
Yugoslav (Hi)stories: a country which no longer exists, except on film

By Ana Grgic and Raluca Iacob

“Yugoslavia ultimately was - as well as these magnificent films that were made there - one grand illusion. A big story. With Tito as a storyteller. That’s basically what he did. Tito told the Yugoslav people a really good story. A story people wanted to live in. And when the story-teller died, the country collapsed.”

- Mila Turajlić (van Duijnhoven, 2010)

At the end of the well-known and highly controversial film, *Underground* (1995, dir. Emir Kusturica), the wedding party in the last scene is floating away on a piece of land separated from the river bank, symbolically representing Yugoslavia and the end of a myth. *Cinema Komunisto* seems to continue where *Underground* left off, in the opening sequence of the film one of the images used is the animation of the now former Yugoslavia’s map, divided into individual states floating away from each other. Mila Turajlić, the director of *Cinema Komunisto*, takes the viewers on a journey through personal and collective memories to that imaginary island, where it all began.

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was a multiethnic and multinational ‘Yugoslav state’ (translating to South Slav due to its geographical positioning and ethnic make-up) was founded after the end of World War II. Until its collapse and dissolution through a bloody war in 1991, Yugoslavia encompassed the present day republics of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia. Josip Broz, or the name he was well-known by, Marshall Tito, was its president until his death in 1980. The post-war Yugoslavia of the 1950’s saw the implementation of a self-managed economy and the renaming of the communist party as the “League of Communists of Yugoslavia” at its Sixth Congress in November 1952, both measures signalling a break with the Stalinist past. This reinforced the party’s new political role in the country’s future, which was now only in theory divorced from the state. Through the 1960s and early 1970s, the communist party loosened its iron grip; Yugoslavia improved its relations with both communist and Western nations, including the USSR, China, the U.S., and the European Common Market nations, also incurring a large foreign debt. Finally, in 1974, following a wave of protests demanding greater individual and national rights, the Yugoslav Constitution gave more rights to the individual republics.

Director Mila Turajlić has constructed in this film an imaginary museum of collective memory for a country, Yugoslavia, that no longer exists, but that has left traces, however faint, on the consciousness of some 23 million ex-citizens. By collating images from fiction films made in Yugoslavia (1945 - 1991), *Cinema Komunisto* exemplifies the capacity and power of film to make visible that which is no longer there. For many post-Yugoslavs, the film holds cathartic value, as it attempts a reconstruction of the collective cinematographic memory of Yugoslavia, a nation that no longer exists and has gradually been erased from the newly constructed national memories of each successor state. *Cinema Komunisto* is a daring film addressing a sensitive issue - the socialist pasts of the new successor states. Its main achievement is the effort to illuminate some aspects of Yugoslav history and cultural memory which have not been dealt with in recent films, and it stands as a small torch in a fog amongst the barren landscape of filmmaking in the post-states, as contemporary films often focus on the conditions and effects of the recent war, forsaking their socialist pasts.

The film functions as a contemporary 'site of memory' according to Pierre Nora's concept, as in modern societies, the 'milieux de memoire' - real places of memory - have disappeared (Nora, 1989). In the new successor states, street names from Communist times have been renamed and statues testifying to socialist heroes have been removed to express the newly formed identity. In this sense, ritualised commemoration, very common during the socialist period in the guise of parades, national holidays and children's pioneer pledges for the first day of school, no longer take place. Furthermore, the very fact this film assembles archival images from predominantly fiction films but also newsreels produced in Yugoslavia, renders it a sort of a film-museum - an archive of cinematographic memory. If this country no longer exists, then we must search for it in the images that remain. In this sense: 'The mode of memory is recherche rather than recuperation. The temporal status of any act of memory is always the present and not, as some naïve epistemology might have it, the past itself, even though all memory in some ineradicable sense is dependent on some past event or experience.' (Huysen 1995:3) Indeed, the director had spent several years researching and viewing fiction and non-fiction films made in Yugoslavia between 1945 and 1991, noting and selecting the footage to be used in the historical documentary. The archival images are interspersed with footage of interviews and visits to significant locations, thus creating a temporal and spatial link to the present as sifted through past memory.

The film opens with footage reminiscent of home movies, where a statue of Tito's head is being placed on a table, while the view is turned upside down and right again. As such the sense of constructing/depicting a repository of personal memory is established, as is the underlying idea of

deconstructing and reconstructing nostalgia. Alongside the tone of personal memory, this idea of *recherche* as the mode of memory is most felt when viewing *Cinema Komunisto*. The sentiment of nostalgia, then, is reinforced by the use of melancholy music and the feeling is further evoked by the recent footage of abandoned state film studios, Avala Film, in Belgrade. Music has been found to be essential in eliciting feelings of nostalgia, a bittersweet emotional state which combines positive affects (love, pride and joy) as well as negative ones (sadness, disappointment, suffering), in creating affective and mnemonic experiences. Empirical research has shown that autobiographical contexts (familiarity of the song, memory linked to the song and previous affective experiences) is fundamental to the eliciting of feelings of nostalgia (Janata, et al., 2010). It is thus important to underline that the reception of the film and the nostalgic responses are dependent on the spectator's familiarity with that which was (and is virtually being recuperated on film) Yugoslavia. Moreover, *Cinema Komunisto* showcases how a nation can be constructed through images and how cinema functioned as a propaganda tool, as Yugoslavia, the country, and its idea, a concept of socialism (brotherhood and unity), seemed to have existed only in images of fiction films produced under the state, especially after its collapse and the recent war.

According to Mila Turajlić, the film addresses the trajectory of the film industry in Yugoslavia as a metaphor for the creation and the breakdown of the country (van Duijnhoven, 2010). Between 1945 and 1990 there were 890 completed films in Yugoslavia (Janković Piljić, 2009), out of which 350 were partisan films (Goulding, 2002). Thus, these propagandistic narratives are central to the construction of a national identity, and thus are a central part of the *Cinema Komunisto* film. These productions of historical epics, meant to create a sense of national identity for a newly formed state, use historical fact and creative embellishment to instil a sense of national pride and move the viewer towards creating a shared collective memory. Contrary to the situations in other Eastern European countries during the Second World War, in Yugoslavia the liberation of the country happened not through the intervention of either the Soviet or Western Allied forces, but rather through the fight of the partisans. The representations of these stories in film have become essential to the establishment of a foundational myth for the young country of Yugoslavia.

'Gibanica' westerns are local versions of the Red (Ostern) Western, which refer to partisan films of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and which retain some of the same characteristics of the western genre, especially the binary positions of the loyal and courageous partisans who fight for the freedom of their people, and the villainous figures of the enemy; the climactic fights between the two sides; the figure of the hero as a figure commonly motivated by a sense of justice; and the symbolic value of the

landscape—these films generally being situated in the mountains and outside of the realm of civilization. These characteristics are exemplified in *Cinema Komunisto*, through the montage of a series of selected scenes from partisan films, reminiscent of spaghetti Westerns, or rather ‘Easterns’ here, where the embodiment of the Yugoslav national hero of the partisan, Bata Živojinović, is shown killing the Nazis in spectacular ways. Furthermore, the fictionalised persona and mythicized figure of this actor, is reinforced by the inclusion of a popular joke, which Bata Živojinović recounts in the interview himself: “What’s the last thing Hitler said before he died? - Kill Bata Živojinović!”

Cinema Komunisto draws a constant association between the past, through fictionalized narratives in feature films, and the present, through the memories and stories of the people interviewed. The film weaves together a dialogue with several key players in the Yugoslav film industry from the most important film star of the partisan films, Bata Živojinović, to the communist party operator, Gile Đurić, who was the head of the film studio Avala Film. An important figure interviewed in the film is Leka Konstatinović, the film projectionist of three decades for Josip Broz Tito, who can attest to the interest that the president had in cinema. A very powerful moment in the film is represented by the scene in which Leka, now a pensioner, returns to Tito’s residence in Belgrade which had been destroyed during the 1999 NATO bombings. Images of the place in the past, as it had been when Tito was in residence and Leka was working there, are combined with present images of the place, devastated by the bombing and with nothing but the walls still standing, seems to be another metaphor for the dissolution of the former Yugoslav state. An avid cinephile, Tito would watch on average a film every day with a total of 8801 films, as documented by his projectionist who had kept records of the number of films screened every year between 1949 and 1980. Tito’s favourite film genre was the Western, especially when featuring John Wayne, and Tito perhaps recognized the ability of the genre to inspire devotion towards a cause. Like other communist leaders, it would seem that Tito found cinema a very useful propaganda tool and used it to construct a collective identity and national ideology. As such the state would offer financial and material support, exemplified in the film *Cinema Komunisto* through the case of the partisan film *Battle of Neretva* (1969, dir. Veljko Bulajić), for which Tito had commissioned Gile Đurić, the head of Avala film studio to prioritize it as a project and for which two generations of military service were involved in the film production. As hinted in the film, *Battle of Neretva* thus acquired the status of what could be described as a communist blockbuster epic production, and was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1970. Indeed it was the most expensive film produced in former Yugoslavia, with an international star cast, including Orson Welles, Sergei Bondarchuk, Franco Neri and Yul Brynner.

As the leader of the partisan fight against the Nazis during the Second World War, Tito was not only involved as a supporter of the 'gibanica' westerns, but also as a character in some of these stories. *Cinema Komunisto* documents how important Tito would find the information disseminated from these films, from the historically accurate recreation of situations to the correct serial number on his car. As a unifying patriarchal figure for the country, the representations of Tito on film as a national hero are given great importance, including the choice of actors to portray the character of Tito on film. For Sutjeska the actor chosen to play Tito is Richard Burton, who is given Marshall Tito's original uniform jacket in order to increase the authenticity of the portrayal. This idea of authenticity is further reinforced by the blowing up of a real bridge at Jablanica during the filming of *Battle of Neretva*, which Tito authorised himself. Nowadays this is still a tourist attraction, where the Yugo-nostalgic communities reunite to sing partisan songs and throw red carnations into the river Neretva below. Thus the blurring of fiction and reality, the Yugoslav illusion and that which remains, meet in this significant location, in an act of commemoration of the past.

With the openness towards the Western world, and the distancing from the Soviet influence, one of the things that had changed was the fact that Soviet film productions were no longer circulating in Yugoslavia, and thus the film industry had oriented itself towards the West, circulating especially Hollywood productions. Not only did it reorient itself towards Hollywood mainstream cinema, but Yugoslavia became a coproducing entity for historical epic films and a tourist destination for some of the stars of the period.

At one point in *Cinema Komunisto* Gile Đurić in an interview introduces a wall of photographs of foreign celebrities in the lobby of hotel Metropol in Belgrade, and at several points in the film it is mentioned that famous film stars have visited and spent time on Tito's private island, Brioni, off the coast of Croatia. The bourgeois luxury and celebrity status that Josip Broz Tito and his wife Jovanka Broz enjoyed during his role as leader of Yugoslavia seems to come in stark contrast to the socialist ideology. *Cinema Komunisto* uses the news footage of Richard Burton and Elisabeth Taylor spending their holidays in Tito's exclusive summer villa on the highly coveted Brioni Islands, exposing this increasingly contradictory situation of the country in an ironic way. The glamour of entertaining movie stars on his private island or yacht seems incongruous with the position of a communist leader, however it is undoubtedly one of the elements which have constructed a positive, benign image of Tito in the West, one which was more open towards cultural and economic cooperation and less entrenched in the strict codes of communist ideology. The film uses a clip of an interview with Orson Welles, evoking Tito's cult personality, in which the famous filmmaker stated: 'Since we

judge greatness in a man— usually— by leadership, it is a self-evident fact that the greatest man in the world today is President Tito’.

Our hopelessly forgetful societies need contemporary sites of memory, which can manifest themselves in many ways, through images, songs, books and monuments, in order to remember. Thus, *Cinema Komunisto* is a process of catharsis for the younger generations, contributing to the concept of the post-Yugoslav, and can be situated amongst recent trends in literature. Alongside Mila Turajlić’s recherche, recently the young writer Stefan Simić, emphasises this need and affirms there are less and less Yugoslavs but more and more post-Yugoslavs: ‘I am trying to reconstruct my old Yugoslavia and at least in fiction I become its inhabitant’ (2013). For many ex-Yugoslavs, the film creates a virtual space which they can inhabit for the time of its screening. The renowned writer Dubravka Ugrešić writes in her novel *The Ministry of Pain* (2005) about a university lecturer living in exile and teaching ex-Yugoslav literature course to ex-Yugoslavs in Amsterdam. In one of her classes, the lecturer asks the students to fill one of those blue and red shopping bags with things from ‘back home’ they liked symbolically, with souvenirs of a lost past, of a country that no longer exists, thus recreating the idea of Yugoslavia. This image-souvenir is reminiscent of the Madeleine biscuit whose smell evokes Marcel Proust’s childhood memories in his novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Similarly these stories are cathartic for their readers and the authors themselves. The archival footage of old Yugoslavia, representing its movie stars and slogans, functions as image-souvenirs in *Cinema Komunisto*.

Indeed, according to press articles and reports, the film has screened widely throughout the ex-Yugoslav states, receiving very positive feedback but having also been accused of Yugo-nostalgia. For instance, the journalist Nenad Polimac reports in the Croatian daily press *Jutarnji List* that the premiere of *Cinema Komunisto* in Sava Center in Belgrade, Serbia’s capital, had a turnout of 3500 spectators, while at the premiere in the cinema Europa, in Zagreb, Croatia’s capital, members of the ‘older generations’ were seen with tears in their eyes at the end of the screening. Mila Turajlić attempts to explain this underlying feeling of negotiating with the past, in her note: ‘I enter this story as a member of a new generation of Yugoslav filmmakers, one that has hazy memories of a country that no longer exists. We come of age surrounded by the ruins of something that is nostalgically referred to as a golden era, but no one has yet offered me a satisfactory insight into how it was all thrown away.’ (2010) *Cinema Komunisto* offers the possibility to travel back and fictionally inhabit old Yugoslavia, even if only for the time space continuum of its screening, and functions as a contemporary site of memory, where each spectator of the fragmented nation can negotiate their past.

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