

SUBVERTING MALE GAZE: MEDITERRANEAN WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY CROATIAN CINEMA

Etami Borjan*

Abstract

This article intends to explore how female filmmakers in Croatia have represented social transformation in the Mediterranean during the last twenty years, and how gender issues have shaped Mediterranean narratives and characters. Thus, dominant representations of Mediterranean women, femininity and gender relations in recent Croatian women's cinema will be critically reviewed. This work traces articulations of gender issues in contemporary women-centric films set on Croatia's Adriatic coast. The majority of films shot by female directors in the last decade were set in Mediterranean cities, or small villages, where gender roles are strictly defined by a conservative society in which women's roles are reduced to domestic space. However, contemporary Croatian women directors subvert this paradigm by presenting active, problem-solving female heroes that both challenge and deconstruct traditional roles imposed upon Mediterranean women. Croatian women filmmakers take us away from the idyllic Mediterranean scenery and stress its confining nature. The settings are deeply anti-exotic, deviating drastically from the appealing tourist image of the Mediterranean coast in presenting the oppressive roles which women there are forced to take. Physical space speaks loudly for its protagonists, and these spaces often mirror the trauma of their female inhabitants. Recent films contest the historic domination imposed on women by patriarchy and tradition, which have always undermined the advancement of female characters. Women filmmakers speak openly about female sexuality, not neglecting body and pleasure, but they try to subvert the male gaze by de-eroticizing nudity and sexual intercourse.

Keywords: women's cinema, feminist cinema, Mediterranean women, female Croatian filmmakers, women's bodies on screen

The study of anthropology of Mediterranean societies initially tried to develop appropriate models to accommodate for regional diversities, as well as economic and political processes, that were typical to each society.

* University of Zagreb

Other approaches in earlier ethnographies and historiographies stressed the history of mutual influence among the peoples of the region, which contributed to the vision of the Mediterranean area as a homogeneous unit. For decades, many historians and anthropologists accepted Braudel's vision of Mediterranean homogeneity.¹ However, the controversial subject of the "cultural unity" of the Mediterranean has been questioned in anthropology in recent years.² Transformations to the socio-political systems in the Mediterranean countries call for a reconsideration of clichés related to the Mediterranean "unity", since mutual contacts and influences between these countries do not imply cultural unity. As Croatian and Bosnian writer and scholar Predrag Matvejević argues, the image of the Mediterranean was not only deformed by different histories, but also by different *understandings* of history.³ The distinctiveness of the Mediterranean as a cultural and conceptual category was built upon its multitude of geographic, ecological, political, economic and cultural diversities. However, none of these criteria is sufficient for defining the Mediterranean construct, given the complexity of many societies which exist around the Mediterranean Sea, and the internal cultural contradictions that are more discernable in some societies. As Driessen argues,

[...] there are clear differences between inside and outside perspectives on Mediterranean boundaries. To be sure, in both cases 'Mediterranean' is a cultural construct. Its boundaries may be visible or hidden, ethnic, linguistic, political and religious, but they are never simply natural, that is clear-cut lines on landscape and maps. Inner and outer frontiers in the Mediterranean have emerged out of the interactions between political centers, often in the interior, and their peripheries, frequently coastal zones and their mountainous hinterlands. They rarely have a long-term permanency but rather tend to shift and change.⁴

From the anthropological point of view, the Mediterranean is a transitional zone consisting of micro-regions that, due to their peculiarities, threaten to undermine homogenizing tendencies in area studies.

The body of knowledge from past and present anthropological research is hardly comparable since earlier studies focused more on peasant societ-

1 Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, vol. 2 (Paris: Armand Colin, [1949] 1990).

2 João de Pina-Cabral, "The Mediterranean as a category of regional comparison," *Current Anthropology* 30, no. 3 (1989): 399-406.

3 Predrag Matvejević, *Breviario mediterraneo* (Milan: Hefti edizioni, 1987), 14.

4 Henk Driessen, "People, Boundaries and the Anthropologist's Mediterranean," *Anthropological Journal on European Cultures* 10, (2001): 17.

ies, whereas newer studies shift their focuses on social and cultural variations of different regions brought about by globalization and sociocultural transformations in these traditional societies.⁵ However, some scholars argue that the complexity and variation of social dynamics in contemporary Mediterranean societies have been present in ancient cultures too. The “Mediterranean entity” has been associated with several sociocultural traits such as: rigid sexual segregation, a tendency towards reliance on kinship units, and an honor-and-shame syndrome which defines sexuality and personal reputation.⁶ There is a strong emphasis on male dominance and machismo in Mediterranean societies, whereas the themes of family solidarity and loyalty between siblings are universal in the region. Within these societies, in which gender distinctions are enforced, male dominance is more likely to be present; as a consequence, older anthropological studies offered a male-oriented image of Mediterranean societies since women were considered of limited social significance. “In the Mediterranean literature, the ‘outsider’ quality of this imagery is exaggerated by a powerful quantity of male anxiety and fear about an ungovernable female sexuality. Women are repeatedly portrayed through male eyes as a threat, a symbol of disorder and chaos.”⁷ The traditional dualistic view of a woman as both mother and a sexually salacious deviant has persisted into the present day in literature and cinema. The dichotomization of “good” and “bad” women reveals patriarchal roots of this bipolar construction. Many Yugoslav films tell their stories through a male perspective, with women being marginalized to the roles of wives, mothers or sisters. The two images of mother and whore readily infiltrated the Mediterranean media space, and the degradation of women soon became the norm. Even the dissident *Black Wave* films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which the regime of the time attacked and often banned, “featured a negative female character, a prostitute that denounces/robs/deserts the main male character, made fragile by his social position and/or his political past.”⁸

-
- 5 See Dionigi Albera, “Anthropology of the Mediterranean: Between crisis and renewal,” *History and Anthropology* 17, no. 1 (2006): 109-33; Christian Bromberger, “Towards an Anthropology of the Mediterranean,” *History and Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (2006): 91-107.
- 6 David D. Gilmore, “Anthropology of the Mediterranean Area,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11, (1982): 179.
- 7 Gilmore, “Anthropology of the Mediterranean,” 195.
- 8 Svetlana Slapšak, “Representations of Gender as Constructed, Questioned and Subverted in Balkan Films,” *Cinéaste* 32, no. 3 (2007): 37.

The entry of female researchers into the field gave access to parts of Mediterranean society that were previously inaccessible to men. Easier access to women's experiences and their cultural networks have provided new perspectives on how Mediterranean women exercise power. In her book *Women and Knowledge in the Mediterranean*, Fatima Sadiqi argues that peoples in the Mediterranean share "significant sociocultural traits such as the central place of the family in social organization, a rigid space-based patriarchy, a saliency of kinship, local cults of patron saints, and an honor-and-shame principle underlying sexuality and reputation."⁹ Drawing on the older research of anthropologists in the 1970s,¹⁰ Sadiqi argues that knowledge as a concept needs to transcend formal frontiers to accommodate both women's experimental knowledge, as well as their different ways of producing meanings. Osiek claims that, before making assumptions about gender, four factors must be considered when discussing both ancient and contemporary Mediterranean cultures: kinship structures as fostered by a strong mother figure, social hierarchies (both its status and perceptions of it), economic factors and social power exercised by women through their participation in economic structures, and social networks as the expression of greater social power.¹¹

Woman as the mythical figure of Mother has existed for decades in (post)-Yugoslav cinema. In conservative Balkan societies, a woman's place was restricted to the domestic realm. The role of the mother had a symbolic meaning as a guardian of tradition and family. Perpetually reduced to second leads, female characters in Yugoslav cinema contributed to the representation of an archaic Balkan culture. Nevena Daković claims that mythical dominance of a woman was guaranteed by her ability to be a mother. "Through this logic, woman is paradoxically positioned when represented as maternal: she is both socially acceptable and able to switch from an inferior social position to one of power."¹² As Daković notices, the typology of the Mother figure in Yugoslav cinema relied on the image of the Mother of the Mediterranean: dressed in black, iron-willed, and forced

9 Fatima Sadiqi, ed., *Women and Knowledge in the Mediterranean* (London/New York: Routledge, 2013), 1.

10 See John G. Peristiany, ed., *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); Jane Schneider, "Of Vigilance and Virgins: Honor, Shame and Access to Resources in Mediterranean Societies," *Ethnology* 10, no. 1 (1971): 1-24.

11 Carolyn Osiek, "Women, Honor, and Context in Mediterranean Antiquity," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 64, no. 1 (2008): 333-35.

12 Nevena Daković, "Mother, Myth, and Cinema: Recent Yugoslav Cinema," *Film Criticism* 21, no. 2 (1996-1997): 41.

to cope with hard life in silence. Her physical appearance is reminiscent of the Mediterranean mother goddess so often evoked in South European literature. A strong Mother figure commands respect and obedience and, as such, transgresses patriarchal conventions; it is, after all, through women that strong men are born.¹³ A very popular Croatian TV series from the 1970s, *Prosjaci i sinovi* (*Beggars and sons*, Antun Vrdoljak, 13 episodes, 1972), set in the Dalmatian hinterland, is an emblematic example of the patriarchal Mediterranean family. The series offers images of repressed femininity in all senses: physical, psychological, and economic. Two leading female characters – the protagonist’s sister and wife – have no right to speak or to make decisions about their future. They are represented as mute figures whose identities may only be understood in relation to the men in their lives, be it a father, a brother or a husband. The protagonist, an illiterate but very intelligent beggar, never calls his wife by her name; instead, he refers to her as “impure force”; to him, she is a symbol of uncontrollable female sexuality that needs to be governed, on the one hand. His sister, on the other hand, is almost coerced into committing suicide, as her extra-conjugal relationship threatens social disgrace to her family. She is considered too lascivious, a devil and a threat to the honor of all the men in her family.

Naturalized misogyny was an essential characteristic of Yugoslav entire cinematography. The discriminatory neglect of the female characters, paired with astonishing sexism, lasted even in the period after the Yugoslav collapse, in the so-called realm of “Balkan cinema”.¹⁴ Contrary to the wild Balkan men, women in the Balkan cinema were submissive and passive, deprived of their own will and made objects of male lust.¹⁵ Following the

-
- 13 As Daković points out, the Mother figure is only apparently respectful in these films, but she is a rebellious matriarch with absolute authority to rule over everyday banalities and domains that are “natural” for women. The Mother figure suggests old age and wisdom but also a woman without carnal desires for men. “She has no love interest, thus avoiding conservative fears about women’s sexuality.” See Daković, “Mother, Myth, and Cinema,” 47.
- 14 A number of scholars, including Maria Todorova and Thomas Elsaesser, have noted that Western strategies of representation of Balkan cultures and people function in a similar way to Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism. See Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005).
- 15 A frequently used narrative of Balkan weddings in domestic films during the 1990s introduced a bride who takes a completely passive and humiliating role on her own wedding within the hierarchy of power where someone else has a total authority over her life and destiny. A typical example is the character of Natalija in Emir Kusturica’s movie *Underground* (1995), one of the best examples of the

Western strategy of representing the area, several international film scholars grouped the cinemas of Southeast Europe (former Yugoslavia, Albania, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey) under the umbrella terms of “Balkan cinema” and “Balkan film genre”, claiming that the post-communist movies share many stylistic and thematic affinities as well as cultural, geopolitical and historical realities. By blurring the boundaries between different cultures and people, Western cinema and media have perpetuated a Eurocentric perception of the region as homogeneous. Film scholars Dina Iordanova¹⁶ and Nevena Daković¹⁷ have supported the thesis that the cinemas of Southeast Europe can be regrouped on the basis of similar cultural, geopolitical and historical realities, but they underlined the importance of stressing the heterogeneity of the region. Maria Todorova mentions three key points that summarize the Western perception of the Balkans: exoticism, ambiguity and thirdworldization.¹⁸ The “Otherness” of the Balkans is not a purely Western construct: it was gradually adopted by the majority of local filmmakers in the 1990s, who followed the trend of self-exoticism and perpetuated a stereotyped image of the region as primitive and wild. However, some former Yugoslav countries, such as Slovenia and Croatia, have refused to acknowledge their cultural legacy with the Balkans since, historically, both countries were under Venetian and Austro-Hungarian rule. Since Croatia’s independence in the 1990s, stressing historical and cultural links with the rest of the Mediterranean has become a point of geopolitical importance as part of a process of rebuilding national identity.

Movies by the new generation of Croatian women filmmakers, during the last two decades, have turned away from the damaging stereotypes of the “Balkan film genre” and towards more intimate explorations of tense or violent family relationships in the domestic sphere.¹⁹ Female filmmakers

Balkan film genre. She is a submissive object of lust of two male protagonists, forced to marry one of them.

- 16 See Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of Flames, Balkan Film, Culture and the Media* (London: British Film Institute, 2001); Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film* (London/New York: Wallflower Press, 2003); Dina Iordanova, *The Cinema of the Balkans* (London/New York: Wallflower Press, 2006).
- 17 See Nevena Daković, *Balkan kao (filmski) žanr: slika, tekst, nacija* (Beograd: FDU – Institut za pozorište, film, radio, televiziju, 2008).
- 18 See Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*.
- 19 The first post-Yugoslav women filmmakers to speak about war and trauma from a gendered perspective were two Bosnian directors: Jasmila Žbanić (*Grbavica, Esma's Secret*, 2006) and Aida Begić (*Snijeg, Snow*, 2008). Post-Yugoslav female filmmakers have created a synergy of thematic preoccupations and stylistic choic-

explore the ways in which women have contested forms of oppression, and in doing so have challenged patriarchal cultures. Their movies promote rebellious women who blatantly seek self-fulfillment. Although contemporary Croatian female filmmakers do not align their cinematic works with the genre of “feminist cinema”, their movies have redefined the politics of female representation.²⁰ By virtue of its willingness to explore subject matters and representational modes that have been excluded in majoritarian cinema, contemporary Croatian (and post-Yugoslav) women’s cinema can be considered minor feminist cinema. The concept of minor cinema borrows from the notion of minor literature, as described by Deleuze and Guattari.²¹ In his later works, Deleuze argues that minor cinemas (that he also terms “modern political cinemas”) mirror the features of minor literature. Minor cinema deterritorializes majoritarian cinematic language from within by destabilizing its codes and clichés and employing them in the interest of marginalized, or “minor”, peoples. The boundary between the public and the private in modern political cinema is blurred, as private struggles take on political value.²² The merging of these private and public realms within Croatian minor women’s cinema corresponds to second-wave feminists’ claims that personal is political.

The movies that this article will cover challenge the language of majoritarian Croatian cinema not only by their choice of topics and typology of

es, as well as similarities in treating female characters. Their cinema has had a significant influence on contemporary women’s cinema in Croatia.

- 20 The refusal of the “feminist” label can be explained by a longstanding pattern of underrepresented female directors in East European cinema. As Iordanova claims, even those East European female directors who have focused predominantly on women subjects have been practicing “reluctant feminism”. See Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe*, 125. This could be explained by the fact that the very concept of “feminism” encompasses a range of social practices in different socio-political contexts.
- 21 According to Deleuze and Guattari, minor literature has three distinctive traits. “A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language” – it deterritorializes the majoritarian language from within by transforming existing modes of representation. “The second characteristic of minor literatures is that everything in them is political” – the boundaries between private and public struggles disappear, and private affairs merge with the socio-political. “The third characteristic of minor literature is that in it everything takes on a collective value” – collective value produces solidarity among marginalized people. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polak (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1975] 1986), 16-17.
- 22 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L’image-temps* (Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1985), 284.

female characters, but also in their representation of the female body on screen. Contemporary Croatian women filmmakers call for the replacement of sexual objectivization common in majoritarian Balkan cinema with a new filmic apparatus that destroys patriarchal ocularcentrism; they reject voyeurism and identification from the male perspective. In order to contest cinema's patriarchal standpoint with a feminist perspective, women filmmakers endeavor in creating a new imaginary and language that would allow them to create different images of femininity and female desire. I depart from Cixous's concept of "feminine practice of writing,"²³ which introduces alternative modes of representation by which women write from their subjective experiences, to propose a mode of filming in the feminine. Although filming in the feminine cannot be defined in set terms, it can be generally described as a woman's entry into history as a fighter for her own rights. Women's cinema tends to tell stories that merge women's private and personal experiences with social, political and historical dynamics. Although women are much more likely to engage in this type of production, as they have direct experience of subordination and exploitation under dominant misogynistic ideologies, the ability to film in the feminine should not be restricted solely to female authors.²⁴ Male directors in Croatia were first to tackle women's problems given the availability of filmmaking positions to them, but they focused much more on larger societal issues and did not change significantly feminine modes of representation, although their works did feature complex female characters. Female directors draw on their subjective experiences, both bodily and otherwise, in order to establish a non-objectifying mode of representation, born from the narrative and esthetic critiques of the male gaze.

The concept of "women's cinema" has been highly debated in feminist film theory since the 1970s. Feminist critics and film scholars have taken different views on how women artists should confront the problems of the dominance of the male gaze. As Laura Mulvey explained in her groundbreaking article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," the male spec-

23 Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875-93.

24 Recent movies made by male directors have explored some socially relevant topics and included strong female characters (*Fine mrtve djevojke*, *Fine Dead Girls*, Dalibor Matanić, 2002; *Majka asfalta*, *Mother of Asphalt*, Dalibor Matanić, 2010; *Oprosti za kung-fu*, *Sorry for Kung Fu*, Ognjen Sviličić, 2004; *Šuti*, *Shut Up*, Lukas Nola 2013). However, in these films, female characters are used as a medium to address other issues, such as domestic violence, social injustice, LGBT rights. Women's interior world is still neglected and the focus rests on larger social issues.

tator always identifies with the male protagonist as the possessor of the gaze, who looks upon the woman, defined by her “to-be-looked-at-ness.”²⁵ Feminist film scholar E. Ann Kaplan asserts that the male gaze contains the dual power to both act upon, as well as possess, the object of that gaze, while women cannot act upon it.²⁶ The idea of gendered gaze is connected to the question of who owns the power to construct representations of feminine sexuality. Women’s cinema subverts male gaze and moves away from the narratives that lead to identification with the dehumanizing gaze of the camera and the diegetic male protagonist. Mulvey argues that feminist cinema has to deny the visual and erotic pleasure traditionally produced by mainstream cinema in order to be non-oppressive to women. She believes that women’s cinema should develop a new visual language that avoids powerless and victimized female figures.²⁷ However, our understanding of women’s cinema cannot simply be imported from another cultural and political context without taking into consideration local specificities of women’s struggle. Western feminism cannot be fully applied to former Yugoslav socio-political context since the problems of East European women were not identical to those of women in the West. Yugoslav feminism, that arose in the 1960s and 1970s, was not only closely tied to the socialist revolution, critical Marxism, post-structuralist French feminism, but also to the Yugoslav partisan tradition²⁸ that promoted emancipatory ideology for women. Yugoslav feminists targeted the socialist state’s proclaimed, but not fulfilled, politics of emancipation, highlighting the gap between the normative goals of socialism and patriarchal reality in the process.²⁹ “While Western feminism was more worried about domestic violence, abuse, rape and the glass ceiling, the leading concerns in the former Eastern bloc were the leg-

25 Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, [1975] 1986), 203.

26 E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York/London: Routledge, 1988), 31.

27 See Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure”.

28 In 1943 partisan women created the Anti-Fascist Front of Women (AFZ) that propagated Marxist principles of class consciousness and gender equality. During World War II a large majority of women, inspired by the Marxist principles, discarded patriarchal norms.

29 Due to the inner struggle between the factions of the Yugoslav Communist Party and the accusations of the alleged alignment with Stalin, AFZ was abolished in 1952. As Murtić argues, there was no space for independent women’s movement as the Communist party believed that the positions of women in society should be a concern for the entire society. See Dino Murtić, *Post-Yugoslav Cinema* (Hampshire/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 94-95.

acy of state socialism and the manipulation of women's voices within the public sphere."³⁰ Communist women focused their attention on concrete social issues such as unemployment and social benefits and could not fully identify with Western feminism, which to them appeared rooted in completely different matters.

An underlying issue for contemporary female filmmakers in Croatia has been that of knowing what the "feminine" might be, if stripped from the constructs of a binary male-centric dichotomy. Examples of this tendency include a variety of countermeasures to excessive displays of the feminine body that pervade male-dominated Western culture. Focusing on sexuality in films by women filmmakers aims to disrupt patriarchal codes of female sexual desire, since women have traditionally been represented as vulnerable objects of a male voyeuristic gaze. The *mise-en-scène* of the sex scenes in women's movies (*Aleksi*, Barbara Vekarić, 2018; *Mare*, Andrea Štaka, 2020; *Tereza 37*, Danilo Šerbedžija, 2020, *Quit Staring at My Plate*, Hana Jušić, 2016) departs radically from the way in which heterosexual sex is usually presented in mainstream cinema. The act is usually shot with a handheld camera that privileges the woman's gaze on her partner's body, but does not lead to objectivization of the other. Nudity is very present, but it focuses on both male and female bodies, which serves to highlight issues of women's pleasure. A non-objectifying vision of female body reflects critically on the phallogentric culture and language that have long structured and disciplined femininity through practices of denigration. Transgression through images of sexuality or nudity are much more prominent in films by women filmmakers; the act of female protagonists claiming complete control over their sexuality contributes to promoting emancipated and autonomous women fending for themselves and striving for self-fulfillment outside of monogamous heterosexual couples. Recent movies, which position themselves as minor feminist cinema, contest the dominant ways of filming and perceiving women's bodies. Women filmmakers speak openly about female sexuality, bodies and pleasure but they subvert heteronormative modes of viewing women's bodies by refusing to stage erotic spectacles. By de-eroticizing nudity and sexual intercourse, these movies open a multitude of methods for the politics of viewing, exploring the possibility of creating a female-oriented representation of sexuality.

Mediterranean women in contemporary Croatian cinema do not always tolerate the restrictions of physical and mental boundaries. The imposed relegation of women to the private sphere does not prevent the

30 Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe*, 124.

filmmakers from promoting strong female characters who are steadfast in their goals, and determined not to quit. Such is the case of Barbara Vekarić's movie *Aleksi* (2018), set on the peninsula of Pelješac. *Aleksi*, a troubled young woman, returns to the peninsula to live with her parents after graduating from college. There, she's torn between the desire to integrate and the need to rebel against the rules and expectations set upon her by her family. Her lifestyle represents the pertinent contrast between traditional Mediterranean culture and modernity. She finds herself bored in the small village and spends time with various men: a local musician who, although much too traditional and old-fashioned for her taste, is nevertheless attractive to her; a middle-aged, rich Slovenian playboy who tries to seduce her with an extravagant lifestyle; and an American photographer with whom she shares the same interests. These cross-cultural encounters stress *Aleksi*'s feelings of alienation and underline the split between tradition and modernity. Barbara Vekarić and other directors whose work I analyze here have subverted the existing paradigm by presenting problem-solving female heroes that challenge and deconstruct traditional roles imposed upon women. *Aleksi* suggests possible modes of representing female experiences which differ from those imagined by a patriarchal perspective.

Space plays an important role in Mediterranean societies, especially women's spaces. Space is socially demarcated and constructed. The "production of space" was first introduced by Henri Lefebvre, providing us with the theoretical framework that can be used as a tool to deconstruct the concept of gendered spaces. According to Lefebvre, spaces are endowed with meaning through our perception of them; they are produced by people through their activities, imagination and ideologies. Lefebvrian conception of space production implies three-dimensional analysis of space: perceived space, conceived space and lived space. Spaces assume meaning through our perception of them, our production of knowledge about them, our daily interactions and social practices. Lefebvre's triadic conception of space presupposes that every society produces its own space. Therefore, it is important to understand the politics of space that can help us decipher cultural, political and temporal processes that attribute meaning to particular types of places and gender roles associated with them. Spaces become channels for power relations, and they influence the way we interiorize the values presented by the dominant discourses that shape society.³¹

31 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, [1974] 1991), 2.

Traditionally, the female body in Mediterranean societies has been closely connected with the spaces of domesticity and closeness, and women have been considered economically inactive despite their contributions to the domestic economy. The outside world of traditional Mediterranean society has been inaccessible to them, with a clear boundary between public (male) space and private (female) space. Patriarchy, like other power discourses, has justified the superiority of men through their appropriation of outward space that gave them more chance of gaining power over their lives. In traditional Mediterranean societies women have often been associated with the spaces of invisibility whereas men have lived their public lives throughout history. Traditional Mediterranean gendering of space between male and female spaces is a societal process that hegemonic discourse produces in order to create different types of spatiality. The same pattern can be seen in the cinematic representations of women in older Croatian movies set in Dalmatia: female exclusion from public spaces is reflected by the images of closed windows, balconies and other liminal thresholds. Gendered spatial boundaries have always been carved into the urban landscape, and they have been enforced by tradition, religion and culture. Many older Croatian movies used the rural setting of the Dalmatian highlands, barely touched by modernity, to enhance the image of an exotic and archaic Mediterranean culture.

Contemporary women's cinema takes us away from the idyllic Mediterranean scenery by making deliberate choices in scenery which deviate from the appealing tourist image of the Mediterranean area. Female characters in Croatian women's cinema usually inhabit suffocating urban spaces typical of societies in transition. As Vidan argues, urban geography

[...] fortifies the notion of trauma and in some way serves as another mechanism for inflicting pain on the character. Physical space [...] seems also to speak as loudly for the female protagonists, and with its confining and condensed nature, it reflects an entrapment by the social structures undermining their advancement.³²

Hana Jušić's *Quit Staring at My Plate* (*Ne gledaj mi u pijat*, 2016) is set in the coastal city of Šibenik, but main tourist attractions are almost absent from the movie: tourist images of the city are replaced by suffocating socialist settlements and run-down quarters. Marijana, a young woman, lives in a tiny apartment with her parents and her unemployed brother. In this

32 Aida Vidan, "Framing the Body, Vocalizing the Pain: Perspectives of South Slavic Female Directors," *Studies in European Cinema* 15, no. 2-3 (2018): 138-39.

kind of neighborhood, where windows and doors are open most of the year, and buildings stand shoulder-to-shoulder, the residents hear a lot of what is going on in their neighbors' lives. *Quit Staring at My Plate* addresses the issue of oppression in the family through the collective figure of both parents: a *pater familias* figure, whose decisions are never questioned, and an abusive mother who repeats a vicious patriarchal cycle. The mother favors Marijana's brother, and although he is an unemployed young man with no purpose in life, his gender guarantees a protected social status. She blatantly applies double moral standards to the siblings, and does not refrain from inflicting physical punishment upon her daughter, who she understands solely as a source of material benefit. Her mother perpetuates the sadistic, patriarchal pattern in which the violent disciplining of the female body is interwoven into the basic fabric of social relations in a culture that readily permits and celebrates domestic abuse. This – and the other films analyzed here – move away from traditional Mediterranean families and homes as safe spaces where people feel connected and protected. The family atmosphere is often a source of anxiety, and family gatherings over meals become occasions for settling various familial accounts.

The nightmare of being trapped in the home is also reflected in the movie *Mare* (Andrea Štaka, 2020), set in a small Mediterranean town on the outskirts of the touristy Dubrovnik. Mare is a middle-aged housewife overwhelmed with family worries, who often feels like a stranger in her home. Preoccupied with her three children and a husband with PTSD, she never finds time for herself. Like many women in traditional Mediterranean families, she is invisible to her family. Feeling emotionally neglected and longing for a change – much akin to Flaubert's Madame Bovary – she tries to escape the banalities and emptiness of provincial life. When a Polish construction engineer moves into the house next door, Mare takes a big risk and embarks on an affair with him. *Mare* follows a psychologically complex female character who feels trapped in both physical and metaphorical sense; it is only through her extramarital affair that she finds liberation for herself.

In all three movies (*Aleksi*, *Quit Staring at My Plate*, *Mare*) the directors create space in which female characters can express their own sexuality and desire through polyamorous relationships. Female sexuality is not seen anymore in relation to, and as a response to, male desire. Polyamorous relationships, as depicted in the movies, subvert the accepted notions of female sexuality that is closely linked to a passive sexual role. In order to make a radical critique of the social construction of the feminine, the three directors reclaim and re-appropriate current cultural imagery and raise

questions around the expression of complex female erotic sensibilities. The movies are subversive of cultural notions of what is acceptable behavior in a woman. Instead of showing contempt for the female characters who betray the image of the biologically determined female sexuality that is gentle and nurturing, they promote protagonists who are in control of their desire and lovemaking. Set within the wider context, these movies question the ways in which the wider culture has played a part in the shaping of sexual identity. Female sexual desire has been denied expression within patriarchal culture with no recognition in its own right. The movies analyzed here discard representations of women as submissive to male desire and promote the image of women as actively desiring sexual beings.

Physical space in *Quit Staring at My Plate* and *Mare* speaks to the lives of their female characters. Depressive environments and suffocating blue-collar neighborhoods mirror a deeper mental state of female characters, and enhance the sense of claustrophobia through long takes and minimal cuts to many scenes. *Mare* does not capitalize on the town's scenic qualities such as rocky coastline and transparent blue sea; instead, Andrea Štaka opts for capturing unappealing concrete buildings and cracked roads. The intimate camerawork in *Mare* conveys the sense of captivity in this oppressive environment, especially in the long takes when the camera follows Mare closely from behind as she walks through her run-down surroundings. Spectators are brought close to Mare's body, facilitated by the abundant use of close-ups that create a sense of physical and emotional intimacy with her, effacing the distinction between the private and the public spheres of human life. In both films there is a constant intrusion into the female protagonists' private space, leaving them physically exposed and without their right to privacy. *Quit Staring at My Plate* is shot mostly with a handheld camera that leans toward close-ups with occasional subjective shots reflecting the emotional impact of the protagonist. As Vidan notes, "Marijana's character is often framed marginally, as if falling out of the composition to emphasize the irrelevance of her individuality."³³ The idea that a woman could have any sort of private life never occurs to their family members, who invade the protagonists' intimate space constantly in both movies. The visceral quality of these movies is underscored by stylistic choices made by the directors: the mechanism of haptic visuality is mobilized in order to activate spectator's visceral response to the traumas suggested by the films.³⁴ The viewers are faced with an awkward situation

33 Vidan, "Framing the Body," 142.

34 Vidan, "Framing the Body," 128-30.

from the first frames in *Quit Staring at My Plate* as her family lines at the door of their shared bathroom and shout for Marijana to get out. Similar scenes of family members bursting in the bathroom while Mare is sitting on the toilet stress the poetics of naturalness in Štaka's movie. Both directors emphasize the intrinsic physicality of women's world, either by showing the characters' bodily functions or their random sexual encounters. The poetics of naturalness is further stressed by sound that is mostly diegetic. Ambient sounds speak on behalf of voiceless women and emphasize the silence imposed upon them. Silence is often associated with spaces, as a sign of outwardly imposed muteness on female protagonists. Marijana is reluctant to speak for herself both at home and at work; just like Mare, she never voices her needs and desires. Marijana's silence can also be interpreted as a consequence of oppression and domestic abuse which manifests itself as inability to interact and connect with others. Here, silence functions simultaneously as a means of self-protection, as well as a symbol of disempowerment.

The interplay between spaces and silence is a key to many contemporary Croatian movies. Another movie that dramatizes the intolerable subordination of women in the Mediterranean and places the spectator within a woman's point of view is *Tereza 37* (Danilo Šerbedžija, 2020).³⁵ Tereza, its titular protagonist, lives in Split, a coastal city on the Adriatic Sea. After several miscarriages caused by a genetic incompatibility with her husband, she questions her monotonous marriage and begins having casual encounters with strangers in an attempt to get pregnant. Tereza lives in a conservative Mediterranean city and is constantly under pressure by her family and friends to become a mother. She never speaks about the trauma of her several miscarriages, nor does she articulate her wishes, decisions, dilemmas or sadness. Her silence is, in part, imposed by the rigidity of her city's society and the importance of maintaining family status and honor. In conservative Mediterranean society, exposure to gossiping is a major issue, especially for women. Women in patriarchal cultures sometimes use silence as a means of passive resistance. Outwardly, Tereza appears as a conventional Mediterranean woman who is unspoken-of and unnoticeable in her plain dress, but she uses her "self-effacement" to challenge the patriarchal establishment by sleeping with other men. In this and the other films, female characters appear without make-up, intensifying the sensa-

35 Although not directed by a woman, *Tereza 37* is also a minor feminist film in that Lana Barić can be considered its feminist creator: in addition to being the main lead, she also wrote the screenplay. Her hybridized factual-fictional feminist writing includes biographical details from her own past experience.

tion of “being invisible” to their respective societies. Her reluctance to expose herself to a society that puts value on women’s outward appearances emphasizes her right to privacy.

In all three movies, the overall sense of isolation in battles for everyday survival is prevalent, and the filmmakers use similar narrative and aesthetic mechanisms to convey this sense of oppressiveness in contemporary society. As Aida Vidan argues in her analysis of contemporary South Slavic women’s cinema,

As a rule, the male characters in their environments are either violent, and consequently removed from the female universe, or else succumb to the circumstances, thereby setting the female protagonists as pillars carrying the burden of a dysfunctional society on their shoulders. At times, they seek support in other female individuals whose aid may be obtained with obstacles or not at all, but the overall sense of isolation in battles for everyday survival is prevalent. [...] These are thus films of departed or absent masculinities and violated femininities, of the world stitching its scars as it tries to move on.³⁶

The majority of recent movies shot by Croatian women directors are set in Mediterranean towns or small villages where gender roles are still strictly enforced. Traditionally, Mediterranean women are meant to be principal bearers of family honor, but at the same time must remain invisible. Marijana, the protagonist of *Quit Staring at My Plate*, is guided by her strong sense of moral responsibility for her family, especially when her father’s stroke renders her salary the home’s only source of income. Despite Marijana being the sole provider for her family, she is still expected to fulfill her role of a Mediterranean woman, one who holds the power of behavior that determines men’s honor, even when the father figure loses his position of honor as a caretaker. The concept of masculine honor is directly related to Mediterranean community life and moral reputation.³⁷ In recent Croatian movies, old Mediterranean values coexist with modern values and often cause character-changing clashes. Contemporary female characters fight against traditionally imposed silence and attempt to negotiate their way in a society in which there is a pressure to be a virtuous, traditional woman

36 Vidan, “Framing the Body,” 128.

37 Earlier ethnographies have shown that Mediterranean idea of male honor contains three vectors of competition: for wealth, for status in the sense of respect, for masculinity narrowly defined as virility. The honor of position gained through possessions, wealth or social status (class and power) is distinguished from the moral category of reputation in the society. See Gilmore, “Anthropology of the Mediterranean,” 191.

on the one side, and an independent woman on the other.³⁸ Marijana, too, finds a way to escape the imposed role of a good and obeying daughter: her casual encounters with men become her personal rebellion. At one point she decides to escape to Zagreb in order to avoid her responsibilities but, unfortunately, she puts her moral obligation to help her dysfunctional family before her personal needs. This ending suggests the impossibility of departure from the confined spaces of family relationship and society.

Recent Croatian movies contest the domination imposed on female characters by social structures undermining the advancement of female characters. Set on islands or picturesque coastal towns, these movies stress the oppressive nature of the landscape and focus on the ways that space relates to disempowering female voices. From the early days of Croatian cinema, the coast and the islands, considered to be icons of the Mediterranean and its culture, never took the form of a neutral image but were used to reflect the peculiarities of local people and culture. *Murina*³⁹ (Antoneta Alamat Kusijanović, 2021) focuses on a teenager's perspective on gender roles; it is a reflection on the ways in which gender roles shape the relationship between a teenage girl and her parents. Julija is a quiet but independent 17-year-old girl who lives on a remote island off Croatia's Adriatic coast with her domineering father and passive mother. She dreams of leaving the beautiful but emotionally oppressive island to move to a big city. After a visit from the father's wealthy friend, who flirts with Julija's mother during a seaside excursion, she urges her mother to leave her father and flee with his friend. Although the mother is aware of the scars left on Julija by her authoritarian father, she decides to stay with him, tolerate his egocentrism and accept her subordinate position in a society dominated by male chauvinism. The father is short-tempered, often shouting orders and showing resentment towards Julija's attempts to assert her independence. A rudimentary patriarchal norm obliges men to protect women as their property; instead of protecting Julija, her father tries to subjugate her. The movie is a poignant story about a young girl's struggle to find her way out

38 The interest in the honor-shame paradigm first came from the male directors. *Sorry for kung-fu* (*Oprostite za kung-fu*, Ognjen Sviličić, 2004) is a movie about a pregnant unmarried woman returning to her village in the Dalmatian inland. After having spent some time in Germany as a war refugee Mirjana decides to return but her traditional family cannot accept her state and desperately seeks an appropriate husband for her in order to save the family honor. Her father has a hard time dealing with the gossiping and mockery of the villagers. After giving birth to an Asian boy Mirjana's reputation and her sexual respectability is further compromised and she is forced to leave her parent's home and return to Germany.

39 The movie's title is a Croatian word for a Mediterranean moray eel.

of familial, and patriarchal, oppression. In these societies, male authority is respected unconditionally. But Julija, unlike her mother, steps away from the common pattern of worshipping the father figure. Although the movie benefits much from the scenic Mediterranean landscape: crystal-clear sea, rocky coast, sapphire-blue sky, the aridity of the terrain suggests the confining nature of a land stripped of its possibilities. Julija never seems freer and happier than when she is diving in the vast blue sea, the only place where she feels really free of all the impediments. A pervading feeling of general discomfort and uneasiness is juxtaposed with the soothing images of Julija immersing herself in the water. The underwater sequences stress the lightness and grace of her body movements, the free expressions of herself. The sea is the only place where her problems are absorbed by the water and dissolved in silence of the underwater world.

The films analyzed in this article have challenged the hierarchic construction of the gaze by redefining the politics of representation. They illustrate the ways in which feminist cinema can elicit alternative images of the female experience and subvert misogynist regimes of perception common in patriarchal Balkan cinema since the 1990s. Many contemporary women filmmakers in Croatia have appropriated problematic representations of female sexuality that pervade both Mediterranean and Balkan culture, subverting and reconfiguring gender norms and the power relationships that they entail. These filmmakers have radically deconstructed stereotypical pornographic images of female body, exploring the possibility of creating a female-oriented gaze as opposed to a male-oriented one. Contemporary women's cinema encourages transformation on the part of its spectators and fosters an awareness of the gendered modes of subordination and exclusion. Women's movies lead to a particular recognition of the ways in which ideological constructions of gender impact spectators' understanding of female suffering. A non-objectifying vision of the female body reflects critically on the social factors that have shaped it by exposing the ways in which dominant patriarchal regimes of vision continue to objectify them. New women's cinema encourages spectators' awareness of the gendered dimensions of vision in majoritarian patriarchal modes of filmmaking and constructs a feminist mode of spectatorship by employing haptic images of female experiences. These movies invite spectators, no matter their gender, to form a sympathetic and compassionate solidarity in relation to female suffering through the aesthetically induced embodied proximity of spectators to female pain. Contemporary movies posit patriarchal violence in the Mediterranean area as the primary source of female suffering, and although female sexual desire has been denied expression within male-dominated

Mediterranean culture, recent women's cinema in Croatia presents female characters as actively desirous sexual beings. The poetics of proximity to female bodies constitutes, in my opinion, a minor feminist mode of filming. Although the cited female directors refuse to label themselves as feminist filmmakers, I consider their works exemplary models of minor feminist cinema that bear in mind the fragmented nature of feminism(s), their diversities, and the oppositional relationships among them.

Bibliography

- Albera, Dionigi. "Anthropology of the Mediterranean: Between crisis and renewal." *History and Anthropology* 17, no. 1 (2006): 109-33.
- Braudel, Fernand. *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, vol. 2. Paris: Armand Colin, [1949] 1990.
- Bromberger, Christian. "Towards an Anthropology of the Mediterranean." *History and Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (2006): 91-107.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875-93.
- Daković, Nevena. "Mother, Myth, and Cinema: Recent Yugoslav Cinema." *Film Criticism* 21, no. 2 (1996-1997): 40-49.
- Daković, Nevena. *Balkan kao (filmski) žanr: slika, tekst, nacija*. Beograd: FDU – Institut za pozorište, film, radio, televiziju, 2008.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Translated by Dana Polak. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1975] 1986.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinéma 2: L'image-temps*. Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1985.
- Driessen, Henk. "People, Boundaries and the Anthropologist's Mediterranean." *Anthropological Journal on European Cultures* 10, (2001): 11-23.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005.
- Gilmore, David D. "Anthropology of the Mediterranean Area." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11, (1982): 175-205.
- Iordanova, Dina. *Cinema of Flames, Balkan Film, Culture and the Media*. London: British Film Institute, 2001.
- Iordanova, Dina. *Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film*. London/New York: Wallflower Press, 2003.
- Iordanova, Dina. *The Cinema of the Balkans*. London/New York: Wallflower Press, 2006.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. *Women and Film: Both sides of the camera*. New York/London: Routledge, 1988.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, [1974] 1991.
- Matvejević, Predrag. *Breviario mediterraneo*. Milan: Hefti edizioni, 1987.

- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, edited by Philip Rosen, 198-209. New York: Columbia University Press, [1975] 1986.
- Murtić, Dino. *Post-Yugoslav Cinema*. Hampshire/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Osiek, Carolyn. "Women, honor, and context in Mediterranean antiquity." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 64, no. 1 (2008): 323-37.
- Peristiany, John G, ed. *Honour and shame: The values of Mediterranean society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966.
- Pina-Cabral, João de. "The Mediterranean as a category of regional comparison." *Current Anthropology* 30, no. 3 (1989): 399-406.
- Sadiqi, Fatima, ed. *Women and Knowledge in the Mediterranean*. London/New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Schneider, Jane. "Of vigilance and virgins: Honor, shame and access to resources in Mediterranean societies." *Ethnology* 10, no. 1 (1971): 1-24.
- Slapšak, Svetlana. "Representations of Gender as Constructed, Questioned and Subverted in Balkan Films." *Cinéaste* 32, no. 3 (2007): 37-40.
- Todorova, Maria. *Imagining the Balkans*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Vidan, Aida. "Framing the body, vocalizing the pain: perspectives of South Slavic female directors." *Studies in European Cinema* 15, no. 2-3 (2018): 125-45.