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MOSTAR AND STOLAC IN THE HISTORY OF BOSNIAN CINEMA

Dejan Kosanović

Cinema and all other kinds of moving pictures – television, video, DVD – in the contemporary world are an extremely important part of public life. Moving pictures and sound (words) coming from the screen is an important means of forming some ideas within audiences, and this impact can be used or misused. Regardless, the history of cinema demonstrates that films in the last 110 years could generate both – hate as well as understanding. It depends on who is using or misusing the power of moving pictures, how, and why. So, if we are striving for unity and plurality in Europe, we have also to discover the place of the cinema in public life.

To understand any modern human activity we have to look into its past. So it is with the cinema. Only 110 years divide us from the appearance of this great invention of the end of 19th Century, but the films made since condense the history of the 20th Century. Watching them we can also distinguish the good from the evil and learn something to improve contemporary public life. The history of cinema in Bosnia and Herzegovina, compared with some developed European countries, is modest, but an important part of Bosnian cultural continuity. The aim of this lecture (article) is to present only a segment of early cinema history in Bosnia and Herzegovina – *Mostar and Stolac in the History of Bosnian Cinema*.

In the Film Century (meaning from 1896 on) Bosnia and Herzegovina changed its political status and state position several times: until 1918 temporarily occupied by Austro-Hungarian Monarchy; from 1918 to 1941 a part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians/Yugoslavia (not as one administrative unit), during the Second World War (1941-1945) divided again, and only after 1945 a territorially compact part of Yugoslavia un-

til the tragic events of 1992. Each political change was reflected in the cinema of the country.

The first film screening on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina was held in Sarajevo on July 27, 1897. This event could be considered the beginning of film activities in this region. As the owner of the first traveling cinema, Angelo Curiel from Trieste, came to Sarajevo via the Dalmatian city of Split (Spalato); it is not ruled out that he stopped in Mostar, too, to screen moving pictures. But for the moment it is only a hypothesis, as we have no proof of it. Later on, many towns in Bosnia and Herzegovina hosted a number of moving-pictures presentations by different traveling showmen; his gave large audiences the opportunity to watch early silent films, documentaries, newsreels and first features. As early as 1907 a succession of openings of permanent cinema theaters in many cities began. We have data for Sarajevo, Mostar and some other larger towns. Stolac, as a small town, was never particularly mentioned, but we have reason to believe that traveling cinemas visited it as well. Between two world wars, cinema became the most popular entertainment for a vast majority of people, as well as after the Second World War until the expansion of television.

In October 1900, the city of Mostar hosted *The Paradise Theatre – the Biggest Enterprise for Fantastic Attractions*, and we assume that screenings of moving pictures were one of their attractions. The traveling *Elektro-bioskop Teater* owned by brothers Karel and Alexander Lifka presented films in Mostar from the end of April until May 10, 1903. Their cinema consisted of two big tents, a steam-operated electrical generator, multi-colored lighting, a mechanical organ and several circus wagons for the transportation of their equipment. Two years later, in 1905, the *Kosmograf-Elektrobioskop Theater from Düsseldorf* screened films in the hall of the Mostar Croatian Musical and Singing Society “Hrvoje”. An Italian immigrant, an electrician named Antonio Tiberio, opened in 1906 the first local semi-permanent cinema in Mostar – *Kinematograf Tiberio* and for his performances used the facilities of the Muslim Merchant Society “Ittihad”. Later on he owned several permanent cinema theaters in Mostar – *Royal Kinematograf, Urania, Central* – and remained in the cinema business until 1941.

The owners of several traveling cinemas shot their first films in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1898. The first of these films was *New Sarajevo Pictures*, shot and screened in Sarajevo in October 1898 by Franz Josef Oeser, the owner of the traveling *Edison Theatre*. But, like many other films, the oldest footage is now lost and we know about it outside of secondary sources (press and catalogues). In the first decade of the 20th Century, a great number of foreign film operators were attracted by the beautiful landscapes and oriental charm of Bosnian cities (Sarajevo, Mostar, Jajce, etc). In 1906 the most important British film enterprise “Charles Urban Trading” had its crew traveling and making films in different Balkan countries. Urban’s cinematographer McKenzie filmed, among other sites, Mostar, and in the Urban Society Catalogue are described recorded *views*, unfortunately not preserved:

- Mostar, Capital of Herzegovina. One of the most picturesque Eastern cities, beautifully situated.
- General panoramic view of Mostar from the Bridge, with its mosque, minarets etc.
- Street scenes in Mostar. Exceedingly Turkish in character.
- The “hooded women” of Mostar. Black garbed and cowered, no feature visible. Excellent portrait views of these women, who are only to be found in this city.
- The one arch stone bridge of Mostar, from which the town derives its name. The highest one span bridge in Europe.
- A typical Turk of inscrutable countenance; Portrait view.
- Railway panorama through the gorge of Neretva, Magnificent views of both banks of the turbulent river which separates Herzegovina from Bosnia. Wild and picturesque scenery as the train winds up the valley: of mountains, defiles, passes, cliffs and waterfalls, giving a beautiful and comprehensive idea of the physical aspects of the country.

Later on, before, during and after the First World War, many other documentary films and newsreels were shot in Mostar and even Stolac, especially in the thirties. This footage is only partially preserved. After the Second World War, in post-war Yugoslavia, national film production was organized in all parts of the country, including Bosnia and Herzegovina. Like other cities, Mostar and Stolac were filmed continuously and this material is preserved in different national film archives.

With the development of feature film production in the second decade of the 20th Century, producers and directors started to look for attractive locations to realize their films. Bosnia and Herzegovina, with their impressive and beautiful landscapes, specific oriental charm of its cities and villages, and nearness to the large film production centers drew many crews to this country to shoot parts or entire feature films. Until the beginning of the Second World War (1941) a total of 59 exteriors of foreign films were shot in Yugoslavian lands, of them 7 in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The first one was shot even during the First World War, in 1916, by a Hungarian film production society from Budapest. The title of the film was *Szulamit* – a noble girl’s name, the central character in a medieval melodrama about love, fidelity and treason. The film was shot in Mostar and its environment, but the print was never found, so the film is considered lost. Of particular interest to us are two Austrian films made in 1919 in Mostar and its surroundings – the first foreign feature films shot on the territory of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians. The producer was a Viennese film society “Jugoslavija Film GmbH”, a subsidiary of “Jugoslavia Film” from Zagreb, but the films were entirely Austrian (director, actors, operators). Their titles were *Treasure Hunter from Blagay* (*Kopač blaga od Blagaja*) and *The Fairy of the Neretva River* (*Vila od Neretve*). In fact we are talking here about one simultaneous production enterprise, most probably in early spring and summer of 1919, whose result were two mentioned silent films. Recently, the first one – *Treasure Hunter from Blagay* – was found in Switzerland and restored. This is a melodrama, typical for silent features of the period just after the First World War: a Bosnian shepherd Muharem falls in love with an Austrian girl visiting Mostar. The story develops in the city of Mostar and nearby village Blagay and the surroundings, providing for us today an impressive document of the appearances of these sites 90 years ago. The second film – *The Fairy of the Neretva River* – has not been found to this day.

About 15 years later, already in the sound film era, in 1934/35, one foreign full-length feature film was entirely realized in Mostar, Sarajevo and mainly in Stolac. It was a German-Austrian co-production titled *Blood Brothers* (*Blutsbrüder*, *Pobratimi*) or *Bosnians*, a story of love, passion and jealousy. The film was advertised as “... a story from the life in Bosnia and Herzegovina...”

The scriptwriter was the Viennese author Franz Tanzler, director Johan Hübler-Kahla, and in leading parts were famous actors: Brigitte Horney, Willi Eichberg and Attila Hörbiger. The filming took place on locations, in September and October 1934, with the participation of the choir and dancers of the Mostar Singing Company "Gusle". All extras were local and the final sequence, with a national festivity and horsemen competition incorporated in the film, was shot in the Stolac field, with the hill and old citadel as background. The opening presentation of this film took place in Berlin in January 1935, and it was later screened in Belgrade, Sarajevo, Mostar and other Yugoslav cities.

In the period between 1918 and 1941 many documentaries, travelogues and newsreels were shot by foreign and domestic operators in Mostar, Stolac and along the Neretva River. An important part of this film footage is preserved and today presents very precious historical documents. The city of Mostar, with the old bridge, oriental market street and mosques and minarets, especially attracted filmmakers. Several preserved films show the old and picturesque village of Počitelj, on the left bank of the Neretva.

As I mentioned earlier, after 1945 in post-war Yugoslavia the state organized a national film production in all parts of the country, including Bosnia and Herzegovina. Many documentaries and features were realized and the results of such a production present an important part of our national film heritage from the second half of 20th Century. I would like to stop here, because we have no time to mention a large number of documentaries and features shot in Mostar, Stolac and their surroundings after 1945.

Before I finish, however, I believe that it is very important to single out one important film shot in Mostar, Počitelj, Stolac and surrounding areas in 1953. This is the Austrian-Yugoslav co-production *The Last Bridge* (*Die letzte Brücke, Posljednji most*) – a turning point in the history of European and Yugoslav cinema. Besides the fact that *The Last Bridge* is an excellent film, directed by the famous German filmmaker Helmut Käutner, with Maria Schell and Bernhard Wicki, it was the first film co-production between the West and the East during the cold war and the Iron Curtain period. The film obtained several international prizes and presents the first step in the opening of Yugoslav cinema to the world film industry. In addition, it also marked the beginning

of the so called “co-production period” in the contemporary history of cinema in Yugoslav countries. And, as a coincidence and historical curiosity, we have to remember that the first foreign film on Yugoslav territory after the First World War – *Treasure Hunter from Blagaj* – was also shot in Mostar and environments in 1919!

And what could be the conclusion of this short survey of a segment of past cinema in Bosnia and Herzegovina? It is evident that cinema and other kinds of moving pictures have an important function in building tolerance and understanding in the world today. And for a better comprehension and adjustment of differences in public life and religion, and in order to use moving pictures towards such a goal, it is necessary to learn something about its past. As we can see, Mostar and Stolac have their places in the history of Bosnian cinema, but for the moment our knowledge about this is limited. Only serious research in the future will help us to learn more. On the other hand it is clear that it is impossible to speak about the history of Mostar and Stolac, without mentioning film as a part of their cultural heritage.



Scene from *Treasure Hunter from Blagaj* (*Kopač blaga od Blagaja*), a silent film recorded in and near Mostar in 1919.



Another scene from *Treasure Hunter from Blagaj* (*Kopač blaga od Blagaja*).



Scene of the Old Bridge at Mostar, from the full-length feature film *Blood Brothers* (*Pobratimi*), popularly called *Bosnians*, filmed mainly in Stolac, as well as in Mostar and Sarajevo, in 1934/35.



Scene in Stolac from *Blood Brothers (Pobratimi)*.



Scene from *Blood Brothers (Pobratimi)*.



Scene from the full-length feature film *The Last Bridge (Posljednji most)* realized in Mostar, Počitelj and Stolac in 1953.



Another scene from *The Last Bridge (Posljednji most)*.