

Aleksandar Petrović

For critics and general audience alike, the name of the Yugoslav director Aleksandar Petrović epitomizes the modernist renewal of Yugoslav cinema. Born in Paris in 1929, Petrović grew up in Belgrade, where his adolescent years were interrupted by the World War II. The War atrocities, some of which he personally witnessed, left imprint on Petrović and found their expression in some of his films. Petrović's film education was irregular: his studies at the Prague Academy of Performing Arts were interrupted in the wake of the 1948 rift between Yugoslavia's and the Eastern bloc. Back in Belgrade, he graduated in Art History and became involved in documentary filmmaking. His first co-authored film *Uz druga je drug (Keep in Step, Comrade, 1955)* was a propagandist take on the history of working class movement. The next documentary *Flight over the Swamp (1956)* and visual essay on Serbian modernist painter Petar Dobrović (1957) showed versatility of the young author's cinematic language.

Petrović's first feature film *And Love has Vanished (Dvoje, 1961)* made a radical departure from the post-war cinematic context. The two young lovers, architect Mirko and music academy student Jovana, meet by chance, passionately fall in love, and at one point part their ways. The allegedly superficial plotline, socially undefined characters, and thin psychological motivation for their actions, were criticized by official critics. The complexity of cinematic language, especially the use of visual metaphors and sound counterpoints was perceived as deliberately abstruse. The author was also accused of avoiding classical dramaturgy, as a result of which his supposed melodrama turned into a celebration of bourgeois-style alienation. On the other hand,

the film was hailed by liberal intellectuals and critics for the affirmation of a real human individuality with all its frailties.

Petrović's reputation as the most distinctive voice of what was branded as New Cinema (Novi Film) was reasserted by his subsequent film *Days (Dani, 1963)*. The author's sophomore feature further explored the socially less opportune aspects of love and human relations. The focus is again on a couple of chance lovers – a young professional Dragan, and the idle and ennuied housewife Nina – who engage in a socially unacceptable affair. The lives of Dragan and Nina are revealed as contingent: despite their affair being doomed to fail, they engage in it passionately, as it is the sole part of their lives that they can emotionally relate to. In *Days*, Petrović's visual language is refined, yet economical. Influence of European new wave cinema also comes to the fore: perfect geometrical framing and long aerial shots prompted some critics to compare *Days* with Antonioni (which Petrović rebuffed), while his night-for-night shooting and use of real locations brought comparisons with French *Nouvelle Vague*.

The prose of the Serbian writer Antonije Isaković, which addressed the horrors of WWII in a humane, rather than heroic key, galvanized Petrović's own memories of war. As a result, his next feature *Three (Tri, 1965)* was an attempt to give the struggle for national liberation a human and more universal touch. The film, which tells three episodic stories about a man caught in a whirlpool of war, makes little use of the standard expressive means of its genre. Rather, *Three* examines the dehumanizing effects of war on people's ability to judge and feel. This focus on what is ordinary and personal, while striving for what is universal, marked a "Copernican turn" in Yugoslav post-war culture. In the first story, we see the Belgrade student Miloš as he arrives

to the train station in his home-town. The local population and disarrayed Yugoslav army are gathered around the station expecting the onslaught of German army. Fear and anxiety gradually inhabits people's hearts and we witness a senseless execution of a man wrongly accused of spying. In the second episode we see Miloš and his comrade in a desperate attempt to escape Nazi units. They split, Miloš gets to the free territory, but his comrade is caught and brutally executed. The final episode shows Miloš as a commanding officer of partisan units and focuses on his doubts in the retaliatory justice of the victors. A young woman is arrested and sentenced to death on the account of collaboration: before learning of her destiny, her eye meets Miloš's and without a word she understands what the sentence is. Despite the liberation, Miloš's uneasiness and doubt dominate not only the final scene, but the entire film. For Petrović, the question of judgment must not be ideological, but universally human. The indictment is made not on ideological adversaries, but on the history itself. *Three* received both national and international acclaim: it was garlanded at the national film festival in Pula, at Karlovy Vary, and was nominated for Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, where it lost to Claude Lelouch's *A Man and a Woman*.

Petrović's fourth feature, *I Even met some Happy Gypsies* (*Skupljači perja*, 1967) were an immediate triumph: nominated for Academy Award (this time losing to Jirí Menzel's *Closely Observed Trains*), the film won major prizes at Cannes and at the national festival in Pula. Set within gypsy settlements in the northern Yugoslav province of Vojvodina, the film tells the story of a feather-gatherer Bora, whose business dealings and tumultuous emotional life come into one when he falls in love with the step-daughter of his business competitor Mirta. Once Bora is swindled by his arch-rival, he also finds out that Tisa is at the same time her stepfather's

mistress, and decides to take her away. Mirta attempts at his life, after which Bora stages revenge – he kills his rival and disappears. As a liberal Yugoslav critic wrote in connection with *Happy Gypsies*, the breakthrough of new Yugoslav cinema could be summed up in “replacing collective mythologies with private ones”. Indeed, Petrović should rightly be credited for reintroducing the private sphere in Yugoslav culture, as much as the films of Dušan Makavejev, Živojin Pavlović, and others. However, Petrović’s position vis-à-vis Novi Film – with regard to this, and other issues – was a complex one. While, in visual terms, Petrović shares the naturalistic veneer of Novi Film, he utilize this imagery in a different way. For example, although perfectly authentic, his Bora is an epic individuality, rather than a sociological case-study; although never aestheticized, Petrović’s portrayal of the socially marginalized Gypsies is subsumed under something greater than itself. Non-professional actors from the domicile Roma community were employed not for the sake of ethnographic accuracy or social critique, but rather, to create an artistic, or metaphysical, vision of a life freed from social, or any other constraints.

Petrović’s next film, *It Rains in my Village* (*Biće skoro propast sveta*, 1968) is also set in rural Vojvodina. The story-line, for which the author took inspiration from F. M. Dostoevsky’s novel *The Demons*, centres upon a docile swineherd Triša, who, maliciously enticed by villagers, marries a local fool, but then leaves her when seduced by the new schoolteacher. When rejected by his vagrant lover, Triša turns to drinking, kills his wife and is lynched by the village mob. *It Rains in my Village* is Petrović’s formally most daring film. The plot, which is simplified to the level of a folk-tale, is interrupted with the series of Brechtian songs performed by gypsy bands. The songs comment on the narrative in a seemingly light-hearted and humorous way: they anticipate events or universalise some aspects of the plot. As a result, the elemental bucolic

narrative transforms into a pessimistic allegory of the conflict between frail human virtue and all-pervasive evil. In addition to its grim moral component, the film has a strong political dimension. More vocally than any of Petrović's previous films, *It Rains in my Village* is replete with provocative political statements: while immediate references were made to student movement of 1968 and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Yugoslav electoral system was ridiculed as a travesty of democracy.

By the time Petrović's film reached its audience, the relatively liberal climate of the Yugoslav 1960s began to melt. Films with political charge were met with tougher stance of the official sphere. In his attempt to circumvent these conditions, Petrović's next project, a loose adaptation of Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *Master and Margarita*, was released as an Italian-Yugoslav coproduction. The film, which is based chiefly on the first part of the novel, tells the story of a Russian Soviet writer whose play about the dialogue between Jesus Christ and Pontius Pilate is banned by authorities, as a result of which the writer is gradually slipping into insanity. Petrović emphasises the writer's relationship with Professor Woland, the devil incarnate, who helps the writer to stage his play and even reveals the hypocrisy of literary officials. In the increasingly hostile political environment of the early 1971, the reception of Petrović's film by both the general public and film establishment was surprisingly good: the film won two major prizes at the national festival in Pula and special prize at Venice. On the other hand, in the wake of political crackdown on liberal state institutions, individuals and social practices, *Master and Margarita* was severely criticised and refused license for public screening. Petrović's situation was further aggravated by the trial of his student Lazar Stojanović, whose graduation film *Plastic Jesus (Plastični isus)*, was banned and confiscated by the secret police. After a long and agonizing trial, Stojanović was sentenced to three years in prison, and Petrović, while avoiding

jail sentence, was dismissed from the Belgrade Academy of Film and Theatre: ironically, the destiny that awaited the director was precisely that of his and Bulgakov's Maestro.

Forced to leave Belgrade in 1973, Petrović settled in Paris where he began work on his ambitious new project – adaptation of Heinrich Böll's novel *Group Portrait with Lady* (*Gruppenbild mit Dame*). Result of French-German coproduction, the film premiered in 1977, and went on to win several national awards in Germany and was nominated for Palm d'Or at the Cannes film festival. The film follows the life of Leni Gruiten, which took many unfortunate turns over the period of 20 years: brought up in a Christian and humanist spirit, Leni spent her pre-war adolescent years in a catholic convent, got engaged during the war, but both her fiancée and brother were killed by Nazi guard while attempting to flee Germany. She meets a Russian prisoner of war, with whom she falls in love, but he too disappears with the first days of liberation. At about the same time Leni's father is found dead under unclear circumstances. The excruciating life of a woman who, throughout her life, epitomized the ideals of love and compassion, is Petrović's dark exploration of the meaning of human effort against the wheel of history.

Following the moderate success of *Group Portrait* Petrović attempted to reactivate his career in Yugoslavia, but at no avail. When he eventually struck a deal with state Television for adaptation of a novel by the Serbian modernist writer Miloš Tsernianski, the debt crises and political disintegration of Yugoslavia postponed its realization. The filming of Petrović's *Migrations* (*Seobe*) began in 1987 and was brought to a partial end in 1989. To the author's dismay, the post-production of what was one of the most expensive Yugoslav films ever, was halted when a

financial scandal broke out. It took Petrović additional five years to release the material and editing process finally began. Although the gravely ill author approved the work of the editing team, he died in August 1994 without seeing his ill-fated *magnum opus*. *Migrations* is a historical drama set in the 1700s, which portrays the lives of the Serbs who migrated from Ottoman-controlled parts of the Balkans to the south-east borders of the Habsburg Empire. By focusing on the life and fate of Vuk Isaković, commander of a Serbian regiment in the service of the Austrian Crown, Petrovic meditates on the position in which the Serbs found themselves – in a new hostile territory, torn between medieval past and uncertain future. On a more universal level, Petrovic *Migrations* are a pessimistic elegy on the senselessness of history and human inability to defy oblivion and death.

Dušan Radunović