

M E M E N T O

100 years since the birth of Blagoja Drnkov

”THE FIRST THING IS LIGHTNESS!“ Interview with Blagoja Drnkov (1914 – 2012)

Blagoja Drnkov is a doyen of the Macedonian documentaristics and unchallenged artist in photographic mastership. Ever since he was a student, he started to work with photography. Upon termination of his secondary education, he was employed in the shop for photography ”Fotoamater” (Photo-amateur), when he bought his first 9.5mm camera and his own cinema projector, and since 1940 he became the owner of ”Fotoamater” (Photo-amateur).

He made his first movie in 1935. In 1945, he was named the first director of the Macedonian Directorate of Film and the first correspondent of Film News from Macedonia. During this period, he filmed numerous film writings that are important due to their social-historical value. For seven months during 1947/48, Drnkov was staying in Czechoslovakia where he specialized in the studios ”Barandov“.

Until 1953, he was working at ”Vardar film“, and then he started to work in the Museum of Ethnology as a photographer, cameraman and director of ethnological films. From 1957 to 1960, again, he was working in ”Vardar film“. From 1960 to 1964 he was a photographer and a cameraman in the Executive Council, and since 1964 to his retirement in 1969 he was working in Television Skopje as a director of documentaries and television series. He won many awards and acknowledgements, some of which include:

- awards at the television festival in Bled for the television series ”Fingers“, dedicated to the old crafts and ”Silkworm“,
- 1950 Awarding a decree by the Government of PRM for ”Joyful childhood“
- 1950 Labor Medal from the Presidium of the National Assembly of FPRY,
- 1965 Special acknowledgement from Filmske Novosti (Film news) on the occasion of the 20th anniversary
- 1973 Labor Medal with a golden crown with Decree from the President of SFRY,
- 1994 Republican award ”11 October” for lifetime achievement.¹
- 2008 Medal of merit for Macedonia²

*

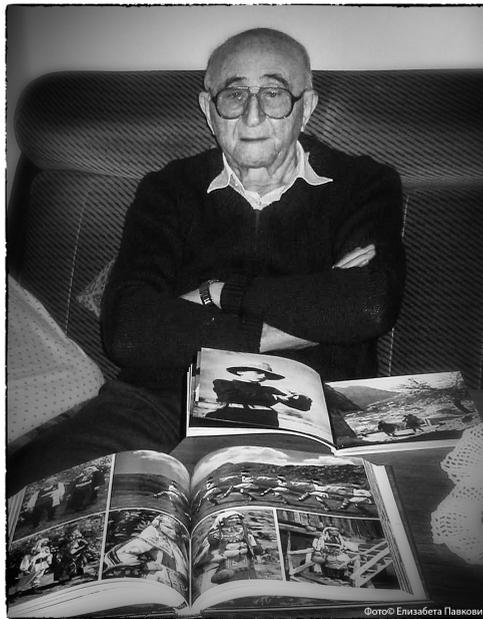
* * *

The conversation with Blagoja Drnkov took place on December 9th 2008, in

¹ http://www.maccinema.com/avtor_detali.asp?IDSORABOTNIK=376&tSearch=%E1%EB%E0%E3%EE%BC%E0&kategorija=all (7.4.2013)

² Mk.wikipwdia.org/wiki/Благоја_Дрнков (7.4.2013)

his apartment in Skopje. He was 95 years old at the time, with excellent memory and incredible life-energy. With pleasure, "in the dialect of Skopje", he was speaking about some events from his childhood, his fascination with photography, his undying thirst to conquer new knowledge, the feeling of business, and mostly the enthusiasm of his approach to the photographic and film work that never abandoned him to the end of his long, fulfilled and inspiring life.



"As a child... I come from a civil family, we were five children. I was the oldest... actually, six children. I'm the only boy and all others were girls. Five sisters. When I was in third grade in primary school, I had three sisters at the time. My own sisters, that is, they were younger than me. And my father invited a photographer, who lived nearby, to take pictures of us, the kids, in the yard. He came... and we were ready. He set up the stand, and over the stand he put a black cloth. And then... over the camera, so he can... because he is supposed to see there, right? That's how it was done at the time... photographing. And I was looking at him and I found that very interesting", "What is this man going to do", I said to myself, "What is he trying to do with this black cloth"? And that black cloth reminded me of... my school, when I went to school some magicians were coming there and they used black cloth. And they took things out of the black cloth, all sorts of things, magic tricks. And I was looking at this man wondering, "Is he a magician? Why did this magician come to take a picture of us?" He prepared us for the photograph and he started to cover himself so he could see how we were positioned and he said, "You stand like this, you go that way". And I'm looking at him, I'm laughing and.... I'm saying, "This man is a magician". (He laughs). And, this magic then, this art of magic entered into me since I was a child, I was interested to this date to work with this

magic. There, that is the beginning and the interest how this thing hung up. Well, all right, he took a picture of us, he left, he finished his work and then I left, I started to do different things when I was a child... And then, one day, I don't know what day it was, there was this place, now... behind the Catholic Church, here there was... I'm not sure if you know where the Catholic Church was here in Skopje? You don't? It's amid "Marshal Tito" Street... "Marshal Tito" Street is this one, from the right side as well. That's the street. So here there was this huge shop, called "Dechki Bazar" (Children's Bazaar). They were selling all sorts of toys. And where you're a child, normally you go to a place where there are toys, you see if you can pick something to buy... And one day, I went there and I saw a boy, older than me, he was buying something and the man there was explaining him how to make photographs. "There you have", he said, "I have negatives. Ten negatives packed in a small plastic bag. And these came from America... they had some filmstrips left, they cut them into ten pieces and sell them to children together with special paper. They put the film on special paper, it puts it in a sunny place and it becomes light and then once you wash it in salty water... a photograph remains"! When I saw this, 'Wow', I said, 'Oh! Quickly, let me!' (He laughs). And I took it and started to make photographs, I was practicing it. And so I continued practicing it and I felt it was interesting. Occupation. You do something! That's the magic, so it entered inside me and it had to be expressed in some manner. And I continued to work this... And then I was supposed to... I was in first year in high school, so I was supposed to take a picture of myself and give the picture in the school. So I said to myself, 'Well now, why I am supposed to go there so he can take a picture of me and make my photography? He can give it to me... he will give me the photographic plate, I will pay him, I will take paper and make the photograph myself'. And that's how I started to work with photography. When I started my third year in high school, we were learning physics then, the professor of physics was from Debar, but he liked me very much because I was doing all sorts of things... If he said, "Small well. How does a small well look like"? I would make a well from boards, I cut them, I made the well and gave the model to the professor, and then he would take it to high school in order to show it to the other children. However, since we had good contact, he was practicing photography and one day our class teacher organized a picnic on Vodno. And since he was with us, he came and said, "Blagoja, you know what", he told me, "I'll let you carry the camera". He wanted to make me pleased. "So, when we take pictures there, I will tell you something, and then I'll tell you one more thing about something else". And indeed, we climbed up, on Vodno. I was the happiest of all students. I was carrying my professor's camera! I guess, we took pictures and then he told me, "Tomorrow you will come so we can develop the plates". Since, I hadn't seen development of plates in the night. I know only about the daily ones, how to make the pictures in the sun. And then I went at his place, I saw how this is done in darkness and I learned how to do this. We washed the plates, I was pumping water there, because they were supposed to be washed and he said, "You know what, tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, once I'm free, I'll tell you to come so you can see how... also to make photos, how to copy them in red lightness, artificially. The photos we made today". And I said, 'Yeee! Was there a happier man than me'! And then I guess, I went there after two days and I saw how it was done. "There, you see now? Here, you put that like that, there is a developer... And you can buy a developer from a photographer. You will go to a photographer to give you a developer; they will give you fixer, because you can't make the composition yourself. You're still very young. You'll do

this when you grow up“. I was very happy, I immediately went to buy a developer, I bought everything and now... But I needed a dark place and red lightness, so I could see and work with it. What was I supposed to do then, it occurred to me that I can use the oil lamp, at home we had this oil lamp, we didn't have electricity at home at the time, so I took the lamp, I made a red balloon, like this, on a wire, it was red, I made it and put it on the lamp. And here, it became red. So I could be able to work. Once you make them, they won't be destroyed, otherwise the photography will be destroyed. So that's how I started to work. One day, I don't know what happened... I accidentally moved somehow, so the oil lamp made smoke and it made me dizzy. I was under the bed, because I was doing this under the bed. There was no place where to do it, I didn't know how all that was done. So I fell, and my mother was covering the bed with the blanket from both sides, so I can work, I moved the blanket and some air came inside and I came to consciousness. Otherwise, I was going to suffocate. Eh, and then what? Now what can we do – how can we do it? And then I went to the yard, I made something like a small room, I made it from boards, it was one square meter and I put a red glass, the day light made red lightness and I was working inside. So it was suitable for work. And that's how I slowly became a photographer. And then, every day I started to spend more and more time working this, I was making photographs. And when I finished the fourth year of high school, I found a job in a bookshop as a commercial assistant, a seller. So I was working there, all that work, however, opposite our shop, which was also in "Marshal Tito" Street, on the other side, there was a German man, who came here and opened a shop with material, he was selling photography cameras and all such stuff, so that the ones who were working with photography could be able to buy materials from his shop. And I, since I needed to buy some materials, I went in his shop to buy some things. He taught me to make a developer myself. And that's how I started to visit his shop. And one day he said, "Hey, what are you doing? You're just making photographs. You should be taking pictures, hey"! He said, "You should take a camera and start taking pictures". 'Oh', I said, 'Camera! But ... that costs money'. My father was a tailor, poor man. He had no possibility to give me money... He said, "You know what? Here, this is how we shall do – I'll give you a camera Carl Zeiss, it costs five hundred dinars...". "At the time five hundred dinars was an entire salary! (He laughs), "However, you will pay monthly, fifty dinars every month. You will pay me. I trust you, I know you're a good boy here". And I couldn't be happier! I'm growing... and I started. I used to gather my friends, we went to a picnic; we took pictures. We went to Skopska Crna Gora, then somewhere else, we did different things. That's how it all started and that's how I started to develop. I was working there for about two or three years... And while I was working there, in the shop, I went in a trade school. "Trade School of Skopje's youth", that was the name of the school. Its specialty was correspondence and accounting. In general that was about it. Also we taught Serbian language and other subjects. However, this was the main thing... I was one of the first students in the school. I was an expert for accounting and correspondence. And when I finished ... they admitted me... it was for six years, and since I had finished four years of high school, they immediately admitted me in fourth grade. Fourth grade lower school and two grades higher school, that's how the school was. So... They immediately would have given me the degree from higher school, but because I'm not that familiar with things, it's better to spend one year learning some basic things so you can be... So I finished there and I became an accountant par excellence. And... now what are we going

to do now, since that is my vocation. I can earn more money rather than be an apprentice. And I established contact with a cooperative for production of slippers, and there can't be a cooperative without accounting. There has to be accounting. I was employed there and I started to keep their account books. So this is what I was working, however, I continued working with photography. That's something else. And a new shop was open, a person named Teodosije Vuchidolac. Here he had a house. He was some monk and as a monk he learned about photography and he started to sell photography cameras, so people can have one when buying materials; a shop for this purpose; same like the German guy; now this man. And I don't know what happened with the German man, he went somewhere, he closed his shop, I don't know what happened. And I, because I was buying some things in his shop, he asked me, "Hey, what are you doing there?" "Well", I said, "I'm an accountant. I do bookkeeping and correspondence". "So", he said, "you know what, you can also do correspondence and bookkeeping for me as well". "I", he said, "do not know much about that; like a part-time job. You can do your work there, and then after lunch, once you finish with you work, you can come here and work in the evening". And I agreed... Once I went inside... In the kingdom of my fantasy! My magic! (He laughs). Cameras! Materials! Everything I need, everything is here! Everything! And... after some time, a child came, not a child, I think... a boy, seventeen years old, he told my boss: "I have one cinema camera, 9.5mm, let me sell it to you. I'm leaving this place so I don't want to take it with me". The boss said, "Oh! Ok. Give it to me"! And he bought the camera. I... immediately opened my eyes. I said to myself, "Wow! Now I would have a camera for taking pictures here"! (He laughs). And I immediately reeled films for that... And since the old man was not able to go to Zagreb, I went there, to buy materials for us, and there I immediately supplied materials for this camera... So it can have films as well, if someone comes and wants to buy it. And I bought films for myself as well, so when I wanted to... And the first thing I filmed was a video in the yard where we lived we had chickens and two cocks. They were fighting each other from time to time. And I filmed this together with my mother while she was looking at them and yelling at them, "Don't fight"! And things like that. This is the first thing I've filmed in a film. So simultaneously I started to work with film. And now, that was nice. I did different things, I filmed there in... there was one... the Catholic Church, it was a holiday, I don't know the name of it, they gathered, they went in the church, everything. And I filmed all that and I showed it to the priests. "Wow! Well, this is a nice thing! Well you should sell this to us! We should have this... But where can we watch it?" "You will watch it, but you will also buy yourself a projector, a device that projects an image". And by that time we already learned everything, also about having a projector. (He laughs). And that's how I started to work both with photography and film. I was filming different folk dances, I went to the villages and filmed while people were harvesting, while peasants were working in the villages. I filmed all those activities - both on photography and on film - but, as I proceeded, another more modern photography emerged, eight millimeters. It was much more practical, quite nicer camera, higher quality of work. And then already I had the opportunity, and I bought myself one such device and I started to work with it. All the things that I had photographed! I filmed Matka, we went to different places, I filmed different things. And then I was showing them. I had a friend from high school, I told him, "You know what, let's make a children's cinema, in the cellar. We will show them the films and they will pay twenty five paras. Then there was one ruptured coin. They gave twenty five paras, and we were

showing the films that I've recorded". "Ok", he says, "let's do it". And we took their money. And that's how I also started to earn from the kids who were coming and watched all the films.

...

While I was working there, every fifteen days I was in Zagreb to supply material for the shop. It was my obligation. The boss still didn't complain that I bought a camera and that I'm taking pictures. I was doing promotion, and others would buy. So some professors came by and bought cameras, so... There were two or three large shops which were wholesaling and I there I bought supplies.

It was a photography trade where I was working. And at the same time photos for customers were being made. Either they came, either I... there was this girl, she was working, we made the photographs and they came to take them. No taking pictures. Only making other people's photos. No photo studio. It was photography trade. For cameras and making amateur films. For customers, they bring the film they wanted. We develop the film and make photographs from the film and then he comes and picks them up and pays. The boss was a photographer. He learned photography in a monastery. He wasn't working with photography at all; he was an older man. It's just that he had money. He was from Skopje. Here he had a large house. Here, in this street, Ilindenska. That's where his house was. He had a Slovenian wife and a daughter. And many people dared to... to make me marry his daughter. I said, 'I don't want to. I'm not getting married now and... that's an important thing for me'. (He laughs). And then, they left this place.

...

I was working with eight millimeters, when I started to work with film seriously and at the time we were friends with Kiro Gligorov, I went to see him today (he laughs), his daughter was getting married. She was getting married for a merchant from the village Carevo Selo, from Delcevo. And I said, 'You know what, I'll film the wedding, we'll put it on film, so we can have it'. And I made a nice film of the wedding, everything. And everyone watched the wedding "Wow, it's so nice, it's so nice"! And that became a vocation for me. Different people asked different things, many people wanted me to take pictures of their weddings. When we went to a picnic I was filming everything and then we watched ourselves. And this person, Fercho, son-in-law of Kiro Gligorov, who came from Delcevo, made photographs at my place. I made photographs for him and we knew each other very well. We were good friends. And now he became son-in-law of Kiro Gligorov and we are also friends with Kiro Gligorov and I made pictures from their wedding, they thought about all this, and one day he came to see me and he told me, "Listen, Blagoja, you know what? Let's do something nice. Let's ask the boss, he is not able work anyway, he can no longer do anything. Let's ask him to sell us the shop. I'll give money, we'll buy the shop and we'll work together, as partners. You won't give any money and you will be my partner. You will work here and I will be in Delcevo, I will work there". And that's what we did. We bought the shop and I became half owner of the shop and this is how this entire thing started to develop.

...

And we got to the moment when the war began. It was war; there was unrest. War. I had filmed many things, films and different stuff. The Germans that went inside my shop, when they came to Skopje, they were burglarizing many shops. And they burglarized in my shop as well. They stole many films, many photos and many cameras. All that... What can you hide? How can you know? I work every day. In the morning, you open the shop and you work. They were doing all things in the evening. Still, it happened. We went through that as well. Now... too bad... too bad.

And when this unrest happened, while this war lasted, for three or four years, I was doing my business. Everything that was possible here. I even went with the partisans and filmed. I went in villages, so no one could see me, so that they can't notice my presence. I started to write the history of Macedonia, both with film and with photographs, everything. The partisans who needed identity document used to come and they used to say, "I am sent by this or that person, they told me to come here so you can take a picture of me". Take his picture, give it to him and go. "It's all right, you don't have to pay anything". We became even closer with Kiro Gligorov since he was here... And when the war ended, after the liberation, he was assigned Minister of Culture. And now, what are we going to do and then it occurred to me to make "Vardar-film". To create an idea... I told him, 'It wouldn't be bad to do that'. And the proposal, "Who should we engage", his assistant asked him. And he asked my friend, "what were we doing with children, the movies we were showing"? He said, "Is there anything better you can think of than Blagoja? He understood everything about this thing". "You're right! Come on Blagoja Drnkov – director of the Macedonian director of film". All cinemas... and... to start making a movie, to do things slowly. And that's how this thing developed.

...

There was no topic. Everything was a topic! Everything that is interesting, everything that is nice, everything should be photographed. I took pictures of everything. Everything that can be presented in a photo... I made an exhibition of that and then one professor came to see the exhibition and he was looking at the trees. There, such trees... Between Stip and Strumica, there were many interesting trees and one day, while I was travelling there, I stopped, I made photos of everything and I made about seventy large photographs. Here, like this one; a bit smaller... twice smaller than this one. And I made an exhibition. And this professor came; he sees them and says, "Oh, how is this possible? These are not trees to be burned, it's a pity". He says, "Look at it! To burn this or, do something else with it. Too bad. This tree is a miracle! Trees sing in my place. It's a pity to destroy this". And I started to get awards, for movies, for photographs; I made exhibitions; I got awards for this. I sent photographs throughout the world. Everywhere! I've sent photos all the way to China, to Australia... Is there a place where I haven't sent photographs! I have exhibitions and awards from the events, praises and all such things.

Those are all my personal things. While I was observing I noticed someone looking and saying, "Look, what a nice photograph"! So this means I've done the right thing. When I sit, let's say, and take a picture of an old man... now... today it is my portrait. (He laughs). An old man!

...

I became a film correspondent... And yes, I forgot to tell you about that. When we established "Vardar-film" here, I started to go to Belgrade because the cinematography of Serbia was already established there. In Belgrade, there was this person named Alexandar Vucho so I went to visit him so I can see everything. And there they had the film journal "Filmske novosti" (Film news). When they saw whom they were dealing with, they told me, "Let us give you a camera, so you can be our cameraman. Just go there and film! Do your business in your shop and all obligations you may have... there in the directorate. But, go and film!" They paid me for this job and I was making movies, different things... I sent everything I considered nice and interesting to "Filmske novosti". What is happening here... and things like that. There, I was the first cameraman from Macedonia.

...

Everything I've done was with thinking. How should I do this? What am I supposed to do? Or when I see something – should I film it from this side or is it better to film it from both sides? What side is better? You see? This is nicer. That's what I'm going to do; I'll throw away the others. That's what it was all about, that I was feeling something in myself. I had something, some urge for this work.

...

I never worked with retouch. There is retouch in photography, like this. If there would be some mark, some stain, it is being retouched and repaired, probably so that it is not visible. Let's say it can be some... let's say a butterfly, it's not appropriate to have it in the photo so you have to delete it. That's only for correction, but I never did retouch. In portraits or doing such rework – no!

...

So, look, I... knew Manaki. We were friends with Manaki. He was buying materials in my shop. When I was visiting him, I was able to see, he was showing me his films, the types of films he filmed and things like that. And that's how it was... while I had a shop. And then we became friends and then we continued to be friends. And I watched his films, what he made and... he showed me the pictures he had, the photos he made, all his work, I saw it. There, that's it. I cooperated with him only. I was not interested about others, because... it was... how should I put it... primitive thing. Someone wanted to take a picture and that's what he did. That wasn't my interest. I was interested in portrait. If someone was interesting, with a traditional costume, a nice suit or a nice hat, or have SOMETHING. That is completely different view than... this. And when I learned about this, I caught the train and straight there! I went and I filmed bombed Europe. I immediately made a document for this matter. Everything! And that's all in history, this thing. There, that's what I was interested about.

...

Afterwards, I was working in the Museum of Ethnology. Then I was working in television. Some traditional costumes were supposed to be photographed for the museum, things like that, everything. The photographs are shown to this date. There they praise with the photos... etc. So if data is required, it's there. I left everything. It has its order. There is card index, there's everything, I think I was there for four years. And I have made some films there. I have made films in the Museum of Ethnology. There I've made about four-five movies, "Customs for Saint George's Day", "Rusalii". It's all there. I had made a film about a silkworm.

I published the first monograph "My Macedonia". It was published by MANU in 2001. The first monograph was published in 1975. Cvetan Grozdanov was writing about me; black and white photographs. They are here, in the beginning, and then there are color photographs.

With digital cameras? Of course! Well, I'm working with them now. It has its benefits. You don't have to buy film; you don't have to do many things. Just press the button, do your job, make the photos, put it in a book and it shall stay there. Until you want to take it. So there is no film, no developing and no such things, that's all. It's easier. And I make large formats. With these digital cameras, that's done without any problems. We have... let's say; these are printed in my place. We have a printing machine. But new machines were made, more expensive ones. Buy it and there's the machine, down there. Dejan, my nephew was working with these machines. He works with computers. But, this one is made over there, at "Grafika". I make them here now, at "Grafika".

...

This requires that you take the angle of lightness. That's basic. The first thing is lightness!"

Conversation and photo E. Pavkovic