University of Huddersfield Repository

Marinkova, Milena

Po-co-co Balkans: Dancing Bears and Lovesick Donkeys, Bouncing Mines and Ethnic Conflict in Two Films from the Region

Original Citation

This version is available at http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/17645/

http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/

Po-co-co Balkans: Dancing Bears and Lovesick Donkeys, Bouncing Mines and Ethnic

Conflict in Two Films from the Region

Milena Marinkova

Following the end of the Cold War, the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the ensuing armed

conflicts - all underpinned by violent and usually state-sanctioned ethnic nationalism -

unleashed an unprecedented torrent of 'moving' images of the Balkans.[1] The multinational

nature of these enterprises has been accompanied by the somewhat unequal exposure of films

produced by Balkan directors as compared to those produced by Western companies.

Nevertheless, the two works to be discussed in this article, *No Man's Land* (Danis Tanović,

2001) and *Life Is a Miracle* (Emir Kusturica, 2004), have enjoyed relatively wide exposure

and a good selection of accolades.[2] Both directors' flirtation with the culture industries of the

West[3] has benefited their works by securing international audiences, which most local

filmmakers and distribution companies could not afford to do, probably with the exception of

access to regional or esoteric film festivals. Moreover, the fact that these films originate from

the 'inside' of the conflict in the Balkans, and by extension present the insider's perspective,

lends the artefacts the added value of passionate authenticity over the detached impartiality of

Western products.

   Nevertheless, the anticipated climax of the two films, both of them set in Bosnia in the

1990s, appears to be deferred and non-committal: if not a mere backdrop - as is the case in

Kusturica's film - the Bosnian conflict is presented in broadly humanistic terms as a violent

and irrational event, as Tanović's work suggests. Most reviews of *Life Is a Miracle* also tend

to debunk it as a contemporary Romeo and Juliet romance, or as an absurdist mix of William

Shakespeare and the Marx brothers.[4] Whilst acknowledging Kusturica's already recognisable

cinematic style of excess and surrealism, critics are overly concerned with the absent or

dubious ideological stance of the director.[5] In comparison, the less controversial Danis

Tanović tackles the Bosnian war theme more directly by developing the central plot line around a trench story. Nevertheless, his film is replete with crude dark humour, reductive anti-Western sentiments and absurd situations in the director's attempt to 'treat a subject that was serious with a good sense of humour'.[6]

One can then logically enquire about the validity of such treatment of a war, which has been uniformly denounced as the ugliest example of ethnic nationalism. The artistic flight into humour and parody can be interpreted as the aestheticisation of an event that demands unequivocal political commitment; moreover, the films' challenge to armed conflict approximates a kind of a universalist discourse about good and evil, essential identities and ancient animosities. On the other hand, it is equally pertinent to insist on the political viability of postmodernist parody with respect to essentialist representations of the region and its populations.[7] The refusal to 'take sides', which both films seem to advocate, then, becomes an attempt to be committed to those that are not aligned with and dangerously suspended in-between the 'opposing camps'.

Whence the po-co-co?

The above issues remind one of the perennial tensions between postcolonial critique and postmodernist aesthetics, 'serious' political commitment and historical analysis *vs*. playful irony and post-ideological cynicism. This, in its turn, calls for the deciphering of the first part of my playful title: po-co-co Balkans. That representations of the Balkans by those within and those without can be read against postcolonial critique of essentialist and universalist discourses is not hard to imagine. Historian Maria Todorova introduces the term 'Balkanism', arguing that similarly to Orientalism, Balkanism is a discourse about difference as defined against the European self. However, whilst Orientalism is a discourse about imputed differences between 'types' (self vs. other), Balkanism is a discourse about imputed differences within 'one type' (self vs. not-quite-self). In this sense, the Balkans are

constructed in the European (read 'Western') imaginary not as the irreducibly different 'other', but as 'an incomplete self,' almost the same but not quite. This precarious hybridity of the region has competed against celebratory, but equally problematic, metaphors of the Balkans as the bridge between 'East' and 'West' and the meeting ground of three of the world's major religions. She summarises:

By being geographically inextricable from Europe, yet culturally constructed as 'the other' within, the Balkans have been able to absorb conveniently a number of externalized political, ideological, and cultural frustrations stemming from tensions and contradictions inherent to the regions and societies outside the Balkans. Balkanism became, in time, a convenient substitute for the emotional discharge that orientalism provided, exempting the West from charges of racism, colonialism, eurocentrism and Christian intolerance against Islam. After all, the Balkans are in Europe; they are white; they are predominantly Christian, and therefore the externalization of frustrations on them can circumvent the usual racial or religious bias allegations. As in the case of the Orient, the Balkans 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. With the re-emergence of East and orientalism as independent semantic values, the Balkans are left in Europe's thrall, anticivilization, alter ego, the dark side within.[8]

Rather than simply replacing Said's 'Oriental' with a Balkan other, Todorova suggests that Balkanist discourse has become the repository for Europe's anxieties about its own self-perception: steering clear of the compromised binary between European self and Oriental other, Balkanism sets up another, albeit paradoxical and more threatening, split. Within white, Christian and civilised Europe, there resides a not-so-white, not-so-Christian and not-so-civilised not-quite-self. Contaminated by adjacent non-European political and cultural

structures, this alter ego is similar but not quite, is within but not alike, is abject and yet appealing. Not only are the Balkans seen as the unfortunate source of international crises such as the First World War and disreputable regimes such as Nazism,[9] but the deplorable political setup of this powder-keg of a peninsula is used as a recurrent metaphor for sectarianism, tribalism, barbarism and partisanship, as valid for Eastern Europe as for Africa, Asia or Latin America.[10]

An identitarian Balkanist framework inevitably engages with stereotypes from within the Balkans themselves, premised on the kind of essentialism that Aijaz Ahmad, in a different context, has labelled 'Orientalism-in-reverse',[11] and Gayatri Spivak condemned as 'ideologically contaminated by nativism or reverse ethnocentrism'.[12] Such ethnocentric Balkanism-in-reverse often takes the form of anti-Western essentialism, which is premised on the same identitarian thought that has been demonising the Balkans since Ottoman times and caters to insalubrious nationalist sentiments. The Balkan self-designations within this framework embrace the supposed backwardness of this South-Eastern corner of Europe and attribute it to the pernicious presence of the 'foreign' empire of the Ottomans, whilst simultaneously celebrating the region as the discriminated cradle of 'Western civilisation'. Thus, not only is the Balkanist binary not deconstructed, but it is being perpetuated and reinforced; and following the collapse of the communist regimes in the region, 'Balkanism-in-reverse', bolstered up by extreme nationalist programmes, has been redefined as a viable political strategy for the dismantling of the corruptive legacy of state communism.

Whilst a po-co (postcolonial) critique of representation of the Balkans *à la* Todorova is justifiable to an extent, it is important to distinguish between the postcolonial condition of regions affected by Western colonialism and the historical legacy of the Balkans. That there were colonial and imperialist stakes in the region is beyond doubt: the bridge between East and West, conveniently situated near the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, was a strategic point for exercising economic, political and military control. At the same time, however, the most

prominent quasi-colonial presence in the region was that of a non-Christian (hence, not essentially European) Ottoman Empire, which penetrated the integrity of European Christian 'civilisation'.[13] Within the European imagination, the tables were reversed and the non-European 'other' has penetrated the European 'self'. The main trajectory of Balkan othering proceeded along the religious trajectory - the region was not quite Christian, not quite Muslim. With the exception of Western philhellenism, the Christians of the Balkans were demonised by Balkanist discourse as a contaminated East-in-the-West,[14] and even contemporary political theorists keep reinvigorating such problematic metaphors: Samuel Huntington, for instance, declares the need to 'bound the West' within the realms of Western Christianity, thus consigning the 'fault line' of Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam to the outside,[15] and Julia Kristeva ascribes to the lands of Orthodoxy the unhealthy qualities of passivity, effeminacy, paganism and irrationality.[16] Kaplan's wonderfully embellished tale does not disappoint in this respect either: in his account, the Balkans transcend their status of an abject and volatile mixture of religious doctrines to become the tangible and infectious essence of the 'Third World', existing before the West 'discovered' them:

The Balkans were the original Third World, long before the Western media coined the term. In this mountainous peninsula bordering the Middle East, newspaper correspondents filed the first twentieth-century accounts of mud-streaked refugee marches and produced the first books of gonzo journalism and travel writing, in an age when Asia and Africa were a bit too far afield … What does the earth look like in the places where people commit atrocities? Is there a bad smell, a genius loci, something about the landscape that might incriminate?[17]

For all the similarities between Balkanist and Orientalist writing, it must be recognised that the Ottoman rule in the Balkans left a different social, economic and political legacy from that of European colonial empires elsewhere. One of the most frequently cited distinctions is that

the Ottoman was a contiguous empire (similarly to the Habsburg and Romanov ones), whose territories were more integrated than those of the external, colonial structures of the British and French empires. Free peasantry and the lack of any indigenous aristocracies (apart from the Danubian Principalities of Wallachia and Moldova, roughly coinciding with present-day Romania and Moldova) resulted in a strong sense of egalitarianism and a powerful state mechanism. Demographically speaking, the level of ethnic and religious homogenisation in the region was relatively low, which can be attributed to the ethnically more tolerant Ottoman authorities, the preservation of indigenous village structures, and the rotation (non-hereditary position) of resident Ottoman rulers and their armies.[18] Whilst this level of relative local autonomy and state protection from the exploitation of local rulers facilitated the emergence of Balkan revolutionary movements and the spread of nationalist ideologies, it also led to a higher level of integration and cohesion between indigenous and imported structures. Thus, after the collapse of the European empires at the end of the First World War, and especially more so in the case of the Ottoman one, the newly independent nation-states inherited most of the socio-political set-up of the former imperial entity. In contrast, the dissolution of external colonial empires took place after the Second World War and the resulting independent states had to come to terms with the rupture in the political and cultural continuity that the colonial intervention had brought about.[19]

Finally, another significant imperial presence in the region - that of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union - resulted in the addition of yet another layer to the mosaic of the Balkans and the vigour of Balkanism. Conceptualised by the European Enlightenment imagination as an 'Other', the Russian power state, with its pillars of Eastern Orthodoxy and authoritarian rule, became a threat in the eyes of Europe despite Russia's self-institution as a protector of Balkan Christendom from the advent of Islam. Geopolitical struggles in the region, the collapse of European empires around the two world wars and the 'construction' of the Iron Curtain cemented the already existing quasi-Orientalist Balkanist discourse into what

came to be known as Cold War rhetoric.[20] Thus, Kaplan's masculinist and Orientalist translation of the Balkans into a demonised communist landscape is seamless:

Snow beat upon the window. Black ignite fumes rose from the brick and scrap-iron chimneys. The earth here had the harsh, exhausted face of a prostitute, cursing bitterly between coughs. The landscape of atrocities is easy to recognize: Communism had been the Great Preserver.[21]

If previous metaphors sealed the region into ahistorical anarchy and irrationality, the picture of Eastern Europe emerging in the paragraph above is frozen in the grim mausoleum of 'Western' Cold War rhetoric. Even if with the collapse of state-supported communism the label 'Eastern Europe' has proliferated a cohort of geographically more specific and Euro-centred locations - Central Europe (*Mitteleuropa*), the Baltic, South Eastern Europe - the leftover designation 'Balkan' has retained the ancient bias against the peninsula as primitive, violent and ethnocentric (and despite potential confusion with the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913, the conflicts following Yugoslavia's dissolution were named 'the Balkan war'). Samuel Huntington, on the other hand, prefers to attribute the fate of the Balkans to their unfortunate 'fault line' location on the borders of different civilisations whilst simultaneously insisting on the essentially ethnic nature of political and ideological allegiance.

In the post-Cold War world, multiple communal conflicts have superseded the single superpower conflict. When these communal conflicts involve groups from different civilizations, they tend to expand and to escalate. As the conflict becomes more intense, each side attempts to rally support from countries and groups belonging to its civilization.… The longer a fault line conflict continues the more kin countries are likely to become involved in supporting, constraining, and mediating roles. As a result of this 'kin-country-syndrome',

fault line conflicts have a much higher potential for escalation than do intracivilizational conflicts and usually require intercivilizational cooperation to contain and end them.[22]

Pronouncing the Cold War experiment of ideological 'cross-civilisational' alignment as unsuccessful, Huntington insists on the strength of ethnic kinship relations in determining a country's or a region's policy. All the more so in fault-line situations as the one in the Balkans, where a cluster of failed communist states of mixed ethnic populations became inevitably drawn into an escalating conflict aiming for civilisational purity. Whilst his argument purportedly relies on historical specificity, it smacks of rigid ethnic (and religious) identitarianism, devoid of any subtle cross-referencing with the current socio-economic, political, demographic and discursive situation.

How do Kusturica and Tanović tackle the Balkan theme in their works? As already mentioned, both films abound in staple Balkanist imagery centred round the 'Balkan war' of the 1990s. However, it is my contention that by invoking and actively using flagrant Balkanist discourse the two films destabilise it and point at its internal contradictions. Whilst the drive for internal demarcation, division, and exclusion underlying identitarian and nationalist thought has been ascribed a crucial role in the armed conflict in the multi-ethnic state of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and by extension to the Balkans, thus becoming a powerful metaphor in Balkanist discourse, the two films suggest that such a stance is highly equivocal. The stringent identitarianism pervading such conceptualisations is re-enacted in both films in a centrifugal move towards recharted ethnic and national belonging. Concomitantly, however, there is a centripetal move towards the personalisation of the conflict, which unfolds within more confined communities: in Kusturica's case within a small town and in Tanović's between two soldiers. By transposing the battlefield onto the intimate space of personal relationships, *No Man's Land* and *Life Is a Miracle* do not merely put a human face to an otherwise anonymous experience that some philosophers have classified as a mere media event. Arjun Appadurai

observes that the violence inflicted within the immediate community arises from a feeling of betrayal committed by a friend, neighbour or acquaintance, to a large extent provoked by the revived identitarian politics of ethnic nationalism, which overrules prior communal affiliations:

The rage that such betrayal seems to inspire can of course be extended to masses who may not have been intimates, and thus it can and does become increasingly mechanical and impersonal, but … it remains animated by a perceived violation of the sense of knowing who the Other was and of rage about who they really turn out to be. This sense of treachery, of betrayal, and thus of violated trust, rage, and hatred has everything to do with a world in which large-scale identities forcibly enter the local imagination and become dominant voice-overs in the traffic of ordinary lives.[23]

In this sense, the macropolitics of the state, nationalist parties and the media not only commits violence on communities and individuals by imposing on them stringent parameters for ethnic and national identification and calling for unequivocal alignment 'with one of the camps', but also causes a paranoid rupture in the prior microscopic relations. This intrusion of the macropolitical into the personal and communal results in a re-charted 'striated space' (to use Deleuze and Guattari's term),[24] where ethnic and national identitarianism becomes prevalent.[25] On the other hand, this striation imposed from without not only suggests that the disintegration of what some historians call a once successful multiethnic state has been driven by a complex of socio-economic and historical factors,[26] but also undermines popular perceptions of the Balkan region as violent, irrational and chaotic.

'M-a-d-e in Europe' – No Man's Land *and the agency of bodily entrapment*

Danis Tanović's *No Man's Land* is an anti-war film permeated by the sense of absurdity. Trapped in a trench between the Serbian and Bosnian enemy lines, the so-called 'no man's land', Nino (a Bosnian Serb) and Čiki (a Bosnian Muslim) have to resolve a dilemma: the body of a third soldier, Čiki's friend Cera, has been placed on a bouncing mine which will explode if the body is removed. Faced by the impasse, the Serbian and Bosnian headquarters inform UNPROFOR. The latter, however, is far from effective. The result of media intervention is similar: keen on breaking the news, reporters (predominantly from the 'West') are after a newsworthy piece. And a war story they get: in line with the clichéd representations of conflicts as gory clashes and of Balkan peoples as 'maniacs', a shooting takes place which is successfully broadcast by all television crews on site. The story behind this instance of typical Balkan irrationality and ethnic hatred, however, turns out to be a story of personal betrayal: Nino's eagerness to desert the two Bosnian soldiers threatens to disrupt the finely tuned power dynamic in the trench, thus he falls out with Čiki, and in the ensuing scuffle they kill each other. Allusions to the Yugoslavia break-up are more than obvious, and the ending is foreboding: after a German mine expert declares the impossibility of defusing a 'm-a-d-e in E.U.' bouncing mine, UNPROFOR stages a fake rescue for the journalists' sake whilst actually abandoning Cera's body in the no longer exciting trench.

The displacement of the conflict onto the intimate space of personal relationships surfaces from the very opening scenes of *No Man's Land*. On the one hand, one can discern a certain disillusionment in the ironic treatment of externally imposed ethnic identities: Nino's commander uses Cera's body as a playful ruse to kill more Bosnians (who being Muslims will come to collect their dead after the day's battle), just like Nino and Čiki swap roles in absurd cat-and-dog skirmishes about who started the war (the Serbs or the Bosnian Muslims). On the other hand, however, the fallibility of the soldiers' allegedly firm ethnocentrism is demonstrated in Nino and Čiki's inability to shoot each other even when at gunpoint and through the emphasis on their shared past: both have been in love with the Banja Luka beauty

Sanja, and desperate to avoid the gunfire of the Serb and the Bosnian side they strip naked (of clothes as well as of other markers of identity) to wave the white banner of peace (made of their T-shirts). Nevertheless, the predicament of filiation is never out of sight, and although they apologise for being rude to each other the two men exhibit anxiety at the prospect of becoming friends:

Čiki: Sorry about earlier.

Nino: You were right. Why get acquainted to watch each other through sights? (44:28)

This latent hostility erupts when Nino threatens to breach the fragile trench camaraderie by deserting the two Bosnians in order to save himself, culminating in the final shooting with no ultimate winner.

But there is a survivor, albeit doomed. Cera has been the aural incapacitated witness to the mini-battles in the trench. Unable to keep coherent track of the eventful afternoon, Cera is torn between his fear of death and his responsibility for the lives of the other two soldiers. As a bitter commentary on the nature of war, his position is doubly undermined: by a mine produced in countries that have assumed the role of peace-keepers and by his limited control over the circumstances. Surrounded by the halo of impending demise, after surviving a fake death (unconsciousness), he awakens to find himself sentenced to death and turned into a death sentence for others. Cera has survived in order to witness and die without a witness, similarly to the fog-enveloped deaths of his squad mates at the opening of the film. This paradoxical position of a survivor *cum* death is counterpoised by the foregrounding of his physicality: in addition to the high-angle and bird's-eye shots of his sprawled body, close-ups of his face and hands abound. Being an image of death has not after all divested the mine-trapped soldier of his living corporeality: his body itches, his eyes cry and squint, his hands move. This reinforces the equalizing and suffocating impact of the situation: should anybody

survive the mine, they would have to deal with the front lines of the two camps which surround this no man's land limbo. Cera's exclamation,

Who cares who started [the war]? We're all in the same shit now. Can I have a cigarette? (33:51),

invokes the disposability of corporeality, especially to the outsiders who hygienically 'flush' conflicts into the blind zone of their eyesight. The close-up on Cera's quivering face after Nino and Čiki's death, as well as the final zoom-out from his immobile and deserted body, intimates the despair of those trapped in the conflict.

Cera's incapacitated presence can be discussed in parallel with the highly inefficient Western observers: UNPROFOR and the media. The similarities, however, end here. The self-proclaimed defenders of the bodies in war conceive of Cera's body as a portent of their own undoing, which therefore needs to be undone: for the UNPROFOR officials it will compromise their peace-keeping campaign and destroy their public image of *deus ex machina*, and for the mass media it is a convenient vehicle for ineffective criticism of the military which will boost their sales, but which needs to fit in their own political agenda. The disenchantment with such peacekeepers is highlighted by Nino and Čiki's derogatory nickname for the UNPROFOR troops (the Smurfs) and silent disregard for the zealous British journalist Jane Livingstone. The watchdog role of mass media is repeatedly contested: Jane does corner colonel Soft into helping the three soldiers trapped in no man's land by threatening him with bad publicity; however, her own incentive is to film a spectacle for *Global News.* Claiming to be a direct witness to the tragedy unfolding on the screen, the journalist tailors her testimony to the channel's audience's expectations. Thus, after Nino's and Čiki's death, her only question to the cameraman is: 'Did you get it?' (01:25:54), which is followed by a zoom-in on Čiki's corpse from the cameraman's point of view. Whilst Cera's agency is severely circumscribed and cannot extend beyond placating belligerent Nino and Čiki, and choosing to lie still in order to prevent the death of others, the Western

peacekeeping forces and media appear to be in greater control of their role in the conflict but choose to 'stay still' and thus cause the death of others. Although the idealistic French sergeant Marchand rebels against his British commander colonel Soft's decision for non-intervention and collaborates with the equally high-minded journalist Jane in exposing UNPROFOR's passivity, they both become complicit in Cera's objectification, turning him into a convenient tool for personal advancement.

The condemnation of the 'West' in *No Man's Land* is downplayed into a cliché by representing 'Western' individuals as equally trapped by corporate and institutional mechanisms as Cera is by the bouncing mine. Jane's private conversation with sergeant Marchand is revealing in this respect:

Jane: Aren't you neutral?

Marchand: You can't be neutral facing murder. Doing nothing to stop it is taking sides.

Jane: Magnificent. Will you say that on camera?

Marchand: I may be mad, but I am not stupid. (57:44)

The invocation of these ultimate equalisers, death and madness, as well as the unequivocal moral position on murder appears to blur the differences between the three soldiers trapped in *No Man's Land* and the self-righteous Marchand and Livingstone (whose explorer namesake resonates with my earlier claim about the affinities between Orientalist and Balkanist discourses). The line between 'taking sides' by doing nothing (thus letting innocent people be killed) and 'taking sides' by intervening (thus potentially killing innocent people) is thin and as the film shows easy to criss-cross. Nonetheless, the identitarian principle has co-opted all sides to the conflict: the ethnic nationalism embraced by those in the trench is conducive to segregation, exclusion and annihilation, trumping and erasing any prior affiliations along class, gender or occupation lines. Those outside the trench, on the other hand, for all their appeal for inclusion and acceptance of difference hardly ever compromise with their own identity positions and perceived moral superiority. In this blend of broadly humanist ideas and

rigid identity politics, one is left to wonder who takes and represents the side of those trapped in the war against their will. The film ends with a bird's-eye zoom-out from Cera's body, accompanied by a lullaby loving hummed by a motherly voice: 'Sleep, dear son'. The camera eye leaves Cera, whose name, ironically, translates as 'cure'. Is this departure as ethically questionable as the presence of the representatives of power? Or does it metaphorically stand for the cure for the problems of an ethnically motivated conflict? Earlier Cera has complained that in addition to all the assaults on his body by enemy fire and mines, he has to endure being in the limelight, whilst no one is interested in his well-being. In a countermove to the media interest in him as a spectacle, the camera at the end of the film pulls back, leaving Cera spread-eagled on the mine and stripping him of the objectifying halo of a media-generated war image.

'It's all in your head.' – Life Is a Miracle *and the possibilities of the absurd*

Life Is a Miracle is set in a small town in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992, just before and during the conflict. The main plot revolves around the family of Luka Djukić, a Serbian railway engineer, obsessed with the reconstruction of the railway, which will (re-)connect Bosnia and Serbia, and boost local tourism and trade. His neurotic wife, Jadranka, is a former opera singer who is prone to jump into her Anna Karenina role any minute. Their son, Miloš , is a promising football player whose dream is to play for Partizan Belgrade. Their life of colourful excess and loud music, of violent football matches and corrupt politicians, is disrupted by the sudden arrival of the war. During a farewell party Jadranka runs away with a Hungarian musician, leaving Luka desperate and lonely. Miloš is drafted into the army and later taken hostage by the Bosnian side. A plan is hatched to exchange him for the captured Muslim nurse, Sabaha, whom Luka is assigned to take care of. Eventually, Luka and Sabaha fall in love and against all odds decide to run away together, ignoring the exchange agreement. However, different military fractions present obstacles to their plan and in the course of the

escape Sabaha is wounded. Luka is forced to take her back to the military headquarters as they carry out the POW exchange. The film ends on a positive note: after Luka's attempt to commit suicide, thwarted by the lovesick donkey Milica, he is magically reunited with Sabaha.

Unlike *No Man's Land*, *Life Is a Miracle* is hard to define as a war film, with the first half being saturated by music, alcohol and dance, raucous people and anthropomorphic animals, and the second being driven by the tragic love story of Luka and Sabaha. Nevertheless, the contextualisation of the conflict in the small community of Golubci on the Bosnia-Serbia border and the loud household of the Djukićs allows for the exploration of shifting allegiances once the ethnic imperative steps in. The violent intrusion of the latter is signalled early in the plot by the mysterious onslaught of murderous bears fleeing the war in Croatia:

Veljo: The bears are slaughtering everyone.

Luka: But Tito shot the last one.

Veljo: They're pouring in from Croatia! Beasts from Croatia. And you just sit here playing!

Luka: What beasts?

Veljo: Bears. They're like ours, only different. A bit bigger but with grey fur.

Luka: They must be Persian bears.

Veljo: Not Persian bears! They're fleeing the war in Croatia. (7:27)

Similarly to Kusturica's critics, Veljo is resentful of Luka's preoccupation with the celebrations of Liberation Day, in face of the impending bear attack. The metaphorical dimensions of this absurd scene suggest an implicit criticism of ethnically motivated conflict, but simultaneously with that acknowledge its infectious and pernicious nature. The scene that follows - a conversation between a gluttonous but honest (old school, communist) mayor and a new-party-line but corrupt (new school, mafia) politician - complicates the supposedly simple power dynamic in the conflict: it is not the ethnic affinity of Serbs, Croats and Bosnian

Muslims that fuels the ongoing war but the interests behind freight trains of oil and cigarettes, the political structures that lobby for them, and the propaganda machine that is set in motion.

The excruciating pressure exercised by macropolitically defined identity somewhat unexpectedly surfaces in the lecture that the Serbian captain Aleksić gives to Luka, who, distraught and desperate after his son's capture, volunteers to be exchanged for Miloš :

Aleksić: Remember, this isn't your private war.

Luka: I can't take it any more. I'll kill myself.

Aleksić: What? […] You'll kill yourself? Too easy. Death doesn't hurt, my friend. It's living that hurts. Did you know I have a brother? Or I had one. I don't know. My Stefan. It's been two years. Two years since he disappeared. He's not among the dead so I can't bury him. He's not among the prisoners. He's not among the living so I can't hug him. The man simply vanished! Vanished into thin air! I asked for a transfer to Lika. Know what they told me? This isn't my private war. It's someone's war, my dear Luka. It's a war for scum. Not yours or mine, for sure. (1:13:45)

Once again the metaphor of individual helplessness in the face of war is mobilised, reminiscent of the no-win situation in the trench of *No Man's Land*; war is presented as no one's war in particular, yet a war that implicates everyone, without drawing clear-cut boundaries between guilty and innocent. Military men such as Aleksić in *Life Is a Miracle* and the three soldiers in *No Man's Land* are presented as unwitting participants in an event beyond their control, as pawns in a game orchestrated from outside and whose allegiance to the ethnic principle is highly unstable. The bouncing mine from *No Man's Land* is replaced by captivity in *Life Is a Miracle*, whereas non-committal peacekeepers and image-making media by corrupt and publicity-thirsty warmongers. If *No Man's Land* brings to the limelight the debilitating situation of those trapped in war through the constant reminder of Cera's exposed and vulnerable body, *Life Is a Miracle* does so through the figure of the vanished brother: neither dead, nor alive his presence is validated only by the absence of a confirmed

death. Whilst filiation has successfully embroiled Aleksić and Luka in the conflict - the former hoping to find his brother and the latter his son - and whilst this resonates with 'sons of the soil' ideology, the illusory status of Aleksić's brother undermines the unconditionality of the familial, and by extension ethnic, imperative, just like Luka and Sabaha's affair and Miloš 's friendship with the Muslim Eso affirm affinities that bypass ethnic and religious identitarianism.

Absurdity and chaos transcend the human world to permeate the behaviour of an abnormally high number of anthropomorphic animals in this film: Croatian bears attack the small town, the lovesick donkey Milica saves Luka's life, a cat kills pigeons through hypnotisation, a horse wants to play chess, a hawk brings about Hiroshima in the Djukić's house. On one level it is possible to read the anthropomorphism as a denial of the ethnic strife and exoneration from responsibility for the ethnic war. And instances of such critique of essentialism are not that infrequent in Kusturica's film: the impossible romance between Luka and Sabaha may be interpreted as affirming mutual tolerance and respect in a country that once epitomised the peaceful co-existence of different ethnic groups. But with the advent of populist nationalist discourse the tables are turned: Miloš's traditional visit to Eso's at Ramadan is interpreted by his mother as a danger. On a more collective level, revisionist history takes the upper hand and Serbs become 'Chetniks', Croats 'Ustache' (invoking respectively the ethnic cleansing carried out by the Serb royalist resistance and by the fascist regime in Croatia during the Second World War). The small town is literally torn apart by intolerance: a football match turns into an outright battle, whilst shooting bottles off the top of one's head is just another form of teenage entertainment.

One may be tempted at this point to accuse the director of over-spicing his production: the all too Balkan flavour of loud gypsy music (performed by the gypsy-techno band *No Smoking* where Kusturica himself plays), perpetual inebriety, exuberant dances, verbal and physical abuse, unhealthy superstition and paranoia, ubiquitous violence, explicit misogyny, corrupt

politicians, rustic landscapes and human-like fauna – all are part of a Balkan exotic inventory thriving in the 'Western' popular imaginary. Similarly, and as a counterbalance to the frolicsome allusion to Balkanist stereotypes, Kusturica's treatment of the 'West' - in particular its mass media - is close to crude lampoonery. The simplified news coverage reduces the conflict to the neat camps of aggressors, the Serbs, and freedom fighters, the Bosnian Muslims. As much as the idea of multiculturalism is widely promulgated by these same journalists, when it comes to identifying the stakeholders in the conflict the latter undergo 'ethnic purification' according to the 'one nation-one state' principle. Thus, towards the end of the film, when the Bosnian Serb Miloš is finally exchanged for the Bosnian Muslim Sabaha, an American journalist quickly 'identifies' Miloš as a representative of the typical Bosnian family who has been fighting against Serbian aggression. Consequently, the quest for a newsworthy story is not alien to her, much like Jane Livingstone in *No Man's Land*: without even asking Miloš, she fills the gaps for him weaving an action movie plot about his imprisonment, torture and suffering. The comment on Western media coverage of the conflict is unequivocal: to the simplistic question directed at Miloš about his readiness to die for the freedom of Bosnia, the football star-turned-soldier burps and tosses the mike. Not only has he been addressed in a language he does not understand, which technically prevents him from speaking back, but Miloš has already been ascribed an ethnic identity by the impudent journalist - an identity that is as essentialist as those advocated by ethnocentric nationalists and whose hold over people's minds is multiplied by media dissemination. Unable to engage with the space pre-determined for him, the 'typical' representative responds in a 'typically' crude way.

***

Luka: Try to be smart your whole life and in the end you can't prove anything. It's all theory.

Aleksić: After Hiroshima, there's no more theory.

Jadranka: My dear captain, Hiroshima is in our house!

Luka: It's all in your head. It's got nothing to do with Hiroshima. (2:19:00)

This final exchange at the failed reunion of the characters of Kusturica's film takes place outside the destroyed house of the Djukićs, in the aftermath of a hawk killing chickens or perhaps a cat pouncing on pigeons. Absurd, fragmented and intertextual, the scene smacks of a typical postmodernist ploy to invoke the uncertainty of the times, the incoherence of experience. Life becomes just another theory, Hiroshima enters a Bosnian household, and then everything is dissipated into the ether of abstraction. The reference to Theodor Adorno's dictum about the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz recalls the scope of ethnically driven destruction, emphasises the power of discursive formations and questions the political motivation of cultural products. The invocation of Hiroshima brings forth the issues of what constitutes a justifiable military intervention, of who is responsible for the consequences and how the prioritisation of conflict resolution is carried out. In a similar fashion, the two films discussed in this article question the representation of war by exploring the complexity of 'taking sides' and challenging the superficiality of finger-pointing. Denouncing the reduction of the conflict to 'a theory' about ethnic, racial or religious groups, these works focus on the concrete and material – exemplified by Djukićs' family and Cera's body – and claim that historical, social, economic and political factors need to be considered in the representation of a war zone. Condemning the universalism and essentialism of Orientalism and Balkanism, frequently employed by contemporary culture industries (and mass media in particular), *No Man's Land* and *Life Is a Miracle* recognise the power of identitarianism and the inevitable complicity of artistic representations in such discursive practices. Nonetheless, each of them attempts to forge its own sympathetic way of conveying that which others have decided to demonise or sentimentalise.

NOTES

1 According to film critic Dina Iordanova it was not so much the demolition of the Berlin Wall – symbolic of the demise of communism in Eastern Europe – but the Bosnian crisis and the subsequent conflict in Kosovo that gave rise to the international cinematic interest in the Balkans (over 200 documentaries and 40 features). Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film*, Culture and the Media, British Film Institute, London, 2001, pp 5-26.

2 Tanović's film won a Best Screenplay Award at Cannes 2001, a Golden Globe for Best Foreign Film 2002 and an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film 2002. Likewise, Kusturica's work has been awarded the Prix d'Education Nationale at the Cannes Festival 2004, a César for Best Film of the European Union 2005 and a Golden Globe for Best European Film 2005. In addition, the controversial director of the latter, Emir Kusturica, has been enjoying the benevolent praise of the European film community with two Palme d'Or awards for his earlier works *When Father Was away on Business* (1985) and *Underground* (1995), as well as a Best Screenplay Award at the Cannes Festival for *Time of the Gypsies* (1989).

3 In this article, 'the West' is a construct that refers to the geopolitical formation 'Western Europe' (pre-2004 15-member EU and countries from the EEA), the US, and to a lesser extent to white-dominated settler countries such as Canada and Australia, a construct that is prevalent in the Balkan imaginary. See Maria Todorova, Imagining the Balkans, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997. Such denotation appears to reinforce the problematic definition of 'the West' as a culturally distinct (and somewhat homogenous) civilisation put forward by Samuel Huntington in *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, The Free Press, London, 2002, pp 40-8. In the course of this article, however, the essentialism of such terms is challenged.

4 Kevin Laforest, 'War Chimes', Montreal Mirror 20.24, 2-8 December 2004; Peter Bradshaw, review of *Life Is a Miracle*, *The Guardian*, March 11 2005; Caleb Starrenburg, 'Love Is a Miracle', *The Lumière Reader*, June 26 2005, available at http://www.lumiere.net.nz, accessed 10 April 2006; Kirk Honeycutt, 'Life Is a Miracle', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 1 January, 2006, available at http://www.hollywoodreporter.com, accessed 10 April 2006; and Nick Grant, 'The Transformation Problem', *The Socialist Review*, March 2005, available at http://www.socialistreview.org.uk, accessed 10 April 2006.

5 The release of Underground in 1995 and Kusturica's Palme d'Or provoked a heated polemic around the director's ideological affiliation. It started with Alain Finkielkraut's article in *Le Monde* on June 2 1995, 'L'Imposture Kusturica', where he accused the filmmaker of pro-Serbian feelings, Yugo-nostalgia, and deliberate vilification of Croatia and Slovenia as Nazi states. Since then, there has been an ongoing debate around Kusturica's ideology, additionally fuelled by his denunciation of the ethnic nationalism of Croatia, Slovenia and the Bosnian Muslims, as well as the funding of *Black Cat, White Cat* (1998) and *Life Is a Miracle* secured by Serbia and Montenegro. For a more detailed discussion of the critical debates, see Dina Iordanova, *Emir Kusturica*, British Film Institute, London, 2002.

6 'A Serious Film with a Sense of Humour', Paul Fischer in interview with Danis Tanović, 14 February 2002, available at http://www.iofilm.co.uk, accessed 17 December 2005

7 A pertinent example here are Huntington's controversial designations of 'civilisations' based on an unqualified blend of geographical, religious, linguistic, and geopolitical criteria, e.g., African and Latin American, vs. Islamic, Orthodox, Buddhist and Hindu, vs. Sinic and Japanese, vs. Western, and an ossified, ahistorical and essentialist understanding of cultural identity. An instance of literary production that subscribes to such views is Robert Kaplan's,

Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History, Vintage Books, New York, 1994, wherein political and ideological choices have been explained through and reduced to an almost biologically determined cultural fundamentalism.

8 Todorova, p 188

9 Kaplan, p xxiii

10 It is again Kaplan's memoir that fabricates such unwarranted parallels as: 'Whatever has happened in Beirut or elsewhere happened first, long ago, in the Balkans.' (Ibid, p xxiii); and 'Belgrade, Bucharest, Sofia, Athens, Adrianople. These were once the datelines of choice for ambitious journalists – the Saigon, Beirut, and Managua of a younger world.' (Ibid, pp xxii–xxiii)

11 Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, Verso, London & New York, 1992. Ahmad's critique targets Said's concept of Orientalism along two main lines: on the one hand, by placing Europe as the subject of Orientalist knowledge, and the Orient as the object, Said, in Ahmad's words, subscribes to the Hegelian master-slave metaphor and becomes an Orientalist himself; on the other hand, Said's treatment of a uniform European identity is equally essentialist as his the treatment of the Orient in Orientalist discourse.

12 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p 306

13 The schism between Western Christianity and Eastern Orthodoxy needs to be taken into consideration here too.

14 On literary constructions of the Balkans, see Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1998; and John B Allcock and Antonia Young (eds), *Black Lambs and Grey Falcons: Women Travellers in the Balkans*, Bradford University Press, Bradford, 1991

15 Huntington, pp 157-63

16 Julia Kristeva, *Crisis of the European Subject*, Trans. by Susan Fairfield, Intro. by Samir Dayal, Other Press, New York, 2000. For a critique of these views, see Yonka Krasteva, 'The (Re)Construction of the Balkans after 1989, in Andrew Hammond (ed), *The Balkans and the West: Constructing the European Other, 1945-2003*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2004, pp 97-109.

17 Kaplan, p xxiii

18 This is not to say that members of the different religious denominations were treated equally; the Christian subjects of the Sultan had corvée obligations, were forbidden to wear weapons or green clothing, and were sometimes liable to pay 'blood tax' (the Ottoman authorities collected young Christian boys from their parents and gave them Ottoman education in Constantinople; whilst depriving Christian families of their young, this procedure has also been discussed as facilitating the promotion of Christian subjects to higher positions in the imperial court).

19 On the history of the Balkans, see Barbara Jelavich, *History of the Balkans* vol 1 and vol 2, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983; Andrew Hammond (ed), *The Balkans and the*

West: Constructing the European Other, 1945–2003, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2004; and Mark Mazower, *The Balkans*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 2000. On the history of European empires, see E J Hobsbawm, 'The End of Empires', in Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen (eds), *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building: The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman and Habsburg Empires*, Westview Press, Oxford, 1997, pp 12-16; and Alexander Motyl, 'Thinking about Empire', in *After Empire* (see Barkey and von Hagen), pp 19-29.

20 On the 'construction' of Eastern Europe, see Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1994.

21 Kaplan, p xxvii

22 Huntington, p 272

23 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, London, 1996, pp 154-55

24 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Trans. and Foreword by Brian Massumi, The Athlone Press, London, 1988. According to the two philosophers, monolithic and essentialist macropolitics, coinciding with a concept of the state apparatus as sedentary, hierarchical and disciplinarian, is constantly being unsettled by the creative impulse for deterritorialisation underpinning the micropolitical. The striated space occupied by the macropolitical is equally sedentary and hierarchically organised.

25 On the internalisation of the Orientalist paradigm of othering and its use to designate groups within former Yugoslavia, see the discussion of 'nesting orientalisms' in Milica Bakić-Hayden, 'Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia', *Slavic Review* 54.4, 1995, 917-31; as well as, Milica Bakić-Hayden and Robert M Hayden, 'Orientalist Variations on the Theme "Balkans": Symbolic Geography on Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics', *Slavic Review* 51.1, 1992, 1-15.

26 See Constantine Danopoulos and Kostas Messas (eds), *Crises in the Balkans: Views from the Participants*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1997; and Bogdan Denitch, *Ethnic Nationalism: The Tragic Death of Yugoslavia*, University of Minnesota Press, London, 1994.