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The fall of the pink curtain

Alliances between nationalists and queers in post-Yugoslavian cinema

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CHAPTER 4: SICK CRIMINAL LESBIANS

Saša: This is not Paris, Lana. We don't tell our parents who we fucked the previous night.

Lana: If you did, maybe you wouldn't be so fucked up. Maybe your folks would still be together.

Take a Deep Breath

In this chapter I analyze a Serbian-produced feature film entitled *Take a Deep Breath* directed by Dragan Marinković, written by Hajdana Baletić and made its première at Belgrade's Sava Center in 2004. While the film is indeed the first from Serbia to present a lesbian couple as its main protagonists, the director did not specifically address lesbianism as a theme nor did he promote it as being a lesbian film, as Marija Grujić points out (2012: 182). Marinković focused not on representing the Balkan war of the 1990s, which many other films at the time had – instead he marketed it as a story about a generation gap. Despite his attempts to shift the focus away from the lesbian relationship and the central theme of lesbianism, the film nevertheless acts as a cinematographic coming out that breaks the silence surrounding the taboo of lesbianism in Serbia.

The film centers on Saša (Ana Franić), a student from Belgrade, who dreams of emigrating to Canada. At the beginning of the film she has a boyfriend, Stefan (Branislav Tomasević), but soon we find out that she is a closeted lesbian. After announcing their decision to move during a family dinner at Saša's home the couple has a car accident and Stefan is admitted to the hospital. Upon hearing the news, Stefan's sister Lana (Jelena Djokić), a photographer and a lesbian herself who had moved from Belgrade to Paris, returns home and begins an affair with Saša. After Saša comes out as a lesbian, a Pandora's box is opened, and many family secrets are revealed. Viewers learn that Saša's heterosexual parents are not the exemplary couple that they pretend to be: Saša's father Miloš (Bogdan Diklić) suffers from impotency and sexually harasses his female cleaner, while

Saša's mother Lila (Mira Furlan) has an affair with a younger male lover. Finally, the lesbian relationship between Saša and Lana brutally ends after Miloš' intervention when he accuses Lana of being mentally ill and exerts his power in the court to have her incarcerated.

The story is set in the beginning of the 2000s, a time in Serbia's history when older generations were still firmly upholding heteronormativity and denying the existence of lesbians. One of the first lesbian activists from Serbia, Jelica Todosijević, notes that at that time, "Being a lesbian in Serbia means that you don't exist at all. You don't exist legally; you don't exist illegally. You are an offensive word, a bad character from a cheap novel or a character from a pornographic film" (1996: 171). This label clearly continues in 2003. At the time the film was produced, the background of homophobia in the mainstream media was still considered offensive and pornographic (Vučković 2006: 14-15). While the film can be seen as countering the in-existence of lesbians by virtue of centering its narrative around a lesbian couple, it is important to examine just how the lesbian characters are deployed in the film. Therefore, I examine whether the film works to both document and critique the notion that lesbians are the so-called bad guys of Serbian society. By analyzing what the film says about homophobia and the activist tactics used to challenge it, I posit that the film tells a story that accuses lesbians of being sick and criminal – and can be therefore accused of homophobia – but also displays a way out, by proposing lesbianism as a liberation process and thus offering a critique of homophobia.

Voyeurism and Identification: A Thin Line

Pride parades and public demonstrations involving queer communities may still attract the attention of homophobes, but they have become ubiquitous in Europe and in the West in general. The situation in the East is different and collective coming outs continue to be occasions of violence. Peter Davies argues that coming out is "a constant struggle against those who, on the one hand, accept the disclosure and then, on the other, refuse to accept its implications" (qtd. in Kuhar and Takács 2007: 42). In the post-Yugoslavian region there is a silenced and privatized treatment of

homosexuality which forces sexual nonconformists into a transparent closet. The film illuminates the core problems of internalized homophobia as a coping strategy of survival in nationalist and homophobic surroundings. It also assists our understanding of the most recent nationalist perspective on lesbianism in Serbia.

Popular media such as *srbinfo* have been misusing existing sexual theories to prove their point. Misinterpretations of the Kinsey Reports (1948/53) are a case in point: Ilija Vuksanović, not only misspells the name (Kinsey becomes Kinski), but also accuses Alfred Kinsey of being a pedophile who sexually abused children and even babies while experimenting with orgasms (2015). Vuksanović has also argued that homosexuality is a threat to society because it spreads sexual diseases and pedophilia, and, using Kant's categorical imperative as a tool, has argued that if all of us were attracted to the same sex, the human race would be extinct in 70 years.³⁴ Lesbians are not considered criminals in contemporary Serbian society. Yet, same sex attraction is often attacked by voices that support heteronormativity and portray lesbians as diseased, and as such, harmful to the nation. The film indexes such discourses while exposing how lesbian characters are considered to be affected by a mental illness that needs to be surveilled, policed, criminalized, and ultimately eliminated.

When Lana comes out as Saša's girlfriend to Miloš, he slaps her and threatens Saša: "If I see you again with this psycho, I will kill you both" ["Vidim te još jednom sa onom ludačom, ubit ću i tebe i nju"]. He is clearly convinced that homosexuality is a mental illness. Saša, however, is quite capable of internalizing her father's definition of homophobia. In the next scene where she is alone with Lana in her bedroom, she says "[t]his is sick, Lana" ["Ovo je bolest, Lana!"]. The homophobic perspective of her father pushes Saša back into the transparent closet. This definition of homosexuality as a mental illness does not mean that the logical response should be caring for and curing a patient. Instead, pathologizing immediately leads to criminalization, surveillance, and policing. Throughout the film, lesbian love is depicted as a crime. Moreover, a strong nationalist

³⁴ These discourses are similar to the mis-appropriation of gender equality discourses by Catholic organizations, as demonstrated in Chapter 1.

fervor undergirds the definition of lesbian love as being sick and criminal. The depiction of surveillance in this film is quite different from that of *Fine Dead Girls*. There, the landlady spied on the lesbian couple to heterosexualize them and punish them for being lesbians. In *Take a Deep Breath*, however, the way in which surveillance is portrayed questions the voyeur's powers.

Early in the film, Saša and Lana seem persecuted by hostile gazes: when they come out as a lesbian couple, a series of scenes make the point that they are being watched. First, we see a car following Lana through the streets of Belgrade while tracking her every move. The viewer is placed in a position that adopts Lana's gaze, looking back at the follower. Shortly thereafter, the camera-angle changes to an aerial view and viewers see both automobiles traveling along the street. We are not told or shown who is following her and the stalkers' intentions are not narrativized which creates an atmosphere of threatening uncertainty. Another series of scenes follow the couple walking along the river bank, hugging and kissing. Viewers can plainly see that they are not hiding their affection for each other and that they are clearly an emancipated couple. At this point, viewers are in a position to observe them – we share the same view as their stalkers. I interpret this to mean that the director wants to share the perspective of surveillers. Also, in these scenes, viewers are asked to understand that the women are not aware that they are being observed. But shortly thereafter, a different interpretation is proposed: when the camera begins to zoom in on the couple, we hear the voices of the stalkers: Miloš, the judge, and his assistant converse about why they are spying on the couple. Only then does the camera cut to a shot of the two men in a parked car while watching the women through binoculars.

At that point, viewers only see the couple through a frame of surveillance: we see what the men see. They are observing the couple, although the camera makes a point of not adopting the view through the binoculars. In these scenes Miloš and his assistant watch them, and the viewers are forced to do the same. He appears to have power and control over the situation. He is the symbol of surveillance to the extent that he does not even need to see for himself and this is supported by the fact that he does not look through the binoculars. Instead, he orders his assistant to direct the

contraption at the women and the obedient observer then reports what he sees. The act of giving orders only intensifies Miloš' power and control, which makes us aware of the danger of the chain of command trickling down the social ladder. He can delegate to his subordinates just as fascist regimes deploy their administrative tentacles.

At the same time, the film also provides us with another narrative regarding his position of power. He is more pathetic than powerful: his disease is to see the world as a pornographic scene. The lesbians are filmed by a camera which deliberately alludes to the code of pornography. It is not such a far-fetched proposal given that as Todosijević argues that lesbians in Serbia exist only as an offensive word or characters from a cheap novel or a pornographic film (1996: 171). When considered from that perspective, the consequences of spying seem rather harmless. Miloš is not so much in control as obsessed by his childish curiosity: he is a pathetic voyeur who transforms everything that he sees into pornographic theater. The women are imagined as objects of consumption and masturbatory fantasies for heterosexual men. Male desire is incorporated into the lesbian relationship as a parasitic gaze.

The first intimate scene between Saša and Lana shows them drinking and making love. It begins with a close-up on a box of matches as Lana lights one. Next, the camera is positioned from above and we see the couple lying on a sofa, drinking red wine and smoking cigarettes. In the middle of their conversation Lana mentions to Saša that she is the first of Stefan's girlfriends whom she has found attractive and with which she can converse. The camera slowly approaches the women while they continue their conversation about love and passion. Suddenly they are interrupted by water overflowing the bathtub. Realizing that their apartment is being flooded, they frantically take off their shirts to absorb some of the water. The director obviously made a choice here: instead of providing his actresses with a script involving towels, he chooses to have them get undressed. This is not, however, a scene about sex and desire between the women. Yet, this visual cliché might trigger the viewer's internalized male gaze and produce a moment of objectification of the women's bodies.

Given what follows, this scene seems to be a prelude to the representation of sex between the two women. First, they end up in the bathtub, drunk and naked. The camera gets closer towards them, suggesting that their relationship is becoming increasingly intimate. Saša leans over Lana and kisses her softly on the cheek. But the representation of sex does not appear. The next shot is a view of the whole living room, a temporal disconnect occurs, since we see them sleeping on the sofa, apparently a few hours later. The spectator cannot witness or testify to the existence of a sexual act. The question remains in the imagination of the viewer, this is visually supported by the camera that seems to be scanning the room as if to investigate, slowly moving laterally over the women's bodies underneath the bedsheets. It is useful to critique this objectification of their bodies. This cinematic tactic is a predictable way of objectifying women's bodies, especially lesbian bodies. The camera looks down on them, making them powerless and available for visual consumption. We are not so far away from a classic re-appropriation of lesbian desire for heterosexual male consumption, a phenomenon that has been already well documented, including by Laura Mulvey who points out that women are usually filmed as passive objects who appear submissive when the camera peers down upon them (1975: 10).

Similarly, the following scene is constructed to trigger the same phantasies even though nothing sexual is precisely shown. On the balcony, when Saša comes out to her mother Lila, she responds with a story from her teenage years explaining that she almost had a sexual encounter with one of the girls from her gymnastics class. As she explains, this girl approached her and put her hand on her breasts. Then there is a pause. The camera focuses on Saša, then on Lila who says "I will never know what would have happened if I had not taken her hand away" ["Nikad neću znati šta bi se dogodilo ako ne bi izvukla ruku"]. Lila's story, and this dialogue in particular, leaves the issue unresolved and the viewer is free to imagine what could have happened. The allusion to a locker room – a highly charged and politicized site of nudity and social segregation – is more likely to trigger images of men swapping stories from a pornographic male perspective than to participate in the creation of a lesbian imaginary. One would hope that this had become an old stereotype by

now, but unfortunately, allusions to lesbian love in such a setting does not protect the characters from a predatory heteronormative interpretation.

Cinematographically, the film does indeed depict same-sex love but does not seem able to celebrate it. Or rather, the camera is still using the familiar and conventional gaze used to depict straight love making scenes: the women's nudity is objectified in a manner that indexes an old-fashioned and dominant heterosexual male gaze (Mulvey 1975). Lesbian love is merely wrapped into the standard plotline of popular heterosexual romances, which as Mandy Merck argues dilutes the social and political implications in such films and reduces them entirely to the personal level (1993: 379-80). It is a familiar pattern that does not need to be perceived as an Eastern phenomenon. We may remember Bernadette Barton's analysis entitled "Male phantasies about lesbian desire" critiquing Spike Lee's *She Hates Me* (2004) which she reads as the construction of a lesbian relationship from a male perspective (2005). Richard Dyer has gone even further by suggesting that the heterosexist plot was central to the structure of mainstream lesbian films (1984: 34). He suggests that gayness is used merely as a way to reinforce the appropriateness of heterosexuality when he writes that "the true sexual definition of a woman is heterosexual and that she gets that definition from a man" (34). Similarly, *Take a Deep Breath* borrows straight conventions and situates Miloš as a constant voyeur who observes and attempts to control the women, making it difficult for the viewer not to be complicit with the represented male gaze.

On the other hand, the film is also a coming-out story which offers a rare representation of lesbian desire. *Take a Deep Breath* tries to increase the visibility of lesbian love but cannot avoid turning lesbian desire into a heterosexual male fantasy. The type of femininity that the couple represents is also relatively stereotypical and panders to masculinist appropriations. Here, the aesthetic of lesbian embodiment is resolutely femme and there is no allusion to any butch code. It would be too facile to blame it on an Eastern contextualization. Popular television series such as *The L Word* (2004-09) are clearly playing on such stereotypes and as Susan J. Wolfe and Lee Ann Roripaugh have argued, the representation of women in that context is "shamelessly pandering to

the male, heterosexual gaze” thus promoting “assimilationist visibility” (2006: 43). On the one hand, the lesbian is not dismissed as a non-woman because she is masculine (although the stereotype of a so-called masculinized diesel-dyke can also be harmful). On the other, the so-called normalization of the feminine lesbian makes it difficult to avoid the confusion between voyeurism and identification. And from that perspective, the film treads on shallow water.

Take a Deep Breath is neither clearly homophobic nor straightforwardly pro-gay activist, and the ambiguity leaves the spectator questioning how lesbians can be accurately represented in film. Hollinger argues that ambiguous films refuse to identify unequivocally as a portrayal of female friendship or lesbian romance and thus can seamlessly appeal to both a lesbian or heterosexual female audience (1998: 6). She argues that “in this way, they offer their audience the voyeuristic satisfaction of seeing two beautiful women interacting in sexually provocative ways on the screen without overtly challenging heterosexist norms” (6). Ambiguity as a tactic thus works two ways: (i) it creates a safe zone for lesbians in an overtly homophobic milieu, and (ii) it minimizes threats to heterosexist ideologies of the heteronormative world. Hollinger also argues that, as opposed to ambiguous films, an open portrayal of lesbianism can pose a significant threat to the heterosexist patriarchal *status quo*. Instead, ambiguity acts as to “deauthorize and foreclose cinematic representations of actual lesbianism” (de Lauretis qtd. in Hollinger 1998: 129). *Take a Deep Breath* can be read as being not entirely ambiguous. While certain to provoke heterosexual male fantasies, the lesbian relationship in the film is controlled, surveilled by the male gaze, and finally criminalized when Lana is imprisoned for being a lesbian and thus pushed back into the (not-so-) transparent closet.

Because the viewer has been made aware that Miloš was watching the women and that Lana has now been jailed, we can only assume that he is responsible for her incarceration. Miloš has indeed misused his position as a judge. The scene is shot in low-light and we briefly see Lana being escorted to a cell by a policewoman. As the armored cell door opens with a squeaky sound, Lana asks her jailor why she is being locked up. There comes no answer, no phone call, and no

explanation. There are no legal grounds to incarcerate her because of her sexual preference but the scene suggests that Miloš is not the only one to abuse the system and that corrupt individuals who represent the government trample protections supposedly offered by that same government. The incarceration is the logical output of Miloš' homophobic definition of lesbian love as a mental illness.

Lesbianism: An Imaginary Threat from the West

Not only does the film present lesbians as mentally ill criminals it also suggests that they are connected to the West. The West is responsible for the problem and it also constructed as the enemy who has exported homosexuality. When Saša has a breakdown after her coming out and begins to doubt her sexuality again, she says to Lana, "This is not Paris, Lana! We don't tell our parents who we fucked last night" ["Ovo nije Paris, Lana! Mi ne kažemo svojim starcima sa kim smo preživeli noć"]. This statement reinforces the stereotypes that persist between East and West: in Paris you may be gay and talk about your sex life with your parents; while in Eastern Serbia, you need to hide your sexuality while parents surveil you while knowing about it. In the film, there is a slight reversal of this one-sided view of the West, since it is both the place Lana moves to and where she comes from, which positions the West as a place where Eastern failures go and where successful Easterners come from. The distinction between the two poles of failure and success is articulated in the scene where Miloš and Saša argue after she has come out to him. Miloš is worried about Saša moving abroad, to which she replies, "I'll finally be able to breathe!" ["Prodisat ću!"] a statement which equates home with death and Paris with life and rebirth. This is also a response to the figure of illness – they are not sick, but the environment disables and poisoned them. The nationalist imagination assumes that Lana only became a lesbian once she migrated to the West and became ill, and it is difficult to find a position that breaks out of that mental mode. When Saša says, "This is not Paris," she is implying that Lana would always have the option to say she is gay when in Paris. Not only does her remark disregard the fact that Paris is a place where homophobia exists as well,

but she ignores the fact that Lana was gay before moving to Paris and may wish to express her orientation at home too.

The nationalist perspective presents homosexuality as a threat to the nation and society and the film is capable of addressing that issue. Before the balcony scene described above, a sequence of scenes presents the viewer with windy exterior night shots: first we see a close-up of leaves fluttering in the wind. Then there is another close-up shot of the tinkling wooden chimes on the balcony. Afterwards, the camera focuses on a small light mounted on the outside wall surrounded by leaves. The last close-up before the shot of the women on the balcony is of a wooden rocking horse teetering in the wind, as if someone had just been using it, leaving only a creaking sound that causes an eerie and mysterious feeling. The editing of one scene with another is akin to shots in a thriller film. The scenes are intercut with one another, accreting weird elements to create a certain kind of mystery that provides viewers with feelings of mirroring, or cause and effect. This signals that there might be a link between the eerie scenes and lesbian love making, because in a traditional thriller, such shots cause us to expect danger and we are prompted to equate it with lesbian love.

Two additional scenes follow the same logic. After Saša and Lana meet, Saša discovers that her mother has a secret lover. As she walks through the park alongside the river bank talking on the phone with Stefan, Saša sees her mother kissing a man. The camera shows them from a distance, it focuses on them while the surroundings become blurry. The next cut is a close-up of Saša's face while she tells her friend: "My mother has a lover" ["Moja mama ima ljubavnika"]. This time, the lesbian daughter is in the position to surveil her mother and she discovers that her parents' supposedly perfectly-functioning heterosexual marriage, is riddled with guilty secrets. In the very next scene, Miloš experiences a heart attack while playing tennis with his younger colleague. His wife is not present while he is in pain, instead she is experiencing joy with her lover. The same music links the similarity between the two events. The parents' relationship is presented as being dead. The supposedly healthy normal model of straight relationships is exposed as being flawed at the very moment that Saša announces her intentions to move to the West. National borders become

unstable when Saša opens her Pandora's box; this reveals a violent national legacy inherited from older generations. As long as that closet is locked, the normativization of straight relationships can be maintained. In other words, the opening of the box reveals that the norm is a dirty secret.

The illusion of the lesbian threat is presented as coinciding with the demise of traditional family values and the heteronormative structure is exposed as a failure. In the meantime, there is a possibility for salvation, although fraught with danger. The film paints a picture of conservative Serbia where homophobia is considered a punishable illness which leads to internalized homophobia and a conception of same-sex love as something that only happens in the West. These scenes suggest, however, that there is no real threat coming from the lesbian couple or the West. The heterosexual relationships are not threatened by outside forces but are collapsing on their own accord.

The film also manages to insinuate that lesbian love is a way out rather than a threat. The myth of Pandora's box communicates that the only thing left in the box after all the other forces have escaped is hope, and this is also suggested by the film. One way the film presents hope is to construct the lesbian relationship as a form of liberation. While the heterosexual relationship is a site of conflict where both partners are miserable and collapsing under the weight of hiding and pretending; Saša and Lana's partnership is presented as being harmonious. Lana came from the West to help Stefan after his car accident and she is depicted as an improved alternative to Saša's former boyfriend. Soon after her arrival, Lana takes Saša for an automobile ride and says, "Don't be afraid, I'm a better driver than Stefan" ["Ne boj se, vozim bolje od Stefana"]. The proximity of the two scenes makes it clear that the viewer is expected to make a comparison between the two mirroring scenes. By taking the wheel, Lana symbolically takes over. There is no accident when Lana drives, and the viewer is invited to draw the conclusion that while the heterosexual relationship is uncertain, there is safety in the lesbian relationship.

Societal Confrontation

Given the context in which *Take a Deep Breath* was produced, how did the director choose to advertise his film? During the film's premiere, writer Hajdana Baletić and Majda Puača from the Stani pani collective,³⁵ in an interview with liberal TV and radio station B92, admit that they advertised the film as a story about a family that falls apart because of poor communication. The local press pointed out, however, that it was the first gay-oriented Serbian film.³⁶ When a journalist asked Marinković whether he used homosexuality because it is fashionable, the director responded that he was not interested in issue, but he was fascinated by problems posed by untold stories and secrets that the society-at-large wishes to keep hidden. Thus, he wanted to address taboos, of which homosexuality is just one (G.J. 2004). He also insists that he is in favor of protecting privacy. According to the screenwriters, the film denounces the hypocrisy of their society, where a dysfunctional family represents itself as the norm while refusing to deal with its own closet. From that perspective, lesbian desire is only one of the secrets. People do not discuss homosexuality; they oscillate between "tacit tolerance" ["prečutna tolerancija"] (Kupres 2004), latent, or violent repression. Mainstream media seem to alternate between sensationalist or anti-gay approaches as pointed out by Baletić and Puača (Kupres 2004).

Was the film then viewed by the public as being a gay film or not? Ana Franić (Saša) reports that there was much interest surrounding the film during the pre-production phase because it was labeled as the first Serbian gay film, yet after the premiere the audience was pleasantly surprised: "Well, well, well, this is nothing horrible" ["No, no, to ni nič grozno"] she remarked (Rajković 2009). The film was quite successful in the United States and received an award for Best Foreign Film at the 38th annual Houston International Film Festival, as well an award for cinematography. It certainly received much attention from the cinematic world within the Post-Yugoslavian geographic region. The leading actress, Ana Franić received a YU Fipresci award for Best Serbian Actress and

³⁵ "Stani pani" collective is a Serbian organization against discrimination of any kind.

³⁶ The example of cover titles in the local press: *There's a Generation Conflict in Serbia* (G.J. 2004), *A Love Triangle Game* (Babović 2005).

many more accolades from film festivals across the country – in Belgrade, Novi sad, and Niš.³⁷ Her role in *Take a Deep Breath* brought her much attention and she began accepting leading roles in other films and TV series.³⁸ Bearing this in mind, the film was well received as a gay-oriented film in the West yet closeted as a gay-oriented film in Serbia but still accepted. We are left with two speculations: whether there is a special kind of tolerance towards lesbian issues, or whether it is due to the pornographic potential of the representation of sex between women. The reception of *Go West* in Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, makes me suspect that the reaction would have been much different if the film had been about two men.

As usual, the reasons why the film was celebrated and criticized has everything to do with not only the artwork itself but also the way in which critics deploy their interpretations to forward their own agenda. For example, Ana Janković Piljić points out in *Kinokultura* that “to a large extent, this film has been suppressed from the Belgrade public scene even though it is far from a ‘backward community’s manual for gay relationships’ – as some have interpreted it” (2009). The film is clearly no how-to-manual. It voices only one possible message: the only real option for a lesbian is to either not be a lesbian or go back to the West, from where and whence she presumably came. But rather than ending on such a pessimistic note, it is useful to evaluate the elements of the film that can be thought of as queer activist tactics.

Activist Tactics

Anti-homophobic tactics are never obvious, and the viewer is expected to undertake some interpretive work while viewing the film. In Chapter 2, I demonstrated that homophobia manifests itself as a fear that Western and United States concepts will infiltrate the post-Yugoslavian geographic region via the queer community. To a certain extent, the film turns this paranoia into a

³⁷ She received an award for Outstanding Female Role and the Best Actress Audience Award at the Niš Film Festival; and Best Female Role at the Film Festivals in Novi Sad and Supot (Ječmenica 2015).

³⁸ See for example TV series such as *Mixed Marriage* [*M(j)ešoviti brak*] (2003-2007), *The Lime Street* [*Ulica lipa*] (2007-2009), *Stop the Weather* [*Zaustavi vreme*] (2008), *The Truth Play* [*Igra istine*] (2011) and films like *Awakening from the Death* [*Budjenje iz mrtvih*] (2005), *Deadly Motorist* [*Smrtonosna motoristka*] 2007, *The Reject* [*Odbačen*] (2007), *The Beautiful Blue Dunabe* [*Na lepom plavom Dunavu*] 2008, *Passing by* [*U prolazu*] 2009 (Ječmenica 2015).

successful form of conceptual and artistic smuggling. If *Take a Deep Breath* is to be thought of as being progressive, it is because it works obliquely by making unexpected use of concepts. The film can be said to “vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers” (de Certeau 1984: 37). This is a form of re-empowerment that Michel de Certeau has described as a form of “poaching,” which involves being in a place that refuses to see you as the owner (175).

When I say that the viewers need to do some work, I do not mean to suggest that the infiltration of anti-homophobic concepts are purely accidental. Activist tactics within the film appear to be accidents and have the power to turn perspectives upside down, as I demonstrate in the following analysis. The night during which Saša and Lana make love is also a moment of incomprehensible queer symbolism: Miloš, the representative of homophobic injustice turns his world upside down. He literally deconstructs and then reconstructs his domicile while revealing that the home of his happy marriage is merely a façade. Within the plot, the reason for this episode is Miloš’ accidental ingestion of ecstasy pills and alcohol. As if pushed out of his rigid closet of masculinist and nationalistic homophobia, he begins to dance uncoordinatedly and to kiss family pictures hanging on the wall. Viewers see him with a necktie wrapped around his forehead; he pours an alcoholic beverage into a huge bowl and drinks. Local sentimental music – a song about lost love – accompanies his actions. He then starts to alter the apartment with a drill and saw. The camera offers a close-up of his face with the necktie still around his head. He sings, “You can’t hurt me!” [“Ne možeš mi ništa!”]. A series of facial close-ups while he is sawing and singing, hides what he is doing from the viewer. We must wait until – what in the plot is – the next morning to be able to appreciate the results of his efforts. He has literally managed to turn the whole apartment upside down. A table is hanging from the ceiling and other bits of furniture, artistically intertwined with each other, dangle from it. It looks like some type of artwork, a sculpture maybe, or even installation art, but the apartment has lost its functionality. Miloš has changed what were supposed to be commonplace useful structures in a traditional home setting into an art gallery which

transforms this space into a bourgeois kitchen with an artwork hanging from the ceiling. The home where the supposed normal relationship lives is now queered. It might now be capable of welcoming a new queer relationship. Or at the very least it denounces the relativity of the norm, pointing to the easy reversal of the up and down, normalized and non-normative. Here the film symbolically transforms the norms of the heterosexual relationship.

Of course, the possibility of turning reality upside down is limited. This scene can be described as Bakhtinian carnivalesque: when the effects of the ecstasy wear off, order becomes restored.³⁹ The drug is introduced as an accident because Miloš – being a well-established judge, a firm believer in traditional family and national values – is not supposed to use recreational drugs. This notion of the accidental, however, is precious in a fictional-based film because it constitutes a sort of tactical opening of the closet that the film uses to contest and challenge the homophobic environment. Ahmed points out throughout her book entitled *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) that accidental or chance encounters have the ability to lead us away from the beaten path and re-orient us away from normative directions. In the film, the ingestion of a mind-altering substance can be read as a tactical accident. In retrospect, we may also appreciate that the beginning of the film also has to do with a different type of accident: a car accident that enables an opportunity to introduce the leading lesbian characters. Other such accidents include Saša's discovery that her mother has a lover and Miloš' sudden heart attack. None of these events are expected and viewers begin to see parallels emerging between the failure of the heterosexual family and the apparently serendipitous presence of a lesbian couple who actually represent a positive way out.

Besides this implicit theory of accidental change, the film also makes several allusions to what certain members of the audience will recognize as references to gay sub-cultures. An encounter between the two women is filmed in a style that references a lip-sync culture, commonly used as a presentation technique in drag performances. If one is familiar with gay culture, then lip-

³⁹ Bakhtin's concept of the carnival challenges fixed orders and de-constructs the dominant culture (1965). He argues that the carnival is "a special condition of the entire world, of the world revived and renewed;" a world turned upside down (7). This applies perfectly to this scene: it is a temporary state as opposed to a revolution which changes the order for good.

synching indexes drag shows, and their complex politics of tactical repertoires.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, there is not much research or documentation on drag culture in the post-Yugoslavian region. Yet, Velikonja documents that lip-synching performances were common practice in Slovenian queer communities (2004: 21, 25). Although existing much earlier, drag performance moved into mainstream culture at the turn of the 21st century. One of the first public performances of the drag queen trio Sestre [The Sisters] occurred during the 2002 Eurovision Song Contest where they finished in thirteenth place. In 2007, Marija Šerifović, a singer in drag, participated and won the contest for Serbia with a song entitled “Molitva.”

Returning to the film, Lana and Saša are depicted in a nightclub. Lana sings a love song, which is obviously but obliquely addressed to Saša. The camera begins alternating between Lana singing on stage and Saša. From one shot to the next, the camera zooms in, gradually giving the impression that they are the only ones in the packed venue. They are depicted looking at each other; the more the camera zooms in on Saša’s face, the more the two women seem to connect with one another. At some point Saša begins to lip-synch to Lana’s song. Lana helps Saša to articulate her desire, which allows Saša to come out to herself as she realizes that she has feelings for Lana. It is clear from the beginning that there is a difference between them, since Lana lives openly as a lesbian and is conscious of her identity, while Saša lives a closeted life and has a boyfriend. However, in this scene, her heteronormative identity is exposed as being precarious, even though Saša accepts her father’s heterosexual matrix. The film thus addresses communities that – like the two characters – arrive at the gay scene from very different perspectives. Each viewer will see something different and position themselves as either insiders or outsiders.

Another activist tactic in the film addresses an attempt to bypass the gender binary to facilitate a positioning that does not directly confront nationalistic homophobia. This proposal is precarious because it is close to, and easily interpreted, as denial. For example, the morning after Lana and Saša make love, Lana insists that she is Saša’s girlfriend, yet Saša refuses any connection

⁴⁰ For example, drag shows as political tactics through entertainment settings challenge dominant gender and sexual orders and offer a space for constructing collective identities (Taylor et. al 2004).

with a gay gender identity. She screams at Lana, “I’m Stefan’s girlfriend, and I’m not gay, you hear?” [“Ja sam Stefanova djevojka i nisam gej, čujes li?”]. Typically, this type of denial is interpreted as internalized homophobia, which would be in keeping with the situation in Serbia. Yet, I argue that the vocal denial of any lesbian identity by one character introduces a more interesting and subtler hypothesis: rather than defending a traditional coming out, the film introduces the possibility of forms of sexuality that simply refuse to visually confirm the male/female binarism, which complicates the opposition between gay and straight.

An example of this hypothesis occurs during the opening credits, which is a love scene where only one body is gendered. The camera focuses on two bodies, but viewers cannot see their faces, nor can we identify more than one article of clothing, a brassiere, which suggests that at least one woman is present. It is incumbent on the viewer to fill-in the invisible pieces of the scene. Two bodies (or perhaps more) are depicted in the throes of passion. In the first close-up shot we see a hand opening a shirt. The leading actors’ names then appear on screen. In the next shot, also a close-up, the same hand touches the bra-straps and slowly pulls them down. In another cutaway the director’s name and the film’s title appear on the screen. The close-up shots continue to focus on a disrobing woman while the flesh of her body is revealed. Internalized heteronormativity will probably lead viewers to conclude that this is a man and a woman. The film challenges us to notice that the lover, who does the undressing, is visually genderless and could indeed also be a woman. The film plays with the notion that gay is the marked element of the straight/gay binary. Thus, in the absence of markers, one will assume that the scene is presenting heterosexuality. Viewers are provided with a double-take experience through which expectations and biases are exposed. The opening montage suggests to me that it is possible to frame a sexual act without including gender identity politics, and that sex does not necessarily need to be viewed from that perspective. In that case it would always remain a guessing game. For example, an open-minded liberal viewer might assume that we are looking at two female bodies since the two protagonists are having a lesbian

relationship; while a conservative viewer might assume that these bodies are of opposite genders since this is the norm in Serbian society.

The director chooses to avoid most gender markers which means that we cannot definitively say that we saw two women. For instance, when the camera pans down the torso of a naked body but stops short of showing any genitalia. This attempt, to de-gender the body or at least to avoid any marker that would allow viewers to identify one of the lovers, curiously resembles the theoretical definition of bisexuality proposed by Hélène Cixous (1976) and Marjorie Garber (1995). They both argue that bisexual desire destroys the dichotomies and rigid identity markers that align sexual preference and gender identity. Cixous elaborated on the Freudian concept of bisexuality by arguing for the “other bisexuality” as a destructive force for binary positions so that sexuality gets closer to a universal bisexuality of polymorphous perversity, a precursor of queer theory’s later emphases (884). Similarly, Garber argues that bisexuality is a destabilizer of heteronormativity since desire is “unquantifiable” (283). The opening montage of the film attempts to establish a representational grid that suggests that desire does not necessarily need to be pinned to gender.

This might be a precious tactic in a homophobic society where “Out and Proud” mottoes lead to polarization and confrontations. I am certainly not suggesting that the film is arguing that one should hide in order not to disturb the homophobes, but rather, *Take a Deep Breath* seeks other ways to challenge their rigid norms. After all, the desire to go beyond the opposition between gender polarities may be matched by a desire to avoid constructing two radically opposing political camps.

This issue is even more important now because polarization also occurs in the realm of ethnic categories. I suggest that the film attempts to redraw the borders of sexual orientation and to communicate across ethnic borders. It was marketed as film that was not about the war in a period where cinema audiences were fascinated by ethnic conflict. It focuses on the minutiae of individual relationships, thus avoiding “important historical and political issues” as Baletić points out (Kupres 2004). Yet Moss argues that, war and ethnicity are the “elephants in the room:” they are a

structuring absence (2011: 365). The film implores its viewers to comprehend a more fluid definition of sexual preference and orientation; it also warns against the disintegrating effect of binary oppositions. *Take a Deep Breath* is not specifically about the 1990s war, but still manages to insinuate parallels between the splitting up of Miloš' patriarchal family and the dismantling of communist Yugoslavia.