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Balkan Film at the 2021 Thessaloniki International Film Festival

The Thessaloniki International Film Festival (TIFF), which took place between November 4 and 14, this year, is a resourceful hub for cinephiles and film professionals around the world to learn about recent output from the film industries of the Balkans, as well as about its cinematic traditions. To provide a panorama of Balkan cinema, TIFF has several tools at its disposal. The Balkan Survey showcases ten relevant recent feature films from the region and a selection of shorts. In addition, it features a special tribute for a director from the region, this year for Binka Zhelyazkova. Greek films are presented in a dedicated national section, while the Meet the Neighbours competition selects from an area that includes the Balkans, the Mediterranean region, and Eastern Europe.

TIFF is a well-established event, with several competitive sections, the most important ones offering Golden Alexanders. This year, the Golden Alexander for the main competition went to *Softies* (Samuel Teis, France, 2021), while the Golden Alexander for Meet the Neighbours to *Small Body* (Laura Samani, Italy-France-Slovenia, 2021). The films from the Balkans that gained prestigious awards this year were *Magnetic Fields* (Yorgos Goussis, Greece, 2021), which won several awards including Film Forward for 'young and daring directors who question our ties with reality.' *Vera Dreams of the Sea* (Kaltrina Krasniqi, Kosovo-North Macedonia-Albania, 2021) was awarded the Silver Alexander of Meet the Neighbours, and *Celts* (Milica Tomović, Serbia, 2021) won the Mermaid Award for the best LGBTQI+-themed movie.

The Balkan Survey is not competitive; however, in the words of its curator Dimitris Kerkinos, it is 'one of the salient features of TIFF's international identity, offering a strong motive to Greek audiences, but also to foreign film professionals to catch up on the latest cinematic developments in the Balkans'. The Survey was inaugurated in 1994, shortly after TIFF became an international festival. The Survey was aimed to build bridges of dialogue between national film cultures in the Balkans and stimulate coproductions. From its launch, it assertively used the term 'Balkan' to mark its pool of selection and did not shy away from introducing itself as promoting not only the talent but also the traditions of the area. This year's line-up included titles from Bulgaria, Kosovo, Northern Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Turkey. Kerkinos describes it as showcasing 'films with a great stylistic and thematic diversity that bring to light major regional concerns, such as issues of women's liberation, the refugee crisis, immigration, religion, the family, and social dynamics'.

Highlights from Romania

This year's Survey included two Romanian titles. Octav Chelaru's debut *A Higher Law* (Romania-Germany-Serbia, 2021) and *Întregalde* (Radu Muntean, Romania, 2021). Chelaru's film celebrated its world premiere in the Survey. It addresses Christian-Orthodox religious customs, specific to the Balkan region, and questions the way they affect people's judgments and actions and the position of women in society. Starring Mălina Manovici and

Alexandru Papadopol, both present at the premiere, *A Higher Law* adopts a different aesthetic to the minimalism and realism that characterizes Romanian festival cinema. Noteworthy are its stylistic choices and narrative ambition to explore, at the tight pace of a thriller, abstract but topical ethical and existential dilemmas. It should be valued less for the authenticity of its characters and situations, but rather for the precision with which its plot creates suspense and uses it to stimulate the viewer to ask questions regarding responsibility for one's decisions and assumable freedom.

Întregalde is the work of a highly respected Romanian director and addresses a relevant concern for the region: class differences and feigned social solidarity. However, it divided film critics. It was appreciated as aesthetically bold and indicative of Romania's economic and cultural disparities, but it was, at the same time, discredited as formulaic and insufficiently assertive. In the tradition of the New Romanian Cinema, the film is worth remembering because it ventures into uninhabited spaces. While the directors of New Romanian Cinema, and Muntean himself, are masters of the apartment building drama, *Întregalde* relocates its plot into the woods of Transylvania and exploits the experience of being cast out of one's regular habitat, beyond the protection of the physical and symbolic walls of urban civilization.

Patriarchy and Migration

Issues regarding patriarchal oppression and women's marginalisation are recurrent in the Balkan Survey. This year's selection included four titles directed by women, three of which are from (or/and involving co-production with) Kosovo. Among them is Blerta Basholli's *Hive* (Kosovo-Switzerland-Albania-North Macedonia, 2021) that won all three main awards in the World Cinema Dramatic Competition at the Sundance Film Festival earlier this year, as well as the Balkan Survey Audience Award at TIFF this year. Based on real events, the film tells the story of a Kosovar war widow, who, in defiance to both male prejudice and female submissiveness, succeeds in building a business as she gradually recruits the initially reluctant women of her village community. Framed by two failed attempts to identify the body of her missing husband, *Hive* does not dwell into the conflict but rather tells a classic story of one woman fighting against adversity. The film's strength lies in the simplicity of its storytelling, the stoic, understated, self-determination of its female lead, and the inspirational quality of the true-story convention that it adopts.

Migration is another recurrent theme in Balkan cinema, usually presented from the perspective of those who leave the region to go further West. This year's selection features two films that tell complementary stories positioning the Balkans as a space of both immigration and emigration. Stefan Arsenijević's Karlovy-Vary winner *As Far as I Can Walk* (Serbia-France-Luxembourg-Bulgaria-Lithuania, 2021) is a predominantly English-dialogue film that follows an African couple as they are stationed in a refugee camp in Serbia. Through voice over inputs in Serbian language, the film maps the couple's predicament onto the medieval Serbian epic poem 'Strahinja Banović', which tells the story of a nobleman in search of his kidnapped wife. What splits the contemporary migrant couple, however, is not a hostile act, as in the original source material, but rather the quest for personal fulfilment and ambition – qualities rarely explored in the context of migrant stories. Rather than settle into a subordinate role in her husband's grand plan to stay in Serbia and join a local football team, the young woman chooses to leave without explanation and follow some Syrian

refugees across the border to Germany. The first ever Serbian film with a black character in its lead, *As Far as I Can Walk* offers a subtle but potent political intervention in the context of a country and a region that has only recently become a migrant destination.

A more familiar Balkan tale of emigration is at the core of Pavel Vesnakov's debut *German Lessons* (Bulgaria-Germany, 2021). This is the story of a bruised man in his fifties, whose last hope for a new start in life is to follow his much younger partner to Germany, but who finds himself full of doubt and inner conflict as he goes about settling affairs and parting from loved ones. The film is as much a portrait of a stagnant place as of a character who, behind his rough and fierce exterior, reveals sensitivity and complexity of emotion.

The motif of the recorded German lessons that he listens to in his car journeys, always stuck in the same chapter, underlines his fear of failure and the unknown, while his attempted cover up of the death of his father's dog explores the power of unexpressed feelings. This is an intimate film focusing on an unlikely protagonist and graced with an excellent performance by Julian Vergov that talks about attachment and longing, and that deserves wider recognition.

[Celebrating Binka Zhelyazkova](#)

One of the highlights of this year's festival, Tribute to Binka Zhelyazkova paid homage to a unique woman filmmaker from Bulgaria. The most comprehensive international retrospective of the director's work to date, it showcased six fiction films and two documentaries, as well as the documentary about her life and work *Binka: To Tell a Story About Silence* (2007, Elka Nikolova). Binka Zhelyazkova (1923 – 2011) was the first woman director in Bulgaria, active during the communist period. Though she struggled with state censorship and oppression, her films testify to her singular artistic vision and uncompromising critical spirit. Seeing her films on the big screen at TIFF was a revelatory encounter with one of the most under-acknowledged auteurs of Balkan and Eastern European cinema. Though her films have been described as 'wildly imaginative', 'free spirited', and 'universally relevant', drawing on Italian neorealism, French New Wave, and Soviet Cinema, thanks to decades of oppression and inaccessibility, they remain little known beyond Bulgaria. The diversity of stories and genres that Zhelyazkova tackled during her career also allowed for experimentations in film style. The early films, *Life Flows Quietly By* (1957), co-directed with her husband and frequent co-writer, Hristo Ganev, and *When We Were Young* (1961) deal with stories of partisans and comradeship. While the socialist realist cinematic formula of the time sought clear-cut representations of the individual, Zhelyazkova's characters are full of doubts and conflicts, and ultimately question the postwar version of state socialism.

Her most celebrated title, *The Tied-Up Balloon* (1967), which played to a full audience at this year's TIFF, is a social satire of a group of villagers who attempt to capture a loose army balloon hovering over their land. Their adventures are counter-pointed by still frames with highly symbolical political metaphors and quotes, including an omnipresent voice from the balloon who observes the villagers' futile attempts. *The Swimming Pool* (1977), which was awarded with the Silver Prize in Moscow, deals with the existential dilemma of a young woman, who juggles feelings for two men, an architect representing the old socialist guard whose lofty ideals no longer fit the times, and his best friend, a free spirited comic performer. Her last fiction film, which premiered at *Un Certain Regard* competition in

Cannes, *The Big Night Bathe* (1980), is an existential parable focusing on a group of friends, caught in a spiritual dilemma.

In the 1980s she made two documentaries, *Lullaby* (1981) and *The Bright and Dark Side of Things* (1981), addressing the existential struggles and personal stories of the 'invisible' women, young mothers and their babies of the female prison in Svilen. Zhelyazkova spent a long period in Svilen, researching and getting to know the prisoners. Exploring a similar theme, *The Last Word* (1973), is a story of six female political prisoners awaiting execution and contemplating the notions of survival and resistance. The film was selected for the Cannes competition and shows the director's explorations of existential questions surrounding mental and physical freedom and confinement. In one of the most affective and captivating scenes of the film, in which Zhelyazkova's visual flair for purely cinematic expressions emerges to the fore, the female prisoners perform a fire dance, one of the oldest pagan rituals in the Balkans. Zhelyazkova builds the ritual through the rhythmic juxtaposition of wide shots of female prisoners in trance-like state dancing around the fire, with haptical close ups of their faces, movements and hands, to the liberating act of jumping over the fire.

Shorts and Development

The Balkan shorts showcase also offered high-quality viewing experiences. Perhaps the most notable were Radu Jude's *Plastic Semiotic* (Romania, 2021) and the heavily awarded *Displaced* (Samir Karahoda, Kosovo, 2021). The former continues its director's quest to find original means to reveal the barbarism informing contemporary civilization. The latter is a brilliantly filmed reflection on dedication, generosity, and resilience. It dignifies two table-tennis coaches who adamantly pursue the goal of offering their students quality practice. In a former warzone like Kosovo, this pursuit becomes a metaphor for the aspiration for stability and normality of communities unsettled by conflict.

Finally, one needs to emphasize that Balkan film was present at the festival not only as final product on display in the theatre, but also as object of distribution, co-production deals, and development assistance. Most notable is the support offered by TIFF within Agora, the festival's project showcase and co-production incubator. Agora helps projects that have as majority coproducer a country from the 'neighbourhood,' the term being understood similarly as for the Meet the Neighbours competition. This year, Agora assisted projects and professionals not only from predictable countries such as Kosovo, Romania, or Cyprus, but also from Georgia and Poland. Despite the pandemic, it hosted in-person seminars, pitches, and in-depth training with industry experts.