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WEICHOLZ GLOBAL FILM SERIES

WRITTEN PRE-FILM LECTURE BY DR. JOHN PFEIFER

QUO VADIS, AIDA? *"Where are you going, Aida?"*
Bosnia and Herzegovina (2020)

WEDNESDAY, JULY 7 AT 7PM



THE REASON I SELECTED THIS FILM TO OPEN THE 2021 WEICHOLZ GLOBAL FILM SERIES

After years of teaching middle and high school English in Vero Beach, Florida, I attended Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois to pursue a Ph.D. in Language Disorders and Learning Disabilities. Upon the completion of my coursework and qualifying exams, I took a job as a school administrator in Lincolnwood, Illinois.

The Village of Lincolnwood is located approximately 10 miles north of downtown Chicago and serves as the gateway to Chicagoland's wealthy North Shore. An inner suburb of Chicago, it shares its southern, eastern, and a small section of its western boundary with Chicago, also bordering Skokie to the north and west. Once a predominantly upper middle class Jewish neighborhood, it is now an ethnically diverse town, with tree-lined streets, beautiful parks, an excellent school system, and a prosperous business community. Merrick Garland, the current US Attorney General, was born and raised in Lincolnwood.

I was extremely proud to serve in a school system that maintained rigorous academic standards, an extraordinary music program, and a student population of disciplined, hardworking minority children of Jewish, Asian, Asian Indian, Muslim, Eastern European, and African American descent. As a school principal, I always took it upon myself to know the name of every one of my students and as much about their families as I could possibly gather. In fact, many students thought that I studied old yearbooks, and spent my evenings calling parents and caretakers to gather information about them. I remember so many of those students for their accomplishments and the obstacles which they overcame.

One child who stands out in my memory was a 12 year-old Bosnian Muslim refugee who was living with her five-year-old brother at the Lincolnwood home of her uncle. The uncle had left Bosnia many years before to attend university in the United States and never returned to his war-torn homeland. Amina (not her real name) spoke very little English, kept to herself, and had the saddest eyes that I had ever seen in a child of that age. Her depressed demeanor so concerned me that I asked our school social worker, who happened to be of Polish descent and spoke fluent Polish, to see if she could possibly communicate with Amina and help her to adjust to her new surroundings.

I considered myself an informed citizen, and I was aware of the conflicts in Bosnia during the early and mid 1990s. To be frank, however, I had a "nightly news," superficial understanding of the situation on the ground and the ineffectual response of the U.S. and UN administrations to address the humanitarian crisis plaguing the Bosnian people. Although Polish, Bosnian, and

Serbian are very different Slavic languages, they share some words and phrases to allow limited communication, so the social worker was able to uncover some details. What I learned from our school social worker and my subsequent conversations with Amina's uncle was heartbreaking.

Amina's family had lived in Srebrenica, Bosnia-Herzegovina, during the forced evacuation of the Muslim families. Her mother, who gathered a few personal belongings and tried to board the UN buses to a refugee camp, was denied access to the bus by Serbian soldiers along with several other attractive young women. She insisted that Amina and her little brother board the bus with the older women and other children from the village. Amina's father was taken away on another bus filled with Muslim men by the Serbian Army.

Amina and her little brother were taken to a refugee camp, and they never saw their parents again. Because she knew her uncle's name and address in the United States, Amina and her brother were reunited with their uncle in Lincolnwood, Illinois. This film documents the historical events leading up to the Srebrenica massacre, and the genocide and forced migration of people from their homeland. When I saw the film, I couldn't stop thinking about Amina and her family. I watched, I cried, and I remembered Amina's sad eyes.

FACTS ABOUT QUO VADIS, AIDA?

Quo Vadis, Aida? (Where are you going, Aida?) had its world premiere at the 77th Venice International Film Festival on Sept. 3, 2020 where it was nominated for the Golden Lion for Best Film. It lost to Chloe Zhao's *Nomadland* starring Frances McDormand. The film was also screened at the Toronto International Film Festival on Sept. 13, 2020.

At the end of September 2020, the film was selected as the Bosnian entry for Best International Feature Film at the 93rd Academy Awards. A total of 97 countries submitted a film, with a record 93 being accepted for consideration. *Quo Vadis, Aida?* was one of 15 of these films to be shortlisted in February 2021, and the film garnered one of five Academy Award nominations on March 15, 2021. Once again, it lost the Oscar to another film, Denmark's *Another Round* directed by Academy Award nominee for Best Director, Thomas Vinterberg. In my opinion, *Quo Vadis, Aida?* is a far more important film than either of the two films mentioned above.

In addition, the film received a number of other accolades. It won the Audience Award at the 50th edition of the Rotterdam International Film Festival, and the Best International Film Award at the 2021 Gothenburg Film Festival. The film won the Best International Film Award at the 36th Independent Spirit Awards. In March 2021, 74th British Academy Film and Television Awards (BAFTA) nominated the film for Best Film Not in the English Language, and Žbanić earned a nomination in the overall BAFTA Best Director category. It lost both BAFTA awards: Best Film to the Danish film and the director award to *Nomadland* director Chloe Zhao.

Quo Vadis Aida? was released in the United States through virtual cinema on March 5, 2021, followed by video-on-demand on March, 15 2021. For such a well regarded film, the international box office was miniscule. It played on live screens in Portugal and South Korea

earning \$15,664. In most countries, the only way to see the film was and is through on-demand streaming.

Sadly, very few people from around the world have seen the film. Its appeal may be somewhat limited by its harrowing and emotionally taxing story, and possibly an ignorance of its historical context and the actual events surrounding the film. In order to better appreciate and understand *Quo Vadis, Aida?*, I am providing information regarding the Bosnian/Herzegovinian Film Industry, the historical context about the creation and dissolution of the Republic of Yugoslavia, and a brief explanation of the Bosnian Ethnic Wars and the Srebrenica Massacre of 1995.

FACTS ABOUT THE BOSNIAN/HERZOGOVINIAN FILM INDUSTRY

The already fragile film industry of Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) was severely shaken by the Covid-19 pandemic. Movie ticket sales in the country dropped significantly compared to those of 2019, and nearly all production of new B&H film projects were abandoned or postponed until 2021 or later. In fact, only one domestic film went into production at the end of 2020. According to Film New Europe Daily's market analysis, "A total of 109 films premiered in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2020 (of which three films were screened for only one day, as they premiered on 31 December), with another 27 films continuing distribution from 2019 and 19 films having re-runs. The numbers show a 50% drop in released films compared to 219 films that premiered in cinemas in the country in 2019. The complete picture shows a 70% drop in theater admissions and a 69.5% drop in total box office."

Despite that hit to the Bosnian and Herzegovinian theatre business, several interesting things happened as a consequence of the pandemic. In normal years, American films dominate ticket sales in the country. However, as most of the American studios decided to delay the release of new films, distributors of Bosnian and Herzegovinian films used the opportunity to put more domestic films on the market for live attendance and expanded film streaming opportunities. Bosnian films saw a significant increase in their share of the domestic market in 2020. "Admissions to domestic films increased by 438 percent." (FilmNew Europe.com)

In addition, the Sarajevo Film Festival was organized completely online in 2020, as public gatherings were banned in Sarajevo and other major Bosnian cities during the summer of 2020. This exposed more domestic and foreign viewers to B&H films. *Quo Vadis, Aida?*, directed by Jasmine Zbanic, had a success that had not been recorded by a domestic film in the last 10 years, finishing fifth in the domestic B&H box office and admissions, behind three American films and a Russian feature which screened in early 2020 before the ban on public gatherings. *Quo Vadis, Aida?* became the first B&H film to use a distribution model in which it has been available in cinemas and online from the very beginning of its distribution.

THE CREATION AND BREAK-UP OF YUGOSLAVIA AND THE BOSNIAN WARS

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) came into existence on Dec. 1, 1918. At the end of the First World War, the defeated Austro-Hungarian Habsburg Monarchy collapsed and large parts of Europe were rearranged. A federation of six republics, the SFRY brought to-

gether Serbs, Croats, Bosnian Muslims, Albanians, Slovenes and other Slavic minorities under a comparatively relaxed authoritarian monarchy. The regions of Kosovo, Macedonia, North Macedonia and Vojvodina were parts of Serbia prior to this unification.

The new country's formation was based on a myth that Yugoslavs, meaning southern Slavs, were all descended from one ancient society, the Illyrian people, and that this diverse group of Slavic people could and should all naturally live together in one state under one ruler. This myth would eventually become a fatal birth defect for the nascent nation.

Peter I, "The King of Serbia," became the first autocratic ruler of the newly formed SFRY and assumed the title of "King of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes." Peter's successor changed the title to "King of Yugoslavia," and the Karadordevic dynasty led the country until the Nazi Germany occupation on April 17, 1941. The King of Yugoslavia succumbed and tolerated the Nazi invasion while the citizen, partisan resistance fought against the German forces. The monarchy was formally abolished at the end of World War II.

After World War II, the Yugoslav Union was re-established under Communist rule and Soviet influences. Josip Broz Tito, who had led the partisan resistance and the Yugoslav guerrilla movement against the Nazis during the war became the chief architect of the new "monarch-free" Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia. A communistic authoritarian leader, Tito served as both prime minister and president (1944-1953) of the country and later became "President for Life" until his death in 1980.

In an effort to create a strong independent economy, Tito broke with the Russian form of Communism in 1948. Yugoslavia became the first country to leave Cominform, the official central organization of the International Communist Movement. Cominform was a supranational alliance of Marxist-Leninist communist parties in Europe to coordinate their activity under the direction of the Soviet Union during the early Cold War.

Upset with Tito's actions, Stalin threatened Tito with invasion and ultimately expelled Yugoslavia from the international association of socialist states. Stalin took the matter personally and arranged several assassination attempts on Tito, none of which succeeded. In a correspondence between the two leaders, Tito openly wrote: "Stop sending people to kill me. We've already captured five of them, one of them with a bomb and another with a rifle... If you don't stop sending killers, I'll send one to Moscow, and I won't have to send a second."

That same strength enabled Tito to successfully suppress ethnic tensions between the federation of six republics that had been brought together by a myth that failed to consider the current differences in ethnicity, language, religion, and the desire for self-determination. His authoritarian rule routinely suppressed human rights, gave deference to Orthodox Serbians and Catholic Croats while imprisoning Muslims for asserting their ethnic identity. Tito also favored Serbia's centralist state concept of government as opposed to Croatia's and Slovakia's desire for a federal system with greater local control. Victor Sebestyen writes, "Tito was as brutal as his one-time

mentor Stalin, with whom he was later to fall out but with whom he shared a taste for bloody revenge against enemies, real or imagined” (2014). Under Tito’s rule, Yugoslavia had more political prisoners than all of the rest of Eastern Europe combined (David Matas, 1994).

After Tito’s death in 1980, Serbian communist leader Slobodan Milosevic sought to continue Serbian sovereignty in a more relaxed manner. The power of a centralized federal government was replaced by a collective presidency of eight provincial representatives and a federal government with little control over economic, cultural, and political policy. The only thing that held this union of disparate states together was their fear of a Soviet takeover. However, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, the re-unification of Germany in 1990, and the imminent collapse of the Soviet Union removed the individual republics’ powerful incentive for unity and cooperation.

Slovenia was the first to declare “sovereignty” issuing a parliamentary declaration that Slovenian law took precedence over Yugoslav law. Croatia followed in May, and in August, the Yugoslav republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina also declared itself sovereign. Slovenia and Croatia both declared formal independence on June 25, 1991. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, a referendum on independence took place in March 1992, but was boycotted by the Serb minority in Bosnia.

Serbian minorities in all three of the newly formed countries declared independence from their new governments expressing their desire to re-join Serbia, sparking violence between armed militias. Milosevic and the Yugoslav People’s Army (Mostly Serbian) intervened to separate the combatants, but it quickly became apparent that they supported the local minority Serb forces.

Slovenia was able to successfully defend their independence in 10 days, effectively confirming Slovenia’s separation. The Croatian War of Independence was fought from 1991 to 1995 resulting in tens of thousands dead, and hundreds of thousands of people forcibly displaced even though the international community and the United Nations recognized Croatia’s independence in January 1992.

Despite the UN’s recognition of Bosnia and Herzegovina as an independent country, the Serbs were even more brutal in that country. The Bosnian Serbs, led by Radovan Karadžić and supported by the Serbian government of Slobodan Milošević and the Yugoslav People’s Army, mobilized their forces inside Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to secure ethnic Serb territories within its sovereign borders. War soon spread across the country, accompanied by ethnic cleansing of the Bosnian Muslims. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and displaced millions from their homes, as Europe witnessed the most horrific fighting on its territory since the end of World War II.

One of the most horrific atrocities of the Bosnian War is exquisitely portrayed in this film through the eyes of a Bosnian Muslim UN translator who personally documents the events of July 11, 1995. Under the command of Gen. Ratko Mladic, The Yugoslav people’s Army overran the town of Srebrenica, which had been declared a safe haven by the United Nations. Muslim civil-

ians sought refuge at a nearby U.N. base led by Dutch forces, but were handed over to Mladic's soldiers, who separated them by gender and loaded them into buses and trucks. This film not only highlights the brutality of the Serbian forces but also the fecklessness of the UN peacekeepers in charge of protecting the Muslim citizens of Bosnia.

A.O Scott from his New York Times review says it best, Aida's "situation is dramatized with exquisite empathy. Pity isn't the only emotion in play; it does battle with shame and disgust. The failure of the U.N. is almost as appalling as Mladic's viciousness. The rule-bound, well-meaning Dutch officers in charge of the base become the general's hostages and then his accomplices. The massacre was a war crime supervised by peacekeepers — a failure of institutional resolve, of humanity, of civilization.

Eventually, Mladic was tried in The Hague and sentenced to life in prison. The final act of *Quo Vadis, Aida?*, Bosnia and Herzegovina's official Oscar entry, makes clear that many other perpetrators escaped with impunity. The war ended, and some version of normalcy returned, but Zbanic takes no consolation in the banal observation that life goes on. It's true that time passes, that memory fades, that history is a record of mercy as well as of savagery. But it's also true — as this unforgettable film insists — that loss is permanent and unanswerable." (NY Times review, March 11, 2021)

CONCLUSION

As you watch this film, I hope you can appreciate the marvelous performance of Jasna Djuricic as Aida, the broad framing of images that show dozens of people waiting for an answer concerning their fate, and the impeccable editing which allows the tension to build slowly until its inevitable conclusion. My favorite scene is the acerbic finale in which Aida gets some well-deserved justice.