

The imagination of the WWII, Resistance and Collaboration in Yugoslav and Serbian Visual Media

*Films mirror our reality. We are looking into this mirror
(Siegrfried Kracauer)*

ABSTRACT

Visual media are a powerful transmitter of historical images. Film and television influenced the “master narrative” of the past perhaps more than academic historiography. The Communist regime of Yugoslavia invested a lot in films about revolution and WWII. An entirely specific genre emerged, which glorified the Partisan revolution by means of western film aesthetics (mostly western and action movies). This source of historical perceptions is to some degree linked to literature. For example, two historical films *Premeditated Murder* (1995) and *The Knife* (1999), that offered a different picture of the recent past, were filmed novels. However, these few attempts could not match the huge production of the Communist times. Hence, the visual imagination of, say, WWII remained under the influence of the previous ideology, even when the alleged ‘anti-Communists’ are concerned. For example, the Chetnik admirers during 1990s modeled their appearance not in accordance with real historical Chetniks, but after somewhat the caricatured Chetnik image in films from the Communist times.

Visual media are a powerful transmitter of historical images. Film and television influenced the “master narrative” of the past perhaps more than academic historiography. The Yugoslav cinematography has been very developed and multifaceted. The specific cultural liberalism had a positive influence upon this art¹. The Communist regime of Yugoslavia invested a lot in films about revolution and WWII. An entirely specific genre emerged, which glorified the Partisan revolution “Partizanski film” or “Partizanac” as one of the most prestigious film critics Ranko Munitić, named it. In the period from 1947. to 1990. out of 890 feature films, 250 were Partizan films. The strange fact about this genre was its direct use of the Western film aesthetics (mostly western and action movies) for an Eastern ideological project such as the glorification of the Yugoslav Revolution and Resistance. Munitić compared directly Western movies with “Partizan” Yugoslav films. He noticed a parallel in the development of the both genres. For example there is a similar process of the transforming of the real historical persons and events to the legend. Nevertheless, “Partisan movies”, according to Munitić, present an unique example of the specific genre, without match in any other, not even in a Hollywood cinematography. This genre is “a phenomenon and unique... It is the crystallized *consciousness* and *sub consciousness* of the Yugoslav cinematography.”²

The first film stories in the Yugoslav cinematography told the black and white tale about the heroes and their epic battle for the good cause without dark spots, even without civilian victims. The war was a warrior, mainly masculine thing. There were women (the first Yugoslav film ever, *Slavica* was about the woman Partisan fighter at the Adriatic Sea), even children in war films, but they were fighters, too. When civilians appear, they also behave in a heroic way. In the beginning, there is almost no passive victims. They either cooperate with the Partisans, or at least,

¹ Among many books concerning the history of the Yugoslav cinema see P.Volk, *Istorija jugoslovenskog filma*, Beograd-Ljubljana, 1986; S.Franić, *Svođenje računa: jugoslovenska filmska misao 1896-1996*, Beograd, 2000; D.Iordanova, *Cinema of Flames. Balkan Film, Media and Culture*, London. BFI, 2001; A and M.Liehm, *The Most important Art: Eastern European Film After 1945*, California University Press, Berkeley, 1977).

² O.Bulgakova, “Film als Vordrängungsarbeits. Der osteuropäische Film“ in R..Rother, *Mythen der Nationen: Völker im Film*, München-Berlin, 1998, 201-217; R Munitić, “Partizanac“, in R.Munitić, *Adio Jugo-Film*, (Beograd: Centar Film, 2005), 261-270.

they die in some heroic pose. Only in 1960's Yugoslav films started to describe civilian tragedy of the war including concentration camps, hostages and massacres. Such films are *Deveti krug* (The Ninth Circle, 1960), *Nebeski odred* (The Heaven Unit 1961) about the concentration camps, *Prozvan je V3* (The Class V3 is Called 1962) about the 1941. shooting of 15 year old hostages in Kragujevac, among thousands of the other hostages. In this regard, the most remarkable is *Kozara* (1962). This film includes, of course, a heroic battle, but even today, the most effective scenes in this film are those describing sufferings of civilians. That was not only the case with the Yugoslav films. Even in the Soviet cinematography, 1960's witnessed films made from the victims perspective (for example *Ivan's Childhood* from 1962).³ This situation reflected a general 'politics of memory'. For example, in Tito's speech at the Fifth Party Congress in 1948, out of 70 pages concerned with the WWII, only few passages refer to the civilian victims. Even Dedijer, who was the pioneer of the revisionism in 1980's in counting and exaggerating of the casualties, mentioned only occasionally civilian casualties in his war *Dairies*. Even in Europe, in the beginning of 1980's, holocaust historians were anxious about the forgetting. Fortunately, everything went in a precisely opposite way.⁴ This fear of oblivion can be sensed in some film from this time such as *The boys from Brazil* (1978), in which Nazi-hunter is a lonely, marginalized crusader, without any official support.

The other peculiar trait of these films was an unrealistic description of combat. Such an attitude belongs naturally to the typical iconography of action movies. Nevertheless, one has to consider the fact that mass culture in Yugoslavia has developed an image of war as of the amusing and fulfilling activity. In a combination with the privileges enjoyed by Resistance veterans and permanent glorification of their combat, this war mythos could have molded consciousness of the following generations. Perhaps warriors of 1990's believed that their mythical time has arrived?

This unrealistic reflection in the mirror of the visual media has been a result of a very conscious ideological agenda. Namely, Yugoslav regime tried to invent a 'common historical memory' of the Yugoslav peoples founded on the Partisan resistance myth, a myth that implies a heroic and symmetrical picture of the past, equally shared by different Yugoslav nations.⁵

Therefore, representation of collaborators has been a very delicate matter. In the majority of the Yugoslav films "the enemy" is the occupation army, mostly German one. Italians were observed in an other manner, more or less similarly like in general European imaging of the Second World War.⁶ Unlike the "historical reality», where Yugoslavia in WWII has been a battlefield for perhaps the most numerous domestic and foreign armies, in Yugoslav army the war is a binary Black-White struggle, between Good and Evil. Because of the national symmetry, the horrible aspects of the fratricidal civil war should have been 'slightly' silenced. For that reason, in the time of Communism, there are few films concerning the ethnic bloodshed. For example *Kad čuješ zvona* (When You hear the Bells, 1969) made after war diaries of Ivan Šibl, depicting war

³ M.Čolić, *Jugoslovenski ratni film*, Beograd-Užice:Institut za film,1984),100

⁴ For the status of victims in historiography see T.Sindbaek,«Masakri i genocidi počinjeni u Drugom svjetskom ratu i ponovno otkrivanje žrtava: razvoji unutar historiografije socijalističke Jugoslavije«, u: H.Kamberović. (ed.) *Šezdeset godina od završetka Drugog svjetskog rata.Kako se sjećati 1945. godine*, Sarajevo, 2006, 63-74.

⁵ Wolfgang Hoepken: "Von der Mythologisierung zur Stigmatisierung: 'Krieg und Revolution' in Spiegel der Geschichtswissenschaft und der historischen Publizistik", in *Kommunismus und Osteuropa*, Kozepte Perspektiven und Interpretationen im Wandel, ed. by E. Schmidt-Hartma. Muenchen: 1994, pp. 165-202.

⁶ P.Marković"«The Image of Italy in Serbian Popular Culture and Media“, in D.Dahlmann, M.Kosanović, M.Ristović, R.Gašić (eds.),*Clio im südosteuropäischen Diskurs-Festschrift für Andrej Mitrović zum 70. Geburtstag*, (Bonn:Zikic Stiftung, 2007),305-322

between three neighboring villages (Ortodox, Catholic and a Moslem one) is among the rare examples of this. If ethnic hatred has been mentioned, it was limited to a few traitors and collaborators. In *Akcija Stadion* (The Stadium Action, 1977), Croatian students prevent the Ustashi attempt to divide them among ethnic lines and to kill Jews and Serbs. In the *Okupacija u 26 slika* (Occupation in 26 Pictures, 1978) by Lordan Zafranović shocked the audience with the sights of brutal Ustashi massacres against Jews and Serbs. More bitter evocation of the ethnic hatred came only at the very end of the regime in late 1980's. The Croatian film *Život sa stricem* (The Life with My Uncle, 1988) describe how brutal Serb partisans tortured a Croatian, nationally oriented boy. A Serbian film *Braća po materi* (Maternal Brothers, 1988) tells a story about two brothers, one by Croatian Ustashi father, the other by a Serb policemen. It was not only the Yugoslav cinema that avoided the less glorious side of the war. The biggest war film director of Poland Andrzej Wajda, filmed only in 1995. the film *Holy Week* that tackled the Polish role in the Holocaust.

In the time of Communism, the most popular 'traitors' in the Yugoslav films were chetniks. They were convenient for that role for several reasons. First of all, their stigmatization did not provoke interethnic disputes. The struggle between them and partisans could be presented as a pure opposition between the freedom fighters and collaborators. In addition, in more ideologically engaged films, this combat could be described as a class struggle. Nevertheless, even chetniks did not appear so often in 'partisan' movies. According to the tacit "Law of the Political Correctness", they have never appeared in the Croatian, Slovene, not even in the Bosnian films. In the same way as historiography, cinematography should not have deal with the other republics job. The exception was *Pad Italije* (The Fall of Italy, 1981) by Lordan Zafranović. Apparently, after *The Occupation in 26 Pictures*, he (himself a Croat) had to show some non-Croatian atrocities.

But, within the Serbian and Montenegrin cinema chetniks received some attention. The ideological rigor did not allow any justification of the movement. Therefore, an attempt to show a human, even negative side of chetniks, in the film *Čovek iz hrastove šume* (The man from the Oak Forest, 1964) has been strongly criticized. The very interesting film is *Praznik* (Holyday, 1967) where the typical Chetnik and Ustashi execution method, namely throat-cutting, is depicted as a strange quasi ritual experience. In the biggest Partisan spectacle *Bitka na Neretvi* (The Battle on the Neretva River, 1969), the imagination of the chetniks is a twofold one: on the one side, they are a wild horde, attacking the Partisans in a very Western film style. On the other side, their political leader is a cynic bourgeois politician without scruples, played by Orson Welles. During 1970's in a time of the more severe "Fight against Nationalism" the image of chetniks deteriorated further, even at the expense of the historical reality. An example of that is the film *Užička Republika* (The Republik of Uzice, 1974). The ideological problem was how to accuse chetniks for the collaboration in that period, when in reality, they started the struggle together with partisans. The film has explained that their collaboration with partisans in the beginning has been only tactical and halfhearted, aiming at a weakening of the Partisan movement. Almost immediately, chetnik leaders planned collaboration with Germans. The similar perspective was used in *13 juli* (July 13th, 1982) about the uprising in Montenegro, in reality shared by both Resistance movements. Nevertheless, the most bizarre reinterpretation of historical facts occurred in a forgotten film *Crvena zemlja* (Red Country, 1975), about the common Partisan-Chetnik siege of the Serbian city of Kraljevo in October 1941. The siege failed, of course, because of the Chetniks treason.

However, exaggerated image of chetniks with their folklore and barbaric behavior, like those of the Mexican bandits in main stream Westerns, or even more to the point like pirates in classic adventure movies, had an unexpected effect upon the audience. In the two part Tv film *Poslednji čin* (The Last Act, 1982) about the capture of the Royalist leader Draža Mihailović, the most popular role was Nikola Klabić, village bully and the man who eventually informed the Communist police on his commander. Unexpectedly, many teenagers were attracted with such characters who spend war with Gypsy music and alcohol, singing, swearing, raping.

Unfortunately, in 1990's many such admirers got the chance to realize their movie dreams. Ironically, most of the paramilitary fighters found an inspiration in these caricatured images from the Communist movies. So, the propaganda message of these films continues to work, even for a completely another purpose. The bad guys suddenly became role models.

Oddly enough, maybe the only example of the film deprived of any propaganda is *Gluvi barut* (Deaf Gunpowder, 1990) filmed version of the Branko Ćopić's novel with the same title, made by a Bosnian Moslem Bahrudin Bata Ćengić. In this film, strife between partisans and chetniks has been described as a tragic conflict running within the families and friends circles, without unilateral accusation and simplification so typical for all previous films.

Is a film revision of history possible? Only several films in 1990's covered the Second World War: *Premeditated Murder* (1995) and *The Knife* (1999), that offered a different picture of the recent past, were filmed novels. The most ambitious in the regard of revision, *Sinovci* (Nephews, 2006) passed almost unnoticed. There is no strong state willing to invest in the filming of war time history. The most expensive Serbian films of the decade *Sveti Georgije ubiva aždaju* (Saint George Kills the Dragon, 2008) is though a war film, but dedicated to the First World War, and an anti-war film in its nature. Like the light of death stars, Partisan films will continue to shine in the years to come.

Conclusion

The Yugoslav cinematography has been very developed and multifaceted.. The Communist regime of Yugoslavia invested a lot in films about revolution and WWII. An entirely specific genre emerged, which glorified the Partisan revolution. In the period from 1947. to 1990. out of 890 feature films, 250 were Partisan films. The strange fact about this genre was its direct use of the Western film aesthetics (mostly western and action movies) for an Eastern ideological project such as the glorification of the Yugoslav Revolution and Resistance. "Partisan movies", present an unique example of the specific genre, without match in any other, not even in a Hollywood cinematography.

Yugoslav regime tried to invent a 'common historical memory' of the Yugoslav peoples founded on the Partisan resistance myth, a myth that implies a heroic and symmetrical picture of the past, equally shared by different Yugoslav nations. Because of the national symmetry, the horrible aspects of the fratricidal civil war should have been 'slightly' silenced. In the time of Communism, the most popular 'traitors' in the Yugoslav films were chetniks. They were convenient for that role for several reasons. First of all, their stigmatization did not provoke interethnic disputes. The struggle between them and partisans could be presented as a pure opposition between the freedom fighters and collaborators. In addition, in more ideologically engaged films, this combat could be described as a class struggle. However, exaggerated image of chetniks with their folklore and barbaric behavior, like those of the Mexican bandits in main stream Westerns, or even more to the point like pirates in classic adventure movies, had an unexpected effect upon the audience. The revision of the history in film is not possible. There is no strong state willing to invest in the filming of war time history. Like the light of death stars, Partisan films will continue to shine in the years to come.

FOOTNOTES

Among many books concerning the history of the Yugoslav cinema see P.Volk, *Istorija jugoslovenskog filma*, Beograd-Ljubljana, 1986; S.Franić, *Svođenje računa: jugoslovenska filmska misao 1896-1996*, Beograd, 2000; D.Iordanova, *Cinema of Flames. Balkan Film, Media and Culture*, London. BFI, 2001; A and M.Liehm, *The Most important Art: Eastern European Film After 1945*, California University Press, Berkeley, 1977).

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