

The Other Side of Everything

Mila Turajlić, 2017

Screenwriter: Mila Turajlić

Place: Serbia, France, Qatar

Studios: Dribbling Pictures, Survivance, HBO

Length: 103 minutes

Language: Serbian

Matthew Rogers, University College London.

Serbian director Mila Turajlić's second feature length documentary recounts her country's painful past, which she claims can be best understood by talking about divided spaces. A fusion of personal history with the national, through the participatory and performative modes of documentary filmmaking Turajlić explores her ancestral family apartment and her relationship with her own mother, to cast a lens over Serbia's traumatic political history.

The title concerns Turajlić's ancestral apartment, in which four generations of the same family have been raised. Authorities from the new communist government that seized power in Yugoslavia following the Second World War had split the Turajlić family's 'bourgeois' apartment in two, accommodating another family behind the doors that have remained locked ever since. The film's focus on these dividing doors, unopened since 1946, presents the motif of deep-set ethnic divisions which still persist as an obstacle to democratic modernity in Serbia.

Indeed, the family history is as bourgeois as it is intertwined with Belgrade politics. The director's great-grandfather, Dušan Peleš, was a wealthy politician, lawyer and signatory of the 1918 Declaration of Unification that created the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. This is clearly reflected in the opulence of the apartment building that Peleš commissioned.

The resulting film is a masterful blend of the deeply personal with the painfully political. It is primarily a portrait of the life and career of the director's mother, Srbijanka Turajlić, a retired university professor and prominent anti-Milošević activist. We trace her political struggle, initially as a young activist outraged that her professors did not join the 1968 student-led strikes against graduate unemployment. Later, we see her as a professor herself, in the Faculty of Engineering at Belgrade University. Ironically, after the Milošević regime decreed that all academic appointments were to be controlled by the state, she was fired from Belgrade University for joining student dissent in 1999. Exploring the microcosm of history that is her apartment, Srbijanka recounts her stirring and insightful observations in almost poetic cadence.

Turajlić's storytelling is infused with a clear and dynamic sense of space. Although *The Other Side of Everything* is set entirely within the apartment, it recounts events through compounded archival footage with shots from the perspective of the apartment's windows, such as the 2017 election of populist nationalist and Milošević associate, Aleksander Vučić. Viewers will be left with a contextual awareness of the Srbijanka's turbulent family history through their distinctly Slavic household decorations, keepsakes and ornaments.

A depressingly resonant production, *The Other Side of Everything* is a condemnation of populist ethno-centrism and strongman politics, set in the capital of a failed-state ironically founded on the principle of ethnic diversity. The film is a clear endorsement of the director's mother's lifelong dedication to anti-authoritarianism. Whilst ostensibly a denunciation of a political tradition of a distinctly Balkan character and context, the film's message should not be overlooked by audiences abroad. As a political science graduate of the LSE, Turajlić is assumedly aware of the implications of her message for Serbian politics on a western political landscape increasingly dominated by social media strongmen.

The film's sense of profound sadness is impressive considering it features almost none of the typical newsreel footage of human suffering that students of the Balkan Wars are so familiar with, but rather focuses on Srbijanka's impassioned speeches to enormous crowds of rallying students. The director told the *New York Times* that for a Serbian audience "images of the 90s, of the war and suffering are superfluous." As Srbijanka closes her memoirs from behind a curtain of cigarette smoke, she laments that, with the nationalists back in charge, Serbia's democratic revolution has ultimately resulted in failure.