

BLACK WAVE PHILOSOPHY: METHODICAL MARXISM

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Abstract:

this paper deals with the philosophical underpinning of the Yugoslav Black Wave. A brief discussion of the Yugoslav Black Wave as cinematic movement is followed by a consideration of "Orthodox Marxism" as defined by György Lukács (which laid the groundwork for the thought process that colored this movement) before arriving at an introduction and contemplation of a new term: "Methodical Marxism."

Key words:

yugoslav Black Wave, film, Marxism, ideology, Yugoslavia, philosophy.

The basic thought process of the cinematic movement known as the "Yugoslav Black Wave" can be located in the concept of what some have incongruously labeled "Orthodox Marxism," which contains both its ideological underpinning as well as its practical application. Crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the Black Wave is a familiarity with a particular methodical facet of early Marxist rhetoric. However, before this understanding can be engendered, an attempt at clarification regarding the variety of these Orthodox Marxist concepts and their relation to the Black Wave must be made.

The Black Wave films were examples of a new ideology at work in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia exhibiting a modernist, nonconformist outlook and style. These films were a concentrated eruption that lasted, roughly speaking, from 1963 to 1972 within the broader all-encompassing division of Yugoslav New Film: a new wave of young film directors who brought new sensibilities to Yugoslav cinema. Many of the Black Wave films were quite

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fatalistic and highly transgressive in relation to classical Yugoslav cinema and Yugoslav society in general, thus earning them the *nom maudit* “black.”

The values of these rebellious films were called into question by the mainstream press – particularly the newspaper *Borba*, the official publication of the League of Yugoslav Communists which often featured committee thinking in its film pages which took the form of consensus discussion-style articles from ten or so critics who were all in agreement on a particular issue, no doubt representing the official party line. The reactionary attacks in the press culminated in a 1969 *Borba* article entitled “The Black Wave in Our Cinema”, written by Vladimir Jovičić which coined the very term “Black Wave,” identified films and filmmakers to be associated with it and effectively launched the official counter-action against them.² This counter-action coincided with a general tightening up of progressive liberties that had been allowed throughout the 60s (among them New Film and the Black Wave) in Yugoslavia in an attempt to present a positive image of “socialism with a human face” to the rest of the world. The counter-actions were motivated in part by Prague Spring in early 1968 and the Soviet intervention that was read as a potential threat of incursion, as well as the Belgrade student demonstrations in the summer of the same year which were seen as a possible fomentation of a similar uprising. Revolution was “in the air” in the 60s throughout the world and it was in the vested interests of those maintaining positions of power to push back.

Black Wave films were created by the postwar generations of Yugoslav filmmakers and contemporaries with other groups that came to embody the new waves of their respective national cinemas in the 60s: the French and, more closely both geographically and politically, the Polish and Czechs. Like the French, many Black Wave filmmakers got their start as film critics; many also circulated around the Yugoslav *Cinematheque* (which Henri Langlois visited in 1954 to program a month-long series of screenings culled from the archives of the Cinémathèque Française) and their local ciné-clubs where they made fiction, non-fiction and experimental shorts. Like the Polish and Czechs, many Black Wave filmmakers received a higher education at their national film school – the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade (at that time called the Academy of Theater, Film, Radio and Television) – some eventually became professors there as well. The Black Wave filmmakers were concerned with asserting authorial independence and a subjective point-of-view in their

2 “In an article on the Black Wave (*Borba Reflektor*, August 3, 1969), Vladimir Jovičić defines the cycle of films and what they mean in relation to the state.”

work. This was a rejection of the “romantic” socialist realist aesthetic that the Yugoslav film industry was founded upon, which served heuristic and propagandistic purposes and was designed to avoid abstract experimentation (Goulding 1985). The most vital issue for the Black Wave filmmakers was confronting the constructs and confines of the state and its “orthodox” tendencies from the perspective of the new generation. Black Wave filmmakers struggled against dogmatism through their films and agitated for a better and more humane socialism with equality and freedom for all.

That the Black Wave can, and possibly should, be viewed through a Marxist lens is not an arbitrary endeavor. The filmmakers of the Black Wave came of age in a socialist republic that prioritized a Marxist worldview; this worldview grew with them from the time they were “little pioneers”³ (adolescents) to the time they were adults as something close to their hearts and as a building block of their formative knowledge – not to mention something that informed their everyday external reality. It is a fallacy to believe that all of the Black Wave filmmakers were “anti-communist”, or that all of their work was somehow “anti-socialist” (their work was critical, and criticism should not be confused with condemnation). Quite the contrary, some of these filmmakers were committed socialists whose work was designed to not only exercise the postulates of the ideology that they had studied and practiced but also to play its part in realizing the “socialist paradise” that Tito was intent on creating – though perhaps their vision of that paradise and how to realize it differed from the official opinion.

Orthodox Marxism is a nebulous term – the word “orthodoxy” itself implies conservativeness at best and dogmatism at worst. In the hands of the League of Yugoslav Communists orthodoxy, indicated convention and conformity – a rigid application of Marxist tendencies. By the 1960s, those in the first generation of Yugoslav communists (Tito’s Partisans) were already middle-aged or better. Having controlled the country since liberating it from the Germans during World War II these communists had a quite natural vested interest in a conservative approach to all levels of society and governance that would allow them to maintain their grip on power. Anyone seen to be deviating from their preferred path could potentially be attacked as counter-revolutionary or an enemy of socialism, therefore a direct threat to the state. As old ideas crystallized with time they became unwieldy with the dogmas of an orthodox Marxist society; with the appearance of the postwar generation

3 A “little pioneer” was a unique ideological term in Yugoslavia that referred to youth; they were “little pioneers” of the communist party – the next generation of leaders.

coming of age, the stage was set for the first conflict of ideologies within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Considering Orthodox Marxism and its variable meanings, when used by the League of Yugoslav Communists in relation to their practices it referred to traditional values such as those represented by socialist realism in the arts. Those values were inherently non-threatening to the existing power structure in Yugoslavia. The tenets of Marxism in this instance were dictated by the state, retroactively (sometimes derogatorily) labeled “Titoism” by some. Titoism was based on the principle that the means of attaining communist goals in a particular country must be dictated by the situation and realities of that country and not by an external model (in this case the Soviet Union). The defining and unique characteristics of Titoism were self-management in the workplace and the theory of associated labor. To be an orthodox Marxist in Yugoslavia ultimately meant adhering to the vision of Tito as the most important mitigating factor in society, whether in regards to politics, economics, culture or any other societal sector; to be an orthodox Marxist meant to consent rather than dissent or criticize. Those that diverged from the official Titoist outlook and promulgated other ideologies (particularly Soviet ones after the Tito/Stalin split of 1948) were marginalized and sometimes imprisoned.⁴

In contrast, the filmmakers of the Black Wave can be thought of as “Orthodox Marxists” in the sense of the term as outlined by the Hungarian philosopher György Lukács – though of course, they never consciously labeled themselves in such a manner. In his book *Main Currents of Marxism* Leszek Kołakowski states that Lukács was “the most outstanding Marxist philosopher during the period of Stalinist orthodoxy. Indeed, we may go further and say that he was the only one” (Kołakowski 2005: 989). On the subject of Lukács’ book *History and Class Consciousness*, which was first published in 1923, he writes that “among all his works it is this one which gave rise to most controversy and left the deepest traces on the Marxist movement” (Kołakowski 2005: 994).

History and Class Consciousness contains a chapter entitled “What is Orthodox Marxism?” (Lukács 1971). Here, Lukács proceeds to lay out his vision for the concept – a vision which melds with the humanist Marxist outlook of the Black Wave. Lukács and his vision played a large part in initiating the

4 Goli Otok, or Naked Island, was an infamous site of incarceration in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – a high-security, top secret prison and labor camp for Stalinists and others accused of exhibiting pro-Soviet and/or anti-Yugoslav tendencies.

general line which came to be known as “Western Marxism,” which took hold of a new generation of Marxist thinkers in the 20th century, characterized by a progressive revolutionary outlook through the critical method of Marx’s early writings (including his letter to Arnold Ruge of 1843 and his essay *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s “Philosophy of Right”* of 1844 – both written when Marx was in his 20s). Kołakowski notes that, “In 1930-31 [Lukács] spent some time in Moscow, where he worked in the Marx-Engels Institute and became acquainted with Marx’s early manuscripts, which had still not appeared in print” (Kołakowski 2005: 996). In a generic sense, Western Marxism referred literally to a grouping of Marxist thinkers who were based in Central and Western European countries as well as in North America. Western Marxists prioritized the study of culture in an effort to understand society and they focused not on economic analysis, as Marx himself was concerned with, but rather on the more philosophical areas of Marxist thought. Regarding Lukács specifically, who was also an influential literary critic, his main ambition was to “lay the foundations of a Marxist aesthetic” (Kołakowski 2005: 1016).

Lukács defined orthodoxy as fidelity to the Marxist method, not to dogmas. As Kołakowski explains, “*Method* does not mean here a set of rules for intellectual operations, as it does in logic, but a particular way of thinking which includes awareness that in thinking about the world it is also helping to change it, being at the same time a practical commitment” (Kołakowski 2005: 998). This method located its spirit in young Marx’s writings, centering on the idea of criticism. Lukács opens his chapter by quoting one of Marx’s more famous statements – the eleventh of his *Theses on Feuerbach*: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” (Tucker 1978: 145). This extraction stresses the importance of unifying theory and practice in the Marxist method, revealing the key to this method to be tangible social action.

Though Western Marxists generally studied abstract philosophical concepts in and through Marxism, Lukács was more interested in demystifying theory and stressing practice. This makes him a true Orthodox Marxist, as Marx’s original statement and stance can be interpreted as an attempt to reject the mystification that mars modern philosophy in a fog of aesthetics, favoring instead radical action. Lukács wrote that “for the dialectical method the central problem is to change reality” (Lukács 1971); the idea being the fact that without an emphasis on social change, dialectics ceases to be revolutionary. He also centers Orthodox Marxism on the notion of understanding the real meaning of dialectics: a dissolving of the borderlines between concepts and a

continuous alternation of definitions. As a result there is no dualism between subject and object, nor one between theory and practice.

Lukács continues by writing that “we need the dialectical method to puncture the social illusion so produced and help us to glimpse the reality underlying it” (Lukács 1971). An analogous principle exists between this conception and the work of the Black Wave filmmakers, who were concerned with exposing elements of society that until then had not been seen in Yugoslav cinema, such as decaying buildings and marginal people. Classical Yugoslav cinema, supported by what could more descriptively be called “conservative” Marxism, conjured this social illusion; Black Wave cinema served as a means to destroy it. Black Wave filmmakers sought to set up the conditions in which reality could be grasped so it can be criticized, criticized so it can be changed and changed so it can aspire to improve.

Young Marx argued for the necessity of a “ruthless critique of all existing conditions” – ruthless in the sense that this critique “must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be” (Tucker 1978: 13). It is this strategy that was adopted as the *modus operandi* of the Black Wave filmmakers. Robert C. Tucker, in his edited collection of Marx’s writings, noted that “many in Russia and Eastern Europe, reacting against Stalinism and the dreary orthodoxy of official Communist Marxism, have found support and inspiration in the early Marx for a new, morally aware, critical Marxism” (Tucker 1978: 13). This would seem to explain the birth of Western Marxism and also the *raison d’être* of the Black Wave. In fact, as Kołakowski writes, Lukács’ book *History and Class Consciousness* “disappeared without trace from Communist annals and was only rediscovered after Stalin’s death” (Kołakowski 2005: 995). It disappeared because “at a period when Communist ideology was hardening into dogmatic form, [...] Lukács’ book was sharply attacked in the most official manner possible, namely at a session of the Third International” (Kołakowski 2005: 994).

The support for and inspiration of early Marx was amplified in Yugoslavia by the Korčula Summer School⁵ which was organized by the Praxis group on the Croatian island of Korčula in the Adriatic Sea as a popular yearly meeting place for philosophers and social critics from all over the world, attended by such notable Western Marxists as Ernst Bloch, Erich Fromm and Jürgen Habermas – also, some of the Black Wave filmmakers. The critical

5 The Korčula Summer School was in operation from 1963 to 1974, coinciding with the years of operation of the journal *Praxis* as well as the years of productivity of the Black Wave.

philosophical Marxist journal *Praxis*, first published in Zagreb, Croatia in 1964, called for freedom of speech in all social spheres throughout the world – particularly in countries belonging to the Eastern Bloc. Advocating a reliance on the early works of Marx, *Praxis* editors urged an incessant social critique; the very name of the journal symbolized this dedication to method – a dedication shared by the Black Wave filmmakers. Also, as Kołakowski notes, “Lukács died at Budapest in 1971. In the previous decade interest in his ideas increased rapidly, as is shown by the number of books, articles, and discussions concerning him, and also by the numerous translations and new editions of his works themselves” (Kołakowski 2005: 997).

Since Lukács felt that orthodoxy refers exclusively to method (the method of early Marx being an incessant critique) his conception functions well as a piercing methodological framework for engaging with the films of the Black Wave – a framework which helps to illuminate the strategies of the Black Wave filmmakers and also the ends they were trying to achieve. However, due to the flexibility of the idea of “Orthodox” Marxism and its multiple, sometimes conflicting connotations, it is perhaps necessary to forward a descriptive term that can be applied and utilized for the purposes of study as something that will closely encapsulate the theme and spirit of the brand of Marxism that the Black Wave filmmakers practiced, while at the same time evading confusion. It seems that such a term should be “Methodical Marxism.”

The term “Methodical Marxism” can be defined simply as Lukács elaboration on orthodoxy: anti-traditional, oppositional and critical. This diverges from programmatic, optimistic and educational, which constituted the tenets of socialist realism as originally defined by Maxim Gorky in his 1934 pamphlet *On Socialist Realism* (Gorky 1977). The Yugoslav film industry was founded on Gorky’s definition of socialist realism, which in turn conditioned the aesthetic of classical Yugoslav cinema as an “orthodox” and conservative cinema. Methodical Marxism and the Black Wave represent progressive Marxism and the spirit of early Marx.

The conditions of Methodical Marxism can be applied to the Black Wave films through analysis, meaning that the anti-traditional elements of the films can be analyzed in terms of formal style, in an attempt to see how and why Black Wave films diverged from the classical path of Yugoslav cinema; oppositional elements of the films can be considered in terms of ideology, how Black Wave films countered the prevailing dogmas of the League of Yugoslav

Communists; critical elements of the films can be investigated in terms of the implicit and explicit arguments the Black Wave filmmakers were making as efforts to engage with society and expose its faults. Black Wave cinema is a polemical cinema and the concept of Methodical Marxism can be utilized to reveal a better understanding of the progressive rhetoric that was forwarded.

These Methodical Marxist criteria are not meant to explain the films in their entirety, nor can they account for the totality of their effect; rather, the criteria utilized can function as a starting point in an effort to sort out and clarify the various codes at play within the films themselves. Though these filmmakers came from different points of departure and operated with different styles any study of them should begin with illuminating their commonalities, of which there are many and which would work as the most revelatory method in lending such a survey significance. What makes the Black Wave unique is the contention that these filmmakers were moving in the same direction at the same time, through the same ideological and aesthetic means.

Though it is obvious that Marxism already suffers from an overwhelming number of descriptive expressions to follow the different waves and directions it has been propagated in, the importance here in introducing the label “Methodical Marxism” into the fold is a practical one: not for the purposes of creating a new line of thought, but rather to clarify an existing one. To borrow a notion from the literary critic Northrop Frye, the intention is to make the use of this concept akin to scaffolding in the construction of an evaluative history. If it is necessary to be discarded after the fact, so be it.

Summary

The basic thought process of the cinematic movement known as the Yugoslav Black Wave can be located in the concept of what some have incongruously labeled “Orthodox Marxism,” which contains both its ideological underpinning as well as its practical application. The Black Wave films were examples of a new ideology at work in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia exhibiting a modernist, nonconformist outlook and style. These films appeared from roughly 1963-72 within the broader all-encompassing division of Yugoslav New Film: a new wave of young film directors who brought new sensibilities to Yugoslav cinema.

Orthodox Marxism is a nebulous term—the word “orthodoxy” itself implies conservativeness at best and dogmatism at worst. In the hands of the League of Yugoslav Communists orthodoxy indicated convention and conformity—a rigid application of Marxist tendencies. In contrast, the filmmakers of the Black Wave can be thought of as “Orthodox Marxists” in the sense of the term as outlined by the Hungarian philosopher György Lukács. Lukács defined orthodoxy as fidelity to the Marxist method, not to dogmas. This method located its spirit in young Marx’s writings.

Young Marx argued for the necessity of a “ruthless critique of all existing conditions”⁶—ruthless in the sense that this critique “must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be.”⁷ It is this strategy that was adopted as the *modus operandi* of the Black Wave filmmakers. However, due to the flexibility of the idea of “Orthodox” Marxism and its multiple, sometimes conflicting, connotations, it is perhaps necessary to forward a descriptive term that can be applied and utilized for the purposes of study as something that will closely encapsulate the theme and spirit of the brand of Marxism that the Black Wave filmmakers practiced, while at the same time evading confusion. It seems that such a term should be “Methodical Marxism.”

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7 Ibid.

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FILOZOFIJA CRNOG TALASA: METODIČKI MARKSIZAM

Rezime:

Osnovna misao vodilja filmskog pokreta poznatog kao „jugoslovenski crni talas” može se locirati unutar nezgrapnog pojma „ortodoksni marksizam”, a koji istovremeno sadrži ideološku potku samog pokreta i, u istoj meri, njegovu praktičnu primenu. Filmovi crnog talasa primeri su nove ideologije na delu u Socijalističkoj Federativnoj Republici Jugoslaviji, i kao takvi, demonstriraju modernistički, nekonformistički stil i pogled na svet. Ovi filmovi se pojavljuju otprilike od 1963. do 1972, unutar šire i sveobuhvatne podele „jugoslovenskog novog filma”: novog talasa mladih filmskih reditelja koji su doneli nove senzibilitete jugoslovenskom filmu. „Ortodoksni marksizam” predstavlja nejasan i maglovit termin – reč „ortodoksni” sama po sebi implicira konzervativnost u najboljem slučaju, odnosno dogmatizam u najgorem. U rukama jugoslovenskih komunista, ortodoksnost je označavala konvenciju i konformitet – rigidnu primenu marksističkih tendencija. Za razliku od ovakvog shvatanja, reditelji crnog talasa se pre mogu shvatiti kao ortodoksni marksisti onako kako ovaj pojam shvata mađarski filozof Djerdj Lukač. Lukač definiše ortodoksnost kao vernost marksističkom metodu, a ne kao dogmu. Ovaj metod pronalazimo u delima mladoga Marksa koji se zalagao za neophodnost „bespoštedne kritike svih postojećih uslova”, bespoštedne u smislu da se takva kritika „ne sme plašiti sopstvenih zaključaka, niti konflikta s vlastima”. U pitanju je strategija koju kao *modus operandi* primenjuju reditelji crnog talasa. Međutim, usled fleksibilnosti same ideje ortodosnog marksizma i njegovih višestrukih i ponekad konfliktualnih konotacija, možda je neophodno lansirati još jedan deskriptivni termin koji se može primeniti za potrebe proučavanja, kao nešto što će blisko obuhvatiti temu i duh one grane marksizma koju su praktikovali rediteji crnog talasa; ovaj termin bi takođe bio od pomoći u izbegavanju nepotrebne konfuzije i može se nazvati „metodički marksizam”. Iako reditelji crnog talasa dolaze iz različitih provinijencija i operišu sa različitim stilovima, svaka vrsta ozbiljne studije o njima treba da započne osvetljavanjem njihovih mnogostukih sličnosti i zajedničkih karakteristika, a koje bi mogle da funkcionišu kao značajan metod koji treba da doprinese značaju ovog preglednog rada. Ono što crni talas, dakle, čini jedinstvenim jeste argument da su se ovi rediteji kretali u istom pravcu, u isto vreme, i kroz ista ideološka i estetička sredstva.

Ključne reči: jugoslovenski crni talas, film, marksizam, ideologija, Jugoslavija, filozofija.