

FILM REVIEWS

General, dir. Antun Vrdoljak
(Hrvatska radiotelevizija, 2019)

The Diary of Diana B., dir. Dana Budisavljević
(PFF, 2019)

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Ideologically charged arguments about truth, often linked to fabrications of the past, have been discussed for decades in post-Yugoslav countries. They have also contributed to memory conflicts in different discourses. In addition to relativizing historical facts, marginalization of one's own crimes and enlargement of others have also contributed to fragmentation of the truth and the emergence of parallel stories about the historical past.

Those who have tried to address critical issues through art, film or literature in their own countries, have often been defined as autochauvinists, whatever that means. The simplified dichotomy between a patriot and autochauvinist is paradigmatic for all post-Yugoslav states, to a greater or lesser extent.

Last year, two films sparked large debates in Croatia and generally divided the public along two sharply distinct ideological lines. Very little time was spent on the film discussions. The debates were mostly dealing with memory conflicts.

The first film is *General*, made by the film doyen Antun Vrdoljak. Vrdoljak has during his life been an actor, director, screenwriter, sports journalist, Croatia's first Olympic federation president, head of state-owned radio and television - HRT, MP and Croatia's

vice president for a certain period. Several journalists have pointed out that Vrdoljak's propinquity to power can be seen as a reason for his successful career, both during the socialist period but also after Yugoslavia's breakdown. During the first democratic elections, he joined Franjo Tuđman's Nationalist-Croatian Democratic Unionist Party (HDZ) and was shortly thereafter appointed Croatia's Vice President. Vrdoljak's time as head of HRT was filled with nationalist statements and purges. He had emphasized, among other things, that the TV house would serve as the cathedral of the Croatian soul, which should be cleansed from communists and Serbs. Several of his former associates testified that they had been driven away from their workplaces because their ethnicity did not fit in the new cathedral of the soul. From belonging to a privileged cultural elite under socialism, Vrdoljak switched sides and became a nationalist who rejected his own socialist past.

General is a story about the Croatian general Ante Gotovina, a controversial figure in the recent past, to say the least. The court in The Hague freed Gotovina, but many people still believe that war crimes against Serbs in Croatia were committed under his command. Vrdoljak's film lies close to HDZ's unnuanced and nationalist historiography and the film opened the national film festival in Pula. Croatia's former President Kolinda Grabar-Kitanović was present. Despite the Presidential cheers, *General* received no significant awards and was considered one of the worst films screened at the festival.

The second film, seen as a counterpole to *General*, was *The Diary of Diana B.*, Dana Budisavljević's first feature film. Diana Budisavljević made large and important humanitarian efforts during World War II but has been a forgotten name in the collective post-war memory.

When Diana Budisavljević, an Austrian woman married to a Croatian doctor of Serbian origin, learns that Serbian women and children are taken to concentration camps in Croatia, she begins to

help innocent victims. Independent State of Croatia (NDH) is during this period a satellite country to Nazi Germany. In the autumn of 1941, Budisavljević began helping Serbian women and children imprisoned in the Loborgrad prison camp. Diana's efforts culminated in the summer of 1942. In a series of transports from the concentration camps of Jasenovac, Stara Gradiška, Mlaka and Jablanac (with the help of twenty anonymous and courageous employees working at various NDH institutions), she took thousands of seriously ill and starving Serbian children and made sure that they got adopted by Croat families mainly in Zagreb. It is estimated that Diana and her assistants saved up to 10,000 Serbian children from the concentration camps.

The film is based on Diana's diaries which she wrote between 1941 and 1945. These were found after her death and were published in 2003. In the film, certain episodes from the diaries are reconstructed and dramatized and are shot in black and white. The reconstructed scenes are cross-cut with interviews with the survivors. The interviews are recorded on site in Lobor-Grad and Gradiška. Reconstructions and interviews in the film are also mixed with journal films produced by a state-owned film company commissioned by NDH.

Budisavljević's film is a hybrid. It is perhaps easiest to characterize it as docu-drama and the result is astonishing. Different film forms, documentary sequences, archive clips and dramatized scenes are well mixed and balanced. Usage of different formal elements does not disturb the story in itself, it rather reinforces the narrative. Budisavljević is somehow overturning the expectations. Thus, the played parts are restrained and minimalistic, while the documentary parts are emotional, stark and vivid.

The authentic archival material serves as a platform for further dramatization and for interviews conducted in the present. Diana is

played by famous Croatian actress Alma Prica. The survivors Živko Zelenbrz, Nada Vlaisavljević, Milorad Jandrić and Zorka Janjanin testify about the camps they visit after 70 years. The scene where Jandrić marvels over the tall surrounding trees is fantastic in its melancholy. In a subtle way the scene shows that time passes but that certain traumas never fully disappear. Tall and healthy trees grown in a place where so many have died, living nature that contrasts death recalls other film meditations such as *Night and Fog* (*Nuit and Brouillard*, Alain Resnais, 1955) and *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985) where the passage of time contrasts with traumas forever frozen in time.

Diana Budisavljević and the people who helped her were "ordinary" and were not part of any revolutionary movement. They seemed to act driven by human impulses, not by ideological beliefs. They tried to find solutions in an almost hopeless situation. *The Diary of Diana B.* is not THE movie about the war, but one of the films about the shared and complex interwoven past of the former Yugoslavia. It gives us new knowledge about individuals, but it does not sacrifice the historical complexity. And it certainly does not glorify a certain narrative at the expense of something else.