

COMMENTARY

Serbian Cutting: Excerpts from the book paper movies

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If there is some visible fondness in the disposition of the Serbian (Balkan) man for resolving problems in his private life and in war by reaching for sharp instruments fit for meals and other related (butchering) activities, it is natural to expect that there exists a commensurate method of Serbian film montage. (We do not need to ‘consult’ examples of celebrated/notorious epic poetry: it is enough to cite the current black journalistic chronicling.)

Threatening catastrophe to illustrate this hypothetical genesis with an even more hypothetical style of montage betrays raw (cooked would be better, because the wise proverb ‘fry then reply’ advises one on the seasoned preparation of verbal courses) fiction, just one more national (nationalist) fantasy – and then the author would end up as a patient in some cultural decontamination center.¹

It is a shame that the Serbian language introduced the French word *montage* in place of the English word *cutting*. Would not everything be much clearer from the start? But in the English-Serbian-Croatian /?!/ Dictionary written by Ristić, Simić and Popović, *cutting* is, unfortunately, defined as ‘shortening (of drama, film)’. That particular volume is also clueless when translating the expression ‘montage’, for not following the cautionary words ‘cut-throat – executioner, decapitator’. There is no longer any doubt that we are again confronted with a mini-conspiracy or a cover-up. However, maybe those esteemed lexicons are only ‘cutting capers . . . ; (fig.) leading one on (with tricks or jokes); happy and easygoing behavior’.

It is no wonder that the idea of Serbian Cutting is so enduringly tried and tested when difficulties (sabotage?) already begin at the level of dictionaries.

Anecdotes towards ‘theory’

In Dušan Makavejev’s film *Love Affair or the Case of the Missing Switchboard Operator* (1967) there exists, you will remember, a scene in which a mail carrier makes advances on the operator-protagonist. It was shot at night (always difficult), the actors were unsatisfied and nervous (according to custom), and the location had to be left at the crack of dawn. Like this, like that, as it was written – the scene was filmed, including the ‘dramatic climax’: the postman manages to acrobatically land between the revolving chair at the desk and the back end of the switchboard operator. When the editing (process) was already well underway this scene had a black cloud of directorial discontent floating above it. (Towards that, maybe those on the other side of the Atlantic had already let out a siren’s scream that explicit sex and frontal nudity is an obligatory constituent of every self-respecting art film at the box office.) With luck, in the editing (room), at the so-called ‘galgen’,² there hung a few meters of a found film from the kinoteka [Yugoslav Cinematheque].

Concerning this archival jewel, it contained some titled frames of a naked, fat mustached man and a likewise portly woman in poses borrowed from the darkest academic sculptures of the nineteenth century (Ariadne, The Rape of the Sabine Women, and similar works). Copied [by the kinoteka] just in case, and in regards to the emerging narrative

structure, it had a certain magical status. It was proposed that with the kinoteka's consecration of frontal nudity pasted on the truncated (or *manqué*) climax in telephone central, those two long deceased pornographic stars³ would complete the initiated scene in lieu of the weary respite of the performing parties within *Love Affair*. That loaned readymade CONTINUES TO SUPPLEMENT THE FICTION BY OTHER MEANS. THIS IS THE BIRTH OF *SERBIAN CUTTING*.

The recipe arrived of inconvenience and was quickly repeated throughout the rest of the film. When the German buyers found that *Ein Liebesfall* was not a satisfactory debt according to the local regulations for a full-length fiction film, a few minutes of footage from the documentary *Parade* (1962) [by Makavejev] were inserted as additional compensation.

'Reception'

Competent thinkers (film critics), it must be acknowledged, immediately felt operative 'tricks' on display with this montage. This is the invention of *Serbian Cutting* by D.M., who forever exists (remains) in memory as a practitioner of an Eisensteinian montage of attractions. Perhaps at fault for that Russian connection is a fragment of the film *Enthusiasm or Symphony of the Donbass* (1930) [by Dziga Vertov], which is used in *Love Affair* as something completely normal/conventional: a television show.

However, the fate of Eisenstein's manifesto is a sad one. It was translated according to a condensed English version by Jay Leyda. Even with the complete translated text from the magazine *LEF*, published in the volume *Film Theory* (edited by Dr Dušan Stojanović, Nolit, Belgrade, 1978), an understanding of montage of attractions was not enabled in the slightest. Serbs comprehended it as the joining together of two viewpoints in disparate frames. This is a bit in the sense of the old colloquial expression: what does that have to do with the price of tea in China (or, connected like a cannon and sour cream)!

Innocence bathes at noon

Between *Love Affair* and *Innocence Unprotected* (1968) P. Adams Sitney included the former Yugoslavia in the volume *New American Cinema*, which also presented Connor's *A Movie* (1960) and *Cosmic Ray* (1961). After that the procedure of manipulating found footage was no longer so exotic.⁴ Was [actor/director Dragoljub] Aleksić's [original film] *Innocence* [*Unprotected* (1943)] found? – it was. Very quickly one French critic recalled the *readymade*.⁵ So *Innocence* in a new condensed, colored, decorated, supplemented and 'annotated' version selected by D.M. was classified as a *readymade assiste* or *rectifie*.

Nice and neat. Neither from the pocket of Duchamp nor in the pocket. That which for us is of most interest in this chapter: the moment when Miss Innocent Nada from Aleksić's fiction looks through the window and sees Terazije Street after the bombardment (documentary construction). Or: the excited man begins to attack Nada's titular innocence with his lustful claws, which provokes an animated rendering of the German troops' assault plan on the map of the Eastern front. This is once again the work of *Serbian Cutting*. If a substantial part of *A Gorilla Bathes at Noon* (1993) utilizes the 'found' Soviet film *The Fall of Berlin* (Mihail Chiarelli, 1949) it does not need to be believed that the author, because of that (or only in the first place), uses 'contents of an operatic quality', which are 'naïve and pathetic, grandiose and moving', 'a wonderful comic strip', that 'indicates the work of Leni Riefenstahl', which is 'an example of the rare symbiosis of communist and fascist art'.⁶

It would be funny to contest those reasons for the authorial choice, but the ‘true’ explanation professes the necessity of found material: THE PARENTS OF THE RUSSIAN MAJOR, THE PROTAGONIST OF MAKAVEJEV’S FICTION, ARE THE HEROES AND HEROINES OF *THE FALL OF BERLIN*: HE WAS BORN CONNECTING TWO FICTIONS. THIS IS COMPLETELY NATURAL FOR *SERBIAN CUTTING*. MAKE LOVE, PROCLAIMED SURREALISM. FILMS LIKEWISE. SO THERE, THEY MAKE CHILDREN.

Precursor

The year 1948, the novel *Cash and Carry* (Prosveta, Belgrade) by Djordj Jovanović is published posthumously. Makavejev immediately reads this novel and entertains the thought that he is shooting a film. As much as we can remember, the plot is as follows: a filthy (sick/rich) American capitalist buys a clerk’s healthy body. The genius surgeon consummates this procurement by mounting the old head on the new body.⁷ Then the head of the participant in the transaction becomes infuriated with its new body and tries to destroy it. Finally, the capitalist leaps to his death from a skyscraper while they shoot with news cameras. In the epilogue, the novelist watches the already-stale Paramount news journal in a movie theater in [the Belgrade neighborhood] Dušanovac. VOILA, THE ARCHETYPE FOR *SERBIAN CUTTING*. (The dear reader will already know that in this book there is no distinction made between film on celluloid and film on paper.)⁸

Scenes from the life of a schoolboy

Between *Innocence* and *Gorilla* something very atypical happened: the absent-minded inventor forgot to control the invention. *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971) is bursting at the seams with kinotek-ian homages, though the principle of ‘associative montage’ is applied.⁹

An unreliable memory of one screening of *Sweet Movie* (1974) gave the ‘impression’ that found footage was used in two places (a ‘scientific’ film about infant exercises and actuality footage documenting the exhumation of corpses in the Katyn Forest). There is nothing that should be concluded about this functioning *vis à vis* *Serbian Cutting*. *Montenegro, Or Pigs and Pearls* (1981), *Coca Cola Kid* (1985) and *Manifesto* (1988) are all cut rather unambitiously.¹⁰

Everything can be learned, even *Serbian Cutting*. While the sleeping beauty in Makavejev’s films acts the schoolboys are educated. In *Scenes from the Life of an Outstanding Worker* (Bato Čengić, 1972) [co-written by Vučićević, cinematography by Karpo Godina] during the May 1st parade in Moscow one can see with the official eye of Soviet film newsreels, and the film turns into a private letter. (The only thing left is the unrealized and alluring idea that the scene of the departure of the workers in the mine could be switched with Disney’s dwarves, following the same line of labor, singing that celebrated *Heigh ho, heigh ho!*) The ‘surrogate’ ending of *The Medusa Ship* (Karpo Godina, 1980) [also written by Vučićević] was foreseen even before writing the scenario. By accident, the filmmakers reviewed a Slovenian documentary series from 1945 and encountered a reportage about a home for blind children. Then, in *The Medusa Ship*, the heroine is faced with the mechanistic will of comic melodrama: as a nurse in a house for the blind, while cadets sleep like angels, the burning of a sentimental letter causes a fire from which she loses her sight, and naturally she lives out her life among the blind. This is followed by the next surrogate conclusion, ‘finessed’ with a shrewd perversity. The

absence of the heroine is clarified (in voice-over) with the fact that she died before the shooting schedule, and that – during the shooting of everything that we watched – her corpse is situated in the basement, among ‘American food cans and piles of old potatoes’.

The schoolchildren are removed in the conclusion, but they are also instructive. In *Plastic Jesus* (Lazar Stojanović, 1971) ‘surrogates’ in metastasis are consumed by the so-called ‘fictional section’. Staged fiction is buried in the pornographic amateur film passages in which the protagonist Tom [Gotovac, the avant-garde filmmaker and performance artist] appears, fascist film news, overlaid frames from the television series *The Forsythe Saga*, ‘outtakes’ from Tito’s preparation for some historical speech ... etc. It should be mentioned, however, that we can recognize this school of thought [and method of montage] has been inactive for a long time. It is likely on hiatus.¹¹

Translated by Greg de Cuir, Jr.

Notes

1. [A reference to the Center for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade] The best cure for megalomania is locating similar feelings of exceptionality in other people. So, to compare, in the days /.../ before Christmas, when Hitler was released from prison in Landsberg, the police in Münsterberg at Breslau burst into the apartment of Karl Denke, who they knew as the ‘most faithful of church parishioners and a respected citizen’. This beloved 54-year-old village guesthouse owner, in the windy bellows of the meat market of the Evangelistic church, attracted the attention of a young worker by the name of Vincenzo Oliver who was looking for a job and in search of mercy. Denke invited him in his guesthouse, asked him to sit down, attacked him by surprise, and cut him up into pieces. The tenants of the building, alarmed at the ruckus in Denke’s space, were witnesses to the life and death fight between the guesthouse proprietor and the young man; both were so wounded that blood sprayed everywhere on all sides. According to Denke the young man wanted to rob him, but in other areas of his home barrels with traces of pickled human meat were found, as well as boxes and drawers full of human skeletal remains and pots full of human fat. In truth, the Münsterberg residents had always asked themselves how, in times of famine and poverty, the guesthouse owner’s clients were always served such tasty portions of meat. If any meat was eaten in those hard times it was usually dog meat, cat or rat, though pickled meat, bloody sausage and bacon bits *à la* Denke must have had a certain delectable prewar quality. Denke committed suicide by hanging himself in a prison cell. The authorities found that he left little notes for himself with administrative regulations, which showed that for 20 years he killed more than 30 young people of both genders. These notes marked dates, the weight, eye color, hair color and other distinguishing features of his victims. He could not resist, it explained, because at that time his instincts drove his actions. If he did not eat the carcasses and sip their blood himself, he sold the remains to butchers, or at the market, or he served them to his guests. This story is creepy like something from gothic times. And as known to us from the ancient folk parables (‘fairy tales’) by the Brothers Grimm: the witch from *Hansel and Gretel* who fattens children so that she can eat them, the monster from *Rapunzel* that devours children (‘I smell human flesh’), the wolf in sheepskin in *Little Red Riding Hood* who approaches, licking his lips, while lurking close to the little girl (‘But grandma, why are your teeth so big ...’). Germany – the country of *Dichter and Denker* (poets and thinkers)? Kurt Tuholski called it the country of *Richter and Henker* (judges and executioners). In an interview with the Russian Sergei Tretyakov in 1937, Bertolt Brecht proposed that in the future Germany be called the country of Denkes. And he clarified it: ‘Denke is the name of a criminal that killed people so that he could use their bodies. Human meat was preserved, he made soap out of fat, buttons out of bones, and handbags out of skin. His business was based on science (...). In my opinion, those in Germany who charged and tried Denke did not see that he possessed a genius illustration of the German character: methodical, pedantic, cold-blooded and philosophical in the creation of their deeds (...). They needed to give him an honorary doctorate’. Jeroen Brouwers: ‘Adolf Hitler and his predictions’, *Književne novine*, ???.

2. From the German word, which translates as 'clothesline' – wooden bases with hooks (bent tacks) where film strips are hung to dry. Those hooks look like miniature replicas of the hooks in butcher shops where meat is hung to dry.
3. The pasted ancient poses caused hysteria in the British Board of Film Censors, which banned the screening and added puritan black stripes across external organs and pubic hair. Not even frontal nudity from the early twentieth century (and even more, from museum pieces) can pacify. As such, editing 'wisecracks or tricks' are relied upon.
4. Cornell's *Rose Hobart* (1936) was still not in circulation. See P. Adams Sitney: 'Cornell's Film Collage', *Avantgarde Film 1895–1939*, Radionica SIC, Belgrade 1984, pp. 154–156.
5. Dominique Noguez: 'Found (Again) Film', *Filmske sveske*, #8, October 1969, p. 510.
6. Jochen Brunow: 'Going Wild with Monkeys, Interview with Dušan Makavejev', *New Moment* 1, p. 23.
7. Let's dispense a little literary detective work! Jovanović's 'inspiration' was when he found an article about Soviet experimentation on preserving life within severed dog heads. See Professor S.I. Čečulin and Dr. S.S. Brukhonenko: 'The Life of the Central Nervous System Under Artificial Conditions', *Nova literatura*, #1, December 1928, pp. 26–28.
8. Striving for some type of thoroughness, however, after 40 years we again attempted to read *Cash and Carry*. The plot is for the most part recalled exactly, and the effect of Serbian montage is not – with God as a witness – imagined. As we would expect, the fictional America is constructed after the themes of comic strips, Hollywood films, and 'progressive literature'. A pleasant surprise of 'postmodernity' before its time: genre, epigraphs (Max Stirner, da Vinci, Pascal), a satirical dedication to H.G. Wells and many sharp jokes on his account ... etc. ...
9. See Dušan Makavejev: *WR: Mysteries of the Organism*, Bard Books, New York 1972, pp. 14–23, for the director's understanding of montage and explication of the expression *shifting Gestalts*.
10. Correction!!! In *Coca Cola Kid* there exists a dreamlike allusion to a forgotten example of Serbian montage: a color-tinted shot of the moon from *Un Chien Andalou*.
11. While these footnotes quite insensibly outlasted the usefulness of this form of inventory (EDITORS UNITE!!!), let there be a few pieces that are complete. Some additions in the style of a who's-who: MARIJAN MAKAVEJEV, BOJANA, musicologist. Creator of radio-montages in the 1960s. With her first film, *Merry Working Class* (1969), edited with the eccentric directing of 'documentary' scenes (see *FEKS*), she outperformed all future works in the genre of skilled body and spirit ([for example, those by the filmmaker Želimir] Žilnik). 1970: a disposable film (screened at Belgrade International Film FEST [in a program curated by Makavejev, with the assistance of Lazar Stojanović]) made from the pornographic animation *Ever-ready Hard-on* (around 1925) and the spoiled sentimental 'Larin's Song'. 1997: *Yearning for Life* (commercial spot). Creator of the sound and music collages for the films of D. Makavejev. Sometime film producer. Bibliography: *Spaces of a Thirsty Sun*, Belgrade 1961.

Notes on contributor

Branko Vučićević began working as a film critic and translator in the 1950s. In the 1960s he began working as a screenwriter and collaborated with Dusan Makavejev on the films *Love Affair and Innocence Unprotected*. He co-wrote *Early Works* with Želimir Žilnik in 1969, which won the Golden Bear at the Berlinale. Vučićević is one of the most significant voices writing on avant-garde art and culture in Yugoslavia. He lives in Belgrade.