

encyclopedia of the  
**DOCUMENTARY FILM**

Volume 3  
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## ŽILNIK, ŽELIMIR

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Žilnik's highly original works—mostly docudramas, reenacted documentaries, and provocative features—have cemented his reputation as the Yugoslav master of subversive filmmaking. His consistently daring explorations of social taboos are informed by a serious commitment to radicalism and liberalism. Challenging the conventions of the documentary genre has helped Žilnik to examine and expose some popular myths of Yugoslavia's historical destiny.

Žilnik's critical approach and gritty visuals were first appreciated internationally in the late 1960s. His documentary on the homeless *Nezaposleni ljudi/The Unemployed* (1968) won at Oberhausen, and his experimental feature *Rani radovi/Early Works* (1969) won the Grand Prix at the Berlin Film Festival. Named after the highly contested Hegelian writings of Marx, *Early Works* is considered a prime example of the Yugoslav Black Wave, made at a period when the influence

of the neo-Marxist Praxis group was at its height in Yugoslavia. Tito's personal disapproval of Žilnik's work, however, led to the ban of *Lipanjaska gibanja/June Turmoil* (1969), a documentary on the awkward subject of student dissent, as well as of *Early Works* and *Sloboda ili strip/Freedom or Cartoons* (1972).

In interviews given around this time, Žilnik said he particularly appreciated feature films that mixed documentary parts, as long fiction and documentary were clearly distinguishable. "In the final analysis," he said, "if you are using film as a tool, as a means of communication that, hopefully, will change people, then I think the documentary film is always stronger. I think a documentary film will live longer" (Van Dyke, 1970).

In the 1970s, Žilnik worked in exile in Germany, making independent leftist documentaries on Gastarbeiters and anarcho-terrorism and was

censored once again, this time by the Germans. Back in Yugoslavia, Žilnik deployed his trademark sarcasm in a number of made-for-TV documentaries on socially sensitive topics. His black comedy *Tako se kalio čelik/How the Steel Was Tempered* (1988) revealed the disastrous state of the underground personal economies flourishing within the mismanaged system of state socialism.

In the 1990s, Žilnik became an outspoken critic of nationalism and worked on subversive satires realised for Belgrade's dissident *Studio B 92*. His internationally acclaimed "mockumentary" *Tito po drugi put medju srbima/Tito Among the Serbs for a Second Time* (1993) questioned the cult to Tito's personality and effectively weakened the overwhelming referencing to Tito as the source of all Yugoslav troubles. In this film, Žilnik lets a well-known Tito impersonator spend a few hours on the sidewalks of Milošević's Belgrade pretending that Tito has been resurrected and has come to confront (and rebuff) the spontaneous opinions of ordinary people on the streets. The footage of this improvisation is intercut with archival footage, thus producing a powerful statement on the past and present iconic quality of Tito's personality.

In his docudrama *Dupe Od Mramora/Marble Ass* (1995), Žilnik attacks the Serbian brand of "machismo" by featuring a male prostitute who claims that by enduring the sometimes excessive passions of his lovers, he in fact absorbs the violence that plights society at large. The film is yet another example where a fictional narrative evolves from reenacting the protagonist's real-life experiences.

In the late 1990s, Žilnik's interest was focused mostly on the issue of European-wide migrations. *Kud plovi ovaj brod/Wanderlust* (1998) critically examines the movements of East block nationals during the first decade of post-communism. *Tvrđjava Evropa/Fortress Europe* (2000), yet another reenacted documentary shot on digital video in Slovenia and Italy, mixes the litanies of Russian émigré Artjom and his daughter Katja with shattering footage of interviews with detainees in the asylum seekers camps in Italy and Austria.

DINA IORDANOVA

See also Makavejev, Dušan

### Biography

Born in 1942, in Niš, Yugoslavia (Serbia). Studied law and entered filmmaking as an amateur. Has more

than sixty shorts, documentaries, and features to his credit. Suffered censorship in Yugoslavia and migrated to Germany in the 1970s in search of artistic freedom, but was soon disillusioned and returned. Worked in theatre and television through the 1980s. In the 1990s associated with the anti-nationalist critical intelligentsia in Serbia. Winner of numerous awards at international feature and documentary festivals.

### Selected Films

- 1967 *Žurnal o omladini na selu zimi/Newsreel on Village Youth in Winter* (Yugoslavia): writer, director
- 1967 *Pioniri maleni, mi samo vojska prava, svakog dana nicemo ko zelena trava Little Pioneers* (Yugoslavia): writer, director
- 1968 *Nezaposledni ljudi The Unemployed* (Yugoslavia): writer, director
- 1969 *Rani radovi Early Works* (Yugoslavia): writer, director
- 1969 *Lipanjaska gibanja/June Turmoil* (Yugoslavia): writer, director
- 1970 *Crni film Black Film* (Yugoslavia): director
- 1972 *Sloboda ili strip Freedom or Cartoons*, (Yugoslavia): director
- 1972 *Žene dolaze The Women are Coming*, (Yugoslavia): director
- 1972 *Ustanak u Jasku/The Uprising in Jazak* (Yugoslavia): director
- 1972 *Öffentliche Hinrichtung Public Execution* (Germany): director
- 1972 *Unter Denkmalschutz Protected Heritage* (Germany): director
- 1988 *Tako se kalio čelik How the Steel Was Tempered* (Yugoslavia): writer, director
- 1993 *Tito po drugi put medju srbima/Tito Among the Serbs for a Second Time* (Yugoslavia): writer, director
- 1995 *Dupe od mramora/Marble Ass* (Yugoslavia): writer, director
- 1998 *Kud plovi ovaj brod/Wanderlust* (Yugoslavia): writer, director
- 2000 *Tvrđjava Evropa/Fortress Europe* (Slovenia/Italy): writer, director

### Further Reading

- Iordanova, Dina, *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media*, London: British Film Institute, 2001, 96–99.
- Miltojevic, Branislav, *Rani Radovi Želimira Žilnika*, Nis: Sirius, 1992.
- Zelimir Zilnik Website*. Available: [http://www.geocities.com/zilnik\\_zelimir](http://www.geocities.com/zilnik_zelimir) (April 4, 2002).
- Steinberg, Stefan, and Anders, Ernst, Interview with the filmmaker Zelimir Zilnik. *World Socialist Web Site*, June 29, 2001. Available: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/jun2001/bint-j29.shtml> (April 4, 2002).
- Van Dyke, Willard, "Early Works: An Interview with Zelimir Zilnik," in *Grove Press International Film Festival Book*, 1970. Available: [http://www.geocities.com/zilnik\\_zelimir](http://www.geocities.com/zilnik_zelimir) (April 4, 2002).