

By Dinko Tucaković

Documentaries – A Serbian Perspective

Prologue

“The entire microcosm on a stage no larger than one square meter, the depth of which is, to be mathematically accurate, equal to zero!” This was how Pavle V. Vujić reacted, in the Srpske Novine of June 5, 1896, to the first presentation of the Brothers Lumière program in Belgrade and the Balkans. What an enthusiasm. What a great start!

It was only six months after the screenings in Paris. The following year, 1897, an agent of the Lumière Company, André Carré, filmed the first documentary footage in Belgrade.

It was a hundred and one year ago.

Once Upon A Time (1896-1945)

This is why a case can be made for more than a century of tradition of Serbian documentaries. However, these early beginnings in the late 19th century came about due to the work of foreign cinematographers, like the aforementioned Carré, or Louis Pitroff De Beéry, a.k.a. Lojos Zsoltan Arpad Pitroff, an associate of the first Serbian producer, Svetozar Botorić, between 1911 and 1913. Their entire opus has been considered lost, until a complete collection of two features and sixteen documentaries was found in the Filmarchiv Austria (The Austrian Film Archives). At the moment, the footage is being restored by the experts of the Jugoslovenska kinoteka (The Yugoslav Film Archives) in Belgrade. So far, three restored films have been presented to an international audience: [JEDNA SRPSKA SEOSKA SVADBA / A SERBIAN COUNTRY WEDDING](#) (unknown director, 1911), [LETENJE AVIJATIČARA DJOVANIJA VIDMERA NA BANJICI 14. JULA 1 GODINA / FLYING OF AVIATOR GIOVANNI WIDMER AT BANJICA FIELD](#) (unknown director, 1912) and [TRKE NA BANJICI / THE RACES OF BANJICA](#) (d.: Svetozar Botorić, 1911). The milestone of this era is the feature documentary [KRUNIŠANJE KRALJA PETRA I. KARADORĐEVIĆA 7 THE CORONATION OF KING PETER THE FIRST](#) (1904), made during the coronation ceremonies in Belgrade in 1904 by camera operator Frank Storm Mottershaw, and Arnold Muir Wilson, at the time a honorary consul of Serbia in Sheffield. Until World War II, documentary production has been mainly linked with the turbulent history. Among the pioneers, the key names are the producers and directors Đoka Bogdanović and Kosta Novaković, and the cinematographers Mihajlo Al. Popović, Mihajlo Ivanjиков, Josip Novak and Stevan Mišković. During the world wars, local film production was haphazard, and not organised by any state agency, but still one of the most significant in the region at the time.

During World War II, two parallel activities can be traced: filming conducted in Serbia under the Nazi control and supervision, and the work of the film section associated with the headquarters of the Yugoslav Partisans. The period before 1945 was not recognised by the postwar Communist authorities, so it had been practically erased from the official film history, or, to be more precise, its importance had been diminished. Thanks to the work of film historians like Bosa Slijepčević, and later Dr. Petar Volk and Dr. Dejan Kosanović, this ideological absurdity has finally been rectified.

Happy Together (1945-1991)

In Tito's Yugoslavia, or better to say Yugoslavias (the FNRJ [Federativna Narodna Republika Jugoslavija, 1945-1963], SFRJ [Socijalistička Federativna Republika Jugoslavija, 1963-1991/92]), the ideological basis for the development of the film industry was given by Lenin's maxim that "cinema is the most important art for us Communists". The keywords of the ideology were Brotherhood and Unity. So, in that period, it is hard to distil any national cinemas, including the Serbian, as it is impossible to escape the phenomenon of the "Yugoslav Cinema". Or is it now politically incorrect even to mention such a term? And not to open a Pandora's box of strife? This question is still to be discussed among professionals, not ideologues.

It is hard to understand the histories of today's independent nations – Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia (and what comes out of the UNMIKosova, or the Province of Kosovo and Metohija, whatever the official name still is) – without considering the background of the Yugoslav history. It is also hard to understand a particular phenomenon, such as the history of documentaries, in this part of the world. Focusing on Serbia, it is nearly impossible to construct a pure national history of documentaries, especially when it comes to the 1960's and the 1970's. The "national" film production at that time has been amalgamated with a Yugoslav flavor. The same goes for the other national histories of the former Yugoslavia, although the independent traditions of Zagreb, Sarajevo, Ljubljana or Skopje can be recognised.

But, on this occasion, let us remain with Serbia. As in the rest of the federal country, production was very well organised, and the first international recognition soon came through the successes at the leading documentary film festivals, such as the Krakow Film Festival (Krakowski Festiwal Filmowy), the International Leipzig Festival of Documentary and Animated Film (Internationales Leipziger Festival für Dokumentar- und Animationsfilm) or the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen (Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen). The main production houses were Dunav, Avala, and Inex, supported by the state. The distinguished style of filmmakers like Miljenko Štrbac, Krsto Skanata or Stjepan Zaninović lead the film critics to coin the term "The Belgrade School", which soon stormed the European documentary scene. Their films dealt with difficult issues, such as unemployment, ethnic conflicts or official history, with an artistic approach, very different from the type of reality perpetuated in the state-controlled newsreels. They inspired a new generation of filmmakers like Dušan Makavejev, Puriša Đorđević or Želimir Žilnik, whose films were soon labeled by the local censors as "The Black Wave". That movement, which lasted for almost a decade, from the early sixties to 1971, has not only created the high watermarks of the Serbian and Yugoslav cinema history, but also some of the very best achievements of the European documentary cinema, with films like [CRNI FILM / BLACK FILM](#) (d.: Želimir Žilnik, 1971), [ON / HE](#) (d.: Puriša Đorđević, 1961), or [PARADA / THE PARADE](#) (d.: Dušan Makavejev, 1962). The official reaction was massive. The filmmakers were forced to leave the country, or to abandon professional filmmaking. The crackdown culminated with the arrest and imprisonment of the film student Lazar Stojanović, who made the notorious and banned film [PLASTIČNI ISUS / PLASTIC JESUS](#) (1971), a fiction feature with a lot of documentary materials that contrasted the totalitarian aspects of Communism and Fascism. Although the documentary production as a whole remained strong, the following two decades never managed to rise to the golden moments of the Black Wave. Recently, Dinko Tucaković and Milan Nikodijević produced an anthology on the Yugoslav Black Wave, and its artistic and political impact ([ZABRANJENI BEZ ZABRANE / CENSORED WITHOUT CENSORSHIP](#), 2007).

War & Peace (1992-2000)

Another tough issue to deal with is the conflict on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, which resulted in mass murders, war crimes, destruction and genocide. During the war, which was never named so officially, the film industry in Serbia collapsed to the level of handicraft. The regime decided to use the national television, RTS (Radio-Televizija Srbije / Radio Television of Serbia), as its main propaganda tool. TV reporters were mostly recruited for this job, answering directly to the head of the RTS, Milorad Vučelić, a former film critic. One could see Miodrag Popov, Miloš Marković, or Radovan Brankov standing in trenches and over dead bodies in prime time slots.

The production on film stock had practically ceased. However, independent film productions used the advantages of the new technologies, and created a number of low- or no-budget films, among them significant titles which opposed the regime of Slobodan Milošević. The leading producer of that period was the B92 Television, with films like [POLUDELI LJUDI / BELGRADE FOLLIES](#) (d.: Goran Marković, 1997) or [VIDIMO SE U ČITULJI 7 THE CRIME THAT CHANGED SERBIA](#) (d.: Janko Baljak, 1995). Many filmmakers left the country, and those who remained attempted to work under nearly impossible conditions. Another chapter of this period came with the NATO intervention of 1999, which led to the drama of Kosovo, unresolved to this day. A number of films dealt with the bombardments of Belgrade and their consequences for the individual citizens and the larger political environment, like [ANATOMIJA BOLA / 02:06 – THE ANATOMY OF PAIN](#) (d.: Janko Baljak, 2000).

Modern Times (2000-2007)

The average Serbian production of today is hard to trace, due to the fact that there is no official mechanism for collecting this kind of data. An overall idea can be gleaned from festival catalogues. For 2005 and 2006, an approximation could be 3-5 feature-length documentaries, 60-80 short documentaries, 120-150 TV documentaries, and 30-50 student documentaries. The most prominent independent director is Boris Mitić, with titles such as [PRETTY DYANA / PRETTY DYANA](#) (2003) and [UNMIK TITANIK / UNMIK TITANIC](#) (2004). Internationally recognised ones are Želimir Žilnik – who, in his recent films, [EVROPA PREKO PLOTA / EUROPE NEXT DOOR](#) (2005), and his trilogy on Kenedi Hasani, a Rom expelled from Germany after the end of the wars of the breakup of Yugoslavia, deals with the new borders of Europe – Janko Baljak ([ANATOMIJA BOLA / 02:06 – THE ANATOMY OF PAIN](#)), and Goran Radovanović ([PILEĆI IZBORI / CHICKEN ELECTIONS](#), 2005). There are also several young filmmakers who are active both in the European Union countries and in the USA (Marko Sopić, Adrijana Stojković, Darko Lungulov). Pure documentaries, in the sense of the golden age of the Belgrade School, do not exist anymore. Production is for the most part geared towards festival or TV slots. State-owned production studios, like Dunav Film or Avala Film, still exist, but are in the process of privatisation. Private producers are mainly not interested in documentary production, barring a few exceptions, e.g. Art & Popcorn, E-mote, Centar Film, FRZ Belgrade, or Baš Čelik. A similar situation can be found at the national TV broadcasters, with the sole exception of the B92 Television which has, however, unfortunately turned to reality shows and soap operas. Most of the documentary funding comes from the Ministry of Culture

of Serbia, but regular funds have been created by the Film Centre of Serbia and the Belgrade City Hall, which opened calls for applications from 2006. Both funds usually support no more than five titles per season. Each had a total budget of around 3.000,000 Dinars (approximately 87,500 Euros) for 2005 and 2006. This amount is split between projects which receive, on average, no more than 12,500 and no less than 6,250 Euros each. Over the last two years there have also been script development competitions and certain (non-obligatory) post-production support funds. The overall situation of Serbian cinema is quite delicate. The head of the Film Center of Serbia, Đorđe Miličević, has resigned, while the new Minister and the staff at the Ministry of Culture still have no strategy for cinema, and the pertinent legislation hasn't been completed yet. The feature production will be around the yearly average of 12 or a few more titles in 2008, but documentary films are out of the picture.

There are two state-run film schools, the Belgrade Faculty of Dramatic Arts and the Novi Sad Academy for Theatre, Film and Television, plus another three private schools in Belgrade that offer academic training (the Dunav Film School, the master classes at the BK University, and the Film and Media Department at the Megatrend University). None of these schools offer significant documentary training, although their students have to create at least one obligatory etude a year. There are also the Kvadrat training project of Svetlana and Zoran Popović, who also run the Magnificent 7 Feature Documentary Film Festival, internationally renowned for its intellectual discussions, and some ad hoc seminars, like the workshop for young film students from the region, organised by the Atelier Varan Belgrade, founded as a result of an intensive three-month film workshop held by the Paris-based documentary institution Ateliers Varan in 2004.

There are very few examples of co-productions, such as the last films of Janko Baljak, whose *VUKOVAR – POSLEDNJI REZ / VUKOVAR – FINAL CUT* (2006) was produced in cooperation with a Croatian partner, Dragan Elčić (Bosnia and Herzegovina / Republic of Srpska), and Jovan Todorović, whose *FANTOM / PHANTOM* (2006) was made in cooperation with Bulgaria and Hungary, supported by Eurimages.

Documentaries are presented mainly at film festivals. Among the total of 30 film festivals in Serbia, the most important for documentaries are the Magnificent 7 (January, Belgrade), FEST – The Belgrade International Film Festival (February/March), the Belgrade Documentary and Short Film Festival (April), the Film Festival Serbia (Novi Sad, July), the Palić International Film Festival (Palić, July), and the Student Film Festival (Belgrade, December). There are very few regular television programming slots – again, B92 is a positive example – but far away from prime time. There are no specialised cinemas, but some venues, like Dom omladine, Kulturni centar and Muzej jugoslovenske kinoteke, occasionally support and screen documentary films.

The only documentary audience is comprised of festivalgoers, and a very small percentage of TV viewers. The media reception is poor and irregular. Due to the political and economical situation – wars, the post-war situation and the transition period – interesting subjects abound. Thus, a large number of films deal with the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the Kosovo issue, and Serbia's recent history as related to the rule of Slobodan Milošević. Also, the torments of transition are a major topic for documentary films. Most filmmakers, a significant number of whom lack any professional training, use a journalistic approach, dealing only with the surface of the problems. There are very few intimistic and family documentaries of the kinds that are fashionable these days. Documentary films are usually made in the form of interviews with the use of archival materials, and those that have a touch of humor or even a personalised view of the subject are very few and far between.

Interlude

Usually, the documentary approach is one-sided, depicting one truth only, with no attempt to confront both or more sides of a problem. It is here that we reach the dangerous ground of – “propaganda”. “Propaganda” is one of those ambiguous words which contains a problem, both as a pejorative term in common usage, and as an overall term among its professional users. The Nazi Germany accepted the word “propaganda” as a positive concept. The same goes for the Soviet Union and some other totalitarian regimes. Propaganda was one of the proper methods for the process of “informing” and, through that “information”, motivating the citizens to actively support the state. One could recognise this method in production of documentaries in Tuđman’s Croatia, Milošević’s Serbia and Izetbegović’s Bosnia and Herzegovina. To deny the existence of those means of propaganda is to commit another crime. It is impossible to avoid the kitsch propaganda film about the war lord Željko “Arkan” Ražnjatović’s Tiger Squads, released only as a commercial VHS tape, directed by Mika Aleksić and ordered by Arkan himself, made in 1993.

Epilogue

Most of the Serbian documentary filmmakers target television and film festivals – mostly for promotional reasons. Cinemas are out of the picture. Documentaries have raised some major topics, but currently it is the politicians and media who create the general opinion. More than the documentary films itself, the post-screening discussions have an effect on the public opinion. The films only rarely deal with the issues of genocide, political incorrectness or guilt of their own nation. The general penetration of the regional documentaries to the major international festivals is low. Also it is hard but fair to say that there is, like in politics, a lot of manipulation coming from abroad, which sometimes resembles the notion of putting out fire with gasoline – namely the German and Austrian embrace of Croatia, the Arab countries’ support of Bosnia, or the “eternal love” love of Russia for Serbia.

The powder keg has exploded, but there is another chance for a start with a clear slate, when the neighbors are going to be partners and not enemies. Making network instead of war. If not love.

Dinko Tucaković Biography

Dinko Tucaković, filmmaker, programmer and film critic. Born 1960 in Zenica (Bosnia, ex SFR Yugoslavia), Tucaković finished grammar school in Sarajevo (1978), and Faculty of dramatic arts in Belgrade, group for film and TV directing (1984).

Film theorist and critic, wrote for all main Yugoslav magazines, as well as the international ones *Positiff* and *Sight and Sound*. Author of the several film books, e.g. *Tajni Život Filma* (The Secret Life Of Film, 1993), *Stranci u raju* (Strangers in Paradise, 1998). Has worked as a selector of several national film festivals. Chair of the Board and the selector of the FEST (Belgrade International Film Festival) 1997-2002. Since 1998, programming director of Yugoslav Film Archives (Jugoslovenska kinoteka). Works as a film critic for the *Vreme* magazine. Chairman of Author's Film Festival Belgrade. Artistic director of the international film festival in Čačak. Guest lecturer on history of cinema and film direction on Faculty of

Dramatic Arts (Belgrade). Member of Programming commission of the FIAF. Chief editor of the publishing branch of Yugoslav Film Archives.

His films have attended international film festivals, *Bernisa / Berenice* (Madrid), *Šest dana Juna / Six Days in June* (Selb), *Pismo / The Letter* (Berlin), *Moralna Opera političkog idiota / Jasmina und der Krieg* (Venice), *Drzava mrtvih / The State of the Dead* (final cut of the late director Živojin Pavlović; Munich, Cairo), *The Rubber Soul Project* (Montpellier, Singapoore,), *Zabranjeni bez zabrane / Censored without Censorhip* (co-directing with Milan Nikodijević; Zagreb).

Also has done more than 100 programs for TV and around 30 clips for Yugoslav R'n'R bands.

Source: www.seedox.org