

‘Resilience, Traumatic Fortitude, and Advocacy Journalism:
Representation of the War in Bosnia in Post-War Film Production,’
Essay for *Media Portal Bosnia*, September 2012.
(In Bosnian and English).

***Resilience, Traumatic Fortitude, and Advocacy Journalism:
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Dina Iordanova



Grbavica, 2006, Jasmila Zbanic

Similar to other high profile international conflicts – like the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s or the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 1970s, the war for Bosnia’s independence drew a global crew of journalists who reported on it for the benefit of worldwide audiences. High profile international figures, such as American Christiane Amanpour, who went on to become one of the key political commentators for her network, CNN, or BBC’s Martin Bell, who eventually embarked on a political career as one of the few independent members of the British parliament, came into prominence while reporting live from the war zone, often under fire. A number of other respected

international journalists – such as Asne Seierstad, Jeremy Bowen, Tim Judah, and veteran freelancer Ed Vulliamy – published articles and books that became the basis for the way this war’s story is told. Similarly, ranges of international filmmakers were attracted to the conflict. Whilst many films featuring the war in Bosnia were made during the war itself, the majority were released after the war was formally over, in the late 1990s and 2000s. Many of these films were made in co-production, sometimes by up to seven countries entering partnerships in order to finance a feature that detailed the war.

Media representation of the war in this period was marked by a number of innovations, specifically linked to advancements in digital technologies, that determined the shape and style of news production: direct broadcasts via live video link from the site of events (where the reporter could be occasionally seen coming under fire), cell phones, the portable laptop, as well as e-mail and other ways of sending material via the Internet. Later on, when reporting on other international conflicts such as Iraq, journalists became more reliant on the military for communication and were often ‘embedded’ alongside troops, thus limiting their vantage point and sovereignty. In the case of the wars of Yugoslav succession, however, visitors to the war zone could still travel around and explore: a set up where freedom of movement came alongside higher exposure and risk. Many of the documentary films made during the war and its aftermath rely on footage taken during such field trips. Likewise, features also often rely on footage that shows travel through areas of destruction, marked by the wounds of war: these semi-ruined landscapes still dominate the international films made in the years that followed the war.

The Westerner: A Normative Narrator

A war reporter/aid worker/returning émigré who has come from abroad would frequently act as a central protagonist in films that told stories about the Bosnian war. Such positioning of the Westerner as a 'normative narrator', as a person who stands in for the only possibly objective point of view, is in vein with the generally observed tendency to 'narrate' the Balkans from the point of the West. Such person is supposedly above things and remains untainted by the cultural shortcoming identified by thinkers such as Samuel Huntington, whose view of the 'clash of civilization' dominated the discourse of the period (1997). An early example of such 'narrator' was the protagonist of from Milcho Manchevski's *Before the Rain* (1994), Aleksandar (Rade Serbedzija), a prize-winning London-based photographer. Even if originally from the Balkans, Aleksandar has been in emigration for long enough and is now fully Westernized; he returns to his native region to reflect over the challenges that recording violence and barbarity in a violent encounter in war-torn Bosnia have presented him with.

Similarly to *Before the Rain*, a number of cinematic works released in the aftermath of the war tell the story of the Bosnian conflict from the point of view of someone with sufficient Western credentials, a person who is regarded as unbiased representative of a solid and objective moral standpoint (a journalist, an aid worker, an IFOR officer). A number of internationally made films set during the Bosnian conflict, for example, featured subplots involving the work of journalists. Spanish *Territorio Comanche* (1997), based on a controversial documentary novel by Arturo

Pérez-Reverte, chronicled the harsh experiences of a group of television journalists during the war. Polish *Demons of War* (1998) portrayed a squad of peacekeepers who accidentally come to help a couple of journalists who are endangered by a warlord whose crimes they plan to expose.

Not only journalists were seen as objective observers to the situation. In other films there would be aid workers or translators witnessing the atrocities, or, in the aftermath of the war, junior politicians, humanitarian envoys, or police. British TV production *Warriors* (UK, 1999, Peter Kosminski) and Dutch television film *De enclave/The Enclave* (2002, Netherlands, Willem van de Sande Bakhuyzen), for example, explored challenging moral problems linked to the role of the international troops stationed in Bosnia, whereas Canadian *Whistleblower* (Germany/Canada, 2010, Larysa Kondracki) radically problematized the alleged complicity of international NGOs in the excessive growth of human trafficking in the region.

Advocacy, representation, and redemption

One of the most internationally seen and acclaimed films released almost immediately after the end of the war was Michael Winterbottom's *Welcome to Sarajevo* (1997), based on the book *Natasa's Story* by journalist Michael Nicholson, and featuring the daily life of an international group of journalists in besieged Sarajevo. Again, the story is told from the point of view of 'normative narrators', a group of Westerners based in Sarajevo who decide to act, in solidarity with each other, in facilitating their British friend Michael Henderson (Stephen Dillane), who is not only reporting the war and the heroic workings of orphanage's leader Mrs. Savic, but who also makes

arrangements to lead Emira, an orphaned child, to safety in Britain. The effort is supported by passionate even if somewhat idealized American aid worker Nina (Marisa Tomei) and jaded journalist Flynn (Woody Harrelson). The pro-active taking sides shown in this film, where the protagonists not only observe and report but also get directly involved by following their moral compass and intervening in the name of humanity, is one of the most consistent early representations of what was to later on become known as the 'advocacy' trend. Despite its idealism, *Welcome to Sarajevo* remains the authoritative summary about Western involvement in Bosnia at large.

It is this activist stance, where the consensus is that one must take sides and where reporters take part in the public debate about the ways to tackle the conflict, that has marked the representation of the Balkan conflicts at large and in Bosnia specifically. Various referred to as 'attachment' (Ruigrok) or 'advocacy' (Schindler), this specific stance of international political activism has mainly been aimed at governments, especially where civil groups have felt that the intervention of the international community is needed. Its most vocal representative has been Samantha Power, a policy adviser to the Obama administration, who started her career as a reporter in Bosnia in 1993. Winning the Pulitzer Prize for her *The Problem from Hell* a decade later, she developed it into a consistent doctrine and successfully argued for interventions in Libya and elsewhere. In that, the advocacy stance seen in films treating the conflict of Bosnia in the 1990s has been extremely influential in reaching out and shaping the general views on intervention and international activism.

A number of international films made after the end of the war were structured around tales of return to Bosnia. More often than not their stories evolved around shattered lives and were meant to be led by sympathy to the victims, yet the concerns of

Westerners were still in focus. Based on Scott Anderson's Esquire magazine article, the protagonist of *The Hunting Party* (2007) is yet another foreign journalist who is returning to Bosnia many years late. The story goes back to 1995 when reckless correspondent Simon Hunt (Richard Gere) and his cameraman Duck (Terrence Howard) are reporting from Bosnia. Simon cannot withstand the pressures of this rough job and is fired, only to return five years later and revisit the region after the end of the war as a bounty hunter, in an attempt to catch a notorious war criminal. He is not so much after the money rather than after the opportunity to take an interview which would, purportedly, restore his ruined journalistic reputation. The film is supposed to address journalistic ethics but the focus is shifted and focuses mainly on the hunt. It is meant to be a moral treatise on professionalism; the actual conflict in Bosnia serves as a backdrop for the hero's soul-searching.¹

Angelina Jolie's *In the Land of Blood and Honey* (2011), a film that revisits the conflict and reexamines matters of violence and rape from the time of the war, attracted good-sized audiences mainly due to the celebrity status of its first-time director. The film split the opinions at the festival circuit where it was regarded as a well-meaning yet somewhat impetuous exercise in politically correct advocacy; it was welcomed and acclaimed in the Bosnian capital where it received the coveted 'Heart of Sarajevo' award.

¹ Even if not directly linked to Bosnia and set predominantly in Croatia of 1991, French production *Harrison's Flowers* (2000) is another widely seen film that Western viewers often associate with the conflict in Yugoslavia and journalism. The narrative, which also raises matters of journalistic ethics, focuses on the plight of a faithful wife (Andie MacDowell) who ventures into a horrible war zone in search of her missing husband, the Newsweek Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Harrison (David Strathairn).

After the War: Lonely Mourning, Moving On

In the same year that *Welcome to Sarajevo* was released, Woody Harrelson was seen in yet one more film, which, even if seemingly not directly linked to Bosnia, was clearly meant to serve as a commentary for the political impotence the West had shown, and powerfully satirized the generally inadequate response of America to the conflict in the Balkans. Veteran Barry Levinson's *Wag the Dog* (USA, 1997) mocked the perverse ways in which American media's attention was manipulated by policy advisors, lobbyist and PR professionals who blow up a single episode of hostility by fabricating a whole war that needs journalistic attention in order to cover up inopportune news at home.

Films made by directors who were more closely linked to Bosnia, systematically displayed such critical stance to what they treated as contemptible Western efforts to intervene. Such is the view taken in Oscar-winning Danis Tanovic's *No Man's Land* (2001), an acclaimed satire that mocks all military, aid workers and reporters, who are shown as pursuing their own (career) agendas and are not clued enough to the realities on the ground. One of the sharpest observations of post-traumatic life in Bosnia after the war, Pjer Zalica's *Gori vatra/Fuse* (2003) shows Western observers as equally distant, scheming over career goals, people to whom a spell in post-war Bosnia is not much more than an item that may look good on a CV. A range of pensive and perceptive films by Bosnian auteurs, like Pjer Zalica's *Kod amidze Idriza* (2004), Jasmila Zbanic's acclaimed *Grbavica* (2006), or Aida Begic's *Snow* (2008), show Bosnians whose lives are profoundly changed by the war and who find the strength to go on in the aftermath. Ognjen Svilicic's subtle *Armin* (2007) makes a pointed and

bitter commentary on the relations between today's Bosnians and Western 'advocates' in showing the ordeal of the young boy, whose musical talent is of no interest to the German film crew but who is immediately of interest to them once they sense he suffers from a post-traumatic syndrome and they may be able to use him as a subject of documentary that, again, would give a boost to their CVs. Such films address some of the deepest issues related to the ethics of humanity, assistance and representation in a particularly understated indirect manner, where the real Bosnian lives remain out of sight and only those traumatic aspects that fit into the commonly accepted narrative are of interest.

Danis Tanovic's segment in the omnibus film *11' 09" 01 – September 11* (2002), which showed the women of Srebrenica commemorating their dead in a dignified silent protest, is probably the best epitaph of the post-war discourse on Bosnia.

11' 09" 01 - September 11, segment 'Bosnia-Herzegovina' (UK/ France/ Egypt/ Japan/ Mexico/ USA/ Iran, 2002, dir. Danis Tanovic and others) *Armin* (Croatia/ Bosnia and Herzegovina/ Germany, 2007, dir. Ognjen Svilicic)

De enclave/The Enclave (2002, Netherlands, dir. Willem van de Sande Bakhuyzen)

Demony wojny według Goi/Demons of War (Poland, 1998, dir. Wladyslaw Pasikowski)

Harrison's Flowers (France, 2000, dir. Élie Chouraqui)

The Hunting Party (USA/ Croatia/ Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2007, dir. Richard Shephard)

Gori vatra/Fuse (Bosna and Herzegovina/ Austria/ Turkey/ France, 2003, dir. Pjer Zalica)

Grbavica/ Esma's Secret (Bosna and Herzegovina/ Croatia/ Austria/ Germany, 2006, Jasmila Zbanic)

In the Land of Blood and Honey (USA, 2011, dir. Angelina Jolie)

Kod amidze Idriza/ Days and Hours (Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2004, dir. Pjer Zalica)

No Man's Land (Bosnia and Herzegovina/ France/ Slovenia/ Italy/ UK/Belgium, 2001, dir. Danis Tanovic).

Pred dozhdot/Before the Rain (Republic of Macedonia/France/UK, 1994, Milcho Manchevski)

Snijeg/ Snow (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany/ France/ Iran, 2008, dir. Aida Begic)

Territorio Comanche (Spain, 1997, dir. Gerardo Herrero)

Veillées d'armes/ The War Correspondent (France/ Germany/ UK, 1994, dir. Marcel Ophuls)

Wag the Dog (USA, 1997, dir. Barry Levinson)

Warriors (UK, 1999, dir. Peter Kosminski)

Welcome to Sarajevo (UK/USA, 1997, dir. Michael Winterbottom)

Whistleblower (Germany/Canada, 2010, Larysa Kondracki)

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