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Srebrenka Zeskoski and Bojana Videkanic on Althea Thauberger



Srebrenka: I have to say I saw the film fleetingly the first time. Then I thought this was not good enough, one should really see it again and look at it a little bit more carefully. Then my second thought was ‘why were there costumes of that sort?’ I know that the idea was that the children chose their costumes. Which actually make sense since kids love to get dressed. But on the other hand, the different costumes set the set a bit apart from the reality of the space and gave it more of a whimsical aspect. I don't know, what do you think of the costumes being what they were?

Bojana: The first thought was that they looked very much like Russian constructivist costumes, that the colours were so bold and it reminded me of the posters and illustrations that I have seen. That was really interesting to me because then I saw the kids in space and especially the scene in the film that shows the kids working and making all these sounds of machinery. In that moment and when you see them dancing as if they are working it reminded me of some avant-garde Russian ballet or theatre. It took me back to the 1920s. I was listening to the sound of the factory, of a factory being revived. It was a very uncanny feeling of these children inside this space that used to make these noises and now they are making them in these costumes that are so colourful. But then you see the gloves...which reminded me of production on an assembly line. It was very interesting to go between the space as a factory, to avant-garde art, to being whimsical as you say and the children at play which creates all these layers of meaning, existing at the same time. You could almost cut it like a cake and see the time as different layers.

S: ...I didn't really think that much about constructivism maybe because I was very much involved within the period and within the country. What was interesting was also the dialogue which [showed] how these two groups of children were divided into “us” and “them”. I don't know if you got that impression, but they were mimicking a situation that still exists today and existed *then*, years ago. When I am saying *then* it's when the factory was in full operation, maybe those kinds of doubts and questions would not have been raised because you were not trained to raise them. Nowadays when this space is supposed to have a second life, their dialogue is very much current...for me personally because I am very involved in politics of space and the failure of many factories with many spaces becoming available either to be torn down or given some sort of second life. In this case, it seemed that they really understood, I don't know how much they were coached, but they really understood what the situation is. I don't know if you got that?

B: I completely agree with you. I was struck by the words, the speeches of the children. As you were saying, they were very much of the now, of the kinds of conflicts and the intentions that exist not just in Croatia and in the entire region, with its economic, social and political pressures. That's what really got to me at first...that it was this truth that was coming out of these children's mouths. It was so unexpected and uncanny because you don't expect

them to speak of these social, political and economic things so clearly and yet so, surreally at the same time. So I completely agree with you there.

S: ...I am trying to figure out how much they were told and how much they really knew. I think that as the film progressed and as they took on much more of identifying with the issues, it seemed they suddenly really understood what they were talking about and that it became very natural. Their own opinions especially the very last or the very next to last scenes they argue – if you don't give us this, we will stay and we will occupy, we will not leave this space. This is something that has been playing constantly in the adult world in that area in these years of transition...I am that much older than you, I lived in those periods and what was pounded into people's heads was that the factories were yours. You work in a place that belongs to you, they were not owned by any corporation because they were state-owned. It was an iffy relationship but people really believed. In most cases they took very good care of the equipment, because it was like having your own sewing machine at home. You are not going to abuse it because it is something that earns you money and livelihood. With the new changes, many of these previous workers, who no longer work, cannot understand that they are not part of the ownership. It is very hard to comprehend and to accept.

B: But what is important is the way in which the transition happened in former Yugoslavia, all of the regions of former Yugoslavia. The economic transition from state owned or self-management as it was known...

S: Yes, self-management.

B: As it was referred to in socialism. The transition to private hands had very problematic circumstances and in extremely traumatic ways illegal things happened. The factories, for example, were sold for like a dollar and transferred hands during the 1990s when the war was happening. [Certain people] used the situation to their own benefit and transferred some of these enormous industries into their own hands. Basically, they became rich by using and selling something that used to be publicly owned or state-owned. What's happening right now is that people have been stripped of their livelihood in many cases, especially people of a certain age. Not a lot of new jobs were created, especially in production and industry so there is kind of an undercurrent there that is bubbling up to the surface of the political and social discontent. I think some of that is transparent in the way that the children have sort of played it out in the film. I think Althea very carefully, even though she is not from there, understood that there are all these layers that have happened in the last twenty years.

I think it very important to know that some of the sadness, as seen throughout the Yugoslav Wars – not being able to cope with what had happened – also came out of a deep discontent with how this place changed...from a self-managing socialism to, in the course of four years, a wild capitalism. This kind of trajectory, that was enormously fast, caught people in its path...

S: They say there are inner factors and outside factors, and the country and all the other republics that were a part of former Yugoslavia were suddenly plunged into a completely new attitude towards work, towards companies and ownership. Yes, it is very true many people became rich but many people could not sustain the modern world. Many, who wanted to take over the factories in the same manner that it was functioning during the Yugoslav period, couldn't compete in the modern world. Look at Detroit, look at Oshawa, Windsor. This is that happened to us as well in Yugoslavia. Suddenly, you couldn't maintain a factory with 2000 workers, where 200 would be good enough. The producers and Althea really understood the problem and certainly spurred these things on with the children...

B: As you say, this is a larger movement, not just the region but across the world. This is what post-industrial, post-Fordist capitalism, has produced – a kind of precariousness of labour, a precariousness of life that has been reduced to it super basic functions for survival. I spoke with Althea prior to coming here today about how former Yugoslavia and some other countries across the world that went through a transition in the 1990s or after the fall of the Berlin wall – exist as a Petri-dish. What happened over the last twenty years, especially in the '90s in Yugoslavia is something that we can see repeated over and over again across the world in many different countries including Canada, including the United States where factories are being closed down, they are moved, labour has been stripped of all of its power and labour movements, unions – what is left is workers who are completely

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unable to support or defend themselves against this onslaught of capitalist profit. Some of it has to do with betterment of production in terms of robotics and machinery but a lot of it has to do with the engagement of profit as a kind of final end point in itself and I think we have seen in the last five years since the so-called “Great Recession” is that there has been a turnaround from the recession but without any work created. Across the world. What Althea was pointing at with this work is a kind of laboratory – these kids were pointing to what’s happening across the world. What is a bit different with Croatia and former Yugoslavia is that we were socialist for fifty years; we existed under this very specific socialist condition. I think that these kids who were born in the 2000s are so removed from the experience of socialism. But it was interesting how that experience got played out in their lives, which was surreal because these kids have nothing to do with socialism. There is a scene where two or three boys are reading from a book, and one of them asked...

S: he asks, "what is communism?"

B: What is communism? I was thinking of myself in that age, growing up in the '80s knowing full well what communism was. I was very well aware of the larger structures of society, who the fallen common comrades were like Rikard Benčić, who was a partisan or a leftist and was killed...now, these kids...don't even know what the terminology is that they are using. It was sort of funny and yet, here it is they are speaking the truth of this past period, and even the period past before WWII and they are also talking about the period of the now and what their future is in the post-Fordist world. What is the precarious future that they will be living in, in the new wild capitalist economies that have taken over the entire world?

S: It is actually even more interesting and endearing, I use this word purposely, what is endearing is that these children, regardless of their ideology maybe - left, right, center, whichever – in their discussions about the factory and what is happening right now, they understood justice. And what would be just in this moment...this is an endearing, but also a redeeming, quality of children around the world that once confronted with a situation they are able to process it whether coached or not. Whether ideologically brought up or not. That they see and understand when something is wrong and there should be some way of redeeming the situation...I think that was a very redeeming quality of this particular film because it gives you a hope, even if the things look black and hopeless, that this new generation may, if they continue in this direction, will be able to set the record straight and maybe put the world... It is very idealistic; I am not that idealistic, especially at my age, I shouldn't be...

B: You know I agree with that, I was thinking the same thing that there is hope to see these children...a lot of people from my generation who were born in the '70s lived through their childhood in communism and now, we all have children now and we work, have adult worries, and yet I think a lot of us carry this, I would say idealism and utopian idealism, just because we grew up with it and it was programmed into us sitting in school... and not necessarily acting on it. Right? That we have it, but it's there, especially in the '80s because that generation grew up with all the socialist stuff but also with the western world...It was an interesting thing that happened with us, we existed on two planes, on an ideological utopian plane of socialist life [but] there was also the plane of pop culture, we were listening to Madonna and Prince that '80s culture that spread throughout the world. There was also a level of politics that I knew through my parents. Through what was discussed in the house, the kind of discontent from the people with the system, the political system. Also watching the news, the 7:30 news...

S: “The must”.

B: “The must see” of the period. I remember I always had to be very good and very quiet during that because my father and my mom had to watch the news. Through that I got the struggle and the tension that existed in the '80s so it is interesting how in the film, that some of that tension especially at the moment when the children are in two camps – with the mayor and the workers – fighting, some of those old newscasts played in came to mind with recent newscasts of people staging sit-ins and occupying factories because they have been taken over or sold. I was reminded how surreal it is, because these kids are 7 – 10 years old. It is impossible that they know all this and yet here they are; they know it.

S: There is a bit of a difference between you and me because of age. I grew up in an earlier situation, after WWII. The distinction and the differences between the ‘haves’ and ‘haves not’, practically did not exist. At that time, that

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utopian idea was not utopian, it really worked well. Why am I saying this? Because, in the early stages the idealism really worked.

But I want to touch upon something else. When we were in high school students had to work two weeks in a factory environment. This was a must, this was volunteer work. Not that we really contributed much but it was an incredibly good experience to see what these people went through... I worked in a pharmaceutical industry...other friends worked in machine shops and so on. We didn't have any training; but it was incredibly useful. I remember some students in my class who were not terribly interested in studying and so on; it changed their perspective when they saw this very hard repetitious work, day in and day on. Two weeks for a kid is a long time, many changed their mind and decided that maybe their course for life would be different. What the government at that time tried to do is to bridge the difference between the intellectuals, the workers, the students, those who were in trade school and so on. I am not sure whether this was exemplified in this film because it was a very particular thing; I believe they abandoned it after about five-six years of doing that. For some reason it died down, but we were the generation who was in it...Did you do paramilitary?

B: No, I didn't...

S: We were very proud because the women were allowed; we were also given the guns. I think a lot of women benefitted in that environment because we were brought up to believe that we were equal. There was absolutely no difference in anything, in studies, in physical education, in any of the activities. Personally, I think that served me extremely well.

B: I remember my mom who is also post-war generation, she is 68 now, was educated as a doctor. That was what she was saying; she was brought up to think there was nothing stopping her, to become a doctor...

There were these things that really empowered women to do different things so when that generation had their own kids, I remember being brought up to believe there was nothing that would stop me from being whatever I want to be. That was a very good thing that happened in socialism. I think that now it is kind of reversed, so now women and men are falling into their more patriarchal roles. When I came to Canada when was immersed into the Western world was interesting was that women had to fight for these things...

S: Yes, the rights...

B: That I took for granted...because women in Yugoslavia already had those rights. They didn't have to fight. The right to an abortion existed in the Yugoslavian constitution in 1947, it was written into the constitution so, for example, no one had to fight for that....

Today we have women who can't find work because there is no work. I have many friends who are of my generation from Croatia, who have lost jobs and can't find jobs. There are a huge number of young people who are leaving the country – who are just waiting to go which is an unfortunate thing for Croatia. In a way what the state does - in a way of the states in the region do – is that they educate young people who have no prospect for jobs, so they are leaving. That becomes apparent in the film. This idea of abandonment especially since the factory itself is empty, it is stripped down.

S: It is like a skeleton of its former self. It almost difficult to now envision a second life, especially since everybody bickers about it – made especially difficult because public money is relatively scarce. There are many other issues which came again with the discussion between the officials and the workers in the film, where they are explaining how they wanted to take it over and make it into a library or what have you. I don't think it is still is resolved.

B: In fact there is a lawsuit regarding the public contest for the architectural design of the new buildings...

S: And that becomes very convenient since as long as someone is being sued than nothing can be done and then the status quo is achieved and you can keep prolonging it ad nauseam...

B: The discussion between the children in the last portion of the film was interesting: where they ask, what should this space be? I think this is an interesting ethical question related to work...Should it be [used for] cultural

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industry or should it be a factory? What would be the ethical thing to do with the space? Especially since Rijeka as a city was for decades if not centuries an industrial hub of the northern Adriatic Sea. Many of its factories have been destroyed – if not all of them – so the question would be: is it ethical to use the space another cultural industry that can only employ a couple of people like a library or a museum space which would only exist for the elites, right? I mean if it is going to be open to the public, who can afford it? This is what the discussion is about between the public on some of the forums. Or is it more appropriate for what could be the local industry, to re-engage these spaces?

...

This seems to speak to Althea's work and her implication within the whole process of the culture industry. I think this is an important political question. I have known of Althea's work and I asked her about this question and she recognized – and wanted to talk about – her own implication within this system of production of the culture industry and how it is in many ways problematic. In many ways we can ask the ethical question, is it right for these children to be participating in someone else's work? Can we ask the same thing about the film industry and production of any film that is collaborative? Those questions are also important in the way that culture is used to fill in the gap of industry that employed a lot of people.

S: Yes, that is a very valid point and in this case also you have to ask can a city of half a million inhabitants really support something that is going to be used in a cultural sense?... It is not going to be used sufficiently. To warrant, to justify...

B: Or should something smaller accommodate the Museum of Contemporary Art?

...

S: The countries that generally can't afford a lot tend to go grand...with a swan song and then they make something that is neither useful nor should be there. Yet, it is this kind of showpiece of “yes, we can do it.”

B: I think that also the art world globally has been organized...We have the biennials and the festivals that are world renowned...it's very difficult for smaller countries that don't have the money but it is expected of them to do the same as some other large economies in the West. I think there is that tension between them. You know we can talk about a beautiful conceptual piece done by Mladen Stilinović – a Croatian contemporary artist – who has this banner that says “An artist who doesn't speak English is not an artist.” It speaks to these sort of questions that are brought up by Althea in the film - what do we do with this? Should be producing with, yet another, large building dedicated to...

S: The white elephant.

This is an edited transcription of a discussion that took place on December 13, 2014. If you wish to read the full transcript please contact the gallery.