

**Yugoslav War Cinema:  
Shooting A Nation Which No Longer Exists**

**Stephanie Baric**

**A Thesis**

**in**

**The Department**

**of**

**Communication Studies**

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

**August 2001**

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## **Abstract**

### **Yugoslav War Cinema: Shooting A Nation Which No Longer Exists**

Stephanie Baric

From its inception following World War II, Yugoslav war cinema played a major role in representing and challenging the discourse of the nation. Films depicting the Partisan war experience during the “national war of liberation”, the foundational narrative of socialist Yugoslavia, played a significant role in constructing and deconstructing Yugoslavia’s revolutionary past. After the death of Tito in 1980, critical focus in cinema shifted away from the events of WW II to post-war Yugoslavia and the brutal anti-Stalinist purges following Yugoslavia’s break with the Cominform. With the disintegration of Yugoslavia, “Yugoslav” cinema faced an uncertain future. Post-socialism marked the re-emergence of the war film genre that critically examined the conflicts that tore a nation apart. As communities throughout the former Yugoslavia attempt to come to terms with the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the wars that followed, cinema may be an effective tool for deconstructing the myths of ethnic nationalism. Discourse analysis will reveal the intervention of film in the political and cultural spheres of the nation and its significant role in reshaping the foundational narrative.

## **Acknowledgements**

I owe an enormous debt to my supervisor Lorna Roth, without her encouragement and support I doubt whether I would have completed this thesis. I thank the members of my committee, Monika Gagnon and Rick Hancox, for their invaluable suggestions and insights.

This thesis is dedicated to my deceased father Stjepan, my mother Slavica and my partner Siniša whose nation no longer exists, and my sister Nancy. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to those throughout the former Yugoslavia who refused to embrace ethnic nationalism.

## Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	1
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### Chapters

1	THE ESTABLISHMENT AND EVOLUTION OF A NATIONAL CINEMA - THE CELEBRATION OF PARTISAN HEROICISM.....	15
2	DECENTRALISATION AND BREAKING THE SOCIALIST MOULD - CONFRONTING THE REVOLUTIONARY PAST.....	36
3	CRITICAL ACCOMMODATION AND RESURGENCE.....	56
4	FROM THE MOVIE THEATRE TO THE GRAVE - WAR CINEMA IN POST SOCIALISM.....	77
	CONCLUSION.....	98
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	103

### Appendixes

1	FILMOGRAPHY.....	109
2	HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF YUGOSLAV WAR CINEMA.....	110
3	MAP OF THE KINGDOM OF SERBS, CROATS AND SLOVENES.....	112
4	MAP OF THE SOCIALIST FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF YUGOSLAVIA.....	113
5	MAP OF THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLICS.....	114

## Introduction

As the most popular mass medium in Yugoslavia's cultural sphere, war cinema played a major role in re-presenting the past as a way of promoting change in the present. The inherently political character of Yugoslav cinema created a struggle between filmmakers critically revisioning Yugoslavia's past and hard-line members of the government interested in maintaining the status quo including the perpetuation of the same foundational narrative of the nation. Despite this struggle, war cinema maintained its critical nature throughout the history of Yugoslav national cinema. Although the disintegration of Yugoslavia raised questions about the future of cinema in the region, the violent destruction of the nation has been a central theme for filmmakers and well received by spectators attempting to come to terms with the war and its origins.

In the opening credits of *Lepa sela, lepo gore* (*Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* 1996), the film is dedicated "to the cinema of a nation which no longer exists". The dedication is appropriate in that *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*, like the war films of the past, "favours a state of the nation discourse" or the intervention of film in the political debates of the nation (Xavier 353). The disintegration of Yugoslavia and the wars that followed in the republics of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina raised questions about the future of cinema. *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* was the first film to examine the horrors of the conflict in Bosnia where communities, which had coexisted for centuries, were suddenly drawn into a war based on ethnic

divisions. Beyond depicting the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the film indicates that the tradition of critically examining national discourse through cinema has re-emerged in the post-socialist film industry.

The end of World War II marked a victory for Tito and his Partisans in defeating the Nazis and fascist collaborators in the region determined to partition Yugoslavia.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by Soviet cinema and Lenin's proclamation that "film is the most important art" the newly-formed Yugoslav film industry under the auspices of the socialists set out to produce films that celebrated the heroic efforts of Tito's Partisans during the "national war of liberation" (Goulding, *Liberated Cinema* 18-19). Post WW II Yugoslav cinema, especially war genre films, constituted a discursive site for imagining the community and producing collective memory. Although in its initial stages war cinema articulated and codified cultural narratives that defined the nation according to the socialist representation of the national past, the genre later intervened in political debates, challenging the myths of the nation. During the sixties, as the events of WW II grew distant, the unifying heroism of the communist party no longer sufficed and a critical dialogue with the past accompanied demands for democracy. It was during this critical period in Yugoslav history that war cinema reflected the battle of the discourses between the government and members of the "imagined community".<sup>2</sup> Cinema "[...] became an important field in which the battle for the democratisation of Yugoslav society was waged" (Liehm and Liehm 128).

In the early seventies, as members of the Communist Party sought to suppress opposition movements, the government took direct control of the film industry as well as other elements of the cultural sphere.<sup>3</sup> Partisan films increasingly reflected the government's determination to "rule the country simply by invoking a heroic past" (Horton, "The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Partisan Film" 25). Expensive Hollywood-style Partisan films were produced, with simplistic narratives that marked a return to the heroic-nationalist style of the late forties. In response to the falsification and exaggeration of the Yugoslav war experience, audiences "[...] eventually shrunk in direct proportion to the over-simplification of the genre" (25). Consequently, as war films ceased to articulate the destiny of the nation according to its members, and instead promulgated the official doctrine of the government, cinema lost its privileged position in Yugoslav social and cultural discourse.

Critical engagement with the national past returned to Yugoslav cinema in the eighties, as films were once again "[...] characterised by wide-ranging political and cultural expression and debate which sharply question received myths and which critically address the multiple dilemmas of contemporary social, economic, and political life" (Goulding, *Post New Wave Cinema* 249). Filmmakers abandoned the war genre that depicted the Partisan war experience, creating instead films that examined the post-war years during Yugoslavia's break from the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform) including the persecution of Stalin loyalists. The Cominform was established in 1947 in Poland under Stalin's



instructions stressing the division of the world into socialist and capitalist camps and was dissolved in 1956.

The violent disintegration of Yugoslavia disrupted feature filmmaking in the early nineties, except for Serbia where filmmakers continued with the same vigour in post-socialist Yugoslavia.<sup>4</sup> While socialist Yugoslavia may have been dismantled, the tradition of creating films that represented the social and political realities of the nation re-emerged.

This thesis will consist of an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion providing a historical overview of the inception of the war film genre following WW II and its continuation after the destruction of socialist Yugoslavia. In terms of situating Yugoslav cinema, it defies classification in many respects. "If Yugoslav cinema, like Yugoslavia itself in the past since 1948, was always "something in between" capitalist and socialist models, it is even more "in between" since the wars of independence broke out in 1991" (Horton, "Only Crooks Can Get Ahead" 414). During socialism, the Yugoslav film industry relied on both government subsidies and box office sales. To position Yugoslav cinema in Eastern European cinema, ignores the "honesty and openness to a degree not possible in the Soviet Union or Warsaw Pact nations, in treating sociopolitical conflicts as well as the individual frustrations of modern life" despite socialist Yugoslavia's one political party system (Horton, "Yugoslavia: Multifaceted Cinema" 640). Similarly, positioning Yugoslav cinema in Western

European Cinema (e.g. France or Italy) ignores the restrictive ideological climate that often limited the expression of the filmmaker. Given the central role that cinema played in re-presenting the past, Yugoslav cinema may best be compared with national cinemas such as Israel that similarly escapes a strict classification. Like Israel, Yugoslav cinema faced the challenge of developing “[...] a cinematic infrastructure and wresting control of the domestic market from foreign domination [...]” and in “[...] moving from a somewhat idealising nation-building “mythic” cinema into a more diversified “normal” kind of industry” (Shohat 4). Another similarity lies with the inherently political character of the Yugoslav cultural sphere. Like Israel, Yugoslavia “[...] was the enactment of an explicit political ideology [...] rather than the product of a kind of aleatory historical accretion over centuries. The debates which attended the foundation of the state reverberate within the biographical and historical memory of filmmakers” (4).

Although I have chosen to focus on the war genre within Yugoslav national cinema, it is difficult to compare Yugoslav war films with other cinemas that examined war or even more specifically World War II. Yugoslav war films paid scant attention to the specifics of WW II, focusing instead on the victory of socialism as an ideology and “brotherhood and unity” as the foundational narrative of the Yugoslav nation.

Despite the socialist realist character of early war films such as *Slavica*, it is inappropriate to label these films as propaganda. Yugoslavia’s liberation during

WW II was not owed to the Red Army (as was the case with other socialist nations) and, more importantly, socialism was a grassroots movement rather than a Soviet imposition. While it is possible that the popular appeal of Partisan films "[...] derived less from their historical relevance than from the authenticity of their characters and a certain naivety of narration. It would be unfair to label all films from this period as state propaganda" (Taylor et al. 268). Early Partisan films reinforced a will to coexist in a unified nation rather than an attempt to win support for such a cause.

In providing an analysis of historical developments in the Yugoslav war genre and its role in representing national discourse, I have applied discourse analysis as a methodology. In studying the development of war cinema vis-à-vis the historical, political and cultural processes of Yugoslavia, narrative film is defined as a text that intervened in the political and cultural sphere of the nation defined as the context. Discourse analysis is the most appropriate method for dealing "[...] with the properties of text [...] and what is usually context, that is the other characteristics of the social situation or the communicative event that may systematically influence text" (Van Dijk 3). Moreover, as a methodology, discourse analysis sheds light on the viewer as a social subject, a cultural construct that is "[...] the result of various discourses put in play by the text, but also the subject of social, economic, and political practices beyond the text, which are brought to bear at the moment of screen/viewer interaction" (Miller and Stam 159). In examining the role of film in 'constructing' and 'representing' the

discourse of the “imagined community”, discourse analysis is the most appropriate for exploring “[...] culture as a site where subjectivity is constructed” (Stam 225).

As for a theoretical framework, I have relied on Michel Foucault’s theory of “discursive formations” or the situating of single texts (i.e. films) in the larger textual practices of Yugoslav culture. I have used “discursive formations” to identify the systems of meaning that were negotiated, and the “power struggles” that went on between the government, members of the cultural sphere (i.e. filmmakers) and members of the “imagined community” as spectators. In addition, I have used Ismail Xavier’s theory of “historical allegory” or “pragmatic allegories” where “[...] the underlined analogies between past and present are taken as a piece of rhetoric, a form of raising a question about the present using the past” (355). In Yugoslav war cinema, re-examination of the past was used to re-evaluate the present. In each chapter, I have chosen to discuss a film that represents a thematic perspective of war cinema and how it relates to critical periods in the history of Yugoslavia as a nation.

Chapter One: The Establishment and Evolution of a National Cinema - The Celebration of Partisan Heroicism, consists of an overview of the historical origins of Yugoslavia as a nation based on the pan-Yugoslav movement of the 1800’s that led to the creation of Yugoslavia after WW I, the events of WW II and the emergence of a national cinema. Although the historical overview of the

creation of the Yugoslav nation is rather lengthy, much of the information is necessary in understanding the obstacles the socialists faced in reconstructing the Yugoslav nation after WW II. In this chapter, the first feature film of post WW II Yugoslavia, *Slavica*, will be discussed as an example of the films produced during this period that represented the struggle of Tito and his Partisans to form a unified nation. Based on the story of a Partisan woman who sacrifices her life in the fight against fascism, *Slavica* was written and directed by Vjekoslav Afric a veteran of the war. The film was enthusiastically received; in its first year, *Slavica* drew an audience of nearly 2,000,000 viewers throughout the different regions of Yugoslavia (Goulding, *Liberated Cinema* 12). *Slavica* is an important film in that it anticipates the direction the Partisan film would take (Horton, "The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Partisan Film" 19).

In Chapter Two: Decentralisation and Breaking the Socialist Mould - Confronting the Revolutionary Past, I discuss the departure from an inflated and fabricated heroism, marking a "deromanticisation" of the war experience, and an abandonment of the abstract idealism of films such as *Slavica*. The shift away from "heroic romanticism" was to some extent a result of Yugoslavia's break from Stalin and the Cominform in 1948, and the country's experimentation in decentralisation and self-management.<sup>5</sup> As the nation set out to create a unique path for socialism through political and economic reforms, artists increasingly sought to free their work of dogmatic propagandistic formulas. The changes

made in the fifties in many respects laid down the groundwork for one of the most innovative periods in Yugoslav cinema often referred to as the “Golden Age”. During the sixties, filmmakers, critics and theorists embraced *novi film* (*new film*), a movement advocating greater freedom for personal and collective artistic expression, stylistic experimentation, and films that dealt with contemporary themes, all within the context of the socialist/Marxist state (Goulding, *Liberated Cinema* 66). A central figure in the development of *new film* tendencies was Aleksandar Petrovic, one of Yugoslavia’s most renowned filmmakers. It was during this period that Petrovic directed *Tri* (*Three*, 1965) inspired by stories from the author Antonije Isakovic. The film consists of three war stories all involving a soldier and three different encounters with death. Despite the positive reception the film received in Yugoslavia and the multitude of awards and critical attention it received abroad, the tendency of *new film* to deconstruct the past was met with opposition from the government. Alarmed by events such as the 1968 student demonstrations in Belgrade demanding an end to authoritarianism and the Croatian nationalist movement favouring a looser confederation in 1971, the government moved to suppress critical voices within the political and cultural spheres of Yugoslav society. In an attempt to avoid any kind of ideological clash with the government, many filmmakers adopted a form of self-censorship in their work.

In Chapter Three: Critical Accommodation and Resurgence I begin with an overview of the film industry in the seventies subject to government control. Most war films of this period were a product of the glorification and “Hollywoodisation”

of the Partisan war experience. Although the advent of television in the sixties contributed to the decline of film spectators, the simplification of the Partisan film was to blame as well. The reactionary politics of the regime aimed at crushing political dissension made the revival of naïve heroic romanticism in war films unacceptable to most spectators in Yugoslav society. Based on the events of the sixties, there was no going back to the Partisan war myth and “[...] its heroic deeds, sacred songs, slogans, and icons [...]” that had been used as “[...] emblems of legitimacy for the post war leadership” (85).

The death of Tito in 1980 and the onset of high inflation, a crippling deficit, unemployment and growing economic disparities between regions in the North and the South left the country in chaos. Despite the economic and political crises in Yugoslavia, the eighties marked the rise of a new generation of filmmakers committed to creating films that reflected “[...] critically upon *savremene teme* (contemporary themes), but without the radical confrontation impetus of earlier *new film* directors” (145). It was during this period that the new generation of filmmakers adopted “[...] an attitude of critical accommodation rather than dialectical confrontation” and the Partisan war experience disappeared as a cinematic theme (145). Instead, critical focus was placed on the years immediately following WW II and Yugoslavia’s break with the Cominform in 1948. In *Otac na sluzbenom putu* (*When Father was Away on Business*, 1984), director Emir Kusturica examines the purge of pro-Soviet Yugoslavs, many of whom were imprisoned in work camps.<sup>6</sup> The film portrays the difficulties a boy faces after his

father is sent to jail for supposedly criticising Yugoslavia's break from Stalin; when the boy asks his mother where is his father, she tells him that he is away on a business trip.

In Chapter Four: From the Movie Theatre to the Grave – War Cinema in Post Socialism I provide a brief overview of the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the outbreak of war, first in Croatia in 1991, and then in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992. Despite the complexity of the situation, the simplistic 'bloody Balkan history' narrative was widely adopted in the West and by ethnic nationalists as an explanation for the political crisis in the region. According to this narrative, "[...] contemporary relations between Croats, Muslims, and Serbs [...]" are controlled by "[...] deep currents of ethnic hatred and memories of awful events from six centuries past" (Hardin 23). Applying metaphors such as 'the powder keg of Europe' and 'Balkan quagmire', the war was represented as inevitable among people predisposed to 'ethnic violence'.<sup>7</sup> Although peaceful coexistence characterised ethnic relations in Yugoslavia from 1945 – 1991, proponents of the 'history of ethnic hatred' explanation claim this was achieved through the creation of a "fictional nation" ruled by coercive governance. The fall of communism supposedly unleashed hostilities long suppressed, marking a return to the pre-existing order of ethnic violence. Yet, previous to World War 2, no ethnically motivated armed conflict ever erupted between the South Slavs (Udovicki 35).



*Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* (Lepa Sela, Lepo Gore, 1996) was the first narrative film to examine the violent destruction of the nation through the war in Bosnia. Inspired by a series of Bosnian war reports featured in the Serbian magazine *Duga*, *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* is loosely based on the true story of a ten day siege in which Serb soldiers were trapped inside a tunnel surrounded by Muslims without food or water. Although *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* is one of the first Serbian films to deal directly with the events of the civil war, graphically depicting the destruction of Muslim property and lives at the hands of Serbian forces while trashing the dangerous idealism of Serbian nationalism, by attributing the destruction of Yugoslavia to ethnic hatred which supposedly existed beneath the façade of 'brotherhood and unity', the film actually reinforces the 'ancient hatreds' discourse. It is a contradiction of terms to condemn ethnic nationalism and war, while upholding a discourse that treats conflict as inevitable among historically antagonistic ethnic groups.<sup>8</sup>

## **Conclusion**

With the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991, although filmmaking ceased in most of the former Yugoslav republics, Serbia has been the exception, where cinema has continued with the same vigour despite a major drop in government subsidies. Although *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* was not the first film to address the disintegration of Yugoslavia, it was however the first film to critically examine the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina and ethnic nationalist discourse. While the film exposes the human cost of ethnic nationalism, it does not however, challenge the

history of ethnic hatred explanation central to ethnic nationalist discourse that depicts Yugoslavia as a fictional nation that forced mutually antagonistic ethnic groups to coexist under the false slogan of 'brotherhood and unity'. It is specifically this aspect of the ethnic hatreds explanation that is often used as a justification for the creation of ethnically exclusive communities as a way of ensuring that the cycle of violence finally ends. Given the role that cinema has historically played in the nation, in confronting representations of the past in order to critically engage with issues in the present, it is an appropriate medium for challenging assumptions about the past (i.e. the inevitability of the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia) and in deconstructing ethnic nationalist discourse that has wreaked havoc on the region for the last decade.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Nazis were not alone in attacking Yugoslavia, there were the *Ustasa* (fascist Croats) and the *Cetniks* (Serbs loyal to the King in exile), as well as neighbouring countries with territorial aspirations such as Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria and Albania.

<sup>2</sup> After WW II, despite the events of the war (i.e. the civil war) there was a will to live in a unified country. Consequently, Yugoslav films represented this commitment to coexistence and a socialist future. Later these films would reflect sentiments within Yugoslav society, including the need for political reform.

<sup>3</sup> In many respects, this decade may be seen as the 'beginning of the end' of Yugoslavia. Rather than accept the demand for change, the government responded instead with uncompromising brutality. Despite changes in the Yugoslav constitution in 1974, including the decentralisation of power, the country never recovered from events of this period.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout the history of filmmaking in Yugoslavia, Belgrade dominated film production. For this reason, it does not surprise me that Serbian filmmakers continued to produce quality films despite the destruction of Yugoslavia.

<sup>5</sup> Based on a revisionist interpretation of Marxist-Leninist theory, the Yugoslav communist party launched a system of "decentralised self-management socialism" which was supposed to serve as a way of preventing the party from becoming a totalitarian elite. The system was applied to all aspects of Yugoslav society. In the workplace, this meant that companies were, in theory, owned and operated by the workers. In terms of the relationship between the federal government and the republics, self-management granted greater autonomy to each republic.

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<sup>6</sup> Many were sent to a prison referred to as *Goli Otok* (Barren Island). Several journalists and historians drew attention to the prison during the late eighties highlighting the brutal treatment of prisoners. The purge supposedly cost Tito a nomination for the Nobel Peace prize.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Kaplan's book, *Balkan Ghosts*, is a prime example of the use of the 'Balkan Myth', where villages are described as "[...] full of savage hatreds leavened by poverty and alcoholism" (p. 22). In his Prologue "Saints, Terrorists, Blood and Holy Water", Kaplan portrays the Balkans as having "[...] been isolated by poverty and ethnic rivalry, dooming them to hate. Here politics has been reduced to a level of near anarchy that from time to time in history has flowed up the Danube into Central Europe" (p. XXIII). Despite the book's ethnocentric tone, it actually made the *NY Times* Best Seller's list.

<sup>8</sup> If Yugoslavia was in fact what Dubravka Ugresic sarcastically refers to as "a prison of nations" (*Nacija* when literally translated into English is "nation"; a more appropriate translation is ethnic group or ethnicity) in her book *Culture of Lies*, then the country was in fact doomed and there was nothing to prevent the outbreak of war among inherently hostile ethnic groups.

## **Chapter One: The Establishment and Evolution of a National Cinema - The Celebration of Partisan Heroicism**

In analysing the establishment of a national cinema in Yugoslavia that would in its initial stages of development constitute a discursive site for imagining the community and producing collective memory under socialism, an examination of the historical processes involved in creating the Yugoslav nation is essential. Although the unification of the South Slavs was a struggle, it starkly differs from the simplistic 'bloody Balkan' narrative embraced by most Westerners, depicting mutually antagonistic ethnic groups forced to coexist in a fictive nation despite ancient hatreds. After centuries under colonial rule, *Yugoslavism* became a reality with the creation of a united Slavic state in 1919. However, from its inception, the nation was politically unstable and with the outbreak of WW II, it collapsed. Upon defeating fascism and forces intent on partitioning Yugoslavia, Tito sought to re-construct a nation that would address the grievances of the ethnic communities stemming from colonial rule under the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, and distance itself from the political follies of the "bourgeois" government which existed between the two world wars. In seeking to create a unified state, the socialists supported the development of a national film industry that would contribute to the construction of a cohesive entity.

In this chapter, I will discuss the historical processes involved in the rise of *Yugoslavism* and the unification of the South Slavs, the events of WW II, the

reconstruction of Yugoslavia under socialism and the emergence of Partisan films as the perfect unifying medium in the nation.

### **Unification of the South Slavs**

During the first half the of the nineteenth century, as the majority of South Slavs lived under the Austro-Hungarian Hapsburg dynasty and the Turkish empire, a movement for the unification of the Southern Slavs was established. "The early movement for South Slavic unity was created by a group of Croatian scholars who called themselves Illyrians, after the oldest tribe known to have inhabited the Balkan Peninsula, dating back to classical Greek times" (Jovanovic 43). During the 1830s and 1840s, the Illyrians emphasised the uniqueness of the Slavic culture and sought to create a common literary language among the South Slavs as a first step towards a unified national culture (43). The idea of unifying the South (*jug*) Slavs into one state, or "Yugoslavism" (*jugoslovenstvo*), was later developed during the revival of the Illyrian movement in the 1860s (44).

Although pan-Slavic unification was debated in Croatia during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century as a way of ending Austro-Hungarian cultural domination, in Serbia, the idea was all but ignored. Turkish rule was less assimilatory, and as a result, few Serbian parties paid attention to Yugoslavism. However, in the wake of the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913, and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Yugoslavism was embraced as a means of uniting all Serbs into one state. Victory against the Turks during the first Balkan war led many Serbs to believe that the Hapsburg

Empire could be easily defeated as well, thus allowing the South Slavs to unite into one state. When the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was fatally shot in Sarajevo in 1914, Austria accused the Serbs of sponsoring the assassination and along with Germany, Bulgaria and Turkey declared war against Serbia. With the outbreak of WW I, Serbian leaders began to define their war aims in terms of South Slav liberation. "If the war with Austria-Hungary could not be avoided, it at least offered a possibility for Serbia, in case of victory, to create a powerful Slav state, uniting Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes" (48). In the war, approximately 1.9 million Yugoslavs were killed and Serbia lost half of its economic assets. Based on the Corfu Declaration of 1917, a new nation unifying the South Slavs, The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, was established on December 1, 1918, under the rule of the Serbian monarch Aleksandar Karadjordjevic. "The aggressiveness of Germans, Hungarians, and Italians had the effect of further strengthening the Slav union as a means of national survival" (49).

Although the newly formed state was a victory for pan-Slavism, many Croats and Slovenes regarded the establishment of a highly centralised federation as a sign of growing Serbian hegemony. The nation's constitution, drawing from the liberal European model of "one man, one vote", meant that the Serbs, who outnumbered any other group, controlled most of the political decisions in Parliament.<sup>1</sup> While the Croats and Slovenes expected increased political power based on their economic clout (in 1930 approximately 80% of the industry was located in Slovenia and Croatia), the Serbs expected increased economic power

as a result of their political clout (almost two thirds of government personnel were Serbs) (53). The murder of Stjepan Radic, a popular Croatian politician shot by a Montenegrin deputy during a parliamentary session in 1928, marked the end of parliamentarianism. King Aleksandar used the crisis to suspend the constitution and outlaw political parties under the pretext that they were inciting strife among the people. By establishing a dictatorship and renaming the state "The Kingdom of Yugoslavia", the Monarch further alienated the Croats. King Aleksandar was assassinated by Croatian and Macedonian extremists during an official visit to France in 1934. Amid growing demands for Croatian independence, a concession was made granting greater autonomy to Croatia in 1939. The move created resentment among the other republics (i.e. Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and even Serbia) since they were not given the same status. Eighteen months after the signing of the agreement for Croatian autonomy, Yugoslavia collapsed. "The creative energy symbolised by the unification and the accumulation of human, intellectual, and economic potential had foundered on the phenomena of permanent political crisis and national antagonism" (57).

In terms of cinema, because the Yugoslav government previous to WW II "[...] did not adopt legislative measures to protect an indigenous film industry - laws that would limit the import of foreign films to ensure the distribution and financing of domestically produced films [...]" few local productions were made, none of which were profitable (Goulding, *Liberated Cinema* 1). In an attempt to promote the growth of a national film industry, in 1931 the government enacted a law levying a tax against film distributors who failed to present at least 10% of

Yugoslav produced films. Although the law led to the establishment of 22 new film enterprises, rather than spur the growth of a national film industry, it had an adverse affect.

The dispersion of scarce talent and investment capital among so many firms in a market as small as Yugoslavia proved fatal [...] studios and labs capable of producing sound features that could compete with imports failed to emerge – Yugoslav feature film production remained at the silent film level of technology until 1941” (Stoil, *Balkan Cinema* 15).

With Yugoslav audiences expressing “[...] a decided preference for light comedy, historical spectacle, and melodramatic romances [...] Serbian, Croatian and Slovene filmmaking efforts alternated between exploiting national traditions and borrowing content ideas from the imported film” (17). Given the technological limitations Yugoslav filmmakers faced, many theatre owners paid the fine rather than show the technologically inferior products of local filmmakers that simply duplicated the thematic approach of foreign films (15). Based on the setback of the Yugoslav film industry between the two world wars, it became obvious to Yugoslav filmmakers that a national cinema could not be developed without direct government support.

### **The Struggles of Tito’s Partisans during World War II**

When World War II began with the bombing of Belgrade in April of 1941, Hitler and Mussolini abolished Yugoslavia as a country and divided its territory between Germany, Italy, Bulgaria and Hungary (later in the war Mussolini handed over the Serbian province of Kosovo to Albania). With the exception of Greece, all of the countries bordering Yugoslavia sided with the Nazis. Germany



annexed Slovenia and set up a military administration in Serbia, Italy took control of Montenegro and most of the Adriatic coast, Bulgaria seized Macedonia, and Hungary claimed the Backa region in Serbia. Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina were joined to create the Nazi Puppet State *Nezavisna Hrvatska Drzava* (the Independent State of Croatia) led by the Ustaša leader Ante Pavelic. The Ustaša, whose ranks included militant Croatian and Bosnian Muslim nationalists, set out to quash communism and exterminate “foreign elements” in the state: Serbs, Jews and Roma (Gypsies).<sup>2</sup> In response to the atrocities committed by the Ustaša, the Cetniks, an army loyal to the Serbian King in exile led by General Drazen Mihajlovic, sought revenge against Slavic Moslems, Croats and Communists. Although both the Ustaša and Cetniks persecuted minority groups, the Ustaša were far more murderous as the killing was organised by the state, whereas the Cetniks were engaged in guerrilla warfare.<sup>3</sup>

With Yugoslavia destroyed as a political entity and occupied by the Nazis and their sympathisers, and a campaign of genocide launched against the Serbs, Jews and Roma, Josip Broz Tito and his Partisans emerged as a force committed to the original idea of Yugoslavia and a united South Slavic resistance against the Fascists. “Tito promised a new, federal Yugoslavia, national equality, and a change in the prewar sociopolitical order” (Tepavac 65). Tito had been a major figure in the Communist Party of Yugoslavia from the early twenties, and was named General Secretary of the party in 1937.<sup>4</sup> When the Germans invaded Yugoslavia in 1941 and then launched an offensive against Russia three

months later, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia called for partisan warfare as a way of liberating the country from the foreign occupiers. "From a relatively minor guerrilla force of about 11,000 in 1941, the Partisans grew into an army of 700,000 by the end of the war" (Crmobnja 67). Although not all of the members of the Partisan forces were communist, the key leaders were.

Along with the struggle against the Germans and other occupiers, Yugoslavia was also the scene of a civil war with the Partisans fighting against the Cetniks (who often collaborated with the Italians and Germans for support against the Partisans), and the Ustaša (both factions were vehemently anti-Communist). Out of a population of approximately 16 million people, more than 1.9 million Yugoslavs were killed (almost half of them perished in the civil war fighting) and at least 30% of the economy was in ruins (Goulding, *Liberated Cinema* 2). Other than Poland, no other country suffered such a widespread loss of life and destruction of their economic infrastructure (2).

In 1945, with the victory of Tito's Partisans, the Socialists set out to reconstruct a country devastated by war. Based on plans developed two years earlier, Tito set up a federation consisting of the republics of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia. Rather than address the atrocities committed among the ethnic groups during the war, the party promoted 'brotherhood and unity' and emphasised the struggle of all ethnic groups against fascism.

### **Yugoslav National Cinema and the Rise of the Partisan Film**

In reconstructing Yugoslavia, the central founding myth of the nation was the Partisan war experience, or the “national war of liberation” against fascism (85). Inspired by Soviet cinema and Lenin’s proclamation that “film is the most important art,” Tito’s government decided to support the establishment of a national film industry (2).

Films were conceived of as a powerful mass medium for serving heuristic and propagandistic purposes, as well as for reflecting the development of a distinctive socialist art based upon the principles of nationalist realism-Yugoslavia’s variant of the Stalinist-Zhdanov narrowly conceived socialist realism dogma. (2)

Despite obstacles such as the lack of technical personnel and limited resources, the Socialists set out to create a national cinema that would represent the “national war of liberation” and promote the reconstruction of Yugoslavia based on the principles of socialism and ‘brotherhood and unity’ (11). “Film became elevated to a cultural and national resource and was consequently allocated significant funds” (Taylor et al. 261). The national film industry was organised using “the soviet model of hierarchical and centralised organisation under strict party control” (Goulding, *Liberated Cinema* 1).<sup>5</sup>

In 1945, the Film Enterprise of the Federation of the People’s Republic of Yugoslavia was established under the Ministry of Education. The film enterprise was given the task of: (1) administering the production of documentaries, news films, and cultural education films, (2) maintaining the export and import of films,

(3) overseeing the distribution of films throughout the country, and (4) administering nationalised and private theatres and projection facilities (2). "For the first two years after the War, documentaries, most which concerned the War, were the first products of the newly formed Yugoslav film industry" (Horton, "The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Partisan Film" 19). In 1946, the federal committee of cinematography organised regional committees in the six republics, and production houses and studios were established in Belgrade and Zagreb. Eventually, every capital city throughout Yugoslavia's republics had a production house and studio.

The first feature film in post war Yugoslavia was *Slavica*, produced by Avala Film in Belgrade.<sup>6</sup> *Slavica* is "[...] a landmark film not only for Yugoslav cinema as a whole, but in particular for the development of the partisan film" (19). Representing the entire span of the war, *Slavica* is an epic drama based on the personal story of a young Dalmatian woman who joins the Partisans and sacrifices her life in the fight against fascism (19). "Written and directed by Vjekoslav Afric, a Dalmatian himself who drew upon his own war experiences, *Slavica* marked a propitious beginning for a fledgling power" (19). Since there were no film academies in the country, Afric received his training much like other feature filmmakers in the infancy of Yugoslav cinema, working on documentaries first shot after WW II (Horton, "Yugoslavia Multifaceted Cinema" 641).

Based in the coastal city of Split, *Slavica* opens with idyllic shots of the Adriatic Sea and the surrounding mountains, highlighting the spectacular beauty of the Dalmatian coast. Although there is peace, the intense music suggests that war is imminent. In an opening scene, Marin's mother voices frustration over her son's unemployment. Marin responds that he would much rather starve than be exploited by some factory owner. Marin runs into Stipe who invites him to help rebuild a boat with a group of fishermen. The spectator is introduced to Slavica as she leaves exhausted from the local sardine factory where she works with her parents. Widespread discontent among the workers at the factory is represented in a scene where a group of men meet with the local socialist leader, Ivo Marusic, who lectures about the exploitation of workers and advises the men to trust no one, especially local traitors (referring to the factory owner and his eventual collaboration with the Fascists). An informant tells the factory owner about the meeting, and the scene reveals a portrait of Hitler hanging on the wall of his office thus confirming Marusic's suspicion about the city's elite. Marusic is arrested and jailed the next day.

As Slavica complains about the harsh working conditions at the factory, Stipe invites her to join the fishermen in rebuilding their boat. While inspecting the boat, Slavica meets Marin. Love develops between Slavica and Marin, and she promises to marry him once the boat is finished. Slavica decides to quit her job at the factory and the factory owner threatens to fire her parents unless she agrees to marry his son.

With the restoration of the boat, Slavica and Marin are married. The wedding celebration is cut short by German planes flying overhead and the news that the Germans have bombed Belgrade and declared war against Yugoslavia. Mussolini's army arrives in Split and receives an enthusiastic welcome from the local politicians, including the town's priest and the factory owner. The sardine factory begins working for the Italian army. The factory owner visits Slavica's parents, who have lost their jobs as a result of her marriage to Marin, giving them food and money as an incentive to convince Slavica that she should marry his son instead.

When the fishermen are told they will have to surrender their boat to the Italians, they decide to hide it instead, leading to their arrest along with Slavica's parents and some of the townspeople. The local police chief threatens to execute Slavica and Marin if they do not disclose the location of the boat. The Partisans led by Marusic (who managed to escape from jail) free the prisoners who flee to the mountains for safety. As the Partisans distribute weapons, Slavica is given a gun; her mother begs her not to join in the fight and to give the gun to a man instead.

In the town, those unwilling to cooperate with the Italians are rounded up and shot. The Partisans find a woman wounded in the shooting in the mountains. Before dying, the woman tells the Partisans about the execution by the Italians

and their plans to shoot more townspeople. As more locals are rounded up for execution, the Partisans intervene saving the townspeople. Convinced that the Partisans will take over Split, the Priest flees the city leaving behind the factory owner who is then captured by the Partisans. The factory owner begs Slavica's mother for mercy and she helps him escape. As the fighting intensifies between the Partisans and the Italians, Marusic decides that their only way out is by sea using the fishermen's boat.

The year "1943" flashes across the screen, as a radio report announces that the Partisans are gaining ground throughout Yugoslavia. As reflected in Slavica's unit, large numbers of new recruits are joining the Partisans each day. With the capitulation of Italy in the war, the Italians begin to leave Split with the quislings begging them to stay. The Partisans manage to enter Split as the Italians withdraw and are warmly greeted by the townspeople. Although the Italians have left, the Germans are headed towards Split.

During a battle with the German Navy, although Marin and the fishermen manage to defeat the Nazis and take one of their main ships, Slavica is killed as she tries to repair holes in their ship. Marin discovers Slavica's body and the men are moved to tears by her death. Her dead body is wrapped in the Yugoslav flag and Marin removes the flag to kiss her one last time. The sad scene is interrupted by the happy news that Split has been liberated. The

Germans are forced to surrender and the quislings are captured and led away by the Partisans.

There is celebration in the streets, the Partisans are carried on the shoulders of the townspeople, Yugoslav flags are waved all over the place, and a large portrait of Tito is carried by a procession of people. As Marin is forced to tell Slavica's parents of her death, "[...] he and the grief-torn parents join the marching throngs, flags unfurling in the wind behind them [...] heroically transforming grief into exalted revolutionary victory – facing resolutely forward, against time and grief, to form a new nation of brotherhood and unity of all the nations and nationalities of Yugoslavia" (Goulding, *Liberated Cinema* 17).

In analysing *Slavica*, it is interesting to note that the hero/protagonist of the film is a woman, which is highly unusual especially when compared with World War II combat films made in Hollywood (Horton, "The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Partisan Film" 20). The representation of a "bi-gendered" army was reality based, as there were many women who fought with the Partisans during the war. Ninety-two women achieved "national hero" status because of their role in the "national war of liberation"; "[...] thirteen attained rank in the partisan forces as indicated in their official biographies" (Webster 73). The image of the *partizanka* (female Partisan) "[...] with gun in hand, commanding troops and joining with her Slav brothers to bring a new federal Yugoslavia [...]" was in many respects "[...] a myth of partisan creation [...]" young women "[...] uprooted by the passage of



fighting through their village were given a gun and told to join the village partisan unit.”<sup>7</sup> However, *Slavica* at least recognises the role of women in the struggle against fascism. “Ideologically this reality reflects part of the allure of the New Yugoslavia under Communist leadership which promised a classless society built upon sexual equality” (Horton, “The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Partisan Film” 20).

As a character, Slavica possesses stereotypical traits of a male war hero while maintaining her “femininity”. Slavica displays incredible strength and courage in keeping up the morale of the men, openly resisting the occupiers, carrying a gun and showing no fear in the face of battle. Slavica was never afraid of dying even when the police threatened to execute her over the hidden boat. Although she finds personal fulfilment in her love for Marin, her duty lies with the struggle against fascism. Beyond her heroism, Slavica is beautiful and motherly in the way she nurtures Marin and the other soldiers. Unfortunately, such a strong female character would never be replicated in another Yugoslav war film.

The narrative represents socialist realism as it strictly delineates between good and evil, and sets character types (Goulding, *Liberated Cinema* 7). The workers are portrayed as honest and hard working, easily identifying with the compassionate ideology of socialism, while the factory owner is a ruthless capitalist who works his employees to exhaustion, and sympathises with Hitler and Mussolini, and the cruelties of fascism. The Italians and the Germans are

heinous and brutal as revealed in a close-up of a helpless woman clutching her child as the Italians are executing the townspeople. The Partisans, on the other hand, are merciful and display comradeship. When Slavica's mother apologises to Marušić for helping the factory owner escape, he gently dismisses the incident as an act of poor character judgement on her part. Throughout the film, despite the various battle scenes, the viewer never actually sees the Partisans kill anyone. When the Partisans lead away the captured collaborators, although they were more than likely executed, this is not shown. As the Partisans (e.g. Marusic and Marin) embrace socialism and the Nazis (e.g. the factory owner) embrace capitalism, capitalism is equated with fascism, and socialism is portrayed as a system that promotes equity and fair labour practices, and humanity in war.

Although the spectator never actually sees Tito, he and the Partisans are given mythic status. When the people ask Marusic about the Partisans, he explains that they are fighting occupiers throughout Yugoslavia under Tito's slogan "death to fascism, long live the freedom of the people". To reinforce this notion of widespread support of the Partisans throughout the country and the mix of ethnic groups within their ranks, Slavica's unit is promised reinforcement from a Bosnian unit for the liberation of Split. Even Slavica's mother, who was prepared to accommodate the Fascists, later proudly sews a red star, the Partisan symbol, on her husband's cap.

In terms of style, the film combined “[...] Russian cinema (montage sequences, for instance, shot in a Russian style) and American cinema (comic, romantic and dramatic moments intermixed as in *Slavica*’s love and marriage to a young fisherman),” styles which continued to permeate Yugoslav films in the early years (Horton, “The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Partisan Film” 19). Although the Socialists claimed responsibility for the establishment of a national cinema as part of the socialist revolution that brought cultural development as well as economic and social benefits, dismissing earlier cinematic experiments as “artisan filmmaking”, *Slavica* reveals influences from pre-WW II Yugoslav cinema including the preference among Yugoslav spectators for “the historical spectacle and melodramatic romance” (Stoil, *Balkan Cinema* 15).

In its first year of screening, *Slavica* was an overwhelming success. More than 2 million spectators went to see the film throughout Yugoslavia. Prior to WW II, no other film had ever received such a reception. For the first time in history, Yugoslav audiences viewed a feature film that was in their language and based on their experiences (Horton, “The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Partisan Film” 20). Given that the director was a veteran of the war, and a unit of the Yugoslav Navy that actually fought in battles appears in the film, the film was lent a degree of authenticity. “[...] It combined documentary and drama for an authentic power: the crowd and war scenes were re-enacted using actual locations and a public that still had fresh memories of the events depicted” (Horton, “Yugoslavia: Multifaceted Cinema” 645). “Divided between civilian town scenes and rural

battle scenes [...],” the film reveals “[...] the interrelated nature of war as it affected the general population and as it was fought in the mountains outside the population centres [...] the military partisans are seen as only part of the war story [...] the viewer is witness to the suffering of the people during the war” (Horton, “The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Partisan Film” 19).

For Yugoslav audiences, the narrative represented much more than simply a story to which they could relate. Tito’s regime made incredible progress immediately following the war, “[...] within two years, one could travel safely from one end of Yugoslavia to another, irrespective of nationality, religious beliefs, or language. In a country where one-tenth of the population died fighting the occupation or had fallen victim to genocide, this amounted to a miracle” (Jovanovic 65). The narrative in *Slavica* reinforced the desire of most Yugoslavs to live together in one country and look beyond differences in ethnicity, language and religion. *Slavica* also served to reassure audiences that despite the horrors endured during the war, including the loss of life, and the destruction of the economy and infrastructure on a massive scale, Yugoslavia under socialism promised a bright future.

In terms of representing national discourse, post WW II Yugoslav cinema, especially war genre films, constituted a discursive site for imagining the community and producing collective memory. Yugoslav cinema was “[...] a privileged discursive site in which anxiety, ambivalence and expectation about

the nation, its history, and its future [...]” were “[...] played out in narrative form” (Burgoyne 11). Partisan films of the late forties and early fifties, despite their simplistic heroic-nationalist character, provided a foundational narrative for the nation and appealed to audiences as self-representative texts. Consequently, war cinema established a close relationship with spectators who could compare their own experiences to the films they were viewing. The “national war of liberation” took on epic proportions in Yugoslavia, and served as a “rich resource [...] for filmic representation and for propagandising and legitimising the newly founded people’s socialist government” (Goulding, *Liberated Cinema* 16).

In terms of the development of Yugoslav cinema and the war genre, *Slavica* is an important film in that it “[...] anticipates [...] many of the directions Yugoslav cinema in general and the war film in particular would take” (Horton, “The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Partisan Film” 19). The film:

[...] is built on a structural model which was to be emulated by most of the other early Partisan films of this period. It is a pattern which begins by affirming Partisan-led local initiatives in specific locales, involving distinctive nationalities of the region, and builds organically to an affirmation of the epic all-Yugoslav character of its leadership and heroes-with Tito presented as the preeminent heroic unifying symbol-and of the all-Yugoslav character of the Partisan fighting forces, which becomes the essential guarantor of ultimate victory in war, as well as the basis upon which to build a completely new Yugoslavia. (Goulding, *Liberated Cinema* 20)

*Slavica* marked the birth of heroic romanticism, a combination of the historical spectacle and the melodramatic romance, a formula that would be widely adopted by most filmmakers of this period.

Based on the popularity of Partisan films, it is evident that “from the beginning, a Yugoslav national identity was involved with both war and film” (Horton, “The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Partisan Film” 19). Despite the success of the genre among spectators, early films “[...] were circumscribed by the prevailing strictures of nationalist realist dogma and plagued by naïve and inept scenarios, exaggerated pathos, simplistic stereotyping, technical limitations, and theatrical histrionics” (19). Vjekoslav Afric, the director of *Slavica*, in reflecting upon this period of Yugoslav cinema noted “we were not romantic so much as naïve” (20). As the events of WW II and the Stalinist period from 1945 to 1948 dominated the subject of most films, contemporary subjects were neglected (Horton, “Yugoslavia Multifaceted Cinema” 645). By 1956, 80% of Yugoslav film production was dedicated to Partisan films based on the easily duplicated formula of *Slavica* (Stoil, *Balkan Cinema* 90). “The Partisan film began with the honest enthusiasm of *Slavica* but quickly settled into an exaggerated mythology of the good partisans winning out against the evil Germans and Italian Fascists, a genre that fulfils a role similar to that of the Western in American cinema” (Horton, “Yugoslavia Multifaceted Cinema” 645).

Ideological fatigue and foreign imports forced Yugoslav filmmakers to reconsider the socialist realist aesthetics, theories and practices (Stoil, *Balkan Cinema* 90). “Serious polemics, discussions, criticism, and self-doubts were expressed by more discerning critics and film artists impatient to see Yugoslav-produced films move to a higher plane of technical and artistic expression” (Goulding, *Liberated*

*Cinema 16*). During the early fifties, "there were already signs of increasing impatience to break the confining mould of socialist realist dogma, to expand, diversify, and deepen the possibilities for filmic expression, and to move toward greater flexibility and decentralisation of film organisation and production" (31). As Yugoslav filmmakers sought to break away from socialist realism, Yugoslavia was on the road to establishing a distinctive film culture.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Constitution of 21 June 1921 was created on *Vidovdan* or St. Vitus Day, an important holiday for Serbs. It was on this day 600 years earlier that the Serbs fought the battle of Kosovo, resisting the military advances of the Turks and the spread of the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>2</sup> Ante Pavelic and many other leaders of the Ustaša, to the astonishment of the Nazis, were married to Jewish women (Arendt 184).

<sup>3</sup> According to the Museum of Tolerance Multimedia Learning Centre found on the Internet, in Croatia, the Ustasa murdered approximately 500,000 Serbs, killed most of the Jews living in the republic and about 20,000 Gypsies.

<sup>4</sup> The King in the mid-twenties outlawed the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. Tito was jailed in 1928 for his involvement with the party, serving a five-year sentence.

<sup>5</sup> "No filmic tradition" refers to the Yugoslav film industry that, before WW II, was underdeveloped. As American film companies dominated film production and distribution, the growth of an indigenous cinema was stunted; consequently, there were few trained technicians. (Goulding, *Liberated Cinema* 1).

<sup>6</sup> According to Petar Volk, in attempting to create a pan-Yugoslav film industry, *Slavica*, the first film produced by Avala Films, Belgrade's production house, was directed by a Croat. "Disputes around the idea of Yugoslavian films began with the filming of the first post-war films *Slavica* and *These people must live* (*Zivjece ovaj narod*). In order to create a superficial national balance it was decided that a production from Belgrade would be directed by Vjekoslav Afric, a Croat, and a Croatian production would be directed by Nikola Popovic, a Serb from Belgrade." The experiment in a pan-Yugoslav cinema was dropped as each republic gained increased autonomy in film production. (*Srpski Film* 11)

<sup>7</sup> An interesting note about women who fought with the Partisans: "[...] the main thrust of Chetnik propaganda against partisan women was the immorality of their giving up home, family, and God to fight like men alongside men" (Webster 69).

## Chapter Two: Decentralisation and Breaking the Socialist Mould - Confronting the Revolutionary Past

With Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Cominform in 1948 and the introduction of the principle of socialist self-management, Yugoslavia's cultural sphere gradually began to reject the socialist realist formula. Despite the ideological shift, most filmmakers continued to create films using relatively non-controversial forms. It was actually during the sixties with the rise of *auteurism* or the director's cinema that Yugoslav filmmakers managed to break away from the more traditional and stylistically formulaic forms of cinema. "It is no accident that this fertile time coincided with a sense of liberalisation throughout Yugoslavia as well as the spirit of social unrest and youth movements around the world" (Horton, "Yugoslavia: Multifaceted Cinema" 644). With increased demands for democracy in the political sphere, a new generation of filmmakers sought to liberate Yugoslav cinema from the conventions that dictated filmmaking for twenty years. Although "new film" directors succeeded in creating award-winning films that were well received both in Yugoslavia and abroad, the government viewed this break from tradition as an affront to their power.

In this chapter, I will discuss the end of heroic romanticism in the war genre, the *new film* movement that challenged dogmatic representations of the past, confrontations between the government and members of the cultural sphere, and



the government's campaign to take control of the film industry, thus ending one of Yugoslavia's most innovative periods in cinema.

### **Yugoslavia's Break from Stalin and Departure from Socialist Realism**

Following the end of World War II, Yugoslavia's political and economic system emulated the Soviet model of rapid development. Although the Yugoslav communists glorified Stalin, his arrogance and constant meddling in the internal affairs of Yugoslavia increasingly infuriated Tito.

Stalin resented what he viewed as the excessive self-confidence of the Yugoslavs. Foreign Communist leaders were supposed to be reverent, not proud and independent, and, of course, the last thing in the world Stalin wanted was a ruling communism he could not control. Stalin made it clear to Tito that the achievements of Yugoslavia's antifascists [...] must be considered very small in comparison with the wartime exploits of the great Soviet Union." (Tepavac 66)

As Tito began to openly defy Stalin, the communist party of Yugoslavia was expelled from the Cominform in 1948. With Tito's break from Stalin, the country claimed the status of a non-aligned socialist state pursuing its own political, economic and cultural agenda. Isolated from the Communist bloc, Yugoslavia's communists decided to create a system of socialism that would be distinctive from the Marxist-Leninist paradigm based on economic self-management and political decentralisation. Economic reforms were initiated in 1950 including the gradual replacement of a central planning system with self-management where workers' councils served as decision-making bodies (Crnobrnja 72). The political

system moved towards authentic federalism, as each republic was given greater autonomy (73).

As Yugoslavia decentralised politically and economically, the film industry followed suit, adopting the principles of self-management in film production and film distribution (Goulding, *Liberated Cinema* 32). "With the establishment of this new decentralised organisational scheme, the Committee for Cinematography, which had been the centralised guiding force in the early development of film, was formally disbanded" (36). Free associations of film workers were created in each republic and the Union of Film Workers of Yugoslavia was founded at the end of 1950 (36).

As the nation set out to create a unique system of socialism through reforms, members of the cultural sphere sought to free their work of dogmatic propagandistic formulas and gain greater artistic control. In cinema, the 1950s marked a "deromanticisation" of the Yugoslav war experience and a rejection of socialist realism.

The initial phase of this period was characterised by polemic and ideological efforts to stretch or to break the narrow propagandistic mould of the first period and was followed by increasing experimentation with new styles of realism and by greater thematic complexity, variety of genres, and emphasis upon character development and psychological individualisation." (32)

An example of a war film reflecting this period of modernist experimentation is *Partisan Stories*. Based on the literary work of Antonije Isakovic, *Partizanski*

*Price* (*Partisan Stories*, 1960) was directed by Stole Jankovic. Jankovic, a veteran of the war, “deplored films which idealised the war experience and obscured its human costs with shallow heroics” (52). Consisting of two war stories, titled *Return* and *The Red Shawl*, in the first narrative a young woman helps a wounded Partisan soldier despite her family’s concern that the Germans will find out. Later as she helps the soldier to escape, the Germans accuse her of collaborating with the Partisans and execute her. In the second narrative, a unit of Partisans carrying their wounded through the mountains stop in a town to rest. It is winter and extremely cold, and a young soldier decides to steal a wool shawl to ward off the freezing temperatures. As the soldiers are about to leave the town, a woman runs from her house screaming “someone has stolen my beautiful, large red shawl.” According to the Partisan code, any soldier caught stealing from the locals is sentenced to death. The captain of the unit questions his soldiers; finally the young soldier admits that he has taken the shawl and prepares to be executed. When the woman understands what is about to take place, she begs the captain for leniency. The young soldier is led away by his comrades and shot.

As revealed in *Partisan Stories*, representation of the past became less rigid and more realistic, reflecting many of the hardships people faced during the war. “Interesting problems of human survival and the cruel moral dilemmas of war are posed in concrete and even eventful stories in which filmic narrative is advanced by freely linked visual sequences and is shorn of postured set speeches and

abstract heroics" (47). However, the break from socialist realism did not lead to a bolder investigation of social issues or a dramatic transformation in the treatment of the "national war of liberation" in films. Although Yugoslavia was in the midst of political experimentation with self-management, many ambiguities remained as to the ideological direction of the nation and its impact on the cultural sphere. As a result, most filmmakers were unsure of the acceptable boundaries of cinematic expression and their films took relatively uncontroversial forms.

In the early 1950s there was a tendency to respond to the possibilities of new freedom and new thought by a retreat into [...] "socialist aestheticism" or art for art's sake [...] combined with this strategy was the retreat to safe historical subjects in which...experimentation could take place without rubbing against sensitive areas of contemporary life and dealing critically with *savremene teme* (contemporary themes)." (40)

In films such as *Partisan Stories*, although the brutality of the war is exposed, the struggle against fascism takes precedence over the loss of life, and the Partisans are still portrayed as infallible heroes. In the first story, the girl's death is outweighed by her courage in assisting the Partisan soldier and her execution serves only to reinforce the barbarity of the Germans. Similarly, in the second story, while the shooting of the young soldier for stealing a shawl seems rather harsh, the Partisan code carries a sense of morality that rises above such ruthlessness. Regardless of the limited experimentation which took place in films such as *Partisan Stories*, the transformation of war films, especially in the late fifties, laid down the groundwork for one of the most innovative periods in Yugoslav cinema often referred to as the "Golden Age".

### **The New Film Movement or Black Cinema**

Through broad modernisation and industrialisation, Yugoslavia experienced during the sixties a rise in standard of living that surpassed socialist countries such as Hungary and Czechoslovakia, which were better off before WW II (Tepavac 71). Parallel to the rising prosperity of Yugoslavia, was the demand for greater democracy within the Yugoslav political system and cultural sphere. In terms of the film industry, the sixties marked a significant increase in the number of feature films produced and a re-evaluation of cinematic expression, resulting in "[...] an honesty and openness to a degree not possible in the Soviet Union or Warsaw Pact nations, in treating sociopolitical conflicts as well as individual frustrations of modern life" (Horton, "Yugoslavia: Multifaceted Cinema" 641).

In Yugoslav cinema, the sixties opened with the "director's cinema" or personal cinema, "[...] a particularly fruitful period of filmmaking during which a new generation of *auteurs* came to age [...]" and film rose to the "[...] vanguard of Yugoslav culture as a medium of honest social expression" (644-45).

Yugoslavia entered its most creative and innovative period of experimenting with new forms of self-management socialism and fostering an atmosphere of wide-open debate and discussion in social, economic, and cultural spheres of development. It was a period in which film advanced to the forefront of artistic experimentation and was often a lightning rod which attracted heated polemic exchanges on the "proper" role of artistic expression in a socialist state and on how far the boundaries of "free" expression and stylistic experimentation should be extended. (Goulding, *Liberated Cinema* 66)

As distance grew from the events of World War II, and the unifying heroism of the communist party no longer sufficed, a critical dialogue with the past in cinema accompanied demands for democracy in Yugoslav society. It was during this period of liberalisation and social unrest in Yugoslav history that war cinema reflected the battle of the discourses between the government and party-loyal film critics, and filmmakers and spectators (who as citizens of the nation were demanding democratic reform). Cinema "[...] became an important field in which the battle for the democratisation of Yugoslav society was waged" (Leihm and Liehm 128). Further political decentralisation led to increased self-management in the film enterprises and a shift toward greater republic autonomy for production (66).

The Basic Law on Film was revised in 1962 to reflect this changed emphasis and ushered in a period of considerable reorganisation of film activity throughout Yugoslavia's six republics, leading to a more richly textured filmic representation of the diverse cultures and languages of its nations and nationalities." (62)

While the Yugoslav film industry did not experience a large-scale reorganisation during the sixties, it did, however, open the industry to independent groups of filmmakers or individual enterprises to compete with established state enterprises for subsidies.<sup>1</sup>

Filmmakers, critics and theorists seeking change in the film industry embraced *novi film* (*new film*), a movement advocating greater freedom for personal and collective artistic expression, stylistic experimentation, and films that dealt with contemporary themes, all within the context of the socialist/Marxist state (66).

*New Film* creators [...] vigorously and critically confronted collective myths about the National War of Liberation and its aftermath, often endowing these themes with new contemporary relevance and urgency [...] explored the sources of humanity's alienation in a society that had theoretically, at least, eliminated its causes; and [...] created a series of open metaphors about contemporary human and societal conditions which resisted closure and which refused to offer easy and optimistic answers to the questions they posed. (67)

The *new film* movement derived many of its theories from the Praxist philosophy, a strain of humanist thought promoting democratic socialism.<sup>2</sup>

A central figure in the development of *new film* tendencies was Aleksandar Petrovic, who would become one of Yugoslavia's most renowned filmmakers. Petrovic led a distinguished career in the Yugoslav film industry, beginning as a film critic after WW II, and later directing award-winning documentary films and writing scripts. During the sixties, Petrovic taught at the Belgrade Academy of Theatre, Film, Radio and Television, and he was chairperson of the Union of Film Workers. It is interesting to note that Dusan Makavajev also played an important role in developing *new film* tendencies. Petrovic, "[...] who brought to feature film a strong background in art history and documentary films [...]" became one of the leading proponents of "an "intimate" or personalised cinema" (Horton, "Yugoslavia: Multifaceted Cinema" 649). After the success of his documentary film *Let Nad Mocvaram* (*Flight Above the Marsh*, 1957), Petrovic directed two feature films, *Dvoje* (*Two*, 1961) and *Dani* (*Day*, 1963), which revealed strong influences from the French New Wave, especially the "tendency of deconstructing conventional narration into fragments of everyday life and love"

(Taylor et al. 180). With Petrovic at the forefront of a Yugoslav 'new wave' or *new film*, he directed *Tri* (*Three*, 1965) based on stories written by author Antonije Isakovic who also assisted Petrovic in writing the script for the film. The film is a triptych representing three war stories each involving a man's encounter with death during the WW II. "Each segment stars, Bata Zivojinovic, a leading actor sometimes called the Spencer Tracy of Yugoslav film" (Horton, "The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Partisan Film" 21). In the first story, an innocent stranger suspected of spying for the Germans is executed at a train station. In the second story, the Nazis capture and execute a Partisan soldier, and in the third story, a young woman accused of collaborating with the Nazis is executed.

The first story opens in a small town in Serbia with a crowd of people waiting for a train. News of the war leads many to believe that the fighting is close and that the train will not arrive. When a train does come, it is full of soldiers and the people cannot board. A policemen yells at the crowd "get back you animals, you can't get on this train."<sup>3</sup> An officer on the train calls over a Roma and his dancing bear for entertainment. As the bear dances to the Roma's singing and drumbeat, soldiers on the train laugh and toss coins. The crowd stands on the platform resentful that the train is full. As the train departs the station, someone in the crowd comments on how the army is "fleeing like rats." The stationmaster announces that another train may be arriving, as geese run across the tracks. A mad man appears at the station carrying a cross screaming "repent" and the crowd mocks him. A man in the crowd calls to the others "to come and take from



the wealthy;" train cars are opened and the people begin to steal goods, including sheep. As people push and shove to get to the goods, arguments break out over shares of the loot. Three men appear in Yugoslav uniforms and fire their guns in the air. The crowd moves back onto the platform and someone asks the men "who do you think you are, were you not like us once? Suddenly you put on a uniform and think you're important?" The self-appointed commander of the three answers "we are the war patrol" as they begin asking people for their documents. As the commander reaches the protagonist, he states that his name is Milos Bojanic and he is a student. A lone man walks across the tracks and joins the crowd at which point the commander asks for his identification. The man responds, "I don't have anything. Everything is burnt. My house was bombed. I fled from Belgrade." The commander responds sarcastically "we all have our little stories." The crowd questions the stranger's pronunciation of the letter "r", and a man says, "Serbs do not pronounce the letter "r" that way." The stranger states that he has from birth pronounced it that way. The commander asks him about the camera he is carrying, and he explains that he is a journalist. A woman in the crowd screams, "he is using the camera to earn money as a spy." The man insists that his wife and child are proof that he is not a spy. When the commander instructs him to call his wife, the lone man shouts "Vera", as the crowd laughs. When members of the crowd tell the soldiers to kill him and make it quick, Milos shouts, "we should wait for his wife." As the crowd turns around to look at Milos, he adds, "you can't just execute a man without evidence or a trial." The commander responds "this is war and

military laws apply.” The crowd then begins to question whether Milos is a spy as well. As the soldiers drag the stranger away, he continues to beg them to wait. The soldiers shoot him and drag his body off behind a railway car. The same crowd that encouraged the soldiers to kill the man, express surprise at the action. The man’s wife appears with their son, and when she asks the crowd whether they have seen a man wearing a beret carrying a camera, the camera zooms in on Miloš who stares at the woman while everyone else lowers their eyes in silence. Throughout the segment, a woman sits expressionless at a window, a silent witness to the entire event. In the final scene, the Roma and his bear walk down the railroad tracks alone.

The next scene marks the beginning of the second story with Miloš fleeing from German soldiers through a forest. The scene is chaotic with the Nazis screaming in German, dogs barking and the sound of machine gun fire. Miloš falls down a hill and manages to get away from the soldiers only to be pursued by a German plane. He manages to take cover at a river and as he is drinking water, a German catches him and as a struggle between them ensues, Miloš drowns the German and takes his machine gun. As Milos continues to flee shooting at the Germans, he runs out of bullets, dives into a river and manages to escape by swimming to the other side. Milos arrives at a graveyard and runs into a Partisan who tells him to put down his gun. Milos tells the Partisan “Comrade, I do not have bullets and even if the gun were full, I would not kill you.” The Partisan is relieved and asks him where his cap is (Partisans wore caps with red stars on

them). Milos explains that he lost it as he was fleeing. The Partisan explains that he was wounded in a battle and that his unit was supposed to return for him days ago. Milos tells him that they are surrounded by Germans and must flee to the sea where "their" soldiers are waiting. As the two walk off together, the Partisan admits that he is scared, he had been alone in the graveyard and thought he was going to go mad. Milos explains that he was about to go mad as well, eating roots the last few days to stay alive. The Partisan explains that he is not a coward, simply frightened and tells Milos "you mean the world to me" to which Miloš responds "and you to me." A German plane spots the two and begins shooting at them. The two manage to escape. As they walk through tall swamp grass, they realise they are surrounded by Germans. The Partisan tells Milos, "let's split up. There is not point in the two of us dying. I'm not scared anymore. Don't worry one of us will make it through. Please remember me." Milos responds, "I will remember you." As they separate, the Partisan states "we'll both make it, you'll see" but Milos gives an expression of pain as though he knows this is not true. The Partisan runs alone and is caught by the Germans. Milos sees the Partisan being led away. As the Germans place the Partisan in front of a chicken coop, turning his face towards the wall, the Partisan turns around and stares into the camera. The Partisan's expression reveals that he is not afraid of dying. As he continues to turn around, a German pushes him into the coop, sets it alight and the soldiers fire at the burning coop. As the Germans leave, Milos screams and cries in pain as though he is the one burning. As he

screams "life", a bird's eye view of the area reveals that they were close to reaching the sea.

In the third story, in a village, Milos is standing at a window wearing the uniform of a Partisan officer. A wild black horse runs around the yard as children carve out melons. As a soldier struggles with an accordion, Milos asks whether he is learning to play. The soldier responds "Yes, I must learn to play. Since it is the end of the war, I'll need it." A group comprised of Cetniks, Nazis and a woman are led into the yard of the house. Milos takes a strong interest in the woman who stares back at him. He returns to the typewriter to continue writing a report about a battle. As he looks out of the window, he stares at the girl again who is praying. Another officer enters the room to take the typewriter at which point Milos asks, "who are they?" The officer responds "scum, we're going to execute them by nightfall." "Do you have to do it so quickly?" asks Milos to which the officer responds "I'll give them due consideration, some of them will be executed, some I will let go" and adds "we're becoming a state yet we do not have jails." The officer borrows the typewriter. A maid enters the house carrying melon and asks about the group "what will happen to them?" Milos explains, "those who are guilty will be shot," to which she responds, "but how do you know they are guilty?" The maid asks if she can take some melon to the woman. Milos watches the woman as she eats, staring at her legs revealing a sexual attraction. The maid returns to the house complaining how the prisoners have had nothing to eat since the morning and she tries to convince Milos that the woman should be

spared since she "is young and she will change." Milos responds "how do you know? Well, it's not my decision." Milos is restless, walking around the room in a circle, obviously disturbed by the impending execution. When he looks out the window again, the woman is gone. The other officer returns with the typewriter and pictures which are clear evidence that the woman was having an affair with a Nazi and therefore involved with the Gestapo. The woman is led away but she manages to escape and runs as geese flock around her. The Partisans finally grab her and drag her behind a house. Although we do not hear gunfire, we know that she has been executed. Milos leaves the house, trying to find her. We hear a Roma singing, followed by a wedding procession. The film ends with Milos staring into the camera with a pained expression on his face.

In an interview in 1966 in the Belgrade daily *Politika*, when asked what is it about Yugoslav cinema that makes it interesting to foreign audiences, Petrovic responded "freedom of thought" and "films that are devoid of dogma [...] emphasising non-intervention and an honest artistic experience" (Petrovic 61). *Three* is an example of "freedom of thought" and "non-intervention" as a subjectivist approach to the events of World War II devoid of self-evident truths or easy answers to the dilemmas the protagonist faces. "War becomes a situation in which life in its standard forms can no longer exist and instead becomes absurd" (Volk, *Let nad mocvaram* 118). In *Three*, Petrovic forces "[...] the audience to go beyond its usual role as distanced viewer in a war film to become a direct war observer, a hunted war victim, and a war judge [...]" leaving viewers with "[...] a

heightened sense of the conflicting complexity of war as it affects individuals” (Horton, “The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Partisan Film” 22). The significance of Petrovic’s film lies in comparing *Three* as a product of the *new film* movement, with the heroic romanticism of past Partisan films. “A distinction needs to be made between those films generally called partisan films which simplify and glorify the accomplishments of Tito’s forces, and more sensitive works which observe war from a much more personal and less nationalistic perspective” (Horton, “Yugoslavia: Multifaceted Cinema” 646). Beyond rejecting the traditional thematic approach of glorifying of the Partisan war experience, *Three* is an anti-war statement. “With the hundreds of war films made by American, French, Italian or Soviet authors, as viewed on our screens, not one like *Three* raises the problem of war on such an ethical and moral level, as Petrovic did” (qtd. In Volk, *Let nad mocvaram* 144).

Twenty years had passed from the end of WW II and most Yugoslavs began to raise questions about the foundational narrative of the nation. Petrovic stated in another interview in 1966 for *Politika*, “although my film is situated in the past, that is the past war, it is at the same time, and one of the main reasons for making this film, relevant to the problems we face today” (Petrovic 15). Although narratives such as *Three* continued to examine the events of World War II, there was a dramatic transformation from representations that were filled with patriotism and idealism, to broad critical discourse concerning the revolutionary past and contemporary conditions. In deconstructing the Partisan myth, Petrovic

used “open metaphors” which raised questions rather than provide definitive answers about the past. As a result, *Three* did not assume the meaningfulness or coherence of the discourse of the nation but rather challenged it and in turn challenged the spectator and their assumptions about the nation and its national past.

Shot in documentary style (according to Petrovic there was a thin line separating the documentary from the feature film in depicting reality), the searching camera creates the observer’s (both the protagonist and the spectator) point of view in the first segment.

We sense both the crowd’s feeling of uneasy anticipation and of apathetic boredom with barely a word spoken. The subsequent suddenness with which arriving soldiers grab one stranger in the crowd who happens to have a camera and execute him without ever bothering to find out who he is, creates in the viewer (the “observer”) both excitement and confusion. Because we share the observing character’s perspective, we too become implicated in the detached mob psychology. (Horton, “The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Partisan Film” 22)

As the protagonist enters the scene, his individuality stands in stark contrast with the crowd. When he walks over to join the crowd, it is with resignation. When the protagonist questions the accusations made against the stranger, he once again resigns himself to the collective consciousness of the crowd. “There is chaos and an atmosphere of collective uncertainty where anything is possible [...] people have lost their individuality, fear grows [...] and the crowd explodes in an unexpected and tragic way” (Volk, *Let nad mocvaram* 123). Whereas in *Slavica* war brought out the humanity in people (i.e. Partisans helped one

another and were united in their struggle against fascism), in *Three*, humanity is lost in the face of war. Similarly, while in earlier Partisan films action was taken against a clearly defined enemy that was invariably foreign and characterised by an inevitable brutality, in *Three* the conflict is "internal", both within the individual and among Yugoslavs. Yugoslav soldiers callously murder a Yugoslav. "The theme in *Three* was purposefully transformed from a celebration of the partisan experience to a condemnation of the cruelties inflicted by all sides during the war" (Stoil, *Balkan Cinema* 93).

In the second story, the war is a battle between life and death for the protagonist. Gone is the brave and infallible Partisan soldier of earlier films, as the Partisan in *Three* admits his fear of the war to Milos. As the Partisan says "let's split up, there's no point in both of us dying. One of us is enough for them" he is willing to risk his life for the protagonist Miloš. The selflessness of the Partisan stands in stark contrast to the selfish behaviour of the crowd in the first segment.

The final segment is perhaps the most difficult to watch. Milos is supposed to judge whether a woman, whom he is clearly attracted to, should live. Milos' loneliness is emphasised in the scene where he stares at various wedding pictures in the house where his unit is stationed. His reflection as a single man on the picture of a couple during their wedding day, and the final scene with the wedding procession, highlight his desire to find a wife. As he deliberates whether the woman should live or die, two characters represent the conflict in his mind:



the maid who asks him to spare the woman's life and his comrade who simply sees the woman as a Nazi collaborator. As the maid enters the house carrying cantaloupe, she tells Milos to eat some since it is a "light fruit", suggesting that he should give the accused woman a "light" sentence. Soon after, a comrade enters the room carrying pictures that provide clear evidence of the woman's involvement with the Nazis. As Miloš debates in his mind whether or not to let the woman live, she is executed. "Glorification of the horrors and the suffering is impossible, even the glamour of victory is lost" (Volk, *Let nad mocvaram* 119).

Whereas in traditional Partisan films ordinary people are caught up in extraordinary events, in *Three* the protagonist Miloš is the "anti-hero", an ordinary person who wields no power or control over the events surrounding him.

The protagonist is not so much the author of his actions as he is carried along in the sweep and tide of historical events and concrete human dilemmas. His impulse is to intervene and to prevent the three senseless and cruel deaths in the film. He ends by being a reluctant, helpless, and despairing witness. (Goulding, *Liberated Cinema* 90)

*Three* achieved critical acclaim nationally and internationally, capturing first prize at Pula in 1965 (Yugoslavia's national film festival), a nomination for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film in 1967, and first prize at the Karlovy Vary Festival (Czechoslovakia's Eastern European film festival). Petrovic, along with other *new film* directors, gained international recognition for Yugoslav cinema for the first time since its inception. But the tendency of *New Film* to deconstruct the past was met with opposition from the government.

*New film* creators often offended the guardians of sanctioned traditions by reworking the substrata of collective experience into personal filmic visions and by infusing the past with the living present. They painted portraits of false heroes and of fallible Partisan warriors. They moved the viewer through troubling and ambiguous moral landscapes, where “right” and “truth” are not easily discerned. They traced out the dark shadows of the new dawn and unblinkingly and unsparingly exposed the betrayal of dreams and the corruption of high purposes. (85)

While advocates of *new film* celebrated the significant breakthrough the movement made in “contemporary thematics and film form”, party-loyal film critics criticised *new films* as “imitative, pale reflections of French and Italian *nouvelle vague* tendencies which were alien to the distinctive cultural roots and contemporary conditions of socialist Yugoslavia” (68). Heated debates surrounding *new film* went on throughout the sixties with attacks stemming from party members and party loyal film critics. The charge that *new film* was “foreign” in its representation of the Yugoslav experience was dismissed by Petrovic, arguing that while *new film* tendencies were “part of a worldwide revolution in film stylistics and thematics (in France, Italy, and elsewhere) [...] he asserted that the roots of Yugoslav *new film* expression could be traced to the documentary work, amateur films, and the progressive ripening of feature film expression which had occurred in Yugoslavia during the fifties. More significantly, Petrovic objected to the various attempts to artificially label any Yugoslav film which touched on the intimate and sometimes tragic dimensions of human existence as nonsocialist or as “an infectious import from abroad” (Goulding, *Liberated Cinema* 72). The Socialists viewed *new film* as a direct attack on all that was held sacred about the socialist revolution and the struggle against fascism. Party officials were

indignant that a cultural sphere they were responsible for developing was being used to question rather than affirm the social ideology of Yugoslavia. Pressure increased to bring an end to the movement, labelled “black cinema” by critics who felt that *new film* over-emphasised the negative aspects of socialist life (Horton, “Yugoslavia: Multifaceted Cinema” 645).

In Yugoslavia [...] the struggle for the future [...] and for freedom of culture and art in the broader sense of the word, to some extent took the form [...] of a public confrontation between opposing opinions and concepts. As the future course of Yugoslavia was being worked out in these debates, so also was the destiny of a national film culture that had taken an important and original place in the Europe of the sixties. (Liehm and Liehm 432)

The political monopoly of the Communist Party prevented further reform, and much of the liberalisation that took place during the sixties was never carried out to its ultimate conclusion.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Independent groups of filmmakers, organised for the production of a single work, were given the right to compete with established enterprises for subsidies in 1960. This action is held responsible for tripling the number of production companies and for rapid emergence of “new wave” directors in Yugoslav cinema. As theatre prices rose, the film studios came to rely less on the subsidies awarded by the Film Boards and to rely more on successful mass marketing of their productions for revenue; however, the Film Boards continued control of distribution ensured their influence on the financial health of the industry. In 1966, individual enterprises received the statutory right to participate directly in cultural cooperation with foreign countries, opening the way for direct sale of films to foreign distributors. (Stoil, *Balkan Cinema* 49)

<sup>2</sup> In her article “Testaments Betrayed: Yugoslavian Intellectuals and The Road to War”, Laura Secor best summarises the Praxis movement: “The Praxists were captivated by the early Marx’s theory of alienation. In an ordinary capitalist or a Stalinist socialist society, man was alienated from himself by the commodification of his labour and by the overweening power of a small, privileged class and its institutions. A utopian Marxist society, the Praxists imagined, would overcome that alienation; it would unleash human creativity—“or praxis”—by doing away with the ruling class through self-management. The workers would directly control not only their workplaces but also social and cultural institutions—even local political parties and governing bodies. The state, given enough time, would of its own accord “whither away,” just as Marx had predicted.”

<sup>3</sup> The policeman uses the word “stoka” which, when literally translated, means “livestock”. In Serbo-Croatian, “livestock” has several connotations including a lack of manners and also people who are prone to the ‘lemming mentality’.

### Chapter Three: Critical Accommodation and Resurgence

In a move to eliminate all forms of protest in the political and cultural sphere, intellectuals and artists who embraced critical movements during the sixties were victims of a government purge carried out in the early seventies. In the film industry, government subsidies were primarily granted to productions that embraced the traditional Partisan film. While television replaced cinema as the most popular mass medium, after a turbulent decade including a re-examination of the official version of the national past, a return to the heroic nationalist Partisan film was no longer acceptable to spectators. With a dramatic drop in spectators and a lack of creative force, by the mid-seventies, the Yugoslav film industry was in decline. A new generation of filmmakers, primarily educated at the renowned film school in Prague FAMU, revitalised Yugoslav national cinema during the late seventies. With the death of Tito in 1980, the war genre was abandoned and replaced by films that played a major role in the critical revisioning of Yugoslavia's revolutionary past and examined *savremene teme* (contemporary themes) in a nation experiencing political and economic problems.

In this chapter, I will discuss the government campaign against the *new film* movement including the suppression of *new film* tendencies, the production of Heroic Partisan films that lacked thematic boldness and resulted in the dramatic drop in spectatorship, the resurgence of cinema based on the films of the Prague

Group and the impending destruction of Yugoslavia as a nation in the late eighties in the face of domestic crises.

### **The Attack on the *New Film Movement***

The seventies were marked by increased repression in Yugoslavia as hard-line communists dominated the government. Alarmed by events such as the 1968 student demonstrations in Belgrade demanding an end to authoritarianism and the Croatian nationalist movement favouring a looser confederation in 1971, the government moved to suppress critical voices within the political and cultural spheres of Yugoslav society.

Yugoslavia departed decisively from Soviet dogmatism in that it genuinely attempted to create a more democratic socialism, moving ahead under the impetus of postwar enthusiasms and significant foreign aid [...] Many inside and outside of the country thought Yugoslavia had succeeded in finding an original road for socialism. But the essential prerequisite for maintaining growth and progress, a policy of fundamental democratic changes from top to bottom in the political system, was out of the question. (Goulding, *Liberated Cinema* 22)

With "[...] increasing ideological stringency, aimed at non-establishment Marxists (especially philosophers associated with the internationally acclaimed journal *Praxis*), members of the non-Marxist "humanistic intelligentsia," radical student leaders, and artists," the government attacked all groups perceived as anti-establishment (79). In addition, the government actually started withdrawing from distribution or banning films, and in 1973, Petrovic, one of Yugoslavia's most prominent filmmakers, was removed from his position as chairperson of the

Union of Film Workers and dismissed from his teaching position at the film academy.<sup>1</sup>

These events followed a well-worn script, involving heated and extreme ideological and polemic accusations of party functionaries and members of cultural commissions, the banning of texts either by formal court action or by various arts councils which constitute the organs of social control, and renewed impositions of preventive censorship, in which self-management organs saw the handwriting on the wall and imposed censorship upon themselves-democratically. (Goulding, *Liberated Cinema* 79)

Filmmakers that remained unscathed by the counteroffensive against *new film* accepted thematic limitations in their work and produced “traditional” mainstream films.

### **The Return of the Partisan Spectacle**

Faced with ideological restrictions, the majority of films produced in the early to mid seventies dealt with the Partisan war experience, as filmmakers adopted the “Hollywood style” narrative and mode of production. While early Partisan films such as *Slavica* appealed to audiences by combining “the triumphalism of the official post-war posture with a certain naivety of narration” emphasising “psychology and emotions,” as the genre evolved through the sixties and seventies, much of this dimension was replaced with “Western-like action” (Taylor et al. 265). The result was a simplistic schema, where “[...] every big battle from the rich history of Yugoslavia’s World War II experience deserved a monument and a movie” (265). Many of the filmmakers that adopted this approach produced “[...] commercially oriented light-entertainment films, which

were often so weak in inventiveness and cinematic style that they failed to reach even the low target of audience taste at which they were aimed" (77).

*Partizani* (*Partisans*, 1975) directed by Stole Jankovic (the director of *Partisan Stories* discussed in Chapter Two), a Hollywood-Yugoslav co-production, is an example of government-sanctioned films that dominated the seventies. Jankovic and Howard Berk, an American writer, wrote the script for the film.<sup>2</sup> The narrative involves a Partisan who manages to save a boat full of Yugoslav Jews from heading to a death camp. Although the film claims to be a true story, "...the tale is true only in the broadest outlines: there was a war in Yugoslavia, Jews were rounded up, and partisans did help many of them while fighting Nazis" (Horton, "The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Partisan Film" 23).

*Partisans* condemns itself through its stereotypic American combat film plotting (with the one Yugoslav element of the wartime romance kept in), one-dimensional acting and characterisations, and monotonous battle scenes. The major casualty in these films are neither the Partisans nor the Nazis, but the Yugoslav audiences who have suffered through such a fabrication of their own experience. By 1983, when very few such films were still in production, authorities had to resort to such tactics as herding school children into theatres to get audiences for films. (22)

Although the decline in film production in the seventies could be attributed to "[...] the spectacular growth and impact of television, reflected in the rapidly increasing numbers of set owners, network expansion, and the increase in program time and diversification of program offerings," audiences also shrunk in direct proportion to the degree of simplification of representations of the past, making the films unappealing, if not unacceptable to Yugoslav audiences (Goulding,

*Liberated Cinema* 65). While film critics loyal to the party attacked *new film* for its “foreign elements,” they did not see the “foreign element” in the Partisan films of this period that were really nothing more than a pale imitation of Hollywood. In any case, the banning of *new film* tendencies led to a major loss in revenue that left the Yugoslav film industry in a dire state and without creative direction (66).

### **The Rise of New Wave - New Yugoslav Cinema**

The Yugoslav film industry made a comeback during the late seventies and the early eighties when film production rose to levels comparable to the late sixties, the most successful period in Yugoslav cinema. “The dark period of uncertainty that ensued in Yugoslav film was broken by the arrival of the Prague School of Yugoslav directors and cinematographers who had studied in Czechoslovakia and who had begun their home careers in television” (Horton, “Yugoslavia: Multifaceted Cinema” 656). While low box office sales during the sixties revealed limited interest from Yugoslav spectators for the more complex treatment of issues found in *new films*, with the Prague Group, “for the first time the public showed a preference for Yugoslav films in general [...] in 1978, Yugoslav films domestically outsold all foreign films, including American films for the first time” (656).

There has perhaps, never been a period in Yugoslavia's postwar film development in which there have been so many seasoned, artistically gifted, and professionally well-trained film directors [...] and other film artists and technicians eager to further strengthen the artistic integrity of Yugoslav films and expand the international audiences for them. (Goulding, *Post New Wave Cinema* 280)



The Prague Group in many respects filled the gap left in Yugoslav cinema, as many producers were reluctant to work with directors from the *new film* movement (Horton, "Yugoslavia: Multifaceted Cinema" 645).

With a commitment to creating films that reflected "[...] critically upon *savremene teme* (contemporary themes), but without the radical confrontation impetus of earlier *new film* directors," the Prague Group brought about a resurgence in Yugoslav filmmaking labelled the *new wave* or *new Yugoslav cinema* (Goulding, *Liberated Cinema* 65). It was during this era of "critical accommodation" or "deconstructing contemporary Yugoslav cinema" that a new generation of filmmakers adopted "[...] an attitude of critical accommodation rather than dialectical confrontation" with the past and the Partisan war experience disappeared as a cinematic theme. The death of Tito in 1980 "symbolically closed the period of partisan triumphs" (Taylor et al. 266).

Among the members of the Prague Group was Emir Kusturica, a director from Sarajevo who was educated at FAMU and began his career at TV Sarajevo. Like the generation ten years his senior in the Prague Group, "Kusturica absorbed influences of both the quality humanistic film tradition of the Czech New Wave (and subsequently of the Prague Group of Yugoslavia) and Western influences which include everything from John Ford to rock'n'roll" (Horton, "I Don't Want to Kill Anybody" 54). After the success of his debut film *Sjecas li se Dolly Bell?* (*Remember Dolly Bell?* 1981) which captured the Best First Film award at the

1981 Venice Film Festival, Kusturica directed *Otac na sluzbenom putu* (*When Father Was Away on Business*, 1985) co-written with Abdulah Sidran, a writer and poet. The film “reflects the influence of much of modern Yugoslav cinema in its bittersweet depiction of a Muslim family’s struggles under the anti-Stalinist purges in Yugoslavia during the early 1950s” (Horton, “Yugoslavia: Multifaceted Cinema” 659). With “the steady reduction and virtual disappearance of films dealing with the Partisan war experience [...] the critical focus has shifted to inter-war Yugoslavia, the Stalinist aftermath of the war, and the dramatic period following Yugoslavia’s break with the Cominform on June 28, 1948” (Goulding, *Post New Wave Cinema* 254). Following the death of Tito, public debates emerged surrounding the government’s brutal treatment of opponents to Yugoslavia’s break with Stalin.

Within a year of Tito’s death on May 4, 1980, a spate of articles, novels and plays began to appear in Yugoslavia which sharply reexamined the most controversial aspects of the anti-Stalinist purges carried out by the Tito-led government following the anathema and expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform on June 28, 1948, with special attention focused upon the Gulag-type concentration camp set up on the arid and desolate northern Adriatic island of Goli otok (Naked Island). (254)

*When Father Was Away on Business* opens with the titles “Sarajevo June 1950” and “An Historical Love Film”. Sitting under a tree is a man playing the guitar and singing Spanish songs in Serbo-Croatian as two boys sing along and pick lipa leaves. As the man and the boys drive away, the protagonist, a young boy, introduces himself. “My name is Malik Malkoc, I was born on November 2, 1944 but because the war was going on and we were poor, my mother wrote the 29<sup>th</sup>

of October so that she could get an extra month's worth of allowance even though I was not yet born."

In the next scene, Malik's father, Mesa, is on a train with his lover Ankica. As Mesa looks at a political cartoon in a newspaper showing Marx seated in an office with a portrait of Stalin on the wall, he comments how the government has "gone too far". Ankica tells him that he is evil and asks why his recent promotion in the party does not allow him to divorce his wife. Ankica storms off to the back of the train as Mesa buys two lipsticks from a thief. Mesa follows her and she screams "when will you get a divorce? Never!" They embrace and have sex in the washroom and as he gives her the lipstick, she tells him that he does not love her to which he replies "who can love anyone in this madhouse?"

As Mesa enters the courtyard to his house, he meets his son who narrates how his best friend Joza's father was taken away in a straight jacket yelling, "I would rather eat Russian shit than American cake." According to Malik, his family soon after took down all of Stalin's pictures in their home. As Mesa enters his home, he gives presents to his sons and the lipstick purchased on the train to his wife. In the next scene, the family goes to a military fair. Malik's father tells to him that he should stop swinging his arms as he walks, "intelligent people walk with their feet parallel [...] communists have an inborn aesthetic sense." Ankica is at the fair as one of Yugoslavia's rare female pilots. Sena's brother Zijo arrives and Mesa invites him to their house for a drink, to which he declines saying that he is

too busy. Later in the scene, Ankica is in a truck with Zijo and another communist official. As Zijo laughs at the political cartoon Mesa had commented on the day before in the train, Ankica adds how “some people do not think that it is funny.” When the other official asks whom that might be, Ankica looks at Zijo and says “you know him well, he’s your own brother-in-law.”

At home, Malik and his family listen to a soccer game over the radio Yugoslavia is playing against Sweden. After Yugoslavia wins, the boys run out to the yard to play soccer and Mesa looks through the window with a pained expression as he speaks with someone over the telephone. The next day, Mesa goes to Zijo’s office. Mesa begins to explain “listen she (Ankica) was mine now she’s yours.” Zijo responds, “do you think we arrest people for screwing?” Mesa then understands that he is being arrested and asks Zijo to wait until after the circumcision ceremony for his sons before jailing him.

As family and friends are gathered for the circumcision ceremony, Mesa and Zijo are tense. At one point Sena’s father looks at Zijo and says, “Fuck you and the Russians” as he realises what is about to take place. Mesa goes into the boys’ room, and tells them “now you’re real men and when I get back you’ll be healed up” as he leaves with Zijo. The boys are told that their father has gone away on a business trip. Malik narrates how since his father went away on business, “everyone in the house is tense, even people who come over. They shake their heads, tic-toc, like clocks. Mother is always at the sewing machine and when

she stops sewing, she starts crying. Our neighbour over coffee told my mother "don't cry Sena, he's not an informer, he's something else" and then my mother asked, "what is he then?" One evening as Sena goes into the boys' bedroom, she realises that Malik is gone. She leaves the house with her older son and her father as they search for Malik. They find him sleepwalking along the edge of a bridge and decide to tie a bell to his toe every night before he goes to sleep as a preventative measure.

Sena decides to go over to her brother's house to ask about her husband. It is early in the morning and Ankica answers the door in a robe with a towel over her head. Sena enters her brother's bedroom, and as he lies in bed she asks him "tell me my brother can you sleep?" to which he responds "as you can see my sister, I can." Above the bed is an enormous portrait of Tito. Ankica makes coffee for the two of them and leaves the room but eavesdrops on their conversation. Sena asks his brother, "why haven't you been by? I thought you would at least come to see your father." Then Sena asks him point-blank "where is he?" referring to Mesa. Zijo tells her to mind her children and herself and to not come and see him anymore. When she asks why Mesa has not written, he tells her "he'll write when he can." Sena asks him how he can be so indifferent considering it is his brother-in-law to which Zijo responds "he can be god as far as I am concerned. I am a soldier of the party. Do you understand?" As she leaves, she asks Zijo to take a package of clothing for her husband. When he refuses to take the package, Sena reminds him that when the Ustaša arrested

Mesa, Zijo was willing to take a package to him then. Zijo tells her to leave the package and rolls to her a leather soccer ball for Malik.

Sena's younger brother, who is in the Navy, comes home and she tells him that Mesa has been arrested. He asks why Zijo has not done anything. The next day her brother brings her a letter from Mesa. Malik narrates a letter he has written back to his father, "dear father, we are so happy that you have written. We can't understand why you haven't come back but continue to work as a volunteer in that mine. We've collected enough money to come and see you as we sold the large rug in the living room [...] You can expect to see us the first of April." As they arrive at the train station in a town called Lipica, Mesa meets his wife and Malik. As they go to a room right by the train station, Sena ties the bell to Malik's toe and explains to Mesa that he has started sleepwalking. When Sena asks her husband why he was arrested, he tells her that he does not know and that she should ask her brother. He then says she should ask Ankica, and Sena mentions that Zijo has married her. Mesa tells her not to bother asking Ankica and that he has no idea when he expects to be released. Each time his parents try to make love, Malik rings the bell and then forces his way into his parents' bed. Meša falls asleep with Malik and Sena begins to cry.

When Sena gets back to Sarajevo, she goes to the school where Ankica is a gym teacher. When Ankica asks when Mesa will be returning home, Sena tells her "he told me to ask you." Ankica pretends that she does not understand, "Me? How

would I know when he'll be released?" Sena begins hitting Ankica with her purse screaming "You don't know? You whore, you don't know?" Malik bites Ankica as he tries to protect his mother.

In the next scene, the family prepares to move to Zvornik where Mesa is will be released as part of the "resocialisation process." "I didn't know that the city of Zvornik existed until my father sent us a letter saying he had finished his work at the mine where I visited with my mother. We were moving there as it is cheaper for starting a new life." Although Sena's brother comes to see them off, Sena refuses to say goodbye to him.

During a visit from a party official who is overseeing Mesa's rehabilitation, he asks how things are and Mesa responds "*nema odmora dok traje obnova*" (there is no rest during reconstruction).<sup>3</sup> Malik in the meantime develops a crush on the daughter of a Russian émigré doctor, Maša. Malik narrates "I fell in love on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September, 1951, that day Yugoslavia beat Sweden in soccer 2-1." We discover that Maša is terminally ill with a fatal blood disease.

As the best student in his class, Malik is chosen to deliver a speech as a *Pionir* (the Pioneers were Tito's youth corps) to the mayor of Zvornik. Malik forgets his lines and his father is worried that it will reflect poorly on him. When the party official calls in Mesa to question him about Malik's mistake in his speech, he finds out that he has completed his process of re-socialisation and is moving back to

Sarajevo. As Malik walks home, he discovers that Maša is about to be taken away in an ambulance and he tells her that he loves her. Maša dies that night.

As the date "22 July 1952" flashes across the screen, the whole family is back in Sarajevo at Sena's younger brother's wedding. Mesa sits beside his brother in law who asks him "have you forgiven me?" Mesa responds, "forget I can but forgive I can't." Zijo asks, "then why did you invite me?" Mesa responds "do you still think that I was wrong?" Zijo tells him, "it no longer matters what I think." Mesa asks Zijo "did you have me arrested for my words or my thoughts? You, my very own brother-in-law." Zijo responds "those were crazy times." Mesa tells his wife to go over to her brother and make up with him. She sits beside Zijo and asks him "Can you sleep my brother?" he responds "not well my sister." As the musicians play wedding music, Ankica dances around flirtatiously and Zijo smashes his head on a bottle. As Sena helps Zijo into the house, Mesa signals Ankica to follow him into the basement. As Mesa rips her clothes off, she tells him that she did not expect his own brother-in-law to have him arrested for his comments. Mesa has sex with Ankica, as Malik watches through a window. Mesa turns his back on Ankica and in desperation, she tries to hang herself with a toilet cord in the washroom. The grandfather instructs Malik's brother to go and get his suitcase. Everyone is crowded around a radio listening to a soccer match between Yugoslavia and Russia. Malik narrates how his grandfather left on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 1952 when "he checked himself into an old age home because he



was sick and tired of their politics.” In the final scene, Malik is sleepwalking; he turns to the camera with a smile on his face and winks.

*When Father Was Away on Business* evokes “the ambiguities and contradictions of the past” by critically re-examining “[...] the official mythology of Yugoslavia’s socialist founding and evolution from Heroic Partisan War to early Stalinist orthodoxy to the “progressive” break with Stalin to a system of enlightened “self-management” socialism” (262). The film represents the idealism of the socialist movement in Yugoslavia following WW II shattered when “a zealous backlash developed against those who had strongly and idealistically supported Stalin after World War II. Over fifty thousand Yugoslavs were sent to prisons in a purge conducted throughout the country, a terror that has shaped the consciousness, memories, and fears of a whole generation” (262). Although Yugoslavia broke away from Stalin and developed an “alternative” system, the harsh treatment of dissidents revealed that the Yugoslav government was as repressive towards its opponents as the communist regimes Tito criticised in other communist countries. The film appeared in the midst of economic difficulties exacerbated by a political paralysis at the federal level and “[...] continuing debates over how Yugoslavia best might be governed in the future (decentralisation versus centralisation, one-party versus two-party system, etc.)” (262). The narrative of the film was part of the wider discussions that went on in the political sphere including a re-evaluation of the revolutionary past and an open dialogue in post

Tito Yugoslavia promoting a revamping of the economic and political system that was on the verge of collapse (262).

*When Father Was Away on Business* is a portrayal of the anti-Stalinist period, “[...] depicting the tensions and the moral and political ambiguities which prevailed in Yugoslavia after the break with Stalin, as these impacted on a Moslem family living in Sarajevo” (255). The arrest of Mesa in the film represents the plight of many socialist ideologues that suddenly found themselves as expendable, despite their role in fighting with the Partisans and in reconstructing Yugoslavia after WW II. Mesa is a devout socialist as revealed in a comment he makes to his son about communists having “an inborn aesthetic sense.” Mesa’s genuine commitment to socialism is juxtaposed with Zijo’s political opportunism. As Sena visits Zijo to inquire about Mesa, despite his rhetoric about being “a soldier of the party” we discover that Zijo was an Ustaša during the war. Mesa’s arrest was not for ideological reasons but rather an act of revenge on the part of Ankica, the spurned lover, and Zijo who is jealous of Mesa’s relationship with Ankica. Later in the film, once Mesa has been released from the labour camp, his cynical use of party slogans such as “*nema odmora dok traje obnova*” (there is no rest during reconstruction) expose Mesa’s disillusionment with the socialist system. Mesa’s arrest reveals how personal politics were mixed with national politics and intimate moments of the family were inseparable from the social reality of the state. This is evident in the scene during the circumcision ritual of Malik and his brother and Mesa’s arrest by Zijo, and Mesa’s ideological

rehabilitation and Sena's attempt to forgive her brother for inflicting such pain on her family.

The story is narrated in the first person from the perspective of the protagonist six-year-old Malik. Typical of a child, Malik remembers family experiences as they relate to childhood memories of soccer games and his first love Maša. As the protagonist and narrator, Malik's experiences are approached with innocence and vulnerability, free "from the restrictions of competing political ideologies" (Horton, "Oedipus Unresolved" 69). Even the camera at times takes the point of view of a child through low angle shots of the adult world. Rather than create a melancholic story, Kusturica uses his child protagonist to create a tragic-comedy, where Malik exposes the absurdity he finds in every situation thus exposing the absurdity of the political situation of the time (Hartl). In terms of representing the past through a child protagonist, "Kusturica counters the rigidity of competing "truths" with the pluralistic (naïve and innocent) viewpoint of a child-narrator. Malik's subjectivity is not the truth. It is, rather, one view, recalled through memory, mixing imagination, facts, and dreams into what Bunuel liked to call the "lie" that becomes personal truth" (71).

In the final scene, Kusturica provides what appears to be a 'happy ending': Mesa is home from prison, Sena is pregnant and the entire family is united at the wedding of Sena's youngest brother; the family survived despite all of the adversity that surrounded them (67).

But the survival of the family as a unit has been paid for at a high cost to its individuals. In the same wedding sequence, happiness is undercut by the bitterness of co-existence between Mesa and his wife's brother, Zijo, who sentenced him; Mesa's rape of Ankica and her subsequent attempt at suicide; and the final departure of the grandfather from the family, headed for an old folks' home. (67)

Regardless of the 'not so happy ending', in reflecting upon this harsh period in Yugoslav history, the film promotes acceptance and forgiveness rather than dogma and revenge (67).

The time of the film is condensed from the summer of 1950 to the summer of 1952, a period in which Yugoslavia weathered the harshest diplomatic, economic, and military threats against her independence, and steadily gained strength. The dramatic structure of the film mirrors and reflects this steady progress toward reconciliation and transcendence. (Goulding, *Post New Wave Cinema* 255)

The final shot of Malik sleepwalking where he turns and winks at the camera is an unforgettable visual metaphor for the triumph of childhood over the peculiarities of his family and of the times. "Seen through the eyes of a child, both awake and asleep, Kusturica's film dares to tamper, like a child, with the conventions and rules of society, politics [...] to create a narrative that both entertains and challenges its viewers with a particular view of a particular history, that of Yugoslavia" (Horton, "Oedipus Unresolved" 77).

As a film that portrays the suffering of a family, victims of an arbitrary and unjust imprisonment during an ideologically charged period in Yugoslav history, it reflected the widespread controversy and polemics in the cultural and political sphere about the arrests during the anti-Stalinist purge that reached their

greatest intensity between 1982 – 83 (67). Although the film was produced in 1985, Kusturica had sought funding for the project two years earlier during the height of the debate. According to Kusturica, “I faced all the same old problems that most Yugoslav filmmakers have to face at some time during their careers. The people who decide what is going to be produced, especially in the case of films that deal with sensitive political matters, are very cautious” (Downey 13).<sup>4</sup> Supporters of the anti-Stalinist purge argued that the actions of the government were justified in that the arrest of pro-Stalinists prevented Yugoslavia from becoming a Soviet style repressive state. Critics of the purge such as the author Antonije Isakovic who wrote a best-selling book based on interviews with survivors of Goli otok (Isakovic wrote *Partisan Stories* and co-authored the script for *Three* discussed in Chapter Two), “[...] acknowledged the weight of this historical argument, but reasoned that numerous innocent victims had been caught in the purge either because they were mistakenly arrested or were victims of witch hunts and of petty officials settling old scores” (Goulding, *Post New Wave Cinema* 255).

While the war genre of the *new film* movement sought to re-present the foundational narrative of the nation, for a generation far removed from the events of World War II the Partisan experience was simply no longer relevant. The “multiple crises” that Yugoslavia faced in the eighties, including a deteriorating economy (e.g. high inflation, a huge deficit, a precipitous drop in living standard), and political infighting among politicians who either supported reform or insisted

on maintaining the status quo led to a lack of “[...] public confidence in the system [...]” and “[...] an erosion of beliefs in the founding myths of the state and the inherent superiority of self-management socialism” (248). Along with the Partisan experiences of WW II, self-management was also a myth in the foundational narrative of socialist Yugoslavia. In abandoning the depiction of the events of WW II, *When Father Was Away on Business* revealed how debates surrounding the foundational narrative of the Partisan war experience in the national war of liberation were replaced by a wide-ranging debate which sharply questioned received myths and critically addressed the multiple dilemmas of contemporary social, economic and political life in Yugoslavia (249). Whereas during the sixties, the *new film* movement challenged the myths of the nation in order to improve the existing system by returning to the fundamental values of socialism, *new Yugoslav cinema* challenged the legitimacy of socialism, seeking a change in the system.

*When Father Was Away on Business* gained international recognition for Kusturica winning the “Palme d’Or” award at Cannes and an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Film. Like the *new film* directors, the Prague Group achieved international prominence. Major retrospectives of Yugoslav films were organised by the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris and the National Film Theatre in London in 1986, a series of retrospectives in the U.S. by the American Film Institute in 1987, and in special sections devoted to Yugoslav films at major international film festivals confirmed the widespread international critical and

popular success of Yugoslav cinema. However, the retrospectives in many respects may be seen as a requiem for Yugoslav film “[...] the increasingly intractable political problems began to be reflected in the politics of national cinema too. Acrimonious debates at the national film festival in Pula were perhaps symptomatic of the imminent collapse of the country as a whole” (Taylor et al. 271). The disintegration of Yugoslavia as a nation ended its national cinema.

The dark irony of the collapse of Yugoslav cinema as an entity is well noted by Maja Vujovic in the 1993 edition of the *International Film Guide* when she states that the outbreak of war came as “Yugoslav filmmaking finally founded its academy, approached its thousandth title and won its first two Felix (European Oscar) awards.” (qtd. in Horton, “I Don’t Want to Kill Anybody” 54)

In the late eighties, rather than confront the economic difficulties and the breakdown of a civil and political order, the majority of politicians in Yugoslavia embraced ethnic nationalism as an alternative force for maintaining (or achieving) hegemony. Ethnic nationalists, from seemingly opposing sides, united in representing coexistence and co-operation among the various communities as a political illusion coinciding with the ‘unnaturally born state’. By 1990, there was little doubt that Yugoslavia as a nation was on the path to destruction.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In an interview about his book which examined the life and work of Petrovic published in 1999, Petar Volk attributes the rise of a national cinema to the director. According to Volk, despite his significant role in Yugoslav cinema, Petrovic is largely ignored by the institutions of Yugoslav cinema. “As a creator of black film [...] he was removed from the Academy. The process went on for 17 years, which is unheard of even in our system. When he was rehabilitated in 1991, his former students would not allow him to return insisting that he did not understand modern film.

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Disillusioned, he gave up [...] At the end of the century, in a list of the best young cineastes, absent are the works of Aleksandar Petrovic [...] His films are shown nowhere. Films that are the foundation of our cinema are wasting away in bunkers. Distribution has been privatised. Preference is given to Hollywood kitsch, false spectacles. We do not have a movie theatre where Yugoslavian films may be shown" (Milivojevic).

<sup>2</sup> Horton is right in pointing out that the film was not directed "[...] by a hack director, but by Stole Jankovic, who had previously made distinguished war films" ("The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Partisan Film" 22).

<sup>3</sup> "*Nema odmora dok traje obnova*" ("there is no rest as long as there is reconstruction") is a slogan that was widely used by the socialists during the reconstruction of Yugoslavia after WW II.

<sup>4</sup> In the same interview, Kusturica also made the following statement: "All of a sudden they have become guardians of socialism, and I keep asking myself, "Who the hell are they protecting socialism from? Is it the generation born in 1955 – my generation? Or are they merely trying to protect their own comfortable life styles which are permitted only by their politics?" (Downey 13)



## **Chapter Four: From the Movie Theatre to the Grave – War Cinema in Post Socialism**

By the eighties, massive foreign debts led to the imposition of austerity measures plunging the country into a major economic crisis. Despite requests for assistance by moderate politicians expressing concern with the rise in ethnic tensions coupled with worsening social conditions, including an extension on the foreign loans that were due, their pleas were largely ignored by the international community. Politicians in the republics increasingly rejected the imposition of pan-Yugoslav measures for social and economic stability. As each republic held a referendum on independence, the disintegration of Yugoslavia led to war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. With the death of Yugoslavia, cinema in post-socialist nations faced an uncertain future. "Rather than eradicate the cinema industry, the vicious Yugoslav war re-energised filmmakers, and spawned an artistic revolution" (Nadler). This was especially true in Serbia where a new generation of filmmakers continued with the tradition of creating films that represented the national discourse, critically examining the conflicts that plagued the region.

In this chapter, I will discuss the rise of ethnic nationalism and the appropriation of the 'history of ethnic hatred' discourse, the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the resurgence of cinema as a sense-making device in post-socialist nations.

## **The Rise of Ethnic Nationalism and the 'Ancient Hatreds' Discourse**

In a country plagued with economic and political problems, ethnic nationalist politicians insisted that independence would resolve the crises Yugoslav society faced. Referendums voting in favour of secession led to the declaration of independence in Slovenia and Croatia in 1991. War broke out in Croatia where a large Serb minority fought to remain in Yugoslavia. Bosnia-Herzegovina held a referendum on independence the following year, where the Serb population boycotted the vote. Although the Serbs, constituting close to 40% of the Bosnian population, abstained from voting in the referendum and threatened war if the republic seceded from Yugoslavia, the international community recognised Bosnia-Herzegovina as an independent state.

Despite the complexity of the situation, the simplistic 'bloody Balkan history' narrative was widely adopted in the West and by ethnic nationalists.<sup>1</sup> According to this narrative, "[...] contemporary relations between Croats, Muslims, and Serbs [...]" are controlled by "[...] deep currents of ethnic hatred and memories of awful events from six centuries past" (Hardin 23). Applying metaphors such as 'the powder keg of Europe' and 'Balkan quagmire', the war was represented as inevitable among people predisposed to 'ethnic violence'. Although peaceful coexistence characterised ethnic relations in Yugoslavia from 1945 – 1991, proponents of the 'history of ethnic hatred' explanation claim this was achieved through the creation of a 'fictional nation' ruled by coercive governance. The fall of communism supposedly unleashed hostilities long suppressed, marking a

return to the pre-existing order of ethnic violence. Yet, previous to World War 2, no ethnically motivated armed conflict ever erupted between the South Slavs (Jovanovic 35).

After the break up of Yugoslavia, the film industry collapsed in most of the former Yugoslav republics with many of the best filmmakers moving to Western countries. The rise in black-market videotapes had the effect of undercutting theatrical sales and the flood of cheap American and foreign films filled the cinemas thus "crowding out local productions" (Horton, "I Don't Want to Kill Anybody" 55). The exception was Serbia where many members of the Prague Group remained and continued to produce quality films.

After the internal borders of the former Yugoslavia became firmly fixed probably for good and when even inveterate optimists became aware that we had passed beyond the point of no return and no hope, *We Are Not Angels* (*Mi Nismo Andjeli*) by Srdjan Dragojevic, a film which undoubtedly marked the beginning of a totally different and entirely independent cinematographic entity, was presented to domestic cinematic audiences. (Kosti)

Dragojevic, who graduated in Psychology in 1987, finished film direction at the Belgrade Academy in 1992. Dragojevic directed *Mi Nismo Andjeli* (*We Are Not Angels*, 1992), a box office hit and winner of a Yugoslav film critic's award for Best Film. It was during the editing of *We Are Not Angels* that Dragojevic's horror at the events unfolding in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992 led him to make a film about the war (Grujic).<sup>2</sup>

Inspired by a series of Bosnian war reports featured in the Serbian magazine *Duga*, Dragojevic co-wrote and directed *Lepa sela, lepo gore* (*Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* 1996). Loosely based on the true story of a ten day siege in which Serb soldiers were trapped inside a tunnel surrounded by Muslims without food or water, *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* won critical acclaim in Yugoslavia and the West as a film that “[...] pounds home its condemnation of war and ethnic hatreds” (Van Gelder). Although *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* is one of the first Serbian films to deal directly with the events of the civil war, graphically depicting the destruction of Muslim property and lives at the hands of Serbian forces while trashing the dangerous idealism of Serbian nationalism, by attributing the destruction of Yugoslavia to ethnic hatred which supposedly existed beneath the façade of ‘brotherhood and unity’, the film actually reinforces the ‘ancient hatreds’ discourse. According to the ‘ancient hatreds’ or ‘history of ethnic hatred’ discourse, the Balkans is inhabited by mutually antagonistic ethnic groups which have fought brutal wars over territory for centuries. Although Dragojevic is a long time critic of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Milosevic’s regime, it is a contradiction of terms to condemn ethnic nationalism and war, while upholding a discourse that treats conflict as inevitable and is widely embraced by ethnic nationalists.

The film begins with a mock newsreel dated 27 June 1971 at the opening of the ‘brotherhood and unity’ tunnel in Bosnia. One of the politicians at the ribbon cutting ceremony cuts his finger. The band strikes up a *kolo* (traditional Slavic

celebration dance) with people dressed in the various costumes of the region, dancing at a maddening pace. In the next scene, the year is 1980 and the tunnel is in a dilapidated state. Milan and Halil as children stand before the tunnel wondering whether they should go in. According to Halil, "the ogre is sleeping inside, and if it wakes up it will eat all the people in the village and burn down all of the houses." The next scene cuts to the year 1994 at a military hospital in Belgrade where Milan is being airlifted. In the background we hear a nationalist Serbian song "*ko to kaze ko to laze Serbia je mala, nije mala nije mala tri put ratovala*" ('who says, who lies that Serbia is small, it's not small it's not small it fought three wars').

In a scene marking the first day of the war in Bosnia, Milan and Halil are playing basketball. After their game, they sit down for a drink at a café owned by Sloba. As Sloba serves Halil and Milan drinks, he comments on a newspaper story about a Serb who was shot in Sarajevo during a wedding procession (this actually happened). "Look at what they [Muslims] are doing to us" says Sloba. Halil asks him why he reads the Serbian newspaper *Vecernji Novosti* instead of the Sarajevo daily *Oslobodjenje*. Sloba answers that *Oslobodjenje* is too big to hold in his hands, and Halil suggests that he "put the paper on the floor, kneel and bend over to read it." Sloba adds how "the paper is good for praying" (i.e. Muslim prayers). The bickering over the newspaper highlights the tensions between Serbs and Muslims. As a man plays the song "*bacila sve niz rijeku*"

("she threw everything away") on the accordion, Milan smashes his hand on a glass.

Milan and a group of soldiers are in a house where the telephone rings. A woman at the other end desperately asks to speak with Dzamil, Veljo the thief picks up the telephone and tells the woman that Dzamil is "indisposed" as he lies dead in his backyard. As the woman screams for Dzamil, Veljo passes the telephone to the Professor who hangs up and asks the question "they say that war brings out the best and the worst in people, when will the best come out?" The film cuts back to the main characters meeting in a village café as they prepare to move to the front. We are introduced to Viljuška (meaning fork) singing a vulgar song about Easter eggs. Milan appears on a hillside and reluctantly walks over to the men. Brzi appears in a medical truck with a female doctor asking if there are any wounded men in need of the doctor's care. The film cuts back to Milan saying goodbye to his mother. A couple of war profiteers driving a tractor full of stolen goods ask Milan and his mother whether there are any Muslims hanging around and drive to Halil's house. As they carry a TV out of Halil's house, one of the profiteers says "*nema odmora dok traje obnova*" ("there is no rest while there is reconstruction"). As one of them pours gasoline over Halil's garage and comments on how the sign on the shop is crooked, Milan has a flashback when he hung the sign with Halil years earlier. The film cuts back to Milan shooting the war profiteers in the legs as Sloba leaves the house carrying a *gobleni* (needlepoint picture). Sloba asks Milan whether Halil the

*“balija”* (a derogatory term referring to the fascist Muslims of WW II) sent him over to protect his house. Milan points his gun at Sobo who asks him “what is wrong with you? Blood is not water” (suggesting that they are related by blood since they are both Serbs). The Captain arrives at the scene and screams at Milan “who are you to judge? Who gave you permission to shoot?”

Back in the hospital, a group of Muslim prisoners of war arrives for treatment. Milan becomes obsessed with one young Muslim whom he can see through glass dividing their rooms. The film then cuts to Milan returning to his home that has been torched with graffiti all over the wall. His mother is nowhere to be found. He runs to Sobo's café, where Sobo explains that his mother was killed by Muslims who when captured admitted that they were members of Halil's unit.

The film returns to the front where Viljuška holds a plastic snow scene of the city of New York, Veljo tells him “did you know there are more people in the city of New York than Serbs?” The Professor adds, “they say that if the Serbs continue at this rate there will only be enough of us to stand under a pear tree.” Milan says, “we're lucky to be sitting under a pear tree.” As a light shoots up in the sky, they realise that they are under attack. Milan suggests that they flee to the tunnel. Milan enters the tunnel reluctantly. With the Muslims on top of the tunnel, Veljo asks, “who the hell led us here?” to which Milan responds “I did.” All of the sudden a truck comes charging through the tunnel and as it stops Brzi jumps out. In the back of the truck they hear sobbing, it is the American journalist holding up

her passport explaining that she is an American citizen and as she begins to explain that “according to the Geneva convention [...]” a rocket comes flying through the tunnel. As the men try to convince her not to leave as it is too dangerous, she responds “yes I’m fully aware of the Serbian concern for women in this war” (referring to the accusations of mass rapes). As she runs, she is shot at, and Veljo is forced to carry her back where they tie her up. Brzi pulls out a coke bottle full of water and as Milan gives the woman a drink of water, Veljo runs to seize the bottle shouting “who are you giving water to? The media are to blame for this shit” and he is shot.

Over the Captain’s walkie-talkie Milan and the group hear the Muslims torturing a Serb. Milan unties Lisa and tells her to go, but she chooses instead to stay. Angered by what he has heard over the radio, Lazar moves towards the end of the tunnel and is shot. Viljuska cries and begs him to stay alive. In the next scene, Lazar is sitting with his family and Viljuska watching the news. As the report about the war uses inflammatory language such as “the Ustaša committing genocide against the Serbs” and Lazar gets up and decides to volunteer to fight in the war. Back in the tunnel, Milan takes Lisa’s camera and tells her to film Lazar dying. Lisa protests by saying “I’m just doing my job, it is not my fault you’re killing each other.” She picks up the camera saying “you’re just a bunch of electronic images.” The film cuts back to the hospital where the professor reads a passage from the book “we noticed one night a village burning.” The scene moves to the group of them standing in front of a burning village. The Professor



asks, "what is the name of this village?" Veljo answers "who cares? Pretty villages burn prettily, ugly villages remain ugly." The Professor then comments, "See we've set a village on fire and we don't even know its name. Here we are fighting over ashes." Viljuska then adds, "if we left matters to the educated, Serbs and Serbia would have gone to hell long ago." Back in the tunnel, Milan decides to fix the truck as a way of getting out. In the next scene, we see Brzi trying to score some heroine handing over his father's retirement gift, a watch, to the dealer.

Back in the tunnel Lisa decides to interview the group and Viljuska jumps up and says, "I have something to say for the news." As he looks at Lisa he talks about the fork "You poor thing, you do not realise that while Germans, the English and Americans were eating with their fingers we ate with a fork. Yes, while at the Serbian royal court we ate with a fork, the Germans were eating pork with their fingers." The Professor picks up the fork that Viljuska has thrown down and says, "it is because of this fork that we have returned to the cave." The Captain has an exchange with the commander of the Muslim unit, who we find out is his best man.

The scene flashes back to Brzi scoring dope, and the dealer makes the comment "this is why we will lose the war, thirty years of service in the military for a gold watch that is swapped for drugs." Back in the hospital as the nurses clear Brzi's bed and throws out his Walkman, we find out that he has died of internal

bleeding. The film then cuts to Brzi stoned out of his mind standing on a bridge with people throwing flowers and cheering for the army as they head off to war in Croatia. Brzi jumps from the bridge into a military truck singing a Partisan war song. In the next scene, Brzi's body is placed in a drawer at the morgue.

In the tunnel, as the Muslims play the Yugoslav national anthem over the Captain's walkie-talkie, everyone solemnly listens to the song. In the next scene, Milan and Halil watch their teacher having sex in a field with the town's postman. A song playing on the radio is interrupted by a news flash that Tito died and the teacher and postman begin to cry. Milan and Halil are disappointed that they are unable to cry about the death of Tito.

Back in the tunnel, Milan's teacher appears beaten and raped. Although they fear that she may be rigged with explosives, they are unable to shoot her especially Milan who says through tears "she was my teacher." Viljuska gets out of the truck and shoots the teacher screaming "you would allow this woman to come and kill us all, what is wrong with you?" Viljuska throws down his gun and starts walking to the end of the tunnel saying, "I'm going home, I've had enough." As he leaves the tunnel, a Muslim asks him "where do you think you're going?" and he answers "home." The next scene shows Viljuska volunteering to fight in the war so that he can take care of Lazar. As they enter a bus headed for the front he says "god take care of the Serbs." Back in the tunnel, the Muslims kill Viljuska. The Captain chooses this moment to tell his life's story, "I walked 350

kilometres to Tito's funeral. Yes, you find it funny. I was young back then for me it was like taking a stroll. He was smart that bastard, he lied but we all loved him."

Returning to the tunnel, Veljo gives his ring to Milan saying "please give this to my mother, I know you're going to make it out of here." Veljo puts a gun to his head and asks Lisa to film him, he then asks her to kiss him one last time. He kisses Lisa passionately with Brzi filming the two. After the kiss, he says, "this is worth living for. Actually that's not true" and he kills himself with the gun. Brzi is completely shaken up muttering "you fucked me you fucking thief." In the next scene, Veljo returns home from Germany. As he greets his mother and brother, the military police knock at the door. Veljo decides to go in place of his brother and as he leaves with the police he says "the sooner I go the sooner I will be back." In the next scene, Milan falls out of his hospital bed. The Professor notices that Milan has left his bed and is headed towards the Muslim. In the tunnel, the Captain decides to drive the truck out as a decoy, as he sings the Partisan song *Uz Marsala Tita (With Marshall Tito)*. The Captain tells them that he is off to meet with his best man. The next scene flashes back to him walking to Tito's funeral carrying a large portrait of Tito. The Professor picks up Brzi and runs; Lisa is killed as she returns to pick up her camera.

As Milan leaves the tunnel, he runs into Halil who asks him "so you went into the tunnel?" Milan responds "I did." Halil asks him "why did you burn our garage?"

Milan asks him “why did you kill my mother?” Halil says “I didn’t kill anyone” and Milan responds “I didn’t burn down your garage” and Halil asks, “who did it then Milan? The ogre from the tunnel? Was it the ogre?” Halil is shot and falls at Milan’s feet. Back in the hospital, the Professor manages to stop Milan at the foot of the Muslim’s bed. As Milan lies on the floor about to die, he says, “that fucking ogre.”

In the next scene, Milan and Halil are in the tunnel as children. Milan is beating a drum while Halil holds a knife standing over bloodied dead bodies. The film cuts back to the café at the beginning of the war, Halil says “it’s a good day to drink *rakija* (plum brandy). Tell me Milan do you think there will be a war?” In the final scene of the film, a mock newsreel shows the year 1999 at the opening of the “tunnel of peace” and again a local official cuts his finger during the ribbon cutting ceremony.

Using a non-linear structure, “like the dismembered nation from which it came, *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* is told through a fractured narrative that crisscrosses through four different time periods between 1971 and 1992, and stretches from the killing fields of Bosnia-Herzegovina to the relative comfort of a Belgrade hospital” (Leong). The film is a criticism of Serbian nationalism, from Sloba (diminutive for Slobodan) the café owner turned war-profiteer who, like Slobodan Milosevic, uses ethnic nationalist rhetoric as a cover for stealing from his former neighbours, to the stupidity of the brother-in-laws fighting for the Serbian cause

without really understanding what that means beyond rambling on about Serbs using forks before anyone else, to the madman roaming the hallways of the hospital singing Serbian nationalist songs.

Dragojevic's choice of actors for the film is full of irony. The Captain is played by Bata Zivojinovic (who played Milos in *Three*), an institution in Yugoslavia's film industry, best known for his leading roles in Partisan films throughout the sixties and seventies. Zivojinovic was an elected member of parliament in Milosevic's political party. Dragan Bjelogrić who played Milan starred in Yugoslavia's popular TV comedy soap opera *Bolji Zivot* (*A Better Life*) about a family surviving the economic hardships of Yugoslav society during the eighties. It is also interesting to note that among the two children actors, the boy who plays Milan is a Muslim in real life and the boy who plays Halil is a Serb.

Beyond its criticism of ethnic nationalism, *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* is a statement against the war exposing its brutality. Since the film was shot on location during the war (before the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995), the spectator is witness to the wanton destruction of towns and cities. As we come to understand the ridiculous circumstances under which each character was drawn into the conflict, their deaths reveal the senseless loss of life during the war.

The Vietnam war spawned a series of films that served as cathartic vehicles for Americans – political statements of damnation – that usually managed to convey the pathetic futility of all wars. But that cliché is not worth repeating again in the context of the Bosnian civil

war, which, unlike Vietnam, was a conflict that turned buddies against each other, neighbours into enemies, and the closeness of the kin made the atrocities even more unbearable to contemplate. *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*, while shattering in many respects, deals so humanely [...] with its subject matter that it ends up rather less depressing than it might have and far less derivative. (Urban)

As a Serbian film depicting the Bosnian war, it is successful in portraying the conflict without demonising the 'other' (i.e. the Muslims). The film is not interested in identifying the culprit, for this reason, at the Venice film festival, the festival's director denounced the film as "fascist."<sup>3</sup>

"Beginning in 1971 with a ceremony ushering the opening of the 'Brotherhood and Unity' tunnel somewhere in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the film traces the tunnel's auspicious inauguration, its eventual abandonment by 1980, and finally its use by an ambushed Serb military unit during the Bosnian war of the early Nineties" (Glenny, "If You're Not For Us" 11). In many respects, the tunnel serves as a metaphor of Yugoslavia as a nation. Constructed as a 'connection' between the cities of Zagreb and Belgrade, the tunnel was supposed to be a symbolic 'connection' between the various ethnic communities. The construction of the tunnel was abandoned, and instead of unifying the people of Yugoslavia, the tunnel eventually drove a wedge between the communities.

Each one of the men in Milan's unit have their own reasons for fighting in the Bosnian war, and very few of them are there merely to 'slaughter Muslims' [...] as the film recounts their battle for survival against the encircling Muslim forces, Milan and his fellow soldiers reflect on both their lives prior to the war and the seemingly criminal war they are fighting now. (Leong)

The characters trapped inside the tunnel embody a diverse spectrum of Yugoslav society. Milan who once lived in an ethnically diverse village is consumed by hatred for the Muslims. A former Communist Army Captain reminisces about 'the good old days' under Tito. Veljo, who carries an air of disengagement about the war, talks incessantly about his criminal past as a thief in Germany. A teacher, nicknamed "Professor", is a Yugo-nostalgic critic of ethnic nationalism struggling with the realities of war. "Brzi", a junkie whose father served in the Communist Yugoslav National Army, represents the sickly offspring of communism. "Viljaska" (which means fork in English) and his brother-in-law Lazar volunteer to fight in the war inspired by Serbian mythology. Then there is Lisa, an American journalist who slowly comes to realise that the simple narrative of 'good guys versus bad guys' adopted by the Western media in covering the war in Bosnia, overlooks the complexity of the conflict.

Although the film revolves around an interesting array of characters, what I found most disturbing is the lack of compelling female characters. A feminist sociology Professor from the University of Zagreb remarked "we must remember that it is almost completely men who have made this war and the women who bear the consequences." Lisa, the only female in the tunnel, personifies the West and its blasé attitude towards the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the war. There are secondary characters such as Milan's mother who is killed, his teacher who is raped and mistakenly killed, the alcoholic prostitute from his childhood and a cow that appears at the end of the tunnel named Jovanka (named after Tito's widow).

Of course there are the nurses in the hospital who are either expressing disappointment that all the good looking straight men are fighting at the front or making derogatory remarks about Bosnian Serbs suffering from a lack of civilised behaviour.

The war has taken a major toll on women who have either been positioned as victims in need of male protection or “witches” who dare to question the legitimacy of nationalism. Basic women’s rights protected under socialism were eroded under nationalism (e.g. in Croatia during the mid-nineties there were discussions about banning abortions and in Serbia there was a dramatic increase in domestic violence especially against minority women in “mixed” marriages). Dragojevic has chosen to ignore the plight of women rather than recognise, at the very least, their difficult role as mothers/wives who were forced to send their sons/husbands off to war.

As the characters attempt to overcome their prejudices against one another, a scene involving an argument between the Captain and the Thief represents the fall of Yugoslavia and the descent into war. The Captain accuses Veljo of leading a ‘dishonest’ existence, whereby Veljo responds with a diatribe about the ‘false assumptions’ of Yugoslavia as a nation:

You and your renowned honesty. You [Communists] were always full of that honesty crap. Tell me something Captain do you really think that any one house that we burnt, or any one house that they burnt, was earned honestly? Yeah right! If they were honestly earned, we would not have been able to destroy each other’s homes with such ease. While Tito stuck American dollars up your



asses you knew how to bullshit about brotherhood and unity, all the while smiling at one another until it came time to 'settle the score'. That is fine, but tell me something, why didn't you do it earlier? Instead, for fifty years you drove the best cars, screwed the best-looking women and when you couldn't get it up anymore, you decided to start talking about honesty. Yeah well I for one shit all over your honesty and your entire generation of honest people.

While the film may portray Yugoslavia as a nation based on lies and doomed for destruction, the break up of a life-long friendship (along with an entire nation) due to the realisation that they were actually living under 'false pretences' seems rather simplistic.

In one of the final scenes, as Milan flees from the tunnel and meets Halil for the last time, the 'nation of lies' theory is reinforced. Halil asks Milan "why did you burn down our garage," Milan responds "I never burned down your garage. Why did you kill my mother?" Halil responds "I never killed anyone." Halil asks the question that the film attempts to answer: "Who did it then? The ogre in the tunnel?" Is the "ogre in the tunnel" the ethnic hatred rather than mutual coexistence which characterised relations in Yugoslavia? Did the ogre wake up, "eat all the people in the village and burn down all of the houses" and destroy Yugoslavia as a nation? Did the townspeople avoid entering the tunnel fearing to see the truth about their relationships? If the answer to any of these questions is "yes," despite its "anti-war message," the film actually reinforces an argument commonly held by ethnic nationalists: the inevitability of the war based on ethnic antagonisms which existed beneath the façade of "brotherhood and unity."

Although the 'history of ethnic hatred' explanation continues to dominate political discourse throughout the former Yugoslavia and the West, closer examination reveals debatable theoretical assumptions about ethnicity and nation. The 'history of ethnic hatred' discourse has been used throughout the history of post WW II Yugoslavia, albeit for different reasons, both inside and outside of the country, to advance varying political agendas. For Tito's socialist government, it provided a version of the past that stood in stark contrast with the re-construction of a post war nation based on 'brotherhood and unity'. For Westerners, the 'history of ethnic hatred' discourse is used to either justify intervention in the conflicts (in order to "end the bloodshed and bring stability to the region") or non-intervention (arguing the West's powerlessness in overcoming lethal ethnic hatred which has existed for centuries). For ethnic nationalists, the discourse served as a justification for waging war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina based on ancient hatreds and the creation of ethnic exclusive communities. If 'ethnic conflict' in Yugoslavia was inevitable due to 'ancient hatreds', then the following conclusions may be drawn: (1) ethnicity is primordial and ethnic rivalry is inherited through 'Lamarckian laws' (and therefore non-negotiable), and (2) Yugoslavia was an 'artificial nation' where the inherently hostile multiethnic population coexisted through a combination of force and collective delusion. The primordial understanding of ethnicity when applied to the Yugoslav case implies either "[...] all ethnic societies (much of the globe) must disintegrate [...] (unless the international community actively facilitates ethnic apartheid) [...]" or the war in "Yugoslavia was unique" and stemmed from "peculiar Balkan hatreds"

(Woodward 21). But the norms of ethnic exclusion which dominated nationalist movements and led to war in the region may be understood instead as “[...] social conventions, not *a priori* or natural distinctions [...]” which were “[...] reinforced through the interested actions of relevant group members” (Hardin 26). Ethnic relations are then ‘instrumental’, “[...] a social and political resource, a socially constructed repertoire of cultural elements that afford a site for political mobilisation,” and nations are “[...] distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (Anderson 6).

Although *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* marks the return of Yugoslav cinema as a sense-making device that critically examines the past, the film fails to challenge a discourse that is the heart of ethnic nationalism: communities full of ancient hatred leading them to commit atrocities against one another.

Perhaps the most devastating possible consequence of the history of ethnic hatred [...] is the fact that the future begins to be imagined in ethnic terms. For by precluding alternative projects, this exclusive ‘ethnic future’ naturalises, in history, the ethnic way of being [...] The continuity between the ‘ethnic past’ and the ‘ethnic future’ is, thus, established and the reminders of other possibilities are hidden, erased or reinterpreted. (Zarkov 111)

As communities in the region continue to perpetuate the same exclusionist natural norms, “[...] the Yugoslavian naturalised war between ‘naturalised’ ethnic groups makes any of hope of resolution unnatural and even impossible,” even among those who oppose the war such as Dragojevic (110-111). In other words, as long as relations among the various ethnic groups are viewed as inherently hostile, conflict is inevitable rather than avoidable.

As communities attempt to come to terms with the violent disintegration of the nation, cinema could play a major role in de-constructing the past and confronting the wars that have killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced millions.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> David A. Norris in his book *In the Wake of the Balkan Myth* best summarises the historical development of the 'Balkan myth' in the West. The spread of the Ottoman Empire began after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Within 100 years, the Ottoman Empire included the whole of the Balkan Peninsula and beyond, essentially creating a border in Europe between Christian and non-Christian rule, and East and West. The word "Balkan" "is Turkish in origin and means 'a chain of mountains', usually wooded. It was used to refer specifically to a chain of mountains in what is now northern Bulgaria and called the *Stara Planina* range"(7). During the Ottoman rule, the people of the region were completely cut off from the rest of Europe. Consequently, with little known about the region, the Balkans emerged as an 'exotic place'. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term became "a reference for the more extreme sense of Otherness to the West" (10). "Further steps to isolate the Balkans and increase the sense of Otherness or borderland about the Balkans were taken with the adoption of the forms 'Balkanise' and 'Balkanisation'. Balkanise according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, is a verb which means 'to divide (a region) into a number of smaller and often mutually hostile units, as was done in the Balkan Peninsula in the later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries'. The first recorded use of the term was after the First World War in 1920, but it has remained in British political vocabulary ever since" (10). As Norris states, the Balkan myth is very much in accord with the idea of Orientalism formulated by Edward Said. Orientalism is based on "fear and anxiety brought about by contact with alienating sense of Otherness which Western cultures felt on contact with the East and is also based on an attraction for the exotic which is felt to be taboo or repugnant" (12). Orientalism is a discursive practice "backed up by the West's political, economic and military superiority which imposes a global, institutionalised infrastructure" (13). Despite military, economic and political co-operation between the Balkan states, including uniting to overthrow the Ottoman Empire, the region remains, in the minds of Westerners, a volatile place. In reality, "the Balkan myth produces images which do not correspond to the historical events to which they are supposed to refer" (11).

As Andrew Baruch Wachtel states in his book *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation*, if such ancient hatreds had existed, there is no way the first Yugoslavia could have been constituted after WW I (established as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918), much less the second Yugoslavia after WW II, where approximately one million people were killed as a result of interethnic fighting in the region. Another one million were killed by the Nazis bringing the entire death toll to two million.

<sup>2</sup> In an interview about *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*, Dragojevic explained that when first confronted with television images of snipers and barricades in Sarajevo "I wanted to return to the security of the darkness of my editing room and make a film. I wanted to escape from it all. Obviously I was unable to escape, as was the case with all of us". When Dragojevic met a

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journalist writing war reports from Bosnia-Herzegovina, they agreed to write a script about the conflict. (Grujic)

<sup>3</sup> As Glenny writes in his review of the film "If You Are Not For Us," "One assumes that such ignorance was borne of a desire to see a simplistic pro-Bosnian government film, as opposed to a complex examination of the mythology surrounding the 'dark vilayet', as Andric once described the former Ottoman province (*vilayet*) of Bosnia" (12). Similarly, when a group of Sarajevo's intellectual elite watched the film at the invitation of the Belgrade weekly *Vreme*, their reaction to the film was primarily negative. Scenes of Muslims killing and the raping of Milan's teacher especially disturbed the group. I can't help but wonder did they really think that the Muslims were exempt from the brutal behaviour during the war? Although the Western media often compared the plight of the Muslims with the plight of the Jews during WW II, the reality is that the Jews did not have concentration camps for the Germans, whereas the Muslims did for Serbs and Croats during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

## Conclusion

From the inception of Yugoslav cinema, the development of the war genre, as a contemporary historical film, has been “[...] a privileged discursive site in which anxiety, ambivalence, and expectation about the nation, its history, and its future [...]” were played out in narrative form (Burgoyne 11). From the filmic representation of the foundational narrative which initially glorified the Partisan war experience, to the rise of *new film* which reflected critically upon the myths of the national war of liberation, to the resurgence of Yugoslav film which abandoned the Partisan war experience choosing instead to examine contemporary themes through the national past, to the re-emergence of Yugoslav war cinema in post-socialist Yugoslavia, throughout the history of Yugoslav national cinema, war films have played a critical role in the cultural sphere. A historical overview of Yugoslav war cinema reveals the dichotomous relationship that developed between the films discussed in this thesis as the discourse of the nation transformed through the decades. *Slavica* as the heroic romanticist film is the antithesis of the anti-heroic negativism of *Three*, and *When Father Was Away on Business* revealed the end of the dialectical confrontation with the Partisan war experience as represented in *Three*. The films also reveal a continuity such as *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame* that draws from the critical representation of the past as found in *Three* and the political satire of *When Father Was Away on Business*. *Slavica* and *Three* dealt with the Partisan war experience as the foundational narrative of the nation, *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame* deals with the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina that destroyed Yugoslavia

and constitutes, in many respects, a foundational narrative for post-socialist nations. While *Slavica* reinforced the will to coexist in a unified nation based on a shared experience during WW II, *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame* portrays the loss of will to coexist as difference (i.e. ethnicity) made a difference in communal relations. What is consistent about these films is how they reshaped memory surrounding the foundational narrative of the nation by representing the past in order to promote change within the present.

Although the socialist government supported the development of a national film industry after World War II with the sole purpose of promoting the official version of the national war of liberation, Yugoslav cinema would eventually evolve into a cultural site that challenged dogma. Except for the film *Slavica*, the role of war cinema in its critical representation of the past as a reflection of the contemporary problems of the nation created a challenge for filmmakers who were constantly fighting for freedom of expression in the cultural sphere. This was especially true for creators of the *new film* movement. It is ironic that the government would lash out against *new film* creators who were committed to reforming the system (by returning to the fundamental values of socialism) rather than replacing it. In retrospect, the demise of socialism in Yugoslavia may be traced to hard-line politicians who were prepared to take whatever steps were necessary (even if it meant brutal repression) to maintain the status quo and their privileged positions in Yugoslav society. Unfortunately, many of the challenges filmmakers faced under socialist continued in post-socialist nations. Although Dragojevic received

government funding for *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame* and for his subsequent film *Rane* (*The Wounds*, 1998), after opening to hit reviews and record box office sales, Milosevic's cronies realised that the film was highly critical of the government and ads for *The Wounds* were banned from state owned media organisations. Dragojevic is now living in the United States after signing a three-year contract with Miramax Films. As ethnic nationalist politicians continue to lose in elections throughout the former Yugoslavia, members of the cultural sphere may finally be free of ideological intervention.

Returning to cinema that has bridged the "old" nation with the "new" nation, although *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame* marks the return of the critical film to the cultural sphere, it is discouraging to see the persistence of the 'history of ethnic hatred' discourse in defining ethnic relations in post socialist Yugoslavia. In a review that appeared in the *New York Times*, film critic Lawrence Van Gelder provided the following story synopsis:

[*Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame*]...flashes back and forth from the days of Yugoslav unity under Marshall Tito, to 1999, when a tunnel that symbolised national brotherhood and enlightenment at its dedication in 1971 is rededicated as a symbol of peace. On both occasions, the official wielding the shears at the ribbon cutting bloodies his thumb. Mr. Dragojevic leaves no doubt about his vision of the future: poisoned by unrelenting hatred between Muslim and Serb, it is bleak and seethes with the potential for another war.

As long as the 'history of ethnic hatred explanation' dominates political discourse surrounding the violent destruction of Yugoslavia and continues to define ethnic relations, the future is "bleak" and seething "with the potential for another war."



Beyond the debatable theoretical assumptions of the 'history of ethnic hatred' discourse, it has negative political ramifications for the region. As long as relations among the various ethnic groups are viewed as inherently hostile, conflict is inevitable rather than avoidable.

With the more recent political developments such as the election of democratically oriented governments in Croatia and Serbia, and as discussions continue in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina concerning the establishment of "truth commissions," cinema may be an effective tool for confronting ethnic nationalism and its myths, and the atrocities that were committed during the war. "The wars in the former Yugoslavia succeeded in devastating social relations throughout all six republics [...] this mass trauma is reflected in the breakdown of tens of thousands of family bonds, the firmest friendships, the most respectful acquaintances" (Glenny, "If You Are Not For Us" 10). The only way communities can move towards reconciliation and political stability in the region, is through the deconstruction of the 'history of ethnic hatred' discourse and a recognition that "there once was a nation" where communities coexisted. Until Yugoslavia as a nation is re-presented and the history of ethnic hatred discourse has been deconstructed, there is little hope for tolerance and reconciliation in the "post-socialist nations" that were destroyed by ethnic hatred.

In a review in *Arkzin* about *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame*, Stefancic wrote:

*Pretty Village* is a film about a generation that watched partisan films with Bata Zivojinovic and wound up in a dark tunnel similar to

the movie theatres which screened his films [...] it's a film about a generation that went from the movie theatre to the grave.

It is perhaps this generation that remembers watching films about the Partisan war experience and then experienced war firsthand that will challenge representations of the past that portray the break-up of Yugoslavia as inevitable and make a film that says, "it didn't have to happen this way."

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## Filmography

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*Lepa sela, lepo gore (Pretty Village, Pretty Flame)*. Dir. Srdjan Dragojevic. Perfs.

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## Historical Overview of Yugoslav War Films

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Slavica</b><br><b>1946</b>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ Post World War II reconstruction years in Yugoslavia</li> <li>★ Closely allied with the Soviet Union</li> <li>★ Foundational narrative of the nation established based on the Partisan experience during WW II</li> <li>★ Emergence of film industry subsidised by the state</li> <li>★ Socialist Realism</li> <li>★ Partisan Heroicism</li> </ul> |
| <b>Partisan Stories</b><br><b>1956</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ Yugoslavia breaks with Stalin and the Cominform in 1948</li> <li>★ Self-management, political decentralisation and the rise of the non-aligned movement</li> <li>★ Abandonment of dogmatic propagandistic formulas</li> <li>★ De-Romanticisation of the Partisan war experience</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Three</b><br><b>1965</b>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ Economic prosperity</li> <li>★ Demand for democratic reforms in the political system</li> <li>★ <i>New Film</i> movement</li> <li>★ <i>Auteurism</i></li> <li>★ Stylistic experimentation and critical dialogue with the past</li> <li>★ Anti-Heroic Negativism</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Partisans</b><br><b>1975</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ Reactionary politics</li> <li>★ Purge of artists and intellectuals who supported reform</li> <li>★ Return to traditional Partisan films</li> <li>★ Embrace Hollywood style of production</li> <li>★ Spectacle/Action war films</li> </ul>  |

- When Father ★ Death of Tito in 1980  
 Was Away on ★ Political and economic crisis  
 Business  
 1985 ★ *New Wave – New Yugoslav Cinema*  
 ★ Critical focus shifts to post war years in Yugoslavia
- 
- Pretty Village, ★ Disintegration of socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in  
 Pretty Flame 1991  
 1996 ★ War in Bosnia-Herzegovina 1992-1995
- 
- ★ New generation of post-socialist filmmakers  
 ★ War cinema in post-socialism

## The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes



Figure 2. The Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1918-29)

## Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia



POLITICAL SUBDIVISION OF YUGOSLAVIA UNDER COMMUNIST RULE, 1945-1991  
Census 1963: Number of Serbs in each political unit

Serbs within Serbian Republic.....	4,087,600	58%
Serbs outside Serbian Republic.....	2,978,300	42% !

Source: Paul Shoup, *Communism and the Yugoslav National Question*, Columbia, 1968

## Map of the Former Yugoslav Republics

Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

