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There is no such thing as Balkan cinema, and yes, Balkan cinema exists: Ruminations on the past and possible futures of Balkan cinema (and media) studies?

Ana Grgić

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Twenty years ago, discussing cinema of the Southeastern corner of Europe, Dina Iordanova argued that the Balkans should capitalise on their togetherness and turn the problematic position of ‘being Balkan’ from a burden to a strength.[1] At the time, Iordanova was defining the concept of ‘Balkan cinema’, based on the ‘inclusive understanding of the Balkans’, being a cultural entity and not a geographical concept, and the acknowledgment of a ‘shared Balkan cultural space’.[2] It was simply a matter of *seeing* films from the Balkans to recognise the similarities.[3] Since the digital turn, the exponential rise of streaming platforms, the conflating of television, film, and digital media giving rise to new and hybrid forms of audiovisual works, and the weakening status of film festivals impacted by the global pandemic, where do the small, ‘peripheral’ and low-production capacity cinemas of the Balkans stand? Does it still make sense to talk about ‘regional cinema’ and by extension ‘Balkan cinema’ within the global cultural economy of moving images? And the question still remains: has ‘Balkan cinema’ – this ‘imaginary entity, a newly consolidated concept’ — withstood the test of time?[4]

What is Balkan cinema?

Thomas Elsaesser argued that ‘any book about European cinema should start with a statement that there is no such thing as European cinema, and that yes, European cinema exists [...]’.[5] Equally, by extension, I would like to argue that there is no such thing as Balkan cinema, and yet it still exists and it enriches our understanding of cinematic landscapes at the crossroads of film and area studies.

If ‘European cinema’ is recognisable for ‘its reflexivity, inward turn’, ‘its unique form of ruminating, speculative self-scrutiny’ and philosophical tendencies,[6] ‘Balkan cinema’ attests to ‘a specific artistic sensibility, possibly coming from shared history and socio-cultural space’, and can be defined as ‘an entity of clearly discernible thematic and stylistic affinities’.[7] Despite linguistic and religious barriers, the Balkan countries share the same issues: ‘turbulent history and volatile politics; a semi-Orientalist positioning’ seen as either ‘marginality’ or ‘a bridge between East and West’; confrontation between Christianity and Islam; and ‘a legacy of patriarchy and economic and cultural dependency’.[8] These resulted in some common themes in twentieth century Balkan cinema: historical/nation-building epics, war narratives, political violence and dictatorship, the ‘Balkan national character’ and the associated absurdist humour, ‘village-to-town migration’ issues, diaspora and migration, and patriarchal society issues.[9] Contemporary Balkan films continue to explore and rework these themes, and they exhibit new thematic and stylistic affinities: re-visitations of the past, war consequences and traumas, organised and petty crime, corruption of the political and social system, dysfunctional judiciary, emigration, issues of family and patriarchy, and LGBTQ topics.[10]

Yet, the ‘Balkan’ label has often been rejected by the region’s filmmakers and film critics, which is a consequence of the semi-orientalising perception of the region and its presumed non-European character. The issue appears when Balkan cinema is reduced to a homogenous stylistic characteristic and narrative tendency. Several scholars pointed out how certain films from the region have internalised and reproduced the Balkanising gaze (through ‘self-exoticism’[11] and ‘self-balkanisation’[12]), which perpetuates a stereotypical image of the Balkans as an irrational and violent place. Films by the internationally famed director Emir Kusturica are most exemplary of this tendency, but it is important to note that this style, the ‘poetic model of self-balkanisa-

tion',[13] coincides with the Yugoslav wars and their aftermath and is recognisable in the films made during this period by Srđan Dragojević, Milcho Manchevski, or Goran Paskaljević. Instead of making recourse to reductionist models (such as the 'festival film' or 'misery porn'), Balkan cinema should be critically analysed as a dynamic and hybrid entity, and as suggested by Daković, Balkan identity constructed via and represented by filmic images is determined by 'its very elusiveness, multiculturalism, multinationalism and interethnic nature'.[14]

Furthermore, whereas European cinema has constructed itself in opposition to Hollywood cinema (as its Other according to Elsaesser), we could argue that Balkan cinema has formed itself as European cinema's 'alter ego' (Europe's negative mirror image according to Todorova) or the shadow self (to employ psychoanalytical terms and Slavoj Žižek's claim that the Balkans are the projection space of Europe's repressed realm of phantasms). For much of the twentieth century, the Balkan countries have been negotiating their symbolic return to Europe, nowadays understood as a process of 'Europeanisation', by reasserting their Western cultural genealogy and discarding the alleged non-Europeaness (traced back to the Ottoman legacy), which also meant disassociating the affinities with neighbouring countries.[15] Paraphrasing Todorova's argument which maintains that 'Balkan Otherness is contained in the self-image of Europe', Kolozova surmises that 'the European self and its Balkan Other form a binary that is a fundamental structural unity of the *Imaginary of the European Identity*'. [16] Consequently, Balkan cinema could be conceptualised as 'the liminal self' of European cinema.

Has Balkan cinema withstood the test of time?

That the cinema of the Balkans is still relevant is evident by: the Oscar nomination for the Bosnian film *Quo Vadis Aida?* (Jasmila Žbanić, 2020), the Golden Bear at Berlin for the Romanian film *Babardeală cu bucluc sau porno balamuc / Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn* (Radu Jude, 2020), and the Camera d'Or award at Cannes for the Croatian film *Murina* (Antoneta Alamat Kusijanović, 2021) to name a few. Balkan cinema continues to be showcased in side-bars at film festivals, such as Thessaloniki, Sarajevo, Sofia, and Tirana, and is the thematic focus of festivals such as the Balkan Film Festival in Rome, the Balkans Beyond Borders Short Film Festival, and Balkan New Film Festival in Stockholm. Film co-productions in the region have increased over the last

decades, which point to developing cross-border collaborations and cultural networks. There are a number of regional networks and institutions which help the development of (trans)national film projects, such as the SEE Cinema Network, Balkan Documentary Film Centre, or the Balkan Film Market. Balkan television shows are increasingly made, such as the Serbian-Albanian language crime drama series *Besa* (2018-), co-produced by the Greek Antenna Group, the British/American Red Planet Pictures, and the Serbian Adrenalin company and filmed across Serbia, Montenegro, and Croatia.

Another sign of the continuing relevance of Balkan cinema is the recent publication which tackles the concept of ‘Balkan cinema’, reconceptualising it in the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2008, a period which has witnessed an increase in cross-border collaborations, co-productions, and a more extrovert attitude in film production and distribution in the region.[17] Whereas the global financial crisis did not seem to greatly affect the concept of Balkan cinema, recent work shows it destabilised the notion of a unique European identity or a European cinema, though EU funding policies were not significantly altered.[18] Whether its recognition of a shared cultural space or acknowledgment of being a small cinema industry on the European periphery, it seems that at least in cinematic terms, Balkan film practitioners are increasingly sharing this ‘togetherness’ to get projects off the ground and sustain local film production.

Moreover, two cinematic waves from the region have made reverberations on regional and international levels over the last two decades: the Romanian New Wave (or New Romanian Cinema) and the Greek Weird Wave, both movements with strong aesthetic and narrative tendencies, which can be seen as a response to the economic, social, and existential crisis caused by neoliberal capitalism, and a feeling of ‘postcommunist malaise’.[19] This dynamic period of Balkan cinemas also saw the emergence of a new generation of women auteurs: Aida Begić, Ralitsa Petrova, Jasmila Žbanić, Adina Pintilie, Mila Turajlić, Teona Strugar Mitevska, Sonja Prosenc, Pelin Esmer, and Marianna Economou to name a few, marking an important shift in regional cinemas to start acknowledging female voices and make a departure from the traditionally male-oriented industry. These signs are particularly encouraging for Balkan cinema given that women filmmakers continue to be marginalised and under-acknowledged in screen industries across the world.

Still, contemporary Balkan cinema maintains a connection with its past and significantly expands thematic concerns and formal approaches to the subjects explored. While many films made in the aftermath of the Yugoslav

wars performed self-balkanisation, more recent films such as Dalibor Matanić's *Zvizdan/The High Sun* (2015) or Ognjen Glavonić's *Teret/The Load* (2016) address the issues of the Yugoslav and Kosovo wars and associated traumas through a self-conscious and affective style, which departs from Balkanist conventions and stereotypes. Even some popular films which seem to nod to 'self-balkanisation' and employ the conventions of genre cinema, such as *Misija London/Mission London* (Dimitar Mitovski, 2010), *Parada/Parade* (Srđan Dragojević, 2011), or *Balkanot ne e mrtov/Balkan Is Not Dead* (Aleksandar Popovski, 2013) do so in a very conscious post-modern fashion, exploiting the stereotypes to greater comical effect or critiquing national liberation myths in the Balkans. A poignant example of contemporary self-reflexivity is Radu Jude's *Aferim* (2015), which revisits a common Balkan theme — the Roma communities, but instead of offering an exoticised and Othering representation of these minorities, the film exposes and reflects on the wider issues of slavery, racism, and cultural memory by reworking the characteristics of the 'Red Western' genre popular during the communist period.

Increasingly, well-known film directors are diversifying their practice and getting involved in the production of television series. For example, Dalibor Matanić's political thriller series *Novine/The Paper* (2016-2020) was acquired for distribution by Netflix, thereby becoming the first Eastern European series in their catalogue, while the historical drama *Senke nad Balkanom/Balkan Shadows* (2017-) was the first Serbian series acquired by Amazon Prime. Other established and acclaimed directors such as Emin Alper directed the crime drama mini-series *Alef* (2020), and Bojan Vuletić made a five-part drama series *Porodica/The Family* (2021). The enormous popularity of Turkish television series across the region, such as *Muhteşem Yüzyıl/The Magnificent Century* (2011-2014) and *Binbir Gece/One Thousand and One Nights* (2006-2009), became a strong example of Turkish soft power. The success of these drama series points to their cross-cultural characteristics, with spectators identifying with characters and cultural stereotypes, which allows the series 'to act as a transnational conveyor of different cultural proximities'[20] and reintroduce 'the memory of common values of the people living in the Balkans with the Turkish people from the Ottoman Empire heritage'.[21] Given these developments in the regional film and television landscape, Balkan cinema and media studies, which has just begun to explore different aspects of serial formats,[22] has fertile ground for developing new methodologies to study the transnational, cross-cultural, and hybrid aspects of Balkan television series in this era of 'platformisation'.

The present futures of Balkan cinema

In 2018, Elsaesser described the current condition of European cinema as one of ‘marginality and irrelevance’, and yet it is within this condition that he saw a novel and exciting opportunity: the possibility of freedom and ‘a new kind of autonomy’.[23] Rather than lament its demise and express a nostalgia towards its cinematic past, Elsaesser argued that 21st century European cinema (stranded between its self-perception of a fortress ‘of cinema as autonomous art’ and outside perception of being part ‘of the exotic-ethnographic mix going by the name of world cinema’) is in the process of reworking its legacy.[24]

Now that Balkan cinema and media has ‘matured’ so to speak, and has largely liberated itself from self-balkanising narratives, it can build on and rework both of its legacies: that of European cinema (particularly nodding to the work of East European auteurs during the Cold War), and that of Balkan cinema (through self-reflexivity), offering new perspectives via politically and aesthetically transformative films and television series which address old and new pressing societal issues. While European cinema and auteurs may be burdened by a cinematic legacy (and the tradition to defend cinema as an art form), Balkan cinema and filmmakers may by proxy claim the European cinematic legacy and yet be free from this very tradition, without the sense of betrayal, since they occupy a liminal, crossroads positioning.

Author

Dr. Ana Grgić (PhD, University of St Andrews) is Associate Professor at Babeş-Bolyai University and Adjunct Lecturer at Monash University Malaysia. Her research interests include Balkan and Eastern European cinema and film history. She is author of *Early Cinema, Modernity and Visual Culture: The Imaginary of the Balkans* (Amsterdam University Press, 2022), and co-editor of *Contemporary Balkan Cinema: Transnational Exchanges and Global Circuits* with Lydia Papadimitriou (Edinburgh University Press, 2020). She has published widely in journals, such as *Early Popular Visual Culture*, *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, *Short Film Studies*, *Film Quarterly*, and edited collections such as *The Film Festival Yearbook* and *Cinemas of Paris*. She is also Associate Editor of *Studies in World Cinema: A Critical Journal* (BRILL).

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Notes

- [1] Iordanova 2006, p. 9.
- [2] Iordanova 2001, pp. 6-9.
- [3] Iordanova 2006, p. 3.
- [4] Iordanova 2006, p. 2.
- [5] Elsaesser 2005, p. 13.
- [6] Elsaesser 2018, p. 4.
- [7] Iordanova 2006, pp. 1-3.
- [8] Iordanova 2006, p. 1.
- [9] Iordanova 2006, pp. 6-7.
- [10] Papadimitriou and Grgić 2020, p. 9.

- [11] 'Self-exoticism' is a preferred mode of self-representation which contributes to the construction of 'the Balkans as compliant to Western stereotypes' (Iordanova 2001, p. 56).
- [12] 'Self-balkanisation' reproduces and performs the external look of foreigners (Longinović 2005, p. 35-47).
- [13] Pavičić 2011, p. 141.
- [14] Daković 2008, p. 227.
- [15] Refer to 'nesting orientalisms' in Bakić-Hayden, 1995.
- [16] Italics in original, Kolozova 2011, p. 300.
- [17] Papadimitriou and Grgić 2020, p. 5.
- [18] Kaklamanidou and Corbalán 2018, pp. 1-4.
- [19] Samardžija 2020, pp. 1-17.
- [20] Pothou 2020, p. 15.
- [21] Gündüz 2020.
- [22] See for example, Özalpman and Sarikakis 2018, Gündüz 2020, Pothou 2020 and Daković 2020.
- [23] Elsaesser 2018, pp. 8-16.
- [24] Elsaesser 2018, p. 17.