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CONTEMPORARY BALKAN CINEMA

Transnational Exchanges and
Global Circuits

Edited by Lydia Papadimitriou
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TRADITIONS IN WORLD CINEMA

General editors: **Linda Badley and R. Barton Palmer**
Founding editor: **Steven Jay Schneider**

Traditions in World Cinema is a series of textbooks and monographs devoted to the analysis of currently popular and previously underexamined or undervalued film movements from around the globe. Also intended for general interest readers, the textbooks in this series offer undergraduate- and graduate-level film students accessible and comprehensive introductions to diverse traditions in world cinema. The monographs open up for advanced academic study more specialised groups of films, including those that require theoretically oriented approaches. Both textbooks and monographs provide thorough examinations of the industrial, cultural and socio-historical conditions of production and reception.

The flagship textbook for the series includes chapters by noted scholars on traditions of acknowledged importance (the French New Wave, German Expressionism), recent and emergent traditions (New Iranian, post-Cinema Novo), and those whose rightful claim to recognition has yet to be established (the Israeli persecution film, global found footage cinema). Other volumes concentrate on individual national, regional or global cinema traditions. As the introductory chapter to each volume makes clear, the films under discussion form a coherent group on the basis of substantive and relatively transparent, if not always obvious, commonalities. These commonalities may be formal,

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stylistic or thematic, and the groupings may, although they need not, be popularly identified as genres, cycles or movements (Japanese horror, Chinese martial arts cinema, Italian Neorealism). Indeed, in cases in which a group of films is not already commonly identified as a tradition, one purpose of the volume is to establish its claim to importance and make it visible (East Central European Magical Realist cinema, Palestinian cinema).

Textbooks and monographs include:

- an introduction that clarifies the rationale for the grouping of films under examination;
- a concise history of the regional, national or transnational cinema in question;
- a summary of previous published work on the tradition;
- contextual analysis of industrial, cultural and socio-historical conditions of production and reception;
- textual analysis of specific and notable films, with clear and judicious application of relevant film theoretical approaches;
- bibliograph(ies)/filmograph(ies).

Monographs may additionally include:

- discussion of the dynamics of cross-cultural exchange in light of current research and thinking about cultural imperialism and globalisation, as well as issues of regional/national cinema or political/aesthetic movements (such as new waves, postmodernism or identity politics);
- interview(s) with key filmmakers working within the tradition.





FOREWORD: CINEMA OF THE BALKANS – AN ENDLESS JOURNEY

Dina Iordanova



Theo Angelopoulos, the titan of Greek and Balkan cinema, died in 2012. He was hit by a motorbike while on the set of his last film, *The Other Sea*, and passed shortly thereafter in hospital. It was to be a film about crisis, anxiety and austerity, about migrations, misty border-crossings, about refugees and home longing: a film that would have continued Angelopoulos's eternal themes of exile and endless journeying. Many regarded the director's death as symbolic collateral damage of the Greek economic crisis itself.

In the years that followed, many of the other directors that had shaped cinema in the Balkan region also passed away – Bulgarian Rangel Vulchanov in 2013, Romanian Lucian Pintilie in 2018 and the great Yugoslav-Serbian Dušan Makavejev, in 2019. Even if revered, their last decade was often marked by experiences similar to Angelopoulos' meaningless death – they had difficulties financing projects, felt misunderstood and isolated. The unsettled atmosphere took over the better part of others, who had previously enjoyed the limelight – like Bosnian Emir Kusturica, who got involved in idiosyncratic angry politics and barricaded himself in the narrows of his Serbian mountain stronghold of Kustendorf, out of where he makes maverick theatrical pronouncements to the world.

However, new films were made. New filmmakers stepped in to fill the void that these cinematic titans left. There was a generational change, and here we have a book that takes the challenging but distinguished task to introducing the

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new developments and to telling the story further, as it continues evolving into the second century of Balkan cinema.

The chosen vantage point for the contributions in this collection is 2008, the year of the global economic crisis – as well as the year when the Greek economic crisis started to unravel. These events impacted the South East European region beyond Greece: and indeed, they did, even though many of the countries around the Balkans follow an economic logic of their own. The story in these parts is often marked by perennially underperforming economies or by crises that appear unrelated – like the one in Turkey in 2018, which was preceded by an unprecedented economic boom. In fact, many of these countries often display scarcity and continuous stagnation; people who live here struggle with the mundane logistics of survival – as reflected in the films of the Romanian new wave and beyond. In general, it is a region that is hard to pin down and poses a variety of narrative challenges.

Even if not uniformly, the Balkan countries are regarded as peripheral and insufficiently European; ascendance to the EU is neither smooth nor easy. In fact, from the thirteen countries covered in this book, only six are members of the European Union (Greece, Cyprus, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia). The other seven countries are suspended in various stages of bureaucratic recognition by the EU, and it is difficult to predict how things would evolve (Turkey, Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro). Countries themselves are quite different in territory and population size; there are linguistic and religious divides that often impede productive cultural dialogue. On zooming in, one can easily find simmering conflict in many corners. What in the 1990s used to be one country, Yugoslavia, emerged in the 2000s as a conglomerate of seven newly independent republics – and it is quite possible that some chapters in this collection may be the very first instance where the cinemas of new countries are written about in English as separate national entities. The choice of framework, then, circumvents the complicated and counter-productive question of how things moved during the preceding period of turbulence. By 2008, in spite of economic turmoil, the current national formations were more or less settled.

Likewise, in the context of European cinema the visibility of these cinematic traditions is not particularly high. Yet there are outstanding achievements that compensate on the international scene. In the 1990s, it was the films of Theo Angelopoulos (*Ulysses Gaze*, 1995) and Emir Kusturica (*Underground*, 1995) that helped Balkan cinema gain recognition and acclaim. In the new millennium, it is new waves in Romania and Greece, bold new female filmmakers and the likes of Cristian Mungiu (*4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, 2007) and Nuri Bilge Ceylan (*Winter Sleep*, 2014) that keep cinema from South East Europe afloat. The story continues.

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A balanced country-by-country survey must pay attention to as many phenomena that occur in the covered territory as possible. Many of the authors writing in this book observe that films that are most popular within a given country rarely sell well beyond its borders. What makes an impact in the annals of international cinema may not be as influential at home, so some of the trends that privilege the international playing field may remain overlooked. The dark minimalist realism of the Romanian New Wave, the emotional stupor found in the Greek ‘Weird’ Wave, the existential sensibilities of new Turkish cinema and the range of thought-provoking documentaries made across the region, need special singling out where the ambition is to foreground recent landmark achievements of Balkan cinema.

So even though it is the names of specific countries that associate with the waves of ‘Greek’ quirkiness or ‘Romanian’ philosophical bleakness, it is mainly specific feature films – as well as some remarkable documentaries – that make up for the most recognisable recent cinematic output from the Balkans. Some of the titles that are recognisable internationally include *Dogtooth* (2009), *The Lobster* (2015) and *The Favourite* (2018) by Yorgos Lanthimos, *Attenberg* (2010) by Athina Rachel Tsangari from Greece, as well as *The Death of Mr Lazarescu* (2005) and *Sieranevada* (2016) by Cristi Puiu, *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days* (2007) and *Graduation* (2016) by Cristian Mungiu, or *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006) by Corneliu Porumboiu from Romania. Then, there is the work of acclaimed Turkish auteurs which could be described as a ‘contemplative’ wave: it goes beyond Cannes-winning Nuri Bilge Ceylan to include directors of related existentialist sensibilities like Zeki Demirkubuz, Semih Kaplanoglu, Reha Erdem and Yesim Ustaoglu, as well as internationally acclaimed work by female filmmakers such as Bosnian Jasmila Zbanić (*Esma’s Secret*, 2006), Romanian Adina Pintilie (*Touch Me Not*, 2018) and Macedonian Teona Strugar Mitevska (*God Exists and Her Name is Petrunija*, 2019).

And then, transnationally, there are discourse-defining films by documentarians like Adela Peeva (*Whose Is This Song?*, 2003), Želimir Žilnik (*The Old School of Capitalism*, 2009), Andrei Ujica (*The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu*, 2010), Alexandru Solomon (*Kapitalism: Our Improved Formula*, 2010), Danis Tanović (*An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker*, 2013), Ziga Virč’s *Houston, We Have a Problem* (2016), and Mila Turajlić (*The Other Side of Everything*, 2017), which have gained world-wide recognition and acclaim.

* * *

Talking of identity and collective memory in the Balkans is always fraught with peril; each story can be told in different ways, so touching on sensitive subjects of sameness and otherness is generally avoided. Nonetheless, topics of identity and memory prevail and continue to occupy the minds of the region’s cineastes. Films like the Serbian *The Tour* (Goran Marković, 2008) or the Croatian *Buick Riviera*





(Goran Rusinović, 2008) but even Romanian *Niki and Flo* (Lucian Pintilie, 2003) and *Sieranevada* (Cristi Puiu, 2016) may seem full of incomprehensible petty bickering and are often declared by Western critics to display ‘black humour’ but they provide, in fact, a symbolic battleground where conflicting narratives on recent history clash and reconcile.

Each of the countries surveyed here has produced ambitious nationalist sagas that have been widely acclaimed and awarded in the respective domestic contexts. At the same time, daring directors have continued making films on ‘undesirable’ topics – as seen in films such as Reha Erdem’s exploration of guerrilla war in *Jin* (2013) or Emin Alper’s study of political violence in *Frenzy* (2015).

Then there are the films dealing with haunting topics that require truth and reconciliation approaches – like the war rapes that are continuously being revisited in films from Kosovo and Bosnia; Jasmila Zbanić’s *For Those Who Can Tell No Tales* (2013) is one of the finest examples of these. Or films that revisit the traumas of war like *Ordinary People* (Vladimir Perisić, 2009), *The High Sun* (Dalibor Matanić, 2015), *Men Don’t Cry* (Alen Drijević, 2017) and many others – but also those films exploring problematic and irredentist allegiances from the times of the Second World War or even earlier contexts – the First World War, the Balkan Wars and the Austro-Hungarian or Ottoman rule. While populist governments encourage the production of ornate nationalist sagas in many of the countries explored here, this is also the region that turns up the most consistently committed anti-nationalist films that expose profound moral deficiencies and segregation in areas like education (*Our School*, Mona Nicoara, 2009), the performing arts (*Srbenka*, Nebojša Slijepčević, 2018), at the workplace (*The Miner*, Hanna Slak, 2017), or in public administration and health (*Erased*, Miha Mazzini, 2018). In this line of work, recent films by Romanian Radu Jude’s stand out – the features *Aferim* (2015), which exposed matters of Roma slavery in the region, and *And I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians* (2018), which was a passionate call to contemporaries for facing historical responsibility, as well as the experimental documentary *Dead Nation* (2017), which brought Romania’s suppressed Holocaust record back from oblivion.

The collection seeks to strike a fine balance in giving a true picture that brings together all kinds of cinematic narratives that circulate in the Balkans – glorifying historical sagas alongside films that reveal injustices of the communist period, as well as ‘dissident’ films that engage with the difficulties experienced by ethnic, linguistic or religious minorities. In that, it asks for reflection of the perennial duality of irredentist and populist tendencies on the one hand and cosmopolitan leftist leanings on the other. One of the authors makes an apt remark about the irony of a period which sees the production of massive new film histories in some of the smallest countries that struggle to keep film production going. There is





recognition, however, that cinema is chronicling the experience of the nation. In that, the film archives based in the region remain important, even if sometimes impoverished, so the work of organisations such as the Albanian cinema project, the Nitrate Film Festival in Belgrade and the Istanbul cinémathèque is recognised as a remarkable preservation effort.

As an extension of this preservation work, several important documentaries explore the specific fortunes of filmmaking in the region: Mila Turajlić's *Cinema Komunisto* (2010) chronicles the film industry of Tito's Yugoslavia, Cem Kaya's *Remix, Remake, Rip-Off: About Copy Culture and Turkish Pop Cinema* (2014) zooms in on Yeşilçam and questions the biased understanding of cross-cultural appropriation. And, Greek Nina Maria Paschalidou's perceptive investigation *Kismet: How Turkish Soap Operas Changed the World* (2014) delves into the wide international spread of female-authored Turkish soaps and the way in which they shape women's self-esteem across the Balkans and the Middle East.

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This book recognises the importance of new policies, facilities and distribution channels; each and every chapter charts the specific industry landscape, an underlying factor for the evolution of a national film culture: film institutes, production companies, mainstream and arthouse cinemas, membership in international funding bodies and organisations like the European Film Academy. Whereas most of the countries in the region would comfortably fit in the 'small national cinemas' framework proposed by Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie, there are also some 'micro' industries, like in the case of Montenegro or Cyprus, as well as some sizeable ones, like Turkey, which produces more than a hundred films annually. The smaller size necessitates pulling resources together and engaging in co-productions, and indeed these collaborations are charted across the board to reveal a thriving and convivial creative milieu – with a special attention to matters of majority and minority co-productions, as well as runaway business.

In the context of digital transition and profound changes in exhibition, television and new streaming platforms (some of them international, like HBO) have stepped in and play an important role as producers; they also provide opportunities for improved (and truly global) exposure – many Turkish films are available on Netflix, and so is the Croatian mini-series *The Paper* (Dalibor Matanić, 2016–) or Romanian film *Rocker* (Marian Crisan, 2012). Amazon Prime features the North Macedonian *Honeyland* (Tamara Kotevska and Ljubomir Stefanov, 2019) – a film which won at Sundance and gained two Oscar nominations, as well as a package of Bulgarian AgitProp documentaries, including Andrey Paounov's *Georgi and the Butterflies* (2005).





But there is also awareness that transnational production contexts can occasionally backfire – as shown in Melis Behlil’s interesting case study of *Mustang* (Deniz Gamze Ergüven, 2015), a Turkish-language French film set in Anatolia and purporting to represent specifically Balkan matters of gender. *Mustang* was acclaimed in the West, then entered into the Oscars by France and subsequently shortlisted for the best foreign language film award, yet in Turkey it was regarded as inauthentic and even ridiculed.

The Balkan film festivals are given true recognition. Not only does one learn of important events across the region – from the veteran festival of cinematography the Manaki Brothers in Bitola, North Macedonia, through to the dynamic new DokuFest in Prizren in Kosovo – but one receives a comprehensive overview of the festival scene. The largest such forums include the Thessaloniki Film Festival (a conglomerate of several events), as well as the festivals in Sarajevo and Istanbul, which play an important transnational role in showcasing the area’s cinematic output. Thessaloniki’s Balkan Survey, a comprehensive sidebar that also features retrospectives of specific directors, has been in existence for more than two decades. In the absence of strong regional distribution networks, the festivals, which also feature project markets, enable a variety of Balkan collaborations, often structured around linguistic trajectories. In that, they become an important transnational factor in the evolution of cinema.

The specifics of transnationalism here is assessed against categories suggested by Mette Hjort (2010), and the talk is mainly of a prevailing ‘affinitive’/‘milieu-building’ stance that manifests in transnational collaborative choices and where the affinities once again evolve mainly along linguistic groups, even if one also comes across examples of occasional ‘opportunistic’, ‘globalising’ and ‘epiphanic’ transnationalisms that manifest in a wider European context where the ‘Balkan’ classification turns undesirable. The transnational approach permits authors to give attention to the respective national diasporas and the dynamics of in- and out-migration trends, as far as audiences and film personnel is concerned.

* * *

This collection is radically different from all previous books on Balkan cinema in that it departs from the traditional male-dominated historiography which tends to overlook the achievements of women and makes a decisive step toward properly recognising female-made films, both in the present and retrospectively. And this is not only about the women who won top awards and gained international visibility – Jasmila Zbanić, Adina Pintilie, Ralitsa Petrova or Mila Turajlić – but also many others, like Aida Begić, Sonja Prosenz, Pelin Esmer, Zornitsa





Sophia, Marianna Economou, to name just a few, who enjoy a high international profile and festival accolades. It is a period of unprecedented push for women, and one that marks a radical departure from the time when only male directors would receive nominations or awards and when only male filmmakers would remain in film history. Finally, this collection signals an opportunity to start bringing out of obscurity the work of important female directors of earlier generations such as Bulgarian Binka Zhelyazkova (1923–2011) and Albanian Khanfise Keko (1928–2007).

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The screening of Greek documentary *Catastroika* (Aris Chatzistefanou and Katerina Kitidi, 2012) – a film analysing the complex causes and global beneficiaries of the Greek economic crisis – at the Subversive Film Festival in Zagreb presented an unforgettable experience. The auditorium was totally packed, with people overflowing from the balconies and reacting stormily. The Q&A with the filmmakers was heated and went on for a long time. The atmosphere of solidarity and sharing was intense. This is the way I have always imagined what May 1968 must have been, in Paris and at the interrupted Cannes film festival . . .

In the past decade, my travels have taken me to many diverse corners of the Balkans – be it for participation at film festivals in Turkey, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Macedonia and Serbia, or for visits with friends in cities like Skopje, Novi Sad, Heraklion or Izmir. I also enjoyed the inspiring beauty of these lands – on the marble pebble beaches below Pelion mountain in Greece, on the ferries that criss-cross Istanbul’s waterways, on the boats that take off from Okhrid and float during spectacular sunsets over the lake. I walked cobblestoned streets in Piran in Slovenian Istria under the watchful rooftop ‘eyes’ of houses in old Sibiu in Transylvania and marvelled at the architectural genius of Mimar Sinan at Istanbul’s Süleymaniye Mosque, majestic yet restrained. I had my share of exposure to the unsettled politics of the region – at the anarchist Exarchia in Athens, near the disputed Gezi Park in Istanbul and at downtown protests in my native Sofia. I sat in the shadow of the makeshift ‘wall’ that divides Nicosia and stood in front of Ceausescu’s mammoth People’s Palace in Bucharest. Wherever I went, I encountered the same feeling of solidarity among ordinary people, accompanied by humble awareness of limited power and modest economic means yet showing integrity and willingness to support one another when it comes to difficult times. The Balkans may be confused and peripheral, but they are also full of dignity and tangible humanity: a site for endless journeys.

* * *



If I knew who I was, I would have stopped making movies. I make movies to know myself. And to know the world. And also to find a balance, to understand. And that keeps me standing; just having this curiosity and a desire to travel that never ends. A desire to know other places, other faces, other situations, and to always feel myself, on an endless journey.¹ (Theo Angelopoulos, 2012)

¹ From the film *Letter to Theo* (Elodie Lelu, 2019).