Why Serbian?

by Vladan Petkovic

Former Yugoslavia (1945-1991) was the Cold War bridge between the USA and the USSR. It was politically influenced by the Eastern Bloc, but remained independent enough to be on the Western side of the Iron Curtain in the cultural sense. Yugoslavia was a country with a healthy interest in Hollywood product, European arthouse, Hong Kong martial arts and American independent films, but also developed a significant cinema of its own, where World War II epics and comedies for the widest audiences led the box office. Yugoslav cinema also had its Black Wave in the sixties, when filmmakers such as Zivojin Pavlovic, Zelimir Zilnik, Dusan Makavejev and Aleksandar Petrovic won prizes at Cannes, Venice and Berlin, while some of their films were simultaneously banned in their country.

When Yugoslavia fell apart in bloody civil wars in the nineties, the film industry was ravaged along with the rest of the infrastructure and the new independent countries had much more urgent problems than to prioritize film-making and cinema-going. Naturally, the first films made in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Macedonia dealt with the war itself or its consequences, displaying nationalistic hatred of former “sister” nations, primarily fuelled by the state media. Some films made in Serbia, such as Srdjan Dragojevic’s Pretty Village Pretty Flame (1996) and Wounds (1998), and Goran Paskaljevic’s Powder Keg (1998) were the rare significant drops in the sea of mediocre or downright awful films about the breakdown of the former country, remnants of war or the state of society. The other kind of local films one could see in Serbia were rural or fake urban comedies, mostly far below any decent level of professional filmmaking or artistic taste. In the first decade of the 21st century, with the development of European funds, europpuding and rise of co-productions, many filmmakers turned to making arthouse films which did well at festivals but were practically invisible in the local theatrical distribution.

In 2003, the young director Dejan Zecevic made the first Serbian slasher horror T.T. Syndrome which sold some 30,000 admissions in Serbia and had a pretty lucrative DVD distribution in selected European territories, including the UK and Belgium. Although an anomaly in Serbian cinema at the time, the film laid foundation for what would happen by 2010. In 2007, the same director made The Fourth Man, a dark thriller in the vein of The Bourne Identity which marked the beginning of the new wave of Serbian genre films, which now includes Nebojsa Radosavljevic’s neo-noir Who the Fuck Is Milos Brankovic, Milan Konjevic and Milan Todorovic’s zombie flick Zone of the Dead, Aleksa Gajic’s anime-inspired animated feature Technotise: Edit & I, Uros Stojanovic’s pseudohystorical epic/ fantasy Tears for Sale and Mladen Djordjevic’s lauded, subversive arthouse gem The Life and Death of Porno Gang.

This is the context in which we should put A Serbian Film. Owing its transgressive content to Japanese and Korean ultraviolent cinema, visual identity to Hollywood of the seventies (Peckinpah, Friedkin, Scorsese), it seems like this film has come out of nowhere to shake, disturb, horrify and outrage unsuspecting audiences, while its roots are actually in the tradition of Yugoslav film. Writer Aleksandar Radivojevic (also responsible for Tears for Sale) and debutant director Srdjan Spasojevic have taken certain characteristics and archetypes of Yugoslav and Serbian film, amplified them to 11 on the volume knob, turned them upside down and infused them into the thriller genre, attacking both the society and the mentality of Serbian cinema. On one hand, Serbian (as well as the other Balkan)

filmmakers are more and more often compelled to agree to the reality of European co-productions, which requires to check certain boxes when writing a script, such as consequences of war, victimized characters, pathetic and straightforward transition questions, and above all, a numbing political correctness in the form, expression and point of view. On the other hand, Yugoslav cinema had a long tradition of motifs such as incestuous family relations, rough sex, violence between spouses, violence against children, and high body count of characters that the writer didn't know what to do with. A Serbian Film takes all this and more, creating a metaphor for the society which mistreats its children from birth, sending them to meaningless wars, not giving them any freedom of choice, discouraging them from getting acquainted with other cultures, and pressing them into numb submission.

A Serbian Film shows you what no film financed by European funds or state grants does- the agonizing reality behind bland proclamations of liberty, unity, human and civil rights and freedom of speech. This film will tell you the truth about the state of mind in Serbia, Europe and the world. You just have to extract it out of the nightmarish conglomerate of images and sounds it will bomb you with.

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