



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### The fall of the pink curtain

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

Vravnik, V.

**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*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

## CHAPTER 5: STRANGE BEDFELLOWS: WAR VETERANS AND QUEER ACTIVISTS<sup>41</sup>

Chetnik, a derogatory term for a Serb by Croats, Bosniaks, and Kosovo Albanians. Ustasha, a derogatory term for a Croat by Serbs, Bosniaks, and Kosovo Albanians. Balija, a derogatory term for a Bosniak by Croats, Serbs, and Kosovo Albanians. Shiptar, a derogatory term for a Kosovo Albanian by Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. Faggot, a derogatory term for a homosexual person. Used by everybody.

*The Parade*

In this chapter I examine Srđan Dragojević's 2011 film entitled *The Parade*, a semi-fictional documentary and dark comedy which revolves around the organization of a gay pride parade in Belgrade in 2011. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the pride parade is a serious political issue and homosexuality remains a highly controversial taboo in Serbia to the current day. Despite this fact, the film was an unprecedented box-office success in the post-Yugoslavian region and won several regional and international film awards. This film graphically depicts the events leading up to and during the first attempt to organize a parade in 2001. Unfortunately, the event ended in a deadly struggle. The film managed to attract many production companies from various parts of the region including: Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia, and even several countries belonging to the European Union. After its Belgrade premiere, more than half a million people in the region chose to see the film – a number that is not often achieved by other films from this region.

---

<sup>41</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 Srđan 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).

The director addresses the paradoxical, even comical, challenge of recruiting war veterans to protect Belgrade's queer community during the parade. Dragojević deploys comedy as a political tool, which on first inspection could seem contradictory, since comedy might appear less capable of influencing politics. He changed both the meaning of a comedy and the means of delivering his political message: with the use of humor Dragojević detached himself from the power of a political message and downplayed its value. I first saw *The Parade* at a screening in Slovenia; the beginning was filled with humoristic interventions and the audience laughed often, while I was embarrassed. During the second part, the audience was silent and finally embarrassed. No one laughed anymore, despite a few comic scenes towards the end. The film had a powerful, almost hypnotizing effect on the audience.

The film is not a hard-core documentary that displays victims or attempts to create sympathy, although it does achieve these objectives. Neither is it a theoretical treatise, yet it does make a theoretical point about homophobia in the region. Regarding this point, the film depicts how local police refuse to offer protection because they have strong alliances with homophobic nationalists. As an attempt to resist (and the specificity of this attempt is alarming), the parade's organizers decide to recruit war veterans to protect them from homophobic neo-Nazis who have vowed to attack the parade's participants. This leads to unforeseen consequences such as the abandonment of current allegiances and the rekindling of others. The film envisions the growth of unexpected post-war alliances between Croats, Bosniaks, Kosovo Albanians, and Serbs: these communities fought on opposite sides during the 1990s Balkan wars. They make strange bedfellows because, on the one hand, they focus on solidarity with nationalistic sentiments and on the other, on sexual preferences. Another potential alliance introduced by the film is the relationship between father and son. The father being a war veteran who is hired to protect the pride parade and his neo-Nazi son, who is a member of a group who has vowed to disrupt it. It is a problematic alliance that emphasizes an unexpected generational regression from a progressive father to a conservative son.

Cultural and national memories, identities and practices do not flow simply from one generation to the next, but paradoxically in both directions.

While analyzing the political critique and queer alliances in the film, I take into account the interplay between the Catholic church, nationalism, and queer activism in Serbia in order to assist in understanding the unexpected alliances proposed by the film. How can war veterans be expected to protect a pride parade? In some people's minds, an image of a male war veteran can be equated to a threatening militarized masculinity within a strict heteronormative and homophobic military milieu. Why then would the queer community be willing to accept their solidarity? To this end, I examine the paradoxical nature of a space where war veterans and queer communities form new alliances to counteract homophobic, nationalistic and religious discourses in the post-Yugoslavian geographic region. I also investigate how it was possible for *The Parade* to become such a public success as well as present a mainstream voice, despite the conservative and heteronormative nature of the region. How are nationalistic and homophobic discourses counteracted and appropriated by queer activists to challenge homophobia that will trigger a political change? During my analysis, I pay special attention to the potential of the counter discourse that this film holds for queer communities.

### **Alliances and Non/mis-Alliances**

The main plot of *The Parade* is the lack of protection afforded to the queer community. It features footage of the 2010 parade during which neo-Nazis violently protested, resulting in the activists seeking alternatives to protect themselves. In the film, the parade organizers hire a Serbian war veteran named Limun (Nikola Kojo) to coordinate the parade's security. A known criminal, he was recruited into the war, he is divorced, and he owns a judo club in Belgrade from which he also operates a security agency. As a war veteran, he is looked upon as a hero, having fought for national pride. He is dating Biserka (Hristina Popović), a young effervescent woman who operates a beauty salon. They are soon to be married and are introduced amidst the planning phase of their wedding. This is how they meet their wedding planner Mirko (Goran Jevtić) who is also an activist engaged

in organizing the pride parade. After Limun finds out Mirko is gay, he immediately assaults him. Biserka then demands that Limun think of positive approaches towards the queer community, such as “non-violent communication” (*The Parade*) – a serious expression that becomes a positive tongue-in-cheek pun during the evolution of the film. Limun reluctantly accepts this as the only way to reconcile with Biserka and offers his security service for the parade. However, this proves to be an extremely difficult (and at times comic) task. First, he calls his local criminal friends and asks for their help, but they turn him down flat. He then approaches members of his dojo, but they too refuse; being homophobic nationalists who do not wish to protect the local queer community. Limun continues to search for partners and then decides to gather his old war buddies (who fought on opposite sides of the war) and have managed to remain life-long friends. He recruits a Croat, a Bosniak, and a Kosovo Albanian to help with his task; he simultaneously remolds old alliances and forges new ones with other veterans.<sup>42</sup> Despite the fact that they fought against each other during war, the small group of comrades-in-arms unite to protect the pride parade and fight a common enemy: the vociferous Serbian neo-Nazi movement.

Why am I interested in this phenomenon of seeking unlikely bedfellows? Firstly, because governmental authorities are unwilling to offer physical protection, therefore the only foreseeable solution is to find alternative partners; secondly (and more importantly), because alliances between governmental authorities and the queer community are problematic due to the normalizing power of the government. Butler points out that “there are reasons to worry about requesting state recognition for intimate alliances and so becoming part of an extension of state power into the socius” (Butler 2002: 27). She makes the point that by bypassing the government and finding alternative ways to protect the parade is not completely useless.

The newly reformed group of war veterans, during a meeting with the organizers, agree to oversee the security of the parade. The veterans cite veteran solidarity as the reason for their

---

<sup>42</sup> War veterans constituted a special political community in the post-war period and were usually regarded as nationalists. However, twenty years after the war they began forming alliances. For example, Croat and Bosnia-Herzegovinian war veterans helped collect money for the veterans from the Serbian Republic living in Bosnia-Herzegovina (“Ujedinjeni u siromaštvu” 2012; T.V. 2012), as I pointed out in Chapter 2.

acceptance of the task. However, these newly formed alliances are actually based on a solidarity with the queer community and it therefore becomes a queer alliance. Their relationship seems organic since it is based on the historical roots of Yugoslavia and Tito's concept of Brotherhood and Unity, popular during his years in office.<sup>43</sup> The film suggests that these relationships are so strong that they are capable of overshadowing the homophobia of the veterans who end up protecting the queer community during the parade. If the community of war veterans is based on the concepts of Brotherhood and Unity; on which concepts are the alliance of the war veterans and queer community based on? Another important question is whether or not the organizers are willing to accept their solidarity. Is it something for which the community hopes, or does the solidarity emanate from fear?

These relationships are difficult to define because they are volatile and have unexpected outcomes. Audiences in the post-Yugoslavian region might expect the alliance (particularly the alliance between the veterans who are fighting against the Serbian neo-Nazis and therefore against homophobia) to be implausible due to the historical background. One such example is the alliance between the Welsh miners during their 1984-85 strike in as presented in the film *Pride* (2014). Diarmaid Kelliher points out that activism of Lesbian and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM) and their alliance with the miners "suggests that in suitable circumstances, the solidarity of small groups of politically active people can have a significant impact" (2014: 258). Similarly, in the current political atmosphere in Serbia it is important for fragile groups to build binding relationships with one another. It is useful to explore the impact of such alliances, namely between two politically excluded entities: veterans and the queer community.

The common ground for their alliance with the queer community is a shared exclusion because the veterans are marginalized as well. They both stand in opposition to the police and are excluded from the government in a struggle against a common enemy. This resembles the alliance

---

<sup>43</sup> Brotherhood and Unity was a popular slogan of the Yugoslavian Communist Party. Established during WWII it was used to mobilize people against Fascist occupation. Later, it symbolized the official inter-ethnic policy of the six republics united within Yugoslavia.

of LGSM and the Welsh miners, especially regarding the mistreatment by the police as common ground for this alliance. It “was frequently pointed to as a shared experience” (248). They developed mutual solidarity based on shared experiences of oppression. These examples tell us something about the possibilities of forming such alliances in other regions, although in Serbia they are uncertain and potentially contradictory. Such gay-straight alliances have negative connotations within the queer community if they are seen in a superior/inferior positioning of the straight/gay community in terms of idealized heteronormativity and hegemony over a secondary queer community.

Furthermore, the film introduces other problematic relationships and addresses even stranger alliances. Limun has a son named Vuk from a previous marriage; he is an automobile mechanic and a member of a Belgrade right-wing neo-Nazi group. Along with his compatriots, he plans to attack the parade participants, including his father who was hired to protect the event. The father-son relationship is complicated by their different political commitments. Limun represents the last generation born during Yugoslavia’s sovereign existence and the common cultural bonds within multiculturalism. His son, however, represents a younger generation, born during the break-up of Yugoslavia who witnessed the birth of various forms of nationalism.

The representation of the father-son relationship especially in relation to politics is quite original. In the contemporary post-Yugoslavian geographic region, fathers and sons are not similarly politically motivated. The unhealed collective trauma can be transmitted and perpetuated into future generations – or what Marianne Hirsch calls “the generation of post memory” – which evokes intolerance and extremism (2012: 106-7). I would suggest that future generations could become increasingly intolerant. In the post-Yugoslavian region, we have the opposite formula to what happens, for example, in the *Godfather* (1972), where the focus is placed on the son who cannot avoid acquiring the views of his father. One assumption is that sons and fathers are always going to be alike, but also that sons are more liberal and progressive. *Sasha* (2010) is a film by Dennis Todorović, born during the Yugoslavian break-up in Germany to immigrant parents from

the post-Yugoslavian region. The film depicts a story about a gay son born into a homophobic family and implies that older generations are always more conservative than the younger. Today, however, another script is becoming increasingly plausible. In Hanif Kureishi's novels, particularly in *My Son the Fanatic* (1994), the liberal father is a first-generation immigrant from Pakistan and his religious-fundamentalist son was born and lived his entire life in the United Kingdom. These examples show that the teleology that predicts that the younger generation's political progress is not systematic. *The Parade* reminds us that we cannot expect that newer generations will automatically relinquish their homophobic beliefs. A father's authority might also fail; thus, providing homophobia with a path that can cut through familial lines and form unexpected alliances.

This film addresses a potential change and shows the transgression of this non/mis-alliance between Limun and Vuk. In the film they do not have much contact except during the night preceding the parade. Limun suddenly decides to pay his son a visit because he recently watched *Ben Hur* (1959) – a film that, it could be argued contains clearly homoerotic scenes which I analyze later. Limun arrives at Vuk's home in the company of queer activists and war veterans. This nighttime scene depicts Vuk exercising on his balcony. A portion of their dialogue is filmed through a broken window which can be interpreted as alluding to their rather broken relationship. Limun tries to convince his son that it is better not to fight the following day. The camera then zooms in on his face while he tells his son that he will protect the parade. He also tries to bribe him, offering him a substantial amount of money for not attacking the parade. The discussion escalates into a physical fight while the camera zooms out; alluding to the fact that the connection Limun wished to establish has collapsed. Although Limun tries to prevent his son from attacking the parade, Vuk refuses and shows up with his neo-Nazi friends the following day. In the next scene, Vuk is depicted together with hundreds of young male skinheads while Limun stands on the frontline between the neo-Nazis and the parade participants. During the ensuing violent confrontation – when Limun is hurt and needs help – Vuk turns against his compatriots and protects his father. He then offers the parade participants his protection.

## **Activist Tactics**

Strange alliances and duplicitous tactics abound in this film and constitute a counter discourse which I see as the only way to challenge homophobia within the storyline. Queer activists recruit nationalistic veterans to advance their cause. As a result, the following conditions occur: (1) veterans fighting on opposite sides become friends again; (2) the homophobic veterans become LGBTI rights activists themselves by protecting the parade and; (3) the relationship between father and son is repaired when the homophobic nationalist neo-Nazi son metamorphizes, at the point he realizes that his father truly needs him.

The film is a kind of Trojan horse, adopting and perhaps advocating the use of indirect activist tactics which are obfuscated by the film's storyline and aesthetic. Like the ten-year conflict between the Trojans and the Greeks, the conflict between the queer community and the heteronormative society in Serbia is a long and chaotic confrontation. Like the Greeks, the queer community needs to find an entrance into a fortress that denies them entry – the fortress being here the recognition of political rights. They attempt to enter the homophobic environment which is protected by a thick wall of heteronormative rules and legislation. Their horse represents the united war veterans and it is just one of the unlikely alliances I investigate in this study. This tactic is used to communicate while deploying a positive message regarding protecting LGBTI rights.

This is achieved indirectly when veterans – former nationalists from all parts of the post-Yugoslavian geographic region – come together to fight against younger nationalists from Serbia. These veterans travel outside of their national borders which creates a conflict zone with similarities to the Balkan wars. They are recruited along the value lines of Brotherhood and Unity – a kind of nostalgia, or more specifically “Titostalgia” (Velikonja 2008). The young neo-Nazis were all born after the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was officially dissolved in 1992; it was a multicultural nation-state with three main religions which then became six autonomous nation-states where nationalistic sentiments and religious practices reemerged during the early-1990s.

Younger generations were not able to understand the Brotherhood and Unity values to which their fathers were devoted.

These can be viewed as being contradictory forces. The conflicting forces resulted in a unity within the post-Yugoslavian region, despite national and international conflicts among the post-Yugoslavian nation-states. Were veterans during the Balkan wars temporarily stuck with the nationalist sentiments of the different nations that previously formed Yugoslavia? Or were they stuck with Brotherhood and Unity values from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia? Assuming a nationalist position of protecting national pride, the veterans fought against nationalists in opposing countries, but what is more important is that they eventually rebel against homophobia as well.

Just as the horse was sacred to the Trojans (Haviland 2012: 134), the veteran community is an unusual political community and deemed sacred in Serbia and other post-Yugoslavian countries. Representing an alliance with the queer community is a form of activism, since veterans are usually seen as homophobic nationalists. It suggests the possibility of solidarity with the queer community instead of reiterating the obvious assumption of homophobia and therefore perpetuating it. Since the queer discourse is embedded within the discourse of cultural bonding between different countries, the homophobic viewer is challenged to accept the film as a whole.

A strategy that helps connect the old cultural characteristics of the region is also a main feature of the film – a rollick road trip through the entire post-Yugoslavian region. Figuratively, the car takes the form of a Trojan horse in which Mirko's partner Radmilo (Miloš Samolov) and Limun make their journey in search of other veterans, former friends of Limun who would willingly protect the parade. This Trojan horse undergoes a curious metamorphosis and becomes a palimpsest. They travel to the homophobic environment of small villages in various post-Yugoslavian countries. Before the trip even begins, the pink-painted automobile is a constant target of homophobic graffiti: for example, "Death to Gays" ["смрт педерима"] or "Faggot Motherfuckers" ["Pederske pičke"] is spray-painted along the sides of the automobile. Radmilo

does not report these events to the police; instead he drives the car to his father's workshop where he removes only some of the graffiti. As they drive with "Faggot Motherfuckers" still visible through different post-Yugoslavian countries, the automobile becomes progressively covered with trans-nationalistic graffiti, applied by various local nationalists. Before Radmilo and Limun cross the Serbian-Croatian border, viewers see a Serbian cross, a national symbol which means "Only Unity Saves the Serbs" ["Само слога Србина спасава"]. Eventually, the graffiti do not add up to a coherent slogan any more. At the beginning of the journey the automobile is already marked with homophobic graffiti, but then, when it crosses national borders, the graffiti begins to interact with its locality and becomes transformed. In Croatia someone corrupts the Serbian cross by adding to it. Another corruption occurs when the travelers enter Bosnia-Herzegovina and meet a Muslim friend, a veteran who owns a video store in the suburbs. There, young men apply even more spray-paint and change the graffiti from "Faggot Motherfuckers" to "Chetnik Motherfuckers" ["Pičke četničke"]. The same occurs in Kosovo when they meet with a Kosovan-Albanian veteran; other young men again spray-paint the automobile. They scribble on top of the previous graffiti and change "Chetnik Motherfuckers" to "State of Kosovo."

Written in the languages of the various regions in which it traveled, the graffiti-covered automobile conveys the ideals of homophobia and nationalism for everyone to see. Dissimilar national or gay symbols are transformed into similar bigoted statements through the automotive palimpsest. Beginning with a homophobic statement which is then overwritten by a xenophobic one, the Trojan horse cum automobile continues to gain access to the countries of the post-Yugoslavian region. Their multiplicity shows how the graffiti become superimposed in a collective production of national liberation movements. This symbolizes the political situations in each country, where the new generation claims that their territory belongs only to their nation; and clearly expresses self-nationalist and xenophobic positions. On the other hand, the pink Trojan horse cum automobile, with its passengers, becomes a symbol of resistance and complements the nationalist forces and homophobic environments in which they travel. The automobile now appears

to be an advertisement with a nationalist slogan, which allows it to infiltrate the fortress of homophobia and simultaneously enter hostile nationalist environments. While the automobile continues to accrete additional textural layers, there are still traces of older ones visible.

Homophobic and nationalist discourses make for a schizophrenic palimpsest, layers are being added without completely eroding the previous ones. As soon the automobile crosses a border, graffiti artists express a nationalist discourse. Yet, at the end of the journey, it does not matter how many new layers have been added; there are still traces of the first homophobic graffiti layer visible. The interactions between sexuality, religion and nationalism are multi-directional and multi-dimensional, and should not be oversimplified.

The ever-accumulating homophobic and nationalist graffiti can be equated with additional soldiers being inside the Trojan horse; thus, increasing the amount of force to stave off its enemies. Not only does the group resist being labeled, but they even empower themselves and bypass national sexual norms. The stronger the nationalist force from the outside is, the stronger the resistance within the Trojan horse cum automobile becomes. Their historical trans-national connection embedded within their Brotherhood and Unity ideals becomes stronger. The film uses this myth to challenge the ethnic divisions along nationalist and religious lines. By doing this, the rhetoric of other veterans is appropriated and challenged by historical bonds to re-unite so-called brothers from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, and Kosovo, even though they fought on opposing sides. Limun manages to enlist his old war buddy veterans into his cause. Their goal is to challenge homophobia, although the veterans are blissfully unaware of this outcome. In other words, their fight against homophobia, which takes the form of protection from violence, ends up reuniting communities and protecting them from violence.

Let us not forget that these veterans are homophobic nationalists. Sexual nationalism and homophobia have the same roots and function in the same way, as I have previously argued. In the film, the Trojan horse cum automobile is comically and accidentally transforming homophobic veterans into LGBTI rights activists while not deliberately transforming the nationalistic sentiments

among the citizens of specific post-Yugoslavian countries. They had become friends before the wars had begun and when they meet again after a long period of time, their friendship resembles the meeting between Ben Hur and Mesala in the 1959 film, when they meet again after fifteen years. They hug in the same way, drink with their arms crossed and shoot an arrow at a target. Their close friendship and cultural bonds are stronger than homophobia and this becomes a recruiting force in the fight against homophobia. While the car functions like a Trojan horse for the actors in the film, the idea of veterans fighting homophobia functions as a Trojan horse for the viewer. However, Jasna Koteska validates that Limun is a mythic character similar to that of Ben Hur and adds to the idea of “an attempt to re-universalize the Balkan myth of the indestructible hero” (2012: 118). She argues that *The Parade* is a stereotypical camp production with a dubious ethnic message and a storyline which moves from one nationalist joke to another.

These veterans have all been reared in the multicultural environment of undivided Yugoslavia. Irrespective of the Balkan wars, the previous national sentiment still binds them together. Queerness becomes irrelevant for them. Dragojević suggests that the multi-culturalism from the unified Yugoslavian era is now in opposition to homophobic nationalistic practices that have found fertile ground after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Paradoxically, it is being employed as a Trojan horse against their own rules and ideologies of excluding queerness. The fortress of heteronormativity is tricked into accepting a gift, an idea of nationalism that no longer exists but can be reintroduced. When the obviously enlightened veterans re-infiltrate the heteronormative environment of Belgrade, a new form of hybridity is proposed. While the hope that harmonious multicultural cohabitation between various ethnic and religious groups collapsed during the Balkan wars, now, some sort of reconciliation can be imagined but it is based on types of identities that bypass religious and ethnic markers.

After the gift of protection is accepted, a queer activist named Mirko delivers a speech. Moments before the parade is scheduled to begin, hundreds of neo-Nazis appear and aggressively

approach the participants; some supporting protesters are intimidated and begin to leave. To prevent further departures, Mirko moves to the front and says:

Before any of you take off, look at these people! This is not a question of who is gay or straight. These are two different kinds of Serbia! One part is persuading you every day to be what you are not. It forces you to have six different roles. One for the parents, for friends, for the street, for work .... It forces you to be what you are not! It undermines your strength! I know we will get beaten up today like never before in our life! But even that beating is better than the humiliation we endure our whole fucking life!

Mirko's character is that of a so-called gay soldier who exposes his sexuality to the neo-Nazi group which has gathered before the parade begins; they are there to protect their perceived border of heteronormativity. Mirko points out the role-playing that the queer community must perform in order to fit the norms of heteronormative hegemony. In his monologue, he encourages the other participants to endure the attack, which, to him, seems less painful than having to undergo daily humiliation. Mirko also expresses the opinion that there are two sides to Serbia: the homophobic and heteronormative neo-Nazis on one side, and the queer community on the other. The queer community has purchased the support of the veterans, so they are finally able to retaliate. Unfortunately, it is still a fact that violence is the only way to protect LGBTI rights in some parts of the world, but the queer community – as the film suggests – is not an unimportant minority anymore. The parade participants ally themselves with the band of veterans, who themselves are a small marginalized community and actually become stronger.

Because of the solidarity between these two communities, the film suggests that certain changes occur within the group of nationalists. For example, a change occurs in Limun's son, who abandoned the neo-Nazi group and joined the queer community troop because of the relationship

with his father. The visual aesthetics of the alliance is also useful to note. The band of veterans resembles a group of men who affiliate themselves with the gay bear subculture. For instance, when the veterans position themselves between the participants and protestors – on the front line so to say – they appear as older chubby veterans and remind the viewer of the stereotypical gay bear. Opposing the younger and more dangerous nationalists, the veterans appear as affectionate bears who have infiltrated the gay culture. This is a productive reason to sympathize with the veterans and accept their Trojan horse gift.

### **Standing Ovations and Ambivalence: Right and Left Radicals**

The script for *The Parade* received wide international support including from the European Cinema Support Fund (Eurimages), the Ministries of Culture of Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia, the Croatian Audio-Visual Center (HAVC), and the embassies of The Netherlands, Germany, and France (Cicović 2011). It attracted a large number of production houses, including those from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Republic of Macedonia, Slovenia, Serbia, and the United Kingdom. However, most of the Serbian companies that Dragojević approached for financial help during the pre-production stage refused because of a fear of being accused of producing homosexual propaganda. The only exceptions were the insurer Dunav Osiguranje and Serbia Broadband (SBB) (“Srđan Dragojević” 2011). The film premiered in Belgrade in October of 2011; it broke all box-office records in the post-Yugoslavian region and the audience reached more than half a million people.<sup>44</sup> The film crossed national and sexual borders since this was the first Croatian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Serbian, and Slovenian co-production after the Balkan wars (Kirschbaum 2012). Furthermore, the cinemas across the region screened the film without subtitles which expressed a cross-national acceptance.<sup>45</sup> Astonishingly, when news media outlets from the

---

<sup>44</sup> Not only in Serbia but also in other post-Yugoslavian countries, no other post-war film has been so widely screened (Gec 2012; Milek 2012).

<sup>45</sup> After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, all Serbian films screened in Croatia needed to include special subtitles with an emphasis on Croatian, even though there are only minor differences between Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian languages (“Bez kravate Srđan Dragojevic” 2013).

region wrote about the film, they all claimed that it came from their country (van den Berg 2012). In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Serbian-produced film attracted the largest audiences since the wars ended. It received a standing ovation in many Serbian cities such as Novi Sad and Niš. The audience's applause lasted more than ten minutes in Croatia's capital Zagreb. Surprisingly, the film was most positively accepted by audiences in Split, where violent attacks on parade participants took place in 2011 ("Parada' obara rekorde u Hrvatskoj" 2011). The film attracted a wide range of viewers while having a potent effect on the collective consciousness of the region's general population. This is evidenced by continuing public discussions about the film which lasted months after its premiere (van der Berg 2012). For example, Croatian actress Ana Gruica said she was not a supporter of pride parades but after she saw the film, she felt sorry for not being a supporter (Njegić 2011).

Dragojević insists that art is political and that artists must try to change the world. He does not see hooligans as bad, but rather as uneducated (qtd. in Milanović 2011). Nevertheless, Dragojević denies any direct connection to his activist intentions. He holds that the story of organizing a pride parade in the film is only a McGuffin plot device used to trigger a discussion on tolerance and understanding (Njegić and Dugandžić 2011; Milanović 2011). Dragojević says that one journalist even thanked him because of the effect the film had on his homophobic teenage son who stopped "hating fags anymore" (qtd. in Hoad 2012). The son had been enjoying the hatred he felt towards queer people; possibly, the more he hated them, the more he felt accepted into the Serbian homophobic environment. Yet, after viewing the film, he changed his homophobic perception and does not hate them anymore.

*The Parade* had an immense effect on the audience and its activist purpose was served and rewarded. Nationalists were now turning away from homophobia and some of them even became queer community supporters. Jacques Rancière argues there are no criteria for relating art to politics, however, art already effectively makes communities and creates real effects producing "regimes of sensible intensity" (Rancière 2004: 39). He would say that a political formula in *The*

*Parade* is identifiable, since the film managed to create new communities and new ways for people to relate to one another, especially the way nationalists managed to relate to their feelings of homophobia and overcome them after viewing the film.

From one perspective the film was widely accepted and became a success, while strange alliances formed within the audiences as well as in the film. *The Parade* was rejected by groups on the radical left and right wings of the political spectrum. Neo-Nazi groups in Serbia called for a boycott and openly protested the screening of the film (van den Berg 2012). In a milder action, nationalists among football fans in Croatia only protested the fact that Radmilo, the gay character in film wore a T-shirt saying “Hajduk forever” [“Hajduk živi vječno”], Hajduk is Split’s local team. They did not care about the homosexual nature of the storyline but rather about the problem of aligning homosexuals with a football fan community (“Parada’ obara rekorde u Hrvatskoj” 2011). At the same time, Croatia is also the only country that has a football fan group fighting against homophobia.<sup>46</sup> The film expresses the notion that it is acceptable to be queer but not within the neo-Nazi community. To use Bal’s concept, the object is “speaking back” and stating that homosexuals should not be a part of their community (Bal, 2002: 45).

Unfortunately, anti-gay discourses developed and progressed. After the premiere, the actor Miloš’ automobile was engraved with large letters spelling “gay” [gej] (“Bez kravate Srdjan Dragojevic” 2013). The perpetrator did not use the insulting word “faggot” but the politically correct and neutral expression for the homosexual community. Is it possible that by eliminating the word faggot and changing it to gay, they also eliminated its negative connotations? The word “faggot” (“Kill the Faggot!” [“Ubi pедера!”]) has a more negative connotation and it is frequently used by anti-gay communities at pride parades. In this context the word gay is still used in an insulting way. This shows that the praxis of homophobia in the post-Yugoslavian region had changed and intellectually developed its vocabulary of hate. The result was the same: homophobia, which infiltrated its way into new discourses about the queer community. Nationalists are deploying

---

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Grief (2012) for more on the connection between football fans and homophobia.

their own techniques by masking the homophobic discourse and making it more acceptable.

Therefore, this cunning tactic of using the word gay, might be even more dangerous.

The film was also not positively accepted by many Serbian war veterans and they distanced themselves from the proposed mutual solidarity with the queer community as presented in the film. In 2012, one year after its release, veterans from Serbia announced plans for their own parade to take place on the same day as the pride parade (G.V. 2012). This was clearly a strategy attempting to reclaim public spaces and streets. Their motto, “The Pride of Shame,” was clearly developed to jab at the pride parade. They claimed their right to be acknowledged by the Serbian government because they felt that veterans are the most marginalized community in Serbia. With this protest they placed themselves in opposition to the public majority and aligned themselves with the queer community; they both struggled against a common enemy. The film thus continued to participate in a form of cultural resistance. Moreover, the veterans formed alliances with the Gay Shame movement, although this was probably not their intention.<sup>47</sup> In the film’s veteran/queer alliance, the rigid stance of the veterans softened, and their concept of the enemy progressively changed, thus marking the beginning of a transition.

The relationship between the three main religious institutions in region was also remarkable, since Croatia’s Catholic Church was the only one to reject the film; a bishop banned the screening organized in a church-owned Dubrovnik theatre. There were two reasons for the ban: the disapproval of the film’s gay theme, and the fact that Dragojević was known for not taking sides in his previous war-themed films (Pilsel 2012; Radosavljević 2012). Nevertheless, the Croatian Catholic Church employed anti-gay discourses and protested indirectly several times against the queer community.<sup>48</sup> It is also noteworthy that the film received the Ecumenical Jury Prize at the 1992 Berlin Film Festival.

---

<sup>47</sup> Gay Shame is a radical alternative movement within the queer community, which was created in opposition to the over-commercialization of gay pride events. It represents a grass-roots collective founded on the principle of resistance to normalization.

<sup>48</sup> For more on this, see their “In the Name of the Family” campaign addressed in Chapter 1.

Strange alliances formed within post-Yugoslavian media outlets as well. The film received mostly positive reviews in the Serbian and international media; one Serbian mainstream media outlet accused Dragojević of being a propagandist, although this was the only negative critique. The film was even promoted by the Ministry of Education.<sup>49</sup> Since no other film in the past four years had been recommended for public education purposes by the ministry, the media accused Dragojević of attempting to indoctrinate students; many teachers objected to using the film for educational purposes (van den Berg 2012). The main problem expressed in the media was that the film is not appropriate for pupils under sixteen years old. According to several outlets, the film was too controversial to be shown to young pupils and this restriction constructed a line between what is acceptable for young children and what is not. Since the film does not contain any nudity or sexual scenes, the gay theme is the only plausible target. These media outlets align themselves with the notion that young children should be forbidden to view films which fall outside the boundaries of the heterosexual matrix. Furthermore, film directors who deploy homosexual themes are accused of being propagandists. To the contrary, heterosexual propaganda in public institutions is never questioned.

The idea of veterans who have committed war crimes protecting the parade was unimaginable and morally problematic to the queer community. Activist Boban Stojanović from Queeria, a Belgrade-based organization asked, “Would people who have definitely committed such crimes defend minorities like the LGBT population? This is an issue for me” (qtd. in Canning 2011). The main objection was the fact that the veterans are portrayed as overly macho men and homophobic nationalists. Grujić argues that the film represents criminals who protect queers only for their publicity (2012: 183). Compared to other queer films from the region, *The Parade* is a comedy in which humor is used as a successful strategy to evoke unified-Yugoslavian nostalgia.

---

<sup>49</sup> Dragojević asked the government to organize screenings in public schools. The Ministry of Education then produced leaflets for hundreds of primary and secondary schools in Belgrade and Novi Sad, and offered discounts to teachers. The purpose was to offer them a starting point for a discussion on homophobia prevention (I. M. 2012a, 2012b, 2012c).

She draws parallels with the representation of bad men in the film *Pulp Fiction* (1994) who also fought for justice and became heroes, similar to bad men in new Serbian cinema. Grujić writes that:

The bad guys of the new Serbian cinema are not only violent towards other gangsters but also towards ethnic minorities, women, homosexuals, children, etc. Nevertheless, in the context of the Balkans, there is a significant effort in cinematic narrations to represent a bad guy as honorable and with a strong character. (183)

Grujić is critical of Dragojević's other films as well, for example *Lepa sela lepo gore* (*Pretty Villages Pretty Flames* 1996), *Rane* (*Wounds* 1998), and *Mi nismo anđeli II* (*We are not Angels II* 2005). They all suggest that only bad men – strong masculine Serbian men – are charismatic characters who can be successful role models in a Serbian environment. She claims that the role of queer characters in *The Parade* represents “efficient motive to glorify the moral values of war criminals” who protect them (184). By reminding viewers of historical and cultural bonds between the nations of the post-Yugoslavian region, namely the concept of brotherhood, and naming the main character Limun (Lemon) and his dog Sečer (Sugar), significantly downplays the negative characteristics of war criminals.

According to both Grujić and Koteska, the problem in this film is that a transgression of the Balkan masculinity fails and does not achieve its goal to send a message of tolerance. This is because the veterans present key characteristics of Balkan masculinity, while the queer perspective of this alliance is ignored and the film itself is less concerned with gay subjectivity. However, as I have argued, occasionally dubious tactics do indeed need to be adopted to successfully penetrate a heteronormative environment. The alliances forged in the film recall strong sentiments of Brotherhood and Unity and manages to infiltrate previously impenetrable homophobic fortifications. In this chapter, I have demonstrated that *The Parade* is an activist film that positions a

criminal war veteran at the center of the storyline and uses him as an activist tactic to access a wider audience.