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Author(s): Temenuga Trifonova

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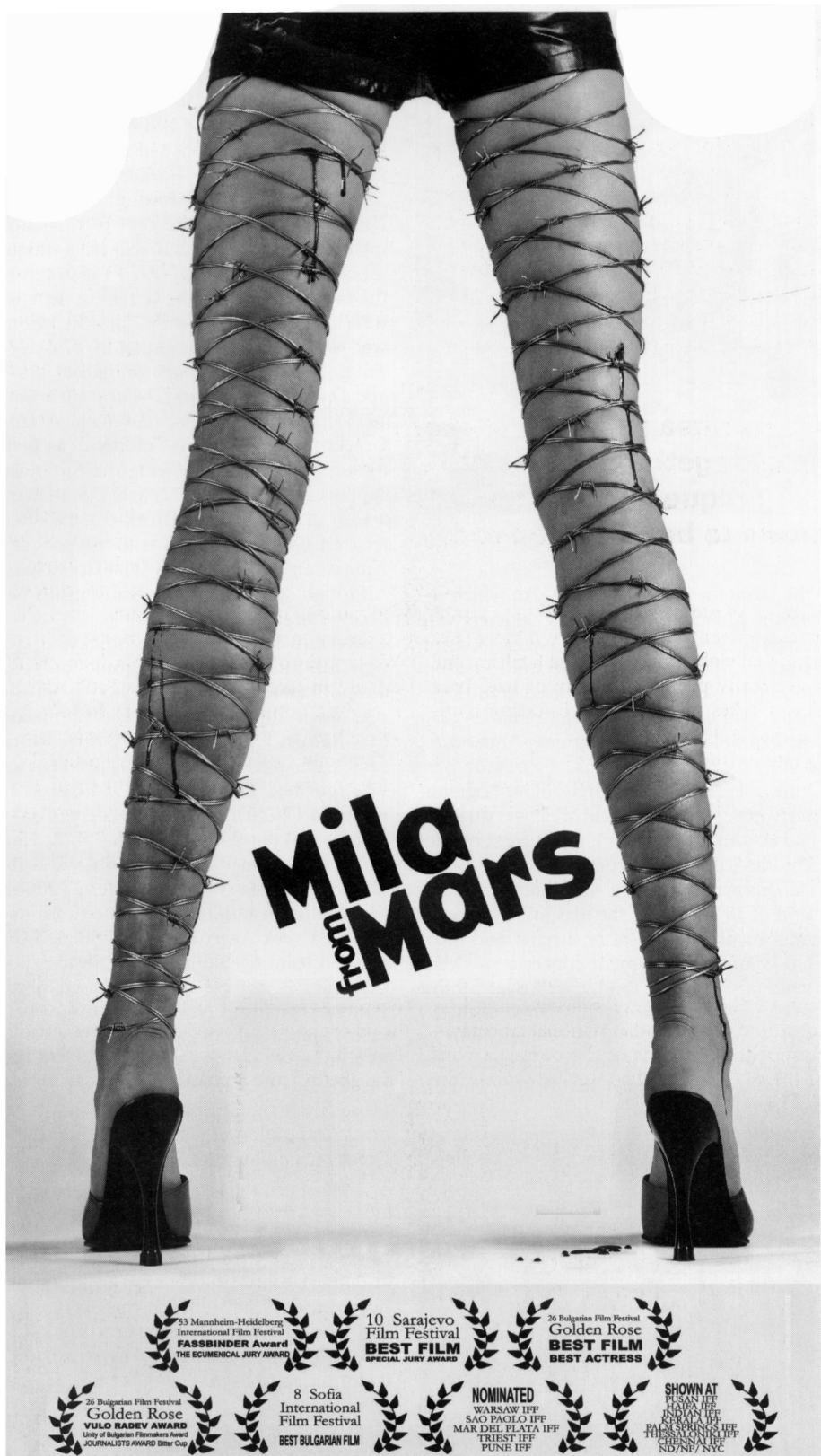
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Mila from Mars



Stoned on Mars: Home and National Identity in Recent Bulgarian Cinema

by Temenuga Trifonova

In an early scene of *Mila from Mars* (*Mila ot Mars*, 2004) the heroine, Mila, arrives in an abandoned village on the Bulgarian border. When one of the half-stoned villagers still living there wonders out loud why she has come to this wasteland, he is interrupted by another cranky villager: “What do you mean ‘wasteland’? I live here!” Toward the end of the film, the wasteland reference is extended further, both literally and figuratively. In a flashback to the orphanage in which Mila grew up, she and a few other orphans watch a film about the hardships of village life. While she openly empathizes with the villagers’ plight, one of her friends exclaims, “Why do you care? They are on Mars. There is no atmosphere there.” “So what? They are people too,” Mila replies, expressing a complex mixture of hurt pride, low national self-esteem, and an exaggerated sense of entitlement that permeates a great many Balkan films.

Questions of legacy, historical continuity, and rapture have always been at the center of Balkan and East European cinema. Filmmakers’ engagement with history was the defining criterion in Yvette Biró’s popular chronology of post-World War II East European cinema. The overcoming of history and the question of historical guilt were at the center of the cinema of paths of the first post-Stalinist phase (late 1950’s to the mid-1960’s). Films of that period exhibited a strong moral preoccupation with history as a living, ongoing reality rather than as something irrelevant or dead. From the late 1960’s through the 1970’s, however, East European filmmakers abandoned their former preoccupation with heroes, villains, and victims and began focusing on ordinary people, on the trivial and the mundane, adopting an ironic stance and often crossing over into the absurd. The displacement of pathos by irony signaled a shift from a macro view of history to a “history from below,” which centered on individuals in their immediate socio-historical context.

The development of post-1989 East European and Balkan cinema can be divided into two subperiods, based on the filmmakers’ changing relationship to history. The first wave of films made in the five years immediately following 1989 were preoccupied with exposing the abuses and taboos of totalitarianism and the moral sacrifices people were forced to make under the communist system. The second wave began to view the past with a bittersweet nostalgia rather than with anger or shame. Wolfgang Becker’s *Good Bye Lenin!* exemplifies this new type of romanticism based on “emotions recollected in disillusionment” and expressed as *Ostalgie*, the nostalgia for anything East German or, more generally, anything East European. Recent Balkan cinema, whose dominant motifs include divided communities, dysfunctional families, and split personalities, is representative of the general fragmentariness and moral relativism usually associated with postmodernism.

Bulgarian films made immediately after 1989, eager to expose the truth about totalitarianism, often produced a self-congratulatory, democratizing discourse. Peter Popzlatev's *The Countess* (*Az, Grafinyata*, 1989) set during the political upheaval of 1968, features a teenager caught using drugs and sent to a girls' reeducation camp and later to a mental asylum, where she continues to resist being "reeducated." Dimitar Petkov's *Silence* (*Tishina*, 1991) focuses on a gifted and politically subversive sculptor struggling in vain to protect his work from the repressive regime. In Ivan Andonov's *Vampires*, *Spooks* (*Vampiri, talasumi*, 1992), set in the first years of the communist regime, an actress is forced to make moral sacrifices to preserve her social status and her job. In Evgeni Mihailov's *Canary Season* (*Sezonat na kanarchetata*, 1993), a woman is psychologically and physically abused by the communist regime, while in Romyana Pekova's *Burn, Burn Little Flame* (*Gori, Gori Oguncha*, 1994) a young teacher witnesses the painful 1980's "revival process" in a remote village on the Bulgarian-Turkish border.

The second wave of postcommunist films replaced the pathos of revealing secrets and assigning guilt with an ironic and/or nostalgic stance that frequently reduced the past to Communist "camp." Films such as Ivan Pavlov's *Fate as a Rat* (*Sudbata kato pluh*, 2001), Aleksandr Morfov's *Blueberry Hill* (*Hulmat na borovinkite*, 2002), Peter Popzlatev's *Même Dieu est venu nous voir* (*Poseteni ot Gospoda*, 2001) and now Sophia Zornitsa's *Mila from Mars* do not treat history as "a living reality" but as a cabinet of curiosities from which filmmakers can draw with the confidence and gleefulness of post-

modern collage artists. These films indulge in a deliberate stylization of history, pursue a self-conscious fascination with oddities and absurdities, and do nothing to challenge the stereotype of Bulgaria—which Bulgarians themselves seem to treasure even more than foreigners do—as a perennial theater of the absurd. *Fate as a Rat* is a tragicomedy about the hysterical attempts of a group of losers to protect their land by the Black Sea from being sold to enterprising Bulgarian businessmen and greedy foreign investors. The film demonstrates Bulgarian filmmakers' almost masochistic willingness to con-

Sophia Zornitsa's quirkily allegorical film mixes together pieces of the past to offer unique insight into what it means to be Bulgarian today.

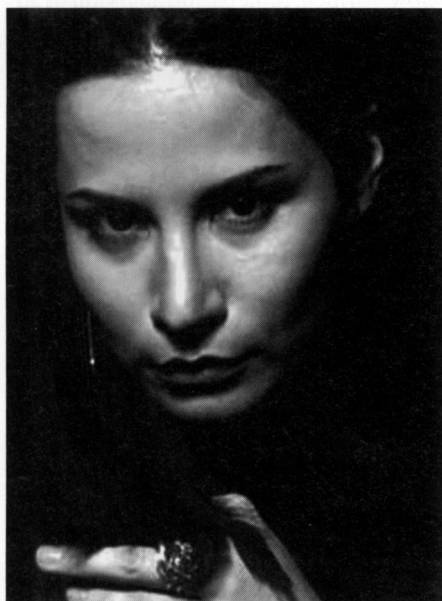
form to Western stereotypes of the Balkans as the epicenter of uncontrollable urges, irrational violence, deep-seated fatalism, and a generally premodern way of life. Ivan Pavlov takes great pleasure in creating off-the-wall, vulgar, idiotic characters incapable of rational thought but very good at dressing exotically, cursing profusely, blowing things up, and having brutal sexual encounters.

National cinemas in periods of transition tend to be politically conservative. They are preoccupied with exporting the historical, literary, and geographical heritage of the nation abroad while preaching a return to a past that is generally presented as free from the problems and contradictions of the present. Unlike the tasteful, reflective, and lyrical period films of other national cinemas—British heritage films or the nostalgia films of the 1970's Australian Revival—films like

Mila from Mars draw on that particular mixture of the absurd, the grotesque, the quirky, the homey, the noisy, the irrational, and the vulgar that has come to be associated with Balkan cinema. The film's self-conscious quirkiness and spunk do not necessarily render it immune from political and cultural conservatism. Despite its attempt to redefine national identity through a return to indigenous folk life and to the "essence" of Bulgarian national character, the film does not demonstrate that the past is always alive in the present—as films from the first postcommunist period did—but rather treats the past as an exotic souvenir brought back from a weekend excursion. *Mila from Mars* willingly participates in the discourse of Western versus Eastern Europe, which associates the West with rationality while positioning the East as irrational and slightly dangerous or exotic. In that context,

Balkan cinema is distinguished from the allegedly more meditative, angst-ridden Western European cinema. This discourse is evident in recent films such as Fatih Akin's romantic comedy/road movie *In July*, in which Daniel, the German protagonist, travels through Central and Eastern Europe, his curious adventures in the land behind the Iron Curtain growing increasingly absurd. He is drugged, robbed, mocked, beaten up, and seduced in accordance with the Western stereotype of Eastern Europe as a chaotic land ruled by unfathomable irrational forces that render the West, by comparison, a boringly rational, safe, navel-gazing place.

Mila from Mars tells the story of Mila (Vesela Kazakova), a sixteen-year-old rebellious orphan who loves to play basketball and improvise rap songs about her life in "the ghetto" (the orphanage). One day she is



Sophia Zornitsa, director of *Mila from Mars*.



Vesela Kazakova stars in Sophia Zornitsa's *Mila from Mars*.



The villagers decide to adopt Mila in this scene from *Mila from Mars*.

essentially sold to Alex (Lyubomir Popov) who, in addition to becoming her pimp, is also a successful businessman. Alex smuggles marijuana seeds to a village beyond the border, pays its aging inhabitants to grow the seeds, and smuggles the pot back. The film opens with a pregnant Mila in “traditional” prostitute getup, escaping from Alex at a gas station and hitching a ride with the stoned driver of a Groceries-on-Wheels minivan. They cross the Bulgarian border to the accompaniment of modernized Bulgarian folk music and head for a village that is all but abandoned except for a group of whacky, cunning, stubborn, pot-smoking villagers (played by nonprofessional actors from a senior citizens home) involved in Alex’s marijuana trafficking. The national border, a pathetic looking shack decorated with one of those familiar pompous signs extolling the importance of law and order—legacy of Bulgaria’s Communist past—is patrolled by a single officer too busy going to the toilet behind a bush to mind his post.

The villagers “adopt” Mila as a sort of a surrogate communal grand-daughter/confidante: they share with her their personal stories of pain, which involve the loss of one or more descendants (e.g., one of the village women offers Mila the dowry of her granddaughters who live “at the end of the world,” i.e., in Sweden; Stoyo, on the other hand, has no children or grandchildren and thus no stories to tell; instead, he shows Mila a secret room where he keeps a female mannequin he calls “Martha,” either a replica of the daughter he wishes he had or a sex doll) or the curbing of personal freedom (e.g., Yanaki’s son was recruited in the navy even though he was afraid of water; when he returned home he painted everything blue and was certified as mad but managed to escape to Morocco). The villagers renovate one of the old houses, give Mila a bath, dress her up in traditional peasant clothes and prepare her for the much awaited birth of her child, Christo.

Despite the slightly mocking tone—e.g., the title cards situating events in the film on a timeline extending from B.C. (before Christo) to A.C. (after Christo)—it is quite clear that Christo’s birth is supposed to mark, symbolically, the rebirth of the nation. After the birth, the villagers don’t really care what becomes of Mila as long as they can keep the baby, bring him up, and maybe make him the village mayor. Feeling abandoned, Mila attempts suicide but is saved by Assen (Assen Blatechki). The schoolmaster-turned-shepherd (due to the lack of pupils and the abundance of sheep in the village) is a pompously idealistic young man with a secret past, pierced ears, long sideburns, and a tattoo on his neck. He lives in a blatantly allegorical crumbling ivory tower on the outskirts of the village, doesn’t talk much and when he does, it’s either some New Age mumbo jumbo about the four vows of Buddha or a lesser version of anticapitalist rhetoric à la *Fight Club* about the superfluity of material possessions such as shoes, fridges, and stereos. Mila and baby Christo move in with Assen and the three begin an idyllic pastoral life. Assen and Mila have passionate sex in the nooks and crevices of their rocky home, occasionally spicing things up with rock-climbing equipment. At the end of the day, wrapped up in traditional thick woolen blankets, they watch the sunset together.

Mila, however, cannot forget the past. She wants Assen to kill Alex, the father of her child. And just when we begin to wonder why Assen is not thrilled with the idea, the director fabricates a last-minute sloppy explanation that is meant to complete the squiggly love triangle between Mila and the two men: Alex, it turns out, was in the NATO corps with Assen and saved his life in a successful antiterrorist operation. The detainment of the terrorist group involved an attack on civilians, in which a three-month-old baby was killed. Assen feels

guilty about the baby’s death, which is why he is so hung up on being a Shepherd, a Father, and a Schoolmaster to boot. These plot points prove too much to bear even for Mila who decides to run away again. Since it’s time for the usual framing device, she hitches a ride with the Groceries-on-Wheels minivan, is reprimanded by the same stoned driver for running away again, gets off the van and runs back to the remains of the village church, arriving just in time for a possible shoot-out between Alex and Assen. Alex seems determined to shoot Assen but apparently their shared political past and the sweet sight of innocence restored (Mila with baby Christo) outweigh his murderous impulses. We are to rest assured that the young lovers’ familial pastoral bliss and, by extension, the rebirth of the nation from the ashes of communism, is forthcoming.

Inasmuch as the inherent naïveté of allegory as an artistic form is typical of the early stages in the development of postcolonial and postcommunist national cinemas, it is not surprising that *Mila from Mars*, which has been widely welcome as marking the revival of Bulgarian cinema and reexamining Bulgarian postcommunist national identity, functions as an extended allegory for the nation’s continuous attempts to reconcile its communist past and agrarian roots—treated in the film both with nostalgia and self-mockery—with its *nouveau riche* present and its uncertain future. “Mars” stands, allegorically, for the communist past (with which the nation must continue to come to terms), for the village (referencing village-city migrations and the waning of indigenous folk culture) and, finally, for Bulgaria, a country that occupies one of the positions furthest from the sun in the solar system known as “the European Union.”

As a quest for a new, postcommunist national identity, the film can be read in the context of the popular return-to-Europe rhetoric, which configures Europe as the homeland. The repositioning of the Balkans in the discourse on “Europe” (their conceptualization as a “Third World” waiting to “return to Europe”) was a consequence of the substitution of cultural divisions (Western Europe as the epitome of civilization versus the primitiveness and barbarity of the Balkans) for political divisions (the old East/West dichotomy). Balkan filmmakers, more often than not, respond to this positioning by willingly exaggerating the cultural divide between East and West, thereby sabotaging the argument for affinity with Europe. This propensity to self-exoticism is further evidenced by the popularity of the travelogue-type narrative structure which positions the Balkans as an object of the Western traveler’s gaze.

We thus find ourselves in the paradoxical situation of being “exiled from exile.” Our quest for a homeland will be granted on the condition that we admit we are not searching for one, that we demonstrate we are

already at home. But if we are already at home (always or already European) we cannot be in exile; therefore, we cannot really “return home.” This schizophrenic state of mind is reflected in the two contradictory statements, “I live in a wasteland” and “This is not a wasteland! I live here!” In the end, then, *Mila from Mars* is not really concerned with getting us off Mars but merely in getting others to recognize that we Martians/Bulgarians are people too. But the Martians have so well internalized the exoticizing gaze that they actually quite like living on Mars. It’s picturesque, it’s far away and, best of all, it makes us different. To sustain that difference we must voluntarily remain on Mars, which is exactly what Zornitsa’s film allows, even urges us to do. She might have intended *Mila from Mars* as a sort of a tongue-in-cheek mission from one of the former outposts of the Soviet empire to the Brussels headquarters of the new Europe. Judging by her dismissal of the bleak postcommunist present as a degradation of some ideal and essential Bulgarian national character located, supposedly, in Bulgaria’s preindustrial past, Zornitsa appears to have remained on Mars.

Mila from Mars is often annoyingly allegorical, self-consciously whimsical, saccharine in its cuteness, and a little too self-congratulatory in its use of vulgarities and colloquialisms set off against calculated lyrical digressions. The director’s sense of the absurd, however, occasionally alleviates some of the pretentiousness. Her representations of peasants are borderline caricatures. She mocks pseudopatriotic sentiments in a Christmas sequence, in which the peasants celebrate the holidays by piling up all available TV sets, producing a piece of installation art. Teary-eyed and bathed in a bluish TV glow, they watch the scrambled image of the Bulgarian national coat of arms accompanied by the national anthem. Postcardlike shots of Mila in prostitute getup are contrasted with a background of a traditional Bulgarian landscape of blue mountains receding in the distance and beautifully abandoned village houses in ruins. The political allegory of the rebirth of the nation through the affirmation of the continuity between the past and the present, between peasants, prostitutes, businessmen, and New Age pseudo-Marxists like the schoolmaster, is encapsulated in the shot of Mila, in her prostitute outfit, supported by one of the old village women as they walk away from the camera down an abandoned country road. Mila is allegorically deified by heavy inter-cutting between the city bar frequented by Alex and his prostitutes and the old abandoned church in which Mila, sitting in a pew raised above the others, is crowned as Mother.

Mila from Mars is premised on a pre-modern recurring temporality: it imagines the rebirth of the nation as a return to some vaguely defined point of innocence in the nation’s past. The cyclical notion of time is characteristic of the genre of female melodrama, in which the story moves from unjust accusations or violence inflicted on the female protagonist to the reinstatement of her innocence and honor. The film perpetuates the symbolic discourse of nationalism based on the stereotypical association between collective identity, collective territory, and womanhood. Threats to national identity are rendered in terms of sexual assaults on women. Zornitsa updates the metaphor by replacing rape with prostitu-

“By offering folk culture as a token of national identity, the film perpetuates a Sleeping Beauty view of national identity, that some fundamental sense of identity has merely been lying dormant awaiting the arrival of a Prince Charming.”

tion, but she keeps the metaphorical meaning. Saving young women from prostitution becomes a trope for the purification and rebirth of the nation from the shameful abuse by the aggressor, whether Ottoman, communist, or capitalist. In this respect, *Mila from Mars* belongs in a long line of Bulgarian films that depict the violation of Bulgarian national identity under Ottoman rule in terms of the sexual violation of Bulgarian women. In these films, the most famous of which is Metodi Andonov’s *The Goat’s Horn* (*Koziyat rog*, 1972), saving the honor of an Orthodox woman is understood as saving the honor and identity of the nation. In *Mila* the evil, barbaric Turk is replaced by the evil but sexy capitalist

mafioso (Alex), repulsively misogynistic yet partly redeemed through his past noble actions. Mila must be saved from this tyrannical capitalist and, if possible, returned to her rightful owner, the macho, authentic Bulgarian, the schoolmaster.

Despite Sophia Zornitsa’s predilection for nostalgia, pastiche, collage, and irony, which reveal her approach to history as typically postmodern, she subscribes to a “perennialist” (rather than a modernist) view of the nation, which defines the “nation” in cultural terms as a “people” linked to a particular ancestral territory or “homeland” and held together by a collective memory. *Mila from Mars* foregrounds shared cultural memories, especially Orthodox Christianity and indigenous folk life, as essential to the construction of the nation. Ironically what remains forgotten and repressed is not the past—although even the representation of the past is too stylized to serve as a reliable binding mechanism—but the present. Zornitsa is not at all concerned

with representing Bulgaria’s present in its concreteness, immediacy, urgency, and transitoriness. She makes no effort to challenge the images of the Balkans presently prevalent in Western media—abandoned houses, ruined churches, and old peasants in torn, unfashionable country garments. Instead, she proudly offers stylized versions of these as if they were Hallmark greeting cards. The images we get of Bulgarian city life—the gas station, visually indistinguishable from American gas stations, and the bar/discotheque where Alex hangs out—are immediately positioned as inauthentic or corrupt versions of the true Bulgarian ethnoscape, the village. A national cinema rooted in a perennialist notion of the nation



Mila (Vesela Kazakova) and The Schoolteacher (Assen Blatecki) in *Mila from Mars*.



Against a backdrop of houses in ruins and mountain ranges, Zornitsa creates an "ethnoscape" of Bulgaria in *Mila from Mars*.

often reproduces ethnoscares with the greatest possible verisimilitude or authenticity, a poetic and populist authenticity rather than a factual one. In *Mila from Mars*, the repeated images of village houses in ruins and mystical mountain ranges receding in the distance, accompanied by traditional folk music, construct a familiar ethnoscape that is sure to warm the heart of even the least patriotic Bulgarian.

Zornitsa treats the idea of "homeland" rather conventionally, in line with a strong tradition in Bulgarian cinema to configure national identity in terms of the village/city dichotomy. This is most evident in the Bulgarian migration cycle from the 1970's, which explored the negative changes in public mores brought about by the migration from villages to cities. The migration cycle includes films such as Lyudmil Kirkov's *The Villager with the Bicycle* (*Selyaninat s koleto*, 1974), in which a city man who is unable to break away from his traditional way of life keeps returning to the village of his youth, and *Matriarchy* (1977) in which only women inhabit a village which men have left to work in the city. Hristo Hristov's *A Tree without Roots* (*Darvo bez koren*, 1974) focuses on an old villager who does not fit in with his son's family in Sofia and *The Last Summer* (*Posledno lyato*, 1972-74) deals with a villager who refuses to leave his home when a recently constructed dam threatens to submerge it under water. While communist regimes frequently exaggerated their appreciation for folk culture in order to naturalize communism and conceal its ideological character, *Mila from Mars* revives this fascination as a convenient antidote to the bleak postcommunist reality. By offering folk culture as a token of national identity the film perpetuates the long outdated "sleeping beauty" view of national identity as some fundamental, essential sense of identity that has merely been dormant.

Mila from Mars identifies the past with traditional folk life, which is positioned as the inside, a pure homeland in danger of being polluted or profaned by the present, which is associated with the outside, the foreign amorality and capitalist greed embodied in free-market mafiosi. By offering a kind of retrofitted future, in which the punk image of young, orphaned, cheated, wasted, corrupted new Bulgaria (Mila) will be purified and have its innocence restored, by old, folksy Bulgaria, the film remains comfortably situated within a strong tradition in Bulgarian cinema. Although betrayed, beaten, and apparently defeated, in the end, she is a survivor, who is both naïve and tough, self-destructive and self-sufficient.

At one point in the film the villagers celebrate the birth of Mila's son, Christo, by lighting candles in the picturesque remains of the village church. Behind one of the candles is a miniature McDonald's decorative flag. The shot captures the contradictory nature of post-communist, pre-EU Bulgaria. It combines a romantic notion of nationalism—the nation as an organic entity, a common people (*Volk*) steeped in tradition and held together by their Eastern-Orthodox Christian heritage—with a characteristically Bulgarian stubborn skepticism about the nation's newly minted market economy future. ■

Balkan Cinema on the Red Carpet Since 1989

The Academies

The Oscars (Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film)
2002: *No Man's Land* (Bosnia)

The European Film Awards

1989: *Landscape in the Mist* (Greece)
[Best European Film]
1995: *Ulysses' Gaze* (Greece) [FIPRESCI]
1998: *Cabaret Balkan* (Yugoslavia) [FIPRESCI]
2000: *Clouds of May* (Turkey) [FIPRESCI]
2001: *No Man's Land* (Bosnia)
[Best European Screenwriter]
2004: *Trilogy—The Weeping Meadow* (Greece) [FIPRESCI]

"Category A" Festivals

Winners at festivals accredited by FIAPF as Competitive Feature Film Festivals. Prizes are the main prize unless otherwise stated.

Berlin International Film Festival

2004: *Head-On* (Germany/Turkey)
2006: *Grbavica* (Bosnia)
2007: *Takva—A Man's Fear of God* (Turkey) [FIPRESCI Award for the Panorama Section] Cairo
2003: *The King* (Greece)
2005: *Magic Eye* (Albania) [FIPRESCI]

Cannes International Film Festival

1989: *Time of the Gypsies* (Yugoslavia) [Best Director]
1995: *Underground* (Yugoslavia)
Ulysses' Gaze (Greece) [Grand Prix of the Jury and FIPRESCI]
1998: *Eternity and a Day* (Greece)
1999: *Beautiful People* (Bosnia)
[Prix Un Certain Regard]
2001: *No Man's Land* (Bosnia) [Best Screenplay]
2005: *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (Romania)
[Prix Un Certain Regard]
2006: *Climates* (Turkey) [FIPRESCI]
12:08, *East of Bucharest* (Romania) [Prix Camera D'Or]

Montréal World Film Festival

2002: *The Cordon* (Yugoslavia)
The Professional (Yugoslavia)
[Best Screenplay and FIPRESCI]

Shanghai International Film Festival

1999: *Propaganda* (Turkey)

San Sebastián International Film Festival

2003: *Distant* (Turkey) [FIPRESCI]

Tokyo International Film Festival

1989: *That Summer of White Roses* (Yugoslavia)
1997: *The Perfect Circle* (Bosnia)*
2000: *Slogans* (Albania)

Venice International Film Festival

1994: *Before the Rain* (FYROM) [Golden Lion* and FIPRESCI]
1998: *Black Cat, White Cat* (Yugoslavia) [Silver Lion]
Cabaret Balkan (Yugoslavia) [FIPRESCI]
2001: *Bread and Milk* (Slovenia)
[Luigi De Laurentiis Award]

Footnotes:

* Joint winner

FIPRESCI indicates a prize awarded by a jury installed by the International Federation of Film Critics

The country listed indicates the nationality or cultural affiliation of the director and the subject matter of the film, rather than the indicating the location or financing of the production.