

# YANNIS LAMBROU

## From ruins to ritual:

### The Balkan Survey of the Thessaloniki International Film Festival

I would like to take my turn in welcoming you all in Thessaloniki, nicknamed “the nymph of the Thermaic Gulf”, the body of water adjacent to the city. I would also like to wholeheartedly thank the organizing committee of the conference for inviting me to enlighten you about the culture of this fascinating corner of the world.

Our conference is entitled *Thessaloniki: Cytometry at the crossroads of cultures*. I therefore begin my talk by posing three questions: Why crossroads? Why cultures? Why Thessaloniki? Thessaloniki probably started its history as a crossroads when, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, the Romans constructed the road Via Egnatia, stretching from Dyrrachium, modern Durrës in Albania, to Byzantium, modern Istanbul in Turkey. Thessaloniki lay right in the middle, and, already a port town, it soon established its position as a crossroads between the two edges of the Balkans and the Aegean Sea. After centuries of Roman and Byzantine rule, during which Thessaloniki’s importance as a Balkan crossroads grew, the city became Ottoman in 1423. When later the Spanish Jews were exiled from Spain, they settled in Thessaloniki in 1492. The coexistence of Greeks, Turks and Jews along with Balkan peoples made Thessaloniki a truly multicultural city for at least four centuries. In ca. 1913, just one year after the seizure of Thessaloniki from the Ottomans by the Greek Army, the population of Thessaloniki was 39% Jewish, 29% Turkish, 25% Greek, 4% Bulgarian, 2% Roma and 1% other (Various authors, 1973, p. 340). This population mix made Thessaloniki a truly Balkan multinational city with a culture encompassing the most important population elements of the Balkan region.

Let’s get to the here and the now. One of the most vibrant Thessalonian cultural events is Thessaloniki International Film Festival, taking place every year in Autumn since 1960. As Thessaloniki is primarily a Balkan crossroads, I would like to focus on the Thessaloniki International Film Festival Balkan Survey, which has been part of the festival since 1994. In order to present to you something enjoyable first thing in the morning, I read the synopses of all films so far screened at the Survey with the goal of finding some cheerful ones to show you. The results of my research were not very successful, as cheer is not a huge part of contemporary Balkan culture. This came as no surprise. The Balkans have been recently plagued by war, ruled by totalitarian regimes and, last but not least in the case of Greece, marked by financial chaos. This dark recent past of the Balkans is actually anything but recent. With their loose borders and mixed culture until the beginning of the twentieth century, the Balkans have long established a pattern of going through periods of crisis, thus perpetually contrasting with the more stable western world. Maria Todorova introduces the term “balkanism” to describe this, a notion less negative than orientalism (Todorova,

2009, p. 17), which is full of unfavorable connotations especially in our times of Islamic fundamentalism. This is because the in-betweenness of the Balkans, their transitory character, has made them more of an incomplete self (Todorova, 2009, p. 18) than a hostile other such as the orient. While orientalism primarily deals with the difference between east and west, balkanism deals with the differences within a specific type, the Balkan one (Todorova, 2009, p. 19). In this view the Balkans are therefore seen as an incomplete identity always in the making. As such, they have to occasionally go through war, destruction, ruin and rebirth to redefine themselves. In response to Todorova, Vangelis Calotychos introduces the notion of the unstable referentiality of the Balkans which thwarts their concreteness (Calotychos, 2013, p. 29).

However, not everything is gloomy in the Balkan Peninsula and the Thessaloniki Film Festival Balkan Survey. Reading the synopses of the Survey's films, I managed to find three, namely *The Oak Tree* (1992) by Lucian Pintilie, *Midwinter Night's Dream* (2004) by Goran Paskaljević and *Milk* (2008) by Semih Kaplanoğlu, which display some optimism and hope for the future. When a little later I watched the films, I also came up with something that, to my mind, is a little discovery: All three films depict elements of ritual. Ritual, as seen by Catherine Bell, aims at mastering social life (Bell, 2009, p. 81). This is certainly necessary when social conditions are rough, like the ones in the Balkans. Furthermore, in Bell's view, certain ritual practices are culturally specific, therefore belonging to a specific cultural space, in our case the fragmented yet distinct Balkan one (Bell, 2009, p. 93). It therefore should probably be expectable that the three films, being Balkan as they are, display elements of ritual. Ritual may finally be a strategic way to 'traditionalize,' that is, to construct a tradition, but in doing so it can also challenge and renegotiate the very basis of existing traditions (Bell, 2009, p. 124). In a cultural space like the Balkans, constantly reinventing itself after destroying itself, ritual seems an appropriate means of reinvention of tradition and identity.

Let us therefore examine ritual in the three films. In *The Oak Tree*, set in Romania a year before Ceaușescu's downfall, Nela, a dynamic teacher, meets Mitica, an uncompromising surgeon, after the death of Nela's father in a communist-style slum. The unconventional couple faces a web of unimaginable trials. Nela suffers an attempted rape and gets swept away by a torrent during a storm. Mitica is thrown into jail because he slapped a state persecutor, and even though there's certainly love between the two, they don't declare it to one another. This changes when Nela buries the ashes of her father, an ex-member of the Securitate, the Romanian secret police, under an oak tree, in a ritual whereby she burns pictures of her students and her sister, a member, too, of the Securitate. When the ritual is complete, Nela and Mitica witness innocent children being gunned by the secret police. This event, tragic as it may be, seems to bring about the cathartic effect of the ritual preceding it. The couple finally unites under the oak tree where Nela's father is buried and Mitica declares that if the child they will have is normal, he will strangle it. With this ending, Pintilie seems to say that he craves for insurgent, Promethean individuals, at odds

with the “normal”, submissive people favored by totalitarian regimes (Kerkinos, 2013, p. 26).

In Serbian film *Midwinter Night's Dream* (2004), the man, Lazar, is haunted by war memories. He has killed his best friend in a drunken brawl and spent ten years in jail. The woman Jasna, occupied his home with her autistic child, Jovana, while he was away. Lazar's first impulse is to kick them out, but he then decides to let them stay, falls in love with Jasna and takes care of her child. The autistic child symbolizes Serbs themselves, who, striving to survive the worst aspects of their political life, have entered a kind of autistic state that makes them feel immune (Fainaru, 2013, p. 48). Lazar tries to save Jovana from her autism by taking her to a modern Balkan witchdoctor for treatment. Of course, the witchdoctor's ritual doesn't work, Jasna is killed by a man declaring his love for her, possibly Jovana's father, and Lazar shoots himself. Yet in this somber universe we find some hope. Jovana escapes in an orchard full of blossoms towards an unknown future.

In *Milk* (2008), set in rural Turkey, symbolism of a surrealist kind is abundant (Haritos, 2013, p. 75), along with many Freudian references. At eighteen Yusuf lives with his forty-year-old widowed mother Zehra. They make a living from the milk and cheeses they obtain from their cows. The mother-son relationship is one of mutual interdependence, as required by survival and the Sharia law, whereby a widowed woman remains a widow forever. Nevertheless Yusuf finds his life purpose in writing poetry, and he actually manages to see one of his poems published. His mother on the other hand starts a secret relationship with a man, the local stationmaster. The new claim on Yusuf's mother leads to his final weaning, coming about in a symbolic scene where Yusuf's three-wheeler motorcycle turns upside down rendering him unconscious while milk pours out of his mouth. Yusuf then liberates himself from the mother-son bond by finding work as a miner in a local mine to support himself, and in *Egg* (2007), Kaplanoğlu's earlier film, we see Yusuf later in life as an established poet. Yet Yusuf's liberation from his mother Zehra and the ghost of his father has to go through a ritual of exorcism (Haritos, 2013, p. 75). The phallic snake residing in Zehra's body, a symbolic remnant of Yusuf's dead father, must first be driven out by Kemal, the local exorcist, before Yusuf can move on to a new life. It is well-known that in Freud's theory of dreams, the snake symbolizes the phallus, and with it, anything pertaining to its primordial bearer, the father (Freud, 1900/2010, p. 370).

In conclusion, even though the three films do not offer to the spectator the happiest of experiences, they offer him hope. Through their rituals exorcising the demons of the past they show the way to a new Balkan future by establishing new identities and a new tradition in a part of the world with a mixed heritage constantly striving to find its identity. In *The Oak Tree*, the constricted man of totalitarian regimes gives way to the new, free, if not restless man of our modern times. In *Midwinter Night's Dream* the old problem of autism remains but the future is open for its sufferer. And in *Milk*, probably the most optimistic of the three films, the boy becomes a man, leaving Islamic restrictions behind and taking his future in his hands as a struggling

miner-poet. Thus the three films clearly display a drive towards the freedom and restlessness of modern-day man. This drive, if I am not mistaken, is the new Balkan but also international tradition constructing itself through our everyday rituals.

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