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Alternative Film/Video Belgrade 2011

Maja Kranjc

Alternative Film/Video Belgrade began as a festival of Yugoslav alternative film and video production, with the aim to document and define trends in film theory as well as to identify the values and new creative possibilities in the field. The themes of the festival often set a mandate for exploring various aspects of the term 'alternative'. This term has been included as the name of the festival since its founding in 1982. In this aspect, 'alternative' included many kinds of alternative modes – from experimental, art, short, and radical film, to film reflection and other forms.

From 1985 the festival continued as 'Alternative Film/Video', which established and further explored the double relation of alternative (film and video) production to commercial and classical production. For the next five years, until 1990, hundreds of works by Yugoslav filmmakers were shown at the festival. After a decade-long pause from 1991-2002 (the time of several Yugoslav wars of secession, when inter-republic communication was severed amid the general dissolution of the country), the festival re-emerged in 2003. Its new edition was described as follows:

[a]ccording to the tendencies of re-integration inside the ex-Yugoslav region, we aim to explore and re-construct the image of alternative film and video production in this area in the past decade. Aware of the urgency of re-integrating the broken and blurry image and the necessity of establishing a line of continuity in this sphere, Alternative Film/Video also intends to explore the new phenomena of alternative production practices.¹

The founder and organiser of the festival is the Academic Film Centre (AFC) of Dom kulture 'Studentski grad' ('Student City' Cultural Centre), located in New Belgrade (Serbia). AFC evolved from Akademski filmski klub (Academic Ciné-club). Through its long history, AFC produced some of the outstanding filmmakers in the history of Yugoslav cinema as well as experts in alternative film, such as Kokan Rakonjac, Živojin Pavlović, Dragoslav Lazić, Sava Trifković, Tomislav Gotovac, Ivko Šešić, and many more. Pavlović, (*Kad budem mrtav i beo* [When I am Dead and Pale, 1967], *Zaseda* [The Ambush, 1969]), for example, was a key figure during the era of Yugoslav New Film (from 1961-1972, representing the most important aesthetic period of Yugoslav cinema) and soon became recognised as one of the most celebrated Yugoslav filmmakers.

During the initial years of the festival, its mission was to gather filmmakers and organise film projections and discussions, with the ultimate aim of publishing a volume that would serve as a document of the whole festival. Through precisely transcribed discussions and the speeches and lectures of invited guests (film theoreticians, critics, curators, directors, et al.), accompanied by introductory texts related to the various programs, the culture surrounding the festival was repeatedly anthologised. The practice of publishing a volume at the end of the festival is very important for further exploring and researching the medium of experimental film, and it is a practice that continues in the most recent editions of the festival.

Student City Cultural Centre has already published some essential film literature, such as the book *Avangardni film 1895-1939* (Avant-garde Film 1895-1939), edited by film theoretician, screenwriter, film publicist, and translator Branko Vučićević, as well as *Dramaturgija zvuka u audio-vizualnom delu* (Dramaturgy of Sound in Audio-Visual Work) by Ivo Blaha, for example. Student City Cultural Centre has also released many compendiums and monographs on alternative practices and alternative film, often related to the theme of the festival in a given year, such as *Werner Nekes* (1987), *Između kvadrata* (Between Squares, 2003), *Stanje stvari* (State of Affairs, 2004), *Asociacije* (Association, 2007), *Sećanja* (Memory, 2008), *Found Footage* (2009), and *Vreme kino klubova* (The Ciné-Club Era, 2010).

The importance of the festival and its specificity are demonstrated by the fact that it gathers young filmmakers, veteran auteurs (mostly from the ex-Yugoslav region), film theoreticians, critics, curators, and cinephiles from all over the world to discuss important issues at thematic roundtables that deal with various trends in the world of alternative film (as expressed in the titles of the previously-mentioned festival monographs). We should also emphasise the importance of AFC as a production house, which plays a great role in offering a space for creative practices in film and video media. By archiving over 500 works that were produced in the centre throughout its history, representing a remarkable collection of the (alternative) history of Yugoslav cinema, the Alternative Film/Video archive at AFC is considered a valuable and unique custodian of cultural heritage.

AFC continues the tradition of what was once a very important ciné-club culture. The path to modernism in Yugoslav film was paved by numerous ciné-clubs which were established everywhere, in Belgrade, Zagreb and Split (Croatia), Sarajevo (Bosnia & Herzegovina), Ljubljana (Slovenia), and other large cities in the ex-Yugoslav region. These clubs signified a non-bureaucratic and low-budget production avenue while also championing freedom of expression.

Since 2006, with a desire to enable insight into new tendencies on the wider global scene (also to enable a wider contextualisation for the regional scene), Alternative Film/Video became international. Filmmakers from all over the world are

invited to submit a film or video to the competition program and also to partake in the various lively discussions. Last year's edition of the festival exhibited a vivid cross-section of contemporary experimental forms in the competition program, and also a distinguished review programme that consisted of retrospectives and lectures.

One such retrospective was *Search and Seizure*, curated by the daring programmer Vassily Bourikas (who co-founded the independent film laboratory LabA in Athens, which he has led since 2009). His programme juxtaposed the work of Ivan Ladislav Galeta and Paul Sharits – two legendary artists of avant-garde cinema. Sharits was a pioneer of the Fluxus movement, who developed structural and flicker films while playing a key role in the transference of cinema to larger artistic spaces. Ladislav Galeta is a conceptual artist who discontinued his filmmaking activities almost two decades ago but still remains one of most important figures in experimental art practices from the former Yugoslavia. His films are generally unclassifiable but often exhibit a rigorous formal exploration of various doubling effects and visual echoes.

Another retrospective explored the history of Austrian avant-garde film, presented by Gerald Weber of the important distributor *Sixpack Films*, which publishes the work of such famous film artists as Peter Kubelka, Kurt Kren, Mara Mattuschka, and others. In addition, the history of Film Author Studio Zagreb was presented by film critic and professor Hrvoje Turković, Sebastyén Kodolány of the Béla Balázs Studio in Budapest curated a short survey of films from the studio's long history, and a lecture on the history of Slovenian experimental cinema was delivered by festival jury member and Slovenian Kinoteka program manager Jurij Meden.

Besides reviving experimental classics and great cineastes from the past, another outstanding sidebar offered an exploration of a recently-discovered breakthrough in contemporary experimental cinema: the work of Jean-Gabriel Périot. Périot, a young French sculptor, painter, and director (who also served as a member of the jury), has made numerous shorts and medium-length works using both video and film technology. His films recall the manner of Santiago Alvarez, without voice-over or any kind of explanatory titles, while confronting and commenting on politics, historical events, and a variety of socio-economic issues, including workers' rights, unemployment, and gay rights. Périot's films often begin or end with famous quotes that are used as a kind of framework for the theme that is dealt with.

Périot gives a different shape to experimental cinema and its contemporary language. Because of the method he uses, his works could be considered as experimental documentaries. His creative approach is marked by digging into the treasures of photographic and film archives. Music also plays a significant role in Périot's work; he builds dense sound spaces and collages in the process of

editing. Most of his early works (which vary in form from documentary to animated to experimental) deal with violence, history, and both collective and intimate memories. For example, *Even if She Had Been a Criminal...* (Eût-elle été criminelle, 2006) features footage of the Second World War that was filmed immediately after the liberation of France in 1944. In its first minute the film offers images of aerial bombing and tanks – all set to the sounds of *La Marseillaise*. We could easily describe these images as a condensed history of the war. The song then starts to overlap itself, becoming almost unrecognisable in the process, and the images of armed conflict are replaced by scenes that depict the merry state of masses on liberated streets. Happiness is underlined on the various faces captured in close-ups. Soon, we realise that the reason for the joy does not lie in liberation, but rather in the bitter public exhibition and mistreatment of women that were accused of consorting with the enemy. By contextualising the happiness that appears in the second part of the film, this joy becomes only an extension of the violence we observe (in condensed form) in the first minute.

By combining new alternative film and video with a thoughtfully-curated review programme of retrospectives, along with a critical questioning of the practices and issues concerning the field of alternative cinema, the festival served as a key platform for exchange and a lifeline for the alternative media production scene in the region and worldwide. In December 2012, under the leadership of festival director and founder Miša Milošević, Alternative Film/Video Belgrade will celebrate the 30th anniversary of its establishment. Among the planned activities for this new edition of the festival include hosting the 1st Alternative Film/Video Research Forum, an academic workshop gathering an international group of scholars who are concerned with the study of avant-garde/experimental practices in film and video. As a festival dedicated solely to avant-garde/experimental film and video celebrating 30 years of existence, Alternative Film/Video Belgrade enjoys a profound and unique historical importance in the landscape of European film and video culture, and will no doubt continue to play a significant role in driving that culture in the region and beyond.

Note

1. <http://www.alternativefilmvideo.org> (accessed on 5 January 2012).

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