

## Article

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## **Dušan Makavejev (1932-2019)**

Before the successes of Emir Kusturica, Dušan Makavejev was the best known director from Yugoslavia. Some of his enthusiasts regarded him as one of the leading figures of European film modernism, alongside such directors as Jean-Luc Godard and Miklós Jancsó. He was one of those innovators of the 1960s, who broke with the stale cinema dominating their countries in the previous decades. Others admired him for breaking social taboos, especially those regarding sexual behaviour. Finally, some saw him principally as a political filmmaker, engaged with Marxism, in a way which was typical for Yugoslav cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, but rare in other socialist countries, largely because the Yugoslav version of socialism was more democratic and open to criticism, as demonstrated by the work of Praxis philosophers from Belgrade and Zagreb.

Makavejev was clearly all of the above. In this sense he was most similar to Godard; he was the Godard of Eastern Europe, who didn't take cinematic form for granted, but explored it, experimenting with editing and colour. Like the director of *Weekend*, he was also deeply interested in films made by other directors; his background was in the amateur film movement, and apart from making films, he engaged with film theory. Like Godard, he was also very political on and off screen. He joined his country's communist party and never left it, only being expelled from it, following the production of *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971). Like Godard, there is also much sex on screen in Makavejev's films and it is presented in a way which is disconcerting, even for people who pride themselves on not being prudish, especially in his *Sweet Movie* (1974), which touches on the issue of children's sexuality. Finally, both directors were very cosmopolitan. Their films were set in many countries and we can hear in them many languages. In the case of Makavejev, it was in part due to necessity, as after *WR* he was not allowed to work in his homeland and sought employment in countries such as France, the United States and Sweden.

Yet, there were also differences between these two auteurs. Godard was never an ethnographer; his goal was to bring his ideas to foreign places, rather than learn about them and share his knowledge with the viewers. Makavejev, on the other hand, travelled with curiosity and an open mind and was enchanted by, for example, Gypsies stealing wire in a copper factory, as shown in *Man Is Not a Bird* (1965) or those at the forefront of the sexual revolution in the United States, as presented in *WR*. There is a curiosity and fascination with the 'other' behind his projects, which affords his films an exotic quality, which did not disappear even many decades after their premiere. Similarly, while Godard's films come

across as dogmatic, Makavejev's work is free of dogma. This can be attributed to the fact that he and fellow Yugoslav directors of his generation, creators of the Yugoslav New Wave or Black Wave, such as Živojin Pavlović and Želimir Žilnik, wanted to save Marxism, as practiced in their country, from dogmatism. Finally, unlike Godard, Makavejev was not hostile to American cinema and culture at large. He spent some time there, shooting films and lecturing and befriended some American directors, most importantly Francis Ford Coppola. That said, he looked at this country from the position of a bemused observer, rather than somebody who identified with it.

Great artists are obsessed by timeless ideas, which reappear in their works. Makavejev was no different in this respect and his topic was the pursuit of freedom. It is telling that the title of his first full-length fiction film is *Man Is Not a Bird*. The bird is a symbol of freedom and in this film we find people who literally try to defy gravity, but also those who attempt to break social constraints, such as a woman mistreated by her worker husband, who rebels against her subservient position. Due to his interest in freedom, Makavejev's films are informed by two influential modern thinkers: Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. The first of them was preoccupied with the slavery, imposed by capitalism, known as alienation; the second with culture, which represses our sexual nature. It is worth mentioning here that Makavejev studied psychology and his background in psychology is discernible in many of his films. He frequently shows that alienation was not eradicated under socialism and people living there suffered from repressed sexuality and solitude. Significantly, men in his films tend to be more sexually and mentally repressed than women.

Although many film enthusiasts have heard about Makavejev, his films are not well-known. His early productions fared best: *Man Is Not a Bird*, *Love Affair*, or *the Case of the Missing Switchboard Operator* (1967), *Innocence Unprotected* (1968) and *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971). His later films, widely regarded as weaker, remain practically unknown and the same is true about his early shorts. The fact that he stopped making films in the mid-1990s further precluded deeper engagement with his work.

This long silence was in a large part the result of Makavejev's independence, his unwillingness to endorse any political system he did not agree with or seek favours from private sponsors. At the time when Yugoslavia was disintegrating, his identity remained Yugoslav, as opposed to becoming a Serb, and he yearned for the time when Serbs, Croats and Bosnians lived in peace with each other. This anti-nationalist stance did him no favours among the political and cinematic establishment in his country.

I had the pleasure of meeting Makavejev on several occasions in the early 2010s. At the time he lived in Belgrade on Charles Chaplin Street, probably the only street in Belgrade named after a film director. What I found fascinating was the contrast between his affinity to the surreal, the grotesque and the boldness with which he explored the ‘mysteries of organism’ and his gentle manners, his almost childish simplicity and modesty. Moreover, while I saw him as somebody who imposed on the photographic material his unique vision, he perceived himself as a documentarist, who merely captured what was ‘already there’, in plain sight. When we met, he was full of ideas. His main project was a film about his countryman, Nikola Tesla; he confessed that he was spending his days researching Tesla’s life and his inventions. I hoped that I would see this film coming to fruition. Now I know that it will never happen, but rejoice in the fact that the films Makavejev managed to finish never lost their freshness and ability to outrage.

In *SEEC* we tried to make up for the scarcity of critical engagement with Makavejev’s cinema, by dedicating a special issue to him in 2014, edited by Greg de Cuir. Its main purpose was to focus on the less well known films and facets of Makavejev’s artistic persona. We hope that his death will serve as an opportunity to revisit his films and the publications devoted to him.