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## **BALKAN CINEMA in the 90s: AN OVERVIEW**

**Afterimage**, Jan, 2001 by Dina Iordanova

While other lesser-known national cinemas are moving from obscurity into the international spotlight, the treasures of Balkan cinema remain unknown even to cineastes. With the exception of the systematic work on Yugoslavian film by such critics as Daniel Goulding, [1] Ronald Holloway [2] and Andrew Horton, [3] little has been published on one of the most interesting film cultures in Europe. The masterpieces of Dimither Anagnosti, Kujtim Cashku, Liviu Ciulei, George Dyulgerov, Branko Gapo, Nikos Kunduros, Zeki Okten, Ali Ozgenturk, Zivojin Pavlovic, Mircea Veroiu, Rangel Vulchanov, Pantelis Vulgaris, Binka Zhelyazkova, Zelimir Zilnik and many others remain virtually unknown beyond the borders of their respective countries, and even the works of internationally celebrated veterans such as Theo Angelopoulos, Michalis Cacoyannis, Yilmaz Guney, Dusan Makavejev and Lordan Zafranovic are considered exotic and are rarely shown.

It would be misleading to conceive of the cinema of the Balkans in monolithic terms. The groups that inhabit the region do not share a common heritage in linguistic, religious and

political terms, nor are they reputed for cooperating in the field of culture--a cooperation that makes the talk of a Scandinavian cinema, for example, perfectly legitimate. I have chosen to lump these cinemas together and talk of Balkan cinema, as opposed to the cinemas of the individual countries in the region, because a regional approach allows us to discover recurring concerns and visions that otherwise remain ignored, but more importantly because I believe that there is such a thing as Balkan cinema--one with analogous sites and conditions of production--a clearly definable category with clearly set thematic and stylistic dimensions.

### **BALKAN CINEMA: MAIN FEATURES**

While there are distinct characteristics and features that characterize Balkan cinema, to outsiders the very claim that there is such a thing as "Balkan" culture may sound unacceptable. They have been told repeatedly that people in the Balkans do not share a feeling of togetherness, that the culture of each Balkan country stands for itself, separated from the others by language barriers and long-standing ethnic hostilities, and that there is not much artistic exchange among the groups in the region--Bulgarian, Romanian, Bosnian, Greek, Serb, Turk, Albanian, Kosovar, Montenegrin, Croat, Slovenian and Macedonia.

A closer look, however, reveals that even though the cultures of these countries stand on their own, their independent cultural output testifies to a similar mentality derived from a shared socio-cultural space. Because the problems, across borders, are the same--turbulent history and volatile politics, marginality, a specific Orientalism, the legacy of

patriarchy and economic dependency--it is not a surprise that the new cinema of the Balkan countries presents similarities in theme and style. [4]

### **Thematic**

Thematically, Balkan film includes features that address the specific positioning of the region between East and West, variably interpreted either as a civilizational crossroads of Orient and Occident, or as a European margin. All include films that focus on clashes between Christianity and Islam, even if these clashes are seen and interpreted differently. All explore the controversial interference of western powers in the Balkans, most often mocked for their undisguised colonial-type policies.

Even when the history is contested or is just a record of adverse confrontations, it is the source of common themes. Yugoslav cinema focuses on controversial moments of political violence in history such as the Ilinden uprising (*Republikata vo plamen, Republic in Flames*, 1969, by Lubisa Georgievski), the *Ustasha terror* (*Okupacija u 26 slika, Occupation in 26 Scenes*, 1978, by Lordan Zafranovic), or the self-styled anarcho-socialism of the early Yugoslav years (*Caruga, Charuga*, 1990, by Rajko Grlic).

Similarly, political violence and lawlessness perpetrated by the powers-that-be is the theme of Gunei's *Yol* (1981), a film full of rough encounters and endless background shooting.

Many of the adverse encounters in Balkan history are the subject of Angelopoulos's *To vlemma tou Odyssea* (*Ulysses Gaze*, 1995), where, during the protagonist's Balkan-wide

travels, it gradually becomes obvious that the history of each Balkan nation is often determined by confrontations--subtle or overt--between neighbors.

In many films the filmmakers have addressed the unease of political and national tensions. For example, a seemingly minor historical episode, the 1902 abduction of an American missionary by Macedonian rebels, was the subject of two of the best-known films from the region: the Macedonian *Mis Ston* (*Miss Stone*, 1958, by Zika Mitrovic) and the Bulgarian *Mera spored mera* (*Measure for Measure*, 1982, by George Dyulgerov). The 1965 *Padurea spinzuratilor* (*Forest of the Hanged*, by Liviu Ciulei, Romania), based on the novel by Liviu Rebreanu, tells the difficult story of an ethnic Romanian drafted in the Austro-Hungarian army who refuses to fight against his kinsmen and comes to face the death penalty. In lyrical overtones, the Bulgarian classic *Kradetsat na praskovi* (*The Peach Thief*, 1964, by Vulo Radev), depicts the politically awkward infatuation of a Bulgarian officer's wife with a Serbian POW during World War I. *Crno Seme* (*Black Seed*, 1971, by Kiril Cenevski) explores the horrific treatment of the Macedonian participants in the Greek civil war of 1945-49.

Most cinemas in the region have produced films addressing the Ottoman legacy, featuring either uprisings against the Ottomans or traumatic moments from the time of disintegration of the empire. Alongside television series like the Romanian "Revolt of the Haidouks" (1972) and the Bulgarian "Captain Petko Voivode" (1988), feature films like the Yugo-Macedonian *Solunskite atentatori* (*Thessaloniki Assaults*, 1961, by Zika Mitrovic, Yugoslavia) and *Makedonska krvava svadba* (*Macedonian Blood Wedding*, 1967, by Trajce Popov, Yugoslavia), the Romanian *Neamul Soimarestilor* (*The Hawk*,

1965, by Mircea Dragan), the Albanian *Skenderbeg* (1953, by Sergei Yutkevich, USSR/Albania) and *Balada e Kurbinit* (*Ballad of Kurbini*, 1990, by Kujtim Cashku, Albania), all looked at the Ottoman past of their respective countries. In some instances, historical epics about the Ottoman period were abused by governments that showed them as part of campaigns that increased inter-ethnic tensions--Bulgarian *Vreme na nasilie* (*Time of Violence*, 1988, by Lyudmil Staykov) dealt with a seventeenth-century forced conversion to Islam, but was made and released at the peak of the assimilationist campaign against the ethnic Turks of Bulgaria in the 1980s. The 1989 Yugoslav production *Boj na Kosovu* (*Battle of Kosovo*, 1989, by Zdravko Sotra), which dealt with the infamous 1389 defeat of the Serbs at Kosovo polje, was of equal political ambiguity.

Satire has often been the preferred genre in representing earlier Balkan clashes sparing neither the bickering Balkan nations nor the interfering European powers. Nikos Kounduros's allegory *Bordello* (1985, Greece), is set during the 1897 uprising on the island of Crete where the Greek rebels gained a short-lived freedom from Turkish domination. Here, alongside an international fleet of French, English, Italian and Russian warships, a motley crew of prostitutes, adventurers and racketeers from all over Europe flocked to the island. In Rangel Vulchanov's *Posledni zhelaniya* (*Last Wishes*, 1983, Bulgaria) we see soldiers crossing bayonets and warring sides dashing without ever being clear who fights whom in a series of Balkan wars. The fighting, nonetheless, is interrupted at a decisive moment so that a previously scheduled golf game of European dignitaries can take place in their Balkan estates. In *Lachenite obuvki no neznayniya voyn* (*The Patent Leather Shoes of the Unknown Soldier*, 1979), another feature by Vulchanov, the brief interruptions between the wars are treated as intermissions during which the soldiers

only manage to drop home, check on the animals and impregnate their wives. The war only comes to an end when an angry granny, fed up with all the wrangling, goes to the battlefield and scolds the diverse band of raggedy soldiers.

The recycling of historical myths has frequently been a feature of historical filmmaking in the Balkans. The cinemas of the countries with communist regimes and state-run production facilities in particular have yielded a large number of officially endorsed epics focusing on glorious moments in the nation's formation. Such were the Bulgarian films *Khan Asparukh* (1981, by Lyudmil Staykov) and *Boris I* (1984, by Borislav Sharaliev), or the Romanian films *Dacii* (*The Dacians*, 1966, by Sergiu Nicolaescu) and *Mihai Viteazul* (*Michael the Brave*, 1971, by Sergiu Nicolaescu). There were, in addition, dozens of films idealizing the communist anti-fascist resistance and glorifying the communist takeover, like the Yugoslav partisan sagas directed by Veljko Bulajic and Branko Marjanovic.

Yet another sphere of common themes in Balkan cinema is the attention paid to village life. While industrial development in Central Europe led to an earlier growth of cities, in the Balkans villages remained the predominant forms of communal organization until much later into the twentieth century. Respectively, filmmakers from the Balkan countries maintained a persistent attention to village life. A number of Balkan films deal with the difficult years of the village during and after the wars, and with the period of forced collectivization in the 1950s. The industrialization of the 1960s and 1970s led to the desertion of villages and to massive village-to-city migrations that have been explored in many of the region's masterpieces from the 1970s, usually referred to as migration

cycle films, made in Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and the countries of former Yugoslavia.

All Balkan cinemas share an interest in the Gypsy (Roma) minority; albeit this interest has often been revealed in entrenched patterns of patronizing and exoticizing. Even when sympathetic to the Romani (Gypsy) predicament and while questioning the social framework of minority policies, cinema has exploited their excitingly non-conventional lifestyles, thus bringing up issues of authenticity versus stylization. Cinematic representations of Romanies have built on recurring themes such as the passionate and self-destructive infatuations, the feast-in-times-of-plague attitudes, the strikingly mature streetwise teenage protagonists, and the mistrust of outsiders. The rough realism and excessive exoticism, shown as the cinematic celebrations of freewheeling Roma and seen in a range of films, from directors such as Dyulgerov, Emir Kusturica, Aleksandar Petrovic, Stole Popov and Slobodan Sijan are best understood if considered in the context of a broader preoccupation with marginality found across Balkan cinema.

Further shared thematic spheres for Balkan cinema are the examination of social problems (from the Yugoslav black wave to the new Turkish cinema), as well as the preoccupation with moral concerns, reflecting an overall European trend from the 1980s until today. The popularity of some specific genres, such as the comedies of mores (usually structured around the tensions between what is seen as primitive or refined) or the melodramas, also suggest similarities in audience tastes across the Balkans.

### **Stylistic**

The stylistic influences over Balkan cinema can be located mostly within Europe--the Italian Neorealism and the French Nouvelle Vague largely determine the narrative approaches found in Balkan film. The visual style, however, was mostly influenced by the dynamic camerawork seen in Czech cinema of the 1960s, and by the elaborately staged takes of directors such as Hungarian Milkos Jancso and Russian Andrei Tarkovsky, as well as by the tableau-style of Georgian Serguei Paradjanov. More recently there have been eastern influences coming from Iranian and Turkish cinema, the genre of the Western has been imitated in many Balkan productions that have made use of desolate landscapes and rough protagonists in a way that has led critics to talk about the specific subgenre of the "Eastern" Equally important are the pictorial influences coming from the Byzantine and the Ottoman aesthetics, as well as from the rich tradition of naivist painting in the region.

Another shared stylistical dimension of Balkan cinema is in its respect to folkloric heritage, which is used as a source of inspiration and visual referencing, as seen in the numerous cinematic scenes featuring communal events, in particular weddings, religious celebrations (from St. George's Day and Christmas to Ramadan and Bar Mitzvahs), and funerals. The leading cinematographers of the region--Tomislav Pinter, Yorgos Arvanitis, Karpo Godina, Radoslav Spassov, Vilko Filac and others--created the visual style of Balkan cinema as a unique and clearly distinguishable domain of images and visions.

Balkan cinema is characterized by a specific poeticism, of which critic Holloway talks at length, often linked to the slow pace of the narrative, the long takes, elaborately choreographed scenes, the understated colors and misty barren scenery and the haunting

musical score. On the other hand, here we find works that reflect harsh social realities in gritty and dynamic narration that leaves a lasting and unsettling impression on the viewers. These seemingly incompatible lines of Balkan cinema--the magic realist world of poetic imagination, folk legends and composite cosmological and mythological worldviews on the one hand, and the socially critical investigations driven by restless moral anxiety on the other--come together uniquely in Balkan cinema. Without descending to eclecticism, the filmmakers working here manage to keep a fine balance between storytelling that reflects on universal concerns and imagery that borders on the exotic.

## **THE FILMS**

The breakup of Yugoslavia was the major event that not only marked the political life but was also the leading topic of cinematic interest for the Balkan region. But besides the films responding to the Yugoslav crisis, the region's filmmaking continued to yield works containing the main thematic lines of Balkan cinema. Here I will look at the continuity in shared thematic spheres, followed by a discussion of the main films made in response to the Yugoslav breakup, and will give a brief overview of the current situation in Balkan cinema.

Two motives reverberate across a range of interviews given by Balkan filmmakers throughout the 1990s. One is their consciousness of the fringe positioning of the Balkans in relation to Europe, which in turn gives rise to intentions to turn the marginality into an advantage by exploiting its rich visual and narrative potential. The other one is a certain annoyance with their continuous classification as "Balkan" (indicating indigenous,

peculiar, non-European) which effectively limits their ability to address themes of universal concern and obliges them to seek success mostly by engaging in exotic self-representations.

### **Thematic spheres**

In the 1990s, many filmmakers in the Balkans continued their preoccupation with history and revisited moments of the region's past. A range of films looking back into history were marked by a specific nostalgia for the irretrievably lost times of harmonious multi-ethnic co-existence. The first film to set the tone was Angelopoulos's complex historical investigation *Ulysses Gaze* (1995) where the protagonist's trip across the Balkans grew into a journey toward the past times of happy conviviality. Such is the tone of newer films as well—the Bulgarian *Sled kraya na sveta* (*After the End of the World*, 1998, Germany/Greece/Bulgaria), featuring a multicultural society of Jews, Gypsies, Turks, Bulgarians, Armenians and Greeks, all living in the same old neighborhood in the Bulgarian city of Plovdiv, or the Greek *O Anthos tis Limnis* (*Flower of the Lake*, 1999, by Stamatis Tsarouchas), set in Kastoria, a region of western Macedonia, where at the turn of the century Turks, Greeks, Jews and Slavs lived together in peace. Other films concentrated on the intersection of personal fate with the mighty flow of history and explored events that took place during the wars of the twentieth century. The coercive land collectivization in the 1950s was the topic of Bulgarian films by Docho Bodzhakov and Evgueny Mikhailov. The legacy of totalitarian times was addressed in powerful features by Macedonian and Albanian directors like Popov and Cashku.

The number of films exploring the delicate issues of interethnic balance and ethnic minorities like the Roma, was on the increase across the Balkans. Then, there was a growing body of films evolving around the representation of neighbors--Greek films featuring Albanians or Bulgarians, for example--where traditional stereotypes were abandoned in favor of a humanized portrayal of the ethnic other. Many films focused on inter-ethnic love within the Balkan universe--between a Macedonian man and an Albanian woman in *Preku Ezeru* (*Across the Lake*, 1999, by Antonio Mitrikeski, Macedonia/Poland), between a Turkish man and a Greek woman in *Kayikci* (*Boatman*, 1999, by Biket Ilhan, Turkey/Greece/Bulgaria), between a Bosnian man and a Slovenian woman in *Outsider* (1997, by Andrej Kosak, Slovenia), between a Croat man and a Serbian woman in *Vukovar--jedna prica* (*Vukovar: Poste Restante*, 1994, by Boro Draskovic, Yugoslavia/Cyprus/Italy/USA), and between a Jewish man and an Armenian woman in Bulgaria in the aforementioned *After the End of the World*.

Ethical and existential problems were the focus of attention of young directors from Turkey and Greece. In the former communist countries the moral concerns mostly took the shape of films that depicted the social chaos and drabness of the first post-communist years, explored in shattering critical dramas such as the Romanian *Patul conjugal* (*The Conjugal Bed*, 1991, by Mircea Daneljuk), and *Terminus Paradis* (*Last Stop Paradise*, 1998, by Lucian Pintilie), or the Bulgarian *Zakasnyalo palnolunie* (*Belated Full-Moon*, 1996, by Eduard Zakhariiev) and the Macedonian *Samounistuvanje* (*Self-destruction*, 1996) by Turkish director Erbil Altanay.

Some of the leading themes in Romanian cinema were the legacy of the Ceausescu era, the paranoid obsession with Securitate, the controversial revolution of December 1989, and the limbo faced by the younger generation, explored by directors like Pintilie, Nae Caranfil, Stere Gulea and Sinisa Dragin.

A number of movies made across the Balkans were preoccupied with issues of migration and the quest for one's identity across cultures. Their plots evolved around new immigrants (*Mirupafshim, So Long*, 1997, by Christos Voupouras and Giorgos Korras, Greece), the difficulties of adaptation (*Berlin in Berlin*, 1993, by Sinan Cetin, Turkey), the impeded travel to Europe (*Traka-trak, Clickety-clack*, 1996, by Ilia Kostov, Bulgaria), or the discomfort of displacement (*Tudja America, Someone Else's America*, 1995, by Goran Paskaljevic, France/UK/Germany/Greece). These films feature protagonists who travel in various directions, who either think about leaving or plan returning, or who are constantly on the move but nonetheless never reach the elusive destination they are headed for.

With a new generation of filmmakers, Turkey lives through something of a cinematic revival. The members of the group of the so-called New Turks have not hesitated to approach tabu subjects like the Turkish-Kurdish relations, or the country's controversial recent political history. Others, like Zeki Demirkubuz, Yavuz Turgul or Dervis Zaim, focused on contemporary urban dramas featuring marginal characters. Nun Bilge Ceylan's personal films were acclaimed for the fine psychological portrayal of the provincial protagonists.

Across the region--in Sarajevo, Zagreb, Sofia, Bucharest, Skopje, Athens, Istanbul and Tirana--many young filmmakers engaged in avant-garde video projects exploring burning issues of identity and politics of what many of them dub "Balkania."

### **The films of the Yugoslav breakup**

It is a bitter irony that the recent interest in Yugoslavia and its cinema was triggered by the bloody conflict there. Yugoslavia's break up in the 1990s attracted the attention of a large number of filmmakers, both from within the country and internationally. Over 250 feature and documentary films were made about the Yugoslav breakup, thus making it the event that inspired the most active cinematic output in postcommunist times. Along with these films, scattered writing on the subject matter of Yugoslav film, and particularly on those dealing with the Yugoslav breakup and its causes, appeared in a wide range of popular and academic periodicals.

The global trend that turns all feature filmmaking into a multinational enterprise is clearly visible in the case of the features that look at aspects of the Yugoslav breakup. The early conflict of the Croatian breakup was featured in Draskovic's *Vukovar: Poste Restante* (1994), making the case for the Serbian side, and in Branko Schmidt's *Vukovar se vraća kući* (*Vukovar Comes Home*, 1994), making the case for the Croatian side. At least 35 feature films were made internationally in response to the Bosnian war. The most ambitious ones tackled the complex history of the Balkans, like Kusturica's Cannes-winner *Underground* (1995) which offered a controversial take on the history of Yugoslavia since 1941. Numerous films explored the difficult choices in taking sides in the ethnic conflict, like Srdjan Dragojevic's acclaimed *Lepa sela lepo gore* (*Pretty*

Village, *Pretty Flame*, 1996) and Milcho Manchevski's Venice-winner *Before the Rain* (1994, UK/France/Macedonia). Many other films focused on Sarajevo. Ademir Kenovic's *Perfect Circle* (1997, Bosnia/France) explored the fate of displaced children, Michael Winterbottom's *Welcome to Sarajevo* (1997, UK/USA) looked at the moral issues facing journalists covering the siege, and so did *Territorio Comanche* (*Comanche Territory*, 1997, by Gerardo Herrero, Spain/Germany/ France/Argentina). The Italian *Il carniere* (*Gamebag*, 1997, by Maurizio Zaccaro) told the story of two hunters caught in the middle of the siege. Other films, by Gorcin Stojanovic and Paskaljevic, focused on the psychological stagnation of people in Belgrade. The experiences of displacement that many from former Yugoslavia lived through were the subject of various works that looked at involuntary migrations and diasporas in the making. The Kosovo bombing was the backdrop for the psychological drama *Nebeska udica* (*Sky Hook*, 1999), directed by Belgrade actor and producer Ljubisa Samardzic.

In documentaries, the breakup of Yugoslavia attracted the attention of internationally renowned documentarians, such as French veterans Chris Marker who made the 30-minute film *Le 20 heures dans les camps* (*Prime Time in the Camps*, 1993, France), and Marcel Ophuls who made the four-hour collage *Veillees d'armes: Histoire du journalisme en temps de guerre* (*The Troubles We Have Seen: A History of Journalism in Wartime*, 1994, France/UK). The documentary that gained the best international exposure was the multi-national television coproduction *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* (1995, by Angus McQueen and Paul Mitchell) which used a large variety of documentary sources and featured interviews with most of the main political figures involved in the conflict.

Documentaries were also made by well-known public intellectuals whose usual domain is

the written word, such as Bernard-Henri Levy with *Bosna!* (1994, France) and Michael Ignatieff with *Blood and Belonging: The Road to Nowhere* (1993, UK/Canada). In *Truth Under Siege* (1995, France/USA), Natalie Borgers and Leslie Asako Gladsjo tackled the workings of independent media across former Yugoslavia. Mandy Jacobson's *Calling the Ghosts* (1996, USA) investigated the Bosnian rapes.

Critical voices from within Yugoslavia developed the genre of the mock-documentary, which mixed fact and fiction and used re-enactment and stagings, such as the hilarious production of Studio B92, Zilnik's *Tito Among the Serbs for a Second Time* (1993). The topic of the largest number of films was Sarajevo: over 70 documentaries, by both local and international filmmakers, explored the city's ordeal. While being systematically destroyed, the city was perpetually revived in the works of the Sarajevo Group of Authors (SaGA) who chronicled its agony and proud survival. SaGA, under the creative leadership of Kenovic, was responsible for many of the films made here, including *Sarajevo: Ground Zero* (1993) and *MGM Sarajevo: Covjek, Bog, Monstrum* (MGM *Sarajevo: Man, God, Monster*, 1992-1994, SaGA, Bosnia). Many other independent documentarians worked in Sarajevo as well, making remarkable films about the city's ordeal.

Wrapping up the decade, it is likely that the year 2000 will mark a slow-down in the numbers of films that dealt with the painful and traumatic Yugoslav breakup. But weren't the best Vietnam-war films made in America only years after the official end of the war? Didn't the ghosts of Vietnam feature powerfully in Hollywood as recently as 1995, with Robert Zemeckis's *Forrest Gump*? Similarly, in 1998 two acclaimed films treated the 20-

year-old subject of the Lebanese civil war-Ziad Doueiri's *West Beirut*, and Ghassan Salhab's *Phantom Beirut*. The filmmakers, who were teenagers at the time, revisited the topic of war two decades later and recreated it in their personal cinematic narratives. Deepa Mehta's *Earth 1947* (1998) reopened the still controversial theme of the Indian partition nearly 50 years later.

Similarly, with time, it is possible that more films about the breakup of Yugoslavia will be made. Those whose lives were deeply affected by what happened there in the 1990s will return to their traumatic experiences. In the years to come, Balkan filmmakers will be looking back at taking sides, villains and victims, displacement and migrations. Many more important films are likely to appear that will revisit the topic of war in Yugoslavia, and of the healing process, which has, presumably, begun.

## **THE INDUSTRY**

### **The industry cycle: from finance to exhibition**

Film industries in the Balkan region originally developed early in the twentieth century. Only after World War II, however, were systematic production patterns established, and did national cinemas begin to take shape. This was the time when most studios in the region were built and film production thrived from the 1960s through the 1980s.

The data on feature film production from the various Balkan countries throughout the 1990s reveals two general patterns: stability in countries with capitalist economies like Greece and Turkey, and decline in cinematic output across the countries undergoing the transition from state socialism to a free market economy. The drop in production numbers

is clearly visible in the case of Bulgaria and Romania which in 1985, the peak year under state socialism, respectively released 40 and 30 feature films. There is no reliable data on the production numbers of some of the Balkan countries, or where data exists it only concerns select years. Cyprus, for example, released three features in 1995, only one in 1996, two in 1997, and none in 1998. The data on Albania is even more sparse--while in 1985 a total of 12 features were made, in 1992 only one is listed. Still, due to the breakup and the division of the film industries, it is most difficult to track down the Yugoslav output. In the 1980s, the Yugoslav production numbers were set at around 30 feature films a year. Since its independence in 1992 Macedonia has produced about 10 features, Bosnia fewer than 10, Croatia over 50, Slovenia about 15 and Serbia has been releasing films at the pace of about 10 annually.

We might summarize that in this last decade the end of the communist period brought state interference in filmmaking to an end, but that it also meant massive cuts and the withdrawal of centralized government funding. The shift to a market economy affected every level of the film industry from its basic infrastructure to its mode of financing and administration. The pattern of changes in the media economy and film industries was similar throughout all former communist countries: a sharp decrease in state subsidies, empty studios looking to attract foreign film crews, the disappearance of domestic films from the circuits and armies of idle film professionals. Freedom of expression and the end of state censorship had finally been achieved, but the emerging new constraint of market considerations now seemed to pose the greatest threat to indigenous film cultures.

The funding crisis led to shrinking production, particularly in features and animation. Financing for film production changed profoundly, moving from the unit-based studio system to producer-driven undertakings. State subsidies, competitive in some countries or automatic in others, became a hotly contested territory. The involvement of national television networks in film production became of crucial importance, alongside international coproduction funding and the expanding sector of private financing. Film industries grew increasingly dependent on cross-border "runaway" productions, which take advantage of the cheaper facilities and locations but do not allow for serious artistic input: the directors and the lead actors are from the country that finances the film, and local help is employed only as technical support or as extras. Most studios became partially or fully privatized, and today compete in attracting foreign film crews to shoot on location.

The major film studio in Greece, Finos Film, which in the mid- 1960s produced over 50 features a year, closed down in 1975. The other large studio in the Balkans, Jadran Film, was initially established near the Croatian capital Zagreb in 1946, and was regularly used by domestic and western filmmakers. In 1962 Orson Welles shot his adaptation of Kafka's *The Trial* there, and in the 1970s Alan Pakula made *Sophie's Choice* there. Other studios in Yugoslavia have included Avala (Serbia) and Vardar (Macedonia) film. During the 1990s these studios were no longer able to attract former numbers of co-productions. However, they are still often used for postproduction services. One of the survivors has been the Bulgarian studio, Boyana, built in the 1950s on a large piece of nationalized land on the outskirts of the Vitosha mountain near Sofia, that had an annual output of around 25 feature films during its peak in the 1980s. In the 1990s it was hit by financial

difficulties and has not worked to its full capacity for nearly a decade. At the moment of writing Boyana is about to be sold, with the most attractive bid coming from Eastman Kodak.

There is concern amid the professional community that after privatization the studio may not retain its scope of activity. The Romanian studio, Buftea, located 16 km outside Bucharest, also built in the 1950s, used to specialize in epic historical super productions. In 1998, Buftea was sold for a ridiculously low amount to Media Pro, a Romanian branch of the western European offshore enterprise CME. It is expected that after a face-lift and investment boost it will become specialized in TV production.

As elsewhere in Europe, in the Balkans it is also easier to see American than locally made films. American movies command a hefty share of the market, ranging between 75% and 95% of the distribution. There is selective distribution of other foreign titles from Europe and elsewhere, often under the auspices of Eurimages's--the pan-European film funding organization--support for distribution programs. Locally made films, however, are poorly distributed, with the exception of select box-office hits. The promotion and distribution of domestic films is subsidized in Greece, while in former state socialist countries like Romania and Bulgaria, where such subsidies existed before, the assistance has virtually disappeared. The number of national titles in distributors' catalogs ranges between 2% and 6% on average, and has never been over 10% during the 1990s. Only in select cases have domestic films ranked among the top 10--in Turkey this was the case of Istanbul Kanatlarimin Altinda (Istanbul Under My Wings, 1996, by Mustafa Altıoklar) and of Eskiya (Bandit, 1996, by Yavuz Turgul), and in Greece of the

tongue-in-cheek *Valkanisateur* (*Balkanizator*, 1997, by Sotiris Goritzas). The international boycott of Serbia has no doubt contributed to consolidate Serbs and make them more interested in their own identity. It is no wonder, then, that all three top-grossing films in Serbia for 1998 were films made by Yugoslav directors--Kusturica's Gypsy saga *Crna macka, beli macor* (*Black Cat, White Cat*), Paskaljevic's *Bure baruta* (*Cabaret Balkan*), and Dragojevic's *Rane* (*Wounds*).

The situation with film exhibition across the Balkans is equally uneven. In the conditions of general inflation, admission prices skyrocketed in the former communist countries, which led to a sharp decrease in cinema attendance. While Greece has a relatively modern system of exhibition and some new multiplexes, in Bulgaria, where more than three quarters of the cinemas have closed in the course of the 1990s exhibition is in deplorable condition. After privatization of the cinemas across the country, many have been turned into bingo halls or discotheques, as such enterprises prove more profitable for their new owners. The bigger cities get a fair share of cinematic exhibitions while the exhibitors in smaller towns and village regions often find it impossible to keep the business going.

Even though the situation differs from country to country, in their summary of the main points that need to be addressed in the forthcoming years, the unions of filmmakers in the Balkans have made very similar requests of their respective governments: linking developments in production to those in the sectors of exhibition, import and distribution of films; promotion of national cinema not simply nationally but regionally; closer

collaboration with the television institutions; linking finance for filmmaking to box-office receipts from the showing of foreign films.

### **Balkan Coproductions**

The need to coproduce is usually explained with the economic need to pool together large financial resources, to share studio and postproduction facilities. In cold war times, coproductions and mutual use of facilities involving the countries in the Balkans was non-existent, but this is rapidly changing in the 1990s, with new networks developing. A number of films made during the 1990s can be described as typical products of Balkan-wide collaboration in the field of cinema. The first Bosnian movie shot after the war, Kenovic's *Savršeni krug* (*Perfect Circle*, 1997), became possible only due to international grants from the Soros Fund, Eurimages, the French Fonds E.C.O., the Swiss ProHelvetia and Rotterdam's IFF's Hubert Bals Fund. Macedonian *Pred dozhdot* (*Before the Rain*, 1994) secured the participation of the Macedonian Ministry of Culture mostly due to the availability of funding received from French and British sources. The Macedonian film *Dust*, which was shot in the summer of 2000, had only 5% domestic financing, the rest of the funding coming from international sources. Acclaimed films set in Yugoslavia, such as Kusturica's *Underground* (France/Germany/Hungary), and *Black Cat, White Cat* (France/Germany/Yugoslavia) as well as Paskaljevic's *Cabaret Balkan* (France/Greece/Turkey) are all international coproductions, made only with a minor involvement from Yugoslavia.

In the 1990s, most of the Balkan countries joined Eurimages, a move which was supposed to enable them to take part in what was meant to be a pan-European cinematic

interaction. In reality, however, the pan-Europeanism evolved into the formation of specific new regions of collaboration within Europe: Romance (including countries like France, Italy, Spain and Portugal), Germanic, Scandinavian, Central European, as well as Balkan. Contrary to the widely shared belief that people in the Balkans are permanently at odds with each other, Balkan film producers regularly engage in coproduction undertakings. Eurimages's records throughout the 1990s show that a large number of coproductions have included participants from at least two Balkan countries. Greece and Bulgaria appear as partners most often, and the unlikely pair of Greece and Turkey have acted together on over 15 coproductions--not a bad record for countries commonly believed to be unable to leave behind their long history of tensions. In many other instances there are partnerships between Bulgaria and Turkey, Cyprus and Greece and Cyprus and Bulgaria. On the rare occasions when filmmakers from former Yugoslavia, who do not have direct access to Eurimages funding, manage to put together a Eurimages application, we see them collaborating within the Balkan region as well.

Until recently, the only country in the region with access to the European Union's (EU) cinema support program, MEDIA, was Greece, which made it a particularly desired partner for those in the region seeking access to EU funding. EU's new program, MEDIA PLUS, which will be in effect between 2000 and 2005, will include several more of the Balkan countries, a move which is likely to become a basis for further integration of the regional film production.

## **Venues**

The coproductions and other regionally-made films are featured at a range of film festivals that take place throughout the Balkan countries. More and more venues feature a dedicated Balkan section, thus asserting the trend to represent Balkan cinema as distinct. The leading venue is the International Thessaloniki Film Festival in Greece. It takes place in November and besides the regular panorama of Greek films it offers an annual showcase for recent Balkan productions. The festival is the largest cinematic event in the region and has turned into a place for lively contacts between filmmakers from the region and from other countries. The International Istanbul Film Festival in Turkey, regularly taking place in the month of April, is bound to become the second site for such interchange. Other festivals are the Manaki Brothers Festival of Cinematographic Mastery in Bitola, Macedonia (October), The International Festival of Coproductions in Sofia (June), and the Belgrade FEST (February). Thessaloniki is also the site of an International Documentary Film Festival that stresses Balkan filmmaking. A number of national festivals, devoted to features and documentaries, take place in their respective countries. The former panYugoslav festival in Pula has been inherited by Croatia for an annual national film festival.

Outside of the Balkans, the region's production is regularly in the focus of the annual Alpe-Adria Film Meetings in Trieste, Italy in January. Big international festivals such as the ones in Berlin (1993) and Toronto (1997) scheduled special panoramas of recent Balkan filmmaking. In 2000, the Venice Biennale held an extensive panorama of Balkan cinema, which was put together by veteran critic Sergio Grmek Germani, in close collaboration with filmmaker Makavejev. Films from the Balkan region received awards at the most prestigious international film festivals throughout the 1990s at Cannes

(Underground and Ulysses Gaze, 1995; Eternity and a Day, 1998), Venice (Before the Rain, 1994, Black Cat, White Cat, 1998), Berlin (Gunese Yolchuluk, Journey to the Sun, 1999, by Yeshim Ustaoglu, Turkey/Germany), and elsewhere.

Various diasporic organizations have arranged showcases across the U.S. and western Europe. The London Festival of New Turkish Cinema took place this past fall for the eighth time. The New York (and touring) festival of Greek cinema is in its fourth year and a Bulgarian film festival has been taking place in New York and Los Angeles since 1999. The situation with video distribution of the films from the Balkan countries, however, is fairly poor. Facets ([www.facets.org](http://www.facets.org)), the biggest clearinghouse for foreign cinema, carries about 20 Yugoslav and 15 Greek titles, but the cinemas of Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania and Albania are seriously underrepresented.

A Balkan Film Board was established in 1995, and although it is non-functional at the moment, it is a structure that many filmmakers from the region say they would like to see operational. The English language Balkan Media magazine, edited in Sofia and distributed internationally, is now in its ninth year of publication.

### **Documentary, animation and multimedia**

Making feature films involves financial resources that are often out of reach for many in the Balkans. Thanks to other forms of audio-visual expression, people still manage to maintain artistic freedom by avoiding the demands of feature financing. As a result, documentary filmmaking is burgeoning across the Balkans, and so are multimedia

projects, particularly among the younger generation of artists who make use of digital video and the Internet to nearly the same extent as their western counterparts.

The projects of multimedia artists can be seen mainly at exhibitions, which, in effect, means little exposure, but many of them have their work displayed on the Internet where it can be widely accessed. The documentary output of the Balkan countries, however, is seen considerably less internationally. Occasional glimpses of remarkable films can be caught at specialized documentary and visual anthropology festivals. The topics range from ethnographic explorations of minorities, like Boyan Papazov's *Where the Souls Rest* (2000, Bulgaria) about the nomadic lifestyle of the minority group Karakachani, or Menelaos Karamanghiolis's *Rom* (1989, Greece), about Greek Gypsies. Serbian filmmakers have produced some remarkable documentaries, ranging from the satires made by veterans like Zilnik to the films about the bleak and demoralized reality found in the works by Janko Baljak (*The Crime that Changed Serbia*, 1995) and Mladen Maticevic and Ivan Markov (*Ghetto*, 1995).

With a few exceptions, the few female filmmakers working across the Balkan countries do not explicitly subscribe to feminist ideas. Most women filmmakers are known only within their region. The names of female directors like Gordana Boskov (*Budenje Proleca*, *The Awakening of Spring*, 1993) or Mirjana Vukomanovic (*Tr letnja dana*, *Three Summer Days*, 1997) are barely known beyond the borders of Serbia, and the works of Sarajevan documentarian Vesna Ljubic (*Ecce Homo*, 1992-1994) and young Bosnian Jasmila Zbanic are seen mostly at specialized festivals. In the other countries of the region, the best-known female filmmakers remain veteran Romanians Malvina

Ursianu and Elisabeta Bostan, Albanian Anisa Markajani and Bulgarian Binka Zheljazkova. Other active female directors in Bulgaria are Ivanka Grabcheva, Mariana Evstatieva and the young Milena Andonova and Igljka Tri fonova. Roumiana- Petkova, a feminist filmmaker who regularly works with a female director of photography, Svetla Ganeva, enjoyed the best exposure for her works focusing on the Pomak minority in South-East Bulgaria (the feature *Gori gori, ogame, Burn, Burn, Little Flame*, 1994) and the documentary *Mezhdinen svyat (A World I In Between)*, 1995). The work of documentarian Eldora Traykova, devoted to the plight of Bulgaria's Gypsies, has also been acclaimed internationally.

The high profile of a new and upcoming generation of female filmmakers is best maintained by two young directors from Greece and Turkey. Greece boasts a number of female feature and documentary filmmakers, but none of them has ever reached the popularity enjoyed today by Olga Malea, whose attention is exclusively devoted to the problems of contemporary women (*O Orgasmos tis ageladas, The Cow's Orgasm*, 1996 and *I diakritiki goitia ton arsenikon, The Mating Game*, 1998). Young Turkish director Yeshim Ustaoglu won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 1999 for her Istanbul-set tale of friendship and resistance to oppression, *Journey to the Sun*.

It is important that the work of these Balkan filmmakers is watched and seen in the context of Europe-wide feminist filmmaking on the fringes, which includes their other Eastern European counterparts such as Hungarians Ildiko Enyedi, Ibolya Fekete, Marta Meszaros and Ildiko Szabo, Czech Vera Chytilova, Polish Agnieszka Holland and Dorota Kedzierdzawska, and others.

## THE FUTURE

For the coming decade viewers can expect to see a continuation of the existing thematic lines in Balkan cinema: a persistent interest in history, in contemporary social problems, in minorities and migrations as well as further growth in diasporic filmmaking. The 1990s will be remembered not only in regard to former Yugoslavia, but in European cinema at large. Unlike Bosnia, the Kosovo conflict did not generate the same level of interest among feature filmmakers and the number of documentaries on the Kosovo war far outweigh the features. This lack of interest may be explained by simple fatigue. Or it may well be that by the end of the 1990s, as the juxtapositions became more ambiguous than originally thought, filmmaking on the subject matter of the Balkans poses more challenges than before. Nonetheless, the events from the end of the twentieth century will claim a durable presence in the minds of filmmakers from the Balkans. Undoubtedly, they will be revisiting these years in new plots and personalized narratives, trying to see what bearing history has had on the way things evolve.

Numerous Balkan films, both historical and contemporary, have examined and questioned the instances of Western interference in Balkan affairs. Increasingly conscious of the ongoing marginalization, Balkan filmmaking has been yielding works using the symbolism of obstructed travel; where the final destination (presumably Europe or the West) cannot be reached. The notion of "Europe" is continuously revisited and problematized in the cinema of Romania, Bulgaria and Greece, as a concept of inherently ambiguous nature, carrying an internal tension between granted location and elusive

destination. This self-conscious examination of marginality is a trend that is likely to continue and develop.

At the moment, the cinemas of the Balkan countries are almost unknown internationally. A handful of existing studies highlight a narrow range of select aspects. Due to poor distribution networks, the scholarship on Balkan cinema coming from the region is virtually unseen in the West. It is hopefully not just wishful thinking to say that the situation will change, with good and comprehensive scholarly writing on Balkan cinema appropriately highlighting the masterworks of this neglected cinematic tradition for the rest of the world.

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## NOTES

(1.) See Daniel J. Goulding, *Liberated Cinema: The Yugoslav Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); *Occupation in 26 Pictures* (Trowbridge, UK Flicks Books 1998).

(2.) See Ronald Holloway, *The Bulgarian cinema* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated Presses, 1986); Goran Paskaljevic *La tragicomedia humana* Valladolid: 41 Semana internacional de cine, 1996; "Macedonian Film: A

History of Macedonian Cinema, 1905-1996," in Kino: Special Issue 1996 with Cinematheque of Macedonia, Berlin; "Slovenian Film: Slovenian Post-war Cinema, 1945-1985," in Kino: Special Issue 1985 with Cleveland Cinematheque, Berlin.

(3.) See Andrew Norton, "'Only Crooks Can Get Ahead': Post-Yugoslav Cinema/TV/Video in the 1990s," in Sabrina P. Rametand and Ljubisa S. Adamovic, eds., *Beyond Yugoslavia: Politics, Economics and Culture in a Shattered Community* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 413-431; *The Films of Theo Angelopoulos: a Cinema of Contemplation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); *The Last Modernist: The Films of Theo Angelopulos* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997).

(4.) See my *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media*, Chapter 2 (London: British Film Institute, 2001).

(5.) Rosenstone, Robert A., "The Future of the Past: Film and the Beginnings of Postmodern History," in Vivian Sobchack, ed., *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), Pp. 201-219.

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