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**THE ELEVENTH THESIS or
ŽELIMIR ŽILNIK'S NEWSREEL ON CITY YOUTH, SUMMER**

XI

Filmmakers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point however is to change it.

Film critics have only interpreted cinema in various ways, the point however is to change it.

Film viewers have only watched, the point however is to live.

X

The Arriflex 35 was the first reflex 35mm production motion picture camera. It was conceived as a compact, handheld camera for capturing actuality footage. Many consider it the most impactful camera ever invented. In addition to its size, sturdiness, and ease of use, the camera's chief novelty was its mirror shutter, which allowed camera operators to see a viewfinder image equal to the recorded picture, without parallax, or displacement error between two separate viewing angles. This camera was produced at the Arri factory in Munich, which was founded in 1917 as Arnold & Richter Cine Technik. It served the German war effort as a battlefield camera, often in the service of gathering intelligence. During the war the factory was largely destroyed, but after the war Arri continued manufacturing the camera as the Arriflex 35 II. Many filmmakers of various new waves in numerous countries began using this camera, which helped lend a freeform immediacy to their work and also helped them move out of the studio and onto the city streets. The last and most improved model of the Arriflex 35 was the IIC, which was introduced in 1964.

IX

Santiago Álvarez was a Cuban filmmaker and one of the more significant figures in Latin American cinema. He was a founding member of the Cuban Film Institute and the director of its weekly Latin American Newsreel. Álvarez' most well-known work is the short experimental film *Now* (1965), which was composed of news photographs of demonstrations and civil unrest in the United States set to the music of Lena Horne, narrating through montage a polemic against American imperialism and racial intolerance. This is a work of poor cinema, without the benefit of a camera or a crew, but all the more effective for attacking the ideology of what came to be known as 'first' and 'second' cinema, or Hollywood and European art cinema. Cuban revolutionary cinema, along with other Latin American cinemas it had an affinity with, represented a 'third' cinema. We might also call this a 'non-aligned' cinema. In practical terms this meant a third way to speak about the world, to see and show the world, to change the world. Álvarez' collage aesthetic was both highly effective and highly influential. His films were shown at the Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, which at that time in the 1960s was the premiere international showcase for short films, particularly short works of non-fiction. Yugoslav-Serbian filmmaker Želimir Žilnik had been invited to show his own short documentaries at the festival, and this is also where he was exposed to the work of Álvarez, which left a deep impression on him. Film festivals can be more than engines of commerce – they can be shared revolutionary spaces for internationalist solidarity.



Želimir Žilnik, *Lipanjaska gibanja*, 1969, 10 min, 35mm, black and white, courtesy of the artist

VIII

From 1961-1962 Žilnik was the chief organizer at Youth Tribune, a cultural institution in the city of Novi Sad in Serbia. During his term he came into contact with a large segment of the cultural scene in Socialist Yugoslavia. At this time Žilnik was also writing film criticism, and he met two other film critics who would prove integral to his future filmmaking work: Branko Vučićević and Bogdan Tirnanić. Together, along with others, they represented a new generation of cineastes with a critical spirit that was incubated in the pages of progressive journals and magazines. One such publication was *Praxis*, a Marxist-humanist journal initiated by professors of philosophy at the University of Belgrade. This journal was for a reawakening of the critical spirit of the early works of Marx, for a ruthless engagement with the social status quo in Yugoslavia. It is this incessant critical engagement that fueled student unrest in Belgrade in 1968, which was echoing other student demonstrations in other countries, and also the Prague Spring liberalizations, which sent shockwaves through Yugoslavia when Soviet tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia to suppress this 'socialism with a human face'. If the point is to change the world then the question remains through which means. Revolutionary activity might be best located in the streets, but it might also be best served in the university halls. It might be best affected on a cinema screen, or in the pages of a newspaper, or through the work of a cultural organizer. This search for a proper means, a proper program, is the real revolutionary act – because it prioritizes method.

VII

It took six months to produce a film when Žilnik began making short documentaries.

All films should be shot quickly.

As Robert Bresson wrote, 'Prefer what intuition whispers in your ear to what you have done and redone ten times in your head.'

All films should be shot cheaply.

The amount a film costs to make can be measured in inverse relation to its necessity. Dziga Vertov wrote that 'a man's efficiency factor is inversely proportionate to his garrulousness.'

All films should be revolutionary.

Jean-Luc Godard defined cinema as 'the expression of lofty sentiments.'

VI

The title of Žilnik's film *Lipanj'ska gibanja* is loaded with ironic significance. In some Slavic languages, Croatian for example, 'lipanj' is the sixth month of the Gregorian calendar. The name is derived from the lime tree, which blooms at this time of year. Medicinal capacities are associated with limes, and the tree is composed of timber that is prime for sculpting. The lime or linden tree has also been ascribed symbolic value across the centuries, and in ancient times some even held judicial meetings under it because it was believed that the tree would help clarify the truth. Does Žilnik's film help clarify the truth of 1968 in Socialist Yugoslavia? 'Gibanje' is a basic term of classical mechanics, defined as the change in position of a body in relation to a referent across time – similar to a cinematic parallax. Žilnik's film is all about bodies in motion. The reference point is the state, or society, or the camera, in more practical terms. The time period is the month of the year, or the running time of the film, or the length of the film's production schedule. How to calculate these variables hypothesized by Žilnik? His basic idea was to make a film on how a revolution started. The formula embedded in his documentary might rather illustrate how a revolution ended.

V

Neoplanta Film was a production company based in Novi Sad. The name of the company is a Latin version of the name of the city, which translates to 'new seed'. Indeed, Neoplanta did its share in planting new seeds in the Novi Film era of Yugoslav cinema. The studio was amenable to working with new directors, such as Žilnik. Also, Neoplanta was a friendly place for directors with unusual projects that were avant-garde in both aesthetics and politics. It should be remembered that in the 1960s the Black Wave in Yugoslav cinema had crested, and Neoplanta also had a hand in bringing about this unconventional and polemical film movement by producing work by legendary figures such as Dušan Makavejev, who shot his capital subversive film *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971) as a co-production with Neoplanta (Makavejev was invited to Neoplanta by Žilnik, who had previously worked as his assistant director). Neoplanta came under fire for supporting the filmmakers of the Black Wave, and the director of the boutique studio was removed from his position and ultimately replaced. This was the general post-1968 climate for many who strayed from or challenged the party line.

IV

During the outset of the student demonstrations in Belgrade in June 1968 there was almost nothing reported in the mainstream media. Students had a firm grip on the building of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Belgrade, which

they renamed Karl Marx Red University. It was not possible to enter the building without student identification, which Žilnik had because he was auditing classes at the faculty (he had already finished a degree at the Faculty of Law in Novi Sad). Students had set up an action committee and were at work on a concrete list of demands and plans for the reorganization of Yugoslav society. These were not grand philosophical statements, as it may seem from a distance, but rather practical attempts to unite students and workers, to liberate the cultural and education fields as spaces for free expression, to limit the excesses of the ruling class, to increase the amount of real socialism offered by those in charge. What this entire June 1968 happening represented was the first internal shock to the Yugoslav system. However, Žilnik felt the event was somehow unfinished, just as his film material languished in an unfinished state for months. What *Lipanjaska gibanja* represented (upon eventual completion) was a preface of sorts – primarily for Žilnik's debut feature *Early Works* (1969). Perhaps June 1968 was also a preface to a much grander piece of “total directing” that had wider geopolitical consequences. One of the many quotes used in the film *Early Works* is ‘Those who make half-revolutions dig their own graves.’ An old cinematic axiom states that films must be cut. On the contrary, revolutions must flow.

III

‘Films wish to be reports from the field. But who are they reporting to? Our documentary films have practically no audiences, except at festivals. It is cruel to make films about socially-powerless groups for these audiences, because they cannot relate to those films other than as good entertainment. We refuse to make and support films which will be ideological relief for these audiences: they should be scared, shocked, disrespected. That will only be possible if the growing bourgeoisie, along with its exploitative role and its moral poverty, were placed in front of the camera lens. Only this type of film today can be a barometer of freedom and directorial achievement. Our goal is to show that those who are “responsible for our future” have no connection with the quasi-ideological fanaticism of our socially-engaged films – they cleansed themselves of their conscience long ago and are driven by the principles of power, the principles of profit, and the principles of success.’

‘Ovaj festival je groblje’, Želimir Žilnik, Bogdan Tirnanić, Prvoslav Marić, Slobodan Mašić, *Sineast* #13/14, 1971, translated by the author.

II

Žilnik first received a call from a colleague telling him something significant was happening in Student City in Belgrade. He then drove from Novi Sad to see what was going on. When he witnessed the conflicts between students

and police he immediately drove back to Novi Sad, directly to Neoplanta Film, and asked for a camera. He was given an Arriflex 35 IIC and film stock. The crew was also assembled in haste. Dušan Ninkov, an experienced sound man, became the cinematographer. The sound was recorded by Branko Vučićević and Bogdan Tirnanić – neither of whom had any experience as sound recordists. This accidental, cross-disciplinary, legendary team produced a document that was sui generis in the history of Yugoslav cinema – what Žilnik himself might have called self-critical realism, or what we can more modestly describe as a newsreel on city youth in the summer of 1968.

I

‘FILM – WEAPON OR WASTE?’

Želimir Žilnik, Manifesto - Black Film, 1971



Želimir Žilnik, *Early Works*, 1969, courtesy of the artist

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