

'I Am From Titov Veles': Time, Decay, and Haunting History In Post-Yugoslavia Macedonia

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By **Aaron Wee**

When the grand monumental tales of history are set up and told, and re-told, sometimes the present cannot stand on its own. Veles, on and off again for millennia in various guises, wrestles with Titov Veles, a name the town adopted for little more than half a century. From that moment as a Yugoslavian city, Veles inherits its own cancer – an industrial behemoth of lead and steel where the past can still corrupt and hold on to the town.

Titov Veles is not a pretty town; Teona Strugar Mitevska, too, makes no attempt to hide it. *I Am From Titov Veles* (*Jas sum od Titov Veles*) lavishes the bleak austerity of a post-Yugoslavian moment in tender/macabre glances at a city in decline. The peeks of beauty we are allowed are fleeting and remember a different age, any other age than the communist one, or if that, subverted and twisted into ways unimaginable but a few decades ago. Veles' lead factory looms with appropriate menace, the largest of many reminders of a past that is still being resolved, and blamed for a modern cancerous plague, its original use forgotten.

Titov Veles is no "nostalgie"-film and more of an appraisal of the things lost to communism – the world did not wait for Macedonia or Yugoslavia, and now Veles seems stranded in time. Veles' blight, figurative within history or literal in its urban decay, is the central concern of the entire town and focused in the film upon three sisters. Veles' decline prompts talk of flight – Slavica (Ana Kostovska), the eldest dreams of an older suitor who provides material security; Sapho (Nikolina Kujaca) unironically desires the economic opportunities to be found in Greece; Afrodita (Labina Mitevska), rendered mute after the death of the father, finds escape through her own meditations and in her maternal desires.

The rootless Macedonian is the revolving characteristic of the film. Talk is of emigration and jobs that are difficult to come by. In the post-communist moment, it seems as though whatever future that could have been imagined had been appropriated by the clinging symbols of the past. Bitter, verging on the morose, Veles prompts the most foolhardy optimism to combat the bleakness of reality, a tactic that seemingly pays dividends when both Afrodita's sisters find implausible ways out of the city.

Which leaves Afrodita herself. Uncomfortable as she is with reality, Afrodita's thoughts are depicted in classically blurry dream sequences. With the departure of her sisters, Afrodita's grasp of reality becomes even more tenuous, her perceptions become less and less grounded. Director Mitevska joins in, increasingly building the narrative with greater subjectivity, questioning Afrodita's perceptions of the world with less cynicism than one would expect. (Unrelated but interesting: a meta-example of the director's sisterly love and attention to the character her sister is portraying)

While the film succeeds in carrying the emotional weight upon the shoulders of the uncertain Afrodita, it's easy to feel bogged down by the morass of the film's implications. With minor success, *Titov Veles* is the sort of film that would reward a prepared viewer and at least pander to the festival-goer. Its slow, deliberate pace enables Mitevska to unfold her distinctive visuals and experiment with a lethargic narrative.

Ultimately, however, with the slim exception of Labina Mitevska, the film's performances feel a little flat, a little too unforgiving, and just a little too stained with the taint of Veles. *Titov Veles* does not necessarily engender a viewer's interest aside from a morbid curiosity of the town's declining state. Nevertheless, a curious choice for a country's submission to the Academy Awards, banking perhaps on an arthouse sentiment.

Yet the film's assertion is that it *is* from Titov Veles, a town that accordingly no longer exists. Amended with an honorific to the Yugoslavian dictator, Veles, it seems, is not Veles without its Titoist past. Claiming that one is from Titov Veles is a poignant statement, not happily resolved by any cut-rate nostalgia but by a vicious reminder and recognition of the ways we find ourselves entrapped by our historical situations. Titov Veles was Veles during the communist era, but Veles will remain Titov Veles while the dominant concerns rest with how to resolve a history in a contemporary world. Unfortunately, the film does not succeed and a viewer can be left wondering just where that prognosis leaves a deeply cynical and dysfunctional society.



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