Affording Room for Deviance in Croatian National Cinema Discourse

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ISSUES OF EVOLVING identities steeped in Croatia's turbulent 20th century history make it an excellent case study for examining national cinema theory. Academic discourses on Croatian national cinema since the country's independence have been shrouded in generalisations. By reviewing the ways in which dominant trends have been understood and affording a place for deviant ideologies, I present a new approach to national cinema theory, understood in terms of overlapping, nationally conditioned networks, which has room to accommodate changes.

Yugoslavia was ruled by Josip Broz Tito since the end of the Second World War, coinciding with the institutionalisation of the country's cinema. Following his death in 1980, the country lacked firm leadership and the political system, which had publicly espoused the tenets of *Brotherhood and Unity* and *After Tito; Tito*, was hijacked by opportunist nationalists in both Croatia and Serbia: Communists one day but then nationalists the next. In Croatia, Franjo Tuđman's government was staunchly nationalist and centred its nation building and affirming projects on the traditional patriarchal institutions of the church and the family.[1] Concurrently, deviant gender, national, religious and sexual identities were both actively and passively oppressed. Following Tuđman's death in 1999, Croatian politics has liberalised considerably. Successive governments have sought better trade relations with regional neighbours and have steered the country towards the key political goal of European Union membership. Socially however, progress has been far more modest. Whilst alternative voices can now be heard, such as those of homosexual and Serbian organisations, their causes are usually met by virulent protest.[2] Furthermore, they are afforded little protection by institutions of power such as the government, regional authorities, the police, the church or the courts.[3]

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[1]Goldstein writes of the political drive 'to create a cult of the family, with many children and the mother as housewife, and to ban abortion' alongside 'often tasteless and fawning obeisance paid to the church by the authorities'. Ivo Goldstein, *Croatia: A History* (London: Hurst & Company, 1999), 260.

[2]Gay Pride parades in Zagreb, since 2002, and Split, since 2011, have endured perpetual intimidation, even from elected officials, and have regularly been the victims of physical violence. The legal right of Serbian minorities in Vukovar, constituting one third of the population, to use the Cyrillic alphabet has, since 2012, been aggressively protested by Croatian nationalists.

[3]An example of this is the announcement by the member of parliament Marko Turić, whilst debating civil partnerships in parliament, that 'homosexuals, or rather, as we say in Croatian, faggots, can wait a bit', a statement which was not censured. Ante Pavić, 'Sukobi oko zakona o registriranom partnerstvu', revised March 2006, *Nacional* [Accessed: http://www.nacional.hr/clanak/23875/sukobi-oko-zakona-o-registriranom-partnerstvu. 2 April 2013].

Existing Discourse

Contemporary academic discourses by Croatian and English-language writers concerning cinema in Croatia differ considerably in how they frame Croatia's cinema culture. Generally, Croatian writers conceive Croatia's cinema tradition as having always constituted a distinct Croatian national cinema with a unique identity detached from those of its neighbours. Books within this approach look to stress the permanence of Croatian cinema, often being written as fully-fledged histories or collated records. Examples of this include Ivo Škrabalo's *Hrvatska filmska povijest ukratko (1896-2006)* and Nikica Gilić's *Uvod u povijest hrvatskog igranog filma.*[4] Furthermore, Croatian writers tend to ascribe an unjustifiable importance to films made during the Second World War in the fascist Independent State of Croatia so as to construct a history which seemingly predates socialist Yugoslavia and therein survives it, thus undermining the key role played by the socialist authorities in establishing a functioning domestic film industry in Yugoslavia.[5] This stance has constructed a very exclusive and non-contextualised cinema for the Yugoslav years, deemed a mere phase which Croatian cinema had to pass through rather than its galvanising catalyst, relying too heavily on appropriation from the traditions of other republics or simply ignoring inter-republican elements which do not seem to fit. Such flaws persist to the present day regarding how Croatian authors approach the transnational, such as co-productions and foreign elements. In contrast, English-language authors tend to locate Croatia's cinema within broader Yugoslav or Balkan conceptions of national cinema. These are prescriptively constructed by orientalising Western prejudices regarding Yugoslavia and the Balkans. The titles of works such as Dina Iordanova's *Cinema of Flames* and Pavle Levi's *Disintegration in Frames* adequately convey the sense of turbulence, which is contained within this discourse. One consequence of this approach is that the discourse drawn from the 1990s is retrospectively and anachronistically applied to previous periods. Furthermore, this approach often focuses on particular cinematic trends not uniformly found across the whole of Yugoslavia, for instance Serbian black wave from the 1960s due to its dissident appeal, inaccurately giving the impression that Croatian cinema was in a state of suspended animation at this time.

Despite their differences and having shown little scholarly interaction, both of these academic traditions correctly divided post-independence Croatian cinema into two distinct periods: the 1990s and the 2000s. It is worth noting that whilst such a chronological division may appear too convenient, it should be ascribed to the significant social and political changes, which accompanied Tuđman's death in December 1999 rather than essentialism.[6]

[4]These literally translate to *A Brief History of Croatian Film (1896-2006)* and *An Introduction to the History of Croatian Feature Films*, respectively.

[5]Aside from the fact that these works served, at the very most, as an apprenticeship for Croatian filmmakers prior to entering the stable Yugoslav industry, their enduring influence is negligible since they are mostly unavailable to viewers. Given the active role of the scholar in deciding which films are preserved within evolving discourses, there is also a sense of bad taste in overly aggrandising the jingoistic films made by the Independent State of Croatia, a fascist state responsible for the murder of hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews, Romani and social and political enemies, although its gradual rehabilitation, whereby it is portrayed as one manifestation of a long-held Croatian quest for statehood, has been common in discourse since the 1990s.

[6]Following Tuđman's death, the growing discontent with his authoritarian rule in the post-war years, typified by protests at his refusal to confirm the appointment of multiple Zagreb mayors

Although this basic divide of the country's post-independence cinema is apparent, it has fostered misleading generalisations in scholars' search for coherence. Both Croatian and English-language scholars adhere to a simplistic dichotomy for this period, operating within the parameters of a negative 1990s, which are conservative and nationalist, and a positive 2000s, which are liberalising and democratic. In doing so, discourse has become self-perpetuating and tautological. Existing discourse, which used prescriptively selected films as case studies to prove desired points, feeds the production of new discourse which uses it as evidence along with the same select pool of films, thus generating more homogenous material which feeds the cycle.

In their seminal work *Film History*, Allen and Gomery warn against the imposition of a narrative upon discourse, so as to create a good story, whereby the conventions of fiction writing take precedence over historical analysis.[7] Thus, the two identifiable cinematic periods need to be addressed from a dual standpoint: Firstly, it must be asked whether Croatian cinema is actually as stable as it is portrayed in the dominant discourses, in other words, how nationalist were the 1990s and how liberal were the 2000s? Secondly, by moving beyond dominant trends in Croatian national cinema discourse, non-dominant, or deviant, discourses should be identified in both periods. These approaches will challenge the dominant discourse, which is currently propagated, and will include alternative interpretations of films which are already foregrounded, along with others which have either been displayed as anomalous or simply ignored. It is by accepting this challenge from a deviant discourse that the dominant discourse achieves credence and meaning in so far as a discourse is only dominant if understood in relation to its opposite, a deviant discourse. In the specific context of national cinema theory, this approach also helps to show that each national cinema is not constructed from a single national identity discourse but rather multiple and conflicting nationals.

Tuđman's Croatia

With regards to their judgements on the dominant nationalist cinema of the 1990s, now unsparingly criticised for its stylistic and ethical failings, academics have accurately identified how the works were rejected domestically. The poorly conceived propagandistic content was a case of preaching to the converted and thus failed to ever reach foreign audiences. Since these films lacked popular audiences or critical recognition, their place as the centre of attention, as afforded to them in academic works, is rather undermined. Operating as films of self-victimisation, Pavle Levi refers to this period as 'national necrophilia' whereby the challenge, gladly accepted by filmmakers, was to depict one's own nation as suffering ever worse fates at the hands of the (perpetually Serbian) enemy.[8] These nationalist melodramas were intended to convey the Croatian political cause, often featuring explanatory dialogue for the phantom, presumably western, audiences. Characters' morals are determined exclusively in alignment with their ethnicity: Serbs are devious, sadistic villains; Croats are well-intentioned, naïve

selected by opposition parties, was translated into loses for his HDZ party in local, parliamentary and presidential elections in 2000.

[7]Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 1985), 44.

[8]Pavle Levi, *Disintegration in Frames: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Cinema* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 128.

victims. Each film uses its own individual markers to aid the viewer, for instance, in *Bogorodica* (The Madonna) the Serbs are unshaven alcoholics whilst in *Četverored* (Rows of Four) they are mentally unstable.The ethnic divide is transposed upon other identities too, such as gender for instance. Croatian women are pure and often compared to the Virgin Mary, whereas Serbian women are distinctly physical and explicitly sexual. A divide between Croats and Serbs is also made along the lines of belonging. Croats are shown as being closely in touch with the land and local tradition whilst ethnic Serbs are, entirely inaccurately, universally attributed the ekavica dialect synonymous with standard Serbian and the use of the Cyrillic alphabet.[9] In reality, Croatian Serbs speak no differently from their ethnic Croat neighbours and have even complained of discrimination because of this when visiting Serbia.[10] This was captured in the 2002 Serbian film *Kordon* (The Cordon) in which a Croatian Serb policeman who, having moved to Belgrade following the war, is treated as a Croatian outsider by his Belgrade colleagues despite his own strong affirmations of his Serbian identity.

Concurrent to the nationalist cinema of the 1990s was the emergence of a conflicting trend headed by a new generation of young directors. This came to be known as Young Croatian Film and was characterised by a rejection of nationalist propaganda and a more critical approach to Croatian national identity. However, the easily appreciable correspondence between the dominant nationalist cinema and the dominant nationalist politics, which funded such works, means that Young Croatian Film, prior to 2000, has been marginalised in discourse. Instead, particularly in English language discourse, individual works have been removed from their context with little explanation as to why they differ so greatly from the nationalist Croatian films, which they are presented alongside. The best example of this is the 1996 film *Kako je počeo rat na mom otoku* (How The War Started On My Island), which demands attention as the most viewed post-independence Croatian film.Compared with the pathetic melodrama of dominant films, Vinko Brešan's deviant work employs comedy, an approach that initially evoked criticism from nationalists who felt it mocked the Croatian war effort.[11] Instead of the brave, patriotic 'our boys' of the dominant discourse, in this work about Croatian townsfolk surrounding a Yugoslav army barracks prior to the outbreak of the war, Croatian characters are shown as amateurish, occasionally weird, opportunists. Even more importantly, the main Serbian character is humanised rather than demonised. Instead of depicting him as a foreign invader, the main Serb character in *Kako je počeo rat na mom otoku*, the commander of the barracks, is shown to be fully integrated into the local community, something he is regularly reminded of by the locals who try to persuade him to surrender the barracks and join them. In one comic scene his integration has even gone too far when he considers leaving voluntarily but then reconsiders after discovering that his wife, a local Croatian woman, is furious at him after discovering that he has a mistress, another local Croatian woman from the small

[9]Jurica Pavičić, *Postjugoslavenski film: Stil i ideologija* (Zagreb: Hrvatski filmski savez, 2011), 110.

[10]Glenny writes of his own experiences in the Serbian controlled parts of Croatian during the early 1990s, noting that they spoke the Croatian variant of the language and estimating that only 5% of ethnic Serbs could use Cyrillic. He recounts seeing a Croatian Serb try to address a letter to relatives in Belgrade in Cyrillic but struggling so much that he gave up and reverted to the Latin script. Misha Glenny, *The Fall of Yugoslavia* (London: Penguin, 1996), 12.

[11]Anja Šošić, 'Humor kao oslobađenje', *Zapis: bilten Hrvatskog filmskog saveza* 64–65 (2009) [Accessed: http://www.hfs.hr/nakladnistvo_zapis_detail.aspx?sif=90#.Ud5wivmsh8E. 10 July 2013].

community. The relationship between gender and ethnicity exists within personal contexts in *Kako je počeo rat na mom otoku*. This differs from nationalist cinema in which Serbian men raped Croatian women in such a way as to symbolise the rape of the nation, thus undermining the plight of the film's female victim and, consequently, those who actually suffered wartime rapes.[12]

Post-Tuđman Croatia

Different authors favour the use of terms Young Croatian Film and New Croatian Film for the style that emerged in the 1990s as a deviant approach but became the dominant approach for the 2000s. I suggest that it ought to be referred to as Young Croatian Film until 1999, since it was initially headed by a generation of young directors, and then New Croatian Film from 2000 onwards, when they were joined by more established faces who had either changed political stance to fit the new political landscape or returned from hiatuses and adopted a more socially critical approach.

New Croatian Cinema represents the dominance of a deviant discourse. It confronts the traditional patriarchal values, which still dominate, by focusing on the challenges faced by society's non-dominant groups, such as women, homosexuals and ethnic minorities, and by criticising powerful institutions such as the church and the army. The movement's leading director, Dalibor Matanić, produced the 2002 film *Fine mrtve djevojke* (Nice Dead Girls), which looks at the hardships faced by a lesbian couple in a communal house, which represents a microcosm of Croatian society, populated by a grotesque array of characters such as a wife-beating war veteran and a backstreet abortionist.However, although Matanić's film is certainly critical of intolerance, it is excessive to say that it delivers a pro-homosexual or queer message. The lesbian couple are passed through a crude heterosexual filter; one of them fulfils the traditional male role of the breadwinner, the other is pretty, helpless and in need of protection.[13] Come the film's conclusion the message in fact appears very bleak since, as with all Balkan films dealing with homosexuality, there can be no happy ending. The masculinised girl is martyred at the hands of the mob whilst the feminised girl must revert to her former heterosexuality so as to achieve security and fulfil the patriarchal society's intended role for her as a loving mother and dutiful wife. Having remained largely passive as her girlfriend was slain, it is only in the role of a mother, her child having been snatched, that she exhibits strong emotions, the implication being that love within lesbian relationships is less real than a woman's motherly instinct.[14] Read in such a way, *Fine mrtve djevojke* hardly constitutes a progressive message.

For a period which is characterised so optimistically in discourse as being socially conscious, it is also worth noting the existence of regressive works such as *Zapamtite Vukovar* (Remember Vukovar), *Duga mračna noć* (A Long Dark Night) and *Josef* (Joseph) which are barely diluted throwbacks to the dominant nationalist discourse of

[12]Evangelista explains how rape was not a by-product of the war but rather one of the weapons used to fight it. One example of this was the intentional impregnation of Bošnjak women by Serb paramilitaries so that the gendered victims, in the patrilineal society, would be forced to raise enemy children. Matthew Evangelista, *Gender, Nationalism and War: Conflict on the Movie Screen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 111.

[13]Mima Simić, 'Forenzičarka feministica u akciji!' *Hrvatski filmski ljetopis* 45 (2006): 66–67.

[14]Simić, 'Forenzičarka feministica', 65–66.

the 1990s.For this reason, they are mostly overlooked since they deviate from the dominant discourse of a steady transitional normalisation. Whilst New Croatian Film is concurrently the dominant cinematic discourse but a deviant socio-political discourse, this deviant cinematic discourse is in keeping with the dominant social discourse in so much as the three aforementioned examples all employ common, non-filmic, nationalist narratives. *Zapamtite Vukovar* indulges gratuitously in the mythologisation of the siege of Vukovar, *Duga mračna noć* eponymously describes Croatia's entry into socialist Yugoslavia and *Josef* takes the post-Yugoslav trend for discrediting Tito to an extreme by depicting him as nothing more than an opportunistic Russian.

National Cinema Networks

Taking into consideration the myopia of existing discourse on Croatian national cinema, a solution can be found in the way in which national cinema theory is understood. Writers of national cinemas allocate films as belonging to national cinemas. This conceives national cinemas as receptacles, either for all films made within the framework of a nation-state's industry or critically determined canons that present the best a country can offer. This implies an unjustifiable stability and a lack of contextual awareness to the means of production and reception, which are never so one-dimensional. Drawing from Elsaesser's theory of double occupancy, whereby films have multiple identities, and Berry's work on Taiwanese films, presented as existing as part of both a Taiwanese nation-state national cinema and a Chinese cultural national cinema, national cinemas can be better understood as networks rather than containers. In this transnational model, every factor has a non-fixed position and, instead of the film scholar's current role of actively constructing national cinemas, the more passive task is now to identify the links between entities and their relative strength, be they films, directors, trends, scholarly work, historical events or industry factors. This model avoids arguments over exclusive national ownership of works and, in fact, there is nothing unusual in identifiable elements operating as part of multiple national cinemas, attached primarily to nations or identities rather than nation-states. In the case of Croatia's cinema tradition, overlapping Croatian, Yugoslav, Serbian, Bosnian, Balkan, Mediterranean and Mitteleuropa identities, not dependent upon political sovereignty, can all be appreciated as part of Venn diagram-like cinemas.

Of course, an entire national cinema network could never be drawn up, since this would constitute an infinite task. Instead, this model is suggested primarily as a way of conceiving national cinemas, which offers a use value for analysis rather than merely attaching labels. Furthermore, this can serve as a practical way of contextualising particular transnational elements as part of a chosen national cinema, which may otherwise appear to be more closely aligned with another national cinema, for example a Serbian actor in a Croatian film. Importantly, with regards to the un-bridged divide between Croatian and English language scholars, the approach which I have proposed allows for the concurrent existence of both Croatian and Yugoslav national cinemas, therein facilitating greater cooperation without either tradition being dismissed outright.

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