Retrieving Emir Kusturica's *Underground* as a Critique of Ethnic Nationalism

by Sean Homer

It is now fashionable for many Balkan intellectuals and scholars to dismiss the work of the former Bosnian Muslim, now Serbian Orthodox,[1] film director Emir Kusturica for, at best, pandering to Western Orientalism and Yugo-nostalgia and, at worst, providing "the libidinal economy of Serbian ethnic slaughter in Bosnia" (Žižek 1997a; 1997b, 60-6; 2008, 174). In this paper I want to argue "against the grain" of what now seems to be the accepted and dominant reading of Kusturica's *Underground: Once Upon a Time There Was a County* (1995).

In sympathy with the editors of the volume *Balkan as Metaphor* (2005) I suggest that it is time to retrieve *Underground* as a site "of genuine resistance and triumphant critique, rather than as an apology for nationalism" (Bjelic and Savic 15).[2] In order to do so I will briefly situate *Underground* in relation to Kusturica's earlier films and his association with the Sarajevo based subculture, the New Primitivs.[3] I will then outline the critique of *Underground*, as it has been expressed by some of Europe's most prominent intellectuals, most notably Alain Finkielkraut and Slavoj Žižek, as well as more recently by the Balkan film scholar Pavle Levi (2007). Finally I will consider the film as a text that explicitly critiques the nature of historical construction in nationalist mythologies and the cinema's complicity in these constructions. (I will leave the question of Kusturica's more recent, apolitical, productions, *Black Cat, White Cat* (1998), *Super 8 Stories* (2001) and *Life is a Miracle* (2004) out of this paper.)

"New Primitivism" and the subversion of official culture

In marked contrast to his current status as an exponent of Serbian nationalist culture and history, Kusturica's early feature films, especially *Do You Remember Dolly Bell* (1981) and *When Father was Away on Business* (1985), emerged from a very specific cultural environment that was at once radical and subversive of official culture and ideology.[4] In terms of their cinematography these films were heavily influenced by the Czech New Wave and Italian Neo-realism (Iordanova 2002, 50-60), but this style, in Kusturica's hands, was in turn inflected through the "New Primitivism" of Sarajevo. These "anti-communist" films (Gocic 21) were set in Sarajevo, and in both Kusturica used local and non-professional actors. The dialogue was in the local dialect rather than standard Serbo-Croat of mainstream Yugoslav cinema, and Kusturica also depicted local Muslim customs, such as the circumcision of the two young brothers in *When Father Was Away*.

In these aspects we can see the influence of the Sarajevo New Primitivs (SNP), who were primarily a punk subculture that originated in the early 1980s, associated with two rock bands: Zabranjeno pušenje (No Smoking) and Elvis J. Kurtovic & His Meteors as well as the satirical radio and later television show *The Surrealists Top-List*. The name, New Primitivism, is sometimes referred to as a response to the "New Romantics" that emerged in the UK as a reaction against the politics, raw energy, do it yourself style and ethos of Punk. The name is also a response, however, to the more well known and sophisticated artistic movement based around the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) in

Slovenia.[5] The art critic Nermina Zildzo describes the New Primitiv style thus: "[T]he main principle of SNP (Sarajevo New Primitivs) is the exploration of identity—an attempt to explain one's self in one's own words, through one's own, un-imposed prism. It manifests itself in: an alleged anti-intellectualism; the use of local iconic and lexical properties; the manipulation of prejuduices about Bosnians, with a particularly productive use of elements from the Muslim milieu in the Sarajevo suburbs." (qtd. in Levi 63)

The New Primitivs were militantly provincial and anti-intellectual. Rather than rejecting Balkan stereotypes, such as the Balkan "Wildman," they embraced these stereotypes and exaggerated them. They adopted an ironic stance regarding official culture and drew upon folk culture as well as the tradition of Yugoslav naïve painting in order to subvert it from within. While the movement was not directly involved in film making, Kusturica's early films were clearly influenced by the movement's aesthetics and he was an associate of the group.[6] As Dina Iordanova observes, Kusturica's early films "confirmed his reputation as an indigenous director" through "the truthful and self-confessed devotion to his roots" (2002, 50). They also confirmed his status as an outsider developing a critique of official culture. According to Goran Gocic, Kusturica was seen to embody and indeed celebrate many of the characteristics of Sarajevo "buddy culture" and its cult of marginality (47-82).

Blacky in the film *Underground* is often cited by critics as exemplary of Kusturica's celebration of the "Balkan Wildman," although he appears to be more like a character straight out of a silent era slapstick comedy.

A cartoon hero? While escaping from captivity in a trunk Blacky succeeds in blowing himself up with a grenade.

The question arises, then, how did this radical critique of Yugoslav culture in Kusturica's work apparently turn into its opposite? Pavle Levi notes that the central feature of Kusturica's aesthetics, "the eruption of enjoyment in the public sphere" (85), is strongly indebted to the SNP. This aesthetic manifests itself in the exuberant wedding scenes, the sleepwalkers who tread a thin line between the rational and the irrational, the seemingly inexhaustible alcohol-induced states of trance and excess as well as the so-called magic realism.[7] Kusturica's aesthetic is above all an aesthetic of excess which will find its fullest expression in *Time of the Gypsies* (1989) and *Underground*. In the early films this excess functioned as critique, very much in line with the main principles of the SNP, through Kusturica's opposition to both socialist dogma and newly emerging nationalist discourse that was replacing it: "What the group [SNP] aimed for was not merely a negation of the popular content pertaining to specific cultural ideology

(whether state-socialist or ethnonationalist) but, rather, a deeper subversion of the elementary discursive coherence, without which ideologies cannot be generated in the first place." (Levi 70).

Through a systematic "exemption of meaning" (71) the SNP radically questioned all forms of identity, both individual and national. The one thing that they did not question, however, was the stability of their own identity, that is to say, their own "Yugoslavism." As I will argue below, while the advocacy of Yugoslavism may have functioned as critique of the emerging ethno-nationalist discourses to the 1980s, by the mid-1980s it had become irredeemably associated with Greater Serbian nationalism. In short, an uncritical assertion of Yugoslavism was seen to be synonymous with Serbian nationalism. It was this tendency, Levi argues, that Kusturica succumbed to in the 90s, transforming "his aesthetic of the sociopolitically inassimilable energetic outpour into an ethnocentrically motivated, quasi-transgressive aestheticization of collective enjoyment" (105).

I will come back to this below but before turning to the main focus of my paper, Kusturica's *Underground*, I should first say something of the historical context that it represents, as this is crucial to understanding the controversy that surrounds the film.

"Once upon a time there was a country …"

Modern Yugoslavia was born out of the conflict of the Second World War and the communist revolution of 1941 to 1945.[8] In fact, Yugoslavia was created twice in the twentieth century. The first time through the Treaty of Versailles in 1918, after the First World War, as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and renamed Yugoslavia in 1929.[9] This state was dismembered and partitioned by Germany and its allies in 1941. The country was then recreated by the communist led partisans in 1945 as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, consisting of six republics—Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina—and the two Autonomous Provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo. The partisans were led by the Croatian Josip Broz-Tito, who became the country's Prime Minister from 1945 to 1953 and President from 1953 until his death in 1980. Tito was initially a close ally of Stalin but broke with the Soviet Union in 1948 and Yugoslavia was expelled from Cominform, the International Organization of Socialist States he had helped to found in 1947 in Belgrade. This early break with the Soviet Union, as well as the fact that Yugoslavia was liberated through its own means and not with the help of the Red Army, bestowed upon Tito's socialist government a legitimacy that the other socialist states of Eastern Europe lacked.

After Tito's death in 1980 the complex system of checks and balances that had maintained the unity of Yugoslavia and constitutionally guaranteed minority rights began to unravel (Gowan 1999). According to Susan Woodward (1995) two key factors contributed to the break-up of Yugoslavia: the fundamental changes that came about in the international order with the end of the cold war (Yugoslavia lost its strategic geopolitical position mediating between the East and the West, as well as its role in the Non-Aligned Movement) and the global financial crisis and economic recession of the mid-70s and early 80s. In 1979 Yugoslavia had a foreign debt of $3 billion (Magaš 80), one year after Tito's death this had reached $20 billion and was rising (94). The federal government response to this crisis was a harsh austerity program that resulted in

massive unemployment, a dramatic fall in living standards, consumer goods shortages, escalating inflation and falling wages (Woodward 51-2).

Political momentum grew in the country, particularly in Slovenia and Croatia, for a decentralization of power and greater democracy in order to address the crisis. This movement was in turn opposed by "party hardliners" demanding a greater centralization of power in Belgrade in the name of a unitary state.[10] This situation escalated throughout the 1980s as the social unrest, resulting from the austerity program, intensified and the momentum for decentralization gathered pace. In April 1987 Slobodan Miloševic, then Chairman of the League of Communists in Serbia, delivered a virulently nationalist speech at Kosovo Polje, near the site of Serbia's historic defeat by the Ottoman empire. Miloševic had risen to power by effectively uniting party hardliners and Serbian nationalists around the issue of Kosovo, he was elected President of Serbia in 1989 and the "liberals" within the Party were expelled.[11]

On the 1st March 1989 the Ljubljana Declaration was released in the Slovene capital calling for greater democracy, the recognition of minority rights and ethnic plurality and in November of 1990 multi-party elections were held in the non-Serb republics. Following these elections a "compromise" was offered to Belgrade—"the transformation of Yugoslavia into an association of sovereign states" (Magaš 105). Belgrade rejected this proposal and in June 1991 Slovenia became the first republic to break away from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Croatia followed suit in 1991 and declared itself an independent sovereign state. With the Federal Republic already disintegrating Macedonia declared their independence in September 1991, followed by Bosnia-Herzegovina in February 1992. As Slovenia had the most homogenous population of all the former republics, its departure resulted in a tense stand-off between Ljubljana and Belgrade but only a brief 10 day conflict before the Yugoslav army agreed to pull out of the newly independent country.[12]

The situation with Croatia, with a significant Serbian minority in Krajina (the border region between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina), was very different and in the summer of 1991 full scale war broke out, in 1992 this war spilled over into Bosnia-Herzegovina. Bosnia-Herzegovina was the most ethnically mixed of all the former republics and when it declared independence in 1992 Serbian forces invaded the following day.[13] Initially both the Serbian and Croatian leadership believed that Bosnia-Herzegovina should be partitioned between their respective republics but they had not taken into account the resistance of the Bosnian population. Under pressure from the European Union and NATO Croatia allied itself with Bosnia against Serbia and the war raged until 1995. It is this history from 1941 to the early 90s that *Underground* presents on an epic scale—the cinema release is 3 hours long and the television release over 5 hours—the controversy that surrounds the film is precisely how this history is represented.

From Bosnian "emancipator" to betrayer

With the theatrical release of *Underground* in 1995 the already open divisions between Kusturica, his former associates and the city with which he had become so closely identified were complete.[14] Kusturica's status as an emancipator (to use Gocic's term) of Bosnian culture, language and identity was transformed into that of a betrayer of the

national ideal. The film was widely acclaimed by many Western European critics and won the Palm d'Or at Cannes. At the same time, it was greeted by howls of outrage by critics from the non-Serb republics, who attacked the film for being nothing short of Serbian nationalist propaganda. The French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut brought this debate into the wider European public domain when he wrote in *Le Monde*: "In recognizing *Underground*, the Cannes jury thought it was honoring a creator with a thriving imagination. In fact, it has honored a servile and flashy illustrator of criminal clichés. The Cannes jury highly praised a version of the most hackneyed and deceitful Serb propaganda. The devil himself could not have conceived so cruel an outrage against Bosnia, nor such a grotesque epilogue to Western incompetence and frivolity." (qtd. in Iordanova 2001, 117)

A key point of contention in the film was the use of documentary footage portraying Slovenes in Maribor and Croats in Zagreb cheering and welcoming Nazi troops in contrast to the footage of devastation wrought on Belgrade by Nazi bombers, the fairly obvious implication being that the Croats and Slovenes were collaborators while the brave Serbs resisted the occupation. Kusturica defended his use of this documentary footage, arguing that he was trying to counter the selective humanism of the West in showing only the Serbs as the aggressor. He was, he insisted, against ethnic cleansing of all kinds, whether it came from Bosnians, Croats or Serbs.[15]

In his controversial use of documentary film footage in *Underground*, cheering crowds are shown welcoming Nazi troops into Zagreb (1941).

The scenes in Zagreb are juxtaposed to the devastation of Belgrade by Nazi bombers (1941).

Slavoj Žižek also intervened in this debate with a short article entitled "*Underground*, or Ethnic Cleansing as a Continuation of Poetry by Other Means" (1997a) which subsequently appeared as a section in *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997b) and his influential essay "Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism" (1997c). As Žižek's reading of the film has set the tone for the wider reception of the film by many on the Western European Left, I want to follow his argument here. Žižek took as his starting point not so much the film itself as the political controversy surrounding it and Kusturica's own, often unfortunate, response to the criticism.[16] The political meaning of *Underground*, argued Žižek, "does not reside primarily in its overt tendentiousness, in the way it takes sides in the post-Yugoslav conflict—heroic Serbs versus the treacherous, pro-Nazi Slovenes and Croats—but, rather, in its very 'depoliticized' aestheticist attitude" (1997c, 37).

Žižek supported this argument with reference to an interview Kusturica gave in which he claimed that the film was not political at all but a "deferred suicide" note for the Yugoslav state. For Žižek: "What we find here [in *Underground*] is an exemplary case of 'Balkanism,' functioning in a similar way to Edward Saïd's concept of 'Orientalism': the Balkans as the timeless space onto which the West projects its phantasmatic content. Together with Milcho Manchevski's *Before the Rain* (which almost won the Oscar for the best foreign film in 1995), *Underground* is thus the ultimate ideological product of Western liberal multiculturalism: what these two films offer to the Western liberal gaze is precisely what this gaze wants to see in the Balkan war—the spectacle of a timeless, incomprehensible, mythical cycle of passions, in contrast to decadent and anemic Western life." (38)

Žižek, of course, acknowledges that *Underground* is a multilayered and self-referential film, but immediately dismisses this as postmodern cynical ideology. What Kusturica unknowingly provides us with, concludes Žižek, is "the libidinal economy of ethnic slaughter in Bosnia: the pseudo-Bataillean trance of excessive expenditure, the continuous mad rhythm of drinking-eating-singing-fornicating" or ethnic cleansing as poetry by other means. Žižek even goes so far as to draw a parallel between Kusturica and that other infamous Serbian nationalist poet Radovan Karadžic, former President of the breakaway Bosnian Serb Republic and recently captured war criminal (38-39); I will come back to this point below.[17] The problem with *Underground* then, according to Žižek, is not that it is "political propaganda" but that it is *not* political enough.[18]

The libidinal economy of ethnonationalism

More recently, Pavle Levi (2007) has developed a much more sustained critique of the libidinal economy of *Underground*, or, what he calls (following Sandor Ferenczi) Kusturica's aesthetic of "genitofugal libido" (90). *Underground's* highest aesthetic achievements, writes Levi, are when it causes the spectator to suspend all narrative/diegetic concerns in favor of sheer scopic gratification. These "libidinal choreographies," he argues, produce "autonomous *dynamic systems*" that generate the effect of a dissipation of energy (91).

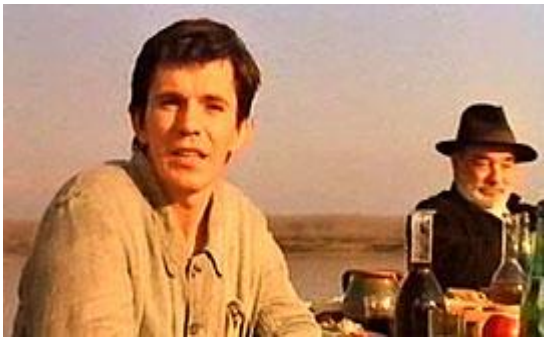
In *Underground*, Kusturica's aesthetics of "genitofugal libido" is created through the rotational movement of the characters.

Here the dissipation of energy is achieved through the band performing on a spinning wheel which spins at an ever faster rate until the image becomes a blur.

The film accomplishes this through the centrifugal effect achieved by its use of low camera angles and ecstatic bodies organized in circular and rotational movements. An example of this is the extreme low-angle shot of the film's three main protagonists—Marko (Miki Manojlovic), Blacky (Lazar Ristovski) and Natalija (Mirjana Jokovic)—singing the song "Moonshine" directly into the camera, from above, as their bodies spin around its central axis. More importantly, Kusturica extends this idea of libidinal excess beyond the characters themselves to encompass Yugoslav culture as a whole. An excessive libidinal investment is seen to be the essence of Yugoslav culture in all "its dishevelled and polymorphous spirit" (92). In its explicit concern for Yugoslav history and politics, argues Levi, *Underground* "establishes the sign of equality between this overwhelming enjoyment and the notion, the idea—or rather the Ideal—of 'Yugoslavness,' of Yugoslav national identity" (92).

The epitome of this Ideal of Yugoslav identity would be the final "utopian" scene of the film where all the characters come back to life to celebrate Jovan's (Srdan Todorovic) wedding. While they wildly celebrate, the small piece of land they are on breaks away and drifts down the Danube as Marko's brother Ivan (Slavko Štimac) turns and talks directly into the camera (having now lost his stutter) recounting a tale that ends, "Once upon a time there was a country…"

In the final scene all the characters come back to life to celebrate Jovan and Jelena's wedding. The small piece of land they are on breaks off and drifts down the Danube, in what critics see as a final "utopian" gesture of Yugo-nostalgia.



Marko's brother Ivan turns and talks directly into the camera recounting the tales they will tell their children, which will begin "Once a upon a time there was a country..."

As with other critics of *Underground* Levi draws attention to the film's use of montage and documentary footage. Regarding the scenes of Nazi troops entering Maribor, Zagreb and Belgrade discussed above he suggests that the "message" embedded within this sequence could not possibly have been missed by a domestic audience: "Its primary function is to cinematically empower the discourse of 'Serb victimhood'—one of the pillars of Serb nationalist resentment ever since the late 1980s—while discrediting other Yugoslav nations" (97).

In the film, crowds mourn the death of Tito in Zagreb, overlaid with the sound track of "Lili Marlene," a song with strong Nazi connotations.

Similar scenes of mourning take place in Belgrade, with the same sound track, and strongly associating the death of one dictator (Hitler) with another (Tito).

This message is further reinforced by an intratextual link within the film to a second montage sequence which is also accompanied by the song "Lili Marlene." This second sequence also involves crowd scenes in Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade but this time assembled for Tito's funeral in 1980. Thus we have a striking juxtaposition of sound and image: a song with Nazi overtones is overlaid on the foremost icon of Yugoslav socialism, the image of Tito himself. Levi writes of this combination of image and song: "The immediate associational effect thus produced is that of the 'death of a dictator,' but the musically established intertextual link with the earlier sequence evocative of the past ethnic conflicts also aligns the Yugoslav 'dictator' with the 'anti-Serb coalition' led by the Croats and Slovenes." (98)

Levi's critique of *Underground* is by far the most persuasive I have come across but it remains, I want to argue, a rather selective reading of the film. I am absolutely sure that Levi is right that a domestic audience could, and indeed did, read the film in the way he says. But as Iordanova has pointed out, for an *international audience* if *Underground* is Serbian propaganda, then it is so cryptic that no one noticed it as such (2001, 118).

Ethno-nationalist propaganda and/or historical allegory?

The problematic relationship between political propaganda and historical allegory within *Underground* has been extensively addressed (Iordanova 2001, 111-35; 2002, 157-74) and I do not want to rehearse these arguments again here but, rather, to consider the nature of allegory itself. Allegory, in Fredric Jameson's (1981) formulation, functions as an opening up of the text to multiple competing readings and, ultimately, to the untranscendable horizon of History itself. In this sense all texts can sustain not only different interpretations but also contradictory ones. Political propaganda, on the other hand, works through a process of reduction, the assertion of a single unambiguous meaning. *Underground*, I would argue, is an historical allegory in this Jamesonian sense of being open to multiple and, indeed, contradictory readings.

If we take Levi's two examples here we can see how an international audience might read them in rather different ways. Levi reads the final wedding scene, for instance, as exemplary of Kusturica's "Yugoslav Ideal" (94). This scene, however, does not exist in isolation and is in fact Jovan's (Blacky's son) *second* wedding and the *third*

wedding of the film. The first abortive wedding takes place between Blacky and Natalija on a boat carrying stolen arms to the resistance. The wedding results in a fight between the two friends Blacky and Marko over Natalija and is then interrupted by the arrival of Natalija's German lover, Franz (Ernst Stötzner). The wedding ends in chaos with Natalija running off with Franz, Blacky captured, and Marko abandoning Blacky and fleeing down the Danube.

Blacky abducts Natalija and attempts to force her to marry him.

Blacky abducts Natalija for the second time at Jovan's wedding, further reinforcing the link between these two scenes.

The second wedding takes place in Part II in the cellar between Jovan and Jelena (Milena Pavlovic). Once again the wedding ends in chaos with the cellar destroyed, Jelena committing suicide and Jovan leaving the cellar with his father, where he will shortly meet his own death. The second wedding is clearly a repetition of the first:

- the same Gypsy band plays the music
- there is precisely the same shot of the three protagonists singing "Moonshine"
- in both scenes Blacky has Natalija tied to his back
- both scenes result in a fight between Blacky and Marko over Natalija,
- and finally we see Marko being ridden like a donkey first by Blacky and subsequently by Natalija.

After fighting with Marko over his attempt to seduce Natalija at their wedding, Blacky forces Marko to carry him on his back while braying like a donkey.

In yet one more repeated shot between the two wedding scenes, Natalija forces Marko to carry her on his back around the workshop.

The two weddings, then, are quite clearly linked within the film and are not simply scenes of exuberant celebration but sites of tension and ultimately violence.[19]

Bato celebrates the miraculous recovery of his legs in the final scene of the film in what initially seems to be a utopian reprieve for all the misery that has gone before it.

As Blacky is reunited with his dead wife, Vera, however, tensions immediately arise between them, as they start to argue over Jovan's age and Natalija's presence at the wedding. Natalija and Marko also immediately resume old quarrels.

Is then Jovan and Jelena's second wedding celebration a reprieve, a utopian compensation, for the conflicts and violence that have gone before? I do not think so. It is true that Natalija's disabled brother Bato (Davor Dujmovic) can now walk, that Ivan has lost his stutter, furthermore, Blacky is reunited with his dead wife Vera (Mirjana Karanovic). However, Blacky and Vera immediately start to argue over Jovan's age, and the tensions between Marko and Natalija, over her drinking, are equally evident. Although this wedding may seem to break the repetition established between the first two, the seeds of conflict are already present in this "utopian" scene. If the previous two weddings are anything to go by the future of their little island does not bode well. It would seem, then, that the ending is rather *bleaker* than at first appears. Herein we can note the conservatism and the pessimism of Kusturica's politics but also a rather more critical view of Yugoslavism than his critics allow for.

Leonid Brezhnev attends Tito's funeral along with many other Eastern European leaders, members of the Non-Aligned Movement and leaders of national liberation struggles, such as Yassar Arafat.

Margaret Thatcher, along with members of the British Royal family and the Heads of all the major Western powers also paid tribute to Tito after his death and in marked contrast to their criticism of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Similarly, the montage sequence of Tito's funeral is open to a number of different interpretations. As Levi notes, the association of one dictator (Hitler) with another (Tito) would be, for an international audience, an immediate effect of this sequence, and the idea of an anti-Serb coalition led by Croats and Slovenes would probably not enter into the picture.[20] From a non-Balkan perspective, what is striking in this scene is the parade of world leaders at Tito's funeral, from the Duke of Edinburgh and Margaret Thatcher to Leonid Brezhnev and Nikolae Ceausescu. With post-1989 hindsight and five years of war in the former Yugoslavia, the sequence could just as easily be read as an indictment of Cold War cynicism and the hypocrisy of both the East and the West—in the sense that the very powers, who in the 1990s were condemning Tito's Yugoslavia for fostering conflict through its suppression of ethnic identity, as well as its economic mismanagement, were openly supporting the self-same regime in the 1970s and 80s for their own geo-political purposes.

What I am arguing here, therefore, is that we can read *Underground* as exemplary of Balkanism as Žižek suggests, or, as exemplary of Yugoslavism as Levi argues. But we can also read it as a *critique* of Balkanism and Yugoslav history. In other words, *Underground* functions as a critique of the myth of Tito's Yugoslavia at the same time that it is a product of Yugo-nostalgia. The fact that *Underground* is a fundamentally "contradictory" text is what makes it one of the more interesting productions attempting to come to terms with the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and its history.

Underground as historical reconstruction

Žižek and Levi are right, I think, on a number of counts. Kusturica is clearly a film maker who is playing to Western audiences and critics. He is now more popular abroad than at home. His films deliberately exploit an aesthetic of self-exoticization, taking up Western European clichés of the Balkans and playing them back to us in exaggerated form. I have already mentioned the example of the Balkan "Wildman" which Kusturica celebrates. We can see this especially in the figure of Blacky in *Underground*, who is shown to have voracious appetites and superhuman strength.[21] Indeed, one could argue here that similarly to Žižek's often repeated example of political resistance, the rock band Laibach, Kusturica is adopting a strategy of "over-identification," and by completely identifying with Western stereotypes he reverses the Western gaze (Gocic 84).

From this perspective, the New Primitivs can be seen as adopting a similar strategy to Laibach and the NSK, but identifying with different aspects of Yugoslav culture. This, however, only serves to highlight for me the very problematic nature of such a position and political strategy—what one critic (Gocic) can take to be the ironic over-identification with Western stereotypes and myths, another (Žižek) takes to be the unconscious ideological fantasy of the director. As Levi's points out, however, the SNP were never an explicitly politicized group, unlike the NSK who they parodied (76).[22] The cyclical narrative structure of *Underground*—The War, The Cold War, The War—is also ideologically loaded, replicating Western European views of the Balkans as an atavistic, barbaric space outside of time and history.

What I want to argue here, however, is, that the very multilayered and self-referential aspect of this film, which Žižek so quickly dismisses and Levi does not address in his analysis, *is* the whole point of the film and not simply some cynical ideological ploy on the director's part. There is clearly a politics to *Underground*, but not where Žižek is looking for it.

Underground represents the history of modern Yugoslavia from 1941, the outbreak of WWII, to 1992 and the Bosnian conflict. The narrative is divided into three parts: The War (1941—); The Cold War (1961—); The War (1992—). Each of these dates represents key moments in Yugoslav history: 1941, the dismemberment of the old Yugoslav state and the beginning of the Partisan resistance; 1961, the first formal meeting of the Non-Aligned movement in Belgrade and the opening up of Yugoslavia to the West; 1992, the Bosnian conflict and effectively the end of the Yugoslav state.

This history, however, is told through the personal histories of the three main characters, two resistance fighters and communist party members—Marko and Blacky—and Natalija, an actress and sometime mistress of Blacky and Franz and later wife of Marko. After being informed on for stealing an arms shipment Marko hides Blacky and his relations in a cellar for the duration of the war. But he then tricks them into believing the war is still continuing and keeps them there for over twenty years. The lives of these three main characters are shown to be inextricably bound up with the history of the country and it was precisely this analogy that many of Kusturica's critics picked up on. Stanko Ceroric, for instance, was one of Kusturica's most outspoken critics; he claimed that it was not by chance that in *Underground*: "The revolution is led metaphorically by a Montenegrin and a Serb; two archetypal Belgrade figures, who together represent the cliché image of Serb heroes created by nationalist writers. These are the people who fight and make love better than anybody else in the world, doubtless thanks to some genetic and spiritual superiority—but who sometimes also happen to sin or do wrong precisely because of this spiritual generosity and naivety. Even their violence only adds to their irresistible charm." (qtd. In Iordanova 2001 116)

Marko celebrates his membership in the communist party by going to the local brothel. Given the weight of ideological critique of this film, there is very little said about its appalling sexual politics.

In order to fool the partisans living underground that World War II is continuing, Marko stage manages an extremely elaborate theatrical set-up, including bombing raids, old news reports and constant updates on the progress of the war.

If we scrutinize the film a little closer, though, this ideal image of national heroism becomes a little difficult to sustain. As well as being an international arms smuggler, Marko is a rather awful nationalist poet and something of a stage director himself.

Marko manipulates the partisans into remaining hidden in the cellar and believing that World War II is still going on through a complex fabrication of reality. He constructs an elaborate mise-en-scène, through news reels, music, bombing raids and special performances by his actress wife, Natalija. Marko in fact writes the scripts that he and Natalija will perform in front of the partisans in the cellar, scripts that constantly glorify Marko's own historical role but invariably involve her being humiliated and abused by the Nazis. In this script within the script Marko arranges for Natalija to escape her captors and arrive at the cellar just in time for Jovan's wedding. She has been tortured and raped and is to arrive at the cellar on the verge of death. Natalija refers to this script as "trash" and insists that what is missing from it is "The truth!" Marko responds: "No text, my dear, has any truth in it. The truth exists only in real life. You are the truth! You! You are supposed to be the truth. There is no truth, only your conviction that what you say is the truth. No, art is a lie, a big lie! We are all liars a little bit at least."

This postmodern relativization of truth and representation is consistently emphasized within the film, at a generic level, as I will discuss below, but especially in relation to Marko. In a similar scene between Natalija and Marko earlier in the film, Marko attempts to seduce Natalija by reciting some of his poems to her. Natalija resists him repeating "You're lying. You're lying," to which Marko replies "I never lie, never, never." As she succumbs to his embrace and kisses him, Natalija whispers "You lie so beautifully."[23] It is precisely Marko's skill at deception and lying that makes him so attractive to Natalija, but these are also the very qualities that make him completely inappropriate as a national hero in any ideal sense.

If we are supposed to take Marko as exemplary of the brave Serbian nation then we also have to accept that he is a fraud from beginning to end. It is here, then, in relation to Marko as a character that Žižek's comparison to Radovan Karadžic as a poet and ethnic cleansing as a continuation of poetry by other means has resonance, and not to Kusturica as director. Given the explicitly deceitful and manipulative nature of this particular character, however, this would suggest that the film is a critique of such nationalist poets rather than an apology for them. Indeed, we are left in very little doubt that this very selective view of history is not to be taken at face value. History is always contested.

Underground is a very self-conscious cultural artifact. Both Gocic (2001) and Iordanova (2002) see Kusturica as a distinctively postmodern filmmaker in terms of his films' self-reflexivity, his use of parody, and above all through his representation of history. Gocic distinguishes five levels of narrative reference in the film: the film diegesis itself, Kusturica's own body of work, Yugoslav cinema history, Yugoslav political mythology and Yugoslav history (146). Iordanova, on the other hand, outlines four broad criteria characteristic of postmodern historiographic film that particularly apply to Kusturica:

- a self-reflexive narrative
- a refusal to take storytelling seriously
- the blurring of traditional boundaries and subversion of hierarchical categories
- the questioning of interpretative conventions, specifically the conventions of historical representation (2002 162).[24]

In the remaining sections of this paper I will broadly follow Iordanova's criteria and consider *Underground* 1) as a self-reflexive text, 2) as a parody of nationalist films, 3) as a subversion of historical truth through the blurring of generic boundaries and thus opening up the possibility of a more radical questioning of the past.

Narrative reflexivity

Let me begin then with the issue of formal and narrative self-reflexivity. *Underground* is not just a film about the history of a country that no longer exists but also, to borrow the dedication from another controversial film on the Bosnian conflict, a film about "the film industry of a country that no longer exists."[25] *Underground* constantly draws attention to itself *as* film and as the production of a specific film industry. I have already mentioned above Kusturica's so-called "magic realism"—flying beds, flying characters, telekinetic powers etc.—and *Underground* is no exception in this respect.

In the central wedding scene of the film, Jovan and Jelena's wedding in the cellar, we have a shot where the bride flies across the screen with her veil and wedding dress billowing in the wind. This is a wonderfully romantic and Kusturician image, as the bride, angel like, descends into her seat. However, as we see Jelena flying across the screen, the camera tilts down to reveal a rather crude dolly on which she is being carried and then cuts to a side shot so that we can see both the dolly and wind machine constructed by the partisans in the cellar to create this magic realist effect. Not only therefore do we see the magic realist effect but also the technology used to create this effect and the means of its staging.

The bride flies through the cellar to meet her groom in a quintessentially Kusturician romantic image.

Jelena descends, angel-like, to her place next to Jovan.

The magic realist effect of this image, however, is

The camera then cuts to a medium side shot

immediately dispelled as the camera tilts down to reveal the two men operating the dolly.

showing both the bride balanced precariously on the dolly and the men in front of her operating the primitive wind machine.

Similarly the frequent use of low or unusual camera angles, for example, the positioning of the camera as if it inside the womb for Jovan's birth as well as the use of unusual framing, such as side framed close-ups or upside down frames, all draw attention to the medium itself and the mise-en-scène. In other words, the spectators' attention is constantly drawn to the artifice of the image. All of these features point to a very self-conscious piece of film making. And if we do not want to fall into the rather tired postmodern cliché that *Underground* is yet another film about film making and historical relativity, then we would need to say more about the purpose of such self-referentiality.

History as repetition: from tragedy to farce

Marx once wrote, paraphrasing Hegel, that all great events of history and world historical figures occur twice, "the first time as tragedy, the second as farce" (1973 [1869], 146).[26] The notion of history as repetition is inscribed within the three part narrative structure of the film but also within the film's mise-en-scène through the repetition of scenes, shots, songs and dialogue. This idea is most conspicuously evident in the central section of *Underground*, "The Cold War." Part II is all about the making of a film, but not just any film: it is the filming of the events we saw in Part I. With respect to the film's overall view of history, as I noted above, this presents us with a particularly conservative, fatalistic and pessimistic view, in the sense that nothing can be done to escape this endless cycle of violence.

Marko heroically saves the day in the partisan movie *Spring Comes On a White Horse*. This film within the film is based on the events we saw in Part 1 of *Underground* but now ...

... re-narrated through Marko's memoirs. Marko (Miki Manojlovic) meets the actor (Miki Manojlovic) playing the role of Marko (Miki Manojlovic) in *Spring Comes On a White Horse*.

The structural and formal repetitions, however, could also facilitate a radically different reading of the past. The film within the film is a Second World War partisan movie entitled *Spring Comes on a White Horse* and is based on Marko's own memoirs of his "dead" friend and comrade Petar "Blacky" Popara. The scene we see being filmed is Blacky and Natalija's wedding on the boat containing stolen arms. In contrast to the

first scene, however, Marko is shown heroically defending the arms shipment while Blacky is captured trying to rescue Natalija and then executed. Marko and Natalija are invited onto the set to give the film their official stamp of approval and we are presented with the image of Marko first embracing an actor playing the character of Blacky and subsequently the actor who plays the character of Marko, while Natalija kisses the actress who plays the character Natalija, all the time commenting on how life like the actors look. The situation becomes even more farcical when the "real" Blacky appears on the set and attempts to rescue himself, killing a number of the cast of German soldiers in the process.

Miki Manojlovic as the actor playing Marko (Miki Manojlovic). This doubling of narrative levels and repetition of scenes, shots, songs and dialogue in *Underground* suggests...

... that nothing should be taken at face value. Mirjana Jokovic as the actress playing Natalija (Mirjana Jokovic), who, we should note, had wanted to play the role herself.

In this play of mirror images where performance and reality, truth and fiction, past and present become blurred what we should not forget is that what is being rewritten is History itself, both in terms of the film's diegesis (Marko's memoirs) but also in relation to *Underground* as a text.

Kusturica plays a cameo role as a war profiteer negotiating the purchase of arms from Marko, flanked by UN "blue helmets."

Kusturica concludes his arms deal, self-consciously drawing attention to the role of filmmakers profiteering from the conflict.

As if to underscore the director's own self-consciousness of, or complicity with, this fabrication of history towards the end of the film, when we move to the present conflicts and wars of succession, Kusturica himself plays a cameo role in the film as an arms dealer and war profiteer. This very overt narrative repetition and doubling of characters

within the film serves to open up a critical space whereby we can see the past being constantly rewritten, reconstructed and manipulated and therefore always open to alternative and more radical interpretations. An example of such an alternative reading would be the location of the film within the history of Yugoslav cinema as well as the broader socio-political history of the former Yugoslavia as I shall now discuss.

A film industry that no longer exists

The parody of partisan films is more than simply farce. Partisan films were one of the principal and most popular genres produced by this film industry that no longer exists. The classical period of Yugoslav partisan films was between the end of the Second World War and the early 1950s, what is usually referred to as the Red Wave.

In the 1960s, a new generation of film directors, the most well known in the West being Dušan Makavejev, reworked the genre into more personal and ambiguous visions of the past, much as Hollywood directors of the 1980s have done with the Vietnam War.[27] What was known at the time as New Yugoslav cinema but has posthumously been labeled "Black film" or the "Black Wave" was particularly critical of the ultra-realism and kitsch of the Red Wave. After the political clampdown across Yugoslavia in the early 1970s, there was a revival of Red Wave films. Partisan films have continued to have a resonance in post-Yugoslav film production and the influence of the Black film of the 1960s can be seen in both *Underground* and Dragojevic's *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*.[28] Partisan films were also central to the New Primitiv critique of official culture; the rock group No Smoking called their first album *Walter* after the Partisan blockbuster *Walter Defends Sarajevo* (1972).[29]

Left: A poster for the partisan blockbuster *Walter Defends Sarajevo* (1972). The film *Underground*'s intertextual reference to Yugoslav new film of the 1960s and 70s again links it to a tradition of critical and anti-war filmmaking, rather than nationalist propaganda.

Above: A helicopter rises above the tree line and swoops down upon the beach in a shot reminiscent of *Apocalypse Now* (1979), intertextually linking *Underground* with a tradition of critical anti-war filmmaking.

Originally, partisan films served purely propaganda purposes, idealistically glorifying and confirming a revolutionary past and at the same time reinforcing this revolutionary spirit in the heroic struggle to construct a socialist society out of the ruins of the war. Partisan films also represented a particular national aesthetic, "nationalist realism," which Tito's government promoted as an alternative to the "socialist realism" of the Soviet Union. These films were technically crude, stereotypical and simplistic. They were initially directed for a domestic audience and were very popular films. For instance, the second Red Wave also tried to break into the international market with big multinational productions and such international stars as Richard Burton in the role of Tito. As Daniel Goulding (2002) writes, partisan films were also imbued with an intense sense of nationalism and pride as a result of Yugoslavia's unique historical experience: "Yugoslavia was the only European Communist government established after the war whose legitimacy was founded primarily on its own efforts and not the sponsorship and the political and military domination of the Soviet Union." (23)

Partisan films are frequently referred to as Yugoslav Westerns, and they share something of the mythic structure of the North American Western, in the sense that they stage a primal "conflict between civilization and wilderness." For the partisan film, this meant "constantly returning to the pioneering days of Tito's Communist party and the founding mythologies of the state during the Nazi occupation in the second world war" (48). This is, of course, precisely the territory of Kusturica's *Underground*, as well as of the film within the film.

Spring Comes on a White Horse (the film in *Underground*) is a classic partisan film in its low production values, stereotypical characters and over dramatization, and could be read merely as a parody of the genre, except that the actual "historical" events that it is supposedly based upon, and which we saw in the first part of *Underground*, are no less a critique of the genre and the history that it represents. The two central characters of *Underground*, Marko and Blacky, are, as I have argued above, womanizers, crooks and liars who act more out of self-interest than ideological conviction. This is hardly the image of heroic resistance fighters and neither is keeping a population imprisoned in the dark for 20 years many leftist's idea of how to construct socialism. *Spring Comes on a White Horse* is at once a nostalgic homage to a film industry that no longer exists and, at the same time, it foregrounds the complicity of that film industry in the construction of historical memory and national mythology. Without wishing to labor the point, if *Underground* is in any sense a propaganda film, it is because it is a film *about* propaganda films.

Generic discontinuities and historical truth

In the opening scene of Part II (The Cold War) Marko is opening a cultural centre in memory of his old friend and national hero Petar "Blacky" Popara, and he takes the opportunity to recite one of his poems. Politician, hero of the resistance, poet, stage director, script writer and actor, it would appear that Marko is something of a renaissance man, were it not for the fact that he is a complete charlatan and motivated solely by self-interest. The character of Marko, however, also serves to draw attention

to the existence within the film of a range of cultural forms and mutually exclusive genres. Most obviously there is the film within the film discussed above, but there is also a staged play within the film, as well as the montage sequences of documentary footage. *Underground* contains elements of slapstick humor and Natalija's theatrical performance is sheer melodrama.

Marko and Blacky are (as Laurel and Hardy) in slapstick mood, as they head-off to abduct Natalija.

Natalija's theatrical performance is sheer melodrama, but no more so than her performance for the partisans in the cellar.

But, as we have seen, it has been the inclusion of archival footage that has aroused most attention and criticism. The combination of different forms and genres: feature film and documentary, historical drama and personal memoir, lyric poetry and farce, serve to highlight the difficulties and tensions of representing the past but also how that past has been inscribed in a multiplicity of texts—films, books, poems, art works—thus creating a specific national mythology. The different texts and genres within *Underground* do not sit comfortably together but create their own internal tensions within the film text itself.

The archival footage is usually tinted and in a number of sequences used as back projection, drawing attention to both its presence in the film and the fact that the image has been manipulated.

At times Marko is seamlessly edited into sequences with Tito, reminding us of the old Stalinist practice of editing out discredited figures from visual images and hence from the historical record.

Documentary is conventionally understood to be the opposite of a feature film. A documentary presents us with "real" information and historical facts; it aims at the truth

rather than the imaginative reconstructions of fiction films. What happens, therefore, when these two opposing genre are combined in a single artifact? Does the inclusion of documentary footage provide historical legitimacy for the fictional account, or does the fictional account undermine the veracity of the documentary presentation? As can be seen from the conflicting interpretations of *Underground*, it clearly does both.

What I think is notable in *Underground*, however, is the very diversity of ways in which this footage is incorporated into the film. There are scenes in the film where the documentary footage is simply spliced in, such as the bombing of Belgrade in 1941, or the controversial scenes of cheering grounds in Maribor and Zagreb. The archival footage has frequently been tinted so that we are aware that this material has been touched-up and manipulated. The documentary footage is also used very crudely and obviously as back projection, while in other instances Marko is seamlessly edited into sequences with Tito—we see Marko apparently shaking hands with Tito, or standing with him on a balcony watching a May 1st parade. The overall effect of this diversity and integration of archival footage and fictional characters is to stress, yet again, the way in which film can be used, and has been used, in the reconstruction of Yugoslav history and national mythology.

The gap between the representation and history itself is always quite evident, history as a text is always constructed and therefore always-already ideological. It is worth recalling here Fredric Jameson well known formulation from *The Political Unconscious*, "history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious" (35).

Marko shakes hands with Tito.

Marko exhorts cheering crowds in Belgrade to save "the heart of the country" and defend Trieste, which would shortly be taken under Allied control and then returned to Italy.

It is this level of textualization and narrativization that *Underground* consistently foregrounds and in doing so emphasizes the ideological operation inherent in *all* narratives of the past. To give one last example, in the concluding montage sequence of Part I we see Marko addressing a large crowd in Belgrade, his revolutionary rhetoric stirring the crowd to the defence of Trieste through armed resistance. The city of Trieste, on the border between Slovenia and Italy, was liberated by Yugoslav partisans in 1945 but almost immediately brought under Allied control and subsequently returned

to Italy. It is always, it seems, the unreliability of Marko's historical perspective that the spectator is left with.

Conclusion

Dina Iordanova has argued that Kusturica's "choice," as it is usually termed, of siding with the Serbs was not so much a choice *for* something (Serbian nationalism) as *against* something (nationalism in general and Bosnian nationalism in particular). However, as an active choice it did facilitate his recuperation, as is now clearly evident in his public profile in Serbia, into a nationalist discourse that he himself once rejected (2002 20). Kusturica now lives, at least part of the year, in his newly built "traditional" Serbian village, Küstendorf, in the mountains Southwest of Belgrade.

"A war is not a war until a brother kills a brother." Ivan confronts Marko with his lies and deceptions before killing him and committing suicide himself (his second suicide attempt in the film).

As Blacky leads his men and refugees back into the cellar he abandoned 30 years previously, the utter senselessness of these cycles of violence is underscored.

1992, Blacky is still fighting his own "personal" war against "Fucking Fascist Motherfuckers" in a seemingly relentless cycle of violence.

UN "blue Helmets" transporting refuges through the underground tunnels for a price, as the UN are consistently shown to be complicit in the recent violence in Bosnia.

What we can see here is the difficulty facing critics of nationalism in the Balkans, of circumventing that ideology, or of maintaining a position outside of it that is not itself open to recuperation by nationalist discourses. I have argued in this paper that, however, flawed and contradictory, it is possible to read Kusturica's *Underground* against the grain of ethnic nationalism and as a critique of this process rather than an apology for it.

If we read *Underground* as a film, and not simply as a vehicle for the dominant ideology of Serbian nationalism, then we can see it as a critique of Tito's Yugoslavia and the film industry's role in reconstructing history and nationalist mythologies. This entails reading *Underground* as a film *about* propaganda though rather than *as* propaganda.

In one of many cinematic intertextual references in the film, Kusturica cites Hitchcock.

Kusturica cites Tarkovsky in a game that reminds us that *Underground* is as much about cinema history as it is about socio-political history.

Notes

1. At the time of *Underground's* release Kusturica was known internationally as a Bosnian director of Muslim descent. After the controversy surrounding the film and the Yugoslav wars of succession he now identifies himself as Serbian Orthodox.

2. I want to make this argument specifically in relation to *Underground* and would not wish to extend it beyond this film, especially in the light of Kusturica's public statements in the late 90s and since, culminating in his public support for the Serbian nationalist campaign "Solidarity – Kosovo is Serbia" formed in the final months of negotiations for Kosovo independence. Kosovo finally declared itself to be an independent sovereign state on February 17th 2008.

3. The New Primitivs spelt their name without the "e" (Levi 63 ft. 4).

4. In this section I draw on Iordanova (2002), ch. 1; Gocic (2001), ch. 1. The best account of the New Primitivs so far published in English is Pavle Levi's (2007), ch. 2.

5. See Monroe (2005) for an account of the NSK.

6. Kusturica plays base for the renamed No Smoking Orchestra and his son is now their drummer. The Orchestra scored Kusturica's last two feature films, and *Super 8 Stories* is a documentary of their recent European tour. As Levi points out though, since 1997 there have been two No Smoking Orchestras, one in Belgrade consisting of those members of the band who sought refuge there during the Bosnian war and the other in Sarajevo consisting of those who remained in the besieged city (62).

7. Levi notes that Kusturica's version of magic realism differs significantly from that of Gabriel García Márquez's; whereas Márquez strove for the poetic transformation of the object world, Kusturica saw Yugoslav reality itself as enchanted. Furthermore, "in this vision the use of magical reality as the site of an opposition to the various forms of social and political reification does not automatically preclude its potential to also serve as the subject matter for a national panegyric" (86-87).

8. I draw extensively in this section on the work of Magaš (1993) and Woodward (1995).

9. The relationship between modern Yugoslavia and its predecessor as well as the question of whether or not Tito's partisans led a genuine social revolution became highly contested in the period I am concerned with here (the 1980s and 90s) as it brought into question the very legitimacy of the federal state and its constitution, see Magaš ch. 1.

10. Woodward notes that the drive towards centralization to address the economic crisis facing Yugoslavia was not initially motivated by "Greater Serb Nationalism" but by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) itself. The IMF attributed many of the economic problems facing Yugoslavia with the "excessive decentralization of the banking and foreign exchange systems" and it urged greater federal control over the economy and the Central Bank. In 1987 the IMF made further support for Yugoslavia *conditional* upon these changes and the reform of the 1974 constitution (74-82). Slovenia was the most outspoken opponent of these changes and in October 1987 walked out of the federal parliament (along with Croatia) refusing to contribute any longer to the federal budget.

11. The situation is by no means as straight forward as this simple opposition between liberal, democratic, reformers and hardline, totalitarian, nationalists suggests. Woodward points out that Miloševic was a 1980s liberal in the sense that he combined economic liberalism with political conservativism, a trend that we can see right across Europe and North America at the time and one reason why the West supported him until the early 1990s (106). On the other hand, the wealthier more Western oriented regimes, such as Slovenia, were in fact more conservative and nationalistic in their response to the issue of political and economic reforms (61).

12. Woodward observes that both the EU and the US repeatedly failed the former Yugoslavia by prematurely recognizing the national sovereignty of the new states without any accompanying guarantee of minority rights (143); a mistake they have once again repeated, I might add, with the recognition of Kosovo.

13. Strictly speaking the Yugoslav army occupied Bosnia to maintain the territorial integrity of the country, something it was legally entitled to do, in practice, however, the JAL had now become irredeemably associated with Serbia and its territorial aspirations.

14. The antagonism between Kusturica and his fellow Bosnians began in 1992 when he published a plea to stop the war in Bosnia and criticized the nationalists who had started it. Branka Magaš also reports a meeting that she had with Kusturica in Slovenia during the filming of *Time of the Gypsies* where he strongly condemned nationalism (Magaš 134).

15. In response to this argument Levi remarks that Kusturica made no attempt to show Bosnian Serbs committing atrocities such as the destruction of Vukovar in Croatia or the siege of Sarajevo. "So much," he concludes, "for *Underground* as a cinematic contribution to the critical discourse on selective humanism" (98).

16. Kusturica simply ridiculed critics such as Finkielkraut rather than engage seriously with their criticisms. See Finkielkraut's original article, Kusturica's response to it and Finkielkraut's unapologetic reply after finally seeing the film on the website: http://www.kustu.com/w2/en:polemics.

17. As Bjelic argues, this comparison is rather 'a hard sell' and paraphrasing Sartre's comment regarding "lazy Marxists" writes 'Yes, Kusturica, like Karadžic, poeticises "the wild Serb man" but not every "wild Serb" is Kusturica; yes, Karadžic is a poet, like Kusturica, but can Karadžic make [*Underground*]?' (2005 119 ft 29).

18. For a fuller critique of Žižek's reading of Kusturica see Homer (2007) and in particular his failure to account for his own position and the rise of Slovene nationalism during the period this critique of *Underground* was developed.

19. If we look at central wedding scenes in *When Father Was Away on Business* or *Time of the Gypsies* we can see a similar pattern emerging.

20. The equation of socialism with fascism is a specifically cold war ideology and when it is resurrected again today, as Žižek has argued, it has particularly unsavoury political connotations. Such a view results in a profoundly reactionary view of history whereby fascism inevitably becomes "the lesser evil, an understandable reaction to the communist threat" (2005, 8). Even given the reactionary nature of Kusturica's current politics I do not think this is a view he would be arguing for.

21. When Blacky is captured by the Nazis he is tortured through electrocution. However, as an ex-lineman, he can absorb electrical current to the point that it kills the average person.

22. See Ian Parker (2007) for a discussion of the psychoanalytic understanding of over-identification and some of its problems as a political strategy.

23. Natalija repeats this line again in Part II as she and Marko make-up after another fight about his deceptions.

24. Iordanova has taken this modified list of characteristic features from Igor Krstic (1999 145), who has in turn paraphrased Robert Rosenstone's (1996 206). For my own views on postmodern historiography see Homer (2006).

25. See Srdjan Dragojevic's *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*. This film was also greeted with accusations of Serb propaganda upon release.

26. It is not clear, however, that Hegel ever wrote this and Marx seems to be developing the idea from his correspondence with Engels. Marx, of course, never believed that history repeated itself in this fashion.

27. *Underground*, for example, makes explicit reference to both Makavejev's *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, which again suggests that Kusturica is locating his film within a tradition of anti-war cinematic production (see Iordanova (2002), ch. 3 for a discussion of the intertextual references and "makeovers" in *Underground*).

28. See Krstic (2000) for a discussion of the both Hollywood and domestic references in *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* that share many similarities with *Underground* and locate Dragojevic's film in the traditions of Black Wave film, post-classical Hollywood westerns and critical Vietnam movies.

29. See Šešic (2006) for a discussion of *Walter Defend Sarajevo* and Levi 64-67 for an analysis of the New Primitivs' interest in the film.

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