The Future Perfect of South/East/Central European Early Cinema Studies

Ana Grgić, *Early Cinema, Modernity and Visual Culture: The Imaginary of the Balkans* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022).

At the beginning of her book on early cinema in the Balkans, Ana Grgić surveys the state of early Balkan cinema as she has found it in the close-to thirty archives in the South/East/Central European region. "The small percentage of surviving archival films in the Balkans emerge as archaeological vestiges of what once was, and can be perceived as memories — incomplete, fragmentary and blurry — of the original films," (37) Grgić writes. She outlines the stakes of her project to lie both in the discovery of the region's early cinematic past, a period of time that roughly spans the early 1890s until the end of the 1912–1913 Balkan Wars, and in the affectively heightened acts of remembrance that contemplation of such a fragmentary case of film heritage inevitably entails. The paucity of extant films in a particular part of the world, especially from before 1913, will not necessarily make it news-worthy for the early cinema historian. That the overwhelming majority of the world's silent film heritage has been lost to war, pillage, fire, natural disaster, the elements, time, or simply its preservation on more durable materials is by now a well-known trope. Nevertheless, the realities of loss, particularly in the case of the South/Central/East European region, may have some contributions to make to film studies discourse in general.

What is cinema without film? Grgić notes that there are no statistics to confirm the number of extant films in the South/East/Central European region (29–30). That being said, she does give an example of loss that may distinguish this region's film studies as, not — sadly — exemplary, but perhaps foreshadowing the not-so-distant future. "Referring to the film catalogue compiled by the Romanian film historian Bujor Rîpeanu," Grgić writes, "out of 25 fiction films made in Romania until 1918, only one has survived" (29–30). In the United States, the fact that the Library of Congress establishes three-quarters of the nation's silent film history as missing still makes headlines.[1] The sense of loss may be because with twenty-five percent of the over ten-thousand silent films produced in America, there is still much to lose. But what do you do when practically none of a region's films remain? With the sample of available objects nearing zero, what does it mean to continue to understand "film" as the descrip-

1) Abby Ohlheiser, "Most of America's Silent Films Are Lost Forever," *The Atlantic*, December 2013, accessed September 30, 2022, https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2013/12/most-americas-silent-films-are-lost--forever/355775/.

tive term in this field of study? Why not call it pataphysics, as suggested by Eric Kluitenberg regarding the archaeology of "imaginary" media, the science of the fictional creations found in myth or legend?[2)]

The question is particularly intriguing as the account of early cinema's trajectory through the South/East/Central European region given by Grgić is as rigorous as it is expansive. The book assembles an abundance of material about the silent era from non-filmic, that is, literary-critical, photographic, architectural, and other visual-cultural sources. Locating early cinema in the few physical film prints and ephemera that remain extant as much as the artifacts of other media dispositifs, Grgić understands early cinema as a cultural "imaginary" more than a delimitable set of objects. This not only aligns her work with the more speculative and archaeological work in the field[3)] but also ends up bolstering her argument that cinema's legacy in this region is to be sought in the systematic representation and persistence of certain dynamics of colonialism, othering, and self-representation.

Another payoff of this "imaginal" approach to cinema lies in the possibility of complicating the narrative of difference that has characterized cinema in the South/East/Central European region since its purported origins at the hands of Western industry and capitalism. Firstly, by reclaiming the discourse of its origins, which Grgić does in chapters one and two. No longer bound to the materials of film, cinema shows evidence of roots in a range of regional practices and popular traditions. Secondly, by tapping into multiple, often contesting imaginaries, it becomes possible for the cinema historian to locate difference and otherness as being produced locally and as inherent to a socio-cultural fabric that is multi-ethnic, multi-confessional, and multicultural, rather than imposed from without.

In this, Grgić makes an important point. If prior generations of scholars have focused on stereotypes of belligerence in the cinema of and on this region, Grgić succeeds in tempering the implication of cinema's ideological complicity by showing the multiplicity of agendas involved in the region's reception of Western notions of progress, industry, and modernity. The camera may have been used to record scenes of violence, insurgency, and war, particularly at the hands of imperial powers whose interest in eastwardly expansion or continued occupation such images would have served. This was the case, for instance, with the scenes of atrocity in Ottoman Macedonia between 1893 and 1912 that legitimized the involvement of the Great Powers in the region's geopolitics (170–175). Or, similarly, the imperial camera's creation of images of seeming backwardness would have helped bolster the impression of industrial advance back home (155–156). Rather than take for granted locals' subjugation by the camera, a narrative that is often conditioned by presumptions of locals' "naive" reception of technology, Grgić finds ways of restoring nuance to the relations cinema introduced between viewer and viewed, self and other, occupier and occupied. She does this by gathering together ample evidence that the South/East/Central European region was indeed aware of cinema's capacity for propaganda and political persuasion, often to the point of applying it to their own purpose. For instance, the author mentions the immediate validation gained by the Montenegrin King by distinguishing a film Pathé-

2) Eric Kluitenberg, "On the Archaeology of Imaginary Media," *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, eds. Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 48–69.

3) Pavle Levi, *Cinema by Other Means* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); François Albera, "First Discourses on Film and the Construction of a 'Cinematic Episteme'," in *A Companion to Early Cinema*, eds. André Gaudreault, Nicolas Dulac, and Santiago Hidalgo (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 119–140; Erika Balsom, "Introduction — The Othered Cinema," in *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 9–25; Noam M. Elcott, "The Cinematic Imaginary and the Photographic Fact: Media as Models for 20th Century Art," *PhotoResearcher: ESHPh European Society for the History of Photography* 29, (2018), 7–23.

Frères made about fallen Montenegrin soldiers with a Third Degree of Honor awarded to its director (189). And, perhaps even more effectively for her argument, her range of accounts of films available in the region during this period suggests that moving images were not merely being consumed, but also deliberately manufactured by local producers whose work often sought to directly address the issue of cultural presumptions being introduced through cinema.

If Grgić's book brings much new to the table and builds an argument for early cinema in the South/East/Central European region as a case study for world cinema, it is not solely by uncovering a range of new film artifacts. The book is interesting methodologically because it builds understanding of its topic out of considerations that are cinematic in both the strictly materialist *and* the expanded sense of the term and by locating cinema in a range of technical and discursive effects. It foregrounds the networks of cultural exchange and intermedial hybridity that originally constituted cinema and that continue to make its investigation productive in spite of "incompleteness, fragmentation and blurriness" (37).

Already in the first chapter, entitled "Visual Culture in the Balkans, Haptic Visuality, and Archival Moving Images," the books commit to introducing this region's early cinema in the context of a discussion of the haptic, a mode of visuality Grgić draws on a range of thinkers to define and which she argues characterizes the region's cultural heritage (35–40). The variegated history of the haptic reinforces the connections between the region's cinema and the legacies of other arts. For instance, Grgić guides her reader through consideration of the abstract patterns on Albanian tapestries and of the surface values of Macedonian Islamic architecture before broaching the topic of what silent cinema in this region looked like (50–60). Viewed through the lenses of applied art, Mediterranean icon-painting, and architectural ornament, the moving image made by the Manakia brothers of a single seated weaver threading her loom (Figures 25, 59) will no longer appear as a symbol of the region's economic backwardness and its failure to adopt Western-style mass production. Instead, Grgić presents the brothers' decision of capture the weaver's handiwork on film as recognition of a mode of perception characteristic of this region that valorized textured surfaces, shadow-play, and tactile visuality. Their presence in this mechanically-produced image testifies to the kind of "afterlife," "survival" (*Nachleben*), or resurgence of certain iconic images that make them definitive of a given culture or civilization (60–61). Part of what underpins the decision to organize this chapter around the haptic is the reemergence of this notion within strands of film theory preoccupied with embodied modes of perception in cinema. These modes have themselves returned to Eastern genealogies of vision, such as Laura U. Marks on the persistence of transcendence and immersion in contemporary cinema (53) or Sergei Eisenstein (reference to whom is missing) on the recurrence of certain image-formulae of "pathos" or heightened affect, such as the "inverse" perspective or the axonometric drawing Grgić here brings examples to illustrate (Figures 28–31, page 64).[4)]

If the first chapter locates cinema temporally across different historical strata, the second chapter, entitled "Historicizing the Balkan Spectator and the Embodied Cinema Experience," situates it in space. How did cinema relate to other spaces of modernity and in which contexts did it first appear? The question is well-chosen for at least three reasons; firstly, because of the ephemerality of early cinema sites, secondly, because of the expansion in cinema's discursive territory that potentially ensues and, thirdly, because of the inaccessibility of information on this subject in the English or German lan-

4) Yve-Alain Bois, "Sergei M. Eisenstein. Montage and Architecture," *assemblage: A Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture*, no. 10 (1989), 111–131.

guage. Grgić finds evidence of cinema at a range of familiar locations for early cinema, including the fairground, the circus, inns, hotels, and taverns, indicating its close association with other, similarly temporary, sites of visual spectacle. Film screenings that took place in coffeehouses receive particular attention as these not only hark back to the *meddahs* (public storytellers) and *Karagöz* (shadow-puppet theater shows) of Ottoman times but, because of their combination of entertainment with stimulants, position cinema as a counter-site to modernity, or a *heterotopic* space (77).[5] The notion of the haptic again becomes relevant here as the cinematic is discovered by Grgić at the experiential level in texts such as short stories by the Yugoslav novelist Ivo Andrič (80–81) and the Bulgarian writer Ivan Andreichin (98–102).

Grgić's digest of existing film historical sources deserves special commendation. In one segment of the second chapter (83–92), as with — happily — many similar segments throughout the book, the author consolidates studies of cinemas written within national discursive frameworks that have become classics in their respective region but that, for lack of translation, remain out of reach to readers with no Slavic linguistic background. In the above-mentioned segment, for instance, we have opportunity to learn that just six months after the 1895 December screening by the Lumière Brothers, projected and photographic moving images appeared in Vienna (27 March 1896), Bucharest (27 May 1896), Belgrade (29 May 1896), and within the same year, they emerge in Maribor, Zagreb, Sophia, Thessaloniki, Istanbul, Trieste and Northern Macedonia (83–92). The rapidity with which film emerged across this region is noteworthy, particularly in contrast with other forms of image production. While it is important to distinguish between the availability of cinema's physical apparatus and its eventual reorganization of a culture's field of sensory relations, the appearance of film virtually simultaneously across the European continent should counter presumptions made regarding the region's experience of modernity.[6]

The book's third chapter, entitled "Mapping Constellations: Movement and Cross-cultural Exchange of Images, Practices and People," bears out the need to extend the conceptual, disciplinary but also national frameworks in which scholarship on cinema tends to take place. In this chapter, Grgić presents the handful of individuals whose investment into and enthusiasm for moving images made possible the emergence of the medium within such a short time period in this region. Procuring technical equipment and films from distributors like Gaumont and Pathé-Frères in cities like Vienna and Budapest, these entrepreneurially-minded enthusiasts of film, much like other itinerant entertainers, brought moving images into the lives of inhabitants of more rural areas. And while some of these individuals, such as the film-"adventurer" Stanislaw Noworyta (129–130), covered more ground with their showmanship than others, all of them led a peripatetic lifestyle that may have substantially contributed to the establishment of the very networks of infrastructural and filmic exchange that would soon make possible cinema's institutionalization. The role of intercultural, multi-lingual, cross-border, and transnational relations in determining cinema's emergence becomes clear in Grgić's account of these pioneers' nomadic approach to cinema spectatorship. Cultural difference would have been inscribed into cinema starting with its very conditions of appearance — in addition to the experience of largely untranslated intertitles and foreign cultural contents on films imported from France, America, Denmark, Germany, etc. (129–135, 136). As Grgić's book makes evident, the conditions in which ear-

5) See also Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986), 22–27.

6) This has also been recently demonstrated by Izabella Füzi: Izabella Füzi, *[From the Fairground to the Movies: The Emergence of Hungarian Mass Visual Culture (1896–1914)] A Vurstlitól a Moziig: A Magyar Vizuális Tömegkultúra Kibontakozása (1896–1914)* (Szeged: Apertúra Könyvek, 2022).

ly cinema in this region was exhibited, distributed, and circulated testify to the existence of a thoroughly cross-cultural network of exchange between different cultures, languages, faiths, and ethnicities.

Two of the examples of itinerant film pioneers Grgić gives in this chapter demonstrate the potential behind such cross-cultural dialogue in the contemporary scholarly context, namely in terms of intercepting with and cross-fertilizing ongoing and parallel projects in film archival research. Without such dialogue, neither of the two following figures would have been discovered as significant. The first one is Louis Pitrolf de Beéry, a nomadic film exhibitor and a filmmaker responsible for several film titles in the early teens (134–139). His film *Karađorđe* from 1911, which Grgić returns to in detail later in the book, is "considered the first Serbian fiction film, but also the first Balkan fiction film by some film historians" (136). Despite the arguably crucial role de Beéry played in the emergence of cinema in this region, piecing together who he was and what he did would prove difficult without doing "inter-archival" research — as Grgić has herself done — in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where he appears to have shown films, Serbia, where he made films, France, where he developed his films, and Hungary, from which he originated.

Similarly, research into the legendary Ienache and Milton Manakia, a.k.a. the Manakia brothers, also requires a circuitous path through the region's many archives (139–144). The mystery that continues to shroud basic information regarding the brothers, who made some of the world's earliest ethnographic footage and who, as Grgić writes, captured the last days of the Ottoman Empire on camera, may have as much to do with the lack of cross-cultural dialogue between different national archives as it had with their mixed ethnicity and cultural heritage. Born of a Romanian and Moldovian minority population and working out of Greece and Northern Macedonia, the brothers would be ultimately separated by the Iron Curtain and most of their films lost. "Rather than focusing on the parameters of present-day nations," Grgić writes, referring to separate attempts on the part of film historians to claim the Manakia Brothers as Yugoslav, Macedonian, Greek, Albanian Turkish, or Romanian nationals, "the early cinema history in the Balkans is [here] envisaged through a transnational and intercultural perspective, which allows the plurality of voices and micro histories to emerge" (148). That the Greek auteur Theo Angelopoulos dedicated his magnum opus, *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995), to tracking down the traces of films by the Manakia brothers serves her point nicely. This kind of investigative process not only benefits individual nations' and regions' film histories, but also secures a better preparedness for the challenges of mapping a world cinema and a post-filmic discourse regarding cinema.

Grgić dedicates the final two chapters of her book to the phenomenon of a "gaze" through which early cinema negotiated an imaginary of the Balkans. Chapter four, entitled "Imagining the Balkans: the Cinematic Gaze from the Outside," examines several episodes in the crafting of the Balkan "Other" through a visual discourse of war, violence, and atrocity in still and moving images. Key to the argument is the creation of the images at the hands of foreign professional film producers and amateurs who are traveling for purposes of tourism or ethnographic study. Coming to the region during an era of historic conflict, rebellion, and counter-insurgency that culminated in the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, these outside observers shot images of locals they imagined to be bandits, rebels, or soldiers engaged in scenes of unrest, as well as those individuals, such as merchants and artisans, who were perceived as typifying the generally "Balkan" character of the region. Among these, Grgić relates, are scenes shot by the Charles Urban Trading Company, a contingent with often "little knowledge of the history and local traditions" (167), the visual accounts of several episodes of battles, skirmishes, and atrocities during the Balkan Wars taken by filmmakers hired by Pathé-Frères, and scenes of refugee camps docu-

mented by members of Albert Kahn's "human geography" project. These and other films both mentioned and omitted (such as, for instance, Georges Méliès's *The Terrible Turkish Executioner* from 1904) coopted the gaze of the film camera to create a "savage" or "exotic" spectacle that implicitly served the interests of Western geopolitical involvement in a region, insofar as this was battling the collapse of two historic empires and the rise of nationalism in its newly formed nation-states.

Beyond blatantly self-serving reportage, another feature that characterizes this "Balkanizing" gaze is its compromised documentary status. Grgić notes on several occasions that the footages of atrocities and violence were often staged. Although it is not perhaps surprising that production companies shied away from actual battlefields (although some, like de Beéry, allegedly joined them), the extent to which they owned up to their spectators as fabricating reality appears to have varied. Some films, such as Pathé-Frères' *Assassination of the King and Queen of Serbia* (1903) and *Massacre in Macedonia* (1903), were clear reenactments portraying events no traveling cameraperson could have happened upon by chance (although they were not marketed as such). Other views, such as *With the Insurgent Bands of Macedonia* (1904), were extolled as actualities, newsreels, or, as the Charles Urban company put it, "the only Animated Pictures of Macedonian and Bulgarian Scenes in existence" whose producers would have been taking the "risk of being shot" in procuring the images for Western audiences. Early cinema is thus shown to be coincident and complicit in the colonialist process (177).

However, for Grgić the story of early cinema in the South/East/Central European region does not end there. Images may belong to their makers, but the desire to make further images does not. Her final chapter, entitled "'Made in the Balkans:' Mirroring the Self," surveys the range of filmmaking practices that appeared in the wake of the introduction of western cameras by outside observers of the region. Grgić's purpose here seems partially to reorient the discourse of post-colonialism from the cultural pessimism of self-Balkanization, which she inherits from prior generations of scholar, into a more affirmative and validating discourse of "self-representation". And while this gesture and the ensuing readings of various film productions in Cluj, Ljutomer, Sombor, Split, and elsewhere offer eloquent testimony to this effect, this reader remained intrigued by her decision to ultimately focus the end of the book on two examples of films dedicated to not only nation-building, but also examples of unabashed nationalism within early film production. Both *The Life and Deeds of the Immortal Vožd Karađorđe* (1911), a celebration of a nineteenth-century Serbian military leader, and the depiction of Romania's 1877 independence war, *The Independence War* (1912), also known as *Independenta Romaniei*, are consciously Romantic portrayals of military might (the military of both countries being involved in production) and national sovereignty (*Karađorđe* was purchased by the Serbian Royal Court) as demonstrated in the vanquishing of the Ottoman enemy. And while the size of the productions, their cast, and *mise-en-scène* may make them landmarks in the region's history of pre-industrial filmmaking, they imply the downfall of the imaginary of intercultural and multi-ethnic dialogue that Grgić so beautifully demonstrated to have once bolstered cinema into a cultural imaginary in the region. This reader is left desiring of further discussion of the many other, less-than-usual-sounding genres of film production the region's enterprising pioneers embarked upon, such as the Greek Spyros Dimitrakopoulos' comedies (220–221), Romanian and Bulgarian detective and adventure films (221), Serbian realist dramas (221, 203), Slovenian home movies made under the influence of an itinerant Fritz Lang! (216–220), and a Hungarian-Serb's visionary scenes of Greek love and statuary come-to-life (203–204). These seem to bear evidence of the kind of asynchronous contemporaneity or "hybrid modernity," as Grgić puts it, that makes South/East/Central European early cinema such an intriguing case of study. Or, in her words, a "*heterotopia*," "[connecting] spectators in the Balkans to other spaces," as

Grgić puts it, "and [allowing] them to join the global network of viewing, sharing, and appropriation of spaces and events elsewhere."

In summary, there are multiple cross-disciplinary and discursive agendas at work in Grgić's treatment of cinema in the South/East/Central European region. The aim of the book is fundamentally to invest debate regarding this region's cinema with critical, postcolonial, and speculative methods. In this regard, Grgić draws on a discourse of post or "semi"-coloniality that already exists in English-language film scholarship, particularly as represented by Maria Todorova and Dina Iordanova, the second of whom contributed the book's foreword.[7] Questions of intersectionality, peripheralization, self-orientalism, and "Balkanization," the consensual enactment by non-western individuals and institutions of toxic non-western stereotypes, already connect this region's cinema scholarship with the emerging field of world cinema and its ambition to decolonize film discourse. Nevertheless, Grgić's decision to focus on the historical period of early cinema makes for a novel and arguably necessary intervention in this body of scholarship. Firstly, the pre-industrial mode of production involved in early cinema and the artisanal and craft-based conventions it drew on open the door onto a range of cultural and artistic artifacts that would traditionally fall within the disciplinary purview of aesthetics and art history — discussing them within film history has the potential to foreground the multiple genealogies of concepts shared between these disciplines, such as, for instance, hapticity. Secondly, the itinerant nature of early cinema and the ephemeral quality of its exhibition spaces uncover a network of cross-cultural and multi-ethnic exchange that has the potential to overwrite any monocultural or national frameworks still palpable within the literature. And thirdly, because it is a neglected but not entirely untreated topic of film-historical research written in regional languages, early cinema in Grgić's case has yielded a range of discoveries connecting different bodies of textual, visual, and archival knowledge. In this respect, Grgić's movements across and in between the region's national archives and institutions could invite Anglo-Saxon scholars to embark on their own trajectories through her Albanian, Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, Hungarian, and Romanian references. Only by integrating these sources and giving them space within English-language scholarship will it become possible to decolonize South/East/Central European cinemas from the agendas of the west.

Eszter M Polónyi (University of Nova Gorica)

Bibliography

Albera, François. "First Discourses on Film and the Construction of a 'Cinematic Episteme'," in *A Companion to Early Cinema*, eds. André Gaudreault, Nicolas Dulac, and Santiago Hidalgo (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 119–140.

Grgić, Ana. *Early Cinema, Modernity and Visual Culture: The Imaginary of the Balkans* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022).

Balsom, Erika. "Introduction — The Othered Cinema," in *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 9–25.

7) Dina Iordanova, "Foreword: Travelling Down / Travelling Through," in Ana Grgić, *Early Cinema, Modernity and Visual Culture: The Imaginary of the Balkans* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022).

Bois, Yve-Alain. "Sergei M. Eisenstein: Montage and Architecture," *assemblage: A Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture*, no. 10 (1989), 111–131.

Elcott, Noam M. "The Cinematic Imaginary and the Photographic Fact: Media as Models for 20th Century Art," *PhotoResearcher: ESHPh European Society for the History of Photography* 29, (2018), 7–23.

Foucault, Michel and Jay Miskowiec. "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986), 22–27.

Füzi, Izabella. *A Vurstlitól a Moziig: A Magyar Vizuális Tömegkultúra Kibontakozása (1896–1914)* (Szeged: Apertúra Könyvek, 2022).

Iordanova, Dina. "Foreword: Travelling Down / Travelling Through," in Ana Grgić, *Early Cinema, Modernity and Visual Culture: The Imaginary of the Balkans* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022).

Kluitenberg, Eric. "On the Archaeology of Imaginary Media," *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, eds. Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 48–69.

Levi, Pavle. *Cinema by Other Means* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Ohlheiser, Abby. "Most of America's Silent Films Are Lost Forever," *The Atlantic*, December 2013, accessed September 30, 2022, https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2013/12/most-americas-silent-films-are-lost-forever/355775/.