

The Threshold of Europe: Imagining Yugoslavia in Film

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To those who have not visited them, the Balkans are a shadow land of mystery; to those who know them, they become ever more mysterious... You become, in a sense, a part of the spell, and of the mystery and glamour of the whole. ... Intrigue, plot, mystery, high-courage and daring deeds – the things that are the soul of true romance are today the soul of the Balkans.

Arthur Douglas Smith, 1907 (Todorova 14)

This 1907 quote in Maria Todorova's now immensely popular book, *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), is still valid today. It testifies to the persistence of the Balkan contradictions and secrets; the book argues that the myth of the Balkans has not essentially or drastically changed during the last century. The issue of the Balkans and their identity as expressed in images, legends, and fiction-fiction forms has been raised during this century by researchers of many different stripes: military strategists, historians and politicians, anthropologists, cultural theorists, etc. Regardless of the approach, the "Balkan problem" always turns out to be sort of Pandora's box. Once the questions are articulated, they simply multiply while at the bottom of the "box" remains little hope that someone might provide definitive answers to the Balkan riddle from any of the numerous perspectives. Furthermore, the "negative" spotlight cast over the region at the beginning of the 1990s, due to the raging Yugoslav wars, revived the historical metaphor of the "Balkan powder keg," giving so far the richest and fullest meaning to the pejorative term "balkanization." Now, as in the past, the Balkans remain the eternal "heart of (European) darkness." Thus, in spite of its growing importance, interesting profile and hybrid, multiethnic and multicultural character, the region resists accurate definition, its gloomy secrets remaining mysteriously veiled.

Nevertheless, the world book market continues to proliferate with books exploring the topic, either concerned with the different representations of the Balkans or searching for their putative essence – their "balkanness" (such as

Stoianovich (1994), Bakic-Hayden (1995), Todorova, Goldsworthy (1998), Norris (1999), Anzulovic (1999), etc.). Inspired by their research and taking some of their theses as points of departure, I would like to briefly examine *cinematic representations of the Balkans*. In order to make this rather vast topic manageable, I will mainly explore visions and images provided from an *outsider's* perspective – conveniently limiting the sphere of interest by excluding related issues of eclecticism of stereotypes, of the ways national cinema perpetuates the models of world cinema, and of national self-imaging – *from the early 1900s to the 1990s*. I will first provide a global theoretical analytical framework for the topic, and then focus and try to verify the premises of the *case study in question – cinematic images of Serbia and, in a few cases, of Yugoslavia*. While the majority of the films to be discussed deal with the representation of Serbia and Serbs in world cinema, some concern other former Yugoslav republics. As even a string of raging wars could not efface our common history and cultural heritage, we are allowed in this case to use occasionally the perplexing notion of Yugoslav/Serbian representations.¹

YUGOSLAVIA/SERBIA – BALKANISM

This paper takes as the possible and probable basis of the attraction that the Balkans hold for world filmmakers an alleged essence, “balkanness.” This essentialist attitude places this research within the framework of “Balkanism.” Maria Todorova’s inspiring book offers a complex historical, political, and geographic study of this topic. She discusses the relationship between orientalism as defined by Edward Said and “Balkanism,” and suggests a definition through analogy as “dealing with the Balkans... a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Balkans” (Todorova 7). Further, she closely examines the characteristics and the genesis of this stereotype and identifies three important features – exotics, ambiguity and Thirdworldization – which are, in my opinion, most firmly associated with the “glocal” charm that this part of the world has maintained for centuries, and which deserve to be reconsidered individually.

Exotics: Exotic is certainly a key word, describing the region as different, uncanny, magical, or at least unusual in comparison with the habitual North Atlantic illustrations. Glocal appeal translates an exotic quality into a series of contradictory qualifications, such as cultural originality, primitivism, barbarism, Dionysian spirit, Rousseau’s noble savagery, a petrifying obsession with the past, inherent delay, nationalism, and romance, while each term lends itself to any form of the wide scope of polarized imaginings.

Ambiguity: The attributes of the Balkans always entail double, opposed meanings and evaluations, allowing their image to be endowed with signifying and signified ambivalence. They make up a rich semantic field, their film image being Barthes' text for "writing on it or over it," permitting constantly innovative interpretations. In linguistic terms, the Balkans are a floating signifier and their "flexible, transitional" non-stipulated character is visible in many domains, as well as in their two-faced, Janus positioning. They are frequently referred to as the crossroads or bridge that connects sharply contrasting entities such as East and West, North and South, Western and Oriental, Middle European and Mediterranean, Byzantine and Ottoman. Geographically, they are recognized as the fringes or "threshold of Europe." Culturally, they are the highly permissive margin, most certainly an area of ineffaceable differences used for their construction as a "noble paradise" or as a "war hell."

Thirdworldization: Finally, Todorova notes the increasing Thirdworldization of the Balkan image, its oxymoronic labeling such as the Third world corner of the First world or Old Continent. Accordingly, the presumed contradiction is structured through pictures matching those that Robert Stam (1994, 1997) in his persuasive analyses of Eurocentrism and the Third world recognizes as the colonial heritage of the Third world expressed into cinematic ethno-images. Following Stam's rethinking and pushing the analogy to the extreme, we find on one side the envisioning of the Balkans by the group in power as the distorted, exaggerated "exotic." This is mediated by the excessive stereotypes of mainstream films: images of a "poverty, misery, and garbage" aesthetic in the "superior" North Atlantic orchestration of primitivism, passion, and menace. On the other side, emphasizing its cultural and civilizational uniqueness and fairy tale past provides points of resistance toward marginalization and pejorative stance (cf. Stam, 1997, 111), allowing for an idealistic picture of the Balkans to surface.

The idea that diverse imaginings of the Balkans are part of the long-lasting quest for the Other, a pivotal term of film theory's semio-psychoanalyses, needs no special proof or logic. Psychoanalytically, enigmatic images are points in relation to which the group in power determines its own identity and position. The Balkans are the Other of the North Atlantic space as seen from many perspectives: cultural, political, religious, artistic, etc.; they provide essential guidelines for their identification. However, the Balkans themselves emerged from the violent civilizational reunion of Byzantine and Ottoman empires already mutually positioned as the Other. Through further building them up as the "Other" of the North Atlantic space, we come to the accumulation and multiplication of differences organized in many (mis-)conceived images.

Misconceptions of the Balkans are defined by a range of binary oppositions falling into different categories: religious (Orthodoxy versus Catholicism or

Christianity versus Islam), semi-racial (dark-skinned Oriental and Mediterranean versus white Anglo-Saxon protestants and Western Europeans), economic (poverty versus wealth, decline versus prosperity, and rural versus industrial), ideological (menacing Communism versus democracy), emotional (excessiveness versus repressed emotions), sexual (libidinal southerners versus consciously restrained northerners) or legal (traditional customs versus written law) (cf. Stam 1997 1).²

Because these qualifications are as equally valid for the Balkans as a whole as for each individual country, we can focus on the representational patterns of Serbia/Yugoslavia. The goal, then, is to trace back and systematize the representations of Serbia that have circulated in international cinema and to demonstrate the variety of representational types that wander between two poles: the romantically positive vs. the brute, ugly negative, which has tended to be the dominant one. I will show that images of Serbia belong to three representational patterns, as I have chosen to name them: romantic, ironic and traditionally historical.

1. *The Romantic Pattern*

The romantic pattern refers to the image of Serbia as an idyllic, make-believe place. It is the one that ruled classical Hollywood; the country joins the Hollywood pastiche scenery album of romantic places like the Scotland of *Brigadoon* (1954, d. Vincent Minelli), or the Shangri La of *Lost Horizon* (1937, d. Frank Capra). In this bucolic world, love is the way opposite cultures are brought together, and the predictable melodrama premised on fascinating haunted love is rendered more exhilarating by a specifically regional, unpredictable history.

One of the very first films portraying Serbia presents a short inventory of the exotic (historical and other) motifs meriting romantic curiosity and sensationalist attention, which have since been employed in the broader stereotypical making of the Balkans. The coronation that legitimized the brutal dynastic succession to Serbia's throne³ is recorded in the 1904 "protocolar" reportage, *The Coronation of King Peter I*, shot by the Englishman Arnold Muir Wilson. The film is composed of several thematic blocks: procession, coronation, and travel through Oriental parts of the country. It is marked by strong local ethnological colors, Turks, Albanians and highlander populations in a variety of costumes.

Cecile B. de Mille's commercial instinct registered the territory of Yugoslavia on Hollywood's world map. In his first two films, *Unafraid* (1915) and *The Captive* (1915), he used the mountain principality of Montenegro, at the outskirts of Europe, as the scene for a heartbreaking love affair. It is vividly illustrated in the following description of his second film *The Captive*:

Again the setting is Montenegro, and again the heroine falls in love with the enemy, though here the dramatic tension is increased. Sonya, (Blanche Sweet) at first dominates the captive Turkish soldiers (Muhammad Hussein – House Peters), then submits. He comes to her rescue in defiance of his own countrymen; and in finding each other, both have to sacrifice everything. (...) As expected, “love conquers all,” but at what price? (*Le Giornate* 15)

Similarly, Erich von Stroheim, the Hollywood cynic, displaced his version of Franz Lehár’s operetta *Merry Widow* (1923) from habitual Marsovia to Monte Blanco, even through the name frankly alluding to Montenegro as that fanciful but troublesome kingdom.

Three screen adaptations of Anthony Hope’s “yarn” *Prisoner of Zenda* (1894) form a nodal point of celluloid imagining of the Balkans and especially Serbia (1937, d. John Cromwell; 1952, d. Richard Thorpe; 1979, d. Richard Quine).⁴ The imagined principality of Ruritania in the 1880s only partially corresponds to the Serbia of the time. Vesna Goldsworthy deduces from the confusing geographical indications that Ruritania “could hardly be further south-east than Bohemia,” or simply like Stoker’s Transylvania in *Dracula*, “it is a land ‘beyond the forest.’” However, “it nevertheless became one of the most widely used symbols of the archetypal Balkan land” (Goldsworthy 46). Due to historical allusions, the evoked dynastic, melodramatic adventure and drama of errors are more specifically, and more easily, identified as the barely disguised turbulent Serbian monarchical chronicle.⁵ Hope and his epigones initiate the lasting common mistake associated with a region later to be popularly codified in Agatha Christie’s novel *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925). The dangerous, anarchistic country of Herzoslovakia, clearly the combination of Herzegovina and Czechoslovakia, finally substantiates the claim that Hope, like Balkan principalities and monarchies, are, in fact, countries “in between,” neither/nor or either/or the Balkans and Central Europe.⁶

The same error is revived half a century later in Dusan Makavejev’s comedy *Manifesto* (1988) about an unnamed Balkan/Central European country in the 1920s, where the inhabitants’ ethnically suggestive sonorous names, such as Svetlana Vargas, Lily Sacher, and Dr. Lombrosow, simultaneously underline the director’s typical self-reflexiveness. The film is loosely based on Emil Zola’s short story *For a Night of Love*, and the narrative boils with assassinations, sexual liberation, revolution, and repression.

The aura of Balkan mystery is also magnified in the first version of *Cat People* (1942, d. Jacques Tourneur), which connects with the region in two ways: first, through the esoteric heroine of Serbian origin, Irena (Simone Simon) who has a Russian family name “Dubrovna,” and secondly, by utilizing a narrative based on a variation of a Balkan legend about werewolves. Irene initiates a line of

cursed Balkan beauties, a combination of Slavic sacrificing self-destructiveness and erotic, sensuous southern/even half gypsy women that inspire passion trimmed with death. In these embellished imaginings, the region becomes a rediscovered Arcadia that magically celebrates the wish fulfilling principle. An imaginary "Paradise Lost" with the charm of its own, it enacts a nostalgic return to the unbound, endowing films with a Dionysian *joie de vivre*.

2. *The Ironic Pattern*

The ironic pattern is recognizable in narratives that do not explicitly deal with, or mention, but rather peripherally imply Serbia/Yugoslavia as a semi-developed, godforsaken, impoverished or economically backwards Third World state. Its set of enchanting marginal differences now becomes the source of comic occurrences exploited in narratives to display casual contempt. In the early 1950s, with hopeless attempts to reshape the country's identity through never achieved modernization and Westernization, Yugoslavia became, in the eyes of the developed world, synonymous with cheap tourist resorts, economic decline, and industrial products of poor quality. Alas, the stereotype has hardly changed, appearing today in a myriad of jokes ranging from sporadic sarcasm to comic relief.

A typical example of minimalist degradation in punch lines is related to the only Yugoslav car model produced for export. The Yugo – its nickname, a shortened form of Yugoslavia, also means "southerner" – is a low budget, highly unreliable car like the Russian Lada and East German Trabant. In the film *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (1995, d. John McTiernan), Bruce Willis furiously exits the Yugo during the peak of a chase on the middle of a bridge in New York City, commenting on its poor quality and snatching the first available Mercedes. However, spectators who notice that he has left the golden bar on the back seat of Yugo might reach different conclusions about the car's and the country's (hidden) qualities.

Other sub-themes such as tourism or economic immigration in search of "daily bread" are of no better faith. The latter is a colorful thematic obsession of filmmakers of Yugoslav provenance like Steve Tesich, the scriptwriter for *Four Friends* (1981, d. Arthur Penn). The *Bildungs*-film deals with the coming to maturity of a boy of Yugoslav origin. Danilo's (Craig Wasson) journey to adulthood meanders between the American sixties, traumas of Vietnam, work in the steel mills of East Chicago and the patriarchal customs of the "old country" cherished by his hardworking, homesick father who dances "kolo" with his compatriots. Like Kazan's *America* (1963), this film is an unforgettable account of cultural clash, confirming the high price of the second generation's assimilation and acculturation.

A vast number of examples confirm that the downplayed role of Yugoslavia in this mode is hugely deceptive (tourism: *Murder in the Orient Express*/1974, d. Sidney Lumet; *Evil Under the Sun*/1982, d. Guy Hamilton; *Il Carniere/The Hunter's Bag*/1997, d. Maurizio Zaccaro; Yugo: *Dragnet*/1987, d. Tom Mankiewicz; *The Crow*/1994, d. Alex Proyas; *Backfire*/1994, d. A. Dean Bell; *Drowning Mona*/2000, d. Nick Gomez; emigration: *Broken English*/1997, d. Gregor Nicholas).

3. The Traditional Historical Pattern

The traditional historical mode covers a wide range of stories connected with the history of Serbia/Yugoslavia, popularly identified as a "Balkan powder keg" that regularly explodes every fifty years or so, proving the repetitive circular pattern of Balkan history. In spite of my personal wish to decontaminate this paper of excessive politics, one cannot escape the film perception of Serbia/Yugoslavia being strongly molded by local history, as well as by the official attitudes of the respective countries where the films are made. Until 1999, Yugoslavia's war delineated a symbolic, closed circle in time and space that can be described as from Sarajevo 1914 to Sarajevo 1992 and that has inspired the wild fantasies of directors to chronicle these historical events.

The year 1914 has become a primary landmark in historical epics, such as in *De Mayerling a Sarajevo* (1940, d. Max Ophüls) and *Ultimatum* (1938, d. R. Wiene, R. Siodmac). The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand that led to the outbreak of World War I is seen as both an admirable fanatic gesture against oppression and as the ironic, even stupid end of an epoch regarded with nostalgia, undoubtedly done by Serbian conspirators.

The confounded history of World War II in Yugoslavia – simultaneously the fight against the Germans, civil war, and socialist revolution – is mirrored in films concerned with either flimsy, illegal operations behind enemy lines (*Operation Cross Eagles*/1969, d. Richard Conte; *The Secret Invasion*/1964, d. Roger Corman; *Bomb at 10:10*/1966, d. Charles Damic), or with the relations between the patriotic anti-communist Chetniks and the revolutionary yet equally patriotic communist Partisans and their international supporters. The American film *The Chetniks* (1942, d. Louis King) is a routine guerilla war story, portraying the Chetnik leader (Philip Dorn) as a devoted family man, a combination of Pancho Villa and Robin Hood. As the film plays out archetypal characters against a photogenic background, the simple substitution of geographic names would allow this film to be about a war anywhere in the world. The British film *Chetniks* (1943, d. Sergei Noblandov) begins in the same way, but as Great Britain transferred support to the Partisans, who became the "freedom fighters"

while the Chetniks became a terrorist band, the film was re-edited and re-titled *Undercover*, thus moving to the opposite ideological pole.

During “peaceful” interludes, Serbia is seen as a dangerous spy nest, an unknown place behind the Iron Curtain where human life is cheap, as in the film *Masque of Dimitrios* (1947, d. Jean Negulesco), inspired by Eric Amber’s novel (1939). The genre hybrid of a thriller and Balkan “travelogue” tells the story of a curious journalist (Peter Lorre) who travels throughout the Balkans investigating the alleged death of Dimitrios (Zachary Scott), a mysterious Greek spy and notorious “ladies’ man.” Retracing Dimitrios’ last voyage takes the journalist to Belgrade, which looks suspiciously like Budapest, and where people have Czech names and the local language is an unclear soft Slavic whisper. The episode in Belgrade, recounting the corruption of a small government clerk (Steven Geray), accommodates many Balkan images such as macho gambling in smoky coffee houses, desirable but unfaithful wives, and the betrayal of military secrets. In fact, it seems like a concentration of all of the typical motifs, crystallized collective images of the Balkans where accuracy is of no importance to an audience that does not know much about the topic.

Yugoslavia is also the setting of a breathtaking section of *From Russia with Love* (1963, d. Terence Young), a film from Ian Fleming’s Bond series. The Orient Express, en route through Yugoslavia, stops in Zagreb and in Belgrade, which look more Russian than Balkan. During brief stops in a murky, military atmosphere, the Russian agent manages to get onto the train but does not accomplish his sinister mission. The idea is to emphasize Yugoslavia as the “hole” in the Iron Curtain, enabling the loosening of the Eastern Block Grip. Also, Bond’s thinking “On whose side is Tito?” clearly alludes to Tito’s habits of running shady businesses and being the political “servant of two masters.”

In the 1990s, Yugoslavia as a real war zone emerged as an interesting and profitable film topic for the cinematic revisiting of history. Again, the new image is barely distinguishable from the old. The Bosnian agony became the equivalent of Third world anguish in Europe and is frequently spoken of in different ways. The hunger in Bosnia is mentioned with blissful indifference during courteous dinner table chit-chat, as in *Home for the Holidays* (1995, d. Jody Foster) or in *Kika* (1993, d. Pedro Almodovar) where Somalia and Sarajevo are indicatively linked in one sentence.⁷

Frequently, the Bosnian war provides a convenient background for the stunning display of the skills of almighty protagonists. In the introductory part of *The Rock* (1996, d. Michael Bay), emotionless Serbian anarchists hide a deadly chemical weapon in a child’s toy sent to a Bosnian refugee camp. A highly professional Nicholas Cage prevents the disaster, instantaneously establishing himself as the hero who will save the world and survive until the end of the film.

In narratives which focus on the war, directors are, for the most part, reluctant to take sides or make political judgments. Instead, they prefer to focus on human suffering in general, blaming destiny, ghosts of the past, or at least all warring parties. A symptom of the irresolvable, eternal conflict is popularly diagnosed in Manchevski's *Before the Rain* (1994) by the doctor, Sasa (Meto Jovanovski), who reaches the profound conclusion that "War is like a virus." Similarly, concrete or metaphorical explanations in their distinctive ways neutralize the political or ideological aspects of the conflict, promoting the fatalistic conception of the war as Balkan destiny. The vengeance-seeking character of *The Peacemaker* (1997, d. Mimi Leder) eventually explains that he "is Serb, Croat, and Muslim," managing to reject the nationalistic basis of the war. Dusan (Marcel Lures) is a desperate man who has lost everything and is ready to commit sheer lunacy – to plant an atomic bomb in the heart of New York. After the "last minute rescue," the audience is ironically left to wonder who the peacemaker is after all – the UN, the USA or someone else.

Other "balanced" or neutrally made films include the almost religious melodrama *The Savior* (1998, d. Predrag Gaga Antonijevic) or a Miss Saigon-like story *Welcome to Sarajevo* (1997, d. Michael Winterbottom). Both portray the cathartic experience of a foreigner who finally finds a new meaning of life in the war-torn country. A classical description is made of the set of familiar clichés otherwise known from the political thrillers about Third World crises, including *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1983, d. Peter Weir), *Under Fire* (1983, d. Roger Spottiswood), and *The Killing Fields* (1984, d. Roland Joffe). In the most outstanding example, *The Savior*, the narrative develops through a chain of sacrifices made, ending with St. Christopher (alias Joshua Rose/Dennis Quaid), who comes from the West, saves the victimized population, speaks about the ultimate importance of human life,⁸ suppresses politicization, and condemns war in general. By the end of the millennium, harsh reality merges the chronotope of fiction with the reality of its Balkan counterparts. The films are larger than life, but the reality of Yugoslav war proves stronger than its cinematic versions.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

The systemization provided here is just one way of opening the Balkan Pandora's box with cautious vigilance, limited interest and unlimited pretentiousness. Conceptualizing the Balkan and Serbian issues is regularly carried out, as in this case, through the reflection of and comparison with the North Atlantic region. From this process emerge attributes like ethnocentricity, mythomania, romance, a small dosage of Europeanism, populism, barbarity, chauvinistic contempt, the pagan experience of history, in a word: Heaven and the Apocalypse.

Thus, the rich charm of Serbia and the Balkans lies in their being a rather amorphous other, epitomizing eternal longing and offering juxtaposed options frequently existing within the same narrative. The disentangling of this Gordian knot of popular prejudices and romanticization, romantic exaltation and poorly hidden contempt remains, fortunately, for the most part an unachievable task. The polyvalent nature of Serbia's appeal rests on its intangible nature. It is translated into modes which differ in focusing profoundly on one aspect of bucolic beauty, economic collapse or historical turmoil while also entailing a genre shift from melodrama (*The Captive, Cat People*) to action (*Die Hard, The Peacemaker*) or historical like *The Chetniks*.

On the basis of the array of stereotypes, one can argue that the cinematic representation of Serbia is far from being uniquely and systematically negative, as some might claim. International cinema does not carry on the premeditated plan of labeling a nation as negative, villainous, executing a politically profiled plot, but rather we are dealing with the uncritical repetition of existing stereotypes prompted by actual reality, as seen most recently in the films *Beautiful People* (1999, d. Jasmin Dizdar) or *Diplomatic Siege* (1999, d. Gustav Graef Marion). The next test that might confirm or undermine this proposed loose schemata would be an analysis of films recycling the "factitious" NATO bombing into cinematic fiction. History repeats itself and the cinematic images will return in future attitudes and events.

NOTES

- 1 The option of letting this paper belong to the domain of "Serbism" or "Yugoslavism," a domain not yet defined but logically supposed to exist "dealing with Serbia or Yugoslavia etc." would be more accurate but too preposterous. So let us concentrate on the Balkans, which Serbia is definitely part of or, even more, the concentrated, crystallized image of: its core part.
- 2 Further appropriation of Stam's conception of the Third World to the Balkans is as a European Third World.
- 3 In fact, one of the first films about Serbia recounting this unconventional historical event is *Les actualités turques*. Pathe's *False journal: Assassinat de la famille royale de Serbie* (1903, d. Lucien Nonguent) carefully and imaginatively reconstructs, with all of the hair-raising details, the Coup of May 1903 that scandalized the world and stirred the imagination of the French producer. The royal couple of the Obrenovic dynasty was brutally assassinated by conspirators; and their dead bodies covered with blood were thrown from the main balcony onto the street. This cruel episode, shot in the style of "cloak and dagger" or "blood and power," could have been considered customary for medieval times, definitely unthinkable for the Europe at the beginning of this century but obviously real and possible for Serbia.
- 4 There is also a comic book version of the novel, Disney's *Mickey and his Double*.
- 5 Even more transparent is the character of Regent of Carpathia in Terence Rattigan's play *The Sleeping Prince* (1954), allegedly inspired by the historical figure of the Serbian