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Who Wants to Be an Albanian?

The Representation of Albanians in the Serbian Movie »The Hornet« *

Do you remember 1999? From today's point of view it seems very hard to imagine how the world in Serbia looked like before 1999. After that date, a return was impossible. This essay will not be an attempt to re-create the time before the so-called 'NATO intervention' in FR Yugoslavia, nor will it deal with the real political actions at that time. This essay is an attempt to give a short analysis of the representation of 'the Others' – in this case the Albanians – in the Serbian movie »The Hornet« (1998), seen as one of the rare attempts of the Serbian (pro-democratic) culture establishment to deal with this sensitive issue. If we consider movies as one of the most powerful media, the fact of a lost chance to change the dominant stereotype presentations of bloody and chaotic Balkans and Serbia (or Yugoslavia) with this movie becomes increasingly unforgivable. Instead of making an attempt to explain the background of the existing conflicts to the 'Western' but also to the domestic, Serbian public (by telling a story on the "love between a Serbian girl and a young Albanian boy, placed into the vertigo of ongoing Balkan wars"),¹ we find a shallow, banal and completely misunderstood interpretation of the problem in this movie. By telling a story without really saying anything, it remains just the same strategy as was used by the former Serbian government to put the problem of Kosovo 'under the carpet'. Instead of offering an alternative or at least a deeper view on the relations between Serbs and Albanians, the authors have succeeded in producing something that doesn't differ from the breaking news seen on every pro-Milosevic TV station at that time.

»The Hornet« was a project produced by an independent production company, Cinema Design,² but was also supported by the main national TV station (Radio Television of Serbia), television strongly controlled by Milosevic's regime at that moment. The public had great expectations about this work: a really long time had passed since the last movie, where it could see a story about Albanians, and Serbs and Albanians. In addition, the team working on the film was a very well known one; the casting was perfect. The producers couldn't have found a better moment – it was shown in cinemas during the 'hot' year of 1998, at the moment of culmination of Serbian and Albanian conflicts but when the possibility of reconciliation of the two sides still existed. One of the most important reasons for such high expectations was that among the twelve movies produced in that year, only this one had the 'courage' to tackle the issue of war that was about to happen. Unfortunately, the expectations were completely betrayed.³ Without analysing its artistic achievements, the story shown in the movie was a

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¹ Information at the official website of the producers, *Cinema Design*: www.cinemadesign.com/movies-hornet.htm.

² It was filmed as a Serbian-Italian co-production, sponsored by Avis and Diners Club International as well. See more in: *Andrew J. Horton*, Vignettes of Violence: Different Attitudes in Recent Yugoslav Cinema. *Central Europe Review*, Vol. 1, No. 18, 25 October 1999, www.ce-review.org/99/18/kinoeye18_horton1.html.

³ The official number of people that have seen the movie in Serbia and Montenegro goes from 161,464 (the results from the Federal Bureau of Statistics, the information from Film Institute Yearbook, Belgrade 1999), to 183,566 (the non-official results from the distributors). In both cases, the number of people who saw it was significantly

great disappointment. The surprise of the Serbian public was even greater, having in mind the fact that it was directed by Gorcin Stojanovic, known as a strongly 'anti-regime' and 'pro-democratic' theatre and film director.⁴ The screenplay was inspired by a novel,⁵ "based on the true story of the Mafia executioner, code named 'the Hornet', an Albanian from the Yugoslav province of Kosovo, whose own destiny was as cruel as his job".⁶ The movie was, in fact, a drama of love between two young people, a story that was possible to have a happy end, if they weren't a Serbian girl and an Albanian boy. The problems between Serbs and Albanians – the problem of cultural, social, or class differences – however, were minimized and reduced to the problem of the Mafia. So the tools for a crisis solution suggested by the movie were strictly the ones used in destroying the Mafia cartels and in breaking the chains of drug dealers and criminals. The aim was to cut off the tumour from the healthy national body.

When we read some more official details about this movie, we learn that "»The Hornet« is a first film co-production treating the subject of the Albanian mafia, the powerful and uncatchable network of criminals ruling the drug transport from the Middle East to Western Europe and the USA." In comparison to the Sicilian Mafia, the Albanian mob is also basically founded on the power of big families and its members are utterly devoted to their aim. Furthermore, they seem to be even more ready to sacrifice themselves for the organization and even more close-mouthed than their Italian counterparts."⁷ So the problem of the Kosovo province is seen as being purely 'criminal' in its nature, the problem is drug trafficking, it has nothing to do with wrong politics of past decades. It is not the consequence of wrong political moves of the Serbian government that has been cultivating this conflict and racist behaviour towards 'the Others'. As we learn, the problem can be solved with a simple, effective police intervention. Probably a stronger reaction on this film by an 'independent' and 'pro-democratic' cultural establishment lacked considering the 'democratic' reputation of the team that produced it – the disappointment was so great that it was better not to mention it at all.⁸ But also soon after it was possible to see the movie in the theatre, reality had completely changed. Everyone had more important things to think about.

1. On Her and Him

Her name in the film is Adriana; she is a young and innocent Serbian or Belgrade high-school girl,⁹ living in a surrounding of 'high risk', chaos and constant danger (the first frame shows her in front of high school, hiding during the shooting at the café across the street). As expected, she cannot resist the charm of a little older guy with a shady past, speaking English and presenting himself as an 'Italian'. He offers her the shelter and safety of a material world,

below expectations (the most popular domestic movies in past years had each more than 1 million of spectators in theatres). It also seems that the producers had really high expectations, too, since it was released in Italian theatres soon after its Belgrade release.

⁴ After 5 October 2001 and the democratic changes in Serbia, he was appointed Manager of the Yugoslav Drama Theatre in Belgrade, one of the most important theatres in Serbia and ex-Yugoslavia.

⁵ Screenplay by Zoran Popovic (also the author of the novel), Srdjan Koljevic and Faruk Begoli.

⁶ Information from the official website.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ It was really a problem to find film critics or daily newspapers analysing this movie; both sides - pro-regime and opposition - kept silent.

⁹ Although we forget this all the time, since Mirjana Jokovic, the actress playing her part, is almost twice as old as the character should be.

although of unknown origin. Nevertheless, our heroine is different from the regular 'sponsored girls'¹⁰ – she is searching for love and serenity, finding it in the arms of the young 'Italian'.

He is a generous and elegant young man with sophisticated taste and habits. He is taking out his beloved one from the Belgrade 'in war', going with her right to a Swiss lake, relaxing her in a Jacuzzi-bath, having dinner in a sushi restaurant, presenting her spectacular intimate dinners with candles and classic music in his 'modest' villa. They speak English perfectly, the only language they can communicate in. Nevertheless, during a romantic ride in a boat, she suddenly discovers that he is not 'an Italian count' but just a 'common' Albanian from Kosovo. His name is Miljaim Isa; he is damning the Balkans and their 'poverty' and life in 'ghetto', promising to save her from it. We find out that he was forced to eat ground as a little boy, as he almost starved to death. So that's one reason why he wants to forget the Balkans and to get the Serbian language out of his mind – which is, as we may assume, the main reason for the Balkan 'misery'. He teaches her that the first thing in freedom is to "learn to speak English", the universal language of human rights and freedom. Our young heroine has no problem with this discovery and she is completely giving herself up to this passion. Nevertheless, their cute love nest soon becomes her prison as well. Due to the cultural rules he was brought up with, he doesn't see the 'imprisoning' of women within house walls as a problem. But she starts to suffocate and loses patience, waiting for him to change something. They can't find their happiness, neither in Europe nor in Belgrade (to where they have returned for his killing 'job'), and he is taking her to Kosovo, into his own village, to his parents. He has to run away that same night to Albania but she also succeeds in running away from his parents' home (who, by the way, do not mind at all). In the end, she finally comes back into the safe arms of her father.

2. On 'Us' and 'Them' – Police and Mafia

The parallel story is following the life of Miljaim's older brother Abaz, who has crossed to the other side: As a member of the Serbian police forces he fights against 'his own people'. This level of narrative is providing us with a lot of interesting details. Abaz's commander, Mr. Boban, has decided to fight against 'Shiptar Mafia' until the end. The coincidence is that Adriana's father asks this same commander for help, since he used to be his professor of biology in secondary school. As a personification of an 'intelligent' and 'joking' Serbian policeman fond of basketball, Boban doesn't approve of his former professor and the 'liberal' upbringing of his daughter. This kind of upbringing resulted in the fact that she escaped 'with a Shiptar'. The next time we see Adriana's father, he has a bruise on his eye, after some 'encounters' with local boys, trying to find some trace of his daughter. When Mr. Boban sees him, he asks him with a laugh whether he has gained this 'souvenir' at the public demonstrations.¹¹ After this, we can conclude that the Serbian police is highly organized, disciplined, professional and effective in dealing with problems of missing daughters, interventions against 'disobedient' citizens / students / professors, or when breaking the international chains of drug trafficking.

The specific 'spice' in this police story occurs with the entrance of Swiss detective Helmer, who is looking more like a philosophy professor than like a policeman in comparison to his Serbian

¹⁰ During the 1990s, people in Serbia were witnessing a phenomenon named 'sponsored girls'. This title described very young teenage girls who had only one thing in mind: to meet a rich (usually much older) man, probably a criminal, who would provide them with luxuries. The girls offered their company in return but without any sexual obligations.

¹¹ He is speaking of the civil and student protests in the winter of 1996/97 against the stealing of votes during the elections. For more than three months, the police forces were sent out to beat civilians and students.

colleagues. Before his arrival in the 'dangerous' parts of the world, Helmer is telling his Swiss friend that they (the 'West') have no interest in finding out what these Balkan wars are about. They just want to break the chain of drug trafficking, the rest should be left to the domain of 'human rights'. It seems that nobody really cared about the Balkan 'situation' – it was left to be solved by itself, so the bloody outcome was inevitable. During his visit, Helmer is completely confused about what he sees, but we have Mr. Boban to help him understand. He finds out that Shiptars are in fact "Albanians who call themselves Shiptars but get insulted when Serbs do the same". We see that every bakery or pastry shop is just one more spot in the organized drug traffic ¹² and it seems that every Serbian penny paid for a cake is invested in weapons and opiates from the East. It even looks like the Serbs were stupidly eating sweets and peanuts, giving money to Albanians who were wisely investing it into the 'right' things. The Serbs took the wrong way – liberalism – but the Albanians were strongly sticking together among themselves and their relatives, and the moment for a rebellion of the 'hungry, poor and oppressed' people had come. They are fighting against the Serbian language, the Serbian 'hegemony', they have learned English and became free. But as we all know, you need 'two for the fight'. In our case, we see victims on both sides and relativising the responsibility for all the deeds done is just a shortcut to erase the responsibility for all of it. Both sides must be capable of understanding the truth of the other side.

Abaz the policeman, as 'an outlaw' in the Albanians' eyes, had to be punished sooner or later. The person chosen to 'eliminate' him is his own brother Miljaim. In the beginning, Miljaim refuses to do this but he meets their father saying that this would be the way to lose them both (Abaz had already been lost in a 'symbolic' way). Miljaim kills a boy who had the task to eliminate him, since he hadn't obeyed to the demand of killing his brother and so he changes his decision. After a modest dinner amidst quite a rich interior in the house of "an Albanian policeman somewhere in the Kosovo province", Miljaim kills his own brother. Nevertheless, the effective Serbian police has realised very soon that their policeman Abaz is threatened, therefore surrounding the house at that very moment. But Miljaim commits suicide by activating dynamite laid all over his body, in front of the eyes of the policemen, Albanians, the Swiss detective, his beloved one and her father.

3. Where, Actually, Are the Albanians?

As already mentioned, one of the things about the movie »The Hornet« is the almost totally lacking reaction of the public and the culture establishment. It looks like the Serbian culture establishment comes to a dead-end when it should react or criticize the work of authors who are considered to represent the alternative and 'democratic' point of view. This situation is one of deep amnesia and blindness concerning ongoing problems and has no excuse; it is far from representing a rather different way than dominant 'nationalistic-chauvinistic' politics. With this in mind, we should pose the question of the authors' responsibility, of the so-called representatives of democratic values in today's Serbia, and the creators of its 'new' modus of life. The authors couldn't resist producing a movie that follows the line of Milosevic's politics. In addition, they didn't resist to work inside the stereotype framework of the Balkans' representation created by the 'West' – banality, simplification and the absence of the attempt for a deeper understanding of the problem. Things we have experienced many times already.

¹² In former Yugoslavia, the most common owners of bakery and pastry shops were Albanians, Macedonians and Gorans.

When we analyse the movie in a deeper way, it looks like a little childish psychodrama in which Serbs pretend to be Albanians. Almost every role is played by famous Serbian (or more precisely, Serbian, Montenegrin and Macedonian) actors.¹³ This fact makes us believe that the Drama Faculty in Prihtina wasn't able to produce any interesting Albanian actor during all these years of its existence. Maybe it was too much a subversive thing to give a job to an Albanian actor to play an Albanian; maybe it was too subversive that an Albanian takes money from a 'poor' Serbian colleague. It also seems that in the movie a main plot is focused on the question of language. Serbs speak Albanian, the Albanians have two factions: one that wants to speak Serbian and the other that doesn't. But nobody has a problem to speak English. 'Our' actors had an excellent professor of Albanian language and maybe nobody bothered to find an Albanian who would speak Serbian (even on the screen, for the sake of his profession). Thus the spectators can hardly believe in the 'authentic/realistic' background of the story, since they do not see any Albanian in the movie. Serbs play themselves, make love to themselves and make war among themselves, committing suicide in the end.

In this way, we find the words of the anthropologist Aleksandar Boskovic to be a suitable illustration of the problem: "In the projection of our origin backward, we came to the ethnical groups that have lived in the Balkan peninsula much earlier than the Slavs. We came to the ethnical groups mostly known as Illyrians. Even though Albanians are not Illyrians, they are closest to them. As such, they symbolically represent the connection with the past, the connection that other (Slav) people just try to find. As such, they are (as 'the Others') reminding 'us' (as 'the Others' to Albanians) of the tradition (the antique times, when the Mediterranean basin and South-East Europe were indeed the 'cradle' of the European civilization) we want to be part of, at the same time reminding us (with their hardly understandable culture, language, customs, etc.) how far we are from this tradition. In some way, all we (Slav inhabitants of the Balkans) would like to be Albanians with a 'link' to this famous (heroic) past."¹⁴

The next question missing an answer is the reason for the failure of the movie's love story. We ought to remember the love story between the Macedonian man and the Albanian woman shown in the movie »Before the Rain« – a relationship full of tension and clearly pointed out obstacles for the realization of their love – from their youth days. In »The Hornet« we see no such thing: Adriana is a liberal Belgrade girl with the support of her liberal father. On the other side, when Miljaim introduces her to his family, his mother is accepting her with a plan to teach her the specific way of life in their family, throwing away the fact that she is a Serbian girl since she has an "Albanian name". Miljaim's mother plans to teach her to speak Albanian but our heroine doesn't learn a word, so we have no chance to see a slice of even one character transformation in the movie. These two young lovers throw away the possibility to fight for their love, since they have no obstacles in their way. Here the authors are giving us another stereotype representation, e.g. the artificially created picture that this kind of love is *a priori* impossible, so we need no facts to prove that.

If we keep aside a 'domestic', Serbian public opinion, we might ask ourselves about the possible reception of this movie in the 'West', or we try to find an answer why this movie didn't have much attention abroad, having in mind its 'hot' subject. The Balkans are seen as a place of poverty, misery, blood, ashes, sticky fog from the Had. Therefore, we can assume that

¹³ Except Enver Petrovci, an Albanian actor (in a supporting role), regarded by the Serbian public as a 'domestic actor'.

¹⁴ *Aleksandar Boskovic*: Kosovski bozuri, Magazine 'Arkzin' 06, Zagreb 1998.

'Western' spectators would like to see this kind of pictures but the movie has failed to fulfil their desire. All the time we hear our heroes talking about this 'misery, poverty, ghetto and the ground you must eat if you want to survive', but we see no such thing on the screen. All characters ('Serbs' and 'Albanians') are very well fed, urban, driving (more or less) luxurious cars, clean and ironed; there is no difference between social classes (the apartment of our 'liberal' professor of biology is as luxurious just as the house of the "Albanian policeman somewhere in the Kosovo province"). Their 'war' looks more like a childish game compared to the well-known scenes of violence seen in the (documentary) movies about the life in L.A. So where did the blood, ashes, bones, cruel crimes, rapes, poverty and chaos imagined by the 'West' disappear? There are two possible answers: either nothing of this ever happened or our authors have never left their comfortable armchairs in the very heart of Belgrade. Maybe Belgrade wasn't capable of realizing at all what had happened until the night of March 24, 1999,¹⁵ – the night that has changed everything and made it impossible to go back.

4. Where to Go Next?

The situation in which we have found ourselves on the Balkans at the end of the 20th century has clearly shown us the mechanisms of producing / constructing the images of 'the Others'. The construction of 'the Others' as the main opposition upon which the creation of 'the Self' is based has become the symptom of all the 'conflicts' we had. The creation of 'ethnic Others' (Serbs vs. Croats, Bosnians or Albanians) or 'the Others among us' (spies, students and the others 'paid by the West') was a precondition for the creation of every conflict situation. Thus the question of 'the Others', of the mechanisms that are creating it, has to be the main question in the all-Balkans' public. In the movie »The Hornet«, Serbia is represented by a young, innocent, open-minded, tolerant, and emotional girl; 'they', the Kosovars, are the passionate, explosive, powerful, sophisticated, liberated but above all, dangerous killers. She (or 'we') didn't resist him and was seduced in the first place but soon realized that the road made of 'liberal' aspirations leads right into the gorge. She is coming back to the secure, 'conservative' world (we would say: a nationalistic-chauvinistic one) being the only possible option. Feels like reading one of the leading Milosevic daily newspapers: we gave them (the Albanians) too much freedom, we made a marriage condemned to fail. So the best solution is to go back to our 'truly' 'primordial' essence and let the others decide who will take care of our children (we might not have any, as seen in the movie).

Maybe we wouldn't be so surprised when we find out historical facts like the one that during centuries, Albanian families have guarded Serbian churches, monasteries and sacred places all over the Kosovo – a fact hidden by both sides.¹⁶ Maybe such facts wouldn't be so strange to hear, if we all had tried to find examples for life in peace and harmony between Serbs and Albanians in the past, when they didn't mind to learn the language of each other instead of searching for examples of conflicts. There still is the question when these sides 'in conflict' will start a dialogue again, since we do not see any readiness on both sides to fight against the artificial pictures about 'the Others'. Conservatism, hostility and animosity are bred on both sides – before a different background but with the same aim: to keep the conflict alive and the (ruling) radical political parties in power. We should be scared by the fact that we have persons on both sides considered to be the leaders of the 'democratic' future but who are actually just the pupils of the same school, the old school attended together with the persons from the replaced regimes. If we managed to learn English (as a language 'of freedom', not the language

¹⁵ The night when the 'NATO intervention' began.

¹⁶ After 1999, most of them were destroyed by Albanians (or more precisely, by the Kosovo Liberation Army).

of the contemporary most powerful 'Empire') so easy and so fast and became free, it may be reasonable to try to do something different from what they wanted us to do. To learn the Albanian (or Serbian) language, to look into the dictionaries and get surprised when we see so many equivalent words. If it is not too late.

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Summary

This essay is a short analysis of the representation of 'the Others' – in this case the Albanians – in the Serbian movie »The Hornet«, 1998. The movie was filmed by a 'pro-democratic' and 'anti-Milosevic' circle of artists, but in its essence it reproduced the same stereotypes and mechanisms used by the official government of that time. In it, the problem of Kosovo is seen as a pure criminal one; the problem of cultural, social or class differences between Serbs and Albanians is minimized and reduced to the problem of the Mafia. As we learn, this problem can be solved with a simple, effective police intervention – which we all witnessed soon after.