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Underground: Music as a Door through the Absurd World of Yugoslavian History

ARCHIVES > FOUR > | **ESSAY** | BY KAZ RAHMAN



In Emir Kusturica's 1995 Palme d'or winning film *Underground*, music is used as a way to digest, satirize and travel into the absurd world of Yugoslavian history.

Few films have received such disparate criticism as *Underground* has- from its initial assault by some writers as being 'Serbian propaganda' (Rayns p.53-54) (Kusturica is ironically enough a Bosnian from Sarajevo); to others focusing instead on its 'circus' qualities while completely side-stepping any references to Yugoslavian history and war. *Underground* presents and comments on an enormous flow of historical, cultural and political information- something volumes of books on the region struggle to do- while retaining a fantastic narrative and visual flow. This combination is something which 'great' art does very rarely.

The key to the magical 'flow' of the story alongside heavy political and historical situations is the use of music as a thread. Composer Goran Bregovic and editor Branka Ceparac use four main strands of music in the film.

Underground opens with the sound of the travelling Gypsy band which sets the carnival-like tone of the film. Gypsy music is weaved into the whole entity of the film- often brutal situations such as Vera's death are immediately followed by the distinct sound of the band- the repeated use and effect of this is to highlight the contradictions and absurdity in the film; raw emotions, death and brutality as well as weddings and 'love' are all associated with the band's music. The lines between every kind of human emotion are blurred.

Titles are used to lay out the film's three parts- WW II, the Cold War and the early 1990's war (as well as other events)- into an understandable narrative. The choice of titles as low-fi and understated in their appearance and content reinforces the humour while also serving as valuable markers.

'Blacky' breaks into spontaneous song when celebrating, drinking or after receiving a watch from Marshall Tito through 'Marko'. This character singing is a device used in musicals as audience entertainment- in *Underground* it also acts as a gritty tunnel into the moods and emotions of the characters and again accentuates the contradictions and similarities between celebration and devastation.

Old German and Slavic records are played at various intervals to give a scene more historical resonance. Air raid sounds are used by Marko to convince the group underground of the continued German occupation and even diegetic sounds such as explosions and aircraft propellers are manipulated to play with the viewer's perceptions as Blacky and the gang underground react to this barrage of noise on-screen.

The portion of the film where Marko continuously cons the group into living underground in the cellar for 20 years references the period under Tito; newsreel footage is used in a visually remarkable way to give the impression of Marko as Tito's right-hand man- and of course music is present. The choice of never-ending communist-era 'anthems' with only images speaks volumes and sets a distinctly cold tone.

Kusturica talks about the success of *Underground*: 'For me film has to be close to music- if you're not close to music it's very difficult to believe you could construct a whole film...if I had a film school I would choose people based on whether they at least know how to whistle, how to fit their vision into a certain musical frame.' (Wrathall)

Most of the ride *Underground* takes through the complexity and contradictions of Yugoslavian history is through *Kusturica's* eclectic yet sophisticated musical frame.

FOOTNOTES

1. Glenny, Misha 'If You Are Not For Us.' Sight and Sound, November 1996, p.10-13.
2. Iordanova, Dina 'Kusturica's Underground- Historical Allegory or Propaganda?' Historical Journal of Film, Radio and TV, March 1999, p.69 (18p.)
3. Rayns, Tony 'Underground.' Sight and Sound, March 1996, p.53-54.
4. Wrathall, John 'Gypsy Time.' Sight and Sound, December 1997.



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