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CONSTRUCTIONS OF POST-YUGOSLAV IDENTITIES IN CONTEMPORARY SLOVENIAN FILM

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the construction of Slovenian national identity in relation to memories of the period of Socialist Yugoslavia and its dissolution in the context of contemporary Slovenian cinematography (1991–2021). The dynamic of forgetting and remembering Socialism and Yugoslav identity is presented with the help of an in-depth analysis of representations, reception and contexts of production contexts of select representative cases: Outsider (1997), the most popular Slovenian feature film of the 1990s, the mockumentary Houston, We Have a Problem! (2016) and the co-production Parada (2011). The article demonstrates that films are repositories and re-examiners of national and regional policies, trauma, and reinterpretations of history and identities. As such, they are important objects for analyzing processes of remembering memory processes and transformations of the attitudes towards the Slovenian recent past.

Keywords: Slovenian cinema, identity formation, cultural memory, nostalgia, trauma

COSTRUZIONI DI IDENTITÀ POST-JUGOSLAVE NEL CINEMA SLOVENO CONTEMPORANEO

SINTESI

Questo articolo discute la costruzione dell'identità nazionale slovena in relazione al ricordo del periodo della Jugoslavia socialista e della sua dissoluzione nel contesto della cinematografia slovena contemporanea (1991–2021). La dinamica dell'oblio e del ricordo del socialismo e dell'identità jugoslava è presentata con l'aiuto di un'analisi approfondita delle rappresentazioni, della ricezione e dei contesti di produzione di alcuni casi rappresentativi: Outsider (1997), il più popolare lungometraggio sloveno degli anni '90, il mockumentary Houston, We Have a Problem! (2016) e la coproduzione Parada (2011). L'articolo dimostra che i film sono depositari e riesaminatori di politiche nazionali e regionali, traumi e reinterpretazioni della storia e delle identità. Come tali, sono oggetti importanti per analizzare i processi di memoria e le trasformazioni degli atteggiamenti verso il recente passato sloveno.

Parole chiave: cinema sloveno, formazione dell'identità, memoria culturale, nostalgia, trauma

INTRODUCTION

The dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991 resonated forcefully in the domain of film production, as the multinational state's film industry was effectively shut down and eventually replaced by smaller, national industries established in the newly founded states, such as Slovenia. Brought about by political circumstances, the changes in the sphere of film production were not merely organizational, infrastructural, and economic. Although the significance of these dimensions of the shift cannot be overlooked, they should not be regarded in isolation from the realm of codes, symbols, and narratives. To put it in very specific terms: 2021 marks the thirtieth anniversary of Slovenian independence, as well as the thirtieth anniversary of the first post-Yugoslav Slovenian film, in fact, the first ever Slovenian film hit, *Grandma Goes South* (*Babica gre na jug*, 1991, dir. Vinci Vogue Anžlovar). In this movie, the titular heroine, a stubborn and lively grandma, Sara B. (Majolka Šuklje), decides to escape a retirement home and hitchhike her way towards a high-end seaside resort.

Today, this production is a familiar symbol of "Slovenian cinematography" for many generations of local audiences. Since the film's release, the fascination over the film and its heroine has doubtlessly partially stemmed from the production's double allure. In 1991, the old lady's extravagant, adventurous road trip sprinkled with casinos seemed to belong to Hollywood, rather than to a new post-socialist film industry plagued by perennial financial concerns. At the same time, the film appeared "familiar", that is firmly embedded in what appeared to be a new – ahistorical, but clearly modern and non-Yugoslav – Slovenian society. Indeed, this film appears to have functioned as an historical agent, in line with the historicist tradition of film analysis, wherein films have been "perceived as offering a window on the time during which they were produced" (Falbe-Hansen, 2003, 108). Accordingly, film scholars Zdenko Vrdlovec (2014) and Peter Stanković (2013) have even described this movie as a fitting metaphor of new times full of optimistic anticipation that Slovenians, as a national collective, are headed towards their high-end future.

With thirty years' hindsight, this verdict can be re-visited from the perspective of legacy and (dis)continuity. In academic discussions, Slovenian feature fiction cinema has been infamous for its notorious disregard for history in general and for Yugoslav history in particular. At the same time, many studies have observed that this does not make Slovenian cinema immune to a very specific kind of perspective of the Yugoslav past, that is Yugonostalgia (cf. Tomanič Trivundža, 2010; Mazaj, 2011). Admittedly, most of these studies date back to the late 2000s and 2010s. However, the recent surge of interest in the post-Yugoslav space and its history in the cultural sector in Slovenia, including the field of film production, distribution, and reception, begs for a re-inspection of the relationship between Slovenian film production, the cultural memory of the Yugoslav past, and post-Yugoslav national identity.

Accordingly, the aim of this article is to advance the discussion on Yugonostalgia in Slovenian cinema by investigating it from a diachronic perspective. In doing so, we explore how longitudinal analyses of fictional representations, such as those presented

in feature films can be deployed to investigate a nation's cultural memory. In other words: in what ways have post-Yugoslav Slovenian films related to Yugoslavia over the past three decades of post-Yugoslav film production? What kind of nostalgia for Yugoslavia emerges from close readings of a selection of post-1991 Slovenian films, and (how) is it recognized and received by Slovenian and international audiences and critics?

In what follows, we first outline the basic structural parameters of the contemporary Slovenian film industry, making a case for the peculiar prevalence of “auteur” productions in this national context. Then we position Yugonostalgia in this outlined context, relating it to existing literature on nostalgia in post-Yugoslav societies and post-Yugoslav cinema. We proceed to analyse Yugonostalgia, provisionally defined as an emotively charged dynamic of forgetting and remembering of the regional past, in close readings of three select representative cases – *The Outsider* (*Outsider*, 1997, dir. Andrej Košak), the most popular Slovenian feature film of the 1990s, the mockumentary *Houston, We Have a Problem!* (2016, dir. Žiga Virc) and the co-production with Serbia, *The Parade* (*Parada*, 2011, dir. Srđan Dragojević) – each representative of a certain political context, and each well received both by professional critics and the broader audience.

AUTEUR AS GENRE, AHISTORICITY AS FORM: CONTEXT AND CORPUS

Post-1991 Slovenian film production, which comprises over 309 feature films, among them 70 co-productions, where Slovenia was a minor co-production partner (BSF, 2021), has been heavily marked by the funding capacities and limitations of the Slovenian Film Centre – *Slovenski filmski center* (SFC) (formerly Slovenian Film Fund – *Slovenski filmski sklad*).¹ The SFC has the financial capacity to annually support the production of only a certain number of features (from six to eight on average). The often-criticised Centre has specific project evaluation criteria; the “artistic merits” of a work account for 50 % of the score, allowing for a great degree of subjectivity. As Matic Majcen (2015, 11) has pointed out, Slovenian Film Fund/Centre functions as a national “gate-keeper” with a specific set of values and the power to decide which films and themes are going to receive financial support. Additionally, the prevalent public opinion that Slovenian cinema is “depressing and unwatchable” is not conducive to support from the private sector (cf. Stan-ković, 2020, 82–86). According to Majcen (2015), the Slovenian film market was distinctly introverted until 2004, when producers began to make more efforts in seeking alternative funding sources. His data also reveals a continual collaboration of Slovenian film productions with other former Yugoslav states (most notably

1 After 1991, the old Yugoslav system of film funding that relied on centralized republic-level producers was replaced with a system of independent producers, who apply for funding to state and foreign institutions, corporate investors etc. (cf. e. g., Majcen, 2015).

Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia), demonstrating that at least some of the former Yugoslav film networks remained intact or reopened after the disintegration of the Federation.

All the abovementioned factors have contributed to very specific conditions of Slovenian film production, including the considerable – and constant – prevalence of so-called “auteur” films over genre productions. At the same time, Majcen’s analysis (Majcen, 2015) shows that authorship is not independent of its discursive and institutional contexts. This means, the films were not made in an artistic vacuum, but should rather be considered in terms of specific socio-cultural contexts. This begs the question, whether and in what ways post-independence auteur works have tackled the Slovenian collective and personal post-transitional identities. And how are these identities connected to and influenced by the past?

In his historical overview of Slovenian film, Peter Stanković (2020) has observed that Slovenian films produced in the 1990s are a stylistically and thematically eclectic group and that they were – at the time – often unable to grasp their social context. However, as Ilija Tomanić Trivundža (2010, 662–663) has noted, these auteur films nevertheless share a set of traits, including “ethnicity-based hero and villain, weak main characters or determination with destiny”. In accordance with Mette Hjort, Michael Fulford, and Scott MacKenzie’s (2000, 4) observation that films are “one of the loci of debates about a nation’s governing principles, goals, heritage and history,” the outlined common characteristics of Slovenian auteur productions “can also be traced to the shared patterns of collective identification, promoted by cultural and political institutions under the banner of national identity” (Tomanić Trivundža, 2010, 663).

Despite the almost proverbial aversion of Slovenian filmmakers to topics that engage directly with the nation’s recent history, Tomanić Trivundža’s observation should be considered precisely with this past in mind. Accordingly, Martin Pogačar (2000, 134) has argued:

Peaking at the time of the collapse and escalating during the Yugoslav Wars, (media) nationalism prompted the new states to craft nationally exclusive physical and symbolic landscapes. New landscapes and, increasingly, the mediascapes became the central props in the process of discrediting the Yugoslav political system, contesting the republic-level entrenchment of power, and in the processes of the installation of new regimes and power structures.

In the Slovenian context, significantly less marked by war and violence than the other post-Yugoslav states, the process of constituting new regimes entailed remarkable ignorance for the recent past and attempts to align Slovenian national identity with “everything but” the Balkans, and Yugoslavia. This was not only characteristic of political discourse, where Slovenia was consistently branded as a Central European state, a nation rooted in a specific cultural project, and, bordering on, but not a part of the Balkans. Majcen’s analysis of features made between 1995 and 2013 reveals 75% of the films were set in the present (corresponding to the time they were made) (2015).

Tomanić Trivundža's analysis of nationally funded Slovenian film production from 1991 to 2005 reveals a similar trend. He notes that most of the 50 feature films from this period position their narratives in a "mythical post-independence time" (Tomanić Trivundža, 2010, 671). In turn, Meta Mazaj (2011, 18) concludes that this mythical present is visually and narratively preoccupied with the transition, from the barely established and somewhat empty "national" to the – presumably European – "supranational", which appears equally foreign.

Given that only a few Slovenian films have avoided national temporal amnesia, it is important to ask: what form and function does remembering the past take on in Slovenian cinema? The films that were made in the first decade after Slovenia's independence rarely dealt with the – both pre-Yugoslav or Yugoslav – past, and mostly did so through intimate stories, e. g. *The Flying Machine* (*Zrakoplov*, 1993, dir. Jure Pervanje); *Halgato* (1994, dir. Andrej Mlakar). Some engaged with the history of the recent fall of Yugoslavia and the following war conflicts, e. g. *Felix*² (1996, dir. Božo Šprajc). Fewer still were able to reflect on their time and place and their connection to the past; Stanković highlights *Radio.doc* (1994, dir. Miran Zupanič) in this small group; a production which dealt with the mysterious death of a reporter in the 1970s and his daughter's efforts to solve the case two decades later. However, it was not until *Outsider* that Slovenia got its first film to evoke a sense of nostalgia for the Yugoslav past.

Over the next two decades, Slovenian films were still mostly intimate affairs set in the present. Nevertheless, with greater historical distance, nostalgic elements connected to remembering and re-constructing Yugoslavia through fiction and cultural appropriation of past times began to creep into cinematic works more often: see, e. g., *Sweet Dreams* (*Sladke Sanje*, 2001, dir. Sašo Podgoršek); *Headnoise* (*Zvenenje v glavi*, 2002, dir. Andrej Košak); *Tractor, Love and Rock'n'roll* (*Traktor, ljubezen in rock'n'roll*, 2008, dir. Branko Đurić); *Bread and Circuses* (*Kruha in Iger*, 2012, dir. Klemen Dvornik); *Shanghai Gypsy* (*Šanghaj*, 2012, dir. Marko Naberšnik) etc. However, we should note that in many of the mentioned films reworking the past was mostly a stylistic, less a reflective device of engaging with the regional history. In this regard, regional co-productions, works taking on recent events following the disintegration of the old regime, proved to be a more fruitful ground to think about reflective engagements with the past. Especially when working in the genre of comedy the films, among them *No Man's Land* (*Ničija Zemlja*, 2001, dir. Denis Tanović) and aforementioned *The Parade*, proved to be popular and successful at home and internationally.

Over the past decade, the increasing amount of regional co-production activities has further complicated the question of screening *national* identities. We argue that such co-productions, that is films produced by directors from two or more post-Yugoslav states and/or funded by more than one national film production funding

2 Felix presented an alternative version of the story of how the 1991 Slovenian War for Independence started and was at the time heavily criticised as "disgraceful parody of the Slovenian liberation efforts" (Majcen, 2015, 66). Due to financial conflicts, the film was never released and is currently unavailable.

body, allow us to investigate the construction of post-Yugoslav national identities from a special position. In the production process of these films, attitudes to the shared past and to various, often nationally specific historical narratives about this past (cf. Pavasović Trošt & Mihajlović Trbovc, 2020), as well as other nationally-coded tropes, such as stereotypes about nationals of a certain state are necessarily negotiated and adapted by the international production crew. In this sense, such co-productions are an especially interesting vantage point to study heritage cinema (cf. Jelača, 2016). In the context of this article, the heritage films of interest are those concerned with the Yugoslav state and its symbolic imaginary, along with its doctrine of brotherhood and unity, multiculturalism, and specific economic model, based on workers' self-management.

METHODOLOGY

Cinematic Mnemonic Agency and a Note on Corpus

As popular-cultural metaphors for future aspirations and diagnoses of traumatic presents, films in general, and especially state (co-)funded productions have an important role to play in identity-formation processes, not only providing examples of how to be or not to be a member of a certain society or acting as witnesses to reality, but also due to their commemorative function (cf. Levi, 2007). In film and memory studies, feature fiction films have repeatedly been established as sites of memory with a certain mnemonic agency, that is as both containers of certain ideas, values, and narratives and as enunciations with a certain impact (Erll, 2008; Daković, 2008; Rigney, 2015). Moreover, following Ann Cvetkovich and Dijana Jelača, we propose the analysed films are not just "cultural texts," essential to the exchange and proliferation of myths, ideas, and ideologies, but also "repositories of feelings and emotions" (cf. Cvetkovich, 2003, 7; Jelača, 2016).

In this article, we chose to focus on Yugoslav-themed films with significant critical acclaim and popular appeal, that is productions that have reached great numbers of spectators and have become, or are on their way to becoming canonical productions, widely considered as emblematic of Slovenian cinematography of a certain decade. Three films from the history of post-1991 Slovenian cinematography stand out according to these two criteria, and have thus been selected for closer analysis: allegedly the most popular Slovenian film of the 1990s, *The Outsider* (1997), the most successful Slovenian co-production, *The Parade* (2011), and the most internationally resonant Slovenian film of the 2010s, *Houston, We Have a Problem!* (2016).

The mnemonic agency of a film production emerges at the crossroads of film-making as praxis, the film production as text and audiovisual representation, and distribution and screening practices that contribute to the cinematic experience and to its reception (e. g. Jelača, 2016). In line with this methodological consideration, the film analyses below are all equipped with information about the reach of the film in question. Furthermore, narrative analyses of each of the featured films, focused on the

production's constructions of societal norms, value hierarchies, and (individual and collective) identities are complemented by an analytical overview of the films' critical reception in all available (national, local, international) contexts.

Yugonostalgia and Slovenian Cinema

Once our sample got narrowed down to three productions, it stood out that all three engage with the Yugoslav past in a very positive way, which is easy to label as (Yugo) nostalgia. While nostalgia for socialism, that is the longing for an idealized version of the socialist past (cf. Boym, 2001; Velikonja, 2009) has been very popular with East European cultural-studies and media scholars, some reservations have recently been raised with regards to its analytical potency. For example, Sabina Mihelj observes:

If one were to judge solely by available research, it would be tempting to conclude that post-socialist nostalgia constitutes the most common relationship with the past in Eastern Europe. Indeed, one is left with the impression that post-socialist citizens have undergone a radical reversal of their relationship with time, suddenly dropping their future-oriented, revolutionary sense of time and transforming themselves into past-oriented beings filled with a sense of loss or even longing for the bygone era. Yet, as soon as we consider the empirical basis of research on nostalgia, it becomes apparent that this sense of pervasiveness may, to some extent, be simply a product of scholarly investment in the topic. (Mihelj, 2017, 238)

At the same time, Mihelj (2017, 238) notes, "scholarly investment" in post-socialist nostalgia reflects a range of various motivations and angles of inquiry, and leads to diverse conclusions that are sometimes very difficult to compare: as well as longing for one's own personal past, youth, and a certain socio-political system, nostalgia can be seen as popular discontent with the present, or as the effect of political efforts to interpret the past in a certain way. This diversity of definitions complicates transnational comparison, as does many researchers' tendency to focus on in-depth readings of a small number of productions, which does not allow for generalizations. While sharing many of the concerns raised by Mihelj, we argue that the gap between abundant micro case studies of nostalgias (and traumas) related to the Cold War and memories of it and scarce transnational analysis of the mediation of these memories can best be bridged through a series of studies that aim for the latter goal while not ignoring the contribution and insights of the former.

Accordingly, this article builds on existing studies of Slovenian cinema, which have noted that Yugonostalgia is perhaps the privileged way in which Slovenian film directors engage with the Yugoslav past (cf. Petek, 2010; Tomanić Trivundža, 2010; Stanković, 2020). These and related studies (e.g. Mazaj, 2011) tend to align this loving longing for the socialist past characteristic of post-1991 Slovenian cinema with regrets over the loss of a common multicultural state and its socialist ideals, as well as with forebodings concerning Slovenia's transition into market capitalism and its accession to the

European Union. The Yugonostalgia diagnosed in these publications can thus be easily interpreted as a symptom of societal malaise about its present and future. Interestingly, the diagnosis is very time-specific: all the cited publications refer to pre-2010 films, and no serious research about Yugonostalgia – or memories of Yugoslavia – in later Slovenian productions exists. It is therefore plausible to relate the heightened scholarly interest for the topic to concerns related to the aftermath of Slovenia's accession to the EU, characteristic of the 2000s, when the abovementioned studies were published.

While Yugonostalgia may not appear to be at the forefront of Slovenian film production today, the fact that it characterizes some of the most important national productions over the past three decades accounts for our interest in the phenomenon. Nevena Daković (2008) argues that “problematizing the official version of the socialist past taught in schools and the popular versions advanced by the “national cinema classics,” these [post-1992 Yugonostalgic] films invest in new truths. Investment in new truths means at the same time investment in new genres of “historiographic metafiction.”” Indeed, films about the past may contend established historical narratives and dominant national memory politics; at the same time, they project a lot of their own time back into the past that they portray. Therefore, the claim of this article is that Yugonostalgia in contemporary Slovenian cinema has as much to say about reflections on the Yugoslav past as about the symbolic imaginary of Slovenian culture. Slovenian film productions set in or preoccupied with the Yugoslav past articulate a broad palette of identities, including nation-based collective identities. The aim of this article is thus to explore what kind of Slovenian identity is constructed and re-constructed in post-1991 Yugonostalgic Slovenian films. In other words, we will use close readings of the identified selection of films to unpack the broad contours of Slovenian Yugonostalgia. Our analyses will be especially focused on the place of Slovenia, Slovenian culture, and the articulation of “Slovenian” values and value hierarchies in these films. These analyses will be contrasted with the critical responses to the three films, to account for the place of these productions in Slovenian cultural memory.

ANALYSIS

Outsider

Andrej Košak's 1997 feature *Outsider* is the first post-Yugoslav Slovenian cinematic articulation of a nostalgia for the Yugoslav past and its promise of a utopian future. From the perspective of memory studies, this film can easily be considered as a paradigmatic site of memory, offering a reflection on the causes of the Yugoslav disintegration.

Outsider, made by a director with ties to the Slovenian punk scene, is set in 1979 and 1980. We follow a story of Sead (Davor Janjić), a son of a Bosnian father, a strict army officer (Zijah Sokolović), and a Slovenian stay-at-home mom (Miranda Caharija). This military family is constantly on the move, in fact, it has just moved to Ljubljana. Even though *Outsider* portrays the time of proverbial Yugoslav brotherhood and unity, a 1997



Fig. 1: *Outsider*. Photo: Stane Sršen (Source: the Slovenian Cinematheque archive).

reflection of the past times is not a naïve one. The young high-schooler Sead is seen by his peers as the Other, a “Bosniak”, with a funny name and a thick accent that can never fully belong. He eventually finds his place in the punk subculture, which is itself the Other or the object of the late socialist Yugoslav society. To further complicate his position, he falls in love with a Slovenian schoolmate Metka (Nina Ivanič), coded as his complete opposite, an almost stereotypical embodiment of Slovenian femininity. She is firmly embedded in the national collective and reflects its values of diligence and kindness. *Outsider* is part comedy, part drama and a multicultural love story, and made at the time of the Yugoslav wars, cannot have a happy ending: neither for the star-crossed lovers, nor for Yugoslavia. On the day of Tito’s death in Ljubljana, Metka and her family decide she should have an abortion and forget about Sead. Faced with loss and a prospect of another move, Sead kills himself. The last image of the movie shows Metka in a white hospital gown running through Ljubljana’s empty streets decorated with Yugoslav flags. Vrdlovec interpreted this as a symbol of a lonely Slovenia running towards independence. And Sead as the first victim of future violent events in the Balkans.

Following Dijana Jelača’s (2016, 19) question how collective identity and belonging is constituted through a [cinematized] “trauma as central to identification, but at

the same time, a site of identity's frequent undoing", it is important to ask, what was there about *Outsider* that the audiences responded to *en masse*? And did this film hit succeed to subvert or disrupt cultural memories and identities anchored in the rise of Slovenian nationalism post-independence?

At the time of the film's release film critic Bojan Kavčič (1997, 8) remarked that *Outsider* succeeded in invoking an old Balkan cinematic atmosphere of epic proportions. It did so by placing the story at the time of Tito's death in Ljubljana, broadening the borders of a small country like Slovenia. At the same time, *Outsider* revealed Slovenian identity constructions; because it had a Bosnian lead, "an archetype of the 'hated other'" it played with the intricacies of Slovenian mentality and attitudes towards former "Southern brothers and sisters".

Similarly, Stanković (2020, 209–210) points out that *Outsider* is part of a body of films critically dealing with Slovenian attitudes towards migrants from the Balkans.³ However, *Outsider* was different from its cinematic predecessors in two ways. Firstly, it looked back to the past to comment not only on Yugoslav history, but also, on the consequences of the post-Yugoslav transition in Slovenia. Secondly, the film was overwhelmingly positively received among the audiences. Stanković hypothesizes the latter was due to an extensive popularization of the "Balkan scene", which included a cultural nostalgia and appropriation of the past (music, films, activities, language, references and images) that became popular (again) after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. *Outsider* played into this nostalgic remembering, using not only a specific collective trauma – the death of Tito in Ljubljana, and the subsequent violent disintegration of Yugoslavia – to anchor the film in a specific temporal and regional frame, but also constructing (an often inaccurate) memory and atmosphere of Ljubljana's Punk subculture, which offered an alternative way of being and identifying. In this sense, the film acted as a mediator of trauma and fantasy, collective and individual memory, the past and the present. *Outsider*, being a serious reflection of the past, a comedy and a teen film at the same time, managed to capture the (post-)Yugoslav collective imagination; both as a form of nostalgic remembering for generations that lived through the 1980s, as well as a form of post-memory, which Marianne Hirsch (2012) has described as a relationship to past collective traumas that new generations, lacking direct experience, construct indirectly – through stories, images etc.

However, when evaluating the film's potential to subvert Slovenian nationalism, which was on the rise at the time of its release, *Outsider* yields somewhat ambivalent results. On the one hand, *Outsider* can be read as a form of reflective nostalgia (Boym, 2001), as it explores marginal histories and different ways of being, as well as confronts Slovenian and Balkan audiences with the violent historical trajectory of the region and forms of nationalist hatred. On the other hand, *Outsider* itself did not always manage

3 Other films with a similar theme of discrimination are: *Don't Come Back by the Same Way* (*Po isti poti se ne vračaj*, 1965, Jože Babič); *Rams and Mammoths* (*Ovni in Mamuti*, 1985, Filip Robar-Dorin); *Cheese and Jam* (*Kajmak in marmelada*, 2002, Branko Đurić).

to avoid repeating the same stereotypes it wanted to deconstruct: namely, making its main characters cliché embodiments of imagined national traits – a somewhat not very intelligent Bosnian; a diligent Slovenian; a bunch of provincial high-schoolers living in Ljubljana; a group of sexist punkers etc. The film is more successful in connecting the trauma of 1980 with the resignation of 1997 through a symbolism of the social and personal decay (Stanković, 2020, 218), which is not so much a comment on Yugoslavia as it is on the post-transitional Slovenia. Metka and Sead's last scenes indicate, according to Stanković, that *Outsider* is not only nostalgically looking back, but hinting that the fall of Yugoslavia and the cut-throat individualism and capitalism that followed were as destructive as the strict Yugoslavia of the older: generations that the movie's "punk politics" criticizes. In this regard *Outsider* is one of the more polemical Slovenian films.

Since its release, *Outsider* has become hailed as the movie marking Slovenian cinematic rebirth, attracting a record 91000 cinema visitors across the country and being the first Slovenian movie post-independence with a successful distribution in all parts of former Yugoslavia. Its international popularity has remained strong throughout the years, consistently generating new comments on various online platforms, for example this YT comment from 2017, invoking a sense of the post-Yugoslav brotherhood: "What a great movie! Greetings to Slovenian brothers from Beograd."⁴

The Parade

A similar nostalgia for (post-)Yugoslav brotherhood can be found in *The Parade*, which is a part of Slovenia's growing co-production archive. This 2011 feature was directed by Srđan Dragojević (also famous for his war film *Pretty Villages, Pretty Flame – Lepa sela lepo gore* (1996)). After the release of the film, this is how he described it, with a clear reference to regional connection:

The Parade is a film about tolerance, understanding, and the fact that people can become friends despite their differences and regardless of their sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. This is why The Parade is much more than a film about a gay parade. Already the fact that it is a Serbian-Croatian-Macedonian-Slovenian co-production speaks for itself. (Slovenian Film Centre, 2012, 13)

The Parade highlights the mechanisms of regional post-Yugoslav identity formations, connections, and exclusions through the story of Lemun (Nikola Kojo), a Serbian war veteran, now a resourceful gangster, who ends up protecting the LGBT Pride Parade in Belgrade from groups of neo-Nazis. At the beginning of the film, Lemun is deeply homophobic, but when he gets an ultimatum from his future wife Biserka (Hristina Popović), who doesn't approve of his homophobia, he is forced to get to know and protect the LGBT community. Because his gangster colleagues don't want anything to do with the matter, he and Radmilo (Miloš Samolov), a kind

4 Kakav sjajan film. Pozdrav braći Slovencima iz Beograda.

gay veterinarian, are forced to take a road trip across the former Yugoslavia, asking Lemun's old war enemies/buddies for help. These characters include Roko (Goran Navojec), a Croatian war veteran; Halil (Dejan Aćimović), a Bosnian Muslim; and Azem (Toni Mihajlovski), an Albanian from Kosovo. Edo the Slovenian is briefly mentioned; regrettably, he was supposedly killed by the Montenegrin mafia in Stockholm. The absence of Slovenians is understandable, given the protagonists are Yugoslav war veterans, but also speaks about the structural position of Slovenia in post-Yugoslav collective memory of brotherhood nations – a position of marginality and mostly unimportance.

Similarly to *Outsider*, *The Parade* dissects nationalism through the genre of comedy, which catches its audiences off-guard and can therefore highlight societal traumas in a non-threatening way. There are many constitutive Others in the Balkans, as joked about in the film's intro:

“Chetnik—derogatory for Serbs, used by Croats, Bosniaks, Albanians”; “Ustasha—derogatory for Croats, used by Serbs, Bosniaks and Albanians”, the same for “Balija—derogatory for Bosniaks [...]”; and “Shiptar—derogatory for Albanians [...]”. What all post-Yugoslav languages have in common, though, is the term “Peder—derogatory for a homosexual person, used by *everyone*”. [emphasis – authors.]

The Parade demonstrates how post-Yugoslav national identities and collective values are constructed as heteronormative – not just in the “violent” Balkans but also in the self-proclaimed “liberal” Slovenia. In this post-Yugoslav heterosexual matrix (Butler, 2001) specific notions of femininities, masculinities and heterosexuality are integrated into the national collectives; and others – gender and sexual minorities – violently excluded (cf. e. g., Nagel, 1998). In this regard, *The Parade* resembles the Slovenian film *The Guardian of the Frontier* by Maja Weiss (*Varuh meje*, 2002), which highlights the interconnectedness of nationalism and protection of the state and symbolic borders through gender violence. In contrast to the nostalgic comedy of *The Parade*, Weiss, however, opted for contemporary horror.

Due to *The Parade*'s focus on regional homophobic and militarized masculinity that is, as the story suggests, capable of transformation from toxic violence to post-Yugoslav kinship that would also include the gay community, the film received mixed reviews at the time of its release.

In the West it was praised as “Serbia's Brokeback Mountain” by *Boston Review* (Hockenos, 2012) and “The Pride of Serbia” by *The Guardian* (Hoad, 2012), and the reviews sometimes even bore a mark of Balkanism, reminiscent of the constructions of the region described by Todorova (2009). In these constructions, the Balkan itself is seen as a homogenic place and the Other of the West. For example, in his review, Paul Hockenos (2012) evoked a memory of the first Serbian Pride Parade:

The legacies of socialist hostility and religious conservatism have bred a culture of homophobia that continues to set the region apart from Western Europe, where there is broad-based respect for gay rights.

For many critics, *The Parade* was thus an indicator of a turning point for the region, a symbol of a more open Balkan. This interpretation of the film presupposes a rather naïve notion of a progressivist politics – from socialist homophobia to nationalist violence and lastly, democratic tolerance and LGBT visibility –; in reality the region's history and attitudes towards minorities are far more complex (e. g. Kuhar & Takács, 2007; Jovanović, 2016). Regional critics, vividly remembering the wars in which the likes of Lemun and his buddies took part in, were less welcoming. Slovenian *Pogledi* (Barlič, 2012) claimed the film is less about the LGBT community than it is a Parade of machismo, and *Balkanist* (2013) wrote that *The Parade* “also has a darker agenda: It quietly celebrates 1990s-style nationalism under the guise of promoting ‘tolerance’”.

Some of the regional criticism holds true, however, so does the view that *The Parade* can be seen as a turning point in regional *mainstream* cinema, as it subverts national constructions of toxic masculinities, showing their cracks and a great deal of homoerotic undercurrents among former “no-homo” war buddies. *The Parade* evokes the notion of queer trauma, violent and forgotten histories and pain of those who are usually invisible and marginalized in post-Yugoslav national collective memory but are nevertheless a constitutive element of national identities – as the internal Other. Still, the film offered a form of visibility, a queering of the Balkans through cinema, and managed to reach the mainstream public. It took the lead at the 2011 Serbian box office, overcoming *The Smurfs* (2011, dir. Raja Gosnell), and achieving almost 600,000 admissions in the former Yugoslav countries.

Houston, We Have a Problem!

Our first two analyses have allowed to highlight two loci of Yugonostalgia (and their limitations): dissatisfaction with Yugoslavia's disintegration, and a longing for the lost Yugoslav ideals of multicultural brotherhood and unity. The third selected case study, Žiga Virč's 2016 mockumentary *Houston, We Have a Problem!* approaches the Yugoslav past in a very different way, exploring the limits of documentation on the one hand and narrativization on the other.

Houston, We Have a Problem! is a humorous and rather sophisticated commentary on the relationship between truth, history, and media. Like Alexei Fedorchenko's mockumentary *First On the Moon* (*Pervye na lune*, 2004), which suggested that the Soviets might have launched a manned rocket to the moon in 1937, *Houston, we have a problem!* adopts a serious tone, including archival footage and statements by “professionals”, to explore the myth of Yugoslavia's apparently prematurely interrupted space program. The film premiered at the Tribeca film festival and resonated in international media, yielding mostly positive critiques in journals such as *The Hollywood Reporter*, *The Wrap*, *Montage Magazine*, and *New York Observer*. In the latter, Noah Charney (2016) has remarked that the film “mocks Yugonostalgia”, alluding to the film's starting point: a myth that historians would not find difficult to debunk. But what happens if this myth is explored through documentary footage; does acknowledgement of the fictionality of a narrative reduce its affective charge?

In *Houston, We Have a Problem!*, the omnipresent gaze of the camera transcends time and space, switching between various places in the United States of America and in the former Yugoslavia, and connecting archival footage to fictional episodes, and images from the past to the contemporary reality of the locations explored. In doing so, it gives us a glimpse into the glory and demise of the Yugoslav state, foregrounding mythical objects, such as Josip Broz – Tito's ship *Galeb*, used for luxurious long voyages in the mid-20th century, and deteriorating, anchored in the Croatian port city of Rijeka. Possibly inspired by Marta Popivoda's 2013 documentary essay debut *Yugoslavia: How Ideology Moved Our Collective Body*, *Houston, We Have a Problem!* explores the prevalence of ideas and political statements over individual lives in the social fabric of Tito's Yugoslavia. It even takes a step further, showcasing this dominance of the political and collective over the individual and interpersonal as myth. The fictional character of Ivan Pavić (Božidar Smiljanić) is used as a comical mediator between the past and the present. According to the film, he was involved in the development of the Yugoslav space program, which Tito sold to the US for 2.5 billion US dollars. Upon arrival in the US, the entire project was revealed to be underdeveloped and beyond salvation, sparking a rift between the USA and Yugoslavia, which would only grow deeper over time.

While this overarching narrative premise of the film is grim, the characters, featured archival footage, and the commentary on the relationship between myth and reality, provided by the popstar of Slovenian philosophy Slavoj Žižek, tells a different story, exhibiting enthusiasm for the Yugoslav project, and a sense of pride related to Tito's way of handling the situation and negotiating with the USA. "Even if it didn't happen, it's true, and that's the crucial message," Žižek explains to the audience. On the level of the film's narrative, the explanation relates to the mechanisms of mythology. At the same time, it is repeated so frequently that it seems to encapsulate the film's message about the Yugoslav past, as picked up on by Iva Kosmos and Tanja Petrović who have noted that "Virc's film ... reveals a [post-Yugoslav] desire, a longing for the possibility to tell, listen to, enjoy and engage with diverse, real and unreal, possible and impossible histories from the second part of the twentieth century which still represents a part of experienced memory for millions of citizens, but is usually subject to normative interpretations that view socialism as a totalitarian system" (Petrović, 2016, 506).

On a related note, Sunčana Laketa (2019) has remarked that *Houston, We Have a Problem!* is a commentary on "modern liberal democracies", inviting the spectator to reconsider how and whom she is encouraged to believe, and what kinds of limitations are imposed on the conditions of possibility of her imagination. While this is certainly a factor that has contributed to the international resonance of the film, we argue that it is dangerous to claim that, as an "open call for thought", *Houston, We Have a Problem!* is not really related to contemporary Slovenian directors' strategies of investigating the Yugoslav past.

Amusingly Yugonostalgic and ironic toward its own post-memory position, the film manages to create a perspective that aligns it with both *Outsider* and *The Parade*. The Slovenian enunciation in *Houston, We Have a Problem!* is aligned with that of the



Fig. 2: *Houston, We Have a Problem!* poster. Studio Virc (Wikimedia Commons).

producer and director, and the philosopher, here embodied by Slavoj Žižek himself, reinforcing the impression that the film is a documentary-like attempt to critically reflect on the subject matter. This mechanism resonates with the strategy at work in *Outsider* and *The Parade*.

CONCLUSION

From the perspective of memory studies, fiction films “not only represent but convey reality” (Ernst, 1983, 402) and they do this by offering an unintentional truth. In other words, controlled or not, films act as witnesses, and “as a kind of commentary on, and challenge to, traditional historical discourse” and in that way add to our historical understanding (Rosenstone, 2006, 9).

Outsider, *The Parade*, and *Houston, We Have a Problem!* all point to an insistent ambivalence that characterizes the reception of locally, Slovenian-produced or co-produced films that attempt to interpret the Yugoslav past in an affective and affectionate way. Our analysis shows that this affection is conditioned by subtle estrangement techniques that hint that what is screened is not entirely objective or even not true at all. At the same time, the status of the images and narratives conveyed via the cinematic medium is different in these cases: in 1997, *Outsider* addressed generations that could relate this story to memories: their parents’ or their own. *The Parade* and *Houston, We Have a Problem!* make no such claims; they simply design an alternative reality, weaving certain stereotypes and myths about the Yugoslav past into a slightly alternative, although highly allegorical present. Slovenian critical reception of *Outsider* and *The Parade* is indicative: they were appreciated due to their humour and “artistic merits”, as the Slovenian film fund might have put it, but distanced from on accounts of nostalgia: for Yugoslavia, youth, and rebellion in the first case, and for – in a sense – cutified 1990s-nationalisms in the second case. *Houston, We Have a Problem!* is different in this respect: taking pop philosophy and a myth as its starting point, it appears – on the surface – to long for the past. However, it celebrates this past through images and editing, delivering a subtle message, echoed in Žižek’s statements about myths: they function regardless of our “knowledge” that they are not true.

Žižek’s point can be extended beyond *Houston, We Have a Problem!* In fact, *Outsider* and *The Parade* also engage in exploring narratives about the Yugoslav past that greatly rely on stereotypes and postmemories, and reflect today’s (rather than yesterday’s) problems. Moreover, our analyses reveal that all three films elaborate a “Slovenian” position toward the Yugoslav past: through the characters in *Outsider*, the dialogues in *The Parade*, and the philosophical commentary and documentary footage in *Houston, We Have a Problem!*, it emerges as sympathetic, but somehow detached from the subject matter. This kind of engagement with the recent past is not entirely innocent: it ignores, to a great degree, one’s own involvement in this past.

GRADNJE POJUGOSLOVANSKIH IDENTITET V SODOBNEM SLOVENSKEM FILMU

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POVZETEK

Članek naslavlja vprašanje konstrukcije slovenske nacionalne identitete v razmerju do spominjanja na obdobje socialistične Jugoslavije in njenega razpada v kontekstu sodobne slovenske kinematografije (1991–2021). Naslanjajoč se na pregled slovenskih kulturnih politik, vezanih na filmsko produkcijo v izbranem obdobju, preizprašava simbolno mesto zgodovine in posebej zgodovine, vezane na obdobje socializma, v sodobnem slovenskem filmu. Dinamiko pozabljanja in spominjanja na socializem in na jugoslovansko identiteto nadalje predstavlja prek poglobljene analize izbranih reprezentativnih primerov – v devetdesetih letih najbolj gledanega slovenskega celovečerca Outsider (1997), mockumentarca Houston, imamo problem! (2016) in koprodukcijskega filma Parada (2011). Analizo reprezentacij poveževa z analizo kritiške in popularne nacionalne in mednarodne odmevnosti izbranih del, pri tem pa filme obravnava kot odlagališča in preizpraševalce nacionalnih in regionalnih politik, travm, reinterpretacij zgodovine in emocij, ki niso zakodirane samo v samih tekstih, temveč tudi v kontekstu praks, ki obkrožajo njihovo produkcijo in recepcijo (cf. Erll 2009). Vsi trije izbrani primeri pokažejo, da je film pomembno mesto refleksije in konstrukcije nedavne Slovenske preteklosti. Vendar pa opažena filmska jugonostalgija še zdaleč ni enoznačna, temveč skozi tri desetletja neodvisnosti Slovenije prevzema raznolike pomene – od hrepenenja po nekdanjem “bratstvu”, do travme transformacije in nenazadnje parodične distance do jugoslovanske preteklosti.

Ključne besede: Slovenski film, oblikovanje identitet, kulturni spomin, nostalgija, travma

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