

AN INNER EXODUS

The Many Diasporas of Balkan Cinema

It is said that language departs from itself more slowly in the colony than in the homeland, if only because the exile holds more tenaciously to his dying roots.

To quote migrant Macedonian filmmaker Mitko Panov with whom I was working in Sarajevo as script consultant to the film festival's Cinelink programme: "You speak your own language more grammatically, you avoid using outdated colloquialisms because you don't know the new ones, you end up asking 'why are you talking like a book?' There is a danger that migrant filmmakers make just such films about their abandoned homeland, because the trauma of departure has frozen in time their cultural references.

Emigration is a traumatic event (in the strictly Freudian sense) for whatever reason it is undertaken, and filmmakers of the diaspora create from a base of latent trauma – the psychic disaster of their own exodus - whether they are aware of it or not.

Mitko Panov left Macedonia aged nineteen to study Directing in Poland; from there he went to film school in the USA to learn and subsequently teach anglo-saxon Aristotelian dramaturgy; then he migrated once more to Switzerland mainly for family reasons. His remarkable short film *Z podniesionymi rekami* (With Raised Hands, 1986) won the Palme d'Or in Cannes with a reconstruction of the infamous photograph of the boy with his hands up under German guns in the Warsaw ghetto, a ghostly evocation of one isolated incident and arguably the best Holocaust cinematography ever shot.

Despite this widely recognized début, Panov's subsequent career has been strewn with interruptions, due at least in part to his various migrations and his international teaching engagements. The short film *Livada* (1998) saw him back in Macedonia with an intercultural fable of friendship between a Muslim peasant and an Orthodox doctor; and his major documentary *Comrades* took him right across the Balkans retracing the protagonists of another photograph, a carefree snapshot of his former comrades of the Yugoslav "Peace Army" in 1981, happy conscripts since then divided on opposite sides of a bloody civil war, frontline victims of an inner exodus inflicted by the break-up of their state, an enquiry which left him baffled by their lack of rancour and, if I read him correctly, feeling even more of an outsider.

During 2006 I advised Panov on his full-length screenplay with working title *The War Is Over*, which tells of the anguished exile to Switzerland of an Albanian Serb (or Medvedjar) teacher during the Kosovar crisis, a man who withers once separated from his cultural roots.

"Diaspora is the biggest trauma of all," he ruminates, with permissible hyperbole, a gentle, bearded introvert with a watery, distant gaze, "Think of the early pioneers who simply got in a boat and sailed away, never to return. I can scarcely imagine their sacrifice, the inner turmoil, the pain of separation. The shock was so great it was still

felt by the second and third generations, who grow up like resilient mutants, a shock that makes the USA what it is.”

Though clearly a vessel for his own experience, Panov’s suffering teacher of *The War Is Over* is in fact based on an old army comrade whom he happened upon recently as a stateless person in Switzerland, an example of how an accomplished film writer displaces autobiography the better to tell it: though an exile, Panov himself has never been a refugee; he is neither Albanian nor Serb but a Macedonian Slav; he has never been caught up in a war zone nor suffered such extreme alienation as his subject.

“What’s the difference?” he asks with the ingrained self-effacement of the dramatist. “All experience is common.” The asylum-seeking teacher Rasim stands not for his author but for displaced humanity, though this prompts me to wonder whether the universal is achievable in film without a scrupulous adherence to the specific, and whether the culture-hopping of the migrant inevitably involves a dilution of narrative intensity.

“Without leaving home I could never talk like this,” he muses and turns to his Israeli producer Assaf Shapira, “It’s the Exodus that makes you who you are”. He might be quoting from Freud, in a diasporic vocabulary laid down in the Pentateuch and perpetuated in the concepts of *yerida* and *aliya*.

So my question is: does the cinema of exile obey the same rules as language? Does it wither or flourish, stultify or diversify? Does the filmmaker’s voice develop or fall silent? In other words: to what extent is a filmmaker dependent on his or her roots? And equally: does the trauma of exile make good film?

Nowadays diaspora is a more complicated affair than a one-way ticket in steerage class. You can always catch the next flight home. As a filmmaker you’re likely to spend time at international markets and festivals in search of co-producers from opposite ends of the earth. Cinema is being globalized as fast as any other sector. Far from reducing the trauma of emigration, however, onward mobility paradoxically may intensify it through a compulsive “acting out” in a hapless pattern of *aliya* and *yerida*: once gone, no return is ever complete or adequate, however often repeated.

Having made *yerida*, Panov’s teacher fears nothing more than the impending *aliya* imposed by the Swiss authorities who wish to send him back. He knows that his home will not be the same, and, more crucially, nor will he. Unconsciously he suffers from the guilt implicit in the very concept of *yerida*, a betrayal of the covenant with one’s land, one’s ancestors and one’s god. He has become a non-person and return will never restore his integrity.

“Every uprooting is fatal”, says Panov and his logic eloquently drifts: “If you don’t survive it... it’s fatal. Everyone who leaves is in the category of survivor. My career ended where it was supposed to start, as soon as I left school, my country disintegrating, one part of the world collapsed, you have no project, you have to start from scratch, you’re less of a filmmaker than someone who’s done nothing, never studied but carries a project for three years. Then there’s the competition, these people don’t respect the rules, I’m on the startline and they’re already a hundred meters ahead, you can never catch up. You have an emotional sense of injustice. But

then... it's never going to be fair. Every place has its challenges, the ideal space doesn't exist." In his eyes I see the wandering focus of the nomad, attempting to locate the source of his trauma, and he quietly concludes: "Yes, I feel like a survivor".

The War is Not Over relies on a framing device set in a Swiss gaol from which Rasim recounts his sufferings to a fellow inmate, and the quality of the flashbacks with their searching, broken rhythms and hazy focus, their uncertain gaze and fractured timeline reflect not just the failing memory of the narrator but the traumatic amnesia inflicted by events themselves, of which migration has clearly been for him the worst imaginable, inflicting an inner caesura, a spiritual rupture which will not be healed in the simple recounting. His latent trauma can be confronted and released only by a return to the land from which he emigrated and which he believes he betrayed, though this will be no easy task since his children are by now Swiss, his marriage is in tatters and his ancestral land has been sold by his acquisitive brother.

Like the teacher in his film, Panov tried to go home, he spent two years trying to re-settle in Macedonia in the nineties. "I just walk straight back in," he claims, denying any readjustment problems, then gradually admits that the extravagant welcome of the prodigal son rarely outlives his return: the fatted calf tastes stale the next day.

"People look at you with a fear of new competition, as if you're going to expose their cosy little game - you must think you're better than they are, with all that experience - and they make life five times tougher for you," and he adds with a laugh, "when I'm tempted to say, 'hey, these Swiss are giving you a really hard time' I remind myself: 'remember those Macedonians, they treat you *really* bad'." The resentment of the returning émigré is amusingly parodied in the frustration of Rasim's materialistic younger brother visiting home from Western Europe loaded with gifts for all the family from whisky to lingerie, who feels he is undervalued, mistrusted and misunderstood, while forgetting that none of his luxury items are appropriate to a culture from which he has simply parted company, so much so that his robust displays of independence nearly spark an outrage by the local Serb police, proving that the habits and strategies of ethnic conflict fossilize into self-caricature in the diaspora.

Like language, cultural observances freeze in time at the moment of migration, reduced to extravagant displays of loyalty such as folk dishes unknown to native cuisine and culinary film purveying long abandoned or purely mythical renderings of "life at home". Conversely, the robust self-criticism adopted by home communities reflected in films such as Fatmir Koçi's *Tirana Year Zero* (2001) provoke howls of outrage from the disappointed diaspora, the latest example being the protests of the Australian Slovenian Conference at Jan Cvitkovič's *Odgrobadogroba* (Gravehopping, 2005) as an insult to national pride "degrading Slovenian image and Slovenian culture", "which is Central European NOT Balkan", sentiments not echoed or reciprocated in Ljubljana or elsewhere in the Former Yugoslavia to which Slovenia till so recently belonged. This diasporic *fatwah* additionally indicates how easily the term "Balkan" can itself be balkanised as an unthinking pejorative and an implement of ethnic rejection, though its current usage in film circles of South East Europe points more to its joyous recuperation as an emblem of regional solidarity. Diasporic ignorance of this linguistic mutation only proves how perma-frozen national diasporas can remain.

Panov's teacher has a doubly problematic trajectory in that the Albanians of Serbia are already part of an inner diaspora, from which Rasim departs into an international no man's land. Albanians are to be found in most nations of the Balkans, and particularly in Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro, besides obviously Albania itself, where a newspaper editor recently took exception to my reference to a 'regional diaspora' with the rejoinder that Albania is simply not large enough for its ethnic population and an extension of its borders was all that was needed to bring the 'diaspora' home in a flash. Since Albania has progressively shrunk over the centuries to exclude much of its natural population, the argument might have some merit, though its equal but incompatible application to and by other peoples and nations of the region does much to explain the historical conflict.

Whether or not one should refer to an 'inner diaspora', greater-Albanian film is experiencing a modest renaissance in the wake of recent upheaval:

Kosovo has seen the revival of veteran director Isa Qosja whose *Kukumi* (2005) won a special award at last year's Sarajevo Film Festival (a tale of the unplanned diaspora of lunatics set free in a country taking leave of its senses) and who is now following up with a story of mad dogs in a similar role.

Golemata Voda (The Great Water, 2004) from the novel by Zhivko Chingo, directed by Macedonian Ivo Trajkov and produced by émigré Albanians from German house Lara Entertainment recounts the institutionalisation of stray children by the newly empowered post-war communists.

With the help of the same financiers and French co-producers Ciné-Sud Promotion, Fatmir Koçi is currently shooting in Albania proper *Viti i Mbrapshtë* (A Lousy Year, 2006/7) from the novel by Nobel-winning Ismail Kadare which tells of the dismantling of Albania pre-1914 that created, in part at least, the current inner diaspora.

Gjergj Xhuvani is following his *I dashur armik* (Dear Enemy, 2004) - an Albanian answer to *Captain Corelli* set under Italian then German occupation - with *The Missionary* (in development) which tells of an orphanage during the chaos of the pyramid scheme collapse.

In all these films, dealing as they do with the trauma of the last century of Albanian history, the common theme appears to be the nation as false asylum, from which any sane member could only wish to escape. This goes some way to explain the emergence of a far-flung outer Albanian diaspora, in that so many citizens of the region clearly couldn't wait to leave it, and with good reason.

This account of historical trauma is laced in every case with the ironies of patriotism betrayed and the pain of roots abandoned, in no case more eloquently than two recent films by Kujtim Çashku (reviewed separately), Principal of the Marubi Film School in Tirana where this writer teaches

Son of a communist father and an anti-communist mother the prolific Çashku launched a brilliant directing career with five films under the paranoid communist

dictator Enver Hoxha whom he flays in *Kolonel Bunker* (1996), emigrated into a period of creative reflection in Romania, then the USA and returned to thrive once more under the paranoid capitalist dispensation dissected in his *Magic Eye* (2005).

“Ceaucesku’s Romania pre-1974 was a liberal country for Eastern Europe (similar to Titos’s Yugoslavia) at a time when Albania was deep in its repressive alliance with China during Mao’s Cultural Revolution. It was in Romania that I had my first contact with western cinema and literature. My wife and I bought over a thousand books. When the time came to leave, the Embassy promised to transport them home. We never saw them again. Eventually the Foreign Office told us the authors were forbidden. This was a terrible pain in our lives.” Almost two decades later, following the Albanian revolution of 1990 during which he founded the Forum of Human Rights in Albania (today the Albanian Helsinki Committee), Çashku spent a year at Columbia University, New York, where he continued to pour all his creative energies into Human Rights, working with Amnesty International for the release of Albanian political prisoners. “The biggest shock was seeing the Albanian totalitarian system from the outside. The lessons I learned during this time abroad? - 1) a new appreciation of the meaning of time, place and space 2) the priority and power of selection – one can shape one’s own trajectory 3) never give up, where there’s a problem, there’s a solution; where there’s a will, there’s a way!”

Çashku made nothing during his years of exile, though he insists that the exposure to different film traditions in Romania, France and the USA had a defining influence on his own style once he returned to Albania, and arguably he could have made neither *Kolonel Bunker* nor *Magic Eye* without the liberating experience of his exile years and the new detachment it provided. Once he returned home, his career flourished, suggesting that in this region at least the all-important factor is simply to *be there*.

While the repeated pattern of *yerida* and *aliya* might appear to be the most fertile for any creative artist, and few Balkan filmmakers have ever entirely severed their roots, one may ask what is gained and what is lost by such a terrible separation. The experience of two young Albanian exiles in the USA is distinctly mixed.

Actor, stage and film director Avni Abazi refers to the honesty of the US film world compared to the corruption in his homeland, also to the ‘even playing field’ he encounters at New York auditions. But the mixed results are revealed in this short quote: “US immigration approved my case under the category ‘Extraordinary ability in filmmaking’. My intention aged thirty was to continue my career in US, where I believed there was a better opportunity for me, but I’m still looking to find the right direction to make my ideas into films. It’s true that I will continue to work for an Albanian audience as I did with my New York stage play ‘American Dream Audition’, but mainly I will do my best to bring our themes and ideas to the western and American audience.”

His compatriot Dhimitri Ismailaj provides further insight into the assimilation process when he refers to ‘the blending of the background I come from with the new reality of a highly developed technological country, such as it is the USA’, even while acknowledging that he has become ‘more nostalgic and sensitive towards Home’.

The diasporization of sensibilities starts early, and continues remorselessly.

It is worth asking also what Albanian emigration means for those left behind, and the answer is most eloquently provided in Eno Milkani's short film *Abandoned Eden* (2004) which captures the loss of an entire generation of young Albanians to economic migration in the wake of the pyramid scheme collapse through a parable set in a mountain village high above the sea in southern Albania deserted by all but its oldest inhabitants, unaltered for centuries without electricity or running water, its whitewashed cottages crumbling into the hillside, doorsteps sunbaked with the exhaustion of old age as the tiny remnant sits out its remaining days in baffled silence, contemplating imminent extinction. Into this stasis the church bell brings news of an advent, the first birth in the village for years, and the old folk come to life in their black dresses and black suits to rush to the scene of the miracle (no couple of childbearing age being anywhere in evidence), to offer the adoration of the magi at this small epiphany. Amidst the ecstatic dancing of aged limbs at the local feast, spinning wheels turn and arthritic hands knit feverishly to protect the messianic life that will rescue them from oblivion, but the church soon rings a death knell for the infant, despatching the blighted village back into its coma of resignation and denial, reminding us that emigration is a creeping genocide of age-old civilizations, posing the stark choice of "leave or die". Performed without dialogue and with dignity by the villagers themselves, wearing their own everyday black clothes, the film achieves a universal stature in the harsh simplicity with which it confronts the cruelty of fate, ascribing no blame, offering no pleas, asking no condolences and wailing no lament.

We cannot know the depth of their suffering, whether they expect to see their loved ones again or have given up hope entirely, but the trauma of bereavement hangs heavy over the place throughout, catalysed by the brief illusion of a return that turns out to be a haunting, the villagers mocked by the ghost of their dreams.

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The trauma of the Former Yugoslavia, by contrast, has created an inner diaspora within a once unitary state now fractured into its not-quite-constituent parts, a diaspora of the soul by which the country has taken leave of its inhabitants, not the opposite, inflicting on them an inner exodus which might prove an unhappy model for diasporas yet unimagined. Panov's *Comrades* have not left home. Their home has abandoned *them*. A once unitary (if federal) state has evicted its citizens into the chilly world of competing nationalisms, redefining itself through exclusion and ancient tribal bonding.

A glance at Bosnia's recent output is enough to confirm the traumatic fallout: *Kod amidze Idriza* (Days and Hours, 2004) written by Namik Kabil, directed by Pjer Žalica, with its endlessly slow recounting of the moments of bereavement stretching to eternity on a simple family visit; Srđan Vuletić's *Ljeto u zlatnoj dolini* (Summer in the Golden Valley, 2003), apparently a simple genre piece about a teenage kidnap whose explosive violence reveals the harrowing of an entire generation of Sarajevo's youth along with its architecture, a film foreshadowed in Ademir Kenović's siege-bound *Savršeni Krug* (Perfect Circle, 1997) which tells of orphan kids surviving the war with a drunken poet; through to the elusive *Grbavica* (2006) by Jasmila Žbanić, winner of the Golden Bear at the Berlinale, a study of the traumatic suppression of wartime ethnic rape by a mother unwilling to remember and incapable of revealing

her daughter's paternity inflicted in a prisoner-of-war camp; meanwhile the unique voice of Nedžad Begović (untamed by this writer as consultant) offered us *Sasvim Licno* (Totally Personal, 2004) produced by Ismet Nuno Arnautalić, premièred at Tribeca, an anarchic collage of the Sarajevo soul on home video, the artist unburdening years of siege in dada-ist autobiography. And this is just Bosnia-Herzegovina. Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia - all have similar tales to tell.

It is the singular achievement of the Sarajevo Film Festival (and its director Mirsad Purivatra), founded in the midst of the longest siege in history accompanied by genocidal atrocity, that it has created a forum in which these historical disasters can be addressed, an asset to Bosnian diplomacy of which the Government is fully aware. The Festival's Cinelink script development programme run by Sarajevo producer Amra Bakšić Čamo brings together practising filmmakers from across the region of South East Europe to work together on their next project, uniting cineastes from Bosnia with their counterparts from across the Former Yugoslavia in creative reconciliation through the asking of very hard questions, while the culminating Cinelink market held during the festival invites producers from across Europe to invest in the results.

In the process, Sarajevo has made itself the motor of an accelerated process of healing which only the victim can set in motion. Through the tenacity of a shared spoken language with its enduring cinematic traditions and the concomitant distribution market, the film producers of this warring region are finding every reason to make common cause. The recently completed *Karaula* (Border Post, 2006), with its ribald tale of venereal disease suppressed, denied and eventually erupting as *casus belli* between Balkan neighbours, effectively satirizes the artificial and unwanted diaspora that its pan-Balkan finance package and production team inherently defy.

Based on the bestselling Croatian novel by Ante Tomić and directed by US-based Croat director Rajko Grlić, the film was piloted by leading Bosnian production house Refresh led by the prolific Ademir Kenović, who succeeded in assembling a coalition of co-producers from each of the Former Yugoslav republics including Kosovo, with the addition of France, Austria and the UK, and top-up investment from the EU's production fund Eurimages.

Giving a case study session at Cinelink in the spring of 2006, Kenović explains that this was a genuine collaboration of like-minded partner companies each with its creative contribution and invaluable access to separate state funds and ministerial support. He stoutly denies any political or peace-making agenda in repackaging the Former Yugoslavia for the cameras ('This wasn't a metaphor, just a comedy!') but agrees that *Karaula* might serve as an example (after the Scandinavian model) for the reconstruction of a Balkan film industry that once thrived under the command economy, though the film's audit provides a sobering note of caution: the addition of so many co-producers, each with their own costs, inflated the production budget by between 25% and 30%, accounting for much of the overspend from the planned 1.8 to the final 2.7 million euros, a spend which can scarcely be recouped within the former federal market alone even though the film topped the charts in each of its contributing states (despite the loss of two thirds of the anticipated one million audience to the

intellectual piracy endemic in the region), a chronic shortfall which leaves the producers dependent on international sales to break even.

Kenović is unrepentant: “This was not just a film, it was a special experience. Suddenly the participants were no longer separated by an ice wall, the canyon that had separated them was filled with stepping stones, creative energies were liberated, enabling a wider choice of cast and crew”. He was pleurably surprised that the anticipated tug-of-war between competing ministries in the respective capitals was soon overtaken by an appreciation of the political benefits as soon as it became clear that this project advocated neither greater ‘closeness’ nor greater ‘separation’. Put simply: “It’s better when things are good!” The main achievement, he believes, was to show that the Former Yugoslavia is capable of looking at the seeds of the conflict as it subsequently emerged (even in comedic form), to reflect on the situation before and after federal disintegration and to overcome uneasiness about the truths this disguises.

The inward diaspora inflicted by the break-up of the Former Yugoslavia and its traumatic effect on the psyche of its inhabitants can surely not be reversed even in the imagination of the inspired filmmakers of the region, but their newfound co-operation, aided and abetted by the central role assumed by Sarajevo, will surely play a role in the current if fragile *détente* and hopefully play a useful part in the cause of peace and reconciliation in the region.

Whether or not this turbo-*Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (overcoming of the past) can be achieved before the asset-strippers of the international film world leave the region a cultural desert and the filmmaker again a rootless nomad, remains to be seen. Richard Gere is the latest star name (following Michael Winterbottom’s contested *Welcome to Sarajevo* (1997)) to have discovered the “Sarajevo-effect” with *Spring Break in Bosnia* (2007) directed by Richard Shepard, a “true story” of western journalists on the trail of a “Balkan” war criminal. Let us hope the Bosnia we receive is the Bosnia Bosnians recognize.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the memories of recent war followed by the endemic corruption and criminality encountered in the region, the language of Balkan film is developing with an originality and breadth that international filmmakers will find hard to match.

One cannot help wondering whether the wisdom that Mitko Panov acquired in the USA was an adequate return for the loss of roots which his *yerida* inflicted, especially since, by a cruel irony, the Western European film market dominated by the festivals and run by an intellectual elite takes far more interest in the seriously “ethnic” output of undiscovered first-time directors – particularly from fashionably war-torn regions - than in the complex, reflective offerings that spring from the complex identity of the migrant.

Panov has identified the problem with his ironic title *The War is Over*, an excellent script of a film which will surely one day materialize, just as peace – though a long time coming, and much, much more difficult to achieve than the mere absence of war - will finally prevail.

Gareth Jones 17th June 2006 (corr 14th November 2006)