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A BALKAN ODYSSEY

In *The Eye of Odysseus*, a film that reels from one immense pretension to the next, the vapid apathy of the wandering hero, played by Harvey Keitel, burns through celluloid as yet another Balkan oddity. A man with no name, who speaks each line with all the authority and all the dispassion of an ancient Greek chorus, he must cross the wilderness in search of himself.

There is a point to this odyssey, of course, but no one, most particularly the director, has a clue as to where it could be found, so why should the audience look, or care? It's the Balkan disease—to drift with no purpose—and it is a disease that consumes the film's most lyrical moments. The frozen stillness of Albania and the fields of displaced Greeks staring toward a distant homeland they will never find, the fog shrouding Sarajevo as a small orchestra conducts the mindlessness of war, our hero cruising the Danube on a barge that carries the dismembered remains of a giant statue of Lenin, whose one arm extends in a threatening—now impotent—gesture to the West as thousands of orthodox Romanians kneel and cross themselves.

Moments like these that go on for countless minutes, as the camera gropes for every possible angle, to make the journey matter. God forbid that our hero should speak, because when he does it is as though the sky has opened and the air is filled with a sudden dead silence. He means to find the three lost reels of the Manakis brothers, the first Balkan filmmakers, and he drifts from Tirana to Bitola to Skopje, Sofia, Bucuresti, Constanta, Beograd. He finally confronts, of course, the ruined Sarajevo, but by then we know his odyssey is hollow, that the reels of film that play on the dark wall of the Platonic cave in a Bosnian basement are blank, mere shadows of that other world.

Comrade, we have sold ourselves the rope and hang from its sentence. Lenin was right, and his dismembered arm still points threateningly. The barge with the modern Odysseus drifts through the gates of Scylla and Charybdis, with Charon as ferryman. Nowhere does a film so richly deconstruct itself and show our artifice as it does at midnight, at the dark Balkan border, when the voice of the customs agent intones in rich Serbian, *Who is on this ship?* And Charon replies, *No man . . .*

Our hero misses the point. He searches the Balkan wasteland trying to find one. He leaves a carapace of broken love affairs in his wake, each increasingly absurd. / *cannot love you*, he openly weeps at his first loss. *Not tonight, my dear. I have a date with Lenin's foot.*

Such is the cruel mystery of fate, the hard failure of art. When it can compare beauty only to itself with such feeble arrogance. When the people of Sarajevo deserve far better than anything that ever existed to describe the exquisite nature of loss. Nothing, and certainly no man, shall suffice. In the film's final reel, he speaks in the dark, lost among faces that are just a flicker of light, suffers Penelope to learn how he shall be known by the signs of their first love, from ages before. Madness and sorrow, no, not even these, can approach the rage they must feel.