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CONTEMPORARY BALKAN CINEMA
Transnational Exchanges and Global Circuits

Edited by Lydia Papadimitriou and Ana Grgić

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CONTENTS

Figures and Tables vii
Acknowledgements x
Contributors xii
Traditions in World Cinema xix

Foreword: Cinema of the Balkans – An Endless Journey xxix
Dina Iordanova

Introduction 1
Lydia Papadimitriou and Ana Grgić

1 Albania: Crossing Borders with a New Imaginary 18
Bruce Williams and Kledian Myftari

2 Bosnia and Herzegovina: Challenging Precarity, Rethinking Trauma 34
Dijana Jelača

3 Bulgaria: Reframing Contemporary Arthouse and Mainstream Cinema 50
Gergana Doncheva

4 Croatia: Film under Ideological Pressure – The State, Its Citizen and the Faltering Future 69
Jurica Pavićić and Aida Vidan
CONTENTS

5 Cyprus: Transnational Challenges, Opportunities and Compromises 87
Costas Constandinides and Yiannis Papadakis

6 Greece: Transnational Dynamics in Greek Cinema since the Crisis
Maria Chalkou 100

7 Kosovo: Cinematic Developments between Conflicts and
Social Transformation 121
Francesca Borrione and Albana Muco

8 Montenegro: A Small, Open and Forward-looking Film Industry
Sanja Jovanović 139

9 North Macedonia: A Nation and Cinema in Transition
Vessela S. Warner 154

10 Romania: Transnational and National Tensions Beyond the
New Wave 172
Raluca Iacob

11 Serbia: Reco(r)ding the Cinematic Turn
Nevena Daković, Aleksandra Milovanović and Iva Leković 190

12 Slovenia: A Small National Cinema in the Phase of
Transnational Synergy 208
Polona Petek

13 Turkey: Transnational Dimensions of a Large National Film Industry
Melis Behlil 228

Tables 250
General Bibliography 290
Index 295
FIGURES AND TABLES

FIGURES

1.1 Klevis Bega and Niko Kanxheri in Pharmakon (Joni Shanaj, 2012). Courtesy of Joni Shanaj 22
1.2 Flonja Kodeli in Bota (Iris Elezi and Thomas Logoreci, 2014). Courtesy of Iris Elezi 23
1.3 Poster for My Grandmother (Jurgen Agushi, 2014). Courtesy of the Marubi Academy of Film and Multimedia 26
2.1 Two Schools (Srđan Šarenac, 2017) 41
2.2 Snow (Aida Begić, 2008) 42
2.3 Great Wall of China (Aleksandra Odić, 2017) 46
3.1 Love.net (Ilian Djevelekov, 2011). Courtesy of Ilian Djevelekov and Matei Konstantinov 51
3.2 Āga (Milko Lazarov, 2018). Courtesy of Veselka Kiryakova and Milko Lazarov 53
3.3 Omnipresent (Ilian Djevelekov, 2017). Courtesy of Ilian Djevelekov and Matei Konstantinov 60
3.4 A Picture with Yuki (Lachezar Avramov, 2019). Courtesy of Chuchkov Brothers 61
4.1 *These Are the Rules* (Ognjen Sviličić, 2014) 75
4.2 *Quit Staring at My Plate* (Hana Jušić, 2016) 77
4.3 *The High Sun* (Dalibor Matanić, 2015) 79

5.1 *Smuggling Hendrix* (Marios Piperides, 2018): Greek Cypriot Yiannis (Adam Bousdoukos), second from left, forms an unlikely alliance with Greek ex-girlfriend (Vicky Papadopoulou), Turkish Cypriot Tuberk (Özgür Karadeniz), third from left, and ‘Turkish settler’ Hasan (Fatih Al) to smuggle Jimmy the dog. Courtesy of AMP Filmworks 90

5.2 Costas (Yiannis Kokkinos) haunted by his past struggles to cope with his work and social life in *Rosemarie* (Adonis Florides, 2017). Courtesy of AMP Filmworks 94

5.3 Elpida (Stela Fyrogeni) enjoys one of her rare moments of freedom at a karaoke bar in *Pause* (Tonia Mishiali, 2018). Courtesy of A. B. Seahorse Film Productions 95

6.1 By featuring internationally recognised experts, such as philosopher Alain Badiou, *Debtocracy* (Aris Chatzistefanou and Katerina Kitidi, 2011) articulates the Greek crisis as a problem of the global economy 110

6.2 In *Little England* (Pantelis Voulgaris, 2013) the island of Andros stands as a culturally hybrid microcosm where women consume foreign cultures 112

6.3 The *mise-en-scène* of *Son of Sofi* (Elina Psykou, 2017) is populated by cultural references originating in former communist countries, such as Misha, the mascot of the 1980 Moscow Olympic games 113

6.4 *The Night Fernando Pessoa Met Constantine Cavafy* (Stelios Charalampopoulos, 2008) narrates a fictional encounter of two major European poets of the early twentieth century, the Greek Cavafy and the Portuguese Pessoa 117

7.1 The aftermath of the Kosovar war: trauma, ethnic conflict and war rape in *Agnus Dei* (Agim Sopi, 2012) 123

7.2 Kosovo as a ‘theatre of war’ in *Home* (Daniel Mulloy, 2016) 128

7.3 Diaspora and the experiences of the post-war Kosovar generations in *Unwanted* (Edon Rizvanolli, 2017) 129

7.4 Marginalised communities in *The Marriage* (Blerta Zeqiri, 2017), a Kosovar queer film 130

8.1 Pierce Brosnan in *November Man* (Roger Donaldson, 2014), shot in Perast, Montenegro 142

8.2 Official poster for *The Ascent* (Nemanja Bečanović, 2011) 147

8.3 Still from *Lowdown* (Pavle Simonović, 2016) 148
8.4 Nikola Ristanovski as Father Petar in The Black Pin (Ivan Marinović, 2016) 149
9.1 Secret Ingredient (Gjorce Stavreski, 2017) 159
9.2 The Third Half (Darko Mitrevski, 2012) 162
9.3 Balkan is Not Dead (Aleksandar Popovski, 2013) 165
10.1 Aferim! (Radu Jude, 2015) 179
10.2 Child’s Pose (Călin Peter Netzer, 2013) 183
10.3 Pororoca (Constantin Popescu, 2017) 185
11.1 The Load (Ognjen Glavonić, 2018) 193
11.2 Poster for Requiem for Mrs. J (Bojan Vuletić, 2017) 194
11.3 The Other Side of Everything (Mila Turajlić, 2017) 201
12.1 Bruised-looking photography incarnates perfectly the desperate situation of Mara (Maruša Majer) in Ivan (Janez Burger, 2017). Photographer: Marko Brdar. Courtesy of Staragara 211
12.2 Claustrophobic framing captures the sinister atmosphere of Nightlife (Damjan Kozole, 2016). Photographer: Željko Stevanić, IFP. Courtesy of Vertigo 213
12.3 The dreamlike world of History of Love (Sonja Prosenc, 2018) interweaves close-ups of grief-stricken human faces and shots of water of all shapes.Courtesy of Monoo 214
13.1 Market share of ticket sales for domestic releases 231
13.2 Total and domestic ticket sales 231
13.3 Distribution of genres in top ten domestic releases 2008–18 233
13.4 The title character of Recep Ivedik 5 (Togan Gökbakar, 2017) in all his glory 235
13.5 Golden Palm winner Winter Sleep (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, 2014) 236
13.6 Şerafettin the Bad Cat (Ayşe Ünal and Mehmet Kurtuluş, Turkey, 2016) raiding the fridge 239
13.7 Mustang (Deniz Gamze Ergüven, 2015), not a Turkish favourite 242
13.8 Share of top ten films in all local ticket sales 243

Tables
3.1 Top Bulgarian releases of local film by box office 2008–16 59
11.1 Feature fiction film production (2008–18) classified according to genre 198
11.2 Cinemas in Serbia 203
13.1 Top ten films (co-)produced in Turkey in terms of EU admissions 245
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The idea for this book was sown by the banks of the Danube during the Divan Film Festival in Cetate, Romania, where the two of us first met in 2013. Those long summer days and evenings, filled with Balkan films and endless discussions with filmmakers and scholars from across the region over delicious locally produced food and plentiful wine, made very clear to us how much in common Balkan neighbours have, and how far cinema can help communicate it across borders. We would therefore like to express our gratitude to Marian Țuțui for inviting us to Divan, and for his inexhaustible energy and enthusiasm that made the festival and its annual symposium on Balkan cinema such memorable experiences. We would also like to thank Dina Iordanova not only for her seminal academic contributions to the study of Balkan cinema, but also for introducing us both to Marian and thus implicitly triggering the making of this book. Below are some of the filmmakers, scholars and friends that we had the opportunity to share fruitful exchanges with in Cetate, and who helped us expand our understanding of Balkan cinema: Martichka Bozhilova, Agron Domi, Dana Duma, Aleksandar Erdeljanović, Mihai Fulger, Magda Mihăilescu, Eno Milkani, Petar Kardjilov,
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Traditions in World Cinema is a series of textbooks and monographs devoted to the analysis of currently popular and previously underexamined or under-valued film movements from around the globe. Also intended for general interest readers, the textbooks in this series offer undergraduate- and graduate-level film students accessible and comprehensive introductions to diverse traditions in world cinema. The monographs open up for advanced academic study more specialised groups of films, including those that require theoretically oriented approaches. Both textbooks and monographs provide thorough examinations of the industrial, cultural and socio-historical conditions of production and reception.

The flagship textbook for the series includes chapters by noted scholars on traditions of acknowledged importance (the French New Wave, German Expressionism), recent and emergent traditions (New Iranian, post-Cinema Novo), and those whose rightful claim to recognition has yet to be established (the Israeli persecution film, global found footage cinema). Other volumes concentrate on individual national, regional or global cinema traditions. As the introductory chapter to each volume makes clear, the films under discussion form a coherent group on the basis of substantive and relatively transparent, if not always obvious, commonalities. These commonalities may be formal,
TRADITIONS IN WORLD CINEMA

stylistic or thematic, and the groupings may, although they need not, be popularly identified as genres, cycles or movements (Japanese horror, Chinese martial arts cinema, Italian Neorealism). Indeed, in cases in which a group of films is not already commonly identified as a tradition, one purpose of the volume is to establish its claim to importance and make it visible (East Central European Magical Realist cinema, Palestinian cinema).

Textbooks and monographs include:

• an introduction that clarifies the rationale for the grouping of films under examination;
• a concise history of the regional, national or transnational cinema in question;
• a summary of previous published work on the tradition;
• contextual analysis of industrial, cultural and socio-historical conditions of production and reception;
• textual analysis of specific and notable films, with clear and judicious application of relevant film theoretical approaches;
• bibliograph(ies)/filmograph(ies).

Monographs may additionally include:

• discussion of the dynamics of cross-cultural exchange in light of current research and thinking about cultural imperialism and globalisation, as well as issues of regional/national cinema or political/aesthetic movements (such as new waves, postmodernism or identity politics);
• interview(s) with key filmmakers working within the tradition.
Theo Angelopoulos, the titan of Greek and Balkan cinema, died in 2012. He was hit by a motorbike while on the set of his last film, *The Other Sea*, and passed shortly thereafter in hospital. It was to be a film about crisis, anxiety and austerity, about migrations, misty border-crossings, about refugees and home longing: a film that would have continued Angelopoulos’s eternal themes of exile and endless journeying. Many regarded the director’s death as symbolic collateral damage of the Greek economic crisis itself.

In the years that followed, many of the other directors that had shaped cinema in the Balkan region also passed away – Bulgarian Rangel Vulchanov in 2013, Romanian Lucian Pintilie in 2018 and the great Yugoslav-Serbian Dušan Makavejev, in 2019. Even if revered, their last decade was often marked by experiences similar to Angelopoulos’ meaningless death – they had difficulties financing projects, felt misunderstood and isolated. The unsettled atmosphere took over the better part of others, who had previously enjoyed the limelight – like Bosnian Emir Kusturica, who got involved in idiosyncratic angry politics and barricaded himself in the narrows of his Serbian mountain stronghold of Kustendorf, out of where he makes maverick theatrical pronouncements to the world.

However, new films were made. New filmmakers stepped in to fill the void that these cinematic titans left. There was a generational change, and here we
have a book that takes the challenging but distinguished task to introducing the new developments and to telling the story further, as it continues evolving into the second century of Balkan cinema.

The chosen vantage point for the contributions in this collection is 2008, the year of the global economic crisis – as well as the year when the Greek economic crisis started to unravel. These events impacted the South East European region beyond Greece: and indeed, they did, even though many of the countries around the Balkans follow an economic logic of their own. The story in these parts is often marked by perennially underperforming economies or by crises that appear unrelated – like the one in Turkey in 2018, which was preceded by an unprecedented economic boom. In fact, many of these countries often display scarcity and continuous stagnation; people who live here struggle with the mundane logistics of survival – as reflected in the films of the Romanian new wave and beyond. In general, it is a region that is hard to pin down and poses a variety of narrative challenges.

Even if not uniformly, the Balkan countries are regarded as peripheral and insufficiently European; ascendance to the EU is neither smooth nor easy. In fact, from the thirteen countries covered in this book, only six are members of the European Union (Greece, Cyprus, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia). The other seven countries are suspended in various stages of bureaucratic recognition by the EU, and it is difficult to predict how things would evolve (Turkey, Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro). Countries themselves are quite different in territory and population size; there are linguistic and religious divides that often impede productive cultural dialogue. On zooming in, one can easily find simmering conflict in many corners. What in the 1990s used to be one country, Yugoslavia, emerged in the 2000s as a conglomerate of seven newly independent republics – and it is quite possible that some chapters in this collection may be the very first instance where the cinemas of new countries are written about in English as separate national entities. The choice of framework, then, circumvents the complicated and counter-productive question of how things moved during the preceding period of turbulence. By 2008, in spite of economic turmoil, the current national formations were more or less settled.

Likewise, in the context of European cinema the visibility of these cinematic traditions is not particularly high. Yet there are outstanding achievements that compensate on the international scene. In the 1990s, it was the films of Theo Angelopoulos (Ulysses Gaze, 1995) and Emir Kusturica (Underground, 1995) that helped Balkan cinema gain recognition and acclaim. In the new millennium, it is new waves in Romania and Greece, bold new female filmmakers and the likes of Cristian Mungiu (4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days, 2007) and Nuri Bilge Ceylan (Winter Sleep, 2014) that keep cinema from South East Europe afloat. The story continues.
A balanced country-by-country survey must pay attention to as many phenomena that occur in the covered territory as possible. Many of the authors writing in this book observe that films that are most popular within a given country rarely sell well beyond its borders. What makes an impact in the annals of international cinema may not be as influential at home, so some of the trends that privilege the international playing field may remain overlooked. The dark minimalist realism of the Romanian New Wave, the emotional stupor found in the Greek ‘Weird’ Wave, the existential sensibilities of new Turkish cinema and the range of thought-provoking documentaries made across the region, need special singling out where the ambition is to foreground recent landmark achievements of Balkan cinema.

So even though it is the names of specific countries that associate with the waves of ‘Greek’ quirkiness or ‘Romanian’ philosophical bleakness, it is mainly specific feature films – as well as some remarkable documentaries – that make up for the most recognisable recent cinematic output from the Balkans. Some of the titles that are recognisable internationally include *Dogtooth* (2009), *The Lobster* (2015) and *The Favourite* (2018) by Yorgos Lanthimos, *Attenberg* (2010) by Athina Rachel Tsangari from Greece, as well as *The Death of Mr Lazarescu* (2005) and *Sieranevada* (2016) by Cristi Puiu, *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days* (2007) and *Graduation* (2016) by Cristian Mungiu, or *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006) by Corneliu Porumboiu from Romania. Then, there is the work of acclaimed Turkish auteurs which could be described as a ‘contemplative’ wave: it goes beyond Cannes-winning Nuri Bilge Ceylan to include directors of related existentialist sensibilities like Zeki Demirkubuz, Semih Kaplanoglu, Reha Erdem and Yesim Ustaoglu, as well as internationally acclaimed work by female filmmakers such as Bosnian Jasmila Žbanić (*Esma’s Secret: Grbavica*, 2006), Romanian Adina Pintilie (*Touch Me Not*, 2018) and Macedonian Teona Strugar Mitevska (*God Exists, Her Name is Petrunija*, 2019).

And then, transnationally, there are discourse-defining films by documentarians like Adela Peeva (*Whose Is This Song?*, 2003), Želimir Žilnik (*The Old School of Capitalism*, 2009), Andrei Ujica (*The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu*, 2010), Alexandru Solomon (*Kapitalism: Our Improved Formula*, 2010), Danis Tanović (*An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker*, 2013), Žiga Virc’s *Houston, We Have a Problem* (2016), and Mila Turajlić (*The Other Side of Everything*, 2017), which have gained world-wide recognition and acclaim.

Talking of identity and collective memory in the Balkans is always fraught with peril; each story can be told in different ways, so touching on sensitive subjects of sameness and otherness is generally avoided. Nonetheless, topics of identity and memory prevail and continue to occupy the minds of the region’s cineastes. Films
like the Serbian *The Tour* (Goran Marković, 2008) or the Croatian *Buick Riviera* (Goran Rusinović, 2008) but even Romanian *Niki and Flo* (Lucian Pintilie, 2003) and *Sieranevada* (Cristi Puiu, 2016) may seem full of incomprehensible petty bickering and are often declared by Western critics to display ‘black humour’ but they provide, in fact, a symbolic battleground where conflicting narratives on recent history clash and reconcile.

Each of the countries surveyed here has produced ambitious nationalist sagas that have been widely acclaimed and awarded in the respective domestic contexts. At the same time, daring directors have continued making films on ‘undesirable’ topics – as seen in films such as Reha Erdem’s exploration of guerrilla war in *Jin* (2013) or Emin Alper’s study of political violence in *Frenzy* (2015).

Then there are the films dealing with haunting topics that require truth and reconciliation approaches – like the war rapes that are continuously being revisited in films from Kosovo and Bosnia; Jasmila Žbanić’s *For Those Who Can Tell No Tales* (2013) is one of the finest examples of these. Or films that revisit the traumas of war like *Ordinary People* (Vladimir Perišić, 2009), *The High Sun* (Dalibor Matanić, 2015), *Men Don’t Cry* (Alen Drijević, 2017) and many others – but also those films exploring problematic and irredentist allegiances from the times of the Second World War or even earlier contexts – the First World War, the Balkan Wars and the Austro-Hungarian or Ottoman rule.

While populist governments encourage the production of ornate nationalist sagas in many of the countries explored here, this is also the region that turns up the most consistently committed anti-nationalist films that expose profound moral deficiencies and segregation in areas like education (*Our School*, Mona Nicoara, 2009), the performing arts (*Srbenka*, Nebojša Sljepčević, 2018), at the workplace (*The Miner*, Hanna Slak, 2017), or in public administration and health (*Erased*, Miha Mazzini, 2018). In this line of work, recent films by Romanian Radu Jude’s stand out – the features *Aferim* (2015), which exposed matters of Roma slavery in the region, and *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians* (2018), which was a passionate call to contemporaries for facing historical responsibility, as well as the experimental documentary *Dead Nation* (2017), which brought Romania’s suppressed Holocaust record back from oblivion.

The collection seeks to strike a fine balance in giving a true picture that brings together all kinds of cinematic narratives that circulate in the Balkans – glorifying historical sagas alongside films that reveal injustices of the communist period, as well as ‘dissident’ films that engage with the difficulties experienced by ethnic, linguistic or religious minorities. In that, it asks for reflection of the perennial duality of irredentist and populist tendencies on the one hand and cosmopolitan leftist leanings on the other. One of the authors makes an apt remark about the
irony of a period which sees the production of massive new film histories in some of the smallest countries that struggle to keep film production going. There is recognition, however, that cinema is chronicling the experience of the nation. In that, the film archives based in the region remain important, even if sometimes impoverished, so the work of organisations such as the Albanian Cinema Project, the Nitrate Film Festival in Belgrade and the Istanbul Cinémathèque is recognised as a remarkable preservation effort.

As an extension of this preservation work, several important documentaries explore the specific fortunes of filmmaking in the region: Mila Turajlić’s *Cinema Komunisto* (2010) chronicles the film industry of Tito’s Yugoslavia, Cem Kaya’s *Remix, Remake, Rip-Off: About Copy Culture and Turkish Pop Cinema* (2014) zooms in on Yeşilçam and questions the biased understanding of cross-cultural appropriation. And, Greek Nina Maria Paschalidou’s perceptive investigation *Kismet: How Turkish Soap Operas Changed the World* (2014) delves into the wide international spread of female-authored Turkish soaps and the way in which they shape women’s self-esteem across the Balkans and the Middle East.

* * *

This book recognises the importance of new policies, facilities and distribution channels; each and every chapter charts the specific industry landscape, an underlying factor for the evolution of a national film culture: film institutes, production companies, mainstream and arthouse cinemas, membership in international funding bodies and organisations like the European Film Academy. Whereas most of the countries in the region would comfortably fit in the ‘small national cinemas’ framework proposed by Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie, there are also some ‘micro’ industries, like in the case of Montenegro or Cyprus, as well as some sizeable ones, like Turkey, which produces more than a hundred films annually. The smaller size necessitates pulling resources together and engaging in co-productions, and indeed these collaborations are charted across the board to reveal a thriving and convivial creative milieu – with a special attention to matters of majority and minority co-productions, as well as runaway business.

In the context of digital transition and profound changes in exhibition, television and new streaming platforms (some of them international, like HBO) have stepped in and play an important role as producers; they also provide opportunities for improved (and truly global) exposure – many Turkish films are available on Netflix, and so is the Croatian mini-series *The Paper* (Dalibor Matanić, 2016–) or Romanian film *Rocker* (Marian Crișan, 2012). Amazon Prime features the North Macedonian *Honeyland* (Tamara Kotevska and Ljubomir Stefanov, 2019) – a film which won at Sundance and gained two
Oscar nominations, as well as a package of Bulgarian AgitProp documentaries, including Andrey Paounov’s *Georgi and the Butterflies* (2005).

But there is also awareness that transnational production contexts can occasionally backfire – as shown in Melis Behlil’s interesting case study of *Mustang* (Deniz Gamze Ergüven, 2015), a Turkish-language French film set in Anatolia and purporting to represent specifically Balkan matters of gender. *Mustang* was acclaimed in the West, then entered into the Oscars by France and subsequently shortlisted for the best foreign language film award, yet in Turkey it was regarded as inauthentic and even ridiculed.

The Balkan film festivals are given true recognition. Not only does one learn of important events across the region – from the veteran festival of cinematography the Manaki Brothers in Bitola, North Macedonia, through to the dynamic new DokuFest in Prizren in Kosovo – but one receives a comprehensive overview of the festival scene. The largest such forums include the Thessaloniki Film Festival (a conglomereate of several events), as well as the festivals in Sarajevo and Istanbul, which play an important transnational role in showcasing the area’s cinematic output. Thessaloniki’s Balkan Survey, a comprehensive sidebar that also features retrospectives of specific directors, has been in existence for more than two decades. In the absence of strong regional distribution networks, the festivals, which also feature project markets, enable a variety of Balkan collaborations, often structured around linguistic trajectories. In that, they become an important transnational factor in the evolution of cinema.

The specifics of transnationalism here is assessed against categories suggested by Mette Hjort (2010), and the talk is mainly of a prevailing ‘affinitive’/’milieu-building’ stance that manifests in transnational collaborative choices and where the affinities once again evolve mainly along linguistic groups, even if one also comes across examples of occasional ‘opportunistic’, ‘globalising’ and ‘epiphanic’ transnationalisms that manifest in a wider European context where the ‘Balkan’ classification turns undesirable. The transnational approach permits authors to give attention to the respective national diasporas and the dynamics of in- and out-migration trends, as far as audiences and film personnel is concerned.

* * *

This collection is radically different from all previous books on Balkan cinema in that it departs from the traditional male-dominated historiography which tends to overlook the achievements of women and makes a decisive step toward properly recognising female-made films, both in the present and retrospectively. And this is not only about the women who won top awards and gained international
visibility – Jasmila Žbanić, Adina Pintilie, Ralitsa Petrova or Mila Turajlić – but also many others, like Aida Begić, Sonja Prosenc, Pelin Esmer, Zornitsa Sophia, Marianna Economou, to name just a few, who enjoy a high international profile and festival accolades. It is a period of unprecedented push for women, and one that marks a radical departure from the time when only male directors would receive nominations or awards and when only male filmmakers would remain in film history. Finally, this collection signals an opportunity to start bringing out of obscurity the work of important female directors of earlier generations such as Bulgarian Binka Zhelyazkova (1923–2011) and Albanian Xhanfise Keko (1928–2007).

* * *

The screening of Greek documentary *Catastroika* (Aris Chatzistefanou and Katerina Kitidi, 2012) – a film analysing the complex causes and global beneficiaries of the Greek economic crisis – at the Subversive Film Festival in Zagreb presented an unforgettable experience. The auditorium was totally packed, with people overflowing from the balconies and reacting stormily. The Q&A with the filmmakers was heated and went on for a long time. The atmosphere of solidarity and sharing was intense. This is the way I have always imagined what May 1968 must have been, in Paris and at the interrupted Cannes film festival . . .

In the past decade, my travels have taken me to many diverse corners of the Balkans – be it for participation at film festivals in Turkey, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, North Macedonia and Serbia, or for visits with friends in cities like Skopje, Novi Sad, Heraklion or Izmir. I also enjoyed the inspiring beauty of these lands – on the marble pebble beaches below Pelion mountain in Greece, on the ferries that criss-cross Istanbul’s waterways, on the boats that take off from Ohrid and float during spectacular sunsets over the lake. I walked cobbled streets in Piran in Slovenian Istria, strolled under the watchful rooftop ‘eyes’ of houses in old Sibiu in Transylvania and marvelled at the architectural genius of Mimar Sinan at Istanbul’s Süleymaniye Mosque, majestic yet restrained. I had my share of exposure to the unsettled politics of the region – at the anarchist Exarchia in Athens, near the disputed Gezi Park in Istanbul and at downtown protests in my native Sofia. I sat in the shadow of the makeshift ‘wall’ that divides Nicosia and stood in front of Ceaușescu’s mammoth People’s Palace in Bucharest. Wherever I went, I encountered the same feeling of solidarity among ordinary people, accompanied by humble awareness of limited power and modest economic means yet showing integrity and willingness to support one another when it comes to difficult times. The Balkans may be confused and peripheral, but they are also full of dignity and tangible humanity: a site for endless journeys.
If I knew who I was, I would have stopped making movies. I make movies to know myself. And to know the world. And also to find a balance, to understand. And that keeps me standing; just having this curiosity and a desire to travel that never ends. A desire to know other places, other faces, other situations, and to always feel myself, on an endless journey.¹
(Theo Angelopoulos, 2012)

¹ From the film Letter to Theo (Elodie Lelu, 2019).
INTRODUCTION

Lydia Papadimitriou and Ana Grgić

Twenty-five years ago, in 1995, as the war was still raging in the former Yugoslavia two films from the Balkans dominated the Cannes Film Festival, winning the Palme d’Or and the Jury Prize respectively: Emir Kusturica’s *Podzemlje/Underground* and Theo Angelopoulos’s *To vlemma tou Odyssea/Ulysses’ Gaze*. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s a number of films from the region won international acclaim: Milcho Manchevski’s *Pred dozdot/Before the Rain* received the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1994, Danis Tanović’s *Ništa zemlja/No Man’s Land* won the Oscar for Foreign Language Film in 2001 and, a few years later, in 2006, Jasmila Žbanić’s *Grbavica/Esma’s Secret: Grbavica* was awarded the Golden Bear in Berlin. Despite their stylistic variety, all these films dealt with ethnic conflict, violence, war and their repercussions. Balkan cinema, inevitably, became almost synonymous with such topics, reinforcing entrenched perceptions of the Balkans as a place of unruliness and symbolic darkness. As Maria Todorova ([1997] 2009) has shown, the Balkans have long been laden with such negative connotations, and the violent post-communist breakup of the former Yugoslavia helped them resurface again in media and political discourse. With peace returning to the Western Balkans, the global limelight on the region has gradually dimmed, and with it, considerations of Balkan cinema as a whole. Certain national film movements, such as the Greek and Romanian New Waves, and/or individual directors from the region, such as Nuri Bilge Ceylan or Ralitsa Petrova, have since gained the attention of critics, academics and film festivals, but Balkan cinema has gradually lost its currency.

This book counters this tendency. It argues that the notion of the Balkans remains a valid framework within which to examine cinemas from the region, but
that Balkan cinema needs to be reconceptualised in order to take into account new geopolitical, institutional and technological circumstances. As such, this collection widens the geographic focus in order to provide an inclusive view of the region and disband narrow identifications of the Balkans with the former Yugoslavia. Concurrently, it brings the temporal focus to a recent historical period, taking as its starting point the 2008 global financial crisis rather than the collapse of communism in Europe which often initiates such accounts. In throwing the spotlight equally on all countries of the region, irrespectively of size, wealth or output, the book aims to redress the terms of engagement with these cinemas, inviting a fresh look at each country’s cinematic activity while also placing emphasis on instances of collaboration and exchange within, across and beyond the region.

Some of the cinemas examined here are very little known outside their particular context, and this collection provides the first available critical and historical account in English. As such, the book serves a dual function as both a scholarly study and a reference text. It presents national profiles of the cinematic production and film industry in all thirteen countries of the Balkans, while placing emphasis on transnational links within and beyond them. The collection (re)positions Balkan cinema in the global cinematic map, not only by highlighting the various challenges cinemas in the region have faced (and in many cases still face), but also by underlining ways in which filmmakers and institutions have sought – and often succeeded – to overcome them by developing existing and forging new cultural, economic and political alliances.

The adoption of the collective term ‘Balkan’ to consider the films of the region, rather than the apparently more neutral and descriptive designation ‘South-Eastern European cinema’ serves a polemical purpose: to disperse some of the deeply rooted negative perceptions of the region, by throwing into light a number of ways in which post-2008 cinematic developments testify to a more positive, constructive and collaborative ethos. While financial, social and political difficulties persist in many Balkan contexts, the last decade or so is marked by the ever stronger realisation among filmmakers and cinema-supporting institutions that cross-border collaboration is crucial in enabling projects to materialise and reach audiences. Such an emphasis on transnational exchanges does not only support the argument for the meaningful existence of a Balkan cinema, but also undercuts the negative connotations of the term ‘Balkan’.

The origins of the West’s unfavourable perceptions of the region, emblematised in words such as ‘balkanisation’, lie in its history as part of the Ottoman Empire and its consequent breakup into a number of nation-states. As Maria Todorova explains, ‘Balkan’ is originally the Turkish for ‘mountain’ or ‘stony place’, which was gradually used to refer to the mountain range that crosses contemporary Bulgaria (Haemus, in ancient Greek), before giving its name to the whole peninsula in the nineteenth century (2009: 26–8). It was Western travellers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that started spreading...
this word, which was at times accompanied by comments regarding the perceived decline or debasement of classical ideals under the Ottoman rule (22). The term’s strong negative connotations, however, only emerged at the start of the twentieth century, around the time of the Balkan Wars and the First World War, when the term ‘balkanisation’ also started being used (32). Already from the 1930s there were attempts in the West to replace reference to the ‘Balkans’ with ‘South Eastern Europe’, but this term also became problematic as it was used by the Nazis (28). While the issue subsided in the communist era, the violent fragmentation of the former Yugoslavia brought back reinforced perceptions of ‘balkanisation’ and associations of the region with conflict, war and violence, as well as essentialist interpretations of the Balkans and its politics (Glenny 2012). In the West’s perception of the Balkans, history became mixed with projected fears enhanced by myths surrounding the region (for example, Dracula), reproducing and reinforcing negative stereotypes concerning this ‘other’ Europe. As Larry Wolff (1994) has noted with reference to Eastern Europe more widely, the Balkans hold an ambivalent relation to Europe, being both inside and outside it. They are, in many ways, Europe’s liminal zone.

By branding the cinema of the region as ‘Balkan’ the book takes its cue from existing scholarship in cultural, historical and film studies but goes beyond it by offering a fresh perspective on post-2008 cinematic activity in the light, especially (but not exclusively) of fruitful cross-border interactions. The work of Edward Said (1978) and Todorova has had a deep impact on critical approaches on the Balkans, with concepts such as ‘nesting orientalisms’ (Hayden and Bakić-Hayden 1992, 1995), ‘self-exoticism’ (Iordanova 2001) or ‘self-balkanisation’ (Longinović 2005) being developed to address issues around representation and identity in the region. More recently, Dušan Bjelić has combined postcolonial with psychoanalytical insights in his analysis of Balkan pathologies (2016), critiquing the role of Europe in adopting neo-liberal and neo-colonial strategies to perpetuate a social, political and symbolic subjugation of the Balkans (2019). Along similar conceptual lines, Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli (2017) has offered close readings of selected artworks from the Balkans as a means of unmasking the crisis of European identity. This book is less engaged with attempts to unravel the complex symbolic and political relationship between the Balkans and the West and more concerned with offering an empirically grounded account of the cinematic activity within and across the region.

In the realm of film studies, no existing study examines Balkan cinema within the same spatiotemporal and conceptual parameters, that is temporal proximity, geographical inclusivity and an emphasis on transnational exchange and global visibility. Anglophone literature has tended to either conflate the Balkans with the former Yugoslavia (Iordanova 2001; Levi 2007; Jelača 2016) or focus on national case studies (Suner 2010; Karalis 2012; Vidan and Crnković 2012; Nasta 2013). The same applies to publications in local
languages (for example, Daković 2008; Pavićić 2011). The predominance of national cinemas is a result of many factors, including linguistic and political ones. The mutual incomprehensibility of many Balkan languages makes it difficult to delve into neighbouring cinemas, while the political situation of recently separated nations such as the case of former Yugoslavia reinforces the desire to create nationally distinct cinematic narratives. Most crucially, unlike the case of Nordic countries that have systematically developed transnational institutions to support their regional cinema (Nestingen and Elkington 2005), there is no equivalent institutional framework in the Balkans to reinforce cross-border accounts of Balkan cinema. As a result of the above, local film scholars tend to privilege national frameworks as opposed to comparative or regional studies. The only other book that has a similar geographic scope is Dina Iordanova’s *The Cinema of the Balkans* (2006), which nonetheless consists of twenty-four analyses of individual cinematic masterpieces from the region rather than the more industrially and contextually informed approach offered here. This book extends and expands on Iordanova’s premise, who noted the disregarded interactions between Balkan filmmakers during the Cold War and in the new millennium (2006: 10), by offering detailed and concrete accounts of the ways in which such transnational exchanges have been experienced from within each different Balkan country and in recent years. We are particularly grateful to the authors of individual chapters (most being based in the particular country under analysis), who have been able to provide invaluable insights and who were instrumental in helping us connect the dots to create a collective account of Balkan cinema. We would not have been able to do so alone precisely due to continuing difficulties of accessing cross-border information, linguistic differences and the fact that formal transnational links are in the process of development. To this end, we would like to stress how the fruitful results of this edited collection are truly a joint and collaborative effort between different Balkan cinema scholars.

**Spatiotemporal delimitations of Contemporary Balkan Cinema**

Our account of contemporary Balkan cinema starts with the 2008 financial crisis, which began in the United States and spread across the rich world, accelerating the eruption of the European debt crisis in the following year. Unlike more obvious demarcations or moments of rupture that have served as starting or ending points for scholarly examinations of local, national and regional cinemas, such as the Second World War, the communist period, the fall of the Berlin Wall or even the digital revolution, we have chosen to focus on the decade following the onset of the global financial crisis in order to investigate the newly witnessed synergies on the Balkan film scene. This is because we have observed that, for a variety of reasons, since 2008 the region has – and is still
INTRODUCTION

in the process of – experiencing dynamic and increasingly transnational movements in terms of cinema production, distribution and exhibition. This is partly the result of the so-called Europeanisation of the Balkans. We acknowledge that this process has functioned as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it has resulted in collaborative, transnational projects on all levels of the social, political and cultural spheres – including a number of exciting and novel film-related initiatives such as those discussed in this book; at the same time, it has led to the realities of neoliberal market ideology, unemployment and emigration, as well as, in some cases, the rise of nationalist, racist and right-wing ideologies – points of friction and concern that also manifest themselves through cinema, as is also evident in several chapters here. Indeed, recent scholarship has critiqued this form of European neo-colonialism and the ‘economic subjection’ of the Balkans, which has reconfigured the economic, political and social landscape and resulted ‘at once in global integration and local social disintegration’ (Bjelić 2018: 751–8).

While, broadly speaking, such changes have affected the whole region, it should also be noted that the impact of the financial crisis, specifically, has been experienced at different stages and with different degrees of intensity in various parts of the region, largely because of the different degrees of integration of the Balkan countries into the structures of global finance. The countries that were part of the Eurozone – Greece, Cyprus and Slovenia – were most directly and deeply affected by it, while for the majority of Balkan countries, with different currencies and smaller economies, the crisis had little direct impact. Despite such differences, however, 2008 marks a shift towards an embrace of a more extrovert attitude in film production and distribution across the Balkans. Whether as a direct consequence of the crisis or more deep-seated reasons, the post-2008 period has been economically challenging, but cinematically rewarding, for the Balkan region. For instance, a number of countries in the Balkans have established film centres or implemented important structural changes in cinema legislation and funding in the last decade. These include the Film Law and the founding of the Croatian Audiovisual Centre in 2007, the merging of Slovenian Film Fund and Slovenian Film Centre in 2011, the introduction of the new cashflow system for film productions in Serbia in 2014, the adoption of the international co-production funding scheme in Albania in 2015 and the founding of the Film Centre of Montenegro in 2017, among others. The book highlights the ways in which filmmakers fought for survival, the kinds of stories they told and the means by which both individuals and institutions responded to this changing landscape, by – among others – building on cross-border cinematic collaborations across and beyond the Balkans.

Returning to the question of ‘what are the Balkans’, we acknowledge that definitions of the geographical boundaries of the Balkans vary a lot. Narrow definitions tend to reinforce particular perspectives on the region and thus
contain irreconcilable contradictions more easily. Often, as noted above, the term has been conflated with the countries of the former Yugoslavia, especially as it re-emerged in media and political discourse at the onset of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. At other times, the term is used to refer only to ex-communist countries, thus excluding Greece and Turkey. The relationship of some geographically liminal countries, such as Romania or Slovenia, is often particularly ambivalent towards the Balkans, and as a result these are often excluded from consideration. The variations are many.

This book opts for an inclusive interpretation based on shared geography, culture and history. Put simply, this consists of being in South Eastern Europe, feeling connected to both East and West, having historically belonged either to the Ottoman or the Austro-Hungarian Empires (or both), and sharing the cultural imprint left by diverse civilisations inhabiting the area. Based on the above criteria, and as the book is organised by country, the geographical boundaries of the region are defined for our purposes here by four limit points as follows. In the North is Romania – both an Ottoman protectorate and part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before its national independence in the nineteenth century. In the North West is Slovenia – long under Austro-Hungarian rule, but also part of Yugoslavia which had a strong Balkan identity. In the South East is Cyprus – an island of the Eastern Mediterranean geographically far from the Balkan peninsula but culturally very close to two Balkan countries, Greece and Turkey. In the East is Turkey – by far the largest country in the region and geographically mostly outside Europe, but whose imperial past has left a deep imprint in the history and identity of the region. It should be noted, however, that beyond national boundaries, the liminal positioning of the region at the edges of East and West renders it into a fluid imaginary and geopolitical space with fuzzy contours that cannot be strictly defined. While the geographical space thus delimited consists of thirteen countries, all of which are individually examined in this book – Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Turkey – this book does not restrict the cinema activities it examines within strict boundaries of identity, nationality or space.

The organisation of the book by national cinema, whereby each chapter focuses on one country, allows the individual authors to highlight transnational and global links starting from the specific, local and national, but does not stop them from reaching out beyond national confines when assessing cinema activities and movements of Balkan filmmakers. Such an organisation has a number of advantages, especially given the lack of existing publications in the English language on the cinemas of some of these countries (such as Montenegro, North Macedonia or Kosovo). It acknowledges the role of nation-states in supporting cinema through production subsidies and promotional activities (e.g. in international film festivals), while also providing autonomy and agency.
to each (transnationally framed) national cinema. Furthermore, the coexistence
of nationally designated chapters alongside each other in the volume invites the
reader to initiate their own comparisons, while the alphabetical organisation
aims to challenge any pre-conceived hierarchies or conceptual priorities, and
establish a level playing field for all the cinemas presented.
Let’s explain further.

1. As there is no equivalent publication that provides fundamental infor-
mation on the film-related activities and current state of the industry
in all Balkan countries, and especially in the newest among them, a
country-by-country organisation serves this initial reference function.
However, the chapters are not just descriptive, but also critical, as the
authors frame the account of each country’s cinematic activity in the
context of transnational collaborations while assessing, where possible,
current and future global prospects. It is this combination of the infor-
matives and the critical that supports the book’s dual function as both a
scholarly and a reference work while offering the foundations for future
research on Balkan cinema.

2. Both conceptually and in practice, the transnational depends on the
national. While the global disregards national boundaries, the transna-
tional involves interactions and collaborations across defined national
entities. The collection positions Balkan cinema in relation to both
concepts, with the emphasis placed on the transnational (i.e. mostly
regional and European collaborations) as the global impact and circula-
tion of cinematic activity from the region remains rather limited. One
of the most significant transnational dimensions of such activity is co-
productions. For so-called ‘official co-productions’ (Hammert-Jamart
et al. 2018) national designations are essential as they determine
the legal dimensions of the arrangements. It is therefore necessary to locate
transnational collaborations in the context of different national policies,
institutions and discourses.

3. A number of countries included in the book have only gained their national
independence since the 1990s and are still in the process of nation-building.
Cinema plays a major symbolic role in shaping their national image and
identity, and to reinforce perceived and desired (European) values. This
is expressed both with reference to the past (constructing a national film
history), and the present/future (branding the country internationally
through new films). To a certain extent similar concerns also affect more
established film industries in the region. While the different countries’
nation-building projects are not the book’s main focus, they are, however,
examined as part of the broader context of film production, and especially
if they impact on film-related policies, practices and collaborations. The
book’s implicit agenda is to suggest that creative, cultural and financial partnerships and exchanges (such as the SEE Cinema Network, the Balkan Documentary Centre, the Balkan Film Market and CineLink at the Sarajevo Film Festival) are the main ways forward for the survival of these otherwise fragmented and, in their majority, poor film industries. Cinema can and does function as a unifying force.

4. The chapters are organised alphabetically, which may seem conceptually random at first, but this organisation is in fact both meaningful and critical of pre-existing power structures and formations of national cinema historiographies. The aim is to encourage novel readings that enable the repositioning, revaluation and reassessment of the richness and diversity of Balkan cinemas in the global edifice. In a context so complex and sensitive as that of Balkan cinema, any alternative chapter organisation that would involve grouping them in subcategories would impose an interpretative structure that would prioritise particular criteria and foreground one specific approach and perspective. Possible groupings could be made on the basis of the countries’ global cinematic presence to date (critically recognised ‘waves’ and/or film exports); by size (of their film industry and/or population); according to their pre-1989 political status; by EU membership; or by a combination of the above. However, any of these would interpretatively fix the relationship between different countries with each other and globally in a premature way, given the fluidity of the cinematic state of affairs in the Balkans and the ongoing movement of contemporary film productions.

The book starts from a position of respect for each country, presenting them equally alongside each other irrespective of size, wealth, longevity or the international acclaim of their cinema. Some of these countries are, or until recently have been, affected by political difficulties and impasse, often among neighbours. For example, a naming dispute between Greece and the (former Yugoslav) Republic of Macedonia was only resolved in June 2018 with the adoption of ‘North Macedonia’ for the latter, while Kosovo remains unrecognised by over half of the United Nations’ states and, crucially, by some Balkan neighbours and EU countries. While acknowledging such points of tension, the book focuses mainly on the positive steps taken in many parts of the Balkans in order to find common ground through cinema – both in terms of production and representation.

Transnational Balkan Cinema Post-2008

Collaborations across different Balkan countries at the level of production are not always linked with explicitly Balkan topics and/or iconographies, but, as Iordanova argues, a comparative and cross-cultural perspective can reveal a
INTRODUCTION

number of thematic and stylistic affinities across Balkan cinemas. If, as she points out, constructing Balkan cinema as an object of study is a project of ‘connecting a disconnected space’ (2006: 3), by offering transnational profiles of all national cinemas of the region this book contributes to forging and strengthening such connecting links. It should be noted, however, that while collaborations and textual similarities are present across the cinemas of the region, Balkan cinema should not be conceptualised as a closed genre with fixed and repeating characteristics, but rather as an open and dynamic entity with both converging and diversifying themes and styles that express the fluidity and, in some cases, precariousness of these cinemas. Any attempt to adopt a more fixed definition of Balkan cinema leads to narrow and restrictive interpretations. For example, film scholars and critics have often identified the specific type of black humour and cynical world-view present in films by Emir Kusturica and Srđan Dragojević as quintessentially Balkan in a way that ultimately reproduces a stereotypical perception of the region.

Observing recent films from the Balkans explored in the chapters, it is clear that several themes recur across national boundaries. These include the exploration of the past (whether returning to national myths or questioning official historical narratives), war and its consequences, crime and corruption, the effects of a dysfunctional state, judicial and educational infrastructures on the individual and the family, poverty and migration. A recent Slovenian film discussed in the book as a successful example of a co-production, Ivan (Janez Burger, Slovenia/Croatia, 2017), focuses on a personal and social drama against the backdrop of societal corruption and demonstrates a distinct auteur style. Similarly, in the case of Bulgaria, Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov’s social drama Urok/The Lesson (2014), a coproduction between Bulgaria and Greece, is an outstanding social drama dealing with crime, which has garnered several international awards. The Serbian majority coproduction Rekvijem za gospodu J./Requiem for Mrs. J. (Bojan Vuletić, Serbia/Bulgaria/North Macedonia/Russia/Germany, 2017), an intimate drama set against a decrepit and realistic urban setting, explores similar themes prevalent in post-communist cinemas. While different in style and approach, Mila Turajlić’s documentary Druga Strana Svega/The Other Side of Everything (Serbia/France/Qatar/Germany/Hungary, 2017) which won the main award at IDFA, and Radu Jude’s film Îmi este indiferent dacă în istorie vom intra ca barbari/ Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians (Romania/Germany/Czech Republic/France/Bulgaria, 2018), which won the Crystal Globe award at Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, serve as effective and highly successful examples of very recent arthouse Balkan films that rely heavily on co-production models and have global outreach. Both films offer counter-narratives of national history and question historical memory, one from a personal family perspective and the other through that of an artist.
While a number of these films are made as co-productions, this is not always the case. It can certainly be argued, though, that transnational collaborations encourage themes that resonate across borders, and the fact that these have increased in recent years only serves to reinforce the transnational character of post-2008 Balkan cinema. It should be noted that the stories are not always explicitly transnational in the sense of taking place in different locations across national borders or involving characters of diverse ethnic and national backgrounds. However, the recurrence of common thematic patterns and cultural-historical references and, as will be shown below, certain stylistic trends, even if these are not explicitly promoted as Balkan, testifies to the increasingly transnational nature of contemporary Balkan cinema. A recent example of a film that reflects what can readily be identified as Balkan sensibility is the primarily Romanian/Bulgarian coproduction *Aferim!* (Radu Jude, Romania/Bulgaria/Czech Republic/France, 2015). A historical road movie set in nineteenth-century Wallachia, the film testifies to the multi-ethnic and multicultural status of the Balkans at the time, while also reviving a cinematic trope shared among many ex-communist Balkan countries, that of the Red Western. It also draws on the shared regional mythologies around the *haidouks* – peasant bandits and/or guerrilla fighters who troubled both Ottoman and Habsburg authorities and romantically represented the desire for freedom.

Shot in spectacular black and white cinemascope, and heavily dependent on dialogue that is based on nineteenth-century Romanian literary sources, the style of *Aferim!* is at once quite unique and quite typical of a certain naturalist urge that characterises a lot of contemporary cinema from the Balkans. While oversimplifications regarding a dominant Balkan cinema style should be avoided, we can certainly note the significant impact of the minimalist, neo-realist approach introduced by the Romanian New Wave across many recent art films in the Balkans. For example, non-mainstream Croatian films, as discussed in more detail in the relevant chapter, have adopted several stylistic (and thematic) tropes inspired by the Romanian New Wave, including the choice of everyday locations, the absence of non-diegetic music and the naturalistic use of dialogue. Another notable stylistic trend is the Greek Weird Wave, although its extreme stylisation and very distinctive aesthetic sensibility has proven less directly influential. Stylistic experimentation with a marked authorial stamp is evident in Balkan art cinema across borders, as evident in the work of Slovenian Sonja Prosenc (*Drevo/The Tree*, Slovenia, 2014), the Croatian Dalibor Matanić (*Zvizdan/The High Sun*, Croatia/Serbia/Slovenia, 2015), the Greek Yorgos Zois (*Interruption*, Greece/France/Croatia/Italy/Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2015) and the Romanian Adina Pintilie (*Nu mă atinge! Touch Me Not*, Romania/Germany/Czech Republic/Bulgaria/France, 2018), among others. In popular cinema, the identification of a distinctive Balkan group style is harder to ascertain, as film
style here tends to service genre and storytelling rather than mark itself through attempts at distinction.

In conceptualising the notion of Balkan cinema and the way in which cross-border fertilisation and exchange take place, it is important to take into account all levels of interaction, ranging from production to distribution and exhibition. While European co-productions have been formalised since 1989 with the founding of the Council of Europe’s cultural support fund Eurimages, and then in 1992 with the European Convention for Cinematographic Co-production which regulates the legal framework for such cinematic collaborations, the last decade has seen an increase in the number of co-productions with partners from Balkan countries, as explored in the individual chapters and further evidenced in the Tables at the end of the book. With the exception of Kosovo, by 2019 all Balkan countries were members of Eurimages and signatories of the European Convention on Cinematographic Co-production. In 2018, a revision of the convention that lowered the minimum participation level for a co-producing partner to 5 per cent served to enable smaller territories to become co-producers on bigger projects from which they had been effectively excluded before, due to budgetary restrictions. The likely consequence of the revised convention will be an increase in European co-productions involving Balkan countries in the years to come. (As this book was going to print, the world was hit by the Coronavirus pandemic that caused serious disruption to the film industry globally. The extent to which the disruption will be long-lasting and affect co-production practices in the Balkans and beyond remains to be seen). While such ‘official co-productions’ (Hammett-Jamart et al. 2018; Papadimitriou 2018a, 2018b) often involve at least one large co-producing partner from Western Europe (usually France or Germany), as these provide not only significant amounts of funding but also increased access to distribution possibilities, there has also been an increase in co-productions across Balkan countries without Western European involvement. For comparative purposes and in order to observe the increase in the number of co-productions (majority and minority) since 2008, we provide reference tables for each country at the end of the book. These tables also include yearly data on the number of feature fiction and documentary films, animation and short films, as well as admissions and box office figures. All the above offer supplementary insights into the fluctuations of national film production, distribution and exhibition, and the economic situation of each film industry overall.

There is no doubt that the primary motivation for co-productions is financial – access to more production funds and markets. In an influential article that distinguishes between different types of collaboration, Mette Hjort (2010) characterises this kind of co-production ‘opportunistic transnationalism’, as it reflects the pursuit of financial opportunities rather than more organic needs emerging from a particular script or other cultural or artistic factors. However,
even if their primary motivation is financial, the pursuit of such co-production opportunities often also reinforces pre-existing cultural links while also helping consolidate a stronger sense of regional identity, as evident in Hjort’s categories of ‘affinitive’ and ‘epiphanic transnationalism’ respectively. While the former refers to collaborations among partners that share core cultural and often linguistic elements, the latter concerns the creation of deep transnational links at a regional level. The case of co-productions among countries of the former Yugoslavia offers good examples of both, as these are based on common cultural characteristics (including, in some cases, a common language) and pre-existing production, distribution and exhibition networks from Yugoslav times, while they also explore the desire to redefine commonalities on new ground. Titles of such co-produced films that explore themes related to memory and trauma from the Yugoslav wars include Turneja/The Tour (Goran Marković, Serbia/Bosnia-Herzegovina/Croatia/Slovenia, 2008), Krugovi/Circles (Srdan Golubović, Serbia/Germany/France/Slovenia/Croatia, 2013), Matanić’s The High Sun, Teret/The Load (Ognjen Glavonić, Serbia/France/Croatia/Iran/Qatar, 2016) and Some Strane/On the Other Side (Zrinko Ogresta, Croatia/Serbia, 2016). Other examples of affinitive transnationalism include co-productions between (or including) Albanophone countries such as Bota/World (Iris Elezi and Thomas Logoreci, Albania/Italy/Kosovo, 2014) and Martesa/The Marriage (Blerta Zeqiri, Kosovo/Albania, 2017); or between Greece and the Republic of Cuprus, such as I istoria tis prasinis grammis/The Story of the Green Line (Panicos Chrysanthou, Cyprus/Greece, 2017), Figadevondas ton Hendrix/Smuggling Hendrix (Marios Piperides, Cyprus/Germany/Greece, 2018) and Pafsi/Pause (Tonia Mishiali, Cyprus/Greece, 2018).

The increased embrace of co-production opportunities from Balkan countries is the result of increased extroversion facilitated by institutional changes within a number of national Film Centres, which designate the allocation of funds towards co-productions. This, in itself, is a result of both a wider overall desire for ‘Europeanisation’ among the vast majority of Balkan countries, but also the implicit recognition that increased global competition makes it ever more hard for cultural products from small countries to survive not only at the global, but also at the national and local levels. The advent of digital technologies and their impact not only on production but also on distribution is largely responsible for such intensified competition. Lower costs have led to the production of an unprecedented number of films, which in turn find it harder to reach audiences in this overcrowded global marketplace. While large global players, such as the Hollywood studios, continue to dominate by differentiating their products through expensive technological investments and innovations (for example, in special effects) and huge marketing costs for theatrical and online global distribution, films from small and low production-capacity countries, such as the majority of the Balkan countries (with the sole exception of the Republic of Cuprus).
of Turkey which has a very large film and television industry), increasingly rely on film festivals to achieve visibility and reach audiences. A world premiere and, even better, an award at a major international film festival such as Cannes, Venice, Toronto, Berlin or Sundance guarantees that a film will be shown to many smaller festivals across the world, while also having the chance for mainstream theatrical distribution in different territories. Television, DVD and streaming rights will most likely also follow, at least for some territories, and the film will therefore succeed in reaching transnational and global audiences. Inevitably, films from Balkan countries that aspire to global visibility depend on film festivals, and increasingly, as already pointed out, national cinematic institutions offer support for festival exposure.

Aside from leading to an overall increase in the number of films produced globally, and to the proliferation of Internet-enabled forms of distribution through both global and nation/region-based VOD platforms, digital technologies also lie behind the exponential increase in film festivals globally. The simple fact that films do not have to be physically transported as prints in order to be shown at a film festival, in what was an expensive, slower and more difficult to coordinate system, has resulted in an increase of events that bring films to local and national audiences. This phenomenon is also evident in the Balkans and, as the individual contributions in this book show, it has had a significant effect in facilitating cross-fertilisation across Balkan cinemas and strengthening the bond between films and audiences. In fact, this book owes its existence to two such festivals (the Divan Film Festival in Romania and the Thessaloniki International Film Festival in Greece) where the editors initially met and, then, over repeated encounters, witnessed the increased dynamism of Balkan cinema, as well as the audiences’ and filmmakers’ desire to reach beyond national borders and explore commonalities in both heritage and prospects.

Apart from the proliferation of, often specialised, film festivals, which encourage cinephilia and expose audiences to arthouse and alternative films (an indicative example is Slovenia, a country of two million inhabitants that has twenty-nine active film festivals), the region’s largest festivals serve as hubs for the promotion of Balkan films and the creation of further networking and development funding opportunities for filmmakers. Established in 1994, the Balkan Survey program at the Thessaloniki International Film Festival regularly screens a selection of the latest arthouse films from the region, and organises retrospectives of Balkan filmmakers (for example Romanian Cristian Mungiu in 2012, Serbian Želimir Žilnik in 2014, Romanian Mircea Daneliuc in 2015, Turkish Zeki Demirkubuz in 2016, Yugoslav Dušan Makavejev in 2019). Since 2005, Thessaloniki has provided networking opportunities for filmmakers from the region through the Crossroads Co-production Forum that is open to projects from Mediterranean and Balkan countries (Papadimitriou,
2016). A major player in terms of both promoting regional films in its competition programmes and supporting co-productions is the Sarajevo International Film Festival that was founded in 1995 during the siege of Sarajevo as a symbolic cultural counter-offensive to the atrocities of war. The festival has expanded to include professional activities, including the CineLink Industry Days (since 2003), a co-production market for regional feature projects in the development and financing stages, and Talents Sarajevo (since 2007, and in cooperation with the Berlin International Film Festival), which is an educational and creative platform for young professionals from the region. The Transylvania International Film Festival (est. 2002), one of the biggest film festivals in Romania, regularly features the Balkans in its country focus section: Bulgaria in 2018, Slovenia in 2017, Croatia in 2016 and Greece in 2013, while also having played an important role in promoting Romanian cinema within Romania. In Bulgaria, the Sofia International Film Festival, also established in 2002, is credited for the revival of the Bulgarian film industry and for the visibility of emerging Bulgarian filmmakers such Maya Vitkova (Viktoria, Bulgaria/Romania, 2014) and Ralitsa Petrova (Bezbog/Godless, Bulgaria/Denmark/France, 2016) within and beyond Bulgaria.

Film festivals function as alternative distribution networks for arthouse films, but they also serve as exhibition outlets, especially in the former communist countries where the dismantling of the vertical distribution system has left many areas, especially rural and suburban ones, without access to cinemas. A number of contributions (Bulgaria, Romania, Kosovo, Montenegro) point to the significant reduction in the number of cinema theatres in recent years, as well as to the fact the new multiplex cinemas that to a certain degree replaced capacity (and are usually located in shopping malls) exhibit mostly Hollywood fare and, occasionally, local popular genre films. European arthouse films are sometimes shown in a select few cinemas in city centres, while national arthouse films or – even worse – films from neighbouring countries (whether arthouse or popular) are usually unable to reach mainstream distribution.

Finally, we should point out the increasing economic but also upskilling significance of attracting major international film and television productions to shoot locally, especially for smaller countries. Several contributors have noted the increase in subsidies and incentives for foreign productions and the establishment of dedicated infrastructure (film commissions) to oversee this process. Notable examples of such productions which have also helped boost tourism, aside from providing work to local professionals, are the HBO TV series Game of Thrones (Season 2, 2012) in Croatia, action films such as the USA/UK co-production November Man (Roger Donaldson, 2014) starring Pierce Brosnan in Montenegro, or Luc Besson’s Anna (France, 2019) in Serbia. The impact of the influx of foreign capital through foreign film productions is particularly
visible in the small and newly independent (since 2006) country Montenegro, which has resulted in the creation of a large number of local film production companies (thirty-three in operation by 2018) and accelerated the overall professionalisation of the sector.

BALKANS: THE FUTURE IS CINEMA?

In lieu of a conclusion, given that we consider the transnational movements in post-2008 Balkan cinemas as an ongoing and open-ended process, we would like to draw attention to several positive developments that have occurred within the fabric of the cinematic landscape in the last decade: from institutional changes, to the digitalisation of film heritage, to the increased cross-border movement of filmmakers and the presence of arthouse films at international film festivals among others. The increasingly extrovert attitude of film centres, institutions and archives has led to charting new territories, evident, for example, in the more visible Balkan presence at the Berlin and Cannes film markets. It has also strengthened existing, and/or forged new, regional and international alliances, as indicated by the collaboration between the Tirana International Film Festival in Albania and the Apulia Film Commission in Italy, or the Bulgarian National Film Centre’s financial participation in Serbian mainstream film productions. Most importantly, it has led to the emergence of a young generation of authors, such as Ivan Salatić from Montenegro, Sonja Prosenc from Slovenia, Tolga Karaçelik from Turkey, Ilian Metev from Bulgaria, or Hana Jušić from Croatia among many others, whose films received recognition at prestigious film festivals. The rise of women directors across the region is particularly encouraging (Bulgarian Maya Vitkova, Romanian Adina Pintilie, Slovenian Hanna Slak, Croatian Ivona Juka, Serbian Mila Turajić, Cypriot Tonia Mishiali, among others) and the emergence of new stories and attitudes toward topics and themes that have traditionally been more difficult to broach, such as LGBTQ, women, refugee and minority issues (particularly in Greece, Kosovo, Slovenia, and Serbia).

Despite the growing tendencies of right-wing and nationalist conservative ideologies across Europe and the world, as mentioned earlier, the Balkans have recently witnessed positive changes on the socio-political front: the resolving of the name dispute between Greece and North Macedonia, the ongoing efforts towards reaching a mini-Schengen trade agreement between Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania, and the strong civic consciousness as evidenced from the wave of protests against corruption and crime, or those for education reforms and women’s rights across the Balkans in 2019. Despite the economic difficulties, unresolved political issues and wavering unemployment levels evident across the region, we hope that this book will not only serve as acknowledgement and witness of the recent energy and movement in all areas of film production,
distribution and exhibition in the Balkans, but also inspire a continuation of this positive and progressive ethos of collaboration and transnational exchange. Presenting itself as a broad historical account of the last decade that seeks to trace the relationships and synergies between the different countries and filmmakers in the region and beyond, the book establishes a unifying and complex picture of cinematic activities, by placing emphasis on the increasing fluidity, mobility and exchange of people and things. Ultimately, the book aims to attract more viewers for Balkan films, motivate future cinematic collaborations, and inspire further academic work. It does not consider Balkan cinema as a uniform and fixed entity, but as a dynamic and multifaceted one that deserves both the world’s attention and a more positive (self-) image. Most importantly, it argues that Balkan cinema deserves to be known, understood, loved.

**References**


INTRODUCTION


