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Between Subversion and Critique

New Yugoslav Film

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P*roblems with Naming: From New Yugoslav Film to Black Wave*

Reflection on the history of Yugoslav film immediately takes us to the golden age of “New Yugoslav Film” between 1963 and 1973. Isolating this fascinating sequence from other periods does not entail that there was no Yugoslav film before 1963. However, the period introduced innovations both in terms of aesthetics and political commitment of the film-works, which also justifies the naming of the sequence as a central event in Yugoslav cinematic history. What needs to be added is that the seemingly unified film movement rather consisted of heterogeneous authors such as Dušan Makavejev, Aleksandar Petrović, Želimir Žilnik, Krsto Papić, Živojin Pavlović, Karpo Godina, Kokan Rakonjac and others. These filmmakers were active in a period when the heroic time of reconstruction and founding of a major cultural infrastructure (particularly cinema clubs and film studios) was already over. This historical period put a new question on the agenda, namely that of how the Yugoslav and socialist project in and beyond cinema should be continued. Arguably, this became an existential task for the new generation of authors who each in their own way attempted to invent a path to move on, whether through a clear rupture, critical continuation or a subversion of their predecessors, thus establishing a dialogue with other filmmakers across Europe.

Though many of these directors had been awarded on international film festivals by 1969, New Yugoslav Film was more than just ‘auteur cinema’. It was not only their artistic work that made these filmmakers ‘immortal’. One could claim controversially that their ‘eternal fame’ should be credited to those who were the very targets of the deepest criticism in those films: the official *League of Communists*. If by 1969 many Yugoslav filmmakers were known internationally, what really catapulted them into the spotlight and soon caused

repressive countermeasures was the publication of an article that signaled a radical shift in the domestic cultural policy. Vladimir Jovićić, a Party intellectual, published the piece in the journal *Borba* in August of 1969. In it, he reinstates the utmost importance of film for Yugoslavia's future. According to Jovićić film has a central place among the arts, and as a privileged guardian of cultural memory should help constructing it. He notes that if film is assigned such a strategic historical task, one should be weary of tendencies within contemporary Yugoslav cinema of then – it is his article that coined the pejorative term 'Black Wave'. According to regime critics that proliferated afterwards, these films shared one feature, that is the portrayal of Yugoslav society as 'one big toilet' which as such distorted the socialist reality. Two things became clear during that historic juncture: firstly Yugoslav film became highly politicized. Secondly, the socialist authority did not only target filmmakers from the Black Wave but likewise further representatives of the craft, which in early 1970s resulted in arrests of filmmakers and the banning of their films.[1]

Also, one should not forget that filmmakers were not passively taking on the role of dissident victims, but fought against their discrediting through the authorities in their own medium. Many of them ironically or seriously re-appropriated the term 'black' into their filmic practice; let us mention two important examples. Perhaps the most famous short film from Želimir Žilnik was made in 1971, which he symptomatically named *Crni film* (*Black Film*). In this film Žilnik takes a group of homeless people to stay at his home and attempts to resolve their situation. In what later became known as his famous doc-drama approach, Žilnik puts different political authorities on trial by asking them two simple questions. How come in the socialist country, the country of working people, we can still have homeless (and unemployed) people? And what is to be done with this? Besides pointing to one of the failures of socialist modernization, the piece is made further convincing due to its dark ending: Žilnik kicks the homeless out of his home, and by way of this gesture, self-critically, does not exempt filmmakers from the trial. The real quality, the 'black' aspect of the filmic procedure concludes that art itself cannot transform the world. Another less famous short film that deals with 'blackness' was made in 1969 by Krsto Papić. His film *Čvor* (*The Hub*) takes us on a fascinating journey at a newly modernized train station, one of the largest European rail junctions at the time. The camera follows and records the words of the director of the train station, who proudly pronounces all achievements in Vinkovci. At the same time he demands from Papić and his film crew not to make films that only show the negative sides of socialism. His words and images are copy-pastes of the official line on the Black Wave, and within the film, they stand in opposition to the images of the rural poor and seasonal workers who use the same station, but as their shelter. Papić does not simply satirize the words of the official, but rather shows the dialectical movement of socialist modernization. Parallel to an improvement of living standards and material progress there were regional differences and growing unemployment that later

forced many to migrate as *Gastarbeiter*.

Formation of New Yugoslav Film, or Tracing Back the 'Black' Frames

New Yugoslav Film did not fall from the sky, but had instead developed from the first phase of Yugoslav cinematography that emerged from the ruins of the Second World War. This period is usually considered to be a sequence of relatively unsuccessful attempts to overcome low professional standards. Aesthetically, it is marked as the period of socialist realism which brought about huge numbers of films made on the topic of the People's Liberation Struggle. However, the history of Yugoslav film is somewhat different from what it is generally remembered for and it can certainly not be read as a discontinuous series of exclusive film waves. If it is true that the decade from the early 60s to the early 70s is the most productive and recognized period in the history of Yugoslav cinema, we should recover some early moments – filmic roots that can be traced back to the 1950s, namely partisan films from the first phase of Yugoslav cinematography. Already in 1953 war veteran Radoš Novaković filmed *Daleko je sunce* (*Far Away is the Sun*), a film adaptation of a novel written by another partisan veteran Dobrica Ćosić, which can be understood as the archetype of the 'Black Wave' movies that were engaged in a creative and critical deconstruction of mythological narratives about the People's Liberation Struggle. Radoš Novaković dealt with the psychological dimensions of the Second World War in his later film *Vjetar je stao pred zoru vjetar* (*The Wind Had Stopped Before the Dawn*, 1959) which also reveals existential dilemmas and opens up ethical issues of the political struggle. In this sense it is also important to mention František Čap's *Trenutki odločitve* (*Moments of Decision*, 1955) or Jane Kavčič's war drama *Akcija* (*Operation*, 1960), films that addressed the partisan cause in more ambivalent terms, opening the question of local collaboration in 'conciliatory' tones. These films already practiced a high degree of dialectics in the domain of class differences and political and ideological conflicts. There nevertheless are two major deficiencies of the beginnings of Yugoslav cinematography once we compare them to the new Yugoslav film in 1960s. Firstly, the lack of more aesthetic and experimental approaches, and secondly, the relative absence of contemporary themes.

But even in the late 1950s, critical films with highly contemporary topics appeared. It was in 1959 that Veljko Bulajić arguably made his best film – *Vlak bez voznog reda* (*Train without a Timetable*) -, where he dealt with the issue of the post-war colonialism of land and the lives of poor peasants. Both aesthetics and subject were deeply informed by the poetics of Italian neorealism. The so-called mosaic dramaturgy in the treatment of the problems of the rural population, as well as the celebration of the people's spirit that one can notice in Giuseppe De Santis' *La Stada Lunga Un Ano*/*Cesta duga godinu dana* (*The Year Long Road*, 1958), had a huge impact on Veljko Bulajić. In the same year

that *Vlak bez voznog reda* came out, Branko Bauer directed *Tri Ane* (*Three Girls Named Anna*, 1959), a naturalistic film with a gritty atmosphere and harsh characters. *Tri Ane* can be compared to *Umberto D.* (*Umberto D.*, 1952) by Vittorio De Sica or Michelangelo Antonioni's *Il Grido* (*The Cry*, 1957) and is certainly one of the biggest Yugoslav film achievements from the 1950s.

A major breakthrough in terms of aesthetic and thematic sensibility took place in 1961 with a series of movies that deal with the topics of unfulfilled love and suffering. The film *Dvoje* (*And Love Has Banished*) by Aleksandar Pavlović unfolds like an existentialist dilemma of a couple becoming a love triangle that is often compared to Godard's work, though one can also notice the strong influence of Eric Rohmer's theoretical work and his early films like *Berenice* (1954) or *La Sonate à Kreutzer* (1956). Two other Slovenian directors, Boštjan Hladnik who directed *Ples v dežju* (*Dancing in the Rain*) and Mirko Grobler who filmed *Nočni izlet*, were strongly influenced by Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960). Nevertheless, the movie which most powerfully foreshadowed the coming of the 'Black Wave' was again connected to the name Veljko Bulajić and his *Uzavreli grad* (*The Boom Town*). It is in this film that the issue of the rapid industrialization of Yugoslavia is portrayed through a gallery of different shady characters from the 'black zones' of society, such as criminals, prostitutes and other dodgy figures. This later becomes, in style and topic, one of the recurring 'black' elements, the official stamp of New Yugoslav Film.

One could extend the list of the prehistory to the short and amateur films that dealt with contemporary and critical topics yet earlier, but for the retracing of the new Yugoslav Wave another aspect is far more critical. From the late 1950s to the early 1970s an extremely creative period for arts unfolded in Yugoslavia, which was primarily a consequence of the good functioning of the institutional framework. The general wave of modernism and avant-gardism happened in different arts, from theater, literature, visual arts to music and performance. At the time, *Danas*, a new magazine for culture was launched in Belgrade along with *Perspektive* in Ljubljana (which, among other things, addressed films). One should also stress the role of cinema clubs, where several filmmakers actually started their careers as amateurs. They gathered around such clubs in Belgrade, Zagreb, Split and later on in Novi Sad, Sarajevo and Ljubljana. These were first of all places where people got together to watch movies, but also to discuss cinema and exchange ideas. There, some of them were first introduced to the work of Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Dziga Vertov, Aleksander Dovženko, Robert Wiene, Luis Buñuel, Rene Clair or Jean Cocteau. Cinema clubs were social spaces where independent cultural production was taking shape, with some exciting works transcending amateur production frames. Amateur film festivals were organized and generally funding was spent on the organization of cultural events. Also, young filmmaking amateurs were given small budgets that enabled critical research and film production. They would get technical equipment (mainly cameras) in order to film – an approach which actually adhered to the spirit of the then official cultural policy running under

the slogan “technique to the people”. Film amateurs received public assistance and finances, and directors often worked with 8mm and 16mm film tape. Already in 1955 Dušan Makavejev filmed *Pečat*, Kokan Rakonjac directed *Bela Maramica* and Dragoljub Ivkov made *Volite se ljudi*.[2]

It is difficult to ascribe the historical formation of New Yugoslav Film to one cause, or psychologically speaking, to the geniality of filmmakers. Instead we encounter a set of interdependent reasons, from institutions to film intellectual history and the contours of Yugoslavia in the 60s. The year 1962 is most often seen as the real beginning of New Yugoslav Film. For example, three directors from the cinema club Belgrade – Živojin Pavlović, Marko Babac, and Kokan Rakonjac – decided to put their films together in an omnibus entitled *Kapi, vode, ratnici*. But the year 1963 could also be considered a beginning, mainly because of the (anti-)Genre Film Festival *GEEF* organized in Zagreb.[3] That was the first official meeting of cinema amateurs from all across Yugoslavia. Also, it was the year when Aleksandar Pavlović filmed *Dani*, and the year when the directors of the *Kapi, vode, ratnici* omnibus made another omnibus, *Grad*. This time the omnibus made very black headlines; it remained one of the very few productions in Yugoslavia to be prosecuted and then officially banned with a verdict that all film copies be destroyed. The key question here is why the film was banned, since the intention of the film was not to provoke, criticize, or subvert. *Grad* is a psychological drama which tells the story of the estrangement of the modern socialist man and openly shows a different attitude towards reality (though without an explicit intention to rebuke it). We take 1963 as the year which marked the transition of film amateurs to professionals, and that in which many of them received further support for their debut features. It was in the period of the next 10 years that many authors developed a specific filmic language that differs from both the previous and later Yugoslav films.

Oscillation between Critique and Subversion

Broadly speaking the films that now emerged could be defined along the lines of social critique and/or subversion, which would demand further exploration in terms of their respective political and aesthetic strategies. Let us only briefly mention a few lines that reflect internal convergences and divergences of the new Yugoslav film. First of all, it is a widely accepted thesis that these films addressed critically the topics that were either not discussed openly, or were narrated in a very linear and homogenous way. Also, the films shifted attention to different protagonists and spaces of action, so that the naturalistic illumination of the extreme social misery as well as futile attempts to escape it soon became a ‘classical’ feature of their plots. Still, it would be wrong to claim that New Yugoslav Film only dealt with the margin. Rather, New Yugoslav Film could be related to a parallax view – a view from the side on the very same

central topics that were already circulating in society. Some authors, most notably Živojin Pavlović (*Zaseda*, 1969), but also Aleksandar Petrović (*Tri*, 1965) and Zelimir Žilnik (*Ustanak u jasku*, 1973), did deal with the topic of the partisan struggle, but in a way which re-figured partisan memory.

Importantly, these films should not be perceived as dissident ready-mades that diagnosed the totalitarian nature of the state and prognosticated its inevitable decay. On the contrary, their political message often revolved around the dissatisfaction with existing socialist paths and the fading away of revolutionary ideals. The critique was not made for the sake of critique, or as a kind of 'cheap' anti-totalitarian gesture that spoke about the ultimate non-freedom of socialism. Not only that the very existence of such a variety of critical films itself accounts for the artistic freedom during Socialism. Also, socialist art did not see itself as exempt from these struggles. For many filmmakers, the critique in their films was made in order to re-impose a more egalitarian society and to strengthen revolutionary ideals. Thus, they made all the sacred topics 'contemporary' and open for further critical scrutiny and discussion. To highlight the decay of socialist values and the ensuing dangers for the future of Yugoslavia, these films can be put on similar footing as their Polish predecessors, documentaries from the 1950s, or their Czech black contemporaries. Their critical attempt made them rethink socialism and the role of socialist art, which was hitherto too easily subjugated by the official politics.

New Yugoslav film also introduced a new type of protagonist, an antihero who is typically a man.[4] Typically, the antihero follows his instincts or other internal drives. More or less conscious of his place in society, he follows the line of passive resistance, which represents a sort of opposition against the given way of life. However, from the very beginning it becomes clear that this kind of resistance will not change his existence or the world, but rather end tragically. The antihero is a passive rebel and undeniably a loser. Thus, he could hardly be called a role model for future generations, hence bringing up the question of 'learning'.

While critical perspectives were omnipresent in New Yugoslav Film, the technical and aesthetic side witnessed a far more heterogeneous development. For example, the generation of authors like Aleksandar Petrović[5] and Živojin Pavlović[6] used realist/neorealist/naturalist narratives and a linear temporal progression. They referred to the existing or past cinematic canon, while on the other hand films of Želimir Žilnik, such as his *Nezaposleni* (*The Unemployed*, 1968) and *Ustanak u Jasku* (*Uprising in Jasak*, 1973), though portraying very realistic and contemporary topics, used a new doc-drama approach and thus contributed to the development of a new genre. However, perhaps the most innovative film form could be ascribed to Makavejev, who is by some authors considered to be the Godard of the East. Makavejev skillfully applied intertextuality, intermediality and interdisciplinarity in his works. He is actually

one of the first film authors to employ interdisciplinarity and can be considered a role model of sorts for authors like Errol Morris (e.g. *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control*, 1997) or Chris Marker (*Immemory*, 1998). What everyday materials signified for avant-garde theater directors like Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor they also meant to Makavejev in his film practice. With his approach, he continually raises the question of reality and fiction and points to borders within cinema.

One can pose the question to what extent his film strategy can be described as paradigmatic for the method of subversion? Obviously Makavejev's films are ironical towards proclaimed ideals and falsify supposed truths, but there also is subversion in his approach. It is more than a subversion of the social norms and its anti-order spirit closely connected to the spirit of détournement and that of May 68. Makavejev's early works subvert the reality, but also point to the (im)possibility of representing the relation between reality and "the real". This is attained through a questioning of different levels of enunciation; the limitation of fantasies of old and new revolutionaries is examined in the film *W.R.- Misterije Organizma* (*W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism*, 1971). Perhaps it points to the birth of the subversive image that was used to bracket both reality and the reality as pictured by cinema. In his short film *Parada* (*Parade*, 1962) we see the unofficial representation of the public celebration that not only subverts the dominant ideological ritual of the times. Thus, his "critique" is not only "realist" in revealing the divide between ideals and their realization. It also opens the path of simultaneous human experiences in socialism. This subversive procedure becomes an important intellectual tool and an aesthetic form of expression which could politically be identified with anarchism; Makavejev drags the viewer into a session substantially different from the usual cinematic experience.

The other side of the subversive image can be found in surreal and existentialist films conceived as psychological dramas. The famous film *Tri* (*Three*, 1965) leaves to the viewer a certain freedom to decipher the presented metaphors, where director Aleksandar Petrović himself prepares and organizes this freedom. Yugoslav film theorists dubbed this kind of integration of poetic and artistic construction with realistic-looking things the "open metaphor", which leads eventually to the multiplication of sense and thus to the continuous self-renovation of films. One could also formulate this as a dialectical process, in which the movement proceeds from data to idea, from the idea to its disintegration, and finally toward polyvalent sense. As such, the film strongly opposed the fetish of critique, making it both subversive and in some respects revisionist in the partisan legacy.

Conclusion: Back to the Present Use of the Black Wave or Rewriting the History of Film in Nationalist Terms

We showed in what way the term Black Wave was pejoratively used by the socialist authorities in the late 1960s, but simultaneously ironized by filmmakers. Nowadays, the term ‘black’ plays an ambivalent and even oppositional role in two different interpretative schools that return to New Yugoslav Film. On the one hand, it is very popular among those who strengthen and even mythologize the role of the filmmaker in his dissident struggle against the totalitarian state. These authors base their argument on weak definitions of subversion and over-emphasize the symbolic power of images. On the other hand, another interpretation underscores the plurality of waves and what is known as Yugoslav film. This latter position actively criticizes the simplified binary opposition between good art and the bad state, a position which becomes highly plausible upon thorough examination.

The return to this exciting period consists not so much in recovering the original kernel – the original sin – of the Black Wave or New Yugoslav Film, but rather in pointing to recent developments which constitute a black spot within the post-Yugoslav context. Another signifier, which used to be very present in past discussions, has gradually lost its symbolic power. After the tragic break-up of Yugoslavia, the last two decades witnessed an utmost historical revisionism which even Yugoslav film did not escape. What appeared to be a historical fact, that is, that the Black Wave emerged under socialist Yugoslavia, has not only been veiled in a dissident cloak, but furthermore “nationalized” according to the ethnicity of filmmakers. Thus, what used to be part of the Yugoslav film history has been re-appropriated and transformed into Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Bosnian and Herzegovinian, and perhaps now also Kosovar film history. Counter to this nationalization of cultural memory in the new nation states, one needs to strengthen the view that the Yugoslav Black Wave took place all across Yugoslavia. Moreover, the emergence of such a wave would not have been possible without the self-managed infrastructure and cultural policy of Yugoslav socialism, notwithstanding all its ambivalent outcomes and tragic end. Not only that the cast and film crews consisted of multinational members. Also, this all-Yugoslav collaboration was manifested in the co-production character of many film projects back then, and even today.

Many young film festivals either focus on national films, or on the ‘classical’ filmmakers of the Black Wave that originated in the Serbian context (Belgrade, Novi Sad). Pluralistic approaches do not wish to stress national differences which would re-impose the identity politics of the post-Yugoslav context. Rather, they reveal that the complex and heterogeneous web of influences, the Black Wave itself, could only emerge in the times of Yugoslavia. But today Yugoslavia has become a space that exists no more and thus an integral modality for watching and re-assessing the legacy of its ever contemporary Yugoslav film…

References

For example Lazar Stojanović’s “Plastic Jesus”, 1971.

“Volite se ljudi” was inspired by Charles Chaplin, Jacques Tati and burlesque movies.

“Genre film” was here considered a film which was neither documentary, nor fiction film.

In exceptional cases, women also star in this role, for instance in “Rani Radovi” (“Early Works”, 1969) by Žilnik or “W.R.- Misterije Organizma” (“W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism”, 1971) by Makavejev.

“Skupljači perja” (“I Even Met Happy Gypsies”, 1967) or “Biće skoro propast sveta” (“It Rains in My Village”, 1968).

“Buđenje pacova” (“The Rats Woke Up”, 1967), “Kad budem mrtav i beo” (“When I am Dead and Gone”, 1967), “Rdeče klasje” (“Red Wheat”, 1970).