

Film in Focus

Dušan Radunović*

Time Never Regained: Film, Memory and History in Mila Turajlić's *Labudović Reels*

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Abstract: The article reviews the documentary film diptych *The Labudović Reels* by film-maker Mila Turajlić. Based on her archival work at the Filmske Novosti production company, Turajlić discovers the legacy of hitherto unknown cinematographer Stevan Labudović. Both films are hybrid documentaries that combine archive footage with interview-style documentary, and both focus on two intertwined thematic cycles – Labudović's coverage of the Algerian war of independence (1959–1961) and the first summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (1960–1961). Conceptually, Turajlić's films engage thought-provoking matrixes, among them Pierre Nora's *lieux de memoire* and, more especially, Walter Benjamin's reflections on historical progress. This review finds that the implementation of the latter blurs the boundary between the critique of the idea of progress and historical relativism, which leads to the confusing presence of mutually exclusive voices in Turajlić's film, one calling for the reappropriation of the past, and another calling that same past into question.

Keywords: documentary cinema; Yugoslavia; Algeria; anti-colonialism; Non-Aligned Movement

A documentary film-maker, Mila Turajlić first caught the attention of international audiences with *Cinema Komunisto* (2010) which tells the story of the Belgrade-based Avala Film studio, established in the early 1960s to facilitate lavish international co-productions. The film was Turajlić's debut, and in it she weaves a social history of Yugoslavia's opening-up to the world and the film industry's role in that process. It is in the form of a hybrid documentary intercutting talking heads and archive footage to chart the rise of the studio to its 1960s and 1970s heyday and its subsequent demise in the 1990s. The film thereby places in its foreground a parallel it draws between the fates of Avala Film and of its home country. By way of a preface to *Cinema Komunisto*, Turajlić uses a line from the French philosopher Jacques Rancière's *The Future of the Image* to posit that the “history of cinema is the history of the power of making

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history” (Rancière (2003) 2007, 55). The film therefore declares at its outset that Turajlić believes that the cinematic medium wields considerable power in history; indeed that is revealed to be one of her most abiding concerns.¹ The film’s first diegetic line is from its auteur, telling the viewer that this is “a story about a country that no longer exists, except in cinema” and immediately introducing a related idea, equally central for Turajlić, that the moving image is a repository for collective memory; a symbolic archive through which the past is reconstituted, re-evaluated or refashioned. Indeed, as will transpire in this article, looming large in all of Turajlić’s subsequent films is the notion that film’s transformative power goes beyond its immediate impact on its audience. In fact, for Turajlić film contains a deeper, mnemonic potential in its ability to release buried layers of the past, which gives film-viewing a restorative component.

Turajlić’s sophomore work *The Other Side of Everything* (2015) is a documentary portrait of her mother, a public intellectual who earned renown as a freedom fighter during the period of Slobodan Milošević’s rule in Serbia in the 1990s. In *The Other Side of Everything*, Turajlić’s preferred hybrid style of storytelling combining talking-heads documentary with prolific use of archive material, was leavened by a deeply personal narrative mode. Through a variety of gestures – sighs, trenchant comments in emphatic tones, confrontation with participants, and even appearance on camera – the interviewer’s passive authorial position is slowly eroded, sometimes movingly. The authorial instance morphs from the subject of filming to participation in the filming, and then to being the subject of it. The resulting authorial position, oscillating as it does between observer and participant, endows the film with simultaneous broader reflection and intimacy. Its overriding dual narrative and temporal composition around the juxtaposition between the contemporary moment and the era of Milošević is expanded by the inclusion of intricate family history documenting an upper-middle-class Belgrade family’s decline post-World-War-Two, which eventually saw their family townhouse taken into state ownership, leaving them confined to the communal space of a converted first-floor apartment. The three layers of the narrative, interrelated by a variety of visual and non-visual means, are given a double exposure, first through Turajlić’s mother who is the film’s key participant, and then through Turajlić herself – the daughter and the film’s author. Nostalgic recollections, photographic records, and some archival footage all create a multi-layered tissue of cinematic emotion. The complex and at times colliding spaces of the film coalesce to create a synthetic and, it seems, irrecoverable time; a reversal

1 The further unfolding of *Cinema Komunisto* in which the viewer observes the film’s focus shifting towards the appropriation of the film industry by former Yugoslavia’s political structures departs from (and in fact simplifies) the ideas one finds in Rancière, but that discussion lies far beyond the scope of this article.

of the Proustian “time regained” in which the mother’s nostalgia-laced strategy for coping with her many personal, emotional, social and material losses is counterposed to her daughter’s emotionally charged but professionally distant authorial relationship with the film’s material.

The Labudović Reels: Ciné-Guerillas

Many of the features found in Turajlić’s earlier films, from their approach to documentary film making to their hybrid-media structure and emotively-engaged authorial position, are present in her most recent output too, a double-bill or documentary diptych which emerged from her exploration of the Yugoslav cinematographer Stevan Labudović, chief cameraman of Filmske Novosti, Yugoslavia’s official newsreel studio. Tasked with documenting but also shaping public life in Yugoslavia, Labudović spent over 30 years at Filmske Novosti but remained largely unknown to the general public. Of central importance to Turajlić’s cinematic interests, Filmske Novosti was the key media outlet during the pre-television era for Yugoslavia’s growing international presence, especially in the Third World and in postcolonial developing nations, the political arenas where Yugoslav diplomacy achieved considerable impact. Indeed, by creating a visual identity for Yugoslavia’s increasingly dynamic foreign policy, Filmske Novosti became a “conduit of exchange, solidarity and important political ties” (Turajlić 2021, 484). The company’s international activities began in Ethiopia in 1954 but soon expanded together with Yugoslavia’s diplomatic penetration into the developing world, efforts which culminated institutionally in the establishment in the 1960s of the Non-Aligned Movement.²

The most visible effort internationally and arguably the most significant politically was the company’s presence in Algeria just when that country’s war of independence was gaining traction. *Ciné-Guerrillas: Scenes from the Labudović Reels*, the first part of Mila Turajlić’s diptych, focuses almost entirely on the company’s involvement in Algeria and the work of its Master Cinematographer. It was agreed during a meeting between the country’s Provisional Government and the Yugoslav authorities that a Filmske Novosti crew should be dispatched to Algeria (Vučetić 2019, 137; Turajlić 2021, 490). That meeting took place in Belgrade in June 1959, and Yugoslav president Tito further committed to providing, in addition to this “filmed diplomacy”, a comprehensive aid package to Algeria’s Provisional Government, ranging from military assistance to medical support for the National Liberation Front. That “filmed diplomacy” was to involve the production of newsreels with the

² On Yugoslavia’s cinematic diplomacy in the rapidly decolonialising Third World and the intricate global dimensions of this process at the height of the Cold War, see Vučetić 2017, 62 and *passim*.

aim of internationalising the Algerian question and countering in both domestic and global circles the negative French-dominated representation of the anti-colonial struggle. Documentary and feature films were to be supplied about Yugoslav liberation too, which had originated during the Second World War and which the Algerians perceived as a potential tactical blueprint for their own guerrilla war (Turajlić 2021, 490).

The film's opening scene is set in the Algerian National Museum of El Moudjahid (Museum of the Revolution), a place dedicated to the preservation of the collective memory of the struggle for independence from colonial rule. There, among various objects from the days of the war of liberation, an important place has been dedicated to the permanent display of a cinematic apparatus, including a 35 mm Arriflex camera, a variometer, and a cinematographer's flat-cap à la Vertov (Figure 1). Along with other objects commemorating this landmark moment in Algeria's national history, Stevan Labudović's film equipment is revered by schoolchildren as one of the instruments that showed the world the Algerian people's suffering under colonial rule. At that moment, a voice-over suggests that there, in the museum's exhibition, the Algerian revolution is "boxed inside an institution". That idea of the museification of the Algerian struggle, its reduction to objects in an exhibition – to monuments, or other "sites of memory"³ – is likely to perplex the attentive viewer insofar as it is left hanging, without further reflection, during the course of the film. Adding to the semantic confusion caused by the voice-over, the real-time footage from the Museum of the Revolution is immediately matched to archive footage filmed by Labudović in 1959 (Figure 2). The whole therefore creates a montage sequence indicating a gap, or perhaps a disconnection, between the struggle for liberation and its "boxed-up" positioning in present-day memory.

From present-day Algeria the film-maker cuts to present-day Serbia, where we meet Stevan Labudović himself, now in his 80s. The cut enables Turajlić to establish parallel temporalities between the "then" of the revolutionary struggle and the "now" of her film's making. Just as in her earlier films – although within a different conceptual framework and offering a different conclusion – the semantic contours of the film emerge from the imaginary time-space between two temporalities. Turajlić's mode of communication with Labudović is personal and intimate throughout; following an initial conversation with him she takes viewers to the old Filmske Novosti premises, now derelict. A memorable scene shows Labudović standing in the archive vault with reels of his own films in his hands as he recites the names of the

³ Here the film's reference, although this is never stated in so many words, is probably to the French historian Pierre Nora and his conception of memory sites (*lieux de memoire*), which considers public spaces or objects, material or symbolic, as relevant to public remembrance and, by extension, for the construction and preservation of collective identities (Nora 1984–1992).



Figure 1: The apparatus of history; Stevan Labudović's filming equipment at the Algerian National Museum of El Moudjahid in Algiers. Film still from *Ciné-Guerrillas*. Courtesy: Icarus Films, New York.



Figure 2: The Algerian National Liberation Front; film still from *Ciné-Guerrillas*. Courtesy: Icarus Films, New York.

places he had visited and the battles he had filmed (“Algiers, destroyed city [...] Tebessa, entry of the army”). Like Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, the cinematographer is aware of his own bridging of historical eras, regaining moments from the past and giving them a new lease on life. Fleeting and instantaneous, this fine moment remains nonetheless memorable as the nexus between past and present as it is established through the act of cinema; but then: “the historical moment only flashes up and is never seen again” (Benjamin 1969, 255).

The appearance in the film of Labudović’s comrades in arms is particularly illuminating. Interviewed in Algeria, one of them recounts the ongoing information war between the liberation front and the visual propaganda department of the French colonial forces, the so-called Fifth Bureau, and *Cinema des Armes*, whose task was to “shock the public”. In the absence of trained cadres, and lacking a national film infrastructure, the Algerian freedom fighters and their political wing were heavily out-gunned by their opponents. The long aftermath of the censorial decree introduced in 1934 by Pierre Laval as French Minister for Colonial Affairs⁴ had the result that by the time of its war of independence, visual literacy in Algeria was virtually non-existent, suggesting that for the Provisional Government the aid provided by Filmske Novosti was “on a par with political cooperation” (Vučetić 2019, 137). Although glossed over in the subsequent course of Turajlić’s film the theme of colonial monopolisation of vision and seeing has been well noted and underpins some of her preeminent concerns, among which is the moving image’s centrality in history. In a revealing scene, Labudović reframes this film–history nexus by recounting an incident one night when his unit was caught in mortar fire and he was forced to run for his life: “I was asleep and started running, sleepwalking in fact, and I dreamed I was in Rome, in a movie theatre watching a war film.”

In an act of “cinematic solidarity”, the Yugoslav cinematic aid, which resulted in 60,000 metres of exposed film, accented the high morale of Algerian guerrilla fighters, while drawing attention to the atrocities committed by the French army and thereby enabling the liberation front to counter the media narrative created by the colonial power (Turajlić 2021, 490–1). Labudović’s work was aimed at both international and domestic audiences; his footage was shown abroad – albeit mainly in the Eastern Bloc including the GDR and Cuba – and at home, where the Filmske Novosti newsreels were shown all over the country, not least to boost morale.

The gradual undermining of French media domination within Algeria and abroad paved the way for what would be the most successful media offensive

4 Laval’s decree aimed not only to control the content of films made in French Africa but also to minimise the participation of local subjects in home-grown African film production (Diawara 1992, 22).



Figure 3: Opening credits to *Djazairouna* (Our Algeria); film still from *Ciné-Guerrillas*. Courtesy: Icarus Films, New York.

achieved by Labudović’s newsreels. In 1960, on the eve of the 15th session of the UN General Assembly, an international collective summoned by Filmske Novosti cut together material from newsreels shot by Labudović and footage of an unknown number of other cameramen into a 10-minute film entitled *Djazairouna* (Our Algeria) (Figure 3). It was arguably the first instance of what would later come to be known as *ciné-geography*, a mode of “situated cinecultural practice” transcending the boundaries of national cinema and individual authorial practices and driven by situations of urgent struggle (Eshun and Gray 2011, 1). *Djazairouna* was gifted to the Algerian delegation in the UN to be shown in bilateral and multilateral meetings to the world’s diplomats, as well as at universities and further afield. Labudović was flown from northern Africa to New York for the occasion, to film the historical session of the UN General Assembly where, on the first day, sixteen nations, most of which were former French colonies, were admitted to membership of the United Nations. That left Algeria as the only African country remaining under French colonial rule.

The short film produced by Filmske Novosti about the Algerian war of independence became not only a document of the Algerian struggle and a hallmark of the postcolonial movement in general but, as suggested before, the inauguration of a new way of seeing the oppressed colonial subject. In Turajlić’s film, “Our Algeria” is prefaced by Yugoslav president Tito’s speech to the UN session, in which he laid out a scathing critique of the global arms race and the colonial order in general. Appropriately, “Our Algeria” is then juxtaposed with the speech by Antoine Pinay, member

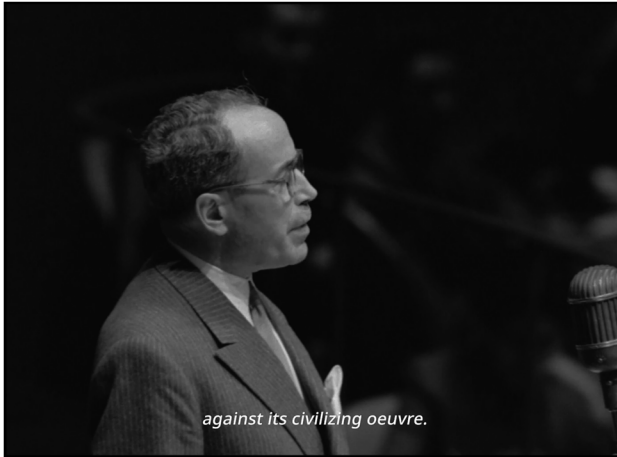


Figure 4: Antoine Pinay, member of the French delegation at the 15th session of the UN General Assembly, talking about the French *mission civilisatrice* in Algeria; film still from *Ciné Guerrillas*. Courtesy: Icarus Films, New York.

of the French delegation at the session. Pinay, in a tone starkly contrasting with that of the Yugoslav delegation, vehemently defended the French *mission civilisatrice* (Figure 4).

Just as the French newsreels shown earlier in her film, which are the canvas for an artificial picture of the colonial condition, Turajlić's exposure of the blatant language of colonial subjugation heard at the UN creates a powerful counterbalance to the anticolonial struggle displayed in Labudović's newsreels. The centrality of the ethos of global engagement, anti-colonialism, and active peace-making suggests to the viewer that those three aspects constitute the moral of Turajlić's film, and its ideological crux. Yet, as pointed out earlier, there is tension between the film-maker's desire to create a documentary homage to a forgotten cinematographer and her attempts to build a narrative about what he ultimately achieved, namely the inauguration of a new way of seeing the colonial subject's struggle for freedom. Unfortunately, that tension has not been successfully resolved to the benefit of the film. Sometimes indeed, the viewer is at a loss as to where the film is going; the vacillating authorial intention is felt in the film's tantalisingly thin line between the idea that on the one hand the moving image wields agency in historical processes, and on the other hand the postmodern notion, only seemingly commensurate, that history is by nature evasive, that it is a narrative structured as text – in this case a visual text – and that the shape and meaning of it emerge and by turns collapse.

The Labudović Reels: Non-Aligned

Titled *Non-Aligned: Scenes from the Labudović Reels*, the second part of Turajlić's diptych is an offshoot of the same creative effort – Turajlić's thorough archival work on the film and print material found in the Filmske Novosti company's archives. By centring on the events leading up to the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in Belgrade in September 1961, the film proceeds both chronologically from the events described in the first part of the diptych and in terms of the global political history it purports to trace. The film opens at Belgrade airport with a deep-focus shot depicting a landing aircraft, reminiscent of French documentary film-maker Chris Marker's *La Jetee*, and for sheer visuality the image represents the film's high point. This opening scene is offered up to double acts of gazing, first through the all-encompassing eye of the camera and then through the eyes of silent witnesses who are the awed onlookers at history in the making (Figure 5). Found among the many outtakes held in the Filmske Novosti archive, this striking opening sequence introduces the theme of multiplication of the imperative of looking which was a hallmark of the socialist public sphere, to then be extended to the crowded streets of Belgrade where enchanted citizens are seen greeting the heads of states who as the city's guests are to participate in the coming summit. Their initially silent gaze is thus transformed into an eruption of public endorsement of state policy.

The visual evocation of the memory of the inaugural summit of the Non-Aligned Movement prompts the film-maker to continue her interrogation of how history unfolds. The images of the past, her voice-over reflects, “stare back [...] in a secretive



Figure 5: Onlookers' "silent gaze" at Belgrade airport, September 1961; film still from *Non-Aligned*. Courtesy: Icarus Films, New York.

silence [...] unaware that their protagonists mean little to us today”. Just as in the first part of the *Labudović Reels*, such questions lead the viewer to the central pre-occupation of the second part, which is the representation of historical events. Again however, the impression is that the emphasis is as much on “representation” as on the actual events. In other words, the second part of the diptych further interrogates the manifestations of history to be seen in images or other acts of real and symbolic remembrance, and wonders how the present historical horizon renders the past anew. It comes as no surprise that *Non-Aligned: Scenes from the Labudović Reels* is prefaced by an epigraph taken from Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*: “History decays into images [*Bilder*], not into stories” (Benjamin 2002, 476), with which, scholars tell us, the German-Jewish philosopher aimed to refute the ideas of continuity and progress in history and to promulgate his idiosyncratic version of historical materialism (Kittsteiner 1986, 208). In the latter conception, the validation of the past arrives only in specific and privileged historical moments. Those privileged moments, which Benjamin terms “images”, are neither necessarily cinematic nor even of visual nature at all; rather they are dialectical junctions where past and present meet. That is why for Benjamin the image is the only moment when past and present coincide in what is, as he famously put it, “dialectics at a standstill” (Benjamin 2002, 462). Now, the question that arises from the outset appears similar to the one identified in the first part of the diptych: if Benjamin’s “standstill” signifies historical indeterminacy in long *durée* and is a way of saying that there is no single unitary horizon of history, we are left only with more questions. But we shall look in vain in Turajlić’s film for clues to their answers (Figure 6).



Figure 6: History into images; still from *Non-Aligned: Scenes From the Labudović Reels*. Courtesy: Icarus Films, New York.

The great and glaring question here is, “What do viewers of Turajlić’s film learn about the historical events it depicts from her conceptualisation of them that renders historical processes elusive and accessible only through symbolic representations, or through various fields of memory?” Have the meaning and significance of those events been rooted out of the course of history and left, “high and dry” as it were, in the symbolic realm? Are they scattered, fragmentary images, as in Figure 6 above? Would the decolonised non-aligned nations themselves accept the view that their liberation efforts were contingencies of historical circumstance rather than the outcomes of real historical processes that channelled new “social, cultural, political, and economic imaginaries (of a non-hegemonic global order)” (Stubbs 2023, 3–4)? What would Stevan Labudović himself have to say as a cameraman and an active participant at once about the idea of the historical contingency of the anticolonial struggle? And, lastly, how does the film-maker herself reconcile the idea of the radical evasiveness of history with the notion so emphatically stated and re-stated throughout the film, that as a cinematographer Labudović was not merely a chronicler of an era but one of its protagonists, wielding considerable power in the historical processes he filmed?

The final sequence of the second film of the diptych reintroduces the footage used in its opening scene showing the exhilarated crowd on the streets of Belgrade welcoming the foreign dignitaries (Figure 7). This time however, a voice-over by Turajlić describes the magnificent display of public support for the country’s policy of international cooperation as a “tangible way to anchor the vision of global kinship”. Her words close the film, and are an apparent answer to her question which she raised at its very beginning: “Why dig out the images of an event that hardly anyone remembers?” With this ending, the viewer is given to understand that it is the public solidarity with the vision of global kinship that makes the author proud, but is simultaneously left wondering whether Turajlić’s is a purely subjective vision, conditioned by her restorative work of cinematic memory, or whether even that restorative work was conditioned by her own (or was it someone else’s?) historical circumstances?

The emphatic yet controversial and possibly mistaken interpretation of Benjamin’s philosophy of history throughout the film emerges in clearer light when placed against the method, so frequently applied in the film, of paralleling historical epochs. Parallelisms and historical juxtapositions indeed abound, but they give only the appearance of leading to any refutation of the idea of historical progress (as in Benjamin). What they in fact achieve instead is a *relativisation* of history. For example, early in the film, archive footage shows the citizens of Belgrade attending a public exhibition, staged in the city centre, of large boards displaying information about the countries participating in the non-aligned summit, many of which would until then have been unknown to those citizens. The sequence is immediately



Figure 7: Belgrade, September 1961. Public endorsement of “global kinship” as installed by Titoist Yugoslavia; film still from *Non-Aligned*. Courtesy: Icarus Films, New York.

followed by a scene showing the author sitting with Labudović in Belgrade’s Friendship Park, laid out during the first summit by the presidents of all the participating nations. As Labudović reminisces about these days of the first summit, he and Turajlić become witnesses of another “exhibition” as a tour guide takes tourists through the park showing them the trees that were planted by various world leaders in 1961. The scene then cuts to archive footage of Third World leaders actually planting the trees, accompanied by Turajlić’s present-day voice-over saying that many of those leaders, then seen as progressive, either themselves ended up as dictators or were deposed in coups – not infrequently both. With that scene in the park therefore, the former Yugoslavia, present-day Serbia, and even the park itself all merge into one synchronous museum of forgotten – or defunct – political ideologies.

A similar relativising effect is achieved by the inconsistent treatment of the socialist past. For example, the viewer hears the film-maker laughing with the head of the archive section at Filmske Novosti over the formal-bureaucratic tone of Labudović’s newsreels (“That was the title? You must be kidding me...”). That their remarks were not edited out suggests that a sort of “ideological meandering” is integral to Turajlić’s auteur’s vision, which brings us back to the question of the film’s

vacillating perspective. I must emphasise here that by no means do I consider the lack of a clear ideological compass as a token of any sort of failure of the film. However, I do believe that the light-heartedness with which its perspectives veer from subjective endorsement to superficial revisionism creates an effect contrary to what the author intended. Ultimately, historical processes have been relativised, which means that the way they are presented stands in the way of the viewer's ability to apprehend them in all their complexity.

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Filmography

CINÉ-GUERRILLAS: Scenes from the Labudović Reels, dir. Mira Turajlić

94 min/Color/B&W

Serbian; English; French; Arabic/English subtitles

Closed Captioned

Release: 2023

Copyright: 2022

NON-ALIGNED: Scenes from the Labudović Reels, dir. Mira Turajlić

100 min/Color/B&W

Serbian; English; French; Arabic/English subtitles

Closed Captioned

Release: 2023

Copyright: 2022

Bionote

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