

# CENSORSHIP

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L-R

*Editor*

DEREK JONES



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## DUSAN MAKAVEJEV

Yugoslav filmmaker, 1932–

Dusan Makavejev has experienced two types of censorship – the repressive censorship of communism and the subtle one of capitalism. Under communism he made films which were later shelved; under capitalism nothing was shelved, but many of his projects never materialized.

By the time he made his most controversial *W.R.: Misterije organizma* (*W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism*) in 1971, Makavejev was internationally acclaimed. *W.R.*, which in addition to explicit sexual content makes daring nonconformist political statements, was found outrageous by the Yugoslav Ministry of Culture and shelved. Makavejev's further projects did not receive approval for production. As travel abroad for Yugoslav citizens was not restricted at the time, the director and his wife, Bojana Marian (musical editor of all his films), chose to leave the country. They set up home in Paris, but also worked in the USA, Canada, Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany, Australia, and Israel. Since leaving Yugoslavia, Makavejev, who has also written all his films, has had a hard time securing finance for his projects. While in Yugoslavia (1965–71) he was able to make four feature films; over 30 years in the West he has only realized six more. Since 1994 he has tried in vain to find finance for a feature project called *Yugoslavia*.

Born in Belgrade, Makavejev graduated in psychology from the University of Belgrade and made amateur documentaries. He was strongly influenced by the Yugoslav Marxist-humanist group Praxis, which itself was subject to censorship. In his early work, Makavejev set out to explore the extent to which individual behaviour is determined by social and political influences. His first feature, *Covek nije tica* (*Man Is Not a Bird*, 1965), is a love story with a sad ending. The lovers copulate to the accompaniment of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. His second film, *Ljubavni slučaj ili tragedija sluzbenice PTT* (1967, *Love Affair; or, The Tragedy of the Missing Switchboard Operator*), again a love story with a tragic end, received international acclaim. In this film Makavejev daringly experimented with nonlinear narrative and Godard-inspired techniques of associative montage. In a scene which was supposed to be the prelude to the first screened sexual intercourse, Makavejev showed his Yugoslav protagonists watching television footage of Russians pushing down church crosses (from Esphir Shub's *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*). By using this seemingly unrelated documentary footage, Makavejev was not only setting up a sociopolitical context for the love story but creating a complex allegory. The challenge to the previously erect but now falling symbols of the religious establishment was a visual equivalent to the vulnerability of phallic power which the film examined. Scenes containing nudity were cut when the film was released in France and Britain.

In three of his next five films, *Nevinost bez zastite* (1968, *Innocence Unprotected*), *WR* (1971), and the Canadian–French co-production *Sweet Movie* (1974), Makavejev abandoned straightforward narrative altogether and switched to complex associative montage to make statements about the complex interaction of personal libidinal inclinations, national character, and world politics. *Nevinost bez zastite*, incidentally, was

based on an original work by Dragoljub Aleksič, a Serbian acrobat who had not been allowed to perform in public during the Nazi occupation. Aleksič, a childhood hero of Makavejev, made the film clandestinely, and, after it had been reworked, apparently took the film around Yugoslavia by bicycle before it was banned. Makavejev's version – which includes interviews with Aleksič – mocks Nazi and Communist politics.

*W.R.: Misterije organizma* opens with a 20-minute documentary on the American period in the life of one of the leading members of the Frankfurt School, Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957), and combines feature and documentary to make a nonconformist statement on social and sexual liberation, totalitarianism and imperialism, communism, and free love. The director meshes together subplots about Yugoslavs, Soviets, Chinese, Americans, and Germans. *W.R.*, standing for both Wilhelm Reich and World Revolution, was avant-garde, unconventionally structured around a wide array of cinematic techniques – mostly musical collages and associative montages of documentary and feature film (from documentary footage of crowds cheering Mao Zedong to feature excerpts from a 1948 Soviet glorification of Stalin, and “shock corridor”-style scenes from an American mental institution). The film is, in fact, an attack on communist prudery. One of its characters, Milena, believes that “communism without free love is a wake in a graveyard”.

*W.R.* was shown at the Yugoslav film festival in Pula, but then withheld from distribution initially after Soviet pressure. Graphic sex was one of the concerns of the Ministry of Culture. Another was the ridicule of socialist kitsch, and the generally incomprehensible appeal to sexual and social liberation, considered to be a harmful Western influence. Reportedly, Tito himself found the film to be a perverted work of art and left before the end of a private screening, along with writer Miroslav Krleža. In 1973 a lawsuit was launched against Makavejev by a veterans' association in Vojvodina who had felt offended by the film's preoccupation with masturbation, homosexuality, and exhibitionism. In the West, *W.R.* played mostly within the festival circuit and had a limited theatrical release, even then censored for sexual content in Britain, France, and the USA.

Makavejev's subsequent *Sweet Movie*, made in the west, went even further in applying the approaches of *W.R.* and has a visceral disturbing effect on the viewer. It is one of his most controversial films and has caused public outcry in western Europe and North America for its bold treatment of sexuality and politics. The film has had limited release in the West and exhibitors, fearing audience outrage, refrain from scheduling it. Since *Sweet Movie*, Makavejev has had enormous difficulties in finding sponsors for his work. In his later films (such as *Montenegro*, 1981; *The Coca-Cola Kid*, 1985; and *Manifesto*, 1988), he gradually abandoned associative referencing and stopped making political statements. He maintained his interest in human sexuality, but now treated it with less intensity. Makavejev returned to using associative political referencing in *Gorilla Bathes at Noon* (1993), dealing with the end of the Cold War.

It is not just the sex but rather the cross-referencing of sex and politics that censors of Makavejev's films have found difficult to handle. There is nothing as brazen as Makavejev's daring montages, which overload his simple plots with numerous layers of significance. He does not hesitate to use stereotypical images, like the stiff Russian lover in *W.R.*, or the hygiene-obsessed Texas oil tycoon and the sensual, glamorous Latin singer in *Sweet Movie*. Makavejev's stance is to defy traditional stereotypes by placing them in a nontraditional sequence of other cultural icons and signifiers which allows him to subvert the commonplace pillars of historical imagination. He has not always been successful. Nevertheless, it is Makavejev's trademark to challenge popular understanding by confronting commonplace mentality with frivolous subversive collages. Makavejev's oeuvre is routinely part of the curriculum for film production students.

DINA IORDANOVA

### Films

- Covek nije tica* (Man Is Not a Bird), 1965  
*Ljubavni slučaj ili tragedija sluzbenice PTT* (Love Affair; or, The Tragedy of the Missing Switchboard Operator), 1967  
*Nevinost bez zastite* (Innocence Unprotected), 1968  
*WR: Misterije organizma* (WR: Mysteries of the Organism), 1971  
*Sweet Movie*, 1974  
*Montenegro*, 1981  
*The Coca-Cola Kid*, 1985  
*Manifesto*, 1988  
*Gorilla Bathes at Noon*, 1993  
*Hole in the Soul*, 1994

### Writings

- "Film Censorship in Yugoslavia", *Film Comment* (July–August 1975)

### Further Reading

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