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## **The Documentaries and Short Films of Ratko Đurović and Velimir Stojanović**

**Abstract:** This paper shows the contribution of screenwriter Ratko Đurović and director Velimir Stojanović to documentaries and short films in general and not only in Montenegrin cinematography; in fact, this duo was unique as they were reformers of Yugoslav film expression.

**Keywords:** documentary; short film; experimental documentaries; Lovćen Film; Ratko Đurović; Velimir Stojanović.

One of the best traditions lies with the documentary form. I believe it is not the most decisive factor; at least it's not the factor which determines the fate of the man who wants and desires. His consciousness was always more important than material forces. If it weren't like that, Man would have not created anything.<sup>1</sup>

Film activity in the years after the war in Montenegro was almost symbolic. The lack of material, modest technical abilities and a small number of skilled professionals resulted in thirteen short coverages filmed between 1949 and 1951 (this was the time when Montenegro was one of the republics of the Democratic Federal Yugoslavia). So, it is no surprise that the first documentaries came through at the beginning of 1951. All of this is understandable considering that the setting up of a company for making and distributing films, Lovćen Film, took a few years and that it was working two years after it was established. Along with creating the conditions for an active production within the Lovćen Film company, the public is presented with two important personas, screenwriter Ratko Đurović and director Velimir Stojanović, while their best collaborations were filmed by Vladeta Lukić. In the beginning, Stojanović created the following films: *Iz našeg pomorstva* (Zvezda Film, 1950), *Da nas niko ne iznenadi* (Avala Film), *Njegoš i u slavu Njegoša* (Lovćen Film, 1951). It was immediately apparent that they were more than just propaganda coverages, and that they were inspired

<sup>1</sup> Ratko Đurović, Interview for *Pobjeda*, January 12, 1980.

by life and tradition, that they captured the ambience in which they were filmed, the sea, fortresses, islands, dungeons, ruins, rocks, the roads between the rocks, people and the atmosphere, and everything which undeniably could not be alienated from Montenegro. Authors simply do not take for granted the rustic beauty, the exaltation, and the tragedy of life.

Đurović shows a great deal of selectivity while choosing themes for his films, presenting events, and traditional beliefs as well as current dilemmas all through his own perspective; therefore, some of the works are basic, natural, albeit native, persevering, and authentic. Although, from time to time, the text is more impressive than the picture; yet, in the places where all the elements were in sync the form was expressive. Stojanović's early work was not always equally rich when it came to using expressions; it was closer to showing classical solutions than personal and subjective movements, especially when it came to the fact that for him the final result was not only an authorial desire but also the expression of the content itself. The extent of this could be seen in his film *Djelo Tripa Kokoljića* (1952), which was created by Đurović, Stojanović, and Vladeta Lukić. Presenting the best frescoes from the church Our Lady of the Rocks, on the island of St. George in Boka Kotorska, of this renown painter did not only deliver the information but also an expression that gave this work a certain autonomy. In that film, the director's talent and persona matured, so that in the following film *Mrtvi Grad* (1952) it showed its full artistic potential. The dead, abandoned and demolished houses, empty squares of Perast, the damaged sills and objects from which a long time ago life has fled have actually evoked memories and summoned the past centuries. The camera kept diving into that dead world; it paused on details which remind of the time when there was life and abundance in the city (directing dealt with organizing and meshing of such impressions). The theme of suffering, the bondage of Montenegrin patriots, the desire for freedom and endurance, which is more powerful than dying; all of it inspired Stojanović to create three films: *Za život*, *San nad bezdanom*, and *U odbojima sunca* (1954), which are tied to the infamous dungeon on Mamula island. Even though, these are somewhat variations on the same theme, the most expression and spontaneity are seen in *U odbojima sunca*. The suffering of prisoners, the uncertainty, the constant presence of death and the Sun complement each other and enrich the mutual metaphors. From this period, the film *Utkani tokovi* (1954) is noticeable. In it, the high mountains, steep cliffs, and the meandering roads create a certain pastiche, which presents some of the well-known symbols of Montenegro. The work of Stojanović is in many aspects quite unusual. In a short span of five years, he created some 15 documentaries from which some momentarily became the epitome of such work in Yugoslav documentary film. The remarkable and almost unmatched agreement of screenplay, directing, and camera has led to a perfection of expression in order to reveal the essentials of the themes as well as realizing the values of its full potential. All these films were entwined with the ambience, time, people, while at the same time being informative but never actually becoming solely coverages but works that had a deeper content. The short film is more

than just a skill and routine for Stojanović; it is a creative output for presenting facts, motifs, impulses, and experiences within a certain topic, which in the end can become symbolic. Stojanović worked with such an artistic zeal; he did not stray from work that was informative, purposeful and commemorative, but he was also able to work with his colleagues, rise above the mundane, and create a platform for expression. As a screenwriter, Đurović did not only work with Stojanović, but he also worked with many other Montenegrin screenwriters.

There is not a famous name in cinematography that he did not lay the groundwork for film with; he wrote screenplays, texts or finalized production. His experience is manifold and rich; one that is tied to classical values, openness to new experiences and forms, a connectedness to beliefs which see in film not only the mundane reality but also the history, tradition, nature, and all that enables us to perceive life in its full meaning. This is why there was an endeavor to continue with the values which were established in the works of Stojanović, and which demanded that new films knew the processes on which originality and a socially engaged expression depended on. Their influence on future generations of documentary film makers was detrimental for the development and affirmation of those who followed. With the first documentaries and the beginnings of Montenegrin cinematography, it was realized that documentaries were not an illustration of the spoken text, a report or journal, in which the picture must follow the spoken information from a pre-ordered text, but that it is an authentic, independent work, recounted via a new media and an authentic cinematographic language. The text was given, if it was used at all, like in the unforgettable documentary *Mrtvi grad*, a completely different role from the one it had before. The documentary *Mrtvi grad* was their shared success.

“From this temporal distance, after more than five decades, some anthological scenes from *Mrtvi grad* still exist in the mind and are remembered. Especially the one, when the invisible hand brings back to life dead objects.”<sup>2</sup> Đurović, as a screenwriter, did not succumb as his colleagues did to write out the whole text, which was narrated by Marija Crnobori in *Mrtvi grad*; instead he unmistakably chose the verses of Ivan Gundulić: “Die the kingdoms, and die the towns, and all are hidden by noble grass...”<sup>3</sup> Thus, with this film he powerfully reminded us of the most beautiful moments taken from the rich written heritage of the Slavic language. The composition of frames in *Mrtvi grad*, alongside the spoken verses, stand far away from any literal interpretation, while at the same time being adorned not only in a noble hue of an age long gone, but also in a modern curiosity regarding the tragedy of many human endeavors and sacrifices. Bedazzled by the poetic impressions left by this film, Aleksandar Vučo wrote: “*Mrtvi grad* can be regarded as one of the film masterpieces. And not only that. Its place is among the finest works among contemporary documentaries worldwide.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Milorad Bošković, *Film i jugoslovensko društvo na kraju vijeka* (Podgorica: CANU, 1998, 36).

<sup>3</sup> Ivan Gundulić, *Osman*, <https://www.rastko.rs/rastko/delo/10062>, acc. on January 1, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Aleksandar Vučo, *Borba*, February 2, 1958.

In the documentary *Zatočnici mrijet naviknuti*, he took the paintings of famous artists (Jaroslava Čermaka, Vlaho Bukovca, Paje Jovanovića) as a foundation since Montenegro was the theme in all of them. It spoke of the resistance of Montenegro to various conquerors, so Stojanović was able to poetically praise Montenegrin freedom, while keeping his camera from beginning to end on the canvases. By using framing, the viewer follows the passive paintings, while sound montages portrayed the battles, shouts of Montenegrin heroes, muffled sounds of the wounded, and the fury of battle in which the Montenegrin people, while defending their freedom, wrote their national identity in European proportions. This way the passive paintings became active. Therefore, Stojanović was the first to show that by skillfully framing a two-dimensional painting along with a good rhythm of sound montages it is possible to create a dramatic ode. Later, such techniques were used on film and television, but they never succeeded in creating the freshness and inspiration of Stojanović's film. His next documentary on a similar theme *Slikarstvo Tripa Kokoljića* was less successful. It was filmed in the church Our Lady of the Rocks (Gospa od Škrpjela), because it was created at the same time as his other documentary *Mrtvi grad*. Stojanović's name is also connected to the first experimental documentary titled *Tri pjesme o sužnju*. In this trilogy, Stojanović worked on his own without a co-author, and he satisfied his artistic curiosity as well as achieving the uninhibited dance of light and shadows while placing himself as the director turned slave on the infamous Mamula. His life comes down to the only piece of a wall that light shines on and hand-curved signs of former inmates – his brethren in suffering. It is believed that while Stojanović worked on the trilogy that he was immensely fascinated by the island fortress and its harsh, monumental, and picturesque appearance; he was so impressed that he returned to the exterior of it for his last feature film *Kampo Mamula*. For one year, four of their documentaries (Đurović – Stojanović) were shown and positively accepted at various prestigious foreign film festivals: Berlin, Manheim, Venice, and Edinburgh. Đurović and Stojanović were in a way reformers of the Yugoslav documentary genre; it must be noted that documentary film up to the works of these two men was understood in previous republics of Yugoslavia as, plainly stated, a television story in which the pictures are explained by the narration followed by illustrations. Therefore, there was no true artistic creation and thus was it considered as a lower genre. What they did was novelty; in *Mrtvi grad* they left a bit of narration where it was needed but they used Gundulić's verses recited by Marija Crnobori; therefore, they used poems in a creative way by combining the male and female voices. Still, this film was understood as an art form liberated from its usual form/stereotype that existed at this time (1952). Đurović felt that the documentary genre should not be pushed toward verbalization; therefore, it needed to be liberated from narration and verbalization and nudged toward something that looked like a feature structure in which real life people from those places would actually 'act'. A flat, simple, and mundane story is presented and narrated. Đurović is there. There are many steps between that mundane story and art. *Gvint* is a moment in which something mundane becomes artistic. That's when something that is from everyday life gets a higher meaning, when the story becomes universal, and

when a local story becomes an inducement for a greater story that speaks to people from different spaces and time. Đurović's *gvint* is the crossing from mundane to art. In the first documentary *Njegoš*, filmed by Lovćen Film (screenwriters Đurović and Danilo Lekić), which was filmed for the centennial of the poet's death in 1951, the screenwriters rejected the traditional way of narrating the poet's biography in chronological order. In the delicate structure, they included features sequences, which was remarkable at the time and was highly artistic; thus, with only the use of film they conveyed their own experience and interpretation of the poet's life and persona to the viewers; they conveyed the part that was a specific world that enabled the creation of one of the most powerful individuals and poets among the South Slavic nations.

The following year (1952), the anthological documentary *Mrtvi grad* was filmed. By shooting the abandoned and covered in ivy chateaus, lavish railings, powerful baroque architecture, luxurious homes without roofs, windows covered in cobweb staring into the sky, graves, paintings of captains and ships of Perast, they were able to simultaneously show the splendor of a lost civilization and to create an intense and poetically melancholic sensation of Man's ephemeral existence all with the help of Gundulić's poetry and all in order to tell a tale of a once thriving and now forsaken city.

The ballad of a dead city is accompanied by a long-verse folk song about a tragic love between a sailor and beautiful Kata: down the ivory torso floats a withered leaf on a drop of rain... Real, pure poetry! There are multiple examples of classic visual expressions, the use of pure film language from which one is most memorable to me and that is of the rebellion of people from Perast against the French: a rifle barrel – a flash – the shattering of a lantern. That visual and acoustic effect should be entered as one of the most beautiful expressions in film.”<sup>5</sup>

The documentary *Mrtvi grad*, was their first mutual success. Every skillfully done frame in *Mrtvi grad*, along with the narrated verses which stand far from any literal meaning, radiate in a noble hue of a long-gone age, but also in a modern curiosity regarding the tragedy of many human endeavors and sacrifices.

The combination of a female and male voice is a novelty in domestic documentaries; a novelty which managed to effectively empower the dynamics of the film. The directing of Velimir Stojanović, clear and tending towards simple solutions is far from the usual advertised solutions to historical topics. The success is even greater because *Mrtvi grad* was made by a small filming company with modest means; thus, confirming the reality of its existence and further development.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Vicko Raspor, “Kritički prikaz,” *Pobjeda*, January 1, 1954.

<sup>6</sup> V. Kolar, “Kritički osvrt,” *Pobjeda*, February 1, 1953.

*Mrtvi grad* was presented in Venice and Edinburgh, while it was shown in 1954 in Manheim during Film Week in the category of chosen films.<sup>7</sup>

On his copy of the script for *Utkani tokovi*, Stojanović wondered and wrote: “How does one portray the dance of roads through Montenegro, how does one catch the melody of their movements and whiteness, configuration of space into which they are stitched; how does one achieve joy and beauty to the eye and ear with its reality and imagination?” The poetic style of the script, more precisely a part of it, I give in this work.

The film is about intersecting roads in Montenegro and which form a unique visual phenomenon. It was filmed in 1954. In his regular film rubric in *Politika*, the cinephile Vicko Raspor wrote on June 21, 1954: “One can elaborate on experimental films in our country only after the emergence of Lovćen’s Film’s *Utkani tokovi* (screen-play: Ratko Đurović, director: Velimir Stojanović) i trilogije *Tri pjesme o sužnju*.”<sup>8</sup>

Films: *Za život*, *San nad bezdanom*, and *U odbojima sunca* are parts of the trilogy *Tri pjesme o sužnju* these are the first experimental films in former Yugoslavia. They are inspired by common places, life, death, and freedom, and they happen in an ambience of the dark and moldy dungeon walls on the island of Mamula in Boka Kotorska. These three films are a segue to the later film *Kampo Mamula*, which was made by the same authors. They also made a film *Naša tamnovanja* in 1954 in which the history of the freedom-loving Montenegrin people is portrayed. Instead of a conclusion about their work, let’s use a quote from *Borba* (Jun 6, 1954) from an article on the *Poetry in the films of Velimir Stojanović* written by the critic Aleksandar Stefanović:

Velimir Stojanović succeeds in finding the right word; in adjusting his expression to the topic that he is discussing. His telling in *Naša tamnovanja* has a sort of strength of epic poems; in *Zatočnici mrijet naviknuti* is almost ceremonial told with Romantic pathos; functional with the paintings of the masters which show the national battle for freedom. In *Mrtvi grad*, it is practically a poem – light, subtle, elegantly framed as a sonnet.<sup>9</sup>

Stojanović is the founder of the Montenegrin school of documentary films, which was described as one with specific style and universal artistic range by Vicko Raspor, one of the undisputed authorities on evaluating Yugoslav documentary films. It was a fruitful period in young Montenegrin cinematography during which meaningful successes were happening. To confirm this statement, it is best to read the opinion of one of the most renowned film critics of the time, and without any doubt a great cinephile, Raspor:

<sup>7</sup> Gojko P. Kastratović, *Crnogorska kinematografija i filmovi o Crnoj Gori* (Podgorica: Društvo za očuvanje baštine, 1999, 48).

<sup>8</sup> Vicko Raspor, *Politika*, June 21, 1954.

<sup>9</sup> Aleksandar Stefanović, *Borba*, June 6, 1954.

If one cannot connect the names of Veljo Stojanović and Ratko Đurović with the beginning of our short, documentary films, because before them there were artistic works in SFRJ of value such as Belan's *Tunolovci* and Kosmač's *Prešern*, then at least one can say that these names signal the beginning of founding the school of a clearly defined direction and style that embrace the themes of Montenegro in the art of film.<sup>10</sup>

A careful review and insight into the productions of Lovćen Film back in the day, one can see that the greatest number of documentaries and short films (by all means not forgetting the experimental documentaries whose beginnings in the former Yugoslavia are tied to the name of Velimir Stojanović) were defined by programs and themes that were from an age – the past, near past, and the present moment of contemporary Montenegrin life.

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<sup>10</sup> Raspor, "Kritički prikaz."