

Dina Iordanova, 'Whose is this History?',
Introduction to Iordanova, Dina (ed.)
Special Balkan supplement to *Cineaste* (New York), Summer 2007.
Preface to special supplement on Balkan cinema.
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Whose is This Memory? :

Hushed Narratives and Discerning Remembrance in Balkan Cinema

Dina Iordanova

The more I look at Southeastern Europe's cinema, the more it seems that all important films from the region ultimately deal with historical memory. 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 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.” 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 civilization.”

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 and filmmakers have begun to reject traditional historiographic traditions that eliminate or twist the complex nature of the Ottoman period. Quite often a challenge to nationalist narratives requires questioning traditional national borders. Maria Todorova's influential work restored the concept of the 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, thereby embracing aspects of Ottoman culture. Other historians focused on the history of a city or region rather than a nation state. Multicultural Thessaloniki has been the subject of several such projects.

The work of Elias Petropoulos, an anthropologist and urban ethnographer who served terms in Greece due in his writing is celebrated in *An Underground World* (2004), a documentary by Kalliopi Legaki. 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 rembetiko music, unconventional sexual mores, the intricacies of gay slang, Greek Jews, and the Ottoman influence on Greek culture. Petropoulos, who emigrated in the 1970s, 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 “balkanized.” His usage implied that balkanization 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. Ethnically mixed populations were divided and grew suspicious of one another. One consequence of the imposed Balkanization was the urge to differentiate oneself from one’s immediate neighbors. Chauvinists nourished and cultivated innumerable territorial claims based on ethnic purity, claims that became the basis for irredentist warfare once the Ottomans were overthrown.

Contemporary filmmakers have begun to probe aspects of their culture that traditionalists have been trying to eradicate so vigorously. Numerous documentaries and features seek and rediscover traces of hushed multicultural histories and past migrations. One recent film, *Hamam Memories* (dir. Peggy Vassiliou, 2000), looked at shared lifestyle features by discovering the use of the Turkish-style bathhouses (*hamam*) across the region. In *Between Venizelos and Atatürk Streets* (2004), Turkish director Hande Gumuskemer 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’s Yesim Ustaoglu *Waiting for the Clouds* (*Bulutlari 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. Films that address these issues are considered highly awkward and often trigger negative reactions.

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 who are *de facto* foreign subjects.

Important and politically sensitive cinematic texts made across the Balkan region often remain largely unseen within their own countries and rarely reach international audiences. An example of such work is *After the End of the World* (Sled kraya na sveta, dir. Ivan Nichev, 1998) which nostalgically tackled the gentle and complex inter-ethnic balance of multicultural Bulgaria from the early twentieth century. Set in one of the oldest neighborhoods of the picturesque city of Plovdiv the film shows Armenians, Turks, Jews, Gypsies, Bulgarians and Greeks who have lived alongside one another for generations. 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 Akin'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*. 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 Akin'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*). Nor is it by chance that Nuri Bilge Ceylan's atmospheric *Uzak* (Distant, 2002, reviewed in this issue) uses Istanbul's cityscape as its most important asset.

Istanbul, again treated in an atmospheric and melancholic manner, also is at the centre of the Greek *A Touch of Spice* (Politiki kouzina, 2003; see review in this issue). Tassos Boulmetis, the Greek director, was born in Istanbul. Although his family was expelled from the city, he makes only slight reference to traditional Greek and Turkish conflicts. This restraint of antagonistic memories in favour of rediscovering possible relationships and togetherness, the willingness to stress commonalities and put 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?* (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 becomes a motif of pan-Balkan mutuality with all its Ottoman, Western, and other connotations affably affixed.

The Communist Legacy

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 Marshal* (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 traumatized that they do not want to talk about their broken lives. Siniša Dragin's documentary reconstruction *Pharaoh* (Faraonul, 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* (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, 2001), on the contrary, features a protagonist who not only feels the urge to remember but also is excessively talkative about the darkest past. In this remarkable film, summarising Pintilie's bitter observations on memory and continuity in Communism's aftermath in Romania, 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 Communist 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 neighbor mostly as a pretext for

setting free their own need to brutalize 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 Kumbaro's *Death of a Horse* (Vdekja e kalit, 1995), for example, persuasively looks at the repressive years of Albania's Hoxha 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 favor 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 moral 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 *Colonel Bunker* (1996) focuses on the man charged with "the bunkerisation" of Albania (see review in this issue). The colonel eventually becomes victim of the system he serves, but his inner contradictions remain difficult to grasp because the very authority that generates the paranoia does not figure in

the film. 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 a future that is not bright. The most interesting of these films are about migration, 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.. The theme has been a constant in Balkan cinema; in Greece it can be traced back to Alexis Damianos' triptych *To the Ship* (*Mexhri to plio*, 1966) and Theo Angelopoulos' *Reconstruction* (*Anaparastasis*, 1971), and it is revived once again in recent films of leading directors that show a community that is divided. Togetherness is no longer possible. Loved ones have already left (in *The Slow Death of Mister Lazarescu*, the daughter has left for in Canada) or people eager to leave, give away their personal possessions as in Lucian Pintilie's *Niki an Flo* (2003).

Those who take the path of forced or voluntary exile may have difficulties reconnecting at a later point, as the life in the place they have left behind continues in a different direction. This line of exile and not reconnecting is the leading factor in Edgar

Reiz's *Heimat*. Paul, the protagonist, simply did not return home one day. Only years later is it learned that he went to America. He now faces the huge moral problem of someone who tries to reappear and reconnect, an endeavor for which it is simply too late as half of his life is over.. The same theme is found in Angelopoulos' *The Voyage to Cythera* (*Taxidi sta Kithira*, 1983) 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 realize 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.

Where Are the Villains?

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. 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 neighboring territory 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. He thought 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). 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 zimske noći*, 2004) address the core of recent traumatic events (see review in this issue). The biggest box office hits, however, are apolitical films filled with folklore tradition or punk rock humor. 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 perceived 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.

These features and documentaries show innocuous blameless people. They suggest Serbians all led quiet and peaceful lives in their respective villages or towns and then the war came to destroy their lives and turn them into refugees. 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.

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 review in this issue). 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) (see review in this issue).

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 neighbor 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 hold “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 has produced a number of films on highly controversial subjects (see essay on Factum in this issue). Although only partially released in Croatia, they raise 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?

Whereas the films from the 1990s depicted the blue helmets as an 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* 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 *NATO go home* posters 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 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 locals as a foreign occupation.

A prevailing sense of bitterness with the “international community” prevails all over Southeastern Europe. This is less a new feeling than a return of 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 *Magic Eye* (Syri magjik, 2005; see review in this issue) makes a pertinent comment on the impossibility of public record. In the aftermath of the 1997 collapsed financial pyramids in Albania, insolvent crowds seized arms and chaos 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 is a practice favored by Western media agencies, the main clients for this type of material. Public space is shown as available only for the manipulated media coverage. The truth remains confined between the four walls of private gatherings and only a handful of people seem to 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 last 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 December 22nd 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 militiamen, one of whom has spent the night trying to help the uprising but finds himself captured and accused of being a terrorist. Reminiscent of Goran Marković’s remarkable *Cordon* (see review in this issue), the film gives the story from the point of view of those who are supposed to defend the agonizing 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 scrutinized and are 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 remains 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 at 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 Nott?* 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 neighbor is whether or not the townsfolk took up the revolution seventeen years ago. The evidence is thin and opinions differ; the conversation veers away. The pettiness and drabness of 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.

In the commentary to the DVD release of his films by French *MK2*, Romanian director Lucian Pintilie makes what he himself describes as a "monstrous" statement: the social and political anxiety of post-Communism that surrounds him is so grave, he says, that he would not like to make any grievances over the problematic state of cinema. Certain things are more important than making films, the director explains, and they need to be looked after first. There are reasons to share this pessimism. But there are also reasons to argue against the gloom. The production context may be difficult, but films coming from the region have triumphed against all odds, and the knotty story of the Balkans is continuously being told in cinema.