

OUR CITY (83m)

Director: Maria Tarantino

Image: Klaas Boelen

Sound: Origan Cannella, Bruno Schweisguth

Edit: Rudi Maerten, Menno Boerema

Producer: Maria Tarantino, Maarten Schmidt

Co-producer: Pieter van Huystee

Sound edit: Origan Cannella, Maxime Coton

Sound mix: Remi Gerard

Color grading: Michaël Cinquin

LOGLINE

Hallo, I'm Brussels. How is it going with me?

A kaleidoscopic portrait of Brussels through situations, people and places that bring to life this little-known but vivid city.

SYNOPSIS

This is Brussels, the capital of Europe, a city of concrete cages wrapped in glass, planned by businessmen and politicians, set in motion by construction workers, and animated by office people. But there, in the narrow spaces just beyond the reach of bureaucracy, lies the Brussels that still breathes. You can hear its multicultural heart beating and see the traces of all the other cities, the ones each person carries within him/herself. All of us together add up to create the complex body and dissonant identity of *Our City*.

BIO-FILMOGRAPHY

Maria Tarantino (born in Milan in 1972) studied philosophy in Scotland and Italy before settling down in Belgium, where she gradually moves from philosophy to journalism.

In Brussels she works for the press, radio and television for several years. It's her program for Flemish television about young documentary-makers from all over the world (***The World of Tarantino***) that inspires her to quit journalism for cinema. That's how she directs her first two documentary films, both of which are anchored to the world of prisons. The first, ***Inside Out (Dritto Rovescio)***, 2009, Canvas, selected by the London Independent Documentary Festival and broadcast by BBC), follows a group of prisoners in an Italian prison as they create a theatre performance inspired by the writings of Michel Foucault : « the theatre of the free word inside the theatre of power ». The second, ***Kubita (A game for many players)***, 2011) is a self-funded and self-shot film about torture in Burundi's prisons. The film uses the experience of "theatre and reconciliation" inside the prison of Mpimba in Bujumbura (initiated by theatre-maker Frederique Lecomte) to displace all levels of meaning and free the word of prisoners on the tabu-subject of torture.

Kubita toured around Burundi, it was shown at the festivals of Docville, Parnu and broadcast on TV5.

Maria Tarantino sets up the production house WILDUNDOMESTICATED in Brussels in 2009 and begins the long adventure of the feature-length documentary *Our City*, which will be completed five years later.

FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH MARIA TARANTINO ON OCTOBER 7TH 2014

The making of the film

Our City is a mosaic, a cubist portrait of the city, a kaleidoscope. I chose for it the form of collage because it's the best suited to expressing the diversity of the inhabitants of Brussels. You could say, to continue the pictorial metaphor, that the film uses "mixed techniques" to assemble very different situations that echo each other in different narrative veins, without having to use voice-over.

The result is a film of choices and risk-taking, stretched between the chords of intellect and sensitivity, which required years of reflection before and after the shooting of the film. I could call the choice of "pieces" "structuralist", probably because of my academic path, which incited me to think first about the "elements" or "atoms" of meaning that should make up the film and then find the best way to translate them into images.

For example, I knew I wanted to film representations of power like the decision-making process that makes up official Brussels. An EU summit had to be part of the film but should not take up too much place. I wanted to film youngsters and, through them, a possible future. I needed a school where we see how the teaching process trains youngsters but also deforms them. I wanted a bar, a wasteland, a squat, a worksite, an office, etc. And I also wanted people, immigrant workers, people who have no official papers and people who have them, an architect, a journalist, etc. For each idea, I checked out locations by filming them with the help of Klaas Boelen (who subsequently became the Director of Photography) and Maarten Schmidt (who subsequently became the producer of the film).

The team at work

We met during a hunger strike led by undocumented migrants, in which we were all deeply involved. Maarten and Klaas offered to help me with the film, which at the time was called *Au boulot: het is tijd om te dromen!* (To work: It's time to dream!). At the time, I had the idea of filming somewhat Dadaist interventions in the city in a documentary style. For example, an initiative of actor friends of mine

who stood in front of cars stopped at the traffic lights of the rue de la Loi during rush hour, wearing orange overalls and carrying big F1 flags. When the lights were about to change colour, they would wave the flags and encourage the drivers to rush "To work!"

This approach was mainly inspired by a Malaysian musical comedy, *Sell Out* by Joon Han, a parody of ultraliberal multinationals, full of crazy situations and cynical humour. I could imagine myself making a sort of documentary about a musical comedy, dancing the life of the city. I imagined a great collective choreography on the rooftops of the city, with all the different ethnic groups, each with their own dance, to a chameleon-like music that would metamorphose from one musical colour to another. But I realized that, as much as I appreciated cynical humour and musical comedy, that was not me and I could not have found the *film* in that style.

Ensued a tireless physical exploration of the city, armed with a ladder to observe urban textures (signs, walls, facades) or, with the complicity of the yardmen of construction sites, we reached the top of cement skeletons to discover the landscape of a changing city. Klaas jumped on workers' lifts as they changed the street lamps on summer nights, climbed trees in the company of pruners who cut branches in public parks. We were inspired by the exploits of Kalatozov in *I Am Cuba* without the means to achieve them ourselves, but it sometimes enabled us to transcend documentary reality.

Then there were the people. How to make a documentary film "with" and not "about" people? Taking on an approach like that of Rouch or Pasolini in the film on Africa, I thought we could have in the image a small avant-garde of people that would push the film forward. We filmed some conversations where I was in the image. We looked at them but were not convinced. I wanted to involve the "characters" further in the film and its construction, let them pass on the other side of the mirror, displace the mirror: show them images and film their reactions. There are elements of this that remain under the visible surface of the film: I approached the main people who make the story of the film by asking "what would you like to give to the film?".

The edit

Maarten introduced me to Johan van der Keuken's film, *Amsterdam Global Village*, which was a revelation for me, and to the producer of that film, Pieter van Huystee, who ended up becoming the co-producer of *Our City* and a precious advisor throughout the making of the film. Menno Boerema, who edited *The Long Holiday*, van der Keuken's last film, was the film's first editor. I retain from him a lesson about freedom and a demanding attitude toward the visual material. Klaas also participated to the edit. Throughout the shooting period, he made "models" which explored the aesthetics of the film and form it would take in the end. The editing process stretched over a long period of time, there was a considerable amount of filmed material, but I could count on the precious advice and help of Khristine Gillard, my second assistant director. As the balance of a non-narrative film is always more complex to find, we had to try, undo, redo differently, before we could reach the right music of image and sound. The right balance was eventually found in Brussels thanks to Rudi Maerten, the final editor of the film.

I often had to face the comment that the film I was trying to make was a film one makes when one is fifty and has a string of good films behind one's back, and not as a first feature-length, because there are ten films in this one and the project is risky. But I wanted this complexity and I wanted to find a cinematographic way to embody my entire reflexion. This film forced me to grow up fast but in doing so I never relinquished the principle of experimentation and risk-taking that I had set myself to support my "visions" and convey them to the spectator in a way that is both intelligible and sensitive.

Meeting Brussels

Our City is a very personal film, even if the "I" does not appear in it. I am more attached to Brussels than to my native village in Italy, which I left a long time ago, first to study philosophy in Scotland, and then at the University of Leuven in Flanders in 1995. At that time I did not speak French, and Brussels was the city I traveled to on Sundays. I arrived at the South station and was snapped up by the sight of blackened buildings with pigeons living on the top floors and large signs advertising cars exports to Africa, bars with old prostitutes working during the day. It felt like a city that had been bombed out. It was a wild city full of hybrid

places and spontaneous happenings. A city that did not try to be beautiful or fashionable.

Two years later, I decided to settle in Brussels. I dropped my doctorate and started work as a journalist. I went to the summits, to European Commission and NATO press briefings. It was impressive to see all these directives, sanctions, wars, emerge from meetings that took place behind closed doors. During this time, I was reporting on the various cultural communities in the city, and I met people who had been pushed here as a result of conflicts elsewhere – dissidents and political refugees from Franco’s Spain, from Pinochet’s Chile... It was in this breeding ground, combining the vision of large-scale events and their effect on individuals, that I honed my way of looking at things. The better I got to know each layer of the city, the more this point of view became that of a foreigner.

Over the years, Brussels has revealed itself to me as a city of weak subjectivity. The confrontation of the two linguistic powers creates there a space of liberty where all expressions become possible. It's in the absence of a univocal cultural reference that a true multiplicity of references can develop, often in chaotic and contradictory ways. It's a place where “roots” and “belonging” get questioned and possibly redefined through the encounters with different people who have made Brussels their home. In a city like this, one realizes that identity is a construction, necessary but fictional and this is the challenging landscape that *Our City* explores.

Places and people of the film

The construction of realities in this film has the unity of a totem made out of disparate pieces. It can have the head of a man, the body of an animal, an object for a hand, all stuck on top of each other and forming one unity of sense. It's as if I cut every character or situation in horizontal slices and then mixed all of them up.

Of rooftops and views from above

The glance of the Foreigner

I'm very fond of views from on high, when the ground becomes a white page on which people's movements are drawn. A little like the aerial views of fields in the photographs of Giacomelli. Or like Marie-Françoise Plissart's images of Brussels, which encouraged me to explore the rooftops of the city. From up there, the city seemed like a cloth, at times a place of golden dust, barely defined, and at other times slashed by the blue shadows of a winter sunrise. In the film, we are often on a rooftop. We step back, put things into perspective. We escape the density of close-up things filmed with a short focal length, we lose ourselves in our thoughts, we escape the flow of tragedies of daily life and, stepping back, we weigh the pros and cons and look at the world like an extra-terrestrial being who has just arrived. Like the workers who take flight and end up singing in their floating container.

The film adopts and constructs the point of view of the Foreigner, who is both caught up in the nuts and bolts of everyday life – finding work, obtaining papers – and yet far away in thoughts of an elsewhere s/he has left behind.

The dolphin

One day, a friend who saw the film told me that it made him feel like a dolphin in the city, plunging seamlessly from one scale of values or magnitudes to another. Klaas Boelen and I tried to dance with the city and its inhabitants. We sought fluidity in the camera movements, an impression of floating, of being suspended and of being able to cross spaces.

The film's recipes

Technically, we sometimes had to invent our own solutions. The images taken from the roof of the WTC at the beginning of the film, for example, were shot with a small crane lent to us by a friend, that we were able to set up with the connivance of the watchman who lives inside this enormous block of offices. With this same crane, we were able to film the sequence in the city administrative offices, in which the camera rises like steam above the irreconcilable borders

between bureaucracy and humankind. The sequence of the container that takes flight above the Schuman worksite was a gift from the workers, one summer evening after working hours, to us who had been haunting their worksite for three years, at all hours of the day and night.

There are more examples of this way of working, like the horizontal movements of the film, which had to be smooth even without rails, travelling on a dolly. In the Polish Ball, we move from a busy kitchen where a team of chefs is dishing out the food, to the reception room where the waiters serve people at the tables and then back to the narrow corridor where the dirty plates and cutlery are arranged before washing. Klaas had the camera fixed on a metal wheel which he "drove" freely around the room and which allowed him to squeeze between the working waiters along the narrow corridor that connected the posh reception room to the kitchen. In the Iranian celebration of the New Year, in order to film the young boy jumping over the ritual fires from far away, Klaas had to sit on the roof of my car as best as he could, as I drove slowly across the space.

The worksite of place Schuman

I am fascinated by worksites. Not so much for the buildings that grow out of them but for the wastelands formed by the brutal disappearance of the past, now deemed useless, and for the traces that remain, an intimacy exposed to all and sundry: a half-crumbled wall showing someone's kitchen wallpaper, someone else's bathroom tiles. It gives me visions. Sometimes the old cement or reinforced concrete pillars look like Roman columns and the fragments of buildings become archaeological blocks.

During my explorations in the city, I had come across a wasteland covered by a thick mantle of trees and bushes that you find around lakes. In fact, the promoters had discovered important water infiltrations from the nearby canal into the piece of land and all construction plans had been postponed indefinitely. Now, this strange "jungle" ran across a white blind wall of a long building which houses... the archives of the city! Isn't that a piece of poetry? On one side the archives, all the memory of the city, on the other the memory of the land, a living archive of the city, the bio-diversity of the wasteland as a mirror of the folders stacked up inside the building...

So I travelled the city with this mindset and finally chose the specific worksite of Place Schuman where, since 2009, the new headquarters of the European Council is being built. Klaas Boelen and I filmed this worksite for three years. It became an obsession. The worksite was like a metaphor of myself at that time and simultaneously a metaphor of our living together in the city. Belgians, Turks and Bulgarians would pour enormous slabs of concrete by day, while the Portuguese illuminated the night with spectacular welding around gigantic metal beams.

It was a physical confrontation with a multifaceted and dangerous place, which was constantly changing face in an intensity of work the likes of which I had never seen before. Before, I had imagined a sequence wherein the Bulgarian would sing in Bulgarian, the Pole in Polish, etc. But in these incredibly difficult working conditions, you can't just ask these men who eat dust all day long in an infernal racket, to please sing a little song!

You could not talk much to the workers inside the building site: they had to work fast, often in dangerous situations and the noise was often unbearable. We managed to get to know well some of them, some Turkish workers living in Brussels and a team of workers from Portugal.

The Portuguese had been all over Europe, from Norway to the Netherlands. Sons of very poor farmers, they were proud that through their work in exile – a true pact with the Devil – they would be able to buy a house for their children back in their homeland. In the end, all I kept of their tale was their expressions during their breaks.

Encounters such as these had a snowball effect and led us to film the traditional marriage of the friend of a Turkish worker we had met on the worksite.

The Greek café

The Greek café Kozani is located in a neighbourhood which used to be mostly Greek about 30 years ago. In the same row of houses there is still a Greek garage and a Greek restaurant. Kozani is a place where men come to spend time after work, or where pensioners linger the entire day, to get away from their wives. It's

one of these bars which are always filled with smoke and where there's always a naive fresco depicting a corner of Greece, or Spain, or Italy – the old guard of cafes from the times of those immigrations.

It's a microcosm where everyone knows each other since time immemorial and where jokes fly from one corner of the room to the other, like in the comedies of the 50s. I wanted to film the café to get this special atmosphere. This was also the time of the Greek crisis in all media and in the European summits we were filming. It irritated me to always hear stories about Greece and Greek people without even hearing Greek people themselves. That's why we decided to spend an afternoon at Kozani : to hear what Greek people had to say. It was our way to add a counterpoint. We brought Harry (short for Orestis) with us, a Greek student who would help us translate what was being said. People reacted to our presence, of course. I explained to them why we were there and everyone started giving their opinion about Europe. At a certain moment, an old man came toward me to talk and as soon as he heard I was Italian, he began a tirade against those Italians who had destroyed the Greek empire. I made a sign to Klaas to come and film. The man extracted from a pocket of his jacket a neatly folded page he had ripped from an old history book. It was a man of the Greek empire, at the time when Greece included a large part of Italy. But I realized that the effort these men made to speak to me in French made their exchanges less personal. That's why I asked the translator to mix with people, to talk and listen as we do in a café. Harry is the young man at the bar who talks to the father whose daughter calls to say she got her diploma. That man surely would not have talked to me in the intimate way he does to Harry.

Matthieu Ha – The accordionist

Over the five long years of gestation, the magical elixir of Matthieu Ha's music enabled me to keep alive the desire, the deep intuition of the film. I had been familiar with his music for a long time. Matthieu is part of the Brussels underground scene. He is out in the field, he searches, he invents. As I listened to one of his concerts on a barge on the canal of Brussels, I thought to myself that these pieces sung in an imaginary language, woven into versions that were sometimes fast and joyful, sometimes more melancholic, and this way of constructing his musical identity, corresponded perfectly to the type of film I had in mind, a film whose rhythm, evolution, and blossoming of colours and

situations prevailed over a linear narrative. Mine was to be a film of associations, of metaphors that could trigger the spectator's imagination like a piece of music.

I approached Matthieu and asked him to become the voice of the city that sings. I didn't want him to write specifically for the film. I wanted to film his daily life and call forth the music from it. We followed Matthieu to his regular haunts, to the African bar MK, where he plays in the back yard with his friend the singer Rodgens Botela, then to his singing tree, a secret place he wanted to share with us and which I placed at the end of the film.

It is Matthieu's music that opens the curtain on *Our City*. It is the first "spoken" sequence of the film, and sets the language for the rest of the film. It is Matthieu's sound that attracts the children to the city (and us along with them – their city becomes ours), and to the tree where, lifting their gazes, they manage to see him.

The kids : Faissal, Leandro, David, Michel, Said, Ayub

"Ayub: you know, maybe when we grow up, we could go to the country where each of us is from..."

I had noticed that some interesting things went on in parks across the city. One day we filmed a group of Roma kids who played acrobatic tricks which reminded one of folkloric dances from the Balkans. Another time I met the very young Hassan, who crossed a good portion of the city all alone to come and play football with other children. His parents had come to Brussels from Pakistan but he dreamt of emigrating to London to play in a big stadium like Wembley. This moment of childhood, between 10 and 13 years, was very interesting to me. It's the age at which kids invest the city with their games with more freedom than adolescents or adults because there is still magic in their way of understanding the world.

The kids we see in the film met us in the Duden park, in winter, while we were filming parakeets, these exotic green-yellow birds which build huge nest in city parks. The kids were sliding in the snow using trash bags and a skateboard without wheels. Klaas Boelen and Olivier Dodier (who was taking sound that day) began filming as they were sliding on a different bag, behind the kids. To glue the camera to the movement of the kids in the snow, this full immersion with

action – be it running or playing hide & seek – appeared to us a good way to bring the viewers into the inner workings entrails of the film.

These three kids introduced us to their friends. They were from Portugal, Morocco and Georgia. They had arrived to Brussels at different ages and had to learn French to be able to go to school. Coming from families who worked very hard and expected a lot from them, they had a big weight on their shoulders. I went to see them from time to time, but the time of the film was not their time: they were growing up fast and there were entire months when they were nowhere to be found. Finally we agreed to spend a whole evening together to be able to film in a wasteland and then in a fun fair.

I wanted the film to be like a child, to traverse the city while inventing games that could transform reality. That's why I brought in the game of cricket at the beginning of the film, which is played by Indian engineers who worked for the Belgian telecom. I could not get the permission to film them at work but I could show a moment of play among them, which was also a trace of the British colonisation. The short scene, without words, already said a lot about questions of identity, which are far from being linear.

Kourosch Garegani, poet and taxi driver

"You never feel alone here. (...) It's a city full of energy (...) They are turning the city into an office (...) but this vision has been forced upon us, it conditions us."

(Kourosch, taxi driver)

Everyone knows that the ranks of taxi drivers include film experts, revolutionaries, adventurers. The taxi drivers serving the Central Station in Brussels are almost all Iranians. I imagined finding a driver who would drive us through Brussels describing to us his native town in Iran. I imagined – thanks to imagery acquired here and there of an Iran that cultivates the art of the word as it never is in the West – a thickly woven prose unfolding over images that did not correspond to it. I wanted to create a feeling of disorientation and suggest that the images and memories in the heads of people from elsewhere float around the things of the city here. One day I turned up at the Central Station and asked the drivers if they knew a "taxi driver poet". They did. Kourosch.

The first time, we drove around in his car, along with a translator (so that Koresh could express himself freely in Farsi). I wanted him to take us to "his" places, get him to talk about "his" city. This conversation was instantly moving to me (and I kept it in the film) because it was as if the guy had read my script, as if he already knew the heart of my work, before I had even spoken to him about it. I thought to myself that this "found object", so to speak, was sacrosanct and that he would become the narrator of the film. Next, we became friends and, in this great intimate complicity, I was not at the same time able to construct his character for him to become truly, in the eyes of all, the narrator. He nevertheless held a special status in the film: it is he who has the task of first naming and describing Brussels, he who extracts the journalist from his dry pose, as if he was an integral member of the team, he who recites a poem in the corridors of the European Parliament.

That evening, he had invited us to a celebration of the Iranian New Year (Nowrooz) that took place at the European Parliament at the time when the same Parliament voted sanctions against Iran... Kourosh imagined a meeting that could have taken place two centuries earlier: an exchange of enlightened opinions during which people could have taken the word. He had prepared a long poem about freedom that he wanted to read out. Instead we had to go through a string of empty speeches by politicians, followed by a reception and some notes of folklore. Kourosh was appalled. As if executing a ritual of exorcism, he recited his poem of resistance in the corridors of an absurd power.

The young Belgians

"The teacher : - What is a Belgian ?

The student : - A Belgian, already, is white, he does not have a special accent, he does not have the same surname as us."

In my structuralist dream, I needed children and I also needed young people who will be the adults of tomorrow. I could not get the permission to film inside international schools nor to find a teacher who could support my project. With one exception: a religion teacher in a professional school in Molenbeek, David Dhont, had seen one of my films and had invited me to show it in his school. I

found his teaching method very interesting and I proposed to him to film conversations about the city with his students. It became an odyssey. It took one year to get the permission to film. And this was nothing compared with the mistrust of students, who considered us as enemies. We were “television” or, worse still, those who trafficked images on the net to make fun of people. We did not have the same references and it made me feel like I was building a bridge on an abyss of miscomprehension, a fragile bridge that could crumble at any moment.

We had managed to film some students in one class during some weeks. We were able to speak about their impressions of the city. But then the exchange stopped because parents had home had disagreed with the project. We had to begin from scratch with another class.

Nevertheless, what remains of the students in the film has its place fully because the suffering and the abyss, this difficulty to talk and to talk together, are at the heart of this fictional identity I try to track down.

Zeinabu Diori, jewellery designer

"Today I'm here, but I have other constraints that have nothing to do with religion, but which have to do with a small piece of paper"

(Zeinabu Diori, jewellery designer)

I met Zeinabu at a dinner at a Senegalese friend's house. We were several women around the table, many were from Africa and their conversations reflected the diversity of a continent we often see as one monolithic block. Those women exchanged incredible anecdotes – like the one about the toad that African women inserted into their vagina as a natural “condom” – before starting a competition on who could shake each buttock separately.

It was not easy to convince Zeinabu to take part in the film. She had really lived through situations and had things to say; what I asked her was a lot. When I first met her, she did not have official papers. When she talks to us so intensely about stones and their qualities, collecting them by type, I have the impression that she

is talking to us about people, about cultures and that her small mounds of stones on a white cloth form a cartography of the world.

With Zeinabu, as with Kourosh and with the teacher at the vocational school in Molenbeek, with all those who gave me the opportunity to dig deeper, I wanted to reach a stage where there was a meeting between the film and the people, that's to say, to find with them their place in the film, have them sketch it for themselves and seize it. Zeinabu spoke to me of her childhood, of playing hide and seek in the river of her village, of the bricks she carried in buckets on her head to build roads (yes, just like the businessman at the formal dinner describes the women in India). According to her, it was a job that paid really well. It was based on her stories that I imagined transposing Zeinabu's Nigerian "desert home" into this elsewhere in Brussels. In Nigeria, the sand is red, but those seeing the scene on the hills of sand in Brussels can imagine for an instant that it is truly a desert: a metaphor of a stranger's need to build, deep down inside them, a familiarity with the place in which they find themselves.

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