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THE FIRST BALKAN GENRE: FILMS ON OUTLAWS

791.221.7(497)

791.224(497)

COBISS.SR-ID 255762444

Abstract

In the Balkans, the “haidouks” were often considered as “national bandits”, defenders of Christians against the Turks. The filmmakers were successfully turning to good account the national character and the spectacular potential of such films, which are actually a subgenre of adventure movies, but also related to rural melodramas. The earliest haidouk films in Yugoslavia was Outlaw Stanko (Hajduk Stanko) (1923, d. Slavko Jovanovic); in Romania Iancu Jianu (1928, d. HoriaIgiroșanu); in Greece The Last Days of Ulysses Androutsos (Ai teleftaiiimeratou Odysseos Androutsou) (1928, d. Dimitrios Kaminakis) and in Bulgaria Most Loyal Guard (Nay-viarnatastrazha) (1929, d. Vasil Poshev). Such films appeared mainly due to the local factors, such as the influence of folklore and literature of historical inspiration. Their importance has been confirmed by their proliferation, especially in the era of sound since the 30’s until the 90’s also in other Balkan countries.

Key words

Haidouk, klepht, folklore, national hero, adventure movie, sword fighting movie, foustanella.

The “haidouks” were the groups or communities of free, armed, belligerent and combative men (seldom accompanied by women), chased away from their lands; they rebelled against medieval servitude, at first spontaneously, but later with more elaborate strategies. They appeared in the Balkans in the 15th century after the great Christian landowners and the Turkish conquerors had seized the lands to the detriment of the small owners. The mountainous and less populated areas in the Balkans allowed the existence of such peasant rebels. Their Western correspondents appeared seldom and earlier: Robin

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Hood in 13th century, and Wilhelm Tell at the beginning of the 14th century. Later on, the rebels similar with the ones in the Balkans, i.e. mainly peasants, emerged also in Italy, Slovakia², China and Indochina (Hobsbawm 1969: 14)³. The etymology of the word is controversial: the Turks used “haydut” referring to Hungarian infantry, while in Hungarian “hajto” formerly meant “shepherd, cowboy”. The origin of the word “hayduk” is probably pre-Turkish and has different versions according to each country. In Hungary, they were part of the frontier paramilitary troops, sometimes supported by the king and even ennobled in 1605, in order to fight against the Turks by their own means, same as the Cossacks in Russia⁴. The haidouks were organized in “cheti”, lead by a “voievod” (“voyvod”, “self proclaimed leader” in the South-Slavic languages), while the second in command was a “bairactar” (from “bayrak”, flag in Turkish), often flag bearer, treasurer and in charge of logistics. The cohesion based on oaths and the morals on a code of conduct (set of rules). At the end of fall, they often retreated back home to their families if they had any.

In the Balkans, the “haidouks” were often “national bandits”, defenders and avengers of Christians against the Turks and their deeds were not considered as cruel, as they illustrated the popular feelings towards heroes such as Robin Hood (who took from the rich and gave to the poor). The folkloric imagination transformed Marko Kraljević from a petty rebellious noble into a great fighter against the Turks, who had miraculous powers, including the powers of his horse “Sarac” who could drink and speak like a man. Promoting the “haidouk” as a typical Balkan hero contributed to the numerous folks songs and poem collections such as the ones of J. G. Herder (1778-1779), Charles Claude Fauriel (1825), Vuk Karadžić (1850) or Vasile Alecsandri (1853). Then followed the poems dedicated to the haidouks such as those of the Greek poets: Rigas Feraios and Panayotis Soutzos, Montenegrin Petar II Petrovic Njegos, Romanian Vasile Alecsandri and Ștefan Octavian Iosif, Bulgarian Christo Botev and Giorgi Rakovski, as well as Rayko Zhinzifov and Grigor Prlichev in Bulgaria and Macedonia. We can add the memories on those of Ion Ghica (1882) in Romania or those of real Bulgarian rebels such

2 Juraj Jánošík (1688-1713) has been a Slovak highwayman whose redeeming deeds at the early 18th century reached to Slovak and Polish folklore. In Czechoslovakia, three films were made under the title Jánošík in 1921 (d. Jaroslav Siakel), 1935 (d. Martin Fric), 1963 (d. Palo Bielik), while in Poland the movie and TV series in 1974 (both directed by Jerzy Passendorfer).

3 A Malaysian rebel, Sandokan, of noble origin (he is the son of the sultan of Moulkarem) is in the film *Sandokan, la tigre di Mompracem* (1963, Italy-France-Spain, d. Umberto Lenzi) after the novel *Le tigri di Mompracem* (1900) by the Italian writer Emilio Salgari (1862-1911). In fact, the film was followed by several screenings of Salgari's novels, including a cartoon.

4 Hobsbawm 1969: 61-62.

as Panaiot Chitov and Vasil Levski, as well as plays, feuilletons and novels in Romania. We should not ignore the role of Romanticist writers who travelled to the Balkans, such as Chateaubriand (1881), Lamartine (1836), leaving the travel notes with reference to the Balkan rebels and bandits. Byron, Shelley and Pushkin wrote several poems on them. Later on, the information on Balkan bandits and revolutionaries inspired writers like Jules Verne⁵ and Karl May⁶ who had never been in the Balkans, but chose exotic landscapes for their adventure novels that include “chetniks” and bandits.

Even having obvious local folklore and cultural local roots, the Balkan films with haidouks were preceded by the films like *Wilhelm Tell* (1910, Germany) and *Robin Hood* (1912, USA, d. Etienne Arnaud and Herbert Blache), the well-known Western relatives of the haidouks. They made even a parody on ancient bandits as early as 1933: *Fra Diavolo*, directed by Hal Roach, starring Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy.

The filmmakers in the Balkans were well-received by the audience, turning to good account the national character and the spectacular potential of the films with “haidouks”. Thus, the earliest films with haidouks were silent as appeared in the 1920s as a subgenre adventure films, but also related to rural melodramas or the so-called “foustanella” films. The first film with haidouks was presented in Serbia in 1923, in Greece in 1926 or 1928, in Romania in 1928, while in Bulgaria in 1929.

The films on haidouks appeared as a subgenre of adventure films especially in Serbia, Romania and Hungary. In Greece, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Albania their adventurous characters were sometimes overwhelmed by the historical one, as in these countries the haidouks contributed decisively to the anti-Ottoman struggle and liberation. Under the Ottoman occupation, their deeds represented at a certain time the only national political manifestations. Moreover, in Greece at the beginning of the 19th century, in Bulgaria and Macedonia at the end of 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century the haidouks became members of the secret liberation committees, therefore vectors of the political history, as the official history of such countries recorded their deeds as the major events. One can say that in the Balkan countries, the folklore turned the haidouks into mythological heroes, while

5 The Danube Pilot (*Le beau Danube/ Le Pilote du Danube*) (1901).

6 From Baghdad to Stambul (*Von Bagdad nach Stambul*), In the Gorges of the Balkans (In der Schluchten des Balkan), Through the Land of Skipetaren (Durch das Land der Skipetaren), The Shield (*Der Schut*) (1892).

history, literature and cinema went on with such a process compensating the lack of political activity during Ottoman rule.

The first films with haidouks in Romania were *Iancu Jianu* (1928), *The Haidouks (Haiducii)* (1929) and *The Song of the Stranger (Ciocoi/Cântecul străinului)* (1931), all directed and produced by Horia Igiroșanu. The films are inspired by the novel *The Haidouk* (1908) by Bucura Dumbravă⁷. The events took place in 1820, when Tudor Vladimirescu and the members of the Filiki Hetairia⁸ were planning the revolution. Iancu Jianu (featured by Dorin Sireteanu) from a tax collector becomes a haidouk and takes the command of the gang, formerly run by Mereanu (Hristache Antoniu). He revenges his mother killed by serdar⁹ Cărc (Aurelian Barbelian) and is betrayed by his former girlfriend, the innkeeper Anca, but saved on two occasions by Sultana. The end is according to folk tradition: 12 haidouks escape from hanging as 12 maids accept to marry them. *Haiducii* (after “folk legends” according to Igiroșanu) includes as a character the revolutionary Tudor Vladimirescu (1780–1821) (featured by Lucian Ștefănescu-Brăila) together with haidouks Jianu (George Ștefănescu) and Mereanu (Hristache Antoniu). The main character is Mereanu who fights against the posses of Corbea. The escapes and revenges are completed here by travesty, secret loves and tortures. In *The Song of the Stranger* the haidouks have only a secondary role: to save a rich girl from a seductive upstart, Alexis the Phanariot. It is interesting that the three films impose, as a male lead, the Albanian actor and opera singer Hristache Antoniu (Kristaq Antoniu, 1907–1979) featuring haidouk Mereanu, respectively Alexis, a womanizer villain, in the last film. The sound version of *The Song of the Stranger* consists of an aria sang by Antoniu (Ripeanu 2004: 36) who later left Romania and continued his career as an opera singer in Albania (Xoxha 2004: 34).

Although in Romania the phenomenon of haidouks ended by the beginning of the 19th century, two silent films refer to outlaws in the 20th century. It is about *Lia* (1927, d. Jean Mihail) and *Snake Island (Insula Șerpilor)* (1934, d.

7 Bucura Dumbravă was the pen name of Hungarian-born Romanian writer Stefania Szekulics (1868-1926). Her first novel *Der Haiduck* was written and printed in German in 1908. It was such a great success that was immediately translated into French and Romanian and at its third edition in 1912, it had a foreword by Queen Elisabeth of Romania (signed with her pseudonym, “Carmen Sylva”).

8 Filiki Eteria or Society of Friends was a secret 19th century organization, whose purpose was to overthrow the Ottoman rule of Greece and establish an independent Greek state.

9 Serdar (Ottoman Turkish: سردار) from Persian “Sardar” was a military rank in the Ottoman Empire and a noble rank in Montenegro and Serbia. Sardars especially served at the borders of Ottoman Empire. They were responsible for security of lands. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serdar> (Ottoman_rank).

Horia Igiroșanu). Both outlaws in the films are inspired by contemporary Terente, a bandit residing in the marshes of the Danube who was shot in 1927. Lia is kidnapped by a bandit in the Danube Delta while rich girl Miky is rescued from a villain in the Danube marshes by outlaw Ivan. The latter is shot by the gendarmes and dies in her arms. It is interesting that Horia Igiroșanu directed *Snake Island* immediately after his three films with haidouks and that the producers changed the title *Snake Island* into *Terente*.

The oldest Bulgarian film with haidouks, *Most Loyal Guard (Nay-viarnatastrazha)* (1929, d. Vasil Poshev) is a free adaptation after the story with the same title by Jordan Iovkov from the volume “Legends from the Balkans” (“Staro-planinskilegendi”) (1927). In a village in Bulgaria at the end of the 18th century, the servants of Hagi Emin abduct Ranka, Kosan’s girlfriend. Stricken with grief Kosan becomes a haidouk. Monk Dragota is also in love with Ranka. He plans Ranka’s liberation. With the help of her brother and of Dzhalma, the neglected wife of the bey, Ranka succeeds to flee. The posse on the trail of the fugitives has to fight with Kossan’s haidouks. The girl hides in a monastery. After a struggle with Kosan, Dragota runs away, but the Turks catch him so he tells where the lovers hide. When Emin Bey draws his sword to kill Kosan, there appears the light in the form of a cross between the two of them. Emin and Dragota go crazy. Kosan and Ranka get married. Although there are lots of theatrical scenes, the film has some qualities, such as thrilling action and a good image due to Franz Wutt. The picturesque shooting places play special roles as well: Boyana, Samokov, Sofia (its neighborhoods Knyazhevo and Dragalevtsi). It is significant that the producers (Paisii Film) mentioned that it was a “historic-adventurous drama” („istoricheskoprikluchenska drama”) (Kardjilov 1987: 117). Such genre they attributed also to the other Bulgarian films with haidouks.

Although it tries to render some episodes from the adventurous life of Vasil Levski *The Slaves’ Revolt (Buntatnarobite)* (1933, d. Vasil Gendov), its producers consider it as a drama (probably mainly because it evoked a national hero) by the biographical volume “Vasil Levski. Jivotat, dela, izvori” (1929) by Dimitar T. Strashimirov (1868–1939), memories of Dimitar Katev-Burgovski, as well as the recollections of inhabitants of Kalofer, Karlovo and Sopot. Schoolmistress Hristina, Levski’s lover is closely watched by the Turks. Finally, they arrest her together with priest Nikola while they torture Levski’s mother and then they throw her in the fountain of the house. Levski in disguise follows the posse that looks for him. After surpassing several difficulties, Levski liberates Hristina. The blinded priest prays, while

the bell starts to toll by itself. The miracle strengthens everybody's hope for liberation.

The producers considered *The Heap (Gramada)* (1935, d. Aleksandar Vazov), by the poem with the same title, written by Ivan Vazov, as "melodrama". At the second half of the 19th century, in a Bulgarian village, the young and poor Kamen is in love with Tsena, the daughter of chorbadzhi Tseko. Tseko sends his girl to the harem of Halit Aga. Kamen and Tsena flee, but the father and Halit Aga pursue them. Halit Aga wounds Kamen and takes the girl again. The villagers are shocked with Tseko's behavior, curse him and build a heap. Against all attempts of Tseko and Halit Aga, the heap is growing day by day. Kamen gets well and gathers a gang of haidouks. They attack Halit Aga and free Tsena. Kamen and Tsena return to the village a little while before the arrival of the Russian troops. Tseko gets crazy, climbs the heap where the lightning strikes him. The tempest is over, Kamen and Tsena plough. Although the film is naïve and schematic, it was a great success.

Strahil Voivode (StrahilVoyvoda) (1938, Bulgaria-Germany) is a film in which, a Serbian director, Iosip Novak, and a Bulgarian writer, Orlin Vasilev (1904-1977), adapted the newly appeared novel of the latter, *Mother Does Not Feed Outlaws* ("Haidutimaika ne hrani") (1937). The action takes place at the end of the 18th or the beginning of 19th century. Mehmed Bey's men abduct Ivana. The haidouk leader Strahil and his second in command Goran liberate her and take as a hostage Mehmed's son. Ivana and Strahil fall in love in the mountains. Mehmed announces that he will pardon Strahil if he liberates his son. Strahil and Ivana return and get married. A rumor about Strahil having betrayed his comrades shows up. The Turks take advantage of the confusion of the haidouks and rob the village. The villagers rise in rebellion. A Turk shoots Ivana. Dying in her husband's arms she implores him to become a haidouk again. It is interesting that after 20 years, director Petar B. Vasilev made a remake of this movie under the title *The Oath of the Haidouks (Haydushka kletva)*. There are some differences in the story.

The Greek films with klephts appeared early. *Ali Pasha* (1926) is a lost film, shot in Thessalonica. The title of the film indicates that it was about Ali Tepeleni, the rebel pasha of Ioannina whom klephts joined in a certain moment. *The Last Days of Ulysses Androutsos (Ai teleftaiaimeratou Odysseos Androutsou)*(1928, d. DimitriosKaminakis) is inspired by the struggle of the hero with the same name, who, on the 8th of May 1821, heroically struggled, with his 120 men against the army of 8,000 soldiers of Omer Vrioni Pasha at

Gravia inn, in Eastern Greece. The film shows in the beginning his and Karaiskakis hideaway in a cave near Tithorea (Velitsa) on Parnassos Mountain. After the fight, he agreed for a truce with Omer Pasha in order to gain more time to regroup. Gouras, one of his former comrades, plots against him therefore Androutsous will be considered a traitor. The same Gouras is appointed to execute him. This film casts amateurs for all the roles. (Koliodimos 1999: 520). The same year the same producers (Hiro) made another film dedicated to the independence war: *25th of March 1821 (To labarotou 21)*(d. Kostas Leloudas) (Mitropoulos 1968: 30, 129). It recreates two episodes of the beginning of the Greek revolution in 1821: bishop Germanos declaring the start of the fight for independence on the 24th of March 1821 and Karaiskakis fights that followed.

Karadjordje (Život i delo Vožda Karadjordja) (1911, d. Ilija Stanojević Čiča), the first Serbian fiction film, is a historical one that evokes the uprising in 1804, which led to the liberation of Serbia in 1812 and its acknowledgement as an autonomous principedom. The uprising was under the haidouk leader Georgi Petrović Karadjordje, who later founded the Karadjordjević dynasty. For Serbian people, the film is not only the first fiction film, but as Nevena Daković explains, it becomes a national symbol:

For a long time it was the mythical, lost movie, first feature fiction film of former Yugoslavia and later -according to new history -of Serbia. For more than two decades historians were looking for it in the world film archives. However, it was found only in 2003, conveniently to be shown for the major national celebration of the 200 anniversary of the Serbian rebellion against the Turks, of the same event depicted in the film. The coincidence could be understood either as the orchestrated or miraculous but all the same very good "omen" interpreted as the sign of the continuity and stabilization of chronically shaken Serbian government. (Autelitano, Re 2006: 486).

Even before the film was found, it had a certain mythical aura due to its script:

The scenario is based upon the stage play of Milos Cvetic simply called *Karadjordje* and inspired, -i.e. it uses some motifs of- by the epic poem *Početak bune protiv Dahija/The Beginning of the Rebellion Against Dahias* and by *Karadjordje's* biography. The poem was allegedly written by the blind folk poet/guslar Filip Visnjic. His blindness was the sign of

his mythical status of the national poet-prophet's figure. Like Homer or Tiresias, he possessed magical insight in nation's spirit and soul and expressed their utmost thoughts in verses.

Nevena Daković also analyzes the reception of the film, both during communist Yugoslavia and nowadays:

In classical film histories, the paragraph about Karadjordje contains the sentence that Karadjordje is followed by another epic spectacle Vladislav Hunjadi and Urlich Celjski about Croatian historical figures. (Autelitano, Re 2006: 487).

and

At the moment Karadjordje is presented like Birth of a Nation project without too much acknowledgement and recognition of its cinematic values. The overall importance provides good alibi for the neglecting of the cinematic or textual analysis. It has become part of the collective romantic national consciousness formation independent of its media existence as it brings to light the eternal values susceptible to political functionalization. (Autelitano, Re 2006: 489).

A lost film *Outlaw Stanko (Hajduk Stanko)* (1923, d. Slavko Jovanovic) after the homonymous novel by Janko Veselinović was indeed a film with haidouks (Volk 1996: 264, 280, 652-653). It seems that in 1925 in USA, Petar Zebić together with a group of compatriots shot *Kraljević Marko* (Kosanović, Tucaković 1998: 85).

A project of director Kosta Novaković *Proslava 550 godisnjice Kosovske bitke*, dates back from 1939. He intended to reconstruct the episodes of Serbia's history from 1389 up to 1918. They shot in Topčider Park with the help of actors of the National Theatre two parts: *Kosovska bitka* and *Robovanje pod Turcima*. The second episode, from which a fragment of 15 minutes is preserved, shows haidouks liberating a group of slaves. The film has not been finished and edited yet. (Kosanović 2000: 161-162).

We can conclude that, similar to melodrama, such films represent at the same time a genre, as well as an incipient stage of cinema, reflecting its humble origins of folk entertainment. In this respect, they require charity as attitude and polarization, even conventionalism of characters as a composition principle. On the other hand, the Balkan haidouk films can be considered sword-fight-

ing movies as the ones produced in the West where knights, musketeers and pirates have been replaced by valiant rebels.

The importance of such films is confirmed by their proliferation, especially in the era of sound from the 30's to 90's, also in other Balkan countries (Albania, Macedonia, Turkey), when more than 35 films were made. Very recently in Bulgaria, such films re-emerged: *Levski* (2015, d. Maxim Genchev) and *Vo-evoda* (2017, d. Zornitsa Sophia).

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