



HISTORICAL JOURNAL OF FILM, RADIO AND TELEVISION
2021, VOL. 41, NO. 3, 559-577
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2021.1936984>

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The socialist Yugoslav paradox: Documentary cinema exhibition opportunities and the meaning of 'Dissent'

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ABSTRACT

This article will examine the position of critical cinema in socialist Yugoslavia by analysing the archives of the only documentary festival in the country, the Yugoslav Documentary and Short Film Festival in Belgrade (founded in 1954). It will compare the festival's most prosperous years, when a series of internationally acclaimed Black Wave films were screened (late 60s/early 70s), and its final socialist phase, when a series of 'patriotic' films, mostly seen as uninteresting by international programmers, were shown (late 80s/early 90s). Analysing the ideological change in the festival's programming, the article will show how Yugoslav documentary moved from a critique within a socialist perspective in the 60s to the promotion of a predominantly anti-socialist and nationalist perspective in the 80s. In doing so, it will demonstrate that although often regarded as 'the' dissident cinema of Yugoslavia, the Black Wave was in its essence in dialectical dialog with the socialist state, unlike the critical films of the late 80s and early 90s, which were arguing for regime change in favour of a nation-state. The article will shed light on the paradoxes of Yugoslav censorship and film exhibition opportunities, in the specific context of the only European country that was ruled by a communist government but that was outside of the Eastern Bloc.

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This article analyses the position of critical cinema in socialist Yugoslavia through examination of the archives of the only documentary festival in the country, The Yugoslav Documentary and Short Film Festival (YDSFF). Created in 1954 as the 'official' event for displaying national cinema, with the League of Communists well integrated in its structures, YDSFF was, somewhat paradoxically, often the only place where local audiences could see films that critically confronted the major Yugoslav socialist myths, that is the myths of Second World War and of the country's socialist revolution at the end of the war. We can define two pivotal periods in the festival's socialist history, both marked by programmes that were critical of the (political) situation in the country: its 'golden age', when a series of internationally acclaimed Black Wave films were screened (late 60 s/early 70 s), and its final socialist phase, when a series of 'patriotic' films, which usually attracted little interest from international programmers, were shown (late 80 s/early 90 s). The three questions that the article addresses are: What does the analysis of these programmes reveal about the evolution of political documentary in socialist Yugoslav history? What do these programmes tell us about the level of liberties and restrictions in filmmaking and programming in socialist Yugoslavia? What do the polemics that surrounded critical films tell us about their alleged dissident nature? By addressing these questions, the analysis will demonstrate how criticism within a socialist perspective in the 60 s and early 70 s gave way to the