

Nation as narration: the (*de*)construction of “Yugostalgia” through Kusturica’s cinematic eye

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“We shall remember our country with grief, sadness and joy, every time we tell our children stories beginning like a fairy tale: ‘Once upon a time, there was a land...’”

from the epilogue of *Underground*

“There is no war until a brother kills his brother.”

Marko in *Underground*

1

“Bila jednom jedna zemlja” – once upon a time, there was a land... Kusturica does not wait for the epilogue of *Underground* (1995) to introduce narrativity as the principal approach for remembering both his nation and a painful journey away from home. Indeed, it is right at the beginning, as in a fairy tale – in the tradition of a tale narrated orally – that the ‘once upon a time’ phrase is brought in as the proper frame to understand the Yugoslavia that in the meantime had also become that very journey away from Kusturica’s home. After a fictional plot full of allegories and impossible tunnels connecting Europe from under the ground, the epilogue turns up in the few words directly addressed to the viewers – eye-to-eye – to reinforce the narrativity approach and to further confront them with the apocalyptic reality of a vanishing country once called Yugoslavia, of a vanishing, impossible but irretrievable utopia remembered with mixed feelings of grief, sadness and joy.

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My aim with this essay is to unearth the way Kusturica uses cinema to tell that tale and to convey a sense of nostalgia regarding the political/social/cultural project named Yugoslavia in which he was born and which clearly stands out as an existential and artistic *Heimat*/home of sorts for the man and the filmmaker. The object of this particular nostalgia – or ‘Yugostalgia’, as I shall call it henceforth – is a lost *Heimat*, one to which it is impossible to return, irredeemably doomed by the selfish drives of absolutely modern individuals suddenly freed from their cave of illusions and its all-encompassing paternalistic power. Therefore, ‘Yugostalgia’ revolves around the Musilian motif of possibilism, namely of there being – or of there having been – a Yugoslavia based on multiculturalism, *i.e.* the utopia of a common home for the South Slavs taken as a ‘band of brothers’ at a time when the country named Yugoslavia was breaking up, to the point of ultimately having vanished from maps and from the discourse of daily life. As I try to demonstrate, ‘Yugostalgia’ becomes the expression of that impossible synthesis between ‘utopia’ and ‘disincanto’ – grief, sadness and joy, to go back to *Underground*’s epilogue – the categories that Claudio Magris uses to try to make sense of the ‘terrible twentieth century’ with “its primacy of cataclysms and exterminations performed through a monstrous symbiosis of barbarity and scientific rationality” (Magris, 1996: 8). I contend that throughout the film, and through Kusturica’s cinematic eye, Yugoslavia comes to embody both ‘utopia’ and ‘disincanto’: faith in the potential of humanity and disappointment vis-à-vis the misery humans can produce. Such is the ‘ground zero’, as it were, of the paradoxical feeling of ‘Yugostalgia’, and my central intention is to focus on Kusturica’s cinematic eye from *under* this *ground*. This means that I have in mind an approach that discloses the basic assumptions (i) that cinema can be read as a particular form of social knowledge; (ii) that not unlike all other forms of social knowledge, cinema is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose. Following a world-view that draws on a broadly conceived critical perspective of the social world, my particular approach to Kusturica, *Underground* and cinema at large as a medium of mass communication implies the crucial divide between traditional theory and critical theory, and develops a reading of all things ‘social’ according to which every approach to social knowledge always swings between the acceptance *qua* legitimisation of the existing social order and challenging it. In this context, the distinction made by Cohen-Séat in the context of discussing film acquires a renewed importance. According to this author, it is crucial to understand the filmic fact as different from the cinematic fact. The filmic fact

consists in expressing life, the life of the world or of the mind, of the imagination or of beings and things, by a determined system of the combination of images. The filmic fact therefore includes those aspects of the film as an object, as a combination of visual

images natural or conventional and audial images – sounds or words. (Cohen-Séat, 1946: 57)

On its own terms, however, the cinematic fact refers to film as a specific social phenomenon. According to Cohen-Séat, it is the “circulation in human groups of a resource of documentations, sensations, ideas, feelings, materials offered by life and given form by the film in its fashion” (Cohen-Séat, 1946: 57), and it therefore comes close to Durkheim’s social fact applied specifically to the social role of cinema. Consequently, and as Diana Holmes and Alison Smith put it in the introduction to their edited volume *100 years of European cinema*, “there is the undoubted ability, and some would say the inevitable fate, of cinema to carry, and to communicate to large numbers of people, a set of values and priorities, a certain way of imagining society” (Holmes and Smith, 2000: 1). I argue that this ability to imagine society turns cinema into a most potent political instrument, in the sense that all sorts of social actors, official and otherwise, use its medium to try to convey their contending visions of what a society is and ought to be, of what the relationships among its members mean or ought to mean. Therefore, the cinematic fact about cinema brings to light the strategies of social actors, *i.e.*, their cultural clashes over the nature of collective identity and what must follow from it – what kind of contract should bind people together in a political community, what kind of norms and rules should operate in its workings, what principles of inclusion and exclusion are to be accommodated in order to draw the fine line between inside and outside, friend and foe. All this means that even when cinema does not deliberately take up the duty to encourage its audience to think and question, or to uphold a specific cause, we cannot assume it is just entertainment and spectacle. In my view, cinema is never just entertainment and spectacle, for the plain reason that it has to do with more than just the filmic fact. In a critical way, it has to do with the cinematic fact underlined by Cohen-Séat. As a social phenomenon, cinema is more than the simple combination of visual images and audial images; the crux of it, as far as my essay is concerned, lies in the circulation in human groups of a resource of ideas about the very nature of culture, society and identity. According to this critical meaning, cinema is never just entertainment or spectacle because, like all other forms of social knowledge, it is constitutive of society itself, not just a by-product of it. As Slavoj Žižek put it in his essay on *Underground*, “[a]s we know from philosophical phenomenology, the object of our perception is constituted through the subject’s attitude towards it” (Žižek, 1996: para. 1/19). Moreover, at the outset of the twenty-first century, it is more evident than ever that cinema is crucially enmeshed in the production of cultural relations and meanings which sustain or contest the global system of power and domination and that, consequently, it can-

not escape the broadly defined field of ideology and its concomitant clashes over world-views and what should follow from them in terms of political activism.

Earlier debate over the nature of cinema between realists such as Bazin, who celebrated cinema's power of realism over and above other art forms, and formalists such as Balázs and Eisenstein, who perceived cinema's vitality to lie in its ability to transcend the real, was in effect resolved and surpassed by the semiotic conception of film upon which the current edifice of film theory stands. As David Clarke stresses in his preview of *The Cinematic City*, this development in film theory occurred as a result of "the semiotic approach providing the insight that both sides of the formalist-realist debate rested on the misplaced assumption that cinema primarily bore an indexical relation to reality" (Clarke, 1997: 7). Yet, my present discussion of Kusturica and cinema does not attempt to proceed along the lines of film theory; neither does it seek to develop a semiotic approach to it. Rather, it should be located in a somewhat different intellectual domain, namely that of the particular crossroads at which international (political) studies meet cultural studies and renew its interest for social ontologies, viz. for identity and ideational phenomena at large as producing a web of intersubjective meanings which ultimately give substance and texture to the social world. In this essay, I set out to appropriate Cohen-Séat's cinematic fact in order to show that, by being enmeshed in the imagining of society and in the production of a resource of quite 'real' ideas about it – real in the sense that they are meaningful for a global audience of viewers – cinema *always and already* bears some sort of indexical relation to reality, irrespective of whether we assume it represents reality or is but a *simulacrum* of it. As I hinted before, this relation is primarily connected to the fact that through cinema, prevailing images of reality get constructed/legitimised and deconstructed/contested.

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According to Péter Krasztev, *Underground* is a film in which history at large is brought closer to the viewer through a love triangle simulating a family. The structure of the film follows the history of Yugoslavia since the German occupation of 1941 and is presented in three separate sections that respectively correspond to World War II, the Cold War and the Civil War in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1990s. The extensive documentary footage inserted in the film is meant to recall crucial historic landmarks for Yugoslavia – the German invasion of Belgrade and Zagreb, and Tito's burial – but it also acts as a powerful trigger for the narrative action. The fictional characters mingle with historical protagonists, which in my

view is a tool designed to consolidate the (historical) narrative claim that guides Kusturica's entire project. By mingling fiction with documentary footage, the filmmaker critically breaks the borders separating history from the stories of the fictional yet probable characters in the story. At the same time, he claims the storied nature of history on the one hand, and the historical nature of all individual stories on the other. The subject in *Underground* is not accessible as a proper philosophical argument in the course of the film. Instead, it is worked out in the process of narration and always in tension with the historical raw material – the documentary footage – that Kusturica uses to trigger the action. As Yakov Bok, the unfortunate and unhappy handyman from a small Jewish *shtetl* in Malamud's *L'Homme de Kiev* says,¹ “out in the open, it rains and it snows. It snows History” (Malamud, 1967: 273). In *Underground*, and by integrating fiction with documentary footage, the ‘personal’ actually becomes the ‘political,’ an instance of sorts in the historical fabric of the social world.

The action in sections one and two takes place in Belgrade, and in section three, mainly in Bosnia. The core of the plot develops around five characters living through these three historical moments. Crni (Blacky) and Marko are *kumovi*, blood brothers like the South Slavs, vying for the attention and love of Natalija, the untalented actress, *i.e.* “two macho types fight for the heart of the character Natalija” (Krasztev, 2000: 24). Accordingly, the two men come to embody the stereotyped masculine figures of the partisan resistance: the former is the easily manipulated idealist, while the latter embodies the careerist manipulator who seems never to lose in any situation. Meanwhile, Natalija is submissive to the designs of both men, and seems to have no say in the development of the action. In Krasztev's view, she could represent Yugoslavia itself, which everyone wishes to possess. In his words, “both men have a claim on this woman”, and therefore, according to the patriarchal stereotypes, “women are never seen as anything other than a means to satisfy the possessive greed of men, a mere tool in any given situation [...]” (Krasztev, 1999: 24). Then there is Ivan, Marko's true brother, the keeper at Belgrade Zoo, who adopts an orphaned chimpanzee following the German bombardments of Belgrade and keeps it throughout the action; and Jovan, Crni's son, whose mother dies in the mythical cave during the German occupation while giving birth to him.

The three sections revolve around the realities of war, or to be more specific, they revolve around the myths produced by the wars that constructed and sustained the Yugoslav state and that eventually left it in tatters. The first section deals with World War II and the partisan resistance to German occupation, leading Crni and Marko's clan to the cave where they set up a small arms factory and prepare the liberation. Crni puts all his energy into conquering Natalija who, in

the meantime, engages in a relationship with a German officer. During one of Natalija's performances, Crni kidnaps her and prepares to marry her. The plan is frustrated by a German military operation in which Crni is imprisoned but promptly freed by Marko and taken with the rest of the clan to the cave through Belgrade's sewage system.

The second part of the film, named 'Cold War', takes place under Tito's Communist regime and culminates with his burial in May 1981. During this time, and while Crni is kept in the cave and made to think that the Germans are still occupying Belgrade, Marko becomes an important member of the Communist party and a reputed intellectual close to Tito. Meanwhile, the Yugoslav National Film Academy decides to produce a film to immortalise Crni, the epic hero fallen in the battle to free the country from the Germans. All along, Crni and the rest of the clan are kept underground manufacturing the arms which Marko and Natalija sell for their own profit. During the celebration of Jovan's wedding in the cave, its walls crumble and accidentally reveal an elaborate system of tunnels, mostly running from the East to the West and carrying a heavy traffic of clandestine migrants. Crni decides it is time they went out and finally face the Germans, and he takes his son with him to the surface. They emerge in the site where the film is being shot. Taking fiction as reality Crni shoots at the actors playing the German soldiers, while taking them for terrorists, the Yugoslav army goes after them. Jovan eventually drowns in the Danube, unable to face life outside the cave.

In the third and last section, the action is set at the beginning of the 1990s, when Yugoslavia would disintegrate and leave the trace of a bloody civil war not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also in Croatia. Ivan reaches Germany, but when he finds the truth that had been kept from him by Marko, making his life a complete lie, he wants revenge and heads back to the Balkans through the imaginary network of underground caves linking it to the rest of Europe. Ivan emerges somewhere in Bosnia, in a village in flames, where Crni leads a militia and Marko, in a wheelchair, carries out his arm deals with Natalija's assistance. Ivan completes his revenge by murdering his brother and then committing suicide. Before dying, Marko still has time to enunciate the cruel reality of every civil war – and for that matter a central message in *Underground* – i.e. that “there is no war until a brother kills his brother”. Crni's paratroopers shoot Natalija, who dies in Marko's lap. The wheelchair with the bodies of the two is then set on fire and pushed to circle around a cross in what is one of the most poignant scenes of the whole film, underscoring the apocalyptic nature of that historic moment. In the epilogue sequence, inspired by magical realism, the whole clan comes back to life and celebrates Jovan's wedding on the banks of the Danube, on a strip of land that suddenly but irrevocably

floats away from the mainland. Rounding out and drawing on Dina Iordanova as far the visual, technical appraisal of the film is concerned,

[i]n *Underground*, Kusturica plays with lengthy, elaborate scenes, ornate, dark props, a haunting musical score and a reality that refers to François Rabelais, Hieronymus Bosch, Terry Gilliam and Federico Fellini. The viewer is taken on a trip into the bizarre, the absurd and the deformed. Visually, the film is very dark, shot mostly in various shades of brown. There is even a shot taken from an unborn baby's point of view, watching out of the darkness of the womb. The camera prefers unusual angles and purposefully seeks aesthetics of the cellar. The film leaves a lasting and unsettling impression. (Iordanova, 1999: 69)

This last scene of reuniting the family in an atmosphere of joyful celebration clearly points to the recovery of the lost sense of *Heimat*/home among the South Slavs. However, in my view, it delays this to the mythical time of the *post-mortem*, which determines that “this story has no end”, as we are made to hear in the epilogue. Marko asks Crni for forgiveness. The latter accepts the apologies while asserting that though he cannot forget. ‘Utopia’ and ‘disincanto’ indeed. Beyond the controversies it has aroused, *Underground* is primarily a film about the complex and murderous legacy of communism. The very dedication of the film establishes at the outset that it is “to our fathers and their children”, *i.e.* to themselves – suggesting that it is addressed to and can be fully understood only by those who lived under communism and experienced its tragic downfall. It is addressed to those still in need of some sort of reflection, understanding or simply narration of that tragic downfall.

Underground can thus be read as a historical film that offers a very personal perspective about the chain of violence engulfing Yugoslavia in the second half of the twentieth century and the concomitant causal nexus constructing/determining personal trajectories and projects over those decades. Writing in *Le Monde*, French intellectual Alain Finkielkraut claimed that through this perspective on Yugoslav history recorded on film, Kusturica, had openly put himself in the service of the Serbian supremacist policies led by Slobodan Milošević and had therefore betrayed the intrinsic multicultural legacy of a Sarajevo-born citizen. What is at stake in Finkielkraut's criticism is above all the way Kusturica reified the fanaticism of the main characters, portraying them as heroes in the defence of a bloody and repressive political project while putting himself in the service of Serbian propaganda². For Slavoj Žižek, Kusturica's guilt would be of a qualitatively different nature. He criticises Kusturica not for any blatant politicisation of the Balkan wars, but for what he calls an “apolitical phantasmatic background of the Yugoslav ethnic cleansing and war cruelties” (Žižek, 1996: para. 3/19). Paraphrasing Kierkegaard, Žižek

argues that *Underground* performs a sort of aesthetic suspension of the political, a social activity that goes beyond politics and cancels it out through the means of the ecstatic aestheticisation of the communist and post-communist experiences. The bottom line here is that consequently Kusturica would aesthetically reinforce

the innocent gaze of liberal and democratic Europe on the Balkans – the gaze in which the Balkans appear as a kind of exotic spectacle that should either be tamed or quarantined; the place where the progress of history is suspended and where one is caught in the circular repetitive movement of savage passions. (Žižek, 1996: para. 8/19)

Insisting on the massive (Serbian) state subsidies put into *Underground*, Krasztev has blamed Kusturica for having surrendered the *Palme d'Or* at Cannes, a highly revered prize, to Belgrade's ideologues. Moreover, and much in line with Žižek's criticism, the crux of the matter would be that "the West found narcissistic pleasure in rewarding the movie for reflecting all the typical Western misconceptions" (Krasztev, 2000: 23) about politics in the Balkans and the involvement of the main Western powers.

Despite all the criticism that *Underground* sparked when first released and when it subsequently won the award at Cannes, I am convinced that it was far from Kusturica's intention to support Milošević and the Serbian nationalist *nomenklatura* of the 1990s. On the contrary, *Underground* is in itself a potent critique of the manipulative character of power, of every power imposing on people, a kind of 'inherent obscenity' in the expression used by Slavoj Žižek, consequently twisting human interactions and transforming society into a mere reproducer of brutal power relations. Žižek himself appropriately reminds us how Marko is the great manipulator in the lineage of the evil magician who controls an invisible empire of enslaved workers, therefore becoming "a kind of uncanny double of Tito as the public symbolic master" (Žižek, 1996: 18/19). It is my contention that, through the potent allegory of the cave network, *Underground* deliberately exposes and criticises the connection binding Tito's Communist regime to Milošević's nationalist drift and that, as a result, the critique of ideology *cum* manipulation is the main target of the filmmaker regretting the end of his impossible yet irretrievable utopia. The fanaticism and ethnic cleansing of the 1990s emerge alas as a mere parody and tragic simulacrum of a project – the South Slav brotherhood and common home – deferred to the floating island of the dead where the abortive possibilities of history have a chance of being fulfilled.

Drawing again on Žižek, it is necessary to emphasise the fact that one can approach Kusturica's *Underground* in multiple ways: viz. as an aesthetic object, as claim in our political-ideological struggles, it can function as the object of technical interest regarding how it was shot, and it can also act as the object of scientific curiosity "to the subject who is able to assume the gaze of a historian and who can study the film in order to learn some background about the Yugoslav crisis" (Žižek, 1996: 2/19). In this essay though, I intend to expand on the specific *problematique* concerning how the narration of Yugoslavia through Kusturica's cinematic eye addresses Balkanism and the dialogic forces of *inclusion/exclusion* operating in a region that is still largely perceived as located in-between Europe and a vague Orient, in that realm of hybridity being neither/nor or either/or Europe and the Orient, which ultimately deprives it of a full status of Europeanness. In this sense, 'Balkanism' has to do with a certain way of representing the Balkans and its peoples through the image of an incomplete self, as Maria Todorova insists in her *Imagining the Balkans*. In this discourse, the entity 'Balkans' is represented through a sort of complex 'transitory' status and hence as semi-developed, semi-colonial, semi-civilised and semi-oriental. Although meaningless heuristic notions for Todorova, these become the sign of an intrinsically ambiguous status which helps to understand that "[u]nlike orientalism, which is a discourse about an imputed opposition, balkanism is a discourse about an imputed ambiguity" (Todorova, 1997: 17). Therefore, the difference between 'Orientalism' and 'Balkanism' lies in the fact that the former deals with the irreconcilable opposition between two imputed types – the Occident versus the Orient –, while the latter explores the differences applying within one of these types, the Occident. As an incomplete self, the Balkans are not oriental, but neither do they embody the Occident in its completeness, in its wholeness. As an incomplete self, the Balkans become a phantasmatic place on which the West projects both its fears and its timeless fantasies about that which is intrinsically human in humans. As Žižek comments apropos *Underground*, 'Balkanism' is the Western gaze transforming the Balkans into "a mythical spectacle of eternal primordial passions, of the vicious cycle of hate and love, in contrast to the decadent and anaemic life in the West..." (Žižek, 1996: 5/19). According to Todorova then, 'Balkanism' was formed gradually in the course of two centuries, where the Balkan wars and World War I were instrumental in producing this discourse. During the rest of the twentieth century, the discourse would have gained some accretions but these were mostly a matter of detail, not of essence.

In the omnivorous vigour used to characterise the Balkans, as Dina Iordanova has put it, in the poor light inside and outside the tunnels that dims all ethi-

cal standards, in tearing down clear boundaries between victimisers and victims, *Underground* seems to reiterate the 'balkanist' vision of the Balkans. And yet, in my view, Kusturica's *oeuvre* is diametrically opposed to a certain filmic tradition stretching from Cecil B. de Mille to Erich von Stroheim, John Cromwell, Richard Thorpe, Richard Quine or Dušan Makavejev. Whether introduced by means of an imaginary Marsovia, Monte Blanco, Ruritania or Herzoslovakia, 'Balkanness' has held a kind of attraction to filmmakers and eventually led, according to Nevena Daković, to the crystallisation of three representational patterns of its essence: "the romantic pattern, the ironic pattern, the powder keg pattern" (Daković, 2001: 70). Consequently, cinema and its filmic strategies have been instrumental in the production and reproduction of 'Balkanism', creating a cinematic fact for generations of viewers who never travelled to the Balkans, or if they did, were *always and already* biased by that very fact.

I contend that the fact that cinema bears an indexical relation to reality by means of helping to constitute the prevailing intersubjective meanings on which the social world is constructed is integral to the notion of Kusturica's cinematic eye. Particularly in the context of *Underground*, it is crucial to bear in mind that his is an insider's approach to the general subject of narrating Yugoslavia at a distinctively formative moment for its collective identity. If nations are like narratives, as Homi Bhabha has claimed elsewhere, "they lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realise their horizons in the mind's eye" (Bhabha, 1990: 1). Given that mass communication is nowadays integral to understanding a nation's horizon, the mind's eye of the filmmaker turns consequently into a first order mediator in reading and narrating the nation. I argue that the Bhabelian theory and language are especially suitable to interpret Kusturica and *Underground*, not so much because of the apparent nostalgic overtones of this quotation, but mainly for his insistence on the nation as a form of cultural elaboration, in the Gramscian sense, which implies a critical agency of ambivalent narration, *i.e.* both narration and counter-narration. Simultaneously an instance of construction and *deconstruction*, of consensus production/reproduction and contestation *qua agonistikós*, Bhaba constantly invokes this ambivalent margin of the nation-space as constituting the crux of modernity's cultural representation. I believe that Kusturica's *oeuvre* clearly assumes this ambivalent margin at the core of the nation-space, and the row over his alleged 'Yugostalgia' has been formulated in an utterly simplistic way that does him and his *oeuvre* no justice. The ambivalent space forged by 'utopia' and 'disincanto' has definitely been neglected when looking at *Underground*.

Transcending this specific row, I claim that Kusturica's narration of Yugoslavia is overwhelmingly ambivalent in the sense that the nation is assumed as an

a priori unstable system of cultural signification. In this sense, the nation in *Underground* assumes the specific character of the representation of performativity in the production/reproduction of social life, which turns Kusturica's cinematic eye into a Bhabelian instrument that discloses the inherent instability of all social knowledge beyond prevailing *qua* essentialised narratives of the nation. In Bhabha's own terms, performativity implies that the present of a people's history must be approached as "a practice that destroys the constant principles of the national culture that attempt to hark back to a 'true' national past [...]" (Bhabha, 1994b: 152). In sharp contrast to this, essentialised national narratives inscribed in the realm of the pedagogical miss the performance of identity as iteration and re-creation. In this context, the mythical character of a nation embedded in essentialised narratives is based on the assumption of a 'homogenous empty time' in which temporality is nothing but the continuity of a coherent process of self and collective identification *cum* historical sedimentation. Through the medium of the filmic strategies used in *Underground*, Kusturica consciously points at the kind of instability that constitutes the process of cultural signification, *i.e.* the separation of language and reality, ultimately leading to an understanding of the nation as inscribed in the particular juncture formed by the dialectics of contending temporalities. In this sense, the central theme of the Platonic cave in which Marko, or should I say Kusturica, puts Cerni and the other partisans for a period of time which encompasses the decades between World War II and the ethnic wars of the 1990s, while eventually turning fuzzy – and the object of a row in the epilogue – in the protagonists' mind is remarkably telling. Both Bhabha and Kusturica adhere to a worldview according to which the act of enunciating, or narrating, the nation should always reflect the instability and ambiguity of cultural signification in order to open up the imaginings of self and collective identity. This, I contend, becomes the crucial purpose of the cinematic narration of Yugoslavia, *i.e.* opening up alternative, counter-narratives of the nation which, in the film, are deferred to the floating island of the dead. In this world apart, reality dissolves into a wide spectrum of possibilities and so the epilogue of *Underground* becomes both epiphany and denial of the apocalyptic facts narrated up to that point. Therefore, the joyful celebration on the floating island eventually comes to embody the Musilian utopian principle of indeterminate possibilism (characteristic of *Der Man Ohne Eigenschaften*) comprising "a continuing denial or negation of the reality constructed by past events" (Jonsson, 2000: 150). Kusturica seems to suggest that it is on the buoyant island – but only on the buoyant island – that the utopia called Yugoslavia has a chance to survive and reconstruct itself on a renewed basis.

As Bhabha always emphasises, and by connecting his time/space location of the nation with Julia Kristeva's own time/space construction of the nation's finitude, "the figure of the people emerges in the narrative ambivalence of disjunctive times and meanings" (Bhabha, 1994b: 153). For Bhabha, the production of nation as narration discloses a distinctive disjunctive temporality, *i.e.* a split between the pedagogical and the performative. While the former hints at the process of identity constituted by historical sedimentation, coherence and continuity, the performative disrupts the signification of the nation as selfhood by introducing the particular temporality of the 'in-between' whereby heterogeneity is articulated and confronted within the nation itself. Through the combined strategies of the pedagogical and the performative, the national narrative is therefore located at a complex temporality juncture whose tangible consequence for the people being narrated is their location in the space of liminality: the double inscription of people as pedagogical objects and performative subjects. Consequently, the complex temporality of the national narrative brings about the dissemination of identity, *i.e.*, the narrative splitting of the subject of identification. I would argue that Kusturica's cinematic eye in *Underground* proceeds very much by means of a kind of disseminatory act of enunciation. The split between Marko's 'real' world and Cerni's Platonic cave corresponds to the Bhabelian liminality and the concomitant splitting of the subject of identification. As Bhabha maintains and Kusturica's cinematic eye ends up underscoring, the disseminatory act

makes untenable any supremacist, or nationalist claims to cultural mastery, for the position of narrative control is neither monocular nor monologic. The subject is graspable only in the passage between telling/told, between 'here' and 'somewhere else', and in this double scene the very condition of cultural knowledge is the alienation of the subject. (Bhabha, 1994b: 150)

According to this argument, *Underground* is unmistakably a counter-narrative that is meant to go beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities, in which the alienation of the subject coincides with a distinctive postmodern awareness that all ethnocentric projects also represent "the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices [...]" (Bhabha, 1994a: 5). In *Underground*, the particular passage between telling/told, 'here' and 'somewhere else', *i.e.* between the 'real' world and the Platonic cave, is manufactured by means of the resurrection, at the end of the film, of all the dead characters and their being set adrift on the buoyant island that is heading off the continent's dry land. Kusturica's last disseminatory move therefore addresses what Bhabha calls the performance of identity as iteration, *i.e.* "the re-creation of the self in the world

of travel” (Bhabha, 1994a: 9). The resurrection of all the dead characters on the buoyant island heading away from dry land is ultimately just a metaphor of the sovereign subject’s much needed alienation or de-centring given the traumatic history of Yugoslavia, of the *dépaysement* exhorted by Breton.

Likewise, dissemination approached as Kusturica’s critical emphasising of the disjunctive temporalities that constitute the nation-space clearly opens the door to a Bakhtinian reading of *Underground*. The opening of space for alternative narratives of the nation or the re-creation of self by iteration is performed through an intrinsically dialogical relationship between two levels of chronotopic meaning. Rephrasing and adapting Martin Flanagan’s statement on Bakhtin and film, this is the sort of relationship that can be found between the chronotopes represented in the film *qua* text and the particular time-space relations governing the world of the viewers. In this context, Kusturica’s mingling of fiction with documentary footage in *Underground* is definitely envisaged as a way of promoting this sort of unsettling dialogue between the two types of chronotope; between the world of the film with its fictional action and the ‘real’ world of the viewer, so much so that, in a Bakhtinian sense, the representational elements of the text emerge “[o]ut of the actual chronotopes of our world” (Bakhtin, cited in Flanagan, 1998: para. 10/19). As already emphasised above, I contend that Kusturica critically aims to deconstruct the fixed borders between those two textual levels and accordingly to underscore the way the social world of human interactions is a hybrid construction conveying heteroglossia through the medium of its multiple, but always storied, voices and discourses. When cinema is approached not as a merely explanatory or descriptive device but instead as producer of reality, chronotopic synchronism comes to embody the genuine spirit of dialogic relationship and eventually challenges all reified accounts of the textual interaction between different levels of social space and time. All in all, whatever meaning it is possible to disclose in the nation – and accordingly in ‘Yugostalgia’ – is thus produced along the lines of the dialogics of a storied History vis-à-vis a naturalised fiction of sorts, in the context of the complex workings of Kusturica’s narrativity and cinematic eye.

4

Drawing on Bhabha’s assumption that nations are like narratives and only fully realise their horizons in the mind’s eye, it consequently becomes crucial to further develop the argument of narration and narrativity as specific strategies to account for collective identity. Kusturica’s *Underground* is an example of narrating

the nation at a distinctive historical juncture for Yugoslavia, a juncture that can be conceptualised as a new formative moment running roughly since Tito's death and intensifying throughout the 1990s. As Erik Ringmar puts it in a different context, a formative moment can be understood as a time when "old identities break down and new ones are created in their place; times when new stories are being told, submitted to audiences, and new demands for recognition presented" (Ringmar, 1996: 83). In a decade marked by the break up of the multinational Federative Republic, the wars of Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo, the quasi-war of Macedonia and the concomitant mass displacements of people, *Underground* emerges as a very tangible exercise in submitting to audiences a de-essentialised *cum* de-naturalised account of what a Yugo-identity can be and what political consequences should follow. Kusturica's *oeuvre* reveals therein the fine awareness of how foreclosed political options for community building can be every time they are assumed to flow from natural essences instead of social imaginings. As Alina Hosu Curticean claimed at the SSEES 2003 postgraduate conference, "[a] narrative approach to identity [constitutes] an effective way of avoiding the naturalisation of group identity" (Curticean, 2003: para. 5/39), otherwise a common temptation when approaching this kind of issue. Moreover, such a de-naturalised account of identity based on the notion of social imaginings instead of trans-historical essences denotes the poststructuralist assumption according to which identity has a history, for it always emerges within particular discourses or regimes of truth.

In my view, this forms the theoretical ground upon which both Bhabha and Kusturica develop their approach to identity formation, leading them to acknowledge that identity is intrinsically contested and far from being an objective fact of nature. I would claim that the crucial position in *Underground* is that Kusturica intends to intervene in the row over identity formation by alleging that it is impossible to provide an authoritative ground for identity, either the communist internationalism of post-World War II or the ethnic closure of the 1990s. At a formative juncture for Yugoslav identity, and at a crucial time of physical tragedy stemming from the battle to settle it on authoritative grounds of ethnic exclusion, Kusturica's narrative approach to identity is above all meant to stress the urgency of re-creating the self on iterative/ambivalent grounds. *Underground* then constitutes a true counter-narrative of the nation in the Bhabelian sense, at the same time evoking and erasing the totalising ambitions inherent in the nation and disturbing "those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities" (Bhabha, 1994b: 149). Both Bhabha and Kusturica have the merit of successfully making the case for a narrative approach to human affairs as a way of reconstructing, from within, all the complexity and ambiguity that consti-

tutes social phenomena. By stressing the capacity of human agency in face of social structures, narrativity reveals itself as a potent corrective to over-deterministic accounts of human action that focus solely on the supposedly coherent process of pedagogical historic sedimentation based on trans-historical essences. In contrast, the narrative approach is a distinctive enunciatory strategy based on the character of the disseminatory act. Narrativity aims eventually to empower the performative subject located at the crossroads of a formative moment. The urgency to re-articulate self and collective identity makes the narrative approach especially suitable to the study of such moments. In this context then, 'Yugostalgia' has nothing to do with supporting the Communist legacy or with Serbian propaganda in the middle of a bloody civil war; it is solely the expression of a political stance grounded in the refusal to take sides in such a war.

Besides, it is crucial to emphasise again that the narrative strategy in Bhabha and Kusturica is not a pure explanatory device; it is constitutive of what we so often assume to be an objective reality. In fact, as Sommers and Gibson point out, "social life is itself *storied* and [...] narrative is an *ontological condition of social life*" (Sommers and Gibson, 1994: 38). According to this statement, it is possible to affirm that the storied character of social life comes right from 'underground', and that as a result Kusturica's film becomes the ultimate metaphor of the ontological condition of the social world. By storying the nation in *Underground*, Kusturica points at the performance of identity as iteration, the constant re-creation of the self through narratives emphasising the self-shaping capacity of the mind's eye and the power of stories to refashion collective identity. Likewise, one should not underestimate the role Bregović's music plays in the development of narrativity strategies throughout *Underground*. His "fundamentally unpure [sic] art" has the role of musically stressing hybridity as the re-creation of identity and the de-centring of the sovereign self. In fact, what Bregović does is a kind of patchwork that follows the gypsy method of appropriating, fusing and transforming musical traditions, an audial construct intended to uncover hidden ontological possibilities both for music and identity itself. In the way, he catches

the vitality of the sub-culture in its most trashy aspects, definitively excluded from the tasteful spheres, [...] [and resists] to the scheduled standardization of taste and feelings and to the control of conscience, those new threats of our 'globalized' world... (Goran Bregović Home Page)

In sum, by linking Bhabha's theoretical *oeuvre* to Kusturica's cinematic eye, I intend to underscore the way in which both research and film are linked together in understanding the collective processes that lead to the crystallisation of imagin-

ings such as ethnic group or race in powerful compelling ‘realities’ for which some people are ready to sacrifice their lives and kill those who are constructed as strangers, *i.e.* deprived of their intrinsic humanity:

The Serbs, the moralists, Jefferson, and the Black Muslims all use the term “men” to mean “people like us”. They think the line between humans and animals is not simply the line between featherless bipeds and all others. They think the line divides some featherless bipeds from others: There are animals walking about in humanoid form. We and those like us are paradigm cases of humanity, but those too different from us in behavior or custom are, at best, borderline cases. (Rorty, 1993: 113)

By approaching the nation through narrativity and its accompanying strategies, by focusing on “the plurality of stories that different cultures and subcultures tell about themselves” (Hinchman and Hinchman, 2001: xiv), both the theoriser and the filmmaker play a crucial role in problematizing collective enunciation and in leading the way to the de-centring/iteration of the sovereign subjectivity. As I stated before, all this has to do with the critical responsibility of identifying alternative collective imaginings. By unearthing how essentialised representations of the nation came to be, and by focusing on the political consequences of them being imagined in that particular way, Kusturica is in fact trying to open up critical space for alternative imaginings and political solutions that part company with exclusive representations of the nation. However, it is not possible to conclude that *Underground* and Kusturica’s *oeuvre* in general have had a profound influence in this terrain. In fact, political fragmentation has continued to widen in the region since 1995, and the politics of identity as sameness, wholeness and integrity has caught the attention of large audiences that are always eager to adhere to primeval stories in order to reiterate an authoritative *cum* sovereign account of self and group. Finally, the introductory words in *Underground* have been brought to their fullest significance. “Bila jednom jedna zemlja” – once upon a time, there was a land – now means that even the word Yugoslavia has been erased from the Balkan vocabulary and could eventually fade away in the horizon of the mind’s eye. In 2003, the rump Yugoslavia of the 1990s has become the Union of Serbia and Montenegro, and 2006 could well witness both the end of such a shabby political structure and the independence of Kosovo. The Yugoslav idea may be irretrievable. Nevertheless, the aforementioned facts could just be the prologue of a renewed era in the Balkans, with the European Union pushing for increased regional co-operation as a crucial pre-condition for granting membership to these new political entities. It could well be that the new home for the South Slavs comes to be located within a united Europe.

Come what may, in the film “Bila jednom jedna zemlja” is a potent reminder of nostalgia. Traditionally, *i.e.* beginning in the seventeenth century, nostalgia entered the medical vocabulary as the technical term for a disease that occurred during extended absence from home and was also known as *mal de pays* and *Heimweh*. Therefore, the concept established itself as a reference to a distance in space from what one perceives as home, while the earlier approach based on the spatial aspect soon accommodated distance in time. According to Peter Wagner,

the distinction was blurred from the beginning owing to the fact that nostalgia refers to the movements of a human being across time-space, namely over a part of his or her life-course. The experience of the other space, for which one longs, is always past, and the absent space of home is simultaneously the absent time of the past. (Wagner, 2001: 90)

Nostalgia is then about lack and loss, and ‘Yugostalgia’ certainly has an imaginary home lost both in space and time as its object. All in all, I believe that the concoction of ‘utopia’ and ‘disincanto’ giving substance to ‘Yugostalgia’ stems directly from the end of Yugoslavia as a grand narrative of human emancipation. It here represents a longing for foundations of thought – an Archimedean point of reference, as it were – for a subject that nevertheless understands that emancipation is often manipulated and that “the origins are always unattainable” (Wagner, 2001: 91). Consequently, it is the hopeless longing of a subject who sees life as a journey with no turning back, that “Nietzschean, rectilinear journey of Musil’s characters, a journey that always proceeds forward, towards an evil infinite, like a straight line that progresses by swaying into the void” (Magris, 2005: xii). ‘Yugostalgia’ then becomes the unattainable yet irretrievable longing for an original *Heimat* that, according to Ernst Bloch in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, finds itself at the end of the journey, not at its nostalgic beginning. At the limit, it is possible to envisage that the buoyant island setting off from the coast in the epilogue of *Underground* does embody this principle of hope and that at the end of a traumatic journey, the South Slavs eventually find their joyfully celebrated *Heimat*. Who knows, in their relentless heading towards a united Europe? ‘Utopia’ and ‘disincanto’, in any case.

5

To conclude, and as I claimed right at the outset, *Nation as Narration* is an essay both in tune with and devoted to drawing on the cultural turn affecting international (political) studies since the end of 1980s. In the perspective I have tried to express here, a cultural reading of politics implies focusing on the constitution of

the social world through the medium of ideational and intersubjective phenomena such as identity. Therefore, identity matters for a whole range of academic disciplines dealing with the critical spheres of the ‘social’ and the ‘political’, from international relations to communication science and beyond. As Markus Reisenleitner wrote in a different context, this claim becomes crucial in particular because “it raises fundamental questions about how individuals and groups fit together, are co-opted into or excluded from communities and the social world, and these meanings appear to be in crisis” (Reisenleitner, 2001, 8). In my view then, *Underground* consists primarily of an endeavour to stage/represent identity through the distinctive strategy of disseminating self and nation in ambivalent temporalities. Kusturica’s filmic strategies point therewith at a basic argument according to which identity gets de-naturalised and does not equal sameness, wholeness nor integrity; rather, it always consists of a representation and always already includes difference as a possibility of enunciation and articulation. It is in this sense that *Underground* critically stages Bhabha’s narrative splitting of the subject of identification as well as its opening space for alternative *qua* de-reified narratives of the nation. Whatever trace of ‘Yugostalgia’ we may find in it can be ascribed anyway to Kusturica’s ethical and aesthetic preference for the possibilities uncovered by multiculturalism over the closure of a ‘monocular’ and ‘monologic’ identity structure. To conclude and round out my argument, I would emphasise that at a time of such ‘monocular’ closure on identity as the Balkans have experienced throughout the 1990s – which some political analysts say could come back after the death of Milošević – *Underground* acts as a potent reminder of Reisenleitner’s identity claims, *i.e.* that it is an object of constant negotiation, “[a] view that thinks of identity not as an already accomplished fact but as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always within, not outside representation” (Reisenleitner, 2001: 12). If cinema then is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose, as I argue, Kusturica’s cinematic eye unveils narrativity as the proper ontological condition of social life and dissemination/iteration as the key to thinking *beyond* reified narratives of sovereign subjectivities. In this context, nostalgia simply reflects the lack and loss – the separation at the crux of the human subject – stemming from life in the world of dissemination/iteration. Following Stefan Jonsson in his outstanding appraisal of Robert Musil’s *Der Mann Ohne Eigenschaften*, so too *Underground* seems to reveal, expose and criticise

the ways in which dominant ideologies of patriarchy, nationalism, and racism reduce the human subject to its cultural origin or sexual disposition by imposing on it an allegedly natural, and hence inescapable [sic], essence, coded in terms of ethnicity, gender and class. (Jonsson, 2000: 2)

NOTES

- ¹ For the original edition cf. Bernard Malamud, *L'Homme de Kiev*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967.
- ² Cf. Alain Finkielkraut, "L'imposture Kusturica", *Le Monde*, 2 June 1995.

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