers there are scarcely any women. The same can be said about visual art in general.

The history of art is a line of great art names and it includes very few female authors, if they are at all included, which indicates that art history was mostly created by men. This poses the following question: *Why not women?* It is imperative that we do not to accept everything that is served to us and presented as "natural", but to critically assess the root of the problem, searching

for the cause and uncovering the complex relations between knowledge, power, gender and art.

Nevertheless, with the advance of technology in the 21st century, the approach to film production has been democratised in a certain way and I am convinced that this will influence wider involvement of female authors in the world of film. I believe that by involving more women as film directors, the art of film making would be enriched with fresh creative potential that would not be as focused on technical aspect as it is the case with male directors.

Thanks for sharing your time, Tanja, we wish you all the best with your filmmaker career. What's next for Tanja Balac? Have you a particular film in mind?

I am currently in the final editing stages of my new short film with a working title "The Birth of a Nation". The film presents only one character- a pregnant woman, as a metaphor not only of the present, but also as a representation of the future of my country, Macedonia, which is currently going through a very turbulent period engulfed with deep oppressive divisions which are becoming greater and greater with every passing day. The feeling of collective apathy and hopelessness have gained their own political expression in the protests and demonstrations that take place daily on the streets of my city. A part of the visible political involvement, which is a matter of personal decision of every individual, is the question of survival of the people who live on the tail of Europe. I am convinced that the responsibility of the artists at this time is even bigger, and I view artistic involvement as the artists' civic duty.