The State That Was Swept Away: The Class War Against Custodians in Late Socialist Cinema
Aleksandar Momčilović

In the early period of the restoration of capitalism in the late Yugoslav and early post-Yugoslav period, the ideologues of market capitalism constructed an ideal figure that embodies the fundamental problem with Yugoslav model of socialism based on workers's councils — custodians (*čistačice, tetkice*). It has become commonplace and common sense that the reason behind the collapse of socialist enterprises (*preduzeća*) is the fact that at the workers's council — where all workers or, in larger enterprises, representative of the workers, voted about the main business decisions — the vote of allegedly short-sighted and uneducated custodians/cleaning ladies/janitors (but as a rule, female figures) carries equal weight to that of the experts. By voting for their own short-term benefit (such as the immediate pay raise) at the expense of the long-term *smart* decisions, cleaning ladies were pictured as the main saboteurs of the Yugoslav's market socialism. Remarks such as that by the liberal economic journalist Miša Brkić (2014) that "in the old days the cleaning ladies were debating the scientists (!) on equal footing on workers' councils at the Institute "Mihajlo Pupin" [the major information technology institute] about new projects" are still circulating in the post-Yugoslav media and cultural sphere. Yet, although ubiquitous, such images are always given in passing, and taken for granted. In this talk, Aleksandar Momčilović seeks to trace the representation of *tetkice* and *čistačice* in late socialist Yugoslav cinema that gradually constructed the straw woman of a precious middle-aged custodian, who is a sovereign ruler of the informal and unofficial realm, personally charming but politically harmful.



Aleksandar Momčilović is a PhD student in the Department of Slavic Languages and the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University. He earned his MA from Charles University and a BA in Comparative Literature and Literary Theory from the University of Belgrade. His research interests include theories of world literature and the social and intellectual history of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European countries. He has contributed to several edited volumes, including *The Routledge Handbook of Popular Music and Politics of the Balkans* (2024).