

TIME IN THE AFTERLIFE: *I HAVE A SONG TO SING YOU*—A VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF A RETIRED CLAIRVOYANT

I mam pesmu da vam pevam (I Have a Song to Sing You) is an experimental short documentary that re-visits Ivanka, the last known woman to have experienced visitations from fairy women known as ‘Šojmanje’ in the rural Vlach community of Eastern Serbia. These supernatural beings would cause her to fall into a trance by means of song, then lead her to the world of the dead. Having entered this state, she would be able to ask the deceased questions about the future, which she would then report back to the people who came to visit her on significant dates in the orthodox Christian calendar. However, the Šojmanje pledged to abandon Ivanka at the age of 60, and since that time she has effectively retired from occult activities.

Our film retraces the timelines of this experience by considering the overlapping of past-present-future in Ivanka’s experiences as a *seer* in an attempt to understand the relevance of the passing of time both for the custom itself and her experience of it, which is closely intertwined with her own identity. It also reflects on the contemporary representation of tradition by revisiting a former ethnographic field-site and the related archive materials. The carefully elaborated stylistic palette of the film discloses multiple temporal lines and calls for the problematisation of tropes associated with an idealised ruralism, which risks undermining the relevance of such practices for contemporary culture by exoticising them.

We first came to know of Ivanka through the films of Paun Es Durlić (2013), who had documented Ivanka’s trance seances in 2006. At the time that these materials came into our possession, our own research concerned the relationship between women and magic in Vlach culture, and her singing left such an impression on us that we eventually went in search of her. The stigma surrounding Vlach mysticism, especially black magic, is so strong that most people deny the existence of such phenomena in their surroundings, despite their proliferation in everyday life. This meant that the process of retracing Ivanka was not straightforward, as we only had two simple pieces of information to work from—her first name, and the nearest village. Nevertheless, we finally succeeded in finding her farmstead and she was open to discussing our primary research question, namely how her positioning in relation to both the physical space surrounding her and





the local community had changed since losing this ‘gift’ of prophecy.

The central concept of the film hinges on the duality of temporalities of Ivanka’s two different states as a prophet and as a lay person, a parallel mirrored in the intertwined use of the archival footage and the material filmed by us. These two moments in time are complicated by the fact that in the footage of the past she is looking to the future, while in the contemporary footage she is reflecting on the past. Our return to Durlić’s site shed light on a phenomenon for which we had had no evidence until that point, i.e. the moment in a practitioner’s supernatural timeline in which they cease being obliged to provide information to people. This instance of someone retiring from prophesying is highly unusual, as Vlach magic is generally associated with the elderly, who only stop carrying out their activities when they are forced to do so by illness.

In order to establish a temporal contrast with Durlić’s material—which was shot on basic digital equipment for the time, but which

has very low resolution by today’s standards—we opted to film Ivanka in high resolution, specifically 4K. In addition to providing a visual separation between the two time frames, this decision was also motivated by a desire to break from certain tropes used to depict the past visually, and to address ideas associated with idealised ruralism and the romantic associations connected to nostalgia. For example, we had the impression that the sepia aesthetics of super 8 film, with its characteristic scratches, jumping frames, and lightleaks, still remains the dominant paradigm for evoking a wistful, longing impression of the past. In the case of Ivanka, although we initially imagined that she looked back on her time as a seer with a sense of loss, we discovered that her experience of falling into trance had actually been a great burden. She revealed to us that the Šojmanje had beaten her and robbed her of her ability to speak for herself. In light of this, we did not want to represent her past simplistically as a time of lost greatness. As such, we were interested in breaking with the analogue/super 8 conventions



by going to the other extreme of using an ultra-modern format. Moreover, given Ivanka's traditional bucolic lifestyle in a secluded and dilapidated farmhouse, we also felt there was a risk that our contemporary footage might be perceived as belonging to an earlier time, and it was important for us that the materiality of the film made it clear that Ivanka was talking from the present day.

One of the ways this digital quality is emphasised is through the recurring use of material affected by a glitch that means it is covered with grey stripes. Portentously or not, this footage was shot when we crossed the 'Prerast', a karst bridge over a river that is claimed by locals to be the dividing line between the worlds of the living and the dead. While we decided not to include an explanation of this origin in the film, in the interests of not interrupting or overcomplicating the main narrative, we nevertheless retained it as a transition indicating a shift between natural and supernatural/domestic and sublime worlds. These moments of liminality are represented in

conjunction with images of water—a classical reference that is also part of the Vlach imaginary. They also play a crucial role in the overarching structure of the film, which, as per the title, is structured around the song Ivanka sings to enter into trance state. The song itself provides the underlying frame, while the interview segments are broken into 'verses' intersected with montages of repeated elements that serve as a kind of chorus. The intention behind this was to create a format that to some degree reflected the rhythmic and haptic qualities of the trance experience itself.

As a final note on the role of time in shaping this film, one important consideration is that of the production context. The film was funded by London Short Film Festival's 'With Teeth' programme, and the funding came with certain limitations and stipulations. First of all, the deadline only allowed for one short trip to Ivanka's home, which prevented us from elaborating on the concept through prolonged interaction with her and to some extent dictated the final form of the film. We would have liked

to be able to spend more time learning about her impressions and also to acquire more visual materials of her home. Secondly, the duration of the film was fixed to 5 minutes, a constraint that had a significant effect on the final tempo and flow of the work. The pace ended up somewhat faster than we would have otherwise preferred, which did result in the unexpected benefit of a hypnotic momentum. However, it was unfortunate not to be able to include more contextual information and ethnographic detail. In this sense, the time constraints were, overall, a mixed blessing.

REFERENCES

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