

An Insider Snapshot of the Recent (Trans-)National Developments in Balkan Cinema

Contemporary Balkan Cinema: Transnational Exchanges and Global Circuits, edited by Lydia Papadimitriou and Ana Grgić, Edinburgh University Press, 2020, 304 pp., £80 (E-book PDF), ISBN: 9781474458450

Most of the scholarship in the field of Balkan cinema tends to focus on one particular national cinematography at a time, exploring its history, politics, expressive aesthetics, influential creative figures, artistic movements, overlapping or conflicting representations, and/or relations with the European ‘cultural centre’. Among the few notable (English-language) exceptions which privilege a more comparative approach are Dina Jordanova’s seminal works on Balkan film and media in the aftermath of the Yugoslavian conflict (2001; 2006) and women in Balkan filmmaking (2014), as well as the special issue of *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, titled ‘Re-imagining the Balkans’ and edited by Saša Vojković (2008). Still, the majority of academic research in Balkan cinema remains predominantly focused on textual analyses which does not fully take into account local or transnational film industry mechanisms of functioning. Hence *Contemporary Balkan Cinema: Transnational Exchanges and Global Circuits* proves a much needed contribution to the field. In addition to bringing previous studies of Balkan film up to date, the current edited volume implicitly compares and contrasts the diverse contexts of film legislation, production, distribution, exhibition and consumption across the Balkan region. It highlights the role of national and supranational entities in supporting cinema ventures, developing film culture(s), and increasing collaboration and mobility of people, services and products. By revealing the complexity and density of creative interactions which take place on the Balkans (and beyond), the collection argues for a more nuanced and positive portrayal of Balkan cinema than was previously the norm.

As the volume’s editors, Lydia Papadimitriou and Ana Grgić, point out, Balkan cinema originally came to international prominence as a result of the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001), which led to a broadly reductionist view of its perceived themes and

geographical scope. Thus, one of the primary aims of this collection is to counter the negative connotations of 'Balkan' and to highlight the multiplicity, openness and dynamism but also precariousness of film-related activities in the region. The geographical scope of the volume is purposefully inclusive. It features separate chapters on Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Turkey. Hence, the Balkan region is conceived of, and based on shared history, culture and experiences while borders are perceived as fluid and permeable. Even though nation-states remain the distinct structuring units of investigation, this edited collection also traces the individual steps each Balkan country has taken towards 'Europeanisation' (often in conflict with rising nationalistic attitudes) by offering specific and detailed accounts of the ways in which film topics and representations have shifted, and transnational exchanges have been promoted and experienced. The establishment of specific film centres or structural changes in cinema legislation, the introduction of new cash-flow systems for film productions, and the adoption of international co-operative funding schemes, which facilitate creative collaboration, majority and minority film co-productions, have resulted in more opportunities for productive interactions across borders.

In terms of theoretical underpinnings, the volume consistently employs Mette Hjort's typology of cinematic transnationalisms (2010) to analyse the motivations behind collaborative initiatives across the Balkan region and beyond. When it comes to temporal delineation, the book focuses on the decade following the global financial crisis of 2008. While the aftermath of it was experienced differently across Balkan countries, it reaffirmed the need for financial and cultural cooperation for a more sustainable and internationally visible film sector. As the editors admit, the book's implicit agenda is to highlight creative, cultural and financial partnerships and exchanges (such as the South Eastern Europe Cinema Network, the Balkan Documentary Centre, the Balkan Film Market and CineLink at the Sarajevo Film Festival) as routes to overcoming the national fragmentation and financial limitations of the region. Beyond its ideological agenda, promoting cinematic unity on the Balkans, the volume is practically useful as a thesaurus offering succinct information on the main institutions supporting and regulating film-related activities in each of the territories, the number of national and co-produced films completed in the last decade, box office data

and major national film festivals taking place in each country. For ease of access, all of this is summarised in the appendices as well.

Splitting from the traditional film criticism canon which privileges exclusively national *auteur* cinema, the chapters in this collection investigate developments in popular genres alongside arthouse formats. There is an explicit focus on younger filmmakers and women in the film industry, as well as film topics and themes dealing with marginalisation. Each instalment also accounts for the state of the respective national exhibition sector (usually consisting of Hollywood-dominated multiplexes), alternative forms of film screenings, educational initiatives and film archive preservation efforts. A special place is reserved for the role of film festivals as hubs for promotion of Balkan filmmaking through networking, professionalization opportunities, film markets and audience development programmes. Finally, the edited volume does not shy away from exposing some of the common challenges faced by film professionals and viewers across the region. The different chapters tell similar stories of local film industries suffering the burdens of slow or corrupt administrative regimes, clashes between filmmaking generations, infrastructural difficulties in reaching audiences, ethnic and political divisions, as well as the limitations of a small national film market. It is important to note here that the only country in the region which did not experience the latter issue was Turkey, whose large domestic market makes it a self-reliant and commercially viable film territory. A brief look at the different chapters helps to outline further territory-specific topics.

Bruce Williams and Kledian Myftari detail the role of nation-building which Albanian cinema has recently undertaken, with emphasis on funding authorial films, which, nonetheless, prove unpopular with local audiences. Dijana Jelača observes that Bosnia and Herzegovina remains ethnically and politically divided. Fittingly, most local films are co-productions with other former Yugoslav republics and deal with collective and individual trauma. Gergana Doncheva notes that, thanks to sustained legislative and professionalization efforts, Bulgarian cinema has achieved relative success with its diverse popular and arthouse film fare but national and European grants remain crucial for sustaining film outputs. Jurica Pavčić and Aida Vidan praise the progressive Croatian film law of 2007, which collects obligatory contributions from commercial exhibitors, but lament the pressures which the right-wing government exerts over the Croatian Audiovisual Centre. Still, the country boasts a successful home and service

industry which promotes film tourism. Costas Constandinides and Yiannis Papadakis note a shift away in Cyprus from films dealing with the ‘the Cyprus Problem’. While that helps promote transnational cooperation, they wonder if it further reinforces political and ethnic divisions. Maria Chalkou credits the financial crisis and the emergence of the Greek Weird/New Wave with the decidedly transnational shift in Greek film production and distribution. Heritage films and socially- and historically-engaged documentaries are another marker of post-2008 Greek cinema. Francesca Borrione and Albana Muco examine Kosovo as a ‘post-national state’, focusing on intercultural dialogue, rights and social issues, in which cinema and film-related institutions play a key role. Co-productions with European and extra-European partners thematically focus on migration, war, trauma, catharsis and resilience. Similarly to Croatia, Sanja Jovanović notes that Montenegro has been successful in attracting foreign productions which, together with the establishment of educational institutions and festivals, increased professionalization and international cooperation. Vessela S. Warner reveals multiple national representations in North Macedonian film – the effects of postcolonialism on remembering, rewriting and reinterpreting local history/ies – which result in a type of hybrid nationalism. In the case of North Macedonia, minority co-productions have proved more successful in local and international markets than national films and majority co-productions. Raluca Iacob examines the Romanian New Wave, which has benefited from Western European co-production support and achieved success at international film festivals, in contrast to nationally-funded films, which tend to be genre-orientated adaptations of American originals, aimed at Romanian viewers. Nevena Daković, Aleksandra Milovanović and Iva Leković similarly scrutinise the two distinct directions in contemporary Serbian cinema – one European-orientated, responding to global patterns of popular cinema, and another, reflecting on the country’s troubled past and present. Domestic financing has given rise not only to majority and minority co-productions with neighbouring countries (regionalisation) but also to successful local genre films and TV series. Polona Petek focuses on transnational influences over Slovenia’s film culture which triggered investment in improving film literacy, developing film scholarship, exploring its own history and maintaining a lively festival culture. Melis Behlil discusses the commercial viability of Turkey’s industry, which boasts successful soap opera exports but struggles with authentically translating local issues in transnational co-productions.

In summary, the book provides an insider snapshot of the current state of Balkan film industries. This proves a valuable contribution to both scholars and viewers interested in cinematic output from the region. The one shortcoming of this edited volume remains the fact that online film distribution and exhibition initiatives (granted, still relatively underdeveloped in the Balkans) are not examined in great detail. Papadimitriou and Grgić admit that digital developments have led to increased production capabilities and a more competitive distribution environment. Particular case-study films and series are highlighted as benefiting from video-on-demand (VoD) or free online distribution via Amazon Prime video, HBO Go, Netflix, VoD platforms in France and YouTube. However, there is no further information on local or regional developments in the sector. The issue of film piracy, which is mentioned as one of the reasons for low cinema attendance in Montenegro, but undoubtedly influences the rest of the region as well, does not form part of any of the in-depth investigations. Bearing in mind the previous limitations of the national exhibition circuits and the crucial role which online film distribution and consumption have played during the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide, it would be interesting to see accounts of more recent digital film developments across the Balkans. So, perhaps these themes could be addressed in a sequel to this edited volume?

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