

**SCREENING MACEDONIAN IN-BETWEENNESS:
TEONA STRUGAR MITEVSKA AND
ANETA LESHNIKOVSKA**

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Abstract

There is a long tradition of constructing a discourse on the Balkans that implies an essentialized image of the region as a place of perpetual turmoil and patriarchal relations. This study focuses on the cinematic representations of Macedonia, being part of the Balkans, and discusses the alternative narrative strategies used in Balkan cinema that may undermine the dichotomy West/the Balkans and the possibility of the gazed (the Balkan people) to cast back the gaze. The thesis contains an analysis of two films by female authors: *I am from Titov Veles* by Teona Strugar Mitevska and *Does It Hurt? – the First Balkan Dogma* by Aneta Leshnikovska. The analysis deals with their representation of Macedonian in-betweenness within the concept of Balkan cinema. More specifically, it discusses *écriture féminine* and Dogme 95 as film styles that in different ways shift or undermine a generalized image of the Balkans. Furthermore, the analysis is also focused on the gender representations and the construction of female subjectivities on screen. Finally, the concept of transnational exilic cinema is also employed in order to take into account the different perspective that these two female directors have in their representations of the Balkans.

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Introduction

“[A] Macedonian village is an ironic native idealization. Neda, a perfect woman, has a cross tattooed on her forehead, speaks fluent English, and utters short slogans on killing in the name of liberty: she typifies the status of the colonized. A known character from a highly stylized comic, Corto Maltese, the ultimate wandering adventurer/colonizer, appears among the Turkish soldiers” (Slapsak 2002).

This scene from Milcho Manchevski *Dust* (2001) shows how the director takes certain stereotypes from Balkan and Western official history, as well as a character from Western pop-culture, and subverts the historical narrative. With his filmmaking, Manchevski presents an image of the Balkans that is not a simple version of a violent war-torn place, but where the roles of the colonizer and the colonized are interchanged.

In relation to the subversion of a generalized presumption of a region, I consider two films directed by Macedonian-born film directors: *I am from Titov Veles [Jas sum od Titov Veles]* (2007) by Teona Strugar Mitevska and *Does It Hurt? – The First Balkan Dogma [Boli li?- Prvata Balkanska dogma]* (2007) by Aneta Leshnikovska. Thus, in this thesis, I look at how these female authors use the Balkans/West divide and provide a possible representation of the Balkans that does not depict the region and its peoples as the subordinate pair in the binary. I argue that Mitevska and Leshnikovska use certain narrative strategies, such as film style, to construct an image of the Balkans that cannot be interpreted simply as a negative or exoticizing interpretation of the region. Furthermore, the positioning of the gender roles in the two films is a central aspect in presenting a multi-layered illustration of Macedonian (Balkan) society. Finally, I argue that the transnational character of the works also adds to the perspective of the authors and their depiction of a region.

The concept of Balkanism is closely connected to the West/Balkans binary. The term was first coined by Maria Todorova, who was influenced by Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, however, it was constructed independently from it, since, the Balkan region perceived itself as within Europe and opposed to the 'Oriental others' in relation to race, religion and history (Todorova 1994, 455). Balkanist scholars have a different approach than Orientalists in the way that they do not discuss what the Balkans are, but how they are constructed by representation (Bjelic 2002, 4).

As Todorova (1994) notes, the Balkans as a construction is an ongoing process for almost two centuries now, initiated by Western media representations, but also international politics and scholarship. The reason for this, is that by pointing to the Balkans as a violent place of constant ethnic wars, or a traditional patriarchal society, the West is establishing a self-praising and self-idealized image in relation to the 'Other' (Todorova, 1994).

Bjelic (2002) explains that Balkan intellectuals began a more engaging work in constructing the discourse around the Balkans in the early nineties (4). He notes that the concept of Balkanism can have various usages, but he broadly distinguishes two categories. The first meaning entails the body of work done on the Balkans without questioning how this information is produced. The second approach to Balkanism refers to "the critical study of this very discourse", and, as Bjelic states, this is primarily seen in Todorova's work (5). In my thesis, I will also use the latter connotation of the term in order to examine how the two authors, Mitevaska and Leshnikovska, pose their representations of the Balkans. I also want to argue that these accounts of the region's position and mentality do not contribute to the "frozen image of the Balkans" (Todorova, 460), but on the contrary, they deconstruct the West/Balkans binary.

In my writing, I use the category of ‘Europe’ referring to the western part of Europe, but more often I use ‘the West’ to refer to what is commonly known as North America and Western Europe. I use the term ‘the Balkans’ to refer not only to a geographical context, but also to a cultural space that has been essentialized in its presentation by assigning pejorative stereotypes such as violence and barbarism, or patriarchal relations. I use the binary oppositions the West/Balkans as a method to discuss how these concepts are constructed by representation. This does not mean that I dismiss the argument that the Balkans are seen as an interstice of the East and the West, but to show that in relation to Europe, and its conception as the ‘Other within’, the region is positioned as a subordinate part of that pair. Furthermore, I also follow what Bjelic assigned to some Balkanist authors in their attempt to critically examine the essentialized view of the Balkans by the “need to homogenize the West in order to de-homogenize the Balkans” (2002, 18).

More specifically, the first chapter deals with the theoretical framework of this thesis and explains several concepts that will be used for the analysis. I use Iordanova’s (2001) concept of Balkan cinema in order to discuss the two films that deal specifically with Macedonia but their authors, particularly Leshnikovska, make many references to the Balkans. I also criticize Iordanova’s theory that most of the Balkan directors only contribute to the construction of the Balkans as a backward society. Then, I talk about Macedonian films within the Balkan cinema and provide examples of films that represent a more complex image of the violence in the region. Further, I discuss the gender representations in Balkan films and the general absence of more ‘realistic’ female characters, with few exceptions that mostly come from female directors. I also employ Hamid Naficy’s concept of transnational exilic cinema in order to place the two films in another context, while having in mind their multinational

production as well as Leshnikovska's and Mitevaska's migrant status. Finally, I introduce the two specific narrative styles these two authors use, *écriture féminine* and Dogme 95. I argue that the way they are issued by the filmmakers contribute to the undermining of Western hegemony.

In the following two chapters I analyze the films separately by employing the above mentioned concepts and theory. In Chapter 2, I deal with Teona Strugar Mitevaska's film, *I am from Titov Veles* released in 2007. I mainly use *écriture féminine* to analyze how the feminine writing (on screen) provides space for the female characters and thus, undermine the essentialized image of a Balkan patriarchal society. I also take Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject to explain the audience's possible identification with the main female character.

In the third Chapter, I look at Aneta Leshnikovska's *Does It Hurt? – The First Balkan Dogma*, also released in 2007. I focus on the Dogme style and how it provides the author with the possibility to criticize the state system. Furthermore, I argue that Leshnikovska's use of irony and particular gender representations undermine the West/Balkans dichotomy and subvert the gaze of the Westerner.

In the final Chapter, I bring the two film texts together in order to see the possibilities for 'melting' the "frozen image of the Balkans" by emphasizing on the gender perspective. I also draw some parallels between films made in the tradition of the Yugoslav Black Wave and these two Macedonian films. Finally, I pose some questions regarding the 'nationality' of films and the future of Balkan filmmaking.

The reason for choosing *I am from Titov Veles* and *Does It Hurt?* for an in-depth analysis is threefold. First, both films are made in recent years in Macedonia, so this might indicate a change in the way artists tend to present the Balkans in their works. Secondly, both films deal with the representation of Macedonian life while situated within Balkan cinema, and

this may present another side of Balkan in-betweenness. The third reason for selecting these two films is their authors' gender and the possibility that this might affect the perspective of representing the Balkans.

With my analysis of Balkan representations on the silver screen, I would like to contribute to the debates on the Balkanist discourse. I hope to do this by, to use Bjelic's words, an "improved understanding of the dynamics of [my] region of origin, [and] when considering the internal optics of globalization and fragmentation, to *gaze* back at those who *gaze* at [the Balkans] in order to reverse the panoptical process of the center" (2002, 19).

1 Situating Macedonian Cinema

In this chapter I draw on the concept of Balkan cinema as defined by Dina Iordanova and explain how films from Balkan directors have been considered to reiterate the essentialized presentation of the region as synonym for violence, wars and rupture. I also discuss Macedonian films that is, films that have their plot situated in this country. Then, I give a short review of the gender representations in Balkan cinema and the negative stereotyping that is usually attributed to this cinematography, with certain exceptions. Further, I also employ Hamid Naficy's concept of transnational exilic cinema, which I explain here, in order to situate the two films that are the subject of my analysis. Finally, I briefly give an overview of *écriture féminine* and Dogme 95, as film styles present in the films of Mitevaska and Leshnikovska respectively, and explain how I consider them as a point of subversion of the generalized image of the Balkans as a patriarchal society.

1.1 'Cinema of Flames?'¹

Can we really talk about Balkan cinema as one entity? If yes, then: Does this concept include films that have a story situated in the Balkans? Or, is it perhaps that the director who makes the film should be from the Balkans? Or, should it be produced by a country or countries situated on the Balkan peninsula? The answer to these questions is not simple. Some films in recent years labeled as Balkan have a plot that takes place both in the Balkans but also outside of it (Manchevski's *Before the Rain* and *Dust*). Further, many filmmakers were born in the Balkans but now live and work abroad (Manchevski, Kusturica). Moreover, the funding of most of the

¹ The title of the sub-chapter is taken from Dina Iordanova's book *Cinema of Flames*.

films made in Europe today comes from co-productions, and more specifically, films made in the Balkans are usually co-produced from national funds, as well as from different sources, most often West European (for example, Euroimages²). Different opinions on this topic can emerge, and this term might be problematic if one wants to contest generalized associations with the Balkans. On the other hand, many filmmakers from the region (Damjan Kozole from Slovenia, or Nuri Birge Ceylan from Turkey) talk about a “Balkan sensibility” in the films³ and thus, acknowledge a cultural link between the cinematography in the Balkans.

For the purposes of this study, I mainly employ the concept of ‘Balkan cinema’ following Dina Iordanova’s (2001) definition. She defines this region as a “cultural entity” more than a geographical concept, and thus, sees the Balkans, and its cinema, as a place that is not limited to the former Yugoslav states, but it also includes Albania, Romania, Greece, and Turkey (6). Thus, to answer the posed questions above, I think we can talk about Balkan cinema in terms of a “cultural sensibility” so that this also includes films that have a plot primarily set in the Balkans, while their directors may not necessarily be from the region, or may not live there any longer.

However, I find certain inconsistencies in Iordanova’s study of Balkan cinema. She uses the umbrella term ‘Balkan cinema’, but mainly focuses on ex-Yugoslav films, particularly those made in relation to the 1990s crisis. Her main argument is that cinematic texts have played a crucial role in the marginalization of the Balkans by representing it as generally associated with wars (2001, 6). The topics of those films at the time are very understandable since there was a war in several Yugoslav countries, and those films were made during or after it. Thus, her analysis of predominantly ex-Yugoslav films may not be a complete justification of the

² Euroimages is the Council of Europe fund, established to co-produce European films.

³ A symposium was held posing the question: “Is there Balkan cinema?” and various filmmakers and journalists were asked for their opinion.

encompassing concept of Balkan cinema. Iordanova mentions several other films from the region (the Greek film *Ulysses' Gaze*) and finds many common features that establish a particular cinema that she calls Balkan. Thus, for the purposes of my analysis, I will also use the concept of Balkan cinema as a common denominator for the films coming from countries that, although may not be having the same foreign policy or current political situation, share “a common socio-cultural legacy and modern-day trends” (Iordanova, 2001, 7). According to Iordanova, this includes the countries that had some or all of the following: being a part of the Ottoman empire, having a communist past or dealing with ethnic diversity.

If we see Balkan cinema as an entity, I argue that this does not necessarily involve films with war or post-war topics only, as might be inferred from Iordanova's study. By analyzing *I am from Titov Veles* by Teona Strugar Mitevska and *Does It Hurt?* by Aneta Leshnikovska, which are set in Macedonia, as part of the Balkans I argue that Balkan cinema can have various representations that do not depict only a location of violent ethnic wars, but also a place where there is a peaceful life.

1.2 *'Imagining the Balkans'*⁴

As Todorova (1994) explains, the positing of the region as the 'other of Europe' began with its conceptions by the Westerners. These constructions developed from early 19th century mainly through travel literature and foreign policy when people from the West traveled to the Balkans and wrote of their impressions. They presented the people and the place as primitive and always involved in an ethnic conflict or war. According to some theorists, these ways of looking at the

⁴ The title of the sub-chapter is taken from Maria Todorova's book *Imagining the Balkans*.

Balkans did not change so much in the past two centuries. I agree to a certain extent with Iordanova (2001) that international media continue to present the Balkans with predominantly ‘Third World’ images rather than urban sites and people. Here, she mainly refers to the Bosnian war and the 1990s crisis. However, I argue that when discussing Balkan cinema today, several things should be taken into consideration. First, around 15 years have passed since the war in ex-Yugoslavia ended. Also, not all countries were involved in the war directly, such as Macedonia, and not to mention countries that were not a part of the Yugoslav federation. Consequently, not all Balkan films in the last two decades deal only with the above issues. My aim is to support this argument by examining how Macedonia is represented in *I am from Titov Veles* and *Does It Hurt?*. Particularly the latter film focuses on Skopje urban life and presents a country capital that deals with the highs and lows of young people and their everyday existence.

Concerning the conceptualizations of the Balkans in the moving images, theorists like Iordanova (2001) and Todorova (1994) locate various stereotypes that are constructed by artists and intellectuals coming from the region, as well as from outside. These representations tend to construct binary oppositions between the Balkans and Europe and thus positing such dichotomies as West/East, culture/coarseness, peace/war. Furthermore, the Balkan is usually depicted as a place of perpetual turmoil and ethnic tensions that create a ‘powder keg’ of the region threatening to burst at any moment (Todorova 1994, Iordanova 2001).

In relation to cinematic representations from artists from the region, as Iordanova (1996) notes, there is a “collective endeavor of explaining the inexplicable” by Balkan directors. These directors believe that they have the privilege of presenting a “truer” image of the region because they live there. However, Iordanova also states that these representations cannot be objective since they are influenced by certain ideology of their country (883). Moreover, Iordanova

analyzes several films made by directors from the region, such as Emir Kusturica and Milcho Manchevski, and concludes that they only reassert the stereotypes that construct the Balkans as the ‘other’ to Europe, “as exotic and attractive but impossible to deal with” (1996, 887).

Common typical features of Balkan films, Iordanova (2001) states, are their narrative strategies. The films usually involve a trip or a visit of a Westerner to these ‘exotic’ countries. Although the Balkan peoples may be represented as careless, exciting and good-spirited on the one hand, or violent and blood-driven on the other, they usually show a subordinate face to the Westerners. Fundamentally, the West/Balkan dichotomies are reiterated and the region and its peoples remain “objects of the Western traveler’s gaze” while the “Balkan film remains uncritical and fails to recognize the controversial effects of the Eurocentric construct” (56). At the end, the outcome of these representations is just an emphasis on the different power relations between the Balkan and the West. According to Iordanova, Balkan intellectuals and filmmakers in their attempt to construct themselves as closer to Europe, actually move step further away in their way of self-critiquing which proves to be counter-productive (64).

In the analysis of the two films, I start from some of the stereotypes that are common for the West/Balkans divide, and I will analyze how the films in question confirm or subvert them. However, this issue is not so simple for drawing conclusions since there are more sub-questions here. For example, should one look at the author’s intent of representing Macedonia (Balkan), or examine the audience’s understanding of the film’s message, which can differ. Further, there is an issue of which audience should be taken into consideration – audience from the Balkans, or Western audience, or perhaps international, in general? Mainly, I do a close reading of the film texts concerning the Balkanism concept, but I also address the authors’ intention in relation to how purposefully they define the Balkans in relation to the West.

Iordanova gives an example that can be compared to the Balkan situation, which is Third Cinema⁵. This cinematography, however, uses a different approach, which is subversion and resistance to Western rules of filmmaking. For Balkan cinema, on the other hand, in Iordanova's opinion, this is not the case, and this will continue to be so. She states that:

It is most likely, instead, that the Balkan intellectual discourse will continue moving within the established framework of concessionary self-denigration and lack of self-confidence... Although they may begin to criticize some attitudes, this will only scratch the surface, and they will most likely fail to question radically the symbolic meanings of traditional narrative structures and representations (68).

In my opinion, the production of some new films in Macedonia/the Balkans within the past several years may prove Iordanova's point wrong. I argue that these films employ certain thematic and stylistic features that can be read as a critique of traditional representations in the Balkans. Firstly, by focusing on female protagonists, the films present a different image of the region, which is otherwise thought of as patriarchal. Particularly *I am from Titov Veles*'s construction of predominantly female world gives another edge to the 'expected' gender relations in the Balkans. On the other hand, the use of irony in presenting precisely those stereotypes Iordanova and others discuss proves the critical attitude Iordanova calls for from Balkan filmmakers.

1.3 Macedonian in-betweenness and its cinematic representations

As Iordanova explains, since Macedonia's independence, the media, including foreign-related documentaries, assumed that the 'real' powder keg of the Balkans is situated precisely in Macedonia and that it might spill over at any moment and bring violence and war in the country

⁵ Third Cinema refers to films made in South America.

(2001, 76). She focuses on the most internationally successful Macedonian film *Before the Rain*⁶, and, although she does not see the film as a clear-cut situation, thinks that from Western side the film was regarded as the “truth” about the Balkans (Iordanova 1996, 201). In this case, I will agree with Iordanova that the film can present Macedonian, and the Balkans for that matter, as backward, violent place where people only negotiate with guns. However, I also think that the situation is more complex and that not all foreign critics saw the film as solely representation as Macedonian/Balkan violence.

Certain Western critics did not consider the film as simply a reiteration of typical representation of the region. Katarzyna Marciniak (2003) also wrote about *Before the Rain*, and her interest was to investigate (film) texts that can provide a different take on the Balkan issues by undermining the stereotypes. Primarily, she deals with the ethnic representations usually understood as polarities between the Macedonian and Albanian population living in Macedonia, which is one of those commonly used preconceptions of the Balkans. She says that on one level, the film can be seen as “another example of the readiness to cast a gaze at oneself as an exotic object” (Iordanova 2001, 157). However, Marciniak argues that the film can be interpreted beyond the conventional understanding of the ethnic violence in the region. Namely, this can be demonstrated by an analysis of the formal structure of the film – a non-linear narration that “performatively critique[s] the stereotypical violence in the Balkans as a permanent historical construct in the region” (2003: 67). Although my focus is not on ethnic issues, I agree with Marciniak that film representations of violence, ethnic conflicts or gender relations in the Balkans can be understood as something that is also happening in a broader context, and is not only characteristic for this particular region.

⁶ The film received a nomination for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. It also won several awards at the Venice Film Festival including the Golden Lion, and many international awards (from Manchevski’s official site).

In her review of Manchevski's two films, *Before the Rain* and *Dust*, Vojislava Filipcevic (2004/2005) places them within Balkan cinema and discusses how the "East-West leitmotif" is presented by employing unconventional narratives and subverting history. However, she emphasizes that a main feature in Balkan films in the 1960s and 1970s was the in-betweenness of the region. After the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Balkan artists turned more towards individual national identities and were "marred by essentialist visions" (6). In the films of Milcho Manchevski, Filipcevic finds novel ways of setting up "the project of re-envisioning the Balkans" (8) still staying within Balkan representations but showing "a different sort of in-betweenness (that of exile) and through critical visions of historical narratives... drift away from and resume the course of Balkan cinema" (8).

Marciniak's and Filipcevic's analyses point out that perhaps Balkan cinema in the 1990s has been mainly preoccupied with essentializing representations of war and turmoil, but it is not a monolithic characteristic of this cinematography. Balkan, and in this case, Macedonian, directors with alternative filmic strategies "re-envision the Balkans" and show the shifting of categorizations.

1.4 *Gender (un)conventions*

Iordanova (2001) discusses how women are represented in Balkan cinema. Her argument is that Balkan films predominantly restate that the region and its people are different from Europe. However, her prime focus is gender violence in ex-Yugoslavia and its film representations, and she does not cover films from other countries in the Balkans that deal with gender issues. Nevertheless, she does mention the presence of female voices on screen and the possible

“feminization” of resistance to the nationalist discourse as opposed to the dominating preconceptions of “macho’ Balkans” (2001, 197). Consequently, she states:

I am more and more often inclined to think that it is women who represent the viable and vocal critical alternative in former Yugoslavia today. This is due, in my opinion, to the questionable credibility of the men who occupy the public sphere in the Yugoslav successor states, and is certainly associated with the widespread perception that machismo and nationalism go hand in hand in former Yugoslavia (210).

I agree with Iordanova regarding the female perspective in Balkan cinema, but I would add that this should not be always taken at face value, which would entail essentializing the presence of a female voice as the only voice of reason. As I will show in my reading of *I am from Titov Veles*, the depiction of women on screen is a more complex one, taking into consideration that the author is female.

Certain analyses made in the Balkan region concerning representations of the West/Balkan dichotomy through gender roles prove the complexity of the above-discussed point. Elissa Helms (2008), for example, is looking primarily at media discourses in Bosnia for identifying East and West stereotypes presented through gender patterns. Her conclusion is that these long-established divisions are still being reinforced in the country, although they may change. These representations that reiterate the binaries are not fixed but variable.

Svetlana Slapsak (2007) gives an analysis of the gender representations in Balkan films in recent years. She states that generally there is misogyny in Balkan cinema, and this has been the tradition for decades. She criticizes the films from the so-called Yugoslav Black Wave, which were concerned with commenting on the social regime of the late 1960s and 1970s. These films played with the film form and subverted genre conventions, as well as provided a critical thinking of the region, however, they failed to give credible female representations. Slapsak states that the Black Wave films and the Balkan films more generally, tend to present

female characters negatively. They usually involve “a prostitute that denounces/robs/deserts the main male character, made fragile by his social position and/or his political past. Other stereotypes include the crying mother in black and the paralyzed sister” (2007, 37). Slapsak, like Iordanova, also points out that it is primarily Balkan women directors, such as Greek director Olga Malea, who subvert gender conventions in their films, mainly through comic or ironic elements. She also acknowledges the works of several male directors from the region that can be said to defy gender stereotypes. Her main example is *Dust* (2001) written and directed by Milcho Manchevski. She proclaims the film “a feminist film dealing with Balkan history... [which] remains a promising example that highlights feminine characteristics in the Balkans” (39-40). Slapsak does not focus only on gender representations, but also on the narrative style of Manchevski’s film, and concludes that it unquestionably plays with Balkan myths, history and stereotypes in general.

1.5 Moving beyond borders

Iordanova is very critical and pessimistic at many occasions about the never-changing pattern of representing the Balkans as Europe “wannabees”, and how this strongly influences the way they represent themselves on screen. She also acknowledges, though, that with the fast-paced change of cinematic trends and conditions, Balkan cinema might also take a new direction. One of the factors that influence this “critical rethinking of the Balkan space” is migration and displacement (2001, 270). She says that Balkan people have a long tradition of migration and thus, encounter different peoples that come from outside of Europe. Iordanova states that by acknowledging other marginalized people, the Balkaners may find that the “reconfiguring [of]

the space of their own lives, and accepting new localities, will allow them to reject the embedded hierarchies according to which they are ‘insufficient European’” (2001, 262). This, she argues, will enable them to explore new paths and find a sense of their situation.

Transnational cinema is defined by Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (2006) as a result of the diminishing guiding principal in the global age and its reflection in the film world. They argue that it is becoming more difficult to speak of a national cinema today due to the international funds for its production and the different nationalities of the team that creates the film (1). It is important to note, as Ezra and Rowden state, that the practice of transnational cinema is different from ‘world cinema’ since it does not exoticize itself but has a global character. It also “transcends the national as autonomous cultural particularity while respecting it as a powerful symbolic force” (2). The scholars argue that even Third Cinema that used to be regarded as a clear opposition to mainstream Western cinema, cannot be so simply regarded nowadays due to the different countries that have a role in the making process of those films (2006, 4).

Hamid Naficy (2006) calls this type of cinema accented and establishes two general groups of filmmakers. The first one moved from their original countries in the late 1950s to the mid-1970s due to what he calls “Third World decolonialization”, while the second group appeared in the 1980s and 1990s “as a result of the failure of nationalism, socialism, and communism” (111). Furthermore, Naficy places these films into three loosely divided categories: exilic, diasporic and ethnic. In his words, exiles are “individuals or groups who voluntarily or involuntarily have left their country of origin and who maintain an ambivalent relationship with their previous and current places and cultures” (2006, 112). He says that by living in another surrounding where they are on the margins of society and experiencing a

liminal state of being, these filmmakers have the potential to produce very powerful works. The diasporic filmmaking is similar to the exilic and emerged out of displacement from the homeland. However, while exiles can be individualistic or collective, diasporas are always collective. “As a result, plurality, multiplicity, and hybridity are structured in dominance among the diasporans, while among the political exiles, binarism and duality rule” (114).

For the purposes of my analysis, I will use Naficy’s definition of accented exilic films as I find it more suitable for the films that are analyzed. Mitevaska’s and Leshnikovska’s work cannot be seen as part of a diasporic collective, but individualistic, which is a characteristic of the exilic filmmaking. Both directors come from a country that used be under socialist regime. They set their stories in Macedonia and deal with Macedonian people. However, if Leshnikovska’s film can clearly belong to the abovementioned category and I elaborate on this further, Mitevaska’s film is not so straightforward. As Naficy says, “[f]or external exiles the descent relations with the homeland and the consent relations with the host society are continually tested” (113). In this way, the character of Aneta in *Does It Hurt?* (who is similar with the director in many respects) is an expatriate who comes back to her home country in order to make a film about Skopje, Macedonia’s capital. There are constant references of Macedonia/Balkan and the West. However, as I will argue, the author’s noticeable use of irony tends to subvert the stereotypical depiction of Macedonia as opposite to the West, and this can be seen as a feature of transnational cinema.

As Naficy explains, although accented films cannot function as one film genre or movement, they have two very important common features that make them distinct from other cinema. Living in a country which is not their place of origin, but at the same time addressing issues that are of interest in their countries of origin, these filmmakers have “liminal subjectivity

and interstitial location in society and the film industry” (111). Both Teona Strugar Mitevska and Aneta Leshnikovska can be placed in this category of accented filmmakers. Teona Mitevska was born and raised in Macedonia and pursued her further education in New York, USA. Today, she lives in France but all her films so far have been filmed in her native country. Aneta Leshnikovska is also a Macedonian-born who was educated in Holland and has been living and working in Amsterdam for the past almost two decades. However, she filmed her first feature film in Macedonia. Thus, both authors have the transnational experience of presenting their stories as both being from Macedonia but also looking at it from the outside.

On the other hand, Mitevska’s work may not be explicitly put in the category of exilic cinema, but is certainly transnational. Firstly, her living in Western Europe provides her with the opportunity to look at things from another perspective than if living in Macedonia. Her story does not involve directly an émigré, although she touches upon the Aegean question⁷, thus bringing in the issue of borders – territorial and mental. For the purposes of this analysis, I think it is viable to consider both films as accented exilic filmmaking. Additional factor for their transnational character is the fact that both films are co-produced by funds from Macedonia, and several West European countries, but this is the case with many films made in (geographical) Europe today.

While discussing the accented cinema, Naficy, however, does not go into how the class and gender aspects affect the author’s work. Ella Shohat (2006), on the other hand, discusses what she calls “post-Third-Worldist” feminist film and video and focuses primarily on the category of gender in relation to Third World Cinema as transnational cinema and a counter-movement for mainstream (Western) films (40). She explains that with the use of this term she

⁷ The issue is concerning the Macedonian minority living in Greece that is not recognized by the Greek government.

wants to signify the importance of these works that go “‘beyond’ a specific ideology”, such as nationalism. She points out the significant difference between feminist works produced within a country that has the burden of a certain state ideology since it is sponsored by it, and on the other hand, works by feminists who live abroad and make films that transgress border ideologies (40-41). Shohat thus, emphasizes that “the postnationalist films call attention to the fault lines of gender, class, ethnicity, region, partition, migration, and exile” (48). Certainly, every film carries within itself a certain ideological underpinning, whether imposed by the author or the producers, but I agree with Shohat that the transnational character moves far beyond a nationalistic framework. What Shohat discusses can also be related to Balkan cinema and I employ it for my analysis. These films come from a region where many countries exist. It is also a region with a tradition of migration and divisions. Furthermore, as I argue more specifically in the fourth Chapter, the author’s gender plays a part in the way certain ideology is transferred through a particular film text.

Still, for this study, I maintain the concept of Balkan cinema as I explained above, with keeping in mind the transnationalism of production of the two films. To add to the discussion about the concept of Balkan cinema and my justification for using it, I will also say that both authors refer to themselves and their work within Balkan boundaries. Mitevaska sees herself and the film as part of the Balkan legacy: “The film prepares you for a new beginning, a renaissance that can start precisely here in the Balkans, a movement that will focus on our future rather than our past, as it has been so far” (from the official website of Mitevaska’s production). Leshnikovska’s film first, has a subtitle that directly categorizes it as Balkan: *The First Balkan Dogma*. It also makes constant references to Balkan and Western preconceptions.

1.6 *Film style as a means for subversion*

As I have argued above, I find the particular film style the two authors use for conveying their stories as a means for subverting certain generalizations of the Balkans in relation to the West. *Titov Veles* and *Does It Hurt?* differ in many aspects, but with the use of specific styles by the directors, I believe is one of the key elements to question “the symbolic meanings of traditional narrative structures and representations” (Iordanova 2001). I explain here briefly the film styles, and then apply an analysis on the films in the following chapters with an interpretation of how this might affect conventional Balkan filmmaking.

For *I am from Titov Veles* I will apply Hélène Cixous’s concept of *écriture féminine* and locate female subjectivity in the Macedonian cinematic space. The constant self-expression through the body of the main character, Afrodita, provides her with ‘voice’ for her thoughts and feelings. The employment of *écriture féminine* also enables defying patriarchy, and thus, I will argue, it defies reinforcement of Balkan patriarchal life through cinematic representations. Besides body movements, this style of (film) writing also uses female pleasure, non-linear narrative structure, as well as female and male libidinal economy, all of which will be explained in detail in the following chapter.

Does It Hurt? is very different from the poetic and flamboyant cinematic style of *I am from Titov Veles*. While Mitevska conveys her story in a dreamy surrealist mode, Leshnikovska’s intention is to use a documentary style of expression. Her film belongs to a particular style and it received a certificate from the Dogme 95 film movement. Therefore, it was also advertised as the first Balkan dogma film. This way of filmmaking was instigated by several Danish film directors who were influenced by the French New Wave and the realists. They wanted to create a new way of film expression that will defy big (Hollywood) studio

machines by using basic film equipment without additional lighting, props, or sound effects. The use of minimalism in cinematic tools enables the filmmakers to focus on the story and characterization, but also provides space of creatively inventing new ways of getting around the set rules by the Dogme 95. These rules and regulations are written in the “Vow of Chastity”, which is explained in the third Chapter.

In this chapter, I have set the theoretical framework of my study. I have introduced certain debates around the concept of Balkan cinema and have elaborated on my use of it for the purposes of this analysis. I have also explained my use of Macedonian cinematography in order to discuss the West/Balkans dichotomy and how representations in the two films undermine the hierarchical positioning of the pair. Furthermore, I also argued that these films present strong female characters and thus question the misogyny of Balkan films. The transnational character of the films is also important and taken into consideration for analyzing *I am from Titov Veles* and *Does It Hurt? – The First Balkan Dogma*. Finally, the narrative strategies Leshnikovska and Mitevaska employ are important for subverting the gaze of the Westerner.

2 Writing the Female Body: *I am from Titov Veles*

As I have already discussed in the previous chapter, Katarzyna Marciniak sees beyond the usual interpretation of the most internationally known Macedonian film *Before the Rain*. Critics generally tend to draw conclusions from the film as a depiction of Macedonia as a land of perpetual ethnic conflict and rule of the gun. Marciniak however, offers a reading of the film text primarily through its narrative structure of non-linearity, as well as the abject position of the main character. Similarly, I would like to go beyond the essentializing images of representing the Balkans as a masculinized violent society. By analyzing Teona Strugar Mitevska's film style, as well as of the position of the female characters in the abject zone, I argue that we could read *I am from Titov Veles* as a film that provides space for female subjectivity. I look at how textual operations (narrative, images, framing, film language) function in the positioning of women in the film, more specifically, of the female body. By exposing these issues and analyzing the female body in the space of abjection, I argue that the film can be read as a representation of Macedonia/the Balkans that does not rest on strict oppositions to the West, but is a more complex issue.

2.1 *Speaking through the body*

A non-phallogentric work is one that has different "discursive spaces" in Grosz's words (1993); and with its writing techniques undermines the phallogentric order of language. One possibility of defying the phallogentricity of society is *écriture feminine*, which provides space for (female)

subjectivity within language. This concept, put forward by Hélène Cixous, aims to offer liberation of repressed female voice through writing.

While discussing *écriture féminine*, and the possibility of female subjectivity, Cixous herself deploys this particular way of writing in her academic works⁸. The main characteristics of the style are numerous and they include symbolic codes, multiple meanings, non-linear structure, autobiographical elements, and pleasure. Furthermore, a crucial part of *écriture féminine* is writing through the body, it is where “writing, freed from law, unencumbered by moderation, exceeds phallic authority, and where the subjectivity inscribing its effects becomes feminine” (Cixous 1993, 66). Mitevska may not have purposely intended to use *écriture féminine*, but the numerous elements that constitute this style can be found throughout *Titov Veles*, particularly in Afrodita’s ‘speaking through the body’.

I am from Titov Veles is a story about three sisters living in Veles, a small town in present-day Macedonia. The story is narrated by Afrodita⁹, one of the sisters, who actually does not speak in film time, but only to the audience and in her dreams. The sisters live in an old family house and try to make ends meet. Afrodita is trying to keep up a good spirit amidst the grayness of the town and she fantasizes of having a child and tries to do so with Aco, who does not have a serious interest in her. Safo, Afrodita’s younger twin, works as a cleaner, and attempts to obtain a visa for Greece in order to leave Macedonia in the pursuit for a better future. She sleeps with various men and hopes that someone from them will help her to escape her misery. Slavica, the oldest, is a former heroin addict who is now on methadone and works in the town factory. The factory employs many of the local population but is also the main cause

⁸ Cixous’s idea of *écriture féminine* is discussed at length in her works: “Sortie”, “The Laugh of the Medusa” and “Coming to Writing”.

⁹ Not to be confused with misspelling, I spell the names of the characters in the way they are originally written in Macedonian.

for severe pollution and diseases. The story is mainly revealed through Afrodita's eyes, and words (off-screen), as she unravels the tale of the three sisters.

One of the aims of *écriture féminine* is to de-hierarchize the well-established binaries in Western thought and critique the masculinized binary system, which is the basis for all Enlightenment thinking. The oppositions such as activity/passivity, culture/nature, and man/woman are seen in a hierarchical order. Thus, woman is always less than man, she is the other of the two, her place marginal and her voice repressed. The deconstruction of such oppositions brings the possibility of revealing the phallogentric order and thus subverts it (Cixous, 1993).

To explain it more specifically, I will analyze one scene from the film. It is the scene in which Afrodita stays alone in the house after Safo finally obtains the visa and leaves for Greece, while Slavica marries the owner of the factory. After spending some time in isolation with almost nothing to eat, Afrodita hears the news that Aco will come to visit her. She cleans the house, boils some hotdogs, puts on Safo's red dress and waits for Aco. She sets the table for two, and after awhile, realizing that he is not coming, she climbs on the table and imagines she is pregnant. This scene can be read as a failed heteronormativity, meaning the expected relationship of a woman and a man, where woman is subordinate, is part of a phallogentric order.

Afrodita has short hair, and a very skinny, boyish body. She usually wears blue and green dresses, which can be interpreted as her will to live, and perhaps to be a mother, as she constantly imagines being pregnant and having a child (a creation of something new in life). In this particular scene, she is wearing her sister's red dress. This can be seen as her attempt to be part of a heteronormative life. By putting on the red dress, she takes on the role of her sister. She

is performing the ‘expected’ femininity in her surroundings – seductive but shy, available but modest and engaging in a ‘normal’ heterosexual relationship. However, this attempt to fit in the norm can perhaps be read differently. It might be that in her determination to have a child, Afrodita reaches out to Aco as someone who can provide her with her desire – the one of becoming a mother.

Another representation of failed heteronormativity in that scene is the sequence with the setting of the table. It is shot from above in a very symmetrical manner, almost having an ironic edge to it. We see only the table with two chairs opposite of each other. The tablecloth is set, with two plates, each having the same amount of food in it, and a vase with flowers in the middle. This perfect harmony is broken by the fact that only Afrodita is sitting at the table: the man in the binary fails to appear. The stereotypical couple scene, and thus, the ‘real’ enactment of conventional relationship between man and woman are undermined. The film is ‘written’ in the way that it actually “threaten[s] the stability of the masculine structure that passed itself off as eternal-natural, by conjuring up from femininity the reflections and hypothesis that are necessarily ruinous for the stronghold still in possession of authority” (Cixous 1993, 65). Since one of the stereotypes of the Balkans, as mentioned before, is the assumption of the fundamentally patriarchal order that does not change. Here, the author’s *écriture féminine* indeed points out to the phallogentricity, however, with the female space within the film, this order is undermined. This situation demonstrates the complexities of representing the Balkans, and proves the possibility of shifting binary positions.

2.2 *The power of the gift*

Another important part of *écriture féminine* is the concept of libidinal economy. Cixous distinguishes between two types of libidinal economies: masculine and feminine, the main difference being in the gift and return. When the masculine economy gives something, there is an expectation of receiving something in return. The feminine economy is constructed differently. The female giving does not entail a receiving, but the act itself gives pleasure, or *jouissance*. Arleen Dallery (1989) cites Kristeva's definition in *Desire in Language* for this type of pleasure: "*jouissance* is a giving, expending, dispensing of pleasure without concern about ends or closure; it is sexual, spiritual, physical and conceptual, at the same time" (Kristeva quoted in Dallery, 57). Precisely in the film as well, Afrodita performs a feminine libidinal economy. She gives care and love to her sisters, without expectations. She regularly brings methadone injections to Slavica as the only way for her sister to live more or less calmly. She also helps around the house and tries to stay positive in her everyday routine. In relation to Aco, she invests feelings and attention into the relationship, and only hopes of his kind demeanor. Moreover, her desire to become a mother plays an important part. The baby that she dreams of bringing to the world can suggest a positive view of the future to come. Accordingly, "the feminine gift is always like mother's milk: it is a good exchange, because the return is in the gift itself, in the pleasure of giving" (Žabić, 2001).

2.3 *Bodily expressions*

The practice of *écriture féminine* is particularly focused on the body. The female body, as Cixous says, together with her experiences and the opportunity to express oneself has been

taken away from the woman within the phallogentric world. However, the woman should use her bodily expression to create space and acquire her subjectivity. Throughout the film, Afrodita expresses herself through body movements. Although she cannot speak in film time, she uses her body to convey her thoughts and feelings. Though Afrodita uses her body constantly as a means of seeing and experiencing the world there are several scenes that present her explicit language through the body. For instance, at the beginning of the film, after she comes back home, she diligently removes all her clothes and lies on the dining table. Although there is no speech the viewer can see the depth of emotions communicated outward.

Some feminist film theorists (Mulvey, 1990) state that the masculine subject positions are constructed through the fetishistic look directed to the woman on screen, particularly on the female body. In this film, however, perhaps the situation is not so straightforward. Annette Kuhn discusses the problematic position of theorizing female pleasure in cinema if we take into account the relations of power (Kuhn, 1988). These relations produce female and male subjectivities differently. As Kuhn notes, one of the feminist strategies of resistance that can be applied in this film as well is a resistance to the powers of representation by seeking alternative forms of expression (Kuhn 1988). Such form can be the feminine writing of the body.

The unconscious is closely related to the way women write or express themselves (Cixous, 1993). In the film, the realm of dreams or unconscious is presented with several surrealistic scenes that are somewhere between Afrodita's dreams and fantasies. In this way, Afrodita is "a traveler in unexplored places; she does not refuse, she approaches, not to do away with the space between, but to see it, to experience what she is not, what she is, what she can be" (Cixous 1993, 86). This thought very well depicts Afrodita's voyage through the realm of her desire intermingled with the social conditions in which she lives. Again, bodies are the focus

of the imagery. One of these surrealist scenes shows Afrodita trapped in a machine and giving birth to a baby through her mouth. Later in the film, the same scenery is evoked but this time, many men, lined like soldiers, with a uniform look and a synchronized walk, are heading towards the water from the cabin in which Afrodita seemingly gave birth. Each man is carrying a baby in his hand, in a trance- like walk down the lake. The third image shows how Afrodita, in a long strikingly green dress, secretly manages to sneak out of the cabin with her baby, find a small boat and row away towards the water horizon.

This scene can be interpreted as Afrodita's "voyage: as a body" (Cixous 1993, 66). It is her move away from the normalizing phallogentric world with the metaphor of a mother with a child. The phallogentricity of the world represses women's desires and pleasure and produces normalizing disciplined bodies. Afrodita's flight with the child is her escape from the norm of Macedonian society. Although she attempts to have a relationship with Aco, she is focused on her crating a new life and stepping out of the masculine order and economy.

The ending of the film is tragic and Afrodita and Safo die in a house fire. It might be simplistically interpreted as silencing the two women. However, fire as a metaphor also can signify purifying or the beginning of something new. This too was Teona Mitevska's point, as I have cited her in the first chapter. To go further with this interpretation, I argue that it can also be seen as Afrodita's defying phallogentric order. Her conscious decision to die in the fire together with her older sister can be seen as female agency. The issue of death as agency is indeed problematic, but I think that the author's words regarding Afrodita's death clarify the meaning. Mitevska's argument relates to my initial point – the film representations of the Balkans do not necessarily convey a strict line between this region and the West. Balkan authors, like Mitevska, may undermine certain stereotypes (monolithic patriarchy, for instance)

on the account of re-establishing others (Macedonia as a wasteland) but ultimately, do not essentialize the region.

An interesting issue in the film is the way voice and body are connected. Although Afrodita does not speak in the film because of a physical disability, the audience can hear her voice off-screen. According to Kaja Silverman's (1988) theory, usually the female voiceover is not the same as the male in relation to constructing subjectivities in narrative cinema, but she mainly refers to Hollywood films. This is so, since the female body is only conflated with the female voice because they are almost never disembodied and thus, they cannot function as "an omniscient perspective 'outside' the diegesis as some male voiceovers do" (Chaudhuri, 2006, 60). However, I argue that in the case of *I am from Titov Veles* the voice and the body are complementary since we do not hear Afrodita speaking to others except when she addresses the audience. In this way, the film is subversive in its disruption of the unity of body and mind. Furthermore, her not being able to speak in film time does not hinder her to have agency and thus construct her subjectivity. She expresses herself both, through her body, and through her actions, apart from speaking off-screen.

The underlying concept of *écriture féminine* can be criticized for an essentializing view of women, but I would say the contrary. Cixous speaks of the feminine that is repressed and misrepresented by the phallic order. The feminine does not entail only Woman or women, but refers to the *feminine* libidinal economy that is closer to women but can also be attributed to men as well. More specifically, *écriture féminine* acknowledges that the body is not monolithic, but individual. Moreover, the political ramification of writing the body can be differently seen depending on the locality as well. Afrodita in the film is a woman living in certain socio-cultural conditions that are present in Macedonia. The poverty of her existence is also a factor in the way

she is presented. Thus in the film she can be read as a representation of women as historical beings (Lauretis, 1987). Although we can talk about many patriarchies and not one that is universal, the phallogentricity of society still exists that deprives women of voice in various forms. Therefore, the importance of providing space for female subjectivity through the writing of the body for example, is crucial in the subversion of this type of order.

2.4 *The grotesque body*

The unconscious in the film can serve as an abject zone of the characters, and this can finally lead with identification of the viewer with Afrodita, and thus, distort strict boundaries of posing the Balkans as an object of the gaze. As Kristeva (1997) notes, the abject represents the blurred line between object and subject, so is the division of conscious / unconscious ambiguous:

The “unconscious” contents remain here *excluded* but in strange fashion: not radically enough to allow for a secure differentiation between subject and object, and yet clearly enough for a defensive *position* to be established – one that implies a refusal but also a sublimating elaboration (234).

To talk more specifically about abjected bodies on screen, here I apply Mary Russo’s concept of the female grotesque body¹⁰, and Afrodita’s body can be seen as such. Russo (1994) distinguishes two types of grotesque body. The first metaphor of the body is related to the social. She says that this body “is identified with the ‘lower bodily stratum’ and its associations with degradation, filth, death, and rebirth” (8). The second body trope is related to the psyche and the abject. Kristeva locates the abject in “the social and political potential of transgression and the linguistic transgressions of the norms, codes and structures of language” (Russo 1994, 10). In the film, Afrodita’s body can be seen as a site of female grotesque, and both a trope for

¹⁰ This term is coined by Russo, with reference to Bakhtin’s grotesque body in order to speak about the female body representations.

the individual and the social. Macedonian, or Balkan society for that matter, is perceived on the margins of Europe, as a patriarchal society with a perpetual conflict. However, Afrodita's boyish body does not fit in the 'norm' of a classical femininity which is a woman with curves and usually long hair. Yet, the audience is confronted with the naked body of Afrodita.

Russo connects the grotesque with the freak and explains their relation to the transgressive. "The freak can be read as a trope not only of the 'secret self', but of the most externalized, 'out there', hypervisible, and exposed aspects of contemporary culture and of the phantasmatic experience of that culture by social subjects" (1994, 85). Thus, by placing Afrodita's 'freakish' body as abject connected to 'impurity', the film, to use Marciniak's words, "hopes to elude spectatorial comfort zones" and require from the spectator to eventually identify with certain aspects of what is being represented (2003, 79).

According to Kristeva, the most obvious site of abjection is the maternal body. Afrodita in the film is not pregnant or a mother, but has constant longing to give birth to a child. Furthermore, we see her mimicking her pregnancy. As Kristeva states, the pregnant mother is seen at once both, with admiration and fear, and these are the feelings that might be projected in the viewer. Russo also discusses the maternal body as a female grotesque. "The grotesque in each case is only recognizable in relation to a norm and that exceeding the norm involves serious risk" (1994, 10). She refers to Foucault and his theory about the normalization process of the body in a society. Precisely the (female) grotesque body signifies a departure from the norm. In this way, the film might be seen as reinforcing assumptions that women's primary role is to be mothers. However, in her dreams Afrodita does not see her self within a conventional union with a man. Her wish for a child can be a result of her loneliness.

In this chapter, I have attempted to step beyond the familiar readings of Balkan cinema in the last nearly two decades (Iordanova, 2001). While many scholars tend to see the efforts of Balkan and foreign filmmakers as re-establishing familiar stereotypes, I believe that this may not be necessarily the case. While these films can be read as a negative or, as an exotic presentation of the region, there are other ways of interpretation as well. I have focused here on a Macedonian example of representation in one particular film and analyzed the female body that can write its space on screen and thus, subvert generalization of the silence of female characters in Balkan films. I have argued that this body writing have the power to subvert the positioning of a body, and also of a region as “other”.

3 *Documenting the Balkans: Does It Hurt?*

As the terms ‘Balkan’, ‘Balkanized’, or ‘Balkanization’ have long been used to signify something traditional or backward, the more recent usage of these concepts may be starting to flip the meaning and encompass a different perspective. As I argue, the construction of an image of Macedonia or the Balkans through the cinematic screen is not simply black or white. That is, ‘the frozen image of the Balkans’ as Maria Todorova put it, is not monolithic, as some film authors would have us believe due to their take on the Balkans.

In her first feature *Does It Hurt? – the First Balkan Dogma*, Aneta Leshnikovska consciously takes the Balkan-versus-West references and plays with them throughout the film, using irony most of the time. Her intention is clearly to present a Macedonian (Balkan) society, which can be regarded as something that is indeed liminal, but cannot be viewed strictly as an object to be gazed at by the ‘cultivated’ West. Furthermore, her choice of using the Dogme style as a manner of expression is important for making more openly certain statements such as a critique of generalizing representations of Balkan and Western societies. With this film style, Leshnikovska is ‘mock(doc)umenting’¹¹ Macedonian, as well as Western society. Namely, in a documentary-like filming, she is mocking the discussed West/Balkan preconceptions. Leshnikovska is able to posit certain questions important for the Balkanist debate: What is Macedonian identity and how is it constructed with regards, for example, to different nationalities living in the country? How do Macedonians see themselves within the Balkan context? How do they perceive their position in relation to Europe or the West? Finally, how do representations of Macedonia / the Balkans subvert the usually perceived image of the region?

¹¹ Not my term.

In this chapter, first I intend to present the specific style of film expression that Leshnkovska is using. The Dogme 95 film style is employing a documentaristic way of filming a fictional story, and thus, is an interesting way to depict and bring closer to the viewer the urban life of the people living in Skopje, the capital of Macedonia. This includes for instance, their everyday difficulties, dreams and aspirations, conflicts and disappointments. Then, I discuss the Balkan – Western references that emerge throughout the film and how the director ironically questions them. This, I argue, contributes to the representation of Macedonian society that complicates the perception of the Balkan image as not simply a rural place of continuous brutality and ethnic hatred. Finally, I focus on the representations of the female characters in the film. I argue that although not abruptly put forward, the portraying of women in the film is very important for the subversion of ‘traditional’ representation of women in Balkan cinema. Rendering certain agency of the two main female characters, as well as questioning gender stereotypes, is crucial for challenging the ‘masculinized’ Balkan film narratives.

3.1 Documenting Macedonian society

Dogme 95, also referred to as Dogma 95 or just dogma, is a film movement that was established in 1995 by several filmmakers from Denmark. Their original aim was to set up a ‘New Wave’ of filmmaking in the midst of enormous commercialization of film production (Walters, 2004). The founders of the Dogme 95 were Thomas Vinterberg, a young and promising film author at the time, and Lars von Trier, who had already been established on the European art film scene. The two filmmakers wrote a Manifesto in the fashion of the French 1960s radical movements, which was accompanied by a Vow of Chastity that set 10 rules for the filmmaker (Walters

2004). This, originally ‘Danish New Wave’¹² of filming was intended to provide an alternative to big studio productions and focus on the art of making films. The Manifesto called upon a re-birth of cinema unencumbered with profit-oriented flashy film effects. Its aim was not to give solutions of how to make a film but posited certain restraints to the means available to film authors in the process of producing their works (Walters, 2004). The Dogme regulations that make the Vow of Chastity can be seen as a certain recipe for creating a film. An important rule in the Vow is that the shooting of the film must take place at a certain real location in the present moment, without any additional props on the scene. Furthermore, no additional lighting can be used during the shooting, as well as no post-production interventions such as sound effects or image correction. The last rule in the Vow states that the director of the film must not be credited. As Simons (2007) notes, these set rules of making a film automatically impose a more realistic presentation of the film story (39). He explains how the Dogme manifesto was focused on the manner of creating the film and the techniques that should and should not be used in that process. Simons concludes that thus, it “approaches film not from the vantage point of the finished product, but of the impending product; and it aimed not at the spectator, but at the maker” (37). This is important to note since the author’s intention is taken into consideration here. “The director becomes more than someone who chooses things, she becomes a medium through which a story is told” (Valluri, 2007). This point may be seen as contradictory with the tenth rule of the Vow of Chastity that states that the director should not be accredited for the film. However, since all the rules are directed to the director of the film, s/he has a significant role in the construction of the whole work.

The originators of the Dogme 95 movement, which is considered as avant-garde filmmaking, were primarily inspired by realism and the 1960s French New Wave. Thus, their

¹² My formulation.

intent was to use everyday characters and events without any dramatic situations (Valluri, 2007). With the restraints put forward in the Vow regarding film production, one can see that the author is required to be more creative in the way she/he presents the film, but also more focused on the development of the characters and the story itself. Another very important feature of this way of filmmaking is the clear connection with social criticism also very characteristic for the films of the French New Wave. Firstly, the employment of minimal means of film equipment for making the film and the possibility of filming everything digitally already significantly lowers the cost of the whole film process. This also goes against the capitalist tendency of commercialization of filmmaking and the narrowing down of film art to a simple commodity. Launching the movement was an attempt by these *auteurs*¹³ to ‘save’ the film art form and initiate an alternative of creating films while being critically engaged as well. As the founders put it, “[t]he essence of Dogma 95 is to challenge the conventional film language – in order to make authentic films, in search for the truth” (Von Trier and Vinterberg quoted in Simons, 1995b, 45)”. Perhaps this ideology is somewhat farfetched placing on the filmmaker the capacity to present the ‘truth’. I would re-phrase that statement in their defense and say that in order to subvert the film aesthetics, these filmmakers use documentaristic techniques to present events that are very close to reality; they want to expose certain issues in society and comment on them.

Aneta Leshnikovska’s choice for using the Dogme style for her first feature film has certain implications: she produces a film specifically about Macedonia, discussing Balkan ‘way of life’, but a film that cannot be said to belong to the national (Macedonian) cinema for a number of reasons. The small budget for the film collected from international sources provides a

¹³ The French word *auteur* is used for film directors that are thought to have a noticeable signature in their works. The word began to be used in the 1950s in France, however, in recent film theory its meaning is contested due to the many other factors on which a film depends (Kaplan, 1988, 12).

freer manner to convey the story. Furthermore, as a politically engaging way of filmmaking, the Dogme provides the director with explicit social criticism, of Macedonian, but also of the Western society.

It is important to note that the film was mostly shot with a very small budget that covered only basic means of production. *Does It Hurt?* was produced by AKA Production which is the company of the director, who used her own money to make the film¹⁴. Furthermore, she engaged a large number of volunteers to work on her project, and she convinced the actors not to be compensated for their participation. She secured certain help in logistics from an art center in Skopje, as well as from a Kosovo production company.

Does It Hurt? is a story about Aneta who currently lives in Amsterdam, and comes to her native Macedonia with a plan to make a Dogma film. She tells her Macedonian friends about her intention and the possibility of her film being funded by Danish producers. Saying that she is doing research for the film, Aneta is filming her friends constantly. Thus, the viewer is presented with the everyday life of people living in the capital of Macedonia together with all the struggles of young people, and the corruption of Macedonian society. At the end of the film, Aneta's friends find out that her film was actually the story of their lives and their actions in front of the camera. Aneta is cast away as one who betrayed them, but she still made her film. The film narrative has many common points with the facts. Aneta, the filmmaker, does live in Amsterdam and in the summer of 2006 came to Skopje to make the first Balkan dogma. Furthermore, the characters in the film have the same names as the actors and some of them even the same profession as in the film (for instance, Daniela is also playing an actress, and Lenert is working as a cameraman in Holland). However, *Does It Hurt?* as much as it looks

¹⁴ Information provided by Aneta Leshnikovska.

realistically *is* a fiction film, and it is Leshnikovska's *representation* of Macedonia (the Balkans).

As it says in the summary for the International Film Festival Rotterdam, *Does It Hurt?* is “[f]or a change, a true film about a fictional event, instead of the other way round”(official site). It is indeed a meta-fictional narrative: a Dogme film about how to make a Dogme film. In this way, it follows the rules of the Vow; it employs realistic characters involved in daily situations, and thus, provides the audience with a peak into the complexity of Macedonian (Balkan) relations, as well as perhaps a closer identification with the characters.

Ann Kaplan (1988) discusses avant-garde films within feminist film theory. She explains the difficulties female authors face in representing women within a patriarchal culture. She places women's alternative films into three categories depending on “the cinematic strategies used: first, the formalist, experimental, avant-garde film; second, the realist political and sociological documentary; and third, what I call the avant-garde theory (political) film” (87). These film styles derive from different art movements in history such as French surrealism, German expressionism and Russian formalism, as well as Italian neo-realism and the French New Wave. However, the problem with these forms of expression is that they were mainly instigated by white men, and this poses a problem for full realization of women's concerns (87). Yet, these women filmmakers are trying to work with the existing (male) film forms and redefine the cinematic strategies for their own ends. Particularly interesting are women's experimental documentaries which, as Kaplan explains, dealt with analysis and commentary of political events by using cinema *vérité* techniques such as hand-held camera, grainy image, or sharp and fast montage. Kaplan's discussion is not limited only to documentaries but films that have a strong component of realism in them. Very similarly, and as I have already mentioned,

the Dogma style largely relies on a documentaristic film style and encompasses a large political component in itself. Drawing on Eileen McGarry's theory that every film image, whether documentary or fiction, has an embedded ideology in itself, Kaplan elaborates further that the female documentarist is not "totally controlled by signifying practices", but does have a control over what is presented in the film, that is, on the film ideology. This applies to Dogma cinema and *Does It Hurt?*. Leshnikovska takes the genre conventions to work with but is aware of having a firm hold on the meaning she wants to convey. The same goes for Aneta's character in the film as she is building her film with the stories of her friends, which she very well knows. In this way, to refer back to Kaplan, by using avant-garde film language the female film author openly shows the viewer that she is aware of the film's aim to represent events, meaning, does not show 'real' events. Therefore, she is "able to illustrate the role the cinema itself... has played in perpetuating women's oppression" (143). Leshnikovska's aim is perhaps not to represent women issues per se, but I argue that in the way she represents the female characters in the film, she can be read in that way.

3.2 'The Balkan-West leitmotif'¹⁵

When the filming process began, *Does It Hurt?* was immediately advertised in the media as the First Balkan Dogma. This characterization was put forward by the author herself. The obvious reason for this is the media attention for the film as something that is new and done for the first time in the region. Interestingly, Leshnikovska does not focus on the film as a Macedonian product, but refers to its Balkan origin. This indicates how she places herself and her work

¹⁵ The title is a version of Vojislava Filipcevic's article "Historical Narrative and the East-West Leitmotif in Milcho Manchevski's *Before the Rain* and *Dust*".

within Balkan boundaries although she has been living abroad for a long time. The references to the Balkan as a region, and as mentality, are examined throughout the film. Clearly, Leshnikovska's intention is to put in question some long-lasting characterizations of the region in relation to the West or Europe. However, she presents herself and the film characters as very aware of this opposition and employs an ironic outlook. As Dina Iordanova (2001) has noted, usually Balkan artists tend to have a self-critiquing approach to the representation of the region, but not towards the West, and thus reiterate the stereotype of 'self-exoticism' of the Balkans. In the case of *Does It Hurt?* however, it is not so. As I argue, the construction of the Balkan image on screen is not such that places its people subordinated to the gaze of the Westerner. Leshnikovska is one of the authors who use irony and self-critique, but she also calls upon the 'non-idealization' of the West. With the figure of irony she attempts to deconstruct the Balkan/West binaries and de-hierarchize their relation. I will illustrate this with specific examples from the film.

Boshko, one of the characters, at first acts like someone who wants to present himself as strong macho type who is primarily interested in pornography. He works in a video store renting pornographic films and is very keen on taking part in Aneta's film and helps her around the movie in any way he can. In one scene where Aneta goes to see him at his workplace, they discuss how the first Balkan Dogma about Macedonia should be presented. He proposes that Aneta should include sex scenes instead of shooting only "Balkan misery, folklore and shit". In this way, the author mocks the Westerners' expectations of representing the Balkan as a desolated, traditional place. Aneta, in the film, manages to persuade Boshko to show her what kind of erotic scene should be placed in her film and gives him the camera. Reluctantly, yet wanting to

keep his word, he secretly films making love with his girlfriend, Miliana. At the end, this scene is (as the viewer sees) included in the film itself.

Another reference to the sentiment of Macedonians towards European or Western acceptance can be read in Igor's speech near the end of the film. Igor is a politician working in the Ministry of Culture and promising Aneta to provide funding for her film. At the first AKA festival, a gathering of Macedonian musicians, artists, and intellectuals, as well as other younger Skopjans, he delivers a speech that seems to be the leitmotif of the whole film. He states:

We are gathered here in the heart of the Balkans, where blood and honey flows through our veins, and we are slowly but firmly walking towards the embrace of the EU. You are the ones who with grace, creativity, fairness and involvement will pave the way... You are the ones that will show the world that Macedonia and the Balkans are not about wars, suffering, corruption, manipulation and desperation. Macedonia has a future, and that future is you.¹⁶

The solemnity of Igor's speech is somewhat exaggerated and it is as though he acts to announce something very important. There is also an allusion with previous scenes where Igor is participating in a rally organized by his political party. It resembles the speech of many Macedonian politicians that want to boost Macedonian confidence with their promises of soon entering the "embrace of the EU". In the last part of this excerpt, there is an indication of how Macedonians want to be perceived, and this can be read as Leshnikovska's intention with making *Does It Hurt?* – to present "the other side" of the Balkans/Macedonia – where not only there is suffering and corruption, but also where there is modern way of living and where young people hope for the future.

From these two examples, we can see that Macedonia perhaps is still seeing itself in relation to the EU and its acceptance, but the characters are positioned in a way where they are critical of the Balkan-West divide and their objectification and want to change their position in

¹⁶ This, and all following citations from *Does It Hurt?* are taken from the official translation of the film.

the hierarchized binary. In relation to the West/Balkan binary, Leshnikovska is critically reflecting and deconstructing the binaries arising from the main one: culture/coarseness, modernity/tradition man/woman. Thus, she is de-centering the West as the superior part within these pairs. Consequently, the West and the Balkans are de-hierarchized in their representation by the author. Leshnikovska's critical approach to Macedonianness and Westernness with an ironic twist provides a representation of the Balkans that is complex and re-thinks the generalized assumptions of the region.

In addition to the lingering discussion around Macedonianness, Balkanness and Europeanness in the film, specific characters can be read as representing different contexts. Aneta's friends are obviously posed as the Balkan side. To a certain extent they can be seen as a homogenous group that is on the one hand somewhat naïve, but also greedy either for money or for fame. On the other hand, they are also presented as individuals, each one with her or his peculiarities and character. Lenert, Aneta's cameraman who is coming from Holland, is clearly representing the West and though at the beginning he seems as the dominant European who is seen as a rescuer, by the end he is just as much confused and in-between as the other characters. Aneta, as the person who comes from Amsterdam in her native Skopje is more interesting to read. Her in-betweenness is characterized by living in two places, two cultures and yet nowhere fully belonging. This is what makes her somewhat intruder in the lives of her friends. They believe her at the beginning, and confide in her but by the end she is excluded since she violated their trust. At one point in the film Lenert, being aware of Aneta's deceit all along, is watching her conversation with Boshko to let him know that she actually does not have Danish producers to sponsor the film. Lenert calls her a 'Miss Double Nationality' referring to her double-dealing in order to shoot her film. This also refers to the two countries of her residence, Macedonia and

Holland. We can go even further, and see it as her double liminality – born and raised in a region that is seen as in-between East and West on the one hand, and her current liminal position of working between two cultures on the other.

3.3 *The gazed gaze back*

The world in *Does It Hurt?* is not a men's world as is usually the case with Balkan films. Male and female characters are almost equally presented. Representations in the film are not of a Macedonian society that is traditionally male-dominated, but of one that makes space for women's voice as well. The leitmotif of Balkan and the West is also present in the gender relations that subvert the image of stereotypical Balkan macho man and submissive woman.

Aneta's role is one of being somewhat in the shadow since she is most of the time behind the camera, but she is also the one who is manipulating her friends in order to make her film. Although her way of leading her friends to believe she is filming them only for her research and not for the actual film is morally questionable, however, there is no doubt that the author has constructed her character as one with agency. She is determined to make the first Balkan dogma and she succeeds. In this respect, she can also be seen as the one who has the power to manipulate the gaze since she is holding the camera, and thus, is powerful to act.

A scene that subverts the gaze of the Westerner is the scene with Daniela and Lenert. During the film, their relationship of acquaintances who plan to work together on Aneta's project evolves to being lovers. In this particular scene they are in bed, probably after making love and have a conversation about Daniela's future as an actress. Lenert is holding the camera and by filming Daniela has his gaze directed to her. He is the Westerner, also a man, who

objectifies the ‘Balkan woman’. Daniela infers that she hopes to go with Lenert to Holland after the film is finished. Lenert replies: “I cannot bring every Balkan girl to Holland”. At this point his gaze subordinates Daniela and presents her as ‘just another girl from the Balkans’. In her expression the viewer sees her disappointment and ‘nakedness’, but the scene does not end here. Daniela realizes her situation and tells Lenert she has something to show him. He takes him to the front door, opens it, and tells him to leave. Lenert, still holding the camera, is confused and surprised. At first he does not want to leave, thinking he has the power (with the gaze through his camera). Daniela is persistent and pushes him outside.

Again here, the duality of Westerner/‘Balkan girl’ is undermined with an emphasis on the gender relations in the scene. At first the Westerner’s gaze is strong and shows Daniela inferior as if reiterating that Balkan women hope to be ‘saved’ by someone from the West and take them away from the “misery and backwardness” of their home. Yet Daniela does not let herself be objectified and subverts the gaze. She refuses to be made a stereotype and stands up for her subjectivity. Leshnikovska represents her as a young woman with dreams of becoming a well-established actress, but also a woman who can act for herself.

Iordanova (2001), sees the ethnic component as a very strong thread in post-1991 Balkan cinema. The tensions between different ethnic groups are the topic of many films, such as Manchevski’s *Before the Rain* where Macedonians and Albanians that live in Macedonia are presented as opposed to each other and being in a state of perpetual conflict. The ethnic issues in *Does It Hurt?* are also tackled mainly through the gender relations. However, here, although there are certain tensions present, the resolution at the end is different. This can be seen primarily through the characters of Amernis and Dejan. At the beginning of the film, Dejan is presented as heart-broken because as he explains, he and Amernis love each other but cannot be

together because of ethnic differences. Amernis can be seen as a young modern Albanian woman who is struggling between her tradition and her Macedonian love. Dejan once, in desperation, asks Visar, also Albanian and close friend, “why do your people hate our people”, clearly referring to Albanians and Macedonians. This again shows the author’s awareness of ethnic tensions in the region, but also involves an exposure of the issue, which does not end with a divide. Despite their little quarrel, Visar and Dejan remain friends. Amernis and Dejan also, by the end of the film are seen embracing each other at the AKA festival, clearly, overcoming their differences.

The gender relations presented through the couple Miliana-Boshko can be read on two levels. Boshko is first represented as a macho Balkan man who is only interested in pornography. To prove his dedication to Aneta’s film project, he secretly films Miliana and himself while having sex. In a way, he uses his girlfriend and without her will exposes her to the gaze of the camera. However, while making love, Boshko asks Miliana: “Do you still love me?”, to which Miliana answers: “Only girls ask that question”. Boshko’s insecurity about Miliana’s feelings and his demonstration of affections point to a masculinity that cannot be characterized as Balkan. The tough macho Balkan man is deconstructed here with showing a gentler, vulnerable side of Boshko. When he realizes that Aneta was lying to him about the Danish producers he sees his mistake with giving her the tape that shows him and Miliana and asks it back. Aneta does not give it to him.

Another ironic remark on the part of the characters regarding gender stereotypes is Daniela’s comment to Dejan. When the group of friends notices the attraction between Daniela and Lenert, they start making remarks about them. Dejan tells Kire to make his girlfriend (Daniela) “shut up” clearly acting the Balkan masculinity. Daniela tells him: “You are such a

stereotype full of Balkan macho shit”. The irony here is that these stereotypes of tough man and obedient woman are exposed and mocked by making them apparent. Daniela does not “shut up” but continues to flirt with Lenert. The Balkan machismo is undermined.

With the analysis of *Does It Hurt?* directed by Aneta Leshnikovska, I have exposed some of the gender stereotypes and how they are deconstructed in the film. Also, I have presented how the director is using the Dogma film style as a means to present Macedonian (Balkan) reality and its critical relation towards the West. In this way, I have supported my argument that the representations of the Balkans as a ‘powder keg’ are not a monolithic image, as some authors might suggest. On the contrary, they can change and in fact, certain films are showing a reflection of the region that is complex and does not necessarily place the Balkans and its people as the subordinate part of the West/Balkans couple.

4 Screening Macedonian In-betweenness

In the previous chapters, I have analyzed two recent films directed by Macedonian-born female directors in order to show how these authors have represented Macedonia on screen. Accordingly, as I argue throughout the thesis, representations of the Balkans, in this case, Macedonia, cannot be read solely as exotic examples on the one hand, or traditional and dangerous places on the other. On the contrary, the image these authors have constructed is multifaceted and undermines Western superiority within the West/Balkan binary. The two film texts that I examined are very different in many aspects. First, their narrative techniques differ greatly. *I am from Titov Veles* has an ostentatious style of presenting the story with many strong colors, wide-screen shots and dramatic music. Conversely, *Does It Hurt?* employs a documentaristic manner of storytelling with a hand-held camera and a grainy image. Moreover, the films engage in dissimilar topics and settings. The former film deals with Macedonia's outskirts – a small town that is struggling to survive in a post-socialist climate. The latter film provides a view to a Macedonian urban setting – the life in the capital and all the turbulences that go with it. However, I find certain elements in the two films that are common and I take those as a basis for my argument. I claim that the specific styles of film expression, as well as the gender representations in the films, demonstrate the complexity of the image construction of the Balkans. In this chapter, I bring the two films together in an analysis that will support my argument, first focusing on how the gender of the authors can play a part in the representational perspective, then I discuss the social criticism embedded in the two films following a long-lasting tradition of Yugoslav filmmaking. Finally, I take transnationality as a formative part of

the directors' viewpoint and how this complicates matters when it comes to characterizing a cinema in terms of Macedonian, Balkan or transnational.

4.1 *Gender Musings*

Vojislava Filipcevic (2004/2005) discusses the trend of representing the Balkans during and after the Bosnian war particularly in cinema. She concludes that while internationally successful and awarded, Balkan films¹⁷ only re-established the image of a war-torn Balkan by “misrepresenting or manipulating Balkan history” (3). She locates Milcho Manchevski's creative film work as something that does play on the ‘East-West leitmotif’, but presents more ambiguous relations of the Balkans and the West. She states that,

Manchevski constructs a novel East-West ‘encounter’ and uncovers new meanings of ‘in-betweenness’ in the Balkan cinema through advanced visual grammar and powerful iconography of interlinked reverse exiles and crossings (in both *Dust* and *Before the Rain*) and through a hybrid-genre, cinematic critique of Balkan historical narratives... (4).

I argue that Mitevaska and Leshnikovska work similarly to Manchevski's filmmaking in the way they present a different in-betweenness in Macedonia and in the Balkans using specific narrative techniques in the representation. Each of these two directors achieves this differently, which I have already discussed, but the result in both cases is, in my opinion, that the film texts subvert the said-to-be traditional image of the Balkans as a place that is subordinate to the West. I argue that, as in Manchevski's films, these films also present Macedonia (the Balkans) as apart from Europe, but in this case, it is not as objects to be exoticized or assigned a violent character. These films return the gaze of the Westerner and so, have the power to construct the image of

¹⁷ Here, again, there is a mention of only ex-Yugoslav authors while speaking of Balkan cinema.

the region as not black and white. The colors these films present say that though there is still misery (where is there not?) and poverty there is also a more constructive way of looking at and presenting oneself.

At first sight, *I am from Titov Veles* might not project what I have said above. The film can be interpreted as presenting Macedonia as a wasteland, but seen from a feminist perspective, it can provide other readings. Here, Macedonia looks like a land with small, seemingly deserted houses and a big factory that pollutes the whole town. In one particular scene, Afrodita and Safo are lying in what seems to be hills of residue from the steel factory. The scene looks even apocalyptic as the two sisters first, lie down and then start running in the gray grainy substance with their vivid colored dresses (blue and red) projecting out of the grayness. However, this scene can be read as the will and power of the two women to resist that grimness, and locate a space for them to do that. As I have discussed in the analysis of the film, the depiction of Macedonia, and the ending can be seen as problematic, however, Mitevska's film shows that generalizations of the Balkans are not fixed, but can shift.

What makes *Titov Veles* move away from Balkan films that are said to present a men-dominant society where women are rarely present¹⁸, and if so, are silenced, is the strong gender emphasis. Here, it is important to take into consideration not only the fact that all main characters are female, but also the gender of the film director. Annette Kuhn (1994) discusses women's cinema and how to approach and analyze representations of women in images. She also states that the organization of the text is very important in the analysis, and in this case, it is the feminine organization (12). As I have discussed in Chapter 2, Mitevska's style in *Titov Veles* can be read as *écriture féminine*. The essence of this style is using a feminine language, or feminine writing by the author, whereby the author also becomes important.

¹⁸ Iordanova (2001), for example, sees these constructs in films like Kuturica's *Underground*.

Elizabeth Grosz (1993) discusses the elements that make up the politics of (any kind of) text, in terms of being feminist or patriarchal. She notes that the context in which the text is written as well as read is crucial. Furthermore, three things should be taken into consideration in order to produce a feminist text: it has to challenge phallogentrism in some way, it has to explore new “discursive spaces” in terms of style, form, or genre, and finally, the “sexual coding” of the author should also be noted (21-23). Grosz explains that certainly, even if the author is a woman, it does not mean she can automatically produce a non-phallogentric work, however, the “always sexually specific corporeality” of the author is important in the way a text is created (21-22). This can be applied to *Titov Veles* and its female author. Mitevska’s corporeality is important in the way we can read the film. The female perspective in representing Macedonia undermines the dichotomy West/the Balkans by the clear presentation of defying phallogentric (Balkan) order. In order to avoid essentialism, both Grosz and Kuhn discuss the feminine (not the female) and its relations to meaning construction, since the feminine organization of a text “poses a challenge to dominant forms of relationship between texts and recipients” (Kuhn, 12). Recipients are important in what I have discussed so far in the representation of the Balkans, meaning, that constructions of the region are related to how the viewer might perceive them.

In *Does It Hurt?*, the situation is more clear in terms of presentation of Macedonia. Leshnikovska creates a Macedonian society that is corrupted but also presents a non-idealized West. Her use of irony in referring to Western expectations of the Balkans (such as being a place of tensions, violence, or exoticism) de-hierarchizes the West/Balkans binary and subverts the gaze, both in the film, through the characters of Aneta and Daniela for example, but also in its reading of it, that is, in terms of the audience.

Aneta's gender representations, as I have discussed in Chapter 3, provide space for women's subjectivity and agency. There are certain similarities to be found in both films in relation to the female space. In *I am from Titov Veles*, the story revolves around the three sisters and it is almost a menless world where the three women try to make ends meet and dream of an escape, each one in different ways. The two male characters in the film are brought down to a universal category of cruel abusive men that help move the plot. In *Does It Hurt?*, the author represents a multi-faceted gender relations. However, within the boundaries of her home in Skopje she presents a different picture; there is a representation of 3 generations of women: Aneta, her mother and her grandmother.

4.2 *The 'New Wave'?*

Pavle Levi (2007) explains that the 1960s was the decade with the most production of films in Yugoslavia and certain young authors emerged at this time that did not want to work within the imposed state ideology. Thus, a new film movement emerged called the New Yugoslav Film, or due to its infamous reputation by the state system, also known as "the Black Wave". One of the main goals of these film authors was to give a critique of the social and political situation in the country. Furthermore, it emphasized the individual character of the author with the purpose of replacing the "collective mythology" (Levi, 2007, 15-17). Iordanova (2001) for example, points to the Yugoslav Black Wave cinema as an attempt to subvert the national narrative and pose a different image of, at the time, Yugoslav socialist society. She states that Dushan Makavejev was the most influential to filmmakers from the region in his setting of "definitive standards for Balkan critical filmmaking" (96). However, as I have mentioned before, although subversive,

this cinematography was still misogynist in the way it represented female characters (Slapsak 2007, 37).

Certain intellectuals (Slapsak, 2002, 2007, Filipcevic, 2004/2005) have noticed similar dealings with the representation of the (mainstream) historical narrative in the works of Milcho Manchevski. I want to argue that a certain continuation of the Black Wave filmmaking can be noticed in the films of Mitevaska and Leshnikovska, however, with one additional strong element: the gender perspective. Both authors follow this tradition of critical filmmaking by having an embedded social criticism in their films.

In the scene I mentioned above, where Afrodita and Safo are amidst the pile of grey residue, Safo explains to Afrodita that the fastest way for her to obtain Greek visa is to say that she is from Skopje, and not from Macedonia. Afrodita does not reply, but just runs into the grayness. Safo shouts: “I am from Titov Veles”. This can be seen as a reference to the Black Wave and its referring to that time of Tito’s Yugoslavia. This is certainly used also as a critique of the current situation in Macedonia since this town is now called only Veles. Yet, the factory built in the socialist period still exists and pollutes its residents and it is obvious that the authorities are not doing anything to improve the situation.

Leshikovska also follows the Black Wave tradition in the way she chose an alternative filmmaking with the Dogme. In *Does It Hurt?*, the critique of the system can be found everywhere, but it is definitely personified in the character of Igor. He is a corrupted politician who drinks, takes drugs and seduces under-aged girls. Iordanova (2001) explains that politicians from the Balkan are stereotypically represented as “European on the surface but intellectually inferior and inefficient beneath the façade” (176). In this case, Igor does not hide his ‘Balkanness’, and at the end of the film he manages to hide his wrongdoings in the public.

Reading this in view of the spirit of the whole film, this can also be seen as a critique of every politician, no matter if he is coming from the Balkans or from the West.

4.3 *Globalizing the local / localizing the global*

Another common characteristic of the two authors discussed is their transnational perspective. While discussing the concept of Balkanism, Bjelic (2002) infer that the Balkans today should also be regarded in the context of globalization, and not only of its past. In the case of the two films, the globalization part can be seen concerning the transnational character of the texts. As I have mentioned before, both authors are Macedonians who live and work abroad, and I take that as a significant aspect in the meaning production of the film texts. The transnational exilic cinema¹⁹ applies here, since in addition to the authors' experience from living abroad, the funds for the films also come from several countries.

Naficy (2006) states that accented cinema in general tends to be more subversive than national or Hollywood cinema, although that is not a rule. Very often this type of cinema with “its subversion of the conventions of storytelling and spectator positioning, its critical juxtaposition of different worlds, languages, and cultures, and its aesthetics of imperfection and smallness...critiques the dominant cinema” (121).

Naficy (2006) explains that the liminal character of the transnational exilic cinema is inherent in the works of the authors. The in-betweenness in *I am from Titov Veles* and *Does It Hurt?* can be thought of as double. In the case of these Macedonian film directors, as already being in-between (East and West), they give another perspective in the way they represent the

¹⁹ I explain this concept in Chapter 1.

Balkan liminal character. This also goes in relation to Milcho Manchevski subverted presentation of official Balkan narratives (Slapsak, 2002), since he is also a Macedonian who lives and works outside his native country. Ella Shohat (2006) discusses Third World transnational cinema from a feminist perspective, and she puts forward the gender and the exilic sides as both contributing to subversive filmmaking as opposed to hegemonic texts. She argues that these “post-Third-Worldist” authors work outside a nationalistic ideological framework and tackle the issues of exile identities (of any kind) concerning class, gender, and ethnicity.

The transnational character of the films brings into question the concept of Balkan cinema, and what is more, of national cinema. I have touched upon the issue of the author’s embedded ideology in the moving images in Chapter 3, but there are other factors that influence what the film is conveying. What was once considered a cinema of a nation with having in itself a certain (national) ideology cannot be said for these films. Moreover, Balkan films are usually a co-production of several countries, and very often a Western (European) country is one of the producing partners. This means that there can be no one ideological framework within the film that is being produced.

In my opinion, the transnational component of the films in question adds to Balkan cinematography. I take the example of these two films that situate the plot within Macedonian in-betweenness to discuss Balkan cinema. I argue that this liminality may not only result from Macedonia’s position between the East and the West, but also between North and South. Its liminality can also be seen as a country between Albania, Greece and Serbia, each of them with a politics that poses certain insecurity of Macedonian territory. In addition, the construction of the Macedonian identity encompassing the Albanian population in the country is a continuous process that does not go without difficulties (Ramet, 2002). Finally, the change of political

power and the rise of nationalism in recent years is yet another thread. However, I discuss these examples of the two (Macedonian) films as a demonstration that the filmmaking of Balkan authors is changing. This can be seen as a trend or a new movement that is initiating new narrative strategies in representations. These representations can re-establish a different relation of the Balkans to the West where the gazed gaze back in their awareness of a marginal position but with a critical outlook.

In this chapter, I discussed several aspects that I think are important to take into consideration when examining *I am from Titov Veles* and *Does It Hurt?* as examples of representations of the Balkans that subvert the image of the region as a place subordinated in relation to the West. I have explained how the gender of the author should be taken into consideration in constructing an image of Macedonia. I also discussed the social criticism that these authors engage in, and finally, I opened some questions regarding the transnational character of the films, and of cinema in a broader context.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I analyzed the Balkan films, *I am from Titov Veles* by Teona Strugar Mitevska and *Does It Hurt? – the First Balkan Dogma* by Aneta Leshnikovska. I argued that these two female directors move beyond generalizations of the Balkans and present an image that does not illustrate the region and its people simply as subordinate to the Western gaze. Mitevska's style, I argued, can be read as *écriture féminine* and this provides a space for female subjectivity on screen. Consequently, this defies a stereotypical patriarchal notion of Macedonian/Balkan society. Leshnikovska employs the Dogme 95 style of filmmaking and thus, while providing a social critique of the state system, together with the figure of irony, she criticizes the idealization of the West and deconstructs the West/Balkan binary. Furthermore, the gender representations in the film are a key aspect that contributes to the subversion of the Balkan image as a place of barbarity, patriarchal relations and violence.

The depth of the various discourses on Balkanism and film representations in this study can be further extended, however, considering the time constraints, I limited my analysis to two films, and the main Balkanist theorists. Moreover, I did not include an analysis of the media coverage of the films, nor reviews from the international press. The reason for this is that *I am from Titov Veles* and *Does It Hurt?* are quite new (they were both released in 2007), so, there are not many critical essays and analyses written about them. Therefore, I could not reflect on the way these representations are perceived by the international audience and critics. Finally, it would be very interesting and challenging to continue such analysis on film representations of the Balkans by selecting more films on Macedonia, but also, to do a comparative study with other films from the region.

With this thesis, I hope to expand the collected history of the Macedonian cinematography of recent years, as well as add a new segment in the Macedonian feminist scholarship by analyzing gender representations on screen. Furthermore, I hope that by addressing and taking side in the debating about Balkan cinema, I have contributed to the discussions on theorizing Balkanism.

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Filmography

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