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CHAPTER III

JAGGED NARRATIVES AND DISCERNING REMEMBRANCE IN BALKAN

CINEMA¹

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The more I look at South Eastern Europe's cinema, the more it seems that all important films from the region ultimately deal with historical memory.² The peculiarities of historical discourse in recent Balkan cinema, however, are not so much in the entangled history of the region but mostly in the way one addresses/reconciles with history in the Balkans. More specifically history is treated as something to endure, to live through, a process where one does not have agency but is subjected to the will power of external forces. Someone else ultimately decides your present and future. Shifting narratives permit the story to be told from different angles. Priority is given to some memories while others are neglected or totally eliminated. These conditions often result in uneven or choppy yet ultimately agreeable narratives of the historical past, present and future of the region.

The Ottoman Footprint

The present political configurations and alignments of Eastern and Southern Europe largely match the three empires that defined the map a century ago; Central European states roughly correspond to the former Austria-Hungary and are definitely considered European. The

cluster of Russia and its former satellites is equivalent to the Russian Empire, and is thought to have the potential to become truly European with some adjustments. And the Balkan lands, all of which were once part of the Ottoman Empire, are treated as representing various degrees of Orientalist culture. The dynamic, rational, and pragmatic Europe is thought to have only a weak association with the Balkans, a region that is generally associated with being slow-moving, lazy, poorly organised, autocratic, mystic, and inefficient. Countries such as Greece, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, and Albania are therefore deemed “insufficiently European.”³ They are regarded with distrust and have to constantly prove their suitability for European status. Even Greece, which has been a member of the club for a while, has to face such misgivings and is forced to constantly speak of itself as “the cradle of European civilisation.”

But being classified as “Balkan” means reproducing once again the Orientalist isolation and being treated as strangers and second-hand Europeans. At the dawn of the 21st century one lives a centennial flashback, where the political task for many in these countries is the same they had in the dawn of the 20th, to emancipate themselves from the Ottoman, proclaimed to be culturally incompatible and kept at bay from Europe.

One of the main ideological goals for each Balkan country following the expulsion of the Ottomans was to assert a distinct national identity. Historical narratives were crafted that presented the centuries of Ottoman rule as intrinsically alien to and destructive of national identity. Each respective nation was shown as having emerged from the Ottoman period unsullied by the foreign Islamic influence. Anything that hinted at mixing with the Turks, anything that alluded to impure nationality was berated or denied. Turks were assigned the role of the archetypal bad guys in the region’s literature and cinema, typically presented as oppressive, corrupt, and treacherous villains. Thus, scenes of cruel Turks impaling fair-haired

Slavic rebels have been a frequent feature of Balkan cinema. A few examples of such fare are the Yugoslav *Banovic Strahinja* (1983), the Greek *1922* (1986), the Bulgarian *Time of Violence* (*Vreme na nasilie*, 1988), or the Macedonian *Dust* (2001).

More recently, however, historians as well as filmmakers have begun recognising that the true story cannot be told by eliminating the Ottoman period. Quite often a challenge to nationalist narratives requires questioning traditional national borders. Subverting the traditional nationalist historiographic tradition, a range of new historians have challenged the nationalist narratives and have engaged in historical writing contrasting with the purist versions of national self-determination. Maria Todorova's influential work restored the concept of Balkans and Balkanism, triggering a host of works that treat the Balkans as a metaphor, stressing the syncretism and the hybridity of the local culture, and thereby embracing aspects of Ottoman culture. The history of the Balkans, which largely neglects the confines of strictly national frameworks, comes across much more dynamic and vibrant in her writing. Other historians focused on the history of a city or region rather than a nation state.⁴ Multicultural Thessaloniki has been the subject of several such films. *An Underground World* (2004), a documentary by Kalliopi Legaki celebrates the work of Elias Petropoulos, a Thessaloniki anthropologist and urban ethnographer who had served prison terms in Greece due to his writing. Petropoulos was powerfully attracted to subject matters that revealed the presence of "impurity" in the official higher Hellenic culture. Among his topics were the underworld of Athens, the culture of remebetiko music, unconventional sexual mores, and the intricacies of gay slang, Greek Jews, and the presence of Ottoman influence on Greek culture.⁵ Petropoulos was forced to emigrate in the 1970s. In the film he is shown sitting in his Paris apartment telling the camera he now joys writing freely, self-publishing his works, and hurling them "like hand grenades into Greece."

Speaking with Manthia Diawara in *Rouche in Reverse* (1995) Jean Rouche notes there is danger that African countries may become “balkanised.” His usage implied that “balkanisation” was something that had come from the outside and imposed. The Ottoman *millet* system of governance that divided populations into language and religious units is a classic example. One consequence of the imposed Balkanisation was the urge to differentiate oneself from one’s immediate neighbours. Ethnically mixed populations were divided and grew suspicious of one another. Chauvinists nourished and cultivated innumerable territorial claims based on ethnic purity, claims that became the basis for irredentist warfare once the Ottomans were overthrown.

In their effort to delete the Ottoman footprint and to carve a unique pure identity, the Balkan countries indeed ended up quite “balkanised”, turning their backs to each other. Lately, however, the opposite comes to be true: intellectuals from these countries get more and more interested precisely in those aspects that were so vigorously denied in the past. Contemporary filmmakers have begun to probe aspects of their culture that traditionalists have been trying to eradicate so vigorously. They are coming together, rediscovering their similarities and no longer abhorring the Ottoman legacy.

Numerous documentaries and features seek and rediscover traces of hushed multicultural histories and past migrations. One recent film, *Hamam Memories* (Peggy Vassiliou, Greece/Great Britain, 2000), looked at shared lifestyle features by discovering the use of the Turkish-style bathhouses (*hamam*) across the region. In another one, *Between Venizelos and Atatürk Streets* (2004), director Hande Gümüşkemer interviews the remaining survivors of the “exchange of populations” between Greece and Turkey in the 1920s that involved 1.5 million Greeks and a half million Turks. A forgotten ethnic cleansing campaign is the subject of Turkish director Yeşim Ustaoglu’s *Waiting for the Clouds* (*Bulutları Beklerken*, 2004)

where an ethnically homogeneous Turkish village with a hidden multicultural past still shelters survivors of the massacres of Pontian Greeks.

Courage is needed to make films about these Balkan “hushed histories” concerning forgotten forced migrations, linguistic coercion, and identity curtailment. Everybody in the Balkans has fought against everybody else and has practiced the assimilation business at some point. The narratives of resettlements and bullying that have taken place as part of bigger historical processes are usually contested and remain suppressed in official historiography. The stories differ and sometimes challenge officially fostered nation-building and identity narratives, so they are regularly avoided in public discourse yet nonetheless keep popping up in spoken memory and anthropological writing.

Films that address these issues are considered highly awkward and often trigger the negative reaction of the powers-that-be that inevitably resist the uncovered alternative stories. They usually deal with just one dimension of the many “hushed histories” that circulate in the Balkan realm: stories of displacement and assimilation that are largely extricated from the official annals but live mostly in oral history and vernacular reports. Set in contested territories, these films are politically inconvenient, touching on topics that even today are still regularly avoided and surrounded by muted reactions. These films are contentious also because they often depict events that take place beyond the territory of the producing country and thus concern the lives of people that are *de facto* foreign subjects. Nonetheless, the filmmakers behind these films believe that issues of identity can be addressed adequately only by including in the narrative the experiences of those whose lives have been, for one reason or another, spent outside of the (shifting) nation-state borders of their respective countries.

Over the recent years important and politically sensitive cinematic texts made across the Balkan region address the divided state of the nation, whose discourse they are tackling. Important and politically sensitive cinematic texts made across the Balkan region often remain largely unseen within their own countries and rarely reach international audiences. It takes commitment to watching across borders in order to allow for these fascinating narratives to unravel in their full complexity, it takes interest in seeing how the strangers from the neighbourhood see the story that affects all in the region. Minorities have prominently returned to occupy the focus of filmmakers, who aim to promote inter-ethnic peace. One of the areas where this supranational togetherness is embraced and explored is in the films that uncover the multicultural chronotops and that, rather than furthering the nation-state narrative focus on the convivial multi-ethnic existence in cities or regions.

An example of such work is *After the End of the World* (*Sled kraya na sveta*, dir: Ivan Nichev, 1998) which tackled nostalgically the gentle and complex inter-ethnic balance of multicultural Bulgaria from the early twentieth century. Set in one of the oldest neighbourhoods of the picturesque city of Plovdiv the film shows Armenians, Turks, Jews, Gypsies, Bulgarians and Greeks who have lived alongside one another for generations (Stojanova, 2006). One of the most popular recent Turkish films, Ezel Akay's *Why were Hacivat and Karagöz Killed?* (*Hacivat Karagöz Neden Öldürüldü?* 2006) shows another multicultural and pluralistic chronotop. Set in the city of Bursa in the 14th century, this colourful revisionist historical film shows the early Ottoman empire as a truly ethnically and religiously diverse sphere, where Islam is struggling for dominance and gaining followers mostly because of tax-related advantages, and where a group of strong-willed Amazon-like women enjoy the most respected and powerful position in society.

The ultimate chronotop, however, is Istanbul, a place to which all Balkan nations bear some sort of historical kinship. The great Constantinople, the city of emperors and sultans, is held in high reverence across the region. The city truly bridges continents and cultures; it combines the rush of modernity with the relaxed manner of the Oriental, the vertical piercing images of minarets with the horizontal waters of the Bosphorus. Fatih Akın's musical documentary *The Sound of Istanbul* (2005) superbly brings together all the city's reverberations and contradictions into a modern beat while simultaneously capturing the melancholy of empire's end that permeates Orhan Pamuk's essay-novel *Istanbul* (2006). Travelling to and losing oneself in Istanbul has become a line in celebrated centripetal narratives in films like Ferzan Özpetek's *Hamam (Il bagno turco)*, 1997) and Fatih Akın's *Head On (Gegen die Wand)*, 2004) synonymous to rediscovering oneself in Tangiers (as Tony Gatlif's *Exiles* [2004], or Andre Techiné's *Loin* [2001]) or in Mecca (as Ismaël Ferroukhi's *Le Grand Voyage*).⁶ Nor is it by chance that Nuri Bilge Ceylan's atmospheric *Uzak (Distant)*, 2002) uses Istanbul's cityscape as its most important asset.⁷

Istanbul again treated in an atmospheric and melancholic manner also is at the centre of the Greek blockbuster *Touch of Spice (Politiki kouzina)*, 2003).⁸ Tassos Boulmetis, the Greek director, was born in Istanbul and, reportedly, his family was expelled from the city. But he makes only slight reference to traditional Greek and Turkish conflicts. This restraint of antagonistic memories in favour of rediscovering possible relationships and togetherness, this willingness to stress the commonalities and put the adversities aside, is the most promising ideological motif in contemporary Balkan filmmaking.

That same spirit permeates pan-Balkan films like Theo Angelopoulos's *Ulysses' Gaze (To vlemma tou Odyssea)*, 1995), where a pensive filmmaker traverses the Balkan realm in search of shared record and reminiscence. In like manner, the acclaimed Bulgarian documentary

Whose Is This Song? (*Chiya e тази pesen?*, 2003), follows filmmaker Adela Peeva, on her travels across alienated and linguistically incoherent Balkans to investigate the astonishing range of metamorphoses of a simple popular folk tune. Beginning in Istanbul, the journey's path meanders to the Greek island of Lesbos and then on to Albania, Bosnia, Macedonia, Serbia and Bulgaria. Everywhere the same song pops up in varied rhythms and with lyrics in diverse languages; sometimes as a love song, and sometimes as a belligerent nationalist hymn claimed by both Slavic Orthodox nationalists and Islamic Jihadists. In each and every place the locals are seen claiming that this is "our" song, which always belonged to "our" tradition. The more different parties lay claim to it, the clearer it becomes that the song, like the history of the region, is best understood as a shared experience. The search for the song's origins is not about finding a clear-cut answer. It becomes a motif of pan-Balkan mutuality with all its Ottoman, Western, and other connotations affably affixed.⁹

Shifting narratives of past and present

Balkan cinema also reflects a Soviet footprint. Many filmmakers in Romania, Bulgaria and Albania spent the greater part of the 1990s uncovering the wounds of recent history and making public the whispered stories of perverted communist rule. Only in Yugoslavia was reassessing the communist years not a major theme in cinema, partly because this critical project had already been carried out in the 1980s and partly because of the gruesome break-up that imposed a different set of concerns around the aura of Tito's legacy. One exception to this cultural amnesia was the Serbian domestic box-office hit *The Professional* (*Profesionalac*, 2003), directed by playwright Dušan Kovačević. The film reveals how a former secret service agent systematically controlled all aspects of the life of the man whom he was charged with monitoring some decades earlier. Regimes may have changed, but Kovačević suggests the surveillance "professional" will always try to rule our lives.

Tito's charismatic and controversial figure inevitably dominates all Yugoslav memories. Footage of Tito cutting the ribbon on yet another part of the highway of the brotherhood and unity or Tito gloriously coming out of airplanes is used in a great number of films made in the former Yugoslavia. Croatia's Vinko Brešan's tongue-in-cheek *The Marshall* (1999) even resurrected Tito's ghost on an isolated Croatian island. The apparition inspires a group of diehard Yugonostalgics to declare the leader is not dead and to seek restoration of the old order. Local entrepreneurs use the opportunity to begin plotting the development of Tito-ghost tourism for retirees. They dream of eventually creating a new international niche market of political tourism by reviving the spirits of other lost great leaders of the communist era. Erich Honecker is their first choice, a sly reference to *Ostalgic* Germans.

The stories told in the films of communism usually feature those who feel they must tell of their suffering for the sake of those who perished along the way. Some of the most striking films, however, involve people who are so traumatised that they do not want to talk about their broken lives. Siniša Dragin's documentary reconstruction *Pharaoh (Faraonul, Romania, 2004)* stitches together the main episodes in the life of an aged homeless man who has been repatriated after 40 years in a Siberian jail and now drags himself silently between Bucharest's wintry streets and a home for destitute elderly. The introvert protagonist is so profoundly withdrawn that he barely utters more than a few words. All he wants is to be left alone and not to be asked to remember.

The protagonist of Anri Sala's documentary *Intrevista* (Albania, 1998), the director's own mother, also does not want to remember. Her son, a film student, confronts this attractive middle-aged woman with footage showing her addressing a Comsomol rally in her youth. The footage has no soundtrack and the attempt to restore it is doomed to fail. Even if

technically possible, there is no consensus about revisiting episodes that have been successfully obliterated from memory.

Lucian Pintilie's *The Afternoon of a Torturer* (*Dupa-amiaza unui tortionar*, Romania/France, 2001), on the contrary, features a protagonist who not only feels the urge to remember but is excessively talkative about the darkest past. In this remarkable film, summarising Pintilie's bitter observations on memory and continuity in communism's aftermath, versatile actor Gheorghe Dinica appears as a retired communist henchman Franz Tandra, keen to come into the open about his transgressions. He may have silenced many but now he wants to go on record and put forward his case to the young journalist and the soft-spoken professor who record testimonies about the communists' crimes. Tandra's intrinsic sadism and the brutality of his early childhood years have conditioned him for what is revealed as life of cruelty and murder. The unrepentant torturer lives in a shack at the end of town where most of his life has passed and where his memories play out during a confessional afternoon in tableau-like scenes under the tree in the backyard. The shack is covered in graffiti and abusive slogans. The giant penis someone has sprayed at the front suggests that the torturer lives under siege from vandal gangs who use the outrageous media revelations about the shady past of this neighbour mostly as a pretext for setting free their own need to brutalise others. These vigilante hooligans probably would themselves happily become torturers should there be a demand.

Numerous films about the communist past also bring bitter conclusions about its present-day consequences. Saimir Kumburo's *Death of a Horse* (*Vdekja e kalit*, 1995), for example, persuasively looks at the repressive years of Albania's Xohxa regime by tracing the fate of an honest and brave soldier who becomes a victim of the envy of an official. When released after many years, the protagonist, who has lost all members of his family, finds that the

treacherous bureaucrat responsible for his demise, is again in power and in favour with the new regime.

Imprisonment and interment that stem from personal envy and gain abound in recent Balkan cinema. Examples include Romanian *Bless You, Prison* (*Binecuvântata fii, închisoare*, dir: Nicolae Margineanu, 2002) in which the supposed crime involves religion, or Macedonian *Across the Lake* (*Preku ezeroto*, dir: Antonio Mitrikeski, 1997) and Bulgarian *Parched* (*Izpepelyavane*, dir: Stanimir Trifonov, 2004), in which love relationships are paramount. These films reverse old clichés of state socialist filmmaking in which morally communists would fall victim to perverted and excessively violent fascists. In the newer films, the villains are communists, bestially envious and lacking in moral values while the victims are usually virtuous and pious men and women.

Although many of these films are set in the late 1940s and 1950s, some look into more recent periods. Kujtim Cashku's *Kolonel Bunker* (1996) focuses on the man charged with "the bunkerisation" of Albania, one of the most absurd acts of the country's paranoid leader that resulted in the erection of thousands of concrete bunkers meant to protect the nation in a foreign assault (these semi-destroyed concrete bunkers litter Albania's landscape today and have become a sort of an embarrassing visual trademark of the country). The Colonel lives in constant overwhelming fear, yet, as a true military man, he never seems to question the madness which he perpetuates. Once the task of building the bunkers is over, he is asked to test them personally by sitting inside one and letting himself being bombarded; then he is interned into a camp, a fate that befalls even the most dedicated servants of the regime. He becomes victim of the system and is gradually destroyed by it. His inner contradictions, however, remain difficult to grasp because the very authority that generates the paranoia does not figure in the film (see Jones, 2007).

In comparison, Gjergj Xhuvani's *Slogans* (2001) puts a more credible human dimension on the same period. School teachers, rather than engaging in instruction in the school where they work, have to spend their days on the surrounding hills where they assemble various prescribed slogans in white stones. The film, set in the mid-1980s, looks and feels like the ideologically absurd 1950s. The teachers are forced to construct slogans condemning the American imperialist aggression in Vietnam, even though the war has long been over. All breathing space in this pessimistic film is obliterated by the suffocating rhetoric of the party secretary.

Whatever the past and its bleak representations, the bleakest assessment is found in films featuring life in post-communism and foretelling future that is the opposite of bright. The most interesting are the films about migration, about the gradual disappearance of people. The stories are usually told from the point of view of those who stayed behind and observed how life gradually moves elsewhere, how there is nothing more to be continued here, no more births and weddings to take place in these lands. The theme has been a constant in Balkan cinema; in Greece it can be traced back to classics like Alexis Damianos' triptych *To the Ship* (*Mehri to polio*, 1966) and Theo Angelopoulos' *Reconstruction* (*Anaparastasis*, 1971), and is revived once again in recent films of leading directors.¹⁰ These films show a community that is divided where togetherness is no longer possible and people whose their loved ones have already left (in like manner, the daughter of Mr. Lazarescu has left for Canada), or people who eagerly prepare to leave and who give away their personal possessions (like in Lucian Pintilie's *Niki an Flo*, 2003).

Those who take the path of exile (be it forced or voluntary) may have difficulties reconnecting at a later point, as the life in the place they have left behind continues in a different direction. In Edgar Reiz's first *Heimat* this line of exile and not reconnecting is the

leading factor in the story. Paul, the protagonist, simply does not return home one day. Only years later do we learn that he went to America. He faces the huge moral problem of someone who tries to reappear and reconnect, an endeavour for which it is simply too late as half life is over, and he is no longer one of them. The same theme is found in Angelopoulos' *The Voyage to Cythera (Taxidi sta Kithira, 1984)* that features a repatriated communist unable to comprehend the new Greece.

People who were duped and betrayed during the years of communism, have a need to come into the open to shout about it. Increasingly, however, filmmakers realise that making new films telling the world how the communists cheated them won't improve today's situation, especially as cheating and duping is still occurring on a comparable scale. Whatever the virtues in making films about the past, recycling the same trope by showing yet another victim of the system can render viewers unnecessarily pessimistic about what lies ahead.

“I do not know anyone...”

Last year I had the opportunity to talk to one of the leading independent Serbian documentarians, whose work I admire mostly because of its unyielding Frederick Wiseman-type approach. I asked him why Serbian documentary today is mostly populated by the impoverished and confused victims of Yugoslavia's break up whereas those responsible for this state of affairs are largely missing.¹¹ His answer was: that neither he nor his personal acquaintances knew anyone involved in the conflicts as a perpetrator. He said he thought that the “willing executioners” who perpetrated the Serbian violence of the 1990s were mostly rednecks coming from remote hamlets and acting as accidental weekend paratroopers crossing into neighbouring territory, raging in drunken madness and then withdrawing, hurling away the uniforms and returning to their normal village routines. He did not think it feasible to go to these people today and make them talk about the atrocities they had

committed. The focus should stay with the victims as they still dwell on what happened while the villains have moved on.

Many Yugoslavs believe that the roots of the conflicts of the 1990s are to be traced to inter-ethnic crimes committed during World War II. During the Tito years, however, memories of these crimes were deliberately suppressed and people were invited to forget (even if they could not forgive) in the name of Tito's "brotherhood and unity." The ugly transgressions of the Croatian Ustaša regime have been addressed in just a handful of Yugoslav films, the best-known of which remains Lordan Zafranović's classic *Occupation in 26 Scenes (Okupacija u 26 slika, 1978)*.¹² Public reception of recent films such as Dino Mustafić's *Bosnian Remake* (2003) that revisited these episodes and pointed at parallels with recent events has been subdued.

Only occasional works of Serbian cinema, like Goran Paskaljević's *Midwinter Night's Dream (San zimске noći, 2004)* address the core of recent traumatic events (see Orr, 2007). The biggest box office hits, however, are apolitical films filled with folklore tradition or punk rock humour. The Serbs feel undeservedly punished and support films that depict their international victimisation over the Kosovo crisis. Ljubiša Samardžić, the veteran actor-turned-producer, for example, directed maudlin films about the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia, showing it from the point of view of innocent residents of Belgrade who inevitably saw it as appalling intimidation. Milutin Petrović's *Land of Truth, Love & Freedom (Zemlja istine, ljubavi i slobode, 2000)*, while set in an underground shelter during the 1999 bombing, is probably the only film that critically revisits the national narrative in the best tradition of Makavejev's associative montage, smartly intercutting scenes of a 1950s Serbian glorious populist fairy tale.

There are good reasons to show the innocent residents of Belgrade and other Yugoslav locations being mass-punished by the west for alleged crimes none of them has personally been involved with. After all, wasn't Kosovo an early authorised rehearsal of the series of "preventive aggression" wars that we have seen in the years since? Serbian filmmakers and intellectuals are quite right in reiterating the absurdity of the punishment and the unnecessary victimisation of their population, castigated to remain as an isolated enclave of barbarity amidst amalgamated Europe that surrounds it.

What is striking, however, is that wherever one looks, in all features and documentaries, one only sees these same innocuous blameless people who are nothing else but victims. They suggest Serbians all led quiet and peaceful lives in their respective villages or towns and then the war came to destroy their lives, turn them into refugees, and take away the little they had. After the war, they remain impoverished and adversely effected, but they go on with their peaceful and quiet lives. The villains are missing. We never see those who killed, maimed, raped, burned, looted, and destroyed; finding and filming these people has not become a central interest for filmmakers.

Bosnian cinema, on the other hand, is mostly focused on war traumas, tackled in films like Pjer Žalica's subtle *Fuse* (Gori vatra, 2003) and *Days and Hours* (Kad amidže Idriza, 2004) and Jasmila Žbanić's widely acclaimed *Grbavica* (2006, a.k.a. *Esma's Secret*) (see Mazaj, 2007). Bosnians' wounds are also addressed in films made by non-Bosnians (from Spain: Isabel Coixet's *Secret Life of Words*, 2005, from Germany: Christian Wagner's *Warchild*, 2006, from the UK: Anthony Minghella's *Breaking and Entering*, 2006, and from Switzerland: Andrea Staka's *Das Fräulein*, 2006).

While the official Croatian discourse is focused on showing the country as a true democracy, there are Croatian filmmakers who address some of the controversial and hushed issues of

recent history. Vinko Brešan's *Witnesses* (*Svjedoci*, 2003) revisited an unsightly episode of Croatia's war for independence in which a Serbian neighbour loses his life and his small daughter is nearly obliterated. Told from three different and slightly overlapping points of view, the story raises questions of accountability. The image of a local doctor turned politician (whose striking likeness to Tudjman cannot be accidental) is particularly disturbing. There is no need to keep "our boys" responsible for what can easily be covered up as collateral damage, he warns, as it is war and the dead Serbian man can easily be classed as an "enemy."

Nenad Puhovski's Zagreb-based documentary collective *Factum* released a number of films on highly controversial subjects (see Vojkovic, 2007). Although only partially released in Croatia, they raised a number of uncomfortable questions about the extremities of Croatian nationalism, particularly related to situations in which Serbians were not only mistreated but unlawfully expelled or destroyed. The civic bravery of the authors of documentaries such as *Pavilion 22* (about an impromptu concentration camp early in the conflict) or *The Storm over Krajina* (about the forced expulsions of Serbian population) remains unmatched in other parts of former Yugoslavia.

One Serbian filmmaker, Janko Baljak, best known for his visionary wartime documentary *Will See You in the Obituary!* (*Vidimo se u čitulji*, 1996), has ventured into exploring some of the most awkward issues of the conflict. Baljak's *Vukovar: The Final Cut* (2006), a Serbian-Croatian collaboration, tried to tell the story of the deadly battle over the Danube town of Vukovar as comprehensively as possible. People seen in the 1991 footage from the conflict are asked to comment in retrospect on the events and on their representation. Years have passed and life has triumphed over death: the crying child from the convoy is now a teenage girl and the women from the 1991 TV footage, now ten years older, know that that they have

been caught on camera precisely at the moment when their relatives were being slaughtered elsewhere.

Was There or Wasn't?

The Balkans was one of the first areas to where liberty and democracy was spread under the new global order, something like a dry run for later ventures. I have often wondered why is it that Pentagon officials needed to watch the forty year old *Battle of Algiers* (1966) soon after Iraq's invasion in order to understand how radicalisation comes and spreads.¹³ Whereas Gillo Pontecorvo's film is one of my favourites, I believe that they could have foreseen the radicalising consequences of their actions much better if they had watched some recent Balkan titles – they would probably see some early warnings of the extremities to which the bitter cynicism and disillusionment with the peacekeeping hypocrisy of foreign interventions could lead.

The films from the 1990s depicted the blue helmets as alien presence at best. The representation of peacekeeping forces in films from the Balkans has since undergone important transformation toward the negative, from mockery to denunciation. Danis Tanović's smart parable *No Man's Land* (2001) was an early warning. Pjer Žalica's *Fuse* (*Gori vatra*, 2003) powerfully ridiculed the ineptitude of the intervention and the arrogance of Bosnian assistance programmes. Even the Kosovar film *Kukumi* (*Isa Qosja*, 2005), set just after the 1999 intervention, depicts the presence of foreign forces in an extremely negative light; symbolically, the innocuous lovably insane protagonist is killed at the end by blue helmets.

Teona Mitevska's Macedonian *How I Killed a Saint* (*Kako ubiv svetec*, 2004) shows 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. Having come back home after a lengthy stay in America, young Viola is seriously worried by the signs of Western resentment and anti- NATO sentiments. Tanks and foreign soldiers are everywhere, and while they say they came for peace, they carry guns all the time. Amidst the harassment and violence of daily life, boys throw mud at any car that may be carrying foreign diplomats, and posters calling *NATO go home* are seen everywhere. Viola’s own teenage brother has grown into an extreme nationalist and is involved in terrorist activities.

The peacekeepers are shooting us and are turning us into prostitutes but no one really cares – this is more or less the message of these films. Local people are bitter over the foreign presence; all sorts of extremisms are flourishing and the radicalisation of the community is rapidly deepening. It is impossible to distinguish between gangsters and patriotic fighters, as crime and nationalist politics have both thrived on the embargoes and have evolved hand in hand, triggered by the peacekeepers presence (seen by them as foreign occupation).

There is a prevailing sense of bitterness with the “international community” all over South East Europe that will not go away. This is a new feeling so much as a return of old enduring sentiments of derision and worthlessness that have been around for centuries. No one from the outside seems to care what happens here, in Europe’s backyard. What is the point of remembering all the drabness and turmoil? People here are sceptical on the matter of memory and certification, and filmmakers often turn this scepticism into a theme.

Kujtim Cashku’s Albanian *Magic Eye* (*Syri magjik*, 2005) makes a pertinent comment on the impossibility of public record (see Jones). Set during the 1997 riots, when, in the aftermath of the bust financial pyramids, insolvent crowds seized arms and anarchy ensued, the film follows a photographer from the South who attempts to expose an instance of media manipulation. It is suggested that presenting lawlessness as a consequence of local people’s

insanity was, in fact, a common practice favoured by Western media agencies who were the main clients for this type of material. In the film, public space is shown as available only for the manipulated media coverage¹⁴. The truth remains confined between the four walls of private gatherings as, anyhow, it would just be a handful of people who would care to be privy to it.

Most uneasiness over the impossibility to ever know the real answers, however, is seen in the recent films from Romania. They go a step further than anyone else by not only showing it is not possible to know the recent past but also asking the question “who the hell would need to know”. The shady details of Iliescu’s power takeover in December 1989 are so many that it may seem worthwhile to ask: Was there a revolution in Romania? Clearly, the so-called “revolution” was a dodgy event heavily reliant on a televised staging, so that it may seem worthwhile to keep up the scrutiny on how events evolved in Timișoara, Bucharest and elsewhere. Even what happened to the Ceaușescus is not quite clear. Hence, the recurrent symbol of the helicopter that took them away from that fateful rally has become a powerful trope of popular mythology in Romanian films such as Mircea Daneliuc’s *Conjugal Bed* (*Patul conjugal*, 1993) and Lucian Pintilie’s *Too Late* (*Prea târziu*, 1996).

Set on the night of 22nd against the 23rd of December during Romania’s “revolution,” Radu Muntean’s *The Paper Will Be Blue* (*Hartia va fi alabastra*, 2006) depicts the absurd military paranoia that leads to the meaningless deaths of two young militia men, one of whom has spent the night trying to help the uprising but finds himself captured and accused of being a terrorist. Reminiscent to Goran Marković’s remarkable *Kordon* (see Živković, 2007), the film gives the story from the point of view of those who are supposed to defend the agonising regime and shows how shaken their own beliefs and loyalties are.

Taking place over a longer period but again evolving around the 1989 revolution, Catalin Mitulescu's *The Way I Spent the End of the World* (*Cum mi-am petrecut sfarsitul lumii*, 2006) covers the same conceptual ground and raises similar concerns of perplexed individual loyalties amidst the shifts of turbulent historic times. Teenage Eva's limited life choices and idiotic patriotic schooling under communism are mercilessly scrutinised and ironically juxtaposed to a sarcastic representation of Eva at the end, sailing away on a brightly lit cruise liner, making it clear that escaping into the consumer paradise of the West is still the only viable option available in the revolution's aftermath.

We are never likely to know about all the machinations behind what mass audiences were invited to accept by face value as a revolution. From the drabness and emerging petty gangster capitalism, however, it is clear that communism would have ended sooner or later and we would be more or less at the same dead end point where we are today, with or without the revolution. This is the message of Corneliu Porumboiu's *12:08 East of Bucharest* (*A fost sau n-a fost?*, 2006), the Romanian title of which translates literally as *Was There or Wasn't?* (see Nasta, 2007). This diminutive film features a talk show staged by a small provincial TV channel in Romania, where the question put to the alcoholic teacher and the accidental neighbour is if the townsfolk took up the revolution seventeen years ago or not really. The evidence is thin and opinions differ; the conversation veers away and no one really cares if there had indeed been a revolution or not. The petty drab everyday life has taken its toll and now, seventeen years later, it no longer really matters. Life has gone on; today's concerns prove ultimately more pertinent than secondary issues like memory and historical record.

Conclusion

Ideological landscapes in the discourse on Europe have shifted quite significantly in the South East European region in recent years. I hope to have shown some of the important

trends that characterise the thinking on history and social process via my transnational survey of current cinema from this area. Some important aspects of the shifts included the gradual reconciliation with the Ottoman legacy, the abandonment of chauvinist paradigms of national purity and the emergence of previously muted narratives in historical discourse, the reevaluation of the not-so-distant past and the invention of new strategies for dealing with the communist legacy, the trials and tribulations that came along with the trauma of Yugoslavia's break up, and the latest political twists and turns that make filmmakers question the official narratives of global political interests and trajectories. The knotty story of the Balkans is continuously told in cinema, once again confirming that it is not so much about entangled history but mostly about the resolve of cineastes to query and subvert received historical wisdom.

NOTES:

¹ A version of this text appeared in *Cineaste* (New York), Vol. XXXII, no. 3, (Summer 2007), 22-27. The author would like to acknowledge the generous assistance of the AHRC of Great Britain whose continuous academic support made this research possible.

² Most of the writing dealing with the region's cinema makes references to the representation of history in film. See for example Bjelić/Savić, Goulding, Iordanova, Levi, Papadimitriou, Elsaesser, Jameson, and the forthcoming book on Greek cinema by Maria Stassinopoulou.

³ This argument is developed in detail in the opening chapters of my *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media*.

⁴ Historians like Mark Mazower abandon the national framework for the sake of telling the history of the region in a supranational manner, or focusing on the history of one particular multicultural facet like the city of Thessaloniki, a multilayered chronotop that has gone

through many transformations and has not really been ethnically pure for long periods of time. Similar works are published about the Black Sea (e.g. King), and once again historians choose to follow the history of a chronotop, of a city, of a region, as opposed to a nation-state, and to highlight other aspects. In a new identity move, where the Ottoman footprint was to be vigorously deleted before, historians nowadays do not terribly mind to rediscover it and even restore it.

⁵ Unfortunately only some of the books of Petropoulos are available in English (like his study on the Rebetika tradition, translated in 2000). The main text where he discusses the Ottoman presence in Greek culture has not been translated (*Ho tourkikos kaphes en Helladi*, Nephele 1990).

⁶ On Özpetek see Girelli and on Akın see Berghahn.

⁷ These aspects are discussed in the text by Savaş Arslan on Bilge Ceylan's work.

⁸ On this film, see the texts by Lydia Papadimitriou and Dan Georgakas in the Summer 2007 issue of the *Cineaste*. In the film there is no mention of the anti-Greek pogroms from the mid-1950s, yet those are described in detail by Orhan Pamuk in his *Istanbul*.

⁹ See reviews of this film by Iordanova (2005) and Doncheva (2006).

¹⁰ On the issue of the importance of immigration in Greek cinema, see Georgakas (2007) and the book on *Immigration in Greek Cinema* (2006) which was published in conjunction with the sidebar on migration-themed films at the Thessaloniki film festival.

¹¹ For an overview of key trends in new Serbian documentary and feature related to the Kosovo bombing, see Daković (2001, 2004).

¹² Film historian Daniel Goulding has written a small book dedicated to the film (1998). An

essay by Margit Rohringer on another similarly-themed film by Zafranović, *The Fall of Italy (Pad Italije, 1981)* is included in *Cinema of the Balkans* (2006).

¹³ For a discussion of the Pentagon screening of *The Battle of Algiers*, see the 2003 texts by Freund, Kaufman and Johnson.

¹⁴ Similar Western media practices in relation to Romania and Macedonia are discussed by Iordanova in *Cinema of Flames* (2001), Chapter 3.

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