Balkan Black Box: a festival of Balkan film in Berlin—Part 1

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This is the first of two articles on a recent festival of Balkan films.

A recent Berlin festival of Balkan film provided an opportunity to review and concentrate on some of the strengths of films from the region and, at the same time, obtain a glimpse of the enormous decline in social and cultural conditions which has taken place throughout the former Stalinist bloc over the past ten years. In a region which has suffered economic decline and the ravages of war, the former Yugoslavia, a number of filmmakers exhibit an admirable resistance to nationalism and a healthy scepticism towards the "wonders" of Western democracy.

A crucial element in finding one's feet as a filmmaker in eastern Europe is coming to terms with the heritage of Stalinist rule in the region and at least a handful of Balkan filmmakers seem willing to undertake, in a preliminary fashion, an appraisal of the past decades.

The festival, organised by a group called "black box network," in co-operation with a group of filmmakers who engage in the distribution of works from the region, featured a retrospective of the films of Zelimir Zilnik (see Part 2), together with a selection of films from the region which have featured at film festivals and then gone into independent distribution over the past few years. Included among the latter were Emir Kusturica's *Underground* (1995) and *Black Cat, White Cat* (1998), Goran Rebic's *The Punishment* (1999) and a superficial documentary, *Off Season* (1994-7), which deals with the work of the German Hans Koschnick as the European Union administrator in the divided town of Mostar in Bosnia Herzegovina.

There were also some feature film debuts of young directors, among them the weak and cliché-ridden feature *Beautiful People* (1999) by Jasmin Dizdar, the more complex, though, alas, not very illuminating *Before the Rain* (1994) by Macedonian filmmaker Milcho Manchevski and the charming but limited *Gone with the Train* (1996) by Slovenian filmmaker Igor Sterk. The festival also featured selections of short films as well as exhibitions.

The Chinese Market is a new documentary film by director Zoran Solomun (see interview from the Toronto film festival in 1997: http://www.wsws.org/arts/1997/sep1997/tff-1.shtml).

The film deals with the so-called "Chinese Market" in the Jozsefvaros district in Budapest, first established in 1992. *The Chinese Market* is a revealing examination of the appalling living conditions that confront millions in eastern European countries following the collapse of Stalinism. The market grew rapidly in the middle of the 1990s as thousands of Chinese moved to the Hungarian capital and took over the local market as a centre of exchange and haggle for commodities mass-produced at rock-bottom prices in Chinese factories.

Rasid from Bosnia, Mihaela from Rumania, Bosko from Macedonia and Margit from Hungary are regular visitors to the Chinese market in Budapest. Like tens of thousands of others throughout eastern Europe they earn a living by travelling hundreds, sometimes thousands of kilometres every month buying cheap at the Chinese market and then transporting the goods back to their own countries for sale at local markets. The expenditure of time and energy on the part of the dealers is enormous.

We watch Rasid shaving in the mirror before setting off on his marathon trip to the market. He wants to look smart and convince the customs officials that he is no smuggler. At the market in Budapest he fills a voluminous bag with a selection of blouses, sandals, cosmetics etc. Because of the language gap communication with the Chinese stallholders takes place almost exclusively via portable adding machine. Rasid punches in his buying price and shows it to the trader, the Chinese tradesman punches a higher price on his own adding machine and the haggling begins.

One East European driver tells us that he makes a journey of 1,000 km to the market and back three of four times a week. Having purchased their goods the east European traders must wait hours at the various borders—Bosnia, Macedonia, Rumania, etc.—while custom officials check through the wares. In additional to an official border tax averaging perhaps 50 marks per head, the traders are also

expected to pay additional bribes to the border officials (or take orders from the officials for future purchases).

In interviews the dealers and traders reveal their past jobs and lives. One of the dealers says he is the former director of a factory with 1,000 workers. Another worked as an editor in a publishing house. Yet another was a professor at an East European university—now they either man market stalls or spend their working week undertaking long, arduous journeys and haggling over cheap commodities. Mihaela from Rumania worked for years as a nurse, the profession of her choice. Now more than 30-years-old with a child, she was recently made redundant and still cannot afford to live apart from her parents. Many of the main figures featured in the film are highly educated and qualified people now desperately scratching together a living.

In one scene we meet a women seated in front of the shabby container toilets set up outside the market hall. She says she has trained as a secretary and is qualified to process parliamentary protocols. Now she works 12 hours a day collecting 40 Hungarian forints from every person who wants to use the toilets. The toilets appear in a thoroughly unappetising state—nevertheless the owner has established an electronic sensor which detects every human body which enters the toilet. At the end of the day he compares the tally of customers with the takings to ensure his profit margin.

The market is a dizzying mix of nationalities. Four thousand Chinese traders operate their stalls—in the main poor peasants who have travelled to Budapest determined to make more money in Hungary than they ever could in China. Additional stalls are manned by Turks and Indians. Customers come from all over eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Nevertheless the market and city are rigidly divided into national ghettos—there is not the slightest effort made by the ruling authorities to encourage any sort of cultural inter-change. At the same time in the course of the film the people interviewed acknowledge that despite their 12-hour days, sometimes in freezing cold, they will never be rich. Somewhere back in China a factory manager is making a fortune, but the majority of people involved in eastern European trading earn barely the means of subsistence.

In discussion after his film director Zoran Solomun conceded that hundreds of thousands in the former eastern bloc live this way. Taxes and bribes at the borders sustain the customs authorities. Rents paid by the market traders are pocketed by the city and town bureaucracies. In the former Yugoslav region of Bosnia economic collapse means that the single greatest source of income for the area are purchases (including for prostitution) made by the occupying NATO troops. At the beginning of a new millennium, the film strikingly documents the extraordinary waste of human energy and potential under the eastern variation of the “free market.”

Marshal Tito’s Spirit is a Croatian production by director Vinko Bresan who has basically taken up an idea first utilised by director Zelimir Zilnik to resurrect the spirit of Marshal Tito . During the burial of an old partisan fighter on a small island off the coast of Croatia the ghost of Marshal Tito (who died in 1980) appears. The local mayor, Luka, calls for help and police officer Stipan, who grew up in the small town, is sent too investigate. Stipan confronts the hostility of a group of old partisans who have remained loyal to Tito and see an opportunity to use his return to restore “communist” power on the island.

Stipan also has problems with the town mayor who, following the collapse of Stalinism, has taken over the town’s only hotel, museum, etc. A rabid advocate of free market capitalism and an anti-communist, the mayor recognises the possibilities of reviving the sleepy town’s economic fortunes by encouraging “Polit-tourism.” When he can confirm that the apparition of Tito was real, he reckons that tens of thousands of nostalgic veteran Titoists will travel to the island, stay in his hotel and make him rich. He ponders the possibilities. If it works with Tito, then why not resurrect the ghost of Erich Honnecker for the Germans or even Mao and potentially hundreds of millions of Chinese tourists! In the film’s most amusing scenes the mayor pragmatically pockets his anti-communism, decks out the village in hammer and sickle flags and organises a May Day parade with tractors, peasant “heroes of work,” young pioneers and other Stalinist trappings.

The film was a huge hit in Croatia and has evidently struck a popular nerve. Millions in the region are thoroughly disenchanted with their decade-long experience of so-called democracy and the free market. Particularly amongst older layers of the population there is a profound nostalgia for the relative stability of life under Tito. Bresan’s film is amusing, full of engaging music and certainly worth seeing, but with his parody of the veteran Titoists, he has picked an easy target. It is to be hoped that he and other filmmakers attempt to intensify and deepen their investigation of Balkan society in the 20th century.