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Fragments of a Forgotten Spectacle: Tito, the Serbs, and Appropriated Time

Abstract

Želimir Žilnik's *Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time* was filmed and released in Serbia's capital Belgrade, in 1994. The country was under severe international sanctions due to wars in the neighbouring republics, all of which until recently were parts of the Socialist Yugoslavia, once created and led by Josip Broz Tito. By taking an actor to wear Tito's uniform through Belgrade, Žilnik documented the bemused comments of random passers-by, thus creating a 'filmed happening'. In this essay it is argued that on a number of formal and narrative levels this is very much a typical Žilnik's documentary, and as such it is contextualised within his work made both prior and after this film, with an emphasis on his most acclaimed feature *Early Works* (1969). However, by introducing the theory of the Spectacle by Guy Debord, as part of the Situationist International, it is also argued that this film marks a clear rupture within Žilnik's oeuvre, after which he takes a new direction in his critical approach. This film thus further clarifies his political positions retrospectively, concluding that it could be read as an example of Situationist action too, re-appropriating time for its disenfranchised and marginalised subjects.

Keywords

Želimir Žilnik; Guy Debord; Society of the Spectacle; 'Tito Among the Serbs'; Docu-fiction; Berlinale; Yugoslav New Wave

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Biography

Dr Vlastimir Sudar lectures in the Critical and Historical Studies department of Kingston School of Art at Kingston University. His main research interests are in Balkan and East European cinema and he published a monograph entitled *A Portrait of the Artist as a Political Dissident: The Life and Work of Aleksandar Petrović* in English in 2013, and in his own translation in Serbian in 2017. His feature length film *Borders, Raindrops* (2018) has won a number of international awards.

Additional Information

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The career of Željimir Žilnik began in the mid-1960s, a period characterised by significant technological innovation in film production equipment. Lighter cameras, smaller gauges and faster filmstock had already had an impact on the aesthetics of a number of films, and were indeed fundamental to the phenomenon of the French New Wave, stimulating similar practices. Željimir Žilnik was equally obsessed with seeking ‘truth through film’, his first films being short documentaries. His loyalty to the form meant that a documentary aesthetic imbued even his later fictional work.

Notwithstanding these beginnings, both of Žilnik’s most successful films, winning top awards at the Berlinale – *Rani Radovi/Early Works* (Yugoslavia) that won the Golden Bear in 1969, and *Dupe od mramora/Marble Ass* (Yugoslavia) winning Teddy Bear Jury Award in 1995 – were distributed as fiction films. This led to his work frequently being described as *docu-fiction*. The principal focus of this essay will be on his mid-length documentary film *Tito drugi put medju Srbima/Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time*, henceforward *Tito Among the Serbs*, produced by the Serbian radio station B92, and premiered at Belgrade’s Cultural Centre on 15 April 1994 (Popović 1994, 39). At the time of film’s production, Serbia was embroiled in armed conflicts following the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and the film was a comment on the political situation in which it was made.

When Žilnik started making films in the 1960s, he embraced the spirit of *cinéma vérité*. At that time, one of the principal modes of making and thinking about film was to engage with social and political issues – issues which culminated in the protests of 1968 that shook the whole world across political divides. While the events in Paris are well-known and documented, those in Belgrade the following month are less so. Žilnik’s short documentary *Lipanjaska gibanja/June Turmoil* (Yugoslavia, 1968) demonstrates explicitly that Žilnik was not just an observational filmmaker, but also a passionate participant. Several other *cinéastes* of the period joined the protests of the people they were filming, notably Jean-Luc Godard, the *Nouvelle Vague*’s key filmmaker. These political events heavily influenced both Godard’s and Žilnik’s subsequent careers.

Guy Debord and the Situationist International are generally understood as being the ideologues of the 1968 student protests, and they have certainly remained its memorable proponents through their theoretical and artistic work. Although there were no direct ties between Žilnik and the Situationists, it is revealing to explore the extent to which an analysis of the political and economic conditions of the latter’s work corresponded to that of Žilnik’s, and how his films often epitomised many of their concepts. I shall focus on Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, published in 1967, although in 1974, Debord also made a film based on the book.

While one of the most significant characteristics of the Situationists from the contemporary perspective, is that they tried to ‘decolonise’ and ‘internationalise’ their membership, and consequently their political discourse, there are still a number of acknowledged flaws in their theories. Furthermore, even if Žilnik is approaching his eightieth birthday at the time of writing, he is still very productive and his work continues to defy strict characterisation. Within this loose triangle of theoretical shortcomings, the continued production of films and the nurtured perceptions innate to the researcher, the ideas proposed here are offered as potential directions for further research.

I intend to demonstrate why *Tito Among the Serbs* is a landmark film, which while firmly maintaining the continuity of Žilnik's political engagement and criticism, represents equally an unambiguous rupture in the content of that criticism. In the process, I shall examine the ways in which this film simultaneously challenges two types of spectacle described by Debord.

Debord, Žilnik, and the Proletariat: Before and After 1968

The 1960s were a decade in which there was a reassessment of WWII's legacy, the Cold War clearly being not as cold, as was described. Often starting from a Marxist viewpoint, conceptual and ideological alternatives struggled to emerge. The incisive social critiques of these efforts are in evidence in Žilnik's early short documentaries: *Žurnal o omladini na selu, zimi/Newsreel on Village Youth, in Winter* (1967) and *Nezaposleni ljudi/The Unemployed* (1968). *Early Works*, his first feature length fiction film was similarly challenging in its criticism of the practical application of Marxist ideas in the villages of Vojvodina, then autonomous region of Yugoslavia.

The criticism that Socialist countries such as Yugoslavia were not true to their Marxist principles, was confined not just to the residents of these countries, but was also common amongst a number of those living and working in the West. This was especially the case for young people who felt betrayed by the official parties of the left in their own countries, as well as those who felt that what Karl Marx had written in the nineteenth century needed to be brought up to date to accurately describe contemporary capitalism.

In 1957, the charismatic thinker Guy Debord wrote the Situationist manifesto 'Report on the Construction of Situations'. This pamphlet addressed an eclectic group of mainly European artists. However, the group soon broke up, due to disagreements over the extent to which Marxist revolutionary theories were of significance for the members' art practices. By 1963, Debord, together with Raoul Vaneigem, had turned away from contemporary artists, instead finding allies for their revolutionary ideas amongst the students of various French universities. The most prominent of these was the Tunisian Situationist, Mustapha Omar Khayati, best known for his pamphlet 'On the Poverty of Student Life' that caused an uproar at the University of Strasbourg in 1966.

In 1967, Raoul Vaneigem published *The Revolution of Everyday Life* and Debord his *Society of the Spectacle*. These texts managed to update and revitalise Marxism while at the same time providing a more global, albeit still centralised, critique of capitalism. Both texts were much concerned with the notion of post-colonialism and developing a decolonised perspective on the struggles against capitalism's exploitative strategies.

Debord took a critical approach to Marx's analysis, on a number of levels: he coined the now famous adage that the results of early Marxism lie in the 'graveyard of good intentions' (Debord 2014, 37). Marx wrote *Capital* in the British Library and Debord also – with humour – pointed out that Marx had incorporated a number of Victorian prejudices and misconceptions within his ostensibly revolutionary work (ibid., 38). Such a critical approach to Marxism did indeed provide new ways of reading Marx and of criticising current conditions.

In 1969, the film that marked Žilnik's international breakthrough riffed in its title on Marx's famous 'Early Works'. Equally, the film was much concerned with the problems of interpreting Marx in social practice and emphasised revolutionary impotence when these ideas are not sufficiently attuned to the social and economic conditions in which they are implemented.

Debord proposed that the way to organise society was through the formation of Workers' Councils, which would then federate amongst each other (ibid., 62). At this time, Yugoslavia was a federation of six republics, in which worker self-management was actively promoted. The social context in which Žilnik was working was therefore as close as anywhere to the 'generalised self-management' advocated by the Situationists. None of this prevented Žilnik's films criticising the practice of Yugoslav Socialism.

Debord and Žilnik also shared concerns about the changing position of the working classes. It is on this latter level that parallels in their work were prescient rather than coincidental, and on which level, their work still resonates today. Debord wrote in his 114th thesis that the developed world's proletariat, which for Marx was supposed to be the primary revolutionary class, 'has lost its ability to assert its own perspective' (ibid., 60-61). Debord recognised that in 'developed capitalism', the worker – formerly a proletarian – has been reshaped into a consumer (ibid., 17). Reading *Society of the Spectacle* today, Debord's descriptions of the logic of consumer culture are one of the aspects that resonate most strongly. Debord saw humans as being turned into animals chasing their own tails, doing jobs they don't like in order to buy things they don't need, and all this for the sake of producing profits for a handful of mostly men.

The notion that the main objective of post-World War Two capitalism was to somehow 'pacify' its most revolutionary class was later expanded in André Gorz's *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism*, first published in 1980. Who would the 'working class in practice' be in the developed capitalist world that Karl Marx initially analysed? This became the key political question, not only for policy makers and conservative think-tanks, but also for Debord and Žilnik.

Žilnik spent most of the 1970s in the Federal Republic of (West) Germany, where he became preoccupied with documenting the lives of the so-called 'guest workers'. *Die Gastarbeiter* were a mostly disenfranchised immigrant labour force, who powered the now famous German economic post-war boom. In 1975, Žilnik made his documentary *Inventur – Metzstrasse 11* on this subject. His preoccupation continued when he returned to Yugoslavia in January 1977, and made a rare venture into the theatre. Collaborating with the composer Pedja Vranešević, Žilnik directed the 'guest-worker opera' – *Gastarbajter opera*.

That the culture of the working class was changing under economic and social pressures was clear to both Debord and Žilnik. Such changes would become an enduring theme in Žilnik's later work. He addressed the question of migration, in *Kenedi se vraća kući/Kenedi Goes Back Home* (Serbia and Montenegro, 2003). Six years later, he looked at the declining industries of Eastern Europe and the consequent eradication of working class culture in *Stara škola kapitalizma/The Old School of Capitalism* (Serbia, 2009).

Both Debord and Žilnik were concerned with the displacement of the local working class in order to maintain the capitalist order and existing power relations. In practice, this

displacement took place most relentlessly in the two countries ideologically leading the capitalist world: the US and the UK.

Debord had anticipated that the foundations of capitalist dominance over Socialist alternatives would first have to be won at home, in ways in which the local working classes felt that they had been – of their own free will – involved in the process of sharing capitalist wealth. Margaret Thatcher, as prime minister of the United Kingdom, and Ronald Reagan as president of the United States, both put their strategies into practice in the 1980s. The former did not envisage the proletariat of the developed capitalist countries as owners of the means of production but through privatisation, she made them shareholders of the country's once public companies. The workers were bribed to become small-stake capitalists themselves. Thatcher also effectively transformed her arch-enemies – the unions – from being advocates of class struggle and even potential leaders of a revolutionary takeover, into, defenders of consumer rights, at best. Whatever one may feel about Thatcher and Reagan, we have to acknowledge that in the 1980s, they succeeded in achieving their goals. The predominance of liberal capitalism through deregulation and privatisation would become their crucial victory over any form of planned approach to politics and economics (Jacobs 2021). While in the late 1990s and early 2000s, this may have created a feeling of consumer bliss in the West, the economic crisis of 2008 was a telling demonstration that this type of capitalism inevitably leads to a crisis that can only be soothed by financial interventions from the state. Not only were these characteristics of 'new' capitalism predicted in *Society of the Spectacle*, they also became the focus of Žilnik's oeuvre, after *Tito Among the Serbs*.

When the place of proletariat in developed capitalist countries is taken by cheap, often illegal immigrant labour, is it any wonder that immigrants and refugees are despised and feared – and seen as a threat? Immigrants and refugees are now recognised as a potential revolutionary force that could pick up on the historical class struggle described by Karl Marx, as the domestic workforce has been successfully assuaged, subverted and its desires commodified by the beacons of the 'free market'. Žilnik's later films including *Tvrđjava Evropa/Fortress Europe* (Slovenia, 2000) and *Najlepša zemlja na svetu/The Most Beautiful Country in the World* (Austria, 2018) also address this situation.

Debord and stolen time

Guy Debord introduced two additional ideas, crucial to the arguments in this essay, one being *the spectacle*, the other, *time*; naming a chapter in his book – Spectacular Time.

Debord's notion of the Spectacle was subsequently developed further by his colleague, Jean Baudrillard, who theorised spectacle as a hyperreality in itself, especially when reinforced by the relentless proliferation of modern technology, anticipated by them both (Poster 2001). As Debord explains in the poetic and concise prose of his 1st thesis:

In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation (Debord 2014, 2).

Debord defines his total, conceptualised Spectacle – thus with a capital S in this debate, as opposed to any ordinary spectacle – as a 'materialised' worldview, which has 'become an objective reality'. He argues that whatever 'its particular manifestations – news, propaganda,

advertising, entertainment – the spectacle is the *model* of the prevailing way of life’ (ibid.). Debord argues that contemporary capitalism has managed to channel our thinking and desires, our whole existence, into serving the purpose of its own maintenance and progress, yet in ways in which we participate willingly and often consider our participation as personally liberating.

As a consequence of this, and as a stepping stone to our full entrapment within the logic of free capitalism, ‘it was first necessary to *violently expropriate* [our] *time*’ (all emphases in the original, ibid., 85). Debord then describes the historical background, stating:

The *owners of history* have given time a *direction*, a direction which is also a *meaning* [...] The masters who used the protection of myth to *make history their private property* did so first of all in the realm of illusion (ibid., 71).

While going through the history of the ‘expropriation of time’ he explains its all-encompassing consequences: ‘the ruling class [is] made up of *specialists in the possession of things* who are themselves therefore possessed by things’ (ibid., 78). Debord, along with other Situationists, perceived a number of struggles against capitalism as elements of the struggle to reclaim this appropriated time, and explains that ‘by demanding to *live* the historical time that it produces, the proletariat discovers the simple, unforgettable core of its revolutionary project’ (ibid., 79). He thus shows that the struggle for time is crucial. With amusing but undimmed persistence, he exposes why full control of our time is necessary for capitalism to be sustainable:

Life insurance ads merely insinuate that he may be guilty of dying without having provided for the smooth continuation of the system [...] This social absence of death coincides with the social absence of life’ (ibid., 86).

Debord, somewhat pessimistically, concludes: ‘The spectacle [...] represents a *false consciousness of time*’ (ibid., 85).

Society of the Spectacle can be seen as a development of Marx’s and Engels’ original idea of *false consciousness*, taken to an extreme. Debord also points out that the origins of the society of the spectacle can be found in medieval religious imagery, combined with the interpretations of the Gospels, both of which served a hierarchical political function in society. He opens his book by citing Ludwig Feuerbach from *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), claiming that: ‘The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion’ (Debord 2014, 6).

My intention is to take Debord’s work on the Spectacle ‘as is’ in its temporal and broader context, to situate it (pun intended) in contrast and in conjunction with Žilnik’s work. The intention is to see whether by doing this, we may achieve a deeper understanding of Žilnik’s work, as well as of one particular film and the social context in which the latter was produced. Both Debord in Paris and Žilnik in Novi Sad clearly identified problems with the implementation of Marxism in ‘real-socialist’ countries, and their work often revolved around these criticisms. They were not alone: in his collaborative film *Pravda* (1969), Jean-Luc Godard criticised ‘real-socialism’ for being a form of state capitalism, as well as the Czechoslovak workers’ protests for lacking ideological purity.

The Insatiable Power of the Capitalist Spectacle

The division of the world in the 1960s became increasingly transparent. The capitalist, industrially dominant first world continued to lead in the production of the Spectacle – notwithstanding the enormous advances, especially in the ‘space race’, of the Socialist industrialising second world. Debord describes Soviet Block socialism as ‘bureaucratic state capitalism’, as opposed to the ‘bourgeois capitalism’ of the West (ibid., 59). Debord, actually, predicted the future collapse of the USSR, explaining that there was a lie at the heart of its existence. The other countries of the Soviet Block slightly readjusted this lie to better fit their own national contexts, thus each country created its own *national lie* (ibid., 57).

During the Belgrade demonstrations of June 1968, the student demonstrators addressed the fact that – although ostensibly socialist – Yugoslavia was full of inequalities. One of the most popular banners was ‘Down with the Red Bourgeoisie’. Žilnik unambiguously captured such sentiments in his film of these events. At the time, Yugoslavia was a socialist country: its citizens held red passports emblazoned with a coat of arms crowned with a Communist star and enshrined in sheaths of wheat and other products of peasants’ and workers’ labour. Heraldry notwithstanding, Tito had split with Stalin’s USSR’s in 1948 and thereafter vociferously criticised the Soviet system for its bureaucratic failings. In contrast, Yugoslavia developed its own variant of socialism based on workers’ and peasants’ *self-management*. Furthermore, in September 1961, Tito had chaired the first summit of the non-aligned nations in Belgrade. With Egypt and India as his principal allies, the official realignment of the ‘Third World’ had begun (Lampe 1996).

In view of the above considerations, one might imagine that Tito’s Yugoslavia would endear itself to Debord and the Situationists. However, as history has so far demonstrated, Debord prioritised the importance of the production of Spectacle. The Spectacle belonged to first world capitalism, and he perceived any alternatives as at best fake. On this level, Debord would probably have stood firmly behind Žilnik and his films of the period, in which the latter brutally dismantled the promises of Yugoslav socialism. Žilnik did not restrain himself from making oblique, albeit recognisable swipes at the cult around Tito, the fearless leader of the Partisans, the Yugoslav resistance movement of War World Two. While Žilnik’s early documentary was titled *Little Pioneers*, it was clear to most people in Yugoslavia that it referred to the movement better known as Tito’s Pioneers.

Žilnik’s films of this period are now seen as part of the Black Wave of Yugoslav cinema. These were all ‘polemical films’, following Greg de Cuir’s argument that the Black Wave films always confronted the mainstream politics of their own country (De Cuir 2019). Žilnik’s *Early Works* is perhaps the crowning film of the period. In it, he portrayed the Yugoslav inebriation with ideology as deeply concerning – as Debord had in his book – while deconstructing the Yugoslav condition in relation to Marxist theory. In the process, Tito’s presence is strongly felt, leading to one of the most commonly retold anecdotes of Yugoslav cinema.

President Tito was an avid film fan and watched all new Yugoslav films, and many others, in a private screening room with his own projectionist – the subject of Mila Turajlić’s documentary *Cinema Komunisto* (Serbia, 2010). Some 20 minutes into the screening of *Early Works*, Tito allegedly stopped the film, fuming furiously and demanding to know what these ‘idiots’ actually wanted? (Vučetić 2012). The ‘idiots’ presumably referred to both the characters in the film, the four young revolutionaries pursuing ‘true’ Marxism in backward Yugoslav villages, as well as the author of this broad critique of Tito’s socialism.

Before its premiere, the film was almost banned in Yugoslavia by a court order. This was overturned however, through a legal appeal, by, amongst others, Žilnik himself who has a law degree. Regardless, the film was then quietly suppressed through the 'voluntary ignorance' of those Communist party members in charge of managing the film's distribution. In Yugoslavia, Žilnik was perceived as an anarchist who hated the system, as well as President Tito. In the early 1970s, following various crackdowns on dissent, he left the country and moved to West Germany.

This severe criticism on film of Yugoslav political and economic conditions had an ambiguous perception. While highly regarded in the West, especially at major film festivals, and seen as a sign of Yugoslav intellectual and political maturity, it was no surprise that the country's political mainstream found it galling. Arguably, the film may have contributed to the political crackdowns in the early 1970s.

Outside the mainstream, there were some young, ideologically independent film reviewers, who started criticising films such as *Early Works* as shallow and dull. These critics argued that such films pandered too brazenly, to the expectations of Western critics and festivals, which would in return, celebrate the dissidents' work. Žilnik's film received such a review from the young Croatian, Ranko Munitić, who subsequently became one of the most important critics and chroniclers of Yugoslav cinema, until his death in Belgrade in 2009. In his review 'One Film Scandal the Yugoslav Way', Munitić described certain characteristics of ostensibly persecuted films from second and third world countries, which would be endorsed at major Western festivals, regardless of the films' cinematic, narrative or other qualities (Munitić 1969, reprinted in Miltojević 1992, 92-95). Munitić claimed that such films were made due to the premeditated opportunism of their authors, on which basis, they received support in the West. He maintained that Žilnik was just a 'shock artist', who had already stirred up public opinion during production with promises of how the film would attack every possible taboo. In support of these claims, Munitić cited Žilnik's release of erotically charged production stills that were gratuitously exploitative of its principal actress – Milja Vujanović.

The 'hype' built up to such an extent that the court charge came as no surprise, even before the film was screened. There was also an expectation that the ruling would be overturned. In the meantime, the *mêlée* would provide the best possible publicity before the film's already agreed premiere at the Berlin Film Festival. According to Munitić, the hype worked and this rather 'mediocre' film thus managed to get the attention and praise that would otherwise have been lacking, especially at a festival such as Berlin, which ultimately, had its own political agenda (*ibid.*). Such criticism strikes a peculiar note nowadays, as there is greater awareness and interest in the nature of film festivals themselves, especially as Berlin itself was recently rocked by a dramatic scandal.

At the time of its jubilant 70th edition in 2020, investigative journalists from the German newspaper *Die Zeit* proved that Dr Alfred Bauer, one of the key figures in the inauguration and establishment of the festival, had been a high-ranking Nazi during the War and worked for Joseph Goebbels, a fact he had kept hidden (Pulver and Connolly 2020). Considering that when the Berlin festival had begun, the city had been divided – symbolically the West of the city stood for capitalism, the East for socialism – the festival's agenda had clearly always been political. The Berlin Film Festival was indeed, first proposed by an American film officer Oscar Martay, who persuaded the American Army to fund it, with the aim of making

West Berlin more glamorous and desirable than its sombre Socialist counterpart. The significance of such an event was recognised immediately, which would not have surprised Debord, who recognised in turn the crucial importance of a spectacle in construction of the Spectacle. Is it any wonder that Alfred Bauer's security check was not as thorough as it might have been? The USA had a new enemy to fight and recruiting former Nazis was not uncommon.

Bauer was the festival's director when Žilnik received his much coveted Golden Bear, and himself praised the film's dissident attitude. Ineluctably, this lends credibility to Ranko Munitić's criticism that a festival such as Berlin would give awards to films from countries on the other side of the political divide when such awards were likely to have adverse political consequences there.

Early Works represented a dissident and oppositional voice in Yugoslavia and may therefore reasonably be placed in the tradition of such politicised cinema. Notwithstanding Tito's break with Stalin, Yugoslavia was on the other side of the political divide to West Germany, which hosted the Berlin Film Festival. This was especially pertinent, considering that on the other side of the Berlin Wall was Communist territory.

Debord saw acts of dissent and resistance as feeding the Spectacle, which then 'override[s] the ideological or police-state protectionist barriers set up by local spectacles with pretensions of independence' (Debord 2014, 23). What Debord terms here a 'local spectacle' corresponds to Tito's political discourse as imposed through the Yugoslav state and its apparatus, including local media and press. For Debord, these are just minor pieces of a puzzle within the broader, dominant spectacle, with opposition support given to filmmakers such as Žilnik explained in his 57th thesis as follows:

Just as it presents the pseudo-goods to be coveted, it offers false models of revolution to local revolutionaries. The bureaucratic regimes in power in certain industrialised countries have their own particular type of spectacle, but it is an integral part of the total spectacle, serving as its pseudo-opposition and actual support. Even if local manifestations of the spectacle include certain totalitarian specialisations of social communication and control, from the standpoint of the overall functioning of the system those specialisations are simply playing their allotted role within a *global division of spectacular tasks* (ibid.).

For Debord, producing politicised work and winning awards at major festivals, filmmakers, such as Žilnik in 1969 – as well as the politicians they opposed – were merely 'play[ing] their allotted role' in the 'global division of spectacular tasks'. It is evident from this premise that Debord believed in the central position of capitalism, easily over-arching and conditioning its opposition in the then Socialist world. For Socialist countries such as the USSR, Debord claimed: 'in reality they are nothing but particular sectors whose fundamental essence lies in the global system that contains them, the single movement that has turned the whole planet into its field of operation: capitalism' (ibid., 22). He then concludes that:

The society that bears the spectacle does not dominate underdeveloped regions solely by its economic hegemony. It also dominates them *as the society of the spectacle* (ibid.).

Some of these definitions may raise an eyebrow, however, socialism in Europe has indeed collapsed: East Berlin and East Germany were co-opted into a reunified Germany according to West German requirements, and neither the USSR nor Yugoslavia exist today. It is hence hard to argue with Debord that the capitalist Spectacle prevailed over its socialist alternatives.

Within the former, Žilnik's critique of Tito's socialism in *Early Works* was neither Marxist nor revolutionary, but just one small piece within a much broader field of capitalist exploitation.

Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time – the Film and Resistance

In 1994, Žilnik's documentary, *Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time*, premiered in Belgrade, far from any major festival. By this time, the Yugoslav context had changed beyond recognition, even though it was still within the perimeter described in Debord's *Spectacle*. As Debord had predicted in 1967, revolutionary societies led by bureaucrats lead to collapse. The Soviet Union had been at its last gasp in 1989, when demolition of the Berlin Wall started on 9th November. Although not really part of the Soviet Block, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was still part of this same 'spectacle', and thus began unravelling around the same time. Military conflicts ignited at different intensities in Slovenia and Croatia in 1991, then spread to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992. While the federal capital Belgrade remained the capital of Serbia, this meant that the latter was perceived as trying to maintain its own interests via the Federation, or rather the federal army – still well-trained and equipped. In the chaos that ensued, many perceived Tito, who had died in 1980, as the culprit; and if he was not the culprit, then he had at least been a highly unpopular Socialist dictator.

Even if an earlier account may be anecdotal, there seems little doubt that Žilnik was despised by the country's patriarch, whose system his films criticised. It would have not been surprising therefore, had Žilnik led the charge against Tito's personality cult. At this time, a number of other, clearly opportunist directors, released films 'punching' Tito, who was already dead in the ground, without any possibility of defending himself. Goran Marković's *Tito i ja/Tito and I* (Yugoslavia, 1992), for example, was a clichéd comedy shamelessly seeking to capitalise on the situation. If Žilnik too, had been such an opportunist, we might have expected *Tito Among the Serbs* to follow the same route. In a number of interviews following the premiere of the film however, Žilnik emphasised that 'in these truly difficult times', it was essential to try and 'soberly and rationally evaluate Tito's legacy' (Milosavljević 1994, 30; Pašić 1994, 9). Should this be perceived as a volte-face on Žilnik's part, or had he been all along, a genuine critic rather than an opportunist? In any case, *Tito Among the Serbs* here marks a rupture with Žilnik's previous work, if only in terms of its political content.

Žilnik's career throughout the 1960s had been altogether dissident and oppositional, and resulted in him leaving Yugoslavia in the 1970s. During the 1980s however, as real-socialism slowly released its hold on power, Žilnik's early work, including *Early Works*, started to enjoy a reappraisal. The director even became a distinguished presence on the state owned station, Television of Novi Sad. He directed a number of original works for television, often involving a combination of fiction placed in what would otherwise be a documentary setting. *Brooklyn – Gusinje/Brooklyn – Gusinje* (1988) was an example of this and subsequently earned the epithet, 'docu-fiction'.

By the late 1980s, it was evident that socialism as a system was disintegrating and would be replaced by some form of liberal democracy. What was less clear was the devastating effect this would have on Yugoslavia. The disappearance of Socialism – which was, at least in theory, outward looking, egalitarian and international in principle – from everyday discourse,

led to its replacement with inward looking nationalisms and the most rabid form of ‘winner take all’ capitalism. While this transformation was more or less common in all the former Socialist states, where Debord’s Spectacle had introduced an obsession with wealth and commodities, this was further exacerbated in Yugoslavia, by merciless inter-ethnic wars.

Before the reconfiguration of identity had even started, many in Yugoslavia had flinched at the new direction – but there was no going back. Moreover, those setting up new power structures in the erstwhile Yugoslav republics had all been in one way or another, part of the former communist establishment, and simply readjusted their discourse to fit the new situation. In Serbia, Slobodan Milošević seized power. Once a classic communist bureaucrat, he was now a charismatic leader flirting unabashedly with nationalism, while still leading the Socialist Party of Serbia, the descendant of the Communist party. Unsurprisingly, the narratives became a cocktail of improbable ideological ingredients, but as Debord explained, these minor spectacles worked in their own pseudo-states with aspirations of independence.

In 1994, Serbia was at one of the lowest points in its history, emerging from the highest inflation ever recorded, suffocated by international sanctions and blamed for financing and equipping the exceptionally vile war in neighbouring Bosnia. There was again plenty against which to rebel. Although, as a legacy of the Socialist system, the mediated space was homogenised and controlled, there were nevertheless some independent, oppositional stations. One of these was Radio B92, standing for Belgrade FM92, which persistently applied for a TV frequency or national broadcast channel, but which the government equally persistently refused to grant, as the station was staunchly opposed to the Milošević regime. As the struggle for a broadcasting licence intensified, B92 initiated production of TV programming. Žilnik proposed a film to B92, which was immediately accepted (Petkovska-Gajić 1994, 13; Čurgus 1994, 17). *Tito Among the Serbs* was filmed in two days, in early March of 1994, resulting in three hours of material, all shot by Žilnik’s frequent collaborator, Miodrag Miša Milošević.

Žilnik’s concept was simple and frugal, both in terms of narrative and production. He employed two actors, the well-known comedian Dragoljub S. Ljubičić – Mićko – who wore Tito’s Marshal’s uniform, and Milan Pavlović who would be the driver of Tito’s famous black Mercedes limousine. The pair would drive to downtown Belgrade and provoke reactions from the inhabitants, while the crew filmed. The filmmakers thought ‘the trick’ would most likely fail, as Ljubičić was something of a celebrity and especially familiar thanks to the satirical radio programme, *Indeksovo radio pozorište* (‘The freshers’ radio theatre’). In these shows, he often imitated the voice and manner of speech of famous Yugoslav politicians, including Tito himself. It was to be expected therefore, that he would be recognised by pretty much everyone and they would either ignore him or not take him seriously. At the press conference held for the premiere, Ljubičić expressed his astonishment at the extent to which the passers-by had latched on to his obvious ruse, and engaged openly with the late leader (Popović 1994, 39). The unrestrained outpouring of disaffection and pain at the events in which they found themselves surprised not just the filmmakers, but the critics and commentators as well. Roger Cohen reported in *The New York Times* that the film successfully ‘captures the confusion of a fractured nation, unsure of its history, bewildered by its present, utterly at a loss as to its future’ (Cohen 1994).

The film’s persuasiveness does not stem solely from the sincere reactions of people on the streets, but is of course well-structured by Žilnik and his editor Dara Arsenov, who used extensive archive footage of Tito, as well as sequences from the recent conflicts in Croatia

and Bosnia, to provide both narrative framework and visual shape to the film. This mid-length, 43 minute, documentary premiered in Belgrade in April 1994, attracting much attention and provoking extended debate, while demonstrating Žilnik's trademark agile approach to filmmaking.

When the film opened, some of the reactions related to its unconventional form and duration. The Serbian critic Milan Vlačić defined it as a 'video film, which is documentary-fiction' (Vlačić 1994, 16). Vlačić continues to explain that the model for this type of political satire is to be found in classic late nineteenth century Serbian literature, notably that of Radoje Domanović (ibid.).

What is more intriguing is this definition of 'documentary fiction'. Ever since the crude but useful dichotomy of the Lumière brothers *versus* Georges Méliès, films have been seen as either documentaries or fiction, but not both: docu-fiction thus appearing as an oxymoron. However, if we revisit the basics of documentary theory, it becomes clear that things are not as simple as they seem. John Grierson's definition of documentaries as a 'creative treatment of actuality' resonates: the 'creative treatment' implies that there is an element of 'fiction', or alteration of actuality, in every documentary. Bill Nichols developed this thinking in his *Introduction to Documentary* (2001), in which he introduced the sub-genre of *performative* documentaries. In such films, the filmmaker is often present, and her or his presence instigates the events to be recorded. The documentaries of Michael Moore are popular examples of this type: if Moore were not in front of the camera, nothing would happen. On the other hand, what happens is neither scripted nor could be anticipated.

A number of Žilnik's works fit well within this sub-genre: *Crni film/Black Film* (1971), for example, employed this strategy with Žilnik in front of the camera, many years before Michael Moore. Žilnik may not be in *Tito Among the Serbs*, but Ljubičić in costume is his proxy. It could be argued that *Tito Among the Serbs* is most similar to Žilnik's short documentary *Ustanak u Jasku/Uprising in Jazak* (1973), in its approach. In it the camera itself performs thereby causing the 'performative' documentary to unfold before it. Certainly, the nature of documentaries remains a theoretical battleground and Stella Bruzzi's two books on the topic epitomise this inner conflict, as she argues sometimes against herself (see Bruzzi 2000, and Bruzzi 2006).

If Nichols' approach comes across as too simplistic, Žilnik's practice might be better explained by considering Debord and the Situationists. While the Spectacle may 'appropriate our time', Debord also believed that time could be reclaimed through Situationist action. Tom Vague explains the notion of a Situationist, as 'having to do with the theory or practical activity of constructing situations' (Vague in Debord 2011, n.p.). Such situations 'disturb' the regular order, and hopefully the Spectacle too. With *Tito Among the Serbs*, Žilnik had not only 'constructed a situation' in a public sphere, but had himself described this production as a 'filmed happening' (Sebić 1994, 24). If this was a recorded art-happening, then the end result is a documentary; moreover, it is a Situationist construct. The description of 'docu-fiction' could perhaps be best applied to Žilnik's fiction work – which always had a strong flavour of documentary. Both abovementioned *Early Works* and *Brooklyn – Gusinje*, would be good examples of this. Although unrestrained and often improvised, 'docu-fiction' is still guided and defined by a script, while *Tito Among the Serbs* was a brave leap into the unknown, and the record of this leap is a documentary film.

Another term used by Vlačić in his article following the premiere described *Tito Among the Serbs* as a 'video film' (Vlačić 1994, 16). This caused further confusion as to the actual nature of this work. At the time, there was considerable fear that celluloid film would give way to video tapes and disappear. It is no surprise that Vlačić took a purist stance emphasising that the work originated on Beta SP video, rather than on film. While this was an accurate comment, we might note that debates on nature of film continue to this day, albeit in slightly different form. Considering that film technology had changed immeasurably and often irreversibly throughout the history of cinema, it is no wonder that there are occasional questions around the medium's identity. Only recently, an editorial in *Sight and Sound* opened its debate with the sentence: 'When is a film not a film?' (James 2019, 5). While this editorial referred to a conflict between those productions that go straight to streaming online, without any theatrical distribution, as opposed to those that are first projected, regardless of whether either of them originated on celluloid, this narrative contributes to the ontological confusion about what makes a film a film. Žilnik's practice was never conservative in relation to format, be it celluloid, tape or digital. Žilnik, over his career – like Jean-Luc Godard – has probably used most formats to which he has had access. What is most important for both Godard and Žilnik, is that the formats were used to complement the subject. Purists in love with celluloid might describe the garish quality of Beta SP as, in the Canadian filmmaker Guy Maddin's demeaning terms, 'butt-ugly video', but its textures feed into the immediacy of Žilnik's action – and his documentary practice – as well as testifying to the time in which the work was made. The sullen wintry colours of Belgrade in early spring filmed on video, lend the proverb of 'history caught in amber' a specific cinematic quality.

In its crudeness and immediacy, the look of the film invokes the famous call by another revolutionary, Oliver Cromwell, who wanted his portrait done 'warts and all', challenging the prettifying customs of the feudal lords of his time, the members of the ruling class perhaps unconsciously setting the groundwork for the aesthetic of the Spectacle. There is nothing glamorous about Žilnik's use of fuzzy video, which almost by its nature hints at the aesthetic of anti-spectacle. Moreover, before being screened on television, the film had its premiere on the silver screen and even played in cinemas, despite its unconventional length. It is worth noting that Žilnik has remained committed to the practice of transferring his work to 35mm film for distribution and archiving, regardless of the original format used during filming.

Describing *Tito Among the Serbs* as a documentary film of medium length therefore seems entirely correct. While the term 'docu-fiction' appears to be gaining traction in popular literature, film distribution and academia, even claiming Robert Flaherty's documentary classic *Nanook of the North* (1922, USA) for this categorisation, it remains to be seen how the boundaries of this classification will shift in the future. Nevertheless, regardless of classification – let alone potential further commodification of the practice, of which Debord warns – at the time of its production, Žilnik's use of video visually evoked a disruption of the Spectacle's most common aesthetic.

Tito Among the Serbs premiered in Belgrade on 15 April 1994. The event was heavily politicised. Writing about it in the opposition daily newspaper, *Borba*, Verica Petkovska-Gajić quoted first the opinions of the opposition political elite, all of whom were present at the screening (1994, 13). These included the charismatic Zoran Djindjić, who until his assassination, would become the first Serbian prime-minister after Milošević's downfall in 2001. As much of the producer, B92's identity was based on being the oppositional Serbian radio station of the time, this presence is not surprising. However, the extent to which the

film was 'hijacked' for political purposes was overwhelming. Most of the articles published in the West took the opportunity to interpret what was happening in Serbia, rather than to focus on the film *per se*. That *The Guardian* in Britain (Chazan 1994), *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* (Cohen 1994; Ottaway 1994) reported on the premiere from Belgrade, also reveal the extent to which Žilnik's work was widely respected. While these media outlets may have been focused on current affairs rather than film, the insistence that this work was politically 'oppositional' is striking. This can even apply to *Variety*, whose review also emphasised that the film was opposed to the people then in power in Serbia. In its easily recognisable and somewhat pedestrian style, *Variety* reviewer Deborah Young described the film first, speculated on its marketing and distribution potentials second, and then in the last paragraph concluded that although the 'pic's anti-government sympathies are never directly stated, the satire's gloomy undertones leave little doubt about Žilnik's intentions' (Young 1995). If Žilnik had involved Tito in the film in order to make another political provocation along the lines of *Early Works*, this would indeed have left *Tito Among the Serbs* vulnerable to further criticism following Debord, of offering 'false models of revolution to local revolutionaries', within the realm of the local spectacle (Debord 2014, 23). However, while *Early Works* was oppositional to Tito, he was then in power. *Tito Among the Serbs* is not oppositional but instead, attempts to reevaluate Tito's legacy. Most importantly, current affairs and politics aside, the qualities of the film are not yoked to political action, but transcend the time and place in which it was produced to tell us something more about the period in which it was set.

The film opens with archive footage of Tito's final resting place, the 'House of Flowers' in Dedinje, an affluent suburb of Belgrade. This edifice is now a museum of Socialist Yugoslavia, still housing the grave of 'the old man'. From this scene, Žilnik cuts to his actor in Tito's uniform walking down the stairway. 'Tito' meets his driver of a long black limousine, and asks what the situation is like in the country since he left, or rather died, fourteen years before? After hearing that the situation is 'inexplicably bad', and that the country is no more, 'Tito' asks to be taken downtown, as he wants to hear 'what people think'. Žilnik shoots these encounters in three locations, with passers-by at varying frequency and an assortment of backgrounds: in front of the main railway station, in the main shopping street, and in the park by the old Belgrade fortress. 'Tito' receives a torrent of responses on what was happening right then in Yugoslavia, on his policies, on who is to blame, and most often bewildered and fearful speculations on what is to come, and how to get out of the abyss in which Serbia found itself. We see people, confused by history unfolding and battered by the relentless barrage of conflicting media representations of that history, being lead into a sort of mental anaesthesia slowly sliding for some into complicity, for others into complacency. The film was shot at a point where there was a dawning realisation of the irretrievable loss of socialism, conceding defeat to commodity capitalism. At the same time, this coincided bizarrely with the international economic sanctions that withheld from its citizens precisely that abundance of commodities that had been promised after Socialism was vanquished – unless they behaved according to the requirements of the dominant Spectacle.

The various interactions on the street are regularly interspersed with archive footage of Tito, accompanied by a Hawaiian slide guitar, inducing a sense of nostalgia. Tito is seen talking to the likes of Winston Churchill, Joseph Stalin, Jimmy Carter, Leonid Brezhnev, and the Pope. Towards the second part of the film, on two occasions, this archive footage is replaced by news footage of the conflict in Yugoslavia, probably from Croatia and Bosnia, including the footage of the infamous destruction of the Old Bridge at Mostar in 1993 by Croat forces. This editing strategy of course suggests a continuity between the period of Tito's rule and the

demise of the country (see interview with Žilnik in Pašić 1994, 9). As Tito famously used to say, the people always need to be ready for war and Yugoslavia was thus armed to the teeth, so the violence of the civil war was perhaps, not entirely unexpected.

Tito, however, is not blamed for the country's predicament, and the actor, Dragoljub Ljubičić, continues to recount the achievements of 'his' tenure to everyone who comes to talk to him. It is worth noting that the real hero of this film is Ljubičić, as he maintains his composure and remains in character even when the feelings of passers-by get a bit tetchy, or outright confrontational. He also manages to come up with quick-witted repartees, even when his audience does not seem up for a joke. When an older lady tells him that she wants to give him flowers, he fires back that he does not need any, as he has plenty where he lives – in the 'House of Flowers'. While this may be a well-rehearsed *bon mot*, the laughter of the gathered crowd diffuses the tensions his presence sometimes generates.

In other scenes, the actor is confronted by people who are simply very angry. While some blame him – or rather the real Tito – for the ills Yugoslavia was suffering, others praise his achievements and see his rule as the 'good old days'. Those who criticise him vary from one pensioner who accuses him using all kinds of self-contradictory conspiracy theories, such as that he was a freemason from the Vatican who actually hated the Serbs, to another pensioner who blames him for betraying the Soviets in 1948, going on to praise the 'real' communism that Tito eschewed. Those who are fond of him claim that the quality of life was much better, while some regret that he did not put a better system in place before he left, and that he should take all the current ex-Yugoslav leaders back with him to heaven. A young college guy talks about his teachers, while curiously enough, the man who sells right-wing and nationalist paraphernalia on the street-stall tells him how he is not interested in politics, but only money.

Perhaps the most unexpected encounter is with a young black African from Ghana, who is the only one perfectly content in Serbia and full of praise for the resilience of its people. His presence there is not unusual, considering Tito's friendship with Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of independent Ghana and one of the founding members of the non-aligned pact. A number of the former non-aligned nations continued to sympathise with Serbia and perceived the international sanctions as ongoing neo-colonialism.

Finally, Tito chats to a mild-spoken young man who fought in the war, probably in Croatia. He talks about the horrors he has seen and explains that local people in the affected areas are the ones most opposed to the conflict, in contrast to the way they are portrayed in the mainstream media. As if in further evidence of this, Tito comes across an older man who introduces himself as a Bosnian refugee. His sense of desperation is palpable as he talks to Tito about the removal of the monuments of Tito's period and the state of disrepair the country finds itself in. The film ends with Tito going back to his limousine, concluding that the people he has spoken to are divided. It could be added here, they are divided not just in their opinions, but as a social entity and a nation.

Conclusion

The film's closing remark that the people (the Serbs) are not in agreement reemphasises the idea that no nation is homogeneous and consequently, there can be no unified, single representation. The Serbs are not all the same, and they are not the demonised followers of an

evil regime, as they had been relentlessly portrayed by the Western media and press. The role the Spectacle gave the Serbian people was radically challenged in the film, as was the image of Tito. Indeed, Žilnik's own critical view of Tito from earlier in his career was also challenged. I shall conclude that *Tito Among the Serbs* represents an important rupture within Žilnik's oeuvre, after which he takes a new narrative direction. This rupture was related to the content rather than the form of his films and was conditioned by the changed political landscape around him. As a filmmaker in Tito's Yugoslavia, he had criticised the problems of Socialism. When that system disappeared, in this landmark work, he called for a multidimensional reappraisal, while continuing to take a critical approach to the new situation. In the films that followed, he criticised the rabid capitalism in which the whole world found itself, as the cause of migrations, forced displacements and social and ethnic polarisation. It is clear that Žilnik was a Marxist critic all along, rather than a provocateur, as claimed by some at the time of release of *Early Works*. When he made that film he was 27 years old. Clearly, much had changed when he made *Tito Among the Serbs* some 25 years later. It is also worth noting that Žilnik manages to relate himself in a more complex way to Debord's notion of the Spectacle. Sam Cooper explains it as follows:

The spectacle, therefore, is the mechanism through which power appropriates not common land but everyday life. The spectacle is the expansion of capitalist relations beyond immediate economic production and into the experience and representation of daily events. To control representations is to frame events in particular ways in order for power to justify and/or disguise itself (Cooper in Debord 2011, n.p.).

In this respect, *Tito Among the Serbs* manages to defy both the internal spectacle of Milošević's representation of life within Serbia and its conflicts with its neighbours, as well as the external – or rather dominant – spectacle as represented by a combined cluster of the most influential Western media (some of whom have been quoted above). The latter had demonised the Serbs *en masse*, simplifying the conflict into a digestible and viewer friendly 'good versus evil' binary dichotomy. In the process, Žilnik also challenges the image of Tito, as somebody who had armed his population, as someone friendly with Stalin, but also with Churchill, John Kennedy and Jimmy Carter. Rather than shouting the student slogans of *Early Works*, in *Tito Among the Serbs* Žilnik documents the nuanced complexities of a troubled nation and its political leader, and the situation in which they found themselves.

I would thus conclude that the film transcends the idea of political action – which was the reason the producers supported this project. In the fiercely divided politics of Serbia, based on who was for and who against the regime in power, taking political action was to be expected. It was also to be expected that Žilnik's inveterately insouciant manner would always see him on the side of opposition, if for no reason other than as a result of his innate Marxist *weltanschauung*. The specific humanism, however, that he brought to *Tito Among the Serbs* is revealed, now that Slobodan Milošević as well as a number of politicians who then opposed him, are part of the past. It is the sights and sounds of the ordinary people of the time, living that specific historical moment, that are now touching.

In a recent article on the culture of binge-watching, David Thomson praises the TV series *Babylon Berlin*, fictionalising life in the German capital at the end of the Weimar era, just before the Nazi ascent (Thomson 2019, 22-27). Thomson talks about the attractiveness of the programme as it exposes the moral maze in which we all find ourselves, especially when caught up in historical events beyond our control. Thomson compares the hazy confusion of Weimar's Berlin to the 'mental spaces' generated by Brexit in the UK, or Trump's presidency in the US, events that set us on the path to confusion or complicity. He

hypothesises: ‘there is something about the rush towards doom in *Babylon Berlin* that overrides our will. Just think of being German in 1929 with 1933 coming’ (ibid., 25). This quality of *Babylon Berlin* could apply equally to *Tito Among the Serbs*, as it is hard not to think what it meant to be those people in this film, in Belgrade in 1994, with the brutal NATO military campaign arriving in 1999. Both of these works ask that exceptionally hard question of what it is to be a human being at a time of overwhelming turmoil, war, revolution or the break-up of a country. It is thus precious now to be able to watch these Serbs trying to fathom what was happening to them, hinting at the moral challenges facing the unwitting participants of any major historical change.

Humanism enables us to observe all these disparate historical moments together, rather than through the reductive political polarisation offered by the Spectacle. Besides the theories of Debord, it is also worth remembering Donna Haraway’s methodological reminder that even ‘the standpoints of the subjugated are not “innocent” positions’ (Haraway 1988, 584) It is, therefore, essential to continue with critical interpretation, as ‘rational knowledge is power-sensitive conversation’ (ibid., 590). In order to do so, it is worth revisiting films such as *Tito Among the Serbs* that manage to capture one of many moments of global strife unfolding in the post-Cold War era, which in itself promised the end of history. Considering that such moments of global strife are now – 29 years later – far too numerous, and history’s end is nowhere in sight, the time appropriated by the Spectacle continues to deprive large groups of people of any possibility of reclaiming time for themselves, let alone living those creative lives of which Karl Marx and the Situationists dreamt. At least, Željimir Žilnik was able to offer briefly, a respite from this entrapment to a small group of passers-by in Belgrade, through a Situationist action that to this day remains documented and known as *Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time*.

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