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REVIEW

# Sour Milk

## Emir Kusturica's *On the Milky Road* (*Na mlečnom putu*, 2016)

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What do you do as a director after you've already made a movie comparing yourself to Maradona? What else but cast yourself as a protagonist being fought over by two beautiful women, one of them none other than Monica Bellucci. And why not at the same time make your character a Saint Francis type beloved of the animals and untouchable by bullets? Luckily for Kusturica, he just about has the on-screen charisma to make this creative choice as convincing as it is ever likely to be, but the word "indulgence" lingers uneasily from the first to the last frame. *On the Milky Road* is probably Kusturica's glossiest film to date, although the inherent merit of that is debatable, and there is no shortage of the director's trademark frenetic Balkan music, zany antics and debauched festivities. Those hoping for any degree of substance are likely to be disappointed, however, and anyone with a low tolerance for bad CGI can expect to be thoroughly irked.

The story, such as it is, takes place in the midst of the Balkan war, in the heart of a regiment, although it is never really made clear whose side they are fighting for. Kosta, played by the director himself, is something of a loner, having lost his father and brother under traumatizing circumstances. Either through recklessness, insanity or a deluded sense of self-importance, every day he risks a ricocheting hail of gunfire to go and fetch milk for the troops, armed only with an umbrella, a donkey and a pet falcon. Eagerly awaiting his visits is Milena (Sloboda Mićalović), a spirited young woman who makes a point of emphasizing her prowess as a rhythmic gymnastics champion and dreams of getting married, specifically to Kosta.

Meanwhile, Monica Bellucci is yet again stuck playing the femme fatale with a mysterious (or in this case completely illogical) past, doomed to create chaos wherever she goes on account of her devastating beauty. Essentially, Malena has been uprooted to rural Bosnia on the completely baffling pretext of being a refugee seeking refuge in a war zone. Such is the archetypal nature of her

character that she doesn’t even have a name, and is known simply as the Bride. She comes into the story after being bought as the future wife of Žaga Bojović (Kusturica favorite Predrag Manojlović), Milena’s war hero brother. While on the surface she appears to be the perfect acquisition – compliant, placid and largely silent – she spells trouble in the form of a former lover whose passion drove him to kill for her and who has just been released from jail. Needless to say, she forgets her pledge of wifely devotion the moment she claps eyes on Kosta.

The film is divided into two parts, the first concentrating on the romantic triangle burgeoning against the backdrop of exploding bombs, and the second, inevitably enough, with the two lovers on the run. In between the two, Kusturica outdoes himself with the ultimate horrific Balkan wedding scene, where all the guests are burned to a crisp with a flame thrower. In keeping with the rest of the film, the only fleeting moment of mourning is dedicated to the donkey.

Animals play an increasingly important role as Kosta/Kusturica inches his way towards sainthood, taming a snake here, French-kissing a bear there. The imagery is typically prominent but lacking any subtlety, with ducks bathing in a bath of pig’s blood and a chicken obsessively trying to catch a glimpse of itself in the mirror. They serve to add to the overall quirkiness of the film, as well as reinforcing Kosta’s affinity with nature and the brutal nature of humanity, but, like the film as a whole, they often venture too far into heavy-handed magical realism, ending up jarring and bewildering.

As ever, the plot of *On the Milky Road* is secondary to a succession of raucous set pieces, which give the film much-needed verve and rhythm. Outrageousness and decadence on film are no bad thing, and in fact in a lot of contexts they would come as a very welcome change, but Kusturica needs to let audiences in on the fun too. Hopefully he will come to realize that his reputation is not infallible and recognized that he needs to go back to producing work with a scope beyond that of his own ego.