

# Scenes of Serbia

reviewed by [James M. Wall](#) in the [October 4, 2003](#) issue

With the premier of *The Cordon* at the Montreal World Film Festival in August, Serbian director Goran Markovic completed his trilogy on the fall of Slobodan Milosevic. Earlier films in the trilogy are *Burlesque Tragedy*, which won an award at the 1995 Montreal festival, and *Serbia, Year Zero* (2001). *The Cordon*, named best film of the festival by an international jury, tells a story of the impact of Milosevic's years in power.

I asked Markovic about how he merges television news coverage of the 1996-97 Belgrade street protests with the tightly focused story of an exhausted police unit that randomly beats protesters. "Those street scenes were not from television footage," he told me. "We re-created all of those street scenes, based on what we knew had happened."

The film opens with images that have been shot by a young television cameraman who is running from police. With him is the daughter of the captain of the police unit. The cameraman and the girl are lovers, and they celebrate an escape from the police with a brief interlude of lovemaking under a stairwell.

Unfortunately, the young man forgets to turn off his camera. When he is eventually captured by police, his camera contains incriminating evidence that is viewed by all members of the unit, including the daughter's outraged father. The policemen are exhausted, angry with the protesters and eager for revenge.

In his book *The Fracture Zone*, Simon Winchester writes that "the bewildering variety of unfamiliar names that appear in any writing relating to the Balkans seems dramatically to inhibit any average reader's sympathetic understanding of the story." *The Cordon* overcomes that inhibition with a story and images that transcend political complexities. In one scene, for example, the daughter angrily confronts her father at the foot of the hospital bed where her lover lies in critical condition. The father's repentance does nothing to appease her. Yet *The Cordon* does not demonize the police but sympathizes with their anger and exhaustion. The demons are higher up in the chain of command. Markovic makes the point that when political leaders

operate without moral constraint, police brutality is inevitable.

Burlesque Tragedy employs a comedic tone to depict a doctor's attempt to return mental patients to their families when his hospital can no longer care for them. *Serbia, Year Zero*, begins on October 4, 2000, the day Milosevic is arrested and ousted from power, and tells the story of the chaos left behind by a dictatorial rule. Now isolated in his prison cell in The Hague, Milosevic awaits the resumption of his trial for war crimes and genocide. The case against him is based on atrocities in Kosovo, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The case will also address charges of crimes committed by Milosevic inside the current borders of Yugoslavia. Markovic's trilogy won't be part of the evidence given at the trial, but it could be.

Politics and recent history were also evident in a film from India, *In the Forest . . . Again*, directed by Goutam Ghose. Ghose is paying homage to famous Indian director Satyajit Ray and his film *Days and Nights in the Forest*. Ray envisioned *Days and Nights* as the first of four films examining the theme of complacency among middle- and upper-class Indians. On their journey into the forest, four young men (in 1969) encounter lower-class tribal members and display the snobbery and arrogance of their class. In the words of critic Pauline Kael, they offer a "study of the cultural tragedy of imperialism; the young men are self-parodies-clowns who ape the worst snobberies of the British."

In Ghose's film, the same three men, played by the same actors, are again on a vacation trip with their families. (A fourth man in the original film died, so the script omits his character.) Palamau, the forest in the first film, is now considered too dangerous for tourists, so the families go into the forest of North Bengal on India's northern border. The men have lost none of their youthful complacency. But the daughter of one of the men is grieving the loss of a boyfriend who died in New York's Twin Towers on September 11. When she disappears one night, she is rescued by members of an impoverished tribe, and she discovers that these people endure the poverty with spiritual strength. The insight inspires her, and she begins to emerge from her despair. But then a tribal leader tries to barter her safe return for a ransom that would alleviate the tribe's poverty, and the girl's father lies to her and to her rescuers. The tribal leader is arrested, and the girl falls back into her depression.

Ghose's *In the Forest . . . Again* is a fitting conclusion to Ray's work. It also contains some nuanced observations on the motives of the attackers of September 11-- comments that will not be well received in the U.S., but which will no doubt play well

in those countries that resent U.S. imperialism.

One of the benefits of the film experience at a festival like Montreal is the presence of directors and sometimes a leading performer. The opening night film this year was directed by Louis Belanger, whose *Gaz Bar Blues* evoked an unusual ten-minute standing ovation. At the film's conclusion, Belanger came on the stage and proceeded to invite members of the cast, all Montrealers, to join him.

This Canadian film, the ecumenical jury's pick as best in the festival, is "packed with finely observed details," as one critic noted. In a family-run gas station in a rundown section of a Quebec town, regulars gather every day to drink coffee and exchange insults. The station is also important to employees and regular customers for whom it is a second home.

The owner, who is suffering from Parkinson's disease, is holding on to the station because he wants to turn it over to his three sons. But none of them is eager to work in the station. One makes his break when he sees television coverage of the fall of the Berlin Wall and is inspired to go to Berlin to take photographs. His father is furious and refuses to even look at the photos the son sends home, even though they reveal both the son's compassionate side and the ambiguity of the politics of Berlin in transition. *Gaz Bar Blues* celebrates human communities that form in settings where people trust and rely on one another.

While it is not likely that any of the documentaries exhibited at Montreal will show up on commercial TV, PBS might consider four that would be welcomed by viewers: *Crapshoot: The Gamble with Our Wastes*, a film that examines the impact of human waste on the environment; *Bearing Witness: Jocelyn Morton*, which takes an honest look at the final months of a woman dying of cancer; and two films directed by women, *La Petite Morte (Little Death)* and *My Tango with Porn*, which examine the depressing but lucrative world market for pornography.