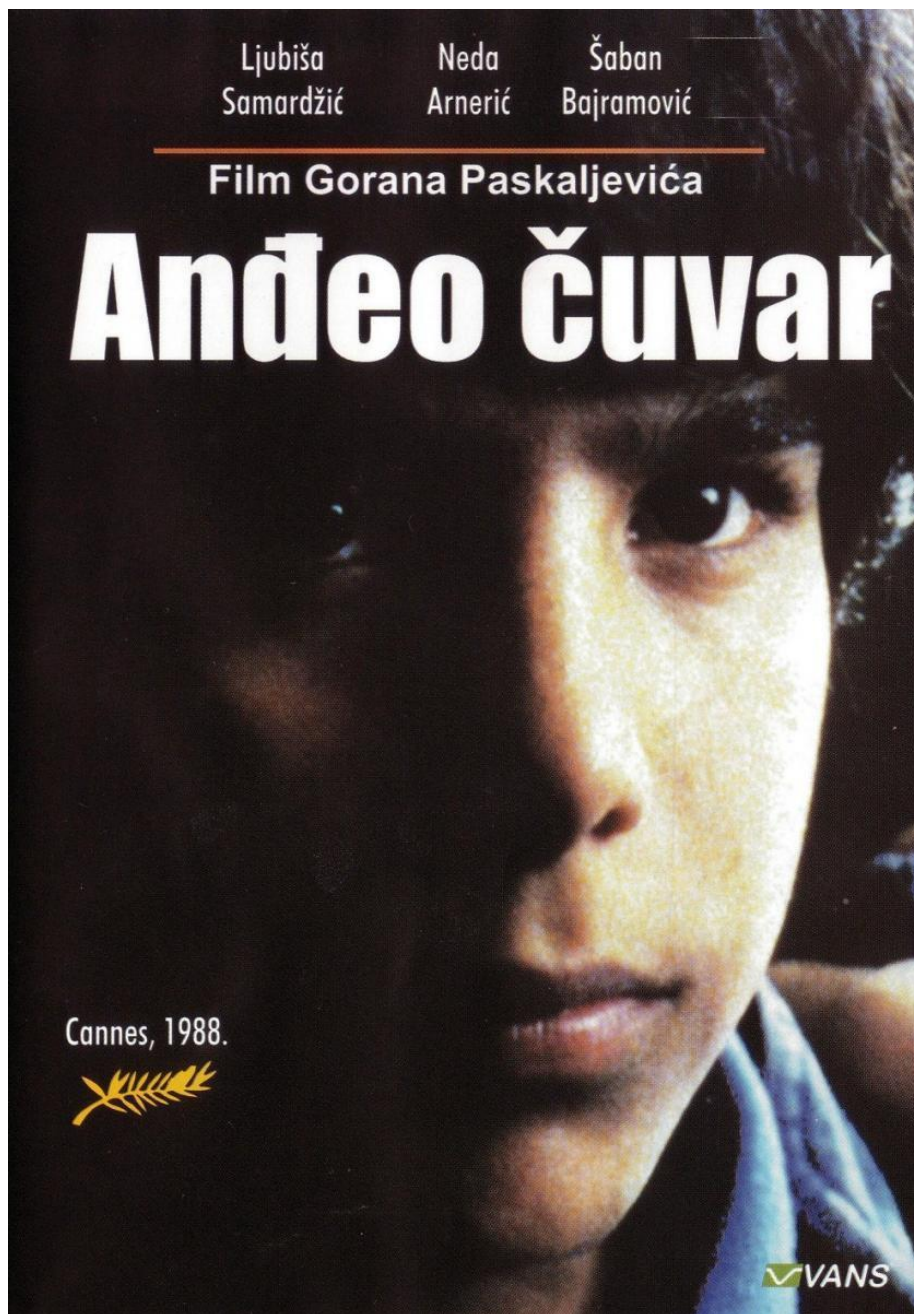


*Andjeo čuvar/Guardian Angel*  
(1987, Goran Paskaljevic, Yugoslavia)

Dina Iordanova

This essay is dedicated to the memory of  
director Goran Paskaljevic,  
who passed away in September 2020.



Over 20,000 Gypsy children from Yugoslavia have been left to the mercy of white-slave traders across Europe in the 1980s, a statement on the screen at the end of *Guardian Angel* reads. With this outspoken stance, the film ranks among the first European films that raise the issue of human trafficking as a social problem.<sup>1</sup> It tells the story of a Yugoslav journalist who investigates the fate of Sajin [Sha'yn], a twelve year-old Romani boy who, along with other children, becomes a victim of trafficking and exploitation in Italy.

*Guardian Angel* is neither the first nor the last Yugoslav film about Romanies. Threading in the steps of Aleksandar Petrović's acclaimed *Skupljaci perja/I Even Met Happy Gypsies* (1967), it even uses some of the same cast and crew. And only two year after its release motives of it are extensively borrowed and recycled in Emir Kusturica's *Dom za vešanje/ Time of the Gypsies* (1989) yet another film that tackles the theme of trafficking and exploitation of Yugoslav Gypsy children in Italy.<sup>2</sup> But while *Time of the Gypsies* tells the story by following closely the moves of its teenage Roma protagonist Perhan, *Guardian Angel* sticks to the more traditional approach of telling a story about trafficking through the eyes of what is perceived as a more 'legitimate or 'trustworthy' source, the journalist Dragan. This narrative approach is more in line with the majority of 'Gypsy-themed' films that also present the story

---

<sup>1</sup> While there are no reliable data on the film's international distribution, there is evidence that it has aired on Channel 4 in the UK, as well as screened in Poland, Finland, and East Germany.

<sup>2</sup> Kusturica's film has enjoyed a much better exposure, especially as it received the best director award at Cannes that year. There have been some exchanges on matters related to intellectual property over *Time of the Gypsies*' extensive borrowings from *Guardian Angel*, but they have remained confined within the Yugoslav context. The matter of copying *Guardian Angel* is even jokingly addressed in Kusturica's film, where the ringleader in Italy refers to a film having been made in Yugoslavia about him (evidently meaning Paskaljevic's *Guardian Angel*). Both films share composer Zoran Simjanovic and set designer Milenko Jeremic.

through the eyes of an educated stranger who penetrates in these tightly-knit communities. As discussed in the previous chapters, this is also a prevalent narrative strategy in a large number of films about human trafficking as well, where the story needs to be told from the point of view of a 'legitimate' reporter.

The plot follows Dragan (Ljubisa Samardzić)<sup>3</sup> as a social worker introduces to him some Romani children that have just been repatriated after a period of exploitation as beggars in Italy; this has been going on for a decade now, she says. From the western border of Yugoslavia the children are deported back to their homes in the interior of the country, mostly to the South East of Serbia; most of them escape on the way. Dragan, who plans to run a series of articles on child trafficking, befriends Sajin (Jakup Amzić), and attempts to track him down at his home in the Gypsy neighbourhood a few days later, to learn that Sajin has returned to Italy. The realisation that Sajin has not been happy to be back home but seems to have voluntarily chosen the life of bondage again makes Dragan realise there must be more to the trafficking that meets the eye, so he undertakes it to investigate in depth. He spends time in the Gypsy neighbourhood and later on travels to Italy, where he finds Sajin and manages to uncover a lot about the trafficking operation. He brings the boy back to Yugoslavia but, in the process of arranging for his release from bondage, loses his trust and friendship. Determined to expose the traffic ring, Dragan continues to investigate but is attacked and killed in the Gypsy neighbourhood where he has returned for more clues.

---

<sup>3</sup> Samardzić is one of the most popular actors within Yugoslav cinema. By the time of *Guardian Angel*, he had already more than eighty roles to his credit, mostly in comedies and action films. In the post-Yugoslav period, Samardzić became a prolific film producer; he also directed some films.

Director Paskaljević's interest lies mostly in exposing the social ills of contemporary Yugoslavia that make such level of victimisation and slavery possible. Clearly, trafficked children like are reluctant to talk and renounce the people who exploit them; none of them is willing to discuss the events that sent them to Italy for begging, pickpocketing, and prostitution. On the few occasions they would talk (after being offered a cigarette), the children tell stories about being lured away with promises, then smuggled into Italy overnight at the back of the van; they are then trained to pretend to be blind or crippled, and beg amidst the pigeons and the tourists on the piazzas of Italian cities. If they try to run away, they are severely beaten. A man who has been posing as the father of one of the repatriated boys is now exposed as a trafficker who has been sent on a mission to get them back.

A closer acquaintance with Sajin, the teenage protagonist, provides some background to the story. One of four children, son of an alcoholic father and ill mother, he is a talented accordion player yet withdrawn and inhibited. After losing Sajin's traces within Yugoslavia, Dragan travels to Italy to search for him, but none of the street beggars in sunny Venice is willing to disclose the boy's whereabouts. Still, Dragan manages to find him at an Italian detention centre where he is held as a pickpocket. It amazingly easy to get his release – the Italians are really keen to get rid of this kind of prisoners. After the release, however, Sajin is more scared than relieved: Musa, the ringleader, is likely to kill him if he finds out Sajin is talking to the journalist. With an astonishing maturity, the boy outlines what he sees as the only possible way out: if Dragan would consider to buying him and his girlfriend out, they would be free to return. (Wearing a white fur coat, teenage Rava is seen soliciting at a theme park; she

seems to be drugged most of the time). Escape is not an option, paying the bail is the only approach that would work. He is prepared to come back to Yugoslavia but only if his master releases him and if he could release Rava as well; he cannot simply run away though, the only way is for him to buy himself out. He does not think of himself as a slave, he appears conscious of having obligations to his masters. The journalist finds it striking that the boy acts like an adult in trying to negotiate a deal rather than accepting assistance, like a child would do: Sajin's maturity appears unnatural to him, he dismisses the idea of bail. One cannot possibly pay the traffickers, they are criminals who need to be resisted, not negotiated with, Dragan thinks.

While witnessing the transfer of a newly arrived child in a café in Venice, the journalist manages to meet the ringleader under the false pretence he wants to buy a gun. Black-clad Musa is polite but evasive, yet he takes Dragan to his headquarters in a campsite at the outskirts of the city and treats him to a glass of scotch. While pretending he has come to buy the revolver, Dragan observes the comings and goings of various groups of children, but does not even notice that at the same time he is stripped off his watch and other personal possessions. Musa, the ringleader, makes fun of Dragan; he first provokes him with an offer to sell him a child, then drops him off in the middle of nowhere, telling him to mind his business. Back at the camp, a boy is severely tortured in public, for having spoken to the journalist; the other children tremble in fear as they look on. And, when the next morning Dragan brings the police to the campsite, there is no trace from the Gypsies. Even if the journalist talks about their involvement in firearms and trafficking, there is no proof of any wrongdoing, as the alleged criminals are not even there...

While in Yugoslavia, Dragan makes several visits to the maze of slums where the home of his young friend is located, hoping untangle the workings of the traffic ring; he has witnessed some children being quietly taken away during his first visit already. Here, he is exposed to the reality of contemporary Gypsy life in Yugoslavia: a picture of misery and destitution of what is mostly an outdoorsy life: countless children and pigs roam the slum's muddy streets, animals and people share the same living space, girls play with rag dolls on a scrap heap<sup>4</sup>, toddlers with naked bums piss around unsupervised, scruffy idle men hang on the corners. People are not exactly hostile but withdrawn, and avoid contact with the stranger who, like other 'gadjo' (non-Gypsies) before, has come to marvel at their misery. Even though Dragan claims he is recruiting for a TV talent show, they do not become more forthcoming and answer questions only reticently.

It is against the backdrop of this harsh reality of Gypsy life that Dragan's compassionate concern for Sajin and other Romani children's fate develops. The film locates trafficking as a problem only in relation to the Romani minority, where it seems to be endemic, and places it in direct correlation to the poverty and abjection of the Romani minority. In Sajin's house, Dragan discovers that the mother has died a while ago and that the father is always drunk; two little sister are left to care for a third a deaf and crippled brother, there is no running water nor sanitation. In this context their response that 'Sajin went to Italy' sounds like a relief; rather than

---

<sup>4</sup> The scrap heap is a key prop in most of the films about Romanies. A recent one *Dallas Pashamende/ Dallas Among Us* (Robert Adrjan Pejo, 2004) even set the whole film in a Gypsy community located at a giant rubbish dump (a special set was built in Romania for the shoot). See Iordanova, Dina. "Mimicry and Plagiarism: Reconciling Real and Metaphoric Gypsies," *Third Text*, Vol.22, Issue 3, May 2008, pp. 305-310.

worrying for the safe return of those who have been trafficked out, more children are keen to go away, the prospect of begging in Italy appears as a desirable option in comparison to their current life.

However, Dragan's interest in Sajin is fraught with ethical problems. Yes, his effort is brave: it is necessary to bring the concern of trafficking to the attention of the wider public. But it is also patronizing. His visits to the Gypsy neighbourhood are meant to be similar to the outings of an anthropologist, yet he cannot help adding a moralistic slant to what would be a matter-of-factly record if it were engaged in pure observation. His is not the non-judgmental gaze of an ethnographer, but more one of an interventionist who is prepared to manipulate and lie, in order to fix things. Dragan is determined to find proof that the boy has been sold into bondage and to expose the whole chain of human trafficking; he is not concerned to understanding the reasons behind the practice but in proving it is taking place and in condemning it. And so, in order to get hold of the information he needs, he does lie on a number of occasions, both during his visits to the Serbian slum and during his trip to Italy. While in Italy, he 'bribes' Sajin into talking by treating him to a large bowl of ice cream, taking him to an amusement arcade, buying an accordion, and even giving him and his child-prostitute girlfriend Rava a ride around town. As if accidentally, Dragan forgets to tell the boy that his mother died recently. He is not bothered to protect Sajin's privacy, either. His willingness to help is, thus, premeditated and intrusive. It also becomes clear that Dragan's own fourteen year-old son now lives with his mother in Switzerland and is barely in contact with the father; this revelation casts suspicion over the whole relationship with Sajin: isn't Dragan trying to play father to someone else's son, having failed to care properly of his own?

A crawling suspicion, which has been there from the outset, grows into viable hypothesis: the parents of the trafficked children seem to be complicit in the whole thing. It comes across as a monstrous deed, which someone like Dragan is incapable to comprehend. When he confronts Sajin's father (played by legendary Romani singer Šaban Bajramović)<sup>5</sup> on this matter, during his first visit to the Gypsy neighbourhood, the man flatly denies it: 'I would never do this!' But later on the father apologetically elaborates: 'I only hired him out for a year,' he says. 'I had to.' The father tells Dragan of the apparition of Sajbiya, the guardian angel of the Romanies, who came to him in his sleep and dictated a solution to his problems. Later on Sajin will confirm this account: His father had a vision of Sajbiya, the guardian angel, who told him to get a white ram without and offer *kurban* at his home, so that the mother is cured and all problems of the family -- resolved.<sup>6</sup> In order to offer the *kurban*, the father borrowed 10 million dinar from Musa, agreeing in exchange that he would send his son Sajin to work for him in Italy for a year.<sup>7</sup> A scene of the ram's offering, the *kurban* gathering, and Musa's blessing, and the father singing songs of praise to Sajbiya, is shown in a flashback.

---

<sup>5</sup> See 'Šaban Bajramović (1936-2008)' at *DinaView*, 26 June 2008, Available: <http://www.dinaview.com/?p=157>.

<sup>6</sup> *Kurban* is a sacrificial offering of a ram, which is slaughtered and cooked into soup that is then given away to friends and neighbours. Part of a Muslim tradition, making *kurban* is widely practiced among Orthodox Christians in the Balkans as well.

<sup>7</sup> It is difficult to estimate how much is the dollar equivalent of ten million dinar, as the film is made in a period when the Yugoslav dinar undergoes huge inflation. In 1982, ten million dinar would have come to more than \$150,000, yet in 1987 (the year of the film's release) it would be an amount equal to about \$7,700. I am grateful to Slobodan Šijan for helping with these estimates.



Throughout the film a recurrent flashback shows father and son bringing back the ram in the golden light of a late afternoon. It is an image full of serenity and poise. Apparently, it has all been done in an effort to save the ill mother and help the handicapped little brother, to secure the family's wellbeing within the restricted means available to this class of people. Sajin is not 'trafficked' then, he is on a mission to help his family, with images of his ill mother and little brother, the bringing of the ram back home in the golden light of that late afternoon before his departure, rushing into his mind. He would not come back to Yugoslavia as Sajbiya, the guardian angel, may punish him and his family for breaking the word of honour.

Even though the journalist begins to grasp that there are more complex layers in Sajin's bondage, he still treats it as a straightforward matter: the father has sold his son into slavery, period. Indeed, selling one's child looks like an awful deed; the fact that the child accepts and embraces this fate does not matter, as a child has got no vested competence. Sajin, however, refuses to engage in accusations: his father has given his word, he can leave the traffickers only if he is bought out, and not if he is 'rescued'; running away would be below his dignity. He may be a victim, but he shows more emotional intelligence than the journalist, who single-mindedly pursues his agenda of 'rescue' and 'repatriation'. Dragan acts as manipulative liar when he conceals the fact of the mother's death from Sajin: if the boy knows his mother has died, he may not want to return and Dragan's repatriation plan would fail. In this sense, the journalist comes across as morally corrupt, yet his behaviour is sanctioned by his socially acceptable concern for the trafficked child's wellbeing. Sajin, acting according to the unwritten honour rules of his underprivileged milieu, is dignified and truthful.

The female social worker (Neda Arnerić), who initially introduces Dragan to a group of repatriated trafficked Gypsy boys, has a different attitude. While Dragan takes the children's reluctance to talk as a sign of trauma or fear, the social worker knows they conceal a more complex explanation that the general public would understand. During her six years on the job, she has learned that most of the children are sold into bondage by their parents but does not pass judgment. The children that are repatriated have to be escorted and placed in an orphanage; if they go back returned to their families, they will soon end up in Italy again. She is sceptical of Dragan's chances to get to the bottom of it, and even more reserved to his efforts to intervene: the traffic has been going on for more than a decade now, and it is not for newspaper articles to put an end to it. 'They are a different world from us,' she concludes with resignation.

And indeed, the birds' eye view of the Gypsy neighbourhood with which the film opens and closes, only confirms this. Under the accompaniment of powerful soulful Gypsy music, the camera wanders around the Sajin's family's poor household, showing them in their sleep – father and children, handicapped boy in trolley. The father wakes up and looks into the camera – evidently, this is a flashback to the moment of his vision, Sajbiya's apparition. Other scenes in the film also depict the particular mysticism that marks the Gypsy worldview – be it the Spring celebration of St. George's day, the merriment of public occasions, or the golden light of the later afternoon in Sajin's vision of his home return with the father and the ram.

Ultimately, the world of the Romanies remains impenetrable; the effort to break the trafficking circuit is doomed from the onset. 'We are treated worse than Blacks in America,' one of the Gypsy men in the local café remarks. 'If the police comes, it is

only to investigate some robbery, never to help us.' So no wonder they are all suspicious to Dragan, especially as it will transpire they are all, at least to some degree, involved in the trafficking business. They think he is an undercover snoop dog who has been sent to spy on them. As it happens, they will also become Dragan's killers at the end of the film, beating him with wooden planks when it transpires he has got closer to exposing the ringmasters. These people are not joking; trafficking may be an engaging investigative assignment for him but is a matter of livelihood for them. The loss of the journalist's life is symbolic: he has tried to penetrate into a closed world that is beyond his comprehension.

**Dina Iordanova**