 DOI: 10.31577/sd-2026-0018

STUDIES

The Figure of the Father and its Geopolitical Connotations in the Early Films of Emir Kusturica

Jana DUDKOVÁ

Institute of Theatre and Film Research, Art Research Centre of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia

Abstract: This study examines Emir Kusturica's first three films and their portrayal of the father figure in the context of the ongoing geopolitical changes in the country. It shows that the waning authority of the father may in fact relate to the weakening of the Lacanian "name of the father," caused in part by the upheaval of the country's political order — literally, the symbolic order in which we live. At the same time, however, the paper subjects this Lacanian interpretation to critical analysis and shows that Kusturica always subtly draws attention to the inheritance of certain qualities and values between fathers and sons, particularly in the sense of the tragic inheritance of toxic patriarchy, which is also transmitted into the idylls of families founded on matriarchal principles — whether latent or openly present.

Keywords:
fatherhood, Emir Kusturica, toxic masculinity, intergenerational continuity

When writing about directors who systematically explore the figure of a father, Janina Falkowska refers to "an increasingly globalized cultural economy and an uncertain political and social situation of Europe" which leads to the decline of "symbolic paternal authority."[1] Similarly, Isabella Guanzini notices "a huge transformation process in globalised societies that are increasingly dominated by abstractions," and that attack "the symbolic function that the 'Name-of-the-Father' supports," suggesting that the Lacanian "discourse of the capitalist" weakens the perception of the limit, the power of interdiction and the regulation of desire that characterise the paternal function.[2]

Isabella Guanzini thus asks: "What does it mean to be a father in the time of the evaporation of every symbolic function? What does 'to inherit' mean in the epoch of the death of the father, or in the time of Chronos, who kills his children?"[3]

In this text, I will analyse the meaning of the father figure in the first three films by (then still Yugoslavian) director Emir Kusturica. These films were made in moments of gradual social and political transition of Yugoslavia. The debut, *Sjećaš li se Dolly Bell?* [Do You Remember Dolly Bell?] (1981) was relesead in the year following the death of President Josip Broz Tito (1980) who had been perceived as the country's longterm integrator and guarantor of its political direction ever since the end of the World War II. In the decade following Tito's death, still preceding the actual collapse of Yugoslav communist system and the following civil war, Kusturica completed two other films, both of them reflecting the fading authority and power of a father. It is thus tempting to link the presentation of father figure in Kusturica's films to literal death of the figure of the leader — the "father" of the nation — and to following breakdown of the old symbolic systems. However, in the following text I will challenge this popular interpretation and emphasise the moments of continuity of values — the viscious circle of toxic masculinity shared by both fathers and their sons. In order to do so, I will move from *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?* to *Dom za vešanje* [Time of the Gypsies] (1988) which paradoxically asserts matriarchal principles just a year before the symbolic escalation of nationalist (toxically patriarchal) sentiments in Yugoslav society.[4]

Methodologically, I will stem mostly from thematic analysis and analysis of filmic motifs, relying at the same time on cultural studies and *auteur* theory, which can be justified by recurring phenomena in the director's career: Emir Kusturica always participated in his films as scriptwriter, often used recurring motifs, sometimes

1 FALKOWSKA, J. The Myth of the Father: Melancholia in the Films of Andrzej Wajda from Poland, Michael Haneke from Austria and Aleksandr Sokurov from Russia. In *Studies in European Cinema*, 2010, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 67.

2 GUANZINI, I. Reality and Paternity in the Cinema of the Dardennes. In *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*, 2016, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 18–19.

3 Ibid., p. 24.

4 In June 1989, at a mass gathering to celebrate the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo (1389), freshly elected president of Yugoslav Socialist Republic of Serbia, Slobodan Milošević, publicly hinted at the possibility of armed conflict between the peoples of the SFR Yugoslavia. His infamous Gazimestan speech was later seen as a kind of symbolic instruction to start the strife leading to civil war, especially in the context of the mass nature of the gathering (estimated at half to two million participants).

even self-citations, and his films often emerged as responses to the previous ones, developing and varying their themes and motifs or shifting them into significantly different meanings. All of this suggests that the director has voluntarily chosen to function as *auteur*, regardless of any changes in his creative staffs, which, however, remained relatively stable.[5]

In this study/the text, I am interested in how the political situation of a given moment synchronically (not necessarily causally)[6] reflects on the narratives and specific motifs of the individual Kusturica's films. The connection of the father figure in his debut film with the symbolic potential of the specific times of their creation can be considered not only as meaningful and meaning-making, but also as setting a long-term trend in his work. In fact, his theme of distancing from the father can truly be understood as a part of his tendency to allegorically depict the changing political situation seen literally as a kind of loss or weakening of what Jacques Lacan (in his seminar *The Psychoses* in mid-1950s) called "*nom du père*": the function guaranting our placement in symbolic order, our identity as human subjects, but also signifying the Oedipal prohibition, the "no" of the incest taboo — in a broader sense, the limitations of social law.

But this way of thinking is not new. It appeared even recently, in the analyses of the work of various contemporary directors, most often being also *auteurs*. Individual scholars have sought to make connections between the weakening of paternal authority and the contemporary disintegration of symbolic values, whether of communism (i.e. in the work of Andrzej Wajda, Alexandr Sokurov, but also Emir Kusturica)[7] or capitalism (Michael Haneke, the Dardenne brothers).[8]

But is this just a sign of the globally perceived, waning paternal authority, or are there other webs of meaning to be found complicate this imminent connection? The aim of this study/paper is to test the pros but also limits of this approach. Before that, in the next chapter I will offer a short overview of the aformentioned approaches.

Fatherhood in the epoch of the collapsing divisions of the world

Both Janina Falkowska and Isabella Guanzini analyse very specific authorial approaches to the figure of the father. Falkowska points out film authors who react to social and political uncertainties by "the melancholic reworking of the myth of fatherhood,"[9] when a "preoccupation with the state of the contemporary world [is] expressed in the feelings of mourning and melancholia, [...] by destroying archetypical

---

5 For more see IORDANOVA, D. *Emir Kusturica*. London : British Film Institute, 2002.

6 This allows me to avoid the production and creative history of the films in question, which could certainly bring a different, admittedly useful insight to the subject. However, I will not deal with it in this study/text.

7 FALKOWSKA, J. The Myth of the Father: Melancholia in the Films of Andrzej Wajda from Poland, Michael Haneke from Austria and Aleksandr Sokurov from Russia; see also HORTON, A. Oedipus Unresolved: Covert and Overt Narrative Discourse in Emir Kusturica's When Father Was Away on Business. In *Cinema Journal*, 1988, Vol. 27, No. 4, pp. 64–81.

8 For Haneke, see FALKOWSKA, J. The Myth of the Father: Melancholia in the Films of Andrzej Wajda from Poland, Michael Haneke from Austria and Aleksandr Sokurov from Russia, and for Dardenne brothers, see GUANZINI, I. Reality and Paternity in the Cinema of the Dardennes.

9 FALKOWSKA, J. The Myth of the Father: Melancholia in the Films of Andrzej Wajda from Poland, Michael Haneke from Austria and Aleksandr Sokurov from Russia. In *Studies in European Cinema*, p. 67.

fathers when nostalgically idealising them in tableaux-like frames, when presenting them as inactive and helpless and when mourning them desperately after their death."[10] On the contrary, Dardenne brothers who were choosed for analysis by Isabelle Guanzini, passionately search for something to fill the empty space left by the figure of the father: they "search for a new contact with reality and a concrete belief in the world, focusing on the theme of body and paternity, in the epoch of their evaporation [...] in a post-political and post-ideological age."[11]

Isabella Guanzini's focus is naturally limited to "the globalised, depleted and deserted post-industrial landscape [...] dissolving certainties and basic orientations and weakening the fundamental trust in the world."[12] Janina Falkowska is thus one of the rare authors who consider weakening of the symbolical figure of the father in both socialist, post-socialist, and capitalist contexts, including both Andrzej Wajda's over-idealised images of father and Michael Haneke's images of empty fatherless world. Before her, in the context relevant for us, only Andrew Horton had also identified a link between the fading father figure and what he called „erosion of the centre," meaning the death of "the father of the nation," president Jopis Broz Tito (in connection with Emir Kusturica's second film *Otac na službenom putu* [When Father Was Away on Business] (1985),[13] but he was very cautious about the direct linking of the two phenomena, the film image and the real event. Thus it will be important to distinguich specific images of fatherhood in Kusturica's films and define their own relations to the global perceptions of the destruction of the old symbolic orders of communism. We also have to define with more precision the way in which Kusturica's films fill the abovementioned "empty space" left by father figures, as Isabella Guanzini suggests in her inspiring analysis.

Toxic masculinity and the continuity of communist patriarchy in Emir Kustica's debut

Emir Kusturica's auteur work took off after several short student and longer TV films with his feature debut for cinemas, *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?*, in 1981. As this was a very short period after the death of the president Josip Broz Tito, the film is not openly critical of the period of his rule. Instead, it focuses on the clash between old, dogmatic thinking and opening up to Western or mystical influences in Yugoslav popular culture in the early 1960s.

Just as in the next four Kusturica's films, the central character of the film is not the father. It is rather a boy coming of age — in this case the middle son Dino.[14] With the

10 Ibid., p. 68.

11 GUANZINI, I. Reality and Paternity in the Cinema of the Dardennes. In *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*, p. 21.

12 Ibid., pp. 21–22.

13 HORTON, A. Oedipus Unresolved: Covert and Overt Narrative Discourse in Emir Kusturica's When Father Was Away on Business. In *Cinema Yournal*, 1988, Vol. 27, No. 4, p. 65.

14 With the exception of Malik, who is only six years old at the beginning of *When Father Was Away on Business*, these are always characters in their adolescence age or state. This includes even the adult Axel from *Arizona Dream* (1993) who also experiences the coming-of-age story, through his relationship with his uncle and two emotionally unstable women.

story set in the summer of 1962, Dino represents the new: popular music (he wants to become a singer), the erotic industry, which fascinates him but also hypnosis, which symbolises his desire to detach from rigid materialism of his father.

The father, the good-natured but stern and, from today's perspective, highly manipulative patriarch Maho, in turn represents the old. This manager of a Sarajevo restaurant appears to be a hard Marxist and party supporter who carries the self-management methods typical of post-war Yugoslavia into his own family. He regularly sits his three sons down at night where the youngest has to take minutes,[15] and takes offence if anyone disagrees with his interpretation of Marx. He also tries to distract Dino from hypnosis by asserting that "chemistry is physics, physics is biology, and everything is dialectics." Referring to the soul in vulgar terms, in the final section of the film father nevertheless suddenly falls ill and eventually dies.

The film's bitter paradox, however, is that the father's death doesn't mark the end of the old symbolic order, and the weakening of his authority is not associated with the rebellion of the son (which, for example, confuses Andrew Horton when analyzing Kusturica's next film, 1985's *When Father Was Away on Business*).[16] Instead, following the death of his father, real progression occurs for Dino. The family finally moves from their long-inadequate "temporary" housing to a new housing estate, Dino begins to sing in a newly founded band, and in the context of the sexual initiation he had previously undergone, he even seems to gain symbolic capital in the marketplace of youthful love. The final happy ending, however, subtly highlights the bitter paradox of his success. Although it was Dino who appeared to be an idealist believer in love and the intellectual progress of humanity, everything that has improved in his life outwardly tends to confirm material values. But also: all this happens with the tacit approval, encouragement or even active participation of the deceased father. In fact, the values that Dino acquires — both material and symbolic — were literally *projected* by his father. It was his father who had spent years trying to obtain better housing from the state; his father, as a great lover of women, who was reserved about Dino's interest in what he disdainfully called "the soul," but was delighted and hopeful about Dino's bonding with a village girl, whom a local thug and pimp had hidden in his pigeonhouse. "Stick to women," he advised Dino shortly before his death ("and "scr…w the soul").

---

15 It was the introduction of the first self-managed enterprises in 1949 that was one of the manifestations of the split between "Tito"s" Yugoslavia and "Stalin's" Soviet Union. Tito leaned towards a more democratic version of socialism, but the consequences of this schism were severe persecutions thematised in the following Kusturica's film in which the father makes a politically inappropriate comment on a cartoon ironizing Stalin's power. Father's over-attachment to the principles of socialist self-government in Kusturica's debut can thus also be read as a pre-emptive action after experiencing the trauma of *When Father Was Away on Business*.

16 A. Horton links the lack of son's rebellion to a regionally specifical, more fragmentary narrative structure that differs from Hollywood cinema and, instead of resolving the Oedipus complex, introduces a tension between "overt" and "covert" narration – the former mediated by a six-year-old boy and the latter being associated with camera or various fluid, changing subjects. In HORTON, A. Oedipus Unresolved: Covert and Overt Narrative Discourse in Emir Kusturica's When Father Was Away on Business. In *Cinema Yournal*, pp. 74–76.

None of the family members rebel radically and the father remains strict, but does not punish beyond admonitions. Although he appears outwardly rigid, I argue, he himself is also a victim of patriarchal toxicities. This is also why Dino's world fascinates him even when he appears patronizing and manipulative. Toxic masculinity, however, appear on multiple levels in the film, from manipulation of the father to the obscene power embodied by the pimp who subjugates not only the youth but also the communist functionaries running the youth club.

An indictment of toxic masculinity in *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?*, however, does not lie in a direct critique of patriarchal power — the father and even the communist youth club officials are actually quite good-hearted small-town characters stuck in an ossified system of governance. Rather, it is the enduring symbolic presence of the toxicity of patriarchal power that is best translated in this film through the complex symbolism of smoking. As Goran Gocić notes, in *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?*, almost everyone smokes (though, let us add, exclusively males). The motif of cigarettes symbolizes not only the principle of power hierarchy and coming of age, but also the principle of pleasure.[17] Adults, through the control of smoking, exercise power over the pleasures of young ones. Quite illustrative is the scene when the father, in an attempt to lead a more sincere dialogue with his son, resorts to a kind of ironic manipulative game with him: knowing that Dino is secretly smoking, he offers him a cigarette, but after a short while, he sternly takes it away from him. Thus, by offering and then withdrawing the cigarette, the father declares his right to *control* Dino's entry into the world of pleasures associated with the life of a grown man. This does not only concern cigarettes, but also his interest in Dino's sexual maturation. Apart from the pleasure principle, which Goran Gocić prioritises in relation to smoking — taking into account the director's own fondness for cigars,[18] but also the fact that the pleasure principle is a key function of smoking in most of Kusturica's other films — however, I would venture to suggest that in *Do You Remember Dolly Bell*, smoking functions as the ultimate symbol of toxic power of patriarchal hierarchies, including state power mostly represented by powerfull men. Unlike the cigarette in the mouth of the matriarchal grandmother Hatidža in *Time of the Gypsies*, it literally possesses the potential to kill (the father dies of a lung disease). The father in *Do You Remember Dolly Bell* should embody patriarchal power, but he becomes extremely vulnerable: he secretly yearns for his own lost soul, and is wounded by the very patriarchal circles of power within Tito's regime that the toxicity of cigarettes symbolizes as well.

Of course, in a literal sequence of events, the father simply catches a cold after a family visit to his sister (there he gets engaged in a quarell with his sister's husband and subsequently decides to stay alone in the sudden rain like an offended boy). The father's death is thus set in a series of scenes in which he makes his rigid habits and

17 GOCIĆ, G. *Notes from the Underground: The Cinema of Emir Kusturica*. London – New York : Wallflower Press, 2001, pp. 78–80.

18 Ibid., pp. 77–82.

stubbornness seem comical: after the visit, he drunkenly repeats that no one will lecture him on what Marx meant, even trying to reconvene a late-night house meeting, and later, in the hospital, he quickly slides a cigarette to Dino so that the doctor won't notice his smoking.

The father's waning authority and the deliberate focus on his almost childish stubbornness can be read as a reference to the contemporary situation in the SFR Yugoslavia which for several years had been facing the ageing, weakening, illness and subsequent death of the "leader" figure of Josip Broz Tito. But the story of the father and son in Kusturica's debut is much more complex, and in this text I would argue that it reveals especially their continued rootedness in the toxicity of both the communist system and patriarchy. The father is not a Tito's pendant, and his behaviour is very much related to the trauma caused by the corrupt post-war regime, as Kusturica will show in his next film. Yet the father's victimhood, explicit in Kusturica's second film, is so far only indirectly suggested through his specifically tragicomic performance. The father's death remains represented as the result of the ideological convictions he stubbornly clings to and refuses to give up, even though his expression throughout shows a childish theatricality and a tragicomic sense of irony.

This sense is also present in the interpretation of the father's sternness. On one hand, Maho does terrorize his family with his alcoholic late arrivals when the whole family has to get up and follow his instructions, but his demeanor contains elements of irony that are actually accepted by his closest. It is a game that everyone has accepted and the father's role is in fact to protect the family, including his right and obligation to designate his successor. The debut, therefore, does not emphasise the true toxicity of the father's effect on the family, as in the following film where the father continually cheats on the mother while his business trips and constant absence literally traumatise his young sons.[19]

Dino's rebellion against his father is thus also very mild: he smokes in secret, studies hypnosis and hides the mysterious Dolly Bell in a pigeon house in the backyard. All these secret pleasures, however, happen with the father's knowledge: not only does he know from his older son that Dino does smoke, but he also secretly spies on him when he brings a dinner to Dolly. The father's prohibition against smoking is meant almost as part of family folklore: in his will, it is to Dino that he dedicates his

19 The difference between the two fathers is also in the choice of actors: the father from *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?,* is interpreted by Slobodan Aligrudić, known precisely for hidden ironic shades in his portrayals of macho characters (Kusturica used this aspect of his acting also in *When Father Was Away on Business* where Aligrudić appears in the role of a stern supervisor who is supposed to keep an eye on the father while he is serving his sentence, but thanks to his implicite irony, this character actually symbolises the gentler side of state power, since after the harsh part of the sentence in the mine father's punishment continues in a version where the representant of the state power does not take himself quite seriously). Opposite *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?*, Miki Manojlović as the father in the following film, on the other hand, represents a cynical indulger who is not hesitant about hurting his family – but who also hides his need for love and completeness with his cynicism (this is shown, for example, in the affectionate relationship between Meša and his sons or the passionate embrace with his wife after an argument when the whole family subsequently snuggles up to each other in the family bed).

precious smoking paraphernalia, and not to his older brother who seemingly fulfills his fantasies more (wearing a fancy suit, he makes a conscious effort to be attractive to women, and he does not in any way contradict the father's compromise with the regime either).

A Serbian anthropologist Božidar Zečević notes that in both of Kusturica's first films, the father is not the cruel patriarchal Dis Pater. On the contrary, "he is the one who loses, at the same time tender and full of compromises [...] a protector, not a tyrant."[20] In a bit uncritical yet inspiring manner, Božidar Zečević believes that the upheavals in the father's life fulfill a mythic function, as the father has taken over the function of the South Slavic mythic *ancestor.* Although some small indications suggest otherwise, Božidar Zečević believes that there are no signs of a real rebellion against the father in any of the first two Kusturica's films. This is also because the father is supposed to be *sacrificed*. The father is here, like the mythical ancestor, "the keeper of the family hearth and overseer of the fate of the family, to whom love and respect but never fear and hatred are shown," and his sudden absence, even exile (in Kusturica's second film) function precisely as part of the mythical structure of the two films.[21]

The father also clearly belongs to the generation that came of age in the World War II (in his will, he mentions 1920 as the year of his birth). We can only suspect that Maho was shaped by the communist ideals promoted during and after the WWII, of which he was deprived by the further development of the countrie's politics. However, his fate becomes truly tragic only after confrontation with the fate of Meša, the father from *When Father Was Away on Business*. Emir Kusturica and his co-screenwriter, Abdulah Sidran, actually created their second film as a prequel to *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?*, with new actors and slightly changed names of the characters. The age difference between the siblings, the recurring mother's name, and the informations about the time when the stories take place all fit the bill.[22] If Dino is an adolescent in 1962, there's nothing implausible about the fact that he was six years old like Malik when the story of the second film begins. For now, however, it suffices to point out that the father is not the ruler in Kusturica's debut, but precisely the victim, and it is quite possible that in Dino's idealism and reverie he sees himself and his former, perhaps even revolutionary ideals — yet the authors never reveal if (and what) these were.On the other hand, the father repeatedly makes negative comments about the soul, the consequence of his specific trauma depicted in *When Father Was Away on Business.* Maho's final message to his son Dino: stick to women and be phlegmatic, because women like phlegmatics, relates to his experience of the ideological somersaults he must have experienced only relatively recently, and which are apparently the reason for his fatal illness, when he seemingly only pays

20 ZEČEVIĆ, B. *Čitanje svetla*. Beograd : YU film danas – Prosveta – Prometej, 1994, p. 159 – quoted from the section entitled *Prilog mitologiji pretka* [Contribution to the Mythology of the Ancestor], dated 1985 without indication of the place of publication.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., p. 158.

for his smoking with death from lung disease. But we can see much more in this disease. Someone has made it impossible for the father to breathe freely: and exactly the same thing happens to Dino. In the film, Dino experiences several encounters with toxic masculinity (in its obscene form: with the pimp Šintor, the erotic industry as a trade in women, or the attempt at the initiation into the world of sexuality through gang rape; but also in the form of official power: the plethora of well-meaning communist officials who decide to support the formation of a youth band for the sole purpose of controlling the youngsters). After these encounters, Dino does get a flowering in line with the supposed liberation of the cultural atmosphere of 1960s, but his singing career signifies nothing more than a continuation of the principle of toxic masculinity in a new guise, yet still controlled by the communist functionaries who actually buried his father (this last meaning only becomes clear in the context of *When Father Was Away on Business*). In other words, all the apparent loosening of the rigid hoops of communist culture turns out to be toxic and hypocritic as well: the erotic industry is run by a toxic patriarch exploiting women, and popular music is used as a tool of communist control of the youth. What is more, both official power (communist officials) and obscene, in Žižek's terms, power (the pimp Šintor) take control of all forms of loosening ties, and collaborate closely.

The bitterness of the film lies in the fact that Dino who wanted to change the world through hypnosis, actually becomes "just" a singer, and apparently a future darling of women. His first concert performance is staged just so that this paradox is clearly visible: Dino is taken in close-up while he smiles conspiratorially at someone over his shoulder, unobtrusively and with newfound confidence, and than begins to sing. For a moment, however, we can see a slight shadow of sadness at Dino's face. It's literally seconds, and Dino sings on further. The trauma of his father's death does not prevent him from taking the conformist path that the official authorities expect from him.

The bitterness is underlined in the following sequence as well. The last shot shows Dino's family getting on the truck that is taking them to their new home. The local kids scramble after the car for a moment, but it gradually fades into the distance, and by the time the closing credits roll, all we can hear are the realistic sounds of the deserted street. What we see of the new housing estate are only the outlines of apartment blocks and cranes, with the mysteriously recurring leitmotif of a small light flickering between them: this motif symbolises hope for a better future troughout the narrative, but we never see more than this particular light from the new housing. Before the last shot, we also briefly see Dino, again shot in close-up, thoughtfully smoking a cigarette — wich is also, as we have stated before, the symbol of patriarchal power. "Every day and in every respect, I'm making more and more progress" ("Svakoga dana, u svakom pogledu sve više napredujem"), Dino repeats to himself monotonously out of frame. This mantra, which he picked up while reading books on hypnosis, sounds as bitter as his musical performance. Dino has indeed become his father's heir and can smoke in public. But at what cost? His father is dead, but the results of his work (both his attitude towards women and his progress up the social ladder when, after his death, he is finally granted an apartment for his family) will

continue to define Dino's life. And so will the results of the work of his father's entire generation, who actually built the new housing estate as well.

The business trip: toxic fatherhood in *When Father Was Away on Business*

Do You Remember Dolly Bell? is thus conceived as a film about the exchange but also the paradoxical continuity of generations in which not only material values but also the very vulnerability of the male and father figure plays a key role. In her book *XY. De L'*identité masculine [XY. On Masculine Identity][23] Élisabeth Badinter describes the male identity as precisely that vulnerable and precarious one, as if determined already by the incompleteness of the male chromosome. Leaving aside this suggestion of harmful biological essentialism, Élisabeth Badinter's interpretations of male vulnerability corresponds with Kusturica's intuition. It is the man who has to constantly prove he is a man, while his patriarchal upbringing based on cruel initiation rituals and tests of hardening prove he cannot be who he is without them. Similarly, Dino in Emir Kusturica's debut must prove his masculinity through a series of trials, including a gang rape (which he refuses), defeating a pimp in a fight, and the loss of his father.

We don't know what trials had to overcome his father. But as we have stated before, although the film was released only shortly after the death of Josip Broz Tito, the father figure it presents can be understood as symptomatically linked to the theme of the withering away of paternal authority, and this "paternal" authority was, in the context of Yugoslav society, also Tito himself. The association of the theme of the father with the death of the "father of the nation," however, did not explicitly appear until Andrew Horton's text on Kusturica's subsequent film, *When Father Was Away on Business*. "With the death of the patriarchal figure, Tito, the 'center' has been stadily eroded."[24] However, *When Father Was Away...* does not refer directly to the death of president Tito. Even Andrew Horton rightly associates it with the situation of the loosening of self-censorship and the explosion of themes related to previously tabooed episodes in Yugoslavia's post-war history which were strongly tied precisely to the cult of Tito's personality. In the 1980s, theatrical plays and around twenty novels were written about these topics, but according to Andrew Horton, "Kusturica's major contribution to the continuing national dialogue on the anti-Stalinist period is his presentation of the past as it affects a *family*."[25]

Many of the characters' motivations were obscured in Kusturica's debut, but are indirectly explained in *When Father Was Away on Business*. It is the traumatic event of the title, the departure of the father on a "business trip" that also explains why the father in *Do You Remember Dolly Bell* is more interested in debating with Dino, with whom he seemingly disagrees, and why he prefers him more than his older brother.

---

23 BADINTER, E. *XY. On Masculine Identity*. Translated by L. Davis. Columbia University Press, 1997.

24 HORTON, A. Oedipus Unresolved: Covert and Overt Narrative Discourse in Emir Kusturica's When Father Was Away on Business. In *Cinema Yournal*, p. 65.

25 Ibid.

In fact, the motivations and actions of the father in *Do You Remember Dolly Bell* are motivations caused by the trauma he has experienced. *When Father Was Away on Business* can thus be understood as a completion of the father's story from Kusturica's debut *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?*, and this completion is made from a perspective of the generational trauma linked explicitly to the labour camps that the post-war regime used to both intimidate and get rid of the inconvenient ones. The father in *Do You Remember Dolly Bell* is an ardent Marxist, but the father in *When Father Was Away on Business* ends up in just such a camp merely because of a cartoon featuring Marx.

When Father Was Away on Business seems to be narrated by a young boy whom we meet at the age of six and whose story ends two years later. Malik is partly the narrator and partly one of the film's main characters. He speaks to us off-screen in the very opening of the film, and through his childlike perception we seem to follow the whole story of a family whose father is sent to a labour camp during the Tito-Stalin split (1948–1953). Over 50,000 people were victims of such camps. However, as with *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?*, against the backdrop of historical change, the film mainly presents the father-son relationship as part of the son's coming of age. This is understood in both cases as a series of trials and traumatic experiences, but also elements of sexual maturation, which has led Božidar Zečević[26] to understand both of Kusturica's films as stories of boyhood initiation, following archetypes of rites of passage. On the other hand, Horton sees the story primarily as the story of Oedipus complex which remains unresolved due to the boy's age.[27] That is also why Zečević sees the father-son relationship in both Kusturica's films as part of rather matriarchal archetypes, similarly as in his third film, *Time of the Gypsies*, in which the matriarchal model of the family is finally apparent.[28]

Zečević describes the father's story as that of a victim: the traumatized and weakened father falls ill and dies of lung disease a decade later after his inprisonment[29] (*Do You Remember Dolly Bell?* takes place in 1962, *When Father Was Away on Business* between 1950–1952). But the way the illness is causally and symbolically anchored in the narrative of *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?*, says a lot about what actually happened: the lung disease may be a consequence of the father's smoking (the symbol of patriarchal power). But in a more direct connection, the illness is revealed after the father's cold which he acquires after an argument with his sister's husband. The two men are divided by their interpretation of Marx, and it is the cartoon of Marx sitting in his study room with Stalin's picture on the wall that becomes the reason for the father's arrest and posting to a labour camp in Kusturica's next film. But as we have already suggested, the lung disease also symbolizes the difficult breathing. Although we don't see such a situation in any of the two

26 ZEČEVIĆ, B. *Čitanje svetla*, p. 158.

27 HORTON, A. Oedipus Unresolved: Covert and Overt Narrative Discourse in Emir Kusturica's When Father Was Away on Business. In *Cinema Yournal*, p. 67.

28 ZEČEVIĆ, B. *Čitanje svetla*, p. 161 and further.

29 Ibid., p. 158.

films, it could symbolically mean that the father couldn't breathe properly. He now suffers from his rigidity and childish stubbornness, his authority weakened by this very childishness, but at the same time it is clear that perhaps once upon a time the father did try to breathe freely, or even "fly" freely — just as levitating Malik in the second film's closing shot.

Unfortunately, it is *When Father Was Away on Business* that also shows toxicity of the father's freedom, consisting of repeated "business trips" and infidelities, harmfull for the mother but also, through the perpetual absence of the father, traumatizing his young sons. Six-year-old Malik even becomes sleepwalking after the father's arrest (disguised to the children as yet another business trip).

Since *When Father Was Away on Business* is, similarly as Kusturica's debut, conceived as a coming-of-age film and literally traumatic initiation into the adult world, Malik experiences also other losses in addition to the loss of his father: traumatic circumcision directly presedes father's arrest, forced move to another town is followed by the death of his first love. As we have seen, Dino experiences a similarly cruel end to his free exploration of sexuality in *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?*, and similarly deeply rooted in the cruel rules of patriarchy: his secret love, whom he freely befriends in a pigeon house,[30] is gang-raped by his friends as part of her initiation as a prostitute.

Yet the business trip from Kusturica's second film's title has another meaning: it symbolizes father's own trauma, when he is denounced by his dissatisfied mistress and sent to the labour camp. In both films, beside other traumatic experiences of growing up, the sons have to face their father's traumas as well (and especially their father's reactions to their traumas). Malik's harsh coming of age is consummated at his mother's younger brother's wedding at which the father takes revenge on his former mistress — now Malik's aunt Ankica — by raping her. The boy becomes an unwilling witness to this, literally perverted "primal scene," and immediately afterwards to his grandfather's departure for a retirement home.

Unlike Kusturica's debut, based on a permanent confrontation between father and son until the father's death (with the son fully replacing the father), *When Father Was Away on Business* raises the theme of traumatic oscillation between the presence and absence of the father by its very title. Even this time, however, we follow the father-son relationship in which the decline of the father's authority and revealing of his trama makes a condition of the son's coming of age.

It is precisely the situation of the erosion of the "center"[31] described by Andrew Horton that young Malik experiences. He experiences not only the "great" traumatic moments of his own little deaths, as described above, but more and more gradually perceives the cracks in the adult narratives and his reunions with his father become

30 The pigeon may symbolize the symbolic freedom that Dino longs for, but even more important is the fact that the pigeon loft is elevated above the earth and thus symbolizes the different space-time of Dino's sexual maturation, which initially takes place quite outside the patriarchal world of the everyday, in the utopian space of daydreaming.

31 HORTON, A. Oedipus Unresolved: Covert and Overt Narrative Discourse in Emir Kusturica's When Father Was Away on Business. In *Cinema Yournal*, p. 65.

more and more traumatic as he, for example, discovers that he has to fight with his mother for his father's love, but also that his father is unfaithful to his mother and even becomes violent towards her.

Yet one of the most intriguing aspects of the film is the fact that it is narrated without a clearly distinguished narrator. We are introduced to Malik as the narrator, spicing up the narrative with the charm of a child's point of view, but as Andrew Horton points out, already by the third sequence we see a scene that can in no way belong to Malik's own experience (the father with his lover on the train, attending one of his buseiness trips).[32] "In fact, Malik only speaks about four times. His narration is thus more a form of narrative punctuation [...]: the disruption of familial relations translates into a complex interplay of narrative voices."[33]

Similarly ambivalent is the (non)presence of the father in the film: although the father figure is already present in the title, out of 29 major sequences, the father appears in only 15.[34] Yet the father is "present in Kusturica's first films even when he is effectively absent."[35]

For Andrew Horton, who takes an inspiration from Seymour Chatman's term "degrees of audibility," the tension between "overt" (identified narrator, in this case Malik) and "covert (effaced) narration" is crucial, and not only sets the film in contrast to Hollywood cinema,[36] but also determines its ambivalence. "The interplay of covert (mother/father) and overt (son) narratives [...] subtly represents the tensions of a classical Oedipal situation. While the family is much larger than this [...], the focus of our attention as spectators is with the Oedipal triangle. Quite plainly, the narrative discourse [...] mirrors this sense of disturbed family space."[37]

Stemming from Raymond Bellour's text on *Gigi* (direction/dir. Vincente Minnelli and Charles Walters, 1958),[38] Andrew Horton further assumes that "a classical Hollywood cinema is, in part, a cinema in which Oedipal situations are resolved. Such a 'resolution of Oedipus'on the familial level [...] necessarily leads to narrative resolution and closure on the cinematic level."[39] However, this is exactly what is not at stake in Kusturica's film. And though lovable boy acts as the narrator, "Malik's subjectivity is not the truth. [...] **'**The disintegration of ideology' that defines the state of Yugoslavia's national dialogue (in 1985, added by J. D.) is thus reflected in the emphasis on

---

32 Ibid., p. 70.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., p. 66.

35 ZEČEVIĆ, B. *Čitanje svetla,* p. 158.

36 "Emir Kusturica has presented his story through a narrative that can best be described as a contrast to classical cinema rather than a radical destruction of such a paradigm." HORTON, A. Oedipus Unresolved: Covert and Overt Narrative Discourse in Emir Kusturica's When Father Was Away on Business. In *Cinema Yournal*, p. 74. For more on the differences from the Hollywood style of building up narrative, see ibid., pp. 71–74.

37 Ibid., p. 70.

38 BELLOUR, R. Segmenting/Analyzing. In ROSEN, P. (ed.). *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*. New York : Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 66–92.

39 HORTON, A. Oedipus Unresolved: Covert and Overt Narrative Discourse in Emir Kusturica's When Father Was Away on Business. In *Cinema Yournal*, p. 66.

Malik's emotional truth (subjectivity) and the fragmented development of the narrative discourse within the film."[40]

It is the fragmentation of narrative that gradually becomes characteristic of Kusturica's films, the more so as the collapse of the whole country approaches: it begins to manifest markedly in *Time of the Gypsies*, and culminates in *Underground* (1995). From *Time of the Gypsies*, moreover, Kusturica becomes interested in the model of families in which the father (and sometimes also the mother) is fully absent. In *Time of the Gypsies*, the protagonist's father is an unknown Slovenian soldier (while the mother died long time ago giving birth to the protagonist's younger sister). In *Arizona Dream* (1993), the protagonist is an orphan who is left with only an uncle who still blames himself for his parents' deaths. And in *Underground*, we meet two surrogate father figures, embodied in a pair of former partisan resistance members: Marko lives in a childless union with the actress Natalija, whom he has taken over from his godfather Crni. And Crni, being a bohemian, is more concerned with his pleasures than his son. The son thus grows up to be an extremely naive individual who does not know the "real" world above at all, who mistakes a catfish for a deer and shoots the film crew in blind enthusiasm, believing them to be fascist enemies.

Father characters in Kusturica's films are increasingly portrayed as incomplete, unworthy, deserting their paternal roles. In his late films, fathers even return to adolescence and it is they, not their sons, who experience romantic relationships with fatal, often dangerous women — i. e., foreigners or members of enemy ethnicities: *Život je čudo* [Life is a Miracle] (2004), *Na mlečnom putu* [*On the Milky Road*] (2016).

The basic story — a son growing up in the shadow of his father's traumas — fades away in Kusturica's films over time, and so does the political urgency and interest in the real history of the country. Already in *Crna mačka, beli mačor* [Black Cat, White Cat], Emir Kusturica chooses to place the plot in the fairy-tale-like setting of Vojvodina, and although some references are made to the economic blockade of Serbia, the film avoids political conclusions. Similarly, politics is avoided in *Time of the Gypsies* and *Arizona Dream*, although here it could be the result of a more explicit choice of matriarchal model of the world and family.

The dream of the matriarchate

Both of Kusturica's first two films are stories of loss and vulnerability of the father, but Kusturica's third film, *Time of the Gypsies*, appearing on the eve of the civil war, suddenly turns into a defence of a matriarchal family. Matriarchy thus seems to be Kusturica's primal response to the need to protect humanity from the toxic masculinity. And this applies to his mature oeuvre as well, despite the fact that Axel from *Arizona Dream*, for example, finds himself entrapped exactly in a kind of matriarchal nightmare with tragic consequences (when one of the female characters commits suicide and another loses her mind).

40 Ibid., p. 71.

Yet in 1985, it was still rumoured that the director's third film would be entitled *Otac je kuća koja se ruši* [Father is a House that is Falling down].[41] And then *Time of the Gypsies* actually become his third film, with father replaced by a grandmother with shamanic qualities and two unworthy male characters: mother's brother and eventually mafia boss Ahmed.[42] For Božidar Zečević, this, together with the main character Perhan's strong affection for his sister, tends to reveal the matriarchal order in which Perhan grows up and from which he is torn. In Božidar Zečević's uncritical reading of Johann Jakob Bachoven, this also means Kusturica's supposed desire for an ideal world (of matriarchy) understood according to Bachoven's speculative utopia[43] as one of love and peace, not submission to the constraining authority of a patriarchal ruler, which would lead to a necessary rebellion.[44]

In Božidar Zečevi'ć reading, this also explains the negative figure of the mother's brother in both *When Father Was Away on Business* and *Time of the Gypsies*: it is the mother's brother who, according to Bronislaw Malinowski, embodies the father's authority in a matriarchal society.[45] "The mother's brother, Malik's uncle, is nothing other than the embodiment of power and authority who manages to remove [the father] from The Community."[46] "There is no father at all in the *Time of the Gypsies*, he is a stranger who is hardly remembered anymore [...]" and this notion is matched by the other fathers in the film: the wry Azra's father or even Perhan, who himself leaves his son to take revenge.[47] The shift from the father to the duality of father and uncle and finally just to the uncle indicates Kusturica's gradual departure from the patriarchal model of the family with which the role of the father in Kusturica's films is firmly intertwined.[48] However, the function of the uncle is not directly related to the matriarchal world order. Uncle in *When Father Was Away on Business* or *Time of the Gypsies* is always the cause of the protagonist's unhappiness and the challenger of the ancestors.[49] He is thus not the protector of the matriarchal order but its disruptor and destroyer.

In any case, in *Time of the Gypsies*, Oedipal situation occurs in the relationship of Perhan and Ahmed, not Perhan and his biological father. Like Dino or Malik, Perhan is not rebelling against his father — but he is rebelling against Ahmed, who is not the

41 ZEČEVIĆ, B. *Čitanje svetla,* p. 158.

42 Ibid. The second part of the text entitled *San o carstvu plodnosti* [A Dream of a Kingdom of Fertility]. No indication of original place of publication, dated 1989, pp. 160–172.

43 Johann Jakob Bachofen imagines that it is a woman who, for the sake of caring for children, is more likely to learn the ability to love other human beings and therefore it is her who embodies the principle of love and universality, not limitation and strictness like patriarchy. BACHOFEN, J. J. *Der Mythus von Orient und Okzident*. München : Ch. Becksche Buchhandlung, 1926, p. 4.

44 Božidar Zečević goes so far as to see Perhan's affection for his little sister as a potential reversal of the Oedipus complex: the sister becomes a substitute for the mother and the uncle for the father. ZEČEVIĆ, B. *Čitanje svetla,* p. 168.

45 MALINOWSKI, B. *Magija, nauka i religija* [Magic, Science and Religion] Beograd : Prosveta, 1971, p. 139.

46 ZEČEVIĆ, B. In *Čitanje svetla,* p. 165.

47 Ibid., p. 166.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

part of his own blood. And he is rebelling because "Ahmed (just like his uncle) has disrupted the matriarchal system of kinship [...]."[50]

From his debut to the present day, Emir Kusturica thus appears as a revealer of the tragic tones in patriarchy, dreaming of the completeness of a matriarchal world. Already in his debut, the father figure says: stick to women. But it is not yet a complete reawakening to the fiction of matriarchy. For at the same time, the father says, don't give a damn about the soul. But ignoring "the soul" has tragic consequences in all of Kusturica's films. And indeed, the story of *Time of the Gypsies* is a variation on an ancient tragedy, in which the protagonist leaves the safe circle of his original family and is integrated by a cruel initiation[51] into the clan of human trafficker, Ahmed. The clan functions as a variation on the obscene power of the patriarchy, much like the pimp Šintor in Kusturica's debut. And like Dino, Perhan also rejects this cruel initiation based on the humiliation of a woman — yet unlike Dino, he faces a painful punishment. He is so broken that he finally becomes Ahmed's direct heir. He literally "loses his soul" (as he later writes to his grandmother Hatidža), and when he discovers Ahmed betrayed him, he kills him and finally has to die himself as punishment.

Upon returning Perhan to his original family only in a casket, probably the most tragic part of the story appears: reactions of the male members of the family, Perhan's uncle and his little son which actually give us a clue to how Emir Kusturica really sees contemporary forms of patriarchy in the first triad of his films: as the tragic death of God. For instead of mourning, the little son steals the two coins that the grieving family had ritually placed on Perhan's eyes and runs away. Uncle, who is an inveterate gambler, quickly runs after them, but eventually stops at a chapel with an upside-down Christ: he corrects the crucifix, but only to beg a winnings dice from Jesus. Christ falls backwards, turned inside out.

This reference to Wajda's *Popiół i diament* [Ashes and Diamonds] (1958) appears once again, in *Underground*, where it also signals the death of God, this time in the context of a tragic saga of the country's history, the perpetuum mobile of recurrent civil wars.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can state that Emir Kusturica creates particular authorial visions of the father figure in the changing geopolitical conditions of his country. He offers the possibility to read the weakening of paternal authority or, more directly, the relative absence of the father in the lives of their sons as a reference to the disintegration of the *symbolic order* that had functioned before (the death of Josip Broz Tito and the gradually increasing tensions in the SFR Yugoslavia that culminated in its disintegration and civil war). However, my aim was also to verify in what varieties the relationship between fading father figures and geopolitical changes appear. In

50 Ibid., pp. 160–172.

51 Structurally similar to the one in *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?*: it is also based on the gang–rape of a woman, who by this act is to become a prostitute.

conclusion, I can state that early Kusturica´s films indirectly point to the continuity of qualities and phenomena that are inherited between fathers and sons despite their declared and profoundly analyzed mutual distancing or manifest differences. And this continuity acts as an ambivalent acknowledgement of geopolitical changes that are *not* really perceived as changes at all.

This study is an output of the VEGA 2/0055/24 project Dystopian Narratives in Film.

Literature

BADINTER, Elisabeth. *XY. On Masculine Identity*. Columbia University Press, 1997. 274 p. ISBN 9780231084352.

BACHOFEN, Johann Jakob. *Der Mythus von Orient und Okzident*. München : Ch. Becksche Buchhandlung, 1926.

BELLOUR, Raymond. Segmenting/Analyzing. In ROSEN, Philip (ed.). *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*. New York : Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 66–92.

FALKOWSKA, Janina. The Myth of the Father: Melancholia in the Films of Andrzej Wajda from Poland, Michael Haneke from Austria and Aleksandr Sokurov from Russia. In *Studies in European Cinema*, 2010, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 67–76. ISSN 1741-1548.

GOCIĆ, Goran. *Notes from the Underground: The Cinema of Emir Kusturica*. London — New York : Wallflower Press, 2001. 192 p. ISBN 978-1903364161.

GUANZINI, Isabella. Reality and Paternity in the Cinema of the Dardennes. In *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*, 2016, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 15–31. DOI: 10.25364/05.2:2016.2.2. ISSN 2617-3697.

HORTON, Andrew. Oedipus Unresolved: Covert and Overt Narrative Discourse in Emir Kusturica's When Father Was Away on Business. In *Cinema Journal*, 1988, Vol. 27, No. 4, pp. 64–81. ISSN 0019-7101.

IORDANOVA, Dina. *Emir Kusturica*. London : British Film Institute, 2002. 240 p. ISBN 978–0851708997.

MALINOWSKI, B. *Magija, nauka i religija*. Beograd : Prosveta, 1971.

ZEČEVIĆ, Božidar. *Čitanje svetla*. Beograd : YU film danas – Prosveta – Prometej, 1994. 308 p.

Jana Dudková
Institute of Theatre and Film Research
Art Research Centre of the Slovak Academy of Sciences
Dúbravská cesta 9
841 01 Bratislava
Slovak Republic
E-mail: janadudkova@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3059-3711