

In the Red Dust Country

(A conversation with Zelimir Zilnik, by Mirosljub Stojanovic)

MS: You took a long time to decide and accept this tete-a-tete, an interview. Where is the source of this uneasy feeling?

ZZ: It is, first of all, that long time span. Four decades. The subject of our conversation. I am trying to remember: when was I twenty years old? It was in Nineteen-sixty-two. And, when at that time somebody mentioned or spoke about the nineteen-twenties... What did interest me, what did I feel? The basic thing is that when you speak to a young man about things that happened some forty years ago, the images remain vague, uncertain, as if those things really happened four hundred years before his time... Speaking about books or films, I craved to see them all and read them all, not to listen to stories of those who made them, stories which could come as a post- explanation or a kind of justification for the work done. Secondly, I remember that all the recommendations, one way or the other, to which I listened as a young man and was told by different persons in their sixties, had no precise significance for me. I wanted with all my heart to go through it all by myself, through my own experiences. Conferences or interviews of the then actual Yugoslav "Coryphaeus of Arts" whom I heard or read - Miroslav Krleža (a mighty leftist critic of bourgeois culture and of the political regime of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Austrian soldier in the First World War, a writer inspired later by Lenin, and the author of novels and plays written in Croatian language, in the period between the two Great Wars); Ivo Andrić, Nobel Prize for literature, and King Aleksandar's diplomatic "servant", in the nineteen-thirties, even in Berlin under Hitler; or Ervin Sinko, a novelist, one of the leaders of the 1919 Hungarian Socialist Republic under Béla Kun, and later a witness of Stalin's "leaden years"; and when I met him in Novi Sad - a scholar, a professor at the Philosophy Faculty. So, in spite of their turbulent youth and undergone risks, they surfaced for my generation in their roles of proud representatives of Tito's establishment and ideology.

Their position and functions within the cultural life of Yugoslavia in the nineteen-sixties were untouchable. As to us, reaching hardly our twentieth birthdays, we were being told that they accomplished, mostly, all of their youth ideals. They used the status symbols and the luxury of the then ruling elite, and misused in a way the toughness of the intellectuals. Yes, it was their product: once upon a time sensitive to social injustices and political aberrations, they became silent, without remorse, about all the absurdities which surrounded us, which my generation felt at that time.

- All those experiences were a sort of early warnings against the absurd, the sorrow facts of life: ageing does not mean necessarily integrity and wisdom, but rather a dissipation and dilution of once defended principles of your youth. I wouldn't know precisely whether it had been a conscious or an act dictated by circumstances, but this experiences developed into a strategy of accepting the marginal. It is more or less a constant value of my forty years of making "motion pictures".

MS: My second question. How can you summarise the cultural environment in which, as you said it yourself, you chose or, better phrased, you were predestined to a marginal position?

ZZ: - Reviewed in a sequence of instant shots of all those years, the enormous waste of energy and time, and the fall of a number of States bearing the name Yugoslavia, it comes out as follows: only in two time intervals the political and cultural environment of my country was near to normal. Open and encouraging. Those were at the beginning of the nineteen-sixties until the anti-establishment student protest in (Nineteen)-68. I remember those eight years as years of peace - you could live, learn, work full abreast. Without any killing dogmatism running down your spine. Without a sentiment of uneasiness and shame because of the stupidity, kitsch values and self-destruction of the ruling model. And another period when we lived almost normally was the eighties, after Tito died. I thought then: Yugoslavia after her life under "enlightened absolutism" could embark on the road leading to sober democracy. Both "Yugoslav Springs" had been cut to their very root. Firstly by neo-Stalinism in the seventies, that is by the rigid Tito power devaluating the acquirements of "creative Titoism" of the previous decade, the time of self-management and non-alignment of Yugoslavia. The second stage had been ruined by power feuds among the political elites of the "nomenclatures" in the Federated Republics. It started with disputes over Tito's heritage, escalated to plundering wars about the succession to the dead monarch's inherited goods.

In those "quiet sixties" I was able to start making my amateur films. I was able to chair the Youth Forum in Novi Sad, a highly polemic and active cultural institution in the country at that time. I was able to go and participate in the Kor-ula Summer School, the absolutely best known summer university in the world. To finish my Law studies. To produce films and earn my living in my status of "free-lance artist". To film documentaries: "The Diary of Rural Youngsters, in the Winter", "Young Pioneers...", the "Unemployed", "June Movements", or the feature film "Early Works". As a "promising young man", I was admitted to the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, and thrown out as an "anarchist liberal element". As it happened, I was accepted by film critics, got big festival prizes for short and long feature films. And also, to be contested, banned and prosecuted in courts, notably for my "Early Works".

Came the decade of the seventies, I hardly could keep my head above the water. I was an almost drowning-man several times.

And then, unexpectedly, the quiet eighties. The years of the most compact part of my filmography: thirteen long feature television films in the genre of documentary dramas. Those were stories and destinies of everyday people, workers, peasants, and the people from the under-bottom of the life-line. That was the time when I came to realise that they were the only world animating the existence of the Balkans whose elites are of a bad kind.

The stream of the nineteen-nineties started. Fratricide, plundering was conceived and led by the worse crooks of the previous regime; their objective being to dominate over the Balkan space, with criminals and assassins. They nearly made it. Serbia and Montenegro are nowadays engaged in an uncertain battle on the issue of whether the civil society will really be able to eliminate the acting bandits.

MS: I go on with my questions. Your film-making debuts are set in what you call the normal, quiet years. Where lies the origin of that decision?

ZZ: - I have to go back to 1960, I am finishing secondary school. I love painting, theatre, literature. Hardly freed from socialist realism, Yugoslav film-production enthusiastically follows the steps of modernist trends. Exhibition galleries are full of enformel paintings. In the theatres, the hit representations are those of Beckett and Ionesco. Writers experiment with language and the world of the fantastic.

Personally, I am magnetically attracted to cinema theatres. The country is in a full opening towards the world. We can watch a fantastic repertoire: Bunuel, De Sica, Fellini, Rossellini, Carné, Godard, Cassavetes, Visconti, Elia Kazan, Kloss and Kadar, the young Milos Forman and Jirzi Mencl. And, my first occasion to see some Russian film production: Medvedkin, Eisenstein, Pudovkhin. My generation grew during the time of the conflict with Stalin. So, no Russian films around.

At that same moment the Yugoslav film industry is absorbed in the closed circuit of war stories. Some of the famous names in the later film production: Zivojin Pavlovic and Dusan Makavejev, were not shooting yet. I meet them as film critics whose conferences I organise in the Youth Forum in Novi Sad. And it's then that I discover a segment of film life nearly out of public focus, but gathering film fanatics: the cine-clubs of those times. We worked with 16 mm negative, or "Umker" film. We developed it ourselves. The editing was done on ancient moving manual machines looking like typewriters. The cine-clubs were animated by a special spirit. The art itself - you're transforming with your own hands stories emanating out of your head. And, then, the fantastic world of cameras, lenses, light, editing, work in the laboratories. Work in teams, communication and collaboration. Excellent communication with cine-clubs from all over the country: Belgrade, Zagreb, Skopje, Ljubljana, Novi Sad, Nis... And whom do you meet there, movie fanatics like yourself. Then, the festivals. The participants and the juries were more qualified and professional than those "presiding" over the official film-making industry. That's how I met Dusan Stojanovic, the most important film critic and aesthetic in Yugoslavia in those times, unsurpassed to this day. Branko Vucicevic - the best connoisseur of the alternative film. Pansini, Gotovac, Petek, Zafranovic, Jaksic Fandjo, Karpo Godina - my all-life time friends.

When a few years later I started shooting my professional films on 35 mm, I asked Fandjo to be my cameraman for short feature films, and Karpo Godina to be in charge of the camera in the "Early Works".

MS: This intellectual nucleus (Dusan Makavejev, Branko Vucicevic, Zivojin Pavlovic, Jovan Jovanovic, Lazar Stojanovic) how much was it an encouragement for you? Do you consider that you all came out of some global shared idea?

ZZ: It would be interesting to make a precise emergence genesis of the "new film of the Sixties". Some authors and titles forgotten since could prove to have been "trend setters". For example Purisa Djordjevic, Jovan Zivanovic, Kokan Rakonjac, or films like "Ceremony" signed by Djordje Kadijevic, and "Hot Years" signed by Dragoslav Lazic... A common idea - yes, it existed. Abolish or 'fight' with ninety percent of the then current cinema making which was only one branch of the official ideological and propaganda mechanism.

MS: Your departure for Germany was, all in all, imposed? You found yourself dislocated from a natural environment. But, then and there, you started making engaging, subversive films. What was, really, the basic reason for your expulsion from Germany?

ZZ.: The films emanating from the circle to which I belonged were being severely politically attacked, and particularly by the end of 1969. What was the significance of that? The ideological sections of the Central and municipal committees, various consulting meetings, discussing all about "the situation in the national film production"; and finally some state bodies - ministries and funds, came to conclude that the film industry "reveals enemy contents"; that some authors "annihilate the successes of socialism". So, my "Early Works" were indicted as early as June the same year. The indictment said: "The author devaluates ideological and political relations in our country. He makes a grotesque and ironic picture of the family, the people, the intimate relations between young people, of the life in rural and urban areas. This film attributes a negative connotation to the relations between nations living in Yugoslavia, to the questions pertaining to agricultural policy, the employed and the unemployed, to the role of the League of communists in the society.

The film is grossly ironic of the symbols and the emanation of the progressive past, in our country and in the world". In court, I defended the film by proving the absurdity of the indictment. It was still a time for a possible dialogue. The judge having seen the film, stamped it as free. But, neo-Stalinism was gaining new wings because of the "nomenclature" fears and remorse, provoked by the students' revolt of 1968. It was directly

against the "red bourgeoisie", and against the gerontocratic authority which reigned as an epidemic in all socialist countries. During two or three years, there was an on-going fight, a sort of testing, between the already strong critical opinion front and the dogmatic ones. There is also a conflict in the top circles of the state. Tito and his lieutenants are settling their accounts with the "Serbian liberalism" and the "Croats' Spring". "Neoplanta" a film production company in Novi Sad, my producer, becomes a straightforward victim of this conflict. It's with the same producer that Makavejev starts making in 1970 his film "WR-Mysteries of the Organism", while I am in the army. Back from my military service, I am shooting my documentary "The Black Film", I start working on a feature film entitled "Freedom or Cartoon". Makavejev finishes his "Mystery" in summer of 1971, but the film is denied the necessary license for public release in the country. Being a co-production, the film starts to live happily and successfully abroad. The manager of "Neoplanta", Svetozar Udovicki, is strongly defending "his authors" and is finally replaced and sacked from his job. And my "Freedom or Cartoon" is suspended in the middle of the production and never finished. In the mid-eighties, a first occasion to gather the material and finish the film, the negative could not be found. No traces. Probably destroyed. So, my film was taken from me while it was on the editing table. A huge campaign is mounted in the media and the Party apparatus. The "unacceptable works" are being listed. On the list, all the titles of the films I made. I was "dropped" from the League of Communists in summer of 1969, after the court procedure. The Social Insurance authorities inform me that I can no longer count on my health insurance to which I was entitled as an artist, since my works "have been banned from the public scene". All producers' doors are closed. Lazar Stojanovic, the author of the "Plastic Jesus Christ" is arrested, because of his film.

That's the moment when I decide to go to Germany. Why Germany? It's a country which in those years receives hundreds of thousands of so-called guest-workers (gastarbeiters), from Yugoslavia. I thought that I could try making film stories about those workers. Secondly. Germany - its State, sciences, technical know-how, army, language - are present in the minds of Yugoslavs more than any other European country. For centuries, while under ottoman occupation, Vienna, Munich and Berlin were the first nearest Christian centres, one went there in exile, to study or join the army. Serbian and Croatian books were printed there, many people studied there. The most important Serbian novel "Migrations" by Milos Crnjanski is dedicated to soldiers and officers, Serbs, who fought under the Savoy Prince Eugene. And then, later, the traumatic moments: First World War starting with the conflict between Serbia and Austria-Hungary. And the founding of Yugoslavia on the remnants of the Empire, in 1918. Twenty years later, another "close contact" with Germany - Hitler's army occupies and dismembers the country, as from April 1941. My school days and youth are marked by stories and pictures of "partisans versus fascists". And, finally, what I wanted to see "in its origins" was the evolution of Society and State between extreme poles - communism-fascism-capitalism.

These are, whether you like it or not, primarily "German inventions". I wanted to see how one survives and what happens when a society experiences a narcissistic euphoria of the "ruling over the world" followed shortly after by a total defeat, destruction, frustration. The need to see it emanated from the previous experience of the destruction of the "New Yugoslav film". Although a limited field of activities, it showed the progress of a disease in society, the progress of ideological madness, the way things take an upside-down direction.

MS: And then. You're off to Germany: with a project, something ready in your pocket?

ZZ: I depart seeking refuge. I contact a few people that I met during previous years at film festivals. Understandably, I cannot explain to whom so ever that the "Yugoslav situation has changed". Nobody would believe me. For we were that happy country where one spend his or her vacations at the seaside, in that "other" country with a different socialism offering big hopes. And Tito, on an official visit to Germany, soon after my arrival, plays his charms with the young and the elder by relating his stories about his working in a plant in Mannheim, in 1925, about how he was in charge of the maintenance of a Bugati cabriolet owned by the famous operetta director Geza Von Cziffra. And a scene on the TV screen: these two old persons, 80 years each, meet, have a lot of fun, slap each other on the shoulder. Geza Von Cziffra says: you Broz, you were talking all the time about how you would go to America, and I see that you're still down there in the Balkan. Tito answers in his working class German: my dear Geza, I made America in my down there environment. I invite you to come to Brioni and see for yourself what Hollywood looks like. As for me, I keep silent and start making short feature films.

The incentives for the national German film production are very favourable. Once finished, the films are submitted to a certification (Bewertunstelle) and if the certificate (Besonderes Wertfol) is obtained the producer gets a compensation of 30 thousand German marks and a tax-free license. I have completed seven documentaries. Three or four get the positive certificate. In one case I discovered suddenly the existence of a precertification procedure before the film is viewed by the competent board. It's a sort of Free will self-control (Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle). In fact a body which informed me and my producer that in the film "Offentliche Hinrichtung" the "chosen subject had not been treated adequately". It was a short feature film essay about how police interventions against the Red Army Fraction ended often with fire shots and killings of "terrorists", as presented in TV News editions. The film develops on the thesis that it's a kind of contemporary execution, i.e. an introduction of death penalty by the small door. And that short film was never shown, at least not before 1997, the year of a retrospection of films dedicated to the "leaden years"; the film was the first item of this retrospective review. Shortly afterwards and following my already described topics of interest, which led me to Germany, we pooled all our energies and funds in favour of a long feature film project: "The Paradise". The story was "well peppered and hot" - a falling down speculative firm. In order to defend itself from the robbed clients and its own shame, the firm hires a team of hippies who will introduce themselves as terrorists. They will rob the strong-boxes of the firm. The public and the banks feel a deep pity towards the "poor victims of anarchism". The capitalists will kill the "terrorists" and appear as heroes on TV News.

The film was agreed upon with Telepool company, a TV extension for co-productions. A few days before the shooting started

the manager Siegfried Magold calls me and asks whether I read the papers. No, I said, no time for that, I am casting and choosing locations. Big mistake, says Mr. Magold. There were elections yesterday in Munich. The reigning Social-democrats lost the elections. He will lose his job, says he. The newly elected authorities will appoint their own people. The project "Paradise" is to be stopped, now. So, there are ideological "cleansings" even on the solid terrain of the Bundes Republik. We managed to complete the film, in spite of enormous budget problems.

It was edited in the Filmverlag Der Autoren whose staff comprised Kluge, Edgar Reitz, Brustelin, Sinkl, Ula Stoeckl. I saw off and on even Werner Herzog. The film was completed and shown at a premiere in the Munich Werstadt kino - and that coincided with the beginning of the feverish "chase of the enemy" following the murder of the Industry Chamber president Shlaira - the police burst into my apartment. They were looking for proofs of my "links with terrorists". They found nothing because there was simply nothing. But, my working permit-visa was not in order, my tax payments inaccurate. I was deprived of residence for two years...

MS: According to some information, the main male film role in THE PARADISE was reserved for Fassbinder! Is that correct?

ZZ: We had talks with Hana Shigule for the role of the firm owner, and Fassbinder should have been the leader of the kidnappers' group. The talks came to a halt when Telepool got out of the project and when we started working with "bits and pieces".

MS: What was, in general, the influence of Germany on your own self? In the sense of new ideas, encouragement...

ZZ: I felt a sort of "comeback to life" after all those pressures and sanctions in 1972 and 1973. I woke up in another setting which had a creative concentrated energy in favour of the "New German cinema". It was interesting to be on the spot and be at the same time an outsider. From my conversations with authors I could conclude about the amount of energy they were investing in their strategy of "engagement with a distance". No hasty rush in the "digging up of social and historical wounds" - as we, belonging to the "black film" wave, did in Yugoslavia, without hesitation. The Germans, probably bearing in mind the difficult lesson of their own history, knew naturally how the State could be a dangerous mechanism which can stop you, incarcerate you or make you for a head shorter - so they watched me a bit incredulously while I was presenting my films "Offentliche Hinrichtung" and "Das Paradies".

But, hadn't I gone through that, would I have had later enough patience to keep on working on apparently less attractive projects necessitating a lot of "digging in the field" of TV productions. And also, would I have been able to come to know Europe as it was seen by migrant workers who are a kind of "half-free peasants" on a feudal estate. And based directly on that experience a theatre project - "Gastarbeiter Opera" - was born in the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad. I staged it in 1977. That was my comeback in the national press. I was on no list of "unsuitable persons" for theatre activities... And without my "excursion to Germany" I doubt whether I could have made "The Second Generation". Even "The Fortress Europe" owes one to that experience. And the film I just finished - "Kennedy goes back Home".

MS: The EARLY WORKS initiated something to be confirmed by the German phase that something being what I would qualify as a distinctive Zilnik style: erasing of differences between fiction and documentary, low budget, deeply engaging scenarios, incredible sensibility for the instant, work with non-professional actors, shooting on exterior locations...

ZZ: I experienced in ten years of my life, between my twenty-fourth and thirty-fourth, two enormous "take-offs", they both ended by my pounding my head against the wall. All cinema doors closed at home. A black stamp on my passport in Germany. All those tales about any kind of solidarity in cinema or in general within the "self-management in Yugoslavia", are illusions. People, with the exception of some closest friends, evaded mixing with the "marked ones". No telephone calls, no visits, job offers zero. Serious conclusions became imperative. How to go on? A lot of people counselled me to abandon film-making. You can't find your way. The principles you mentioned were formulated at that time. Certain authors in the same situation opted for another approach. For example, Lordan Zafranovic turned to great historical films, such as the "Occupation in 26 shots". Makavejev made a few unusual commercial films - "Mister Montenegro", "Coca Cola Kid". In Slovenia, Zika Pavlovic makes films based on works of best known writers in the Slovenian milieu, namely Vitomir Zupan. So, there were different options...

MS: Once back in the country, did you find it substantially changed?

ZZ: Yes. All those true qualities of the late sixties - openness and diversity in the sphere of culture, polemics about the future of socialism in politics, the young experts replacing the old apparatus generation in the economic sphere - all that was labelled as "obnoxious tendencies". In my case, the Yugoslavia in which I lived my youth was dead by then. There it is, but in fact it is absent. It's like when you pay a visit to a friend. He is sitting, but connected to infusion tubes. He reacts with his nodding head, listens to you, but has no part

in real life...

MS: The German experience, did it perhaps have a later influence, for instance on the creation of your film the SECOND GENERATION?

ZZ: Yes. But that film was made eight years later. During the time we were speaking about I was confronted with the problem of how the survive through those eight years.

MS: In reality, that was the phase of your covenants with television? How come that it happened?

ZZ: I was searching for an answer to the question: what to do? No chance of opening the doors leading to national cinematography. All the films were somewhere deep in the basements. My theatre work started very well, but I could not accept to renounce, to put a cross on "motion pictures". And, first of all, because I was violently and grossly chased out. So, I decide to try myself in the television media. At first glance, television seems to be under even a greater grip of politics than the film industry. Television is a mechanism which has to comply with the rules of the press, in other words the authors' rights and freedom are less protected than in the case of film-making. Yes.

All that is correct, in a way. And television needs quite an amount of minutes to fill in the screen. That dictates the timing of shooting, postproduction and broadcasting, calculating within standard norms. No huge mystification like the one surrounding the film industry: committees reviewing the scenarios and scripts, State Foundation in charge of projects, engrossed salaries for actors or crew members, problems with technical material and costs of the 35 mm film, stresses during postproduction - one has to get the decisions of the "Board", of "Drama departments". And, last but not the least, the censorship committee. So, during the winter of 1977 I knock politely at the door of Television Novi Sad. Their reaction: The manager is the only one who can decide about your case. The Manager, Slobodan Budakov (nowadays a valiant democrat among the Vojvodina politicians) sizes me up:

After

all your ideo(logical) misgivings we can give you one and only chance in the Humorist-Variety department. I react with a nod. I get my shooting crew, for a week. Working feverishly day and night, I manage to produce three short films, thirty minutes each. The first, "Our stars are our spiritual food" was about imitators of well known TV and film heroes. One of them was jumping and yelling as the Hindu version of Robin Hood in that time, the famous Sandokan. Another one was

driving his tiny Fiat 600 in the "grand" style of Schumacher, and the third one sang like Elvis Prestley. There were others as well. The second short feature film was about a popular fair in the town of Sabac. Entitled "The Masters of the Market-Place", it was a story about the local authorities imposing and collecting taxes from the circuses, merry-go-rounds, fair salesmen.

The third piece, "A Comedy and tragedy according to Bora Joksimovic" was really quite interesting. In a small provincial theatre in the town of Zrenjanin, a person in charge of the theatre heating installation, hating the current repertoire, spends his free days and nights in writing comedies and dramas. Very naïve texts with terrific subjects, characters and details from everyday life. A few examples: the "Talks of Stalin and Hitler in Hell", the "Killer of his Own Brother" - one brother being good, the other rotten to the bone. Or the comedy "Girlie, Cover Your Legs" about retired persons who spend their time in parks, promenades or playing chess. But, watching secretly young schoolgirls and students escaping lessons and playing, talking endlessly and smoking in those public spaces and parks. He wrote forty-five different texts. In two days of shooting my crew filmed the portrait of this "naïve artist" and staged fragments from two of his drama texts. Ten days later, I am presenting the roughly edited version to the manager and the Editorial board. A highly strung atmosphere, no "enemy position" can pass undetected. I start with the "Comedy and Tragedy", the material is unusual and interesting. In the dark, everybody laughs. The lights on, the manager is far from satisfied. And he says: Well, Zilnik, is scribble mania something positive or negative in a society such as ours? And my answer: I can't be precise, but I think that it can't be harmful. Well, he says, you're wrong, the mania of scribbling is negative; and you demonstrated a positive attitude and sympathy towards that phenomenon. We are not going to broadcast this. Can you imagine how many writers, scribbles of that kind could come asking for a chance... All the present persons agree... I am down.

Thinking that my television plans are nearly gone for ever. The "Masters of the Market-Place" is accepted and shown by the Editor of the Documentaries' Department. "Our Stars..." find their place in the night variety-humorists programme. They are broadcasted shortly afterwards. The press reacts. So, I am starting to "legitimise" my position. In the whole TV repertoire, the most interesting segment to my mind is the Monday 8 O'clock Original national TV film or TV drama. The Editor of that segment is becoming hysterical, he is desperately trying to fill it in. Established authors are not craving to do it - small budgets, small fees, no film glamour. The Editors in charge are in real pain. The programme is followed closely by the viewers and TV critics, they have to offer them quality. At that time, we had joint schemes for the most interesting programmes and prime hours of broadcasting. So the drama pieces broadcasted by TV Novi Sad were seen in Sarajevo, Zagreb and in other Republics of the ex-Yugoslav federation. Well, I started thinking how to "move in" in that space. And I made it, but not without problems here and there. During the eighties, the final score was thirteen titles... I couldn't believe it myself, then, even now when I come to think about it. In the nineteen-seventies I was a "banned name". In the nineteen-eighties I was an author "well accepted by the viewers and TV critics". Some of the plays encountered an exceptional reception and were re-broadcast several times, until this day...

MS: I must admit that I didn't have an insight into your television production. But viewing it a posteriori, I find in it a typical Zilnik strategy: engagement, actuality, questioning, polemic notes, provocative echoes... but enriched through a great number of micro-levels. If we follow them very carefully, which is not always a case of the ordinary viewer, one can detect quite a number of tiny details modelled as quite relevant, anticipating features. I am taking one example. As far as I am concerned one of your best works in the late eighties still is the TV film "The Old-timer". As early as 1988, a TV production of yours featured the following phrase: The war had not yet started, but we better be ready... Have you had a kind of premonition of a future disruption of the country?

ZZ: Summer of 1988. All over the country the leaders of all Federated Republics were engaged in heavy disputes. The public form: sessions of Central Committees revealing among other things different options existing within the established socialist regime. The Central Committee of Slovenia, led by Kucan, later to be the President of the independent Slovenia, for a whole decade, is defending the model of Euro communism. So, debates and factions within the Party. Pluripartite parliamentary system. Milosevic speaking in the name of Serbian communists, is leading a tougher, centralist line. He is against pluripartism and the then existing model of Federation. The others divide themselves according to these options. But, nobody is able to gain a majority on the level of the whole Yugoslavia and replace Tito. It was a kind of subconscious desires of all the actors involved. They grew out of the shadow of an authoritarian father and they all wanted to occupy his shiny limos and his villas. The language of the debates is a mixture of a marxist-leninist-self-mangement lingo. This language looses ground on the so-called world level. Gorbachev appears. YU-Leaders operate with a nationalistic phraseology, and the resentment. Some were always "part of Europe" - Slovenia and Croatia. Others "defended Europe against the Ottoman invasion" - Serbs, Macedonians.

And some others, the Moslems, wanted to prove that a great civilisation and its culture, urban development and architecture came into the Balkans only with the penetration of the Ottoman Empire in these spaces. This Empire was a tolerant one, it preserved Christian monuments; further more, it was a modern State accepting Serb and Croat representatives converted to Islam, as high State dignitaries. The great administrator and soldier of the Turkish Empire Mehmed Pasa Sokolovic was of Serb origin. In the Turkish Empire he detained a role similar to the one the French Eugène de Savoy had in Austria... So, the elites in the Republics dug out their war-hatchets, during the second half of the nineteen-eighties. The triggering off action was only a question of time.

Milosevic took charge of this by the way he (mis)used the Question of Kosovo. It's a fact that Kosovo was six-seven centuries ago the "cradle" of the Serbian State and Statehood. And that during the Ottoman occupation and rule a large number of Serbs started migrating towards the North and inhabiting southern regions of Austria, around the Danube. The State of their new homeland accepted them as militaries in charge of safeguarding the frontiers. They were given houses, land, school and

ecclesiastic autonomy. Kosovo modified its demographic structure, during those same centuries, with the immigrating Albanians. This historical circumstances (present in numerous European territories, since the wars, occupations, famines, provoked even greater migrations) were used in this overheated conflict about "who will inherit Tito" by Milosevic's power apparatus; transformed in an "act of anti-bureaucratic revolution", in defiles of "discontent and oppressed Serbs and Montenegrins from Kosovo".

They begin their protestation in Belgrade in front of the Federal institutions, seek State intervention. Then they go to Vojvodina in order to overturn the "insensitive bureaucratic authorities". I went to the first people's meeting of that kind in Novi Sad, in 1988. Ten minutes of conversation with the participants were enough to make me understand that everything was well under control, co-ordinated with the secret police. Transport, costs were covered. Slogan-boards and speeches prepared in advance. I rapidly return to Novi Sad TV centre asking for a crew so that we could follow what's happening; as revealed later, it was a masked ball. They refuse me. I call TV Belgrade, they refuse me. I am on the phone with TV Ljubljana explaining that interesting things were happening, a TV film could be made out of the event. They agree, but I have to link that to what is happening in Slovenia in order to justify the whole project. I ask that their shooting team comprises an interesting person, a rocker - Marjan Ogrinc, whom I wanted to try as an actor. And that's how "The Old-timer" started. A story about a rocker on a motorbike, DJ banned from the Radio-Student in Ljubljana, his programmes being considered too provocative. He is motorcycling across Yugoslavia. Coming across with anti-bureaucratic revolution meetings. He understands very well that a violently imposed disruption of the country has begun.

Accompanied by my crew, I was present at some fifteen meetings of the kind; no dilemma: a grave was being dug for Yugoslavia. I am taking the footage to TV Ljubljana for further editing. Having seen it, the Programme managers become worried. And saying: look you seem to agree completely with these "new political trends". I react by saying that I consider the "action" as a sort of amalgam of Mussolini and the Chinese cultural revolution. They are flabbergasted. We have to call someone from the Socialist Alliance in order to review the material, was their answer. And, comes a delegation. Views the roughly edited footage. Their conclusion: Zilnik does not understand that in this on-going restructuring one must make use of rough methods. The film project is stopped. It's at that very moment that I understood that the process of disintegration of Yugoslavia is a concerted one and that it included the elites of the Federated Republics, still uncertain about the final issue. This is happening in November 1988. Within a few months to come the tensions between Milosevic and Kucan rise to a cracking-point. Parting becomes inevitable. Television Ljubljana calls me to come and finish the film.

MS: "The Old-timer" is in this, let's call it, later phase the most effective example revitalising the "road movie" genre. Why this preference for "road movie" instead of a simple answer: the films made in this manner are more dynamic and adventurous?

ZZ: My short retracing of the making of this film could confirm clearly that I had to have an action linking the Slovenia-Bosnia-Vojvodina space, and down to the south; the main hero concluding that you can no more live in this space and that one must ride on southward, to Greece. That ride on a vintage motorcycle and the title of the film looked to me to be the nearly perfect symbols of a system becoming rusty.

MS: Your specific "anticipating" trend in your works regarding the actual developments in the spaces, lands, of the Ex-Yugoslavia, must include, to my mind, the BROOKLYN-GUSINJE film. As I see it, you tried to reaffirm the role of Albanians within the Yugoslav community. How was it made?

ZZ: We have to turn to the events of the previous year(s). The language of ideological campaigns used in regard to various "segments of public life" - and which I experienced during the hysterics about the "Black film" - becomes more dangerous, an anathema of nationalist groups. Propaganda campaigns are directed against Albanians. I couldn't understand it. As a child and in my youth, I remember how the Albanians did odd jobs: porters, wood-sawyers, and so on, in Belgrade and other towns.

I remember how zealous and modest they were in this work-for-daily-bread for them and their families in Kosovo and Macedonia. And respective - as they were - of their own traditional culture and education they were considered as people of confidence. I remember how our own families entrusted them with keys of our apartments and houses while we were away on holidays. And, then, came this terrible odium. I wanted to size up the situation on the spot. So I drove to the frontier with Albania, through the huge mountain range of Prokletija.

For several days I talked with ordinary people. Saw that their culture and family life were nearly identical with those of the traditional Serbian and Montenegrin families. I explained that I wanted to make a film, to show them as a part of the world we were all sharing. . They promised to be helpful. TV Belgrade ensured a crew and in twelve days, in an exceptional atmosphere, "Brooklyn-Gusinje" was finished.

Although the Albanians had the main role and that half of the text was spoken in their language, the film was so much "an excerpt from life" that it was really welcomed by the public and the critics, independently of the boiling hysteria. And, en passant, I came to understand the initial "trigger" of the campaign. In the early eighties small private firms with six or seven employed were allowed. Thousands of private bakeries, groceries, patisseries were opened. A big percentage of that kind of business belonged to Albanian families

structured under the severe authoritarian pater familias ordering the employment of daughters and sons who were kept under control in that way. An economical independent stratum was enlarging within the national community of Albanians. That was a deranging fact for the inert communist nomenclature. And even before Milosevic, it started satanising the Albanians. Later, when the tough nationalist line became official - the mounting up of hate escalated.

MS: How did you find your multilingual Albanian actors?

ZZ: I asked the villagers to gather all the gastarbeiters on vacation on the spot. I chose my actors among them. That was imperative for my film. And I could communicate with them in English or German.

MS: Would you agree with me that BROOKLYN-GUSINJE, apart from your own engagement, owes a few things to the so-called ethnic concept of film-making?

ZZ: Certainly. It was very important to me to shoot in the inhabitants homes, to film the culture and customs of everyday life. The meals they shared, the conversations they had, their customs, songs, weddings. Even in that old mosaic Yugoslavia people did not know each other sufficiently. They did not enter into each other's houses. "Fraternity-Unity" was a practice for Party meetings. Their attendants were seated as in schools. You had to raise two fingers for an opportunity to speak. The Secretary in charge was occupying the front table armed with his little notebook, and drinking mineral water.

MS: Marginal groups of all kinds are living in the rich corpus of your films. Deprived of the pathetic and heroism, and even - I would say - apologetics, they are nonetheless a strong catalyst for your microscopy insight of society, of a milieu...

ZZ: Yes. You're right. I tried several times to compensate it. One try was attempted in the "Hot salaries" whose main protagonists are seven daughters coming from rural to urban areas and working as charwomen.

MS: Let us go back to the OLD-TIMER. This film is under a spell echo of the notorious Eighth Session that is obvious. At the same time, this film is revealing with subtlety a cleavage in the European space which the motorcyclist tries to avoid by the end of the film with the following words: "Fuck the West, and work, I want to go to the South, I want women, wine..." I took this as an invitation to utter hedonism...

ZZ: The atmosphere which we observed around us during the shooting of the film, that earthquake-to-come which was already grounding in the deep earth underground, had an effect on large groups of young and educated people. They understood that the ship was sinking. And it's then and there that their exodus started: Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa. They were not refugees, not yet. They were human beings searching for a place where one can really live as a normal person.

MS: I find that your TV phase is important for another reason too. It reveals an unbelievable quantity of humour and humorist ingredients in your work. A great number of your films reveal a delicate irony. For example: TITO... and THE HOT SALARIES. Yes, there are contestable, eccentric protagonists... But what is more problematic is really the milieu, the environment that generated them...

ZZ: Yes. How to survive all that without the ability to detect a clown aspect of our own confusion and self-destruction...

MS: Quite suddenly, in the midst of those enchanted forms comes the WANDERLUST?...

ZZ: It's 1997. YU-wars are slowly fading away. I feel some kind of an inarticulate but omnipresent wish to communicate. I learn through hear-say that "Tito for the Second Time..." and the "Marble Ass" are secretly big video-cassette hits in Croatia, Bosnia, Macedonia. In Amsterdam, an unknown person stops me somewhere and invites me for lunch. He said that he was from Croatia and that he wanted to pay his dues for all the money he had earned with video-cassettes featuring my productions.

So, I decide to go for a first post-war Ex-YU film story. But, who will be the hero? A Serb, a Croat, a Moslem? Each one has his own version of the chaos. Since I consider this hardly gone times as a kind of specific Balkan fascism, I decide that the hero must be someone who survived to the "real fascism". He should be a "mirror". A German or an Italian. In the age of those who could have been soldiers during the Second World War. The so established story was that of an ageing

Italian who will be moving through Ex-YU spaces, with a wish to get married in his already advancing years. He will move from Istria to Cetinje and the Court of King Nikola whose daughter was the last Italian Queen - Jelena. It's a ballad about a fallen country and an ageing man nearing the end of his life. The only glimpse of hope being that if fascism appeared it should wither away as well...

MS: WANDERLUST is certainly a nostalgically nuanced idea of "Mittel Europa", but is at the same time tracing and indicating your future researches!

ZZ: I am contemplating about wars and tragedies that afflicted us, in the following manner: the guilty ones, the criminals are among the ruling class ranks - I am speaking about the nineteen-eighties - who conceived the whole project of chaos to maintain itself "on the surface". Becoming afterwards national leaders, valiant warriors, peace negotiators. And Europe is extending a friendly hand! Seven-eight years of deals which were proposed to them! A high degree of disregard for the true opposition to Tudjman or Milosevic comes precisely from world leaders who meet endlessly in secret with those specific creatures of the Balkans.

MS: I am experiencing it as a specific anticipation of the FORTRESS EUROPE which is to my mind one of the most significant films in general...

ZZ: Some thematic lines are directly announced. The second personality in the film, Djordje, becomes part of the story after having lived the destiny of the heroes we'll meet in the "Fortress Europe".

MS: What was the general reception in Slovenia? THE FORTRESS... was in fact a success for the Slovene producers?

ZZ: Speaking of Slovenia, the film was proclaimed "the best television feature film for the Year 2001", and was awarded the "Viktor" Prize. My film opened a number of questions concerning the attitudes to adopt towards the illegal immigrants. Slovenia as a State was simply not aware of the fact that being economically successful and politically stable, it became one of the "chosen destinations".

MS: I experienced THE FORTRESS as a radically engaged political film settling - as from its beginning - numerous accounts with the last remnants of existing illusions about the humane and humanitarian aspects of western societies. The preventive acts of the West are lived as a kind of brutality, and that is what they really could rime with...

ZZ: The Schengen demarcation lines give an official stamp to a number of paradoxes in the contemporary world. The Firm label is "Europe", but a good part of that continent is "outside". Mafia post-communist bosses. and some of those worst ex-members of Stalinist repression apparatuses - army forces, secret police, Party committees. When during the "transition" they plunged and gained enough, they became prominent guests and even owners of villas on the Mediterranean coast, in France, in Italy, in Spain... In the Swiss Alps. They are throwing around someone's heavily earned dimes. "Democratic Europe" keeps delivering visas, passports, residential permits. And ordinary citizens, intellectuals and workers who are the real victims of the "transition hyenas" - have to go through humiliating and refusal procedures when soliciting visas for themselves...

MS: You're "Europe", doesn't it show the substantial meaningless of transition?...

ZZ: Today's parameters, a decade after the fall of State socialism, reveal with precision the general pauperisation, the destruction of local industries and economies along the deployment line starting, let's say, from the Balkan and via Bulgaria, to Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia... But, the events in this country and the behaviour of the "elites" produce simultaneous evidence of how deeply State socialism was rotten and was simply awaiting a referee to whistle "the end". That person was Gorbachev. Having heard the whistle, Milosevic and Tudjman, but the nomenclature of Shevardnadze and others as well, took hand of their Kalashnikovs and started plundering!

MS: Having been a non-permanent resident in another country, as well as Makavejev, you did not bough before their self-sufficiency and self-projected illusions of the perfections of their society?

ZZ: I can undergo a lot, renounce to a lot of things. I have no problem with a forty-nine hours long train ride to Moscow. Or, if needed, to take a shovel in my hands and mix concrete. To cut timber. But I can not keep silent about the truth when it is right there in my eye.

MS: In this constellation of your affinities the MARBLE ASS is somehow a less serious film. One has difficulties to classify it within your film opus?

ZZ: I am ranking this film among the five best things I did. Summer 1994. The Balkans' butcher-house operates at full capacity speed. In order to function, it must be "lubricated" by State propaganda machinery, a huge outlet for stereotypes. The "authentic" Serb adorns his chests with bullets and his mouth with a knife. He is also a macho, drinking himself to death, trumpet music around him. Violating girls behind café-bars. Try to recollect the heroes and the stories of the hit movies at that time, and the millions of dollars the State invested in them! And the co-producers from the West were also there, ready for such projects.

TV News develop in a cabaret atmosphere dominated by the weekend warriors... Today, ten years later, each and everybody is perfectly aware, finally, that what happened in the sphere of media and culture was a fool's paradise instrument deployed simultaneously with transactions of huge amounts of money, with plunders of property, households and houses. State and Parties' top-levels, the commanders of the paramilitary, were brazened by the black-market, the trade of arms, of human lives.

So, the war was a black cloud enveloping the emanation, the production process, of a new post-Yugoslav ruling class. And, "the poor thing" can not come to peace with "its own savage people". Otherwise, it is dedicated to the "defence of Christian values and traditions". And for that reason, "it must conquer and occupy" old Belgrade and Zagreb villas, build concrete safe houses, and surround it by detachments of body-guards. Amidst that hot boiling pan - limited to a tiny personal free space - we are striving to make "Marble Ass". Twelve days of shooting at my home in Novi Sad. Budget: ten thousand German Marks, up to the final Beta-cassette version. It was like going over a deep canyon on a tiny string.

The film relates the destiny of a young warrior, a rascal. So, he is not "a hero", "a defender", but an unfortunate young man pushed into the war events. He comes back from the front, meets some of his old friends who in the meantime finished by articulating the transvestite's milieu in Belgrade. The roles are magnificently played by Nenad Rackovic and Vjeran Miladinovic. The film was thoroughly done as a fiction, but it leaves the impression of being a documentary. I think that by its shooting procedure it follows the "Early Works". The finale movement of the film is presented as a citation coming from the film itself. Please, try to see "Marble Ass" once more. It's as compact as a box of matches.

MS: Are you of the opinion that an engaged prohibited word, and the notion of engaged film-making, should be considered as anachronistic?

ZZ: In our environment, amidst a conceived sort of confusion, it is possible to hear that being engaged in something is an anachronism. But, there is no stage representation, book or music piece that is not judged even by a layman under the angle of the artist, according to the time and the milieu in which he or she lives. For example, take the songs of a rapper Eminem, or watch Tod Solandz's film "Happiness", or theatre play "The children of Heracles" written two thousand years ago (by Euripides) and staged last year by Peter Sellars in the USA... One of the more substantial elements of your visual impression is the possibility to cope with the dialogue, the artist and the milieu in which he is moving.

MS: THE FORTRESS EUROPE together with the early Michael Hanneke's films - let's take THE SEVENTH CONTINENT, one of the best films about the cancer spreading over Europe; and later on Hanneke will really start making "cancer" films such as: THE PIANO TEACHER...

ZZ: The degree in which "New Europe" as a value system is under question is directly reflected in the comfortable all-European film co-productions, benefiting from the financial aid of the EU. One can find in those some anthology cases of real bad taste. Last year, I saw a spectacle happening in Czechoslovakia during The Second World War. Nazism was, of course, the occupying force in the country. But, there were then and there extremely human SS officers who lead a saving campaign in for Jewish children...

MS: Are you in visual touch with the world film production? Where's the State of the art of the world film today?

ZZ: My answer would be: Yes and no. I don't have a total vision of what is happening in the world cinema. But, I could mention some brilliant titles from these last few years: "My Son's Room". Films by Mike Leigh. Then "Hundstage", "Bloody Sunday"...

MS: Ian Cameron, who is maybe the best British film critic of all times, provoked a general consternation by declaring that the good old British film is better than the "New" one. Where are you in your comparisons of the films made by your generation and the recent Serbian films?

ZZ: The question is very simple. We should make a comparison with some of the intervals in the sixties. The cinema production generated by Aleksandar Petrovic, Zivojin Pavlovic, Makavejev, Purisa Djordjevic, Djordje Kadijevic. Later on, it was never as well "compacted" as it used to be.

MS: How do you vision your position in the Serbian cinema production?

ZZ: I do not know the answer to that question.

MS: Werner Streter once said: IT ALL FINALLY SUNK IN THE SMOKE OF MONEY AND SMALL BOURGEOISIE, AND THEY ALL SEEM TO BE GETTING READY FOR A NEW WAR... Do you think that he was right in his manner of thinking?

ZZ: The chaos is still awaiting us, after the earth-quake. It could happen, perhaps, that soberness comes out of defeat, and amazing films also...