

Berlin Film Festival, part 5

Beyond the shadow of Milosevic

The Punishment, a documentary film by Goran Rebic

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The young director Goran Rebic began filming *The Punishment* at about the same time as the German media were defaming prominent Austrian writer Peter Handke as a friend of the Milosevic government in Serbia. From the very beginning of the NATO campaign Handke had declared the bombing of Serbia to be a crime.

Rebic (*Jugofilm*, 1996; *At the End of the World*, 1992) was born in Serbia and grew up in Vienna. He began shooting his documentary film after the first bombardment of Belgrade in March 1999. The film finishes at the end of the same year with the fireworks display ushering in the new millennium.

The strength of Rebic's film does not lie in stirring images designed, in the first place, to expose the brutality of war. Its power resides in its depiction of everyday life in a country beset by war. We see an oil refinery devastated through bombing, as well as young girls in summer clothes strolling through Belgrade against a picturesque sunset. Motor boats chug along the Danube. A man silhouetted against this romantic background declares: it doesn't matter how you look at it, the situation in the country is “devastating.”

The opening scene shows a bride and groom at a registry office. Suddenly a siren begins to wail—an air-raid alarm. The group assembled for the wedding appear somewhat irritated, there is embarrassed laughter. Somebody is fiddling with a video-camera. On the streets people are going about their normal business. After all, NATO had declared their intention of bombing only strategic military targets. The fading tones of the siren blend together with noise of a passing lorry and finally cease.

On the motorway to Belgrade. The weather is sunny

and fine, the sky is blue. Alongside ruins of the bridges that used to cross the Danube we can see ordinary houses bombed in the middle of vibrant, populated areas of the city. A cameraman stands before the totally ruined building that used to house the state television company and relates what took place on the night when at least 16 of his colleagues lost their lives as the building collapsed around them. The men who died were in the course of transmitting a news programme. He concedes that in war it is permissible to bomb targets with the purpose of militarily weakening the opponent, but bombing a news station merely because NATO does not like the news reports being put out?

In the waters of the Danube, heavily polluted by the NATO bombing of oil and chemical plants, a woman is washing clothes surrounded by five young children. An older man, standing by, tells the film crew that the reports of an ecological disaster must have been exaggerated in foreign reports—otherwise the Serbian government would have warned inhabitants.

Together with artists and intellectuals, Rebic has mainly interviewed young people from Belgrade itself. The director stated that he wanted to provide a platform for those who have something to say, but have no chance of speaking out either at home or abroad. What they have to say corresponds neither to the official line of the Serb government nor the picture spread by the media in the US and Europe during the bombing, i.e., the general presentation of the Serbs as fanatics lacking any culture and as people who have to be physically forced to respect “universal human rights”.

A young woman explains that anybody inside Serbia who protested at young men being sent straight from the university into war was accused of “being in favour

of the NATO bombings”. She is in favour of democratic political relations such as exist in a country like France. “But when France then attacks weaker countries, I am opposed to them. I do not, however, want things to remain the same here—with nationalism and chauvinism. Although the European Union has brought about an opening up of frontiers, the division between class and castes remain. We belong to the poorest. The representatives of western culture educated us, but now they suddenly declare that we belong to the savage Orient.”

Those interviewed regard any notion of a collective guilt for the war as nonsensical. Those who are really responsible will not be punished. “They have anti-nuclear bunkers, their own electric generators. They're not afraid of winter, they are not afraid of anything.” An older man presents himself. Before the war he lived in Prizren in Kosovo. Now he has to struggle to survive in Belgrade, a long way from his homeland. “I am a Serb, but my nationality was never more important than my personality.”

A psychologist explains the problems confronting young people and children in attempting to establish their own identity under the prevailing social conditions. In puberty the question of “who am I?” is firmly posed. Today young people suffer because the prevailing social climate demands that the most important element of identity is nationality. A school student complains about the priorities: “Why are we not asked about what music we like to hear, which films we like to see. Why is the first question always—are you a Croat?”

We see youth in the streets of Belgrade. They wear modern clothes, they all carry American Eastpak rucksacks. They are influenced by a culture which has increasingly assumed international forms and which they themselves see as enriching their lives.

The director speaks with high school students who are completing their studies, confront exams and then compulsory military service. One says he doesn't believe the war will end. A few times they had wrongly thought the war was finished. “Tomorrow it could be Vojvodina that will be bombed, then the carving up will simply continue.” Another declares that he did not hate the American people, just their politics: “We are all at the mercy of multinational concerns.” To the question whether he would take up weapons and fight,

he replies: “I would take up weapons, irrespective of the politics of the government. It is everyone's moral responsibility to defend their country which embodies centuries of tradition.” But then he says with resignation, “We can only stand up in a moral sense. We will lose anyway.” Then he speaks of a global understanding based on knowledge. He still has such a dream.

Colder weather has begun. The main announcement board at Belgrade airport shows just one flight for that day: Moscow. A 35-year-old actress indicates the deserted airport terminal. Formerly 70 to 80 planes flew to the most diverse destinations. “The embargo has ruined our people. The richest families have been able to obtain enormous wealth. They have mobile telephones and ride around in jeeps.” In 1993 she did not have enough money to send a letter to America. “I have no hot water boiler and my lavatory doesn't work. How was it possible for business interests and the military to monopolise the media revolution? They have taken away our right to participate in international life.”

The film powerfully dismantles the widely held standpoint that increasing nationalism in the former Yugoslavia has a broad base with cultural roots going back centuries, i.e., from generation to generation. Instead Rebic show people who are seeking to join the international community, but are consciously prevented from doing so by their own government on one side and NATO on the other. The film vividly demonstrates their feelings of helplessness. They're seeking a social alternative to lead them out of a nationalist dead end. They are not clear about the way forward and feel they have been deserted by everybody.

One can only hope that as many people as possible have the opportunity to see this film.



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