

# QUESTION OF IDENTITY, DEPICTION OF IDEOLOGICAL ASPIRATIONS IN THE CONTEMPORARY SERBIAN MOVIES / DEPICTION OF QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY SERBIAN CINEMATIC WORKS

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## ABSTRACT

*In the 1990s, the split-up of Yugoslavia culminated in a bloody civil war. The economical recession, the social tensions overwrote the thought of Yugoslavism, as a result of which centralist (Serbian) and separatist (Croatian, Slovenian etc.) views became dominant. The nightmares of the war conflicts, the risings of nationalist aspirations, the social indifference and the painful moments of statelessness, the illusions of the deformed nostalgia – in an explicit and implicit way – set a base for thematics of the contemporary Serbian movies from past quarter-century. The rise of the transitional period of Serbian cinematic culture coincided with the democratization and capitalization of the country. The beginning of information and communication technology development (digitalization) can also be registered to this period.*

**Keywords:** Identity, Yugoslavism, nationalism, Serbian films

## INTRODUCTION

During the 19-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Yugoslavism became more widespread within the scope of Serbian, Croatian and Slovenian nationalist aspirations. The demand for a political community of common interest served as a cohesive power and significantly contributed to the birth of a new South Slavic state (Juhász 2000).

The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes established in 1918, as well as the Tito's communist Yugoslavia, which was reunified after the Second World War (1943-1945), could only be governed via dictatorial means (Arday 2002:274-291). The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) functioned on the basis of three guiding principles: the personal cult of the dictator (Josip Broz Tito), the resolution of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (renamed in 1952 as the Alliance of Communists of Yugoslavia), and the idea of „brotherhood-unity” („bratstvo-jedinstvo”) were considered to be unquestionable and inviolable (Velikonja 2008). Nationalizations and expropriations reflected nationality-based discriminations and the intention to capital nationalization (A. Sajti 2013:133). In 1949, Yugoslavia cut ties with the Information Office and tried to establish a new economic model according to the principle of ”self-administration of workers”.

In addition to central control, the paradox version of decentralization could be noticed from the 1960s, which was legitimized by the new constitution declared in 1963 (Juhász 2019:132). The new Yugoslav socialist mindset – after a certain amount of time – already included the tendency of the theory of general social self-administration. The idea of the “self-administration of nations” elevated to the level of a republic started a process of disintegration, as a significant portion of the economic, social and cultural elite was connected to the six member states (Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia) (Juhász 2019:121–132 ; Gábrity Molnár 1981). Under the scope of the new fundamental law of 1974, Vojvodina and Kosovo could become complete members of the federation. As a result of political and economic reform, taking place during the 1960s and 1970s, the Yugoslav nationalism receded. Factors promoting strong, unified national identity, that integrate linguistic, religious, regional and cultural differences were lacking (Juhász 2019:175–176.; Jović 2003:56–58). Following the death of head of state and party leader Josip Broz Tito in 1980, the state of Yugoslavia gradually drifted towards disintegration. Owing to the economic recession starting in the mid-1980's and worsening afterwards, the antagonisms among the nations increased. The tendencies of disintegration significantly increased, during which the nationalist ideologies became more pronounced. The separatist waves of Serbians, Croats, Macedonians etc., demanding national self-determination, along with ground-gaining trend of recentralization – that emphasized Serbian dominance - connected to Slobodan Milošević, resulted in a bloody civil war. The shift of international power-balance had a decisive effect on the South Slavic events. With the bipolar world coming to an end, it no longer served the interest of the great powers to preserve the status quo on the Balkan Peninsula.

The previously listed factors sealed the fate of the unified South Slavic state and made a peaceful change of regime impossible in the falling-apart Yugoslavia.

The siege of Vukovar and Sarajevo, establishment of concentration camps, the destruction of the bridge in Mostar, the genocides of Srebrenica and Kosovo, as well as the NATO operation infiltrated into the minds of the public as the sorrowful end-game of the tragic events. The number of casualties of the civil war exceeds 150,000, and as a result of the ethnic purges, nearly 4 million people migrated from different regions of the territory. Almost half of the Serbian refugees (approx. 600-700 thousand people) settled in the multi-ethnic Voivodina (Tátrai et al. 2013: 42–50).

### **PARTISAN MOVIE, BLACK WAVE, TRANSITIONAL PERIOD**

In the study, I analyze the works of contemporary Serbian cinematography of the last quarter of a century from the perspective of how the Serbian cinematic culture reflected the political and social changes occurring in the region. Primarily, I examine the chosen movies by ideological aspirations. In federal Yugoslavia, every member state could form its own film producer company. The products of federal film workshops – Avala Film in Belgrade, Jadran Film in Zagreb, Bosna Film in Sarajevo, Triglav Film in Ljubljana, Vardar Film in Skopje and Lovćen Film in Cetinje (Budva since 1955) - were distributed by the federal Jugoslavija Film (Volk 1986). The partisan movies produced after the Second World War propagated the socialist Yugoslav regime and Tito's personal cult. One of the most well-known pieces of the genre is the superproduction *The Battle of Neretva* (1969), that includes several acclaimed Hollywood movie stars (Franco Nero, Orson Welles, Yul Brynner), and Josip Broz Tito also played a role (Bulajić 1969). The poster of the movie was created by Pablo Picasso. Another monumental work promoting the partisan movements is *Sutjeska* (1973), in which Comrade Tito was starred by Richard Burton (Delić 1973). The regime treated inclusion of great names of the cinematic world as a matter of prestige.

The Yugoslav film industry flourished during the 1960s. The Black Wave became known as the standard-setting trend of South Slavic cinematic art, the most prominent representatives of which are: Želimir Žilnik and Dušan Makavejev. Their movies, infused with a pessimistic tone and discovered real existential social problems, were - together with the movement - banned in Tito's Yugoslavia in 1973 (Žilnik 1969; Makavejev 1971; Gocić 2007a). Most of the in the late 1970s appearing directors, representing the genre of social horror, obtained their diploma at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (Gocić 2007b). In their works, Goran Paskaljević, Goran Marković, and Emir Kusturica present the tragedy of marginalized ethnic groups, the fate of the common man who drifted to the verges of society, and the world of - declassified - elements living off crime (Paskaljević 1977; Marković 1982; Kusturica 1988).

The Balkan wars of the 1990s had a marginal impact on the cinematic culture of the region. Due to the effects of isolation, international sanctions, and economic difficulties, the production of Serbian film industry fell back to manufactory levels (Kosanović 1996). In spite of this, quite a few first-time directors made their debuts in the – by the specialized literature defined as transitional (*tranzicija*) – period (Ternovác 2017). The new generation carried the stylistic features of the defining period of post-Yugoslav cinematic art, including the Black Wave unfolding from the 1960s, and especially the social horror genre of the 1980s and 1990s. The rise of the new Serbian cinematic trend coincided with the democratization and capitalization of the country. Furthermore, the beginning of the development of information and communication technology (digitalization) can also be attributed to this period.

The contemporary cinematic generation was – from a thematic perspective – radicalized, and it did not use the caricaturing, ironic tools of the Black Wave for the presentation of social horror. In their works, reality becomes rawer, more dramatic, and frequently apocalyptic. With the repetition of chronotropic patterns, they mystify and crush the ideal, the unfulfilled dream of the Yugoslav new wave of the 1980s. The horrific events of the Balkan wars towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the political and economic crisis, the emerging social tensions, and the deformation of the Yugoslav, later Serbian national status resulted in identity crisis. The phenomenon is mainly noticeable among members of the X generation, but it is not irrelevant in the case of the younger age group either (Janković 2012; Gocić 2007b). The protagonists of contemporary Serbian films often embody the hopeless, disappointed, and visionless teenagers of the disintegrated society (Milošević 2018: 197–198). Nevertheless, in addition to the world of deep melodramas, in the movies of the new generation, the American (Hollywood) commercial model is also applied. The romantic comedies of the so called „pink wave” direction – mainly about love, and understanding – progressively more and more successful (Gocić 2007b).

## **REPRESENTATION OF CULTURAL MEMORY IN SERBIAN MOVIES OF THE MODERN ERA**

The peculiarity of collective memory is that it identifies past events exclusively within the context of the current present. Communicative memory reflects on the recent past, while cultural memory shapes the mythologised past using symbols and rituals. (Assmann 2004:38–59; Szirmai, Újvári 2015)). Owing to its reconstructive nature, the cinematic culture provides an opportunity to preserve cultural identity, to make collective memory present (Váró 2015:21–23). The film earned itself a key role – since the birth of the cinema – in the forming of national identity.

Through the narrative structure and visual tools, it defines the ideal of the nation and the myths of the historical past. The archetype of national identity is presented in movies, on the one hand by depicting heroism (virtues, personal dramas) and, on the other hand, by displaying the “ethnic atmosphere” (symbols, props etc.) (Smith 2000: 44–60).

In the post-Yugoslav territories, the ideology of nationalism became dominant, which also left an acute mark on the film production of the region. The movie *Nož/ Knife* (1999), not omitting violent episodes, was based on the similarly titled novel of Serbian writer Vuk Drašković (Lekić 1999). The film mainly presents scenes – revealing brutality – that were directed against the Serbian nation. Their main function is to demonstrate Serbia as a victim (Zvijer 2018:56–57). Set in the time frame of 1941 to 1993, the opening shots of the film depict the Herzegovinian landscape from a bird’s eye view, focusing on an Orthodox church and a stone house. The conflict between the Jugović (Orthodox) and Osmanović (Muslim) families resulted in carnage. On Christmas 1942, the Jugović family was massacred, but the life of the newborn Ilija was spared, moreover he was taken with them to the neighbouring Bosnian village. Revenge awaits not for long, since the Chetniks murder the male members of the Osmanović family. The Muslim wife (Rabija) manages to hide in the attic, where little Ilija was hidden. The Chetniks take Rabija’s consanguineous child with the idea that they managed to free the kidnapped Serbian newborn Ilija. Rabija (known as Alija) raises the Serbian boy as her own child. Growing up as a Muslim, Alija (Ilija) decides to find her kidnapped brother. He meets the villager Muslim teacher, during which Hodja Halil unveils the sorrowful reality to him. The dramatic ending scenes show the bloody events of the Balkan war of the 1990s. During the battles, Alija (Ilija) meets the man thought to be his brother, who was kidnapped by the Serbs. Alija (Ilija) and Miloš (Selim) experience the painful moments of national awakening together in the turmoil of the war.

Srdan Dragojević explicitly presents the events of the Eastern Bosnian frontier in his drama from 1996, the *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* (Dragojević 1996). The representation of the past, the destruction of Yugoslavism, but simultaneously the exploitation of the possibility provided by nostalgia reflects the disharmony of the strange feeling of duality. The director displays the horrors of the unnecessary war through the lives of two good friends, the Serbian Milan (Dragan Bjelogrić) and the Muslim Halil (Nikola Pejaković). The plot includes four well-separated timelines. The documentary interludes filled with parodistic elements illustrate the ideal of the Yugoslav national identity, the opening of the “Brotherhood and Unity” tunnel. In the visions of the seriously injured Milan, kept in the military hospital of Belgrade, the events of recent past (battles taking place in the symbolic tunnel), in conjunction with images of further past (important moments of his childhood)

appear (Perić Momčilović 2016: 116–123). The flashbacks of timelines determine the dynamics of the movie, although the alternations and connections of nostalgic frames of dreams and traumatic experiences provide the film its essence. A recurring emblem of the movie is drama is the DrekaVac, the notorious monster figure of South Slavic mythology, which acts as a symbol of destruction and inevitable doom (Kulišić et al. 1980:116). The atrocities occurring during the Bosnian massacres are also dealt with by the American-Serbian production the *Saviour*, revealing the distressing story of a Serbian mercenary soldier (Antonijević 1998). The war-themed post-Yugoslav movies are not merely classical war movies. They can be interpreted as documents of a given period, forms of trauma narratives, and visual heritage of cultural memory.

### WAR NARRATIVE, ROAD MOVIE

Especially important element of films produced in this period: the war narrative combined with road movie style. Similar movies were also delivered in earlier periods of Serbian cinematography (Šijan 1980). One of the most reputable road movie is *The Red Colored Grey Truck* (2004), the protagonist of which are Ratko (Srđan Todorović), a colour-blind truck driver from a Bosnian village, and Suzana (Aleksandra Balmazović), who is fleeing the big city abroad. The variation of methods of comedy and tragedy, their journey – going through war zones too – interwoven with surreal elements create the distorted illusion of a happy ending (Koljević 2004). The Italian coast, envisioned to be the final destination, acts as a symbol of the desired imaginary space (Ternovác 2017:248).

The comedy *The Tour* (2008) presents members of a theatrical group traveling from Belgrade finding themselves in the chaos of ethnic and religious conflict (Marković 2008). Escaping across frontlines, experiencing series of tragic events, they realize the critical situation of Yugoslav national identity, and its paradoxical, schizophrenic state. The naive, pacifist performers gain an awareness of the rise of (Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian) chauvinism and the painful reality of senseless warfare. The significance of language-coded identity (the difference between dialects) is to be considered a handy directorial trick (Ternovác 2017: 253–254). The different use of words of the Serbian actors, who are captured by the Croatian guard, cause them to end up in a life-threatening situation. Lale (Gordan Kičić) young actor's plaintive monologue's conclusion: "I am not a Serb! I am an actor!"; furthermore the scene of conflict between the Belgrade Chetnik leader and the local Bosnian Serb commander hints a complete confusion of identity in the cinematograph.

The plot of the unusually unsettling movie, *The Load* (2018) is situated in the darkest period of the Milošević regime, the Kosovo genocide ending (1998-1999)

NATO bombings (Glavonić 2018). The protagonist, Vlado (Leon Lučev), a truck driver from Pančova, receives a special task. In the course of his hazardous journey, he must transport a secret shipment from Kosovo to Belgrade. At the end of his journey, he becomes aware that he was carrying the corpses of the victims of the genocide to the extermination base. In the movie's epilogue, the matter of recognition and the moment of confrontation weighs as a heavy burden on his soul. It is worth to mention the feature film *Summer Movie*, directed by Szabolcs Tolnai, who is originally from Vojvodina. The plot of it takes place amidst the years of the Balkan war in the 1990s, and it depicts the anomalies of the fragmented ex-Yugoslav society (Tolnai 1999).

### **SOCIAL DRAMA, PRESENTATION OF TRAUMATIC EVENTS IN MODERN SERBIAN CINEMATIC WORKS**

The NATO air strike left an acute mark in Serbian cinematic culture as well. Among the movies dealing with the bloody period of the spring of 1999, Ljubiša Samardžić's first directorial work, *Sky Hook* (2000), is worth to be mentioned. The story presents the daily life and hopeless struggle of desperate younglings who build a basketball court in the ruins of the capital (Samardžić 2000). Throughout the course of the moments that construct cultural trauma, the power of group identity forming factors becomes more valuable (Gyáni 2011:5–19; Caruth 1991; Alexander et al. 2004). In Ljubiša Samardžić's cinema, sport - serving social cohesion and integration – acts as a symbol of national unity.

Emir Kusturica's *On the Milky Road* (2016) is characterized by a drawn-out, confusing plot and frequently appearing forced clichés. The audience has a hard time understanding the love thread of the story, the complicated, irrational relationship between Kosta (Emir Kusturica), who transports milk to the Bosnian front on a donkey, and Nevesta (Monica Bellucci), a refugee girl. Bloodshed seizes by the half of the movie, consequently the interpretation of the horrific war, interwoven with allegorical-fantastical elements can only be considered a secondary role (Rác 2017).

In connection with multiple works of the transitional period (*Wounds, The Fourth Man, No One's Child, Circles*) it can be determined that the depiction of war-time atrocities in an indirect manner happens via connecting different time layers. The primary goal of these movies is to illustrate the disintegrating Yugoslavia's and its successor state's economic and social problems from the individual's, as well as the micro-community's perspective. Traumatizing factors can act as resultants of the social crisis situation, having a negative impact on the identity of the individual, who actively contributes to the shaping of collective consciousness.



The fundamental question of the drama *Wounds* (1998) is how the fragmentation of the Yugoslav state and the civil war affected the behaviour of the younger generation and the formation of their future vision (Dragojević 1998). The director depicts the misery of the various social layers of the Belgrade residential area, the sad, stigmatized self-destructive fate of adolescent boys living on crime, using neorealist, occasionally naturalistic methods and a grotesque insight (Spiró 1999).

*The Fourth Man* (2007) action/thriller's key figure, is the heavily wounded, Major (Nikola Kojo), awakening from a coma. After the symptoms of amnesia induced by the trauma ease, terrific memories of his past progressively return. The dire moments of his life, burdened with murders, multiple crimes against innocent civilians, and a series of frames, reminiscent of the loss of his wife and child, slowly get visualized to him (Zečević 2017).

The drama *No One's Child* (2014) covers the shocks and integration of a boy to human society, who was discovered in the Bosnian mountains and raised by wolves (Ršumović 2014). The tale of the boy named Haris (Denis Murić), is also perceivable as a bizarre adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's novel *The Jungle Book*. He learns to walk, later to speak as a resident of the foster home of Belgrade. His socialization progresses slowly, step-by-step, but within 4 years he manages to almost completely integrate into the institute's micro-community. At the outbreak of the Balkan war, Haris is identified as Bosnian based on his name, and he is sent to Sarajevo. The stateless adolescent ends up in a refugee camp, eventually finding himself in the whirlwind of clashes. He escapes the front, through his instincts he recognizes the landscape, the wilderness of the forest covering the Bosnian mountains, from where he was taken to the bonds of human civilization as a child. Director Vuk Ršumović, in his award-winning work at the Venice International Film Festival, gives a distorted picture as a form of criticism of the senseless carnage taking place in the region.

*Circles* (2013), an iconic Serbian movie about making dramatic moral decisions and forgiveness, places the events in multiple parallel timelines (Golubović 2013). The stem of the story is a fratricide committed by three armed Serbians during the war. As a Bosnian tobacconist in a small Bosnian town is attacked, Serbian soldier Marko (Vuk Kostić), who is on a holiday, attempts to defend him and is killed by the aggressors. The threads of the story are destined to be intertwined twelve years later. The father, who built a church for the remembrance of his murdered son, helps the son of one of the perpetrators, while the good old friend of the victim (Marko) – working as a doctor – is forced to save the life of the other killer. In the battle-scarred Bosnia and Herzegovina, numerous Orthodox and Catholic churches and mosques are being constructed (for the cultivation of religious belonging). However, in the movie it serves a different purpose: it symbolizes purification,



acceptance, and forgiveness. Srđan Golubović, the director, explained during an interview, that: “The construction of the church to me is not a religious act, but an elder’s effort to set up a memorial for his dead son, thereby providing meaning to his own life.” (Gorács 2013).

The subjects of quite a few Serbian films produced in the last twenty years emphasize the interpretation of problems of society occurring after the war. In the case of works presenting the everyday lives of generations burdened with trauma, lacking a vision of future, struggling with financial problems, the South Slavic war appears only as a consequence. The main characters of the thriller/drama *Absolute 100* (2001) are the Gordić brothers, residents of outer Belgrade (Golubović 2001). Saša (Vuk Kostić) is trying to save his elder brother’s, Igor’s life, a former world champion sports shooter, who has escaped in the realms of substances. Consequently, the similarly talented sports shooter boy, who once admired his brother, ends up in a conflict with the local leaders of organized crime, resulting in an unavoidable tragic outcome. The works *The Trap* (2007), *Huddersfield* (2007), and *When I Grow Up, I’ll Be a Kangaroo* (2004) are the most valid representations of the social identity crisis following the war (Golubović 2001; Živković 2007; Andrić 2004).

To sum it up, the conclusion can be drawn that the South Slavic warfare of the end of the 20th century, severe economic difficulties, and social tensions had an awfully large impact on productive Serbian cinematography of the transitional period. War narrative, interwoven with the genre of road movie, is one of the essential elements of movies of the cycle. The directors of the traumatic, identity crisis inducing period depicted the reality of social horror in a much rawer and more dramatic manner, compared to their predecessors.

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