Happily Sick: Trauma, Nation, and Queer Affect

Yugoslavia’s rich cinematic tradition rarely tackled the themes of queer desire overtly, perhaps mirroring the overarching lack of public discourses on such topics in a country in which homosexuality in some republics remained illegal well into the 1990s. If and when the themes of homoerotic desire appeared—for instance, in Srđan Karanović’s *Virdžina* (1991) or Živko Nikolić’s *The Beauty of Sin* (1986)—their representations of queer subjectivities typically veered toward a more figurative use of its subversive potential, most notably toward critiquing patriarchal traditions of a “backward” region such as the Balkans. Queerness was therefore inevitably linked to subversive or transgressive tendencies, pitted in a binary opposition to an inherently reactionary heterosexuality. Moreover, these approaches, as instances of critically reflexive self-Balkanization, were at times overt attempts at linking traditional patriarchal, heteronormative rule to nationalist tendencies. Yet, what remained out of reach in such frameworks is a consideration of queer desire outside of the binary framework that has to perpetually pit it against heteronormativity in order to position it as visible or readable (Jelača 2012). In the years following the violent Yugoslav conflict, there has been an increasing number of films that tackle the topics of non-conforming sexualities and gender identities, a cultural turn which is linked to the increasing efforts of the regional LGBTQ groups to achieve greater rights and public acceptance for persons of non-normative gender identity and sexual orientation. In that sense, we can classify the emergence of a greater number of LGBTQ-themed films within the domain of what Jurica Pavičić has called the regional “cinema of normalization” (2010). LGBTQ-themed films are an important element of such normalizing cinema, particularly since LGBTQ rights (or lack thereof) have been one of the main stumbling blocks for some of the regional nation-states’ EU integrations.¹ A direct link is therefore
created between LGBTQ rights and the EU integrations—a link that carries as much potential for a perpetuation of reductive dichotomizing between the “civilized West” and “backward East,” as it also represents an arguably effective tool of political mobilizing on either side of the ideological coin. As Marko Dumančić argues, “the question of gay/lesbian visibility in the Western Balkans is indivisible from anxieties about national identities burdened by the wartime mythology, the fear of being classified as Balkan/non-European, and the EU expansion” (2013: 80–1).

In this chapter, I wish to temporarily put aside the focus on the role of LGBTQ visibility in the pro- and against-European discourses in order to look at the mechanisms through which the greater visibility of queer desire in post-conflict cinema after Yugoslavia engages in the establishment of affective regimes by which to deny the primacy of heteronormative understandings of and responses to trauma. I use the term “queer” rather than other alternatives such as gay, lesbian, transgender, or LGBTQ in order to maintain the implication of categorical unfixity of identity as such (as much as that is possible). I lean on Halberstam’s useful definition in which “‘queer’ refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time” (2005: 6).

The topic of queer trauma is largely neglected in the studies of post-Yugoslav queer-themed cinema. I aim to probe how a circulation of queer desire, and queer trauma, as an overtly political, as well as affective intervention in the more dominant heteronormative deployments of collective national traumas, is constructed culturally and by extension, politically. I examine the potential of the queer-themed films to intervene in the processes by which the claiming of trauma is typically made possible only for those citizens who successfully re/produce, literally and figuratively, the “ideal” heterosexual body that is inevitably linked to ethno-national ideology. I suggest that post-Yugoslav queer-themed films—for instance, Serbia’s Marble Ass (Želimir Žilnik 1997) and Take a Deep Breath (Dragan Marinković 2004), Croatia’s Fine Dead Girls (Dalibor Matanić 2002), and Bosnia’s Go West (Ahmed Imamović 2005)—establish, to differing extents, temporary regimes in which queer emotions are put into cultural circulation in a way that stages an intervention into the (hetero)normativized affective economies within which the cultural memory of trauma is typically contained, thereby effectively queering national feelings and trauma in particular, by making it into a more malleable and unfixed entity.

I refer to the films discussed in this chapter as queer-themed rather than simply “queer,” because it is questionable whether they are examples of what might be viewed as a consistently queer mode of vision. While Mima Simić (2012) and Kevin Moss (2012) place focus on the fact that most of