



Tytuł

Between History and the Future. On Sonja Savić's Videos

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Abstrakt

Sonja Savić (1961–2008), a star actress of 1980s Serbian cinema, was also a filmmaker whose independent work from the 90s and 2000s remains unknown. Her complex video pieces engage with ex-Yugoslavia's political situation and portray her generation's intellectual and countercultural scene, disillusioned by official socialist state culture and forced to endure the war (Super Real, 1997, Play 1997). Savić developed a trancey collage of found footage, animation and staged acting scenes, where motifs freely travel between pieces and unhinged, almost entropic, visually resonates with her country's condition in the 80s and 90s. Savić worked with a commune of performers who staged for her absurd activities, obscure rituals and manifested cultural, gender and queer identities. She collaborated with the cult band Supernaut, whose members made acting, visual and musical contributions to her work (Supernaut – Belgrade Underground, 1996), and later formed a "troupe" of young performers (Waiting for God, 2006). Remaining conspicuously absent from her films and eschewing celebrity status, Savić diluted authorship for the sake of collaborative experimentation.

Przepraszamy, ten wpis jest dostępny tylko w języku Amerykański Angielski.

Between History and the Future. On Sonja Savić's Videos

Sonja Savić was a star actress of ex-Yugoslav mainstream cinema. Born in 1961 in Čačak, Serbia, she debuted as a teenager in the 1977 film

Butterfly Cloud, and studied at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade, graduating in 1982. She rose to fame the following year with a role in Sugar Water, which garnered her the best actress award at the Pula Film Festival. Her acting career spans dozens of movies, some of them of cult status, including roles in Una, notorious for its explicit erotic imagery, and Life Is Beautiful, for which she received a Special Mention for Best Actress at the Venice Film Festival in 1985.¹

Major success in the 1980s failed to continue in the next decade, during which she lost prominence as an actress, but re-channelled creative energies to independent work in alternative theatre and video art. The latter field is the focus of this paper, which discusses Savić's five elaborate video productions: *Supernaut – Belgrade Underground* (1996), *Superreality* (*Superstvarnost*, 1997), *Play* (1997), *Sarlo Is Watching You* (*Sarlo te gleda*, 2003), *Waiting for God* (*Cekajući God-a*, 2006).



Sonja Savić, *Supernaut – Belgrade Underground*, 1996, film still, courtesy Nadežda Petrović gallery in Čačak

These complex pieces, which remain relatively unknown, are addressed here to shed light on Savić's engagement with the ex-Yugoslav artistic and subcultural underground, the politics and troubled history of the Balkans in the 1990s, the presence of queer imagery in her work, as well as her move away from mainstream cinematography towards work based on horizontality, community and diluted authorship – seeking to position her as a link between the late 20th century video art scene and future tendencies in the visual arts.

Portrait of the underground

With a soundtrack by the Serbian alternative band Supernaut, the film under the same title bears testimony to Savić's long-term collaboration with the group, whose members have acted in her

films and made crucial contributions to her work. They became close friends with her, and together they embarked on a more interdisciplinary project involving independent video production.

Supernaut manifests Savić's engagement with the alternative music and art scenes in Belgrade, which she pays homage to in her following productions, responding to the heritage of the 1980s video scene, allied with alternative music and countercultural circles. As Barbara Borčić writes, 'The mass video production and practices of the 1980s could no longer be easily placed within the context of art, since they occurred outside the institutional frameworks and belonged to the context of alternative (rock, punk) culture and new social movements', while artists 'also overwhelmingly saw themselves as part of the alternative scene and acted within it, rather than as part of (postmodernist) art'.² Savić also did not consider herself part of the visual arts milieu, but rather saw her place within the interdisciplinary underground circulation.

Supernaut is a performative video portrait of the band and the people around it. These figures invade the streets of Belgrade in bizarre attire, engaging in mysterious and grotesque activities, or performing in dark alleys and empty backyards. They descend into dark, dungeon-like halls, where they are seen in live concert footage, and stage infernal rituals emanating a dark, erotically charged atmosphere. These are interspersed with shots of ordinary people on Belgrade's streets. A stark contrast is drawn between the daylight cityscape and the underground, where subcultural performances take place. The film is a frenetically looped collage, in which the main sequences are interlaced with punk comic strip drawings, rock album covers, and fragments of historic war documentaries and movies.

The same filmic structure is found in *Superreality* (1997), called the first Serbian 'techno vaudeville'. The film pulsates with an old school electro soundtrack, while the imagery consists of a trancey stream of vintage computer animation, drawings, found footage, staged scenes with actors, and text. Once again we encounter a group of loosely defined and somewhat absurd characters, mostly played by *Supernaut* members, staging various performances in public spaces and dark underground environments. Many scenes will be familiar from the earlier *Supernaut*, showing that Savić's rhizomatic approach to film structure goes beyond the confines of a single work. Motifs easily travel between her pieces, forming a pool of images situated in various contexts, building an audiovisual state of flux.

Superreality adds a vital aspect to Savić's portraiture of Belgrade's underground by capturing the moment when the alternative scene with its roots in the 1980s was reinventing itself through new, technologically-influenced tendencies. On the lookout for all things contemporary, Savić and the underground milieu around her embraced the influence of the nascent rave scene as a new lease of life to the new wave and punk styles of

the previous decade. Bearing testimony to this reorientation is the electronic soundtrack by Miodrag Stojanovic Ceza, as well as computer animations by Srdjan Djile Markovic, both from the band Supernaut.

Portrait of a generation

Superreality ends with the following dedication: 'Five million people left the Balkans during the 20th century, of which 2 million left between 1991 and 1996. Three hundred thousand Belgrade intellectuals of the TV generation were dispersed in 1991, refusing to accept the bloody sacrifice, in search of an existential minimum. This film is dedicated to them.' This declaration reflects an important layer of Savić's filmic undertaking, and foregrounds the political engagement of her work. Her films abound in found footage images of war and protests, making references to the painful history of the Balkans in the 1990s. Savić seeks to explore the political, historical and cultural experience of her own generation, characterised by disbelief in the official state culture of late socialism and faced with the atrocities of war. Those people are often considered a "lost" generation: creative, educated individuals forming an artistic and intellectual elite, who could not fulfil their potential in the country; many of them emigrated and some died an untimely death.



Sonja Savić, *Sarlo Is Watching You* (*Sarlo te gleda*), 2003, film still, courtesy Nadežda Petrović gallery in Čačak

Sarlo Is Watching You (2003) is a documentary devoted to major figures on the Yugoslav avant-garde scene in the last decades of the 20th century. Founders of experimental theatre troupes, members of independent bands, avant-garde musicians, intellectuals, poets and visual artists, many of whom emigrated in the 1990s, receive an homage as figures that shaped the country's cultural and intellectual life. Each is mentioned in a biographical note, outlining notable contributions and life stories. Found footage interviews, performance recordings and photographs represent breakthrough moments and key figures in Yugoslav cultural history, while also reporting on their plight during the country's violent disintegration. It is difficult, however, to mistake *Sarlo Is Watching You* for a classic documentary. The abundance of information is delivered through Savić's dynamic collage aesthetics that

interweaves and loops motifs and imagery.

The film is also her personal homage to those who shaped her artistic sensibility and path. Her way to inscribe herself in this lineage was to interlace the film's documentary content with long shots of personal home video-style footage from a trip to the Slovenian coast, in which she discusses history and life with a close friend, and observes her son through the camera lens. This further complicates the documentary status of the piece, revealing a tension between a personal subjective view and a historical documentary perspective that conveys a political statement. These two levels come together in Savić's work.



Sonja Savić, *Play*, 1997, film still, courtesy Nadežda Petrović gallery in Čačak

Another piece in which political engagement becomes pronounced is *Play* (1997). It reiterates the message about those who fled the war-ravaged country, and revolves around documentary footage from various sources depicting violently suppressed protests in Belgrade in March 1991 and in the winter of 1996–1997. These visual materials are re-edited and reconfigured into highly non-linear, looped structures. Savić's cinematic idiom and the themes that she addresses turn her work into a documentary and performative portrait of a generation whose precarious condition in the Balkans in the 1990s is reflected in the unhinged, almost entropic, visuality employed.

This mode of portrayal is a clear nod to the legacy of the video art scene in Yugoslavia, particularly Slovenia, in the 1980s, a decade when 'the formalist approach to the medium', characteristic of the 1970s, yielded place to its use in 'socially engaged audiovisual research'.³ Television broadcasts became an essential resource, offering a vast reservoir of images for artists to 'appropriate', 'truncate', 'recode', and 'change their meaning',⁴ as exemplified by the work of the FV Group. In the landscape of Eastern European socialist and post-socialist production, Marina Gržinić distinguishes a tendency for 'video (film) projects that were created by copying, in most cases the political broadcasts of the national television network. These copied sequences were then re-edited and re-interpreted, taking into

consideration the internal replay logic of the video medium. Selected TV sequences on political events were combined with music, and re-edited in vertiginous rhythmic repetitive works.’⁵ This logic was harnessed by Savić for her own idiomatic mode of documentary portrayal of the 1990s, in which political engagement articulates itself in a language of visual radicality determined by the hypnotic collage aesthetics of her work.

Between documentary and artificiality

Documentary footage in Savić's films is interspersed with acted scenes created by the filmmaker, featuring a wide variety of characters. These are shot with a small group of actresses and actors, including the Supernaut band members, who recur in her pieces in different roles. Immersed in the looped visual realities of the videos, they stage obscure rituals, engage in absurd activities, or simply present themselves and perform for the camera. The characters seem to take on a symbolic meaning, as figures that convey a cultural and political critique.

This approach also appears to draw inspiration from the 1980s Yugoslav video art scene, where – as Barbara Borčič writes – ‘Video projects took up marginal and taboo topics, the main references for which were socially endangered groups, unspoken violence and hidden sexuality, the socially unacceptable lifestyle of young people and its particular image, on the one hand, and social events and state rituals, centres and relationships of power, and the myths and taboos of the socialist system on the other – all this to raise the issue of the relationship between the social mechanisms of power and the libidinous structure of individuals.’⁶

At times, these performances involve an appropriation of totalitarian and nationalistic aesthetics, not far-removed from the strategy of the Neue Slowenische Kunst collective. Other potential references include the Meje kontrole št. group, in whose work ‘Stories concerning the relationship between the individual and institutions of power, and the visual pleasure experienced from eroticism and sexuality, were built using dialogues and artificially composed scenes, while the videos were halfway between the documentary and the artificial.’⁷

Video productions of the already mentioned FV Group may also be evoked here, not only for their reworking of television footage interspersed with acting sequences, but specifically for the live performances of the group members featured in ‘scenes of “unnatural” sexuality, sado-masochism, homosexuality, violence, isolation, and despair’.⁸

These references appear the more relevant as gender and queer motifs are heavily explored in Savić's work. Her characters stage performances of masculinity, femininity and the spectrum between, bringing gender fluidity into sharp relief. Non-heteronormativity and queer bodies are

prominently featured, for instance in an explicit, almost pornographic, photo shoot with two men in *Superreality*. The presence of the queer in Savić's films might have been inspired by the openness towards LGBT communities in the 1980s on the alternative scene in Slovenia. Marina Gržinić writes: 'During the eighties numerous new social movements were established in Slovenia around the "coming out" of male homosexuals and, somewhat later, lesbians from Ljubljana's underground, and the appearance of "gay" culture.'⁹ The attitudes in Slovenia obviously cannot be automatically extended to whole Yugoslavia. However, the 'externalisation of sexuality [that] took the form of overtly staged pornography and gender confusion (gender-bending) of gay, lesbian and transvestite sexual attitudes', which influenced the Slovenian scene in the 1980s,¹⁰ definitely permeates the performances in Savić's work. The more so that the artist was very much aware of the heritage of Slovenian cultural underground and openly admitted being influenced by it.¹¹ Her work stages a similar kind of 'masquerade of re-appropriation' to Slovenian productions from the preceding decade discussed by Gržinić, which concentrated 'not only on the simple question of the formation of identity of the artists or of the underground community but the process of negotiation with multiple realities deployed in the production of continually ambiguous and unbalanced situations and identities'.¹² For Savić and the underground scene, the queer became a vital element of cultural opposition to ossified, normative social and artistic conventions.

Escaping the spotlight

Savić's experimental filmmaking abounds in bodies, characters and identities. Notably, she is absent from the field of vision herself. Her presence is more strongly felt only in *Sarlo*. The last film by Savić, *Waiting for God* from 2006, contains scenes with actresses and actors performing a theatrical adaptation of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Savić created it with a group under her leadership: 'I worked with the young actors and taught them all I had learned', she explained.¹³ Originally staged in 1998, in 2006 the spectacle was re-enacted, recorded and enriched with postproduction that introduced the spirit and dynamics of her earlier videos.

Savić devoted herself to collective theatre and multimedia experimentation that relied on collaboration, for example with *Supernaut*, or members of the alternative theatre troupe she formed. This marked a radical shift away from her prominent position in mainstream cinema. Savić disappeared from the screen and diluted the authorship of her works. She eschewed the artificiality of mainstream cinematography and sought authenticity in collaborative experimental action on the fringes of theatre, music and video.

The pieces which are discussed here were mostly created without official support. Their independent profile and major artistic contributions from a circle of close friends obviated the need for large budgets. Despite the lack of open calls for official funding, on several occasions Savić

managed to obtain some money for her work from the City of Belgrade and the Ministry of Culture. Her videos were also absent from official circulation, presented mostly in underground venues and places such as the Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade, where she was invited owing to her personal connections with people who respected the integrity of her uncompromising approach. These were small-scale screenings, however, which did not develop a broader audience for her work; the circle of viewers would often mainly consist of the people involved in the co-creation of the videos.

Towards the future

Engaging with her country's history and the experience of her generation, Savić's experimental filmmaking explores the past, seeking to save it from being forgotten in the political turmoil. However, the mode of this engagement is oriented to the future, as the artist embraces new tendencies through which counterculture and the art scene reinvented themselves beyond the 1980s. Such reinvention also takes place in her own work, which at a certain level may be seen to anticipate the tendencies that emerged in the early 21st century, when the Internet redefined the landscape of visual arts. Although Savić's analogue video productions originate from the era 'before' the Internet, her approach to images and content in some ways prefigures the experience of their digital flow in online circulation.

This can be seen in her strategy of documentary portrayal and conveying the experience of her generation. The artist explores a broad visual archive in search for images, symbols and testimonies. She enters the role of a curator or narrator of these resources in a sense similar to how Artie Vierkant later defined 'artists after the internet' as those 'who engage with the proliferation of images and objects – [...] and proclaim an authorial stance by indexing / curating these objects'.¹⁴ The images, tropes and references used and reworked by Savić do not originate from online research. She created her pieces at the time when online-inspired artworks still represented tendencies characteristic of net-art.

There is a difference, however, between her approach and that of net artists working in the second half of the 1990s, who 'were more likely to use the internet as a creative medium than as a field for research'.¹⁵ Savić would appear closer to the next generation: that of 'post-internet art', which 'involved a departure from the technological specificities of new media celebrated by new media art'.¹⁶ An analogy could be drawn here to Mark Leckey's seminal piece *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore*, which 'In its sampling – and deeply skilful editing – of found film sequences, [...] anticipated the YouTube generation's easy manipulation of digital sources.'¹⁷ Created in 1999, Fiorucci apparently has nothing to do with art after the Internet, but is widely seen to anticipate the form of artistic practices later adopted in the

realm of the omnipresent digital network.

The proposed understanding of Savić's videos from the point of view of post-internet art is neither medium-based nor aesthetic. It is structural, and seeks to highlight that her mode of work may be seen as an attempt to 'think in the fashion of the network' ¹⁸ The found footage used and scenes shot for her films are freely reconfigured – remixed – and recontextualised by narrative, textual and graphic interventions. They are delivered in dozens of iterations and configurations, looped, spilling beyond the limits of individual video pieces in an open-ended stream.

Savić's approach to filmmaking may be seen as a strategy to transcend the ties of her work with the medium of video and move towards a territory inhabited in the next decades by post-internet artists – to bring the medium closer to what Marisa Olson later called the 'post internet way of working'. ¹⁹ Savić delivers images and content in a cloud, to reflect what she seeks to document and portray through a multitude of freely forming connections.

Following Savić's untimely death in 2008, efforts were launched to save her work from oblivion. A key role has been played by her parents and the Nadežda Petrović gallery in Čačak, which keeps custody of her estate and organises exhibitions, film screenings and debates devoted to the artist. The establishment of the 'Sonja Savić Multimedia Centre' is planned in Savić's house in Donja Gorevnica near Čačak as a venue that will showcase her work, offer a platform for research and host a residency programme for artists and scholars. ²⁰

Nonetheless, the artist's videos discussed here remain little known, overshadowed by her fame as an actress. Immersed in the heritage of the Yugoslav video art scene of the 1980s, Savić drew inspiration from it and sought to reinvent it. She responded to that legacy in a forward-thinking way that gave it a new lease of life and took it further towards the future. On top of the outstanding artistic quality of her videos, this is a crucial reason why they should be firmly located in scholarly and critical reflection on video art and artists of the moving image.

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