Representing Yugoslavia?

Emir Kusturica's UNDERGROUND and the politics of post-modern cinematic historiography

Igor Krstic

De Joegoslavische film UNDERGROUND won in 1995 in Cannes de Gouden Palm. Maker Emir Kusturica werd geprezen om zijn stilistische meesterschap. Maar de film was ook omstreden. Hij werd zelfs zo hard aangevallen dat Kusturica besloot nooit meer films te maken – een besluit waarop hij inmiddels is teruggekomen. Veel gehoorde kritiek luidde dat UNDERGROUND in het licht van de oorlog die de volkeren in het uiteengevallen Joegoslavië op dat moment voerden, juist vanwege zijn ver doorgevoerde estheticisme een tendentieuze film was. De in Joegoslavië geboren en al sinds zijn elfde in Duitsland levende Igor Krstic stelt in onderstaand artikel eveneens dat de politieke inhoud van UNDERGROUND ligt in zijn vorm. Hij analyseert de film vanuit de context van de post-moderne (film)theorie over de representatie van de geschiedenis. De auteur is het niet eens met de conclusie die de critici trokken.

Emir Kusturica's epic farce about the horrors of war that took place during the last fifty years in former Yugoslavia was the winner of Cannes' 1995 Palme d'Or. The film was celebrated by critics for its aesthetically (editing, production design, mise en scene) breathtaking style, but also criticised for its ambiguous political meanings. It seems as if the collision of a highly controversial contemporary issue like the history of Yugoslavia and the 1990's war in Bosnia with a cinematic style that is both monumental and satirical or parodistic, leads to divergent public opinions and controversial debates.¹

UNDERGROUND tells the history of former Yugoslavia through a melodramatic story of a love triangle. Blacky and Marko, two life-long friends, fall in love with the same woman, Natalija, who is an actress at the Belgrade state theatre during the German occupation. She is friends with a high ranking Nazi officer who supports her acting career and also attempts to capture Blacky and Marko, the two communist bandits and weapon dealers for the partisan underground during the Nazi occupation. When Blacky is arrested by the ss, Marko deceives his best friend and betrays him. Wasting no time, Marko makes Natalija the object of his affec-

tion and marries her. Still, Marko rescues Blacky from the Nazis and hides him in his cellar. Now a high ranking communist official after the Nazi occupation, Marko, however, keeps the cellar locked over the course of the next twenty years. By deceiving Blacky, his son, his own brother, Ivan, along with a host of others, into believing that the war is not yet over, Marko succeeds in making them work to produce munitions for his own profit. Aided and abetted by recordings of air raid sirens, bombs, Hitler speeches and Lale Anderson's German song *Lili Marleen*, the illusion of war is sustained.

Slavoj Žižek, a well-known Slovenian philosopher, was one of the most radical critics of the film. He saw in *UNDERGROUND* a tendentious film, taking unambivalently the Serbian perspective towards Yugoslavian history and the war in Bosnia. Žižek argues:

"The political meaning of *UNDERGROUND* is not to be found primarily in its overt tendentiousness, in the way it takes side in the post-Yugoslav conflict (heroic Serbs versus the treacherous, pro-Nazi Slovenes and Croats...) but, rather, in its very "depoliticized aestheticist" attitude."

I would like to argue in a similar way that the 'politics' of *UNDERGROUND* lies in its aesthetics. Contrary, however, to Žižek's socio-psychoanalytic reading of *UNDERGROUND*, I want to approach the film

Tableau de la troupe van de *UNDERGROUND*-cast. In het midden de drie hoofdrolspelers.

Bron: Universal Studios

within the context of post-modern film and theoretical debates about representation of history. In my opinion the film deals with Yugoslavian history in a very self-reflexive way. The course of the paper will therefore be as follows. In the first section, I will try to explain the connections between the crisis of truth and representation and the traumatic modernist events of this century. Subsequently I will introduce the strategies and ideas of post-modern art, especially, post-modern films in their problematizing of history and representation. In the second section I will try to open-up the context of Yugoslavian history from a perspective that comes closest to the perspective Kusturica offers in his film. In the last and largest section I will try to unfold the complex structure of Kusturica's film through a reading that foregrounds the related texts and stylistic modes of the film. In this section, I will also try to answer the question, in which way Kusturica's film can be understood as a post-modern film and how the film offers an alternative 'meta-narrative' of Yugoslavian history. In the conclusion, I will come back to Žižek's criticism and try to answer the question which side the film takes in the post-Yugoslav conflict.

Beeld uit
UNDERGROUND met
de drie
hoofdrolspelers
Blacky, Marko en
Natalija.
Bron: Universal
Studios

The crisis of truth and the post-modern answer

In his essay *The modernist event* Hayden White discusses realist, modernist and post-modernist accounts on representing history in both literature and film. He is foregrounding which effects, what he calls, the 'holocaustal events' of the twentieth century had on such concepts like truth, fact, story or agency. Modern events like the Holocaust, the World Wars or nuclear explosions, that are so ungraspable in their impact on human suffering and destruction, can hardly be understood in conventional patterns of knowledge and representation.

'Some of these "holocaustal" events (...) function in the consciousness of certain social groups exactly as infantile traumas are conceived to function in the psyche of neurotic individuals. This means that they cannot be simply forgotten and put out of mind, but neither can they be adequately remembered; which is to say, clearly and unambiguously identified as to their meaning and contextualized in the group memory in such a way as to reduce the shadow they cast over the group's capacities to go into its present and envision a future free of their debilitating effects.'

The aim of traditional or realist modes of historiographic representations was to remember or 'identify' causes, agents, and facts of historical events unambiguously and in a coherent way. White argues that it was the closed and unifying nature of narration in both literature and historiography, which provided this unambiguous task. White foregrounds how the psychological impact of those 'modernist events' destabilise traditional beliefs in knowledge and progress. They are causing traumatic neurosis in the psyches of the individuals who are confronted with these kind of experiences.

Recent psychoanalytic and sociological discourses on trauma acknowledge that traumatic symptoms are less symptoms of the unconscious than of history. This means that trauma is less a matter of repression and that the effects are less symptoms of an illness or pathology. On the contrary, the experiences of traumatised individuals question the very notion of how to understand what they have experienced. Cathy Caruth argues in her introduction to *Trauma. Explorations in memory*.

'It is indeed this truth of traumatic experience that forms the centre of its pathology or symptoms; it is not a pathology, that is, of falsehood or displacement of meaning, but of history itself. (...) Yet what can it mean that history occurs as a symptom? It is indeed this curious phenomenon that makes trauma (...) in its definition, and in the impact it

has on the lives of those who live it, intimately bound up with a question of truth.⁴

The 'truth' of the traumatic experience lies in the very radical disruption of everyday beliefs. The extraordinary confrontation with 'reality' leaves the traumatised literally without words. That is exactly one aspect of what one might call the crisis of truth or the collapse of understanding.

Another aspect of this crisis can be traced in what one might call the 'modernist' character of those events. In this century technology and science are constitutive elements of mass destructions and world wars. As Bernd Hüppauf argues, realistic modes of representation, such as pictorial realism or documentaries, do not seem appropriate in grasping the complexity of these events.

To the degree to which modern reality has succumbed to science and technology, and has become disjointed, opaque, and characterised by abstract mediation, the relationship between pictorial representation and linguistic account has become highly problematic. It is the abstract nature of modernity that seems to require conceptual modes of representation rather than a pictorial duplication of visible reality.⁵

The modern age changed not only the experience of warfare, but also of everyday social and cultural life in the western industrialised world. Old modes of representation were not appropriate anymore to grasp the complexity of these issues. The term, 'conceptual modes of representation', refers to modes that reject pictorial or narrative realism and acknowledge the complex character of the events they represent. In the following, I want to introduce the post-modern mode, concentrating on its treatment of history in film. The guiding question will be how post-modern historiographic films deal with the crisis of truth and representation.

Post-modern historiography and film

'A post-modern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes / The work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they / Cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories / To the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for.'⁶

This quotation from Lyotard's influential essay on the post-modern touches one of the main practices of post-modernist art, which one can

define as the selfreflexive nature of those arts. Post-modernist self-reflexivity is less a serious philosophising about the nature of human interactions and meaningmaking. It is rather a playful questioning and negotiating of historical, artificial, and/or social issues in a given cultural context. It problematises questions about the common-sensical and the natural, but it never answers those questions in a totalizing way. It uses and subverts dominant discourses, which claim to represent the truth or unquestionable facts. Contradictions and paradoxes are what post-modernists foreground in their meaningmaking. For post-modernists all knowledge is a matter of discourse, and truth is an arbitrary concept, bound to local, community or cultural specific narratives.

Linda Hutcheon emphasises in her *Poetics of post-modernism* the focusing of post-modernist artists on the rewriting of history as one of its main issues. As Hutcheon argues those artificial products are 'fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political. (...) These contradictions are certainly manifest in the important post-modern concept of the presence of the past.'⁷ Frederic Jameson emphasises that history is a main issue for post-modernism, when he states in his book *Post-modernism*, that 'it is safest to grasp the concept of the post-modern as an attempt to think the present historically in the first place.'⁸ The concept of the 'presence of the past' emphasises, that on the one side there is no understanding of contemporary social, cultural, or political issues without reflecting on their specific historical background. On the other side, the concept emphasises, that our presence (subjectivity, memory, culture) is a result of the historical constructions of how history happened and what meaning these events had.

'What the post-modern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past. In other words, the meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past events into present historical facts.'

The constructed nature of history is part of the notion, that all what we know about history is only available to us through representations or systems of signification. The idea behind this is, that all texts (in the broad sense of the semiotic term) are semiotically constructed as coherent systems and that representation is, therefore, also involved in ideological struggles of how to assign truth to an event. Meta-narratives, like the narratives of the liberal humanistic enlightenment or the communist class struggle are, in the post-modernist view, 'stories' created by those who had the institutional power to create those stories. In this sense, historiography is just another way of creating a story, with the difference that it

legitimises itself by claiming that, what it represents, actually happened, that it's not a product of the imagination. Post-modernists blur the distinction between fact and fiction, showing how the factual is manipulated by different forces (ideologies) for different reasons.

Most recently films like Stone's *JFK* and *NIXON*, Spielberg's *SCHINDLER'S LIST*, Zemecki's *FORREST GUMP* or earlier films like Syberberg's *OUR HITLER*, Visconti's *THE DAMNED* and Terry Gilliam's *BRAZIL* were discussed and labelled as post-modern historiographic films or historical 'metafictions'-films that are reflecting on historical representations as such.¹⁰ According to Hutcheon, the narrative has been the major focus of these metafiction. These fictions use conventional storytelling in order to subvert it. In doing so, they explore different perspectives (for example, from minority groups) towards history and offer alternatives to the dominant narratives and discourses surrounding the subject matter they deal with. The following subversive practices are crucial for rewriting history in film:

1 Selfreflexive narration: always referring to the constructed nature of narratives and to the fictional nature of film itself.

2 Using parody and irony: approaching the past with humour, absurdist, surrealist, dadaesque attitudes, in order to reveal the constructed nature of former norms of representation like realism.

3 Blurring traditional boundaries and deconstructing hierarchical categories and oppositions, like fact and fiction, truth and imagination or good and evil and intermixing contradictory elements or genres like documentary with melodrama and satire, film noir with science fiction or fantasy and so on.

4 Post-modern fiction interprets history and shows which underlying concepts are structuring historical events from various point of views.

5 Intertextuality is one of the major features of post-modern films. The extensive quoting and parodistic or selfreflexive rewriting of other films (in style, story or plot) raises various issues regarding representation, authenticity and realism."

My assumption would be to regard the theoretical concept of historiographic metafiction in film as an ideal framework for my reading of Kusturica's *UNDERGROUND*. One of the most obvious features of the film is that it constantly refers to a variety of styles, plots, and issues of earlier films. Therefore, the basic aim of my reading of *UNDERGROUND* is to contextualise these aesthetic features and to clarify the reason for its referring to other (filmic, visual or literary) texts. The context of Kusturica's film is, of course, the history of communist Yugoslavia. This is why I would like to foreground a historicizing interpretation of the film.

UNDERGROUND deals especially with the communist period in Yugoslavian history, from the invasion of Nazi Germany in 1941 till to the break-up of Yugoslavia in the early 1990's. The film tells the story of a country, whose founding mythology and identity was heavily concentrated on the defeat of Nazi Germany by the communist partisans. Kusturica's film ends with the war in Bosnia. The film is a retrospective, telling the story of communist Yugoslavia and its break-up after the *artificiality* of the communist stories, concerning the past, present, and future of the country became obvious. It is also told, as the introductory sentences of the movie suggest, as a fairy tale, a tale about fictions, lies, betrayals and deceptions. Kusturica himself suggests a reading of his film that considers its historical background, when he emphasises:

'In this region, war is a natural phenomenon. It is like a natural catastrophe, like an earthquake which explodes from time to time. In my film, I tried to clarify the state of things in this chaotic part of the world. It seems that nobody is able to locate the roots of this terrible conflict.'¹²

Beeld uit
UNDERGROUND.
Bron: Universal
Studios

War traumas and propaganda in Tito's Yugoslavia

The history of Yugoslavia in the twentieth century is marked by an unusual magnitude of wars, genocides and ethnic violence.¹³ The ongoing war in Kosovo is already the sixth war of this century in that region. National boundaries, ideologies, and political systems have been replaced and have succeeded one another in this part of the world. Matthijs van der Port's anthropological study in Novi Sad during the war in Bosnia, tries to answer the question, how the experience of wars affected the Yugoslavian people's understanding of the world:

'I would like to recall the fact that all those states, ideologies and political systems had their roots in the experience of war. They were installed with blood, and they were wiped out again with blood. In this sense the horrors of war marked continuity for the Yugoslavs. (...) In this way too, the war could call for the survivors: I am reality, I am the firm ground beneath your feet, the certainty among all uncertainties.'¹⁴

Van der Port points out how this horrible history disjoints all beliefs in humanity, feelings of honour and self-respect among the people of that region. Through traumatic experiences the victims of war felt betrayed, deceived, and disillusioned, causing a fundamental distrust in all official versions and stories about the war. He stresses, how 'war teaches that every conceivable taboo can be broken, and every taboo is broken', so that the belief in civilisation and humanity becomes fundamentally disturbed.¹⁵

The multiethnic land of brotherhood and unity was far and foremost constructed by Tito and his communist party. The horrible incidents that happened during and after the ww II (ethnic genocides from all parties that were involved) had been tabooed during communism. The communist propaganda commemorated the Second World War as a glorious fight of the Partisans against the evil Germans. They had great interest into keeping the historical enemy fascism alive, considering the post-war instabilities of the country. History books, school lessons, speeches, newspapers, and, especially partisan films were supposed to spread this propagandist view concerning the events of ww II, as if there hardly had been any history before 1941. The partisans were portrayed as brave, intelligent, humane, and victorious, the nazis as stupid, clumsy, and cowardly. Van der Port points out that the Yugoslavian historiography after World War II was marked to a great degree by euphemisms and suppressions and that:

'...the histories produced by the Titoist historians or epic poets show how, after the war, fictional reality enters a completely different but

no less alienating crisis: people are introduced to the unlimited potential of the lie.¹⁶

'After the war' means in this context, after the war in Bosnia, after which all communist ideals of brotherhood and unity, of prosperity, and a future society in which the children will live in peace and wealth, but it also means the stories once told about the glorious defeat of Nazi Germany, the brave struggle of the righteous people against the evil fascists revealed as empty and idle. 'War is a world of experience in which the artificial nature of the world as we know it is revealed. "All those stories are nonsense" is the lesson of war.'¹⁷

UNDERGROUND as historiographic metafiction

In the following, I want to analyse the post-modern aesthetics of UNDERGROUND. What I want to point out is, how the film plays with several (film-)historical issues in a post-modern way. First, I want to discuss the spectacular forces of the melodramatic or operatic mode which one can find in UNDERGROUND. The next section will deal with the connection between the spectacular in cinema and in history, stressing the self-reflexive relationship, which exists when cinema deals with a history that has become itself spectacular. The third section tries to unfold the multi-layered underground-metaphor, stressing its complex symbolism. In the fourth section, I will focus on parody and the film within a film sequence in UNDERGROUND in order to show how the film depicts the notion of the exchangeability of fact and fiction or authenticity and the fake. In the last part of this chapter, I will try to concentrate on the question, which alternative 'master-narrative' Kusturica offers for a new historiography of communist Yugoslavia.

UNDERGROUND tells the history of former Yugoslavia through a melodramatic story of a love triangle. Filmhistorian Marcia Landy discusses the melodramatic mode of popular cinema in her sixth chapter of *Cinematic uses of the past*.¹⁸ Discussing German post-war cinema, she tries to establish connections between Germany's traumatic past and the mourning work proliferated through the affective mode of melodrama. Melodrama reaffirms feelings of loss, guilt or anticipated vindication and, therefore, constitutes an important emotional mediator for a collectivity between the present and the past. She discusses two different uses of melodrama and memory in connection to post-war Germany: what she calls 'monumental melodrama' and the 'anti-melodrama'. In my opinion, one can find both modes present in Kusturica's UNDERGROUND.

Monumental historical representation one can find in so called 'operatic' films. This mode of the 'operatic' was central for the Italo-American New Hollywood films of the 1970's, which were depicting the American history of this century from the point of view of immigrant communities (Michael Cimino's *THE DEER HUNTER* or Coppola's *GODFATHER*-films).¹⁹ Like *UNDERGROUND*, those films were made in a post-traumatic political period (post-Vietnam).

Melodramas and operas proliferate viewer identification and engage the viewer with their musical and visual motifs to reinforce a sense of tremendous loss, a mood of total despair and hopelessness.²⁰ This emotional manipulation with monumental spectacularity proliferates a collective 'mourning experience' for the audience. In *UNDERGROUND*, one can find a mood of overwhelming nostalgia, a mourning for a certain concept of Yugoslavia that has been lost. This could be explained through the reference to another operatic Italo-American epic, Sergio Leone's *ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA*. *UNDERGROUND*'s subtitle ('Once upon a time there was a country...') refers to Leone's' nostalgic film about friendship and betrayal, themes that are also central in *UNDERGROUND*.²¹

The use of a dynamic mise en scene that coincides with the dynamics of the gypsy music throughout *UNDERGROUND* can be best described as manic depressive, a constant whirling of outrageous celebration and deep sorrow. The mood of nostalgia for a lost world coincides with certain melodramatic values that are sublimated into colour, decor, gesture, and composition of frame. The use of brown colours for the decor in the underground scenes; the decor of the underground as a hybrid mixture of pre-industrial mechanics and 19th century poorhouse; the dynamic composition of the mise en scene that coincides with the emotionality of the partly monumental music (bombardment of the zoo or death of Marko and Natalija); all these stylistic elements create a melodramatic or operatic viewing experience, which is connected to the nostalgic mood of the film.

As I mentioned above, in my opinion one can find in *UNDERGROUND* also a selfreflexive 'anti-melodrama' mode. The German song *Lili Marleen* became in Yugoslavia a symbol for the Nazi occupation, considering the historical fact that Radio Belgrade, the German Army broadcast station in Serbia, played the song every night, since it was released in 1943. One can say, that the reference to this legendary popular song also implies a filmic reference to Fassbinder's *LILI MARLEEN*. Kusturica referred to Fassbinder already in earlier films.²² In *UNDERGROUND* he makes this reference very obvious, when he himself, for example, appears later on in the film as a black market weapon dealer in Bosnia. This refers to Fassbinder's self-appearance as a German post-war black market dealer in *DIE EHE DER MARIA BRAUN*. There is also a striking reference to *LILI MARLEEN*, when

one compares the melodramatic plotlines of the two movies. In *LILI MARLEEN* the protagonist Willi, who is the singer of the song, stands between two men, Robert, the son of a wealthy Jewish family, who is actively supporting the resistance within Germany, and a high ranking Nazi, who supports her career in the German show business.

Although the two films deal within different ideological and national backgrounds, by citing *LILI MARLEEN*, Kusturica tries to make an ironic comparison between the two films. If one tries to read *LILI MARLEEN* as an intertext from *UNDERGROUND*, what is crucial to note is that the characterisation of the protagonists are very similar. Secondly, if one approaches both films within the context of history as spectacle, Marko's betrayal, as well as the underground as a metaphor for a history that is imaginary and make-believe, refers to the theme of cinema's selfreference to a history that is itself a created spectacle.

Having this in mind, *UNDERGROUND* can also be read allegorically as a selfreflexive film about a history that is a cinematic spectacle; a history where the signs have no reference anymore and where history becomes a stage for spectacle. This reference must be seen in the light of the 1970's reflection of European Art Cinema on Fascism as well as what Fascism has in common with the melodramatic, erotico-pornographic, horror, and fantasy subjects of cinema (by Italian and French filmmakers like Visconti, Bertolucci, Truffaut or Louis Malle). As Thomas Elsaesser points out, these filmmakers 'had made a (...) melodramatically or operatically spectacular representation of history the dominant model of filmic representation'.³³ But unlike the operatic melodramas of Cimino, Leone, and Coppola, these filmmakers made Fascism as a vantage point for the cinematic representation of history, because Fascism itself used the manipulative techniques of cinema.

I would like to argue – having in mind that Kusturica mentioned both, Visconti and Leone as aesthetic intertexts of *UNDERGROUND*, and having in mind that Kusturica refers to Fassbinder, who thematized Fascism in a similar way – that *UNDERGROUND* explores the history of communist Yugoslavia with a double strategy: on the one side it engages the viewer with its melodramatic operatics, creating feelings of mourning and loss. On the other hand, with the use of satire and parody, the film distances the viewer from the characters and from what they are caught up in. Thomas Elsaesser's reading of the characters in *LILI MARLEEN* deals with their involvement in the worlds of fascism and show business.

'Because on the emphasis on a topsy-turvy, looking glass world of upside down values and identities, Fassbinder's films about the 1930's

and 1940's are at one level anxious allegories of what (...) I called the cinema's historical self-reference. (...) What emerges is the notion that cinema has a claim on history, where this history is spectacle and make-believe, deception and self-deception. Fassbinder's characters are caught up in show-making and entertainment worlds....²⁴

The main protagonists in *UNDERGROUND* are eccentric figures with 'upside-down values and identities', characters that are caught up in deceptions and self-deceptions. Natalija performs at the Belgrade state theatre for high Nazi officials and Belgrade's bourgeoisie, where she delivers a poor performance of Strindberg's *THE FATHER*. Marko becomes a communist politician and a wanna-be poet, writing propagandist clichés about the glorious old days of the Nazi resistance. Blacky enjoys his status as Tito's lovely underground fighter in the cellar with his gypsy music, drinking, eating and celebrations. Marko, Blacky, and Natalija are either betraying and deceiving themselves or others. They are caught up in worlds of make believe and spectacle: Marko and Natalija in politics, theatre, poetry, and even film and Blacky as a fictitious hero of a resistance, fighting against ghosts.

Beeld uit
UNDERGROUND.
Bron: Universal
Studios

As mentioned above, UNDERGROUND's national and ideological background is not fascism but communism. Nevertheless one can say that the film establishes an analogy between fascism and communism, both creating a history that is spectacle and make-believe, both using techniques of mass manipulation and propaganda. The stage of history and the stage of cinema emerge as interwoven domains in UNDERGROUND.

The metaphor of the underground

Kusturica incorporated already in earlier films, such as ARIZONA DREAM and TIME OF THE GYPSIES, fantastic or imaginary aspects that were bound to the cultural background of the characters. In UNDERGROUND the semi-fantastic underworld is an allegorical place, suggesting certain connotations. These connotations refer in my opinion to specific fictional worlds (films or literature) that are in a similar way imaginary or symbolic. One can draw, for example, a striking reference to one of the most important East European post-war movies, KANAL (1957) by Andrzej Wajda. The film shows the descent of a platoon of the Polish underground national army into the sewers of Warsaw in order to escape the Nazis during the uprising in 1944. The extreme situation of their journey through the sewers brings out the terrors of war and the traumatised psyches of these people. The film stylistically relates strongly to the dominant European post-war representational mode of Neo-realism. The reference to this film in UNDERGROUND can also be seen as a reference to the East European author cinema, which was opposed to the ideological dogmas of social realism. In UNDERGROUND, the realist undertaking of post-war existentialism, as it is presented in KANAL, becomes transformed into a gigantic orwellian allegory for the state of the Yugoslavian people after the war. The partisan underground fighters remain in the sewers for the next twenty years, while being deceived and controlled by the communist regime. This dystopian view of communist totalitarianism clashes with the utopian propaganda of communism itself.

Mentioning the dystopian futuristic vision of Orwell in 1984 seems maybe a bit misguided here. Nevertheless, UNDERGROUND's metaphor refers to similar issues: totalitarian states, propaganda, make-believe worlds. These orwellian issues have been depicted very often in the history of film, such as, for example, in Fritz Lang's METROPOLIS (in which the enslaved working class lives and works in the underground for the wealth of the capitalist class), in Orson Welles' film version of Kafka's *Trial*, in Terry Gilliam's BRAZIL (where a bureaucratic propaganda regime controls the distribution of information, set in an old fashioned

futuristic environment), or just recently in Peter Weir's *THE TRUMAN SHOW* (where life is a TV-series, controlled by the producers of the show). One can say that cinema's own self reference is also related to the film-historical issue of dystopia, because the manipulation strategies of totalitarian regimes refer also to the manipulative techniques of cinema.

To understand *UNDERGROUND*'s reference to this filmhistorical issue is only possible, if one tries to establish another reference to a fictional genre that has been labelled *magic realism*. Since the 1950s and 1960s the concept of *magic realism* has increasingly been associated with Latin American fiction. *Magic realism* in literature is writing that works both within and against the aesthetics of realism. Normal, plausible, and everyday events co-exist on the same level as supernatural, extraordinary and even fantastic events whose authenticity is never questioned. In her book, *Magical realism and the fantastic*, Amaryll Chanady explains, that magic realism is characterised by two conflicting but autonomously coherent perspectives, one based on an 'enlightened' and rational view of reality and the other based on the acceptance of the supernatural as part of the everyday.²⁵ Despite the presence of fantastic events, however, it is always linked with the 'real' world, grounded in recognisable reality through social, historical and political references. This so called third world-literature mixes fantasy and reality, fact and myth, while resisting classical expectations of closure and unity. Salman Rushdie's essay on the magic realist Gabriel Garcia Marquez in his *Imaginary homelands*, explains the connection between the Third World reality and the fictional world of magic realism in a very transparent way:

'The damage to reality in South America is at least as much political as cultural. In Marquez's experience, truth has been controlled to the point at which it has ceased to be possible to find out what it is. The only truth is that you are being lied to all the time. (...) Magic realism, at least as it is practised by Marquez, is a development out of Surrealism that expresses a genuinely Third World consciousness. It deals with (...) half-made societies, in which the impossibly old struggles against the appallingly new, in which public corruptions and private anguishes are somehow more garish and extreme they ever get in the so-called North, where centuries of wealth and power have formed thick layers over the surface of what's really going on.'²⁶

The social reality of Yugoslavia seems to have been no less half-made and corrupt and, as Matthijs van der Port describes, no less mendacious and untruthful.²⁷ The imagining spirit of fictions, myths and fantasy bound to their specific cultural imaginary, reflect in one way the struggle between the reality of modernity and that of a culture's traditional beliefs.

The surreal idea of people living for over twenty years in a cellar, deceived by a man with the techniques of show business and propaganda refers both to dystopian films and fictions, and to a magical realist view of history. UNDERGROUND's interpretation of Yugoslavian history is dystopian, as it shows the deceptions of a totalitarian propaganda-machine. The socialist paradise was, in fact, a false consciousness. It is a magic realist interpretation, because it depicts a realistic situation, hyperbolizing it in an absurd way. The realism of Wajda's KANAL becomes in UNDERGROUND a fantastic metaphor. The poetics of magic realism reveal a historical reality that has become mysterious through its manipulations and it does so, by hyperbolizing the despotism and arbitrariness of the manipulators. The absolute power of the patriarchs becomes in a hyperbolizing metaphor an absurd and tragic-comic mirror of the social reality.

The metaphor of the underground also thematizes genuinely cinematic issues, such as the reference to the platonic cave metaphor suggests ('Is it sunshine or moonshine?'). What we really see are just shadows, or to contextualize in the world of communism: what we really see is just propaganda. Therefore, the 'reality' of Yugoslavian history is only possible to represent through the reference to fictional history or through transcending realism, because it was realism that was abused by communism and reality that was manipulated.

Selfreflexivity: film within a film

From a post-modern perspective it has become no longer possible to distinguish between fiction and fact, truth and lie, experience and its representation. The digital insertion of the fictional hero into documentary footage and into an interactive relation with 'real' historical events and persons is a technique that has been used in UNDERGROUND, but also in films like FORREST GUMP and Woody Allen's ZELIG. It functions like an ironic and playful recognition of the post-modern sensibility towards the problems of historical representation, especially when one considers the manipulation of photographs and documents during communism in the Soviet Union or in other totalitarian regimes. These ironic displacements of document and fiction in the movies mentioned above, can be understood as *parodies* on this kind of propagandist strategies. The official and politically motivated rewriting of history is mirrored in UNDERGROUND by an ironic and metaphoric rewriting of history.

It has been argued above, that films dealing with the history of countries or systems, where propaganda, make-believe and spectacular ma-

nipulation has disturbed the relation to 'what really happened', are inevitably involved into a mise en abyme relation to what they represent. In *UNDERGROUND* one can trace another striking example for a self-conscious ironic play with the theme of history and fiction: the film within a film. When Blacky and his son Jovan finally escape out of their underground world to fight against the Nazis, they face a filmset where a propaganda film is being shot, that is full of communist kitsch and clichés. This propaganda movie depicts the heroic death of the national hero Peter Popar – alias Blacky –, based on the events of a 'true' story, as it was told by his best friend and hobby poet, Marko. The viewer of the film however has the knowledge of what 'really happened', because the propaganda film depicts exactly that scene, which led to the capturing of Blacky earlier on in *UNDERGROUND*. Blacky has been betrayed by Marko, when he escapes with the ship, leaving Blacky without resistance in the hand of the Nazis. And Natalija was far too interested in going back to her Nazi protégé Franz, than to stay with Blacky, who kidnapped her earlier from the hands of her Nazi protégé Franz. In reality, there was no heroic fight for the ideals of the communist party and no heroic death of Petar Popar, as it is depicted twenty years later in the propaganda film. The parodistic character of this scene is even topped by the enthusiastic director of this historical propaganda film, who motivates his actors to act as 'natural' as possible.

This is a classical example for an ironic use of mise en abyme.²⁸ A parody within the film about the clichéed story's of the communist propaganda film industry. This film industry, as the parody suggests, depicted the history of the 'glorious' resistance fight of the partisans in a manner that could be best described as communist kitsch. In *UNDERGROUND*, this communist kitsch is revealed through parody. The film within a film sequence on the other hand shows how history has been manipulated through film and how exchangeable the relation of truths and lies, facts and fictions has become.

Rewriting history: 'Hunting Nazis and losing reality'

When Blacky and Jovan escape out of their underground world and face the film set of the anti fascist propaganda movie, they believe, that what they see is real and not 'just a movie'. Yugoslavia is still occupied by the Nazis and there are still partisans, who fight against the oppression. Years later Blacky has become the leader of a paramilitary unit, destroying villages in the Bosnian war of the early 1990's. When a British UN-officer questions him about his loyalties (cetnik, ustasa or partisan) Blacky does

not waste time on explaining his ethnicity or ideology. He says: 'I'm fighting for my country. Fuck off, you fascist!'

The communist deceptions lead into a pathological loss of reality and finally into a fictitious hunt for fascists in the Bosnian war – this is what the film suggests. One has to consider at this point, that the reality in post-communist Yugoslavia was already a bloody and horrible one. New deceptions and distortions of truth and reality were at stake. The outcome of the communist ideal of brotherhood and unity was 'ethnic cleansing', an euphemism for genocide and mass deportations.

The insights in Jean Baudrillard's essay, *Hunting Nazis and losing reality* can be extended to the post-communist developments in the Balkans (he wrote the essay in 1989). Baudrillard emphasises that nostalgia for Fascism is not dangerous, but

'what is dangerous is this pathological revival of the past, which everyone (...) is currently participating (indeed virtually conniving) in, this collective hallucination which transfers the power of imagination that is lacking from our own period, and all the burden of violence and reality, which has today become merely illusory, back to that earlier period in a sort of compulsion to re-live its history, a compulsion accompanied by a profound sense of guilt at not having been there.'²⁹

Baudrillard explains that this pathological revival of the past has to be understood in a more psychoanalytic way as a collective hallucination, a compulsion neurosis which emerges out of a merely *virtual* relation to the horrors of the past. A feeling of guilt emerges out of the fact that those realities of violence and wars are absent in the present and that fantasies, that create a desire to re-live those past experiences are still existing within the unconscious. The collective character of this re-living of past horrors is a phantasmatic one, present in films, literature or other popular fictions.

If one considers the topics discussed in the second section of this paper, the connections between modernist events, trauma, history and representation and how post-modern artists deal with these correlations, the context opened up by Baudrillard seems to clarify some aspects of these correlations. Our relation to past events is a genuinely virtual one. The guilt complex of 'not having been there' emerges out of the feeling, that all those past events are merely simulations, not real. This vicious circle can result into a 'dangerous' or pathological desire to re-live those (non-real) fantasies.

These dangerous tendencies sensed in 1989 by Baudrillard, became bitter reality in post-communist Yugoslavia. Serbs were hunting fascist Croats, because their separatist tendencies were connected to the atrocities

of the fascist Ustasha regime during the Second World War. The Serbs were considered as fascists, because their nationalist policy of ethnic cleansing reminded them on Hitler's policy of ethnic extermination. In *UNDERGROUND*, the whole context of ethnicity, religion and age old hatred, which is mostly used by historians or politicians as explanation for the escalation of the conflict, is not mentioned. What Kusturica instead points out is the above discussed thesis of hunting nazis and losing reality. Blacky was not 'there'. He was kept for over twenty years in a passive and virtual relation to reality. When he comes out into another reality he acts like a hallucinating psychopath with this pathological desire to re-live his non-real past. The film therefore not only rewrites the histories of communist myth makers, but also the stereotypes of age old ethnic violence and hatred in the Balkans and offers a different 'meta-narrative' towards the history of Yugoslavia. A 'meta-narrative' that is not only metafictional but in a metaphorical way also psychoanalytical. The underground stands for this phantasmatic Yugoslavia, for a collective unconscious Yugoslavia.

Conclusion

A popular text is always also a multilayered and contradictory text. The paradoxical and complex nature of Kusturica's controversial film is, what I tried to foreground in my reading. Despite these complexities one must emphasise, that *UNDERGROUND* is above all a genuinely *cinematic* popular text, and it is exactly this characteristic, what creates controversial responses and debates surrounding the subject matter and political tendencies of the film. I would like to recall at this point, what Thomas Elsaesser described as a genuinely filmic experience.

'The film experience is, par excellence, a site of mimetic emotions. Its ambiguous, libidinally charged play of identifications is therefore responding to a melodramatic interpretation more obviously than a 'modernist' hermeneutics. Cinema, in this respect, is on the side of the excessive, perverse, or compulsive, rather than ruled by aesthetics of detachment and distance.'³⁰

Detachment and distance is on the other hand the 'adequate' mode for a subject matter that is highly controversial. For many Slovenians, Croats and Bosnians the film took very offensively the side of the Serbian perspective towards the history and break-up of Yugoslavia. Or even more radically, like the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek in his *The plague of fantasies* emphasised, the film took the side of the Serbian rapists, slaughterers and war criminals in Bosnia.

'[Kusturica] unknowingly provides the libidinal economy of the Serbian ethnic slaughter in Bosnia: the (...) trance of excessive expenditure, the continuous mad rhythm of drinking-eating-singing-fornicating. And that is the stuff of the 'dream' of the ethnic cleansers; therein lies the answer to the question 'How were they able to do it?'"³¹

I don't agree with this point of view, although I understand how offensive the film might be. What I've tried to argue in this paper is, how Kusturica's film coincides with many post-modernist ideas about representation and history. Therefore, I wouldn't describe *UNDERGROUND* as a film, that takes a position for a specific ethnic group or ideology. The film shows how a Yugoslav is deceived by another Yugoslav and how these deceptions lead to a catastrophe and not to a glorious fight against 'homeland traitors' or 'enemies of the Serbian nation'. Kusturica's film presents an 'adequately' negative interpretation of Yugoslavia's history and its break-down with genuinely cinematic themes and modes which has become unseparable from the spectacles of history itself.³²

Notes

- 1 This article is a revision of a paper written for the course 'Representation of modernist events' at the MA-Program in Film and Television studies from the University of Amsterdam, led by Bernadette Kester.
- 2 S. Žižek, *The plague of fantasies*, London and New York 1997, p. 61.
- 3 H. White, 'The modernist event', in: V. Sobchack, *The persistence of history. Cinema, television and the modern event*, New York and London 1996, p. 20.
- 4 C. Caruth (ed.), *Trauma. Explorations in memory*, Baltimore and London 1995, p. 5.
- 5 B. Hüppauf, 'Experiences of modern warfare and the crisis of representation', in: *New German Critics* 59, spring/summer 1993, p. 45.
- 6 J.F. Lyotard, *The postmodern condition. A report on knowledge* (translated by G. Bennington and B. Massumi), Minneapolis 1984, p.81.
- 7 L. Hutcheon, *A poetics of postmodernism. History, theory, fiction*, New York and London 1988, p.4.
- 8 F. Jameson, *Postmodernism or the cultural logic of late capitalism*, London and New York 1991, p. ix.
- 9 Hutcheon, *A poetics of postmodernism*, p. 8.
- 10 As it is discussed and conceptualised mainly for literary examples in Hutcheon's *A poetics of postmodernism*. Vivian Sobchack, Hayden White and Thomas Elsaesser mention this concept also for postmodernist films dealing with questions of historical representation in V. Sobchack (ed.), *The persistence of history*.
- 11 The list is a summary of some characteristics of historiographic metafiction or postmodern historical films based on chapter 7, 'Historiographic meta-

fiction. "The pastime of past time", in Hutcheon, *A poetics of post-modernism*, p.105-123 and on R.A. Rosenstone, *The future of the past. Film and the beginnings of postmodern history*, in: V. Sobchack, *The persistence of history*, p. 201-218.

- 12 Zizek, *The plague of fantasies*, p. 62.
- 13 This chapter concentrates on collective war traumas and propaganda in communist Yugoslavia, because this is what Kusturica foregrounds in his movie. In Matthijs van der Port's anthropological study about gypsies and Serbs he discusses this topic in his third chapter, 'Lessons from the reform school of war', in: *Gypsies, wars and other instances of the wild. Civilisation and its discontents in a Serbian town*, Amsterdam 1998, p. 95-131.
- 14 Van der Port, *Gypsies, wars and other instances of the wild*, p.110.
- 15 Idem, p. 114.
- 16 Idem, p. 126.
- 17 Idem, p. 129.
- 18 M. Landy, *Cinematic uses of the past*, Minneapolis and London 1996, p. 229-290.
- 19 See: N. Green, 'Coppola, Cimino: The operatics of history', in: M. Landy (ed.), *Imitations of life. A reader on film and television melodrama*, Detroit 1991, p. 388-397.
- 20 Idem, p. 395.
- 21 In an interview Kusturica mentioned that his cinematic style is highly influenced by the operatic mode in cinema, which he discovers in such filmmakers as Visconti and Leone. In: Kusturica and Grunberg, *Il était une fois.... UNDERGROUND*, Paris 1995, p. 39.
- 22 For example in *WHEN FATHER WAS AWAY ON BUSINESS*, where the last sequence of Fassbinder's *DIE EHE DER MARIA BRAUN* is quoted. The last ten minutes of both films are accompanied by the radio broadcast of the famous 1950's World Cup soccer matches between Yugoslavia and Chile and Germany and Hungary.
- 23 See: T. Elsaesser, 'Subject positions, speaking positions. From HOLOCAUST, OUR HITLER, and HEIMAT to SHOAH and SCHINDLER'S LIST', in: V. Sobchack, *The persistence of history*, p. 154.
- 24 T. Elsaesser, *Fassbinder's Germany. History, identity, subject*, Amsterdam 1996, p.152.
- 25 A.B. Chanady, *Magical realism and the fantastic: Resolved versus unresolved antinomy*, New York and London 1985.
- 26 S. Rushdie, *Imaginary homelands. Essays and criticism 1981-1991*, London and New York 1992, p. 303. Kusturica refers in his interview to Garcia Marquez's magic realist novel *The autumn of the patriarch*, which gave him the idea for the metaphor of the underground: 'C'est une idée que j'ai eue en lisant Marcuse, et aussi le très beau roman de Garcia Marquez, *The autumn of the patriarch*. Le type lève un matin à trois heures, et dit: "Il est quatre heures du matin." On lui répond: "Majeste, il est trois heures." Mais quand il dit quatre, c'est quatre! Il demande qu'on réveille le peuple et que tout le monde mette sa montre à l'heure. C'est le pouvoir absolu!' In: Kusturica and Grunberg, *Il était une fois.... UNDERGROUND*, p. 29.

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- 27 In his chapter 'Truths and lies', in: Van der Port, *Gypsies, wars and other instances of the wild*, p. 126-131.
- 28 The term 'mise en abyme' describes originally a heraldic figure – an emblem – which reduplicates in one part the whole of the emblem. In film, literature and art the term refers to aesthetic practices of self-reflexivity, where a for the medium specific practice is mirrored in one part of the whole aesthetic object. Velazquez' painting *Las Meninas* can be seen as a prototype of this mirroring practice.
- 29 S.G. Mestrovic, *Balkanisation of the West*, New York 1994, p. 29. Unfortunately the essay was not available in English, so that I had to rely on Mestrovic' account.
- 30 Elsaesser, *Subject positions, speaking positions*, p. 150.
- 31 Žizek, *The plague of fantasies*, p. 64.
- 32 Besides the above mentioned literature, for this article I also used: J. Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and simulations', in: J. Baudrillard, *Selected writings*, edited and translated by Mark Poster, p. 166-185; T. Elsaesser, 'Tales of sound and fury. Observations on the family melodrama', in: Landy, *Imitations of Life*, p. 68-91.