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BALKAN CINEMA VERSUS CINEMA OF THE BALKAN NATIONS

3. Cinema Schools in the Balkans

The whole rush undertaking of creating distinct film traditions is particularly artificial because, carried out as it was at a moment when the borders of national cinemas were collapsing and giving way to increasingly transnational film-making, building on new national cinemas today is a causa perduta.

_Dina Iordanova_

World histories of cinema most often ignore the cinema schools in the Balkans or they mention only the Yugoslav and Greek ones. Such schools of cinema deserve mentioning. If we do not take into account the awards in Venice before WW2 and the Oscar nomination in 1959 of the co-production _The Year Long Road/ La Strada lunga un anno/ Cesta duga godinu dana_ (Italy-Yugoslavia) directed by Italian Giuseppe De Santis we shall find that filmmakers representing Yugoslavia received the international acknowledgement with director France Stiglic’s Oscar nomination in 1960, won an Academy award for animation in 1961 through Dusan Vukotić and then in 1965, 1967, 1979 and 1986 other four nominations for films of Aleksandar Petrović, Stole Popov and Emir Kusturica. The Yugoslav animation has asserted itself not only through Vukotić but also with the other representatives of the Zagreb School in Croatia. As early as 1928 they made the first cartoon in Zagreb and Dusan Vukotić received an Oscar in 1961 for _The Substitute/ Surogat_ and another nomination for _The Game/ Igra_ in 1962. Even the Skopje School of animation in Macedonia has produced reputed filmmakers such as Petar Gligorovski and Darko Marković. Yugoslav cinema has been described as being characterized at its beginnings by historical films, immediately after WW2 by films with partisans and by the “phenomenal... rise of animated film”. This school is characterized by an anti-Disney reaction considering that imitating the movement of people and animals does not represent the inner essence of animation. Another axiological landmark is represented by the Belgrade School of documentary where Ante Babaja, Mladomir Purisa Djordjević, Aleksandar Petrović, Krsto Skanata, Stjepan Žaninović and Želimir Žilnik asserted themselves. Another characteristic consists in the co-productions made in Yugoslavia after WW2. The 60s are characterized by the poetry of Petrović’s films, the sarcasm and anarchism of Makavejev, by the political satire of Žilnik and by Živožin Pavlović’s black humor. At the end of the 70s we witness the affirmation of the Prague School (named after the filmmakers who had studied there). Rajko Grlić, Srđjan Karanović, Goran Marković, Goran Paskaljević, Lordan Zafranović and Emir Kusturica manifest by an unprecedented narrative liberty, social satires and diverse genres. Besides them we can notice Karpo Godina, Stole Popov, Soja Jovanović, Mica Milosević, Slobodan Siljan and Stojan Stojecić. Meanwhile veterans Dusan Makavejev and Živojin Pavlović continued their activity.

On its turn, Greek cinema received through actress Katina Paxinou an Academy award as early as 1944 and a nomination in 1961 for actress Melina Mercouri, as well as for directors Michael Cacoyannis and Vassilis Georgiadis for the best foreign films in 1963 and 1965, respectively in 1964 and 1966. We can add to them an Oscar and a nomination for composer Manos Hadjidakis in 1960, respectively in 1965, as well as international successes of directors Nikos Koundouros, Theo Angelopoulos, Pantelis Voulgaris and Kostas Ferris, without mentioning the ones of the self-exiled Constantin Costa-Gavras. Greek cinema has been described as
characterized mainly at its beginnings by genres such as hypersensitive melodrama, comedy adapted after theatrical successes and “foustanella”, a Greek specialty including peasant plot and costumes. Many films include scenes with dances and folkloric music. However, they have noticed films even in the 30s of directors such as Achilles Madras, Orestos Laskos and Dimitris Gaziadis. For the 50s they have noticed the influence of the Italian Neo-Realism mainly with directors like Grigoris Grigorios and Stelios Tatasopoulos. In the 60s are noteworthy Ado Kyrou, Michael Cacoyannis, Nikos Koundourois, George Tzavellas, Vassilis Georgiadis, Theo Angelopoulos and Pantelis Voulgaris while for the last decades Apostolis Doxiadis, George Stamboulopoulos, Kostas Ferris, Tonia Marketaki, Niko Papatakis, Robert Manthoulis, Nikos Vergitis and George Katakuzinos. Alongside with them one should emphasize the merits of composers of music scores like Mikis Theodorakis and Manos Hadjidakis, as well as of actors like Melina Mercouri, George Foundas, Irene Papas, Themis Bazaka and Aliki Voyuklakis. After the period of dictatorship in the 60s a new genre flourishes, the one of political history, whose notorious representatives is Voulgaris and Angelopoulos. In the last decades a significant contribution to the achievements of Greek cinema has also had the director of photography Iorgos Arvanitis, a constant collaborator of Angelopoulos and holder of an award for image in Venice (1989).

Romanian cinema received a first award in Cannes for an animation film by Ion Popescu-Gopo in 1957. The next important award was at the same festival for a screening by Liviu Ciulei in 1965. Awards for Mircea Mureșan (1966) and Mirel Ilișiu (1969) followed again in Cannes, the ones of Dan Pița in Berlin (1985) and Venice (1992), as well as Lucian Pintilie’s award, again in Venice (1998). Recently, young directors Cristi Puiu, Cătălin Mitulescu, Corneliu Porumboiu, Cristian Nemescu and Cristian Mungiu received several awards at the great European festivals in a period of only seven years (2001-2007) so that many critics began to talk about a “New Wave” of Romanian cinema.

Bulgarian cinema enjoyed the first major success in Venice (1947) for the documentary Village Wedding/ Svadba na selo (1946, d. Stoyan Christov) and for co-productions with Russian and German directors: Heroes of Shipka/ Geroite na Shipka (1954, USSR- Bulgaria, d. Sergei Vasilyev) and Stars/ Sterne/ Zvezdi (1959, East Germany- Bulgaria, d. Konrad Wolf), rewarded in Cannes with an award for direction in 1955, respectively with the grand jury award in 1959. Afterwards followed awards for animation films, a Silver Lion in Venice (1966) received by director Borislav Sharaliev for Knight Without Armour/ Ritzar bez bronya and a Silver Bear in Berlin (1978) received by director Georgi Djulgerov for Advantage/ Avantazh. It is equally true that during communism Bulgarian cinema has been constantly promoted abroad inclusively by co-opting foreign critics for elaborating works.

Turkish cinema has impressed until recently only through film production. The way they were making so many films explains however the lack of artistic qualities. In this respect director and producer Hasan Kazankaya confessed. “We were often making two films at the same time. For instance, with Yılmaz Gönery the films had the same topic, “caïdes” (“big shots” in French). We were using the same costumes. We were shooting in a café a scene for the first film and another scene for the second one using the same cameraman and extras. No audience noticed the trick. Our goal was to cut down the costs by using the same cameraman and costumes.” At the beginning of the 80s they made about 350 long features per year, which were representing 80% of the market. The local production diminished quickly: at the beginning of the 90s covering just 50% of the market, while in the mid 90s the American films seizing 90% of the Turkish market. In the last years a revival of the Turkish film production can be felt due to the outlet acquired on the market of some Asian ex-Soviet republics and in Western China, where the Muslim Sunnite audience, Turkish language and related peoples represent an obvious advantage. The y made also film co-productions with such countries. Of course, the partial revival of the Turkish cinema production was due also to governmental subsidies granted beginning with 1990.

The Turkish filmmakers received awards in Berlin with Metin Erksan’s Dry Summer/ I had My Brother’s Wife/ Susuz yaz, with Erden Kiral’s A Season in Hakkari/ Hakkari’de Bir Mevsim
(1983) and with Semih Kaplanoglu’ Honey/ Bal (2010). The first awarded in Cannes were Yılmaz Güney and Serif Gören’s The Way/ Yol in 1982. Nuri Bilge Ceylan was twice successful in Cannes, (2003 and 2008)13. A Turkish Cypriot director Derviş Zaim received in 2003 the first prestigious award for Cyprus, the UNESCO Award in Venice for Mud/ Çamur (Turkey- Cyprus- Italy).

In 1974 American Michael Jon Stoil considered that “about Albanian cinema in general it is enough to say that it offers work for about 200 Albanians, which is not enough for founding a big studio in USA”14. If we consider an Albanian success Sergei Yutkevich’s award in Cannes (1954) for the Albanian- USSR co-production Skanderbeg/ Velikiy voin Albanii Skanderbeg, it still would be singular until 2001. Then director Gjergj Xhuvani received for Slogans/ Parullat (France-Albania) an award for debut in Cannes. In exchange, directors from the new countries emerged from ex- Yugoslavia enjoyed success quite rapidly. Croatian Krsto Papić was nominated in 1990 for the Golden Globe, Macedonian Milcho Manchevski received the Golden Lion in Venice and was an Oscar nominee in 1994, Slovenian Jan Cvitković received an award for debut in Venice (2001) for Bread and Milk/ Kruh in mleko while Bosnian Danis Tanović and Jasmila Zbanić received an Oscar in 2001, respectively the Golden Lion in Berlin (2006). We can add Aida Begić with her Snow/ Snijeg (2008, Bosnia and Herzegovina- Germany- France- Iran) which received Critics Week Grand Prize in Cannes.

However, it is difficult or even impossible to speak of Montenegrin or Bosnian cinema as Dina Iordanova noticed. “Where before we talked of one, albeit diverse, national cinema, now we distinguish Croatian, Slovene, Bosnian, Macedonian, Serbian and Montenegrin cinema, and are confronted with difficult decisions about who and what belongs where. The whole rushed undertaking of creating distinct film traditions is particularly artificial because, carried out as it was a moment when the borders of national cinemas were collapsing and giving way to increasingly trans-national film-making, building on new national cinemas today is a causa perduta.”15

Notes:

1. In Venice before WW2 several Balkan films and filmmakers received awards: Lebleci Horhoro Aga (Turkey, d. Muhsin Ertugrul)- an honorary mention in 1933, Nocturno (Austria, d. Gustav Machatý, i. Croatian Oktavijan Miletic)- award for short film in 1936, The Motzi Land/ Ţara Moţilor (Romania, d. Paul Călinescu)- award for documentary in 1939, Romania Fighting Against Bolshevism/ România în lupta contra bolşevismului (Romania, d. Paul Călinescu)- award for documentary in 1941, We/ Noi (Romania, d. Ion Cantacuzino)- award for documentary in 1942, Odessa in Flames/ Cătuşe roşii/ Odessa in fiamme (Romania- Italy, d. Carmine Gallone)- award in 1942.

2. Stole Popov is Macedonian and has continued his activity in R.Macedonia.

3. Petar Gligorovski received an award in Berlin (1977) for Phoenix.

4. Darko Marković received a special diploma in 1976 in Oberhausen for Stop, the Silver Rose in Montreux (1977) for Hodge- Podge/ Mish- Mash, the award of the catholic jury and the FIPRESCI award (1980) for A Hand/ Edna raka again in Oberhausen, the award of the town Oberhausen (1981) for The Last Window/ Posledniot prozorec and a Bronze Rose in Montreux (1982) for Festival.


11. It is significant that the number of cinema theatres decreased from 3,500 to 200.
12. A good example is *The Man without Fatherland* / Gün Uzur Yüzyıl Oлуr/ Mankurt (1990, Russia- Turkey- Turkmenistan, d. Khodzha Kuli Narliev) which includes an allegory taken from a Kirgiz legend used before in the novel “The Day Longer than an Year”/ „I dolshe veka dlitsia den” (1980) by Chingiz Aitmatov together with the Turkish term “mankurt” which designates a man who has forgotten his fatherland and traditions and which has been applied to the Russified citizens of USSR. The film takes place in medieval Turkmenistan. A Turkmen soldier fights against the enemies who had attacked his country. Imprisoned he is tortured and transformed into an instrument of the conquerors. His mother arrives in order to free him from imprisonment but he does not recognize her and kills her with an arrow. One can say that such film marked a victory of Pan-Turkism in Central Asia although in 1996 the Turkmen government banned it.
13. The Swiss- Turkish co-production *Journey of Hope* / Reise der Hoffnung/ Umud'a yolculuk (1990, d. Xavier Koller) received the Oscar for foreign film in 1991 but the director is Swiss.

4. Two Decades of Success Mean Tradition?

“Going East to collect material… They’ve asked me for a quarter of a column, but they’ll cut it down to a couple of sticks in London. He’s chosen the wrong time. In the silly season he’d have got half a column among the mermaids and sea-horses.”

*Graham Greene* (Stamboul Train, 1932)

There are reasons for a comprehensive vision upon the Balkan cinema which we will expound later. Obviously, decades ago and mainly with Anglo-Saxon historians of cinema it was a vision at a certain moment when cinema schools in the Balkans have not asserted themselves enough or meant neglecting their achievements. In other cases it confirms the identification of a set of trans-border features of a Balkan space, geographically and culturally common. But for asserting almost at the same time of the Balkan cinematic schools or for the asserting of the Balkan cinema as a whole maybe the successes at main festivals beginning with the 80s are more relevant.

If we add all the main distinctions achieved along the time by Balkan filmmakers we shall find out that they have received 21 awards in Venice, 17 in Berlin, 38 in Cannes and 3 Oscars. After 1940 directors of Balkan origin such as Elia Kazan and Constantin Costa- Gavras, other directors representing local cinemas such as Michael Cacoyannis, Metin Erksan, Želimir Žilnik, Aleksandar Petrović, France Stiglic, Veljko Bulajić and Goran Paskaljević or actors like Katina Paxinou, Melina Mercouri, Ljubisa Samardzić and Irene Papas, as well as composers like Manos Hadjidakis and Vladimir Cosma have received important awards, sometimes for films on the Balkans or representing local cinemas. Even the documentary films or animation brought into the attention of international audience local talents such as Mirel Ilieșu and Stole Popov, respectively Ion Popescu- Gopo, Dusan Vukotić, Petar Gligorovski, Darko Marković, Donyo Donev, Rumen Petkov, Slav Bakalov etc. We can even conclude that in the 80s Balkan cinema asserted itself as a distinct phenomenon mainly through the contribution of directors such as Theo Angelopoulos and Emir Kusturica, but also Dan Piţa, Costas Ferris, Pantelis Voulgaris, Nikos Koundouros, Yilmaz
Güney, Erden Kiral and Krsto Papić, of director of photography Iorgos Arvanitis, of authors of music score such as Eugeniu Doga, Vangelis Papanthanosiu, Goran Bregović and Gheorghe Zamfir or of actors such as Milena Dravić and Themis Bazaka. Only during this period the local filmmakers have received 5 awards in Venice, 3 in Berlin, 7 in Cannes and 1 Oscar nomination. Their asserting at the same time imposed to critics to notice both their originality but also a common cultural tradition where they have emerged from. In the next decades other awards added, the ones of directors Milcho Manchevski, Lucian Pintilie, Danis Tanović, Gjergj Xhuvani, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Jasmina Zbanić, Cristi Puiu, Corneliu Porumboiu, Cătălin Mitulescu, Cristian Nemescu and Cristian Mungiu or of actors such as Anamaria Marinca and Doroteea Petre.

Of course, after 1990 one can invoke the Balkan filmmakers’ “advantage” of having lived a dramatic reality, the wars in ex-Yugoslavia as well as the fall of communism, which they could artistically transfigure. In other words “the powder keg” unleashed a brainstorming. The events and films of the 90s finally determined an approach of Balkan cinema as a comprehensive and unitary phenomenon in studies such as Dina Iordanova’s “Cinema of Flames. Balkan Film, Culture and the Media” (2001) and “The Cinema of the Balkans” (2006) or Nevena Dakovic’s “Cinematic Balkans. Balkan Genre” (2003). Such studies elaborated by locals have attempted to identify a cultural tradition, a common series of motifs and artistic manners beyond political borders without omitting the national pattern and universal influences. The fact that some of them have been published in the West confirms the justness and necessity of approaching Balkan films as a common ground.

Certainly, the cultural tradition if not the cinematic one has operated also before, but the successes of the 80s have confirmed it through an affirmation of an entire group of Balkan filmmakers. Obviously, before talking about a tradition of Balkan cinema values of that cinema had to show up and be acknowledged. The political events such as the crush of the Yugoslav federation brought to bloody conflicts and to a total of 11 countries in the Balkans. However, the common cultural tradition continued in the countries emerging from ex-Yugoslavia and even the prestige of some filmmakers finally began to operate significantly and even to have an influence on filmmakers from the other Balkan countries. In this respect we can mention as examples the use of Goran Bregović’s music score in *Train of Life/ Trenul vieţii/ Train de vie* (1998, France-Belgium-Holland-Israel-Romania, d. Radu Mihăileanu) or the apparition of films such as *Blueberry Hill/Halmat na borovinkite* (2002, Bulgaria, d. Aleksandr Morfov) or *The Italian Girls/ Italienele* (2004, Romania, d. Napoleon Helmis) where Emir Kusturica’s influence is undeniable.

Notes

1. We have considered the Balkan filmmakers and films, as well as the awards in main competitions. For other distinctions on big festivals, as well as for the filmmakers of Balkan extract see VI. 3. Successful Films and Filmmakers in the Balkans.
5. Kusturica’s influence can be invoked in the episode “Turkey Girl” from *Lost and Found* (2005). Tatiana, Cristian Mungiu’s main character in the film, is at the age of first idyll but still attached to her turkey. She considers it a special creature and hardly accepts that father to offer it to the doctor who will operate her mother for the second time. Her affection for the turkey reminds of the similar one of teenager Perhan in *Time of the Gypsies/ Dom za vesanje* (1988). They said that Cristian Nemescu’s *California Dreamin’* reminds of Kusturica and mainly of *Black Cat, White Cat* because has a stationmaster as a character. In the short fiction film *Marilena from P7/ Marilena de la P7* (2006) of the same director the main character can provoke short-circuits and cut the lights, which reminds again of Perhan, with his telekinetic powers.