

# The Provocative Želimir Žilnik: from Yugoslavia's Black Wave to Germany's RAF

Lena Kilkka Mann (Berlin)

## 1. Introduction

Želimir Žilnik's films are socially and politically provocative. Žilnik, arguably one of the most controversial filmmakers from the former Yugoslavia, is based in Novi Sad, Serbia. Over decades, he has been able to *continuously* successfully provoke and ignite reactions from his audience through his socially and politically critical films. His career spans over 40 years, with more than 50 films (fiction, documentary, docu-drama, television) – and he is still actively creating.

In this article, a few selected films from a small part of a large spectrum of Žilnik's works will be presented and discussed. Žilnik's first two phases, the First Phase from 1967 to 1973 in Yugoslavia, and the German Phase from 1973 to 1976, will be the main eras of focus. The two phases are fascinating to compare, as they took place in two completely different social, political, and economic systems. By analyzing the cause and effect (i.e., the filmic provocation and response) of his films in and from two different systems, a pattern should emerge: one that is consistently uniquely and quintessentially Žilnik.

## 2. Želimir Žilnik: The Person

Želimir Žilnik's first encounter with the dark social and political reality began the moment he was born. The son of two active communist Partisans, Žilnik was born in 1942 in a German concentration camp in Niš, Serbia. Shortly thereafter, his mother was executed. Baby Žilnik was hidden, being secretly cared for by the prisoners, until finally being taken in by his maternal grandfather, an Orthodox priest, to be raised in Belgrade. Žilnik's

father was killed in 1944 as a People's Hero, a high honor among the ranks of the Partisans.

As a child and teenager Žilnik was a very active Pioneer, becoming president of a local chapter in Belgrade. Through them, he was allowed to spend time in England on a voluntary work exchange, which introduced him to the social and economic aspects of English society. After being back in Yugoslavia, he became editor of a communist youth magazine called *Tribina Mladih*, where he did not delay in publishing a critical article on the front page, already leading to his first accusations of dissidence. Nevertheless, that did not prevent him from being selected to attend an Experiment in International Living program<sup>1</sup>, which took him to New York City. There, for the first time, young Žilnik was exposed to films that expressed clear and direct social and political criticisms: the documentary films of Robert Flaherty, Jean Rouch, and Chris Marker; his interest in film began to grow exponentially. He returned to Yugoslavia, where, while studying law in Novi Sad, he also created amateur films in the local *Kino Klub*, thus becoming connected with the local underground film scene. In 1967, he had his first professional experience in the industry, hired as an assistant in a film by an influence of Žilnik's, the director Dušan Makavajev. After that project, Žilnik decided to dedicate his career to filmmaking. From 1967 onwards, through many turbulent eras and experiences, Žilnik has continued making films with vigor.

### 3. Žilnik's First Phase: 1967–1973

*If we were to summarize his work between 1965 and 1973, he was a filmmaker funded and encouraged by the state, only to be banned with equal enthusiasm.*

Goran Gocić (2003: 90)

#### 3.1. 1960s Yugoslavia, Neoplanta, and the Black Wave

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the 1960s, though under the leadership of a communist dictator, Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980), nonetheless had a relatively open, independently-thinking, and flourishing artistic scene. Tito was a classical Hollywood film fan (especially when Richard Burton played his character), and was known to have mingled among the stars. He

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<sup>1</sup> an international intercultural immersion program, whose purpose was to create dialogue and understanding between nations.

strongly supported the traditional Yugoslav film industry, actively took part in the screening process, and was the main sponsor of the annual Pula Film Festival.

Žilnik describes the early 1960s in Yugoslavia as an opening and encouraging time, where the political and cultural environment of Yugoslavia was “near to normal”. Žilnik recalls the years between 1960 and 1968 as:

years of peace – you could live, learn, work full abreast; Without any killing dogmatism running down your spine; Without a sentiment of uneasiness and shame because of the stupidity, kitsch values and self-destruction of the ruling model. [...] In those ‘quiet sixties’ [...] I was able to [...] produce films and earn my living in my status of ‘free-lance artist’. (qtd. in Stojanović 2003: 136)

Žilnik explains (Klunker 1999: 227) that in socialist Yugoslavia, in contrast to other socialist countries, there was no true “state production”. Instead, there was a so-called “Filmmakers Cooperative”, a type of self-management scheme. Starting a project was not complicated and they had relative freedom in their work. However, at the end of the project or film, it had to be presented to the censors, who could then stop the film.

Since 1967, Žilnik had been working together with a small film production company called Neoplanta, which was founded in 1966 in Novi Sad and was the first film production company in Serbia to be located outside of Belgrade. The company director, Sveta Udovički, and a group of film directors set up this institution to allow the creative freedom of filmmakers (fiction, documentary, animation) from all over Serbia to flourish. The documentary filmmakers at Neoplanta initiated a new concept through the genre of the so-called “committed film”, which based its reputation on criticizing the not-so-glamorous state of social affairs – mostly by examining the everyday lives of ordinary citizens.

In April 1968, Žilnik told the magazine *Susret*:

Yugoslav film earned its fame when it began talking about Yugoslav society without any restrictions, but instead openly, scientifically and with commitment. Before that, documentary film was a folk genre dealing mainly with the past. By now, those issues have been dealt with exhaustively. I won’t make films about foreign influences, but about the things for which we are just as responsible as the federal government. First and foremost, I wish to offer people, women and children too, an opportunity to share the burden they carry around with them with the audience. Because obviously these are not exclusively private issues. (qtd. in Schneider-Siemon 2004: 158)

In essence, socio-politically critical films, even as documentaries, became a more or less *tolerated* part of Yugoslav cinematography *during that era*. The critics, who were mostly interested in classical and not experimental cinema,

were annoyed and, at worst, unabashedly vocalized negative criticism. Neoplanta's committed films did not represent the accepted norm, they were progressively influential, and even "mirrored a socially critical engagement to which other documentary films thus felt bound" (Klunker 1999: 220). It should not be forgotten, however, that even though Yugoslavia seemed to have been a safe haven for filmmakers, breaking with the norm still was not common and was absolutely not a maneuver without risk.

Neoplanta and its artists consciously and bravely carried out a large part of internal reform of Yugoslav cinema. The era of committed film soon transformed into a larger, more threatening "Black Wave". The term came into existence because of a headline by Vladimir Jovičić in *Borba*, the daily newspaper from Belgrade, entitled *Crni talas u našem filmu* (*A Black Wave in our Film*). His article demanded that those involved in this Black Wave rethink their positions and act more responsibly towards reality; that they depict Yugoslav social reality much more negatively than it actually is; that they exaggerate.

The Black Wave did not retreat. It became a country-wide underground film movement, known for being rebellious, progressive, revisionist, experimental, and filled with dissidence. It had been influenced by several international trends, such as the New York Underground (Warhol) and the French School (Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker). Some of Žilnik's Black Wave contemporaries included the filmmakers Jovan Jovanović, Lazar Stojanović, Živojin Pavlović, and Dušan Makavajev.

While reflecting on the characteristics of creative film poetics during those years at Neoplanta, Makavajev stated:

All these 'Black Films' were produced with minimal costs. All were more or less 'home-made' productions. They had a very strong critical spirit, but they had also never forced their hands into the pockets of the people. They were films that had never stolen anything. They could pay themselves off many times over through regular cinema showings. (qtd. in Jončić 2002:66)

However, Tito, the traditional art and film lover, openly criticized the Black Wave, suggesting that its participants are sidelined, dirty, and unable to see reality (Klunker 1999: 230): During that period, Tito is known to have said, "I am against squandering the community's money on some modernist works which have nothing to do with art as such, and even less with our reality" (Gocić 2003: 94).

### 3.1.1. Nezaposleni Ljudi (1968) – The Unemployed

Regardless of the opinions of the Yugoslav critics, or perhaps even due to them, Žilnik became an internationally recognized filmmaker already at the beginning of his career. His third film, a short film called *The Unemployed*, addresses the first wave of post-economic-reform unemployment in socialist Yugoslavia. It won first place at the Westdeutsche Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen (West German Oberhausen Short Film Festival) in 1968.

*The Unemployed* was originally entitled *The Unemployed Men and Women*; the first ten minutes dedicated to men, and the next ten minutes to women. The women's segment was intended to show how unemployed Yugoslav women not only turn to jobs like cooking or tailoring, but also to the quickly-developing sex industry (strippers, working in bars). After the Film Committee had screened the film, they basically claimed that it was not socialism's job to repair the immoral behavior of women gone astray. So, in order to pass censorship to participate in the rapidly-approaching Belgrade Film Festival, Žilnik had to swiftly cut out the "women" half of his film.

The final product is a short documentary film that shows a group of *men* at a homeless shelter. They are left lonely, confused, insulted, and apathetic after hearing the constant empty promises of socialism. There are many intrusive close-ups of body parts, namely feet, toothless mouths, bare-backs, and chests. Similar as in Žilnik's first professional film from 1967, *Newsreel on Village Youth, in Winter*, the men here are filmed doing unusual, unattractive, animal-like activities such as stuffing their faces with bread; one is hitting himself in the head with a hard object; others are doing silly activities to prove their athleticism; they line up in two lines, march, and sing a worker's song.

The marching and singing highly displays the irony: the unemployed and homeless are singing a song that had been used for propagandizing and motivating the worker brigades – "voluntary" workers who received room and boarding while completing hard-labor projects, e.g., laying train tracks, digging tunnels, etc. Their jobs had been to "rebuild" Tito's post-World War II Yugoslavia. In contrast, however, these unemployed men in Žilnik's film do not go on to rebuild Yugoslavia.

Thus, Žilnik was accused of manipulating and exaggerating reality, and of having analyzed the Yugoslav unemployment issue in a very superficial manner (Schneider-Siemon 2003: 132). Many of the ironic sequences had obviously been staged, which leads to the typically Žilnik exploration of the border between documentary and fiction. Such "fictional realism" would end up drawing negative attention from the Party.

The Party criticized not only Žilnik, but also the jury at Oberhausen, printing in the leading party newspaper *Politika* that, “Oberhausen could have given the award to a better film”, and demanded that no more mediocre films “criticizing our society through non-filmic means” be sent to festivals (Schneider-Siemon 2004: 158).

The Party’s demand was left unheeded: Žilnik’s next film, *June Turmoil* (1968), was also sent there the following year and successfully received the Special Award of the Festival Management. The Party vocalized their disappointment in *Borba* by criticizing the selection criteria of the Oberhausen Festival; they wondered why the festival management was negotiating with Neoplanta directly instead of consulting the Yugoslav Federal Jury First (Schneider-Siemon 2004: 158) and why *June Turmoil* had been sent to the Oberhausen Film Festival without Party permission. As a direct reaction, the Party set up a commission or jury (National Commission for Cultural Relations Abroad), with six jurors from each republic plus the president, to review films for international festivals.

### 3.1.2. June 1968 to mid-1970s and “Neo-Stalinism”

The relative creative freedom of the “quiet sixties” came to a halt not too long after the 1968 student protest against the red bourgeois<sup>2</sup>, which in the 1970s led to the neo-Stalinist devaluing of “creative Titoism”.

When analyzing the nomenclature’s reactions against films dealing critically with socio-political realities, the international political climate should be taken into consideration, including outside pressures on Yugoslavia. The year 1968 had been a turbulent one in socialism. Not too long after the June 1968 Belgrade student movement, in August of 1968,

they [Yugoslav nomenclature] started being directly frightened that they could actually be overthrown by the same troops that overthrew Dubček<sup>3</sup>. So, the system started changing swiftly – in terms of coming back to certain Stalinist tools, which had been already used after the war. So that was one reason why liberal cinema was criticized ideologically and stopped – although, this phase of stopping lasted two or three years. It started actually in ‘68, ‘69. Maybe the most outstanding example is the film of mine, *Early Works* ... (Žilnik 2007)

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<sup>2</sup> the student protest was documented in Žilnik’s *June Turmoil*

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Dubček came to Czechoslovak leadership during the Prague Spring (January–August 1968), a period of reforms and liberalization of the Czechoslovak system in the direction of the Yugoslav system. The attempt was overthrown by Soviet and Warsaw Pact troops.

### 3.1.3. Rani Radovi (1969) – Early Works

Arguably the most remarkable reactions were indeed caused by Žilnik's first feature film in 1969. *Early Works*, as the title suggests, is an allusion to Karl Marx's earlier works. In this film essay, a group of youth armed with Marx's quotes attempt to put revolutionary theory into practice. They travel around Yugoslavia on a mission to educate the masses and revolutionize their country.

The nomadic revolutionaries spend time working in a factory, instructing village women in sex-education, defecating as a group in the grass, proclaiming emancipation and living "free love", and fighting alone in the woods<sup>4</sup>.

The lead character, not-so-inconspicuously named Yugoslava, is played by Milja Vujanović, who was known for having the most beautiful female body in all of Yugoslavia. The actress is chosen well, as similar to in Godard's films, "revolution is a beautiful woman – exploited, abused and finally massacred by cold social facts" (Gocić 2003: 97). The car, a Citroen CV2<sup>5</sup>, also takes on symbolism, representative of a burdensome ideal that keeps breaking down and so is eventually destroyed. The cross painted on top of the car alludes to the symbol painted on top of the Russian tanks that invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968. The revolutionaries in the film end up burning the car, representing the annihilation of their revolutionary ideals, just as the Russians invading Czechoslovakia brought about an abrupt and brutal end to the promise of and the belief in the socialist ideal. At the end of *Early Works*, the revolutionaries are exhausted and give up their fight. The heroine, Yugoslava, is killed by her fellow-fighters because she deserted them "to return to the patriarchal reality" (Gocić 2003: 100).

Žilnik said that he wanted to "show that political revolutions have only limited success; that they quickly turn sour, since the protagonists will naturally become tired. The film deals with the impossibility of changing the world with romantic ideas" (qtd. in Schneider-Siemon 2003: 144).

*Early Works* also combines elements of fiction and documentary. It is no classical narrative, but an open narrative, in the sense that it is participant-driven within the constraints of its narrative environment. Žilnik would often not inform the actors of the scene and location until they were actually on-location. This led the actors to express spontaneous and genuine emotional reactions and surprise: In one scene, without forewarning, they were even attacked and beaten up in the mud by villagers.

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<sup>4</sup> an ironic allusion to Tito's Partisans.

<sup>5</sup> a symbol of 1968.

“The playing around in dirt brings body art to mind. That was done for shocking and provoking. The naked body was supposed to shock the audience” (Žilnik, qtd. in Schneider-Siemon 2003: 144). The film portrays a direct association between sex and politics, both of which are taboos of the bourgeois cinema. The captivatingly sensual cinematographic images push the human body into a leading role, and so *Early Works* has become, “if not the most erotic, then surely the most sensual cinematic experience ever to be made in [Yugoslavia]” (Gocić 2003: 97).

*Early Works* was successfully distributed during its first months and had already received invitations to international film festivals when Žilnik was ordered to stop distribution. The film was withdrawn from the cinemas after the public rioted against it – even Yugoslav nationalists were appalled at the ironic political allusions and nudity.

Yet the *major* concern was not the reaction of the general public, but of Tito. It appeared that Tito had screened the film.

He stopped the projection after 15 minutes and said just one sentence, ‘What do those fools want?!’ Nobody knew if Tito was referring to either the actors on the screen or the producers. And I said, ‘but you see, Tito is an old man – so, maybe, he was simply a bit shocked to see a naked woman ...’ (Žilnik 2007)

Žilnik was suddenly asked by his production house manager at Avala Film to sign a paper confirming that the work was still in progress, that the “negatives had not yet been finished” being edited. The manager insisted that it was a dangerous situation for them, yet Žilnik repeatedly refused to sign the document. Within half an hour the police came with a warrant from the public prosecutor that the film is to be taken to court and sued. Within three days, they had a case in court.

The indictment for *Early Works* reads:

The author devaluates ideological and political relations in our country. He makes a grotesque and ironic picture of the family, the people, the intimate relations between young people, of the life in rural and urban areas. This film attributes a negative connotation to the relations between nations living in Yugoslavia, to the questions pertaining to agricultural policy, the employed and the unemployed, to the role of the League of Communists in the society. The film is grossly ironic of the symbols and the emanation of the progressive past, in our country and in the world (see Jončić 2002: 53).

According to Žilnik, nobody wanted to defend the film as a producer. However, because he had finished his law studies and understood the system, he was capable of a successful defense. So, *alone*, Žilnik defended his film in court.



The judge watched the film and found that it was a bit anarchistic and wild, but not a threat to their functioning socialist system. The film was acquitted.

The time Žilnik's film was ordered to go to court until the time it was acquitted was atypically short: from 19 June to 01 July 1969. The whole procedure was so speedy that Žilnik was able to send his film to the 1969 Berlin Film Festival on time, where it won first prize – the Golden Bear. The Festival applauded *Early Works* for

the provocative poignancy in the confrontation of ideology and reality, with which the director bestows a politically abstract life, whereby he has understood it to be equally modern in form and content (qtd. in Grenzland-Filmtage Selb 2001: 37).

On 3 July 1969, *Borba* printed a cartoon by P. Koraksić that pictures two men squatting in the bushes, pants pulled down and waiting for their bowel-movements. One man says to the other, “It’s a shame that no one’s filming us right now... We would have been able to compete in an international film festival”. This is a clear reference to a scene in Žilnik's *Early Works*, where the viewer is forced to watch the youth defecating together outdoors. The caricature is also a clear statement as to how the critics perceive the film – excremental.



Штета што нас сада нико не снима... могли бисмо да конкуришемо на неком иностраном фестивалу  
(Карикатура: П. КОРАКСИЋ)

This *Borba* article discusses *Early Works* and criticizes the newly set-up Yugoslav commission who chose for it to go to the Berlin Film Festival. Four out of seven jurors in the National Commission for Cultural Relations Abroad had voted for *Early Works* to compete internationally.

The Yugoslav critics believed that the only criterion taken into consideration for the prize was the film's political dimension – its provocation and sharp criticism of the Yugoslav political and social reality. For them, this was therefore an illegitimate reason for awarding an *artistic* prize. They saw it unacceptable for the jurors of such a reputable international film festival to neglect all the relevant criteria for art and film, including its form, content, art, esthetics, and ethics, in lieu of some anarchist, anti-communist political statement. In addition, the Yugoslav public evidently perceived this prize as an open provocation against their socialist system (Jončić 2002: 54).

Žilnik and Neoplanta are accused of consciously politicizing their films in order to tailor them to the expectations of their socialism-critical hungry foreign audience and of using and abusing the media coverage that the film received during the court trials for the purpose of attaining the Golden Bear Award at the 1969 Berlinale.

As a result of such criticism, Žilnik was dropped from the League of Communists in the summer of 1969.

### 3.1.4. Crni Film (1971) – Black Film

*There is no black film, only black realization.*  
Želimir Žilnik (qtd. in Jončić 2002: 56)

The film entitled *Black Film* is an ironic response to the genre being dubbed the “Black Wave”. It is a documentary film that is not only a critique of the social inequalities and lack of societal response in socialist Yugoslavia, but also a self-criticism about the way filmmakers use their subjects for personal, filmic, or artistic gain.

*Black Film* is a little essay about how I see the position of filmmakers. I found several homeless men and I told them that I was making a documentary; that they should come sleep in my house because socialism wasn't taking care of them; and that I'd try to help them and to fight for their rights. They slept in my house two or three days, so my wife and child were of course completely shocked ... (Žilnik 2007)

During the waking hours, Žilnik went on the street with his camera and microphone and asked passers-by for suggestions about what he should do with the men since the socialist state is not caring for them. The answers were given hastily with tones of indifference, i.e., “let them stay with you”; “let the police find a place for them”; “let them find a cellar to sleep in”. Hasty and indifferent was also the pace and atmosphere of the film – address the situation quickly, look quickly and superficially for an answer, if nothing emerges, then quickly move on to the next scene in your life.

Žilnik used a technical gag to end the shooting: Near the end of the film, he simply threw the homeless out of his apartment, as he needed to finish the film and explained to them, “I only have three minutes of material left. I’ve helped you as much as I could” (Žilnik 2007). He used lack of film as an excuse to get his point across: I’m through contributing to your cause because I have no material left; is that what the “socially engaged”, especially film-makers, consider “helping”?

*Black Film* was shown at the XVIII Short and Documentary Film Festival in Belgrade in 1971. Naturally, the viewers criticized Žilnik for having used, abused, and exploited the homeless for the purposes of the film. In return, Žilnik reaffirmed his doubt that films criticizing social evil actually bring about change or help those in need; such “abstract humanism” is ineffectual. The social issue at hand (homelessness and effective ways of addressing it) was naturally not debated – only the ironic method he had used to present his case was. This led him to write and present the “This Festival is a Cemetery” manifesto, which is a self-criticism of the “committed film” authors and their exploitation of the socially deprived by the camera for the entertainment purposes of the newly-emerging middle-class audience. Žilnik was a bit “hated for it” at the Belgrade festival (Klunker 1999: 223).

Žilnik had often been criticized by the government, but he had always had the support of his colleagues – until this film and its manifesto. After the *Black Film* showing, he said he would hear statements from his colleagues such as, “What are you trying to pull off? We’ve at least got a little bit of freedom and now you’re even questioning that?!” (qtd. in Klunker 1999: 223).

### 3.1.5. Redžep arrives at Neoplanta

*Black Film* was somewhat ironically the last film completed under the old company director of Neoplanta, Svetozar Udovički, before he was unfairly dismissed<sup>6</sup> and replaced by Draško Redžep, a Party puppet appointed by the Yugoslav Federal Executive Council of Culture, who would introduce massive censorship.

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<sup>6</sup> Udovički was dismissed from his position by the Federal Executive Council of Culture in mid-1972, supposedly because he had not graduated from the Faculty for Performing Arts in Belgrade. “The true reason was the production of the film *W.R. – The Mystery of the Organism* by Dušan Makavejev, which caused a disagreement between the Yugoslav federal communists, the Committee for the Protection of the Tradition of the Front for the Freedom of the People and Svetar Udovički” (see Schneider-Siemon 2004: 159).

Redžep prevented Žilnik's film, *The Women are Coming* (1972) from being shown at the XIX Festival of Short and Documentary Film in Belgrade. But most notable was his sabotaging of Žilnik's film project, *Freedom or Cartoon* (1972), about a multi-national Yugoslav family – yet another open narrative in which characters played themselves, improvising, and keeping minimally to the script. Through the collapse of this family unit, the film alluded to the cultural, political, and national unrest in Yugoslavia in the early 1970s<sup>7</sup>. Žilnik was aiming to symbolically show the national division of Yugoslavia and, ultimately, its road to collapse.

Even before its completion, *Freedom or Cartoon* had been invited into the programs at Cannes and Berlin without having to go through preselection. However, Redžep's measures forced it to halt in post-production limbo; it remained incomplete and was never shown.

A huge campaign against Žilnik and his colleagues was then launched through the media and the Party apparatus. A new law for cinematography emerged, which imposed legal sanctions on film authors who spoke out critically against the Yugoslav socialist reality. The law was instated in order to 1) create a new system of financing that made it impossible to make films that have reactionary and anti-socialistic messages (i.e., socially and politically critical) with state money; 2) stop the privatization (self-management) of the production houses and to bring them back under state control; 3) make sure that film production and distribution industries in Yugoslavia are occupied by ideologically suitable employees (Jončić 2002: 65).

By 1973 the Communist Party had already begun branding the authors of the Black Wave as enemies. All of Žilnik's works had been blacklisted, labeled as “unacceptable works” (Stojanović 2003: 139), put in bunkers and forbidden to be shown – with one small exception: his first film, *Newsreel on Village Youth, in Winter* (1967). In fear of putting their own career in jeopardy, no producer wanted to be associated with him: Žilnik was ostracized. He was informed by the social insurance authorities that he could no longer receive the health insurance to which he had been entitled as an artist, since his

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<sup>7</sup> Namely, in Zagreb, Ljubljana and Belgrade: In 1971 there was student protesting in Ljubljana; in Belgrade there was also student protesting, political dissatisfaction and tension because of the constitutional amendments; in Zagreb there was a student movement for Croatian independence (the Croatian Spring). This was also the year of the Croatian émigré nationalist assassination of the Yugoslav ambassador in Sweden, part of a brutal terrorist campaign in the name of Croatian separatism. One of the most striking scenes in the film was to be a re-enactment of this event.

works had now “been banned from the public scene” (*ibid*). Žilnik talked about additional consequences:

I was thrown out of the union of filmmakers. And my social security card was abandoned. I had a small child. I was really frightened, you know – how should I survive? The only thing I could have done was call the newspaper and say, ‘I made a mistake, I apologize’ – but I didn’t want to. [...] And what is of course the most deconstructive, and I would say, pity, is that these old films that bore this ideological stigma had been taken from us, put in various bunkers or cellars, and were not at all taken care of. So now most of the prints of negatives are lost. That is really tragic. (Žilnik 2007)

### 3.2. First Phase: Summing Up

Already at the beginning, Žilnik had been criticized by all sides because of his manner of filmmaking. He shocked his audience by experimenting with avant-garde elements of film, such as close-ups of body parts and other unconventional camera movements as well as primitive film montage. There was rarely a story line and the flow of his films was inconsistent. He effectively combined documentary and fiction. He utilized participant-driven open-narratives and non-schooled actors, who usually play themselves, as well as other elements of spontaneity and surprise. By giving the actors the freedom and confidence to play themselves and to improvise, they in turn actively participate in the creation and outcome of the script and storyline, and thus of the film itself.

These non-classical, contemporary elements received the largest amount of criticism at the beginning of his career in Yugoslavia. He shocked his elderly and conservative viewers not only by using non-classical, “non-artistic” devices, but, for example, through eroticism, as in *Early Works* (i.e., Yugoslavia’s beautiful naked curves, shower-scenes, mud-fighting). Žilnik made Tito and his regime look ancient; Partisan ideals became an old, dead myth.

So the films from his first phase are not only expressions of anti-art, but also of anti-romanticism and anti-idealism. Through elements of realism he exposed a social and political reality that differed very much to the social and political reality claimed by the Party apparatus.

Through all of the afore-mentioned elements and filmic techniques, Žilnik criticized not only the communist state apparatus, but also the general population: workers, youth, villagers, his colleagues, and even himself. No one could escape the scrutiny of his camera.

The successful effect of his provocations became clear because of the intense reaction he received. From “the Unemployed Women” having to be edited out, to Tito refusing to “squander money” on modernist works which

have “nothing to do with art” and to *Early Works* being labeled as an anti-artistic political pamphlet, Party functionaries and critics were consistently annoyed by Žilnik’s blatant anti-art, and so they conveniently and loudly criticized his artistic style, which was their excuse to criticize the film without having to directly address the social issues at hand. They needed an “anti-artist” in order to validate their legitimacy, and Žilnik was thus in a useful place. Žilnik criticized the system, they criticized his art: They tried to de-legitimize and invalidate his artistic and filmic means of expression, thereby de-legitimizing the validity of the overall socio-political “message” contained in his art.

Harsh reactions from the domestic audience arose because of Žilnik’s content: police arrested students at the *June Turmoil* showing; his film *Early Works* was sued after the public (communists and nationalists) rioted the film, and he was left to defend it himself; *Freedom or Cartoon* was sabotaged and thus prevented from participating in international festivals and stopped in post-production, remaining incomplete; Žilnik’s repertoire was eventually blacklisted, banned; he was ostracized by the film community, and left without insurance or a work license, which would leave him no choice but to “voluntarily” leave the country.

Interestingly, over the course of this first phase, the *international* audience reacted to Žilnik’s provocations quite differently; instead of criticizing his films for non-artistic, non-filmic devices, and exaggeration and manipulation of social reality, they praised his form and content, continually inviting Žilnik to and awarding him prizes at their festivals. It seems these measures by the international audience may indeed also have been the result of the domestic audience’s critical reaction to Žilnik’s films; perhaps they were, indeed, almost overly-welcoming to this man, this underdog, who openly criticized his socialist system. Perhaps there is some truth to the argument presented by the Yugoslav apparatus: that Žilnik and Neoplanta are consciously politicizing their films for the purpose of attaining international recognition, and that the films that won awards were chosen not for artistic merit, but for political reasons.

The international acceptance of Žilnik and his socially and politically provocative films infuriated the domestic audience, which thus intensified and provoked further reaction at home. Not only was Žilnik’s credibility called into question, but so was that of the international jurors at Oberhausen and Berlin, as well as that of the Yugoslav film selection commission regarding *Early Works*; film critics were criticized for supporting Žilnik and the Black Wave, and so were the participating actors and even the domestic audience.

Just as Žilnik spared no one criticism, no one was spared a retaliating remark. Žilnik's provocative black wave was, indeed, tidal in nature.

#### 4. Žilnik's German Phase: 1973–1976

##### 4.1 Working in Germany

Žilnik moved to the Federal Republic of Germany in 1973 to escape the consequences of his being ostracized in Yugoslavia and, as he already had a strong network of welcoming colleagues in West Germany, to continue with his research and filmmaking endeavors. He first worked as a translator for the Oberhausen Film Festival before making six films with Telepool, a subsidiary of Bayerischer Rundfunk (Bavarian Broadcasting).

With *Der Antrag* in 1974, Žilnik began making films that were critical debates about the situation and problems of the *Gastarbeiter* in Germany, a “cynical analysis of the global German mentality” (Jončić 2002: 70). Additional films by Žilnik about the *Gastarbeiter*<sup>8</sup> in Germany include: *Hausordnung* (1974), *Abschied* (1975), *Inventur – Metzstrasse 11* (1975), and *Unter Denkmalschutz* (1975).

Aside from the guest worker situation, Žilnik could not resist criticizing the cultural situation: German *kitsch* was his next victim. His 1975 *Ich weiss nicht, was soll es bedeuten* is a film that parodies German romanticism overflowing with German *kitsch*, through which the structures of German society were made fun of. Basking in irony and *kitsch*, different interpretations of the song *Lorelei* by Heinrich Heine are recited and sung, which makes it “more like a music video than a film” (Jončić 2002: 70). This film was rated *besonders wertvoll* ‘especially valuable’.

Žilnik explained to the author how the system worked in early 1970s West Germany: When a film was finished, it was sent to the *Bewertungsstelle* (Film Assessment Center) at the *Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft*<sup>9</sup> (Voluntary Self-Regulation of the Movie Industry), which judged the “value” of the work.

Is it a very big piece of art, what they called at that time *besonders wertvoll*, or is it just a good film, or is it without any mark? Depending on what mark you got, you could also be freed from taxes. If you were to get *besonders wertvoll*, then the distributor who put it into the program would not have to pay taxes

<sup>8</sup> Typical of Žilnik's works, the heroes of the films played themselves.

<sup>9</sup> similar to the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA).

for the whole program ...So during that time, the system in Germany was stimulating domestic production very much. (Žilnik 2007)

It is apparent that although Žilnik's early German films were critical in nature, they were nonetheless well-received. However, it is especially in his subsequent films that it becomes most clear that Žilnik "has a need to show the nicely wrapped-up and hidden dictator in all levels of life in Germany" (Jončić 2002: 72): a portrait that Germany was not too keen on showing.

#### 4.1.1. Öffentliche Hinrichtung (1974) – The Public Execution

In *The Public Execution* Žilnik tries to prove just that. This short documentary film is basically a portrayal of Žilnik's conviction of conspiracy theory regarding a controversial incident involving the Red Army Faction (RAF). A real-life event unfolding in front of the TV cameras, the police shot and killed the members of a group of RAF-related terrorists as they were retreating out of a bank they had just robbed. The incident was broadcast throughout Germany as a breaking news feature. While watching the broadcast, Žilnik noticed that the lighting looked as if it had been manipulated in order to capture the scene, as in film. Žilnik asked himself:

How could all the journalists know that something like that was going to happen and at the same time have all their cameras on, exactly when everything happened?<sup>10</sup> To me, it seemed, that was because everything had been directed and planned in a cooperative effort between the police and the media. To me, that was a public execution (qtd. in Jončić 2002: 72). It was like capital punishment in the Middle Ages: But instead of on the street, it was on the television screens ... (Žilnik 2007)

To show his convictions that the media and the powerful, uncompromising German state had set up this event and used it as a public threat, Žilnik assembled his case using actual television footage as well as several interviews with reliable sources, such as the police, sociologists, and psychologists. "Basically, the poetic of this film is based on showing and revealing the editing of lies and the media manipulation of Bayerisches Fernsehen" (Žilnik, qtd. in Jončić 2002: 72).

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<sup>10</sup> One must keep in mind that film equipment in the early 1970's was analogue, bulkier, less portable, slower to set up and comparatively more expensive than it is in the digital-era. It would have been uneconomical for crews to simply let their cameras run or leave their lighting on for long periods of time while waiting in hope of catching the action.



Immediately after the film's emergence, without it even having been shown, it was forbidden: Žilnik could not escape the censorship machine even in Germany. It was stopped by *Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle*. "They simply wrote a judgement, to the effect of: 'the film doesn't understand the circumstances in Germany and should not be shown publicly because it's presenting our political debate falsely'. So, it was never shown publicly" (Žilnik 2007). From that point on, Žilnik was under observance as a terrorist sympathizer.

*The Public Execution* is the only German documentary film that was immediately forbidden for public showing (Jončić 2002: 72). It can now be found in the film archives in Koblenz, Germany, and is shown during Žilnik's various retrospectives, mostly out of curiosity as 'the film that was banned in Germany'.

#### **4.1.2. Das Paradies – Eine imperialistische Tragikomödie (1976) – The Paradise – An Imperialist Tragicomedy**

In 1976, Želimir Žilnik made another provocatively defiant fiction film about the Red Army Faction (RAF), which he, himself, describes as, "very ironic, very direct, very nasty" (Žilnik 2007).

He once again came up with the idea through the media: this time while reading the newspaper about the kidnapping of Peter Lorenz, a conservative German politician (CDU) kidnapped by the Movement 2 June, a group affiliated with RAF. Lorenz, a candidate for the mayor of Berlin, was kidnapped on 27 February 1975, just a few days before the elections on 3 March. Nevertheless, his party ended up receiving the most votes during his absence. Lorenz was eventually released on 4 March 1975 in exchange for several imprisoned group members. Žilnik was immediately suspicious of the whole incident, about Lorenz's possible involvement in the event in order to use his kidnapping through the media as a way to win votes. "He (Lorenz) used the whole thing in his political campaign. He used every opportunity available to describe the abduction in detail to the press. And in the end he got many voters and sympathy on his side" (Žilnik, qtd. in Jončić 2002: 76). So Žilnik decided to make a visual allusion.

Bayerisches Fernsehen was supposed to finance the large film project. Žilnik recalls, "And I asked actually Fassbinder and Hanna Schygulla to play the roles first. They asked for some money, which I could give them for 25,000–30,000 German marks" (Žilnik 2007).

After six months of pre-production preparation, only three days before the beginning of the shoot, everything was stopped. The managing director of Bayerisches Fernsehen had suddenly been replaced. The new director

dropped Žilnik's project, and paid Žilnik 100,000 German Marks in compensation. He used his compensation money to continue his now "freed" low-budget production. Žilnik could, however, no longer afford Fassbinder and Schygulla.

In *The Paradise*, Žilnik shows a business woman who sets up her own abduction by an anarchist group. She decides to do this because she had run into financial difficulties and needed a way to present her firm's demise to the public.

One particularly vivid scene becomes yet another example of how Žilnik uses spontaneity, diversion from the script, and a mixing in of elements of documentary: the lead actress was filmed while actually getting a tooth pulled at the dentist's. This was a real, documented event; a very gory and painful-looking scene with an extended close-up focusing on the bleeding and tooth-pulling. It turns out the actress had asked for a day off because she needed her tooth pulled and so Žilnik decided to simply go with her, film it, and add it as film material. It was clearly solely used as a gory shock factor to provoke a reaction from the viewers. He even laughingly admits that it was "a bit too much" (Žilnik 2007).

In the final scene the woman has been "freed" from her captors and is sitting for a televised interview, where she reveals herself as a convert to the anarchist cause. She then proceeds to shoot herself in the stomach in front of the camera and drops to the floor. This is a clear allusion to his *The Public Execution* and the event it had portrayed: The camera man desperately tries to capture the fleeting dramatic event in front of his lens and shouts "Light!!". Defiantly emphasizing the allusion, Žilnik replays the dramatic sequence once more.

Žilnik said that after the premier,

it was cold eyes. They said, 'Oh, you have really done something! You can't film that – no!' And I said, 'but that's alright, it's just a fiction'. But it wasn't a fiction – *that* was the problem, [...] and after three days, I ran to a friend, a film critic. I showed it to him and even he said, 'That's too much for me'. Even today when the film is being shown – because sometimes it's shown, as it was the first film about that topic – the viewers turn and say, 'That's impossible'. And I say, 'Is it bad? Is it junk?' They say [in disbelief and exasperation], 'Oh, no...that's just...no!' So, yes, that was and is a big taboo. (Žilnik 2007)

A few days after its showing and after having searched the BLAT Stadtmagazin office located below, the police searched Žilnik's Munich apartment in vain for any evidence of his connection with terrorists. They questioned him about his relations and Žilnik replied defiantly, "I just read the newspaper" (qtd. in Klunker 1999: 229). The authorities were only able to

find some problems with his legal documents: although he had a residence permit, his work permit had expired and he still owed some back taxes for the production. Luckily for him, Alexander Kluge, the then-leader of the filmmakers' union, helped keep Žilnik, his fellow union member and friend, out of jail. Nonetheless, Žilnik was ordered to leave the country within 24 hours. Civil police picked him up in the night and brought him across the border to Salzburg, Austria, where they left him. He was expelled from Germany indefinitely – that is, until he was invited back to stage his new and successful theater piece, *Gastarbeiter Oper*, less than one year later.

*The Paradise*, however, was not banned and had been shown in cinemas for a few days during the beginning of distribution, though stopped shortly thereafter. Fassbinder had evidently seen it, and the Fassbinder-film that was about terrorism, *Die Dritte Generation* (1978), is in a certain sense “a rip-off of Žilnik’s film” (Klunker 1999: 229). Therefore, it is not far-fetched to say that Žilnik had directly influenced Fassbinder, who was arguably one of the most influential German directors of his time.

#### 4.2. The German Phase: Summing Up

Guest-workers, human rights, the uncompromising power of the German state, truth and lies, manipulation and reality: these are some of the social and political themes Žilnik chose to highlight during his years in Germany. When analyzing his films from the German phase, it is clear that the topics he chose to illustrate were highly critical not only of the West German state as such, but also of the German mentality in general: Prussian, uninviting, cold, xenophobic, watch doggish, hypocritical, perverse, kitsch, and dictatorial.

Unlike in Yugoslavia, in Germany, “lack of artistic value” was not an issue for Žilnik. Similarly, sex and social matters, though attention-getting devices, were not as controversial in Germany. So, what could Žilnik do to effectively provoke? He presented the German society with its taboos. It did not take him long to locate Germany’s Achilles’ heel: the Red Army Faction and terrorism.

Žilnik did not merely express political criticism – that would surely be boring. He showed the terrorists as victims of the German state; that the Germans, too, are capable of perverse and hypocritical methods of flexing their muscles; that German elites are capable of collaborating with the enemy, i.e., RAF. He used conspiracy theories, directly expressed (*Public Execution*) and alluded (*The Paradise*), and supported them with his already-established style of mixing documentary and fiction. In both films, he uses

his own editing and manipulation of reality to question the editing of lies and manipulation of media. Remaining low-budget, he utilizes gore combined with camera movements to shock and grab the attention and provoke criticism from his audience, i.e., the too long and bloody close-up of a tooth really being pulled. He replays the televised suicide to emphasize the sensationalist media trying to capture death on television, an allusion to the case of *Public Execution*.

His German phase is also wrapped around the combination of realism and irony: from having Germans reinterpreting *Lorelei*, thereby reinforcing their *kitsch*, to the title of *The Paradise*, irony abounds.

The German critics were already familiar with Žilnik as a filmmaker before he came to Germany. They did not respond negatively to his critical portrayal of the Yugoslav reality in the late 1960s – on the contrary: they had praised and awarded him several prizes. They were able to applaud criticism of the Yugoslav system and regime, yet they could not handle criticism directed against their own state.

*Public Execution* was banned immediately and without question – ending up being the only German documentary to have been immediately banned; Žilnik was accused of ignorance and of not understanding the country's situation; he was put under observation as a terrorist sympathizer; the production company pulled out of the production of *The Paradise* a few days before it was to begin; the idea from *The Paradise* was later successfully used by Fassbinder in one of his films. In addition, even people who had been long-term contacts of Žilnik reacted negatively. He was not merely ostracized as he had been in Yugoslavia, but because he had openly raised so many critical, sensitive questions, he was suspected of being a terrorist sympathizer, which consequently led to his deportation. In a real-life twist of irony, Žilnik became a victim of exactly what he had criticized: of German hypocrisy, the German watch dog, and the German dictator within.

The German response was indeed harsh and rash, resulting not only in the banning of Žilnik's film, but also the banning of Žilnik the person. It had become obvious that such a controversial figure as Žilnik could not escape censorship, having his films banned, or being ostracized – regardless of the state system he was working in. The competing systems reacted somewhat similarly, yet, ironically, the communist state (Yugoslavia) allowed him to democratically and legally defend his film in a court of law, whereas the democratic state (Germany) simply banned his film without any further discussion.

## 5. Conclusion

What is the truth; what is a lie? What is reality; what is manipulation? What is documentary; what is fiction? Žilnik's audience is repeatedly confronted with such questions as he paints his critical message onto the big screen: Power deceives, exploits, and ruins its subjects.

During Žilnik's formative years, those politically turbulent years, his trials and tribulations helped solidify and reinforce what was to become recognized as his consistently provocative way of communicating his message. His experiences during this period merely intensified his drive to expose the social and political realities that were hidden under a wealth of power and propaganda, whether communist or capitalist, whether socialist or democratic, whether Yugoslav or German. Žilnik, the filmmaker, stands freely and independently as a *humanist* not bound to any political system or state, not bound to the formalities of the industry, and not bound to any conventional form of artistic expression.

He consistently made social and political films through unconventional, non-classical and controversial ways, with technical and artistic experimentation. From the beginning onwards, his films have been defiant, shameless, exaggerated, blatantly ironic, erotic, gory, anti-romantic, anti-ideal, whistle-blowing, highly taboo-breaking, low-budget, and highly controversial. Žilnik's film poetics are based on the fact that he completely utilizes his *artistic freedom*, without fear of being criticized, but with the intent of getting criticized, while criticizing. He seems to say and show everything that he wants to show, and what and how he sees everything, without limiting himself by abiding to some technical or poetic form.

He uses *shock value* to communicate his ideas and arguments. Just as his direct, close-up, in-your-face camera shots leave no room for the viewer's thoughts to wander or escape, so do his intense topics force the viewer into the issue at hand. He exposes the virgin audience to topics and scenery that they are not used to being confronted with, in manners that they are unfamiliar with: Žilnik never bores his audience. Their uneasiness is simply part of the Žilnik experience.

He openly experiments with the invisible *border between documentary and fiction*. His unique blending of those two elements distinguishes him from other filmmakers. His most specific method of directing is giving the reins to the heroes of the films, who very willingly play themselves and are allowed to improvise and stray from the script. Through participant-driven open-narratives and characters that play themselves, Žilnik breathes a new life into each film, a "living organism" which grows to take on its own, unique form.

He relinquishes the over-bearing control as a parent would do for the sake of the independence and development of his child, allowing the film to liberate itself from any formal confines, including its own director.

Žilnik has been able to accomplish so much as a filmmaker because he works very *spontaneously and cheaply*. Being that he is inspired by fresh and current events, when a topic surfaced that he was interested in, he would immediately start filming, not waiting around for securing financial support. This spontaneity and ability to work low-budget has freed him from the restraints of the bureaucratic procedure of waiting for funding, making him a truly independent author. He would take his camera, along with his ideas, and make a film today about the events of tomorrow.

Žilnik's films are a highly original chronicle of social and political events of his time, with a view not consistently found anywhere else. He chronicled not only without fear of the consequences, but with a complete understanding of his provocation and of which consequences his provocation might reap. He chronicled persistently, assertively, fearlessly, and provocatively, with the purpose of including *his* social reality, not that of the authority, among the filmic accounts of the history of the turbulent 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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