



**Contemporary Southeastern Europe**

An Interdisciplinary Journal on Southeastern Europe

# **Displaced Film Memories in the post-Yugoslav Context**

Research Article

Sanjin Pejković

PhD candidate in Film studies, Lund University

[sanjinpejkovic@gmail.com](mailto:sanjinpejkovic@gmail.com)

*Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, 2017, 4(2), 89-101

DOI 10.25364/02.4:2017.2.6

---

*Contemporary Southeastern Europe* is an online, peer-reviewed, multidisciplinary journal that publishes original, scholarly, and policy-oriented research on issues relevant to societies in Southeastern Europe. For more information, please contact us at [info@contemporarysee.org](mailto:info@contemporarysee.org) or visit our website at [www.contemporarysee.org](http://www.contemporarysee.org)

# Displaced Film Memories in the post-Yugoslav Context

Sanjin Pejković\*

In this article, I will try to discern a few different stylistic and thematic approaches of memory representation of the former Yugoslavia in the post-Yugoslav context. I will focus on notions of displaced mediated memories that we get from documentary films of the once existing country. A lot has been written on filmic aspects of remembrance in the post-Yugoslav area, the so-called Yugosphere, but not that many studies have concentrated on mediated memories of the diasporic groups outside the area that once constituted Yugoslavia. In order to talk about displaced memories of the former Yugoslavia, I need to establish some ideas of displaced filmmaking, memory conveying and representations of history. I will also present a general scheme of connections between documentary filmmaking and memories in the area of the former federation, and then concentrate on what I perceive to be three different standpoints on filmic remembrances outside the region.

**Keywords:** film, memory, Yugoslavia, diaspora

## Introduction

The fall of Yugoslavia was a historical event of huge importance for the Balkans, Europe and the world. Different stories, explanations on how the country collapsed and even speculations on possible historical outcomes have dominated documentary representations of the once existing country. I argue that films dealing with the memories of the country are renegotiating the past through contested representations and can raise “forgotten” issues of collective memories and even collective amnesias.

Documentary and semi-documentary films about life and times in former Yugoslavia are mainly produced in the region itself. Studies dealing with the diasporic film memories of the country were clearly missing and I wanted to see whether these films were in any way different to their domestic counterparts. I tried to avoid overly rough sketches about the cinematic “others.” Still, I wanted to see whether one could find and/or elucidate any similarities and differences in cinematic representations of the Yugoslav past, by directors that geographically do not belong to the regional filmmaking scene.

## Exile and diasporic films

In *Accented Cinema*, an acclaimed study of postcolonial and transnational cinema, Hamid Naficy tries to sketch out themes and styles related to the movies that represent exilic and diaspora-related experiences. Naficy investigates connections between exiled, migrated and diasporic directors and

---

\* Sanjin Pejković is a PhD candidate in Film studies at Lund University, Sweden. He holds an MA in Films Studies from Gothenburg University. His research touches upon film cultures in the area that once constituted former Yugoslavia. Main questions are concerned with topics of representations and (re)constructions of the past, constructions of the national(ist) narratives through films and collective memories in fiction and documentary films after 1989.

their connections with home countries and the new ones. He tries to define what he calls a “film accent,” a filmic response to the experience of movement, both inner and outer.<sup>1</sup>

According to Naficy, not all films with an “accent” are exile and diaspora films, but every exilic and diasporic film have an “accent” inserted in the core of its own film language. Naficy’s theories are vague and over-simplified, touching upon the film-production dichotomies between Hollywood and “The other.” For Naficy, the Hollywood industry is equal to mainstream cinema and all other options are accented, in one way or another.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the 1900s, there has been a strong tradition of mobility of film workers: European émigrés who traveled early to the United States and worked in Hollywood, exile directors from the Soviet Union who settled in France, German film workers who fled Nazi rule in Germany, among many others. These directors were and are often part of a film historical canon. Based on author-based theory frameworks, the directors were described as extraordinary individuals, who certainly belonged to certain national contexts, but were even more characterized by their magnificent cinematic visions. The individually-based theories that established some of the postulates of the film theory based research between the 1950s and 1970s have been outdated for some time. Naficy’s research that concentrates mainly on the author’s national identities is in a way a continuation of author theory, updated only with notions of origin and ethnicity.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> To be at both places and nowhere, in a sort of a no man’s land corresponds - according to Naficy - with exilic director’s experiences. The movies they make are sort of blueprints of their inner feelings and thoughts. The films are thus consciously and unconsciously influenced by their director’s cinematic accents. Differences between subcategories are mainly based on different types of relationships that the filmmakers have towards the imagined home-communities. Naficy, Hamid. 2001 *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>2</sup> The equalization of different film styles, genres and contexts, only based on the idea of a certain filmmaker’s exile experience can potentially lead to a rather dangerous generalization, grounded in the idea that the Hollywood industry must be used as a parameter for film analysis. In that point-of-view, accented films will always remain “the other,” a certain bastardized antithesis to Hollywood’s filmic language. Naficy is of course not the only one writing about the issues of exile and diaspora filmmaking. Other interesting studies are Berghahn, Daniela and Claudia Sternberg. 2010. *European Cinema in Motion: Migrant and Diasporic Film in Contemporary Europe*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Loshitzky, Josefa. 2010. *Screening Strangers: Migration and Diaspora in Contemporary European Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Tigervall, Carina. 2005. *Folkhemsk film: med "invandraren" i rollen som den sympatiske Andre*. Umeå: Umeå University, among many others. The aforementioned studies, interesting as they are, may sometimes be overly fixed and centered on simple dichotomies between the majority society and different fragmented minority film productions, which can lead to vague statements that do not take into account different contextual differences and film production practices.

<sup>3</sup> *Accented Cinema* is today, more than 15 years since it came out, still an interesting and thoughtful study. However, some key elements are missing, which can be explained by the fact that they perhaps were not fully visible during the time Naficy wrote the book. The somewhat clear boundaries of the national film production started changing after Naficy’s book. It became easier to make films that focused on ethnicity, migration and polyphonic identities without the directors necessarily belonging to artistic traditions otherwise opposed to the Hollywood norm. European genre films during the 2000s succeeded in mixing Hollywood and certain aesthetic elements from other film cultures in order to incorporate themes such as exclusion, racism, ethnic and national differences, as seen in films by the German director Fatih Akin, or in British “Culture clash” films such as *East is East* (Damien O’Donnell, 1999), *Bend It Like Beckham*, (Gurinder Chadha, 2002), or

## Documentary representations of the Yugoslav past

Film scholar Dina Iordanova writes:

*“The more I look at Southeastern Europe’s cinema, the more it seems that all important films from the region ultimately deal with historical memory. More specifically history is treated as something to endure, to live through, a process where one does not have agency but is subjected to the will power of external forces. Someone else ultimately decides your present and future. Shifting narratives permit the story to be told from different angles. Priority is given to some memories while others are neglected or totally eliminated. These conditions often result in uneven or choppy narratives of the historical past, present, and future of the region.”<sup>4</sup>*

Iordanova’s interesting point on enduring history may surely be applied to a huge number of films coming from the Balkans. I would still like to broaden and add few new thoughts when dealing with post-Yugoslav documentaries, both in the 90’s and 00’s. Rather than merely showing survivors of a cruel history, documentaries on the breakdown of Yugoslavia take a more active role in searching for the answers to what “really happened”. In different stylistic approaches, asking different questions, concentrating on different subjects, these documentaries are trying to question what we actually are talking about when speaking of and representing the past.

Generally, I identify four major recognizable modes of documentary representation of the Yugoslav past. Differences - although not too stark and the distinctions not always being very sharp - are visible in approach, style, genre and the production mode of the films:

1. Essay films: *Testament* (Testament Lordana Zafranovića, Zafranović, 1994), *Totally personal* (Sasvim lično, Begović, 2003), *Serbia year zero* (Srbija nulte godine, Marković, 2001); *The hole in the soul* (Rupa u duši, Makavejev, 1994), where the directors simultaneously - with observation and analysis of the situation - deal with their own film careers and different issues of self-performativity. In meta-filmic ways, they are touching upon the situations that preceded the wars and crisis in the former Yugoslavia by re-analysing and re-contextualizing their own - but even others - films.

2. Compilation (or partly compilation) films that deal with specific “mythical” themes, customs or various parts of wars in the former Yugoslavia, or practices of Yugonostalgia, popular culture and various subcultures: *Do you remember Sarajevo* (Sječaš li se Sarajeva, Kreševljaković, 2002), *The Scorpions - a home movie* (Škorpioni - spomenar, Stojanović, 2007), *Happy Child* (Sretno dijete, Mirković, 2003), *Department store* (Robna Kuća, Stoimenov, 2009), *A long journey through history, history and history* (Dugo putovanje kroz istoriju, historiju i povijest, Mirković, 2009). These films rely on material that already

---

debut films of Josef Fares, Reza Parsa and Reza Bager in Sweden, among many others. The films managed to reconcile two supposedly opposite sides of an imagined dichotomy, between mainstream cinema and art cinema, while the topics were centered on the issues of racism and hybridity. These fusion films would later develop into even more nuanced stories, while borrowing stylistic elements from both experimental and documentary cinema.

<sup>4</sup> Iordanova, Dina. 2007. Whose is This Memory?: Hushed Narratives and Discerning Remembrance in Balkan Cinema. *Cineaste* 32(3), 22-27, 22.

exists, which is then compiled and “directed”, in order to re-contextualise archive footage.

3. Didactic, explanatory documentaries where correctness and objectiveness regarding the recent history is the primary goal for the filmmakers. Often, these films have a voice-over which guides the audience through the facts presented. These films are suitable for TV airings, mostly because of their length, journalistic ideals that permeate the concepts of representations and their supposed objectivity. I include TV series on Josip Broz Tito, such as *Tito* (Vrdoljak, 2010), *Tito - the testament's last witnesses* (Tito - posljednji svjedoci testamenta, Zafranović, 2010).

4. Observational/films of reconstruction, concentrated on either following a person in an investigation, as in *Mila seeking Senida* (Mila traži Senidu, Tomić, 2010) and *Red rubber boots* (Crvene gumene čizme, Žbanić, 2000), or trying to address a question that concerns different aspects of reconstructed remembrance and the processes of memorization: *Interrogation* (Informativni razgovori, Kabil, 2007), *Three* (Tri, Dević, 2009).

Dealing with subjects which are not always easy to answer, some of these films have been fairly popular on “domestic” TV stations and festivals, while other have been practically ignored by audiences in the former Yugoslavia and have had more success at international festivals. Besides different production modes that certainly have enabled certain directors to promote their films more successfully than others, we can see that certain topics and subjects are more popular with domestic audiences while others have more success outside the borders of former Yugoslavia. Nostalgia seems to be more popular “at home,” while critical and personal standpoints on memory and history are festival favourites in the rest of the world.

It is interesting to find that the films in these rather heterogenic groups are in fact recreating common cultural memory. Film essays promote authors themselves, and with the help of compilations and voice-overs, they recount their views on the history and memory of the country. In movies that deal with general collective memories, one can find certain attempts of analysing and studying phenomena which are associated with large groups of people. The subjectivity and individuality of the critical filmmakers contrasts the different approaches and efforts of scrutinizing social mechanisms in a once-existing country. That said, it seems that documentaries which concentrate on “*lieux de mémoires*” of popular culture are rarely analysing the topics in a deeper way. They are rather reinforcing and strengthening the myths and not dissecting them in a more critical way. The collective cultural memory is then being re-introduced to new generations who have not had the chance to remember the country, but are building their autobiographies through “mediated memories.”

On a formal level, the similarities between these four categories lie often in the usage of archive material. Bruzzi argues that there are two ways of using existing archive material.<sup>5</sup> The first one is usage of material for the documentary's own purpose. The second one is when problematizing, questioning and explaining the archive material. For nostalgic films, archive

---

<sup>5</sup> Bruzzi, Stella. 2006. *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 26.

material evokes common iconic events based on collective memories. In the case of explanatory documentaries, the existing material is a tool for reconstructing the past and is often looked upon as “the evidence” for a certain historic situation. In film essays, directors are going back to their own films, commenting and critically discussing both the material they once filmed for different purposes and comparing the lives they once lived with the help of old material. Thus, archive material is in fact neither nostalgic nor critical of the past, different contexts that surround the films and the ideas of the past, are also “commanding” on how the audience should react. I would like to emphasize the notion that cinematic representations of the past often tend to describe the past from the present understandings. Hence, history representations are not merely narratives about the past, but they tend to represent contemporary views on history.<sup>6</sup> Documentaries dealing with the past can, through usage of archives, even evoke historical revisionism. Hayden White declares: “*any historical object can sustain a number of equally plausible descriptions or narratives.*”<sup>7</sup> Just because one can interpret images in many different ways does not mean that different explanations are equally false / true. However, one must be aware that the interpretations of documentary images could and should even change over time.

Fentress and Wickham point to an interesting notion of memory sharing: “memory can be social only if it is capable of being transmitted and to be transmitted a memory must first be articulated.”<sup>8</sup> Documentary films articulate memories with suitable film forms. In order to analyze a mediated memory, one needs to examine the chosen form and stylistic elements such as mise-en scène, photography, sound and performance. Documentary films are - as well as fiction - based on specific selections, filmmakers’ ambitions, ideological affinities and so on. Therefore, it is very important to scrutinize films dealing with the complicated past of the former Yugoslavia, both in examining what is being shown and what is being excluded. Wagner-Pacifici maintains that “memories are never formless. They come to us as narratives, pictorial images, textbooks, pamphlets, legal charters, wills, diaries and statues. And the forms do more than simply present the collective memory in each case.”<sup>9</sup>

Even though they vary in content, theme selection, styles, production modes, the documentary articulations of the past are revealing narrative strategies of today and ideological standpoints regarding how to treat the common past. A key notion seems to remain: not only is remembering important to the notions of cultural memory and nostalgia, even forgetting is an essential concept. Mediated memories are both “helping” in the creation of collective memories but they also have the potential to blur memory by omitting certain events.

---

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin writes: “History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time (jeztzeit),” and continues “articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it “the way it really was,” Benjamin, Walter. 2006. *Selected Writings Volume 4 1938-1940*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 389-400.

<sup>7</sup> White, Hayden. 1987. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 76.

<sup>8</sup> Fentress, James and Chris Wickham. 1992. *Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past*. Oxford: Blackwell publishers, 47.

<sup>9</sup> Wagner-Pacifici, Robin. 1996. Memories in the Making: The Shapes of Things That Went. *Qualitative Sociology* 19(3), 301-21, 302.

The films that I am examining are made by directors who come from the former Yugoslavia or originate from the area. They deal in part with themes linked to transnational connections between Europe/North America and the former Yugoslavia, either in the form of labour immigration, or in the events caused by the war. The chosen films deal with different themes, were made in different production contexts, by different directors and with different stylistic approaches. However, my intention was not to necessarily try and find something that connects them, but rather to try to spot variations and differences. The goal was not to discern one definitive image of the former country, but to find nuanced representations, multiple voices on topics and themes of memory, longing, and nostalgia among many others.

### **Archival memory**

In *Flotel Europa* (2015), director Vladimir Tomić intimately reflects upon his youth on the “Flotel” - a converted ship moored in Copenhagen’s canals. With existing refugee camps completely full, the Red Cross adapted a giant ship to house 1000 asylum seekers from the 1992 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, pulling the Flotel into town to act as a temporary home, while its inhabitants awaited decisions on their applications. With an unreliable phone line, someone on the boat bought two second-hand VHS cameras, taped messages were recorded and sent to relatives back home. Except for a few instances of archive material taken from fiction films, the film consists entirely of the VHS home movies shot by one of the Flotel’s residents.

Tomić initially describes Flotel Europa nostalgically, recounting the girl he likes and all the cool, older friends he hung out with. Over the course of the retelling, Tomić progressively fills in the darker details. The collection of personal material forms a straightforward reflection of life aboard this floating refugee centre. There is music and folk dancing and the children go to school. Beyond the view of the camera, the reality of war invades this world through calls conveying bad news from back home. The TV room is portrayed in the film as the hub for incoming news, full of people watching the international news reports and straining to see familiar faces. We see old divisions from the Bosnian war slowly re-emerge as the refugees settle into their new circumstances.

In a particularly strange scene, he shows Danish tourists visiting Flotel Europa and marvelling at the refugees. What starts as a romantic reminiscence of childhood evolves into a more communal story of displacement. Released at a time in which refugees were being portrayed negatively in the media, Flotel Europa is an effective documentary in humanizing refugees. As Europe searches for social, political and physical solutions to contemporary mass migration and the needs of millions of refugees, the film offers a potent and poetic first-person account.

The film acknowledges two notions of mediated memory conveying. The first one is the importance of the VHS format for documenting personal war experiences, and the second one is showing the remarkable connections between the wars in former Yugoslavia and news broadcasting. The wars in

former Yugoslavia were the first wars which were documented by the people who were experiencing it first-hand. Instead of being shot on mobile phones like today, it was VHS. VHS was the main material for recording that reality, which fitted in the TV news around the world with the help of satellite broadcasting. Private footage would become global material on a much larger scale than ever before.

Flotel is a compilation documentary. Different archival clips are put together so they fit a certain narrative. Compilations are de- and re-contextualising previously filmed images. Excerpts mixed together gain new meanings, and the voice over smooths-over certain discrepancies that might occur. Theorist Joachim Paech writes about the archival image: "The ephemeral historical moment becomes a permanent presence in the moving image in these archives of history."<sup>10</sup> The photographic image, still or moving, as Bazin observed, mummifies history providing in its visual trace a second degree original.<sup>11</sup> The indexical character of the photographic image is seen to underwrite the documentary's claim to facticity. The photographic image signals the presence of the camera on the scene at the historical moment of image capture. Pioneer film theorists like Bazin and Kracauer drew a strong association between the indexical character of the photographic image and the primacy of realism as a code within cinema.<sup>12</sup> Both this understanding of photography and the privilege of realism have shaped the conventional notion that documentary film is primarily an instrument of unproblematic observation and record capable of being put into didactic service.

However in the digital age, a new form of scepticism on the indexical claims of photography emerged. The use of archive material by documentary filmmakers is influenced by other considerations other than those purely evidential. Bill Nichols draws our attention to the work of the Hungarian filmmaker Peter Forgács as exemplified in his 1996 film *Free Fall*.<sup>13</sup> This film relies entirely on archive footage to evoke a sense of wartime Hungary and of the impending disaster about to befall the Jewish community. It reworks this footage, slowing down sequences, cropping images or blowing them up, establishes cutting rhythms against music and elaborating upon abstract visual forms. In other words, Forgács employs a series of digital post-production strategies to both draw the spectator emotionally into the unfolding story but also to force them to question the status of the images they are seeing as documents and of the voices they are hearing as narrators.

Similar reworking of different aspects of individual and collective memories can be found in a few other documentary films, produced in internal and/or external exile from Yugoslavia. In personal film essays, such as *Testament* (Testament Lordana Zafranovića, Zafranović, 1994), *Serbia year zero* (Srbija nulte godine, Marković, 2001) and *The hole in the soul* (Rupa u duši, Makavejev, 1994), directors simultaneously - with observation and analysis of the situation - deal with their own film careers and different issues of self-

<sup>10</sup> Paech, Joachim. 1989. *The Mummy Lives!*, in *Image, Reality, Spectator: Essays on Documentary Film and Television*, edited by De Greef, Willem and Willem Hesling (eds.). Leuven: Acco, 59.

<sup>11</sup> Bazin, André. 1981. *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma*. Paris: Editions definitive, Cerf.

<sup>12</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried. 1960. *Theory of Film*. London: Oxford University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Nichols, Bill. 1994. *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.



performativity. In meta-filmic ways, they touch upon the situations that preceded the wars and crisis in the former Yugoslavia by re-analysing and re-contextualising their own - but even others - films. They deal with specific “mythical” themes, customs or various parts of wars in the former Yugoslavia, as well as practices of Yugonostalgia and popular culture. These films stand as counterpoints to the more “objective” films. Makavejevs, Zafranović’s and Marković’s films do not provide the viewers with definite truths. The past is rather seen through the film lens, and these directors are trying to understand the past through their own works, which is a heterogenic collage of different standpoints.

In Tomić’s film and the film essays I mentioned, the reminiscences of the former country are questioned and destabilized by the very images that are being used. The time passed and certain stylistic elements are being used to deconstruct the indexical stability of the film documents in front of us. This might have something to do with instability and the loss of home, which is then viewed with a certain time delay. This image acts as both truth and fiction, as a document of history but also as unreliable evidence of history that is being rewritten.

#### **Diaspora and performativity**

*The Waiting Room* (2015) is a Canadian quasi docu-drama film, written and directed by Igor Drljača and loosely based on the life of Jasmin Geljo. The film stars Geljo as an actor who was once popular and famous in his native Yugoslavia, but struggled to find success since emigrating to Canada. He dreams of returning to Sarajevo, but fears losing contact with his son Daniel (played by his real son, Filip Geljo) if he goes through with it.

*The Waiting Room* looks at Canadian film from a different angle and situates it in the world with a local/global focus. The film uses the Bosnian diaspora to chart a personal odyssey through the myth of Canadian multiculturalism as Jasmin struggles to escape a role thrust upon him. Geljo’s sophisticated presence in the film offers two roles at once - the performer and his performances. In the film, Jasmin gets offered auditions for roles of villains and bad guys. He has been acting in some Hollywood films and series: the thug from the Ethan Hawke-led remake of *Assault on Precinct 13*, or the thug from the Michael Douglas thriller *The Sentinel*, or the thug from the *Transporter* television series.

In *the Waiting Room*, Geljo usually approaches these roles by asking the directors if they have any sense of how they want the characters to be. “Just interpret it,” they usually say, and Jasmin plays the parts quietly and humanely, favouring realism over a theatrical flair. Usually, though, the directors and casting directors ask for a bit more gusto and, inevitably, cultural flavour. They basically ask him to “Bosnian it up,” which he does. He exaggerates his accent (he already has one) even more, and adds a few curses in Bosnian. Jasmin gives the casting agents what they want: a loud, disorderly “other.”

The film talks about loss, nostalgia, immigration but also about film representations of minorities and stereotypical casting still being an issue in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The title speaks to not only the immigrant experience but to the experiences of entertainment / cultural workers, actors, performers, etc. A performer tries to navigate and maintain a footprint in an industry that sees him as a caricature. Ironically, he became famous in the first place, in his old country by playing a caricature as well.

Though many scenes are filled with lengthy pauses as a static camera watches Jasmin in his isolated existence, there is much to absorb in its frame, starting with the first shot: Acting in a scene set in the Croatian countryside of 1991 - a world he himself left two decades ago, Jasmin stares straight ahead as the scenery passes behind him in rear projection. The simulated backdrop may as well stem directly from his consciousness, as he struggles to come to terms with the past while drifting aimlessly through the present. The past of the real and fictionalized Geljo is not only a backdrop of the Croatian countryside but is juxtaposed through the whole film, leaving audiences to wonder whether they are fictionalized and/or authentic.

In the mix of the complexly structured film is Jasmin's teenage daughter whom he meets from time to time. These scenes do not fit any obvious place in the narrative or chronology. She could be real, dead, lost, present, or absent. A victim of the Bosnian war or the child he never had, she symbolizes a loss that drives his quest for closure. Whether she inspires his performances or haunts them, she is the essential talking point for the film. His final role in the film, which also happens to be his first one in the film, lets him return to the former homeland via a character and rear projection.

Drljača's film not only represents issues of minorities and diaspora, but performs them through Jasmin Geljo. Performative films, says Bruzzi, are not breaking with the factual filmmaking tradition, but are a logical extension of that tradition's aims, as much concerned with representing reality as their predecessors, but more aware of the inevitable falsification or subjectification such representation entails.<sup>14</sup> The performative element could be used to undermine the conventional pursuit of representing the real because the elements of performance, dramatization and acting for the camera are intrusive and alienating factors. The performativity in *The Waiting Room* functions as a statement that simultaneously describes and performs an action.

### **Displacement and nostalgia**

In the film *Dragan Wende - West Berlin* (Dragan von Petrović, 2014), a tragicomical story set between West-Berlin and former Yugoslavia, young cameraman Vuk from Belgrade embarks on the trail of his eccentric uncle Dragan Wende who, 30 years earlier became the street king of West-Berlin's 1970s hedonistic disco scene. Earning easy money in Berlin's most famous nightclubs, work and play went hand in hand. Furthermore, thanks to their Yugoslav passport, Dragan Wende and his friends could easily pass from West-Berlin to East-Berlin: they thus profited from the Wall like few others, made

---

<sup>14</sup> Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 155.

quick money “importing” goods and hard currency. But in 1989 the Wall fell. 20 years later, Vuk’s uncle is an aged alcoholic who lives off social welfare and memories of his youth. He has not set foot in East-Berlin ever since and seldom leaves his West-Berlin. We observe the survival strategies of a group of immigrants who once had it easy and who cannot help but wish for a return of The Wall.

The story within a story is about Dragan’s father Grandpa Mile, a stonemason who moved to Berlin in the 1960s. His life consisted of hard work, saving money and building West-Berlin’s most prominent buildings. Retired after having built a city he did not like, he returned to his homeland “Yugoslavia” which had just ceased to exist. Once a year he visits his two biggest disappointments: Berlin and his son. Their lives, closely linked to the rise and Fall of the Berlin Wall, could not be more different.

Capturing Vuk’s visit with Dragan (complete with tours of the now-gentrified former hotspots of Berlin, life in the brothels and interviews of former partners-in-hustling), the film blends all of this with a series of films within a film - mock 70s-style documentaries. The film offers an interesting approach to documentary storytelling as a combination of direct cinema, mockumentary in a feverish style of the 1970s’ and archival footage assembled like a combination of straight-up TV documentary of the period and the 30s/40s-styled Warner Brothers montages (often fashioned by the likes of Slavko Vorkapich and Robert Wise). Feverishly cut archival footage is juxtaposed with dance music from Dragan’s glory days, and then quickly followed by long sequences of Vuk and his uncle sitting around the apartment trying to decide who will go to work that day. These elements combine to evoke a powerful sense of nostalgia, although it is often not clear who feels it more, Dragan or Vuk. The dynamics between Vuk, Dragan and Dragan’s occasionally visiting father, Mile, are especially engaging, and offer a glimpse into a closely-knit family still as ideologically divided as East and West Berlin.

Svetlana Boym introduces the distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia that she uses to differentiate between national and social memory. In her reading, restorative nostalgia is about truth and tradition, whereas reflective nostalgia, ironic and ambivalent, calls absolute truth into doubt. Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* (returning home) and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia* (aching), in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance. The first category of nostalgics does not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about truth. This kind of nostalgic characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in the anti-modern myth-making of history by means of a return to nationalist symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping conspiracy theories. Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments from the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.

The discourse of Yugostalgia is not continuous, but consists of a series of disconnected discourses that add new elements to those already existing, including turnabouts, ironic decontextualizations, neostalgia, retro-creativity, and even (deliberate) historical ignorance. But the essential components that make this discourse nostalgic are constant: Broz is a brilliant historical figure, his government successful, his times good, his state just, and the attitude of Titostalgics is invariably positive and emotional. In *The waiting room*, the discourse of nostalgia, in positioning “once was” in relation to “now”, creates a frame of meaning and is about the production of the present rather than about the reproduction of the past. The fact that the past literally is another country gives a certain sense of sadness and the melancholy. In words of Boym: “We are all nostalgic for a time when we were not nostalgic.”<sup>16</sup> Memories are slowly descending into the realm of escapism, a necessity in order to handle and get used to the new way of living. Nostalgia is not (only) a story about *how we were* in the past, but one about *how we never were*.

Grandpa Mile as a “Gastarbeiter” holds an idyllic memory of a country he really never experienced. Gastarbeiter (plural, “Gastarbeiter”) is German for “guest worker” (literal translation). It refers to foreign or migrant workers, particularly those who had moved to West Germany (BRD) in the 1960s and 1970s, seeking work as part of a formal guest worker programme (Gastarbeiterprogramm).<sup>17</sup>

Another film placed in post-Yugoslav Gastarbeiter representations is Miko Lazić’s Swedish-produced *Made in Yugoslavia* (2005). The film deals with the notions of contested and negotiated identities. When the war breaks out in the former Yugoslavia, Petar goes into the garage of his suburban Stockholm home to commit suicide. His wife Marija and son Mihajlo fail to stop the attempt, but Petar survives all the same. Film director Miko Lazić uses flashbacks to tell the family’s story and to give a brief history lesson on Yugoslavia. Not a very sympathetic character, Petar is a liar, a cheat, a compulsive gambler and womanizer. His only claim to fame is that he once won the lottery.

*Made in Yugoslavia* can at first glance be perceived as a film dealing with the notions of over-simplified cultural clash issues. Petar and his brothers are portrayed as simple peasants who meet all kinds of new phenomena in the new country. The main dream is to return to their home country. Still, Petar is not longing back to former life in Yugoslavia, but is imagining a new life, based on future dreams rather than reminiscences. *Made in Yugoslavia* is thus representing a nostalgic position that is somewhere in between Boyms’ two models. Petar’s longing is a part of Gastarbeiter’s collective imaginings of the return and re-establishing a united Yugoslav home. But the war in Yugoslavia is being used as a paradigmatic event where the collective longings collide with the individual realization of the dream’s impossibility.

---

<sup>16</sup> Boym, *Nostalgia*, 356.

<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the Netherlands and Belgium had a parallel scheme called the “gastarbeider programme.” Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland had similar programs called workforce-immigration (arbetskraftsinvandring).

The world of this film is partly “Made in Yugoslavia.” Apart from the two boys, who play Mihajlo at different ages, most of the actors are well known, even legendary, professionals from Serbia. Their language is a mixture of Serbian and Swedish which adds up to make the hybridity of the characters themselves. According to the director, this was a conscious choice, as he rather used talented actors who do not speak Swedish than bad actors who just happen to be exiled Yugoslavs. The film not only uses language as the indicator of the characters hybridity, but also themes and some metaphorical concepts that were popular and well-known in the Yugoslav film context during the 1980s, namely the dysfunctional family with a tyrannical *pater familias* at the helm.

The usage of familiar themes and actors have a different meaning when placed in a completely foreign environment. The house by the sea as a symbol of a country that will burn up, a half-tyrannical father who in the Yugoslav context alluded to the country's president, all the famous actors give a transnational tone when introduced to an audience who may not be accustomed to this symbolism and / or these actors. That is also the film's most interesting, but perhaps most problematic approach to these worlds. The film uses a consistent language mix to illustrate a variety of situations and experiences, from simple comic situations to the questioning of certain notions that language is a constant identity marker. In some films dealing with culture clashes, language becomes a dividing line between different cultures. The multicultural society becomes a cosmos of ignorance and (language) barriers. People in the movies live side by side with each other, but rarely understand each other. The Petrović family mix languages, and adapt their own relationship to the new or the old world depending on the situation. Their mixture of languages refers to plural and fluid identities and identity processes.

### **Conclusion**

The films that I have analysed can only give a tiny glimpse into the complex issue of forced or traumatized transnational memory and everyday life. There are many more examples of diasporic memories conveyed through films, but my main goal was to highlight different formal strategies of post-Yugoslav remembrance. Tomić's individual memories visualized by other people's VHS tapes show a different formal approach towards the representation of the past then the performativity and Drljača's semi-fictionalizing of a real characters' everyday experiences.

These films deal with identity, marginalization, conflict, inter-generational debates about values, behaviour, loyalty and shared memories, but also about exile, migration, the asylum process and displacement. Still at the core of the concept of their displacement lies the image of a remembered home that stands at a distance both temporally and spatially. This place of origin may be the focus of a sustained ideology of return; it can still figure as a home in the present or be seen as belonging entirely to the past. It may have been left recently or generations ago; it may not exist anymore or be the destination of regular home trips; it may be a locus of nostalgia and nightmares. The questions “Where is home?” and “Where do I belong?” are important for migrants and later generations of settlers. These are questions about place and

location, as well as identity, but the aforementioned films also involve hybridity, mixed relationships and complicated passages of time and memories.

### **Bibliography**

- Bazin, André. 1981. *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma*. Paris: Editions definitive, Cerf.
- Benjamin, Walter. 2006. *Selected Writings Volume 4 1938-1940*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Berghahn, Daniela and Claudia Sternberg. 2010. *European Cinema in Motion: Migrant and Diasporic Film in Contemporary Europe*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bruzzi, Stella. 2006. *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Fentress, James and Chris Wickham. 1992. *Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past*. Oxford: Blackwell publishers.
- Iordanova, Dina. 2007. Whose is This Memory?: Hushed Narratives and Discerning Remembrance in Balkan Cinema. *Cineaste* 32(3), 22-27.
- Kracauer, Siegfried. 1960. *Theory of Film*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Loshitzky, Josefa. 2010. *Screening Strangers: Migration and Diaspora in Contemporary European Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Naficy, Hamid. 2001. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Nichols, Bill. 1994. *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Paech, Joachim. 1989. *The Mummy Lives!*, in *Image, Reality, Spectator: Essays on Documentary Film and Television*, edited by De Greef, Willem and Willem Hesling (eds.). Leuven: Acco.
- Tigervall, Carina. 2005. *Folkhemsk film: med "invandraren" i rollen som den sympatiske Andre*. Umeå: Umeå University.
- Wagner-Pacifici, Robin. 1996. Memories in the Making: The Shapes of Things That Went. *Qualitative Sociology* 19(3), 301-21.
- White, Hayden. 1987. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.