



# Introduction: Films and Societies in Southeastern Europe

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Armina Galijaš

Assistant Professor, University of Graz  
[armina.galijas@uni-graz.at](mailto:armina.galijas@uni-graz.at)

Hrvoje Paić

Assistant Professor, University of Graz  
[h.paic@uni-graz.at](mailto:h.paic@uni-graz.at)

*Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, 2017, 4(2), 20-24

DOI 10.25364/02.4:2017.2.2

# Introduction: Films and Societies in Southeastern Europe

Armina Galijaš and Hrvoje Paić\*

This special issue of *Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, titled *Films and Societies in Southeastern Europe*, is a collection of six research articles and one research essay that explore multiple current and historical relations between film productions and societal developments in Southeastern Europe. With the generous support of the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz, we organised a series of lectures, hosting numerous recognised experts from this part of Europe and beyond. The lecture series was held in the summer semester of 2014 and served as a starting platform for this publication. Of the seven authors, some were guest lecturers in the lecture series, while the rest are internationally-recognised experts in film and social studies who were invited to participate.

This is first and foremost an academic publishing project, aimed at both research and lecturing staff, postgraduate students and advanced undergraduate students including the interested broader public of media and film critics, film journalists, essayists, film makers and artists. Given the popularity of film, we also envisage a broader (non-)academic public interested in the film, history and politics of Southeast European societies. Especially given the effort to situate the research with regard to other approaches, we expect it to be used in undergraduate and postgraduate courses across disciplinary boundaries, both for area-specific studies and in comparative

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\* Armina Galijaš is an Assistant Professor at the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz. She studied Eastern and Southeastern European History, Modern History and Economics at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich. After graduating, she worked as a research assistant at the Department of East and Southeast European History from 2003 to 2005. From 2005 to 2011 she was a research assistant at the Department of East European History at the University of Vienna, where she also obtained her doctorate in History. Her research interests and academic teaching focus on modern Southeast European history

Hrvoje Paić is an Assistant Professor at the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz. He graduated in Economics at the University of Zagreb and completed postgraduate studies in Political Science at the same University. He also studied Journalism in Zagreb. In 2009 he obtained his doctorate in Political Science from the University of Vienna. Before coming to the University of Graz in 2012, he worked for the University of Vienna and the Austrian Institute for International Affairs. His research interests and academic teaching focus on current political and societal relations in SEE as well as theoretical and methodological questions in political science.

studies of the socialist period, postwar reconstruction, post-socialist transformation, conflict resolution, divided societies, nationalism research, and so on. Apart from degree programmes in media/film studies, this volume will be useful and attractive to teachers of qualitatively-oriented courses in political science, communications studies, sociology, gender studies, history, transition studies and human geography.

The issue collects articles written by renowned university professors as well as young highly promising researchers, including one PhD candidate, and thus the volume embraces academic experience together with innovative and fresh ideas and approaches. The seven authors use different academic perspectives including approaches from history, sociology, gender, visual, literature and film studies in order to reflect phenomena of film productions and related societal circumstances that have thus far been researched only rarely or not at all.

In terms of the time horizon, this collection of articles offers an opportunity to discover selected new insights into the relationship between film and society in the so-called 'Balkans' from the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until now. Starting with the formative phase of cinema development, the issues reflect the establishment of mobile and permanent cinema and related capitalist societal local and broader European contexts during the 1920s and 1930s. The strengthening of local film productions in the period of authoritarian and totalitarian socialism within numerous societal formations in SEE, and its influence over film production, have also been analytically encompassed. The reflection of relationships between forms of socialist rule, related societal contexts and films is also present in this volume as an analysis of filmed memory of this period from today's perspective. The next chronological step relates to the reflection of the erosion of one of the socialist systems in SEE, namely the Yugoslav one, including the usage and reproduction of nationalism within film production as one of the tools employed for the de-legitimation of Yugoslav statehood and the legitimation of new state and societal formations. Besides films that promoted new national and nationalist state projects constructed solely within their relevant societies, this issue also focuses on diasporic nostalgic film, remembering the former Yugoslavia in the framework of locally made as well as displaced (e.g. outside of the region) film productions. The final research article deals with films made during the 2010s. It reflects relationships between the current social transformation phase, with a focus on neoliberalisation and the proliferation of transnational networks on one side, and notions of sex, girlhood and disobedience encoded in current film productions on the other. The issue ends with a special essay that reverses Todorova's concept of the *Other* and thus analyzes the image of the stranger in selected films made during the 2000s.

In terms of spatial-social focusing, the issue uses and partially follows Dina Iordanova's notion of "Balkan cinema".<sup>1</sup> In doing so, the issues reflects synchronically and some diachronically selected<sup>2</sup> films and cinemas in social contexts, predominantly those of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, the former socialist Yugoslav state, and, less frequently but no less importantly, Albania. All analyses are strongly contextualised; both with regard to a reflection of other parts of Southeastern Europe, like Greece, Bulgaria and Romania, but also with regard to relevant film and societal developments in other parts of Europe, like the Habsburg Monarchy and France, and in the framework of relevant diasporic communities. In this sense, the analyses are characterised by sensitivity for an understanding of relations between film and societies in SEE as transnational, transregional and global phenomena.

The issue begins with an analysis by Karl Kaser, professor of Southeastern European history and anthropology at the University in Graz. He raises historical anthropological questions and therefore is more interested in pictures and visual materials as social and cultural phenomena, and less in, for example, questions of the aesthetics of film. He concentrates on the time between the first film screenings in Southeastern Europe (1896) and the outbreak of the First Balkan War in 1912. In his analysis, he reflects mobile and permanent cinema, strongly accentuating the synchronic European context and relevant links. Kaser also focuses on the example of Belgrade and its population during the relevant time framework by questioning whether and to what extent this population was prepared for the new visual medium and its core element – cinema and films. In the final section, Kaser analyses how the European film industry, under the banner of Pathé, has developed, including what kind of role the *cinema balkanica* played in it.

Ana Grgić, course leader at the University of Arts London, investigates how laughter and tragedy was encoded in selected film productions in SEE during state socialist repression and authoritarianism. She examines how film comedies in the repressive state socialist contexts of Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria used traditional comic conventions to offer critiques of the political and social systems. Grgić analyzes *Ciguli Miguli* (Yugoslavia 1951, released 1977), *King for a Day* (Bulgaria 1983) and *The Concert* (Albania 1936) in a comparative manner, searching for their common and different characteristics. She identifies common elements, such as the struggle between the value systems of tradition vs. state socialist modernity, civilisation vs. primitiveness, European-ness vs. Balkan-ness. She finds that such Balkanist constructs did not disappear, but were internalised by the communist totalitarian ideologies.

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<sup>1</sup> Dina Iordanova (2001). *Cinema of Flames. Balkan Film, Culture and the Media*. University of Michigan. As well as Dina Iordanova (ed.) (2006). *Cinema of the Balkans*. London: Wallflower Press, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> The selection and corresponding thematic focus is given by a consideration of the state-of-the-art of the related field(s) as well as the analytical preferences of each author.

Nevena Daković, professor of film theory at the University of Belgrade, explores cinematic history and the memory of socialism and Yugoslavia throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The relationship between history and memory are explored as they are constructed and represented in the cinematic texts of two films by Mila Turajlić, namely *Cinema Komunisto* from 2010 and *The Other Side of Everything* from 2017. In a conceptual sense, Daković's analysis understands cinematic text as 1) the text of cultural memory that constructs the remembrance of the past; and 2) as a cinematic field of tensions of memory and history, textual and metatextual layers, fact and fiction; and finally, 3) as texts that perform the turn from being a 'film about history' to being a 'memory-making film', while keeping both facets. Based on a deep and comparative analysis of the two cases, the author conceptually concludes, besides numerous empirical findings, that films, on the one hand, can recreate national history; on the other, they write out cultural memory as a combination of the ready-made elements previously codified through popular culture.

The article written by Sanjin Pejković, PhD candidate in Film studies at Lund University, analyses displaced film memories that remember Yugoslavia within several traumatised diasporic groups. His starting argument is that "films dealing with the memories of the country renegotiate the past through contested representations and can raise 'forgotten' issues of collective memories and even collective amnesias." Pejković's crucial analytical tools are clearly defined ideas of displaced filmmaking, memory conveyance and representations of history. In doing so, he identifies and characterises a few stylistic and thematic approaches of memory representation of the former Yugoslavia in the context of social developments after its dissolution. He focuses on ideas of displaced mediated memories rooted in documentary films of the former country. The analysed films deal with questions of identity, marginalisation, conflict, inter-generational debates, values, loyalty, and sharing memories, but also exile, migration and displacement.

Nikica Gilić, associate professor for literature and film studies at the University of Zagreb, contributes an article named *Post-Yugoslav Film and the Construction of New National Cinemas*. He questions the usual images of Post-Yugoslav cinema as a social field of (re)production of nationalist traits, while Yugoslav cinema was seen as a social locality of production of only non- or anti-nationalist films. In this sense, Gilić is searching for continuities and discontinuities, e.g. analysing selected films from the Yugoslav period, and later of Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia. He identifies the reproduction of nationalism and cultural traditions like patriarchy within Yugoslav film production, as well as modern and liberal elements within Post-Yugoslav movies. He is mostly oriented towards Croatian film examples and simultaneously tries to shed light also on other film productions in states with similar social history.

Finally, the last research article of the issue was written by Dijana Jelača, adjunct professor of film arts at the Fordham University. She is interested in the identification and characterisation of the links between youth rebellion, post-conflict trauma and social class, primarily on the basis of the film *Clip* (Serbia, 2012), by also taking into account some partially similar films like *Skinning* (Serbia, 2010), *Children of Sarajevo* (Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2012), *Spots* (Croatia, 2011) and *Quit Staring at My Plate* (Croatia, 2016). These films offer insight into locally formed ethno-national identities that are challenged by the proliferation of transnational social connectivity networks. Jelača argues that the approach of the film *Clip* to representing girls offers a rich commentary on the performative aspects of social class in transitional post-socialist societies like Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. She also examines how the film's graphic scenes of sex might point to "sex without optimism", a term that focuses on, according to its authors Berlant and Edelman, "the ways in which sex undoes the subject"<sup>3</sup>. The focus of Jelača's examination is on the relationship between the "sex without optimism" depicted in *Clip*, traditional identity structures, feminine libido and patriarchal regimes of control.

Renate Hansen-Kokoruš, Professor of Slavic Literature and Culture at the University of Graz, contributes to the issue with a research essay. She identifies and investigates characteristics of the figure of the stranger explicated and/or implicated in selected films primarily made in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. All of the films, with one exception – *Someone Else's America (Paradise, Brooklyn)* by Goran Paskaljević (1995) – were made during the 2000s. Cognitively rooted predominantly in Todorova's and Said's way of thinking, her search for the stranger in films is oriented in contrast with the the perceptions and descriptions of the two authors, e.g. perceptions of 'Balkan'/'East' in 'European'/'West'. In doing so, she is interested in film figures like UNPROFOR soldiers in Bosnia and Herzegovina or foreign businessmen in Croatia, including relevant characterisations of the 'strangers'/'others'/'them' and 'locals'/'us' as well as self-characterisations. On the basis of an analysis of the films, Hansen-Kokoruš identifies numerous normative characterisations of both 'strangers' and non-'strangers' and stereotype images in both directions.

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<sup>3</sup> Lauren Berlant nad Lee Edelman (2013). *Sex, or the Unbearable*. NC: Duke University Press.