

Black Cat, White Cat (Crna Macka, beli macor), 1998
Directed by Emir Kusturica (Koo-stur—EET-sa)
Film Workshop by Caryn Cline

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Principal actors:

Matko (Bajram Severdzan); Zare (Florijan Ajdini); Ida (Branka Katic); Dadan (Srdan Todorovic); Grga Pitic (Sabri Sulejmani)
Zarije Destinov (Zabit Mehmedovsk)

“[Kusturica’s] sort of humor owes as much to Tex Avery as to Fellini.”
-- Jonathan Romney in The New Statesman

Observations/questions:

In his discussion of the “Balkans’ Healing Irony,” film scholar Andrew Horton describes Gypsies as “. . .the underbelly of Balkan life. . . . They are considered too low even to participate in ethnic feuding: Everyone picks on the Gypsies.” Kusturica, whose own ethnic background is mixed Serbian and Bosnian Muslim, but who defines himself as Yugoslavian, even after the break-up of that country, feels an affinity with Gypsies. In an interview with Howard Feinstein in The New York Times, Kusturica said that “my own situation has led me to a nomadic style of life. I adore their [the Gypsies] alternative life style.”

The history and tendency of non-Gypsy Balkan filmmakers to use Gypsy characters has been subjected to a great deal of scrutiny by film critics and scholars. Balkan directors may be using these socially “low” characters analogously, to explore their self-defined “outsider” status in European culture.

If you’ve seen the film *The Commitments*, you will remember the band manager explaining the Dublin-based bands’ deep sense of connection to Africa–American blues music. To paraphrase: the Irish are the blacks of Europe, Dubliners are the blacks of Ireland, and Dubliners from his neighborhood are the blacks of Dublin. In American cultural and cinematic history, the roles assigned to blacks or Native Americans (comic relief or noble, spiritual/sacrificial character) in films made by white directors may offer some parallels to the uses of Gypsy characters in Balkan cinema.

Does the social and political crisis in the former Yugoslavia ever enter into the film? If so, where? (For example, Dadan is called “a war criminal,” at one point, and elsewhere he is referred to as “a genuine businessman and patriot.”) At least one critic, Dina Iordanova, has described the film as “apolitical.” Would you agree?

Iordanova also suggests that Dadan is coded as Westernized, and that his power and eventual degradation introduce a political element into the film (all within a comic context, of course). Do you find this reading of Dadan credible? What characteristics displayed by Dadan would support such a reading?

Think about the generations in the film: grandfathers, fathers, sons. What conclusions might you draw from their behavior, their interests, their destinies?

Grga obsessively watches the 1942 American film, *Casablanca*, and even quotes the last line in the film. Hopefully, you all know *Casablanca*. What resonance might that film have with the one we are watching?

From the opening scene, where we get brief glimpses of Matko's jerry-rigged gadgets, technologies of all sorts figure prominently in Kusturica's film. What can you say about these technologies and their roles in *Black Cat, White Cat*?

What about the title? We see a black cat and a white cat (always together) in several scenes. One of the characters says that "black cats are dangerous." Which characters might be the human equivalents of these felines?

Kusturica cuts several times to a scene that is separate from the main storyline. In it, a large pig is slowly devouring a car. Besides its obviously comic purpose, why do you think Kusturica chose to include this recurring scene?

The one romantic and sexual scene takes place in a setting that is noticeably different from the rest of the film. Why do you think Kusturica chose to stage this particular scene in this place? What does the director's choice of setting contribute to our understanding of the lovers dilemma? How does the casting of the actors who play Zare and Ida affect how we see their characters?

Bibliography:

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