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### A STUDY OF REMEMBRANCE IN POST-YUGOSLAV CINEMA THROUGH AIDA BEGIĆ'S SNOW

**Abstract:** After the upheaval of Yugoslavia, women's cinema steadily emerged as a potent mode of artistic expression, capable of transcending the Balkan region's borders by evoking a strong sense of remembrance of past traumas, and nostalgia for a bygone era. This review examines cinematographic distinctions in Aida Begić's *Snow* (Snijeg). Begić is one of the few directors who portray post-war gendered narratives of trauma in the Balkans. By exploring Begić's methods of depicting women's memories and ways of coping with the present while leading lives in complete isolation and exclusion from society, this review aims to shed light on the portrayal of women characters in contemporary Bosnian cinematography. The review's main focus is Begić's approach to showing women's central on-screen presence, followed by a brief analysis of Igor Ćamo's musical contribution. It aims to emphasize the contrast between *Snow* and other films from the post-Yugoslav era, where remembrance is depicted by the reconstruction of war scenes without focusing on women as central movie protagonists.

**Keywords:** post-Yugoslav cinema, remembrance, communal living, gendered trauma

The post-Yugoslav film industry often revisits locations of the siege in Bosnia and Herzegovina, attempting to comprehend the incomprehensible - the traumatic impact of the event. It often reassesses the different ways in which it created an unfathomable social and cultural rupture that is yet to disintegrate years after its initial ending. Many directors go for a nuanced exploration of both individual and collective experiences during the siege. Aida Begić is not one of them, as she delves into a completely different period and portrays the harsh reality and the various healing methods of war survivors. Begić's first feature film, *Snow* (Snijeg) from 2008, depicts post-war life in Slavno, a secluded and desolated Bosnian village near Zvornik. By telling the story of 12 remaining inhabitants in a battered village - six women, four girls, a boy, and an elderly imam - Begić introduces a new way of portraying the magnitude of the Bosnian war in Balkan-produced movies, emphasizing the recognition of the suffering and identification of the women protagonists, their self-image, and subjectivity. (Rawski and Roman 2014). In

Snow, Begić introduces the viewer to her contemplative directing vision that sometimes resembles the aesthetics of Kelly Reichardt's slow cinema, which has two defining characteristics – its commitment to realism and capturing reality. (de Luca and Jorge, 2016) Slow cinema emerged in the 2000s and remained known worldwide for its imposing idiosyncrasies. It is a cinematographic form of discursive activity that entails a critical framework of practices contingent upon the social and economic milieu. (Çağlayan 2018). Similar to its predecessor – the new wave – slow cinema centers around three notions that are the foundation for assessing the film's political and socio-cultural implications: sentimentality, irrationality, and monotony (ennui). (Çağlayan 2018). Snow is the epitome of the contemporary slow cinema of the Balkans; it consists of a potent combination of emotional long takes that distract the viewer from the enforcement of the narrative cause of the effect. In the film, life in Slavno is portrayed as slow and melancholic, and starting from the first frame, there are lingering feelings of loss, sorrow, and generational conflict. As in real life, different age cohorts mean different perspectives and coping mechanisms. Since the movie's focal theme is survival after deep collective trauma that haunts each character, the viewer learns how different characters of a certain age respond to certain events.

Begić succeeds in portraying how repetitive the characters' days are using a quick montage technique, a montage sequence that's often used in Anglo-Saxon film studios (Millar and Reisz 2010). Filmmakers use this technique when they want to add disconnected imageries – ...” impressionistic sequence of disconnected images, usually linked by dissolves, super-impositions or wipes, and used to convey the passage of time, changes of place or any other scenes of transition.” (Millar and Reisz 2010: 87) The opening scene shows a group of women and children playing charades (pantomime) while Nadija (Jasna Beri) is “imitating” her husband, whose fate remains indefinite; she and her daughter Lejla (Alma Terzic) are left wondering if Omer survived the Bosnian war or not. The small commune of war survivors lost track of their families during the war; they continued living their concealed lives, almost entirely detached from others, in a remote, isolated village. Despite their differences, they earn money together by producing quince and sour cherry jam (slatko), ajvar, and sauerkraut together, selling their homemade goods on the open road to Zvornik, on the left bank of the river Drina. One day, an unfortunate situation occurs when Alma (Zana Marjanović), the movie's main protagonist, and Nadija go on their usual route, selling their homemade products on the open road leading to the city of Zvornik. There's a tangible breakthrough point due to the appearance of a new character called Hamza (Muhamed Hadžović). This event is the first sign of disruption of the continued monotony in the protagonists' lives.

Although Begić did not include a single shot of the war atrocities, its burden echoes from beginning to end, portraying the woeful post-war period characterized by severe trauma for the women (mothers and widows – workers, grandmothers – ‘wise-women’) and the orphaned children. By setting the spotlight on women as the main protagonists, Begić quickly stands out among Croatian, Bosnian, and Serbian film directors known for developing the Balkan “macho cinema” (Dumančić and Krolo 2016) in the late 90s and early ‘00s. Through the explicit depiction of violent masculinity, other directors habitually developed their stories through the eyes of men on the war

front, without a cautionary approach towards portraying women as anything else but one-dimensional characters, with desires controlled solely by their image, and as Mulvey points out, creating an illusion that a woman can only be perceived “as the bearer, not maker, of meaning.” (Mulvey 1975). Stories created in the spirit of Balkan macho cinema have one focal point - the masculine identity in times of endurance, and point out the dangers of war and violence, implicitly pointing out the dangers that come alongside physical destruction - moral degradation and ethical decay. (Dumančić and Krolo 2016) Filmmaking has been characterized by a disparity in sexual power dynamics everywhere, not only in Southeastern Europe, and as Mulvey reflects upon the male gaze in cinema, visually deriving pleasure has been divided into active and passive roles assigned to men and women, respectively. Women remain one-dimensional, observed, and showcased characters in the so-called macho-cinema. More often than not, their physical presence is meticulously constructed to possess a bodily allure, essentially signifying their intended purpose of being subjected to observation (Mulvey 1975).

Although post-Yugoslav Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian cinema is acclaimed and honored worldwide for its unambiguous moral stance and rejection of aggression, it has paradoxically elevated and idealized the portrayal of violent masculinity. (Dumančić and Krolo 2016) Filmmakers from the Balkans have employed the stereotype of the abusive yet justifiably enraged macho vigilante, a “circumstantial victim,” resulting in a contradiction. While claiming it is impossible to build a masculine society through vigilante justice, the movie creators exhibit chauvinistic tendencies and glorify violence to achieve cathartic self-discovery. (Dumančić and Krolo 2016) In *Snow*, Begić does not follow that trajectory and shifts her interest in a novel direction. She refocuses the film sequences on quiet solidarity, isolation, and post-traumatic experiences, leaving out any forms of violence or excerpts of the siege altogether. By successfully using discursive framing, Begić created a muted cinematic monument with several focal characters that effortlessly dominate the screen. *Snow* irrevocably addresses trauma, arguing that this approach brings to light how trauma can shape women’s identities. She shifts the focus to remembrance, collective trauma, and modes of survival. Rather than assuming that womanhood is a pre-existing identity, Begić contends that womanhood is formed in response to severe traumatic events that have inevitably created a shared experience that unites the women living in isolation while fighting for survival. These shared encounters provide the foundation for the unconscious creation of collective identity based on a familiar narrative of pain and distress. (Jelača, 2016)

### **Igor Čamo’s rhythmic patterns and consonant harmonies**

Recognized as an intangible heritage (de Miguel Molina 2021), music intertwines power dynamics and territory (Broclain et al. 2019), letting people express their feelings and acquired experiences connected to a specific story. In this sense, music can be understood as a commercial product; nevertheless, the creative progression does not end abruptly since the musical “product” continues to live on. Music, as a cultural

phenomenon and a form of artistic legacy, plays a momentous role in shaping the one-off identity of a country, a nation, or even an entire region. It shelters specific ideas about a precise place or territory adopted by its targeted audience and then shared and recaptured through everyday musical practices and social interactions. A film composition's lyrical and rhythmic themes can symbolize regional reconciliation and remembrance of past times, helping the viewers express their views on the world by creating music or simply by listening, i.e., consuming it. (Ristivojević, 2012) Begić's depiction of an omnipresent melancholy and feebleness of the protagonists is complemented by Igor Čamo's repetitive patterns of four chords. The melody is present only in selected scenes throughout the movie. Although minimal, the major chord progressions are like harbingers of the future that awaits the film characters. Subtly, the melodic line reappears in the scenes without any dialogue. It effortlessly overlaps the recurring scenes when Alma dreams of walking towards an outdoor faucet, washing her face, and leisurely and dreamily returning to her praying husband. The delicacy of Čamo's metamorphosing chords balances the narrative. It remains minimal, as it never crosses the line between melancholy and tragedy, nor does it have build-ups of catharsis or release. Just like Aida Begić and Elma Tataragić's ways of portraying post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, Čamo's compositions for the movie *Snow* do not resemble the typical soundtracks of post-Yugoslav movies of the late 90s and early '00s and are not created in the traditional Bosnian rhythm; therefore, it's impossible to categorize neither the soundscape nor the compositions into any of the genres of syncretic popular music developed in the Balkan region (Samson 2013). In this movie, music exists within the narrative world to evoke emotions without complementing the screenplay. Čamo's sound design aims to create a sensory experience that triggers clairvoyant responses in the viewer; it doesn't rely on understanding or reasoning.

The narrative in *Snow* takes an intriguing turn when two cunning real-estate developers, Dejan Spasic and Jasmin Geljo, arrive in the village with intentions to buy the protagonists' land and coerce them into selling their property. Throughout several breakthrough points in the film, Begić and screenwriter Elma Tataragić perfectly depict how deep corruption prevails in fragile, transitional societies, clearly indicating the feasibility of people using political power to allocate control, with one aim - to make a profit. Spasic assumes an unsympathetic persona, even tells Nadija, and ignores the collective resistance to the real-estate magnate's plan to purchase their land. He asserts his position by mentioning the support he receives from an unnamed minister and the Bosnian government, thereby highlighting the pervasive influence of corruption in fragile transitional societies. The inclusion of this dialogue by Begić and Tataragić effectively depicts the potential exploitation of political power for personal gain.

The characters' multidimensionality shines through whenever the accents fall upon their aspirations, dreams, and hopes that have been overlooked due to war. Her main objective is to provide a more intimate and personal perspective of war, particularly from the viewpoint of children, rather than adopting an objective men's perspective that solely focuses on explaining the political and historical facts. (Leković, 2022) Alma, the taciturn protagonist of the movie, remains steadfast in preserving the memory of her missing spouse and attempts to persuade others to sign a contract to sell their land. However,

her efforts prove futile as most protagonists opt to sell. Subsequently, an intense winter storm stops the salespeople from leaving, confining them to the dwindling village. It results in a climatic event that serves as the film's catalyst, exposing the connection of the real estate agents to the local killings and introducing them as a grave danger to the protagonists' safety, revealing the distressing and painful reality behind the deaths of their families. The snowstorm becomes pivotal in the unfolding of the movie's final act.

In both *Snow and Children of Sarajevo* (2012), Begić strongly emphasizes the characters' collective memories and emotional and psychological state caused by witnessing things that never appear in front of the camera yet linger on until the last sequence. Throughout both films, she challenges the limits of contemporary Bosnian cinematic structure and emphasizes silent and solemn remembrance. She accentuates the notion that cinema doesn't necessarily need to portray hostility to bring pain or be loud to awaken anger or fear. In her latest feature film, *A Ballad (Balada)* from 2022, Begić continues to experiment with expressive aesthetics and her self-reflective approach (Grgić and Lagarias 2023) to filmmaking, prompting spectators to reflect on her film's dialectic relationship not only with the cinematic experimentation but also with reflection and remembrance of times long behind, but still very much alive.

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