



64th Internationale
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Berlin
Panorama

LAST HIJACK

A FILM BY FEMKE WOLTING AND TOMMY PALLOTTA



SUBMARINE PRESENTS

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Netherlands / Ireland / Germany / Belgium - 2014 - 83 min - 16:9 - 5.1



SYNOPSIS

LAST HIJACK is a true tale of survival in Somalia told from the pirate's perspective. Combining animation with documentary storytelling, the film takes an innovative hybrid approach to explore how one Somali pirate - Mohamed - came to live such a brutal and dangerous existence. Animated re-enactments exploring Mohamed's memories, dreams and fears from his point of view are juxtaposed with raw footage from his everyday life in an original non-fiction narrative

Somalia is the worldwide capital of piracy, and Mohamed is one of Somalia's most experienced pirates. But in his homeland, a failed state, Mohamed is just another middle-aged man trying to make ends meet. Far removed from the glamour and adventure of the pirates of books and movies, Somali pirates face increasing scrutiny and stigmatization both at home and abroad. Now Mohamed is engaged and both his parents and his in-laws pressure him to change his ways before the big wedding day. Mohamed senses that the golden age of piracy may be coming to an end, and with pressure mounting to provide for his loved ones, he must decide whether to risk everything for one last hijack.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTORS TOMMY PALLOTTA & FEMKE WOLTING

What sparked your interest in the issue of piracy in Somalia, and how did you decide to develop a feature film on this subject?

We were watching news reports and the image of these tiny boats versus the huge oil tankers fascinated us. We wondered what drove these men to take such enormous risks. As we researched further and found out about all the underlying aspects of piracy, the waste dumping in the waters around Somalia and the broader impact of piracy on Somalian society we got even more interested. Most media stories and news stories reported on Western ships being hijacked and the experiences of the passengers. That made us curious to know more about the pirates themselves. When we started to look into it, we quickly became fascinated by how the pirates were perceived within their own communities. Until recently they were seen as heroes, as the little guys who fought the big Western ships. And many people also profited from their actions, whether directly or indirectly. But then things began to change. A whole generation of young men disappeared, were thrown in jail or simply vanished at sea. That had an enormous impact on the people who were left behind, the families and the women. People in Somalia turned their backs on the pirates. This tension interested us, and made us to decide to make a film from the perspective of the pirates and their families.

Was it clear from the start that this film would be something else than a 'classic' documentary?

We clicked with the subject because we immediately thought it would be ideal to combine animation and documentary footage. We didn't want to make an observational documentary. Because the hijacks were something you could never be part of. Once we thought of the combination opened up so many possibilities. Through the animation we could view the world through the eyes of the pirates. We could visualize their subjective reality, their dreams, from their memories of the civil war to the hijacks they had undertaken.





Documentary, fiction, animation and interactive media have all been combined frequently throughout both of your filmmaking careers. What inspires this openness to hybrid forms? Do you think these kinds of projects will take on a larger importance in the industry in future years?

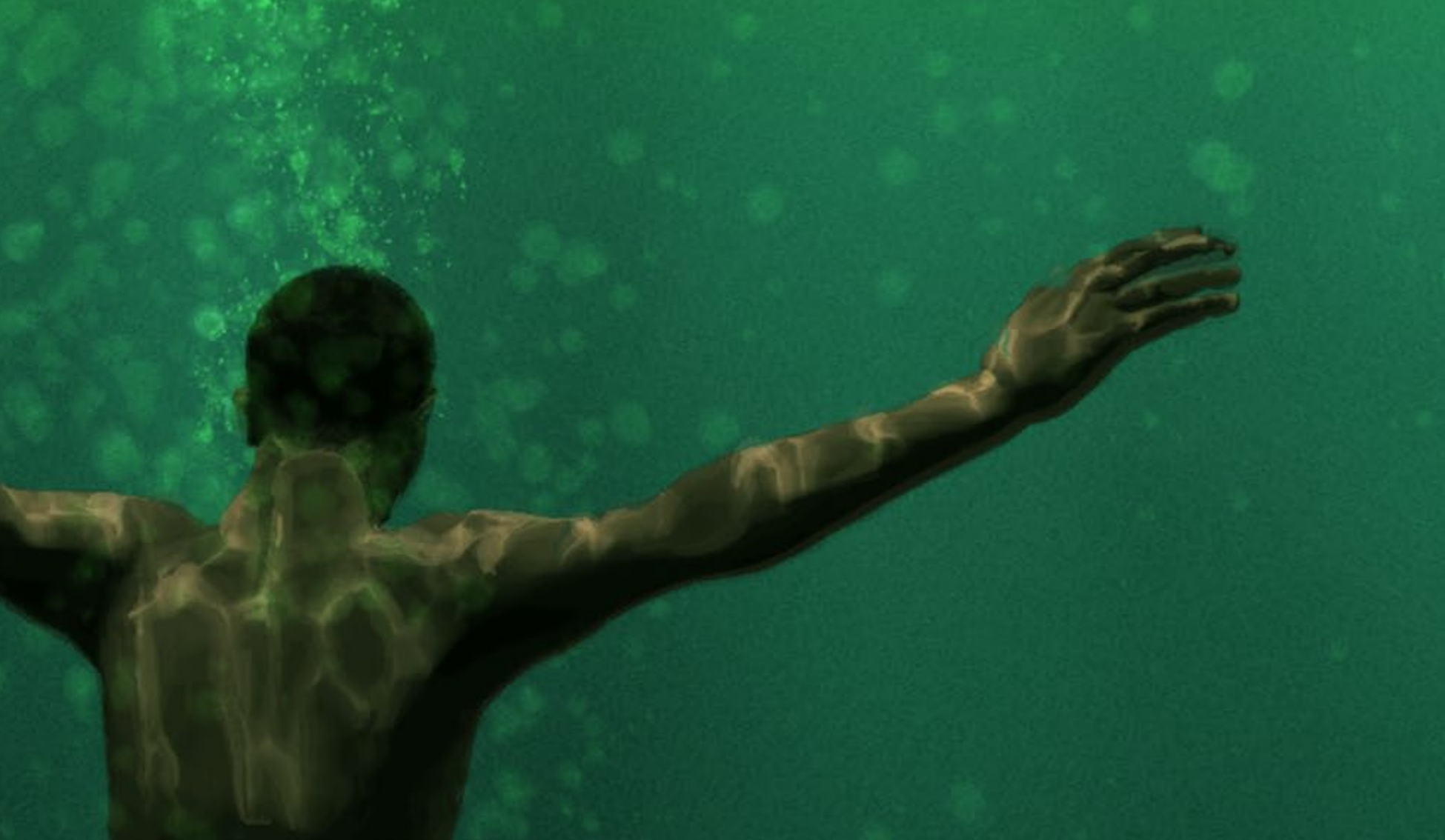
We are interested in hybrid forms because they offer so many more possibilities in terms of storytelling. In terms of non-fiction, they challenge the idea of objective reality that a documentary should capture. So LAST HIJACK is a hybrid incorporating live action and animation, but also feature film and documentary. Feature films and documentaries have been made for more than a century, and there are still all these conventions of genres and specific ways to tell a story. We are excited about these new hybrid forms because you can experiment and search for new forms of storytelling that don't yet have rules. More and more feature films combine live action, effects and animation to create new worlds, and now that is possible in documentaries too.

Tell us about your experience working on similarly “non-traditional projects” with directors such as Richard Linklater (WAKING LIFE, A SCANNER DARKLY) and Peter Greenaway (REMBRANDT’S J’ACCUSE).

Currently we are shooting a feature film by Peter Greenaway in Mexico, called Eisenstein in Guanajuato. It's a love story about the famous Russian filmmaker Eisenstein, and how he felt in love for the first time when he was making a film in Mexico. It's a feature film but Greenaway mixes archive footage from Eisenstein and his films in the fictional narrative. Also we just started working on a new film for a Hollywood studio, a feature film that is a hybrid as well, half live action and half animated.

Somali pirates have lately been represented in several documentary and fiction films (CAPTAIN PHILLIPS, A HIJACKING, STOLEN SEAS, FISHING WITHOUT NETS). What do you think has inspired this widespread interest? Do you have an opinion on the films made as a result, and how is your film different?

Pirates are such an iconic image, something we imagine from old stories and movies, but they still exist in our modern globalized world. I think that's why it's a fascinating phenomenon for filmmakers, both for feature film directors as well as documentary filmmakers. We enjoyed films like Captain Phillips as a roller-coaster thriller but these films are made from a purely Western point of view. Last Hijack is the only film that is made from the perspective of the pirates, and actually shot in Somalia. Somalia is one of the most dangerous countries in the world, that's why hardly anybody actually goes there. All the films mentioned were made elsewhere, in Kenya for example, so they can never be truly representative of the Somali perspective.



What was the artistic process for creating the animated sequences? Were there any specific inspirations for the style of the animation?

It was different for every sequence; sometimes it would be a recreation of a memory, sometimes a dream. The challenge of the film was finding the balance between animation and documentary footage finding a way to go in and out without breaking the viewer's experience. We storyboarded probably about three times as many sequences as we used and it was really a process of trial and error. We would experiment with a storyboard sequence, placing it next to or in between our documentary footage. Then we had to be critical and ask why it was there and how it changed the context of the footage around it. The more subjective and fantastic pieces were, of course, more fun. The inspiration for the style of the animation really came from Hisko who did all the paintings. We had been looking at more traditional designers but the color palettes never seemed right for what we wanted. Animation is traditionally for children and the colors usually reflect that aesthetic. Hisko's paintings brought a more sophisticated color palette and the human touch of the brush on the canvas endowed it with a warmth and an organic feel that we really thought was right for this project.

How did you decide which sequences would be animated and which would use the documentary footage?

We made a distinction between the documentary footage that dealt with Mohamed's present day life, trying to combine being a pirate with starting a family, and the animated sequences. The goal of the animation was to get inside the head of our main character Mohamed, and to show his subjective reality. We knew that the civil war had made a large impact on his life. And in the animation we could flashback to the events that had formed him, such as the day the war started. We could also show his dreams and memories; from his first hijacks, to visualizing his fears about getting married.

Why did you come to focus the film on one pirate - Mohamed - and decide to center the film around his story?

We initially had the idea to tell the story around two pirates, Mohamed and a younger pirate. But the family life of Mohamed was so interesting and gave such a unique insight into piracy in Somali society, that we decided to centre the film around him and his family. For us, it made the subject more universal, because the film is at its heart a family drama. The father and mother want to save their son, who chose to follow a criminal path. The son tries to change his lifestyle but finds it very hard to go back to a normal domestic existence after living the high life of crime for so long.



Did Mohamed open up to the project easily, or was it a process to insure his full participation as well of that of his entourage and family?

It took a long time before we found Mohamed; we researched for about 18 months. We had interviewed and met many pirates, first in Kenya, then in Somalia. Some pirates were not really pirates - there have been a number of reports in the western media about pirates that were interviewed by major news stations, who weren't actually real pirates, just poor men trying to make a living by pretending for the Western media. Many of the real pirates were afraid of exposing themselves to the media because they eventually hoped to leave Somalia in the future. When we found Mohamed, he was very open because he knew for sure that he never wanted to leave Somalia. He could speak freely without worrying too much about being arrested. We knew he was our main character when we spoke with his parents and discovered that he was planning to get married. His parents were very happy that Mohamed participated in the film. They saw it as a way to take him away from piracy, and that was also part of their motivation for getting involved.

Has Mohamed seen the film, and if so what was his reaction?

The finished film will just be ready in time for the Berlinale launch. But as we speak we are working on setting up a screening in Somalia for Mohamed and his family.

Is his career as a pirate completely finished?

We hear from him regularly, and after he lost his wife and his money, he volunteered for a while as guard for the Somali regional government of Puntland. Later we heard that his wife Muna was pregnant and that she and Mohamed were trying to work things out. But most recently we know he went to the south coast of Somalia, to look for some action...





ABOUT THE DIRECTORS

Tommy Pallotta & Femke Wolting

The filmmaking team of Tommy Pallotta and Femke Wolting is a meeting of true industry pioneers who push the boundaries of storytelling. Tommy first connected Richard Linklater with animation when he produced the award-winning feature film *Waking Life*. He followed up with Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly*, starring Keanu Reeves and Robert Downey Jr. He then directed the Emmy nominated *Collapsus*. Femke Wolting co-founded *Submarine*, a multiple award-winning production company. She produced numerous projects such as Peter Greenaway's feature *Rembrandt's J'Accuse*, groundbreaking documentaries like *My Second Life*, and the internationally acclaimed *Meet the Fokkens* about elder twin prostitutes. Femke has also directed many documentaries, such as *Sneakers* - about the rise and rise of the sports shoe - and *Viktor & Rolf: "Because We Are Worth It"* - which followed a year in the lives of avant-garde fashion designers Viktor & Rolf. Currently, Femke is producing Peter Greenaway's next film, *Eisenstein in Guanajuato*.

PRODUCED WITH THE SUPPORT OF

THE MEDIA PROGRAMME OF THE EUROPEAN UNION
NETHERLANDS FILM FUND
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THE DUTCH MEDIA FUND
THE FLANDERS AUDIOVISUAL FUND

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