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Framing the Margins: Representation of the Working Class in Contemporary Serbian Visual and Cinematic Art

Abstract: This paper examines the modes of visual representation of the working class in contemporary Serbian art and cinema. Employing analytical tools grounded in the study of social conditions – such as the social history of art, it explores various elements of visual language used to communicate scenes from the margins with the purpose of answering the questions of how the subject is chosen and portrayed, as well as their contributions to the visibility and representation of these issues. The paper also examines the proximity to, or established dialogue with, historical models of representation and approaches to these themes. Ultimately, realism is identified as the dominant model, though certain departures from it and experimental approaches are also recognized.

Keywords: working-class representation; contemporary Serbian art and cinema; *Working Class Heroes* (2022); *The Working Class Goes to Hell* (2023); Milica Ružičić.

The circumstances of the Serbian society's transition over the past three and a half decades have drastically altered the status and position of the working class. This transition has taken place along the path of transformation from a real-socialist to a capitalist society, accompanied by the introduction and implementation of various processes, among which privatization has had a detrimental impact on the status of the working class in Serbia.¹ In addition to the near-total devastation of industry, new social, economic, and class divisions and inequalities have emerged, with the working class being pushed to the margins in that process.² A large segment of former industrial workers³ was driven into precarious employment in the service sector or the informal economy; some sought opportunities abroad, while others became permanently unemployed. These trajectories fragmented what had previously been a

¹ Nada G. Novaković, "Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije," *Nacionalni interes* 17, no. 40 (2021): 155.

² *Ibid.*, 165.

³ The destruction of industry played a particular role in the process of the working class marginalization. According to Nada G. Novaković, from 2001 to 2013, the number of industrial employees decreased from 700,000 to 340,000, which is even lower than in 1960 (Novaković, "Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije," 165). As she cites Božo Drašković, "Slom industrijskog sektora u Srbiji. Postoje li šanse za deindustrijalizaciju," u *Deindustrijalizacija u Srbiji. Mogućnosti revitalizacije industrijskog sektora*, ur. Božo Drašković (Institut ekonomskih nauka; Beogradska bankarska akademija, Fakultet bankarstvo, osiguranje i finansije, 2014).

relatively cohesive working class, eroding its collective agency, weakening trade union structures, and limiting the capacity to defend labor rights and social protections.⁴ Once positioned at the symbolic and economic core of socialist Yugoslavia, the working class was progressively displaced,⁵ thereby opening space for the ascendancy of political elites and entrepreneurial actors.⁶

A certain number of contemporary works of art and projects emerge and precisely address these problems, which will make them the subject of analysis in this paper. The foundation for this study lies in the following questions: how is the margin represented in Serbian contemporary art, and what kind of margin is it? In seeking answers to these questions, it was concluded that contemporary Serbian art more often aligns itself with the margins than it addresses the establishment – or at least, so it seems. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, we turn to selected examples that have found their place in public, accessible, institutional, and representative spaces, and which focus on issues related to the position of the working class. A limited number of examples will serve as a series of case studies used to explore this issue, including films such as *Working Class Heroes* (2022) and *The Working Class Goes to Hell* (2023), as well as art projects by Milica Ružičić: *Jugoremedija 2004* (2010), *Women of Sićevo* (2017), and *Housing Issue* (2022).

In contemporary Serbian art and film, the working class is represented through a range of perspectives, from explicitly engaged and activist approaches to other, various representational models. This paper examines these different modes of representation by analyzing a selection of works of art that focus on themes of labor and class. Employing analytical tools grounded in the study of social conditions – such as the social history of art – this approach affords an equal analytical framework for

⁴ On the position of trade unions during the process of transition and privatization, see: Nada G. Novaković, “Štrajkovi, sindikati i privatizacija u Srbiji,” *Sociološki pregled* 47, no. 1 (2023): 23–52.

⁵ According to Nada G. Novaković: “The most important effects of the international factors, the domestic capitalist class and the neoliberal model of transition can be seen in the material and social position of the Serbian working class. It is one of the largest social groups that, during the transition, experienced marginalization, accelerated stratification and almost complete disappearance from the social scene. This is reflected in the massive loss of jobs and wages, poverty and an increasingly poor participation in the social standard” (Novaković, *Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije*, 163).

⁶ Over the past two and a half decades, Serbia has undergone a transition process whose main factor was the privatization of socially owned property, which led to the constitution of Serbian society as a capitalist periphery. In this process, social and economic development, as well as national interests, have been subordinated to the interests of international capital and the developed countries of the capitalist center (see: Novaković, “Štrajkovi, sindikati i privatizacija u Srbiji,” 23–24). As a consequence of the transition and privatization process, the consolidation of the capitalist class in power and the growth of economic and social inequalities can be observed. The Yugoslav society before the transition was characterized by a relatively low Gini coefficient of class inequality, up to 28.0, according to Branko Milanović, as cited by Novaković (Novaković, *Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije*, 160–161, cit. according to: Branko Milanović, *Ekonomске nejednakosti u Jugoslaviji*, Ekonomika, 1990). Novaković further notes that after 2000, the Gini coefficient in Serbia grew faster than in most countries in the region, reaching 33.0 in 2002 and 38.6 in 2014 and 2015 (Novaković, *Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije*, 160–161). The income gap between the poorest and the wealthiest in Serbia also indicates class stratification. Using Eurostat data, Nada G. Novaković notes that in 2017, 20% of Serbian citizens with the highest income had 9.4 times more than the poorest, which placed Serbia in first place, as the EU28 average was 5.2 (Novaković, *Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije*, 161).

examining works of contemporary visual and cinematic art, aiming to trace how the working class is visually and cinematically constructed.

Representation of the working class in the films *Working Class Heroes* and *Working Class Goes to Hell*

The representation of the working class, their milieu and lifestyle is a recurring topic in the Serbian cinema over the past two decades.. Notable examples include *Tilva Roš* (Nikola Ležaić, 2010), *Klip* (2012, Maja Miloš), *Barbarians* (Varvari, Ivan Ikić, 2014), and *The Load* (*Teret*, Ognjen Glavonić, 2018), where narrative development, character construction, and motivation are strongly informed by class. Social issues often underpin the central dramatic conflicts, while the cinematic settings clearly reflect marginalized living conditions. What sets these two films apart is that the working class is not merely a narrative element but their core theme. Their prolonged production – marked by limited funding and structural obstacles, as in the decade-long making of *Working Class Heroes* (*Heroji radničke klase*, Miloš Pušić, 2022) – reflects both the broader conditions of the Serbian film industry and a sustained engagement with the topic, also evident in Đorđević's *Working Class Goes to Hell* (*Radnička klasa ide u pakao*, 2023). Key questions emerge as to how these films engage with the real-world conditions of the working class in the post-transition era, and how they construct their representation.

Working Class Heroes is a socio-political drama⁷ that foregrounds the systemic exploitation of illegal construction workers in contemporary Serbia. The story centers around Lidija, a PR manager employed by a construction company, whose task is to maintain the firm's polished image while concealing the realities of labor on the ground. Behind this façade of compliance with international safety standards, workers endure hazardous conditions, withheld wages, and the complete absence of legal protections. As the situation deteriorates, the workers, led by their colleague known as the Professor, organize to resist their employers, transforming diffuse discontent into collective action. Their decision to confront those in power introduces both dramatic tension and political urgency, situating their struggle within broader patterns of corruption, precarity, and the erosion of labor rights. In dramatizing these dynamics,

⁷ Both Đorđević and Pušić made their feature debuts during the 2000s. Pušić's first film, *Autumn in My Street* (*Jesen u mojoj ulici*, 2009), was released in the same year as Đorđević's prominent and critically acclaimed *The Life and Death of a Porno Gang* (*Život i smrt porno bande*). Already in these early works, both directors turned their attention to the social margins, Pušić by following the lives of two teenagers from a poor neighborhood on the outskirts of Novi Sad (also the setting of *Working Class Heroes*), where class position constitutes an integral part of the protagonists' identities and the social milieu in which they move. In the same manner, Đorđević consistently focuses on marginalized worlds, including the porn industry and migrant workers, with *Working Class Goes to Hell* extending this line of inquiry into another exploration of social peripheries. In terms of style, both directors remain close to their earlier artistic concerns. Pušić gravitates toward realism, while Đorđević, though known for blending documentary and fiction, in this film adheres more clearly and consistently to fictional conventions – eschewing authorial self-insertion, blurred boundaries between filmmaker and subject, or technical variations such as handheld camerawork. Both films premiered at major international festivals: Pušić's at the Berlinale Panorama program and Đorđević's at the Toronto International Film Festival.

the film offers a critical commentary on the post-transition Serbian society: it exposes the contradictions between neoliberal aspirations toward European integration and the lived reality of the working poor. *Working Class Goes to Hell*, on the other hand, blends elements of satire, horror, and social drama, situating its narrative in a decaying Balkan town still haunted by the aftermath of a devastating factory fire. The catastrophe – widely believed to have been deliberately staged to facilitate corrupt privatization – claimed numerous workers' lives and left the surviving community in economic ruin. Several years later, the local union continues its futile struggle for reparations, facing entrenched corruption, bureaucratic apathy, and a complete lack of institutional accountability. Amid these circumstances, Svetlana, whose husband perished in the fire, mobilizes the remaining workers in an effort to resist the system. Confronted with forces that far exceed their capacity for political struggle, they ultimately turn to the occult, perceiving it as the only remaining path toward reclaiming a sense of justice and restoring their agency.

Unlike most films featuring working-class protagonists, both *Working Class Heroes* and *Working Class Goes to Hell* foreground class not only thematically but also in their titles, signaling a shift from individual-centered narratives to collective experience and action. This is evident even at the script level, where the central protagonist is replaced by an ensemble cast.⁸ *Working Class Heroes* evokes the rhetoric of socialist realism, specifically how art throughout history framed the working class as the engine of progress and the driving force sustaining the entire system.⁹ However, a secondary layer of meaning emerges when the film's antagonist, after his misdeeds, refers to the workers as 'heroes' in a self-serving media statement. This ironic twist complicates the portrayal of workers in post-transition Serbia as marginalized and devalued subjects, whose occasional and calculated symbolic valorization lacks real recognition. In contrast, *Working Class Goes to Hell* suggests movement and direction, with its title referencing one of the most famous portrayals of the working class – *The Working Class Goes to Heaven* (*La classe operaia va in paradiso*, Elio Petri, 1971). This reference has appeared repeatedly in the local context, most notably in the sculpt(otect)ural series by Mrđan Bajić. By joining this tradition, Đorđević's film directs the working class toward hell rather than heaven – a choice that dialogues more closely with the Yugoslav Black Wave heroes¹⁰ from the working-class milieu than with the idealized victim figure found, for example, in some of De Sica's neorealist films. While heaven, taken literally, implies a sacralized image of the working class or, in a sense, passivity – acceptance of the Christian narrative of otherworldly justice – going to hell

⁸ While heroines Lidija (Jasna Đuričić) and Svetlana (Tamara Krcunović) appear as characters with the most screen time, this does not undermine the depiction of the working class as a unified entity in either film.

⁹ It is also worth considering the existence of John Lennon's 1970 song *Working Class Hero*, whose lyrics closely align with the explicit class hierarchy depicted in Pušić's film.

¹⁰ As the author of the study *Sjaj crnog* points out, filmmakers of that provenance "advocated for a cinema that addresses the existence of contemporary man in all its complexity, including the right to depict even the darkest individual and collective traits" Veljko Radosavljević, *Sjaj crnog: Prilog za bolje razumevanje jednog razdoblja srpske kinematografije* (Filmski centar Srbije, 2019), 225.

in Đorđević's film opposes both of these notions (as well as trust in religious institutions). This is one of many ways in which Pušić's and Đorđević's films similarly engage with the off-screen realities of these regions.

Regarding the cinematic language, the two works employ different approaches. While Pušić's social drama maintains a veristic, almost documentary tone¹¹ aimed at reaching the "ordinary viewer",¹² Đorđević, viewing the topic of post-transition in Eastern Europe as "worn out," seeks to offer "a new angle by combining various genres with a camp approach".¹³ Pušić's approach rests on realism as a style designed not only to be understood by the "ordinary viewer" but primarily aimed at them. Đorđević, on the other hand, pursues a defamiliarization of his subject, although one could argue that camp – as a destabilizer of the boundaries between high and low culture and an expression of deliberately 'bad' taste¹⁴ – is particularly apt for portraying the working class by mocking authority or exaggerating crude everyday life into grotesque comedy or melodrama.¹⁵ The historical discrediting of camp as frivolous, excessive, or aesthetically devalued parallels the persistent discrediting of the working class through the notion of 'taste'.¹⁶ In this context, working-class culture is stereotypically labeled as vulgar or unsophisticated, serving as a mechanism of symbolic exclusion and illustrating the entanglement of aesthetic and class hierarchies. From this perspective, camp can be understood as a suitable response to the question of which aesthetic reflects the perception of the working class from the standpoint of the mainstream visual regimes constructed by elites – the very same elites that relegated the working

¹¹ The dual-lens handheld camera captures the sparse environment in a manner reminiscent of amateur documentary footage. This stylistic austerity stems from production constraints but also aligns with the director's artistic intentions.

¹² "I don't think this film is hermetic, something an ordinary viewer can't understand. I made it so people could easily identify with the characters and recognize their struggles. I hope it finds its audience among the most normal, wonderful people—not just in elitist film circles." Danilo Brakočević, "Miloš Pušić: I dalje želim da pobedi dobro, koliko god to možda bilo iluzorno," intervju sa rediteljem Milošem Pušićem. Filmskopija. Filmski centar Srbije, February 9, 2022, <https://www.fcs.rs/milos-pusic-i-dalje-zelim-da-pobedi-dobro-koliko-god-to-mozda-bilo-iluzorno/>. Author's free translation from the original.

¹³ Đorđević attributes another, broader cultural dimension to his choices by asking whose preconceived image influences the selection of themes and representation of social relations: "I wouldn't say I'm a fan of the Eastern European cinema, because I don't believe its identity comes from within Eastern Europe – it's dictated from the outside. To secure funding, filmmakers tailor their films to the image the West has of the Balkans." Ana Filipović, "Mladen Đorđević: 'Mejnstrim ne voli kada postane neprijatno, bez obzira na to koliko je istinito,'" Filmskopija. Filmski centar Srbije. October 31, 2023. <https://www.fcs.rs/mladen-djordjevic-mejnstrim-ne-voli-kada-postane-neprijatno-bez-obzira-na-to-koliko-je-istinito/>. Author's free translation from the original.

¹⁴ "Camp taste turns it back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgement. Camp doesn't reverse things. It doesn't argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. What it does is to offer for art (and life) a different – a supplementary – set of standards." Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" *Partisan Review* 31, no. 4 (1964): 525.

¹⁵ One need only recall the working class in John Waters' films, epitomes of cinematic camp. In recent Serbian cinema, camp and the working class intertwine in *Have You Seen This Woman?* (2022) by Dušan Zorić and Matija Glušević.

¹⁶ Although the changes brought by the 21st century have in many ways complicated this issue, Bourdieu's thesis on the relationship between taste and cultural capital still provides a crucial counterpoint to the idea of inherently good or bad taste tied to an individual or an entire class. See: Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

class to the margins. Regarding realism, from French poetic realism, through Italian neorealism and British postwar realism, to contemporary social dramas stylistically leaning toward realism, there remains a persistent need to depict the world ‘as it really is’. This need is closely tied to the premise that certain styles suit certain themes better than others. The communicative power of these movements with the working class relied both on the choice of subject and on the commitment to faithfully represent their off-screen realities. Their cinematic language – devoid of stylistic experimentation, heavy intertextuality, or figurative speech – was clear and accessible regardless of the audience’s prior cinematic knowledge. The subjects of these films were predominantly working-class lives, portrayed outside studio settings (*in situ*), with scripts inspired by conversations overheard in the streets and performed by non-professional actors embodying their own class identities on screen. In this regard, both Pušić and Đorđević engage workers and/or local residents, employing them as a form of practical, extradiegetic agency.¹⁷ However, it is important to note that realism had revolutionary potential precisely because of the context of its emergence and the audiences it primarily targeted. The question that arises is whether, and to what extent, this remains the case within the framework of ‘capitalist realism’ (in Mark Fisher’s formulation, the dominant cultural condition in which capitalism appears as the only realistic option, while other possibilities are rendered unthinkable),¹⁸ and how much genre and stylistic play can serve as a suitable model for representing and addressing the working class.

Working Class Heroes and Working Class Goes to Hell: key points

The selected films address two significant issues that have directly affected the working class in Serbia since the transition period: the conditions of labor on illegal construction sites in Pušić’s film, and the consequences of factory privatization in Đorđević’s work. In both cases, the collapse of workers’ rights and the failure of institutions to protect them reflect the realities of the post-transition Serbia, where research shows the “working class is in a far worse position than before the transition to capitalism”.¹⁹ Both films establish a direct connection with the pre-transition legacy: the construction of *Stanovi solidarnosti* in Pušić’s film evokes socialist-era mass housing projects, while the *Prvi maj* factory in Đorđević’s film references the fate of numerous factories, including the textile industry *Prvi maj* Pirot, which operated successfully for decades but declined in the 1990s due to wars and sanctions, ultimately declaring bankruptcy in the 2010s. Yet the contemporary moment betrays the vision of a bright future: *Working Class Heroes* depicts appalling working conditions, while the plot of *Working Class Goes to Hell* unfolds four years after a (possibly deliberately set) fire in the factory that claimed the lives of family members, friends, and colleagues of the protagonist.

¹⁷ While its reach is particular, it can alter the class position of the performer – yet this does not affect the class question in general. What does, however, reflect agency is the freedom to – at least to some extent – have a certain identity represented by those who embody it in real life.

¹⁸ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009), 4–5.

¹⁹ Novaković, “Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije,” 156.

The landscapes depicted in both films are deeply rooted in the tangible local context. While *Working Class Heroes* repeatedly emphasizes Novi Sad as its setting, Đorđević's unnamed town functions as an archetype of the post-industrial Serbian periphery, once sustained by local industry. The concrete skeleton of the future building complex in *Working Class Heroes* evokes not so much the Yugoslav 'concrete utopia'²⁰ as it does the widespread destruction of green spaces caused by illegal expansion of investor projects (Figure #1). A shot of trees being cut down recalls Fisher's words: "The relationship between capitalism and eco-disaster is neither coincidental nor accidental: capital's 'need of a constantly expanding market,' its 'growth fetish,' mean that capitalism is by its very nature opposed to any notion of sustainability."²¹ This critique is even more pronounced in *Working Class Goes to Hell*, where wide shots of a small, polluted, and impoverished town accumulate transitional tropes: a neglected factory, an unfinished hotel, church, and tavern as the sole *locus* of social life.

The process of working-class marginalization is depicted as a direct consequence of the actions of an emerging capitalist class, specifically through the accumulation of capital via the transfer of socially owned into private property. This process is further enabled by institutions such as the judiciary and the church, as well as by public media,²² which both films portray with deep distrust and associate with the decline in living standards, quality of education, and access to healthcare.²³ Figuratively speaking, Đorđević's film begins where Pušić's ends – years after the accident. While Pušić traces hierarchical class relations (workers answer to Braca, Braca to Lidija, Lidija to Miki, and he to the investors), Đorđević examines the internal community dynamics. The former highlights unpaid labor, unsafe conditions, and systemic neglect; the latter shows how prolonged unemployment and systemic passivation hinder political agency and collective action. As Novaković notes, "workers' empirical class consciousness is underdeveloped and confused"²⁴, an issue central to Đorđević's film, which questions the possibility and shape of resistance. Although Pušić's film addresses working-class issues, its narrative centers on the company's PR representative, Lidija, who herself leads a precarious life. She serves as an intermediary figure and is the only character to undergo internal transformation, while the workers, by

²⁰ The perception of socialist architecture in former Yugoslavia as a 'concrete utopia' is particularly prominent from a Western perspective – confirmed by the title of MoMA's major retrospective exhibition in 2018/9.

²¹ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 18.

²² In Đorđević's film, the television screen becomes a central motif for reality distortion, and while 'brain rots' in popular internet discourse primarily refers to the effects of excessive online content consumption, Đorđević's characters, glued to the TV screen, can be said to undergo a similar process. Those scenes evoke Fisher's words: "If the figure of discipline was the worker-prisoner, the figure of control is the debtor-addict. Cyberspatial capital operates by addicting its users.", Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 25.

²³ In the Serbian post-transition context, public media often aligned with political and business elites, legitimizing privatization processes while obscuring their social consequences. This discursive function is closely tied to the erosion of living standards: rather than acknowledging precarity, media narratives frequently depicted workers as living relatively secure or adequate lives, thereby masking structural inequalities and legitimizing institutional inaction in areas such as wages, healthcare, and education. See: Novaković, "Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase u Srbiji."

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

contrast, are portrayed only in broad strokes – as types²⁵ who, aside from occasional acts of defiance (self-inflicted injury or refusal to work until overdue wages are paid), remain largely passive (Figure #2). The ossified hierarchy seems to leave no room for change, so the film's most radical act of rebellion is not a challenge to the system itself, but an act of revenge. *Working Class Goes to Hell* depicts the powerholders as equally ruthless, but somewhat more fearful of the workers' rage, that unfolds into an 'eat-the-rich' fantasy – one of today's prevalent cinematic models of class revolt.²⁶

While the antagonists in both films are largely unnuanced, the workers in Đorđević's film are not portrayed as 'ideal victims'.²⁷ Instead, they appear demoralized by systematic discrediting, surviving without direction and susceptible to any self-proclaimed leader (Figure #3). This depiction corresponds with the self-image many of them have internalized after years of such societal treatment.²⁸ For instance, former Jugoremedija employees described their sudden descent into unemployment: middle-aged individuals found themselves unable to support their families and became dependent on parents' pensions.²⁹ Reflecting on this, the film's community is predominantly composed of middle-aged and older generations. Gender-wise, the composition is more varied, though in both films women are the ones primarily subjected to sexual exploitation. The exploitation of female workers – doubly marginalized category due to both gender and class – is presented as inevitable in a society lacking key labor protections.³⁰ The lower one's position on the social ladder, the more brutal the abuse: in *Working Class Goes to Hell*, young women are literally stored in a refrigerator, treated like raw meat. In terms of education, character portrayal suggests that the protagonists fall below the societal average, echoing sociological findings of

²⁵ Among them are the Professor – likely one of many highly educated people who turned to this work due to lack of jobs in their field – alongside the naïve young Mali and the alcoholic Mile.

²⁶ In recent years, numerous global productions, such as Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019) and Ruben Östlund's *Triangle of Sadness* (2022), have engaged in constructing 'eat-the-rich' narratives.

²⁷ This is especially evident in a scene that recalls the wish-fulfillment fantasy from *Miracle in Milan* – beginning with small, empathetic requests and ending with dreams of wealth and reality show fame.

²⁸ Several interviewees in Marko Cvejić's 2017 documentary *The Working Class Goes to Heaven* speak to this as well. *Radnička klasa odlazi u raj* [The Working Class Is Off to Paradise], directed by Marko Cvejić, feature documentary, 80 min., Serbia, 2017, Film Center Serbia / Mandragora Film, YouTube video, published ca. 5 years ago, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NaTGJAvyoM&t=1445s>.

²⁹ Before privatization, Jugoremedija ranked as one of Serbia's most prominent pharmaceutical producers. Its bankruptcy and disintegration came to epitomize the broader dismantling of the state-owned industry, while its privatization represented both a site of labor struggle and the dispossession of thousands of families who depended on its survival. See: BBC News na srpskom, "Jugoremedija: Kako su radnici postali 'suvišni ljudi,'" February 27, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-47375337>.

³⁰ Since the 2000s, Serbia has progressively weakened several labor protections inherited from the socialist era, including limits on fixed-term and precarious contracts. Women employed under arrangements such as temporary, part-time, or casual contracts are often excluded from full benefits and protections. This legal and structural precarity has heightened their vulnerability to exploitation, discrimination, and workplace harassment. That is to say, the weakening of labor protections not only erodes economic security but also deepens gender-based inequalities, leaving women workers disproportionately exposed to abuse and systemic marginalization.

persistent class-based exclusion from education since the 2000s.³¹ With this in mind, Đorđević does address the issue of patronizing representations of the working class, yet it remains ambiguous whether his satirical scenes – such as exaggerated close-ups of vacant stares at a TV set – function as critique or reproducing of media stereotypes.

The susceptibility to occult figures results in the transference of class struggle from one genre to another, with each genre being deliberately obstructed and thus never fully realized. This aligns with the premise that salvation does not come from the outside – neither the Church, the state, nor the devil – rendering the long-awaited working-class liberation ultimately unattainable through any of the film's particular narrative arcs. The cathartic potential of 'eat-the-rich' films is purposely abandoned at its peak intensity. In a camp-style revenge scene³² rebellion quickly turns into spectacle, further reinforcing the idea of the countless obstacles to self-organization in an era in which "the empirical class consciousness of workers is underdeveloped and confused" (Figure #4).³³ And while the film's protagonists do not acquire a clear sense of how to act effectively during this struggle, the final scenes suggest that awareness of one's position may not be sufficient, but is a necessary precondition for revolt. It is telling that the climactic camp revenge scene is ultimately framed as escapist, as something doomed to fail, while the return to the subdued aesthetic of a social drama serves to restore dramatic seriousness and underscore film's concluding message. The right to represent the working class at its critical moment of awakening is, in the end, not granted to camp.³⁴ Within the narrative of *Working Class Heroes*, however, agency is not channeled through collective action but is instead the expression of an individual's revolt against class violence. Since the film does not aim to dissect models of collective struggle, the act of resistance is not its culmination but rather a sudden reversal in which one member of the working class seizes control that had long been systematically denied. The consequences of killing the investor – depicted in a scene that evokes the *deus ex machina* both visually and narratively – remain outside the diegesis, much like in Đorđević's film, where the open ending withholds any resolution to the question of how to proceed with the newly acquired class consciousness. Does this suggest that, within the contemporary Serbian context, the agency of the working class, and the consequences of reclaiming control, are unimaginable, even in fiction?

³¹ Novaković, "Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije," 168.

³² As in many other 'eat-the-rich' films, the rich are trapped in a confined space – an indicator of their luxury – where they are degraded and reduced to bare physicality (*Parasite*: the house; *Triangle of Sadness*: the yacht; Đorđević's film: a newly built hotel-brothel)

³³ Novaković, "Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije," 169.

³⁴ This choice seems in line with Sontag's conclusion that "the whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious", and that "it neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness". Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" 527, 529.

Jugoremedija, Women Of Sićevo, Housing Issue, and the working class representation

Labor-related themes have not been entirely absent from contemporary Serbian art in recent decades.³⁵ However, the domestic art scene has more strongly engaged with a wider range of social, political, gender, and ecological issues, as well as other forms of discrimination and marginalization. The artistic practice of Milica Ružičić to date has been largely defined by socially engaged themes, focusing on issues of marginalization and other problems rooted in the contemporary socio-political and economic circumstances in Serbia. She deals with them in an engaged manner and through various approaches, addressing issues such as labor, the position of women workers, homelessness,³⁶ poverty, illegal and destructive urbanization, problems of unregulated industry, and pollution. In short, her work touches upon nearly all pressing social, political, and economic issues in Serbia and beyond, as well as smaller-scale problems directly related to them.³⁷ While she explores a wide range of media, including collaborative works, video works, photography, interactive sculptures, objects, and spatial interventions, pieces that will be analyzed in this text, *Jugoremedija*, *Housing Issue*, and *Women of Sićevo*, belong to the domain of painting. More specifically, *Jugoremedija* is an acrylic on canvas, measuring 287 by 213 centimeters, *Housing Issue* is a series of watercolor works, and *Women of Sićevo* is a series of drawings.

The painting *Jugoremedija* (Figure #5) was created in connection with specific events in Serbia's transitional society, referring to the pharmaceutical factory in Zrenjanin of the same name. The events surrounding the destruction of this factory during the privatization process are emblematic of the broader collapse of former state-owned industry across Serbia. The painting depicts a specific event from August 2004, namely the moment when the state police sided with the privately hired security

³⁵ According to Lidija Merenik, the totalitarian model of the socialist realist image was dominant in the period 1945–1948, and in a weakened form persisted until 1953/54. In the second half of the 1940s, a modernist model took shape and became the “second mainstream” in Serbian art, while from the mid-1950s a critical model “beyond modernism” began to develop. Lidija Merenik, *Umetnost i vlast: srpsko slikarstvo 1945–1968*, 2nd rev. ed., vol. 2, Fond Vujičić kolekcija; Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet, 2010), 13–19. Within these models which supplanted socialist realism, there was no engagement with themes of the working class, and certainly not through the use of the language of realism. From the 1950s onward, Yugoslavia witnessed the emergence of various phenomena that were ideologically connected, but not related through their ways of expression, designated by Jerko Denegri as the “second line” (*EXAT-51, New Tendencies, Gorgona*) (Ješa Denegri, *Prilozi za drugu liniju. 2, EXAT-51, Nove tendencije, radikalni enformel, Gorgona: dopune hronici jednog kritičarskog zalaganja* (Macura; Topy, 2005, 16), which also encompassed the emergence of “new artistic practices” (*Nova umjetnička praksa: 1966–1978*, vol. 36 (Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, 1978, 5–13) (conceptual art, new media art, *arte povera*, and other tendencies). Thus, although socially and politically conscious, these phenomena did not directly address subject matters related to the working class.

³⁶ Such as the collaborative art project *Hope = Home*, presented at the 60th October Salon in Belgrade within the section *Hope is a Discipline*. For more, see: *Oktobarski salon, 60. 2024. “What’s Left?”* (Cultural Centre of Belgrade, 2024)

³⁷ For example, her work on Trolleybus 28, which was at one point discontinued but reinstated after months of citizen protests (*Trolley 28*, 2020). For more, see: Milica Ružičić, *Trolley 28*, published August 17, 2020, <https://milicaruzicic.wordpress.com/2020/08/17/trolley-28/>.

forces of businessman Jovica Stefanović, who sought to falsify evidence of the majority ownership. At that time, the workers were in fact the majority owners – a status that was legally confirmed three years later through a court ruling. As co-owners of the factory, the workers defended the plant and its machinery, their property, and their jobs, keeping watch in the factory premises after finishing work, while the privately engaged security forces, supported by the state police, attempted to evict them from the premises.

Jugoremedija functions as a media image that never truly existed. While based on real, documentary content,³⁸ it is constructed through the appropriation of formal characteristics of the official historical genre. In doing so, it surpasses the populism of media imagery and is conceived with the intention of occupying official, institutional spaces.³⁹ The content of the painting, above all, reveals an inversion of the subject in relation to what the title suggests: rather than workers' collective, the central, dramatically lit, and active figures are members of the police force. Thus, the subject of this image is neither workers as individuals nor as a collective body, but rather the act of repression itself. The depicted scene takes place in front of the factory, where the workers, previously expelled from the premises, are being pushed back, while the factory itself is guarded by private security forces, with the police positioned between the two groups. The dimensions of the canvas clearly reflect an effort to monumentalize the subject matter, while the dense accumulation of human figures serves to underscore the repression exerted by minority forces over the majority workforce. In contrast to the prominently displayed, brightly illuminated police officers, the workers are decentralized, positioned along the edges of the composition, rendered in shadowy tones matching their industrial uniforms. Particularly significant is the female figure placed at the bottom edge of the canvas. Her presence underscores both the imbalance of the depicted event and points to the structural conditions shaping the status of women workers in contemporary society, who, in the case of *Jugoremedija*, constituted the majority of the workforce.

The question of women workers is addressed more directly in the drawing series *Women of Sićevo* (Figure #6), created during a feminist workshop held in the village of Sićevo. This series presents portraits of women with whom the artist interacted during her stay, and by including their names and nicknames (Mira, Mila, and Sneža), she also conveys the character of their interaction – whether through a portrait that includes handwritten phone numbers for advertising homemade goat cheese, a depiction of their hostess in Sićevo, as well as the woman from whom she received – and

³⁸ The painting *Jugoremedija* is based on a still taken from the documentary film *Jugoremedija: Ugovor na štetu trećeg* (2005) (*Jugoremedija: Contract to the Detriment of a Third Party*) by Ivan Zlatić.

³⁹ The painting *Jugoremedija* was exhibited at the Cultural Centre of Belgrade, 27th *Memorial of Nadežda Petrović* in Čačak, as well as at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade. In the catalogue for the exhibition at the Cultural Centre of Belgrade, Jasmina Čubrilo states that: "The very concept of the political in Milica Ružičić's recent works is realized as a decision to depict scenes that are uncomfortable, unpleasant, disturbing, and traumatic in a fetishized format: the format of collectible paintings and the format of museum paintings." Jasmina Čubrilo, *Slike. Milica Ružičić* (Kulturni centar Beograda, 2010) Author's free translation from the original.

recorded – advice on how to brew sage tea. Unlike other examples analyzed in this text, the artistic approach in these portraits is centered on making visible women who are otherwise marginalized and unseen. The work was created within the framework of the Feminist Art Colony in Sićevo, whose engagement with gender issues does not alter the class- and gender-determined conditions of the women who live and work in this village – women whom the artist encountered during her stay and who are engaged in strenuous physical labor. For this reason, *Women of Sićevo* adopts an intersectional perspective, emphasizing the interconnectedness of class- and gender-based discrimination. Such an approach functions as a rhetorical strategy that resists anonymity, typification, or the subsumption of women and workers into an indistinct mass.

The visual expression, in the case of *Jugoremedija* and the *Housing Issue* series, corresponds to the so-called ‘documentary style’, characterized by a critical orientation, grounding in real events, and a tendency to examine these events in their social and ideological dimensions.⁴⁰ The language of realism employed in *Jugoremedija* reflects the artist’s intention to communicate issues of labor in a clear and accessible manner. Given that this is a contemporary artwork, it is important to emphasize that the use of realism does not represent an anachronism,⁴¹ but rather a deliberate strategy for articulating social concerns. In other words, the chosen visual language serves a specific function: through its communicative clarity, it seeks to be understandable and accessible to a broad audience – precisely those whose experiences and questions it addresses.

Historically, realism has always existed at the margins or in opposition to modernist currents,⁴² and its use today inevitably engages in a dialogue with its earlier applications. When viewed from the position of the contemporary *capitalist realism*, they may be seen as referring to the transformative shift that occurred in the realist art of Gustave Courbet. More precisely, the use of such tools points to a historical moment marked by the collapse of traditional artistic models and genres, an act of intelligent provocation, and the elevation of marginalized aspects of society and modern life to the status of representative historical painting.⁴³

On the other hand, the realism found in the work of Milica Ružičić can be situated in relation to historically and geographically closer models, such as the *combative realism* of the 1930s, “which represented a political, social, artistic, and critical alternative”,⁴⁴ and the *socialist realism* that, after 1945, was established as “one of the

⁴⁰ Čubrilo, *Slike. Milica Ružičić*.

⁴¹ “Contemporaneity in the phrase contemporary art would signify that it is not a matter of art that depicts contemporaneity, but rather [...] art that is articulated from the artist’s problematization of and work with social symptoms, using a language, form, and medium that critically correspond, in a material, procedural, and conceptual sense, with the content of the given context or symptom.” In: Jasmina Čubrilo, “Savremena umetnost i doba nove normalnosti,” in *Kovid-19 u Srbiji ’20*, ured. Bojan Žikić (Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet u Beogradu, 2021), 57–58. Author’s own (free) translation from the original.

⁴² Briony Fer, David Batchelor, and Paul Wood, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars* (Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 1993), 253.

⁴³ Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (Penguin, 1971), 23.

⁴⁴ Lidija Merenik, *Umetnost i vlast: srpsko slikarstvo 1945–1968*, 2nd rev. ed. Vol. 2 (Fond Vujičić kolekcija; Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet, 2010), 2. Author’s free translation from the original.

political pillars and a foundation of the cultural policy of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (FPRY). [...] functioned as a mechanism for preserving the memory of the Yugoslav People's Liberation War, as a fighter against remnants of the 'reactionary' old regime, and as a propagator of the new social order and its leader"⁴⁵.

Nevertheless, any historical-artistic parallels should be limited to, on one hand, recognizing the recurring need for art to articulate social and economic issues from the margins – something that aligns with the critical potential of *combative realism* – and on the other, to the specific visual language employed, which shares certain traits with *socialist realism*, such as its monumentality and comprehensibility. Importantly, this is a form of art produced in a radically different ideological context, and with the intention of being critical of the conditions produced by privatization and the adoption of a liberal economy, wherein references to socialism and the visual traditions of *combative* and *socialist realism* in this interpretation primarily serve to underscore the contrast with the present condition, in which the working class has shifted to a state of decline.

The *Housing Issue* series addresses the interconnected nature of labor-related concerns, depicting scenes associated with construction workers, the uncontrolled and invasive expansion that has come to define both urban and non-urban spaces in Serbia over the past years, the housing crisis, and the looming threat of homelessness. The works are structured as a storyboard, which points to the inextricable, systemic problems embedded in contemporary society. Each individual piece presents a distinct motif, while all are executed using the same technique. One of the drawings depicts a close-up portrait of a construction worker against a neutral, unpainted background, his facial expression evoking the struggles of precarious labor under unfavorable conditions (Figure #7). A different work portrays a construction site through intersecting red vertical and horizontal lines, within which workers are rendered as distant smudges in grey tones. This near-abstract visual treatment conveys a sense of artificiality, highlighting at the same time the adverse and unsafe conditions under which construction workers labor as well as the inadequacy and megalomania of contemporary urban planning in Serbia (Figure #8). Subsequent drawings allude to a protest of unpaid workers (Figure #9) and pleas for help in the face of eviction threats, particularly those targeting former workers of the Trudbenik company who have long faced displacement from their homes.⁴⁶ The series culminates in images that suggest the potentially dire consequences and outcomes of such situations – in the case of this storyboard, the fictional death of a worker, with an increasingly somber and darkened background and color palette that reinforces the progressively negative atmosphere, which suggest a narrowing of options and the worsening of living and working conditions. The final work in the series presents a painted screenshot – an appropriated media image translated into a visual form⁴⁷ – raising the issue of homelessness and the

⁴⁵ Ibid., 4. Author's free translation from the original.

⁴⁶ Petra Živić, "Trudbenik – od zaboravljenog građevinskog džina do radničkog muzeja" (Trudbenik – From a forgotten construction giant to a workers' museum) Accessed February 17, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-46404677>.

⁴⁷ Čubrilo, *Slike*. Milica Ružičić.

broad question of how this problem is approached, both in Serbia and in economically more developed countries. It underscores the serious threat posed to the survival of existing social welfare systems and the worsening of housing insecurity.⁴⁸ This body of work clearly revisits the issue of intersectionality first raised in the analysis of *Women of Sićevo*, emphasizing the need for a systemic, comprehensive, and integrated response to the complex and interdependent challenges of class, economics, and social marginalization. While in some of the cases represented the self-organization and activism of workers – both women and men – has led to favorable outcomes in resisting a system that persistently targets them, such efforts remain exhausting and unsustainable. Without concrete and durable structural support, this model of resistance is unlikely to successfully address the full range of obstacles posed by contemporary political realities.

Conclusion

The representation of the working class in contemporary Serbian art – both in film and the visual arts – coincides with its extra-artistic reality, whereby the predominant use of language of realism ensures the communicability of the works with a broader audience. This paper draws on examples that consistently build on the tradition of realism (*Working Class Heroes*) – from local, such as Yugoslav social realism to international (e.g. Italian neorealism)—as well as those that, through the recontextualization of this language, complicate its semantic scope and potential in the representation of the working class (*Jugoremedija*, *Women of Sićevo*). It also involves examples that introduce partial departures from realism in order to explore, as in the case of the film *Working Class Goes to Hell* and the storyboard series *Housing Issue*, possible alternatives in the representation of the working class through contrasts of genre and style.

The works analyzed engage either directly or indirectly with the legacy of socialism in the artistic representation of the working class, while remaining primarily rooted in contemporary (capitalist) conditions and the side effects of the post-socialist transition – such as illegal construction, factory closures, and, consequently, deteriorating working and living conditions. Whether as a central or secondary concern, the works raise the question of possible models of resistance, most often responding through attempts to articulate collective struggle and to reclaim agency – both by representing workers as active subjects and by involving them directly in the artistic process. Above all, the analyzed examples underscore the importance of portraying the working class as a coherent social group and explicitly address it in those terms.

⁴⁸ Milica Ružičić, “Housing issue 2022,” accessed September 5, 2025, <https://milicaruzicic.wordpress.com/housing-issue/>.



Figure #1: Still from the film *Working Class Heroes*, dir. Miloš Pušić, 2022.
Courtesy of the director



Figure #2: Still from the film *Working Class Heroes*, dir. Miloš Pušić, 2022.
Courtesy of the director



Figure #3: Still from the film *Working Class Goes to Hell*, dir. Mladen Đorđević, 2023.
Courtesy of the director



Figure #4: Still from the film *Working Class Goes to Hell*, dir. Mladen Đorđević, 2023.
Courtesy of the director



Figure #5: Milica Ružičić, *Jugoremedija* 2004, 2010, acrylic on canvas, Courtesy of the artist



Figure #6: Milica Ružičić, *Women of Sićevo, Mira*, 2017, drawing, Courtesy of the artist



Figure #7: Milica Ružičić, *Housing issue*, 2022, watercolor, Courtesy of the artist



Figure #8: Milica Ružičić, *Housing issue*, 2022, watercolor, Courtesy of the artist



Figure #9: Milica Ružičić, *Housing issue*, 2022, watercolor, Courtesy of the artist

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