

DIRECTOR Emir Kusturica (Bosnia/Yugoslavia, born 1954),
When Father Was Away on Business (1985)

DIRECTOR Theo Angelopoulos (Greece, born 1935), *The
Suspended Step of the Stork* (1991)

DIRECTOR Srdjan Karanović (Yugoslavia, born 1945),
Virginia (1991)

What are you doing, my child?
I'm dreaming, Mother, dreaming
I'm singing you're asking me
what are you doing, my son?
What does the song in your dream
say, my child? Mother,
It says that once I had a house
and now we have none, Mother.
That's what it says,
that I once had a voice and a language
and now I have no voice and no language.
With the voice that I lost in the
language I lost
I sing a song, Mother,
about the house that I lost.

Ademir Kenović, *Savrseni krug* (1997)

beyond *no man's land*

Comic Tragedy & Tearful Laughter in Cinemas of the Balkans

ANDREW HORTON

TWO BUMBLING SOLDIERS FROM OPPOSING ARMIES hurl insults at each other as one holds a rifle on the other and then in his ineptitude loses control of it, and the other soldier takes control and hurls similar humiliations toward his "prisoner" in an isolated battle trench. The scene is somewhere in Bosnia during the Bosnian civil war, and the Serb and Bosnian soldiers then discover in their bantering back and forth that they have dated the same woman in a small town in Bosnia. Combining both slapstick farce and ironic humor ("You dated her too?") coming from so-called enemies, Bosnian filmmaker Danis Tanović's 2001 film, *Nicija zemlja* (Eng. *No Man's Land*), walked off with the 2001 Oscar for best foreign film.

This coveted award for a “Balkan film” that appeared as a darkly comic antiwar statement caught many—who were expecting the award to go to the quirky French “feel good” farce *Amélie*—by surprise. Tanovic’s tragic comedy about the Bosnian War, which he had lived through personally as a young Bosnian soldier, suddenly caught the attention of the millions watching the Academy Awards show in March 2002.

My thesis is a simple one. I feel that what the Academy perhaps did not realize was that we can take *No Man’s Land* as a clear indication that films from the Balkans in a variety of forms have begun to have an impact on American and other foreign moviegoers far beyond the boundaries of the Balkans. Witness, for instance, special conferences and film festivals of Balkan cinema that have taken place at the University of Oklahoma in 2001, the University of Michigan in 2002, and Yale University in 2003, as well as the recent publication of Dina Iordanova’s much-needed study, *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media*.

Of course, one might simply remark that because of the recent Balkan wars in Bosnia (1992–95) and Kosovo (1999), there is an increased curiosity about the peoples and cultures of this troubled area of the world. It is my feeling, however, that such curiosity would lead to selective and limited screenings here and there, rather than to an Oscar for best foreign film of the year. What I feel strongly is that *No Man’s Land* shares with so many films of the Balkans a special blending of humor and horror, the tragic and the comic. In short, these films embrace verbal and physical/visual dimensions that are emblematic of a cultural spirit searching for ways to transcend the conflicts and wars of times present and past. Yugoslav film critic Goran Gocić mirrors such a perspective on Balkan culture when he writes, “When it comes to art, the Balkans is definitely a place of fulfilled dreams—not dark phantasms of carnage, but beautiful, emotional stories full of passion for life.”¹ In these few pages, we will explore this spirit as it is reflected in *No Man’s Land* and other films from the Balkans. I wish to explore briefly Tanovic’s film and then turn to other films from the Balkans to suggest four particular characteristics of these films that cross national boundaries and thus suggest a transnational cultural similarity.

Let us now return to where we began: on the battlefields of Bosnia in Tanovic’s *No Man’s Land*. Two men in tattered boxer shorts wave handkerchiefs as they shout and dance about in an open field. They could easily make us laugh if this were all we knew about them, but they happen to be on a Bosnian battlefield, and the troops on either side refuse to shoot, since no one knows which side they’re on. It is a moment of joyful yet darkly ironic laughter in *No Man’s Land*. What we understand is that the opposing armies don’t know that one of the two men is a Bosnian and the other a Serb because, without uniforms, they simply appear to be two guys taking time off from war to have fun.



Srdjan Karanovic’s *A Film with No Name* (1989), in which “Romeo” is Serbian and “Juliet” is Albanian.

The time period of Tanovic’s film is late in the Bosnian conflict (after the Dayton Peace Accord), when thousands of United Nations peacekeeping troops were in place. The location is an isolated battle trench in which an inexperienced Serbian soldier, Nino (played by Croatian actor Rene Bitorajac), and a cynical Bosnian soldier, Ciki (played by Bosnian actor Branko Djuric), wind up holding each other prisoner in a dangerous standoff in “no man’s land” between Bosnian and Serbian lines.

Such is the simple yet effective setup for Tanovic’s film, but this is only the beginning of this unusual antiwar film. For Tanovic adds one more narrative element that drives his engaging tale in both comic and tragic directions: between the opposing soldiers is a Bosnian “corpse” with a land mine underneath him that will explode if the body is moved. The final twist is that the corpse is actually only unconscious and awakens to his tragic reality, which threatens all three of the soldiers. Cera, the “corpse” (Croatian actor Filip Sovagovic), was only wounded and placed on the mine as a dangerous “joke” by two Serbs as a trap for any Bosnians looking for their fallen comrade.

The United Nations, which surrounds the warring sides with peacekeeping troops, continually offers the explanation: “We are here to keep the peace but we are not allowed to do anything or get involved.” Tanovic’s deftly executed film should make viewers everywhere uneasy about even those UN members who wish to be active in keeping peace rather than passively “camping out” in a troubled land. The film clearly echoes the tragedy of Srebrenica, for instance, where thousands of Bosnian prisoners were allowed to be taken by Serbs, without protest, from UN camps to their execution and disposal in mass graves. Through the French actor Georges Siatidis, who plays a soldier in the UN patrol who attempts to help the three men in the trench, Tanovic appears to reference the well-meaning

efforts of an actual French officer, Lieutenant General Philippe Morillon.

Commentators have made clear that no one's hands were clean in Bosnia, including those of the UN troops.² Likewise, the "let's get a hot story" mentality of the international news media is also criticized in the dark humor of Tanovic's film. The viewer continually watches reporters more interested in their deadlines and how to "beef up" tragic stories than in trying to understand what is really going on in front of their eyes. On the other hand, in Tanovic's tight tale, the UN is ironically pressured into action because of the attention of the international press as British war correspondent Jane Livingstone (Katrin Cartlidge) goes "live" to ask what is being done about the three men in the trench.

The mixed drama and dark comedy of the three men in no man's land then becomes forgotten: the real power struggle is between CNN-like media giants and the UN administrators who want to maintain a "good image." Tanovic's savagely satirical point is well taken. With the UN forces arriving in Bosnia too late to save the lives of several hundred thousand innocent women, children, and elderly, not to mention warring military factions, the allied forces were still not given permission to act in ways that could have stopped or averted further conflicts, killings, and acts of destruction. On a similar note, in a more distant corner of the world, that no overwhelming international outcry has emerged concerning the slaughter of thousands of innocent Chechens by Russians during the past few years is clearly explained by the absence of a similar group of international journalists covering the Chechen-Russian conflict.³

The second half of *No Man's Land* goes far beyond any of the current Hollywood war films in revealing this second war connected to any war being conducted these days. Again, we are speaking of the conflict between peacekeeping troops and the often ambiguous role of the media in covering such action when the terms "fast-breaking" and "shocking" are more important than in-depth or thorough coverage.

No Hollywood happy ending resolves all these efforts in Tanovic's film. Even the German antimine expert brought in by the UN throws up his hands, explaining that a mine of this sort, situated as it is and activated, cannot be deactivated. I do not wish to spoil the ending between Nino and Ciki for those who have not seen the film. Nevertheless, it is fair to explain that the final shot begins with a close-up of our wounded Bosnian on the mine—still alive and conscious, but now abandoned by all. The camera becomes a rising crane shot, which serves as one of the most satisfying examples of how a single shot can capture mood, theme, and even a metaphor in a film that I can remember in recent years. Cera will surely die. There is no solution for his "explosive" situation.

Tanovic's ending is all the more tragic because of the stoic expression on his face as he accepts (what else to do?) the fact that the whole situation—of Bosnia, the peacekeepers, and the



In a scene from Theo Angelopoulos's *Suspended Step of the Stork* (1991), Marcello Mastroianni as a father figure gives away his daughter in a marriage ceremony taking place on the border of Greece and Albania.

media—has become so absurd that no crying, shouting, or protest would do any good. Finally, that Tanovic leaves us with the bomb yet to explode, metaphorically and thematically, suggests that this war and its situation is not over. The peacekeepers are still in place and there is still no real peace.

BALKAN COMEDIES: SPIRITUAL AND DARKLY IRONIC

BEFORE EXPLORING SUCH DARK AND JOYFUL LAUGHTER, however, a note is offered on what we mean by *Balkan*. Dina Iordanova best captures the concept as used here when she notes, "In my usage, the Balkans is not a geographical concept but one that denotes a cultural entity, widely defined by shared Byzantine, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian legacies and by the specific marginal positioning of the region in relation to the western part of the European continent."⁴ We are speaking, therefore, of cinemas from the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Albania, Greece, Turkey, and Romania most specifically, even when, as Iordanova readily recognizes, these countries themselves often resist the label "Balkan."

I would add, more specifically, that what these Balkan histories represent are complicated yet also fertile crossings of Christian Orthodox cultures with Muslim influences from the roughly five hundred years of Turkish domination. In terms of "tragic comedy" as a concept, therefore, it is important to note that we should acknowledge the larger view of comedy in the sense of a triumph that could be spiritual rather than physical or humorous. In such a light, of course, Dante's *Divine Comedy* comes to mind, for the "comedy" is Dante's "triumph" over life, death, and the limitations of this world by his final ability to reach a Christian union with God in paradise.⁵

What I feel strongly is that *No Man's Land* shares with so many films of the Balkans a special blending of humor and horror, the tragic and the comic. In short, these films embrace verbal and physical/visual dimensions that are emblematic of a cultural spirit searching for ways to transcend the conflicts and wars of times present and past.

A similar "comic triumph" in a spiritual vein has existed in the cultures of the Balkans and especially the former Yugoslavia. The epic poems of Serbia, for instance, celebrate the Serbian spiritual victory over the conquering Turks during the Battle of Kosovo in the fourteenth century. The Turks, such poems declare, only murdered and destroyed Serbs as living creatures, not as Christians and spiritual beings.

Equally important to the humor and sense of comedy of these cultures, however, is a very strong sense of irony. We know that irony thrives on drawing attention between what could or might be and what, in fact, is actual reality. As practiced by Balkan filmmakers, irony often calls forth both tears and laughter as we "get" the difference between ideals and harsh realities, dreams and history. Of course, such a blend of humor and horror is not limited to the Balkans, as Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* (1997) suggests in the tragic irony of its title and ending, as the young boy sees an American tank and thinks he has "won" the contest, which his father (Benigni) has tried to pretend the concentration camp is instead of a death camp.

The much-celebrated *Time of the Gypsies* (1989), directed by Emir Kusturica, provides us with a clear example of such dark yet comic irony. Based on newspaper reportage of actual Yugoslav gypsies who not only worked in crime organizations throughout Italy but also sold their own children into slavery, prostitution, and crime, the film tracks one young boy's odyssey from Yugoslavia to Italy in a *Godfather*-like tale (there are, in fact, many direct references to Francis Ford Coppola's crime trilogy). As Kusturica's film ends, the young gypsy-mafia protagonist is murdered, and at the funeral his five-year-old son steals the coins placed over his father's eyes (an ancient custom) and runs out of the house. We cannot help but laugh at the son stealing from his dead father, but, on the other hand, it is a "triumph," for the son has learned to follow in his father's footsteps: to be a good thief! Such a moment is ironic, humorous, tragic, and triumphant at the same time. Thus, unlike many Hollywood comedies such as *Dumb and Dumber* (1994), *Something about Mary* (2001), *Not Another Stupid Teen Movie* (2002), and *Goldmember* (2002), films such as *Time of the Gypsies* and *No Man's Land* are able to take on serious topics—the selling of gypsy

children and the Bosnian War—but open them up to find laughter that is often dark and ironic and also frequently triumphant in unexpected ways. It is worth noting that Greece has also had a tradition of satirical comedy tackling serious topics ever since Aristophanes took to the stage in the fifth century B.C. with such joyous and imaginative farces as *Lysistrata* and *Peace*, which were fully meant as antiwar statements. In a much similar spirit, the former Yugoslavia under communist rule after World War II always allowed artists and intellectuals a much larger degree of freedom to satirize and criticize policies, practices, and politics than did other communist countries.⁶

HOW MANY BORDERS DO I HAVE TO CROSS TO ARRIVE HOME?

LET US NOW CONSIDER FOUR CINEMATIC IMAGES to help us in our effort to illuminate and illustrate better what we mean by tragic comedy and tearful laughter.

First, on a lonely stretch of unpaved road in winter by a swiftly flowing river, a silent crowd in dark clothing gathers as a bride in pure white and her father approach the group. Across the river we see a similar large group in black gathered and a young man who is well dressed as a groom in the middle. A Greek Orthodox priest arrives on the bride's side of the river by bicycle, and a wedding ceremony silently begins—with one clearly noticeable difference from any traditional Orthodox wedding: the bride and the groom are separated by the river and never get to touch, embrace, walk arm in arm.

Our second image is of a young couple on a train headed through the Yugoslav countryside toward the Italian border in 1989. They look at each other with deep love as we notice the woman is more than six months pregnant. The young man then turns to a bag full of cans of 35mm film. He opens the window of the compartment and begins to toss the film out the window as we see the film unwinding in slow motion and falling to the tracks and the surrounding countryside.

Third, we have a scruffy looking middle-aged man sitting with two young starving orphaned boys in a bombed-out apartment building in Sarajevo eating a simple meal as they watch a small portable television. The film is *The Gold Rush*, with Charlie

Chaplin eating his boot and shoelaces as if they were a pasta delight.

Finally, we have two men in their underpants standing in an open country space, waving handkerchiefs as they dance and prance, each facing a different direction. Each image instructs us about the crossroads of Balkan cinematic and thus cultural humor and horror.

1. The sense of triumph at the end of a comedy may be spiritual rather than physical. Our first image is from Theo Angelopoulos's finely tuned but little-seen film, *The Suspended Step of the Stork* (1991). The young lovers who become married in a silent ceremony, reaching across a river that is also a border between Greece and the other nation, is a triumph of the spirit of their love rather than a physical uniting of the two. The young bride explains to a television journalist, who is making a documentary about a Greek politician who disappeared "up north by the borders," that even though politics and wars have and will keep her husband from ever being physically with her (they met as children and fell in love before the current boundaries were redrawn), they have chosen to be so married.⁷

The wedding is, as we know, a main ingredient in the conclusion of most romantic comedies, and thus Angelopoulos does present us with a triumph of romance in the spirit of comedy, even though—in this darkly etched Balkan film on the edges of several nations with hundreds of refugees appearing in the film, all trying to get "home"—this comedy leads to no laughter.

If the wedding is a "comic triumph" in one sense, however, a larger question remains unanswered: "How many borders to I have to cross before I arrive home?" comments the politician (played by Marcello Mastroianni) who has dropped out. It becomes a key question for so many Balkan films as well as for all the nations involved in the recent conflicts. Once more, however, Angelopoulos ends his film on a "triumphant" note as he shows a series of broken telegraph poles along the river border, each with a repairman in a yellow raincoat climbing the poles and beginning to connect wires from pole to pole, reaching across the border.

Such quietly triumphant or hopeful images, Balkan scholar Ger Duijzings suggests, are more typical of the cultures of the area than simply particular constructions of the individual filmmaker. Speaking specifically of Kosovo, Duijzings writes: "Although the war in Kosovo may cause us to think in terms of irreconcilable differences, one should not forget that boundaries—the territorial as well as the cognitive ones—have often faded in more quiet periods."⁸

2. In Balkan "romantic comedy," the couple may come closer to dying than laughing before they are "happily" united in the end. Srdjan Karanović's darkly humorous "romance," *A Film with No Name* (1989), accounts for the second image. Karanović himself often describes his film as a Balkan *Romeo and Juliet* with a "happy ending" (personal interviews). Romeo in this

case is a young Serb in love with a young Muslim Kosovo woman. Their romance is interrupted when the girl's relatives attack the Serb and cut off his penis. The "joke" is on the attackers, however, for the girl is already pregnant. Ultimately, the couple decides to marry and move to Italy, where they are headed by the end of the film. Thus the "happy ending": love triumphs, they will happily marry and have a family life, but outside of Kosovo, Serbia, or any part of Yugoslavia, of course. The final irony is the film thrown out the window of the departing train: the film that is being destroyed represents the efforts of a Belgrade filmmaker to make a documentary about their sufferings. The final "toss" is therefore a vote by the couple for a life without a camera trying to document their troubles. This is tragedy for the filmmaker but a triumph once more for our young couple, who are determined to live their own life without politics, cultural hatred, and fear.

3. Balkan films often reference earlier comedic traditions, including those of Chaplin and silent comedy. The third image brings Chaplin and the Bosnian War together in a highly ironic way. Part of what is both humorous and touching about the scene of an aging poet and two war orphans in Sarajevo watching Chaplin on television while trying to stay alive during a war is that we recognize that such a scene absolutely could happen. Despite the NATO bombings of Belgrade every night for months during 1999, for instance, much regular programming, including reruns of American shows such as *The Simpsons*, continued to be shown. Ademir Kenović's *Savrseni krug* (1997; Eng. *The Perfect Circle*), from which this scene was chosen, brilliantly captures such a seemingly surrealistic moment. That Charlie Chaplin is the reference is also a tribute to the British-born comedian who created the persona of the tramp, that "outsider" who never fits into the society through which he wanders.

4. Dark Balkan comedies such as *No Man's Land* take on political, social, and cultural issues that we should not ignore, without "preaching" easy "happy endings" or solutions to us. Given all we have explored about these dark comedies, how can we speak of this ending as in any way "triumphant"? Simple: Cera is still alive as the film fades to black. Tanovic could surely tell us that some miracle or act of intelligent and passionate intervention might still take place. After all, over a million visitors a year travel to Medjugorje, the village near Dubrovnik in what is now Croatia where the Virgin Mary appeared to young village children not too many years ago.

TOWARD A CONCLUSION: "NATIONALISM WILL BE THE DEATH OF US ALL"

Michael Cacoyannis's memorable film *Zorba the Greek* ends with Zorba (immortalized by Anthony Quinn) dancing arm over arm with Alan Bates. They dance to affirm their lives despite the financial collapse of Bates's mine on Crete, which Zorba had

been helping to reopen. "Have you ever seen such a beautiful disaster!" shouts Zorba with glee and laughter—rather than tears and despair—in a spirit that is very Balkan. For Zorba, as created by the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis, embraces all the Balkans. His prized possession, for instance, is the musical instrument, the santuri, he received from a "wise old Turk" who taught him how to play it.

While Cacoyannis's joyful ending does keep Kazantzakis's truly "Balkan" spirit of laughter and celebration winning out over disaster, the novel has an even stronger Balkan conclusion. Kazantzakis's work closes with a letter from Skopje in Serbian Macedonia, where Zorba has just died after having married a young Serbian woman. His last gesture, the letter reports to the narrator, was to go to the doorframe and, with his eyes wide open, "begin to laugh" at the world, at life, at the universe. That is not all, however, for the narrator recalls that Zorba warned him earlier: "Nationalism will be the death of us all," a line that was used in refugee newsletters during the Bosnian War.⁹

Similar to Zorba's dying laughter, *No Man's Land* and a multitude of films from the Balkans exist and continue to be made, reminding us of both the folly and tragedy of those who misuse causes to bring suffering to millions. To be more specific, I am speaking of a large number of films from the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Greece, including works by such directors as

- Jasmin Dizdar of Bosnia (*Beautiful People*, 1998)
- Emir Kusturica of Bosnia (*Do You Remember Dolly Bell?*, 1981; *When Father Was Away on Business*, 1985; *Time of the Gypsies*, 1988; *Arizona Dream*, 1993; *Underground*, 2000; and *Black Cat, White Cat*, 2001)
- Dusan Makavejev of Yugoslavia (*W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism*, 1971; *Sweet Movie*, 1974; *Montenegro*, 1981; et cetera)
- Goran Paskaljević of Yugoslavia (*Cabaret Balkan*, 1998)
- Srdjan Karanović of Serbia (*Something in Between*, 1983; *A Film with No Name*, 1989; *Virđzina*, 1991, et cetera)
- Rajko Grlić of Croatia (*The Melody Haunts My Memory*, 1981; *In the Jaws of Life*, 1984; et cetera)
- Slobodan Sijan of Yugoslavia (*Who's Singing over There?*, 1980; *How I Was Systematically Destroyed by an Idiot*, 1983; et cetera)
- Theo Angelopoulos of Greece (*The Suspended Step of the Stork*, 1991; *Ulysses' Gaze*, 1995; *Eternity and a Day*, 1998; et cetera)
- Pantis Voulgaris of Greece (*It's a Long Road*, 1997)
- Sotiris Goritsas of Greece (*Balkanizater*, 1997)
- Michael Cacoyannis of Greece (*Zorba the Greek*, 1964).

These films could serve as an introductory survey of Balkan cinema for those interested.

In his recent book *Explaining Yugoslavia*, Balkan expert John Allcock is even more specific in "bringing home" the whole world of the Balkans as fact and fiction, reality and distorted myths: "To understand Yugoslavia and what has become of it is to understand processes within which we ourselves are implicated, and to confront our own problems merely reflected back

to us in a mirror."¹⁰ Tanović's biting irony in *No Man's Land* leaves us with a similar thought. Are we too like the UN troops, here to keep the peace but not allowed to get involved? Meanwhile, the song that begins Kenović's film *The Perfect Circle* poignantly reminds us that the larger sense of "comic triumph" is simply the ability to sing or film a "song" that will survive the troubles that surround one: "I sing a song, Mother / about the house that I lost." **WLT**

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¹ Gocić, *The Cinema of Emir Kusturica*, 176.

² Nader Mousavizadeh brings this point home in *The Black Book of Bosnia* (1996), 38.

³ See Robert Kaplan's study of the wars in Afghanistan, *Soldiers of God* (1990), 138.

⁴ Jordanova, *Cinema of Flames*, 6.

⁵ See Horton, *Laughing Out Loud*, 84–86.

⁶ See Horton, "Satire and Sympathy," 18.

⁷ See Horton, *The Films of Theo Angelopoulos*, 163.

⁸ Duijzings, *Religion and Politics*, 1.

⁹ Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek*, 315, 304.

¹⁰ Allcock, *Explaining Yugoslavia*, 6.

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Doris Dörrie

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Michael Ende

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Hans Fallada

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***Die Blechtrommel* [The Tin Drum]**

Günter Grass

***Crazy* [Crazy]**

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***Sobach'e serdtse* [Heart of the Dog]**

Mikhail Bulgakov

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