

# The Anatomy of Madness: Independent Documentary Film in Milosevic's Serbia

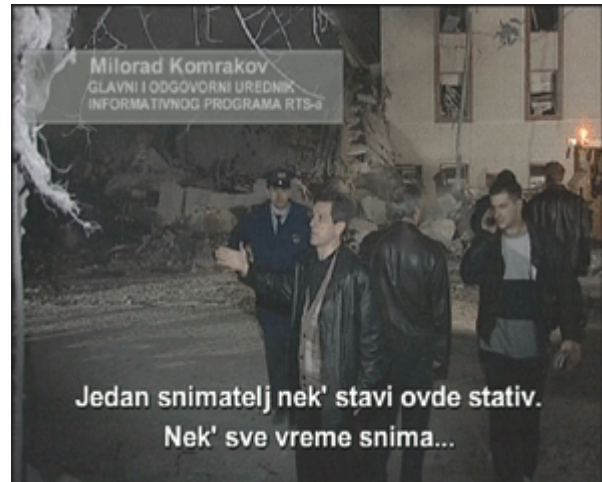
by Boris Trbic

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Milorad Komrakov, the Editor in Chief of RTS: "One camera operator should put a tripod here and keep filming."



The vast majority of documentary films made throughout the '90s and produced independently of state-controlled Serbian television and sponsored by independent media, small production houses and distributors consistently displayed a critical stance towards the regime of Slobodan Milosevic. Independent Radio B92 actively opposed Milosevic's party monopoly between 1990 and 2000, pleading for political pluralism and economic reforms, tolerance and freedom of press in Serbia. The radio station was constantly targeted by the forces of state propaganda and political extremists. It was officially banned in March 1999, after the first air raids against Yugoslavia, as one of the leading voices of urban resistance in Belgrade. In the post-Milosevic era, Radio B92 continues to plead for tolerance and understanding at a time when Serbia is restoring freedom of speech, confidence and bridges with the world.

Produced by Radio B92 and directed by Mladen Maticевич and Ivan Markov, two filmmakers of the young generation, *Ghetto* (1996) is one of the first films to focus on the art scene and popular culture in Belgrade during the period of war and international sanctions. *Ghetto* is a film about the resilient urban subculture which survives in the climate of spiritual and material poverty and also a film with strong political connotations. A number of artists, musicians and public figures in the film took prominent positions in protests against the government. Their performances and interviews reveal a sense of frustration and disappointment with the ghettoisation of city intelligentsia and the marginalisation of art that gave way to the domination of violence and materialistic values, characteristic of the caste of war profiteers affiliated with the regime. In spite of its narrative inconsistencies and certain naivety, *Ghetto's* attempt to capture the urban spirit of Belgrade triggered a series of documentary films about wartime Serbia.

Another documentary which traces the radical transformation of the Belgrade cityscape is Janko Baljak's *Vidimo se u citulji* (*Crime that Changed Serbia*, 1995). Based on a highly successful non-fiction book, *Kriminal koji je izmenio Srbiju* (*Crime that Changed Serbia*), Baljak's film maps an era in which Belgrade transformed from one of the safest European capitals to a city dominated by violence and existential insecurity. The filmmaker follows a chronology of gang wars on the streets of Belgrade, combining archival footage and police reports with group and individual interviews with a young generation of criminals. *See You in the Obituaries* does not merely attempt to record the chaos and violence which characterised public life in Belgrade throughout the 1990s. It also conveys a strong sense of political criticism in the way that it frames the social context as a group of teenagers who emerge as 'national heroes,' 'successful businessmen' and media celebrities.

Documentary film in Serbia became more politically focused following the protest against the electoral fraud in winter 1996/1997. A compilation of five documentary films, *Do jaja*, follows the peaceful demonstrations of students and opposition groups, which spread from Belgrade to other cities in Serbia until the partial capitulation of Milosevic's socialists at the local level. It uses a diversity of non-fiction styles to capture the dramatic events and the mood amongst the demonstrators during the eighty-four days of winter protest.

Directed by one of the main representatives of the 1960s *black wave* of the Yugoslav cinema, Zelimir Zilnik's *Do jaja* is the first in this collection of documentaries. The title is a word play combining the word 'eggs' in Serbian and a popular slang description of an extreme situation using the metaphor of a sexual act. Zilnik established his documentary style during 1970s and 1980s, in television documentaries which focused on everyday life of Yugoslav working class. Their highly pronounced ironical tone provoked a wider popular appeal amongst the audiences, disillusioned with the ruling socialist ideology. Zilnik's film about Belgrade protests demonstrates the salient characteristics of his observational documentary style. The documentarist captures the tense atmosphere of city protests, the anger and frustration of ordinary citizens who demonstrate by throwing eggs at government institutions, disillusioned with their political leaders, standard of living and hopes for the future. Zilnik approaches his topic accentuating the role of documentarist as a *participant* in important political events. His cinematic language maintains a strong reflexive tone, manifest in the selection of shots, angles and camera movements, the use of slow motion, the rhythm of editing, the choice of sound and music, and the interviews conducted on the streets of Belgrade. Zilnik's film maintains a politically engaging voice, focusing on the experiences of those opposed to the totalitarian regime and their efforts to preserve a critical spirit and sense of humour during years of oppression, war and violence.

The second in the compilation, Radivoje Andric's *Eighty Five Days of Walking: Chronology of 1996/1997 Protest*, covers the most dramatic moments of the anti-Milosevic campaign. This film was never shown on government television, however, it remains one of the rare cinematic records of police brutality that took place at the time of the protest. Andric's footage of street confrontation between police and demonstrators reveals a sense of fear, oppression and insecurity. Andric's miniatures in the same collection expose a highly personal vision of the protest, manifesting a sense of optimism and anticipation which dominated the public climate in that period. Filmed and edited in a form of a music video, *Januarska reka* (*January River*) follows a group of drummers who led demonstrators through city streets. Mixing the sound of drums and whistles with the cacophony of noises, heard every night at the time of the state television news, Andric creates a sound matrix which, combined with the footage of clashes between the police and the demonstrators, emerges as a separate and authentic text.

The New Year's countdown in Andric's *January River* is one of the most poignant and revealing documents in Serbian non-fiction cinema, intended as a homage to the exuberant energy and imaginativeness of the protest, the rare voices of opposition against the madness of war.

The fourth documentary, *Nedelja borbe protiv ometanja (A Week of Resistance Against Wave-Jamming)* follows the escapades of the listeners of B92, who use all possible devices and techniques to avoid the police wave-jamming of the radio's frequencies and receiving information about the protest. Andric combines 'overheard' conversations between the radio's listeners and their unusual and often comic attempts to adjust their radio to a correct frequency without interference. This vignette with a strong local flavour, perhaps more than any other film about the 1996/97 protests, shows the undefeated spirit of the citizens of Belgrade who ridicule the oppressive policy of the government, characterised by primitivism and lack of imagination.

The young generation of documentarists continue to explore today the extremely polarised political climate in contemporary Serbia after the recent crisis in Kosovo and the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. Baljak's *02:06: The Anatomy of Pain* (2000) centres on one of the most tragic events that took place during the NATO campaign, the bombing of Radio Television Serbia (RTS), which resulted in the deaths of 17 employees. The bombing came after warnings directed against Serbian state television during NATO press conferences. After the rocket attack, it became widely known that the Milosevic regime, aware of the intentions of NATO generals, used the deaths of the make-up artists, electricians and security guards as a calculated sacrifice. Baljak's film, completed a year after the bombing of RTS, examines the loss experienced by families, friends and relatives of the victims and the moral quandary of politicians and journalists who collaborated in the murder of innocent civilians. Produced by Free B92 Radio, Baljak's film won the award for the best film at the 47th Festival of Short and Documentary Film in Belgrade. Two more documentaries about the bombing campaign, Radivoje Andric's *Jel bombarduju kod vas (Are They Bombing You?)* (Free B92, 2000) and Goran Rebic's *Kazna (Punishment)*, (2000) which won the Grand prix at this year's *Diagonals* documentary festival in Graz, also explore the circumstances of the NATO attack on Yugoslavia, one of the dominant themes in Serbian non-fiction film of the post-war and post-Milosevic era.

Following the 'revolutionary' events of October 2000, Serbian film faces new challenges in the era of political and economic transition. The fragile democratic government is now confronting the legacy of the socialist rule, the crimes of the Milosevic regime and the deterioration of social, cultural and ethical values as a result of his dictatorship. The independent filmmakers are facing a series of challenges. They will have to maintain their critical stance and simultaneously respond to the demands of the market economy in the new, reformed, capitalist system.

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