

## *The trouble of gender sin in post-Yugoslav film – in the name of the father*<sup>[1]</sup>

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Post-Yugoslav film art is, similarly to Yugoslav cinema, exemplary of masculine cultural domination, approaching socio-national themes in a highly gendered mode and reflecting a return to patriarchy, more brutal than that during the existence of Yugoslavia. A new generation of cinéasts explores, with a backlash mixture of contempt and compassion, the themes of violence, displaying a new assault on female emancipation, which seemed to be in line with the socio-political context of rising nationalist movements that led to the bloody events of the Yugoslav war in 1991. The female character is re-located to a place traditionally assigned to women not as the subject of narrative or discourse, but as the object of love and/or hatred by a masculine subject.

The films chosen to be analysed here are full-length auteur feature films – *Virgina*, *Grbavica*, *Djeca*, *Bure baruta*, with a specific focus on the work by Danis Tanović – are not representative of post-Yugoslav cinema, but as rare exceptions demonstrate that, contrary to the dominant post-Yugoslav public opinion, both the Yugoslav wars and post-war traumatic realities remain cinematically unexplored.

**KEYWORDS:** gender, film, Yugoslav, post-Yugoslav, war, auteur, gaze, patriarchy, cinematic representation

Post-Yugoslav film is, similarly to Yugoslav film, exemplary of masculine cultural domination. A new generation of cinéasts has used a mixture of contempt and compassion to explore the themes of violence and assaults on female emancipation as seemingly inevitable outcomes of the socio-political context of rising nationalist movements that led to the bloody events of the Yugoslav war in 1991. Despite a few rare counter-examples (which are discussed in more detail below), demonstrating that formal innovativeness does not preclude inventiveness and re-construction in the sphere of socio-political issues of representation in a broader sense and inclusive of gender relations, post-Yugoslav cinema could generally be described, in Genevieve Sellier's words, as *masculine cinema in the 1<sup>st</sup> person singular*.<sup>[2]</sup> Such films are male authored and represent a male gaze, most often as a direct expression of the film director or mediated through a male character's

[1] The title is a pun on linking the feminist work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) by Judith Butler with the controversial Yugoslav black film comedy *The Beauty of Sin* (Lep-

ota poroka, 1986), directed by posthumously widely critically acclaimed author Živko Nikolić.

[2] G. Sellier, *La Nouvelle vague: un cinéma au masculine singulier*, Paris 2005.

gaze, and are therefore representations of a masculine-dominated perspective.[3] Beyond the diversity of their style and narratives, post-Yugoslav films remain loyal to the Yugoslav film tradition of violence as a favourite theme, but from the 1990s onwards, inter-ethnic/national violence becomes the dominant mode of representation used to reflect socio-political realities. Political and structural (implicit or explicit) exclusion of women guarantees their constant presence at the level of image in the sphere of flow and maintenance of symbolic patriarchal capital, coupled in the 1990's and the first decade of the 21st century with a blatant nationalist ideology.

In light of the above, the films chosen to be analysed here are full-length *auteur* feature films that express a desire to affirm the autonomy of art in relation to social determinations, defying dominant representations of gender, ethnicity, and nation or class, and offering the possibility of a radical aesthetics or a resistance to the established male author's gaze: these include *Virdžina*, *Grbavica*, *Djeca*, and *Bure baruta*, with a specific focus on the works of Danis Tanović.[4]

Srdjan Karanović's *Virgina* (*Virdžina*), released in 1991, the year of the Yugoslav war break out, is a film on female monstrosity, set in a prevalingly patriarchal rural society (at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), the kind of society which was most efficiently led to the war by its nationalist patriarchs, even a century later. Hence, the choice of its being the first film analysed here is fitting; i.e. it is symptomatic of the brutal passage from the patriarchal Yugoslav film to an even more patriarchal post-Yugoslav one.

"Virdžina"[5] is not a female name: it is a phenomenon in the rural Balkans, according to which the girl in a son-less family performs

[3] Yugoslav film veterans continue to make great films in the next decades: Srdjan Karanović, Miloš-Miša Radivojević, Goran Paskaljević, Rajko Grlić, Krsto Papić, Goran Marković, Ante Babaja, Bota Nikolić, (also award-winning younger generation, such as Emir Kusturica and Srdjan Dragojević), with new emerging auteur names: Milcho Manchevski, Danis Tanović, Aida Begić, Jasmila Žbanić, Srdan Golubović, Dalibor Matanić, Zrinko Ogresta, Vinko Brešan, Ognjen Sviličić, Arsen Anton Ostojić, Hana Jušić etc.

[4] Milcho Manchevski's work, which represents some of the finest auteur cinematic masterpieces, cannot be dealt with within the scope of this paper, as it deserves a separate analysis dedicated exclusively to his work. Similarly, the analysis of a fascinating vast body of documentary film works exceeds the scope of this paper and could, hopefully, be focused on in another similar research paper.

[5] or "tobelija", as it is called in some regions. In different regions, as well as in various academic studies and popular accounts, the phenomenon is termed

differently. Besides the term "virdžina" (Albanian *virgjinëshë*), in frequent usage are also "tobelija" (tomboy), "ostajnica" (remaining girl), or "zavetovana djevojka" (girl as a guaranteed gift). Although usually synonymous, various theorists have attempted to assign to these terms qualitative differences, but their precise classification has been rendered difficult because of distinct individual qualities attached to persons from different regions. Thus, for example, Marijana Gušić argues that the phenomenon "virdžina" traces back to antiquity and the cult of "virgo", while Tatomir Vukanović believes that it represents the residue vestiges of "matriarchy". According to the more scientifically grounded hypothesis of the Austrian historian Karl Kazer, the emergence of this phenomenon is a consequence of the Balkans' quite fragile patrilinear kinship organisation, which relied exclusively on the male lineage or male heirs. For studies on this phenomenon, see M. Barjaktarović, *Prilog proučavanju tobelija (zavetovanih devojaka)*, in: *Zbornik Filozofskog fakulteta* 1, 1966, pp. 343–352; and *Problem tobelija (virdžina) na Balkanskom*

both according to her gender given at birth, and then according to an “acquired”, imposed gender. Gender expectations are defined in *medias res* in Srdjan Karanović’s *Virgina*[6] (1991), with the mother screaming when she gives birth to another female baby (her fifth). The woman alone has to take full responsibility for the sex of the child, while a pregnant woman carrying a ‘monstrous baby’ (female) is beaten, punished and humiliated. Such scenes of human cruelty are juxtaposed with scenes of the rugged, harsh and barren land, with the landscape being one of the film’s protagonists, shaping people’s lives.

The phenomenon is played (in Butler’s sense, Butler: 1990) according to a three-fold ‘performance of a performance’, or as a *double masquerade*, in Rivière’s (1986) words: 1) a generally accepted performance according to gender stereotypes, i.e. to given norms; 2) a double gender meta-performance by the parents: towards female children and female-as-male children; 3) an accepted gender performance among sisters and their meta-performance towards a female-brother or a male-sister. *Virđina* has to conceal her physical attributes: similarly to hermaphrodites, her sex is an anomaly, a monster, in Braidotti’s (2006) sense. In contrast to babies born with anomalies at birth, studied by biologists-as forerunners-of modern-embriology, who privilege phenomena that deviate from the norm, a girl *virđina* is born as a normative, healthy, non-deviant body from such a scientific perspective. But she lacks the ‘correct sex’ and is therefore made socially unacceptable, monstrous. Hence, she not only has to imitate, *pantomime* and perform a boy; she also has to somehow *become* one.

Tracing the history of discourse about monsters back to the Greeks and Romans, who maintained the notion of a ‘race’ of monsters, an ethnic entity possessing specific characteristics, Braidotti illustrates that classical mythology does not contain a main divine creature or demigod born of woman. This dimension of ‘unnatural birth’ or immaculate conception strengthens the paradox of aberration and adoration. In this sense, *virđina* as a girl is a monster and represents a site of aberration. But as a girl-who-performs-a-boy, she evokes something wonderful, fantastic, rare, precious and, therefore, represents a site of secret (and displaced) adoration. She/he becomes an unusual object of both horror and fascination, something both exceptional and ominous.[7]

*poluostrvu*, “Glasnik Etnografskog muzeja” 1966, no. 28–29, pp. 273–a 285; M. Dickemann, *The Balkan Sworn-Virgin: A Cross-Gendered Female Role*, in: *Islamic Homosexualities: culture, history and literature*, eds. S.D. Murray and M. Roscoe 1997; LJ. Gavrilović, *Tobelije: zavet kao osnov sticanja pravne i poslovne sposobnosti*, “Glasnik Etnografskog muzeja” 1983, no. 67–79; R. Grémaux, *Woman becomes man in the Balkans*, in: *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. G. Herdt, 1994; M. Gušić, *Pravni položaj ostajnice-virđineše u stočarskom društvu regije Dinarida*, in: *Odredbe*

*pozitivnog zakonodavstva i običajnog prava o sezonskim kretanjima stočara u jugoistočnoj Evropi kroz vekove*, 1976, pp. 269–293; K. Kaser, 1994.

[6] The film was awarded a Golden Palm at the Valencia Mediterranean Film Festival and received the European Film Award for best supporting actress (Marta Keller); it also received great critical acclaim at other international festivals.

[7] The notion of monsters accompanies the development of the medical sciences in the pre-scientific imagination and “conveys an interesting mixture of traditional superstitions and elements of reflection that will lead

The positioning of the author's subtle gaze is a courageous attempt to transform the displayed object of the gaze (spectacle) to the subject of the gaze, i.e. a maturing girl in possession of the gaze upon herself and others. The author's gaze also functions as an anthropologist's: he describes the social and sexual alienation of the female character's *monstrosity* and, eventually, her 'emancipation'. The film's poignant and radical ending may, hopefully, provide women with a fundamental human right to be born, without construing images of deviation in other people's minds. Virdžina's origin is uncertain, her future is uncertain and, by analogy with David Lynch's masterpiece, *The Elephant man* (1980), her morphology is changeable and frightening – a freak. Yet, by such a display of distorted images of women, the author actually allows humanity to see its own distorted mirror image, and the ending becomes more poignant in light of the persisting *virgina* phenomenon found even today in the highly patriarchal Balkan areas.

Aida Begić's second feature, *Children of Sarajevo* (*Djeca*, 2012), provides an almost *cinema verité* documentary-style analysis of post-war Bosnian transitional society through the story of two war orphan siblings. Condensing the narrative to a couple of pre-Christmas days in the lives of Sarajevans, the film contrasts the bleak realities of war orphans with the glamorous life-styles of corrupted politicians and other figures of authority. While her daringly poignant debut *Snow* (*Snijeg*), which won the *Semaine de la Critique* in Cannes in 2008, deals with the direct consequences of the war and the hopeful reconstruction of the society, *Children of Sarajevo* documents the post-war society's challenges in the midst of financial, political, social and moral crisis. But these problems are also found in other Balkan countries, Begić confines her filmic portrayal to Bosnia and – to her protagonist Rahima's point of view:

Playing with the notion of the visual representation, Begić asks many questions but does not provide the answers. Rahima was about five years old during the war and her brother was just born [...] The entire film structure is centred around these questions, suggestive of the play between *veiling* and *unveiling*. Depending on the people with whom she comes into contact, Rahima's war memories unfold, *unveiled* on the screen. Just as Rahima's psyche is marked by her tormented memories, so is she socially marked by wearing the veil. She chooses to be visually and socially marked by the scarf, as if to simultaneously expose and mask her war scars, but refuses to give a clear explanation for her (religious or spiritual?) choice [...] The veil could, thus, become the metaphor for the heroine's vulnerabilities, simultaneously cautiously hidden from others and audaciously revealed to the outside world. Rahima's veil is, therefore, a visual sign of her well-kept intimate secrets, but also of her strength, as she clearly separates herself from the others by boldly asserting her difference.[8]

to a more scientific method of enquiry", R. Braidotti, *Mothers, monsters and machines*, in: eadem, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Utrecht 2006, p. 92.

[8] M. Bogojević, *Can the war memories be unveiled?*, "Fedeora" 2012, <<http://www.fedeora.eu/can-the-war-memories-be-unveiled/>>.

An earlier film which shows Sarajevo's post-war trauma is the award-winning *Grbavica* (*Esma's secret*, 2006) by Jasmila Žbanić. Set in the Sarajevo suburb of Grbavica, the film, as its English title more explicitly suggests, subtly deals with one of the most painful truths for the women of Bosnia: that of rape by enemy soldiers. Esma is a single mother who works as a night-club waitress and struggles to raise her teenage daughter Sara. Sara shows signs of rebellion, typical of any teenager, but her anxiety and insecurity intensify as she starts doubting the identity of her father (she was told that he was a war hero). The mounting tension between mother and daughter is brilliantly conveyed by Žbanić, who subliminally unites the main preoccupations of her earlier documentary and video work into her debut feature, and dares to show the "unspoken, the unrepresentable", by tackling the "taboo" theme of raped women and female victims of the war, about which society had been taciturn until then. The director reveals this secret early on in the film, through hinting or suggesting, without the need to create any suspense, implying that the treatment of this taboo theme is more important and urgent than dramatic tension. The tension, however, reaches its climax when Sara is supposed to go on a school trip for free provided she can supply a certificate proving her father is a war hero. The author builds this tension masterfully, aided by the subtle use of music, but without leaving space for the audience to identify with the film's protagonists. A distancing is created both among the narrative characters and between them and the audience, as if the absolute identification or absolute consummation of the audience's voyeurism were impossible, suggesting that the world of war trauma can only be peeped into, but not experienced through a screen representation.

Esma is left to her own devices financially, psychologically and morally as most other women, civil victims of the war. Bosnia has since, through the campaign "For the dignity of the survivors", introduced a law on the federal level which grants raped women the status of civil victims of the war. Žbanić "states:

Our politicians are men... I was angry for years at the things that had happened. I still cannot comprehend even today how a man can experience an erection out of hatred and a wish to destroy a woman. It took me a long time to distance myself emotionally enough to be able to make this film.[9]

Another film that, arguably effectively, shows the absurdity of violence and war is *Bure baruta* (*The Powder Keg* aka *Cabaret Balkan*, 1998), directed by Yugoslav film veteran Goran Paskaljević, based on the eponymous play by Dejan Dukovski. Set in Belgrade in only one night - the eve of the signing of the Dayton peace accord - the war's violence here is transformed into urban violence, not between different

[9] My translation: "Naši političari su muškarci... Godinama sam bila bijesna na stvari koje su se desile. Do danas mi nije jasno kako muškarac može doživjeti erekciju iz mržnje i želje da ženu uništi. Trebalo

mi je puno vremena da se emotivno distanciram i napravim ovaj film", M. Bogojević, *Interview with Jasmila Žbanić: Prikazati "neprikazivo"*, "Monitor" 2007, February.

ethnic groups, but among Serbs themselves. The society's deepest fears and prejudices are exposed through various characters, including angry young punks, typically Balkan petty criminals and more violent and dangerous criminal gangs, lonely lost refugees from the Bosnian war, junkies, alcoholics, depressed and distressed people, all exploding with violence in the dark and desolate streets of the city. Female characters are not spared any violence either; on the contrary, they are reduced by a male enunciation to a fantasist projection of the traditional docile-virgin/sexual object dichotomy. In order to prove his patriarchal power, man must first possess the female body and, then, if it is not obedient to him as his property, he must destroy it. The female body is infantilised, humiliated, raped, beaten and killed, recycling a patriarchal culture defined by the contradiction between the acceptance of women's sexual liberation and an archaic fear of the *feminine*. Although cinematic representation can be criticised for displaying such violent images of female bodies and romanticising/orientalising images of Balkan virility and the irrational impulses of Balkan 'collective madness', the author successfully avoids male stereotypes, portraying the protagonists as more complex characters, of whom he, too, is critical. By turning a series of violent vignettes into film noir, Paskaljević offers a fictional reflection on a society in disarray, resulting from the country's reality and its leadership's nationalistic, xenophobic and fascist politics. With the film's ending inevitably explosive, as the title suggests, the author succeeds in illustrating, as controversial as it may seem, the absurdity of any type of violence and war. However, a more explicitly critical tone might have led to a different, less self-apologetic, development of protagonists, who could take more direct responsibility for the massacres and genocide committed by the Serbs in the Yugoslav wars.

The absurdity of war is more explicitly conveyed in a film with clear humanistic overtones and a different internationalist resonance – *Ničija zemlja* (*No Man's Land*, 2001) by Danis Tanović. This Oscar-winning film, entirely set in a trench in a no man's land, confronts a Serbian and a Bosnian soldier, revealing all the inefficiencies of the Western powers' involvement in the conflict and wittily satirising the futility of the international community and, particularly, the prejudices of Western media.

In his other award-winning film, *An Episode In the Life of an Iron Picker* (*Epizoda u životu berača željeza*, 2013), Tanović paints a desolate documentary portrait of life on the margins of a Roma family, focusing on real events from the life of Nazif Mujić and Senada Alimanović. According to his own words, Tanović read in the newspaper about the Roma couple being denied urgent medical treatment in Bosnia, after which he felt compelled to make this film.<sup>[10]</sup> Senada is sent for an emergency operation after she begins bleeding during her fifth month of pregnancy, but in the hospital they are given a hospital bank account

[10] Film pressbook, /pressbook-iron-picker.pdf, p. 5.

with a request for payment. They do not have the money, so Nazif tries desperately to save Senada's life for ten days. The victims – Nazif and Senada – re-enact their sad story as the protagonists of the film, shot with a hand-held camera in nine days at the original location (with the budget of less than 20,000 Euro).

Symptomatic of the condition of the most marginal lives, the film constitutes a humane urge against discriminatory practices aimed at the Roma people, not only in Bosnia and the Balkans, but throughout Europe. The director notes himself: "Today we live in a society that turns its head away from the socially underprivileged and behaves as if it cannot see the horror that surrounds us".<sup>[11]</sup>

Three years after this film, Tanović made another socio-political statement with his latest work *Smrt u Sarajevu* (*Death in Sarajevo*, 2016), a fictional reflection on real events, blending the real with the imaginary in a stylised *mise-en-scène* of the evil flow of weapons, money, political manipulation and exploitation of the marginal classes:

There surely was this mixture of arrogance and nonchalance of the European powers, political leaders, of experts and strategists of all kinds [...] Nightmarish, *Death in Sarajevo* is not that only because of the situation it describes, but for its construction of a fluid labyrinth, where heterogeneous elements are suddenly linked, or frightening obstacles appear: physical violence of gangsters, egoism or submission of the employees, the deceit of those in charge, indifference of the great powers, instrumentalisation by the elite media [...] Seen from Sarajevo, from Bosnia, this is extreme darkness, but the film is not sinister by any means.<sup>[12]</sup>

Post-Yugoslav films approach socio-national themes in a highly gendered mode, reflecting a return to patriarchy more brutal than that found during the existence of Yugoslavia. The female character is re-located to a place traditionally assigned to women, not as the *subject* of narrative or discourse, but as the *object* of love and/or hatred expressed by a masculine subject.<sup>[13]</sup> The above analysed filmic examples are not representative of post-Yugoslav cinema, but as rare exceptions demonstrate that, contrary to the dominant/populist post-Yugoslav public opinion, both the Yugoslav wars and the post-war traumatic realities remain cinematically unexplored, with war memories waiting to be

[11] Film pressbook, /pressbook-iron-picker.pdf, p. 5.

[12] My translation: "Il y a bien eu ce mélange d'arrogance et de désinvolture des puissances européennes, des dirigeants politiques, des experts et des stratèges de tous poils. Cauchemardesque, *Mort à Sarajevo* ne l'est pas seulement pour la situation qu'il décrit, mais par sa construction en labyrinthe fluide, où des éléments hétérogènes soudain se relient, où des obstacles effrayants surgissent: violence physique des gangsters, égoïsme ou soumission des employés, fourberie des responsables, indifférence des grandes puissances, instrumentalisation par un intellectuel médiatique... Vu depuis Sarajevo, depuis la Bosnie, le constat est

d'une extrême noirceur, et pourtant le film n'est nullement sinistre.", J.-M. Frodon, «*Mort à Sarajevo*», *danse macabre pour une Europe défunte*, "Camera Lucida" 2017, no. 29–30, p. 5, <[http://camerалucida.net/test/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=825:2017-10-24-18-52-30&catid=31:cl-29-30&Itemid=9](http://camerалucida.net/test/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=825:2017-10-24-18-52-30&catid=31:cl-29-30&Itemid=9)>.

[13] Even the majority of the few female film authors demonstrate an interiorised misogyny, and recycle the new capitalist-consumerist patriarchal discourse, with a flagrant example being Maja Miloš's award winning *Clip* (2012).

cinematically dealt with in a more profound and non-discriminatory manner.[14]

Officially over, the war is still present in Bosnia: in its people's memories, daily lives, in its macabre ruins waiting to be repaired. The future is not only unpredictable, but impossible to plan or imagine. The dreams gave place to (war) memories, to paraphrase [Aida Begić's] words. What might happen in the next few days remains not only unknown, but unplannable...[15]

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[14] The recent film *Ustav Republike Hrvatske* (2016) by Rajko Grlić is one such film movingly dealing with post-war trauma.

[15] M. Bogojević, *Can the war memories be unveiled?...*