

NOCTURNAL PROJECTIONS

A NOTE ON THE CINEMAS OF SERBIAN SURREALISM

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Surrealism's encounter with film has prompted much research and publication ever since studies such as Ado Kyrou's *Le Surrealisme au cinema* (1953) or Paul Hammond's *The Shadow and its Shadow* (1978), some of it of excellent quality and extending the subject into unexplored territories. But, so far as I have been able to tell, among all of them there is a chapter of this story that remains to be written: the importance of cinema for the Serbian surrealist group, active between around 1923 and 1933 (a group that is indeed one of the best-kept secrets in the history of the movement) is missing from all of these accounts. Significantly, this would be a narrative built of absences and impossibilities. Lost films, unfilmed (unfilmable) scripts, collages and writings that figure a 'cinema by other means' (Pavle Levi), film criticism languishing in the vaults of obscure libraries . . . until the instability of all of this activity leaves the sense of a film projected not onto a screen but onto the black cape of night. To throw at least a little powder into the air and reveal some of these fleeting images would take a scholar with access to archives and a knowledge of Serbian; the task of this short text (alas) is simply to signal what such scholarship might redress.

Surrealist activity in the 1920s in what was then named the Kingdom of Serbs,

Croats and Slovenes was in effect centred exclusively on its capital Belgrade. What makes it unique among the history of surrealist groups beyond France is that a number of its leading members were not only well-informed about activities in the nascent Paris group well before its official inauguration in 1924, but would participate extensively in the latter's activities, establishing lasting friendships, signing the French group's tracts and contributing to publications such as *La Révolution surréaliste* (itself not in fact the first formal surrealist journal since the Serbian periodical *Svedočanstva* (Testimonies) was launched a week earlier and only a month after Breton's First Manifesto). At its height – the group's greatest momentum was gained at the start of the 1930s – organised around a core of over a dozen poets, theorists, artists and photographers, many of them active across several media – a number of distinctive interests and debates emerged, some of which it has been argued actually helped to inform the Parisian group's focus rather than the other way around, making it all the more puzzling that until fairly recently so little serious scholarly attention has been paid to this phenomenon. Serbian surrealism privileged a number of formal strategies, notably staged, manipulated or documentary photography, collage

and assemblage. Engagements with the writings of Freud, Marx, Engels and Hegel, in particular the notion of the interactions between psychoanalysis and dialectics, characterised the group, as did an abiding concern with the tensions and interactions between poetry and social engagement – a theme experienced with urgency for the Serbs given the local context of increasingly totalitarian conditions that would eventually render group activity impossible (partly as the result of the imprisonment of three of its members).

One of these abiding interests was film. In common with a number of international avant-garde environments of the 1920s (notably in Czechoslovakia), cinema was a central part of Yugoslav intellectual debates even if actually completed experimental films were rather rare: it stood for something quintessentially new, dynamic, popular and anti-bourgeois, with an access to themes such as humour, modernity, psychology, dream and the absurd. In emerging surrealist circles, this concern was felt especially keenly, but in ways that give the focus a distinctively hypnotic and imaginary quality. Already by 1923 the poet Monny de Boully had published 'Doctor Hipnison, or the Technique of Living', a hybrid text that is in part an 'unfilmable' scenario reading like automatic writing in search of a seated audience. For Pavle Levi, this constitutes an instance of 'written cinema', featuring directions for sounds or movements

in a text mixing prose, poetry and typography in which the eponymous hero moves through fantastic, cosmic dream environments.

Hipnison swallows the moon, puts clouds in his pocket, raises his arm, and transforms the arbitrary landscape into some other illusory set-pieces: an endless purple desert surrounding a hill. There is a black tent at the bottom of the hill; *ex oriente*, a purple and square sun is rising. [...] The band plays oriental melodies. (cited in Levi, p.46)

Already for de Boully, as later for other members of the Belgrade surrealist circle, film is valuable above all as a vehicle for moving not only between worlds but between the concrete realm of lived experience and imaginary, inner territories – a conducting medium capable of the kinds of flashes of connectivity or perhaps resolution between realities in tension that would characterise the group's recurring concerns.

At the height of Belgrade surrealism's activities the group revisited the idea of a scenario beyond realisation but whose form calls into question both the limits and conditions of cinema, in a collaboration published in the almanac *Nemogućel L'Impossible* in May 1930. *Crustaceans on the Chest* combined Aleksandar Vučo's scenario, much of it apparently automatic in inspiration, with a suite of twelve small collages by Marko Ristić recalling

the collage novels of Max Ernst. Based on nineteenth-century line engravings from a book of instructions for amateur magicians, these images only rarely reflect the script directly, giving instead a sense of a second, deeper identity to a proposal that was already unfilmable. They echo, nevertheless, the scenario's characteristic leaps and interruptions from one scene and event to another in a sequential but rationally unrelated narrative that suggests a familiarity with the films and published scenarios of Buñuel and Dalí (not to mention, via the film's title, a hint of the work of pioneering natural history documentary film-maker Jean Painlevé). Body parts, objects, animals all have their roles in this dream-like succession of swerves across logic, but a prologue ('The Foreplay', with an instruction 'not to be played') sets up the very terms under which this imaginary, latent cinema was to be viewed. Part way between hallucination and primitive science, like some magic lantern projection of a dream, the film's phantasmagoria should unfold in the realm of the unconscious:

Let the background be a shadow or a black wave. Most suitable would, in fact, be the dead of night, that dark band of an eternal wall revealing no secrets. The wet, dark brown colour has the good property of concealing all traces of a crime: like a sponge, it soaks the marks left there by the bloody fingers. (cited in Levi, p.68)

Ristić, who was interested in the boundaries between collage and photography, had also produced a suite of fifteen hybrid images a couple of years previously combining photogram shadows of objects and materials (cameraless images made in the darkroom) with figurative elements taken from traditional negatives, and their sequencing and repetitions suggested both a dormant animation and a reflection upon earlier, more properly filmic experiments such as those by Man Ray. But more than this, film theorist Pavle Levi sees instances of a 'cinema by other means' occurring repeatedly throughout the collage practice of Serbian surrealists, notably in the (for its time) rather advanced experiment in assemblage by Vučo and Ristić *The Frenzied Marble* (again of 1930), in which clumsy materials – found objects, twigs, straw, clay, paint – are smeared across a wooden 'apparatus' whose three-part structure suggests both a narrative and the sequential 'freezing' of film frames ready to be stirred into life. Once again, the notion of animating objects and materials, of launching them (back) into a system somewhere in the prehistory of cinema at a point when film might not yet have become that technologized, industrial concern we know now but a ferry between day and night, seems to lie at the heart of such works.

The primitive cinemas of Serbian surrealism are no doubt absent from the mainstream accounts of surrealism's encounter with film in large part for the

very good reason that they left behind no actual films. One, nevertheless, did at least briefly exist, and though we know almost nothing of it, the possibility of its eventual reappearance is enough to make us want to keep this chapter open. Vane Bor's *Les Mystères de Belgrade* was completed in 1936 (that is, several years after the demise of the Belgrade group, though Bor's continued commitment to surrealist practice throughout the later 1930s and early 1940s gives no reason to suggest it should not be considered in this framework): given its première, the film then seems to have disappeared without trace. The project was apparently a kind of homage to silent screen legend Pearl White (whose series *The Exploits of Elaine* was known in France as *Les Mystères de New York*), and was a collaboration between director Bor, pianist and producer Esther Johnson (originator, it would seem, of the scenario) and composer Josip Slavenski (with Bor the co-founder of production company Filmska kulturna zadruga), and is said to have featured intersecting and oblique visions of the city of Belgrade. Photographs of ambiguous urban locations evoking enigmatic figures and imminent mysterious or criminal events feature

in Bor's portfolio from the mid-1930s, presumably not directly linked to the film, but enough to give a glimpse of the kind of oneiric, charged and transgressive atmosphere *Les Mystères de Belgrade* might have possessed. A fascinating character who remains nevertheless almost unknown outside of Serbia, Bor made a significant contribution both to the surrealist groups in Belgrade and Paris, but in parallel to his activities as an innovative painter, photographer, collage maker and theorist he was also an active film expert and critic, publishing reviews and critical texts in Serbian (notably for the journal *Politika*) on all aspects of the cinema during the inter-war years. He was especially committed to the medium of the photogram, with some of these cameraless works, according to art historian Milanka Todić, informed by his interest in avant-garde film. In 1944 Bor would leave Serbia to settle in England, initially in London, where he would continue and extend his work as an artist, theorist, poet and inventor. In 1994 Michael Richardson and I managed to track down his address to an old people's home in Oxford, where he had died the year before.

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