representation of the illusion of disturbance of hegemonic power can only be achieved normalisation of free media practices alone.
THE RETURN OF THE RED BOURGEOISIE — AN INTERVIEW WITH NADA PRILA

Heavily influenced by the Black Wave or dissident Yugoslav cinema of her childhood, artist Nada Prila considers its unique balancing act between iconoclasm and idealism, individualism and communism to be exemplary. In an interview with Stefan Szczelkun, Prila talks about the cultural context of communist Yugoslavia and its mutation into a consumer culture — a shift that her artwork pivots on.

Nada Prila was born in Sarajevo in the former Yugoslavia in 1971, and graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Skopje, Macedonia. She has lived and worked in London since she moved here in 1999. Her work deals with complex situations of inequality within different political, economic or religious formations. Working across media (video, installation and a wide range of material including flags and neon) her work is site-specific, as well as ideas rather than media driven. She was one of the few artists to graduate with me from the Royal College of Art in 2002 who was clearly political in her intent. Her work has progressed with a fearless determination since then. Recently I heard her give a talk at Tate Britain’s Conversation Piece series. Here she talked about her recent show and her move towards a ‘Blackkommunism’. I was intrigued to know more.

Stefan Szczelkun: What is your background? I guess the short way to ask this is what jobs did your parents do? How did the family get its money?

Nada Prila: My family comes from two opposite sides of society: the family from my mother’s side is part of the pre-WWII bourgeoisie, the hated ‘aristocracy’ (or the so-called ‘book aristocracy’ — related to the fact that in pre-WWII times, only the aristocracy could be educated). With the nationalisation of private property, the family lost almost all of their assets, property and possessions — houses, land and a factory that used to employ about 100 people in the pre-WWII period. Ironically, they did not lose their family library, as no one had a ‘need’ for it.

In contrast with this situation of displaced family members, victims of the nationalisation of the family’s assets, my father’s side of the family belongs to the post-WWII ‘new comers’. My grandparents (from my father’s side) were part of the partisan movement; they were what was known as ‘first fighters’ (prvobori — people that joined the partisan movement at its stage of infancy). My grandfather, in particular, also achieved important recognition for his bravery and military accomplishments as a partisan leader. Fighting the Germans and Italians proved profitable… as these heroic partisan figures enjoyed considerable privileges in the post-war period. What I learned from my grandfather was the notion of bravery, a belief in idealism, and faith in a socialist society.

My grandmother, on my mother’s side, was an artist, graduating in painting from the Academy of Fine Art in Belgrade in 1942. She died young in 1952. Her paintings, inspired by Millet and mostly figurative, remained with us and were all around me as I
and cover his body in a casual manner, holding and caressing it. This image opposes the usual use of the flag as a representation of state power. This scene shows Makavejev's respect toward human nature, against the socialist image of man as heroic, and physically and emotionally strong—a man without human weaknesses. I heard that Profete was not accepted by the Communist Party and that numerous scenes had to be edited out—including an image of Tito arriving in his limousine and accidentally stepping next to a scruffy gypsy fortune teller who offers to tell his future for a dinar.

Lazar Stojanovic's diploma work, Plastic Jesus, made in 1971, was seen as 'dangerous' by the authorities and the film was put into a 'bunker' in 1975, re-emerging from censorship and only first publicly viewed in 1990. Tomislav Gotovac plays the lead role of Tom. Gotovac was one of the first performance artists in Yugoslavia whose works were crucial in the shaping of the contemporary Yugoslav art scene. The character Tom is a man who doesn't trust anyone, he doesn't believe in anything; his disillusionment is clearly connected to the consequences of the Second World War and the post-war period. The most fascinating scene of the movie, for me, is when Tom is shown in the background of the room, walking around casually, dressed only in underwear, his partner approaches him and draws the red star onto his forehead using her make-up crayon. Tom moves forward and fills up the frame with his torso, rests his hands on the door frame in a position like that of a crucified Jesus, and sings the

International. In this scene, Lazar Stojanovic juxtaposed religious iconography with the symbols of socialist ideology onto the figure of Tom—a non-believer in either of those two ideologies.

Archive footage shows the Nazi party, socialist party leaders, images of the holocaust, the nationalistic Ustaša in Croatia and the pro-Serbian nationalistic Četnici. All of this footage is 'wrapped up' in the culture of the late '60s and early '70s, the disillusionment with existing systems, the feminist movement, the issues of 'guest-workers' and their annual visits back to their native country, the censorship of TV channels and the underground business of pornography.

SS: Another film you mentioned before was Innocence Unprotected—what would you say were the key images for you in this film?

NP: What I find important in this film is Makavejev's representation of the famous acrobat Alekseic, who is the main actor/character in Innocence Unprotected (1967). Alekseić himself has made a movie entitled Innocence Unprotected during WWII. Makavejev finds the almost caricature-like figure of the acrobat appealing from two opposing directions. Firstly, he enjoys Alekseić's bravery and blind belief in the socialist system, shown through the successes of his acrobatic exercises—perceived as a point of national pride at a time when personal achievements could only be synonymous with national achievements. Makavejev's adoration of the absurdity and irrationality of this character's 'heroic' achievements, which for him symbolise the idealism of early Yugoslavia as a socialist state, is at the same time used as a critique of that very same system/society.

I would perhaps say that I like the end of the film the most; it shows Alekseić much later in life, as a weakened older man, who despite his injuries still maintains a strict regime of physical exercise with the aim of maintaining high spirits and a positive approach to life, as a true socialist Yugoslav. I also enjoy the scene where the film director and two other collaborators from the original film are seen walking on the roof of a building like Werner's angels in Wings of Desire. They are heard discussing the bravery involved in filming during WWII. The film then cuts to the lead female character from the same original film, now as an old lady, talking about how she had won a competition for the 'most beautiful legs in Yugoslavia.' She is shown in an advertisement campaign in which she is shown with her legs wrapped around her head. This is a signature Makavejev editing technique, which enjoys the juxtaposition of the serious, heroic and comic. With that image, Makavejev negates or destabilises the potentially meaningful symbolisms of the preceding scene. Makavejev was sceptical of official ideology and sympathised with the everyday, flawed individuals as opposed to the idealised, communist notion of the 'New Man'. As Michel Ciment
says, 'He wanted to destroy the ideological concept of the "New Man" and exchange concepts and monuments for feelings and real lives.'

SS: What foreign films were significant at that time?

NP: At the time when I was growing up in the '80s, there were two TV channels, western Tom and Jerry cartoons were screened at 7.15 and with the main news at 7.30pm. The main programs would end promptly at 11 pm to be followed by nothing but TV snow. The first late-night program, Black Sheep, appeared when I was in secondary school and was popular throughout Yugoslavia. A lot of 'alternative' movies were screened in this slot. At the same time, good film reviews were transmitted on national TV during the Film Fest organised in Belgrade which gave a valuable insight into new modes. I still remember inserts from Tarkovsky's Stalker and the scene towards the end of the film when the stalker's girl, leaning on the table, starts moving glasses on the table-top with her telekinetic powers. I saw this as an 11 year old child, and such scenes left a great impression on me.

Good films were shown on TV regularly: Tarkovsky, Bergman, Pasolini... Films such as Tarkovsky's Andrei Rublev (1966) would be shown at least once a year. I also remember rushing home at 6pm, once a week, to watch the weekly episode of Kieślowski's Decalogue series (1988) in the same way as we watched David Lynch's Twin Peaks once a week when I was at university in 1993. The first purely 'entertainment' films did not start appearing on TV until much later. The socialist conception of leisure was very different from ours today; "lazy" relaxation was seen as unproductive, or even counter-productive. So that even if you are relaxing -- you should be learning something.

SS: What was your perception of the working class in Yugoslavia?

NP: There was a banknote in ex-Yugoslavia popularly called the 'miner'. It was a banknote worth 10 dinars but nobody, even in the shops, would say a loaf of bread costs 10 dinars -- instead, one would simply say 'the loaf of bread is worth one "miner"'. In my exhibition Should I Stay or Should I Go (2008), I have framed a sample of that old banknote, where I have scratched out the face of the worker (Reference 6). I am intrigued by this idea of workers' invisibility in contemporary society and a number of my recent works are based on this idea. During socialist times, images of the working class were integrated into all aspects of society. In the encyclopaedia at the time, a triple-volume, burgundy, hardbound publication, there are more than 40 pages on factories and industrial workers. Socialism was a system based on ideology and industrialization -- and one of the driving forces of this code of belief was imagery glorifying the working class. Most of this was achieved through banal propaganda -- like the banknote -- but it worked. Now we live in an alienated world where we are not really aware of who makes the products we consume.

The live art event entitled Workers' Production Line (2008), exhibited as part of my Should I Stay or Should I Go solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje in 2008, engaged with this idea. During the opening day of the exhibition, a group of eight factory workers occupied a row of work tables displayed in the main gallery space. They worked on industrial sewing machines manufacturing T-shirts. I joined the end of the production line dressed in a worker's uniform. As the shirts were produced by the workers I painted a selection of slogans onto the front side of each T-shirt. The T-shirts were then displayed on a long railing for the duration of the exhibition. After the completion of the production process the machines, fabric, boxes, cables and everything was left as an installation entitled Stripe (2008). This was intended to resemble the moment of abandonment of a factory -- empty factories are now a common site in the region. I then offered my scheduled interviews with various journalists to the representatives of the local workers' union, with the intention of enabling them to spread their message about the current plight of the workers.

SS: How else does your work relate to the influx of commercialism after the collapse of communism?

NP: Unfortunately the lack of consumerist physical objects during socialist times -- or the lack of a certain variety of products (there was always only three types of soap, toothpaste, chocolates, etc., to choose from) produced a real hunger for the vast variety of objects, which are now readily available. Consumerism, in its most banal form, has overpowered the asceticism of socialism. The public sphere is overspilled by this new 'turbo' aesthetics, which is gradually destroying local Balkan identities. The turbo-folk musical genre, a combination of traditional folk music and pop music, has given rise to a popular 'turbo-folk' culture.

In order to introduce the idea of oppositional thinking, I realised, as part of my 2007 exhibitions, Globalwood, in the National Gallery of Macedonia -- a project entitled Turbo Star (2007). This was a live art event in the form of a singing competition. It included a purpose-built backstop to a stage, on which new stars of the turbo-folk musical genre were being created by competing in a live show/competition. They were faced with members of the cultural elite who sat as a jury: fine art historians, artists and theoreticians.
Zorica Tomić, in her book *The Kiss in the Time of Cooling*, describes turbo-folk music by illustrating the way it has influenced culture and contemporary society in general. She claims that the notion of love in the Balkans today uses a model taken from soap operas that includes a fascination for the accumulation of wealth; she refers to this cultural milieu as 'phantasmagoric Hollywood'. Phantasmagoric Hollywood promotes a body enhanced by plastic surgery, an emotionally cold Hollywood lifestyle, where betrayal is treated as an essential part of a dazzling consumerism. An alternative to turbo-folk is currently non-existent. During socialism there was an opposition, as represented by the Black Wave film movement.

**SS:** What other themes are you working on?

**NP:** Probably the most interesting theme for me now is the concept of displacement and migration. If we are talking again about the Black Wave Cinema, I would introduce a new name to this discussion — Želimir Žilnik, an active film-maker and cult figure in Vojvodina. Žilnik's short film, made in 1975, was and remains my inspiration for working on this subject. One particular scene is really simple and it touches the art video genre in its approach. A static camera is placed in an unnamed unidentified buildings we see only a set of stairs, suddenly a child appears, somewhat ashamed, and climbs down the stairs to a point level with the camera. He says his name, describes his job in Germany and how much he pays in rent, again a bit ashamed, but a little more confident now. He then descends the rest of the stairs and disappears into the darkness of the hallway. The next child does the same, descending from the top floor of the building down to the level of the camera; he states his name, and continues on his way down. Then a third person appears, a plumber, earning 300 Deutsch Marks. Then another: a cleaner. 400 Deutsch Marks, etc. Eventually, one loses track of the number of people climbing up and down the stairs, saying their name and stating their job and salary. You simply observe the characters, face by face, look at their expressions, realising that they are all migrants who receive minimal wages and pay a substantial part of their earnings in rent.

In my video work, entitled *Stop the War Against Immigrants* (2008), I abruptly reveal today's position in relation to the migration within the UK. During the course of several days in the summer of 2008, I positioned protest banners on the streets of London and secretly recorded the unfolding scene with a hidden camera from the opposite side of the street. The banners used in this installation are a document of a real-life scene, where a group of youngsters express their anger toward and mistrust of immigrants, by smashing the series of protest banners (the texts and slogans of which support immigration and the notion of equal human rights for all).

**SS:** You have mentioned that you come from the red bourgeoisie but might, in fact, be moving toward a 'Return of the Black Communists'. What do you mean by this?

**NP:** Now, 20 years after the collapse of communism, and at the time of an apparent collapse of capitalism, where many of its values has been put under scrutiny — there is no political or economic system that could be called exemplary; something to be respected or followed without reservation. I am proposing a new system, something that I would like to be a part of — I have named it 'Black Communism'.

Why 'Black Communism'? During the time of socialism, the socio-political system was distorted and misinterpreted by people who were in a position to give orders. This is the reason for the disintegration of the system, it is not the system itself that is to blame. Looking back at communism as a system, or the idea and overall form it took — free education and healthcare for everybody, affordable housing for all, idealism, brotherhood, equality — these are all concepts I still find to be relevant and important for any political/economic arrangement.

My work as an artist supports the idea of a 'critical communism', as some of the concepts with which I work come directly from communist ideals and methodologies such as the search for unity and equality (like projects dedicated to the support of workers and the integration of minorities). So I would like to live in 'Black Communism', a system that supports the idea of 'the same for everybody', mutual understanding and support, but at the same time a system in which critique is welcome. Or a form of communism in which the critical approach, inherent in the Black Wave movement, would be central to the culture.

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**Footnotes:**

1. Unfortunately, I now see these individuals — the socialist sympathisers — as the 'hosts'. My grandfather (like many others of his generation) broke down after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, this breaking up of the country was too painful for him to recover from, it was more painful than the six bullet holes he received in the battles of WWII. The collapse of the country for which he had fought also meant the collapse of the belief system that went with it.

2. Nada was at the Fine Art Academy from 1991–1996.


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*Stefan Szczeluk* <Stefan@ukart.com> is an artist, living in South London, with an interest in open artists' collectives and networks.