

Of Omniscient Fish and Socialist Utopias: Emir Kusturica's Intermedial Borrowing from Andrei Platonov in *Arizona Dream* and *Underground*¹

Originally published in: *Zeitschrift für Slavische Philologie*, 77(2), 2021, pp. 417-461.

This is a film about a man and a fish
This is a film about [a] dramatic relationship between man and fish
The man stands between life and death
The man thinks
The horse thinks
The sheep thinks
The cow thinks
The dog thinks
The fish doesn't think
The fish is mute, expressionless
The fish doesn't think because the fish knows everything
The fish knows everything²

At the beginning of Emir Kusturica's movie *Arizona Dream* (1993), the protagonist Axel Blackmar (Johnny Depp) explains why he has a special fondness for fish:

¹ This article was written within the project "Im Land der Bauernutopie: Imaginationen traditionaler Gemeinschaft in der russisch-sowjetischen Literatur der 1910er bis 1930er Jahre," funded by a SNSF Doc.CH grant. I would hereby like to acknowledge my indebtedness to the many people who have contributed to this article with advice and feedback, most prominently Jens Herlth, Thomas Grob, Christian Zehnder, Alexei Evstratov, Anna Hodel, Gunnar Lenz, and Clea Wanner at my host universities of Fribourg and Basel. I would further like to thank Kornelija Ićin and Clemens Günther, as well as the two anonymous reviewers for their most useful remarks, and Alaina Janack for the proofreading. I presented some ideas that found their way into this article at the virtual meeting of Junges Forum Slavische Literaturwissenschaft in September 2020.

² Song *This is a Film*, from the soundtrack of *Arizona Dream* (1993) by Emir Kusturica, music by Goran Bregović, lyrics by Emir Kusturica, vocals by Iggy Pop.

People think that fish are stupid, but I was always sure that they weren't, because they know when to be quiet and it's people that are stupid and fish that know everything, and don't need to think. (Kusturica 1993a, 00:07:20)

The same idea appears in the movie's soundtrack, where Iggy Pop sings the lyrics written by Emir Kusturica, cited in this article's epigraph: "The fish doesn't think because the fish knows everything" (Iggy Pop, Bregović 1993). Seventeen years after the release of *Arizona Dream*, this fish imagery comes up in an interview with Kusturica for the Russian newspaper *Delovoi Peterburg*:

[Shnurenko:] Говоря о рыбе – ее образ есть в ваших фильмах начиная с самых ранних...

[Kusturica:] Это русский писатель Андрей Платонов! В книгах Платонова есть очень поэтичная идея, которую я разработал в «Аризонской мечте». В одном из его романов главный герой говорит о том, как рыбы влияют на человечество. Рыбы понимают мир гораздо лучше нас, но они очень мудры и не хотят рассказывать об этом никому. Я же говорю – на меня очень сильно подействовала русская культура! Особенно те ее деятели, которые жили во время Октябрьской революции.³ (Shnurenko 2010)

The novel Kusturica refers to is *Chevengur* by the Russian-Soviet writer Andrei Platonov (1899–1951), written between 1926 and 1928.⁴ In this novel, Zakhar Pavlovich, a solitary landless peasant (бобыль), mechanic and inventor of useless objects, recounts what the fisherman Dvanov once told him:

³ [Shnurenko:] "Speaking of fish—this figure is in your films, starting from the very earliest..."
[Kusturica:] "This is the Russian writer Andrei Platonov! In Platonov's books, you find this very poetic idea, which I developed in 'Arizona Dream.' In one of his novels, the protagonist speaks of how fish affect humankind. Fish understand the world much better than we do, but they are very wise and do not want to tell anyone about it. I'm telling you, I'm very much influenced by Russian culture! Especially by those cultural figures who lived during the October Revolution." Unless noted otherwise, all translations into English are mine (E.F.).

⁴ I owe thanks for the discovery to my student Aurore Favre, a Kusturica aficionado who stumbled upon this intermedial relationship when reading *Chevengur* in the context of our seminar on utopia and dystopia in Russian literature.

Гляди – премудрость. Рыба между жизнью и смертью стоит, оттого она и немая и глядит без выражения; телок ведь и тот думает, а рыба нет – она все уже знает.⁵ (Platonov 2011a, 15)

After this, the fisherman drowned himself in order to discover the secret of death.

Kusturica's affinity for Russian literature and culture is well-known.⁶ Nevertheless, this particular intermedial borrowing, as well as Kusturica's insistence on it, raises a number of questions. How did this early Soviet Russian novel find its way into an early-1990s film, set in the USA and directed by a Yugoslav(-Serbian-Bosnian)⁷ director? What did it mean when Kusturica read and quoted Platonov in the context of Yugoslavia's breaking apart and descending into war? And why did Kusturica express his emphasis on Platonov in 2010, 17 years after *Arizona Dream*? Most importantly, the intermedial borrowing invites us to take a closer look at possible traces of Platonov in Kusturica's films, and at the new insights into Kusturica's artistic world these might open.

In fact, the connection Kusturica establishes between his and Platonov's work might come as a surprise at a first glance, considering the excessive vitality of the former's films and the grim morbidity of the latter's prose. Moreover, Platonov's novel describes the particular atmosphere in his home country shortly after the October Revolution and during the time of the New Economic Policy, which has seemingly little to do with Kusturica's *Arizona Dream*, set in New York, Arizona, and Alaska in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, a closer examination of Kusturica's intermedial borrowings from Platonov reveals striking similarities between the two. This article attempts to offer an answer to these questions, because notwithstanding Kusturica's direct reference to Platonov in the 2010 inter-

⁵ “Look—there's wisdom! A fish stands between life and death, so that he's dumb and expressionless. I mean even a calf thinks, but a fish, no. It already knows everything.” (Platonov 1978, 6).

⁶ Some examples: Kusturica has borrowed from Soviet film, as from Andrei Tarkovskii (Jordanova 2002, 139) or Aleksandr Dovzhenko (Bertellini 2015, 135); he has been inspired by writers such as Fedor Dostoevskii and Isaac Babel (Jordanova 2002, 83, 93), and he lists Nikolai Gogol' and Anton Chekhov among his favorite authors (Jordanova 2002, 130).

⁷ Kusturica still referred to himself as Yugoslav in 1991–1992, as he was filming *Arizona Dream*, and clearly plays with the idea of “Yugoslavism” in *Underground*; for an explanation of Kusturica's continuous use of the term, cf. Bertellini 2015, 12.

view,⁸ no one has so far examined this intermedial relationship and its possible implications more thoroughly.⁹ As I will show, we can observe traces of Platonov's *Chevengur*—and possibly his subsequent shorter novel (*povest'*) *Kotlovan* (*The Foundation Pit*, written 1930)—not only in *Arizona Dream*, but also in Kusturica's following movie *Underground* (1995), which not only takes up on *Arizona Dream*'s fish imagery, but also continues several of the questions raised in his preceding film. Moreover, the exploration of this intermedial relationship expands to a third instance: the link between Kusturica and Platonov repeatedly refers back to Dostoevskian undercurrents to their works.

Platonov's prose and Kusturica's films show many common themes and motifs, such as an interest in coming of age, orphanhood, family-state metaphors, or an abundance of animals. While I will partly touch upon these subjects, my article will, however, focus mainly on one particular commonality between Platonov and Kusturica: their interest in utopian thought, in its most different form, content, and mode of expression. Their fascination for utopia draws from the same three different backgrounds: from eschatological thought, particularly with a Christian subtext, from nature philosophy as well as from popular-folkloric utopianisms. These three spheres will reappear during my discussion of the commonalities between Platonov's literature and Kusturica's films. Most central will be how both Platonov and Kusturica portray the utopia of socialism, which is one of the different ways in which their oeuvre reaches out to Dostoevskian thought. In fact, Dostoevskii's, Platonov's, and Kusturica's stances toward utopia as well as toward socialism follow similar impulses: all three of them flirted with socialism at some point in (or throughout) their lives and oeuvres, and their fascination for utopian thought runs along the axis of conservative, past-oriented utopia in certain similar ways.

First, I will go back to the fish in *Chevengur* and *Arizona Dream* and look at its symbolic meaning. This will open the discussion on the central theme of death and resurrection, connected both to a

⁸ The interview even made it into the Wikipedia entry on the soundtrack of *Arizona Dream*: the article refers to the novel *Chevengur* and links the interview cited above (*Arizona Dream* (Soundtrack)).

⁹ Only one scholarly contribution mentions the reference to Platonov, but does not go into more detail (Nazarycheva, Ovcharova, and Skvortsova 2017, 54).

biblical and a nature-philosophical background, as well as on the role of dreams, more precisely: of dreams' interaction with utopia. Second, turning toward *Underground*, I will address a central similarity between the Soviet writer and the Yugoslav filmmaker: their blending of socialism and eschatological thought. Third, I will take a closer look at *Underground*'s final scene in light of its possible Platonovian influences, suggesting that Crni—one of the protagonists in Kusturica's *Underground*—may have found, in a way, what the curious fisherman in *Chevengur* had been looking for: a utopian Chevengur on the Danube. And in the end, coming back to the image of omniscient fish once more, I will turn toward the problem of language and thinking in light of utopian thought, which will expose the meta-utopian nature of both Platonov's prose and Kusturica's films. Throughout my investigation, I will repeatedly come back to Kusturica's use of animal tropes, which serve, I suggest, five different functions: animals appear as intermedial references; they refer to the religious as well as to the nature-philosophical background to Kusturica's cinematic world; they serve as allegories; and they are used to create comic relief throughout his films.

Before I start my analysis, I will take a look at the Yugoslav (and international) reception of Platonov in the 1980s, which forms the background for understanding Kusturica's intermedial references. After this, I will comment on the conceptual aspects of the intermedial relationship between Kusturica's films, Platonov's texts, as well as the Dostoevskian subtexts underlying them both.

Reading Platonov in Late Yugoslavia

Kusturica's reception of Platonov most likely occurred in the mid-1980s, when Platonov's *Chevengur* was published in Serbo-Croatian in a translation by Milivoje Jovanović in 1984 (Platonov 1984), followed by Jasmina-Ina Krstanović's translation of Platonov's subsequent shorter novel *Kotlovan* next year (Platonov 1985). Both texts could not appear during the author's lifetime. *Chevengur* was published 1972 in a slightly shorter version in Paris (which is the version that got subsequently translated into several languages), and the full novel appeared 1988 in the Soviet Union; *Kotlovan* came out for the first time in London in 1969, the English translation was published in Ann Arbor in 1973, before the novel appeared in the Soviet Union as late as 1987 (Malygina 2011, 575). Even though Kusturica knows Russian and might

have read the Russian original from 1972, it was most likely the translation of *Chevengur*, and possibly *Kotlovan*, that brought the author to his attention. Moreover, Jovanović's translation of *Chevengur* is preceded by an extensive foreword (51 pages), in which Jovanović situates the novel in its historical and cultural context and comments on many of the aspects that I have found to be strikingly similar between Platonov's writing and Kusturica's filmmaking. The post-Yugoslav Platonov reception might also account for Kusturica's emphasis on *Chevengur* 17 years after the release of *Arizona Dream*: the Jovanović translation of *Chevengur* was reissued in 2008 (now under the title *Poslednja komuna* [*The Last Commune*], Platonov 2008), and Kornelija Ičin, Jovanović's successor as Belgrade professor for Russian literature, had sent Kusturica a copy through a student of hers who was at that time writing a thesis on Kusturica and Russian literature (Ičin 2020).

Among Yugoslavia's intellectuals, the 1984 publication of *Chevengur* caused somewhat of a conspicuous absence of reaction. Kornelija Ičin, back then second-year student of Jovanović, recalls:

On [Jovanović] mi je kasnije govorio kako je [knjiga *Čevengur*] bila obavijena velom ćutanja, što je on tumačio strahom mnogih da komentarišu tu knjigu ili nespremnošću da o njoj bilo šta napišu pošto su se paralele sa našom stvarnošću nametale same od sebe.¹⁰ (Ičin 2020)

Indeed, even though the novel was published by the renowned Belgrade publishing house Nolit, to my knowledge not a single review appeared in the country's leading literary journals.¹¹ The only group of literary scholars who actively worked on Platonov was the Zagreb group around the journal *Pojmovnik ruske avangarde* [*Glossary of the Russian Avantgarde*], edited by Aleksandar Flaker and Dubravka Ugrešić: an extensive article on Platonov's

¹⁰ "He [Jovanović] later told me that [the book *Chevengur*] was shrouded in a veil of silence, which he interpreted as the fear of many to comment on the book or the unwillingness to write anything about it, as parallels with our reality imposed themselves."

¹¹ I have checked all issues from *Delo*, *Književne novine*, and *Književna reč* from 1984 to 1986/1987 and have not found a single review of *Chevengur*. In fact, the only mention the novel received is in a list of "bibliographic selections from this year's book fair" in late 1984 (Bibliografski izbor knjiga 1984). *Iskop*, the *Kotlovan* translation from 1985, received two reviews (Strnčević 1987; Tomašević 1987).

Chevengur written by Višnja Rister was included in the 1987 volume (Rister 1987), and Platonov was mentioned in several articles that appeared in the *Pojmovnik* (Smirnov 1984; Kosanović 1985; Hansen-Löwe [sic] 1989; Ugrešić 1990). The absence of reviews of and reactions to *Chevengur*'s Serbo-Croatian translation, however, indicates that an open and in-depth reception of Platonov was mostly reduced to the field of Russian studies. Kornelija Ičin links this to two factors: on the one hand, Platonov is a complex writer, and his oeuvre was not accessible to the mainstream reading public. On the other hand, the intellectual circles which did read and understand Platonov seem to have been stunned by the parallels to mid-1980s Yugoslav reality (Ičin 2020).

Indeed, by irony of fate, it appears that the particular circumstances of the novel's publication in Yugoslavia created a mirror effect. *Chevengur*, on the one hand, depicts Russia before, during, and shortly after the Revolutions, during a time coined by a constantly looming sense of crisis, violence, and fear of the future. At the same time, however, this era is the height of utopia and the belief in a possible utopian socialist world waiting just around the corner. *Chevengur*'s appearance in Yugoslavia, on the other hand, took place in a time of crisis for the socialist utopia, both internationally as well as in Yugoslavia. In the Soviet Union, *glasnost*' and its rethinking of cultural and social values challenged the utopian presuppositions underlying Soviet ideology—a process that was to a great deal linked to the appearance of previously unpublished Soviet-era utopian, dystopian or meta-utopian works of fiction, such as Platonov's *Chevengur* and *Kotlovan* (Clowes 1993, 40). The delayed reception of these works in the late 1980s and early 1990s sparked an enormous interest in Platonov's writing both in the Soviet Union and beyond, developing at different paces, determined through the availability of the texts. Around this time, Platonov scholarship increasingly turned away from the earlier politics- and ideology-focused readings and toward a de-ideologization and an interest in the mythopoetics and the philosophical questions raised in Platonov's writing (Dhooge, Langerak 2013a, 1).¹² Moreover, for Kusturica and other Yugoslav readers of Platonov, Platonov's view

¹² For a thorough overview on the changing Platonov reception, cf. Ben W. Dhooge's and Thomas Langerak's special issue of *Russian Literature* (2013b).

on utopia must have produced a special sense of urgency: *Chevangur*'s critical examination of the utopia of socialism in regard to the early Soviet Union mirrored the sense of instability and insecurity post-Titovian Yugoslavia was facing, suffering from economic decline and increasing political instability (Ićin 2020).¹³ In fact, this mirror effect is completed in the early 1990s when Kusturica films *Arizona Dream*: while Platonov witnesses the Russian revolutions, Civil War, and the violent transition from tsarist to socialist Russia, Kusturica lives through the demise of Yugoslavia, its breaking apart into several successor states, and its descent into war. While the former takes part in building the world's first socialist state and participates in his era's utopian reveries, the latter thus stands at the very end of socialism in Europe, and at the time when utopia was declared dead after the end of the Cold War.¹⁴ This is the context in which we must situate Kusturica's filmic responses to Platonov, both in regard to his era's scrutinization of utopian thought as well as in relation to the "platonovovedenie" of his time.

From Dostoevskii through Platonov to Kusturica and Back

I look at Kusturica's intermedial borrowings as a conscious acquisition of certain ideas or concepts that he takes from Platonov, as well as from Dostoevskii, directly—Kusturica being an avid reader of Dostoevskii¹⁵—as well as, we may assume, through his reading of Platonov. At the same time, following a poststructuralist approach, I propose to also look at this intermedial link from the other side, that is, to read Platonov's texts through Kusturica's films. This way, I want to take a look not only at how Kusturica's reframing of Platonov provides new information on the point of view of the Yugoslav or European reader of Platonov and the viewer of Kusturica of the late 1980s and early 1990s, but at how, through this point of view, the intermedial connection might also shed a new light on Platonov's

¹³ For more on Yugoslavia's crisis in the 1980s, see Calic 2019, 251–283.

¹⁴ Most prominently by thinkers such as Francis Fukuyama (1989) or Boris Groys (1992).

¹⁵ Kusturica had even planned to make a screen adaptation of Dostoevskii's *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* [*Crime and Punishment*], but the plan never materialized (Iordanova 2002, 93); the story should have been relocated to Brighton Beach, with Johnny Depp starring as Raskol'nikov, who would have been a bass player in a punk band (Bertellini 2015, 148).

text itself. Thus, in Julia Kristeva's words, I consider Platonov's text in the light that "toute séquence est doublement orientée : vers l'acte de la réminiscence (évocation d'une autre écriture)" —here: Dostoevskii—"et vers l'acte de la sommation (la transformation de cette écriture)"¹⁶—here: Kusturica (Kristeva 1969, 181–182).¹⁷ The same way, at the same time, Dostoevskii's writing itself evoked previous writing, and Kusturica's film is itself open toward the next act of transformation.

Through citing Platonov and taking up on Dostoevskian subtexts, Kusturica reframes the ideas and concepts from these two Russian writers not only in a new cultural-historical artistic setting, but also in a new medium: he takes them from Platonov's early-socialist (and, indirectly, Dostoevskii's 19th-century) Russian literature and transposes them to early/mid-1990s American and post-Yugoslav cinema. I use the term "intermediality" because of the transition that occurs from literature to film,¹⁸ even though the transition process itself does not stand at the center of my attention. This complex question goes beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁹ I will touch upon questions of mediality only in two regards throughout my discussion of Kusturica and Platonov:

¹⁶ "Every sequence has a double orientation: towards the act of reminiscence (the evocation of another writing) and towards the act of summation (the transformation of this writing)." (Kristeva 1998, 30).

¹⁷ Or as Renate Lachmann described it: „Es scheint, als affiziere die im Phänotext durch die Intertextualität gewonnene Sinnkomplexion auch den Referenztext, als erfasse der sinndynamisierende Prozeß beide Texte, die evozierend-evoziert miteinander in Kontakt treten.“ [“It seems as if the complexion of meaning gained in the phenotext through intertextuality also affects the reference text, as if the process that dynamizes meaning encompasses both texts, which come into contact with each other in an evoking-evocative manner.”] (Lachmann 2002, 136).

¹⁸ The alternative would be to use "intertextuality" in a broad sense, in Kristeva's footsteps, or as Manfred Pfister and Ulrich Broich and the contributors to their 1985 edited volume do (e.g. Zander 1985, 178). In fact, theories of intermediality often extend on more media-philosophical reflections, which is not the focus of this paper. Nevertheless, I chose to use the term intermediality to pay credit to the change in medium, and because the transition from literature to film does play a role in some parts of my analysis. For a thorough reflection on the "literary perspective" on intermediality, cf. Rajewsky 2005.

¹⁹ After all, the discussion on the nature of different media raises very basic questions—e.g., adapting Marie-Laure Ryan and Marina Grishakova's question in *Intermediality and Storytelling*: What is the medium of Platonov's *Chevengur* in the first place: language, written language, the book? (Grishakova and Ryan 2010, 2).

in connection to the aspect of language and, marginally, when I will discuss the cultural codes of film vs. literature. As we will see, the question of language and (mis-)communication is a central theme in Platonov's prose and Kusturica's films; and it must be noted, of course, that film possesses many more tools for the way it uses language than literature does. In some ways, Kusturica's films emulate literature, e.g., when Axel's voice coming from the off tells his life's story in the way a first-person narrator would do this in a novel, or when one of the main messages of the film is transmitted solely through subtitles, i.e., through written language. But obviously, in most other respects, Kusturica's films go beyond the possibilities a book possesses. Moreover, media being "socially realized structures of communication," communicating through one particular medium always follows a particular "cultural practice, a ritualized collocation of different people on the same mental map, sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of representation" (Gitelman 2006, 7). Kusturica's films naturally speak to a different and a much larger audience than Platonov's prose does—Platonov is notoriously known for his complexity, while Kusturica successfully navigates between popular cinema (even Hollywood, in the case of *Arizona Dream*) and art film. Kusturica's quotations from and references to Platonov, I suggest, are thus one of the varieties in which the director combines different cultural codes and plays them out against each other in his films.

Dreaming of a Utopian World without Death

Arizona Dream was filmed mainly in 1991, while Kusturica taught screenwriting at Columbia University's Film School, where he had met the student David Atkins on whose idea the film is based.²⁰ It is a film about coming of age, about orphanhood, death, and suicide, about dreaming, and about Kusturica's cinematic investigation of America and of the American Dream.²¹ The film is framed by three dreams which the protagonist Axel has about fish and the

²⁰ Atkins figures as co-writer of the film and as sole author of the script (Bertellini 2015, 63–64; 160), even though Kusturica seems to have made significant changes to the plot (Iordanova 2002, 70).

²¹ For an in-depth analysis of how Kusturica constructs and deconstructs the American Dream through a focus on diversity in terms of race, geography, and cinema, cf. Roche 2010.

Inuit. These dreams capture the movie's utopian wish for a world without death, and they touch upon all three sources this utopia draws from, from the religious background over nature philosophy to popular utopianisms. In the first dream—the movie's very first scene—we see an Inuit man on his way home from fishing, having caught a strange-looking flat fish. The man almost dies in a snowstorm and is brought home to his family by his lead dog. The first hint at the theme of resurrection comes, subsequently, when the Inuit's wife manages to reanimate her husband. In the second dream, in the middle of the film, the same fish which the Inuit had caught is suddenly alive again: we see the Inuit boy, whom we understand to be Axel's *alter ego*, watching the fish fly through the air (figure 1). In the last dream, at the movie's very end, Axel and his uncle Leo (Jerry Lewis) are two Inuit who are ice-fishing. Leo's presence in the dream is a symbolic resurrection because Leo had committed suicide earlier. Axel and Leo manage to catch the flat-looking fish, but as they look at it in amazement, the fish suddenly stirs and flies away (figures 2&3).



Figure 1. In Axel's second Inuit dream, the fish that had appeared in the first dream is seen flying through the air. Still from *Arizona Dream* (01:02:25).

The fish seems to be the most versatile of all of Kusturica's animal tropes as it fulfils all the five possible functions which animals perform in his films. First, the fish appears as a an intermedial ref-



Figures 2&3. Axel's third and last dream: Leo and Axel as Inuit looking at the Arrowtooth Halibut they caught, before it suddenly flies away. Stills from *Arizona Dream* (02:11:14).

erence to Platonov's *Chevengur*.²² Second, it refers—also, but not only, through its intermedial link to Platonov—to a biblical/religious background of Kusturica's cinematic world: the fish in Axel's dreams does not simply come back to life, but it actually enters a new stage of being, flying through the air instead of swimming through water. Death took the fish out of water, resurrection takes it up into the sky; this metamorphosis evokes Christ's resurrection and Ascension. The fish's resurrection, third, provides comic relief when the fish—animated rather poorly—starts “swimming” through the air, and Leo and Axel stare at it with moronic astonishment.²³ Fourth, fish is an allegory for death, and fish and its incapability to speak serves, as I will discuss later, as an allegory on language and utopia.²⁴ And fifth, the fish's death and resurrection

²² Animals repeatedly appear as intermedial references in Kusturica's movies. The horse is a good example: the white horse walking around in the background of the symbolic war scene in *Underground* is not only a possible reference to Fellini's *The White Sheik* (1952), but clearly one to Tarkovskii; moreover, it is even an “inter-intra-medial” reference to a film that is being made *within the very film*. In *Underground*, Kusturica's cameo self is shooting a film in 1961 on the partisan fights and Crni's alleged heroic death, and the film is called *Proleće stiže na belom konju* (*Spring Comes on a White Horse*).

²³ Examples for other cases of animals creating comic effects are, e.g., the turkey in *Dom za vešanje* [*Time of the Gypsies*] (1989), or when Crni in *Underground* scolds an elephant who stole his shoes by calling it “konju jedan!” [“you horse!”].

²⁴ Other allegories in connection to animals include the tiger, lion, elephant, and zebras roaming the city of Belgrade after the zoo bombing at the beginning of *Underground*, which represents

point toward the story's nature-philosophical subtext.²⁵ As we learn in *Arizona Dream*, Axel's dreaming about Inuit is motivated through his fascination with their understanding of death. He explains to Elaine (Faye Dunaway), the older widow he falls in love with:

Eskimos believe that, even though you die, ... you're never ... really dead. – [Elaine:] What are you then? – [Axel:] Ah... you're infinity. See, they believe that when the physical suit of skin dies, it becomes a part of the earth... but your soul... keeps going, you know... into other things... like ah... trees... or fish... or rocks... or even other people, who actually are, at that point, you. (00:54:05)

Axel wants to understand death as something circular and nature-bound; through death, humans become one with the earth, and people, even animals and objects, can switch to new life. In his search for harmony with nature, Axel turns toward ethnic otherness, the indigenous Inuit, and away from Western culture. Similarly, Elaine and Paul fantasize about an alleged ritual by the natives of Papua New Guinea, thus projecting their unhappiness and sexual dissatisfaction onto ethnic others. In fact, Elaine's comment on the brutality of the native's rite could be read as some sort of meta-self-parody of the "Orientalized" otherness that permeates Kusturica's own movies—such as in regard to Roma in *Dom za vešanje [Time of the Gypsies]* (1989) or *Crna mačka, beli mačor [Black Cat, White Cat]* (1998), as well as in regard to the "wild Balkanese" in *Underground*: Elaine exclaims "but they're natives!" (00:37:20). This exclamation attempts to exempt them from Western moral codes and to justify her interest in their otherness through a presumably non-Western open-mindedness, which, however, actually just perpetuates the existing cultural-historical mechanisms of Orientalizing and othering. This comment parodies America's selective acceptance of foreign cultures—seen, e.g., in the relationship to Mexican culture and immigration in *Arizona Dream*; at the same time, it parodies naïve attempts at counteracting cultural Orientalization that end up reinforcing those very practices. More-

the unleashing of wild instincts during the war (Gocić 2001, 73), or the way in which the ape Soni, who lives in the cellar among humans, stands for "stupidity cultivated in isolation" in socialist Yugoslavia (Gocić 2001, 70).

²⁵ The nature-philosophical category of animal tropes in Kusturica's films reappears in different ways: humans surround themselves with animal friends—Grace, Perhan in *Dom za vešanje*—they imitate animals—Perhan and Axel imitating turkeys—or Soni in *Underground* reminds us of humankind's close kinship with apes.

over, it questions the existence of culturally based moral codes in the first place, and it anticipates the “Western” view on Kusturica’s own “Orientalizing” films, which is a meta-self-parody insofar as it shows the self-reflection behind Kusturica’s depiction of “other” identities in his films.

Apart from ethnic others, the protagonists also project their wishes and dreams onto the world of animals. Elaine’s stepdaughter Grace (Lili Taylor), who also starts a love affair with Axel during the film, asks him upon their very first meeting: “You ever think about suicide? [...] I think about it all the time. I wanna come back as a turtle” (00:33:00). Before Grace gives in to her death wish and shoots herself, she claims that “I’m not going to die. I’m gonna live forever, until one day I’ll wake up and I’ll be a turtle” (01:56:30). Axel’s and Grace’s fantasies thus reveal a striving toward a form of harmonious relationship between humankind and nature, between life and death, which they locate in ethnic otherness and in the animal world, i.e., outside the sphere of Western civilization. Kusturica underlines this interpretation himself in the booklet to the movie’s soundtrack, where he is cited:

It could be that this movie is my reaction to how I see Western civilisation. It comes from a kind of philosophy I’ve established after 35 years of living on this planet. I believe that human beings belong to nature not to civilisation. And I see man as being like a fish passing through a huge city. The fish doesn’t understand anything about the city, he’s just floating through it. What I’m trying to do, always, is to get people wondering. (Booklet to *Arizona Dream*: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack 1993)

Kusturica refers back to the fish metaphor but turns it around: while fish “know everything” in the movie and its soundtrack, they do not understand anything about cities because, it appears, both humans and fish belong to the world of nature, not the world of civilization.²⁶

The popular-utopian subtext of Axel’s fish dreams becomes palpable only when they are read through Platonov’s *Chevengur*.

²⁶ Another relevant explanation by Kusturica himself is found in a later interview, taken at the film set of the French comedy *Nicostratos le pélican* (Olivier Horlait, 2011), where Kusturica explains humankind’s closeness to animals, while he (somewhat chaotically) expresses his criticism toward Western civilization (Cabanis 2014).

A fascination for the theme of death and resurrection is present throughout Platonov's whole novel. Its story starts in a provincial town in pre-revolutionary Russia, where Zakhar Pavlovich lives his solitary life. Through him, we hear about the fisherman:

Захар Павлович знал одного человека, рыбака с озера Мутево, который многих расспрашивал о смерти и тосковал от своего любопытства; этот рыбак больше всего любил рыбу,²⁷ не как пищу, а как особое существо, наверное знающее тайну смерти. [...] Через год рыбак не вытерпел и бросился с лодки в озеро, связав себе ноги веревкой, чтобы нечаянно не поплыть. Втайне он вообще не верил в смерть, главное же, он хотел посмотреть – что там есть: может быть, гораздо интересней, чем жить в селе или на берегу озера; он видел смерть как другую губернию, которая расположена под небом, будто на дне прохладной воды, – и она его влекла.²⁸ (Platonov 2011a, 15–16)

First, in its easily discernible biblical background, the fish is an allusion to the early-Christian symbol ἰχθύς (Ikhthýs), and the fisherman alludes to Christ's apostles (M. Jovanović 1984, 54). The fish (Christ) is the one who knows everything, including the secret of death—or the secret of *overcoming* death. The Chevengurian Gopner seems to assume the same, when he throws the little fish he had caught back into the water with the comment “может, отдышится!”²⁹ (Platonov 2011a, 234). Second, Slavic popular culture understands fish to be a symbol both for death and

²⁷ There is a mistake in the Serbo-Croatian translation: instead of saying “taj ribar je *volio* ribu” [“this fisherman *loved* fish”], it says “taj ribar je *lovio* ribu [...]” [“this fisherman *caught* fish”], both in the 1984 version and the 2008 reissue (Platonov 1984, 66; Platonov 2008, 9; italics mine, E.F.).

²⁸ “Zakhar Pavlovich had known one man, a fisherman from Lake Mutevo, who had questioned many people about death, and was tormented by his curiosity. This fisherman loved fish most of all not as food, but as special beings that definitely knew the secret of death. He would show Zakhar Pavlovich the eyes of a dead fish and say, ‘Look—there’s wisdom! A fish stands between life and death, so that he’s dumb and expressionless. I mean even a calf thinks, but a fish, no. It already knows everything.’ [...] After a year the fisherman couldn’t stand it any more and threw himself into the lake from his boat, after tying his feet with a rope so that he wouldn’t accidentally float. In secret he didn’t even believe in death. The important thing was that he wanted to look at what was there—perhaps it was much more interesting than living in a village or on the shores of a lake. He saw death as another province, located under the heavens as if at the bottom of cool water, and it attracted him.” (Platonov 1978, 6).

²⁹ “Maybe he’ll catch his breath there.” (Platonov 1978, 188).

for birth, because of the fish's muteness that is connected both to the dead and to those who have not been born yet (Iablokov 2001, 185; Gura 1997, 746–747). In this sense, the bourgeois girl who hides from the Chevengurians with her brother sings a song about a fish: “Приснилась мне в озере рыбка, / Что рыбкой я была... / Плыла я далеко-далеко, / Была я жива и мала...,” which Chepurnyi comments with “То-то она рыбкой захотела быть [...] Ей, стало быть, охота жить сначала!”³⁰ (Platonov 2011a, 270). And third, the scene of the fisherman's suicide evokes the popular-folkloric legend of *Kitezh grad*, one of the most widespread Russian popular utopianisms. The city of Kitezh, the story goes, had supposedly escaped the attack by the Golden Horde in the 13th century by disappearing in the Lake Svetloiar. The city—so the legend—continues to exist at the bottom of the lake. Thus isolated, it managed to preserve its genuine, uncompromised character, as a small piece of primeval Rus', untouched by the course of history.³¹ In Platonov's version of the legend, the name of the lake is semantically inverted: Platonov's lake is called Mutevo, in contrast to Svetloiar (*mut*' meaning 'murk,' *svet* meaning 'light'; Seifrid 1992, 231). Hence, if we look at the fisherman's suicide as an attempted journey to *Kitezh grad*, death would be equal to popular utopia, to a concept of paradise anchored in popular culture, characterized through a static purity untouched by the course of time—an aspect I will come back to later, not only in regard to Platonov, but also to Kusturica's *Underground*. These notions, which will be further developed in *Underground*, are already outlined in *Arizona Dream*, though: first, through the reference to Platonov's fisherman; and second, hints at popular utopianisms shine through Kusturica's depiction of America as he chose Alaska and Arizona as his *loci* of Americanness: Arizona was “discovered” in 1540 by Spanish conquistadors on their search for the legendary Seven Cities of Cibola (Roche 2010, 4), and the name “Arizona” is believed to be of Aztec origin; likewise, the name of Alaska supposedly stems from the Yupik word for “great land” (Roche 2010, 4). Thus, Kusturica's

³⁰ “I dreamed of a fish in the lake / And that fish was myself / Far did I swim, swimming on / Living was I, and so small. [...] ‘Seems like she wanted to be a fish or something,’ Chepurnyi guessed. [...] ‘Seems like she wants to live from the beginning’.” (Platonov 1978, 218).

³¹ For more on Kitezh, cf. Heller and Niqueux 1995, 37–38; Chistov 2003, 363–364; and especially Shestakov 1995, 6–32.

American Dream actually predates the US (Roche 2010, 4): it is rooted in indigenous cultures and in pre-modern popular pursuits of paradise.

Apart from this biblical subtext, Platonov's fascination for death and resurrection goes back to his interest in the philosophy of Nikolai Fedorov³² and to a very particular form of nature philosophy. As different scholars have examined³³—among them Jovanović in the foreword to his translation of *Chevengur* (M. Jovanović 1984, 15)—Platonov's prose explores the relationship between humankind and the world of nature in different ways. Their closeness and interrelatedness are given through the anthropomorphization of nature—plants, the earth, the heat, the night or animals—and through attributing the human protagonists traits of plants or animals. In the hierarchy which Platonov creates, nature is superior to humans (Barsht 2005, 244) and humans spend their whole life searching for harmony with nature, or through nature with some higher form of being. The only way this fusion can take place is through death: when a Red Army soldier lies dying, Dvanov observes “как будто природа возвратилась в человека после мешавшей ей встречной жизни, и красноармеец, чтобы не мучиться, приспособился к ней смертью”³⁴ (Platonov 2011a, 77; M. Jovanović 1984, 15). Therefore, life stands in the way of human's closeness to nature, death reunites them. Similar to Kusturica's “kind of philosophy,” Platonov's protagonists also find themselves drawn toward nature rather than toward civilization. And they follow the same two directions, allocating a more “natural” understanding of death to ethnic otherness and to the world of animals. While Kusturica's protagonists turn toward the Inuit and the natives of Papua New Guinea, Platonov distinguishes between the Russians' and the Chinese's stance toward death:

³² For leading examinations of Fedorov's influence on Platonov, see, among many others, Geller 1982, 30–62; Giunter 2012, 31–42; V'iugin 2004, 126–128, 149–150, 392–420; Duzhina 2013. Milivoje Jovanović also elaborates on the Fedorov-Platonov connection in his foreword to the Serbo-Croatian translation of *Chevengur* (M. Jovanović 1984, 38–40).

³³ Cf. e.g. Konstantin Barsht, who focuses mainly on plants (Barsht 2005, 241–254), or Hans Günther, who concentrates more on the animal world (Günther 2011; Giunter 2012, 145–161).

³⁴ “As though nature returned into a person as the life which had opposed it head-on left, and the Red soldier, in order not to torment himself, accustomed himself to it with death.” (Platonov 1978, 56).

Китайцы поели весь рыбный суп, от какого отказались русские матросы, затем собрали хлебом всю питательную влагу со стенок супных ведер и сказали матросам в ответ на их вопрос о смерти: «Мы любим смерть! Мы очень ее любим!»³⁵ (Platonov 2011a, 78).

Fish and death are linked through a seemingly inherent logic: eating fish soup reflects one's attitude toward death. After they have eaten the soup, the Chinese “сытыми ложатся спать”³⁶ (Platonov 2011a, 78), hence symbolically die (Karasev 1994, 116; Iablokov 2001, 186). This scene hints at a difference in Western and Eastern perceptions of death: the Chinese are not afraid of death, but they long to find out the secret behind it. In Platonov's poetics, water—and, thus, fish—is linked to the notion of truth: Cherpurnyi observes how “когда я в воде – мне кажется, что я до точности правду знаю...”³⁷ (Platonov 2011a, 219). As the Chinese eat fish, the animal that “knows everything,” the Chinese thus find out the truth; “съев истину”—having eaten truth— (Karasev 1994, 116), they are now ready for death.

The way Kusturica's film and Platonov's novel depict their characters' obsessive preoccupation with the theme of death shares one fundamental structural commonality which I locate in the two possible hermeneutic levels on which the reader can understand their obsession: as a fairytale-gone-wrong, or as bitter reality. As Fredric Jameson observed in regard to *Chevangur*, we can choose to believe the fairytale character of the fisherman's longing to find out the secret of death. Or we can choose to take a step back and look at the story from a pragmatic, realistic point of view: in this case, the fisherman is in fact committing suicide, and even very insistently so, “tying his feet with a rope so that he wouldn't accidentally float.” In the story's context, we might test his deed for plausible motives—famine, poverty, family problems, mid-life crisis (Jameson 1994, 116). Seen in this light, the fisherman's belief in a utopian world without death appears to be an attempt—by himself or by the narrator—to smooth over existential distress. The same applies to *Arizona Dream*. On the one hand, we can choose to believe in the playful fascination for death that Axel and Grace

³⁵ “The Chinese had eaten an entire fish soup which the Russian sailors had refused [...]. They answered the sailors' questions about death by saying, ‘We love death! We love it very much!’” (Platonov 1978, 58).

³⁶ “Lay down to sleep, replete” (Platonov 1978, 58).

³⁷ “When I'm in the water, it seems to me that I know truth exactly.” (Platonov 1978, 176).

seem to share. On the other hand, the viewer easily makes out the deep voids within the characters: Axel lost both parents; Grace lost her father (and there is no word about a mother); Leo, who hides behind a façade of happiness, sat behind the wheel in the car accident that killed Axel’s parents. And Grace’s and Leo’s suicides are serious events that leave no doubt about the extent of their actual mental distress.

Intertwined with these two different modes of understanding *Arizona Dream* and *Chevangur* is the motif of dreaming, more precisely the role of dreaming in regard to Kusturica’s and Platonov’s utopian thought. Dreaming is one of the only escapes from life open to Platonov’s and Kusturica’s deeply unhappy characters. Thus Axel’s repeated Inuit dreams—he is a dreamer, whom his mother, when he was a child, kept reminding “that day-dreaming was a long way from life’s truths” (00:06:40)—and thus the many dreams in *Chevangur*. About the latter, Valerii V’iugin observes that “речь [...] пойдет о мотивах [...] настолько деликатных, что сон становится, пожалуй, наиболее подходящей формой их воплощения: смерть, любовь, воскрешение”³⁸ (V’iugin 2004, 129). The same applies to *Arizona Dream*; in fact, V’iugin’s analysis of dreams in *Chevangur* (V’iugin 2004, 128–82) could be extended almost one-to-one to the function of dreams in Kusturica’s film. Being much more than a theme, they create a “поэтика «почти-реальности»”³⁹ (V’iugin 2004, 133): even the waking moments in *Arizona Dream* have dream-like qualities, similar to the constant dreaminess that adheres to the events in *Chevangur*. As David Roche observes, the film’s title as well as the way in which the Arizona scenes are assembled through montage point toward the possibility that the whole story apart from the New York scenes might, in fact, be no more than a dream dreamt by Axel (Roche 2010, 2). V’iugin’s Freudian readings of the dreams in *Chevangur* would be equally interesting in regard to *Arizona Dream*: Axel dreams about family (the Inuit), father figures (the Inuit father and Leo), and about death.⁴⁰ But in regard to

³⁸ “We are [...] dealing with motives [...] so delicate that the dream becomes, perhaps, the most appropriate form of their embodiment: death, love, resurrection.”

³⁹ “A ‘poetics of almost-reality.’”

⁴⁰ A Freudian reading would especially thrive on the deleted scene, in which Axel marries Leo’s fiancée and then has a drunken dream in which Leo resurrects (Kusturica 1993c).

Kusturica's Platonovian connection the closeness between dreams and utopia is most fruitful; as V'iugin points out, "[с]он и утопия прочно соединены между собой в литературном сознании,"⁴¹ as he refers to Dostoevskii's *Son smeshnogo cheloveka* [*Dream of a Ridiculous Man*] or Vera Pavlova's fourth dream in Nikolai Chernyshevskii's *Chto delat'?* [*What Is to Be Done?*] (V'iugin 2004, 133). Dreaming both in *Chevangur* and in *Arizona Dream* is much more than a theme: it becomes almost a genre in itself (V'iugin 2004, 128–129). As such, it sheds light on the meta-status of both Platonov's and Kusturica's utopian thought: their stories are neither typical utopias—as they might be no more than dreams—nor actual dystopian narratives—because the dreams may turn out to be empty. Rather, they are meta-utopian, as defined by Edith W. Clowes as imaginations that search out “the linguistic, psychological, and political structures that inform the process of generating and realizing social dreams,” and that entertain “a variety of Utopian scenarios,” while seeking “to expose their common, underlying motivations and assumptions” (Clowes 1993, ix). One way in which Kusturica's and Platonov's works reveal their meta-utopian status is through their common interest in one particular form of utopia: the utopia of socialism. For this, I will turn toward Kusturica's following movie, *Underground*.

Eschatological Socialism, or the Death of the Innocent, Theodicy, and the Challenge to Religious Utopia

Socialism is a central issue in both *Chevangur* and *Underground*. *Chevangur* describes the events before, during and shortly after the 1917 Revolutions in Russia, *Underground*'s timespan covers the years 1941 to 1992, from the Nazi occupation throughout Yugoslavia's socialist period (1945-1992). The most striking similarity lies in the understanding of socialism. In both Platonov's novel and Kusturica's movie, the protagonists understand socialism in religious terms: socialism is not an abstract social theory, but rather an ontological status the world strives toward. This thinking follows the line of eschatological thought, as world history runs toward one great final point—socialism, in its utopi-

⁴¹ “Dream and utopia are firmly interconnected in literary consciousness.”

an manifestation. However, socialism fails as utopia in both cases, and it fails, as we will see, in the same manner: through the death of an innocent child Kusturica's *Underground* reaches out to the problem of theodicy as formulated by Dostoevskii in *Brat'ia*

Karazamovy [*The Brothers Karamazov*] (1879–1880), through Platonov's reading of it. For this, I will show the possible Platonovian inspirations for *Underground* in regard to the way that socialism appears disguised as religion, and fails because it turns out to be a false substitute.

The protagonists in *Chevengur* believe that communism will solve all the problems in the world, including, or above all, the problem of death. This is Sasha Dvanov's conviction:

Он [...] верил, что революция – это конец света. В будущем же мире мгновенно уничтожится тревога Захара Павловича, а отец-рыбак найдет то, ради чего он своевольно утонул.⁴² (Platonov 2011a, 66)

Sasha understands the socialist revolution to be the end of the world, which will bring salvation to both the living (his surrogate father Zakhar Pavlovich) and the dead (his father). The Chevengurians share Dvanov's view: «Дванов догадался, почему Чепурный и большевики-чевенгурцы так желают коммунизма: он есть конец истории, конец времени.»⁴³ (Platonov 2011a, 335). Communism corresponds to the eschatological concept of the apocalypse, being the end of the world, the end of history, and the end of time. According to this understanding, communism would also bring about the resurrection of the dead. This is why Stepan Kopenkin rides across the country looking for communism, which he believes will resurrect his great love Rosa Luxemburg from her grave. However, the collapse of Chevengur reveals their misunderstanding.

For Dostoevskii's Ivan Karamazov, the existence of evil and of unjust death—above all the suffering of innocent children—questions

⁴² “He felt Zakhar Pavlovich's sincere need, but he believed that the revolution was the end of the world. In the future world, though, Zakhar Pavlovich's alarm would be instantaneously destroyed and his fisherman father would find that for the sake of which he had voluntarily drowned himself.” (Platonov 1978, 48).

⁴³ “Dvanov guessed why Chepurny and the Bolsheviks of Chevengur so wanted communism. Communism is the end of history and the end of time.” (Platonov 1978, 273).

the existence of a just God.⁴⁴ The same problem Platonov applies to his utopia. The Chevengurians cannot imagine that anyone could die in the town of Chevengur—where, after all, communism has been established—least of all an innocent child. Hence their confusion when a poor woman’s boy suddenly lies dying. Chepurnyi wonders: «Одну минуту пожить сумеет, раз матери хочется: жил-жил, а теперь забыл!»⁴⁵ (Platonov 2011a, 304). Even when the boy is dead, they still hope for him to return to life: «может быть, мальчик нечаянно вздохнет – тогда так»⁴⁶ (Platonov 2011a, 304). Or: «Сейчас он вздохнет и глянет на нас»⁴⁷ (Platonov 2011a, 304). The boy, however, remains dead. From this, Kopenkin concludes: «Какой же это коммунизм? [...] От него ребенок ни разу не мог вздохнуть, при нем человек явился и умер. Тут зараза, а не коммунизм.»⁴⁸ (Platonov 2011a, 306). While for Ivan Karamazov, a child’s suffering questions the existence of God *per se*, the problem therefore poses itself differently in *Chevengur*: Kopenkin’s conclusion does not unmask communism as an unsuitable substituent for religion, but it suggests that if death still exists, then communism cannot have been reached yet.

In Kopenkin’s words, the ideas which the Chevengurians mistook as communism turn out to be a plague that befell the country. Another reference to Dostoevskii, this suggests possible reasons for the failing of Chevengur. The idea of a plague that contaminates people’s minds is a reoccurring metaphor in Dostoevskii’s works, where it stands for Russia’s infection with Western individualistic ideas, alien to the Russian collective mind.⁴⁹ In this light, Kopenkin’s observation in *Chevengur* points toward the possibility that the Chevengurian utopia failed because the ideas it built upon

⁴⁴ Cf., e.g., Frank 2010, 789–794, 869–890; McCullough 2018.

⁴⁵ “He can figure out a way to live another minute if his mother wants him to! He was alive for a long time and now he tries to say he’s forgotten how to live!” (Platonov 1978, 246).

⁴⁶ “Maybe by chance the boy will breathe again, and then things will be all right...” (Platonov 1978, 248).

⁴⁷ “Now he’ll breathe and have a look at us.” (Platonov 1978, 248).

⁴⁸ “What kind of communism is this? [...] They couldn’t make the boy inhale even once, and the boy up and died right in the middle of it! Maybe it’s a plague, but it isn’t communism.” (Platonov 1978, 248).

⁴⁹ For the trichina dream in *Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, cf. Frank 2010, 506–507; Leatherbarrow 2013, 123–124, for the trichina metaphor in *Son smeshnogo cheloveka*, see Miller 2007, 123.

were not suitable for Russia. Indeed, a similar idea runs through Platonov's *Kotlovan*. In this *povest'*, the orphan girl Nast'ia personifies the Soviet state: of "bourgeois" descent, she is suddenly orphaned and now needs to find her way in the rapidly changing world. Even though she tries to make friends with the workers, the leaders of the new country, she longs to stay connected to the past.⁵⁰ When she dies, she is buried in the foundation pit of the future proletarian house, that is, in the remains of a bright tomorrow that might never take shape.⁵¹ Her death thus symbolizes the need to reconcile the country's present and the future with its past. If we therefore look at Kopenkin's reference to the Chevengurian communism as a plague in light of Dostoevskii's *trichina* metaphor (as in *Son smeshnogo cheloveka*), the project of Chevengur appears to be a Golden-Age utopia that is infected and destroyed by a foreign body in the form of alien ideas.

Kusturica's *Underground* blends socialism and eschatological thought in a similar manner as Platonov's *Chevengur*. The movie's plot starts during WWII and tells the story of the two racketeers Petar Popara, nicknamed "Crni" ("Blacky"; Lazar Ristovski), and Marko Dren (Miki Manojlović), who fight on the side of the partisans. Crni and a group of other resistance fighters end up hiding in a cellar. For a good quarter of a century, Marko makes them believe that the war with the Nazis is still going on, as they produce weapons that he subsequently sells on the black market. While he keeps his friends stuck underground, Marko climbs up the rank ladder in Tito's Yugoslavia: he becomes a famous poet and national hero, who elaborated a national myth around his partisan fight together with Crni, whom the Yugoslav people believe to have fallen during WWII. The film is, among many other things, an allegorical tale that tells the story of socialist Yugoslavia beneath the surface, *underground* in four ways: literally, as part of the story is actually set in a cellar; allegorically, referring to Plato's cave; metaphorically-surrealistically (or "sub-realistically"), with a set of tunnels

⁵⁰ Through collecting salvage material for the Soviet state (Platonov 2011b, 483) and through seeking comfort in her dead mother's bones (Platonov 2011b, 530).

⁵¹ For readings of Nast'ia and her death cf. e.g. Seifrid 2009, 134–135; Duzhina and Levchin 2011; Seifrid even speaks of a "contamination of life with death," which adds another layer to Platonov's continuation of Dostoevskii's plague metaphor (Seifrid 1992, 134).

used for smuggling and human trafficking extending beneath the whole of Europe; and intermedially, as a reference to Dostoevskii's *Zapiski iz podpol'ia* [*Notes from the Underground*].

Socialism is an inherent part of people's lives, even though the underground people do not know that they actually do live in a socialist country. In fact, their belief in socialism is pure and idealistic, while the actual system Marko and "overground" Yugoslavia live in is depicted as highly corrupt. The analogy between socialism and religion is most palpable in the way the underground people practically worship Tito. In one scene, they sing a partisan song together, whose lyrics are "Druže Tito mi ti se kunemo / da sa tvoga puta ne skrenemo."⁵² Crni starts singing and the camera follows the cellar inhabitants as they join in the song one by one, among them a cleric, who starts ringing a bell, and a man who sings while praying his Muslim prayer (01:07:45). The song appears to be a ritual, comparable to a community prayer that promises faithfulness to the socialist cause. This depiction of an almost-religious understanding of socialism certainly goes back to Kusturica's own experience of growing up in Yugoslavia, with an ardently socialist father (Bertellini 2015, 13). Moreover, a similarly mystic view on socialism is shared by Dino in Kusturica's first feature film, *Sjećaš li se Dolly Bell?* [*Do You Remember Dolly Bell?*] (1981).⁵³ At the same time, the understanding of socialism in religious terms is a typical feature both of Platonov and other early-Soviet Russian writers

⁵² "Comrade Tito, we vow to you that we will not turn away from your path."

⁵³ In an almost Platonov-esque interplay, the protagonist Dino (Slavko Štimac) and his father (Slobodan Aligrudić) discuss the nature of communism. They both agree that "u komunizmu neće biti nikakvih dilema" ["There will be no dilemmas whatsoever in communism"] (Kusturica 2003a, 00:25:30)—communism is the solution to everything, to all dilemmas, a quasi-eschatological promise. While his father looks at communism from a scientific point of view, Dino, however, thinks that "treba svako prvo u sebi da napravi komunizam. Onako ćemo lako napolje" ["everyone has to create communism within oneself. Then we will reach it outside easily"] and considers communism to be "vlast nad samim sobom; komunizam; i gotovo" ["power over oneself; communism; and that's all"; 00:25:35]. For him, communism is not an abstract theory, but an emotional state of mind, similar to the way Platonov's characters perceive the world. Both Dino and his father, however, agree in the absolute salvational power of communism. It seems unlikely that Kusturica had already read Platonov as early as 1981, but it is, of course, not impossible.

(which adds up with Kusturica's reference in the 2010 interview that it was particularly the cultural actors who lived during the October Revolution that had influenced him most). But the most striking resemblance to *Platonov* is revealed through the death of Crni's son Jovan and the events that unroll after that.

Crni and Jovan leave the cellar in 1961 and want to end the war with the Nazis that they believe to be still ongoing. On their first morning outside the cellar, the two of them roast a fish on an open fire on the banks of the Danube (02:06:30)—not just any fish, but an Arrowtooth Halibut, the same fish that figured so prominently in *Arizona Dream* (figure 4). The fish prefigures Jovan's death: suddenly, Jovan and Crni are shot at from a helicopter and Jovan, who does not know how to swim, drowns in the Danube. This event and its aftermath point toward the possibility that the Arrowtooth Halibut in *Underground* is more than just a mere self-referential gesture by Kusturica to his earlier movie; rather, Jovan's death and the ensuing events must be watched in light of the importance of Russian culture for Kusturica, particularly with regard to *Platonov's Chevengur* and the Dostoevskian postulation of the dialectic of theodicy.

Not only does Crni's destiny mirror the story of Job, which lies at the base of the theodicy problem in *Brat'ia Karamazovy* (cf. Frank 2010, 30): Crni lost his wife, loses his son, and will lose his whole country 30 years later. More importantly, Jovan's death represents,



Figure 4: The Arrowtooth Halibut reappears in *Underground*. Still from the film (02:06:30).

I argue, the suffering of the innocent. Jovan is not a child anymore; he is 20 years old. Having been tricked by Marko, however, Crni thinks his son is only 15. Moreover, Jovan is naïve and child-like—be it due to his lifelong seclusion from the outer world or a possible mental impediment—which makes him a holy fool-like figure.⁵⁴ This is further hinted at through inversion of the names: Jovan is a south-Slavic variant of Ivan. Crni’s son thus corresponds to Ivan’s brother Alesha Karamazov, to whom Ivan narrates his “Legend of the Grand Inquisitor,” and who is ascribed holy fool-like qualities in *Brat’ia Karamazovy*.⁵⁵ On a symbolic level, Jovan’s death is thus on a par with the death of a child. His death is collateral damage of everything that went wrong in *Underground*’s depiction of Yugoslavia: he is victim to the lies, hypocrisy, and selfishness of Marko, as well as to his father’s blind belief in the good of communism. Another reference to *Arizona Dream* exemplifies these destructive impulses: on the wedding banquet of Crni’s and Natalija’s wedding, a grilled fish comes back to life. But while Axel and Leo would just look at this miracle in amazement, Crni and Marko laugh, draw their guns and shoot the fish (Kusturica 2003b, 00:38:10).

Finally, and most importantly, what follows Jovan’s drowning is *Chevangur* in reverse order. Crni cannot accept his son’s death and spends the following 31 years searching for him. He ends up fighting his way through the post-Yugoslav wars, where all the tragic stories culminate in a final long warzone scene full of symbolic imagery, from biblical motifs to animal symbols: Ivan (Cain) kills Marko (Abel) and hangs himself on a church bell, Marko’s and Natalija’s dead bodies, sitting on Marko’s wheelchair, are set on fire and circle around a cross in the burning warzone landscape. Devoid of any hope, but still looking for his son, Crni goes back underground (any sense of spatial continuum—from the Bosnian

⁵⁴ The holy fool—the *iurodivyi*—from the Russian religious and cultural tradition serves a divine purpose through his/her strange and incomprehensible behavior. He or she exemplifies the wisdom of the cross as proclaimed by Paul in 1 Cor. 1:18. For more on holy foolishness, cf. Likhachev, Panchenko 1976; Ivanov 1994; Hunt, Kobets 2011; Münch 2017.

⁵⁵ The narrator refers to Alësha as “из таких юношей в роде как-бы юродивых” [“one of those young men with an aura of the holy fool”] (Dostoevskii 2012, 22; Dostoevsky 1994, 26), and Rakitin calls the whole family of the Karamazovs “сладогубители, стяжатели и юродивые!” [“sensualists, money-grubbers, and holy fools!”] (Dostoevskii 2012, 93; Dostoevsky 1994, 101).

war to the Belgrade underground—having been literally undermined already, with the underground network underneath former Yugoslavia). He is accompanied by a group of people and animals, reminiscent of the Exodus. Finally back in the cellar, Crni talks to Soni, Ivan's ape, and recalls his lost son, when he suddenly hears Jovan's voice coming from the well (where Jovan's bride had drowned himself just prior to Jovan's death, out of desperation about his disappearance). Eager to join his son, Crni jumps into the water and swims toward Jovan, which can—just as the death of the fisherman in *Chevengur*—be understood on two hermeneutic levels: Crni joining the afterlife paradise on the banks of the Danube—which I will discuss afterwards—or committing suicide. The exact opposite happens in *Chevengur*: when the utopian settlement was destroyed and everyone died but him, Sasha Dvanov rides back to his childhood home and to the lake where his father had ended his life many years earlier. Slowly, he rides into the water and joins his father in death, on the lake bottom—just as Crni, the other way around, follows his dead son to the bottom of the Danube.

In both cases, water constitutes the border between the world of the living and the world of the dead. This link appears repeatedly both in Platonov's novels and Kusturica's films, and water imagery is another similarity their oeuvre shares, from rain to rivers, always at the border between death and life and between dream and awakening: rain accompanies the death of the nameless recluse at the beginning of *Chevengur*⁵⁶ as it does anticipate the suicide of Grace, which is followed by the Arrowtooth Halibut flying through the air, suggesting the possible dream status of the scene that had just taken place (or the whole Arizona sequence, for that matter). Water may or may not hold the power to bring back to life the fish which Gopner had caught in *Chevengur*, as cited above. Obviously, several of Platonov's as well as Kusturica's protagonists seek to end their lives notably in water. When Sasha Dvanov rides into the water, the juxtaposition becomes most clear: the ground of lakes and rivers, with horse heads and bones (Platonov 2011a, 219; Platonov 1978, 176), stands for the realm of death, the world above water is the

⁵⁶ After his death, “бобыль мокнул один в темноте ровно льющих с неба потоков и тихо опухал” [“The recluse [...] was soaking by himself in the darkness of the streams pouring evenly from heaven”] (Platonov 2011a, 14; 1978, 5).

world of light and life, and water stands between the two (Karasev 1994, 115). And water also poses as one of the hypothetical forms of immortality that Platonov suggests as a possible alternative to the living being's complete disappearance through death (V'iugin 2004, 172–173).⁵⁷

Sasha Dvanov's suicide also reveals one more commonality between Kusturica's and Platonov's eschatological socialisms: the problematic nature of time in regard to utopian thought. *Chevengur* contrasts different ways of perceiving time. On the one hand, there is "regular" time, measured by the clock's mechanism, which Zakhar Pavlovich considers to be "лишь загадк[a] в механизме будильника"⁵⁸ (Platonov 2011a, 45). On the other hand, time underlies a deeply subjective individualistic experience, such as when Zakhar Pavlovich observes that "время – это движение горя"⁵⁹ (Platonov 2011a, 48). Simultaneously, however, time presents itself to Zakhar Pavlovich also as "такой же осязательный предмет, как любое вещество, хотя бы и негодное в отделку"⁶⁰ (Platonov 2011a, 48). Time is thus at the same time concrete and measurable, unstable and elusive, solid and palpable. The passing of time is therefore only partially a regular phenomenon. Instead, time can stand still or even lead back into the past: when Sasha Dvanov rides into the lake, he finds the skeleton of the tiny fish he had caught as a child (Platonov 2011a, 408), as if time had stood still since he had left his childhood home, notwithstanding all the events that had happened.⁶¹ The mystery of time torments not only Zakhar Pavlovich, but also Chepurnyi, who therefore decides to speed up the course of history: «Чепурный не вытерпел тайны времени и прекратил долготу истории срочным устройством коммунизма в Чевенгуре.»⁶² (Platonov

⁵⁷ For more on water in Platonov's oeuvre, cf. Ra 2004, 70–124; Kolega 2016, 15–45.

⁵⁸ "Only as a riddle in the mechanism of the alarm clock" (Platonov 1978, 30).

⁵⁹ "Time is the movement of woe." (Platonov 1978, 32).

⁶⁰ "As tangible a thing as any substance, though not fitting to be worked." (Platonov 1978, 32–33).

⁶¹ Konstantin Barsht leads this back to the question of "energy" and "material" (*veshchestvo*; Barsht 2005, 218).

⁶² "Chepurny could not bear the mystery of time, so he cut short the length of history by the rapid construction of communism in Chevengur." (Platonov 1978, 259).

2011a, 318). And for those who want to remember, time rushes by as history and brings oblivion, as Dvanov mourns: «История грустна, потому что она время и знает, что ее забудут.»⁶³ (Platonov 2011a, 319).⁶⁴

Kusturica's *Underground* covers a time span of 51 years, divided into three eras, which are each announced with intertitles: 1941 (00:00:25), 1961 (01:02:05), and 1992 (02:16:20). The timeframe seems to be clear-cut and following a certain logic: the film writes the history of socialist Yugoslavia, and it does so through the lens of the country's wars (or through the national myths created through these wars).⁶⁵ However, time turns out to be an unstable and treacherous concept throughout the movie. Marko manipulates time by ordering his grandfather to set the clock in the cellar back several hours every day, thus tricking the cellar's inhabitants into believing that only 15 years had passed since they went underground, instead of the 20 that had elapsed in reality. Notably, Marko's grandfather thinks of his occupation not as trickery, conflicting with the *real* course of time, but on the contrary: „Za dvadeset godina smanjio sam im pet godina. Znaš šta znači pet godina manje u podrumu?“⁶⁶ (01:10:00). If the clock will measure five years less, then five years less have passed, indeed, even in the eyes of the very person who manipulated the clock. On one hand, time thus structures the movie in the form of exact historical dates. On the other hand, time eludes exact measuring—or measuring it actually determines the flow of time in the first place. But the most pronounced problematization of time in *Underground* is the wedding scene at the movie's end.

⁶³ “History is melancholy because it is time, and it knows that it will be forgotten.” (Platonov 1978, 259).

⁶⁴ For more on time in *Chevangur*, cf. Jameson 1994, 84–87; Livingstone 2004, for time and *Kotlovan*, see Lane 2018, 61–76.

⁶⁵ For a reading of the national historical narratives in Kusturica's *Underground*, cf. Keene 2001.

⁶⁶ “In twenty years, I have deducted five years for them; do you know what that means, five years less in the cellar?”.

“Bila jednom jedna zemlja...”—a Utopian Chevangur on the Danube?

After Crni jumped into the well and started diving toward Jovan’s call, he passes over to *Underground*’s last scene: a wedding banquet on the bank of the Danube, where the whole family and all their friends are reunited after their death. They celebrate Jovan’s earlier underground wedding a second time. Here, time seems to have lost all validity. First, time’s ultimate demand—death—has been suspended, since the dead appear to be very much alive. Time merely serves as a reason for a small bickering between Crni and his wife Vera on the age of their son (02:39:15). Second, while the wedding guests are dancing and drinking, Marko’s brother—named Ivan, another Dostoevskii reference, to which I will return later—pierces the diegetic bubble and addresses us, the viewers, with the following monologue:

Ovde smo podigli nove kuće sa crvenim krovovima i dimnjacima koje će nastanjivati rođe, i kapijama širom otvorenim za druge goste. Bit ćemo zahvalni našoj novoj zemlji koja nas hrani i suncu koje nas greje, i cvetnim poljima koja će nas podsećati na ćilime našeg zavičaja. Sa bolom, tugom i radošću sećaćemo se naše zemlje kad budemo našoj deci pričali priče koje počinju kao bajka: bila jednom jedna zemlja...⁶⁷ (02:40:00).

After this, the riverbank breaks off and the wedding party slowly drifts down the Danube. I argue that *Underground*’s final scene, which has been examined from different angles,⁶⁸ must be looked

⁶⁷ “Here we have erected new houses with red roofs and chimneys, which will house storks, and with gates wide open to other guests. We will be grateful for our new land that nourishes us and for the sun that warms us, and the flower fields that will remind us of the rugs [or: kilims] of our homeland. With pain, sadness, and joy, we will remember our country when we tell our children stories that begin as a fairy tale: once upon a time, there was a country...”.

⁶⁸ Iordanova (2002, 79–80) and Bertellini do not go into great detail concerning the final scene, but Bertellini concludes from it in his interpretation of the film as “a spatiotemporal illusion [...] of a nation,” as well as “the ‘spatiotemporal ideology’ of its director” (Bertellini 2015, 79). Nebojša Jovanović interprets the island flowing down the river to be a paradise lost, an “island of the living dead,” where happiness is perpetuated “ad infinitum et ad nauseam” (N. Jovanović 2012, 166). He sees it as a continuation of *Otac na službenom putu* [*When Father was Away on Business*] (1985)—connected through the wedding scenes—, and thus deduces that the island is a parallel version of Goli Otok, where the father in *Otac* had served his sentence. Sean Homer also calls *Underground*’s end “a rather more critical view of Yugoslavism than his critics allow for” (Homer 2009, n.p.), because the third and last wedding resembles the first two weddings, which had both ended in catastrophes.

at in light of the tradition of popular-folkloric utopianisms so prominent in Russian literature, the same kind of utopianisms that *Kitezh grad* belongs to. Through its seclusion, Kitezh has been saved from foreign influences, from the Mongols to “the West,” and thus represents a conservative topos insofar as it literally *conserved* the past and preserved its primordial character: it is Arcadia, the Golden Age, living on in the present. In a similar way, Kusturica’s island is stuck in the past. Time does not flow anymore, but is bound to repeat itself over and over again. This specific temporality can be understood in two possible ways: either through the conception of idyllic time, which follows the logic of repetition, not linearity,⁶⁹ and which constitutes a temporal entity outside our “normal” time, a break in time.⁷⁰ Or we understand it as the afterworld that follows Judgment Day, the end of time and history. In any case, the island represents the last remnants of Yugoslavia, a state that is no more, but that lives on in the past. It stems directly from a fairytale—“once upon a time...”—and carries folkloric-national character, represented through the kilim of the former homeland, through the “balkanizing” music accompanying the wedding feast, through the symbolic setting on the Danube (figure 5). But this fairytale state of Yugoslavia lives on only in stories of the past, preserved in an “otherworld,” after death. In this line, Bertellini observes that *Underground* is “among many other things, [...] a film about the reality and the spatiotemporal illusions of a nation”

⁶⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin writes on the chronotope of the *bildungsroman*: «Если внутри идиллического дня и есть смена утра, вечера, ночи,—то все идиллические дни похожи друг на друга, повторяют друг друга.» (Bakhtin 2012b, 321). He characterizes the chronotope of the idyll through its fixation on place and its “folkloric” conception of time (Bakhtin 2012a, 472–473).

⁷⁰ Wolfgang Iser writes about the “Iconology of Arcadia,” which Renate Lachmann identifies as an idyllic topos (2002, 277): “räumlich ist es eine Enklave in der Welt, und zeitlich verkörpert es eine Pause in ihr” [“spatially it is an enclave in the world, and temporally it embodies a pause in it”] (“Iser 1999, 226).



Figure 5: The final scene of *Underground*: the last remnants of fairytale Yugoslavia floating down the Danube. Still from the film (02:06:30).

(Bertellini 2015, 79). It is in this parallel afterworld that the dead rebuild their homes and live a life of (Yugo)nostalgia, endlessly caught in the past.

Apart from its folkloric-idyllic character, *Underground*'s last scene draws from Russian literature in a second way: I argue that this scene proposes a third possible ending to the failure of utopia and therewith continues the line started by Dostoevskii and continued by Platonov.

Dostoevskii's *Brat'ia Karamazovy* ends on a positive note: when the boy Iliushechka has died, Alesha Karamazov and Iliushechka's friends go out into the world, anticipating a final unity between the living and the dead. Platonov, however, alters the ending. Jovanović deciphers in his foreword to the *Chevangur* translation how Platonov first reinforces the Karamazov parallel through the repetition of the scene of "literary theft:" as Alesha kissed Ivan Karamazov, Sasha Dvanov kisses his stepbrother Prokofii. But in contrast to the Karamazov brothers, the Dvanovs' kiss carries no fruitful symbolical charge, and while Alesha enters the world, Sasha commits suicide, thus, as Jovanović suggests, choosing the other path that Ivan Karamazov could have followed (M. Jovanović 1984, 49).

In *Underground*, the theme is repeated a third time, but here, no brotherly kiss takes place—on the contrary: Ivan kills his brother Marko, replacing brotherly forgiveness with fratricide, before he

commits suicide. Through inverting the names again, Ivan Dren also corresponds to Alesha Karamazov, becoming another holy fool-like character in the film—he stutters and prefers the company of animals to that of people. By implication, his brother Marko is heir to Ivan Karamazov. Both are writers—Ivan wrote the “Legend of the Grand Inquisitor,” Marko is Yugoslavia’s most famous poet. Ivan’s Grand Inquisitor proposes that humankind longs for guidance, not for freedom; Marko actively deprives a whole group of people of their freedom, and while they are happy and safe underground, their release into the outside world exposes them to danger and death. But while Alesha Karamazov kisses and forgives his brother Ivan, Ivan Dren cannot forgive Marko for having deceived them all—or, following the line of the Grand Inquisitor, for having released them?—and he chooses death for them both.

After killing his brother and himself, Ivan Dren emerges as the narrator of the last scene. Miraculously healed from his stuttering, he sheds his holy-foolish guise and addresses us, the viewers, directly. He thereby invites us to partake in the scene, which is a wedding as much as it is a wake not only for the people who fell victim to the dying spasms of Yugoslavia, as it is a wake for the country itself, a homage to the failure of socialist Yugoslavia. His narration thereby addresses the last issue I want to look at with regard to Kusturica’s films and Platonov’s books: the problematic nature of language, which creates utopia—and destroys it again.

Omniscient Silence, or the Problem of Language and Thinking in (Meta-)Utopia

Let us return one last time to the fisherman Dvanov’s fascination for fish in *Chevengur*:

Он показывал глаза мертвых рыб Захару Павловичу и говорил: «Гляди – премудрость. Рыба между жизнью и смертью стоит, оттого она и немая и глядит без выражения; телок ведь и тот думает, а рыба нет – она все уже знает.»⁷¹
(Platonov 2011a, 15)

⁷¹ “He [the fisherman Dvanov] would show Zakhar Pavlovich the eyes of a dead fish and say, ‘Look—there’s wisdom! A fish stands between life and death, so that he’s dumb and expressionless. I mean even a calf thinks, but a fish, no. It already knows everything.’” (Platonov 1978, 6).

Fish do not think, and they do not speak. This is either the reason for their omniscience, or it is, on the other hand, their wisdom's result (or, probably, both). Thinking too much is a reoccurring theme in *Chevengur* and *Kotlovan*: it does not solve any problems, but rather creates them. Therefore, the characters keep trying to avoid thinking—for example through singing: «Обо всем поет – лишь бы не думать» (Platonov 2011a, 180); they complain about thinking, as does Cherpurnyi: «Чего-то мне все думается, чудится да представляется, – трудно моему сердцу!»⁷² (Platonov 2011a, 210); or they forget to think in the first place: «Пиюсь, ты думаешь что-нибудь? – спросил Дванов. – Думаю, – сказал сразу Пиюся и слегка смутился – он часто забывал думать и сейчас ничего не думал.»⁷³ (Platonov 2011a, 347). Thinking is also how Voshchev, *Kotlovan*'s protagonist, loses his job, “вследствие [...] задумчивости среди общего темпа труда”⁷⁴ (Platonov 2011b, 413).

The problem of thinking is linked to the issue of language—most clearly so in the song version of Kusturica's Platonov quotation, where “the fish doesn't think *because* the fish knows everything” (italics mine, E.F.), while in the film script, the not-thinking and not-speaking is merely linked through correlation: “it's [...] fish that know everything, and don't need to think.” In *Chevengur* as well as in *Kotlovan*, Platonov's protagonists struggle with Soviet “newspeak,” which is reflected in their constant misuse of the new vocabulary.⁷⁵ Moreover, their struggle is shown symbolically: the people in *Kotlovan* are building a future house for the proletariat, symbolically referring to the Tower of Babel; but instead of becom-

⁷² “I'm always thinking of something, imagining something, or thinking I'm seeing something. It's heavy on my heart!” (Platonov 1978, 169).

⁷³ “Piyusya, are you thinking anything?” Dvanov asked. ‘Of course I'm thinking,’ Piyusya said immediately, and then grew somewhat embarrassed. He often forgot to think and was at the moment thinking nothing.” (Platonov 1978, 283).

⁷⁴ “On account of [...] thoughtfulness amid the general tempo of labor.” (Andrey Platonov 2009, 1).

⁷⁵ Much research has been dedicated to Platonov and language, such as Bocharov 1985; Meerson 1997; Hodel 2001; Mikheev 2003; Dhooge 2007; Lane 2018. Most relevant in regard to the question of speaking and silence is Aleksandr Dyrdin's examination of this opposition with regard to traditional concepts of Slavic culture (Dyrdin 2001, 62–74).

ing a tower, the building site turns into a grave, and the Babylonian language chaos prevails.⁷⁶

When all communication is doomed to fail, staying quiet seems to be the only viable option—which the fish already knows. In *Arizona Dream* as well as in *Underground*, speaking lies at the heart of all the misunderstandings and all the deception. Leo's Asian tailor mutters in a foreign language, while he tries to take Leo's measurements; as Leo tells him to "stop singing!," he protests: "I'm not singing! I count!" (00:17:10). The Mexican musicians that are hired for Elaine's birthday are trying to explain something to Axel's cousin Paul (Vincent Gallo) in Spanish, who finally answers, annoyed, that "this is America. We speak English" (01:38:25). Yet he is himself from immigrant background (his name is French; moreover, the actor Gallo is of Italian-American origin), and he constantly fails at communication throughout the whole movie. While the Americans speak a lot, the Inuit family in Axel's dreams understand each other with very few words, which are unintelligible to the viewers' ears. Goran Gocić aptly diagnoses Kusturica's America to suffer "from the Tower of Babel syndrome" (Gocić 2001, 105): all forms of communication fail one way or another. Axel remembers how he felt after having been healed from a bad earache when he was a child: "I was grateful, but somehow I thought I might have been better off mute." (00:22:25). Not deaf, notably, but mute: hearing is not the problem, speaking is. The same line continues in *Underground*, where the characters repeatedly switch languages: to German, when they cooperate with the Nazis; Natalija switches to Russian when she is drunk; Marko speaks French in the end. But whatever language they speak, they seem to be unable to stop lying. Marko is a notorious liar, who builds entire worlds around his lies. Lying also lies at the heart of his profession as a poet, in a way. The actress Natalija uses her acting skills to charm all the men in her life in order to help her brother; but she herself falls victim to Marko's lies, and cannot untangle from them: „Bože... kako lepo lažeš!”⁷⁷ (01:44:50). In fact, in *Underground*, the most positively connotated characters do not speak at all, such as the ape Soni, or they speak with difficulty, such as the stutterer Ivan.

⁷⁶ For more on the Tower of Babel in *Kotlovan* cf. Giunter 2012, 24–30, 149, for more parallels to the fall of Babylon, cf. Meerson 2011, 51–53, 56.

⁷⁷ "God... How beautifully you lie!"

Many of the problems humankind faces in Kusturica's and Platonov's works result from the problem of language. At the same time, however, Dvanov reflects that "[Л]ИШЬ СЛОВА ОБРАЩАЮТ ТЕКУЩЕЕ ЧУВСТВО В МЫСЛЬ"⁷⁸ (Platonov 2011a, 92). Language forms at the same time the base for understanding and the base for misunderstanding. It is the means through which we construct utopia—and it is the trigger of utopia's demise, as well as the result of the fall of the Babylonian tower. In his foreword to the English translation of *Kotlovan*, Joseph Brodsky notes that "the first casualty of any discourse about utopia—desired or already attained—is grammar," as language is "unable to keep up with this sort of thought" (Brodsky 1987, 286). The apparent consciousness with which Kusturica's films and Platonov's prose approach the problem of language in relation to utopia shows their meta-utopian nature. Edith W. Clowes notes as one of the central characteristics of meta-utopia:

It is in the quest for meaning, the conscious balancing and judging of the multiplicity of meanings that inhere in language, and not in the enforcement of one interpretation and one fossilized consciousness, that meaning itself can be found. The paradox and wordplay of meta-utopia continually reassert this vital aspect of language, the denial of which turns consciousness quickly into dogma, into fixated consciousness. (Clowes 1993, 120)

Platonov, whom Clowes calls "meta-utopian *avant la lettre*" (Clowes 1993, 14), acts out this problem when his protagonists imitate the language of the socialist utopian project, and thereby unintentionally deconstruct it from within: the language of utopia does not allow for nuanced meaning, it cannot be reconciled with the everyday life of the people in Platonov's prose. In the case of *Underground*, utopia turns out to be nothing but lies or false hopes: lies, as Marko manages to rise to the highest positions in Yugoslav society, praising socialism, while he smuggles weapons; false hopes for Crni and the rest of the underground people. As Dostoevskii's underground man claims in *Zapiski iz podpol'ia*, "ideals are to be striven for, but not to be achieved" (Clowes 1993, 120): whenever utopia might be reached, humankind destroys it again.

⁷⁸ "Only words can turn flowing feeling into thought." (Platonov 1978, 69).

The end of *Arizona Dream* allegorically subsumes the constructive and destructive nature of language. In the last scene, Inuit Leo and Inuit Axel speak in (presumably mock) Inuit language, and their conversation is transmitted to the viewer through English subtitles (figure 6). It is here that Leo uncovers the mysterious symbolism behind the reappearing fish figure. We learn that the fish is called an Arrowtooth Halibut, and that it is “a very strange fish. When it becomes an adult, one eye moves across, joins the other” (02:09:40). This is why the movie features this particular fish—it is a coming-of-age metaphor, reflecting Axel’s development: “Maybe it’s like a... [...] a badge of maturity. They [the fish] passed through the nightmare. [...] The nightmare that separates children from adults.” (02:09:50). The two manage to catch the fish, and as they take a closer look at it their conversation ends the movie: “[Axel:] Then it’s better to have both eyes on the same side? [Leo:] No. Different. [Axel:] What do you lose? [Leo:] Your other side. You lose something, but you also gain something.” (02:10:55). After this conversation, the dead fish suddenly flies away, and the movie comes to an end. This last Inuit scene thus not only explains the message behind the film’s main symbol, but it also offers a pseudo-comforting note to for all the Axels who face the challenge of growing up in a world adrift. However—and here is where allegory comes in—this key conversation takes place



Figure 6. The meaning of the reoccurring fish motif is explained by Leo in mock Inuit language, decoded only through the movie’s subtitles. Still from *Arizona Dream* (02:10:00).

in coded form, in mock Inuit language, decoded only through the film's subtitles. I thus consider this scene to be an allegorical reference to the problematic nature of language: language is the only code humans possess to “обраща[ть] текущее чувство в мысль,”⁷⁹ to construct utopia—but language is always limited, always already encoded, never fully accessible. Not surprisingly, the problematization of language in Platonov's prose and Kusturica's films leads us back to the nature-philosophical subtext: language is what sets humans apart from nature and from animals. Fish know when to be quiet, while “it's people that are stupid,” creating and destroying utopia with their words.

Conclusion

The last observation leads us back to the questions of mediality and of the different cultural practices and codes that set Kusturica's films and Platonov's prose apart from each other, even though they share their profound interest in language and its different codes and registers, and especially in language in relation to utopia. On a first note, while Platonov's *Tower of Babel* collapses *within* the Russian language, Kusturica lets it fall apart within as well as between different languages, through the language chaos in *Arizona Dream* and *Underground*. On a second note, Kusturica's films also undermine language when they divert from expectations. In *Underground*, the main characters defy an easy national attribution, as their language does not demonstrate regional affiliation,⁸⁰ even though nationality/ethnicity is clearly a topic the film addresses provokingly. In *Arizona Dream*, Americanness and otherness is continuously created and undermined. Leo's Asian tailor speaks English with an Asian accent, but is called Larry.⁸¹ And most con-

⁷⁹ “Turn flowing feeling into thought” (Platonov 1978, 69).

⁸⁰ Marko is often considered a Serb and Crni a Montenegrin (e.g. in Harper 2017, 123), but Kusturica obviously kept the designations vague (in contrast to some other characters in the film; see Gocić 2001, 35 for the different possible readings). Cf. Keene 2001, 238–243 for an overview of the heated debates in the aftermath of *Underground*.

⁸¹ The deliberate confusion Kusturica creates regarding these “non-American” Americans also reflects on the level of research: Goran Gocić refers to Larry as Chinese (Gocić 2001, 105), but the movie never says anything about his origin; the actor's name (Visay Sengdara; he is not listed among the official cast of the film, though (“Arizona Dream—Arte | Programm.ARD.De” 2021)) points toward Southeast Asia rather than China, as does his speaking (he seems to be counting in Thai or Lao, indeed, but his accent is difficult to pinpoint; thanks go to the WIASN Facebook group and my own Facebook bubble for the help).

fusing is the figure of Leo's future wife Millie: he calls her his "Polish cupcake," but she speaks English perfectly and with a strong American accent, and the unidentifiable language in which she sings in front of the mirror a few seconds later is reminiscent of Russian or Ukrainian, but it is certainly not Polish (and neither is it Czech or Slovak, which casting Paula Porizkova, an actress of Czechoslovak origin who grew up in Sweden, might suggest).⁸² And lastly, the foundation for the third way in which Kusturica goes beyond Platonov's language chaos lies in the juxtaposition of spoken and written language that we encounter in *Arizona Dream*'s last scene. Here, Kusturica makes use of the different language tools film possesses in comparison to literature, but when he chooses subtitles to convey one of the central messages of his film, he chooses the probably most unstable form of communication available to his medium. Indisputably, subtitles vary between different versions of a film much more than the audio track does; in fact, the official 1993 Studio Canal version of *Arizona Dream* (Kusturica 1993b) has no subtitles for this decisive scene! I suggest that through this decision, the film undermines its own authority to offer moral comfort, to answer the questions it raises, or to convey any other message for that matter. In this regard, Kusturica and Platonov seem to be very much alike, again: their art is in continuous dialogue with the empirical world around it, it takes up on ideas and events of its time, but it does not offer easy answers, or any palpable answers at all, at least not within the diegetic space of their works.

Kusturica's reference to Platonov creates space for a productive dialogue between his films and Platonov's prose. As our closer look revealed, both examine utopia and the overcoming of death, look at socialism through an eschatological lens, juxtapose and question concepts of time, and problematize language in its relationship to utopia, thus lifting the discussion of utopia onto a meta-level. At the same time—coming back to the initial discussion of intermediality—Kusturica's referring to Platonov not only shapes

⁸² For more on the "eastern" elements in *Arizona Dream*, cf. Meyer-Fraatz 2007.

the way how we perceive his films. Rather, it also offers an insight into the 1980s reception of Platonov in Europe in general and in Yugoslavia in particular. And to a certain extent, this intermedial relationship challenges time in an almost *Undergroundian* or *Chevengurian* sense itself: Platonov's rewriting of Dostoevskian ideas and Kusturica's reframing of both Platonov and Dostoevskii changes the way in which the (imagined) viewer of Kusturica and reader of Platonov perceives the initial proto-texts the successors refer to. In this vein, Dostoevskii prophesizes the failure of Platonov's and Kusturica's socialist utopias, and Platonov foretells the problems in 1980s Yugoslavia—through the perpetuation of the same ideas or of similar views, updated and adapted to new contexts. What finally unites all three of them, Dostoevskii, Platonov, and Kusturica, is the conservative impulse that underlies their thought, which simmers through the way in which their writing and filmmaking strives toward pristine, past-oriented utopia anchored in folkloric-popular culture, and cautions against external influences that may endanger it.

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Abstract

In Emir Kusturica's film *Arizona Dream* (1993) erklärt der Protagonist Axel Blackmar (Johnny Depp) zu Beginn, warum er eine besondere Vorliebe für Fische hat: "People think that fish are stupid, but I was always sure that they weren't, because they know when to be quiet and it's people that are stupid and fish that know everything, and don't need to think." Dieses Zitat ist dem Roman *Čevengur* von Andrej Platonov entlehnt (geschrieben 1926/28), in dem eine der Figuren, ein Fischer, erklärt: „Der Fisch steht zwischen Leben und Tod, darum ist er stumm und sein Blick ohne Ausdruck; selbst ein Kalb denkt, doch ein Fisch nicht – er weiß schon alles“ (übers. Renate Reschke). Kusturica selbst verwies in einem Interview im Jahr 2010 auf seine Anleihe. Dennoch wurde dieser intermediären Beziehung bisher keine wissenschaftliche Aufmerksamkeit geschenkt. Im vorliegenden Artikel werden die gemeinsamen Themen und Motive in Platonovs *Čevengur* und *Kotlovan* (geschrieben 1930) und Kusturicas *Arizona Dream* und *Underground* (1995) näher beleuchtet, wobei auch die Rezeption Dostoevskijs von Bedeutung ist, auf den sich sowohl Kusturica 15.11.2022 17:30:00 wie auch Platonov beziehen. Dabei ergeben sich interessante Schnittstellen insbesondere in Bezug auf das utopische Denken Kusturicas und Platonovs, worin beide auf naturphilosophische, religiöse wie auch auf folkloristische Quellen rekurrieren. Damit eröffnet diese Untersuchung nicht nur einen neuen Zugang zu Kusturicas künstlerischem Weltbild der frühen/mittleren 1990er Jahre, sondern gewährt auch Einblick in die jugoslawische Platonov-Rezeption der 1980er – und wirft dadurch zugleich ein neues Licht auf Platonovs Texte.

In Emir Kusturica's film *Arizona Dream* (1993), the protagonist Axel Blackmar (Johnny Depp) explains at the beginning why he has a special fondness for fish: "People think that fish are stupid, but I was always sure that they weren't, because they know when to be quiet and it's people that are stupid and fish that know everything, and don't need to think." This quote is borrowed from the novel *Chevengur* by Andrei Platonov (written in 1926/28), in which one of the characters, a fisherman, declares: "Look –there's wisdom! A fish stands between life and death, so that he's dumb and expressionless. I mean even a calf thinks, but a fish, no. It already knows everything" (transl. A. Olcott). Kusturica himself referred to his borrowing in a 2010 interview. Nevertheless, no scholarly attention has been paid to this intermedial relationship. In this article, the common themes and motifs in Platonov's *Chevengur* and *Kotlovan* (written in 1930) and Kusturica's *Arizona Dream* and *Underground* (1995) will be examined in more detail, including the reception of Dostoevsky, to whom both Kusturica and Platonov refer. Interesting interfaces emerge, especially with regard to Kusturica's and Platonov's utopian thinking, in which both refer to natural philosophical, religious, and folkloristic sources. Thus, this study not only opens up a new approach to Kusturica's artistic worldview of the early/mid-1990s, but also provides insight into the Yugoslavian reception of Platonov in the 1980s – and at the same time sheds new light on Platonov's texts.