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## THE URBAN IDENTITY IN POST-SOCIALIST CITIES THROUGH THE LENSES OF THE BALKAN CINEMA

### Abstract

The paper deals with the city and its identity in film, through examples of Balkan or Post-Yugoslav cinema. The film is a product of the predominantly urban psyche because its appearance is associated with the modern city. As a result of distribution, film continues to influence our perception and understanding of urban space. All cinematographies in their development have cities “of their own” that are directly or indirectly a constant subject of filmmaking and main protagonists - Paris, Berlin, London, New York, Shanghai, but also visions of an undefined city in numerous sci-fi and noir achievements, films from Italian neorealism, French poetic realism, film-dedications and omnibuses. In the first section are analyzed various ways of representation of the urban space, the urban identity in the contemporary film narratives are analyzed and the city as a living element is explored, as well as the duality between the concrete reality of the city and its fictional representations in cinema. In the second section I give an overview on the political and social changes in former socialist countries in Europe and the changes in the urban landscape (therefore the urban identity) after big historical turns. Following Stuart Hall (1996: 16) the impossibility of simplifying the very concept of identity raises two questions: the question of agency and the question of the political. When it comes to the political, these are at the same time the meanings in the modern forms of political movements, its main connection with the politics of the location, but also all the difficulties and instabilities that affect all modern forms of “identity politics”. When it comes to agency, then it is the subject or identity as the centered author of social practice or the re-articulation of the links between the subject and the discursive practices where the question of identity is repeated. The last section is an overview of these changes in the post-Yugoslav cities, the genealogy of the Balkan city images and the urban identity in context of the post-Yugoslav cinema.

**Keywords:** City, cinema, identity, Balkan, urban landscape



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## INTRODUCTION

The urban landscapes in the film represent the identity of the city and its inhabitants. Christopher Lukinbeal (2005) places the landscape as a central figure in the formation of the film space and gives meaning to the film events and positions the narrative in a certain historical context. Of all the arts, the cinema is largely a part of the social reality – although in recent decades the ideological influence of other media is greater – and from a theoretical point of view its “civic” power (and perhaps duty) is highly valued: *The cinema is exclusively equipped to mark and publish the physical reality and with that it tends towards it* (Stojanović 1978: 387). Therefore, urban identity is an idea closely related to the real or ideal landscape. Ethnic identity is the one that shapes the urban as well as the aspiration towards the ideal identity and is a product that is subject to interpretations by the individual and the institutions in a certain cultural context.

The growing interest in spatial-identity phenomena contributes to the interest in urbanism in cinematography and the changes in the urban space and the changes between the inhabitants; how the urban cinematography and the social, political and historical developments have influenced the change of the architecture, and thus the change of the identity of the inhabitants of the cities. For Šarinić and Čaldarović (2015: 54) the terms urbanity and urbanism are synonymous. The English term urbanism could best be translated as urbanity, i.e. a complex of qualitative dimensions of urban space and hence refers to the “height” of the achieved qualities of urban. The places are filled with personal, social and cultural meanings and thus represent an important framework in which identities are shaped and maintained. The concept of imagined communities leads to the conclusion that the film also has a central role in the development of national identities, and can be applied to cities, neighborhoods, smaller communities, etc. The imagined community refers to the nation according to the definition of Benedict Anderson (1990: 17), and is imagined because the members of even the smallest nations will never meet most of the members of their nation, will not even hear about them, and yet each of them lives with the image of their community. Communities should be distinguished not by their falsehood or truthfulness, but by the way they are imagined.

For the analysis of the identity of the city, the connection with the place should be comprehended, as well as the local interest should become defined; for the identity of the city is not necessarily what individuals see, nor is it an accurate map of the place. New places and new lifestyles have increased the need for new concepts to help individuals understand identity. The starting point was a break with the space and place of the 20th century. The mentioned concepts belong to the issues of identity transformation in cities and buildings as a consequence of cultural globalization, the transformation of local, cultural and architectural values and the sense of belonging.

*Urban identity is inevitably a constructed idea that is tied to a real or ideal landscape. This quality of inseparability from landscape distinguishes identity from image. Ethnic association shapes urban identity and the ideal landscape is forged through a process directed by individuals and institutions in a specific cultural context.* (Arreola 1995: 518)

Lana Slavuj (2011) talks about the processes of creating identity in the place, because these identities are subjective and dynamic categories that are constantly constructed and reconstructed, i.e. do not exist as an objective reality in themselves, but people attribute to

them a certain identity depending on their needs and interests. Identities of places do not expect to be discovered, they are mental constructions.

Thus, according to Slavuj, there are two key processes in the creation of the identity of the place: the first is the assignment of an identity based on positive feelings and connection with the place; feeling when someone is somewhere “at home”. In the second case, identification can also take place by attributing negative feelings to one place, to other, lesser-known places. Places are limited by personal, social and cultural meanings and hence represent an important framework in which identities are shaped and maintained. They are an integral part of everyday life and as such make important the mechanisms through which identities are defined and situated. The concept of “imagined communities” states that the film also plays a central role in the development of national identities, and can be applied to cities, neighborhoods, smaller communities, etc. The post-socialist cities underwent radical changes in the recent past and lend themselves to such analysis.

### FROM SOCIALIST TO POST-SOCIALIST URBAN IDENTITIES

The emphasis is primarily on the post-socialist change of architecture in all capitals across the former state and on the metropolitan identity of these cities and their layered urban landscape. For Crowley and Reid (2002: 2–3), from the incorporation of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe into the socialist space dominated by the Soviet Union to the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc between 1989 – 1991 – there are numerous examples that suggest that in case of postwar socialism the answer to the question ‘do spaces have politics?’, must be affirmative. The end of communism in Central and Eastern Europe created a non-classical model of territorial “occupation”. Namely, the migrations of citizens from Eastern to Western Europe were then considered an act of occupying. The fall of communism created in the “other Europe”, behind the Iron Curtain, conditions similar to those in the former colonies in Africa and Asia, that is, a parallel migration movement.

These countries embarked on a long process of transition involving major political changes in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Eastern European societies ousted autocratic regimes and began the process of building a democratic society. Transitional culture, on the other hand, signifies the symbolic practices that arise from these socio-political transformations, i.e. transition from the socialist/communist order to a liberal-democratic arrangement. Migrations to the West have created “a post-communist diaspora and speak of the crisis in the home: the search for love and bread in the fortress of Europe and the futility of that search” (Daković 2008: 45-46). Ana Miljački (2003: 5) writes that in most cities of Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1991, the masses transformed into citizens, in the old, political sense of the word. They came out of political hiding, took risks and took part in collective action, and the city is the main point of revolution.

The city was the unit of the 1989 uprisings indeed. In 1989, the citizens became visible in Eastern Europe; indeed, the city was articulated through the practice of its citizens, at least for a certain amount of time. In the case of all the countries of the former Yugoslavia, the transformation has been marked by economic collapse, factory closures, rampant unemployment and growing workers’ dissatisfaction. Under terms of the urban landscape,

the restructuring of space, iconography and identity begins. Nationalist aspirations, which previously existed under the official rhetoric of communism and the mask of architectural urbanity, are becoming dominant factors in shaping the urban landscape.

Diener and Hagen (2013) develop the term “post-socialist urbanism” which in urban studies refers to trends in these countries and has three important characteristics. First, it’s obvious that it dates back to the period of urban development that followed socialism. Second, it covers continuity, achievement and shortcomings in understanding modern urban trajectories. And third, by labeling this “post” by negation, by what is and what is not implicit, it shows contemporary uncertainty, transiency, and contingency. Although socialism has brought some uniformity to architecture and urban planning, post-socialist urbanism largely remains in line with some previous strategies.

*Transitions from state to private ownership, from industrial to service based economies, and from urbanization to suburbanization and peri-urbanization, combine with new modes of urban governance to constitute new cityscapes. These changes have been accompanied by equally dramatic transformations in cultural and political identity, especially the inscription of new narratives of the nation and its history into the urban landscape.* (Diener and Hagen 2013: 488)

Post-socialist urbanism is also evolving in a different political context: in some countries it is evolving into an autocracy or oligarchy, where governments have particular authority over urban planning, architecture, and iconography. After 1989, city authorities in almost all Eastern and Southeastern European countries decided to highlight certain periods of the past and ignore others and hence (re)write their own versions of (urban) history and (re)shape (urban) identities.

In these countries the question of memory and oblivion becomes dominant, and the geographical spread of the culture of remembrance has served political purposes and mobilized the mythical past, which aims to support aggressive chauvinist and nationalist policies. New monuments, plaques, street names and museums are emerging just as quickly as those that have been thrown out of the cityscape. A confrontation with socialism at the institutional level begins, revisions of the socialist monumental heritage and a specific articulation of socialism in the textbooks have taken place.

## THE POST-YUGOSLAV URBAN CINEMA

In the countries that emerged from the dissolution of Yugoslavia, burdened with fresh and highly unpleasant memories of civil wars, socialist monuments came to represent oppression. In Croatia alone more than half were destroyed between 1990 and 2000 and in recent years only 100 of those have been restored. In Macedonia, belatedly, the incumbent ruling elite undertook a change in the symbolic landscape of the capital city, since capital cities are representative spaces for the nation. The project “Skopje 2014” not only redefines the socialist past, but also offers a glorified ancient past in its place and as such aims at rewriting history in the public space, directly (Janev 2017: 153-154).

The changes are taking place in a range of practices somewhere from ambitious projects that re-create an entire urban space to a seemingly banal change of street names.

*Three main themes are intertwined in scholarly and popular discourses on the transition from socialist to post-socialist urban identities. The most obvious theme encompasses efforts to re-negotiate the contours of national identity, belonging, and sovereignty as new national histories are constructed and commemorated through urban space. A second theme highlights the unintentional and ambiguous nature of these re-negotiations. Despite the rhetoric of renewal or rebirth originating from this “return to history”, new narratives of national identity and public commemoration are uneasily reconciled with overlapping local, minority, or other identities, as well as established daily practices. Finally, post-socialist urbanism is evolving within the broader context of neoliberal globalization, supranational cooperation, and cultural hybridity. (Diener and Hagen 2013: 496)*

The transformation processes in these cities are under a complex division of similar institutional and spatial heritage, a low degree of commitment to political, economic and institutional reforms in the field of urban policy and strategy. Urban strategies are dominated by the renewal of tradition or the re-traditionalization of society and the shaping of identity by attracting collective ties based on well-known categories and values: nation, traditional family and religion. For Serbian filmologist and sociologist of culture Nemanja Zvijer, a key feature of the post-socialist space was reflected in the radical ideological shift that meant the spread of the dominance of nationalism and thus the suppression of the ideology of the Communist Party. Zvijer points out that in the case of the post-Yugoslav space, an anti-communist discourse prevails in many of the films, which would mean rejecting and diminishing the significance of all key events and processes or prominent figures important to the emergence and development of socialist Yugoslavia or otherwise significant for that country.

The film transforms its narrative with a visual representation. The Balkans function as a specific subcategory of Eastern Europe, as a synonym for a return to the primitive, barbaric. At the same time, the Balkans increasingly want to become Europe, although geographically it has always belonged there. The notion of Europe is becoming more popular than ever: every major Balkan city has a hotel or café with the name Europe. In Sarajevo the first operetta staged in 1995 was also named Europe” (Iordanova 2001: 32 - 33). In Skopje, with the project Skopje 2014, an attempt is being made to establish a European department of local history, the so-called “Europeanization” of architecture and placing Western identity before the Ottoman and socialist heritage. And in some ways it seems that the intended Europeanisation abandons the idea of multiculturalism (cf. Mijalković 2011).

The film continuously revises Europe and its ambiguous nature as a defined location and unattainable destination, which continuously problematizes it. For Aida Vidan (2011: 174) one of the dominant film trends in the region after 1991 is the exploration of space both as a narrative and as a political category following the opposition “place” and “space” by Michel de Certeau. Movement that leads nowhere warns of non-arrival as a permanent state. It also points to the lack of a tidy place, as in De Certeau’s, in which objects (both material and ideological) have a solid point that allows them to coexist. Even when moments of stagnation are shown, narrative tension serves as a centrifugal force that (eventually) catapults characters from their forced stationary accommodations. The concept of movement equally shows the instability of political and spatial terms, because it either continues to take place in eternal times in circular motions or is violently interrupted by the physical death of the characters, which further destabilizes both the narrative and ideological reference point. The

place or country (Yugoslavia) that was used as an organized and stable construct has now disintegrated into a fragmented and uncertain space of competing agendas. In the process of symbolic representation of identity and identification, one of the most important categories is “country” - country of birth, end, landscape, as are the elements of that landscape.

A new theme in post-Yugoslav film is urbicide - the death and destruction of cities caused by military devastation (Sarajevo, Vukovar, Mostar), the changing demographic structure between war and transition (Belgrade, Zagreb) or the escalation of the perpetual conflict between urban and non-urban writes the chronicle of these areas.

*Unfortunately, in the areas of the Central Danube and the Western Balkans, there are many cities whose characteristics have been deliberately humiliated and annihilated. If the war breaks out and those cities can be re-established, will we be able to recognize them? Or, even if they are renewed, they will be transformed into something they were not or, worse, something they did not want to be. Because the killers of cities with infallible, beastly intuition, targeted every city precisely in its vital center: in its memory, in the talisman of self-awareness and identity.* (Bogdanović 2008: 121)

After the wars, the struggle for Europeanization began in the 1990s, centered around the clash of rock and turbofolk as an emanation of primitive nationalism. Since the early 2000s, the representation of cities in Balkan film has begun to change in terms of genre and style: of change” (Daković 2008: 165). One of the reasons for the small number of films that deal with urbanity in the cinemas of the former Yugoslavia in the last 25 years is, as Ryan J. Graves believes, “the concept of the city as a framework for (more) civilized life” in the popular Western imagination. The city in northern Europe after the Middle Ages represents freedom, although this representation is less common in the Balkans where cities were places of regional control and the most visible representation of the Constantinople imperial reach. The city and urbanization - as a material process and cultural transformation - everything that made Europe Europe.

This connection between the concepts of “city” and “civilization” in Europe was further strengthened by the understanding of the city as a place of tolerance and decency. The result of this ideological legacy that connects Europe/civilization with urban living is that ethnic violence is what is against the city and is foreign to the city, hence the urbicide is unavoidable consequence. The rise of nationalist parties in the 1980s, the subsequent wars in these areas, and ethnic cleansing in BiH and Croatia represent a triumph of rural culture over the city’s ideals:

*if violence is foreign to the city, it must be an import from the countryside. Of course, this constructed dichotomy of city-countryside ignores the numerous gradations of urbanity present in Bosnia, where no such tidy spatial division between the town and the countryside can be found* (Graves 2017: 25-26).

The very search for identity in cities and the very identity of cities become dangerous in time of war, because they would stifle any idea of change, difference and innovation. The people were dissatisfied with the identity based on land and landscape and this only increased the tension between the opposing groups who claim that this particular landscape is theirs.

The genealogy of the Balkan city images encompasses a classic and post-war landscape seen through the eyes of a traumatized protagonist. The landscapes of the city are a document of reality and an artistic-textual image. Mapping as a metaphor of the process in the political unconscious, that is, the unconscious military traumas and conflicts of local and global in



Balkan films, opens a different reading of images of cities. The Balkan cinematic landscape is a complex element in the construction of the transcultural identity of the city, which is strongly captured in the collective memories and that landscape invented the tradition and history of the city's transcultural past.

The evolution of that transcultural identity is mapped as a succession of clashes between exotic Ottoman Balkanism and European cosmopolitanism (mostly in Sarajevo, Belgrade and Skopje) and clearly projected on visions of the city. The wars produce erosion of the urban fabric of the city which is visible in the damage to buildings, ruins, exposed interiors and the general state of infrastructure collapse. The architecture of the city is a dark matter, deformed and eroded; it merges with the ground rather than appearing as an articulated presence and composed presentation. The films present the architecture of the city as a spatial field in which social disintegration, political confusion, and cultural ambiguity take place. Often in the plots and narratives of these films there are unresolved questions of nationality and identity of persons, and these are associated with the redrawing of maps and plans (see Lozanovska 2003: 251).

In the postwar cinema, the "blocker films" are also current, as Anikó Imre (2007: 71) names them. The name refers to dilapidated apartment blocks, which are the most common *mise-en-scène* of post-socialist films. The protagonists in these films are in search of female care and male figures - a search that is most often doomed to failure because it takes place in an era where idealistic energies are turning away from political control. This type of film became dominant in Serbian cinema after 1990ies, like *We Are Not Angels* (Srđan Dragojević 1992), *The Black Bomber* (Darko Bajić 1992), *Rage* (Slobodan Skerlić, 1997), *The Wounds* (Srđan Dragojević 1998), *Absolute 100* (Srđan Golubović 2001), *One on One* (Mladen Matičević 2002), *Seven and a Half* (Miroslav Momčilović, 2007), *Tilva Roš* (Nikola Ležaić 2010), etc., which is not the case with other cinemas of the former Yugoslavia, where such films are the exception.

In Croatia, films made after 2000 have a different approach to the treatment of urban and urban areas and deal with the post-war and post-traumatic society in Zagreb. One part of the cinema production analyzes the conflict in the postwar environment and trauma is what determines the entire narrative and ideological universe of the film and it seems that local ethnic polarization, although not necessarily the exclusive paradigm for this type of representation, is dominant.

The new wave of films deals with the city in the new millennium and the transformation of its inhabitants, and Zagreb is again set as a place between the center and the periphery (Europe and the Balkans), characteristic of modernism in the 1960s: *Here* (Zrinko Ogresta 2003), *Armin* (Ognjen Sviličić 2007), *Metastases* (Branko Schmidt 2009), *Mother of Asphalt* (Dalibor Matanić 2010).

In Macedonian cinema, the transition city is themed, followed by the transformation of the subcultural scene and the crisis of urban consciousness. The capital is almost without exception crumbling, chaotic and dirty: in parts *Shadows* (2007) and *Mothers* (2010) by Milčo Mančevski, a blend of urban folklore and underground, like *Punk is not dead* (Vladimir Blaževski 2011), *Amok* (Vardan Tozija, 2016) or a memory of what it once was, like *Upside Down* (Igor Ivanov 2007).



## CONCLUSION

The paper is an observation of the nature of the film, city, and identity in post-Yugoslav cinema and the main goal was to show how socio-political and ideological changes affected the architecture and urban landscape in the Balkan city and to change the identity of urban residents in the former Yugoslavia. The main cities in this environment are the areas that first reflected these changes because their geographical, historical and social context is similar.

In post-Yugoslav film, almost without exception, the boundaries between city and suburbs or between urban and rural are lost, because these cities are not megalopolises, but limited spaces, and the conurbation is metaphorical. Fredric Jameson clearly sees postmodernism as closely related to cities, and much of what he considers a feature of individual postmodern buildings applies to postmodernist film portrayal of architecture and cities. However, this cannot be applied to Balkan film, although the cinema itself portrays a postmodern world. According to Ian Robinson (2010: 116), these films cannot be treated and read only as a response to the problems of urban homogenization, loss of local and personal identity, but also as an argument about where the city is positioned in film art and how it should be represented. These films suggest new ways in which the city can be redesigned and conceptually redefined. Thus, the similarities in these works refer to certain contents that appear in all these films: history, war, trauma, post-war everyday life, revisionism, transition and interaction in urban space, rural-urban relationship and in some films there is a recurring sense of nostalgia, which affects human relationships in the urban environment.

The urban identity is a cinematic field that is still incompletely researched and can be a stimulus for change in the research of the city identities and the future film representations in the urban areas. The film transforms the political, economic and cultural reality and transforms our perception and reading of the urban environment. For these reasons, films should be a regular subject of socially oriented studies in geography, whether it is an analysis of Hollywood production, a particular national cinematography, or a particular authorial poetics. Film practice encourages the process of spatialisation because it itself arises from the exchange between the film text and the viewer, and that exchange creates discursive practices that map socio-political geographies and they articulate them. Films transform places where they are shot into critical spaces.

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