

Queer in Serbian Postsocialistic Cinema: From Non-existence to Pinkwashing

In the present text I would like to expose the line **from non-existence to pinkwashing** through three films / three decades of Serbian postsocialism:

90s, transgender – 00s, lesbian (bisexual) – 10s, gay

I will start from the transgender identity, as almost completely invisible, and finish with gay, as surely the loudest. First I will present the queer body, its positioning in mainstream and postsocialistic cinema, and then I will analyze three case studies: *Marble Ass*, *Take a Deep Breath* and *The Parade*.

Queer body, as a *sexual dissidence*¹ (failure to integrate into gender identification models of heterosexuality and homosexuality), is a body that is, according to Miško Šuvaković, sexually and/or gender carried out on that way that it does not fit into a given binary heteronormative system male/female, whereby the sexuality of the queer bodies is displaced from the standard, firmly established hetero/homo/binormative frames that are conditioned by the binary cultural specificity of the genderness.² And in a broader (political) context, what Marina Gržinić would say, queer body is every body that realizes itself as a model of democratizing the performance of queer identity as a public social practice.³

When it comes to representing the queer body in the mainstream film, according to Ivana Kronja, it has almost always been very strictly marked with stereotypes, whose function was normative: (1) the power of the dominant group (heterosexual men of the European race), and (2) to marginalize and exclude others (women, Afroamericans, working class, queer population).⁴ Gay men were most often portrayed as the transvestite queens, and lesbians as masculine (dyke), and that was based on the ideology of sexual difference and the undermining of the binary gender

¹ Adrijana Zaharijević, "A Short Glossary of Queer Theory", in: Diana Fuss, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, Center for Women's Studies, Belgrade, 2003, 423.

² Miško Šuvaković, *Cases' Studies*, Mali Nemo, Pančevo, 2006, 101.

³ Marina Gržinić, "Designing and challenging (documentary) meaning in artwork", *Walking Theory* 9, Belgrade, 2005, 23.

⁴ Ivana Kronja, "Homosexuality in Films: Gay and Lesbian Authors' and Avant-garde Film", *QT: Journal of Queer Theory and Culture* 3-4, Belgrade, 2010, 303.

division – gay and lesbian have been downplayed against the heterosexual norm, and they can never be a real man and woman.⁵

Also, it is important to note that gay film and lesbian film offer different paradigms of homoerotic film – a gay film offers a suppressed desire paradigm, which necessarily explodes, regardless of the consequences, while the lesbian film bases its poetry, Kronja would say, "[...] on the feeling and state of oceanic belonging, as it appears in the full balance of the individual with nature, the world and itself"⁶. Or how Richard Dyer compares it even more picturesably:

"The gay films are individualistic, using psychoanalytic and mythic imagery as means to express, explore and heal the self. The lesbian films are no less personal, but much less individualistic: the personal becomes the intimacy and inwardness shared by women, to which spiritual and archetypal give access."⁷

Therefore, in the wider cultural sphere marked by the presence of the idea of sexual shame and guilt, as well as the problem of desire and its realization, the gay film has somewhat greater affirmation than the lesbian film. And, on the other hand, the lesbian film has a somewhat difficult reception because the female principle and sensibility are traditionally suppressed in our civilization.⁸

Finally, according to Kevin Moss, if we would limit ourselves to postsocialistic (Serbian) cinema, we would see how stereotypes in the presentation of the queer themes and characters do not differ much from the stereotypes that, for example, had a Hollywood film until the nineties – gay men were feminized so they had to be punished, mostly by death (Dragojević's *The Parade*), there are no lesbians (Marinković's *Take a Deep Breath*), nor any kind of queer community (Žilnik's *Marble Ass*), and the queer is something that inevitably comes from the West. Also, it

⁵ Anneke Smelik, "Gay and lesbian criticism", in: John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, *Film Studies: Critical Approaches*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, 136.

⁶ Ivana Kronja, op. cit, 318.

⁷ Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Historical Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film*, Routledge, London, 1990, 176.

⁸ Ivana Kronja, op. cit, 319.

looks like this queer motive always has a tendency to be a metaphor, first of all as a type of threat to the existing social and political order.⁹

Marble Ass

Marble Ass, a film by Žemir Žilnik from 1995, is "settled" in Belgrade in the early 1990s. The heroine of the film is Merlin, a male transvestite who works as a prostitute. Merlin in the movie played herself – Vjeran Miladinović Merlinka, a Belgrade street prostitute, whose statement "Hey, I used to be the weirdest person in Belgrade, but now everything is so weird that I'm the only normal!" actually inspired Žilnik to make a movie. The period in which the story takes place coincides with the period of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, so homophobic discourse in Serbia is significantly strengthened.¹⁰

The second REAL character is Nenad Milenković, another transvestite, who took the "street" name Sanela, and he was also in the process of changing sex – he started the process before the film began. Both Merlinka and Sanela were, therefore, REAL persons who, at the time of filming, really engaged in prostitution under those names. And also, they were often guests at various TV and radio shows in Belgrade, and Merlinka repeatedly in the media underlined that Sanela was her best friend.

Merlinka seems to lead a life that is not weighed with war and all its consequences. However, through her relationship with Johnny, a returnee from the battlefield, and Sanela, it is obvious that Merlinka's choice is pacifism. For example, when at the beginning of the film advises Sanela not to carry a knife (weapon), because that's not the way to defend herself.

Furthermore, anti-war is closely connected with the anti-patriarchal, which can be seen in the scene in which Johnny's superior officer comes from the battlefield, and Merlinka believes that she is a man because she behaves arrogantly – she verbalizes her masculinity with frequent cursing; without considering she kills Merlin's pet, a little goat; in the scene in which she has sex with Johnny she has a

⁹ Kevin Moss, "Queer as Metaphor: Representations of LGBT People in Central & East European Film", in: Judit Takács and Roman Kuhar (eds.), *Beyond the Pink Curtain: Everyday Life of LGBT People in Eastern Europe*, Mirovni inštitut, Ljubljana, 2007, 261.

¹⁰ Miloš Jovanović, "Camp and Sexuality", *Answer* 1, Niš, 2008, 125-126.

dominant role (being on top of him), and Johnny is calling her "My Commander", strictly in masculine gender.¹¹

At the very end of the film, there is even more noticeable subversion of masculinity – when Merlinka, as the witness of Johnny's death, crossed herself in front of a burning billiard table and theatrical demonstrates her superiority by saying: "Men..."

According to Miloš Jovanović, Merlinka's denial of gender/sex categories, with emphasizing their creation through performance, is shown through the following replica to Johnny, which also highlights the performative nature of her identity:

"Johnny, are you crazy? Who suggests that? So if we cut the dick I would cut it off first... [...] What do you think, that I'm a fool? That people do not know what I am and who I am? That I conceived that I'm a woman? I didn't – everyone knows, but this is show business, you fool... "

In the film, there are numerous scenes related to the transvestism, and the most complex are those with Ruža – a housewife, a "maid subordinated to male domination"¹², who knew Merlin from the time when she had not yet begun with drag.

According to Kevin Moss, for the transvestites, the feminine gender is used throughout the whole film, and it is striking when Ruža uses the male gender and Marilyn's male name: "Dragane, what have you done?" then, in another inversion, this time the Hollywood product – a gay transvestite that wants to be a butch, Marilyn is the one who tries to teach Ruža how a woman and a prostitute should behave. Marilyn dresses Ruža and explains to her how to pick up her client, but Ruža does not manage to pass the condoms test and give up. We see her returning to her housewife's business – cooking. However, Marilyn does not give up – with the help of a rolling pin, she teaches Ruža how to put a condom, and the two of them perform a second inversion of their biological sexes. Ruža fucks Marilyn with the rolling pin. Kitchen objects are sexualizing, just like Johnny's weapon in the first scene. But Johnny also

¹¹ Ivan Živić, "Performative Characteristics of the Gender: Identity Subversion in *Marble Ass* by Želimir Žilnik, *Diskrepancija* 5.1, Zagreb, 2004, 24.

¹² Miloš Jovanović, op. cit, 126.

uses his weapons and martial arts in the kitchen – he breaks the egg with a pistol and crushes the dough by karate grip.¹³



Figure 1. *Marble Ass*, Merlin and Ruža

Finally, according to Ivan Živić, Žilnik's examples confirm Judith Butler's claim that the initial premise on the biological sex from which the culturally constructed gender comes from, even if it is inversed, is unsustainable. On the contrary, queer bodies in *Marble Ass* firmly prove the idea of sex that is constructed precisely through cultural processes, i.e. subversive self-identification: (1) Johnny, who speaks with butch officer during sex in a male gender; (2) Merlin, as culturally constricted women – "real lady", as she calls herself, and (3) Sanela, who decided to become a woman first by the self-construction of her gender, and then sex as well (by decision to change it by surgery).¹⁴

¹³ Kevin Moss, "Yugoslav Transsexual Heroes: 'Virgina' i 'Marble Ass'", *Word* 67(13), Belgrade, 2002, 341-342.

¹⁴ Ivan Živić, op. cit, 24-25.

Take a Deep Breath

Almost 10 years later, in 2004, Dragan Marinković directed *Take a Deep Breath*, which was promoted as the "first Serbian LGBT film", even though the writer, Hajdana Baletić, stressed that it was more about the generation gap in the modern family. In an interview, she even pointed out that it was much more pleasant to see lesbians than gay men, kissing, and that the movie would get on a completely different reception if they did a male gay story.¹⁵ The problem is, only, that this "pleasantness" was directed toward the straight audience, primarily, so the love scene is completely from the genre of straight softcore eroticism.¹⁶



Figure 2. *Take a Deep Breath*

The disintegration of a middle-class family is reflected in the fact that the mother and father do not sleep together for twenty years, the mother has a lover and daughter Saša wants to leave the country with his boyfriend. But, when she and Stefan (boyfriend) have a car accident, he ends up at the hospital, and Sasha is in love with his sister Lana, who came from Paris. When Saša's father finds out about his daughter's relationship, he forced Lana to leave the country and return to where she

¹⁵ See the whole interview https://www.b92.net/kultura/moj_ugao.php?nav_category=389&yyyy=2004&mm=11&nav_id=237617

¹⁶ Olga Dimitrijević, "It's a Dangerous International Gang! These are Gays! – Representations of Homosexuality in the Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Films", *QT: Journal of Queer Theory and Culture* 3-4, op. cit, 332.

came from, and his radical reaction was explained by reminiscences of the possible homosexual experience he had in childhood.

According to Olga Dimitrijević, it is interesting that Saša's both mother and father had their own homosexual/homoerotic episodes - her mother admits that she regretted not having stayed in the locker room one time with her girl friend, while the father, as suggested by the picture, was abused in childhood. And, to refer as well to Kevin Moss a bit, although the film "argues for tolerance of lesbian love, but reinstates homophobia in the form of paedophilia as a root cause of the father's psychological trauma that drives the plot"¹⁷.

Dimitrijević underlines that abuse of father is not explicitly mentioned, but is only hinted at by the atmosphere that paints scenes from father's childhood with an older boy from an orphanage. The father also shows his sympathy for his younger male assistant, and assistant's continuous making advances to Saša can be interpreted as a personal projection, just as a mighty effort invested in the destruction of Saša's and Lana's relationship can be an expression of father's own homosexual panic and the suppression of sexuality. Homosexual experiences of Saša's parents are thus presented as "exuse" of Saša's love, and the lesbian relationship itself is treated as an experiment and is tolerated as the product of the circumstances. It turns out that love just happened to Saša, i.e. that the foreign body, which, of course, came from the West, brought the current confusion.¹⁸

To summarize – at the end of the film, a lesbian is removed, and her bisexual partner has the opportunity to return to "normal", reproductive social trends. Even during the film, Saša is very categorically determined "not to be gay", regardless of what it might mean life without orgasm. As in the Croatian film *Fine Dead Girls* from 2002, by Dalibor Matanić, and *Go West* from 2005, by Ahmed Imamović, the scheme of "real" gay dying is repeated, and other "bisexual" half lives with consequences, and (s)he gets an opportunity to reintegrate into society. Because their authors are heterosexual white men tend to pinkwashing – a lesbian or gay relationship is used only as a means to tell some other story. The consequence is that the patriarchal ideology is only determined, as well as the homophobic scenarios.¹⁹

¹⁷ Kevin Moss, "Queer as Metaphor...", op. cit., 259.

¹⁸ Olga Dimitrijević, op. cit.

¹⁹ Ibid, 334.

The Parade

Although on the eve of the premiere of the *The Parade* of Srđan Dragojević, in October 2011, the film was announced as the first Serbian gay film presenting problems that the gay and lesbian population faces in homophobic Serbia. Beside the problem of intolerance towards this minority, *The Parade*, even more, deals with the issue of nationalism – its clear presence, especially in relation to the Serbs and the people of the former Yugoslav countries. More, because if we start from the assumption that the main character is the one who is experiencing transformation (changing his attitudes and feelings), then the main character of the film is certainly not one of the queer subjects, but war veteran Limun. Queer characters do not change during the film – they are consistent in their attitudes from the beginning to the end of the film, and they are actually presented as the Other, whose role is to construct Limun's character, what is the par excellence example of pinkwashing.

The Parade represents a true critique and analysis of Serbian society, by which the screenwriter and director connects to his works from 90s, in films *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame* and *The Wounds*. Although the public thought that the film was inspired by the first reportedly successful pride from 2010, according to the Dragojević, the idea for its appearance appeared even during the summer of 2001, sparked by scenes of violence during the attempt to organize the first pride in Belgrade. He wrote the first concept of the script in 2004, thinking of an adequate genre for its setting. After much hesitation, however, he decided to make what he had already done several times – a comedy. By the fall of 2009, Dragojević was ready to start filming – the original plan was to film pride scenes exactly in 2009, on the day when pride was planned, in Belgrade, but it was canceled for "security" reasons. And since the first pride was held only a year later, the filming started in 2010 and ended at the end of March 2011. The screenwriter and director emphasized that creation of this film was his civil duty, and that Serbia needed just a film that would talk about this topic, in a different way from the official one.

The first part of the film was planned for the construction of characters, and therefore of numerous stereotypes, in relation to both the queer and the non-queer subjects. Mirko and Radmilo – gay couple in a relationship, they ride the pink mini moris (in which the pink heart hangs on the mirror), have Warhol posters on the walls, *Hello Kitty* key ring, electric toothbrushes, carry the scarves, use the outstretched little

finger while holding a cup or a glass, they use moisturizing creams and listen to classical music. On the other hand, Limun has a large number of tattoos with the names of places where he fought and he carry a huge golden cross around his neck. On the walls of his house there are several paintings of saints, and among them the stuffed deer heads. He hides pistols in the vases. The central part of the dining table is raised by the button, with the melody "Für Elise", revealing bottles of alcohol among which is the icon of the Virgin Mary. The gate is "guarded" by marble lions, and in the backyard there are dwarves. The Albanian is a drug dealer, Croatian Roko is a Dalmatian who looks like a mascot from a can of "Eva" sardine, with a scarf of football club "Hajduk" on his donkey and enjoys the fact that he can beat Serbs in the center of Belgrade.



Figure 3. *The Parade*, Stereotypes

Critics generally tried to find the reasons for such an amount of stereotypes. According to Patricia Bass:

"You can see this ensemble of stereotypes, too Western, too ironic, and so too crazy. Distortion of Balkan social issues (homophobia, ethnic violence, etc.) into cinematic comedy could be compared with the current observer role of Western countries during the Yugoslav wars –

holding aside and observing, according to their interpretation, meaningless tribal violence in the 'spectacle' of ethnic bloodshed."²⁰

On the other hand, Ajla Terzic points to the fact that, in the absence of national gay history, the director was forced to borrow readable codes from the time when under the sanctions and war criminals succeeded with the help of fists and pistols. Stereotypes are therefore used in the function of comedy – with the help of them queer subjects are mocked, as well as the unwavering heterosexuality of the main character and his enormous fear of potentially being queered. The director's humor is in a permanent crescendo, to the very end of the film, when the audience faces Mirko's tragic death as a result of hate and intolerance.

At first sight, a bit ironic, queer in this film is presented quite "clean", almost asexual. In addition to the fact that the queer subjects with the greatest dose of dignity fight for their sexual rights, the audience has never seen Mirko and Radmilo kissing, even in moments of extreme intimacy. There is only one attempt to kiss in the scene when Radmilo returns home. However, Dragojević in this scene doesn't go till the end – Mirko and Radmilo lean towards each other in order to kiss, but soon they change their mind, as the author is aware that the Serbian majority audience is still not sensible for such a scene. On several occasions, the impression is that Dragojević is well aware of the audience, as well as the borders that can be made in such a nearly pioneering work.

²⁰ Patricia Bass, "Homophobic Violence and Kitsch: a match made in Serbia?", <http://eefb.org/archive/march-2012/the-parade/>



Figure 4. *The Parade*, Real gay scene?

In the same way is indicative his choice of the genre. As I already mentioned, the original intent was to film a "serious" film about the Serbian queer population, but the author eventually decided to make comedy. As a well-known analyst and interpreter of the Balkan society, Dragojević probably estimated that the controversial topic would be better accepted through such a genre selection, and made a film for a mass audience, which was enabled to observe the current situation through the vision of both "sides" – queer as well as non-queer characters. Thus, the unpleasantness that the audience might feel for viewing the love scenes between the two men is softened by the presence of "anticheroes", which, from the very beginning, are expected to disapprove gay intimacy.

The second part of the film, except the very end, deals with the reunion of war friends from the former Yugoslavia, under the excuse that Limun is searching for "business partners" to protect the participants of Belgrade pride. A Serb, a Croat, a Bosnian, and an Albanian from Kosovo can still be friends, but in order to reunite it is necessary that there is someone who will represent the Other in relation to all the "macho Balkans":

"This Olympic justice is already evident at the beginning through the etymological explanation of the words: četnik, balija, ustaša – who hate each other – and the fagot, which is hated by everyone."²¹

A homophobic Balkan society, loaded with internal quarrels, can unite only when it is "attacked" by the Other in relation to all of them. In this case, the Other is a queer culture, something all the Balkan nations need to unite against.

For Limun, Roko, Hamil and Azem, homosexuality, like most things that come from the West, is something sick, which needs to be cured. Throughout the film, Limun is trying to teach Radmilo how to hide his sexual orientation. The symbol of homosexuality in Radmilo's case is the holding a cup with a stretched little finger, which is one of the most typical stereotypes for gay behavior. After several corrections, Radmilo finally learned, at the end of the film, how to toast without a stretched fifth finger.

That the homosexuality is a disease that needs to be cured, it is the official attitude of the Serbian Orthodox Church, nationalist organizations and some politicians. The fact that Radmilo was not given the opportunity to answer to his stretched finger, again points us to Dragojević's judgment of the attitude of the average viewer about a given topic.

Unlike Radmilo, to whom "life in the shadow" is not a problem, Mirko is an activist who, during the whole film, is determined to defend his personal right to be gay. During the film, this character managed to transform himself from an irritable and sensitive gay into an individual decided to stand between the "two Serbias". His death was hinted earlier in the film – a scene when Limun throw Mirko on the floor in his office, announces that the blood will be spilled.

The bloody climax of the story relates to current events in close history – the tragic death of Brice Taton, to whom Dragojević commemorates, then demolishing foreign embassies, burning mosques, killing foreigners, tourists, queer subjects and other discriminated groups, by the right-wing forces in Serbia. And at the same time, according to Dragojević, it is also a call for tolerance, and an attempt to influence all those people whose position is that sexual minorities are socially unacceptable. On the official web page of the film Dragojević also wrote:

²¹ Ajla Terzić, 'Kavurma', <http://pescanik.net/2011/11/kavurma/>

"*The Parade* is a film that tells the story in a tragicomic way, about a constant battle between the two worlds in the present Serbian society, divided between the traditional homophobic majority and the liberal minority. *The Parade* is a film in which the genesis of the seemingly impossible friendship between Radmilo and Limun, gay and homophob, is at the same time metaphor for the ability to understand and communicate among people, no matter what the group (sexual, religious, national) subject belongs to."²²

This statement can also be read in a very provocative movie poster. The pointed "middle finger" in the most recognizable symbol of Serbia and Serbian nationalism, "greetings with three fingers", can be interpreted as defiance "the greatest" national values in favor of some more important, more gentle. As on the Michelangelo fresco, God gave his hand to touch Adam's finger and breathed in his Life, so is the desire of the author of the *The Parade* that the touch of "two Serbia" creates a new, (even) better Serbia.



Figure 5. *The Parade*, Film Poster

²² Film "The Parade", „Synopsis“, <http://www.filmparada.com/kovolidacitasinopsis.php#>