SOME METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS REGARDING THE STUDY OF BALKANISM IN CINEMA

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It was in the early 1990s that Balkanism came to the attention of Slavic studies. As early as 1990, Milica Bakid-Hayden drew on Edward Said’s *Orientalism* to describe the rhetoric employed by many a Slovenian and Croatian politician and writer to discuss the Yugoslav crisis of the 1980s. Regardless of whether Balkanism was treated as a variation of Orientalism (Bakid-Hayden and Hayden 1992, Bakid-Hayden 1995) or as a rhetorical paradigm specific to the Balkans (Todorova 1994), Orientalism has remained the conceptual paradigm behind Balkanism well after the most detailed analysis of the phenomenon has been written (Todorova 1997).

According to Todorova, Balkanism dominated western perceptions of the region from the early twentieth century until the beginning of World War II and then again from the demise of the Soviet Union onward. During the communist era, the Balkans had been an indistinguishable part of the monolith of Eastern Europe. After 1989, the Balkans reappeared as the ‘Other’ of the newly forming Central Europe. It was often connected with the notion of Balkanization, denoting the fragmentation of viable larger political entities as well as the return to the primitive, backward and tribal. While Todorova is careful not to identify Balkanism as a mere variation of Orientalism, both discourses serve to reinforce a western style of domination through description, learning and authorization of viewpoints.

Todorova lists a number of features that distinguish the Balkans from the Orient: central among them, the manner in which the construction of Balkan identities takes place. Self-perception plays a critical role in shaping the image of the Balkans. A classical example is given by Bakid-Hayden (1995) and Slavoj Žižek (1999) who identify how, depending on who is asked, the answer to ‘Where do the Balkans begin?’ always slides south-west. For Slovenes the Balkans begin with the Croats, for Croats with the Serbs, for Serbs with the Kosovars and so on. Thus, cultural production from within the Balkans shapes Balkanism as much as cultural production from without.

Almost immediately, purely on the narrative level, Emir Kusturica’s opus presents itself as an obvious choice for the study of Balkanism. Most of Kusturica’s internationally distributed feature films are concerned with subject matter characteristic of the former-Yugoslav region. His *Sjećaš li se Dolly Bell?*/*Do You Remember Dolly Bell?* (1981) and *Otc na službenom putu/When Father Was Away on Business* (1985) tell tales of provincial growing up under a communist regime. *Dom za vešanje/Time of Gypsies* (1989) and *Crna mačka, beli mačor/Black Cat, White Cat* (1998) focus on the most exotic of European ethnic minorities – the Roma. *Underground* (1995a), not only because of the ambitious scope of the narrative depicting more than 50 years of history of Yugoslavia, has become locus classicus for the study of Balkanism. *Život je čudo/Life is a Miracle* (2004) explicitly addresses the wars of the 1990s, events paving the way for the reintroduction of Balkanism. Finally, *Zavet/Promise Me This* (2007) returns to the provincial.

However, having in mind the exemplary status *Underground* has in the study of Balkan cinema (Daković 1997; Elsaesser 2003; Ferreira 2006; Galt 2007; Gocić 2001; Gourgouris 2002; Homer 2007, 2009; Iordanova 2001, 2002; Krstić 1999, Keene 2001; Levi 2007; Longinović 2005; Mazaj 2008; Pejković 2009; Rivi 2007; Žižek 1997a, 1997b) it would appear as a legitimate concern that there remains little to be said about *Underground*, at least as far as its relation to the alleged ethnic bias and Balkanism is concerned. In fact, in a recent anonymous review of a paper of mine (Slugan 2011) the reviewer expresses the following concern:

“When people write about Balkan cinema, the one they inevitably write about is Kusturica, as if no other worthy regional examples exist (or as if no one has ever seen any films from the region other than his). [...] Kusturica as stereotypical “Balkan” is a bit overdone and stereotypical in and of itself as a framework.”

Admittedly, the reviewer’s frustration with yet another paper on Kusturica is understandable. However, his or her implicit call for the expansion of the canon and the application of the existing methodological framework to it seems to be curious. The reason is that there has been considerable work done on other authors and movies such as Mićo Mančevski’s 1994 *Before the Rain* (Longinović 2005; Iordanova 2001; Mazaj 2008; Rosenstone 2000), Theodoros Angelopoulos 1995 *To vlemma tou...*
Odyssea/Ulysses’ Gaze (Iordanova 2001; Horton 1997), Srđan Dragojević’s 1996 Lepa sela lepo gore/Pretty Village, Pretty Flame (Krstić 2000a; Levi 2007; Mazaj 2008; Daković 2003), Dragojević’s 1998 Rane/Wounds (Bjelić 2005; Iordanova 2001; Krstić 2000b), Goran Paskaljević’s 1998 Bure baruta/Balkan Cabaret (Bjelić 2005; Longinović 2005; Iordanova 2001), or Danis Tanović’s 2001 Nićija Zemlja/No Man’s Land (Horton 2002; Mazaj 2008; Van Watson 2008). It would appear then that the reviewer would like either more attention paid to these other works or perhaps he or she would prefer the study of Balkanism to be applied to new films altogether.

Effectively, one and the same reply can be made to both preferences. If we are to discuss Balkanism on a mass scale then we have to turn to authors whose movies enjoy the widest circulation and which are not seen exclusively by academics, film critics, and perhaps festival audiences. It is indeed the case that Balkanism is worth discussing only as a mass phenomenon with high level of diffusion within the general population for why would anyone worry if stereotypical views of the Balkans are held by a handful of people, even if they are academics (one might even say especially if they are academics)? And the best benchmark for this diffusion would obviously be the number of people, both domestic and foreign, who have seen the movies in question. The authors such as Angelopoulos, Dragojević, Mančevski, Paskaljević and Tanović have certainly, unlike other directors from the region, enjoyed some regular foreign distribution. Yet, when compared to Kusturica, with the exception of Tanović, their foreign audience numbers pale in comparison. With that in mind, one could even make an argument that, again with the exception of Nićija zemlja, the aforementioned authors and their movies enjoy critical attention which, relative to the attention they command among the audiences, is even greater than that of Kusturica.

As far as the further expansion of the canon is concerned I could easily apply the Balkanism framework to movies such as Knjiga rekorda Šutke/The Shutka Book of Records (Manić 2005), Nebo sateliti/Celestial Body (Nola 2001), or Nož/The Knife (Lekić 1999). I could argue that the first turns the economical plight of Roma living in derelict Skopje neighborhood Šutka into orchestration of their exoticness for foreign amusement. The second could serve as an example of how the circular narrative inscribes the Balkans as the region in which war recurs eternally. The third can easily be seen as an essentialist depiction of Muslims as barbaric warmongers. Yet all of this would amount to nothing more than an exercise of the Balkanist framework, because none of these movies enjoyed any significant distribution outside of former Yugoslavia if they enjoyed any at all. The expansion of the cannon of Balkan cinema, an effort legitimized by the aesthetic or representative value of a given film and accomplished in Iordanova’s The Cinema of the Balkans (2006), is a procedure substantially different from the expansion of the canon of Balkan cinema for the study of Balkanism. The latter can be legitimized primarily with data on substantial audience numbers for both foreign and domestic distribution, with aesthetic considerations coming second.

If we now return to the special place Underground holds in the analyses focusing on the problem of Balkanism we will see that the authors of these analyses have either made their arguments before Život has been filmed (Gocić 2001; Goulding 2002; Horton 2000; Iordanova 2002) or have deliberately not addressed that particular movie sticking with the old Underground example (Ferreira 2006; Galt 2006; Homer 2007, 2009; Levi 2007, Longinović 2005; Mazaj 2008; Pejković 2009; Rivi 2007). The failure to discuss Život in the analysis of Balkanism in Kusturica’s work, a film which has enjoyed distribution wider than Underground and has won the Best European Union Film, the Best Balkan Film award, and the Cinema Prize of the French National Educational System (given at Cannes) in 2005 is highly problematic. Another reason is that it is this movie, and not Underground, which reiterates the stereotypical image of the Balkans well after Žižek (1997a, 1997b), Todorova (1997), Iordanova (2001, 2002) and Bjelić and Savić (2002) had warned against perils of such representations. By the time the filming of Život took place, Kusturica had been made well aware of this kind of academic criticism of his work through discussions and interviews. Therein lies another reason to analyze Život as a response to Balkanism.
It has to be admitted that the premiere of *Underground* in the wake of Dayton Agreement was bound to produce much more controversy than the distribution of *Život* which took place well after the Bosnian War. However, *Underground* never explicitly addressed the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This conflict, on the other hand, provides the backbone for *Život*’s narrative of two lovers whose respective ethnicities are pitted against each other. Moreover, the analysis I develop elsewhere (Slugan 2011) reveals that *Život*, contrary to what Gocić (2005) might claim, by no means paints a neutral depiction of the Bosnian War. With all of this in mind, I believe *Život* should take precedent over *Underground* in the study of Balkanism.

Another point with regard to my anonymous reviewer remains to be made. The study of Balkanism is by no means a neutral undertaking. It is a political project the goal of which is to put an end to a particular discourse about a particular geopolitical entity. It certainly commands more academic merit than the alternative it tries to dispel – in thanks to a stricter methodology and the abandonment of essentialist claims – but this is not to say it has no ideological slant or that it is methodologically flawless. Thus, insisting on the analysis of “all cultural commentators from the ex-Yugoslav region” in the *Underground* debate with regards to their ideological and national slant, while leaving all other commentators of the hook, as my reviewer would have it, is nonsensical. In fact there is no value-free cultural commentary, every cultural commentator has something to gain or lose in this debate (or any for that matter). The very fact of entering into a cultural debate is always done with a particular prize in mind, if nothing else, then that of cultural capital. With that in mind, our primary concern should be whether a given cultural commentator cherry-picks the evidence in favor of a particular line of argument, and if he or she does, then the analysis can be made in the above key. However, because I am more interested in methodological issues here, my analysis will focus on a type of cherry-picking I find particularly problematic in the context of the study of Balkanism – preferential treatment of extra-textual evidence.

Kusturica’s personal attitudes towards his Bosnian origins as well as his conversion to Christian Orthodoxy have also proven to be significant for study of Balkanism. In his interviews Kusturica has often resorted to the rhetoric of tribalism, repeatedly describing the events in the former-Yugoslavia in terms of unbridled and eternal aggressions and relativizing issues of responsibility by relegating them to the sphere of nature itself. These considerations have often been taken into account when assessing his works.

Extra-textual evidence such as this is perfectly legitimate because we are studying the reception of particular movies in an overall cultural sphere in which the separation between the author, the text and the audience does not play the same role as it does in academia. However, it is one thing to analyze public reception and quite another to produce scholarly analysis of a given film. Whereas in the former case it is reasonable to see why the figure of the author would influence the everyday spectator’s apprehension of the film, in the latter it is certainly no novelty to frown at biographism and psychologism as tools of critical analysis. And yet extra-textual evidence has often been used either to discuss issues the film remains silent about or even to argue against what the intra-textual evidence points to. The best or better yet, the worst example of this is certainly Žižek’s analysis of *Underground* (1997a, 1997b).

The gist of Žižek’s argument is as follows: by exposing the obscene of the Communist regime, and by doing so from a cynical, ironically distant position, *Underground* exposes the obscene of the neo-fascist nationalism or “the libidinal economy of the Serbian ethnic slaughter in Bosnia: the pseudo-Bataillean trance of excessive expenditure, the continuous mad rhythm of drinking-eating-singing-fornicating.” (Žižek 1997b)

Nobody would dispute that *Underground* exposes the obscene of Communism. Marko and Crni of the first part of the movie who masquerade their grand larceny, bar fights, and philandering as Partisan resistance efforts are obvious proof of that. No less is Marko of the second part of the movie who keeps a throng of people in his underground cellar, his brother included, feeding them lies that the outside war rages on and making profit off their weapons manufacture. The
methodological problem here is not in the claim about the Communist obscene but in the manner in which the leap in the discussion of the modern Communist obscene to the claims about the postmodern neo-fascist obscene is made. In order to make this jump Žižek recalls a comment made by Kusturica in an interview to *Cahiers du cinema*:

“In this region, war is a natural phenomenon, it is like a natural catastrophe, like an earthquake which explodes from time to time. In my film, I tried to clarify the state of things in this chaotic part of the world. It seems that nobody is able to locate the roots of this terrible conflict.” (Kusturica 1995b: 69)

Žižek’s reasoning must be something like the following: because, according to Kusturica, the war eternally recurs in the Balkans, the obscene of modern Communism represented in the film and underlying one war (World War II) should be understood as a stand-in for the obscene of postmodern Nationalism underlying another – the one taking place in Bosnia between April 1992 and December 1995. In other words, any regime in the region has basically the same underlying obscene waiting to explode. The first objection that can be made is that if indeed there is a continuous underlying obscene which bursts out at various points in history, then Žižek falls into the same trap he chastises everybody else of doing – the essentialization of the Balkans.

However, what interests me more is how Žižek’s argument fares when confronted with intra-textual evidence. If we watch the film carefully we will see that the only references film makes to Yugoslav Secession Wars of 1990s do not unequivocally point to Bosnia. It is unclear where exactly the war zone in which Crni, one of the film’s two main protagonists, leads his own personal militia is situated (Croatia or Bosnia). Moreover, the geography of the flat plains and the burned down Christian church would suggest it is Slavonia, a region in the east of Croatia that is depicted, rather than mountainous and dominantly Muslim Bosnia of the time.

Second, and much more to the point, the tone of the third part of the film which takes place during the 1990s is quite the opposite from the first part in which the Communist obscene primarily comes to fore. The Communist obscene – the never-ending eating-drinking-singing-fornicating – was depicted in a jocular manner, whereas by the time Crni burns down the whole village in question and unknowingly executes Marko the somber and macabre tone has long since replaced jest. It becomes readily apparent then how Žižek not only assumes things film never explicitly addresses (the Bosnian war), but also blatantly disregards the film itself when evidence point in the different direction. For how else could Žižek hold that the obscene of the 1940s and 1970s Communism stands for the obscene of 1990s Neo-fascism when the latter is not even depicted in reference to what Žižek connects it to (the Bosnian war), and when the tone in which the two are depicted are at the opposite sides of the spectrum.

In conclusion, three main theses of this paper are worth articulating once again: 1) the expansion of the canon must be substantiated by proof of considerable numbers of foreign and domestic viewers; 2) study of Balkanism is not a value free framework so an analysis of commentator’s arguments from an ideological slant should be made only if evidence is cherry-picked; and 3) intra-textual evidence should be given more weight than intra-textual ones.
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i According to IMDB 227 thousand people have seen Ničija zemlja in France alone, and 129 thousand in Spain. It has grossed about $1 million in US which would add about 200 thousand spectators more.
ii According to IMDB figures for admissions in France alone 536,000 people have seen Život and 338,252 Underground.
iii Text here is used in Seymour Chatman’s sense of the word as any type of “communication that temporally controls its reception by the audience” (1990: 8) with a modification by Mieke Bal (1999) that it has a clearly marked end and a beginning.