

# **Balkan Wedding Revisited: Multiple Messages of Filmed Nuptials**

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October 1998  
Working Paper 98-1

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The fighting in Bosnia started over a wedding, or at least the first shots were fired during an incident in March 1992 when the guests of a Serbian wedding walked through a Muslim neighborhood in Sarajevo waving Serbian flags. In response, a Muslim shot at the procession. The father of the bride was killed, and two guests were wounded.<sup>1</sup> This seemingly minor event gained great symbolic power during the Bosnian war, and a reconstruction of it was featured in the opening scenes of *Welcome to Sarajevo*.<sup>2</sup> However, long before that film, shooting at weddings and even shooting at the burials of those killed at them, became a commonplace symbol of the terror people experienced during the Bosnian war. One of the most depressing documentaries produced by TV Bosnia and Hercegovina featured a Sarajevo wedding with an absent groom—he had been killed just hours before the ceremony was scheduled to begin.<sup>3</sup>

Another wedding with a much more disturbing populist-nationalist message took place in the winter of 1995. But, since the wedding happened in the safety of embargo-stricken Belgrade, no one shot at it. Rather, people cheered. It was dubbed “the wedding of the century” and was estimated to have cost about \$250,000. This was the wedding of Serbian warlord Arkan to the folksinger Ceca, showcasing a wealth of peasant and urban wedding folklore. In the footsteps of the eclectic turbo-folk genre,<sup>\*</sup> in which Ceca is a central figure, the members of this wedding engaged in an eclectic mixture of domestic and imported rituals that were supposed to set new trends for celebrating in style. In order to reach wider audiences, the lavish spectacle of the wedding was recorded on a videotape and edited by a local production company, which cut it down to two hours and released it for sale.<sup>4</sup> *Ceca and Arkan*, the video, is available at the store

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\*According to Eric D. Gordy, “The term ‘turbo-folk’ was coined in the early 1990s by Serbian rock musician Rambo Amadeus to describe his satiric cooptation of neo-folk forms and imagery. However, commercial neo-folk performers who lacked Rambo’s irony adopted the term for themselves, and it came to refer less critically to an amplified and synthesized dance kitsch form, which received tremendous commercial promotion. . . . State media began to . . . promot[e] neo-folk, first by promoting established mainstream celebrities, and then, briefly, by widely distributing the work of nationalist-oriented performers which celebrated the ambitions of the regime and attacked its opponents. . . . Two television stations in Belgrade are dedicated to full-time promotion of neo- and turbo-folk videos.” (“On Urban Identity in the Global Palanka: Perceptions of Self Among Belgrade Rockers.” Ph.D. thesis in musicology, University of California, Berkeley, 1996) Kim Simpson adds, “And while political boasting of the more hard-headed sort is actually part of Serbian tradition, as in songs such as ‘Ko to Kaze Ko to Laze Srbija je Mala [Whoever says that Serbia is small is a liar],’ never before have political themes been incorporated to such an extent into the songs of the country’s pop stars.” (“The Dissolution of Yugoslav Rock,” unpublished paper, University of Texas at Austin, Summer 1995)

operated by *Crvena Zvezda* (*Red Star*) soccer club in Belgrade. The proceedings from the sale go directly to foundation *Third Child*, which makes grants in support of ethnic Serbian mothers. Taping weddings is a popular global trend; people do it all around the world. Thus, there is nothing unusual in the fact that this particular wedding was released on video. Moreover, the event purported to be compatible in importance and style to the wedding of Charles and Diana.

This wedding was also, however, a display of inconsiderate confidence, a perpetuation of the “I do not give a damn!” attitude for which the groom is well known.<sup>5</sup> The celebration was a vulgar nationalist demonstration that attempted to establish the couple who got married that day as people to be admired and regarded as role models, not only for what they displayed during the wedding, but for all their shady business undertakings and their commitment to nationalist escapades.<sup>6</sup>

While watching the systematic display of self-aggrandizement in the wedding video of *Ceca and Arkan*, I could not prevent dozens of images from other Balkan weddings from flocking into my mind—village and urban Balkan weddings that I had seen in films from the region. I could not help realizing that while *Ceca and Arkan* was probably seen and admired by thousands, only a handful of people had seen and remembered the haunting images of the cinematic Balkan weddings that I was thinking of—images of melancholic brides from earlier Balkan films, wearing traditional costume and jewelry and performing traditional rituals and dances. These other weddings were also lavish, but in a dignified and beautiful way. And then, there was the intense eventfulness of the weddings in the films of Yugoslav director Emir Kusturica, his quest of the ultimate representation of the Balkans, blending folklore and fantasy in the image of his floating brides.

These other weddings conveyed a message quite different from the mindless, captivating display of populist self-promotion in Arkan and Ceca’s wedding—a message of a fearful insecurity in one’s own fate. This important message can be received if one takes the trip back to revisit the Balkan weddings in film.

## Weddings, weddings, weddings

In the Hollywood tradition one mostly sees weddings of well-to-do people; modest ones are rarely shown. The lavish celebrations of the upper classes, however, have been often used to expose intricate class mechanics and hypocritical matrimonial economics: see, for example, Robert Altman's *Wedding*, both versions of *Father of the Bride*, or Mike Newell's British film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*.<sup>7</sup> In non-Western cinema the wedding scenes may show different rituals and traditions, but the treatment of the wedding also focuses on vernacular economies, class, and caste, and here patriarchy and coercion are more visible. In Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, for example, the bride first meets her future husband only on the day of the wedding. In Sheekhar Kapur's Indian film *Bandit Queen*, a twelve year old Indian girl is married away in exchange for a cow. Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu's *Autumn Afternoon* depicts an apprehensive father of modest means who works hard to marry off his only daughter, and in his fellow countryman Kon Ichikawa's *The Makioka Sisters*, the whole story revolves around the fear that one of the sisters in a large family may not manage to marry at the appropriate social level.<sup>8</sup>

In the East European tradition wedding scenes have often been used to reveal social inequalities. Polish filmmaker Andrzej Wajda's *Wedding* is centered on the celebration of the turn-of-the-century marriage between a lively peasant girl and a city intellectual.<sup>9</sup> The film, shot with a hand-held camera and featuring beautiful folk costumes, swift dancing, and frolic music, is based on a play by Stanisław Wyspiański and is concerned with specifically Polish issues, such as tensions between the nobility, the urban bourgeoisie, and the peasants.

In Hungarian director Marta Mészáros's *Adoption*, set in the 1970s, an underage bride is marrying her boyfriend.<sup>10</sup> At the wedding, however, there are hints of impending trouble and discomfort. Instead of complete happiness the young bride displays signs of depression. This marriage, indeed, is liberating her from the communal confinement of the orphanage, but it is not clear what she is getting herself into. In another Hungarian film, János Rózsa's *Sunday Daughters*, a Gypsy family picks up the teenage bride from a girls' correctional facility.<sup>11</sup> The members of the wedding party are joyful, but the context is grim. In Jiji Menzel's *Larks on a String* a Czech policeman marries a Gypsy girl.<sup>12</sup> Smiling at the fiddler, the bride pours a bottle

of red wine over her head and apparently enjoys it, while the stiff groom is visibly embarrassed by the performance of his free-spirited wife.

In the Balkans, where “a pubic wedding without conspicuous communal consumption would be considered shameful,” the wedding is a crucial event in the life not only of a person, but of a whole community.<sup>13</sup> In cinema, the wedding has been depicted with a wealth of folkloric detail in dress, dance, music, and ritual. Under the celebrations on the surface, however, there are multiple layers of interpersonal discomfort, gender inequality, and controversial social dynamics. The cheerful singing and dancing, the festive outfits and meals, the elaborate rituals and customs only enhance the underlying tensions.<sup>14</sup> Quite often at the center of the wedding one sees a conspicuously ill-matched couple; the festivities are tainted with the ambiguity and the uneasiness that mark relationships within extended families; the guests look silly in their efforts to appear joyful, and some display annoyance. In the midst of a wedding feast, a drama—or even a tragedy—usually unravels, and one cannot even say it happens unexpectedly; rather, it is regarded as part of the normal course of the events. All hesitations and uneasiness become visible, almost palpable at the wedding.

The bride is the centerpiece of the celebration. However, for various reasons she is most often sad, dispirited, even numb.<sup>15</sup> Sometimes she loves someone else.<sup>16</sup> In the Albanian film *A Tale from the Past*, for example, a young woman is being married off to a teenage boy against her will.<sup>17</sup> In *Manly Times*, a Bulgarian film set in the Rhodopi mountains, an affluent bachelor sends two men to snatch the girl of his choice from a nearby village.<sup>18</sup> During the trip between the two villages, however, she falls in love with one of the kidnappers. At the wedding party thrown by the affluent groom, the bride sits deprived of sensation, longing for this other, much poorer man down the table. She is ready to run away, to leave immediately, she is only waiting for him to give her a sign. In the Romanian film *Stone Wedding* the bride goes a step further: she runs away.<sup>19</sup> She is shown sitting at the wedding table alongside the groom; she clearly finds him repulsive, but he does not care. The bride confidently takes charge. She starts looking at one of the musicians. They have barely seen each other before. No words, only a few looks are exchanged, and within minutes the bride’s mind is made up. With just a few words uttered, the freewheeling musician has made up his mind as well, and shortly they have plotted an escape into an uncertain future. A few minutes later they venture into a desperate elopement, hand in hand, the bride’s white dress standing out on the background of the barren hills.

Sometimes the wedding itself takes place in grim times.<sup>20</sup> Under duress, with his three grown up sons detained by the Nazis and facing death, the old man from the Greek film *With Glittering Eyes* repeatedly calls back into his mind the symbolic scene of the ritualistic *sirtaki* he danced at his wedding. To him, the wedding is the watershed of his whole life.<sup>21</sup> In the Bulgarian film *Time of Violence*, which takes place in the 17th century, a wedding feast is set on a mountain meadow on a misty chilly morning.<sup>22</sup> The bride, wearing an elaborate silver headdress, is sad. She is marrying a man she is attracted to, but this Christian wedding itself is held in the midst of a violent conversion campaign initiated by the Ottomans, and the celebration will eventually end in a blood bath. Premonition of disaster is in the air. The bride in *The Canary Season*, a postcommunist Bulgarian feature set much later, in the 1950s, is also sad.<sup>23</sup> She is marrying the rapist who made her pregnant and who was then “sentenced” by the comrades of the neighborhood committee to marry her. The wedding is punishment for both bride and groom, and a metaphor for the gloomy times.

Sometimes the reasons for the bride’s mournful demeanor imply complexities of class difference and patriarchal coercion. The Bulgarian classic *The Patent Leather Shoes of the Unknown Soldier*, mostly known for its wealth of magical realist elements, revolves around a village wedding of unequals.<sup>24</sup> The story is told from the viewpoint of a young boy, whose Little Black Uncle, a misfit Lilliputian, is getting married to a beautiful, idealized, and sad White Auntie. The viewers never learn precisely why the White Auntie is so sad, and one can only assume that economic need is behind this marriage, which she apparently enters reluctantly. Whatever the reason, the White Auntie patiently passes on the embroidered dowry gifts to all relatives, silently kisses the hand of her new mother-in-law, and enters the room upstairs, where the marriage is to be consummated, followed by the Little Black Uncle. Soon thereafter Little Black Uncle takes out her white undershirt, now stained with blood, and fires a rifle. The celebration resumes in a new spree of wild joyfulness as White Auntie returns and silently proceeds to join the dance. She is so grim; she resents the misfit she is now wed to, and her silent sadness embodies a revolt against everlasting patriarchy.

All these films are made by directors who are conscious of the historical particularity and limitedness of their narratives, but who make them an asset. Aware of the established stereotypes in representing the Balkans, they play around the limitations in different ways. By choosing to depict women as their protagonists they challenge the viewer to go one step further in exploring

the “other,” and draw on women's issues such as gender oppression, exploited sexuality, and patriarchal traditions in the wider context of “the margin.” Various dimensions of the wedding have been explored in film to reveal deeply hidden complexes and enhance the gender discourse, transposing gender to a metaphor for cross-cultural interaction and using it for making political statements. The wedding becomes a gendered metaphor of the Balkan plea for equality, in which Balkans are seen as a bride under the control of a domineering groom. The idealized image of the bride it is there not to please but to project insecurity and endurance, and should be read as a self-representation of the Balkans.

This symbolism, certainly, has little in common with the assertive message seen in the wedding of Arkan and Ceca, which was exactly the opposite—an over-the-top demonstration of confident self-determination.

### **The Wedding of the Decade: Arkan and Ceca<sup>25</sup>**

It is Sunday, February 19, 1995. Who is getting married today?

The groom is Arkan, an alias for Montenegrin Zeljko Raĳnatoviĳ, a Belgrade businessman, a parliamentarian, founder and President of the Party of the Serbian Unity. He is well connected both with Serbia’s secret services and with the mafia, and is leader of the paramilitary unit of the Tigers, who engaged in “ethnic cleansing” massacres, rapes, and other atrocities in Eastern Bosnia. Arkan’s business is in sweets—pastries and ice cream. His home in Belgrade is one of the landmarks of *nouveau riche* residential architecture. Many legendary stories of his past are in circulation — like the one of his daring escape from a Swedish courtroom where he was supposed to be tried either for drug trafficking or for a bank robbery, and from where he was abducted by his buddies who kept the judges, the clerks and the court security at gun point. Wanted by Interpol, Arkan is more than confident about his safety at home. His name comes up most often when paramilitary atrocities are mentioned, but he is safe in this respect as well — he is not on the list of those indicted by the Hague tribunal. At home, Arkan is admired by many for his good looks and stubborn attitude of “I do not give a damn!” Well aware of the admiration of his devoted following, in 1994 Arkan pleased his fans by publishing a calendar that featured a different picture of him for every month.

The bride is Ceca, the stage name of Svetlana Velicković from the village of Zhitordja in South Serbia. She is a turbo-folk singer with a following comparable to Arkan's, and consisting of many of the same people. Her best known hit, *Kukavica (Coo-coo)*, is a song about a lonely young woman dating a married man, a situation somewhat similar to her own affair with Arkan, who divorced his wife to make himself available. Voted best looking singer in Yugoslavia in 1991, she takes pride in the comparisons of her waistline to Vivian Leigh's and of her bosom to Pamela Anderson Lee's. Ceca's music videos, in which she sings, dances, and changes costume at least three times a song, can be purchased across Yugoslavia. She sets the standards of beauty as the centerfold in the magazine of Arkan's Party of Serbian Unity. Arkan is 42 and this is his third marriage. Ceca is 21, never married, rumored to have had numerous affairs, including a well-publicized liaison with a Yugoslav Muslim who is now a hotel owner in Germany.

The tape offers an edited version of the several acts of this glamorous wedding, during which the couple proves fit to handle such a hectic day and preserve composure throughout the marathon variety show it performs for its various audiences. For the 140 minutes duration of the tape the groom will change costumes three times, the bride, four. He will display wealth, stability, good looks, and humble reticence. She will display confidence, stability, beauty, and will dance, sing and entertain. For the peasants the couple will pose as villagers, honoring the tradition and even coming up with folklore elements invented especially for the wedding. For the fans of Orthodoxy and monarchy, they will perform as a royal couple. For the secular urbanites they will engage in an elegant civil ceremony. For global audiences they will stage an American-style gala dinner at a restaurant called *Intercontinental*. And for popular tastes there will be turbo-folk and belly dancing.

This bride has nothing in common with the mournful brides from the traditional Balkan weddings captured in cinema. She is a contemporary woman fully in control of what she is doing and who she is. She is not an innocuous virgin and not somebody who can be snatched or coerced. She is a skilled businesswoman entering a long-term contract, and she is busy performing today. And so is Arkan. On the wedding video one can see them working hard to become another populist Serbian media phenomenon.

Act One: Before dawn. Orthodox mass is celebrated at the home of Arkan. He is cleanly shaved, wears a traditional Montenegrin costume and a massive golden cross on his chest. Men in tuxedos surround him. The priest refers to him as "voyvoda" (leader) as Arkan humbly kisses the cross. Then Arkan leaves in a limousine, in the company of the best man, Borislav Prelevic, a



public relations liaison for the Party of Serbian Unity. They are followed by a cavalcade of forty cars, decorated with Serbian flags and flowers, mostly all-terrain vehicles driven by his party comrades in tuxedos.

Act Two: Arkan arrives in the southern village of Zhitordja, the bride's residence, a two hour drive from Belgrade. Folk music plays from loudspeakers and crowds fill up the streets, the surrounding balconies, and yards. Before being let in, the groom is to shoot an apple that hangs from the top of the three story house. After several misses, Arkan hits the apple and then poses with his elegant twin-barrel hunting rifle for the 150 photographers around.<sup>26</sup> He is then let into the house where he is intercepted on the staircase and has to pay off his way to the bride. A briefcase full of cash and gold jewelry changes hands and ends up with the bride's sister. Only then does the sister open the door to an adjacent room where Ceca, in a folk traditional costume, expects the groom. In a minute they descend downstairs to the musical score of folk song melodies. Still holding the rifle, Arkan waves to the crowd. The best man takes out a golden 4-inch-heel shoe and invites Ceca to try it on as the camera focuses on her fine ankle. People around clap hands and sing. Ceca then goes to change and soon reappears wearing a wedding gown and smiling glamorously. The procession is ready to leave. Ceca's mother dances around in the background of the song "*Proshstavay, mayko*" ["Farewell, mother"].

Act Three: Belgrade, the Church of Saint Archangel Gabriel, all decorated with Serbian national flags. A crowd has gathered to catch a glimpse of the bride arriving in the company of the best man. Arkan is already in the church, humble and elevated. He still wears the golden cross, but has now changed into a greenish Serbian uniform from the World War I era. Quiet church music sounds, a choir sings *Gospodi pomiluy* ["Kyrie eleison"], the soft light of candles makes the Orthodox icons on the walls look mystical, and the guests in the church are crossing themselves. The traditional Orthodox ritual is performed — the couple are given wedding crowns and led in circles around the altar.<sup>27</sup> The ceremony is reminiscent of a coronation. The couple is never asked if they agree to marry each other; they only listen as they are sung *Mnogaya Leta* ["many happy returns"], and then they cross themselves. The priests give them a rare Orthodox icon as a gift, and they kiss it. Then everybody kisses and embraces each other. As the couple leaves the church, Arkan sheathes a sword. The bride's bouquet is thrown to the crowd.

Act Four: After a brief visit to the bride's mother, who was not present at the ceremonies, the couple arrive in a limousine in front of the *Intercontinental* hotel. Here they enter a stagelike

setting and are greeted by a city employee who will perform a civil ceremony for them. They are asked if they agree to commit to each other; when they say “yes,” people cheer. They kiss each other, look confidently at each other, and sign the marriage certificate on a red table decorated with a tricolor ribbon.

Act Five: In the restaurant, the camera shows a panoramic view of the royal feast laid out on buffet-style tables — blue ribbon cuisine, a cornucopia prepared to be admired. Guests flock in and let themselves be amazed. Soon all tables are occupied, and slow oriental music plays in the background as the couple arrives. Ceca is now wearing another long white dress “from a US designer reputed to dress Hollywood stars,” outlining her beautiful breasts and revealing her fine shoulders.<sup>28</sup> The groom is in a tuxedo and a bowtie. They descend the podium where they will be sitting at a table facing the guests. It all looks like the setting for an American fundraising dinner. Everybody gets up and remains silent while an Orthodox priest recites a prayer. Then the waiters take off the silver covers from the food. The bride and the groom will eat with golden utensils, a gift from an Italian friend. The guests will eat, drink, cheer, dance, and sing. Ceca’s colleagues, other turbo-folk stars, will perform. Ceca herself will join the *kolo* soon. She is joyful and cheerful and readily dances while Arkan rarely leaves the table and stays reticent, looking on and smiling. The Gypsy musicians play a prolonged melody and Ceca sings for the guests while Arkan holds a little girl on his lap and sings along.<sup>29</sup> The audience rhythmically sways and claps. A few hours later, the wedding feast’s climax comes in the shape of a 150 pound richly decorated cake. Arkan and Ceca cut it up, and soon thereafter Arkan addresses the guests, thanking them for the honor of their presence on this important day. The couple then leaves in a jeep, waving the Serbian flag.

At this wedding there are no drunken hillbillies, no banknotes are pinned to the bride’s dress, and no clashes occur—as would most likely happen at any other wedding of ordinary turbo-folk aficionados. Even the belly dancing does not look vulgar, but rather modest. For most part of the show the couple looks, if not heavenly, at least majestic. The demeanor of all participants suggests that they know they are attending an important media event.<sup>30</sup> Toasts made to the “honorable and decent” couple call to them to ensure that new heroes are born to Serbia.<sup>31</sup> No signs of depression are to be seen in the bride, rather the opposite — she is confident and fully in control. The couple dutifully engages in costume changes, meticulously displays gold and other signs of affluence, and responsibly performs the well-rehearsed rituals that their audience expects of them. They even come up with new rituals, invented especially for the show, such as the

Cinderella moment when the bride tries on a golden shoe that the best man had brought along, or the groom's historical uniform in the church.<sup>32</sup>

Arkan and Ceca presented everyone with their own idea of what a publicity stunt/wedding should look like and added a masterpiece to the tradition of home videos of weddings. The bride is in show business anyhow, but the groom does not fall behind a bit. For the wedding they seem to have relied not so much on image consultants but rather on their own intuitive knowledge of popular taste — the more flamboyant, the better. And they not only prove to be competent judges of mass taste, they show that they know how to shape it. Moreover, they show that they are in command of the media, having made them disseminate their statements about nationalism and lifestyle not just in the Yugoslav media, but all around the world. At least a dozen American newspapers printed a photograph of Ceca, seated in Arkan's lap, showing off slender long legs. Indeed, the event proved a perfect media offering, both of them emanating an almost belligerent readiness to do everything on display.<sup>33</sup> Western media took the bait and readily publicized the event: the lavish feast-in-times-of-plague wedding of a charismatic warlord and a turbo-folk queen.

A few years before this “wedding of the decade,” Serbian anthropologist and media scholar Ivan Colovič had already diagnosed the tendency to enhance the use of folklore-rich events as “a means to legitimize the national sovereignty.” “The essential function of folklorist forms and themes within the new political discourse of Yugoslavia,” he wrote, “is that they suggest (connote) the idea that messages and emotions conveyed in that discourse are inevitably an echo of the people's voice, the expression of its will. Here, folklore serves above all to legitimize certain political and military plans and undertakings in the eyes of the majority of people.”<sup>34</sup>

Arkan and Ceca's wedding came as the best illustration of Colovič's diagnosis. Its massive blending of traditional and concocted folklore works as an allegory for today's populist reality of Serbia, additionally blown up by the media to a definitive, larger-than-life model to be looked up to.

### **Emir Kusturica: happy wedding floating away**

In 1995 again, another memorable wedding scene came to symbolize the status of Balkan affairs. It probably did not gain as much publicity as did Arkan and Ceca's wedding, but was

nevertheless deemed a definitive one: the final scene of Bosnian-born Yugoslav Emir Kusturica's Cannes Festival award-winning film *Underground*, the most haunting image of a Balkan wedding ever.

Wedding scenes are milestones in the films of Kusturica. With an exception of his debut feature *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?*,<sup>35</sup> all his films not only feature wedding scenes, but have the climax of the film take place at a wedding. Even in his American-shot *Arizona Dream*, the flamboyant protagonists of which barely have any relation to the Balkans, two of the female characters appear wearing wedding gowns.<sup>36</sup>

Along with wedding gifts, the guests bring to Kusturica's weddings all their suppressed tensions, and once there, they set them free—betrayal, revenge, desire, corruption, contamination, suicide—and let them run wild. The wedding is a place to settle old accounts, and even if the guests have come to celebrate and not to fight, conflict inevitably erupts as passions heat up after a few drinks. In a way, many other wedding scenes from the Balkans unfold along these lines: gatherings of sweaty men and drunken women and inevitably some clash.<sup>37</sup> This typical plot line is summarized in a line from *The Patent Leather Shoes of the Unknown Soldier*: “Somebody at the wedding took out a knife and stabbed his neighbor, or, rather I am not sure if it happened at this particular wedding, or maybe it was at some other one. . . .” Kusturica's wedding scenes, however, surpass all others in complexity.

The closing scenes of the 1985 Cannes winner *When Father Was Away on Business* show a wedding celebrated by an extended family.<sup>38</sup> Viewers have been exposed to the family's adulteries, disappointments, and betrayals for the past two hours. But at this crucial scene of the film, all the members are together again, seated at the same table, drinking and expressing forgiveness to the accordion accompaniment of prolonged wedding songs. All adverse passions seem temporarily suppressed, but only on the surface. New antagonisms arise as the protagonist, whose wife is nine months pregnant, retreats to the basement to engage in sex with his sister-in-law (and former lover), while her husband, a bureaucrat who sent his own brother-in-law to a work camp in order to steal (and marry) his mistress, gets so deeply into his drunken remorsefulness that he smashes a glass against his forehead.

In *Time of the Gypsies*, there are three weddings: one at the beginning, one in the middle, and one at the end.<sup>39</sup> In the midst of the festivities of the last wedding, Perhan, the teenage Gypsy protagonist, even uses his telekinetic powers to direct a flying fork that stabs his enemy

and sends the whole wedding into disarray. *Time of the Gypsies* is the first film in which Kusturica introduces the hallucinatory image of the floating bride: Perhan returns to Yugoslavia after a lengthy absence to marry his girl, Zamira. He finds her pregnant, but in spite of his suspicions about the father of the unborn child, they get married. Zamira swears to Perhan that he himself is the father, yet Perhan declares that once the child is born, he will give it away. Protesting, Zamira desperately escapes in her wedding gown, to give birth only minutes later and die on the ground near the railway tracks. To a haunting musical score, her dead body levitates in the air, and she wanders in space, the veils of her white gown floating around and giving this magical image a sublime, harrowing quality.<sup>40</sup>

In *Underground*, most of the action takes place in a cellar where the protagonists hide, misled for nearly fifty years into believing that there is a war raging outside.<sup>41</sup> Young Yovan, who was born in the cellar and grew up there, is getting married to Yelena, another inhabitant of the underground. For this elaborate wedding scene, Kusturica unleashes his imagination and his taste for excessive baroque ornamentation to come up with an impressive example of magical realism.<sup>42</sup> In the heavy air of the confined space, to the accompaniment of a Gypsy brass band, the bride is delivered to the groom by air, floating to him supported by an almost invisible and complex device, the veils of her white gown blown by a dynamo-generated breeze. As usual, the wedding takes place amidst suppressed tensions and suspected betrayals and, no wonder, passions collide during the celebration. Soon afterwards the groom, Yovan, drowns in the Danube. In a magical twist while his dead body travels under the water, he encounters the bride, Yelena, floating opposite him, the shawls of her wedding gown spread beautifully around her.

The ending sequence of *Underground* is a wedding again, actually a replay of this same wedding of Yovan and Yelena. It is an imaginary one, set on the Danube's shore. The Gypsy brass band plays as guests gather from all sides—the same people who betrayed and fought each other for the duration of the film. In contrast to the darkness of the underground in which the rest of the film was set, here the sun shines, and people reach out to embrace each other, to forgive each other, to sit joyfully next to each other, and to dance in oblivion. Everybody is in a great mood, cheerful and excited. One of the guests turns to the camera and addresses the viewers: *Here, we built new houses with red roofs, and opened the doors widely to welcome cherished guests. And our children we will be telling this tale of our home: Once upon a time that was a country. . .* The camera cranes up and shows the wedding tables set on the shore from above.

And at this moment the chunk of the shore where the wedding has gathered breaks away from the mainland and quietly begins floating away, farther and farther. But the wedding guests—engrossed in their wedding celebration, dancing, drinking, cheering, and embracing each other—do not even notice what has happened.

*Underground*'s final wedding scene is a narrative device used to gather everyone for a culmination that is no longer in the range of standard intense events, but is rather a warning about an oblivious drifting away toward an uncertain future. This last image is the only wedding in Kusturica's work where undisturbed happiness reigns; but it is also the one that takes place at some utopian chunk of land floating away into the unknown. The whole film is structured around this crucial scene.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, in the tradition of Balkan cinema, the wedding has been used as a metaphor of the status of a whole nation, often associated with complexity and uneasiness. The filmed wedding of Arkan and Ceca also worked as a metaphor of the nation, but one that invoked confidence and self-esteem. In its turn, *Underground* offered a synthesis of these two wedding scenarios.<sup>44</sup>

Kusturica played with one wedding on two levels: once in the cellar and once with its imaginary replay. The first wedding, noisy and incongruous, ended up dispersed in a subterranean labyrinth. The other one, happy and idealized, ended up floating away toward an unknown destination.<sup>45</sup> Without really aiming to do so, Kusturica came up with a higher metaphor that both repudiated and embraced the messages of the other filmed weddings. In *Underground* the concept of the wedding seemed to have evolved from the onerous darkness of the underground to the generous brightness of the sunlight. It was the cellar wedding, however, that was the real one, and the cheerful one that was nothing but an elusive fairy tale. A complex metaphor, indeed, quite an appropriate one for the complex Balkan state of things.

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## NOTES:

1. See e.g. Jasminka Udovicki and James Ridgeway (eds.), *Yugoslavia's Ethnic Nightmare: The Inside Story of Europe's Unfolding Ordeal*. Lawrence Hill Books. Chicago. 1995. "On March 1, 1992, violence had erupted at a Serb wedding party in the predominantly Muslim section of Sarajevo. Serb flags were waved at the wedding, and a gunman, who remained unidentified, fired at the celebrating crowd, killing the groom's father and wounding a guest. This was a spark that set Bosnia aflame." (p. 173). The incident is also featured in part three of the series *Death of Yugoslavia*, UK, 1995, produced by Brian Lapping, dir. Angus McQueen and Paul Mitchell.
2. *Welcome to Sarajevo*, UK/USA, Michael Winterbottom, 1997.
3. *A Wedding in Sarajevo*, Bosnia, Milan Trvić and Sasa Markanović, 1993.
4. *Ceca and Arkan*. Yugoslavia, 1995, dir. George Minkov. RTS-PGP video recording company. 140 min.
5. "I do not give a damn!" says Arkan in English in the documentary *The Crime That Changed Serbia*, in response to the question what he would reply to the international allegations that he is to be held responsible for a number of crimes (Yugoslavia, 1994. Production Studio B-92, dir. Aleksandar Knežević and Vojslav Tufegdžić). This same sentence Arkan repeats several times in a TV interview for TVOntario's program *Between the Lines: The Former Yugoslavia*, April, 1993.
6. When members of my family learned that I intended to write critically about the person called Arkan, they tried to talk me out of writing about him fearing that I might be targeted for revenge by him. While I do not think that my comments on Arkan may be considered slanderous, I feel compelled to quote at least one (out of many) known incidents where Arkan indeed held authors who wrote about him responsible. After the Belgrade newspaper *Borba* "ran a report on the paramilitary leader Zeljko Ražnatović, known as 'Arkan,' and his volunteers (who were to play a ghastly role in the first onslaught on northern Bosnia in March and April 1992), Arkan arrived at the editor's office with two armed and uniformed bodyguards. They demanded that either *Borba* print an interview with Arkan, or they would 'liquidate' Gradisa Katić, author of the offending report." (In Mark Thompson, *Forging War: The Media in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina*. London, 1994. p. 34).
7. *A Wedding*, U.S.A., 1978, dir. Robert Altman; *Father of the Bride*, U.S.A., 1950, dir. Vincent Minelli, and 1991, dir. Charles Shyer; *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, U.K., 1994, dir. Mike Newell.
8. *Red Sorghum*, China, 1987, dir. Zhang Yimou; *Raise the Red Lantern*, China, 1991, dir. Zhang Yimou; *Bandit Queen*, India, 1994, dir. Sheekhar Kapur; *Autumn Afternoon*, Japan, Yasujiro Ozu, 1962; *The Makioka Sisters*, Japan, Kon Ichikawa, 1983.
9. *Wedding*, Poland, 1973. Dir. Andrzej Wajda.
10. *Adoption*, Hungary, 1975, dir. Marta Mészáros.

11. *Sunday Daughters*, Hungary, 1980, dir. Janosz Rozsa.
12. *Larks on a String*, Czechoslovakia, 1969, dir. Jiri Menzel.
13. Tone Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village*. Princeton University Press. Princeton, New Jersey. 1995. p. 130.
14. Documentary footage from the 1930s shows an Albanian bride being tied up on the morning of her wedding day and delivered to her appointed husband on a horseback (*Albanian Journey: End of an Era*, USA, 1991, dir. Paul Jay). In the Bulgarian documentary *A World in Between* (1995, dir. Roumania Petkova) one can see a present-day Pomak (Slav Muslim) wedding. The bride stands as a numb mannequin on display at the village square, her face painted in white, and she carries a mirror. Her girlfriends cheerfully flock to her; the belief is that whoever sees her reflection in the mirror will marry soon.
15. In *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (USSR, 1964, dir. Sergei Paradzhanov) gender stereotypes are reversed. At the wedding it is the groom, Ivanko, who is sad (mourning the death of his beloved Marichka), as the bride takes charge of him inconsiderately.
16. In Spanish *Blood Wedding* (Spain, 1981, dir. Carlos Saura), based on Garcia Lorca's play, the bride is in love with someone else. The lover and the groom kill each other in a deadly fight on the wedding night.
17. *A Tale from the Past*, Albania, 1985, dir. Dimitar Anagnosti.
18. *Manly Times*, Bulgaria, 1982, dir. Eduard Zakhariiev.
19. *Stone Wedding* (Romania, 1972, dir. M. Verouiu and Dan Pi—a). The film consists of two novellas. Here we discuss the second part, directed by Pi—a.
20. This is also the treatment of the wedding in the Israeli film *Wedding in Galilee* (Israel/Belgium, 1986, dir. Michel Kleifi), where the celebration takes place amidst heavy tensions between Jews and Palestinians.
21. *With Glittering Eyes*. Greece, circa 1967, dir. Panos Glekophrydes.
22. *Time of Violence*, Bulgaria, 1988, dir. Lyudmil Staykov.
23. *Canary Season*, Bulgaria, 1993, dir. Evgeny Mikhailov.
24. *The Patent Leather Shoes of the Unknown Soldier*. Bulgaria, 1979, dir. Rangel Vulchanov.
25. *Ceca and Arkan*. Yugoslavia, 1995, dir. George Minkov. RTS-PGP video recording company. 140 min.
26. Here is a popular joke in Serbia from the time of the wedding. Question: "Why does Arkan not manage to hit the apple on the roof with his first shot?" Answer: "Because he only knows how to shoot at people." He himself explained his misses with the fact that he was better accustomed to using a pistol, not a rifle (*Los Angeles Times*, February 20, 1995).
27. This image is directly reminiscent of the haunting image of the Gypsy couple circling around the altar in wedding crowns in the classic *I Even Met Happy Gypsies* (Yugoslavia, 1967, dir. Al. Petrović), the protagonists of which hastily wed in a village church in the middle of the night.



28. "Gunfire and white candles at Arkan's wedding." *Agence France Presse*, February 19, 1995.
29. Ironically, Ceca sang a song by the internationally known Goran Bregović, originally written for the film *Time of the Gypsies* (played in the film as the background for Perhan's levitating bride). There is something paradoxical in this appropriation of Roma musical motifs by Serbian nationalistic turbo-folk, most of whose fans share the belief that Roma are an inferior, criminal minority that fully deserves to be persecuted and discriminated against.
30. In voice-over comments to the home video, the master of ceremonies, Minimax, a well known Serbian entertainer, even made political jokes, like "Bill Clinton and Mitterand did not attend, but they were not invited, either."
31. Ceca has made a public vow that she will bear five children to Arkan, to add to his four from previous marriages. According to an informant from Belgrade, a year after the wedding she gave birth to a son and the family appeared on TV when the baby, wearing a tuxedo, was less than a month old. In 1997, Ceca gave birth to a second son.
32. This uniform of Arkan's was discussed in the Serbian press; it was revealed that he had rented it from a theater company in Belgrade. Slavenka Drakulić wrote about the symbolic use of the uniform in the case of Arkan, whom she believed to be a criminal posing as a military man: "Arkan's interpretation of a uniform is typically Balkan: above all, it represents the abuse of power." In: Slavenka Drakulić, "The Importance of Wearing a Uniform." *Café Europa: Life after Communism*, Abacus. 1996. p. 89.
33. Branson, L. "Disturbing symbolism of Serbian 'wedding of decade': Marriage between warlord Arkan and young singer Ceca is just a paean that reeks of propaganda." *The San Francisco Examiner*. February 17, 1995. The story copyrighted by the Hearst Corporation ran in a dozen major newspapers across the U.S.
34. Ivan Colović, "Vox populi — Vox naturae (Folklor kao sredstvo legitimisanja nacionalnog suvereniteta) [Folklore as a Means of Legitimizing National Sovereignty]." In: *Bordel ratnika. Folklor, politika i rat* [The Warrior's Bordello: Folklore, Politics, and War]. Belgrade, 1994. pp. 83-93.
35. *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?* Yugoslavia, 1982, dir. Emir Kusturica.
36. *Arizona Dream*. France/USA, 1993, dir. Emir Kusturica. The first female character to wear a wedding dress is the Polish immigrant Milly (Paulina Porišková), who is about to marry Cadillac dealer Leo Sweetie (Jerry Lewis), a man twice her age. The second one is Grace (Lili Taylor), the neurotic millionaire misfit, who chooses a wedding gown as the most suitable outfit for the rainy night on which she will try commit the suicide she has been talking about for a long time.
37. In Bosnian Ademir Kenović's *Kuduz*, set in Bosnia of the 1980s, the marriage of an ex-con and a single mother occurs. People of limited means, they have hired a dusty village restaurant for the wedding. Cigarette smoke dims the panoramic view of tabletops, overlooking piles of dirty plates and half-empty bottles. A local policeman picks on this vulnerable wedding, and soon all engage in the noisy quarrel that was somehow doomed to happen. (*Kuduz*. Yugoslavia, 1989).
38. *When Father Was Away on Business*, Yugoslavia, 1985, dir. Emir Kusturica.
39. *Time of the Gypsies*, Yugoslavia, 1989, dir. Emir Kusturica.

40. This image is reminiscent of another levitation scene, seen in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia*, Italy, 1982.
41. *Underground*, 1995, France/Germany/Hungary, dir. Emir Kusturica.
42. When discussing *Underground*, critic J. Hoberman spoke about “elaborate indulgences, especially a sweaty wedding sequence” and compared the lengthy wedding scene to the one in *The Deer Hunter* (USA, 1978, dir. Michael Cimino), which apparently he felt abused the viewer’s patience. This comparison may, however, also be a reference to the “foreignness” of the ritual, since the wedding in *The Deer Hunter* was a Russian Orthodox one. (J.Hoberman, “Lost Worlds.” *The Village Voice*, June 24, 1997, p. 75.)
43. In an interview Kusturica had mentioned that this image of the wedding floating away was the first and only one that he and screenwriter Dusan Kovacevic had in mind when beginning to discuss the film.
44. This example can serve as a perfect illustration of the aesthetic concept of romantic irony or of “Aufhebung,” the term later adopted by Hegel—a work of art that both encompasses and cancels what is contained in its two earlier elements.
45. There have been other interpretations of the weddings in *Underground* that do not fall within my scope of exploration, but that I find compelling nevertheless. For example, Yugoslav film scholar Nevena Daković stresses the importance of the two weddings as helping the parallel construction of the events beneath and above the ground: “Both weddings are unreal and unrealized: one is interrupted and never finished, and even never performed as a wedding ceremony; the other one is imaginary—as all the characters are together and you see Jovan's mother pregnant (with Jovan) next to Jovan as a grown up boy. It is a wedding out of real time and space. . . . *Underground* bears heavy political connotations. If *Underground* is the story about communist Yugoslavia as imprisonment under Tito, then wedding and communal life in the underground are metaphors of the forged and phony brotherhood and unity.” The wedding beneath the earth “breaks” and in that same moment the underground shelter collapses and our characters start to wander in the labyrinths or come to the surface. Just like that Yugoslavia fell apart. Marriage and federation are products of contracts, legally speaking, and not of emotions. (Nevena Daković, Belgrade University; excerpts is from lecture given at the M.A. Course in Film and History, Magdalen College, Oxford University, June 4, 1996).