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*Giorgio Bertellini*

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Giorgio Bertellini

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**Giorgio Bertellini : Emir Kusturica (Contemporary Film Directors)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Emir Kusturica (Contemporary Film Directors):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A Fine Overview of the Great Yugoslav Director's Film Work, Marred by Its Driveby Slanders of the SerbsBy Andrew BaldwinI am writing this review as someone who has seen Kusturica's main films from Do You Remember Dolly Bell? through Black Cat, White Cat but not with any of his earlier or later works.This is a critical analysis of Kusturica's work as a film director, not a biography. His careers as an actor, musician and his other endeavours are mentioned only as they overlap or influence his work as a director.

Bertellini's discussion of Kusturica's film creations is as complete as anyone could possibly, covering feature films, short films and even obscure documentaries, like the 30-minute *Seven Days in the Life of a Bird*, about a Serb who cannot enter or leave his property without trespassing those of his neighbours. Even his student films are described in detail. (We learn that Kusturica's first student film in 1972, *Part of the Truth*, won first prize at the Amateur Film Festival in Zenica. Kusturica was a success in his career even before it had properly begun!) Much of the background information on the films is quite fascinating. Dinos' famous mantra in Kusturica's first feature film, *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?*: Every day in every way I'm getting better and better, was not original, but came from an eminent 19th century French psychologist, mile Cou. When *Father Was Away on Business*, although produced after *Dolly Bell*, was intended by its script-writer to be the first film in an uncompleted tetralogy about the same characters. So the six-year-old Malik in *When Father Was Away on Business* was intended to be the same boy as the 16-year-old Dino in *Dolly Bell*. When Kusturica made the quite defensible decision to have Dinos' father Mustafa die in *Dolly Bell*, against the wishes of his scenarist, the original conception was abandoned, although it is hard to see why, since *When Father Was Away on Business* is a sequel, not a prequel. Bertellini's knowledge of international cinema is truly impressive, and he notices influences on Kusturica's work that make sense when pointed out, i.e. his debt to the great Russian director Tarkovsky, but I at least had never noticed before. Unlike some film critics he doesn't take a purely literary approach to films and has a fine appreciation for Kusturica's film technique. His discussion of music in Kusturica's films is also impressive, and would be very useful to readers knowledgeable about it; unfortunately much of what he said was over my head. Bertellini writes well, but the style may be too academic for some tastes. He is fond of sprinkling his text with Latin phrases that are a challenge even in this age of Google. I am still not sure precisely what he means by (p.140): Kusturica does not conceal his aesthetic desire to show Maradona as a Kusturician (and even Balkanist) character ante and post litteram. The same is true of his use of words or phrases from modern foreign languages. What does (p.85) *lector in fabula* mean? The typos and errors of omission are many in the book and less defensible in a short book like this than in a coffee table book like *The Rise and Fall of American Growth*. (For example, (p.146): *Andrigrad* will sit at the mouth of the Drina River, the setting of Andri's most famous the novel [should be famous novel], *The Bridge on the Drina*.) Kusturica is a very political director and this creates a problem for how a book intended for cinephiles should deal with the often controversial political views that he expresses. Given he is a film scholar, not a historian, Bertellini probably should have confined himself to referencing where critics had praised or, more frequently, savaged Kusturica for, say, his nostalgic view of Yugoslavia in *Underground*. Instead, without providing any historical background to speak of, Bertellini engages in drive-by slanders of the Serbs: Yugoslavia was designed to serve the interests of Serbs, the Bosnian Civil War was initiated and directed by the Milošević regime in Belgrade; the 1995 massacre at Srebrenica was an act of genocide. In my view, these positions are all wrong; they are certainly contentious and should not have been introduced in such an off-hand way as if they reflected some kind of informed consensus. Bertellini asks (p.81) with reference to Kusturica's film *Underground*: And why, in his selection of archival clips, did he not also include along with those that reveal the pro-German parades in Zagreb and Maribor, those showing the destruction of Vukovar or the triumphal sendoff that Belgrade gave the military tanks leaving for Slovenia and Croatia in the summer of 1991? One might respond that since the breakup of Yugoslavia started with Slovenia and Croatia's unilateral declarations of independence and the initial hostilities were by Slovenian forces against border posts with neighboring Yugoslav republics, this would be a defensible choice. Note that an uninformed reader would assume from reading this that troops sent from Belgrade, the capital both of Serbia and of Yugoslavia, were involved in the Ten Days War for Slovenian independence. In fact, the only Yugoslav Peoples Army (YPA) forces, since this is what we are talking about, not Serbian forces, involved in the conflict were either already stationed in Slovenia or sent from bases in Croatia. The forces sent from Belgrade towards Slovenia never arrived before the conflict ended. Regarding the opening of *Underground* at Cannes, Bertellini asks: why at Cannes was he accompanied and photographed with not only the minister of culture Nada Popović-Perić but also with Milorad Vučić, a majority whip in the Serbian Parliament and, most ominously, the director of the [sic] Radio Television of Serbia [should be Radio-Television Serbia], which for years broadcast nationalist propaganda for the Milošević regime? President Clinton was guilty of a war crime in ordering the launching of three Tomahawk cruise missiles to take out the RTS Tower on April 23, 1999, killing 16 people and seriously injuring another 23. This was the first time in world history that journalists and the people behind them, technicians and make-up artists, were designated military targets. Bertellini's censure of Kusturica for being seen at Cannes with the director of RTS comes off to anyone familiar with the NATO aggression on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia as the justification of an American atrocity. Until *Underground*, Kusturica's Serbo-Croatian films were made in the Peoples Republic of Yugoslavia; while his work on films was organized from Sarajevo for the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, his collaborators included a Slovenian director of photography, Croatian set designer, Bosnian and Serb writers. Bertellini seems to attribute the decline in Kusturica's later work mostly to Kusturica himself, but it is clear from the information he himself provides that the breakup of Yugoslavia complicated Kusturica's task considerably. Collaboration with colleagues living in other republics became more difficult and political disagreements terminated what had been very successful artistic collaborations. Bertellini writes that in addition to a dispute over the authorship of the musical score for *Underground*, Kusturica ended his

collaboration with the very talented Bosnian musician Goran Bregovi because he thought Bregovi believed in Islamisation. Oddly, Bertellini has nothing further to say about this and his only reference for this part of the book is to an interview with Kusturica in Italian

Emir Kusturica is one of Eastern Europe's most celebrated and influential filmmakers. Over the course of a thirty-year career, Kusturica has navigated a series of geopolitical fault lines to produce subversive, playful, often satiric works. On the way he won acclaim and widespread popularity while showing a genius for adjusting his poetic pitch--shifting from romantic realist to controversial satirist to sentimental jester. Leading scholar-critic Giorgio Bertellini divides Kusturica's career into three stages--dissent, disconnection, and dissonance--to reflect both the historic and cultural changes going on around him and the changes his cinema has undergone. He uses Kusturica's Palme d'Or winning *Underground* (1995)--the famously inflammatory take on Yugoslav history after World War II--as the pivot between the tone of romantic, yet pungent critique of the director's early works and later journeys into Balkanist farce marked by slapstick and a self-conscious primitivism. Eschewing the one-sided polemics Kusturica's work often provokes, Bertellini employs balanced discussion and critical analysis to offer a fascinating and up-to-date consideration of a major figure in world cinema.

"Bertellini is admirably succinct and evocative in discussing Kusturica's aesthetic management and no less insightful in discussing critical perspectives on the sociocultural, political thematic underpinnings of his major films." --Daniel Goulding, author of *Liberated Cinema: The Yugoslav Experience*, 19452001