

Early Works: an interview with Zelimir Zilnik

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A conversation with the radical film director from Yugoslavia who sees similarities in his country's young protest movement and our own - "the effort, not to destroy society, but to destroy the bad, the false things in it."

Zelimir Zilnik, a young Yugoslav film director, came to the United States in November 1969 at the invitation of the Museum of Modern Art Department of Film. His first feature film, *Early Works*, opened the Chicago Film Festival, and was shown at the Museum along with his documentary on the student protest in Belgrade during the month of June 1968. Zilnik's work shows the influence of Godars, but more surprisingly, *Hallelujah the Hill*.

Early Works received the Golden Bear award at the Berlin Film Festival (1969) and has already gained a reputation of surprising proportions in the underground. It is a young film about young people made By a young man. He is a radical in the true sense of the word.

Question: Is your film *Early Works* autobiographical?

Answer: I suppose so. I worked for a few years in our youth organization. I was sort of a romantic who was extremely excited about those young people of my generation who are lost in villages where no one comes. I was always going to those villages and making strong speeches and getting everyone excited. Afterward I realized I was playing some kind of a game, because I was asking them to do things they could not do. Maybe they didn't even want to. It is hard to change. So my film is about the impossibility of changing this world by romantic means, and also about the feeling of not taking part - the feeling that most of society is not watching what is happening.

Q: You have made many documentaries and one feature. Which form do you prefer?

A: First of all, I felt extremely good when I started making my feature film, because I feel that in a feature you can do almost everything. The story is in your head, or you just make it up as you go along. While I was shooting those documentaries, I was always forced to be so analytical, so objective. I couldn't control what was happening in front of the camera; I couldn't only select what I considered the most important elements. But, if you want to be honest when you are making a story film you must not pretend it is documentary. You can make part of it documentary, of course, and that is why I like *I Am Curious (Yellow)*, for instance, because in some parts it is documentary and in others it is clear that the actors are just playing a game for the camera. There is never any doubt as to which is which. If you want to be honest, you can't fool the audience all the way.

In the final analysis, if you are using film as a tool, as a means of communication that, hopefully, will change people, then I think the documentary film is always stronger. I think a documentary film will live longer. It always going to live longer.

Q: You have been in the United States for about three weeks now, and you have seen a good bit of Chicago and New York. What differences do you find between the young American radical and the young radical in Yugoslavia?

A: Well, I must say I don't think we met many radical people here, but I gathered some impressions from reading the newspapers, following the coverage of the Washington March, and by reading some books. I think there are some similarities between the radical movements in your country and ours - this effort, not to destroy society, but to destroy the bad things in it, the false things. Everywhere in our country, and here, I feel there are powers existing which are afraid of change, because change will threaten their positions, and this fear makes them oppressive.

But I would say that the people in power react differently. I would say that oftentimes politicians in this country turn the protest to their own uses. They say, "See how open we are, see how we allow all these demonstrations"; but nothing much changes.

In our country the people who hold power do so by pretending to be the only ones looking forward, the only ones, how would I say, upon whom the honor of the whole society depends. They cannot recognize that a whole new generation, born during or after the war, feels that socialism is the only way, not only of thinking, but the only way of living. This generation is not against the basic principles of socialism; they are against some people who are building walls, building fences between individuals and society. There are many people in this young generation who are actually against those who are pretending to be revolutionary or socialistic and who are now in power in our society. I would say these pretenders are actually pulling the whole society down because they are so extremely afraid of change.

But there is another difference. Because of the one-party system, every political movement has much more power in our country. For instance, this movement in Belgrade during June of 1968 was an extremely strong confrontation between the young people and the bureaucracy - those people who hold the power. They had to recognize what the students were asking for. They had to say that students have rights because the whole society was shaken, was trembling, while just a few thousand people were asking for right things and telling truths. They were exposing things in our society which needed exposure.

The people in power could not recognize that a whole new socialist society has been build in our country since the war. It is an entirely different situation today from just a few thousand people rising up against the Germans. The rest of the country was quiet because people were scared. People are always scared of doing something that may cause them to lose whatever they have, no matter how little it may be. So those people who were actually leading the revolution at one time became leaders in the government, and I have the feeling that they cannot realize that this whole new generation came, and this generation expects some important things, its own things. My whole generation does not feel that someone else gave us our rights, gave us our freedom, gave us socialism, and so on. We just know that we are living in that type of society, but that doesn't mean it should stand still. We must go further on.

Our whole generation doesn't have the feeling that some of us did a great thing, that some of us were courageous, and others were not. We just feel the rights we have are something very natural and that is why, I would say, we get so excited when some people in power say one thing and act a different way.

Q: Do you think the student movement accomplished anything?

A: I think one great thing was done in our country by this student movement, and that was to make everyone in the power structure realize that anyone can be extremely strongly criticized. Now they say, "A whole generation is watching." A whole generation is watching society, not because it feels that this society must be destroyed, but because the society has to be rebuilt. Of course, that is a great thing. But at the same time, because of their fear, the scare they got, they built a new system of oppression and maybe now it is much harder for those young people - for the people who are for change - to make another big trembling than it was before. In all societies I think the same thing happened. Student movements really did fade in France, in Germany, and so on.

Q: Why do you think that happened?

A: They not only didn't have a program, but they also tried to work within the framework of old politics. They were just trying to be a strong power in parliament, maybe. And what happened? Well, society can always take on new programs, but what it cannot do without changing completely is to begin an entirely new way of life, a way of life that has started to be built in some communities I read about in the United States, in Germany, and maybe in France: small groups of people who are living a new way of life with entirely new values - values of family life, values of raising children, values of education, money values, and so on. They are fundamentally different in their outlook. They just can't join, they must be separate until the society itself changes.

I don't think it is funny to give flowers to policemen. You have to have the right confrontation. Policemen are supposed to keep order when people are demonstrating. To beat the demonstrators, perhaps. But when you had the students who were for demonstrations and you had policemen who were against demonstrations and occupation of buildings you could see everything in its right place. But when everyone pretends, then you have a whole political structure living a lie. I think perhaps this society has more personal freedom, but I believe it is also more rigid. Our demonstration shook up our politicians. Did your march on Washington change anything?

We talk about socialism and capitalism, but those terms don't mean the same things they once did. The men who founded the U.S. would be surprised if they could see it today, just as Marx would be if he were to visit the Soviet Union. I feel that Russia is the most capitalistic country in the world, and we are more afraid of Russian than American imperialism.

Q: Why?

A: Because that kind of imperialism governs not only your political structure, but your mind, your conscience. And that is always more reactionary.

Q: It is clear that you are a man with a social purpose. You want to change things. Do you want to use film as a tool for change?

A: I must tell you something. When we make films, we make them because they are fun to make. In our country we can make films inexpensively so we sometimes make them for ourselves, not just to amuse an audience, not just to make people laugh, not just to attract a big audience for the purpose of making money. Film is the least independent art because it usually depends upon large sums for its existence, but in recent years the underground film has emerged as a means of self-expression. This is occasionally true in our country, too, because films cost less and the director can say what he wants to say. So the people who are making films are sort of in love with filmmaking. They are making films about something that deeply excites them.