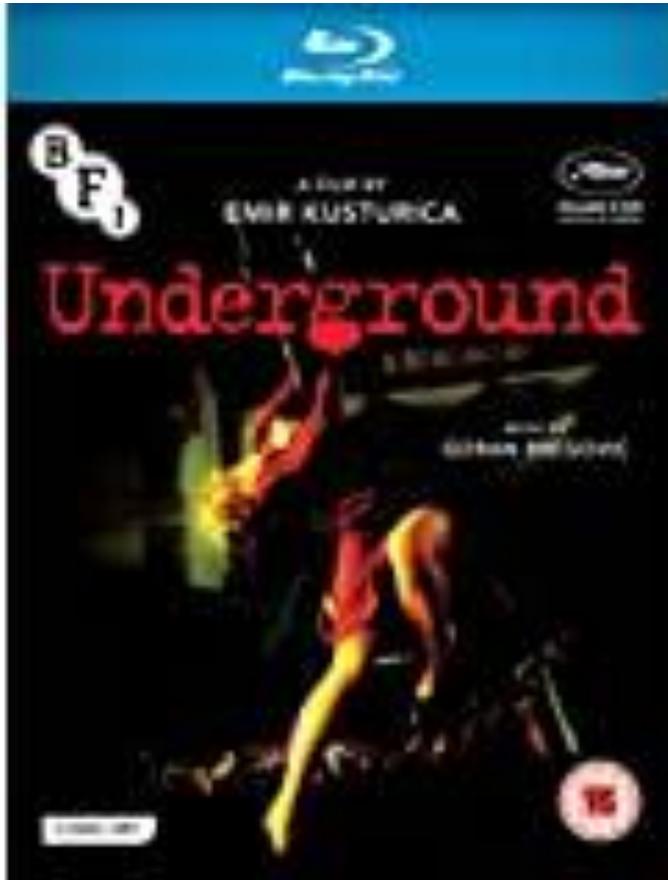


'Kusturica's *Underground*: Obliviousness and Pleasant Madness,'
Essay to booklet for the BFI DVD/blu-ray release, BFI, London,
March 2016.



KUSTURICA'S *UNDERGROUND*: OBLIVIOUSNESS AND PLEASANT MADNESS

Dina Iordanova

Even if billed as an international co-production between France, Germany, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Hungary, the spectacular epic *Underground* is, in fact, a Yugoslav film, perhaps the last one. Not only because it tackles the complexity of Yugoslavia's history, but because it brings together top Yugoslav talent: shot by Slovenian cinematographer Vilko Filač (1950-2008), with a musical score by Bosnian Goran Bregović, and scripted by Serbian playwright Dušan Kovačević. The film's director, Emir Kusturica, is hard to classify. Hailing originally

from Bosnia, he has crossed borders and changed allegiances too many times. Today, the category that can describe him most adequately would be Yugonostalgic.

To understand Kusturica, as I have argued elsewhere (Jordanova 2002), it helps to separate his imagination from his ideology, and explore them discretely, thus acknowledging his lyrical and boisterous artistry whilst exposing his virile and intransigent politics, a split that is clearly revealed in *Underground*.

STYLISTIC EXUBERANCE

This BFI's release of *Underground* offers a superbly crisp version of the film, allowing for the appreciation of what is a truly baroque cinematic monument, both narratively and stylistically. The main plotline is being adhered to, generally speaking, yet it is simultaneously embellished with so many side-aspects and layers, perpetually pulling the attention in different directions, that one feels as if one has encountered the multi-headed serpent of Hydra. The protagonists are entangled in unhealthy ways, revealing an awkward looseness of boundaries between relatives and friends. Even if there are clearly defined couples – like Marko and Natalija, Crni and his wife, Crni's son and his bride – they all live as one extended family, which is excessively enmeshed. Even if the story evolves around a traditional love triangle, where both male protagonists act out of their attraction to the same female and where their romantic rivalry is the trigger for most of what happens, the plot subverts all traditional romantic concepts. Thus, the main ethical categories that define the dynamics of *Underground* are not traditional relationship concepts such as affection or rivalry but rather less conventional ones, like betrayal, manipulation, abuse, and exploitation. Respectively, the main emotional states are those of insecurity and discomfort, anxiety and diffidence, distress and mistrust, of loathing and aversion. Aesthetically – both in narrative and in imagery -- *Underground* evolves around the opposition of above and below, and many

of the most important moves taken by the protagonists are in the vertical plane. The dichotomy of above ground (trigger, control) and underground (shadow, manipulated) is a Platonian one. There is eternal uncertainty who is who. Everything can be quashed. Time and space, standards and values, can all be swayed.

In turn, the aesthetic categories that adequately describe *Underground* are those of the bizarre, the grotesque, the incongruous, and the excessive. This effect is achieved with the use of dark colours, multiple shadow surfaces, murky interiors, labyrinthine tunnels, and a mise-en-scene that lapses around moving up and down, and into profundity— all representational devices that Kusturica has developed over the years. This produces an unsettling effect, which is enhanced by the addition of disquieting music that often sounds out of sync for the Western ear. The aesthetics is in line with monumental war films like *The Deer Hunter* (1987) and *La Grande Illusion* (1937). As in his other works, here Kusturica also re-stages various film scenes that have influenced his aesthetics – the most directly reproduced one is at the well, replicating a famous trope from Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* (1962), but there are also plenty of other references, to imagery from Jean Vigo through to Andrzej Wajda.

For a big part of the film, the atmosphere is marked by Kusturica's characteristic pleasant madness – an approach that first established the director and that is still associated with his name. It is achieved by populating the space with characters driven by primal instincts that they vigorously let reign their lives. The protagonists are never adverse to celebrating life under the oomph of a gypsy brass band. The perpetual exuberance is sustained also by a smattering of zoo animals, horny Nazis, rowdy boat party guests, and tousled extras involved in a lampoon movie shoot.

As in other Kusturica films, the wedding (with a bride as its centrepiece), is a recurring trope. Similar to other films, here one also finds a levitating bride as well as a bride that is shown swimming dreamily under water. There are at least three brides in the extended, made for TV, version – Marko is disguised as a bride for a daring anti-fascist stunt, and then of course there are at least two more weddings – one underground, as well as the imaginary one at the very end of the film. This last wedding is the only context in which the estranged friends can come together around the table, engaging in an intoxicated celebration, for forgiveness to ensue.

A SCORNFUL BALKAN VIEW

This remarkable final scene of *Underground* – of a wild wedding celebration that floats into the unknown -- is probably the most memorable image that Kusturica has ever created. A chunk of land that apparently stands in for Yugoslavia breaks apart and floats away into the unknown, whilst the protagonists who have betrayed one another for the duration of the film congregate, obliviously embrace, and proceed toward forgiveness.

But for the rest of the film, it is all structured around the metaphor of above ground and below ground, and around exploitation and betrayal. Having ‘hidden’ his *kum* (a Serbian name for best man, also connoting best friend) and his family from danger, Marko builds a formidable public career above ground, whilst simultaneously developing a complex clandestine international arms trade network. It is a deeply cynical set-up of elaborate appearances, where Crni, licked underground, is led to believe he is making arms to fight the Nazis whilst he is exploited in a context of surveillance, misinformation and controlled flow of time. It is all theatrics, both above ground and below, for the sake of deeply individualistic and egotistic gratification hidden behind lofty slogans.

Was such unfair and exploitative association in the core of Yugoslavia's unity? Is the perpetual hypocrisy that Kusturica wants to expose as the fatal premise of the country's dismal end? Framed by opening and closing remarks that clearly indicate that the film is meant to be a fable about Yugoslavia's unenviable fate, *Underground's* stated ambition is to disclose that the supposedly brotherly relations within the federation were, in fact, a series of transactions where the parties pragmatically took advantage of one another. Was it a union built on self-serving pragmatism and lack of consideration? Were the foundations of the federation flawed?

It is in this vein that the selective usage of documentary footage in *Underground* must be interpreted. One of the most controversial decisions of the director is to use documentary footage that shows two very different political reactions to the same phenomenon, both found in the same federative country: the welcome that Nazi troops receive in Maribor (Slovenia) and Zagreb (Croatia) at the beginning of World War II is contrasted to the Nazi bombing of Belgrade (Serbia) in April 1941 and the subsequent resistance.

The second documentary diversion in *Underground* is the 1980 footage from the funeral of Josip Broz Tito, the man who held Yugoslavia together. The train carrying Tito's body travelled across Yugoslavia, in the same direction from West to Southeast as the Nazis had done four decades earlier, and was met by universal popular grief, as the footage shows. Tito's funeral in Belgrade was a unique gathering of global dignitaries who at that time – at the height of the Cold War and before Gorbachev's ascent – would not normally come together. One sees the likes of Helmut Kohl, Margaret Thatcher, Leonid Brezhnev, King Hussein of Jordan, Anwar Sadat, Yasser Arafat, side by side with political figures who are considered particularly controversial today, such as Kurt Waldheim or Nicolae Ceausescu, all giving their final tributes to Tito; the last time when Yugoslavia seemed to be on equal

footing with the rest of the world. Bringing this footage into the texture of the film reinforces the view that the fault lines in world politics were always fairly farcical.

By focusing on Marko's illicit arms trade, *Underground* draws a small political universe where the main players appear to be Germans and Russians. The protagonists are leftist and officially confess sympathies to the *Russkies*; they regard the Germans as Nazi to the core – as seen in the scene where a former Nazi officer reappears in a new disguise as German apparatchik some years later. An elaborate network of underground tunnels that run between these two poles enables the lively clandestine exchanges and subverts all appearances. It is a limiting view of world politics. However, Kustirca is not trying to present a comprehensive picture; rather, he aims to assess the main factors that affected the fate of Yugoslavia – brotherly betrayal and intrigues influenced by the forces that have a say in the region.

Toward the end of the film we see Ivan, Marko's docile brother, now hospitalised in Berlin and examined in front of students by a German doctor who comments on his features as *Homo Balcanicus*. This scene is much more extended in the TV series and mangled up (but present nonetheless) in the film. The Balkan subject is presented and treated as an ape, an imitation of a human being, displaying a host of sub-standard characteristics. Thus Kusturica touches on the subject of Balkan exoticization, inferiority complex, all themes widely discussed in regard to his work. According to Slavok Žižek (1997), Kusturica does not manage to go away from the 'journalistic cliché' according to which 'the Balkan people are caught in the phantasmatic whirlpool of historical myths.' But it is important to note that while indeed Kusturica undoubtedly displays the tendency exoticize his subjects (as seen most clearly in his subsequent film, *Black Cat, White Cat*, 1998) he simultaneously attempts to charge the West with this scornful exoticizing stance.

ANOTHER TWENTY YEARS LATER....

The main events in *Underground* evolve around 20 years cycles. The film opens in 1941 (Nazi bombing of Belgrade), and then jumps to 1961 (established communist rule), and later on to 1980 (Marshall Tito's death) – then, as an exception, it accelerates only a decade, to the early 1990s, the wars of Yugoslav succession.

Conspicuously, this BFI release takes place 20 years after the film's premiere, which marks another cycle of sorts and makes for a good opportunity to assess the message of the film in a context that is new and different from the context of the time when it was made. The elapsed time also makes it possible to assess Kusturica's politics in less ambivalent terms.

Underground came out in 1995. Released in Serbia earlier in the year, it won the Cannes film festival in May, an endorsement for the director who had previously received various Cannes accolades. But then it broke into a significant controversy, where Kusturica stood accused with engaging in Serbian propaganda. Notably, the year 1995 will also be remembered as the year of the Srebrenica massacre, which took place in July.

Underground was, in a way, the turning point in the director's career, which has largely been in free fall since. For the past two decades Kusturica distanced himself completely from the complex Sarajevo situation and from his Bosnian origins and clearly ended up on the side of Belgrade. He turned to other exploits – or, one can say, expanded his creativity – such as touring with a gypsy jazz band and acting in films. Resenting his Bosnian compatriots (and being intensely resented by them), Kusturica ended up taking the maverick position of sympathising with the ostracized Serbian side. He purchased property in Serbia and built a cultural centre around a small village, Kustendorf, where he runs various events, including an idiosyncratic film festival that shows films that meet with his approval. At one point he even changed his name to the Serbian sounding Nemanja. He often expresses his aversion to

present-day Bosnia, often more vigorously than necessary, embracing political incorrectness with a zeal that sends a clear message he has given up hope to make himself understood on the international scene.

Kusturica made, however, one more important attempt at communicating his view of the world. This was in his political documentary *Maradona* (2008) – a film about the Argentinian footballer that has not been distributed in the UK or the US but can be found on the Internet. In it, he reveals his sympathies to the plight of small nations that are short-changed by the big powers. *Maradona* also reveals the director's challenger-defender character, as he would be classified in analysis.

Bosnia, Kusturica's native country, underwent significant development since, and it is today an Islamic stronghold on the European continent, heavily reliant on international aid and careful diplomacy. Countries like Serbia Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo are marked by a host of local difficulties. From among the former Yugoslav constituents, only Slovenia and Croatia have been deemed worthy of joining the European Union, pretty much in line with Kusturica's ironic observations. Many regret the dissolution of Yugoslavia, as a lost island of stability that has now given yield to eight new miniature countries and has created new inequalities and a host of local problems, certain division of Europe.

The 1999 NATO bombing of Belgrade over Kosovo, even if hailed in the West as an excellently executed intervention operation, is regarded with resentment in many corners of the Balkans and is one of the major confirmations of their dysfunctional relationship with the West. Kusturica's position is representative of this view: he seems to have given up on the chance that the West would be capable to understand the Balkan concerns, as well as the concerns of the periphery at large, and seems to have resigned to the chances of a meaningful communication.

Is *Underground* a Serbian propaganda, as per the accusation that gained wide currency in the mid-1990s? Even if forgotten today, the allegations undermined the film's mainstream distribution success.

In my view, at the time of the film's conception Kusturica probably did not want to explicitly take a side in the conflict. Perhaps he was genuinely hoping to deliver a philosophical commentary that would be above the partition lines. But it takes several years to make a film, and *Underground* had been in the making for at least two years prior to its premiere. During this process of the film's making things did not stand still and, by 1995, the situation had deteriorated to a point of no return, where it was already too late for any intended lofty objectivity.

Twenty years later it is more than obvious that Kusturica came out of sync with the course of events already at that time; he has not been able to live above and beyond politics since. In the annals of cinema, he is most likely to be remembered as the image-maker of obliviousness and pleasant madness.

References:

Iordanova, Dina. *Emir Kusturica*, London: BFI, 2002.

Žižek, Slavoj. "Underground, or Ethnic Cleansing as a Continuation of Poetry by Other Means." *InterCommunication*, 18, 1997.

Available: www.ntticc.or.jp/pub/ic_mag/ic018/intercity/zizek_E.html