

## THE FUTURE OF CINEMA IN THE LAND OF THE BEARS

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In the Land of the Bears (2012), the second and latest feature documentary by Nika Aitor, tells an old and well-known story. One could even say that it tells a trite story insofar as, especially last year, numerous mass media eagerly chewed and sucked on it only to be able to spit it out and let it sink into oblivion with an easy conscience. In this sense, the fate of this story, which In the Land of the Bears has picked up, shares the fate of its “subject”: the seasonal workers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, whom, with a promise of quick and substantial earnings, Slovenia ground and sucked dry only to spit them out with an easy conscience, underpaid and unpaid, leaving them forgotten and without any rights. In the Land of the Bears is somewhat ironically named after a sign greeting “tourists” at the border crossing Petrina ob Kočevju, which is, among other things, the seat of one of the more infamous exploitative organisations and a place that, in certain parts of BiH, is now more than with anything else – for example bears – associated with a labour camp. With this gesture, explained in the second part of the film by one of the cheated protagonists, In the Land of the Bears dispenses with every kind of irony and similar strategies of establishing a distance. Its first and main strong point is the fundamental strong point of the best documentary cinema: personal affection and the consequent engagement – although we have to be very careful and precise in using this concept in the given situation. Nika Aitor’s film does not boast an engagement that would activistically cut into a difficult situation, try to change it or call to resistance. For the story is, at least for the most part, already finished; the resistance was quenched even before it managed to flare up; the defeat recognised and acknowledged, but therefore turned into an experience. What is at stake is another, subtler and consequently perhaps also more effective form of engagement that calls especially to the following: the sharpening of the gaze. It would be somewhat risky to claim that such a sharpening of the gaze is possible only after the initial passions have subsided and the dimension of a cheap spectacle, as staged by the aforementioned mass media, has been pushed into

the past and entirely thwarted. But without any doubt, this sharpening of the gaze brings what the momentary activist intervention and spectacle will not or cannot: it gives a voice, a name and a history to the formerly voiceless, nameless and fleeting object of exploitation, it allows for the emergence of the subject in all the meanings of this concept. In order to reveal (her and consequently our) anger, empathy and reflection regarding one of the symptomatic and neuralgic points of contemporary capitalism, Nika Autor does not extend her gaze over the horizon, the surging masses, protest speeches and objections, but focuses wholly on one land, the land of the bears, and especially one individual, her friend Armin Salihović, whose particular story thus becomes the most effective metaphor for the universal one. The camera is in her hand and close (where it should be), the editing true to the moment (which makes the film full of suspense), the viewers navigate the story themselves without any explanatory interventions (e.g., the filmmaker's commentary) or emotional manipulations (e.g., music) and are therefore respected (and can respect others themselves). Precisely herein – and hardly anywhere else – lies not only the future of solidarity in the land of the bears, but also the future of documentary cinema.