# Politics and Contemporary Balkan Cinema: (Re)conceptualising a Field of Study

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Cet article explore l'intercommunication entre la politique et le cinéma des Balkans après 2008. Il vise à offrir un cadrage conceptuel du cinéma balkanique contemporain en mettant en lumière le rôle de la politique dans sa formation comme objet d'étude. Par « politique », je me réfère aux relations de pouvoir dans l'espace des pays, entre pays, communautés et citoyens et à la manière dont celles-ci se manifestent dans la réalisation des films et des textes filmiques. En examinant les relations entre la politique et le cinéma balkanique, je soulève des questions principales et j'utilise des exemples indicatifs pour soutenir mes thèses. La principale question examinée ici est de savoir comment le cinéma balkanique a été développé et influencé par les facteurs politiques et les relations de pouvoir entre la crise financière mondiale de 2008 et la crise pandémique (en cours au moment de la rédaction) de 2020.

Keywords: Balkan cinema, Europe, co-productions, transnational cinema, Eurimages, Teona Strugar Mitevska, identity, financial crisis.

This paper explores the interface between politics and post-2008 Balkan cinema. It aims to offer a conceptual framing of contemporary Balkan cinema by highlighting the role of politics in its formation as an object of study. By politics I refer to relations of power within and across countries, communities and citizens, and to the ways in which these manifest themselves in the process of the films' making and on the filmic texts. In looking at the relationship between Balkan cinema and politics, I raise some overarching questions and use indicative examples in order to illustrate my answers. The key overall question is how has cinema in the Balkans been informed and affected by political factors and power relations in the period between the global financial crisis of 2008 and the (ongoing at the time of writing) pandemic crisis of 2020.

Before exploring this question, it is important to clarify why use the term "Balkans" to refer to the geographical area that is otherwise often called South Eastern Europe. As Maria Todorova ([1997] /2009) has compellingly demonstrated, the term "Balkans" is laden with negative connotations. Originally a Turkish word meaning mountain or stony place, it gradually began to allude to notions of darkness, fragmentation and discord. It was Western travellers in the 18th century who first used the term to refer to this region when they visited the Westernmost provinces of the Ottoman Empire in search of idealised visions of classical past, but found instead a very different and, in their view, debased reality. The subsequent break-down of the Ottoman Empire, the Balkan wars of the early 20th century, and the violent post-communist breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s entrenched such negative stereotypes (Wolff 1994, Todorova [1997] 2009).

The adoption of the term "Balkan" here aims to challenge these negative perceptions by highlighting a multifaceted, dynamic and changing reality in the region, especially with regard to cinematic activity. This reality is defined mainly – but not exclusively – by the region's increased European orientation in this period. Grouping together the cinemas of the different countries of the region under the conceptual umbrella "Balkan" is therefore a political and polemical choice that can support the argument that, considered together, these cinemas can achieve increased visibility in the contexts of European and World cinema.

As the Balkans is not an officially defined geographical area, there are varying understandings about where it is. The narrowest definitions restrict it to the area around the Balkan Mountains – Haemus in (Ancient) Greek – which cut across Bulgaria and Eastern Serbia. Often, and especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, it is used interchangeably with "Western Balkans", the area covered by the former Yugoslavia. Here I adopt a broad and inclusive approach of the Balkans based on historical and geographical criteria.[1] Thus, aside from Bulgaria and the seven countries that emerged from the former Yugoslavia (Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo) the notion of the Balkans I refer to includes Turkey in the East, Greece and Cyprus in the south, Albania in the West, and Romania in the North.

This is a markedly varied group of thirteen countries that can make it difficult to conceptualise them as a unified whole. There are evident differences with regard to size, economy, political identity, the extent to which they have been impacted by the global financial crisis of 2008, and, inevitably, the profiles of their cinemas. Indicatively and with respect to differences in size (of population, landmass and films produced) Turkey is by far the largest country with a population of 84 million people, a landmass of almost 800,000 square kilometres and an average production of 90 films a year (often with significant box office returns); Montenegro has the smallest population with 600,000 inhabitants spread over 13,000 square kilometres, and its average production is two-to-three films a year; Kosovo has a slightly lower cinematic output, and has the smallest area of a Balkan country (11,000 sq km), while being quite densely populated (two million inhabitants).[2] Differences in economy across Balkan countries are equally staggering, with some markedly poorer than others. For example, in 2018 the Republic of Cyprus ranked 38$^{th}$ with almost 30 thousand USD annual per capita GDP, while Kosovo was 118$^{th}$, with a GDP of just over four thousand USD.[3]

Politically, the differences among countries still largely depend (with the exception of Greece, Turkey and Cyprus) on the legacy of (post) communism – although this is gradually lessening. Crucially, they also depend on the impact of nationalist ideas on the polity, especially as these underpin the lack of resolution of certain cross-border disputes (most significantly between Serbia and Kosovo).[4] There are also differences in the degree of integration with Europe, as six countries are full members of the European Union (Greece since 1981; Slovenia and Cyprus since 2004; Bulgaria and Romania since 2007; and Croatia since 2013), while others (Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia) have been aligning themselves to European mechanisms in the hope of future recognition – a process somehow dampened by developments in 2019. [5] For Turkey, which is larger and most populous than the sum of the rest of the Balkan countries, the relationship with Europe has been the most ambivalent, as its geopolitical significance assigns it with economic and political advantages that allow it to fluctuate its position towards Europe at will.

Considering the above, it is not surprising that the financial crisis of 2008 impacted mostly on the countries that were closely integrated to the European and global economy, that is, Greece, Cyprus and Slovenia – the three countries that were both members of the European Union and the Eurozone. For the rest, the impact was more indirect and dissipated.

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[1] For a detailed rationale of the criteria for selecting these countries, see Papadimitriou and Grgić (2020).

[2] Data from http://worldpopulationreview.com; for the annual cinematic output, see Papadimitriou and Grgić (2020).

[3] Data from http://statisticstimes.com/economy/world-gdp-capita-ranking.php

[4] For a discussion of recent developments in the Serbia/Kosovo dispute, see https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/kosovo-president-and-pm-at-odds-over-serbia-border-changes/

[5] On the EU's refusal to proceed with accession talks for Albania and North Macedonia, see https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/18/eu-refusal-to-open-talks-with-albania-and-north-macedonia-condemned-as-historic-mistake

For Montenegro and Kosovo, the post-2008 period marks their first steps as independent countries: the former broke out from Serbia in 2006 while the latter declared its independence in 2008 (although it remains recognised by only about half of the United Nations' membership). As such they absorbed the impact of the European crisis while developing new political alignments and trying to assert their presence in the regional and European fields. The post-2008 period in the Balkans has been characterised not only by the negative effects of the financial crisis on some countries, but also by a relative stability in the region as most ethnic and cross-border disputes have been resolved.[6]

Despite all these and other differences (such as the variety of languages, religions and even the degree of acceptance of "Balkan" as self-definition), the argument put forward by Dina Iordanova about an underlying level of cultural similarities across the region remains valid (Iordanova 2006). What motivates this focus on contemporary Balkan cinema is the will to highlight the degree, kind and often quality of cinematic activity that has taken place in the region, despite and beyond such political, social and economic variation. Furthermore, it stems from the observation that in the post-2008 period cross-border collaboration has become, if not the norm, certainly a widely accepted and desired practice in film production.[7] Closer examination of the production and financing contexts of co-produced films in the Balkans shows that cross-country collaboration has largely been the effect of European policies and institutions regarding cinema, to which all Balkan countries (with the exception of Kosovo) adhere and are part of: the *European Convention on Cinematographic Co-production* that provides the overall legal framework for co-productions and Eurimages, the "cultural support fund of the Council of Europe" (Council of Europe A and B. Blázquez 2018). [8] This does not mean that all co-productions have been co-financed by Eurimages, but that there is increased aspiration in being able to access such funds, which has intensified co-production arrangements with both extra-and intra-regional European partners (that is with partners from both Western and Central Europe, and other Balkan countries). Overall, in other words, there been a marked Europeanisation of the production contexts and, arguably, of the thematic and stylistic approach of a number of films produced by Balkan countries in this period.[9]

In what follows, I raise two related questions that point to the significance of reconceptualising post-2008 era Balkan cinema in the light of the broader political re-alignments in the region: Does contemporary cinema from the Balkans function as a politically unifying regional force, seeking to overcome ethno-nationalist divisions in the region? And does the practice of co-productions (which is underpinned by European policies) help define a new Balkan cinema, politically aligned with (progressive) European values?

The answer to these questions requires some further qualifications. As already pointed out, since 2008, there has been an increased number of cinematic collaborations across Balkan countries, including across a number involving countries with a politically sensitive history. Furthermore, a number of these films have thematised the desire and need to overcome past divisions. However, the field of "contemporary Balkan cinema" does not just consist of co-

[6] A positive example of recent progress is the Prespa agreement of June 2018 which resolved the name dispute between Greece and the now-renamed North Macedonia: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/12/nato-flag-raised-ahead-of-north-macedonias-prospective-accession. The Kosovo-Serbia dispute mentioned above remains the key area of contestation in the Balkans.

[7] For a more in-depth overview see the collection of essays *Contemporary Balkan Cinema: Transnational Exchanges and Global Circuits* that presents critical country profiles of all thirteen Balkan countries' post-2008 cinematic activity, while highlighting transnational activity across and beyond them (Papadimitriou and Grgić 2020).

[8] The European Union's Creative Europe MEDIA programme has also provided European institutional support with regard to development and post-production (https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/creative-europe/actions/media_en).

[9] For an exploration of Europeanisation and co-productions in the context of Greek cinema, see Papadimitriou 2018.

productions. Indeed, the majority of films are still made nationally, with a combination of state support and commercial capital. And many Balkan countries, especially the newer ones (which happen to be those that emerged from the dissolution of Yugoslavia), use cinema for nation-building, both in the sense of creating a national corpus and tradition (and therefore legitimising their presence) and making films which more or less explicitly promote nationalist ideas. So, while transnational co-productions have certainly increased (and these happen to be the films that mostly circulate outside the borders of a particular country), they are still the exception rather than the norm.[10]

As a result, while the political impact of Balkan cinema in terms of reinforcing aspirations of Balkan and European unity should not be overstated, it is certainly important to highlight the positive effect that cross-border collaborations have had on both production contexts and texts, and the way in which they could hail a new, more outward and globally visible, era for Balkan cinema. Collaborations refer to the pooling of resources (financial, but also talent) across countries to achieve not only higher production values, but also the potential of reaching larger cross-border audiences. Such collaborations vary in kind: They can be co-productions - both official, i.e. bound by the terms of treaties, such as the *European Convention of Cinematographic Co-production*; and unofficial, i.e. those that take place outside such frameworks. But they can also be cross-border collaborations at the stages of development, or distribution and exhibition. In (re)conceptualising Balkan cinema, co-productions (and co-development) are more important because they lead to films that can have shared cultural characteristics that may project transnational values and imagery. Politically, in other words, such films are more likely to convey a progressive, pacifist and conciliatory agenda (although nothing precludes films *not* made across-borders to also adopt such an agenda).

Looking at the geography of cinematic collaborations across Balkan countries, it is evident that most happen among countries with pre-existing cultural and political affinities. This is a characteristic that Mette Hjort has labelled "affinitive transnationalism" (Hjort 2009: 17). Transnational films sometimes tell stories in which characters cross borders and locations change, making evident the transnational nature of their funding and mode of production, while other times they seem just like any other national film (with the transnational nature in such cases being restricted to "behind the scenes" collaborations than on-screen content). The label "Balkan cinema" therefore refers to the sum total of national films made in Balkan countries, in other words, both those that do, and those that do not, involve cross-border collaborations. Furthermore, it is worth stressing that a Balkan film does not have to be *about* the Balkans. Its references may only be local or national, and its concerns may *not* involve an explicit reference to, or search for, Balkan identity.

While some films have engaged with the concept of the Balkans – most famously, Theo Angelopoulos' 1995 *Ulysses' Gaze* – for most films from the region their Balkan (and even their national) identity is not a topic of exploration, but a backdrop and a *de facto* identity. Indeed, the Balkans as a concept does not feature particularly prominently in the cinemas of the region, and this may be explained by the refusal to become associated with what is perceived as a negative identity. Rather, we need to actively look out for traces of a Balkan identity by adopting a cross-cultural gaze as audiences and critics. We can, in other words, argue that there remains a certain cultural sensibility characteristic of the region, and that this loosely connects these films thematically and aesthetically. Dina Iordanova first identified such a quality a couple of decades ago when she started talking about Balkan cinema. I argue that despite the post-2008 geopolitical, social and demographic changes such

[10] For the number of films produced per Balkan country, including the number of co-productions, see Papadimitriou and Grgić 2020.

a sensibility is still present, but it is now shaped by a stronger (although not always unambiguous) desire for Europe. This process has been the result of political transformations in Europe (mainly the drive towards the European Union's expansion) that have made the possibility of "belonging" more concrete.[11] Cinema from the Balkans explores such tensions, even if they are not consciously and specifically alluding to this political landscape or framed as 'Balkan'. For this reason, despite the films' variety and lack of uniformity, Balkan cinema can certainly constitute a meaningful and valid object of study.

Let me then conclude this polemic by giving some examples of cinematic collaborations that can give a taste for this new Balkan cinema that projects progressive, European values. While, as I already pointed out, Europe-oriented cinema is *not* the *only* kind made in the Balkans, nor the most numerous, it is the cinema that circulates most beyond a particular country's and the region's borders, and it is the Balkan cinema I want to draw attention to here, as I believe that it represents the region's chance to address, redress and re-appropriate its negative stereotyping.

I start with examples from the countries of the former Yugoslavia largely because they represent the most consistent group of collaborating countries and because are they often understood as emblematic of the Balkans.[12] It may seem odd that countries which violently fought each other for national independence as recently as the 1990s would have regular cinematic collaborations. However, as constituent republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, they all had their own studios and production facilities, therefore recent collaborations have built on pre-existing relationships and practices. Furthermore, the languages across these republics are (to varying degree) mutually comprehensible – which means both that collaboration among creatives and technicians is easier, while the films can cross borders more easily. It should also be noted that co-productions give access to larger overall budgets, and therefore they are particularly useful for smaller countries with limited resources. The examples provided below are indicative and space limitations do not allow me to delve into the films' thematic and stylistic choices in any detail, but only to give a brief indication of how they can help (re)conceptualise Balkan cinema by placing emphasis on cross-border collaboration and exchange.

Croatian director, Dalibor Matanic's *The High Sun* (2015) is a Eurimages-supported co-production between Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia. This formally innovative film, which won the Jury Prize of the "Un Certain Regard" section at the Cannes Film Festival, consists of three parts each set on a different decade (starting in the 1990s), and telling, in each part/decade, the story of forbidden love between a Serb and a Croat. Each decade focuses on a different couple, but the actors who play the central characters are the same. The effect is to undermine (ethnic) difference and underline the healing power of love. The story is not new, but the way it is told is, and this makes it very effective despite otherwise lacking specific political and social contextualisation.

Two other co-productions from the former Yugoslavia, both directed by women, adopt a more conventionally realist approach in pointing to some of the residual traces of the wars. In *A Good Wife* (Serbia/Bosnia-Herzegovina/Croatia, 2016) Mirjana Karanović, who also directed the film, plays a Serbian woman who finds out that her husband had been a war criminal. Unable to confront him directly, she faces difficult decisions about how to respond. The film is a slow-burning family drama that focuses on the main character's inner conflict and ethical dilemmas, and in the process exposes the corrupting effect of lies. Hannah Slak's *The Miner* (Slovenia/Croatia/Germany, 2017) is based on the true story of a Slovenian miner

[11] As suggested earlier, by the time of writing the extent to which such a political direction will remain sustainable and desired is very unclear, as the challenges of Brexit and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, among others, are likely to create new political dynamics in Europe – and beyond.

[12] See for example, Mazaj 2007.

of Bosnian origin, who discovered a pit with 4000 executed bodies from World War II. While the film does not explicitly focus on the wars in former Yugoslavia, the parallelisms implied are evident, and (not unlike *A Good Wife*) it raises questions about social justice and the redeeming effect of the truth.

Bojan Vuletić's *Requiem for Mrs J* (Serbia/Bulgaria/North Macedonia/ Russia/ France/ Germany, 2017) Eurimages-supported co-production, also stars Serbian Mirjana Karanović. Adopting a semi-comic tone and a Romanian New Wave-influenced deadpan realism, the film tells the story of a Serbian war widow who plans to commit suicide as she cannot handle the bleakness of contemporary life. A satire of inefficient bureaucracy and the absurdities experienced in what is presented as a stagnant society, the film conveys a sensibility shared across different parts of the region, while the ghosts of the traumatic past are alluded to, but remain in the background.

As suggested by these examples, many co-productions between countries of the former Yugoslavia deal with war-related traumas. This is arguably the result of the therapeutic potential of cinema and art, more generally, that can offer a very powerful tools to work through collective trauma.[13] It should be pointed out too that European support has prioritised films and projects that explore this difficult past, precisely because of their healing power. Evidence of this approach is the establishment (with European funds) of the Sarajevo Film Festival in 1995 during the Bosnian war. As stated on the festival's website, this was part of the effort to help "reconstruct civil society" after the destruction of the city's multicultural fabric (Sarajevo Film Festival A). The festival continues to have strands that explicitly address issues related to its traumatic past, showing how this past is embedded in the identity of both the festival and the city (Sarajevo Film Festival B).

While co-productions across most former Yugoslav countries (Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, Slovenia, North Macedonia and Montenegro) is common, the still unresolved relationship between Kosovo and Serbia has precluded any cinematic collaboration between the two so far. This however has not stopped Kosovo becoming involved in a number of co-productions with other former Yugoslav countries. At the time of writing, its most renowned director Isa Qosja is reported to be working on *The Stork* a co-production between Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia, which has also received support from Eurimages. The story focuses on migration of ethnic Albanians to Montenegro, "a development that started in the 60s of the last century and is continuing today" (Film New Europe 2019). It is therefore an excellent example of a transnational co-production that thematises the migration of an ethnic group (crossing borders *in* the story), while also being a story about one ethnic group – Albanians – that is divided across country borders (thus drawing on a strong sense of national belonging). Another co-production among countries with strong ethnic Albanian presence is Ismet Sijarina's *Cold November* (Kosovo/Albania/North Macedonia) that focuses on the early 1990s and tells a politically charged story based on true events: it highlights the consequences of the cancellation of Kosovar autonomy within the then crumbling Yugoslavia by the Serbs. Both these films are clear instances of "affinitive transnationalism" as the co-productions take place across ethnically aligned countries (since, apart from Kosovo and Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia also have a significant presence of ethnic Albanians). This is transnational Balkan cinema but with a strong ethnic and national character.

Aside from enabling small countries and ethnic groups with limited cinematic presence to become visible, the post-2008 period has seen an increased number of co-productions between countries with a history of political tensions. For the vast majority of these co-productions, the cross-country collaboration is not visible on screen (in the story, the

[13] For a detailed examination of trauma in post-Yugoslav cinema, see Jelača 2016.

characters or the location), but rather it consists of behind-the-scenes contributions. For example, Greece often provides post-production facilities for neighbouring Balkan countries. Bulgarian co-directors Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov have co-produced all their films so far with Greece (*The Lesson*, 2014; *Glory*, 2016; *The Father*, 2019), while Gjorce Stavreski's *Secret Ingredient* (2017), a North Macedonian comedy that won the audience award at the Thessaloniki Film Festival and tells the story of a son who gives marijuana to his sick father, was also completed in Greek post-production studios.

Majority Greek co-productions have also benefitted from collaborations with Balkan countries. Elina Psykou's Greek Eurimages-supported film *Son of Sofia* (2017), was a co-production with Bulgaria and France, whereby the Bulgarian contribution consisted mainly in the camera and visual effects crews. Yorgos Zois' experimental *Interruption* (2015) benefitted from Croatian funds, while Nikos Labot's *Her Job* (2018), an empowering story focusing on an oppressed Greek housewife, received financial support from Serbia. None of these films show visible evidence of being co-productions. Greece has also been involved as a minority co-production partner with neigbouring Balkan countries quite extensively. Here are some Albanian/Greek co-productions (all in Albanian language, and all supported by Eurimages): *Amnesty* (Bujar Alimani, Albania/Greece/France, 2010), *Agon* (Robert Budina, Albania/Greece/France/Romania, 2011), *Daybreak* (Gentian Koci, Albania/Greece, 2017); and some Turkish/Greek co-productions: *Motherland* (Senem Tuzen 2015); *Beyond the Hill* (Emin Alper 2012); *A Tale of Three Sisters* (Emin Alper 2019). I do not have the space to closely examine the content of these films, but it is fair to claim that they are bearers of progressive values with regard to freedom, equality, justice, peace – with issues such as giving voice and supporting the rights of women in largely patriarchal contexts being particularly prominent.

In order to illustrate this last point, I will conclude with reference to a film that premiered at the Berlin Film Festival in 2019, the North Macedonian/Belgian/Slovenian/ Croatian and French co-production *God Exists, Her Name is Petrunia* (2019). The film is directed by Teona Strugar Mitevska, a female director from North Macedonia who is based in Brussels. It tells the story of a woman who jumps into the river during the Orthodox church's ceremony of the sanctification of the water and collects the cross. The narrative conflict arises from the fact that the church (and the local lads/thugs) do not accept that a woman has the right to win the cross.

Situated in the provincial town of Stip in North Macedonia, this is a story of female empowerment set in the context of a traditionally patriarchal, religious and provincial society. The conflicts it illustrates could take place elsewhere, but they also have a distinctly Balkan flavour as a lot of these societies continue to be deeply patriarchal, while religion is often the bearer of traditional and often reactionary values. Adopting a feminist perspective, the film positions us on the side of Petrunia, the central character, an overweight, educatedbut unemployed 32-year old woman, who still lives with her parents, and who is effectively 'stuck ina rut' in this provincial town with no prospects. During an interview for a job as a secretary at a local factory, the boss half-reluctantly hits on her to then tell her that she is too old and uglyto deserve his attention and get the position she applied for. It is on her way back home after this encounter that Petrunia sees the ritual take place and, on a spontaneous whim, jumps into the river to get the cross.

The film's feminism is indicative of the progressive and European values that it promotes. The religious ritual and the entrenched behaviour of the males are presented as in need of reforming – but also, arguably, as objects for the Western exotic gaze who can observe in awe the backwardness of the place. Something contradictory thus takes place here: on one level the film reproduces certain negative stereotypes about the Balkans regarding its "backwardness"; on the other it tells the story of a protagonist who reacts against these

negative qualities. By doing so in a cinematic language that is recognised as artistically worthy, it helps positions the main country of its origin (where the story is set) in the map of European and World cinema, and thus retrieving it from its perceived 'backwardness' – cinematically, at least.

Politics is everywhere in cinema – and in Balkan cinema. It does not have to be explicit, but it informs the worldviews of what is presented, and the author/directors' sympathies. And as cinema is not created in a vacuum but depends on significant resources (both financial and human), the policies that enable it to be produced matter. In order for Balkan cinema to (continue to) flourish, audiences, institutions, creatives and academic need to engage with it, critique, celebrate it. To turn it into a valid object of study and enjoyment – a gesture which, in itself, is political.

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