

**The Annual Review of  
Interdisciplinary Justice Research  
Volume 7, 2018**

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Centre for Interdisciplinary Justice Studies (CIJS)  
ISSN 1925-2420**

## Book Review

Review of Harper, Stephen. 2017. *Screening Bosnia: Geopolitics, Gender and Nationalism in Film and Television Images of the 1992-1995 War*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic. 175 pp. \$45.00. ISBN: 9781623565923.

Some time ago, I found myself in Kravica in Podrinje for the first time, while heading to the Potočari Memorial Centre, and eventually on my way Sarajevo. I stopped at the large cross erected to commemorate Serb victims of war in Srednje Podrinje and Birač. The monument is erected in honour of civil and military victims of the 1992–1995 war, and to Serb victims of World War II. The monument embodies a counter-narrative to the Potočari Memorial Centre and Cemetery for the victims of the July 1995 genocide in Srebrenica. Although I am constantly immersed in the memory of the most recent war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, (re)experiencing these opposing views on the question of responsibility and guilt in the space of just a few hours was, to say the least, depressing. I couldn't shake off the painful impression that today Bosnia and Herzegovina is still at the same exact same spot as it was in the spring of 1992. This is the context in which I read *Screening Bosnia* by Stephen Harper.

The book gives a broad overview of the role played by media reports on film production, especially the narratives that emerged within Hollywood that take the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995) as a central theme. Although the primary aim of the book is to provide insights into the interplay of ideology and geopolitics, and their impact on US and British TV and film productions (*Warriors*, 1999; *In the Land of Blood and Honey*, 2011; *The Hunting Party*, 2007; *Behind Enemy Lines*, 2001), the selection of films also comprises several post-Yugoslav films (*Underground*, 1995; *Lepa sela lepo gore*, 1996; *Grbavica*, 2005) and one Pakistani TV series (*Alpha Bravo Charlie*, 1998).

As outlined in the introduction, *Screening Bosnia* focuses on the ways in which war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was represented by Western/U.S. authors and journalists, and the production of what

Harper identifies as a problematic representation of the stakeholders involved, namely the humanitarian actors, journalists, Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats, the U.S./the West, and the Balkans.

The book is structured along eight segments, through which the reader is first provided with a brief introduction to the historical context of the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and, consequently, some of the key events that led towards the armed conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The second chapter examines the role of U.S. and Western journalists in the formation of what the author terms one-sidedness in the reporting, which favoured Bosniaks and Croats over Serbs. This chapter takes us to the main issue of cinematic representation, namely that biased reporting of the war sided with liberal U.S. foreign policies. Harper explains that the origin of such bias — which produces the narrative that Serbs are the sole villains of the Bosnian war — can be traced to the fact that journalist reporting “was concentrated in Bosnian territory and thus they (the journalists) were unable to witness Serb casualties at first hand” (p. 32). The consequences of that point of view, Harper continues, was “demonizing the Serbs, and downplaying the significance of atrocities committed by other parties” (p. 53).

The third chapter looks at three “humanitarian” dramas: *Welcome to Sarajevo* (U.K., 1997), *Warriors* (U.K., 1999), and *Alpha Bravo Charlie* (Pakistan, 1998). The chosen examples are meant to illustrate the hegemonic construction of a positive image of foreign journalists, peacekeepers and humanitarian workers, and, according to the analysis, representation of Muslims as victims. Chapter 4 continues in the same vein, and examines more specific examples of masculinized fictions of either U.S. or Western agents involved in covert operations, which in turn reinforces the stereotypical image of (fictionalized) Western interventions abroad, such as *Behind Enemy Lines* (U.S., 2001) or *The Hunting Party* (U.S., 2007). In this chapter, the author is primarily concerned with the representations of “assertions of US or Western military and humanitarian superiority”

(p. 94). Along with the issues of stereotypical “Western” masculinity examined in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 turns to another unfortunate particularity of the Bosnian war — gendered violence. The examination of gendered violence as a separate yet complementary element of the conflict provides another insight into the entanglement of ethnic representation, patriarchy, gender, and sexual violence on screen. Drawing mostly on Angelina Jolie’s *In the Land of Blood and Honey* (U.S., 2011), and the Irish film *As If I Am Not There* (2010), the subject of wartime sexual violence is (tentatively) placed in the context of gendered representations of the Balkans. Relying on Maria Todorova’s *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), among others, Harper considers rape as an integral element of Western media propaganda in which Serb men were additionally demonized, since they were “increasingly cast as sexual perverts and predators” (p. 100). According to the analysis, part of the given media representation has had the consequence of concealing Serb women’s suffering, and thus minimizing their victimhood (*idem*). In Chapter 6, “From Nationalism to Normalization,” a more “local” perspective of war trauma in post-Yugoslav cinema is considered. Emir Kusturica’s *Underground* (1995) and *Life Is a Miracle* (2004) are taken as examples illustrating the complex relationship (and antipathy of Serb nationalism) towards the West, coupled with the apparent active willingness to participate in the self-exoticization (or balkanization) of Serb identity, or at least the way in which Kusturica interprets it. The qualification of a “cinema of normalization” might seem odd in a discussion of war cinema. Although it might be expected that some sort of normalization will eventually take place in Bosnian society *after* the war, the films mentioned in Chapter 6 hardly demonstrate a propensity for overcoming ethnic fragmentation.

*Screening Bosnia* provides a rich overview of films and series depicting war in Bosnia, and it goes without saying that the selection does not pretend to be exhaustive. Nevertheless, there are several issues that emerge in connection with the main argument developed by the author. Despite critically engaging with “Western liberal

politics,” and, consequently, the highly questionable representations of former Yugoslavia, post-Yugoslavia, the Balkans, or Western Balkans (this last term being coined by the EU administration) in media and film, the author fails to realize that post-Yugoslav war films cannot be fully contextualized without taking into consideration Yugoslav films about WWII. In addition, an apparent difficulty in acknowledging the historical (and ideological) legacy of WWII complicates the analysis and contextualization, especially when post-Yugoslav war films are considered alongside Hollywood productions. In that respect, assuming a critical position towards the stereotypical representation of Serbs by “Western elites” is rather superficial — taking the opposite perspective does not guarantee overcoming stereotypes. In fact, throughout the book, the arguments presented fail to address the problematic representation of all parties, not only Serbs. It is a fact that Hollywood cinema — and in the recent past, TV series as well — is littered with Serb (negative) characters that came to replace Communist/Russian (negative) characters of the Cold War years. Unfortunately, departing from the premise that only Serbs are misrepresented is a very one-dimensional way of regarding the situation (an early episode of *Law & Order: SVU* comes to mind). Another argument that is presented at the beginning of the book, which attempts to explain the negative connotation assigned to Serbs, is that journalists did most of their work on Bosnian territory and thus were unable to witness the plight of Serb civilians. The given statement, which forms the basis of the argument that is developed further, is not substantiated by empirical evidence. This appears particularly problematic when, for instance, one thinks of Penny Marshall, Ian Williams, and Ed Vulliamy’s reporting on Omarska and Trnopolje (under Serb control).

In its attempt to critically engage with Western propaganda, *Screening Bosnia* reproduces, perhaps unwillingly, anti-Serb conspiracy theories without providing the answer as to the reason behind it. Despite the richness of examples described, the book has elements of *Living Marxism*’s revisionism, especially when the historical background information blurs the boundaries of

responsibility, when the author implies that Srebrenica was the result of Bosnian Muslim leaders' willingness to provoke NATO military intervention (p. 23), and how Harper leaves open the question of responsibility for the attacks on Markale in besieged Sarajevo in 1994 and 1995 (p. 19).

To return to the anecdote from the beginning of this review, Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to have, without doubt, a deeply polarized and conflicted understanding of the most recent war. Looking at it from a position that, under the cover of academic inquiry, blurs boundaries on responsibility for war crimes opens space for further historical revisionism. Given the most recent trend in the reinterpretation of WWII, in post-Yugoslav republics, and Europe, this seems additionally problematic.

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