

'One Must Watch Across Borders'  
Dina Iordanova in interview with Svetlana Slapsak.  
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## **'One Must Watch Across Borders'**

Interview with Prof. Dina **Iordanova**

Interview by Prof. Svetlana Slapšak (S.S.), Ljubljana:

**You are one of a few specialists in world cinema, „the other“ European cinema, and the Balkan cinema: these cinematographies were state funded (like socialist cinema), almost never state-funded (like Greek cinema), or mix-funded (like post-socialist cinema). Can you „read-in“ these turbulent histories of the outside into the film history?**

It is good that you open with this question, as answering it will give me the opportunity to immediately express my basic political stance as a film scholar: From the onset, and all over these years, and into the future, I always propagate the same stance. Namely, one must 'watch across borders'. This is what I do, and this is what I hope everybody who gets engaged with the study of film, to do.

Working in film studies means, first and foremost, watching a countless number of films. This is the material we work with; this is the material on the basis of which we make our pronouncements and see trends and narratives emerge.

Year after year, I see multiple films, feature and documentaries, day in and day out. In my watching, I always try to see films from a variety of countries and from different periods. I cannot possibly be interested to know the films of one national tradition only – so, even though I am Bulgarian, I would normally watch (and write about) films from each and every Balkan country – from Albania and Bosnia to Slovenia and Turkey. This means that I am also, occasionally, exposed to films that are revealing aspects and interpretations that may have been intended for domestic usage only. Over the years, some of the most interesting experiences have been related to seeing contested and controversial films, such as the Macedonian *Black Seed* (1971, Kiril Tsenevski), which exposes the mistreatment of ethnic Macedonian combatants in post-WWII Greece. Or seeing various episodes of the Turkish series about Karamurat -- which presents this Ottoman superhero by using the same visual tropes that would be used in the Slavic countries to show Orthodox super-heroes, like Milos Obilic, who fight the Ottomans....

Watching across borders means to understand we need to take a stance above animosities and assume a position of relativism and against nationalism. It means being open to the possibility of different points of view and different master narratives. It is so enriching... Thus, even though I am East European, I care for and am also interested in seeing films from Scandinavia, and from Spain, and from the Maghreb, and from the Middle East. Even though I am European, I care for and am also interested in seeing films from Asia, and from Africa, and

from Australia. The world is one, and we are citizens of the world. I want to embrace the world in my watching.

I am pleased to say that nowadays, about twenty years since I first started watching across Balkan borders, I am no longer the sole person who approaches matters this way. There are many younger scholars from the Balkans who have realised that it is of paramount importance to be familiar with the films made in neighbouring countries. And, in the community of film studies at large, there is now a movement of people who work in what is called 'transnational mode' where the 'watching across borders' is an entry point for any investigation.

I recently dedicated a piece to these matters, called *Choosing the Transnational*. It is available from Frames Cinema Journal

(<http://framescinemajournal.com/article/choosing-the-transnational/>)

***S.S.: Which would then be some common features of this whole area film making?***

Filmmakers have actually been quite good in overcoming the petty mentality that keeps the Balkans divided. Greece and Turkey, countries that do not seem to be able to get along very much, are in fact among the most frequently co-producing partners – this is because it comes down to the relationships and friendships of individuals, who, luckily, do not need the permission of their respective heads of state to pull off various projects. Likewise, whenever I am at a film festival, if I hear loud laughter from some corner, I know that I will find

there a group of filmmakers from the countries of former Yugoslavia, who immediately find each other at every social opportunity, and stick together – for fun. The divisions and the impossible obstacles that keep these people apart in their respective tiny countries somehow miraculously disappear.... Festivals like those in Thessaoniki, Sarajevo, Sofia, Istanbul, and Transylvania facilitate and contribute to this togetherness, especially with their Agora forums, Meetings on the Bridge or other respective spaces that enable contacts and collaborations.

I have been privileged to have a friend in Dimitris Kerkinos, the man who programs the Balkan Survey section at film festival in Thessaloniki. For more than a decade now he has made sure that I get the chance to see all the films of his selection – even if I do not manage to go to the festival. And it is due to him that I am able to follow the most important developments in the cinema of the disparate countries of the region. The Balkan Survey celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2013. Today this approach to regional programming is mimicked by most other important film festivals in the region, which also feature Balkan sections and often award films from the neighbouring countries. It is one of the most important and productive cultural undertakings in a region that does not otherwise enjoy a reputation as a place where people are truly open to one another.

What would I name as a common feature of this whole area filmmaking? I think there is a certain existentialist subtlety that characterises the best films that come out from the Balkan countries. My preferred filmmakers that represent this line of filmmaking come from Turkey – people like Zeki Demirkubuz (my

favourite director at large) and Reha Erdem. But if I am to reference recent films that are representative of such existentialism, I would mention the Romanian *Child's Pose* (2013, Calin Peter Netzer), the Croatian *The High Sun* (2015, Dalibor Matanić) and the Turkish *Frenzy* (2015, Emin Apler).

***S.S.: Why, when and how should we tackle the state-controlled film production and the cheap pop-film production in the region's film history?***

Film industry was state controlled – more or less -- in the countries with communist regimes, with plenty of incidents of censorship or state-sponsored heroic super productions: think the ‘cinema communisto’ of the partisan blockbusters in Yugoslavia or the megalomaniac historical sagas of Romanian Sergiu Nicholaescu. In countries with no socialism, however, the same period was characterised by the blossoming of hugely popular idiosyncratic local industries where scores of amazingly industrious directors made a range of equally amusing and inventive popular entertainment films on shoestring budgets – one of the most amazing examples, known as Yeşilçam, is tackled in the recent documentary by German-Turkish director Cem Kaya *Remake, Remix, Rip-off* (2015), a film that gave me enormous pleasure to watch and that I have been recommending left and right since.

In the past two decades most films coming out of the Balkan region have had more than modest budgets and thus inevitably end up regarded as ‘pop up’ – such financing conditions do not allow for directors to build consistent filmographies and make films on a regular pace. Whilst the average budget for a

European film is around 4 million Euro, a film that has a budget of over 1 million Euro here is considered to be lavishly financed. It is a simple economic feature due to the size of the producing countries. Large countries like the US or Russia can easily finance their productions, but it is not as straightforward for small countries where the size of the market is equally small and where a film of local interest is likely to only earn minuscule returns. The fact that these films are not shown more widely in the region does not help. Many in the Balkan countries have to rely on co-production partnerships or on investment from television – and such circumstances inevitably lead to adjustments in the storyline and to various other compromises.

What I prefer to stress on, however, is that in spite all such limitations, there is amazing inventiveness and filmmakers manage to make great films against all odds. Among such micro-budget films, I admire the Bulgarian *Lesson* (2014, Kristina Grozeva, Petar Valchanov), for example, as well as the Serbian *Clip* (2012, Maja Milos).

***S.S.: Your favorite film artists from the „other side“ of the European cinema...and women among them.***

It is mostly men, I am afraid☺ I already mentioned Zeki Demirkubuz, an existentialist genius whose oeuvre has not been as heavily promoted as the work of Nuri Bilge Ceylan. But also in general I think the cinema of Turkey is great at the moment.

My other favourite is the documentarist Zelimir Zilnik who is a dear friend. I can never tire of his wry humour and humanism. At 74, to me Zilnik comes across as a younger man than many others who may be born many years later...And he is always at least two years ahead of times. If I know that Zelimir is making a film on a certain topic today, I know that this topic will be the key political issue two years later. He made *The Old School of Capitalism* in 2009, for example – and in 2011 we had the Occupy movement all over. He was working on *Logbook Serbistan* in 2014 – and soon thereafter the wave of refugees and their treatment became the top issue all across Europe...

I have got many favourites, but let's mention the names of women among them – some of who have become personal friends over the years. Penny Panayotopoulo and Myrna Tsapa in Greece, Mira Turajlic in Serbia, and the late Binka Zhelyazkova in Bulgaria – this last one deserves a separate interview...

From Bosnia, I admire the work of Jasmila Zbanic, the film director who speaks about the problems of this country with an unblinking eye. Most of all, I love her 40-min long documentary *Builder's Diary* (2007), a chilling and inforgettable tale of the aftermath of the Bosnian war in the divided city of Mostar – for some reason, this documentary does not currently appear in the imdb nor wikipedia listings of the work of the director. Her film *Grbavica/Esma's Secret* (2006) is also one of the most important testimonies about the aftermath of the war.

***S.S.: You deal with the region to which a film „genre“ is almost denied: curse or blessing?***

Blessing. A firm 'genre' would mean boredom, very soon. Dealing with 'more of the same'. This may be the preferred position for some academics, but not for me. The absence of a tried and tested Balkan 'genre' means there is always space to be surprised. Still, whereas one cannot speak of a specific 'genre', there are certain themes and visual tropes that are present across these cinemas. The extended family and its half-silences is invariably present in films from across the region. But, as we know from Tolstoy, all unhappy families are unique...

Still, there is perhaps one 'genre' that is represented in all these cinematographies – and this is the film that tackles matters of internal migration. Each and every Balkan country has produced films that feature the lives of people who have left behind a more traditional lifestyle in the villages and have made a move to the city where they subject themselves, not particularly successfully, to being moulded by urban life – whilst the peasant in them resists such moulding.

**S.S.: Which are the inner reflexive conceptual, state-of-the art problems of the Balkan cinematographies – beside the chronic lack of money and difficulties in accessing EU funds?**

I will skip this question if it is OK – I think I wrote long enough in response to the others.

***S.S.: Scotland, film and academia: tell us more about your present life and work.***

Well, first of all, Scotland will separate. It has been clear to me since the independence referendum in 2014 (I did not vote, even though I am British citizen – I did not feel it was my issue). The outcome of that referendum was presented as ‘the majority of people chose to stay within the UK’. In fact, however, 45% had voted to opt out and there is no easy resolution for situations where societies are so profoundly split over some issue. With more recent developments, and Brexit in particular, it is becoming clear that the break up of the UK is just a matter of time. It is difficult to predict if it will be a disaster. After all, the UK is supposedly a ‘civilized’ country and may fall apart without the need to go into war...We will have to wait and see. In any case, my life is now connected to Scotland, a country I have come to love for its beauty and style. I hope that the nationalistic tendencies will not take a turn that would make it impossible for people like myself to stay.

I came to Scotland in 2004 for a job – I was appointed the first professor of Film Studies at the ancient University of St Andrews (established in 1413), with a mandate to start a Film Studies department. It will soon be 12 years...On arrival here, I was one of a handful of female professors (the situation has improved since) and one of a few foreigners. But then, these characteristics would apply to whichever context I would work in – women and foreign members of staff are in the minority at most institutions, and in fact St Andrews, even if predominantly white and traditional, is in fact a truly cosmopolitan place.

The years that I have spent working in Scotland so far mark the longest period I have worked in the same place, and it is my feeling that I will remain here until retirement. I managed to build a department that got off to a very good start and established a solid international reputation – and I hope it will survive successfully for many years after I am no longer involved with it. I had the opportunity to develop some of my ideas on research priorities and build a research culture that would respect all film traditions and that would look beyond the limiting boundaries of the West.

You know mainly my work on Balkan and East European cinema, with books such as *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media* (2001), *Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and Artistry of Central European Film* (2003), and perhaps *Cinema of the Balkans* (2006) and *Emir Kusturica* (2002). Since coming to work in Scotland, however, I have published more than ten other books, on a much wider variety of topics – many relate to a large project that I pulled off and feature different approaches to global film festivals (and this work led to the creation of a vast global network of contacts for me). But I also wrote on human trafficking in European cinema, about Asian film, about digital distribution, and so on. My most recent book is *Cinemas of Paris*, a totally enjoyable project dedicated to the best cinematic culture in the world that I worked on with France's leading film critic and my friend, Jean-Michel Frodon. I am currently working on a monograph about Romani representations in global cinema, and am contemplating yet another project that would zoom in on cinema at global airlines. It is also my pleasure to supervise numerous doctoral students – one of

my best students, Croatian-Australian Ana Grgic, who worked on an amazingly original project about the early years of Balkan cinema, just graduated. I am currently working with students from Romania, the UK, Thailand, China, Japan, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia.

It is wonderful to be in Scotland in summer – it is never hot, and the days are so very long, kind of endless. It is daylight between 4 am and 11 pm. So I always try to be here in the summer months, and especially for the festival in Edinburgh in August – UK's largest and most exciting cultural event. But in winter the days are short and darkness prevails. Sadness overtakes me. So I feel I must go away during these periods that are so difficult for me to handle. Luckily, I have the opportunity to travel extensively during the dark days. This coming fall I will be visiting Tirana (thus ticking off the last European country where I have not yet been), Heraklion, Krakow, Zurich, Rome, Berlin, Beijing, Bucharest, and it seems Singapore will also be thrown in the mix. So far this year I spent time in Istanbul, Dhaka, Sofia, Amsterdam, Paris, and Tel Aviv. This past weekend I was in Glasgow; the coming weekend I am in London. And it has been like this every year for the past decade or so. It may be an expression of certain restlessness, I admit. But it is also full of excitement. My favourite position in life, in the context of all these travels, has become the one of 'privileged outsider'.

***S.S.: Your Balkan film gods and goddesses – actors, of course...***

I would like to be politically correct and nominate an actress (or another creative personality) from each country in the region – well, may be not from all countries, but at least from many of them...To a great extent this response is inspired by your own writing, Svetlana, as I remember well the book that you did where you spoke about a range of women that had inspired you. It has always been in my mind since, as an example for something I would love to do some day. So here I will stick to women – I am sure there will be other opportunities to discuss the men.

I will open by nominating two women from my native Bulgaria, who are an endless source of inspiration. The first one is the singer **Lili Ivanova** (b. 1939), a powerful voice and the country's most celebrated singer who still continues recording and performing at the age of 77, confronting and triumphing over prejudice. Lili Ivanova's songs were the songs of my childhood, and it is her voice that will remain with me forever as the voice of Bulgaria. Always choosing the music and the lyrics to her songs to the highest standards, Lili is an inspiring example for all women. Reading her autobiography a few years ago – where she talks of her rise from humble provincial origins and of overcoming shyness and adversity to becoming the country's most celebrated entertainer -- was an amazing motivational exercise.

But I must also speak here of the great **Nevena Kokanova** (1938-2000), an unforgettable actress who was loved by thousands in and outside our small country – especially for films that took her soft glow beyond Bulgaria's borders, such as *The Peach Thief* (1959, Vulo Radev) a film in which she co-starred with

Rade Markovic and which subtly yet radically addresses the absurd split of the Balkan nations along strange lines of allegiance to Western powers.

From Romania, I choose to express admiration for **Ada Solomon** (b. 1968), the producer behind a great number of important 'new wave' films. So consistent is the presence of this woman in the projects that get acclaim that I often wonder if it is the directors who should be in the spotlight, or is it she who needs to be credited with all these achievements.

From the countries of former Yugoslavia – and forgive me for not nominating someone from each one of these newly minted countries -- my favourite actress is **Mirjana Karanovic** (b. 1957). She is of Serbian origin but regularly appears in films beyond Serbia – like those by Swiss-Croatian Andrea Staka, or those by Bosnian Jasmila Zbanic. To me, Mirjana Karanovic has the versatility of Isabel Huppert. She is unforgettable as Petrija in Srjan Karanovic's film, where she is just 25 years old – and she is equally formidable in her most recent work. I understand she now also took to directing, even though I have not yet had the chance to see her film *A Good Wife* (2016).

I will always have great respect for the work of Croatian **Dubravka Ugresic** (b. 1949), who ended up in exile in Amsterdam, full of bitterness and disillusionment. Her novel about Stefica Cvek is one of the quintessential texts that woke up the feminist in me back in the 1970s☺

Back in the late 1970s I had the privilege to attend a performance of *Medea* by Euripides with the unforgettable **Melina Mercouri** (1920-1994) in the title role. There is no actress from this region, in my view, who could match the energy and the fervour of this skinny yet passionate figure. I have since written about her work in film, mainly about *Stella* (1955, Michael Cacoyannis) and *Never on Sunday* (1960, Jules Dassin), two quintessential Greek films, which, even if made by men, are feminist texts in their own right.

In recent years I keep returning to Istanbul – a place that ranks among my three favourite cities on Earth and where I am privileged to have a constellation of friends I love. Consequently, I have seen a large number of Turkish films. In all these, my favourite actress is the gorgeous **Türkan Şoray** (b. 1945), an amazing beauty best known for classics such as *My Prostitute Love* (1968, Lütfi Akad) and *The Girl with the Red Scarf* (1978, Atif Yılmaz, based on Chinghiz Aitmatov's story).