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The 'Aliens' in Post-Yugoslav Cinema

The Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001) brought destruction and exclusion as many citizens of the former Yugoslavia found themselves in new nation-states/entities, homogenized through war violence that were not welcoming the *other* ethnicities now renamed into minorities. Hence, the neighbors of different ethnicities who have been long-lasting living in a city/town/village suddenly became the *aliens* for the emerging states, which were fostering the idea of mono-ethnicity. Therefore, national indifference was not an option, as membership in the majority ethno-nation became a prerequisite of citizenship. Benedict Anderson's (1991) concept of *imagined communities* as well as Steven Lukes' (2005) theory of *hegemony* explained that (ethnic) identity is given by society rather than chosen by the individuals themselves, which became quite visible in the post-Yugosphere. Films, like any other media, help to create the sense of an *imagined community* but they also serve to criticize and point to the flaws and fissures in the community. This article aims to explore how a new generation of post-Yugoslav cinema makers deal with the question of ethnic identity and face the division today.

My Master research¹ revealed that the post-Yugoslav cinema 'breaks through the cracks' of hegemony as the contemporary filmmakers challenge the narratives, impressions and problems constructed by the ruling elites. This paper strives to answer **how the independent cinema in the former Yugoslav states investigates the dilemma of ethnic identity** to overcome the political frames of ethnic identity constructed by nationalistic ideology. To answer this question, I will

¹ (Not) Dealing with War Crimes on Film: Post-Yugoslav Cinema as a Method of Fostering Reconciliation and Peace

provide examples from the contemporary post-Yugoslav cinema that emerged after the collapse of Yugoslavia in the so-called Yugosphere, discuss cinematic representations and conduct a deeper textual analysis (a case study) of the film *Srbenka* (2018) directed by Nebojša Slijepčević. Hence, I will explore the film context, plot and structure, conflict, characterization, style, and point of view. I seek to chart **how the Others (other ethnicities) are represented in *Srbenka* and other the selected films**, explaining why the characters do not fit or how do they subvert dominant narratives of national identity. In this article, I will focus on various co-productions that cover almost the whole territory of ex-Yugoslavia.² The Post-Yugoslav cinema shares cultural characteristics as well as historical background, and most importantly, Yugoslav cinematography tradition that I will shortly introduce before conducting the analysis.

This research analyses the **non- or less commercial** and **non-propaganda** films known as an **art-house cinema** that refers “to films that are of high quality but may not be extremely popular or successful, such as foreign films or ones made by small film companies.”³ In other words, art film appears as an **independent film**, aimed at the niche market rather than a mass-market audience. However, some of my selected films are very popular and known in the region. Some of them are less and appear only at various cinema festivals.⁴ Principally, I investigate the films because of their

² This can be checked in filmography, provided on the last page.

³ Cambridge Dictionary definition <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/art-house>.

⁴ Films of Rajko Grlić (e.g., *The Border Post*, *The Constitution*) are famous in the whole region. *Srbenka* by Nebojša Slijepčević is quite known. While *The Imported Crows* by Goran Dević and *After the War* by Srđan Keča were more known for the fans of film festivals.

Srbenka won 11 international film festivals and received 3 nominations.

After the War participated in 9 international film festivals in Europe and received 5 awards.

narratives and the ways these narratives are transmitted. Certainly, I could not include all the films because of the extent of this paper but I tried to select those that share a **strong anti-nationalistic and anti-war position** while exploring the complex issues. The university film course⁵ and live/remote 17 interviews with filmmakers⁶ determined my film selection. Finally, I aim to investigate and cover the films less or not (yet) discussed in the literature, that are worthy of attention.

Prague Film School – the foundation for the post-Yugoslav cinema

Before starting to explore post-Yugoslav cinema, it is worth considering the generation of the *Prague Film School*, which was/is a group of Yugoslav film directors⁷ that graduated from the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU) in the 1970s. *The Prague Film School* particularly addresses **fluid identities, the topics of the otherness and origins of the war**. *Occupation in 26 Pictures* (1978) is considered an early masterpiece in Zafranović's career as well as the predicament for the subsequent violent dissolution of Yugoslavia. It explores the friendship between Miho (a Jew), Niko (a Croat), and Toni (an Italian) that faces the Second World

Although *The Imported Crows* was the final student project of the Goran Dević, it succeed to receive 5 awards (4 in Croatia and 1 in Sarajevo Film festival), participated in 11 international film festivals around Europe, and was screened in various small cinemas and art galleries all around the world.

⁵ *A Film Journey Through Former Yugoslavia and its Demise* course at the University of Bologna led by the sociologist Ana Dević.

⁶ Zvonimir Jurić, Goran Dević, Ognjen Glavonić, Srđan Golubović, Nebojša Slijepčević, Refik Hodžić, Alen Drljević, Dana Budisavljević, Vinko Brešan, Mirjana Karanović, Jasmila Žbanić, Vladimir Perisić, Aida Begić, Srđan Keča, Leon Lučev, Rajko Grlić, Pjer Žalica together with the film critic Jurica Pavičić.

Isa Qosja and Faton Bajraktari provided written answers.

⁷ Lordan Zafranović, Srđan Karanović, Goran Marković, Goran Paskaljević and Rajko Grlić.

War and collapse as political climate changes and friends choose the different sides. Similarly, in *The Border Post* (2006), Grlić traverses the roots of the ethnic hatred in Yugoslavia and how it went to war while expecting the external enemy instead of investigating what was going on inside the country. According to Grlić (2018),⁸ *The Border Post* is “about the moment when the “Yugoslav” version of utopia came to end.” “I was feeling that I need to say something about this war. So I started to think about something which is... what was the root of the war? Where the war was really born and how was born?... I used as an example of how from something quite peaceful, quite normal between people became the war and how people became criminals and some became victims; how the war in such a short period of time entered their minds and how they changed their view of the life,”⁹ remarks the director. So, both films demonstrate the change of identities and political as well as moral values during the times of great political changes and most importantly, the rise of the dark side in ourselves – when the friend becomes the *enemy* Other because of different ethnicity. Eventually, *The Border Post* also exposes the violence and demonstrates the absurdity of ethnic hatred that always brings nothing more but casualties and destruction. Although *The Border Post* was created after the Yugoslav Wars, it seems to create a similar prediction of the war as the *Occupation in 26 Pictures*. Finally, it is another style of reasoning about the war than it is presented in films like Emir Kusturica's *Underground* (1995) or Srđan Dragojević's *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame* (1996) which justify the war using self-balkanization clichés.¹⁰

⁸ Manuscript in English *Long Story Short* provided by Grlić.

⁹ Rajko Grlić, interview by authoress via Skype, May 21, 2020.

¹⁰ Kusturica, Dragojević and Vrdoljak did nothing subversive since the 1990s (Vrdoljak tried recently with *General* but did not succeed much): they jumped on the opening of the market for ethnonationalism and gathered lavish state funds to address the wars from ‘our side.’ The works analyzed in this work stand for something completely the opposite. They

'**Hybrid identities**' is another important theme for the Prague School. *The Constitution [of the Republic of Croatia]* (2016) by Grlić follows a bunch of neighbors that do not fit into certainly acceptable identity clichés (Vjeko is a Croatian ultra-nationalist, gay, and occasionally transvestite, while Ante is an ethnic Serb and policeman in Croatia), but who manage to recognize and support each other as human beings. Then Paskaljević's *When Day Breaks* (2012) observes a retired music professor, who discovers his Jewish origins and his new identity at his old age. The professor also finds out about the Judenlager Semlin camp that was created by the Nazis in the middle of contemporary Belgrade, so the film also belongs the category of films about the Holocaust. However, it is very much about today's troubles of ordinary people in Serbia (and elsewhere in the post-Yugoslav space): about the fluid/hidden/despised identities that do not fit in any mainstream framework, about the memory politics that choose what to preserve and remember and what to eliminate, about human relations between children and parents. This tendency of revealing fluid identities and national(ist) (in)difference towards them continues up until today, fitting in the concept of transnational cinema.

From *Third (Yugoslav) Cinema* to *Transnational post-Yugoslav Cinema*

One of the examples how transnational cinema studies developed comes from national cinema/s concept that is explored by the film and media researcher Stephen Crofts (1993) in his article *Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s*. Indeed, later Crofts (1998) proposed a more adequate definition of nation-state cinema instead of national cinema. He defines national/nation-state cinema as the director-auteur Anti-Hollywood cinema that is not necessarily against Hollywood itself but rather looks for an alternative to come up with its way. So, this type of alternative cinema started to

do not take any side presenting the human dignity and human beings rather than centering one nation; therefore, they usually have small funds.

emerge with the *French New Wave* and the other *New Waves*¹¹ that sought to re-invent the cinema language and dealt with social issues. According to media and cinema professor Steven Rawle (2018: 2-3; 12), transnational cinema does not reject national cinema but rather supplements it, and the 'trans-' prefix together with hybridity characteristic refers to the cinema overcoming the national boundaries. Rawle (2018: 3; 17) concludes that transnational cinema fights hegemonic and cultural dominant narratives and reveals the marginal ones, raise questions of power and inequality that make sense locally/regionally as well as globally. Finally, transnational cinema primarily refers to international co-production and cooperation among the cinema people (Rawle, 2018: 16), so it impulsively appears 'below-global and above national' cinema (Durovicová, 2009: x).

Crofts (1993) gives five general categories of International cinema: (1) European-Model Art cinemas, (2) "Third cinema", (3) International commercial cinemas, (4) Totalitarian cinema, (5) and Regional cinema. These categories are yet to be refined, especially in applying to the post-Yugoslav film case, so one could find the more developed table of varieties of nation-state cinema production in Crofts' following article (1998: 389). However, looking at the ways of production, distribution, exhibition, and also conceptually, current Post-Yugoslav cinema (its art cinemas and international co-productions that often overlap) navigates towards European-Model Art; as well as large-scale *Europeanization* processes take place in the whole region and cinema centers have to fulfill the European Union standards, for example.

One of the most prominent scholars of post-structuralist narratology in the Balkans, Saša Vojković (2008a), explains that historically Yugoslav cinema belonged to the "Third cinema" as Yugoslavia

¹¹ For example, Yugoslavia has experienced the *New Yugoslav film*, known also by its derogatory name the *Black wave* (1960s-early 1970s), that used to criticize the Yugoslav society, showing its weaknesses of socialism expressed in backwardness and poverty of the marginal groups.

did belong neither to the First World nor to the Second (Eastern Europe). This Vojković's approach contradicts Iordanova's (2001: 68) statements: "No works of Balkan cinema can be deemed equivalent to the subversive masterpieces of Third Cinema... The film-makers of Third Cinema had an alternative ideology to propose to counter the dominant Western model. They resisted it; they wanted to subvert it. All the Balkan film-makers seek, on the contrary, is to be admitted... It would be a step too far to expect that the Balkan film-makers whose recent work was discussed here would engage in any sort of critical discourse aimed at 'unthinking' Eurocentrism..." Iordanova (2001: 69) concludes: "It seems more convenient to perpetuate the practice of consenting self-exoticism, which somehow seems to work better for them in times when dialogue is sought." While Iordanova was looking mainly at the period of the 1990s, Vojković demonstrates that this is no longer the case. She highlights some contrary remarks that the Yugoslav cinema indeed was observed from *exotic* and *oriental* perception. Although in early 2000, Croatia tried to assert itself in Western cinema, it continued to attract a similar gaze of *otherness* as the Yugoslav cinema did; however, this notion has transformed into *self-orientalism*: creating images of self through the eyes of the Westerners to be accepted and acknowledged (Vojković, 2008a: 172-173). Nevertheless, in 2008, Vojković (2008a: 177) discovers a new emerging phase in Croatian film, marked by the complex combination of different experiences as post-communism, post-war trauma, and, above all, the transition to a new (capitalist) system. Vojković research and the newest films reveal that the post-Yugoslav cinema has certainly shifted from self-orientalism to self-reflexivity.

The recent (international) Croatian cinematography does not create homogenization myths about nationalism and national identity but rather analyses fluid identities and interdependence (Vojković, 2011: 87). Most importantly, contemporary Croatian cinema recognizes Croatian cultural imaginary through the interdependence with the Other. Vojković explores three films where: 1) Croatian national identity is being re-negotiated through the Other (Serbian identity): "Croatianness is

expressed through Otherness, concretely a Croatian woman is represented through an actual Serbian woman playing a Croatian woman, implying that, in the discursive sense, the question of Croatian subjectivity becomes an open category, or rather, it becomes open for re-negotiation” (Vojković, 2011: 87); 2) *otherness* appears as an inseparable/incorporated part of ourselves: “Otherness is incorporated – the Croatian woman is pregnant with a Chinese child. As a subject she is definitively inseparable from all the features of the incorporated Other” (Vojković, 2011: 89); 3) *orientalization* of the Other is being disarmed: Vojković analyses film *Armin* (2007), which depicts orientalized Western approach towards non-Western people. Vojković’s (2011: 95) conclusion that “Self is made visible with the help of the Other” actually works for all the contemporary post-Yugoslav cinemas, not only for Croatian. In addition, Vojković (2008a; 2008b; 2011) revealed the role of the individuals and the functionality of the narratives investigating Croatian fiction films;¹² however, leaving behind the documentaries exploring the dilemma of (ethnic) identity.

Finally, the interdependence is confirmed not only by the film narratives but also by the increasing regional cooperation: regional co-productions create a possibility to circulate the ideas, choose the most talented actors, exchange cinema equipment and staff.

Transnational post-Yugoslav Cinema: Funding and Production

The new generation of post-Yugoslav filmmakers cooperates more and more with each other, with the ambition to explore fluid identities and inevitable connection/interdependence on the other identities, spontaneously embodying a quite fresh concept of transnational cinema as post-Yugoslav cinema is produced and distributed across national boundaries. Interestingly, transnational art films

¹² *Man Without a Mustache?* (2005), by Hrvoje Hribar; *Forgive Me for Kung Fu* (2004), and *Armin* (2007) by Ognjen Sviličić.

are funded by national budgets' film funds that, paradoxically, do not get funded directly by the state. Cinema historian and critic Tomislav Šakić gives the example of the Croatian national film fund (called *Croatian Audio Visual Centre*) that collects money from TV advertisements and sometimes from the Croatian Lottery.¹³ Understanding these schemes helps to see how films get funded and why one can talk about transnational cinema instead of only national. However, what is crucial here is how the distribution of these funds takes place, whose decision power matters the most.

Currently, the ex-Yugoslav countries follow the budget co-production of the European Union model, and co-production is mostly done with state television in every country respectively. Šakić explains that the main funding comes from one national film fund/cinema center¹⁴ usually. Then, the rest of the money comes from 1-3 or even 4-5 other national, or regional film funds (minority funds). Almost every film produced in the European Union has around 10 funds listed on the title sequence, and currently, the same works for the post-Yugoslav films. Although, in general, funds outside the Yugosphere are rarely interested in ex-Yugoslav films, some films that I analyze managed to attract funding from countries like France, Czech Republic, United Kingdom, Hungary,

¹³ Tomislav Šakić, Email explaining funding of post-Yugoslav films, July 10, 2020.

¹⁴ Croatian Audio Visual Centre (Hrvatski audiovizualni centar (HAVC)); Serbian national film fund (Filmski centar Srbije), Slovenian national film fund (Filmski sklad Slovenije), North Macedonia Film Agency (Агенција за филм), Film Centre of Montenegro (Filmski centar Crne Gore), Kosovo Cinematography Center (Kosova Cinematography Center, KCC). Bosnian case appears more complicated. There is no cinema center in Bosnia but the cinema fund, which is supported by the Ministry of Culture. As Bosnia is divided into two entities (Republika Srpska and Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina), the cinema fund includes only Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.)

I used the interview with the director Alen Drljević to explain the Bosnian case:

Alen Drljević, interview by authoress via Skype, March 11, 2020.

Austria. Šakić remarks that in the last few years, there has been a trend of “minority co-productions” when the minor part of the funding is given by another national film fund/center. So, most of the latest Croatian films are minority co-productions with Slovenia or Serbia (and vice versa). According to Šakić, there is the expectation that - due to the same or very similar language and cultural history - post-Yugoslav countries rely on each other in film co-productions. Of course, some films were minority co-productions with other countries outside the Yugosphere.¹⁵ Hence, the post-Yugoslav films are co-produced transcend national borders.

¹⁵ Šakić, Email explaining funding of post-Yugoslav films, July 10, 2020.

(Ethnic) Identity: Imposed, Structured, or Chosen? The Case Study of *Srbenka*

“One day, I asked my mom, I didn't know the word was ‘Serb,’ ‘mom, am I Srbenka?’ I started crying because until the age of seven I considered myself a Croat...It confused me a lot. I didn't know what the others would think of me now.... Why didn't they tell me earlier? I wasn't glad...I've tried to find ways to show others I'm a Croat, not a Serb.”

Nina Batinić plays herself in *Srbenka* (2018)¹⁶

Srbenka (2018) is a documentary about the new generation of Serbs born in Croatia after the so-called Croatian War of Independence (1991-1995), which together with the rest of the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001), reinforced the ethnic division in the post-Yugoslav space. The film primarily explores the everyday public discourse towards Croatian citizens of other nationalities – mainly Serbs but also Roma and Jews – in present-day Croatia. Also, it investigates the school bullying and peer violence towards people of different (Serbian) ethnicity in Croatia, inherited after the war and ongoing up until today. Director Nebojša Slijepčević¹⁷ tries to discover, understand and depict how

¹⁶ I recommend to watch film's trailer: <http://restarted.hr/en/movies.php?recordID=163> .

¹⁷ Nebojša Slijepčević (b. 1973 in Zagreb, Croatia) is a scriptwriter and director. In 2005, he graduated Film Directing from the Academy of Drama and Art in Zagreb. He directed numerous TV documentaries and series (*Direkt, City Folk...*), but also creative and author driven documentaries (*Real Man's Film, In 4 Years, Of Cows and People*) for which he received awards from various festivals. Slijepčević is also the author of a short animated film *Dog / Rabbit*, short fiction *Boxed* and short fiction *Slap in the Face*, which is part of the fiction omnibus *Zagreb Stories*. In 2013, he finished his first feature documentary, international co-production *Gangster of Love*. Film was premiered as opening film of Zagreb Dox 2013 where it won audience award for the best film. International premiere of the film was at Hot Docs 2013 and European premiere at documentary competition of Karlovy Vary IFF 2013. *Gangster of Love* was also one of the biggest box office successes in Croatia. Nebojša is also an educator, mentoring and lecturing at School of Documentary Film in Zagreb. He is living and working in Zagreb, Croatia.

(Biography taken from: <https://dafilms.com/director/8942-nebojsa-slijepcevic>)

it is to be a youngster of another nationality born and raised in Croatia; how it is to have Croatian citizenship when you did not choose it but it was given to you instinctively. Therefore, *Srbenka* is about the 'aliens' of Serbian nationality and their feelings about their lives in current Croatia.

Although the film lasts only 72 minutes, it offers a rich narrative that includes a couple of layers and different stories to follow. Firstly, *Srbenka* takes us to 2014 when theatre director Oliver Frlić is rehearsing his play *Aleksandra Zec*¹⁸ about the 12-year-old Serbian girl and her family, who were slaughtered by the Croatian militiamen in Zagreb in 1991.¹⁹ In the first line, the camera primarily follows the troupe's preparation works and discussions on the situation in the 1990s and present-day Croatia. Then there is a line, which follows the protests of the Croatian veterans against Frlić's play. This line witnesses that after more than two decades, the war crimes topic remains taboo in modern Croatia. The third line is the self-reflections and personal stories of the actors and play director. Finally, these three lines slowly bring the viewer to the story of Nina Batinić – a 12-year-old girl of Serbian nationality, who was born in Croatia after the war (in 2001) and stands for the

¹⁸ The play of *Aleksandra Zec* became the departure point for the *Srbenka*. While Slijepčević was doing his visual research for the documentary, he found out that Frlić is working on the relevant topic of ethnic hatred and asked for the permission to come to rehearsals and record them in order to continue his research and make a couple of scenes for fundraising. Back then, Slijepčević had no idea that meeting and filming Frlić, his crew and Nina will become the film itself: "[T]he film was done in 28 days. So, it was just like a coincidence and luck...if you had asked me on the first day of shooting: 'What will I have after 20 days', I would say: 'The trailer that is for me.' So that's what I was thinking at that time...By the 15th day, I thought I'm having a 30-minute film... And a year later I was thinking I have a feature-length...So it was quite intuitive...a bit to luck, a bit of intuition, a bit of...coincidence..." Then Slijepčević let the footage to rest for a few years. Meanwhile, he was fundraising with a short 10-minute film from the material. After the film got the funding, some additional shootings took place. In 2017, the footage was edited. Finally, *Srbenka* was premiered in 2018.

¹⁹ Although the perpetrators were known, they have never been punished.

news generation that Slijepčević wanted to investigate. These four lines perfectly flow together and discover the issue from different perspectives: the perspective of victims/perpetrators, the perspective of empathy/ethnic hatred, the perspective of the young generation that chooses to accept the otherness or to discriminate following the public discourse. As film critic Tina Poglajen (2020) well noticed “[*Srbenka*] is a skilful metatheatre that involves both the troupe’s acting and sense of self as they work on their own memories.” In addition, the film is divided into two realities: the the real-life / theatre; external world / internal space; real light / artificial light; danger space / comfort zone. The film begins in the exterior, then the camera goes inside the theatre, and it ends up outside. Moreover, the viewer gets a glimpse of the outer world when the actors are reflecting on the real-life in their dressing rooms. The window brings natural, not artificial, light from outside, noise comes from the street, bringing reality to the theatre before the spectator goes back to the artificiality again. “[T]hat's basically what is this whole film about...about safe and unsafe, predictable and unpredictable...known and unknown...”,²⁰ concludes Slijepčević. These different segments and contrasts only enrich the narrative and reveal the complexity of the main subject.

The characters are mainly described through the monologues when they contemplate in the dressing rooms in the daylight. Theatre rehearsals also provide some information but the separate interviews reveal private lives much deeper and give a feeling of intimacy. It is important to say that those conversations are never filmed directly – the spectator does not see the face of the actor or Frlić then they talk about themselves. The only exception is the prologue: The film and the lens open up with the interview with a young Serbian woman from the audience [Tatjana Dragičević], who witnesses peer violence and harassment back in primary school in Croatia. This sensitive testimony gives an idea that she could be from the same generation as Aleksandra Zec. However, it is the only

²⁰ Nebojša Slijepčević, interview by authoress, Zagreb, February 5, 2020.

direct conversation with the camera in the whole film. So, when it comes to the actors and Frljić, it would never be face-to-face dialogue. For example, Frljić witnesses his story in front of his actors but the viewer mainly observes the reactions of reception, and for a couple of seconds, him talking to his team but not to the camera. Once the actors start talking about their personal experiences, the dressing room set, where the actors are practicing, exercising or taking their breath, is soon being changed with various frames of the empty theatre spaces behind the scenes: metal structures, surfaces, lamps, even the dust. This montage creates a strong impression of intimacy, and the artificial theatre lighting - even the sound of the humming lamp or piano dings - bewitches the viewer, stimulates concentration to imagine each character's story. Indeed, those separate narratives are essential and appear like the corpus for the film. Frljić's team was a sort of a model of the whole Croatian society because it involved actors of different nationalities from whole Croatia and not only - Frljić himself comes from Bosnia - so they shared different experiences of the war and different approaches as well.²¹ For instance, Frljić shares how it was to be a teenager Croat from Bosnia and Herzegovina in Croatia: he had refugee status and was not treated as a first-class citizen, therefore he was constantly bothered with the deportation. Then, actor Nikola Nedić tells that he used to transform the name of his father Simo adding a tick on the first letter into the name Šimo to make it sound more Croatian like Šime. Through these monologues, the spectator learns about the characters' backgrounds and attitudes towards the question of national identity.

Gradually, the documentary focuses more and more on Nina Batinić, explorations of her identity and how she is dealing with it. Nina, together with three other girls, joined the crew as a student of a local drama school. Slijepčević remembers that from the beginning of the rehearsals Nina was distant and it seemed that something was bothering her (Milekic, 2018). The viewer may observe

²¹ Interview with Nebojša Slijepčević, interview by Cineuropa, 2018, <https://cineuropa.org/video/358377/rdid/352695/>

that Nina on the screen looks nervous: she is biting her lip, her gaze looks distracted; sometimes it seems that she closes herself off. The close-up shots only strengthen the impression. Later it came out that growing up in Croatia, Nina thought that she was a Croat as the majority of the kids at school. Hence, the Croatian identity was imposed by the state and society, and that made her feel safe. However, at the age of seven, she discovered a *new* identity coming from the family that scared her. She realized that she is a Serb, she is *Srbenka*: small Nina used an invented/mispronounced word *Srbenka* instead of *Srpkinja* - a female of Serb ethnicity because she was not fully aware of the word but immediately associated it with something 'bad' in the society she lives. The word 'Serb' may have negative connotations in contemporary Croatia: it might be used as some kind of insult or pejorative word, and not only at the football stadium but also in the public discourse as some politicians or public figures use it as a synonym for the *enemy* Other.²² It is addressed to the *alien*, the *bad*, the *enemy* Other. Therefore, Nina felt confused but she was also scared of what her classmates (the society) will think of her. Also, the schoolgirl was embarrassed that her parents did not inform her about this 'hidden identity' before, and she decided to keep pretending to be a Croat (as the majority) and not a Serb (of minority) further on. So, both Slijepčević and Frljić learned about Nina's nationality only during the rehearsals. This discovery inspired and encouraged Slijepčević to focus on Nina and create *Srbenka* placing her story in front.

The theatre is important not only for creating the special atmosphere and the contrast between comfort zone and dangerous space but also embodies the essential problem of *Srbenka*. The director suggests an allegory for theater, which is with the question of (ethnic) identity: is ethnic identity inherited? Or is it something to be accepted during the formative year? Or is it rather something that we decide on? These are the questions that emerge following Nina and the troupe, and create the

²² Nebojša Slijepčević, interview by authoress, Zagreb, February 5, 2020.

conflict: the internal conflict, where Nina (as well as people of a different nationality) suffers inwardly, and external conflict caused by the political climate in Croatia, where the protagonist and the 'aliens' in general finds themselves in. The culmination of the film is a powerful scene where the main protagonist Nina – an actor but also a real person depicted in the documentary – can choose her ethnic identity in front of the theatre public, so to be a Croat (as it is acceptable in contemporary Croatia) or to accept her Serbian identity (and in a way become an *enemy Other*). Nina is scared. Nevertheless, she chooses the latter, so the 'unpredictable' and 'unsafe.' It is worth mentioning that this is the only fragment of the theatre play that is on screen: Slijepčević deliberately chose not to film the play so that it would not be spoiled.²³ Later, the camera follows Nina leaving the theatre (comfort zone) and approaching reality and the unknown. Nina steps up the pace and disappears. So, Slijepčević asks: "Is it the role we play or something that we are? And again, you have theater and you have Nina, who's an actor on a stage. And she can choose her ethnicity...But can she choose it? Or cannot? These are questions to ask ourselves...I don't have the answers..."²⁴ says the director. He provides the various layers to show up the complexity of the question and invites the audience to rethink the issue of identity and nationality.

Although *Srbenka* was surprisingly welcomed and Slijepčević "did not have any unpleasant experiences in Croatia,"²⁵ Frlić's play was highly attacked by the right-wing media. The reaction of nationalists and Croatian war veterans is one of *Srbenka*'s plotlines; the viewer observes protests against the play on Aleksandra Zec embodied with the posters like "When Will Croatian Victims

²³ "I'm like working offbeat," says Slijepčević because the viewer watches only the rehearsal discussions and then the actors – their reactions while the others act or the actors catching their breath when they are not acting – then they are alone in the dressing rooms.

²⁴ Nebojša Slijepčević, interview by authoress, Zagreb, February 5, 2020.

²⁵ Ibid.

Get a Theatre Performance?”, “86 Kids from Vukovar,” “Who Doesn’t Know Aleksandra Zec? But Who Knows... <the list of Croatian children names>” and the pictures of Croatian children, who were killed during the war, with the special attention to the victims of the Vukovar’s siege. The complete destruction of the Vukovar city with a massive assault on civilians is, indeed, one of the stigmas in Croatian society. Actor and character Igor Kovač also remembers how his family had to leave Vukovar because of the Yugoslav People’s Army and Serb paramilitaries, who attacked the city. Moreover, Igor witnesses how “[h]e was indoctrinated into hating “the other side” because of the crimes they committed” (Milekic, 2018). No wonder after the war, Vukovar became the martyred city.²⁶ The nationalists ask why Frlijić’s play investigates the crime of Aleksandra Zec (the *alien*, the *other* thus Serb), instead of depicting the tragedy of Vukovar (*our*) children that do not attain enough attention, according to them. Frlijić’s answer is simple – because Aleksandra was killed in Croatia and he would not like the history to repeat. During the theatre workshops, Frlijić’s troupe deeply investigate the right-wing position. So, they simulate, provoke and rethink the nationalist discourse in order to catch the essence of that thinking and to open up the ethnic hatred issue for the audience in a way that they would consider it earnestly. The film catches the moment then Frlijić wants to change the introductory part of the play just before the performance and ask the actors to confront the audience from the stage, so to expose nationalistic discourse and trigger the audience. Actors rebel, especially Jelena Lopatić; hence, Frlijić gives the actors freedom to decide how they want to approach the issue and what position they will take on the stage. Eventually, it comes out that actors follow Frlijić’s instructions and the play goes strong. *Aleksandra Zec* openly declares to be an anti-nationalist and anti-war play, and that is the reason why it gained so much

²⁶ In addition, in 2020, the day of November 18 was officially institutionalized as ‘Remembrance Day for all victims of the Homeland War and Remembrance Day for the victims of Vukovar and Skabrnja,’ and became a state holiday in Croatia.

attention and threats from right-wingers. *Srbenka* stands for the same values but it looks less radical, it uses different language. Slijepčević found a very delicate cinematic language to talk about the delicate subject such as ethnic hatred in a way that critics struggled to attack the film. Moreover, if the play rather concentrates on the past, the film clearly speaks about the current situation. Nevertheless, both creative works express a clear position towards the forced choice.

Slijepčević makes no secret of the fact that *Srbenka* was addressed to the people, who are national indifferent (he calls them 'middle people/people in between'): "I think, there are minorities who are on the extremes. But...a large majority are people who're unsure of what's happening. So, they...can swing either way...They aren't empathetic, but they're also afraid they could be persuaded to hate or to love. So...majority of people...does not have strong...attitudes towards political questions."²⁷ This approach coincides with historian Tara Zahra's (2010: 104) claims that individuals "simply did not organize their lives or political allegiances according to nationalist priorities." Actor Igor's reflection discloses nationalistic efforts to differentiate people by their nationalities and simplify the complexity of individuals: "I hate labeling people. "This, you're that..." It makes no sense to me. Someone could say, "You're a Croat from Vukovar. You shouldn't be making a play about Aleksandra Zec." The media could accuse me of that. If I do this play, then I'm what? Do I become a Serb 'cause I'm acting in a play about a girl who got killed?" In other words, national indifference or national agnosticism appears as a negative category in the nationalist discourse (Zahra, 2010), because nationalism stands for the stereotypes and frameworks, while national indifference brings uncertainty and disorder nor it is "memorialized with public monuments or celebrated with festivals, costumes, and songs" (Zahra, 2010: 106). *Srbenka* stands for anyone, who feels different, discriminated and rejected because of the identity.

²⁷ Nebojša Slijepčević, interview by authoress, Zagreb, February 5, 2020.

Srbenka analyzes in-depth the problems on the level of individuals (not collectives), their personal experiences, and their perceptions, rather than skim the surface. First of all, the characters' monologues appear to be the film's body as it was already mentioned. Secondly, when the viewer has the opportunity to observe the play audience's reaction to the performance, it is also about the individuals. The camera finds a young Serbian woman [Tatjana Dragičević], who was interviewed at the beginning of the film, and focuses on her empathy towards Aleksandra and Nina as they all have experienced peer violence, bullying and rejection. "She really experienced the play and the show personally due to her own experience. She was born in 1991 and spent her childhood in Croatia shortly after the war in an area that experienced it, so the situation was further polarised," clarifies Slijepčević (Milekic, 2018). Finally, a similar approach goes for *Srbenka*'s audience as Slijepčević primarily thinks about individuals rather than the masses. "I can only think how it will influence you. I mean, one person who's watching it...I want to make an experience for one member, for every member of the audience, I want to make an experience for them...And I try to make this experience provocative, emotional, inspirational...Changing in a way,"²⁸ he explains. By demonstrating how polarization and social constructs hurt certain individuals and exposing their stories and emotions, *Srbenka* masterly fosters empathy towards the Other.

²⁸ Ibid.

Depicting *Nationalization* of Public and Private Life in post-Yugoslav Cinema

“It has involved the nullification of complex identities by the terrible categorical simplicity of ascribed nationality. It has involved essentialist, demonizing characterizations of the national “other,” characterizations that transform Serbs into Chetniks, Croats into Ustashas, Muslims into Fundamentalists.”

Brubaker, 1996: 20-21

Brubaker (1996) claimed that to understand the power of nationalism, it is important to study nation as a practical category in both public and private life. *Srbenka* illustrates how the question of the political sphere reaches the private one, as a small girl, Nikola's little sister, attacks her dad: “Why did you have to be a Serb? I'm condemned because of it... If you're Serbs, you could've gone to live in Serbia. Why come here?” From this discourse, it seems that even children started investigating the question of mono-ethnic/nation-state, which emerged in the 19th century with the so-called Springtime of Nations and keep bothering right-wing politicians and their followers up until today. Hence, *Srbenka* exposes serious questions of ethnic cleansing: should the people of another ethnicity move to the country, where they would constitute the majority (to their *real homeland*)? Should the ethnic Serbs from Croatia move or must be moved to Serbia where they ‘belong’ (but actually never lived)? It is worth mentioning that a similar discourse (this time of public sphere) may be found in *The Imported Crows* (2004), a short 21-minutes documentary of Goran Dević.²⁹ It explores the opinions of Sisak inhabitants about the breeding of crows in the town, and how to deal

²⁹ Goran Dević was born in Sisak, Croatia, in 1971. He studied law, archaeology and film art at Academy of Dramatic Art, University of Zagreb, Croatia. His filmography includes several documentaries and short films; he is also director and scriptwriter of one feature film. He is the founder of 15th Art Production (Petnaesta umjetnost) - a film production company. Teaches documentary film at the Academy of Dramatic Arts. Lives and works in Zagreb.

with them. Sisak residents treat the crows as temporary and unwanted guests, as intruders.

Therefore, Dević bravely compares the execution of the crow 'surplus' with the killing of people of different ethnicity (in this case, the Serbs): "people in my hometown talk about birds, and they kill birds and talk about them as... with the same language as talk about Serbs during the war."³⁰ Hence, Dević highly focuses on the discourse. The viewer also observes the people who are climbing into trees to destroy the nests of the crows and claim that they do it only for business and would never do it on their own accord. This highly reminds the perpetrators of the war and their justifications. Interestingly, some respondents spontaneously create a story of imported crows as they "are not typical for Sisak" in the same manner as nationalists create myths that Serbs do not belong in Croatia: "they are not *ours*. Just look at the wingspan, the size," declares the representative of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). Nevertheless, some people protect the crows: "Go through Zagreb, London, Paris, a crow you'll find. Do they kill them there? In no other country do they do it, except here,"³¹ says one of the respondents. Another person, an asylum seeker, compares destroying crows' nests with demolishing his own house in Bosnia, "that is why I'm against these birds being destroyed," argues the man. One woman claims that she feels bad to see baby crows smashed on the asphalt "but, if there is no other way, let them do it," excuses the respondent. The end justifies the means. It is unbelievable how the political discourse has crept into every day's life, and how skillful filmmakers reveal this sensitive issue disarming ethnonationalism in post-Yugoslav space.

Anderson (1991) claimed that media gathers the *imagined communities*; whereas Gagnon (2004) illustrated how the ethnonationalist hostilities split in the multinational Yugoslav community and

³⁰ Zvonimir Jurić and Goran Dević, interview by authoress, Zagreb, January 23, 2020.

³¹ *The Imported Crows / Uvozne vrane*, directed by Goran Dević, Croatia. 2004.

destroyed relationships as well as trust between its members with the help of media, controlled by the elites of new nation-states. The film is the most lucrative industry in the mass media and the most influential indeed. That is why cinema appears as a type of media that used to be exploited by war and propaganda since it has ever appeared. Yugoslavia experienced the whole era of Partisan films subgenre (the 1960s-1980s) that heroized Yugoslav Partisans, who fought in World War II and contributed to the creation of Tito's official historical narrative and Yugoslav identity. When it comes to the post-Yugoslav cinema, it seems that post-Yugoslav films seek to rethink the (ethnic) identity, show its complexity, multiplicity, fluidity, and hybridity. *Srbenka* stands for hybridity in a way that theatre troupe's members share different identities: they are of different nationalities, come from various places, have contradicting attitudes, thus argue with each other. Some characters display fluidity or national ambivalence, which is characterized by side-switching: Nina kept pretending to be Croat after getting to know that her parents are Serbs, Nikola used to change his father name to sound more Croatian, to find themselves in a better position and belong to the majority. The complexity of identity is well depicted in the 45-minutes documentary *After the War* (2006) by filmmaker Srđan Keča.³² The film discloses the particularly hybrid identity of Gorani, a small Islamic community of Slavic origin. Gorani was strongly affected by the Kosovo war as they were perceived to have been fighting as a collective on the Slobodan Milošević's side. Therefore, in today's Kosovo, they are considered as the *enemy* Others. Keča explores their undefined identities

³² Srđan Keča is a filmmaker, visual artist and educator. After studying physics at the University of Belgrade, he moved on to documentary filmmaking at the Paris-based Ateliers Varan. He received his M.A. from the UK National Film and Television School (NFTS) in 2011. Keča's documentary films have consistently screened at leading festivals: IDFA, DOK Leipzig, Full Frame, Jihlava IDFF, etc., winning multiple awards and critical acclaim. In 2015 Keca joined the faculty at Stanford University Department of Art & Art History as Assistant Professor, teaching in the MFA Documentary Film & Video program.

Biography taken from: <https://dafilms.com/director/9320-srdjan-keca>

and the life of the small isolated mountain village that is far away from everything. The primary intention of Keča was to find a place untouched by the war: “to go there to make a film that was about the place that’s above everything in the mountains...but then I found the exact opposite of that.”³³ Moreover, the main protagonist Sultan claims to be a Četnik; hence, he conflicts with himself because he could not choose his name/identity himself, thus, he hates his father. Today, Gorani do not fit in any nation-state clichés; hence, they flounder (struggle to fit) and remain detached. *Srbenka* charts how national indifference became impossible after the 1990s and what consequences it creates, while *After the War* simply resists the reified categories and depicts the people, who ‘are not in the interest’ of any nation-state. In conclusion, both Keča and Slijepčević demonstrate how multiple people can be, and how they do not fit into the separate shelves defined by nationalist politicians.

But what if ordinary people/nonelites often feel indifferent to ‘political dramas’? And what if cultural and social historians exaggerate the issue of nationality? To answer these questions, historian Zahra (2010) started a debate on national indifference. While analyzing the post-Yugoslav films, I was wondering if *Srbenka* and other films could be discussed in the light of this approach as national indifference seem to be an important category for the film director Slijepčević. Zahra (2010) challenged Anderson’s (1991) *imagined communities* by proposing a definition of *imagined noncommunities* that ignores national identity. One can notice that post-Yugoslav films treat characters simply as human beings, they do not sort them into any categories and recognize them as separate individuals. On the other hand, *Srbenka*, *After the War* and *Imported Crows* depict the

³³ When the documentary filmmakers start their research they never know where it will take them. Keča’s experience of finding a perfect place but facing the worst of the war only confirms that but the same works for Slijepčević, who imagined *Srbenka* much differently, as well as Žbanić.

current political climate and ethnic division in the post-war Yugoslav sphere. It creates the impression that both public and private discourse are merged and highly politicized by ethnonationalism (*Srbenka* discloses the discourse on the private sphere coming from the public, *Imported Crows* – on the public domain, *After the War* exposes how strong the sense of belonging could be, even living in the middle of nowhere, but at the same time experiencing the rejection of the nation-state that you fought for and feeling of being an ‘alien’). Zahra (2010: 93) suggested national indifference as a new “category of analysis in the history of modern central and eastern Europe,” which was invisible in traditional historiography. Zahra’s research makes a lot of sense in historical research and the world where the nations were yet to be formed or were in the process but does it work for social or interdisciplinary research? Well, in contrast to Anderson (1991), Zahra (2010) focuses on individuals, remarking that historical research “became blind to individuals” (Zahra, 2010: 96) and that sometimes happens with social sciences as well, especially, when it comes to quantitative research. As it was already mentioned, post-Yugoslav films highly focus on individuals, and that fits Zahra’s approach. It might be noted that Vojković (2011; 2008a; 2008b) also explored the role of individuals in Croatian cinema. Vojković paid great attention to ‘hybridity,’ while Zahra instead suggests using the concept of ‘national indifference’ in transnational or migration studies. According to Zahra (2010:116), ‘hybridity’ “assume[s] preexisting national loyalties and coherent group identities.” However, if one looks at *After the War*, it surely witnesses hybridity and not indifference. The director Keča expected to go to the mountains and find indifference but surprisingly found the opposite reality that was very particular. On the other hand, the concept of ‘national indifference’ seems to be a lot about particularity and uniqueness, and that works for the films as they investigate very individual cases. Therefore, the concept of national indifference appears as the key to understanding *Srbenka*, *After the War* and *Imported Crows*.

Srbenka meant to be a local film (“Croatian film for the Croatian audience, without worrying if anyone else would... Understand the film”³⁴); nevertheless, it attained huge international success. “We thought it would be a very local film, but it’s not,” he [Slijepčević] says. “People recognize this is not only a film about Serbs and Croats. This is a film about everybody who is different.” (Vourlias, 2018). Here, the ‘national’ and ‘transnational’ cinema converge as Rawle (2018) projected. Transnational cinema seems to be one step ahead of national cinema in a way that it manages to investigate the issues that make sense both locally and globally (e.g. hegemony, power, inequality, tensions between different ethnic groups, discrimination, peer violence, etc.); therefore, *Srbenka* overcomes national boundaries. “Set against a backdrop of hate and xenophobic violence, “*Srbenka*” feels perfectly in tune with the current global moment. But Slijepcevic admitted he’s been caught off-guard by the emotional responses from viewers at foreign screenings,” remarks journalist Vourlias (2018). Slijepčević primarily goes for local films and claims that “[f]ilm industry tries to push only very international films...what’s left behind are some stories that are locally very important but internationally uninteresting...so...they’re not profitable internationally...I think it’s very important to make small local films dealing with the local topics without worrying if it will go to Cannes, Sundance...”³⁵ However, Crofts (1993) sees regional cinema under the umbrella of international cinema. It seems that a good film may be both local and transnational/international at the same time, and *Srbenka* is a good example of that. Eventually, films often create a possibility of putting yourself in someone else’s shoes and identifying with protagonists, and this connection might be stronger than the specific context, which needs to be understood by the viewer.

³⁴ Nebojša Slijepčević, interview by authoress, Zagreb, February 5, 2020.

³⁵ Ibid.

Conclusions

This paper showed how productively the Others (other ethnicities) may be explored in the films and how certain ideas from nationalism studies could be applied to understand them. Ethnic hatred and otherization is a sensitive issue in divided (post-Yugoslav) societies; therefore, this topic interest many film directors from the region, including Slijepčević, Dević and Keča. All of the three directors primarily care about individuals and their emotions rather than certain (ethnic) identities. Nevertheless, they choose to disclose vulnerable groups (Serbian minority in Croatia, isolated Gorani community) and their painful experiences in the societies they live in. Documentary filmmakers Slijepčević and Keča find a suitable cinematic language to sensitively investigate the issue not hurting their interviewees and fostering viewer's empathy towards the Others. The Post-Yugoslav films seem to follow Zahra's (2010: 118) suggestion to "assume indifference and investigate how and why people allied themselves politically, culturally, and socially from the ground up" as well as Brubaker's (1996) advice that one should not ask "what is a nation" but rather explore how it works in practice.

Moreover, Slijepčević and Dević highly care about the discourse and proof Brubaker's statements about ethnonationalism conquering in both public and private spheres. The filmmakers raise the dilemma of ethnic identity, as well as the hybrid identity, masterly demonstrating the complexity and multiplicity of each personality. Films do not suggest solutions; however, they keep asking questions involving the spectator to participate in this way. If propaganda films are used to form the identity and mobilize the majorities, this kind of cinema seems to unmake the identity and focus on minorities or separate individuals. It reveals how differences and inequality develop into otherization and hatred. Finally, it highlights that the only thing that should matter is humanity and empathy towards each other. In films, the question of national indifference remains in the air as if people cared less about ethnicity, there would not be any tensions and discrimination.

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