Cinema of Flames

Balkan Film, Culture and the Media

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Chapter 3
Narrating the Balkans

The modern-day post-colonial discourse which revealed 'that "East" like "West" is much more of a project than a place', and which originally seemed a theory only remotely relevant to the Balkans, is reinforced by a small but growing number of recent studies that explore the gradual Western construction of the concept of Eastern Europe as 'a work of cultural creation, of intellectual artifice, of ideological self-interest and self-promotion' (Bakić-Hayden, 1995, p. 917). In his work on Russia, Larry Wolff provided abundant historical evidence to show that 'it was the intellectual work of the Enlightenment to bring about that modern reorientation of the continent which produced Western Europe and Eastern Europe', and that, ever since, Eastern Europe has functioned as a 'structural boundary, in the mind and on the map' (Wolff, 1994, p. 1). The major part of this 'mapping' project had been carried out by travellers over the years, so Wolff explores numerous travel-related narratives that have been instrumental for the mental mapping that established Eastern Europe as an intellectual project of 'demi-Orientalization' (ibid., p. 5), of 'neither definitive exclusion nor unqualified inclusion' but constructed on a 'developmental scale that measured the distance between civilization and barbarism' (ibid., p.13).

On this scale, the Balkans were located closer to 'the depths of barbarism', functioning as a specific sub-category of Eastern Europe, as 'a synonym for a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian', and as something that suggested further lower levels of 'nesting Orientalism'. Historian Maria Todorova specifically explored the works and accounts of travellers to the Balkans, and concluded that

> geographically inextricable from Europe, yet culturally constructed as 'the other,' the Balkans became, in time, the object of a number of externalized political, ideological and cultural frustrations and have served as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the 'European' and 'the West' has been constructed.
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> (Todorova, 1994, p. 453)

In her 1997 book, *Imagining the Balkans*, Todorova continued the discussion of the writings of travellers to the Balkans from the seventeenth century until the present day to show how the construction of this image has come into being. She focuses on the Balkan writings of Edward Brown, Robert Walsh, Henry Blount, William Gladstone, George Bernard Shaw and Hermann Graf von Keyserling, along with present-day authors such as George Kennan, Robert Kaplan and Lawrence Eagleburger. Her overall conclusion is that Balkanism and its subject are imprisoned in a field of discourse where 'Balkans' is set in opposition to 'West' and to 'Europe', and where 'Balkanism' is the darker other of 'Western civilisation'.

But while the work of historians is retrospective, it is one of the intentions of this study to show that the 'orientalist' construction of the Balkans is a process that continues today. What is even more important, the 'orientalisation' of the Balkans cannot be declared a purely Western project, as it is a process which has been embraced, internalised and partially carried out by many consenting Balkan intellectuals. It is not just 'the West' which constructs the Balkans as compliant to Western stereotypes, to a large extent this construction is taken up and carried further by 'the Rest', and in our case by Balkan writers and film-makers themselves. The result is a specific voluntary 'self-exoticism', which becomes the preferred mode of self-representation for many Balkan film-makers.

Through the exploration of a number of works of literature and films, mostly by Balkan authors, it is possible to make the following claims.

First, the distinctive travelogue-type narrative structure is characteristic of a large number of 'Balkan' plots. Second, by submissively accepting instead of critically challenging a narrative structure which inevitably positions and constructs them as objects of the Western traveller's gaze, recent films from the Balkans that aim to address the current troubles of the region largely cater to traditional stereotypes. By doing so, Balkan film remains uncritical and fails to recognise the controversial effects of the Eurocentric construct. Third, this lack of critical examination provides grounds for wider speculation about the paradoxical positioning of the Balkans as geographically part of Europe, but conceptually excluded from the European cultural space.

The journey to the dark Balkans: Snakes and ignorance

A brief summary of a short story by Ivo Andrić, *Snake*, will take us to the very heart of the problem (Andrić, 1969, pp. 207–23). *Snake* is set in 1885 and describes the experiences of Agatha and Amelia, two sisters from a high-ranking officer's family in Vienna, as they travel through Bosnia. Back home the sisters have an extensive record of involvement in charitable activities for the poor (Agatha is even dubbed 'Caritas' by her friends), serving hot meals for the hungry, and providing shelter and warm clothes for the winter. In Bosnia,

however, the sisters encounter an unusual situation – their carriage is stopped by a small crowd of people surrounding a girl who has been bitten by a snake. The girl's parents know no better than to call the local charm healer, but the two charitable sisters are just as helpless as anyone else. Although, they have seen and dealt with 'illness and poverty in the slums of Vienna', what they face now is quite different. The sisters react with pained annoyance in the face of people who appear slower and uglier than the ones they are used to dealing with, people whose ways of suffering are unmanageable and coarse. The hardship they encounter here is very different from what they are used to, and does not fall within the specifically aestheticised dimensions of their charitable activities at home. Their sweet ways of soothing pain are not suited for this rough and challenging situation. This lack of style casts an overwhelming shadow over the whole incident.

Still, Agatha and Amelia manage to help the girl by administering alcohol to prevent the poison from spreading. Soon after, they leave angry and frustrated by an experience that has shattered their self-esteem and undermined the image they have of themselves – one of efficient and beautiful fairy godmothers. They have preserved their ethical integrity as charitable benefactors, but the messy aesthetic dimension that accompanied this unexpected experience irritates them enormously. The sisters leave, eager to get away from this cursed place: 'Oh, I told you in Vienna what kind of a country we were going to,' Agatha tells Amelia. 'Now you've seen what it's like. Not a wretched thing under the heavens! I kept telling you about the poverty and the wilderness – the ugly, indescribable squalour. I told you so, I told you so? But it's even worse, it's awful – absolutely awful! Bosnia is not worth crying for.'

The sisters of Andrić's story travel to the Balkans, become involved in an unhappy experience, and then leave – an ordinary and conventional development. This story, however, is among the rare instances when the attitude of the Westerner is subtly problematised within a traditional narrative frame. In most other cases, the Westerner is just an unquestioned measurement used against the backdrop of 'otherness'.

The framework in which the Balkans are represented and conceptualised is most commonly one of accounts presented by European travellers who visit, pass through, explore, or undergo controversial experiences, and who then report on these from the safety and comfort of home. At least, this seems to be the case with some of the most popular works on the Balkans. The best-selling recent paperbacks on the Balkans, for example, have been Penguin's reprint of the 1941 *Black Lamb and Gray Falcon* (subtitled *A Journey through Yugoslavia)* by Dame Rebecca West; Vintage's *Balkan Ghosts* (subtitled *A Journey through History*) by Robert Kaplan (1993), which is widely researched and based on the travelogues of other Western visitors to the Balkans, and Penguin's *The Impossible Country* (1994)

(subtitled *A Journey through the Last Days of Yugoslavia*) by Brian Hall. The travelogue is also the preferred vehicle for documentary film-makers, who chose to retain the travel diary format when editing their footage.[1]

The Journey to the Greek Islands: zest and flamboyance

Works in fictional film – recent, as well as classical – have further constructed the Balkans in this direction. The structure of the plot and the narrative strategies used to tell stories that take place in the Balkans are regularly shaped as accounts of a trip, a journey, or a visit. Typically, a Western protagonist goes to the Balkans and encounters other, different experiences, experiences that are dynamically evaluated through a continual referencing back to the original, Western point of departure. Thus the presumed 'normalness' embodied by the Westerner serves as a measure of the degree of Balkan 'deviance'.

Two well-known 'Greek' films can serve as good examples here.[2] The first one is *Pote tin Kyriaki/Never on Sunday* (1960), written and directed by Jules Dassin (a French-born American), and starring Melina Mercouri. In the film, Dassin casts himself in the role of a proselytising American, Homer, who comes across this cheerful Greek prostitute, Ilyia (Mercouri). Rather than being converted by him to the 'right' way, however, it is she whose influence proves stronger and who makes Homer reconsider many of his beliefs and puritan morals.

Even though the intent of *Never on Sunday* is to ridicule the rigidness of the West and to celebrate the zeal of the Mediterranean spirit, the formal structure of the narrative features a Western traveller and events that unravel in response to his presence; it is he and his experiences that are the first and last point of reference. Presenting Greece as a country of eternal sunshine and its people as joyous bon vivants, *Never on Sunday* is credited with pushing the tourist boom

In *Pote tin kyriaki/Never on Sunday* (1960), Jules Dassin casts himself as a naive American scholar who comes across an aggressive pub visitor and a cheerful prostitute (played by his wife and the future Greek Culture Minister, Melina Mercouri) whose situation he sets out to change

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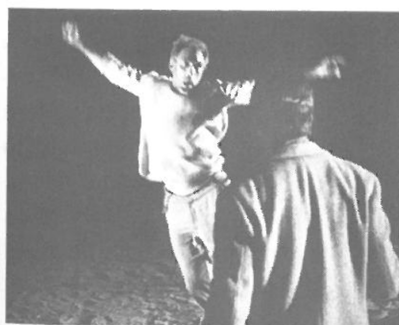
in the early 1960s and establishing Greece as a favourite holiday destination, a jolly alternative to the rigid routines that holiday-makers are escaping from.

The intensity of the encounter between 'stiff upper lips' and the exotic Balkan is taken a step further in the second film, *Zorba the Greek*, a 1964 20th Century-Fox adaptation of the 1946 novel by Nikos Kazantzakis. Scripted and directed by Cypriot Michael Cacoyannis, the adaptation claimed to capture the main moments of the novel's narrative. The film is, nonetheless, a prime example of concessions to Hollywood standards in reiterating self-inflicted stereotypes. Cacoyannis' changes to Kazantzakis' literary source reveal the way the consensual self-exoticising works.

The narrator of the story is a British writer (Alan Bates) who, during a visit to Greece, comes across this incredible individual, the flamboyant and colourful Zorba (Anthony Quinn). Whatever Zorba does in the film (and he does a lot of wild and exotic things), it is always conveyed to the audience through the aloof reticence of the Briton. Many of the scenes between the two protagonists take place within a cinematic frame that features Zorba at its centre (dancing wildly, mimicking mischievously or delivering a showy speech), and Alan Bates in the corner, observing Zorba's overexcited behaviour with restraint.[3]

The numerous challenges presented by Zorba's non-standard moral judgment are supposed to provide a learning experience for the Briton and to give him a chance to re-evaluate his rigid attitudes. But it does not work this way. Instead, Bates remains the onlooker. The Briton is intrigued, but he is far from abandoning his own moral standards, which he 'sacrifices' only occasionally in order to 'adjust' to local ways when circumstances dictate. When he leaves, he is enriched by his exposure to the curious Balkan mores, but he remains essentially unchanged.



Many scenes in *Zorba the Greek* (1964) feature Zorba (Anthony Quinn) doing something wild centre screen while critically watched by the restrained Briton (a young Alan Bates, cast here against the wild type he will come to be associated with later in his career)

Zorba the Greek opens with a shot taken from a descending aeroplane. In the closing shot, the camera moves away, leaving the scene of action by ascending back into the air. The very arrival of the Briton seems to have animated Zorba, as his life before the appearance of the foreigner and after his departure is deemed irrelevant and is left out of the narrative: he only exists in relation to the Western protagonist. The only reference to Zorba's past in the film is made in order to explain his command of the English language – he mentions that he has been to the USA. In the novel, however, the language of the exchange is Greek, not English: Zorba has not been to the USA, he does not know English and it is the Briton, of mixed ethnic background, who speaks Greek. In the film, all explanations of why and how Zorba has become what he is are deleted: he only exists in the present tense. The novel, on the contrary, abounds with references to Zorba's past, which establish him as a rich and complex character. The film ends with the departure of the Westerner, at which point Zorba ceases to exist. The novel, however, features an epilogue, which tells us what happened to Zorba after he parted with the Briton.

The changes that Cacoyannis made when adapting for the screen are indicative of some of the basic premises of the voluntary self-exoticism which characterises many other works by Balkan authors meant for Western audiences: Balkan individuals are represented as flamboyant and excitingly dismissive of the restrictive norms of Western civilisation; their lives before and after their contact with the Western protagonist are irrelevant and are better left out; their existence is of importance only in relation to contact with the foreigner. It is in this way, for example, that the Greek character of Ben Kingsley in *Pascali's Island* (1988) appears out of the blue and approaches an Englishman who has just arrived on the island. It is a Berkeleian '*esse* is *percipi*' situation, as these characters seem to exist only when a foreigner who needs their services comes to town.

If the local Greeks' lives are referred to in some way beyond the Westerner's presence, it is merely to confirm the Westerner's fears that they differ substantially from the act they put on in Westerner's presence. Such is the situation with Tom Conti's Greek protagonist in *Shirley Valentine* (1989): he manages to seduce the British holiday-maker, played by Pauline Collins, only after investing substantial time and effort, and he appears to be genuinely devoted to her. But soon after, when she returns unexpectedly to check on him, he is revealed to be nothing more than a philanderer, who will work equally hard next week to seduce the next Western single female tourist he happens to come across.[4]

The journey to the gloomy Balkans: Blood and bullets

Today, little has changed, and the travelogue narrative continues to enjoy a prominent presence in recent films about the troubled Balkan lands. Again the

brokerage of a Western narrator is needed to validate the story. In *Welcome to Sarajevo* and *Comanche Territory* the story evolves around Western journalists covering the Bosnian carnage.[5] In *Gamebag* it is two Italian hunters who witness the madness of ethnic hatred which sets father and daughter against each other. In Godard's *Forever Mozart* it is a group of Parisian intellectuals who set out to stage a Musset play in embattled Sarajevo, venture into the war zone and suffer at the hands of local thugs. In Predrag Antonijevic's *Savior* it is a Western mercenary fighting for the Serbs who witnesses the guilt of all sides in the conflict. Even *Gadjo Dilo/The Crazy Stranger* (1997), directed by Tony Gatlif, who usually manages to tell stories about his gypsy people without recourse to this narrative device, is structured around the journey of a young Frenchman who ends up in a Romanian gypsy settlement in his search for fervour and authenticity.

The list of films structured around the same plot – of well-balanced and presumably sane Westerners who venture into the Balkan realm of barbarity – is much longer. What is common to all these films is that their protagonists seem to be searching for the madness, longing to get some exposure to it. And they are rewarded, as the Balkan lands always provide the excitement that they have come looking for. The closer the films are to the action-adventure end of the narrative spectrum, the stronger the thrill that the protagonists are exposed to.

There are many other more recent examples of the specific structuring of the Balkan narrative in the tradition of the travelogue. However, I will concentrate on just a few films that repeatedly reveal this pattern. What is special about the next three films – the Romanian *O primavara de neuitat/An Unforgettable Summer* (1994), the Macedonian *Before the Rain* and the Greek *Ulysses' Gaze* – is that they are all feature films made by Balkan film-makers. Unlike the examples listed above, these are films of self-representation. Nonetheless, as we will see, they deploy the same narrative devices as the Western films about the Balkans, and make full use of the travelogue tradition and of the figure of the visiting Western protagonist.

Thus, the 'otherness' of the Balkans, which may have originated in the West, is gradually taken up and internalised by local directors who claim to represent the Balkans 'from within'. Despite wishing to unravel the intricate logic of Balkan tensions, in these three films the directors prefer to present the events from a foreigner's point of view (seen as the only possibly objective one), thus relegating the people whose lives they want to explain to the position of being watched (and judged) by strangers. The result is consenting self-exoticism: the practice of Balkan directors to depict their own cultures as compliant to the Western framework we discussed.

The story of the Romanian film *An Unforgettable Summer*, directed by veteran Lucian Pintilie, takes place near the Danube's delta, in the border region

of Dobroudja. Populated by Romanians and Bulgarians, the area has continually been the subject of territorial disputes, has changed hands in the past and is currently divided between the two countries. The film's events unravel in 1925, at a time when most of Dobroudja belongs to Romania. The protagonist is an officer's wife, Marie-Therese von Debretsy, the offspring of an impoverished Austro-Hungarian noble family. She marries below her status and readily accompanies her husband to his new posting at this remote border outpost – a sign that shows she is ready to give up higher society for the sake of love and family unity.

But she is ready to go even further than that. Once stationed at the border, Marie-Therese displays a readiness to merge with the barren landscape, which she tries to poeticise whimsically. The grey overtones of the peasants' clothes supplement the impressionistic pastels of her fading expensive outfits.

Seemingly out of boredom, she grows compassionate for the members of the victimised local minority. Such sympathies, however, are ill-positioned against her position as an official's wife, which requires her to keep distance from the locals and not to take sides even when she witnesses injustice perpetrated by the authorities. Marie-Therese, however, refuses to play along and persists in her caring attitude, ignoring the warnings of her military acquaintances not to get too involved with the locals. As a result, the officers ostracise her.

The fragile union that develops between Marie-Therese and the oppressed Bulgarian peasants does not last long, however, neither does it have much weight. Her compassion can barely help the peasants; indeed, it only makes things worse. Soon Marie-Therese and her husband are forced to leave, shunned by the officers and disliked by the locals.

The choice of Kristin Scott-Thomas, cast by Pintilie for the role of Marie-Therese, is barely accidental. She is an actress who embodies refined Europeanness. Her very presence keeps the viewer interested in the plot, and the Balkan subject matter. This casting of Western actors is not an isolated case, but is characteristic of most of the Balkan films discussed here. For *Before the Rain*, director Milcho Manchevski cast French actor Gregoire Colin and British actress Katrin Cartlidge, once again faces familiar to viewers both in the West and the East. In a similar way, Greek Theo Angelopoulos regularly uses actors with an established European reputation – Jeanne Moreau and Marcello Mastroianni in *To meteoro vima tou pelagrou/The Suspended Step of the Stork* (1991); Harvey Keitel and Erland Josephson in *Ulysses' Gaze*; Bruno Ganz in *Mia aiwniothta kai mia mera/Eternity and a Day* (1998). The presence of these familiar faces in a Balkan setting sends out a specific message: these are the actors who have inhabited the intellectual universe of directors such as Luchino Visconti, Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, François Truffaut, Andrei Tarkovsky, Martin Scorsese, Jane Campion and Wim Wenders. They have been

cast as apprehensive and sensitive people, and their appearance in films about the Balkans is meant to ensure they are unconditionally recognised as such by the audiences. Once such recognition has taken place, the problematic of the Balkan universe is more likely to be recognised as immediately pertinent to the European one.

The recent Balkan features of Greek Theo Angelopoulos also unfold in the travelogue narrative form: in *The Suspended Step of the Stork* it is a Westernised documentary film-maker who visits a refugee settlement on the Albanian border; and in *Ulysses' Gaze* it is a celebrated film-maker, who has returned to his native lands after thirty-five years in the West, and who now travels across the shattered Balkans on a pensive and melancholic journey.

This narrative form is so typical of Angelopoulos that it is even encoded in the basic morphology of his unique film vocabulary. In *Ulysses' Gaze*, the mostly hand-held camera of his cameraman, Yorgos Arvanitis, moves very slowly and is often positioned in such a way that it reveals actions taking place in two different semantic layers of the screen space. For example, a typical shot for Angelopoulos would involve a long and elaborate sequence in which a torso or a side close-up of the protagonist occupies one corner of the screen, overlooking whatever events develop. As a result, the events lose their objectivity and are actually constructed through the gaze of the onlooking protagonist. Thus, it is not only the plot (which has taken the narrative form of a travelogue) but also the basic components of the film language that ensure that the account of the Balkans is provided through the gaze of a stranger.

Our third example is *Before the Rain* by Milcho Manchevski, a Macedonian-born, American-educated director. His non-linear tale of today's Macedonia, filled with elaborate twists in time and space, is told through the gaze of a displaced native, Aleksandar, a cosmopolitan photographer, who returns from London to his native village after eighteen years of absence only to find that the ancient enmities are stronger than ever. Aleksandar comes from the civilised and rational West, and encounters a world taken over by ugly and violent intolerance. He does not want to take sides and makes an attempt to rise above the irrational rivalries, but in the end his worldly ideas of humanist reconciliation cost him his life – he is killed by his own people. In *Before the Rain* contemporary Macedonia is shown as a land governed by a medieval ethos, where tribal mores mercilessly destroy everyone who dares to stand up against the primitive mentality of an 'eye for an eye'. The film moves within a prescribed framework that mirrors the long-standing stereotype of the Balkans as an exotic and attractive people who are impossible to deal with. It continues the line of representing the Balkans as a mystic stronghold of stubborn and belligerent people, and asserts the existing Balkan trend of voluntary self-exoticism.

These examples suggest that Balkan film-makers prefer to depict their own cultures through the eyes of Westerners (or locals who have spent sufficient time in the West) and that travelogue style of narration is still prevalent in Balkan film-making. Ingenious imagery is offered, but the way it is used often just mirrors established stereotypes. At first glance, it seems that these films are pioneering the treatment of a non-traditional and difficult subject matter, but in fact they do little more than perpetuate and facilitate the Eurocentric gaze, both through their chosen narrative structure and in many of their basic textual elements.

The journey to the poor Balkans: Raki and bunkers

Lamerica (1994), Italian director Gianni Amelio's film set in Albania, is yet another Balkan travelogue. Again, the story is told from the point of view of a Western traveller. What is substantially different here, however, is that the direction of the movement, and thus the gaze of the narrator, which traditionally is positioned from West to South-East, changes at one point in the narrative and is redirected from South-East to West, as we see the situation from the 'inside'. With its change of viewing point, *Lamerica* challenges the established hierarchy which guarantees the Westerner an untouchably higher standing, and thus subverts the Balkan travelogue construct itself.

The subversion is achieved by taking the protagonist, the Italian Gino, from his initial position as Western onlooker, and throwing him into the ultimately deprived position of a local Albanian outcast.

Initially, Gino is the assistant to Fiore, a businessman who arrives in Tirana to establish a joint venture with the locals using an Italian government grant. A shady enterprise, its main objective is to collect the grant money and then rapidly go bankrupt, a deceit which Fiore has performed on numerous earlier occasions in Africa. Gino (Enrico Lo Verso) is a young Sicilian with little education but full of energy. He is eager to make it into business and thus ready to

Gianni Amelio's *Lamerica* (1994) subverts the established Balkan narrative by depriving the Italian protagonist Gino (Enrico Lo Verso) of his privileged Western standing and making him endure the unfavourable condition of an Albanian outcast

work devotedly under Fiore's guidance. He starts off as the typical Westerner, who goes to the Balkans with the intention of leaving as soon as possible. But the circumstances change, and he experiences a forced journey through the country, during which he undergoes several stages of loss which gradually change his position – from a superior foreigner in fashionable shades to a rugged Albanian sailing on a crowded ship to Italy.

Gino is sent into Albania to chase a dim-witted Albanian man who happens to be a crucial element in the registration of the enterprise. While driving east into the interior, he encounters endless columns of hitchhikers, hopeful emigrants who make their way to Albania's ports in the hope of sailing to the West. Soon after, when Gino has completed his mission, which has taken him to the heart of Albania, he has to turn round and drive back to the western shore of the country. This simple physical reversal proves a turning point in the narrative. Gino began this journey as the ultimate foreign traveller, a superior onlooker, who, until just a while ago, was moving in the opposite direction to all these desperate wannabe émigrés. A simple change in direction, however, makes Gino's destination the same as theirs, and from this point in the story they all move in one direction. This is the first step in Gino's 'downfall' – the change of direction is automatically a change in the way his 'gaze' is positioned.

The next reversal occurs when the tyres are stolen from his car. Left without a vehicle, he now has to use the same means of transport as the Albanians – crowded buses, crowded trucks, hitchhiking. Even though his own sense of superiority is still unshattered, Gino now has to literally rub shoulders with the Albanians, to feel their bodies, to be among them, although still not one of them. When the crowded bus is ambushed by policemen who want to prevent the Albanian men from reaching the port, Gino makes it through by uttering a key password: '*I am an Italian*'.

During the journey, Gino finds out that his boss's fake business venture has gone bust. Stripped of his position of a 'businessman', he feels almost as disinherited as the Albanians. The final blow, however, occurs in Tirana, where Gino is detained and thrown into a cell with other Albanians. By the next morning, he has been forced to trade his Western clothes for a tattered hand-knitted sweater. With his scruffy face, he looks like an Albanian now. His superior status has gone, along with his glossy Western appearance.

Gino is released, but the authorities refuse to return his Italian passport. He is now one of the crowd, wandering the streets and thinking of exactly the same thing as all Albanians around him – how to get himself to Italy. He has nothing at his disposal but the same limited means.

At the end of the film Gino boards a ship bound for Italy: among a thousand hopeful refugees from Albania, he is indistinguishable from any one of them, and thus identical; from an onlooker he has turned into one of those who were

originally looked at. The camerawork stresses this reversal in his positioning. Initially Gino appeared in the foreground of many shots, standing proud of the surrounding greyness in his trendy dark-blue suit and shades. Gradually, his appearance became less contrasting, as he is shown among other people more often, thus questioning whether his superior Western looks were an attribute of his personality, or just a volatile shelter which swiftly crumbled as fortune changed.

The plea for admission: Journey back to Europe?

Some Albanian intellectuals perceived *Lamerica* as a hostile, damaging and harmful depiction of their country. Ismail Kadare, the Paris-based Albanian writer, led a vocal campaign against the film. According to him, Amelio maliciously chose to stress the impoverishment and to suppress any positive features in representing the country.

These critics certainly have a case. Albania is so close to Italy (it is 'in the heart of Europe'), just a few hours cruise on the blue waters of the Adriatic, and yet it is represented as a world that is centuries apart. The architectural forms dominating the desolate mountainous landscape are the paranoid, crumbling bunkers of Enver Hoxha and the graffiti-covered monuments of partisan battles. The hills are decorated with surreal ruins and 'cluttering thousands of concrete domes' (Fonseca, 1995, p. 76).[6] The only buildings that the camera explores in more detail are a monstrous plant in the centre of a former labour camp and a shoe factory, all dust and greyness. The people inhabiting these structures are either shadow-like disabled figures who wear rags and chase rats, or worn-out weary women dressed in grey or black. All look alike, and all look hungry. In the bars there is no food, only raki, and the closest thing to food you can see is an oxen's head that the innkeeper chops up with an axe. Wherever a car stops, flocks of noisy, raggedy children who pass the time squatting on street corners immediately surround it (they also inhabit *Zorba the Greek* and *Before the Rain*). Toothless Albanians drink 60 per cent proof raki and grin dimly. Loud stereos play North African rhythms, and Italian television entertainment plays to an all-male, wide-eyed audience in jammed rooms. In the rare instances when the protagonists happen to eat, they keep their hands in front of their mouths, as if to protect the rare experience of chewing.[7] An emaciated young man dies silently; he is bare-footed.

The critics, however, failed to see the real worth of *Lamerica* – its subversive power, its critique of the Western gaze of the Balkans. *Lamerica* is among the rare instances when the Western attitude is subtly problematised within a traditional narrative frame. While in most other cases, the Westerner is just an unquestioned measurement used against the backdrop of 'otherness', here the Westerner is turned into one of the 'others' and left to experience life their way.

Starting off as an observer, Gino ends as one of the observed. With this radical change in point of view, Amelio's film undermines traditionally unquestioned hierarchies and calls for legitimisation of the 'other's' point of view.

The images of underdevelopment ask the painful question: is this really Europe of the 1990s? Barren hills, poor peasant houses, women in black and scruffy, raggedy men? Somehow, it does not fit into the traditional mental image of Europe. Neither, for that matter, does it fit into the traditional mental image of a grey industrialised Eastern Europe. It does fit, however, into a newly carved corner of the mental map of Europe: the Balkans.

The paradox of geographical proximity and common historical background, on the one hand, and the implicit but rarely articulated exclusion from what is believed to be truly European, on the other, makes the Balkan type of marginality particularly interesting to investigate. If used in the Balkans, the concept of *Europe* is a comprehensive one, which includes them as well. If used in the West, however, the notion admits a Balkan element only as a neglected 'backyard', which one needs to maintain, albeit reluctantly, according to the minimal standards.[8]

Balkan intellectuals are faced with the difficult question of how to combat this exclusion: aware that their lands are geographically located in Europe, and yet feeling that somehow they are not a desirable partner within the European realm, they believe that their standing could improve if they made an effort to 're-enter Europe'.[9] In order for this re-entry to take place, they feel obliged to be apologetic, and they are prepared to mirror stereotypical representations of themselves as part of an admission bargain which they believe they can negotiate. This voluntary self-denigration takes various shapes, of which the self-inflicted exoticism easily discovered in cinema is just one manifestation. There are also other examples, some of which are more mundane than the ones we have discussed here – for example, the widespread practice of self-bashing when interviewed by Western journalists, or the eager acceptance of the allegations of primordialism. In a recent work, which continues the tradition established by Jovan Cvijić back in 1918, an expatriate Croat scholar offered an elaborate conceptual scheme which is supposed to replace the tribal image of the Balkan people with more refined concepts such as, among others, some peculiar 'habits of the Balkan heart', which would help the West to better understand the 'power-hungry tendencies' of the Balkan people, who quite often happen to be 'mountain-dwelling herdsmen' (Mestrović, 1993b, pp. 4, 56 and 57). Self-criticism of this type is actually meant to help the dialogue – turning to the West with such disarmingly honest and unflattering admissions about themselves, Balkan intellectuals secretly hope that the West will respond in a similar way, admitting its own wrongdoings. In fact, the only result of this vol-

untary self-bashing is that the issue of the Balkans' 'admissibility' to the superior *European* sphere becomes even more problematic and conditional.

Without realising it, numerous works of Balkan cinema contribute to the project of exclusion and 'Third-Worldisation'. With their articulated preference for 'authentic' indigenous imagery, with their meticulous attention to the traditional and the patriarchal elements of the cultures depicted, with their outspoken confirmation of the peculiar moral standards of the locals, with their willingness to 'legitimise' the Balkan narrative through use of the travelogue structure and the figure of the visitor from the West, the effect of these films is to emphasise difference. Once admitted, however, this difference becomes an argument against the presupposition of affinity, as the 'otherness' is readily accepted, and the desired negotiation of terms for re-entering the European realm cannot take place, as there are no grounds on which it could be negotiated.

No works in Balkan cinema can be deemed equivalent to the subversive masterpieces of Third Cinema, such as Ousmane Sembene's *La Noire de . . . /Black Girl* (1966), Nelson Pereira dos Santos's *Como era gostoso o meu francês/How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* (1971) or Carlos Diegues' *Xica da Silva* (1976), which effectively challenge the dependency on the benevolence of the Eurocentric worldview. The film-makers of Third Cinema had an alternative ideology to propose to counter the dominant Western model. They resisted it; they wanted to subvert it. All the Balkan film-makers seek, on the contrary, is to be admitted. But subversion and resistance do not grant admission. Consessions work better for them.

It would be a step too far to expect that the Balkan film-makers whose recent work was discussed here would engage in any sort of critical discourse aimed at 'unthinking' Eurocentrism, a project conceived by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, who insisted that 'an awareness of the intellectually debilitating effects of the Eurocentric legacy is indispensable for comprehending not only contemporary media representations but even contemporary subjectivities' (Shohat and Stam, 1994, p. 1).

It is most likely, instead, that the Balkan intellectual discourse will continue moving within the established framework of concessionary self-denigration and lack of self-confidence. Balkan film-makers will most likely continue to think of themselves as devotedly belonging to Europe, even though they may doubt that *Europe* is as nurturing and sheltering as they would like it to be. Although they may begin to criticise some attitudes, this will only scratch the surface, and they will most likely fail to question radically the symbolic meanings of traditional narrative structures and representations. They would be reluctant to engage in subversion, as any deep questioning may lead to an alteration of 'the conceptual object itself'[10] (Bhabha, 1990, p. 31,: namely, belonging to the sphere of European. It seems more convenient to perpetuate the practice

of consenting self-exoticism, which somehow seems to work better for them in times when dialogue is sought.

Notes

1. Examples include, but are not limited, to: *Balkan Journey* (Canada, Brenda Longfellow, 1996), *Pancrac Diary* (USA, David Galessic, 1994), *Urbicide: A Sarajevo Diary* (UK, Dom Rotheroe, 1994).
2. I use 'Greek' in quotation marks here, as neither of these films is truly Greek – *Never on Sunday* was written and directed by a Westerner; *Zorba the Greek* was produced by an American company (20th Century-Fox), starred British actors and by financial and other criteria is clearly an American film.
3. The casting of Alan Bates for the role of the restrained and reticent Briton is a particularly curious choice, considering the way Bates' own artistic reputation developed. If *Zorba the Greek* was remade today, Bates would be a likelier choice for the role of Zorba.
4. The same morally questionable but nonetheless intriguing sexual politics have been the subject of other films exploring the encounters of the Western with the Balkan. In Dušan Makavejev's *Montenegro* (1981), for example, an affluent but frigid American-born Swedish housewife ends up in a sleazy immigrant bar in Stockholm, where she is initiated into a range of wild and exciting Balkan sexual practices.
5. In another (now abandoned) Hollywood project, *Age of Aquarius* (USA, Phil A. Robinson), the protagonist (Harrison Ford) was also an aid worker who is sent to Sarajevo and becomes involved with a Bosnian woman.
6. Fonseca's *Bury Me Standing*, a book about the Eastern European Roma, received quite a lot of publicity, and is another example of a travelogue narrative, researched by the author in the course of several trips (during one of which she even 'lived' with an Albanian Roma family). Fonseca observantly notes a Third-Worldisation context in relation to the gypsies in Eastern Europe – a Romani ghetto is described as 'as black as India' (p. 123), and another one is called 'Bangladesh' (p. 118). At the moment of writing, the author is back in the West, and is presented in the short biographical note with the appropriate credentials, 'educated at Columbia University and Oxford University', and 'lives in London'.
7. Alexander Sokurov's characters in *The Lonely Human Voice* (1978), a classical cinematic treatment of hunger, eat in exactly the same way.
8. I should note, however, that there are Balkan film-makers who occasionally become quite critical of the questionable qualification of the Balkans as Europe's backyard. Such a critical stance is found particularly in the films that address the Yugoslav crisis. As many in the Balkans believe that the West has done very little in response to their plight, a representation of this alleged

indifference is to be found, for example, in the portrayal of UN deployments in former Yugoslavia. In *Ulysses' Gaze* the presence of UNPROFOR's blue helmets in Sarajevo is shadow-like and absurd. In *Before the Rain* white UNPROFOR vehicles pass by, as if aliens have landed unexpectedly. In Srdjan Dragojevic's *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* (1996) the Chetniks make fun of the UN soldiers, while in Emir Kusturica's *Underground* (1995) it is even implied that the UN forces are the main facilitator of illegal arms' smuggling.

9. I speak of 're-entering Europe' and not 'entering', as having legitimately belonged to the European cultural sphere until their takeover by the Ottomans, circumstances forcibly removed them from the development that took place in the rest of Europe, is a major trope of Balkan national ideologies. In the Balkans, the project of modernisation is conceptualised as one of 'return'.
10. 'To study the nation through its narrative address does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric: it also attempts to alter the conceptual object itself.' (From the preface to *Nation and Narration.*)