

## Balkan Black Box: a festival of Balkan film in Berlin—Part 2

# The films of Zelimir Zilnik

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The “Balkan Black Box” festival in Berlin was an opportunity to study the work of one of the region’s most productive and interesting filmmakers. In his career so far, Zelimir Zilnik (born in 1942) has made a total of 24 feature films (8-10 for cinema) and 60 documentary films. His filmmaking extends back to the mid-1960s. In nearly four decades of creative work, Zilnik has learned how to both preserve his independence through a series of different political systems and wars, making modestly budgeted but provocative and thoughtful films.

The retrospective in Berlin included brief documentary footage made by Zilnik during a student demonstrations in Belgrade in 1968. In addition to scenes of the mass mobilisation, we witness an actor addressing the assembled students. He is reciting from Georg Büchner’s play about the French Revolution— *Danton’s Death* —on the necessity of carrying out a revolution to the end. Thirty years later Zilnik was also on the streets with his cameras when the Milosevic regime came to an end.

In the course of an interview with the director I was able to speak to him about his career. Below are short résumés of some of his most interesting films.

Zilnik was 26 when he made his feature film, *Early Works*. In the accompanying interview he acknowledges his own idealism and romanticism, which comes across in his film, dedicated to putting a spotlight on the theory and practice of the Tito brand of Stalinism in Yugoslavia. A group of young revolutionaries undertake an odyssey through the Yugoslav countryside, intent on fomenting a new mobilisation of workers and peasants. A young woman repelled by the backwardness of her family relations, in particular her drunken and despotic father, agrees to lead the troop. A literary and political *leitmotiv* to the film consists of quotes from letters written by the young Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge in 1843.

The small group exhibits enormous reserves of enthusiasm, but continually comes up against the conservatism in society as a whole. In a series of scenes the group undertakes to solidarise with the workers by undertaking the hardest and most monotonous of menial work. Quickly exhausted and frustrated by their efforts, they abandon their positions at the factories and attempt instead to radicalise the peasants. Once again they are

brutally rebuffed and the young woman loses heart with the group. Determined to return to her parents, she is turned on by the others as a renegade, cast out and finally burned as a witch.

The film accurately captures the spirit of rebellion by students at that period (and not just in Yugoslavia), at the same time reflecting the limitations of the movement, revealed in its lack of comprehension of the nature of Stalinism in its Titoist variant (typical is occasional sloganeering such as “Only the proletariat is capable of a fulfilled sexual life”). Nevertheless the depiction of the backwardness which still existed in Yugoslavia at the time and the film’s plea for political and sexual liberation was too much for the authorities. After two months of circulation the film was banned and Zilnik prevented from working in Yugoslavia.

*This Way the Steel Was Hardened* was shown together with the documentary *Unemployed Men* from 1968, which highlights the homelessness problem at the time. We hear that “at any train station” one could find fifty to a hundred people sleeping. During interviews with the homeless, a young man reports a discussion he had with a compatriot as to whether the existing system could really be called socialism.

Set exactly 20 years later, *This Way the Steel Was Hardened* is a burlesque comedy about the economic decline in Yugoslavia at the end of the 1980s. The management of a steel mill is unable to adapt its products and distribution to the harsh demands of the world market; instead the factory’s general director engages in ludicrous rackets—his greed is topped only by his ineptness. Factory worker Leo, the main character of the film, helps the director in one of his private businesses. Everybody in the film is trying to make some money on the side; in one scene, two women are beating at Leo’s apartment door to complain to his wife about her “fraudulent” sewing job; in another, Leo finds his landlord taking nude shots of two flighty school girls. Finally Leo is caught by his wife in a compromising situation with one of the school girls and the sparks fly.

The film’s brand of gallows humour is a recurring element in Zilnik’s work and has its roots in the beleaguered history of the Serbian people, who have so often suffered the brunt of foreign occupation, wars, and futile attempts at self-government. In the Balkans, it is farce above all that repeatedly serves as the

artistic form with which to defy the bleakness of everyday reality and keep alive a sense of hope.

Zilnik made the semi-documentary film *Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time* in 1994. Marshal Tito resplendent in his finest military uniform rises from the grave and, 14 years after being laid to rest, wanders the streets of Belgrade, eager to speak with his people. Hyper-inflation and war grip the city. A desperate struggle for survival dominates the day to day lives of the city's inhabitants. Zilnik concedes that the idea for the film, a young actor posing as Tito and taking to the streets, was his own "desperate" attempt to engage in a popular dialogue about what was going on. He made the film in two days and was himself surprised at the reaction.

"Is it better or worse since my death?" Tito asks. The majority he meets are firmly of the opinion that things had gone rapidly downhill with the accession of Milosevic and his cronies. One man tells Tito: "You were a crook, but at least you gave something back to the people. Now we just have crooks who keep everything for themselves." Belgrade in 1994 also has quite a few surprises for the late Stalinist dictator, in particular Tito is amazed to see that trade is now increasingly conducted in the German deutschmark.

Zilnik made *Marble Ass* in the same year as his Tito film, i.e., in the middle of the war period under the regime of ex-Stalinist Slobodan Milosevic. The main figure, Merlin, is a transvestite prostitute, aging and slowly losing his/her charms, but still trying to carry on trade as usual under the most abnormal of conditions. Before the war, Merlin was the most exotic figure in Belgrade. Now everyday life is so crazy that he is the only one who seems normal. Merlin's companion is fellow prostitute Salena, a strapping woman armed with a knife and skilled in kick-boxing. Eager to advance in her trade she wants to learn English so she can win new customers from amongst the occupying NATO troops.

An old acquaintance, Dzoni (Johnny), returns from the war. Traumatized by the brutality of what he has seen and done, he is a ticking bomb who only feels secure with a weapon in his hand. Despite the extremity of the situation and its characters, the film charts their respective search for love, warmth and recognition—for normality. But the scars left by the war run too deep. The tide is ebbing against frail eruptions of humanity. The film ends on a bitter note of self-destruction.

*Fortress Europe* is the latest semi-documentary film by Zilnik and was shot on the borders between Slovenia and Italy, Croatia and Slovenia and Hungary and Austria—i.e. the southern area covered by the Schengen Treaty governing the transit of migrants in Europe. As Zilnik notes in the accompanying interview, this new "wall" against the movement of people is more impenetrable than the Berlin wall.

Zilnik's film revolves around the fate of a Russian family whose marriage has come to an end. The wife has travelled to see friends in Trieste, Italy and now awaits the arrival of her daughter, escorted by her former husband. The girl runs away

from her father in the middle of their trip across Europe and the two of them are then stranded, separated and in a foreign country without the appropriate papers to travel further west. The conditions laid down by the Schengen Treaty are clear—the "illegals" are to be sent to a detention camp, checked for bugs, given a shower and then, when their case is processed, sent back to the previous country they travelled through. In most cases the deported migrants then arrive in another foreign country exhausted, penniless and of course without the appropriate papers.

Either they resort to illegal activity to stay alive or they give themselves up to the authorities and the whole circus starts up again—detention centre, investigation, deportation. One customs official acknowledges a huge increase in the number of migrants attempting to come into western Europe. The deportation centres in the different countries are filled to the brim with refugees from Turkey, Iraq, China, India, Sri Lanka and increasingly the countries of the former eastern bloc.

Forced to flee because of the dire economic and political situation in their own countries and often having gone deeply into debt to pay for their travel, they are trapped in a no-man's land where you can neither go forward or backward. Treated like the most pernicious of criminals, their only crime is to have attempted to escape poverty. A miner reports that he left Serbia because he was working underground for the equivalent of five German marks per month—enough to buy just five bottles of beer. He is one of the "economic migrants" who have been singled out by various Western European governments as the "main enemy" to be kept out. In his latest film Zilnik has tackled the way in which divisions, nationalism, even tribalism, is encouraged by the existing European structures and nation states.

More than any other Balkan filmmaker, Zilnik's feature films and documentaries, with all their limitations, represent an attempt to archive the experiences undergone by the people of the Balkan region since the break-up of Titoism. Zilnik is convinced of the power of film, honestly made, to act as a "conscience" of the people and the times.



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