

Media & Crime

CINEMATOGRAPHY AS CONFRONTATION

NOT ALL LAUGHS ARE IDENTICAL

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Generations were growing up in the second Yugoslavia with films about partisans, with heroes of superhuman powers and a tender heart. The ruling ideology was getting stronger through mythologizing recent history within models of pop-culture, and the Yugoslav cinematography was also an industry that was strong enough to carry out such genre production, financially and technically a demanding one. Heroes of our liberation struggle were so effective and appealing that their glory spilled over to big foreign markets, so that even today Bata Zivojinovic is in China a star of Hollywood proportions.

As a member of one of these generations, I grew up in a specific kind of utopia on the end of history, deeply convinced that the war in which Richard Burton was Tito, and Walter defended Sarajevo, was the last war in the territory of my country. But the new ideological experiment has mysteriously turned the boys fed on partisan myths into ustashas and chetnicks. Or, as Rajko Grlic would put it when speaking about his latest film "Karaula" – this is a film which asks who were these people who in a few months will turn into soldiers, refugees, victims and criminals! Hence, the wars which after World War II were waged in Yugoslavia are also turning into film stories. However, there are no superheroes in them.

The Truths and the Truth

I had the opportunity to see Srdjan Dragojevic's film "Beautiful villages burn beautifully" in the Belgrade cinema "Jadran" in the mid-nineties, accompanied by a film historian from France. The man who has no knowledge of our language watched the film without translation, he was focused and very interested, and only occasionally would he ask me for additional explanation of what he was seeing on the screen. This is somebody who is professionally linked to film, whose knowledge about films is above the average, but still the fact that almost everything was more or less understandable to him speaks very favorably about Dragojevic's film language and about an enviable capability to manage the complex of expressive means which the film as a media has at its disposal.

What did confuse the well-meaning Frenchman were the reactions of the audience. Mainly laughter, loud and, let us say, simple-minded, as if it were not provoked by something which, to say the least, is explicitly black humor. Namely, not every laugh is identical. He asked how was it possible that people laugh at something that was – as he saw it – their tragedy. With this question he hit, actually, the very essential problems of what "happened" to us, as we use to say it, denying with this phrase any personal or collective responsibility.

By its theme "Beautiful villages..." was a volatile topical film. Therefore, there were many of those who could not see it as something that is "only" a film and evaluate it in film categories. The film was dealing with the war which was still spreading its flames, it was made on the spot which was much more than an entrance to hell or the backstage of the front. The very fact that it was produced with the money and within the system of one of the belligerent parties could, by a certain automatism, cast doubt that it is, at least partially, serving war propaganda. For many, the sarcasm contained in the title itself presented already in itself an insurmountable ethical obstacle for even watching it, not to speak of any esthetical evaluation of the film.

Today it is obvious that one decade is not a period that is long enough for the establishment of something that could be called the historical distance which would protect the film author, who is involved in the thematic circle of ex-Yugoslav wars, from a priori doubts and accusations of disgraceful propagandistic activity, a guided political agitation. Accusations, of course, come from the other side of those old, wartime demarcation lines, which separate the chetnicks, ustashas, balijas... or, within one nation, the patriots and traitors.

And then we again face the unpleasant fact that the war is not yet completely over, that we have not

developed to the level of conscience that both for "them" and for "us" it is significant and good that "their" and "our" truths get confronted, so that we could reach the common truth on history which, whether we like it or not, is by its tragedy a common one. Apart from this, film authors who deserve attention also when they make documentaries, and particularly when they deal with fiction, speak in their own name, articulate a personally comprehended truth that was difficult to comprehend, they try not to betray themselves. But, the right to individuality is exactly in war times abolished for a fuller belonging to a collectivity, and I have already stated that we are finding ourselves in a prolonged war.

The Tragedy of Stupidity

In such a situation it is possible to have so much poison spilt out in the Serbian media upon Jasmila Zbanic, the director of the film "Grbavica", poison which seems to have been mixed in the worst agitator's days. Nobody of the poisoners did even see the film, or thought that this would be necessary. Sufficient was one scanty sentence on the content of the film which mentions the Bosniak women who during the war was raped by a Serb, associated with the fact of the ethnic affiliation of the author, and to have the film installed in the centre of the public spitting bowl. The triumph of "Grbavica" at the Berlinale festival was comprehended as a particularly serious provocation, because this meant yet another Serbian defeat in the propagandistic war-waging on the international scene. The "public" which has been for years lamenting over its black role given to it in the black-and-white image of the reality is stubbornly refusing to recognize anything which will not be either black or white, "theirs" or "ours".

"When I chose a certain story, I do not say to myself 'well, now it will be about the war, or it will not be about the war', I start writing about something that hurts me, that makes me happy, that excites me... and we shall see what comes out of it"; because, if it were not so, "Grbavica" would not be such a valuable film as it is. And it is valuable because the author, mastering the film knowledge, managed to articulate her own truth on something that is hurting and obsessing her, not taking care about whether or not this truth will be sufficiently "against the Serbs" and sufficiently "in favor of the Bosnia's". And what does hurt is obviously this incompleteness this infinity of war. Because, it is impossible to put a full stop until the truth is not comprehended and pronounced, and "Grbavica" is a story about the pain of this comprehension and this story-telling.

Just as Dragojevic's film "Beautiful villages..." is valuable in spite of the fact that many saw it as a morally disgusting and politically rotten film, that they felt hurt, because they thought that the bloody Bosnian drama in it resembles the tasteless joke on "stupid Bosnians". But, our tragedy is a tragedy of stupidity – there was not wisdom to overcome the constellation of bad ideological and mentality influences and not to be, so fatalistically, something that "happened to us". And therefore this film is so morbidly cynical, because in front of the flooding stupidity armored with evil wisdom is often hiding behind cynicism.