



# Central Europe Review

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## The Celluloid Tinderbox



## Yugoslav screen reflections of a turbulent decade

Edited by Andrew James Horton



# Central Europe Review

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## Editor's Note

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## Introduction

Dina Iordanova

When Yugoslavia dissolved and the new successor states claimed their respective territories, those working in cultural history came to realise that the division of cultural assets could not occur automatically along the new fault lines. It was difficult to keep everyone happy in assigning them the cultural tradition they claimed. Artistic heritage became a contested territory: in cinema, tradition could be granted to the new countries only by separating the coherent shared film history of Yugoslavia into new units and adjusting them to fit into the new political entities. No doubt, it was a problematic and somewhat arbitrary act, easily susceptible to disputes and disagreements. Where before we talked of one, albeit diverse, national cinema, now we distinguish Croatian, Slovene, Bosnian, Macedonian, Serbian and Montenegrin cinema, and are confronted with difficult decisions about who and what belongs where.<sup>1</sup> The whole rushed undertaking of creating distinct film traditions is particularly artificial because, carried out as it was at a moment when the borders of national cinemas were collapsing and giving way to increasingly trans-national film-making, building on new national cinemas today is a *causa perdata*.

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<sup>1</sup> See the respective entries in R Taylor, J Graffy, N Wood and D Iordanova (eds), *The BFI Companion to Eastern European and Russian Cinema*, London, 2000.



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In addition to this peculiar situation, the amount of writing on Yugoslav cinema in the West is notably scarce. With the exception of the systematic work of Daniel Goulding, and the extensive but little-seen filmographic work by Ronald Holloway, little has been published on Yugoslav cinema, one of the most interesting film cultures in Europe. Nowadays, Yugoslav film is still one of the least-known subjects on the film studies map. At times when other lesser-known cinemas are coming out of obscurity into the spotlight and are extensively written about, the treasures of Balkan cinema remain unknown even to cineastes. The masterpieces of Živojin Pavlović, Želimir Žilnik, Branko Ćopić, Karpo Godina and many others remain virtually unknown beyond the borders of former Yugoslavia, and even the works of celebrated veterans such as Dušan Makavejev and Ljiljana Županović are considered exotic and rarely seen.

Yugoslavia's break-up in the 1990s has attracted the attention of a large number of film-makers, both from within the country and internationally, and a number of films, made both by Yugoslavs and foreign directors, presented a reaction to the conflict. Over 250 feature and documentary films have been made on this subject, thus making the Yugoslav break-up the event that inspired the most active cinematic output in post-Communist times. It is a bitter irony, of course, that it took a bloody conflict to attract interest in Yugoslavia and its cinema. Along with these films, scattered writing on the subject of Yugoslav film, and particularly on those works dealing with the Yugoslav break-up and its causes, started appearing in a wide range of journalistic periodicals and academic publications. Little of this work, however, has been seen in book format, even though proposals for edited collections



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on the cinema of Yugoslavia and the Balkans have made the rounds with editors at established publishing houses.

This volume is thus a first step in compensating for the lack of coherent discussion of films treating the Yugoslav break-up, inaugurating what may become a series of books. It brings together writing which addresses recent cinematic works made in response to the Balkan troubles of the 1990s, approached from various conceptual angles.

In the opening essay, Péter Krasztev critically dissects the work of Emir Kusturica, Milčo Mančevski, and Gorčin Stojanović, raising issues of ideology and reception, history and audiences. Writing before the bombing of Belgrade and anticipating that there is no straightforward answer, he asks who will take the blame for the violence that reigned over the Yugoslav lands for the past decade (this question has since been answered by the bombing which, by attributing collective guilt, has opened up another series of questions).

In a piece evolving around a recent British documentary, Andrew James Horton tracks down the creative development of Emir Kusturica, the celebrated director who has been no stranger to controversy over the past decade and whose work is discussed in most of the essays in this collection. An insightful analysis of Srđan Dragojević's *Lepa sela, lepo gore* (*Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*, 1996) is offered by Igor Krsitić, who brings out the subtly problematic aspects of the message of this otherwise celebrated film. Benjamin Halligan offers an interpretative analysis of a series of Yugoslav films within the framework of what he terms an “aesthetic of chaos” and discusses a general trend toward the blurring of political subtexts in film depictions of the Bosnian war. The two concluding pieces report on recent Serbian cinema—Igor Krstić engages in an extensive analysis of Srđan Dragojević's



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*Rane* (*Wounds*, 1998) and Andrew James Horton offers an overview of a series of new films, ranging in quality and style.

The book's six essays provide a general overview of the issues surrounding Yugoslav cinema in the 1990s. It is a cinema which managed to keep itself alive in spite of difficult conditions, and even devastation, in some parts. Let us take a brief look at the condition of cinematic production across the region.

Serbia is internationally perceived to be the perpetrator of a succession of wars; is a country which has lived under international economic sanctions for more than five years now; and was bombed over the controversial Kosovo province in 1999—yet, in a perverse irony, remains the part of Yugoslavia (in its largest sense) that maintains the most active cinematic production. (The peculiarities of the film industry here have been described in short studies by Andrew Horton.)<sup>2</sup> The international boycott of Serbia has no doubt contributed to unifying Serbs, and making them more interested in their own “identity.” This finds expression in the fact that not just one but all three top-grossing 1998 films in Serbia were not American blockbusters (as it is the case across the rest of Europe), but films made by Yugoslav directors—Emir Kusturica's Gypsy saga *Crna mačka, beli macor* (*Black Cat, White Cat*), Goran Paskaljević's *Bure baruta* (*Cabaret Balkan / The Powder Keg*), and Srđan Dragojević's *Rane*. Of these films, only *Rane* is officially a Yugoslav production, while *Bure baruta* is listed as a co-production with France as a majority partner and the unlikely pair of

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<sup>2</sup> Editor's note: the reader should be careful to distinguish Andrew James Horton, the British critic and Culture Editor of *Central Europe Review*, and Andrew Horton, the American scholar and author.



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Greece and Turkey as minority co-producers.<sup>3</sup> Kusturica's film is a French-German production, with some Yugoslav participation.

This brings us to the issue of Milošević's government interest in filmmaking, a subject of controversy around earlier films like *Podzemlje—bila jednom jedna zemlja* (*Underground—Once Upon a Time There was a Country*, 1995) and *Lepa sela, lepo gore* which also comes up for discussion in the essays in that follow. This government's involvement is not as easy to tackle as it seems: while there is plenty of evidence of government interference in the work of media, with film it is not a straightforward case of a Communist-type direct dictate over film-making.

If one compares interviews given abroad and at home, directors such as Dragojević and Paskaljević have not made the answer to the question on government control any easier: while giving clear indications abroad that they have been deprived of government support and have been turned into *personae non grata*, at home they have maintained high-profile presences both in the dissident and in the mainstream media (something which would barely be possible in a truly totalitarian state). Paradoxically, by not reporting stories of government control, Kusturica seems to have been the most forthcoming one; maybe because as a survivor of the noisy controversy surrounding *Podzemlje* he has learned that, government support or interference, it does not really matter.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See [Bure Baruta's page](#) on the Eurimages subsite, part of the bilingual The Europe of Cultural Cooperation site.

<sup>4</sup> Dina Iordanova "Kusturica's Underground: Historical Allegory or Propaganda," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol 19, No. 1 (March 1999), pp 69-86.



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The work of these three directors has enjoyed the most attention internationally. But all three of them currently live beyond the borders of former Yugoslavia. Others, however, stayed in Serbia and are still there. Some members of the former Prague Group, for example, are stationed in Belgrade, such as: Srđan Karanović, the director of *Virginia*, 1991, who is currently working in the documentary field; Goran Marković, *Urnebesna tragedija (Burlesque Tragedy)*, 1995); and Miloš Radivojević *Ni na nebu ni na zemlji (Between Heaven and Earth)*, 1994). Ljubiša Samardžić, the famous comedian turned producer (running one of the most active companies, Cinema Dizajn), recently made his directorial debut with *Nebeska udica (Sky Hook)*, 1999), a melodrama set amidst the ruins of the Belgrade bombing of 1999. Gorčin Stojanović, a member of the younger generation who started in theater, has made two features: the first, *Ubistvo s predumišljajem (Premeditated Murder)*, 1995), subtly exploring the clash of past and present; the second, *Stršljen (Hornet)*, 1998), a film dangerously jingoistic in its representation of the Albanian minority.

There is a burgeoning documentary filmmaking which ranges from the satires made by veterans such as Želimir Žilnik, who directed *Tito po drugi put medju srbima (Tito Among the Serbs of a Second Time)*, 1993) and *Dupe od mramora (Marble Ass)*, 1995), to the bleak and demoralized reality found in the work of Janko Baljak, the director of *Vidimo se u citulji (The Crime that Changed Serbia)*, 1995) and Mladen Maticević, and Ivan Markov *Geto (Ghetto)*, 1995).

In Sarajevo, as noted by Rada Šešić, the post-war landscape is being rented to various filming crews, as already seen in the politically correct flop meant to be a blockbuster *Welcome to Sarajevo* (Michael Winterbottom, 1996). The only feature made here for the decade was Ademir Kenović's *Savršeni krug (Perfect Circle)*, 1997), scripted by celebrated local poet, and



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Kusturica's earlier scriptwriter, Abdulah Sidran, a film marked by overt sentimentality which was seen at festivals but never picked up for distribution. Kenović is the creative leader of SaGA, a group of filmmakers who were most active during the siege and who are responsible for remarkable and rarely seen footage documenting the war. Documentary production is still very active—in 1998, for example, Haris Pašović's *Greta* and Bato Čengić's *Mona Lisa u Sarajevu* (*Mona Lisa from Sarajevo*) were acclaimed at international festivals—and lately there is a new generation of young filmmakers, mostly working on shorts. Nonetheless, still more films are made about Sarajevo by outsiders than by locals. Branko Lustig, the Hollywood-based and Croatian-born producer of *Schindler's List*, is said to be sponsoring a forthcoming blockbuster called *Sarajevo*, scheduled to be directed by the partisan-saga veteran Veljko Bulajić.

Due to its geographic location, Croatia inherited the site of the former pan-Yugoslav film festival in Pula, which has since turned into a national film festival where annual film production is showcased. Only a handful of the films shown here have been seen internationally, however. With the exception of Jakov Sedlar's *Gospa* (*Madonna*, 1993) which was distributed in the West via a Catholic network, the only two films which were seen on a wider basis were the political comedies of young director Vinko Brešan—*Kako je počeo rat na mom otoku* (*How the War Started on My Little Island*, 1996) and *Maršal* (*Marshal Tito's Ghost*, 2000).

Persisting in their nation's desire to distance itself from the whole bloody Yugoslav break-up, Slovenian filmmakers seem to be preoccupied with a variety of other issues, and none of the films produced here deal directly with the experiences and traumas of the war.



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The documentary of Ljubljana-based American Michael Benson *Prerokbe ognja* (*Predictions of Fire*, 1995) about the artistic movement *Neue Slovenische Kunst* and the group Laibach was the only one to venture into direct exploration of the issues of conflict. Nonetheless, many recent Slovenian films move thematically around questions of historical legacies and positioning within Europe, thus touching on the indirect implications of the war—*Outsider*, Andrej Košak, 1997; *Rusko meso* (*Russian Flesh*, Lukas Nola, 1998); *V leri* (*Idle Running*, Janez Burger, 1999).

Macedonia, a country whose entire film production consists of about 50 feature titles, came onto the spotlight with the celebrated film by Milčo Mančevski *Pred doždot* (*Before the Rain*, 1994).<sup>5</sup> After several years in failed attempts to make another film, Mančevski is now working on a new internationally financed project, *Dust*, a film which will cut across space and time to present yet another inverted idea of history. The plot evolves between present-day New York and Macedonia from the times of the Ilinden uprising of 1903. It is not by chance that his work attracted the attention of film and history theorist Robert A Rosenstone, who organized a conference about *Pred doždot* and recently edited a special journal issue devoted to the film. Besides Mančevski's work, the decade of Macedonian cinema also saw some other successful releases, such as Stole Popov's *Gypsy Magic* (1997), and the sentimental story of inter-ethnic love *Preku ezeru* (*Across the Lake*, 1998), a debut feature of Antonio Mitrikeski.

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on Macedonian cinema, see the [Cinematheque of Macedonia site](#).



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Then, there is the growing number of dispersed Yugoslavs working in diaspora. These include literary figures such as Dubravka Ugrešić, Slavenka Drakulić, and Aleksandar Hemon, performance artists such as Marina Abramović, as well as film directors whose work is known internationally—Dušan Makavejev, the globe-trotting doyen of Yugoslav émigré directors, but also Rajko Grlić in the US, and Lordan Zafranović in Prague. From the younger generation of filmmakers, Berlin-based Zoran Solomun was one of the first to track down the emigration dimension of the Bosnian crisis in *Müde Weggefarten (Tired Companions)*, Germany, 1995), a topic tackled later on by Vienna-based Goran Rebić in *Yugofilm* (Austria, 1998), by London-based Jasmin Dizdar in *Beautiful People* (UK, 1999) and by Vancouver-based Davor Marjanović in *My Father's Angel* (Canada, 1999).<sup>6</sup> And, of course, there is the ill-positioned albeit best-distributed film of Predrag “Gaga” Antonijević *Saviour* (USA, 1997), which besides its questionable and superficial treatment of many issues, grossly copies from the largely unseen but much admired work of Zafranović, *Okupacija u 26 slika (Occupation in 26 Pictures)*, 1978), a classic of Yugoslav cinema.<sup>7</sup>

The cinematic world of former Yugoslavia today seems to be almost entirely dominated by men, thus confirming the allegations of the profoundly macho character of Yugoslav culture made by political scientist Sabrina Ramet or feminist Beverly Allen. Of course, there are talented actresses like Mirjana Joković (*Podzemlje* and *Bure baruta, Stršljen*) and Branka Katić (*Ubistvo s predumišljajem* and *Crna mačka, beli macor*), but the names of female directors like Gordana Boškov *Budenje proleća (The Awakening of Spring)*, 1993) or

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on *Beautiful People*, see [the film's website](#).

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Goulding, *Occupation in 26 Pictures*, Flicks Books, Trowbridge, 1998.



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Mirjana Vukomanović *Tri letnja dana* (*Three Summer Days*, 1997) are barely known beyond the borders of Serbia, and the work of Sarajevan documentarian Vesna Ljubić (*Ecce Homo*, 1992-1994) and young Bosnian Jasmila Zbanić is seen mostly at specialized festivals.<sup>8</sup>

The most interesting productions from this part of the world are being showcased at two international venues - the annual Balkan Survey takes place at the Thessaloniki International Film Festival in November of each year.<sup>9</sup> It was here where many of the films talked about in this volume were first seen. A lesser-known venue are the annual January Alpe-Adria Film Meetings in Trieste. The Istanbul Film Festival, taking place in April, has also developed a permanent Balkan focus.<sup>10</sup> In 2000, the Venice biennale held an extensive panorama of Balkan cinema, curated by veteran critic Sergio Grmek Germani, in close collaboration with Dušan Makavejev.

Wrapping up the decade, it is very likely that the year 2000 will mark the end of the series of films that dealt with the painful and traumatic Yugoslav break-up. The directors responsible for the most important of these films now seem to have switched not only to other geographical but also to other thematic dimensions. Emir Kusturica of *Underground* (1995) established himself in France, starred in Patrice Leconte's *La veuve de Saint-Pierre* (*The Widow of Saint-Pierre*, 2000) alongside Juliette Binoche and recently toured various jazz festivals with his band, No Smoking. His next project will be an adaptation of D M Thomas's *The White Hotel* (1981). This shattering novel (which begins as an erotic piece and

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<sup>8</sup> A sample of Jasmila Zbanić's work can be seen at the [surival-art.org website](http://surival-art.org).

<sup>9</sup> See [the festival website](#).

<sup>10</sup> See [the festival website](#).



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then evolves into a psychoanalytical study of hysteria and ends up as a critique of the limitations of psychoanalysis when faced with the mighty flows of historical violence in the massacre of Babiy Yar), will be filmed from a script by the late Dennis Potter. One of Fellini's regular cameramen has been enlisted for this entirely Western-produced project.

Srđan Dragojević (*Lepa sela, lepo gore* and *Rane*) left Belgrade at just about the time of the bombing over Kosovo started and landed in New York. He has since moved to Los Angeles, where he is engaged in pre-production for a Miramax-supported movie. He has, for now, vowed not to return to the explosive topic of Yugoslavia.

Goran Paskaljević, the director of *Tuđa Amerika* (*Someone Else's America*, 1995) and *Bure baruta*, has lived in Paris since the early 1990s and is at the time of writing shooting his new film (an Italian, Irish, French and British co-production) on location in Mexico.<sup>11</sup>

Life goes on, and the new films of these directors, as well as of those others whom I mentioned here, are eagerly anticipated. One thing is certain—not only in regard to former Yugoslavia, but in European cinema at large, the 1990s will be remembered with the films about the Balkans conflicts and traumas.

## Dina Iordanova

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<sup>11</sup> For more details on Goran Paskaljević, see the [director's official website](#).



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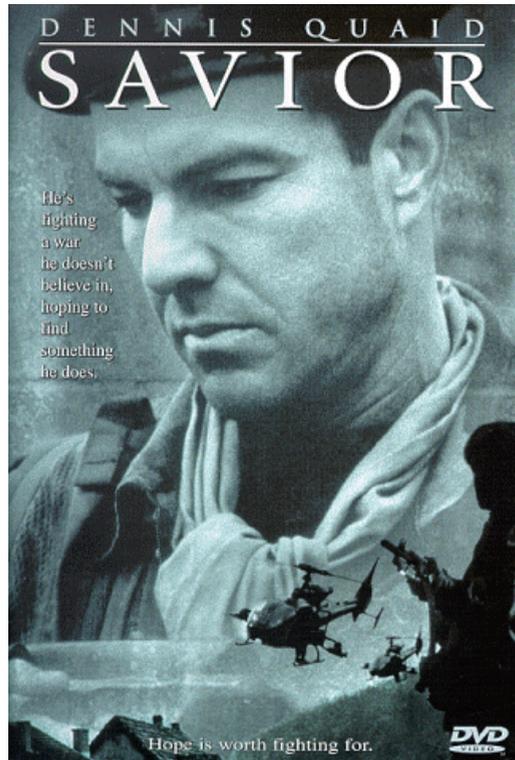
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## Who Will Take the Blame?



How to make an audience grateful for a family massacre \*

Péter Krasztev

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## The unsavable

By a lucky chance, I managed to get into the Belgrade premiere of the Predrag “Gaga” Antonijević film *Spasitelj* (*The Saviour*, 1998), a Serb-American co-production. Not a single seat was left empty in the main hall of the Sava Centar which seats four thousand. The local political and intellectual elites were showing off their English and French outfits and, in the rows before me, well-known war criminals were clutching their wives’ hands in excitement.

The story starts in Paris. An American diplomat is preparing for a dinner out with his wife and young child when an American officer appears and tells him confidentially that he has found out about plans of a terrorist attack by Muslim fundamentalists—could they talk urgently? They have barely left the restaurant when a mighty bang is heard, the building collapses, the diplomat rushes back and, amidst the rubble, finds his wife and child lying in blood. In the next scene he is sitting next to the coffin of his beloved and, distraught with grief, swears a terrible vengeance. He rushes into the street, straight into the first Muslim prayer house that he sees and massacres the Muslims who are praying there.

The tension which had held the viewers spellbound was suddenly released, and the select audience burst out cheering and applauding frantically. Even though I had known

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from the start that I was not sitting among rebellious Belgrade students or pacifist intellectuals, the experience was horrifying. But to assume that I had spent two moderately exciting hours breathing the same air with four thousand potential mass murderers would be neither professional nor humane, even in retrospect.

At the press conference following the premiere, Dennis Quaid, who played the diplomat, told us in a slightly uneasy manner that he had been surprised by the audience's reaction, but then reminded himself that his people gave way to similar emotions whenever they were shown the homes of indigenous Americans on fire.

Reference to universal human stupidity, however, cannot satisfactorily explain how a propaganda mechanism could create such an entirely spontaneous and uniformly subhuman response to a dramatic feature. The family massacre as a cliché has proven a reliable trigger from Taiwan to Hollywood—such a scene should wake the vengeful monster in even the meekest of viewers. But this was something different. What I saw was the ultimate aim of persistent and aggressive brainwashing, the creation of a “grateful” (ie bad) audience. Metaphors charged with the suitable meanings—in this case the metaphor of the family—can be thrown among such a responsive audience at any time and in any context and will yield a predictable explosion. No ideologue could wish for more than that.

## **Sublime sufferings of an ideologue**

Despite how it may appear on first glance, the post-Yugoslav ideologue of our time is not in an easy position as he must elaborate a rhetoric which is effective in three directions



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simultaneously. Firstly, the rhetoric of the present-day film-maker / ideologue must act to create the above-mentioned “grateful” audience. In other words, the rhetoric must soothe society into accepting without qualm or query any sort of war crime or economic crime. Secondly, it must be aware that it determines, to a great extent, future’s image of the present. This means that the criminals of the present day must also be made immune to reproach or investigation on a historical scale. Finally, it must manipulate external observers, at least to such a degree that they become hesitant in uttering their disparaging judgements.

The first challenge was taken up quite easily. In 1994, Renata Salecl systematically analysed the main sources from which the elements of the new mythology –with which the Serbian audience was meant to be anaesthetised– were drawn. According to her analysis, the new ideology uses an indiscriminate mixture of traditional Stalinism, proto-fascist right-wing populism, etatism, the mythologising of nationalism, bourgeois liberalism and patriarchal metaphor.<sup>12</sup> This relatively simple task was accomplished by through state-controlled media, initially creating the appearance of free competition which was later replaced by outright dictatorial means.

The brainwashing of contemporaries is similarly easy, but the much more challenging task is the invention of an historical narrative which can help Serbian posterity to sublimate the crimes of the 1990s and which can avert all the frustrations that are predictably towering on the horizon. At the same time, this historical narrative needs to offer Western analysts a metaphor which they can substitute for the real history that took place and might even divert

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<sup>12</sup> Renata Salecl, *The Spoils of Freedom: Psychoanalysis and Feminism After the Fall of Socialism*, New York-London, 1994, p 64.



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historians at a later stage. This delicate task could not be entrusted to the domestic media; it could be made possible only through some sort of aesthetic missile that is rapid and has massive range. This is what filmmaking offered and this is why no one ever begrudged it the millions it cost, even in the years of the worst poverty.

The Yugoslav ideologue of our time has found the obvious solution—he tries to play up the universal human stupidity to which we have already alluded. In his excellent essay “Europe in the Balkan Mirror,” Jacques Rupnik gives ample consideration to the question we have just outlined and comes to the conclusion that the West has only tried to interpret the events of the Yugoslav region according to two code systems, both of which are erroneous.<sup>13</sup>

One of these is the cliché of belated modernisation, according to which we may view what is taking place in Yugoslavia as the same as what happened in other Eastern European countries at the time of the emergence of nation states. The only difference is that, for historical reasons, the ideas of the German Enlightenment reached Yugoslavia after a considerable delay. This line of interpretation is exploited mainly by people who think of themselves as among the Slovenian and Croatian “national elite.” They argue that their declarations of independence were the result of a long and torturous struggle by their people. Accordingly, the Yugoslav wars were not the overture but the final chord of a fight for independence, meaning that they cannot represent a historical reference point of any importance. Consequently, in these two countries, no significant film about the war was ever produced, with the rare exception of Croatian director Vinko Brešan’s *Kako je počeo rat na*

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<sup>13</sup> Jacques Rupnik, “Europa in Balkanspiegel,” *Lettre Internationale*, 1998. No 42, pp 96-97.



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*mome otoku* (*How the War Started on My Island*, 1996), but this comedy does not bear any ideological ballast.

According to the other Western code of interpretation that Rupnik introduces, what we are facing is the irrational outburst of a tribal hostility that had been long suppressed in the Balkans. Such a representation of the situation has supplied the Serbian and, to a lesser extent the Macedonian, propaganda industry with an inexhaustible wealth of arguments and metaphors—the very raw material for which movies are an excellent vehicle. The basic argument is a reiteration of the central tenet of that dubious masterpiece of political theory, Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations*. In the Balkans, the argument goes, people live in a different world, ruled by different legal, economic and historical necessities. Irrational violence is an elemental part of everyday life, something the thesis holds that observers from the outside world will never understand. It is best, then, that they leave the local peoples alone. The paradox in this statement is that the “unfathomability,” “unutterability” and “mystery of the place” which was originally included in the tribal, irrational explanation is then reinforced by those who are being observed, then referred back to the source where this nonsense was initially invented for purposes of self-reassurance.

It is within this tribal-irrational-patriarchal context that the metaphor of the family creates its own semantic field and exercises its manipulative power.

It is surprising but true that the family metaphor hardly ever surfaces in a pure form within the political rhetoric of the era before the emergence of the first Yugoslav state. In 1867, when the leaders of the Croatian National Party agreed with the Serbian government about the necessity of creating a joint state, allusions were made to the historical kinship of



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the peoples inhabiting the region. But on this occasion the formula declared that the "Southern Slavic tribes" needed to be united. The country as a family became a more widespread theme under Tito. It was he who spoke about "brotherhood and unity" (*bratstvo i jedinstvo*), about a common Yugoslav identity and who always tried to suggest that he was the head of this family, the father, tacitly appointing himself as the *paterfamilias* of the Yugoslav nation. Not all East European dictators dared to overtly assume the title of the Father of the Nation in the manner of Kemal Atatürk, who boasted in a similar vein of having created the Turkish nation.

The central family metaphor of the era of "peaceful socialism" in Yugoslavia was used by director Emir Kusturica in his film *Otac na službenom putu* (*When Father was away on Business*, 1985) Under the conditions of totalitarian dictatorship the family was only point of certainty, the hinterland to which the humiliated and persecuted individual could retreat.

## **The man of our time creates the epoch**

Kusturica has always been a man of his times, then as now. *Podzemlje—bila jednom jedna zemlje* (*Underground—Once Upon a Time There Was a Country*, 1995), a film made with massive state subsidies, is a veritable encyclopaedia of manipulation techniques. Even so, it was awarded Palme d'Or at Cannes, fulfilling the most daring dreams of Belgrade ideologues: the West found narcissistic pleasure in rewarding the movie for reflecting all the typical Western misconceptions. *Podzemlje* proved to be the source of an inexhaustible historical metaphor, simultaneously exposing the supposed anti-Serbian manipulations of



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other nationalities (in Renata Salecl's terminology this amounts to mythologising of nationalism), Communist ideology (bourgeois liberalism), the loss of traditional values (the patriarchal metaphor) and the corruption of the West (traditional Stalinism). In other words, everyone received a spectacular chastisement, yet all parties seemed very satisfied with the end product.

*Podzemlje* is another film in which "history at large" is brought closer to the viewer through a family, more precisely by a love triangle simulating a family. In the story, which begins during the Second World War, two southern macho types fight for the heart of the character Natalia. They are embodiments of two common stereotypes of Communist resistance fighters. One is Crni, the sucker with a pure heart, who has true faith in the ideal and is thus easily manipulated, while the other is Marko, the intellectual, careerist, money-minded manipulator who seems never to lose in any situation.

In accordance with the patriarchal stereotypes, women are never seen as anything other than a means to satisfy the possessive greed of men, a mere tool in any given situation—and even ready to "collaborate" with a Nazi officer. Natalia has no principles and, instead, is subservient to the intentions and designs of the two men, even though all she dreams about throughout the film is a conventional, peaceful family life. Within the context of the film, both men have a "claim" on this woman—each considers her to be "his" wife.

The family metaphor encoded in the film is not difficult to decipher. In Kusturica's vision the history of Yugoslavia since the war has been nothing but lies, false consciousness and a simulation of reality. Nothing is genuine, similarly to the marriages of the characters, in which we never find out which is the real husband, nor is it ever decided which is the real



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world—the underground one or the one on the surface. The female figure could represent the idea of Yugoslavism itself, which everyone wishes to possess.

In fact, both of the rival parties end up frustrated—Crni because during the war he lost his fertility, and Marko because he hypocritically supports an appearance of things which is incompatible with fatherhood. Since one is incapable and the other is unworthy of fatherhood, there is no one to perpetuate or even maintain the patriarchal order. Although Crni had a son by his wife before the war, the boy was shot from a helicopter by people whom Crni believed to be fascists. In the scene following the son's death, we see Crni as a Četnik leader, burning Bosnian villages believed to be fascist and issuing execution orders for everybody, including Marko and Natalia.

All the film's elements are metaphorical in nature—the woman, both male figures, the family, the space and time of the film, even sin itself is a metaphor, meaning that nothing is real: Men and women are only the vehicles for concepts; the family is unreal since it remains childless; time and space are those of the Balkans (ie: they exist only in a symbolic sense; and, most importantly, sin is not real as it has no protagonist who could be blamed for it. Everything is the result of the accursed duplicity and duality of this Balkan world, of the fact that one nation cannot have two fathers. The only culprit in the massive destruction is sinister, unfortunate history, which keeps haunting the region, bringing out inhabitants' urge to kill. The people of this area yearn for nothing other than to escape from the shadow world of this simulation and to experience the “real thing.” We shall return later to exactly what Kusturica considers this real thing to be.



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In a witty and spirited lecture, historian and War Minister John Keegan declared that Winston Churchill defined the image of the Second World War to be used by post-war Anglo-Saxon historians in a single, famous sentence: “In war, resolution; in defeat, defiance; in victory, magnanimity; in peace, good will.”<sup>14</sup> The first statement about the Yugoslav war was uttered by Kusturica, in the language of film.

In his film *Ubistvo s predumišljajem* (*Premeditated Murder*, 1994), Gorčin Stojanović echoes Kusturica’s thesis about historical lies using devices which are slightly less overtly manipulative, drawing on the story of two family tragedies. In one, he tells the history of the love between a young woman from Belgrade who belongs to the opposition and a Serbian fighter from the Krajina who has returned wounded from the front. The woman had been deserted by her parents, while the man’s parents had been killed by Croats. The woman spends her time reconstructing her grandmother’s life-story from after the Second World War, and the grandmother’s story provides the other thread for the drama. Her rich bourgeois family had been impoverished by the Communists, but this did not stop her from falling in love with a Communist Party officer, thus becoming unfaithful to her previous lover—her own foster brother. The tension of the triangle is resolved when the foster brother shoots the Communist officer and the audience is left guessing who the young woman’s true grandfather was.

The meaning of family history as a metaphor is not very different here than in Kusturica’s version—a “system conceived in sin” can only come to a sinful end. There is no

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<sup>14</sup> John Keegan, “Do We Need a New History of the Second World War?” in Stig Ekman and Nils Edling (eds) *War Experience, Self-Image and National Identity: The Second World War as Myth and History*, 1997, p 82.



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hope for family bliss since too much tension accumulated over the previous decades for the conflict to have any rational resolution. The son's vengefulness proves stronger than the positive emotions of the film. Even though, toward the end he relieves himself by screaming "I know that war is a load of crap," he goes back to the front, only to be carried home dead to Belgrade. As with the post-Second World War subplot, this story ends in death. Love cannot be fulfilled and it is impossible for a family to emerge—but history returns and will explain the present.

## **Macedonian variations**

The family metaphor has also been an inspiration for several Macedonian filmmakers in the last few years. Milčo Mančevski's hugely successful movie, *Pred doždot* (*Before the Rain*, 1994), is the most evident example of the use of the irrational tribal cliché. The recurring wave of violence is presented by the director as a natural catastrophe which strikes the people of the region regardless of human will. At the beginning of the story (which in this case does not coincide with the beginning of the film) a lusty, married shepherd sets eyes on a young Albanian girl. He tries to rape her, at which point she unhesitatingly stabs him with a pitchfork. It is here that the usual Balkan vendetta narrative begins, the essence of which is that since the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Albanians and Macedonians have become culturally incompatible. Returning elements are the false or mythical consciousness of the characters, the destructive practices of half-witted individuals reared on Partisan films and the accumulated historical tension which, according to the nature of things, is bound to resurface some time or another.



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The director includes the story of two failures to establish a family, in order to make palpable what might be called “the metaphysics of history.” The hero, Aleksandar, is a well-known photographer returning from England. Sixteen years earlier, he had wanted to marry his Albanian lover, at a time when this was still possible. The woman pays her one-time lover a secret night visit and, at the same time, asks him to save her daughter, who is none other than the murderer of the rapist shepherd—who also happens to be the photographer’s cousin. Aleksandar fetches the young girl the next morning, but her relatives shoot him. The girl flees to a monastery, finding refuge in the cell of a young monk who turns out to be Aleksandar’s nephew. In one night they fall in love with each other, the monk smuggles the girl out of the monastery and they are busy planning their future life together when the girl’s Albanian relatives appear and shoot the girl. Illusions disappear. There is no chance for family reunion since time runs its mythological circles and events recur in the same way as they happened decades ago. The family as a political metaphor interprets the present with the touch of metaphysics.

A peculiar interpretation of the metaphor of the family can be detected in *Samounistwanje* (*Self-destruction*, 1996), another Macedonian film (albeit made by a Turkish director working in Skopje, Erbil Altanay). The technical standards of execution in *Samounistwanje* parallel, in places, those of an average Czech or Hungarian TV soap opera. The main character is a taxi driver with an inherently aggressive personality. He is not only unfaithful to his wife on a regular basis, but also beats her and, at one point, betrays his benefactors for money. All the while he is dripping with nostalgia for the old Yugoslavia,



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where he could at least make ends meet, since neither the multi-party system, nor the nation state, nor freedom can be exchanged for bread.

The cabby is merciless, raping his son's virgin girlfriend who, consequently, becomes pregnant. Carried along by the same impulse, he also tries to rape his own wife but the son can no longer watch this passively—he hits his father and cripples him for life. The story ends on an unexpectedly idyllic note—the family brings up the baby, the son drives the father's cab and makes a more than decent living out of it and order is restored. The viewer finds out that you can make your fortune under the new freedom, all we need are the appropriate people to first get rid of the fathers, then forgive their sins while, of course, bearing the consequences of these sins. With their hard working perseverance, this youthful generation can create an earthly paradise in this small, yet viable, nation state.

## **Return to the Kingdom of Heaven**

Kusturica himself also has a vision of an earthly paradise. As noted earlier, Jacques Rupnik benevolently misunderstands the closing sequence of *Podzemlje*. He believes that the image of the land (the former Yugoslavia) “detaching itself from the continent while its inhabitants continue to sing and dance frenetically” to be an “arresting metaphor for the Balkan predicament today: confronted with the prospect of drift and marginalisation or overcoming the present crisis and creating the conditions for a ‘return to Europe’.”

In fact, the island is the scene of the wedding of a resurrected family in the wider sense: Marko officially marries Natalia, Crni wins his wife's forgiveness and their common



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son is present, together with all the other people who had been swept away by the chaos of different wars during the film. This is the island of happiness, the “Yugoslavia of ideas” as opposed to the “shadow” (underground) Yugoslavia, which is false and full of pretence, the heaven in which, at last, everything is real. It is that “real thing” which every mortal down below craves. For this to come to pass, it was necessary to become detached from the external world, since it is only the closest family (ie the nation state) in which we can be at home. Here, nobody can explode the family; we can be our own grateful audience.

While the happy island slowly floats away and we have fun, the blame is taken by Plato, Huntington, Baudrillard, the Manichean Bogumils, Rudolf Steiner and others whose metaphors about the bipolarity of the world are so frequently quoted and transformed into entertaining images by contemporary Yugoslav directors.

**Peter Krasztev** (translated by Orsolya Frank)



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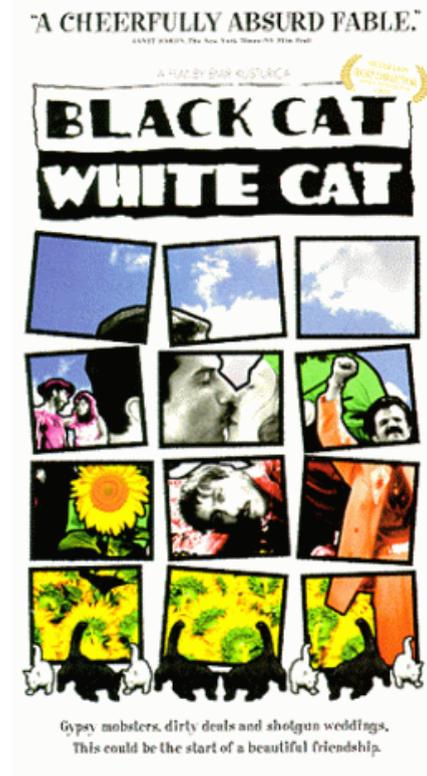
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## Critical Mush



*The South Bank Show* gives Emir Kusturica an easy ride \*

Andrew James Horton

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Emir Kusturica, the Sarajevo-born film director, has in his career experienced the extremes of adulation and moral outrage. *Podzemlje—bila jednom jedna zemlje* (*Underground—Once Upon a Time There Was a Country*, 1995), his most famous film, won him both a Palme d'Or at Cannes and accusations of spreading Serbian nationalist propaganda.

As a result, a British documentary on this most topical and controversial of directors, made for the renowned TV arts programme *The South Bank Show* and broadcast on ITV (Britain's independent television network) on 12 March 2000, had much of interest to discuss and analyse.<sup>15</sup> To help them to get to the root of the matter, the makers had unrivalled access to Kusturica in that much of the hour-long programme, directed by Gerald Fox, was made up of interviews with the director. This approach allowed the audience to gain an interesting insight into Kusturica's influences as a director and the rationale behind a few of his films.

However, the one-sided nature of the programme—the interviewer's questions were edited out leaving just the interviewee's uninterrupted words—meant that not only were serious questions left unanswered by the programme, but they were never actually asked.

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<sup>15</sup> In the US, *The South Bank Show* is broadcast on Bravo.



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Kusturica, therefore, had the perfect opportunity to defend his art without the audience being given the case against it.

## **Gypsy king**

In most cases, documentaries take a chronological approach in explaining a director's story. But *The South Bank Show* chose a more thematic approach, dealing with the relatively uncontroversial Gypsy films first, before moving onto the trickier topics of his forays into politics and history. Interspersed throughout were clips of Kusturica playing rhythm guitar with his band, No Smoking, whilst puffing away at a cigar in staunch defiance of the ensemble's name.

In both his political and his Gypsy films, the director's film-making style has drawn heavily on his childhood in a sprawling near-shanty-town of a suburb at the edge of multi-ethnic Sarajevo. He himself is a Muslim by birth. Despite the poverty, Kusturica considers himself lucky to have grown up among the Roma. In the documentary, he said it enabled him to experience the freedom they have in their lives:

they started drinking earlier than us, they started sleeping with girls earlier than we did. So, every spiritual process that every man has to go through they had instantly and with no problems.

Kusturica denied, though, that he was romanticising the harsh conditions that the Roma often have to endure, a frequent criticism of his films.

As well as training an eye for the minutiae of human behaviour, these early experiences taught him that naturalism had its limits in film, a realisation that has led him to



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the dense magic realism that has permeated the most controversial of his films. Of interest in this light is the director's admiration for French poetic realism, and particularly the "elegance" and "playful ground" found in Jean Renoir's *La règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*, 1939). Later, Kusturica compared himself to Hieronymous Bosch in his wish to control detail.

Kusturica's fame started in 1981 with *Sjećas li se Dolly Bell?* (*Do You Remember Dolly Bell?*), which won both a Golden Lion and the FIPRESCI Award at Venice for its depiction of Sarajevo life on the breadline. With the kudos these prestigious awards gained him, he was able to make a film on a politically sensitive topic, *Otac na službenom putu* (*When Father Was Away on Business*, 1985). The film's title comes from the euphemism used by mothers to explain to the children where their dad was when he was locked away as a political prisoner, and the plot was indirectly inspired by Kusturica's own life, as many of his father's friends were jailed for not supporting Tito when the decisive split with Stalin came in 1948. The political element is only one side of the film, though, and the painful love story goes, as Kusturica acknowledged in the documentary, "deeply into the substance of human life." It was even more successful than his debut, earning the director his first Palme d'Or at Cannes.

*Otac na službenom putu* also saw Kusturica experiment with magic realism for the first time, allowing one of his characters to fly—another feature that would become increasingly important in his imagery. As Kusturica himself explains, flight represents the symbolic overcoming of gravity and freedom of the soul.

Kusturica's reputation increased with *Dom za vešanje* (*Time of the Gypsies*, 1989), which allowed him to vent his imagination more fully. Some audiences, however, started to sense



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an increasing loss of control over the overall story, with too much attention paid to imagistic detail.

## **A dream flops**

This trend was confirmed in *Arizona Dream* (1993), the first (and so far the only) Kusturica film to be directed and set in the United States. Made while teaching at Columbia University, *Arizona Dream* was Kusturica's own interpretation of what the American dream has become. Although he was able to draw on big names such as Johnny Depp, Jerry Lewis and Faye Dunaway in the cast list, the film was a critical disaster. Overly long, rambling, pretentious and failing to analyse America in any meaningful way, the film was felt by many to illustrate that Kusturica was now a director with an ego out of control.

No mention of this was made in the documentary, although Kusturica did put his side of the story across, explaining that, faced with a decision between making films in his style or yielding to the pressure to make marketable hits, he reacted by becoming even more personal than in his previous films.

But the controversy around the director really heated up with his next film, the notorious *Podzemlje*, his attempt to portray the tragic history of his country. Having returned to a war-torn Yugoslavia from his time teaching at Columbia, Kusturica was invited to make a film explaining the background to the war. He thus set about adapting a 20-year-old play by Dušan Kovečević, a process which involved stripping it of all but its most basic plot elements.



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The first cut of the film was a staggering 5 hours and 12 minutes (this full version of the film is nevertheless occasionally shown), and the studio gingerly persuaded Kusturica to re-edit the film to knock a couple of hours off it. Even now, in its three-hour form, its most enthusiastic defenders agree that it is still too long and could do with an extra half hour removed from the middle.

## 50 Years of History

The story concerns two loveable rogues, Crni (translatable as “Blacky,” and played by Lazar Ristovski) and Marko (Miki Manojlović). When World War II comes, the two staunch patriots join the resistance to win back their country and—more importantly—the women they both love from the clutches of the Germans. Forced into hiding, the two carry on their resistance by manufacturing rifles. When the war ends, Marko is somewhat reluctant to give up his armaments factory, and so he convinces the people hiding in his cellar that the war is still continuing. Marko sells the guns they produce for his own profit.

Meanwhile, Marko is also getting ahead in the Communist Party, using his war-time resistance credentials to help him up the ladder. This is not the only duplicity he engages in, as he is also married to Natalija in his above-ground existence without Crni knowing. By the time the characters emerge from their cellar, the Bosnian war has started and the deception is complete.

*The South Bank Show* merely pointed out that the film is “controversial” and that it made him persona non grata in his home town. The only other thing it chose to say on the



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subject was that it won Kusturica his second Palme d'Or: a rather selective presentation of the arguments raging over the film.

Supporters maintain that it is a complex film, working on many levels. They point out the director's acute awareness of the contradictions of Yugoslavia's troubled history and argue that the film satirises the dishonesty and opportunism of the warmongers. One critic, mindful of both the comedy and tragedy of the film, describes it as being "as if The Marx Brothers had been enlisted to tell us the history of man's inhumanity to man."<sup>16</sup>

Detractors have labelled the film pro-Milošević, pointing out that it presents the Balkans as some great arena of madness, in which an ingrained mentality makes violence inevitable and unstoppable. This, critics say, puts Kusturica in line with Serbian foreign policy at the time, which was to try and cloud the issue of Bosnia and make it seem somehow beyond rational comprehension. The aim was to induce a "there's no easy solution, let's leave them to shoot it out" type of response in audiences. Moreover, the film's subtitle, "Once Upon a Time There Was a Country," has been taken by many to indicate that the film is an exercise in nostalgia for Yugoslavia in its largest sense.

Critics interpreting the film in this light have some powerful extra-filmic evidence to draw on. Kusturica defended the Milošević regime in its early years in interviews, and later, although he was less vociferous in his support, adopted much the same language that Milošević was using to express himself to the press. At the film's premiere in Belgrade, the warlord Arkan and other high-profile nationalists were invited and attended.

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<sup>16</sup> Bruce Kirkland, "[Underground Sees the Light](#)," *Toronto Sun*, 24 October 1997.



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## Unrepentant

All of these are points which *The South Bank Show* seemed unwilling to touch upon, either to defend or attack. As with almost everything in the programme, Kusturica's own words, spoken in a thick accent and with dodgy grasp of English grammar (the director's quotes have been edited for the sake of readability), are all that was presented.

"I grew up with a certain resistance—which I think is good anyway—to the politicians in power," he explains while talking about *Otac na službenom putu*. On *Podzemlje* itself he says that it is

about the kind of absurdity of when people swallow the ideological pill. They basically become hypnotised and they don't realise that time has passed. There are endless extended sequences that show what was the lie of all Communism. [*Podzemlje*] was made as a deep reaction to all that I felt about us. It is basically a story about love, about manipulation and about the tragic history of this country and of its people with their great emotions, and by their tradition they stay almost half a century behind and developed a deep misunderstanding with the rest of the world.

He went on to explain that *Podzemlje* was a reaction to a sort of collective amnesia which gripped Yugoslavia when it started to break up and that people wanted to deny that Yugoslavia had ever existed. *Podzemlje* was, therefore, an attempt to remind people that "once upon a time there was a country." However, he did acknowledge that *Podzemlje* had attracted some critical flak:



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This movie gained me my biggest controversy, you know, because I was not screaming slogans against Milošević. For most people it was a sign I was Milošević's man. But anyone who sees this film can recognise that somebody who was close to Milošević could never make this film. It was just a continuation of the absurdity of my life that, on the one hand, I was described as a darling of the Milošević regime [...] and, on the other hand, Milošević's wife was heavily attacking me in Serbia for not losing even a minute to portray the Serbian nation in a bad light. And somehow it was proof to me that I am on the right path.

Such comments are hardly going to convert the sceptical, and presented almost completely without a context they do little to probe what Kusturica really intended (either consciously or unconsciously).

## About-turn

The failure of the programme did not end there. Following the row over *Podzemlje*, Kusturica swore never to make a film again. However, a few years later he was back with *Crna mačka, beli macor* (*Black Cat, White Cat*, 1998). This sudden U-turn is not something that Kusturica deigned to comment on, and quite why he changed his mind is still not entirely clear. Although the programme dwelled for some time on *Crna mačka, beli macor* (perhaps even a disproportionate length of time in relation to its importance in his oeuvre) there was little to explain, either directly or indirectly, this most puzzling of conundrums.



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All the more interesting to know would be his feelings about making a film about Yugoslavia at the end of the 1990s in which there is a total lack of reference to the country's history and to the wars of succession, as is the case with *Crna mačka, beli macor*. Some might argue that there is nothing wrong and perhaps even something commendable in such an approach—after all, why should we reduce the former Yugoslavia to a stereotype of violence and internecine war? Nevertheless, the film is something of a retreat from the hard-hitting approach of *Podzemlje*.

With *Crna mačka, beli macor*, Kusturica returns to a subject that has won him acclaim—the life and culture of the Roma. More than any other film made by Kusturica, this is a film out for laughs. He does not abandon his love of the absurd. This time, however, it is channelled more into the set design than into the narrative structure or the plot, both of which are highly traditional. Lasting a relatively slim 130 minutes, the film sees Kusturica reign in his ego and create a tightly controlled film which is not going to upset anyone. Its light, consciously inoffensive style makes it reminiscent of a 1950s Ealing comedy.

Kusturica is now reported (not by *The South Bank Show*, mind you) to be working on a Dennis Potter script of D M Thomas' novel *The White Hotel*. Whether this will see a return to the director's old narrative and symbolic adventurousness or see him continue in his new-found timidity remains to be seen, all the more so since Gerald Fox and *The South Bank Show* had nothing to comment on this venture and neglected to question the director on his future in film.

Until *The White Hotel* is released, Kusturica commentators have plenty to chew on and the debate over his career—and especially *Podzemlje*—is far from finished. To my mind,



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Kusturica is likely to be written into the history books not as an ardent nationalist, but as a politically naive film-maker who has chosen his company foolishly, and as a man whose ego outstrips his understanding of his actions.

Until a more probing documentary on Kusturica is made, much of this is conjecture, however, and the vital questions remain unanswered.

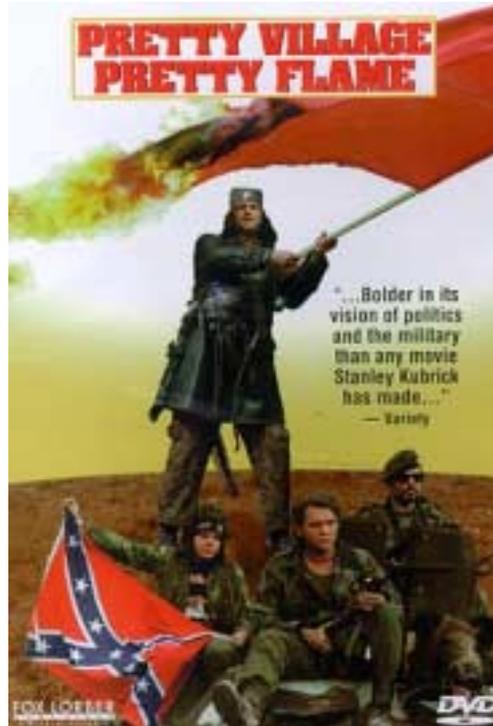
**Andrew James Horton**



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## “Showtime Brothers!”



A vision of the Bosnian war:  
Srđan Dragojević's *Lepa sela, lepo gore* (1996)

Igor Krstić



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## A controversial hit

Whilst Emir Kusturica's *Podzemlje—bila jednom jedna zemlje* (Underground—Once Upon a Time There Was a Country, 1995) may well be the most famous Yugoslav film of the 1990s to have divided critics and sparked bitter controversy with its portrayal of modern Serbian history, it is not the only one. Srđan Dragojević's *Lepa sela, lepo gore* (Pretty Village, Pretty Flame, 1996), a narrative of the Bosnian war shot from a clearly Serbian narrative perspective, has had praise and vitriol heaped on it in equal measures. The film was shown in the former Yugoslavia only a few months after the Dayton Peace Accord was signed and was widely regarded in Croatia and Bosnia as being “pro-Serbian,” a “provocation” and an “incorrect representation” of the war. A critic writing in a Croatian journal remarked:

This film is humiliating for all those people who know what happened over the last four years in Bosnia. Imagine how the world would have reacted if the Germans had made a film in 1946 about the Second World War with the subtext: “We are crazy—that’s fucking right! But we are the strongest anyway.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Marcel Štefančič, “Filmski dnevnik Marcela Štefančiča jr (32),” *Arhiv. Zagreb* 6 12 1996, no 79, p 35 (translated by the author).



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Nevertheless, *Lepa sela, lepo gore* was the biggest-grossing Serbian film in Belgrade at the time and—more interestingly—the first Serbian film to enjoy success in neighbouring Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia and Macedonia after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991. The film has also since been shown in the West to critical acclaim.

Whilst judgements for and against the film have been dogmatic, the film itself is a complex, layered work, which draws on popular film genres to interpret the Bosnian war. *Lepa sela, lepo gore* not only uses and re-writes the popular motifs and clichés of the so-called Yugoslav Partisan films but also employs concepts and stylistic features of American Westerns and Vietnam films. The complex flashback structure and the various sub-plots of the film resist a unifying and unambiguous interpretation of the Bosnian war—of causes and effects or of the roots of the conflict. Instead, the film offers various interpretations and centers on the antagonisms within the Serbian squad, showing their inner conflicts, their worn-out ideals and the aimlessness of their lives.

By examining the allusions and subtexts and interpreting the various layers of meaning related to the war in Bosnia, it can be seen that Dragojević is presenting a complex narrative, central to which is the symbolism of the “Brotherhood and Unity” tunnel, where most of the action takes place. The question here is how Dragojević’s film uses this symbolism to represent the most important issue of the Bosnian war: the roots and causes of ethnic hatred and irrational violence in Bosnia.

In doing this, I aim to avoid an ethical or moral discussion, which might lead to misinterpretations and hasty accusations of propaganda, as was seen in the controversy surrounding Kusturica’s *Podzemlje*. This reading of *Lepa sela, lepo gore* will discuss matters of



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cinema aesthetics, which, in the view of this author, are the only means through which cinema can be “political” or “critical.”

Before these issues can be discussed, however, it is necessary to introduce the film and its plot.

## **The film**

The film tells the story of the Serb Milan (Dragan Bjelogrić) and the Muslim Halil (Nikola Pejaković)—childhood friends from a Bosnian village—from Milan’s point of view. Beginning with Milan lying wounded and traumatized in a Belgrade military hospital in 1994, the film flits back to various time-frames, recalling Milan’s childhood memories with Halil around 1980 (Tito’s death), the time before the war in the early 1990s, when the two friends built up their own car repair shop, and to events during the spring of 1992, when Milan fought in a Serbian paramilitary platoon, burning Muslim villages and destroying houses. Milan’s Serbian paramilitary squad is loosely connected to the “official” army of the Bosnian Serbs. The main narrative of the film centers on the siege of Milan’s platoon inside the “Brotherhood and Unity” tunnel near his village, surrounded by a Muslim unit.

The first scene is a Communist propaganda newsreel from 1971, when the tunnel was opened for a never-to-be-finished highway between Zagreb and Belgrade. The tunnel remains unused and is a forbidden place for Milan and Halil as children, who fear that if they enter, “the ogre who lives in it will come out and burn all the villages.”



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The film uses long scenes of dialogue and, by employing flashbacks, the motives, conflicts and backgrounds of the characters entrapped in the tunnel are revealed. The besieging Muslims remain mere voices from outside, mocking the Serbs by parroting Serbian songs, jokes and insults. The life-long friends become sworn enemies; Milan's unit has burned Halil's car repair shop and Halil's unit has killed Milan's mother. At the end, almost all of the protagonists are dead except Milan, who survives with his traumatic memories. The film finishes ironically with a Bosnian newsreel, showing the newly rebuilt "Peace" tunnel officially re-opened.

## Partisan films and Westerns

The opening title of the film—"dedicated to the film industry of a country that no longer exists"—refers to Dragojević's quoting, referring and rewriting of established cinematic genre motifs. One of the main film genres employed by the film industry of "this country that no longer exists" was Partisan films. Dragojević refers to this immensely popular Yugoslav genre by casting Velimir Bata Živojinović as the commander of the Serbian paramilitary unit. Živojinović is known throughout Yugoslavia for his appearance in almost one hundred Partisan films, and is famous abroad for playing Tito's comrade with Richard Burton in Stipe Delić's *Sutjeska* (*The Fifth Offensive*, 1972). Živojinović, named Gvozden in the film (which translates as "hard like iron"), plays a man living in the past, still believing in Tito's Communism and the fight against fascism. A flashback shows him on the day of Tito's death (4 May 1980) when, as a high-ranking JNA (Yugoslav National Army) officer, he runs 350 km to Tito's grave—an almost religious act of pilgrimage.



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The cliché of Nazi Germany’s glorious defeat under the leadership of the deified Tito had become worn out even in the 1980s, when virtually no Partisan films were produced.<sup>18</sup> Dragojević’s 1996 reference to this genre can be seen within the context of the Partisan film genre as a kind of “Yugoslav Western,” constantly returning to the pioneer days of Tito’s Communist party and the founding mythologies of the state during the Nazi occupation in the Second World War. One of the most important Croatian film critics, Marcel Štefančić, described in a review on *Lepa sela, lepo gore*, its revision of popular genre mythologies:

it seems that from the Serbian perspective, the war in Bosnia came as a revision of genre-motifs of famous cinematic texts [...]. More specifically, the Serbs understand their wars as variations on their myths and also as permutations of the interior of their myths. That is why it is not surprising that they try in [*Lepa sela, lepo gore*] to give the impression that the characters come straight out of films (films by Sam Peckinpah or John Milius, Vietnam films, Partisan films and Westerns)—films which represent compact versions and locations (or battlefields) of popular mythologies. [...*Lepa sela, lepo gore*] is a film about a generation that watched the Partisan films of Bata Živojinović and ended up in a dark tunnel, looking dangerously like a movie theater.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See: Daniel J Goulding, “Yugoslav Film in the Post-Tito Era” in Daniel J Goulding (ed), *Post New Wave Cinema in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*. Indiana, 1989, pp 248-284.

<sup>19</sup> Marcel Štefančić, “Filmski dnevnik Marcela Štefančića jr (32),” *Arhiv*. Zagreb 6 12 1996, no 79, pp 36-37 (translated by the author).



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According to the structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, myths consist of systems of binary oppositions—rules and codes that turn around oppositions of nature and culture, animal and human being and individual and society.<sup>20</sup> These myths ensure the permanency and self-understanding of a social group (for example a nation).<sup>21</sup> The cinematic expression of modern myths within a “national” cinema uses such trans-historical or mythical binary oppositions. The Yugoslav Partisan film, for instance, represents a constant repetition of the opposition of good and brave Communists and evil fascist cowards. More significant, perhaps, is the victory of the (pre-modern) folkloric community of the Yugoslavs over the modernist alienating technology of the Germans.<sup>22</sup>

The bipolar / mythic structure of popular genres such as the Yugoslav Partisan film bears some similarity to that of the classic American Western. As the critics David Bordwell and Kirstin Thompson suggest, “Quite early the central theme of the [Western] genre became the conflict between civilized order and the lawless frontier [...]. The typical Western hero stands between the two thematic poles.”<sup>23</sup> The conflict between civilization and wilderness—a principal obsession of the classic American Westerns—also became a theme of the Bosnian war itself, which witnessed a regression into savagery, barbarism and primal

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<sup>20</sup> In: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*. London, 1972.

<sup>21</sup> A lot of studies had been made, in analysing the mythological structures of mostly American Hollywood films, which proliferate the historically given American ideology through trans-historical mythic structures. A structural analysis of classical narrative cinema for example with Vladimir Propp's analytic set of fairy tale structures or Lévi Strauss' model of binary oppositions, which operate in narratives as essential structuring principles.

<sup>22</sup> In *Sutjeska* for example the narrative centres on a battle near the river Sutjeska in Bosnia, where Tito's partisan army of 20,000 poorly armed soldiers faces a well-trained and high technologised German army of 100,000 soldiers. The most significant part of the film centres on a group of 5000 wounded soldiers, which have to be rescued by Tito's army.

<sup>23</sup> David Bordwell & Kirstin Thompson, *Film Art. An Introduction*. University of Wisconsin, 1997, p 56.



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fantasies of the kind of black and white antagonisms that proliferate in popular cinematic traditions (Partisans vs Germans, cowboys vs Indians, Croats vs Serbs or Serbs vs Croats).

Indeed, one finds in *Lepa sela, lepo gore* allusions to Westerns, when, for instance, in one of the flashbacks the Serb soldier (named Brzi, or “Speedy”) meets a drug dealer dressed like a cowboy. The cowboy dealer tells Speedy in the classic Western manner to behave “like a man” and go to war. In another scene the (Muslim) voices above the tunnel entrance mock the entrapped Serbs with lines such as: “When does the cavalry come? Maybe they don’t have horses?” A more concrete reference is found in a scene in which the seven trapped soldiers drink urine from a Coca-Cola bottle, clearly referring to Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch*, a Western made in 1969. Peckinpah’s film tells the story of five aging outlaws performing their last robberies in Texas and Mexico in 1913. They are themselves trailed by a group of released prisoners, who are promised their freedom only when they catch the “wild bunch.” The leaders of the two gangs were once friends, which is revealed in a number of flashbacks similar in form to the flashbacks used in *Lepa sela, lepo gore*.

## Vietnam films

*The Wild Bunch* is in fact a self-consciously *post*-classical Western, because the film inverts the typical clichés of the classic Western: bad against good and civilization against nature. The reference to *The Wild Bunch* in *Lepa sela, lepo gore* is therefore also a reference to more recent Hollywood cinema, in which the most significant American genre, the Western,



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has faced a fundamental crisis, partly brought on by the Vietnam crisis in American society at the end of the 1960s.

*Lepa sela, lepo gore* draws a parallel between the Serbian paramilitaries and Peckinpah's bunch, showing the decay of Yugoslav myths of folkloric brotherhood and unity. Like Peckinpah's bunch, the Serbs in the "unity" tunnel, gradually become aware of the frailty of their bonds and the mutually alien motives and concerns with the group. This is most significantly portrayed in a dialogue scene between Gvozden and Veljo, another soldier in the tunnel. When Gvozden accuses the younger generation of lacking honesty and honor, Veljo condemns Gvozden's hypocrite generation of hard-line Communists:

Do you think that one single house we burned—or ours that they burned—was honestly earned? If they were honestly earned, they wouldn't be so easy to burn. As long as Tito stuffed American dollars up your ass, you did pretty well blathering about "Brotherhood and Unity." And then the time came to settle the bill! You jerked off for 50 years, drove fancy cars, screwed the best girls and now, you can't get it up [...] Well I shit on that honour of yours and your whole honourable screwed-up generation!

This generational conflict between father and son is further explored when Speedy, the son of a high-ranking JNA general, confesses that going into war for him was more a form of detox therapy than a meaningful act of defending his country or pleasing his military father.

As in some Vietnam films—for example Oliver Stones' *Platoon* (1986)—Dragojević underlines the dilemma of meaning for the Serbs, with the inner conflicts of the group



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becoming more significant than the war against the enemy. In fact, it has become a code of American Vietnam films—John Irvin’s *Hamburger Hill* (1987), Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) or Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979)—to keep the enemy (in the jungle) invisible and off-screen, as Thomas Elsässer and Michael Wedel in their essay on *Apocalypse Now* describe:

In Vietnam War films [...] the jungle becomes the epitome of the horrible not because demotivated youngsters face a determined enemy defending their homelands, but because the films can draw on the topos of the “monster in the swamp”—nowhere to be seen and usually heard too late—in order to “represent” the Viet Cong.<sup>24</sup>

In *Lepa sela, lepo gore* this principle of keeping the enemy off-screen is transformed into an ironic cinematic metaphor, with the Muslim enemies represented as invisible voices, sounds and sometimes shadows at the end of the tunnel. Dragojević refers to Vietnam films more often during the film, for instance when the invisible Muslim “voice-over” wakes the trapped Serbs with an ironic “Good morning Četniks!” a reference to Barry Levinson’s *Good Morning Vietnam* (1987), a film about a radio program in Vietnam. Indeed, the Muslims above the tunnel perform through cellophones a kind of “radio-program” for the entrapped Serbs: they “entertain” them with songs, jokes and lines from films. When the final showdown comes, they end their “programme” with the words: “Showtime brothers! We are closing the disco. If you didn’t use our happy hour, fuck off!”

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Elsässer & Michael Wedel, “The Hollow Heart of Hollywood: Apocalypse Now and the New Sound Space” in Gene M Moore (ed), *Conrad on Film*. Cambridge, 1997, p 159.



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The most significant reference to Vietnam film motifs is, however, made to the famous opening scene from *Apocalypse Now*, in which appear super-impositions and dissolves of helicopter blades, close-ups of Captain Benjamin Willard's head lying on a bed, the burning jungle and the blades of a ventilator in Willard's room, all accompanied by the music of the Doors' "The End." Elsässer and Wedel argue that:

The complex audiovisual texture of the opening of *Apocalypse Now* serves as an apt prelude to the highly subjective mode of narration that will lead both Willard and the immediately disoriented viewer on a journey through psychological torment and violent horror.<sup>25</sup>

*Lepa sela, lepo gore* contains a similar opening: during the opening titles we hear the slowed-down sound of helicopter blades, reminiscent of the sound of an old film projector, or perhaps of a beating heart. The titles with the names of the protagonists are superimposed on a burning background. Then a slow dissolve moves into a close-up of Milan's wounded head, lying in the bed of a Belgrade military hospital, still with the background sound of helicopter / ventilator blades in Milan's hospital room. The next cut shows the actual blades of a medical helicopter. The camera then assumes Milan's subjective point of view, showing confusing images of wounded soldiers, who exit the helicopter, suddenly interrupted by a doctor, who presses an artificial respiration apparatus onto the camera, signifying Milan's face.

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<sup>25</sup> Elsässer & Wedel, p 162.



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The distortions of inner and outer reality on both auditory and visual levels, the intersections of the technologies of warfare (helicopters), cinema (camera) and organic sounds (heartbeats) introduce various themes of the film:

- (1) the entirely subjective mode of narration throughout the film (Milan's personal perspective);
- (2) Milan's flashback recollections, signifying both traumatic repetitions and a cinematic technique;
- (3) Milan's entrapment in the tunnel—a metaphor of the unconscious and of cinema in general;
- (4) the subjectivity of sound sources, either a part of the narrative or superfluous to it.

## Poetry and spectacle

Dragojević's reference to the Vietnam film mode, which represents warfare as a traumatic distortion of inner and outer reality, refers also to the concept of war as an aesthetic spectacle. A famous representative of the thesis of the intersection of warfare and cinema is Paul Virilio, who analyzed the various historical connections between the technologies of warfare and those of vision in his *War and Cinema, The Logistics of Perception*.

Virilio describes a phenomenon that Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* translated into a cinematic language, namely that of the intersections of show business and war—the “art of war” as a spectacle of the senses, a hallucinatory excess of psychological mystification. There



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are two significant scenes in *Apocalypse Now*, which underline these intersections: the helicopter attack on a Vietnamese village, orchestrated to Richard Wagner's "The Ride of the Valkyries," and the surreal scene in the middle of the jungle, where Playboy models stage a rock concert for American soldiers.

In *Lepa sela, lepo gore*, one finds similar interpretations of the cinematic potential of Bosnia's war. Dragojević's interpretation of the Bosnian war emphasizes directly the aesthetic quality, or the poetry, of the Serbian experience in Bosnia. The title itself (more literally translated from Serbo-Croatian as: "Beautiful villages burn beautifully") refers to the aestheticism of war. The film's most central scene provides a similar meta-commentary, when one of the surviving soldiers (the "Professor") reads to Milan from a half-burned book, a prose description of burning villages:

Professor: "We were surrounded by a great circle of strange celebration going on in all those places burning. And the flames just rose up and licked the clouds."

[*Cut to flashback of the Serb platoon watching a village they have set on fire burn*]

Veljo: "Beautiful villages burn beautifully, and ugly ones stay ugly, even when they burn."

Professor: "You would have been the best poet in my class, Veljo."

Veljo: "After so long behind bars, I am as well-read as Rimbaud."

[*Cut to Professor reading from the book in the hospital.*]



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Professor: “A single village burning is a nice sight. It looks cheerful. An ugly hamlet you wouldn’t notice during the day, at the bottom of an ugly little valley. But you can’t imagine how it is at night, when it’s burning, how nice it looks.”

Naturally, this scene has its connotations, especially considering the fact that Radovan Karadžić, the political leader of the Bosnian Serbs during the war who has now been indicted by the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague as war criminal, is himself a poet and a grandson of the Romantic Serb Vuk Karadžić (1787-1864), a transliterator of Serbian oral epics and founder of Serbo-Croatian literal grammarology. (Indeed, one can say that the Serbian Karadžić family stands at the very beginning of romantic Serbian nationalism and also at its very end.) Radovan Karadžić was, ironically, involved in arranging the film’s financing: he initially agreed to help fund it, but then changed his mind and boycotted the opening night.

The underlying “poetics” of Serb warfare in Bosnia, as it is presented in this scene, circulate around issues like celebration, violent destruction, fire and the tavern—issues the Dutch anthropologist Mathijs van de Port in his book, *Gypsies, Wars and Other Instances of the Wild: Civilisation and its Discontents in a Serbian Town*, points to in his discussion of the Serbian sexual economy and their “embrace of unreason.”

Just as wild gestures and savage displays of a lack of control adopted in the Gypsy bars can be understood as an appropriation of the forbidden and disgraceful self-images of the Serbs, so the militia seem to adopt the pose of the barbarian. [...] In the dress of the militia who grow beards and



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wear their hair long [...] and sit around the camp fire in the evening singing of the centuries-old struggle against Turkish domination [...] Unreason is an attractive attribute which they hope will make them feel unambiguously Serbian.<sup>26</sup>

Sitting around the camp fire—in this case the fire of burning villages—and singing the songs Karadžić’s grandfather Vuk wrote down two hundred years ago, with their barbarian appearances and a bottle of *sljivovic*, we see the stereotypical imagery associated with the ancient Serb resistance to their Turkish enemies. This is the poetry of the Bosnian war from a Serbian perspective, and this is what Dragojević is pointing to in this scene: romantic barbarism, the return to savagery and wilderness, and a folkloric rejection and violent destruction of civilization, modernity and technology.

Still, Dragojević emphasizes in his film the “modern,” spectacular side of the war, in counterpoint to the stereotypical images of Serb savagery and romantic nationalism, in order to present a more differentiated picture. In one scene, the burning of a village is accompanied by a Serbian rock song, with the words “All of Yugoslavia dances to rock’n roll, while everything around is going down the hole.” The protagonists dance to this song, while they set everything around in flames; Veljo sits comfortably in a chair in the middle of this spectacle and plays with a Game Boy, whistling an old Serbian folk song. The association of rock music with warfare or war psychosis has been made already in certain Vietnam films—*Apocalypse Now* (The Doors and The Rolling Stones) or *Platoon* (soul music

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<sup>26</sup> Mathijs van de Port, *Gypsies, Wars and Other Instances of the Wild. Civilisation and Its Discontents in a Serbian Town*, Amsterdam, 1998, p 219.



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with marijuana). The rock song in *Lepa sela, lepo gore* provides a commentary on the psychotic subtext of “losing control” and celebration the decay. The Game Boy, an important element of the iconography of the scene, may point to the virtual nature of war games.

## The metaphor of the “Brotherhood and Unity” tunnel

What gives the impression of continuity between Emir Kusturica’s epic film *Podzemlje* and Srđan Dragojević’s *Lepa sela, lepo gore*, despite the difference of genre, historical context and generation, is an obsession with the theme of the transformation of “blood brotherhood” into violent mutual antagonism. There is thus a constant reference to the dominant slogan of Tito’s Yugoslavia: the dogma of brotherhood and unity. *Lepa sela, lepo gore* sets its main focus on the “Brotherhood and Unity” tunnel, and the community of soldiers within it, a setting with metaphorical and literal analogies to the cellar environment and its community in *Podzemlje*. The common theme of fraternity seems to point toward questions of identity and the durability of communities on more than one level. Consider the problem of Self versus (Br)Other, and the fragility of such relationships, and that of the contrived “community” or fraternity, with its ideology of “brotherhood” kinship as the glue in the officially sanctioned social bond.

The objective correlative to these theoretical problems of community and self, and brother and enemy can be found in the ethnically based antagonisms at the heart of the Bosnian war, and at the heart of *Lepa sela, lepo gore*. The entrapment in the tunnel serves as a metaphor for Milan’s (and the Serbs’) entrapment in the unconscious. Halil and his Muslim



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platoon outside of the tunnel become, within this metaphor, voices and shadows of the ethnic Other: former neighbours and brothers now transformed into blood enemies. The Muslim voices symbolize perfectly what the Slovenian Philosopher Slavoj Žižek described as the “neighbour’s ugly voice”—the hated *jouissance* (enjoyment) of the neighbour.<sup>27</sup>

The repression of ethnic differences in the old Communist Yugoslavia is symbolically portrayed in one of the few childhood flashbacks: Halil warns Milan not to enter the tunnel, because a dangerous ogre lives inside, and when he comes out, he will burn all villages. Dragan Bjelogrić, the film’s producer, explained in an interview: “The ogre stands for the *fear of difference*, which the people of Bosnia never have been able to accept. [...the ideologies of] Communism, Brotherhood and Unity have tried to hide this ogre and to lock him into a cave.”<sup>28</sup> “Fear of difference” easily bleeds into a fear of losing one’s own ethnic identity, which manifests again as an irrational desire to exterminate the threat of the ethnic “Other.” *Lepa sela, lepo gore* is a metaphorization of this irrational but essentially human characteristic. The historical “cause” of ethnic hatred in the case of the former Yugoslavia was—from Dragojević’s perspective—the dissolution of the ethnic brotherhood ideology, which provoked an extreme desire to differentiate oneself from one’s ethnically separate neighbour. As the psychoanalyst Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen explains, this “too-closeness” of neighbours

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<sup>27</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*. London, 1997 in the chapter “Love Thy Neighbour? No Thanks!”, p 45-85.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Dragan Bjelogrić in *Arhiv* No 79. 6 12 1996, p 35 (translated by the author).



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provokes violence: “To love one’s neighbour as oneself is no doubt the shortest route to cutting his throat.”<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

*Lepa sela, lepo gore* provides a Serbian perspective on a highly controversial issue, considering what has indeed happened in Bosnia and more recently in Kosovo. The film aligns the viewer unconsciously (viewer-identification) with the perspective of the very people who raped, burned villages and genocidally executed Muslims and Croats in Bosnia. This subtle device, which blurs viewer sympathies and ultimately provokes introspection, understandably provoked an ambivalent public response. Many of the most critical simply viewed *Lepa sela, lepo gore* as “politically incorrect” or, more damning still, as propagandistic.

In truth, from the perspective of the critical eye, one sees a paradox of meaning in Dragojević’s film. On one hand, Dragojević seems to consider the Bosnian war from the Serb perspective as a re-enactment of warfare fantasies, drawn from the rich metaphorical vocabulary of Partisan and Vietnam films. On the other hand, the entrapment in the “Brotherhood tunnel” is an intelligent metaphor for unconscious Serbian fantasies of their solidarity against the threat of the ethnic enemy. *Lepa sela, lepo gore* therefore has to be considered as a film that does not take an ideological side. It is rather a genuinely complex cinematic exploration of the Bosnian war and, moreover, an exploration of the Serbian self-

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<sup>29</sup> Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, “The Freudian Subject,” in Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. W W Norton, 1974, p 93.



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deception, steeped in fantasies of ethnic hatred, blood enemies and the myths of national identity.

**Igor Krstić**



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## An Aesthetic of Chaos



The blurring of political subtexts in film depictions of the Bosnian war \*

Benjamin Halligan

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## The demise of order

The aesthetic of chaos which characterised much of Yugoslav cinema after the death of Marshall Tito found a match in a content of chaos when war broke out across Yugoslavia in 1992. Self-management was seen to have ground to a long-anticipated halt with the death of Tito; in Yugoslavia, Socialism had stultified almost a decade before the Berlin Wall came down. On the Yugoslav screen, the linear historical narrative effectively ceased and was replaced by the manifestations of growing chaos—economic and social—that paralleled the rise to power of:

young urban gangsters in expensive sunglasses from Serbia [and] members of the paramilitary forces raised by Arkan and others.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Noel Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short History*, London, 1994, p 252. Arkan is the nickname of the Serbian war criminal Željko Raznjatović who was assassinated in January 2000.



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and their political paymasters, with their propensity to:

engage in seductive oversimplifications of complex issues, to marginalize the representatives of minority interests (whether ethnic or otherwise), and to harness nationalism as a false principle of legitimation.<sup>31</sup>

This tendency in Yugoslav film to override classical narrative conventions and aesthetic norms might be termed an “aesthetic of chaos,” and is achieved through meandering, chance-filled, seemingly inconsequential, absurdist narratives and an obsessive cramming of the frame with detail. It can also be characterised by frantic and energetic acting, usual locales and juxtapositions on all levels. It creates a sense of a wider activity, beyond the frame – and that the camera has been thrown into the scene and only partially captures all that is going on. Both narrative and aesthetic techniques contribute to a sense of desperation, albeit mainly comic, and the ever-presentness of violence. The aesthetic lends itself to both scenes of war and drunkenness, and chimes with stereotypical ideas about Balkan “wild men.”

This aesthetic is manifested in the opening scenes of Srđan Dragojević’s *Lepa sela, lepo gore* (*Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*, 1996), a film “dedicated to the film industry of a country that no longer exists.” Newsreel footage shows the proud 1971 opening of a tunnel dedicated to “Brotherhood and Unity” in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This is juxtaposed with a scene from 1980, showing the tunnel abandoned and forgotten, save for an aged prostitute who uses its

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<sup>31</sup> Sabrina Petra Ramet, *Balkan Babel: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia from the Death of Tito to Ethnic War*, London, 1996, p 215.



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cover. The interim years marked the decline and death of Tito and Titoism (as represented in the pomp and circumstance of the tunnel opening) and the encroachment of a post-Yugoslavia sensibility in its wake (that of increasing bureaucracy, the building of petty power-bases and ignorance borne of political disillusionment and growing nationalism). In a similar vein, the disconcertingly plot of the allegorical satire *Kako je počeo rat na mom otoku* (*How the War Started on My Island*, Vinko Brešan, 1996), based on the 1991 Croatian declaration of independence, is driven not by political imperatives but the foibles of the characters: infidelity, artistic vanity, stupidity, cowardice and homophobia.

The aesthetic of chaos that had developed in the Yugoslav cinema of the 1980s allowed for much of the depiction of the war of the 1990s to be taken in its stride. This was during a time when much of the socially-conscious Western European cinema selectively presented a reality suggestive of a war-like situation: *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (Stephen Frears, 1987), *C'est arrivé près de chez vous* (*Man Bites Dog*, Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzel, Benoît Poelvoorde, 1992), *Naked* (Mike Leigh, 1993), and *La haine* (Mattieu Kassovitz, 1995), to cite but a few examples. When a European war arose, however, the cinema it informed seemed to negate these European attributes of social consciousness and political imperative that Western critics had come to expect in European cinema. This negation was seemingly achieved by a further descent into the anarchic and apparently apolitical aesthetic of chaos.

This aesthetic of chaos can, therefore, be outlined by means of an examination of cinematic depictions of the Bosnian war. All the films considered here were either made or were partially, fully or belatedly released during 1995 and, with one exception, all are by directors from the former Yugoslavia.



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## Magic Realism and Naïve Art

The filmic expression of the aesthetic of chaos encompasses: the anarchic hordes of economic migrants and urban wide-boys, such as the *Gastarbeiter*, in Dušan Makavejev's *Montenegro: Or, Pigs and Pearls* (1981) with their surreal erotic cabaret / doss-house, the Zanzi-Bar;<sup>32</sup> religious miracles, crowd hysteria and political skulduggery, as in Goran Paskaljević's *Vreme čuda* (*Time of Miracles*, 1990), with its echoes of the Croatian Marian shrine of Međugorje; the gypsy camps, with their blasting music, social codes and rituals and devil-may-care criminality, that form the background of Goran Paskaljević's *Andeo čuvar* (*Guardian Angel*, 1987) and Emir Kusturica's *Dom za vešanje* (*Time of the Gypsies*, 1989); surreal touches of humour, as with the child protagonist of Goran Marković's *Tito i ja* (*Tito and I*, 1992), who develops a taste for the wall plaster of his house; and nature–mysticism, as exemplified in Kusturica's *Otac na službenom putu* (*When Father Was Away on Business*, 1985) and Rajko Grlić's *That Summer of White Roses* (1989).

This anti-realist aesthetic, manifested in scenes of levitation, brawls, wholesale destruction of property, hallucination, sleep-walking, psychic phenomena, drunken parties, operatic emotional scenes, wild love–making and *fin-de-siècle* set-pieces, has frequently been associated with an undefined Magic Realism (particularly in Western critical writing, and particularly on Kusturica). Such an association is misleading.<sup>33</sup> The narrative and aesthetic

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<sup>32</sup> The immigrant - or *Gastarbeiter* - is a central character in Yugoslav culture. The immigrant "look" (ill-fitting and mismatched second-hand clothing) was fashionable in Yugoslavia in the early 1980s with the 'New Primitivism' movement in popular music. For a fuller discussion see Ramet, 1996, pp 108-109.

<sup>33</sup> For example, Dina Iordanova, "Conceptualizing the Balkans," *Slavic Review: American Quarterly of Russian, Eurasian and East European Studies*, Winter 1996, pp 882-890. Fredric Jameson identifies Soviet Magic Realism in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, London, 1992, in the films of Andrei Tarkovsky,



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elements which constitute the aesthetic of chaos contain aspects of myth, animism (which may be compared to the films Jean Vigo); mysticism; satire and the absurd (similar to the novels of Miroslav Krleža); mythic surrealism (similar to that of the poet Vasko Popa); intensity and memory (as found in the novels of Danilo Kiš); cinematic trickery (as in the films of Federico Fellini); and an understated sensuality (present also in the poems of Ivan V Lalić).

Above all, however, the aesthetic of chaos appears to be most heavily influenced by the strong tradition of Naïve Art in Yugoslavia (in particular the Hlebine Peasant School of Painting). The nature of this influence may be seen to be in direct contrast with that of the Western European cinema, where painterly influences more often come from more bourgeois-acceptable painters such as Caspar David Friedrich (as manifested in *La Strategia del Ragno / The Spider's Stratagem*, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1970), Francis Bacon (in *Performance*, Donald Cammell and Nicholas Roeg, 1970) and Edward Hopper (in *Psycho*, Alfred Hitchcock, 1960, for example) and their aesthetic traditions.

The Naïve aesthetic subverts the use of such painterly influences. Not only does it subvert notions of the aesthetic value of “quality” and “studied” art, but it also subscribes to a form of “mystification” of the type outlawed for so long by the codes of Socialist Realism.

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Sergei Paradzhanov and Aleksander Sokurov's *Dni zhatvenia (Days of Eclipse)*, 1988). Neither South American or Soviet Magic Realism, however, hold much in common with the aesthetic of chaos. If anything, Yugoslav films cited as Magic Realist usually have an anarchic narrative structure rather than the strong story-telling narrative drive associated with Magic Realism, and rarely deal with the equally characteristic clash of cultures.



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Such an act, therefore, strikes a new balance and looks to traditions that pre-date Yugoslav Socialism, cinema and Socialist Realism.<sup>34</sup>

Elements of Yugoslav Naïve Art which may be found in the aesthetic of chaos are: the concentration on peasant ceremonies (as in “Gypsy Wedding” and “Woodcutters,” Ivan Generalić, 1936 and 1959); destruction (“Fire,” Ivan Generalić, 1953; “Beekeeper,” Mijo Kovačić, 1976, and “Guyana ‘78,” Josip Generalić, 1978); the equal importance given to the framing of animals and humans (“The Death of Virius,” Ivan Generalić, 1959, and “Gypsy Love in Moonlight,” Matija Skurjeni, 1959); peasant clothing (“Beggar,” Mirko Virius, 1938, and “Cowherd,” Mijo Kovačić); machismo (“Newlyweds from Hlebine,” Josip Generalić, 1975); nature mysticism (“Moses and the Red Sea,” Ivan Vecenaj, 1973); the absurd (“Flee, you people...,” Ivan Lackovič, 1974); and human qualities attributed to animals (“Crucified Cockerel,” Ivan Generalić, 1964, and “Musician,” Matija Skurjeni, 1972).<sup>35</sup>

Of Western influences, Jean-Luc Godard and the films of the French *Nouvelle Vague* were particularly prominent, informing the Yugoslav equivalent, the *Novi Film* movement of the late 1960s<sup>36</sup>. *Nouvelle Vague* influences are apparent in the *Novi Film* works of Makavejev,

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<sup>34</sup> The tradition of Naïve art only really exerted a brief influence on Western European cinema when refashioned as a counter-culture aesthetic in the late 1960s and early 1970s (by Naïve painters such as Ivan Rabuzin, in “Flower from Hiroshima,” 1967/68, and Josip Generalić, in “The Beatles in Hlebine,” 1973) and then mainly on the genre film products that fed on the counter-culture.

<sup>35</sup> These pictures are reproduced in Arkwright Art Trust, *Naïve Art in Yugoslavia (Camden Arts Centre)*, London, 1976, Oto Bihalji-Merin and Tomašević Nebojša-Bato, *World Encyclopaedia of Naïve Art: A Hundred Years of Naïve Art*, London 1984, and Boris Keleman, *Naïve Art: Paintings from Yugoslavia*, Oxford, 1977.

<sup>36</sup> See Károly Nemes, *Films of Commitment: Socialist Cinema in Eastern Europe*, Budapest 1985, p 147, Robin Wood *et al*, *Second Wave*, London, 1970, pp 32-33, Benjamin Halligan, “Makavejev and Zhdanovism in *Nevinost Bez Zaštite*” in *Slovo*, Vol 10, No 1/2, 1998, p 59 and Aleksandar Petrović, *Novi Film*, Belgrade, 1971, for further connections between *Novi Film* and *Nouvelle Vague* film.



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Želimir Žilnik, and Aleksandar Petrović, among others. Godard's freewheeling and anarchic narrative deconstruction, notable in films such as *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*, (*Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, 1966) and *Le weekend* (*Weekend*, 1968), lent itself to the deconstruction of Makavejev's narratives and the distorted narrative constructions *Majstor i Margarita* (*The Master and Margarita*, Aleksandar Petrović, 1972) and *Okupacija u 26 slika* (*Occupation in 26 Pictures*, Lordan Zafranović, 1978). These films, in turn, informed the non-linear narratives and narrative and aesthetic anarchy of the aesthetic of chaos.

## Rural sensibilites

The aesthetic is often drawn from the narrative use and presentation of the immigrant and peasant protagonist. The nature of this presentation, even when removed from Yugoslavia, remains the same. This Yugoslav sensibility is as present in the Brooklyn and Arizona of *Someone Else's America* (*L'Amérique des autres / Tuda Amerika*, Goran Paskaljević, 1995) and *Arizona Dream* (Emir Kusturica, 1993) respectively, as it has been when Paskaljević and Kusturica have filmed in Belgrade.

*Someone Else's America* contains elements of tragedy and the ridiculous in equal measure—namely Bayo's (Miki Manojlović) search for his lost son, and the disruption of the realistic *mise-en-scène* with aesthetic of chaos elements. The latter is especially so in Alonso's (Tom Conti) attempts to convince his blind mother that—after a faked plane journey—she has returned to her native Spain. The protagonists build a well, find a goat, lay a table of Spanish food and provide the appropriate music for an imaginary Spanish farmhouse in their



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filthy Brooklyn backyard. The sham proves successful and the mother dies content, happy in the knowledge of the supposedly Spanish soil beneath her feet.

Much of the Brooklyn-based footage was shot in Munich and the artificial *mise-en-scène* veers towards the control and exaggeration of Fellini's mock-ups of Rome. Indeed, the film opens with a rowdy Fellini-esque beach party with hardly an American in sight, emphasising:

what it means to be a rural European in urban America [...] The images of Spain and Montenegro are pastoral and romantic, accompanied by traditional music. Their kitsch quality contrasts with the noisy “Brooklyn” set.<sup>37</sup>

This jarring falsity is offset by the emotional extremes of the family drama, so that aesthetic of chaos moments come as a cathartic release. The protagonists float upward in their plane-seat-armchairs having finally—through death and separation and the incredibly unhygienic Paradiso Bar run by Alonso—arrived at a happy isle of immigrant confusion in the middle of the seemingly indifferent setting of urban North America. The trust and kinship between the immigrants, founded on their common outlandishness, proves greater than that of the barely-seen bourgeoisie, locked into a system which streamlines only the trappings of human emotions—much like Makavejev's happy commune of immigrant workers in *Montenegro: Or, Pigs and Pearls*.

Bayo's agonised search for his son, assumed to have been drowned in an illegal border crossing in Mexico, holds in common with archetypal American quests in film the

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<sup>37</sup> Vicky Allan, “*Someone Else's America*,” *Sight and Sound*, May 1997, p 54.



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emotionalisation of the landscape (as in the films of Orson Welles and John Ford). In the claustrophobic cityscape, the epic nature of such archetypal quests becomes trivialised—a fellow illegal-worker, an American, tells Bayo of the children he has lost to drugs. Perhaps only the immigrants are left to re-enact such archetypal American quests.

Elsewhere, the immigrants continually celebrate bastardised versions of a wide range of folk myths far removed from their context—Chinese medicine, Flamenco dancing and Montenegrin cooking rub shoulders in cramped and illegal immigrant accommodation. The debris of immigrant life—chickens sleeping with humans, letters from home, the constant playing of language tapes, shady characters offering illegal border crossings for large sums of cash—follows the hapless Bayo and Alonso. Even the dialogue of Bayo’s language tape seems to understand this world: a question regarding why a North London-born man lives in South London is answered with the maxim “Because it is cheaper to live in South London.”

The Yugoslav sensibility is especially apparent in the cathartic use of the aesthetic of chaos. To compare *Someone Else’s America* with other films which use immigrants for protagonists—*Down by Law* (Jim Jarmusch, 1986), *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (Aki Kaurismäki, 1989) or *Meeting Venus* (István Szabó, 1990), for example—reveals that there is something more than a uniquely Yugoslav slant to the drama as presented. In the tradition of Makavejev and Kusturica, alternative notions of *Mittleuropa* are presented, consisting of elements as disparate and startling in their aesthetic representation as in the immigrant characters who embody them. For Paskaljević, the nature of the *Mittleuropa* of the 1990s and the uncertainty of a land prefixed with the word “former” can only be examined in the removed context of a mock-up North America, introduced with hazy aerial shots of the



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Statue of Liberty which might have been taken from a Yugoslav's dreams in 1995 rather than *cinéma vérité*. This paradox of a dream of liberty turning into Bayo's immigrant reality informs not only the narrative drive of the film, but also Paskaljević's own situation in 1995:

Unlike Kusturica, [Paskaljević] refrains from dealing with ethnic strife in former-Yugoslavia. Yet the struggle of immigrants in America must be both a political and personal issue for an expatriate film-maker working in a US-dominated market.<sup>38</sup>

As just such an immigrant film-maker, Werner Herzog found common ground between West German and American cinema in his use of social realism in his *Stroszek* (1977). Tatty bars are occupied by drunks in both *Stroszek* and *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973), where the music is the same, the beer is the same, and the characters still have difficulty keeping hold of their money. Regardless of political ideology, the German film-maker and the American film-maker will find sympathy, and place the camera level on one end of the bar, to induce as much from the audience. In his shooting style and the iconoclastic figures he employs to help him, Herzog re-enacts Jack Kerouac's crazed journeys and records of his travels across North America. The North American consumer society of the 1970s had lost such latter-day archetypal quests—in Herzog's eyes—and the immigrant is left to re-discover and re-enact this tradition. This irony informs much of European film-makers' recent American-based output.

Yugoslav film-makers seem more concerned with excerpting the Yugoslav sensibility on a film made in a foreign land than mimicking American film à la Herzog. And so, uniquely, the Yugoslav camera works in the opposite direction, constructing the trappings of

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<sup>38</sup> Allan, 1997, p 54.



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social realism on top of a gradually revealed anti-realist *mise-en-scène*: that of the Yugoslav sensibility and an aesthetic of chaos. This is true of Paskaljević and it is in this context that Kusturica's *Arizona Dream* can be fully understood.<sup>39</sup> Compared to European World Cinema, these films demonstrate the pervasive nature of the Yugoslav sensibility, part of which is perhaps formed by the unusual “processing” of Western influences.<sup>40</sup>

The contrast between the ridiculous and the tragic, as mentioned above, is mirrored in the contrasting *mise-en-scène* of *Someone Else's America*. Paskaljević's placing of strangers in foreign landscapes recalls the minimalism of films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962) and *Nostalgia* (Tarkovsky, 1983) in the scenes dealing with the search for the missing son. The deep-focus shot of Bayo in foregrounded close up against barren Mexican countryside exactly replicates shots of T E Lawrence in Lean's film. The protagonist is placed against the untouched landscape, alone in his despair. In contrast, the rest of the film remains deliberately and gloriously shambolic—junk fills every scene, music blares away, and it remains a while before the audience can be sure which of the many yelling characters represent the main protagonists. To a certain extent, the unapologetic presentation of such a *mise-en-scène* undermines the allusions to epic cinema inherent in the nods to Lean and Tarkovsky. For Paskaljević, it represents the destruction of the pretension of notions of

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<sup>39</sup> Vigo's cinema also took this approach. Reviewing *L'Atalante* at the time of its release in 1934, the critic John Grierson noted “... a style peculiar to himself [Vigo]... At the base of it is a sense of documentary realism which makes the barge a real barge... But on top of the realism is a crazy Vigo world of symbols and romance.” Quoted in Marina Warner, *BFI Film Classics: L'Atalante*, London, 1993, p 10.

<sup>40</sup> On the eclectic nature of Yugoslav film tastes, see Goran Gocić “Forbidden Fruit,” *Sight and Sound*, March 1992 and Gerald Peary, “Hollywood in Yugoslavia” in Graham Petrie and Ruth Dwyer, *Before the Wall Came Down: Soviet and East European film-makers working in the West*, Maryland, 1990.



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World Cinema and “the foreign eye” that colour much of European cinema—especially recent Krzysztof Kieślowski and Theo Angelopoulos.

## The foreign eye

This is especially salient when seen in the light of Angelopoulos’s vision of the Balkans in 1995, which is far from Paskaljević’s lowly settings. His stately *To Vlemma Tou Odyssea* (*Regard d’Ulysse / Ulysses’ Gaze*, 1995) winds up in Sarajevo at the height of the siege and works as a dire “state of Europe” address. In every respect, Angelopoulos is “the foreign eye,” the high European *auteur* looking into the remains of Yugoslavia. He invokes Franz Kafka, Michelangelo Antonioni, Joseph Conrad, Casper David Friedrich, T S Eliot and Miroslav Holub and, in this respect, is the very antithesis of Krleža, Makavejev, Kiš, Generalić, Lalić and Popa.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly European takes on the conflict can be found in *Vukovar, Poste Restante* (Boro Drašković, 1994, released 1995) and *Pred doždot* (*Before the Rain*, Milčo Mančevski, 1994, released 1995). Both films set their drama against readings of the political background of the break-up of Yugoslavia. They have drawn-away from Yugoslavia sufficiently to avoid an

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<sup>41</sup> The film centres on the quest to find and develop unseen footage of the Balkans taken in 1905 by the Manaki brothers. In a number of sequences, Angelopoulos suggests that this original and God-like “capturing” of reality for its later recreation on a blank screen—the two components of cinema and the process of which the Manakia brothers were pioneers—is an act endowed with a overwhelming spirituality. The nature of the process is something which is beyond mere filming and projecting in importance; it is the creation of history, and so to deconstruct cinema (as Angelopoulos attempts to do), is to deconstruct history. This may be seen as the counter-balance to the reconstruction of history which, as Ramet has identified, has been seminal in the systematic destabilisation of Yugoslavia.



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engagement with an aesthetic of chaos, but not as far away as Angelopoulos and his metaphysical reading of the break-up. The narratives are of a populist Hollywood construction: relationships set asunder by the war and the subsequent re-evaluation of values, set against the background of the rise of nationalism, European complacency, a vicious circle of violence and the historical connections between religions and violence.

Critical reactions to the films highlight the ambiguity inherent in the form of fictional film. *Vukovar, Poste Restante* received its UK premier at the National Film Theatre towards the end of the 1995 London Film Festival.<sup>42</sup> An irate audience heckled the director and writer (Maja Drašković) in a rapidly abandoned discussion immediately following the screening. The film is a skilfully constructed melodrama of characters and families that quickly evokes sympathy. As a result, the narrative engages the emotions in a powerful fashion as it shows the audience the consequences of the basic dramatic premise of a relationship, begun in 1989, between a Croat and a Serb. Within the relatively simple schema of the melodrama, the film brilliantly frames many harrowing scenes of the siege, and so attempts to communicate the reality of the conflict, and the ability of fiction film to represent that reality, in a relatively unpolitical way.

Despite the insistence by the director and writer that that the film was a straightforward romance set against the tragedy of the Balkan conflict, the audience of the London Film Festival took great exception to the supposedly incidental focus on Croatian ethnic

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<sup>42</sup> The film was announced as from Yugoslavia and was screened on 9 November 1995. It was well-received at an Australian premier and won the first prizes at the 1995 Jerusalem Film Festival. It also played at the Berlin Film Festival in 1995 and the Denver Film Festival in 1994. It was scheduled for a theatrical release in the UK under the title “Vukovar” in March 1997 but has yet to appear, although it has been released in South Africa, Japan and North America.



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aggression and war atrocities and the way in which the nationality of the soldiers who rape the female protagonist is not made clear. The closing shot is *cinéma vérité*: a long, aerial sequence of a devastated suburb of a Vukovar “liberated” by the Serbs, accompanied by a suitably optimistic score.<sup>43</sup> This works to define the film as unambiguously pro-Serb.

Its attractive cast, fighting for love and home (with the confusion of familial home and geographic “home”) and its populist narrative and polished aesthetic could then be read as “fascist.” Drašković’s apparent shunning of the aesthetic of chaos, in favour of the uncluttered narrative of the melodrama that would lift his film into the international market for World Cinema, masks an insidious, even if unconscious, propagandist vision<sup>44</sup>. In this way, the politics of *Vukovar, Poste Restante* recall Slobodan Milošević’s international line in 1992-1993—which proved so effective in keeping European Union and United Nations intervention at bay—that the conflict in Yugoslavia was civil strife, to be quelled by the army. The implication was that an anti-war stance was a pro-Yugoslav stance, as championed by Serbia – an idea that resonates in *Vukovar, Poste Restante*.

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<sup>43</sup> The “liberation” of Vukovar by the Yugoslav People’s Army might be considered a crime against humanity. The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague has been involved in the investigation of the mass killing of 261 non-Serb men forcibly removed from the Vukovar Hospital. Vukovar is now the site of one of the largest single mass graves in post-war Europe.

<sup>44</sup> The device worked in North America, where critics have tended to read the film as a powerful romance—“set against the futility of war”—and for the London Film Festival, where the host of the after-screening discussion idiotically announced that he would only take questions of a non-political nature.



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## A film warning

*Pred dožadot* contains a similar deceptively simple surface, but to a different end. The Macedonian and London set film deals with the conflict by proxy. The London section climaxes with a sudden and unexplained attack on a restaurant, playing on the notion of a slaughter of bystanders with the bystanders as urban Western Europeans rather than Bosnian Muslims. The suddenness of the unleashed violence comes across as all the more shocking against the drab London background, which lacks the vitality of the Macedonian scenes.

Mančevski presents a semi-mythical Macedonia, the components of which are an Orthodox monastery, Eastern European peasantry, farmsteads and extended families, played out against spectacular settings—mountain ranges silhouetted against the vaults of the night sky. Against such a *mise-en-scène* the growing violence between Macedonians and Albanians is explicitly associated with the history and religion of Macedonia and the psychological make-up of its inhabitants. Such a reading of the conflict is similar to that expounded by Robert Kaplan, and informed the non-interventionist line in the West.<sup>45</sup> It dramatises the notion of the conflict as a manifestation of ancient blood feuds, an unstoppable implosion best left to burn-out by itself by the wider community. This dramatisation is at one remove, however, since conflict has not broken out in Macedonia. Keith Brown, taking his lead from comments made by Mančevski, offers the reading that the film acts as a warning of a

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<sup>45</sup> Robert D Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History*, London, 1994. The history of Kaplan's take on the Balkan conflict is examined in Elizabeth Drew, *On the Edge: The Clinton Presidency*, New York, 1995, pp 157-158. See also K S Brown, *Of Meanings and Memories: The National Imagination in Macedonia*, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1995, p 37.



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possible future for the Macedonian audience. The fictional nature of the construction of the warning is foregrounded by the depiction of an unfamiliar Macedonian countryside and people. For the Macedonian audience, the film constitutes a potential future, rather than an account of what was happening. Thus, when asked about Macedonian reactions in an interview in February 1995, Manchevski was able to give the following answer;

“I was concerned that the people would be upset with me [...] Some people said, ‘We don’t all live in run-down villages, we also drive Mercedes cars. Why didn’t you show that?’ But most of them read the film just as I wanted them to, which is as a warning.”<sup>46</sup>

The film contains elements of the aesthetic of chaos. A gang of heavily-armed and volatile villagers, the embodiment of age-old hatred, incongruously sport baseball caps and white trainers, play rap music and wield Uzi machine guns. A new addition to this vocabulary is the introduction of modern Balkan images: the United Nation, their vehicles and personnel, looking hopelessly lost and ill-equipped for the terrain.

## The apogee of chaos

This image of the UN occurs again in *Podzemlje—bila jedom jedna zemlje* (*Underground—Once Upon a Time There Was a Country*, 1995). Whereas in *Pred dožd* the vehicles are used in an incidental manner—in a montage of traffic, and as part of establishing shots indicating

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<sup>46</sup> Keith Brown, “Macedonian Culture and its Audience: An Analysis of *Before the Rain*,” Felicia Hughes-Freeland (ed), *Ritual, Performance, Media*, London, 1998, pp 172-173.



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morning—Kusturica casts the UN vehicle as a clown’s car in a conflict portrayed as circus. It is in *Podzemlje* that the aesthetic of chaos reaches the apex of its expression. *Podzemlje* won the 1995 Palme d’Or in Cannes, to Angelopoulos’s publicly expressed disapproval. The film whipped-up a storm of controversy across Europe, centred on Kusturica’s reluctance to show Serbian aggression in the film. Much of the controversy targeted the film’s funding (partly by Radio Television Belgrade), its being made in Belgrade at the height of the conflict, and Kusturica’s public behaviour—the premiere was reportedly attended by Željko Raznjatović (Arkan), the chief of Serbia’s secret police, and the director of Belgrade television. Kusturica is reported to have supported Milošević and Serbian nationalism in the early 1990s and then moved to a cautious stance against the Belgrade government in the mid-1990s. After the controversy broke, Kusturica vowed that he would never make another film.<sup>47</sup>

The film uses the metaphor of an underground cellar in which politician Marko (Miki Manojlović) conspires to keep dim partisans, under his friend Crni’s (Lazar Ristovski) leadership, making armaments from the close of the Second World War through to the beginning of the Balkan conflict, unaware of the end of the former (indeed, one of their number is a monkey). The cellar has been seen to be a metaphor for the facets of historical Yugoslavia—a prison, a device for exploitation of workers and the containment of the wild Yugoslav spirit, Communism itself and never anything but an illusory and manufactured

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<sup>47</sup>. For a fuller discussion of this, see: Adam Gopnik, “Cinema Dispute,” *The New Yorker*, 5 February 1996; Robert Yates, “Gone Underground,” *The Guardian*, 7 March 1996; Stanko Cerović, “Canned Lies,” *Bosnia Report*, August 1995; and Gerald Peary, “Above Ground: Emir Kusturica Comes Up For Air,” *The Boston Phoenix*, 16-23 October 1997.



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“reality.”<sup>48</sup> The film closes with a fantasy sequence, resurrecting long-dead characters on a small peninsula, complete with on-going marriage party, which breaks away from the mainland and floats out to sea—a metaphor for the break-up of Yugoslavia into separate and autonomous regions.

Between these two points, Kusturica infuses the film with “Yugo-nostalgia”: nostalgia for the gregarious Yugoslav character (the film opens with a drunken party to celebrate Crni’s entry in the Communist Party); for camp Yugoslav Socialism (newsreel footage of Tito’s funeral accompanied by Lili Marleen); and for the Yugoslav political illuminati (Marko is an associate of Tito but a criminal nonetheless—his power base is derived from the armaments manufactured by the inhabitants of the cellar). Kusturica and the film’s writer, the playwright Dušan Kovačević, even embed *the* cliché of inter-ethnic aggression—that, for some, the Second World War never ended—into the narrative of the film: for Crni and his associates in the cellar, the war literally does not end, with Second World War segueing into the Balkan conflict. It is thus that the language of the latter includes “Ustaša,” “Četnik” and “partisan.”

The film dramatises history as a “tissue of lies” creating and created by impostors at every level of life. This is notably so in the sequence in which Marko, now a high-ranking politician, visits the film-set of “Spring Arrives on a White Horse,” a ridiculously over-the-top Second World War pot-boiler based on Marko’s fictitious memoirs. The film is a satire on such partisan war epics as *Sutjeska* (Stipe Delić, 1973), which cast Richard Burton as Tito

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<sup>48</sup> For example, see Slavoj Žižek, “Multiculturalism—A New Racism?” *New Left Review*, September/October 1997, p 37, Adam Mars-Jones, “Vision Improbable,” *The Independent* (London), 7 March 1996, p 7 (Section Two), and Misha Glennly, “If You Are Not For Us,” *Sight and Sound*, November 1996, p 12.



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to Orson Welles's Churchill. In this sequence, Marko seems cast as a latter-day Radovan Zogović, the social ladder-climbing poet and politician attacked by Krleža at the Third Congress of the Union of Writers of Yugoslavia in 1952.<sup>49</sup> Overcome with faked emotion at seeing the incredible likeness of his supposedly dead partisan comrade Crni, Marko embraces the effete actor playing that role, crying "Why did they kill you?" The actor—taking his lead from the social toadying director—returns the influential politician's embrace and kisses. . In this sequence, concerned with the reinvention of history, nobody is what they seem and everybody's behaviour is driven by a hidden agenda.

The scenes of the Balkan conflict are short and bitter. In Tito's wake, the political class has become the business class, and as much business as fighting is shown in the blasted landscapes. Europe and the UN speed in for what profit is available and allow a freehand to the warmongers. Kusturica's view of the Balkan conflict may be a damning indictment of them all, but lacks the foundation of a political critique demanded by its detractors.<sup>50</sup> The film deals with the effects of three manifestations of fascism (in the Second World War, the cult of personality in the Cold War and the Balkan conflict) without presenting anything other than cursory explanations. Such an audaciously "unpolitical" stance in 1995 opens Kusturica up to accusations of political blindness. Kusturica fills his frame with the aesthetic of chaos in chronicling the history of Yugoslavia rather than attempt to dissect Croatian and Serbian nationalism. In this respect, the film's few predecessors are *Saló, o le Centoventi*

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<sup>49</sup> See Daniel J Goulding, *Liberated Cinema: The Yugoslav Experience*, Bloomington, 1985, p 39.

<sup>50</sup> For example, Žižek, 1997, pp 37-40.



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*Giornate di Sodoma* (*Saló, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975) and *Okupacija u 26 slika*, films which illustrate only the form of fascism, not its content.<sup>51</sup>

Kusturica makes a telling cameo as an arms dealer. In this role he shows himself to be profiting from the war (perhaps, at least, through his depiction of it). In a similarly self-reflective way, the film attempts to place itself within its framework of Yugoslav history. The deliberately awkward reverse-angle shots between period footage and contemporary footage which place Marko in the midst of battle or shaking hands with Tito highlight the fakery Kusturica employs to graft satiric fiction onto newsreel reality. This deliberately shoddy and unmatched editing mimics the poor Yugoslav aesthetic that characterised so very many partisan war epics from the 1940s and onward.

Part One of the film opens with a shot of a bathing prostitute. A drunken Marko places a rose between the cheeks of her behind and captures three reflections of her and the rose in a three-panel mirror to aid him in masturbation, without the prostitute's knowledge. The three panels anticipate the three labelled parts of the film and the images—a rose in a prostitute's behind for furtive but gleeful masturbation—reflect something of the nature and content of Kusturica's "bad taste" satire, made during the height of the conflict. Kusturica, one of the finest European auteurs, seems to invite the comparison of his idiosyncrasy during time of war with that of Ezra Pound, rather than his politics with those of Leni

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<sup>51</sup> Both these films remain equally controversial. *Saló, o le Centoventi Giornate di Sodoma* has a long history of banning and censorship. *Okupacija u 26 slika*, which has many thematic and visual parallels with Pasolini's film, has recently been banned in Croatia, along with all of Zafranović's films. He has been forced to leave his homeland, threatened with arrest. For a full account see Daniel J Goulding, *Occupation in 26 Pictures*, Trowbridge (UK), 1998.



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Riefenstahl. Meanwhile, “Kusta” is permanently *persona non grata* in his hometown of Sarajevo.

## Chaos as satire

Dragojević works much closer to the ground in *Lepa sela, lepo gore* – the film deals directly with the conflict and 1990s Yugoslav fascism, cutting rapidly back and forth between several flashback narratives to create a layered and clichéd story of human tragedy: the friendship between a Muslim and Serb throughout the 1980s; the Serb and his paramilitary unit trapped in an abandoned mountain tunnel by a revenge-bent Muslim army unit in 1992; and the once inseparable friends realisation that they find themselves on course to kill each other. Characters form a cross-section of society—the old guard through to a wasted drug addict, via a collection of loveable rogues—and the film is shot-through with appalling, frenzied black humour.

A framing narrative of the remaining, embittered Serbs recovering in a hospital provides the “present” of the film and offsets the heroics of the battle sequences. The narrative, with its abrupt flashbacks and the overwhelming amount of information delivered, initially alienates until the realisation that the film utilises a camp Proustian framework of recollection (nor does the hospitalised protagonist, Milan, played by Dragan Bjelogrić, at first appear to be the Milan in the flashbacks). Many scenes of this recollection have an exaggerated and hallucinogenic quality that calls into question the objectivity of the *mise-en-scène*.



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This contrasts with the hyper-realism found in the attention to detail in other sequences (the paraphernalia of the hospital treatments, encroaching madness, thirsty soldiers downing a colleague's urine). Indeed, the film opens with a sequence that announces the destruction of objectivity: newsreel footage of the opening of the tunnel in 1971 falls into a surreal nightmare as the politician maims his hand with the scissors intended for the cutting of an "opening" ribbon. As his wound sprays blood over the horrified children assembled for the occasion, the band plays on in the vain hope of restoring some vestige of dignity.

The film puts violence and the immediacy of the armed conflict in the foreground, although more animals and trees are destroyed than soldiers and civilians. This periodically lapses into an aesthetic which parodies the militant-nationalist Serbian and Croatian media: Dragojević, intending to offend, fills the screens with the chaos of destruction, the unreality of blazing, razed villages, slow-motion shots of victory-drunk soldiers, dancing, waving burning flags and discharging guns into the air, all to the accompaniment of blasting, nihilistic rock music.<sup>52</sup> Dragojević reinvents the image of the Serb against a backdrop of a bloodied aesthetic of chaos. He fashions this aesthetic into an audacious anti-Dobrica Ćosić tableaux of war as human degradation and suffering and manufactured nationalist hatred, targeting the Yugoslav media in the process.

The Yugoslav literary and artistic traditions and counter-traditions that inform the aesthetic of chaos in its cinema seem to have been its undoing in 1995, as with varying

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<sup>52</sup> This, coupled with the film's lack of any explicit indication of Serbian action as aggression, account for the declaration of the film as "fascist" at the 1995 Venice Film Festival. For a fuller account of the controversy see Glenny, 1996, pp 10-13.



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degrees of justification European critics denounced film after film as “fascist” and non-committal. The tempered and informed dissection of the origins and effects of nationalism that had been expected by these critics was continually frustrated by the use of an anarchic aesthetic of chaos. This unbalanced any analysis and highlighted the distance between Yugoslav and European cinema. But to what extent was this descent into the aesthetic of chaos undertaken to mask the calculated blurring of political subtext? And to what extent does the negation of analysis suggest that the ideals of the European cinema, founded on social consciousness and political imperative, no longer apply? Paradoxically, it is exactly this problematisation of these ideals of European cinema, through the use of the aesthetic of chaos, that has given rise to a body of films that constitute a discernible part of the European cinema of the 1990s.

**Benjamin Halligan**



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## Serbia's Wound Culture



Teenage killers in Milošević's Serbia:  
Srđan Dragojević's *Rane* (1998)

Igor Krstić



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## A brutal reality

Srdan Dragojević's *Rane* (*Wounds*, 1998), the third feature film by this 36-year-old director, was by industry standards a low-budget production (USD 800,000), with financial support coming from various sources, including the Serbian government. Despite this, the film is a radical attack on the Milošević regime. At the time of release, the Serbian government tried to limit the film's exposure, forbidding publicity and imposing a complete media and PR blackout. Nevertheless (or maybe as a result), the film became a considerable success not only in Serbia and its neighbouring countries, but also on the international film festival circuit.<sup>53</sup> One festival jury member commended Dragojević's film for "its powerful, dramatic depiction of the brutal reality and complexity of life in the Balkans today."<sup>54</sup>

*Rane* is not only a powerful aesthetic offering—the film also delivers a harsh and direct depiction of the brutal realities of violence, criminality and poverty in Serbia in the 1990s. The impression of authenticity is no coincidence: Dragojević cast his two 15-year-old actors from the streets. When the director first met Milan Marić, who plays Švaba, he was still bleeding from a fight he had on the way to the audition; Dušan Pekić, who plays Pinki,

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<sup>53</sup> *Rane* won, for example, the Bronze Horse at the 1998 Stockholm Film Festival and the FIPRESCI Award at the 1998 Thessaloniki International Film Festival.

<sup>54</sup> From the Jury of the Thessaloniki Film Festival. Quoted on [IMDb](http://www.imdb.com) (International Movie Database).



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had tried to take his own life by overdosing on heroin the previous year and, only six months before making the film, had shot one of his pimp-father's customers.<sup>55</sup>

*Rane* is a film about the social decay and the growing criminalisation of Serbian society in the 1990s. The film's socio-historical framework is constructed with MTV-like imagery, showing people celebrating their new nationalism and later on, during the inflation and the UN sanctions, fighting in the street for their daily bread. The film concentrates on the criminal underground world in Belgrade, a world where nationalism, suburban violence and a degraded Serbian folklore-trash culture exist side by side and which becomes a dead-end for the two teenage protagonists. *Rane* shows within the cinematic genre conventions of the classical film noir how this environment affects the adolescence of two Belgrade teenagers, their senseless and aimless lives mirroring the absurdity of life in Milošević's Serbia.

## The film

*Rane* was described in several reviews as the “Serbian *Trainspotting*.” It deals with the same thematic language as this British cult film: teenagers caught up in the criminal world, drug addiction, and senseless violence, all set within a social context of poverty and decay. The film tells the story of two teenagers, Pinki and Švaba (which can be translated as “Kraut”), growing up in Belgrade between 1991 and 1996 from the former's perspective. In

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<sup>55</sup> Anthony Kaufman and Dave Ratzlo, “[Interview: Yugoslav Filmmakers Fight A Different War, Speaking with Goran Paskaljević and Srđjan Dragojević](#),” *in dieWIRE*, 27 July 1999.



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the opening scene, we see the two sitting in their BMW in the middle of the “100 days” (of anti-Milošević demonstrations in the winter of 1997 in Belgrade).

Pinki’s voice-over narration introduces his best friend Švaba, and he proceeds to relate in a series of flashbacks how the two friends first became teenage criminals. At this point, the story reverts to the high period of Serbian ultra-nationalism and militarism at the beginning of the war in Bosnia (autumn 1991), showing the Serbs’ enthusiasm for the war, and then follows the gradual breakdown of the country, devastated by militarism, economic decay and UN sanctions. Pinki’s father, a retired JNA (Yugoslav People’s Army) officer, is forced to stay at home and watch the events on his TV. We see Pinki growing up in his parents’ home, playing with his friend Švaba in a graveyard in Novi Beograd (a Belgrade suburb).

They soon make contact with their neighbourhood hero Kure (“Dick” in English), a local gangster who introduces the boys to Belgrade’s criminal world. The biggest impression on the youngsters, however, is made by a cynical Serbian TV talk show, *Puls Asfalta* (The Pulse of the Asphalt),<sup>56</sup> a showcase for well-known Serbian gangsters who become living idols for the young pair. Guided by Kure, they quickly rise to fame as teenage killers and finally appear on the show themselves.

Lidija, the femme fatale talk-show host, plays a crucial role, as the friends both fall in love with her and become rivals. Pinki’s father kills himself soon after his son appears on the TV show, and the two youngsters begin a spree of violent shootings, killing Lidija’s husband as well as their former father figure Kure and other local gangsters. But Lidija herself decides

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<sup>56</sup> The show depicted in *Rane* is based on an actual Serbian TV show.



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their fate, when Švaba, believing that Pinki has betrayed him and taken her, shoots his best friend. Pinki survives, heavily wounded, and after spending some time in a hospital, he calls Švaba to meet and drive in the BMW to “their” graveyard. During the ride to the graveyard they get caught in the anti-Milošević demonstration (a return to the opening scene). Finally arriving at the graveyard, an unwritten pact between the youngsters drives Pinki to wound Švaba four times, inflicting the same number of wounds that Švaba had inflicted upon him.

## **Film noir: gangsters, femme fatales and tough guys**

Structurally, *Rane* possesses the underlying patterns of classic Hollywood film noir: a male friendship, thwarted by a jealous woman, ends in deception and violent death. The original noir films were made during the 1940s and 1950s, during and after the war Second World War, a period in which Hollywood (with the government’s encouragement and assistance) was producing numerous patriotic propaganda films. The contrasting film noir was a B-movie genre, dealing with the dark side of American society in the 1940s, introducing the modern themes of gender uncertainty, repressed conflict, urban decay, public corruption and violence. According to its stereotypical definition, film noir possesses several stylistic features and a specific visual style: the setting of the urban environment, low-key lighting, fog and rain, the use of flashbacks and voice-over narration, and the predominance of night-time scenes, creating an atmosphere of anxiety, uncertainty and paranoid disorientation.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Susan Hayward explains, “rather than a genre or movement it might be safer to say that *film noir* is above all a *visual style* which came about as a result of political circumstance and cross fertilization.” Susan Hayward, *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies*. London and New York, 1996, p 117.



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*Rane* pays tribute to these genre conventions, developed during the classic period of the noir gangster film, but re-configures these notions in a postmodern way, within a specific cultural and social context: Serbia in the 1990s. It is a particularly *self-conscious irony* that characterises the film's use of conventional crime noir patterns. In one scene, in which Kure teaches the two boys how to perform in their first sexual encounter, he explains: "Do you know why there were no sex scenes in old American movies? Because Bogey and Cagney didn't want to sell their guts." Pinki and Švaba are themselves not interested in Kure's heroes, Bogey and Cagney. They prefer living Serbian legends of the underworld, who appear weekly in *Puls Asfalta*. This mimetic identification with gangster legends from cinema, TV or real life is a basic theme in *Rane*. The film scholar Thomas Elsässer discovered a similar theme in Fassbinder's early gangster films, observing that in them:

the heroes' desire does not revolve around the acquisition of money or women but is a completely narcissistic desire to play their role "correctly." Both men and women have a conception of themselves whereby their behavior is defined by how they wish to appear in the eyes of others: as gangsters, pimps, tough guys, prostitutes, *femme fatales*. They play with the roles with such deadly seriousness because it is the only way they know how to impose an identity on aimless, impermanent lives. What authenticates these roles is the cinema itself, because it provides a reality more real, but it is a reality only because it implies spectators.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Thomas Elsässer, "Primary Identification and the Historical Subject: Fassbinder and Germany," in Phil Rosen, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*. New York, 1986, p 542.



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Gangster movies provide a variety of role models, most exhibiting the popular mythologies of manhood and toughness. It is Pinki's and Švaba's deeply felt wish to appear on *Puls Asfalta*, which would authenticate their identity as teenage gangsters. *Rane*, therefore, can be seen as a film that uses those conventional patterns of the crime noir genre only to invert its original purposes: the hard-boiled tough guy becomes a narcissistic copy without an established identity, for whom killing is just a virtual game without any meaning.

## **Natural born killers and the paranoid public sphere**

In the first half of the film, *Rane* does not concentrate on crime or gangsters. The film tells a story of boys growing up in a time of social and economic decay, in a paranoid and nationalistic society. The exchange of Tito's picture with one of Slobodan Milošević in Pinki's father's living room signifies how quickly the change from one symbolic order to the next occurred within Serbian families. TV plays a crucial role in Dragojević's film, for Pinki and particularly for Pinki's father Stojan, a retired JNA officer caught by the nationalist manipulations of the state-controlled TV. TV depicts the Serbian occupation of Vukovar in 1992 as liberation from the "Ustaša terror" and one constantly sees propaganda video-clips of the brave and technologically advanced Serbian army accompanied by patriotic Serbian folk songs. The daily news on TV announces in 1992 that the UN sanctions against Serbia are "one of the greatest crimes against humanity in the history of mankind," followed by a folk song with the lines: "They won't get us down, even if the whole world is against us."



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The quote “The whole world is against us” can be seen as a key by-line of Milošević’s anti-Western propaganda, delivered by the state-controlled media during the 1990s. The media created a public sphere, which Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer have defined in connection with Nazi Germany as a “paranoid public sphere”.<sup>59</sup> This paranoid spiral of hatred and violence led Serbia’s people to believe in a series of new “demonic enemies” threatening to destroy the nation: the Croats, the Albanians in Kosovo or the Muslims in Bosnia.

After the Dayton Peace Accord in December 1995, Serbia faced the aftermath of UN sanctions and Milošević’s international political isolation, both resulting in a dire economic and social crisis. The paranoid spiral of violence against “the other” was played out in several directions. The Serbian army fought a civil war against the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in Kosovo, while the Serbian police fought so-called “homeland traitors” (independent journalists or opposition politicians inside Serbia). Public violence, youth crime, drug addiction and organized criminal networks became an everyday phenomenon in Serbian urban centres such as Belgrade, Niš and Novi Sad. Particularly in the urban peripheries, in suburban slums, a new level of criminality appeared during the 1990s.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Theodor W Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London, 1972, p 179-200.

<sup>60</sup> A documentary by the independent radio station B92, *Vidimo se u citulji* (*The Crime that Changed Serbia*, 1996), presents several war and other criminals, with interviews about their criminal lives and activities. The documentary shows how the phenomenon arose during the 1990s in Serbia and how some criminals achieved a status of “living legends” within the Serbian public sphere. Several fiction films have been made about this subject, among them Dragojević’s *Rane*, but also films like Boban Skerlić’s *Do koske* (*Rage*) in 1996 (promoted as the first Serbian “action movie” and sponsored by the state-run media).



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The TV-led discourse in *Rane* and its effect on the people suggest a close relationship between nationalism and militarism in the public sphere and the folkloric sense of community they try to create.<sup>61</sup> Dragojević emphasizes how the public media discourse generated both a collective paranoia and hatred and a nationalistic or folkloric community that was based on public fascination with warfare against enemies. The connection between folklore and violence is suggested in a scene in which Kure starts a brawl in a Serbian bar, accompanied by a Serbian folk singer and his girlfriend, singing her song in the middle of this chaos. Kure and his singer-girlfriend Suzana also suggest an ironic reference to two icons of the Serbian public sphere, the couple Arkan and Ceca— warlord and popular Turbofolk singer respectively, and another example of a “marriage” of violence and folklore.

The figure of the serial killer or mass murderer achieves within this pathological public sphere the status of a celebrity, as a “natural born killer”—a phenomenon that American culture critic Marc Seltzer identifies in contemporary American society, in his book *Serial Killers, Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*. He shows how compulsive killing is one of the crucial elements of America's popular culture, in which addictive violence has become a collective spectacle and a nodal point, where private desires and public fantasies cross.<sup>62</sup> The figure of the serial killer (best embodied in persons like Arkan) has also become central in Serbia's popular culture—a crucial figure for identification and public fantasy in Serbian TV, print media and fiction. In *Rane*, Pinki and Švaba fail to distance themselves

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<sup>61</sup> The Serbian anthropologist Ivan Čolović has written an excellent book on the connections between folklore, politics and warfare in the Serbian public sphere. See: Ivan Čolović, *Bordel ratnika. Folklor, politika i rat*. Beograd, 1993.

<sup>62</sup> Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers. Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*. New York and London, 1998, p 1.



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from these representations, and indeed try to emulate their criminal heroes. Their acts of violence and serial killing amount to mimetic role playing—compulsive addictions necessary to achieve the celebrity status of “natural born killers.”

## **Kitsch and death, Turbofolk and graveyards**

Also characteristic for film noir are its stylistic and thematic roots in the so-called “pulp fiction” of 1930s America. *Rane* itself is a cinematic treatment of typical Serbian “pulp culture”: the film’s setting and iconography draw on a kind of “pulp” environment, a world replete with signs, commodities and symbols of kitsch, camp and trash. The graveyard in the hills of the Belgrade suburb, for example, where the boys spend their time together and to which they return in the end, is not only a graveyard for dead bodies but also for old cars—a scrap yard as well as a graveyard. The *mise-en-scène* of this grave / scrap yard suggests the close connection between modern, mass-production trash culture and death.

One of the most vivid treatments of this trash culture in *Rane* can be found in the use of commodity-obsessed Serbian Turbofolk music, which blurs elements of the machine and the organic, the modern with the traditional. Kure and his Turbofolk-singing girlfriend, Suzana, are the film’s principal representations of Serbian trash culture, and they are adorned with its material symbols: the obligatory BMW, golden crucifix necklaces, and Nike sports shoes. The Dutch anthropologist Mathijs van de Port describes this phenomenon in his book *Gypsies, Wars and Other Instances of the Wild. Civilisation and Its Malcontents in a Serbian Town*, as follows:



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Unlike folklore, Turbofolk is shamelessly commercial mass production. The text, music and visual presentation are an amalgam of traditional and modern [...] Traditional folk melodies accompany texts referring to such present-day phenomena as foreign currency, weekend romances, tractors and bio-energy. Alternatively, a Germanic-sounding “*Schlager*” melody may accompany songs celebrating the place of birth, or even nostalgia for the traditions that are no more.<sup>63</sup>

This music and its commodity universe represent a blurring of Western urban culture with nostalgia for a rural way of life. This melding is most significantly developed in the image of the flat of Švaba’s grandmother: she lives with her TV and her chickens in the middle of a Belgrade suburb and smokes marijuana (unknowingly) with her grandson, while telling “fairy tales” of gruesome massacres perpetrated by the Croats during the Second World War.

Another dominant theme in *Rane* centres on the crucifixion myth, alluded to by the ubiquitous golden crucifix necklaces and images of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion. Srđan Vučinić, a Serbian film critic, explains in a review of *Rane* the significance of the “Christ on the Cross” image:

From beginning to end, *Rane* explores the essence of Kitsch [...]. Wounding, killing and burying merge with show-business, and robbery with national myths. Very often this kitsch universe is sublimated in the

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<sup>63</sup> Mathijs van de Port, *Gypsies, Wars and Other Instances of the Wild. Civilisation and Its Discontents in a Serbian Town*, Amsterdam, 1998, p 57.



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*mise-en-scène* (for example, when Kure practices push ups watching *Puls Asfalta* on TV, while in the background behind him hangs a huge picture of The Last Supper) or in a parallel montage (Pinki masturbates in the toilet, while his father Stojan watches the bombardment of Vukovar on TV) [...] The fatal conclusion of the film is just a logical effect of the kitsch universe, of which the characters are only a product. [...] The golden necklace with the figure of Jesus Christ on the crucifix is not accidentally the central icon of *Rane*—it is its symbolic core. This symbol stands for the kitsch universe of Christian iconography.<sup>64</sup>

The relationship which Vučinić describes is what one might call the connection between representations of death and death itself. *Rane* is full of such references, all symbols or metaphors for death: the graveyard, students in death masks in the anti-Milošević demonstrations, and the skull-and-crossbones flags associated with the nationalist euphoria of 1991. The kitsch universe of Turbofolk, nationalist TV propaganda, crime movies and TV talk shows is constantly set against these signs and symbols of death. The crucifix as the central icon and the graveyard as the central space of the film become metaphors for the close connection between kitsch and death. The film thus offers an interpretation of the social decay of Serbia in the 1990s, drawing upon transformations within this society (from Tito to Milošević, from Socialism to “Democracy lite”), which could be best described as the death of a traditional value system and the emergence in its place of a culture of superficial reference and misleading appearances.

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<sup>64</sup> Srđan Vučinić, “Putovanje na kraj noći. *Rane* Srđana Dragojevića,” *Reč* 46 (June 1998).



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## Conclusion

Dragojević's previous film, *Lepe sela, lepo gore* (*Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*, 1996), had culminated in some form of catharsis. "That's why it was extremely popular, because it produces a lot of tears and audiences can feel better," Dragojević told *indieWIRE* magazine in 1999. "In the case of *Rane*, I didn't want catharsis at all. I wanted a stone in their throats after the screening, and that's all. Probably because of my rage against the Serbian regime. Eight years I had to live in my country, with the hunger, poverty, criminality, cowardliness of the people, and losing any kind of hope."<sup>65</sup>

*Rane*'s final scene, the "shoot-out" between Pinki and Švaba in the graveyard, can be seen as a programmatic reference to the self-destructive forces active in today's Serbia. One may even speak of a culture, in which senseless killing and violence now belong to the Serbs' sense of themselves: as a wounded people that keep on wounding themselves, and even their best friends and neighbours. We can apply Mark Seltzer's notion of America's "wound culture" to modern Serbia. The wound stands paradigmatically as a metaphor for a culture that is traumatized by endless war and everyday violence, and morbidly obsessed with it. This is Dragojević's "stone in the throat."

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<sup>65</sup> Anthony Kaufman and Dave Ratzlo, "[Interview: Yugoslav Filmmakers Fight A Different War, Speaking with Goran Paskaljević and Srdjan Dragojević](#)," *indieWIRE*, 27 July 1999.



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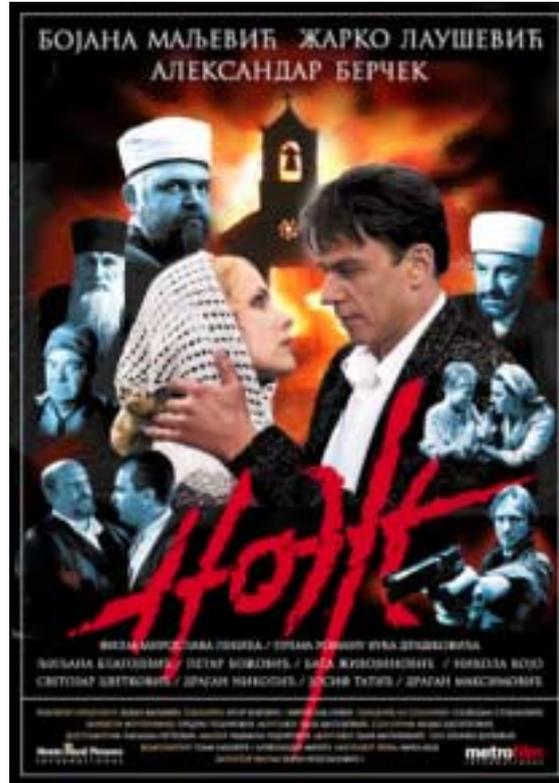
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## Vignettes of Violence



Some recent Serbian screen attitudes \*

Andrew James Horton

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\* This chapter is a re-edited version of two articles: "[Vignettes of Violence](#)," *Central Europe Review*, Vol 1, 1999, No 18 and "[It Was a Dark and Stormy Night...](#)," *Central Europe Review*, Vol 1, 1999, No 5.



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Wherever your sympathies lie, you have to admit that the 1990s have been a traumatic decade for Yugoslavia, marked by violence, fear and bloody rage. Hardly what one would assume to be ideal conditions for the development of a national film industry. And yet against all odds, Serbian film production has continued and the results have attracted worldwide attention and acclaim. War and international isolation may have hindered production and distribution of Serbian films, but they have at least left directors with plenty to meditate on. Just as it is almost impossible to make a film in Hollywood which is not bathed in opulence and glamour, so directors from Yugoslavia cannot avoid the underlying social tensions that have driven the country's politics in the 1990s.

This has made recent Yugoslav cinema compelling viewing, whether you are watching cheap trash for a domestic audience or the art house productions for international consumption. A brief look at six feature films from the period 1998 to 1999 illustrates the point.<sup>66</sup>



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## Epic violence

Miroslav Lekić's *Nož* (*The Dagger*, 1999), billed as the most expensive Serbian film ever made, desperately tries to mould itself as an epic love story in the manner of *Dr Zhivago* or *The English Patient*. Like its role models, *Nož* is based on a best-selling book, the novel of the same name by Vuk Drašković, which, as the film's English-language publicity goes out of its way to point out, is in fact not just a popular book but "literature."

The story starts when the Muslim Osman family kidnap, forcibly adopt and Islamicise the youngest son, Illija, of the Orthodox Jugović family. When Serb troops come on a revenge attack, they take back the wrong son, leaving Illija—or Alija as he is now known—to grow up a Muslim, unaware of his true identity. Even though the Serbs took his "brother," and his "mother" is fiercely anti-Serb, Alija is a relatively cosmopolitan Sarajevo urbanite who falls in love with a Serbian girl, Milica. Ethnic differences, however, lead to the couple's break-up.

Alija's identity is repeatedly challenged, first with the revelation that the Osman family is just a branch of the Jugovićs, and secondly when he finds out who his real parents actually are. In the Bosnian war, he meets his brother, who has grown up with a virulent anti-Muslim streak. Illija (as he is now called again) persuades his brother that he is in fact an Osman, and the film ends with the two sitting and pondering who they are and who they should hate, as the battle rages around them.

*Nož*, like Srđan Dragojević's international hit *Lepe sela, lepo gore* (*Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*, 1995), is an attempt to explain how bosom friends became archenemies in the



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Bosnian war. The two stand in stark contrast to each other, however. *Lepe sela, lepo gore* is a blackly humorous and ironic depiction of war which ultimately shows the futility and idiocy of inter-ethnic hatred. *Nož*, on the other hand, has no room for the comic and glorifies these tensions, showing them to be essential and even heroic.

For a film which publicises itself as a love story, romance is remarkably lacking, and Milica vanishes from the plot at a relatively early stage. Although she remains in the hero's mind, *Nož* is a story about what goes on between men, brotherly love and bitter rivalry to the death. In this way, war and hatred triumph over romance, as Alija becomes more concerned with who he is than with who he loves.

In contemplating his identity, Alija's catchphrase becomes "blood is blood," reflecting the film's concerns with justifying racial divisions and the notion that the parents you are born to are at least as important in defining you as what you experience in your life. If that weren't enough, the Muslims are portrayed as barbaric instigators of unprovoked violence against innocent Serbs, while Serb violence, when it occurs, is portrayed as justified revenge. Furthermore, Islamicism is shown as a form of treacherous deviancy. The Muslims are portrayed as desiring a Turkish invasion of Serbia in the 1950s to re-establish an Islamic empire in Europe, and the relationship between the Osmans and the Jugovićs emphasises that the former are the off-shoots of the latter, with the implication that the Jugovićs, being older, have some form of greater legitimacy.



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## Sex and violence

Gorčin Stojanović's *Stršljen* (*The Hornet*, 1998) is a less outwardly jingoistic piece of cinema (and a far cheaper one, too, with Stojanović coaxing out some very poor acting from some usually fine performers), but it ultimately cashes in on society's prejudices and fears. The plot concerns Adriana, a young Serbian girl who falls in love with an Italian, who introduces her to a lavishly romantic world of Japanese restaurants, expensive presents and luxurious apartments. Just when she thinks she has found perfect happiness, she starts to suspect he leads a double life. Sure enough, this generous and warm-hearted man turns out to be a ruthless Albanian terrorist—code-named the Hornet.

Interestingly, this is not just a tale of a love which turns out to be a thin illusion. As he fears his secret is being discovered, Milijam (the Hornet) uses first coercion and then violence to restrain Adriana. This adds a new dimension to their relationship, and as Milijam's brutal nature starts to emerge their affair develops from a nervous and even childish romance into a passionately carnal one. The film (sponsored by Avis and Diners Club International) and its equation of macho violence with the sexual admiration of young and beautiful women culminates with the two gazing lovingly into each others' eyes from the opposite sides of a police stake-out after Milijam brutally murders his brother.

Radivoje Andrić's *Tri palme za dve bitance i ribicu* (*Three Palms for Two Punks and a Babe*, 1998) is a rather more interesting mixture, both teasing society's expectations and living up to them. *Tri palme* launches off with a sequence which matches the mock newsreel opening of *Lepe sela, lepo gore* in the hilarity of its satire. An American news reporter comments on how drastic the Yugoslav situation has become, mocking Western perceptions of Serbian



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society whilst wryly acknowledging the half-truth behind them, as the presenter reports on inflation of three billion per cent a month, how elderly crones are reduced to climbing high trees to forage for fruit and how Serbs have to recycle their condoms. But Andrić can't keep up the satire, and the film soon descends into a well-paced but rather mundane plot about a bank robbery. The humour returns in occasional bursts, with the duplicity and criminality of modern Serbian society in general, and its banks in particular, as targets for attack.

The film, though, is ultimately driven by the notion that the only way to get your way in a criminal society is to turn criminal yourself. Robbing criminals, as one character points out, is not crime. Although this message is delivered with more than a light dose of irony, there is an inescapable measure of admiration thrown in as well.

*Točkovi* (*Wheels*, 1999) employs a similar balance between satire and sincerity, hardly surprising considering that the writer and director, Đorđe Milosavljević, also worked on the screenplay for *Tri palme*. This dark thriller set in an isolated motel on an excessively stormy night, with a group of people trapped in the Točkovi motel as a serial killer in their midst picks them off one by one. The victims, however, are not as innocent as they first seem.

*Točkovi* explores the two-sided nature of Serbian society, where nobody is quite what first appearances might make them out to be. Slick, violent and driven by an insistent and catchy soundtrack, *Točkovi* could nearly be a perfect piece of cinematic suspense, the climactic flaw coming only in the film's limp and unconvincing ending. The film's treatment of violence has inevitably led the unimaginative to label it "Tarantinoesque." Milosavljević's screenplay, however, has less to do with a fashionable American film director and more to do with a decidedly un-hip English author. *Točkovi* seemingly takes its starting point from the



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Agatha Christie novel originally called *Ten Little Niggers*, a title so outrageously offensive it was eventually changed to *Ten Little Indians*. The inspiration apparent in the film's plot premise also emerges in the ditty "Ten Little Indians," which the killer in both the book and the film sings.

To say *Točkovi* is an adaptation of *Ten Little Indians* might be going too far. However, *Točkovi* does neatly take the essence of Christie's depiction of the English home counties and transposes them into rural Serbia. Both are apparently civilised worlds of order, good manners and affluence, beneath which lurk dark secrets that society dares not talk about. Perhaps the difference is that Christie's England was a rather fantastical invention, intended to make middle-class England seem exciting and gutsy in order to take people's minds off just how boring it really was. Milosavljević's Serbia, although not a naturalistic portrait, is nevertheless a reflection of a real situation. Indeed, the film is dependent on that for its satirical elements. However, this ultimately leaves the viewer questioning what Milosavljević is really trying to say in his handling of violence with an almost affectionate humour.

## **Violence against violence**

Whatever criticisms you may like to level at *Točkovi* for glorifying screen violence, they are nothing compared to Boban Skerlić's *Do koske* (*Rage*, 1998), which is truly strangled by its self-contradictory aims: a violent film to argue against violent films.

With by far the most litres of blood shed of all the films at Raindance, *Do koske* revels in a violence that can only be called cinematic in its obsession with style and youthful



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good looks. The plot pretext is the kidnapping and torture of Mr Kovać, the local gangland boss (played by Lazar Ristovski, best known for his Crni in Kusturica's *Podzemlje*), by a group of disaffected youths who seek revenge for their expendability and worthlessness in society. The film ends with an implausibly high body count and a message of peace and reconciliation, but the latter is an artifice to provide a morally acceptable ending to a self-indulgent film. "They have replaced life with movies," comments Kovać in a closing speech which bemoans the influence of American cinema and drugs on youth. And yet it is hard to imagine a film which glorifies the voyeuristic barbarism of American cinema more.

With its graphic and sadistic rape scene (which carries the implicit notion that a woman will still love a man even if he sanctions her rape), and the contradiction between its half-hearted message and its substance, *Do koske* is a morally repugnant film. However, it has to be conceded that it is also an incredibly well-made one. It suffers from none of the sloppy immaturity of *Stršljen* or the excessive matinee melodrama of *Nož* and its ending is—dramatically at least—far stronger than that of *Točkovi*. It, therefore, emerges as slick, presentable and a disturbingly watchable product.

## One night of madness

However, the most accomplished film of Raindance's selection, and the most famous, was Goran Paskaljević's *Bure baruta* (*Cabaret Balkan*, 1998).<sup>67</sup> This French-Yugoslav

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<sup>67</sup> The film's title translates directly into English as "The Powder Keg." For legal reasons, the film is marketed in English as *Cabaret Balkan*.



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co-production bears the curious claim to fame that it is “the first Yugoslav film to be filmed exclusively at night” and in some ways has aims just as self-contradictory as those of *Do koske*. Set in Belgrade the night before the Dayton Peace Accord is signed, *Bure baruta* is one night of Balkan madness as a small group of characters become entangled in a series of violent episodes. Although the characters believe they control the power they wield, it invariably comes back to consume them.

Paskaljević’s aim in *Bure baruta* was to show how the war in Bosnia affected ordinary people who were not at the front-line. Aided by a strong and gritty script (based on the play of the same name by Dejan Dukovski), Paskaljević aims to pull off a film that depicts the horrors of violence (and especially against women), without reducing the characters to cardboard stereotypes of evil. The protagonists in *Bure baruta* are all touchingly human and in some ways we can all identify with them and the horrific situations they find themselves in. At the same time, Paskaljević shows how their basic human flaw—the desire for revenge—destroys them, and in this sense Paskaljević is highly critical of the protagonists and their actions.

Like *Do koske*, *Bure baruta* is a film which uses violence to condemn violence. *Bure baruta* is, however, a subtler and more challenging film. Whereas *Do koske* reduces violence, rape and death to screen clichés for the sake of making a visual impression, Paskaljević’s film is more measured in its execution and effect, even though it deals with the same themes. Although held in a framework of stories that interlock so tightly they cannot be considered naturalistic, the brutality of the film is horrifyingly non-cinematic. Moreover, the violence is contained not so much in the actions as in the dialogue and the plots, and Paskaljević and



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Dukovski emerge as keen observers of human behaviour, whereas Skerlić comes over as merely a skilled manipulator of screen potential.

## Madness for Milošević?

*Bure baruta* has already had international success, picking up awards at Venice and the European Film Awards, to name but two. Paskaljević is indeed already an established name in Yugoslav film history with such films as *Vreme čuda* (*Time of Miracles*, 1990) and *Someone Else's America* (1995) to his name.

However, this may not silence all the critics. Recent years have seen many Yugoslav films undergo re-evaluation, and several films previously thought to be anti-Milošević in their message are now thought to implicitly support the Yugoslav leader. In particular, the whole idea of “Balkan madness” has been criticised as presenting an image of Balkan violence as irrational and, therefore, unstoppable and uncontainable by the forces of reason. This depiction, the argument goes, is pro-Milošević in that it advocates violence as an inevitable outcome of the Yugoslav predicament and something which the West cannot control.

Furthermore, the obsession of Yugoslav films with trying to pass the blame for violence onto another party has also met with harsh words from critics.<sup>68</sup> Blame is an important theme in *Bure baruta*, and the characters continually question who is guilty and argue their innocence right up to the final moments of the film’s explosive end.

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<sup>68</sup> See Péter Krasztév’s chapter “Who Will Take the Blame?” in this volume.



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Conceivably, some critics might find *Bure baruta* to be pro-Milošević in this sense. Its notions of Yugoslavia as part of some senseless “cabaret Balkan” over which the characters have no control, and the continual questing for someone to take the blame, fit this model.

However, the model—in this case at least—is flawed. *Bure baruta* expresses the angst of an individual lost in larger social mechanisms - a common theme in an area of the world where subjugation by one regime after another has been par for the course. To rigidly label the film as automatically being pro-Milošević is like labelling Franz Kafka as being pro-Hapsburg for showing his characters in subjugation to bureaucracy. Paskaljević shows how violence is bigger than individuals, and, moreover, there is some sense of Fate, poetic justice and even morality which is larger than violence itself. The characters are repeatedly lampooned in their belief that they are not to blame for what is happening (quite literally in one scene) and their lack of faith in some morality which is a higher order than the brutality which surrounds them.

This is more than can be said for most of the films shown at Raindance, which either showed violence and revenge as the highest form of judgement (*Nož* and *Stršljen*), dispensed with morality completely (*Tri palme*) or had an uneasy relationship with it (*Točkovi* and *Do koske*).

**Andrew James Horton**



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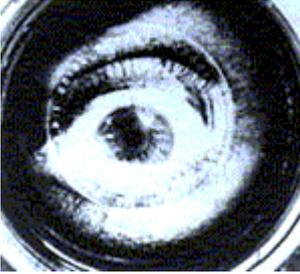
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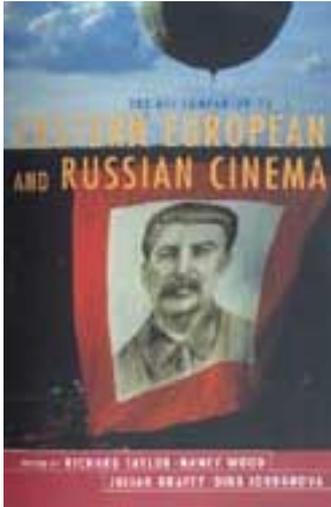
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