

BOOK REVIEW

Contemporary Balkan Cinema: Transnational Exchanges and Global Circuits

edited by

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The cinema of the Balkans has a rich history of creativity, having contributed to world cinema with a fair number of masterpieces, as well as with significant national film movements and trends. Directors such as Dušan Makavejev, Yilmaz Güney, Lucian Pintilie, Emir Kusturica, Theo Angelopoulos, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Cristian Mungiu, and Yorgos Lanthimos are auteurs of international stature, known much beyond the cinephile cycles. At the same time, the Yugoslav Black Wave, the Zagreb School of Animation, the Romanian New Wave and the Greek Weird Wave have created an artistic and cultural legacy that constitutes an indisputable point of reference for its achievements. This cinematic tradition remains vibrant today by a new generation of filmmakers who, responding to the global developments of the film industry, are making films in a framework of regional and international cooperation.

Following the existing scholarship in cultural, historical and film studies, editors Lydia Papadimitriou and Ana Grgić, present, through a collection of thirteen essays, an examination of the latest developments in Balkan cinema, putting special emphasis on transnational collaborations. Taking as a starting point 2008, the year of the global economic crisis, the assigned texts cover all national cinemas of the region in individual chapters. Balkan cinema is approached with a unified geographic scope, strengthening thus its existence as 'an entity of clearly discernible thematic and stylistic affinities' (Iordanova, 2006: 3). Most importantly, the collective volume enriches Balkan cinema's study by focusing on film industry activities and highlighting sociopolitical contexts. It is worth noting that some of the cinemas examined in the book (i.e. those from Montenegro, North Macedonia or Kosovo) are discussed for the first time in

English-language literature, while the editors enlarge Balkan cinema's geographical range with the inclusion of Cyprus. Moreover, the book expands on the disregarded creative collaborations among the countries during the Cold War and its aftermath, as indicated by Iordanova, by detailing how 'transnational exchanges have been experienced from within each different Balkan country and in recent years' (p. 4).

The choice of the politically and culturally charged term 'Balkan cinema', instead of the neutral 'South-Eastern European Cinema', by the editors of the volume, is a justified one as it aims to connect Balkan cinema with a positive meaning. The negative connotations that accompany the word 'Balkan' should be understood within the context of the cultural particularities and the historic parameters that have forged the region. The stigmatization of the Balkans, often presented as the scapegoat of Europe, is to a large extent the product of Western prejudices and politics. As Maria Todorova has shown (1997 [2005]), the Balkans are not a deviation but rather a variant in the general flow of European history. In historical, political and cultural terms, the region is indeed complicated and multifaceted but, at the same time, it is exciting and unique, and these qualities are also mirrored in its cinemas. Showcasing the creative cinematic forces of the Balkan countries and presenting their efforts to establish bridges of communication through their cultural roots, the book works against the negative international media representations and puts forward a different, more positive way of seeing the Balkans.

Equally justified is the inclusion of Cyprus. The editors, following Iordanova's seminal approach to the Balkan cinema as 'connecting a disconnected space' (2006: 1), validate their inclusive interpretation of the region by basing it on shared geography, culture and history. Although Cyprus does not belong geographically to the Balkan peninsula, it is part of South-Eastern Europe and, most importantly, of the Ottoman past, whose cultural legacy essentially defines the region. On the other hand, the inclusion of Slovenia, which was culturally part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, is based on the fact that the country was part of the former Yugoslavia.

Historically, each national cinema in the Balkans has developed independently from the other countries, without – up until recently – a real interaction between them. This is the result of their turbulent history, which created long-lasting national disputes between the states, and also, of the Cold War, which contributed to the lack of a sense of accord between neighboring countries, an absence that has also been reflected in cinema. As the editors observe, this started to change in 2008, a year that 'marks a shift towards an embrace of a more extrovert attitude in film production and distribution across the Balkans' (p. 5). The new spirit of making films that characterizes the contemporary cinematic activity in the region is based on a collaborative mentality and ethos, as well as on an orientation towards 'Europeanization', expressed by an urge to integrate the regional narratives within the European

values. The establishment of transnational collaborations and the emphasis on co-productions have thus become dominant trends in producing films, constituting the strategic response of Balkan national cinemas to the challenges of the new cinematic landscape and the world economic crisis. Regardless these co-productions are either culturally relative ('affinitive' or 'epiphanic', according to Mette Hjort's [2010] categories – often applied by the authors of the book) – as in the case of the countries of the former Yugoslavia, or among the Albanophone countries or between Greece and Cyprus –, or 'opportunistic', seeking the funding benefits and the wider distribution possibilities that the collaboration with Western European partners offers, it becomes obvious that they are of key importance for the survival, the growth and the visibility of the regional national cinemas. This is particularly true for the smaller nations, even though, sometimes, this necessity to secure additional financial support from foreign funds and to increase the marketability of a film entails compromises as, for instance, in the choice of a main actor and the treatment of the story, as Costas Constandinides and Yiannis Papadakis demonstrate in their presentation of Cypriot cinema (p. 91).

The authors of the essays analyze in detail the current state of each national cinema of the Balkans separately. Taking into account socio-political parameters and addressing, although briefly, topics of representation, identity, nationality and space, they point out the challenges of the past and the present, the local and regional institutional developments, the structural changes and reforms made by the national Film Centers, the new policies and orientations in cinema legislation and funding that are designated for allocating funds to co-productions. The authors note the establishment of Film Centers in the recently formed states and the creation of cultural and financial partnerships; their efforts to attract foreign film and television productions to shoot locally, to digitize theaters and preserve national film heritage, to cultivate film literacy and develop institutional film scholarships (a great investment in Slovenia as Polona Petek shows in her entry). They indicate the significant reduction in the number of movie theatres in recent years, particularly in Bulgaria, Romania, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia. They acknowledge the great importance of the film festivals for the circulation and visibility of regional films, as well as for giving the opportunity to local audiences to watch arthouse foreign movies.

In their discussion of the films and the thematic concerns of the filmmakers, the authors pay special attention not only to works that constitute examples of successful co-productions but also to films that are important to the national narrative. They put a well-deserved emphasis on the emergence of female directors and their work, as well as on the dynamic growth of documentary filmmaking. They approach the grand cinematic scheme of the region as a whole, including in the discussion not only auteur films but also the commercial and television sectors, as well as diasporic cinemas, offering thus a much more inclusive and comprehensive picture of each national cinema. Melis

Behlil in her entry about the Turkish film industry – the largest in the region with an average annual production of around 100 films that have, since 2005, an average market share of 50–60 per cent – indicates its symbiotic relationship with television (p. 229), as well as the importance of the broader audiovisual industry, which helps independent cinema to survive, allowing technicians and actors/actresses of arthouse films to earn their living through series, commercials and mainstream films (p. 232).

The domestic audience's lack of interest in their countries' arthouse films is also noted. Even though these may have been internationally acclaimed, the viewers' preference lies on national popular genres (especially comedies), which often appropriate and assimilate American blockbuster and Hollywood formulas, creating new hybrid local forms, as in the case of Bulgaria and Serbia. Gergana Doncheva comments on how local spectators find it difficult to identify themselves with the unattractive characters depicted in many of the arthouse films that deal with the bleak reality of contemporary Bulgaria (p. 56), citing Gotseva's remark that such a 'thematic preference seems to be a successful strategy for receiving national or European grants' (p. 57). Such a semi-orientalistic approach, which is not a new phenomenon in Balkan cinematic representations, expresses a cultural weakness that supports the Western clichés on the region and should be overcome.

Examining the post-2008 films, the authors unravel the filmmakers' thematic concerns. Traditionally, history has been a constant reference point in the cinema of the region. The directors' accounts are heavy with historical memories, haunted by the traumas of the past. Even when the films refer to the present time, the fluidity and insecurity of modern-day social changes spring, precisely, from historical processes: war and its consequences, poverty and economic dependency, crime and corruption, dysfunctional states in a 'perpetual' state of transition, migration – all these themes are present in many recent films. But at the same time, a new wave of directors narrates different stories, distancing themselves from the themes and preoccupations of the previous generations, questioning and challenging the national, opting to explore more personal, contemporary, every-day, urban or cosmopolitan narratives particularly in Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, Romania and Slovenia. They are also interested in subjects with social urgency such as migration, gender, LGBTQ and minorities issues, as is the case in the cinemas of Cyprus, Greece, Kosovo, Serbia and Slovenia. Criticism on patriarchy, nationalism and social exclusion, as well as on dysfunctional social structures, poverty and corruption, is an unavoidable part of their agendas, while, some produce counter narratives on national history and historical memory.

The desire of new filmmakers, many of them women, to differentiate themselves thematically, aesthetically and ultimately politically from the older generations is only natural. We should note that the New Romanian Cinema and the Greek Weird Wave were just two examples of this urge. Some authors in the

collection highlight the impact of the New Romanian Cinema on other regional cinemas and particularly on post-Yugoslav films. Jurica Pavičić and Aida Vidan in their discussion of new Croatian cinema assess that '[it] developed its attributes as a reaction to the stylistic excesses and ideological layers of the 1990s, in particular the "Balkan cinema style" epitomized by the films of Emir Kusturica and Srđan Dragojević'. Furthermore, they consider the Romanian New Wave as 'a cleansing device that could purify Balkan cinema from the "Balkan cinema style"' (p. 75-6). Raluca Iacob in her essay on Romanian cinema, adopts Pavičić's view that the embracement of this influence constitutes 'a "political gesture" for filmmakers who aim to distance themselves from the excessive and carnivalesque Kusturica-style often associated with Balkan films in the West' (p. 172). In Montenegro, the new generation of filmmakers, as Sanja Jovanović reports in her chapter, wishes to develop a new aesthetic direction, differentiating the image of Montenegro from its stereotypical cinematic representations, as established during the Yugoslav era, with the 'swords and fiddles' genre (p. 143).

The authors acknowledge the importance of cinema in the countries that gained independence in the 1990s, as well as its active role in the nation-building process. Dijana Jelača, in her contribution on Bosnian cinema, observes that 'trauma remains one of the dominant themes in post-Yugoslav cinema', not only because of the recent wars but also because of 'cinema's distinct position as a conduit of collective and individual memory of trauma' (p. 41). Francesca Borrione and Albana Muco in their entry on Kosovar cinema write that film 'is bound to the country's political and cultural history and reflects the challenges in shaping a new Kosovar identity while overcoming ethnic, religious and linguistic differences' (p. 121). Vessela S. Warner points out the North Macedonian government's interest in building a film industry as 'a tool of national self-identification and pride' (p. 157), producing films of 'national importance' that are national-recollective or national-symbolic or national-reflective. These functions of films are not a new phenomenon in regional cinema. As Bruce Williams and Kledian Myftari argue, when discussing Albania's lack of international cinematic exposure in the past, the interest of Albania's Stalinist regime was far more 'in the role of film as a pedagogical tool in the construction of a new society than in spreading its cinema in international cultural circles' (p. 19).

It could be said that this multifaceted role of cinema in the region is another of its distinct features. Cinema in the Balkans functions as a means for forging the national identity or for renegotiating it (as seen in Bulgarian or Greek cinemas); as a way of healing war traumas; as a tool for sensitizing the public to ethnic, gender or political issues. In this way, cinema in the Balkans embodies an anthropological dimension (Kerkinos 2013:10) as it participates in the public discourse, constructing 'a space for the externalization of cultural models and processes in order for society to be able to see and reflect on itself' (Fischer

1998: 110-111). It reflects society and makes society reflect; it documents and illustrates socio-cultural dynamics, complexities and transformations.

The authors dedicate a fair space to documentary, exploring its great growth over the last years and pointing out how it often proves more daring than fiction as it touches upon a number of important political, cultural and social issues that are avoided or treated inadequately in fiction. Documentary's dealing with national themes of importance, exposing different perspectives on the complexities of the past and the present, is highlighted in the cases of Greece, Serbia and Turkey. Maria Chalkou notes the politicization of Greek documentary, its strong influence on public opinion, its challenging of the official narratives on the economic crisis, its obsessive concern with history and past traumas, as well as its growing interest in difference and marginality (p. 103-4). Nevena Daković, Aleksandra Milovanović and Iva Leković compare 'fiction film's tendency of promoting a fairly simplistic and nation-boosting account of an ideologically charged national narrative to Serbian documentaries that offer a more nuanced and multi-perspectival vision of the country's complex past and equally challenging present' (p. 200). Melis Behlil shows how the documentaries in Turkey give voice to groups that had been previously silenced and how they question the Kurdish identity, as well as the official histories of the Kurdish region (p. 238).

Overall, *Contemporary Balkan Cinema: Transnational Exchanges and Global Circuits* is a well-detailed book that covers all the important issues that are inextricably linked to the Balkan cinema of today. In doing so and by taking into account positive developments in production and representation, it reconceptualizes the cinema of the region. At the same time it provides a contextualizing overview of the flourishing transnational dimensions of contemporary Balkan film culture, exploring institutional strategies, touching upon production networking, and discussing the new visions for the present, the thematic diversity within Balkan cinema's trends and patterns and the aesthetic heterogeneity of its styles. Importantly it provides tables with comprehensive data on each national production, on co-productions, box offices, major film institutions and film festivals. It examines the work of female directors. It illustrates Balkan cinema's vitality and importance, noting the exposure and success of Balkan films at international festivals, as well as the new cosmopolitanism of the filmmakers. It highlights its socially engaged character and calls for a further examination of its anthropological role. The editors and the authors of the volume provide thus an indispensable and updated record on the Balkan cinema that functions both as a scholarly study and a reference book.

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