Introduction

THE YEAR 1991 marked the beginning of the final stage in the painful process of disintegration of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. War broke out in Slovenia, moved swiftly to Croatia, and in 1992 was rapidly spreading across Bosnia and Herzegovina. In September of that year a peace conference on Bosnia, sponsored by the European Community and the United Nations, began its work in Geneva as a follow-up to the conference that ended the previous month in London. The Geneva sessions helped advance an already influential perception of the war, which downplayed the fact of its being, at its basis, an act of aggression on Bosnia by the military and paramilitary forces serving the nationalist-expansionist projects of Greater Serbia and Croatia, and emphasized, instead, its nature as a three-sided civil and interethnic conflict in which each side—Muslims, Serbs, and Croats alike—was fighting to realize the exclusive interests of its own ethnos.

In the 1990 elections the three ruling ethnonational parties in Bosnia—the (Muslim) Party of Democratic Action, the Serb Democratic Party, and the Croatian Democratic Union—secured, respectively, 29.6 percent, 23.5 percent, and 14.4 percent of the popular vote (with a substantial segment of the population not voting at all).[1] These parties were now recognized as the sole representatives of the *entire* Bosnian people and, as such, were granted the mandate to negotiate at the conference the

division of the country along ethnic lines. This, at the very least implicit, "call for the completion of the process of ethnic homogenization"[2]—the process that in principle may have suited all three ethnonational "warring factions" but in reality meant a systematic practice of savage ethnic cleansing, exercised by far the most against the Muslims—thus entirely negated the existence of the fourth "faction" in Bosnia: the significant and certainly not all too easily dismissible segment of the population consisting of all those who refused to be labeled exclusively in ethnic terms and, on this ground, opposed the idea of the partitioning of their multinational state; all those women and men born out of ethnically mixed marriages; those Muslims, Serbs, Croats, ethnic Yugoslavs, and others who lived together side by side, in unity, all their lives, learning to enjoy and to take pride in their diversity rather than to fear it. What they stood for was a vision of multiethnic and multicultural identity for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Back in the peaceful days of the socialist Yugoslavia, this type of vision would certainly have been designated "Yugoslavism." In the 1990s, however, as a consequence of this term having been usurped, abused, and discredited by the hegemonic project headed by the Serbian president Slobodan Milošević—a project turned into a full-fledged military aggression by the time of the Croatian war—any properly multiethnic vision of Bosnia came, in fact, to represent a form of opposition to the Yugoslav territorial pretensions of the Serbian regime.

In 1993 an international tribunal was set up in the Hague, Netherlands, to investigate Balkan war crimes.[3] Frustrated by the international community's treatment of the Bosnian conflict as a "mere" tripartite ethnic strife, the well-known Sarajevan comedy troupe the Top List of the Surrealists responded to this news by performing the following tellingly ironic number in one of its wartime radio editions: "In September of 1995, the first person convicted faces the tribunal. He is a young Sarajevan, brought there because . . . he advocated a unified and secular Bosnia and Herzegovina; second: because he publicly claimed that regardless of their nationalities, people ought to live together."[4]

Stated succinctly, the tension that the above-described events bespeak, and the tension that today still generates key questions concerning the sociopolitical and cultural activity in the formerly Yugoslav lands, involves the following: to approach the bloody breakup of the Yugoslav

federation—but also to anticipate the future life in the region—from the narrow and rigid ethnocentric perspectives? Or, to consider these issues in ethnically nondeterminist terms, by way of engaging antiessentialist conceptions of identity?

This book investigates the complex relationship between aesthetics and ideology in the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav cinema. Specifically, it examines the variety of ways in which national identity is approached, construed, promoted, or critically dissected in film, video, and television texts from the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia and its successor states, especially Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia. I begin by analyzing some representative examples of politically radical cinema from the late 1960s and the early 1970s (the era of the internationally acclaimed Yugoslav New Film) and proceed to consider works made in the period extending from 1980, the year when Josip Broz Tito—the president-for-life and the "Father" of the modern Yugoslav nation—died, through the mid-1980s, the age of state socialism's gradual collapse, to the 1990s, the time of the country's disintegration and the wars ensuing from it.

All films are engaged on a level that pays close attention to their underlying aesthetic conceptions and their concrete formal properties. Specifically, stylistic traits of the chosen works—relationships established between image and sound, narrative logic or the absence thereof, nature of mise-en-scène, camera work—are elaborated in relation to the ideological functions they perform. Connecting this series of textual "case studies" is the book's overarching aim, to develop a systematic critique of ideology in cinema, at the foundation of which is the following premise about the breakup of the Yugoslav federation: naturalization of ethnic intolerance in the region, its seemingly "understandable" or even "inevitable" character, is the key mechanism of ideological deception by means of which the local political and cultural authorities have justified their territorial aspirations (war) and their will for power. In her book *The Culture of Lies* Dubravka Ugrešić, a writer and cultural critic, relates this point in the clearest possible terms:

The peoples of Yugoslavia lived for several decades in their own country, building not only cities, bridges, roads, railways but also a certain complex of values. Built into the foundations of that complex of values were, among other

things: "the ideology and practice of socialism" (today those same ex-Yugoslavs call that "communism," "Tito's regime," "communist dictatorship"). It was a practice which to a considerable extent confirmed the earlier break with Stalin (even if the break was carried out on the principle of "the same medicine": numerous individuals, usually out of a sheer inability to cope with the rapid ideological U-turn, ended up on the Yugoslav Gulag, Goli Otok). Then there was that famous "Yugoslavism." This implied a multinational and multicultural community and was reinforced over the years not only by Tito's popular slogans—"*Preserve brotherhood and unity like the apple of your eye*"—but also by the practice of daily life. Today those same peoples claim that they lived *in a prison of nations*, and that it was that idea, the idea of Yugoslavism—not *they themselves*—which is responsible for the present brutal war.[5]

Ugrešić is one among a number of Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav intellectuals—critics, theorists, political anthropologists, historians whose analyses of the complexities of life in the region I engage when reconstructing the context of volatile sociopolitical and cultural activity in the 1980s and 1990s. By situating the chosen examples of film and video production within this larger context, dominated by the rise of nationalism against the background of the declining socialist order, I seek to offer a historically grounded assessment of the ideological "effects" of these works at the time of their appearance—effects that are not strictly, or inherently, textual but are a result of the dynamic relationships of mutual influence established between the works themselves and their audiences.

Many of the central dynamics of the recent euphoric outbursts of ethnic nationalism in the former Yugoslavia—messianism, fascination with collective victimization, martyrdom, the cult of the leader—have been described by certain scholars as historically grounded in the (German) romanticist "collectivist-authoritarian" model of the nation. In his detailed historical account of both the theory and practice of "Yugoslavism," Andrew Baruch Wachtel, for example, outlines this model by differentiating it from what he calls the "individualistic-libertarian" one: "The difference between the two is simple but telling. Whereas the latter (characteristic of national thought in Great Britain and most of its former colonies) views the individual members of a nation as sovereign and is directly linked to democracy, the former sees individuals as important

only insofar as they are part of a unique and sovereign national group to which their individuality is subordinated."[6]

But individualistic modes of nationhood can just as well give rise to *etatist* self-indulgence, exclusivism, and hegemonism. On the other hand, their historical manifestations in a region notwithstanding, forces of collectivism are always also articulated synchronically—within, and in relation to, a wider sociopolitical constellation. This is why one needs to be careful not to simply interpret collectivist impulses (crucial as they, indeed, are for the proper understanding and critique of ethnic nationalism) as somehow characteristic of certain national "types"—as *inherent* in the "psychological makeup" of the entire Balkan peoples, for instance. Not unlike the "orientalist" discourses (dissected at great length by postcolonial studies), such reductivist and ultimately apolitical, "balkanist" explanations—frequently originating in the "civilized West"—merely betray the existing phobic cultural phantasms about the region and hardly help in creating an understanding of its dynamics.[7]

In this respect it is, for example, useful to recall that in the 1960s and the early 1970s a pronounced critique of collectivism permeated the ideas of the internationally acclaimed *Praxis* school of Yugoslav Marxist humanism (evoked in Chapter 1, when tracing the wider intellectual climate out of which some of the best-known works of New Film emerged). Declaring themselves against all forms of authoritarianism, in favor of an open, democratic socialist society, the *Praxis* group posited a liberated individual (*not* a mere proponent of *individualism*, though) as the foundation of collective, societal progress. Particularly influenced by Marx's early manuscripts, but in dialogue with other forms of contemporary social thought—such as, for instance, the theories of the "Freudian left" (especially Herbert Marcuse's and Erich Fromm's)—*Praxis* advocated a "merciless critique of everything existing" and argued that social and political ideals are not absolute, nor can they be fully accounted for in advance. "Rereading Marx from a new perspective resulted," wrote Mihailo Marković at the time, "in rediscovery of many forgotten humanist ideas about human creativity, . . . various forms of alienation, . . . and about communism as a society in which the freedom of each individual will be the condition of the freedom of all."[8] Significantly, however, when in the 1990s he became one of the official ideologues of Slobodan Milošević's

political doctrine, Marković demonstrated that certain ideas about "universal human emancipation" can also be successfully appropriated as a conceptual façade for the hegemonic "national emancipation" of the largest ethnic group in a multiethnic state, namely, Serbs in Yugoslavia.

What the contemporary outbursts of ethnic nationalism in the formerly Yugoslav lands may be said to explicate is, then, not some "intrinsic" regional tribalism but *the postsocialist radicalization of the collectivist resistance to, or denial of, the society as inherently heterogeneous and antagonistic*; radicalization of that social dynamic that, in fact, has made years of successful implementation of the paternalistic state-socialist doctrine possible in the first place. Numerous "rediscoveries," at the time when state socialism was collapsing, of the Yugoslav peoples' ethnic roots are, thus, wrongly seen (positively so by the nationalists and negatively so by the disappointed liberal critics) as signs of a simple return to "the way things ('naturally') were" before they were ("artificially" and "forcefully") interrupted by the onset of the transnational communist project. Rather, as Slavoj Žižek points out, the specific function of the 1990s revival of ethnonationalism in the Balkans (and in Eastern Europe in general) is that of a

> "shock-absorber" against the sudden exposure to the capitalist openness and imbalance. It is as if, in the very moment when the bond, the chain [state-socialist system] preventing free development of capitalism, i.e., a deregulated production of the excess, was broken, it was countered by a *demand for a new Master* who will rein it in. What one demands is the establishment of a stable and clearly defined social body which will restrain capitalism's destructive potential by cutting off the "excessive" element; and since this social body is experienced as that of a nation, the cause of any imbalance "spontaneously" assumes the form of a "national enemy."[9]

The breakup of Yugoslavia thus represents a good example of the tendency that Wole Soyinka sees as common to the societies undergoing radical transformation, whether in Eastern Europe, Africa (his native Nigeria, for example), or elsewhere. It is the tendency to "retreat into real and pseudo-ethnic bonds," to "resort to [one's] cultural affiliations," in situations "when politics appear to have failed."[10] This tendency frequently leads toward the formation of exclusivist, dangerously homogenized,

unhealthy cultures of totality—cultures given to radical stigmatization of all types of otherness. In the case of Yugoslavia there is no doubt that the intellectual and cultural elites invested in nationalist mythomanias and static, phobic notions of collective identity are to be directly blamed as principal instigators, promoters, and rationalizers of ethnic hatred in the region. For all practical purposes, this hatred may, therefore, also safely be seen as having originated—as having been manufactured—in the historical present! For, at the turn of the 1990s, the interethnic atmosphere in Yugoslavia was still such that animosity was not at all widespread, and the belief that there would be war did not predominate among the population. That is why, as civil rights attorney and publicist Srdja Popović points out, the crimes committed in the beginning of the war by the members of the Yugoslav Peoples Army and by the specially organized paramilitary formations were so horrific: "[T]hey were poking eyes out, killing people en masse . . . spreading hatred. I believe that all this was contemplated in cold blood, so that the war can be fed. The moment you show corpses and cut-off heads on television, when you kill someone's child, the whole universe changes. It is forgotten that, if we did not exactly madly love each other, at least we tolerated each other and lived together. . . . The violence, then, did not come about spontaneously, but was ordered from the top, and carried out by the professionals."[11]

. . .

Navigating my analysis along different trails of national imagination—ranging from libertarian to centralist conceptions of Yugoslavism, from divisive ethnic essentialism to internationalist solidarity—I present my material in a loosely chronological order, structuring each chapter around a set of issues pertaining to a historically specific mode of cinema's intersection with politics. Chapter 1 looks at films made in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, the time of intensive cultural and intellectual activity on the political left. I focus particularly on Dušan Makavejev's view of political oppression as generated by sexual repression—put forth in his cinematic collages *Innocence Unprotected* and *WR: Mysteries of the Organism*—and on Lazar Stojanović's explicit critique of the personality cult of Josip Broz Tito, in his first and only feature, *Plastic Jesus* (for which he was also imprisoned). The central theoretical issue explored in this chapter

concerns the extent to which the viewer's active involvement in determining the meaning of these montage-driven films can be considered on grounds that structurally parallel the call for the absolute liberation of the individual, an idea developed around the same time by the Marxist-revisionist philosophers of the *Praxis* group.

Chapter 2 discusses the activities of the 1980s Sarajevan subcultural movement, New Primitivism, especially its appropriation of the widespread stereotypes about Bosnians, performed in the name of progressive, radically open multiculturalism. Focusing on the New Primitivist television series *The Top List of the Surrealists*, I analyze the group's comic representations of Yugoslav identity through abundant use of aesthetic paradoxes and signifying inconsistencies, foregrounding, in particular, the sociopolitical implications of their transformation of the post-Titoist socialist everyday into a series of bizarre sketches about the life of a disjointed nation.

Chapter 3 looks at the cinema of Emir Kusturica and the ways in which the director's treatment of the multiethnic Yugoslav ideal has changed from his 1985 film *When Father Was Away on Business* to his 1995 work *Underground*. I pay close attention to Kusturica's rich, excessive visual style—what I call his "cinematic choreographies of enjoyment"—arguing that the primary sociocultural functions that this style had served at the time of *Underground*'s release in Serbia were those of reinforcing ethnic narcissism and of preventing the issue of responsibility for war crimes from escaping the collectivist mentality.

Chapter 4 is concerned with cinematic attempts at explaining, legitimizing, or criticizing the causes of ethnic hatred in the Balkans. Seeking to oppose all teleological and ahistorical explanations of the Yugoslav breakup, and to situate it, instead, in the properly political crisis of the late 1980s and the early 1990s, I examine a wide range of Croatian, Slovenian, Serbian, and Macedonian films, including Jakov Sedlar's *Four by Four*, Andrej Košak's *The Outsider*, Milčo Mančevski's *Before the Rain*, Želimir Žilnik's *Marble Ass*, and Vinko Brešan's *How the War Started on My Island*. This chapter is centered around an exercise in critically appropriating the abundance of unintended textual reflexivity in Stjepan Sabljak's amateur combat-film *Surrounded*, with the aim of exposing ethnophobia as, at the root, a staged, performative act.

Finally, in Chapter 5 I explore the problematic, yet common, view of ethnicity as the primary criterion for differentiating among the opposing sides in the Bosnian war. I begin by establishing and critically evaluating the character of the 1996/1997 carnivalesque street protest against Slobodan Milošević's authoritarian regime and proceed to discuss Srdjan Dragojević's *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*, a film about the Bosnian conflict that is in some ways representative of this "oppositional national spirit" in Serbia at the time. The central portion of the chapter is devoted to probing the functions of what Michel Chion terms the "acousmatic voice" (the seemingly sourceless, disembodied voice) in textual/narrative constructions of ethnic otherness, as evidenced in Dragojević's work.