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Engaged Documentary Cinema in Independent Slovenia

Abstract:

The essay discusses engaged documentary cinema in independent Slovenia. It focuses on the aspects of political engagement that address the deprived, underprivileged or oppressed communities and groups in contemporary Slovenian society. In the most unenviable position among them are members of the Roma community, the administratively erased inhabitants stripped of all their civil rights, exploited seasonal workers, representatives of the LGBTQIA+ community and the like. The discussion devotes its main attention to the operation of the informal collective Newsreel Front and its latest project “If the Forests Could Talk, They Would Dry Up with Sadness”, which documents the tragic situation of the refugees on the so-called “Balkan route” and their attempts at crossing the border between Croatia and Slovenia, fenced off with a razor wire.

Key words:

Slovenian documentary cinema, engaged documentary, essayistic documentary, found footage, documentary ethics, political landscape films, Newsreel Front

Introduction

The history and development of Slovenian cinema is characterised by its prolonged neglectful attitude to documentary films, both in terms of their production and the reflection on documentary filmmaking. The *Filmography of Slovenian Feature Films 1931–2010* discusses only one documentary made before 1991: *Opre Roma* (1983), a touching work by Filip Robar Dorin, who documented the unenviable living situation of the Roma communities in Slovenia according to the *cinéma vérité* principles. This does not mean there was no documentary activity in Slovenia, but it seems to have taken place mainly in short form or television production. In this context, the names of filmmakers such as Dušan Povh, Mako Sajko, Jože Pogačnik, Karpo Godina, Franci Slak, Alenka Auersperger, Helena Koder, Žare Lužnik and a number of others testify to a rich tradition of socially engaged, thematically diverse, creatively in-depth and aesthetically edgy documentary creativity. This, however, has (except for rare exceptions) unfortunately not received its deserved in-depth theoretical consideration or relevant inclusion in the history of Slovenian cinema.

The period after Slovenia gained its independence, in which the film sphere was subject to intensive attempts of (wild) privatisation, hostile capital takeovers and commercialisation, was also one of a state of pitiful stagnation and a struggle for funds. All this only worsened the invidious sideline position of documentary cinema. The production conditions kept changing and most documentary works were made in the framework of the national public broadcaster, which was also subject to political and capital interests. In such a situation, it was especially the auteurs who managed to fight their way to a certain independence that stood out. If we started by searching for a cineaste whose activity represented a bridge between production in the former and the new state, we would doubtlessly find them in Filip Robar Dorin.¹ His work is characterised by his creative commitment, with which he raised a number of pressing social predicaments, including the continuation of his probing of the “Roma issue”, which resulted in two more in-depth studies: *Aven Chavora* (2005) and *Opre Roma 3* (2011). In the new circumstances, documentary filmmaking long endeavoured to find its place on the big screens and consequently in the awareness of the broader public especially through various forms of activism and guerrilla production. Such a deviation from subsidy cycles and state funding contributed to its increasingly more intensive development, which, especially in the last decade, boomed to the extent

¹ At the beginning of the 1980s, Robar Dorin founded Filmske alternative, one of the first independent production companies in Slovenia.

that the number of documentary works practically reached the number of fiction films and, in a certain period, even exceeded it.

Documentary engagement and commitment

Our interest is focused primarily on the documentary filmmaking that is most broadly defined as an engaged probing of contemporaneity and recent history. The concept of public engagement is discussed in the most general sense of the endeavours and activities to eliminate inequality, regardless of the specific activity in the form of social, civic or political engagement. For we are convinced that, in the processes of detecting and announcing social changes, an engaged documentary film (can be or) is the one that actively participates in the endeavours to emancipate the exploited and the underprivileged and to critique and reject universal injustices. Its frequent connection with the harbingers and bearers of social changes is reflected both in the testimonies and the conveying of information about the situation and the position of the communities or individuals that are neglected or excluded from the system and in the treatment of subversive processes, revolutionary seething, rebellious eruptions and other forms of popular insurrection, in which it often also directly participates. With its activity, it expresses much of what Amos Vogel, one of the key thinkers on “film as a subversive art”, categorises among the fundamental criteria of emancipatory cinema:

The basis of politically and socially subversive cinema is the tension that exists between society and artist. This expresses itself in forms and subjects that vary from country to country, resulting not from greater or lesser artistic sophistication or skill but from differing stages of societal development, from political pressure, from the absence or presence of democratic tendencies and the degree of sharpness of social contradictions. In each instance, however, the artist goes further than his particular Establishment wishes him to. This “going beyond” is the precise characteristic of all subversive art (Vogel, 1974, p. 120).

On the basis of the above, we can posit the thesis that, despite the fact that today’s capitalism, which with all its brutality has also grown rampant in the countries that have emerged from the ashes of the former socialist Yugoslavia, tries to subjugate all alternative initiatives, including the forms of direct resistance against it, and change them into consumer goods, subversive practices are not only possible, but are constantly conducted – if not otherwise, then according to Samuel Beckett’s famous principle: “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” Or, if we look at it from Nil Baskar’s point of view expressed while analysing documentary filmmaking that endeavours to return human dignity to the out-

cast and the oppressed: “If the director’s heart is on the side of the victims of the wheelwork grinding the homeless bodies of ‘foreigners’, his solidarity with the protesters – workers, students, autonomists, foreigners in his own country – is the commitment of a real documentarian: it is his duty to be there, too, carefully observing and listening, so he can understand, for himself and for us, what has gone wrong, so that next time it will go wrong in a different, perhaps less erroneous way.” (Baskar, 2013) On the one hand, the subversive charge is certainly the most intense at the core of the processes of detecting social oppositions where the established social order is questioned and the initiatives of overcoming, rejecting or destroying the existing one (either spontaneously or in the form of organised actions) emerge. On the other hand, it is intensively reflected within the filmic treatments of the attempts at stigmatising, rejecting, excluding or erasing all that is supposed to endanger the identity of Slovenian nationhood.

Invisible destinies

At the level of content, various forms of being underprivileged and oppressed are related especially with the sort of difference or Otherness that is supposed to threaten all that the Slovenian people have managed to finally fight their way to by becoming an independent nation. These Others appear primarily in two predominant aspects of “danger”: the danger forcing its way in from the outside and the threats that supposedly “lurk” and “scheme” within national borders. Among the bearers of the external threat are especially refugees, seasonal workers or economic migrants and representatives of the communities living on the other side of the border. The refugee tragedy and the disenfranchisement of foreign workers is examined especially by the Newsreel Front (discussed in more detail later) and also Metod Pevec in *Home* (2015), an observational documentary about a former workers’ hostel where unenviable temporary dwellings are shared by sidelined seasonal workers and socially endangered youngsters who cannot afford more suitable accommodation. Nadja Velušček and Anja Medved, on the other hand, have for many years focused on the dilemmas regarding the possibility of the communities from both sides of the Slovenian-Italian border co-existing and cooperating. Especially in their most prominent works *My Borderline* (2002), *Binding Memories* (2006), *Timeless River* (2010) and *Burnt in Memories* (2017), they employ a combination of personal perspective and historical memory to point out the phenomenon of the border, which simultaneously divides and connects, endangers and calms, represents an area of conflicts and hate, but also reconciliation and coexistence.

The other type of threat – the one coming from within – is (in addition to the already mentioned Roma people, who were especially the focus of Robar Dorin's films) represented by the second generation of economic migrants; the so-called erased (25,671 individuals who, with a political decree in 1992, were stripped of their Slovenian civil rights and their right of residence); members of the LGBTQIA+ community; participants in various uprising movements, which most intensely spread during the great economic and political crisis between 2012 and 2014; and also women, especially the artists and activists who strive for equality in male-dominated misogynous circumstances. The problem of the erased is the subject matter of Dimitar Anakiev's *Slovenia My Homeland* (2010) and Damjan Kozole's *The Long Vacation* (2012), works that in the form of witness-bearing documentariness convey the fate of those whom the xenophobic bureaucratic gesture reduced to "bare life". Siniša Gačić's *A Fight For* (2014), a documentary shot in the manner of direct cinema, is a detailed analysis of the dynamics of the rise and the disintegration of the Slovenian variant of the *Occupy!* movement. The film is a testimony about the process of class struggle and at the same time its constant self-reflection, which provides an in-depth study of the problem of political insurrection in its key dimensions. In *Growing Up* (2017), an intimate subjective document about a little boy growing up and the political struggle of his two mothers Daja and Jedrt against the discrimination of their family, the same filmmaker faces us with an endless series of problems encountered by same-sex parented families and the broader LGBTQIA+ community in Slovenia. The problem of neglecting women is documented by Urša Menart's *What About Mojca?* (2014) through foregrounding the specifically filmic dispositif. This compilation essay examines the role and significance of female characters in Slovenian filmmaking and through them provides an analysis of the changes to their social status.

To the mentioned bearers of the stigma of "being different", we can also add the filmmakers that probed the traumatic facts of Slovenian reality "from the outside" – either "foreigners" filming in Slovenia or Slovenian filmmakers who directed their gazes beyond national and/or state borders. Such is the docufiction exploration of the limitations in "Europe without borders" *Fortress Europe* (2000), with which the famous Serbian "Black Wave" filmmaker Želimir Žilnik decisively criticises the bureaucratisation of the EU's migration politics in the territory of Slovenia. Such is the compilation-essay documentary by the American photographer and filmmaker Michael Benson *Predictions of Fire* (1996), which deals with the rebellious charge and creative development of the artistic-collective project *Neue Slowenische Kunst*. Such is the poetical landscape documentary *Greetings From Free Forests* (2018) by the American researcher Ian Soroka, whose collaging-essayistic approach places it among the examples of political, social and

cultural awareness raising that draw their inspiration for current emancipatory endeavours from the revolutionary (recent) past. Such is the “view of Europe through the eyes of a little girl from the Balkans that can easily shatter our notions about where we live”, as we can read in the announcement of Petra Seliškar’s poetical-political essay *Mother Europe* (2012), which, through the perspective of the daughter from a nationally mixed marriage between a Slovenian woman and a Macedonian man, paints a picture of a “new Europe” and the fate of those who do not have the privilege of being its fully fledged citizens. And such is also the retrospective view of Slovenian filmmakers on the happening in the former federation as represented by *Karpotrotter* (2013), an essayistic compilation film dialogue between two cineastes from different generations: Matjaž Ivanišin and Karpo Godina, his former professor at the film academy and a “Black Wave” *auteur*, who, in addition to his own directorial feats, also worked as a DOP with Želimir Žilnik and a series of other filmmakers of the New Yugoslav Film.

Nika Autor and the Newsreel Front

In the context under consideration, one of the forms of film engagement that made the greatest breakthrough is the filmmaking that was established and has developed and grown beyond the predominating production cycles – in the form of independent, guerrilla, low- or no budget documentary activity related to the broader art field. Among its key actors in Slovenia is the artist Nika Autor in her individual engagement and the group cooperation of the *ad hoc* collective Newsreel Front. On the one hand, the collective’s name originates in the fact that it revives the creative practices of the newsreel as a specific documentary form that, in historical development, played an exceptional propagandistic and anti-propagandistic role. On the other hand, by foregrounding the “front aspect”, the collective strives to act so as to deconstruct and construct at the same time – it rejects and destroys the hardened images and beliefs that the capitalist system creates and indoctrinates with, while conceiving images that sum up the reality of the struggles for emancipation and equality and endeavouring to find formal solutions that best suit the situation under consideration.²accessed: 22.6. 2023].

² This is most tellingly explained in the justification of the jury at the Rotterdam film festival that conferred the newly established Found Footage Award on Nika Autor for one of the internationally most prominent works of the Newsreel Front *Newsreel 63 – The Train of Shadows* (2017): “This film convincingly introduces a new critical paradigm in which every new image questions the entire history of film as a medium and its role within society. It does so through brilliant use of the train as a rich metaphor for human aspiration and technological advancement, connecting the first Lumière film all the way through to the current practice of shooting smartphone footage to document refugees on their quest for a better life.” Available: <http://press.iffir.com/163669-iffir-presents-47th-edition-award-winners> [

That is why their aesthetics is characterised by a distinct formal heterogeneity, ranging from found footage and essay film (which, in addition to the considered subject matter, also intensively reflect on the ways and forms of their audiovisual representation) to observational and participatory documentary film.

The different approaches are adapted to the urgency of the problems that the individual projects deal with, which range from the traumatic consequences of the crimes committed during the time of Yugoslavia's disintegration, the questioning of the "truths" of recent history, the partisan struggle and the values of the revolution, the activities of uprising movements and protest happenings in Slovenia, the exploitation of seasonal workers from the former republics of SFRY and the refugee tragedy (which exploded during the time of the so-called Balkan route and is now only worsening) to the question of the relation between art and various forms of activism. The mentioned topics are conveyed in various formats – as feature-length documentaries (*In The Land of Bears*, 2011; *Newsreel 80 – Metka, Meki*, 2021), as newsreel episodes within an individual work (*Newsreel 55*, 2013, *Newsreel 63 – The Train of Shadows*, 2017) and as shorter independent units (*Report on the State of Asylum Seekers in the Republic of Slovenia*, 2009; *Postcards*, 2010; *Newsreel 242 – Sunny Railways*, 2023), which are often connected into diptychs, trilogies or multipart collections (*Newsreel 65 – We Have too Much Things in Heart...*, 2021; *If the Forests Could Talk, They Would Dry Up with Sadness*, 2022).

In the creative processes of the Newsreel Front, one of the most important forms of uncovering the existing reality and constructing a new one is the so-called "film act" – an activist practice that does not conclude with the film's postproduction and distribution, but continues in the forms of its engaged viewing where the screenings are accompanied by direct interactions with the audience through lectures, discussions and commentaries, which often also receive their printed version in the form of "Newsreel Shreds" – flyers, leaflets, booklets and also more extensive journals that are published upon the film's release. Such a procedure not only complements the film, but also makes it easier for the audience to become its active participants. A film act is a method that, among other things, encompasses the strategies of solidarising, informing, awareness raising and also educating, organising and the direct mobilising of resistance energies directed towards the transformation of both society and cinema. One of the key theoreticians of documentary filmmaking Bill Nichols, who began his exceptional pioneering work in the field of documentary studies precisely with his dissertation on the American revolutionary documentary movement Newsreel (*Newsreel: Documentary Filmmaking on the American Left*), defined the creativity of the Slovenian collective as follows:

Newsreel Front's work restores a sense of life, and value, to people who might otherwise be merely objectified and forgotten. Their reports identify a massive and dangerously overlooked threat to the social order: the reduction of human beings to objects, even criminals, based on their place of origin and the validity of their travel documents. Newsreel Front indirectly, implicitly asks – Who are we and what must we do to affirm and defend our status, and the status of others, as full human beings when institutions and nation states fail to honor this fundamental premise? (Nichols, 2017b, p. 43)

Migrants and refugees in “silent forests”

Since the almost fifteen-year-long creativity of the Newsreel Front has already become well-established at the Slovenian and international level, also through a series of theoretical reflections in English (as we will show at the end of the article), we will focus primarily on its latest newsreel project “If the Forests Could Talk, They Would Dry Up with Sadness” (2022). The project deals with the fate of the refugees on the European southeast “Schengen border” (which at the time still ran between Slovenia and Croatia, but has recently been moved to Croatia's eastern borders), along which Slovenia put up panel and razor-wire fences.³ The project includes an exhibition consisting of three newsreels – the short films *Newsreel 2021 – Here I Have Picture* and *Newsreel 670 – Red Forests* and the medium-length film *Newsreel 4517 – Across the Water to Freedom*, accompanied by a collection of texts and visual interventions. At the project's thematic core is the famous “Game”, which is what the refugees themselves call a series of (mostly failed⁴) attempts to cross from Croatia into Slovenia, and the consequences of the brutality of border authorities, which they are constantly subjected to. That is why their fundamental strategy consists of endeavours for “invisibility”, which enables them to “remain in the game” and evade violence and deportation.⁵ In this inhumane game, nature becomes their key ally – especially the forests, which, on the one hand, offer them physical shelter, in which they arrange their provisional accommodation, while, on the other, they are their hiding places from the executors of repression, who prey on them at every step.

³ The entire length of the fence encompasses 143 km of panels and 60 km of razor wire, which Slovenia began removing after the change in government in 2022.

⁴ The protagonist of *Newsreel 4517 – Across the Water to Freedom*, the Tunisian activist Zied Abdellaoui, who managed to reach Vienna, where he was granted asylum, spent three years and eight months in the extraordinary state of his refugee odyssey, travelled 4517 km and went through 26 “games”.

⁵ This is tellingly expressed in the following excerpt from the commentary of *Newsreel 670 – Red Forests*: “Prepping for the *Game*. / Sheltered by the forest. / An exercise in endurance. / Where being seen means *game over* / and only *invisibility* represents a *chance*.”

Thus, the project's internal dynamics also follows the buildup of invisibility that its protagonists strive towards – as, in the end, it is precisely invisibility that becomes the most suitable, autonomous expression of their condition.

Like most projects by the Newsreel Front, the latest one was also largely conditioned by the guerrilla mode of its production due to the activist approach, which follows the idea and vision regardless of the financial and material conditions for their realisation. We could therefore say that one of the fundamental aesthetic determinations here is the concept of a “poor image” as defined by the committed artist and theoretician Hito Steyerl, who herself cooperated on the “silent forests” newsreel project. Steyerl believes that “the circulation of poor images initiates another chapter in the historical genealogy of nonconformist information circuits” and thus “takes its place in the genealogy of carbon-copied pamphlets, cine-train agit-prop films, underground video magazines and other nonconformist materials, which aesthetically often used poor materials” (Steyerl 2009, 8). In view of the essayistic creative principles, according to which the representation of the happening is closely intertwined with the author's reflection on the possible modes of its expression, the film trilogy can also be placed in the category of poetical documentariness, a concept developed by Bill Nichols in his famous “modes” theory of classifying documentary films:

The poetic mode is particularly adept at opening up the *possibility of alternative forms of knowledge* to the straightforward transfer of information, the pursuit of a particular argument or point of view, or the presentation of reasoned propositions about problems in need of solution. This mode *stresses mood, tone, and affect* much more than displays of factual knowledge or acts of rhetorical persuasion. The rhetorical element remains underdeveloped, but the expressive quality is vivid. We learn in this case by affect or feeling, by gaining a sense of *what it feels like to see and experience the world* in a particular, poetic way. (Nichols, 2017a, pp. 116–117; my emphases)

The newsreel trilogy of “silent forests” has no particular chronological order, but for the purposes of this paper, I will discuss it in the following sequence: *Newsreel 4517*, *Newsreel 2021* and *Newsreel 670*. The first film deals with the refugee fate of Zied Abdellaoui (see note 11) in a relatively classical manner of an observational documentary. In the initial part of the film, we follow his life in the “limbo” of preparing for the recurring “games” of trying to cross the Schengen border, while, in the second part, we see fragments of his life in Vienna, which he managed to run to. In its first two thirds, *Newsreel 2021* faces us with the life in a temporary refugee camp in the middle of a forest, where some of the

“inhabitants” use their photos to mark their temporary, improvised dwellings, knocked and glued together out of branches, cardboard, polyvinyl and tin foil. Their testimonies about their unenviable condition are complemented by the footage they shot themselves as a certain authentic audiovisual commentary on the images shot by the documentarian. In the last third of the film, people suddenly disappear from the picture – what remains are only the forgotten clothes and the shredded remains of the improvised shelters (where the discarded cardboard boxes of humanitarian aid with the boastful symbols of the EU stand out as cynical emphases). Thus, the camera records only the absence with the traces of recent presence, attested to especially by the lost, forgotten, discarded footwear of the most various shapes, colours and purposes covered by fallen leaves, branches and undergrowth. The film patiently devotes enough time to the footwear for us to sense the imprint of the decaying sole and the impression of the walked journey...

The reality of absence is fully developed in *Newsreel 670*, where there is no longer any trace of refugee presence, rather some completely different traces appear – the traces of brutal human relentlessness. The latter is “embodied” in the Slovenian razor wire, which extends through the forests, bushes and meadows on the Schengen border. In the image field, we watch various static images of the landscape and the intrusive danger cutting into it, filmed in a distinctly aesthetic way, for every shot could become an idyllic postcard in which the rust-proof wire is primarily an interesting decoration. The commentary in the “subtitles” describes its key characteristics, its role and significance and its influence on and consequences for people and nature. Similarly to the visual part, the textual part also emphasises, in a distinctly poetic way, all that we cannot see, but is present in our awareness and our notions, perhaps even our knowledge – in our consciousness about the reality that mercilessly lurks and waits, cuts, tears and rips up... This contemplative, calm visual atmosphere is complemented and enhanced by “Deep Waters”, a dreamy song by the Australian instrumental rock band *Dirty Three*, which can be heard throughout the newsreel and serves as the film’s “editing matrix” since the transitions between the scenes consistently follow the rhythm of the melody. At one level, we could consider the film to be an exercise in the style of counterpointing opposites, an emotional rollercoaster that appeals to our visual sensitivity and, by way of abstraction, tries to raise our awareness about the reality we usually avert our eyes from.

The film, however, also contains another dimension, which is a consequence of the optical-chemical characteristics of analogue film technology and the guerilla, low-budget mode of production. The camera with which the film was shot

had a technical error, due to which the light that penetrated the camera coloured certain spots on the film red, orange or yellow or completely exposed the film. That is how visual aberrations were created, a sort of optical stain in the form of glows, reddenings, which more or less intensively determined the image until excess finally “predominated” over normality. That is also why the statement of the film’s commentary that accompanies the height of the audiovisual intervention is quite clear and unambiguous: “The forest is red, not green.” In an incisive analysis of this creative process, Nace Zavrl emphasises that the mentioned realisation clearly echoes the categorical perverting of “the ossified patterns of understanding”, which “opens the possibility of a different, new, still unimaginable future. A future that only a technical error with its ‘mistaken’, ‘misguided’, ‘unnatural’ vision can realise” (Zavrl, 2022, p. 30). But the author goes even a step further and in the fact that the filmmaker insisted on the “solutions” or images that had not been planned, but just happened recognises the phenomenon of the “technical unconscious”. In a dialogue with Walter Benjamin, who developed the concept of the “optical unconscious”⁶ already back in 1931, he claims that, similarly to the filmic and photographic image, the photo-chemical materiality manages to capture something that escapes the ordinary observer:

Instead of the “optical” unconscious, *Red Forests* features something else. *The technical unconscious*: that which flawless craftsmanship cannot see; that which evades optical perfection. A camera and a lens worth tens of thousands of euros might see the calm and peace of riverside forests, but the dimensions of blood, camouflage, and unconditional camaraderie remain alien to them. Here (...) only a technical error can intervene. Only with a mistake that is not one at all can a different, re-established world be imagined in contemporary cinema. Only with a mistake that discovers the horizons are the changes of a slightly less wrong world traced on the screen. Only with a mistake that uncovers the unconscious can we see the depths of the forest, the forest of solidarity (Zavrl, 2022, pp. 30–31; author’s emphases).

Presence in absence

The above makes it clear that one of the central questions of the project is the relation between presence and absence in images and the possibility and impos-

⁶ Benjamin first used the concept of the “optical unconscious” in his “Little History of Photography”. By applying it to the field of cinema, he developed it further in the latest version of his famous 1939 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”.

sibility of a filmic representation of the states of exception of human existence. In the conceptual basis of such a relationship, heterogeneous creative visions and the theoretical reflections that consider them coincide in a picturesque and powerful intertwining of the energy forces of “mobilising the gaze” as discussed by Jean-Luc Nancy in his monograph *The Evidence of Film*. His imperative is based on the belief that an explicit image never shows “everything” – least of all the truth – and that the possibility of actually grasping the meaning of an image is subject to the process of mobilising the gaze. That is a unique sort of an engagement on the part of the viewer, which can be prompted especially by images characteristic of the “intensified cinema” that goes from its inside towards “an essence” directed towards presence. But, as Nancy says, “presence is not a mere matter of vision: it offers itself in encounters, worries, or concerns” (Nancy, 2001, p. 30). They are the forces that break the fetters of the indifference of the “objective” showing, the “credible” presenting or the “neutral” representing of reality. On the contrary, it is about “a set-up for a complex configuration in the relation between presence and absence, on the one hand, and appearance and reality, on the other” (Nancy, 2001, p. 34).

Twenty years after Nancy’s epochal study, Pavle Levi⁷ published his booklet *Minijature: o politični filmski sliki*, in which he explores the new conceptuality of engaged audiovisuality. He devotes his attention especially to “political landscape films”, which is how he names the documentaries from the territories of former Yugoslavia that deal with the traumatic topics of the bloody disintegration of the federation and the consequences of the crimes that the victims, who have been forever marked by the atrocities, are still facing. This category also includes works that focus on various aspects of the unenviable life situations in post-Yugoslav reality, which the engaged filmmakers call our attention to – from the expansion of rampant capitalism and the consequences of neoliberal globalisation (the turbulence of migrations, universal exploitation, poverty, surveillance, dehumanisation and injustices) to the problems of (new) borders, refugee crises and ecological catastrophes. These works are characterised by their focus on the landscapes where the tragic devastations took place, caused by the tendencies to subjugate fellow human beings, on the one hand, and the liberation

⁷ The Serbian film theoretician, who has lectured at Stanford University for many years, is among the people who deserve the most credit for introducing the concept of post-Yugoslav cinema, which he did in 2007 in his pioneering work *Disintegration in Frames: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Cinema*, with which he symbolically overcame the predominance of the Balkanological approach in the discussions of the cinemas of former SFRY.

endeavours of the oppressed, on the other.⁸ On one level, Levi points out the determinations with which he defines the general role of the relation between nature and people or the reaction of nature to “civilisational” interventions. On another level, he calls attention to that “which with its dominant experience most strikes the eye” (Levi, 2021, p. 32). The experience that he points out is the absence of people, of (living or dead) human bodies, for the discussed films involve a “radically reduced” depiction, landscapes from which people are disappearing. So it is a matter of an asceticism based on a clear ethical principle: “That is how landscapes remember a crime! For the mentioned filmmakers, asceticism at the level of representation even means a sort of a common ‘ethical imperative’ about the relation between film and crime. We could say: the film image will be charged, saturated with absence because these films are based on a traumatic experience ...” (Levi, 2021, pp. 35–36).⁹

The foregrounded interventions thus testify to a certain universality of creative processes, art practices and the reflection on them, which through their dialogue and mutual enrichment become a unique common emancipatory project motivated by an encounter with the increasing indifference of the predominant modes of representation. This intertwining strengthens the vision of the “film act” where the creative process does not end when the lights in the cinema come on (or various screens are turned off), but lasts until the awareness of the urgency of engagement fades away, the engagement that Tomas Waugh recognises as “combined documentation, provocation, historiography, interpersonal encounter, and call to solidarity and action ...” (Waugh, 2017, p. 30). Thus, Nace Zavrl’s concept of the “technical unconscious”, which defines the breakthrough nature of the newsreel trilogy, fits well with the creative imperatives of “Relational Filmmaking” as defined by the activist media artist Julie Perini in her “programme” text “Relational Filmmaking: A Manifesto”:

⁸ In this context, it is worth mentioning Martin Pollack’s influential notion of “tainted landscapes”, which he defined as follows: “These are landscapes *that were places of mass killings committed covertly and out of plain sight, often under strict secrecy*. And after the massacre, the perpetrators make every conceivable effort to erase the traces. Inconvenient witnesses were ‘taken care of’; the pits into which corpses were tossed were filled with soil, levelled, and in many cases sowed with grass and carefully planted over with trees and bushes to enable the mass graves to disappear. *The graves are hidden, they are camouflaged*” (Pollack, 2015, p. 21).

⁹ In her “Nika Autor’s *Red Forests: A Material History of Barbarism / An Ethical Perspective*”, Nicole Brenez also draws our attention to the ethical imperatives of the newsreel trilogy: “To us, exhausted and enraged by all the battles lost and to be fought incessantly, Nika Autor rightfully points out: The forest must become an ethical model for humans. (...) The poem about contemporary bio-power composed by Nika Autor (*Newsreel 670 – Red Forests* and the entire migrant trilogy) shines a light on our political path with its flaming colours. One rarely comes across a masterpiece more collectively indispensable” (Brenez, 2022, pp. 8–9).

Relational filmmakers do not know what the final film will look like.

Relational filmmakers make formal decisions that address the aesthetic, ethical, technical, and personal problems encountered throughout the making of the film.

Relational filmmakers do not adhere to established modes or conventions.

Relational filmmakers make films that are abstract, factual, and fictional, all at once.

Relational filmmakers do not fuck around with these tools of representation and power.

Relational filmmakers use their tools to experiment with new ways of being and to emancipate new forms of subjectivity.

Relational filmmakers believe that reality is the consequence of what we do together. Their films carry and conduct traces of this belief. Relational films are co-created through careful and playful interrogations of the roles performed by the people and materials involved with the film's production and reception: artists, subjects, passers-by, audiences, environments, ideas, and things (Perini, 2011).

On the other hand, the tendency towards foregrounding invisibility in the newsreel trilogy is in clear consonance with the reflections of Pavle Levi, who in the heterogeneity of the relation between film and nature, which is often marked by the absent presence of human film protagonists, recognises one of the essential characteristics of political landscape documentaries. Namely, in following the ruthless “game” in which there can be no winner, simply because such a game should never have come into existence, the newsreel triptych of silent forests engages in another “game” – a tragic play in which the key creative element and semantic motivation is the relation between presence and absence. At the core of this “game” is the incomprehensible devastation inflicted on humanity by the institutions of the cold, ruthless system, whose consequences are invisible/unseen, concealed, denied... Because they cannot be credibly presented, the trilogy addresses other registers of perception: the method of conveying presence in absence (or vice versa) becomes a conscious gesture of resistance against, as Levi puts it, “the simplicity of thoughtlessly accepting the possibility of the ‘reliability of pictorial representation’” (Levi, 2021, p. 40). For what is explicitly shown will be devalued in comparison with the rest of the “worn, trite” image field of the ideologically selected mass media companies.

Furthermore, the “absence at the heart of the image”, as Levi emphasises, represents a practically “new ontology of the film image” with the key imperative that the viewer’s experience of the presented reality must be “largely dissociative, disjunctive – it must be both a sensory and an intellectual experience of the established (Daneyean) ‘incongruence’ or ‘dissonance’, whereby the ethics of a film image passes into its politics” (Levi, 2021, p. 41). That is why, precisely due to its absence, what is missing, what is not there, stares us in the eyes and guides us to the attentiveness of the gaze – to the observation in which we can see and grasp all that is not or was not shown. Thus, the main devastation that the triptych defines and depicts in an active relation between absence in presence and presence in absence is actually the devastation of the gaze itself. The unbearable knowledge that, again and again, dehumanisation reaches unimagined dimensions is no longer only a question of audiovisual interpretation, artistic illustration, creative incisiveness and activist engagement, but (again and) again a matter of the gaze – a matter of raising the awareness of the gaze.

Reception and reflection

Awareness raising by no means ends when the lights in the cinema come on or various screens are turned off. The vision of engaging the audience in the style of the activist strategies of Third Cinema is implemented at several levels and in various ways. In the creative segment, it is manifested in the publication of (the already mentioned) newsreel shreds, which are never merely a “catalogue” addition to the films or art projects, but are their composite part and provide an in-depth reflection on the considered problem from various aspects and theoretical approaches. In the stages of presentation, screening and reception, the Newsreel Front team (in various line-ups) attends film premieres, special screenings, exhibition openings, film festivals, symposia or panel discussions and other special events, where it cooperates with various interventions in the form of conversations, interpretations, lectures, workshops and the like. In connection with individual projects, such activities take place at the screenings and exhibitions in almost all the larger towns in Slovenia and almost all the capitals of the countries established after the disintegration of SFRY. Especially important in this context are the screenings intended for target audiences – the refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers in squats of alternative culture and the occupied territories in Metelkova Street and Roška Street in Ljubljana; the participants of the Autumn Film School, an international symposium on film theory and critique in Ljubljana, and students of the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television, University of Ljubljana, the Academy of Visual Arts, Ljubljana, Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt and Stanford University (California); and,

last but not least, high school teachers teaching film subjects at more than twenty high schools across Slovenia. In a certain period (especially when the COVID-19 measures were in force), the films were also accessible online. In addition to such activities in Slovenia and the broader region, various forms of engaged viewing are, if possible, also carried out at international venues where projects by Nika Autor and the Newsreel Front are presented – at film festivals, art museums and galleries or similar one-time events. Such was the case at the 57th Venice Biennial, Jeu de Paume, Paris; MAXXI – National Museum of 21st Century Art, Rome; Stanford University; MSUM+MG, Museum of Contemporary Arts Ljubljana; MIMA, Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art; Tokyo Photographic Art Museum; GARAGE, Museum of Contemporary Art Moscow; TIFF Cinematheque, Toronto International Film Festival; IFFR, International Film Festival Rotterdam; Film Center Serbia, Belgrade; Jeonju International Film Festival; VIENNALE, Vienna; ARS Electronica and LENTOS Kunstmuseum, Linz; Dokufest, Prizren; CRIC Festival of Critical Culture, Skopje; Artport, Tel Aviv; MSU, Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb; The Kunsthau, Graz; The Mosaic Rooms, London etc.

Based on the coverage in all the key film journals in Slovenia and a number of important journals abroad, we can also talk about a noticeable and often discussed activity of the Newsreel Front at the level of media reception and reflection. In Slovenia, the Newsreel Front was covered by the film journals *Kino!*, *Ekran* and *Kinotečnik* and by magazines and journals covering the broader fields of society and culture such as *Dialogi*, *Borec* and *Likovne besede*. At the international level, we can especially mention *Mediantrop* from Belgrade, *Studio Cinema Journal* from Austin, Texas, *International* from New York, *Journal of Canadian Art History* from Montreal, *Herri* from Stellenbosch, *Senses of Cinema* from Melbourne and *SCB Journal* from Berlin. At the same time, a large part of the Newsreel Front production was subject to an in-depth theoretical discussion in the chapters of the following books or journals: *Jolted Images, Unbound Analytic* (2017) and *Minijature: o politični filmski sliki* (2021) by Pavle Levi; *Film d'actualité – l'actu est à nous, Nika Autor*, edited by Muriel Rausch (2014); *The News Belongs to Us!*, edited by Nika Autor (et al.) (2017); *Politics of Truth I: Between Reality and Fiction*, edited by Alžběta Bačíková and Anna Remešová (2017); *Corenous Stories: Cosmetics in Society and Time*, edited by Petja Grafenauer and Katja Kobolt (2020); *When Gesture Becomes Event*, edited by Alenka Gregorič and Felicitas Thun-Hohenstein (2020); *Popularization and Populism in the Visual Arts: Attraction Images*, edited by Anna Schober (2020); *Third Cinema, World Cinema and Marxism*, edited by Ewa Mazierska and Lars Kristensen (2020).

Conclusion

With the discussed works and projects of engaged Slovenian documentary filmmaking, we wanted to draw attention especially to the practices that, on the one hand, represent a reaction to social injustices and repressions and, on the other, strive to open a space for the re-establishment of the very possibility of emancipation by transcending borders and limitations. We focused primarily on the filmmakers that treat the unenviable, often traumatic existential conditions of their “social actors” or the latter themselves as equal co-creators of the film process. In the present framework, the essential thing is the mode of “staging” the film characters, with which the cineastes endeavour to overcome the in-visibility of domination, alienation, repression and resistance. For only the aspects of the equal value and equal rights of the filmmakers and their subjects, their mutual respect and personal engagement can ensure that, in their depiction, the subjects are not reduced to a symbol of suffering and hopelessness that would arouse pity and compassion, but retain the dignity of their whole person. At the same time, such creativity represents the kind of engagement that always conceives a reciprocal bond with which a special commitment is forged: a commitment that is not merely a connection, but a resonance with the mechanisms of seeing, which coincide in the characteristic tripartiteness in which all the actors of the documentary film act are co-involved. This is elaborated by Jean-Louis Comolli in his insightful analysis of the documentary process in which he rejects the model of the bipartite creative investment – the co-participation of the “filmmakers” and those “filmed”. As a necessary pre-condition of creative transformation, a “third party” is supposed to always be formed, which

establishes the film’s necessity for both sides; something in-between that’s a *third element* between self and self. Author or director, *actor or directed body, and spectator or subject* are all separated from themselves and re-stored, exceeded, made new to themselves, renewed in the representation that, divesting them of self, transports and transforms them within the work, in this other zone of togetherness that is the work. Each in turn becomes actor, becomes director, becomes spectator of the trio, and of each within the trio (Comolli, 2004, p. 448).

By focusing on the Other, who from a (social) actor changes into a co-creator of the film act, the works and art projects discussed in this text also belong to the field of engagement that, if Or, if we look at it from Živojin Pavlović’s¹⁰ point of view, by creating drastic images powerfully and relentlessly breaks through the armours of human indifference.

¹⁰ Živojin Pavlović is a famous representative of New Yugoslav Film, more commonly known under the pejorative term “Black Wave”, who, at the time when he was in political disfavour at home in Serbia, filmed an important part of his film oeuvre in Slovenia.

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