

EASTERN EUROPEAN CINEMA VS. HOLLYWOOD:
BOSNIAN WAR FILMS

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BOSNIAN WAR FILMS

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Abstract

The Bosnian War was a conflict that occurred in a little known European country after the fall of the Iron Curtain and break-up of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. The purpose of this study is to compare and contrast the films from the Hollywood and Eastern European arenas. This study will specifically examine the Hollywood blockbuster *Behind Enemy Lines* and the Serbian film, *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* in contrast with one another. Each of these films creates a discourse which influences many other films about the war and how films about the conflict are presented.

Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the differences that can be found between the film industries hailing from both Hollywood and the European film industry, specifically films from the former Yugoslavian republics. Hollywood's industry uses a plot and star driven style, while the European film industry is character and narrative driven.

True Hollywood-style war films are films that rely heavily on the plot and star power of the film. Thomas Elsaesser, the author of *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood*, characterizes Hollywood films as “a less particular place, (and as so often asserted) 'more a state of mind'; rather than restricting access, its lingua franca is English, and it wants to be a site available to all, the films are accessible from anywhere” (492). These films are then easy to move from one time and place to another, as they are not dependent on the situation for the story to make sense, and play heavily on American ideology. European film is found on the opposite end of the spectrum, characterized by strong narrative and characters that are dependent on the situation that is presented throughout the film. Elsaesser states that European film can be defined as a “place based and context dependent. The films from this cinema style carry clear linguistic boundaries as well as geographic markers, their reference points are specific in location and time” (492). So why does the difference in the cinemas matter in the overall story of the Bosnian war?

Answers to this question are complex and can be interpreted in many ways; however, I will answer this in a personal context. The research into this subject comes from an interest in the former Yugoslavian republics and their history. This part of the

world has been a melting pot for hundreds of years and figures into many trade routes that connect the east and west. The history of these peoples is often misunderstood or cloaked in myths, leading to a stereotyping of the people of the region and the cultures they represent. The film industries of these countries play a major role in the breaking of the stereotypes and understanding of the cultures that are present in this region. Also, as the governments of these countries become more democratic and open to freedom of speech, the filmmakers of these countries are allowed to use their own voices to tell the stories of these cultures. The research that was performed for this project becomes a journey to break the misinterpretation, prejudices, and ignorance that once was held specifically by this writer.

The ideas that were changed the most were about the Serbian people, and their roles in the conflict. When the research began, I had a tendency to place the blame squarely on the shoulders of the Serbians. One historian that specializes in the Balkans surmises my thoughts before this project perfectly by stating “knowledge or interest in this specific region for many Westerners does not go beyond generalized, oversimplified, and sometimes outright wrong ideas about the Balkan countries” (Miskovic 440). My knowledge of the region before the project relied heavily American media: television, film, and newspaper articles that place blame and stereotyped the Serbians as the outright enemy of human rights and equality. After completing the project my opinions have changed; the responsible parties are not obvious, people of all sides are guilty of one kind of crime or another during the conflict, and no one people group is completely blameless. The project has also challenged where this will lead to following the conclusion of the research: advocacy for filmmakers from around the world. So, how does this all relate to

the differences between Hollywood and Eastern European film?

The films that were researched for this project range from Hollywood blockbuster to nationalist European cinema, with many films falling somewhere in between. The two films that exemplify the two ends of the spectrum are *Behind Enemy Lines* (2001) and *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* (1996). The background and history of the former Yugoslavian republics, more specifically Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, are important factors to consider when speaking in terms of the Hollywood and European film portrayals of these people.

Background and History of the Bosnian-Serbian War

Eastern Europe is not an easy place to understand historically, politically, religiously or ethnically. This region is a melting pot much like the United States, a place where people from different cultures, religions and political values meet and somehow figure out how to survive together. This thesis will concentrate on the former Yugoslavian Republics and those that were specifically involved in the civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1992-1995. The Bosnian-Serbian War will be used as the benchmark of this investigation; however, wars of independence from Serbia were fought in all of the former republics when the Yugoslavian Federation collapsed.

Bosnia-Herzegovina and the neighboring nation-states have some of the longest histories on the European continent but have fought for their own sovereignty many times over the centuries. Bosnia was annexed into the Ottoman Empire in the 14th century, which introduced Islam to the people of this region. The 19th century saw the influence of the Ottoman Empire fade as the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy gained influence in the region until World War I. Following the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire during and

after World War I, Bosnia was then absorbed into the kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The end of World War II saw the formation of the Yugoslav Federation and the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina was formed, which fell under the influence of Serbia until the declaration of independence from the Yugoslav Federation in 1992.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is a mostly landlocked state. Croatia borders Bosnia-Herzegovina to the north, west and southwest except for the very southern tip which is lined by the Adriatic Sea before meeting the border of Montenegro, while Serbia dominates the eastern border. Citizens of Serbia, Montenegro, and Croatia have over the years successfully settled in Bosnia-Herzegovina and thus created a “need” for the bordering nations to “protect” their own people. These people are Bosnian-Herzegovian by nation but identify themselves by their political, ethnic and religious beliefs. Serbians identify very heavily as Orthodox Christians loyal to the Serbian government and ethnic system. Croats identify as Catholic and loyal to the Croatian government and ethnic system. Montenegro, however, has a very minor portion of the population and tends to identify with the Serbians.

The Bosnian War was started over ethnic, political, economic, religious, and land disputes. The breakup of Yugoslavia saw Serbia and Croatia make assertions of dominance over separate regions of Bosnia-Herzegovina without the consent of the ethnic Bosnian-Muslims or the Bosnian-Croats that inhabited the region. The Serbian army was responsible for the expulsion of more than 60 percent of the non-Serbian population in Eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina by the middle of May 1992 (Silber 185).

The organized mass ethnic cleansing of the Bosniak¹ population by the Serbians, Croatians and Montenegrins began in Eastern Bosnia in late May of 1992, with concentration camps formed reminiscent of those found in Poland from during the Holocaust. The major fighting in 1993 was between the Croats and Bosniaks in central Bosnia-Herzegovina, which saw a major ethnic cleansing carried out in the Lasva Valley region. The United Nations soon created the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia on May 25, 1993, in order to prosecute those who were guilty of performing crimes against humanity during this conflict. Soon after the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia was established, NATO began enforcing a no-fly zone over all of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

International assistance from the NATO forces was not actively given in the form of ground forces or airstrikes until late into the conflict in 1994. The United Nations did send their own United Nations Protection force into Bosnia in June of 1992 in order to protect Sarajevo International Airport, and eventually expanded their duties to include protecting humanitarian and relief aid as well as civilian refugees in militarized zones. The aid given to the refugees by the international forces was minimal at best until the massacres in the towns Srebrenica, Tuzla, and Markale in 1995, after which massive airstrikes were carried out against the Serbian forces. The Dayton Peace Agreement was signed and agreed upon on December 14, 1995 in Paris, France. This agreement saw the most international involvement since the start of the war with a force of 80,000 charged with insuring the peace and that the accords were followed. The force that was deployed was finally allowed to use force if necessary to insure the protection of the towns they

1 Preferred name of Bosnian Muslims.

were charged with helping resettle.

Serbia is the only country that has been found guilty of genocide in the civil war and war of aggression against Bosnia-Herzegovina by the United Nations and the United States Congress in 2007 (Cohen 1). This ruling makes villains of only one of the many guilty parties in the mass murders of thousands of people in Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1992-1995. The massacres in the towns of Srebrenica, Tuzla, and Markale were all carried out under the orders of the Serbian forces of Ratko Mladic. However, Croatian and Montenegrin forces were also responsible for thousands of deaths through massacres, sniper attacks and shellings of Bosnian and Herzegovinan towns.²

The estimated casualties of this war stand at over 200,000 people killed or injured, and 2.2 million people displaced. The population difference before and after this war is about 36 percent. Put in the perspective of another ethnic cleansing of Jews in Europe in the 20th century, the Holocaust of World War II saw a population disruption of 6 million Jews alone, and the Jewish world population of the world as a whole was disrupted by 33 percent. Many films have been made about the genocides of World War II; now the Bosnian-Serbian war is taking its place in the film world, and the differences become more important in regards to understanding the motives of the films.

Hollywood Cinema vs. Eastern European Cinema

Hollywood films are plot and star driven. Films such as *Behind Enemy Lines* and *Uncommon Valor* (1983) exemplify this thought. Both of these films have an A-list actor (Gene Hackman), a storyline that can be moved from one time and place to another, and

2 To learn more about the Yugoslavian Wars of 1992-1995, see *The Fall of Yugoslavia* by Misha Glenny (1992). Misha Glenny is a leading historian on the Balkans.

encourage American patriotism. *Behind Enemy Lines* has Hackman as Admiral Reignart, a commanding naval officer who will give up everything to save the one American who is still alive and caught in enemy territory. *Uncommon Valor* also stars Hackman as an army officer desperate to save his son from the communists after he goes MIA during the Vietnam War, and will stop at nothing to get him home. These two films follow the Hollywood trope in encouraging the viewer to side with the Americans who after great struggles finally emerges victorious. The Hollywood film also allows for many stereotypes to be continued and ignores the detrimental effects they can have to the people that are being portrayed on screen. *Behind Enemy Lines* is full of stereotypes that encourage this idea. The Bosnians in the film are very Western in the way they speak, dress and act, while the Serbians are very foreign in the same ways. The scholar Elsaesser points out that Hollywood encourages the

spectator to identify with the victims, by making the victims “perform their victim hood” [sic] for the camera, thus the camera reproduces this gaze upon them whilst also distancing the gaze, which is to say the hidden knowledge that—as victims—these Bosnian pose no threat, make no demands, stake no claims other than that of being treated as victims. This automatically reconfirms the West's position as benefactor, i.e. secure and powerful enough to be in a position to help. (359)

This idea reinforces the stereotypes that Hollywood has given to the “perpetrators” and “victims” of this conflict. The European films in contrast present a slightly different point of view.

European films such as *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame* are more apt to present the

people from each of the warring faction as “survivors, instead of the more Hollywood thought which is to present the survivors as victims” (Elsaesser 359). The characters and narrative driven stories encourage survival. The characters are much more dependent on time and place than those from the Hollywood cinemas. *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* is completely dependent from the beginning of the film on the start of the Bosnian-Serbian war and the ethnic, political and religious rivalries that have plagued the region for generations. The in-depth analysis will start with a look at *Behind Enemy Lines*.

***Behind Enemy Lines* and Hollywood Cinema's Take on the Bosnian War**

Behind Enemy Lines is an American film that was distributed by 20th Century Fox in 2001 starring Owen Wilson, Gabriel Macht, and Gene Hackman. The film begins with Lieutenant Chris Burnett (Owen Wilson) and Stackhouse (Gabriel Macht) landing on the aircraft carrier in the Black Sea close to the end of the Bosnian war and a confrontation between Burnett and Reigart (Hackman). Burnett and Stackhouse are then assigned to take a Christmas day reconnaissance mission in which they are to see if anything is happening on the United Nations backed side of the demilitarized zone. The mission is non-eventful until Burnett spots movement in the demilitarized zone and convinces Stackhouse to check out what he thinks he might have seen. The Serbians are in the demilitarized zone where they are not supposed to be and are creating mass graves for the victims of a massacre they have just inflicted upon the Bosniaks. The two Americans are spotted and a spectacular fight sequence with many explosions ensues. The plane with Stackhouse and Burnett is shot down on the Serbian side of the line, and Stackhouse is found by the Serbians soon after and shot. Burnett is watching from the forest, and a cat-and-mouse game ensues throughout the rest of the movie between Burnett and a Serbian

marksman. Along the way Burnett makes contact with the American naval ship and is told where to find the rendezvous points only to be told time and time again that he cannot be rescued from those points. Reigart eventually tells Burnett that he must retrace his steps back to the crash site because they cannot pick him up in the enemy territory. Burnett meets Bosniak teenagers while running from these Serbian soldiers that are pursuing him throughout the film. Babic, one of the teenagers, is especially helpful to Burnett and is the most western of the group; he helps Burnett get through the war zone of Hoc. When Burnett reaches the rendezvous point a few minutes too late, he tells Babic to leave because the real reason that the Serbians were after him was not because he and Stackhouse were in their territory, it was because they saw and photographed the mass graves in the demilitarized zone. Burnett eventually makes it back to the crash site and sends a radio signal from his ejector seat to the people on the American naval ship. The men on the ship receive the signal and realize that Burnett is not dead as feared but still needs to be rescued. Reigart then decides to defy a direct order from his commanding officer, offers the marines on the ship a way out and leaves to rescue Burnett from the crash site. The end of the film consists of Burnett taking on a battalion of the Serbian army and the marksman, all while successfully retrieving the recording of the graves that Stackhouse and Burnett were shot down for taking.

Behind Enemy Lines purpose is not to follow the story of the conflict that the people of this region are facing; instead, the film chronicles an American's plight in enemy territory and incites patriotism for the American viewer. The film is a journey of spectacles and star-centric plot points. Chris Burnett and Admiral Reigart are two characters that are simply cutouts that could be replaced by many other film cutouts in

Hollywood film. *Behind Enemy Lines* tries to bring attention to the problem at hand, the Bosnian war, but instead the spectacle becomes the more important message. Burnett's journey becomes more spectacular as the film moves forward. The final battle sequence of the film is so spectacular that the suspension of disbelief is tested. Burnett somehow takes on multiple attackers, tanks, and remains unscathed as he is rescued by helicopter. Stereotypes do, however, play a major role in the Hollywood film as well.

The Serbians in *Behind Enemy Lines* are like the classic western genre black hats. There is no question if there is a redeeming quality within their ranks. One example of this is when one of the Serbian men with the marksman steps on a mine in the forest and the marksman points a gun at him and tells him not to move while he walks away, and then proceeds to shoot the man on the mine. The Americans, on the other hand, fall under the white hats stereotype. Americans are continuously presented as flawed but salvageable in their mistakes. The Americans are presented as the good guys no matter their flaws, and the Serbians are always the villains in this film. The spectacle, star power and stereotypes of *Behind Enemy Lines* are characteristics of the Hollywood brand of cinema and create a distinct end of the spectrum; however, there are many films that fall somewhere between these two ends.

Welcome to Sarajevo (1997) is one such film that falls somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. The cast of this film are A-list stars Woody Harrelson, Marissa Tomei, Stephen Dillane, and Goran Visjnic, but the film is a much more character driven story than that of *Behind Enemy Lines*. The film begins with journalists and aid workers during the siege of Sarajevo who fearlessly capture footage, occasionally provide help to those that are hurt in the shellings or sniper attacks, and eventually “rescue” a young girl

named Emira from an orphanage that is caught in the siege. Emira escapes but not without great loss in the form of “Roadrunner,” a baby from the orphanage that might be her own at the hands of Chetniks. Emira escapes Bosnia and eventually is adopted by the British family.

Welcome to Sarajevo thus sticks closely to the Hollywood style with some European style but it does not give a balanced look into the events or the cultures the film portrays. As most Western films do, the Serbians are demonized, while the Bosnians are portrayed as victims.

Another Western film that walks the fine line of Hollywood blockbuster and European style cinema is *Shot through the Heart* (1998), which was produced by HBO studios. *Shot through the Heart* chronicles two lifelong friends caught on either side of the war. One friend is a Serbian, while the other is a Bosnian Muslim; both must decide where their loyalties lie. The friendship is first tested when the siege of Sarajevo begins. Slavko is the Serbian who warns his Bosnian friend Vlado to get his family out of the city before the fighting really begins. Vlado ignores this advice, and his family is caught with others in the siege. Vlado eventually takes up arms against the Serbians who are laying siege to the city and realizes that Slavko is behind training the snipers that are wreaking havoc across the city. The film ends with Vlado making a choice as a sniper between killing Slavko to save others or leaving the city with his family and guaranteed safe passage.

Shot Through the Heart is guilty of the stereotypical demonization of the Serbian people in the film except for Slavko, who is presented as man who is caught between religious and ethnic loyalties and his lifelong friendship. Vlado, his family, and friends

are also somewhat presented as victims of the circumstances, but the ending proves them to be survivors. *In the Land of Blood and Honey* (2012) is another film that falls somewhere between the European and the Hollywood film.

In the Land of Blood and Honey follows a man and woman who met at a club dancing before the siege of Sarajevo began and then later find themselves on opposing sides of the war. The woman Ajla, a Bosniak, is taken captive by the Serbians as the atrocities begin. The man, Danijel, a Serbian army officer, sees Ajla nearly raped by one of his officers. Danijel proceeds to “rescue” Ajla under the pretense that Ajla is his own personal sexual prisoner. Danijel releases Ajla who then proceeds to betray the Serbian position to her fellow Bosniaks. The film continues to allude to a love story until the tragic ending which ends with the Serbians being demonized once again for the atrocities committed during the war.

In the Land of Blood and Honey, directed by an American, tries to be both Hollywood and European in style, but is ultimately a Hollywood film. The film could easily be exchanged from Sarajevo and Bosnia to any other war-torn country in the 20th century. Another Hollywood style device found in this film is the stereotyping of the Serbians as the villain.³ The message of the film is clear; the Serbians are the bad guys, no matter the small redemption they might have in the story. The other end of the spectrum consists of films from the European and national cinemas of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia.

3 The stereotypes of Serbians, Croatians and Bosniaks are a separate topic entirely. The in-depth investigations of how such stereotypes can and do influence the understanding of these peoples is investigated in many articles. For more information on the Hollywood form of stereotyping in film, please see “Fierce Mustache, Muddy Chaos, and Nothing Much Else: Two Cinematic Images of the Balkans” by Maya Miskovic.

***Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* and Eastern European Cinema's Take on the Bosnian-Serbian War**

The first of the former Yugoslav films is the complete opposite of a Hollywood spectacle film; in fact, it has been referred to as “Serbian propaganda” by some of the audience members from the countries upon which this film is based (Chaudhuri 31).

Pretty Village, Pretty Flame (1996) is a film from Serbia that takes uses a completely different device to drive the story. This film is driven by the characters that are morally ambiguous instead of the Hollywood stereotypes that focus on star- power and plot.

Pretty Village, Pretty Flame relies much more heavily on the circumstances of the war to drive the story forward. The characters of this film are much more dependent on one another, and the events are much more inclusive of multiple characters. The characters also face more realistic consequences for their actions than that of the American Hollywood film. The structure and storylines are much more complex and jarring because the film is done from the opposite point of view than that with which most westerners and Americans identify with. The characters are not easily identifiable, which becomes important when the viewer expects to identify the “good” from the “bad” from the beginning. The story is instead much more complex. The characters are driven by each other, the backgrounds and circumstances of their surroundings rather than the plot.

The jarring effect comes from the preconceived western idea that the Serbians are the “evil” in the war, while the Bosniaks are innocent victims of genocide. The plot is driven by the flashbacks of a soldier who is hospitalized in Bosnia after suffering from shrapnel wounds of from a mortar attack and his desperate need to avenge the death of his mother at the supposed hands of the Bosniaks. This film requires the viewer to see the

Serbians as more than “just murderers, and yet spreads the blame for the war amongst all the parties involved” (Chaudhuri 31). The film is context dependent; the characters have to be from a time and place in which there is a solid history of ethnic, religious, and territorial disagreements that have caused blood feuds for many years. The people in this film are not simply hero and villain; instead they are characters in which the specific history of the character is just as important as the actions they carry out.

While *Behind Enemy Lines* relied solely on the plight of an American soldier and a single character's journey in the film, *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame* entices the viewer to find the deeper meaning in the plot. The history of the Balkans and ethnic and religious backgrounds are each characters of their own in the film, building upon how and why these two friends are on opposing sides of the war.

The stories that are told in the context of European style films are complex and the answers are not always readily available. The cost of sympathizing with a character is much more complicated and sometimes horrifying because morally ambiguous characters make the viewer uncomfortable. Another influence found in this European style of cinema is the acknowledgment of fierce nationalism, religious ideology, and ethnic superiority.

The story also contains fierce strains in the theme of nationalism. The dialogue is filled with lines that speak to this nationalism and the identity that each of these people see themselves as. Bosnians are not simply from an artificially created country; instead, they are self-identified by ethnicity and religious ideology. The nationalism that occurs in this type of cinema is not just a one-nationality point of view. The identification through nationalism is also present in the Bosnian film *Grbavica: Land of My Dreams* (2006).

Grbavica: Land of My Dreams is a Bosnian film that deals with the aftermath of the war. The story is based on a single mother and her daughter who must still deal with the bigotry and distrust of those around her at the end of the Bosnian war. Unlike many Hollywood films, *Grbavica: Land of My Dreams* is attached fully to the context in which it is set. The film cannot be taken out of this specific time and place to be understood. The mother and daughter deal with circumstances that are specific to Grbavica at the end of the Bosnian-Serbian war. The troubles each of the characters face are specific to someone who has come from that place, in this case the Bosnia of the 1990s. A film that falls between the two ends of the spectrum, but identifies closely to European cinema is *No Man's Land* (2001).

No Man's Land is a film that was originally made in Bosnia-Herzegovina by many Europeans from differing backgrounds. This film, like *Grbavica: Land of my Dreams* and *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*, relies very heavily on the European style of film-making, but also uses some of the Hollywood style to bring the plot to a climax. The plot of the film opens when a man becomes booby trapped to a land mine, with two other soldiers who are from opposite sides of the war. The plot hinges on whether these men can avoid killing one another until the UN bomb squad is able to rescue them. The idea put forth in this film is that no one group is completely responsible for the atrocities that happened in this nation and everyone involved was at fault in some way or another. Thus, this film is more about the survivors of the war in the style of the European cinema than placing blame or making victims out of any one group. These films are all important to understanding not only different styles of film-making; they also provide insight into those who were a part of the Bosnian war.

Conclusions

The differences in film-making techniques are what make the stories unique to each culture. Film is a way in which people can learn about history and other cultures. Today there are a growing number of international film festivals and region-specific festivals as well that highlight films from different cinemas. The former Yugoslavian Republics now have 55 international film festivals that cater to films from the former Yugoslavian Republics, with numerous other regional and city festivals aimed at bringing the world new and entertaining films from this region. The ease in government oversight in these countries also helps to boost the film-making industries. This is very evident in the former republic of Croatia where the film industry is being allowed to thrive under the more democratic role as found in the government.

Croatia has a particularly vibrant and growing community of filmmakers and industry because of the political and economic environment that is found in the country.⁴ The trend is for the other former republics to soon follow in the footsteps of the Croatian film industry, with more international award-winning films, as their own government legislation becomes more tolerant of media and expression. The culture and stories that come from the Balkans are incredible stories of survival, friendship, hardship, and conflict which should not be pushed aside for the globalization of Hollywood. The men and women who form the film industries of the Balkans deserve to preserve their own cultures in the form of film. The preservation of the nation specific and European style of film-making then becomes even more important in the overall discourse of film history

4 For more information specific to the Croatian film industry as it pertains to freedom of speech and press, visit freespeechfreepress.wordpress.com/croatia.

and culture of this small, misunderstood region of the world.

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