

# Quo Vadis, Aida?

Jasmila Žbanić, Angel films, 2020. 102 mins.

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On the 12<sup>th</sup> July 1995, twenty thousand Bosnians congregated outside of the UN refugee camp, Potočari, five miles from Srebrenica. They were not allowed in. There was no more space.

In the morning, the Serbian army from whom the Bosnians had fled arrived outside the camp. They piled the Bosnian men onto buses, drove them

away and shot them. Within a week, they had murdered eight thousand men.

But on the evening of the 12<sup>th</sup>, the Serbs had already slipped into the crowd and were indulging in sporadic, brutal acts of violence. Men were dragged away into the night, executed. A child's throat was slit because it would not stop crying. Women were raped in front of other refugees by Republika Srpska

soldiers. A pregnant woman's stomach was cut open. (Prosecution vs Krstic 2001, pp. 13-14; Gurdić 2007, p.101) Screams reverberated through the night air. Cries of panic as stories of atrocities spread. An atmosphere of terror descended outside the camp, and out of fear, some refugees hanged themselves, choosing a quicker, more merciful escape. (Prosecution vs Kristic 2001, pp. 13-14).

*Quo Vadis, Aida?* (2020) shows none of these brutal images of genocide. Jasmila Zbanic's film depicts the Srebrenica massacre—recounting the days in which Srebrenica's Bosnian-Muslim population flee their town, only to be taken by their invaders, under the noses of the UN peacekeepers, to their deaths. But images of violence are completely absent—a carefully considered facet of its storytelling; it enquires into the ethics of representing genocide, and the limits to the visual ways of representing it. By not engaging in spectacle, the film allows for fuller understanding of the event—as dynamic, complex, historical—whilst also exploring the evident denial systemic in contemporary Serbian discourse on the Bosnian War.

The film's protagonist, Aida, is a translator for the UN and a Bosnian mother whose two sons and husband stand to die at the hands of the Serbian army. Aida tirelessly flits between these two roles throughout the film. She is one moment a mouthpiece for the Dutch UN peacekeepers (who speak to her in English), passing on their often cold and bureaucratic instructions to her fellow Bosnians. In the next moment, she is a wife and mother prepared to break any rules or exploit any privilege she has to save her family's life.

This is a film about genocide, the horror of the event and the trauma of its aftermath, pulling no punches. However, there is not one moment of killing, or violence, shown on the screen. For instance, a dolly camera follows closely behind the Serbian soldier charging into Srebrenica, a faithful witness to their invasion, documentary-like, in its observation. However, when the Bosnian mayor is dragged into view, and sent away to be shot, the camera suddenly stops moving. Rather than following the soldiers dragging him around the corner, it backs away, and stares blankly at the soldiers shooting the mayor (out of shot). The

camera always seems to pull away from the spectacle of violence, unwilling to stare horror in the face. It recalls Derrida's assertion that the only true witness to genocide can be the 'absolute victim' (2005, p.87). Moments of violence seem to make 'witnessing' impossible. Instead, the film maintains the unknowability of Srebrenica's atrocities whilst still signalling their existence.

Graphic and horrifying images have often been a popular way to depict genocide-events. Some have argued that Holocaust films like Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (1956) confront audiences with the shocking visual facts of atrocity. They confer, as Susan Sontag has suggested, an immortality on the event it might not have otherwise (2001, p.11). However, the *image* of atrocity is contentious and offers no guarantee of conveying the event's political dynamics. Moreover, 'the visualization of suffering does not always humanize' the victims. It might instead dehumanize them further by rendering violence as an aesthetic (Chouliaraki, 2006, p.87). Perhaps the example *par excellence* is the pornographic spectacle of a room of

naked Jewish women waiting to be gassed, in *Schindler's List's* (1993). As Wood cynically puts it, 'Holocaust "memory" is always a more popular endeavour when there are "sights" (as well as sites) to be seen.' (2012, p.24)

*Quo Vadis Aida?*'s depiction of the Srebrenica atrocity rejects this spectacular mode, which in turn foregrounds other aspects of the atrocity. Philip E Simmons (1997) has defined spectacle 'as a kind of visual excess that threatens narrative coherence.' He continues:

To Laura Mulvey, spectacle occurs when causal or narrative logic gives way to unrestrained scopophilia. To Claudine Eizkyman, spectacle is the moment when the kung-fu movie becomes pure kinetic display, when we forget who is fighting whom or why...To Dana Polan, spectacle is the ending of the 1950 movie *Summer Stock*, in which the song-and-dance numbers of Judy Garland and Gene Kelly overwhelm the movie's narrative of pioneer conquest and replace it with 'a new dream of America as endless performance.' (p.83)

The spectacle of Srebrenica's violence *might have* cast the perpetrators as an Evil irreconcilable to culture and international politics at large, obfuscating the cause and effect

that leads to a holocaust event. Instead, *Quo Vadis, Aida?* emphasises the narrative of Srebrenica, highlighting the responsibility of Dutch UN peacekeepers (and the Western governments they answer to) for the atrocity. The film broadens the culpability for this massacre, and the film's lens scrutinises the West's involvement, actions, and premeditated failure to act.

The film opens with the Mayor of Srebrenica begging the Dutch to intervene before Srebrenica is captured. The Dutch commander, Korremans, promises airstrikes *if* Srebrenica is captured. Which he insists it shall not. 'What happens if the airstrikes do not come?' Korremans is asked. He replies, increasingly frustrated, 'they will come, they will come. They have been issued a United Nations ultimatum.' This sets the tone for the film. The peacekeepers will always put stock into official statements and bureaucratic decrees. By the film's end, in a Kafkaesque reversal, they are complying with the Republika Srpska, helping them herd refugees onto buses as efficiently as possible.

'You will be accountable if the Serbs enter the town.' The Mayor

warns. Korremans shrugs his shoulders. 'I'm just the piano player.' Later, when Srebrenica is attacked, Korremans will pick up the phone and beg for airstrikes that will not come: the political implications are too tricky. Korremans is one in a long line of Pontius Pilates absolving themselves of responsibility. These political machinations, far-off, made in the political headquarters of the US, France, and the UK, are not shown in the film. However, we sense their absence. If the Serbs are the perpetrators of the atrocity, then the West allow it by a long, steady process of passing the buck.

For anyone familiar with the Srebrenica massacre, the failures of the West are not surprising. Western media immediately lambasted the real-life Korremans for his failings in Srebrenica. What might be novel to the film's narrative is its depiction of the denial of genocide, which Pettigrew asserts is as 'utterly crucial' to 'struggle for truth and memory concerning the genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina.' (2016, p.218)

Obradovic-Wochnik's sociological research in Serbia (2009) suggests that denials and mitigations of

the Srebrenica massacre are present at all levels of society. From extremist acts of complete denial or refutation of the evidence—discrediting witnesses, characterising Bosnian Muslims as vengeful, bitter—to party political groups seeking to shift the attention to atrocities done to the people of Serbia—not insignificant, but certainly far, far smaller than those done to the Bosnians (Obradovic-Wochnik 2009, pp.64-69). An endemic belief that Srebrenica was *unfortunate but justifiable*.

Writing in 2009, Obradovic-Wochnik concludes that strategies of denial are, in fact, the first steps of Serbia's long journey towards understanding and accepting the atrocity (p.71). Her claim seems to presuppose an enlightenment sense of progression that the last thirteen years have shown to be erroneous. Denial is more, rather than less entrenched now. The current Mayor of Srebrenica, for instance, has referred to the genocide as 'the hague farce' (Mitrovic 2016). Denial has not lead, inevitably, to acceptance. Instead, Serbia is in the process of forgetting Srebrenica and ensuring it stays out of sight.

*Quo Vadis, Aida?* suggests the narratives of denial began at the site of the genocide itself. In the film, a Serbian cameraman records the images that Ratko Mladic instructs him to capture, editing and deleting what he deems unnecessary to the narrative he would like to present. It is the film's most conspicuously meta-cinematic element. In one scene, he steps onto a bus of Bosnian women forcibly separated from their husbands and sons and, filmed by his cameraman, gives a speech portraying himself as a benevolent patriarch, granting these women their freedom. An obvious deception. But one that is reinforced by the film's portrayal of him, too. Genocide and Mladic's charisma are never captured in the same shot. Even as his men drag the Bosnians away, Mladic stares Korremans in the face reproducing the discourse of denial seen currently in the Serbian media. An active revising of events. Proposing a counter-narrative of what is so blatantly taking place.

There is a politics to the film's elision of violence, then. On the one hand, it intensifies scrutiny on the causality of genocide whilst also recalling (whilst never espousing) its

denial. But beyond the politics of genocide, the film's absences help to convey the event's emotional loss.

Aida charges around the UN refugee camp, attempting to save her sons from the Serbs army. With clean efficiency, they are herding the Bosnians out of the camp with the help of the spineless UN peacekeepers. The women onto buses and driven into Bosnian-controlled territory. The men are to be driven to their deaths. Aida is safe. She is a woman and, as a translator, a delegate of the UN. She has no qualms in using her special privileges to try to save her family. She tries to have them put on the list of UN delegates. They are taken off. Tries to secure them in the UN staff quarters. They are thrown out. She hides them, at last, in the farthest corners of the refugee camp. Soon, they will be discovered by the UN peacekeepers, marched, following orders, into the hands of the Serbs, and although Aida will beg on her knees with the Dutch, they will insist there is nothing they can do. Her family will be loaded onto the back of a farmer's truck, driven away, then herded with a hundred other men into a school hall and shot. The audience sees the machine

guns being poked through holes in the building's walls. Close-ups of the nozzles as they begin to fire. The scene jumps to the yard outside. Calm, tranquil, still. A mountain impassive and immortal in the distance.

This technique might recall Greek Tragedy, where violence, carrying too much emotional weight to be shown, is *obscene*, or 'off-scene'. The visual and visceral horror remains in the audience's imagination. But the tragedy of genocide is different from the tragedy, say, of *Oedipus Rex*. Genocidal Tragedy is not produced by fatal flaws or moments of hubris. Moments, in other words, of *meaning*. Genocidal tragedy is politically complex but personally *meaningless*. Aida's sons are romantic, brash; hot-headed, idealistic. Her husband is world-weary, curmudgeonly. But their identity and shortcomings are insignificant to their deaths. Their narratives are merely cut short.

The film unfolds with grim inevitability. Who in the audience does not cry as the men trundle off in the truck? Overwhelmed, horrified. Though the audience knows what will happen, that genocide will take place, there is

room to hope. To wonder whether these individual lives, set against this grim panorama, might be spared. They will not. Pettigrew has observed that previous films focusing on the Bosnian War— like *Welcome to Sarajevo*, *Shot through the Heart*, and Žbanić’s *Grbavica*—explore the war’s ramifications from singular perspectives, and struggle to explore the macro-level dynamics of the event. Here, Aida’s personal tragedy and the larger-scale tragedy of the Bosnian genocide slide into one. The deaths of Aida’s family are as anonymous and impersonal as the deaths of every other Bosnian in that room.

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### **Filmography**

*Grbavica*, (2006) Dir. Jasmila Žbanić. Bosnia and Herzegovina, 47 mins.

*Night and Fog*.(1955) Dir. Alain Resnais. Contemporary Films/McGraw-Hill, 32 mins.

*Schindler's List*.(1993) Dir. Steven Spielberg. Universal City, California, 195 mins.

*Shot Through the Heart*. (1998) Dir. David Attwood. HBO Films, Canada/USA, 109 mins.

*Welcome to Sarajevo*. (1997) Dir. Michael Nicholson. Miramax, 103 min