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To cite this article: Toni Juricic (2023) And the Marble Ass saw the second coming of Tito: Želimir Žilnik's cinematic representations of a transitional society through the revolutionary carnivalesque, *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, 14:2, 154-167, DOI: [10.1080/2040350X.2022.2041368](https://doi.org/10.1080/2040350X.2022.2041368)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2040350X.2022.2041368>



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Published online: 18 Feb 2022.



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And the Marble Ass saw the second coming of Tito: Želimir Žilnik's cinematic representations of a transitional society through the revolutionary carnivalesque

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ABSTRACT

The violent disintegration of the federation at the beginning of the 1990s transformed the Yugoslav sphere into a landscape plagued by its complicated shared history and the arduous process of transition. Coinciding with Milošević's tendencies towards Greater Serbia, Belgrade became an intersection of anti-war activists, socio-economic difficulties, and nationalist propaganda. Produced within the microcosmos of a post-socialist society undergoing a transition, Želimir Žilnik's *Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time* (1994) and *Marble Ass* (1995) can be understood through Kevin M. F. Platt's (1997) notion of the 'revolutionary grotesque'. For Platt (1997), the revolutionary grotesque is an artistic response that emerges during the periods of radical social transformation, and it is marked by the unusual confrontations and deformations of the past and future. The paper will examine the nature of the revolutionary grotesque found in Žilnik's films through the collective memory of a post-socialist society and the post-war trauma of its transgressive individuals. To understand Žilnik's blend of documentary and fiction, which often deploys the notion of the carnivalesque, I will introduce the term 'revolutionary carnivalesque' to further corroborate the filmmaker's cinematic representations of a transitional microcosmos as the space turned upside down.

KEYWORDS

Carnavalesque;
revolutionary grotesque;
transitional society;
post-Yugoslav cinema

During the 1990s, following the aftermath of the socialist federation's dissolution, Serbian filmmaker Želimir Žilnik took the opportunity to create a cinematic portrayal of a post-Yugoslav sphere as the space that found itself in a transition between both the socialist and capitalist systems. Žilnik's approach to filmmaking in the 1990s can be examined through the notion of what Kevin M.F. Platt (1997) has termed as the 'revolutionary grotesque'. For Platt, the revolutionary grotesque emerges during the periods of revolutionary social change. The sudden shift in the transition between the systems and values, as Platt (1997) further writes, presents an opportunity for authors to create a fictional representation of the society caught within the rapid social changes. These representations often include bizarre and absurd elements that compose a grotesque image of a community caught between the old and the new. As the notion that emerges during the revolutionary social changes, in the context of post-socialist Serbian society, the revolutionary grotesque appears in the aftermath of the federation's disintegration at the beginning of the 1990s. The second case of

social transformation is the series of mass protests on the streets of Belgrade in 1996/1997 against Milošević's regime.

This study will examine how Žilnik's *Tito Among the Serbs for a Second Time* (*Tito po drugi put među Srbima*, 1994) and *Marble Ass* (1995) serve as the testament to Platt's notion of revolutionary grotesque. In a documentary film *Tito Among the Serbs for a Second Time*, the filmmaker deployed an impersonator of the late Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito to take a stroll through the city of Belgrade to observe whether the people are united, 'as they were during his life'. The second film that exemplifies the revolutionary grotesque found in Žilnik's work of the 1990s is *Marble Ass*. In this docufictional text, the author deployed real people to act as the fictionalised version of themselves to document life during the Yugoslav wars. Both films were released during Milošević's regime and between the two socio-political events, which fall under Platt's (1997) understanding that the revolutionary grotesque emerges during periods of rapid social change.

Derived from the theories on the (revolutionary) grotesque, the narratives of *Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time* and *Marble Ass* shall be further explored through the notion of, for which I propose the term, the 'revolutionary carnivalesque'. Corroborated by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) for whom the notion of carnivalesque possesses regenerative power(s) and Platt's theory on revolutionary grotesque, this study will demonstrate how Žilnik employs revolutionary carnivalesque to encapsulate the life of a transitional society. By analysing *Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time* and *Marble Ass*, I will attest how the author's deployment of revolutionary carnivalesque instigates a moment of collective catharsis and implements the sense of regeneration in a society blighted by nationalism and arduous process of transition. Moreover, this study will investigate how the deployment of documentary format and docufictional narrative accentuates the regenerative aspect of revolutionary carnivalesque. Before examining the aforementioned films and how the revolutionary grotesque/carnivalesque resonates with Žilnik's cinematic texts, it is vital to further probe into Platt's notion and explore the function(s) of the grotesque in art.

Of (revolutionary) grotesque and its relation to the post-Yugoslav sphere

To comprehend Platt's interrelation between social transformations and the revolutionary grotesque in post-Yugoslav society, one must understand the definition of grotesque and its function(s) within art. The grotesque remains one of the most challenging categories to define due to its fluid nature that continues to transgress the limits of definition. The definition of the grotesque varies from scholar to scholar, from being a liberating force (see Mikhail Bakhtin 1984: pp. 10–37) to a baleful representation of the alienated world (see Wolfgang Kayser 1963: pp. 31–53). The contradiction in defining the grotesque and in theories between the two authors is corroborated by Ewa Kuryluk (1987), stating that Bakhtin's approach examines the grotesque as the collective chaos of the carnival, while Kayser's notion adumbrates the grotesque as the dark chaos that haunts the individual. While Bakhtin's and Kayser's theories on the grotesque are still highly influential, modern scholars tend to juxtapose these oppositional approaches rather than examine them as two different aspects. Bernard McElroy (1989) states that the grotesque can be studied as an aberration that induces fascination, as a flicker of perverse glee trapped between simply ludicrous and merely ugly. Frances S. Connelly (2003) writes that the grotesque combines unlikely things that possess the tendency to 'challenge established realities or construct new

ones; those that deform or decompose things; and those that are metamorphic' (2). Connelly (2003) notes that the grotesque is characterised by its lack of fixity, unpredictability and instability and is further defined by its effect on the boundaries, as the grotesque may transgress, merge, overflow, and destabilise the established boundaries. One can observe that the grotesque is often deployed to produce a distorted representation of the world that challenges our reality and reveals the hidden truths buried beneath the surface of everyday life. The grotesque can be terrifying or comical, and often it can be both. It jeers as it revolts us. It immerses us in the world of the abject, repulsion, uncanny, carnivalesque and absurd. In her study, Kuryluk (1987) states that Kayser and Bakhtin discerned the interrelation between the grotesque and socio-political context. 'Kayser noticed that the uncanny and the absurd flourished in certain periods more vigorously than in others, and Bakhtin tied grotesque to periods of spiritual unrest and crisis' (Kuryluk 1987: 6). Based on the times of radical social transformation marked by political turmoil and spiritual unrest, Platt (1997) devised the theory of the revolutionary grotesque.

In his study of the revolutionary grotesque and its relation to the rapid social transformations in post-socialist society (with the author's main interest being Russia), Platt (1997) posed the question: 'what special possibilities for literary creation arise in such periods of rapid transition from one set of social institutions to another, from one world into another?' (3). For Platt (1997), the literary works of artists that found themselves within the eye of social transformations often utilise the past and future to portray their society as a muddle of two visions of social life, a muddle that is laughable or lamentable. To create an artistic manifestation of the revolutionary grotesque, as Platt (1997) writes, the post-socialist society's authors often portray a disorienting fusion of old and new social spaces, of the past and the future. Furthermore, 'the grotesque fusions of the past and the future' within the socialist societies can be read as the 'investigations of the subjective experience of eras of rapid social change', which include 'the consequences of sudden social transformation, the distressing uncertainty concerning social values that afflicts individuals and communities during such times' (Platt 1997: 4). While Platt based his examination of the revolutionary grotesque on Russian history,¹ he stated that the model of the revolutionary grotesque in fiction (including film medium) applies to other post-socialist states characterised by rapid social transformation(s), including the countries that emerged with the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The uncertainty of the future, the degraded socialist values, and the socio-economic crisis shook the post-Yugoslav sphere after the dissolution of the federation at the beginning of the 1990s. The disintegration led to wars² between Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia. Compared with the dissolutions of other socialist regimes, the violent acts committed during the Yugoslav wars amplified the revolutionary grotesque within the artistic texts by authors who found themselves, along with their compatriots, in the eye of intense social transformation.

To understand what led to the period of rapid social transformation in the 1990s, one needs to comprehend the context which prepared the stage for the dissolution of Yugoslavia and its violent aftermath. Yugoslavia's economic and political situation quickly deteriorated after Tito's death in 1980. Marie-Janine Calic (2019) points out that, with Yugoslav society becoming more diversified and divided, the eighties saw the rise of nationalism in the nation-states, where the critical intellectuals, entrepreneurs, journalists, and scientists began to deconstruct the key political myths (256). In the face of socio-economic uncertainty and degradation of socialist myths, Slobodan Milošević quickly gained popularity and power

in Serbia, becoming its president in the late eighties. With the first multi-party elections and secession of the nation-states, the nature of the dominant political parties was, as Calic (2019) writes, based on ethnic identity rather than a political program. It was Milošević who played the card of Serbian minority being under threat in Croatia due to the infamous Ustasha legacy from World War II, which saw the fascist Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska – NDH) committing atrocities against the Serbian population. In the atmosphere of ethnonationalism, Milošević managed to mobilise JNA and members of Serbian minorities across Bosnia and Croatia. Propelling the offensives against Bosnia and Croatia in the early 1990s, Milošević's regime transformed the post-Yugoslav space into a bloodbath of war atrocities, including rape, genocide, and ethnic cleansing.

With Milošević's regime being responsible for the massacres in Srebrenica and Vukovar, the Serbian society suffered international restrictions, hyper-inflation, and demonisation in foreign media. With the community that found itself amidst the shattered socialist values of 'brotherhood and unity' and ethno-nationalist propaganda, this period of the socio-political crisis became a fertile ground for the grotesque to flourish. The film became the medium that can juxtapose the past and present with the uncertainty of the future as the instrument of critical examination in Milošević's regime. Žilnik's documentary and docu-fictional approach to the socio-political issues of the 1990s serve as the fitting instrument to analyse the post-Yugoslav transitional society through the theory of the revolutionary grotesque. Both *Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time* and *Marble Ass* will constitute the basis for corroborating the revolutionary carnivalesque as the notion that derives from Platt's work and Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque. The first film to explore the post-socialist sphere as the world turned upside-down is *Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time*, a documentary that offers a carnivalesque confrontation of Serbian society with the late Yugoslav leader.

The carnivalesque spirit and regenerative nature of Tito's second coming

Nearly fourteen years after Yugoslav society was shocked by TV journalist Miodrag Zdravković's announcement that Comrade Tito died, the 'apparition' of the late Marshall appeared on the streets of Belgrade. Played by a Slovene impersonator Dragoljub 'Mičko' Ljubičić, 'Tito' embarks on a journey to find out what happened to his 'beautiful little country', why the red stars disappeared from the streets, and why the people are not united as they were during his lifetime. The impersonator converses with the pedestrians in an unfamiliar way that juxtaposes animosity and nostalgia towards the late president. Pavle Levi (2007) notices that the implications of the performative dynamic between the 'ruler' and his former subjects brings to the front the specific mechanisms of ideological interpellation in post-Yugoslav space. The passers-by see Tito either as the saviour that left them too soon or as the criminal blamed for Serbia becoming a victim of international restrictions. Ljubičić's impersonation of Tito does not only serve as an opportunity for people to witness the second coming of the 'benevolent dictator', but it offers an opportunity to blame him for all the crimes he (allegedly) committed during his presidency.

While Tito was an untouchable icon³ during his lifetime, his death opened the door for a critical examination of his life and political actions. In his film, Žilnik encouraged the citizens of Belgrade to confront the late leader personally. Some of the most memorable exchanges of dialogues between the Serbs and Tito include: 'You should not have died. You

should have been hanged,' 'We had led an awful life. It is all your fault,' 'You worked for other people, not for these people here. You were against your own people,' and finally, 'You initiated all the evil in Yugoslavia.' For Levi (2007), the heavily criticised approach towards 'Tito' reveals that the Yugoslav president's authority was not the only product built from the outside by the apparatus of the socialist state. Tito's 'authority also included a strong "internal dimension"' where his effectiveness 'was to a significant extent enhanced by its subjects' self-submission to it' (Levi 2007: 123). While Tito was, as Levi (2007) further explains, demoted from the untouchable national (or to be more specific, supranational) idol to the criticised and hated authoritarian, a larger population of the film (both old and young) greeted the late Marshall's 'return' as a positive incidence. Levi (2007) links the positive attitude towards Tito to Stjepan Gredelj's notion of 'profane religiosity', which was an essential component of the 1990s ethnocollectivism across the post-Yugoslav sphere, where the objects and subjects of adoration constituted the Yugoslav heroic past, culture, nation, and finally, its leader. As Gredelj points out, the profane religiosity is generated 'amidst certain irregular activities, dramatic events, crises which request that they be overcome, whereas the individual is neither capable of using rational means to reflect upon those nor to resolve them' (Gredelj, in Levi 2007: 121). The example of profane religiosity and its relation to Tito is best exemplified with the Relay of Youth, a symbolic relay race held every year in honour of Tito's birthday. As Gredelj further writes, the engagement in collective rituals and ceremonies 'acquires a socialising and integrative function because it involves states soaked in mystical dreams about the all-encompassing One' (Gredelj in Levi 2007: 121). The interrelation between profane religiosity and the sudden shift in the post-Yugoslav socio-political sphere is a testament to Platt's notion of revolutionary grotesque.

Derived from Platt's theory and Levi's (via Gredelj) examination of Žilnik's cinematic text, one can note that Tito's descent to the square of Belgrade can also be interpreted through Bakhtin's (1984) notion of the carnivalesque. For Bakhtin (1984), the carnivalesque is based upon the carnivals of the Middle Ages as the places of parodies, travesties, profanations, and most notably, the comic crownings and un-crownings. The interrelation between the carnivalesque and Tito's second coming can be further corroborated with Mitja Velikonja's (2010) interpretation of Tito as a trickster who managed to outsmart his enemies (including the forces of Axis and Stalin) and choose the 'third' way between the Eastern and Western bloc. Reading Žilnik's cinematic text based on Platt's revolutionary grotesque and Bakhtin's carnivalesque, it could be noted that the film serves as the manifestation of, what can be termed as, the revolutionary carnivalesque. Within Žilnik's cinematic representation of the revolutionary carnivalesque, the newly crowned 'Tito's' contemporary rule over the square creates, similarly to Bakhtin's theory on forms of time and chronotope in the novel, a special little world.

While Velikonja compared the post-Yugoslav society's image of Tito's persona to that of a trickster, the Marshall in Žilnik's film can be compared to the characters of the rogue, the clown, and the fool discussed in Bakhtin's (2008) work. These three types of characters create their own world, what Bakhtin (2008) terms, their own chronotope. Like them, 'Tito' carries with him 'a vital connection with the theatrical trappings of the public square, with the mask of the public spectacle', where his very being 'does not have a direct, but a metaphorical significance' and is connected to the 'extremely important area of the square where the common people congregate' (Bakhtin 2008: 159). What is essential to the figures of the rogues, fools, and clowns is that they can deploy their right to be 'other' in our world and

exploit their position while wearing their masks, which can be attributed to Žilnik's protagonist who pulled on the uniform of the Marshall. As with the characters of the fool and clown, 'Tito' is laughed at by the others while he laughs at himself too. Another vital element of the film, as the example of Bakhtin's theory of chronotope and carnivalesque, is the setting where Žilnik's cinematic text takes place. Like the fools and clowns that 'ruled' on the public squares where the common people gather, the carnivalesque Tito's contemporary reign is located on the streets of Belgrade as the place where the folk will meet. It is there where the interrelation between Tito and passers-by externalises⁴ 'a human being, via parodic laughter' (Bakhtin 2008: 160). The laughter induced in the people is parodic laughter that mocks both the present and the past. It is the laughter that makes fun of historical revisionism that is taking place in their country where the street names (bearing the names of communist leaders, including Tito) are changed (to the fact that 'his' street was renamed into the Street of Serbian Rulers, 'Tito' nonchalantly replies – 'That is fine by me, after all, I was some kind of a Serbian ruler too'). The revolutionary carnivalesque nature of Žilnik's film offers a joyous and rejuvenating approach to the period of rapid social transformation where, in the society whose values are suddenly shifted and turned upside down, the figure of (once) utmost authority is debased to the level of common people.

Another instance that attests the revolutionary carnivalesque in *Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time* is the comic interexchange of dialogues between the impersonator and passers-by, transforming the late leader into the walking and self-conscious manifestation of 'Yugonostalgia' and 'titostalgia', the two variations of nostalgia specific to the post-Yugoslav sphere. Following the federation's disintegration, Yugonostalgia possessed negative connotations at the beginning of the 1990s. Dubravka Ugrešić (2012) writes that the term 'Yugonostalgics' was used as a label for the individuals who were (supposedly) against their newfound independence. Ugrešić points out that the Yugonostalgics were castigated as people who lamented the federation's disintegration during the period when Tito, Partisans, brotherhood and unity, and Yugoslav popular culture was tossed into the "dustbin of history," into a memory zone where admittance was strictly prohibited' (Ugrešić and Williams 2012: 6). Despite the negative connotation Yugonostalgia possessed back in the 1990s, especially in the wake of the dissolution, this specific variation of nostalgia persisted across the post-Yugoslav sphere. In his study of Yugonostalgia, Mitja Velikonja (2010) states that three main elements constitute the Yugoslav variant of nostalgia: the glorious past (partisan movement in WWII, mythology of Tito as the commander of People's Liberation War, and mythology of exclusivity), the miserable present (mythology of the paradise lost, and the mythology of the enemy), and finally, the uncertain future (the fatalistic and eschatological mythologies). In Žilnik's film, one can notice that the most present elements of Yugonostalgia among the people 'Tito' encountered as the mixture of the first and second category. Ljubičić's presence triggers the pedestrians' memories of the glorious past, the socio-economic stability, and the shared values of brotherhood and unity. Furthermore, along with the nostalgia for Yugoslavia, people mainly express nostalgia towards Tito as their leader and the times when he ruled. The people praise Tito as the leader who saved them from the Germans and was brave enough to say 'no' to Stalin.

The positive approach towards Tito serves as the manifestation of titostalgia or, as Velikonja (2008) writes, the nostalgia directed towards the 'benevolent dictator' who embodied the values of brotherhood and unity. To amplify the effect of the carnivalesque and sentiment of titostalgia amongst the pedestrians, the impersonator creates a more

approachable Tito. Ljubičić's Tito continuously jokes about himself and the politicians, both alive and dead. The impersonator's performance acts as another manifestation of comic debasement of Tito's cult of personality, when the once sacred individual and the symbol of Yugoslavia makes fun of his alleged extra-marital affairs with famous Hollywood actresses, the absence of political oppositions to his rule ('Is there any opposition now? There weren't any oppositions when I was alive'), the problem of political prosecution ('Goli otok?²⁵ I heard about that just a couple of days ago!'), and being a thief that loved to indulge in a luxurious lifestyle ('They complain, I used to live well... You all used to live well, back then!'). Along with praises and hostile comments towards Marshall, some citizens use Tito to vent their discontent with the current politics. Their remarks against Milošević and the nation's state can fall under the second category, where passers-by lament for Yugoslavia as the paradise lost, for the time when they could build houses. At the same time, one of the passers-by shouts that they could not even build a pigsty. Possessing Yugonostalgic and titostalgic sentiment, the people of Belgrade were given an opportunity to mock their past and current leaders. The streets of Serbia's capital became a market square in a Bakhtinian sense, a space where the common people encountered and confronted the carnivalesque embodiment of Yugoslav socialism. In an age of turbulent socio-political shifts, the confrontation with the late Tito offered a seemingly cathartic experience for the people. The pedestrians either lashed out at the impersonator as the guilty party of Yugoslavia's downfall or as the icon that could have save them from Milošević's regime.

The catharsis induced through the encounter with 'Tito' serves as another regenerative element of the revolutionary carnivalesque. As Richard Kearney (2007) states, catharsis invites us beyond the pathology of fear (*eleos*) to serenity, beyond the pathology of pity (*pathos*) to compassion, where the catharsis purges the two primary emotions until they are distilled into a healing brew (52). While the catharsis is primarily expressed, Kearney (2007) writes, as the power of vicariousness and being elsewhere, the catharsis in Žilnik's film is experienced directly by the passers-by. The people of Belgrade are faced with the 'apparition' of Tito, whose carnivalesque nature temporarily suspends the reality of their lives. With the carnivalesque chronotope surrounding the late president, the passers-by simultaneously act as the audience and the actors. Although they interact with the impersonator, the people acknowledge Ljubičić's role and act as if they speak to Tito himself. The pedestrians that interact with 'Tito' become part of the carnivalesque chronotope, where they temporarily suspend the reality of their daily life and accept the impersonator's presence as the second coming of their 'benevolent dicator'. Both the 'players' and the 'audience' experience catharsis through the humorous interaction with Ljubičić. They continuously confess to Tito about the shortcomings of the new (and the old) government or their Yugonostalgic sentiments towards the socialist system and its values. Even the pedestrians who expressed their repugnance towards Tito seized the opportunity to confront their former leader for his misdeeds. This opposite approach to Tito's second coming is a testament to Velikonja's claim that the Yugoslav leader seems to inhabit the liminal zone between being the victorious leader of people during and after World War II to being a traitor and butcher of every Yugoslav nation.

The unexpected (the pedestrians surely did not expect to see Tito walking down the streets of Belgrade) and sudden release of the emotions (*eleos* and *pathos*) triggered the regenerative force of revolutionary carnivalesque. The regenerative force manifests as the 'ritual laughter', which Bakhtin (1984) defines as the practice by comic cults that scoffed

and laughed at their deities and as the instrument that debases the authority. In the debasement of (post-)Yugoslav authorities through the ritual laughter, Žilnik creates the space where the passers-by are given the opportunity to candidly express their sentiments triggered by the abrupt socio-political changes. The filmmaker's deployment of the documentary format further accentuates the collective catharsis as it captures the carnivalesque spirit that emerged on the streets of Belgrade. This spirit is subsequently transferred to the film medium for the audience from the other side of the screen. In so doing, Žilnik's composed a cinematic text that serves as the document of the revolutionary carnivalesque, where the film encapsulated the society caught in the period of immense socio-political changes, where the past was being revised, and the future was uncertain.

Marble Ass and the revolutionary carnivalesque at the margins of the transitional society

The release of *Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time* generated a remarkable commercial success, which allowed Žilnik to fund *Marble Ass*, a film that, similar to its predecessor, offers a peek into the space of transitional society through the carnivalesque representation of toxic masculinity. Far from the main street of Belgrade and the crowd that followed the carnivalesque second coming of Josip Broz Tito, Želimir Žilnik located the narrative of *Marble Ass* on the city's margins. Instead of a documentary approach, as seen in *Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time*, the filmmaker deployed docufictional narrative to produce a portrait of two real-life transgender sex workers Merlin (or Merlinka, the name being the Serbian derivation of Marilyn) and Sanela. Žilnik develops the narrative by introducing Merlinka's violent lover Johnny who returns from the war. One can note that *Marble Ass*, with the inclusion of non-professional actors who play the fictionalised version of themselves, exemplifies the docufictional approach of filmmaking. The fictional narrative, where the real-life characters navigate the space ravaged by nationalist tendencies and war-mongering, captures the actuality of the Serbian society in the wake of the Yugoslav wars. To encapsulate the reality of life under Milošević's regime, Žilnik locates *Marble Ass* on the margins of the transitional society. The two characters inhabit a derelict house on the margins of Belgrade, a space characterised by poor living conditions. The run-down space occupied by the social outcasts stands as the testament to the revolutionary grotesque. Platt (1997) states that the grotesque disintegrates 'the differences that divide old and new social worlds in a grotesque mixed image, in a vision of a place that is neither here nor there and is hence nowhere' (9). With a society in transition, the characters inhabit a place not here nor there. The two protagonists, Merlinka and Sanela, seem to be cast aside from the war, hyperinflation, and other socio-economic issues inflicted on Serbian society.

By introducing a quirky pair of transgender sex workers, Žilnik creates an inversion of the transitional society. Sanja Lazarević Radak (2016) points out that in this inversion, the transvestites stop being 'special' and different from the 'normal' people who try to survive through war and sanctions. Still, Merlinka and Sanela become strange regarding those who are thirsty for blood and violence. Not being interpellated into the ethnonationalist hate, Lazarević Radak (2016) writes that the two protagonists symbolise the last shreds of human dignity within the community plagued by pathological aggression. The inversion of characters corroborates the statement that Žilnik's film exemplifies the revolutionary grotesque in post-Yugoslav society. While the 'public discourse concerning revolutionary social

transformations stands in a continuously evolving dialectic relationship with the political and social realities of revolutionary change' (Platt 1997: 18), the protagonists of *Marble Ass* reject ethnonationalism propagated by Milošević's regime. Žilnik's protagonist Merlinka sees herself as a humanitarian worker, where she counters the violence of Milošević's government by offering her love to men. Merlinka's claim of being a 'humanitarian worker' is supported in a scene where the prostitute, in a dispute with Johnny, argues that she is doing 'an honest job'. Unlike soldiers (and her lover), she is not stealing or killing anyone, and people come to her for love, not violence. In her analysis of *Marble Ass*, Dominika Prejdova, et al. (2009) notes that the protagonists' unconventional presence and behaviour are presented as the only acceptable demeanour in an environment perverted by Milošević's war militarism. The behaviour of the two transgender sex workers also serves as the cinematic manifestation of the individuals that are not, Lazarević Radak (2016) writes, shaken by the fear of losing one's identity. The two transgender protagonists choose their own identities amidst the chaos of radical social transformations, and, unlike their lover Johnny, the stability of their identities is not threatened.

Johnny serves as the prime example of the instability of masculine identity during the 1990s. The combination of PTSD and his excessive display of violent tendencies creates a volatile representation of man emasculated by his nation-state. He is often seen exercising caricatural martial arts moves or playing with weapons throughout the film. Dijana Jelača (2016) interprets Johnny's violent behaviour as the character's inability to escape from the masculinist ideology that interpellated him into the machinery of war and left him emotionally devastated upon his return from the front. With him, he brought a pool table that serves not only as the spoil of war but as a reminder of mindless violence. Under that table Johnny found his best friend butchered, an image that triggered emotional and psychological trauma as seen in the film. Jelača writes that 'the table is an externalization of Johnny's war trauma, one that he never fully verbalizes or directly acknowledges' (2016: 116). Far from the front, the vulnerable and figuratively castrated Johnny tries to maintain the masculine aura to, as Jelača (2016) states, conceal the 'emasculatation' he suffered in the war. Johnny's behaviour, where the character counters violence with more violence to an exaggerated and caricaturist extent, exemplifies a comically distorted Thanatos whose inclination towards violence opposes the Eros-driven nature of Merlinka.

In relation to other post-Yugoslav films of the 1990s, Johnny serves as an example of what Tomislav Z. Longinović (2005) describes as 'volatile masculinity gone wild' (38). Longinović (2005) writes that the filmmakers, such as Emir Kusturica, Goran Paskaljević and Srđan Dragojević deployed the self-balkanised representation of masculinity in their films to appease the gaze of the 'Western eye'. For Longinović, the Western eye represents the dominant gaze of the West and how they perceive the Balkans. Kusturica, Paskaljević and Dragojević incorporated the imagery of Balkan as the lawless space characterised by the excessive and carnivalesque savagery. The most notable example is Kusturica's *Underground* (*Podzemlje*, 1995), where the director utilises slapstick cartoonish violence perpetrated by its two masculine protagonists to compose a self-balkanised representation of post-Yugoslav space. Longinović's theory on self-balkanisation is further attested by Jurica Pavičić (2010), who states that the filmmakers exploited the exaggerated, grotesque, and stereotypical behaviour to emphasise the 'untamed' nature of the Balkans (44). While the men are, as Pavičić (2010) writes, the misogynist slaves of their wild passions, which cannot control their violent impulses, the women in the films of self-balkanisation are

submissive and passive, subject to men's lust and vehemence. The excessive violence perpetrated by the caricatural characters within the society caught within the rapid social transformation corresponds with Platt's notion of revolutionary grotesque. The characters of Kusturica's *Underground*, Paskaljević's *Cabaret Balkan* (*Bure baruta*, 1998), and Dragojević's *Pretty Village Pretty Flame* (*Lepa sela, lepo gore*, 1996) stand as the testament to Platt's theory. As Platt states, the characters found within the fictional texts of the revolutionary grotesque are caught in their struggle to bring to light the consequences of sudden social transformations, a struggle to sort out the divergent social spaces where the past and the future meet with distressing uncertainty. In the context of post-Yugoslav cinema(s) of the 1990s, the characters found within the above-mentioned cinematic texts struggle with the emergence of social chaos and the collapse of social values through the display of excessive behaviour.

The possible relation, and more importantly, a distinction between *Marble Ass* and films of self-balkanisation can be examined in the scene between Johnny and Merlinka's pet goat. The scene encapsulates the excessive violence perpetrated by the traumatised soldier. To prove himself as a masculine man that is not psychically nor emotionally shattered by war, Johnny follows his female officer's order to kill a goat. The scene serves as the grotesque exercise of masculinity, where Johnny skins the dead goat to validate himself as the 'killing machine'. Unable to perform his function as a soldier within social chaos that engulfed the society transformed Johnny into an intoxicated husk that aimlessly wanders the streets and nightclubs of Belgrade. Through the excessive display of masculinity to the female officer (who appears more masculine than other soldiers in the film), he seeks the nation-state's validation that he is 'man' enough to go and kill again in the name of ethnonational love. The explicit skinning of the goat serves as the metaphorical skinning of Johnny's masculine façade, unravelling his unstable mental health. Later in the film, Johnny's repressed emotions emerge to the surface as he wakes up, screaming from the nightmare. The scene serves as the crucial point which sets apart Žilnik's film from the films of self-balkanisation. Žilnik does not utilise the caricatural violence to create a self-balkanised portrayal of post-Yugoslav society, but to problematise the trauma inherited by the men that came from the warzone, men seemingly abandoned by their nation and left to wander through the social margins. Unlike the female characters in the self-balkanised films, Merlinka and Sanela are not the victims of men's rage and lust. Jelača writes that the two protagonists serve as an affirmative and subversive force 'of re-appropriating an affective attachment of love in order to show that the violence of the nation has to be countered by acts that firmly dislocate the links between love and ethno-nation as the only way for love to exist' (Jelača 2016: 117). Merlinka and Sanela seem to be the only characters who remain relatively, at least emotionally and psychologically, intact by the changes in society. Their identities remained unchanged and stable, and their stability gives the two protagonists the ability to mend people whose identities have been fractured by the change in the social order.

The interrelation between the three characters exemplifies the revolutionary carnivalesque in *Marble Ass* as the masculine Johnny, who represents the heteronormative male character, is out of joint while transgender prostitutes became the basis of human decency in the world whose values have suddenly turned upside down. While the soldier is tormented by the memories of his friend dying beneath the pool table Johnny brought home from the war, the two prostitutes mend his mental wounds to rejuvenate his fragile state of mind. Merlinka and Sanela stand as the testament to the carnivalesque element of regeneration

amidst the atrocity of Yugoslav wars, with their house transformed into a space where the tormented soldiers can heal as the world around them adjusts to the new system of values. The revolutionary carnivalesque of the film is further exemplified in the scene between Merlin, Sanela and Johnny, where the two prostitutes tend the emotionally damaged Johnny. To calm him down, Merlinka and Sanela blow up the condoms as balloons so Johnny can play with 'the little clouds'. One can notice that Sanela's first instinct was to put the condom on Johnny's penis. This act can be read as the sex worker's automatic reaction to deploy sex as way of treating the emotionally and psychologically unstable clients that returned from the war. Tended by the two sex workers, Johnny begins to cry, finally admitting that he cares about them and only pretends that he does not need anyone. As Johnny shares a kiss with Merlin and Sanela, the scene indicates the first tender moment between the lovers since the traumatised soldier return from the war. The scene encapsulates the revolutionary carnivalesque of Žilnik's film and exemplifies the filmmaker's subversion of self-balkanised films and their representation of women as passive victims of masculinity. Moreover, the revolutionary carnivalesque of the scene exposes a cathartic moment, where Johnny, albeit temporary, abandons the principles of violence and selects love shared by the two humanitarian sex workers. As he plays with the floating condom balloons, the emotionally damaged soldier seems finally distracted from the horrors of war and his nation-state's need to be a ruthless killing machine. Emotionally tended by Merlinka and Sanela, who created a safe space for their lover, Johnny finally finds himself in an environment that allows him to release his repressed emotions without being castigated.

Despite the tender moment that could mend his broken psyche, Johnny quickly returns to his violent habits, leading to his death at the end of the film. With Johnny's dead body set on fire on the pool table by a group of hustlers, the scene serves as the metafictional moment in the film as the burning body is similar to Jugoslava's death in Žilnik's *Early Works*. With the metafictional moment, which resembles the ending of the filmmaker's first feature film that criticised the socialist authorities, the shot of Johnny's burning body serves as a critique of Milošević's regime, whose actions engulfed society in ethnonationalism and inadequate socio-economic conditions. As a witness to Johnny's gruesome end, Merlinka simply comments, 'Ah, men,' and moves on. This comical reaction to one's tragic death is another manifestation of the revolutionary grotesque (and carnivalesque) encapsulated within Žilnik's cinematic text. In the end, Merlinka, who, throughout the film, advised her friends against violence, is not surprised by her volatile lover's untimely death. The reaction serves as the manifestation of revolutionary carnivalesque, where the prostitute openly mocks the exaggerated masculinity and ethnonationalism that is doomed for failure. One can note that the burning of Johnny's body possesses a symbolic and regenerative function, where the fire serves as the purifying element, the element that purges the violent and nationalist tendencies implemented by Milošević's government. The regenerative aspect of *Marble Ass* is corroborated by Prejdova, et al. (2009), where the margin of Serbian society is not the reflection of its disintegration but a domain of hope for its restoration. With war and nationalist values in the spotlight, especially in the media of Serbian society, the characters that inhabit the otherwise 'unliveable' zones of social life serve as the reminder that humanity is still present and that it is a question of time when the love and affection will return from the periphery. The return of love and affection as the two regenerative forces is emphasised by Žilnik's juxtaposition of fiction and reality, where the docufictional narrative of *Marble Ass* amplifies the cathartic element of the revolutionary carnivalesque. In his examination of catharsis and its effect on

the audience, Kearney (2007) writes that ‘the stories become cathartic to the extent that they combine empathic imagination with a certain acknowledgement of the cause and context of the suffering, thereby offering a wider lens to review one’s own insufferable pain’ (61). While the audience at the cinemas and theatres experience pain (or similar emotion) vicariously through the characters on stage/screen, the domestic audience of *Marble Ass* is not (entirely) detached from the narrative due to the docufictional aspect of the film. The involvement of the amateur actors (that the audience could encounter on the streets of Belgrade back in the day) in the fictional narrative amplifies the reality of their lives in the 1990s. Incorporating characters that the audience could meet on the streets of Belgrade and through the cinematic intersection of fiction and reality, Žilnik’s film offers the domestic audience a cathartic experience to release their suppressed emotions regarding ethnonationalist violence and its degenerative effect on society.

Conclusion

The revolutionary carnivalesque of Žilnik’s *Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time* and *Marble Ass* simultaneously derides the authorities and acts as the collective remedy for the transitional society of the 1990s. The subversive nature of the two films foreshadowed the carnivalesque debasement of authorities in 1996. After the rigged parliamentary election, the people’s dissatisfaction with Slobodan Milošević’s regime culminated with a series of mass protests. The protests lasted from November 1996 to February 1997, with the people of Serbia deploying carnivalesque methods of collective actions to deride and challenge the authorities. Edita Petronijewić (1998) writes that the streets of Belgrade thus became the ‘places of power embodied by the protesters themselves’ (269). The protestors’ sheer presence on the streets, Petronijewić (1998) writes, sent a message of breaking the spell of fear, a message visible and understandable to everyone. Petronijewić (1998) further notes that both laughter and humour played a vital role in exposing the power of authority in Belgrade, as the dominant codes of the authorities were challenged by the introduction of the festivity and games. Levi (2007) states that the carnivalesque debasement of political symbols manifested in organising open-air discotheques, displaying a sponge effigy of Milošević in prison uniform and throwing eggs at Belgrade City Assembly and state-controlled Radio Television Serbia. The protest act of throwing eggs at institutions that symbolise Milošević’s regime Žilnik encapsulated in his short documentary film *Throwing off the Yolks of Bondage* (*Do jaja*, 1996). During its six-minute duration, the film captures the culmination of society’s dissatisfaction seen in the examined films, and finally, it represents the action against the regime. In the context of the carnivalesque protests caught on *Throwing off the Yolk of Bondage*, Žilnik’s two films (*Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time* and *Marble Ass*) serve as the cinematic manifestation(s) of the intermission between the two events of social change, between the fall of Yugoslavia and the fall Milošević,⁶ where the people took their revolutionary spirit to the streets to deride corruption and the abuse of power as part of their fight for social change.

Notes

1. From the days of Peter the Great to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.
2. While not suffering the immense casualties as Croatia and Bosnia, Slovenia was also embroiled in the war. The Ten-Day War between Slovene Territorial Defence and Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA) lasted from 27 June 1991 to 7 July 1991.

3. His cult of personality was considered sacred, and transgressions that debased Marshall's image were met with prosecution. One of the best-known examples of political prosecution for tampering with the image of Tito is the case of Lazar Stojanović's film *Plastic Jesus* (1971). Through the juxtaposition of archival footage, Stojanović equated Tito with Hitler.
4. "It is not their own being they externalise, but a reflected, alien being—however, that is all they have" (Bakhtin 2008: 160).
5. Goli otok (eng. Barren Island) is an uninhabited island in the Northern Adriatic Sea (part of Croatia) that served as a political prison from 1949 – 1989.
6. Or, to be more precise, it marked the beginning of the end of Milošević's regime. The end of Slobodan Milošević's political career as the president came in 2000 when he stepped down from the function due to the disputed presidential elections. One year later, he was arrested by Yugoslav federal authorities and extradited to International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Toni Juricic was born and spent his upbringing in Croatia, where he graduated in Cultural Studies (BA) and Comparative Literature (MA). Under the supervision of Dr Dušan Radunović and Dr Francisco J. Hernández-Adrián, Toni started a doctoral research programme in The School of Modern Languages and Cultures (MLAC) at Durham University. His doctoral project, *The Anatomy of the Grotesque in (Post-)Yugoslav Cinema*, is funded by The Wolfson Postgraduate Scholarship in the Humanities. Combining the cross-disciplinary interests of transnational cinema, comparative literature, and cultural theory within popular culture, he seeks to examine the interrelation between ideological discourses and cultural products. Alongside his academic activities, Toni is a member of Croatian Screenwriters and Playwrights Guild. His screenplay *Labin Republic (Labinska republika)* is produced by Level 52 for HRT – Hrvatska Radiotelevizija (Croatian Radio Television).

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