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THE CINEMA OF THE DISPERSED YUGOSLAVS  
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THE DISPERSED YUGOSLAVS

Diasporas in the making

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Director Srdjan Dragojevic, of the acclaimed *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* (1996) and *Wounds* (1998), was expected to leave Yugoslavia for America half a year before the Kosovo crisis. In the fall of 1998 he had announced a three-picture deal with Miramax, and everyone knew he was bound to the West. It so happened, however, that he left Belgrade just days before the bombing started. By the time he reached New York, America had launched a war on his native country.

At a press conference, Dragojevic refused to condemn the Serbian government, choosing instead to appeal to journalists to see the multiple dimensions of the tragedy that was to unravel, and to point out that things were not as simple and straightforward as many would prefer them to be.

While Dragojevic was talking to the press in New York, his film colleagues back in Belgrade firmly believed that he had never reached the US and was, in fact, stuck in Budapest with his family, his chances to ever be granted an American entry visa steadily decreasing. It seems that the obscurity about Dragojevic's whereabouts was being maintained with his consent.

It is not so difficult to see why: While going to the US was the right career move for Dragojevic, there was no need to manifest it publicly to those who stayed back in Belgrade to take "the punishment" of bombing. It was an awkward situation: He was certainly one disapproving of the regime, but so were many others who stayed behind and who were now charged with collective guilt.

Not only Dragojevic's political allegiances are split in such a way. To various degrees, this attitude is characteristic of many of the film people who left Yugoslavia around the time of this country's break-up. Many of them lead an existence, which can be described as "sitting on the fence," neither here nor there, expected to take sides but unwilling to do so.

In her book about life after emigration, Croatian author Dubravka Ugresic speaks of getting together with other displaced Yugoslav intellectuals in a New York flat—here they are, together, the same people once again, only in a different locale. One of them, the film director, says: "I don't want to stay, I don't want to go back, what can I do?"

These people are not typical exiles. Only a handful of them are in an outspoken opposition to the regime. They can move back and forth freely between their home country and the West. Unlike exiles, they are often celebrated at home rather than perceived as subversive dissidents. It is the topic of their troubled homeland that concerns them all, as well as the themes of migrations and dispersal. They are all part of a new diaspora-in-the-making.

**DIRECTORS AS INTERPRETERS**

Most of the Yugoslav directors who enjoy an international profile have been commuting between America and Europe during the past decade. With a few exceptions, they prefer to move either in the world of US independents or within the European realm rather than plunge into mainstream Hollywood. Even though their films are marked by differences in language and location, they all subscribe, to a greater or lesser extent, to the same project of a critical rethinking of the Balkan space. They have all undergone the necessary experiences of displacement and detachment from their own country, have overcome an ingrained complex of Balkan inferiority, and have launched a sound critical examination of the crisis back home.

The directors of international stature—Goran Paskaljevic, Emir Kusturica, and Milcho Manchevski—have all expressed a desire to work on projects that would not confine them to the peculiar Balkan universe. At the same time, however, they seem to feel compelled to continue making films that present their vision of what the Balkan conflict is all about. In making such films, they accept functioning as cross-cultural interpreters of their troubled home to worldwide audiences.

Serbian Goran Paskaljevic lives in Paris. His Someone Else's America (1995) is set in New York and in Texas, and was produced with French, British, German and Greek involvement. It tells the story of Montenegrin, Basque, and Chinese immigrants. Today, Paskaljevic is involved in a new international project, which is shooting on location in Mexico and will have almost nothing to do with his native Yugoslavia. In-between, however, he made a Belgrade-set film, Powder Keg a.k.a. Cabaret Balkan (1998), which was meant to explain to the international audiences the insanity and bleakness of Milosevic's Belgrade.

Sarajevo-born Emir Kusturica, the one with the highest international profile, migrated to America in 1990. His 1993 Arizona Dream was set in the Southern US and dealt only with Americans. He since returned to Europe and at the moment is working on a Holocaust-themed drama based on D.M. Thomas's The White Hotel. In between, Kusturica made the Yugoslavia-themed but internationally financed Cannes-winner Underground (1995) and Black Cat, White Cat (1998), a story of Serbian Gypsies living on the Danube's shores.2

Macedonian Milcho Manchevski studied and worked in America before making the European-funded tale of Balkan inter-ethnic tensions Before the Rain (1994). He is now working on his next auteurist project, which will be set in Macedonia around the turn of the century, and in present-day New York. In between, however, he spent time working on the set of Miramax's American Civil war cannibalism story Ravenous, a project that he quit in 1997 over creative differences.3

Other former Yugoslavs based in the West continue making movies about the ordeals of the Yugoslav break-up, if given the chance. In the US, Serbian Predrag Antonijevic made Savior (1998), an Oliver Stone-produced story of a Western mercenary involved in the Bosnian war. Croatian Lordan Zafranovic, director of the seminal Occupation in 26 Scenes (1976), moved to Prague and made The Decline of the Century: The Testament of L. Z. (Czech Republic/Austria, 1993), a personal documentary which exposes his fellow Croats for their Nazi inclinations. Others, who live in the USA, would be glad to make Balkan-themed films but have to stick to various projects that allow them to make a living. Rajko Grlic, a famous Croatian director and member of the Prague Group, teaches at Ohio State University and recently released a tutorial CD-ROM in film production. Lazar Stojanovic, the martyr, who had to serve a jail term in Yugoslavia for his daring Plastic Jesus (1971) and who is now based in New York, works as a freelance film researcher. Slobodan Sijan, the author of the classic Yugoslav Gypsy-themed Who Is Singing Out There? (1976), works mostly in advertising in California.

**Diasporic Films**

Once people migrate, multiple new experiences enter and enrich their lives. Sooner or later they realize that there is more to life than the problems that plagued them back home. It often happens that former enemies end up strolling down the streets of the same city, or enrolling in the same language classes for newcomers. Bosnian and Croat families settle next to each other in Toronto, Kosovar and Serb teenagers frequent the same discotheque in Vancouver. Albeit with various degrees of success, these people gradually realize that they cannot possibly import their domestic disputes into this new territory which is neither theirs nor their adversaries'.

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Many of the Yugoslav filmmakers who migrated during the past decade made works that reflected the added dimensions of life in diaspora, and explored how life was going on far away from home. They often chose to deliberately blur the fault lines of ethnic tensions between people who might have been enemies at home, but had now ended up living side-by-side in the West. A body of diasporic films gradually came into being.

The first work was Zoran Solomun's German-made Tired Companions (1997), five slightly overlapping stories following the German paths of various refugees from former Yugoslavia. One is the story of two young Bosnian women who strike up a friendship after they are pulled off a train at the Serbian-Hungarian border; in another one two Serbs meet in Germany but find, after a few drinks, that they have little in common and feel better among strangers than together. The director suggests that there is more to migration than endless suffering and that displacement does not need to be interpreted as an unremittently gloomy experience.

In the U.K., Bosnian-born director Jasmin Dizdar completed Beautiful People (1999) shot on location near Liverpool. For the film, he brought together Bosnian and Welsh, Croats and Britons, whose life paths intersect in places like Rotterdam and London. A baby, which is conceived as a result of a war-time rape, is finally accepted by the reluctant mother and named Chaos. The film shows how tired many of the refugees are of conflict, and that in exile there is something more to their lives than homesickness and dreams of return.

In Canada, originally under the working title West of Sarajevo, Davor Marjanovic made My Father's Angel (1999). The film is set in Vancouver and tells of a Serb and a Muslim who are continuously obsessed with one another, until the moment they realize they need each other's support.

**MAKAVEJEV**

It is still to be seen if these filmmakers and actors, turned cosmopolitan by the whims of history, will continue working internationally. Given the general trend of globalization, it is very likely that they will further explore the chances, which their expanding universe offers, bravely confronting the misfortunes that may come along.

My prediction is based on the example set by an earlier Yugoslav exile, Dusan Makavejev. The director had already exhibited a cosmopolitan side in his 1971 film WR: Mysteries of the Organism, a controversial work that resulted in his emigration to the West. Makavejev's conceptual grasp of an unstable moving world, however, peaked in the 1974 Canadian-French-German funded Sweet Movie (1974) a controversial microcosm in which he gathered together a Canadian virgin, a Texan oil tycoon, a Latino singer, an Amsterdam hippie community, a proletarian prostitute, and a sailor called Vakulinchuk (after the protagonist of Sergei Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin). For his Swedish-funded Montenegro (1981), Makavejev chose a sleazy multicultural Stockholm venue, Zanzí-Bar. For his Australian-funded Coca-Cola Kid (1984) he decided on a setting in the Australian outback. Manifesto (1988) was produced by Israeli Menahem Golan, made with money from the USA and Yugoslavia, and featured an ethnic mix from the margins of Austro-Hungary. The autobiographical Hole in the Soul (1994) was a Scottish BBC production and took place in a variety of locations, from Belgrade to San Francisco.

Makavejev, who underwent the experiences of displacement and exile twenty years ahead of the recent wave of Yugoslav filmmakers tasted cosmopolitanism much earlier. With varying degrees of success he has maintained his interest in the global mixture of localities. In the 1990s, he repeatedly expressed his desire to make a film called Yugoslavia. But being considered a maverick in international film circles, he has not managed to secure funding for this project.

**ACTORS IN NEW ROLES**

The displaced directors from former Yugoslavia are just a handful compared to the actors. Of this last group, some reinvented themselves in the West and started new careers, while others commute between engagements at home and abroad. Croatian Mira Furlan, for example, best-known for her role in Kusturica's Cannes-winner When Father Was Away on Business (1985), ended up ostracized in her own country, migrated to the US and made a successful appearance in the sequel to Star Trek, Babylon 5. Goran Visnjic, first known from his role of the driver Risto in Welcome to Sarajevo (1996) got a network appointment as the new pediatrician hired to replace George Clooney's character in the new series of ER. The leading star of Yugoslav cinema, Miki Manojlović, best-known from his roles in When Father Was Away on Business (1985) and Underground (1995) appeared as the seductive Agostino Tassi in Agnes Merlet's controversial Artemisia (1997) and as "the butcher" in an Italian erotic drama by the same name. Macedonian Labina Mitevska, who first appeared as the Albanian girl in Before the Rain (1994) and then as a Bosnian girl in Michael Winterbottom's Welcome to Sarajevo (1996), was given a role in the next film by Winterbottom, I Want You (1998), a love thriller which has little to do with the girl's Balkan origins. She now lives in Oxford, England.

The Yugoslav success story, however, is Rade Serbedzija, who seems bound to become the best-known international actor of Yugoslav origin ever. His international career, which started less than a decade ago, has evolved from low-profile roles in arthouse productions toward leads in more or less mainstream films.* A Serbo-Croat by origin, Serbedzija first appeared in Yugoslav movies in the late 1960s. He has appeared in over fifty feature films by Yugoslav directors. In possession of a handsome, memorable face, Serbedzija has been cast in a large variety of roles—from Josip Broz-Tito in the TV drama Bombers' Trial (1978) to a sexually over-ambitious servant in Dusan Makavejev's Manifesto (1988). In the early 1990s he became a dissident figure at odds with the nationalist regimes in Yugoslavia and Croatia and left the country. He spent his first few years abroad in London, a period during which he worked on his best-known role—of the weary Macedonian ex-patriciate, the photographer Aleksandar, in the Macedonian-French Before the Rain (1994). Soon thereafter, he was cast as a macho Croatian father in the New Zealand immi-

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3. Raveous (USA, Antonia Bird, 1999). The film was completed by the British director of Priest after Mančevski left.
4. Serbedzija's career follows a pathway similar to the one of the exiled East German Armin Mülln-Stahl who gradually became a familiar face of West German cinema (Fassbinder's Lola, Holland's Angry Harvest). American cinema (Levinson's Avalon, Costa-Gavras's Music Box), and world-wide (Scott Hicks's Australian Shine).
grant story Broken English (1996, Gregor Nicholas). He was then a Prague intellectual and Gina Gershon’s lover in the USA-German-Czech co-production Lies and Whispers (1996, Roger L. Simon). Simultaneously, he was successfully engaged in a number of smaller or larger supporting roles in films made by international directors—from Nicholas Roeg’s psychological thriller Two Deaths (1995), through Francesco Rosi’s Holocaust drama The Truce (1996) and Stanley Kubrick’s last film Eyes Wide Shut (1999). Lately, Serbedzija has been gaining visibility in Hollywood which still avoids featuring his “unintelligible” name in larger print but nevertheless employs him for a wider range of roles, usually of villainous crooks with an articulate East European accent, drunkard’s voice, and oily long gray hair. He landed these types of appearances in mainstream Hollywood flicks such as The Saint (1997), Mighty Joe Young (1999), and Stigmata (1999). (For this last film the spelling of his name was changed to “Sherbedgia” in an attempt to make it pronounceable for American audiences.) At the same time, he continued appearing in a number of features made throughout the various post-Yugoslav states. Serbedzija is now split between Hollywood, European co-productions, and a wide range of productions in the Yugoslav successor states. In the year 2000 he is set to appear in the films of several high-profile directors—from Guy Ritchie’s Snatch 2000, through John Woo’s M:I-2, to Clint Eastwood’s Space Cowboys.

DISPERAL: SUFFERING OR EXCITEMENT

Deterioralization, exile, journeying, border-crossings, life in diasporas, growing awareness of instability and change, and the feeling of displacement at home are all new experiences for many in the Balkans. Amidst these processes, filmmaking has been producing works that can be considered as representative of two opposing tendencies in the conceptualization of migration and change. One is the continuation of the traditional notion of migration as a condition of endless squalor, duress, and alienation. The other one is the willingness to seek and discover excitement in the new experiences that come along with the dispersal.

Traditionally, Balkan people led a sedentary life. In the Balkan tradition, moving and migrating was thought of as a painful experience. To change places was looked upon as something undesirable, and something that could only bring about harsh confrontations and trouble. Even though groups from the Balkans have been involved in out-of-Europe migrations since the nineteenth century when many resettled in the New World—America, Argentina, Australia,—travelling was mostly done back and forth within the Balkan universe itself, to Asia Minor and the Mediterranean, and to Vienna as the western limit.

Cinematic works of the past have recorded the troublesome experiences of economic and political migrations. Notably, many of the region’s cinematic masterpieces explore the village-city migrations, which radically transformed these traditional societies. These films reflect the personal tragedies triggered by migrations which have led to the abandonment of the countryside and the desertion of traditional communities.

Initially, cinema reflected the involuntary migrations triggered by the break-up of Yugoslavia along the familiar lines of painful and undesirable experiences or along the nostalgic longing for irretrievably lost homelands. In an interview, Serbian director Boro Draskovic talked of a visit to Norway for a showing of his Vukovar: Poste Restante (1994) where he encountered a community of suffering refugees: “They’re trying to lead the same life they had in our country. It’s so sad, so far away. Even though Norway is a nice country and people are wonderful to them [..] it is so sad that all around the world there are people who escaped from a country that used to be very beautiful.”

Gradually, however, the excitement of dispersal starts finding a cinematic expression. Moving around inevitably brings disquieting experiences, but staying in one place was no longer possible for many in the Balkans. A moment came when everyone was on the move, many were displaced and lived in transition. Unlike the older migrations, the new one were accompanied by mass mediation that empowered the migrants to overcome marginalization by imagining themselves as pieces in the mosaic of a diverse, global universe. In the process of changing places, Balkan migrants came across a multitude of other meaningful societies. They recognized the vitality of these other worlds, and engaged in a critical reconsideration of their own past experiences.

For the past decade many citizens of what used to be Yugoslavia underwent the experiences of involuntary migration. In this process of migration, however, and they also acquired a chance to think of themselves in new terms. Their marginalized position within the European space was reconsidered in a global context, one in which they encountered other marginalized peoples—the American Southerners, the Maoris, the illegal Mexicans. Such encounters put them at ease with their own inferiority and made them dare imagine themselves as subjects of new, fulfilling experiences. Reconfiguring the space of their own lives, and accepting new localities, allowed them to reject the burden of historical allegiances that they carried from home, to cast away the embedded hierarchies of fortress Europe, and to come up with new visions that permit them to gain control over their disrupted lives. The older localities were lost, but new ones, never heard of before, were validated through the workings of migration, mass mediation, and imagination.

In the new country, with various degrees of success, life goes on. This new existence is not seen as one of deepening alienation but rather as a continuous appreciation of life. Broken English, a film from New Zealand, shows the new migrants interacting with their Maori and Chinese neighbors, and integrating within new communities—not within the framework of the upwardly mobile, but by developing their own viable, even if peripheral, networks.

Living in diaspora is part of the general condition of today’s world. Registering the experiences of migration in film is also part of a more general trend, where the constant mixing of traditionally isolated spheres pushes many filmmakers into exploring changing places and diasporas-in-the-making. A universe on the move, where old borders crumble and new locales come to replace the old ones, is what today’s dispersed Yugoslav filmmaking is trying to grasp.

5. Draskovic quoted by Henry Sheenan, "Vukovar Stirring Raw Emotions: Director of Movie Showing Horrors of Bosnian War Remains an Optimist at Heart," The Orange County Register, March 31, 1996, p. F15.

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