

# TOMISLAV GOTOVAC: OBSERVATION AS PARTICIPATION

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Gotovac is a truly unusually consistent creative mind: his works demonstrate a rare clarity of approach and resilience of orientation. His first film (*Death*, 1962 - interpretative shooting of a series of photos, filmed sound negative with impressive music) showed the fundamental Gotovac aspiration: to awaken his observer's sensitivity in the audience too, enabling the public to partake of it. His second film, *The Forenoon of a Faun* (1963) gave a clear (intuitive but self-aware) programme for the filmic development of this kind of sensitivity. In further creative endeavours, Gotovac worked out this programme thoroughly and consistently, enriching it and testing it out.

In the sequel are some of the key determinants of the programme of Gotovac's approach to film and the consequences for his performance.

1

Gotovac's films are all carefully planned, prepared in advance. The plan here is the declarative characteristic of the film, what has to be perceived during the watching. The following are clearly planned: the film procedures, which are to be consistently carried out through the whole of the film and the scenic area in which the procedures are applied. The planned nature of the procedures are manifested in their reduction, and then in their varied repetition and/or in their extension. For example, for each of the three sequences of *The Forenoon of a Faun* (1963), Gotovac chose an interlinked but varied, markedly pared-down procedure. All three blocks are linked by the anchoring of the camera to the same place and the constant direction of the filming, without any movements to the side. But while the first sequence or frame is completely static (interrupted with occasional jumps in the frame, by the omission of a few pictures), in the second zoom forward is used, while in the third rapid zooming in and out. The reduction of the procedures is seen in the fact that all the other possible film/observer procedures are entirely neutralised, i.e., almost completely absent from the part of the film being taken or from the whole film (but always implicit in their potentiality in the sense of being part of the standard film repertoire of the time). Only one or a few procedures are selected for investigation. In *The Forenoon of a Faun*, of all the possible camera movements, only those men-

tioned are present, the others being all absent (absent: panorama, tracking, tilt, handheld); also absent is any analysis in editing of the scene, its assignment to the actual frames. In the editing, pronouncedly at that, with intermediate titles, only the sequences are separated; again, so that the planned difference of the blocks should be announced, made visible.

The following films just confirm and further work out this principle of simple and clear reduction of procedures. In *Straight Line* (1964), the key procedure is tracking forwards: in the *Blue Rider* (1964) certain "hectic" procedures are selected, there is an observerish doodling across the scene; in *Circle* (1964) a combination of two panoramas is chosen - horizontal and slow vertical; in *I Feel All Right* (1966), *29* (1967) and *Alamo* (1969) (as well as in an unfinished 1971 film under the provisional title of *Plastic Jesus*) it is as if the hectic procedures from *Blue Rider* were being worked out but now with different local arranging "one procedure" interventions (with, for example, pixillation: *29*, *M*, *Plastic Jesus*). And in *Don't Ask Where We're Going*, *Glenn Miller I (High school Playground)* (1977) tracking back and forward are tried out in a variant way in the first, and tracking in a circle in combination with vertical panorama of almost a full circle in the second.

Repetition of procedure and persistent, long-lasting application of procedures and or repetition is not only part of the plan, but a means whereby the planned aspect (the conceptually set) of the pattern is observed quite unambiguously.

An individual methodological structurality becomes the key theme of the given film. In terms of these features, Gotovac's films make an original and (time-wise) pioneering contribution (at about the same time as Vienna's Kubelka and earlier than the Canadian Snow) to the formation of an individual orientation within the framework of the experimental (avant-garde) film, an orientation later known under the definition structuralist film (a term brought in by A. P. Sitney). In addition, such an approach was later noticed as being markedly cognate to the conceptualism movement, and so Gotovac, during the seventies and later, found acceptance and a milieu for his work, within this field of artistic practitioners.

2.

Although the planned element of the procedures in Gotovac's films is a priori, the procedures are planned with an awareness that thus a personal observerly sensitivity is being planned, or selectivity (of creator and audience at once). From film to film, Gotovac was to change and vary the plan precisely in order to test and set up changes in sensitivity brought about by the selected set of filmic procedures. The sensitivity that he thus induces is a sensitivity for film, for the world that will be recorded filmically.

This is primarily a sensitivity for everything that can be found there in front of the camera. This is then a matter of a documentary sensitivity. (Gotovac does not actually count his feature film projects, mainly shot as tasks while a student at the

Academy for Theatre, Film and TV, among his key works.) It would seem that he chooses to film what interested him outside the film, in his daily living relationship with the environment. He chooses mainly those things from his surrounds that are an important and everyday preoccupation.

That is probably why he returns with so much persistence to scenes from the surrounds of his own home (in the films *I Feel Good*, *29*, *Alamo*), to the figures of friends and family - his mother, sister, wife, friends, acquaintances (*T*, *Don't Ask Where We're Going*, untreated notes like *Plastic Jesus*, *Family Film*), the setting of his childish and youthful play (*Glenn Miller I - High school Playground I*). Then he will inevitably shoot things that have a particular, personal, experiential importance (reproductions of art photographs in *Death*; the skin magazine in *S*; the portraits of favourite artists in the films of the trilogy; indications of symbols, like the cross, in *I Feel Good*..). Or he is absorbed in settings strange to himself the fascination of which he observed with a completely personal and individual sensitivity (for example, the films of the trilogy deal with (for Gotovac) the new and obsessive although ordinary settings of Belgrade streets, inns, city sights...).

From this point of view, Gotovac's documentariness is crucially intimate and intimist, saturated with the things that have personal life value for the artist.

But, in being so, it is also fascinatingly realistic and natural: the scenes captured in Gotovac's films are fascinating precisely by their inadvertent appearance: the inadvertent appearance of streets, façades, pavements, yards, people, their movements, reactions, the way they are clothed... Gotovac's films are unique documents of the unprestigious but basic reality of the period in which he filmed them.

### 3.

The origin of the fascination with documentary treatment in Gotovac's films, however, does not lie so much in the scenes themselves, as much as in their having been caught up in the planned a priori nature of the choice of procedures and the main area of their application. Their inadvertent appearance is actually brought about by precisely this systematic approach.

That is, Gotovac is consistently interested by the personal chemical reaction between the filmic approach procedure and the scenes that were valuable in his life. In his words: *I am constantly intrigued by what there is in the relation between my eyes and what it is I am looking at. What makes one thing one way, another a different way?* (from the interview in *Film*, 11-12, p. 55). His choice of film procedures seems to have been imagined to call up scenes known to him, so that through this calling up, this provocation, he would be able himself, but now in a potential community with others, in the induced commonalty present in every cinema presentation, to test out, investigate, reveal himself again, his relationship to them.

And what kind of provocation is this?

While with other structuralist and conceptualist artists the fundamental objective is often, with each new film, each

new action, to catch us out with some new and crucially different structural and conceptual principle as against some previous film or action (such is the case with Kubelka, Frampton, Snow, the English structuralists, Brushewski...), Tom Gotovac's aim is not to amaze us with some new complexity or a completely novelty in his next procedure, rather through these procedures to provoke inadvertency, to develop an undirected or general sensitivity for everything that by chance will come into the field of vision, into the cut of the frame, into the rhythm of frame and frames - in the accidental details, for a unique chiming of circumstances. The planned nature of Gotovac's film is in fact only a mere means for producing and compelling sensitivity for the one-off, the inadvertency, the chime.

What is fascinating in his documentary work is the fascination, then, of a unique counterparting of filmic plan and accidental offer. In the set movement of the film, it is the given accidentalness of phenomena that fascinates: the leisureed movements of the patient on the hospital terrace of the *Forenoon of a Faun* captures your attention; the randomly encountered cars, the movements of the people, the appearance of the city streets in *Straight Line*; the appearance, disposition and behaviour of the people who happen to be there in *Blue Rider*; the appearance of the pavement, the dilapidation of the façade, the mechanical movements of the women in *I Feel All Right*, the colourist compositions on the surface of the terrace, the walls, the roofs... in *29* and *Alamo*, and the tonal compositions in *Don't Ask Where We're Going*; the formal analogies and transformations of figures and cars in the pixillation-interrupted phases from the films *T* and *M*, the captured psychological characterisations in *T* and so on.

### 4.

Prejudice will have it that where there is a pronouncedly present plan, the calculation of planning, then there is no feeling, no room for intuition, improvisation, anything special. Gotovac, however, is totally directed to sensitivity for the occasion, to sensibility, and that is what through his shooting he attempts to develop in himself, as well as in the beholder.

His films last longer than is necessary for the planned pattern to be noticed, not only so that the planned nature should be made clear, and not so that an opportunity should be provided for accident and happenstance, although it is there for that as well. Gotovac's films always last a bit too long for the casual passer-by, because their target is not the casual but the devoted and at-home observer. His films last a long time so as to enable the devoted observer to become at home with the given film, with his approach and his catches, and to give in, to abandon himself to the type of unique sensitivity that he is developing. That is why Gotovac was frustrated with the initial brevity of *Elle*; he plans by careful circular repletion of the tape to spin the film out to half an hour - so that the oneiric immersion in the point of infinity (the film consists of a frame or rapid tracking forward along rail lines

that meet in perspective in the centre of the frame), with occasional divergences, should have the chance for a proper development.

And also, although his films reckon on the convention of the one-time showing and watching of films, a proper relationship to the films involves seeing each one several times (as postulated by Kubelka for his films too) and the linked viewing of different Gotovac films. Looking at just one of his films, in isolation and one time, will almost inevitably entail a failure in experience. Only the multiple and several-part viewing of Gotovac's films, looking at his oeuvre as a whole, gives a chance for a full development of a proper sensitivity for individual films, for personal one-off gains.

The biggest gains from his films are gains in sensitivity and feeling; for example, in the touching melancholy of the portrait of his mother (in the anthology piece first block *T*); in the enabling of almost psychedelic perceptive rapture in formal rhythmical transformations in *M*, in the drives in *Elle*, in the portraits of the last block of *T*; the gentle observery relaxation in *Glenn Miller*; the provocatively joshing mood though shot through with intense interest in *Blue Rider*, *Don't Ask Where We're Going*, *S...* The mood is reckoned on, but it is a mood that is always highly marked by the observer.

##### 5.

There is a certain totality in the film work and the life of Tomislav Gotovac.

Although what is so very obvious with some of the films - the existence of a strong set plan - it is not all that obvious when the whole of his film work is considered, the fact is that the systematicness of the investigation of a certain set of procedures and sensitivities seems the working of what is practically a life-plan: one can almost discuss Gotovac's film development, of his life's series of films, as of a simultaneous, synchronic phenomenon, as of a unique undertaking in which the temporal dimension is just an unavoidable operational technicality.

This is not important only for his ultra-film work, but for the whole of his life as well. As films are a variant of the sensitivity that develops in life, he deems his own life a systematic creation of an artistic project. As his life is an version of his preoccupations in film: "... I am a movie myself", "when I open my eyes in the morning, I see a movie

" (*Film*, 11-12, p. 55), so individual moves in his life are just steps in the creation of a total artistic project: actions (thus he talks about his one time employment as the employment action, of his appearance in other people's films as the acting action, of his own family life action, and so on, see the *Film* interview).

To return to the beginning: it would seem that at the root of all this is Gotovac's ability to find a total system which will make us and him aware of the accidental, fortuitous phenomena of life; his talent is precisely in his being able to give systematic value to such random matters. This is one of

the traits of his general attitude to the world, the manner in which he cognitively experiences and manages the world around him and settles his own place in it, and is thus present in everything that he does, in the whole of his life: not only in the films, but also in his performances, photographic series, collages, his sets of personal documentation.

As against the culturally standardised forms and ways of explaining the phenomena of life, Gotovac focuses on the scattered, fortuitous details, finding them to be much more important, rich and diverse than the deliberately extracted details that are generally considered important, and towards which attention is usually directed.

According to Gotovac, it is this personal all-encompassing principle of structuring and systematising all the information that he cares about (which somewhat self-ironically and also with a knowing and understanding conviction he calls paranoia-view Art), enabling a fresh understanding of the world, which makes him himself (and by artistic transmission, others too) more sensitive to phenomena that it is difficult for us, in the conventional order of our culture and the well-worn ways of our own lives within it, to devote ourselves to.

##### Literature:

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