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EASTERN EUROPE ECHOES: NARRATIVES,
CULTURES, AND MEMORIES FROM COLD
WAR TO DAYTON'S LEGACY (1946–2026)

Edited by

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2. FROM PROPAGANDA TO PRESERVATION: FILM AS HISTORIOGRAPHY IN 1990'S MASSACRES

by Vito Saracino*

Abstract: Questo saggio esamina il ruolo cruciale del cinema come fonte storiografica nella preservazione della memoria dei genocidi degli anni '90 in Ruanda e nell'ex Jugoslavia, contrapponendone le rappresentazioni cinematografiche alle narrazioni occidentali centrate, come l'11 settembre. Attraverso l'analisi di film come *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), *Shooting Dogs* (2005), *Imfura* (2017), *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame* (1996), *The Perfect Circle* (1997), *No Man's Land* (2001), *Grbavica* (2006) e *Quo Vadis, Aida?* (2020), si evidenziano diversi gradi di autorevolezza locale e autenticità, dalle produzioni hollywoodiane dominate che marginalizzano le voci ruandesi al cinema bosniaco emergente con la sua auto-narrazione. Basandosi su filmati d'archivio, analisi della propaganda (*Forbidden Films*, 2014) e progetti come il restauro digitale della Fondazione Gramsci Puglia, lo studio sottolinea la capacità del cinema di contrastare il mito degli "Italiani Brava Gente" e le asimmetrie dei media occidentali (ad es., oltre 810.000 morti in Ruanda/Srebrenica contro 2.977 nell'11 settembre). Si sostiene l'uso del cinema come strumento educativo contro l'oblio, supportato da programmi UE come MEDIA, per favorire il dialogo nelle società post-conflitto.

Parole chiave: Genocidio, Studi sui Balcani, Memoria storica, Propaganda, Media.

Abstract: This essay examines the pivotal role of cinema as a historiographical source in preserving the memory of 1990s genocides in

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Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, contrasting their cinematic representations with Western-centric narratives like 9/11. Through the analysis of films such as *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), *Shooting Dogs* (2005), *Imfura* (2017), *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame* (1996), *The Perfect Circle* (1997), *No Man's Land* (2001), *Grbavica* (2006), and *Quo Vadis, Aida?* (2020), varying degrees of local authorship and authenticity are highlighted, from Hollywood-dominated productions marginalizing Rwandan voices to emerging Bosnian cinema's self-narration. Drawing on archival footage, propaganda analysis (*Forbidden Films*, 2014), and projects like Fondazione Gramsci Puglia's digital restoration, the study emphasizes cinema's capacity to counter the "Italiani Brava Gente" myth and Western media asymmetries (eg, 810,000+ Rwanda/Srebrenica deaths vs. 2,977 on 9/11). It argues for film as an educational tool against oblivion, supported by EU programs like MEDIA, fostering dialogue in post-conflict societies.

Keywords: Genocide, Balkan Studies, Historical Memory, Propaganda, Media Studies.

1. Don't believe the truth! Cinema: Reality vs Propaganda

130 years after the birth of cinema, it seems fitting to reflect on the role the seventh art has achieved as a historical source. The connection between film and historical representation has been very close since the very beginning, thanks to cinema's ability to offer a clearer, and sometimes simplified, image of events. Cinematographic sources have the merit of being a prism with different facets, capable of "telling a story" and attempting to make the events that actually happened didactic while also representing the era in which the films were shot, taking into account the political and cultural influences that intersect with artistic innovations and changes.

Supporting this thesis is the work of the documentary "*Forbidden Films*", directed in 2014 by Felix Moeller. This review of 40 Nazi propaganda films restored by the Bundesarchiv aims to

understand the mechanisms of cinematic manipulation, touching on the delicate theme of the prohibition paradox: banning them fuels myths, while consciously screening them against hatred touches on historical memory and cultural responsibility (Hobbs, 2020).

This process should be repeated for all the complex historical periods that have characterised the short century. In this regard, we recall the digital and historical regeneration project conducted by the Gramsci Foundation of Puglia and Dabimus on the anti-Italian propaganda films preserved in the Albanian Film Archives. This active research effort was crucial to debunking the stereotype of “Good Italians,” created by the Italian public to define its image around the world.

Sometimes a single frame from a film is enough to contextualise the context in which the source material was created. Controversial episodes in history are often told differently, or even in opposite ways, depending on who wrote the screenplays; just consider how some war conflicts have been analysed in polar opposite ways, from their Hollywood origins to German Expressionism and the avant-garde. It is therefore inevitable that cinema is a reflection of the historical-social context in which it is produced (Thompson, Bordwell 1994).

2. Cinematic Echoes of Genocide: Rwanda and Yugoslavia Compared

The 1990s were marked by war crimes and massacres whose consequences are still vivid. Our perception of the present often makes us think that the massacres of innocents belong to a bygone era, cruel in nature, yet this planet is still dripping with blood. These dark pages of history are particularly prominent in

international cinema, especially the extreme actions carried out in Rwanda and the Yugoslav wars.

There are several reasons why these two war theaters capture the most media attention. In Rwanda, the staggering number of victims is striking, while in Yugoslavia, the clashes are between communities that had lived peacefully until moments before, located in the heart of Europe. Between April and July 1994, in just 100 days, Hutu extremists massacred approximately 800,000 Tutsis with extreme cruelty, using machetes, glorified by incessant and merciless hate propaganda broadcasted on the radio. It is estimated that nearly 10,000 people were killed per day by 30,000 guerrillas, capable of killing up to thirty people a day. Just a year later, in July 1995, Bosnian Serb forces killed over 8,000 Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica, violating a “safe zone” declared by the United Nations (Smeulers, Grünfeld 2011).

Thirty years after the Rwandan genocide, a decent filmography offers a successful historical and narrative reconstruction, but the marginal or absent role of Rwandan/African historians and professionals in international productions is striking. The best-known film is *Hotel Rwanda*, a 2004 American production, inspired by the true story of Paul Rusesabagina, a hotelier who saved hundreds of Tutsis by sheltering them in the Mille Collines Hotel in Kigali. Despite Rusesabagina’s presence as a consultant, local figures are virtually absent; the main actors are British or American, while the supporting roles are played by South Africans, the country chosen for most of the filming.

Shooting Dogs – Beyond the Gates a British production released the following year, is a different story. It recounts the massacre at a missionary school where UN peacekeepers abandon the Tutsi population, highlighting the inertia of international forces. This film features several African actors in leading roles, with supporting roles also played by Rwandan genocide survivors. It was

filmed in Rwanda, and many of the technical staff were chosen from local talent. A similar situation is present in the American-French production *Sometimes in April*, which tells the story of two Hutu brothers, one in the army and the other married to a Tutsi, intertwining individual responsibility and collective guilt. The 2005 film features the largest number of Rwandan actors, and this production also features several actors and extras who survived the massacre.

It took a long time for works by Rwandan filmmakers to address the taboo of this fratricidal war and reach international screens. But it was precisely from the ashes of this national tragedy that a professional type of cinema emerged, one that felt the need to tell its story. In the past, both during the Belgian colonial period and the Hutu Republic, access to cinema was limited to viewing Hollywood films in the capital's cinemas (Vitucci, Castrogiovanni, 2023).

In 2017, Samuel Ishimwe served as director, screenwriter, producer, and editor of the medium-length film *Imfura*, the first Kinyarwanda-language film to screen at the Berlin International Film Festival, winning the Silver Bear Jury Prize. The film explores the legacy of the genocide through a young man's return to his missing mother's village. For the first time, the entire creative process is authentically in the hands of local artists, free from prevailing Western influences. Furthermore, the film chooses not to exclusively tell the well-known story of the genocide, but rather to address the consequences of this disastrous event, reflecting on themes such as collective memory and reconciliation.

As in Rwanda, the Bosnian situation has also captivated international productions. For example, the 1997 instant movie *Welcome to Sarajevo*, a British-American production directed by Michael Winterbottom, inspired by Michael Nicholson's book *Natasha's Story* and filmed partly in besieged Sarajevo with

numerous local crews and actors, is a notable example. Selected at Cannes, the film offers a harsh critique of the voyeuristic nature of mass media war reporting and excessive humanitarian bureaucracy.

Unlike Africa, in the former Yugoslavia, a strong desire to analyse unfolding events emerged from the days preceding the wars, giving rise to documentary chronicles and artistic works that did not overlook the most thorny issues of the conflict. This immediate capacity for self-narration was made possible by the strength of Yugoslav cinema, which has developed a critical consciousness capable of challenging the country's founding myths and the social problems obscured by the official narrative since 1968 (Rolandi, 2015).

The ability to describe these harsh political changes is remarkable, the film *Pred doždot (Before the Rain)* by director Milčo Mančevski in 1994 has the ability to describe the pre-war tension and explore the vicious circle of ethnic hatred and violence.

The clear division between states and histories established by the 1995 Dayton Accords also has consequences in cinematic representations that intersect with the ghosts of war.

In Serbia and Montenegro, one of the biggest box office and critical successes of 1996 was the controversial film *Lepa sela lepo gore (Pretty Village, Pretty Flame)* directed by Serbian filmmaker Srđan Dragojević, which ignited a cultural debate in the former Yugoslavia. This grotesque comedy with mockumentary elements reflects on the post-Titoian collapse through a biting black satire that criticises the absurdities of propaganda and accuses war profiteers linked to the criminal underworld. Despite international praise for its irony and realism, it was criticised in Croatia, banned in Bosnia until the 2000s, and accused of pro-Serbian propaganda for its excessive sympathy for Serbian soldiers and its downplaying of Serbian atrocities at the expense of the victims, despite the

director's declared anti-war intent—so much so that it was excluded from some international festivals.

Of a completely different nature is Ademir Kenović's 1997 drama *Savršeni Krug* (*The Perfect Circle*), one of the first films from independent Bosnia, shot and set during the harsh days of the siege of Sarajevo. It tells the story of a local poet who takes in two Muslim orphans who escaped a Serb massacre, promising to take them to the UN-defended airport amid snipers, hunger, and bombing. This work blends stark realism and poetry through an intergenerational friendship against the horrors of war, serving as an example for an entire generation of Bosnian directors and screenwriters, who in the following decade would take decisive steps to reflect on the stories and dynamics fundamental to the construction of a national and cultural identity.

As time passed, a period of technical and artistic evolution began that transcended national borders: in 2001, *Ničija zemlja* (*No Man's Land*), directed by Bosnian veteran Danis Tanović with an international production and cast, won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. Written during the siege of Sarajevo, this work is a bitter satire on the absurdity of war and the bureaucratic hypocrisy of the international community, set in a trench between Bosnian Serb lines.

Artists are rapidly becoming increasingly compelled to confront uncomfortable truths about a troubled past whose consequences endure: this is demonstrated by Jasmila Žbanić's debut feature, which won the Golden Bear at the 2006 Berlin Film Festival with *Grbavica* (*Esma's Secret*) when the director was just 30 years old. The film explores the traumatic legacy of wartime rape through the lens of Esma, a single mother who survived the violence that gave birth to Sara—who grows up unaware of this terrible secret—becoming a manifesto for the dignity of survivors (Pisarri, 2007).

3. *Quo Vadis Aida?* Srebrenica as Bosnia's Cinematic Mirror

In 2020, *Quo Vadis Aida?* reached the pinnacle of this self-representational ability, managing to address the bloodiest massacre of the Yugoslav wars, the Srebrenica massacre. The one who has the courage, almost 15 years after Grbavica, is Jasmila Žbanić, who confronts the harsh reality of the genocide through the perspective of Aida, a Bosnian UN interpreter.

The interpreter bears helpless witness to the international failure to protect the “safe zone” of Srebrenica, which culminated in the massacre of over 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys in July 1995—the worst European war crime since 1945. Aided by a remarkable historical background, she rigorously reconstructs the fall of the city into Ratko Mladić's hands, drawing on eyewitness accounts, documents from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and archives, highlighting the passivity of Dutch UN troops and hierarchical omissions.

The direction alternates dynamic montages of refugees in Potočari with close-ups of the protagonist, capturing the dissonance between protocols and everyday horror without special effects, with a minimal soundtrack and personal flashbacks that intertwine the individual and the collective, avoiding spectacularization to focus on shared responsibilities. The film, which features international co-productions, won the Silver Bear at Berlin, received Oscar nominations, and was acquired by Netflix.

Thanks to its arrival on the renowned international platform, the film reaches millions of viewers, especially young people, thus reviving commemorations in Srebrenica, debates against Serbian Holocaust denial in Republika Srpska, and promoting a new intergenerational dialogue in the Balkans. In the post-war Balkan cultural renaissance, it offers a critique of current nationalisms and multilateral failures, echoing Ukraine, Palestine,

and Venezuela, making the trauma visible to educate generations against oblivion with historiographical rigor and narrative accessibility.

Conclusions

Film sources represent invaluable historical documents which visually and aurally capture events, collective mentalities, and propaganda, in a way that is superior to written texts in terms of emotional immediacy and social context (Saracino, 2024).

In an era of information overload, these sources serve as antidotes to denialism, democratizing history through accessible visual narratives. Their impact endures, stimulating policies of memory that counter contemporary nationalist tendencies.

Thirty years after the events in Rwanda and Bosnia, it's striking how a certain Eurocentric and Western-centric media distance almost blurs the time and space of international memory and remembrance. Geographical and cultural distance privileges Western institutional memory, such as September 11, 2001, with its 2,977 deaths at the World Trade Center in New York—a precise figure that includes victims from the four air attacks—while the 1994 Rwandan genocide (approximately 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus massacred in 100 days) and Srebrenica in 1995 (over 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys killed in a week) have almost faded into collective oblivion. The numerical comparison is striking: over 810,000 lives lost in the two Balkan-African massacres versus fewer than 3,000 in Manhattan—every death is worthy of mourning, of course, but we're talking about hundreds of thousands of non-Western victims never commemorated within the same media space. Just think of the nearly 20 films and TV series about 9/11 that have explored the fragilities of the “American giant,”

contrasting with the dearth of popular narratives about Rwanda and Bosnia, revealing an asymmetrical scale of values rooted in ethnic and geopolitical hierarchies. For this reason, in a media-driven society like ours, the films discussed in this essay become fundamental historiographical sources for posterity, essential for remembering and reflecting on the banality of evil in events that today seem close to us but risk, in the future, being lost in the increasingly complex meanders of world history.

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