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## **Hidden Histories on Film:**

### **Female Directors from South Eastern Europe**

Dina Iordanova

An aging peasant woman, Ayse, who lives in the mountains above Turkey's Black Sea coast, begins talking in an incomprehensible language in Yesim Ustaoglu's *Bulutlari beklerken/Waiting for the Clouds* (France/Germany/Greece/Turkey, 2004). It is gradually revealed that she was originally called Eleni and descends from a family of Pontian Greeks who were displaced during her teenage years. Most members of her family died during the flight, she alone was saved by Turkish peasants and raised as a Turk, with a new name and identity. Now in advanced age, Ayse can no longer resist the urge to go back in time, haunted by a horrible guilty memory of having given up on her little baby brother back then. Her inquiries take her to various places; she learns, to her astonishment, that the brother has miraculously survived and now lives in Athens. Toward the end of the film, Ayse travels to Greece and tries to reunite with her brother. He is no longer young, in his sixties, and has built a large family in the city. The brother is not particularly thrilled by the appearance of this Turkish woman who arrives out of the blue, claims to be his long-lost sister, and starts telling him stories he cannot recall. Her arrival is disturbing his peace: he does not remember her and does not need the memories that she brings along. He treats her with barely suppressed animosity.

In the final scene of the film, brother and sister are seated at a table; he talks her through a pile of pictures. The viewers are shown glimpses of the photographs that he displays for her: his leaving orphanage, then a photograph with the girl who would eventually become his wife, then photographs of the family with their first child, him at the door of his shop, then with the second child, then at his son's wedding, then with the grandchildren, and so on. Then the brother puts the pile of photographs down, turns to Ayse and tells her:

‘Here, all my life is recorded in these pictures, all my family members can also be seen in here. You are not in these pictures; you have not been part of my life. How can you come out of the blue, tell me you are my sister, and expect me to embrace you?’

With trembling hand, Ayse passes on to him a ruffled pale photograph which shows a family: the mother, seated, holds a young baby boy, the father and two older sisters standing beside her. It is this sole photograph that she can present as testimony to her story; not much to offset the overwhelming pile of well documented family history that he has mobilised to counter her story and her claims of a forgotten relationship that disturbs, questions and inconveniences the tidily structured universe of his memories. It is a sole photograph that weighs at least as much as all other photographs and radically undermines the neatly pieced narrative of his life.

*Waiting for the Clouds* is one of these films that I return to every time I ask myself what is the most prevalent characteristic of female filmmaking from the region of South Eastern Europe. It is a film that clearly demonstrates the desire to expose the ‘hushed histories’ that circulate in the Balkan realm: these may be stories of displacement and assimilation that are

largely absent from official annals but live in oral history, or narratives of suppression that remain hidden, forgotten, relegated to oblivion.

Like many families in the region, my own family has one of these stories: about the migration of my grandmother Kostadina, a Slav woman from Aegean Macedonia, whose family settled in the Kyustendil area of Bulgaria in the mid-1920s. At the age of nineteen, Kostadina gave birth to my father, then to his sister, and then died prematurely at the age of thirty-six, in 1949. We only have one photograph of her – a single ruffled and pale picture. Relatives quietly blamed her husband for bringing about her premature death, but they never wanted to talk openly about what precisely had happened. Like many families in the region, my relatives never spoke about the reasons for her migration nor of the ordeal that she had apparently lived through.

It was only with time, and due to my exposure to the vast panorama of female films from the region, that I gradually came to recognise that many areas in the Balkans are sites of intercultural memory, full of silenced memories that come with a daunting scarcity of record. Different peoples have inhabited the region at different times; earlier settlers have had to leave to open up space for others, who have come to settle in their place, deleting the memory of prior presence. Women have routinely been the quiet sufferers in these processes. Wherever one turns, one encounters the same story: occasional ruffled photograph is the only material that stands against a wealth of later records that obliterate the clandestine realities of singular and apparently insignificant female lives.

Female filmmakers across the Balkans seem particularly attracted to these ‘hushed histories’. The stories they tell come from different parts of the region and relate to different memories,

yet they are related in that they often refer to a memory of disturbed multicultural co-existence, to people whose presence has been obliterated from memory. In these films, female directors keep asking who is forgotten and why, and explore history from the point of view of those whose trajectories have been silenced.

Recently, female filmmakers from Greece and Turkey have begun to probe the hushed aspects of the ‘exchange of populations’ between the two countries in the 1920s, a poorly managed process of forced migration that involved 1.5 million Greeks and half a million Turks. In *Between Venizelos and Atatürk Streets* (2004), Turkish director Hande Gumuskemer interviews the remaining survivors, while Peggy Vassiliou’s *Hamam Memories* (2000), looked at shared lifestyle features by discovering the use of the Turkish-style bath-houses (*hamams*) across the regions.

As mentioned above, Yesim Ustaoglu’s *Waiting for the Clouds* explores a forgotten ethnic cleansing campaign by dissecting the quiet life of an ethnically homogeneous Turkish village with a hidden multicultural past that still shelters survivors of the massacres of Pontian Greeks. Her *Güнесе yolculuk* (*Journey to the Sun*, 1999), spoke of yet another hushed story within Turkey, exposing the racist treatment of the Kurds, which is also the focus of another female film, Handan Ipekci’s *Büyük adam küçük ask* (*Big Man, Little Love*, 2001). This one tells the story of a Kurdish girl, Hejar, who accidentally ends up in the care of a retired Turkish judge, after her parents are arrested and taken away. Ipekçi’s new film, *Sakli yüzler* (*Hidden Faces*, 2007) deals with yet another controversial hidden issue, that of honour killings, where young women become victims of rigid ideas of belonging and family pride.

Another Turkish female filmmaker, Pelin Esmer, follows a group of Anatolian village women as they stage a play based on their own life stories in the documentary *Oyun* (*The Play*, 2007), a film that can qualify as a classic feminist text in that it shows little known aspects of female lives in following around a group of peasant women who are staging a theatre play.

The female films of the Balkan ‘hushed histories’ do not seek to revise and establish an ultimate truth about the events behind the story, but focus on presenting the subtle personal dimensions, the way these events have affected the lives of the protagonists and created a personal discourse that may be very different from the stories that are told through officially sanctioned channels. Thus, the films made by women from the region contribute to a daring revisionist project that quietly but persistently undermines the master narratives found in populist nationalist historiography.

Ayse’s trembling hand, reaching out with the pale photograph, undermines not only the official discourse that wants the memory of persecuted Pontian Greeks obliterated; it also powerfully protests against the self-sufficient and confident personal story of the brother who is reluctant to accept the quiet suffering of his seemingly irresolute and confused, yet committed, elder sister.

Turning to my native country, Bulgaria, it is easy to discover the same persistent interest in hushed subjects that characterises many instances of female filmmaking here. Since the fall of Zhivkov’s government in 1990 Bulgaria has maintained a reasonably good record in suppressing the ethnic tensions of the mid 1980s and has managed to avoid further deepening of the ethnic conflict, but the difficult moments that led to the massive emigration of ethnic

Turkish citizens in the summer of 1989 still lingers in people's minds. A succession of governments took various measures to correct the damage of the re-naming process of the Bulgarian ethnic Turks and Pomaks. Remarkably, in cinema, the guilt over the brutal campaign of change of names, has remained a 'hushed history' that has been addressed predominantly by female filmmakers, in a context in which many types of nationalist publications are thriving and one can encounter groups that are more nationalist-minded than ever. These were film productions initiated and staffed almost exclusively by women that set out to promote inter-ethnic peace and to expose the faults of what was called a 'revival process' (a process that was meant to illuminate the Muslim populace as to their inherently Slavic identity, to 'revive' it).

*Gori, gori oganche (Burn, Burn, Little Flame)*, was a 1994 television mini-series by screenwriter Malina Tomova and director Roumiana Petkova (and camera-woman Svetla Ganeva). It powerfully told the story of the mistreatment, harassment and humiliation of helpless Pomak villagers in a remote settlement in the Rhodopi region that eventually culminated in a brutal assimilation campaign, as witnessed by a young teacher of Bulgarian ethnicity. She, like the makers of the film, feels guilty over the acts of violence perpetrated by her fellow Bulgarians over this defenceless population. Malina Tomova, the scriptwriter, claimed that her film was a metaphor for the guilt which Bulgarian intellectuals feel due to their silence and failure to condemn the brutality of the 'revival process'. The film's intention was to evoke genuine remorse for the human rights abuses that Bulgarians had committed against their Muslim compatriots. No wonder, the film became one of the most discussed works of the mid-1990s; its hotly contested reception made the gap between intellectuals and nationalist-minded mass audiences visible than ever.

The 'revival process' and its difficult aftermath were addressed in other films made by women as well. Adela Peeva's documentary *Izlishnite (The Unwanted, 1999)* featured interviews with women inhabiting these same (now depopulated) Bulgarian border regions who bitterly reassess their own role in the re-naming campaign. Today they acknowledge that they suffer from the adverse effects of their own complicit actions. It is an intelligent, subtle film that reveals how, long after those who were abused have found closure, the local perpetrators have fallen victim to themselves, as they are most affected by the repercussions and the guilty consciousness that still haunts them after so many years. Other uneasy aspects of the controversial 'revival process' were also addressed in the made-for-TV work by Tanya Vaksberg, as well as in Roumiana Petkova's documentary *Mezhdinen svyat (A World In-Between, 1995)*.

The plight of oppressed ethnic minorities has routinely been the theme of other women-filmmakers too. Romanies have been the focus of Eldora Traykova's *Za horata I mechkite (Of People and Bears, 1995)* and *Zhivot v geto (Life in a Ghetto, 2000)*, and the plight of the Jews was explored in Milena Milotinoва's *Spasenite (The Saved Ones, 1999)*.

The commitment to telling hushed or non-conventional histories that women filmmakers have had over the years in Bulgaria led to situations of censorship. I can tell of many incidents that have affected the work of such important women filmmakers from the country like Binka Zhelyazkova, Irina Aktasheva, Nevena Tosheva and Adela Peeva.

The essentially counter-cultural nature of female filmmaking in the region can be discovered in films made by women across all the countries of former Yugoslavia. Women were the first to address awkward or hushed topics and to present them in subtle ways, often as if nothing

much happens on the surface while a storm rages inside the protagonist or the small community. In Serbia, Mirjana Vukomanovic's *Tri letnja dana* (*Three Summer Days*, 1997) was one of the first films to look at the ordeal of impoverished refugees from across Yugoslavia who flocked into Belgrade in the mid-1990s, bringing along a few possessions and a lot of memories. In Slovenia, Maja Weiss's *Varuh meje* (*Guardian of the Frontier*, 2002) raised awkward questions of newly erected borders and division lines through the highly personal stories of three women seeking independence. In Macedonia, Teona Mitevaska's *Kako ubiv svetec* (*How I Killed a Saint*, 2004) showed the gradual radicalisation and involvement with terrorist activities of her local community as an inevitable side-effect to the presence of the international 'peacekeeping' forces. Before tackling issues of trauma in her acclaimed *Grbavica* (*Easma's Secret*, 2006), Jasmila Zbanic's episode 'Birthday' in the omnibus *Lost and Found* (2005) was probably the best example of subtly addressing the making of new hushed histories, by tackling head on the inept silence in which the members of the split community in Mostar now raise their children. In my view, this is Zbanic's best film today, persuasively critical of the way in which important issues of reconciliation and trauma are still being avoided. It is important to have films that tell the story from the point of view of those who have been overpowered, and pushed aside by the winners, as is the case of the small community of women, victims of trauma and yet finding their own strategies to survive, that we saw in Aida Begic's recent *Sneg* (*Snow*, 2008).

Courage is needed to make films about these contested Balkan themes, and it is women who lead the way. They seek out the hushed memories and commit to bringing them to the fore, thus quietly subverting mainstream narratives with films that have the potential to trigger public controversies. Many of the female films are politically awkward because they bring up

suppressed subject matter. Yet, by telling the story of the losing side, they manage to tell the all-important story of women.

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