

WITH OR WITHOUT MAGIC: REALISM IN KUSTURICA'S TIME OF THE GYPSIES

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Abstract

Being one of the established directors of the Balkan cinemas, Emir Kusturica is considered a controversial figure, especially in his homeland Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is largely due to his problematic representation of the troubled Balkan past. After a highly political and much discussed film like Otac na sluzbenom putu (When Father Was Away on Business) (1985), however, we see a shift in his cinematic style with the apolitical Dom za vesanje (Time of the Gypsies) (1988).

In Time of the Gypsies, Kusturica provides a good deal of realistic depictions of the Gypsy life and culture, which makes the audience have an idea about the community. Kusturica also pays attention to making social commentary on such crucial subject matter as illegal migration, and human trafficking. Nevertheless, Perhan – the protagonist of the film – has telekinetic powers, and his grandmother is a charm-healer. Moreover, Perhan's dreams play a significant role throughout the film. However, these elements do not come off as fantastical elements, and the film is not listed as fantasy genre-wise. They seem to be essential parts of the film, which makes the audience accept them as they are. Hence the film does not lose any of its credibility. Kusturica owes the success of the film's healthy dose of magic realism to the colorful Gypsy culture and vibrant Romani characters. My main argument in this paper will be that Time of the Gypsies makes substantial use of magic realism and I will endeavor to investigate how it does so.

Keywords: *Magic Realism. Emir Kusturica. Balkan Cinemas. Gypsy Culture.*

Literature has always been a great inspiration for the world of cinema. In fact this late coming art form has borrowed many elements from the art of literature. *Magic* or *magical realism* might be considered one of these elements. Initially a style of painting, it became better known in literature as a writing style or a genre adopted by such authors as Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie. Its potential as a

visual tool has been discovered and used by many filmmakers, one of them being Bosnia's *enfant terrible*, Emir Kusturica. Today Kusturica is considered an *auteur* whose work is distinguished by its authentic style of storytelling and imagery. He is best known for his 1988 film *Dom za vesanje* (Time of the Gypsies). It is with this film that Kusturica began his search for alternative ways to tell and visualize a story.

Time of the Gypsies chronicles the odyssey of Perhan, a young Romani who lives in Sarajevo with his grandmother, compulsive gambler uncle and his crippled sister Danira. Perhan has telekinetic powers – he can move objects with mind power – and his grandmother is a charm-healer. The film opens with a glimpse into the daily lives of Perhan and his neighbors. The village fool addresses the audience directly and says "When God came down to earth he could not deal with the gypsies . . . and he took the next flight back". This statement is enough to stress where the film stands in its look at Gypsies. It does not glorify them in any way but rather attempts to show things as they are in reality. In that sense, one might call Time of the Gypsies a quite realistic film that depicts the Gypsies of Sarajevo. Indeed, the film makes use of the poor living conditions of the Romani minority in order to form a connection between the characters of the film and the audience – and it does not fail to do so because we feel sorry for them as we watch. This is largely due to the fact that it is made clear in the film that they do what they do because they have no other option. Concerning the portrayal of Gypsies in Balkan cinemas, Dina Iordanova states in *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media*:

“While the cinematic treatment of the Roma may have presented them in an unflatteringly exotic light, their portrayal in Balkan cinema remains, nevertheless, predominantly positive. In these films, the Roma are frequently seen to do things which are deemed socially unacceptable. But it is also clear they do not have the option to act in a different way. For example, they often end up as pickpockets, because they have no decent chance of employment or social benefits” (2001, p. 216).

In light of what Iordanova observes Kusturica seems to follow this convention of depicting Gypsies in a realistic way. As Zoran Kuzmanovich points out in his review of *Time of the Gypsies*, the film's success relies heavily on “its director's willingness to immerse himself in the local experience of Gypsy life” (1993, p. 267). This realistic depiction of everyday life is reminiscent of the Italian neorealism tradition, in which the poverty the Italians faced and their struggle to survive after World War II were demonstrated with the use of non-professional actors and location shooting. Kusturica, in a similar way to neorealist directors worked with non-professionals and Romani people in *Time of the Gypsies*.

Despite Kusturica's loyalty to the portrayal of Gypsy life, the film celebrates the existence of binary oppositions in life, just like many other films from the Balkans. For instance, *Time of the Gypsies* has both comedy and tragedy in it. This is best demonstrated in the final sequence where after Perhan, the protagonist of the film,

dies in a very tragic way, his mischievous son steals the golden coins that are traditionally placed on his eyes, which brings about a hopeful ending instead of a dark and pessimistic one. As Andrew Horton talks about Balkan films in general, he states “these films embrace verbal and physical/visual dimensions that are emblematic of a cultural spirit searching for ways to transcend the conflicts and wars of times present and past” (2003, p. 31). As a reaction to what the peoples of the Balkans have gone through in the past, filmmakers from the area tend to add a slight dose of comedy or comic relief into their films. However this is not to be confused with the modern idea of comedy evident in today’s Hollywood films. Along with many other examples from the Balkans, *Time of the Gypsies* displays a quite different notion of comedy, one that bares similarities to Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*. In Dante’s best known work, Dante the character starts his journey in Hell and finishes it in Heaven. Since “all is well that ends well” it is considered a comedy. As Horton underlines in “Laughter Dark & Joyous in Recent Films from the Former Yugoslavia”, “we realize comedy involves some degree of triumph or victory by tale’s end, whether that triumph evokes laugh or not, or whether it is a major triumph or even a minor one. In point of fact, even minor triumphs must be taken as a sign of hope in such tragic times as the past decade in the Balkans” (2002, p. 24).



Figure 1: Perhan’s mischievous son at work.

Apart from its use of comedy and tragedy in the same narrative, *Time of the Gypsies* brings realism and magic realism together as well. As stated earlier, the film represents the lives of the Romani people as realistically as possible. Nevertheless, Kusturica employs various magic realist aspects in the film. Defining magic realism, however, is not an easy task. I believe Jeffrey Wechsler’s thoughts on magic realism might be helpful when figuring this complex genre out. Although he primarily talks about magic realism in paintings his definition can apply to this context too. He quotes H. H. Arnason, who argues that the main concern of the magic realist artists is “translating everyday experience into strangeness” (1985, p. 293). That is definitely what we witness in *Time of the Gypsies*. The “strange” segments of the film are placed in such subtle ways that they do not come off as

irrational or unbelievable. Perhan's close relationship with his pet turkey might be considered one of these instances. One would expect that a boy befriends a cat or a dog, but this one befriends a turkey. Perhan's case is not unreal, it is merely eccentric. Wechsler further comments that "Magic realism does not invent a new order of things; it simply reorders reality to make it seem alien. Magic realism is an art of the implausible, not the impossible; it is imaginative, not imaginary" (p. 293). That is probably why we, as the audience, do not question whether what we see on the screen is real or not, we just accept it as the truth.

All these features of magic realism apply greatly to Kusturica's films. In fact, his cinematic style is easily recognized due to the way he incorporates magic realism into his films. His characters seem to be absurd, but also very real. As Yvette Biró comments on Kusturica's style, she observes "Irony and the absurdity of weird, inexplicable coincidences color his vision" (1990, p. 174). At the beginning of *Time of the Gypsies* where some of the secondary characters are introduced, a newlywed couple who seem to be arguing right after the ceremony exemplifies how strange Kusturica's characters might get. But again, these are not features one might call "fantastic" or "surreal" – none of Kusturica's films is classified as fantasy genre-wise. Magic realism is not to be confused with surrealism because the former incorporates magical elements into the body of an otherwise realistic film and these elements do not stand out, they become essential parts of the narrative. With surrealism that is definitely not the case. When we are confronted with a surrealist piece of art we cannot ignore its detachment from reality and its difference from what we see around us. Magic realism, on the other hand, "deals with a strange reality, not a surreality" (p. 293). As proposed by Wendy B. Faris, "it combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed" (2005, p. 163).

Other than the characteristics of magic realism, its use in *Time of the Gypsies* does not come off as unprecedented due to the vibrant characters of the film. Gypsies have been known to lead colorful lives despite the poverty and difficulties they face as a minority. For a genre like magic realism which brings polar opposites together, the choice of Gypsies as protagonists seems appropriate. Many of the film's magic realist moments owe their effect to realistically portrayed Romani characters and their complex culture. Gypsies have traditionally been thought not to conform to conventional life styles. As a result of their limited economic and social means, they are not able to live in proper houses and find jobs to provide for their families. This lack of alternatives of living has apparently made them closer to different versions of reality, or dreams. This is clear when Perhan complains "A gypsy without dreams is like a church without a roof, like a textbook without letters". Even though they do not have the means to get what they dream of they seldom cease to dream. This is exactly why the audience does not question the magic realist aspects of the film. We somehow associate dreams and the supernatural with the Romani because "they have insights into the supernatural and follow the ancient superstitions in such earnestness that it seems they really work for them" (Gocić, 2001, p. 84). For instance, after he moves to Italy, Perhan dreams of a white flying turkey – probably

a symbol of his dead turkey friend. Later in the film, while he is about to die on the back of a train he sees the same turkey flying towards him.

The magic realist scenes of *Time of the Gypsies* are mostly presented as to have been stuck in between the dream world and the real world, which is why one cannot easily tell if it is a dream or not. One exemplary scene is the part where Azra, Perhan's pregnant wife, dies while giving birth. The magical nature of the scene is described by Jordanova in *Emir Kusturica* as such:

“As soon as they arrive at the campsite in Italy, Azra, who is still in a wedding gown, escapes in desperation. She goes into labour by the nearby railway tracks, her body levitating against the background of a passing train and a haunting musical score, the veils of her white gown floating around and giving this magical image a sublime, harrowing quality” (2002, p. 66).



Figure 2: Azra giving birth.

Although it is clear that Azra goes to labor and dies in reality, the fact that she flies in the air gives the scene a dreamlike quality. Another example of magic realist imagery in the film would be the sequence in which the drunken uncle of Perhan gets mad at his family and lifts their house with a crane leaving it hanging in the air – hence the literal translation of the film is *A House for Hanging*.



Figure 3: *A House for Hanging*.

As discussed throughout this paper, Kusturica's *Time of the Gypsies*, as a magic realist film, brings realism and magic realism together. Although the lives of the Romani are portrayed realistically, the film also employs magic realist elements that are incorporated into the body of the film. Moreover, the fact that it is about the Romani contributes to the magic realist nature of the film.

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