

## **The Cinema of the Balkans**

DINA IORDANOVA (ED.), 2006

With a preface by DUŠAN MAKAVEJEV

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‘When faced today with the international success of the “colonial wisdom” of Emir Kusturica, who cannibalised Yugoslav film tradition by presenting glossy pseudo-folkloric images and loose narratives of the central Balkans, funded generously by Slobodan Milošević, one cannot but despair at the Western and European lack of serious film culture and taste – but also knowledge – when it comes to small cinema traditions,’ writes Svetlana Slapšak in her chapter on *Splav Meduse (The Raft of Medusa)*, dir. Karpo Godina, 1980 (p.154), and her lament might serve as a rallying cry not only for this absorbing anthology edited by Professor Dina Iordanova but also for Wallflower’s ground-breaking *24 frames* series, the title drawn on the one hand from the number of frames exposed per second in the movie camera and by extension to the number of chapters per volume, each chapter dedicated to the detailed analysis of one film in its authorial, cultural and political context.

The ‘Kusturica complaint’, heard today from struggling filmmakers from all parts of the former Yugoslavia, is echoed later in this book by the Greek director Pantelis Voulgaris (p.223), speaking of the long shadow cast by Theo Angelopoulos. The tyranny of international expectation triggered by the overwhelming success of one outstanding figure from any given country, usually on the film festival circuit, inhibits alternative versions of the same reality from equally talented compatriots who may not be admitted or recognized for at least a generation.

This book goes some way to rectifying this imbalance, and Professor Iordanova is to be congratulated for omitting not only the titans already mentioned but also her preface-writer, Dusan Makayev (arguably greater than either), in favour of lesser known but possibly more representative voices, a decision which – apart from educating a Western readership who may never have the chance to see the films under discussion - in itself contributes to the ‘de-Balkanization’ of a much neglected region, “connecting the disconnected space” as she eloquently pleads in her introduction (p1).

South-East Europe has been ostracized from the continental mainstream for generations, not least in its film culture, and the paradoxical revelation contained in this thoughtful collection of essays is that its film culture has thrived despite – one almost wishes to say because of – the historical calamities to which it has been exposed, including war (often civil war), deportation, tyranny, invasion, genocide, collaboration and revenge, social deviance and alienation, which overwhelmingly provide the chosen films’ subject matter whether historical or contemporary.

Choosing twenty-four representative films from a region that defies the title was a challenge the editor describes with admirable candour, and her list of nearly fifty ‘also-rans’ is as revealing as her ultimate inclusions, which convince not so much through their individual merit, however persuasive, as through their strategic placement in the emergence of a film tradition, through the influences they absorbed and bequeathed.

Almost all the contributors are regionally connected in some way and bring a passionate insight to the role played in the filmmaking process by industrial and biographical factors; by political infighting, censorship and party line (whether Tito's, Ceaucescu's or the Greek Colonels'); by foreign influences such as the French *nouvelle vague* which were recruited against the stifling pressures of communist social realism (as was the subversive humour and the magical poetry which bind this disparate sub-continent); and by the sometimes irresistible power of audience response, leaving the reader convinced that history can indeed be recounted through, as well as by, film.

The occasional lapse of a preposition is more than made up for by the sharpness of vision and the insider knowledge conveyed, which lift this book (and the series) from an academic exercise to the realm of investigative history accessible to a wide readership, and extended in this case to a proactive championing of Balkan unity which will chime with recent developments in co-production across the region.

It is refreshing to read the names of cinematographers, screenplay writers and other talent as co-authors beside the director, and the vital role of casting is better acknowledged than in many similar studies. The absence of any woman director (apologized for by the editor)(p4) is compensated by some telling assessments of the female role in many of the films, and the prevalence of the prostitute, the vengeful angel or the suffering sinner does little to correct the region's fiercely male bias.

Besides its advantages of deep focus, the "single purpose chapter" has concomitant drawbacks, for instance in a certain *déjà vu* where consecutive films need placing in the same context. Not all the contributors have avoided the dangers of plot repetition entailed in the generally helpful synopsis-analysis chapter structure. The chronological ordering of films, while the only one logically available, necessitates huge leaps across the region, effecting a certain cultural vertigo, though one might also argue that this highly characteristic disorientation exposes the alleged fragmentation of the region to close scrutiny and ultimately allows the reader to discover its hidden coherence via a dawning acceptance of 'the Balkan premise' which Professor Iordanova defends against all odds. Her case is facilitated by a relatively narrow time window of 1955 to 1989, with a two-film coda from ten years later which casts an interrogative glance at future developments and whets the appetite for more: the recent efflorescence of Romanian film, for instance, and the startling post-traumatic output from Albania and what used to be Yugoslavia.

The hidden question Professor Iordanova hints at but must leave unanswered, is whether the increased access to international markets through co-production, particularly with Western Europe, will dilute the extraordinary vigour of the Balkan film voice, which seems to have emerged from its historical vicissitudes. A second volume on more recent output from the region would encourage and fortify its current generation of filmmakers as well as bringing the reader up to date.

GARETH JONES, *St John's College, Cambridge.*  
Director, Scenario Films Ltd, [www.scenariofilms.com](http://www.scenariofilms.com)  
Script Consultant, Sarajevo Film Festival