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## Go east by southeast – 13th Festival of Central and Eastern European Film Wiesbaden

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## Festival Reviews

*edited by Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist of the Film Festival Research Network*

### Go east by southeast

*13th Festival of Central and Eastern European Film Wiesbaden*

Greg de Cuir, Jr

The Festival of Central and Eastern European Film Wiesbaden,<sup>1</sup> also known as 'goEast', is a key event on the German film festival calendar. This is perhaps in no small part due to the fact that the festival is organised by the Deutsches Filminstitut, also because it enjoys a dedicated following among enthusiasts of the larger, general festival community. GoEast is structured by a modestly-sized feature film competition section which also includes documentaries. The total number of titles in this section in 2013 was 17. There are a number of smaller special programs at the festival, including a retrospective homage to a master cineaste and a multi-part symposium.

The symposium format serves as an example of the profitability of the sites of convergence between film festivals and the academic sphere. Many academics have long been involved with curating and programming activities at festivals; this interaction will likely increase with the further development of the burgeoning field of film festival studies – indeed film festivals themselves may be actively driving this development. The goEast symposium functions as a hybrid academic conference/screening series with a slate of lectures and related film projections. The 2013 symposium was titled *Bright Black Frames: New Yugoslav Film Between Subversion and Critique*, led by Dr. Gal Kirn (Postdoctoral Fellow, Humboldt University Berlin) and Vedrana Madžar (Curator/Filmmaker). *New Yugoslav Film (Novi Film)* represents the golden age of Yugoslav cinema in the 1960s and early 1970s, when a new generation of directors made their debut feature films and ushered in a liberal period of modernist stylisation that often found itself in conflict with the hegemonic power structures in Socialist Yugoslavia (the more extreme fringes of this movement that suffered the most from official attacks were derisively labeled the 'Black Wave' by party bureaucrats).



Fig. 1: *The city of Wiesbaden.*

In the larger context of the festival Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav cinema represent the Southeastern segment of the titular focus on Central and Eastern European cinema, which has always enjoyed a strong presence at goEast if only because festival director Gaby Babić hails from this region. A number of jury members represented this area including Rada Šešić (Documentary Programmer, Sarajevo Film Festival<sup>2</sup>), Marija Škaričić (Actress, Zagreb), and Milan Vlačić (Film Critic, *Blic*, Belgrade); however, only two of the 17 competition titles were from the ex-Yugoslav republics, including the film *Circles* (Srdjan Golubović, Serbia/Germany/Croatia/Slovenia/France, 2012) which won Best Director at goEast.

### **A new generation**

Interest in the history of Yugoslav cinema has been undergoing something of a renaissance in the past few years, coinciding with a new generation of researchers who are connected to Southeast Europe either by birth or by an abiding love for this underestimated film culture;<sup>3</sup> this is an international generation based in various countries all over Europe and North America. One could also trace this renaissance to the year 2007 when the home video distributor The Criterion Collection released special editions of two classic films directed by Dušan Makavejev, who is arguably the most well-known filmmaker from the ex-Yugoslav region (along with Emir Kusturica). Many people know the name Makavejev but rarely had the chance to actually see his work. This changed with the wide DVD release and the subsequent home video publishing of the rest of his oeuvre from the 1960s and 1970s. After this came the first book-length study on Makavejev written in English<sup>4</sup> as well as a

number of film festival retrospectives.<sup>5</sup> Makavejev and his connection to the golden age of Yugoslav film in fact provoked a ‘new wave’ of Yugoslav cinema studies.



*Fig. 2: Caligari Theater, the main festival screening venue.*

Kirn and Madžar belong to this new generation of Yugoslav film researchers; both were born after the death of Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito in 1980<sup>6</sup> and they grew up in the context of the Yugoslav wars of secession – the same goes for a majority of the researchers that were selected to present lectures at this symposium, many of whom are working towards their doctoral degrees. One of the distinguishing elements of this new generation is their interdisciplinarity; they come from such fields as philosophy, cultural politics, literary studies, gender studies, and more. This disciplinary diversity added a unique shading and nuance to the symposium and is also shaping the field of Eastern European cinema studies at large.

### **Continuous waves**

The symposium lectures were hosted in the aristocratic opulence of the Wiesbaden Casino, which functioned as the festival center and was the location for select screenings, press conferences, and numerous social events. One of the more important points that Kirn and Madžar got across in their opening lecture was that the history of Yugoslav cinema was not a series of discontinuous waves. For example, they posited the idea that the subversive and controversial Black Wave of

the 1960s has roots in the 1950s. Indeed, one of the concerns of these new generation academics is the rehabilitation of the reputations of certain 'classical'-era directors and reclaiming their films as unique works of art that did more than replicate official state dogma. On this subject, one of the stated aims of the symposium was to introduce lesser-known directors, which the curators did mostly through two unique programs of short films from the 1960s and 1970s.



*Fig. 3: Wiesbaden Casino.*

Symposium lectures were delivered on the following topics: Makavejev's political subjects; the Black Wave; gender and the films of Bato Čengić; the work of Živojin Pavlović; the significance of form in New Yugoslav Film.<sup>7</sup> Many of the filmmakers and films that were discussed in the lectures were programmed as part of the film component. These presentations were all interesting though they were also very rigorous in terms of theoretical discourse, which could have perhaps been tempered a bit for the sake of insuring that the symposium participants were able to build bridges to a wider festival audience.

Judging from the festival catalogue essay written by Kirn and Madžar as an introduction to the symposium, it appears that this event was aimed at an academic population. This can be confirmed by the attendees, who very much constituted a specialised group of 'insiders' that were acquainted with the field of study (on average there were 20-30 people in attendance at both the lectures and the film screenings). To broaden things out it might have been useful to include more

critics, programmers, and even filmmakers in the presentations – however, this was actually achieved on the final day in a closing panel discussion that had a more anecdotal nature. In comparison the Busan Cinema Forum at the Busan International Film Festival is a much more explicit academic affair, with keynote speeches and organised panels.<sup>8</sup> The Alternative Film/Video Research Forum at Alternative Film/Video Belgrade is also explicitly connected to research and functions like an intimate workshop. Neither of these events are structured with a related film program, which means that neither court a general audience and they often operate at a tangent to the festivals that house them.

### Novi film

The goEast symposium was spread out over three days during the festival, with two lectures in the mornings and anywhere from two to four film programs in the evenings. The film component of the symposium took place in the Murnau-Filmtheater and presented some of the great works of New Yugoslav Film such as *Innocence Unprotected* (Makavejev, 1968) or *Early Works* (Žilnik, 1969), but also such lesser-known achievements as *Red Grain* (Pavlović, 1970), *The Life of a Shock Force Worker* (Čengić, 1972), *Crows* (Gordan Mihić & Ljubiša Kozomara, 1969), and *The Last Stop* (Jože Babič, 1971). Kirn and Madžar delivered a brief introduction before each screening in an effort to connect the films to the ideas presented in the lectures and also to give a bit of historical context to the productions. In a very fortunate instance one of the directors was actually on hand to present and introduce his films: Želimir Žilnik, who also spoke on the closing panel of the symposium. Žilnik is no stranger to the various sites of convergence between academic gatherings and screening series as he organises and lectures in video workshops for young students and was also recently the special guest during the Marx at the Movies conference at University of Central Lancashire (England) in 2012, where he presented his feature *Old School Capitalism* (Serbia, 2009).

The films screened at the symposium highlight the stylistic diversity of New Yugoslav Film and also the varying degrees of political engagement and social critique that the directors expressed. However, as brilliant as these feature films are it felt like the climax of the symposium film component were the two shorts programs that screened across two days. Short film culture was extremely important in Yugoslavia on both a professional and amateur level. The very seeds of New Yugoslav Film can be located in short film production where directors were free to experiment and push the boundaries of personal expression. This freedom arrived largely as a result of miniscule budgets in comparison to the expensive and mythologising feature-length productions that the state produced during this era (which were aimed at much wider audiences and often laden with dogmatic ideological content).

The first shorts program was titled From Unemployed to 'Gastarbeiter', which references two brilliant shorts directed by Žilnik that were screened: *The Unemployed* (1968), which won the Grand Prix at International Short Film Festival Oberhausen,<sup>9</sup> and *Inventory – Metzstrasse 11* (Germany, 1975), which is a structural documentary experiment. The second program was called Critique of Ideology and included *Merry Working Class* (1969) directed by Bojana Makavejev, the wife and collaborator of Dušan Makavejev. The Yugoslav film critic and cineaste Branko Vučićević, another of Makavejev's collaborators, famously said that this playful documentary film 'out-Žilniked Žilnik' (Žilnik's style at that point becoming famous in no small part as a result of winning the Berlin Golden Bear for his debut feature film *Early Works*). Bojana Makavejev was one of the few women directing films at that time in Yugoslavia. Another stand-out in this second program was *On the Art of Love or a Film with 14,441 Frames* (1972) directed by Karpo Godina. Godina's short avant-garde films function as proto-music videos. This particular film of his was treated like a subversive work; it was produced by the Yugoslav army film unit, deemed unacceptable as a piece of military propaganda, and ordered to be destroyed. Godina smuggled a print of the film out of harm's way and this is the reason it has survived to this day. A significant outcome of the symposium is that these rare films collectively painted a vivid picture of one of the final remaining phenomena within the European new waves of the 1960s and 1970s that is in need of larger recognition and comparative analysis.

There was a good amount of interest in this year's goEast symposium and it was nice to see it constructed with such youthful energy and passion. Maybe the event could do with being a touch less pedagogical in its mode of address to better blend in with its surroundings, though with the aforementioned burgeoning field that is film festival studies and its convergence with actual film festivals this may not be a valid concern. The truth is that it seems academic film conferences could use a bit more film festival culture embedded within them. There are often film screenings in conferences but they tend to operate as an often unrelated adjunct to the discourse-based proceedings at hand. Conference organisers could do good to find more novel ways to incorporate the very moving image culture that inspires and structures the field of inquiry. Perhaps goEast Wiesbaden, as a film festival, is a model example of assured steps in this direction with its intriguing and innovative symposium program.

## Notes

1. <http://www.filmfestival-goeast.de/> (accessed on 16 May 2013)
2. <http://www.sff.ba/> (accessed on 16 May 2013)
3. See Pavle Levi's two books *Disintegration in Frames* (2007) and *Cinema by Other Means* (2012). See also Vlastimir Sudar's book (2013). The online journal *KinoKultura* has published a number of special issues on Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav cinema featuring many representa-

tives of this new generation of writers and researchers. See their issues on Serbian cinema published in 2009 (<http://www.kinokultura.com/specials/8/serbian.shtml>), on Croatian cinema published in 2011 (<http://www.kinokultura.com/specials/11/croatian.shtml>), and on Bosnian cinema published in 2012 (<http://www.kinokultura.com/specials/14/bosnian.shtml>). An upcoming issue is planned on Macedonian cinema and it is likely that soon the other remaining ex-Yugoslav republics will be covered as well.

4. Lorraine Mortimer. *Terror and Joy: The Films of Dušan Makavejev* (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
5. In 2013 Makavejev will be a special guest at the Tirana International Film Festival (Albania) where he will present a selection of his films. In 2012 he was given a retrospective at New Horizons International Film Festival Wrocław (Poland). In 2011 the Austrian Film Museum in collaboration with the Slovenian Kinoteka presented a near-complete retrospective of his work.
6. We can retroactively read the death of Tito in 1980 as the beginning of the end of Socialist Yugoslavia. His death helped to mark the end of the golden age of Yugoslavia, which reached an economic and cultural peak in the 1960s before steadily declining towards civil war in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tito was largely remembered as the patriarchal (some say dictatorial) force that held Yugoslavia together during the height of the Cold War. As a founder of the Non-Aligned Movement, which stood apart from the world superpowers, Tito was an immensely popular geopolitical figure.
7. [http://www.filmfestival-goeast.de/files/symposiumsflyer\\_web.pdf](http://www.filmfestival-goeast.de/files/symposiumsflyer_web.pdf) (accessed on 16 May 2013)
8. See the review of the Busan Cinema Forum (Loist/Valck 2011) at <http://www.necsus-ejms.org/busan-cinema-forum-2011/>.
9. <http://www.kurzfilmtage.de/> (accessed on 16 May 2013)

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