

PAST  
IMPERFECT

## Past Imperfect

By Savina Petkova

We all know cinema as a time-based medium. Each film not only has, but *is* a chronotope of its own. Flow, rhythm, and pace are most often considered outcomes of editing, which splices frames into sequences and assembles them with other sequences, but sometimes a film is born out of an attempt to slow things down organically, as they were experienced by someone, somewhere, in another time. In her third feature, Iva Radivojević does exactly that: disentangles time from memories, so that those memories can have a life of their own.

*When the Phone Rang* is set in 1992, in “a country that no longer exists,” as described by the soft, musical voice of a woman narrator, “except in books, films, and the memories of those born before 1995.” For the present-day viewer, Yugoslavia is now a tale from the past, its mythos drenched in blood; past is also the tense of the film’s narration, encapsulated by a phrase that resurfaces again and again: “When the phone rang, it was Friday, 10:36 in the morning.” Speaking matter-of-factly and off-screen (from the future?), the narrator introduces us to 11 year-old Lana (Natalija Ilinčić), who picks up the ringing phone. Her grandfather has died. In silence, she experiences a watershed moment – a split of “before” and “after” that synthesizes for her the experience of war.

For Lana, as for Radivojević (whose memories the film stems from), that one instant has the power to solidify time and to fracture it in ways one can only make sense retrospectively. It is her cherubic face and deep blue eyes that hold the sorrow of a generation, but she doesn’t know it yet. Throughout the film, she gets to lounge around, to meet friends and play, to walk to school, and to peek into other people’s windows, as every girl that age would, but all of those acts are paired with the self-reflection of a woman’s voice who speaks of Lana, her thoughts and worries, in the third person. No wonder: for her older self, that 11 year old girl is a stranger she would like to befriend.

But getting to know someone takes time; it’s a process of arranging fragments and impressions until they resemble a whole. This is why cinematographer Martin DiCicco frames strictly, in close-ups so powerful they enrich the off-screen space: of Lana, of the ticking clock at 10:36AM, of her hands grabbing the receiver, recurring and haunting, but never repetitive thanks to Radivojević’s poetic sense of editing rhythm. One single memory contains multitudes and likewise, one film can contain many – all those mundane experiences and quotidian encounters that mean the world to Lana in that Friday morning feel transfixing, heightened by their impending loss.

What’s the right grammar to describe anticipatory futures in one’s past? Cinema.