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Dissensus and the Politics of Transnationalism in the Cinema of Želimir Žilnik: A Case Study of *The Most Beautiful Country in the World*

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ABSTRACT

The paper takes as a starting point the concept of *dissensus* understood by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière as a gap in, or a redistribution of the right to speak, to see or to be seen. The paper further asserts that *dissensus*, thus understood, perfectly encapsulates the efforts of the post-Yugoslav filmmaker Želimir Žilnik: to intervene in representational order and render visible the socially marginalised and invisible. The notion of political cinema, usually associated with Žilnik, is here redefined as a practice geared towards changing the rules of visibility and towards a redistribution of the authority/right to speak and be seen. The paper also emphasises the immediacy of representation in Žilnik and argues that Žilnik's ideological horizons revolve around Marx's concept of immediate experience, rather than around historical Marxism. Lastly, the paper relates Žilnik's early interrogations of social exclusion to his later preoccupations with displacement and exile and focuses on the author's 2018 film *The Most Beautiful Country in the World*. In conclusion, the paper puts forward the suggestion that Žilnik's last film, while showcasing some of its author's long-standing views of exile, brings forth a new, transnational and socially pragmatic vista on the processes of integration and acculturation.

KEYWORDS

Dissensus; experience; exile; exclusion; acculturation; transnationalism

*Dissensus and the Politics of Transnationalism in the Cinema of Želimir Žilnik: A Case Study of *The Most Beautiful Country in the World**

...the being of men is their actual life-process.

Marx

...precisely the figure that should have embodied human rights more than any other – namely, the refugee – marked instead the radical crisis of the concept.

Giorgio Agamben

Dis-Agreement and the Politics of Experience: Žilnik's Early Films

To paraphrase the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, the fundamental political disagreement, or *dissensus*, is not about different ideas, or ideological values, but rather, about the question of 'who speaks and who does not speak.' In other words, in the modern configuration of the political the question of all questions is that of one's positionality and participation in the power-laden system of political and socio-economical exchange. In what is a revision of the central Marxist concept of class war, Rancière argues that modern-day struggle involves the struggle between those who 'set themselves as able to manage their social interests and those who are supposed to be only able to reproduce their life' (Rancière 2011, 2). The important assumption that derives from Rancière's missive is that politics – and this is what social struggle is – must not be divorced from real social issues; or, that political realm is not made of ideas and grand narratives, but of concrete 'ways of life'. If not, if we accept that there is a separate realm of politics, the question that will arise will be that of competence and prerogative, leading ultimately to the allocation of legitimacy to do politics. In opposition to that view, and this idea will resonate significantly in the subsequent discussion, the task of politics can also be conceived as the unsettling of the very idea of right to do politics. Moreover, it could be understood as the recognition once and for all that sources of power belong to everyone, including those 'who have no qualification to rule' (Rancière 2011, 3).

It would be hard to find a formula that encapsulates more aptly the ethos of Želimir Žilnik's filmmaking than the reclamation of the right to speak of the excluded and empowering of those without 'qualification to rule', that is, enabling the 'unqualified' to gain access to political and every other social power. Žilnik's early documentaries, *Pioniri maleni/Little Pioneers* (1968), *Nezaposleni ljudi/The Unemployed People* (1968), or *Crni film/The Black Film* (1971), interrogate different aspects of social exclusion, the youth, the unemployed, the homeless, to canvas an untoward, heterodox picture of Yugoslavia's seemingly *laissez-faire* model of socialism. The raw, loosely dramatised footage portraying the minutiae of marginalised social groups, revealed the discrepancies of Yugoslavia's rapidly transforming political and socio-economic landscape. The ascendancy of non-authoritarian policies following the Fourth Party Plenum,¹ which brought about political decentralisation and accelerated the country's move towards market-oriented socialism,² did lead to a tangible economic growth in the latter half of the 1960s, but it also had complex after-effects. The failure to advance a true democratic political system and a further imbalance to Yugoslavia's asymmetric socioeconomic structure proved to be particularly difficult to resolve.³ As most accounts of these processes agree, Yugoslavia's multifaceted socio-political transformation brought about an intricate model of governance based on the polyarchy of republican authorities (Rusinow 1978) which foreshadowed a return to different forms of authoritarianism in the 1970s and a further deterioration of socio-economic relations in the 1980s (Burg 1983).

The deviation and collapse of socio-political reforms in Yugoslavia and a continued bureaucratization of the state in the 1970s had immediate negative impact on modernist art practices and filmmaking in particular.⁴ The post-production of Žilnik's 1971/1972 film *Sloboda ili strip/Freedom or Cartoons* was halted and the part-edited material was confiscated from the author. Still, in 1973, Žilnik manages to complete one more project, a staged documentary *Ustanak u Jasku/The Uprising in Jazak*, whose iconoclastic approach to the

WWII liberation struggle causes a stern reaction from Party circles and veteran organisations. Realising that his work in Yugoslavia would no longer be possible, the author leaves for West Germany in 1974, where he extends his thematic preoccupations to include some new issues, most notably for the present discussion, those of immigration and exile. Produced in 1975, the documentary film *Inventur: Metzstraße 11/Inventory* holds a central position in this regard. Set in a confined space of a stairwell of an apartment block in central Munich and shot practically in one uninterrupted run of the camera, Žilnik utilises a simple subject-feedback method to tease out the tenants' reflections on their lives. The tenants, most of them *Gastarbeiter*, foreign workers, descend the stairs in succession speaking mostly in their native tongues (Turkish, Greek, Italian, Serbo-Croatian), or occasionally in German, the medium of their acculturation (Figure 1). The use of linguistic vernaculars, visual simplicity (static camera) and a minimalistic mise-en-scène (the narrow stairwell emerges as an inescapable site of encounter) are matched with the tenants' matter-of-fact enunciation of the subject matter – their own exilic experience, all contributing to the immediacy and transparency of representation. Most important of all, the confessional mode of speaking, the use of vernacular tongues and the heteroglossia⁵ they create, radically intervene into the order of (cinematic) discourse and its system of exclusion to reallocate the right to speak and be seen.

Žilnik's emphasis on the immediacy of telling and transparency of representation bring to mind the Rousseauian (or, perhaps, revolutionary, more generally) dream of spontaneity, 'of total transparency and immediate communication' (Starobinski 1988, 41). Equally, if not more relevant for the concluding part of this discussion, is the circumvention of the tropes of exilic filmmaking, as articulated in, among others, concept of 'accented cinema' advanced by Hamid Naficy (2001, 10–39 *passim*). Not only does Žilnik's configuration of the exilic experience in *Inventory* differ from the so-called accented style of filmmaking,⁶ but it also departs from its much closer stylistic cousin and an important early influence, the Lithuania



Figure 1. The protagonists of *Inventory*.

born American documentarist Jonas Mekas. Indeed, indexicality, radical presentism and the laying bare of the apparatus (in *Inventory*, the viewer is able to hear Žilnik's instructions from behind the camera) dispel any traces of melancholy and nostalgia in the protagonists' accounts, to which some of Mekas's films are occasionally prone.⁷ By relinquishing the nostalgic potential of the scene, either as a reflective, or as a restorative force,⁸ Žilnik configures the phenomena of displacement and exile as a radical presence and foregrounds direct experience, more concretely, the economics of labour and materiality more generally, as constitutive of that experience.

The primacy of experience over reflection, memory, or affect, emerges here as the centrepiece of Žilnik's filmmaking, a corrective that enabled him to evade the dominant ideologies of representation in the early stages of his career. The author's unflattering take on the revolutionary struggle, which comes forth already in his debut feature *Rani Radovi/ Early Works* (1969), revolves precisely around the question of *praxis*, or immediate experience, and how it conditions the possibilities of revolutionary action.⁹ Not surprisingly, the screenplay for *Early Works* was made of (at times verbatim) quotations from Marx's early socioeconomic and historical manuscripts, in which Marx advanced the notion that immediate human experience [literally, life process, *Lebensprozess*] takes precedence over the realm of ideas. The act of thinking, Marx writes, 'appears as the direct efflux of [human] material behaviour', not the other way around (Marx 1998, 42 *passim*). Žilnik translates this same dictum even more radically in his *Black Film* where the laying bare of the filmmaking process erodes the initial *Cinéma vérité* cum survey documentary à la Jean Rouch mode of cinematic telling. Therein, in the final part of the film, the author himself and – involuntarily – his family participate in the film leading to the reversal of the initially established authorial role and the societal authority it symbolically represents (Figure 2).¹⁰



Figure 2. Žilnik, breaking the fourth wall in *Black Film*.

Prioritizing experience over ideology as a doctrine, of direct, participatory filmmaking over dramaturgical norms, takes us further towards the central problem of Žilnik's understanding of political cinema as an intervention in the power-laden order of discourse and representation. Not dissimilar to the (neo-)avant-garde demand for art to interrogate its own position¹¹ – Žilnik's idea of engagement is primarily enabled by his perpetual unsettling of artistic hierarchies and conventions. It is through this opposition to, or *dis-agreement* with the structural capacity of art – cinematic or any other – that the eminently *political* redistribution of the right to assume public space takes place.

Tales of Origins and Migrations: Displacement, Exclusion and Exile in Žilnik's Work

Žilnik's German productions (six short films and the 1976 feature *Das Paradies. Eine imperialistische Tragikomödie/Paradise. An Imperialist Tragicomedy*) clearly retain his artistic signature and many of his thematic concerns, but the period of exile made the author more attentive to the issues of identity and displacement. Interestingly, Žilnik will later reflect that the intimation of exile and exclusion predate his own physical exile, and were first felt at the time of his ostracism in Yugoslavia in the wake of the country's re-lapsing to authoritarianism in the early 1970s (Prejdova 2009a, 115). This statement is significant insofar as it confirms that the novel preoccupations with identity and exile were in harmony with Žilnik's early *credo* that the essence of life is always with those who are deprived of justice, resources or homeland. If with *Inventory* Žilnik gave his earliest clear-cut statement on migratory themes, the 10-minute long *Ich weiss nicht was soll es bedeuten/I do not Know What That Should Mean* represents an important early take on the issues of identity and belonging. Filmed in Germany in the same year as *Inventory*, this short film is a multi-layered assemblage in which sequences showing groups of schoolchildren and elderly men as they sing or recite the verses of Heinrich Heine's poem 'Die Lorelei' (Figure 3) are intercut with images of romantic landscapes and accompanied by 19th century musical renditions of Heine's lyrics. The effect achieved by the complex intergenerational and cross-media juxtapositions thematises the issues of cultural belonging and national imaginary on more than one level.

Žilnik's first accomplished project upon return to Yugoslavia was a theatre play *The Gastarbeiter Opera*, a Brechtian piece about Yugoslav female workers in West Germany. While the very choice of subject signals that the issues of migrations, gender and/or displacement are becoming the author's long-term preoccupation, the extension of his thematic portfolio was also facilitated by an important transition to a new production environment. Back in Yugoslavia, Žilnik realises that his chances of being offered a project via standard film production routes have become less favourable, so he makes a transition to television – a move that would define his career from that moment onwards. Encouraged by the practice he saw in Germany, where television studios acted as propitious venues for young filmmakers, Žilnik knew this would be the step in a right direction. Indeed, a medium with a broad, nation-wide coverage, television opened some new opportunities for Žilnik not least in technological terms and by offering a mass-scale audience, but also by allowing more creative freedom¹² and enabling the democratization of viewing practice more generally.¹³ From the point of view of his authorial style, the new production context prompted Žilnik to reinvent, or further adapt his documentarist approach, a move that gave rise to



Figure 3. 'And gently flows the Rhine...'

his now recognizable *docudrama*, a hybrid style, which combines pure documentary form (surveys, interviews) with fiction (plot, depth of characters), a documentary, real-life content (people/places/events) with fictional elements. Television studios deemed this crosspollination of different modes of representing reality more suitable for prime-time audiences than the raw style of Žilnik's early documentaries (Žilnik and WHW 2019, 30). As for Žilnik, he never deemed that dramatization of factual content betrays or compromises the prerequisite (for a documentary film) demand for truth and authenticity. On this impure, hybrid approach to documentary content, the author will later add: '[w]hy shouldn't people [...] act for the camera [...] if they feel that it can fool or entertain someone' (Stojanović 2003, 55; quoted in Prejdova 2009b, 160). The television studios in Belgrade and Novi Sad showed interest in 'slice-of-life' documentary tales, but the benefit was undoubtedly mutual: Žilnik profited from the pluralism of editorial agendas of different television studios a lot more than he would from any of the mainstream film studios. Organised according to the federal/territorial principle, Yugoslav television studios enabled niches and loopholes in production and especially broadcast, making it possible for some unswervingly dissonant tones, like those expressed in *Brooklyn-Gusinje* (1988) or *Stara mašina/Oldtimer* (1989), to see light of the day and even receive a proper airtime.¹⁴

A typical protagonist of Žilnik's films in the 1980s is still a social misfit, an outsider of mainstream social processes, of which Žilnik remains an insightful and prophetic observer. The issues that find reflection in his films are the social and economic decline, further fragmentation of Yugoslav society and early instances of the growing inter-ethnic tensions. Consequently, this protagonist is now often a gender, age, or ethnic minority, someone who, either openly, or more often in a silent way, by virtue of his/her marginal positionality, disavows the rising tide of new identity politics in Yugoslavia. In *Oldtimer*, while documenting the inception of nationalist mobilization in Serbia, Žilnik juxtaposes the crowd attending nationalist political rallies to his protagonist, a rocker/biker, whose ingenuity and

individualism contrast the populist and staged nature of the rallies, thereby debunking the latter events as a mere machination of the state apparatus. Evidently, just like in the narratives of the early stages of his career (1960s and early 1970s), Žilnik's authorial investment remains unchanged in his 1980s productions: to render visible the marginal, occluded phenomena of life and to unsettle the embedded hierarchies that distribute access to social authority. Importantly, the disruption of established regimes of representation by seizing upon the representational language, which resided outside both the feature film and standard documentary, enables Žilnik to lay bare the unassimilable, irreducible remainders, to render them visible and confer upon them a symbolic recognition.

The outbreak of the civil war in Yugoslavia in the 1990s saw Žilnik extending his investigation into heteronomy and alterity further to foreground the issues of gender and sexual minorities, most strikingly in the 1995 *Dupe od Mramora/Marble Ass*. Set in 1990s Belgrade, in the milieu of transvestites and prostitutes, the film contrasts the supposedly depraved and deviant world of sexual underground to the normalcy of the outside world immersed in violence and hatred. Žilnik's old strategy of revealing/recognizing the world of difference marks only one, initial stage of the process in which the stigmatized alterity reveals itself as a world morally superior to heteronormative one. In the post-war years, in which most of the post-Yugoslav space continued its lasting decline by engaging in regressive politics of its elites, Žilnik, even more pronouncedly than before, places a high premium on the issues of borders, identities and exile. In the 1998 *Wanderlust*, the author's fondness for linguistic code-switching (the languages spoken in the film are Italian, German, Hungarian, English, and Serbo-Croatian), receives a new articulation, in which protagonists at times interact in different tongues, without compromising their community of understanding. This linguistic diversity of the film, which turns on its head the age-long propensity of the medium towards monolingualism,¹⁵ establishes a utopian semantic community in which protagonists do understand one another irrespective of the factually insurmountable linguistic differences between them. Žilnik's multilingualism here becomes a symbolic, but powerful statement that stands in radical contrast with his lost homeland in which exactly the opposite had taken place: people who had had a real, factual linguistic consensus renounced their community of understanding to embrace the imagined communities of origins and belonging. Also in the film, Žilnik's linguistic intervention into identity politics upsets the imposed hierarchies by acknowledging one's right not to speak one's native tongue: Djordje, the nomadic protagonist of the film, relinquishes his native Serbo-Croat and chooses to speak Italian instead. As he confesses, he does that 'out of shame...' Here, the viewer might recall the enunciation of the affect of shame in *Early Works*, in which Žilnik's pseudo-revolutionaries ventriloquize Marx's missive that 'shame already is a revolution'. If the intention of Marx's lines was to describe the public sentiment in 1840s Prussia as a suspended, yet potent affect,¹⁶ the shame that the protagonist of *Wanderlust* enunciates could be understood as an affect without imminent political agency, but with considerable ethical potential, as constitutive of the sense of collective responsibility.¹⁷

Commensurate sentiments permeate Žilnik's ruminations on statelessness and exile in the subsequent decade. Set in the borderline region between Italy and its East-European environs, *Tvrđava Evropa/Fortress Europe* (2000) casts a damning critique on the new forms of European exceptionalism, in which the European super-state ruthlessly closes itself off against its aliens/others, while prophesising at the same time the ease of movement for people, goods and services as its core principle. Part documentary, part docudrama, the

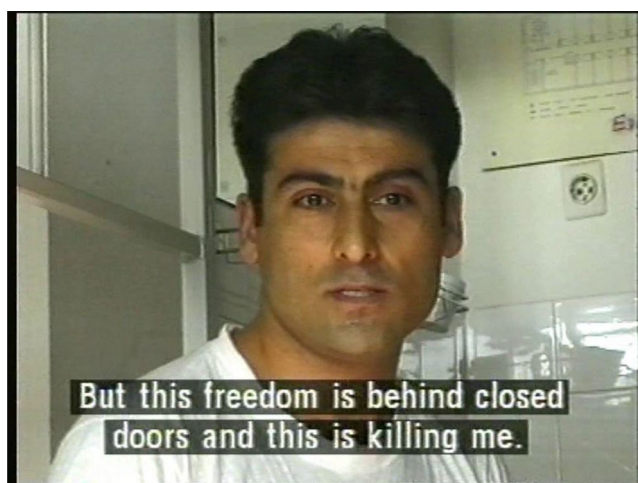


Figure 4. An Iranian asylum seeker in *Fortress Europe*.

film renders visible the globally disenfranchised voices from Iran, Russia, or Moldova, which speak about their visions of Europe whereby the latter emerges not as the destination of their dreams, but as another, inexplicable form of imprisonment. Žilnik's rendition of the migrants' experience of exclusion from global citizenship reveals their vulnerability as the condition Giorgio Agamben has famously termed *bare life*. That condition, Agamben argues, is instigated by the power of the state, which exerts its right to exclude and relegate its fellow humans to what he refers to as the 'zone of indistinction' (Agamben 2008, 92). Banished from the global system based on the right to exclude, which nation states and their supra-national equivalents (in this case, The European Union) continue to exert, the migrant and the refugee not only epitomize the problem of human rights, but, by exemplifying so dramatically the precariousness of human life, they expose the radical crisis of the concept. The paradoxical legality of this exclusion only reasserts the urgency of its representation (Figure 4).

The awareness that the issues of migrations, statelessness and global indifference are showcasing the moral bankruptcy of modern world, underpins most of Žilnik's films of the 2000s. Set in northern Serbia, *Evropa preko plota/Europe Next Door* (2005) is a tale of the everyday lives of the peoples living in the borderline region between Serbia and Hungary in the aftermath of the new Schengen regulations, delimiting their freedom of movement and putting to an end the micro-economic routes on which their livelihoods depended for generations. The *Kenedi Trilogy* (2003, 2005, 2007), arguably Žilnik's most intricate project of the early 2000s, tracks the fortunes of a Kosovo-born Romani man Kenedi Hasani caught in between displacement, legal indeterminacy and pursuit of a better life. Following the deposition of Slobodan Milošević and the supposed end of authoritarian rule in Serbia, Kenedi loses his status of an immigrant in Germany and is repatriated back home in the process of reintegration to the country of origin. However, as a Romani man, Žilnik's protagonist remains a vulnerable and/or discriminated subject both in Kosovo, now an independent country, and in Serbia. In the third part of the trilogy *Kenedi se ženi/Kenedi is Getting Married*, Žilnik interweaves into the narrative Kenedi's fluid sexuality as the protagonist's means of survival and engine of social mobility. The collision caused by Kenedi's parallel

love affairs with his female benefactor and his male Austrian lover creates a dramatic crescendo in the film, but the episode is far more relevant for its intertwining of individual desire with the economy of labour. The latter move in which human actions, the realms of desire and of reflection are tied with the general cycle of production and exchange marks another important extension of Žilnik's materialistic approach to history and human experience.

Produced in 2015 and set in a refugee centre in western Serbia, *Destinacija Srbistan/Logbook Serbistan* is the first of Žilnik's films to deal with the most recent migrant crisis. Part *docudrama*, part direct documentary, the film follows the whereabouts of several groups of migrants and asylum seekers from Africa and the Middle East held in Serbian refugee centres, at the very gates of their desired final destination, the European Union. Himself caught by surprise by the unprecedented scale of the migratory wave and the virtually real-time overlap between the act of filming and the unfolding of its subject, "historical reality", Žilnik weaves a multi-layered narrative without a strictly defined dramaturgical structure or trajectory. Despite this, the author clearly singles out as his central concerns the desire of the migratory subject to survive and sustain and, somewhat surprisingly, the inclusivity of the (temporary or permanent) home communities to accept them irrespective of large cultural and other differences. The episodic narrative, which follows predominantly the fates of two central African migrants as they unfold virtually in real time, remains essentially open and inconclusive, with one of them going off-screen to take his chances and attempt an illegal border-crossing to Hungary, the nearest entrance point to the European Union, and the other one remaining in Serbia to embark on an integration process there. The agency with which Žilnik endows the migrant and the acceptance that the migratory subject receives from the host community are important new moments in the author's figuration of exile. This rapprochement between the exilic subject and the host society, the coming together of different worlds and civilisations, sets the tone for Žilnik's most recent take on the issue, the 2018 film *Das schönste Land der Welt/The Most Beautiful Country in the World*.

Transnationalism and Exile in *The Most Beautiful Country in the World*

The migration wave of 2015 proved to be the tipping point leading to an unexpected, extraordinary resolution of a range of issues (from ethical to economical) surrounding global migration and displacement. The joint decision of European countries to grant asylum to hundreds of thousands of refugee-seeking migrants from the Middle East sets the historic backdrop to *The Most Beautiful Country in the World*. Under such circumstances, Žilnik was commissioned by an Austrian producer to undertake a project that would portray the lives of the migrants who had been granted the right-to-settle status and were on the path of successful integration. The pre-production work and preliminary research for the project involved familiarisation with the lives of the migrants' communities in Austria and the selection of participants willing to take part in the project. Having spent some time in refugee centres across Austria, Žilnik decided to give preference to those participants who took an active part in integration programmes; the others, embroiled in debates over embattled political and military factions in Syria and the Middle East, he found inadequate for the type of narrative he wanted to create (Žilnik and WHW 2019, 36–37). This gesture is significant insofar as it speaks, in different terms, of Žilnik's lasting reservation towards politics from above and his belief in the primacy of direct experience. Certainly, the latter

assessment should come with the caveat that the rejection of top-down politics does not imply the jettisoning of politics *tout court*. Quite the contrary is the case: if, as Rancière has argued, the emergence of politics is to be found in ‘the opening up of a subject space where anyone can be counted ... where those of no account are counted’ (Rancière 1999, 36), the cornerstones of Žilnik’s cinematic dissensus – his circumvention of top-down political discourses and a direct filmmaking style – are political by other means. What is of the essence in the process of empowerment by subjectivisation is one’s right to speak and to be heard, but for that to take place, one has to occupy the public space by appropriating the apparatuses of that space. If, as indicated earlier in the discussion, central to Žilnik’s earlier films was to render his subjects visible and/or allocate to them the missing right to speak, in *The Most Beautiful Country in the World*, he goes one step further to reveal the grammar of this process by showing the migrant as s/he gradually becomes part of real social life. In a way, while at the heart of the film lie the narratives of displacement and exile, each of the film’s central narrative threads in fact tells the story of acculturation, by speaking of subjectivisation of the excluded and their repossession of the public space.

The film opens with documentary footage of anti-war demonstrations staged by Syrian refugees in front of the Austrian Parliament Building in Vienna in December 2016. By focusing on a Syrian refugee choir singing a popular patriotic song *Allah muhyi shawarieak ya biladana/May God Protect your Streets our Beloved Country*, this prologue establishes the type of political discourse that appears to dally with discourses of nostalgia. The documentary footage of the choir is intercut with a dramatized conversation between two of the film’s subsequent protagonists, migrants of different generations, who recount and lament the Syrian tragedy in a more personalised manner. However, as if dismissing the top-down political tone of the prologue, Žilnik immediately cuts to scenes of the quotidian, social lives of the protagonists, their families and friends. The scenes from a language centre, where Wael, the former resident of Aleppo, attends the lessons of German alongside other recent immigrants, are amicable and funny, but they also indicate that Wael is slowly becoming part of the real social fabric. Of equal importance for the viewer is the realisation that Wael’s integration is a two-sided process in which the receiving community is an eager partner and facilitator. Wael’s mother Bessima, who, as we learn, is left by Wael’s father Omar, finds solace in girl-talk with her Austrian friends; in a jocular manner, they advise Bessima to find herself another husband, four of them if possible, to counter the propositions of Sharia law from her home country, where men are allowed to have up to four wives. A similar amenable emancipation narrative is replicated in the next scene, which takes us to a martial arts centre, where the film’s central protagonist Bagher and another fellow Afghan refugee are at some point floored by their female coach (Figure 5). Their reaction is that of laughter – a subtle, but significant gesture signalling the gender sensitivity of the young men and, by extension, their desire to acculturate.

The lives of the displaced community in Žilnik’s most recent production are markedly focused on small-scale gestures and practices of everyday life and it is precisely through these minute, yet significant acts of subjectivization that their intervention into the previously alien and impermeable public space takes place.¹⁸ No doubt, this emphasis on subjective management of the system of social relations is in keeping with Žilnik’s long-standing preference for the subject’s immediate engagement with the world and represents the author’s most forthright so far justification of the politics of acculturation. It might be worth observing, however, that the acculturation of the migrant subject in *The Most Beautiful*



Figure 5. At the judo centre.

Country in the World is portrayed as a relatively unhindered process and that Žilnik lessens, if not absolves, the psychological aspects of adaptation, while foregrounding the sociocultural and economic ones.¹⁹ Uninhibited by the complexities of the cross-cultural encounter, they bargain for rent, attend filmmaking workshops, engage with the Austrian society on every level to develop their potential in life. Even more striking perhaps is the author's depiction of the European newly found willingness to embrace its others and aliens. In stark contrast with a radically pessimistic representation in *Fortress Europe*, or even in *Logbook Serbistan*, the new Europe, or Austria in this case, is portrayed as a genuine plural society, a social environment that successfully combines ethnic and other contrasts.²⁰ Although Žilnik noticeably foregrounds individual interactions with refugees, rather than institutional apparatuses, these individual actions 'synecdochally' acknowledge the benevolent disposition of the host society as a whole towards migrant community.

The question that arises here is whether the optimistic and forward-looking tenor that permeates *The Most Beautiful Country in the World* suggests that the film fails to engage adequately (politically?) with the issues of displacement, exile and global inequality? If one returns to Rancière's idea that the emergence of politics, or what he terms the modes of political subjectivization, is to be found in the moment in which people begin to speak on their own behalf and start to assume the public space as their own, then Žilnik's most recent film is still a politically engaged film. In *The Most Beautiful Country in the World* the strategy of *dissensus* is at its most productive in the author's subversion/circumvention of the modes of signification characteristic of the standard cinematic rhetoric of displacement and exile. While the absence of exilic tropes in Žilnik's earlier films has been pointed out in earlier sections of this article, what his most recent film importantly demonstrates is the lack of epistemic rift between metropolitan location and colonial alterity, a dynamic that is deeply rooted in the Western representation of the *subaltern*, non-European subjects. Moreover, the two sides of the integration process seem to be in symbiotic relation throughout, acting together in the process of adaptation.

The episode of Bagher's staged marriage is paradigmatic in this respect. One day, the protagonist receives an unexpected visit from his grandfather Haydar, who arrives in Vienna all the way from Afghanistan via illegal routes, just to pass on the message to his grandson about his son's, Bagher's father's, death. On this occasion, Haydar also reminds his grandson

that he is now the only one in the male line and it is upon him to continue the family. Bagher is aware of the importance of the patrilineality principle to his community, but he is also aware that the absolute adherence to tradition would stand in the way of his own integration into Austrian society, so his response is down to earth and pragmatic. When his grandfather pleads with him to marry an Afghan woman, Bagher and his friends stage a false marriage between Bagher and his Viennese Afghan friend. This staging of the marriage marks an important semantic shift in the film, insofar as it turns one heavily charged ideological sign (a traditional marriage or traditionalism as such) into a socially pragmatic gesture, if not an empty signifier.²¹ Having seen his grandson getting married to a 'proper' Afghan bride (Figure 6), Haydar leaves in peace, only to embark on an uncertain and tumultuous journey home: he is arrested in the neighbouring Slovenia for an illegal entry and is put in a detention facility to be sent back home. One point that matters is that Bagher's acculturation does not bring the forsaking of his background entirely. In a rare instance of a reflective nostalgia, the viewer can see Bagher in his girlfriend's apartment for a brief moment watching the news from Afghanistan, but the protagonist quickly turns off the computer screen and leaves the past behind. Significantly, Žilnik here spatially cuts to the scene from the detention centre in Slovenia where Haydar and two other detainees are also watching the images of atrocities from Afghanistan (Figure 7). The semantic bridge created by two overlapping news broadcasts turns out to be misleading: their captivation by the images and apprehension at what is awaiting them following deportation, stand in stark contrast with Bagher's pragmatic deferral.

Earlier in the film, Bagher joins his social activist friend on a journey to a migrant centre on the Hungary-Serbia border where they meet Afghan migrants who were declined entry to European Union. In a seamless transition from edited docudrama to pure documentary, Žilnik allows the migrants to speak out about hardships they experienced on their way to a better life and of the unmet expectations of their venture, which glaringly contrasts Bagher's own experience. The scene from the asylum centre in Serbia, the only part of the film that at times recalls the discourse and the tone of *Fortress Europe*, is precipitously intercut with a Brechtian musical interlude showing a choir performing a song about imprisonment and longing for freedom. The effect that the montage juxtaposition between the refugee camp scene and the choir establishes seems all but transparent: migrants' entrapment in the camp and the experience of incarceration are comparable experiences indeed, yet



Figure 6. The 'wedding'.

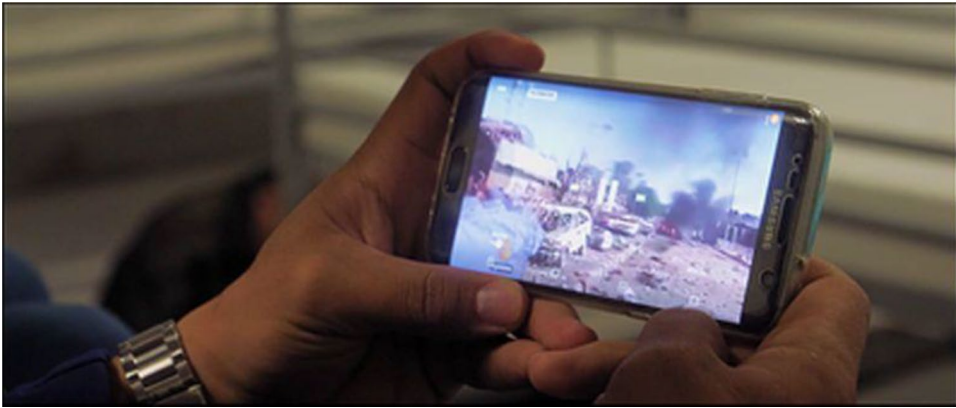


Figure 7. In a detention centre in Slovenia.

this correspondence enunciates another, perhaps more relevant connection. Appropriately named *29 November*,²² the choir is made of immigrants from the countries of former Yugoslavia, a move that emphasises the transferability and universality of the experience of migration and exile. To take this point further, in the follow-up scene, the choir-mistress converses with Wael and his family circle about the musical legacy of their homeland, Syria, and, is attracted by the history and reception of the pan-Arab song *My Homeland [Mawtini]*, to which she refers to as an ‘Arab *Internationale*’ (Figure 8).

This likening of the modern-day stateless and displaced persons from the Middle East to the declassed workers at the dawn of the industrial era is only seemingly accidental and random. In the post-ideological and post-industrial era, where the over-fulfilment of residual needs has turned the working classes into consumers oblivious to ever-growing inequality, it is the migrant and the refugee, more than anyone else, who is prosecuted and consigned to the global zone of indistinction (Žilnik, in Sejdinović 2020). Therefore, the lines from *Mawtini* ‘we do not want eternal humiliation, nor a miserable life’, might not just be about Palestinian yearning for homeland, but about universal experience of statelessness and exclusion. It is for this reason that, for a moment at least, Žilnik’s perennial suspicion towards



Figure 8. The Choir 29 November.

patriotic affect and nostalgic discourses seems to be off guard: not only is the performance of the sincere, ingénue choristers unscathed by authorial comment, but it becomes the closure and the denouement of the entire film. However, the choir's (and the author's) intention is, unquestionably, anything but parochial. De-territorialised from its initial geo-political and historical context,²³ the Arab song here emerges as a universal coda, a transnational hymn of everyone exiled and displaced.

Notes

1. Historians typically take the Fourth Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the Yugoslav League of Communists held in July 1966 on the Island of Brion ('Brionski plenum'), which resulted with the toppling of the minister of interior affairs Aleksandar Ranković, as the turning point in the political history of socialist Yugoslavia.
2. The corrections to Yugoslavia's system of self-management (inaugurated in early 1950s), which had entrusted workers' councils with management rights, towards a market-oriented model of economy, was crowned with Yugoslavia's signing of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1966 (Uvalic 2018, 24).
3. As an example, the uneven development in the economic sphere was accelerating in post-war Yugoslavia with the gap in GDP per capita between Slovenia and Kosovo rising from 1:3 in 1952 to 1:6 by 1968 (Denitch 1977, 113).
4. Crackdown on 'liberal' tendencies in Yugoslav art and cinema in particular has been discussed widely. For Žilnik's own account on the meanderings of Yugoslav cultural politics from late 1960s onwards, see his conversation with Boris Buden (Buden and Žilnik 80-99). Also, for a nuanced take on the relationship between oppressive/official ideology and modern tendencies in Yugoslav art, including cinema, see Dimitrijević 2016, 71 *passim*.
5. Inaugurated by Mikhail Bakhtin in his studies into the history of the novelistic genre, the concept of heteroglossia is achieved through the multiplication, within the language, of marginal, usually non-standard 'social voices' and the social worlds they represent (Bakhtin 1981, 67).
6. Naficy speaks of a range of visual and other inflections that accented, that is, exilic, diasporic, or post-colonial authors use to 'undermine the dominant production mode, and [...] subvert that mode's realistic treatment of time, space, and causality' (Naficy 2001, 22).
7. Meka's melancholy reaches its apogee in his 1976 *Lost, Lost, Lost*, an edited collage of the author's early video-diaries about the lives of Lithuanian immigrants in the American West Coast from his arrival in the United States in late 1940s to the 1960s.
8. I am referring here to Svetlana Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective types of nostalgic affects, in which the former evokes collective past and the latter personal memories (Boym 2001, 49, *passim*).
9. The word praxis here may be of relevance, given the correspondence between the Praxis school of liberal Marxism and new modernist cinema in Yugoslavia. Both were centred upon a de-bureaucratized vision of society.
10. Žilnik's surrender before the problem observed by some authors (see for example Jončić 2002, 56-58) can also be seen as a self-effacing gesture of a (neo)avant-garde author who relinquishes the bourgeois institution of artistic individuality and the concept of individual authorship overall.
11. Žilnik's emergence as a filmmaker is inseparable from Yugoslav neo-avant-garde scene of 1960s, the specificity of which could be seen as an attempt to develop 'new [forms of] communication and dissemination techniques' (Carl 2005, 27). In a related context, Žilnik will himself expound that he approaches protagonists and life-events as 'ready-made' objects (Prejdova 2009, 114).
12. In Žilnik's own words, television production allowed him to work again in a spontaneous, work-in-progress manner, without prepared screenplay, or storyboard (Jončić 2002, 82).
13. Žilnik praised the democratizing role of television for the synchronicity of viewing and for transforming the consumerist relation between cultural producers and cultural consumers (Jončić 2002,

- 80). On the ways in which late socialist television production, the Yugoslav one in particular, defied cold-war stereotypes about the socialist public sphere (information versus propaganda, active versus passive audiences, elite versus popular and so on), see Mihelj 2014, 9 *passim*.
14. The case of *Oldtimer* is especially interesting here. Initially, the film was refused airtime, but was then shown not by one of the television studios from Žilnik's home republic Serbia (say, Belgrade, or Novi Sad), but in Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.
 15. On the inherent foreignness of film as a medium and on different ways in which linguistic unification, or levelling down through subtitles, or dubbing affect representation see Egoyan and Balfour 2004, 21–30 *passim*.
 16. In a letter to his friend Arnold Ruge written in 1843 Marx speaks of an 'anger which is turned inward', caused by the conflict between public inability to act and its realisation of a need to act (Marx 1967, 204).
 17. In a similar vein, Lisa Guenther, in her critical take on Giorgio Agamben's ontological account of shame (originating from the Italian philosopher's discussion of the Holocaust), proposes a reevaluation of the positive ethical capacity of the affect. Guenther writes: '[u]nlike humiliation, which simultaneously subjectifies and desubjectifies through an empty individuation [...], shame intersubjectifies' (Guenther 2012, 3).
 18. In his study *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel De Certeau went on to assert that precisely these small-scale gestures and everyday life routines crucially enable the individual to make internal manipulations of a system (Certeau 1984, 28).
 19. Standard literature on migrant acculturation and social adaptation identifies three interrelated aspects of the process: psychological, sociocultural, and economic (Berry 1997, 6–7).
 20. Fredrik Barth's idea of plural society derives from his anthropological research, but the term has rightly gained a wide currency in sociological studies since.
 21. I am referring here to Elisabeth Mertz's discussion of the transition from the semantics model of language to a pragmatic one in American legal practice, where emphasis on context-dependent approach to legal writings made the referential content of these writings more elusive (1996, 235, *passim*).
 22. The name of the choir refers to the Republic Day in former Yugoslavia, set on 29 November to commemorate the 1943 meeting of the Anti-Fascist Council of people's liberation movement (AVNOJ) that laid foundations for the post-war political and constitutional arrangement of Yugoslavia.
 23. A popular song with pan-Arab patriotic motifs, *Mawtini* was written in the 1930s by the Palestinian poet 'Ibrāhīm Ṭūqān.

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