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## **Understanding A Serbian Film: The Effects of Censorship and File-sharing on Critical Reception and Perceptions of Serbian National Identity in the UK**

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## Understanding A Serbian Film: The Effects of Censorship and File-sharing on Critical Reception and Perceptions of Serbian National Identity in the UK

*Srpski Film / A Serbian Film* (Srđan Spasojević, 2010) generated a remarkable amount of publicity when it was included in the schedule for the London genre festival Frightfest in 2010. It quickly became the most widely recognised Serbian film in the UK and subsequently the most heavily censored film in sixteen years. Produced in Serbia without the constraint of government interference, it is the first independently funded film to be made in the country.<sup>[1]</sup> *A Serbian Film* is a visceral, highly impactful piece of work that tells the story of Milos (Srdjan Todorovic), a porn star lured out of retirement by a large sum of money and the dream of escape from Serbia. Milos agrees to participate in an unscripted reality-porn art-movie, directed in real time through an ear piece. As he becomes increasingly uncomfortable with the director's requests, Milos attempts to resign but instead finds himself drugged, abused, and duped into committing violent sexual atrocities including rape, necrophilia, paedophilia and incest. The film persistently uses excess and taboo in order to push boundaries by juxtaposing images of children with violence and sexualised violence, incorporating snuff, and depicting the rape of a newborn baby.

Despite the disturbing content, the film is a stylish and accomplished directorial debut. Shot over sixty-one days on location in Belgrade, director Srđan Spasojević uses a Red One high definition digital camera to create a distinctive aesthetic finish which is characterised by his use of colour. The director over-exposes external scenes making the sequences seem surreal and uses the impossibly bright Serbian sunshine to evoke a sense of disorientation. This is intensified by a soundtrack that alternates between eerie silence and frenetic electronic dubstep. In contrast, the scenes inside the mansion and the other buildings where the porn film shoot is located are heavily saturated. Rooms are dominated by dark shadows with little gradient jarring against vivid red blood. The most graphic scenes of the film are located in a centre for abused and orphaned children or in stark, concrete rooms. These off-white rooms are clinical and 'wipe clean', echoing the disposable nature of the porn film's cast.

Serbian born director Spasojević describes *A Serbian Film* as a "family drama that descends into hell", and states that it is a political allegory designed to illustrate the plight of the Serbian people during the disintegration of Yugoslavia.<sup>[2]</sup> This article argues that despite Spasojević's endeavour to delineate the plight of the Serbian people, it is evident within the UK critical reception that the film's heavy reliance on "self-Balkanisation" is antithetical, reiterating Orientalist constructions of the Balkan region.<sup>[3]</sup> The article will begin by considering the development of genre cinema in Serbia, with a particular focus on horror. This will be used to contextualise an analysis of the UK critical reception of *A Serbian Film* in order to illustrate the ways in which reception, censorship, and the informal digital distribution of the film shaped, and in some cases exacerbated, negative perceptions of Serbia.

Perceptions of Serbian national identity in the West are influenced by a number of factors but

can partially be attributed to the choices made by film distributors which have implications for the way that Western audiences “interpret and understand” national cinemas and, by extension, entire nations.<sup>[4]</sup> Ivana Kronja argues that Western perceptions of the Balkan region are Orientalist and are rooted in the literature of the Ottoman Empire, when the Balkans appeared to be an “extension of the East, towards which [...] Western culture traditionally nourished exotic fantasies and ambivalent feelings”.<sup>[5]</sup> For Kronja, Yugoslavian directors receiving critical acclaim in the West in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reflected these Orientalist attitudes and satisfied the Western fascination with, and rejection of, communism,<sup>[6]</sup> thus bolstering the perception of the region as the “wild and murky fringes of Europe”.<sup>[7]</sup> This impression was reinforced by the British media during the Balkan wars. The UK played a pivotal role in a seventy-eight day NATO bombing campaign against Serbian forces in 1999. In order to maintain public support for military action, the UK media portrayed the Serbian people as aggressors and equated Milošević’s quasi-nationalism with the Second World War Nazi-regime.<sup>[8]</sup> The media failed to “address the issue of possible Serb victims”, emphasising instead the “peace-enforcing objective of the NATO involvement”,<sup>[9]</sup> instigating Western resentment towards Serbia and the Serbian people for their role in the conflict.

*A Serbian Film* is arguably one of the most conspicuous films to emerge from Serbia. The country has produced fewer than twenty films that could be generically classified as horror.<sup>[10]</sup> This area is under researched, with only a handful of scholars publishing on the subject.<sup>[11]</sup> Outlining the development of the horror genre in Serbia facilitates an exploration of the socio-political context within which the film was produced. It is essential to establish this framework before analysing the UK critical discourse as it is impossible to understand the film without such a background.

State media control was established in Serbia after World War II when Tito’s committee for cinematography instructed that films were to be used for propagandistic purposes. The committee looked to the Soviet film industry to guide the development of a Yugoslavian cinema that offered an effective communication of a unified society. Consequently, genre cinema was barely recognised. Seen as a preserve of the West, in particular the USA, genre had little to do with a “society of self-management”.<sup>[12]</sup> Most genres were considered threatening to Serbian ideologies and subjected to an outright ban. Fantasy was outlawed due to its perceived capacity to celebrate the freedoms of life prior to communist rule.<sup>[13]</sup> Thrillers and science-fiction were similarly disallowed and “there was no place for horror within the parameters of the bright present and the rosy future”.<sup>[14]</sup> This left family comedies, social drama and war films to reflect communist ideologies. Even so, Greg de Cuir, Jr traces the blending of selected Hollywood genre tropes with dogmatic Serbian genre conventions as far back as the Partisan war films of Tito’s regime.<sup>[15]</sup>

Ideological supervision by political authorities continued on some level until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but strict artistic doctrine gradually relaxed. By the late 1980s filmmakers began to openly imitate elements of American cinema as the “struggle to free film from the confining tenets of socialist realism [...] took the form of expanding the range of permissible genres”.<sup>[16]</sup> However, the American embodiment of genre was still considered “inherently alien” to the Serbian world view and directors continued to combine previously outlawed genres with locally acceptable ones.<sup>[17]</sup> This is evident in the catastrophe-horror, *Variola Vera* (Goran Marković,

1982) and horror-comedy, *Davitelj protiv davitelja / Strangler Vs Strangler* (Slobodan Sijan, 1984). Both were initially met with scathing criticism. It was believed that “the presence of genre [...] turned the authentic, creative auteur into a vampire and reduced everything to clichés”.<sup>[18]</sup> Then in 1987 the horror-thriller *Vec vidjeno / Deja Vu* (Goran Marković?) was released to positive critical reception, indicating a slight change in attitude despite a poor performance at the box office.<sup>[19]</sup>

The development of the horror genre was hindered by the outbreak of the Balkan war. As Milošević rose to power in 1989, a decade of bloody ethnic conflict ensued leaving a million people dead and many more displaced. Civil uprising, the aforementioned three month NATO sanctioned bombing campaign and newly enforced nationalist policies left ordinary Serbian people victimised and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia politically, culturally and economically isolated. National film financing collapsed and cinematographers began to seek funding abroad, relying on the “visibility potential of the conflict to secure foreign financing”.<sup>[20]</sup> Many of these films explored the political chaos surrounding the break-up of Yugoslavia. In their investigation of war, ethnic conflicts and everyday violence, the directors “made a whole series of stylistic and thematic choices” uniting them “in a coherent poetic phenomenon”.<sup>[21]</sup> These films embraced the presentation of Yugoslavia as reflected in the eyes of the West and can be categorised using the term ‘self-Balkanisation’. They emphasised the savage, untamed nature of the Balkan region by “staging stories full of unmotivated violence, hatred, betrayal and cruel vengeance” and became popular on the art house circuit, carving out a niche for Serbian cinema.<sup>[22]</sup> As Marković points out in *TOL Magazine*, “stereotypical violence has proven a formula for success”.<sup>[23]</sup>

As the war ended, Serbia experienced rising unemployment and the proliferation of serious crime. Everyday life became a violent, hyper-real “devastating social and moral crisis”.<sup>[24]</sup> The abolition of nationalist rule and the establishment of a liberal democracy saw a “fraught transition from a politics of nationalism to one of Europeanisation”.<sup>[25]</sup> Mechanical changes to film production in Serbia and the Europeanisation of the industry manifested thematically in Serbian cinema. Balkanisation became an undesirable form of self-expression and cinematography entered a period of “normalisation”<sup>[26]</sup> as filmmakers reconnected their national film culture to worldwide developments.<sup>[27]</sup>

Nevertheless, the Western manifestation of genre is still rare in Serbia where generic tropes derived from Hollywood continue to be blended into the Serbian milieu in order to make them meaningful, a trend that Ognjanović hypothesises is more important now than ever in order to obtain domestic box office success in Serbia following the Balkan conflict.<sup>[28]</sup> This is illustrated by Dejan Zečević’s *T.T. Sindrom / T.T. Syndrome* (2002), the first Serbian slasher. The film was critically acclaimed<sup>[29]</sup> and was a popular choice for international genre festivals including Brussels IFFF<sup>[30]</sup> and Puchon,<sup>[31]</sup> but did poorly at the domestic box office. Director Zečević believes that the two genres best suited to the portrayal of Serbian life are either black comedy or horror, but notes that the “general cultural climate has always required a strong rationale for using such motifs: fear for fear’s sake was not generally accepted as particularly entertaining”.<sup>[32]</sup> Serbian cinema is already a “story about the defeated, horrified and terrified individual”,<sup>[33]</sup> without also being a horror film. This is reflected in the sporadic use of the horror genre in the last decade. In 2006, Stevan Filipović directed *Šejtanov Ratnik / Sheitans*

*Warrior*, an absurd, low-budget, horror-comedy. This was followed in 2009 by Mladen Djordjevic's *Zizot i smrt porno bande / The Life and Death of a Porno Gang*, a snuff road-movie, and eventually by *A Serbian Film* in 2010. Both *The Life and Death of a Porno Gang* and *A Serbian Film* represent a movement away from films that straddle domestic and Westernised genre boundaries. Spasojević cites 1970s American director William Friedkin and Canadian David Cronenberg as influences. *A Serbian Film* also has parallels with the more modern, cruelty laden *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005) and a sense of despair similar to that found in extreme European films such as *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier, 2008). The film struggled to secure a domestic distributor until it achieved international notoriety, illustrating the lack of demand for such a provocative and visceral film in Serbia.

Despite Spasojević's insistence that *A Serbian Film* should be generically defined as a family drama that descends into hell, the UK press repeatedly referred to the film as torture porn, a sub-genre of horror.<sup>[34]</sup> The conjunction of "horror, torture and 'pornographic' excess"<sup>[35]</sup> in the film could indeed be interpreted as being for the purposes of "audience admiration, provocation and sensory adventure",<sup>[36]</sup> and therefore deserving of the label 'torture porn' – re-worked as 'spectacle horror' in Adam Lowenstein's article.<sup>[37]</sup> However, this narrow definition is problematic. The film can be understood in a number of complex ways that do not fit the fixed parameters of torture porn / spectacle horror. Lowenstein likens spectacle horror to Tom Gunning's 'cinema of attractions', in which theatrical display dominates "over narrative absorption, emphasising the direct stimulation of shock".<sup>[38]</sup> The narrative of such horror is characteristically propelled only by the need to tenuously connect one extreme scene to the next and is primarily concerned with audience affect. By choosing the subversive world of underground pornography as a metaphor, Spasojević implements a more coherent narrative, providing either a structural or metaphorical rationale for each gruesome scene. *A Serbian Film* certainly exhibits some of the conventions and iconography of spectacle horror, but it also blends genre codes, using elements from family and social drama and post-war crime thriller. It is more fittingly categorised as 'ordeal cinema': a group of films that "challenge codes of censorship and social mores, especially through the depiction of sex and violence".<sup>[39]</sup> For Horeck and Kendall, ordeal cinema places an emphasis on the role of the spectator, as they commit to going through a horrific experience with the character.<sup>[40]</sup> This spectatorial dynamic fits with Spasojević's vision that the film should inspire sympathy for, and understanding of, the Balkan region. It is also evident in his blending of genres as Spasojević spends almost half the film developing his characters, allowing the audience to build an empathetic relationship with the protagonist. It is, however, important to recognise that a prior knowledge of Serbia's history is necessary in order to fully undertake and interpret this ordeal as a political allegory.

Common themes can be traced in the critical dialogue concerning *A Serbian Film*, though there is a clear polarisation of opinion. Surprisingly, the UK red-top tabloids almost completely failed to engage with the film, with the exception of one article printed by *The Sun* labelling it a "vile movie".<sup>[41]</sup> The paper used emotive language: "the brutal rape of children",<sup>[42]</sup> to both articulate and inspire disgust. *Time Out* expressed a similar point of view, Nigel Floyd found the film to be both "reductive" and an "insult to our supposed lack of moral intelligence".<sup>[43]</sup> Some reviewers adopted a more neutral and analytical tone but still made use of descriptive language. Geoffrey Macnab asked, "Is this the nastiest film ever made?" and declared the film a "quite repellent" mixture of "pornography and ultra-violence".<sup>[44]</sup> *Total Film* described it as an "ultra-shocking",

“unsettling tale” with “graphic scenes of sexual violence”.<sup>[45]</sup> Even the most tolerant reviewers found the level of sexualised violence in the film “genuinely disturbing”, but suggested that it might offer “more than just shock value”.<sup>[46]</sup> *The Independent* argued that as “disturbing as it is [...] everything that happens in the movie happens for a purpose”.<sup>[47]</sup> However, the majority of the mainstream publications seemed intent on deterring potential viewers through the use of provocative language loaded with incriminating disapproval. For example, David Cox’s editorial published in *The Guardian* suggested that for a potential viewer interested in “torture porn, rape porn, incest porn, paedo porn, snuff porn, necro porn and (a bit of a breakthrough here) newborn porn, *A Serbian Film* has much to offer”.<sup>[48]</sup> Cox’s language contains the tacit assumption that an audience motivated to view this film would also be an advocate of the listed transgressions. Conversely, this press reaction also provided extensive marketing for the film, making it “an absolute must-see for some”.<sup>[49]</sup>

Discussion of censorship formed a key component of the critical reception. The extreme subject matter of *A Serbian Film* meant that it was subject to cuts in the UK, resulting in the film being withdrawn at last minute from the Frightfest 2010 festival programme. Ordinarily the festival benefits from an agreement with the local licensing authority allowing the exhibition of unclassified films. In this case, *A Serbian Film*’s reputation preceded it and the council received complaints when the programme was announced. They ruled it could not be screened without classification. The film was submitted to the BBFC for review and four minutes and twelve seconds were removed.<sup>[50]</sup> The BBFC felt that Spasojević’s film contravened guidelines around juxtaposing children with the depiction of violence and the presentation of sexualised violence. *A Serbian Film* had become the “most censored film in 16 years”.<sup>[51]</sup> It went on to create more controversy when it was screened uncut in October 2010 at Raindance Film Festival on an invite only basis. The audience was entirely comprised of students and members of the press, enabling critics to see the uncut version of the film.

Regarding censorship, *Sight and Sound* cynically referred to the “the snip-snip-snip of the censor’s scissorhands”,<sup>[52]</sup> and *The Independent* highlighted the “frenzied debates about censorship and freedom of speech”<sup>[53]</sup> prompted by the film’s release. The *Daily Mail*’s Christopher Tookey openly scorned the BBFC’s decision to grant a film he regarded as wallowing in “extreme sexual torture”<sup>[54]</sup> any certificate at all. Kim Newman adopted a more liberal position, hypothesising that even if the “political element is spurious justification for a cynical exercise in attention-getting [and] taboo-busting [...], it ought to be viewers, not censorship bodies, who make that decision”.<sup>[55]</sup> *Total Film* and *Sight and Sound* approached the censorship debate from a different angle. *Total Film* asked readers; “will you be hunting down an uncut copy online?”<sup>[56]</sup> and *Sight and Sound* suggested that censorship would:

boost the film’s notoriety but wreak havoc on its chances of making money in regions where it is cut: no transgressive film fiend wants to see a neutered film, and everyone knows where they can find intact copies.<sup>[57]</sup>

Both publications made overt references to film piracy. The growth of the internet download market has enabled film fans to entirely bypass UK censorship in many cases. It is simpler than ever to obtain a film uncut through streaming media (via various free to access virtual private networks) and peer-to-peer file-sharing, despite attempts at government interference.<sup>[58]</sup> This has

facilitated the expansion of fan communities. The burgeoning long-tail of distribution allows fans to participate as easily as they can congregate without having to purchase and import DVDs. A *Serbian Film* found a niche audience amongst fans of extreme cinema, partially expedited by UK distributor Revolver's decision to stream the film at *IndieMoviesOnline*<sup>[59]</sup> simultaneously to its theatrical release, and their sponsorship of a dedicated discussion / promotion forum at *Cult-Labs*.<sup>[60]</sup> *A Serbian Film* was released across a range of platforms, subjected to differing levels of censorship and subtitled in various languages. A number of internet forums (including *Cult-Labs*) accommodated discussions concerning the acquisition of uncensored copies of the film, providing evidence of demand.<sup>[61]</sup> At *DigitalSpy*, forum user Ultros points out that the Swedish DVD is uncut but without English subtitles. He then suggests that "you can download a 1080p or 720p version (of the Swedish Blu-ray) on line and then just download an English subtitle file for it".<sup>[62]</sup> BitTorrent files found on open access sites such as *The Pirate Bay*, through linking sites such as *Torrent Tree* and also private torrent communities, do not include the director's introduction found on the UK DVD.

This is a diary of our own molestation by the Serbian government [...]. It's about the monolithic power of leaders who hypnotise you to do things you don't want to do. You have to feel the violence to know what it's about [...].<sup>[63]</sup>

A version of Spasojevi?'s explanation (quoted above from *The Sun*) featured as part of the introduction to a selection of the festival screenings and in most UK publicity interviews for the film. Similarly, the promotional website includes a 'director's note', a detailed breakdown of the film's inception designed to assist audiences and news media in understanding the film. The UK DVD also includes a director's introduction. This lengthy segment opens to reveal Spasojevi? seated in front of a dark background featuring a blood red image of Milos' face. Initially he directly addresses the audience, but after around forty seconds he turns to look off camera which, he informs the audience, is to create "the impression of an interview made for such purposes, so you can take me more seriously".<sup>[64]</sup> Just prior to doing so, the director takes a sip of what appears to be whiskey. Whilst still addressing the camera, he attempts to pass the liquid off as iced tea like "we used in the film",<sup>[65]</sup> but his face appears to indicate that he is lying. Interestingly, whilst he is doing so, he will not meet the gaze of the camera and instead looks away to the right. This is the same direction in which he then turns to look whilst detailing his rationale for the allegory underlying *A Serbian Film*. It seems unnecessary that he should lie about or even mention the drink, but doing so appears to be a veiled communication to the audience that he finds this whole process unnecessary and / or ridiculous. This is further reinforced by the explanation itself which sounds particularly well-rehearsed and is organised in a systematic fashion, punctuated by cuts to a plain red screen which are reminiscent of inter-titles. This is then emphasised again as the introduction concludes. Spasojevi? turns to address the camera once more but he is cut off mid-sentence, just as he is expressing his desire that the interview should not be censored as the film has been.

Spasojevi?'s opening line, "this film you are about to see, or you have already seen it and you are now just exploring the contents of your DVD"<sup>[66]</sup> suggests that he is also unaware of the final placement of his introduction on the DVD at the time of recording. This intimates that he regards the audience as intelligent enough to understand his metaphor without intervention from himself, and that to him the introduction is in fact surplus to requirements, a sentiment that

correlates with the irreverent tone of the monologue. It is noteworthy that this introduction went on to form part of the main feature and is not an optional DVD extra suggesting that the UK distribution company believe that the film must be viewed within its socio-historical context in order to justify the transgressive content and to be interpreted as a political allegory.

This article would agree that it is difficult to interpret the metaphor from the film text alone, obscured as it is by shock value, sex, and highly stylised bloody violence. Spasojevič's choice of such an extreme genre to illustrate his frustrations further complicates this, placing his UK target audience between the ages of eighteen and thirty.<sup>[67]</sup> Despite a lingering perception of Serbia as violent, initiated by the extensive UK reporting of the break-up of Yugoslavia, it is realistic to suggest that this alien context, combined with the elapsed time (since the conflict) and the physical distance (between the UK and Serbia) mean that the metaphor underlying *A Serbian Film* would be outside of this audience's direct frame of reference and therefore require the explanation to be effectively understood. The UK censorship of the film drove a percentage of its target audience to seek out uncut versions. The lack of director's introduction on BitTorrent files deprives these consumers of the necessary context required to understand the film's metaphor without further research. The film is recognised and sought out largely for its transgressive qualities and has routinely been included in 'top ten most extreme' film listings.<sup>[68]</sup> This has resulted in an arbitrary interpretation of Serbian national identity, not only on fan forums but also within the wider population. *BodyBuilding.com* user Whytchapel posited, "I thought the movie was pretty \*\*\*\* until I read the director's reasoning and the metaphor the film represents",<sup>[69]</sup> and another asked, "I heard most Serbian people are sick fuks [sic] like the people in that movie, is that true? Apparently most are rapists/child molesters and terrorists".<sup>[70]</sup> In fact there is a pervasive negative view of Serbia. Forum user Horrorreject at *Horrormoviefans.com* explained, "Serbia looks like a beautiful country but these movies lead me to believe that it's a hell hole",<sup>[71]</sup> and many forum users were of the opinion that "films with such content emanate from that region".<sup>[72]</sup>

Representations of national identity are an issue also evident throughout the critical coverage of *A Serbian Film*. The majority of UK reviewers quote or paraphrase the allegorical explanation in an effort to provide context and facilitate understanding.<sup>[73]</sup> One thing that Spasojevič does stress in the UK DVD introduction is that even though life in Serbia was a point of inception for his film, he considers this a universal story. This is not something he is heard repeating for festival publicity very regularly and the UK press fail to acknowledge the transposable nature of the film, perhaps because they are unwilling to admit that this could ever be applied to a Western nation. In doing so, each of the publications 'others' the film. They fixate upon it only as a representation of Serbia. Writing for *The Guardian*, David Cox asked, "so just how does the film's story manage to tell Serbia's?"<sup>[74]</sup> Cox concluded that cinema may not be an effective medium for "parables"<sup>[75]</sup> and acknowledged that *A Serbian Film* would leave viewers with a questionable understanding of Serbia. *The New York Times* shared this view, interpreting the film as a "piece of corrosive social criticism, exposing a national psychology of sadism, misogyny and self-pity".<sup>[76]</sup> The metaphor informing the film is further skewed by existing Orientalist notions of the Eastern Bloc evoked by film's title. For Macnab, the film has "a feeling of nihilistic self-loathing" running through it.<sup>[77]</sup> Despite the target audience not necessarily witnessing the UK media coverage of the Balkan conflict first-hand, Serbia remains a "symbol for tension, conflict and, ultimately, warfare".<sup>[78]</sup> *A Serbian Film* attempts to subvert Western

notions of Serbia by virtue of exaggeration, but achieves the opposite. Macnab surmised that the West may perpetually deem Serbia a “pariah state”.<sup>[79]</sup> The film invokes dated tropes of self-Balkanisation through the use of extreme violence, bloodshed and a pervasive atmosphere of hopelessness in order to attract an audience. This creates normative difficulties. Spasojević embarked upon a project to “communicate the political, moral and psychological downfall of Serbia”<sup>[80]</sup> as experienced by the everyman. In the UK, the outcome of his ambition was largely received as a “violent, revolting shocker” in which “the horrors are merciless”.<sup>[81]</sup> The press reacted primarily to the visceral impact of the film, finding it difficult to disentangle the moral and political message from the sexual sadism, the cruelty and the hatred. This film is “irremediably caught up with [...] aesthetic and cultural forms, with [the] already existing signification”<sup>[82]</sup> of ordeal cinema. Whilst it is arguably successful in helping the viewer to *feel* the extremity of the situation, it does not and cannot directly explain the Serbian condition. Featherstone and Johnson conclude that *A Serbian Film* leaves the audience “in no doubt about the true horror of the sadistic state machine”,<sup>[83]</sup> but this article would argue that *A Serbian Film* actually leaves the UK press in no doubt about the true horror of *Serbia*. To the UK press, *A Serbian Film* represents both Serbia, and the Serbian people as barbaric. Further to this, it indicates that they are unchanged by time and beyond reprieve.

## Conclusion

Originating from a small national film industry, *A Serbian Film* raises questions about how Serbia defines itself in an international context. This is complicated by the unusual circumstances in which the film was produced. The source of funding is not completely transparent. Spasojević claims to have funded the film primarily using his own money, with the cast and crew also contributing. Besides making the film entirely independent of the Serbian government, it also means that the Serbian production most widely recognised in the UK is a vehicle for the agenda of a very limited number of people. The film cultivates negative perceptions of a country that, for the most part, had no hand in its making.

With *A Serbian Film*, Spasojević aspired to challenge Orientalist perceptions of Serbia but simultaneously employed dated tropes of self-balkanisation to secure a Western audience. In doing so he evoked the spirit of the Balkan wild man, a concept which has been largely abandoned by domestic Serbian productions.<sup>[84]</sup> Spasojević adapted and amplified the atmosphere of cruelty and violence exhibited in 1990s Serbian film. Severely testing the boundaries of taste served to increase the success of *A Serbian Film* on the international genre festival circuit, an environment where organisers actively pursue films which will generate maximum publicity. However, the political message of the film is obscured by the director’s use of ordeal cinema requiring a socio-historical framework to confer meaning. Despite acknowledging and in some cases attempting to contextualise the political metaphor, the UK press classified the film as torture porn. In the case of *A Serbian Film*, this combination of sensationalist media reporting coupled with limited understandings of the Balkan conflict led to a reinforcement of the very reductive understandings of Serbian national identity the film set out to subvert.

The censorship of the film in the UK exacerbated this misconception as extreme film fans sought to discover uncut versions of the film online. The ability to contextualise such material is

crucial when negotiating meaning, but this has become increasingly difficult in a world where access to film is unlimited, and uncensored. Even Christopher Tookey admits that “the BBFC’s powers are of limited effectiveness. The two recent films it has refused to certify [...] are available on the internet.”<sup>[85]</sup> The diametrically opposed relationship between digital distribution and classification requires more extensive investigation. Whilst legal streaming platforms begin to routinely make use of BBFC classifications, the expansion of the illegal download market has witnessed an increase in the availability of world cinema. Extreme horror films like *A Serbian Film* or *The Bunny Game* (Adam Rehmeier, 2010), recently rejected in the UK, are easily obtainable. Ongoing research in this area is vital as we seek to understand the ways in which increased illegal dissemination of extreme films impacts upon UK audiences, industries, and censorship policies.

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[1] The film received no funding from either Eurimages or the Serbian Ministry of Culture. Instead, director Srđan Spasojević set up his own production company Contra Film to raise money.

[2] Dejan Ognjanović, “The Art of Atrocity,” *Rue Morgue* 106, (November 2010): p. 18.

[3] The tendency of post-Yugoslav directors to embrace self-Balkanisation, the self-perception of ‘Balkan’ as ‘other’, was initially observed by Maria Todorova. She describes the Western view of the Balkan male as “uncivilised, primitive, crude, cruel, and without exception, dishevelled”. Tomislav Longinović notes that self-Balkanisation manifested within films produced during the Yugoslavian ethnic conflict of the 1990s. These films were made by auteurs exhibiting in a global theatre and seeking to overcome the “domination / submission dichotomy” that defines the relationship of Western cinema to cinema at the periphery. These films “represent the post-Yugoslav space as a zone where distortions of extreme passions strive to satisfy the imaginary demand for violence coming from the Western Eye”. See Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 38-61, and Tomislav V. Longinović, “Playing the Western Eye: Balkan Masculinity and Post-Yugoslav War Cinema,” in *East European Cinemas*, ed. Anikó Imre (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 35-48.

[4] Ramon Lobato and Mark D. Ryan, “Rethinking Genre Studies through Distribution Analysis: Issues in International Horror Movie Circuits,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 9, no. 2 (2011): pp. 188-203.

[5] Ivana Kronja, “The Aesthetics of Violence in Recent Serbian Cinema: Masculinity in Crisis,” *Film Criticism* 30, no. 3 (Spring, 2006): pp. 22-23.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Nevena Dakovi?, "Love, Magic, and Life: Gypsies in Yugoslav Cinema," in *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, eds. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, Vol. 5: Types and Stereotypes (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamin's Publishing Company, 2010), p. 393.

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[58] Mark Langshaw, "UK ISPs Under Pressure to Clamp Down on Illegal Downloaders," *Digital Spy*, 2nd September 2013, [Accessed 20/08/14].

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[67] It is possible to draw similarities between a UK Asia Extreme audience and the potential UK audience for *A Serbian Film*. The following study found the Asia Extreme target audience to be primarily aged 18-30. See Emma Pett, "People Who Think Outside the Box: British Audiences and Asian Extreme Films," *Cine Excess* Launch Issue (ND).

[68] See for example:

"Truly Disturbing," [Accessed 20/08/14], and "Bloody-Disgusting," [Accessed 20/08/14].

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[77] Macnab, "A Serbian Film: Is this the Nastiest Film Ever made?"

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[81] Nigel Andrews, "Film Releases: December 10," *Financial Times*, 8th December 2010, [Accessed 20/08/14].

[82] Dean Lockwood, "All Stripped Down: The Spectacle of 'Torture Porn'," *Popular Communication* 7, no. 1 (2009): p. 47.

[83] Featherstone and Johnson, "Ovo Je Srbija", p. 72.

[84] Referring to films made throughout the 80s and 90s, Frederic Jameson posits that "movies are pre-eminently the place in which the Balkans can be shown [...] to be the place of violence itself – its home and its heartland". He goes on to highlight that "such movies seem to offer eyewitness proof that the people in the Balkans are violent by their very nature; they seem to locate a place in which culture and civilization [...] are at the thinnest veneer, at any moment capable of being stripped away to show the anarchy and ferocity underneath. The inhabitant of this landscape is the wild man of the Balkans". See: Jameson, Fredric. "Thoughts on Balkan Cinema." in *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film*, eds. Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 231-258.

[85] Tookey, "It's Not Just the Internet That's Full of Violent Porn – So Are Cinemas."

## Notes on Contributor

**Alexandra Kapka** is a PhD candidate in the School of Creative Arts at Queen's University Belfast. Her research interests include European distribution, extreme cinema, digital piracy and censorship.

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