

## HOW TO MAKE A FILM, WITHOUT MONEY, WHILE BEING BOMBED

Being a political idiot has its advantages.

By Jasmina Tesanovic

Back in 1999, while my hometown of Belgrade was being blown up by 19 different countries, I was writing and uploading a diary. One day, a producer from German national TV phoned me. She'd been reading my online journal (*Diary of a Political Idiot*) and thought it might make a good film.

Unfortunately, since her country was so busy bombing mine, she couldn't give me any practical help. However, she thought that if my film somehow got made, she could promote and distribute it, and show it at film festivals.

Immediately, I said yes! What a great occasion to make a meaningful European art film, without those tiresome commercial restrictions, backers, producers, and other artistic brakes that every true cineaste fears!

First, I found a cameraman who had somehow survived Bosnia with his equipment intact. He was a Serbian CNN stringer, which was perfect since everyone in 1999 thought that wars could only be won by and/or through CNN.

Because everything around me was a "military secret" under the Milosevic regime, I had no "right" to shoot a film at all. So I declared my own life to be the intellectual property of the world-famous Belgrade cinema archive. Once the archivists had given me the all-important movie permit, the military

authority was even obliged to help me shoot (for example, while the river bridges on the Danube were being blown to pieces).

Soon a new, daily problem emerged: getting electrical power. NATO efficiently bombed the power plants on a regular basis, so we ran from one power-plant coverage area to another. Conveniently, the NATO bombing schedules were regularly published by CNN.

Local volunteer/citizen voltage hackers soon learned how to climb broken power poles and reconnect the wiring, and we learned how to follow them and plug in our equipment. This meant that my film's plot and scenery were strictly associated with available wattage.

Most of the film's extras were hobos, derelicts, and animals, because nobody else wanted to show up every day for a project that might well have no tomorrow.

After 19 days of hectic shooting, our German sponsor impatiently asked for a final edit, concerned that the war might end at any moment and we would lose our target audience on German TV. So we had to make do with the editing, too. A local Andy Warhol fan volunteered for the job. His film studio had been heavily damaged by a famous missile raid on the Serbian national TV building,



but he'd managed to turn some semi-functional machinery into a private studio of his own. The film's editing was patchy, but at least the price was right.

With a completed film, we now had the final hurdle: smuggling the product through the military and border customs into an enemy country.

Two blondes in miniskirts, with two underage kids, jumped into a car full of Walt Disney cartoons. They pretended to be heading to Budapest for a "visa arrangement." One of the Disney films was my diary film. The customs officers were too lazy to screen a whole bunch of kids' cartoons.

So my film and I ended up at the Venice film festival, together with Antonio Banderas, Melanie Griffith, Nicole Kidman, and Tom Cruise.

Eventually, my film, dubbed into German and titled *Jasmina's Diary*, was shown to 1.5 million TV-watching Germans. It still airs, every once in a while, in various corners of the world.

In 1999 *Granta* 67 published an excerpt of Tesanovic's *The Diary of a Political Idiot*. You can read it online at [granta.com/extracts/494](http://granta.com/extracts/494).

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**Jasmina Tesanovic's online journal, *Diary of a Political Idiot*, became the basis of an autobiographical documentary and a book, published by Cleis Press in 2000.**

Images from the film *Jasmina's Diary*