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Jugoslovenska Kinoteka

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THE FALL OF THE AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN MONARCHY IN SERBIAN FILMS

Aleksandar Erdeljanović

A Historical Overview

Aware of the fact that war is one of the most memorable events in the collective consciousness of nations, and aware of the spectator's desire to watch spectacular war scenes, film pioneers like Georges Méliès, James Williamson, Edwin Stanton Porter, Lucien Nongeut, and others started to capture, reconstruct, or fake actual military events for nonfiction films and newsreels respectively. Naively believing in the truthfulness of movie scenes, viewers were excited to see counterfeit scenes from Greek-Turkish, Anglo-Boer, Russian-Japanese, and other wars of the early century. Near simultaneously, viewers across Europe were able to follow staged reports about The May Coup in 1903, the murder of the Serbian King Aleksandar Obrenović and Queen Draga Mašin, massacres in Macedonia, as well as the fighting of Komit troops in the same region, always a politically unstable area. Then two bloody Balkan Wars in 1912–1913 gave Western European filmmakers the opportunity to introduce viewers to the brutal and cruel events located in “exotic areas of the Orient.” However, the First World War from 1914 to 1918 was the most brutal conflict that happened to

“cultural Europe” since the time of the Napoleonic wars. The use of new deadly weapons, tanks and airplanes, sophisticated guns and machine guns, trench warfare, and the usage of poison gases for the first time in history caused great slaughter. Around twenty million people were killed in warfare or died of epidemics and famine. Roughly another twenty million were wounded, many of them incapacitated for life. The war ended with the defeat of the Central Powers and the redistribution of territory, the disintegration of four empires (German, Russian, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian), creating new states on their ruins.¹

Serbian film started just a few years before the outbreak of the First World War. Namely, in the summer of 1911, the Belgrade hotelier Svetozar Botorić engaged the Pathé, Hungarian-born cameraman Louis de Berry, who together with the famous actor and director of the Royal Serbian National Theatre in Belgrade, Čiča Ilija Stanojević, and in cooperation with the Association of Serbian folk recording movies, produced the first three Balkan feature films, *Ulrih Celjski i Vladislav Hunjadi*, *Život i dela besmrtnog Vožda Karadjordja*, and *Ciganska svadba*, also known as *Bibija*, as well as twenty documentary films. By 1914 and the beginning of military operations, three Serbian film companies (the Savić Brothers' Company, the Brothers Cvetković Company, and Djoka Bogdanović's Company) were founded.² Until August 1914, four

1 Aleksandar Erdeljanović, “Oh kakav divan rat ili Prvi svetski rat na igranom filmu,” *Program Muzeja Jugoslovenske kinoteke* (May 2009): 11–17.

2 Cf. Petar Volk, *Srpski film* (Beograd: Institut za film, 1996); Petar Volk, *Istorija Jugoslovenskog filma* (Beograd: Institut za film, 1986); Bosa Slijepčević, *Kinematografija u Srbiji, Crnoj Gori i Bosni i Hercegovini 1896–1918* (Beograd: Univerzitet umetnosti/Institut za film, 1982); Dejan Kosanović, *Počeci kinematografije na tlu Jugoslavije 1896–1918* (Beograd: Univerzitet umetnosti/Institut za film, 1985).

feature and seventy documentary films and newsreels were produced by the Serbian cinematography. War and occupation followed. In this tragic period, around 400,000 Serbian soldiers were killed or died from injuries and diseases, and about 640,000 people were shot, hanged or died in the camps. This means that Serbia in World War I lost about twenty-six percent of the total population.

After World War I, the situation in the new state, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (SHS), and in particular in the Serbian ethnic territories, was very difficult because of the intense destruction, the universal impoverishment, and the apathy of state administration, which was not interested in supporting local film productions. For this reason, the first Serbian feature film in the newly created state, *Kačaci u Topčideru*, was filmed in 1924, six years after the war had ended, though the film was not completed due to lack of funding. In this Kingdom, which lasted less than a quarter of a century until the German occupation in 1941, only about twenty films in the silent and sound period were produced. However, though only a few Serbian feature films were made, two of them related to the First World War and the “Golgotha of the Serbian people and Serbian country.” Moreover, *Kroz buru i oganj* (1930, directed by Ranko Jovanović and Milutin Ignjačević), today lost, and especially *S verom u Boga*, (1932, directed by Mihajlo Al. Popović), were the best Yugoslav films of the interwar period.³ Especially *S verom u Boga*—lyrical and harsh at the same time, as well as dominated by patriarchal values and cinematic modernism—is the most sincere apology for the “suffering and salvation

3 Cf. Dejan Kosanović, *Kinematografija i film u Kraljevini SHS/Kraljevini Jugoslaviji 1918–1941* (Beograd: Filmski centar Srbije, 2011); Aleksandar Erdeljanović, “Prvih pola veka srpske kinematografije 1896–1945,” *Program Muzeja Jugoslovenske kinoteke* (May 2007): 23–33.

of the Serbian people” in the First World War, a unique anti-war appeal without hatred and a strong desire for a new beginning.⁴

World War II and the occupation of Yugoslavia by the Third Reich and its adherents, while at the same time ideological and military confrontations between supporters of the old royal government and the communists strengthened by the Soviet Union persisted, ended with the victory for the Allies and the establishment of a socialist state led by Josip Broz Tito. According to that, a new country as well as a new cinematography was established in line with the standards of the socialist camp. Although over 500 films were produced through the early 1990s, the number of those associated with such an important topic as the First World War was less than the number of the fingers on both hands. With the exception of the Soviet-Yugoslav co-production *Aleksa Dundić* (1958, directed by Leonid Lukov), a biographical costumed spectacle about the life of a Serbian soldier who joins the Red Army and becomes its hero, most other movies are related to the assassination in Sarajevo in June 1914. The Serbian film *Sarajevski atentat* (1968, directed by Fadil Hadžić), described the events with modest budgets but with psychological approaches focusing on the young Gavrilo Princip and his comrades from the secret organization Young Bosnia. The Croatian version of the same event, *Atentat u Sarajevu* (1976, directed by Veljko Bulajić) had unmindful screenwriting, but scores with a spectacular

4 Aleksandar Erdeljanović, *Sa verom u Boga / In God We Trust* - tekst za DVD digitally remastered (Beograd: Jugoslovenska kinoteka, 2015). Moreover, a Czech-Yugoslav production, “A život teče dalje,” should be mentioned here. This movie from 1935, directed by Carl Junghans, F.W. Kraemer, and Vaclav Dryak, centered on a touching story of a WWI-returnee from captivity finding his wife remarried with his best friend.

reconstruction of the historical incidents and the participation of famous international movie stars such as Christopher Plummer, Maximilian Schell, and Florinda Bolkan. Related also to this topic, the film *Belle Epoque* (1990, directed by Nikola Stojanović), made at the time of the dissolution of the State Union, linked the 1914 plot with the work of regional film pioneers like the Sarajevo cameraman Anton Valić, who captured the arrival of the imperial couple in Sarajevo just a few minutes before the assassination. The latest production of the Serbian cinematography on this subject is also noteworthy. This movie, *Branio sam Mladu Bosnu* (2014, directed by Srdjan Koljević), deals with the unknown and forgotten lawyer Rudolf Cistler, the defense counsel of Gavrilo Princip at the trial of the Sarajevo assassins. On the other hand, Srdjan Dragojević's *Sveti Georgije ubiva aždahu* dealt with the topic of Battle of Cer, presenting an impressive reconstruction of a month of bloody fighting and the defeat of Austro-Hungarian troops at the beginning of the war.

Apart from that, the most successful film regarding the First World War in Tito's Yugoslavia was a colored war spectacle entitled *Marš na Drinu*, released on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Cer in 1964. There was a very positive response to the film, especially from the spectators. Some comments allude that the script for the second part of the film—many say the better of the two—never passed political censorship, probably because of the patriotic topic and a kind of self-censorship in the minds of the creators. Any reference to “liberation wars” and the warfare of Serbia in the First World War could thus stimulate emotions of “national unity” and “brotherhood” through “blood and suffering.”⁵

5 Aleksandar Erdeljanović, “Oh kakav divan rat ili Prvi svetski rat na igranom filmu,” *Program Muzeja Jugoslovenske kinoteke* (May 2009): 11–17.

Finally, there is the question concerning the mutual perspective of Serbs and “the others” in the First World War. Adverse opinions about occupiers from 1914 and 1915 were automatically transferred from memories and history textbooks directly to the “art of film.” There are two productions with different approaches to the theme: *Besa* by Srdjan Karanović from 2009 is a subtle and delicate chamber drama that speaks about tempted relations between Serbs and Albanians during the Austro-Hungarian occupation of Serbia since 1915. The feature film *Pukovnikovica* (*Colonel's Wife*) is particularly interesting. It is unique among the Yugoslav cinematography because it deals with the end of World War I on the Serbian front from the viewpoint of the vanquished Austro-Hungarian soldiers. Therefore, it should be an object of further research and analysis in this text too.

Pukovnikovica, or the View from the “Other Side”

When the movie *Pukovnikovica* was released in 1972, a trademark of the Serbian cinematography from the beginning of the sixties and late seventies, the so-called “black wave” films, had already receded into background, after Tito's political clash with representatives of the Croatian mass movement and Serbian liberalism. The respective purge affected the culture of national filmmaking. Its prominent Serbian proponents who had chosen an open and uncompromising way of dealing with the “dark sides” of the “socialist self-management system” of former Yugoslavia perished. The work of Živojin Pavlović, Dušan Makavejev, Želimir Žilnik, Miroslav Antić, Mića Popović, and others were replaced by a so called “white wave,” a collection of impersonal films presenting a perfect political system that stressed the “eternal rule of Josip Broz.” Against this backdrop, for instance, Aleksandar Petrović, the author of the celebrated *Skupljači perja* (1967), who turned to a filmic adaptation of Bulgakov's novel *Majstor i Margarita*, left the domestic

cinematographic scene—and with him left a source of uncompromising critique of Stalinism and any other totalitarianism.

Then arose *Pukovnikovica*, a memory of the last days of the First World War focusing on the Austro-Hungarian/Serbian northern front. This movie was directed by the renowned art critic and director, Djordje Kadijević, after the success of his first two WWII-themed productions, *Praznik* (1967) and *Pohod* (1969). The plot is very simple: In the last days of autumn 1918, an Austro-Hungarian regiment, located in southern Banat—a part of the present Serbian province of Vojvodina that belonged to the Habsburg Empire until 1918—is decimated in the course of military operations resulting in Austro-Hungarian defeat and withdrawal. Suddenly, the colonel—commander of the regiment—gets a telegram informing him that his young wife will come to the front unannounced. The surprised officer waits for her, sending two soldiers to the railway station, in case she should arrive by train. As a matter of fact, the soldiers welcome her and take her to the headquarters, while at the same time many Austro-Hungarian soldiers were killed on the river, shot by the Serbian opponents. During the fighting the colonel disappears; a Serbian swineherd resembling the Austrian officer is buried. However, the colonel reappears, dressed only in underwear. The confused soldiers kill him immediately to avoid the revelation of their mistakes. Awaiting attacks of the victorious Serbs, the regiment retreats. Two soldiers in a car take away the colonel's wife with the casket. Then they are attacked by allied planes; they seize the opportunity to rape her, and they escape. Violated, humiliated, and thrown into the grass, she is found by the arriving Serbian troops.

However, the basically interesting story did not reach the high quality of previous Kadijević films.⁶ Anyway, as in his previous

6 Volk, *Istorija Jugoslovenskog filma*, 208–209.

films, there is an atmosphere that reveals the horrors of war and devastation that occurs when people—threatened by death—try to protect and “find” themselves. According to that, Kadijevic occasionally turns to a dark and naturalistic story of the swineherd and the exchange of the dead bodies, which did not exist in the original script of the film written by the famous writer Danko Popović. For Kadijević, as he remarked himself, it was important to change the scenario, thereby opposing the insatiable desire of the writer for long dialogues and unnecessary details. Because this is exactly what films do not tolerate: a kind of a lack of feeling for timing and cinematographic or “visual situations,” for distinctions between literature and movies or various media in general.⁷ “There was something fatally defeatist, catastrophic, which attracted me to the subject” of the film, Kadijević said.

But the desire to create a tragicomedy with elements of grotesquerie completely failed, despite impressive elements such as the exquisite Renoir impressionistic photographs and Mozart’s “charming” music clashing with the deafening battle noise. Even the careful cast, with his frequent collaborators (Dušan Janićijević, Slobodan Perović, Janez Vrhovec, Slobodan Aligrudić, Ljerka Draženović), could not improve the results of his artistic endeavors. The film is still dominated by flat dialogues and psychologically unconvincing twists. All the characters in the film are one-dimensional, starting from a young woman who wants to be with her husband, followed by the autocratic officers, as well as the simple and violence-prone soldiers. There is no differentiated moral question or a more refined psychological presentation of individual feelings. The film is neither an attraction nor an intellectual challenge. The characterization of “the others” remains too

7 Cf. Dejan Ognjanović, *Više od istine - Kadijević o Kadijeviću* (Novi Sad: Orfelin, 2016).

unambiguous; individuals are only representatives of stereotypes of collectives.

Kadijević did not have the ability to make a tragicomedy comparable to earlier works by Alexander Korda, Mario Monicelli, or Philippe de Broca. That is why the famous critic Svetozar Guberinić wrote in his critical review that *Pukovnikovica*, conceived as grotesque on the topic of moral and physical destructiveness of war, is ultimately not a remarkable achievement. Its structure, Guberinić noted, ends in a series of conceptual and aesthetic questions.⁸ Though the two villains of the movie are soldiers of Hungarian and Serbian nationality, the screening of *Pukovnikovica* at the local film festival in Pula (Croatia) passed without any success. In the opinion of the Kadijević: “Pula was not in the mood for a bit of anti-Croat film, because at the end Serbia wins, Serbian flags flutter, there is the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian, and thus the Croatian army. Croatian spectators in Pula did not appreciate plots like that.”⁹

After that, Djordje Kadijević, the author of movies with exceptional personal sensibility and style, was excluded from Serbian filmmaking, like some other “black wave directors” from the Serbian cinema. Subsequently, he transferred to a similar medium: television. This unusual author “knew how to create multi-layered visual metaphors, to coordinate the various elements of the images, to handle with visual effects and to inspire his staff. At the same time in doing so, he found refuge in the creative multitude of fascinating television films based on the basis of the rich Serbian historical tradition, folklore, myths and legends, full of horror, grotesque and tragicomic details—just to mention the

8 Svetozar Guberinić, “Staro i novo,” *Magazin Sineast*, no. 19 (1972/73): 29–41.

9 Cf. Ognjanović, *Više od istine - Kadijević o Kadijeviću*.

ingenious first Serbian horror production *Leptirica* (1973), or his interpretation of the domestic literary classic Milovan Glišić, as well as the feature film *Sveto mesto* (1990), following Gogol's work *Vij*."

A Brief Outlook

All things considered, there is no indication that, after a century of controversial debate and nationalist hatred, Serbian film producers and directors turn to the "dark chapters" of 1914 to 1918, though there was one exception: *Talog* by Miško Milojević, a 2014 TV drama about a Hungarian-Serbian couple and their troubled marital relations due to the advance and occupation of Serbian territory by the Habsburg army at the beginning of the First World War. Apart from that, a lack of interest of domestic filmmakers regarding the Danube Monarchy and World War One is obvious. On the other hand, 2018 and the centennial commemorations of the end of Europe's "great seminal catastrophe" are nearing—and surprises of any kind, good or bad, are still possible.