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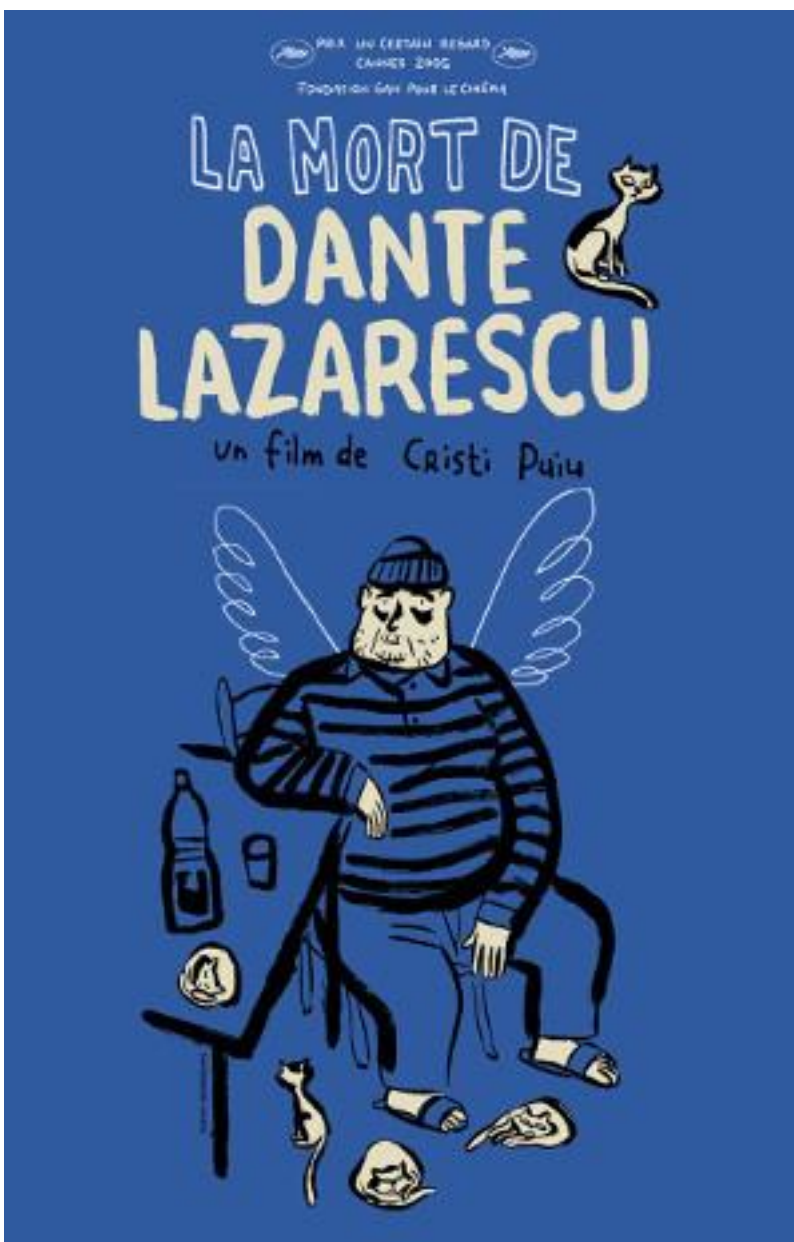
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Chronicling and Countering: 20 years “Balkan Survey” (*)

by Dina Iordanova

Can a story be told before it has happened?



When the first “Balkan Survey” sidebar was added to the structure of the Thessaloniki International Film Festival, in November 1994, it was at a difficult time. The war in nearby Bosnia was at its peak, with the siege of Sarajevo having lasted already two and a half years, with no end in sight.

Some horrible things were happening at that distant moment in the former Yugoslav lands. It must have been around that time that Esmā, a Muslim woman from Sarajevo, was violated in a camp, alongside many other women, and ended up pregnant with an unwanted child, one that she would chose to bear and then learn to love. Twelve years later, in 2006, this child – Sara, a daughter – would confront Esmā in the Sarajevo suburb of *Grbavica*, demanding to know more of her origins. And Esmā would need to face reality; the lie she maintained for years in order to ensure Sara’s wellbeing had to be dropped in favour of revealing the dreadful truth of her daughter’s origin.

Rapes were still being committed in Bosnia at the time of the first “Balkan Survey”. The men who perished at Srebrenica in 1995 were still alive.

At that distant moment in time, the plutocrats featured in Alexandru Solomon's *Capitalism: Our Improved Recipe*, were still labouring toward making their first million. Maria's working class family was still not destitute. Jderescu, the owner of the private TV cable channel from *12:08 East of Bucharest*, was probably still working as an engineer at a state-owned plant in Romania. But he was already plotting his exit from state employment and planning to enter the privatisation wave. Had the TV talk show on remembering the December 1989 events taken place back then, the participants' memories would not be as hazy. In 1994 it would still have been possible to reconstruct as to who stood where in relation to political allegiances. And, at that time, it still mattered. Consumerism and the care for private interest had not taken over yet. `

And, at that distant moment in time, the daughter of one Dante Lazarescu from Bucharest had not yet emigrated to Canada. She was probably only opening up to the idea that life elsewhere would be a better prospect for her. It was only years later that her father would meet his lonely end, in *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*, after enduring the descent into the Hades, presented in that film through his ambulance's desperate cruising of Bucharest hospitals.



Grbavica / Esmā's Secret (Jasmila Zbanić, 2006)

In the years that followed, many more have emigrated. Many others are planning to emigrate. Large Balkan cities – Bucharest, Sofia, Belgrade – are aging. The young are leaving in droves. Films like *Medal of Honor* and *Stanka* tackled the lonely lives of pensioners. Films like *First of All*, *Felicia* and *Huddersfield* focused on the difficulties of dialogue between those who left (and now return to visit) and those who stayed behind.

So, can a story be told before it has happened? In principle – yes. This is what artistic license is all about. But most of the stories coming out of the Balkans were directly rooted in reality. Most of the films that the Balkan Survey featured over the years told stories that were unfolding next door and almost in parallel, both in space and in time – the breakup of Yugoslavia, dramatic economic transformations, massive outmigration, depopulation of the countryside, ruined economies, all in the context of massive social transformations, both west and east – all leading to and interconnected with the catastrophic crisis in Greece.

Many of these films, and many of these stories, would not be seen nor known outside their countries of origin if it was not for the Thessaloniki showcase. The “Balkan Survey”, thus, became a sort of parallel archive that informed the region's self-consciousness.



Stanka Goes Home (Maya Vitkova, 2010)

A parallel archive: the region, the issues

‘The preoccupation of Balkan filmmakers with the past is a recurring practice in the cinema of the region, proof of the imperative need for communication and a renegotiation of major social and political issues or traumas. This year, almost all the films comprising the main programme turn their gaze, in one way or another, to the past.’ (Introduction to “Balkan Survey”, 49th Thessaloniki IFF, 2008)

Thessaloniki is one of the Balkan cities that know past multicultural conviviality better than many others. It also knows sectarian violence, as seen in Vassilis Vassilikos novel and then Kosta-Gavras’ film *Z*, better than many others. It knows all traumas, older and recent ones; it has lived with many of them. Thessaloniki’s story is a parallel archive of the region. Thessaloniki can relate.

At the onset, back in 1994, audiences at the festival may have come to the “Balkan Survey” without much knowledge of the stories that films from adjacent countries would tell. Isolation had settled in. Local people would feel mystified about the madness that seemed to have taken over Yugoslavia. Like members of other nations across the region, Greeks had grown oblivious of the flaws of their next-door neighbours; the past background to current regional conflicts had been obliterated from public consciousness. Linguistic incompatibilities and age-old territorial disputes had come in the way of whatever feeling of togetherness had existed in the past. Respectively, as a 20th century phenomenon, the cinema of each Balkan country, even if rooted in the multiethnic vision of the Manaki brothers, had developed independently of the others, without much collaboration beyond nation-state borders. Nevertheless, despite each country’s tendency to present its cultural traditions and problems as unique and distinctive, once films started appearing in the context of the broader canvass provided by the “Survey”, the shared experiences and similarities promptly reemerged. Stories that had been told with a singular national audience in mind but that would normally not have a wider international exposure, found resonance far beyond their particular national contexts.

This process of ‘countering’ – essentially one of countering the image of discord, of countering the clichés of conflict by offering a diverse and rich portrayal of the complex ethnic and cultural canvass of the Balkan space – was consciously guided by TIFF. The introductory notes to the 48th festival’s survey in 2007 explicitly stated that ‘the cinema of the Balkan countries and the historical reality of the peninsula are inseparable.’ There was talk of shared historical memories and present-day challenges. And even where the plots of some films would have appeared confined to national specifics, there was an acknowledgment that they are also ‘permeated by the wounds of the past or the fluidity and insecurity of modern-day social changes’ that could be traced to the same mutually-binding historical process.



The Goat Horn (Metodi Andonov, 1972)

Over the years, the “Survey” deepened and expanded this approach of ‘parallel survey’ through its sustained programme of retrospectives and special screenings, featuring the most important films made in the region in the past, spanning Ottoman-era films like Bulgarian *The Goat Horn* to the Romanian WWI saga *The Forest of the Hanged*, and including films by classics like Yılmaz Güney or a celebration of the Zagreb school of animation. Another important political move was the embracing of Turkey’s burgeoning film culture: presenting the work of such leading cineastes as Zeki Demirkubuz, Niri Bilge Ceylan, Semih Kaplanoğlu and Kutluğ Ataman, was a particularly important move in a context where their home country is shunned for membership in the European community. Similar vital support was provided to filmmakers like Goran Paskaljević, Goran Marković, and others from Serbia, or to Albanian directors like Kutjim Çashku or Artan Minaroli.

Film festivals can embrace an agenda and, through programme choices and opportunities for filmmakers, they can develop an audience and build an imagined community. Over the decades, we have seen such community building take place all over again. This has been the case, for example, with various Mediterranean-themed film festivals – some located in places like Montpellier (France), Luxor (Egypt), Izmir (Turkey), Split (Croatia), Haifa (Israel), and elsewhere – which have systematically worked toward building cinematic links between a number of countries around the Mediterranean, turning it into a convivial space of lively cultural exchanges. In a similar way, alongside Thessaloniki, the festival in Sarajevo, Bosnia (in existence since 1995), has functioned as the other ‘parallel archive’ for the collective cinematic memory of the Balkans. A city that carries different memories, Sarajevo contributes in its own unique way toward building the same ‘imagined community’ of Balkan togetherness that the “Survey” in Thessaloniki spearheaded.

Building community, building capacity

With the “Balkan Survey” as a focal point, TIFFF gradually became a site for community-and-capacity building for what is now regarded as the new Balkan cinema. It is here, in the context of pitching sessions and financial negotiations, of networking evenings and encounters over Greek (elsewhere known as Turkish :) coffee, that many of the regional projects and co-productions that eventually came to fruition were first conceived. The festival turned into a meeting point for creative people who would otherwise liaise only in the limited individual-to-individual manner, if at all.

It is a situation that invites an analogy with the important role that the Hong Kong International Film Festival played in the 1980s for the consolidation of Chinese cinemas. By bringing together and providing a forum for filmmakers from the People’s Republic of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and farther afield of the Nanyang (the Chinese diaspora), the HKIFF created the ground for what is known today as ‘transnational Chinese cinema’, which comprises of films made by directors based in divergent of national contexts. It was here that Taiwanese Edward Yang could consult Hong Kong veteran King Hu and where mainland Chinese Chen Kaige could mark an aesthetic breakthrough with his *Yellow Earth* and open up pathways for Chinese language cinemas to the world beyond Asia. If it were not for the festival space, these directors would not have the opportunity to meet and see each other’s work, would not have had the opportunity to enter a dialogic relationship and influence each other in narratives and styles. The role of the festival was to act as the invisible intermediary, which, to a large extent, shaped the later dynamics of Chinese language cinemas.



Hadersfeld (Ivan Zivkovic, 2007)

With a similar mission, TIFFF and its “Balkan Survey”, have played the key role in helping the community take off the ground, and in developing its capacity. These Balkan exchanges

were particularly necessary. In the past two decades, most of the countries in the region have only been able to set aside limited funding for cinema. Working in a co-production mode was a matter of pragmatic survival – one needed to enter partnerships in order to raise funds sufficient to pull off a project. The Balkan exchanges were necessary in a context where the production infrastructure had vanished into thin air, be it through tunnelling and privatisation, be it with the turning of territories in the region into playground for runaway productions, or by the breakdown of previous networks. Traditional distribution channels were also in flux due to the straightforward break up of previously unified territories like Yugoslavia, or because of the closure of older theatres and gradual opening of new multiplexes that were dedicated mainly to the blanket bookings of product through Hollywood subsidiaries. In such context, TIFF and the “Balkan Survey” not only secured exposure for films made in the region (doomed to limited visibility by default) but also stimulated the making of new films. The festival brokered partnerships, made friendships, created acquaintances, and enhanced creativity.

The “Balkan Survey” also acts as a broker for interested parties that are based farther afield. It presents an overview of the best from the annual crop, as well as some projects in progress, to a foreign audience not only of critics but also of financiers, producers and distributors. Over the years, the festival’s industry section has also been instrumental in facilitating alliances that have allowed teams to benefit from financing through the programmes of MEDIA and Eurimages, especially benefiting countries on the fringe whose membership access may have been restricted. At one point Turkey and Greece appeared to be the most frequently co-producing countries in the whole of Europe, collaboration resulting in fellgood blockbusters of Greek-Turkish mutuality such as *A Touch of Spice* (2003), among many other notable films.

‘Beyond a significant drop in the anonymity of the cinema coming out of our neighbouring countries,’ – the introduction to the 2004 edition of the Balkan Survey stated – ‘cinema ceased to be exclusively identified, in the viewers’ conscience, with the great filmmaking figures such as Angelopoulos, Makavejev, Güney, Pintilie, and Kusturica.’ And indeed, Thessaloniki was the launch pad for the work of many of new directors whose names first started appearing at the “Survey’s” roster – Vinko Brešan, Cristian Nemescu, Erden Kiral, Derviş Zaim, Sofia Zornitsa, and others.



First of All, Felicia (Melissa de Raaf / Razvan Radulescu, 2009)

Twelve years away from the limelight

Dimitris Kerkinos, the man backstage, has been programming the “Balkan Survey” from 2002, day in day out, for 12 years now. Needless to say, he has developed a unique expertise in Balkan cinema. Starting with background in anthropology and having earned his education internationally in Latin America, Dimitris is all modesty and perseverance, two qualities I find most amazing. His commitment to the “Balkan Survey” project is boundless, and his dedication – unmatched. Having stayed in regular correspondence with him for at least a decade now, through better and more difficult times, I personally hold him in highest esteem on every matter related to the region’s film history and current output.

One of the most valuable projects driven by Dimitris Kerkinos has been the publication series of the “Survey”. So far it features seven bilingual volumes (Greek/English), mainly dedicated to important directors from the region – such as Romanian Lucian Pintilie (37th festival in 1996, edited by Michel Demopoulos), Turkish Kutluğ Ataman (46th festival in 2005), Turkish Nuri Bilge Ceylan (47th festival in 2006), Romanian Nae Caranfil (48th festival in 2007), Serbian Goran Paskaljević (50th festival in 2009), and Romanian Cristian Mungiu (51st festival in 2012) – but also a book dedicated to *Croatian Animation: From the Zagreb School of Animation to the Present* (51st festival in 2010). Alongside the books on major Greek directors like Angelopoulos or the volume on *Cinemythology: Greek Myth in World Cinema* (2003/4) published by TIFF’s Greek national section, these volumes make a priceless addition to the public service that the festival performs in the context of the Balkans at large. And, a few years back, Dimitris Kerkinos authored an important essay on sidebar curation, discussing matters of cultural sensitivity and programming philosophy, and commenting on his approach to countering the prevailing negative image of the Balkans. It has since become

one of the most widely quoted pieces on such matters in the context of film festival scholarship.



12:08 *East of Bucharest* (Corneliu Porumboiu, 2006)

I am trying to remember when was the first time that I visited Thessaloniki for the festival, but my memory is not reliable and I do not seem to have kept good notes. It must have been around 2003, but it may have been earlier. For some reason, my reminiscence is dominated by a fuzzy memory of a long wait on the wintry border crossing between Bulgaria and Greece, near the Pirin mountain, a stop on the way for my first visit to festival in Thessaloniki. I asked the driver at what time we will arrive, to which he responded: ‘When we get in Solun, we will look at our watches, will see what time is it, and will know when we have arrived...’

This year I am headed for the festival again, even though I will be moving through airports and hope to get there according to what published schedules tell me the arrival time will be. I cannot wait for the warm embrace of the autumn afternoon sun on Thessaloniki’s embankment, with the White Tower at the end, and with the feeling that one is, along with Harvey Keitel and the Manaki brothers, walking through the set of Angelopoulos’ *Ulysses Gaze*, the true Balkan Odyssey.

(*) This article has been excerpted from the 54th TIFF’s publication on *Maties sta Valkania / Balkan Survey* (1994-2013) edited by Dimitris Kerkinos.

References

Kerkinos, Dimitris. ‘Programming Balkan Films at the Thessaloniki International Film Festival,’ In Jordanova, Dina and Ragan Rhyne (eds) *Film Festival Yearbook 1: The Festival Circuit*. St. Andrews: College Gate Press, 2009. Pp. 168-179.

A (BIASED) TOP 20 SELECTION FROM THE 20 YEARS OF “BALKAN SURVEY”

1995, 36th

Πριν από τη βροχή/Before the Rain , Μίλτσο Μαντσέφσκι/Micho Manchevski, ΠΓΔΜ/FYROM, 1994.

1997, 38th

Η αθωότητα/Innocence/Masumiyet, Ζεκί Ντεμρκουμπούζ/Zeki Demirkubuz, Τουρκία/Turkey, 1997.

2003, 44th

Φιτίλι/Fuse/Gori vatra , Πιερ Ζάλιτσα/Pjer Zalica, Βοσνία-Ερζεγοβίνη, Αυστρία, Γαλλία, /Bosnia & Herzegovina, Austria, France, 2003.

Ο Νίκι κι ο Φλο /Niki & Flo, Λουτσιάν Πιντιλίε/Lucian Pintilie, Ρουμανία/ Romania, 2003.

Μακριά/ Distant / Uzak , Νουρί Μπιλγκε Τζεϊλάν/Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Τουρκία/Turkey, 2003.

Ανταλλακτικά/ Spare Parts / Rezervni deli , Νταμιάν Κοζόλε/Damian Kozole, Σλοβενία/Slovenia, 2002.

2004, 45th

Η Μίλα από τον Άρη/ Mila From Mars / Mila ot Mars , Σοφία Ζόρνιτσα/ Sophia Zornitsa, Βουλγαρία/Bulgaria, 2004.

Περιμένοντας τα σύννεφα/ Waiting for the Clouds / Bulutlari beklerken , Γιεσίμ Ουστάογλου/Yeşim Ustaoglu, Τουρκία, Γερμανία, Γαλλία, Ελλάδα/Turkey, Germany, France, Greece, 2004.

2005, 46th

Ο ήχος της πόλης /Crossing the Bridge. The Sound of Istanbul , Φατίχ Ακίν/Fatih Akin, Γερμανία, Τουρκία/Germany, Turkey, 2004

Η οδύσσεια του κυρίου Λαζαρέσκου/ The Death of Mr . Lazarescu / Moartea domnului Lazarescu , Κρίστι Πούιου/Cristi Puiu, Ρουμανία/ Romania, 2005.

2006, 47th

Σεράγεβο, σ' αγαπώ/Esma's Secret/ Grbavica , Γιασμίλα Ζμπάνιτς/Jasmila Zbanić, Βοσνία-Ερζεγοβίνη, Αυστρία, Γερμανία, Κροατία/Bosnia & Herzegovina, Austria, Germany, Croatia, 2006.

Συνοριακό φυλάκιο/ Border Post / Karaula , Ράτκο Γκέρλιτς/Rajko Grlić Κροατία, Βοσνία-Ερζεγοβίνη, Γαλλία, Μ. Βρετανία, Ουγγαρία, ΠΓΔΜ, Σερβία, Σλοβενία/Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, France, UK, FYROM, Hungary, Serbia, Slovenia, 2006.

Ήταν ή δεν ήταν; 12:08 East of Bucharest / A fost sau n - a fost ?, Κορνέλιου Πορουμπόιου/Corneliu Porumboiu, Ρουμανία/Romania, 2006.

2007, 48th

Πεπρωμένο/ Destiny / Kader , Ζέκι Ντεμρκουμπούζ/Zeki Demirkubuz, Τουρκία, Ελλάδα/Turkey, Greece, 2006.

2008, 49th

Είσαι ο Μάρλον μου κι ο Μπράντο μου/ My Marlon and Brando / Gitmek , Χουσεγίν Καράμπεϊ/Hüseyin Karabey, Τουρκία, Ολλανδία, Μεγ. Βρετανία/Turkey, The Netherlands, UK, 2008.

2009, 50th

Πρώτα απ ' όλα η Φελίτσια /First of All, Felicia/Felicia inainte de toate , Ράζβαν Ραντουλέσκου, Μελίσα ντε Ράαφ/Razvan Radulescu, Melissa de Raaf, Ρουμανία, Γαλλία, Βέλγιο, Κροατία/Romania, France, Belgium, Croatia, 2009.

Το πιο ευτυχισμένο κορίτσι στον κόσμο/ The Happiest Girl in the World , Ράντου Ζούντε/Radu Jude, Ρουμανία, Ολλανδία/Romania, The Netherlands, 2009.

2010, 51st

Φθόνος/ Envy / Kiskanmak , Ζέκι Ντεμirkουμπούζ/Zeki Demirkubuz, Τουρκία/Turkey, 2009.

2012, 53rd

Στιγμιότυπο/ Clip / Klip , Μάγια Μίλος/Maja Miloš, Σερβία/Serbia, 2012.