

Interview with the filmmaker Zelimir Zilnik

29 June 2001

A retrospective of the films of Zelimir Zilnik was presented at the Balkan Black Box festival recently in Berlin. The WSWS spoke to Zilnik.

Stefan Steinberg: Let's speak first about your new film, *Fortress Europe*. Why did you make it?

Zelimir Zilnik: For social and personal reasons. First of all, I myself am among the millions from 150 nations who have to wait in the queue with a very small chance of getting a visa to travel to Western Europe under the terms of the Schengen Treaty. After the collapse of the Titoist version of Stalinism, we have seen the emergence of very contradictory developments—on one side there is much talk about an open Europe and a Europe without borders—but, in fact, there is now a new wall to keep people out of Europe. This wall is even thicker and higher than the Berlin Wall.

For the whole area of eastern Europe, which is now experiencing enormous levels of poverty, travel to western Europe has been made more restrictive than ever. For very different reasons many people undertook a journey to the West with lots of illusions that the West is democratic, open and full of opportunities. In fact, the borders established by Schengen facilitate travel mainly for Mafia-type elements and the new apparatchniks from the east—i.e. former dictators, Stalinists or even murderers. On the other hand, there are thousands of ordinary people trapped in the no-man's-land between national borders. These people are not criminals, in fact in the course of making this film, I met many very good and talented people.

SS: Tell me about the background to one of your first films, the feature *Early Works* (1969).

ZZ: The film was made after the 1968 student demonstration in Belgrade, which were directed against the ruling bureaucracy and called for a return to real communist and Marxist principles. It was the first movement of solidarity where the new young generation asked for their place in a society which had become gerontocratic—like many other Stalinist societies. The demos took place in Belgrade in June, but were then soon followed by the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in August. What was tragic was that, on one side, the bureaucratic structure was genuinely put under pressure by the demonstrations—at the time Yugoslavia was one of the most open of the Stalinist systems. There was no brutal police or army intervention against the student protests—there was even a discussion about it in the party apparatus. In June and July it still appeared that the Belgrade demos could have a positive affect.

But after the occupation of Czechoslovakia there was a widespread fear—maybe encouraged by the bureaucracy and apparatchniks—that we would be the next country on the Russians' list. For me as a young man of 25, the events in '68 raised a lot of questions concerning the future of socialism, the sense of the revolution and how it is practically implemented. In August and September the concept for my film became clear and it was completed in the autumn.

When the film came out in early 1969 it was a big success because it addressed many of the issues which were in the air. But then after two months the distribution of the film was suddenly stopped. I was surprised and asked the officialdom what was happening. I was told that Tito had watched the film and was very angry. After fifteen minutes he stopped the projection, shouting: "What do these fools want!"—and afterwards the film

was banned. I was romantic and young and determined to defend the film, but in a few hours the police came and took all the prints. I took the issue to court and it was an interesting reflection of the relatively open situation, still, that the courts decided to free the film and allow distribution. Shortly afterwards we went to Berlin and were thoroughly surprised when it won the Grand Jury prize. When we got back to Yugoslavia, however, there was a big propaganda campaign against the film by the bureaucracy. I was thrown out of the party and had no further chance of working.

SS: You did a film called *Capital* in 1970.

ZZ: This was the only one of my films which was stopped during production. Its subject matter was a direct reaction to the re-Stalinisation taking place. In the wake of Czechoslovakia and the movements in Europe during 1968 and as economic problems developed in the country, the party was misusing economic differences to sharpen up tensions and involve people in conflicts about minor material differences. The story of *Capital* reflected these developments. There was one working copy of the film which was confiscated and then either destroyed or lost. Twenty years later I tried to recover the negative but just bits of the film remained.

I had joined the party in my eighteenth year. At the time the party was open for discussion and in 1958 had put forward a progressive programme calling for "democratic socialism with a human face" and acknowledging the importance of the happiness of the individual. There was much discussion and dissent and on the whole it was very challenging to take part in this relatively rich intellectual atmosphere. There were broad international influences at work in the party and many leading figures in the bureaucracy had studied in France, Germany, England. My very first documentary films dealt with social topics like prostitution and unemployment in the provinces. The films were discussed and criticised but at the time they were not stopped—on the contrary, there was a certain amount of encouragement. But then in 1969 this relative openness was coming to an end, and my work was judged "anarcho-liberal" with some additional "Maoist deviations." Other young, progressive filmmakers (Dusan Makevejev, Alexander Petrovic, Zivojin Pavlovic, Lazar Stojanovic) suffered a similar fate.

In the period from 1969 to 1976 a lot of advantages of the former period were undermined. The party bureaucracy was afraid of this new developing social consciousness, and it was at this time the party bureaucracy began digging the grave for the country itself. In order to prevent the development of social consciousness and solidarity among intellectuals and workers, the bureaucracy invented a return to tradition and encouraged the division of the country. Now, for the first time since the war, there was social pressure to identify with a particular nation. At the age of 25, I suddenly learned that my friends were Slovenian, Croatian—before that, ethnic differences had played no role whatsoever.

This tribalisation was understood by intellectuals as a tool of the bureaucracy to create artificial conflicts, to encourage tensions and release the energy which had been displayed in the demonstrations and protests against the bureaucracy. Soon the party bureaucracy and the unions began quarrelling about who had the better salaries. Do the Croats have more chance of having holidays and going to the seaside than the Serbs? And so on—this ridiculous sort of quibbling. This sort of manipulation quickly won a response from certain elements.

Tito had been a charismatic leader and sought to control everything personally, but then his death in 1980 unleashed a sort of medieval squabbling in the apparatus about who should take control and who was the biggest and best so-called “Leninist-Titoist”. After the hundreds of hours in central committees and party meetings, etc., when they discovered that no one could prevail, they then made their decision—OK, let’s turn to nationalism. But the country was still functioning relatively well and it was not possible to divide the country peacefully. The people of the region are all basically southern Slavs with large similarities in terms of culture and language—you could compare the differences in languages between the German you hear in Berlin and that in Munich. It needed a war to break the country up and that was the next step.

SS: You made your film *Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time* in the middle of the war in the mid-nineties. How did you arrive at the idea for the film?

ZZ: In 1994 it was the time of big inflation in Belgrade. The war was making itself felt every minute of the day. Life had a sort of surreal quality. Everybody was just struggling with the most basic forms of subsistence. People were rushing around trying to buy a kilo of bread or potatoes because in a few hours it would be doubly expensive. We had read about hyper-inflation in Germany in the twenties—now we were experiencing it ourselves. There was an enormous pressure from the Milosevic government as well as from the other leaders of the other component regions of Yugoslavia to just brush out the whole history of the past period. Suddenly Serb history began at the battle of Amsfeld (Kosovo, 1389). They pretended that Tito had never existed. His name was censored from numerous street signs. This was something I had to tackle as a filmmaker who had made documentaries on social issues.

I did not know how, but anyway I just went on the streets with my cameraman. We tried to get interviews but there was so much confusion and the people were so busy that, for the first time in my life, I could not get a response. People were crying and pleading that we leave them alone. My first idea was to take one American and one Russian journalist onto the streets, engage with the people and see what would happen. The results were quite astounding, and if you had not been there you would have thought it was manipulation. The American was invariably shouted and sworn at while people began crying and embracing the Russian. I was not happy with the result, but then the next day I had the idea of Tito rising from the grave and confronting his subjects. My cameraman was convinced that we would be beaten up, but we decided we had to it. We called up the actors who had previously played Tito in films and none of them wanted to play the role—they all complained that they had been blackmailed or compelled to play him. Finally we found a young actor who ended up doing a good job as Tito.

SS: Your feature film *Marble Ass* was also made about the same time.

ZZ: I made the film in the middle of the period of Milosevic rule. For me the whole period was like an illness and the country was being broken up and destroyed by sick people. Serb history and especially the openness of Belgrade is completely opposed to the ideas and propaganda spread in the decade shaped by Milosevic. I thought it was very important to demonstrate how life prevails even in the worst times of propaganda and dogmatism. Two topics had to be discussed—the tragic destiny of young people forced to go to war and what happened to them afterwards, after their manipulation. Secondly the creativity of life itself—under the most difficult of circumstances. Even under Milosevic, Belgrade had islands of free expression—areas which were not dependent on state support and at the same time did not interfere with the profits of the criminal elements in the government. Radio, press, exhibitions expressed this creativity in different ways, and I wanted to put it under the spotlight.

The Mafia elements in the war found such areas uninteresting. They involved all their energies in wars, racketeering, occupations, looting. There are many reports of militias coming to the villages and saying we

will not storm your village if you pay us DM 70,000. There are many reports of Serbs kidnapping Croats—now it is the Albanians. According to the going rate for such kidnappings in Kosovo a man costs 30,000—I mean of course one of ours, an Eastern man—don’t worry, a Western man like you must cost much more (laughter).

SS: Why did you decide on the very bitter ending for your film—the brutal killing of one of the main protagonists?

ZZ: The ending expresses the profound self-destructive elements involved in the Balkan films. Many of the mercenary elements involved in the war died terrible deaths. We still see some of the leaders in television, but many of those involved in the fighting committed suicide or died in mutual killings. There was some tendency at that time to glorify nationalism and the war in film, but my film pulls entirely in the opposite direction.

SS: There was much self-destruction expressed in the Balkan wars, but the situation was also helped by outside forces.

ZZ: Of course. Let me relate one experience of mine. I was part of a multinational delegation—Serbs, Croats, Macedonians etc. who were invited to attend a conference on the situation in the Balkans to take place at the University of Texas in Austin. This was a few years ago. The assembled Balkan intellectuals gathered on the podium and spoke before a large audience of students. After a short while, the organisers of the conference broke it up and complained to the Balkan delegates—they were displaying too much harmony and brotherhood amongst themselves. After all, the university had paid out \$60,000 for the conference—couldn’t they concentrate a bit more on the tensions and the differences between them?

SS: Finally, what is the current situation for filmmaking in Serbia?

ZZ: Basically very bad. Annual production is about 3 to 5 films, i.e., the same tendency and decline which can be observed in other eastern European countries. The difference in Serbia is that film production came to a stop because of the NATO embargo, which meant that no negatives were allowed into the country. The years of inactivity lead to the complete collapse of the film-processing laboratories. The hopeful sign on the horizon is new computer technology and digital filmmaking, which is much cheaper. There are promising signs of a new young generation between 16 and 25 producing about 50 new creative videos a year.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact