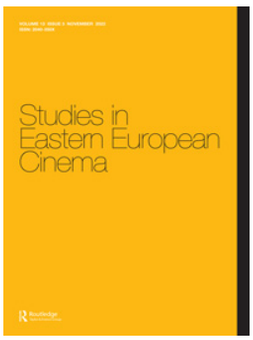

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Bosnia and Herzegovina on Screen: Self-Orientalism in Jasmila Žbanić's Film *Quo Vadis, Aida?*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contemporary meanings and functions of self-Orientalism in the Bosnian context by analyzing Jasmila Žbanić's film, *Quo Vadis, Aida* (2020). The issue of self-Orientalism entails a double intrigue at the individual and collective levels: first, why Bosnian cultural producers (the 'Orientalized') replicate Orientalism; and second, why Orientalism, in its various forms, proliferates in Balkans despite the region's own marginalized position. Examining *Quo Vadis Aida* both within Bosnian's specific context and as part of a global phenomenon of cinematic self-Orientalism or autoexoticism, this paper argues that the film self-Orientalizes in an effort to meet contemporary viewers' expectations for facile resolutions to imperialist Orientalism, as well as to improve the film's marketability with Western audiences. Applying Laura Doyle's framework of 'inter-imperiality' we examine how *Quo Vadis, Aida* 'writes back' to multiple empires by tracing Orientalism's trajectories – from Ottoman Empire to the Austro-Hungarian and modern-day Holland – and by weaving the lingering effects of imperialism from before the arrival Ottomans to Bosnia in Middle Ages to the present. The paper argues that the film reveals the extent of globalist anxiety that motivates producers' artistic imagination and reflects colonial phantasies that promote stereotyped representation of the Balkans.

KEYWORDS

Self-orientalism; re-orientalism; autoexoticism; inter-imperiality; Jasmila Žbanić; Balkans; film

The Case of *Quo Vadis, Aida?*

The Bosnian war film *Quo Vadis, Aida?* (2020) by Jasmila Žbanić was successful in many international film festivals and it has garnered numerous awards. After it premiered at the Venice Film Festival in 2020 it won the Audience Award of the International Film Festival Rotterdam, Goteborg's best international film, and the Best International Film Award at the 36th Independent Spirit Awards, among others. Most notably perhaps, it won the Best Picture at European Film Awards in 2021 and was nominated for the Best International Feature Film at the 93rd Academy Awards (Ellwood 2021). Asides from earning international accolades, the film sheds light onto one of the bloodiest conflicts on European soil since World War II. It offers a harrowing testimony of events that transpired during the Bosnian war of the 1990s when the Army of Republika Srpska massacred more than 8,000

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Bosniak Muslim men and boys around the town of Srebrenica (BBC 2020). The story was based on autobiography by Hasan Nuhanović titled 'Under the UN Flag,' where he recounts the terror and inhumanities experienced by his family, neighbours and compatriots during the Yugoslav genocide. While the wartime violence was unprecedented and has imprinted a lasting trauma into Bosnian collective consciousness, local and global memorialization of the atrocities of the 1990s are rare, fleeting, and actively expunged from public memory. Thus, 27 years later, it is necessary to emphasise mediated enactments of memorialization and memory work about wartime violence, torture, and trauma. Such enactments are survival mechanisms for feminist media and creative practitioners and artists, and, more importantly, for the survivors of wartime aggression (Lengel 2018).

Quo Vadis, Aida? along with other war films by Jasmila Žbanić like *Grbavica* (2006), *On the Path* (2010), and *For Those Who Can Tell No Tales* (2016), have positioned her as a feminist director who takes on profoundly emotional filmic memory-work and addresses women's reactions to violence and horror, while suggesting how local and global communities can deal with past atrocities (De Pascalis 2016; Gold 2010; Tumbas 2020). Yet scholars researching this topic (Ibid.) have thus far failed to note how Bosnian war films rely on oversimplification of complex Balkan identities and geographies while perpetuating negative stereotypes. Although liberties were acknowledged for narrative purposes, Hasan Nuhanović, the author whose work Žbanić uses as an inspiration for the *Quo Vadis* screenplay, still notes that the film contains many historical inaccuracies. Though it covers characters, events and dialogues which can be verified with living witnesses, the film chooses to fabricate certain portions that fit traditional portrayals. As a massacre survivor, Nuhanović finds this disrespectful: 'It's impossible to agree to film about a genocide in which you've lost your family and to accept its inauthenticity and that is the reason I've stopped working with Žbanić (N11 2019).' Yet, the film begins with a warning that it is based on true events and positions those who question its content or accuracy on a level of a genocide denier or a historical revisionist. Hence, it is important to clarify that authors of this paper do not imply that relationships between aggressor and victims are skewed in or that representation of the main events in themselves are false. The film accurately captures the war's chronology and faithfully recreates the victim-aggressor dynamic. Moreover, the majority of the lead characters are based on actual people but their portrayal, namely, individual dialogues, relationships and attributes are, according to Nuhanovic, fabricated. Without examining nuances regarding the historical accuracy of the material, the authors of this paper do examine the filmic choices, decisions and circumstances that contribute to perpetuation of Balkan stereotypes. In other words, we explore the cinematic tropes of Bosnia and representation of film's individual characters through the prism of Orientalist traditions that position Balkans and its populace as inherently dangerous or inferior to the West.

Twenty-seven years after the Balkan wars ended, contemporary war films about Bosnia continue to perpetuate the myth of Bosnia as a violent culture while nourishing viewing of the country through the lens of conflict. Though helpful in shedding light onto portions of national history, filmic productions that use it as a focal point also obscure a modern understanding of a culturally rich region and its complex historical heritage by pigeonholing it into a simplistic set of characteristics that accentuate its position in contrast to the West (Vojković 2008).

Due to its international prominence, *Quo Vadis, Aida?* is an interesting starting point for discussion of what Springer (2009) calls 'violent geographies' or media's tendency to

affix violent narratives to certain places. Orientalism is typically associated with Western media producers and their portrayal of the East but in the case of *Quo Vadis*, a film produced about Bosnians by Bosnians, we would be discussing Self-Orientalism. Self-Orientalism refers to the wilful (re-)action of non-Western individuals and institutions to 'play the Other' – namely, to use Western portrayals of the non-West – in order to strategically gain recognition and position themselves within the Western-dominated global system, economy, and order (Kobayashi, Jackson, and Sam 2019). While issues of Self-Orientalism and Balkanisation have been generously covered in relation to Croatian and Serbian film (Bakić-Hayden 1995; Hirschfeld 2011; Homer 2007; Kronja 2006; Vojkovic 2008; Slugan 2011a; Slugan 2011b), fewer scholarly works have been dedicated to Bosnian productions. Most works that engage with Balkanism in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina rely on Yugoslav cinema and especially on films of Emir Kusturica. As he openly identifies with Serbia and has never been part of its postwar cultural landscape, viewing his works as representative of Bosnia-Herzegovina cinematography seems somewhat fallacious (but for a review of his filmic history, see Baker 2018). The study presented herein aims to fill that gap. In examining it, researchers have used textual analysis and paid particular attention to scenes where Bosnians hold a significant screen presence, such as talking roles and interaction with major non-Bosnian characters. At the same time, we conducted a study of language and signs, as well as costumes, editing, and mise-en-scène. This approach is appropriate because it offers enough flexibility to examine vast concepts like Orientalism, Self-Orientalism, and Balkanism, while at the same time allowing additional hidden cultural and symbolic meaning to come to the fore (Lovric and Hernandez 2019). Film as 'meaningful symbolic material' lends itself well to this kind of research, and textual analysis is a viable tool in providing 'a comprehensive understanding of the meanings' (Chivanga and Monyai 2021; Mikos 2014).

We have also developed an analysis template in the form of codes or questions to organize the indexing of material (Boyatzis 1998; Crabtree 1999; Ezzy 2003). The codes were organized around broad categories, which asked questions such as: Which Orientalist themes are emerging? How are the characters of Bosnian descent portrayed in relation to Orientalist and Balkanist themes? What is the relationship of local people to the UN forces and status quo? How is the portrayal of a Bosnian character representative of stock Balkan characters? These questions were broken down further to narrower units, such as, to what extent are Bosnian characters portrayed as treacherous, conniving or aggressive? How do they behave around the UN emissaries? What positions/jobs do they serve? Lastly, in relation to the setting and symbolism of the region, we posed the following questions: How does the representation of Bosnia and its landscapes correspond to Orientalist ideas? To what extent does the filmic representation of Bosnian culture reproduce the idea of Orientalism?

Orientalism and the Balkanism of Eastern Europe

Edward Said (1979) explored a perceived gap of cultural traits between non-Western groups and Western gazes in his seminal book *Orientalism*, where he defines Orientalism as the distinction between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident'. In Said's analysis, the Western portrayal of the Middle Eastern and East-Asian cultures frames them as unchanging, focused on the past and undeveloped; leading to a deceivingly simplistic view of an Oriental culture that can be studied, depicted, and consequently controlled. Implication being that Western society is superior, advanced, rational, modern and flexible. By defining the whole East as

its less developed antithesis, the West affirms its own dominance and authority while at the same 'othering' cultures it vaguely understands.

In Western films and TV, the Orient has long been associated with enduring stereotypes and binary tropes. In many of them, the Oriental culture is looked down upon as pre-modern, exotic, unchanging, mystical, feminine and dark-skinned, while the Occident is depicted as white, modern, advanced, developing, masculine and empathetic (Bernstein and Studlar 1997; Chuang and Roemer 2013; Hirschfeld 2011; Lovric and Hernandez 2019). It symbolizes the larger political and economic context where the creative process occurred, one that ultimately represents and benefits the dominant Western status quo. This relationship places the production of knowledge about 'the Orient' in service of the Western hegemony, thus generating fragmented images of the Orient as an 'other' that function as an illustration of West's humanity, progress and rightful superiority (Spigel 2005). The Balkans, though geographically situated on the European continent, is often subject to Orientalised representations. Bakic-Hayden (1995) states 'Eastern Europe has been commonly associated with "backwardness," the Balkans with "violence," … while the West has identified itself consistently with the "civilized world."' She stresses that the Orient can geographically shift (i.e. Asia, India, the Balkans, Latin America), while continuing to be seen as the 'other'. There are even hierarchies, where Asia may be more 'East' or 'other' than Eastern Europe, and the Balkans the most 'Eastern' of all[1] (Todorova 1997).

After the Balkan wars in the 1990s, the Yugoslavian disintegration and Kosovo conflict (among others), the Balkan countries gained international media notoriety, and were continuously associated with danger, instability and conflict, hence the metaphor Balkanization (Fleming 2000; Todorova 1997). They have been presented as the brutal and uncivilised forecourt of Europe. However, this is not a new trope born in the 1990s, but a reiteration of an historical one (Garcevic 2017). In early 19th century travel journals, the standard Balkan male was portrayed as uncivilized, primitive, crude, cruel, and, without exception, disheveled (Todorova 1997), in contrast to the feminine Orientalist metaphor of countries, such as China or India. The European perspective of the Balkans has not quite been deemed Orientalism, but Balkanism, an 'Orientalist' variation on a Balkan theme. Much like Orientalism, Balkanism is ordered around a range of binary counterparts arranged hierarchically so that the first site ('Whiteness' or 'Europe') is always primary and definitional of the second ('Blackness' or 'Balkans'), which keeps it in the inferior position (Hirschfeld 2011; Ravetto-Biagioli 2012). Geographically inextricable from Europe, yet culturally constructed as 'the other', the Balkans serve as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the 'European' and 'the West' is constructed (Todorova 1997, 455).

Hence Bosnian cinema, much like Bosnia itself, is situated on Europe's periphery, and representations lean towards Western perceptions of the region. In film, the Balkan narratives stress repression under socialism, wars, poverty, violence, and corruption (Iordanova 2001). For instance, films tend to exaggerate Eastern European's evil behaviour, simplify the existing political conflicts and economic crisis, to focus instead on narratives of espionage, terrorism, war, and human rights violations. The values of these films continue to counterpose the chaos of the zone vis à vis Western freedom and moral values (the 'Western liberal gaze'), particularly ignoring their political and economic interests and the geopolitical significance of the zone (Doyle 2014; Ravetto-Biagioli 2012). Therefore, Western

representations of the various nations of the former Yugoslavia are marked by this kind of automatic essentialism. The Western gaze thus acts as a powerful gesture of reduction and simplification of this single moment in history (Doyle 2014), and the diverse national identities become replaced with a single, stable core identity. However, what occurs when such images are internalized and reproduced by 'Orientalist' actors themselves?

Ongoing Disputes about 'Self-Orientalism'

Contemporary research has extended what is thought of as Edward Said's unilateral understanding of Orientalism to suggest that from the start, the Orientalized have participated in the production of the Orient (Dirlik 1996, 96). As Orientalism refers to how the West gazes and constructs the East (Said 1979), self-Orientalism is grounded on how the cultural East comes to terms with an Orientalized East (Lau and Mendes 2011). That is, challenging meaning construction by the Orient, and/or the construction of Orientalism by themselves (i.e. autoexoticism) (Ko 2019). The motivation behind self-Orientalism may part from a direct need to resist Western cultural hegemony in the group's own terms and from the need to capitalize on these same images (Ko 2019). These images may replicate the same power dynamics but tend to be used strategically by the Orientalized to reclaim some agency and introduce new narrative elements that subvert expectations (Lau and Mendes 2011). Even as researchers largely agree with the idea that the Orient does not submissively wait for its creation, they have been interested and perplexed by the extensive spread of self-Orientalism. Simon Obendorf (2015, 36) notes that self-Orientalism has a tendency to arise where 'cultural self-definition in the wake of colonialism involves state-based reification of perceived essential Eastern qualities as a means of resisting Western cultural hegemony' and, from a simultaneous desire to entice a flow of Western capital. These two opposing motives – one towards compliance, and resistance – inform many of the contemporary developments in self-Orientalism. On the one hand, Western hegemony is challenged by self-Orientalism in the process of recoding Orientalist images and Orientalists, recasting them as constructive actors within the prevailing system. Yet, self-Orientalism succumbs to a capitalist desire for Orientalized goods which, finally, maintains hegemony of the West.

Recent scholarship has focused more towards assessing the positives and potentials of self-Orientalism towards reshaping the power relations. The emphasis is on the possibility that autoexoticism can challenge instead of strengthen the centrality of power, transform the notion of the 'exotic', apply the flexibility to transform between the derived and the original hence permitting the freedom of cultural self-fashioning (Li 2017). Though supporters of this viewpoint are aware that self-Orientalism can reproduce prevailing power dynamics (Lau 2009, 572; Li 2017, 395), they also argue that self-Orientalism is frequently employed deliberately, as a way of subversion and resolution (Lau and Mendes 2011).

Self-Orientalism's oppositional tactics involve self-mockery and mockery, subversion of expectations, stereotypes, revision of existing identity structures, and conforming with the demands for exoticism in a provocative manner (Lau and Mendes 2011). However, Rey Chow (2002) notes that the strive towards the full 'elimination' of stereotype, a fundamental element of cross-ethnic depiction, entails 'cleansing' of identities and boundaries as well (Chow 2010, 52). Put differently, stereotypes are able to both challenge and protect difference at the same time.

Strategic Self-Orientalism and International Audiences

In addition to such motives, the benefits of self-Orientalism in Balkan films may be traced as well to ethno-nationalistic interests (Harper 2017; 2018; Jelača 2020) and the difficulty of properly conveying the complexities of Balkan social issues. In the present section, we explore the latter explanation (for an analysis on the geopolitics of the Bosnian war representation, see Harper 2017). Western economic and political powers have dominated the film production and global film industry for decades (Mazierska and Kristensen 2020). Hollywood, for example, has acted as a leader in creating conventional film formulas, setting up studios, the promotion of famous celebrities, as well as establishing the imagery for appealing global narratives (Teo 2012), even when not directly financing such efforts. Its hegemony is an obstacle for narratives coming from countries that are disconnected from American imagination or for those that are too connected to what media has historically portrayed about them, (Mejía 2020; Teo 2012).

Real life war events often lack a clear enemy, hero or happy ending (Ravetto-Biagioli 2012), but in a market where funding, distribution and audiences are dependent on easy and straightforward narratives, this can be a problem. For example, in the case of *Quo Vadis*, the film was produced by Bosnia and Herzegovina, with Austria, France, Germany, Netherlands, Poland and Romania as co-producers. This is a result of the economic difficulties the country has faced in the latest decades and the lack of state-funded financial support, which drives many creators to collaborate with other former Yugoslav republics and European countries to bring their films to fruition (Jelača 2020). In Bosnia, the Association of Filmmakers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the official body representing film workers, also selects the candidate for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Awards and helps in the promotion of national cinema abroad. Hence, artists may strategically play into Western stereotypes and borrow aesthetic styles to simplify information processing and ensure better reception and funding opportunities. Previous studies on the funding that flows from European film festivals to Third World countries, provides some support for this premise and suggests that there are lingering Orientalist fantasies that prompt practices of self-exoticization (Adamczak 2020; Ihwanny and Budiman 2021; Mitric 2020, 2021; Slugan 2011). Films that play up a binary opposition along an axis of superiority and inferiority or rely on tropes of West–East, rich–poor, savage-civilised, backwards-modern, tend to do better with international audiences and big festivals.

Film aesthetics involves producing filmic output with distinctive visual and audio styles, narrative structures, and approaches to thematic considerations. While film festivals show a variety of types of films and film genres meant for diverse target audiences, they still privilege certain types of films (Wong 2011). For example, festival films lean towards dark, serious, and provoking productions featuring serious atmosphere, minimalism, intertextuality, and controversial issues (Ibid.). The war genre explored in *Quo Vadis* lends itself well to these topics and in the case of Bosnia, it is accompanied with a sense of legitimacy and authenticity. Many of the local filmmakers witnessed the 1990s Balkan wars and use the experience as a creative fuel. For example, the overview of Bosnian submissions for the Berlin International Film Festival from 2000 to 2019 and the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film from 1994 to 2020 signals that most of the nominated films have dealt with the topic of war one way or another, and that they continue to do well (see Tables 1 and 2). Certainly, not all submissions deal directly with war-related subjects, but

Table 1. List of Bosnian submissions for the Berlin International Film Festival.

Year	Title	Theme	Director
2000	*Hop, Skip & Jump*	Bosnian war-related	Srdjan Vuletic
2004	*Racconto di guerra | Wartale | Eine Geschichte vom Krieg*	Bosnian war-related	by Mario Amura
2006	*Grbavica*	Bosnian war-related	by Jasmila Zbanic
2009	*Snijeg | Snow*	Bosnian war-related	by Aida Begic
2010	*Na putu | On The Path*	Non-war related	by Jasmila Zbanic
2013	*Epizoda u zivotu beraca zeljeza | An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker*	Non-war related	by Danis Tanovic
2016	*Smrt u Sarajevu / Mort à Sarajevo | Death in Sarajevo*	Non-war related	by Danis Tanović
2018	*Snijeg za Vodu | Snow for Water | Schnee für Wasser*	Bosnian war-related	by Christopher Villiers
2019	*Can't you see them? – Repeat*	Bosnian war-related	by Clarissa Thieme
2019	*Crvene gumene čizme | Red Rubber Boots*	Bosnian war-related	by Jasmila Žbanić
2019	*Šavovi | Stitches*	Non-war related	by Miroslav Terzić

the majority continue to explore the inhumanity and trauma caused by the war while inadvertently becoming part of the self-Orientalizing trend that encourages viewing of contemporary Bosnia through the violence. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why most of Žbanić' films deal with stories surrounding the Bosnian war and why she rarely crosses into other genres. One notable example is *Love Island* (2014), a romantic comedy set in a peaceful seaside location in the Mediterranean. While the film is a transnational production, involving English language and foreign actors, it did not do well in the festival circuit nor the box office. With return to war topics and issues, the filmmaker's career took an upwards swing as she continued receiving prizes and lucrative engagements (such as an upcoming HBO adaptation of the post-apocalyptic video game *The Last of Us* (2023)).

Self-Orientalism in Quo Vadis, Aida?

The film centers around Aida, a Srebrenica school teacher, who works as a United Nations interpreter and attempts to save a husband and two sons from execution. Aside from specific goals, Aida also serves as a symbolic bridge between East and the West and the sole channel through which Srebrenica people voice their needs to the UN. While walking through the refugee camp, Aida is met with a cacophony of voices asking for updates, water, cigarettes, and other services. To other Bosnian characters she seems to be in a position of privilege and prestige. She holds some authority in the camp and enjoys a variety of perks that come with the post, but as the official UN channel, she is expected to execute orders and to suppress her own voice. She struggles with this as her family is facing an imminent peril, but the job of translator prevents her from acting on behalf of Srebrenica people and voicing their grievances. Instead, Aida spends most of the movie unsuccessfully pleading with the UN bosses and colleagues and ultimately, she tries to 'cheat' her way around the rigid regulations. Despite being the most powerful Bosnian character in the film, her increasingly desperate attempts to save her family bare the true extent of Aida's helplessness and dependence: Just like other Srebrenica characters, Aida's wellbeing depends on the Serbian goodwill and kindness of the Western emissaries.

Table 2. List of Bosnian submissions for the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film.

Year (Ceremony)	Film title used in nomination	Original title	Director	Theme	Result
1994 (67th)	*The Awkward Age*	*Magareće godine*	Nenad Dizdarević	Children's drama	Not Nominated
2001 (74th)	*No Man's Land*	*Ničija zemlja*	Danis Tanović	War Comedy	Won Academy Award
2003 (76th)	*Fuse*	*Gori vatra*	Pjer Žalica	Post-war comedy	Not Nominated
2004 (77th)	*Days and Hours*	*Kod amidže Idriza*	Pjer Žalica	Post-war drama	Not Nominated
2005 (78th)	*Totally Personal*	*Sasvim lično*	Nedžad Begović	War documentary	Not Nominated
2006 (79th)	*Grbavica: The Land of My Dreams*	*Grbavica*	Jasmila Žbanić	Post-war drama	Not Nominated
2007 (80th)	*It's Hard to be Nice*	*Teško je biti fin*	Srđan Vuletić	Crime-Drama	Not Nominated
2008 (81st)	*Snow*	*Snijeg*	Aida Begić	Post-war drama	Not Nominated
2009 (82nd)	*Night Guards*	*Čuvari noći*	Namik Kabil	Family drama	Not Nominated
2010 (83rd)	*Cirkus Columbia*	*Cirkus Columbia*	Danis Tanović	Romantic Comedy/ Drama	Not Nominated[16]
2011 (84th)	*Belvedere*	*Belvedere*	Ahmed Imamović	Post-war drama	Not Nominated
2012 (85th)	*Children of Sarajevo*	*Djeca*	Aida Begić	Post-war drama	Not Nominated
2013 (86th)	*An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker*	*Epizoda u životu berača željeza*	Danis Tanović	Social Drama	Made Shortlist[20]
2014 (87th)	*With Mum*	*Sa mamom*	Faruk Lončarević	Family drama	Not Nominated
2015 (88th)	*Our Everyday Life*	*Naša svakodnevna priča*	Ines Tanović	Post-war veteran drama	Not Nominated
2016 (89th)	*Death in Sarajevo*	*Smrt u Sarajevu*	Danis Tanović	Drama	Not Nominated
2017 (90th)	*Men Don't Cry*	*Muškarci ne plaču*	Alen Drljević	Post-war veteran drama	Not Nominated
2018 (91st)	*Never Leave Me*	*Beni Bırakma*	Aida Begić	Syrian refugees	Not Nominated
2019 (92nd)	*The Son*	*Sin*	Ines Tanović	Teen drama	Not Nominated
2020 (93rd)	*Quo Vadis, Aida?*	*Quo Vadis, Aida?*	Jasmila Žbanić	War drama	Nominated

Child-like Bosnians are, within the campgrounds, expected to remain quiet and to meekly follow plans laid out by other actors. Not only do they lack agency and ability to speak for themselves, but they are also shown as uncomfortable with assuming any kind of leadership positions[2]. For instance, when the Dutch soldiers ask Bosnians to choose camp representatives to engage in negotiations with the Serbian military, the refugee hall is swept in silence. In place of the answer, the camera pans to a group of squirming teenage boys who eye each other uncomfortably before shyly looking away. Prior to this moment, refugee camp is shown as a place that houses chatty elderly and middle-aged population, but at this crucial moment, Bosnian inexperience is embodied in an image of timid youths. Refugees' naiveté prevents them from assuming any sense of control until Aida finally steps in and volunteers her husband, the headmaster, along with a middle-aged business owner and a local accountant named Camila. Despite their maturity and presumed work experience, these 'volunteers' seem as apprehensive about assuming control as a group of inexperienced teenagers. They

timidly respond when asked direct questions and lack courage and fortitude to assume leadership during crucial negotiation with Serbs, or to sway them in any significant way.

The comparative inability of locals to take care of themselves and their lands is in the imperialist discourse often used to morally justify the subjugation of colonies and exploitation of their resources. By rebranding looting of cultural artifacts as protection, and subjugation as liberation, colonialists present themselves as saviours and beneficiaries rather than exploiters or looters. Orientalist mechanism of subjugation and domination is hence effectively disguised as an effort to shield the interests of the inexperienced and painted as an effort to integrate the dominated in the world current of the *modern way of life* (Assayag 2007). Since locals cannot effectively speak for themselves, - due to language barrier and an apparent lack of negotiation skills - their Western 'partners' assume the role of custodians and act on their behalf. While *Quo Vadis, Aida?* inherently criticizes such imperialist dynamic by emphasizing the abysmal failure of the UN policy in Srebrenica, the relationship between the timid locals and assertive foreigners nevertheless justifies the interventionist attitude that the UN forces play in the film.

Apart from Aida and the fiery mayor, Bosnians are shown as passive, reclusive, and sheepishly obedient. In typical Balkanist fashion, they act impulsively and are led by emotion rather than calculated strategy and logic. For instance, the agitated Srebrenica mayor, (Ervin Bravo), who pleads with the Dutch forces to protect the Srebrenica people against the invading Serbian army, tries ineffectively to calm his nerves, and eventually loses his temper and shouts at the gathered UN representatives. He asks them to assist in the city's defense but ends the scene by verbally attacking them and then hotly refusing the handshake. Colonel Karremans (Johan Heldenbergh) and Major Franken (Raymond Thiry) seem to understand the mayor's frustration and appear to struggle with the situation themselves but manage to retain an air of civility and professionalism. Like other Dutch characters, they are presented as cool-headed bureaucrats with limited experience in the Balkans, and inadequate understanding of the events that are unfolding before them. If Srebrenica people are victims of the film and Serbs are its villains, Dutch forces are shellshocked bystanders who cannot even fathom the full scale of horror. Later in the film, Colonel Karremans' façade drops when he unsuccessfully tries to get a hold of superiors and yells at the secretary because the UN forces are not sending planes against Serbia. This outburst happens during a private call which leaves Karremans' professional persona untainted while also humanising him for attempting to help Bosnians. Hasan Nuhanović calls this account of events a 'historical falsification':

> Karremans, (…) was given a human face because he shows responsibility and initiative, concern and empathy for people facing genocide. Karremans did not have or show any of these qualities but behaved in a completely opposite way to what this scene suggests. (…) Karremans never made such phone call, but instead locked himself in the office after meeting Mladić and asked not to be disturbed because he had diarrhea (Nuhanović 2021).

Duality in framing and characterization of impulsive locals, versus diplomatic foreigners echoes the 'Great Dichotomy' of modernization wherein the humanitarian expertise of a 'civilized' West is called upon to tame the 'savagery' of the 'Other (Springer 2009)'. Implication of the Bosnian-UN arrangement is that the morality of the Bosnian people comes not from within, but from encounters with extra-local actors, whereby 'they' are expected to model

themselves and their behaviour after 'us' to achieve nonviolence and join the modern world (Harper 2017; 2018).

Moreover, Bosnia of *Quo Vadis* is not an identifiable place with distinct geographic landmarks as much as it is as a timeless backdrop encapsulating vague fantasies for the Western audience. Though situated beyond the everyday knowledge of the West, representation of Bosnia and the Balkan is done in the way the West imagines both itself and the orient. Though Srebrenica is situated in a northern mountainous region with the highest summer temperature of around 27 degrees Celsius, the film depicts it as a torched grassland where sweaty characters perpetually burn in the summer heat or squat in smoke-filled spaces. This Bosnia could be in the Balkans, but also in Syria or Afghanistan or any other Middle Eastern country from the Global South. The space is familiar yet remarkably indistinct. Moreover, *Quo Vadis, Aida?* is filled with war images that lack specificity and temporal identifiers that separate the 1990s Bosnia from comparable images of war and suffering from other parts of the world. Images of dead civilians in the streets, damaged houses, mosques, along with holocaust metaphors elicit visceral response in viewers while making the conflict 'palatable' to the Western audience. When Srebrenica refugees are cordoned off behind wire fences and crammed into buses like cattle, they become a recognizable representation of collective victimhood and a relatable pastiche of human suffering that is routinely associated with the far orient and/or migrants from non-Western settings. Rather than complex people with contradictory feelings and lands that contain both harshness and beauty, the Balkans and its people are monolithic symbols and universally recognisable tropes of suffering. Universalization of the story, employment of familiar visual cues, and simplification of complex political relations allows the film to meet the expectations of the Western audience and guides them towards quicker understanding of a foreign culture, whilst creating enough recognition for local audiences. In the process, material items like 'food' and 'clothes' are also inscribed with symbols that are negotiated in a Western European setting. An example is how extras in the roles of Bosnians wear stylistically ambiguous costumes that may come from different parts of the 20th century including head scarves and beanies. They are shown engaging in inane actions like cooking, standing, or dragging livestock in the grass fields. Though the story is set in the mid-1990s, Bosnians' interaction with modern technologies, such as cars, TVs, radios, and electronics in general, is absent hence creating the illusion of events taking place in some undetermined past. In one instance, an older gentleman outside the refugee camp drags a cow while yelling 'Let go of my cow. It is my life!' and another shot shows a boy holding what appears to be a dead rabbit. Some of these images did appear in the news reports from the time of the massacre, but one needs to remember that even these images were recorded by the media personnel with their own agenda and that particular aspects of reality were chosen over others.

Žbanić has her reasons for emphasising certain representations but cumulatively, such images construct Bosnia as a harsh and antiquated place free of modernity whose people engage in customs and reveal behavioural patterns that are somewhat unusual in the West. Her themes underline stereotyped ideas that Western audiences expect to see in the Orient. An example is the habit of smoking. Although it is a common practice, not shared exclusively by Bosnians, the relation of the orient and tobacco is well-established in Western paintings, literature, poetry, film, and marketing where it signals hidden pleasures and exoticism (Benedict 2011; Grotenhuis 2017). In the film, Bosnians are shown smoking in both indoor

and outdoor settings and it appears to be the favorite pastime for young as much as the old. Aida and her husband smoke while discussing their plans for the future, generals and soldiers smoke to pass time, various Srebrenica characters smoke to relieve tension as does the medical staff in the camp, and even Aida's teenage children. In Orientalist works smoke and smoking is associated with mystery, sensuality and otherness but in *Quo Vadis,* cigarette also acts as a versatile prop that reveals character's mental states and underlines the notion of Balkan's liminality. This is the space that permits behaviours that are looked down upon in the West and opens new frontiers[3].

Another significant element is the presentation of women, outside of Aida. For example, whereas refugee women wear variations of modesty wear in the camp, in a film's dream sequence, we suddenly see them dressed in colourful and skimpy 80 s dresses and engaged in a beauty pageant. They are dressed up and paraded on stage for enjoyment of the club's male audience. One of the women, Camila (Jelena Kordic Kuret), is featured earlier in the film during the Bosnian-Serb negotiations where she accurately predicts that Serbian peace talks are a bluff. As a woman, Camila is not taken seriously and Aida's husband even remarks that he 'can't handle stupid women'. The representation of female refugees implies that females are disregarded and objectified in Bosnia, a global problem, but highlighted in non-Western settings. Insults thrown at Camila were a deliberate choice inserted by Jasmila Žbanić and this contradicts experiences of Hasan Nuhanović, the author of the autobiography on which *Quo Vadis* was based (N11 2019). Implicit in the chauvinistic insult is the notion that Bosnians are extremely patriarchal people and who considered women less rational than men. For Western viewers with poor understanding of the Balkan culture, West is the norm that makes the Bosnian cultural elements and its people come across as exotic, archaic, and odd.

Conclusions

Compared to regional directors, like Emir Kusturica, Srđan Dragojević, Živko Nikolić, and others, who blatantly use Balkanism to enhance the aesthetic and commercial appeal of their films, Žbanić's instances of self-Orientalism are mild and inconspicuous. This production breaks some common Orientalist tropes and sheds light on a valuable story from Bosnian history, while warning of the consequences of the inefficient international community and slow bureaucracy. At the same time, authors posit that the film engages in a 'tactical retreat' by avoiding the everyday non-war reality of its ostensible subjects in favor of a stereotypical depiction of the Balkans. Due to Žbanić's immense success and recognizability abroad, her vision of Bosnia-Herzegovina is authoritative and has the power to solidify and ultimately reproduce (Orientalized) notions of opposing East and West civilizations. Orientalised elements discussed above prevent the Western audience from seeing filmic events and relationships as a part of their own world, leading to exoticizing and reduction of Bosnians and their country to stock representations.

Although Balkanism (Iordanova 2001; Ravetto-Biagioli 2012; Todorova 1997) and Orientalism (Bernstein and Studlar 1997; Chuang and Roemer 2013; Lovric and Hernandez 2019) have been studied in film representation separately, and authors have stressed their distinct characteristics (Slugan 2011; Todorova 1997), the core element of 'othering' and emphasizing the other's distinctiveness serves as a platform to study its

comparison. The fact that the internalization, and the implications of these violent representations, comes from a local creator that seeks to bring attention and criticize the traditional ethno-national understanding, allows for the consideration of multiple interests at play: 1) the creation of these images by Eastern European themselves (Ko 2019), 2) a deep desire to understand and heal that trauma (Jelača 2020; Tumbas 2020), and 3) the commodification of that same pain to meet Western and marketing expectations (Adamczak 2020; Hirschfeld 2011; Ihwanny and Budiman 2021; Mitric 2020, 2021). By balancing these contrasting discourses, the film tries to exert some agency and certain control in a postcolonial world (Doyle 2014). Yet, the film's Orientalist images are rooted in historical circumstances that have enriched neighboring empires at the expense of Bosnia's economic and cultural development (Doyle 2014). Its Orientalized image was based on distortions that have justified the imperial interventions and glorified the colonialists at the expense of natives, but its characteristics were also adopted by local actors who perpetuated and disseminated it themselves. While the attention to war zones and human rights violations certainly brings international interest and potential resources to much forgotten zones, critics of self-Orientalism have pointed out that these stereotypical images strip people and groups of their complex identities and essentialize them as distant 'others'. While the proliferation of war themes among Bosnian directors is not necessarily an indication of a conscious desire to self-Orientalize, their film's adherence to Balkanist depictions follow trends that are known to improve film marketability and, in the process, reinforce stereotypes (Adamczak 2020; Hirschfeld 2011; Ihwanny and Budiman 2021; Mitric 2020, 2021). Future inquiries into this area should involve interviews with producers and directors regarding their motivations, along with a survey of the financial demands that filmmakers experience early in their creative process while trying to bring their ideas to fruition. Notwithstanding these limitations, our study expands on research which positions cultural producers as conscious participants in the production and distribution of their images as self-Orientalizing commodities, in order to accumulate cultural capital and exert agency in a process that constantly seeks to limit their actions.

Notes

1. The author refers to the hierarchies of eastern European otherness in contrast to a progressive European world.
2. One exception is the Srebrenica mayor (played by Ervin Bravo).
3. An exception of this representation is a dream sequence involving the only scene in the film that highlights eroticism and enjoyment, which is explored through the veil of smoking.

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