



ISSUE 3
February 2006

TRUTH AND ARTISTIC MEMORY IN ISTANBUL: AN ATTEMPT TO DEFINE A NEW BALKAN CULTURAL STUDIES

Andrew Finkel



I confess I did a double take when I was invited to participate at the conference hosted by Istanbul's Bilgi University and Swedish General Consulate entitled "Towards a New Balkan Cultural Studies" in October 27–30, 2005. Although I have lived in Istanbul off and on for nearly two decades –for the first time in 1967- I had never really thought of myself as inhabiting a Balkan city at all. Or rather, I think of Istanbul as a city that may have once belonged to the Balkans, but which like some latter day Atlantis had become submerged in a sea of change affecting Turkey and the region over which it presides.

The city of just over one million people I first knew doubled in population every ten years through in-migration to stand at somewhere near 12 million now. Istanbul was once culturally as well as geographically distinct from the Anatolian heartland but now it is a microcosm of Turkey, housing a sixth of the nation's population and producing over a quarter of its wealth. Occasionally you catch sight of Balkan Istanbul. There is a neighbourhood called "New Bosnia", a reminder that Istanbul was flooded with immigrants during the dismantling of empire during the nineteenth centuries through insurrection, pogrom and bloody war. Some things do not change. One of the first stories I did when I returned as a journalist to Istanbul in 1989 was to follow the flight of Bulgarian Turks fleeing the Zhivkov regime. Moslem refugees from the former Yugoslavia were soon to follow. Uncomfortable to admit but I think of Istanbul's Balkan roots when I zap onto a dedicated Turkish film channel that recycles the low budget potboilers of decades past in which moustachioed men in flared trousers and bosomy women with beehive hair, live, love and die in faded colours against the background of an Istanbul that no longer exists.

Those were the days when Istanbul was land locked – by the poverty of the Asian hinterland, by the Cold War, by the history of animosities with its neighbours. Now, I think of the city as a vast regional centre –like Byzantium itself- that dwarfs its neighbours. Istanbul's cultural avant-garde takes its cues from SoHo or Berlin, its financiers look to Frankfurt or London, its chefs to the southeast of its own country or the Pacific Rim, its businessmen and politicians look to Brussels or Washington, it

entrepreneurs to Moscow or Baghdad. Istanbul has recreated its geography.

One of the startling lessons of the conference delivered by Milena Dragicevic-Sesic [1], a professor in Belgrade, was that my tendency to disregard my immediate neighbours is something Balkan nations have in common. Her study of attitudes in the former-Yugoslavia showed young people throughout the region to be equally ill informed about what was happening across their nearest border. No doubt they have no notion that the former capital of the Ottoman Empire has regained its stature as a global city capable of drawing a host of artists, scholars and journalists to discuss cultural change in a region recently wracked by war.

War is the elephant in the Balkan room. I sometimes think that the real historical divide between Turkey and the European Union it aspires to join is not between Christianity and Islam but because (like Sweden, whose consulate was a co-host of the conference), Turkey was not a combatant during the Second World War. What it does have in common with most of the former-Yugoslav nations is that at a time when Eastern Europe was embracing a new more liberal order, it was slipping into greater authoritarianism, based in Turkey's case, on the war against Kurdish separatism in its own southeast.

"Can the war end before truth can be established?" asked Slavenka Drakulic, the Croatian novelist, a key question in a keynote address [2]. The way she posed it was in many ways rhetorical. Her use of "truth" begged the word reconciliation. To understand may not be to forgive but honesty is the first step to learning to live together. Turkish participants including Murat Belge narrated the efforts of Turkish academics to begin the process of reconciliation at the now famous conference held at the same Bilgi University, "Ottoman Armenians during the Demise of the Empire", which shattered the taboo in Turkey of being deaf to the Armenian side of what happened in 1915. This theme of burying the past was taken up in Hülya Adak's analysis of autobiographical writing in Turkey in a presentation called "The Art of Denial" [3]. Many of the works in the Istanbul Biennial, curated by another keynote speaker, Vasif Kortun [4], were political and confrontational, demanding its viewers to engage with the sins of the not so distant past.

And yet. Many of the works depicted during the course of the conference suggested that to openly acknowledge the past was not enough to heal its wounds. Maureen Freely, a novelist living in Britain, introduced the notion of shame in the novels of Orhan Pamuk, which she also translates [5]. The need to bury shame or to at least embalm in it in silence was a key component of the nationalism which had afflicted the region. It did occur to me that in societies where honour and shame are more powerful than guilt and redemption, the line is easily confused between understanding the past and using history to revive fresh hatred. There is subtle distinction between remembering and picking at old wounds.

We sat in an auditorium in the basement of an Istanbul university and witnessed Bulgarian documentary maker Adela Peeva's attempt to trace

national origins of the song made famous by Eartha Kitt (“Uskudar’a), with each of the nations she visits obsessively possessive that the melody belongs to them alone [6]. When Serbian drinkers heard a familiar song arranged by a Turkish military band, they accused Peeva in none too friendly terms of staging a provocation. And of course in their terms, she was.

If the conference did not define (as co-organiser Kevin Robins predicted it would not) what this “new Balkan culture” was all about, it had least hinted at the need to replace an old cultural obsession with searching for the authentic. It was Adrian Marsh, a British lecturer at Bilgi, who subtly introduced the Roma (of which he is one) as the heroes of Balkan post-modernism [7]. They were the true internationalists with little respect for nation or prejudice. In Svanibor Pettan’s lively ethnomusicological documentary “Kosovo through the eyes of local Rom musicians”, the gypsy bands were likely to play Serbian nationalist songs at an Albanian wedding, then switch to the Lambada if someone started to take offence. This view of Roma as natural-born deconstructionalists is at odds with some of the realities of their own communities –highly stratified, sexist, full of inequalities– but a useful fiction all the same.

One way of taking the nationalistic sting out of culture is of course to turn into kitsch or at least something to be marketed to tourists, as Bulgarian sociologist Milla Mineva pointed out in story of the globalisation of local handicraft into consumer fare [8]. But where does that leave high culture? “Can art actually change things?” asked Susan Kennard, director of the Banff New Media Institute, who has spent times with graphic artists in Sarajevo [9]. She cited the work of the “landmine artist” Alma Suljevic whose sculptures and performances (of demining) have both practical and poetic intent. The idea of exposing the landmine, the hidden agent of destruction, is a powerful metaphor. The characters in the triptych of student films shown by Kathrine Winkelhorn called *Traces of a Young Diaspora* depicted young people who were themselves walking landmines, the violence of war concealed within them. A Bosnian refugee playing a friendly game of football in his adopted Finnish home cannot help but re-enact in his mind another game back home that turned in a scene of carnage.

In his summing up of the conference, Swedish journalist Richard Swartz who had covered the war in the former Yugoslavia took a dismal view of the Balkans, a culture shaped by unreason and condemned to relive a bloody past. I had the last word and took a different view. I quoted from Michael Hertzfeld, the Harvard anthropologist:

“In the recent brawling over the political mayhem in the Balkans, a dangerous prejudice masquerades as an analytic perspective. It is a prejudice far more deeply and more insidiously entrenched than the atavism it claims to have identified in Balkan society at large and that it cites as the pretext for condescension and hegemony. It is the view that pits the allegedly rational democracies of Western Europe against states whose European identity is itself at issue state that are variously

characterized as unstable, kinship based, and small scale. The irony of this perspective is of course that the language in which it is couched is itself that of kinship: that of the stern parent chastising a wayward and fractious brood of children [10]”.

That Western Europe is in no position to preach, would certainly be view of the eponymous hero of Zelimir Zilnik’s powerful documentary (*Kennedy is coming home*)- another Roma man. Named by his parents after assassinated JFK, Kennedy is a refugee, rudely repatriated back to Belgrade from Germany once the war there was over. He was expelled by the police without warning and not allowed to take his belongings or even his money. He is shown as a sort of Charon, driving a taxi from the airport, ferrying those similarly expelled back to the underworld of refugee camps in Belgrade and Kosovo.

If we are to answer Slavenka Drakulic’s question and establish the truth about the recent past then we are obliged to remember as well “civilised” Europe’s role in abetting the antagonisms when they first emerged, only accepting limited responsibilities and then too late. If we look at Europe not over the last fifteen years but over the last fifty or a hundred, the Balkans have been only the most recent of the hidden mines of European irrationality to explode.

Perhaps it is not just a Balkan characteristic but one common to our civilisation that we do our best to ignore our near neighbours even though our fates are closely intertwined. Some truths may never be established and we may be obliged to relive our pasts.

* Andrew Finkel has been a journalist based in Istanbul since 1989. During that time, he has corresponded for a great many news organizations including *The Times*, CNN, *The Economist* and TIME. He has also been a regular columnist in the Turkish language press and appears frequently on Turkish television. He recently completed a fellowship at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington.
afinkel@superonline.com

[1] *Balkan crossroads: for a new ethics in cultural policy making and international relations.*

[2] *When War Ends.*

[3] *The art of denial: the Armenian deportations in twentieth-century Turkish autobiographical writing.*

[4] *Inventing the Balkans.*

[5] *Cities in translation: four literary excavations of Istanbul's lost histories.*

[6] *Whose is This Song?*

[7] *Gypsies, wars and exile; the Balkanisation' of post-Ottoman Romani communities in south-east Europe.*

[8] *Cultural heritage: between national discourse and popular practices.*

[9] *Sometimes art can do no better than life: reflections on the relationship between contemporary art and development in Sarajevo, 1996–2005.*

[10] Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural intimacy: social poetics in the nation-state*, London, Routledge (2nd ed. 2004) p. 127.



SUBMITTED BY: FLORENCIA ENGHEL

2006-01-27

© GLOCAL TIMES 2005
FLORENGHEL(AT)GMAIL.COM
ISSN 1654-7985