

Towards Women's Minor Cinema in Socialist Yugoslavia

Dijana Jelača
Brooklyn College

CONTACT:

Dijana Jelača, Brooklyn College, City University of New York.
dijana.jelaca@brooklyn.cuny.edu

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ABSTRACT

This essay theorizes the concept of women's minor cinema in socialist Yugoslavia, conceptualized through examples of cultural texts that circulate within the so-called women's genres: romance films, "chick flicks," and TV soap operas. Women's cinema is here not defined solely as films made *by* women, but rather, films that *address the spectator as a woman*, regardless of the spectator's sex or gender. I argue that, in the context of Yugoslavia, such works frequently articulated emancipatory, feminist stances that did not demarcate a dichotomous opposition to the socialist state as such, but rather called for the state to fulfill its original promise of gender equality as tied both to the class struggle and the annihilation of patriarchy. In the latter parts of the essay, I focus on the work of a pioneering Yugoslav woman director Soja Jovanović, and urge a rethinking of her oeuvre through the lens of socialist minor cinema that seemingly possesses low cultural capital yet frequently articulates poignant critiques along the intersections of sex, gender and social class. In focusing on the class-based critiques embedded in her television work in particular, the gender politics of socialist women's cinema are explored vis-à-

vis their distinction from the famed New Yugoslav Film. Jovanović has largely been left out of the historical accounts of socialist Yugoslav cinema, as well as out of the feminist accounts of the history of socialist women's film in Eastern Europe more broadly. As a result, this essay seeks to perform a feminist historiography that writes Jovanović both into the history of Yugoslavia's socialist film and into the history of women's socialist minor cinema on an international scale.

Keywords: feminism, socialism, women's cinema, minor cinema, Yugoslavia

“Making women visible is the first step towards questioning the normative relationship between the general and the specific within the hierarchies of relevance in the process of writing history.”

– Lydia Sklevicky (1996, p. 14, translation mine)

In the 1984 Yugoslav film *In the Jaws of Life*, a provocative double staging takes place: a simultaneous embrace *and* deconstruction of women's popular cultural genres—here woman's film (or chick flick) and television soap operas in particular. Based on Dubravka Ugrešić's novel *Štefica Cvek u raljama života* [*Štefica Cvek in the Jaws of Life*, 1981], the film, directed by Rajko Grlić on Ugrešić's screenplay, balances between a critical reflection on 'light' or 'middlebrow' romance fiction intended for women, and an affirmative rethinking of women's agency when it comes to both the authorship and fandom of such genres. Taking this film as my starting point, in this essay I trace the trajectory of a subversive strain of gendered and classed critique staged by a diverse set of socialist Yugoslav films and television programs primarily intended for female audiences, which reside at the nexus of popular cultural genres for women,

such as soap operas or romantic comedies. More generally, popular middlebrow cultural genres intended for female audiences—from romance novels to TV soap operas—are typically carriers of low cultural capital within the classed hierarchies of cultural production in any context, and socialist Yugoslavia, to a large extent, was not an exception in this sense, regardless of the socialist state's declared focus on recognizing class struggle as a basis of all social relations. The social, political and economic focus on ameliorating said class struggle and eliminating class difference altogether does not necessarily translate into a critical recognition of how cultural *tastes* are classed categories in their own right, and often become the domain where gender and class interact and converge in complicated ways that uphold normative patriarchal gender politics demarcated by existing class hierarchies, particularly when it comes to the dismissal of women's genres as carriers of low(er) cultural capital. As has been shown by many feminist scholars of audience and reception studies in various contexts, when the presumed surface veneer of 'escapism' or 'pure entertainment' is cast off, women's popular genres, as well as their fandoms, can reveal a much more complex economy of affective investments that do not run along the axis of passive, uncritical (female) audiences who merely internalize the existing status quo (as, for instance, Janice Radway memorably showed in studying the reception of romance novels in the US [Radway, 1984]).

Ugrešić starts her "patchwork novel" by acknowledging that it belongs to the genre of a women's story (*ženska priča*), and indeed, the written text is permeated and stitched together by the feminine motif of a sewing thread, as well as meta-textual suggestions of where and how the text should be cut and how it should be patched together (as if in the act of reading, the readers are collectively performing an act of sewing together a patchwork garment). As Olga Dimitrijević notes, "the novel plays with the romance genre in an ironic and witty manner, and is considered to be one of the classics of Yugoslavian postmodernism" (Dimitrijević, 2015, p. 535).

In the film version of the story, the novel's meta-textual aspect of sewing and its links to both women's labor and women's writing is effectively converted into the medium of film through being replaced by the cinematic motif *par excellence*: that of the cutting of the film stock itself. Namely, the protagonist of the film is now Dunja, a creator and director of a popular TV series about Štefica Cvek. By adding this extra narrative layer the film alternates, and consistently draws parallels between Dunja and Štefica, or rather, between the inner struggles and external pressures that the two women face in different contexts. Most importantly for the topic at hand, Štefica's story is here conveyed through the double layering—the structure of a TV show within a film—of female authorship and female gaze. For instance, almost all the (chronologically ordered) scenes from the TV show about Štefica are bookended by Dunja, the show's creator, watching them, tweaking, commenting on, and/or editing them together with her editing assistant, who is also a woman (Figure 1). In this highly regarded, popular and oft-quoted Yugoslav film, the women's writing of the literary source material is transfigured into the visual media of film and television, and ultimately whittled down into a low cultural genre of soap opera as the site of woman's authorship and agency in particular.



Figure 1: *In the Jaws of Life* opens with the shots of a woman's hands editing the TV soap opera about Štefica Cvek

Editing, in particular, is a significant, if not central element of woman's film work in socialist Yugoslavia, as depicted in *In the Jaws of Life*, and further emphasized by the fact that this very film, in which we are watching two women continuously cut and edit a TV show, is itself edited by a woman: Živka Toplak. Toplak was already a skilled editor of senior standing when she began her collaborations with the young upstart director Rajko Grlić (their collaborations would produce several feature films and TV shows). In his memoir, Grlić describes Živka Toplak as “merciless with footage, unerringly capable of telling the right shot from the wrong one” (Grlić, forthcoming). This description is a testament to the respect and authority Toplak as an editor wielded with the technical knowledge and exacting eye for the right shot and cut. Grlić relied on her editing skills until she retired.

Indeed, the history of Yugoslav cinema is more than occasionally populated by women working behind the camera—as editors. For example, most of the key films of the New Yugoslav Film, also known as the Black Wave—the most celebrated and internationally renowned period of Yugoslav film history—were directed by men and edited by women: Ljubica Nešić and Ivanka Vukasović jointly edited *Man Is Not a Bird* (Dušan Makavejev, 1965); Ivanka Vukasović also edited Makavejev's *Innocence Unprotected* (1968), and arguably his most important work, *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971)—a film in which its female protagonist Milena Dravić famously proclaims “Death to male fascism!” Furthermore, Mirjana Mitić edited Aleksandar Petrović's *Three* (1965) and *I Even Met Happy Gypsies* (1967), as well as Puriša Đorđević's *The Morning* (1967). Katarina Stojanović edited Petrović's *It Rains in My Village* (1968) and Makavejev's *Love Affair, or the Case of the Missing Switchboard Operator* (1967). And while female editors were arguably overrepresented, the Black Wave period of Yugoslav cinema had no prominent women directors. At the same time, the

male auteurs of this iconic period seemed to have a deep preference for working with female editors in what here appears to be a woman's film work *par excellence*: cutting. Indeed, Lilya Kaganovsky (2018) has positioned film editing as women's work in the context of another socialist film tradition—the Soviet montage: with figures like Elizaveta Svilova and Esfir Shub, both renowned editors (as well as directors), the film movement that so essentially centered on the cut as the nerve of cinema reflects just how much it depended on the work of female editors as a key creative force.

Interestingly, women's editing work in socialist Yugoslavia frequently oscillates between 'art' cinema and more mainstream or lowbrow fare. For instance, Ivanka Vukasović worked with the auteur *par excellence* Makavejev on several of his seminal films, and also edited films like *Truckers* (1973), a highly popular (and notably lowbrow) buddy comedy, which spanned into sequels and a TV series. This is an important element I want to call attention to here, as it destabilizes the binary between 'art' cinema and 'mainstream' cinema in the ways that *In the Jaws of Life* does as well. I consider *In the Jaws of Life* to be one of the key examples of what I refer to as women's minor cinema in socialist Yugoslavia, where women's cinema is not defined solely as films made *by* women, but rather, films that *address the spectator as a woman*, regardless of the spectator's sex or gender (de Lauretis, 1985). I consider such works 'minor' cinema because they do not utilize what may be perceived as the more artistic modes of visual expression but rather lean on the more mainstream, dominant forms of women's genres (romance novels, TV soap operas, romantic comedies) in order to convey their critical stance about existing gender politics in socialist Yugoslavia. By existing within (and insisting on) these 'lowbrow' genres, women's minor cinema in Yugoslavia stages an

overt critique of the classist hierarchies of taste, within which politics (feminist and otherwise) are recognized as such only when they are articulated in the upper echelons of cultural production. In my use of the term 'minor cinema' I echo Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983), and its extensions in Alison Butler's theorizing of women's cinema as minor cinema (Butler, 2002). As Butler pointedly argues, "[t]o call women's cinema minor cinema [...] is to free it from the binarisms (popular/elitist, avant-garde/mainstream, positive/negative) which result from imagining it as a parallel or oppositional cinema" (Butler, 2002, p. 21-22).

Far from being a conduit of mere lowbrow entertainment or reactionary reflection of patriarchal gender politics in socialist Yugoslavia, women's minor cinema is a site of negotiation of multiple, complex and often contradictory impulses and tendencies. As experienced by Dunja, the protagonist of *In the Jaws of Life*, the creation of a soap opera is where she hones her own authorial voice that resists the pressures from her environment on how the story that she is creating should go, or what kind of "more prestigious" creative work she should be doing instead. For instance, in one scene Dunja is given a talking to by her intellectual-leaning male partner about how in "this economic and political shit-show and general social depression" she is "calmly making a little show about trivial things, you occupy yourself with marginal topics and avoid *real* problems, making fun of them." Without responding, Dunja takes a bite out of an apple, which is followed by a cut and a matching shot of Štefica Cvek, the protagonist of Dunja's show, taking a bite out of a tomato. Štefica is in her office, being lectured to by her female co-worker Marijana about the importance of finding the right man. The "trivial things" that Dunja's TV show is about revolve around the quiet and shy Štefica's efforts to discover her own agency in relationships with other people, whether they be various men she attempts to date, her

co-workers, or her aunt whom she lives with. Štefica's story touches on the questions of female libido and sexual freedom, discovering positivity of women's bodily image, and finding ways to resist (not unlike Dunja herself) the pressures from her environment about how she should be and what she should do with her life.

In another humorous scene, Dunja is given unsolicited advice by a close female friend about the more prestigious works she should be making: "Listen, if I were you, I would be making a different series. Gloom." Dunja asks whether by "gloom" she means "political," to which her friend responds: "Political gloom about women's uteruses. Because this part of women's lives is ostracized. No one talks about it, because it's supposedly not proper, not pleasant. I would watch a show about women who get up at 4am and work until 3pm. About their abortions, births, about their children's dirty diapers, about their stupid husbands, and in *that* sense this would be a political film." In this key scene, an overt reference is made to Krešo Golik's 1966 short documentary *Od 3 do 22* [From 3am to 10pm], about a female textile worker who gets up at 3am, and goes to bed at 10pm, and during her waking hours works at the factory, performs domestic labor, takes care of her baby and husband, and so on. This wordless documentary by one of the key filmmakers of New Yugoslav Film has been hailed as a powerful example of feminist cinema, yet its gaze is detached and purely observational. We never hear the woman whom the filmmaker follows speak, as she performs her daily routines robotically, expressionlessly. What Dunja's friend identifies in her advice of what a political film should be is the normative, one-sided understanding of what constitutes a feminist work. Since it is not gloomy and dark, but rather a light romantic comedy, Dunja's TV soap, by implication, cannot be conceived as feminist and political, either by her intellectual boyfriend or her feminist girlfriend. They both articulate narrow definitions of what 'political' and 'feminist' mean, definitions which for them cannot possibly in-

clude a women's genre such as a TV soap opera, and by extension, they both fail to see the subversive subtext of Dunja's work, which is indeed both political and feminist. Because of these intertwined elements that stage a multilayered portrayal of women's creativity, desire, body positivity, fandom and at times contradictory affective investments, the film is an overtly feminist affirmation of 'low' cultural genres as potential sites of resistance where female authorship and agency can indeed thrive. Moreover, *In the Jaws of Life* blurs the boundaries between traditionally defined cinema and television, switching between the two modes and, in the process, suggesting that television (as a less prestigious medium than film) may be one of the key sites where women's minor cinema is given articulation in all its complexity when it comes to both authorship and spectatorship.

Like Ugrešić's novel that it is based on, the film *In the Jaws of Life*, along with other female-centric works of popular culture at the time, articulates within popular cultural domain some of the politics of the so-called "new Yugoslav feminism" that arose in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Zsófia Lóránd, "[t]he new Yugoslav feminism targeted the proclaimed, yet to them, unfulfilled equality of women in Yugoslavia. [The activists] argued from a feminist base, inspired and infused by critical Marxism, post-structuralist French feminism, new theories in psychology, anthropology and sociology, but also referring to the Yugoslav partisan tradition as an emancipatory ideology for women" (Lóránd, 2019, p. 2, emphasis mine). Importantly then, this "new" feminism is not a clear-cut break from either the earlier forms of feminism in Yugoslavia (closely tied to the socialist revolution and antifascist struggle), nor from the socialist state itself, since the state is here not perceived as a monolithic, unchanging, nor totalitarian entity. Instead, this *neofeminism* (as some refer to the Yugoslav feminism of the 1970s) harkens back to the very origins of socialist Yugoslavia—to the Yugoslav revolutionary

socialist and antifascist partisan struggle, and the socialist state's proclaimed but not-yet-fulfilled politics of gender equality and women's full emancipation. Examples of minor cinema that echoes the neofeminist critique of late socialism include a popular comedy *It Ain't Easy with Men* (Mihailo Vukobratović, 1985), about a flamboyant single mother (played by Yugoslavia's greatest female screen icon, Milena Dravić), and her headstrong daughters going on a summer vacation, or a TV series about female textile industry workers, *Stories from the Factory* (1985). Another poignant example is the famed Yugoslav auteur Željimir Žilnik's TV movie *Brooklyn—Gusinje* (1988), which tells the story of two Serbian waitresses living in a provincial town and engaging in interethnic romance with two Kosovar Albanian brothers. This TV movie uses the seemingly conventional romance narrative in order to probe the intersections of gender, class and ethnicity in highly provocative ways, particularly for the period of the 1980s, when nationalist tensions in Yugoslavia were gradually reaching a fever pitch, and would eventually cause the country's violent disintegration in the 1990s. Indeed, Žilnik's entire oeuvre frequently favors "lower" cultural forms such as participatory improvised comedy and absurdist docudramas that blur fact and fiction, over the aesthetically polished, often abstract language of art cinema, on a par with his career-long interest in working with non-professional actors and depicting the lives of the often invisible social underclass—those living on the peripheries of society (the homeless, the Roma, the working-class, rural women, transgendered sex workers, and so on). Importantly, Žilnik's oeuvre also blurs a clear-cut boundary between cinema and television, as he frequently works in both media and for him, the two appear to exist in a seamless continuum that dismantles the normative perceptions of the greater prestige of one (film) over the other (television).

Another example of a 1980s socialist minor cinema that firmly places the spectator within women's point of view is the comedy

Women Who Are Always Ready (Branko Baletić, 1987, with Dušan Makavejev collaborating on the screenplay). The film sees female day laborers staging a violent strike against the exploitative male manager of a rural factory, hijack a “state-owned” tractor and head out to the city to try and find better working opportunities for themselves—thereby effectively staging a female workers’ mini-revolution of sorts. Towards the end of the film we see them enact another mini-revolution at yet another factory that is about to be shut down. Foreshadowing the postsocialist precarity in which workers at times resort to taking over the factories in order to prevent them from closing down, the women, led by their de facto leader, Majstor (“Handyman,” played by Mirjana Karanović), lock themselves inside the factory and refuse to leave until they are forcibly made to do so (most women in the film refer to each other by their working skill set rather than by their proper names). The film’s depiction of the growing worker precarity testifies to the late Yugoslav system’s increasing betrayal of its self-management mantra “Factories to the Workers” (*Tvornice radnicima*). The women’s failed efforts at rallying other workers to strike lead to an attempt to leave the country altogether, and go work in Germany as unregistered guest workers. Yet even that plan is absurdly thwarted when they end up in a car crash. Speaking directly to the unfulfilled promise of socialist Yugoslavia’s emancipatory roots, earlier in the film one of the women says: “My father was a veteran of one of the wartime offensives, he fought for all this,” to which another responds with: “Maybe it would have been better if he hadn’t. Look how it is for us.” Another woman offers a direct address to the state when a TV crew visits the factory where she works, attesting to the country’s growing economic crisis and rising unemployment that saw many workers leave for western Europe as guest workers. Speaking directly to the camera (and thereby breaking the fourth wall), she proclaims: “My message to the state is to find employment for all those who are young and

strong, and then you will see how both the working people and the state will flourish. (...) Find us all work and then we will all be shock workers (*udarnici*). There, that's it from me and from the working-class," in a speech that is followed by a spontaneous applause from other women workers. Workers' rights loom large, as when our group of women take temporary jobs at a factory and immediately start inquiring about why the workers there do not revolt and fight for better working conditions. This group of female troublemakers does not take kindly to other factory workers' passivity when it comes to fighting for the improvement of their working conditions and benefits. "Serves you right," concludes one of the women. In other words, for these working-class women, change is not expected to simply happen through a top down regulation by the state. Instead, in true workers' self-management fashion, the women take a proactive approach to changing the conditions of their own situation by any means necessary, pushing for the realization of the emancipatory politics promised by the state (for both workers and women, who are here one and the same). The provocative class-based critique that this comedy offers invites the audience to laugh *with* the women rather than *at* them, while the final car crash cannot but be seen as a foreshadowing of where the country itself would be headed just a few short years later. This critique aligns with the so-called "emancipationist" approach to women's rights in Yugoslavia, which Adriana Zaharijević describes as follows: "The basic premise of the emancipationist approach to the woman's question was that there was no woman's question above or beyond the question of class" (Zaharijević, 2017, 269).

Rather than being a totalizing challenge to the socialist state as such (as is often assumed, thereby upholding a dichotomous tension and an appearance of a mutually exclusive incompatibility between feminism and state socialism), these articulations of Yugoslav

feminism challenged the deeply embedded patriarchal elements both within the socialist state policies and within the practice of everyday life—elements which are otherwise frequently rendered invisible and therefore naturalized. By highlighting this nuance, we avoid the pitfalls of assuming that the new Yugoslav feminism of the 1960s and beyond was inevitably an opponent to the socialist state as such. Quite the contrary, the relationship between state socialism and feminism was more nuanced and complex than this simplistic binary would entail: Yugoslav feminism, in its activism and cultural production, frequently mapped a road to a more egalitarian socialist society devoid of the deeply embedded and naturalized patriarchal tendencies (tendencies that were often directly related to, or further reiterated by the more capitalist elements encroaching on Yugoslavia's economic system, which is often referred to as market socialism). As a result, “new Yugoslav feminism was cooperating with the state and criticising it at the same time” (Lóránd, 2018, p. 2), the two trajectories here being mutually informative rather than mutually exclusive. That simultaneous cooperation and criticism can be traced in the state-sponsored cultural production illustrated by examples noted above, from film to television.

In the remainder of this essay, I focus on the pioneering yet frequently overlooked work of Yugoslavia's first—and for a period of time, only—female feature film director, Soja Jovanović, and urge a rethinking of her oeuvre through the lens of socialist minor cinema that consistently embraces the aforementioned low cultural capital. In focusing on the class-based critiques embedded in her later (TV) work in particular, the gender politics of socialist minor cinema as women's cinema are explored as formally and aesthetically distinct from the famed New Yugoslav Film, or the Black Wave. I argue that Jovanović's work falling within the popular cultural genres of either comedy and/or women's romance is one of the key reasons why she has been largely left out of the scholarly historical accounts of social-

ist Yugoslav cinema. Moreover, I critique the existing feminist approaches to socialist women's film history more broadly, since feminist scholarship on women's work under socialism frequently positions the socialist woman filmmaker as inevitably a dissident, a figure who needs to be explicitly political and operate within the context of 'art film' for her work to be noted as worthy (thereby clearly echoing precisely the way Dunja's female friend advised her to create 'political' work). It is no coincidence, then, that in the context of Western film scholarship, three of the most lauded and best regarded female directors in socialist Eastern Europe are women whose work is overtly political both formally and thematically, and who made films that fall squarely within the domain of arthouse cinema—the (often banned) works of Czechoslovakia's Věra Chytilová, Hungary's Márta Mészáros and USSR's Kira Muratova. Soja Jovanović as of yet appears in no feminist scholarly accounts of socialist women's cinema. As a result, the remainder of this essay seeks to perform a feminist historiography that writes Jovanović both into the history of Yugoslavia's socialist film, and into the history of women's socialist minor cinema more broadly.

The Socialist Minor Cinema of Soja Jovanović

“Directing is woman's work [...] and a type of profession where a woman can really thrive.”

—*Soja Jovanović*

Sofija “Soja” Jovanović (1922-2002) was the first woman feature film director in socialist Yugoslavia, as well as a prolific theater and TV director. She made her feature film debut with *Sumnjivo lice* [A Suspect Individual] in 1954, based on Branislav Nušić's satirical

drama. She went on to direct the first Yugoslav film shot in color—the enormously popular comedy *Pop Ćira i pop Spira* [Priests Ćira and Spira] (1957). A protégé of the famed film innovator Slavko Vorkapić, who was a supervisor on her first movie, Jovanović conceived of film as a dynamic structure guided by action and movement. Historically, she belongs to the so-called “classical” Yugoslav film period (roughly between 1947 and 1962) and has made some of the most popular movies of that period, yet she has thus far received significantly less scholarly attention than her male counterparts of the same period. As noted above, I argue that this is in large part due to the fact that almost all her feature films are “light film comedies,” as described in a brief section on her in Daniel Goulding’s history of Yugoslav cinema (Goulding, 2002, p. 43). To counter such omissions, I want to engage in a feminist rethinking of her work that upholds Soja Jovanović as a path breaking pioneer of Yugoslav classical cinema generally, and socialist minor cinema in particular. By rethinking the minor cinema of Soja Jovanović, I aim to (re-)establish her rightful place in the history of Yugoslav socialist film and television, but also in the project of mapping new transnational constellations of women’s cinema, ones that do not blindly privilege Western paradigms nor require socialist women filmmakers to be political “dissidents” in order for their work to be deemed worthy of attention.

At the same time, I acknowledge Lingzhen Wang’s (2017) warning, in her writing on Chinese socialist women’s cinema, that our understandings of both women’s cinema and feminism alike cannot be merely imported from one geopolitical context to another (usually from the West to the Rest), but rather need to be (re-)defined anew in each concrete historical and socio-cultural setting. Wang argues that Butler’s concept of women’s cinema as minor cinema, as conceptualized by drawing almost exclusively on Western feminist filmmaking practices and theories, “risks legitimizing West-

ern cine-feminist practice as the origin of all women's cinema practice worldwide" (Wang, 2017, p. 78). Moreover, as Wang pointedly notes, "[a] marginalized or displaced position, for example, does not necessarily correlate to a politically subversive or oppositional stance. Many marginalized practices are contained, and even supported, by the broader system" (Wang, 2017, p. 78). I would suggest that this is *precisely* the case with the work of Soja Jovanović, who persistently articulated marginalized and displaced positions in her work (of, for example, rural or working-class women), without undertaking a politically subversive or oppositional stance the way that, for instance, the all-male directors of the Black Wave were perceived to do. Importantly, just like many of her Black Wave counterparts, Jovanović worked almost exclusively with female editors (Milanka Nanović, Radmila Nikolić, Milada Rajšić Levi)—nearly all her films and TV work were edited by women, in another poignant reminder of cutting as women's film work *par excellence*.

Jovanović's films were never about formally or aesthetically rethinking the language of cinema, nor were they about conveying *overt* forms of challenge and subversion of the political or social establishment within which her work emerges. Indeed, all her films and TV dramas were made firmly within the frameworks of dominant, classical film language. This is why I retain the concept of minor cinema in reference to her work, defined as a cinema made by (and about) minority, marginalized groups using the language of a dominant majority. Her comedies are a rich ground for a multi-layered analysis, as minor cinema often is, and rather than espousing mere escapism, they frequently mount a probing and intelligent satire disguised as lighthearted fun (this is particularly true of her comedies based on the satirical work of writers Branislav Nušić and Stevan Sremac). In his otherwise very brief section on Jovanović's work, Yugoslav film historian Petar Volk notes, for instance, that Jovanović's *Pop Ćira i pop Spira* [Priests Ćira and Spira], a seemingly

depoliticized comedy set at the turn of the century, carries “a certain mild irony” (Volk, 1986, p. 174), but does not elaborate any further from there. The existence of this “mild” irony cannot all too easily be overlooked by feminist historiographies in particular.

As a productive theatre, film and TV director, Jovanović frequently privileged sound over visuals, and conceptualized her work in terms of the aural spectrum before she turned to creating the visuals – in other words, she heard her work before she saw it (Lazić, 2013). Incidentally, this primacy of sound—music and dialogue in particular—might inadvertently align with some scholarly feminist interventions that seek to deny the visual field the primacy established along the patriarchal venues of spectatorial control, and turn to other senses as a way to subvert the dominant visual paradigm when it comes to classical film language (Wilkins, 2016; Vernon, 2017). This is also what made Jovanović welcome the rise of television in particular, because, by her own admission, it allowed her to be more playful with sound, since she switched to the magnetic tape that recorded a much higher quality of sound than the so-called “licht ton” (light-recorded sound) that she used in her films during the 1950s.

After establishing herself as a successful theater director, Jovanović made her first feature film, *Sumnjivo lice* [A Suspect Individual] (1954)—a satirical comedy of errors with a romance at its center—which opens with a literal conversion from theater to film: in the very first scene, a contemporary audience is watching an outdoor theater play set some time in the 1920s, and a conflict between a mother and daughter about the daughter wanting to get married. When the daughter rushes off stage, the play seamlessly transforms into a film as we switch to daytime, and the girl finds her father sitting in the garden and complains to him about the conflict she just had with her mother. In this first scene of her very first film, then,

Jovanović calls attention to her own transformation from theater to film quite overtly and self-reflexively. The film ends on a similar note, when a couple of actors, now out of character, rush their colleagues to end the play so their “kebabs wouldn’t get cold.” But more often than not, her films contain straightforward film language that does not overtly experiment with form nor call attention to itself or the filmmaker’s presence—as seen in her box office hit *Put oko sveta* [A Trip Around the World] (1964), for instance.

In the latter parts of her career, Jovanović increasingly turns to television work, which, rather than a break, is a continuation of her cinematic oeuvre by other means. Her turn to television may be due to the medium providing a platform that carried less pressure and potentially more creative freedom for a female director. Indeed, Jovanović’s “TV dramas” (as the standard term for films made for television was) offered a more openly political depiction of socialist class and gender politics than her earlier film comedies did. This is perhaps due to the fact that TV, perceived as a minor medium, particularly in relation to both theater and cinema, has frequently been a more accessible platform for the participation of marginalized voices and authors. This may be why Jovanović’s TV work articulates a more provocative tone, even if, as I stated earlier, her cinematic comedies are not entirely devoid of (implicit) politics and social criticisms as well. Jovanović’s 1973 TV play *Andra i Ljubica* [Andra and Ljubica] was initially “bunkered” by the socialist authorities (a term used for the practice of unofficial banning in Yugoslavia, where the release of a film or TV program would be indefinitely “delayed”) because it was critical of the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (SKOJ, of which she herself was a member during WWII). The drama was released only after Jovanović, by her own admission, made another, more positive TV drama about the youth organization a couple of years lat-

er. This quid pro quo offers a useful vignette about socialist cultural production that does not perpetuate the myth of artists as inevitably oppressed, but rather pinpoints the dynamics of pragmatism between the state and the individual, an active negotiation rather than static oppression.

Arguing that any examination of socialist television needs to resist the pitfalls of falling into the standard Cold War dichotomies, Sabina Mihelj notes that “the project of socialist television was, at its core, a project aimed at social mobilization and change, committed to advancing social equality and ensuring a high level of cultural sophistication and literacy across the population” (Mihelj, 2014, p. 9). Within the scope of this essay, we can only begin to scratch the surface of the complexities entailed by the term “socialist television.” In her book on the topic, Anikó Imre pointedly notes that “[s]ocialist TV certainly registered the socialist system’s failures. Equally important, however, it also recorded its forgotten successes, *reminding us of the viability of visions that diverge from the current monopoly of neoliberal capitalism on what constitutes the good life*” (Imre, 2016, p. ii, emphasis mine).

Jovanović considered the series *Osma ofanziva* [The 8th Offensive], (1979), an adaptation of two novels by Branko Ćopić, the high point of her TV career (she had previously adapted Ćopić’s *Orlovi rano lete* [Eagles Fly Early] into a feature-length movie in 1966). As in her other work, in *Osma ofanziva* [The 8th Offensive] Jovanović frequently juxtaposes male and female social spaces and interactions, where women’s sphere is often more overtly imbued with explicit class overtones. Two of Jovanović’s TV plays register both the successes and failures of women’s life during socialism in particularly poignant and urgent terms: *Daleko je Australija* [Australia Is Far Away] (1969) and *Izvinjavamo se, mnogo se izvinjavamo* [We Apologize, We Truly Apologize] (1976). I want to specifically dis-

cuss them in the context of socialist minor cinema that marks Jovanović oeuvre more generally, as it here converges with the related concept of socialist women's cinema in particular.

While the genre of TV dramas frequently mimics theater in its staging and direction, in *Daleko je Australija* [Australia Is Far Away], Jovanović was able to use more advanced technology that allowed her to transgress the constraints of a theatrical play regarding the unity of place, time and action, and shoot in multiple locations instead. The TV drama was written by Bojana Andrić, a famed Yugoslav playwright and TV screenplay writer, who, among many other notable achievements, also wrote the script for one of the most memorable Yugoslav horror movies, *Leptirica* [The She-Butterfly] by Đorđe Kadijević (1973). Incidentally, the prominence and acclaim of the made-for-TV movie *Leptirica*, and its highly iconic, cult status in Yugoslav culture, are another testament to the frequent blurring of the boundaries between cinematic and television production in socialist Yugoslavia, particularly when it comes to the 'lower' film genres (here horror, elsewhere comedy and romance).

In the TV drama *Daleko je Australija* [Australia Is Far Away], directed by Jovanović and written by Andrić, the story centers on a live-in housemaid, Desa (Jelisaveta 'Seka' Sablić), who dreams about getting married and moving to Australia. Her hopes of a cross-continental departure are not entirely random: she had heard of a Yugoslav man who moved to Australia for work five years prior, and is now looking for a wife back home to join him through an arranged marriage. Economic migrations were not uncommon at the time, starting in the 1960s, when president Tito signed an agreement with several Western countries to 'export' cheap labor (and simultaneously lower the unemployment rate at home). As a result, '*gastarbajteri*' (German: Gastarbeiter, English: guest workers) be-

came a prominent social group in socialist Yugoslavia—typically low skilled workers of lower class or rural origins, who moved to various Western capitalist countries in search of employment. The group was often stigmatized in Yugoslavia as a carrier of low cultural capital, without much focus on how its collective identity was firmly influenced by the transnational flows of Yugoslavia's market socialism, as well as its links to the global economic fluctuations. By tapping into this particular segment of Yugoslav society, Jovanović's drama pointedly addresses the uneven flows of transnational labor and social power, particularly when it comes to women. Desa's story is both locally specific and firmly tied to the broader transnational dynamics of global economy and international politics.

Aspirations towards class mobility in *Daleko je Australija* are front and center, and are moreover articulated through a decidedly feminine sphere of both labor and emotional intimacy. This is why I highlight the drama as an important precursor to the women's minor cinema of the 1980s, exemplified by *In the Jaws of Life*. Jovanović's film shows that late socialist articulations of feminism in Yugoslavia did not simply emerge out of nowhere, but rather that they carried important links and continuities with the feminist concerns of an earlier generation. In *Daleko je Australija*, the core focus remains closely attuned to the complexities faced by single young women of lower-class background in Yugoslavia. We learn that Desa is an orphan whose mother died after giving birth to her, and that her father committed suicide because he could not bear the burden of taking care of six children alone. Subsequently, Desa was raised by her older sister. Her modest background is informative of Desa's outlook on life—she has a distinctly matter-of-fact approach to tackling hardships and finding pragmatic solutions to them, even when she is facing extremely limited options (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Housemaid Desa taking a short break from what appears to be never-ending housework (*Daleko je Australija*)

Throughout the film, Desa is subjected to the scrutiny of various men who frequently offer unsolicited assessments of her appearance, character and worth (not unlike the experience of Štefica Cvek). When Desa and her friend Ranka get hit on by two truckers at a cafe in the opening scene, one of the men suggests to Desa that the two of them would make a good married couple because he wants his wife to be “young for herself, pretty for me, and proper for the rest of the world.” Desa’s employers are an upper-middle-class couple with a hormonal teenage son who subjects Desa to sexual advances. His father frequently criticizes Desa, invades her privacy, gets uncomfortably tactile with her, and eventually makes overt sexual overtures as well. Echoing the (often untold) experience of many women, the constant presence and threat of sexual harassment is a daily, domestic occurrence in Desa’s life. Moreover, when Desa meets the grandfather of the man in Australia who wants to marry, she is vetted by the older man as to whether she is proper wife material—she attempts to impress him by performing household chores in his house. Desa’s housemistress,

an engineer and apparently sole breadwinner of the household, seems to be the only sympathetic figure in a position of power, who is supportive of Desa and does not scrutinize her in such matter-of-fact terms in which others do.

Caught in a triangle of sorts, Desa has to decide whether to accept the marriage offer from the unknown man in Australia, or from the alcohol-loving, pushy truck driver who wants her to live in his village. On closer scrutiny, neither of Desa's marriage options appears to be particularly emancipatory since they both presuppose Desa's continued subjugation to men in a patriarchal setting. Here, the drama accentuates the class aspects of women's emancipation: while her housemistress is an independent and educated working woman and, for all intents and purposes, the head of her family, for Desa, any option besides continued subjugation within patriarchal relations seems rather improbable. If she stays to work for the family, she will continue to be harassed by the father and son. If she marries either one of her suitors, she is bound to become a housewife (and likely a mother). To make matters more complicated, economic reasons become obstacles to either marriage: Desa's migration paperwork is stalled because she cannot afford to have proper legal counsel, while the truck driver ends up being jailed when it is discovered that he was involved in the black market of transporting cheap livestock to Slovenia (a plot twist that tacitly acknowledges the existence of a grey economy in Yugoslavia). All of these factors are overtly class-conscious commentaries on the dispossession of the socialist working-class, and particularly its women.

Importantly, Soja Jovanović levels this critique in a minor key, on the small screen, several years before one of the prominent Yugoslav male auteurs of New Film, Krsto Papić, tackled the very same issue in his documentary short *Charter let broj...*

[Charter Flight No...], (1975), in which he follows young Yugoslav women migrating to Australia to marry men they'd never met—on a trip that Desa herself never makes, much as she wants to. Neither marriage works out for Desa, as Soja Jovanović's drama ends the same way it started, with Desa and Ranka venting over cake as two new men approach them, and the cycle continues, while hope for any real change in Desa's prospects diminishes.

In the second TV drama that echoes similar sentiments, *Izvinjavamo se, mnogo se izvinjavamo* [We Apologize, We Truly Apologize], the story centers on a random train encounter between two people who fall in love during the course of their evolving conversation and eventually decide to get married, because, as it turns out, they both carry their birth certificates with them at all times in case a random opportunity to get married arises. This humorous plot twist simultaneously reveals the pressures to perpetuate traditional social structures for socialist social actors, especially as they age. The couple initially meet during an overnight train ride from the south of Serbia to Belgrade, and later run into each other again on a bus traveling to the seaside. At first, the woman, Borka (in another iconic role for Milena Dravić, Yugoslavia's greatest screen actress and one who continuously and seamlessly traversed the permeable boundaries between auteur cinema and mainstream film, as well as the more lowbrow, television fare) appears stand-offish and highly anxious, while the man, Milić Barjaktarević (Slobodan Đurić), is outgoing and at times pushy. Over time, she warms up to him and they establish a genuine connection (Figure 3).



Figure 3: A fateful chance encounter on a train that brings two loners together
(*Izvinjavamo se, mnogo se izvinjavamo*)

This TV comedy, in accordance with Jovanović's entire film oeuvre, is another example of minor cinema that gives voice to those lives and experiences not often seen or heard about. When they first appear on screen, Milić's southern twang immediately establishes him as a rural 'hick' type, while Borka is seemingly more urban and stuck-up—but Jovanović subtly pokes fun at Borka's initial snobbish attitude by zooming in on the fact that she is reading a pulp romance novel titled *Nije zlato sve što sjja* [All that Glitters Is Not Gold]. Milić's entry into the cabin is accompanied by his earnest line: "Excuse me for interrupting your reading of this beautiful and educational book." With this, Jovanović's TV drama gently implies that there is not much difference between Borka and Milić when it

comes to their affinities and cultural capital. In accordance with Jovanović's focus on the importance of sound, the comedy is punctuated by Serbian folk music sung by legendary singer Predrag Živković Tozovac. Moreover, in one scene, Milić turns on his portable Japanese radio (a commodity he excitedly brags about) and a hit song by Yugoslav band Bijelo dugme comes on—"Tako ti je, mala moja, kad ljubi Bosanac" ["This Is How Things Are, Young Lady, When a Bosnian Man Kisses You"]. Milić proceeds to dance wildly in the narrow train car, while Borka smiles and taps her feet to the rhythm. This musical twist is notable because it accentuates the comedy's deliberate mixing of different forms of cultural capital. Namely, Bijelo dugme famously mixed rock and roll with traditional folk melodies and instruments into a hybrid genre, earning them a derogatory label of *'pastirski rock'* ('shepherd's rock').

It turns out that Milić is a well-to-do land owner ("neither a peasant nor a city dweller") who frequently brags about his many commodities—the aforementioned Japanese portable radio, Italian bathroom tiles, color TV, state-of-the-art agricultural machines... Moreover, he confides to Borka that he is vexed by Yugoslavia's growing urbanization, during which an increasing mechanization made much of the rural population leave for bigger urban centers, or leave the country as aforementioned *gastarbajteri*, in search of a more prosperous life. Borka seems to agree with him, complaining about the pitfalls of living in the polluted urban air. The dynamics of Yugoslavia's market socialism and its increasing dependency on foreign goods and urbanization of low skilled labor comes through again as a subtle yet important subtext here, playing a significant factor in the budding romance between the two apparent misfits. Milić seems to be a dying breed, someone who is firmly invested in staying in the village and continuing his "record-breaking" agricultural production. He is a rarity because agriculture at this time was dwindling, as industrialization took over. Borka, on the other hand, due

to her less talkative nature, does not reveal much about herself, except that she is an unhappy accountant (here, yet again, a precursor to Štefica Cvek's unfulfilled life and work in a stuffy office). Eventually Milić woos Borka, who agrees to marry him. In the final frame, the two break the fourth wall to apologize to the audience, before kissing and hugging passionately. In contradistinction to *Daleko je Australija*, which ends with a reaffirmed sense of being stuck in a cycle from which its female protagonist cannot escape, *Izvinjavamo se, mnogo se izvinjavamo* is somewhat more optimistic about both socialist class mobility and gender politics. However, the structure of the drama, in which Milić and Borka are virtually the only significant characters, adds to the sense that the two of them are more of an exception than a general rule. Moreover, the lessened sense of being stuck in the latter drama has largely to do with the fact that its female protagonist, Borka, has better education and a higher-class position than Desa's working-class disposition.

We again return to an important subtext of class consciousness that Jovanović's work frequently exhibits: the level of women's emancipation in Yugoslav socialism appears to be directly proportional to their class status—the higher the class, the higher the chance of a continued emancipated life, even within traditional social units such as marriage. This is a key insight of Jovanović's version of socialist women's cinema as minor cinema.

Conclusion: Socialist Modernity, Global Patriarchy

This essay has traced the trajectory and articulation of feminist politics in women-centric films of low and middlebrow genres in socialist Yugoslavia, as a way to establish a continuing thread that binds these works into socialist women's cinema as minor cinema steeped in its own geopolitical and historical particularities and complexities. At the same time, I echo Nebojša Jovanović's insight-

ful point, in his study of Yugoslav classical film, arguing that “Yugoslav cinema testifies that gender order was subject to constant change and re-articulation, shaped by the social factors, many of which cannot be reduced to some supposedly communist features. These gender-related changes, antagonisms, and ambiguities illustrate that Yugoslav socialism, a far cry from being a totalitarian blind alley of the 20th century, fully belonged to the global gender and sexual modernity” (Jovanović, 2014, p. 2). Indeed, socialist modernity, as depicted in the films I have discussed here, is deeply embedded within the global flows of markets, labor, sexual and gender politics alike, not isolated from them. Soja Jovanović’s TV dramas, for instance, illuminate the intersectional complexities of class and gender politics by positioning women at the nexus where they are both free to choose and actively participate in their own fate, while at the same time facing significant limitations rooted, specifically, in the constraints of their class (im-)mobility. These constraints, far from being endemic to socialism only, attest to the global power of patriarchy, particularly as it affects those most vulnerable: poor and working-class women. At the same time, Yugoslav minor cinema departs from ‘mere’ representational frameworks and offers a significant insight into the material social dynamics that frame and inform this particular version of women’s cinema, and of women’s lived experience in socialist Yugoslavia, where feminist activism and cultural production continually pushed the state to fulfill its founding promise of material emancipation and equality for all.

Finally, I want to end with a note that emphasizes the multiplicities of women’s work in Yugoslav film history, one that highlights what I see as a spectrum of continuity from Jovanović and Ugrešić, to the female editors of both mainstream and ‘art’ films, to figures like Tatjana Dunja Ivanišević, Divna Jovanović, Vukica Đilas, Tanja Golić, Tatjana Ivančić, Bojana Vujanović and other experimental women filmmakers in Yugoslavia. On both ends of this imaginary ‘spectrum,’ women were excluded from visibility and not written into film history.

Therefore, for the purposes of feminist historiography, I do not want to conceptualize nor simplify their work as occupying opposite ends of an imaginary polarity: mainstream versus experimental, popular versus 'art' film. Rather, I argue for doing away with such a binary thinking and, instead, place the works in question within a spectrum of complex and varied constellations of socialist women's authorship in cinema, which has systematically flown under the radar of normative film histories locally and transnationally; omitted from them, it appears, *precisely* because these works were articulating the specificities and multiplicities of the supposedly 'trivial' aspects of *women's* experiences in Yugoslavia's socialism. The complex multitudes of the female experiences expressed through Yugoslav women's minor cinema, be it popular or experimental, as well as women's editing and directing work behind the camera, bear a crucial witness to the lives and histories otherwise largely unwritten, yet lives and experiences uniquely positioned to attest to the groundbreaking promise of socialist feminism that can still be fulfilled, in cinema and beyond.

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