



Flotel Europa

Vladimir Tomic

Producer Srdjan Keca, Selma Jusufbegovic. **Production companies** Selma Jusufbegovic (Kopenhagen, Denmark); Uzrok (Novi Sad, Serbia). **Director** Vladimir Tomic. **Screenplay** Vladimir Tomic. **Sound design** Alex Pavlovic. **Editor** Srdjan Keca.

DCP, colour. 70 min. Bosnian.

Premiere 6 February 2015, Berlinale Forum

When this film's director was still a boy, he stood in front of „Flotel Europa“ and was hugely excited about the prospect of this gigantic ship moored in the port of Copenhagen becoming a new home for him, his mother and his older brother. Together with about 1000 other refugees from the former Yugoslavia, they started life anew on the ship. Like many families did in the early 90s, they used to send video messages on VHS to the father, who had stayed back home: footage of the communal kitchen, the windowless cabin, the TV room, excursions made with cool new friends, a dance performance by the unattainable Melisa. Director Vladimir Tomic could have just used this material to illustrate a lost childhood and the squalor of refugee life, but by editing it together and drawing on his memories of that time, he succeeds in creating something new, something of his own, something special. The shift in perspective from internal to external turns *Flotel Europa* in an autobiographical film about a difficult lot, which is all the more touching because it liberates the refugee from the role of the victim – and transforms a shy young man into a lovable film star.

Dorothee Wenner

Video tapes from Denmark

Not long before his death, my grandfather gave me an old VHS tape with the inscription 'To my grandfather from Flotel Europa'. On the tape was a recording of my mother, my brother, and me. We recorded it in 1993, during the time when there was a war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and we were living in Copenhagen, Denmark as refugees. As the phone line to Bosnia rarely worked, we refugees started recording our lives and personal messages on VHS tapes and sending them to our relatives through Red Cross humanitarian convoys. The Danish refugee centre we were living in was called Flotel Europa. It was, in fact, a ship/floating platform placed in one of many harbours in the centre of Copenhagen. We spent two years there, together with a thousand other Bosnian refugees, waiting for a decision on our asylum.

The VHS tape I once sent to my grandfather took me back to that time, and I felt that there was a story that needed to be told. Together with my dear friend and producer Selma Jusufbegovic, I started gathering the VHS material from other Bosnian refugees living in Denmark, and soon I had hundreds of hours of people's personal material in my hands. My memories of life at Flotel Europa were as vivid as the material, so I wrote them down. With the help of my good friend, filmmaker Srdjan Keca, we edited this film in one intensive month.

While making *Flotel Europa*, I felt as if I were reliving that period of my life when I was a twelve-year-old kid trying to find his place and live a normal life on a refugee ship, when not much of what was around him was normal.

I fell into a space between time, a place where refugees often find themselves when forced to leave their homes in search of new stable ground. While making *Flotel Europa*, I was able to look at my life from a distance. Seeing it as it is with all its ruthless beauty made me laugh and cry at the same time, and I would like the viewer to feel the same way.

Through this small personal story I tried to tell a much bigger story, of how Yugoslavia fell apart while I was jerking off.

Vladimir Tomic

"We didn't want life to stop"

Flotel Europe shows a universal destiny through a very personal angle. How did you get the idea of introducing a coming-of-age story – your story, I suppose – as the main plotline? Are all the details authentic, or is there also some fiction involved?

In most of my work with film, I try to keep things on a personal level, especially when it comes to storytelling. That is because I can feel things better and I believe that if I can feel them strongly enough, the viewer will do the same. The coming-of-age story was natural for me to use in this film, as I experienced this story on my own skin.

Like the history that is written down by our selective memory, not one film can be authentic all the way. I don't believe in the one and only truth and I don't claim to know the whole truth, even the one about myself. So it is natural for me to use the material creatively and make the story work, even if there is some fiction involved.

How did you research the video material? How did the protagonists react when you spoke to them again after so many years?

Some time before his death, my grandfather gave me the VHS tape my mother, brother, and I recorded while living at the Flotel Europa refugee centre back in 1993. Because of the war, there was often no telephone communication with family in Bosnia and Herzegovina, so many Bosnian refugees recorded VHS letters and sent them through humanitarian convoys to their relatives in Bosnia. I knew that there was much more material out there among Bosnians in Denmark, so I started contacting them. The original idea I started working on was to shoot a film about those who recorded this material, together with people who were living at Flotel Europa, and use their interviews in the film, but my own story came to me and I decided to do it. I didn't shoot any of the material in this film. It was made by Bosnian refugees who were much older than I was at the time. I met the protagonists and the ones who recorded the material again, and they gave me permission to use the material. The period of war and of being a refugee was a great source of fear in the lives of many Bosnians I talked with. It was a traumatic experience, which many would like to forget, but while interviewing them I also felt that there was a need to talk about this time, in order to put this story in its place.

How much material did you re-watch, and what feelings came up while watching those materials?

I think I re-watched more than 100 hours of this archive material. It was like taking out a family photo album and looking at the pictures. Everybody knows how it is. You look and wonder if everything really looked like that and happened that way. You laugh, maybe you cry when you see people who were dear to you, or not.

Many feelings came up, but the funny thing is that much of the time I was bored to death. I don't want to be arrogant, but I mean, how emotional can it be when you watch twenty photos taken by your uncle, from various positions, of your grandmother sitting on the sofa? But sometimes there were these glimmers in the material that shone through everything else and took me back to the time when I was a twelve-year-old kid living at Flotel Europa, struggling to belong to a group of people who were torn apart because of the war. Those small glimmers evoke every possible feeling there is, and it was those feelings I wanted to present to the viewer.

Do you think those video messages sent from Copenhagen to the war-torn former Yugoslavia also had an effect on how people dealt with the trauma of a lost identity?

For me, the most tragic thing about that war, apart, of course, from the lives that were lost, is the trauma of lost cohesion. Maybe not even identity; identity is a difficult term to talk about, since I believe it is not something stable, as we maybe would like it to be. The feeling of lost cohesion between people is the tragedy. An idea of a new group identity was the only thing many had to hold on in that difficult situation, so many people chose to deal with the loss of identity as Yugoslavs by belonging to an ethnically 'clean' group at the refugee centre. That is why nationalism, religion and folk music experienced

some kind of renaissance there. And it had to be filmed. All of it. Some people needed evidence that they existed.

On the one hand, Flotel Europe talks about a lost youth and missing identities. On the other hand, there are many attempts to live life as 'normally' as possible...

Most people adapt to the situation they are in as best they can. At Flotel Europa we did so too. For us children, it was easier somehow, as we could mostly rely on our parents or just get busy playing. But many grown-ups were traumatised or had nothing to do, so they fell into some state of apathy, and that was hard to watch. I remember one night waking up when I heard a scream from the kitchen as one man stabbed himself to death with the knife, after hearing that his only son had died in war. Or the woman who would send us kids to buy groceries from the shop. She would ask us to buy things for her son as well, although he had disappeared somewhere in Bosnia, and no one had heard from him in a very long time. All this frustration came out as hatred between different ethnic groups at Flotel Europa, and many times I and others experienced discrimination. We lived with all this, but there was no time to stop and think about these things. In those situations, you move. If you stop, you feel, and being so young I couldn't or I did not want to feel those things so close to me. That is why I found those who tried to live in some kind of 'normality'. We didn't want life to stop, we were not in the war anymore, and that war was not our war. We didn't need the new identity or our own 'clean' ethnic group. We escaped from all of that, but at Flotel Europa, far away from the war in Bosnia, much of what was happening there caught up with us again.

After the Flotel Europe experience, you continued to live in Denmark, where you established yourself as a filmmaker. Many of your films deal with subjects having to do with the former Yugoslavia. Considering the refugees entering Europe from other parts of the world today, how would you define 'identity' within your personal biography?

As I said before, I do not believe in identity as a stable thing, so why, then, do we try to hold on to it? After the experience of Flotel Europa, for many years I struggled to understand this, and it still goes on. Through my filmmaking those thoughts of identity and complexity of the human mind come to form, some kind of crystallisation. There are many levels on which identity can be discussed, but I prefer storytelling, as it brings lofty ideas down to the ground and gives them drama, poetry and meaning. Subjects having to do with the former Yugoslavia are often an inspiration for my work, as I find the Balkans to be a 'mirror' turned towards the rest of Europe, maybe the world. A relatively small part of Europe, it is a region that contains very complex identity issues, everything that Europe has been fighting to tame in itself for generations. As we see the rise of nationalism in Europe today, war and floods of refugees, once again we experience the shadow of our past coming over us. History repeats itself so much that in the end it becomes boring, just like the folkdance that spins round and round, or those twenty photos shot by an uncle of a grandmother sitting on the sofa. What better story is there to tell than that of a boy trying to live a normal life in a place where almost nothing around him is normal?

Bernd Buder, January 2015



Vladimir Tomic was born in 1980 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2002, he attended the CPH Film & Photo School in Copenhagen. From 2003 to 2009, he studied at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. From 2008 to 2009, he was an exchange student at the Akademie der bildenden Künste in Vienna. Vladimir Tomic lives and works in Copenhagen.

Films

2004: *Trilogy: Dead Nature and Movements, The Pianist, The Mailman* (18 min.). 2005: *Echo* (17 min.). 2006: *The Valley of Shadows* (12 min.). 2009: *My Lost Generation* (31 min.). 2012: *Unfinished Journeys* (43 min.). 2015: *Flotel Europa*.