

Cinema opens a dialogue about coming to terms with Balkans' past

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The transition from authoritarian regimes to democracy is never easy. Countries and their people must find ways to deal with traumatic and damaging histories. One of these ways has come to be known as “lustration”.

In its narrowest sense, lustration aims to identify individuals responsible for human rights abuses and purge them from public office. Usually, this involves high-profile criminal trials.

Lustration also encompasses truth-seeking and reconciliation. These processes aim to repair the profound damage that periods of trauma and injustice do to civic traditions, social cohesion and intergenerational relationships.

The broader social function of lustration in “coming to terms with the past”, then, is to rebuild trust and bring about changes in community behaviour following times of collective trauma.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, many former communist regimes had to face painful truths about their past. Twenty-seven years later, this quest continues.

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The transition from communist authoritarianism to democracy has been framed primarily by judicial and political procedures of lustration. Unfortunately, lustration efforts have been instituted very unevenly across the former Eastern Bloc – if at all. **National differences** in political will, objectives and legal frameworks have made it difficult for the region to find a sustainable way forward.

The Balkan case and the role of film

These problems are perhaps most pronounced in the Balkan countries of the former Yugoslavia. Here, memories of the **authoritarian past** under Josip Broz Tito endure. Yet there is also ongoing disagreement over the **ethno-nationalist wars** following the break-up of the Yugoslav state.

In other environments where formal lustration procedures have stalled or failed, alternative cultural forms of expression have explored aspects of witnessing and memory that could not be contained within legal frameworks.

In post-war Europe, for instance, literature was a powerful truth-seeking agent in breaking silences over traumatic pasts. This was especially so in Germany after the Holocaust.

Since the Cold War, film too has taken on this role. By engaging a broad base of people on a popular level, film has a much more immediate and visceral impact than formal lustration proceedings.

Many films have been made about the 1990s wars of the former Yugoslavia. Cinema itself cannot resolve issues of ethno-national conflict, nor can it tell us who was right and who was wrong: it cannot communicate a single, absolute “Truth” with a capital T. Yet films can open up dialogue on highly contentious issues.

Two well-known Balkan films, Milcho Manchevski’s *Before the Rain* (1994) and Theo Angelopoulos’ *Ulysses’ Gaze* (1995), are perfect examples of this. Both express a contested, contradictory pre-Yugoslav Balkan history that is crucial to understanding why the ethno-national question in the region is yet to be resolved.

The paradox of Balkan identity

The tension between ethno-national difference on the one hand and a shared “Balkan” heritage on the other has shaped history in this region for centuries. The attempt to resolve this contradiction through the multi-ethnic socialist state of Yugoslavia merely exacerbated its cleavages.

Under Tito, the “benevolent dictator”, ethno-national co-existence through the ideology of **Brotherhood and Unity** was promulgated. This was an uneasy accord, premised on the notion that all subsidiary national identities would wither away, leaving Yugoslav socialism to prevail.

Also, Tito’s state-endorsed “**partisan myth**” of Yugoslav unity whitewashed the lived reality of ethno-national warfare and Nazi collaboration during the second world war. Yugoslav modernity could



A portrait of Tito watches over a Serbian restaurant along the Belgrade-Nis Motorway. chat des Balkans/flickr



The Yugoslav wars (1991-2001). Peter Denton, Peter Božič, Paul Katzenberger & Paalso/Wikipedia Commons

therefore succeed only by disallowing any real articulation of ethnic difference.

When the Yugoslav state collapsed, “difference”, subsequently, found expression in grotesque and perverted forms. The ethno-nationalist wars of the 1990s were marked by a particularly grisly “intimate” violence between long-time neighbours and friends.

That Yugoslav modernity failed to resolve the paradox of Balkan identity is implicit within Manchevski’s and Angelopoulos’ films. Both directors re-articulate the “quest” narrative, which has traditionally been used in cinema to combine visual explorations of travelled space with psychological processes of change, transformation and revelation.

A cinematic ‘vision of survival’

Angelopoulos’ *Ulysses’ Gaze* depicts the epic journey of a successful yet existentially adrift filmmaker. “A” travels across the crumbling post-Cold War Balkan landscape in search of three lost reels of film shot by the **Manaki brothers**, the filmmakers who introduced cinema into the region at the beginning of the 20th century.

A’s journey is traced cinematically as a historical and cyclical “odyssey”. Within a single “gaze” it takes in the entirety of 20th-century Balkan history up to the ongoing tragedy in Bosnia, where the **Srebrenica massacre** occurred just weeks before the first screening of *Ulysses’ Gaze* in Athens, August 1995.

Although the lost reels are eventually found and processed in Sarajevo, they are not watched, and the war continues around A. The great irony, then, is the seeker’s belief in the possibility of finding a single solution to the present conflict in the past; it is a search for a Balkan utopia that never existed.

From *Ulysses’ Gaze*, the pieces of a toppled Lenin statue are transported down the Danube.

And yet the quest for these films does offer the protagonist “a vision of survival”.

Although A’s journey does not lead to the discovery and restitution of a particular Balkan idyll, the self-knowledge and understanding he gains about the contradictions of Balkan history suggest that these societies can only move forward by accepting their multiplicity, not by trying to resolve it.

A’s belief that this paradox is to be realised through film itself – that is, through the search for the lost Manaki reels – draws attention to the power of cinema in post-Yugoslav truth-seeking processes.

Opening up the dialogue

Manchevski’s *Before the Rain* corresponds to the same traditional “epic” understandings of Balkan history that are expressed in *Ulysses’ Gaze*.

When Aleks, an award-winning war photographer, returns to Macedonia after a 16-year absence, he discovers that “home” no longer exists. The bucolic village he left behind, where Orthodox Macedonians and Albanian Muslims once lived together peacefully, has descended into sectarian violence.

The cinematic trope of the “frontier”, so central to the Western genre and a foundational myth for the **American nation**, traditionally narrates the merging of different peoples and cultures at civilisational boundaries through colonial expansion.

The frontiers in *Before the Rain* do not articulate this narrative of national realisation. Instead, these frontiers reify the impact of the Balkan region’s geographical nexus at major civilisational fault lines, and its long history of domination by successive empires.

The “frontiers” in this film are temporal, not geographical. They are defined violently by each individual group seeking distinction from the other, but with reference, ironically, to events within a shared history of imperial occupation.

The repeated line “time never dies, the circle is never round” communicates director Milcho Manchevski’s message about temporal frontiers.

The paradox of frontiers in *Before the Rain*, therefore, is that temporal frontiers of ethno-nationality operate in a geographical space that different nations have historically shared. Manchevski plays out this irony in a final archetypal “Western” shoot-out, which results in intra-ethnic, not inter-ethnic, bloodshed.

The absurdity of this ending is that each side must kill one of their own to uphold the imagined frontiers of ethnically homogeneous spaces where they have historically never existed. This conveys that “difference” is an implicit and ineradicable component of Balkan identity.

As the history of Yugoslavia’s break-up shows, any ideological attempt to suppress this difference will merely result in perverted articulations of nationhood.

Yet the ending’s even-handedness, its implication that “all sides are equally guilty” of warfare, in turn raises important questions about collective guilt and responsibility that formal lustration processes cannot encompass. This suggests that film has the capacity to prepare the ground for the understanding of collective culpability that is required to “come to terms with past”.

Before the Rain and *Ulysses’ Gaze* both demonstrate that cinema does not play a substitutive role for the failures of lustration in the post-Yugoslav environment. Rather, it has a *pre-lustrative* role.

Cinema fulfils this role by opening up dialogues on ethno-national difference and contested understandings of nationhood. These dialogues communicate the level of self-knowledge and participation required of the broader social and national community if it wishes to atone for past wrongdoings and become more stable and democratic in the future.

