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## Bring on *The Parade*: queer cinema, memories of war and transnationalism in Srđan Dragojević's *Parada* (2011)

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines Srđan Dragojević's film *The Parade (Parada)*, a co-production between Serbia, Croatia, North Macedonia, Monte Negro, Slovenia and the Council of Europe, analysing how it engages with both queer rights and nationalist memory narratives. *The Parade* was released in 2011, a year after an anti-gay riot led to more than 100 people being injured at Belgrade Pride. In spite of these events, Dragojević's comedy-drama and its depiction of an unlikely friendship between a homophobic criminal and a gay veterinarian became a box-office hit both in Serbia and in neighbouring countries. This popularity is all the more interesting due to how the film depicts not only LGBTQI activism, but also the history of the break-up of Yugoslavia and the question of transnational solidarity. In doing so, *The Parade* is emblematic of other queer films produced in the region, with works such as the Croatian *Fine Dead Girls* and *The Constitution*, the Bosnian *Go West* and the Slovenian *Guardian of the Frontier* also thematising homophobic prejudice in conjunction with nationalism and memories of war. Drawing on this, this article examines how *The Parade* and other films in the region such as Rajko Grlić's *The Constitution* address queer identity, memory and (trans)nationalism.

### KEYWORDS

Queer cinema; European cinema; memory; nationalism; transnationalism; LGBTQI activism

## Introduction

In October 2010, the second LGBTQI Pride March in Serbia's history took place. Termed by some as the first 'successful' Belgrade Pride Parade, the march was guarded by 5600 police officers, who stood between LGBTQI activists and around six to eight thousand homophobic counter-protesters attempting to reach them (Gould and Moe 2015). Far-right extremists threw petrol bombs and stones, all the while screaming 'kill, kill the faggots'. Cars were overturned and set on fire, with the then ruling Democratic Party headquarters also set aflame. In the end, what was intended as a peaceful march for LGBTQI rights resulted in more than one hundred people being injured, as well as significant damage to Belgrade's city centre. Afterwards, numerous politicians and media outlets condemned the violence, though it is immensely significant here that many of them assigned blame for it to pro-LGBTQ sources, criticising either the queer protesters themselves (according to Belgrade Mayor Dragan Đilas, who said sexuality 'should be

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kept behind [one's own four] walls' (Blagojević 2011)), or to the EU for its insistence on LGBTQ assembly (Minister of Internal Affairs Ivica Dačić).

It is within such a context that, among those marching for LGBTQ equality, a small transnational band of actors could be found, performing the final scenes of director Srđan Dragojević's hit comedy *The Parade* (*Parada*, Dragojević 2011). The film centres on a highly unlikely friendship between the gay activist Radmilo (Miloš Samolov) and the gangster war-veteran Limun (Nikola Kojo), setting up this improbable camaraderie to thematise Serbian homophobia, as well as interethnic prejudice. A co-production between Serbia, Croatia, North Macedonia, Monte Negro, Slovenia and the Council of Europe, the film achieved remarkable success across the region of former Yugoslavia. In spite of the violent reception which the actual Pride march received, the cinematic *Parade* became the Number 1 cinematic hit in Serbia in 2011 (Hoad 2012). In neighbouring Croatia, the film also achieved remarkable success, with its box-office gross surpassing that of the most viewed domestic film of the previous decade (Softić 2012). In response to its popularity, Serbian columnist Marko Vidjoković (2011) commented that Dragojević had effectively organised 'the biggest Gay Pride in the Balkans' at the time. The film was also exhibited internationally and won a number of awards at film festivals including the Berlinale (where it was awarded, among other prizes, the Panorama Audience Award for Best Fiction Film), the Galway Film Festival (Best International Film), the Montpellier Film Festival (Audience Award), the Freiburg Film Festival (Audience Award), the Tróia International Film Festival (Grand Prix) and others. In the UK, *The Parade* can now be accessed via Amazon Prime Video, and the DVD is available in HMV stores.

While the film is itself a co-production, it can be read as transnational not only through the conditions of its funding and the transnational team of actors it brought together, but also through the ways in which it thematises the relationship between Serbia and the neighbouring countries of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. It begins with an unlikely set up, in which a homophobic gangster is tasked by his fiancé Biserka (Hristina Popović) with protecting the Belgrade Pride March. Unable to find someone willing to help him among his usual criminal gang, he instead sets off on what is essentially a buddy road movie, making contact with long-lost friends across the border; the Croatian Roko (played by Croatian actor Goran Navojec), the Bosnian Muslim Halil (the Bosnian-Croatian Dejan Aćimović) and the Kosovo Albanian Azem (the Macedonian Toni Mihajlovski), all war veterans in their respective nations. Through this premise, the film stages a highly-fictionalised vision of transnational cooperation among a group of hypermasculine protagonists from opposite sides, all coming together in order to protect gay rights. While the unlikely nature of this merry-band serves as a constant source of comedy within the film, it nonetheless also positions *The Parade* as a commentary on the interrelationship between queer rights, nationalist legacies and interethnic conflict.

Drawing from this, this article will examine how *The Parade* thematises the question of nationalist memory, transnationalism, and the current state of LGBTQI rights in Serbia. While these aspects of society are often thought of in isolation, it is worth noting that queer cinema in the region has shown a marked concern with their interdependence (Jelača 2016). Whether it is Dalibor Matanić's *Fine Dead Girls* (Croatia, *Fine Mrtve Djevojke*, Matanić 2004), Ahmed Imamović's *Go West* (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Imamović 2005), Maja Weiss's *Guardians of the Frontier* (*Varuh Meje*, Slovenia, Weiss

2002) or Rajko Grlić's *The Constitution (Ustav Republike Hrvatske, Croatia, Grlić 2016)*, all of the region's most prominent LGBTQ-focused films have also focused on interethnic prejudice and legacies of war. For some scholars (Moss 2012; Moss and Simić 2011), such thematic preoccupations have led to an LGBTQ cinema which is not truly 'queer' in spite of its focus on gay characters, especially as these are films penned by straight-identified writers and directors. Kevin Moss (2012) has argued that what makes 'a "typical gay film" for Central Europe' (354) is precisely its usage of queerness as metaphor for nationalism, war and ethnic intolerance. Similarly, in a collaboration between Mima Simić and Moss (2012) on lesbian cinema in the region, these authors argue that 'instead of real lesbians, what these directors are selling are simulacra, mere metaphors, which serve only to construct national allegories' (280). While these arguments are applicable to Dragojević's *Parade* to varying degrees, the film's resignification of both war and hypermasculinity in favour of queer rights is nonetheless worth unpacking, as it presents a complex commentary which both critiques – and perpetuates – politically significant memory narratives about national culpability, innocence and a transnational solidarity. Drawing on this, this article will examine how *The Parade* and other queer films in the region such as Rajko Grlić's *The Constitution* thematise questions of queer identity, memory and (trans) nationalism.

### Reading Limun: war, criminal masculinity and homophobia in Serbia

While the main plotline of *The Parade* centres around the goal of queer activists to organise a Pride march in the face of threats from extremist groups and lack of police protection, its central protagonist is precisely the sort of person one might expect to pose a key danger to the protest – the soldier-turned-gangster Limun. Initially depicted as violent and homophobic, Limun is tasked by his warm-hearted fiancé Biserka to protect the march and, in his effort to do so, develops a friendship with the gay Radmilo. Both men are depicted as motivated by love, with Limun's own desire to please Biserka paralleled within the film by Radmilo's desperation to keep his partner, the activist Mirko (Goran Jevtić) from emigrating from the country due to constant homophobia. This leads to an unlikely pact – in order to prevent both their partners from leaving, the two men set out on a journey to find others willing to protect the march.

However, they soon run into problems, as none of Limun's men, normally ready to engage in illegal activities, are ready to side with the activists. Instead, Limun decides to put together a team outside of Serbia, taking Radmilo along for a trek into Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo in order to solicit the help of the most unlikely allies; his former army buddies, with the twist being that all these men had fought on opposing sides. This is where *The Parade* presents its most improbable, wildly inaccurate restaging of the wars in these countries, as Limun is shown befriending precisely the men he had initially fought against. Through presenting what is a clearly false fantasy of pan-Yugoslavian cooperation, the film also introduces the question of how these wars are remembered in Serbia and the region, as well as the question of how these histories of war continue to influence the current state of LGBTQI rights.

In showing Limun's enduring friendship with the Croatian Roko, the Bosnian Halil and the Kosovo Albanian Azem, the film creates a utopian vision of cooperation amongst veterans which surpasses both ethnic and religious lines. While initially homophobic, all

of these men soon develop a genuine sympathy towards Radmilo and the LGBTQI activists they are meant to protect. Unlike the police, they stand together with the activists to protect the march, and fight alongside them. Tragically, they are overpowered by skinheads, who end up murdering Mirko during their attack. *The Parade* thus ends with the sombre tones of Handel's *Sarabande*, as Limun, Biserka and their friends march with Radmilo, who carries Mirko's ashes through the 2010 Belgrade Prime march. 'I am here for him, as you are for me', Radmilo tells Limun. As he scatters Mirko's ashes, the film ends with information about the actual Pride March of 2010, during which more than 100 people were injured by 6000 counter-demonstrators.

As is clear from this description of the film, *The Parade* presents the current state of LGBTQ rights in Serbia as inextricably linked with interethnic prejudice. The old Yugoslavian slogan of 'Brotherhood and Unity' is here embodied by Limun and his friends, therein raising relevant questions of how memories of war function in contemporary Serbia, as well as how the film's own restaging of these wars intervenes in these memory narratives. In assessing *The Parade*'s reimagining of these histories, it is relevant to take into account the ways in which nationalist rhetoric continues to influence how these wars and Serbia's role in them are remembered. As John A. Gould and Edward Moe (2015) write, the presentation of Serbia as victim instead of aggressor that began during the time of the invasions of Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia continued for years to come, functioning as a cross-party unifier which stemmed far beyond Slobodan Milošević's reign. In their analysis of Serbian politics throughout the last two decades, Gould and Moe note how

[The reality of Serbia's role in the war] was entirely obscured by the veterans' public glorification as national heroes and by the colonization of public space by nationalist books, media, and the ever-present turbo-pop [sic]. In this celebratory narrative, Serbian warriors had saved the nation from annihilation by its aggressors— fascist Croats and jihadist Muslims. The result was a wide gap between what really happened in Bosnia and Croatia and the ethno-national narrative of a heroic defence of a threatened nation. Any attempts by activists to bridge the gap invited homophobic slander, threats, and violence. (276–277)

While perhaps not immediately evident, the link between nationalism and homophobia in Serbian political rhetoric was established early on (Gould and Moe 2015). As Gould and Moe's insightful analysis of this connection notes, 'Serbia provides an important example of the politicized use of homophobia' (273), with 'this narrative [polarizing] society into heterosexual patriots and deviant traitors' (278). They note how

During the 1996 protests, for example, state propagandists put out a manufactured statement from a fictitious gay organization declaring open LGBTQ support for the opposition. Later, a judge assigned to investigate the 1999 homicide of [LGBT activist group] Arkadia founder [and anti-war activist] Dejan Nebrigić, reported that foreign-supported homosexuals were "a gateway for all kinds of sects conducting a special war against our country". LGBTQ activists were "enemies of the state", and "spies and a threat to the system". Nationalists also used homophobia to discredit opponents in their reaction to the 1999 conflict over Kosovo and the related NATO bombing campaign. As NATO bombs struck throughout Serbia, graffiti such as "Clinton, faggot!" and "Albright, we don't practice sodomy!" made perfectly clear the attempt to link homosexuality with a foreign threat. (277–278)

Furthermore, such rhetoric did not lessen after the protests which ousted Slobodan Milošević, which proved successful precisely due to its ideological conservatism (278) and during which a large part of the demonstrators were in fact concerned ‘that the regime had *failed* in its pursuit of the nationalist agenda’ (Gould and Moe, 278). Conversely, the overlapping of the first Belgrade Pride March in 2001 with Milošević’s extradition on the charge of genocide to the Hague International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, itself a deeply unpopular event in Serbia due to the ways in which the ICTY contradicted nationalist rhetoric of Serbia’s role in these wars, led to what has been termed ‘The Massacre Pride Parade’. Groups of up to one or two thousand nationalist anti-LGBT extremists attacked the marchers, as well as a number of journalists, and proceeded to set aflame the offices of the party which supported Milošević’s extradition (Simo 2001). While it had been announced that the Pride march would be attacked by extremist groups, there were only about 50 police officers present at the march (Simo 2001), with many of them standing aside as the LGBTQ activists were attacked (Gould and Moe 2015). In *The Parade*, Mirko plays a short video recording of the event, thus reminding the film’s audience of scenes such as the one replayed on screen, with a bloodied activist being bashed into the ground by attackers.

At the same time as nationalist rhetoric repeatedly reiterated the link between homosexuality and a presumed anti-Serbianism, it is relevant to note the ways in which the persona of the war veteran and that of the criminal also merged in the national imaginary. On the one hand, this is due to the ICTY charges and convictions against numerous Serbian military figures, which were vehemently opposed both by most political parties and the public (in 2005, for example, a survey showed that 81% of the Serbian public believed that Serbs had been the greatest victims of the wars (Gould and Moe 2015)). On the other, the media fascination with which criminal masculinity was treated at the time is perhaps most famously embodied in the figure of paramilitary commander Željko ‘Arkan’ Ražnatović, who was charged with numerous war crimes (including genocide, rape and torture), and was assassinated in a Belgrade hotel prior to standing trial in the Hague. Counter to the treatment one might expect such a figure to have garnered, Arkan functioned as a *de facto* celebrity prior to his death, with both his activities during and after the war, as well as his marriage to turbo-folk singer and superstar Svetlana ‘Ceca’ Ražnatović fuelling continued media interest (Higginbotham 2004).

It is within such an atmosphere that we must regard both the film’s depiction of Limun as a war veteran and criminal, as well as its place in Dragojević’s oeuvre more broadly. Prior to *The Parade*, Dragojević had already secured his place as one of the best-known filmmakers in the region, with works such as *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame* (*Lepa sela, lepo gore*, Dragojević 1996), which dealt with the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and *The Wounds* (*Rane*, Dragojević 1998), depicting life in Milošević’s Serbia and its valorisation of criminal masculinity. Of these films, *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame* achieved particular notoriety, with some praising its anti-war message (writing for *Variety*, for example, Emanuel Levy described it as ‘one of the most audacious antiwar statements ever committed to the big screen’ (Levy 1996)), whilst others criticised the film due to its sympathetic depiction of the Serbian army, thus leading to its rejection from the Cannes, Berlin and Venice film festivals, whose director called it ‘fascist cinema’ (Bass 2012). The tensions in these assessments reflect the ideological tensions present in the film itself, as

the film does present war through a negative lens, but also reserves its most negative depiction not for the Serbian, but the Bosnian army. Most notably, there is a clear disparity to the ways in which the film depicts the soldiers on both sides, with the majority of the film being focused on a group of Serb soldiers hiding in a tunnel from members of the Bosnian army, who are rendered a faceless and nameless threat to their lives. Similarly, the film does not depict the human casualties of Serbian army violence, with the crimes perpetrated by Serb soldiers extending mostly to the destruction of property (the burning of houses, a nod towards the film's title), while the film's human victims repeatedly result from the actions of Bosnian soldiers. In the same vein, it is in contrast to the well-documented and methodical use of rape as a weapon of war by the Serbian army (Kohn 1994) that the film reserves its only depiction of sexual violence to a scene implying the rape of a Serbian school teacher by Bosnian soldiers.

In all of this, the appearance of Nikola Kojo (Limun) in both *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*, as well as in almost the entirety of Dragojević's directorial opus is especially relevant. In *Pretty Village*, Kojo plays Serbian soldier Velja, and is first presented in negative terms, most notably through a scene depicting him dancing to Yugoslavian rock music as he partakes in the burning of a Bosnian village. However, by the film's ending, the misogynistic Velja is effectively depicted as one of the film's heroic figures, both as the Casanova-like soldier who charms the American journalist he first slapped into silence and, as we later learn, as a criminal hiding a 'heart of gold', as it is revealed he has willingly taken his brother's place upon learning he was to be drafted. The presentation of Kojo as both soldier and criminal is especially relevant here, as the film's popularity in the region means he would have been easily recognisable to the audience as the recurring embodiment of this duality, with the link between Kojo and criminality in Dragojević's oeuvre further underscored by his appearance as a gangster in *The Wounds* (1998). Moreover, *The Parade* actually emphasises this connection in its introductory scenes where, as Limun comes down the stairs in his home, we see it is not only littered with war-related paraphilia, but also adorned with pictures of Limun's own role in the wars, with one being of Kojo grinning while fire consumes the image background in what is either a photograph from, or re-enactment of the aforementioned scene from *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*.<sup>1</sup> Taken together, Kojo's appearance in *The Parade* thus mobilises audience 'screen memories' of his own roles (Jelača 2016), in this way invoking Dragojević's previous representations of these wars and Kojo's role therein.

Kojo's Limun can therefore be read as a response to the characters he has played in Dragojević's earlier films, and it is here immensely significant that *The Parade* depicts Limun as a failed father figure to the young neo-Nazi skinhead Vuk (Woolf in English, played by Relja Popović), precisely one of the people regularly beating up LGBTIQ activists. Limun's family history therefore serves as a sort of genealogy of criminality in contemporary Serbia, with the two characters functioning as embodiments of the past and the present, and Limun's journey in the film underscoring the potential of the older generation's influence on the younger (a theme also prevalent in *The Wounds*). The houses in which each of the characters live point also to this genealogy, with Limun's house initially adorned with war memorabilia, while the young Vuk's room has signs reading 'White Pride World Wide', as well as a picture of convicted Bosnian Serb generals Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, this time appearing next to a sign that reads 'The

Best of Serbia', therein charting the connection between nationalism, neo-Nazism and homophobia.

This is a notion highlighted in the film's final scenes, which depict a changed Limun, this time standing with LGBTQI activists, while opposite him stands his son, one of the countless skinheads ready to wreak havoc against them. In a nod to precisely the nationalistic origin of criminal masculinity in Serbia, the scene in which the skinheads appear also features a wall covered with large graffiti depicting Bosnian Serb general Ratko Mladić (found guilty of genocide at the ICTY). This image is swiftly obscured by a multitude of young neo-Nazis, drawing in this way a link between nationalist violence in the past and homophobic violence in the present. Unlike *The Wounds*, however, which presents criminal heterosexist masculinity as inescapable in contemporary Serbia, the ending of *The Parade* does depict the potential for change. As the fight begins, the young Vuk is unable to go against his father, and joins the side of the activists, therein hinting at the possibility of change not only for the father figure, but for the son. In turn, it is significant that this brings Vuk not only on the side of the LGBTQ activists, but also to that of his father's friends from Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia, therein pointing towards the link between homophobic and ethnic discrimination, with one being presented as inextricably linked with the other.

### **Staging *The Parade*: comedy and nationalist memory narratives**

Nonetheless, while *The Parade*'s portrayal of pan-Yugoslavian friendship does advocate for reconciliation, its deliberate distortion of history also plays a problematic role in its own context. As Limun and Radmilo embark on their journey across the countries of former Yugoslavia, the film performs an intentional misremembering of the past, with even the geographical direction of their trek indicating this reversal of history. Namely, in order to find Limun's former enemies-turned-comrades, they travel first into Croatia, then Bosnia and Herzegovina, and then into Kosovo, thus matching the direction of the Serbian invasion during the Yugoslav wars, with the exclusion only of Slovenia, which was attacked during the Ten-Day War. The importance of this direction is all the more relevant as this is a geographically illogical choice, with Bosnia and Herzegovina lying much closer to Belgrade than does coastal Croatia, therein underscoring the relevance of both the geographical and, crucially, *temporal* trek on which *The Parade* embarks. Through reimagining the wars not as a time of destruction, but as an era in which friendships were forged, the film creates a vision of war so evidently false and unrealistic, local viewers will immediately recognise not only its implausibility, but also the ways in which it nostalgically harks back to the old Yugoslavian slogan of 'bratstvo i jedinstvo' or 'brotherhood and unity'.

In showing such a false re-staging of the past, there is little doubt that these scenes are positioned as humorous and are clearly meant to be understood as unrealistic by the audience, at least the audiences from the countries in the region. Nonetheless, it is highly significant that the film depicts all its central veteran characters as also embodying criminality and war profiteering with, for example, the Kosovo Albanian Azem being depicted as trafficking heroin to NATO soldiers, which impresses his Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian friends. Similarly, Dragojević frequently films Limun and the Croatian Roko as mirror images of each other, positioning the two *a la* Ben Hur's protagonists as they



lock arms and drink beer to celebrate coming together again (a narrative echo which the film also uses to highlight the hidden homoeroticism in homosocial male bonding). Similarly, the emphasis on criminality and war profiteering as taking place *on all sides* is particularly prominent in scenes such as the ones in which Limun and Roko list mutual acquaintances to see which one is still alive. ‘What about Kopriva?’, asks Limun, to which Roko replies ‘The Hague. Twenty Years.’ and both shake their heads. ‘Poor man’, adds Limun.

Consequently, Dragojević’s comedic approach to the break-up of Yugoslavia also presents a deliberate refusal to engage with the actual history of the invasions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Kosovo, leading to a depiction which decontextualises the past for comedic effect. At best, it can be read simply as refusing to depict the past in favour of a comedic approach to it. At worst, and this approach bears particular significance within a context in which nationalist memory narratives are still overwhelmingly prominent, it can be read as depicting a narrative of equivalence and, by extension, of equal culpability. Such a depiction matches the frequent patterns of memory narratives adopted by perpetrator nations, in which the question of culpability is often minimised or displaced (Dunnage 2010). As Jonathan Dunnage argues about cinematic memory narratives, ‘the fusion of fiction and history in literary works and films . . . raises ethical questions related to responsibility and authenticity when it comes to reproducing traumatic events, often for “entertainment” and with marketability in mind’ (2010, 92). Crucially, Dunnage continues, “perpetrator” nations or groups in dealing with their past have often emphasized common suffering (through conflict), thereby erasing distinctions between themselves and their victims, to the advantage of the nation/group and to the detriment of the latter’ (92). This is further bolstered by the eventual coming together of Limun and his merry band to defend the queer community, wherein this defence can be read as both absolving Limun of the crimes of the past, and also as a reassertion of the presumed heroism of precisely the nationalist soldier archetype he embodies (Grujić 2013).

Such a portrayal is particularly noteworthy within Serbia’s political context, in which there has been little acknowledgement of the validity of the ICTY’s verdicts. For example, the Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić was asked in 2018 whether she was prepared to acquiesce to the judgement of both the ICTY and the International Court of Justice, which termed the organised massacre of eight thousand Bosnian Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica a genocide (DW 2018). Brnabić responded that she does ‘not think it was a genocide. . . . It was a terrible, terrible crime, but genocide is basically when you are killing the entire population, the women, children, and this was not that case’ (DW 2018). The refusal to attach the label of genocide to the Srebrenica massacre, along with Brnabić’s repeated lack of attendance at the genocide’s commemoration (in 2019, she stated that she was not attending as she ‘was not invited’ (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2019)) matches a broader emphasis in Serbian national memory on ‘mutual guilt’ and on the suffering of Serbia itself, as is exemplified in the negative public reaction to the prosecution and convictions of figures such as Ratko Mladić and Milošević himself.

Through depicting Limun and his transnational friends as war-profiteers and criminals, *The Parade* also harkens back to Dragojević’s previous depictions of the breakup of Yugoslavia and of Balkan masculinity in *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame* and *The Wounds*. Like Emir Kusturica’s *The Underground*, which Slavoj Žižek accused of promoting the

image of the ‘Balkan Other ... [and thereby participating in] inverted racism’ (Žižek 1999), Dragojević’s oeuvre has also been described by a number of authors as creating a cinema of ‘self-Balkanization’ (Jameson 2004; Žižek 2009; Longinović 2005), in which the Balkan protagonist is depicted as uncontrolled, irrational and dangerous, therein perpetuating already-present Western clichés about the Balkans as a threatening and ultimately incomprehensible region (Todorova 2009). As Jurica Pavičić (2010) writes about Dragojević’s and Kusturica’s work, ‘all these films emphasize the violence and “untamed”, “savage” nature of the Balkans by staging stories full of unmotivated violence, hatred, betrayal and cruel vengeance’ (44). Whether it is in *The Parade* comically absurd depiction of war, or the much-more gruesome vision of it in *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*, there is a lack of political specificity to these depictions of conflict, with the films reflecting not a specific sequence of historical events, but rather a generalised image of conflict in which it is ultimately impossible to assign any specificity or culpability. Such a depiction carries particular dangers, both with respect to pandering to Western stereotypes of the Balkans as inherently irrational, but also through the ways in which it fits into nationalist memory narratives which emphasise equal culpability and that blame should be placed equally on all sides.

Within this context, ‘a typical character of such a ‘self-Balkanisation’ film is the ‘Balkan Wild Man’ (Jameson 2004), defined by Longinović ‘as a “global example of volatile masculinity gone mad” (Longinović 2005, 38)’, and embodied by Nikola Kojić in much of Dragojević’s oeuvre. However, what distinguishes *The Parade* is its mobilisation of such stereotypes through a comedic, satirical lens, aiming its presentation of the ‘Balkan macho man’ stereotype firmly towards the gaze of local audiences, using stereotypes and insults that only they will be privy to, and therein utilising them to critique precisely the presence of nationalism in each of the countries of former Yugoslavia. In his overwhelmingly positive review of the film, Croatian writer Ante Tomić (2011) argues that it is precisely this parodic approach to masculinity which serves to bolster the film’s critique of nationalism and the image of the heteropatriarchal strongman. Tomić argues that

The film is a brilliant example of artistic manipulation in which the author, shamelessly utilising all the most horrible, politically incorrect stereotypes, has created a work which as a whole could not have been any more politically correct. Through mocking, fully and without holding back, [both ultranationalists on all sides, as well as gay people], he has succeeded in making all of them human in the end. It is a touching and humanist message that we are all in essence the same. However, there is another reason for *The Parade*’s success in cinemas. Our viewers always find it irresistible to laugh at Balkan machismo, the unwavering heterosexuality of our heroic, right-wing tradition and its mindless fear of queers. . . . These are the men that used to lead us all and whose ideology ruled the 1990s. Irrespectively of faith and nation, be they Orthodox, Catholic or Muslim . . . it is always the same narrow-minded and vengeful alpha males. (np.)

Tomić’s analysis of the film emphasises the ways in which *The Parade* parodies and mocks the image of such hypermasculinity, both through the film’s emphasis on the fear such masculinity demonstrates of being in any way associated with queerness, and the ways in which the film hints at the latent quality of its homosocial bonds. Nonetheless, not all reviewers of the film were as impressed with its approach to traditional masculinity, with critics like Marina Grujić (2013) arguing that the film’s ending implicitly

valorises Limun's criminal masculinity through positioning it as *above* the very minority he seeks to protect. Differently put, while *The Parade* does parody such masculinity, Gruić argues that it also preserves its ultimate association with heroism, this time in the service of promoting tolerance towards LGBTQI people. Consequently, the film embodies a paradoxical position, at once parodying and valorising war-mongering masculinity, allowing for its preservation through repositioning it in the service of gay rights. Similarly, its reimagining of the breakup of Yugoslavia calls for reconciliation and tolerance, whilst at the same time echoing politically dubious memory narratives and perpetuating a self-Balkanizing aesthetic. Taken together, these conflicting aspects of the film speak to the ways in which it simultaneously inhabits multiple ideological positions, and to the complex manner in which it both critiques and perpetuates conflicting conceptualisations of both nationhood and national memory.

As noted in the beginning of this essay, *The Parade* is far from the only LGBTQ-focused film in the region to concern itself with questions of nationalism and how war is remembered. In Želimir Žilnik's *Marble Ass* (*Dupe od Mramora*, Serbia, Žilnik 1995), the interaction between two transgender sex workers and a Serbian soldier just returned from war points towards the ways in which war crimes such as rape and murder cannot simply disappear once the battleground is left behind (Jelača 2016). In Dalibor Matanić's *Fine Dead Girls* (*Fine Mrtve Djevojke*, Croatia, 2002), a female couple moves into a newly rented flat, with their building serving as a *de facto* embodiment for post-war Croatia itself and exposing not only homophobic and xenophobic prejudice, but also the persistence of PTSD and related trauma. In Maja Weiss' *Guardian of the Frontier* (*Varuh Meje*, Slovenia, 2002), a road trip taken by a group of young women across the Croatian border exposes Slovenian conservatism and the persistence of prejudice (Jelača 2016) while, in Ahmed Imamović's *Go West*, a doomed romance takes place between a Serbian and Bosnian man during the Bosnian War. Finally, in the recent *The Constitution* (*Ustav Republike Hrvatske*, Croatia, Grlić 2016), the aforementioned writer Ante Tomić and director Rajko Grlić set up an unlikely friendship similar to that of *The Parade*, this time bringing together a homophobic Serbian police officer living in Zagreb and his next-door neighbour, a queer teacher who hates Serbs (a conflation between extreme nationalism and queerness I will return to shortly).

At their best, all of these films thematise the ways in which different types of discrimination intersect, acting as scaffolding for one another (Jelača, 2016). As Dijana Jelača points out in *Dislocated Screen Memory: Narrating Trauma in Post-Yugoslav Cinema* (2016), the ways in which these films thematise national trauma through a queer lens serves to subvert the expectation that national trauma can be legible and valid only if it experienced by those adhering to heteropatriarchal norms. Differently put, Jelača argues that these films deliberately put into question what constitutes a 'healthy' nation-state, pointing towards the ways in which heterosexist nationalism is itself destructive, as well as enabling those sitting outside its borders to be read as valid national subjects. Jelača goes on to argue that these films demonstrate

how the history of marginalization based on sexual orientation is closely connected to, and often dependent on the histories of other forms of social marginalization - ethnic, gendered, racial, classed, and so on. ... In other words, considerations about local LGBTQ rights cannot be entirely divorced from considerations of the rights of other minority groups - and

yet such struggles are often kept in strictly separate spheres of cultural and social activism' (135).

This is brought to the forefront in developments such as *The Parade*'s transethnic defence of gay pride, or in the emphasis *Fine Dead Girls* places on anti-Roma hate crimes taking place near the house in which one of the queer protagonists is ultimately murdered.

At their worst, some of the aforementioned films present such interdependence through an ideologically muddled lens, as is clear from the above analysis of *The Parade*'s comic restaging of the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, and is also the case in Rajko Grlić's *The Constitution*, which matches *The Parade* both through its opposites-attract buddy plotline, and through casting a transnational team of actors, but does so in a way which subverts expectations, with the Serbian Nebojša Glogovac cast as the Croatian Vjeko, whilst the Bosnian-Croatian Dejan Aćimović plays the Serbian Ante (Aćimović also appears in *The Parade* as the Bosnian Muslim Halim). Whilst this clever reversal of casting highlights precisely the ways in which ethnicity itself functions as a floating signifier assigned to originally unmarked bodies at birth, the film's message of tolerance is nonetheless undercut through the construction of the character of Vjeko himself, who becomes the embodiment both of queer sexuality within the film, but also of Croatian ultranationalism. As a character, Vjeko is defined by his nostalgia for the Ustaša regime, which ruled the Independent State of Croatia as a Nazi puppet state during the Second World War, and which sought to exterminate Jewish, Serbian and Romani people (Milekić 2020). While it is not impossible for a queer person to be an Ustaša sympathiser, writers like Jasna Žmak (2016) have argued that the film does not engage to a sufficient extent with critiquing these political leanings. This is especially concerning considering the revisionist memory narratives present in contemporary Croatia which seek to rehabilitate the memory of the Ustaša regime and to minimise the gravity of its crimes, especially towards the Serbian population (Milekić 2020) – a development which the film ostensibly seeks to critique through its staging of an 'opposites attract' friendship narrative. However, as Žmak argues for the feminist portal *Vox Feminae*

The major problem of the film is that it opens space for the complete relativisation of all of these identities, thanks to which we can also conclude that the Ustaša are, after all, just people too. Through putting all of these identities on equal footing, and creating an ideological backdrop of the film that bolsters the gaze of the white, male, heterosexual majority in comparison to that of the minority to which it supposedly aims to give visibility, it also indirectly absolves the Ustaša of their crimes, of hate. Identities without history, characters without character; this is how we could neatly sum up the political attitude behind this movie. (np.)

While Žmak is writing here about Grlić's *The Constitution*, her critique of the relativisation of identities and insufficient concern for historical realities can also be applied to *The Parade*, therein drawing parallels between both the aims and ideological limits of both films. Taken together, both films thus perform a call to tolerance which nonetheless stops short of intervening into precisely the memory narratives which continue to enable intolerance. Reconciliation is thus depicted as possible only if history is dispensed with, perhaps reflecting a feeling many in the region share that the burden of history has simply become too heavy. Nonetheless, this leaves uninterrogated precisely the ways in

which certain memory narratives continue to negate both the human costs of war, as well as the political propaganda that enabled them. Dragojević's comedic approach to history thus functions as a sort of double-edged sword, calling at once for solidarity and reconciliation, acknowledging the flaws on all sides and yet, nonetheless, presenting an engagement with the past which is so deliberately unspecific as to make it impossible to place the blame for actual events on anyone's shoulders. As noted above, this carries particular dangers in a context in which human rights abuses are still routinely being denied, with their perpetrators valorised as acting as defenders of the people.

### **Crossing the border: cinematic narratives of transnational solidarity and queer invisibility**

While *The Parade* imagines a highly improbable cooperation between heterosexual nationalists in the service of LGBTQI rights, it is relevant to note that the film largely excludes the real history of transnational solidarity and cooperation that actually marks the region of former Yugoslavia – that of feminist and queer activists. Cross-border cooperation among LGBTQI activists has for decades been a marker of queer organising and is briefly hinted at during the first third of *The Parade*, which depicts LGBTQI activists holding a press conference about the upcoming Pride march. At the beginning of the scene, the activists can be seen surrounded by posters of Pride marches in the neighbouring countries of Croatia and Bulgaria, as well as introducing a heavily bandaged gay activist from Montenegro. In this way, the scene points towards how queer activism moves across borders, but what remains not fully acknowledged is how queer activists themselves have consciously worked to critique nationalism, as well as to counter the ways in which nationalist and homophobic discrimination intersect.

While it is impossible to trace the exact beginnings of transnational queer collaboration in the region, events such as the first Yugoslav feminist meeting in Slovenia in 1987 are especially relevant, with activists from across Yugoslavia travelling to Ljubljana and making plans for lesbian organisations to be formed across these countries (Mladenović 2016). When war broke out, feminist organisations such as the Women in Black in Serbia rallied around anti-war activism, and towards helping women who were refugees or victims of violence across borders (Mladenović 2016). Activist cooperation on specifically LGBTQ issues continued after the wars in Croatia and Bosnia had ended, with 2003 seeing the founding of a transnational network bringing together activist from Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, North Macedonia and Montenegro (Dioli 2019). More recently, a number of LGBTQI organisations in the region founded the queer activist network ERA in 2015, bringing together activists from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia and Turkey. ERA (LGBTI Equal Rights Association for Western Balkans and Turkey) now has a membership of 75 activist organisations, therein making it one of the largest LGBTQI organisational networks in Europe. While ERA testifies to the organisational collaboration in the region, collaboration between activists also functions on informal levels, as is evident from the transnational attendance of Pride marches across borders (for example, the organisers of Belgrade, Skopje and Sarajevo Pride recently attended Zagreb Pride in 2022 (Prvan 2022)).

It is also relevant to note that queer activism in the region encompasses not only manifestations such as Pride marches and political activism, but also cultural events such as the Ljubljana LGBT Film Festival (which started in 1984, and was the first lesbian and gay film festival in Europe (Kajinić 2016)), Queer Zagreb (which recently celebrated its 20th anniversary), and Merlinka, the international queer festival named after the central protagonist of Željimir Žilnik's *Marble Ass*, the transgender actor and sex worker Vjeran 'Merlinka' Miladinović. Merlinka has taken place annually in Belgrade since 2009, but has also travelled to Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it has become an annual fixture, as well as being held several times in Podgorica in Montenegro. Such transnational exchanges point towards the ways in which LGBTQI activists have actively worked to both establish and maintain queer networks which both surpass and deliberately undercut national borders, instead working to strengthen their activism through an exchange of tactics and knowledge specifically informed by their local and regional experiences. Within this context, it is perhaps ironic that *The Parade* reimagines transnational cooperation as taking part in the heterosexist majority, but not among queer activists themselves.

Since the release of the film, the last decade has seen complex developments with respect to LGBTQI activist assembly and queer rights in Serbia. On the one hand, 2017 saw the appointment of openly lesbian Ana Brnabić as Prime Minister, making her both the first woman and LGBTQI person to hold the position. While Brnabić's appointment can be seen as a milestone with respect to the public face of LGBTQI political representation in the country and the region, her critics argue that it serves to present the appearance of progressivism and to distract from President Vučić's continued ultranationalism, which they argue remains unchanged since he served as part of Slobodan Milošević's cabinet (Wintour 2017). Similarly, while Brnabić has taken part in the Belgrade Pride marches, a number of LGBTQI activists have expressly campaigned to keep her away from the march, arguing that her presence there distracts from the lack of tangible changes to the rights of the queer community (Maričić and Živić 2018). At the same time, Brnabić's own life has come under close scrutiny from activists, as the explicit ban of people 'with a history of homosexual relations in the last five years' from accessing IVF in the country coincided with her partner giving birth to their child after having herself undergone artificial insemination (Duffy 2019). Her continued attendance of the march has not lessened her lack of popularity within the LGBTQI community, with a banner reading 'Prime Minister, how is it living with all those privileges?' greeting her appearance at the 2019 march (Stojanović 2019).

The conflict between the outward-facing appearance of progressivism and the day-to-day discrimination endured by the LGBTQI community has become particularly pronounced in 2022, when Belgrade was expected to host EuroPride. While Pride Marches have been taking place regularly in the Serbian capital since 2014, they rely on a large police presence in order to progress safely (Traussi and Živanović 2019). While it was reasonable to expect a similar police presence at the 2022 EuroPride, it was only two weeks before the event was to take place that the political leadership of the country announced the ban against its going ahead, citing threats of dangers against the participants (Kwai 2022). In response to this, activists condemned both the ban and the failure of government to provide protection, prompting the country's PM to claim the activists were not banned but merely politely requested to forgo assembly. In the end, activists did

march through Belgrade, facing numerous threats from counterdemonstrators, 64 of whom were arrested (Presse 2022).

A few weeks before the Pride march itself, thousands of conservative protesters marched through the city in a counter-demonstration against EuroPride, with a strong presence of Orthodox Church clergy leading the march. While protesters carried crosses and religious imagery, it is noteworthy that a banner with the image of Serbian WWII general Dragoljub ‘Draža’ Mihailović could also be seen among the crowd (*Al Jazeera* 2022). Executed for war crimes during WWII under Josip Broz Tito, Mihailović remains a notorious figure in Bosnia and Croatia due to his role as the leader of the Četnik guerrilla army during WWII. While his memory has for years enjoyed popularity in Serbia, narratives commemorating Mihailović as a hero have enjoyed a special resurgence in recent years following two key events; a television series in which he is portrayed by Nebojša Glogovac (ironically one of the main actors in *The Constitution*), and the recent verdict passed by Serbia’s High Court, which overturned his Yugoslavia-era conviction for war crimes (Ranković 2015). While the legal rehabilitation of Mihailović’s memory has been publicly opposed by anti-war activists such as the Women in Black (Ranković 2015), the popularity of such revisionist memory narratives speaks to not only the ongoing prevalence of ultranationalist politics within Serbia, but also to the ways in which such revisionism shapes the self-image of the nation-state.

Incidentally, Mihailović’s image is also seen in the opening scenes of *The Parade*, as a closeup of Limun’s skin during a shower reveals his numerous tattoos, with one of them being of the Chetnik leader. These shots serve both to establish Limun’s background as a Serbian soldier, and to show his nationalist political leanings. While the marks on Limun’s skin of course remain unchanged, the film’s progression does show the removal of war-related paraphernalia from his home, transforming it to an immaculate whiteness, therein serving as a metaphorical ‘clean slate’ on which both transnational and straight-gay alliance can be built. In this sense, the starting sequence of Limun washing his body can be seen as presaging a metaphorical cleansing of the national body itself, insofar as Limun himself serves as a stand-in for both nationalism and national history within the film’s narrative. As I have written earlier, such a depiction of national transformation nonetheless cannot be exacted without a re-examination of precisely the revisionist memory narratives which allow for the continued valorisation of figures such as Mihailović, and the mobilisation of these memory narratives towards homophobic and xenophobic political goals.

## Conclusion

Within this context, the queer cinema of both Serbia and the region plays a potentially relevant role with respect to not only how the battle for LGBTQI rights is presented on screen, but also whether issues of nationalist memory narratives and LGBTQI rights are depicted as interrelated. In this article, I have approached *The Parade* as a film which embodies conflicting ideologies, at once critiquing nationalism through its depiction of a utopian cross-border solidarity amongst nationalists themselves, whilst also inhabiting a complex role with respect to nationalist memory narratives which continue to pervade Serbian society. I have also traced the ways in which this approach is echoed by Rajko Grlić’s film *The Constitution*, which also presents a reconciliation which is insufficiently

critical towards the perpetuation of revisionist memory narratives in the Croatian context. In this sense, the ways in which *The Parade* confronts history also reflect the complexity and contradictory nature of certain political approaches to memory, which advocate for reconciliation and a forgetting of past wrongs, but stop short of a self-reflective critique which would allow for a national self-examination with respect to the verdicts of the ICTY. This article has therefore engaged with the ideological ambivalence and conflicting ideas often found within a film like *The Parade*, tracing the complex ways in which it both critiques heterosexist nationalism, and perhaps unexpectedly perpetuates some of its ideologies. When taking into account the recent developments with Belgrade's banned EuroPride, the question of the link between national self-conceptualisation, revisionist memory narratives and queer civil rights seems all the more urgent.

## Note

1. This mobilisation of Kojo's cinematic persona is similar to that described by Galt (2006) and Jelača (2016), both of whom note the ways in which *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame* utilises the cinematic fame of actor Velimir Bata Živojinović to comment on the previous depictions of war Živojinović was famous for.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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