

# Book review

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## **Post-Yugoslav cinema: Towards a cosmopolitan imagining. Dino Murtic (2015).**

**Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.**

*Reviewed by Hariz Halilovich, RMIT University*

If curious readers are expecting a catalogue or a guide to movies made in Yugoslavia, a country that disappeared from the political map of Europe in the 1990s, they won't necessarily find it here. Instead, they will find something more: a reflective journey through some of the most important parts of Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav cinematic, cultural and political history. Written in engaging prose, the book represents both a homage to the cultural history of a lost country and a critical overview of the political, aesthetic and moral principles embedded in post-Yugoslav film.

Following a concise introduction, the book is organised in six thematic chapters that, to a great extent, also follow a chronological narrative order.

To set the scene, Murtic starts by engaging with the dominant debates on the role of ideology in film. Drawing upon Walter Benjamin's ideas, he reminds us that, since it was invented, film has served as a powerful means to reimagine and renew our social worlds. Similarly, Marxists argue that films are always ideological as they embody the value structures in which they are produced (p.13). The use of art and moving images in renewing, reimagining and re-imaging social worlds was especially recognised by the totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century: fascism and communism, with fascism pioneering aestheticization of politics, and communism fostering politicization of art.

As Murtic describes in his concise history of Socialist Yugoslavia, Yugoslav cinematography was not immune from ideological influences, with Communist ideology and antifascism being the dominant themes in most of the Yugoslav movies made between the late 1940s and the early 1980s. This ideological trend went so far that Yugoslav Communist film making developed its own genre, the so-called 'partisan movies'. Murtic describes how

these movies portrayed Yugoslav partisan heroism against the German and Italian occupiers and their domestic collaborators during World War Two (WWII). In these ‘red westerns’, as Nevena Dakovic called them, ‘the narrative was overwhelmed with action scenes portraying the bravery of partisan guerrillas, while the image of the enemy ‘was pictured in the darkest tone available’ (p. 72). All major partisan battles during WWII—such as those fought at Neretva, Kozara and Sutjeska—were eternalised on the big screen as partisan movies. Murtic describes how the partisan movies—screened at cinemas, on TV, local cultural centres and even at primary schools across Yugoslavia—shaped the Yugoslav identity and historical memory of generations of Yugoslav citizens; so much so that history was learned from feature movies rather than textbooks.

One film in particular, *Valter brani Sarajevo* (Walter defends Sarajevo), shot in 1972, and directed by the partisan movie veteran Hajrudin Sibić Krvavac, has remained in Murtic’s own memory, as it has for many other Bosnians of his generation (including the author of this review). This partisan film, or a commonly shared memory of it, has remained as the iconic film of Sarajevo and a tribute to the city’s collective spirit of solidarity and resilience. The movie is set in the city of Sarajevo during the Nazi occupation. It portrays the bravery of resistance fighters led by ‘Walter’, a code name for Vladimir Perić, the Communist urban guerrilla commander in the city during WWII. The most epic and poetic scene comes at the end of the film, when the German Nazi officer in charge of the operation to capture Walter is forced to resign from his post and leave Sarajevo. From a panoramic view of the city, the German officer utters the legendary words to his successor:

- *Since arriving in Sarajevo, I have searched for Walter and have failed to find him.  
And now when I have to leave, I know who he is.*
- *You know who Walter is!? Tell me his name!*
- *I’ll show him to you: Do you see this city below? This is Walter!*

For generations of Bosnians, Walter has not been associated with the historical figure Vladimir Perić—who still has a monument and a street in Sarajevo honouring him—nor Bata Zivojinović who played Walter in the movie, but the city of Sarajevo itself. ‘This is Walter!’ has become a credo of a city that won’t surrender.

The author then focuses on the 1980s, probably the most productive period in Yugoslav cultural production, with Sarajevo becoming the epicentre of a new cultural wave. The fact that in 1984 Sarajevo became the only Yugoslav city to host the Winter Olympics must have played an important role in shifting the focus from other Yugoslav centres, such as Belgrade and Zagreb, to Sarajevo.

For much of the 1980s, popular culture—from music to new TV shows and movies—blossomed in Sarajevo and spread from there across Yugoslavia. Once looked down upon, suddenly the Bosnian, and Sarajevo dialect in particular, started to be associated with this new cool wave that used humour and the local Bosnian context to tackle even some of the broader political taboos in Yugoslavia, such as the Communists' curb on freedom of speech and creative expression ('verbalni delikt'), imprisonment of political opponents in the post-WWII period (Goli otok) and even daring to joke about some of the revolutionary legacies and the National Liberation Struggle (NOB). While all this remained in the realm of art and culture, it echoed in the political domain, with some Communist officials quietly endorsing the cultural winds of change spreading from Bosnia across Yugoslavia.

The culmination of this Sarajevo-led Yugoslav new cultural wave came with the movies *Dolly Bell* and *When Father was away on business*, directed by Emir Kusturica, with screenplays written by the Bosnian poet Abdulah Sidran. Set in Bosnia in the post-WWII period, both movies deal with the lives of ordinary people and their neighbourhoods in Sarajevo. Rather than glorifying some of the dominant themes of Yugoslav cinema, these movies portrayed the poverty of the working class, denunciation of comrades and political oppression of those who dared to think differently from the official Party line. The two movies became very popular across and beyond Yugoslavia. *When Father was away on business* was awarded the Palme d'Or, at Cannes in 1985. This recognition made Emir Kusturica the best-known and celebrated Yugoslav film director. As a result, many benefits from local and central government institutions started to flow in his direction: from an apartment presented to Kusturica by the City of Sarajevo, to state funding for his new film projects. However, his new, grandiose film *Time of the gypsies* (1988), filmed in Macedonia and Italy—and reinforcing some of the stereotypes about the Balkan Roma people, rather than challenging them—failed to excite audiences as the previous two movies had (p. 32).

By following the professional and moral downfall of Emir Kusturica, Murtic also follows the beginning of the end of the Yugoslavia state during the early 1990s. It was not only that Kusturica's new movies were morally scrutinised by many, but he also made political alliances with some of the 'bad guys', effectively 'turning sides' and becoming one of the few prominent Yugoslav artists to express his support for Milosevic, the Serbian president. He effectively changed his image from cosmopolitan Sarajevan, Bosnian and Yugoslav artist to that Serb nationalist and apologist. He even changed his religion (from Muslim to Christian Orthodox), name (to Nemanja) and nationality/ethnicity (from Bosnian to Serbian). Kusturica's 'turn' was rewarded by resources and the exclusive privilege to shoot his films in the midst of the 1992-95 war, when Sarajevo, Kusturica's birthplace, was besieged and mercilessly shelled by the forces controlled by Milosevic and his Serb nationalist protégés in Bosnia. Hence, it did not come as a surprise that Kusturica's film project *Underground: Once upon a time there was one country* (1995) was more about historic revisionism, and providing a smoke screen for the atrocities Milosevic was in charge of during the 1990s, than producing a film about Yugoslavia, 'a country that once was'. According to this movie, Yugoslavia was a lie used by the Communists to manipulate people; the 1990s wars were just a continuation of hostilities for which the Communists and Tito set the scene, and for which Milosevic was not responsible. While morally and politically controversial, this movie nonetheless set the scene for the emergence of a new film genre, the so-called 'Balkan war film'. Unlike the earlier partisan movies, many of these movies have an anti-war stance.

Next Murtic engages with a number of such post-Yugoslav (i.e. post-war) movies, produced in the region after 1995: *Pretty village, pretty flame* (Dragojevic, 1996), *How the war started on my island* (Bresan, 1996), *Beautiful people* (Dizdar, 1999), *No man's land*, (Tanovic, 2001), *Days and hours* (Zalica, 2004), *Nafaka* (Durakovic, 2006), *The living and the dead*, (Milic, 2007), *The blacks* (Devic and Juric, 2009).

Well-deserved attention is given to Danis Tanovic's film *No man's land* (2001), which won 42 prestigious awards, including the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. Like Kusturica, the director of this internationally acclaimed movie is a Bosnian, another Sarajevan—and this is where all similarities between the two directors end. *No man's land* tells the tragicomic tale of three soldiers, two Bosnians and one Serb, trapped in the no man's land between Bosnian and Serb lines during the 1990s war. They find a way not to kill each other and try to find a peaceful solution for their predicament. But a combination of 'outside factors', including the involvement of UN peace keepers and media, all three soldiers die in

the end: two get shot and one is left to die. This is the last scene in the movie—a Bosnian soldier lying on a landmine and abandoned by the UN—is a powerful metaphor for the UN and broader international community’s hypocritical failure to stop the bloodshed in Bosnia and bring a just peace.

Possibly out of ‘political correctness’, Murtic might have felt that he had to provide a ‘balanced account’ of the perceptions and cinematic representations of the war in the former Yugoslavia (and in particular in Bosnia), by looking for a *No man’s land* equivalent made by a Serbian director. In my view, there is no comparable ‘Serbian’ movie, nor is it necessary for Murtic to offset, or complement, Tanovic’s movie with a Serbian counterpart. For his ‘balancing’ exercise, Murtic chooses the movie *Ordinary people* by the Serbian director Vladimir Perisic (2009). While in Tanovic’s movie the characters do represent real (and ordinary) people caught up in the war, Perisic’s film follows an anonymous group of soldiers who get involved in mass executions of prisoners. While Murtic finds similarity between the film character Johnny and the convicted war criminal Erdemovic, who actively participated in the mass killing of Srebrenica men and boys in July 1995, nowhere is this suggested in the movie, nor does it become clear who the perpetrators and victims are, as if ‘we are all victims of war’ in a vague moral equivalence which serves as obfuscation, an alibi.

One of the important original contributions of this book, broadening our understanding of post-Yugoslav cinema, is Murtic’s writing on the role of the ‘other’ (Roma) and gender (women) in Yugoslav cinema. Starting with the film *I even met happy gypsies* (Skupljači perja), directed by Aleksandar Petrovic in 1976, through to Kusturica’s *Time of the gypsies* (1988), Roma people had been portrayed as the quintessential Balkan Other, or the other from within—‘our gypsies’. While these films attracted a broad audience within and beyond Yugoslavia, they hardly generated any serious public discussion about the ongoing discrimination against Roma in the country of ‘brotherhood and unity’. More recently, Roma people featured in Danis Tanovic’s film *An episode in the life of an iron picker* (2013). Tanovic’s approach was to combine a documentary genre with a feature, using real protagonists, a Roma family, and their life story in his film. It addresses the inherent discrimination of Roma people in the post-Yugoslav context, pushed even further to the margins than they were during the time of the common Yugoslav state.

Supported by the evidence from numerous movies and quotes by some of the best-known actresses from the Yugoslav era, Murtic presents a strong case about women not being equally represented in Yugoslav film. He argues Yugoslav cinema generally limited women's roles to the characters of an ultimate (partisan) heroine, a mother, or a whore. For instance, *Slavica* (Afric, 1947), the first movie produced in Communist Yugoslavia, was dedicated to the bravery of a female partisan character, Slavica, and her ultimate sacrifice. After her heroic death in the battle against Italian fascists in Dalmatia, a Yugoslav partisan ship is named after her. That ship was also to represent a new Yugoslavia that was made possible by the sacrifices of many young women and men during the national liberation struggle. In contrast, many non-partisan (and some partisan) movies made in the later period portrayed women in a less glorious light, reinforcing 'patriarchal spirit', even though many women—like Milka Planinc described in the book (pp. 88-90)—had important roles in the Communist Party and in running the country. When reflecting on the Yugoslav movies, Mira Furlan, a leading Yugoslav actress in the 1980s, said of her roles: 'I was either raped or beaten up or humiliated in all kinds of ways and you just start thinking that is how it should be' (p. 95).

The emergence in the post-Yugoslav period of women directors—such as Jasmila Zbanic and Aida Begic—has challenged male dominance. In their films, these two award-winning female directors have effectively used the power of film to depict the aftermath of war from women's perspectives. The popularity of the films, and the awards they received, suggest that this change has been long awaited and might have started yet another new cultural wave, once again spreading from Sarajevo to the rest of the former Yugoslavia. The International Sarajevo Film Festival (SFF) provided a platform from which to launch this change towards a more cosmopolitan imaging and imagining.

Even though, at first glance, it might appear that Murtic has attempted to pack too much Yugoslav history, film, culture, politics and personal narrative into 200 pages, the book does offer the author's unique insights into all these themes, skilfully embroidered into a coherent story. While Yugoslavia as a country has ceased to exist, Murtic demonstrates that the post-Yugoslav cultural sphere continues to invent and reinvent itself, with films and film festivals playing a key role in this process.

Critically engaging with historic and contemporary trends in Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav cinema, the book will appeal to a broad readership: from scholars and artists to ordinary people (from the region and beyond) who will be invited into an exciting journey full of action and discovery. As with the experience of cinema, this journey through moving images

gives us a more engaging and colourful impression of historic events than the ‘objective’ reality itself.

### **Reviewer**

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