GRADUATE INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

DEBATING SERBIA

THE CONTROVERSY OVER EMIR KUSTURICA'S FILM *UNDERGROUND* AND THE IMAGE OF SERBIA

DISSERTATION

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by
Fiona Ziegler
(Switzerland)

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1. Introduction

At the Cannes Film Festival in May 1995, Emir Kusturica's film *Underground* won the *Palme d'Or* as best international film. The jury's decision evoked a heated controversy that started with a polemic by French writer-philosopher Alain Finkielkraut, prominently placed in *Le Monde* of June 2. He harshly criticized the Jury's decision and called the film of Sarajevo-born Kusturica "pro-Serbian war propaganda" and a falsified nationalistic treatment of Yugoslav history.[1]

At the time the Cannes Film Festival took place, the disintegration of former Yugoslavia and especially the war in Bosnia greatly concerned European intellectuals. Since concentration camps were discovered in Bosnia, the very idea of a Europe as a region of peace with common cultural and ethic values was put into question. For the French intelligentsia with their protagonists, such as Finkielkraut and Bernard Hénry-Levy, it was then clear that Serbia was responsible for the Yugoslav wars.

When a film director of Bosnian origins appears on the Cannes Festival scene, having made a film about one of the most difficult phases of Yugoslav history, who even shot part of that film in Belgrade, used Serbian financial support, casted actors from Belgrade while his home-town Sarajevo was suffering Serbian attacks: When such a director's film gets the prestigious *Palme d'Or,* then it comes as no surprise that the Jury's decision is widely perceived as an international gesture towards Serbia. Hence the controversy was to involve not only intellectuals in Paris but soon spread over to other Western European centres of intellectual and cultural *vitalité*. However, the deeper one gets involved in what might be called the case of *Underground*, it becomes obvious that things are more complex in the sense that the general, or better, conventional Western European perception of Serbia as the aggressor has at least to be modified.

The aim of this study is to arrive at a judgement on Kusturica's film and on the controversy's references to Serbia and her role in the Yugoslav wars that is fair - fair in the sense of being supported by the results of (1) an assessment of the film, (2) a survey on the controversy about the film, and (3) the analysis of the film's historical context, of historiographies and of the Western perceptions of the Balkans, Yugoslavia, Serbia, perceptions that determined

[1] See: Finkielkraut, Alain: "L'imposture Kusturica", in *Le Monde*, June 2, 1995.

policies, provoked interventions, shaped the image of Serbia. Accordingly, the study will be structured into three parts: film; controversy; history, perceptions, and image.

It is important to deal with the film first as it is a complex one, basically surrealistic, full of historical references and metaphors. It is only with this background that one can reasonably understand and assess the controversy about the film, its maker and the Cannes decision. As the centre of the controversy was Paris, the study will focus on leading French writer-philosophers Finkielkraut and Lévy without neglecting other relevant voices such as André Glucksmann's and Peter Handke's. The controversy as such was greatly influenced by news about the horrors of the (then) war in Bosnia and by specific perceptions of the Balkans, Yugoslavia, and the role of Serbia. These perceptions will be dealt with in part three and should lead up to a conclusion that hopefully fulfils the study's aim: to arrive at a fair judgement.

Concerning methodology and sources. Part one will be a cinematic analysis and interpretation, supported by interviews, film critiques and secondary literature. Part two will be a descriptive survey, its main sources being leading Western European newspapers and the prestigious French *Cahiers du cinéma.* And part three will be an analysis of perceptions and images, their origins, dynamics, influences; this part of the study will be mainly based on academic literature.

2. The Film

2.1. The film's director: Emir Kusturica

Emir Kusturica was born 1954 in Sarajevo. His family, relatively well off, was Muslim for generations but their ancestors were Slavic Orthodox who under Ottoman Rule converted to Islam. Kusturica's father Murat denounced his faith to become a communist like thousands of others in former Yugoslavia did. Kusturica grew up in Sarajevo and left at the age of eighteen to study at the prestigious FAMU Film Academy in Prague.[2] After his graduation in 1978, Kusturica went back to Sarajevo and soon became a leading film-maker within the Bosnian film scene of the 1980s. He oriented his cinematic work towards the existing aesthetics of Yugoslav cinema called *novi* or *crni* film ('new' or 'black' film) and combined it with what he had learned in Prague and in the cultural circles of Sarajevo.[3]

After Tito's death in 1980, a new artistic trend emerged called 'new primitives'. Sarajevo's 'new primitives' movement was pointedly local, playing with Balkan stereotypes. Kusturica's first two feature films *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?* (1981) and *When Father Was Away on Business* (1985) are clearly set into that scene. Kusturica at that time was even celebrated as "Bosnian Emancipator"[4] as he used and promoted the typically Bosnian Sarajevo dialect (or slang).[5] For example, in *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?* the actors on screen stopped talking in standardised Serbo-Croat and started using their respective accents and vocabularies instead.[6] Referring to his roots in Sarajevo and how they influenced his films, Kusturica says:

> When I returned to Sarajevo, I recognised that the space of my courtyard, my childhood memories, my personal experiences were rich enough to mirror certain

[2] FAMU back then was world-famous due to its ex-students who became widely known as directors of the *Czech New Wave* such as Miloš Forman, Jiří Menzel, Vera Chytilovà, Jan Němec. See Gocić, Goran: *The cinema of Emir Kusturica: Notes from the Underground,* London/New York: Wallflower Press, 2001, 14f; see Iordanova, Dina: *Cinema of the Other Europe,* London/New York: Wallflower Press, 2003, 96-102.
[3] See Gocić: 14-21; see Iordanova, Dina: *Emir Kusturica,* London: British Film Institute, 2002, 5.
[4] Gocić: 19, 21.
[5] See ibid: 16-21.
[6] See ibid: 19. See *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?*, a film by Emir Kusturica, Bosnia-Herzegovina: 1981.

> stories and to be embedded in them. That is the first time when I truly recognised cinema.[7]

Kusturica was highly successful in combining 'his Sarajevo' with 'his cinema'. Both his two first features films were set in Sarajevo's environment and both won international awards: *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?* won the *Lion d'Or* at the Venice Film Festival in 1981 and *When Father Was Away On Business* the *Palme d'Or* at Cannes 1985. Kusturica became an international celebrity and was considered as the most successful Bosnian film director of all times.[8]

This changed with the outbreak of the Balkan wars. Kusturica, who called himself 'non-aligned', refused to support the Bosnian Muslim government, emigrated to France, then moved to New York, teaching at the prestigious Columbia University.[9] Shortly after his arrival in the U.S., he started to shoot the film *Arizona Dream*. The film wasn't a success in the U.S. whereas in Europe it was enthusiastically received and acquired cult status.[10]

In 1993, Kusturica returned to Europe and started to work on *Underground.* The film was shot in Prague and Belgrade between October 1993 and February 1995. The war in Bosnia had started in April 1992 and by the time the shooting of *Underground* began, the director's native land had lived trough two years of war and ethnic cleansing. His native town had been under Serbian siege and daily shelling. In the critiques following the film's release, Kusturica was accused of not having been *sur place* defending Bosnia, for having betrayed his Sarajevan roots.[11] Kusturica's comment to that: "Instead of being on the frontline and defending my city, I was shooting a film. Moreover, in Belgrade. On top of it, I met Milošević."[12] However, *Underground* turned out to be a great international success and brought Kusturica his second *Palme d'Or*, a decade after having won his first one with *When Father Was Away on Business*.

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[7] Kusturica in an interview with Goran Gocić (2001), quoted in Gocić: 15.
[8] See Gocić: 20f; 131-133.
[9] Iordanova, Dina: *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media,* London: British Film Institute, 2001, 121f.
[10] *Arizona Dream* won the *Silver Bear* award at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1993. See further Gocić: 3; Iordanova (2002): 5; 70-75. See *Arizona Dream*, a film by Emir Kusturica, USA: 1993.
[11] See Iordanova (2001): 122-128. See further Ourdan, Remy: "A Sarajevo, les souvenirs amers des anciens amis d'un enfant de la rue", in *Le Monde*, October 26, 1995.
[12] Quoted in Gocić: 46.

2.2. The film's title, script, music

The film's original title was *Once Upon a Time there was a Country (Bila jednom jedna zemlja)*. That sounded very poetic, implying some sort of fairy-tale version and nostalgia.[13] The title was finally skipped for *Underground* that refers to literary titles such as Dostojevski's *Notes from the Underground* or Franz Kafka's *The Burrow* and thus alludes to a literary Eastern European or Slavic topos.[14]

The story and script of *Underground* is based on a play written by Serbian author Dušan Kovačević, called *Spring in January*.[15] Kovačević is known as one of (former) Yugoslavia's most famous playwriter.[16] Together with Kusturica, he re-arranged his original play for the film:

> With the help of Emir, I wrote sixteen versions of the screenplay for *Underground*. It was more than 2000 pages of text. From the idea, when we agreed to do a film together, I was working on it for three years. It was a job which our generation would not be able to repeat. A team of workaholic fanatics gathered, led by Kusturica, who did the film ...[17]

Although Kovačević was immensely important for *Underground*, the screenwriter's name hardly appears in public, unjustly so.[18]

The music of *Underground* was composed by Sarajevo-rooted musician Goran Bregović who worked two full years to compose it.[19] The result of directing, screenwriting and composing was a three hours long firework, a surreal historical meta-fiction, an "unavoidable *fin-de-siècle* film"[20], a film whose speedy rhythm is very much affected by a music vibrating with emotions and nostalgia, with Balkan brass band tunes and Gypsy music that fitted so well Kusturica's "cinema of excess".[21]

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[13] See Gocić: 152.
[14] See Grünberg, Serge: "La caverne d'Emir", in Kusturica and Grünberg: *Il était une fois ... UNDERGROUND*, Paris: Cahiers du cinéma/CIBY 2000, 1995, 102.
[15] See Gocić: 150; The play was unknown when it was used as *Underground*'s starting point.
[16] See Iordanova (2002): 75; see Gocić: 20.
[17] Dušan Kovačević in an interview with Goran Gocić, quoted in Gocić: 150.
[18] See Gocić: 151.
[19] See ibid., 150.
[20] Ibid., 146.
[21] Ibid., 173. See further Gocić: 111ff, 137f.

2.3. The film and its historical context

Underground is about Yugoslavia 1941-1993, about wars, communism, disintegration, Yugoslav characters and mentalities. Its general approach can be termed as surrealistic, tragic-comical, burlesque. Despite all its surrealism and cascade of crazy sequences, the film is a 'conceptual work'[22], organized clearly into three parts. It starts with the German invasion, resulting in the end of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, then moves to the Federation of Yugoslavia and Tito's communist regime, established after World War II, and ends with the demise of Yugoslavia. The film's story is built on three protagonists and their lives: Marko, Blacky and Nataljia. The opening words of *Underground* are: "To our fathers and their children … Once there was a country and its capital was Belgrade."[23]

2.3.1. Part one: War

In the early morning of April 6, 1941, the *Luftwaffe* opens the assault on Belgrade. The German-led invasion precipitated a Yugoslav anti-fascist *coup d'état* on March 27, two days after the Kingdom of Yugoslavia's government had signed the Tripartite Pact in Vienna.[24] Fighting ended on April 17 with the unconditional surrender of the Royal Yugoslav Army, years of German occupation began.[25] Few days before, on April 10, Italian-backed Croatian fascist leader Ante Pavelić declared the independence of Croatia. All this resulted in bitter civil conflict and the break-up of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.[26]

The film's opening sequence is set in this historical context. The bombing of Belgrade and the occupation of Yugoslavia is accompanied by the sound of Lale Anderson's song *Lilly Marleen,* as

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[22] See Gocić: 31.
[23] *Underground* (00:00:19 - 00:00:29).
[24] Following the *coup d'état*, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia's regent Prince Paul was replaced by the young King Peter II; the leading figure of the *coup d'état*, General Dušan Simović, was named Prime Minister. It is known that there was British involvement in the events leading up to the *coup d'état* of March 27, 1941. See Stafford, David: "SOE and British Involvement in the Belgrade *coup d'état* of March 1941", in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Sept., 1977), 399-419.
[25] The Kingdom of Yugoslavia was divided amongst Germany, Hungary, Italy and Bulgaria, with most of Serbia being occupied by the German army.
[26] Charles Jelavich gives an understandable and short 'overview' on the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (renamed Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929), its founding in 1918, "Yugoslavism" and the failure of it, based on his study of Serbian textbooks. See Jelavich: "Serbian Textbooks: Toward Greater Serbia or Yugoslavia?", *Slavic Review,* Vol. 42, No. 4 (Winter, 1983), 601-619.

a song most popular on both sides of the warring fronts, and by superimposed spots of archive films showing a cheerful (or at least co-operating) mass welcoming the German invaders in Zagreb and Ljubljana and a grim (not co-operating) crowd in destroyed Belgrade watching the German troops moving in.[27]

During German occupation, Marko and Blacky are active in the 'underground resistance', involved mainly in weapon's dealing. When Marko learns that the Gestapo has found out about their activities and has arrested some of their comrades, he decides to hide their families in an underground cellar that normally is used for the secret production of weapons but is now transformed into a "shelter for humans"[28]. Vera, Blacky's wife, describing this type of shelter as "horrible"[29], gives birth to their son Jovan but dies immediately afterwards. After three years, with Belgrade still under German occupation and with Marko and Blacky still active in the 'underground resistance', Blacky decides to marry again: Nataljia, an actress, who is dating (and therefore collaborating with) the German officer called Franz.

In a spectacular scene, Blacky kidnaps Nataljia, "the most famous actress of the country" while she is performing in Strindberg's *The Father*.[30] On a boat loaded with stolen weapons and a wildly playing gipsy orchestra, Blacky celebrates his wedding with kidnapped Nataljia. While awaiting the priest to perform the wedding ceremony, Franz arrives, gets Nataljia back and takes Blacky as a prisoner. Marko manages to escape with the weapons and the boat. He later succeeds in freeing Blacky out of a German torture chamber, kills Franz and takes Nataljia with him. During their escape, Blacky hurts himself seriously and Marko brings him into the cellar to recover. In the meantime, the bombings from the Allied air forces set in: "When it's not the Germans, the Allies bomb us"[31], says Marko ironically to Nataljia and seduces her while the bombardment begins.[32] In the film, that historical happening is titled "Easter, April, 1944. The Allies bombs destroyed what the Nazis had left of Belgrade in 1941

[27] See *Underground* (00:14:23 – 00:15:33).
[28] *Underground* (00:21:20 – 00:21:25).
[29] *Underground* (00:21:47 - 00:21:51).
[30] According to Dusan Kovacević, this kidnapping scene refers to a 'real' spectacular escape that happened at the Croatian National Theatre in 1941. See Gocić: 34; 178.
[31] *Underground* (00:57:14 – 00:57:17).
[32] Louis Adamić's article (published in 1944) states that the partisans would not welcome the Anglo-American invasion as an act of liberation and that they might even oppose it. It seems that *Underground* alludes to that shared feeling among partisans against the Allies in 1944. See Louis Adamić: "Yugoslavia and the Big United Nations: 1941-1943", *Slavonic and East European Review.* Vol. 3, No. 1 (May 1944), 3.

…"[33] Throughout the whole film, such titles are repeatedly shown and could be seen as silent-cinema technique used instead of a narrator.[34]

Belgrade's liberation is documented with historical footages from film archives, showing pictures of destroyed Belgrade, the partisans, Tito and his communist *entourage.* Marko is shown as a close collaborator of Tito, as a communist who became a central figure within Tito's closest circle. It is interesting to note that Marko and Blacky, although fictional, both resemble two Serbian associates of Tito.[35] Marko resembles Aleksandar ('Marko') Ranković, the head of the secret police (founded by Tito in 1944) who fell from power when he was accused of having bugged Tito and several other party leaders.[36] Similar to Ranković, Marko in *Underground* is a master manipulator who is not only involved in bugging people's conversations but even observes them visually with a telescope day and night. On the other hand, the character of Blacky refers to Sreten Zujović, who was known in the party as *Crni* or 'Blacky'. Like Zujović, a war hero who had previously served in the French Foreign Legion and could speak several languages, the fictional Blacky appears in *Underground* as a fearless commander, speaking easily foreign languages as he proves on stage while kidnapping Nataljia.[37]

After World War II, Yugoslavia declared itself a Federal People's Republic (November 29, 1945). The new federal state contained six constituent republics. Josip Broz Tito became the first prime minister and in 1953 was elected president of Yugoslavia.[38] Back then, Ranković was among Tito's confidants. One of the film's historical sequences shows Tito embracing his closest associates (including Ranković), and Marko is among them. Furthermore, Marko is also shown as a speaker in front of thousands of people where he demands control over

[33] *Underground* (00:59:18 – 00:59:24).
[34] See Gocić: 152.
[35] See Gocić: 34.
[36] See Aleksa Dijlas in debate with John Lampe about Ranković. Dijlas states that such bugging never took place and that Ranković's dismissal was simply a strategy sanctioned by Tito as he feared a potential rival in Ranković. Lampe on the other hand, points out that his assertion that Yugoslav army intelligence had discovered the Interior Ministry's bugging of Tito's residence and thus precipitated the abrupt dismissal of Aleksandar Ranković (what was even desired by much liberal reformers within the party), are based on evidence provided to him from informed diplomatic as well journalistic sources in Belgrade in 1966. See Lampe: "Responses to Aleksa Djilas", 115; Dijlas: "The academic West and the Balkan Test", 330f.
[37] For references to Zujović and Ranković and their nicknames see Maclean, Fitzroy: *The Heretic: The Life And Times Of Josip Broz Tito.* New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1957, 71f.
[38] See Pavlowitch, Stevan K.: *Tito: Yugoslavia's Great Dictator, A Reassessment*, London: C. Hurst, 1992, 50-66.

Trieste.[39] This speech has to be seen in the context of the Yugoslav liberation movement, the struggle for Trieste and the Soviet-Yugoslav dispute.[40]

2.3.2. Part two: Cold War

The film's second part or block, entitled 'Cold War', is set in the years of communism. After the end of World War II, Marko and Nataljia remain the only figures who know about the people still living in the cellar. Marko makes the people living 'underground' - including his *Kum*[41], his best friend Blacky and his own brother Ivan - believe that the war had not ended yet. He is broadcasting manipulated information, transmitting bomb warnings and sounds of sirens, and playing the *Lilly Marleen* song. Besides being a devilish manipulator, Marko appears as a giant opportunist and profiteer as he abuses his wartime associates as slave labourers for two decades, selling the weapons they produce most profitably. During all this time, the people 'underground' continue an ordinary live: they marry and have children, they have a school, a church, a barber, a bakery, showers, even prostitutes, music, food and their own fountain to get water. One could say that the people living 'underground' had everything in order to survive except daylight and knowledge of what was happening in the real world.

Marko, who has become a key figure within the communist hierarchy, appears in public as a revolutionary, mourning the death of his 'best friend' Blacky and hailing him as a heroic partisan and national hero.[42] Yet, instead of being dead, Blacky is having a good time 'underground' believing that Tito wants him not to move yet as he will be precious for the final battle. The

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[39] *Underground* (01:01:13 – 01:01:25).

[40] About the partisan liberation movement, see Milovan Djilas's memoirs: *Wartime (Revolutionarni rat)*, translated by Michael B. Petrovich, London: Secker and Warburg, 1977. For the Trieste Question, see: J. R. Whittam: "Drawing the Line: Britain and the Emergence of the Trieste Question, January 1941-May 1945", *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 106, No. 419 (April 1991), 346-370. For the Tito-Stalin conflict, see Jeronim Perović's study: "The Tito-Stalin Split: A Reassessment in Light of New Evidence", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Spring 2007), 32-63.

[41] *Kum* translates as child's godfather or best man at wedding. For the relationship between Marko and Blacky, *kum* implies a deeply respected family bond for those who are not blood relatives. Betraying one's *kum* is regarded as a capital sin. As Goran Gocić remarks: the betrayal of ones *kum* is the theme of several works of Yugoslav fiction. The simple fact that Marko marries his *kum*'s lover Nataljia can therefore be seen as a very improper thing to do. See Gocić: 178.

[42] The film states in a sort of documentary black-white board: "Years passed, Marko became a close collaborator of Tito. In Belgrade, in 1961, he paid his debt to his great friend, Blacky." (01:02:10 – 01:02:15).

people 'underground' all believe that Tito is still fighting for their liberation. While they are hiding in a tank from 'fake air raids', they all sing the same song in praise of comrade Tito, believing that "the fascists of World War II were still in power"[43]. Meanwhile, Marko and his wife Nataljia live a modern life, yet instead of being happy, Nataljia becomes an alcoholic accusing Marko of having dragged her into his criminal activities.[44] She is justifying her drinking with words like "I'm drinking Brandy now but you've been drinking my blood for 20 years, you bastard!"[45] To Marko's question of what was missing in her life, she answers: "the truth!"[46].

Although Marko and Nataljia are having an intensive sexual relationship, he seems to be unable to make her pregnant. Nataljia strongly holds that against him besides accusing him of being "evil, a murderer, a criminal, a thief"[47]. To these reproaches, Marko simply answers that the only reason why he is doing all these criminal things is because he loves her and that he has nothing in his life except her.[48] Nataljia, as already at the beginning of their relationship, is seduced by his words and simply admits: "you lie so beautifully".[49] In sum, while people 'underground' are producing weapons and continue a more or less ordinary life, Marko and Nataljia live a rather unhappy life surrounded by lies.

On the day Blacky's son Jovan celebrates his wedding, the whole farce literally explodes: Marko, who had promised to liberate Nataljia for that special event (he made everyone believe that Nataljia had been sent by her former German lover Franz to a camp where she was raped and beaten), arranges the whole scene perfectly. After his and Nataljia's arrival in the cellar, the formal wedding ceremony gets started. The bride, wearing a white dress, arrives in a 'flying' procession *à la* Chagall to sit next to her future husband Jovan. Backed by traditional Balkan wedding music, Blacky is toasting the couple and gives them two golden rings. He proudly talks about the 200 light weapons they had produced in that year and presents their greatest success: the tank. He states that he is happy and proud of the fact that the time would soon come when they would use the tank to liberate their country for good.[50] While people get drunk, Blacky finds out that Marko and Natalija love each other by hearing their conversation. He reacts furiously, shouting to Marko: "My friend, let's break the

[43] *Underground* (01:12:09 - 01:12:17).
[44] See their conversation at Jovan's marriage: (01:44:11 – 1:44:55).
[45] *Underground* (01:36:15 – 01:36:20).
[46] *Underground* (01:23:04 – 01:23:27).
[47] *Underground* (01:43:33 – 01:43:42).
[48] See *Underground* (01:44:11 – 01:44:55).
[49] *Underground* (01:44:58 – 01:45:03).
[50] See Blacky's speech (01:31:04 - 01:31:29).

tradition of a friend killing his best friend. Here's the gun. Do the rest yourself!"[51] By saying that, Blacky shows that he is not willing to kill his *Kum* as the tradition requests, Marko therefore should judge himself knowing what sin he had committed. And then, all of a sudden, two grenades explode hereby opening the way from the 'underground' up to the surface.

In the film, this incident occurs in 1961 thus coinciding with the time of Tito's economic reforms beginning in the early 1960s.[52] The people who get out of the cellar encounter an unexpected reality: Marko's brother Ivan (who is looking for his monkey Soni) finds a complex of underground tunnels and traffic that connect Berlin and Athens. He finally reaches West Germany with one of these 'underground' trucks. Blacky and his son Jovan who are "going outside to end the war"[53] end up in the middle of a set of a partisan film that deals with their own story, falsified and written by Marko. Blacky therefore finds himself in the absurd situation of facing Franz and other Nazis, feeling that World War II has not ended yet and that he is supposed to continue to fight the "fucking fascist bastards!"[54]. Instead of facing reality they end up facing fiction.

Kusturica once said in an interview that apart from the fact that in Tito's Yugoslavia reality was inside the underground and fiction was outside, he himself thinks that this was one of the best achievements of his film because it shows "when one of the main heroes comes out of jail he meets fiction and he believes that it is reality."[55] Moreover, the film shows that its heroes seem to prefer not dealing with this 'real world' outside the cellar. This is best

[51] *Underground* (01:46:22 – 01:46:35).
[52] Economic planning and the introduction of 'self-management socialism' in the 1960s strove to make Yugoslavia more competitive in the world market, the aim was to expose the economy to the beneficial influence of free international trade. In addition, Yugoslavs were allowed to work abroad and the Yugoslav tourist industry received government support. See Biermann, Rafael: "Back to the Roots. The European Community and the Dissolution of Yugoslavia", in *Journal of European Integration History*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2004), 37f; see further Loucks, William N.: "Worker's Self-Government in Yugoslav Industry", *World Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (October 1958), 68-82; see further Staller, George J.: "Fluctuations in Economic Activity: Planned and Free Market Economies, 1950-60.", *The American Economic Review,* Vol. 55, No. 1/2 (March 1965), 161-164;
[53] Blacky to his son: (01:48:57 – 01:48:59).
[54] See the scene when they get out of the cellar and run into the film's scenery. Ironically enough, Blacky thinks that the film's director was a collaborator as he gives instructions to the actor who is casting Franz: (01:57:20 – 01:57:47).
[55] Kusturica in an interview directed by Giovanni Coni: Bonus material from *Underground*: 7 years later – Emir Kusturica in Belgrade, March 2002: (00:10:15 – 00:10:29).

expressed by Jovan telling Blacky: "I want to go back to the cellar."[56] In other words: He prefers going back in the 'underground', thus escaping the real world which, for him, was dark instead full of light. And although Jovan later, when seeing for the very first time in his life a sunrise, admits "how beautiful this world is"[57], he is not able to survive in this reality. As soon as Blacky leaves for a second, he drowns himself in the Danube river. His wife Jelena does not even try to face the world above ground but throws herself into a well and drowns as well. Only in a surrealistic 'underwater-world' do the two lovers find themselves again.

In the meantime, Nataljia and severely handicapped Marko (who had shot himself in the knees with Blacky's gun instead of having killed himself) decide to leave the country and put an end to the whole "underground-setup".[58] They justify their move by saying that they could not go on living in a country filled with "lunatics, madmen, psychopaths, maniacs, liars, thieves, criminals, murders" and that there is no place at all for an honest man in this country (meaning Tito's Yugoslavia).[59] They are simulating an air raid (in order that the people in the cellar get into the tank as usual), blow up the cellar, and escape to West Germany. The film comments Marko's disappearance as follows: "Marko Dren's mysterious disappearance coincided with the loss of the secret formula of Tito's Yugoslavia. Tito, having lost his friend, fell ill. Twenty years later, he died…"[60]. Thus the last scene of the film's second part ends with the gigantic state funeral of Josip Broz Tito in 1980. Again with historical film sequences and accompanied by the *Lilly Marleen* song, the procession is shown in Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade, attended by dignitaries from all over the world, and with the Yugoslav population in tears. The scene closes with one long lingering shot on Tito's grave and with Lale Anderson's last lyrics from her song "Wenn sich die dunklen Nebel drehn, werd ich bei der Laterne stehn, wie eins Lilly Marleen." [61]

[56] *Underground* (02:04:17 – 02:04:22).
[57] See the scene on Danube river in the early morning: (02:06:16 – 02:06:19).
[58] Strangely enough, it seems that except Ivan, Jovan, Jelena and Blacky, all the other inhabitants of the cellar decided to stay in the cellar instead of breaking out.
[59] *Underground* (02:11:40 – 02:12:20).
[60] See the black-white board in the film: (02:13:50 – 02:14:03).
[61] The following prominent international figures are shown in *Underground* on Tito's funeral: Hafez-al Assad, Yasser Arafat, Leonid Brezhnev, Nicolae Ceausescu, Andrei Gromyko, King Hussein, King Olav V, Walter Mondale, Prince Philip, Helmut Schmidt, Margaret Thatcher, Kurt Waldheim, King Hussein.

2.3.3. Part Three: War (again)

New Year's eve 1992/1993 in Berlin: Ivan, in search for his monkey Soni, came all the way to the German capital. There he ends up in a hospital where a German and a Yugoslav doctor try to find out what's wrong with him as Ivan has, according to documents from the Yugoslav Embassy, died during the bombing of Belgrade back in 1941 while working as a zookeeper there. When the Yugoslav doctor explains to his German colleague that Ivan told him he had lived all those years in a cellar, the German replies: "Communism was one big cellar", to that the Yugoslav doctor adds: "The whole planet is a cellar".[62]

This beginning of the film's part three in Berlin is quite significant: The fall of the Wall there marked the end of the Cold War, and with that end came the collapse of the communist regimes and with it Yugoslavia's disintegration, speeded up by Germany's very early recognition of Slovenian and Croatian independence (December of 1991, before recognition had been agreed upon within the EC). During the New Year's celebration, Ivan uncomprehendingly asks why the Germans are celebrating when they did not win the war. When Ivan finally learns that World War II had ended 50 years ago and that his own brother Marko had betrayed him and all his comrades, he flees back into the 'underground', followed by his doctor.[63] There they find a complex of 'underground traffic'. Two UN cars which transport 'Yugoslav' refugees (for 1000 DM each) to Italy stop and take the exhausted doctor with them. Ivan, who badly wants to go back to Yugoslavia, receives a harsh answer from a UN soldier: "There's no more Yugoslavia!"[64]. Not understanding what that means, Ivan stays behind. On his way deeper into the 'underground', he finds his beloved monkey Soni who leads him out of the 'underground' directly into a Yugoslav battlefield where Blacky appears as a general, fighting for "his country"[65] and still against the "fucking fascist bastards!"[66].

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[62] Conversation between the two doctors: (02:16:23 – 02:17:00). Their comments imply that nothing is what it seems, and that the existence of communism or any other political system makes little difference. See Iordanova (2001): 121.
[63] See the scene when Ivan realizes that his own brother had betrayed him and that Marko and Nataljia are wanted by the police throughout the world: (02:18:35 – 02:19:35).
[64] Conversation between the UN soldier and Ivan: (02:21:33 – 02:21:58).
[65] *Underground* (02:32:00 – 02:32:17). An UN-soldier asks Blacky whether he is Ustasha, Cetnik or partisan and who his superior is. Blacky answers that his superior is his country and knocks the UN soldier down by accusing him as a "fucking fascist bastard".
[66] *Underground* (02:25:00 – 02:25:02).

At the same time, Marko still deals with weapons, most profitably so.[67] When Ivan gets out of the cellar, he observes from a window a scene where Marko, protected by UN soldiers, is trying to sell weapons for too high a prize. When a grenade explodes close to the room in which they are negotiating, a black UN soldier explains to Marko in French: "Restez tranquille. Les Serbes tuent les Croates, les Croates tuent les Serbes. N'ayez pas peur!"[68] After having said that, the UN soldier laughs and Marko ironically thanks him for his courtesy. Marko's negotiating partner (casted by Kusturica himself) makes a point of not buying anything as he considers the weapons as too expensive. He addresses Marko with the following words: "You've been abroad too long. You don't understand our language. You're asking too much."[69] Right after, Marko leaves, cursing his negotiating partner with the words: "Buy from Hungarians, you fucker!"[70], and off he goes, still protected by the two UN soldiers.

Back to Marko: As soon as Marko leaves the room in which he tried to do the weapon business, he is stopped by his brother Ivan who starts wordlessly to beat him to death. Trying to make Ivan stop, Marko screams repetitively: "It's a sin to kill your brother! The greatest sin!"[71]. Only when Marko does not move anymore, Ivan stops beating his brother. With his last words "Lord, forgive me", he enters the church and hangs himself in the campanile where soon afterwards the bells start to ring, signifying that Ivan was dead. This all is followed by an image of a goose flying out of the belfry - a symbol for sacrifice.[72] In another sequence, Marko, dying, whispers to his wife Nataljia his last words: "No war is a war until a brother kills his brother."[73] Behind him stands the Biblical cross with Jesus - yet Jesus being

[67] For an instant, one sees Marko's and Nataljia's car. It is a Mercedes with a German registration number from Munich. That indicates that Marko and Nataljia, after having left Yugoslavia and emigrated into West Germany, did very well with their illegal business and therefore could afford a life of 'western standards'.
[68] *Underground* (02:26:04 – 02:26:09).
[69] See Kusturica to Marko: (02:26:14 – 02:26:22) Ironically enough, this sentence would perfectly fit Kusturica himself as he was the one who was abroad for 'too long' when the Yugoslav wars started.
[70] *Underground* (02:26:22 – 02:27:00).
[71] *Underground* (02:27:22 – 02:27:55).
[72] *Underground* (02:28:07 – 02:29:06). When Ivan stops beating Marko, a white horse walks into the scene. This alludes to the Polish classic *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958) by Andrzej Wajda where in a similar setting of desolation a white horse appears in the scene (01:18:54 – 01:19:10) and further there is a murder in front of a church (00:04:57 – 00:05:19).
[73] *Underground* (02:29:46 – 02:29:57).

crucified 'upside down'.[74] This last scene of Marko and Ivan, showing the two brothers both dying, is a symbolic allusion to the Biblical fratricide.[75]

The film ends with a reunion of all the 'dead' characters finding themselves back alive in an utopian last scene of Jovan's re-staged wedding party on a piece of land at the Danube river. Swimming cows trot ashore where the wedding scene is taking place, being a symbol for dead people's souls.[76] Everybody is happy, Blacky back together with his wife Vera, proposing to her again and saying "let bygones be bygones" [77], Marko together with Nataljia trying to make her drink less and asking Blacky whether he forgives him. Blacky answers: "I can forgive but I cannot forget."[78] The whole scene closes with Ivan, normally a stammerer, saying without any stammering the film's very last words: "With pain, sorrow and joy, we shall remember our country, as we tell our children stories that start like fairytales: 'Once upon a time, there was a country…'"[79] While Ivan speaks, the land on which they are celebrating breaks apart from the riverbank and floats away. This final scene appears as a metaphor for the breaking apart of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Kusturica himself said about the closing scene:

> It was really a nightmare how to close the movie, how to find a picture that grows from reality into a metaphor. And I must say that towards the end of the movie I was just (…) coming very often to the places on [the] Danube river. I was looking for the small islands, being created by [the] nature and trying to make this world of *Underground* proportionally corresponding to what [the] nature gives you as an offer. And [it was then] when I discovered basically that there is an expression in our language in which you could say [that] "the land is broken". When you say "somebody is broken" or "the land is broken" it means almost the same. And [I was] thinking –

[74] The image of Jesus hanging upside down is also utilised in *Ashes and Diamonds* in a similar setting of destruction and desolation (01:11:59 – 01:13:08).
[75] See the whole scene: (02:27:00 – 02:29:57).
[76] See Gocić: 73.
[77] *Underground* (02:39:06 – 02:39:09).
[78] *Underground* (02:39:56 – 02:40:00).
[79] *Underground* (02:40:03 – 02:40:50). The whole scene with the cows arriving on that piece of land and finally Ivan's speech could be read as a biblical allusion to Noah and the deluge. Earlier on in the film, Marko says when entering Ivan's apartment: "My brother's like Noah saving the world after the flood." (00:17:54 – 00:17:57).

> why wouldn't I do the end of the movie [about] what in our language happened to ex-Yugoslavia: "the land is broken".[80]

This scene marks an absolute contrast to the whole of *Underground* as it happens in sunny warm light whereas the rest of the film appears in dark colours. All the main protagonists of the film are happily reunited on a piece of land which is drifting apart. The last words "Once Upon a Time There Was a Country" are raised nostalgically.

2.4. The film and its interpretations

Underground is a film that plays with a great many aesthetic elements and with different levels of perceptions, with - psychoanalytically - 'consciousness' and 'unconsciousness'. The people underground live in an 'unconscious' state of mind and are 'consciously' manipulated by the people living on the surface. They live 'unconsciously' in a non-realistic world, preparing for liberation by producing weapons in order to liberate themselves from an infinite German occupation. The times underground do not correspond to those on the surface, and people living underground are held uninformed of what is really going on outside, receiving only the manipulated messages of the state media (sent by Marko and Nataljia). So, in the sense of Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave', they only perceive deformed shadows of reality instead of the truth.[81] Thus, their knowledge of the world above ground is based on lies and manipulations.[82] A world that seems similar to the "war communism" of the USSR until 1921 (people preparing their final liberation by producing weapons).[83]

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[80] Kusturica in an interview about *Underground*, bonus material of *Underground* (00:21:14 – 00:22:40); interview directed by Giovanni Coni, Belgrade, 2002.

[81] See Grünberg, Serge: "Comment Kusturica déplaça les montagnes", in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 492, June 1995, 68. See further Biffle, Christopher: "Allegory of the Cave", in *A Guided Tour of Five Works by Plato*, London/Toronto: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1995, 88-96.

[82] Hence, people living 'unconscious' about what is going on 'outside' within the context of Tito's Yugoslavia appeared in a novel written by Borislav Pekić, published in 1970 under the title *The Houses of Belgrade*. It is the story of a man who had lived after the end of World War II until 1968 in his house in Belgrade which he never left as he had been ill for the whole time. During all those years, he did not know what was going on outside and thus did not know about Tito and communism. See Pekić, Borislav: *The Houses of Belgrade,* Evanston, Illionois: Northwestern University Press: 1994.

[83] See Grünberg (2000): 102-104.

Underground therefore can be seen as a metaphor for the communist system, as a visual condemnation of communism in general and Tito's form of communism in particular.[84] It portrays a country as a manipulated, backward cellar - a cellar where weapons are produced endlessly which can be read as a parody of Tito's ambitious investments into the domestic weapons industry, geared to lucrative exports to the Third World.[85] In that context, the message of the film could be that in the period between World War II and the outbreak of the Yugoslav wars, war never really stopped - war was just frozen for almost five decades in the "cellar of communism"[86]. That would further mean: The era of Tito's communism was just a surreal interlude between two wars, a period when uninformed manipulated people were unconsciously preparing for another war (interpretation supported by the fact that people living underground are producing weapons on end because they believe the war is still going on).[87]

This reading of *Underground* is also supported by the film's structure, organised around a slightly modified A-B-A scheme where the circular movement stands out. War is followed by the Cold War which is followed again by war. A vicious circle in which those who did not learn from history are condemned to live through its repetition.[88] The film seems to suggest that only when Tito held Yugoslavia together, when they all were 'unconsciously' singing the "same" song (as it is shown in the film) praising their "same" leader, they managed not to have war.[89] Thus when Tito died, wars broke out (again) and Yugoslavia fell apart. Here, Hobbes' *Bellum omnium contra omnes* comes into mind: Yugoslavia as a multi-nation state could only function as long as there was a quasi-absolute ruler (Tito), holding the state together by having a *Leviathan* type system of control over each citizen and, indeed, each nationality. So there was stability, albeit a fragile one, based on repression and manipulation, and the result of all that was stagnation and backwardness. After Tito's death, Hobbes' pessimistic dictum *homo homini lupus* (men are wolves to each other) was only too clearly

[84] See Gocić: 32f, 148; see further Iordanova (2001): 118f.
[85] See Gocić: 34.
[86] Conversation between the two doctors in *Underground* calling communism "one big cellar" in *Underground* (02:16:23 – 02:17:00).
[87] This interpretation of *Underground*'s story seems to be approved by Kusturica's suggestion that World War continued with secondary conflicts such as Korea, Vietnam and the wars in the Middle East. See Kusturica, Emir: "Souvenirs de bord", in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 496, November 1995, 42f.
[88] See Gocić: 140.
[89] *Underground* (01:12:09 - 01:12:17).

confirmed.[90] In sum, Kusturica's narrative of Yugoslavia's modern and contemporary history consists of wars with the 'cellar of communism' as period in between, a period exposed as one giant farce.[91]

While *Underground* is a film about history, it is also one about amorality and manipulations, amorality of and in the communist system as well as beyond any political system.[92] Kusturica said that his intention was not just to make a film about Yugoslavia's history but about "the nature of our people"[93]. He wanted to examine and explain how two interesting but unappealing characters turn into such nasty and 'amoral' human beings.[94] The result of this however is that although the film's two main protagonists are criminals, thieves and typically 'bad boys', they behave still in a humane way and their motivations even seem comprehensible. Kusturica commented that they were "basically worse than you could imagine but still very acceptable."[95] This is best proved with the character of Marko who could be seen as standing for Tito's regime, an interpretation clearly supported by Kusturica and Kovačević in their interviews.[96]

Marko is a clever opportunist who rules over his 'comrades' living underground. Ironically, the people 'unconsciously' victimised by Marko think of him as a saviour and seem to admire him instead of disliking him.[97] If one tends to read the relation of Marko with the people working for him underground as a variation of Hegel's parable of a Master and Slave dialectic, then Marko clearly appears as their Master and the people living underground as his Slaves. However, this dialectic is applicable only to a certain extent: In *Underground*, other than in Hegel's dialectic, the Slaves not only accept their Master, they even consider him as an equal and respect him for the risks he takes by participating in the imagined resistance on

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[90] See Hobbes, Thomas: *Leviathan or the matter, form and power of a Commonwealth ecclesiastical and civil,* ed. by Michael Oakeshott, Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1957, part one, chapter 13, 80-84. See further about the historical context of Hobbes's theory, about man's nasty and competitive nature and the resulting need for absolute power in order to protect mankind: Wiener, Jonathan M.: "Quentin Skinner's Hobbes", in *Political Theory*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (August 1974), 251-260.
[91] See Iordanova (2001): 118; see further De Baecque, Antoine: "Dans les entrailles du communisme", in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 496, November 1995, 40f.
[92] See Iordanova (2001): 118f.
[93] Kusturica in Robinson, David: "A Tunnel Vision of War: An Interview with Emir Kusturica", in *The Times*, March 5, 1995.
[94] See ibid.
[95] Kusturica in an interview about *Underground*, bonus material of *Underground* (00:09:30 – 00:09:39); interview directed by Giovanni Coni, Belgrade, 2002.
[96] See Gocić: 32.
[97] See Iordanova (2001): 119f.

ground level. By accepting his rule and considering him as an equal, they do not challenge him or his rule. So they will never fight him, and the Master will not have to bother about his authority being questioned. In the end, there is no progress, only stagnation. This in a somehow negative way alludes to Hegel's thesis that history is being determined by and through a permanent fight between Slaves and their Master, and once this fight ends, the dialectical historical process ends and mankind arrives at the end of history.[98]

When applying this variation of Hegel's *Phenomenology* to *Underground,* the film's critique is not only directed against Tito and his rule over former Yugoslavia, against his form of communism and 'socialist economy' but also against the people living under these conditions without standing up for themselves or even trying to move up to the ground level and face the facts. The extended documentary footage of Tito's funeral, showing Yugoslav people crying over Tito's death, is part of that critic. Also, by showing such mutually incompatible political figures at the funeral like Ceausescu, Thatcher and Waldheim, Kusturica makes quite a point about the relativism of politics and ideology.[99] Kusturica says that Western dignitaries weeping at Tito's funeral shows how much Tito was considered a good guy and how little they cared about his repressive regime, therefore their tears were "not so much crocodile tears as tears of ignorance"[100]. Altogether, *Underground* is very critical about Western policies of supporting Tito: When Ivan breaks free from the "cellar", what he finds is a whole underground tunnel system connecting all Europe, a traffic system used mainly to transport guns, tanks and 'cheap' labour forces. This 'underground' economy alludes to the complicity between incompatible political regimes, and it amounts to much more than just a denunciation of the communist system: it is a scathing critique of international morality and, especially, Western European politics and policies.[101]

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[98] The application of Hegel's idea of 'Masters and Slaves' would, in the case of *Underground*, mean that the people working 'underground' did 'unconsciously' accept their existence as Slaves and 'unconsciously' recognize the victory of their Master and thus his superiority and power over them. Following Hegel, the people's existence in *Underground* is reduced to *Work (Arbeit)* which they execute in the Master's *Service (Dienst)*. Although they 'unconsciously' serve as Slaves, they are 'conscious' that their work (the production of weapons) serves the interest of their 'Master' Tito (and Marko) who, they think, is fighting for them 'on ground level'. Thus they work in relation to an *idea* of a *Master*, to a social, human and historical notion. The work they are doing in *Underground* (construction of the tank and weapons) literally opens the way to their liberation but results in chaos and another war. See Alexandre, Kojève: *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1980, 42-70.

[99] See Iordanova (2001): 121.

[100] Kusturica quoted in Malcom, Derek: "The Surreal Sarajevan Dreamer", in *The Guardian*, June 29, 1995.

[101] See Grünberg (1995): 103.

This critique is visualised in the last part of the film, starting in Berlin. Kusturica shows Berlin celebrating - five decades after Hitler had started World War II - while at the same time Yugoslavia is facing war; on the one side, German re-unification, on the other Yugoslav dis-integration. Kusturica commented that everyone talks about the spectre of a 'Great-Serbia' but nobody mentions that with re-united Germany a massive new power re-appeared on the world stage.[102] He further suggests that the fall of the Berlin Wall had major effects for the whole region of former Yugoslavia, and that the reasons of Yugoslavia's demise were not only 'home-made' but 'constructed' in advance and motivated from 'outside', as indeed had always been the case.[103] The critique of Western involvement is further developed in *Underground* by showing UN-soldiers posing as protecting Bosnia while in fact they are protecting the weapon dealers (Marko) and taking personal profit out of the 'underground' refugee traffic.[104]

Underground does not deal with the years immediately following Tito's death, but shows what happened after the Berlin Wall had fallen, liberal democracy had won over communism, and Francis Fukuyama had declared "The End of History"[105] - what happened, however, was the unfolding of another, of a new chapter of history with new wars and new tragedies.

That is where Kusturica's film steps in for its final setting, showing an apocalyptic scene where brothers kill brothers, friends their best friends, where everyone turns against everyone. It seems almost like the fundamentally pessimistic world of Hobbes where in the absence of an absolutist order man's dark nature breaks through, leading to war among each and all. The film's concluding sequence, however, contrasts with this Hobbesian outlook by showing a colourful, happy wedding on a piece of land that breaks apart. An allegory of that piece of land once known as Yugoslavia which broke apart from the European continent, drifting into incertitude. As the story of *Underground* is told like a fairytale (Once upon a time there was a country), it can be concluded that the film suggests that Yugoslavia never existed for real but only as an idea and ideal, as a dream and illusion. Or one could interpret the fairytale approach as expressing nostalgia for a once upon a time united Yugoslavia.

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[102] See Kusturica in an interview: "Propos de Emir Kusturica", in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 492, June 1995, 70.
[103] See ibid 69f.
[104] See Gocić: 32.
[105] See Fukuyama, Francis: *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York/Toronto: Free Press, 1992.

For interpretations of *Underground* as a pro-Serbian or nationalistic film, there is no valid basis at all.[106] While Kusturica used to direct previous films with particular accents and dialects, he refrains from doing so in *Underground* and thus from exposing his characters as Croats or Serbs. There are only a few restrained references to the characters' origins; one concerns Blacky and his wife Vera, crossing themselves in an Orthodox manner hereby indicating that they are Orthodox Christians and hence Serbs. While Ivan's name (Marko's brother) is a Catholic version for 'John', one could infer from this that Marko and Ivan are Catholics and therefore Croats.[107] While Gocić and Iordanova argue that there are no 'nationalistic readings' applicable to *Underground*, Montenegrin journalist (and outspoken critic of Kusturica) Stanko Cerović argues that Blacky and Marko are metaphorically a Montenegrin and a Serb who together represent the cliché image of Serb heroes.[108] However, as script writer Dušan Kovačević insists, there simply is no basis for any 'nationalistic reading' of *Underground*.[109] And as the controversy after the Cannes Jury's decision on *Underground* was to prove, the assumptions on Kusturica's motives were based on much more complex reasons.

3. The Controversy

3.1. Cannes 1995, the jury and its decision

The International Film Festival of Cannes has the reputation of being both a most prestigious and most influential film festival. "Although solidly rooted in its own history"[110], as its general delegate Thierry Frémaux states, the festival is open to all kind of new artistic approaches within contemporary cinema and therefore an important trend setter. It is "a centre for all cultures and hopes, a spring of effervescence and, above all, transmission"[111]. Its prestige originates from the quality of the films shown and their originality.[112] The first 'Festival International de Cannes' was planned for 1939 but the outbreak of World War II led to a postponement of the starting event to 1946. Since then the festival, first managed on a

[106] See Gocić: 34; Iordanova (2001): 118.
[107] See Gocić : 35.
[108] See Cerović, Stanko: "Canned Lies", in *Bosnian Report*, August 1995.
[109] Kovačević's statement is based on an interview directed by Goran Gocić, quoted in Gocić: 35.
[110] Frémaux, Thierry: "About the Festival", in www.festival-cannes.com/en/about.html, accessed on June 20, 2009.
[111] "Who we are", in Festival de Cannes (official homepage): http://www.festival-cannes.com/en/about/whoWeAre.html, accessed on June 20, 2009.
[112] See Frémaux: "About the Festival", in Festival de Cannes (official homepage).

non-profit basis, has developed into a brilliant event with its award *Palme d'Or* being introduced in 1955.[113]

In 1995, at the 48th festival, this award went to Emir Kusturica's *Underground*, one of the twenty-four films within the festival's "Sélection officielle"[114]. The selection of 1995 was marked by a focus on films that were political or socio-critical. Thierry Jousse, noted film critic, wrote in *Cahiers du cinéma* that "Parmi les films sélectionnées, en effet, nombreux sont ceux qui témoignent d'un très fort ancrage politique ou social"[115]. This was underlined by the fact that the festival's other important award, the *Grand Prix,* also went to a politically and socially highly committed film, to Theo Angelopoulos' *Ulysses' Gaze.*[116] In Cannes, both *Underground* and *Ulysses' Gaze* were considered as potential winners, and both films dealt with the conflicts in the Balkans. Yet, while Kusturica's *Underground* was a fast and loud film, Angelopoulos's *Ulysses' Gaze* was more of a slow and quiet film telling the story of its protagonist's 'Odyssey-like' journey trough the warring Balkans in search for the mystical film reels of the Manaki brothers.[117]

In the end it was Kusturica's *Underground* that should convince the Jury of 1995. The Jury's president was famous French actress Jeanne Moreau. She already had presided the Jury at the festival of 1975 and thus was considered as "forte de son expérience à l'Avance"[118]. Other members of the jury were author Nadine Gordimer, screen writer Maria Zvereva, the directors Gianni Amelio, John Waters and Gaston Kabore, director of photography Philippe Rousselot, producer Michèle Ray Gavras, actor Jean-Claude Brialy, film critic Emilio Garcia Riera.[119]

The fact that this Jury awarded the *Palme d'Or* to a Bosnian director at a moment when only three nights before a Serbian massacre in Tulza killed 71 young Bosnians could be understood

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[113] See "Festival History", in Festival de Cannes (official homepage): http://www.festival-cannes.com/en/about/aboutFestivalHistory.html, accessed on June 20, 2009.
[114] See "La Sélection officielle 1995", in Festival de Cannes (official homepage): http://www.festival-cannes.com/fr/archives/1995/inCompetition.html, accessed on June 20, 2009.
[115] Jousse, Thierry: "Un cinéma d'intervention", *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 492, June 1995, 4.
[116] See "Awards 1995", in Festival de Cannes (official homepage): http://www.festival-cannes.com/en/archives/1995/awardCompetition.html, accessed on June 2009.
[117] The Manaki brothers were pioneering photographers and filmmakers in the Balkans. They filmed the first motion pictures in 1905. Theo Angelopoulos's film opens with the first images of the Manaki brothers, showing their 114 year old grandmother spinning wool. See *Ulysses' Gaze*, a film by Theo Angelopoulos, Greece: 1995.
[118] "Sélections cannoises: Compétition officielle", in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 492, June 1995, 6.
[119] See "Juries 1995", in Festival de Cannes (official homepage): http://www.festival-cannes.com/en/archives/1995/juryLongFilm.html, accessed on June 20, 2009.

as a political statement.[120] Although it was clear that Kusturica's film was a politically most 'sensitive' one, the Jury did not publish any official statement or comment as to why it decided to award the *Palme d'Or* to *Underground,* a decision that was to provoke controversy.[121]

3.2. Beginnings of the controversy

The controversy was initiated by Alain Finkielkraut with his polemic "L'imposture Kusturica", published in *Le Monde* of June 2, few days after Kusturica's film got the *Palme d'Or* (on May 28). Finkielkraut had not seen *Underground* and thus based his article mostly on interviews given by Kusturica (*Cahiers du cinéma*). He wrote by awarding *Underground* the Cannes jury expressed its outrage about the massacre of Tulza and its solidarity with the victims of the war in Bosnia, yet by trying to do something for the right cause, the jury mistook a beautiful film for a good one, in other words: it mixed up aesthetic demands with the demands for compassion.[122] To Finkielkraut, the film's subtitle 'Once There Was A Country' indicates that Kusturica locates the responsibility for the destruction of Yugoslavia not by the Serbs but by those nations who had chosen independence (meaning: Croatia and Slovenia). Finkielkraut supports this point by referring to Kusturica's use of historical film material of 1941 showing Croatians and Slovenes welcoming the German invaders. Finkielkraut sees in Kusturica's film a "*nazification des victimes du nettoyage ethnique*" (meaning Slovenes and Croatians), a "*denunciation du IV Reich, défense du David serbe dans son combat héroïque contre le Goliath germanique*" (meaning re-unified Germany after the fall of the Wall), and he concludes:

> ce que Kusturica a mis en musique et en image, c'est le discours même que tiennent les assassins pour convaincre et pour se convaincre qu'ils sont en état de légitime défense car ils ont affaire à un ennemi tout-puissant. Ce cinéaste dit de la démesure a donc capitalisé la souffrance de Sarajevo alors qu'il reprend intégralement à son compte l'argumentaire stéréotypé de ses affameurs et de ses assiégeants. Il a symbolisé

[120] An attack on Tuzla on May 25, 1995, committed by Serb military forces, killed 71 civilian people (mostly between the ages of 18-25).
[121] In 1995 the Jury did not make any comment or statement about its choices. In 2004 for the first time in the history of the Festival de Cannes, Gilles Jacob gave the jury an opportunity to explain their *Palme d'Or* award choices. It has been the case since every year. Information by e-Mail from the Festival's Press Office on June 24, 2009.
[122] See Finkielkraut, Alain: "L'imposture Kusturica", in *Le Monde*, June 2, 1995.

> la Bosnie suppliciée alors qu'il refuse de se dire Bosniaque et qu'il entre dans une sainte colère quand on ose traiter Slobodan Milosevic de fasciste ou les Serbes d'agresseurs.[123]

As Finkielkraut had not seen *Underground,* it seems that his polemic was more directed at Kusturica himself and his political point of view than against the film. That Kusturica had a different view on what was going on in former Yugoslavia than the French intelligentsia was not new. As early as in April 1992, Kusturica wrote an article in *Le Monde*, entitled "Europe, ma ville flambe!"[124], asking the European Union to take action against what was going to happen in Sarajevo. He wrote:

> Europe, l'affrontement des Musulmans de Bosnie et des Serbes de Bosnie n'est pas authentique, il a été fabriqué, il est apparu sur les décombres des empires déchus laissant derrière eux les cendres. Il est entretenu par les mouvements nationalistes dépourvus de toute raison, c'est TON incendie, c'est à TOI de l'éteindre.[125]

Finkielkraut, however, saw in Kusturica a 'Pan-Serbian nationalist propagandist' and thus in the Cannes jury's decision a support of Serbian war propaganda:

> En récompensant Underground, le jury de Cannes a cru distinguer un créateur à l'imagination foisonnante. En fait, il a honoré un illustrateur servile et tape-à-l'oeil de clichés criminels; il a porté aux nues la version rock, postmoderne, décoiffante, branchée, américanisée, et tournée à Belgrade, de la propagande serbe la plus radoteuse et la plus mensongère. Le diable lui-même n'aurait pu concevoir un aussi cruel outrage à la Bosnie ni un épilogue aussi grotesque à la frivolité et à l'incompétence occidentales.[126]

3.3. Serbian propaganda?

The next issue of *Cahiers du cinéma* reacted immediately to Finkielkraut's article arguing that although Kusturica was not without ambiguity, the film deserved being seen differently than just

[123] Finkielkraut (June 2, 1995).
[124] See Kusturica, Emir: "Europe, ma ville flambe!", in *Le Monde*, April 24, 1992.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Finkielkraut (June 2, 1995).

as a simple instrument of propaganda.[127] In the same issue of *Cahiers du cinéma,* Serge Toubiana calls Finkielkraut's article "un texte virulent"[128] and compares Finkielkraut's attack with the way artists and intellectuals were treated during Stalin's communism when films were judged or even censored before being screened first - thus making the point that Finkielkraut termed *Underground* "Serbian propaganda"[129] without having seen the film.[130] Serge Regourd - he had been sitting in the audience at the Cannes festival when *Underground* was shown and when it was awarded - writes in *Le Monde* that Finkielkraut seems to behave like Andrei Jdanov, the head of Stalin's cultural police.[131] Regourd states that the world of Finkielkraut of 1995 was the same as the one of Jdanov back in 1947 when the Cominform was created and a fence divided two camps: the good and the evil, the victims and the executioners. By stating that "Le diable lui-même n'aurait pu concevoir un aussi cruel outrage à la Bosnie"[132], Finkielkraut uses a rhetoric where the enemy becomes diabolized; a rhetoric used by nationalists during times of war, writes Regourd.[133] He states that the situation in Bosnia was much more complex as Finkielkraut's reductionism makes people believe. And he remarks ironically that Finkielkraut is confusing film genres as the propaganda film on Bosnia had already been produced by Bernard-Henry Lévy.[134]

Lévy reacted immediately. The day after the publication of Regourd's article, he writes in *Le Point*, admitting not having seen *Underground* yet, that Kusturica indeed is a most problematic public figure:

> «Une affaire» Kusturica? Mais oui. Je maintiens le terme. Non pas à propos du film, que je n'ai, je le répète, pas vu. Mais à cause de l'homme, du personnage public et des déclarations politiques qu'il multiplie depuis trois ans.[135]

Lévy accuses Kusturica of praising Milošević and of ignoring his project of 'Great Serbia' as well as having used hideous propaganda by reviving the Nazi past of Croatia and Bosnia. Like

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[127] Jousse, Thierry: "Kusturica sur terre", in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 493, July/August 1995, 29.
[128] Toubiana, Serge: "L'effet «Itinéris», in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 493, July/August 1995, 33.
[129] Finkielkraut (June 2, 1995).
[130] See Toubiana (July/August, 1995): 33.
[131] See Regourd, Serge: "Underground, Alain Finkielkraut et Jdanov", in *Le Monde*, June 9, 1995.
[132] Finkielkraut (June 2, 1995).
[133] See Regourd (June 9, 1995).
[134] See ibid. See also *Bosna!*, a film by Bernard-Henri Lévy, France: 1994.
[135] Lévy, Bernard-Henri: "Le bloc-notes", in *Le Point*, June 10, 1995.

Finkielkraut, Lévy bases his article on the interview Kusturica gave to *Cahiers du cinéma*.[136] However, he differs from Finkielkraut by arguing that it is not scandalous to award such a film, the main point was whether the jury knew that by awarding Kusturica it was in the situation of a jury which in 1938 would have awarded the fascist, anti-Semitic author Louis-Ferdinand Céline.[137] He then asks whether Kusturica meant for the cinema what Céline meant for literature but says he will not judge before having seen *Underground.*[138] Lévy finally sees the film on November 4 and writes the same day that "Kusturica est, sûrement, un collaborateur de la Grande Serbie. Mais son film est, peut-être, un chef-d'oeuvre"[139]. And he admits that having been taken by surprise that "ce discours pro-serbe, la politique et la morale explicites de Kusturica, pèsent finalement peu dans le contenu même des images"[140]. He further admits that *Underground* is a fiction and a free variation on Dostojevski's *Notes from Underground* (1864) and summarizes the film as:

> Une fable sur les rapports du réel et de l'illusion, sur le mensonge, le temps retourné, la beauté de la paternité, l'énigme de la fraternité rompue. C'est une méditation baroque sur la guerre, oui - mais une guerre universelle, métaphorique, dont on se demande par quel malentendu on a pu la réduire (et Kusturica le premier, dans ses innombrables gloses et causeries) à la seule guerre en ex-Yougoslavie.[141]

Lévy admits that *Underground* indeed deserved the *Palme d'Or* but not its author. He criticizes Kusturica for not having said a word of compassion for the victims of Tuzla the very night he won the *Palme d'Or* and thus concludes that the whole 'Kusturica-affair'[142] would be a new illustration of the fact that one can be a terrible militant and at the same time a talented artist.[143] Again Lévy refers to French writer Céline, his revolting political position on one side and his talent as an author on the other.[144] Although Lévy judges *Underground* in the end as quite a masterpiece, he maintains his accusations against Kusturica and his politically "incorrect"[145] position.[146] To this, Kusturica used to say:

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[136] See ibid. Further see in *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 492: "Propos de Emir Kusturica", 69f.
[137] See Lévy (June 10, 1995).
[138] See ibid. See also Lévy, Bernard-Henri: "Le bloc-notes", in *Le Point*, October 21, 1995.
[139] Lévy, Bernard-Henri: "Le bloc-notes", in *Le Point*, November 4, 1995.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid.
[142] See Lévy (June 10, 1995).
[143] See Lévy (November 4, 1995).
[144] See ibid.
[145] Ibid.
[146] See ibid.

> Alors, si je suis «politiquement incorrect», tant pis, ou plutôt tant mieux, car j'espère le rester jusqu'à ma mort, pour sauvegarder mon indépendance et ma liberté contre les cénacles et les terrorismes, intellectuels ou pas…[147]

Both Finkielkraut and Lévy had based their articles on the interview published in *Cahiers du cinéma* in June 1995, an interview in which Kusturica spoke about the significance of the use of historical film material, his identification with Bosnia and what he thought about Milošević.[148] Concerning Bosnia he said that while some French intellectuals were "citoyens d'honneur"[149] of Sarajevo, he himself could not go back to his home-town and if he would dare to do so he would be killed.[150] He states that he is not sure what exactly he had done to the Bosnians since had written an article in *Le Monde* right at the beginning of the war, denouncing the Serbian and the Croatian atrocities without ever saying anything against the Muslims.[151] But as they judge someone who is not with them as being against them, he, Kusturica, seems to be seen as a traitor. He further states: "Ils n'attendent qu'un mot magique: que je dise que Milosevic est un fasciste! Je ne le pense pas, et je sais qu'il ne l'est pas!"[152]. And concerning his position he had taken between the war fronts, he says:

> J'ai pris une position humaniste minimale; pas plus, car on ne peut pas me demander d'être meilleur que je suis! Les extrémistes ont gagné la partie; les autres ne survivront pas. Moi, je suis fatigué. J'en ai assez, de tout ça. Aujourd'hui, je vis en France. La France est le dernier pays du monde où on comprenne encore le cinéma.[153]

Ironically enough, it should be exactly in that country which he praised as being the last one in the world to understand cinema where his film *Underground* would become so fervently denounced and, as will be seen, misunderstood.

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[147] Kusturica in an interview with *Le Point*: "«Underground» comme un ouragan", in *Le Point*, October 21, 1995.
[148] See Kusturica in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 492: 70.
[149] Ibid.
[150] See ibid.
[151] See Kusturica (April 24, 1992).
[152] Kusturica in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 492: 70.
[153] Ibid.

In his article "Cinéma Disputé", Adam Gopnik argues that the Paris intellectuals still "believe that what they say matters, and that what they think today the world will think tomorrow"[154]. Taken in account the "fraternal jealousies"[155] among French philosophers and the "direct pipeline to the popular press"[156], Gopnik observes:

> When a new fact or experience - a movie, or even a war - appears, the trick for a Paris intellectual is to enclose it within his set of allusions and abstractions before the other intellectual can get out *his* set of allusions and abstractions.[157]

In the case of the Yugoslav wars, the leading Paris intellectuals were among the first to take position. Lévy supported the Bosnian cause, writing a book as well as shooting a documentary film called *Bosna!*.[158] Finkielkraut, from the very beginning of the Yugoslav wars, defended forcefully Croatian independence and thus the Croatian cause.[159] And as his article on *Underground* shows, Finkielkraut was the first to incorporate Kusturica's film into "his set of allusions and abstractions"[160] without even having seen the film.

The irony that Alain Finkielkraut had criticized a film he had not seen became subject of parody in Pascal Bonitzer's satirical movie *Rien sur Robert* (1999) where its protagonist writes an article about a Bosnian film he had not seen yet, describing it as 'pure fascist propaganda'.[161] Whereas Bonitzer's protagonist justifies his overhasty article as having been simply necessary, his critics describe it as an "unfortunate article"[162] and one even terms it "ce typique exemplaire français de l'arrogance intellectuelle"[163]. Furthermore, in Bonitzer's comedy there is confusion whether the criticized film is a Bosnian or a Serbian one[164], and this - put in the context of the controversy over *Underground* - could be read as an allusion to the fact that Western critics often called *Underground* a 'Bosnian movie' which it was not

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[154] Gopnik, Adam: "Cinéma Disputé", in *The New Yorker*, February 5, 1996, 32.
[155] Iibd., 32.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid.
[158] See *Bosna!*; see also Lévy: *Le Lys et la cendre, journal d'un écrivain en temps de guerre en Bosnie,* Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1996.
[159] See Finkielkraut, Alain: *Comment peut-on être croate?*, Paris: Gallimard, 1992.
[160] Gopnik: 32.
[161] See Bonitzer, Pascal: *Rien sur Robert: Scénario*, Paris: Cahiers du cinema, 1999, 9.
[162] Ibid., 38f.
[163] Ibid., 23.
[164] See ibid., 9, 14, 23, 38, 68.

at all.[165] Except for the film-maker's own origins in Bosnia, the film itself does not deal with Bosnia and is not directly touching on anything Bosnian. It is a French-German-Hungarian co-production, shot in Prague and Belgrade, with a plot that was set in Belgrade, back then still part of Yugoslavia. This undifferentiated treatment of the film's origins by its reviewers indicates, as Dina Iordanova suggests, that in the minds of Western critics and journalists the Balkan nations were all the same and did not differ from each other.[166]

3.4. New irritation

After the heated controversy that Kusturica's *Underground* and the Cannes decision had provoked, Kusturica came up with a new surprise. Instead of having the film's first official viewing in a neutral place, Kusturica chose to show his film first in Belgrade, that is: to a Serbian audience! Among the guests invited to *Underground*'s official opening ceremony were personalities such as the Republic's president Zoran Lilić[167], the federal premier minister, the minister of culture, the foreign minister, the mayor of Belgrade, then soccer star Dušan Savić (from Red Star Belgrade), the Serbian ultranationalist Arkan and the singer Ceca.[168] To the surprise of many, Slobodan Milošević and his wife Mirjana Marković did not attend the event.[169]

When asked why he had chosen Belgrade for the film's *première publique*, Kusturica answered that he wanted to show *Underground* in a city where people could still say that they had lived peacefully together during 45 years. And if this would have been possible in Sarajevo, Zagreb or Ljubljana, he would have screened it there.[170] Asked whether the choice of Belgrade was not pure provocation, he replied in an interview with *Le Point*:

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[165] Some examples: A short article on Cannes' Film Festival 1995 appeared in *The Houston Chronicle* as: "Bosnian film big winner at Cannes" (29 May 1995). Reuters and Associated Press entitled the winning of *Underground*: "Bosnian film wins at Cannes", See *The Ottawa Citizen* (29 May 1995).
[166] See Iordanova (2001): 118.
[167] He was President of the National Assembly of Serbia in 1993 and President of Yugoslavia from 1993 to 1997.
[168] Svetlana "Ceca" Veličović, a popular folk singer, married Željko Ražnatović (widely known as Arkan) in 1995. Ceca and Arkan functioned as a glamorous power couple often appearing at public events and in the media. Arkan for his part was a Serbian paramilitary leader in the Yugoslav wars. In 1999 the ICTY announced his indictment. Arkan was assassinated on January 15, 2000 (before his trial had started).
[169] See Hatzfeld, Jean: "A Belgrade 'Underground' vire à l'autocélébration serbe. La première du film d'Emir Kusturica a réuni 5.000 'happy view'", in *Libération*, June 21, 1995.
[170] See ibid.

> Quant à la projection à Belgrade, n'oubliez pas deux ou trois choses. D'abord, j'ai tourné le film dans cette ville, et je trouvais normal de le montrer à ses habitants. Ensuite, je suis toujours citoyen yougoslave, et j'ai conservé mon vieux passeport, même si tout cela n'a plus de sens aujourd'hui.[171]

Jean Hatzfeld writes that while the film was shown in Belgrade, there was complete silence, and the next day no reviews had appeared in the media. He goes on arguing that the audience in Belgrade did not seem to have seen the same film as the audience in Cannes:

> A Cannes, ils ont regardé un film sur la guerre. A Belgrade, ils voient ou ne veulent voir qu'un film sur la Yougoslavie. (…) Beaucoup, et Kusturica en tête, répètent que les étrangers ne peuvent comprendre cet hymne au grand désordre amoureux d'un people serbe ou yougoslave, qui explique la guerre plus que le nationalisme grand-serbe.[172]

Kusturica himself said at the *première* in Belgrade:

> A la fin de ce siècle, nous avons voulu accompagner ce pays qui n'existe plus par quelque chose de beau. Par des émotions qui perpétueront la mélancolie d'avoir vécu toutes ces années ensemble.[173]

Words that allude to Kusturica's 'Yugo-nostalgic' position in face of the demise of Yugoslavia. To that, Kusturica says: "j'avoue qu'*Underground* n'est pas un film nostalgique (…). C'est moi qui suis nostalgique"[174].

A harsh critique and reaction to the *première* of *Underground* in Belgrade comes from the Montenegrin journalist Stanko Cerović, appearing in the August 1995 issue of *Bosnia Report*[175]. His article is entitled "Canned Lies" and begins as follows:

> Belgrade has rolled out the red carpet for a new epic film. Its world premiere was

[171] Kusturica in an interview with *Le Point* (October 21, 1995).
[172] Hatzfeld: (June 21, 1995).
[173] Kusturica quoted in Hatzfeld: (June 21, 1995).
[174] Kusturica in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 496: 44.
[175] *Bosnia Report* is a bi-monthly magazine from the Bosnian Institute in London. It is available on the World Wide Web.

> attended by the Serbian secret police chief, flanked by celebrated war criminal 'Arkan' (the Rambo of the Balkans). But did the jury at Cannes have to give the same film the Golden Palm?[176]

Cerović argues that the Cannes jury wanted to reward political engagement and social responsibility, so Kusturica won the prize "not because the film was good, but because it was about war"[177]. He calls the 1995 festival "the most successful manipulation in film history - the equivalent of the proverbial 'crime of the century'"[178]. And he accuses Kusturica of consciously making propaganda, of "defending the people and ideas most responsible for this war and its crimes"[179]. He then claims that Kusturica's film was partly financed by Belgrade Television, "the institution which with the army, bears most responsibility for this war"[180] and whose director Milorad Vučelić, "one of the most hated figureheads of the Serb nationalist movement"[181], was in Cannes when Kusturica won the *Palme d'Or*.[182]

Cerović's polemic did not receive any publicity as, observes Iordanova, his origins and very name were sufficient to immediately classify him as a biased.[183] However, Florence Hartmann, a French journalist in Belgrade, took up Cerović's critic on Belgrade Television and questioned in *Le Monde* of October 25 the financing of the film.[184] She accuses the financers of having helped to break the embargo, of having helped to make profits that served Serbian interests. She says, that 5% of the co-production was covered by the Radio-Television of Serbia (RTS) whose director was at that time Vučelić, chef of the parliamentary group of Slobodan Milošević's party. She then mentions that Radio-Television of Serbia, according to the UN (High Commission of Human Rights, Report 1 and 3 of Ex-Yugoslavia), functioned as an instrument of war propaganda as it had a quasi monopoly (96%) and was meant to provoke ethnic hatred.[185] As Hartmann writes, Kusturica "a toujours soutenu que la télévision d'Etat serbe associée à une autre société de Belgrade n'avait fourni que des prestations de

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[176] Cerović, Stanko: "Canned Lies", in *Bosnia Report*, August 1995, in: http://www.barnsdle.demon.co.uk/bosnia/caned.html, accessed on June 11, 2009.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Ibid.
[180] Ibid.
[181] Ibid.
[182] See ibid.
[183] See Iordanova (2001): 117.
[184] Hartmann, Florence: "L'embargo sur la Serbie aurait été violé", in *Le Monde*, October 26, 1995.
[185] See ibid.

services en échange des droits d'exploitation du film en Serbie-Monténégro"[186].

Hartmann's article provoked journalist David Grosz to calling for an end of the so-called bad process against Emir Kusturica: "Que cesse ce mauvais procès contre Emir Kusturica!"[187]. Referring to and comparing with Angelopoulos's film *Ulysses' Gaze* that was also shot in Belgrade (as well as in Vukovar and Mostar), Grosz notes that Angelopoulos has never been accused of "serbophilie"[188] nor of complaisance towards Belgrade - so why should Kusturica be treated so badly, writes Grosz.[189] However, Hartmann and Cerović both touch a most critical point: the accusation that the war in Bosnia was partly caused by the propaganda of Radio-Television of Serbia (RTS). That RTS and other the state-controlled media were major provocateurs has subsequently been confirmed by independent Serbian journalists and European media experts.[190]

3.5. Defence and escalation

On the very day Hartmann's article appeared, *Le Monde* published Kusturica's long expected response to Finkielkraut in the form of a letter, written at the occasion of *Underground*'s opening in French cinemas (October 25, 1995) Introducing Kusturica's article, Jean Michel Frodon sums up the state of the debate: "Il y a le film. Et ce qu'il y a autour du film. Dans le cas d'Underground, cet «autour» risque de prendre le pas sur le cinéma" [191]. Kusturica replies under the title "Mon imposture"[192] to Finkielkraut's article reducing *Underground* to "la version rock, postmoderne, décoiffante, branchée, américanisée, et tournée à Belgrade, de la propagande serbe la plus radoteuse et la plus mensongère"[193]. In his letter, Kusturica does not address Finkielkraut directly, as could have been expected, but the newspaper *Le Monde* accusing it for having published such an article:

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[186] Ibid.
[187] Grosz, David: "à Kusturica", in *Le Monde*, 27 November 1995.
[188] Ibid.
[189] See ibid.
[190] French media expert Renaud de La Brosse who analyzed the performance of the Serbian press, television and radio in the 990s comes to the conclusion that without Serbian media propaganda the war in former Yugoslavia probably could have been avoided. See Robelli, Enver: "Journalisten als Kriegshetzer", in *Der Bund*, August 5, 2009.
[191] Frodon, Jean Michel: "Le génie d'Emir Kusturica se confronte à la réalité yougoslave", in *Le Monde*, October 26, 1995.
[192] Kusturica, Emir: "Mon imposture", in *Le Monde*, October 26, 1995.
[193] Finkielkraut (June 2, 1995).

> Lorsque *Le Monde* a publié, le 2 juin, l'article d'Alain Finkielkraut "L'imposture Kusturica", j'ai d'abord ressenti une grande tristesse puis une assez grande colère, et finalement une sorte d'incertitude. J'aurais voulu répondre immédiatement; mais pour quoi dire? Non que mon imagination eût été prise en défaut, mais je ne trouvais pas de mots pour répliquer à l'auteur de l'article, qui, à l'évidence, n'avait pas vu mon film Underground. (…) Je ne comprends toujours pas que *Le Monde* ait publié le texte d'un individu qui n'avait pas vu mon film, sans que personne ait cru bon de le signaler.[194]

Kusturica resented *Le Monde* having published 'fiction' labelling him as supporter of 'Great Serbia' and 'best friend' of Milošević, having engaged in 'war propaganda'. Had he expected such harsh critics and polemics? To that Kusturica replied in an interview:

> Je m'attendais à des attaques, mais pas forcément à celles que j'ai subies. Je ne sais pas si ceux qui ont écrit tous ces articles - certains sans même avoir vu le film - savent combien je suis hanté par le doute à chaque instant d'un tournage - le processus de la création repose d'ailleurs sur le doute permanent, alors, lire que je suis un imposteur ou un exhibitionniste, que sais-je encore … Quant aux critiques plus politiques, qui taxent mon film de proserbe et moi de partisan de Milosevic, je ne peux les admettre. *Underground* est un pamphlet ironique contre toutes les propagandes, d'où qu'elles viennent…[195]

Kusturica's article in *Le Monde* is written in an ironic style, very imaginative, almost epic and therefore it is difficult to elicit a clear message out of it. However, Kusturica does not miss the opportunity to encourage the readers to go seeing his movie in order to judge by themselves, and he concludes by accusing both Finkielkraut and *Le Monde:*

> Croyez que je regrette que vous ayez préféré donner la parole à quelque maître à penser de seconde zone qui risque, lorsque la Bosnie sera passée de mode, dans six mois peut-être, de se passionner pour le Cachemire. Les lecteurs du *Monde* seront donc amenés à juger de la véracité de ce texte en allant voir mon film.[196]

Finkielkraut's answer appeared only four days later, entitled: "La propagande onirique d'Emir

[194] Kusturica (October 26, 1995).
[195] Kusturica in *Le Point* (October 21, 1995).
[196] Kusturica (October 26, 1995).

Kusturica"[197]. Finkielkraut who had finally seen *Underground* admits: "Maintenant que j'ai pu voir le film, je reconnais que j'ai été injuste avec Emir Kusturica"[198]. Having said that, however, he attacks Kusturica even more violently than in his first article. Finkielkraut compares *Underground* with Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) explaining that back then it was not necessary to even watch Riefenstahl's movie as it was clear that it was pure Nazi propaganda.[199] He calls Kusturica a traitor and accuses his film of being a Balkan cliché.[200] Furthermore, Finkielkraut justifies his previous article: "Le collabo a ainsi empoché la palme du martyr: cette mystification insultante et stupide exigeait d'être dénoncée séance tenante. Ce que j'ai fait"[201].

However, Finkielkraut now states, differing from his first critique, that *Underground* was not "propagande de guerre" anymore - instead, Kusturica's film represented a new genre, meaning: "la propagande onirique"[202]. Propaganda because of the usage of historical film sequences showing the Slovenes and Croats welcoming the German invaders euphorically and because of showing Kurt Waldheim (a most controversial figure because of his Nazi past) at Tito's funeral. Propaganda also because of portraying Mustafa (one of the film's fictional characters; by name a Muslim) as the one who as a partisan in the resistance is betraying his comrade-in-arms. Propaganda also because of the way Kusturica portrays the UN and in particular the black UN soldier who does just nothing to help the victims of the violence in Bosnia or Croatia. He summarizes that *Underground* is made out of lies and excessiveness, and he finishes his article by suggesting that in that whole context "le grand auteur transgressif du XXe siècle n'est plus Bataille mais Faurisson"[203]. Robert Faurisson is a French Holocaust denier, and with that allusion the whole 'Kusturica affair' became a Nazi/Anti-Nazi touch, in other words: Finkielkraut equals Kusturica with those who deny the Holocaust.

To this escalation in tone and aggressiveness, Serge Grünberg reacts with his anti-Finkielkraut polemic "Onirique ta mère"[204], defending Kusturica against a simplistic vision of the world where one is the victim and the other the perpetrator:

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[197] Finkielkraut, Alain: "La propagande onirique d'Emir Kusturica", in *Le Monde*, October 30, 1995.
[198] Ibid.
[199] See *Triumph of the Will*, a film by Leny Riefenstahl, Germany: 1935.
[200] Finkielkraut (October 30, 1995).
[201] Ibid.
[202] Ibid.
[203] Ibid.
[204] Grünberg, Serge: "Onirique ta mère", in *Libération*, November 27, 1995.

> C'est contre cette vision simpliste du monde qu'Emir Kusturica s'élève, en tant que Bosniaque démocrate, en tant que Yougoslave qui n'a pas accepté la disparition de la défunte Fédération et qui est bien placé pour savoir que Milosevic, Tudjman et Izetbegovic représentent tous, à des degrés divers, le même symptôme: le nationalisme hystérique qui devait nécessairement provoquer les massacres qu'on connaît et contre lesquels il s'était élevé dès 1991 dans un texte publié dans le Monde.[205]

Kusturica for his part answered to all this with his 'renouncement' of cinema[206], avowing that he had been politically naïve:

> *Underground* est mon film le plus important; pas seulement à cause de ses qualités, mais surtout à cause des pertes qu'il implique: en premier lieu ma naïveté politique. J'ai reçu une leçon: s'en tenir fermement à logique ne signifie rien, au regard de l'Histoire. L'Histoire a sa propre logique. J'y ai mis beaucoup de sentiment, de nostalgie… ce n'est peut-être pas mon meilleur film, mais c'est le plus important, le plus abouti formellement. Pour moi, le fait d'avoir vécu dans un pays et m'apercevoir qu'il n'existe plus, représente une perte irréparable.[207]

Yet only three months after his announcement of retiring from film making, he started a new film project, shooting 1996 *Black Cat, White Cat* which was released in 1998 and won the *Silver Lion* at the Venice International Film Festival in the category "Best Director". This film was far less controversial or even political and thus seemed to indicate that Kusturica was moving into new directions.[208] However, the controversy over *Underground* went on.

3.6. From controversy to a debate on the debate

On November 27, still 1995, André Glucksmann published a letter to Kusturica in *La Libération*, saying that although he does not agree with Kusturica's interview-statements, he highly respects his work as a film-maker and artist. Glucksmann insists that the subject of the film was not nationalism at all but the consequences of communism:

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[205] Ibid.
[206] See Colmant, Marie: "Kusturica tire sa révérence", in *Libération*, December 4, 1995.
[207] Kusturica in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 496: 44.
[208] See *Black Cat, White Cat*, a film by Emir Kusturica, FR Yugoslavia: 1998.

> On ne sort pas du communisme indemne. On s'extrait mutilé d'une cave où personne n'a vu le temps passer. Votre allégorie vaut pour la moitié orientale de l'Europe. Les conflits d'avant la domination soviétique n'ont pas été résolus par elle, mais gelés.[209]

He then tells Kusturica not to take Finkielkraut and Lévy too seriously as they are sorry spirits who had displayed the impertinence of condemning before seeing.[210] By siding with Kusturica's film and by simultaneously questioning Finkielkraut's and Lévy's relevance, Glucksmann seems to have changed the focus and substance of the debate without, however, having changed his critical position concerning Serbia: "Qu'elle [L'Europe] apprenne dans Underground à moquer la folie meurtrière grand-serbe et à sourire d'elle-même"[211]. By quoting Novalis ("after a miserable war, we must write comedies"), Glucksmann suggests that if we do not learn to laugh at the murderer, then the murderer laughs at us.[212] In that context, the murderer was Serbia.

Serbia? Austrian writer Peter Handke, living near Paris and described by Gopnik as an "honourable Paris intellectual"[213], published soon after Glucksmann's letter to Kusturica a two-part reportage on his travels in Serbia in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Munich). He openly questioned whether Serbia really was the main aggressor in the Yugoslav wars, herewith enraging the European (mostly German) intelligentsia.

Handke also harshly criticized the positions of Finkielkraut and Lévy, and concerning Glucksmann and his article on *Underground* he wrote:

> André Glucksmann, another new philosopher, grotesquely reversed the point when he congratulated Kusturica on his film - which he *had* seen - as a coming to terms with a terroristic Serbian Communism that, as opposed to the Germans, had learned nothing from its historical misdeeds: a person who reads that into *Underground*, what has he seen? What does he see at all?[214]

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[209] Glucksmann, André: "L'alambic magistral d'Underground", in *Libération*, November 27, 1995.
[210] See ibid.
[211] Ibid.
[212] See ibid.
[213] Gopnik: "Cinéma Disputé", p. 37.
[214] Handke, Peter: *A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia*, translated by Scott Abbott, New York: Viking, 1997, 8f; It was first published in Germany under the title: "Gerechtigkeit für Serbien", in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, January 5, 1996.

The day after the publication of the first part of Handke's reportage "Gerechtigkeit für Serbien" (Justice for Serbia) in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of January 5, 1996, the *Corriere Della Sera* (Milan) published translated excerpts of Handke's article[215] and Glucksmann replied on the same page of the *Corriere* to Handke's critique, calling him "a monomaniac terrorist"[216]. Glucksmann writes that Handke, instead of sitting in front of the television, should have left immediately for Yugoslavia at the moment the war there erupted (as Glucksmann himself did) in order to verify the cruelties committed by the Serbs. Glucksmann accuses Handke of discrediting the German intelligentsia (represented by personalities such as Grass, Fischer, Habermas, Cohn-Bendit) who shared the same opinion as he (Glucksmann) on the Serbs and their massacres. He even suggests that Handke's arguments were moving towards condoning terrorism of the Baader-Meinhof type and "Although he is against Hitler, he fatalistically is in favour of the Serbs"[217]. While Glucksmann criticized Handke's article as a pro-Serbian pamphlet, Handke criticized Glucksmann's praise of *Underground* as hidden irony that was meant to do Kusturica and the Serbs as much harm as Finkielkraut had done by his attack.[218]

One month later, Adam Gopnik published quite an extensive summary of the controversy over *Underground* in the magazine *New Yorker*.[219] While the debate over *Underground* slowly came to its end, the debate on the question whether Serbia really was the aggressor was about to emerge. However, in his article Gopnik does not refer to that very complex other debate but extensively summarizes the whole controversy over Kusturica's film by analyzing the French philosophers' position within the discourse of the ongoing Yugoslav wars. "Reading these philosophers is a little like watching men try to find their way out of a collapsed tent: you admire the intensity of their struggle for the way the canvas bulges, but they don't even get out into the air."[220] Gopnik argues that what really was behind Finkielkraut's attack on *Underground* was the problem of defining good and bad nationalisms.[221] And he concludes that the whole debate over *Underground* became more of a metaphor for the problem of nationalism and within this debate Finkielkraut's position was an abstract philosophical one which had to do with "other"ness whereas the movie was the

[215] See Handke: "Perchè sto con i serbi", in *Corriere Della Sera*, January 6, 1996,.
[216] Glucksmann in Munzi, Ulderico: "Ma Glucksmann risponde: 'Sei un terrorista'", in *Corriere Della Sera*, January 6, 1996.
[217] Ibid.
[218] See Handke (January 5, 1996).
[219] See Gopnik, "Cinéma Disputé", 32-37.
[220] Ibid., 34.
[221] See ibid.

metaphor for good and bad nationalism. In that context Kusturica happened to be in the middle.[222]

Gopnik's article marked a specific moment in the controversy over Kusturica's *Underground:* The basic points and positions were set and from this point onwards it was more a debate over the debate than any new approach to the subject.[223]

4. Yugoslav History, Balkan Perceptions, and the Image of Serbia

4.1. Nazis, Ustashas, Cetniks and Partisans

> I had read an interview that Kusturica gave in connection with the movie (…). He was talking about his use of the documentary footage of the Nazis arriving in the Yugoslavian capitals – the Croatians and the Slovenians collaborate, the Serbs resist. That was typical of the most vulgar Serbian propaganda, and so I wrote my article in *Le Monde* and was attacked by the cultural elite.[224]

This is how Alain Finkielkraut explained what incited him to write the article about *Underground* that was to provoke such controversy over the film and its director as well as the Cannes Jury's decision. Finkielkraut refers to the Croatian Ustasha collaborating with the Nazi invaders during World War II, a chapter of Yugoslav history that has not been studied during the times of the Tito regime.[225] The 'hidden stories' of massacres on Serbs, Jews and Gipsies committed by the state of Croatia (Nezavisna Drzava Hrvatske) and its militia, the Ustashas, appeared only after Tito's death - and were subsequently used by the Milošević

[222] See ibid., 35.
[223] In 2005, the year Kusturica was presiding the Cannes Film Festival, controversy sparked off again but only temporarily, repeating well-known positions and fuelled partly by the fact that in the meantime, Kusturica had converted to the Orthodox (Serbian) religion. As the Balkan wars were over, discussions would never achieve the intensity or, indeed, intellectual and journalistic aggressiveness of the controversy ten years ago, in 1995. See the article of Cédric Housez: "Alain Finkielkraut and Bernard Henry Lévy, two propagandists of the 'clash of civilisations'", May 18, 2005.
[224] Finkielkraut quoted in Gopnik: "Cinéma Disputé", 35.
[225] See Banac, Ivo: "Misreading the Balkans", in *Foreign Policy*, no. 93 (Winter 1993/1994), 173-183.

government as a propaganda instrument to portray the Serbs as the eternal victims of history.[226]

In the early 1980s, journalistic articles as well as some literary works appeared, dealing with World War II and the break between Tito and Stalin (in 1948). The major Serbian weekly *NIN,* for example, started in 1982 a series of articles on the prison camp in Goli Otok, set up by Tito's government in 1948. Imprisoned were those who sided with Stalin in the quarrel between the two leaders. The articles included interviews with and accounts of survivors of the camp. While the existence of the prison camp had never been denied, the Yugoslav public was shocked to read about the cruelties practiced there and the number of citizens sent there on the basis of little or no evidence.[227] These newspaper articles about Goli Otok were followed by more literary and artistic works, such as the Yugoslav nominee for the 1986 Academy Award for best foreign film (Los Angeles) and winner of the *Palme d'Or* (Cannes): Emir Kusturica's *When Father Was Away On Business*, the tragic-comical treatment of the injustices and cruelties in the period following the break with Stalin and the Yugoslav form of 'Gulag' at the beginning of the 1950s.[228]

One of Yugoslavia's founding myths was the moral superiority of the communists and their partisan army (over the Croatian Ustashas and the Serbian Cetniks). The Ustashas were described as having been even worse than the Nazis; official Yugoslav history states that over 700'000 Serbs were killed by the Ustashas. Whether this number is correct or exaggerated, the genocide was widely suppressed in the name of promoting the communist goal of 'brotherhood and unity' during the whole era of Tito's Yugoslavia.[229] That was also the case with the communist partisans' massacres committed on Ustashas and Cetniks at the end of World War II; although publicised in emigrant circles, they were not allowed to be debated or even openly mentioned under Tito.[230]

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[226] See Hayden, Robert M.: "Recounting the Dead: The Rediscovery and Redefinition of Wartime Massacres in Late- and Post-Communist Yugoslavia", in *Memory, History, and Opposition Under State Socialism*, 1994, 172f.
[227] See ibid., 169.
[228] See ibid. See *When Father Was Away On Business*, a film by Emir Kusturica, Bosnia-Herzegovina: 1985.
[229] See ibid., 176, 184; See Biermann: 31.
[230] See ibid., 173f. Milovan Djilas mentioned in his war memoirs in 1977 that many Ustashas, Cetniks, and other opponents of the communists were killed (around twenty thousands or more). Djilas's depiction of partisan guilt, was only a brief passage at the end of a 450 pages book, went largely unnoticed. See Djilas (1977): 443-447.

This changed at the beginning of the 1990s with the intervention of Franjo Tudjman, one of Tito's leading partisans and after World War II a general in the Yugoslav People's Army. He later turned historian, became a Croatian nationalist and thus a dissident. In 1990, Tudjman was elected president of Croatia. Just before that election, he published a book in which he played down the genocidal acts of the Ustasha, arguing that the number of Serbs murdered as listed in the official statistics was grossly overstated and, secondly, that genocides have always been part of human history and thus should not be overrated.[231] This approach led to a new Croatian historiography based on the argument that the number of Serbs killed by the Ustashas was on purpose exaggerated by communists and by Serbian historians. It is best summarized by a professor of history at Zagreb University in 1990, stating that "Ustasism, with all its characteristics and consequences, was not genetically Croat but was the product of specific historical circumstances"[232].

4.2. Historiographies and nationalisms

While the Ustasha genocide was minimized and communist partisan massacres on Ustashas were maximised by revisionist Croatian historians, Serbia's regime under Milošević ensured that the crimes of the Ustashas against Serbs would not be forgotten. Serbian newspapers carried long series of stories on atrocities committed by the Ustashas, on existing and rediscovered mass graves and when the mortal remains of Ustasha victims were found in Bosnia in the summer of 1991, a huge public funeral was held. The re-discovery of crimes committed by Ustashas was used by the Milošević government to demonize Croats as Nazis and to put the Serbs among the victims of the Holocaust.[233]

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[231] See Tudjman, Franjo: *Horrors of War: Historical Reality and Philosophy* (*Bespuća Povijesne Zbilnosti)*, Translated from Croatian by Katarina Mijatovic, New York: M. Evans and Company, Inc, 1996 [1st edition 1989], 3-17. Former U.S. ambassador to the Vatican from 1989-1993, Thomas Patrick Melady, praises Tudjman's book (English version) as a political memoir, an intellectual tour de force, a political document of an important period in Croatia's history, and a broad historical philosophical survey; he describes Tudjman as one of the most important statesmen in contemporary Europe. See ibid., xvi. Tudjman, formally recognized by the U.S. as president of independent Croatia in April 1992, was officially invited by the U.S. government in 1993 to attend the opening of the Holocaust Museum in Washington. That Tudjman had written a book that openly minimalized Ustasha war crimes (also committed against Jews) and that Croatia had an obnoxious fascist Ustasha past seems to have been mainly ignored. See also Hayden: 182.

[232] Boban, Ljubo: "Jasenovac and the Manipulation of History", in *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Fall 1990), 589.

[233] See Hayden: 173-179.

All this went together with rising nationalisms. The Serbian media campaign reviving Ustasha atrocities culminated by instigating the Serbian population in Croatia with nationalistic slogans like "Serbia is where Serbs live", thus increasing ethnic tensions in the Krajina and in Slavonia.[234] After Tito's death, Yugoslavia entered a period of "permanent crisis"[235] with a stagnating economy, high inflation, mass unemployment and a surge of nationalistic passions in the republics, nationalisms that had been suppressed during the communist rule.[236] Kusturica once mentioned in an interview that Tito had created a system in which nationalities were so badly suppressed that if you sang a Croatian song in a bar, you might have got jailed for three or four years, and after Tito had died, what had been left was a nation with bitter memories and hundred ethnic tensions.[237]

What began as an economic crisis became a political one as experts began increasingly to link the troubles of the Yugoslav economy with the cumbersome system of 'self-management socialism' and with the complicated constitution of 1974. That constitution was more and more put into question, mostly so in Serbia in the 1980s. Serbia felt that it had been the republic most disadvantaged by this constitution which had otherwise decentralized the country to the point of confederation. Where as the other republics received exclusive powers in their respective territories, Serbia felt handicapped by the strengthening of the two 'autonomous provinces' within its borders: Kosovo and Vojvodina. These provinces were virtually independent of Belgrade and could pass legislation without having it reviewed by the Serbian parliament. Serbia, on the other hand, could pass its own legislation only with the consent of both provinces. In 1971, a symposium was held in Belgrade, being highly critical of the proposed new constitution. As a result, the Belgrade University law faculty was purged by the Tito regime and professors critical of the new constitution were removed. One of them, Andrija Grams, was interviewed years later, in telling about his trial and subsequent misery. This and other similar stories in the major Serbian newspapers seem to have reinforced the assumption that Serbs critical of what they considered an unfair constitution had been the victims of a conspiracy.[238]

The increasing resentment concerning the position of Kosovo and Vojvodina and the loss of Serbian control over these territories was particularly acute in regard to Kosovo, once the

[234] See Biermann: 35.
[235] Hayden: 169.
[236] See Biermann: 30-35.
[237] See Kusturica quoted in Malcom, Derek: "The Surreal Sarajevan Dreamer", in *The Guardian*, June 29, 1995.
[238] See Hayden: 170-172.

heart of the medieval Serbian kingdom. It was highly symbolic for Serbs as it was the site of the great defeat of Serbian forces in 1389 that led to 500 years of Ottoman domination. Kosovo, inhabited by Albanians, Serbs and Montenegrins, became increasingly Albanian as many Serbs emigrated and the birth-rate among the Kosovo Albanians was one of the highest in Europe. In 1981, the Kosovo Albanians began a campaign of resistance to Serbian domination. Belgrade reacted by increasing its police and paramilitary activities in the province. In this climate, populist leader Slobodan Milošević, then president of the League of Communists of Serbia, used the issue of Kosovo to come to power in a nationalistic coup in October 1987. Milošević pursued the transformation of a nominally communist party into an openly nationalistic one. In the same year, Serbian intellectuals manifested their support in a memorandum prepared at the Academy of Sciences and Arts in Belgrade arguing that Serbia was at a disadvantage within Yugoslavia and proposing a program for Serbian national development.[239] This 'memorandum' circulated unofficially, a fact that somehow underlined the notion that Yugoslavia was an anti-Serbian conspiracy, designed to cut Serbia down to size.[240]

To Ivo Banac the main problem of the state of Yugoslavia was that its component parts and constituent communities were never genuinely equal. The Serbian supremacy of royalist Yugoslavia (Kingdom of Slovenes, Serbs and Croats) was followed by the centralism of the communist regime in Belgrade after 1945. Tito, writes Banac, tried to correct that trend with his (con)federalist constitution of 1974 but by doing so he was provoking reactions by the Serbian establishment, reactions and interests that Milošević was to transform into a powerful and explosive nationalism.[241] To Slovenian intellectual Slavoj Žižek it was at the moment of Milošević's nationalistic coup and his subsequent constitutional changes, depriving the Vojvodina and Kosovo of their autonomy (realized in 1989 and 1990), when the fragile balance on which Yugoslavia rested was irretrievably disturbed.[242] By pursuing the strategy of restoring Serb dominance in Yugoslavia and by making Serbia look both as the victim of history and as the loser within the Tito's Yugoslav union of 'brotherhood and unity',

[239] See Ibid., 170f.
[240] See Gow, James:" After the Flood: Literature on the Context, Causes and Course of the Yugoslav Wars – Reflections and Refractions", in *Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 75, No. 3 (July 1997), 448.
[241] See Banac: 177f.
[242] See Žižek, Slavoj: "Against the Double Blackmail", in *New Left Review*, 1/234 (March-April 1999), 76.

Milošević became the forerunner of developments that led to the degeneration of Yugoslav politics into nationalistic antagonisms.[243]

This kind of re-defining historiography, fuelling and supporting a rising nationalism not only in Serbia but also in Croatia and Slovenia, led first to the disintegration of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) into separate communist parties in 1989-90 and next to the victories of openly nationalist(ic) non-communist parties in the elections of 1990 in Slovenia and Croatia. The elections in Croatia in May 1990 with the success of Franjo Tudjman opened confrontation between Serbia and Croatia. Rafael Biermann writes that Yugoslavia's break-up turned violent not the least because of Tudjman who provoked the Serbs living in Croatia with his nationalistic agenda.[244] Tudjman in addition permitted his party and government to revive the insignias, songs, and legends of the Ustasha and encouraged army units and others to flaunt them.[245] This use of nationalistic symbols that, as Carl Jacobsen writes, were seen as symbols of independence and pride by the Croatian population was topped by the fact that Tudjman demoted the Serb population of Croatia (among six hundred thousand) from 'constituent people' to a 'national minority'.[246] These developments meant that a totalitarian ideology, communism, was being replaced by its structural opposite, nationalism. This in turn meant the end of the idea of a pluralistic, democratic and federal communist Yugoslavia.[247]

4.3. Serbia in the negative perception spiral

In his book *Comment peut-on être croate?*, published in 1992, Finkielkraut suggests that the problem with Yugoslavia was not her historiography but the Serbs who justified their hegemonism with their suffering under the Usthasha regime.[248] He writes that "les nazis de cette histoire ont voulu se faire passer pour les Juifs".[249] To Tudjman's book he comments: "conclure de ce livre au caractère fasciste et antisémite de la Croatie actuelle, c'est tomber dans le piège révisionniste tendu par la propagande serbe à l'opinion publique

[243] See Biermann: 35; See Hayden: 170-172.
[244] See Biermann: 35.
[245] See Jacobsen, Carl G.: "Yugoslavia's Wars of Secession and Succession: Media, Manipulation, Historical Amnesia and Subjective Morality", in *Mediterranean Quarterly*, (Summer 1994), 25f.
[246] See Ibid: 25f.
[247] See Hayden: 167-169.
[248] See Finkielkraut, Alain: *Comment peut-on être croate?*, Paris: Gallimard, 1992, 49f.
[249] Ibid., 50.

internationale"[250]. Serbian propaganda meant for Finkielkraut (as mentioned before) the falsification of Serbian history by stating that the Croats had all been Nazis and the Serbs all part of the resistance.[251] Yet as Finkielkraut had supported the Croatian cause from the very beginning of the Yugoslav crisis, he seemed to ignore that propaganda was not an exclusive Serbian phenomenon but something that happened simultaneously in the Croatian and Slovenian parts of Yugoslavia from the mid-1980s onwards.

Concerning Croatia's past, Finkielkraut states that "Le noir épisode de l'Etat oustachi créé par Hitler en 1941 ne fait pas de la Croatie une non-nation"[252]. Despite Croatia's obnoxious fascist Ustasha past and despite its president minimalizing the role of the Ustasha genocide (also committed against Jews), Finkielkraut does not waver in his support of the Croatian cause arguing that, indeed, he himself was a Jew: "Si je n'avais pas été juif moi-même, peut-être n'aurais-je pas mis l'ardeur et l'insistance que vous avez remarquée à défendre la Croatie"[253]. What seems at first sight rather incomprehensible is explained as follows: "il m'a paru indispensable de refuser la bénédiction de la mémoire juive à la Serbie conquérante, et d'empêcher le recrutement des morts dont je me sens le gardien par les adeptes actuels du «nettoyage ethnique"[254].

Already in 1991, Finkielkraut has no doubts left: The wars in Croatia are not 'civil wars' but wars of aggression led by Serbia aiming to transform 'Yugo-slavia' into 'Serbo-slavia'[255], a hegemonial state characterized by Serbian predominance, resulting from territorial expansion through the instrument of war, instrument that was banned in and through the historic project of European unification.[256] In this context, Finkielkraut sees Slovenian and Croatian claims for independence as a matter of self-defence of two nations having chosen democracy against totalitarianism, hence they have the legitimate right to be recognized by a democratic and anti-totalitarian Europe.[257]

Finkielkraut's notion of Europe includes Slovenia and Croatia but not the rest of former Yugoslavia; for him Slovenia and Croatia are driven by their sentiment of belonging to

[250] Ibid., 50.
[251] See Ibid., 50.
[252] Finkielkraut in an interview with Colombani J.M/Simon, F: "Un entretien avec Alain Finkielkraut ", in *Le Monde*, July 9, 1991.
[253] Finkielkraut (1992) : 51.
[254] Ibid., 51f.
[255] See Finkielkraut: "Ne nous félicitons pas", in *Le Messager européen*, no. 5, 1991, 13f.
[256] See ibid., 14f; see Finkielkraut: "Les mots et la guerre", *Le Monde*, October 4, 1991.
[257] See Finkielkraut in *Le Messager européen*, no. 5 : 9-17.

Central Europe, hence their desire to move apart from Yugoslavia.[258] By suggesting that "Slovénia n'est pas une création de la Fédération yougoslave!"[259], he seems to ignore the very existence of a Yugoslav identity and goes as far as saying that Serbia's aggression against Croatia was directed not only against Croatian industry and military potential but "contre son européanéité même"[260].[261] In October 1991, Finkielkraut, Czech writer Milan Kundera and the historians François Furet, Marc Ferro and Jacques Le Goff launched a petition in *Le Monde*, advocating French recognition of Slovenian and Croatian national sovereignty.[262]

However, this position was, at the beginning of hostilities, not shared by the EC. Initially, the EC favoured the preservation of Yugoslavia, thus supporting the reform programme of then Yugoslav prime minister Ante Marković. His approach of introducing a free market economy and furthering democratisation seemed to the EC and also to the U.S. the right way to stabilize Yugoslavia. In February 1990, the EC even elevated Yugoslavia to the status of a 'candidate' for full membership in the Council of Europe. However, the events in Slovenia and Croatia made it for Marković almost impossible to succeed. The EC had to realize that by supporting the last prime minister of Federal Yugoslavia with his program considered as the last chance for a unified Yugoslavia, it came too late.[263] However, at the time both the EU and the U.S. had wanted to hold Yugoslavia together, the leaderships in Slovenia and Croatia, not Serbia, were the main centrifugal forces.[264] Following this line, the war which broke out in July 1991 in Croatia was a war between an independence-seeking Croatia and units of the Yugoslav army defending the country's territorial integrity and, in some localities, Serbs who opposed Croatia's secession.[265]

French writer-philosopher Lévy followed the same approach. In November 1991, Lévy signed an appeal entitled "Trois propositions pour la Yougoslavie" published in *Le Monde*.[266] It is an appeal that refuses to choose one cause against the other, one nationalism against the other, an appeal demanding European intervention, and it is an appeal calling for coexistence and for

[258] See ibid., 13.
[259] Finkielkraut in an interview with J. M. Colombani/F. Simon (July 9, 1991).
[260] Finkielkraut (1992): 30.
[261] See ibid., 28-34.
[262] See "Un appel pour la paix", in *Le Monde*, October 16, 1991.
[263] See Biermann: 39f.
[264] See ibid., 41f.
[265] See Woodward, Susan: *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the cold War*, Washington, D. C.: Brookings, 1995, 17.
[266] See "Un appel de onze écrivains. Trois propositions pour la Yougoslavie", in *Le Monde*, November 21, 1991.

the continuation of Yugoslavia's union, suggesting that there should be found "nouvelles formes d'associations entre les peuples appelés par la force des choses à vivre ensemble"[267]. In sum, it is a call in favour of a unified Yugoslavia with different ethnicities and a refusal of separatism and of Croatian or Slovenian independence and thus the counterposition to Finkielkraut's. However, Lévy was to change his pro-union stance when war broke out in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The same change of perception and political approach can be observed in most of EC/EU-Europe, change that occurred after Serbian atrocities committed in Bosnia had become public.[268] The German government was the first to change course. After Serbia's rejection of the Carrington plan in November 1991, German policy was driven by the impression that Serbia lacked the will to cooperate, pursuing a perfidious dual track policy of purposely obstructing peace negotiations and thus delaying a compromise solution while at the same time creating irreversible military facts. The Germany government began to identify Serbia as the main aggressor of the ongoing wars in Croatia. As then foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher writes in his memoirs, he in 1991 arrived at the conclusion that the only possibility to bring the war in Croatia to an end would be the recognition of Croatia's and Slovenia's independence and thus the internationalization of the conflict. Germany was the first EC/EU member state to recognize Croatia and Slovenia as independent states (December 1991).[269]

This turn provoked agonizing debates in the EC/EU. It was clear that the German recognition and thus the internationalization of the conflict would change the nature of the struggle in Yugoslavia from an internal dispute to one of a war of Serbian aggression against two independent states. By mid-1993 Europeans had changed their policy towards Yugoslavia and adjusted it after having recognized the independence of Slovenia and Croatia, later also of Bosnia.[270] However, it is important to keep in mind that up to 1992, Slobodan Milošević was widely perceived as a smart and eloquent former banker and determined South-Eastern European politician, speaking excellent English, and being acknowledged as a key factor of stability in the region.[271] And as Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek harshly remarks, by siding against Milošević the West began to fight its own creature, "a monster that grew as the

[267] Ibid.
[268] See Biermann: 42.
[269] See Genscher, Hans-Dietrich: *Erinnerungen*, Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1995, 955-963.
[270] See Biermann: 42f; see Woodward: 9.
[271] See Biermann : 42f.

result of the compromises and inconsistencies of the Western politics itself".[272]

Bernard-Henri Lévy, too, changed his mind under the impression of the war in Bosnia. In June 1992 he had gone to Sarajevo and what he witnessed there preoccupied him intensely.[273] The cosmopolitan multi-ethnic city, besieged by Bosnian Serbs, was for Lévy *the* symbol for and of Europe.[274] Lévy uses historical analogies by criticizing Europe's attitude concerning the siege of Sarajevo and the entire conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina. He writes in *La Règle du Jeu* in September 1993 that Europe "ne bougea pas, en 1936, pour l'Espagne. Ni, en 38, au moment de Munich. Ni en 56 à Budapest ou en 68, à Prague ou, en 81 encore, sous Jaruzelski, à Varsovie"[275]. Lévy's critique against Europe's 'indifference' goes so far as to state that the idea of Europe is dying in Bosnia.[276] André Glucksmann, who during the Croatian war compares Europe's attitude of non-involvement with Munich of 1938[277] and Serb aggression with that of Japan in World War II by writing of "Un Pearl Harbor moral"[278], rather avoids using historical analogies when it comes to the war in Bosnia. He states that "L'affaire est contemporaine donc d'autant plus inquiétante"[279] and, differing from Lévy, "L'Europe n'est pas morte à Sarajevo. Elle est malade de ses élites"[280]. Sylvie Daillot concludes her study on Europe and the intellectuals' discourse on the crisis in Yugoslavia from 1991-1995 with the hypothesis that the first three years of the Yugoslav crisis gave the French intellectuals the occasion to position themselves as truly European intellectuals.[281]

The historical comparisons of the Yugoslav wars in general and the comparison of Serbia with Nazi Germany in particular as it appeared again and again in Europe's intellectual writings on the Yugoslav wars is a problematic approach to the question of Yugoslavia's

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[272] Žižek (March-April 1999): 79f.
[273] See Lévy (1996): 9-12.
[274] See Lévy: "Editorial", in *La Règle du Jeu*, no. 10, May 1993, 5-8 ; See Lévy: "Editorial", in *La Règle du Jeu*, no. 11, September 1993, 7-10.
[275] Lévy in *La Règle du Jeu*, no. 11: 7.
[276] See Lévy in *La Règle du Jeu*, no. 10: 5-8.
[277] See Glucksmann: "Un Pearl Harbor moral", in *La Règle du Jeu*, no. 13, May 1994 [first published on December 11, 1991], 114.
[278] Ibid., 109.
[279] Glucksmann: "Pour qui sonne Sarajevo?", in *La Règle du Jeu*, no. 13, May 1994 [first published on March 2, 1993], 120.
[280] Glucksmann: "L'Europe refuse de payer le prix de la paix", in *La Règle du Jeu*, no. 13, May 1994 [first published on September 29, 1993], 128.
[281] See Daillot, Sylvie: *L'Europe dans le discours d'Alain Finkielkraut, Bernard-Henri Lévy et Edgar Morin sur la crise yougoslave (juin 1991 – juin 1994)*, Mémoire présenté pour l'obtention du diplôme d'études supérieures en relations internationales, Genève: Institut Universitaire de Hautes Etudes Internationales, 1995, 52.

disintegration. This Robert Hayden pointed out already in September 1992. By focussing on the Serbs and their actions, Western European intellectuals and politicians were absolving themselves from their own responsibility for provoking the Yugoslav disaster by so prematurely recognizing Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia. This 'easy new history' resulting in blaming Serbia for everything must, writes Hayden, cause intellectual unease as it simply is too unfair to one side and too undifferentiated.[282] The only solution to the Yugoslav problem, comments Susanne Woodward, would have been to address directly the real origins and fundamental issues of the conflict such as the collapse of states, the problematic meaning of national self-determination and the process of incorporating (or excluding) former socialist states into the West.[283]

The turn-around of EU and U.S. policies amounted to a formal approval of Yugoslavia's dissolution and with that the identification of Serbia as the main culprit for that process. So when Emir Kusturica ends his film with the fairytale version of a country that was once known as Yugoslavia, showing a wedding party on a piece of land drifting apart, this alludes strongly to what happened in 1993: Yugoslavia ceased to exist and its demise was even supported by the international community. That Serbia, calling herself together with the territory of Montenegro still 'the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia', further worsened Serbia's image within the West which saw Serbia also as the last relevant bastion of communism in Europe. [284]

4.4. External and/versus internal factors

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, the very international context in which Yugoslavia had asserted herself as a so-called non-aligned nation fell apart.[285] Being non-aligned as a result of the Tito-Stalin split 1948 meant for Yugoslavia being communist without being forced into the Soviet bloc. With her political distance to Moscow, Yugoslavia was considered by the West as an interesting strategic component within the Cold War context, therefore receiving Western financial and economic support.[286] With the Cold War context gone, external factors stabilizing the internal situation (including international

[282] See Hayden: 182.
[283] See Woodward: 13.
[284] See ibid., 13.
[285] See ibid., 3.
[286] See Biermann: 37f; see Woodward: 16.

assistance to the national economy) fell partly away hence making it extremely difficult for the government to succeed in both solving Yugoslavia's pressing economic and intricate political-institutional problems as well as in re-positioning herself internationally.[287] It, obviously, did not succeed. Kusturica makes here quite a point. He states in *Cahier du cinéma* that the fall of the Berlin Wall had a major influence on the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and his film's last part entitled 'War' starts in the Berlin of the early 1990s, showing a celebrating re-unified Germany and contrasting it with images of Yugoslavia's dissolution. One could say that Yugoslavia was held together as long as it was needed within the system of the Cold War, and as soon as this system fell apart, Yugoslavia with her hitherto special strategic position fell apart.

Genscher recalls his discussions with Henry Kissinger who feared that Moscow could succeed in forcing Yugoslavia back into the Soviet block; hence it was of major Western interest to keep Yugoslavia as a non-aligned player in the international system and to hold the country together.[288] The external factor had already played a role in the times of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia when it was feared that Germany, after her recovery from World War I, could be tempted to expand into Southeastern Europe; it was a fear that was only too soon to be proved right.[289] Following these lines, one could argue that both the royal and the communist Yugoslavia emerged out of a major war and were stabilized by external factors: Whereas the Kingdom of Yugoslavia functioned after World War I as a kind of buffer zone (similar to the Czech Republic) in order to contain Germany, Tito's Yugoslavia functioned after World War II as an important element in the Western strategy of containing Russia.

Underground is framed by this very historical context as its story starts in 1941 with the Nazi invasion of Belgrade and the demise of the first united Yugoslav state, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and ends five decades later with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of the second unified Yugoslavia. In between these two demises comes the "cellar of communism", detaining the population, keeping it uninformed, economically backward, yet in an internal situation that appears peaceful. *Underground* thus portrays Yugoslavia's fate being determined by a tragic interplay between external and internal factors.

The euphoria over the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism contrasted starkly with developments in former Yugoslavia, developments that confronted Western governments

[287] See Woodward: 16.
[288] See Genscher: 929ff.
[289] See ibid., 930.

with policy and security challenges rather contrary to their post-Cold War expectations. What had started as a local conflict with little strategic implications turned into an international crisis and a threat to the very European identity as the outrage grew over Europe's failure to prevent war on its soil at the end of the 20th century.[290] Biermann argues that dealing with the problems in and with former Yugoslavia speeded up the development of Europe's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).[291] In *Underground,* all these European as well as international efforts and interventions are shown in a most critical light, particularly the activities of UN peace-keeping troops.

By 1994, the Yugoslav wars had changed both norms and institutions of the West. Germany, by sending pilots to participate in a Nato-enforced no-fly zone over Bosnia, was engaging for the first time since its defeat 1945 military power outside Nato's frontiers. Nato, by launching air strikes against the army of Bosnian Serbs, was intervening for the first time directly in European hostilities. And the United Nations sent peace-keeping forces to Europe for the first time ever.[292] Furthermore, Russia was recognized as an equal partner in the decision-making concerning European security by being included in the Bosnia peace negotiations and in the five power Contact Group set up in April 1994. Russia pressed Serbia to start serious negotiations and to concede territorial gains to the Muslim-led Bosnian government by giving assurances of Russian protection of Serb interests. Russia's cooperation was mainly explained with historically and culturally (common Orthodox Christian religion) rooted sympathies between Russians and Serbs, to a certain extent also with reference to Russian strategic designs in the Balkans.[293]

4.5. Two views

After the Balkan wars had begun, most writers on the subject focussed on the question of responsibility: Who or what side was responsible for Yugoslavia's demise, for the outbreak of violence, for the war and the war crimes?[294] Susanne Woodward concludes that there are two main views on the causes and nature of the Yugoslav conflict and in particular the war in

[290] See Woodward: 2f.
[291] See Biermann: 29f.
[292] See ibid; see Woodward: 2.
[293] See Woodward: 12.
[294] See Kent, Sarah A.: "Writing the Yugoslav Wars", in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 102, No. 4 (October 1997), 1086.

Bosnia. One considers Serbia as the aggressor, implying that the Serbs under the leadership of Milošević had begun the aggression in alliance with the federal army of Yugoslavia against Slovenia and Croatia to create a Greater Serbia. In order to achieve this goal, Serbia aimed to annex territory in the republics of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina where Serbs lived. This led to ethnic cleansing by expelling or killing all inhabitants of these territories who were not Serbs and by expelling ethnic Albanians, Hungarians and other non-Serbs from the two provinces within Serbia (Kosovo and Vojvodina). This view was to become the dominant one in the course of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina and lead to the policy of isolating and punishing Serbia.[295]

In the other view, at the beginning of the Yugoslav wars still very common in Europe, the Yugoslav wars were the result of the eruption of ethnic conflicts and tensions that were suppressed during the communist era, conflicts that came to the open after the collapse of communism, after people had regained their freedom. According to this view, the conflict which erupted between the Croatian government and its Serbian minority after Croatian nationalists won the presidential and parliamentary elections of April 1990 was a revival of an old Croat-Serb conflict. [296]

This kind of approach or view is also pursued in *Underground*. When it comes to Tito's Yugoslavia, the film portrays a system of communism that deep-freezes the internal ethnic tensions during five decades before these tensions unlash in the 1990s. However, when reports appeared about the war crimes of Bosnian Serbs, this view lost support after readers and viewers had been exposed to the worst crimes committed on European soil since Hitler and Stalin.[297] As Kusturica won the *Palme d'Or* with a film that generally follows the second view, seeing the wars as civil or ethnic wars, resulting from tensions deep-freezed under communism and not primarily fuelled by Serbian aggression, it becomes clear that the message of *Underground* went at the time of the Cannes Jury's decision against the political as well as intellectual mainstream.

[295] See Woodward: 7.
[296] See ibid., 7f.
[297] See Brock, Peter: "Deadline Yugoslavia: The Partisan Press", in *Foreign Policy*, No. 93 (1993/1994), 152-172.

4.6. Question of identities

Labelling the conflict on the Balkans one between "Serbs", "Croats" and "Muslims or Bosniaks" and referring to "the Milošević regime", "the Muslim-led government" and "the politics of Tudjman" inevitably leads to oversimplifications. This thinking in terms of "Serbs", "Croats" and "Muslims" leads to a rhetoric of easily identifiable, monolithic national communities that did in no way correspond to the complexity of the question of national, ethnic, cultural and societal identities on the Balkans.[298]

As Sarah Kent observes, if there was ever a Yugoslav national identity, resulting from the imposition of the communist 'brotherhood and unity', it was progressively damaged by the economic demise in the 1980s, by hyper-inflation and the dramatic fall in the general standard of living. Kent writes that competition for shrinking resources created new demands and interests which in turn intensified disagreements among the constituent republics of Yugoslavia. As each of the republics had a dominant nationality, the exception being Bosnia-Herzegovina (Bosniaks or Bosnian Muslim were the largest but not the dominant group since Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats together outnumbered them), regional grievances easily escalated into nationalistic grievances. A prominent articulation of such grievances is the (already mentioned) memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts in 1986. But as Kent notes, the Serb leadership did not operate in a political vacuum, nor were Serbs alone in being adversely affected by the worsening economic situation. Also, the Slovenes, especially when Janez Drnovšek headed the Yugoslav presidency, increasingly resented that their taxes being given away to support the economically weaker republics of Yugoslavia.[299]

The transition from communism to capitalism led to the fragmentation of a once rather unified political elite and this in turn affected Yugoslavia's identity. The idea of a federation of different ethnicities lost much of its appeal in the post-communist world, being gradually replaced by the idea of nationalistic identities.[300] To Iordanova, the only remaining choice of those who did not want to cave in to the nationalists' hysteria was to side against their own ethnic group, as only such an act would expose the irrationality of the nationalist discourse.[301] Kusturica's refusal to embrace a narrow-minded identity by leaving Sarajevo and emigrating and later working in Serbia probably intended to make the same point. Problematic, however,

[298] See Kent: 1092.
[299] See ibid., 1086.
[300] See ibid., 1086f.
[301] See Iordanova (2001): 139.

was the fact that he had relied on support from a group which was no less sectarian than the one he wanted to snub.[302] The mutually exclusive ethnic identities as they emerged out of Yugoslavia's demise meant: deprivation of individual freedom of choice.[303] Kusturica as an 'insider-outsider' came to realise that the hard way. Everyone who challenged the official view would be seen as supporting the other side and thus being a traitor.[304] This was exactly what happened to Kusturica. The fact that his origins are in multi-ethnic Sarajevo make his case even more particular.

For the inhabitants of Sarajevo who had known before the war a unique 'Yugoslav identity', based on a lively multi-ethnicity, the siege of the Bosnian Serbs provoked a crisis of their own identity. On the one hand, there were the extreme Serb nationalists who tried to impose an exclusive identity that led to conflict and not co-existence. On the other hand, there was the extremist Bosnian Muslim government propagating a Muslim identity. However, when the Bosnian Serb troops surrounded Sarajevo, many Serbs continued to live in the city under the siege of their own 'ethnic group'; a somehow absurd situation.[305]

In the course of Yugoslavia's disintegration, people had to switch to a restrictive concept of belonging and to confine themselves to a clear ethnic identity. Although many were unwillingly to undergo this imposed re-identification, it was crucial to take sides and for many literally became a matter of life and death.[306] As Susan Woodward states, those who proposed to analyze the conflict in Bosnia first instead of immediately taking side were accused of assigning moral equivalence between victims and aggressors.[307] German writer Peter Handke found himself exactly in this problematic context when trying in 1995 to challenge the dominant perception in the Western world that Serbia was the only aggressor of the wars in the Balkans. His writings caused a sensation in Germany and lead to heated exchanges.

One main problem was that almost everyone writing on the Balkan wars was lacking a certain critical distance. Roy Gutman, for example, who won the Pulitzer prize for his reporting on the concentration camps in Bosnia, and with him British journalist Ed Vulliamy publicly

[302] See ibid., 140.
[303] See ibid., 137.
[304] See Hayden: 180.
[305] See Kent: 1098f.
[306] See Iordanova (2001): 136.
[307] See Woodward: 3f.

stated that not taking side meant complicity in the crime.[308] One of the few who criticised that approach was Michael Ignatieff. He suggested that Western European intellectuals committed themselves so totally to the Bosnian cause because of an element of European narcissism: Sarajevo as an ideal-type mini-Europe. Ignatieff wrote that it was not so much a question to save the Bosnians as part of Europe but to show that Europe 'meant' something, stood for toleration within a peaceable and truly civilized civil society. So it was more a question to save an image of oneself as defender of European decency. Within this context, the image of a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional, multi-cultural Bosnia corresponded, of course, to the way Europe wanted to see herself.[309]

4.7. Imagining the Balkans

When the wars in Yugoslavia broke out, there were few academics and scholars specialized on the Balkans in general and Yugoslavia in particular.[310] This lack of expert knowledge became evident when 'Orientalism' in the sense of Edward Said, meaning Balkan clichés and stereotypes, came to the fore. The image of a geographical region that was described as a land of violence and mystery and inscrutable politics literally became *the* image of the Balkans.[311] This image had been promoted by famous Western European writers such as Agatha Christie, Lawrence Durrell or George Bernard Shaw who produced fictional literature set in the Balkans and featuring Balkan protagonists.[312] Vesna Goldworthy goes so far in her study *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination* as to state that Western nations (mainly Britain) exploited through an "imperialism of the imagination" the cultural resources of the Balkans to supply their literary and entertainment industries and by doing so they pursued an imaginative, textual colonialisation.[313]

The Balkan images as produced in literature were somehow reinforced by geographical facts: rugged, wild, spectacular landscapes encouraged the creation of a mysterious, complex and

[308] See Vulliamy, Ed: "Death That Cheated Justice", in *The Guardian*, August 4, 1998, 9. See also Iordanova (2001): 149.
[309] See Ignatieff, Michael: "The Seductiveness of Moral Disgust", in *Social Research,* Vol. 62, No. 1 (Spring 1995), 80f.
[310] See Banac:173-183.
[311] See Fleming, K. E.: "Orientalism, the Balkans, and Balkan Historiography", in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 105, No. 4 (October 2000), 1218f.
[312] See ibid., 1218-1221.
[313] See Goldsworthy, Vesna: *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, 2; 211.

cryptic image of that region, an image of the Balkans as Europe's "outsider within"[314]. The Balkans were perceived in terms of Catholic Habsburg domination on the one and the Muslim Ottoman domination on the other side, as a region that was simultaneously proximate and distant to Western Europe. It is in this context that the Balkans came to be perceived as a bridge between West and East, the bridge as a metaphor for the region being popularised in Ivo Andric's world famous novel *The Bridge on the Drina.*[315]

The Ottoman conquest of large parts of the Balkans involved policies of re-population, a gradual (largely non-enforced) conversion over the course of generations to Islam, and military campaigns that shaped the Balkans and its people in such a way that their political and historical development was different from Western and Central Europe. Then there was the Habsburg Empire with its (relatively) disciplined administration, differing markedly from the 'laissez-faire' of the Ottomans. In sum, external powers influenced the Balkans such that the whole area remained in a somehow ambiguous relationship with the rest of Europe.[316]

As Maria Todorova observes, the Balkans as a distinct geographic, social, and cultural entity were 'discovered' as late as in the 18th century by European travellers.[317] Their reports and literary fiction reinforced the perception of the Balkans as wild, exciting, backward, underdeveloped, and filled with mystery and danger.[318] Todorova, inspired by but also differing from Edward Said's brilliant study *Orientalism*, outlines in *Imagining the Balkans* that the Balkans have served as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the 'European' and the 'West' has been constructed. By being geographically inextricably linked to as well as being apart from Europe, the Balkans are perceived culturally as "the other"[319] within Europe.[320] In this context, the very word 'Balkan' and its verb 'Balkanize' (meaning to divide or fragment) were negatively charged, alluding to a primitive mentality of the Balkan people.[321] Edward Said argues that 'Orient' is less an actual place than a frame of mind and thus it is not a territory but a mode of

[314] Fleming: 1220; see further Todorova, Maria: *Imagining the Balkans*, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997: 188f.
[315] See Todorova, 15f. See further Andrić, Ivo: *The Bridge on the Drina*, translated from the Serbo-Croat by Lovett F. Edwards, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977 [1st edition 1945].
[316] See Fleming: 1222f.
[317] See Todorova: 62.
[318] See Fleming: 1224ff.
[319] Todorova: 188.
[320] See Ibid., 184-189.
[321] See Fleming 1224; 1219; See further Todorova: 32-37.

thought that appears as a system of representations by the West. The discourse of *Balkanism* too can be defined as a system of Western representations.[322]

The negative perception of the Balkans as Europe's 'other' and the neglect of academic interest in the region is topped by the fact that the Balkans only received real attention during moments of crisis. This in turn tended to reinforce the perception of the Balkans as a dangerous and notoriously unstable region.[323] An example of this negative perception and lack of knowledge and understanding is the comment of John Gunther, written on the eve of World War II, reflecting on the significance of the Balkans concerning the outbreak of World War I:

> It is an unhappy affront to human and political nature that these wretched and unhappy little countries in the Balkan peninsula can, and do, have quarrels that cause world wars. Some hundred and fifty thousand young Americans died because of an event in 1914 in a mud-caked primitive village, Sarajevo.[324]

4.8. 'Balkan Ghosts', 'Balkanism' and 'Otherness'

Almost five decades later, the general perception of the region does not seem to have changed much. Events in the 1990s mostly led to new versions of the old patterns of perceiving the region and talking about it. Interesting in this context is the reprint (appearing at the beginning of the 1990s) of the 1913 Carnegie Endowment inquiry into the causes and conduct of the Balkan wars. George Kennan, U.S. ambassador to Yugoslavia from 1961 to 1963, wrote the introduction to the reprint, saying that "aggressive nationalism"[325] and not religion had always fuelled conflicts in the Balkans and that Ottoman rule had left the Balkans with non-European civilizational characteristics. This perception of the Balkan's 'apartness from the European civilization' is seen by Ivo Banac as probably the chief reason for Western indifference to the area and as the basis for Europe's politics of non-involvement.[326]

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[322] See Said, Edward: *Orientalism*, London: Penguin Books, 1995 [1st edition 1978], 202f.
[323] See Fleming: 1224-1228.
[324] Gunther quoted in Fleming: 1229.
[325] Kennan quoted in Todorova: 5.
[326] See Banac: 181.

Todorova agrees with Banac's interpretation but differentiates it.[327] Todorova insists on the relevance of explaining the Yugoslav crisis with rational 'Western' criteria instead of explaining it in terms of 'Balkan ghosts'.[328] These 'Balkan ghosts', the historically rooted perception of the Balkans and the old rhetoric of the region's "primitive tribal peoples"[329], led to the assumption that the 'underdeveloped' and 'uncivilized' Balkans were different from 'developed' and 'civilized' Europe, and this may have played a role when the 'West' chose a policy of non-involvement at the beginning of the Yugoslav wars.[330] Susanne Woodward in her broad study *Balkan Tragedy* arrives at the same point as Banac and Todorova in stating that outsiders always insisted that the Yugoslavs were not like them, that such atrocities as committed in the Balkans characterized the region and its penchant for war and Balkanization, that the conflict was irrelevant to the security of Western powers and therefore justified inaction.[331]

The irony is that Kusturica in *Underground* portrays this 'underdeveloped' and 'uncivilized' notion of the Balkans and creates a visual image of what had started to be condemned by academic scholars such as Todorova. As Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, Kusturica shows the predominant cliché about the Balkans and herewith supports 'Balkanism', functioning in a similar way as Edward Said's concept of 'Orientalism': the perception of the Balkans as the timeless space onto which the West projects its phantasmatic content. For Žižek, *Underground* is the ultimate ideological product of Western liberal multiculturalism, thus Kusturica's film shows the Western liberal exactly what he wants to see in the Balkan wars: "the spectacle of a timeless incomprehensible mythical cycle of passions, in contrast to decadent and anaemic Western life."[332] In the end, it is probably this very spectacle, accentuated in *Underground* with a firework-like cascade of burlesque scenes, which the West sees in the Balkans. And this explains to a certain extent why the film was so successful in Cannes.

Although *Underground* contains elements of 'Balkanism' because of Kusturica's use of Balkan stereotypes and clichés, the film is more complex - complex because it deals with the question of the causes of the Yugoslav wars. The idea of the Balkans as a timeless

[327] See Todorova: 185.
[328] See Ibid., 185f.
[329] Kent: 1090.
[330] See Ibid., 1091.
[331] See Woodward: 19f.
[332] See Žižek, Slavoj: "Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism", in *New Left Review*, 34.

incomprehensible mythical cycle of passions, wars and hatred led to the assumption that no foreign intervention could bring peace into these region as it is part of its peoples' character to be at war among themselves. Then there is the other assumption that the causes of the wars are not only domestic ones but had to do with external factors.[333]

Kusturica covers both aspects. He works with Balkan clichés, showing the Balkans as a dark space inhabited by people fighting, drinking, living excessively, betraying each other, going to war after Tito's death. As war appears as a natural phenomenon, nobody seems to be able to locate the roots of the conflict.[334] That, however, is not the case with the second aspect: While Kusturica plays with clichés condemned by Todorova and Žižek as 'Balkanism', he on the other hand bases his narrative on the second aspect by locating the roots of the Yugoslav wars in external factors that twice brought tragedy over Yugoslavia. First, the German invasion of 1941 that resulted in the collapse of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, secondly, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 which, although perceived as such so very positive, in the final analysis encouraged developments leading to the break-up of Yugoslavia.

Contrary to Finkielkraut's critique, *Underground* is not a pro-Serbian film but a homage to a united Yugoslavia. While French intellectuals and the EC/EU were supporting Yugoslavia's dissolution by recognizing her former republics as independent states and pointing at Serbia as the responsible for Yugoslavia's break-up, Kusturica's film closes with a 'happy ending', with a wedding party. Kusturica herewith seems to suggest that peaceful, friendly coexistence among South Slavs would indeed have been possible and that the very idea of a united Yugoslavia was a good thing. Again a point that went against the European political and intellectual mainstream back in the time of the Cannes Film Festival 1995.

[333] See Liebich, André: "Les conflits dans les Balkans: deux sources, aucune solution", in *Relations internationales*, no. 104, (Winter 2000), 507-518.
[334] See Kusturica: "Propos de Emir Kusturica", in *Cahier du cinéma*, no. 492, June 1995, 69.

5. Conclusion

The controversy over Emir Kusturica's film *Underground* occurred during the war in Bosnia, and it is in this context that it can be understood. For the reports about the atrocities committed by the Bosnian Serbs and about the plight of besieged Sarajevo confirmed the Western mainstream opinion that Serbia was the aggressor not only in the Bosnian but in all Yugoslav wars. That opinion in turn was influenced by a certain perception of the Balkans and a specific image of Serbia: the perception of the Balkans as a backward region of eternal conflict and inherent instability, and the image of Serbia as the notoriously aggressive troublemaker aiming at a 'Great Serbia' and thus as the main responsible for the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Kusturica and his film do not fit into this picture which partly explains the critiques of *Underground* as being pro-Serbian or, worse, "Serbian war propaganda" (Finkielkraut).

As our study has shown, there is no basis for that accusation: *Underground* is a complex treatment of Yugoslav history from 1941 to 1993, tragic-comical and surrealistic, playing with Balkan stereotypes and superimposing revealing historical film material - in the end, the film amounts to an homage to the very idea of Yugoslavia as a federation of South Slaves. As our study has also shown, by focussing almost entirely on Serbia's role and guilt the controversy over *Underground* excluded a great many other factors and players that contributed to Yugoslavia's demise such as the loss of the strategic significance of a 'non-aligned' after the end of the Cold War, the premature recognition of Slovenia's and Croatia's independence by Germany and other EC/EU member states, the brutal suppression of ethnic orientations and traditions under communism, the negative consequences of the 'socialist' economy, the disclosure of reports on war crimes committed by Ustashas and communist partisans during World War II. In the final analysis, one always comes back to the problem of perception and with that to the problem of oversimplification of the causes of the Yugoslav wars - oversimplification that led to a collective demonization of a people and a country and with that to the reduction of a creative, courageous film-maker to a simplistic nationalist.

The controversy over Kusturica's *Underground*, occurring within a general political debate about the Yugoslav wars, about interventions and guilt, was shaped by an image of Serbia that led to judgements and interpretations which, all in all, were far from being nuanced. It might be time to re-debate Serbia, critically and with real intellectual openness.

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