
Screening gender in Yugoslav cinema in socialism and after

MIREES' open lecture

Dr. Nebojša Jovanović, from Central European University in Budapest (Department of Gender Studies) and University of Sarajevo (Centre for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies), held an Open lecture in the framework of workshops and seminars organized by the MIREES program (Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe), on June 15th, 2015.

Jovanović provided an insightful gendered approach to the screening of some Yugoslav films both during the Socialist regime and after the violent dismantling of Yugoslavia. He started the lecture with a series of dichotomies – a series of word pairs which have usually been identified under a male-female relationship, i.e. day-night, sun-moon, civilization-nature (the former being identified as masculine concepts and the latter as feminine concepts). According to the movies under analysis in his lecture, the male-female dichotomies are turned upside-down. Therefore, the usually feminine concepts of nature and tradition apply to men and those of civilization and modernity refer to women.

As the core movie of Jovanović's analysis, *Kuduz* (1989, by Ademir Kenovic), recounts the story of a Bosnian petty criminal, Bećir Kuduz, who is released from prison and marries Badema, a rather unconventional young mother despised by the society for her liberal attitudes. Based on the true story of the outlaw Junuz Kečo, who killed his ex-wife because she asked for a divorce and then hid in Montenegro as an unregistered construction worker, the movie paves the way to a new dichotomy: the one associating *psychosis* to man and *hysteria* to women. Bećir perfectly embodies the psychotic man: driven by instinct and nature, he never escapes his ordered life of certainties and religion, and not once has he put his behaviors into question. The *psychotic* man knows perfectly well who he is, and he does everything he can to keep the truth from the others, pretending to be "normal". On the contrary, Badema embodies *hysteria*: she has a very modern and liberal spirit which never fails to challenge men's authority.

Through a series of extracts from the movie, Dr. Jovanović effectively showed us the development of the relationship between the two main protagonists, eventually leading to their tragic end. The first element of analysis is the community in which Bećir and Badema live, which pushes them together because both lead a "problematic", good-for-nothing existence. In the scene of Bećir's proposal to Badema, the woman's hysterical nature stands out: she starts challenging him, stating that she would not give up her habits once married, that she would not dress in a traditional way and that she would not quit smoking her cigarettes. They get married and Bećir

grows very fond of his wife and step-daughter, Amela. However, Badema is not happy, she keeps dreaming of her previous life in Germany. She starts working as waitress in a lively café and also engages in a love affair with another man. Bećir cannot understand what Badema wants, and finally hits her, revealing the violence within. He tries to reconcile with her, but it is too late: she has seen what is hidden behind his mask of benevolent man. Ultimately, she understands that he will do anything to keep the illusion of their perfect marriage in the eyes of the community, no matter at what price. She runs away out of fear, taking her daughter with her.

At the end, he manages to find her, he murders her and starts the life of an outlaw, hiding in the woods, sometimes getting food and shelter from some sympathizers who supported his actions: to the community, Badema was nothing but a negligent mother and an adulterous woman who cheats on her good husband.

While in the woods, Kuduz completely blends with the nature, becoming a sort of “wolf-man”. He starts having hallucinations on Badema, providing the viewer with an ultimate confirmation of his psychotic nature. In his hallucinations, Badema appears in traditional clothes, smiling at him, and telling him he did the right thing to kill her, further strengthening his psychotic certainty to be always right.

Although the police finally catch him, it is thanks to his innate, masculine wilderness that he manages to survive for such a long time in the woods. And this – Jovanovic stated – is the core focus of the film: the strong connection between man’s nature and wilderness.

The first impression – Jovanovic claims - is that both protagonists are masters of their own fate. However, the surrounding plays a pivotal role and actively participates in their demise. Even their marriage was somehow arranged by the community. Kuduz’s psychosis relies on the social environment and, by killing Badema, he did nothing but what he had to do to keep the appearance to be normal. Murder is socially accepted if it fits with the preservation of the social community. When the film premiered, in 1989, the general reception by the audience was that the story was about a good man who eventually is led to commit homicide. The audience identifies with Bećir Kuduz, a man who commits a terrible crime for the sake of the community and social order. Although in 1989 *Kuduz* was celebrated as the “last noble outlaw”, Jovanovic’s thesis is different: the film is not about some traditional, rooted notion of “noble outlaw”, but it can be considered under the context of the ongoing laws on divorce which were to be put into effect in 1991.

At the end of the Open lecture, many students gave interesting interpretations and contributions based on their own experiences. Thus, this Open lecture was a one-of-a-kind opportunity for MIREES students to dig deeper into the field of analysis of past and contemporary gender issues in Socialism, namely art, cinema, and visual representations.

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