

INTRODUCTION

Rajko Grlić and Cadences of Reality

Aida Vidan

Rajko Grlić's *One More for the Road* provokes in the reader both a sense of great joy and one of deep sadness. The joy arises from the narrative opulence, balancing on an existential and political brink and propelling us to ask some of the most pertinent questions a human being can pose. At the same time, Grlić's stories, presented in the form of lexicon entries, immerse us in a complex set of artistic, ethical, and political topics while traversing the globe and offering a taste of a life lived in diverse social and cultural circumstances. Much like in his films, overtones of humor, irony, mischief, and resilience pervade the scenes before us. The sadness, on the other hand, descends upon the reader as they reach the final pages and realize that these notes about slivers of lives both real and imagined from the director's notebook will never be made into movies. Disillusioned with both socialist censorship and capitalist profiteering that prevented the production of at least some of them, one is grateful for the eye-opening journeys they afford us while capturing the recent tumultuous decades in which individual fates and feats stood up against belligerent political projects.

Rajko Grlić was born in 1947 in Zagreb, Croatia (then Yugoslavia) to a family who, over the centuries, had been settling in Zagreb and then leaving it, carrying with them memories of images, ideas, stories, songs, and tastes, and losing anew with each generation what little material possessions the previous one managed to acquire. As Grlić adeptly puts it: "In all these centuries-long migrations, in the maze of places they lived, the only anchor for arrivals and departures has always been Zagreb, a small town on the edge of Europe. They all came to it bright with hope, lost nearly everything each time they were here, and then set off on a quest for new lands" (Preface, p. xxiii). His own life follows this same pattern of departures and arrivals, as well as accomplishments undercut by retributions and lost opportunity. His family—of mixed German, Slavic, and Jew-

ish background, which in previous centuries migrated between Germany, Spain, Hungary, Austria, and England to Zagreb, and in more recent ones from Zagreb to Canada, Brazil, Congo, Switzerland, New Zealand, Pakistan, Italy, England, and the US—has been a repository of cultural memory that has colored his upbringing in the most profound way and which he selflessly shares with his readers. Unfortunately, one need not look far back to uncover horrors and suffering—despite fighting on the antifascist side, both of the director’s parents spent time on Goli Otok (Bare Island), the most ruthless Yugoslav labor camp for political prisoners. Although his father, philosopher Danko Grlić, eventually became a university professor and was among the founding members of the Praxis group which brought together influential European Marxists, the shadow of uncertainty and suspicion continued to hover over the family even after Yugoslavia was no more. And yet, despite the hardships he depicts, his narrative reveals a defiant spirit, a seemingly inexhaustible persistence, and a subtle joy of living which measure up to relentless challenges.

A small Bell & Howell camera, the auspicious gift Rajko Grlić received from his uncle who had been living in the West, launched him on a path of cinematic exploration when he was only fourteen. His early engagement with the medium as a member of a local cine club resulted in the first amateur films made during his teenage years and acceptance at the renowned Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU) where he was deemed sufficiently advanced to skip his first year. His mentor, Elmar Klos, prominent Czech filmmaker and 1965-Oscar winner in the category of Best Foreign Language Film for his *The Shop on Main Street*, appears in multiple narratives. Klos had a major impact on Grlić’s artistic vision, especially when Klos’s creative output was obliterated by the Soviet invasion of 1968. Klos, however, was not silenced: he resisted by raising a new generation of directors who, in addition to learning the nuts and bolts of scriptwriting and directing, were also instilled with a strong sense of political responsibility and adherence to ethical values. Grlić’s time at FAMU was a period of major stylistic development through the study of works by important auteurs, whose poetics left a lasting resonance with him. He was particularly drawn to Godard and the French New Wave as well as Italian directors Antonioni and Fellini with whom he felt he shared a kindred spirit and geographic connection.

Over the years, FAMU educated several South Slavic directors of the post-World War II generation, among them Goran Paskaljević, Srđan Karanović, Lordan Zafranović, Goran Marković, and Emir Kusturica, some of whom forged life-long friendships while others found themselves on opposing sides of political barricades. Rajko Grlić and Srđan Karanović’s multiple collaborations as well as his friendship with the eminent Serbian

director Dušan Makavejev, both portrayed here in several stories, provide further testimony of solidarity prevailing over political extremism. Through an account of Grlić's studies in Prague, the reader relives the frightening uncertainty of Soviet oppression and witnesses the collapse of cultural and social institutions in a sovereign country while at the same time learning about the efforts of the local population to preserve a semblance of normal life. Several chapters and decades later, we encounter Rajko Grlić and several other young Yugoslav filmmakers in Moscow at the invitation of *Mosfilm* and the Ministry of Culture of the USSR. The stern official protocol is challenged by the disheveled appearance and informal attitude of the invitees who scramble to improvise the expected laudatory speeches. The nonconforming toasts culminate in the Yugoslav delegation's public praise of Isaak Babel and Boris Pilnyak, Russian writers executed during the Stalinist period. Consequently, the delegation's effort to meet Andrei Tarkovsky remains unanswered, however, they are lucky to be escorted by Larisa Shepitko, a former student of Alexander Dovzhenko. Their last nocturnal walk through Red Square, during which they outline the Coca-Cola logo with their footsteps in pristine snow, would these days possibly be called an installation. Back then it was a mischievous provocation, a punch back for old unsettled accounts, which did not escalate only because of Yugoslavia's special status between the East and the West.

Never a part of the mainstream, Grlić was affiliated early in his career with the intellectually provocative underground scene which resented the official "Red Wave" film production meant to glorify Partisan conquests during World War II and achievements of the socialist period. Maturing in a family distrustful of the political establishment at a time when the new order was starting to exhibit serious cracks, he had the impulse to look behind the scenes and capture raw unfiltered reality. No wonder the GEF (Zagreb's *Genre Film Festival*), a venue for experimental film which, among many others, showed the work of Jonas Mekas, had caught Grlić's attention even before his Prague years. His FAMU experience did not turn into a long-term engagement with the Czech film industry because of abysmal political circumstances so he returned to Zagreb upon graduation. In addition to the skills of the trade, he took with him the ability to envelop his films in both humor and tragedy (reflected also on the pages of this book), and to employ ambiguity and metanarrative devices as core elements of his scripts. He directed his first award-winning film *If It Kills Me* at twenty-seven and proceeded to make *Bravo Maestro* in 1978, which was nominated for the Palme d'Or at the *Cannes Film Festival*. A story about a wasted talent abandoned for social advancement, the film is as much about a young musician as it is about society depicted through its music microcosm.

Grić's next film *You Love Only Once* (a.k.a. *The Melody Haunts My Reverie*) from 1981 was equally well received at Cannes where it was included in the category *Un Certain Regard* for its "original and different" vision. The film focuses on the period immediately after World War II and on a young Partisan hero rising rapidly through the socialist hierarchy; the narrative gradually shifts its upbeat momentum for a tragic downfall. The hero, who falls in love with a beautiful ballerina from a bourgeois family, becomes suspect by the sheer act of affiliating himself with the wrong class. The true reason for his punishment, however, turns out to be the envy of his comrades, rather than any political or revolutionary motivation. Although censorship relaxed after Tito's death in 1980, as the Yugoslav leadership turned to address a cohort of pressing economic and political issues, the film still caused major consternation. Anticipating harsh criticism, the director smuggled a copy out of the country and managed to enter it into the Cannes Film Festival competition. Once it was included in the official program, it became impossible for censors to remove the film from the public domain and consequently it was seen by a large audience. Many critics consider this film one of the best Yugoslav/Croatian productions. Its subtle interplay between the notion of personal freedom and oppressive authority was a slap in the face to the leadership who responded with particular wrath to insinuations of corruption as the true motivator behind political action (Vidan 2017: 36–38). Some scholars (Gilić 2011: 129–30; Pavičić 2017: 228) find connections between *You Love Only Once* and Fassbinder's and Szabo's films from this period through their focus on family matters refracted through specific historical circumstances.

Although loosely based on a diary by Ruža Jurković, a Croatian prima ballerina and choreographer, the film pursues its own narrative course, and through a calibrated juxtaposition of characters becomes a sharp social critique. The principal protagonists, Tomislav and Beba, are trapped in a postwar province experiencing the harsh reality of life with a shock-brigade and surrounded by political watchdogs. Owing to their dissimilar backgrounds, their relationship is complicated enough and becomes additionally saddled when her family, with whom they share close quarters, is constantly interfering. His comrades too do not hesitate to pry, under the guise of duty, and ultimately turn everyone against the couple. The lack of freedom is accentuated by the impossibility of having any personal space, and this forces the couple to withdraw from social interactions. Against this stark social canvas, the erotic scenes serve as an emotional shelter and the only psychological stronghold. However, even the most intimate sphere is not safe from political schemes and rivalry which eventually compromise their marriage, landing Tomislav in prison and leading to his demise. Along with the protagonists, the viewer quickly becomes

aware that Marxist idealism has nothing to do with the life in the provincial outpost, where differences of any sort are considered antirevolutionary. What is more, the seemingly organized society aspiring to high ideals of equality, justice, and prosperity quickly turns into a bloodthirsty pack while the idyllic space of joined labor becomes a site of terror and lawlessness. Much could be said on account of gender relations in this and in Grljić's other films that bravely depict the rawness of patriarchal relations and machismo embedded in both the private and social aspects of life even in a system that nominally espoused gender equality. The male protagonist pays the price in part because of his failure to play along with the macho schemes. Prioritizing the ordinary things in life such as preferring a relationship over the revolutionary agenda and, moreover, signaling that the agenda has been tarnished by serious ethical concerns, was problematic even for this late-stage, more tolerant brand of Yugoslav socialism. The visual vocabulary of the film with its subdued color palette, spatial organization, and a gradual transition from long shots to mid-shots and closeups underscores the protagonists' psychological drama and their sense of captivity. Tomislav Pinter, who was the director of photography, is praised as the most influential Croatian cinematographer and is also known for his work with Orson Welles.

The nonconformism exhibited in his early films has persisted throughout Grljić's career. Irrespective of the system and the name of the country where he is residing, he finds himself walking the razor edge of criticism in many of his projects; this is never voiced overtly but wrapped in the palpable everyday reality of the protagonists whose psychology is carefully counterposed to their milieu. Even when they appear to be heroes carrying the weight of the narrative arc, their fate is typically anything but. Indeed, they come away stripped of any heroic aura and their activity ends up illustrating futile endeavors, the fruits of which are obliterated by systems, governments, wars, and corrupt ploys. Grljić's next film, *In the Jaws of Life*, completed in 1985 and based on Dubravka Ugrešić's novel *Steffi Cvek in the Jaws of Life* (*Štefica Cvek u raljama života*, 1981) is a case in point. The metanarrative intervention is brought to the fore by the interplay between the subplot of film production, which mimics the content of the film that is being produced. The lives of the characters and putative film crew entwine around soap opera plots serving as prime examples for a study in behavioral gender patterns. Ugrešić's novel is based on a parodic premise, which in its cinematic iteration acquires additional dimensions by exploiting political and gender stereotypes to the maximum: it plays off the profiles of a conformist, an anarchist, and an activist, while bringing into the mix regional ethnic nuances. Urban and rural mentalities clash in humorous encounters while each character is pitched against their

metafictional doppelgänger. This East European version of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, appearing long before Hollywood's intellectually depleted version, provides a rich cultural script through its multilayered structure and witicism distributed along the axes of characterization, narrative pattern, cinematic devices, social analysis, and political activism. Although well-received by a wide audience, its noncommercial aspect places it in the niche category.

Needless to say, each of Grlić's films has had its own interesting journey reaching international audiences, festivals, and critics, which led him to enjoy a number of exciting encounters. One such example is his 1987 film *Three for Happiness*, which won the Grand Prix at the Salsomaggiore–Parma Film Festival with Sergio Leone presiding over the jury. Through the directors' informal exchange over a lunch, the reader is familiarized with the complicated editing saga of Leone's legendary *Once Upon a Time in America* and his unsuccessful quest to provide his own cut of the movie. After *Bravo, Maestro*, Grlić's path intersects with that of Erland Josephson, one of the most recognizable faces from Ingmar Bergman's films. An exceptionally gifted, modest, and open-minded actor, he accepted the invitation to act in Grlić's *You Love Only Once*. Grlić's trips to Paris included visits and walks with Milan Kundera, his former professor at the Prague Academy, during which they worked on a screenplay that, too, was sadly never realized. His stroll down the famous alley in Cannes ended in a funny episode of an enormous restaurant bill for an impoverished East European film crew with no credit cards, while his participation at Valencia Film Festival (the Mostra) afforded him a life-long friendship with Honorio Rancaño, an anti-Franco activist who was deported to the Soviet Union and worked for Fidel Castro. A dinner with Honorio turned into a movie-like scene with gunshots, robbery, and a political showcase for the ETA, the Basque separatist organization, which used Mostra as a stage for its proclamations. In Grlić's narratives, be it cinematic or literary, such ancillary episodes provide the ground for painting a complex historical picture in which regimes, outcasts, dictators, and movements shape everyday occurrences and catapult those who are caught in their orbits into unpredictable directions.

His film *Charuga* is the tale of one such individual, a legendary rebel-outcast figure from the northern part of Croatia living in the turbulent 1920s, a period of political instability similar to that of 1991, when the film was made. The film examines the topic of leadership in a humorous manner at the very moment when the region was at a historical and political crossroads, having just gotten rid of the communist government and facing the rise of nationalist leaders in all corners of southeastern Europe. He playfully explores the compelling need of the locals to embrace a fatherly hero-figure regardless of his ethical and political stance (which is sub-

verted, needless to say, from the ostensible altruist mode to a self-serving agenda). Layering the film with the motifs of freedom, rebellion, and anarchy underscored by robbing escapades, sexual abandon, and Roma music, which in itself celebrates the notion of free living, Grlić, in this film, “in many ways pre-figures and comments on the events that were to unfold in the 1990s” (Vidan and Crnković 2012: 101). *Charuga* received funding under the old Yugoslav system but when the movie emerged, it was delivered to an entirely changed political landscape; in the meantime Croatia had become a newly established country. Owing to Grlić’s engagement in Srđan Karanović’s production, coincidentally taking place in the Dalmatian hinterland that was gradually being occupied by Serbian rebels, Grlić’s own mixed family background was being questioned as was his long-time friendship with his Serbian colleague. Although he previously taught for the Academy of Dramatic Arts on multiple occasions, after his return to Zagreb from a Fulbright leave of absence, he found his contract annulled. He and his family were threatened, his films banned from movie theaters and TV programming. In such a cultural wasteland, exacerbated by war and a nationalist agenda, he decided to turn the page even if it meant that he would never again be able to make films. The paradox has it that while in the US he showed *Charuga* at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts to a curious audience of students and faculty whose excitement generated an offer from NYU to teach there along with Spike Lee and Arthur Penn. And so the journey continued.

This move opened a new educational chapter in Grlić’s career which, like everything else, has spanned both continents. In three decades of teaching in the US, in addition to providing instruction to NYU film students, he was also a guest professor and artist in residence at Columbia University; the University of California, Los Angeles; Harvard University; and currently he has the post of Ohio Eminent Scholar in Film at Ohio University, Athens. His departure from Croatia, however, did not imply the severing of all ties. He returned there regularly and, at the time when the Croatian film industry faced its darkest period, he initiated the Motovun Film Festival with the intention of supporting independent productions from the region and abroad. Organizing such a venue with foreign financial support in 1999 amounted to a political statement as well, since the program of the national film festival held in the nearby Istrian city of Pula only considered Croatian productions that had been approved by the current government. Having inherited the Yugoslav—and, by extension, Russian—antiquated state-controlled production and distribution model, the new Croatian leadership had its fingers deep in film budgeting and programming, thereby preventing any ideological aberrations and effectively suffocating the next generation of filmmakers. Films produced to meet

the ideological agenda quickly dispersed the war-impooverished audiences and brought the industry to its knees. The Motovun Film Festival served as a critical outlet not only by presenting itself as a cultural venue which brought together writers, journalists, filmmakers of all stripes and backgrounds, musicians, visual and media artists, but also by extending educational opportunities. For seven years Rajko Grlić and Nenad Puhovski ran the so-called Imaginary Academy and the latter went on to conceive the production house Factum and Zagreb Dox—one of the most respected documentary film festivals in Europe. This program launched a new generation of filmmakers among whom are some well-recognized names such as Jasmila Žbanić, Dalibor Matanić, Dana Budisavljević, and others. In the post-war decade, those reaching maturity were burdened with war experiences that they were unable to translate into films because of the scarcity of funding. The school offered both instructional mechanisms and a platform for engaging in more easily financed documentary projects. From these the new cohort of directors was gradually able to realize larger productions and introduce much-needed diversity in both Croatian and regional production. It has to be noted that the South Slavic statistics on female directors do not mirror the low numbers in the West; with Žbanić's generation and going forward we have witnessed the emergence of several gifted female filmmakers, a trend in part set by the Imaginary Academy.

In addition to bringing his students to the set and helping them realize their own projects as a part of coursework at the Ohio University School of Film, during the years when he was unable to make films, Grlić embraced an educational multimedia project. Rather than writing yet another manual on film production as requested by a publisher, he and a group of computer experts ventured to design a CD-ROM—a brand new technology at the time. The adventure, which was supposed to take only a few months, evolved into a complicated operation, both technologically and intellectually, as he found it necessary to dissect many processes over which an experienced filmmaker has an intuitive command. *How to Make Your Movie: An Interactive Film School Version* was pronounced the American film product of the year, reviewed in numerous IT publications and lauded at festivals as a supreme educational achievement. As in the case of his professor who had been silenced by political decree, Grlić was able to invest time in his students on both continents and affect the world of independent filmmaking for a long time to come. Luckily, unlike the older generation, he reentered the film scene again, initially through documentary projects, which he holds essential for a filmmaker of any orientation.

His *Croatia 2000—Who Wants To Be a President (Novo novo vrijeme)*, which he codirected with Igor Mirković, introduces a pluralist perspective during the critical election period in Croatia when the monolithic coverage

by national TV provided an anemic account of reality. By simply following the politicians on their daily tasks for three months, Grlić and Mirković captured a different, nonsterile political canvas that the audiences felt compelled to see in movie theaters even though they had been watching the same faces daily on their television sets. In many ways this documentary was for Grlić a testing-ground or probe into the reality of the Yugoslav disintegration, the subject of his *Border Post*, 2006, the first coproduction among the successor states of former Yugoslavia. Grlić cowrote the script with Ante Tomić, basing it on the latter's novel *Nothing May Surprise Us* (*Ništa nas ne smije iznenaditi*, 2003), the title of which evokes a country-wide military training program designed to prepare for an attack by a potential enemy. A war film in which two national agendas clash featuring “our good guys” against “their bad guys” was not something that interested him. Rather, he wanted to go back to the turning point in 1987 when tensions were still building, and the media incessantly added fire to the already collapsed socialist project (Vidan and Crnković 2012: 109). This disjointed moment—when Slobodan Milošević, the Serbian nationalist leader, first came into power—provided texture for crafting the memorable characters of soldiers stationed at a mountainous outpost on the border between Albania and North Macedonia. Their gossip and the street-smart attitudes of privileged urban youth listening to rock songs reveal their cynicism and disregard for any political platform, and especially for a socialist fairy tale and its slogans. Under the watchful eye of an abusive (and promiscuous) commander, this group of young men from various corners of Yugoslavia forge comradeships and rivalries, but they also support one another in amorous escapades. What unites them is their desire to outsmart their Bosnian commander, himself a frustrated casualty of political and military schemes who failed to be promoted and relocated. His rural Bosnian accent and gullible reckoning make him an easy target for pranks, but they also serve as the backdrop for cultural and political differentiation. In order to buy time he needs to treat a sexually transmitted disease; the commander announces a lockdown due to an alleged Albanian military threat. Deprived of the little entertainment and freedom the soldiers enjoyed, they start going stir-crazy. The two best friends, a Croat and a Serb, compete in mischief and disobedience: first, by eventually seducing the commander's wife on his trips to obtain the medications for the commander in a nearby town; and second, by misleading the officers about his trip on foot to Tito's memorial burial site in Belgrade. Each of them in his own way inadvertently causes an avalanche of uncontrollable events. As Levi points out “*Border Post's* narrative asserts a connection between political turmoil and the assertion of phallic authority” (Levi 2007: 63). The tenor of the film changes over the course of events

from humorous to tragic, turning it into an account of abrupt maturing and disillusionment. As Johnson correctly observes, “an ostensibly comic story, full of realistic details of life in a military outpost in the far reaches of Yugoslavia several years after Tito’s death, becomes a metaphor for Yugoslavia’s demise” (Johnson 2012: 162). The film brings into focus much of what held the country together (including the obligatory military service which forced young men of different ethnic and religious backgrounds to serve together), but also subtly reveals subcutaneous discords signaling the future collapse of the country.

Already early in his career Grlić was preoccupied with the notion of lost utopia and disillusionment or “utopia tripping over reality” as he once put it (Vidan and Crnković 2012: 108). Going into greater detail in this book, he connects his three films

that examine three pivotal moments in the utopia where we see ourselves as having lived: *Charuga*, a story about the beginnings of the utopia; *You Love Only Once*, about the clash between that utopia and real life; and *The Border Post*, about the moment when the “Yugoslav” version of the utopia came to an end. In some way, all three movies tackle the same topic. I approached each of them in a completely different way because, told through three different characters, these were three distinct stories. (p. 102)

This trilogy thus tasks itself with the intention of understanding how things took a wrong turn and at which point the ideals became permanently severed from the realm of possibility and lost their ethical currency.

Taking a temporary break from politically charged topics in his next film, entitled *Just Between Us* from 2010, Grlić weaves an intimate humorous drama of infidelity and friendship in the spirit of the best Prague school tradition. A portrait of two middle-class families whose private affairs intersect at multiple levels, the film probes questions of relationships, attraction, and marriage by fleshing out convincing and well-acted characters. Despite the somewhat lighter nature of this film, a scandal erupted when the Catholic Church took a stance against sexual explicitness. During the previous era, Grlić may have been accused of subversive intentions, however nudity in his films had never prompted censors to act. A shift in social mores was visible already in these reactions. When asked about a hiatus in political topics and a choice to occupy himself with ahistorical characters and their foibles, he stated that in his view there are no more politics since “it is all about money. Politics have been reduced to money. The element of utopia has disappeared as well as the element of the social category in politics. Politics represents the process of arriving at a position of power that can be calculated through money. In particular,

in transitional countries which have a portion of the new capital that was generated by crime, politics has become an empty category” (Vidan and Crnković 2012: 106).

Grić’s most recent film *The Constitution*, produced in 2016, reintroduces the political dimension and situates its characters in a typical four-story building in a Zagreb neighborhood. Sufficient time has elapsed since the last war for the protagonists to lead a normal life and for the most part ignore one another’s ethnic backgrounds. The main character, Vjeko Kralj, rendered superbly by the late Nebojša Glogovac, is a high school teacher and a highly esteemed member of society owing to his family’s right-wing political affiliations. At home he grudgingly cares for his bedridden father, an officer in the Croatian World War II Nazi-occupied puppet state and now a shadow of a man. Their love-hate relationship acquires a new dimension when Vjeko decides to come out and, after many years of abuse, admits he is gay. What is more, he himself becomes incapacitated after a herd of skinheads attacks him during one of his secretive outings, while dressed in drag. Although they live in the same entryway, Vjeko and his neighbors, a childless couple, avoid one another. Seeing him in this predicament, Maja (played beautifully by Ksenija Marinković), who is a nurse, comes to his aid. This hesitant and initially awkward relationship grows more intricate when her husband, who happens to be of Serbian descent, enters the picture. Serving in the Croatian police force, he has to pass an exam on the constitution and needs some coaching. Vjeko’s father’s demise eventually frees Vjeko but also forces him to face his own demons, and it is at this critical moment that the humane face of the neighborhood prevents a tragedy. *The Constitution* tackles difficult issues of nationalism, LGBT rights, oppression, revenge, solidarity, love, and hate and does so by providing a glimpse into a Croatian neighborhood while eerily reminding us of our own backyards. The topic of father–son relationships in recent Croatian film production is a layered one and deserves a separate examination but suffice it to say here that it raises the question of accountability and answerability for political outcomes that have a lasting negative impact on future generations. It just so happened that the main role was played by a Serbian actor, not as a statement, but because he was best able to portray the principal character. The anecdote shared in this book of Nebojša Glogovac’s accent-coaching by a professional linguist is yet another example of the separations and connections so well captured in this film.

Grić’s sensibility for political issues is covert, woven into the textures of life, the inescapable traits and essences of an individual who stands in opposition to the system and who lives that system through his or her everyday actions. As the characters cannot escape the intricacies of their own temperament and habits, they are similarly entrapped in the circum-

stances dictated by a specific historical and political moment. These simple human stories uncover the absurdities that lie in plain view and invite us to reflect. The notion of solidarity looms large in Grlić's works as he puts to the test the values propagated against simple human truths. He shows how human life never fits into a binary universe and why dissidents are essential for the dispersal of dogma of any kind. Although ethical and political aspects are omnipresent in his films, they never obscure the aesthetic intention. By his own admission, he does not believe in unidimensional stories, rather he indulges his viewer (and, we can say, the reader here) to play with ambiguity and discover this multiplicity of levels as they see fit. Because ultimately, in Grlić's view, films are stories about specific people and specific places, not ideas, and this is what gives them their universal potential. To the complicated question of how to tell a film story, he answers as follows: "I usually start from the main protagonist. I ask myself: if he or she were to make a movie about themselves, how would they do it? In what kind of breath, what cadences, what images, color, sound? I search for a way to tell the story from within the mindset of the lead, in their life rhythm, in short—as their story" (p. 102).

The present volume is as multilayered as Grlić's movies in the sense that these are his stories inasmuch as they are his characters', friends', and family's stories. They are self-reflective and playful, hilarious and tragic, political and subversive, metanarrative and realistic, nuanced and colorful.

The one hundred and seventy-seven film terms provide sometimes a direct and at other times a metaphoric path to Grlić's stories and concurrently serve as a self-referential mechanism to comment on a series of film attributes. The entries can be read in any order, allowing for the reader's own "montage" of the book's universe. Through this palimpsest of fates, circumstances, encounters, and calamities emerges a subtle socioanthropological account which not only provides an insight into the ins and outs of the socialist film industries but also brings us face-to-face with important film figures and venues in the West. Grlić adroitly captures the absurdities and paradoxes in one's life resulting from the sort of tectonic shifts with which East European history abounds. His collection offers a taste of "the other" Europe's reality and yet demonstrates how much this liminal space, despite the political unrest, has also been an intrinsic part of Western culture. However, it also immerses us in scenes of living in many other places and times, while forcing us to ask the same essential questions.

As Jacob Mikanowski has put it in his reflections on this corner of the world, "the stories of Eastern Europe offer another way of looking at the world. They are a reminder that we are not always the masters of our own fate" (Mikanowski 2017). Given the state of the world's affairs, Grlić's stories could not have arrived at a more opportune moment.

Aida Vidan holds a PhD in Slavic Languages and Literatures from Harvard University, where she taught in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures for over a decade. Currently, she teaches in the Department of International Literary and Cultural Studies at Tufts University. Her areas of research include East European film as well as written and oral literature from the South Slavic region. She is the author/editor of four books, numerous articles, and several short and feature-length documentaries.

References

- Gilić, Nikica. 2011. *Uvod u povijest hrvatskog igranog filma*. Zagreb: Leykam International.
- Johnson, Vida. 2012. "Rajko Grlić: *Border Post* (Karaula, 2006)." In *Contrast: Croatian Film Today*, ed. Aida Vidan and Gordana P. Crnković. Zagreb, Oxford: Croatian Film Association and Berghahn Books.
- Levi, Pavle. 2007. "Border Post by Rajko Grlic." *Cinéaste*. 32(3): 63.
- Mikanowski, Jacob. 2017. "Goodbye, Eastern Europe!" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 27. Retrieved January 12, 2021 from <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/goodbye-eastern-europe/>.
- Pavičić, Jurica. 2017. *Klasici hrvatskog filma jugoslavenskog razdoblja*. Zagreb: Hrvatski filmski savez.
- Vidan, Aida. 2017. "Perceptions of Authority and Freedom in Late Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Film." *Studies in Eastern European Cinema. Europeanization in East-Central European Fiction Film and Television (1980–2000)*. 9(1): 33–46.
- Vidan, Aida, and Gordana P. Crnković. 2012. "A Conversation with Rajko Grlić: Films Are Stories About People, Not About Ideas." In *Contrast: Croatian Film Today*, ed. Aida Vidan and Gordana P. Crnković. Zagreb, Oxford: Croatian Film Association and Berghahn Books.