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# Political Body in Relation to Memory and History

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*Yugoslavia, How Ideology Moved Our Collective Body* [motion picture]. 2013. Dir. Marta Popivoda. Serbia, France, Germany, 62 min., 2013.

*Landscape of Resistance* [motion picture]. 2021. Dir. Marta Popivoda. France, Serbia, Germany, 95 min., 2021.

In every era the attempt must be made  
anew to wrest tradition away from  
a conformism that is about to overpower it.  
(BENJAMIN 2007: 255)

The two documentaries by Serbian director Marta Popivoda discussed below are exceptional films, as they are equally valuable in terms of their philosophical and performative aspects. In both works, Popivoda addresses the theme of the body, politics, and history, explores their interconnections and, simultaneously, the tensions between them. As a contribution to this *Theatralia* volume dedicated to the body as archive, I would like to open a discussion of the body in documentaries, using Popivoda's creative approach to the topic in her *Landscape of Resistance* (2021) and *Yugoslavia, How Ideology Moved Our Collective Body* (2013).

## Flashforward

Marta Popivoda, a Serbian director, video artist, and researcher, currently based in Berlin, is a renowned film director who is often described by critics as being ahead of her time. Popivoda is known in European cinema as a director, who works with a deep philosophical background connecting to performing art practice. The theme

she often focuses on in her artistic works is that of war, destructive to human lives, places, and countries. In her two films war is yet again the subject of this reflection, as she offers a deep probe of the subject and examines at a critical distance the relationship between memory, history, and the personal, authentic traces in both.

*Yugoslavia, How Ideology Moved Our Collective Body* (2013) was Popivoda's first feature-length documentary which premiered at the 63<sup>rd</sup> *Berlinale* and was later shown at a number of other international film festivals.<sup>1</sup> *Landscapes of Resistance* (2021) is her most recent feature-length documentary which participated in the Tiger Competition at the 50<sup>th</sup> *International Film Festival Rotterdam* and instantly won several awards.<sup>2</sup>

In both films, Popivoda links the story with archives and narrative history. The connection helps her to reveal new historical facts. For instance, she captures the tension between collective and individual bodies, as well as ideology and everyday

1 The film is in the permanent collection of MoMA New York and has been part of 'What is Contemporary Art?' MoMA online course on contemporary arts.

2 These include *Cinéma du Réel* – Library Award; *Jeonju International Film Festival* – Best Film Award; *Thessaloniki Documentary Festival* – Golden Alexander Award; *Sarajevo Film Festival* – Heart of Sarajevo; *Lima Alterna International Film Festival* – Best Film Award.

life in *Yugoslavia, How Ideology Moved Our Collective Body*. She uses the archives (images of buildings of Yugoslavia, social gatherings, major Yugoslav monuments) to remind the viewers of the Yugoslav Communist Revolution. On the other hand, in the documentary *Landscape of Resistance*, Popivoda abandons the use of archives and relies on the extraordinary narrative ability of the lead character Sonja.

The different narrative techniques used in the two documentaries allows the director to talk about history and memory through the perspective of the subjective, social, and political body. In *Yugoslavia, How Ideology Moved Our Collective Body*, the camera follows in the footsteps of the supranational state of Yugoslavia. To Popivoda this country represents an exciting political project ‘with its own authentic Communist revolution with ideas of anti-fascism, apolitical movements, workers’ unions, social justice’ (POPIVODA 2021). The director herself comments on the archival documentary materials of the progressive Yugoslavia and its ‘ornaments’ (Josip Broz Tito statue in Belgrade, Sport Centre May 25 in Belgrade, Stone Flower, Jasenovac, etc.) in contrast to the images of war-torn places or the current landscape of the individual states. Her commentary is essentially a theoretical and philosophical essay, a discussion of the past and the present. In *Yugoslavia, How Ideology Moved Our Collective Body* Popivoda mentions:

Is memory present perfect or past perfect?... Individual bodies are the means of collective bodies... Even if I wanted to grasp history, it is not history... The first day among the ruins – f\*\*\*. Stop. Is it planted in history? I thought we came from heroes... The speed of memory is declining... (POPIVODA 2013)

This narration quoted from the film reflects Benjamin’s concept of history on various levels. Monuments, the ornaments of history, are now represented as ruins on which one can exhibit new associations and new contexts (BENJAMIN 2007: 253–264). It is these ruins and their use that are the progress itself, that is to say, progress in the perception of history and the truthfulness of history based on personal experience. According to Benjamin, history does not mean knowing how something actually was. History is a captured memory of individuals as well as traces of the country. This is how personal experience is presented in *Yugoslavia, How Ideology Moved Our Collective Body*, as the director’s highly subjective and original commentary.

In a similar manner, *Landscape of Resistance* is built upon the testimony of a nearly 100-year-old Sonja Vujanović, the grandmother of the film screenwriter and Popivoda’s partner Ana Vujanović. As a highly politically active girl, Sonja joined the anti-Nazi resistance movement and survived Auschwitz. Popivoda places Sonja’s personal memories and the exceedingly compelling story against the background of lands destroyed by people or untouched by people. The cameraman (Ivan Maković) captures places directly related to the events that Sonja is talking about: former war zones, or war crime sites, as well as Auschwitz. At present, these loci are peaceful, almost idyllic places (forest, field, etc.). The contrast of image, sound, and spoken word creates Popivoda’s distinctive tension between memory and history. Sonja only appears in the film a few times; her voice speaking over shots of grass, trees, cracks in walls, puddles, grazing deer, a chimney, etc. Her memories and story add a concerning

context to the rise of neo-Nazi ideologies today. *Landscape of Resistance*, however, primarily connects the past, present, and future (similar to Benjamin's interpretation of Klee's *Angelus Novus*), where personal also means political. This approach was also based on specific dramaturgy:

In terms of perspective, I was also interested in using the film to solve the challenge of how to simultaneously inhabit a country with different perspectives or views. This directly arises from my and Ana's exchange of information about her concept of 'landscape dramaturgy'. (POPIVODA 2021: 1–2)

The authors of the documentary Popivoda and Vujanović understand landscape dramaturgy in theatre, dance, film, or performance as an artistic tendency to open and expand the established chronological and spatial systems that determine how we perceive ourselves and our society (POPIVODA 2021: 12–17). Landscape becomes a visual archive, making its past accessible. With personal memories in *Landscape of Resistance*, Marta Popivoda tries to capture the past and its events, moving between memory and historical discourse. At the same time, however, she responds to the immediate context of living in her nation today. Benjamin (2007: 228) suggests that it is the discontinuity of history that disrupts, in the first place, the perception itself. This disruption becomes the vantage

point for a change in contemplating the present.

These days, when we are witnessing a shock of yet another war in Europe, with its new ruins and new personal memories, it might be the 'landscape' which has the ability to capture the true reality as the facts, human stories, war-affected places may differ.

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