

Interview with Mihajlo Jevtić on his feature-length début documentary “Four Passports”

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- *You deal in your film with very complicated subjects and painful history. When did you decide to make the film? And did you want from the beginning to tell the story from your own and your family's perspective?*

I had the idea for this film in the beginning of 2012. It existed as one page idea, basically a personal statement that I was living on the same address for more than 30 years, yet I was issued four different passports with three different country names on them. I had an urge to tell the story of my generation. How we grow up while socialist Yugoslavia was falling apart in civil wars, and modern Serbia was in the making. And what was the impact of this process on the individual and its sense of identity. For the past 15 years, Serbia is one of the world leaders in brain drain, and this is one of the outcomes of that process of social transformation. I knew from the beginning that it will be a very personal film, and that it will include my family, my friends and me as a character.

- *Did you have a clear idea from the beginning about the structure of the film? Or did that happen at a later stage of the filming / production process?*

The main concept that existed from the very beginning was to make this film as a collage. I wanted to mix family archives, animation and present day footage. I had some ideas about the structure before the filming and wrote two scripts for the film, but they all ended in the trash bin. We had to develop a method for working on the film. We were shooting, animating and editing the whole film in parallel for a year. I would shoot one scene in Serbia, and send it to editor Aleksandar Stojanov, who is living in Italy, alongside some editing ideas. He would return a draft edited scene back to me – I would then write and record voice-over, and we would insert it. Based on the scene, I would then write a short script for a piece of animation for the animator Stefan Vogt who is living in Germany. He would make it, and then we would edit it all together. After one scene was over, I would develop the idea for the next one. The whole process of making this film was a experiment, one big jam session, and a lot of work was done over the internet.

- *Your film is in a way full of nostalgia of the past, but I didn't feel like you miss a certain era, but more like you were reflecting on the current times. Was it difficult to talk about the past without glorifying it?*

It was one of the first decisions that I had to make as a director of this project. It was very important for me not to glorify the past, and make simple, black and white treatment of the past or present day reality. It was mandatory to dig deeper inside myself and focus on one personal view and personal history, and leave enough thinking space for the audience. The key was to focus on my own experience, one particular human experience, and construct my own narrative about growing up under such circumstances of drastic social transformation.

- *One of the things I found interesting in your film was to learn about your generation and your parents' generation, what they have been going through, and how they view the changes that took place in the last three decades. Were you tempted to include the young generation in your film? And indeed what kind of the challenges are they facing?*

It was an outcome of the casting process. I knew that I will be the main character, and in a way represent the younger generation. Originally, I wanted to have more friends, representatives of younger generation in the film. But I realized that my parents carry most of the experience of living while Yugoslavia was disappearing in wars – and we were protected by them. My experience was experience of a child, and I also wanted to somehow translate that personal childlike point of view into this film. Regarding my generation – we somehow got lost, during those last 25 years. Everybody expected that the years that we had lost during the wars between 1991 and 1999 will be compensated with the rise of “democracy” in 2000, and that we will build a better society. But nothing happened – the same ideology and political factors are present in Serbia and the whole ex Yugoslav region as they were 25 years ago. The only thing that happened was a redistribution of wealth. I can say that my generation is quite invisible in the present day Serbian society. Probably that was one of the reasons I wanted to make this film, to remind us that we exist.

- *How did you explain the project to your family? And how do they like the final version of the film?*

I told them that I am making a film about emigration and recent history of former Yugoslavia. It was a very delicate line, trying to be both the director and a protagonist of this film at the same time, their son. And I think they gladly got into the film because they knew I will be with them as a character, in front of the camera. There was no film crew most of the time – I would operate both camera and sound, and talk with them during the filming. The first scene I had shot with them was a scene when they are watching super 8 films of our family vacations in Croatia, just before the start of the Yugoslav war. And when we edited that scene, I have showed it to them so they could understand where the film will be going. It gave them a sense of direction – what roles they can take in the film. But after that, I did not show them anything. Everybody saw the complete film for the first time on the festival premiere in Belgrade. And my family was really happy with it, and how they are portrayed as characters.

- *You use animation in your film in the way that some of American documentaries do, are you fan of American documentaries?*

We used animation in this film to represent the memories, images and dreams that I could not present in any other way. Animator Stefan Vogt, has very specific style of animation – his animations look like they were made by a child. And it was a perfect fit, since I wanted to somehow underline this point view of me as a child. We met very early, in 2012, while this project existed as half page of text, and decided to work together on this film. I did not have any premeditated formula or model for using the animations in this film. I liked his style and thought that it will be a good fit. It was my first time to work with the animator, and first

time to make this collage type of film, so it was all one big experiment, not just for me, but for the whole creative team.

- *Have there been many documentaries from old Yugoslavia about its bloody history, and do you think that we are going to see more films about those turbulent years?*

There are some documentaries that deal with the fall of Yugoslavia, but they rarely deal with it from the personal perspective. And I hope that we will see more personal documentaries on this topic soon. In this parts of the world, but also globally, the personal narratives have been suppressed by the collective narratives and nationalism, and these have always been controlled by the state elites. And that is the power of personal creative documentary – to share the individual stories and to remind us that the individual human experience and personal narratives are above the collective one.