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# **Idylls of socialism: The Sarajevo Documentary School and the problem of the Bosnian sub-proletariat**

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## **Abstract**

*This historical overview of the Sarajevo Documentary School considers the films, in the light of their recent re-emergence, as indicative of both the legacy of socialist realism (even in the context of Yugoslav media) and attempted social engineering in the Bosnia of the 1960s and 1970s. The argument is made that the documentaries, despite their questionable aesthetic status (in respect of cinéma-vérité and ethnography) and problematic ideological strategies and attempted interventions, document a history and offer insights that counter the prevailing revisionist trends in the presentation of Eastern and Central European history.*

## **Keywords**

Bosnian media

Bosnian sub-proletariat

ethnography

socialist realism

post-socialism

Yugo-nostalgia

I would describe it like this: our documentary film school showed the truth about Bosnia for the first time. Up until my generation, films were only about

machines we didn't have, about methods of working and [P]artisans. We started talking about the villages we came from. We spoke about the neighbours. About the fact that neighbours can live alongside each other without skin colour, religion or nationality playing a role. That was our attitude: an attitude, by the way, that the city of Sarajevo also demonstrated in the recent war.

(Vlatko Filipović quoted in Salihbašić-Selimović 2009: 124; amended translation)

### **‘Yugo-nostalgia’ and the ‘Obscure Disaster’**

Critically and historically, the Sarajevo Documentary School (circa 1962–1978) is a newly emergent area. Even the origins of the umbrella term ‘Sarajevo Documentary School’ (SDS) remain unclear.<sup>1</sup> The films were almost all produced by Sutjeska Film, a state-run company for (mostly) small and short productions in Bosnia, founded in 1960. At the time of their making, the films were intended for distribution to Yugoslav cinemas, as supporting programmes, but their eventual unpopularity with the cinema owners resulted in film festivals becoming the chief outlet. At the time of writing, the SDS filmography is only partial: some prints have been sourced from original East German export versions, little if any restoration work has occurred, and access to the films is still only really available via the festival circuit.<sup>2</sup>

It seems certain, however, that the films’ potential current audience may still be drawn from their original audiences, who have complex personal and strongly nostalgic reactions to the films. The SDS films seem prime candidates therefore for the former Yugoslavia’s version of *Ostalgie*: ‘Yugo-nostalgia’. Volčič isolates and critiques the notion of Yugo-nostalgia, in the sense of the ‘commercial (Re)production of Yugoslavia’, and notes three modes of (and for) this reproduction: ‘Revisionist’, ‘Aesthetic’ and ‘Escapist, utopian’ (Volčič 2007: 28). In this respect, the idea of

Yugo-nostalgia suggests, in film theory terms, a sub-genre category available for decoding – even down to the specifics of the demographic groups and their reactions to the films. To consider the films in such intimate terms, and to reduce or co-opt the SDS films to a mere hit of ‘Yugo-nostalgia’, is to render a disservice to these complex personal and strongly nostalgic reactions.

These particular yearnings or longings are more appropriately considered in terms of new subjectivities arising from states of displacement, in the contexts of post-socialism and globalization, and in the light of a phase in which horizons of utopian imaginings have been assailed by the ‘death of Communism’. Svenonius coins the term ‘the Psychic Soviet’ when discussing the mass reaction to the moment when dreams of a socialist society or communist utopia are seemingly abandoned, so that ‘[t]he collapse of the Soviet Union was the most grievous psychological event in recent history’, resulting in ‘nihilism and despair... depression... a “Post-Soviet Depression” syndrome...’ (Svenonius 2006: 1–2). For Badiou, who tracks the same phenomenon across the political (rather than the predominantly cultural) scene, this is the ‘obscure disaster’ of the 1990s, coming in ‘... the redoubtable effects of [the idea of Communism’s] lack’ (Badiou 2003: 69). In Volčič’s reading, *pace* Jameson’s writings on nostalgia and postmodernity, Yugo-nostalgia itself would seem to subsume these ‘redoubtable effects’ into Disneyworld-esque Yugo-simulacra, and in this comes the attempted anaesthetization of the collective trauma of (rather than the sellable melancholy of) Yugo-nostalgia.

There may be much to learn from the reactions of the initial audience to the films and it is hoped that research will be conducted into the SDS as an essential part of Yugoslav, and specifically Bosnian, film history. Babić notes that this may constitute a project for the newly-founded Sarajevo Film Centre (Babić 2009: 123): a

study of the making and subsequent distribution of the films would be appropriately complemented by audience research into contemporary reactions to them. While this article considers the SDS films in terms of their initial propaganda value and aesthetic strategies, further discussion as to their specific propaganda model, and (as noted below) the debate concerning subversive or dissenting elements within the films, is to be welcomed.

There is more at stake, in the SDS now, than surplus value sentiment (as is often the case with the repackaged documentaries of yesteryear). After Tito's death and the fall of the Berlin Wall, financial collapse and internal migration, the wars of succession and the NATO bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, after Tuzla (mentioned and seen from time to time in the SDS films), the idea and feel of what daily life was once like in the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia must seem utterly inaccessible. In the three-decade process of achieving the 'post-' of this post-socialism, from 'Yugoslavia' to 'ex-Yugoslavia' to 'the former Yugoslavia', the nation itself has been fragmented and dissolved and its people literally de-territorialized. An encroaching westernization and the staying-put of those who went into exile, now unwilling or still unable to return to their locales, raises the prospect of the country unmade rather than, as NATO apologists insisted throughout the 1990s, remade. The obfuscations and failures of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague, and the sensitivities on the part of the western powers as to the reasons and nature of the tribunal's interventions in the late 1990s (that is, the remaining secrecy of documentation, particularly in respect to support for Kosovo militias) has effectively frozen this recent history. Any people's history is now beset by historical revisionists and those who would retrospectively co-opt national or nationalist sentiment or event, or expressions of an indigenous culture, to

claim that 'Yugoslavia' was itself a fantasy construct, a conceit of bureaucrats: a temporary contingency arising from a melding of state-lets at the fraying western fringe of the Eastern bloc. This rewriting of Soviet-era history is far from unique to Yugoslavia; the condition of post-socialism is one that engenders a retroactive revisionism on the part of historians and politicians, town planners and tourist guides, and a kind of resultant doubling of countries and histories – the notional co-existence of Eastern bloc Poland and the 'real' Poland during the cold war, for example. Indeed, it is within this framework that a new role for post-'89 Eastern and Central European cinema can be seen; this is apparent in Wajda's rightward trajectory, and to anyone with even a passing interest in the debates that surrounded Kusturica's *Bila Jednom Jedna Zemlja / Underground* (1995).

The films of the SDS return the viewer (whether or not he/she has a personal emotional investment) to a time before these brutal events and, in so doing, offer a perspective on and an access to the experience (and the media) of 'really existing socialism' in Yugoslavia. It is ironic that these short films, seemingly designed to reflect, comment upon and shape day-to-day lives (and so parochial in this respect), should come to function as historical documentation for a time and place much in dispute. Thus these modest films present to us, after the (multiculturalist) de- and (neoconservative) re-Othering of Muslims in nominally secular and inclusive societies, evidence of a kind of existence, now disputed, as once lived and still liveable. To use Manghani's terminology (in respect of his 'image critique' of the fall of the Berlin Wall – a more orthodox series of images of post-socialism for analysis and discussion, but carrying not dissimilar ideological loads): the SDS films offer '... a *site* and a *sight* of critical importance' and the promise of 're-citing / sighting history' (Manghani 2008: 35, 54). With just such a potential, and now cast as witness

for the ‘before’ in this tragic historical narrative of ‘before and after’, the crassness of the extreme propaganda of the SDS films (extreme in the sense of propaganda that structures the films and often marshals their subjects while denying them a voice) seems relatively unimportant.

However, it is not sufficient to simply recuperate the SDS along sociological and, as shall be argued, ethnographic lines. The propaganda purpose of the SDS is deeply embedded in the films, in both form and content. Their resultant didacticism is the product of a mature Stalinism, and such Stalinism is the antithesis of an unmediated ethnography. Stalin himself, writing in 1921, dealt directly with the need ‘... systematically to develop the consciousness... systematically to educate [‘the mass of the workers’] in the spirit of communism’ in respect to both industrial and ideological ends, and that such an enterprise was defeated by any attempted coercion;

... only methods of persuasion... can make it possible to unite the working class... and strengthen its confidence in the Soviet power, the confidence that is needed so much now in order to rouse the country for the struggle against economic ruin.

(Stalin 1975: 10–11)

Stalin’s concern was with unions but, as a blueprint for education and social engineering, the *praxis* suggested translates well to the SDS. And, as artefacts from a media concerned with social engineering, the SDS films offer insights into the mindset of the Communist League of Yugoslavia, and its regional bodies, as it sought to finesse a hasty catch-up with industrialization from the mid-1960s onwards.

For the SDS’s principal protagonists, a sub-proletariat of rural workers, and those whose gravitation to the cities remained an incomplete journey, the

consequences of industrialization and modernization were literally life changing. In this respect, the political ossification of the league is apparent in the suggestions made in the SDS that spiritual fulfilment was possible in factories and flats in housing blocks (as with *Stanarsko pravo lagumaša Safera / The Tenancy Rights of Safer the Miner* (written and directed by Petar Ljubojev, 1974)), away from the problems associated with rural existence (e.g. school children walking up to 12 km to get to school, only to battle their exhaustion once they arrive, as in *Đaci Pješaci / Walking School Children* (Hadžismajlović, 1966)). These films, typical of all Stalinist propaganda, betray a fear of the working classes, with those in power seeking to control these groups, by and through denying their autonomy. In effect, an anti-ethnography was in operation: a muting, and sub-proletarianization, of live subjects. Thus miner Safer, even as the nominal star of *Tenancy Rights*, is only allowed to express himself via talking about meeting his wife, counting his six children (with respect to the number of rooms he can anticipate in his new apartment) and his amateur violin playing.

To be precise, a distinction must be drawn between a rural proletariat and the transient rural workers, as found,<sup>3</sup> who would have been termed peasants or peasant farmers / farm workers in non-socialist societies, often living in presumably illegal settlements (in fact the very subject of one SDS film). Bosnia, as the most rural and economically straitened area of Yugoslavia, would have contained the biggest proportion of this latter group, and the biggest potential of those who, like Safer, were in the final stages of exiting this group, and leaving its mindset and habits behind. The SDS films sought to present this group as a sub-proletariat – erroneously, perhaps, from a sociological view, or with Marxist wishful thinking – but this was the nature of the presentation nonetheless (and so this term will be used hereafter). Such a



presentation provided some leeway in allowing the grouping to 'have' religion (often seen in SDS films, and never attacked) and effectively excused the films' interviewers from asking formally political questions about clearly political situations, as these kinds of questions would be nonsensical for their mostly uneducated interviewees. Such a presentation offered the hope of the redemption of this group – a grey social substratum whose placement into formally class-stratified society was a political goal, and for progressive ideological ends.

### **The educational role of the SDS**

Education remained a foremost concern of the SDS films – and often education by rote; the morals and points of the films are endlessly repeated. *Walking School Children* illustrates the need for drivers – truck drivers in particular – to offer the children lifts to and from school. *Dva zakona / Two Laws* (Hadžismajlović, 1968) lets parents express their concerns about the liberal and progressive ways of schools in order to illustrate that such reactions, and illegally denying an education to their children – daughters as well as sons – only reinforces the cycle of rural poverty. Where the children also complain, their complaints seem to be little more than a mimicking of their parents. *Tenancy Rights* contains details of the kind of flat that could be expected in an urban conurbation, and illustrates a system whereby points are derived from the quantity of children in a family or outstanding industrial achievement (points translating into the number of rooms). The film begins with a panel consisting of a worker, a woman, an academic and a bureaucrat (it is a tableau difficult to take seriously now, as with full 'ostalgic' tokenism),<sup>4</sup> listening to a lecture praising the Yugoslav worker. The message is that Safer, and those like him, are doing well – relatively speaking – despite the acknowledged niggling social problems;

the lyrics of a song played on the soundtrack run ‘The Housing Commission is doing its work / the unsolved question is now being solved / Flats are distributed piecemeal /...’ and so on. And with the flat comes a shaking off of sub-proletarian tendencies; once rehoused in his new flat at the close of the film, Safer is seen clothed (before he played his violin shirtless), and one child leaves the bathroom to the sound of a flushing toilet; the ‘before’ to these images remain unseen, of course, and both implications are fairly slanderous to the rural sub-proletariat. The film ends with the camera zooming out from the happy family, on their balcony on the top floor of their block of flats. This movement from country to town, now complete, is likened to growing up in the accompanying nostalgic song: ‘Pictures of my childhood are vanishing from my heart / and now dreams of work await me in the town / the green pastures have become an old memory / [...].’ From a contemporary perspective, one regards such a progression with horror – even the few contrasts seen here between the urban and rural milieu are enough to communicate a feeling that the family, who presumably represent a group who had never before ventured into the city, are ill-equipped to deal with the move; the trauma resulting from the suddenness of the loss of space would be considerable. But from an ideological perspective, *Tenancy Rights* remains untroubled by the individuals it singles out and their specific needs once relocated – its concern is more with the kind of pastoral lyricism that speaks of a wider representation of rural Yugoslavia. Here the SDS insists on a kind of enforced nostalgia: this existence, the films say, must pass.

*Tenancy Rights* cuts between scenes in Safer’s mine and sunny fields, and the two are seen as allied – both places of work (coal and hay to be harvested) and in harmony with each other. This unsurprisingly bucks the Romantic tradition that posited industry as enslaving and contra the nature on which it feeds (with nature

invariably wreaking revenge, in the novels of D. H. Lawrence, for example, or as projected in H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*): the SDS worker, who is typical of socialist-realist worker figures, is content and purposeful in his work, and so untouched by urban or industrial alienation.<sup>5</sup> A more extreme vision of work – *Ugljari / The Charcoal Bearers* (Hadžismajlović, 1973) – suggests as much too: a collective purpose for all and from all. This approach redeems the unpleasantness of the children's work, upon which the film concentrates, with the result that the question of child labour is never raised. There is no real harshness in the presentation of nature but rather an equitable balance between wilderness and homestead; the idyll of *Tenancy Rights* seems a 1950s vision of the notion of a harmony between wilderness and man (in direct contrast to the rural-retreat notion typical of 1960s, where nature is seen as de-alienating and restorative, or the undeveloped and dangerous backwater of the 1970s, where those 'left behind' seem to have been left behind for a reason). Likewise, the rain that is another tribulation for the *Walking School Children* is not portrayed as a further trial of the outdoors but merely the course of nature. *Charcoal Bearers* ends with gorgeous, *Dr Zhivago*-like winter landscapes, across which the children return to homes with warming fires (evidenced by picturesque chimney smoke).

Some concession to 'social issue film-making' is given, here and elsewhere, and it was this aspect that Hadžismajlović seemed keenest to emphasize during the post-screening discussions at the Oberhausen festival – that is to say, the films as pioneering exposés of the social problems of the poor. Thus it was recalled that the film-makers sometimes hid their cameras from the view of their subjects, so that the subjects could speak freely. It would perhaps be too much to ask, in respect of the time and place in which *Charcoal Bearers* was made, to expect contextual

information to this end (the amount of hours the children engage in this work, for example), but their clothes and hands seem suspiciously clean and no one complains about the evidently wretched labour. In this respect, and with the film therefore working as an impression-driven rather than documentary-like engagement with the Banovići opencast mine near Tuzla, the film could be seen as a straight exhortation to work harder.

However, *Two Laws* gives the parents plenty of space to talk about their fears. And *Sljeme za tjeme / A Roof Over One's Head* (Midhat Mutapčić, 1964), which concerns the ramshackle and farm-like shanty towns springing up on the outskirts of Tuzla (owing to a lack of available city housing), could be said to be an 'issue' film. The inhabitants express frustration and openly challenge the authorities to intervene and provide social housing. Indeed, since one occupant announces that he had been a Partisan, the film initially seems to attempt to shame the authorities into acting. These illegally erected dwellings suggest a social grey area, neither entirely rural nor entirely urban (and so in keeping with a preoccupation of the SDS films). And yet, despite the majority of the film's time being given over to talking heads (albeit in a cautious medium shot) as the subjects are given the opportunity to repeatedly voice their concerns (or, specifically, their one concern: housing), what seems to be at stake is a backwards recalcitrance in the face of a noble attempt at social engineering: the liberation of the rural poor from their misery via their relocation to the city. *A Roof Over One's Head* is no work of agitation; instead a potentially explosive issue is comprehensively diffused by the film's framing device – the two suited officials who are visiting the settlements (taking us, the viewer, with them) in order to listen patiently to these complaints. And as they leave, at the close of the film, the officials are entirely sympathetic, and offer understanding rather than apportion blame. The

message is clear – the party hears you, and will endeavour to help you. In fact, the film functions as an aspect of the former process, and hence the limited voice it concedes to the sub-proletariat. There is no danger of critique, self-critique, analysis or condemnation, only local irregularities and bureaucratic problems, couched and circumscribed within a discourse about family rather than party. These are safe subjects. And even the concern about flouting legality in building such settlements implicitly casts these settlers in a more favourable light and affords them more dignity than those transients on the way out (the *gastarbeiter*) or, reputedly, those in the Roma. These dispossessed are seen to live modestly and soberly, and to aspire to legality in their dwellings, and one assumes that at any rate the film would only have been sanctioned once this problem was in its final stages.

Thus in Hadžismajlović's video *Sarajevo 1984* (1984), concerning the preparations for the Winter Olympic Games, it is claimed (in voice-over) that the mountain-dwelling sub-proletariat feel that they remain in possession of the imminent sports events, despite the accompanying media circus. It is as if the world comes to them, and they are not forcibly brushed aside to make way for a global event (as has historically been the case, and remains so at present). At one point, the villagers gather to watch a TV broadcast of *U zavjetrini vremena / In the Slipstream of Time* (Filipović, 1965), perhaps the most celebrated of the SDS films – then 'quoted' in its entirety in *Sarajevo 1984*; the television presenter introduces the broadcast by saying that it marks the coming of the Olympics. In a Rouchian moment, Hadžismajlović cuts from the ending of this film-within-a-film back to the villagers, who note that things have improved incredibly in the intervening twenty years. This theme is picked up and expanded upon by the voice-over of the paternal commentator: they no longer live 'as in the eighteenth century', '[a]s people say, "It's a miracle we made it this

far”’. The intended irony is presumably that televisions are entirely absent – along with electricity – in the village of Lukavac in *Slipstream*. The actual irony is that, for a film in which little, if any, ideological framing allows for a ‘purer’ ethnography, *Slipstream* is now re-contextualized in *Sarajevo 1984* on an entirely ideological basis.

Comparable documentary investigations into workers’ lives from this period, even relatively sophisticated ones, are often later reread as insights into the times, even when such a reading is counter to the original intentions of the film and film-makers. Linguistically, aesthetically, musically and even sartorially, such films offer an experience of bygone ambience, mores and aspirations: visualizations of the world of parents and grandparents. Thus the ethnographic aesthetic offers a potential for dissection and discussion, even in the most unworthy of films. And the ethnographic aesthetic is understood to be accessible still, unsullied by the sometimes heavy-handed attempts on the part of the film-makers to make sense of, or impose a meaning on, the subject matter.<sup>6</sup> And such is the case with *A Roof Over One’s Head*, despite its re-contextualization via the framing device of visiting government inspectors.

### **Socialist realist metaphysics**

*Nada / Hope* (Midhat Mutapčić, 1970) contains extraordinary scenes of religious ecstasy and devotional practices: supplicants crawl on bloodied knees around a church (St. John the Baptist, in Podmilačje) seeking intercession for the village sick, who are plentiful in the film. Here Muslims and Catholics pray as one in an open-air, dogma-busting communal event – a coming together and commonality that could have had the potential to deflate the divisions sown along religious and ethnic lines only two decades later.<sup>7</sup>

At first glance it is difficult to discern the socialist perspective in *Hope* but the existence of the film itself effectively verifies the inclusive and tolerant nature of Yugoslav socialism under Tito. The Bosnian authorities used and presented their tolerance of religion practices as a token of their light-handed touch from the late 1960s onwards, while seemingly conceiving of this tolerance as a smarter and ‘softer’ approach to the secularization of society. Malcolm notes that the concession of finally offering ‘Muslim, in the sense of a nation’ as a category on a 1971 census form (in addition to categories of Serbian or Croatian) arose, therefore, from ‘... want[ing] the Muslim identity in Bosnia to develop into something more definitely non-religious’ (Malcolm 1994: 199, 200). And the SDS films do mostly show religion to be a matter of custom – even interior decoration; *Hope* offers a non-judgmental approach to the subject, even when showing the thousands who pack the church, and despite a number of subjective shots that communicate the experience of being in this roused crowd. Formal religious practices might be considered to be part of the old life to be left behind – out in the fields that Safer leaves for his new life in the city. In that it is the gentleness of this transition that is of prime importance in the SDS films, religion as a subject for toleration comes to make ideological sense. Although the absolute alternative – an exclusively materialist reading of sub-proletarian life – is avoided, the films do not present their metaphysical supplement to socialist realism in phenomenological terms. This is not surprising in respect of the abovementioned muting of individual voices; even in the impression-orientated *mise-en-scène* of the SDS, any sub-proletarian interiority is at best implied and at worse absented. It is this that also accounts for the horrified (albeit liberal and contemporary) reaction to *Tenancy Rights*; there is no quarter given in which a consideration of the psychological impact of the move can be made.

Where a 'metaphysics' of sub-proletarian subjectivity is expressed (often in later SDS films or documentaries that exhibit the influence of the SDS), it is one that speaks of a spiritual fulfilment allied with 'brotherhood and unity' – allied even beyond the grave – and organically connected to a socialist work ethic. *Na objedu / At the Meal* (Hadžismajlović, 1972) shows a bereaved mother stoically soldiering on with the task of being a mother – the missing men remain an absent presence throughout (photos seemingly of the husband's funeral, and others working away from home, are seen on her wall). Aged men are lovingly lit in their cafe in *U kafani / In the Inn* (Hadžismajlović, 1969), smoking and drinking coffee, playing dominos and dice, watching an agreeable world outside the window (a young, courting couple pass by unawares) without nostalgia. Their mortality – the reassuring tick-tock of the cafe's clock – seems not to trouble them. Indeed, these final days seem overwhelmingly sensual: the rituals of coffee grinding and tobacco rolling, and the morning air on the mountains that rolls down and ventilates the wooden hut. They are contented in this retirement, enjoying a dignity and sociability derived from a life of hard work to the common good – as apparent in the lined and leathery faces that fascinate the camera. The film evidences this agreeable waiting room as a possibility for the future (of the intended audience) in the face of auteur films that then claimed otherwise – such as the deracinated and dispossessed left to their own fate in the apocalyptic *Skupljaci perja / I Even Met Some Happy Gypsies* (Aleksander Petrović, 1967). *Ana* (Mirjana Zoranović, 1984) near-wordlessly follows the daily routine of its ancient subject, doubled-over with age and entirely alone, as she prepares her meals, milks cows, feeds chickens, lights a fire, lugs hay and so forth – a heroic task of running of her small farm with only her animals (to whom she talks) for company. When she rests from her duties she looks pensively at the photographs – again



presumably of departed family members, and again on her living room wall (a typical feature of such homes) – with whom she now seems to commune. Her only connection with the outside world seems to be walking to a spot where she can see a local bus drive by. This later film seems to assume or consciously work with a SDS style and could be considered a coda to it – heightening the concentration on doomed rural subjects, whose life is seemingly allowed to dictate the film’s pace (albeit qualified by the use of heavily sentimental music).

These encounters with an everyman who, denied individualization, comes to represent collective subjectivity seem to anticipate Aleksandr Sokurov’s documentaries (particularly *Smirennaya zhizn / A Humble Life* (1997) and also in *Dukhovnye Golosa / Spiritual Voices* (1995) and *Povinnost / Confession* (1998)), but this tendency had already been apparent in Sokurov’s then-contemporary work such as *Mariya / Maria* ([1978] 1988) and its forerunner, *Poslednii den’ nenastnogo leta / Last Day of a Rainy Summer* (1978).<sup>8</sup> Here the farm seems desolate and semi-derelict, its yield dwindling, its workers exiles at the end of their days. Sokurov severs the hope of, or communicates the lack of evidence of, a holistic connection between worker and land, environment and spiritual fulfilment, in this conjuncture. Such a subversive critique seems to slide in, under an otherwise fairly typical – ‘regulation’, even – documentary. With the lexicon of images and modes of presentation to which he nominally adheres, Sokurov engages indirectly with the remnants of socialist realism, or the persistence of a socialist realist sensibility. What is refuted is the kind of spiritual fulfilment offered in these late SDS films and their Russian counterparts.<sup>9</sup>

The socialist realist metaphysics of the SDS even includes evil – identified in the moral panic-like *Sanjari / Dreamers* (Hadžismajlović, 1971). Children on the streets of Sarajevo and lacking parental guidance develop unhealthy interests: ‘girlie’

and science fiction magazines, smoking and western films (which prompt them to perform dangerous stunts and play-fight on the back of a tram). This leads to theft and arrest for the worst urchins. Salvation comes from a return to the woods – tree cabins and branches to swing from – and a rejection of the tempting superficialities of a foreign, popular culture. This evil is entirely secular: the evil of one's mind drifting from one's immediate surroundings – the 'dreaming' of the title (as opposed, presumably, to 'working') – and surrender to the corrosive influence of decadent, western, consumer culture.

### **Female equality as the dividend of socialism**

Feminism or a proto-feminism, implicit, aspirant or otherwise, is not a formal concern of the SDS. However, as apparent in the above synopses, women remain central to the Bosnia of the SDS. This centrality seems in keeping with the boasts of socialist realism about the enlightened elevation of women in socialist societies, and is defined in relation to the role of women, and a specifically feminine contribution, to Yugoslav brotherhood and unity. Naturally, dignity is afforded to the woman's tasks at home – seen to enable the men's work elsewhere. Such a relatively straightforward approach is apparent in *Đurđica* (Mirza Idrizović, 1978), which anticipates *Ana* in its opening-up of a psychological space for its female protagonist within an essentially objective – and so documentary-appropriate – framing. That is, the films refuse to engage in the western modernist / avant-garde trope of psychological realism in rendering subjectivity. In *Đurđica* the lowly position of a modest woman (who sweeps, cleans and prepares food during the day) is presented as essential to the fabric of this society. The final shots of a rural dwelling in the evening, with a welcoming glow

from its windows, as with *Charcoal Bearers*, emphasizes the non-marginalization of these domestic roles understood to be fulfilled by women.

However this emancipatory impulse, once it pushes out of the domestic sphere, seems to become badly lost. In *Misija Ismeta Kozice / Izmet Kosica's Mission* (Ljubojev, 1977)<sup>10</sup> young rural women are rounded up by a clothes factory agent, who then returns to his factory with them for employment – ‘so that our working class is rejuvenated’, as Izmet puts it. A comedic strain places the viewer on the side of the put-upon Izmet; he loads his female cargo into the back of a tractor at one point, and is seen walking barefoot, leading them across the river, at another. Once ensconced in their new dormitory, Izmet – who sees himself as something of a Lothario (of the kind once satirized in Jiří Menzel’s own performances in the 1960s; diminutive, devoted to work, demanding his allotted place in the sexual revolution) – sets to work on his second phase: overseeing a lifestyle makeover. This people’s Professor Henry Higgins is both paternal and lecherous; at one point, in the dormitory, he requests that they come to him with any problems they might encounter. The girls enjoy the promised ‘hope and security’ the small factory offers, take dance lessons, are re-clothed, ‘blossom’, pose for the camera, and are warned about the dangers posed by boyfriends (after the first kiss, there is no turning back). As Izmet’s females are scrubbing up, he peers through a hole in the shower wall and he – and, alas, we – partake of an eyeful of the young, soapy bodies (bubbles drift across the foreground – a soft-core stylistic cliché more typical of David Hamilton’s films). A repetition of this alarming equating of female emancipation with stripping comes with the sudden cut from a Muslim woman having her hijab torn from her face to a naked woman twirling in her see-through red stole in *Kasabe / Provincial Town* (Idrizović, 1977): emancipation to a condition of exploitation.<sup>11</sup> And yet this exploitation occurs on

tertiary grounds: the entertainment industry – which, in terms of tradition female roles, could be seen to represent the ultimate ‘freeing’ of women from the land. *Šou biznis / Show Business* (Zlatko Lavanić, 1977), a sort of *X-Factor* docudrama, follows a young female singer – clearly cast for her sunny looks as much as musical abilities – who makes her way to Šabac (a non-Bosnian city, but one noted for its music culture) in search of work. Yet even in these SDS films it is possible to salvage a progressive element: the dreary moralism of attacks on sexually active and unmarried women in British sex education films from this time (that is, state-funded, and for educational purposes), such as *Don't Be Like Brenda* (Hugh Baddeley, 1973), illustrate the general reticence in the West to acknowledge – let alone ‘celebrate’ – female sexuality in the 1970s.

By the mid- to late-1970s there seems to have been a concerted attempt to showcase attractive young Yugoslav women, both as a sign of the dividend of progress, and – presumably – to bolster the tourist industry. The template – at least if *Show Business* is representative – seems to frame Slavic features with West Coast fluffed, blonde hair: a distinct difference from the darker Italian women of this time. Such a sexualization of the Yugoslav woman remains political. *Show Business* is much like the equally psychedelic *Provincial Town* and *Fasade / Facades* (Suad Mrkonjić, 1972). These films present Yugoslav urban society as swingingly socialist and European; *Facades* is an entirely celebratory swirl of colours and music, building activity and city renewal, clean streets, happy workers and parades. Here the images of Lenin and the Red Star are readily accommodated within the pop art aesthetic. *Provincial Town* includes rock music, contrasts old black and white newsreel footage with Franciscan monks playing football and shows the sub-proletarian farming women now pacing supermarket aisles. These later SDS films fuse renewal and

regeneration and present the resultant new forms of urban life, qualified by a sense of the continuity of Bosnian history. In the final analysis, the projected Bosnian identity – indeed, the new Bosnia – is founded upon the two. Such ‘dynamic’ city documentaries were typical across Western Europe in the 1970s, for tourist reasons and as expressions of civic pride.

### **The SDS sub-proletariat**

The SDS films would seem to have been subject to a very careful negotiation with Yugoslav history: economic, ideological and political, and geographical. It is certainly possible – and we will only know once further research has been carried out – that a level of control was exerted, or assumed to have been effective anyway, on their making. In that later case, Yugoslav self-management would have found a reverberation in effective Yugoslav self-censorship. So it is unfair to talk dismissively of the failure of the SDS films in this instance; what kind of successful outcome could have been derived? And it is the nature of the failure that warrants further analysis.

The SDS, in subject matter and general concerns (in the didactic sense, but also in terms of the films as betterment of the places and people they look to) suggests a proletarian cinema. The SDS presents itself as the chronicler and enabler of modernization and social and civic revolution. But it is the very strata of the upwardly mobile sub-proletariat (understood to be on the cusp of these changes) that the films remain incapable of engaging with. It seems necessary, rather, for the SDS to homogenize and mute the Yugoslav sub-proletariat. Their en masse presentation is necessarily limited and curtailed: the interviewees only speak of immediate concerns and raise questions that call exclusively for bureaucratic or altruistic solutions. A cynic may say that the SDS specialized in forcibly refashioning ethnographic material

along party lines, and re-couching unavoidable social questions in a way acceptable for party bureaucrats and technocrats, centrally or (post-decentralization) locally. Therefore as an ideological intervention into Yugoslav media, and with a characteristic reliance on Stalinist practices, this refashioning can only be described as a process of projecting the idea of the ‘correct’ sub-proletariat onto images of the actual rural proletariat and transient rural workers. In this respect, the actual group, even though ethnographically-rendered, is reduced to the *scriptio inferior* in such a palimpsest-like overwriting. And the net created result, or effect – as far as the SDS films are concerned – is a socialist idyll.

In terms of form, the films also exhibit a further Stalinist tendency: a counter-revolutionary conceptualization of the sub-proletariat that speaks of a fundamental institutional fear. So in addition to the effective muting of the Bosnians comes an immobilization of the radical potential of these nominal investigations into their everyday life. The films offer the reassurances of continuums – the past vibrant in the present – but remain defiantly un-dialectical, both in their straightforward narrative constructions and in their idiosyncratically late adherence to the tenets or spirit of socialist realism. The sophistication of the Novi Film and the subsequent Black Wave of film seems from another time and country altogether.<sup>12</sup> The SDS sub-proletariat and the Novi Film peasants in Želimir Žilnik’s *Rani radovi / Early Works* (1969), in which the peasants wind up raping a female student who has gone to the countryside to rally the proletariat to the Marxism cause, could not be more different. It is not just that the social conditions of the city are diametrically opposed in, say, Živojin Pavlović’s *Budjenje pacova / Awakening of the Rats* (1966) and *Show Business, Provincial Town* and *Facades*, but that the very tenor is entirely different.

Dušan Makavejev's films suggest an element of antagonism between these two areas in late 1960s Yugoslav film or media culture; the comical lectures of the sexologist Dr Aleksandar Kostić in *Ljubavni Slučaj Ili Tragedija Službenice PTT / Tragedy of the Switchboard Operator* (Makavejev, 1967) seems to satirize the heavy-handed didacticism of films such as those of the SDS, and the satire of Tito's personality cult in *Innocence Unprotected* skewers exactly the kind of communal adoration of Tito seen and implied in *Facades*. Indeed, there is much in the SDS that will delight fans of Soviet-era camp; so bad is the opening of *Tenancy Rights*, with its panel of token worker and token female listening to a bureaucrat lecturing on housing, that the uninitiated could at first assume it is a sophisticated postmodern pastiche, and scholars of Eastern and Central European film could detect dissent.

Likewise, it can be argued that *Facades*, which at times tentatively suggests that this frenzy of building and cleaning activity is merely for the visit of the party congress to town (that is, one symbolic gesture for another), has its own measure of 'Makavejev-ian' subversion. Such a reading is advanced by Stevens in her report on the Oberhausen retrospective; Stevens also finds in *The Dreamers* '... an open and damning condemnation of authority' and posits an anti-propagandist, anti-authoritarian bent in the SDS, detectable in 'irony' and 'implication' and a bucking of previous tendencies in socialist realism to glorify work and the worker (Stevens 2009: 8). Did Mrkonjić and Hadžismajlović, then, smuggle in dissent while Filipović engaged in *cinéma-vérité*? Such an auteurist approach to cold war Eastern European and Russian cinema tends to eek out dissenting elements to prove the presence of a guiding and individual – and individual's – intelligence. The assumption at work in this reading – and it is an assumption that is now absolutely in the ascendant, and one that seems to be the motor for the newer new waves of Eastern European miserabilism

(such as the New Romanian Cinema, or Henckel von Donnersmarck's *Das leben der Anderen / The Lives of Others* (2006)) – is the way in which *any* historical portrayal of Soviet-era social reality has to carry a severe critique of that reality. Thus the connection between the auteur as an individual, free-thinking intellectual and his or her therefore automatic condemnation of the realities of existing socialism is automatic. The auteur, in this model, is a humanist – organically incapable of being an ideologue.<sup>13</sup>

Yet this approach to Eastern European and Russian cinema seems another variant on the abovementioned condition of post-socialism as one that engenders a retroactive revisionism. In the crude formulation of the western powers, accession to a European Union status for former Eastern bloc countries remained in direct correlation to their histories of dissent. Those who could have been said to be the most ebullient in their public anti-Soviet stances were the first to be invited. Is it not the case that seeking out subterranean, subtextual currents of dissent in Soviet-era films, and the intimations of all not quite well, and, in doing so, reclaiming the films along these dissenting lines, effectively does the same thing? In this way, the burgeoning western canon of Eastern and Central European cinema reflects the citizens of post-socialism countries own identities and histories, as apparent in these films.

Such an operation shuts down an awkward interjection against the westward march of history: the recuperation of existing socialism, particularly in the light of the disasters that have befallen the Eastern bloc since 1989 (and their use for Badiou's 'obscure disaster' as the essential foundation for post-nation state capitalism) by those who were once the subjects of really existing socialism. Dissent is therefore a particularly western index for the assembly of a history of Eastern European film. And such dissent gives rise to a methodological approach that, in its rejection of the



idea of a sophistication in response to life with Stalin, reduces or misreads the ambiguities of the dissenting text by way of an ‘... interpretive madness in which every feature can be interpreted as a sign of its opposite: complain that the “triumphant” ending of the Leningrad Symphony was banal and you might get the response, “Ah, but it’s *meant* to be banal!”’ (Žižek 2008: 236, emphasis in the original).

Here, in Žižek’s recent reading of the dissident subtext and western responses to art and Stalin (which centres on questions of the anti-Stalinism, or otherwise, of Shostakovich and Prokofiev), the verifications of dissent that are required tend to inevitably be external to the text (or, in these cases, musical scores). The sub-proletarian focus of the SDS films would seem to remove them from such intellectual parlour games; the seeming audience for the Czech new wave of the late 1960s – dissenting, urbane intellectuals – at the time of the suppression of the Prague Spring, effectively implicated the films themselves as products of a class that had overstepped the mark. (Or, to adapt Žižek’s reading, this class, in their films, had come to express sincere private rather than acceptable public anti-communism – the latter as an essential caveat of cynicism deemed necessary for the workings of government.)

Turning to Nemes, whose obscure English-language overview of Eastern and Central European film articulated the Soviet party line on this history, Yugoslav film at the time of the SDS is seen to be characterized by two factors: in the Novi Film comes the ‘retreat from life’ and ‘alienation’, resulting in ‘Films of Negation’. This is apparent in ‘... an increasing amount of room [given] to the tendency of disillusionment [... and t]he filmmakers’ turning away from real life is especially evident in the choice and behaviour of their heroes’ (Nemes 1985: 128). Nemes suggests a standard attack on a tendency that would have been typically termed and understood as bourgeois (his

study, in part, attempts to account for the banning of the aesthetic ‘excesses’ in the Czech new wave and so forth). For Nemes Novi Film, in its avant-garde modernist artfulness and overwhelming psychological realism, jettisons the totality of the world view that Lukács had found in the nineteenth-century novel and had deemed essential for all properly socialist art. What, then, is acceptable for Nemes – by default – are the very qualities found in the SDS films: hope rather than alienation; a collective rather than an individual; everyday figures rather than the intellectual; everyday life rather than exceptional events; and a ‘straight’ aesthetic in which psychological realism has little or no place.

To attempt to position the SDS films along dissenting lines is to do them a disservice, and necessitates a reading that – at least at this early stage of their re-emergence – goes against their very *mise-en-scène*. These films are the idylls of socialism, and create and present their sub-proletariat as such. More progressively, it is in the nature of the failure of the SDS, in this post-1989 framing, along with the opportunity to experience the (at times) lightness of touch of such a heavy ideological load, that the hope of an unravelling of the processes of ‘post-’-ing socialism can be seen. It is not that Yugo-nostalgia redeems this otherwise entirely problematic propaganda, but that the films redeem, in their making real, the basis of Yugo-nostalgia itself: the historical socialist Yugoslavia, as it and its offices of state once imagined itself.

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<sup>1</sup> 'School' is used here in the sense of a shared time and place of origin, and the general concerns exhibited – as with the 'the Polish School' of the existential / modernist films of the 1950s concerning war and psychological trauma (Wajda, Munk, etc). What is shared in the SDS films, in very general terms, is a preference for impression over documentation, ambience over formal presentation; the films evoke rather than excavate their subject matters. The standard English-language critical studies of Yugoslav film contain nothing on the SDS or associated directors: neither Goulding (1985), in the revised and expanded edition of 2003; nor Iordanova (2001), for whom the SDS would have been mostly outside the scope of her study; or even, surprisingly, the recently published Levi (2007). Even Šešić's brief entry on the '[sic] Bosnian Documentary Movement' subsumes the SDS within a general overview of Bosnian documentaries, but pays some attention to Vefik Hadžismajlović; see Šešić 2005 (130–132).

<sup>2</sup> Most recently a twenty-film retrospective was curated by Gaby Babić, with directors Hadžismajlović and Vlatko Filipović in attendance, for the 55th Oberhausen Film Festival, Oberhausen 30 April–5 May 2009. SDS films had been programmed sporadically for Oberhausen (and with some success in terms of awards) in the 1960s and 1970s.

<sup>3</sup> For this reason, such a distinction does not occur in Seroka and Smiljković (1986), who use the terms peasant and farm worker interchangeably, for their study of political organizations in Yugoslavia.

<sup>4</sup> Volčič notes the essential differences between Ostalgie and Yugo-nostalgia – terms typically considered to be synonymous by critics; in the final analysis, Yugo-nostalgia literalizes or restores the

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element of the historical ‘catastrophe’ to Badiou’s ‘obscure catastrophe’ since Yugoslavia remains unique in terms of the blood shed that followed in the wake of 1989; see Volčič 2007 (26–27).

<sup>5</sup> Socialist realism, associated with the formulations of the role and nature of art and literature by A. A. Zhdanov (so that the terms ‘Zhdanovist Socialist Realism’, or ‘Zhdanovism’, are sometimes used) became the exclusive aesthetic mode in the Soviet Union until the mid-1960s or so, and the dominant one thereafter. Even after Stalin’s death, Lukács could still argue in favour of an orthodox tradition of socialist realism, different from the degeneration of socialist realism that had prevailed in previous decades (Lukács 1963: 133). Some critics have argued that the politicization and policing of aesthetics and fictional narratives was not the main concern of socialist realism but rather, as with the industry codes of practice of US media at the same time, enabled the smoking-out and blackballing of dissident artists and imposition of state control (soft or hard) over the media sectors. A straightforward narrative that is comprehensible to the uneducated typifies socialist realism films, as does the use of ‘types’ rather than characters, the use or incorporation of nationalist sentiment, the use of popular genre elements – particularly those of the musical – and a general poverty of the *mise-en-scène*. The persistence of socialist realism, its later phases, and its existence at one remove (in Eastern bloc countries, or even Cuba) tended to occur in spirit rather than practice, and is more apparent in the politics of representation than a heavy-handed dramaturgical impulse of advancing a socialist perspective (Lukács’s ‘perspectivism’). Such a looseness of adherence to aesthetic dogma was especially the case in Yugoslavia, where cinema was periodically perceived as an index to freedom of expression during the 1960s. In Makavejev’s appropriation and pastiche of socialist realism, in *Nevinost Bez Zaštite / Innocence Unprotected* (1968), this aesthetic tendency is conflated with Stalinism, and reapplied to counter-revolutionary political elements in post-war Yugoslav history, up to and including the public persona of Tito himself; see Halligan (1998). Outside of Novi Film (the Yugoslav new wave), however, a late and loose socialist realism persisted, as evidenced in the ideological content, and seeming function, of the SDS films. For further on socialist realism and film see Liehm and Liehm (1977), and on Yugoslav cinema and socialist realism see Goulding (1985).

<sup>6</sup> In respect of some typical examples, one thinks of the disdain for the working classes evident in *O Dreamland* (Anderson, 1953) and – as critics argued elsewhere in respect to other films from the British Free Cinema, see Allsop (1964) – the paradoxical mixture of lionization and condescension; or of the panel of experts of *Comizi d’Amore* (Pasolini, 1963), ‘making sense of’ the raw material also

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presented to the viewer in the form of interviews concerning changing attitudes towards matters of love and sex.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, some of the children seen in *Hope* would have been in the same age group as the visionaries of Međugorje – the villages in which apparitions of the Virgin Mary began in 1981, which soon attracted such religion practices on a wider scale. The events at Međugorje initially pitted the parish's Franciscans (now armed with an international congregation) against the local authorities (including the area's initial archbishop) in a religious refraction of the cold war, before becoming associated with Croatian nationalism.

<sup>8</sup> Work on *Maria Voinova's Summer* began in 1978; the film was eventually released, with additional material added, as *Maria* in 1988. *Last Day of a Rainy Summer* was Sokurov's last documentary for Gorky Television.

<sup>9</sup> An echo of this tendency can be found in Larissa Shepitko's *Znoj / Heat* (1963) and Andrei Tarkovsky's *Ivanovo detstvo / Ivan's Childhood* (1962).

<sup>10</sup> Šešić notes that Ljubojev was the head of Sutjeska Film for several years; see Šešić (2005: 131).

<sup>11</sup> The party forbade such headdress – a rule no doubt flouted outside conurbations. In this, as well as the dubious ends of this urban emancipation, the SDS predate the degeneration of western liberal secularism and feminism by some decades; the hijab remains banned in many western schools, and 'raunch culture' – as Levy terms it (2006) – has usurped the goals of first and second wave feminism for many young and independent women as a token of liberation and autonomy.

<sup>12</sup> The Yugoslav 'Black Wave' consisted of the films banned and publicly attacked, a rearguard action that occurred from the late 1960s in common with many other Eastern bloc countries in the wake of the suppression of the Prague Spring. Veljko Vlahović, president of the Ideological Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Serbia, criticized the 'strayings' of Yugoslav Novi Film film-makers as originating in a use of alienation '... in the same way as their colleagues in the West' (quoted in Goulding 1985: 71). Such alienation invariably occurred via dialectical and associative montage strategies and psychological realism – aesthetic strategies almost entirely absent from the SDS. Vlahović initially diagnosed this straying in a speech delivered to a meeting of Communist Party film-workers in December 1963; Novi Film was the result of mismanagement of

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studios (then out of state hands) and had led to iconoclasts of questionable talent using precious studio resources.

<sup>13</sup> The question of genre seems to be the blind-spot in this concatenation – North American, cold war-era exponents of capitalism are not spared an ideological critique of their work; the classic example is Frank Capra, whose brilliance can remain acknowledged and his derided propagandizing of the ‘American way’ is not seen to mar that brilliance. But *genre* film-makers tend to be understood to operate in an ideologically neutral environment, with allegiances merely to the rules of the game rather than the role models of the righteous artist in the unjust society (or even the responsibilities of representation). Of Soviet cinema, only Russian war films seem to have attained this safe ground.