

Berlin Film Festival

# Interview with Goran Rebic, director of *The Punishment*

8 March 2000

*Goran Rebic was born in Vojvodina (Yugoslavia) in 1968 and has lived in Vienna from the age of one. Following his documentary films During the Many Years (1991) and At the Edge of the World (1992), he completed his first full-length feature film Jugofilm in 1996.*

*WSWS: How did you arrive at the title of your film?*

*Goran Rebic:* I didn't search out the film, it was much more a case that the film found me. I come from Serbia, I was born there and have emotional and family ties although I live in another part of Europe. I have made films on similar themes for the last 10 years. This means that *The Punishment* was not merely the direct expression of my experience of the recent bombardment, but deals rather with the experiences in Yugoslavia over the last 10 years—permanent punishment, a permanent wandering through an endless dark tunnel without any hope of finding a way out. This naturally gave rise to the title because it directly corresponded to what was discussed in Europe and the world at the beginning [of the bombing of Serbia] on March 24, 1999—collective punishment, collective condemnation, collective guilt. Are there such things? Can one proceed in this way?

In this connection I have been very interested in some discussions following the showing of the film in which parallels have been drawn to the recent situation in Austria. Of course you cannot make a direct parallel, but there are similarities in Europe's position, in the attempt to isolate Austria. The population in Austria has reacted with the same old motto: "OK, let's stick together!" Such a mechanism, which encourages nationalism, was also expressed in Serbia. *The Punishment* is definitely a film which demands and encourages discussion.

*WSWS: What criteria did you use in choosing persons to interview in your film? To what extent do they represent a significant section of the population?*

*GR:* I chose people according to different criteria. I wanted to show a broad spectrum of different voices from a different Serbia. Some of the people I knew personally, others I found

through interviews in newspapers opposed to the government. I sought out people from various layers, but above all I concentrated on young people. Those people who, due to events, have lost the most valuable and interesting 10 years of their lives, a period during which personality is formed, when one establishes relationships, gathers experiences, undertakes journeys, when one breaks free, when one begins to make one's own way.

I made a decision not to approach people whom one knows in advance what they are going to say. You know, those sorts of reports where people in Belgrade are asked questions in a shopping centre or in a bombed-out house. There have been enough of such reports in my opinion. But there was another picture of Yugoslavia which was missing in the European media. I wanted to give these (missing) people their own voice and make a comparison, show that Belgrade is a metropolis, a large city, which has its own life, its own multinational population, its own cultural identity and past, its own music culture—the city where the punk movement begun in the east in 1980, a city with a developed youth culture. Young people were confronted with a decision, either to leave the country—this was the choice of the most sensitive ones—or to put up with what was going on. I count myself amongst those who probably would not had been able to hold out, I doubt whether I could have tolerated what was going on.

*WSWS: In the film there is some indication of social divisions inside Serbia itself, although this is not a direct part of your film. Could you say a bit more about such differences?*

*GR:* I never intended carrying out an interview with people like Arkan [nationalist militia leader who was recently murdered]. I know how the people in uniform think and what they have to say—the picture of the classic Chetnik Serb. I wasn't interested in people like him—he is part of the upper 10,000 who have set themselves up over the past 10 years. Such people are part of an apparatus which is difficult to break through. You can't just cut them off when they

constitute the basis of society.

I don't have my own vision of what can be done, I only have the hope that one can continue to undertake something against them. There were demonstrations in 1991, 1992 and then the more well-known ones in 1996. People disappeared and were killed. The people knew that this apparatus worked through extraordinary terror and repression. Many were fearful and couldn't express themselves. Others did so. The issue was to develop a broad discussion inside Serbia. Naturally many, or the majority, knew about the terrible things which were happening. They knew what had taken place in Kosovo. But such things are still only being discussed underground. The regular media which is loyal to the government now speaks about a victory over NATO, revenge and other idiocies which is no one is prepared to believe.

*WSWS: What is your opinion of Serb films like The Dagger or the Polish film Pan Tadeusz which seem to reactivate old myths in a very nationalist way?*

*GR:* I know a few of these films. It's apparent they haven't emerged from their own dead end. There are also those who maintain they are making anti-war films, but do it through showing excessive violence and depicting war crimes, something which I regard as indefensible. That's not my idea of film. Many of these films in my opinion have an internalised nationalist standpoint. When one describes such things, then it is possible to do it in different ways whereby one can express a critical political standpoint or point of view.

*WSWS: One of your interview colleagues states that civilian values are increasingly disappearing in favour of military and repressive values. She made the point in regard to Europe as a whole and not just Serbia.*

*GR:* What she says is extreme of course, also when she says for example, that she feels she is living in a camp. She is one of those who decided to stay, to continue carrying out resistance and I know she feels enormous anger inside. With regard to Serbia when she speaks about the opening up and closing of a country, then I agree with her ... when she says one is practically powerless, made responsible for the deeds and activities of a man whom one does not want and with whose politics one cannot identify. One can feel the anger over the fact that Europe has not been able see beyond the shadow of Milosevic and recognise people with very different standpoints. Punishment applies, I want to repeat this point, not just to the bombardment but rather to the entire last 10 years.

There were a whole number of steps along the path which ended with NATO carrying out its bombing. The beginning of the collapse of Yugoslavia was also the beginning of this 10-year history when the decision was made to support the

nationalist movements in Yugoslavia on the grounds that it was an independence movement, then the decision to isolate Serbia ... a whole chain of decisions with profound consequences. For a long period one had this picture—on the one side good, on the other bad, black and white, simplifications which have always been used in war—in the First World War, the Second World War. To condemn a whole people, as in the case of Yugoslavia, is completely absurd. Take my own case: my grandmother is Croatian, my father comes from Serbia.

*WSWS: What is your estimation of the effects of the events of the last 10 years on intellectual layers?*

*GR:* What took place in Serbia was very public and clear, even for someone like myself living in Austria. A problem erupts, something which was always there. I can draw a parallel with Austria and the issue of Haider. The reaction of many intellectuals has been to declare that they will leave the country because of Haider. But I am not prepared to leave. Something has to change—that is clear. It is necessary for us to stay, to come forward, to say our names and what we think. When enough people are prepared to do this, as they have done in Vienna [in mass demonstrations] then that is the way forward. There is no other alternative for me and that is why I condemn the selective isolation policy and economic sanctions being employed by Europe against Austria. I think such a course is a big mistake.

*WSWS: Has your film been shown in Serbia?*

*GR:* No. Serbia has entered a new phase—executions. Anyone who says anything bad about the country is branded as a traitor. This has already taken place. The executions are a message to the intellectuals and the media. It is impossible to be surprised anymore about what is going on. What could possibly happen next? The bombing, the worst thing that could happen, has already taken place. What happens now? Civil war in Belgrade? It's possible.

*WSWS: One last point. In the discussion following the film you said that towns governed by opposition parties were particularly badly hit by NATO. Is that correct?*

*GR:* Yes, Novi Sad, Kragujevac, Belgrade and other towns. This appears absurd and I would appreciate an explanation.



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