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Book Reviews

BALKAN CINEMA AND THE GREAT WARS

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Abstract

Edited by Adrian Silvan Ionescu, Marian Ţuţui, and Savaş Arslan, *Balkan Cinema and the Great Wars* is a testament to the fertility of Balkan cinema. The collection is the product of a conference held in Bucharest in 2018 on the representation of wars and conflicts in Balkan cinema, and it explores, among other things, how battlefield heroism, patriotic sentiment, alternative histories, and the landscapes of death and destruction are presented in fiction films, documentaries, and newsreels.

Keywords: Balkan cinema, film history, Great Wars..

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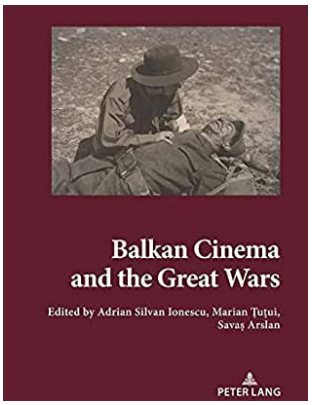
BALKAN CINEMA AND THE GREAT WARS

Öz

Adrian Silvan Ionescu, Marian Ţuţui, and Savaş Arslan'ın derlediği *Balkan Cinema and the Great Wars*, Balkan sineması kavramının ne kadar verimli olduğunun ikna edici bir kanıtı. Derleme 2018'de Bükreş'te Balkan sinemasında savaş ve çatışmaların temsili üzerine düzenlenen bir konferansın ardından oluşturulmuş ve başka bazı konuların yanında, kurmaca filmler, belgeseller ve aktüalite filmlerinde muharebelerdeki kahramanlık, vatansever duygular, alternatif tarihler ve ölüm ve yok oluş manzaraları gibi konuları ele alıyor.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Balkan sineması, film tarihi, Büyük Savaşlar.



Balkan Cinema and the Great Wars
Edited by Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, Savas Arslan and Marian Tutui

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Edited by Adrian Silvan Ionescu, Marian Ţuţui, and Savaş Arslan, the collection is another convincing testimony to the fertility of the concept of Balkan cinema. Adrian Silvan Ionescu is a prominent Romanian art historian specialized in the history of early photographic documents. Marian Tutui is an experienced researcher of Balkan film and author of an insightful book on the work of the Manakia Brothers (2009), the first filmmakers of the region, as well as of the monograph *Orient Express: The Romanian and Balkan Cinema* (2011). Savaş Arslan is an international Turkish film scholar and author of a monograph on the history of cinema in Turkey and a book on melodrama. The collection is the outcome of a conference on the representation of wars in the Balkan cinema. The conference was organized in Bucharest, in the centenary of World War I in 1918. Its stated goal was to explore how battlefield heroism, patriotic sentiment, alternative histories, and the landscapes of death and destruction are presented in fiction and documentary film, newsreels, and studio-made melodramas. The collection presents selected and improved versions of the papers presented at the conference.

The concept of Balkan cinema serves as a perceptive framework for re-telling the stories of the various national cinemas of the region—Turkish, Albanian, Romanian, or Croatian—in terms of thematic, stylistic, and industrial development. Further, it helps better understand the social function of cinema in these countries, and how, over time, various political regimes, with various ideological affiliations, made use of cinema to increase and maintain power. Moreover, given the ethnic and religious diversity of the region, the concept of Balkan cinema is also insightful in revealing how a device and an institution invented in Western Europe is then successfully exported to North America and enabled new ways of self-perception in other parts of the world, and exercised a disc-

rete and effective colonial influence. Finally, studies like this put on the radar a multitude of original films, which otherwise would have remained forgotten in their national archives and given little public or scholarly attention outside the borders of their countries.

The collection addresses the topics mentioned above. It does so by focusing on the representation of war in Balkan film, as well as on the impact of war on filmmaking, and at times on film distribution and reception. War is a central concern for both the heroic and tragic history writing of the twentieth century, given the many tens of millions of deaths related to armed conflict in Europe only. War was also a favorite instrument of twentieth-century European regimes to legitimize their grip on power and to energize patriotism and collective identity in emerging nations—which was the case for many Balkan nations during that time. For the Balkans, war is a relevant historical topic because both war and war crimes seem to have lasted longer in the Balkans than in other parts of Europe.

In relation to World War I, the Balkans have been unjustly blamed for having started it. With its shared culture and collective history, the Balkans, however, have another important link to WWI. The war was certainly a disaster for the Balkans in terms of loss of human life and material and biological destruction. Nevertheless, in conjunction with the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913 that preceded it, the war was also instrumental in the emancipation of many nations of the region from imperial or colonial rule. WWI contributed to the creation of states and to the reconfiguration of the South-Eastern European map. Within the cultures of these emerging states and within their reconfigured borders, new discourses of nationalism and patriotism found their articulation under the influence of war. Cinema was, of course, instrumental in the dissemination of these discourses. Moreover, it was after WWI that many of these nations were exposed to socialist and communist ideas–an exposure that would change the destinies of these countries later.

World War II had also a brutal effect on the Balkans, with countries like the former Yugoslavia suffering unbelievable human losses. The war exposed most of the Balkan states to Nazi Germany's neocolonial practices, and, under the influence of Italian fascist and Nazi ideology, some Balkan states, such as Romania, engaged in perpetrating war crimes. Further, the end of WWII once again brought radical changes in the political organization of the region. Most of the Balkan states, with the

exclusion of Turkey and Greece, fell under the Soviet sphere of influence, which meant the imposition of Stalinist regimes after 1945. Greece and Turkey escaped this influence but fared not significantly better in the early postwar period. They went through civil war, military rules, and even a war against each other over contested territories.

The collection tackles some but obviously not all the war-related topics mentioned above. Further, its chapters address not only the quality and veracity of the representation of war on screen but also related issues such as the way film operates as a history-telling device and delivers insights into the past and the ideological context of the times. Contributions also inquire about the interested parties in rendering cinema to a narrator of national histories: What were the social effects of such projects and what strategies did political and economic actors employ to control audiences' reactions? Most research for the volume is produced by means of textual analysis, and from this point of view, the volume complements a more industry-driven approach to the Balkan cinema as proposed by the forthcoming collection *Contemporary Balkan Cinema: Transnational Exchanges and Global Circuits*, edited by Lydia Papadimitriou and Ana Grgic (Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

Contributors to the volume come from various Balkan countries, such as Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, and the former Yugoslavian countries. They address mainly phenomena in their national cinemas. They adopt various approaches to film analysis, such as historiographic ones, semiotics, and intermediality, as well as cultural studies' analysis of power-knowledge nexuses including postcolonial ones. While some articles present surveys that deal with multiple films, others choose to deliver close readings. Periods under focus range from early interwar film and experimental cinema to productions from the era of German and Soviet occupation, state socialism, and beyond.

The collection is structured in three parts. The first is dedicated to the representation of WWI. The chapters of this section reflect on topics such as, melodrama as a war genre and its effects on further filmmaking; transmedia storytelling from the early days of the war to the present; body language in cinema during the transition from silent film to talkies; cinematic deconstructions of war heroism and their political intervention; cinema as a propaganda institution in contested territories during wartime; and the mythologizing of WWI female heroes over time and in different ideological contexts.

The second part focuses on the representation of WWII. Its chapters address issues such as film censorship and the loss of film due to the turmoil of war or willing destruction; the wartime turn to propaganda in film magazines and how such topics are prioritized; the socialist-era anti-war animation and its reflection of Cold War threats such as the atomic bomb; the Balkan interwar avant-garde film and how it rejected cinematic realism in favor of Soviet montage; and the envisioning of war treachery in feature films of the 1960s as part of a larger practice of symbolic violence against women in contrast to the socialist emancipation discourses and the female partisan fighter figure.

The third part bears the title "Balkan Perspectives." It includes chapters approaching a mixed bag of topics. Most of them are related to understandings and representations of the Balkans from both inside and outside the region. Others propose original perspectives on social and political realities that bear the Balkan brand. Topics include the Eurocentric envisioning of the Balkans as a film market and an exotic shooting location, and the strategies outlined to exploit it accordingly; the lack of the veracity of soldier uniforms in war films and the quality of the cast of historical figures; the way Australian films envisioned the Balkans as a battleground, a country of emigration and war exodus, and as a place of return (especially the Greek islands), thus both negatively stereotyping it and yet idealizing it; the way narratives of war create identity and otherness, as well as the way progressive war film undermines them; the curation of Balkan film at international festivals on archive films, and a reflection on how these practices can be improved; violence and its cinematic construction; and the transformations in the representations of war before and after 1989.

The chapter on the curation of Balkan film at international archival festivals highlights perhaps the most important message sent by the collection to the academic milieu. In that, the chapter highlights and scrutinizes a huge and valuable component of the European film heritage that is still under-researched. The collection has the merit to put on the scholarly map films that are normally treated as belonging to the deep archives of film history. From this angle, the collection shows that Balkan film deserves more attention at least for three reasons: first, to challenge the stereotypes that still inform approaches to the cinematic production of the region; second, to reveal that Balkan filmmakers produced films that are comparable in value to those of Central and Western Europe; and third, to show that, despite its diversity and tumultuous

history, the Balkan cinema is a source of valuable material for mapping developments in the history of European film and society as a whole, as well as for achieving an improved understanding of Europe's artistic and political discourses.