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### The fall of the pink curtain

*Alliances between nationalists and queers in post-Yugoslavian cinema*

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**Publication date**

2018

**Document Version**

Other version

**License**

Other

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Vravnik, V. (2018). *The fall of the pink curtain: Alliances between nationalists and queers in post-Yugoslavian cinema*.

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## CHAPTER 2: NO WAY OUT – GO WEST<sup>19</sup>

Orthodox Serbs hate Muslims. Muslims don't like Orthodox Serbs. The Croats also live there [in Bosnia-Herzegovina], they're Catholic and ambivalent towards Muslims. I think they currently don't like each other. However, this hatred will stop someday. They will lay down their guns and forget about the war. But they will continue to hate homosexuals. In the Balkans, your family would rather you were a murderer than a faggot.

*Go West*

In this chapter, I focus on Ahmed Imamović's 2005 film entitled *Go West*. It was the first mainstream feature-length film produced in Bosnia-Herzegovina to showcase a homosexual couple and remains so until the present-day. It portrays a love story between Bosniak Kenan (Mario Drmać) and Bosnian-Serb Milan (Tarik Filipović) and was set during the 1990s war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Most of the Bosnian-produced films from that period focused on the war, but none addressed homosexuality. *Go West* is not only the first Bosnian homosexually-oriented film but also the first Bosnian film to address queer identities during the war. In many Western novels and films that explore the intersection between war and homosexuality (*Aimée & Jaguar* [1999], *November Moon* [1984], *Serving in Silence* [1995], *Walk on Water* [2004], *Yossi & Jagger* [2002], *Platoon* [1986], etc.), the encounter always raises issues about non-normative masculinities. What makes this film ripe for study is the fact that it features an interracial homosexual relationship: the couple fear not only homophobic but also xenophobic responses.

The story begins in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina, where Kenan is playing the cello in an orchestra during a concert for peace, amidst the beginning of the 1990s war. Illustrating

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<sup>19</sup> A part of an earlier version of this chapter is presented in Vravnik and Sremac (2016). Vravnik, as leading author, was responsible for the majority of the article; Sremac wrote subchapter 2 and contributed to the conclusion and general editing (Vravnik, Vesna and Srdjan Sremac. "Strange Bedfellows: (non/mis) Alliances between Nationalists and Queers." *Facta Universitatis, Series: Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology and History*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2016, pp. 71-82).

war in the first scene, Milan is depicted simultaneously practicing karate and fighting. These scenes are inter-cut with scenes drawn from the peace concert. In the next scene we learn that the couple is attempting to flee the country in fear of their safety. On their way they stop in Milan's Serbian village, a territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina occupied by Serbians. Both xenophobic and homophobic tensions lead Kenan to dress as a woman and they pretend to live as a straight Serbian couple. Later, Milan is conscripted into the Serbian army and a local female sex worker named Ranka (Mirjana Karanović) discovers Kenan's gender-secret and rapes him. Soon after, Milan is killed at the frontline. In retribution for his perceived perversity, Ranka castrates Kenan and destroys his cello. Milan's father Ljubo (Rade Šerbedžija) then kills Ranka. With the assistance of Milan's friend Lunjo (Haris Burina), they help Kenan continue his journey Westward, although this time he is alone, heartbroken, and with an empty cello case.

I begin this study with the role of the cello, which I view as a symbol for hope as manifested in the form of classical music. In the opening scene, in a documentary-style face-to-camera close-up shot on French television, Kenan begins the story by explaining the hateful relationships that exist between Croatians, Serbians, and Bosniaks. As the epigram suggests, all of which have a common enemy, homosexuals. Kenan plays the cello beginning at the peace concert and throughout the film when he is trapped in Milan's village because of a war. In the last scene, he is still playing his instrument, only this time it is an invisible one. As problematic as the direct transfer of ideas are between East and West, here, in the film, East and West are symbolically talking to each other. This documentary-style dialogue frames the film with one segment at the beginning and another at the end. The cello is deployed to challenge homophobia and xenophobia. Nevertheless, as he plays the invisible cello, we the viewer can hear the music, but the journalist cannot and asks him to play louder.

The cello and its invisible counterpart correspond to the division between the local and Western perspectives. The cello is presented as a localized reason for hope and the West is perceived as a way out. It is a point of departure for the couple in a Serbian village where religion

propagates homophobia and xenophobia. They require protective camouflage, so they present themselves as a Serbian heterosexual couple. The boundary between visible and invisible plays a crucial role throughout the film and attaches a label to what does and does not pass for normal. Before proceeding Westward, they pass successfully at their heterosexually-organized wedding, which is, in actuality, a wedding between two homosexual men. This gender and nationalist closet does not protect them for very long since there is a complication in the village: the sex worker Ranka. She cannot, however, stop Kenan from proceeding Westward (after the death of Milan) nor can she take away his hope. Even though she destroys his cello, Kenan retains the instrument's case.

Yet, the element of hope lies not only in the cello, to which I will return at the end, but also in the relationships developed by the main characters. For instance, Lunjo assisted them with cross-dressing gender transformations and the preparation of counterfeit passports. Milan's father and Ljubo (a supposed traditional patriarch) ally themselves with Kenan after Milan dies and help him continue his journey Westward. Both Lunjo and Ljubo act to protect the main characters and stand united to challenge homophobia.

The film aids me in probing the encounters between homosexuality and the specificity of the Balkans' masculinist culture. Alternately expressed, I am interested in the non-normative masculinity that manifests itself in a region which is not only a complicated mix of ethnicities but also a mosaic of different religions, namely: The Eastern Orthodox Church, Islam, and Roman Catholicism. *Go West* is a film that paradoxically succeeds in shedding light on homosexuality in the Balkan region but fails to provide a positive or optimistic portrayal of homosexuals. The title of the film alludes to the extremely limited maneuvering room for sexual minorities and offers a suggestion. The only option, in the film at least, is for homosexuals to move (or escape) Westward. However, this is not my main notion, rather it illuminates the background of my concentration point: the relationships between the agents of various colliding groups. Specifically, I explore the unlikely alliances and activist tactics that challenge homophobia. The film provides viewers with

specific strategies – which could be considered rather dubious – but prove to be quite viable in the context of the film’s setting.

### **Political Positioning: A Cultural Coming Out and Visibility Politics**

*Go West* is an original cultural intervention that took place in a region where national origins and religious beliefs are usually good predictors of the kind of message a story will convey. Regarding the war, most films produced in the region tend to take one political side or another. They mostly focus on the role that each political group played during the 1990s conflict. Most of the Bosnian films – produced during and after that period – portrayed Serbian people as aggressors. Imamović’s film did not. He also did not intentionally desire to be the spokesperson for any specific community. His film portrays characters involved in multi-ethnic relationships. In other words, the portrayal of gay characters and of the catastrophic homophobic violence occurs within a very specific geo-political context, i.e. Kenan is a Bosniak and Milan a Bosnian-Serb. This was not the case earlier in multi-ethnic Yugoslavia, but beginning at the start of the war, ethnicity played a major role and became a demarcation factor. Religious nationalism was erupting, and interracial relationships were perceived by these nationalists as a threat to national security. Homosexual relationships were similarly considered to be treasonous.

This film received more public attention than any other Bosnia-Herzegovinian film in most of the post-Yugoslavian countries. Moss remarks that it received twice as much local media coverage than any other film with a gay or lesbian theme (Moss 2007: 361). But in this case, visibility certainly does not mean acceptance or even a change in mentalities. Most commentators reported on the film in an enraged demeanor. Right-wing and religious groups violently critiqued the film and even sent Imamović death threats (Hawton 2005). Additionally, he received negative responses from queer community members who suspected him of cultural exploitation and of using homosexuality as a self-serving publicity tactic (Simić 2006b).

One of the first striking contradictions I noticed while studying the reception of the film was that conservative people were outraged by a film wherein homosexuality is neither celebrated nor presented in a positive way. It seems to send a rather pessimistic message about the homophobic construction of masculinities in the region. It portrays an immense imaginary homosexual threat; however, it is only one character, Ranka who believes homosexuality is a threat. Also, the narrative proposes only two solutions for a gay couple: to stay in the closet or flee the country in search of political, religious, and cultural freedom.

It is not my intention to suggest that globally queer people should rejoice or hail this film as a successful attempt to make homosexuality visible or as a positive portrayal. All the films included in the corpus of this study follow this logic: the films still cannot be celebrated as a cultural coming out or a clear marker of political progress. On the contrary, this is a film about homophobia rather than homosexuality. It is useful to analyze the specific kind of localized homophobia that emerged around the time the film was released to understand why violence was inflicted on homosexual men. *Go West* is the first film to portray such violence and to suggest survival strategies, limited as they are. Because they are limited, I focus on the complicated politics of visibility and the ambivalence of the film itself.

The various discursive voices that made their positions clear were often extreme and negative, yet the project had begun on a positive note by receiving government funding.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps then, it was not so absurd to imagine that queer communities would be encouraged to envisage the construction of alliances with governmental institutions. I suggest that this acceptance by the government and all the critiques promulgated by specific communities reveal a profound ambivalence for a film whose message remains mostly opaque. I do not propose to decide whether the film contributes to or denounces specific types of homophobia and xenophobia that the film narrative makes visible. Instead, I focus on the contradictions that make it difficult for queer activists, as well as for heteronormative voices, to lay claim to this tragic film.

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<sup>20</sup> The national Foundation for Cinema Sarajevo [Fondacija za kinematografiju Sarajevo].

This first film from the region wherein homosexuality is represented can hardly be called a gay film because of the complex and contradictory visibility politics at play. Neither Kenan nor Milan are the film's focalizer and homosexuality seems to be filmed in such a way to make it acceptable to straight and/or homophobic audiences. Similar to Kenan's cross dressing or straight acting, the camera also remains in a sort of closet. On screen, Kenan and Milan never appear engaged in intimate scenes. Their only on-screen kiss is obscurely filmed in a dimly-lit corridor set during nighttime. In the scene, we see only silhouettes of two people who kiss at the end of a tunnel and the darkness perpetuates the mystery. Shortly thereafter, there is another intimate moment – without kissing this time – that takes place in their darkened room in Milan's village. In my view, homosexuality is filmed in such a way that does not break taboos. This was, however, enough visibility for the media to respond.<sup>21</sup>

The actors' reactions are more than ambivalent and can hardly be hailed as homosexual icons. Tarik Filipović, the actor who played Milan, distanced himself from the kiss scene and insisted that he was only playing a role.<sup>22</sup> He claimed that he had never kissed a man and added that he would never again agree to play the role of a homosexual man (Moss 2012: 363). Apparently, distancing himself from the kiss seemed a necessary professional step to protect his career and shows an amount of acceptance of such violence. However, Mario Drmać who played Kenan, was proud of his role as a gay character. He even publicly lamented that the depiction of homosexual sexual relations was not included in the final version of the film (Moss 2012: 363).

The media's obsession with homosexual kissing and the contamination effect of a homosexual role on an actor's resume, is a pattern that is certainly not restricted to the Balkans. In the West retaliatory measures could include the withdrawal of sponsors and financial losses from advertisement revenue. The West, which the characters perceive as a kind of sanctuary, is actually rife with such occurrences. We only have to remember the scandal over the billboard depiction of

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<sup>21</sup> Especially in the articles of Iličić and Petrinović (2005): "How I was kissed by Tarik Filipović" and "The Secrets of my Feminine Side" pointed out by Moss (2012: 363).

<sup>22</sup> A well-known figure who hosts the local version of *Who wants to be a Millionaire?* [*Tko želi biti milijunaš?*] on the Croatian national television channel HTV from 2002-2007 and 2009-2010 (Reić 2010).

two men kissing which appeared in a marketing campaign for Suitsupply, a Dutch fashion company which caters to men (“Zoenende mannen? ‘Mensen schrikken’” 2018). Vandals destroyed over thirty billboards; yet the very next day a political center-right party (VVD) launched a campaign by placing 100 posters depicting a homosexual kiss for each vandalized Suitsupply billboard (“VVD start postercampagne zoenende mannen” 2018).

### **Survival Tactics of Cross-Dressing**

Cross-dressing has a long tradition in Western films dating back to the early days of the silent film era during the 1930s, with actors such as Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel. Nowadays the stakes are different because the reasons for passing vary from one film to the next. Cross-dressing can be presented in a playful manner in comedies, or – in paranoid narratives – as a serious threat to social stability (Phillips 2006: 5). John Phillis points out that in comedies such as *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), *Victor/Victoria* (1982), and *Some Like it Hot* (1959), cross-dressing is positioned as a functional pursuit to achieve a specific aim and a pragmatic solution to a problem. It is a temporary transgression which does not threaten the *status quo* and in fact reinforces heteronormativity. In thrillers, however, cross-dressing characters are almost exclusively presented as killers, sexual predators, or psychopaths, such as in films like *Psycho* (1960), *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and *Freebie and the Bean* (1974).

Yet, the practice of cross-dressing or rather living as a woman, as presented in *Go West*, is radically different from what we see happening in Western and US cinema. *Go West* is inscribed in a very different local tradition where cross-dressing as a theme is governed by different socio-political norms. The constant fear of violence has consequences concerning the kinds of choices fictional gay characters are expected to find plausible. In *Go West*, the depiction of cross-dressing is not a defiant drag performance such as in *Paris is Burning* (1991) where voguing is both an art form and the manifestation of a chosen sexual and social identity. In *Go West* cross-dressing is not a



choice but a survival tactic. Kenan never actually feels like a woman, and there is no allusion to gender dysphoria or transgenderism in his case.

Two films that focus on cross-dressing were released in the region during the 1990s: *Dupe od mramora* (*The Marble Ass* 1994) directed by Želimir Žilnik and *Virgina* (*Sworn Virgin* 1991) directed by Srdjan Karanović.<sup>23</sup> *The Marble Ass* is a film about a real-life character named Vedran vernacularly known as Merlinka, a male transvestite and sex worker in Belgrade. Merlinka is a personage who is mocked and considered by some to display a deviant form of masculinity. Merlinka's boyfriend Johnny is drafted into the army and is subsequently killed. However, this film presents the main character as someone who chooses to cross-dress. The idea is not to hide one's sexual preference as in *Go West* but there is a striking similarity: the two stories are both set during wartime although this time in Serbia. Masculinity is systematically associated with violence, while femininity is limited to the domestic milieu. Sex in this story is used to convey the idea of maintaining peace. The famous anti-war slogan "Make Love, Not War" is befitting to this film since Merlinka is a sex worker who strives to make peace in her own way. This is certainly a similarity with *Go West*, but on the other hand, Kenan is raped by a sex worker and sex is used as a survival strategy.

*Sworn Virgin* is an even more important example to the extent that it highlights a cultural practice that is not completely recognizable in Western LGBTBI discourses and representations. Cross-dressing here has to do with one form of transgenderism, yet in a different context than in *Go West*. While Kenan is a homosexual man who lives as a woman because he fears discrimination and violence, Stevan is a woman who needs to become a man for social rather than sexual reasons. She is a straight woman but needs to accept the role imposed upon her by another aspect of a male-dominated culture. Because none of her siblings are male, Stevan, by default, cross-dresses as a

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<sup>23</sup> Želimir Žilnik is one of the major film directors of the Yugoslav Black Wave Cinema known for his social engagement. Vedran was his favorite actor in *Beograde, dobro jutro* [*Good morning, Belgrade*] and *Lijepa žene prolaze kroz grad* [*Beautiful Women Passing through the Town*] both produced for television in 1986. He then played a major role in *The Marble Ass* before being killed in 2003. The perpetrators were set free in 2004 due to a lack of evidence (Kalaba 2017).

man in order to maintain the patriarchal tradition of Montenegrin and Albanian rural society. Known as sworn-virgins these woman-born women are pressured to live as men because the absence of a man at the head of the household is unthinkable in those societies, as Antonia Young writes extensively in her book *Women Who Become Men: Albanian Sworn Virgins* (2001). For the sworn-virgin, this specific form of transgender transformation only serves to reinforce the prestige and power of the symbolic male – the potentially transgressive sexual element is simply bypassed. The so-called new men are extracted from cultural sexual exchanges, this perpetuates the idea that the possibility of creating more potentially homosexual or deviant subjects, is foreclosed.

In *Go West*, however, the scenario is even more problematic since cross-dressing represents both a concession to heteronormativity and a cover-up, which functions as a dramatic incendiary device because a cross-dressing homosexual male is likely to create sexual panic and paranoia. Perhaps more importantly, while the sworn-virgins not only reinforce gender hierarchies but also uphold the cultural norms legitimized by their community, the hero-character of *Go West* transgresses not only gender and sexual norms but also the implicit taboo forbidding ethnic and religious exogamy. Kenan must metamorphize in order to survive; he must appear as a woman so that he may appear as a straight Serbian woman married to a non-Muslim Serbian man.

If sex is what the sworn-virgins must forgo, then it follows that it is also a weapon of oppression which is visually exhibited in *Go West*. Kenan, cross-dressed as a woman, is raped by a woman. While the kiss between the lovers is hidden in a deliberate silhouetted long-shot depicted at the end of a tunnel; the rape scene, conversely, is filmed in a daylight setting. The rape is depicted as being more desirable and appropriate: the camera does not flinch away from a shot which captures the raped person experiencing sexual satisfaction, whereas a legitimate homosexual kiss is taboo.

Kenan's first encounter with Ranka occurs the day after he arrives in the village. He is seen urinating standing in an outhouse located behind Milan's home. The doors only partially conceal him: from his ankles to his shoulders. Ranka sees him, but Kenan excuses himself because sitting

on such toilet would be considered unhygienic for a city girl. He maintains the deception this time, but while Milan is fighting at the battlefield, Ranka discovers Kenan's penis when she accidentally falls on him and feels his genitals beneath his skirt. Shortly thereafter she takes advantage of him and rapes him. He tries to resist but Ranka is persistent and continues pushing Kenan, eventually backing him up against a wall, when she finally – beyond the frame – grabs hold of his penis and says, "I'm so glad that you are not a woman," while the camera captures their faces in a close-up shot. There is no allusion here to whether he is homosexual or not, she seems only interested in his identity as a biological male. She uses him for her own sexual gratification, and in Kenan's case, the male body does not amount to masculinity.

One of the particularly disturbing elements of this scene is that Kenan does not actively fight back against Ranka. In order to keep his secret from spreading, he is required to have sexual relations with her. Sex now becomes currency: Kenan is both being raped and used as a sex worker, to the extent that the price of the sexual act protects his homosexual closet. There is, however, a sense that he is transforming, not only hiding: the closet changes him but the transformation is the opposite of coming out of the closet. The closet not only makes him look heteronormative, but it also, progressively, harms his body to the point of mutilation. Ranka's rape reiterates his position as a male body, but a male body who has lost the power that he was supposed to enjoy as a privilege. The pleasure that he seems to experience when he has sex can be read as a form of alienation from himself. If he is going to be a gay male, then he is, here literally, forced to indulge in heterosexual sex. Yet, this alleged pleasure is merely a strategy to survive. In the next scene Kenan pretends to enjoy the sex to keep Ranka from guessing that he is actually homosexual. To the extent that we know that he is at the mercy of Ranka, one wonders what the narrative is trying to transmit here. Perhaps because his body betrays him, he has no choice but to feel pleasure at the hands of someone who is coercing him.

The character is ensnared in a web of contradictions, all of which have to do with the necessity to be someone else, if he wants to survive. Socially, he is always in some sort of closet

that seems to uphold the conservative norm: his cross-dressing act is not a preference, it's a performance. He dresses as a woman so that his love for Milan can be perceived of as a heteronormative construction, but he is freely homosexual when he is alone with his partner. He is no transvestite, no drag queen, and certainly not transgender.<sup>24</sup> Yet, the film exhibits an apparently conservative and rather ironically transgressive perspective of cross-dressing. On a symbolic level, Ranka seizes the dominant masculine position while feminizing Kenan. However, when he is with Ranka, he is viewed as a lesbian. Soon thereafter, during their second sexual encounter, their roles become reversed. In order to retain the heterosexual perspective, Kenan – still dressed as a woman – assumes the dominant masculine position and penetrates Ranka anally. The scene opens with the sounds of a cello, which Kenan had played in the previous scene. The musical score serves as a leitmotif to homophobes who would think “Yes, finally!” but the film critiques the heterosexual perspective of this act since, the sound of the cello is presented as a tool to challenge homophobia, an issue to which I will return later.

Furthermore, the transformation will lead him towards a caricature of transgenderism. This can be observed during a nighttime scene filmed in the local graveyard. Kenan is shown sitting next to Milan's grave, without a dress or even a wig, almost naked – amidst a fit of tears. Moonlight illuminates his half-naked body while he plays his cello. When Ranka approaches him, there is dramatic music playing in the background. She then tries to save him, dress him up and hide him in her arms, Kenan resists and pushes her away. He expresses his love for Milan, but he also points out that he is a Muslim and does not belong on Serbian soil. This is the second reason he masquerades as a woman. Ranka replies that she can accept the fact that he is Muslim, since she has a son whose father is also Muslim. Kenan, however, continues to comport himself as a homosexual man and insists that he has never loved a woman as much as Milan. “Do you understand?” he shouts. Ranka refuses to believe him, hurriedly undresses him and attempts to initiate sex, saying that he belongs

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<sup>24</sup> Being forced into heteronormativity reminds me of Iran's supposedly liberal trans-policy. Homosexuality is treated as gender identity disorder not as homosexuality *per se*, which enables some subjects to avoid repressive laws. This policy opens up some safe space for homosexuals, yet they need to undergo gender transformations to be able to express their same-sex desire in a heteronormative way (Najmabadi 2013: 1-3).

to her. Kenan finally manages to thwart her advances. The dramatic music then becomes louder while the camera travels around and behind a wooden cross that stands before a tombstone. When Kenan rejects the notion of continuing to be her sex toy, she punishes him in a harshly possessive way. Clutching a knife, Ranka raises her hand, and in one fell swoop, separates his testicles from his body.

When Kenan refuses to remain in the internalized or a so-called transparent closet – while he is telling Ranka that he loves Milan – she attacks him and focuses her attention on his genitals. Now she is trying to turn him into a castrated man and attempts to eliminate a part of the male body that represents masculinity in a hetero-normative patriarchal society. What she cannot eliminate, however, is the fact that he still loves Milan. The price he must pay for the self-disclosure of his sexual orientation is that his body must bear the marks of homophobia: he becomes a man without testicles, who has endured a barbaric punishment for not complying with the rapist's coercive tactics.

The film suggests that the only desperately cruel and tragic way for him to continue to relate to a heterosexual male body is to deny what is problematic about his maleness: the physical sign of maleness which, in the warped logic of the narration, is supposed to be in contradiction to his sexual preference. Ranka's jealous and disturbed character, redesigns Kenan's body to make it compatible with her own gruesome morals. The narrative denounces her acts by presenting her as a sadistic clairvoyant who predicts the future from a coffee cup and places a curse on Milan's body. The price of her corrupted logic is that someone's body must be mutilated. Thus, the mutilated body becomes the physical representation of the price to be paid in order to propagate such apparently normative – but in fact incredibly violent fantasies – of binary oppositions. When institutionalized sexism, intersecting with homophobia/Islamophobia, Kenan is raped not just as a woman but also as homosexual and Muslim.

The film presents a theme which is rarely addressed, namely the fact that men are also victims of rape, in a context where women are so often the victims of rape more than men. The

narrative makes it particularly clear that rape is a weapon that can be deployed within both homosexual and heterosexual structures. Dubravka Žarkov argues that rape is a way to realign or eliminate a person's ethnicity. Sexual violence against male bodies also has to do with castration: it can be symbolically seen as a means to emasculating entire ethnic groups (2001: 78). In Žarkov's eyes, sexual intimidation or violence serves to humiliate an entire ethnic group. In the case of the homosexual male cross-dressed as a heterosexual female, the group that is targeted is the entire sexual minority community, regardless of their ethnicity and/or sexual preference.

### **Ambivalence in Local Perception**

Gendered identity and sexual practices are constantly being policed by governmental and religious groups. Consequently, any narrative that depicts homosexual characters must also consider the dominant and conservative definitions of what constitutes a nation, a traditional family, and a so-called normal body. To expose the homophobic and xenophobic tensions within this film, I investigate how nationalism, religion and sexual minorities become intertwined.

Firstly, this geographic region is traditionally homophobic, therefore homosexual people can expect little assistance from the legal system. Governmental institutions and legislation are still officially heteronormative. Neither homosexual marriage nor partnership agreements exist. Homosexuality was decriminalized relatively late (in 1996 in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and in 1998 in Serbia<sup>25</sup>) and the only existing legal protection<sup>26</sup> is the 2009 Anti-Discrimination Law that makes it illegal to discriminate on the grounds of "sexual orientation, gender identity, or sexual characteristics."<sup>26</sup> However, this law has never been properly implemented. Vladana Vlasić, a program coordinator at Sarajevo's Open Center [Sarajevski otvoreni centar] argues that there is no harmonization between the existing legislation and the 2009 Anti-Discrimination Law, which should have been implemented by 2010. Additionally, no discrimination register has ever been

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<sup>25</sup> The film focuses on a Bosnian-Serbian Republic established within the borders of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

<sup>26</sup> 2009 Anti-Discrimination Law, Article 2.

established, which was supposed to be introduced by the Ministry for Human Rights. Furthermore, the government did not educate the public about the prohibition of discrimination nor did they explain the mechanisms of protection (Sekulić 2013).

Secondly, when it comes to promoting national autonomy, the government of Bosnia-Herzegovina does not hesitate to use openly homophobic rhetoric. The country is also systematically equated with or imagined as a homogeneous heterosexual society. While countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, France, and the Scandinavian countries, along with a rising number of US states, proudly proclaim their acceptance of sexual diversity, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, however, homosexuality is still perceived of as a threat to national, cultural, and religious security. Tomasz Sikora suggests that “as long as the construction of masculinity (a male-inflected nationalism) involves a ban on homosexuality, the figure of the homosexual will be (as it has been) represented as anti-national” and in my opinion, ostracized in various ways (2004: 74).

Thirdly, beyond the law and the fact that the nation embraces heterosexual masculinity, homosexuals also suffer from an alliance between government and religious communities. In several religious discourses, homosexuality is presented as sinful, unnatural, and even as a mental illness, and the war has reinforced this latent homophobia (Jovanović 2013: 87-88). There is no natural progress towards liberalization. During the war and its aftermath, homophobic discourses were mobilized in the context of a societal re-traditionalizing trend and national re-patriarchialization. Importantly, at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, homophobia is a form of xenophobia and vice-versa. For instance, during the attacks on Belgrade’s gay pride celebration, neo-Nazis were chanting: “Serbia for Serbs, faggots out!” [“Srbija Srbima, napolje pederima!”]. In their opinion, queer people may not belong to the nation. Similarly, in Croatia, homosexuals were viewed as Serbians. During Croatia’s 2002 pride celebration, a throng of demonstrators were heard chanting “Go to Serbia” and “Kill the Serbs.” Homosexuals are considered by various strata of society as a subaltern other, being a domestic enemy, and a threat to the nation – internally and abroad. Croatian nationalism is profoundly homophobic, and homophobia is perceived to be in the national interest.

Moreover, homophobic xenophobia has added another component to the rhetoric: The West is accused of infecting the region with hemophilia and homosexuality. On the one hand, this is a very familiar trope: sexual deviants are also strangers and traitors. Their presence triggers the kind of “homosexual panic” described by Eve Sedgwick in her book *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). What is specific to the region, however, is the emphasis given to the interwoven forms of homophobia and xenophobia. Contrary to what Sedgwick describes as homosocial contradictory impulses – the panic caused when “intense male homosocial desire [is] as at once the most compulsory and the most prohibited of social bonds” (1990: 187) – the crisis here centers around the suspicion that Western discourses are infiltrating the Balkan region because of the presence of homosexuals. Part of the process of joining the EU addresses changes in human rights laws, which makes it more hospitable to the queer community. That situation has prompted a backlash because Europeanization is seen as a threat to the Muslim community and religious nationalists. In other words, homophobia has its sources not only in traditional religious and nationalist sympathies but is also caused by new forms of anti-globalization sentiment.

Meanwhile, ultra-rightwing nationalists and religious groups were accused of attacking homosexuals and were violently opposed to what these Westernized bodies symbolized. On the one hand, homosexual relationships are not protected by domestic laws and there is already a strong homophobic discourse coming from religious and nationalist voices. On the other hand, homophobes feel threatened by the (perceived) continued Western liberalization: their homophobia becomes now linked with anti-Western rhetoric. This paranoid plot assumes that queer people are vectors of conceptual infection. It follows then that a narrative of this genre produced within the geographic region is *de facto* already influenced by these discourses, and *Go West* is no exception.

Consequently, it is no surprise that the myth of the West as promised-land was appropriated by filmmakers. At the end of the film the West is presented as the only refuge from homophobia. At this point in the film, Kenan has been the victim of horrific homophobic violence and his lover Milan has been killed. Milan’s friend, Lunjo, is shown waiting with Kenan for the train to the West.



The camera shows us the train station in the distance. It makes the spectator aware of the Serbian flag flying atop a building and of the presence of soldiers in the background. Meanwhile, Kenan and Lunjo are sitting on a bench. Kenan is again cross-dressed as Milena and appears seated quietly exhibiting an empty stare. Lunjo gets emotional and begins to cry. He says:

I plan to desert as well. War is a crap. Do you know how much industry has progressed? But we're fighting instead. We must catch up, bro. But we'll never catch up. How can we catch up? We never will! Fuck, we're persecuting each other like we are still in the Middle Ages. Abroad they're producing computer chips. Do you know how much data a computer chip the size of a fingernail can hold? A million! And what's happening with us? We're attacking each other on hills and in forests. Don't we have anything more intelligent to do? You must go West, that's my advice!

The quasi-orientalist myth of the West as peaceful and technologically advanced is appropriated by a desperate character who sees no way out except emigration. The film accuses the warring communities of being caught in their own barbaric past. The West is about production and industry, in contrast, the Balkans are somewhat underdeveloped, rural, and self-destructive. The film shows that this is the form that homophobia takes.

Imamović thus reproduces some of the stereotypical views of the Balkans that can be found in travelogues directed by Western filmmakers (*In the Land of Blood and Honey* [2011], *The Whistleblower* [2010], *Welcome to Sarajevo* [1997], etc.). The fact that the director is from the region does not make much of a difference in this case. Jordanova points out that filmmakers from the Balkans internalize the foreign point of view (2001). However, here, a bit differently. The West is presented as a place where queer people could escape homophobia, a dreamland where one longs to live. However, the West is a sort of home that was never a home, it is only nostalgia for a

(dream) home, which no longer exists. And now, Kenan is almost like a foreigner, although the couple never left the home that does not recognize them. The title *Go West* alludes to the pessimistic conclusion of the story: if you are queer in the Balkans, then the only solution is to emigrate West, which is seen as the promised land of sexual liberation. Although, the West is presented as a dream domicile for homosexuals, Western nations, however, do not hear the local realities: metaphorically, they do not hear the cello. The West is not just presented as ambivalent because it welcomes people and ignores local issues but also, because – in the eyes of homophobes – it is threatening, and it is thought to attract homosexuals.

This is also a common approach in other post-Yugoslavian homophile films. It creates schizophrenic audiences who might identify with all these messages concurrently. When the film is seen by Western audiences, however, the same sort of in-and-out positioning will lead to other interpretations. The Western viewer might be willing to resist the idea that the West whom he or she knows well, could be such a safe haven. Queer people in the Balkans may also refuse such a myth. Homophobes in the West may find it frightening if Balkan queer people should see the West as a safe-haven and reproduce the same xenophobia – from within the West – that Eastern countries are espousing. The film continuously interweaves Eastern and Western notions to illustrate a struggle for dominance.

The film seems to be a pessimistic tragedy, yet I would argue that one of the positive elements is that it serves as the beginning of a public dialogue between the queer community and homophobes. The film's dialogue is indeed violent but at least it contributes in another way to the visibility of the queer community and public discourse on homosexuality in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The film received much attention in national, regional and international media: there was twice as many articles published about *Go West* than any other film included in this study. Before the film was even released, director Imamović and co-writer Enver Puška were physically attacked and received death threats from enraged conservatives and Islamic religious groups (Hawton 2005). A right-wing pro-Muslim magazine *Walter* even published an edition where the main actors and the

director were depicted on the cover engaged in an anal orgy. The cover characterized the film as blasphemous, a religious term that equates homosexuality with sin. Journalist Fatmir Alispahić wrote that homosexuality is a physical disease. He criticized the director for appealing to what he calls the “faggot lobby” to promote himself (Spahić 2005). Since the film was promoted as a “love story between two soldiers on the front,” the protesters claimed that it is “the most controversial film” ever produced in Bosnia-Herzegovina (qtd. in Moss 2011: 358, 361). Islamic intellectuals criticized the lack of distinction between the victims and aggressors (Pavičić 2006). During an episode of *Hayat*, a pro-Islamic talk show on NTV, the film was introduced as making a “mockery” of the Muslim genocide during the war (Soares 2005). Enver Čausević, an editor at *Walter*, claims that “by addressing the issue of homosexuality in a film about the Bosnian war, it belittles the real issues at stake during the conflict” (Hawton 2005). Right-wing and religious leaders were incensed by the fact that the issue of homosexuality could be the focus of a story about the Balkan war.

One of the most original and provocative elements of the narrative is that the borders of ethnicity and heteronormativity are simultaneously transgressed. Any love story between a Bosniak and a Bosnian-Serb would obviously be controversial. Before the dissolution of Yugoslavia, mixed marriages were considered to be a positive and significant characteristic of the region (Korac 1998: 162), after the war in 1990s a re-traditionalizing and re-patriarchialization process started which made mixed marriages a target of conservatives. They were described as “bastard families, that are polluting the biological national source of family” (Mitić qtd. in Korac 1998: 162). Korac argues that this rhetoric was only a pretext for further ethnic cleansing (1998: 162-64). As a result, homosexuality is almost only an extenuating circumstance in the view of homophobes. The fact that the story is about a bi-ethnic but homosexual couple can be perceived of by homophobes as a relief, because it gives them the ability to focus on one transgression and deliberately turn a blind eye to the other.

At the beginning of *Go West*, we hear Kenan say:

Orthodox Serbs hate Muslims. Muslims don't like Orthodox Serbs. The Croats also live there [in Bosnia-Herzegovina], they're Catholic and ambivalent towards Muslims. I think they currently don't like each other. However, this hatred will stop someday. They will lay down their guns and forget about the war. But they will continue to hate homosexuals. In the Balkans, your family would rather you were a murderer than a faggot.

It is clear that there is hatred towards different ethnic groups which is a result of the rise of religious nationalism and an ethnically-based war. Yet the monologue also exposes the hope that xenophobia will someday be surpassed, and the war will end. But all ethnic groups will continue to have a common enemy: queer people.

On one hand, Kenan helps us imagine a hierarchy of acceptability when he points out that as a homosexual, he is less likely to be accepted than a veteran. That statement reflects the recent history of alliances forged between Croatian, Bosniaks, and Serbian war veterans. When Croatian and Bosniak veterans came to understand that their Serbian counterparts received no pensions, they decided to collect money for them ("Ujedinjeni u siromaštvu" 2012; T.V. 2012). This clearly shows a historical possibility of alliances between inter-racial war veterans. Apparently, nowadays, it does not even matter which side the soldiers were on. But while the borders of ethnicity may now seem more porous, no such thing happens with sexual borders. Sexual minorities are perceived of as threats to the national security. And alarmingly, the level of homophobia has actually increased after the war. No narrative of progress or automatic increase of acceptance is possible.

On the other hand, homophobic religious groups were not the only vocal critics. The queer community also objected to the film's content. The director was not gay himself and was accused of cultural appropriation: issues surrounding his finances and rise to celebrity was viewed as problematic. Croatian theorist and vocal lesbian Mima Simić, accused him of using homosexuality in a story about the war to make it more dramatic and to attract wider international audiences

(2006). In her view, he did not want to help the community to challenge homophobia but rather he took advantage of the oppressed sexual minority. The director's response was unexpectedly dismissive and aggressive. He addressed her as "it" ["ono"] and then invited her to perform fellatio ("Redatelj filma 'Go West' kritičarki" 2006).<sup>27</sup> This incredible hostility reflects what is at stake in this struggle for a contested cultural terrain. Also, any kind of attack on an openly homosexual activist should be considered homophobic. Imamović claims that his remark was not homophobic: he said in the interview with Moss that his remarks about Simić was not levied against her for being homosexual, but "for her putting words in his mouth" (qtd. in Moss 2012: 365). He might not be a homophobe, but he certainly acts sexist. He admits that he does not know what it is like for queer communities-at-large, yet he expected the local queer community to accept and defend the film. This is confirmed when he says: "I started things rolling, and you didn't join in. I have the balls to make this film, and you didn't have the strength to join me" (qtd. in Moss 2012: 365). He employs a classic macho image of courage to defend himself. It follows then that his sexist and homophobic statement can generate meanings that the director himself cannot control. He is not willing to give voice to a community that suspects his motives. On the other hand, his argument: "I have the balls" makes a clear distinction between him and the queer community. Setting the metaphor aside, he is clearly upset that the community do not recognize any sort of alliance. However, it is impossible to ignore the masculinist reference to genitalia as a form of courage. Does the statement mean that he literally has testes and they do not? Or does it mean that only men have the correct genitalia to create a revolution, but women and homosexuals cannot? I argue that the lines of alliances are far from clear and contaminated by homophobia, sexism, nationalism, and religious discourses.

Regardless of the fact that the film offers conflicting arguments by both religious and homosexual communities, Svetlana Đurković, a leader of Organization Q argues that this film helps promote LGBTI rights:

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<sup>27</sup> "It" ["ono"] is a neutral pronoun and when used for a person it has a dehumanizing effect.

I support this film [*Go West*]; it represents a big challenge and offers an alternative. It shows the human perspective of a story that is stronger and much more important than many of the so-called big issues. I believe that afterwards, things will no longer be the same again; our people will overcome many prejudices. This film is indeed a promotion of human rights. (qtd. in Spahić 2005)

Đurković also remarks that the director portrays untold stories from the war. Due to religious and nationalistic mosaics in Bosnia-Herzegovina there were many ethnically mixed relationships, also within queer communities. Đurković is not afraid of negative criticism but rather she argues that it exposes the immaturity of journalism: “Homosexuality is something that has always been hidden in this society. So, people don’t know how to react when it comes to the surface. They feel threatened.” (qtd. in Hawton 2005). Despite, or perhaps precisely because of the controversy, activists from Bosnia-Herzegovina were satisfied to see a homosexual couple as the focal point of the narrative.

What is also important to consider is the fact that the film received governmental funding and resources which helped the queer community gain national recognition. A countrywide fund, the Foundation for Cinema Sarajevo (Fondacija za kinematografiju Sarajevo), donated €175,000 to offset the production costs of *Go West*.<sup>28</sup> We could expect to see from the strong alliance between the government and the church during the recent war, that they would take the same stance to the common enemy – homosexuals – but this was not the case with this film. The request for financial support was not rejected; it therefore implicitly acknowledged and permitted a film to be produced about homosexuality. However, according to the director, this was not enough money to fully support the film, therefore a Croatian co-producer Alka Film offered his technical equipment as part of a joint venture (Jovičević 2005). It is common for films from this region to search for

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<sup>28</sup> This foundation allocates €750,000 annually for cinema productions.

international co-producers (Bubalo 2004). Iordanova argues that after the 1990s, many Eastern European countries enacted massive budgetary reductions and withdrew funding from many areas – this had a severe impact on film productions (Iordanova 2001: 571). Therefore, co-production practices played an essential role in filmmaking. She contends that “during this difficult decade, cinematic co-productions came to play a vitally important role within the film industries of all Eastern European countries” (2001: 517). The director did not just form an alliance with the government but also with neighboring countries. I suggest that the focus of these alliances was not on the content of the film, but on supporting artistic production in general, which clearly was not the case with religious groups.

Until now, I have investigated the ambivalent reception of an ambivalent film, now I highlight the rare moments where the homosexual characters are assisted by people who are aware that Kenan and Milan are not an ordinary Serbian heterosexual couple.

### **Activist Tactics: Rhetoric of *Détournement* and Music as (Inaudible) Critique**

The robust homophobic elements present in and centering around *Go West*, either in the film’s implicit cultural references or in the way it was received (including the actors’ desires to distance themselves from their homosexual characters) are not good reasons to simply ignore it or refuse to welcome it into the archives of queer cinema. Instead, I propose a queer approach to other elements that can easily be ignored if we do not read against the grain. In the last section of this chapter, I focus on what can be seen as moments of unexpected solidarity and alliances that develop in the midst of – and often without directly confronting – omnipresent homophobic religious and nationalist discourses. I expressly address moments of solidarity that, when translated into the world of activism, offer the beginning of a repertoire of tactics.

One spectacular and unexpected alliance develops between a heterosexual father and his homosexual son. It is certainly intriguing for queer activists to understand how a father-figure can stand for patriarchal structures and at the same time, form an alliance with the partner of his gay

son. In order for alliances between heterosexual men and the queer community to succeed, heterosexual men need to question the dictates of religion and governmental bodies. The film deploys a form of resistance to seize upon dominant discourses of religion and nationalism that produce heteronormativity in the region. It exemplifies a rhetoric of *détournement*: it invites us to focus on these alliances, rather than on homophobia as a dominant discourse.<sup>29</sup> Guy Debord and Gil Wolman argue in *A User's Guide to Détournement* (1954) that it is a rhetoric of subversive misappropriation of a dominant discourse in which “any sign is susceptible to conversion into something else, its opposite” (1954/2006: 18). Nedra Reynolds further argues that this tactic can be most effective in “draw[ing] attention to ... marginalized speakers and writers” as well as to “the ideological workings of discursive exclusion” (1998: 60). My own contribution or adoption of *détournement* consists in focusing on elements of the film that were rarely discussed and may not constitute crucial statements. Therefore, this form of analyzation can prove quite productive. I do not only focus on the challenging alliance between father and son but also on the thought-provoking role of the father in this conservative setting. This alliance can be better understood through an analysis of the regulation of power structures by the government and different religions. In *Go West*, Ljubo is the patriarch of the family. Spectators aware of the dominant ethos in Bosnia-Herzegovina will therefore expect a typical authority figure whose role as a father cannot be completely separated from nationalism because the *paters familias* can also be viewed as fathers of the nation. What kind of solidarity can be forged with their minority-loved-ones or with what they represent?

Firstly, how do alliances between hetero- and homosexual men work? Kenan and Milan form a strong alliance with Milan's heterosexual friend Lunjo who deserts the Serbian army and helps them obtain a wig and counterfeit passports. This alliance seems to work only by breaking the laws of the nation-state: i.e. army desertion. Similarly, and in order to protect his son, Milan's father Ljubo resists the patriarchal father-figure image and offers to help his son's partner escape to the

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<sup>29</sup> *Détournement* is a French term with several meanings including: “turning expressions of the capitalist system and its media culture against itself” Holt (2010: 252).



West. Both Lunjo and Ljubo betray one rule to respect another. As we see, religious and nationalist extremists oppose the queer community and are in constant conflict. Only by the rejection of a traditionalist patriarchal heterosexual position, can one actually cooperate with the queer community.

Ljubo also directly confronts a discourse that defines family equality, bloodlines, and by extension national values. When soldiers come back from the front with news that Milan has died, the local priest is depicted singing nationalist songs; Ljubo asks him to stop alluding to political rhetoric. The priest prays for Milan's "hero blood" ["janačka krv"] but Ljubo counters with another tune: "Whose blood? Whose blood? My blood!" ["Čija krv? Čija krv? Moja krv!"].<sup>30</sup> Ljubo is presented from an unfamiliar angle and as not being in line with stereotypical father figures of the post-Yugoslavian geographic region. It seems as though bloodlines are only an illusion in traditional patriarchal structures of male-dominated societies. In this scene the director manages to transgress the nationalist bloodline discourse and presents it as a fantasy. Ljubo occupies a balanced position between Bosniak and Bosnian-Serb while transgressing their conservative patriarchal boundaries. He rejects his traditional identity not just because he sides with his dead son and his partner, but also because he refuses to allow Milan's body to be used by nationalists as a symbol of ethnic violence.

The father image brings even more contradictions to light. After Ranka screams repeatedly to Ljubo: "Your Milan is a faggot" ["Tvoj Milan je peder"] his reaction is to invoke a concept that is normally appropriated by the Church. He claims that his son is "holy" to him and bypasses his sexual orientation. His reaction is to abruptly push her away; he does so with such force that she falls, hits her head and dies. This is confirmed by a close-up shot showing her face, and then time seems to march on with a montage, showing Ljubo taking wounded Kenan with him. What now becomes important is that Ljubo helps Kenan go West.

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<sup>30</sup> Milan also refuses to present his fiancé(e) as a symbol of nationhood, a Serbian woman, when he is asked at the military check point, "Is she ours?" ["Ali je ona naša?"], meaning does she belong to the Serbs, he answers "She's mine, bro" ["Moja, brate. Moja!"].

The fact that a straight father should support his son even after being told that he is homosexual, comes as a surprise after the scene where Ljubo kills Ranka. On the one hand, the father is a figure of authority, he is an allegory of the nation, which should make the audience expect him to be violently homophobic, but this is perhaps, in itself, a form of critical homophobia that the film denounces. This also marks the end of the journey for the father. Having helped his son's lover escape to the West and entrusted him with the legacy of his wife, he commits suicide as if there was nowhere else to go. Regardless of the nature of the alliance that existed between father and son, it was saturated with violence. Because he commits suicide, we might assume he breaks the alliance. Yet, we might also assume he has finished his mission.

However, the film proposes two images of a father: one that fits the patriarchal role and its counterpart, a liberal father, who opposes patriarchal structures. Ljubo is happy to marry his son off; he organizes a large-scale Serbian-style wedding with loud music, excessive drinking, and a banquet that lasts for three days. The film also depicts him as an ordinary villager who goes to Church every Sunday. Given the conservative context, the spectator may be forgiven for assuming that the figure of the father will be perceived – including by his homosexual son – as the guardian of patriarchal and heteronormative norms. In *The Unbearable Comfort of Privacy: The Everyday Life of Gays and Lesbians* [*Neznosno udobje zasebnosti: Vsakdanje življenje gejev in lezbijk*] (2005) Švab and Kuhar conclude that revealing one's sexual identity to one's mother is a radically different gesture in Slovenian society than revealing it to one's father: the father remains feared as an authority figure and the mother does not (76-78). These expectations are already contradicted by the name of the character, an element that will most likely not be perceptible to viewers who do not understand the local language. Ljubo means Ljubomir in Bosnian<sup>31</sup> and is comprised of "love" ["ljubi"] and "peace" ["mir"]. Love and peace are present as a sign to decode, or an oblique allusion. The film thus proposes a narrative that questions, rejects or at least complicates accounts drawn by sociologists.

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<sup>31</sup> Also in Croatian, Serbian, and Slovenian.

A liberal image of a father is a character who will protect his son (and his memory) by assisting his homosexual lover. After Ljubo kills Ranka, he assembles the family jewelry and gathers his savings to give it to Kenan for his traveling expenses. Ljubo then gives him the counterfeit passport and places Milan's passport inside Kenan's shirt – close to his heart. He says: “Go and find your happiness. For your and Milan's soul” [“Idi i nadji svoju sreću. Za tvoju i Milanovu dušu”]. He then gives him a photograph of Milan and Kenan (dressed as Milena) at their wedding. With this interchange, Ljubo makes Kenan their heir, however, Kenan is still concealed as a Serbian woman, but this time the fake filiation is life affirming. Kenan will carry the memory of Milan's mother; this is the moment when Milan's mother and Ljubo spiritually become Kenan's mother- and father-in-law. As opposed to during the sham marriage where it was all just a performance and a strategy to survive.

Setting up an alliance between a traditional father figure and a homosexual figure in Bosnia-Herzegovina is only one rhetorical tactic of *détournement* – a constant conflict between male-dominated society and the queer community. The idea of an alliance between a father and his homosexual son displays solidarity between nationalists and the queer community. Similar alliances are also addressed in the film *The Parade* which I examine in Chapter 5. These alliances are imaginary opportunities for queer activists.

The second example of *détournement* I wish to focus on is the use of classical music. To underscore the visual scenery that challenges homophobia, the director employs classical music in various ways. It is used for theme music, the background score, and to make a political statement – indeed, music plays a pivotal role in this film. It exemplifies the debate between dominant discourses and counter discourses. Music emanating from the Serbian village includes not only sounds made by nationalistic trumpets and religious stringed-instruments such as the gusle, but also abrasive sounds such as the sound made by a chainsaw accompanied by two singing villagers. This is the dominant sound; the classical music is to be considered a counter-sound. Piano music can be heard in the background when Ljubo helps Kenan reach the West. An even stronger element,

however, are the resonant sounds of the cello. Kenan is depicted playing his cello on numerous occasions: first at the peace concert in Sarajevo, then several times in the village when Milan is recruited into the army, and after he dies, and during the TV interview, where the French journalist could not hear the sound of an invisible instrument. Richard Terdiman points out that “for every level at which the discourse of power determines dominant forms of speech and thinking, counter-dominant strains challenge and subvert the appearance of inevitability which is ideology’s primary mechanism for sustaining its own self-reproduction.” (1985: 39-40). In this case, artistic output becomes a symbol of resistance: the act of playing the cello is intended as a weapon in the war of hatred between nations and towards homosexuals.

Dominant and counter discourses are in constant flux and conflict. The sound of the cello is often cross-cut with sounds from church bells or a gusle. This signifies an oscillation between the dominant discourses of religion and nationalism, and the power of resistance incarnated in the cello. Imamović uses cross-cutting techniques and parallel editing to show Kenan playing the cello at the Sarajevo peace concert before the war began. This is inter-cut with images of Milan training at the karate club, during a period where all nationalities present in Sarajevo could live and train together. The karate fight impersonalizes the conflict between Croats, Bosniaks, and Serbians – this being the dominant discourse, while the sounds of the cello performance act as a counter language and discourse that is desperately trying to establish peace. Then, when messengers from the warfront arrive in the village, we hear church bells while the priest descends from atop the hill. Kenan starts to play his cello, which ends in a visual montage of the priest playing his gusle and singing nationalists songs. After Milan’s death is announced, the priest attempts to play the gusle but Ljubo attacks him and prohibits him from delivering the eulogy at the funeral. Both instruments attempt to commemorate war victims: the gusle represents a dominant instrument and the cello a counter-instrument and symbol of resistance.

Classical music, or more specifically the cello, became a symbol of cultural resistance during the siege of Sarajevo thanks to first-chair cellist Vedran Smajlović, who I expounded on in

Chapter 1. The closest resemblance with Kenan is, when Kenan plays cello after Milan dies, but Kenan is seen as taking the position of resistance throughout the whole film. Ranka, however, refuses to hear the message of the cello. After she castrates Kenan she removes a wooden cross from Milan's grave and begins to attack Kenan's cello, which she eventually destroys. Here, a Christian religious symbol is used to destroy an instrument intended to challenge homophobia. Yet, as we see at the end of the film, the cello is destroyed, sounds become inaudible, but Kenan can still play to an audience. The viewer can indeed experience the melodious music, yet the French journalist cannot. She is incapable of tuning-in to the sounds of homophobia. This scene represents Imamović's ideas regarding the problem of knowledge transfer through the East-West divide, wherein the West could not properly see or understand the East.