

The Halperns in Orasac

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Kamenko Katic (producer/director-- TV-Belgrade)

In 1953, Joel and Barbara Halpern began what was to become a longitudinal study of the Serbian village of Orasac spanning more than 35 years. At this time, the villagers still traveled along mud roads dating from Turkish times, only two households out of 480 had tractors, a scant five percent of the houses were electrified and indoor plumbing was unknown. In most ways, Orasac conformed closely to the model of a traditional preindustrial peasant community. In contrast, during the summer of 1986, the Halperns returned to a transformed village in which almost every family owned a tractor, most had electricity and many had constructed new, modern houses alongside the now-paved main road. This was no surprise to the Halperns who had observed this metamorphosis taking place over a number of years during their frequent visits to Orasac. This time, however, they were accompanied by Kamenko Katic, the host of a popular TV-Belgrade series, who filmed for his program a 43-minute segment entitled "The Halperns in Orasac." This production is now available on video with an English-language voice-over translation of the original Serbo-Croatian narration and dialogue, and with a segment added by the Halperns explaining through the use of slides how the film was made. An English transcription of the dialogue is also included as a study guide. The film's unifying theme is the longterm relationship between the Halperns and the villagers as expressed by their mutual reminiscences about the changes that have occurred in Orasac and their own lives over the past three and a half decades. The approach is a broad-brushed one encompassing a spectrum of topics ranging from the zadruga, epic poetry, folk medicine and blood-sisterhood, on the one hand, to the introduction of modern agricultural technology, the growth of a cash economy and the overall lessening of the cultural differences between rural and urban life, on the other. Reading between the lines, the underlying theoretical motif is the concept of stability in change, that is, the ability of many aspects of folk culture to adjust to new political, economic and demographic conditions.

At times, the viewer will surely find "The Halperns in Orasac" overly staged and somewhat self-conscious. However, it should be kept in mind that this film was produced by a Serb for an exclusively home audience. In this respect, it is perhaps as much a cultural artifact as

it is an "ethnographic" film in the usual sense. For instance, there is a recurrent overtone of "Isn't it remarkable that two American professors found the background and quaint ways of our countryside so intriguing! Of course, as you see, we are hardly like that anymore!" Nevertheless, this production does, in fact, make amply clear that in spite of modernization, much of the legacy of the past and the mentality associated with it still lie barely below the surface in Orasac. For the anthropologist, this film suggests a number of theoretical and methodological issues related to problems of visual representation in ethnography. Specifically, I make reference to the question of reflexivity as it pertains to the Halperns, the villagers and the intended Yugoslav audience. For the student, it can provide an instructive supplement for the Halperns' written work, especially the 1986 Waveland Press edition of *A Serbian Village in Historical Perspective*.