



Vlažnost

Humidity

Nikola Ljuca

Producer Nataša Damjanović, Vladimir Vidić, Derk-Jan Warrink, Joost de Vries, Leontine Petit, Nikos Moutselos, Ivica Vidanović. **Production companies** Dart Film (Belgrade, Serbia), Lemming Film (Amsterdam, Netherlands), 2.35 (Two Thirty Five) (Athens, Greece), Cinnamon Production (Belgrade, Serbia). **Director** Nikola Ljuca. **Screenplay** Staša Bajac, Nikola Ljuca. **Director of photography** Maja Radošević. **Editor** Jelena Rosić, Nataša Damjanović, Vladimir Vidić. **Music** Janja Lončar. **Sound design** Evelien Van der Molen. **Sound** Zoran Maksimović. **Production design** Zorana Petrov. **Costumes** Dejana Vučićević. **With** Miloš Timotijević (Petar), Tamara Krcunović (Mina), Maria Kraakman (Karin), Katarina Marković (Bojana), Dragan Bakema (Srdjan), Milan Marić (Djordje), Slaven Došlo (Milan), Jasna Ornela Bery (Dragica), Fedja Stojanović (Dragiša), Jelena Stupljanin (Andjela).

DCP, colour. 113 min. Serbian, English, French.

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Petar is a smooth businessman, ambitious, firmly part of the nouveau rich, his flat decked out with designer furniture. One day, his wife Mina vanishes. He keeps her absence a secret, but behind the happy facade of preparing an upcoming family celebration, shady deals at work and weekends of excess with his colleagues, insecurity, nervousness and even aggression begin to set in. A week later, everyone still acts as if nothing ever happened, as if the family were still complete. The suit fits as well as it always did. There are gifts and drinks on the table. But everything has changed. Who can still be trusted here and why? Nikola Ljuca's astutely directed feature debut depicts the neo-capitalist establishment in post-Milošević Serbia as being caught between cocaine and corruption, technocratic cool and social traditions. The director has described it as "a road movie through Belgrade akin to an odyssey". His protagonists are people for whom everything is now a no-brainer and who no longer reflect upon themselves. This is a razor-sharp, universal portrait of a society in which the outwardly urbane is merely a convention.

Bernd Buder

Life in a bubble

Vlažnost is a film about a certain generation of people in their mid- to late thirties living in Belgrade. They are the ones whose lives were about to start just when the former Yugoslavia collapsed, the ones who stayed in the country and didn't emigrate. They went to universities and protested against Milošević, and believed themselves to be the future of the country. They did everything they could to survive and stay normal. When the situation in Serbia changed, all they wanted was to be on top of the game. But the times were cruel, and sacrificing ethics and emotions was the price of success. Once their new lives were established, maintaining the image of success and Serbian prosperity, their personal issues started resurfacing in a strange fashion. Does Petar keep silent about Mina being gone because it's so important to maintain that false image of success and project a harmonious life?

Is it possible that none of his friends and family notices it or are they silent as well, fearing they will disturb the 'harmony'?

Freud said that when the original object of an instinctual desire becomes lost as the consequence of repression, it is often replaced by an endless series of substitute objects, none of which ever give full satisfaction. This may explain the lack of stability in object choice, the 'craving for stimulus', which is so often a feature of the love of adults.

The protagonists of the film live, work, and move inside of a bubble. They are not aware of this bubble but subconsciously they all keep it from bursting. That bubble consists of newly built and seemingly perfectly designed apartments, offices, restaurants, expensive clothes, and cars. That bubble is minimalist, with straight lines and it despises the tacky colours, gold and chaos of the nineties. Nevertheless, all that minimalism only covers up the essential kitsch it is made of. Like any other bubble, this one, too, is transparent and through it you can see the run-down buildings, urbanistic mess, and poverty of the others who are left outside of it.

Social transitions strike people economically, but intimately we should always re-evaluate what we've gained and what's been lost in the process of change. With this film, I want to get rid of post-Soviet and post-war Eastern European stereotypes and traditional formulas, which have been very characteristic in the movies from my region. The Balkans exists in the midst of huge chaos, changes and instability, and planning any kind of future is almost impossible. I am finding new characters and images that will represent this and while doing that I am creating the real image of contemporary Belgrade, Serbia.

Nikola Ljuca

The aquarium of possibilities

The story for *Vlažnost* originally came from an idea for a short film – a woman is driving her husband from the airport and, while listening to him and his best friend and colleague converse in the car, she decides to leave him. She silently observes their arrogance, sense of privilege, superiority, charismatic and sexual confidence. Men who have succeeded in the post-war, neoliberal wild East that is contemporary Serbia. Her quiet withdrawal, I felt, was an act of rebellion and contempt, but also a testament of her own failure as it is her own life that she is abandoning. As we discussed the complexity of her act and realised how it can only

be fully understood through watching the consequences it would have for him, we realised we had a feature about the complex lives that an entire generation of Belgraders are living.

The question why she doesn't say anything or try talking to him imposed the structure and further events in the film. What needed to be seen is how the architecture of their lives is laid out in such a way that any potential questioning or self-reflection is near impossible. Each of the characters operates in a construct of what their own fixated happiness is made of – wild nightlife, expensive furniture or perfectly organised family gatherings. When the main character's wife disappears, it gives him a new and skewed position, from which he keeps on colliding with this made-up, nightmarish world of realised dreams. However, just like everyone around him, he is still not prepared to let go of his imagined self, so the main dramatic conflict in the film actually stems from situations where his constructed identity is met with his actual feelings.

Seeking the anti-catharsis

Just as the characters have these two overlapping layers, the same goes for the setting, where nothing is as it seems. Work life is an everyday battle of balancing professional appearance and 'getting things done' the only way we know how – through political connections and scams. Even though Serbia is eagerly rushing towards the European Union, implementing whatever is requested, intrinsically, the mechanisms still remain mobster-like. The pressure to keep up appearances is no different in the social sphere, where falsely sexually liberated girls serve as badges of macho honour and family values are nothing but a mere decoration.

In this elusive world, where the true nature of things is so hard to pinpoint, the situations and dialogue oddly had to be very fast and liquid in order to feel suffocating and heavy. The desired effect was that the flamboyant ocean of possibilities would start to feel like an aquarium.

In that sense, the issue of genre was also of great importance. In a narrative with a simple starting point that evokes the thriller or mystery genres, but no other elements of these types of films, we decided to play with exactly that. We tried to create situations that trick the viewer into thinking there is a subplot, or a discovery, but nothing of the sort ever happens. The result, we hoped, would be that the audience would feel an anti-catharsis or even a disappointment. With this, we would achieve a certain understanding of what it is that the main character is going through, without classical 'identification'. This was important precisely because we also wanted the audience to partially be able to observe the system that we have illustrated with a sort of Brechtian detachment.

Staća Bajac



© Vladimir Vidić

Nikola Ljuca was born in Belgrade, Serbia in 1985. From 2004 to 2008, he studied in the Film and TV Directing Department of the Faculty of Drama Arts at the University of Arts in Belgrade. He took part in the 2011 Berlinale Talent Campus Script Station Project Lab with the first draft of his screenplay for *Vlažnost*. Nikola Ljuca has worked in casting and as an assistant director. Fol-

lowing a number of short films, *Vlažnost* is his first full-length feature film.

Films

2008: *The Beginning of Summer* (14 min.). 2010: *Thursday* (26 min.). 2011: *Sergeant* (21 min.). 2012: *Scenes with Women* (16 min.). 2016: *Vlažnost / Humidity*.