

Fragmentary time and personal crisis in Ivana Mladenovic's *Ivana the Terrible*

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Abstract: This article explores Ivana Mladenovic's 2019 film *Ivana the Terrible*, focusing on its engagement with historical and personal trauma along the banks of the Danube on the Romanian-Serbian border. The film weaves together Mladenovic's personal experience with broader socio-political dynamics, examining the collapse of Yugoslavia, the impact of shifting borders, and the psychological residue of these transformations. Central to the film is Ivana's personal crisis, intertwined with the unresolved communist past of the region. A remnant of this past, the Kladovo Festival is a symbol of past cross-border camaraderie and contemporary economic desperation on the Serbian side, and for Ivana it becomes the point in which timeframes converge to create a background for her personal crisis that is complicated by historical trauma. The article analyzes how the film blurs the lines between fiction and reality, past and present, highlighting the protagonist's internal struggle as a metaphor for intergenerational trauma. Mladenovic's non-linear narrative and fragmented storytelling mirror the effects of trauma, presenting Ivana's personal breakdown as symptomatic of larger historical forces. By examining the relationship between personal and collective histories, the study underscores how unresolved traumas can perpetuate a sense of dislocation and identity crisis, destabilizing one's ability to navigate the present.

Keywords: *postcommunism; historical trauma; Ivana Mladenovic; identity crisis; dislocation; Kladovo festival.*



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Introduction

The Danube, dubbed the most international of Europe's rivers, currently touches the territories of ten countries. This geographical region has seen its share of historical turmoil, with borders and power relationships continually reconfigured. These reconfigurations have brought changes to the lives of those living on the banks of the Danube, their cultural identities forced to evolve in accordance with changing political dynamics. In her 2019 film *Ivana the Terrible*, Ivana Mladenovic tells a story that addresses the complicated Romanian-Serbian history on the Lower Danube in order to reveal how shifts in economic power during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, along with shifts in political circumstances, have given rise to crises of identity. At the core of her project lies a desire to reveal the intricate dynamics of experiencing a personal crisis against the backdrop of the Kladovo festival, an event that united the Yugoslav and Romanian sides of the Danube during the Cold War, and that still brings the two sides of the river together, though now under changed political and economic circumstances. Ivana is faced with having to process both her country's diminished economic and political situation while trying to grapple with her own personal issues. The dreams she may have had for her own future and for the future of her birth country have been shattered by the passage of time. The overlap between the processing of historical trauma and the attempt to process a personal crisis results in a fragmented, disjointed, non-narrative thread that collapses notions of temporal linearity. This essay looks at the effects of the resurgence of the past, in particular the communist past and Yugoslav-Romanian relationships, and the way their negative impact on Ivana's psyche deepens her inability to deal with her own personal crisis.

In an interview published in a Romanian journal, Mladenovic describes the film as "based on real events from my life and the life of other girls in my hometown" ("An Interview" n. pg.). This statement highlights Mladenovic's focus on fluidity: the film blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality and between self and other. Based on an attempt to reconstruct and relive a personal crisis from the summer of 2017, the film's screenplay (written by Mladenovic and Adrian Schiop) invited friends and family to relive, with Ivana and for her benefit, the events and emotions that moved them during that summer. The central narrative of the film follows Ivana's return from Romania, where she has garnered some recognition as an actress, to Serbia, where the locals honor her as a rising star; they think her far more successful than she perceives herself to be. She financially supports her family and helps fund the construction of a house they plan to turn into a bed and breakfast, an unfinished project that has swallowed most of her earnings and has become a financial albatross around her neck. Meanwhile, she becomes romantically involved with a much younger man, first in secret and later openly, sparking gossip throughout the town. Approached by the organizers of the Kladovo Festival, Ivana invites her ex-boyfriend and his new partner to perform at it. She uses this opportunity to try to figure out what went wrong in their relationship, which seems to have fallen apart for no particular reason. The tables have turned on the two sides of the river: the Kladovo festival once symbolized opportunity for the Romanian people during the totalitarian regime, providing access to otherwise unattainable goods; in 2017 the festival is now an

event intended to revitalize Kladovo's stagnant economy after the Homeland Wars and Yugoslavia's disintegration. Revisiting her childhood home and attempting to rekindle the festival's former glory do little to resolve Ivana's personal struggles as she is confronted with the struggles that her hometown faces in this new historical reconfiguration. It is in this context that she begins to grasp how deeply historical events can leave their mark on people, realizing she might be one of those profoundly affected by the scars of historical trauma, much like her father before her.

Perhaps because the film focuses on her personal experience and features her as the main protagonist, or perhaps because there are moments in which the (quasi)fictional Ivana seems to be demanding and impossible for her family and friends, many of the reviews of the film characterized it as self-centered, others as "cute, self-indulgent, harmless" (Gorzo n. pg.). In *Romania Literara*, Angelo Mitchievici warmly recommends the film as a fun vacation romp, but as nothing that needs to be taken seriously: "[i]n other words, a movie along the lines 'how I spent my summer holiday' without any other higher stakes, which offers vignettes of personal life but nothing complicated, nothing truly dramatic, nothing that is too difficult to be said or seen" (n. pg.). Mladenovic's previous film, *The Soldiers* is based on a similar concept, but the story, also (quasi)fictionalized, belongs to Adrian Schiop, and received a mostly positive review in *Variety*.

Serbian and Romanian shared communist pasts

Both films feature a loose narrative *sans* narrative arc; various moments progress together and tell a story without organizing the story. It is my contention that the story is not the point of this film, but rather the feelings expressed and the process of working through these feelings. *Ivana the Terrible* encourages audiences to reflect on how traumatic experiences are processed, though the focus is not on whether this process succeeds or fails. Instead, the film emphasizes the emotional struggle and sets this struggle against the backdrop of broader historical or social contexts. It does this, for example, by playing with time and location; locations are characters that seem to interact and speak with the human protagonists, even to the point of playing a discernible formative role in their lives. Some of the locations are also symbolic. In *Ivana the Terrible*, the location of the opening scene is a moving train. The first shot following the opening credits transports the audience suddenly, abruptly to a train car, where strangers are in the middle of a conversation. By thus beginning *in medias res*, on a train full of travelers from different points of origin, the film highlights the jarring everyday predicament of relating to others without knowing their histories, without understanding what came before and where the other person had started their journey. And it points to the futility of trying to understand a personal crisis without looking at the broader context, without digging back into the possible origins of this crisis, and discerning the various emotional sources that are its tributaries.

This opening scene shows the flow of people from Romania to Serbia, various lives and stories traveling together in one place, at times showing each other kindness, at times at odds with each other. And even though one can leave one's seat for a while, as Ivana

does, one is still trapped in the same predicament, stuck on the same train, with the same people. Getting off the train may not produce much of a change in one's predicament either. Ivana leaves the train at the last train station in Romania, where meets her parents. Now she seems to be boarding another train, a train that transports her back in time. Her world becomes narrower as she is picked up in a Yugo, the car of her childhood, by her parents who treat her like a child, and when the car crosses the Danube into Serbia, Ivana regresses into a petulant child.

Ivana's passport, which the audience can see when she presents it at the border, is filled with overlapping stamps that show her movements back and forth between the two countries. The close-up of the passport reveals various experiences, various timeframes, symbolized by the overlapping stamps on the filled passport; it speaks to Ivana's in-betweenness and the continual need to flow back and forth between different identities. Her own fluidity as a born Serbian woman who lives and works in Romania, who has built a life and a career here, could be in itself a reason for her crisis, as she cannot identify only as Serbian, but also cannot identify as a Romanian. The close-up of the passport is a close-up of a personal identity crisis, but also an invitation for us, the audience, to observe how overlapping periods of time meld together in a small space, which we see again a short time later when she visits the family home, where 'stamps' of previous conversations mark everyday interactions, or when the river comes into view, where thousands of years of history create a backdrop that dwarfs the personal crisis. The personal crisis is fueled by the jarring dissonance of her attempt to inhabit past and present at the same time. But there is no going back because, just as the passport's stamps cannot be erased, neither can her experiences disappear. Only the extinguishing of one's life can erase the imprint of traumatic events upon a person. The posters with black margins displaying information about the recently departed in public places (0:14:54) evoke the image of the stamps on the passport. These posters are the only visible remnant of the passage of the departed through life, just as the stamps are the visible mark of the trips Ivana has taken between the two countries. And yet both the trips and the lives of these people have left marks on their surroundings and community that are much more indelible than the visible stamp or a mourning poster. Even when the imprints of the past are not as obvious as a stamp in one's passport, or as stark as a poster about a dead loved one, they are still present and resurface in subtler, ghostly, yet equally intrusive ways, potentially as psychological distress.

The shared communist past of the countries reemerges without warning, as the film cuts to scenes from an old communist propaganda film (0:13:05-0:14:15). When the film highlights the Iron Gates bridge, the quality of both the film stock and the music tells viewers who have experienced the seventies and eighties in the two countries that they are traveling back in time. The visual and auditory markers are unmistakable. As the frame widens, an official who, though speaking in 2017, looks like he has stepped out of the historical film, talks about the Romanian-Serbian friendship that was confirmed in 1972 when the 'Friendship Bridge' was built to connect the two countries. As Nicolae Ceausescu, Tito and other communist officials meet and shake hands on the television screen behind him, the official continues: "This is the film that inspired us to re-create a new iteration of the festival, in the context of Kladovo's current deplorable industrial and

economic situation. Romania was in a deplorable situation back then, and festivals like this and other collaborations reinvigorated the area across the Danube from Kladovo. It is now Romania's turn, as Serbia's historical friend, to contribute to the reinvigoration of Kladovo" (0:15:45). The jarring image of the present-day official who uses the language of communism and even wears clothing similar to clothing worn in the film, along with the antiquated TV and the resurgence of old communist tropes of friendship between the countries, is visibly disturbing for Ivana, who struggles to figure out what her role might be in this event that seems to want to turn back the clock.

And, as in its first iteration, the program of the festival in 2017 will consist of children's choirs, folk dances, poems, and other forms of pomp and circumstance that transport Ivana back to her childhood: "These grannies were singing when I was a kid." However, the officials are not interested in her protests, nor in the quality of the program; what they care about is the length of the festival, for the longer the festival the bigger the windfall for local businesses: "We have a three-day program to fill up" (0:31:04). Wanting to extricate herself from this past, she proposes avant-garde Romanian music, while trying to repel the handsy representative of the local Wallachian Party (Romanian ethnic minority in Serbia) who had promised accommodation and help when she moved to Romania 15 years earlier. He had not kept his promise, and she had begun life in Bucharest in an economically precarious position. The shock of being homeless in a foreign country, while her own country was breaking apart due to war that broke out after the fall of communism, has left deep wounds on Ivana.

In her efforts to break free from the compulsive repetition of the past, she invites two avant-garde musicians to play at the festival: her ex-boyfriend Andrei Dinescu and his current girlfriend, Anca Pop, a musician who achieved acclaim in both Romania and Japan before a tragic accident ended her life in the Danube shortly after finishing *Ivana the Terrible*. The negotiations for the payment of the artist fee look like negotiations between the past and the present: old timers who look like the people from the propaganda film, stuck in a rigid communist past, negotiate with the ultra-modern artists. There does not seem to be a common ground for this discussion; the result of this incongruous meeting can only be a disaster, as the film shows. The ideology that supported Romanian-Serbian encounters during previous versions of the festival no longer possesses a unifying power. The Serbian side, stuck in the past, has no bridge to cross to meet the Romanian side (which is not necessarily a bad thing, for in this case the Romanians at the table are deeply flawed and turn out to be untrustworthy).

As the 13th edition of the Kladovo Festival officially opens, the very brief speech by the mayor is a welcome break from the communist tradition, where the usual "meat" of these speeches would have consisted of thanks to the great communist leaders and their guidance. Instead, the short speech concludes with "God bless" (1:05:05). The folk dances and the traditional singers recycle the same acts that have regaled the locals for years, but the new and modern Romanian artists who were recruited to usher the festival into the 21st century prove to be a disappointment: Anca Pop has disappeared, and Dinescu's lewd and strange performance flops. After the festival has officially closed, in a deserted landscape filled with garbage and drunk people, Anca Pop emerges onto the stage drunk and half-naked and stumbles ineptly through a song, to the horror and shame

of some of the organizers. Ivana's friends have failed, and the present has failed to meet, much less surpass, the standards of a past that the organizers were trying to resurrect.

The festival is almost over. The only thing that remains is the finale at which somebody needs to be honored, according to the pattern of communist festivals. In this case, Ivana Mladenovic herself is to receive the key to the city from the mayor. Despite the fact that her guests have ruined the festival, in true communist fashion all failings are swept under the rug and the mayor rhapsodizes about the hydroelectric power plant, which is "like a heart that we share" (1:19:54), and about the pride of Kladovo in their most cherished daughter, who is praised as a "good girl" by her primary school teacher in a speech, and who is sexually assaulted on stage by the Wallachian Party's leader who noticeably fondles her behind as he lifts her up in the spirit of lifting up heroes (1:21:09). Nevertheless, the gathering on the bridge does break with the usual artificial communist discourse during the concluding words of two poets present at the ceremony: Mircea Dinescu and Adam Puslovic, Nichita Stanescu's translator from Romanian into Serbian. It is Dinescu who mentions that before the meeting of Ceausescu and Tito on the bridge, and long after, Romanians on the bridge were shot by their co-nationals, as they were trying to escape communist Romania and find a better life abroad. The bridge of 'friendship' is also a 'common cemetery'. During those times, Yugoslavia/Serbia beckoned to Romanians as a gateway to Europe. After 2007, when Romania became part of the European Union, the roles switched and Serbians came to see Romania as a gateway to Europe and an escape from the economic ravages of war.

The festival tries to gloss over these painful and traumatic events; Ivana, too, favors a similar strategy of repression as a coping mechanism in her personal life. But the past keeps coming back in waves, as various moments of the communist past, re-imagined from the perspective of the present, relentlessly find their way into Ivana's life. Her affect when confronted with these moments is either flat or betrays a concealed anger that at times manifests at the level of the dialogue. These moments do not fill her with the sweet succor of nostalgia. To the contrary, these moments throw her deeper into a "Groundhog Day" that compromises her ability to deal with her own personal crisis. It is not clear if this personal crisis stems from historical trauma, from traumatic personal events, or from some other source. It is clear, though, that with every new blow she receives during the festival's various stages, Ivana's suffering grows more acute and she becomes desperate to escape the merry-go-round of destructive repetitive patterns, whether in the form of patterns of communist festival organization, or patterns of relationships with authority, with family members, or with her former lover.

Is Ivana's disease imaginary, as the doctors and her family and friends keep telling her? Let me ask this another way: is anxiety and its effects on the body imaginary? Are the effects of trauma imaginary? This trauma can be the trauma of violent histories, both private and public, that one has to come to terms with; or it can be some other destabilizing force that haunts both body and mind, such as the one her father admits to suffering in his youth. Historical trauma is a collective traumatic experience of a group of people over time and across generations (Mohatt et al), and though this term was originally used to name the results of the Shoah experience in Jewish communities, it has been expanded over the past decade to include the experience of communities or cultural

groups that share a history of victimization or exposure to trauma (Mohatt et al; Wexler et al; Karenian et al; Daud et al). It is unclear what trauma affects Ivana's present, and perhaps this is the point: the inhabitants of a borderland territory, having hundreds of years of traumatic and violent history behind them, can suffer from intergenerational or historical trauma without the ability to pinpoint a starting point for the flood of pain, as they may be separated by generations from the point of origin of a trauma that continues to reverberate in their present crisis. Invalidating that trauma or reducing it to current triggers disavows the depth of the effects it has on the individual.

Ivana's perceived bodily experience is one of suffering. Interestingly, her attempts to find out what is wrong in her body is criticized as navel-gazing by her family, as well as by film critics who have decried Ivana's public attempt to understand her breakdown as self-indulgent. And yet, the film shows how, through straddling different spaces and straddling different times, Ivana attempts to piece together what ails her. She shows herself as simultaneously standing on the brink of both professional success and professional failure, admired by the people in Kladovo while privately feeling that she has achieved much too little for her age; she shows herself struggling to truly pay attention to the world around her and to think deeply about the past in a post-modernity that is teeming with superficiality, engrossed in the vacuous present moment; she presents herself as fundamentally out of place, not at home in either country, in either culture, yet existing in both, and simultaneously at different stages in her life (a 30-some-year-old and a child in her family's home). Throughout the film she stumbles from crisis to crisis, groping in the dark to find her place in history, while historical events of great importance serve as a counterpoint to her rudderless life. Yet her history does not anchor her, does not provide a stable place from which she can find a direction for her life, because the past, as the audience learns during the various stages of the festival's organization, is tainted by lies.

Beneath her struggle with self-doubt and dislocation is her attempt to deal with her mysterious embodied trauma. And Ivana the filmmaker translates this attempt quite appropriately into a choppy and incongruous narrative, in which close-ups of objects point to gaps in her ability to figure out what role the past may play in figuring out the present. This visual grammar serves to blur boundaries between the present and the past, between the real and the imagined, and in doing so it enacts the dynamics of trauma, with its intrusion of the past upon the present and its experience of danger where there is no objective present threat. But one should also not forget that the very thing that Ivana Mladenovic has been criticized for (writing about herself and featuring herself) is itself motivated by the struggle with trauma. Theorists of trauma from Phillip Bromberg (see *Standing in the Spaces*, 1998) to Donnel Stern (see *Unformulated Experience*, 2003) have called attention to how trauma inevitably engenders dissociation, not only from the traumatic event, but as a feature of a lived experience that is fragmented and broken and discontinuous, where the suffering person is increasingly disconnected from aspects of their own life. It is against the backdrop of this pervasive dissociation endemic to trauma that one can appreciate the significance of the director's choice to return to the time of her personal crisis, to bring forward the people involved, and to revisit the difficult

moments. In her effort to reconnect with her past by literally reenacting it, she dramatizes one of the potential remedies for trauma.

Conclusion

The border between Romania and Serbia, a space that engenders hybrid identities, creates the perfect backdrop for Ivana Mladenovic to investigate the relationship between personal crisis and historical time. In addition to potential personal crises that arise from the fluidity of cultural identity in a liminal space, this choice of setting contributes to Mladenovic's ability to portray the palimpsestic quality of time. This is because cultural exchanges at the border can only be understood with reference to previous moments in time. The film highlights how historical events often resurface unexpectedly, overlap with the present, and coexist with other moments in time, triggering emotional responses that leave characters stuck between the past and the present, unable to lead fulfilling or healthy lives. Considered from the perspective created by Mladenovic's film, people on the Serbian side of the river are frozen in a past that prevents them from truly moving forward, while Romanians seem to have completely lost their compass in their attempt to move forward. Just as Ivana is mired in her malaise, her countrymen are also immobilized by illness. Their illness is the inability to understand that some features of the past belong in the past: that the empty wooden speeches, the empty promises of friendship, and the antiquated folk festivals should be left in the past. The effect of this ghostly past that constantly resurfaces to overlap with the present, which feels like a double-exposed film, can create blurriness, confusion, and pain in one's personal life. In Mladenovic's film, where home is a space of in-betweenness, it fails to provide a solid foundation from which personal healing can begin. Far from securing the much-needed homely feeling, home is the space where the negative effect of the constant resurgence of the past deepens a personal crisis that affects both mind and body.

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