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## ***'Whose Is This Song?'*** **Nationalism and Identity through the lens of Adela Peeva**

### I. Through the lens: a search for truth

*"The unexamined life is not worth living"*

Socrates

*Whose is this Song* is a palimpsest of overlapping cultural layers that explore the imagined cultural and ethnic stereotypes of the Balkan community through this well-known shared tune. It is a documentary film about this hybrid folk tune that is common throughout the Balkan region, but which is the cause of much dissension and the incitement for the events portrayed in the film. Many have commented on, or tried to trace the archetype of, the song 'On the road to Üsküdar' (Turkish version) or 'Απο ξένο τόπο / *From a foreign land* (Greek version). Adela Peeva is on a quest for the truth. As she says in the film, she is on a quest for "the discovery and communication of truth."<sup>1</sup> Though an interesting topic in itself, this paper is more concerned with the "documentary voice"<sup>2</sup> created by the director through the scenery and the subjects she chooses to interview. How she uses her camera lens, and its synchronous focus on the background, or backdrop, not only adds to the mystery of the film, but more importantly to the greater issue of cultural similarity and perceived diversity: nationalism and identity within the Balkans.



(Adela Peeva, b. 1947, Bulgaria)



Adela Peeva is a Bulgarian Documentary Filmmaker<sup>3</sup> who has been involved in the making of over 30 European and International documentary films. Her documentary, *Whose is this Song?* is considered an international work as it was part of a project developed within the “European Documentary Network including workshops in Thessaloniki, Greece and Dubrovnik, Croatia and funded by various European Sponsors”.<sup>4</sup> It stresses the importance of the context of this documentary about a region that shares a cultural and historical past. Some of the films of Adela Peeva made in the period before 1999 were banned by the communist authorities<sup>5</sup>: *Mothers* and *Int he Name of Sport*.

Her films “Whose is this Song” and “Divorce Albanian style” are till now the only Bulgarian films, in the whole history of Bulgarian cinema, nominated by the European Film Academy for Best European Documentary - Prix ARTE

The film begins with a dramatic reconstruction in a ‘performative mode’ where the filmmaker herself is sitting at a table with friends enjoying a meal in the Turkish city of Istanbul. She says that the conversation that night gave her an idea for the documentary *Whose is this Song?* The positioning and the presence of the camera lens, accompanied by the narration, begins in a mode of ‘direct cinema’<sup>6</sup> style but as the story unfolds reverts to the tradition of ‘cinéma vérité’,<sup>7</sup> more of an interactive and even reality style. The participants in this first scene behave as if there is no camera.

The camera itself does not focus on any person in the beginning. It frames the action, and it stays still at one end of the table. In fact, it is as if the camera itself is an appendage of the table or even another one of the guests. The style is akin to a cinema film rather than a documentary. The voice over, Peeva's own voice, begins to narrate, as if retelling a story, remembering an event in the past tense, replaying the scene, directing the audience, but it is also like an exposé that both the viewer and the narrator share. This narration sets the autobiographical tone of the film.

The scene is set for the style of 'cinéma vérité' in Balkan documentary film for which Adela Peeva is well known. The film is autobiographical for Peeva, as it involves the director herself in the pursuit of a childhood memory of a song with which she identifies. The director not only directs the film, she acts in it, she is the narrator, she is the interviewer and her reactions are documented as the reactions of the "other", whether it be another 'missing' ethnic group, the audience or the viewer. 'Cinéma verité' or "observational cinema" works well in this form of documentary as it combines improvisation with the use of the camera to unveil hidden truths but it can also provoke a reaction from the subjects being interviewed, which in turn exposes the crudeness of their perceived reality. It gives the impression of realism but is often a reality based on some 'imagined' truth. In the case of the Balkans, this 'imagined community' plays a major role in Peeva's film.

When the camera position changes to scan across three members of the orchestra, it is as if the camera is invisible. A close up of the female singer, singing *Üskündera gider iken* (*on the road to Üskünder*), one of the Turkish versions of this song, a love song (the other being a military march), ignites the argument at the table where our director sits with her multi-ethnic friends. Through the frame of a door, a third camera peers in at the director who is speaking to the guests at her table adding to the realism factor of the 'cinéma verité' where the main characters, impervious to the existence of the camera, argue between themselves as they each claim the song originates in their own country. Suddenly, the camera imposes on the party, giving us a close up of one man's face, and Adela speaking to another male at the table as they try and argue their case, in Adela's words "then we started a fierce fight – Whose is this song?" The fight was in fact not 'fierce' but rather animated, entertaining and even funny as Adela herself seems to be quite theatrical.

Again the camera focusses on the orchestra and the singer. The band: two violinists, an oud (outi) player and a kanoun (kanonaki) player, a Toumberleki / percussionist and the only female, the singer. All these traditional instruments are common to most of the countries in the Balkans which Adela travels to in her efforts, as she says, to uncover the true origin of the song. In doing this, she is unveiling the archaeology of the song's performance as the idea of an 'origin' for this song and many others of the region is an impossible task. During the Ottoman Empire these instruments and the type of songs such as this one in the film were quite commonly played across the Balkan lands.

However, in front of the musicians and on the stage is a very big and old looking wooden chest, covered in books and a unique old wooden music stand that the violinists and the singer seem to be reading their score from. It is very appropriate for the whole theme of this film as the wooden chest can be seen as a keeper of the culture, a treasure chest that has travelled and ended up here in Istanbul surrounded by people of various cultures. A Pandora's Box full of the rich and colourful Ottoman culture bringing with it both the wonders and the woes of the area. Even the wall in the background, with its broken and missing plaster, and the many small frames hanging on it, gives a feeling of the war-torn history of the past that all adds to the song's significance. The scenery and the atmosphere of this tavern make sense, adding to the mystery of the song. The 'documentary voice' is introduced and lives in the scenery, the atmosphere and the music of this typical Turkish, but also very much cosmopolitan, restaurant.

Suddenly, the camera is out of the restaurant and in front of Adela as she walks uphill through a narrow picturesque street in Istanbul. She visits a CD shop and asks for the recorded version of this song. From this scene on, she employs a type of reality cinema where it seems as if she is randomly talking to people on the street. As a documentary filmmaker she has succeeded in incorporating her research on the topic, seemingly coming across interesting characters to interview. The people she speaks to are used to express not only the 'documentary's voice' but also the 'director's voice' uncovering the issue of belonging. Belonging to one's culture through this song and therefore not belonging to another is a point her film is trying to make. As one review attests "The film explicitly reveals how a popular

musical piece becomes associated with any given national imaginary (for example, Albanian, Bulgarian, Greek, or Turkish). It comes as no surprise that the characters categorically refuse to accept that representatives of a foreign, though neighbouring community, could sing the same song and love it as they do. By a bitter irony, instead of dividing them, the song binds together these national territories like a thin red thread, uniting collective memories and personal stories. Above all, however, it shows the typical Balkan predisposition to stubborn negativism".<sup>8</sup>

The film has been advertised as being a "funny, dramatic and tragicomic search for the truth about a song" that has been claimed by the various states mentioned as their unique heritage. It is, in fact, an exposé of the character of the people of the Balkans, especially at the time it was filmed in 2003, so soon after the Bosnian vs Serbian conflict. "In the Balkans, the issue of the search for roots is raised because of collective forgetfulness."<sup>9</sup> The common Ottoman Culture is thrust aside in search of the uniqueness of a nationalistic identity. Cultural aspects considered good are considered the heritage of the "one chosen culture" and the "collective memory" is discarded. This very identity, or lack of it, is one of the main causes of struggles in the area. According to the Film's DVD cover, it is a "film showing with a sense of humour some of the typical features of the character of the peoples of the Balkans, as for example their habit of appropriating all that is good and denying the others the right to possess the same qualities, the same songs, the same customs, the same temperament."<sup>10</sup> The first man she interviews in Turkey insists the song is Turkish. "No!" he says, "it is not Arabic, Greek? No! It is Turkish!" Another says it is a symbol of being Turkish and as Turkish as "shish kebab and Turkish delight". And so the film continues as Adela travels to search for the 'truth' from Turkey to Greece then to Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia, Serbia and Bulgaria. Adela approaches the Balkans as a type of shared "historically connected, cultural space",<sup>11</sup> something that almost all of the people she interviews are ignorant of. They are not interested in the "uncomfortable facts, which refuse to be fitted in," as Maria Todorova says "we find ourselves ignoring or distorting so that they do not disturb these established assumptions."<sup>12</sup>

Film is the perfect medium for expressing political situations, historical perspectives and national pride; how other or different nationalities appear or do not appear is paramount. The presence and treatment of the

'other' in these films expresses the society portrayed. The perception is that in order to claim an identity a culture must differ from the identity of the 'other'. Therefore, differences are magnified and even sometimes manufactured. In this documentary, Adela Peeva is aware of the 'other', she brings it to the attention, through this beautiful song, to all those she interviews, however their reactions confirm the divisions between the cultures in the Balkans. She tries to break this omission of the "other" in her documentary by suggesting to each ethnic group that maybe this song originated elsewhere, however, the need to feel a part of a privileged identity makes the people distance themselves from the rest. Her camera captures this raw reality and questions it. It is the documentary voice, her 'voice'; an autobiographical gaze of the many troubled and 'imagined communities' that make up the Balkans.

In Serbia, the Gypsy community claims it was sung by a famous Gypsy singer Koštana. She finds and speaks to a couple of Koštana's grandchildren, the camera focuses on their wrinkly faces and toothless smiles; their sincerity. Here her film reverts to an old, highly sexualised, film of the very attractive Koštana singing the song in a musical-theatrical production. Later, she comes across a gypsy parade celebrating St George's Day where they play the Bregovic<sup>13</sup> version of the song with its lively jazz band style of music. The loud music, happiness and joy of the gypsy parade is then juxtaposed with the absolute silence and severity of a young Serbian priest. He appears in his study, surrounded by books giving the impression that he is well-educated and 'civilised' in comparison to the gypsy masses enjoying themselves out on the street. He questions why the gypsies should celebrate St George's day at all. Further evidence of the homogeneity in the Serbian nation is when the priest blames the composer Bregovic and the filmmaker Kusturica<sup>14</sup> for the popularisation of such gypsy music and even refers to the "gypsification" of Serbian music; the term being derogatory and outright racist.

With the fall of communism, after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, nationalism once again prevails in the area with the many smaller ethnic groups vying for independence and sovereignty. When the government of the Yugoslav republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina declared its independence from Yugoslavia in 1992, war broke out and over the next several years, "Bosnian Serb forces, with the backing of the Serb-dominated Yugoslav

army, targeted both Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) and Croatian civilians for atrocious crimes resulting in the deaths of some 100,000 people<sup>15</sup> by 1995. Peeva's documentary does not focus directly on these issues though the scenery in the documentary speaks for itself. Her goal is to expose the many problems and differences between these nationalities; the tragedy and the comedy of it all. She exposes the ridiculousness of the situation; that they are willing to fight over a song.

Adela Peeva also uses the same tragic-comic style in her film *Divorce Albanian Style*, with its light-hearted title but very serious topic, about the separations enforced on Albanians married to women from the Soviet Union, after a political fall-out, by the Albanian government in 1961. "Since the fall of Soviet-styled socialism there has been an explosion of discourses about nationalism and nostalgia. Many critics have pointed out that nostalgia signifies a longing (algos) to "return" home (nostos). The construction of a homeland, driven by longing, in turn can conveniently be used as a means of legitimising the "emerging" nation-state after the age of (Otto-man, Russian, Austro-Hungarian) empire and the Cold World order."<sup>16</sup> The nationalism of the people interviewed is evident and representative of the various cultures in the Balkan area. Their inability to recognise the familiar, the shared memory leads them to such preposterous claims regarding this folk song. "This "return" to the nation-state, however, as Benedict Anderson and Stathis Gourgouris argue, is more a product of imagination and dreams than an historical fact, since it involves more the recent past (and even present) than recollecting a more distant past."<sup>17</sup>

Through the 'documentary voice' she has succeeded in breaking this glass ceiling which separates one ethnic group from the other, simply by acknowledging the existence of these perceived cultural differences. Through the use of the song, Peeva shows how irrational nationalism is and how much all these people have in common. It is, however, those people interviewed and how they view the 'other' that stands out in the film. The way they view themselves as 'special' and the song as their property, their community's personal memory exposes the identity they have created and the subsequent nationalism forever re-shaping their collective memory.

## Re-inventing a cultural and national identity of belonging

*‘Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.’<sup>18</sup>*  
Clifford Geertz

The Balkan region had always undergone change and has two crucial historical legacies that have influenced thought and humanity in the region. One is “the millennium of Byzantium with its profound political, legal, religious and cultural impact. The other is the half millennium of Ottoman rule that gave the peninsula its name and established the longest period of political unity it had experienced.”<sup>19</sup>

Originally part of the Ottoman Empire, between 1912 and 1917 the Balkans was divided into smaller states, each fighting for independence, sovereignty and a national identity. This balkanisation continued in the area after WWI and again during the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990’s.

Though there is no precise definition of where the Balkans start and where they end, the Balkan Peninsula is a geographical and cultural region of Southeast Europe some 490,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Serbian filmmaker Dušan Makavejev says, “There are 67 million people in the nine Balkan countries. If we add Turkey, which is leaning on the peninsula with one small leg, we have 132 million “Balkanians”. And with Hungary and Austria, although these ladies drink tea and are persuaded to be Middleuropa, then we Balkanians and semi-Balkanians are 150 million.”<sup>20</sup> Being Balkan it seems is nothing to be proud of.

“Ottoman rule is considered to have been a major interruption in the development of the Balkan countries as part of Europe, and is conceptualised as a significant impediment to the fulfilment of these nations’ European goals.”<sup>21</sup> During the Ottoman Empire, which lasted roughly between 400 and 500 years, the whole area was a mixture of various ethnic groups who shared a lot of aspects of the same culture. Later on, this shared culture and historic memory would lead to war as each ethnic group struggled to lay claim to various aspects of the culture and land and maintain what they perceived to be their own unique heritage. The Balkanisation of the area was, therefore, based on the differences between them and the “other” ethnic groups. “All identities are constructed”<sup>22</sup> and this “territorial identity is a fundamental anchor of belonging.”<sup>23</sup> Similarities were claimed as heritage



or influences that had been somehow either borrowed or stolen from them. This rise in Nationalism in the area accounts for much of the hostility between neighbouring states and so their focus has been on their “differences” rather than their “similarities”. Therefore “what is called cultural identity is constantly compared to and at the limit conflated with ‘national identity’.”<sup>24</sup>

Religion has also been another basis of dissention as we see when Adela visits the Muslim sections of Albania, Bosnia and Macedonia. “Religious practices and symbols” are “thought of as affirmations of cultural identity or of privileged anchoring points for *imputing* a cultural identity.”<sup>25</sup> Each nation within the Balkans, despite its shared heritage, is far from a homogenous society. The Serbian priest who remarked about the ‘gypsification’ of his culture and what he refers to as “the Balkan evil” is an example of this mentality of nationalism encouraged by the State in an effort to keep the nation ‘pure’ and strive to be more western European. The importance of “Identity” that “is people’s source of meaning and experience”<sup>26</sup> is in itself not evil. After all, it is natural for all humans to want to belong to a community. It is only when one’s identity becomes nationalistic, when it is based on the non-existence of another person’s right to the same identity that it becomes outright dangerous. It becomes the source of evil evident in ‘ethnic cleansing’ during the breakup of Yugoslavia and elsewhere in the Balkans.

Culturally none of these countries want to be seen as being part of the Balkans and “the political situation, the historical background, the mixture of nationalities and the issue of national pride all make the position of the ‘other’ in the Balkans a particularly complex and interesting element of filmmaking.”<sup>27</sup> The negative connotations of being Balkan are “a synonym of war and painful tragedy”<sup>28</sup> and “exoticism, ambiguity and ‘third worldisation’.”<sup>29</sup>

In the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo, in the backdrop, the lens captures the remnants of the war which are evident, as many damaged buildings are still standing, with people still living in them, even though walls are missing and the buildings are open to the elements. There is no need for narration as the camera conveys its own story. *Whose Song is This?* could just as well be *Whose story is this?* A story of the Balkans using this beautiful folk tune as the catalyst.

When in Albania, Adela asks if the song could be Serbian, she is told “Serbs have no traditions (meaning compared to them).”<sup>30</sup> The situation is

the same in most of the other countries she travelled to. The camera shows scenes of children playing on the military bunkers, as the narration continues to tell us that there are 750,000 bunkers built by the Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha to keep others out, a reminder of the long period of communist military rule in the country and lack of freedom. This is the raw face of the Balkans. "The way one nation regards the other is most often negative, or at least mocking in tone."<sup>31</sup> It is in total opposition to the façade of a civilised western nation that the singer wants to portray when she says, "we are the most ancient of peoples" as if that is some claim to civilisation. The fact that, the Albanians may well have been in the area for 4,000 years and view themselves as descendants of the ancient Illyrians<sup>32</sup> is used as a strong case for Albanian nationalism. What has occurred since is forgotten. "In the Balkans the issue of the search for roots is raised because of collective forgetfulness."<sup>33</sup> As Peeva asks people on the street for their opinion about the song. They fervently claim it as their own and scoff at suggestions it could also belong to any of their neighbouring countries. Here the song sounds like a classical song, accompanied by guitars and mandolins; a wonderful fusion of Albania's Ottoman and Italian influences.

The Balkan cultural identity is constructed around a perceived glorious historical past, a common language, folklore, music and dance. Culturally groups tend to be "self-defining in terms of their ability to articulate differences between self and other."<sup>34</sup> These are attributes that people are willing to die for in the belief that their cultural or ethnic group is somewhat superior or different from the 'other'. The achievement of this new, reconstructed identity and sense of belonging as Balibar says, "is never a peaceful acquisition: it is claimed as a guarantee against a threat of annihilation that can be figured by 'another identity' (a foreign identity) or by an 'erasing of identities'."<sup>35</sup> Authenticity in music and identity are closely related as "it focuses a way of talking about music, a way of saying to outsiders and insiders alike 'this is what is really significant about this music, this is the music that makes us different from other peoples."<sup>36</sup>

With the term Balkanisation coming to be perceived as "the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian"<sup>37</sup> many nationalities want to distance themselves from it. In fact, the term 'Balkan' is a term of such contention in this area that Croatia and Slovenia issued "documents explicitly stating their desire not to be referred as 'Balkan'"<sup>38</sup> as they strive to be

considered European. The Balkans are always the 'others'. The fact that new intellectuals and filmmakers are now going back to the 'orientalisation'<sup>39</sup> of the Balkans in an effort to renew the cultural similarities once enjoyed by all in the Ottoman period is a much welcomed respite from the almost self-flagellation of the Eurocentrist, Balkan martyr, who is trying to beat the devil (the Ottoman heritage) out of his system in an effort to identify with what is perceived as a more civilised and cultured Western Europe. This 're-imagining' of the Balkans, whereby the Ottoman history is embraced, is one of the underlying issues in many of Peeva's documentary films and the "lens" or point of view, from which she views these issues.

One fact remains, "because of its proximity but also because of a period of some 500 years of occupation by the Turkish Empire, much of the Balkan Peninsula has music clearly related to and often even definitely a part of the music of the Middle East."<sup>40</sup> This cultural diffusion in the area has led to many shared cultural experiences including dance, craft and music. The Uskandar song attests to this as do a myriad of other folk tunes. Songs such as, for example, the Turkish / Greek versions of *Firtina* (*Στο'πα και στο ξαναλέω*), *Aman Doktor* (*Αμάν Ντοκτόρ*), *Izmir'in Kavalari* (*Ο Τακιτζής*), *Gözün aydın* (*Αρμενάκι*), the Greek/ Albanian Dance of *Zalongo* (*Χορός του Ζαλόγγου*) and countless more shared songs that are common throughout the region. In fact, the common threads of music in the Balkans goes back much further, centuries in fact, from around the 12<sup>th</sup> century when the Greek version of the epic poem *The Bridge of Arta* (*Το γιοφύρι της Άρτας*) appears. In Serbia, it is known as *The Building of Skadar* and in Romania as *Mesterull Manole* (*The Masterbuilder Manoli*). The common theme is human sacrifice of the master builder's wife in order for a structure to stand strong. This same theme is also present in the poetry of Bulgaria, Albania and the other cultures of the Balkan Peninsula. Where did this notion of human sacrifice begin from who knows? The idea of human sacrifice has been around from antiquity. We have only to remember the Homeric legend of *Iphigenia* who was sacrificed by her father Agamemnon so that the winds would come, and his ships would sail. More recently, the same themes are used in new musical constructions and the works of the classical composers of the area, such as that of *The Master Builder* by Manolis Kalomiris last century when he set music to the Greek version of the epic poem. These epic poems, which are immersed in the 'oral' tradition of transference from one

generation to another, do not necessarily share an archetype, an original, from one particular area. The multiple variations and constructions of these epics occurred over the centuries via this oral tradition over large areas of Europe, the Middle East and Asia. This is the beauty of cultural diffusion; a shared culture, and this is also the incubus of nationalists as it deconstructs all that nationalism stands for.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the constant re-invention of historical contexts the folk tunes took on a new function. They went from songs to be enjoyed at a time of harvest, religious and secular celebrations to connote nationalistic songs of freedom performed at nationalistic celebrations. In an effort to re-invent themselves as homogenous ethnic nations of the Balkans, common folk tunes, like other cultural attributes, were plundered and their new 'pure' identity created. When nations are being torn apart and new nations are forming, the folk song takes on a new role in unifying the ethnic group by supporting the idea of a collective historical memory.

With the onset of recording the dissemination of the music changed from an aural-oral setting to a fixed 'learn it from the record note-for-note' setting which meant the music and song became stagnant. It also meant that those who had recorded it first claimed it as their own original work. This is the case with many of the Rembetika songs recorded in America by Panayiotis Tountas in the 1920's and 30's and which many listeners assume he composed. Once folk songs are recorded and notated in songbooks they stop being folk songs, their function changes. "They became national songs learned from songbooks and taught in classes... and sung at concerts."<sup>41</sup> They become identifiers of culture and ethnicity. They change from "melodies sung unaccompanied to choral settings with harmony, and from songs that existed in many variations to standardised versions."<sup>42</sup> Semiologically, they take on a new meaning. From that moment on they have a different life to the creative process and fluidity they had before.

The "function of the song for identity construction"<sup>43</sup> is paramount as folk songs have always been important in the creation of a cultural awareness among similar peoples. Sometimes this is used in a nationalistic way to help form an identity that is perceived to be unique.

### III. A song's journey

“Only when all of us - all of us – recover our memory, will we be able, we and them, to stop being nationalists.” Rubert de Ventas<sup>44</sup>

The peoples of the Balkan area shared many cultural characteristics, the transmission of music through the aural-oral tradition being one of them. As Nettl says “Music is a cultural universal it is not a universal language”<sup>45</sup> therefore the idea that music is universal crossing borders and that it unites us all is a fallacy. What is true is that different cultures adapt a melody and create an entity that performs a function in that society or community. In this way a new identity is constructed and the melody is identified by this one ethnic or cultural group as belonging to them. This can happen simultaneously in different parts of the world. In the Balkans, the same basic folk tunes, for which there was no written notation, have been adapted, stories or histories created surrounding their pre-existence or conception and they then are used to form the identity of that ethnic group as they see themselves. The aural way that music is disseminated in such cultures and the constant re-invention of tunes, where the common practise was a natural process of accumulation culminating in multiple authorships of the same tune is a natural phenomenon.

However, another influence on the folk tune is when “different cultures’ music are affected differently when they come into contact with other musical cultures”<sup>46</sup> as once these folk tunes travel to different nations they are almost certainly influenced by the various musical traditions and outside influences of that particular region. This occurs when different localities create different re-imagining of the music, thus simultaneously creating an entity that satisfies their cultural modes of expression. For example, in Albania, the song takes on a classical air, whereas in Turkey it is both a love song where the more Ottoman influences are present but also a military march celebrating the fall of Constantinople in 1453 where the German band style musical influence is apparent. Historically, German band music was very much a part of the Ottoman Empire as the Ottomans used German maestros to organise their military marching bands.

On mainland Greece it is known as *Από ξένο τόπο κι απ' αλαργινό* (*Apo Xeno Topo ki ap' Alargino*). However, Peeva does not travel to the Greek mainland, but instead to the Greek island of Mytilene. Out of all the

Greek versions the most interesting was the one of the almost toothless Solon singing in a Greek Taverna whose rendition of the Mytilenian song, *Έχασα μαντίλι* (I lost a handkerchief with a hundred gold coins) was similar to that of a Turkish *Amanè* reminiscent of the Ottoman influences on the island.

In the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia the camera follows Adela to the house of a Dervish Community leader Baba Orel. Orel asks the director "Let me dress up properly first" (meaning for the camera) before they interview him but the camera is rolling, documenting this reality. He claims it is a jihad song used for the Islamisation of the people.

While travelling in the car the camera records Adela being accused of not being objective by her Macedonian driver, as in his view she is only showing the Muslim view. She does not cut this from the scene. It adds to the reality of her search for "truth" and 'cinéma vérité' style. The culture is not homogenous. There are great differences of religion and even dialect in many of the countries in the film. The camera scans the ruins of an old dilapidated Orthodox Church. The suffering of these people is evident. The driver says that too much emphasis is given on historical events in the Balkans. He doesn't care whether Alexander the Greek was Macedonian or Bulgarian, "He waged wars, he lost, that's that!" The fact that he did not know that Alexander was never defeated in battle just highlights the fact that many of these people don't know themselves or their collective history at all. However, more importantly and very current is the young man's plea when referring to the whole Balkan area "We are too preoccupied with history, that is our fault." In a way this young man, in need of a job in a crisis-riddled South East Europe, sums up the problems of his generation who are stuck in a time warp and used as pawns by various nationalistic governments thus adding to the expression of the 'documentary voice' in the film. He sees history as being meaningless to his survival. His remarks dignify the purpose (or misuse of) of history to justify the unjustifiable, a mythologised past in order to validate nationalism worth dying for.

At a Serbian dinner party, Peeva provocatively plays the Bosnian version of the song, which may not have been the best tactic since these countries were only recently out of a war with one another. "This is theft!" one of the guests exclaimed. Whether she got the effect she expected or not, the party broke up with Peeva and her crew forcefully asked to leave.

She seemed quite upset in the film and this is the first instance when we see that there is a camera and that its presence is acknowledged when she instructs the camera person to continue taping even though a skirmish is breaking out. She wants it all documented. All in all, it was a good outcome for her film as it added to the “documentary voice” of the film and the context she wanted to explore.

The documentary ends in Bulgaria where the reaction is as bad as in Serbia. Even though Adela remembered it as a love song “A Clear Moon” in the town of Strandja it is an anthem of liberation. At a gathering to commemorate the liberation of Strandja from the Ottomans which began in 1876. The men she spoke to threaten to stone or hang anyone who says it is not Bulgarian. The film ends when a fire takes hold in a field and the soldiers and others rush to try and put it out. The fire and “the way of editing the images is designed to foster a concentration of such patriotic elements.”<sup>47</sup> The film’s ending serves as an allegory for the situation in the Balkans; the fire represents the Balkans, everything is heated, hatred is burning people up, the ethnic cleansing, the divisions, the balkanisation of an area, the patriotism and struggle for a national identity in an area that once shared a common past and still shares many common cultural elements but refuses to accept it, is powerful.

The nationalistic and sometimes dangerous aspects of Remembrance days are questioned. As Rohringer asks “Which function do such ceremonies have until today?”<sup>48</sup> Many of the Klepht songs sung at these ceremonies are different versions of the same song in a different dialect as they were common among the people of the Balkans such as the Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbians and Romanians. An example is the Vlach song A Black Life we Black Klephtes have (Μαύρη ζωή που κάνουμε εμείς οι μαύροι κλέφτες). The need for these quite small ethnic groups of the Balkans to celebrate and keep alive sometimes manufactured notions of history and grandeur, within a framework of nationalistic self-importance, has become a dangerous and extremely volatile tradition. The use of folk songs in such commemorations and their function is also evident as the folk song now represents to them an anthem of their previous glory which they now aspire to regain.

“The fact that the Balkan peoples do not know about the existence of the same song in their neighbouring countries might result from such

# Üsküdar'a gider iken

Apó kséno tópo / Der Terk in Amerika...

**A** = 60

Em B Em

Em B Em

Em B

Em B Em

**B** Em B

Em B *f*Em *2*Em

62 Tous aux Balkans !  
<http://www.tousauxbalkans.net/Uskudar>



socially constructed processes of forgetting.”<sup>49</sup> Could this be unique to the Balkan region? Probably not. Rohringer refers to the “fencing off”<sup>50</sup> of the different nations in the film, as they do not have any knowledge of a ‘collective memory’ of the song. The film shows up “how ‘different’ memories about the song are constructed in the ‘different’ places”.<sup>51</sup> This poses many questions and the ‘director’s voice’ becomes a stimulant for understanding and change which is why it has been won a number of awards and been nominated for countless others.

Peeva has been successful in showing that part of human nature that is open to the brainwashing of nationalism and contrived history. Where music is “an art which transcends all borders”<sup>52</sup> and so is supposed to unite people in this instance it is a catalyst for hatred. As she says in the film. “When I first started searching for the song I thought it would unite us... I never believed the sparks of hatred can be lit so easily”.

The reception of the film is also interesting in that in many reviews the film is branded as a “tragicomic depiction of the Balkan region.”<sup>53</sup> A blogger, Sammish writes “It is so sad to know that old wounds never heal when it comes to ethnicities in the Balkans. Although Peeva’s approach of going and interviewing common people instead of seeking academics and experts in music history is well taken, it falls short of getting an objective assessment of where this song originated. I guess this approach (common people interviews) is excellent in assessing the deep political differences and ethnocentric tendencies of the population.”<sup>54</sup>

A very important element that must also be considered is the language of the song. One reason people feel so strongly about it is because of the language. The assumption is that if the lyrics are in Greek or Turkish or Serbian therefore it must be Greek or Turkish or Serbian. The fact that the song has a similar theme; a love song about a girl, in so many of the countries attests to its ‘translatibility’ in the area. The cultural diffusion and shared values, aspirations and culture of these people who lived in such close proximity for hundreds if not thousands of years.

One criticism of Peeva is that she has stereotyped the Balkan people and that her questioning technique and interviews tend to be directed at a westernized audience, as an audience considered to be more “civilised”<sup>55</sup> compared to the “Balkan Madness.”<sup>56</sup> The film is sometimes a shock for the

more westernised audience, who see in it the hatred these people feel for each other as an unsolvable problem whereas those of Balkan background can see the ridiculousness of it; the humour. “Both audiences however, repeat stereotypical constructions of extremes and polarisation.”<sup>57</sup> Rohringer believes that the western audience take the film too seriously and the animosity between the cultures as extreme and worrying. It is also important to mention that this film was made soon after the war in the former Yugoslavia so there would have been a lot of antipathy between the nations. The film actually won the OSCE Award for Human Rights and Diversity at the Dokufest Film Festival in Prizren Kosovo in 2006 it was said that the “film educates people about tolerance and diversity”.<sup>58</sup> It seems that the context in which the film is shown and the song that is heard plays a major role in its favourable reception and the viewer’s understanding of it.

#### IV. So who owns this song?

*“To arrive where we started and to know the place for the first time.” – T.S. Elliot*

In the documentary *Whose is this Song?* Adela Peeva chose to interview what seemed more like random people she met or heard of along her travels rather than experts in the field of Ethnomusicology. Though she did speak with some artists, mostly musicians and singers as well as others, they were mostly not experts in music nor academics of cultural studies. It is more likely she chose to speak to typical people on the street rather than the experts who would no doubt give “politically correct” answers to her questions. By choosing to interview lay people she unravelled the core of one of the greatest challenges that people of the Balkan area face, one of identity. This is what leads to nationalism, sectarianism, racism and hatred that has ravaged the area for centuries. However, by doing so she also exposes the ridiculousness of it all and in so doing joins the many other documentary film makers of the Balkans, many who came along after Peeva, such as Petra Seliškar (*Mama Europa* – Slovenia, Macedonia, Croatia)<sup>59</sup>, Lode Desmet (*The Majority Starts Here* – Bosnia, Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia), John Zaritsky (*Romeo and Juliet in Sarajevo* – Bosnian), Andreas Apostolidis and Yuri Averoff (*Twice a Stranger* – Greece, Turkey) to name a few. Adela’s other films also continue this theme with other award

winning documentaries such as *The Unwanted*, *Born from the Ashes*, *I Dream of Mummers* and *The Mayor*.

The *Uskandar* song in *Whose Song is This?* is well known in Turkey as a Cemil Bey<sup>60</sup> composition, however it is also well known in many other countries within and without the Balkan region. It has been performed from as early as 1700 (and later recorded in many versions, many times) as an Armenian, Ottoman, Sephardic Jewish and even Persian song. It has travelled all over the world including, Egypt and the Middle East (in Egypt it's known as 'Fel S Hara' or 'Ya Banat Iskandaria'), the USA (Eartha Kitt sang it in Turkish in the 1950's and the jazz flautist Herby Mann even played it) and it has even been performed in Japan (by electric guitarist Taketsi Terauchi). The only Balkan voice of dissention (and of reason) in the documentary, as far as the tune goes, is Macedonian composer-musicologist Ilia Pejovski who says "It is not a Macedonian tune. There is no such beat in Macedonian folklore." The only one with that opinion. The rhythm of 4/4 is played slowly in some versions of the songs and faster in others. It is a western rhythm partnered with a very eastern tune giving it a very exotic sound. Considering all this controversy, it would be hilarious if it originated from a most unexpected northern European country such as Scotland as is one view by a couple of Turkish bloggers (the first to mention it was Sunay Akin), who claim it is not a Turkish rhythm either, on various blogging sites about the song Iskandaria (Uskandar).<sup>61</sup>

The so called 'origin' of the song and the empirical race to find where it comes from comes to an end. This song, another fluid creation where there is no particular cultural ownership, belongs to all. It is "...a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of the superimposed upon or knotted into one another..."<sup>63</sup> After all, "culture is located in the minds and hearts of men."<sup>64</sup> If you identify with it, it belongs to you just as much so as to anyone else who also identifies with it.

However, this film is not just about a song, this song—it is about hundreds of such shared cultural experiences that belong to all in the Balkans. It is about multiple origins and multiple interpretations that share commonalities with countries around the globe and in this tune's case even as far as Persia and India. It is a film about the similarities and the perceived differences. It is about "a society in constant fluidity and instability."<sup>65</sup>

For Adela Peeva it is an effort not necessarily to find the true origin of this song, but to show a truth about the Balkan region, one that no nationalistic state will accept. The documentary can only ever be a snapshot of the dominant perceptions of the Balkan Peoples at a particular time. After all, "Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly?"<sup>66</sup> Adela leads us, she directs our responses she fuels our outrage all the time allowing us to experience the 'beauty and the beast' that is the Balkans. Peeva believes in the Balkan entity. This most beautiful tune may be viewed as divisive but the documentary itself "stresses the existence of a collective memory."<sup>67</sup> Peeva's challenge to find a commonality in this documentary through the common tune was fraught with difficulty even though she chose a narrative that tried to build upon their relativity. The autobiographical tone of the 'documentary voice' in this film adds to its truthfulness and its positivity encourages discourse and understanding between the various Balkan countries. Peeva is not afraid to question the mistakes of the past and portray ethnic issues in the Balkans and hence her documentaries have consistently won documentary film awards in the Balkans and overseas.<sup>68</sup>

## Notes

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- 3 Has been working as a director for the TV stations in Ex-Yugoslavia and as a Director in the Studio for Documentary Films and the Studio for Feature Films in Sofia. Has been a teacher of Documentary Film and a juror in a number of Film Festivals. See her biography at <http://adelamedia.net/adela-peeva.php>
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- 5 *Mothers* - "Silver Rhyton" at the National Non-fiction Film Festival  
*In the Name of Sport* - Prize of the Critics at the National Non-fiction Film Festival
- 6 Fitzgibbons, Laughren, Williamson, 2011, p.5
- 7 Fitzgibbons, Laughren, Williamson, 2011, "...it promotes communicative exchange between filmmakers and participants through, for instance, techniques such as interview, talking heads and testimony."p.6

- 8 Gergana Doncheva, National Academy for Theater and Film Art (NATFA), Sofia, Bulgaria. From <http://www.kinokultura.com/specials/5/song.shtml>
- 9 Petia Slavova, Adela Peeva, Bulgaria *Whose Is This Song?* In Darras, M. Palacios Cruz, (Eds) *Balkan Identities, Balkan Cinemas*, Nisi Masa, European Network of Young Cinema, p.36.
- 10 *Whose is this Song?* DVD Cover.
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- 12 Todorova, Maria, *Imagining The Balkans*, NY & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
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- 45 Nettle,2008, ibid. p.13
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- 49 Rohringer, Margt, 2009, ibid.
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- 52 Petia Slavova, 2009, p.36
- 53 Rohringer, Margt. 2009, p.86
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- 68 See Adela Media website <http://adelamedia.net/movies/whose-is-this-song.php>

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Production: 2003  
Genre: Documentary  
Length: 55/70 min  
Formats: Betacam SP  
35 mm. Film copy  
Director: Adela Peeva  
Producers: Slobodan Milovanovic  
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