

Katarina  
Zdjelar

Between  
*the*  
Sounds

# FADE-OUT AND RISE AGAIN

In her most recent film, *Untitled (A Song)* (2016), Katarina Zdjelar records a group of four young musicians spending the dead of night in a provisional music studio overlooking a wide boulevard. Coming inside through the open window, the sound of the passing train in the distance is the only clearly audible noise cutting through the silence. A window of the apartment frames the pitch-black immateriality of the outside world whilst the inside is presented with close-ups of textures of blankets, amplifiers, instruments, and the faces of the protagonists. A rotating ventilator indicates the slow tempo of a warm summer night and the *silent noise* it produces underlines the whole film. We are in a big city, but in that prolonged moment when it shuts down and fades out. The moment we experience is a temporal void marked by darkness and silence, the time when everything is over, and a new day, which will eventually arrive, lies deeply stored in the abyss of anticipation and regret. It is the moment of both desiring and not desiring for the future to come.



Inside the studio a man lies back holding his guitar. He is almost asleep; his shirt is sweaty, and he seems to be fading out along with a few hushed chords he plucks on his guitar. These chords lazily follow a woman who is humming an improvised melody she accompanies with a few notes from an organ. A bearded guy looks through the window, and the fourth one rolls and lights a cigarette. At one moment a guitar improvisation more vividly cuts through the stillness. And then it stops. Everything now becomes silent and still – the camera leads us out of the room through the empty corridors and staircases of the large building, all the way to the street. And again through the details of the surfaces of the building's interior we find ourselves back in the room. Nothing really happens, but this “nothingness” is impregnated with details and fragments as the silence is impregnated with noise and its musical organisation. Anxiety interlaces with harmony.

As mostly happens during the viewing experience of Katarina Zdjelar's films, we are exposed to an unagitated duration of some self-enclosed and orchestrated situation. Bound by the tones and rhythms of the music or the spoken word, this duration indicates here some temporal vacuum, a lacuna of *transition*, an experience of waiting situated in the social space of an extended *in-betweenness*. These films repeatedly present some form of a representational backstage to the ideological imaginarium of these changing, dynamic, and accelerated times of ours. These films are always dealing with the alternative chrono-geographies, with the maladjusted side of the ideological acceleration, its under-represented side.

The effects of the social and economic transition (and this film was recorded in Belgrade, a city in one of the countries hit hard by these processes) have split the temporal unity that once seemed to exist within the modernist and socialist spaces. This split of temporal unity (as an aspect of new social stratification) created not

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just parallel spaces (the spaces for the advantaged entrepreneurs of the affluent class vs. the space for the disadvantaged majority), but also the opposite modes of experiencing time. If the sound is an indicator of time whilst an image is an indicator of space, the dialectics of silence and sound, and of darkness and light, indicate in the Belgrade film how different the experiences of time and space have become in the world ideologically presented to us as an uncontested continuum.

As the musicians very loosely control the sound they produce (and the convention of making music is an ability to control sound, to organise the noise) they are actually searching for the moment in which the music and the silence could co-exist, in which both are there, indicating the relationship between our subjective rhythms of existence and the rhythms of the multitude. The moving image and the flowing sound are the means to indicate their opposites, the stillness and silence. The rhythmic flow of the sound and the image is treated as an indicator of its temporal opposite – of the condition in which time has stopped. Katarina Zdjelar explores the fictionality of time in a filmic encounter of the self and the multitude, and this encounter is staged like a communally constructed *physical narrative* in the social conditions of some defined site-specificity.

In *My Lifetime (Malaika)* from 2012, the situation is similar yet somewhat more “generous” in indicating social and cultural connotations. Zdjelar records a rehearsal session of the Ghana National Symphony Orchestra in a poorly ventilated hall of the National Theatre in Accra. As in the Belgrade film we never fully comprehend a whole stage, but are only provided with some fragmented clues in details and close-ups. The camera pans calmly over the surfaces of scratched wooden and brass instruments, as over the hands and faces of the musicians. The slow pace of a popular song

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is coupled with lethargic expressions of musicians and with their gentle and skilled movements. Some of them are performing, some are simply waiting for their slot. Similar to the guitarist in Belgrade (yet for clearly different reasons) a trombone player has almost fallen asleep, and the eyes of the clarinetist are also slowly closing down. The flow of music keeps them both awake and dreamy, as they all sweat, overpowered by the stuffy heat.



As in the Belgrade film, it is as if we are observing some remains and traces of events that have already happened, but remains and traces that resonate (carried with the sound of music in both films) in an undecided waiting-room of the future that is delayed and possibly even suspended. The Ghana Symphony Orchestra was one of the national cultural symbols of independent Ghana, the result of the modernising and socialist policies of president Kwame Nkrumah in the 1960s, who issued a decree to establish such an orchestra to indicate the pride and progress of the newly

independent country. Today it has become just a relic of that vision, an orchestra without a proper space to practice, using old instruments and just playing occasionally for foreign dignitaries and diplomats. In Zdjelar's film they perform *Malaika*, one of the most popular African songs, a love song, a tune associated with the times of independence from colonial rule and the spirit of Pan-Africanism. The song was written in Swahili (and it is a matter of dispute who originally composed it) and became a global hit in the 1960s, especially after it was performed by Miriam Makeba and Harry Belafonte.

In a rather detached manner the musicians perform the song they have apparently played so many times before; the song that is presented in an embodied time slowly unwrapping in the tranquility of the heat, which devours their enthusiasm. Again we are almost haunted by the rhythm of this temporal and social in-betweenness. The Belgrade band in the off-beat session in the middle of the warm night, or an orchestra in Accra rehearsing in the middle of the hot day – both play music for no audience. There may be a recurrent poignancy in Zdjelar's attitude when suggesting this melancholic disconnection, but she continually de-stimulates our emotional empathy and keeps us disorientated and unengaged. Zdjelar's camera is never interfering; it combines the sense of a close inspection with a sense of a distant glance, it provides both exposure and "privacy" for her protagonists, who, on their part, never communicate directly to one another and appear as continually self-engrossed. Zdjelar's protagonists may seem aloof, but they are also very sensitive and convoluted in their relation to their immediate environment.

If the two films discussed so far propose an identification and poetics of the time-space continuum of transition as a *condition of waiting*, then the earliest example of this particular line in Zdjelar's work is her 2008 film *Everything Is Gonna Be* (2008). Here we encounter a group of middle-aged and middle-class citizens of

a small town on the Lofoten peninsula in the northwest of Norway. Zdjelar records one of their regular gatherings as they form a choir to engage and entertain themselves, again without any outside audience. In an isolated, yet this time much more affluent



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community, to sing together is for them a way to recharge their comfortable yet monotonous existence. The song at stake here is the famous late 1960s rock classic, *Revolution* by the Beatles, and it seems that this song has not been a part of their standard repertoire. It is clumsily rehearsed, some singers just simulate singing not knowing the lyrics properly, some don't even bother, and there is a floating sense of hesitation turning into alienation. Music is again defining the atmosphere of the scene, but it also seems to provide an uncanny discontinuity with the image.

*Revolution* is the song in which John Lennon warns against the radicalisation of the late 1960s youth movements in the West,

against their extreme actions and closed-minded political views. It is a song that represents a predominant sense among those in the Western middle classes who experienced a flirtatious infatuation with the radical leftist politics but have gradually abandoned their youthful enthusiasm for the tranquility of life that the very belonging to this class allows for. The singers in Zdjelar's film lethargically re-enact the humanist message of the song with a sense of a detachment filled with a soothing promise that Zdjelar turns into something quite eerie: *Everything is gonna be alright, alright, alright...* One of the singers at the end of the film keeps opening his mouth in the shape of the further "alrights" even when the music fades out.

We are again reminded that the past future is behind us; that since this Beatles song hit the radio waves nothing has become really "alright." We have witnessed both the failure of the socialist alternative and the capitalist devouring of society to make space for a new individual capable of accommodating to the accelerated time produced by the instrumental reason. Everything isn't alright, but everything becomes obsolete. Especially the imagination of the world changing and progressing. Zdjelar takes us on the slippery road of comprehending how the proverbial dynamism of the global world of today, presented to us as perpetually marching in front of our eyes, in order to secure its ideological parameters first requires a dissolution of any social imagination.

In the work made a year before the Lofoten film, *A Girl, the Sun, and an Airplane Airplane* (2007), Zdjelar takes a look at the other side of the "iron curtain" in the time the Beatles declared the limits to the idea of the revolution for the Western middle-classes. Albania under Enver Hoxha was the most severe Stalinist regime in Europe, and its citizens were kept isolated from the West whilst keeping some relations only with the USSR and China. The Russian language was taught as an obligatory language in schools, but after the downfall of Hoxha and upon entering the transitional times

the knowledge of this language signified a conflicting unpreparedness for the emerging world, the language supposed to be learned for another kind of time and for another kind of space.

Zdjelar invited a group of residents of Tirana to a sound studio to record them saying the Russian words they can still remember from the times they learned them in schools. They concentrate most painstakingly, and some random sentences emerge from their fading Russian vocabulary. These words mostly do not have any coherent mutual connection, and only the structure and the lines of association stored in some individual memory are what gives them their logic of utterance. The memory is fading as quickly as the times are changing, and along with it goes the rationale behind knowing something expected to become relevant in the future. However, this future itself seems no longer relevant.



*Rise Again* (2011), the fifth film in this selection may seem at odds with other works observed here. Instead of an enclosed urban interior the situation is set in a non-urban exterior. Instead of music or spoken words, the sounds are here belonging to the “natural” ambience, to vibrations and resonances of leaves and branches, to bodies moving through the sun-lit green scenery. Across a meadow and into a small forest, we see a group of men, who are all asylum-seekers halted in a refugee camp in Slovenia. However, they are not presented in any of the modes the media focused on the current exodus has routinely represented them. They seem neither confined to the closed space of a camp nor moving along the road in some desired direction. They wander around through a calm and soothing nature in the stillness of the sunny day.

This time the trope of a waiting room is clearly indicated. Each and every refugee centre is structured as a waiting camp. The place where time stretches so much that every tick of a second, every quiver of a leaf, every slow step, and every branch cracked under foot puts a waiting body into a simultaneous profusion of anticipation and oblivion. Is this experience of waiting exactly the other side of the capitalist acceleration that bends our temporal experience and turns it into a newly ritualised norm?

Nothing seems to happen to the wandering men in the forest, so we are lulled again by this non-event. But, at one moment, it is as if we see someone in a tree, someone whom we did not initially notice in the stillness of natural mimicry and the calmness of the slowly moving image. In the next moment we become certain that behind the branches we see a man dressed in a black kung-fu uniform moving swiftly and elegantly through the forest. Among the five films presented here this is the first with an unexpected event, a rupture in the loop of waiting. All other protagonists slowly gather around the martial artist. His technique becomes

the locus of their interest, and all of a sudden they even dare to begin practicing with him. We cannot help but see the man's striking similarity to one of the first and biggest non-white global film and sports heroes, Bruce Lee. What is a Bruce Lee lookalike doing in a forest in Slovenia?

He is also one of the refugees. And when we see them for the last time they are no longer scattered around, but configure a group walking together through the woods. At the end of the film, when we return to the opening shot of the small forest glimpsed from the meadow, we have changed our perception of it. Suddenly it contains a puzzling anticipation. Then, when we look back to other films in the presented selection, we realize that the anticipation manifested here has been understated in them all the time.

Film, being an audio-visual medium, organises along with the image all the sounds in one single continuum. These sounds (divided into three categories – noise, words, and music) are either perceived *in* the visual field or *off* the visual field. In her films Katarina Zdjelar places music (as well as words and noises) in the visual field (we see the sources of music), but this music is never seamlessly accompanying it. Sounds of the music are site-specific, but they also mark the ruptures in our ability to fully articulate the situation we are observing. This is indicated by moments of silence that precede or follow the audio-visual synthesis – *Malaiika* starts with a soundless image of fingers plucking the strings of a cello, as *Everything Is Gonna Be* ends with one member of the choir opening his mouth whilst the music has already faded. This *inactive intervention* opens the rupture in the continuity of the image and the sound, but more importantly indicates the sense of absence that cannot be suggested only by the image itself.

In relation to the other four films that are selected for this presentation, *Rise Again* contains no music. But the focus given to music in other works makes the absence of music in *Rise Again* particu-

larly audible. This absence, this *aphonia* of the protagonists (not singing, not playing instruments, not uttering any words) sharpens the natural noises and strengthens our anticipation of an event that is delayed. The movement of the body of “Bruce Lee” becomes musical in the way it both discloses a learned cultural recognition (the symbolism of Bruce Lee as an ultimate third-world hero generated by the commercial cinema) and denies full access to a signified object. It is the movement, the rhythm, the dance of the martial artist that assembles a community of wandering refugees. As elsewhere in Zdjelar's work this film is about producing the relations between the dissonance of noises and the harmony of music as a relation between anxiety and order. As there is no music in *Rise Again* we are instead focused on the relations between the moving bodies and the sounds of the environment, and these relations open up a new physical narrative induced by a small “miracle” in the forest, a modest narrative in which suddenly an anxiety of waiting becomes an anticipation of eventfulness.

In a referentially discreet fashion characteristic of her work, Zdjelar is dealing here with the plight of refugees as represented beyond the media spectacularisation of their suffering. She focuses on their quest for order (for an orderly society that they desire) as an aspect of their anxiety to be overcome by a communal event. The void of their anticipation is filled by movements and sounds. Within this audio-visual environment they change: the randomness of their movement through Slovenian nature, as filling the gaps of time stretched in the conditions of the waiting room, is replaced by the sudden event constructed around the performing body. And this is where the title of the film comes around with some baffling implications.

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text translated by MAGDA SZCZEŚNIAK

Katarina Zdjelar. BETWEEN THE SOUNDS

FADE-OUT AND RISE AGAIN

# KATARINA ZDJELAR

(born 1979) studied at CENPI, University of Arts in Belgrade and Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam. Lives in Rotterdam. Represented by SpazioA Gallery.

## RELATED EVENTS

June 18, at 12:00 noon, ms', curatorial tour by Maria Morzuch and the artist Katarina Zdjelar

September 13, 6 p.m., ms', a lecture by Barbara Kinga Majewska

10.09.2016, ms' 11:11 a.m.

Workshop for children from the series *Half Square for Youngster: Between the Sounds, Between Words*.

Registration required; to register call 605 060 063 (Mon–Fri, between 8:00–16:00).

10.09.2016, ms' 01:13 p.m.

Workshop for children from the series *Family Squared: Between the Sounds, Between Words*.

Registration required; to register call 605 060 063 (Mon–Fri, between 8:00–16:00).

MY LIFETIME  
(MALAIKA), 2012, 5'37''

RISE AGAIN, 2011, 11'23''

UNTITLED (A SONG), 2016, 10'45''

A GIRL, THE SUN AND AN AIRPLANE  
AIRPLANE, 2007, 9'53''

EVERYTHING  
IS GONNA BE, 2008, 3'35''



Katarina Zdjelar. Between the Sounds

17.06–18.09.2016

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