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8

THE BARBARISM OF THE SIMILAR:
NEIGHBORS, GUESTS, BARBARIANS

The commandment, "Love thy neighbor as thyself" is the strongest defense against human aggressiveness [...] The commandment is impossible to fulfill.

—Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (90)

Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself. A symptom that precisely turns "we" into a problem, perhaps makes it impossible. The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities.

—Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (1)

Even though the meanings of things are only those that human actions, transactions and motivations invest them with, in order to study their historical circulation, we need to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. By following the trajectories of things, we can also study the human relations and transactions that enliven them and give them meanings.

—Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things* (5)

In its various guises, the barbarian always denotes the absolute other. It is a category of otherness supposedly grounded in irreconcilable difference and incomprehensibility. Positing difference is a necessary condition for the construction of the other as barbarian. However, this positing can have diverse and even opposing motivations. To put it differently, in the barbarization of others, radical difference is always the final construction, but not necessarily the starting point. The process of barbarization can be motivated by the other's threatening difference, which the self is unable to domesticate and therefore degrades to the realm of the "barbaric." However, this process can also be set in motion on the basis of *similarity* of the other to the self, which can be just as disconcerting as

radical difference. Thus, the barbarian can also be identified in the face of a neighbor—a neighbor with whom we might share a past and have a lot in common in the present, but precisely because of that commonality, we wish to solidify the borders between us in the most steadfast way possible.

In this chapter, I discuss the problem of the barbarization of the neighbor in the context of Balkan nationalism. In particular, I explore the seeming paradox that the othering and even barbarization of Balkan nations by their Balkan neighbors is not motivated by radical difference, but rather by similarity—a phenomenon Sigmund Freud calls “the narcissism of minor differences.”¹ This similarity is perceived as threatening to the superior identity of the national self, which is constructed on the basis of difference from others. In this context, I probe the relation between the figures of the neighbor, the guest, and the barbarian.

In Judaism and Christianity, the commandment in Leviticus 19:18 to “love your neighbor as yourself,” which Freud also addresses in the first epigraph of this chapter, has been an object of disagreement and skepticism among secular and religious readers. In their study *The Neighbor*, Kenneth Reinhard, Eric Santner, and Slavoj Žižek argue that this commandment seems “deeply enigmatic,” since it involves “interpretive and practical aporias in all its individual terms” (5). This injunction, they argue, raises many questions. What kinds of acts does the imperative to love our neighbor involve? (6). Hospitality would be one of them. Welcoming the neighbor as a guest into our space is an instance whereby we come face to face with this other and are called to determine the nature of our bond with him or her. But on what conditions do acts of hospitality take place?

Moreover, since the commandment’s reflexivity relates the love of one’s neighbor with the love for oneself, it raises questions about subjectivity and the “nature of self-love” (6). Neighbor-love suggests a bond between self and other. But in this bond, we could ask, “is the neighbor understood as an extension of the category of the self, the familial, and the friend, that is, as someone like me whom I am obligated to give preferential treatment to; or does it imply the inclusion of the other into my circle of responsibility, extending to the stranger, even the enemy?” (6-7). And does this injunction invite us “to expand the range of our identifications” in order to include others like us, or to come closer to “an alterity that remains radically inassimilable,” like that of the barbarian? (7). In other words, is it a call for proximity to the self or to the other? In my view, the above questions do not necessarily reflect either/or choices. In the Balkans, as I argue in this chapter, the neighbor can be both like the self and a radical other. To be more precise, the neighbor is often (constructed as) a barbarian, because the neighbor resembles the self. This paradox, as well as the dynamics between the roles of neighbor, barbarian, and guest will be unraveled in the course of this chapter.

¹ Freud coined this phrase in his essay “The Taboo of Virginity” (1918) and also used it in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) to refer to ethnic conflict. More on this later.

The relation between these figures is examined through a focus on the migration of cultural objects in the Balkans and the fight for their “ownership.” The disruption of notions of self and home, when what is supposedly “ours” escapes the national boundaries and turns out to carry traces of foreignness, is central to my theoretical ventures in this chapter. If the neighbor is constructed as a barbarian so that the national self can sustain its superior identity, what happens when this “barbarian” is shown to share the same cultural products, only in slightly different versions? What happens when the self is forced to recognize a (minimally altered) image of itself in its barbarian others?

In this chapter, I address these questions by following the migratory journey of a popular song in the Balkans as it unravels in the documentary film *Whose is this Song?* [*Chia e тази pesen?* 2003] by Bulgarian filmmaker Adela Peeva.² The film’s journey across Balkan nations becomes an occasion for exploring the function of geographical and ideological boundaries in the Balkans, as well as the violence and hostility that migratory objects can give rise to, when they trespass foreign territories and unsettle national narratives.³ The film underscores the thin line that separates hospitality from hostility, when a foreign object (the song) and its human carrier (here, the filmmaker) cross Balkan borders and turn up at the threshold of each nation.

The object of controversy in the film is a haunting song, the ownership of which is claimed by every Balkan country. In each country she visits, the director seeks out and visits people that can provide her with information about the song. Most of the people she meets stubbornly claim the song as their own and devise elaborate stories to prove that the song’s origins are indissolubly linked with their nation. The filmmaker’s encounter with her interviewees becomes an occasion for fierce nationalism, pronounced feelings of superiority, and negative stereotyping of the neighboring nations to surface. The documentary demonstrates the absurdity of any attempt to prove cultural purity and ownership. In so doing, it foregrounds the paradox of people who seem to have much in common, and yet would do anything to defend the authenticity and uniqueness of their culture, history, and heritage.

The song in question is a migratory object. Approaching the song as “migratory” presupposes the acknowledgement of this object as foreign, migrating into “our” space.

² The documentary film, released in 2003, has received a lot of critical acclaim. Prizes it won include a nomination by the European Film Academy for Best Documentary Film 2003, Special Jury Prize at the Golden Rython Festival 2003, the FIPRESCI Award and the Silver Conch Prize at the Mumbai International Film Festival 2004, the Gibson Impact of Music prize at the Nashville Film Festival 2004, the Prix Bartok at the 23rd Ethnographic Film Festival 2004, and the Silver Knight Award at the International Film Festival Golden Knight 2005.

³ Peeva has dealt with sensitive and controversial Balkan issues in her other films as well: in *The Unwanted* [*Izlishnite*, 1999] she addresses the problems of Bulgaria’s ethnic Turks. Her last project, *Divorce Albanian Style* [*Razvod po albanski*, 2007], deals with the thousands of Albanian families who were forcibly separated for marrying foreigners by Enver Hoxha’s regime during the communist era.

However, the film shows that in each nation the foreign identity of the song is covered up, as the song is incorporated in each country's national myths. By showing that what is supposedly "ours" is shared by our neighbors in slightly different versions, the film unsettles national certainties and turns fixed boundaries into spaces of negotiation. In these spaces, the migratory object acquires agency vis-à-vis sovereign national narratives. My discussion of the song will be framed within the particularities of the situation in the Balkans. Nevertheless, the issues raised by the film resonate beyond the Balkans and engage several other contexts.

This chapter centers on Peeva's documentary and is not an independent ethnographic study of the song featured in it.⁴ Therefore, my discussion of the song is inevitably filtered through the film's representation. This does not mean that I align myself with the film's perspective. As I engage with the film, I also voice my critique to elements in the film's approach and to the narrative it constructs.

The film represents the song's travels as marked by constant transformation. I take the song's movement as a trigger of theoretical thought. In particular, I consider it indicative of processes of translation. In what follows, I approach the song's versions as translations without an original, inspiring a specific aesthetics of translation. The aesthetics of translation that the song triggers enriches Walter Benjamin's, Paul de Man's, and other theorists' views on translation. But the film simultaneously challenges these views by testing them against the backdrop of a Balkan politics that resists the song as a product of translation. As a result, the song becomes a thought-provoking theoretical object for studying the clash and interpenetration of the aesthetics and politics of translation.

Migrating objects are usually accompanied by human agents who transfer them with their passage through places. They are indexes of people in transit—migrants, refugees, travelers.⁵ In each country, an encounter takes place between these migrants or travelers, and the host nations. The filmmaker is also a traveler, contributing to the song's dissemination. In the encounters that take place in the film, acts of hospitality unravel in relation to people, as well as to cultural objects. On a first level, hospitality pertains to the reception of the song by each nation. On a second level, the filmmaker is a guest in each country and in the homes of the people she visits. Standing at the boundaries between

⁴ The volume *The Walled-Up Wife*, edited by Alan Dundes, comprises comparable but independent folklore studies of the ballad of "The Walled-Up Wife" in its different versions, as they appear primarily in Eastern Europe. The volume approaches the ballad from various perspectives and addresses the nationalistic proprietary claims to the ballad by earlier scholars from various nations. While earlier scholarship on the ballad was preoccupied with the ballad's origins and with "'proving' that the ballad belonged originally to a particular country or people," the essays in this collection put the question of origins aside and focus on issues of function, meaning, and structure (Dundes 1996: 185).

⁵ Due to advanced communication systems today, this physical movement of human agents is not always necessary. But assuming the song was spread around the Balkans in earlier times, migration and travel must have been the main vehicles for its dispersal.

nations, she faces the laws of hospitality and the easy passage from hospitality to hostility or even violence. And on a third level, a cultural object (the song) enters Peeva's filmic narrative and raises the question of hospitality in relation to the filmmaker's treatment of her object. Can the hospitality of the filmmaker and, by extension, of an artist or cultural analyst with regard to their objects, be an unconditional welcome, or is it always regulated by certain laws set by the host? The antagonistic and often authoritative relation of host to guest is acted out in the film on multiple levels. I will show how the film manages to complicate and pluralize the meaning and metaphoric functions of the concept of hospitality and its constituent agents. Finally, I argue that the operations triggered by the song in the film suggest an alternative way to envision the relation between the self and its neighbors.

Myths, Stereotypes, Nationalism, and Other Stories of Balkanism

The cultural objects nations come to share as a result of movement and migration are—paradoxically—precisely the things that divide them, especially when there is disagreement about their purported “ownership” or “origins.” Greek and Turkish coffee is one and the same thing, but if you call Greek coffee “Turkish” in Greece or vice versa, you are most likely to collect strange or angry looks. And I suspect the Dutch would not be thrilled to be reminded that their most typical national product—the tulip—is in fact not native to Holland, but originated in Turkey and Central Asia, and was only introduced to Holland in the sixteenth century. People are unwilling to concede that things they assume to be “theirs”—their national “property,” their cultural heritage—could in fact be foreign, migratory objects.

Adela Peeva's documentary film *Whose is this Song?* revolves around such a contested traveling object: a song. In the beginning of her documentary, the director explains in a voice-over how she embarked on the journey of making her film:

I was in Istanbul with friends from other Balkan countries—a Greek, a Macedonian, a Turk, a Serb and me, a Bulgarian. There I heard the song I want to tell you about. As soon as we heard the song, everyone claimed this song came from his own country. Then we started a fierce fight—whose is this song? I knew from my childhood the song was Bulgarian. I wanted to find out why the others also claimed the song was theirs.

The film starts with a warm and hospitable image: a group of friends from different Balkan countries sitting around the table in a tavern in Istanbul, eating, drinking, laughing, and listening to the band playing music in the background. It is a celebratory microcosmic image of a multicultural community enjoying its togetherness in a multicultural feast. This is how things would go in the best-case scenario of globalization. However, this idealized imagery of cross-cultural encounters is disrupted as soon as this group of friends gets into

an argument about the origins of a song the Turkish band is playing. Everybody claims passionately that the song comes from his or her native land. Seventy minutes later, the film ends with a dark image of fire and chaos, as firemen and civilians from a Bulgarian village are struggling to put out a forest fire, initiated by fireworks, gunshots, and cannon firing during a celebration of the Bulgarian struggle against Ottoman rule.

Contrary to the common saying that music unites, contrary to the celebratory spirit of European unity supposedly represented annually by the Eurovision song contest, and, finally, contrary to the filmmaker's own initial intentions to follow a song that would unite the Balkans, the documentary becomes an exploration of nationalism, hostility, and ethnic conflicts that still impose rigid boundaries among Balkan nations or ethnic groups. This transformation of happy multiculturalism into a bleak image of destruction is gradually laid out in the film. This transition reflects the contradiction between, on the one hand, the commonplace image of the world as a "global village" wherein strangers become our loving neighbors, and, on the other hand, the violence and aggression against one's neighbor in several recent ethnic conflicts.

The intensification of cross-cultural exchange and the loosening of boundaries as a result of global movements often go hand-in-hand with a celebratory view on globalization and postnationalism. Despite these developments, the film shows people in the Balkans fighting for the copyright of cultural objects, with an unshaken belief in the myths of their origin and a steadfast denial of their migratory identity. The free travel of elements due to processes of globalization and the simultaneous intensification of nationalism and ethnic violence in the last two decades do not form a paradox, but are directly associated. People resort to nationalism in their effort to regain some sense of certainty about their identity and status in the world. According to Arjun Appadurai, some of the principles of the nation-state, such as the idea of stable and well-defined territories, population, and categories, "have become unglued" with globalization (2006: 6). As Appadurai writes,

where the lines between us and them may have always, in human history, been blurred at the boundaries and unclear across large spaces and big numbers, globalization exacerbates these uncertainties and produces new incentives for cultural purification as more nations lose the illusion of national economic sovereignty or well-being. (7)

In *Whose is this song?* the song's case enables us to probe the other face of postnationalism and globalization. The director, holding the memory of the song from her own childhood in Bulgaria, is surprised to discover that there are several "suitors" involved. She therefore sets out on a journey with her film crew across the Balkans, passing through Turkey, Greece, Albania, the Republic of Macedonia, Bosnia, Serbia and, finally, Bulgaria, in search of the song's its supposed "owner(s)" and of the reasons behind the several proprietary claims on it. She thus finds out that the song is sung everywhere in the Balkans and has fallen into different genres in every region: a sentimental love song, a love ballad, a song

about poverty and the lower classes, a song of the rising bourgeois class, an “amanes,” a religious “qasida” or “Jihad” Islamization song, a military march, a religious hymn, a song for a gypsy *femme fatale*, and a patriotic anthem.⁶ In each of its transformations the song serves disparate cultural and political objectives and ideologies and becomes invested with different national imaginary. One could even contend that we cannot speak about the “same song” anymore. Although to talk about the “same song” here is somewhat catachrestic, I follow the film’s choice to identify the different songs as versions of the same song. This assumption also has an empirical basis: most people in the film, when listening to their neighbors’ versions of the song, consider these versions as “stolen” or “imitations” of their own song, which suggests that they perceive them as (albeit inferior) variations of the “same” song. The common element in these versions is the music. The basic melody does not change, although the beat and mode of execution vary. However, the musical genres, and especially the lyrics, change considerably in the different versions. In most cases each version is thematically unrelated to others.

In *Whose is this song?* the filmmaker is actively present in the documentary as protagonist and as narrator, in the form of voice-overs. She positions herself as a Bulgarian filmmaker—and thus an insider in the Balkans—and explains her personal relationship to the song. However, her position as an “insider” is contestable. Despite her Bulgarian nationality, she is as much an outsider in the countries she visits as she is an insider. Accordingly, her journey can be viewed as an ethnographic exploration of the song. Such an approach presupposes a participant-observer’s perspective. Nevertheless, her ambiguous position raises the question of what it means to be an insider or outsider in the Balkans. The answer to this question is dependent on whether the Balkans are perceived as a homogeneous community or not.

Peeva can be considered an “insider” if the Balkans are viewed as an indivisible semantic space and a homogeneous cultural entity, widely defined by shared Byzantine, Ottoman and, more recently, communist legacies. According to this representational mode, quite prevalent in the West, not much difference is recognized among Balkan countries (Iordanova 6-7).⁷ In Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations*, for example,

⁶ “Amanes” is a Greek type of pathetic and monodic song characterized by emotional intensity and by the repetition of the Turkish word “aman” [“alas!” or “mercy!”] in the middle of sentences or between stanzas. In the Greek popular imagination this type of song is associated with the oriental side of the Greek psyche. Peeva records an “amanes” version of the song on the Greek island of Lesbos. “Qasida” is an Arabic poetry form, usually in praise of someone. Here, a music teacher in Bosnia identifies a Bosnian version of the song as a “qasida” in praise of Mohammed. A man in the Dervish community of the Republic of Macedonia identifies the same Bosnian version as a “Jihad song” used for “islamization” in times of war.

⁷ The term “West” is relational. When employed in relation to the Balkans, it usually denotes Western Europe and the U.S. In other contexts (in relation, for example, to the Orient) the term would possibly include Balkan countries as well. Whether the Balkans are European or not is an object of academic and political debate (Todorova 7). The complex position of the Balkans in Europe and their representation either as a bridge across cultures (the East and the West), or as the “other” in the

differences between Muslim and Orthodox populations in the Balkans are bypassed. Huntington's study presents all Balkan nations as culturally similar and united under one signifier, denoting the "other" of Europe and Western civilization.⁸ This simplified image, which allows no serious consideration of internal conflicts, tensions, and contradictions in the Balkans, is quite dominant in Western popular and academic discourses. This image is sustained by biased or totalizing popular media representations, as well as by the insufficient knowledge of Europeans and Americans with regard to the complexity of Balkan issues. When Balkan issues and conflicts seem difficult to grasp, they are often ascribed to the Balkans' alleged irrationality.

Whose is this Song? challenges this representational mode. As the film traverses the Balkans, the viewer finds herself amidst conflicting viewpoints and interpretive networks, which make a unified narrative of the region's history untenable.⁹ The geographical and ideological boundaries of each Balkan nation are presented as fixed, yet highly contested when they collide with the boundaries of neighboring nations. But in their constant overlap and interpenetration, these boundaries are not zones of negotiation: they remain thin lines, triggering conflict when they intersect. As most people interviewed in the film vehemently declare their nation's "ownership" over the song, the discussion about the song often leads to general nationalist remarks. When Theresa Kreshova, an Albanian opera singer, is asked to talk about the song, which she used to sing in the opera of Tirana in her youth, her speech quickly takes a nationalistic turn, resulting in a monologue about the strength of Albanian character. "Finally, I want to say that I am proud for being born Albanian," she exclaims, in a speech that demonstrates how the song turns into a synecdoche for the nation.

There are only two people in the film who acknowledge the song's foreign origins. A composer in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia asserts that the song cannot be Macedonian, as there is no such beat in his nation's folklore. Also, a music teacher in Bosnia remarks that the song came to Bosnia with the Turks a long time ago. Both views stem from specific expertise. The testimony of the former seems to be predicated on musicological data. In the latter case, the music teacher's assumption of the song's Turkish origin does not only have a musicological basis, but possibly also religious motivations. As he shares the same religious (Muslim) background with the Turks, his willingness to concede the song's foreign (Turkish) origins possibly stems from his religious affiliation with them. Thus, in his mind the song is not truly foreign, because it still originates in the Muslim world.

margins of Europe, makes the use of the term "West" highly problematic in the discourse about the region.

⁸ In Huntington's view, the Balkans are not part of Europe and the West, for "Europe ends where Western Christianity ends and Islam and Orthodoxy begin" (1996: 158).

⁹ See also Iordanova 89.

The reactions of most people, however, take a very different direction. In the statements of most interviewees, the boundaries of their nations are invested with truth-value, which makes them almost naturally opposed to the people on the other side of the border. In their words, the nation emerges as a singular and superior entity, based on exclusionary mechanisms and on the “othering” and vilification of other Balkan nations. There are many examples of this: In Albania, people in the street react strongly to Peeva’s suggestion that the song might be Greek or Serbian. One of them remarks: “Serbs can never do a song like this. The Serbs have no traditions.” Later on in the film, an accordion player in Bosnia states that the song is so beautiful that it can be nothing other than Bosnian. Upon hearing that the Serbs claim the song as well, an old Bosnian woman who used to sing the song in her youth, exclaims: “My foot! It is ours!” And in Serbia, an Orthodox priest objects to the song’s assumed Romany origins, arguing that the Romany have no traditions and identity of their own, but live parasitically on the traditions of others.

There are undoubtedly gradations in the hostility with which people react to the suggestion that the song may not be theirs. Variations in people’s reactions depend first of all on nation-specific parameters, such as recent or remote historical traumas and memories. This is especially evident in people from former Yugoslavia, where recent war traumas and suffering may be correlated with their increased anxiety and intolerance. Moreover, it is particularly in rural areas, small villages, and regions closer to the borders of each country where Peeva often faces the most fierce fanaticism and intractable nationalist positions. The nationalist aggression and racism she encounters in Petrova Niva, an area in Bulgaria very close to the Turkish borders, is a case in point.

However, the reactions Peeva monitors are also determined by person-specific factors (disposition, profession, gender, age), as well as by the specific dynamics that develop in people’s encounters with the filmmaker. Remarkably, the majority of Peeva’s contacts are men, whose reactions to the filmmaker are shaped not only by their own beliefs and disposition, but also by the gender dynamics between them and the (female) filmmaker. Thus, although the film’s thematics draw attention to the factor “nation,” the underlying gender aspect cannot be overlooked. The interface between nation and gender is crucial in interpreting the spectacles that unravel in the documentary. Many of the men Peeva interviews interpret their encounter with the filmmaker in antagonistic terms. They therefore try to counter her position of power as a filmmaker and their supposedly passive position as her film’s “subjects” by overprojecting their masculinity.

This antagonism is often expressed through aggressive comments, hostility, condescending attitudes, sexist clichés or sexual innuendo. In that spirit, Stovan, a Bulgarian armorer, tells Peeva: “What is a man without a knife? The same as a lady with no jewels.” His statement is not only a way of validating his profession as an armorer, but also a way of projecting his masculinity. A group of teenagers on motorcycles in Bulgaria indulge in racial slurs against Turks, Romany, and anyone who is not Bulgarian,

while playing with knives in their hands. Among their racist remarks are the following: “The Turks and Gypsies are the worst nations. I feel like crushing them only at the sight of them. If they are not Bulgarian they deserve a knife. We Bulgarians have to always support each other.” The racial aggression in this scene is combined with sexual tension. This is registered in their appearance (some are half-naked), threatening posture, and the looks in their eyes, which, combined with the knives they so demonstratively play with, is suggestive of sexual provocation towards the filmmaker. The gesture of tossing their knives, which accompanies their “death threat” against all non-Bulgarians, is also a way of daring the filmmaker, who stands out among the people on the scene due to her threatening foreignness, both as a woman and as a filmmaker.¹⁰

The role of the filmmaker in these confrontations is hardly neutral. At points, Peeva capitalizes on the gender-related antagonism in order to elicit provocative statements and reactions. Some scenes border on sensationalism. Therefore, most reactions in the scenes mentioned above need to be reassessed in this context. In order to understand them better, we have to treat them as what they are, literally: *reactions* to the filmmaker’s presence and (not always neutral) inquiries.

Thus, Stovan the armorer’s words are a response to Peeva’s question: “Do Bulgarians and knives go along well?”—a question meant to trigger a specific response. Since nationalist discourse is predominantly male, his response turns Peeva’s nation-specific question to a gender-specific answer: knives belong with men, jewels with women. In the reactions of the aforementioned Bulgarian teenagers, we need to add three other factors, which frame the boys’ hate speech. First, Peeva suggests to them that the song may be Turkish. Second, the lyrics of the Bulgarian version have a nationalist content, celebrating the struggle against the Ottomans. Third, on that specific day the Bulgarians in the region celebrate the Bulgarian uprising against the Ottoman occupation.

The director thus makes conscious use of particular tensions among nations. It is no coincidence that when she suggests the foreign origin of the song to her interviewees, she often attributes the song to their nation’s “historical enemies.” “Do you know that people say the song *Clear moon* is Turkish?” she asks the teenagers as well as another group of people present in the Bulgarian celebration. The response she gets is as provocative as it is provoked: “This is the anthem of all Strandzha. You risk to be stoned if you say that it was a Turkish song.” When she is talking to Bulgarians, she suggests that the Turks also claim the song. When talking to a Turk, she suggests that the song may be Greek. When talking to Albanians, she asks them whether the song may be Greek or Serbian.

Instead of explaining to her interviewees that there are multiple versions of the song, Peeva capitalizes on the pairs of antagonistic national identities in the Balkans. Her interventions bring out what Appadurai calls “predatory identities,” which emerge out of pairs of identities—such as the Serbs and the Croats, the Greeks and the Turks, and

¹⁰ The scene takes place during a Bulgarian celebration of the uprising against the Ottomans.

so on—with long histories of contact, mixture, and mutual stereotyping (2006: 51). Such identities see neighboring groups as threats to the existence of the “we” (51).¹¹ Their horizon of national wholeness and of a “pure and untainted national ethnos” cannot be attained due to the presence of an other who resembles the self and yet is not part of it (8). Appadurai calls this phenomenon the “anxiety of incompleteness” (8). Peeva’s suggestive remarks rekindle this anxiety and inevitably lead to emotionally charged reactions. The more irrational or aggressive people’s reactions are, the more the filmmaker’s position is sanctified and takes on an air of superiority.

In the encounters the film stages, nationalist, religious, and racist fanaticism is intertwined with gender problematics. The filmmaker’s interventions sometimes amplify the tension. However, what is common in the reactions of the people she interviews is their consistent wish to stay divided and not be placed under a “Balkan umbrella.” Their mutually exclusive national narratives, based on the myth of the purity, homogeneity, and continuity of the nation, make it impossible to tell the history of the region—and of the song—in a way acceptable to all its actors.¹² The Western construction of the Balkans as a unified signifier is debunked in the film, as the (Western) viewer’s stereotypical image of the Balkans is tested against a more complex reality.

Whose is this song? leaves the viewer with a rather bleak image of Balkan nations. Their nationalism, stubbornness, parochialism, and hostility surface as dominant elements of their disposition. Even in light-hearted or comical scenes the viewer is tempted to laugh *at* and not *with* them, as the comic effect is often caused by the irrationality that supposedly typifies the Balkan character. While the film deconstructs certain Balkan stereotypes, it also helps to confirm others.

Some of the stereotypes projected in the film correspond with Western representations of the Balkan character. The Balkans, according to Balkan historian Maria Todorova, have served as a repository of negative features upon which the self-congratulatory image of the “European” has been constructed. Since the beginning of the twentieth century “Balkanization” denotes “a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian”; the Balkans are associated with industrial backwardness, irrational and superstitious cultures, and lack of advanced social relations (Todorova 3, 11). Along the same lines, Žižek points out that the Balkans have functioned as a site of “fantastic investments” and as “the Other of the West”:

the place of savage ethnic conflicts long ago overcome by civilised Europe, the place where nothing is forgotten and nothing learned, where old traumas are being replayed again and again, where symbolic links are simultaneously devalued (dozens

¹¹ According to Appadurai, predatory identities usually develop in majorities who carry the fear of being turned into minorities unless they make another minority disappear (2006: 52).

¹² See also Iordanova 89.

of cease-fires broken) and overvalued (the primitive warrior's notions of honour and pride). (1992)¹³

As Žižek argues, the myths about the Balkans and the commonplaces about the region as “the madhouse of thriving nationalism” are a construction of the Western gaze, which takes pleasure in the spectacle of ethnic passions (1992).¹⁴ *Balkanism*, a term coined in analogy to *Orientalism* to designate the Western representational mode and discursive construction of the Balkans, is sustained not only by Western media and academia. It is also practiced by Balkan intellectuals and filmmakers, who reiterate existing stereotypes by “perpetuating a trend of self-exoticism” (Iordanova 21).¹⁵ This trend is, for example, sustained by filmmakers such as Dušan Makavejev and Emir Kusturica, whose films depict the Balkans as “the land of refreshing folkloric diversity,” whereas for authors like Milan Kundera the Balkans becomes “the place where the idyll of Mitteleuropa meets oriental barbarism” (Žižek 1992).

Peeva's documentary also contributes to the negative stereotyping of the Balkans. Balkan men in the film often have a crude and macho attitude that projects the patriarchal structures of their societies.¹⁶ Other interviewees, such as a Turkish filmmaker who had his days of glory in the 60s or a Greek musician on the island of Lesbos, are shown to be irremediably nostalgic, caught up in the past and refusing to keep up with the present.¹⁷ These cases confirm the stereotype of the static Balkan (or more generally Eastern) universe, resistant to progress and unable to live up to the challenges of the future. In an article about the film in the *International Herald Tribune*, Peeva states that her film “makes us laugh at ourselves.” Self-mockery can surely be an act of self-criticism and self-reflection.¹⁸ But it can function just as well as a self-indulgent, or indeed, a self-exoticizing act. Humor can help gloss over violent and disturbing habits or situations by normalizing them as “funny” cultural idiosyncrasies, and thus not worth criticizing. Although not all humoristic elements in the film function in this manner, there are scenes that produce humoristic effects by confirming Balkan stereotypes, such as the ones mentioned above.¹⁹

¹³ The online version of Žižek's essay has no page numbers.

¹⁴ He goes even further to argue that the West is not an innocent onlooker, but is to a great extent responsible for the outbursts of ethnic passions in the area.

¹⁵ Todorova recognizes the similarities between the two kinds of discourses (Orientalism and Balkanism), but refuses to see Balkanism as a subspecies of Orientalism and discusses the significant differences between the two terms (1-20).

¹⁶ According to Todorova, balkanist discourse is singularly male (15).

¹⁷ In her review, Gergana Doncheva notes about the Greek musicians in the film: “Their melancholy is too intense; their yearning for lost youth is so strong, that suddenly a wave of nostalgia comes over the silver screen” (n.p.).

¹⁸ One of the film's reviewers seems to share this view of humor as a strategy to counter stereotypes when she writes: “Against all these stereotypes, Peeva uses a most powerful weapon—her self-deprecating sense of humour. And it works” (Doncheva).

¹⁹ Moreover, certain cinematic techniques employed in the film yield self-exoticizing effects and enhance stereotypical representations of the region. Each country through which the filmmaker

However, the stereotypical elements in the film do not neutralize its critical intervention. The film captures a complex reality in the Balkans while preserving the contradictions of its material. It gives voice to conflicting standpoints without making a choice among them. It demystifies national narratives and the myths around the origins of cultural commodities, and thereby unsettles the certainties on which stereotypes rest. Consequently, Peeva's initial intention to find out the song's "rightful owners" is abandoned in the course of the film. Since the song appears to function as a cultural commodity in the service of nationalism, the question of its origins and "owners" changes focus. Instead of "where do the song's origins lie?" or "who are its real owners?" the crucial question in the film is: "how does the issue of origins and ownership *function* in the Balkans?" This is not anymore an ethnographic, but a political question. Thus, the underlying assumption that a cultural object can be owned—also suggested by the possessive pronoun "whose" in the film's title—is problematized, though, perhaps, not abandoned altogether. The issue is not proving or disproving the legitimacy of proprietary claims, but exploring their political functions and ramifications.

Welcome to the Balkans

In order to unravel the mechanisms that govern the song's reception in the Balkans, I will explore its involvement in a politics and ethics of *hospitality*—a notion with a long tradition and heavy signification in the Balkans. The song's reception by each host country, the filmmaker's visits to Balkan countries, and, finally, her reintroduction of the song as a foreign object to people in these countries, are worth examining as occasions of hospitality. During these occasions, the defining lines between neighbor and barbarian are tested. Is it easier to provide hospitality to a neighbor than an absolute foreigner? Or is the danger of turning the guest into an enemy—a barbarian—more present when the guest is a neighbor?

Before bringing the notion of hospitality to bear on the song, I want to probe the theoretical gain of applying the metaphor of hospitality and the designations "host" and "guest" not only to people, but also to migratory objects. The semantic link between migration and hospitality and the accompanying labels "guest" and "host" have been established in common parlance and carry an air of self-evidence. In *Postcolonial Hospitality*, Mireille Rosello points out that "the vision of the immigrant as a guest is a metaphor that has forgotten it is a metaphor" (3). The same holds for the designation "host country"

passes becomes recognizable through conventional shots of the landscape or of cities, as well as through stereotypical music that is sometimes suggestive of the location. Shots of olive trees in Greece, images of poor cities and of Enver Hoxha's bunkers in Albania, or of half-demolished buildings in Sarajevo function partly to convey *couleur locale* and reinforce the stereotypical imagery of each location.

for a country that receives immigrants.²⁰ These are cases of *dead metaphors*: metaphors no longer perceived as such.

The epistemological implications of a dead metaphor become more lucid once we lay out how a metaphor functions in the first place. Several theorists, such as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their study *Metaphors We Live By*, demonstrate the way by which metaphors structure our ways of thinking and everyday practices.²¹ Bal argues that metaphors can often be read as “mini-narratives,” which yield insight “into what a cultural community considers acceptable interpretations; so acceptable that they are not considered metaphorical at all” (2006: 154). But the plurality of meanings a metaphor can yield is only possible, Bal argues, when a metaphor is considered as such (157). Therefore, in the case of a dead metaphor, the (metaphorical) “death” that takes place conceals the metaphoricality of the metaphor, and hence limits the plurality of its meanings and masks the socio-political ramifications of its use.

The discourse of hospitality is hardly perceived as metaphorical when applied to immigrants. The concealed or dead metaphoricality of this discourse results in its naturalization in language. This has consequences. Since the labels of “guest” for immigrants and “host” for the receiving country are registered as natural, the meaning of these terms and the roles they imply remain fixed. The hierarchical relations and normative expectations inscribed in these terms (e.g., the grateful subjugated guest and the sovereign host) are therefore left unchallenged. The inflexibility of the discourse of hospitality forestalls a possible renegotiation of the roles of guest-migrant and host country, and makes it difficult to redefine hospitality and its conditions in the political realm.

What could then be the point of reintroducing the dead metaphor of hospitality to talk about a song’s reception by different nations? Extending the metaphor of hospitality to migratory objects instead of people requires a second level of metaphoricality, which yields a double metaphor: in a first act of metaphorical substitution, the object (song) becomes a migrant, and in a second substitution, the song-migrant becomes a guest. The double metaphorical substitution that takes place in adopting the discourse of hospitality for objects can denaturalize this discourse in the case of human migration and reawaken its metaphoricality. It can make us aware of its figurative dimension not only in the case of objects, but of people as well. This places the metaphorical pairs of migrant-guest and

²⁰ The term *Gastarbeiter* is a good example of the metaphorical language of hospitality surrounding migration. While this term is naturalized, foregrounding its metaphorical nature shows that it carries several implications regarding the status of these immigrants and the kind of hospitality they receive. As Aydemir notes, the term evokes a policy “that insisted that migrants be ‘guests,’ their stay temporary, while the provisional hospitality extended to them remained fully conditional on their labour” (316).

²¹ In *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), Lakoff and Johnson explore the idea that metaphors are not mere rhetorical or poetic devices, but cognitive tools that determine the ways we speak, act, and know the world.

host country under scrutiny and allows us to question their hegemonic transparency and invisibility.²²

In *Whose is this Song?* the song-as-guest is implicated in nationalist discourses that impose their own conditions on hospitality. Yet, as I will show, the acts of hospitality that unravel in the film reveal the tensions between the roles of host and guest, and, when the guest is a neighbor, between the guest's reception as "one of us" or a barbarian. These tensions invite renegotiations of the meaning and practice of hospitality.

In *Of Hospitality* (2000), Derrida makes a distinction between "absolute hospitality" and "conditional hospitality" (or what he calls the "pact of hospitality") (25). The ideal of absolute hospitality requires the opening of the host's home not only to a foreigner with a name and a definite status, but to "the absolute, unknown, anonymous other" (25). It is hospitality graciously offered to the other, without any demand, imperative or sense of duty for the host (83). Conditional hospitality, on the other hand, requires a process of interrogating, identifying and naming the foreigner before welcoming him or her. The guest is subjected to the host's laws and the host maintains sovereignty (27). The host exercises this sovereignty by filtering and choosing guests, in a process that involves exclusions, violations, and violence (55). The guest has to obey the rules the host determines. This kind of hospitality becomes a reaffirmation of the law of the same (Yeğenoğlu 8-9). The guest is welcome as long as he or she complies with the host's law.

In his *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (1999), Derrida makes a similar distinction between "an ethics of hospitality (an ethics as hospitality) and a law or a politics of hospitality" (19).²³ The former (ethics) corresponds to what he calls "unconditional," whereas the latter (law or politics) to "conditional" hospitality. As Rosello notes, an ethics of hospitality would be "infinite and beyond any human law," while a politics of hospitality involves "limits and borders," including "national borders and state sovereignty" (2001: 11). While these two kinds of hospitality seem to form an irreconcilable opposition, Derrida does not really present us with either/or choice between politics and ethics. As Rosello argues, the two concepts are incompatible and yet inseparable, destined to "cohabit" in a chaotic state of constant tension, which is "what hospitality is precisely all about" (11).

The song in question is involved in a highly conditioned politics of hospitality. It arrives at a certain historical moment at the threshold of each country as a guest, possibly carried by migrants or nationals returning from abroad. The host nation welcomes it on a specific condition: that the guest's identity be erased and reappropriated by the host. The encounter between host and guest is precariously situated on the course of a pendulum that "swings wildly between generosity and cannibalism" (Rosello 2001: 175).

²² See Rosello's *Postcolonial Hospitality* (8). In *Postcolonial Hospitality*, Rosello also problematizes the self-evidence of the host-guest opposition and the consequences of the use of metaphors of hospitality on migration.

²³ Derrida's *Adieu* is a reading of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* as a "treatise of hospitality" (21).

The guest-song becomes the sacrificial victim in a cannibalistic act, whereby the guest is devoured by the host and lives on within the host's body, after the traces of its alterity have disappeared. The song's assimilation suggests the host's fear of the guest's potential transformative force, which has to be minimized through appropriation.

The invasion of foreign elements into one's national or cultural space is often perceived as threatening. The appropriation of foreign, migratory elements by national narratives is a way of dealing with the (presumed) threat of the other. This mechanism is not exclusive to the Balkans. Cultural commodities carried by migrants to Western European countries and elsewhere often become an integral part of the host country, and their foreign origin is either forgotten or suppressed. In these cases, the host nation turns migratory objects into sedentary constructions as a means of solidifying its identity.²⁴

The song's emergence in all the countries Peeva visits is an unmistakable sign of cultural exchange and commonality in the cultural identity of Balkan peoples. The film, *Gergana Doncheva* remarks, supports "the view of the Balkans as sharing a common legacy in terms of lifestyles, everyday social practices, and compatible sensitivities" (n.p.). But it is a song everyone sings differently. The different lyrics in the song's versions pose as antagonistic signifiers floating over the Balkan space and trying to attach themselves to the same melody by writing over each other. The song poses a problem to national identity construction. This construction is based on difference and cannot tolerate a great degree of similarity with others. Thus, nationalist discourses cannot easily legitimize the slightly altered repetition of the same song in neighboring nations. Acknowledging this similarity in terms of mutual influence or common heritage with its neighbors would prevent the national self from constructing itself as superior and the neighbor as inferior. Therefore, common ways to deal with the neighbor's shared traditions or objects is either to "legitimize" them as one-sided imitations of the self by its envious, culturally dependent others, or to view them in terms of theft.

Indeed, most people that appear in the documentary perceive cultural exchange as a unidirectional process. They deny having received from the neighbors, since they see themselves as the only offering agents. According to this logic, neighboring nations or ethnic groups are perceived as empty receptacles with a shallow history and tradition, capable only of passive reception. In that spirit, in Serbia, where the song is associated with the gypsy seductress *Koshtana*, the song's performance brings out the tension between

²⁴ The fate of migratory cultural objects can also be different. As Aydemir notes, within the framework of a politics of assimilation, lately European nation-states try to "wipe clean the public realm of those signs of otherness" regarded as "incommensurable" (318). The headscarf affairs in major European countries are such examples of foreign elements that are forcedly discarded, because assimilation practices fail to integrate them (318). However, there are also cases in which the foreign identity of cultural objects is ostensibly foregrounded, especially when a country wishes to promote its multicultural profile. Nevertheless, the foreign elements projected and even "advertized" in this process—foreign cuisine and ethnic restaurants are cases in point—are often subject to stereotypical and caricatured representations that serve the economy and ideology of the host nation.

Romany culture and Orthodox Christianity. An Orthodox priest has difficulty conceding that the Serbians owe the song to Romany culture. His argument is that Romany culture in fact does not exist, because it is parasitically constructed from the traditions and cultures of others: Romany people in Serbia, he contends, take up Serbian traditions, which is why they differ from Romany people in Egypt, who take up the Egyptian culture. In his eyes, Romany culture is only capable of cultural reception, whereas the Serbian Christian Orthodox culture remains the exclusive source of dissemination of culture. A culture that openly welcomes elements from other cultures and thus allows “barbarisms” to enter, such as Romany culture, is in the priest’s view non-authentic, if not non-existent.²⁵

Thus, neighboring nations or ethnic groups are sometimes allowed to borrow and modify “our” song, on the condition that the “original” version is explicitly recognized as “ours.” The acknowledgement of the neighbor’s cultural debt to the national self is thus an essential condition of this form of hospitality. If the neighbor breaches this condition, she or he turns into a malicious agent, a parasite, a barbarian. Therefore, when other nations claim the song as their own and refuse to acknowledge their presumed cultural debt to “us,” then the “gift” to the other is perceived as stolen property. When Peeva plays a tape with the Bosnian version of the song to a group of men in a Serbian tavern, one of them cries out: “This is theft, simple abuse. Outrageous!” Since hardly anyone in the film recognizes the song’s foreign descent, its foreign versions are more often perceived as theft than as a gift to neighbors. The “gift” that turns into “stolen property” marks the easy transition from hospitality to hostility, when hospitality is predicated upon strict rules of compliance.

By knocking on people’s doors in the Balkans and reintroducing the song as a foreign guest, the filmmaker spreads confusion. The foreign song they hear resembles the one they take to be their own, and is subsequently received as an imposter of their beautiful song, who threatens to overthrow the host’s authority. Thus, listening to a foreign version of “their” song often results in hostility not only towards the song’s foreign version, but also towards the filmmaker, who carries it into the nation’s space, either by playing tapes with foreign versions of the song or by suggesting with her questions that the song comes from somewhere else. “Do you know that people say the song *Clear moon* is Turkish?,” she asks, for example, some Bulgarian teenagers—a suggestion that ignites aggressive reactions.

As a Bulgarian, the filmmaker is a neighbor to the people in the countries she visits. However, she is not received an insider—as “one of us.” But neither is she treated as an absolute and neutral outsider. As a guest, she is a “known” or “identifiable” foreigner. The hospitality she receives in these cases is still far from unconditional: the hosts welcome

²⁵ The priest’s argument unravels as a reaction to what he calls the “gypsification” of Serbian culture and the idealization of Romany culture in Balkan films and music: “They tend to gypsify everything and say it all originates from the Gypsies. This is what Bregovich is doing with his music and Kusturitsa with his films. They are going through a terrible identity crisis. They could not survive the Balkan madness, the hatred, the fratricide, the Balkan evil. And they resorted to a total gypsification.”

her on the condition that she aligns herself with their discourse and that she has earned (or will repay) their hospitality. It is with such conditions in mind that a Bosnian friend of hers—a musician—welcomes her: “My Bulgarian friend. You Bulgarians recognized Bosnia first when it was worst for us.” On other occasions, however, she faces more suspicion and hostility than a filmmaker from outside the Balkans would probably face. Precisely because she is a neighbor, she is seen as a potential spy or *agent-provocateur*: a semi-outsider with inside knowledge and with an unclear political agenda. Peeva is often distrusted, because she meddles in the affairs of her hosts, provoking them with questions and trying to elicit reactions. In so doing, she is constantly walking a tightrope between trust and distrust, hospitality and hostility.

Twice she is physically threatened for daring to suggest the song’s foreign identity. One of these occasions is during a feast in a Serbian tavern, organized in her honor by a group of Serbs she met during the shooting of her film. In this feast, Peeva is welcomed as a guest. As Julia Kristeva remarks in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), a “food fest,” a “banquet,” is very often the site where the hospitality ritual unfolds:

A miracle of flesh and thought, the banquet of hospitality is the foreigners’ utopia—the cosmopolitanism of a moment, the brotherhood of guests who soothe and forget their differences, the banquet is outside of time. (11)

In the Serbian banquet, everyone is having a great time, drinking, dancing, telling jokes, and laughing. However, the celebration takes a dramatic turn when Peeva decides to play the Bosnian religious version of the song on tape, in order to monitor people’s reactions. Upon hearing the song, everyone’s expressions change. The filmmaker realizes that in the eyes of her hosts she has crossed a sacred boundary. The laws of hospitality they implicitly set for their Bulgarian guest are violated.

At first, her hosts turn against the Bosnians: “The Bosnians are fools. They have abused a beautiful love song and turned it into a war appeal.” But soon afterwards they redirect their hostility against the filmmaker. They wonder what the objective of her query about the song is and suspect her of political provocation. They stand up in anger and depart, leaving their honorable guest alone, because they suddenly develop doubts about her intentions. They conclude that they had wrongly identified this guest as a friend. Their definition of “friend,” however, presupposes that this guest endorses their law and narrative. If this does not happen, their neighbor-guest turns into an enemy. “The curtain has fallen. We know who you are,” one of them says to the whole film crew. But when Peeva poses the question again—“Who are we?”—their answer makes clear that it is precisely their ignorance of their guests’ real identities that has transformed their hospitality into fierce hostility: “I don’t know who you are. Who actually are you? Do you have any ID? Any license to shoot here at all?” For Derrida, this interrogatory process of identification is part of the pact of hospitality. But eventually, her rights as a guest are

withdrawn and yield to prohibitions (they question her license to shoot on that location). Official identification is now demanded as proof, when they ask for her ID.

Extending hospitality to the neighbor may be more tricky than welcoming a complete foreigner, because the neighbor's similarity is often perceived as a source of deception. In his article "Dead Certainty," Appadurai argues that the exchange and circulation of material or ideological elements across national borders due to globalization has generated new forms of uncertainty, which can be correlated with the increase of ethnic violence (228).²⁶ These processes of exchange make the delimitation of the national self on the basis of difference from others difficult to sustain. The uncertainty that arises as a result produces the suspicion that people around us—our neighbors—are not really what they claim to be, and that our likeness to them hides difference. The ethnic body, Appadurai argues, is "potentially *deceptive*": the neighbor may appear friendly, but beneath this mask, "truer, deeper, more horrible forms of identity may subsist" (232, 238). The suspicion that social appearances are masks hiding other identities may transform friends and neighbors into monsters and barbarians (238). This transformed perception of the neighbor as a barbarian can easily lead to extreme violence (233). Beneath the familiar face of the neighbor, a barbarian is believed to be hiding who needs to be destroyed. Thus, brutal violence is often meant to turn the face of someone who looks like us into the unrecognizable face of a barbarian.²⁷

A similar logic—which fortunately does not come to such extremes in this case—dictates the attack of the Serbian men against Peeva in the scene previously described. As soon as the neighbor's identity is put under suspicion, her status as a guest disintegrates. The guest becomes a barbarian intruder. Anyone who encroaches on the host's sovereignty is regarded as an "undesirable foreigner, and virtually as an enemy" (Derrida 2000: 54-55). Although the hostility of the Serbian men in this scene does not turn into physical violence, it comes close when one of the men threatens to knock her down on the floor.

²⁶ Appadurai refers to the increase of ethnic violence in the 1990s.

²⁷ Appadurai sees the mutilation of ethnicized bodies in ethnic conflict as a desperate attempt "to restore the validity of somatic markers of 'otherness'" (1998: 242). He argues that the primary target of extreme ethnic violence is the body, and that in an ethnic context the worst acts of violence—"involving feces, urine, body parts; beheading, impaling, gutting, sawing, raping, burning, hanging, and suffocating"—follow a cultural design (229). These acts are attempts to physically (re)construct the neighbor as completely other by erasing or maiming those bodily features that are evidence of the ethnic other's similarity to the self. According to Appadurai, violence is not only a sign of suspicion towards the neighbor, but also of uncertainty about the ethnic self. He writes: "The view advanced here of ethnocidal violence between social intimates is not only about uncertainty about the 'other.' Obviously, these actions indicate a deep and dramatic uncertainty about the ethnic self. They arise in circumstances where the lived experience of large labels becomes unstable, indeterminate, and socially volatile, so that violent action can become one means of satisfying one's sense of one's categorical self" (244).

As a neighbor, Peeva is all the more under suspicion because the discourse she inhabits as a Bulgarian filmmaker overlaps with that of her hosts, but they are not sure about the exact nature of this intertwining: does the narrative she constructs in her film comply with, or undermine, their own discourse? In other words, she is too close to them as a neighbor, and for that reason, her behavior as a guest is under strict scrutiny. As Žižek points out in *Violence*,

Since a Neighbor is, as Freud suspected long ago, primarily a Thing, a traumatic intruder, someone whose different way of life (or, rather, way of *jouissance* materialized in its social practices and rituals) disturbs us, throws the balance of our way of life off the rails, when it comes too close, this can also give rise to an aggressive reaction aimed at getting rid of this disturbing intruder." (50)

In *Tarrying With the Negative*, Žižek argues that what binds together a national community is a shared relation toward "enjoyment." "The national Cause," he writes, "is ultimately nothing but the way subjects of a given ethnic community organize their enjoyment through national myths" (1993: 202). When another nation is thought to be threatening or stealing the nation's enjoyment, enmity emerges.²⁸ The song in question is a *locus* of this enjoyment. It embodies it symbolically, but also literally. Certainly in the Balkans, music is a primary marker of tradition and cultural identification, and therefore functions as one of the key sites around which the nation's "enjoyment" is organized. The realization that other nations have "stolen" "our" song, poses a threat to the cohesion of the national community and the stability of its myths. The neighbor's version of "our" song distorts the nation's enjoyment with its abusive sound. In the scene in the tavern, the disruption of this enjoyment by the neighbor is literalized in the abrupt ending of the feast and the expulsion of the "disturbing intruder," the filmmaker.

Although the experience in the Serbian tavern is very upsetting for the filmmaker ("this was too much for me," she says), I argue that the friction in this scene is productive, because it exposes the conditions in which hospitality is grounded. "A completely harmonious and pacified level of interaction," Rosello writes, "may not be the best test of successful hospitable gestures" (2001: 173). Clearly, the confrontations and violence in this scene are not markers of a successful hospitable encounter. However, had the feast been peaceful and without disruptions, it would have probably confirmed the roles of the guest as powerless and subordinated to the host's law, and of the host as retaining absolute sovereignty. Such hospitality "without risk" often "hides more serious violence" (173). The disruption of an artificially harmonious hospitality in this scene, confrontational as it may be, creates the conditions for a renegotiation of the typical roles of host and guest, and perhaps a critical rethinking of hospitality itself.

²⁸ Žižek's argument presented in Mouffe 28.

The filmmaker's intervention generates tension in the unifying operations of each discursive community, because it forcibly encumbers it with alterity. Peeva stands at the signficatory boundaries of Balkan cultures, which is where, according to Homi Bhabha, the problems of cultural interaction emerge and where "meanings and values are (mis-) read or signs are misappropriated" (50). The varied lyrics attached to each version of the song, as well as its different musical execution in every region, change its aesthetics, its genre, and the identifications and affects it stirs in each community. However, whenever Peeva confronts people with the song's performance in another national community, the dissonant sound of the other's song is disquieting and perceived almost as cacophonous, *precisely because it sounds strangely familiar*.

The song's familiar sound releases what I call the "barbarism of the similar." This describes a process set forth when a subject is confronted with a similar but slightly altered—and in that sense, barbarized, contaminated—version of an object or practice they have internalized as "theirs." As a result, they construct this "similar-but-not-quite-identical" object or practice—and the subjects responsible for its "barbarization"—as barbarian: impure, malicious, improper. This process comes very close to what Freud identified as "the narcissism of minor differences." As he argued in "The Taboo of Virginity" (1918), "it is precisely the minor differences in people who are otherwise alike that form the basis of feelings of strangeness and hostility between them" (205). In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud used the same term in relation to aggression and violence in ethnic conflicts, to argue that

it is precisely communities with adjoining territories, and related to each other in other ways as well, who are engaged in constant feuds and in ridiculing each other—like the Spaniards and the Portuguese, for instance, the North Germans and South Germans, the English and Scotch, and so on. (61)²⁹

Freud's "narcissism of minor differences" strikes at the heart of the relation between the neighbor and the barbarian. One of the ideal demands of civilized society, Freud writes, is the commandment "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (1967: 56). In fact, however, "nothing else runs so strongly counter to the original nature of man" than loving one's neighbor (59). The neighbor is closer to a barbarian than to a friend: neighbors arouse more feelings of hostility and aggression than love, because they are a provocation to the

²⁹ Freud coined the phrase "narcissism of minor differences" in "The Taboo of Virginity," referring to earlier work by British anthropologist Ernest Crawley. Michael Ignatieff views Freud's idea of the "narcissism of minor differences" as the key to understanding the ethnic warfare of the 1990s, especially in Eastern Europe. In a chapter entitled "The Narcissism of Minor Differences" in *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (1998), Ignatieff brings Freud's theory to bear, for example, on the mutual hatred between Serbs and Croats, despite the intertwining of their histories, customs, languages, and identities. For another application of Freud's idea to ethnic conflicts, see Vamik Volkan's article "The Narcissism of Minor Differences between Opposing Nations."

self. So much so, that this commandment becomes identical to the commandment “love thine enemies” (57).

Constructing the other as barbarian presupposes the other’s radical difference. As we see in the film, however, in the Balkans the barbarization of the other is grounded in the exact opposite realization: that of the similarity of the self with other groups situated close or at the borders of its community, society, or nation. Thus, in practice, the others against whom the self constructs its superior identity are often quite similar to the self. The film produces this insight through the exposure of a shared cultural object: the song.

The threat the neighbor poses can be even more powerful than the threat of faraway barbarian enemies, precisely due to the neighbor’s proximity. Therefore, the neighbor has to be kept at bay through strict oppositional lines. To maintain its borders with neighbors, the national self devalues and dehumanizes them: they become barbarians. The barbarization of the neighbor, then, takes place in order to conceal or eliminate commonality.

Conceding how similar we are with our neighbors can sabotage our identity construction, because basing our identity on difference is the easiest path to self-definition. In “Reflections on Racism,” Cornelius Castoriadis traces the roots of the devaluation and hatred against others in the “incapacity to constitute oneself as oneself without excluding the other” (1997b: 23). As Castoriadis argues, “the inferiority of the others is only the flip side of the affirmation of the *proper truth*” of the self, and this “proper truth” excludes everything else, “rendering all the rest as positive error” (25). However, when others prove to be similar to us, the nation’s “proper truth,” established by means of excluding the other’s version as erratic, is destabilized. What “we” regarded as “erratic” or “barbaric” is similar to us, and thus part of the self. To hide this different truth, we repress or pretend not to notice our similarity with them.

Freud’s “narcissism of minor differences” enables us to understand why in close relationships the self tries to exaggerate differences in order to preserve its distinction from the other.³⁰ In a nationalist context, the existence of neighboring countries with similar traditions, habits or cultural objects, challenges the uniqueness of the national self. As Appadurai argues, “the elimination of difference” “is the new hallmark of today’s large-scale, *predatory narcissisms*” (2006: 11). However, Appadurai continues, this elimination of difference “is fundamentally impossible in a world of blurred boundaries, mixed marriages, shared languages, and other deep connectivities” (11). In this context, “minor differences can become the least acceptable ones” (11). This is because minor differences point to the impossibility of sustaining the ideal of a pure and homogeneous nation. In other words, they function as “barbarisms” that sabotage the nation’s attempt to either fully assimilate foreign elements or fully exclude them from its discourse. If the nation’s project only accepts either full identification or exclusion, then minor differences

³⁰ For an application of the “narcissism of minor differences” on personal relationships, see Gabbard.

are a glitch in this project. In Peeva's film, when people in each national community listen to their neighbor's song, its common basis is somewhat bracketed, and gives way to an excessive emphasis on its differences (the different lyrics and style of execution), which are perceived as offensive. What most people in the film hear in the other's song is not their common culture in the basic tune that stays the same, but the cacophonies inflicted upon "their" song by their neighbors.

The strange combination of similarity and difference the song embodies is emblematic of the "interconnected yet disjunctive world in which we live" (Durrant and Lord 12). The sound of the other sounds familiar to the people of each nation because they recognize part of themselves and their cultural heritage in it. Yet, this sound is discomfiting, because it belongs to the other. The song exposes the other as a slightly altered version of the self. In the other's song, people hear themselves as other. While the song's performance in all these nations seems to bridge the absolute distance between self and other, it simultaneously compels people to face the inherent otherness in themselves: the fact that their (national) identity can never be identical to itself. Herein lies the song's unsettling force, registered in the distressed or hostile reactions of many of Peeva's interviewees.

Ultimately, the film exposes the paradox that what keeps Balkan peoples divided are the things they have in common. In each national text these similarities are (mis)read as differences or, where they cannot be circumvented, they are interpreted as elements of the self, which have been imitated, stolen or abused by others. "Why Turkish and not Albanian?" an old man in an Albanian music school protests; "Maybe the Turks took it from us. We are one of the most ancient peoples."

The "barbarism of the similar" as well as Freud's "narcissism of minor differences" both refer to a negative process that leads to the barbarization of neighbors and their cultural products based on their similarity with the national self. However, in Peeva's film this operation is counterpoised by another operation, which stems from the kind of translation in which the song is involved. The negative side effects of the proprietary claims around the song and of the resulting barbarization of the neighbor are undercut by the film's presentation of the song as a traveling object that cannot be fully appropriated by any nation or group. What becomes increasingly relevant in the film is not the retrieval of the song's "original" form or its "rightful owners," but the operations involved in its cross-cultural translations. These will be unraveled in the section that follows.

Between Metaphor and Metonymy: Barbarian Translation

Given that the term "translation" is traditionally used for texts, its employment for the song, which combines two different media (music and text), is not self-evident. There is a plethora of terms, more suitable perhaps for a musical object, such as a cover, adaptation, or variation. However, I will try to make a case for the theoretical gain of latching on to the term "translation" in order to address the song's versions. In the following, I will

approach the song as a theoretical object that houses a specific theory on translation. The theorization of translation triggered by the song converses with Walter Benjamin's ideas of translation as laid out in "The Task of the Translator" ["Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers"]. The theory and aesthetics of translation the song inspires are tested against a politics of translation in the Balkans, which fosters a different approach. The interaction between the song's aesthetic of translation and the politics it confronts in its travels, as represented in the film, leads me to propose the concept of "barbarian translation" in order to capture the operations of the song's movement.

In common parlance, a translation presupposes an original, to which it refers back and tries to reproduce. In the film, however, the original song, if there ever was one, seems to be irretrievably lost. The film sets up its own course: it draws an open circle around the Balkans, starting from Turkey and ending in Bulgaria. Although the filmmaker's own itinerary may create the impression that the song followed a similar course, she never suggests that this is the actual geographical course of the song's dissemination. The film is not concerned with a historically accurate retrieval of the song's migratory course, but with its movement and the effects thereof.

The emphasis on movement rather than stasis and origins is underscored by the image of the road, which takes center stage in the film. Every time the filmmaker and her crew move on to the next destination, there are extensive shots of their mini-van or car in motion. These shots project the documentary as a road movie. In this way, the film also suggests the song's mode of being as travel, as constantly being "on the road," with provisional stops along the way. The film does not convey the idea that there is a "proper" song linked to a specific location. There is only a series of translations, traveling throughout the Balkan space. The song's translations—its different versions—appear as independent of a "master version" and thus also of the authority of a "master culture." If there was ever an original song, its existence becomes irrelevant in the film.

But how does the film bracket the idea of an original song? The film's main theme is the song's travels, and the contrast between its travels and people's insistence on its static nature. Despite people's belief in its uniqueness and originality as a national product, the film allows the viewer to listen to one translation of the song after the other. As a result, the viewer is able to observe the repetitions, common patterns, differences, or tensions among the song's translations, while recognizing them all as translations of the same song. Repetitions and similarities are detectable not only in the music, but also in the lyrics. In a version of the song from the Dervish community in the Republic of Macedonia, for instance, the viewer can hear a partial repetition of the lyrics of the Turkish version. But even when the lyrics are entirely different, the viewer can still detect common patterns: a religious song (in Bosnia) and a love song (in Serbia, Albania, Turkey, and elsewhere) are all about love, either directed to God or to a woman or man. Regarding the music, there are many variations in the song's execution. The song's performance as a military march, for

example, requires different musical instruments and a different beat than its performance as a love ballad. However, the different versions retain the same basic melody, which enables the recognition of each performance as a version of the same song.

Thus, each version can be viewed as a translation in that it is somehow influenced and shaped by previous versions, even when formed in opposition to them. In its turn, it influences and generates other translations, without there being a stable reference to an originary song. The viewer cannot compare these translations to any original. Consequently, these translations are not committed to a notion of fidelity to an “original”—whether fidelity is seen as a close reproduction of the meaning, or as “literalness” (the precise rendering of the form in the target language).³¹ There is no hierarchy among them in the film. Although they compete with each other, they all stand on equal ground.

The film’s unwillingness to point to an original song invites me to bring the song to bear on Benjamin’s ideas in “The Task of the Translator.” For Benjamin, translation issues from the original’s “afterlife” and marks its continued life, but does not strive for likeness to the original; it is an unpredictable “outliving” of the original (1999b: 72-73). Translation is not an image or copy. It is neither about representation, nor about the reproduction of meaning, but about the changes that are instigated in the languages and semiotic practices of both the translation and the original (Derrida 2007: 204).³² Paul de Man takes this idea a step further, arguing that Benjamin’s translation theory implies the death of the original in the translation: “The process of translation [...] is one of change and of motion that has the appearance of life, but of life as an afterlife, because translation also reveals the death of the original” (2000: 25).

According to De Man, Benjamin’s notion of translation upsets the status of the original by undoing “its claim to canonical authority” (2000: 22). The de-canonization of the original in Benjamin’s theory reverses the dependency of the translation on the original. As Bal succinctly puts it in her discussion of Benjamin, “translation produces the original rather than being subservient to it” (2002: 54). The original does not exist without translation. Derrida’s reading of Benjamin’s text in “Des Tours de Babel” also disputes the priority of the original by attributing to it a constitutive incompleteness, which always makes it anticipate its translator. “And if the original calls for a complement,” Derrida writes, “it is because at the origin, it was not there without fail, full, complete, total, identical to itself. From the origin of the original to be translated there is fall and exile” (2007: 211). Similarly to Derrida’s “fall and exile” in the original, de Man views the movement of fragmentation that the original undergoes through translation as “a wandering, an

³¹ Benjamin brings forward the notion of “literalness” to denote a mode of fidelity, motivated by the desire to retain the form (and not necessarily the meaning) in translation: “no case of literalness can be based on a desire to retain the meaning” (1999b: 78). Venuti calls this literalness “abusive fidelity” and proposes it as a kind of translation concerned with conveying the foreignness of the source language in the target language (2003: 252-53).

³² See also Aydemir on Benjamin (322).

errance, a kind of permanent exile”—an exile, however, without any homeland, since the origin for de Man (and Benjamin) does not really exist and is only evoked by the fragments that translations constitute. (2000: 33).

We could thus argue that translation precedes the original, which is mythically constructed after the translation. Following one of Benjamin’s well-known metaphors, translations are like the fragments of a vessel.³³ These fragments, de Man argues, do not constitute a totality. In fact, the broken parts “remain essentially fragmentary,” since “there was no vessel in the first place, or we have no knowledge of the vessel, or no awareness, no access to it, so for all intents and purposes there has never been one” (2000: 32-33).

By choosing not to focus on the song’s roots but on the here-and-now of its operations in every community, the film subscribes to this theoretical view. However, the political functions of the song in the Balkans are not disengaged from the idea of origins. On the contrary: the myth of the “original” thrives on the belief of each national community that their version is, in fact, the original song. The preoccupation with origins often envelops the myth of the nation’s beginnings, as in the statement of Stovan, a Bulgarian armorer: “I get mad when everybody says that we will become European. The first Bulgarians in Strandzha Mountains here were called *Europi*. Then Greeks were called European. The name of Europe comes from here.” When Peeva asks him if this is a legend, his answer is negative. In the Balkan politics in which the song is implicated, the notion of “origins” still exercises power over the present and pervades national discourses, regardless of its foundation in reality.

Because most people in each country hail “their” song as the original, the film ends up presenting the viewer with multiple alleged “originals.” The existence of multiple “originals” collapses the myth of the original, which is grounded in uniqueness. The idea of the “original song” is thereby weakened and ridiculed. In the film, no version is made canonical, imposing its authority on others. As a result, to borrow Bhabha’s words, the song’s series of translations “desacralizes the transparent assumptions of cultural supremacy” (327).

What is more, by showing that each version of the song is a translation, the film unsettles the purported authenticity of each nation’s tradition. As a translation, the song captures the self-alienation within each tradition. A tradition is never identical to itself, because it carries foreign elements from other traditions, which we may call “barbarisms.” These barbarisms are what allows it to change, transform, and maintain its connectivity to other traditions. Thus, when we hear the title of the Turkish version, “Üsküdar,” being

³³ “Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel” (Benjamin 1999b: 79).

repeated in one of the song's translations in the Republic of Macedonia, the presence of this foreign element in a Macedonian version can be seen as such a barbarism.³⁴

These barbarisms can be correlated with what Lawrence Venuti calls the "remainder" in translation.³⁵ This term refers to foreign, untranslatable elements that refuse to be appropriated into the target language, and thus introduce in it an irreducible difference. The remainder signals the "evocation of the foreign" in a dominant language (Venuti 1996a: 92). In the case of the song, each translation adjusts to the dominant discourse of the community that "hosts" it. For example, the Turkish version, which tells the story of a handsome clerk, carries the discourse of the rising bourgeois class in Turkey in the 60s. The Bulgarian version—an anthem about the struggle against the Ottoman rule—embodies the Bulgarian nationalist discourse. The Bosnian religious version projects a religious (Muslim) discourse as the nation's unifying force. How is the "remainder" released in these translations? First of all, it is released through foreign elements *within* the song's translations—such as the repetition of the Turkish "Üsküdar" in a translation from the Republic of Macedonia. But the remainder is also released through the film's act of exposing the songs as translations and confronting both the viewers and the people in the film with their foreign versions. Making the (Balkan) viewer aware of the song's translations is likely to unsettle the cohesion of the dominant discourse the song incorporates in every region.³⁶ The song's translations, then, operate as barbarisms, released within each national, religious, or cultural discourse. In this way, the discourses the song's translations inhabit are slightly deterritorialized and delegitimized as "original" or transparent. According to Venuti, when a translation releases the remainder, a major language is shown to be foreign to itself (1996a: 92). The song points to this inherent foreignness in each culture, because, as the film suggests, it arrives in every community from somewhere else.

By exposing the inherent foreignness in every community, the song's operations in the film problematize the assumed purity of cultural, national or ethnic formations. Iliya Peyovski, a composer in the Republic of Macedonia, refutes the authenticity of the "Macedonian" version of the song, claiming that there is no such beat in his nation's folklore. There is undoubtedly candor and levelheadedness in his claim that a "national" song is in fact foreign. He thereby seems to exceed the nationalist shortsightedness of other interviewees. Nevertheless, his verdict on this song as non-Macedonian because

³⁴ The man who starts chanting it, however, is unwilling to see that, and simply states: "Now, that one is our song!" He claims this version to be "theirs" as opposed to the Bosnian version, which Peeva had just played for him on tape.

³⁵ Venuti borrows the notion of the "remainder" from Jean-Jacques Lecercle's *The Violence of Language*. What Lecercle calls "the remainder" are the "minor variables" that cohabit in every language together with the major form. The remainder subverts the major linguistic form by unveiling within language "the contradictions and struggles that make up the social" (Lecercle 182; qtd in Venuti 1996a: 91).

³⁶ For the challenge the remainder poses to the unity of a dominant language, see Venuti 1996a: 92.

it incorporates a foreign beat, implies that an “authentic” and “rightfully” Macedonian version should be pure and devoid of folklore sounds from other traditions. The film, however, questions the idea of a homogeneous “Macedonian” culture (or any culture) by hinting, for example, at the tensions among the Muslim and Christian populations in the Republic of Macedonia. These tensions surface in the annoyed reaction of a taxi-driver, who complains to Peeva that she only films mosques in his country, thereby ignoring what he considers a crucial part of the Macedonian tradition (Orthodox Christianity).

Another way in which the film takes issue with the idea of a nation’s cultural homogeneity, is by recording different translations of the song within the same community. In Greece alone, for instance, the film records three versions: the first one is chanted by some old men in a café, the second is performed by the local singer Solon in a tavern, and the third one is sung by the popular Greek singer Glykeria during an open-air concert. All three involve completely different lyrics—their themes ranging from a love song to a poor man’s lament—and their performances differ in style. And they are all recorded on one Greek island, Lesbos.³⁷

By presenting three different translations of the song on the same Greek island, the film projects the heterogeneity of cultural forces within just a fraction of the same national space. In doing so, it suggests that national borders do not coincide with cultural borders. Thus, instead of delimiting national territories, the song’s translations become points of intersection of cultural forces that traverse national borders in ways that cannot be charted by official geographical divisions. The song thereby shows how the strictly defined national identity of Balkan people does not always coincide with their cultural identity. Cultural forces follow a different course from that of national borders and challenge the transparency of the latter.

The song does not only operate as a divisive force among nations. In a few cases, people present it as a unifying factor. Thus, an accordion player in Bosnia remarks: “This is a Bosnian song. It is so beautiful, I have no words. Everyone, Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, we all have liked and protected it because it is a nice Bosnian song. It brings East and West together.” Here, the song seems to unite various ethnic and religious groups. However, in his words I read a crucial condition, on which the song’s unifying operation is predicated: the song brings everyone together, from East to West, as long as it is acknowledged as a *Bosnian* song. As his statement suggests, transcending Balkan differences in a spirit of unity and brotherhood requires that neighboring groups acknowledge the primacy of the national “we” as a superior culture that has the power to unite. The final shot the film

³⁷ The film records different translations of the song within other countries as well. It presents two versions of the song in Bosnia (the love song “Anatolian girl” and a religious song) and two versions in the Republic of Macedonia (a song entitled “Oh my dear Patsa of Drenovtsi” and another version, whose lyrics sound a lot like those of the Turkish version). In Turkey, the film shows the song “Üsküdar” performed both as a pathetic song about a clerk loved by many women, as well as a military march during the Turkish parade that celebrates the fall of Constantinople.

takes in Bosnia shows a little girl chanting in a mosque: "Allah has mercy for all living creatures, but most of all for the believers." Here, too, brotherhood is conditioned on the superiority of Muslim believers. As these scenes suggest, whether we are dealing with a national or a religious "we," this "we" only accepts the neighbor as an *inferior* brother.

In the image of the Balkans that the film constructs, cultural or religious hybridity is more often than not considered as a source of weakness, corruption, and evil. An old man from the Dervish community in the Republic of Macedonia, for instance, attributes the war in Bosnia to the mixed marriages: "There are 750,000 mixed marriages in Bosnia. Catholics, Orthodox, Muslims, in one tribe, in one house. How would you know if a child is Orthodox, Catholic or Muslim?" Maintaining a pure ethnic and religious identity by keeping the neighbor at bay is for him a means of keeping the "Balkan evil" at bay. Cultural or religious "barbarization"—in the sense of contamination—is here considered the cause of the war in Bosnia.

Contrary to such views that advocate cultural purity, the film subverts the myth of the song's authenticity in each nation and shows it to be part of a bigger network of cultural objects and traditions. Through the intricate cultural reality exposed by the song's translations, the song draws its own cross-cultural map, which is not even limited to the Balkans. Its translations can also be found across continents. On "YouTube," for example, Peeva's film has sparked an array of testimonies and videos recording versions of the song from Balkan, Arabic, Asian, and Western European countries. The discussions about the particular song on "YouTube" as well as in various blogs underscore the song's never-ending process of translation and turn Peeva's film into an open project.³⁸

The translations of the song scattered around the world brings forth a notion of translation marked by travel and movement. According to Bal, translation, as its etymology indicates (*tra-ducere*: "to conduct through, pass beyond") emphasizes transformation, renewal, and displacement (2002: 64). As Bal argues, translation liberates the object from confinement and de-centers it, as well as its readers (64). The liberation of the object through translation is also suggested in the metaphor Benjamin uses to describe the relation between content and language in translation: "While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds" (1999b: 76). This happens because in translation the language remains somewhat alien to the content, while in the original language and content form an indivisible unity.³⁹ The image of the royal robe also suggests that there is more flexibility of movement between the robe and the body than in the case of the fruit and its skin. This grants

³⁸ Versions from Lebanon, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Malaysia, Poland, and even Norway are mentioned or uploaded, among many others.

³⁹ Bhabha also reads this metaphor in Benjamin as signifying the disjunction of the content or subject matter from the form of signification in translation (235).

a certain freedom to translation.⁴⁰ The fold, Bal argues, “theorizes and embodies a relationship without a center” (2002: 87).⁴¹ This notion of translation does not preserve an essence under its protean forms—its ample folds. Translation becomes a ground for aesthetic experimentation, on which infinite possibilities “unfold” for the relation between language (form) and content. These possibilities are neither bound by the original as their center and point of reference, nor based on a hierarchical subordination of language/form to content.

The song’s translations embody a number of these possibilities. But, if we follow Benjamin’s metaphor, what would be the song’s “content,” enveloped by the “folds” of each “language” (in a broad sense) into which it is translated? In his study of the travels of the Balkan ballad “The Walled-up Wife,” Alan Dundes argues that the question of the “meaning(s)” of this ballad—a case in many ways comparable to the song in question—can only be tackled if one takes into consideration the totality of its available versions (1996: 185). I do not share his view. The song’s translations produce diverse meanings through their lyrics and performance. Although looking for a common meaning in these translations might be an interesting literary or folkloric exercise, I argue that the song’s “content” should be seen neither as a universal meaning nor as an underlying pattern all the translations ultimately give form to. The song’s “content” or “meaning” should be described in different terms.

Translation, de Man writes, “is a relation from language to language” (2000: 21). I suggest that the “meaning” or “content” of the song’s translations is precisely this relation from language to language, translation to translation, performance to performance. In other words, its content is shaped by the kinds of relations, gaps, tensions, and affects that spring from the song’s displacement and travel. As these relations change, so does the song’s content. In one of the song’s translations, the song’s content as relationality and displacement has worked its way into the lyrics too. The most popular Greek version of the song is entitled “From a foreign land” (“Από ξένο τόπο”), and is a song about a young migrant girl, who has come (to Greece) “from a foreign land,” most likely from Asia Minor. By thematizing migration, this version of the song foregrounds the song’s own migratory nature: it is a migratory song about migration. This song is reported to have come to Greece from Asia Minor in Turkey.⁴² Thus, the song, just like the girl it talks

⁴⁰ What is more, in suggesting a natural relation between form and content in the original, the biological fruit-metaphor locates the original in the realm of *physis*, as opposed to translation, which is artificially created and could thus be seen as belonging to *techne*. A royal robe does not have a natural relation to the body it covers, but rather an aesthetic one. I would therefore argue that with this metaphor Benjamin places translation in the realm of art—more so than the original.

⁴¹ Bal’s interpretation of the fold as center-less is based on Deleuze’s Leibniz, in which “the fold represents infinitude by engaging the viewer’s eye in a movement that has no vanishing point” (Bal 2002: 87).

⁴² This version is reported to have come from Smyrna (now the modern city of İzmir in Turkey), a city on the coast of Asia Minor, which used to have a thriving Greek community until 1922. After the

about, is also a foreign tune, migrating into Greek space.⁴³ The girl's displacement in the lyrics functions as a metaphor for the song's displacement and traveling that is its content. This version, by suggesting the song as foreign and migratory, projects and releases its "remainder" in Greek culture. The song, as the title of this translation suggests, is always "from a foreign land": always a barbarian song, never fully domesticated.

Translation thereby emerges as a wandering or "errance," to borrow de Man's terms, without a clear point of departure or a final destination. In his essay "On Language As Such and on the Language of Man," Benjamin writes:

Translation attains its full meaning in the realization that every evolved language [...] can be considered a translation of all the others. [...] Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract ideas of identity and similarity." (2004: 69-70)

As translation theorist Emily Apter argues, this concept of translation marks a shift away from a model of translation that prescribes fidelity to the original, and "toward a transcoding model, in which everything is translatable, and in a perpetual state of in-translation" (7). This also corresponds to de Man's conceptualization of translation as a metonymical process. "The translation is not the metaphor of the original," de Man writes (2000: 23). The original and its translations "follow each other up, metonymically, and they will never constitute a totality" (32). Translation functions metonymically, continuously transforming into something else—not replacing something, as is the case with metaphorical structures. Accordingly, the song's versions stand in a metonymical relation to each other, a relation of *contiguity* rather than *replaceability*: they touch, complement, enhance or oppose each other. They are "neighbors" that co-exist, and even when they are in competition, they do not seek to eliminate each other. Their metonymical relation guarantees their movement: while the filmmaker may hope to come closer to pinning down the song with each visit she makes, the song's translations move forward and transform, propelling her to her next visit—to the next "foreign land." Every version is always "translated away," as it were, into further displacement (Flèche 107).

The filmmaker's choice to approach the song by means of a journey allows the film to capture the metonymical structures of its translations. However, the film is simultaneously concerned with issues of ownership, mastery, and appropriation of the other's elements as

Greek-Turkish war of 1919-1922, the remaining Greek population was forced to migrate to Greece as part of a population exchange between Greece and Turkey. In the film, the singer Glykeria performs this version of the song. I am grateful to professor Evangelos Calotychos for pointing out the title and importance of this song's content to me.

⁴³ Although a small fragment of this song is recorded in Peeva's film, it strikes me that neither the title nor the lyrics of this version are addressed in the film, despite the special interest its title obviously excites in the context of a film devoted to the song's travels. Due to its title, this version could function as a hitch in the film's representation of Balkan people's perception of the song as an authentic national product, strictly embedded in national narratives that hide its foreign traces.

parts of the self. The kind of translation the song's travels help articulate gets complicated as the song stumbles upon the politics of translation in the Balkans. In this politics, the song's origin is still an issue—the issue in fact. Ironically, if we follow de Man's statement that the original is dead in the "afterlife" of its translation literally, the people in the film seem to be fighting over a dead body.⁴⁴

Balkan politics, as presented in the film, resist the metonymical concept of translation I just laid out. Instead, they endorse a notion of translation based on replaceability instead of contiguity. Balkan politics appears to support a metaphorical conception of translation, perceived in terms of substitution: each foreign version of the song does not add something to the others, but steals something away, by trying to replace the "rightful" version. The politics in which the song is implicated seek to pin down each translation as a unique expression of a national imaginary. The song becomes a nationalist symbol. As a Turkish musician remarks about the Turkish translation of the song, "Üsküdar is a *symbol* like *şiş kebab* and Turkish delight." In Bulgaria, people identify the song as "the *anthem* of the Strandzha mountains," while others add: "this song is a *relic*. It is an *icon*" (emphasis added). In these statements, the song emerges as a metaphorical entity, captured through all kinds of semiotic signs: a "symbol," an "icon," a "relic" (which constitutes an index). In this politics of translation, the song's versions express a particular (religious, national or ethnic) identity, grounded in processes of inclusion and exclusion, rather than in metonymical processes of contiguity and relationality.

Balkan discourses in the film are not only governed by metaphorical relations, but even by tautological ones, which are impossible to disprove. "So *men are men*. Come on! Shoot more!" a man says to the filmmaker after singing the song during a Bulgarian national feast (emphasis added). To his remark, a woman in the same company adds: "Bulgarians have always stayed Bulgarian." A tautological discourse leaves no room for other discourses to enter and challenge its "truth." In both propositions, the interface between nation and gender surfaces, to confirm the self-identity of men and Bulgarians, as well as (implicitly) of men as Bulgarians. Although they have no knowledge-content, both propositions are true under any possible valuation: how can one disprove that men are men or that Bulgarians are Bulgarians?

The confrontation of the song's movement with these inflexible discursive mechanisms reveals the tensions between an aesthetic theory and a politics of translation. In Bulgaria, Stovan, an armorer Peeva is acquainted with, offers to drive Peeva to Petrova Niva, where

⁴⁴ The film constructs an image of the Balkans whereby history has taken control of the present. But there are also reactions to this tendency. A taxi-driver in the Republic of Macedonia reacts against this obsession with history: "All the Balkans live with history. Why look where Alexander the Great went? Was he Macedonian or Bulgarian? I don't care. [...] We are much too preoccupied with history, that is our fault. Now in the 21st century I need work, a good life, 15 days to go to the sea after I have worked for a whole year. I need nothing else." The taxi-driver's wish to overcome the Balkan family feuds about origins and historical ownership is correlated with the urgent need to start living in the present rather than fighting over corpses of the past.

the Bulgarian celebrations for the liberation from Ottoman rule are taking place. The film captures a shot of Stovan's car moving through Bulgaria, carrying a wooden cannon on its roof, which Stovan plans to use during the celebrations. The image of the moving car with the cannon on top captures the tension but also the inseparability between the song's theory of translation as metonymical movement and the politics of violence in which it is implicated. The image of the road, suggestive of the song's travel, merges here with the conflicts the song's movement generates. Thus, the song's translation is not just presented as borderless movement. The song's "migratory aesthetics" does not describe a "free-floating aesthetics that somehow transcends national borders," but addresses aesthetic practices that are subject to, and at the same time contest, specific cultural and political constraints linked to migration and movement (Durrant and Lord 11).⁴⁵ The song's nomadic course is interrupted by sedentary mechanisms and boundaries. The resistance its movement meets by discursive boundaries, as well as the resistance it offers to these boundaries, are both inscribed in the song's migratory identity.

The combined connotations of travel and violence in this image suggest that the song's operations do not reinstate an opposition between an aesthetics and a politics of translation. In the film, the two discourses permeate each other and tease out each other's blind spots. The metonymical relations of the song's translations expose the logic behind the metaphorical structures of Balkan politics, as they stumble against them. And the politics of translation portrayed in the film suggests that a theory of translation that would not engage the practices of translation inscribed in every singular object, would also be missing part of its value. In the film, the theory of translation I laid out is tested against a politics that tries to regulate cultural translation in the Balkans. This confrontation does not diminish the potential of the theory of translation the song inspires. A theory of translation does not have to be aligned with a certain politics. On the contrary, its operations are all the more political when they challenge specific political interests and practices. The transformative potential of such a theory can take effect only when it confronts these practices head on.

Based on the above, I propose the term "barbarian translation" to describe the following operation. A "barbarian translation" takes place when different "languages" (in this case, conflicting Balkan national discourses, as well as aesthetic and political discourses) come into contact and release barbarisms into each other. This confrontation can be signaled as "barbarian" in that it foregrounds the intrinsic foreignness in these languages—the fact that they can never be pure, self-sustained, and devoid of barbarisms. In the film, the song's centrifugal movement of de-centering, away from the original, challenges the centripetal force of nationalism, which draws everything towards the nation and does

⁴⁵ The term "migratory aesthetics" was introduced by Bal; see "Double Movement" 2008. Bal sees "migratory aesthetics" as a "ground for experimentation" that creates "possible relations with 'the migratory,' rather than pinpointing such relations" (2007: 23).

not enable objects to get away for fear of getting “contaminated or “barbarized.” The sedentary, tautological discourse of the nation stumbles against the song’s nomadic, barbarian force, and this collision releases barbarisms in both parties involved.

I signal the above process as a “translation” insofar as it makes foreign languages or discourses touch each other and be changed by their encounter. The term “barbarian translation” does not describe the end product of this operation (e.g., the different versions of the song), but the operation itself. Therefore, the agency in this case lies neither with the song itself nor with the film or the filmmaker, but rather with the operations all these agents set forth by the confrontations they stage.

I have chosen to use a linguistic notion (translation) to talk about a musical object. In bringing the “foreign” discourse of translation to bear on the song, my aim was not only to illuminate the song’s operations in different ways than a musicological terminology possibly would, but also to let the song’s “barbarism” challenge theoretical discourses on translation. Moreover, my preference for the term “translation” stems from the term’s capacity to convey the processes of movement, displacement, and de-centering the song is engaged in. As Bal argues, the aspects of the meaning of translation that emphasize dissipation, transformation, and activity (translating as a verb), make the concept of translation a model for “historical work on—as well as through—images” (2002: 67). The same semantic aspects also make the term “translation” suitable for capturing intermedial operations. *Traducere*, which Bal translates as “to conduct through, pass beyond,” could also signify the passage from one medium to another. Therefore, “translation” is a fruitful concept for articulating the song’s operations, which involve not only geographical, cultural, and ideological passages, but also passages from one medium to another (from text to music and back).⁴⁶

For Benjamin, translation is “only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages” (1999b: 75). This foreignness does not only pertain to the relation of any language to other languages but also to its relation to itself. This is so, Cadava argues, because a language changes constantly according to heterogeneous paths and is “always in the process of becoming different from itself,” and as such is never, in fact “itself” (17). Although each translation of the song subscribes to a different ethnic, national, religious, or cultural narrative, its performance contains hidden foreign traces—its remainder—from other translations. What is more, each version changes with each performance, as well as through its contact with other traditions and objects. In that sense, the song is always barbarian to itself: it might serve to solidify identities, but its own identity is provisional and precarious.

⁴⁶ Broadening of the term’s scope, as it happens here, also runs the risk of creating a notion that signifies everything and nothing. “Translation”—originally a textual notion—could lose its specificity by being applied to almost every process of adaptation, appropriation, reproduction, displacement, metonymic complementation or metaphorical substitution. By specifying it through the term “barbarian translation,” I try to retain its theoretical rigor.

The Host's Displacement

Being alienated from myself, as painful as that may be, provides me with that exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of my imagining and thinking, the impetus of my culture.

—Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (13-14)

In the last sequence of the film, the filmmaker finds herself in Bulgaria, in a place on the Strandzha Mountains called Petrova Niva, where many Bulgarians are gathered to celebrate their liberation from the Ottomans. During this feast, the song is also performed. When Peeva mentions to the Bulgarians present at the scene that the song is claimed to be Turkish, she is told by her own people this time that she runs the risk of being stoned. “I’ll hang the one who says the song was Turkish on that oak tree,” an old man cries out. In all other countries, the filmmaker was a foreigner/guest, and in some cases she experienced the transformation from guest to enemy. Now she is “at home,” in Bulgaria, and yet she still feels like a foreigner. More precisely, her position here is that of an insider who, by questioning the national “truths,” turns into a hated foreigner and runs the risk of being expelled from the community. In the end, Peeva poses as a stranger among the people of her native land, because her journey outside the borders of her national community has exposed her to the impossibility of a singular national truth in the Balkans.⁴⁷

Consequently, a shift takes place within the film and in the filmmaker herself: setting off from a secure position within the safety of her national boundaries, she eventually loses the ground beneath her feet. Her challenge to the song’s secure place within her own national narrative entails the questioning of her own identity, which has been (at least partly) shaped within this narrative. The song, which Peeva in the beginning referred to as “hers,” has now escaped her and can no longer be in her possession—nor in anyone’s possession.

Peeva starts her cinematic narrative in the mode of a fairytale, with her voice-over promising to tell us about the journey of a song, in the hope of untangling the truth about its supposed owners. In the final shots of the documentary the camera is recording a raging forest fire that lights up the night sky—the toll for the fireworks, gunshots and cannon firing during the celebration in Petrova Niva. This fire is disarmingly real, but also has an evident symbolic function, evoking the good-old stereotype of the Balkans as the “powder keg” of Europe.⁴⁸ The director’s voice-over returns here for the last time, announcing her disillusionment at the subversive turn her fairytale took:

⁴⁷ This part of her narrative contains allusions to the *Odyssey*. The homecoming of Odysseus in Ithaca is initially accompanied by feelings of estrangement and disappointment—Odysseus also feels like a stranger in his home.

⁴⁸ According to Doncheva, this scene in the documentary can be associated with the final scene of Goran Paskaljević’s film “Cabaret Balkan” (1999), also released as “Powder Keg” (“Bure baruta”).

My song changed beyond recognition. I was standing alone in the crowds waiting for the celebration to be over. When I first started searching for the song I hoped it will unite us. I had never believed that the sparkles of hatred can be lit so easily.

The voice-over often functions as an authoritative device of imposing coherence upon a filmic narrative. Peeva's voice-over can also be seen as an attempt by the "host" to retain mastery over her narrative and her object-guest (the song). But in its final appearance, her voice-over is there to concede defeat. Her attempts to lead her object in the direction she initially wanted—a song that unites—have failed. Her project and task in this film—her "Aufgabe"—turns out to be an "Aufgabe" in the second meaning of the word: an act of giving up. De Man translates Benjamin's "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" as "the defeat, the giving up of the translator"—a giving up of "the task of refinding what was there in the original" (2000: 20). Derrida complements this translation, by reading "aufgeben" as "to give, to dispatch (emission, mission) *and* to abandon" (2007: 200). This double, even triple, meaning effectively captures Peeva's project as an active, provocative venture, an act of travel and dissemination, and simultaneously a letting-go, a giving up. What she gives up, is the idea that a song can be a nation's "property." She also gives up part of her authority as a filmmaker. The song's foreignness invades her narrative and shifts its initial intentions.

To be sure, the director also plays a role in this change of direction in the film. Although she expresses her wish to see the song operate as a unifying factor, in her role as an interviewer throughout the film she often provokes hostile reactions and causes commotion, which all increase the film's marketability. In the end, the documentary still tells a story. And like every good story, this one also needs the element of *peripeteia*: surprising changes in the plot, without which it would probably be less gripping.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, her journey is fraught with the "excitement of discovering that what we see differs from what we thought we knew"—a feeling that helps us deal with cultural difference (Boer 2004: 195). I argue that in her attitude towards her object the director performs her own act of hospitality. Her hospitality is certainly not unconditional, but it has a less authoritative and intrusive character than the conditional hospitality with which many people in the film receive her and the song. The director comes to accept the "guest" of her film (the song) in its migratory nature, without wishing to own it. She welcomes the other together with the challenge of its difference.⁵⁰

As a result, her guest-object brings about a slight shift in the host's initial plans and a repositioning of the host. Sometimes it is the guest who "becomes the one who invites the

⁴⁹ *Peripeteia* is a term from Aristotle's *Poetics* and signifies a sudden reversal in a narrative, a moment when there is a clear change of direction. For Aristotle, *peripeteia* is one of the most effective means of working upon the viewer's emotions. On "peripeteia" see, for example, J. Jones 15-16.

⁵⁰ See also Derek Attridge's discussion of the act of opening oneself to the other (1999: 27-29). For Attridge, this act always involves a risk ("[s]ince by definition there can be no certainty in opening oneself to the other, every such opening is a gamble"), but one worth taking (27).

one who invites"—"the host's host" (Derrida 2000: 125). As Derrida writes in his *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, "[t]he welcoming one is first of all welcomed in his own home" (1999: 41). This marks a process of dispossession, "by which the 'owner' is expropriated from what is most his own," making one's home a transitory place (42). Ultimately, the home does not belong to the host, nor to anyone: "the home is not owned."⁵¹ In the film, Peeva and the Balkan viewer become for a while foreigners in their own "home," be it Bulgaria, another Balkan country, or the Balkans in general.

This notion of hospitality also has implications for the issue of ownership of cultural objects, which the film poses through its title. Instead of being owned, the film suggests that cultural objects such as the song can only be hosted in the course of their travels. The hospitality provided to them does not have to involve total appropriation of the guest by the host. The film opens the possibility for a less conditional hospitality, which recognizes the guest's right to be different. Moreover, it problematizes the opposition between host and guest and helps redefine the dynamics between these two roles. It deprives the host of the sense of absolute mastery and revisits the boundary between owning and disowning, exercising and giving up power, standing still and traveling.⁵² For Rosello, this fluidity is essential for the workings of hospitality: "if the guest is always the guest, if the host is always the host, something has probably gone very wrong" (2001: 167).

The feeling of displacement and the renegotiation of one's position in the world is one of the most poignant implications of a "barbarian translation," as I laid it out in this chapter. A barbarian translation shows our own language to be foreign, barbarian. De Man points out this function of translation in his reading of a sentence in Benjamin's text. "What translation does," de Man writes,

is that it implies, in bringing to light what Benjamin calls "die Wehen des eigenen"—the suffering of what one thinks of as one's own—the suffering of the original language. We think we are at ease in our own language, we feel a coziness, a familiarity, a shelter in the language we call our own, in which we think that we are not alienated. What the translation reveals is that this alienation is at its strongest in our relation to our own original language, that the original language within which we are engaged is disarticulated in a way which imposes upon us a particular alienation, a particular suffering. (2000: 24-25)

The loss of the "coziness" and "familiarity" of our own language, which yields a particular "alienation" and "suffering," is registered in the perplexed, defensive, and hostile reactions of many people in the film whenever they are introduced to "their" song's foreign translations. These translations force them to listen to their own song with different ears. It is not the same song they know anymore. Its familiarity is disarticulated due to the alterity of a different translation. This alterity does not only reside in the

⁵¹ Levinas's views presented in Derrida (1999: 42).

⁵² See also Rosello 2001: 18.

translations themselves, but is also revealed as an indispensable part of their own song. The “suffering” this revelation causes, reflects the “sometimes painful possibility of being changed by the other” (Rosello 2001: 176). Allowing oneself to be slightly transformed by the other’s practices, aesthetics forms, and values, is the precondition of the kind of hospitality the film proposes.

The operations of the song in the film do not prescribe an ideal model for dealing with migrating objects, but reveals the contestations and tensions between the aesthetics and politics in which these objects are involved. Moreover, they create boundary spaces, on which new relations can emerge in the continuum between sameness and difference, hosts and guests, neighbors and barbarians. By focusing on the movement, travel, and transformation of objects, subjects, metaphors, and practices, the operations of the song offer an alternative to thinking in terms of fixed identities, origins, copyrights, and predetermined positions. In so doing, the song’s operations suggest a method for the interdisciplinary study of culture, whereby travel becomes the “unstable ground” for analysis, and cultural objects become living beings, immersed in all the questions and considerations that our travels have led them to (Bal 2002: 4). This method is not embedded in the song as such, but emerges from the interaction of several agents: the song’s translations, people’s reactions, the narrative of the filmmaker, as well as that of the cultural analyst (myself), shaped through relevant concepts and theoretical approaches. Ultimately, the song is not a single object that travels around, but a protean force with no original form—it is itself a metaphor for travel and transformation.

The migration of objects to new cultural contexts often requires a small remolding of the aesthetic space of the self: elements in our everyday life, the things around us we love, the songs we sing.⁵³ These objects invite a reconfiguration of the same, so that it can “host” the aesthetics of a foreign object without fully absorbing its otherness. In the song’s case, the rules of the host (i.e., of each Balkan nation) demanded the appropriation of the object and its incorporation in national myths. The same ideological mechanism often demands the assimilation of migrants in the Balkans, in Western European countries, and elsewhere. However, the success of such mechanisms is never definitive or permanent, because migrating people as well as objects have a palimpsestic existence: they continue to carry foreign traces from their previous journeys. These “barbarisms” can resurface through critical interventions.

⁵³ For the multiple ways in which migrants shape the space of the host country, see Hoving, Dibbits, and Schrover (2005). Their study focuses on changes in everyday life, including practices, habits, language, and aesthetic judgments, under the influence of migrants in Holland in the second half of the twentieth century.

From “the Barbarian Other” to “an other”

The neighbor’s song is the song of the self, but not quite. When made to listen to “our” love song as the neighbor’s religious hymn or military march, the self-love “our” song embodies is “contaminated.” Consequently, people often construct the song’s difference from translation to translation as so absolute and impenetrable as the unintelligible mumblings (the *bar bar*) of the barbarian. But the film shows the song to be “barbarian” in another sense too. It foregrounds the song as a migratory object and allows it to release its barbarisms in each discursive community—its remainder. These barbarisms question the assumed authenticity of cultural objects and national narratives. At the same time, however, the film makes its interviewees and viewers face the familiarity of this barbarian song. In doing so, it creates the possibility of another relation between the self and its “barbarian” neighbors. The song’s familiar basis points to a commonality, which, if recognized as such, could turn the neighbor’s *bar bar* into a different, but intelligible idiom.

Facing the “barbarian” neighbor as a worthy interlocutor and even as a version of ourselves, instead of an inferior, incomprehensible other, is a challenge the film presents us with. Such a change of perspective is often resisted by the people in the film, as it exposes national subjects to certain risks: reassessing their sense of self, revisiting narratives that have fostered their identity, as well as negotiating a different relationality with others. The space of negotiation the song’s translations create stresses the shared cultural objects and traditions among neighbors, without, however, eliminating difference: each translation retains its “barbarisms” as reminders of the part of the other that the self will not be able to appropriate or erase.

By simultaneously engaging difference and similarity, the song’s operations converse with, and intervene in, theoretical debates about “the other.” The approach to the other that the song and its operations in the film help me articulate is first of all grounded in a distinction between the other as a *linguistic construction*, and “*real*” others, on which linguistic categories of otherness are imposed. The film, I argue, foregrounds this distinction without obstructing the contact between the realms of language and what we could (catachrestically) call “reality.” This is done by unfolding a case, in which a linguistic construction of otherness is strikingly at odds with the actual conditions of its material referents: those construed as absolute others, barbarians, are in reality our neighbors—people we happen to share a lot with.

The film does not only expose the political mechanisms behind constructions of others as barbarians, but, in my view, also manages to counter three theoretical pitfalls. First, by addressing the arbitrary relation between linguistic categories of otherness and “real” people, the film avoids essentializing the barbarian. In doing so, it speaks back to theoretical approaches or practices, which—knowingly or not—tend to conflate these two kinds of others (linguistic and real). The main consequence of this conflation is the

identification of a linguistic category of otherness with specific groups of people: the label “barbarian” becomes undistinguishable from specific subjects, which suffer the violence of this essentialist mechanism. The film’s approach, I contend, exposes this violence.

Second, the film manages to question the reverse theoretical tendency, namely *radicalizing* the distinction between linguistic and real others in a way that forestalls any contact between the two realms. Theorists and philosophers who adopt a radical distinction between linguistic and real others are often motivated by the desire to protect real others from the violence of the aforementioned essentialist conflation of the linguistic and the real. Poststructuralist and postmodern theories have therefore often endorsed the idea of an absolute Other, which always remains foreign and unintelligible and thus cannot be appropriated (and controlled) by the self. Despite the political and ethical merits of this theoretical stance (meant to protect subjugated others and minorities from (neo) colonialist acts of violence and assimilation), when such a theoretical approach is tested on political and social realities it can end up sabotaging the possibility of communication and contact with others. The idea that “the Other” remains inaccessible and thus cannot and should not be violated, in practice is often translated into a form of respect towards “real” others, which is premised on distance instead of proximity. In order not to risk doing violence to others, one misses the chance to engage with them in productive encounters.

The film addresses the neighbor’s barbarization and the relation between the self and its others as one of constant negotiation between alterity and similarity. In language, the difference between self and other constitutes a strict dualism. As a result, cultural theorists, anthropologists, or philosophers, often read real encounters with others in the same binary terms, and consequently construct relations of absolute difference between self and other—relations of one to zero. Nevertheless, in practice, as the film shows us, the difference between self and other cannot be expressed as a relation of one to zero. It is rather a difference of degrees, whereby the other may resemble the self, without being reduced to it.

While the film helps us realize that the linguistic construction of others as barbarians is meant to conceal similarity, it does not dismiss the idea of the other’s irreducible alterity. Rather, this alterity is relocated as a disruptive element within the self. This otherness is not something we should hesitate to address so that we do not violate it. Rather, we are invited to endorse it when it emerges in the form of “barbarisms” entering the discourse of the self and triggering operations of self-*alteration*. Therefore, the film neither focuses solely on theoretical abstractions of the other, nor does it resort to a reductionist conflation between linguistic and real others. Instead, it addresses the complex and problematic aspects of the relation between linguistic constructions of otherness and the people on which they are imposed. It thereby forms a basis for encounters between interlocutors or adversaries instead of barbarian enemies.

This basis does not guarantee “easy” dialogues. The third and final pitfall the film resists, is idealizing cross-cultural communication and exchange as an unproblematic and smooth process. In the film, failed or violent encounters outnumber felicitous cross-cultural contacts. The film does not subscribe to an ideal of brotherhood in the Balkans that bypasses the conflictual relations between Balkan neighbors. Instead, it focuses on the tension between similarity and alterity, communication and miscommunication.

The strange entanglement of similarity and difference embodied by the song confronts the self with its own slightly altered mirror image: through its translations, the song gives rise to the uncanny experience of the alterity in the self. Its travels in the film become a testimony of the fact that we can never own what we think belongs to us, including our languages, our cultural practices, our own selves. The figure of the neighbor is often constructed as “barbarian” precisely because the neighbor, being the closest to the self but not quite the same, carries the danger of exposing the self to the inconsistencies of its own language—its internal barbarisms. This exposure brings about a disappropriation of one’s own language and culture. Getting close to the neighbor thus involves the risk of suffering—Benjamin’s “die Wehen des eigenen.” But it also contains a promise for discovering new ways of relating to our home and cultural “belongings,” ways that are less territorial and more inclusive, less focused on ownership and more on hospitality. To say, then, that the sound of the other sounds strangely familiar, is also to understand that the sound of the self is at the same time the sound of the other—not always a barbarian, but simply *an* other, our next-door neighbor.

