

Article

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The Dilemma of Modernity - Who's Singin' Over There? (1980)



The passing of 2023 has put the entire world community in a state of inactivity in which nothing can be done, facing right before us the horrors of the war between Israel and Palestine. The inhuman bombings and killings, especially in the Gaza Strip, have shocked us as human beings. More such massacres are likely to occur in the future, and we have to deal with it. Our problem is that such conditions are created not in a state of pre-modern milieu as human beings but in a situation built on modern and postmodern conditions. To examine this dilemma of modernity in particular, we examine the 1980

film *Who's Singin' Over There?* made by Yugoslav film director Slobodan Šijan. The film is primarily a Black Comedy film based on World War II and is an object of events from a day close to the 1941 Nazi invasion of Yugoslavia. The film is primarily considered a Road Movie genre film, as the model parallels American director John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939). The film also recalls the Black Comedy conditions of human behaviour during the horrors of war in Spanish artist Fernando Arrabel's work *A Picnic of Battle Field*. The film has been criticised in various aspects, and our

commentary is expected to build on the dynamics of modernity and the conditions contained through the concepts in Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* and *Modernity and the Holocaust*. (*Who's Singin' Over There?* The movie was selected in 2016 by the Yugoslav Film Archive for the *100 Serbian Feature Films [1911-1999] for a Cultural Asset of Great Importance* as a critical selection for the Cannes Classics at the Cannes Film Festival in 2020.)

In the early 1980s, the advent occurred of two significant directors to Yugoslavia's cinema. The two are Slobodan Šijan and Emir Kusturica. In 1980, Slobodan Šijan made his first film, *Who's Singin' Over There?* While Emir Kusturica created his first film, *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?* The two directors' films are cinematic works related to the history of Yugoslavia. While Emir Kusturica creates on the theme of Yugoslavia's economic and cultural boom of the early 1960s, Slobodan Šijan creates on the situation in Yugoslavia in 1941, which was affected by World War II.

Notably, both directors also use the black comedy genre in their films. Examining these two films shows that both directors often used the same cast for their creations. It is also quite remarkable that the two directors' first films were subject to critical acclaim at international film festivals. The screenwriter of *Who's Singin' Over There?* is the veteran screenwriter and director Dušan Kovačević, also the writer of Emir Kusturica's *The Underground*. The historical conditions of Yugoslavia are explored in new dimensions of reality and constructed with humour and satire unique to him. The two works, *Who's Singin' Over There?* and *The Underground*,

have drawn some critics to parallel reading as historically and artistically constructed cinematic works under the circumstances of the collapse of Yugoslavia.

The film begins with two young musicians presenting lyrical speeches to the audience. These gypsy young men are descendants of the Romans. (The Romans have long been deprived of voting rights in Eastern Europe, with no homeland to claim the way other linguistic or ethnic groups did in the 19th and 20th centuries.) These two young men perform their lyrical performances in this way several times in the film, facing the audience. It is, in a way, reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre system and allows one to watch it through a rigorous dissection method without being unique to the events and characters of the film.

An urban singer, tuberculosis patient, hunter, soil researcher, war veteran and two young Gypsy musicians are waiting for a bus to take them to Belgrade, the capital of Yugoslavia. A dilapidated bus arrives, with a drunk conductor and his son, with an infantile mind, as the driver. The central conflict begins with the activities of the Passengers, the conductor, and the driver. The bus travels to the capital city in April 1941, closer to the fascist attack on Yugoslavia. These passengers have to travel on the bus, facing the rules imposed by the conductor on the spot. The basic comedy is created as a conflict between the views of the conductor and the passengers. Everyone on the bus seems to be behaving for their survival. When the bus travels a short distance, a newly married couple joins them, and their arrival also changes the internal conditions of the bus.

The young man in the couple doesn't seem to be so mature, and the singer on the bus seems to be trying to win the heart of his newly married wife.

During the travel of the bus, conflicts are created with the situations that occur during the journey, and the bus moves forward, creating humour and satire. The war veteran here is a participant in The First World War, and his bravery and pride are visible to others. At the same time, the soil researcher always praises the order and efficiency of the Nazi state. He compares the waste, corruption, and inefficiency inherent to the Serbian/Yugoslav situation. The war veteran here loses his wallet when the bus ride, which is full of various conflicts, approaches Belgrade. Everyone on the bus blames the two young Roman singers on board. Everyone attacks them, and bombs are hurled at several places in the city at the same time. In this situation, the bus is also bombed. The bus is destroyed, and only two young singers survive. They get up from the rubble and perform the final song.

Before analysing this film, it is important to create a basic idea of the history of Yugoslavia. After World War I, the Balkans, Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes formed the kingdom that included these three regions. In 1929, it was changed to Yugoslavia. Germany, Italy, and their allies invaded Yugoslavia during World War II in 1941. A few years later, communist revolutionary and politician Josip Broz Tito liberated Yugoslavia from the invaders and became the country's leader. He founded the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, uniting various ethnic groups and building a socialist state in Yugoslavia. In 1963, it was changed

to the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Josip Broz Tito died in 1980, and during this period, an economic and political crisis arose, and nationalist and ethnic conflicts intensified. As a result of this and the collapse of socialist states, including Russia, Yugoslavia collapsed in the early 1990s. It was later divided into six independent states: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia.

We need to pay attention to how the content of this film is built on the foundations of modernity. The world has long believed modernity to be the most vital factor in determining the future course of humanity. Accordingly, the importance of rational intelligence, innovations in science and technology, development, democracy, free market, optimism, etc., arose in modernity. Many social and economic analysts had an exaggerated belief in this situation. But with human massacres, including world wars, the previously mentioned good dream of modernity faded. The philosophical discourse on modernity, which creates such genocides, was to be made in Europe. As a result, literary and art trends such as Dadaism, Absurdism, etc. were created. Also, scholars redefined modernity. The most crucial analyst for our scrutiny is the Polish national Zygmunt Baumann.

The importance of Zygmunt Baumann is to link these conditions to form the foundations of modernity rather than as the historical mistakes of individuals or states, including world wars. Baumann states that modernity takes on a dual form, making it more evident in his work *Modernity and the Holocaust*. According to Baumann,

modernity is referred to as the period of Enlightenment on the one hand, and modernity was referred to as a tool for a civilised process through the factors of emancipation, rationalisation, and development. It created the development of machines, gas chambers, and bureaucracy that led to events like the Holocaust, which, on the other hand, is necessary to commit genocide. Accordingly, Zygmunt Baumann argues that rationality promotes production and its ability to destroy human lives. Baumann analyses the relationship of concepts such as Max Weber's *Theory on Bureaucracy and Rationality to Genocide*, which laid the foundation for modernity.

The film tells the story of a dilapidated bus from a village in Yugoslavia to Belgrade, the capital, at a time nearer to the Nazi attack. According to our analysis, the situation created in *Who's Singin' Over There?* by Slobodan Šijan and Dušan Kovačević by the unreliable and dilapidated bus symbolises the situation in Yugoslavia. It puts characters in situations where they behave in everyday situations and have no vision of what is happening due to internal pressures. In this situation, some of the characters create sermons and behaviours about the heroism of war and the rationality and efficiency of modern society. At first glance, there is a logical approach to the rules of the conductor of this bus. But the rules that he builds on a logical basis work in a nonsensical position that benefits him. The people on the bus do not try to get into it and tolerate everything to migrate to the capital city by complying with those rules. It takes place on a bus that reflects modern science and technology advances, but it is a dilapidated bus. Modernity does not

enter Yugoslavia in a systematic, formal process, but modernity is built on different social and economic conditions, racial values, and pre-modern conditions. Thus, at the outset, it can be said that modernity enters Yugoslavia as a ruined bus.

The film ends with an unexpected, inhuman bombing of the capital city of Yugoslavia during World War II. In our observation of the basis for creating this situation, we find that the logic and bureaucracy of modernity lead to this as well. The Germans and others have created an existence in Hitler's idea of committing genocide in the same way that the people in the previous bus adhered to the conductor's absurd rules on a basic rational basis. Furthermore, Nazi bombs were also designed according to modern science, technological advances, and bureaucracy and rationality conditions. As mentioned earlier, modernity comes to Yugoslavia initially as a dilapidated bus, and eventually, it comes as massacres and bombings.

According to Zygmunt Baumann, German officers believed Hitler's word and acted under the official and rational system from the beginning. Extermination was recognised as the best course of action. Get rid of the Jews, and all your problems will be solved, Hitler said. Thus, modern methods, including the official and rational system, were used to claim the lives of millions of people, including Jews. According to him, the genocide was created by a division of ordinary officers built on bureaucracy and rationality. For Zygmunt Bauman, modernity creates society by modelling a park. Maintenance, proper care, and removal of unwanted plants are essential for the park's

survival. Hence, to quote Bauman, “*Behind the alliance stands fast the modern ‘gardening state’, viewing the society it rules as an object of designing, cultivating and weed-poisoning.*” Thus, in modernity, the justification of genocide, including wars, takes place on such a logical basis. Zygmunt Baumann quotes Marko Feingold as follows, saying that in Modernity and the Holocaust, the creators of modern science and technology contributed to the promotion of the production process as well as to genocide.

“[Auschwitz] was also a mundane extension of the modern factory system. Rather than producing goods, the raw material was human beings, and the end product was death, so many units per day were marked carefully on the manager's

production charts. The chimneys, symbol of the modern factory system, poured forth acrid smoke from burning human flesh. Modern Europe's brilliantly organised railroad grid carried a new raw material to the factories. It did so in the same manner as with other cargo. In the gas chambers, the victims inhaled noxious gas generated by prussic acid pellets, which were produced by the advanced chemical industry of Germany. Engineers designed the crematoria; managers designed the system of Bureaucracy that worked with zest and efficiency more backward nations would envy. Even the overall plan itself reflected the modern scientific spirit gone awry. We witnessed nothing less than a massive scheme of social engineering ...”

References

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