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Hammond, Andrew

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# 'The danger zone of Europe'

## *Balkanism between the Cold War and 9/11*

**Andrew Hammond**

*Swansea Institute, University of Wales*

**ABSTRACT** This article argues that the Balkans formed one of the major sources of alterity for the West in the decade following the end of the Cold

War. Taking the place of the erstwhile communist Other, the region was constructed in journalism, political statement and travel writing as a zone of backwardness, barbarism and violence which threatened to engulf the civilized and democratic West. Using travel writing as a source material, this article argues more specifically that the ideological scepticism and aesthetic conventions of postmodernism have been an important influence on contemporary balkanism, as they have been on the representation of other non-western locations. Although the role of the Balkans has now been superseded by Al-Qaida and the 'international terror network', the post-1989 representational styles continue to have devastating political and economic effects in the region.

**KEYWORDS** 1989, 9/11, Al-Qaida, balkanism, Balkans, Cold War, postmodernism, representation, south-east Europe, travel writing

**Between the Cold War** and the current 'War on Terror', the Balkans formed one of the West's most significant others. The Balkans refers roughly to south-east Europe, including such countries as the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania and Albania. After the loss of Cold War paradigms, and the consequent shifts in the western imaginary, the Balkans were chosen as a little piece of Cold War Eastern Europe to be retained as the model of otherness, creating for a younger generation a similar style of alterity to that which their parents had in Soviet communism. 'The iron curtain has gone', as Larry Wolff (1994: 3) wrote during the Bosnian War, 'yet the shadow still persists'. Although other regions and other enemies were posited as the civilizational antitype,<sup>1</sup> it was the Balkans which engaged most fully the popular imagination and which, via a series of revolutions, economic crises, uprisings, wars and waves of asylum seekers, dominated prime-time television for over a decade. These events were not interpreted as an inevitable consequence of



political collapse and the region's entrance into a brutalizing global economy, but as some congenital bent for self-destruction. This article will analyse the motifs of this denigration through a survey of British and American travel writing from the 1990s. More specifically, it will argue that the forms and evaluations of postmodernism – the interpretative framework which dominated the late 20th century and which in part emerged from Cold War realities – has had a powerful, shaping influence on the continuing vilification of cultures such as those of south-east Europe. The article will go on to analyse the political consequences of denigration and, as the West acquaints itself with a territory vulnerable to external control, to ask whether representation has advanced the cause of western power.

It should be emphasized from the outset that the vilification of the Balkans is not unique to the post-Cold War period. In western cultural production, the evocation of a 'dystopian nightmare' (Winchester, 1999: 114) in relation to south-east Europe has had a long tradition, emerging out of the colonial discourses that informed western thinking from the Enlightenment period onwards. It was during the Victorian period in particular that the Balkans were allotted their disreputable role in the western imagination. At this time, the Ottoman Empire had regional dominion, although its weakening grip on the provinces and the rise of indigenous nationalist movements were raising doubts about the future administration of the territory. Fascinated by political developments, travellers began to view the Balkans not merely as an overland passage to the East (as had long been the case), but as a destination in its own right, combining social turmoil with a fine, rugged landscape which offered ample scope for masculinist adventure. However, their writings found little else to commend. Text after text from the 19th century depicts an abject and primitive realm, with peoples governed by chaos, turpitude and, as one traveller put it, a barbarous 'ferocity . . . inherited from their savage ancestors' (Creagh, 1875, Vol. II: 92). By the latter part of the century, when the nationalist insurgencies quickened, the representational paradigm began to revolve around four major tropes: obfuscation, savagery, discord and backwardness. So regular did the paradigm become that Maria Todorova, in *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), evolves the term 'balkanism' both to distinguish it from orientalist imaginings and to evoke the region's very special position in western imaginative geography. As opposed to the Islamic Middle East, with its status as external to Europe, the Balkans are the internal Other, a liminal zone which threatens the continent's orderly, progressive civilization from within the perimeters of Europe itself.

Naturally, this tradition has an impact on the balkanist practice of the late 20th century, and has influenced the ways in which contemporary crises are interpreted. But the current styles of viewing the region are composed also of contemporary influences, not least the despairing,



deconstructive cultural perspectives and artistic modes of postmodernism. The postmodern aesthetic is viewed commonly as a response to, and style of representing, the new social forms that emerged in western society after the Second World War. Here, the steady expansion of computerization, bureaucratization, consumerism, militarism and the pernicious imagery of advertising, television and the media are understood to have created a standardized and totalizing global network that greatly reduces opportunity for human agency and epistemological certainty. The arts which responded to such developments have produced some of the most oppositional cultural commentary of our age. In literature, writers have been concerned with an exploration of 'the dark side of postmodernity' (Arthur Kroker and David Cook, in Hutcheon, 1989: 223), a critical unmasking of the horrors that lie beneath the western self-image of benevolence, affluence and order. Indicative of the language's dearth of cultural signifiers, which has long conflated non-western territories, postmodernist constructions of the West simply draw upon Enlightenment conceptions of alterity to oppose the western collective sense of self, deploying the motifs and images of radical otherness to construct and condemn the era of late capital to which Enlightenment narratives have led. The contemporary novel's construction of the West, in short, deploys all the motifs traditionally used to denote the cultural Other. For example, the trope of civility is exchanged frequently for those of brutality and violence, and a vision of technological civilization, not as 'utopian *polis*', as William Spanos writes, but as a 'microcosm of universal madness' (Spanos, quoted in Waugh, 1992: 83). Similarly, notions of order and progress pass to those of poverty, entropy, squalor and degradation, all set in an irredeemably chaotic landscape lacking either order or community. At the same time, epitomizing the whole shift, clarity and rationality are replaced by obfuscation and paranoia about political misinformation. In Tony Tanner's (1971) words, this was a notion of 'society as . . . vast conspiracy, plotting to shape individual consciousness to suit its own ends' (p. 427), with postmodernist texts becoming 'full of . . . hidden dimensions, plots, secret organisations, evil systems' (p. 16), an evil so vast that there seemed a 'Manichean demon at work in the land' (p. 148). The mood was summed up in Lyotard's (1984: xxiv) famous phrase, the 'incredulity toward metanarratives', by which critical thought came to disbelieve the legitimizing narratives of consumer capitalism, and to disbelieve all other forms of ideological authority, associating them with 'totalitarianism and terror' (Waugh, 1992: 6).

The development of postmodern scepticism has had a huge impact on the way in which other cultures are constructed in the literary text. On the one hand, loss of faith in the grand narrative has undermined one half of the traditional binary, with writers now discrediting the self-idealization against which the iniquity of the foreign was gauged. On the other hand, a good number of writers have continued to deny any worth to foreign



cultures. Significantly, for many travellers in the early part of the 20th century, antipathy towards enlightened modernity often led to a romanticization of the pre-modern (or at least the non-western), with travel becoming a process of psychological liberation and indigenous culture a revered milieu of spiritual truth. At some point in the century, romanticization became outmoded, escape seemed chimerical in an era of global capital, and an acceptance of belatedness, of there being no other alternative to western mores, pervaded textual discourse.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in the travel writing emerging from the postwar climate, romanticism has been exchanged for the same denigration that marks commentary on the postmodern homeland. David Spurr (1993: 165–6) makes the point when he writes that the present generation ‘tends to favor images of violence’ and to expound ‘the notion that human chaos and disorder are somehow a natural condition of the Third World’. Mary Louise Pratt (1992: 217), speaking of the ‘ugliness, incongruity, disorder’ that is often projected onto postcolonial societies in the contemporary period, argues that ‘[t]he impulse of these . . . metropolitan writers is to condemn what they see, trivialize it, and dissociate themselves utterly from it’. As if wishing to harrow, to appal, to find relief from the boredom of the postmodern, travellers appear to be hunting down the most shocking aspects of their travelled environment, interpreting, mastering and condemning that environment in the same way that they condemn the mores of a hypermodern West. The only inconsistency is that, in the non-western context, this postmodern gaze deploys an interpretative framework similar in all major features to the racializing practices of both traditional colonial discourse and today’s official political rhetoric. In short, what seems radical and oppositional at home is profoundly reactionary abroad. Yet this paradoxical mode forms the paradigm of the age: tough, hip, worldweary, negotiating the traditional duality of home and abroad only to bring down both.

The Balkans received an exemplary instance of this conflation of postmodernist self-criticism and cross-cultural discourse. At the same time, the region suffered from a second aspect of the postmodern mindset, one linked to cultural scepticism, which was its inability to perceive a foreign crisis as anything other than a distant, even illusory, media event. Stjepan Meštrović has elaborated on this via his reading of western political and journalistic approaches to the Bosnia conflict in *The Balkanization of the West* (1994). Meštrović works from Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality, the notion of our contemporary culture as a society of the spectacle, or of the media, in which imagery is so prevalent that the boundary between fact and fiction is blurred and the individual becomes merely a consumer of simulations of reality, lacking in coherence, depth or ethical consequence. In a world where superficiality and scepticism predominate, the manifestation of sympathy and moral commitment in response to large-scale crises such as the Bosnian conflict is replaced by



voyeurism, or 'the business of war-watching' (Meštrović, 1994: 79). In fact, as Meštrović argues, the western treatment of Bosnia somewhat vindicates Baudrillard's thesis, with not only the media engaging in 'Balkan War-watching' but also political administrations spending '[m]illions upon millions of dollars' on 'United Nations *monitors*, European Community *observers*... Helsinki Watch *watchers* and Amnesty International observers' as part of the West's political approach to the tragedy, all 'while Balkan people continued to suffer' (1994: 79; emphasis in original). What compounded this distanciation from the suffering was the West's refusal (both in political pronouncement and unofficial intellectual output) to find virtue or credibility in any of the 'warring factions', as they were termed. As if postmodern relativism had entered western government, the discourses by which each party justified its position were all cynically deconstructed as forms of fiction-making, as a glossing-over of culpability, a process entrenching the official claim that all sides were equally guilty for atrocities. The outcome is typically postmodern: the vicarious thrill of the spectacle, yet with no obligation to do anything to help. As Meštrović asks with regard to the victims of Serbian aggression: '[W]hich is more remarkable, the explosion of the savage id in the Balkans . . . or the refusal of the world's television-viewing public to put an end to the barbarism?' (1994: 85).

The West's response to the Yugoslav wars was to set the tone for the conceptualization of the whole peninsula. The understanding of Yugoslavia as a collection of fractious, malevolent entities was central to the wider discursive recovery of Victorian balkanism, the assessments and accusations that marked western commentary on the nation quickly spreading to encompass all post-revolution societies, and helping to make the Balkans once again a byword for mendacity and savagery. Indeed, for western commentators working elsewhere in the peninsula, the representation of Yugoslavia formed a pre-arranged interpretative framework which needed very little modification when accounting for Romanian orphanages, Bulgarian poverty, Albanian anti-government protests, or any of those other post-communist crises on which western journalists and travel writers dwelled. It is this obsessive focus on the negative by the vast percentage of commentators, and its links with postmodernist modes of social criticism, with which this article will be concerned. Most importantly, it will posit the view that, whatever Baudrillard's notion of circulating fictions, the scepticism and voyeurism that drives denigration has effects in the material sphere, and the very real political and economic outcomes of representation will be analysed later. Indeed, while clarifying the links between contemporary representation and Victorian representation, this article will be concerned also with the connections between postmodernist scepticism and the discourse on the Balkans which has marked official political rhetoric since 1989.

Perhaps the return to Victorian balkanism is exemplified best by the 139



resurgence of the trope of obfuscation. Travel writing has always grounded itself in the twin motifs of travail and mystery, both essential components of the adventure narrative, and after the Cold War there seemed to be few parts of the globe 'where the truth was more complex, more fundamentally unknowable' (Hall, 1996: 8) than the Balkans. One text which demonstrates the evocation of enigma is Helena Drysdale's *Looking for George* (1996), a thrilleresque travelogue set in post-Ceauşescu Romania. The author's ostensible purpose in the country is a search for an Orthodox priest (the eponymous George) with whom she developed a friendship during an earlier visit in 1979, and she brings to the story an unrelenting air of suspense and mystery. Romania, she establishes early on, is a land sunk in 'remoteness, buried as it were in the back regions of Europe' (p. 11), where even the physical landscape conspires to bewilder and mislead, with its 'dark strange country' (p. 48) and 'sprawling' towns 'pitted with rubble and hoardings and nascent modernist blocks' (pp. 120, 157). The human landscape is just as bewildering. Drysdale claims that due to their constant surveillance by the secret police, the people are characterized by 'mistrust and paranoia' (1996: 185), not only 'scent[ing] a conspiracy around every corner' (p. 102), but also 'hid[ing] secrets of their own little compromises' (p. 64). To sum up, Romania is 'a Theatre of the Absurd' (p. 80), in which the 'entire population was slightly mad' (p. 231). In this evasive atmosphere, Drysdale's search for George – round institutions, monasteries, the family village – becomes mired in difficulty. As she puts it:

Again and again I blundered against Romanian subtlety. Hoping that sixteen months after the revolution I would be able to talk freely about George, I realised, often too late, that almost everyone had something to hide. Intrigue, bluff and double bluff: it was not just the recent stifling years of Communism, but centuries of artful survival under Turks, Phanariots, Habsburgs and feudal Boyars. This was an old people, old and sophisticated. (1996: 3)

Significantly, the population is essentialized both temporally, with their age-old mendacity unchanged after the revolution, and spatially, with this passion for intrigue exhibited by an entire society, not just the ruling system. In fact, the dominant sense of Balkan peoples in the period is of an undifferentiated mass, an 'Eastern horde'. This is confirmed by Drysdale's claim that the Romanian 'lack of individuality, the *we* as opposed to the *I*, was a feature of 'the general Orthodox make-up' (1996: 149; emphasis in original). She goes on to interpret George's crime (it transpires that he is killed by the *Securitate* for bucking the system) as a determination to gain 'personal freedom' and 'self-esteem' (p. 188) away from the crowd, to be an individual in the western, post-Enlightenment mould. In this way, Drysdale's search is less into George's personal history than into the nature of a society that denies its citizens their individuality, a quest with no final revelation save for the proverbial frightfulness of the region.



In other words, Drysdale's ability to cut through the swathes of obfuscation that the Balkans erect to thwart the rational westerner leads to the discovery of the usual regional attributes: chaos, savagery and backwardness. Of these, the motif of backwardness best demonstrates the regression to Victorian paradigms that underpins present conceptualization. The important fact here is not that the Balkans remain economically behind the West, but that British commentators, despite their air of liberal sophistication, are still prepared to condemn them for it. For example, when Michael Ignatieff (1994: 39) refers to 'the poverty, backwardness, stubborn second-rateness of ordinary Balkan existence', the judgement is not made against some fixed, external standard of development, but against the economic and social norms of the West, and the bourgeois West at that: a condition which Ignatieff presumably considers 'first-rate'. A similar distinction is present when Drysdale chides the 'shapeless clothes' and 'middle-aged hair-dos' of the women (1996: 192), when Georgina Harding (1989: 106) bemoans the 'ecological disaster' caused by outmoded industry, and when Isabel Fonseca (1996: 158, 98) – giving the country's backwardness a moral twist – denounces the Romanians' 'dishonesty' and 'fear of work'.<sup>5</sup> Such cultural snobbery is a direct descendant of 19th-century binarisms, although contemporary criticism is based so often, not on the absence of industry or manufacture (as it was during the Victorian era) but on the shoddiness of consumer items and related shortcomings in advertising, packaging and presentation. Western socio-economic conditions are still considered the norm, their absence a deviation.

A good example appears in Bill Bryson's sketch of a visit to Sofia in 1990, contained in *Neither Here Nor There* (1992). Eschewing commentary on the finer details of Bulgaria's industry and trade, Bryson's notion of regional backwardness is limited solely to the realm of shopping and to his thwarted attempts to consume. The focus emerges as soon as he enters Sofia, late one evening. Looking around the communist statuary and darkened streets (which typically draw comparison to some Orwellian dystopia), the author's major concern is the evident lack of consumer possibilities, with the bars and restaurants 'doing . . . a desultory business' and the windows of the shops 'dark' (1992: 119). On his walks the next day, the American's consumer gaze eagerly seeks out these darkened outlets, only to be checked by a terrible array of 'cheap-looking plastic alarm clocks' (p. 222), 'scraggy meat' (p. 220), 'cruddy teddy bears' (p. 221), 'mustard-brown' socks of 'thin cotton' (p. 221) and other 'unidentifiable odds and ends' (p. 222). With similar (mock-)horror, Bryson records the wretchedness of the commercial interiors, the shops 'stripped bare' and sunk in 'impenetrable gloom' (p. 221), and restaurants 'poor, plainly lit, with maybe just a factory calendar on the wall and every surface covered in formica' (p. 225). This kind of consumer reportage, of course, is travel writing in its most debased form, hardly elevated by Bryson's attempts to make the poverty of Sofia's shopping a running joke between writer and





reader: '[W]hen was the last time you saw a mono hi-fi?' (p. 221), he asks us with a grin. Such 'humour' peaks with his professed love of communist kitsch, an ironic mode of consumerist evaluation based on a self-image of sophistication and superiority. This is best seen in his description of a department store (visited during a trip in the 1970s but deposited in his sketch of the present sojourn as if time in Bulgaria were static) which failed to sell

a single product produced more recently than 1938 – chunky Bakelite radios, big stubby black fountain pens that looked like something Lord Grade would try to smoke, steam-powered washing machines, that sort of thing. I remember standing in the television and radio department in a crowd of people watching some historical drama in which two actors wearing beards that were hooked over their ears sat talking in a study, the walls of which were clearly painted on canvas. The television had – no exaggeration – a four-inch circular black and white screen and *this* was attracting a crowd. (1992: 218)

Bryson's approach is the postmodern equivalent of the amusement the Victorians would feel towards, say, 'primitive' agriculture or cottage industry, treating the region's merchandise as if it were an outlandish backwardness that entertains, but that also risks disbelief ('no exaggeration', he assures the reader). Needless to say, although the passage places Bryson *in* the 'crowd of people', he remains apart, the ironic, mocking postmodern *flâneur*, entering these contemptible spaces of consumption in order to seek out palliatives for his boredom. At the same time, we are not far here from Drysdale's 'Eastern hordes'. On the one hand, there is the undifferentiated 'mob' (or the 'queue', to give the thing a distinctly communist slant), 'scavenging for purchasable goods' and 'ready to kill to get one'; on the other, there is Bryson, the detached, mobile individual, dipping into the crowd but always able to 'retreat . . . to the luxurious sanctum of the Sheraton, where I could get cold beers and decent food' (pp. 220–5). Despite the text's odd moment of favourable representation, the local lack of purchasables Bryson considers so 'depressing' (p. 225) that he feels 'as if he could cry' (p. 222): 'Bulgaria', he concludes, conflating the act of shopping with life itself, 'isn't a country; it's a near-death experience' (p. 225).

If Bryson's emphasis on the backwardness of the Balkans was ubiquitous during the post-Cold War period, the location of discord was even more so. Whereas militarism and nationalism in south-east Europe were interpreted positively during the inter-war years, a sign of the region's heroic struggle for national independence, after 1989 there has been a return to the Victorian accusation of 'petty Balkan imperialism' – the viewpoint popular amongst reporters, columnists and even academics, as notions of 'ancient ethnic hatreds' and 'clashes of civilisations' come to stand in for genuine attempts to understand post-communist crises. The



approach has been the same in travel writing. Here, Romania is 'discordant, anarchic, demonic' (Maclean, 1993: 186); Albania is 'anarchic and fractious', with everyone . . . at war with everyone else' (Winchester, 1999: 164; Carver, 1999: 45); and Bulgaria is 'a tundra of human intolerance' where '[o]pen racism is practised' (Fonseca, 1996: 115; Smith, 1995: 11). There is no doubt that ethnic conflict has marked Yugoslavia in recent years. But how relevant to these events can the epithet 'Balkan' be, when most of the peninsula, including some of its most ethnically-mixed areas, has remained peaceful and when racism has burgeoned simultaneously in the West, its prejudice against the Balkans being only the most pertinent instance of its own ethnic intolerance? And to return to an earlier point, to what extent does the postmodern West's fascination with the spectacle of social breakdown determine the way that it overlooks the less spectacular manifestations in the region of that rectitude and tolerance which exist in any human society?

Of course, the country that would seem to justify the location of discord in the Balkans is the former Yugoslavia, as Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts* (1994) attempts to illustrate. This bestselling travelogue fails to find even the smallest cause for optimism in the region, with the author unearthing such an incessant round of strife and antagonism that any possibility of social progress or moral redemption is precluded. The Balkan peninsula, Kaplan pronounces, is 'like the chaos at the beginning of time' (1994: 4). The most prominent 'ethnic hatred' that he locates is the 'Serb-Croat dispute' (p. 15), although this is merely indicative of a wider problem, with Bosnia 'a morass of ethnically mixed villages', 'full of savage hatreds, leavened by poverty and alcoholism' (p. 22); Macedonia 'a power vacuum of sectarian violence' (p. 57); and Kosovo riven by 'violence' and 'racial hatred' (pp. 40-1). Indeed, so great is the presence of dissension in Kosovo that chaos is inscribed in the very landscape. In his prologue, Kaplan asks whether there is anything singular about 'the places where people commit atrocities' ('Is there a bad smell, a genius loci, something about the landscape that might incriminate?'; p. xxiii). The answer is found in Priština: the city, he claims, resembles 'a vomit of geodesic, concrete shapes' (p. 48) composed of 'jumble[s] of wooden stalls', 'messy jigsaw[s] of brown brick' and 'prefabricated apartment blocks that appeared to reel like drunks on cratered hillsides' (p. 41). Architecturally, here is all the unpleasantness, conflict and moral disorder that Kaplan finds in the human community, which is beset by sectarianism, alcoholism and physical violence and where, significantly, he never 'feel[s] quite safe' (p. 41). It is at this point, upon noting this mixture of essentialization and threat, that one realises how close Kaplan's mode of representation is to racism. If one defines the ideology as the racialized construction and negative stereotyping of a social collectivity whose innate shortcomings are imputed to present a danger to the self, then Kaplan's writing is exemplary. At many points in the text, he proclaims that the region's congenital evil, with its 'social



disintegration and triumph of violence and sexual instinct over the rule of law' (p. 6), offers demonstrable threat not only to his person, but to the West as a whole. 'Whatever has happened in Beirut or elsewhere happened first, long ago, in the Balkans' (p. xxiii), he asserts, before claiming that the 20th-century's major evils (terrorism, refugeeism, religious fanaticism, world war) all have a Balkan pedigree:

Twentieth-century history came from the Balkans. Here men have been isolated by poverty and ethnic rivalry, dooming them to hate. Here politics has been reduced to a level of near anarchy that from time to time in history has flowed up the Danube into Central Europe.

Nazism, for instance, can claim Balkan origins. Among the flophouses of Vienna, a breeding ground of ethnic resentments close to the southern Slavic world, Hitler learned how to hate so infectiously. (1994: xxiii)

The foolishness of this allegation aside, the important feature here is Kaplan's inference that the Balkan 'anarchy' which has troubled the West in the past, 'forming the radials of twentieth-century European and Middle Eastern conflict' (p. 51), will inevitably endanger the West in the future. The basic thesis is that the region is a historically determined 'time-capsule world' (p. xxi), governed by unruly 'passions' (p. 59) and 'ethnic hatreds' (p. 51), which have a habit of upsetting Great Power relations. It is a point that would not have been lost on his contemporary readership, at that time aware of the escalating war in Bosnia. To develop the thesis, he even represents the peninsula as the geographical zone where '[t]he tectonic plates of Africa, Asia, and Europe collide and overlap' (p. 51), driving discord ever deeper into the landscape and giving his argument a spurious geological angle. Kaplan has gained some notoriety in academic circles for his opinions,<sup>4</sup> and could be considered the extreme that a representational paradigm can facilitate. Nevertheless, the text defines the conceptual framework that the vast majority of writers from the period used, with the whole of the Balkans being seen as succumbing, ominously, to 'the regional disease of ethnic patriotism' (Fonseca, 1996: 61).

The last major trope of traditional balkanism, that of savagery, is an inevitable concomitant of dissension, and forms a constant in texts from the period. Robert Carver's *The Accursed Mountains* (1999), describing a three-month stay in Albania, is typical in its evocation of barbarism, cruelty and violence in the country. Ridiculing what he calls 'fairy-stories' about 'Albanian honesty', the author claims to find so much theft, murder, kidnapping, rape and beatings, and such a resurgence of the traditional vendetta after the collapse of communism, that 'there was an ever-increasing chance I was not going to get out alive' (1999: 52, 116). In this strained atmosphere, charged with 'imminent violence and death'



(p. 249), Carver returns to the Victorian image of the Balkans as a kind of Eastern frontier, a dangerous peripheral zone away from the civilizing influences of the centre. The town of Bajram Curri, for example, he calls 'the Dodge City of northern Albania', 'a bad-ass, black-hat cowtown' wrecked by 'gunfights, dynamite and blood feuds' (p. 249) and menaced by 'frontier lawlessness and violence' (p. 262). This depravity is not only manifest in common Albanians, but also lies deep within political life. From Carver's sketches of the past regimes of Ali Paşa, King Zog and Enver Hoxha, there seems no moment in Albanian history free from official brutality, and today's political system is seen as heir to that history. For example, political rallies are disorderly, politicians unruly, the ruling Democratic Party corrupt and manipulatory and their special forces intimidatory towards the opposition. 'Like the Ottoman gendarmes from whom they had inherited their traditions,' Carver says, summing up this cycle of official violence, 'the Albanian police had a reputation for beating people first, and asking questions later' (p. 161).

The trope of savagery also reiterates the fusion of inbred evil and danger that lay behind Kaplan's racist depiction of Yugoslavia. As Carver's historical sketches suggest, the 'lawlessness' that he finds is not the temporary outcome of the collapse of communism, but the product of 'long-established traditions', the country being 'heir to Levantine and Balkan ways' (p. 31). For the author, this rather vague phrase signifies the primary motifs of traditional balkanism, as well as the rather biblical iniquities of 'evil, corruption and sin' (p. 191), a remarkably old-fashioned portraiture that also informs his comparisons of Albania to such 19th-century imperial locations as 'Kafiristan . . . in the 1890s' (p. 257) or 'the north-west frontier of Hindustan in 1887' (p. 193). This social malfeasance is complemented by the second feature of the Victorian notion of Balkan savagery to re-emerge, that of threat. An example appears when Carver takes a crowded bus journey through remote country in the north. It is not long before he senses 'a groundswell of hostility' around him, and with the other passengers able to 'smell the dollars in my money belt', their only thought is '[h]ow to kill and rob me, and get away with it' (p. 234). Of course, this is a list of suppositions (not least the idea that if robbery occurs, murder will naturally be involved), and Carver reaches his destination safely. Nevertheless, one's impression of his co-travellers becomes based on exactly his suppositions: that these northern Albanians are all (potential) robbers and killers. As with Kaplan before him, Carver is keen to outline the kind of menace that the Balkans represent to the West, becoming particularly heated on the issue of economic migration from Eastern Europe. At one point, for example, pondering the wretchedness of Albania, he asks:

What could you do with a place like this? Even the usual authoritarian solutions that people on the extreme Left and Right advocate had been tried:



dictatorship, compulsion, forced labour. I felt that not only had I passed through a landscape of fifty years ago, with its oxen and donkeys, hand-hoed fields and vegetable gardens, but also a terrible vision of the future, of an exhausted broken, overpopulated world crammed with hungry, hopeless people with the ruins of failed industrial culture all round them. All of this within four hours' sailing distance from the coast of Italy. (1999: 140)

As the last line indicates, Carver's fear is of a 'slow, vast march of desperate people from the Third World to Europe and North America', a march that he likens to a 'beast which would in time overwhelm us and destroy us in its desire to become like us' (p. 259). This is the epitome of racist discourse: the terrible spectre of otherness 'bent on destroying our civilisation and way of life' (Said, 1993: 376). For Carver, south-east Europe is simply the closest manifestation of what he refers to as 'the invisible barrier between the Third World and the First' (1999: 329), that monstrous periphery endangering the metropolitan centre, producing unwanted fear and insecurity. When Carver – in an extreme but not untypical conclusion to his text – calls the Albanians an 'anarchic mix of smiling murderers and honourable kidnappers, hospitable rapists and elegant torturers, welcoming robbers and wife-beating family men' (1999: 337), the message is that 'fortress Europe' has to tighten its defences: we would not want these people over here.

It is this conjunction of savagery, backwardness, discord and obfuscation which has marked the British concept of the Balkans in the post-Cold War period, and which – with its admixture of evil and danger – returns the discourse to its racist, essentialist origins in the 18th and 19th centuries. So it is that much of what we take for empirical knowledge on south-east Europe, in our television broadcasts and newspapers, would not have been out of place in the most spurious of Victorian travelogues. The essentializations found in Carver, Kaplan and their contemporaries all have their roots in Victorian theories of race and morality, as does the frequent 'panic' induced by 'the danger zone of Europe' (Gill, 1990: 212; Winchester, 1999: 37). As with 19th-century balkanism, crucially, this discriminatory, hierarchical mode of continental geography also works through metonym. The construction is not nation- or ethnicity-specific but, via the deployment of the term 'Balkan', holds as its true object the whole peninsula; balkanism being that cross-cultural discourse which targets a collectivity of negatively-evaluated ethnic groups whose properties may appear at any one point across the region but are always characteristic of the collectivity as a whole. Moreover, the discourse exemplifies what Bhabha (1994: 66) terms 'fixity', a 'paradoxical' strategy of Othering which, in manufacturing 'cultural/historical/racial difference', 'connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition'. This is the West's concept of the 'eternal Balkans', always fixed and immutable, yet at the same time



always worsening, a persistently unprecedented barbarism evoked in a register mingling amusement, absurdity and absolute terror.

The post-Cold War travel writers have brought to this denigration all the determination that had marked previous stages of knowledge-formation of the Balkans. In order to confirm their viewpoint on the region, for example, such writers typically deploy quotation, synopsis and cross-reference to past periods of balkanism, constructing a rich textual apparatus which might appear to the unsuspecting to provide indisputable historical lineage for a discourse profoundly rooted in the contemporary. For example, Richard Bassett (1990) verifies Montenegrin savagery by citing Lt-Col. Barry's *The Gates of the East* (1906) and Winchester (1999) justifies his apprehension at entering Serbia by citing events from A.W. Kinglake's *Eothen* (1844). If intertextuality inadvertently highlights the element of *choice* that lies behind contemporary signification, so too do the routes the travellers opt for and the locations that make up their idiosyncratic mapping of Balkan 'reality'. Often deciding their itineraries before the journey has begun, with the assistance of previous travelogues, the imaginative geography of the late 20th-century balkanist typically rejects such frivolities as beaches and ski resorts, favouring instead sites of pollution, massacre, poverty and failed industry. In Romania, for example, the routes pursued by travellers such as Georgina Harding and Brian Hall are, for the most part, through industrial cities and the grimmest districts of the capital, with only the briefest depiction of the country between.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, travel writers are highly selective in their exposition of Balkan history, choosing not the more colourful, heroic or cooperative events to accentuate, but the most savage and discordant: those moments from the past which accord most with their view of the present. Sophie Thurnham's (1994) sketch of Romanian history, for example, is based almost solely on biographies of Ceauşescu, Vlad the Impaler and Elizabeth the Blood Countess, and Paul Theroux's (1996) historical Albania is reduced to Hoxha and blood feuds. With travelogues frequently being composed of the same historical sketches, the same routes, even the same cross-referencings, there appears little desire for originality amongst today's balkanists, unless their miserable outpouring of abuse in a supposedly tolerant age is felt to be sufficiently original in itself.

Alongside the more overt assertions of the balkanist are a whole host of silences, elisions, adumbrations and oversights which conspire to keep modes of interpretation other than those foregrounded in the text off the agenda. Nowhere is this more evident than in the current refusal to offer textual support to autochthonous national discourse. In past periods of travel writing, positive accounts appeared of the peninsula's growth to nationhood: its heroic endurance under the Ottomans, its struggles for independence, its military glories, its literary, artistic, linguistic and architectural achievements; of all those features, in short, which identify and valorize a national culture. This was particularly true of travellers'



enthused reaction to south-east European nation-building during the First and Second World Wars, although the trend also continued in response to socialist development after 1945. However, in the late 20th century, as the power of those grand narratives underlying western thought – nationalism, modernity, communism, romanticism – has begun to erode, scepticism has arisen towards the ideologies upon which such valorization was based. The cultural preferences, the belief systems, the human and social qualities, the very *language* through which travellers once viewed and constructed their favoured peoples, were unavailable to a post-romantic age; so much so, in fact, that there was little discursive material left with which to build a favourable mode of interpretation. As a consequence, travel writing was reduced to little more than an itemization of the worst aspects of regional actuality.<sup>6</sup> When one remembers that this very postmodern perspective evolved from issues at home – issues of corruption, dissensus, fragmentation, hyperreality, the instability of meaning and consequent suspicion towards metanarrative – the projection of that scepticism abroad would appear naively universalist, if not ideologically problematic. Even at home, the crisis of legitimation associated with the supposedly radical postmodern arts has proved questionable. As Marxists such as Fredric Jameson argue, not only has postmodernism been frequently complicit with commodification and the market, its denial of the narratives of emancipation as well as those of oppression also made it – in Bertens' (1995: 199) phrase – 'politically crippling', working to reinstall and entrench exactly the hegemonic power within western society that it reputedly opposed. When transferred abroad through such genres as travel writing, this radical criticism becomes even more spurious, the suspicion of metanarrative becoming the suspicion and opprobrium of other cultures. The deconstruction of national mythology that this entails, and the refusal to credit histories that indigenous peoples applaud, replicates traditional patterns of cross-cultural representation by refusing any worth to subaltern cultures and therefore refusing to challenge western power over such cultures.

And it is balkanism's complicity with western power in south-east Europe that has marked out the discourse as so pernicious. Into the vacuum caused by the end of communism, the Balkans have been reduced gradually to subaltern status within a western sphere of influence. Harold Pinter's (1999) usage of the term 'imperialism' in this context is not inappropriate. Successfully combining the neo-imperialist practices of economic hegemony with the traditionally colonialist strategies of military intervention, political interference and administrative supervision, the West has achieved tremendous leverage within the region. Among the numerous instances of direct domination, there is the controlling and overseeing of the break-up of Yugoslavia, the legitimizing of the Berisha and Illiescu regimes in Albania and Romania respectively, the attaining of direct rule across much of Kosovo and post-Dayton Bosnia,



the sizeable control of Balkan economies, and the pursuit of a wide-ranging cultural imperialism under the guise of humanitarian aid. With regard to economic domination, the West now controls a huge eastern market that stretches all the way from the former German Democratic Republic to China, pursuing policies that have not only increased post-communist penury but also actively manufactured the Balkans as highly dependent client states. This has been achieved by ensuring a large trade surplus in the region, by establishing protectionism against Eastern European products, particularly against cheap agricultural and industrial goods by which the West feared being undercut, and by pursuing unequal patterns of investment which overlook the more geographically remote Balkans for East-Central Europe (see Aldcroft and Morewood, 1995). The results of these tactics have been compounded by an increase in the debt burden to European Community creditors which was already high from communist times. Bulgaria, for example, inherited some \$12 billion of external debt, 80 percent of which was owed to foreign banks, and the refusal of its creditors to compromise has 'undoubtedly constrained Bulgaria's reform process' (Aldcroft and Morewood, 1995: 222).<sup>7</sup> This article is not arguing that the region is without internally-created social and political problems, but simply that the West's interference in the region has exacerbated, even created, many of what are interpreted as purely Balkan issues.

This economic and political will-to-power on the part of the West has been assisted by cross-cultural discourse – those images, registers and evaluations through which the West constructs all territories that it covets. As Homi Bhabha has written:

The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction. (1994: 70)

It is exactly this objective that such discourse has achieved for the West in the post-Cold War Balkans. Behind every western investment, loan, military action, diplomatic agreement, judicial regulation and electoral supervision lies a representational practice which, whether in travel writing, fiction, film or political pronouncement, scripts the region as a locale of such unnatural depravity that no other recourse is possible than to foreign rule. And the postmodern scepticism held by many commentators does not exempt them from this kind of power relation, with its denigratory approach unwittingly ending up very close to the official line that these were botched countries with bad histories, unable to administer themselves.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, postmodern travel writers make criticisms of the West, for which they feel little conscious loyalty. The West has been seen, for example, as a place where nations have had 'a far worse record of local feuding' (Morgan, 1997: 102), and where people are given to 'violent





crime' and 'racially motivated attacks' (Drysdale, 1996: 24). Yet such criticism is overshadowed by fault-finding of the Balkans, and in the absence of any study of how western strategy has affected the region adversely, the resultant image is of a civilizational Other whose problems are nothing to do with us and whose crises do not warrant our involvement.

There is another, more urgent, function that balkanism has had for the contemporary West. In a post-ideological, supposedly post-nationalist age, one could argue that the discourse has proved itself to be far more effective than any distant post-colonial alterity at maintaining western television viewers' adherence to national culture. The nightly broadcasts of Balkan chaos and savagery, of homes destroyed, of householders displaced, of the *civitas* besieged, of shells landing in marketplaces, indicated not only a highly undesirable condition in itself, but also a highly symbolic attack on the core values and practices of western society. The Yugoslav wars, in fact, were a particularly effective model of what could happen to consumer capitalism should the Enlightenment project collapse, epitomizing the chaos, the impoverishment, the lack of consumer power, the physical harm, the sheer discomfort. The horrifying sight of such values breaking down, as well as justifying western power over south-east Europe, surreptitiously divested western audiences of power, driving into them an unconscious loyalty both to those civilizational qualities presented as the antithesis of the Balkans and to the state system that preserved them from the spectacle they were witnessing. It was a process that combats or neutralizes postmodern scepticism, working on a deeper level where individuals, however sceptical they might continue to be on the surface, are taught to accept situatedness in modern, bourgeois society. In Foucauldian terms, the Balkans have been, like madness, criminality, disease, a spectacle from the social margins against which people at the centre gain definition and become individualized. This securing of loyalty to Empire (or its neo-imperialist successor) is derived from a style of representation which reformulates the old colonial dialectic: the Balkans lack, the European Union is plenitude, and the viewer is made to feel intense gratitude for being on the right side of the equation. To re-engage with Baudrillard's notion of spectacle, the viewer/voyeur is not merely in the business of 'war-watching', which suggests detachment from the spectacle before one, but in a damaging, tyrannizing relation with power in which attachment is the primary outcome.

To conclude, it may be that with the rise of the 'Axis of Evil' this usage of the Balkans is no longer required, that the oppositional vacuum created by the end of the Cold War has been filled with a more effective antitype. Despite south-east Europe's emergence from the former Eastern bloc, there is no doubt that the 'network of terror' is the antagonist that most closely resembles the old Soviet 'menace', the two being allotted such mutual characteristics as organized militarism, international chicanery,



high-grade intelligence and nuclear capability. Consequently, this new civilizational binarism has displaced the Balkans from the news, the region's crises being no longer of interest to a media that can find all the drama and spectacle it needs in the potentially endless conflict with Al-Qaida. Yet this conflict was not immediately available after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Chantal Mouffe (1994: 105) wrote in the early 1990s, western 'democracy' had 'been destabilized by the loss of its erstwhile enemy', and there was some urgency to reinstate stability 'by the creation of a new political frontier'. For this, the dusting down of the old Victorian Other of the Balkans proved efficacious, not least due to the region's geographical positioning *within* the continent of Europe, suggesting (with its populations of 'dud Europeans' and its 'disarming whiff of Asia' (Fonseca, 1996: 28; Whittell, 1992: 137) a close and imminent threat to all that western Europe held dear. Between 1989 and 9/11, it was the role of the Balkans to retain that crucial sense of alterity for the West until a more successful Other was found, a role that travel writing, political rhetoric and the media foisted upon it with considerable zest.

## Notes

1. These included South American drug cartels and a predatorial Japanese economy.
2. This belatedness, a fundamental feature of the 'post-culture', is summed up by Steven Connor (1992: 65) as the 'fatigue of the latecomer', who recognizes that '[e]verything is now organised and planned' in the postmodern West (Jameson, 1991: 309).
3. Fonseca (1996: 212) also terms Eastern Europeans 'badly dressed white folk'.
4. See, for example, Todorova (1997: 53, 119).
5. It is remarkable – to underline my point – how frequently travellers in Romania end up in Copșa Mica, a small, industrial town in central Transylvania which has the reputation for being the most polluted town in the northern hemisphere; far from putting travellers off, it seems to have attracted them.
6. An interesting example here is David Rieff's *Slaughterhouse* (1995). Although in the abstract, Rieff views the 'support of the Bosnian cause' (p. 25) as a just one, he is quick to deny full sympathy, claiming that he is 'intensely critical of the Bosnian government' (p. 25), that the Bosnian military has a 'lawless and brutal character' (p. 132), and even that he is 'bored and exasperated by the way the Bosnians talked . . . about themselves' (p. 26).
7. Aldcroft and Morewood go on to say that '[a]t a time of recession and rising unemployment, the threat of competition from the East clearly disturbs the members of the EC', and to foresee the implementation of 'quotas to restrict the increasing competition posed by low-cost East European goods' (1995: 223). Similarly, Susan Woodward (1995: 15) locates the source of the Yugoslav crisis in the country's inability 'to resolve a foreign debt crisis' which, through the 1980s, was producing poverty, recession and regional conflicts over dwindling economic resources.



8. This is exacerbated by some travellers actually advocating western expansionism. Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*, for example, the text which had so denigrated Yugoslavia, views Romania similarly as a place of corruption, poverty and ethnic violence, and contends that 'German economic imperialism', by its replacement of Soviet influence in the region, 'offered the most practical and efficient means of bringing free enterprise, democracy, and the other enlightened traditions of the West' (Kaplan, 1994: 180). Similarly, Hall puts into the words of a Yugoslav interviewee the hope 'that America will come and occupy this country, and write a constitution for us as they did for Japan after World War II' (Hall, 1996: 402).

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**Biographical note**

Andrew Hammond is a lecturer in 20th-century literature at the Swansea Institute, University of Wales. In both teaching and research, he has pursued interests in modernism, identity, exile and cultural representation, particularly in the genres of prose fiction and travel writing. He has published a number of articles on travel writing and the Balkans, and is the editor of *The Balkans and the West: Constructing the European Other, 1945–2003* (Ashgate, 2004). He is currently editing *Cold War Literature* (Routledge, forthcoming). ADDRESS: Faculty of Humanities, Swansea Institute, University of Wales, Townhill Road, Swansea SA2 0UT, Wales, UK. [email: ahammond@mail5.freemove.co.uk]