

TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM

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Amateur Experiments in Social Engagement: Serbian and Croatian Ciné-Clubs

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Research Abstract:

This research project, carried out over the course of three months in summer 2019, examined contemporary film culture in Croatia and Serbia, with particular attention to ciné-club members and activities, film festivals, and a host of related workshops and educational programs in the region geared toward engaging publics of various ages as viewers and makers of films. Through participant-observation in workshops, interviews, and archival work, I worked to link contemporary film culture in these two countries to the region's historical film infrastructure, which included both large studio projects and amateur, experimental, and low-fi movements. In this way, the project examines contemporary film education, making, and programming in the region as a multi-scalar field where people use film to connect with other artists and with publics.

Research Goals:

My general goal for this research project was to conduct an ethnographic study of film culture in the former Yugoslavia, broadly defined, but with special interest in smaller-scale productions and in investigating the range of opportunities available for nonprofessionals to get involved in film culture, whether through the making or screening of films. This would give me the opportunity to think of film culture as not always neatly divided between production and reception and would open up the field of makers to include nonprofessional filmmakers, as well, so that I could ask what film brings to civil society on a more nuanced level.

Because this is the first of several planned visits to the region, I kept my research questions rather simple and broad: “Who are the various players involved in creating – and rebuilding – film industries and infrastructures in the region? What are their political and social motivations for doing this? And what are the means by which they accomplish their goals?” My interest in keeping the questions and scope broad emerged from preliminary knowledge and contacts with ciné-clubs and an understanding that members of the clubs historically were involved in a range of activities and filmmaking practices (Levi 2012; 2007; 2017; DeCuir 2011).

As a linguistic anthropologist with a growing interest in visual anthropology, my second goal was to participate in the creative process of filmmaking in order to observe it as a project of collective imagining that would require specific interactional strategies in order for participants to accomplish their goals. The subfield of visual anthropology has rich traditions of treating visual culture in a region as an object of study and of creating visual materials as a medium for

presenting research results (in the form, most often, of ethnographic films) (Banks and Ruby 2011; Grimshaw 2001). Meanwhile, linguistic anthropologists have increasingly argued for considering the scope of the field to include visual materials, their creation, and uptake as semiotic processes (Ball 2014; Nakassis 2016; 2018). As an anthropologist with a background in studying creative processes as interactionally complex negotiations between the frames of fantasy and real (M. Barker 2019; M. M. Barker n.d.; Bateson 1955; Goffman 1974; Lemon 2017), I wished to get greater firsthand knowledge of how these processes unfold by participating as a filmmaker in various workshops and other activities, with long-term goals of co-creating ethnographic films with local participants. This holds potential for developing the possibilities of engaged ethnography by drawing from local experimental filmmaking practices as themselves resulting in materials of value to anthropologists.

Third, because I knew that film festivals have been playing an important role in shaping regional identities, I wanted to observe a range of festivals, large and small, in order to observe the import these had to the communities hosting them. In larger venues, do they work to set agendas or identify filmmaking styles for the region? In smaller towns and on islands, are these primarily geared toward offering tourists entertainment during their summer holidays, or are they offering something to the members of the community?

Fourth, I wished to understand contemporary film culture – the institutions, social networks, funding opportunities, and film styles – within the historical context of the Yugoslav film industry and ciné-club scene. I was interested not only in the films themselves, but also in the social networks of filmmakers, particularly those emerging from the ciné-club scene or from similar sites outside of the arts academies.

Research Activities:

In order to discover answers to those first questions, surrounding the field of film culture and the motivations and activities of those forming a part of it, I began by interviewing members of the Zagreb Ciné-Club. As I did so, these filmmakers often put me in touch with filmmakers who were perhaps more peripherally involved with the club, considered “friends” of the club while they more actively taught filmmaking or film studies in academies or other workshops. They also let me know about other film-related activities with which they were involved, such as educational workshops for children or workshops on various aspects of the filmmaking process that were unrelated to the activities of the club.

As I participated in workshops, I conducted interviews with teachers and participants. I also participated in a documentary filmmaking workshop in Serbia, discussed below, where I was able to learn more about the process of gaining funding for a film project, in addition to more creative concerns. Over the course of the three months, I conducted more than 30 interviews. My interviewees included amateur and professional filmmakers, documentarians and experimental filmmakers (many of whom also had abundant experience making fiction films), film festival organizers, scholars of film culture of the region, and film students of local academies. The age group of these interviewees ranged from 19 to 78.

Regarding my second goal of learning more about filmmaking by participating in workshops and other filmmaking opportunities, I was able to participate in a three-day filmmaking workshop in Zagreb, during which I made an experimental film with a teammate. I participated in a pitching workshop in Split, Croatia, in which the workshop leaders worked with me to develop both my film project idea and the pitch. At the end of the three days, film

professionals came in to evaluate our pitches and to offer feedback on the project. In Croatia, I also observed a student film shoot, which was a far larger-scale project than I had previously observed.

In Serbia, I participated in a nine-day documentary film master class, Interdoc, which was more theoretical than practical, and was more international than the other workshops I attended. However, all of the documentary filmmakers serving as instructors of the course were from the region, as were the organizers, volunteers, and some of the participants. The documentary filmmakers who led the masterclasses offered different perspectives on the history of documentary film, debates surrounding observation versus intervention, and the process for getting funding for film projects. The workshop also offered an opportunity to discuss with filmmakers and students from all over the world their impressions of the region, their prior knowledge of the region itself, their knowledge of films from the region, and their impressions of the local films that we viewed over the course of the workshop.

Regarding my third goal of learning more about festivals, I attended the following film festivals, all of which took place in Croatia between mid-June and early August: Days of Croatian Film (Zagreb), Vukovar Film Festival, Pula Film Festival, Postira Seaside Film Festival (on the island of Brač), and Brač Film Festival (in the town of Supetar). At these festivals, I attended opening events in order to hear the discourses surrounding the festivals as a kind of soft power. I attended screenings and related events, such as film trivia nights. I spoke with organizers about their educational and industry programs in order to see to what extent these festivals are doing work to promote film culture by offering local publics a chance for viewing films otherwise difficult for them to find. They are also to cultivate film culture by encouraging

young and upcoming filmmakers through educational and networking efforts. In addition to attending the festivals and speaking to those involved in organizing them, I also spoke with local filmmakers about the festival scene in order to find out which they considered the most important, and to get a range of perspectives on the large number of festivals in the region. In Belgrade, I met with the Academic Film Center (Akademski Filmski Centar) organizers of the festival “Alternativa” Festival of Film and Video regarding the research forum I am co-organizing with Dr. Greg de Cuir, film historian and curator, which will take place in December.

For the fourth question regarding the history of film in the region as providing historical context for my present project, I viewed experimental films from Croatia and Serbia. I interviewed historians, archivists, and others who had been working to preserve the films made at the clubs and to educate new generations regarding this history.



Fig. 1. Plaque at Kinoklub Zagreb outlining its founding in 1928 as a section (of “film amateurs”) under the auspices, then, of the Photo Club Zagreb, and its establishment as an independent ciné-club in 1935, its renewed activity in 1953, and its 50th anniversary commemoration of its founding in 1978.



Fig. 2. Opening night at the Vukovar Film Festival



Figure 3. Opening night of the Pula Film Festival.



Fig. 4. Pula Arena from outside the Pula Film Festival.



Figure 5. Pula Film Factory, an active ciné-club in Croatia.



Fig. 6. Screenings in Požega, Serbia, as part of Interakcija and Interdocs at a former factory.

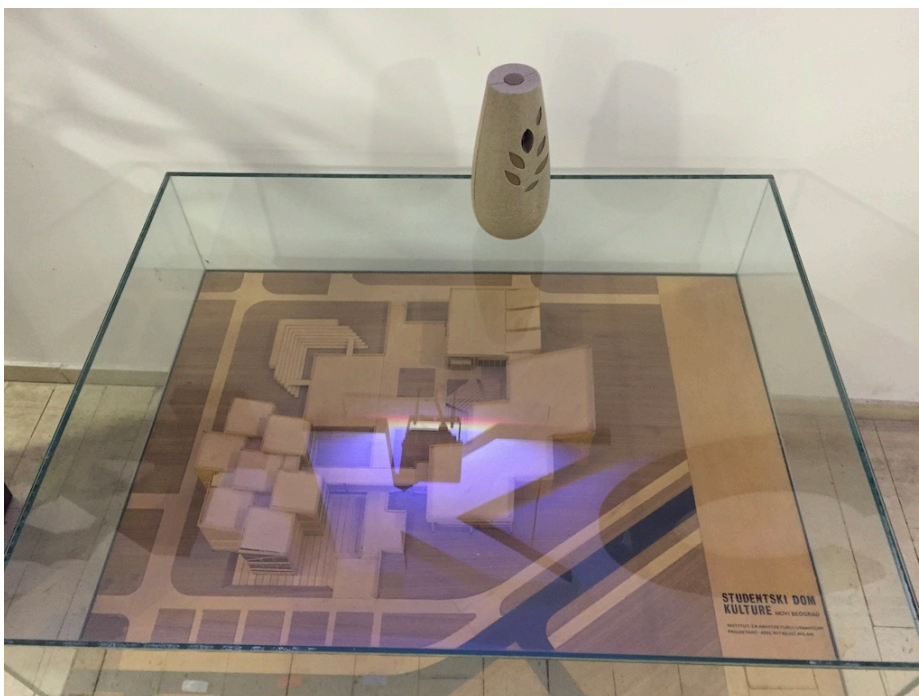


Fig. 7. Miniature of the Students' House of Culture, where the Academic Film Center is housed in Belgrade, Serbia.

Important Research Findings:

Regarding the first questions of the various players in film industries and film infrastructures in the region, I was first surprised by the robust ciné-club scene in Zagreb, where over a hundred films were made in the last year. Clubs in Zagreb, Split, and Belgrade hold regular workshops and screening programs throughout the year; members' level of involvement varies from those who regularly attend or host screening series and workshops to those who have attended only the initial filmmaking workshops but might occasionally drop in to an event or to access the equipment.

Active members of the club include, as well, a range of levels of commitment to film as a major focus of their lives. Some simply use the workshops in order to get training necessary in order to gain access to an academy, and once in the academy, they move from the amateur scene to the professional filmmaking scene. However, other members I interviewed found, upon completing the academy, that they lacked a feeling of an artistic community. Therefore, they returned to the clubs, teaching workshops and participating in others, valuing the spirit of collaboration and experimentation they found there. Many members did freelance work on more commercial projects, and made use of the clubs to create their more artistic and experimental projects.

To some, the clubs act as a resource for accomplishing a variety of goals. Because club members can check out equipment without many questions asked in advance regarding their

goals (but the clubs act as producers and ask to be credited once a film has been completed), the clubs themselves avoid taking explicit stances in regards to politics, though members are allowed to make films that have political messages if they wish. At the same time, the existence of the clubs— according to some of the more active members —is inherently part of particular political commitments. Some members, for example, were fiercely committed to the principle of amateur filmmaking as a political stance against making films for a market.

I had expected sharper divisions between professional and nonprofessional filmmakers. I also anticipated that perhaps particular filmmakers would be dismissive of attempts of citizens to gain filmmaking skills without attending a formal academy. However, I found that in Zagreb, for instance, professors of arts academies were often involved in the film clubs; they moreover offer non-degree programs in documentary filmmaking that are affordable and are designed for individuals coming from a variety of backgrounds. Club members also taught filmmaking skills to children and teenagers. These educational programs – for children or high schoolers – are the predominant form of workshops still offered by many of the smaller ciné-clubs located outside of the main clubs of Zagreb, Belgrade, and Split. In addition, organizations such as the Croatian Film Association (Hrvatski Filmski Savez) offer “media education” schools, as part of a wider effort in the European Union to raise the level of “media literacy” of citizens.

In my interviews, filmmakers – both those passionate about amateur filmmaking and seasoned professionals – admitted that the film scene had changed, not only in the former Yugoslavia but globally. Film is less important than it used to be, they said. It no longer has the same impact that it did. At the same time, they saw in this shift an opportunity for greater creativity. With less pressure from a market, Croatian and Serbian filmmakers could make the

films they want to make. Many insisted that short and documentary films were becoming increasingly important, as fictional films seem to rely increasingly on tired narratives, repeated and rehashed. Because short, experimental, and documentary films could be made on a much smaller budget, this meant that filmmakers perhaps did not have to rely on the infrastructure of a large film industry. And as one interviewee related to me, real life was always more interesting than fiction, and there would always be an abundance of new subjects for documentary film.

Regarding the interactional aspects of the workshops themselves, I participated in three very different workshops – one focused on making an experimental film, one focused on pitching, and the third focused on theoretical and practical steps for making a documentary film. Regarding the first, because we worked on teams, one interesting result I found was that team members with more professional experience articulated greater feelings of frustration at the results of their efforts, whereas the participant who considered herself a true amateur was simply grateful for what she had learned from the exercise (and this was my experience, as well). All participants found the constraints that the organizer of this workshop put upon us to be productive, however. They said, in the end, that even more of these challenges would have been useful in making decisions. This could contribute to growing literature in linguistic and semiotic anthropology on the play between creativity and constraints ((Chumley 2016; Wilf 2014; 2019).

The pitching workshop – in addition to discussions at the documentary filmmaking workshop on the various stages of getting a project funded – were instructive in considering the relationship between the various genres – spoken and written – that require preparation, practicing, and editing simply in order to get a project made. This makes the film an object loaded with a textual history far more complex than a simple path from script to screen. At the

same time, I observed an interesting paradox, particularly regarding documentary filmmaking in the region – that there is a parallel commitment to reducing to the greatest degree possible a reliance on language within a film – especially voiceover and such direct means of explaining to the viewer what is happening.

The documentary workshop, moreover, provided me the opportunity to observe the final steps of Interaction, a film camp geared at bringing film students from around the world together to make a documentary film in western Serbia over the course of three weeks. This required students to make quick decisions about what would be most interesting in the town assigned to them, shedding light on the aspects of these small cities and towns that stick out to outsiders. I spoke with the participants after the filming was completed about points of tension – either among the team members themselves or between the team members and the locals. I found that the relationship between the directors – coming from other countries and not speaking Serbian – and the local characters for their films were largely mediated by the local production assistants and volunteers assigned to them. These mediators sometimes felt pressure, on the one hand, to help directors achieve their creative visions for their projects, and, at the same time, needed to maintain positive relationships with locals, some of whom were reluctant to appear in front of the camera. The results of the workshop thus depend on a relationship of trust built over the course of a few short days; the camps’ success in continuing over the course of more than a decade already, however, suggests that the organizers have been successful in using the camp as a way to create an exchange between local publics – which include teenage volunteers who eventually go on to study filmmaking – and international filmmakers. These encounters provide a unique setting for considering the relationships between outsiders creating representations of local

populations that come up in anthropologists' concerns regarding the ethics of fieldwork and ethnographic writing (Behar and Gordon 1995; Clifford and Marcus 2010; Fabian 1983).

Regarding the festivals, I found that these were not only important to local filmmakers as a way for them to show their short and experimental films (which were unlikely to see any general cinema distribution, locally or abroad), but that these acted as ways to expose young people to new forms of film. Many interviewees at the film clubs first got interested in experimental film through volunteering at film festivals, which seem only to be becoming more abundant in Croatia. Several people joked to me that “every village has a film festival” in Croatia these days. However, some, more seriously, questioned the benefits of investing in one-off events such as festivals in places where people have no access to a cinema because they had no way to habituate themselves to watching unconventional types of films and were likely merely to watch the bigger-budget films at the festivals. While Bosnia-Herzegovina was not part of the scope of this research project for the summer, I asked filmmakers about it because it was the most important festival in the region. Some film club members said they had attended events such as the Talent Campus and had found it a valuable resource for them to meet other up-and-coming filmmakers from the region. Others criticized it for being too focused on industry events, rather than the films themselves. They, moreover, questioned the extent to which the festival really benefited Bosnia's film scene, arguing that the money spent on bringing to the festival big-name stars would be better-spent on building a real film infrastructure, which they said the country still lacked since the collapse of Yugoslavia. These criticisms echo larger concerns surrounding the “festivalization of culture” in the region, as citizens in the arts and culture fear

that these one-off events come at the cost of funding institutions and infrastructures designed to cultivate the arts as a long-term investment (Woodward, Taylor, and Bennett 2014).

At the same time, when I spoke with organizers of the film festival on Supetar, they pointed out, for example, that the process of privatization after the collapse of Yugoslavia had led to their community building being sold and eventually demolished in order to make room for an extension to a hotel. Their festival was not designed to attract tourism, but rather to offer cultural programming that had largely disappeared, indirectly due to tourism, in fact. This festival, like many held on the coast or on islands in Croatia, was entirely outdoors, and I found families and groups of child friends gathering to sit on the stairs leading from the main square up to the church. A film was interrupted one night by a mother calling out to her daughter that it was time to come home and come to bed. These smaller festivals seemed squarely committed to offering a chance for citizens of the community to come together, and programmers admitted that they worked to choose family-friendly films with some kind of a “message” for audiences. These organizers of the festival saw this event as a way to offer something to the local community in a way that actually didn’t require a large budget and was thus a feasible option, for the time being. They were hopeful that it might eventually lead to a more permanent institution, but in the meantime, this was a viable option for offering arts programming to the community.

Regarding the legacy of the region’s film history, I found that scholars and archivists were working not only to preserve these films, but also that they were using these films as inspiration for their own creative projects. In the previous year in Zagreb, a workshop “I am not from yesterday” (*Nisam od jučer*) was held, offering screenings and discussions about the history of experimental film in Zagreb, followed by an assignment for each participant to make a film

inspired by one of the older examples. In Belgrade, filmmakers Slobodan Šijan and Marija Kovačina recently directed and edited a film using the film-diary footage of the late Vukica Djilas, an artist and prominent member of Yugoslav artistic and intellectual life in the 1970s and 1980s. While the film community in Serbia was still mourning the recent death of filmmaker Dušan Makavejev, other prominent Yugoslav-era filmmakers are still active both in filmmaking and in educational and scholarly activities, including Šijan and Želimir Žilnik, so that historical artifacts and figures of Yugoslav cinema are not merely preserved or remembered in these communities but play an active role in the creation of new projects. At the same time, the archiving of the films made within ciné-clubs – and access to these films – is sometimes a complex bureaucratic process; privatization of cinemas in smaller cities has apparently led to ciné-club archives being simply discarded. Moreover, over the course of my interviews I was able to find out about other film activities and movements in the history of alternative or underground filmmaking, such as a movement of “low-fi” filmmaking that thrived in Belgrade in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Stories of film enthusiasts saving boxes of film reels from dumpsters reminds us of the fragility of films, particularly those made by amateurs, where perhaps only one copy exists. Such found footage may be of little concern to the film world at large, but can have immense value to the communities where this footage was filmed.

Policy Implications and Recommendations:

This research supports government funding of similar initiatives as part of cultural policy in the US. Film clubs, free or affordable workshops for children, adults, and youths, and festivals

aimed at enriching communities by offering affordable programming and educational opportunities – all of these offer the opportunity to promote greater media literacy, to make children and adults alike more aware of the techniques through which visual media are produced, and to give citizens the opportunity to contribute to visual culture as artists. We can treat media as a source of information we passively absorb and hope that it is truthful and unbiased; we can treat it as a troubling distraction that destroys interpersonal interaction and our attention spans; or we can use it as a tool through which we offer opportunities to creatively construct and deconstruct representations of ourselves and the world around us. Clearly, with the rise of new media, citizens are already active in offering visual representations of their everyday lives. However, these educational activities surrounding film culture offer an opportunity to consider the creation of video materials as not only a question of aesthetics but of art. The difference between the two, based on my observations and conversations with these filmmakers, is one of a commitment to an idea and to using visual media to push viewers' perceptions in new directions.

Co-Curricular Activity:

I met with scholars from the region and abroad (who are studying the region) at the regional ASEEEES meeting in Zagreb in June 2019, where I discussed filmic representations of children in Eastern Europe. I met with scholars working on documentary and fiction film in the region, along with attending discussions of policies and institutions surrounding the arts during the era of socialist Yugoslavia and into the present. I met with the leaders of film clubs and organizers of other film workshops, some of which have status as NGOs, and others receive direct governmental support.

Conclusions:

In conclusion, there are still many aspects of film culture in the region that I wish to explore in order to understand the processes of filmic representation and the role it plays in shaping perceptions of the region, both for local audiences and for outsiders. However, I find it promising that there is a flourishing, if complex, ecology of organizations and initiatives surrounding film in the region. Some of these new initiatives reject the ciné-club model because they wish to avoid any reliance upon the government for their funding; yet we can find within these varied initiatives that there is a common commitment to the notion that there is some inherent value in offering citizens knowledge about filmmaking and that film scenes benefit from this wider range of perspectives, rather than necessarily being limited to those with the means and pedigree to realize film projects.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications:

I plan to apply for a Wenner-Gren Post-PhD Research Grant to continue this research. I will be returning to Belgrade in December for the Alternativa Film and Video Festival and for the research forum I am co-organizing. I will return to Zagreb for Zagrebdox in March 2020; and I will return to the region when I have research leave between April and September 2020. I will expand my research to the other former Yugoslav republics, including Bosnia-Herzegovina – where I plan to volunteer at the Sarajevo Film Festival – and Slovenia – where I will participate in a filmmaking workshop there next summer. I am working to put together a workshop on ethnographic filmmaking with Kinoklub Zagreb.

In April 2020, I will present the results of my research on documentary film in the region at the Annual Conference of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies in Denver, Colorado.

This fall, I will be writing an article based on my research at the film clubs to be submitted in January 2020 to *Visual Anthropology Review*. I will use feedback from the SCMS conference to draft an article on creative documentary rules and practices to submit to the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* in May 2020. As this research continues, I will begin drafting a book-length project; I may also co-edit a volume in Serbian and English, based on the research forum taking place in December.

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