Film Review

SLOBODANKA VLADIV-GLOVER

Goran Radovanović, Ambulance

2009, 84 minutes, English subtitles
A Serbian/Greek/German co-production
Format: 35mm, color
Length: 84min
Director Goran Radovanovic
Script Goran Radovanovic
Producers Goran Radovanovic, Lilette Botassi, Jesenka Jasniiger
Radovanovic, Didi Danquart, Nico Hein & Katerina Oikonomou
Art director Vladislav Lasic
Director of photography Radoslav Vladic
Composer Aleksandar Sanja Ilic
Sound Designer Aleksandar Protic
Editor Andrija Zafranovic
Cast: Vesna Trivalic, Nenad Jezdic, Natasa Ninkovic, Tanasije Uzunovic,
Sonja Kolacaric

The Serbian film maker, Goran Radovanović, specialises in the genre of
documentaries executed in a reportage-like style which is nevertheless selec-
tive and artistic. These documentaries are in the tradition of Dziga Vertov’s
Constructivist movies of the 1920s based on the technique of “cinema eye”
(kinoglaz), which constructs a scene as it captures it with the ‘gaze’ of the
camera. The “konoglazovci” (cinema-eye-people), as the Russian avant-garde
movie group around Vertov called themselves, privileged the cinematic text as
both a text (with content) and a meta-text about its own means of production
and creativity.

Ambulance, which is his penultimate documentary (to be followed by a film
on Cuba in 2011), takes up one of Radovanović’s main themes – the destiny of
his country, Serbia, since the demise of Communism in the 1980s and Serbia’s
transition to a new order, dictated by historical circumstances attending the
dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation and the civil wars of the 1990s.

Radovanović represents the situation of the common man and woman in a
series of dramatic cameo scenes, strung together by a disjointed chronological
thread of allusions to historical and political events. Real footage of street
demonstrations in Belgrade and exodus columns of Serbian refugees, with
which the Serbian audiences are already familial, are recycled as an integral part of the documentary genre.

Radovanović’s message, amidst the devastation of his country caused by the political upheavals of the 1990s and the attendant economic disaster – people not getting paid by the state for months on end, jobs being lost, the refugee crisis – is optimistic. Ambulance ends with a scene showing how the tenants of an old house on the outskirts of Belgrade collectively build a ramp for a Serbian girl in a wheelchair. This follows from the change of perspective and the self-perception of the Serbs about the destiny that has beset them, which is represented in a dramatic metaphor of two women – the ambulance service doctor, Vera, and the disabled girl, looking at the firmament through a telescope at the Belgrade (Avala) observatory, in search of an asteroid called “Serbia”. While they can’t see the asteroid – the telescope is too weak – they return to their daily life with renewed energy for self-help. The message is: even if the future is unfathomable, it is necessary to look to it and not dwell on the past, particularly not on past disasters. This message is re-enforced by the way other characters handle crises in their lives, for instance the ambulance orderly, Goran, who is a volunteer carer for the boys and girls taken on an outdoor camp by the Red Cross and its Norwegian EU representative. After the restructuring of the Belgrade ambulance service under the impetus of the EU – as one of many preparations undertaken by the new reformist Serbian government (of Zoran Djindjić and his successors after his assassination in 2003) – Goran attempts suicide by sleeping pills. He is saved and is seen washing floors in the ambulance centre, but happily responding to a mobile phone message which indicates that he has moved on and has a life outside his work place. This is the last of the suicide attempts represented in the film, as an index of the despair of displacement experienced by people whose social roles and functions were swept away by history. Another attempt is by the classy looking news reader who is the daughter of a JNA (Yugoslav Army) colonel. The father, who once had status, power and privileges, dies by the ‘hand of God’, choking on his own despair. The daughter is the remnant of the political propaganda machine of the Milosevic government which supported the Army until the demise of the Serbian President.

This is probably one of the most balanced of Radovanović’s films attempting to chronicle Serbian history of the past 30 years. Although there are allusions to the bad deal Serbia is getting from the international community, particularly the EU, the film concentrates on the naked facts about the daily lives of the Serbian population in the capital city of Serbia and shows a cross-section of typical destinies in different classes and professions. The film features many children and younger adults. They are the focus of Radovanović’s message of hope for the future of Serbia. One figure which stands out of an otherwise Vertov-like treatment of individuals as part of a larger multiplicity or crowd is a refugee orphan boy. The orphan recites the Lord’s Prayer (“Our Father, who art in Heaven...”) before bedtime. This is a life-saving device for him and a memory aid – he is from an outlying region of Serbia, where the population still adheres to the old Serbian Orthodox customs, a tradition which