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No Escape from the Body: Bleak Landscapes of Serbian horror film

Dejan Ognjanović¹

Abstract: *This paper aims to investigate the body of Serbian horror film, which is slim in number of titles, but rich and diverse in their accomplishments. Looking at them from the standpoint of the body's role and presentation, new perspectives are opened for understanding the impressions of bleakness and doom which hang over most of these films. If body gothic may provide for temporary and imaginary escape or release from the constraints of embodiment via fantastic re-shapings, transformations or hybridisations, in Serbian horror films there is no transgression nor transformation – corporality seems inescapable while characters are constrained and doomed in vicious circles of repetition.*

*More specifically: sexuality leads to damnation or is damnation itself in Djordje Kadrijević's *The She-Butterfly* (*Leptirica*, 1973) and *A Holy Place* (*Sveto mesto*, 1990); there is no escape from the body and the autopsy, with which the film ends, reduces its protagonist to dead meat in *GASP!* aka *The Backbone* (*Kičma*, Vlatko Gilić, 1975); *Variola Vera* (Goran Marković, 1982) uses the smallpox disease as a metaphor for the unhealthy system of the socialist Yugoslavia and sees the virus as eternal, inescapable, constantly mutating; in *The Life and Death of a Porno Gang* (*Život i smrt porno bande*, Mladen Djordjević, 2009) there is no possibility for real, lasting emancipation: transgressive individualists' bodies are sold for fun and profit; finally, *A Serbian Film* (*Srpski film*, Srdjan Spasojević, 2010) presents its characters as literally and metaphorically raped from birth; it*

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depicts body as a pleasure dome, as Hell, and as a weapon which is, ultimately, self-destructive. Close reading and motif analysis of representative Serbian horrors prove that the bleakness in them is more than a mere genre trope: the darkness in these films is rooted in a cultural and spiritual crisis which is not alleviated by the change of system (from socialist to neo-liberal capitalist state) but is even more pronounced.

Keywords: *Serbia, horror, film, body, sex, disease, metaphor, transgression, transcendence, pessimism*

Before investigating representation of the body in Serbian horror films, it should be pointed out that the notion of genre cinema in a country whose cultural and production context is vastly different from that in the Western Europe or USA may present problems if taken without some precaution. First of all, this paper shares the assumption "that genre is a categorizing tool emerging from historically shifting accretions of discourses; while texts may contain qualities which are associated with certain genres, a film's reception through culturally situated discourse primarily determines its generic status" (Church 2015, 75). This categorizing tool can be helpful for new researches, but it should be stressed that it was mostly not used when the films to be discussed below were originally released. In other words, films selected for this analysis made during Yugoslavia were rarely, if ever, advertised or discussed as horror films.

This is not an exception particular only for Serbian cinema, but can be found in other Eastern European countries as well, where production and reception are dictated by different cultural context than the Western one, which birthed genre cinema. For example, the editors of *European Nightmares* remind the reader that "*Taxidermia* itself was described by Channel 4 as 'horror' for its UK screening, but is not referred to as a horror film anywhere on its own website, or in Hungarian reviews. The grotesque and surrealist aesthetics which characterize *Taxidermia* locate the text firmly against a background of high art rather than the popular/trash culture usually associated with horror" (Allmer, Brick and Huxley 2012, 222). Christina Stojanova, in the same anthology, addresses this issue when she says: "Due to the traditionally uneasy relations of Eastern European cinema with genres and entertainment, and because of the specificity of its

perception of horror, predicated on over-investment in Hegelian rationality – 'What is real is rational, but not everything that is rational is real' – the paradigmatic darkness, mystery and violence of the horror genre has migrated to the experimental and art cinema" (Stojanova 2012, 230).

As argued elsewhere (Ognjanović 2008, 69), in the days of socialist Yugoslavia, Serbian filmmakers prevailed in the open application of genre models in their works in comparison to colleagues from other republics. However, the dominant Marxist aesthetics and ethics in the best case underestimated such films or regarded them with contempt, or, in the worst case, with open animosity. In Tito's Yugoslavia genre was considered a Western concoction which did not have anything to do with our society of self-management, the original economic concept of Yugoslavia. One of the most influential domestic theorists (Severin Franić) claimed that genre is inherently alien to our experience of the world and the values of our society. In the local setting, according to him, it can only exist as an intruder, as a foreign body violently incorporated in somebody else's milieu.

This was especially true regarding the beginnings of horror genre in Yugoslavia, which posed several problems: 1) it did not have a strong basis in local literary or cinematic tradition; 2) it did not have a significant popularity among domestic audiences even concerning foreign titles of this genre; 3) it had a strong ideological stigma (designated as a Western product improper for local, socialist consumption); and last, but not least: 4) it had a strong aesthetic stigma, since it was perceived inferior, either as puerile ("boogey tales"), dirty (equated with "pornographic") or dangerous ("sick, depraved, corrupting"). For these reasons, horror was not welcome within Yugoslavia's socialist system of values, it was not popular with the audiences, and ultimately not even with the filmmakers. In the few instances of what can be retroactively labeled as horror (due to recognizable motifs, themes and genre rhetoric) the films were neither advertised nor analyzed as horrors at all. One further reason for this was that local critics mostly lacked the critical apparatus to approach such works, and this started to change, slowly, only in the early 1980s.

Because of the above problems attendant to horror films made in Serbia, a clear division is obvious between those made while Serbia was still a constituent republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1991) and those made after the country fell apart in civil wars and Serbia became an independent state. In

the former, genre was disguised as adaptation of recognized literary classic, as satire and parable and/or as experimental and art cinema. In the latter period, younger filmmakers dispensed with the stigma of the genre and embraced it fully, paying homage to Western European (especially Italian) and American horrors of their youth while, in some cases, also attempting to implement the Western tropes into personal stories rooted in the local tradition.

This introduction regarding the cultural context of Serbian films made in Yugoslavia and afterwards is important because "body horror" has usually been theorized with references to Anglo-American cinema, where horror was famously labeled by Linda Williams as one of the "body genres", together with pornography and melodrama: "The body spectacle is featured most sensationally in pornography's portrayal of orgasm, in horror's portrayal of violence and terror, and in melodrama's portrayal of weeping" (Williams 1995, 142). For Williams, horror is defined as one of those "genres whose nonlinear spectacles have centered more directly upon the gross display of the human body" (Williams 1995, 142). Those films "privilege the sensational" and deal with "the spectacle of a body caught in the grips of intense sensation or emotion" (Williams 1995, 142). Williams's definitions, however, were largely based on then-popular slasher films, with the unfortunate result that they equate the rich variety of horror genre with only one of its recent subgenres. As such, they can be helpful for understanding those horror films which tend towards slasher, but significant modifications are required for older films belonging to a different aesthetic background which is very distant from sensationalism and spectacle in presentation of the body.

The tradition of films made in Serbia which can be construed as horror is a relatively recent phenomenon (the first genre title is a TV film from 1973), and while its numbers are still slim, fewer than twenty, the accomplishments of the most significant films are surprisingly stellar within such an undernourished context. Not numerous, but still important, these films have been made by some of the most recognized Serbian directors like Djordje Kadijević, Slobodan Šijan, Goran Marković, and are among the most successful, talked-about and analyzed recent Serbian titles even abroad (especially *A Serbian Film* and *The Life and Death of a Porno Gang*). In all of them, as befits the genre, presentation of the body offers a fresh perspective from which they can be (re)evaluated.

Sex equals Death

It is almost a truism to claim that "gothic is also inherently somatic and corporeal" (Reyes 2014, 2). Numerous scholars agree that "horror is essentially bio-horror and involves the tenuous negotiations between rationality and a looming biological plenum that defies rational mapping" (Morgan 2002, 3). Yet, the implications arising from this basis are not inevitably the same. Existing in the body and nothing but the body is seen by many as a cause for pessimism, since the body is denied that which is seemingly reserved only for the soul – transcendence. Jack Morgan, for example, says that horror genre, by its very nature, favours sinister elements antagonistic to ideas of rebirth and renewal (expect in their horrific, perverted, fantastic shapes): "Horror, despite its often obscene depravity, is driven by an anti-erotic, and fertility-adversarial perspective. Though the Dark Romantic impulse shares the broader Romantic concern with physicality, it is with the menacing aspects of physicality" (Morgan 2002, 8-9). Corporeality as such, devoid of spirituality, seems to spell doom, and the same, apparently, goes for the genre which is so deeply rooted in the somatic: "Horror and comedy both thus situate us in physicalness," he argues, "tracking adventures in the mysterious, contingent, organic scheme. Rather than on fertility, however, horror centers upon withering; rather than on renewal, it focuses on degeneration; rather than on an intrepid human vitality, it centers upon the eminently assailable human body and the deep-rooted anxieties it situates" (Morgan 2002, 85-6).

Other scholars and artists, however, see a positive potential in the body itself and in the genre dealing with its various aspects. "Body gothic positions the body at the centre of the experience of horror even if, in some cases, its destruction and mutilation may provide for temporary and imaginary escape or release from the constraints of embodiment via fantastic reshaping, transformations or hybridizations" (Reyes 2014, 16). Opposed to this is slasher, an inherently nihilistic subgenre of horror, because body in it is reduced to meat and gore; Reyes, however, stresses the fantastic elements in other subgenres which offer new fictional possibilities for reshaping and transforming the mortal, transient flesh. A similar attitude is found in one of the most prominent practitioners of "body horror", David Cronenberg:

I don't think that the flesh is necessarily treacherous, evil, bad. It is

cantankerous, and it is independent. The idea of independence is the key. It really is like colonialism. The colonies suddenly decide that they can and should exist with their own personality and should detach from the control of the mother country. At first the colony is perceived as being treacherous. It's a betrayal. Ultimately, it can be seen as the separation of a partner that could be very valuable as an equal rather than as something you dominate. I think that the flesh in my films is like that." (Cronenberg in Rodley 1997, 80)

Others disagreed and saw Cronenberg's portrayal of flesh, body and sexuality as "reactionary", "premised and motivated by sexual disgust" (Wood 1979, 24). Such differences between pessimistic and optimistic interpretations are probably inevitable regarding a topic of such vast potentials as the body. In any case, such views exemplify the richness of horror genre and its ability to be situated in opposing parts of the ideological spectrum. However, when one takes a look away from the richness of Western horror cinema and into the limited sample of Serbian horror films, using the body as a magnifying glass, one sees only the bleakness, pessimism and despair. In Serbian horror sex equals wounds, the disease is incurable, people are trapped in vicious circles of repetition, there is no chance for transcendence, no escape from the body's prison, and suicide, madness and death seem inevitable.

Djordje Kadijević pioneered horror at a time inimical to it, under the guise of literary adaptations made for TV, although with expressive cinematic style in accordance with his previous feature films. The series of four films, three of which he directed, was labeled, after Poe, "Tales of mystery and imagination". To this day Kadijević renounces the label "horror" (e.g. during his public master class at the Grossmann film festival in Ljutomer, Slovenia, in July 2014), equating it with American slasher which he sees as unambiguous and commercial, and prefers the term "dark fantasy" which he equates with European, non-commercial, authorial cinema. Under any label, those films use obvious themes and motifs of horror such as vampire in *The She-Butterfly* (*Leptirica*, Djordje Kadijević, 1973), demonic femme fatale in *The She-Butterfly*, *The Maidenly Music* (*Devičanska svirka*, Djordje Kadijević, 1973), and *A Holy Place* (*Sveto mesto*, Djordje Kadijević, 1990), gothic castle and skeletons in *The Maidenly Music*, a mysterious stranger of otherworldly origin in *The Protected One* (*Štićenik*, Djordje Kadijević, 1973) and witches, hags, the living dead etc. in *A Holy Place*. All of them

contain serious, brooding tone (with a slight exception in deceptively semi-comedic *The She-Butterfly*) and numerous scenes directed with a clear aim at creating suspense and fear.

Three out of four films directed by Kadijević feature the central motif of a femme fatale: a virginal girl is transformed into a vicious vampire in *The She-Butterfly*, a sadistic seductress kills her lovers in *The Maidenly Music*, and a sexy living dead witch seduces a theology student in *A Holy Place*. Eroticism and death are interlinked in a manner more typical for German and Anglo-American romanticism and gothicism than it is for Serbian literary or cinematic tradition. There is a telling scene in this author's first and best known foray into the "dark fantastic", *The She-Butterfly*: after a local vampire, Sava Savanović, has been dispatched in the prescribed manner, with a stake through the coffin, there is a wedding ceremony for the young hero (Petar Božović) and his bride (Mirjana Nikolić). But, on the night preceding the official wedding in the church, the impatient groom sneaks into the bride's room. He caresses the sleeping girl's body and unbuttons her night-shirt – only to reveal a gaping bloody wound on her belly. It transpires that a butterfly carrying the vampire's soul (in accordance with Serbian folklore) had escaped during his execution and possessed the "innocent" young girl. The wound on her belly comes from the stake driven through Sava's coffin.

This image is shocking on several levels. First of all, it is a surprising twist nonexistent in the film's literary basis (the 1880 story "After Ninety Years" by Milovan Glišić), and therefore not even the viewers familiar with the story could have anticipated it; second, it comes at the very end, after the monster has been defeated, at a time (1973) when "one last shock" twist endings were not prevalent even in the world cinema, not to speak of a Serbian film coming practically out of nowhere, with no previous genre tradition; third, the relatively light tone of the film and the humour of the preceding wedding scenes created a quite different "horizon of expectations"; fourth, explicit scenes of gore and body damage were scarce in Serbian films of the time (found, rarely, only in war movies), and were nonexistent (and therefore unexpected) in TV films of early 1970s; fifth, nothing in the film had prepared the viewer for the girl's transformation into a vampire (except two ambiguous scenes which gain weight only in retrospect, i.e. upon second viewing), especially since everyone in Serbia is familiar with the

legend of Sava Savanović, a decidedly male vampire within a culture which has no significant female vampires; sixth and final, no one expects a wound where a vagina should be. And yet, in a male subconscious, according to Freud, that is exactly what vagina is: a gaping wound, an absence carrying a trace of castration. This is especially true in the context of a scene which apparently leads to deflowering of a virgin, an act usually accompanied with a blood flow from vagina.

In western horror film such explicit scenes are usually, as in Linda Williams's definition, linked with sensationalism and spectacle, but in this instance that may not be the case, or at least not entirely. *The She-Butterfly* was made at a time when the state television had only two channels, governed by relatively non-commercial programs. There was no competition, commercials were rare, and sensationalism of any kind had no place there. Therefore, it was not necessary to lure the audiences with cheap tricks because the viewers had no other channels to turn to. The motivation for this explicit body horror image is elsewhere. The gory wound under the attractive girl's shirt is an archetypal image, not only for many a male's psyche, but is also emblematic for this director, in whose work sensuality is usually linked with suffering and death. Revelation of the wound is followed by the bride's growing of big teeth and facial hair (in Serbian mythology vampires and werewolves are often synonymous), after which transformation she jumps on the groom's back and rides him, literally, to exhaustion and death, like a *mora*, a being from Serbian folklore with attributes of a disease, nightmare and a witch.

Another Kadrijević's film, from the same cycle, *The Maidenly Music*, concludes with a discovery that the music surrounding an isolated castle is actually created by the feet of skeletons hung up and moving slowly in the wind over a harpsichord in the attic. Those skeletons belong to previous lovers of Sybilla (Olivera Vučo, a Serbian sex-symbol of the time).

A Holy Place, a much later film, contains numerous scenes of sexual dread, most archetypal of which depicts a willful and sadistic landowner's daughter, Katarina (Branka Pujić), literally jumping and treading upon a servant's genitals. After her death she comes back to haunt the young theology student forced to spend three nights reading psalms next to her coffin in a lonely church, eventually riding him like a *mora*, both in the shape of a maiden (Pujić) and a hag (Mira Banjac). This film was based

on Nikolai Gogol's story "Viy", but typical for Kadrijević, it is a very free adaptation, and almost all elaborations of sexual dread are original to his script.

As can be seen, the female body in Kadrijević's films is portrayed as desirable and seductive, but also treacherous, as it can easily and unexpectedly transform into something repulsive and destructive. It is malleable, but only for the worse: the erotic easily turns into the repulsive in *The She-Butterfly* (vagina = wound), the feminine turns into masculine (growth of hair on the maiden's cheeks), the human into monstrous. A large part of the monstrosity is contained in the gender role reversal: a supposedly passive girl becomes aggressively active, literally riding her groom, instead vice versa (according to the patriarchal expectations of what a wedding night should look like). Female sexuality is depicted as threatening, leading to destruction (male lovers turned into skeletons in *The Maidenly Music*) and so powerful that not even death can contain it (the revenant witch in *A Holy Place*). While in the latter film female body's transformations can be seen as liberating from the patriarchal constraints, they are depicted with unrelenting horror and negativity. Within this director's poetics, rare instances of explicit body imagery (gaping wounds, skeletons, etc.) are used in order to underscore a consistent worldview which is, at least partially, informed by the junction of Eros and Thanatos, and the prevalence of death principle.

Diseased body politic

Just like Kadrijević, Goran Marković is another classical, canonical Serbian director (although of a younger generation) whose major films were made, recognized and awarded in the time of Yugoslavia. The dominant theme of his opus is the effect of socialism on common people's souls; his common approach is a satire, while his *mise en scene usually has to do with* an isolated group as a microcosm which reflects ills of the society. Fantasy and horror are strongly present in three of his films: *Variola Vera* (, 1982), a mixture of horror and disaster film, *Déjà vu* (aka *Reflections*, , 1987), a political psycho-slasher, and *The Meeting Centre* (*Sabirni centar*, 1989), a fantasy black comedy about a group of people who come back from the dead only to encounter the betrayal of their neighbors and relatives.

Variola Vera is especially potent in its use of a real event for purposes

of a political parable by appropriating elements of body horror. Its starting point is an incident which took place in Belgrade and several other places in Serbia in 1972, when a Muslim pilgrim from Kosovo brought smallpox from the Middle East and inadvertently created a small epidemic because the symptoms of this disease had not been instantly recognized. Marković's film is confined to a small Belgrade hospital turned into quarantine, and this setting becomes a microcosm which reflects the ills of the macrocosm, i.e. the soulless, bureaucratic, incompetent socialist system.

Marković uses the disease as a metaphor: it provides a distorted mirror for an unhealthy system. He does not shy away from the gruesome imagery of smallpox: ulcers, scabs, pus, blood-vomiting, etc. but, more importantly, the body horror of the disease is used to tell the story and enliven it through constant suspense, fear and occasional shock. Besides the sinister prologue in the Middle East, two horror scenes stand out. Redžepi, the Albanian "typhoid Mary", runs from his bed, tormented by pains, while Dr. Grujić (Rade Šerbedžija) follows his trail of blood through the half-darkened hospital corridors. They lead him to the attic stairway, its far end shrouded in darkness. Delirious, Redžepi leaps screaming from the blackness straight into the doctor's lap, his bloodied mouth leaving a red mark on the white coat. The handheld camera and very few cuts enhance the scene, so that the viewer "runs" together with the doctor until virtually being thrown into the arms of the man covered in bloody boils.

In another horror scene, a female hospital worker is looking for a colleague, the missing handyman. She goes to the boiler room, unaware that the man is infected, when the light bulb burns out. She uses matches to make her way towards an indistinct mumbling, which brings her to a shocking encounter with his bloodied face. Marković manipulates the audience's emotions by using the subjective camera in an environment which provides a minimum of visual information. Suspense is accentuated by the context, i.e. the reality and physicality of the threat, with the release in shock: a sudden appearance of a screaming, pox-marked face.

It should be noted that in *Variola Vera* obvious horror scenes are not numerous: the stress is on the human drama and political allegory. However, what the film lacks in sheer number of horror scenes, it more than makes up for in the dense atmosphere of the quarantine claustrophobia and the sense of doom hanging over the entrapped characters. It is strengthened

through the imagery of scary men in white protective suits and corpses of the deceased, wrapped in sheets soaked with disinfectant, to be sealed in metal caskets. In its uncompromising portrayal of the disease's advance and the disposal of its victims, *Variola Vera* occasionally reaches the levels of political satire in the harrowing Mexican disaster-horror film *The Year of the Plague (El año de la peste, 1978, by Felipe Cazals)*. It is interesting to note that in a cinema lacking experienced technicians for elaborate make-up effects, the appropriately gruesome ravages of smallpox were designed by a professor from the Medicine Faculty (Ognjanović 2007, 80).

The film's final image, in which the rising politician innocently and unwittingly holds the smallpox-infected flute at the press conference, is a powerful allegory of the "disease" which only changes its appearance but not destructiveness. It shows where the real and more corrosive disease hides, its virus seemingly indestructible, leaping from one victim to the next. The gloomy "disease theme" by Zoran Simjanović stresses the grim future in store for the people with such politicians in power.

The theme of the vicious cycle of evil, constantly perpetuating itself in ever-widening circles, is present in his other horror, *Déjà vu*, where the victims of yesteryear seem destined to grow into the tormentors of today, in turn guaranteeing the transformation of their own victims into the evildoers of tomorrow. The wrongs are never really balanced or corrected, only enriched with new injustices and new victims. Everything remains the same, as if 'already seen': only the protagonists are different.

A similar sense of despair permeates Vlatko Gilić's *The Backbone*, aka *GASP! (Kičma, 1975)* which could be called the first Serbian existentialist horror film. For reasons discussed above, one should be careful in using the "horror" label in the context of Serbian filmmaking. Still, in spite of *The Backbone's* obvious artistic ambitions and veiled metaphors, in spite of the slow rhythm, its lack of sensational set-pieces and overall strangeness, the film is unlike anything preceding it in the Yugoslav cinema and is largely informed by the body horror imagery. It boasts grimness verging on nihilism, and bears a resemblance in tone to David Cronenberg's early work, especially *Shivers* (released the same year), but without the elements of exploitation that made Cronenberg's "body horror" films commercial.

Backbone deals with air pollution in Belgrade's new high-rise block and its effect on the tenants. Dragan Nikolić plays Pavle, a doctor who

works in the city morgue. He is intrigued by the wave of suicides in the neighborhood affected by the pollution, and starts investigating on his own. He discovers that the sickly-sweet, yellowish haze originates in the nearby surreal, almost gothic crematorium. He wanders among the disaffected people, and – unable to do anything about their (and his own) condition – eventually commits a suicide by surgically draining his blood into a glass vessel (shown in excruciating and explicit detail). The film ends with his own autopsy, with images of his heart and lungs weighed on the scales and his brain dissected. *Backbone* depicts people (and society) who lack a backbone to hold the organism together: there is no hint of human feeling among the alienated, selfish and aimless characters, nor is there any sign of ideology or spirituality to provide a unifying factor. People are reduced to mechanical biological organisms which live and die with no purpose. The autopsy which concludes the film shows the protagonist as only so much dead flesh.

Again, such imagery is not motivated by sensation and spectacle of commercial cinema, but by the author's need to express disgust and despair with the hopeless position of an individual in his society. The film can be seen as an allegory of a repressive system, or as a metaphor of the human condition outside of any political context. The director is distanced from obvious political symbolism, and the surreal atmosphere of his film implies an amorphous threat, with the horror internalized and released only through a suicide. The feeling of despair is undeniable, however, but it remains unclear whether the breakdown of humanity originates in the unhealthy political system or in our very biological foundations (frail and volatile as they are) – or, perhaps, in both.

The Body Prison

A Serbian Film (*Srpski film*, Srdjan Spasojević, 2010) is unique among the domestic titles, and has very few contenders in the world cinema for the title of the most despairing and nihilistic film ever made. Its plot is activated by the motif of escape: an ex-porn star wants desperately to escape the impending poverty of Serbia, desiring a solid bourgeois existence for his wife and small son which, he believes, awaits him in the prosperous West. For this reason he accepts a shady deal for one last job and only too

late discovers that it involves pedophilia and snuff. His intended means of escape eventually becomes something to escape from, but as the film insists – there is no escape.

The whole film is an extended metaphor for how its authors – screenwriter Aleksandar Radivojević and co-writer and director Srdjan Spasojević – perceive life in Serbia today. The country is depicted as an oppressive, claustrophobic prison in which one is doomed from birth and hope is lost for those who remain there.

Our film treats violence as a way of communicating rage. We are trying through *A Serbian Film* to communicate our own rage and our own frustration. So it is neither historical nor is it 'fun violence' that we are dealing with, but something else. Violence is here merely a tool and it is an unusual, rare way of using horror and porn film-genre clichés to communicate something that is profoundly personal and therefore hard to express under the best of circumstances because it is rather abstract. (Radivojević in Radović 2015, 9)

The central image on which the film's idea hinges belongs to the notorious "newborn porn" scene in which a muscled man literally rapes a newborn baby girl while its mother smiles in approval. This scene, situated around the film's middle, depicts a subgenre of pornography which, luckily, does not exist; its shockingly unpleasant innovation, however, much to the complaints of the appalled viewers, is not there merely to exploit the spectacle and controversy (although there is that, as well). The "newborn porn" is motivated by the authors' idea, consistently embodied throughout, and made explicit in this scene, that in Serbia one is raped from birth. "The murder of the youth in this country. That was the point. We were trying to show the idea in the flesh, in the explicit terms of the skin flick, something politically threatening. To cinematically reshape our reality by treating it as violent pornography, because that's what it's actually turned into" (Radivojević in Radović 2015, 9). Therefore a tagline "Not all stories have a happy ending" to a film titled *A Serbian Film* makes a perfect sense.

It also makes sense that the film's ideological aspect is so dependent on the body imagery, uniting as it does the worlds of sex (pornography) and death (horror / snuff). Body is initially seen as a pleasure dome, a sex machine, a wonderful, fetishized tool. Here is the praise from the shady producer, Vukmir (Sergej Trifunović) to the porn star brought from

retirement, Miloš (Srdjan Todorović): "Right hand is the sex centre in any man. It's a direct line between your brain and cock. Ever since your childhood. Your hand is special, for it has jerked such a special cock. Miloš, it's an honor to shake a hand to such an artist of fuck." Yet, this tool can be easily switched from pleasure to pain, as evidenced by plentiful tearing and bleeding shown in the film, by far the goriest among Serbian horrors. Unlike his older predecessors like Kadijević, Marković, Gilić etc. the angry young debutant, Srdjan Spasojević, does not aim for respectability or high art: he is not ashamed to admit and incorporate influences from American genre cinema. However, both authors stress that genre references are not there merely as homage, for commercial reasons (as could be claimed for the B-movie horrors of Milan Todorović, *Zone of the Dead* /2009/ and *Mamula* / aka *Nymph*, 2014/), but are intended as tools for personal expression. "While inspired by those (genre) auteurs, I was trying to formulate a new aesthetic here. After all, the New World calls for a new breed of genre cinema – we can call it 'Metasploitation.' Genre films more openly dealing with a new reality through fiction in an unexpectedly blunt manner" (Radivojević in Radović 2015, 9).

The excess of imagery related to body's damage is fuelled by the authors' anger and dismay, and is mostly of a sexual nature. A woman has her teeth pulled out and is then raped in the mouth until she chokes on her own blood. Another woman is drugged by a strong aphrodisiac so that she violates herself with an iron bar and dies of bleeding from a vagina. Yet another woman is gorily decapitated while handcuffed to the bed and raped from behind. An eyeless man is raped through his empty eye socket. Tellingly, in all these instances, rape and murder are equated, implying that in Serbia as its authors see it, one is not merely killed, but is at the same time also humiliated, dehumanized and violated by the system.

The body, as presented in *A Serbian Film*, is a tool, a commodity to be bought and sold, a fetish, a weapon even (e.g. the penis through the eye-socket scene), but ultimately it is a prison. The fleeting joy leads to ultimate perdition and destruction. Miloš tries to control the flesh, i.e. his penis (e.g. in an early scene of preparation for the job in which he commands his erection), but ends up being the controlled one: injected with an aphrodisiac for bulls, he becomes a puppet, a sex-zombie ruled by the shady masterminds into murder, mayhem and rape of his own family (he

is tricked into unwittingly raping his own son). After the total humiliation the survivors are too devastated to live; they have nowhere to go but to self-destruction, i.e. suicide. In the final blackly ironic twist, even their dead bodies cannot rest in peace: their still warm corpses will be raped again, in front of the cameras, for fun and profit. Raped at birth, they are also raped in death and the cycle of abuse and humiliation is never-ending.

Similarly bleak conclusions haunt *The Life and Death of a Porno Gang* (*Život i smrt porno bande*, Mladen Djordjević, 2009), an unusual mixture of road-movie, black comedy and splatter horror. *A Serbian Film's* writer, Aleksandar Radivojević, said at a panel after the film's Serbian premiere at Novi Sad's "Cinema City" festival, that his film is a horror in which the monster is – Serbia itself; the same could be said for Djordjević's film as well. It deals with an ensemble of outsiders (junkies, homosexuals, transvestites, porn actors) traveling rural parts of Serbia with their Porn-Cabaret. Sex sells badly, however, so they are lured by a shady German investor into making snuff films, but with a peculiar Serbian twist: unlike American horrors, in which unwilling "actors" fight with all their might to escape the clutches of insane directors, here the victims are coming voluntarily. In an environment where all hope is abandoned a new set of outsiders appears – those willing to sacrifice themselves in order to sustain their otherwise destitute families. A lot of blood is shed in a very convincing (but staged) scene of animal violence, and there is also a gruesome use of razor on one's own torso and neck, plus sledge-hammer to the head and a decapitation with a chainsaw, an explicit throat cutting, together with some more conventional, but quite gory gunshot wounds.

Again, like in *A Serbian Film*, the spectacle of a violated body is not there for the sake of exploitation but is an expression of anger and frustration: "The explicit imagery for me is more than just shock," says Mladen Djordjević. "Ultimately, shock is not particularly interesting to me. This violence in the film expresses a destructive attitude towards reality: I wanted the explicitness to be taken so far as to destroy the reality, the next step is just to make the celluloid burn. I'm interested to deepen the violence and destruction until there is a light at the end of the tunnel" (Djordjević in Ognjanović 2010, 19).

No light can be seen at the end of *The Life and Death of a Porno Gang*: pornography and snuff are metaphors for violations and abuse in a world in which bodies are sold and destroyed mercilessly and there seems

to be no escape from that. The colourful outsiders of this film, with their unorthodox bodies, make-up and dress, are emancipated only for death. They are raped (in one scene the angry villagers gang-rape the entire "Porn gang"), persecuted, killed or driven to suicide until in the end only the idealistic film director (Mihajlo Jovanović) and his girlfriend remain. Seeing no perspective for themselves, they commit a group suicide, slashing their veins together at an archeological site which connects Serbia to its distant past. Future, however, seems inconceivable.

Conclusion: No Escape from this Skin

There is a Serbian saying: "Iz ove se kože ne može" ("You can't escape from your own skin"). The films analyzed above seem to present a bleak, hopeless worldview which illustrates that. In this regard, some similarities can be found with other Eastern European subgenres, such as the miserabilism of the so called "cinema of damnation" (McKibbin 2005), commonly associated with the films of Béla Tarr, or the Russian "chernukha" films of post-socialist despair from the late 1980s and throughout 1990s. However, Serbian horror films cannot be related to those, except superficially, for several reasons. First of all, they span a larger time-frame, beginning in the early 1970s, and therefore cannot be related to the post-socialist despair since some of them have been made while the socialist system was in full power. The newer ones, on the other hand, belong to the times of "transition" between the defunct socialism and the emerging, ideals-shattering capitalism, whose once-promising prospects have been revealed as driven by the need for cheap labor and new markets instead of by human rights and democracy. Second, since Serbian horror films have been largely devoid of commercial prospects, they were mostly driven by strong authorial poetics of the individuals who made them. Some of those can be construed as pessimist (e.g. Kadijević and Gilić), while authors like Marković are better described as deeply critical of the system(s) and human fallacies, but not really pessimist regarding human potentials for change and betterment on individual and societal scale. The hopelessness of most recent Serbian horror films seems to be the result of their authors' realization that the changes of regimes, from Tito's to Milošević's to allegedly democratic ones, did not bring any betterment. Quite the opposite. In this regard, Miloš,

the protagonist of *A Serbian Film*, is a highly emblematic character:

He is in a way like a metaphorical stand-in for the country of Serbia – humiliatingly impoverished and easily manipulated by the powers that be (the European Union) and the people (politicians) in charge... He is drugged, molested, raped and so on. And that is precisely what happens with some of the employees here who work in the private sector, with marketing or virtually any job you can get. This is a film about the neo-sociopolitical industry in which any kind of monetary exchange or any kind of emotional exchange comes off as porn. (Radivojević in Radović 2015, 13)

The body, in this context, is seen mostly as passive, a puppet, easily victimized and manipulated. Under the burden of cheerless and unpromising economic and political reality the young Serbian filmmakers do not have the relatively optimistic options of, say, Clive Barker's "fantastique" or David Cronenberg's "new flesh". Settled within rich capitalist societies, authors like Barker and Cronenberg can afford the relaxed luxury of dreaming up the transcendent, hopeful new possibilities of the imaginary, half-monstrous, half-fascinating bodies with their fantastic reshapings, transformations or hybridisations. In other, less fortunate parts of the world, however, in the desert of the economically deprived reality, as evidenced by Serbian horror films, corporeal transgression and transformative acts of the body can only lead to unhappy endings. The horror genre, in this regard, comes as a handy tool for expressing collective, national (but also universal) fears, as it essentially deals with the inversion of the fertility rites and with the victory of the Waste Land.

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„Филм је наша нечиста савест“

Владимир Коларић
Београд

Сажетак: У раду се истражују естетичке и етичке импликације проблема представљања на филму. С обзиром на репродуктивну природу филмске слике разматра се могућност филма да представља и сведочи о „истинитој реалности“, а одговори се траже у аутентично хришћанском схватању појмова односа, општења и личности.

Кључне речи: филм, естетика, етика, личност, хришћанство, однос, општење.

Говорити о филму као нечистој савести или нечистој савести филма је, наравно, сумњиво. Јер филм не може имати савест – савест ваљда има (или може имати) само личност, а још мање може „бити“ савест, јер питање је до које мере филм уопште „јесте“. Најзад, савест је категорија морала или етике, а повезивање уметности са моралом и са етиком је у данашње време и те како сумњиво, јер нам мирише на цензуру или на овакав или онакав есенцијализам, што нас одбија; тако смо научени, превише труда многих генерација уложено је да нам се у главу утуви ова одбојност према спајању оног што је проглашено неспојивим да бисмо је се сад тако лако одрекли, сматрајући да би се тиме одрекли слободе. Мада, да ли је проблем или један од проблема данашње уметности или тумачења уметности управо у сваковрсном одрицању, па и у одрицању од уметности саме, или макар од појма