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Born To Be Wild?: Repetition Compulsion, Agency, And 'The Lessons Of History' In Three Balkan Films (Angelopoulos, Kusturica, Manchevski)

In the 1990s, western popular opinion was conditioned to believe that the Balkans and its people were hardwired to repeat the mistakes of a troubled past. That they were a 'poor study' of their own (especially violent) history, unable to absorb the 'lessons of history' and therefore liable to repeat its errors time and time again. Of course, this may not be at all the case. And to dissent from this position hardly casts someone responding from the Balkans as a dissident: Slavoj Žižek makes the case in rather flip terms in his description of an interview between a Serb, Albanian, and an Austrian pacifist in his *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* In this interview, the Serb and Albanian look at each other in utter disbelief when the pacifist suggests that the two of them will at any moment be moved to violence by age-old hatreds!

Whatever the truth of the matter, a number of basic issues remain: If the people of the Balkans are unable to learn from the lessons of history, we need to ask how is the past, or how are the lessons of history constructed or applied in the present? What is the status of the present in relation to the past that so commands our attention in the region (and is so overwhelming in western popular opinion of this region and its people but also in nationalist discourse from within the region)? After all, the present is the criterion for what we find in the past since the past has no way to declare its identity without the present offering it a place.

This presentation proposes to consider the issue of a fatal repetition compulsion in film narrative, where, as in Balkan postmodernist fiction, history remains alive and well and where the issue of historical repetition is engaged time and time again... Consequently this presentation will (briefly) look to three prominent filmmakers who pose such questions in grand, sweeping films that engage with history from the period in question. Predictably, the presentation will draw from Theo Angelopoulos's *Ulysses' Gaze*, Emir Kusturica's *Underground*, and Milko Manchevski's *Before the Rain*.

Indeed, it may be pertinent to see how such issues are treated in film as some critics, like Dina Jordanova, have argued that in this genre filmmakers from the region have resorted to reproducing stereotypes and expectations from the West. How do filmmakers of the region engage the inevitability of history's repetition (as it is received from the West?) and how do they define their roles as filmmakers and citizens? How do they intervene in the workings of time and history? In each case, what does their intervention say about their view of artistic or political action? To what degree does their intervention amount to a dissenting or dissident voice or vision? And against whom?