„ART IS ABOUT SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY" – EIN INTERVIEW MIT TEONA STRUGAR MITEVSKA

Posted on 27. Dezember 2021 by Julia Engellandt

Die nordmazedonische Regisseurin, Drehbuchautorin und Produzentin Teona Strugar Mitevska ist über Nacht international bekannt geworden, seitdem ihr Film "Gospod postoi, imeto ì e Petrunija" (dt. "Gott ist tot, ihr Name ist Petrunya") 2019 auf der Berlinale gezeigt wurde, den Preis der Ökumenischen Jury und den Gilde Filmpreis gewann und große Resonanz in der Presse erhielt. Dabei stellt dieser Film mit einem unzweifelhaft dokumentarisch-realistischen Anspruch eine einfache lokale Begebenheit ins Zentrum der Handlung: Das Aufbegehren einer Frau, die sich durch patriarchale Strukturen ihrer Lebensperspektiven beraubt sieht und einem spontanen Impuls folgt, sich an dem (normalerweise nur Männern vorbehaltenen) Epiphanias-Ritual in ihrer Dorfgemeinde zu beteiligen.

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nicht zum Opfer machen lässt.

novinki unterhielt sich mit Teona Mitevska, deren Karriere mit der Ausbildung als Grafikdesignerin und einer zweiten in Filmregie an der *Tisch School of the Arts* in New York begann, über ihr bisheriges Schaffen (u.a. über ihren Film *Jas sum od Titov Veles,* dt.: *Ich komme aus Titov Veles* aus dem Jahr 2008) und ihre Motivation zum Filmemachen, über die heutige Filmkunst und -kultur in Nordmazedonien und über aktuelle feministische Diskurse, die uns alle betreffen.

Julia Engellandt: Teona, in an interview for the *Berlinale* 2019 you mentioned that a real person, who actually did not have a background as a feminist activist, inspired your conception of the female protagonist in *Gospod postoi, imeto i e Petrunija*. But in your film, there clearly is an emphasis on the character's feminist motivations. What influenced your decision to center your movie around this aspect?

Teona Mitevska: I think feminism is something natural. Yes, we put a name to it, but for me feminism is about injustice. Every human being, who has experienced injustice, will voice her or his opinion regarding that. As the film develops, Petrunya gains more confidence in herself and in her actions. But in the beginning her primary motivation is the need for justice. What else can a woman do, other than to criticize the conditions of life in a society, which were created without her participation? What else can I as a woman speak about, other than something that concerns me deeply every single day? Something that we all strive for: to better our living conditions, to better the conditions of the disadvantaged members of society. And the movement – feminism – is part of this. I would not say that injustice is part of feminism, I'd say that feminism is part of justice.

J.E.: Where there any other themes or motives that were important for you to include?

T.M.: Patriarchy. Capitalism. I am not offering a solution here. And I do not think that films can manage to turn down the whole of patriarchy in the next 50 years. But it is something to strive for and something that we still need to fight against. It is very difficult to change a system that has been existing for centuries. But in fact, we as women are prisoners of this system. That makes patriarchy a big problem for me, and it should be like this for anyone in the world. I could not see myself *not* striving for a change. Our world is very much unified. Most of our aims are very similar – we all want a change for the better. Cinema, being a very popular art form, can touch many souls on different educational and emotional levels because you are dealing with sensations, experience, feelings, and you are telling a story. You can convey extremely complex ideas through film.

J.E.: What forms of occupation are traditionally linked to women in North Macedonia?

T.M.: Ironing and cooking; it's ridiculous. But we are forced to keep up with this kind of traditions. During the ritual of swimming after the cross (what you can see in the movie) women must only observe the men and applaud… I was reading an interview with our prime minister a few days ago and was outraged. He said, "My daughter studies medicine in Sofia. I was against it because studying medicine takes six years. That is too much. It's not good for a woman. A woman should be a mother." What is even worse, none of the smart and strong Macedonian women have commented on this. He is the leader of this country. How dare he say something like that? His daughter is probably smarter than him.

J.E.: Where do you see the importance of incorporating real-life events in your work?

T.M.: Reality is more fantastical than anything you can imagine. It is incredible, of course, the capabilities of human creativity. But what happens in real life can also resemble fiction. Filmmakers and storytellers, or artists in general, always try to be on the same level with society, to respond to the environment we live in, to the problems that the world is preoccupied with. There are problems that concern us all, sometimes to a greater extent than what we are conscious of. And as an artist it is very important to investigate these problems. You could call them universal. They are extremely important for starting a discussion and for bringing society forward.

J.E.: A couple of your earlier movies faced an immense backlash from the North Macedonian government, and there were debates about censoring. How was *Petrunya* received?

T.M.: *Petrunya* went okay. But it remains a film that presents a certain aspect of the country's culture that does not necessarily correspond with how people want to see themselves. All my films are being viewed as controversial, and I can understand why. But we live in a country where people are afraid to talk. There is no real freedom of expression. Basically, there are certain guidelines of what people are supposed to think and people just follow that. As I say this about my country, my stomach trembles. How can one produce anything of value when the basis for your decisions is fear? Of course, freedom of expression is being discussed, but on a very superficial level. We don't fully understand what it means. The division between the church, the state, and the artist exists. But the democratic idea, to have the right to voice your opinion without caring about what other people think or feel, is still very far away from us. They wanted to put me on a blacklist. What does that even mean? Are we living in Stalinist Russia? Nobody stood up and said anything, because of fear. People are just accepting it. And that is the worst part.

J.E.: You also worked as a graphic designer and as a painter. What influenced your decision to pursue a career in

filmmaking?

T.M.: When I was six years old, I was a child actor in former Yugoslavia. I took part in a couple of commercials. When I was about 12 years old, I said: "Fuck it." I did not want to be told what to do. So, I started a cinema club. But it was quite frustrating for me because I was the youngest and a female in a group of older men. And I was never being taken seriously. There is this assumption about women that they should not touch cameras, technology or whatever. That is my life story: constant frustration and dealing with restrictions that your environment has put on you. Very similar to *Petrunya* actually. When I started working in the fine arts, I tried lots of different things. But my desire has always been to make cinema myself, to be a film director. It took me a long time to have the courage to do so. The restrictions that we put on ourselves can be understood as auto-censorship. It has to do with confidence as well. Especially women are often being told what they can and can't do. It took me a long time to give myself the permission to do what I wanted to do. So, after I finished university, I started working in advertising and only then did I say to myself: "Now I can direct."

J.E.: How do you think your filmmaking has changed over the years?

T.M.: I am less stuck-up. My ideas were very limited about what I thought cinema was. Today I know that everything can be cinema. And this freedom can be quite challenging. Film is basically just a medium that expresses emotion. The more freedom you have in terms of using that medium, the more beautiful it gets. And it doesn't necessarily have to work all the time. It's important to challenge yourself and try to do the undoable. There are many great films today, especially in Europe. But it's not enough to just make a good film. You must propose something more. It must be a great idea with an excellent form. To achieve this can be really challenging, but this is what is important to me.

J.E.: How do you think your experience as a designer and painter influences your ways of filmmaking?

T.M.: I come from the visual world, so in all my films every frame must be like a painting. Coming from this background and feeling comfortable about visualizing things was something I always relied on. It was something that I knew how to do. And then I would build upon that, all my stories and my characters. Today I'm conscious about the fact that my pursuit of this harmony, what I look for within a frame, can also be imprisoning. This pursuit of perfection can be limiting, if it does not fit the dramaturgy of the film. There is a fine balance that one must work around. Cinema is a visual form, but what is the point of the visual form, if it does not serve the experience the characters feel in that moment? I am talking about this because it has been my biggest struggle. To put my visual expectations back and put them in the function of the character or the dramaturgy. Once I got over that, I started looking at the entire film as a painting. Also, I think the interesting part is what is *not* harmonious, beautiful or balanced. These kinds of ideas are

part of how we define ourselves as humans. There is always space for difference, for proposing different kinds of beauty and of reality.

J.E.: What was it like for you as an artist to work during the pandemic? Did you see it as a productive moment or was it rather limiting your creativity?

T.M.: During the pandemic I went through a personal turmoil – not with cinema, but with my family. And that process clarified a lot of things for me. It has been a cleansing experience on a personal level, and therefore it has been also beautiful. Priorities have become clearer. I also finished one film that I have never shown to anybody because it is so personal. But during the production of that film, which is more like a diary, I released myself from the idea of what cinema is. I don't know if it is of any value for anybody else, but that doesn't matter. It is important for my personal development. It freed me from many rules and constrictions about how I thought I needed to make cinema.

J.E.: How would you describe your current position in Macedonian film culture? What would you like to contribute in the future?

T.M.: I just hope my films touch people on an emotional level. That is one of the most important goals for a filmmaker. It is however not so important to me if you like my film or not. What I care about is that 15 years later, there is still an image, a moment, something that has touched you and something you still remember. It is important for artists and scientists alike – everything is interrelated; we sort of feed off one another and we move the society forward. The most important thing is that you don't do something for your personal gratification only. Art is not about that but about social responsibility. Despite all the controversy around my films I think that I am influencing many young film makers - male as well as female - in a positive way, showing them a way how to do things differently and to be brave in art. We have reached a point where it is not so difficult to make a well-packaged film production-wise. But that is not enough. Cinema is about exploring the form, pushing its boundaries. And for this you need a good education in filmmaking. You need an encouraging atmosphere. But here, where people are afraid, everything is very traditional. I hope that by proposing the type of films I do, I'm able to open certain doors in people's minds.

J.E.: Since this interview addresses a German speaking audience with little to no knowledge of Macedonian film, could you recommend another young film director?

T.M.: Just yesterday the first Macedonian film ever was accepted in *Cannes*. We have never had a film there. And it's a female film maker. It's a short film by Marija Apčevska. It's called *Severen Pol* (*North Pole*) and we are very proud of it.

J.E.: Just one last question: Are you planning on jumping after the cross one day?

T.M.: No, I don't like cold water. It's not my thing. But if there was a tradition like climbing a rock, I would totally do it.

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