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Sex and Uncivil Disobedience: Girlhood and Social Class in Transitional Post-Yugoslav Cinema

Dijana Jelača*

In recent post-Yugoslav cinema, trope of troubled youth in films as diverse as *Skinning* (Stevan Filipović, 2010, Serbia), *Children of Sarajevo* (Aida Begić, 2012, Bosnia-Herzegovina), *Spots* (Aldo Tardozi, 2011, Croatia) and *Quit Staring at My Plate* (Hana Jušić, 2017) allows for an inspection of the links between youth rebellion, post-conflict trauma and social class. These cinematic depictions of youth-in-crisis, which I refer to as transitional films, offer insights into locally produced ethno-national identities as challenged by the proliferating transnational networks of connectivity. In this essay, I highlight one provocative example of transitional film – *Clip* (Maja Miloš, 2012, Serbia). I argue that the film's provocative approach to representing girls offers insightful commentary on the performative aspects of social class in transitional post-Socialist democracies of former Yugoslavia. Moreover, I examine how the film's graphic scenes of sex might point to what Berlant & Edelman call "sex without optimism" (2013), a term that focuses on "the ways in which sex undoes the subject" (4). In *Clip*, sex without optimism stages an encounter that destabilizes traditional identity structures rather than reintroducing feminine libido into the patriarchal regimes of control.

Keywords: girlhood, post-Socialism, social class, gender, precarity

Introduction: Post-Yugoslav Youth-in-Crisis Cinema in the Age of Moral Panics

In recent post-Yugoslav cinema, coming-of-age narratives are frequently positioned as productive frameworks for a critique of the social, cultural and economic circumstances of precarity rooted in the post-socialist transition. These cinematic depictions of youth-in-crisis offer insights into locally produced ethno-national identities, as challenged by the proliferating transnational networks of connectivity. Moreover, such films often run counter to mass-mediated instigations of moral panics when it comes to discourses about the uncivil disobedience of "deviant" youth. In his influential work on moral panics, Stanley Cohen describes them in following terms:

"Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, a person or group of persons emerges to become defined

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*as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media.*¹

While his analysis was directed at Britain's youth at the height of the "rock-and-roll" era, the concept has proven to be quite malleable and adjustable to various contexts in which the trope of youth-in-crisis is seemingly resolved by its kin concept of "deviant youth." Moral panics that are instigated about any perceivably anti-social or uncivil behavior on the part of society's youth are typically disseminated via mass media, and frequently have the following feature: they place upon youth standards of social civility that are defined in the terms of the parent culture, and that seek to mask the contradiction that is embedded in them. This contradiction is reflected in the parent culture's deliberate blindness to the fact that it is its own failure to sustain the youth in a socially meaningful way that makes the youth turn to what is perceived as social deviance in the first place.

Rather than further disseminating such mass-mediated moral panics that rest on simplified approaches to social problems, post-Yugoslav coming-of-age films have tended to depict delinquency from a more complex standpoint that implicates the parent culture rather than reiterate the contradictory standards of civility upon which social acceptance is based. Indeed, in recent years an ever-growing number of regional films situate their explorations of material precarity and social critique in depictions of struggling youth, either neglected or entirely forgotten by their post-conflict, post-socialist parent culture(s). I refer to these films as "transitional," since they address various kinds of intertwined and mutually informative transitions. The list includes works such as *Mirage (Iluzija)*, Svetozar Ristovski, 2004, Macedonia), *Skinning (Šišanje)*, Stevan Filipović, 2010, Serbia), *I Am from Titov Veles (Jas sum od Titov Veles)*, Teona Strugar Mitevska, 2007, Macedonia), *Tilva Ros (Tilva roš)*, Nikola Ležaić, 2010, Serbia), *Children of Sarajevo (Djeca)*, Aida Begić, 2012, Bosnia-Herzegovina), *Spots (Fleke)*, Aldo Tardozi, 2011, Croatia), *The Barbarians (Varvari)*, Ivan Ikić, 2014, Serbia), and *Quit Staring at My Plate (Ne gledaj mi u pijat)*, Hana Jušić, 2017, Croatia), to name just a few. These titles could be categorized by Jurica Pavičić's term "cinema of normalization," which designates a strain of filmmaking that has taken hold in post-Yugoslav cinema since 2000. In the films of normalization, Pavičić argues, "the central theme is the will, or absence of the will, of the post-Yugoslav subject to realize him/herself as a citizen."² And yet, while Pavičić places the protagonist's (in)ability to change his/her situation firmly in his/her own hands (or, in the presence or absence of the will to do so), many of the films that may fall under the rubric of "cinema of normalization" focus precisely on the *structural conditions* that prevent a subject from becoming a social agent even when there is will to do so. This is particularly the case in the transitional films about post-Yugoslav youth cultures.

¹ Cohen, Stanley. 2002. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. Psychology Press, 1.

² Pavičić, Jurica. 2011. *Postjugoslovenski film: Stil i ideologija*. Zagreb: Hrvatski filmski savez, 211.

I refer to these films as transitional for several overlapping reasons: they are, in terms of cultural production and the film industries that sustain them, created in the context of ongoing and ever-complicated political, economic, social and cultural transitions: from conflict to post-conflict times, from socialism to neoliberal capitalism, from a multi-ethnic federal state to separate, ethnocentric nation states. Moreover, since they are coming-of-age films, they are about the transitional (st)age where childhood ends but adulthood does not quite begin: at their center is usually a figure who is neither a child nor a fully matured adult, but in the process of transition between the two, or residing in a state of arrested development. Finally, one other kind of transition marks many of the transitional films' respective visual aesthetics: that of the transition from cinema as an analog, celluloid technology to post-cinema, understood as a proliferation of digital screen technologies. Digital screen technologies are both used to produce said films and utilized within their frames as important factors in the narrative. These different aspects of transition converge in post-Yugoslav films about youth-in-crisis in mutually contingent ways.

Here, I am particularly interested in the question of how youth precarity is closely related to the restructuring of social hierarchies that transitional times bring about. Transitional films often position the challenges placed on post-socialist and post-conflict youth through the reality of vicarious remembering, or trans-generational inheritance of recent political, social and economic upheavals (in another kind of transition - that of memory - from one generation to the next) that have marked the region's shifts from socialism to neoliberal capitalism, and from single-party multiculturalism to multi-party ethno-national states. The influence of such upheavals on the youth's present-day struggles is undoubtedly central to the general reign of existential precarity that marks the youth's (as well as everyone else's) challenging present and uncertain futures. As I have illustrated elsewhere, the youth inherit the conditions of social and existential struggle and often rebel against them in anti-social, even violent, ways, through various forms of subcultural activity.³ It should be noted that this subcultural activity is typically depicted in films about youth cultures as decidedly heterosexual, yet often permeated with homo-social and homoerotic undertones (see, for example, *Skinning*, *Tilva Ros*, and *Spots*).

By way of exploring the gender politics of such films, this article focuses on those coming-of-age narratives that center on girls' troubled adolescence, and aim to articulate a social critique of the material precarity that characterizes the conditions under which post-Yugoslav girls are coming of age and finding their place in the world. A diverse group of films that put forth a social critique of the material position of young women and girls came out in recent years - films as varied as the aforementioned *I Am from Titov Veles*, *Children of Sarajevo*, *Spots* and *Quit Staring at My Plate*, as well as *Sisters* (*Sestre*, Vladimir Paskaljević, 2011, Serbia), *On the Path* (*Na putu*, Jasmila Žbanić, 2010, Bosnia-Herzegovina), and *Slovenian Girl* (*Slovenka*, Damjan Kozole,

³ Jelača, Dijana. 2014. Youth After Yugoslavia: Subcultures and Phantom Pain. *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 5(2), 139-54.

2009, Slovenia). With varying degrees of success and cinematic quality, these films articulate many aspects of women's and girls' precarious existence in post-socialism after Yugoslavia. In Tardozi's *Spots*, for instance, the focus is on young women exacting vigilante justice in response to sexual violence; in Žbanić's *On the Path*, the female protagonist faces challenges brought on by religious fundamentalism; in *Sisters* and *Slovenian Girl* it is human trafficking and prostitution; and in Begić's *Children of Sarajevo*, social and economic challenges are directly linked to war trauma and post-war deprivation. In Jušić's *Quit Staring at My Plate*, a girl's troubled life is tied directly to the economic precarity that does not appear to have a resolution in sight. These socially engaged works of regional cinema attempt to bring to the fore the challenges faced by young women under the conditions of economic insecurity that is distinctly linked to transitional post-conflict democracies, and the emergence of neoliberal capitalism on the East European peripheries of global economic flows. In light of such circumstances, where transitional economic hardship often affects women more so than men,⁴ these films explore the varied models of female agency possible, or even merely imaginable, when it comes to young girls becoming meaningful social actors in their own right. Some of these films overtly reflect emancipatory feminist politics and in doing so reveal that, even when other social hierarchies and factors are in flux, patriarchy still remains unchallenged as a framework within which young women face daily challenges based on various forms of gender-based discrimination.

The economic precarity that has become increasingly prevalent in recent times is thus rendered doubly precarious for women, as they are always already surrounded by patriarchal scrutiny that limits their role as social actors. Because of this complicated double-bind, emancipatory patterns emerge in unexpected, sometimes seemingly counter-intuitive ways. For instance, in *Children of Sarajevo* (as well as in Begić's earlier film, *Snow*), a young Muslim woman finds protection from social pressures in the act of covering herself, or wearing a headscarf. This has, at times, prompted feminist critics to designate such films as problematic and reactionary. For instance, Mima Simić suggests that films such as *Snow* tacitly usher in a re-traditionalization of gender roles rather than offering emancipatory narratives.⁵ My reading of *Snow* and *Children of Sarajevo* diverges from such a conclusion. The choice (and it is emphasized in both films that this is a choice the protagonists made) to wear a headscarf is depicted as an intimate assertion of agency over one's own body, even when social pressures and potential ridicule hinder a woman's desire to do so. Here, covering up - always a highly contested and politicized practice - can be understood in terms of what many decolonial feminist thinkers have

⁴ See, for instance, Milić, Andjelka. 2007. The Family and Work in the Post-socialist Transition of Serbia: 1991-2006. *International Review of Sociology-Revue Internationale de Sociologie* 17(2), 359-80; Čičkarić, Ljiljana and Marija Kolin. 2010. Položaj žena u ekonomskom i u političkom životu Srbije u kontekstu evropskih integracija. *Socijalna misao* 17(4), 139-53.

⁵ Simić, Mima. 2012. Poderani maskuliniteti, celuloidne zakrpe: Neke tendencije ženskog filmskog pisma u regiji. *Sarajevske sveske* 39/40, 193-206.

theorized as a subversive act, and Belma Bećirbašić describes the “veil as resistance to the dominant ideological discourses.”⁶

In another example of exploring the seemingly contradictory and counter-intuitive pathways to reclaiming women’s agency, one of the protagonists in *Sisters* voluntarily goes back to being trafficked for the purpose of sex work, since she does not see any other way to gain material security. Her decision speaks both to the structural limitations placed on the opportunities women face in trying to make ends meet, and to the morally ambiguous limitations placed on the concept of agency itself.

While stylistically, aesthetically and thematically different, these films all emphasize a potentially inconvenient truth: that paths to young women’s social agency and material security might be found in practices that are traditionally not understood as emancipatory or affirmative. Instead of casting a judgmental or dismissive gaze on such practices, our understanding of their shifting role needs to be less moralistic and more attuned to the material conditions that radically reconfigure the concepts of possibility, agency and subversion.

In the remainder of the article, I will closely examine Maja Miloš’s debut feature *Clip*, a film that focuses on girlhood and precarity through an exploration of another seemingly contradictory framework: exaggerated performativity of traditional gender roles, sexual promiscuity, and their role in staging encounters that defy social norms, precarious existence and class immobility alike.

Sex, Class, and the Digital Age: Vision, Patriarchy and Libidinal Pleasure

“(…) behind every ideology lies a kernel of enjoyment (jouissance) that resists being fully integrated into the ideological universe.”⁷

It has been well established that women’s bodies were subjected to both discursive and physical violence in the process of Yugoslavia’s disintegration. The combination of rampant ethno-nationalism and patriarchal ideology ushered in an invention of ethnic exceptionalism that was supported, even brought upon by the kin discourse of gender normativity. Gender, in return, became constituted through its ideological alignment with ethnic identity,⁸ so much so that Rada Iveković has argued that Yugoslavia’s nationalisms grew in parallel with misogyny.⁹ In the years since the conflict’s end, women have been

⁶ Bećirbašić, Belma. 2011. *Tijelo, ženskost, moć: Upisivanje patrijarhalnog diskursa u tijelo*. Zagreb: Synopsis, 139.

⁷ Salecl, Renata. 2002. *The Spoils of Freedom: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Ideology After the Fall Of Socialism*. Routledge, 6.

⁸ Žarkov, Dubravka. 2007. *The Body of War: Media, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Break-Up of Yugoslavia*. Durham: Duke University Press.

⁹ Iveković, Rada. 2000. *(Ne)predstavljivost ženskog u simboličkoj ekonomiji: Žene, nacija i rat nakon 1989. Godine*, in *Žene, slike, izmišljaji*, edited by Arsić, Branka. Beograd: Centar za ženske studije, 9-30.

caught in a precarious position: frequently denied access to opportunities to assert their social and material agency on the one hand, and simplistically reduced, often via feminist discourses themselves, into the category of helpless, powerless victims.¹⁰ In light of these two polarities, post-conflict cultural production - and particularly film - has been imbued with a dilemma: how to call attention to, and criticize, the precarious position of women in post-socialist, post-conflict transition without reducing their precarity to a singular trait that borders on essentialism and further feeds ethno-nationalist notions of women as victims and victims only? The region's female directors have created a relevant and diverse body of work that tackles this dilemma: from Maja Weiss' *Guardian of the Frontier* (2002), to Teona Strugar Mitevska's *I Am from Titov Veles* and *The Woman Who Brushed Off Her Tears*, to Jasmila Žbanić's *Grbavica* and *On the Path*, to Aida Begić *Snow* and *Children of Sarajevo*, to name a few relevant examples. Serbia's Maja Miloš is another filmmaker who belongs on this list, even though her work is a visual and thematic departure from the "softer" approaches of, for instance, Žbanić and Begić.

Since its release in 2012, Miloš's debut feature *Clip*, a relentlessly gritty vision of Serbia's millennial youth, has received its fair share of critical acclaim, controversy and public condemnation alike. The controversies and condemnations are of particular interest here, since I want to explore how this film triggered moral panics, which in turn made it obvious that a certain double standard is applied when girls (and their sexuality in particular) become a focus of graphic cinematic representation. While the film played to critical acclaim at various international festivals, its domestic rollout was marred by bombastic tabloid attacks whose headlines proclaimed some variation of the following claim: "Serbia's arts and science ministry financed a film that features child pornography."¹¹ Such proclamations were met by rebuttals from the film's director and producers, who countered that *Clip* is a grim vision of millennial youth that offers critical social commentary rather than exploiting innocent children.¹² The controversy emerged when it came to light that *Clip*'s lead actress, Isidora Simijonović, was significantly underage when the explicit sexual scenes were filmed (she was fourteen at the time). This prompted Maja Miloš to issue a disclaimer, explaining that the actress herself did not participate in any *actual* sex scenes, and that body doubles and prosthetics were used (the film contains one such disclaimer at the end).

At the same time, *Clip* was largely lauded by domestic film critics,¹³ and received the title of Serbia's best film of 2012, as selected by the Serbian branch of Fipresci. Some critics even situated *Clip*'s gritty aesthetics and unflinching

¹⁰ For more work on regional women's issues, local forms of feminism, as well as their interaction with the global flows of feminist thought, see edited volume Zaharijević, Adriana. (ed). 2008. *Neko je rekao feminizam? Kako je feminizam uticao na žene XXI veka?*. Beograd: Centar za ženske studije; for more on the status of women as pure ethno-national victims, see Bećirbašić, *Tijelo, ženskost, moć*.

¹¹ Kurir. 2012. Skandalozno: Ministarstvo platilo porno film sa decom. *Kurir*, 10. July, 2012 (accessed: 14. February 2018).

¹² Tanjug. 2012. Film *Klip* nije pornografija. *B92*, 10. July, 2012 (accessed: 14. February 2018).

¹³ Lakić, Dubravka. 2012. Pornografija sa pokrićem. *Politika*, 13. April, 2012 (accessed: 14. February 2018); Anđelić, Borislav. 2012. Klip u glavi. *Večernje novosti*, 24. April 2012 (accessed: 14. February 2018).

social commentary within the tradition of the Yugoslav Black Wave, the most radical strand of the New Film of the 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁴ The chasm between the populist controversy (further illustrated when the film was shown on a Serbian TV station and incited another round of moral outrage) and critical acclaim revealed an uneasy separation between critical embrace of a provocative subject matter and mainstream culture's tendency to dismiss explicit explorations of adolescent girls' sexuality as unavoidably improper, exploitative and scandalous.¹⁵

Even though *Clip* paints an affectively challenging and at times gut-wrenching portrait of the social precarity under which millennial youth are predominantly coming of age in the post-conflict transitional democracies of Yugoslav successor states, the main controversies arose from the film's graphic depiction of sex, particularly an adolescent girl's promiscuity and willing participation in borderline-BDSM sexual practices.¹⁶ This moral panic about sex effectively displaced attention away from *Clip*'s social critique of the conditions that might have contributed to the youth's perceived self-destructive behavior. *Clip*'s protagonist, Jasna, is a teenager who lives in a concrete apartment block on the outskirts of Belgrade. Her family is struggling to make ends meet: the mother is the sole breadwinner, as well as caretaker of Jasna's father, who is bed-ridden with what appears to be terminal cancer. Emotionally, Jasna seems fully detached from her family and from the difficulties they face: she spends her days dressing up in skimpy attire and taking graphic, often semi-nude pictures of herself with her phone camera. At night, she parties with her friends in turbo folk clubs and consumes vast amounts of drugs and alcohol. Not unlike the youth in Larry Clark's *Kids* (1995) - a film to which *Clip* owes a great deal in terms of its cinematic atmosphere, *cinéma vérité* aesthetics, and perhaps also in the ambiguity of the exploitative gaze, which I address below - the camera in *Clip* frequently fetishizes the youth as pleasure-oriented and seemingly unconcerned with any form of ethical responsibility that might arise from their acts. The youth's stylistic disposition is heavily informed by the decade of the 1990s, when glamourized and romanticized "thugs" dominated the spectrum of male representation in the media, and equally glamourized turbo-folk singers married them. The most famous of these couplings was that of Arkan and Ceca,¹⁷ and indeed, Ceca's music is heard on the film's soundtrack, particularly in the clubs that the girls frequent. This fandom

¹⁴ Janković, Zoran. 2012. *Ljubav fatalna*. *Popboks*, 9. April 2012 (accessed: 14. February 2018).

¹⁵ In 2013, *Clip* was shown on Serbian TV at 10pm on a Saturday night, and this screening triggered a number of negative reactions that condemned the showing of a "soft core" film with explicit sexual scenes at a time that is "not suitable" for such imagery (even though the film was visibly rated as not suitable for audiences under 16). One editorial writer deploys sarcasm in describing her dismay at being made to watch what she overtly likens to porn imagery that involves a group of female teenagers (Marinković, Lara. 2013. *Seks Sinhronicitet*. *City Magazine*, 06. October 2013 (accessed: 14. January 2018). Another calls for stronger regulation that would delegate such potentially "harmful" imagery to after-midnight programming slots (as excessive exposure to pornography "skews young people's perception") (Janković, Aleksandar. 2014. *Strast kao rutina*. *Novosti*, 04. September 2018).

¹⁶ BDSM is an abbreviation for several overlapping terms: Bondage and Discipline (BD), Dominance and Submission (DS), and Sado-Masochism (SM).

¹⁷ See Dina Iordanova's discussion of the figure of the "thug" as well as the "glamourized villain" in Iordanova, Dana. 2001. *Cinema of Flames*. BFI, 178-86.

exposes the persistence of what might be deemed an intimate public sphere¹⁸ that is a product of the precarious times which brought about a restructuring (and deepening) of class divisions in post-socialist Serbia. More than being about mere escapism, the fandom of Ceca and similar turbo-folk figures seems to be about social scripts that offer a *performance* of empowerment, otherwise so sorely lacking in the girls' lives.¹⁹ This performance might speak to the phantasm of power to which Renata Salecl points when she argues that "the ultimate lesson of the tragic entanglements of post-socialism is that some kind of fantasy is always in control, which is to say that the structure of power is inherently fantasmatic."²⁰

In *Clip*, the phantasm is evident in the examination of social class, and particularly the dispositions of the youth's taste, which take a distinctly, almost excessively normative gendered form: girls are shown to be objectified by the patriarchal parent culture, and encouraged to emphasize their feminine traits in order to make themselves more appealing to men. Yet they are not mere passive victims either - through their exaggerated performances of femininity, the embracing of the turbo folk aesthetics, and seemingly submissive interactions with boys, the girls are also shown to be *active* participants, most notably in the form of self-mediatization, as they turn cell phone cameras to their semi-naked bodies and pose seductively. This heightened gender performativity, perhaps paradoxically, gives the girls in *Clip* the possibility to temporarily take themselves outside of the grim material reality that otherwise frames their lives. Hence, the girls perform an ambivalent relationship to the dominant patriarchal culture, to say the least, in which they negotiate the stifling reality of everyday misogyny by attempting to control the gaze that objectifies them. Moreover, an overabundance of the girls' sexual desire in *Clip* acts in excess of the dominant patriarchal gaze, as it frequently escapes its attempts at control. In fact, the excess of female libido exposes the patriarchal gaze in its historicity, and girls reappropriate the mechanism of seeing by manipulating the gaze towards their own, feminine, economy of pleasure. The accusations about the film's exploitative gaze are rendered more complicated by the fact that Jasna seems to enjoy her sexual encounters with Đorđe (sometimes more so than he does), and finds a self-effacing pleasure in being sexually submissive. That feminine economy of pleasure, as much as it seems to take shape within the patriarchal dominant order, is nevertheless "neither identifiable by a man nor referable to masculine economy."²¹ Rather, it acts as a *jouissance*, a multiplicity that has the potential to bring about the breakdown of the dominant patriarchal culture.²²

¹⁸ Berlant, Lauren. 2008. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Duke University Press.

¹⁹ Ceca's perceived appeal as a figure of female empowerment was elaborated upon in Volčić and Erjavec's study of the singer's trans-ethnic fandom, in Volčić, Zala, and Karmen Erjavec. 2010. The Paradox of Ceca and the Turbo-Folk Audience. *Popular Communication* 8(2), 103-19.

²⁰ Salecl, *The Spoils of Freedom*, 7.

²¹ Cixous, Helene. 1988. *Sorties*, in *Modern Criticisms and Theory: A Reader*, edited by Lodge, David and Nigel Wood. Pearson Ltd, 359-65, 363.

²² Cixous, *Sorties*; Gallop, Jane. 1982. *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; *Jouissance* is a concept that has been used in a variety of contexts and scholarly traditions, by Lacan, Žižek, Deleuze & Guattari, Barthes and others. While in this article my use of the term is mainly influenced by Cixous, Barthes' own theorizing of

The root of the moral panic around *Clip* seems to rest on Jasna's to-be-looked-at-ness, which is often identified as an inherently and inevitably objectifying apparatus of control.²³ However, many critiques of the "gaze is male" structure have identified the ways in which pleasure and spectatorial identification do not necessarily align with the normative taxonomies of sexual difference and power, and theorized about oppositional, or queer visual pleasure that arises from re-appropriating the apparatus of vision in ways that are seemingly uninvited, yet nevertheless quite possible.²⁴

While *Clip* does not necessarily cater to queer visual pleasure, its representation of and insistence on the centrality of the homosocial (and at times homoerotic) feminine sphere is, I want to suggest, central to its depiction of millennial girls coming of age in post-conflict and post-socialist transition. The film's complicated treatment of visual pleasure, libidinal economy and control is neatly summed up in a single sequence: in the opening scene, Jasna is filmed by a man who we do not see - we only hear his somewhat intimidating voice ordering her what to do (later we learn that this is Đorđe, Jasna's romantic interest). The optics of the camera align with his (and the spectator's) gaze, and with the shadow that the man's seemingly threatening figure casts over Jasna's body. The camera's gaze thus *constitutes* the threatening patriarchal shadow (Figure 1). At first glance, the scene implies a traditional stance towards vision and power - that the girl is in a potentially dangerous situation, where the eye of the camera is aligned with the threat of the dominant male gaze. Yet, as Jasna starts undressing and making physical contact with her observer, we discover that she desires him more than he desires her, and she actively wants him to look at her and satisfy her (which he does not). Moreover, the phone through which she is being filmed is hers. The scene offers one of the film's dilemmas in a nutshell: can a girl's libidinal pleasure, even when seemingly locked under patriarchal power relations, be considered a potentially transgressive investment on her part, because it gives her (temporary) social agency, visibility, and the opportunity to experience *jouissance* (or, a transgression of the dominant order)? And moreover, how does the work of cinema position itself vis-à-vis such potential for transgression? In other words, could it be that, contrary to Papić's claim that "in patriarchal societies, women are unable to imagine themselves outside of this role of victim,"²⁵ a girl can find space within confinement to act on feminine desire (no matter its complicated routes of disposition) and achieve social agency through *jouissance*, thus temporarily suspending the social structures that confine both her social position and libidinal pleasure? Even if she were able to do so,

jouissance (as pleasure that shatters hierarchical structures) is important as well (Barthes, Roland. 1975. *The Pleasure of the Text*. New York: Hill and Wang).

²³ Mulvey, Laura. 1975. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen* 16(3), 6-18.

²⁴ See hooks, bell. 1992. *The Oppositional Gaze*, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Brooklyn: South End Press, and White, Patricia. 1999. *unInvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

²⁵ Papić, Žarana. 2002. *Europe After 1989: Ethnic Wars, The Fascistization of Civil Society and Body Politics in Serbia*, in *Thinking Differently: A Reader in European Women's Studies*, edited by Griffin, Gabriele and Rosi Braidotti. London: Zed Books, 127-44, 132.

disciplinary discourses within which female libidinal pleasure is placed seek to return her to the fold of socially acceptable behavior. And moreover, even if the gaze is not always necessarily male (as a number of influential feminist film theorists, such as E. Ann Kaplan and Teresa de Lauretis have postulated), a male-centric understanding of the apparatus of vision continues to haunt. To that end, Lucy Fischer notes, “a ghost haunts the lens of the woman director when aimed at the female body (especially if nude); and she is often asked whether she, too, is objectifying women.”²⁶ It is perhaps this long-standing unease with a continued exposure of a naked female body engaged in libidinal pleasure that prevents films like *Clip* from being considered as emancipatory, or feminist depictions of girlhood, millennial and otherwise.

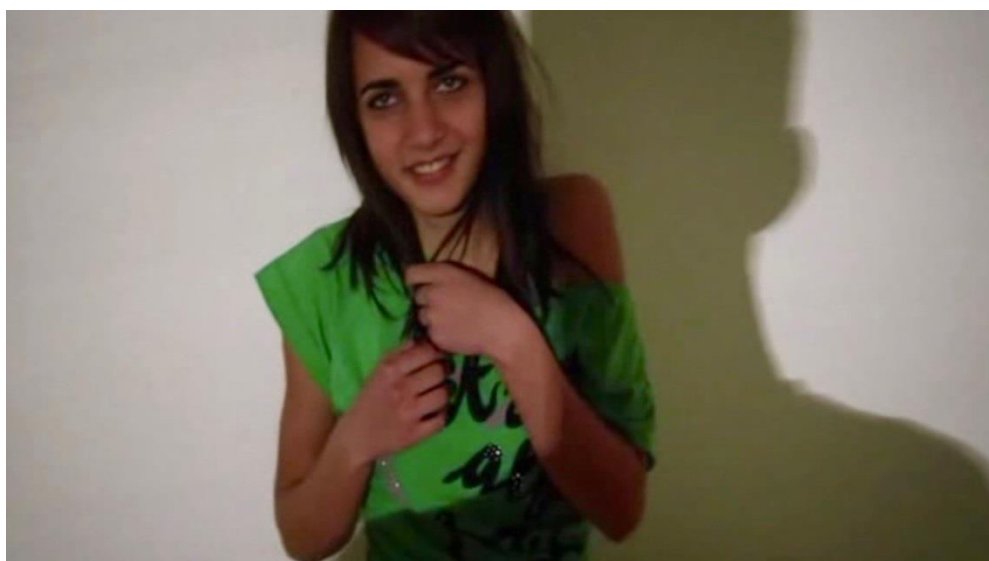


Figure 1: Jasna faces the camera and the male gaze (*Clip*, Maja Miloš, 2012)

Jasna is infatuated with Đorđe, whose affections she is desperately trying to win. When she manages to get his attention, they develop a complicated relationship centered on borderline-BDSM sex, in which Jasna submits herself to various forms of domination. In their graphic, elaborate and lengthy sexual encounters, the pair perform, in their sex play, a heightened exaggeration of gender normativity by which she becomes a virtual slave to the masculine power - this is most notably clear in the scene in which Jasna wraps Đorđe's belt around her neck and he walks her around the room as if she were his dog. More generally, all of Jasna's female friends enact an exaggerated version of femininity, greatly inspired by the turbo-folk aesthetics of the so-called *sponzorušas* (sponsored girls): skimpy, glittery clothes and over-the-top makeup, while the boys play rough guys in baggy outfits, reminiscent of the iconic look of Serbia's criminal underground of the 1990s. This prototypical Serbian 1990s heteronormative coupling informs not just the aesthetics but also the attachments that the youth in *Clip* recognize or affectively respond to.

²⁶ Fischer, Lucy. 2017. *Feminist Forms of Address: Mai Zetterling's Loving Couple*, in *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Gender*, edited by K.L. Hole \ D, Jelaca \ E.A. Kaplan and P. Petro. London: Routledge, 36-46.

With this, a habitus of sorts is implied: the girls recognize Ceca's cultural script as a desirable path towards becoming socially acceptable - even recognizable - agents. To that end, *Clip* depicts a feminine intimate public sphere that arguably misreads the Ceca-Arkan coupling as a love plot instead of an upward mobility plot. That misreading of love leads to an enactment of feminine libidinal investment by which Jasna gains pleasure by submitting herself to Đorđe's control. At the same time, that submission itself cannot be understood as an endpoint at which Jasna's agency, however fickle, ceases to exist. That reading would imply an approach to sex that foregrounds its affirmative, positive features as a prerequisite for its acceptable existence. But what if we consider the sex in *Clip* to be "the theatrical exercise of social contradiction,"²⁷ and moreover, a distinctly self-shattering practice, the way that Berlant & Edelman theorize sex in their dialogic book *Sex, or the Unbearable*?²⁸ For them, the desired negativity of sex implies "the psychic and social incoherences and divisions, conscious and unconscious alike, that trouble any totality or fixity of identity."²⁹ This approach to the negative (as in identity-effacing) side of sexuality can perhaps help us unpack the provocative role of sex in *Clip*. I want to suggest that *Clip* engages in a form of what Berlant & Edelman call "sex without optimism,"³⁰ a term that focuses on "the ways in which sex undoes the subject,"³¹ and moreover, asks "what survives the encounter with the scene of sex once it's separated out from the dominant framework of optimism?"³² Moreover, Berlant and Edelman maintain that:

*"One need not romanticize sex to maintain that it offers, in its most intensely felt and therefore least routinized forms, something in excess of pleasure or happiness of the self-evidence of value. It takes us instead to a limit, and it is that limit, or the breaking beyond it, toward which sex without optimism points."*³³

In sex without optimism, self-effacing negativity eschews the ways in which sex is typically framed in moralistic terms that emphasize its affirmative and productive features. Instead of self-affirming optimism, sex is here allowed to embrace *jouissance*, or a temporary breakdown of the social order. Moreover, such sex without optimism can only take the form of non-routinized practices. The sexual encounters in *Clip* represent a form of sex without optimism in which heterosexual power play becomes a non-routinized exercise, not of the reiteration of patriarchal normativity, but of a self-shattering that challenges stable identity positions and social relations as such. In *Clip*, sex without optimism stages an encounter that destabilizes traditional identity structures rather than reintroducing feminine libido into the patriarchal regimes of control. One such instance is the dog leash scene, in which Jasna, in a reversal, takes charge of the sexual encounter by mimicking extreme submission - yet she is the one fully in control of both her own, and Đorđe's pleasure here. In

²⁷ McClintock, Anne. 1995. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. Routledge, 144.

²⁸ Berlant, Lauren and Lee Edelman. 2013. *Sex, or the Unbearable*. Duke University Press.

²⁹ Lauren and Edelman, *Sex*, vi.

³⁰ Lauren and Edelman, *Sex*, 3.

³¹ Lauren and Edelman, *Sex*, 4.

³² Lauren and Edelman, *Sex*, 35.

³³ Lauren and Edelman, *Sex*, 12.

another scene, Jasna and Đorđe have sex in the building stairway, after Jasna's emotionally challenging day. The scene is completely silent and depicts a sexual encounter that serves as another self-shattering activity. Moreover, this sex without optimism moves Jasna (and Đorđe) beyond the constraints of social precarity that otherwise marks their lives. This form of sex, far from being referential to or reiterative of existing social norms, is decidedly anti-social in that it represents a performance of escape into a realm where existing social norms (most decidedly those that limit the expression of female sexuality), as well as material and affective deprivation, are temporarily suspended.

The film's provocative approach to representing girls and sex without optimism offers insightful commentary on the performative aspects of social class in transitional post-socialist democracy. Its complicated look at the role of club culture in general, and sex in particular, in the context of social marginalization suggests that youth's aesthetic dispositions, sexual practices and social interactions emerge directly in reaction to the depravity of their parents' lives. Their working class families are barely making a living while the youth party incessantly, girls dress in glitzy attire, and consume large quantities of drugs and alcohol. Indeed, the girls' class background seems to be the central element of their attachment to a clique whose gender performances enact female submissiveness. Their fandom of turbo-folk suggests the same thing. As Volčić and Erjavec have found, Ceca is a figure who offers a feminine upward mobility script, and indeed, the girls in *Clip* persistently try to emulate such a script.³⁴ Jasna at one point even notes that she and Ceca have the same zodiac sign, to which Đorđe replies that they look alike as well. Ceca is positioned as an object of (distinctly capitalist) social mobility, a phantasmic script of escape from social precarity.³⁵

An insightful approach to complicated phenomena such as this might be the notion of *class performativity*, as a cultural script that addresses existential precarity. In her research on working class white and Mexican-American girls, Julie Bettie argues that class is a performative activity that is often articulated through habitus, or "our unconsciously enacted, socially learned dispositions, which are not natural or inherent or prior to the social organization of class inequality, but are in fact produced by it."³⁶ Through this approach, Bettie traces the ways in which the girls whose practices she studies engage in a form of "class passing," performing a class belonging that is out of sync with their material economic background, as a means to achieve social mobility and acceptability. This way of approaching our understanding of social class is closely echoed in the way *Clip* presents the girls' intimate public. While they come from impoverished class backgrounds, their performances of class

³⁴ Volčić and Erjavec: "Ceca is seen as someone who rose out of poverty and an unstable social context, something many of the informants aspire to," and moreover, she is seen as "a self-made superstar who epitomizes the promise of social mobility and the commodified myth of the self-made woman," in Volčić and Erjavec, *The Paradox of Ceca*, 116.

³⁵ Jelača, Dijana. 2015. Feminine Libidinal Entrepreneurship: Towards a Reparative Reading of *Sponzoruša* in Turbo Folk. *Feminist Media Studies* 15(1), 36-52.

³⁶ Bettie, Julie. 2003. *Women Without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity*. University of California Press, 51.

belonging would suggest a hedonistic form of affluence and a carefree attitude associated with the economically more privileged. Indeed, on their nights out the girls in *Clip* may pass as affluent when, in the reality of their parental homes, they are anything but. Yet it is important to note, as Bettie does, that the concept of class performance needs to be approached through an understanding that performativity is clandestine, self-perpetuating and structural rather than entirely consciously “performed.” In other words, the girls’ choices, even when presented as such, are influenced by factors that are invisible yet structurally omnipresent. As Bettie astutely claims: “A widespread misreading of Judith Butler’s notion of performance also conceptualized actors as agents who are free to choose identity performances.”³⁷ In reality, if anything, performativity exposes the extent to which the field of available social performances is limited and restrictive, which in *Clip* is starkly illustrated by the youth’s channeling, both stylistically and in their behaviors, of the aforementioned Ceca-Arkan archetype as a cultural script readable, available, and affectively appealing to them. The archetypal femininity of 1990s Serbia hence becomes a habitus by which the girls come to understand how to perform affluence and power in their absence.

The fandom of Ceca, and the enactment of *sponzoruša*-as-class-passing, indicate a form of *class consciousness* - not necessarily *false* consciousness - about the precarity within which the girls’ choices are always already limited, if not entirely predetermined. When the girls roam a flea market and ridicule fake Vuitton bags, for instance, they perform a knowledge of affluence that gives them pleasure and a pretense of cultural capital (here, one of the girls points out how precisely one can spot a fake Vuitton, implying that he has seen, even owned, many original Vuitton bags in her life). And even though a limited set of options defines the girls’ existence, *Clip* suggests that certain performances make possible a temporary dismantling of rigid but permeable boundaries within the patriarchal structures that bind girls’ pleasure and social life. While exploring how girls attempt to work through their social precarity by putting on a performance of hyper-femininity, the film sometimes reintroduces them into an objectifying patriarchal gaze, perhaps as a means to position itself as a socially engaged diagnosis which suggests that, much as they try, the girls ultimately cannot escape the constraints of patriarchy on their sexuality and their future as social agents.

Yet, as I have suggested, to flatly condemn the film for depicting a girl’s pleasure, experienced through non-normative sexual practices, is to delegate sex to a strictly affirmative, normativizing and moralistic lens within which sexual power play is a mere mirror reflection of power and submission in the “real world.” Many scholars have offered a more balanced reading of sadomasochism, some even arguing that it is the submissive person who has the power in such sexual practices, because s/he is in control of the dominant person’s pleasure.³⁸ Indeed, the performance of submission in sadomasochistic sexual practices should not be read as a direct reiteration of normative power inequalities. Quite the contrary: it often performs a radical, uncomfortable

³⁷ Bettie, *Women Without Class*, 53.

³⁸ Califia, Pat. 1989. *Macho Sluts*. Boston, Mass: Alyson.

parody of those normative power imbalances.³⁹ In *Imperial Leather*, for instance, Anne McClintock argues that sadomasochism (S/M) is “an organized subculture shaped around the ritual exercise of social risk and social transformation. As a theater of conversion, S/M reverses and transforms the social meanings it borrows.”⁴⁰ This transformative reversal through S/M is glimpsed in *Clip*, where visions of alterity towards normative gender and sexual practices are infrequent but nevertheless present.

On the Multiplying Visions of Post-Cinema

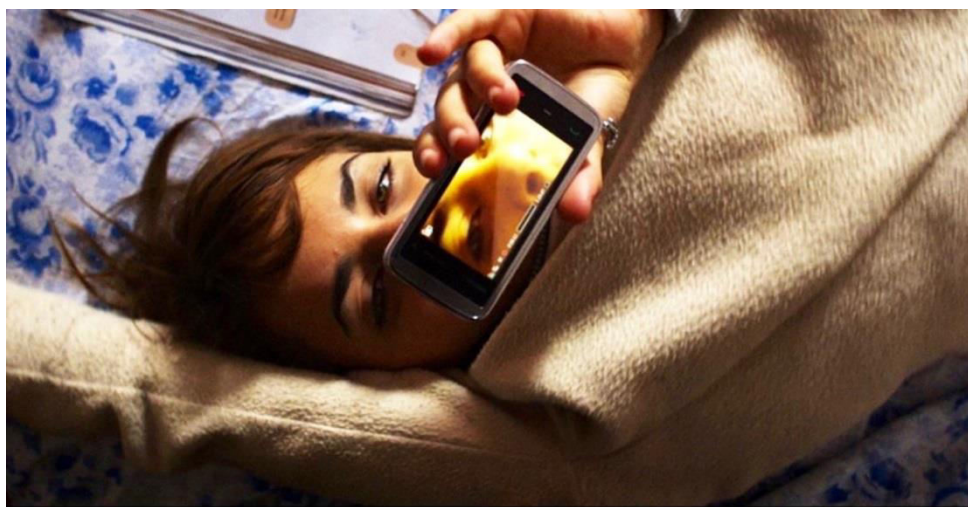


Figure 2: Mediating girlhood (*Clip*, Maja Miloš, 2012)

In many ways, *Clip* is a work of post-cinema,⁴¹ inasmuch as it reflects the realities of the digital age, where screen technologies have become omnipresent and put to multifold use. The youth in *Clip* make heavy use of phone cameras, filming themselves in different situations (boys often film their sexual intercourse with girls, girls film boys or themselves, and so on) (Figure 2). This multiplying of camera views has the effect of establishing proliferating fields of spectatorial vision, as the pro-filmic gaze is often switched back and forth between the film camera and the post-cinematic frames, particularly phone cameras with which the youth film themselves and each other (as in the aforementioned opening scene). The post-cinematic structure is emphasized by the film's very title: “clip” refers to a short video snippet of the kind that the film's protagonists frequently make. Miloš herself has stated that she got the idea to make *Clip* after seeing a number of similar YouTube clips made by Belgrade teenagers, which depicted wild partying, drug intake and underage sex.⁴² *Clip* frequently downplays sensationalism over the youth's excesses in

³⁹ Noyes, John. K. 1997. *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

⁴⁰ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 143.

⁴¹ Shaviro, Steven. 2010. *Post-Cinematic Affect*. Park lane: Zero-Books.

⁴² In Miloš's own words: “I started thinking about the film when I saw these YouTube clips of real teenagers in Serbia, and my idea of the dramaturgy of the film and feeling of the film was to obey the law of those YouTube clips. [...]. How did these kids create their life while filming it? The answer might be that these people from this younger generation film themselves to have proof that

favor of exploring their complicated and often seemingly contradictory emotional attachments.

Jasna's camera effectively captures her raw bodily affect: libidinal pleasure and deep grief alike. These two are both deeply associated with different modes of power, or the lack thereof, to which she is exposed: Jasna gains pleasure from being dominated by the masculine Đorđe, and is deeply emotionally disturbed when she meets a seriously ill girl in the orphanage. She is also disturbed by the sight of her weak, dying father, the most powerless figure in the film, and the family member she is in many ways closest to. Success and failure are positioned as deeply gendered categories for both men and women alike, and moreover, they are directly linked to the (im)possibilities of class passing: Đorđe can enact material power by performing as a tough guy (whose material reality and life with a working class single mother are not much better than Jasna's), while the father's dying body can only reflect depravity and immobility (in both economic and purely physical terms).

The film quite effectively depicts the existence of two divergent temporal frames: one connected to "club culture"⁴³ and the accompanying enactment of class passing, the other connected to home and family life lived under precarious conditions. While in the latter temporal frame nothing ever seems to change as time stands still in utter monotony, in the temporal modality of the club culture and class passing, Jasna and her friends experience *jouissance*, a temporary suspension of material depravity and of the social hierarchies that surround them (the same *jouissance* is connected to the film's depiction of sex without optimism). The two temporal frames are at stark odds, as Jasna seems to live in a parallel universe to that of her family (she goes to sleep as they are getting up, she is up and about when they sleep, and so on). Several times in the film, when Jasna is at home, she is seated at the kitchen table, and as she passively observes her family interacting, the camera is positioned right behind her, or aligned with her point of view so as to allow the spectator to embody Jasna's vision and see the familial life as utterly monotonous, slow and depressing (Figure 3). With this cinematic device the spectator is invited to take the view *from* Jasna's body (as opposed to the more prevailing view *of* Jasna's body), as a means to understand the gloomy depravity of ordinary rituals in her familial life, and thus understand why she is so detached from its temporality, and unwilling to participate in it.

they're alive," in Kaelan, James. 2018. This Film Isn't Real: Maja Milos' Tiger Award-winning debut. *Clip. MovieMaker*, 18. April 2018 (accessed: 14. February 2018).

Moreover, she has elsewhere noted: "There were huge amounts of energy bursting from them and I wanted to see what goes on with love, empathy and friendship in such cruel surroundings," Orton, Karen. 2013. Isadora Simijonovic & Maja Miloš. *Dazed*, 02. January 2013 (accessed: 14. February 2018).

⁴³ Buckland, Fiona. 2002. *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World-Making*. Wesleyan University Press.



Figure 3: Seeing home from Jasna's perspective (*Clip*, Maja Miloš, 2012)

Another significant encounter occurs when Jasna turns her camera towards her sick father. She briefly films him lying in his bed and inadvertently repositions the gaze that fetishizes gender normativity and powerful masculinity. Her camera thus captures a weak, dying man, in stark opposition to the tough guys, such as Đorđe, that she usually films. After she admits to worrying about her father dying, Jasna's camera captures another reversal: heretofore unemotional, she now films her own emotional breakdown and sobbing tears caused by her father's almost imminent death. The viewer is here presented with an alternative, intimate gaze, the sight of a girl who turns her camera to record the raw effect of grief, and the feeling of powerlessness, as opposed to her usual seductive looks and seemingly carefree hedonism, which have, up until that point, functioned as defense mechanisms against facing grim realities. Jasna is, the film here suggests, not as emotionally detached as we were initially invited to think. Rather, her alternative temporal frame of club culture and sex without optimism functions as a protective veneer against

the reality of seemingly inevitable loss and continued social precarity. Through the post-cinematic mode of switching the visual frame between the film's camera and Jasna's phone camera, *Clip* calls attention to its own form and allows for the destabilization of a singular frame of vision. This is, at the same time, a formal way for the film to challenge the possibility of its own objectifying gaze, by placing the technology of vision and spectatorship in the hands of its female protagonist herself. Perhaps that post-cinematic visual proliferation can sustain seemingly incommensurable pleasures and experiences where traditional cinema cannot.

Conclusion: Whither the Future of Transitional Feminism?

"It is quite amazing how patriarchal conservatism always manages to recreate the optimal conditions for its own survival by reasserting the priority of reproductive (non)sex over jouissance while submitting it to the imperatives of advanced capitalist societies—precisely at a time in history when feminist forces are at work in society to redefine sexuality differently."⁴⁴

Braidotti's words still ring true, perhaps unsurprisingly so, since her comments are meant to imply that patriarchal conservatism has an uncanny ability to perpetually reinvent itself in light of any new and emerging conditions. Yet, what often remains overlooked in this understanding of patriarchy's continued hold that reinvents itself is an awareness that, if its structures and ways of control shift, so should our understanding of what form feminist and emancipatory projects should take as a response. It is evident, in the case of *Clip*, that patriarchal conservatism has shifted in the postsocialist, post-conflict context of the former Yugoslavia into a mechanism by which moral panics about youth delinquency and female sexuality further mask the roots of social precarity. But what the condemnations of the film have also made evident is that feminist and emancipatory politics need to shift if they are to incorporate new realities and the experiences of millennial youth, particularly girls.

With its particular interest in club culture, as a form of subculture that offers alternative communities and social interactions than those provided by the parent culture, *Clip* explores an often neglected domain of subcultural belonging - that of girls. Reflecting both on the seeming prevalence of men in subcultural activities and in the scholarly work on subcultures, McRobbie and Garber have asked the following: "If subcultural options are not readily available to girls, what are the different but complementary ways in which girls organize their cultural life? Are these, in their own term, subcultural in form?"⁴⁵ They concluded that girls do not group into subcultural units the way boys do - rather, they form *cliques* whose purpose is to exclude other, non-desirable girls (as well as boys), and also to worship pop idols and produce

⁴⁴ Braidotti, Rosi. 1994. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 42.

⁴⁵ McRobbie, Angela and Jenny Garber. 1976. Girls and Subcultures. *Resistance Through Rituals*, 209-22, 211.

culture through fandom (here of Ceca and the likes). Post-subcultural studies, which emerged in the 1990s, have shown more interest in the ways in which girls and young women create alternative communities akin to subcultures. Indeed, as Rašeljka Krnić has argued, post-subcultural studies have placed club cultures, and (electronic) music in particular, at the center of examining how subcultural belonging might redefine traditional gender roles assigned to girls.⁴⁶ In shifting our understandings of both subcultures and the performative ranges of gender and class roles alike, the girls' sexual submissiveness, fandom and participation in a turbo-folk club culture in *Clip* cannot be reduced to a mere false consciousness and blind worship of problematic figures - as such activities are often dismissively assumed to be. Instead, the girls' fandom reveals the inherent ambiguity (as well as high appeal) of an aesthetic disposition, coupled with exaggerated gender dynamics, that has accompanied a deeply troubling time in the region's history. It is also important to note that, in *Clip*, the girls' class positioning seems to be a central factor in their attachment to a subculture whose gender performances fetishize excessive femininity as a way to temporarily escape material constraints and precarious dispossession.

If anything, provocative films (or works of post-cinema) such as *Clip* invite us to reflect on the shifting understandings of female subjectivity (locally contingent and fluid at the same time), and of feminist projects as such. In particular, the film invites us to reflect on how transitional feminist projects need to be rethought outside the traditional, moralistic norms of gender/sexual acceptability, so as to incorporate new developments and shifts in the realities and experiences of millennial, post-conflict, post-socialist girlhood in the specific locale of the former Yugoslavia, with all its social and historical contingencies. For the girls in *Clip*, an active investment in self-shattering sex without optimism, as well as a reinvisioning of their class futurity via performances of hyper-feminine class passing, expose the contradictions that precipitate (perhaps even necessitate) the mechanisms of coping with their material reality. Far from being merely problematic, objectifying or sensationalist modes of representation then, these depictions suggest a more complicated structure of affective exchange, by which the postsocialist millennial girls work through, or cope with the challenges placed on their material reality. What the girls inherited through the habitus of post-socialist, neoliberal capitalist and post-conflict precarity is a limited set of options. This, in turn, reveals a performance of hyper-feminine class passing as one of the most effective means to enact (but not necessarily achieve) ascendance of the class ladder in order to temporarily escape the existing, stifling absence of options. In this complicated structure that does not offer easy answers, *Clip* ends on a paradoxically grim-yet-optimistic note (perhaps we can call it optimism *without* optimism): first Jasna is beaten by Đorđe for kissing another boy, and then Jasna and Đorđe kiss through her bleeding lips, locked in a passionate embrace — as we witness millennial youth locked in the cycle where the lines between love and hate are blurred, and where violence and sex without optimism sometimes seem to be the only ways to reflect a deep

⁴⁶ Krnić, Rašeljka. 2012. Žene i rodne uloge u postsupkulturnoj teoriji: Primjer *rave* kulture. *Društvena istraživanja* 21(4), 885-900.

emotional attachment. Such examples of post-cinematic, transitional work reflect something contradictory and incommensurable, yet nevertheless Real about the post-Yugoslav culture and its discontents.

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