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TOWARDS A THEORY OF POLITICAL ART

Cultural Politics of 'Black Wave' Film in Yugoslavia, 1963–1972

MA Sezgin Boynikin valtio-opin/kulttuuripolitiikan väitöskirjan Towards a Theory of Political Art – Cultural Politics of 'Black Wave' Film in Yugoslavia, 1963–1972 tarkastustilaisuus pidettiin 13. joulukuuta 2014 Jyväskylän yliopistossa. Vastaväittäjänä toimi professori Milena Dragičević Šešić (University of Arts Belgrade) ja kustoksena professori Kia Lindroos (Jyväskylän yliopisto).

To discuss Yugoslavia today, even in academic and scholarly institutions, always involves certain ideological and political issues. I should make this clear already at the beginning of my introduction to the topic. The topic of my dissertation is the cultural politics of Yugoslavian 'Black Wave' films between 1963 and 1972. One could ask, logically, what kind of relevance such a topic could have in the circumstances temporally and spatially so distant from the original context. Simply, what is the value of theoretical and scholarly work dealing with Yugoslavian film of the sixties and seventies today in Finland? I am arguing that there is a lot. The main device of my methodology, which I am deriving from the work of Russian Formalism, is the procedure of distanciation, or de-familiarization, which gives a possibility to look at the issue at stake from unusual perspectives. This device, often used in artistic practices, is also a possibility to renew, or refresh, the working methods and forms of experience. Putting in these terms, I could say that writing this dissertation and conducting most of the research in Finland gave me that unusual perspective. I will soon talk more about these unusual conditions and theoretical conclusions which I have drawn from them. Yet another reason why I think there is schol-

arly, scientific or theoretical value in conducting research on 'Black Wave' in Finland has to do with international scope of the subject. One of the things I am arguing in my dissertation is that 'black wave' films should be grasped in relation to international film modernism, or the so-called cinematic modernism, not through lines of national representations. Even if films of Dušan Makavejev, one of the leading 'black wave' film makers, is shown and discussed along the other international cinema productions (for example a few years ago there was the third retrospective of Makavejev's films in Finland); the scholarly discussions are usually disclosed in a very narrow provincial context. My aim is to break from these constraining theoretical positions and to introduce a debate within a larger theoretical field. This is the main reason why in my writings I have given so much space to the 'theoretical' and 'conceptual' parameters of the subject. I believe that the theoretical work is one of the ways to de-familiarize from ongoing debates on Yugoslavian 'Black Wave' cinema. Today I can say that conducting this research in Finland, because of many reasons, offered me sobriety in focusing on theoretical and abstract issues.

I have started by saying that discussion about

Yugoslavia is inevitably about politics, and even discussion about art in Yugoslavia is unavoidably interwoven with the political and historical issues. This is especially the case when discussion takes place in the so-called ex-Yugoslavian, or post-Yugoslavian places, for example if you are to discuss the 'Black Wave' in Novi Sad, Skopje, Ljubljana, Sarajevo, Zagreb or Belgrade. The choice between 'ex-' or 'post-' (Yugoslavia), both seemingly neutral, will tell a lot in certain circles in these cities. This little prefix, for instance, can tell whether the locutor, the speaker, is seeing the transformations happened in Yugoslavian state as logical or neutral, or whether he or she conceives the state of Yugoslavia as a legitimate experience to understand current dynamics. Whatever the case, these discussions are mostly local issues. I have benefited greatly from these local quarrels, some still continuing; heated debates over the culturalization of politics mainly initiated by Boris Buden, or around ideologies of representation, mostly around the journal *Prelom* dealing with issues of image and politics, or addressing the issue of culture from the position of inequalities and class position analysis, as in work of Rastko Močnik and the journal *Agregat*. Most of these discussions are, as one could guess, riddled with confusions, contradictions and conflicting positions. It is especially these kinds of discussions which were most important and helped very much in the formation of my intellectual position: namely, an understanding of culture and arts, and discussion about these as the site of competing and conflicting views. Since my generation, maturing during the bloody civil war, has been struck in a most difficult process of transition, both culturally and politically, where a discourses of historical falsification, nationalist myth-making (very well described by Milena Dragičević Šešić) became the norm, we had to work very cautiously and always in our own wild and untamed ways to find the possibilities of different expressions.

The research, discussions and debates around 'Black Wave' realized since ten or so years, can depict this situation very well. Even the title 'Black Wave' is a reason for many dis-

putes. Black Wave was pejorative term for 'new film' used in 60s. Even if the adjective 'black' was used by film makers themselves, as in Želimir Žilnik's film *Black Film*; it is usually associated with ideological connotations. It is especially because of these ideological connotations/associations I am preferring to use this terms instead of neutral and technical 'new film'.

Since there was not any classified archive or documents related to the films made in Yugoslavia, the researchers had to come up with their own ways of how to collect the data and information about the topic. Usually the sources are very random and contingent; from the accidental discoveries in archives or flea markets, or in the personal collections of cinephiles and film makers themselves. Anyone who wishes to make the research on Yugoslavia has to be prepared for this scarcity, this method of data collection which Walter Benjamin best described as 'rag picker'. Luckily now certain historiographic and theoretical form starts to take shape, allowing us to look at more subtle dimensions of 'Black Wave' film productions.

Initially 'Black Wave' films were, at the time when they were realized, internationally shown and discussed works. In the sixties and seventies, films of Dušan Makavejev, Želimir Žilnik, Bato Čengić or Krsto Papić were part of international cinema discourse and film theory. Historically things changed sometime around nineties and 2000's, when post-socialist discourse equipped with the theories on totalitarianism started to address the issue of arts and culture during socialism from different perspectives. One visible result of this shift was that 'Black Wave' films were seen as proof of assumed anti-totalitarian stance, or as some kind of artistic products guaranteeing the freedom of speech. I agree with the thesis that 'Black Wave' and other avant-garde and experimental arts in Yugoslavia (such as conceptualist art, or new music) was a struggle for autonomy, and quest for new expressions and speeches emancipated from ideological constraints. But I also argue that this quest for autonomy and freedom in the sixties and seventies in socialist Yugoslavia was in different terms than what is available to our con-

ceptual apparatus today. In my text dealing with the cultural policy of Dušan Makavejev, I argue that the cultural policy of socialist Yugoslavia was based on a different set of ideological and institutional relations. This is especially because the theory and practice of self-management had particular potential for novel expressions as it is enthusiastically mentioned by Lefebvre, Sartre, Bloch, Marcuse, Goldmann, and Castoriadis.

Furthermore I argue that in order to understand the concept of cultural policy, certain terms such as 'collective' or 'self-management', which are absent from the current theoretical discourse should be introduced to the subject of study. That's why I propose a reversal of concepts. The important thing in insisting on the distinctiveness of the cultural and political context of 'Black Wave' film productions is to underline the complexities and contradictions surrounding these works. This is the reason why I insist on heuristic possibility of the contradictions in understanding artistic formations; they have helped me to look at the ideological, institutional and philosophical determinants of 'Black Wave' films from different perspective. For example by looking at self-management contradictions, I argue that these contradictions always existed in socialist Yugoslavia. They didn't come about when things gone wrong, due to economic crisis, or global situation. Contradictions didn't cease to exist when state was doing well; they were always there. This is why addressing the social and political field as free of contradiction and contingency is limiting the complexity of the subject.

Apart from theories of totalitarianism, another change which happened in scholarship on Yugoslavia after the nineties is that almost everything produced in the sixties and seventies, during the time of socialist self-management, is seen through the lens of the 'break-up' of the country. According to these schema, the Black Wave film, punk music, theater productions, and many other cultural productions, in this or that way allude, or show that the country was going to inevitable dissolution. This approach, assuming that we can see, retroactively, the coming break-up of Yugoslavia from the works

of the sixties has two important theoretical and methodological consequences. Firstly, there is certain historicism and teleology involved in this historical understanding. This both implies a deterministic explanation of what happened and conceives historical changes as unavoidable. The reason why I have used various conceptualizations of temporalities is to avoid these simplifications. In this regard I have benefited from the temporal conceptualization of politics as developed by Walter Benjamin (I also have to add that Kia Lindoos' book on Benjamin's concept of time was very beneficial for my work). Second theoretical consequence of this approach is to undermine the singularity and distinctiveness of the Yugoslavian experience; it reduces it to mere representation of state policies. My aim is to offer a counter-thesis to this argumentation. In order to justify my thesis, I have dealt extensively with the existing corpus of theories on political art and researches on 'Black Wave' and especially on Dušan Makavejev, due to the richness of published materials existing about his work. Concretely, my aim was to offer a different conceptualization analyzing the relation between politics and arts. My objective is that research based on representation of politics in the arts tend to oversee the difference between artistic and political forms, and their intelligibilities. In order to find how political contingencies determine the artistic forms, my theoretical and conceptual procedure is based on the assumption that art works include, or better incorporate, or even better, following Colin Mercer, would be 'inscribe' the extrinsic, or outward, political transformations. In the case of 'Black Wave', instead of discussing how cultural policy of Yugoslavian state institutions shaped the look of these films, I argue that the films of 'Black Wave' had their own, distinctive concept of 'cultural policy', which was not necessarily determined by and overlapping the state concepts. This distinction, I believe, is important to underline if we want to understand art forms in their full complexities, without reducing them to a mere reflection of social dynamics. I argue that in order to grant autonomy to artistic formations and to grasp their intrinsic



dynamics, we have to perform this separation in each instance. For example, I have published an article, which is not included in my dissertation, about representation of mud in Živojin Pavlović's films, another exceptionally interesting 'Black Wave' film maker. I argue that, mud of the cinema, is not the same as the mud of the sociology. Usually seen as metaphor of underdevelopment, or unevenness of development, mud is interpreted as something representing in between urban and rural conditions of life in Yugoslavia. Mud is metaphor of contradictions of socialism. In many books written about Yugoslavia at that time, in the cover we can see a picture depicting muddy streets in the urban environment, etc (as in Sharon Zukin's book, *Beyond Tito and Marx*). But in cinema this mud has a distinctive appearance, this social or sociological mud does inscribe into the film, but in its own way. Already a fact – that in order to film mud, certain cinematographic registers (which are of technical nature) have to be taken into the account – is a reason for this distancing. What I want to say is that even if cinema does include the mud which carries the index of certain social facts, parallel with that it has its own ideas, thoughts and concepts about it. My aim is to make these visible. In this regard the concept of the 'real' is highly important for understanding the avant-garde films such as 'Black Wave' works.

As a conclusion, I have to say that this conceptualization has particular importance in dis-

cussing the relation between avant-garde experimental art and cultural policy. Sometimes it is argued that art is emancipation from social and political constraints and instrumentalizations. That true flowering of artistic creativity happens in conditions of absolute disinterestedness toward the concerns of any policies. Or that artist should not be bothered with cultural policy, which always narrow or limit their creativity. By looking at the work of Makavejev I argue the opposite; that Makavejev's involvements in 'cultural policy' of socialist Yugoslavia has enriched his film forms, and contradictions of this involvement have contributed to his experimental and ambiguous expressions. I guess that it is obvious that Makavejev and other avant-garde film makers had their own 'cultural policy', which was in undisturbed dispute with ongoing state policies; it is this richness that both contribute to politicization of cultural policy and to understanding the artists' contribution to the changes in cultural policy as well.

I believe that discussion on the relation between art and politics, between cultural policy and artistic forms, and the contradictions surrounding these are part of current discussions in contemporary art practice. I could add that my involvement in a few contemporary art projects, particularly projects in collaboration with Minna Henriksson, have contributed to my understanding of these contradictions in more concrete ways.