

Antiheroes in films about Vietnam, Chechnya, Afghanistan, and former Yugoslavia

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The problem of self-representation is extremely complicated because it is directly connected to the theme of collective guilt. Cinematographers bear heavy responsibility when they evoke certain events because in this way they create, consciously or unconsciously, models through which history should be perceived and understood. However, the moral responsibility of these artists compels them to state their explicit assessment of the past and to offer adequate answers to the questions: What exactly happened, who are we and how can we repent? In other words, as Emir Kosturitsa said in one of his interviews: 'History cannot be told as a Benneton-style fashion-show, which made advertising videos drowned in blood. You have to keep your dignity, create only personal things and defend them to the end.'¹

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Painful acts of reminiscence cannot be realised in film unless the whole truth is reconstructed, however repulsive it may be. This is the greatest challenge for film directors and the success of such an undertaking depends on many factors. Firstly, the relatively small temporal distance has a negative effect, i.e. people's memories are charged with very strong emotions, which leads to a biased view of the experience for which simplified patterns of interpretation are used. As a result, there is the potential danger that films are rejected or stigmatised because the moment is not ripe for a wide public debate on the dimensions of a certain event.

Another factor, no less important, is the national identity crisis. In case of an open confession of the harm that was done, all moral justification of aggression would be invalidated. That, on the other hand, would provoke painful doubts regarding the authenticity of sanctioned fundamental ideas, values and beliefs, which used to constitute each community spiritually.

The feeling of guilt is projected in various ways through self-representation, however its in-depth interpretation excludes radical generalisations, which would place all 'our' heroes in the category of murderers and oppressors. For the critical creative artist, the emblematic image of the thug may seem to be the most vivid embodiment of the concept of war, however, it does not exhaust the gallery of images that illustrate the alternatives of human behaviour. The following examples will try to show that each aspect of collective guilt generates a logical typology of characters, characteristic of the three cinematographies, discussed here.

Impossible heroes

Before discussing the specific manifestations of anti-heroes, it is important to outline their social profile on the basis of the suggested titles. This approach will allow us to get a closer view of the reasons and mechanisms, which turn an individual into a tool of pathological violence.

In all works studied, almost without exception, there are references to the social status of each character. These implications reveal the collisions and problems in society itself, the society to which the character belongs. Thus, from the outset, the cinematographers specify that the concept of 'we' is not a monolithic entity but suggests at least two variants: the people guilty of war, and those who were sacrificed. Trying to sketch a sociological portrait of the protagonist in American, Russian and Serb films, we can immediately say that he comes from godforsaken

towns and villages, located in remote provinces, has a low-paid, modest job, leads a monotonous life and is not interested in the world.

The quiet, dull everyday lives of Michael Vronski, Nick and Steve (*The Deer Hunter*) are hardly different from the pre-war serenity of Milan (*Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*) and Bogdan (*Premeditated Murder*) or from the boring routine of Vanya Zhilin (*Prisoner of Mountains*) and Kolya (Muslim). The relatively low position of the characters in the social hierarchy predetermines their lack of choice. If Chris Taylor (*Platoon*), a boy from a good family, is able to leave college and carefree student life to volunteer for Vietnam, most of the soldiers in his unit never dreamed of such an opportunity. Oliver Stone repeatedly emphasises the tension threatening to explode between the representatives of different social groups and shows that the dividing line separates not only the rich from the poor but also white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) from coloured Americans.

Identification of social status is a very important detail, because it correlates directly with the motivation for taking part in the war. It is most clearly expressed in Serb characters, to a lesser degree in American characters and is weaker in Russian ones. This regularity, in fact, reflects the dynamism of involvement in each conflict and on the basis of quality is a measure of the value losses for each party participating in the war.

The greatest damage was done to Serb national identity. That is not accidental. The radicalisation of the Serb element, under the influence of official propaganda, is based on so-called 'ethnic fears'. Dreading the possible encroachment on the collective identity of his community, Bogdan (*Premeditated Murder*) and Milan (*Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*) are mobilised to fight to the death. Their drama, as Misha Glenny says, is that 'they are victims, however, not of the Muslims or the Croats, but of a wide spectrum of confusing and contradictory myths and ideologies, which devastate other people, including themselves.'²

Sardjan Dragojevic in *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* casts more light on the reasons, which define the behaviour of some of the heroes. For instance, the motivation of the captain of YNA, Maximovic, comes from his romantic nostalgia for the era of Tito. The collapse of Yugoslavia is a real tragedy for him, because suddenly all the values that used to give meaning to his life collapsed. The reference to the glorious guerrilla past of the character is realised by choosing Velimir-Bata Zhvojinovic for this part, whom the older generation remembers from a series of films about Yugoslav resistance during the Second World War, He featured primarily in the film *Walter Defends Sarajevo* – an epic story about the defence of the Bosnian capital against the Nazis. However, in contrast to the above-mentioned characters, the image of captain Maximovic is devoid of the glory of any pathetic heroism whatsoever.

What motivates Speedy (Barzia) to go to the front is quite the opposite. He is a former drug addict whose social background is connected with the circles of Red nomenclature, however, he rejects the self-interested ideals of his parents, holding fast to the attractive idea of Great Serbia. Velya, one of the characters in the work recreated with the greatest talent, is a representative of the underground. When visiting Belgrade, he decides to help his brother, a promising student in archaeology and to fight for his country instead of him.

The theme of motivation is not so precisely developed in American works. Michael Cimino and Oliver Stone involve it in the texture of the plot in order to reinforce the suggestion of the complete collapse of beautiful illusions. Doing one's patriotic duty turns out to be a big lie, propagated by the political regime in order to manipulate the feelings and actions of ordinary people. However, this deception transforms forever the life and views on life of the average American, forming a permanent national complex called 'the Vietnam syndrome'.

Michael Vronski, Nick and Steve (*Deer Hunter*) do not engage in deep analysis of the problem of the war in South-East Asia as Chris Taylor (*Platoon*) does. They rather feel intuitively the complete discrepancy between what is presented as a just cause, in words, and the real dimensions of the war. Their personal experience with death and endless violence so far affirms in the mind of the viewer their anti-heroic presence in Vietnam, which is devoid of any moral grounds. Compared to the characters from *The Deer Hunter*, Chris Taylor is much more reflective. He searches for the reasons for evil and comes to the painful realisation that he is no more than a pawn in a military game, instigated by the politicians.

Russian films treat the problem under discussion vaguely. Using the procedure for recruiting trainees, who have to complete their military obligations, Sergei Bodrov Senior illustrates how unpopular the Caucasian conflict is in Russia. The message is directly stated:

'This war is not our war, it is the war of our rulers.' Check Point adds to that impression featuring the change of guards at the border-control point. The newly arrived guards start singing in an improvised rap rhythm: 'Here is Russia, here is my home/the home where we live./We shall return to that place/where is the Russia where I grew up.'³ Their song, however, seems to be more an unavoidable ritual than a shared incantation. This forced 'encouragement' cannot conceal the fear of the unclear future and the vague feeling of nearing death.

The 'close' stranger

The appearance of the 'close' stranger is symptomatic for the three national cinematographies. This conceptual image is eloquent proof of the irreparable damage that war leaves behind. The 'close' stranger is presented in several key versions.

- The individual with new cultural and religious identity (Kolya-Abdula, Muslim);
- The mystic master of evil (colonel Kurtz, Apocalypse Now);
- The unwanted (Bogdan, Premeditated Murder; the Bosnian refugees, The Gunpowder Keg).

The argument that allows us to bring the so-called heroes into a common framework, although they differ considerably in terms of content, is that they are doomed. The 'close' stranger embodies the identity crisis. The essence of the identity of the 'close' stranger is transformed under the influence of the terror and suffering he undergoes. As a logical consequence, he turns into a metaphorical figure, whose tragic fate is one of the forms of most fierce criticism of war and violence.

The irreversible change leads to a serious clash between the concrete hero and his own environment because he rebels against the dominant ethos of his community. The ordeal that Kolya faces (Muslim) after his return from Afghanistan is how to reintegrate into his former environment, because he fails to find his place in the everyday life and existential model of the rest of the characters.

Cultural opposition, however, is only one of the dimensions of the conflict in the film of Vladimir Hotinenko. What is more important for the director is the universal moral dilemma: to what extent a genuinely spiritual person, who lives according to the rules of absolute morals has the chance to survive in a world of unbelievers. The answer, sadly enough, is quite gloomy: high moral values and divergence from what is considered the norm are doomed in intolerant societies.

The question of taking a personal moral stand is subject to analysis in the film Premeditated Murder. The protagonist, Bogdan Bilogoratz, takes the decision to join the army, following the principles of his ethical code, which do not allow him to desert. And in spite of the fact that he fully realises 'the dirtiness of the war' his life is fully connected with the collapsed nationalist myths. The symbolic gesture, mentioned before, expresses the despair of the character by the fact that he is equally useless both on Croatian land, where he was born, as well as within the boundaries of Serbia. A lonely stranger in Belgrade, Bogdan, just like the Bosnian Serb refugees in The Gunpowder Keg, is confronted with the callousness of official authorities and with the inertia of a sluggish bureaucratic system. Having lost his home, family and identity, he has no other choice but to die.

Hatred and death also precondition the choice of Colonel Kurtz (Apocalypse Now) but in a totally different way. The mysterious master of evil wages a war against the American army in Vietnam, retreating deep into the jungles of Cambodia where he establishes a sinister kingdom, governed by monstrous laws. The colonel's brutality is a function of the immeasurable violence, beyond which moral categories are devoid of meaning.

Kurtz embodies dark, irrational forces, concealed in the human mind. He resembles a forgotten, pagan god, whose primitive power is based on suffering and the secrets of horror. His intellectual and moral deformity is projected in many details: he never appears in daylight, he seems surrounded not by living people but by submissive shadows, and the boundaries of his sinister kingdom are marked by dead bodies, hung up for edification. The insanity of the character in Apocalypse Now turns out to be a plausible alternative to the sincere self-sacrifice of Bogdan in Premeditated Murder.

The oppressor

The thug has an important place when analysing the concept of 'we'. He represents the most explicit articulation of the idea of shared collective guilt, although he is just one of the concrete

images of the much wider notion of the oppressor. The films studied here allow us to concentrate our observations in two directions:

- Violence, caused throughout the war (namely, the actions of the thug);
- The oppressor – an emanation of post-war society.

Showing war directly poses the question of rendering death commonplace. Here, we shall comment primarily on the direct connection between aggression and the appearance of the thug as a crucial figure in a certain plot. He is present in all of the three national cinematographies discussed here, although the degree of his exposure is different in each of them.

American films develop his image in greatest detail (*Platoon*; *Apocalypse Now*), while their Russian and Serb counterparts are much more sparse in this respect. Apart from the factor of time (the closer temporal distance as regards the events for the latter) a possible explanation for the difference could be the different traditions characteristic of American and East-European cinema. Hollywood shows a taste for shows, for the literal quotation of battle scenes and episodes drowned in blood from the chronology of a given war. In contrast, Russian and Serb works are interested most of all in the spiritual and psychological dimension of the concrete event. This observation, however, does not mean that American films are superficial and lacking in depth.

Emphasis on the thug and his pathological behaviour is subject to special attention by director Oliver Stone. In *Platoon*, he features the demonic sergeant Barnes, who is a real embodiment of evil. In order to achieve maximum effect, the author creates his image in comparison to Elais, the model of a valiant serviceman, whose adherence to principles leads to a confrontation with Barnes.

Everyday violence and instinct for survival provoke a fierce frenzy in Barnes, which is directed not only against Vietnamese, but also against those American soldiers who dare to contest his authority. Exceptionally brave and decisive, the sergeant has a genuine vocation to be a fighter, however war erodes his moral values and he turns into a killing machine. In a way similar to that of Colonel Kurtz, aggression for him is a form of personal expression and self-assertion. But in contrast to Francis Coppola's character, he is able neither to intellectualise the events, nor to penetrate into the secrets of horror. Kurtz possesses a kind of sinister wisdom, while Barnes is just a trivial thug.

War inconspicuously transforms individual human nature. Captain Willard (*Apocalypse Now*) returns to Saigon in charge of a dangerous mission because he has no other identity left but that of a soldier. His attempt to adapt to the world outside Vietnam turns out to be a complete failure and that is when Willard takes up doing what he can do best: killing. The moral aspect of murder takes on a special sensitivity when cinematographers pose the question of aggression against one's own people. The stated motive drives the film action: Willard leaves for Cambodia in order to 'neutralise, using the professional idiom, the disobedient former serviceman Kurtz. There is no remorse regarding the predetermined fate of the colonel. Even his merits to the army and his brilliant career as a Green Beret commando cannot soften the decision of the General Staff.

However, the problem is treated in greater detail in *Platoon*. Murdering Elias marks the final stage of the process of Barnes's de-heroisation. At the same time, it is a turning point in the behaviour of young Chris Taylor, who kills the guilty sergeant in order to restore violated justice. However, this act of revenge drives him closer to Barnes' personality than it may seem at first glance. The scene successfully illustrates one of the potential mechanisms through which war creates merciless monsters, filled with hatred.

Russian and Serb interpretations of the theme of the thug are represented in a much more modest manner in *Prisoner of Mountains*, *Check Point* and *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame*. Sergei Bodrov Senior interprets it by means of the image of Sasha Kostilin in *Prisoner of Mountains*. Sasha lacks the permanent exasperation of Barnes, as well as his desire for self-expression. On the contrary, Sasha is a modest young man, quite cheerful and having a certain artistic talent. For him war and more specifically throat-cutting are just a part of the job and a way to survive. He does not participate in the war because he feels a need for that, but in expectation of the end of his compulsory army service. Superfluous and too careless, Sasha does not feel committed in terms of emotions or values to the objectives of the Chechnya campaign.

Compared to the character of Sergei Bodrov Senior, Kaifa in *Check Point* commits atrocities driven by immeasurable fear. He sets a home-made bomb totally aware that its victims

will not be Chechen soldiers but ordinary civilians.

Pretty Village, Pretty Flame only outlines the motive of the thug. The Serb platoon commanded by captain Maximovic engage in pillaging in the flames of the burning Muslim houses, against a background of crazy rock and roll (an indirect quotation of Apocalypse Now). During one of the pillaging campaigns, the heroes come across people hidden in a small wardrobe. Following machine-gun fire some thin spurts of blood suggest to the viewer that the invisible refugees are dead.

The concept of the oppressor, however, is not exhausted with aggression during war. Violence can be viewed as a qualitative characteristic of post-war society. In this regard, The Gunpowder Keg represents a peculiar cinematographic dissection of social life in contemporary Belgrade. The psychological effect of the national tragedy, i.e. the fall of Yugoslav Federation, is projected in the everyday life of the average Serb. Violence penetrates everywhere: in the pub, at the bus stop, in the sports room. The catastrophic anticipation of imminent calamity is increased with every cadre. For the educated West-European viewer, the film characters may evoke vague associations with the distorted, ecstatic faces in the pictures of Hieronymus Bosch, or the fearful demons of Goya: unexpectedly erupting passions, frightening primitive vitality, unbearable suffering.

The shameful war has branded all, and overall despair and lack of perspective are an important emphasis in this work. In support of this thesis is the episode in which a young man terrorises late passengers in a bus. The aggressive behaviour of the young man is, in fact, an expression of his inability to change anything in his own world. He embodies the whole sacrificed generation, whose alternative is living in a muddle or going to fight.

Another interesting example of violence on an everyday level reflecting the moral degradation resulting from the above-mentioned events is the policeman Dimitar. As a representative of law and order he himself violates written laws and applies lynch law with regard to the offenders. Showing no respect for the law is symptomatic evidence of serious problems in post-war Serb society.

The guilty

American, Russian and Serb films categorically identify the instigators of the war as the political elite and the military. The power of exposition, however, depends on the level of imposed guilt, which outlines an interesting trend: most often the military are targeted as the object of direct criticism. According to cinematographers they bear heavy responsibility for the crimes committed, which cannot be justified by the fact that they followed orders. Charges against them are not limited to committing outrages in regard to the enemy (especially as regards victims among civilians), but also touch upon the problem of the indisputable power of the army, which disposes with the lives and fates of thousands of young people. The sinister image of the army as a gigantic machine driven by individuals who have been depersonalised by force, is created in Platoon, Prisoner of Mountains, and Premeditated Murder. The picture presented illustrates the complete heartlessness with which the army sends recruits little prepared for real battles, kids like Chris Taylor (Platoon) and Vanya Zhilin (Prisoner of Mountains) to their certain deaths.

Military institutions are interested in individuals only to fill their ranks and do not differentiate between the ways and means applied to achieve that end. A convincing example in that respect is the arrogant behaviour of Yonko Mudzhak (Premeditated Murder) the repulsive representative of YNA, who recruits fresh blood to be sent to the front line. He admits cynically that 'Never has it been like now, when everything is permitted', which plainly reveals the process of dehumanisation as a result of trampling over basic war norms.

Another crucial emphasis in these works is the incredible apathy regarding the fate of their own soldiers. Wounded or killed, soldiers are quickly forgotten and left to their own devices. They are simply unwanted. Confined forever to the invalid chair, Steve (Deer Hunter) spends his days in oblivion in a horrible institution for veterans; the almost healed Bogdan (Premeditated Murder) spends the night on a bench in the city park, because there is no place for him at the hospital.

Sergei Bodrov Senior adds to the theme (Prisoner of Mountains) by introducing one very painful motive, especially probed into by documentary-makers (for example The Damned and the Forgotten of Sergei Govoruhin): soldiers' mothers looking for their sons, who have disappeared without trace. Private Zhilin's mother arrives in Chechnya in order to free Vanya, who is being held hostage. Her meeting with the commandant of the federal army is harrowing. He offhandedly

explains to her that nothing can be done because 'people disappear every day'. This remark is open criticism of the military bureaucratic system, which provides regular reports on statistical losses without taking account of the value of each individual.

In certain cases, the effect of condemnation is achieved by the artists using grotesque parody. Parody emphasises the suggestion of absurdity of war by demythifying the characters and describing them in comic light. The use of this device is especially characteristic of *Apocalypse Now* where Francis Coppola creates the image of the crazy lieutenant Kilgore. He is a caricature version of the coloniser, the pioneer, aggressively conquering new territories, a caricature of the dare-devil from western movies. His personality and behaviour are described in detail: from the helicopter on which the character flies, which bears a coat of arms of two crossed swords and the sign 'Death from on high' - a vague reference to Doomsday - to the ludicrous cowboy hat and bright yellow colour of his front. Everything suggests Kilgore's dementia.

The general from Check Point is described in a similar way and his presence is an indirect reference to Russian general Alexander Lebed. The general has a notable biography – a hero of the war in Afghanistan, awarded many medals for his special merits, he seems to be the most suitable man for the purposes of the Chechen campaign. However, contrary to the expectation of heroic deeds, this high-ranking military man goes through a series of funny situations, which completely deprive him of his former glory.

Apart from the military, parody of politicians is also very successful. The best argument refuting the charge that Sardjan Dragoevic's film *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* was made by order of the government and supports the authorities is the appearance on the screen of Sobo. In this regard the distinguished historian Misha Glenny says that 'the Serb president is discreetly, however, openly satirised' by moulding the character in question. 'Svobodan is a common Serb name, however, the diminutive Sobo is associated by most people with Svobodan Milosevic.'⁴

Sobo, the character in *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* readily plunders the houses of the Muslim neighbours, left by them in search of a safer place, thus trampling on their confidence. The nationalist newspaper that he reads, as well as the chauvinist rhetoric typical of his speech, openly manifest the position of the author as regards the policy of the regime in Belgrade.

Another very important element, typical of Serb works, is the representation of anti-war feelings among certain circles of young people in Serb society. The protesters are the ones who state directly that the war is a result of the power struggles of the political elite. In *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*, the demonstrators sing 'Give peace a chance!', speak movingly about love, surrounded by numerous burning candles and flowers, i.e. the whole vision is an intentional reference to the model of pacifist, anti-Vietnam protests by American young people at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s.

At the same time, the directors add different shades when describing the rallies. For instance, in *Premeditated Murder* Gorchin Stoyanovic shows the mercantile attitude of some Belgrade students, who need veterans in their ranks only to serve as a rallying point and living slogan for their demands. Human compassion is displaced by political passion and heartlessness in the name of mercantile ambition.

Notes

1. Kosturitsa, Emir. 'About his new film *Underground*', *Cinema*, No. 3, 1995, p. 32.
2. Glenny, Misha. 'If you are not for us', *Sight & Sound*, No. 11, 1996, p. 11.
3. Stishova, Elena. 'Notes on the Caucasian War', *Film Art*, No. 1, 1999, p. 23.
4. Glenny, Misha, *ibid.* p. 12.

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