

David Walsh on the San Francisco International Film Festival--Part 3

Some films from the Balkans and Africa

11 May 1999

The San Francisco festival screened three films from the former Yugoslavia: *Black Cat*, *White Cat*, directed by Emir Kusturica, *The Powder Keg* by Goran Paskaljevic and *The Wounds* by Srdjan Dragojevic.

Kusturica is an interesting figure. Born in Sarajevo in 1954, he attended the FAMU film academy in Prague, winning a prize at the Karlovy-Vary Student Film Festival with his third-year film. After returning to Yugoslavia, Kusturica made a film for Sarajevo Television that was banned because of its treatment of incest. His first feature, *Do you remember Dolly Bell?* (1981), dealt with teenagers growing up in Sarajevo, a milieu of small-time criminals and the influence of American culture.

In *When Father Was Away on Business* (1985), set in Yugoslavia in the early 1950s, a man is denounced for suspect political views by his brother-in-law because the latter is a rival for the affections of his mistress. His wife tells her two children that their father is on a business trip. The story is told from a child's point of view. A critic remarked that despite its serious subject, the film did not "give in to sentimentality" and exhibited a "typically Balkan gaiety." Kusturica followed this up with *Time of the Gypsies* (1989), about a Gypsy youth, growing up in a Sarajevo slum and trying to make his fortune in a Europe still hostile and closed to his people. While teaching film studies at Columbia University in New York City, Kusturica became interested in a student's idea for a screenplay and eventually filmed *Arizona Dream*, his only English-language work, with Johnny Depp, Jerry Lewis and Faye Dunaway.

Kusturica's three-hour epic about postwar Yugoslavia and its breakup, *Underground*, won the highest prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1995. The Bosnian-born director came under fire from a number of prominent French intellectuals, including Alain Finkielkraut, as well as the media, for being insufficiently anti-Serb. This is the same collection of right-wingers and ex-radicals that now applauds as Serbia is bombed back to the pre-industrial age.

My sympathies lie entirely with Kusturica against the critics of *Underground*. In reality, they despise him for suggesting, even in a confused fashion, that there was anything progressive or worth defending in the old Yugoslavia. Kusturica, who lives in France, announced that he was giving up the cinema in disgust. He didn't, of course, and he has now made *Black Cat*, *White Cat*.

A synopsis of the film would be relatively pointless. Let's say a lot of things happen in this extravagant tale about rival Gypsy clans living on the banks of the Danube: a crime caper goes astray, an arranged Gypsy wedding goes wildly astray, a tiny woman falls in love with a giant, a lot of people madly chase a missing bride, corpses come alive,

a lunatic, cocaine-snorting crook falls through the floor of a latrine, a pig eats a car, etc. In the end, love triumphs and the lovers sail away, with a bundle of money too.

Kusturica says about this film: "I want to express my enthusiasm and admiration for all natural things. I've returned to Life, Colors and Light. I've got rid of tragedy. In this movie the dead come to life again. The Gypsies enjoy being in love and they adore every moment of their lives. The vim and vigor which gypsies burst with spread through the whole movie, the music, comic scenes...."

"The kitsch gypsies possess simply intrigues me because of its emotional strength. This kind of kitsch destroys any genre. It's a kind of mockery. They don't take anything seriously. They are easygoing and I love that. I feel as if I have come home. They are said to be nomads, somewhere between heaven and earth, in the middle of nowhere. In some ways, all that resembles my life, too. That's where all that light comes from."

Kusturica doesn't say so, but it's difficult not to interpret *Black Cat*, *White Cat*, as one commentator suggests, "as a farce about the Yugoslav trauma." Or, rather, as a farce which sets in relief the Yugoslav trauma. Kusturica, who explains that the film was inspired by the works of Soviet writer Isaac Babel (killed by the Stalinists in 1941), would perhaps say that the people in his film could never get themselves into such a mess, they love life too much, they don't take things so seriously.

I interpret Kusturica as advocating reconciliation, rebellion, anarchy, sensuality, drunkenness, madness--everything but good business sense, ethnic hatred, war.

My sympathies lie with Kusturica, but that's not the same thing as saying I admire his new film. *Black Cat*, *White Cat* is colorful, vivid, energetic. ("Energetic" doesn't do it justice, the film never stops to catch its breath!) But it's a mess too.

This is partly a matter of personal taste. I'm not attracted to the grotesque, to "absurdist, black comedy." I find the film too broad, too facetious to get inside of. Its insistence that I be amused, dazzled at every instant has the opposite effect--it makes me tired, a little depressed.

Anyway, I'm not convinced that a return to "Life, Colors and Light" truly reflects the totality of Kusturica's deepest feelings about the Yugoslav tragedy. How could it? That the director hasn't thrown his hands in the air, that he hasn't written off the human race as a bunch of murderous swine, that he hasn't given in to easy (and marketable) pessimism, that's all to the good, but it doesn't settle the matter.

What's happened in the former Yugoslavia is still monstrous and Kusturica's response--"Everything is crazy and beautiful no matter

what!"--seems to me to fall terribly short. I'm willing to go out on a limb and suggest that one wouldn't have to scratch this particular instance of "typical Balkan gaiety" too deeply to come across deep despair. The danger always exists that one frenetically whoops it up as a substitute for and a means of not thinking about difficult, intractable problems. In any case, Kusturica has a genuine talent and a feeling for people. We will see what he does next.

I feel less sympathetic toward Paskaljevic's *The Powder Keg*. I saw it at the Toronto film festival last September and commented briefly on it at that time. Its basic theme seems to be that the Serbs are animals who have just been waiting for the chance to jump at one another's throat. It has some striking performances, some tragic moments that ring true, but, in the end, this kind of thing is very superficial. How much does it help to explain a tragedy by suggesting that it was always there in the making? This is not so much deeply-felt fatalism, as shallowness, the refusal to sort out complex historical issues.

The Wounds by Dragojevic is much weaker still. The story of two Belgrade teenagers who rise to the top of the criminal world is slick and cynical and facile. It exhibits no genuine sympathy for the victims of the disintegrating society and moral abyss it portrays. The kids are amoral, macho monsters, the Serbian patriots are ridiculous buffoons, the intellectuals are all whores, etc., etc. This is very easy stuff. Anyone who doesn't really care about much of anything, except making a name for himself with the people who count, can do it. Anyone, let's say, who brags about leaving a four-room penthouse and a luxury car in Belgrade and wants to live even better in America.

It's not astonishing that artists in the Balkans should be overwhelmed, confused, disoriented. Terrible events have washed over them. They were unprepared, no one had predicted this. They were intellectually disarmed by a half-century of something that was passed off as socialism. One must say, in fact, that the Yugoslav filmmakers have responded more thoughtfully than their counterparts in the former Soviet Union, who have been completely undone.

Art is not science, but the artist can't get along without some scientific insight. The Yugoslav filmmakers have the energy, the intelligence, as well as the technique and the actors, but without some degree of scientific, i.e., historical insight into recent events, they will simply pass on their confusion and their sense of being overwhelmed to the spectator. How much help is that, in the end? Such efforts will have little or no lasting intellectual or artistic impact.

Last Stop Paradise is a film by Romanian director Lucien Pintilie (born 1933). Mitu works on a pig farm; he has a brother in New York. "I got the pigs, you got America," he bitterly tells his brother home on a visit. Mitu falls for Norica, a waitress, who works for and gets pawed by the repulsive Gili. Mitu's attacks on his rival escalate, until he finally kills Gili in a jealous rage. The two lovers get married. "Forgive me for ruining your life," Mitu says calmly. She does, more or less. They make a hopeless attempt at flight, tracked by soldiers on foot and in helicopters. The end, of course, is tragic. As Michel Ciment writes in the festival's catalogue, "Who in Romania today could honestly exhibit signs of hope?" Dorina Chiriac is memorable as Norica.

The San Francisco festival presented a number of films by the Senegalese filmmaker Djibril Diop Mambéty, who died in Paris last July while undergoing cancer treatment, at 53. I saw two of his early features, *Badou Boy* (1970) and *Touki Bouki* (The hyena's journey) (1973), and a short, *Contras' City* (1969). The films, made on a shoestring budget, are edgy and rough. *Badou Boy* is about a street kid in

Dakar trying to stay one jump ahead of a fat policeman. In *Touki Bouki*, Mory and Anta travel about Dakar on a motorcycle adorned with cattle horns, dreaming only of escaping to Paris. Both films, as well as *Contras' City*, playfully and sardonically examine the various social layers that make up the city.

I didn't see enough of Mambéty's work to reach any definitive conclusion, but he seems to have been inventive, intelligent and original, and obviously endowed with a deep, but not uncritical, feeling for the ordinary Senegalese.

In 1992 he made *Hyenas*--an adaptation of Swiss dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Visit*--which treated the unhappy state of African society. In an interview he commented, "The hyena is a terrible animal, able to follow a sick lion during all seasons. And during the lion's last days, he jumps on him and eats him. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund do the same with the poor South of the world. They know we are sick and poor and we have some dignity. But they can wait for the last days, when you say O.K., I want to survive. Please take my dignity and kill me with your money." His death is a loss.

Algerian immigrants living in a French shantytown in the early 1960s are the subject of *Living in Paradise*, directed by Bourlem Guerdjou (born Asnières, France, 1965). The film's central character, an Algerian construction laborer who brings his family from their native village to the miserable plywood shack where he has been living, wants to make it in French society at any cost. His idea of paradise is obtaining an apartment of his family's own.

Many of the film's elements are familiar: the conflict between the immigrant's ambition and the demands of a social cause (in this case, the FLN, which raises money from the shantytown's residents), the wife's awakening and the crisis this creates, the moment of truth when the protagonist must choose between the greater good and his own plans, etc.

The filmmaker means well, but why must all his characters, particularly the women, be quite so noble and even sanctimonious? (For another slant on women confronted with Islamic fundamentalism and tradition, see *Divorce Iranian Style*. Those women give as good as they get, and they play rough!) R.W. Fassbinder pointed out a long time ago that it does little good to represent oppression without showing the scars it leaves. In reality, to paint the oppressed in pretty colors is to minimize the depth of their oppression, because if the latter leaves its victims so morally unscathed, then why should anyone consider it a condition requiring a radical remedy?



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsws.org/contact