

Look for New Partisans: A Conversation with the Authors of the Video 'Partisan Songspiel. Belgrade Story'

Jelena Vesić

Conversation with the authors of the video Partisan Songspiel. Belgrade Story where we discuss contemporary anti-fascist struggles, particularist politics and historical consciousness through the issue of the politicization of art by means of language, form, representation, participation and direct action

Jelena Vesić: Your new video *Partisan Songspiel. Belgrade Story* is an analysis of a concrete situation. It opens with the representation of Belgrade city government's violence against the Roma population living in the vicinity of the luxurious Belville district, from where they were forcefully exiled on the occasion of the University Games in the summer of 2009. At the same time, the work addresses a more universal political issue, that is the severe polarization of various existing positions into oppressors and the oppressed: in this case, the city government, war profiteers and business tycoons vs. the disadvantaged – workers, NGO activists, war invalids and minority groups. You also established something that we could call "the horizon of historical consciousness," represented here by a choir of dead Partisans who comment on the political dialogue between the oppressors and the oppressed. The main political message is based on the idea of class struggle, and is proclaimed by the Partisan choir addressing the oppressed. In short, they state that it is necessary to unite in a collective struggle as opposed to the current strategy of identitarian politics. How did you decide to portray precisely this political moment and represent it through precisely these social characters?

Dmitry Vilensky: For us, it was very challenging to work with the realities of Belgrade's social and political life. We were lucky to have enough time to research the situation with the help of friends and local experts. We met Vladan and Rena and started the dialogue. Chto Delat had already developed a certain way of working in our first "songspiel" *Perestroika. The Victory over the Coup* and we wanted to develop this further by including the element of dance. We dreamt of making a real musical... Coincidentally, we took the case of the Roma settlement as a departure point and it proved to be a very important case as it was coupled with such a global event, the World University Games. The decisive point, however, was that Vladan and Rena took an active part in the protest campaign defending the rights of Roma settlers and we took this event as a starting point in the construction of the script, which was based on the principle of typicality. Why typicality? –we can ask and simultaneously offer some arguments. The realist approach, which we investigate in our work, is achieved not through the depiction of the concrete and particular (which is the case in mainstream contemporary art, where identity politics is hegemonic in representation), but the typical. As Engels famously put it, realism's principal task is "the truthful reproduction of typical characters in typical circumstances"¹. The typicalist approach allows us to think and embody the problematics of contemporary society as an integral system rife with contradiction and in need of transformation. So, we constructed fictional characters, which from our point of view are representative of the general antagonistic struggle in any society. At the same time, we suggested analyzing the complex problems that constitute the pitfalls and limits of these individual and identitary struggles. We very much respect these struggles and consider them to be very important, but we also think that there is an urgent need to reconsider them as new forms of class struggle. In our scenario, the group constructed of differently oppressed people is confronted with the exaggeratedly "old-fashioned" rhetoric of the dead Partisans. Through this confrontation, we have tried to demonstrate how hard, almost impossible, it is to articulate and come up with a new universal language, which is able to fuse together different forms of "minoritarian" politics. Like *Perestroika*, this work too concerns the difficulties of developing a common language and solidarity. At the same time, I hope that it does not imply political melancholy as the ultimate state of things but tries to think further ahead and to open up new political horizons –the last address of the choir is: "Close your ranks, comrades! Look for the new partisans!" It is a direct agitation and proposal for the continuation of the militant struggle for emancipation.

¹ Letters, Marx-Engels Correspondence, 1888.

http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1888/letters/88_04_15.htm

Rena Rädle & Vladan Jeremić: *Partisan Songspiel...* deals with the moment in which the cannibalization of a society takes place. During the last two decades, our society existed as an isolated camp where everyday life was monopolized by corrupted politicians and ruthless tycoons. After the catastrophe of the wars in the ex-Yugoslav countries, which unfolded in the manner of mutual extermination, there followed the economic polarization and discrimination against a large part of the population. It was the Roma that were most gravely affected by this. Many of them ended up homeless and deprived of any state protection. The scenario of *Partisan Songspiel...* aims to present the most extreme positions in post-war and post-transitional Serbian society and to present them in their typicality. Two extremes, the oppressors and the oppressed, define the current composition of society as a whole and indirectly describe the bleakest everyday lives of the majority of people. *Partisan Songspiel...* takes place in an old factory that looks like a post-Fordist slum. In his essay "Planet of Slums,"² Mike Davis argues that national and local political machines accept informal settlements as long as they can maintain political control and extract direct financial benefit. These almost feudal relations of dependence on local police or important players in certain political parties and non-governmental organizations are deeply rooted, and disloyalty may cause the destruction of the slum itself. The four oppressed characters "inhabit" this metaphorical slum of an abandoned factory: Worker, Roma Woman, Lesbian and Veteran. Their personal stories are stereotypes constructed from public testimonies or interviews produced by the media, referring to recent events in Serbia. The worker who cut off his finger, the leader of numerous hunger strikes, is a victim of shameless privatization and tycoonization, which forces companies into bankruptcy. For us, the important question is how to unite the discriminated class today in the fight against capitalism? Which one of our characters is actually a possible revolutionary subject? The Partisans as the "historical voice" recall the legacy of solidarity in the struggle against fascism, but also in the struggle against neoliberal particularization and the atomization of the social sphere. An important moment in our film is when the Partisan choir addresses the oppressed and makes a call for unity, primarily addressing the worker as the guardian of the historical torchlight. However, unity within the slum is uncertain and it remains unarticulated and fragmented until the very end.

Jelena Vesić: Would you tell us something about the mode of production you selected for the *Partisan Songspiel...* How does this mode of production compare to, for example, art-activist films dedicated to the same situation that you take as the point of departure of this video? How do you perceive the difference between the "video reportage" (or concepts of art based on "political participation" and "direct action") and the method of "high art" (concepts of art based on "contemplative experience" and "production of social consciousness")?

Rena Rädle & Vladan Jeremić: Taking artistic practice primarily as a system of actions while also being active in the field of contemporary art, we believe that the experience of political reality as well as the active and public stance of the artist can produce "real knowledge" and a transformative experience. This approach also reveals social mechanisms and norms in which we operate and offers a clear insight into contemporary political realities. The conditions of production are inscribed into the product and are always reflected in our artistic work. Our recent video *Belville*,³ which you refer to under the label of "video reportage," emerged as a concentrated result of our active participation and media activism during the protest against the violent eviction of Roma families and the tearing down of their homes in New Belgrade. The video reveals the relations and power mechanisms between all the actors in the conflict: the Roma, the mayor, investors, journalists, international mediators, politicians, police, activists, etc. Our artistic/activist practice and direct contact with the actors involved enabled us to analyze and display this situation in its full complexity. The film was first screened in the settlement of the protesters and is part of our ongoing artistic/research project about the situation of Roma in Europe. Meanwhile, one of the huge *mahalas* of Belgrade, where part of our project *Under the*

² Mike Davis, "Planet of Slums", *New Left Review*, 26, March–April 2004

³ The video can be seen @ <http://vimeo.com/8159674>

More about context @ <http://www.modukit.com/raedle-jeremic/>

Bridge took place in 2004, has been completely torn down and over a thousand people have been temporarily resettled into containers on the periphery of the city or deported to Southern Serbia. Right now, we are preparing video stories that will trace the destinies of these families and will be shot by the inhabitants themselves.

Dmitry Vilensky: The distinction that you emphasize is one of the crucial issues for contemporary debates on “political art.” The task of “spreading the information” is important and valid, but then we should ask another question: where are activist-artists spreading this information and are their goals different from the goals of “engaged” journalists? I can criticize this situation from the inside because I have been involved in making important documentation of various local struggles in Russia for different activist groups, making them accessible online. I find that very important but at the same time there is something very unsatisfying in it. The most unsatisfying factor is when these things appear not just online (where they must be) but also at art venues. On the one hand, I would definitely prefer to see this stuff at exhibition venues rather than any “higher form” of the propaganda of commodity fetishism and sophisticated entertainment. But this doesn’t mean that we don’t have a problem here –there is also an ethical problem– it always looks quite obscene when the “art crowd,” who don’t give a fuck about these struggles, watch them at their “beautiful gatherings.” Therefore, I think this isn’t the time for mixing the functions of information and art. Art has an amazing power to inform too, but it should be realized in another way –just to briefly say that it should question art and its history, it should question the medium (because why should we trust that what is presented is true?); it must show and problematize the position of the speaker (Who is speaking in the film? What is the political identity of the privileged person with the camera?) and there are many other questions. I think that without tackling these questions, there is no possibility to speak from within the art world about political issues, especially in a direct documentary form. When we start to ask these questions, then we clearly step aside from the documentary and reveal the construction of the whole film as it discloses itself as something else. From its emergence, realism set itself the task of uncovering the meaning of reality in its development. This task, however, is also a political task. Documentarism helps us rethink the problem of mimesis that has plagued traditional art forms like theater and painting (this rethinking began with the Brecht-Lukács debate) and tackle the problem of authenticity at another level. As Brecht proved so precisely then, authenticity has nothing to do with the “simple photographic reflection of reality.” Authenticity is based on the work’s construction, for even in the most “faithful” documentary film “there is no material that is free of organization.” That’s why for us the “reactionary” medium of songspiel and musical – where everything is openly constructed and estranged and where we take full political responsibility for the speeches and political statements– somehow becomes a way of dealing with the limitations of documentarism, in trying to break away and reach a truly realist position in art. We have discussed all these problems through the reactualization of Godard’s famous question *How to Make Film Politically?*, to which we dedicated one issue of the *Chto Delat* newspapers.⁴ Brecht and Godard are important sources of influence and reference for the activity of our group and we take into account the obvious relations between these two names. What is important for us today is to arrive at a method that enables us to mix quite different things –reactionary form and radical content, anarchic spontaneity and organizational discipline, hedonism and asceticism, etc. It is a matter of finding the right proportions. That is, we are once again forced to solve the old problems of composition whilst not forgetting that the most faithful composition is always built on the simultaneous sublation and supercharging of contradictions. As Brecht taught us, these contradictions should be resolved not in the work of art, but in real life. The most important point about which we are in agreement on Brecht is in sharing his short statement “That’s great art: nothing obvious in it!”.

Rena Rädle & Vladan Jeremić: For us, the most interesting of Brecht’s conceptions is to see the audience as an active partner that completes the theatre play through its actions in the real world. Brecht used to rewrite his plays and adapt them to current situations. He understood theatre as an open and interactive media. Today Brecht would perhaps include in his work the

⁴ *Make Film Politically*, Newspaper “Chto Delat”, special issue, 2007.

http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=178&Itemid=447&lang=en

telecommunication media such as the internet or media hacks, in order to make political agitation possible. *Partisan Songspiel...* has the classical structure of a Greek tragedy with protagonists accompanied by a chorus giving comments and judgments through recitations. As in Brecht's dialectical theatre, there is an absence of cathartic resolution, which leaves the viewer feeling uncomfortable. A tragedy without catharsis –it's actually a nightmare, a horror story without an obvious exit. After all, we have to ask ourselves if it is possible to produce a progressive shift in the audience with this kind of tragic surrealism.

Jelena Vesić: The video *Partisan Songspiel...* is based on the collective work of, first of all, the Chto Delat group and Biro Beograd, but also of many other contributors and active participants. The making of a political film also implies a capacity to articulate a common position; it can be a model for the fullest unfolding of the entire collective's creative powers, with each participant acting as an equal co-creator. What does collective authorship mean to you? How would you describe it in terms of production, collaboration and content?

Dmitry Vilensky: For me, collective work is something produced by a group of people with a clear understanding of interdependency –meaning that no one from the group could do the work alone or with the help of paid professional labour. So, the whole work is based on an intensive process of discussing and negotiating. On the other hand, we fully recognize that such a classical film medium, which we used for the *Partisan Songspiel...*, is very oppressive and hierarchical, so we had to mix collective decision making with trust in individual professional skills. I would say again that, in political terms, we are trying to build a new form of collective work by combining collective identity and providing a space for all the singularities involved. That's why it was important for us to mark the work as a Chto Delat film and specify all contributors who worked on the film, in the form of temporary art-soviets. Also, I insist that we must differentiate between collective naming and branding –of course with the full recognition of the dangers that any collective faces when operating in the professional conditions of cultural industry. I would suggest that the true value of the collective is the political positioning and the building of its own broadly recognizable political context. Here we are coming to the crucial distinction between corporate identity or individuality, and the collective. The collective is about striving for non-alienated labour, equality, solidarity, self-help, sisterhood and so on.

Rena Rädle & Vladan Jeremić: The methodology that was developed in previous Chto Delat film projects was offered to us as a collaborative tool. One specific methodology was predefined: what a Chto Delat film should look like. We made our work within the framework of specific categories and roles characteristic for such film production. Apart from the more defined roles and positions in this working process, we would also like to stress that there were many voices from Belgrade and Russia that helped a great deal, by offering interesting ideas and comments before and during the making of the video. The film was directed by Olga Egorova Tsaplya; Vladan Jeremić, Rena Rädle, Dmitry Vilensky with Olga Egorova Tsaplya were assistant directors, scriptwriters and stage designers; the music was composed by Mihail Kutlik, the costumes designed by Natalya Pershina Gluklya; the choreography was created by Nina Gasteva and Olga Egorova Tsaplya, and editing and post-production was done by Olga Egorova Tsaplya and Dmitry Vilensky. The production was realized in Belgrade by Biro Beograd –Biro for Culture and Communication Belgrade during July 2009.

Jelena Vesić: I would like to conclude this conversation by returning to the first question in relation to your intention to present a contemporary leftist quest for the new "politics of equality." You narrate this search starting from the oppression of the Roma community in the capitalist-fascist society of contemporary Serbia and ending with the historical revolutionary message of Yugoslav partisans. How do you see this circle of struggle, also in the context of numerous presentations, interpretations and debates of your video in the past two years?

Dmitry Vilensky: It's important to mention that all our work is related to the situations of transition and instability, which is the case in Belgrade as it is in Russia ... but also everywhere. This instability is multidimensional, but we can also read it in terms of the atomization and precarity of the resistance. The title of our video precisely signifies this quest for the new "politics

of equality.” Yugoslav partisans are the embodiment of the true heroic position in the struggle against fascist-capitalist axis, and frankly, we very much lack this archaic type of self-sacrificing struggle today. However, our intention was not to make the “partisan choir” in our songspiel to be so dominant –we hoped that our “identity groups” would play a central role in terms of the identification with the audience. But it turned out that the Partisans became a much stronger voice. Some people reacted to it, reading the appearance of the Partisans as an “empty political offer” coming from the horizon of long gone times. I would say that this is a misinterpretation because *Partisan Songspiel...* doesn’t agitate the desire to repeat old politics but looks for a new desire and politics that must acknowledge the messages of past struggles and bring them into accord with the new class composition. Nonetheless, without a clear articulation of fidelity to the old struggle, we can hardly move forward. And we hope that this is quite evident in our work.

Rena Rädle & Vladan Jeremić: Partisan chorus appears in the form of a “singing monument” which discusses the situation and supports the oppressed. The Partisans act as a collective reminder and alter ego, showing the deep historical perspective in which we can find the key for understanding the current unsatisfactory situation. What is important is that the rhetoric of the Partisan monument belongs to the years before 1948. The partisans represent fighters who fought and fell in the Yugoslav People’s Liberation War. The scenery for the Partisan monument is a collage of two existing monuments, one from Serbia and the other from Croatia, made by sculptors Sreten Stojanović (1951) and Franjo Kršinić (1954).

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