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Victims, Perpetrators and Bystanders: Atrocity and Its Aftermath in the Films of Jasmila Žbanić

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The paper excavates ‘implicit criminologies’ concerning victims, perpetrators and bystanders from four films by Bosnian director Jasmila Žbanić: *Grbavica* (2006); *On the path* (2010); *For those who can tell no tales* (2013) and *Quo Vadis, Aida?* (2020). I argue that in criminological terms, Žbanić’s work is strongest, and has greatest transformative potential, as an example of cinematic victimology. This is produced through characters who simultaneously encapsulate particular (ethnicized) and universal elements in micro-level stories of the individual in a larger social, political and historical context. Focussing on this form of universalism, I question an ethical standard of inclusivity in atrocity cinema which calls for a single film or director to directly represent victims of all ethnic groups.

KEY WORDS: film, atrocity, victimology, Bosnia and Herzegovina

INTRODUCTION

As an object of criminological study, films about atrocities¹ and their aftermath intersect cultural, visual and sensory criminology, criminologies of war, atrocity and state crime, and discussions around public and popular criminology (Brown and Rafter 2013; Carrabine 2018). This paper follows Brown and Rafter (2013) and Bostock (2019) in exploring how films communicate, work through or even generate knowledge about atrocity. I examine four fictionalized but fact-based dramas by Bosnian director, Jasmila Žbanić. The films all reflect on the legacy of the 1992–95 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH): *Grbavica* (2006), named after a Sarajevo neighbourhood, focusses on a mother and daughter living with the legacy of war time rape; *Na putu* [*On the path*] (2010) follows a couple struggling to have a baby while dealing with their own experiences of the war; *Za one koji ne mogu da govore* [*For those who can tell no tales*,

1 Atrocity crimes are taken to coincide largely with crimes prosecutable under international criminal law (see Aydın-Aitchison *et al.* 2023: 268).

hereafter *Za one*] (2013), is based on an actor's response after finding she had unknowingly spent a night as a tourist in a hotel used as a detention centre and rape camp during the war; and Žbanić's most recent film, *Quo Vadis, Aida?* (2020).² The latter is her only film covering the war directly, but it still reflects on life after atrocity in its final scenes. It depicts events immediately before the massacres which constituted a major part of the genocide at Srebrenica. By focussing on Žbanić's sustained attention to atrocity and its aftermath, and on representations of victims, perpetrators and bystanders in these films, I argue that her work is at its strongest, and has transformative potential, when read as a critical public victimology. As a body of work produced in a post-conflict setting, Žbanić's portrayal of victims requires a careful reading that looks past the ethnicized particulars generated and reinforced through conflict and post-conflict politics. This, rather than a call to be more inclusive of particular victims (see Simić and Volčić 2014), is key to appreciating how she deals with her ethical responsibility as an atrocity filmmaker. The first section explores the connections between criminology, atrocity and film. The second section gives more detail on Žbanić and her films in the context of post-war BiH cinema, and my approach to analysis. The following analytical section handles three cross-cutting themes: victims, perpetrators and bystanders.

The war in BiH, the context for all four films, began within a month of the state declaring independence in spring 1992 and lasted until the close of 1995. It commenced with attacks on towns and villages by the Yugoslav People's Army and allied forces organized under local Serb political structures. Catherine Baker's book, *The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s*, gives an excellent historiographical account of the conflicts (Baker 2015). The war resulted in more than 100,000 deaths, widespread destruction of homes, places of worship, cultural objects and infrastructure and displacement of population outside the country as refugees and internally in ethnically homogenized territorial units. A recent project on detention camps recorded over 15,000 detainees accounting for only one-fifth of the 1,500 known sites of detention (Hodžić 2022: 3). Within these camps, rape, sexual abuse and torture was prevalent. Although genocide has received international legal recognition in the limited context of mass killings in July 1995 at Srebrenica, there are strong arguments for seeing this as one point in a larger genocide (Bećirević 2014). Peace came in two stages, resulting in an asymmetric state union of two entities, one predominantly Serb, the other predominantly Bosniak and Croat and further subdivided into 10 Cantons. A further district (Brčko) is governed separately. The governance of the country is characterized by frequent contestation of power between levels and by fragmentation and difference in policy and procedure across governments. Throughout the post-war period an international High Representative has overseen the peace, exercising executive power at various points (on post-war governance, see Aitchison 2011: 43–53). Prosecutions for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide have been pursued domestically and in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

CRIMINOLOGY, ATROCITY, FILM

Criminologists increasingly recognize the importance of images in general and film in particular, such representations being key to how we understand and 'organize our worlds' (Rafter and Brown 2011: 5; see also Carrabine 2012; Walklate 2017). Films take us beyond an ocularcentric sensory experience by adding sound, silence and a visceral sense of anticipation (Young 2010: 11; McClanahan and South 2020: 4). Together, cultural, visual and sensory criminologies offer insights into how film can be read as a cultural product with particular visual and cinematic languages; as a product of many hands; and as a socially situated product which is shaped by, and in

2 For her full portfolio see <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1120092/>.

turn shapes, its context. Writing broadly on the image, Carrabine (2012: 465) contrasts Becker's emphasis on cooperation and interaction in production with Bourdieu's situation of artistic outputs in an 'arrangement of forces', making power and conflict more explicit. Kracauer (1947) anticipated both when trying to uncover the foreshadows of Nazism in early German cinema. More than other art, Kracauer (1947: 5) saw cinema as attributable to more than just the auteur, and as being shaped by others in anticipation of its mass audience. Láníček's (2021) analysis of the successive script changes and ultimate scrapping of the Czechoslovak Holocaust drama, *For One Life*, in 1948 gives a good sense of social and political pressures 'behind the scenes'.

Cinema plays an important role in collective understandings of crime and related phenomena (Yar 2010: 68–69). A growing body of criminological scholarship tracks back to Rafter's (2000) *Shots in the Mirror*. In a posthumously published reflection on her engagement with film and on the development of the field, she emphasized the importance of including films in an understanding of how we come to know. That is, ideas communicated through movies enter, stay in and fall out of, our heads (Rafter 2017: 57). This insight provides the link to public (Brown and Rafter 2013) or popular criminology (Rafter and Brown 2011). In both, films are 'public space in which to work through meanings that can enter collective memory' (Brown 2020: 52). A film can be a powerful tool in the classroom, allowing for the exploration of myths about crime (Kadleck and Holsinger 2018: 178) or working through different theoretical perspectives (Rafter and Brown 2011: 8). The richness of film as a medium allows multiple perspectives to be engaged in a way that is difficult for conventional forms of academic communication (Rafter and Brown 2011: 8). Film, television and streaming media can serve as a bellwether for shifting attitudes and practices related to crime and criminal justice (Hogan 2022) and carry messages that may shape those attitudes (Delehanty and Kearns 2020). Cinematic criminology, like its academic counterpart, can generate harmful impacts, for example through negative stereotypes (Shaheen 2003: 175). Still, the movie form has potential for new questions to be asked, providing not just an exposition of social attitudes but challenging these on psychological, philosophical or other grounds (Rafter 2007). A criminological study of film is not just a search for common ground between parallel academic and cinematic criminology. Films offer new approaches and new focal points (Rafter and Brown 2011: 185–186). Here, I excavate criminological themes from Žbanić's atrocity films as echoes of, extensions to, or even potentially transformative for academic criminology.

When Brown and Rafter turned their attention to genocide films as a category, they also turned away from Hollywood and other mainstream commercial productions to focus on more 'critical' films (Brown and Rafter 2013: 1019–1020). This accompanies a terminological change from 'popular criminology' to 'public criminology'. Comparing their writing across texts, the distinction would appear to be one of degree, with a higher theoretical and empirical bar being set for public criminology (compare Brown and Rafter 2013: 1020 with Rafter 2007, 415). In the next section, I come back to how to categorize Žbanić's works. For now, I note that there is significant overlap in the questions asked of popular culture and critical films as criminology, and that distinctions which exclude popular or mass culture as a space of public debate are problematic (Torchin 2012: 12–13). Rather, when setting any other form of criminology alongside its academic parallel, it is important to assess the merits of work in each category (Carrabine 2008: 187). Whether defined as popular or public criminology, atrocity films can help audiences with limited or partial experience to understand atrocity by exploring and exposing causes, patterns of organization and perpetration through 'implicit criminologies' (Brown and Rafter 2013: 1021; Bostock 2019: 124). This is part of the pedagogical value of film in educational and public settings. Rothe and Ross (2007: 332) suggest that films help students to imagine dimensions of the victim experience that are not conveyed in academic texts. *Night and Fog* and *Shoah* are used widely in Holocaust education (Brown and Rafter 2013: 1023). Even in societies that have

endured atrocity, access to experiences of the full range of atrocities and related criminal justice processes are mediated (Hodžić 2010: 114–115; Bećirević 2014: 178; Pettigrew 2016: 208).

As discursive events (Kaes 1992: ix) atrocity films are an important aspect of constructing collective understandings and collective memory (Bostock 2019: 124). Part of the power of film is its longevity and its capacity to supersede individual memory and experience (Kaes 1992: ix). Cinematic critique of state links film with critical traditions in criminology (Brown and Rafter 2013: 1021; Brown and Carrabine 2019), and often films present truths that neither draw on the state for legitimation nor lend themselves to appropriation in state narratives (Žarkov *et al.* 2019: 98–99, 102–103). Critiques extend to demonstrating the bureaucratic rigidity or political self-interest of states and the UN who abandoned victims or were actively complicit in atrocity. This is especially evident in films dealing with the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda (e.g. Brown and Rafter 2013: 1024; Chaudhuri 2014: 75–76). In certain political contexts, critical narratives might not survive the production process (Láníček 2021) or are risky and need to be partially concealed through narrative techniques (Riep 2012).

Recognizing the limits of formal criminal justice responses to atrocity (Morrison 2010: 192; Bećirević 2014: 127; Žarkov *et al.* 2019: 93–94; Viswanath and Li 2023), films can be an important site for ‘coming to terms with trauma’ (Jelača 2016: 40). Recognition and acknowledgement, important transitional justice aims, are widely seen as a possibility in post-atrocity art (Brown and Rafter 2013: 1021; Simić and Volčić 2014: 384; Fijalkowski and Valderhaug 2017: 342; Lippens 2019: 1). The weight of these possibilities places an ethical responsibility on filmmakers (Brown and Rafter 2013: 1019; Pettigrew 2016; Walklate 2017: 174; Elander 2023), highlights the limit of film and other forms of representation in the face of the scale and horror of atrocity (Hewitt and Friedman 2016; Pettigrew 2016), and raises questions about crossing the dividing lines left in the wake of conflict (Simić and Volčić 2014). Several works identify challenges for filmmakers handling atrocity. Some of these relate to narrative, others to aesthetics. Films may represent the past as distant and disconnected, the episode of atrocity as an aberration, thus creating complacency with ongoing situations of atrocity or with harmful legacies of atrocity (Brown and Rafter 2013: 1020; Chaudhuri 2014: 53–54). Audiences can be reassured by simplistic binaries, reinforced with particular iconographic tools, othering perpetrators or reinforcing problematic constructions of victimhood (Chaudhuri 2014: 7, 52). Binaries are often prevalent in films focussing on a single protagonist, enduring and overcoming hardship (Hewitt and Friedman 2016). In such films atrocity is often backgrounded to spotlight the moral tale of the individual (Chaudhuri 2014). Criminologically, the strongest films simultaneously engage with the complexities and ambiguities of atrocity, link this to broader social and political contexts, and build connections between the past and the present. As (Chaudhuri 2014: 59) shows, these are not always immediately recognized and can include commercially oriented films. Against criticism of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* as a kitsch gloss, trivializing and misrepresenting the Holocaust, she observes the presentation of characters in terms of similarity to the intended audience, using British accents and the reassuring familiarity of Merchant-Ivory style production juxtaposed with the presence of Nazi iconography (Chaudhuri 2014: 60). David Thewlis’ camp commandant is frequently seen in roles of domesticity and respectability (Chaudhuri 2014: 61). His character is listed as ‘Father’ in credits, underscoring the generic dimensions of the role. Furthermore, alternating between perspectives of the child Bruno, and his mother, interrogates levels of awareness among the German population as bystanders, and their acceptance of the murderous crimes enacted against German and other European Jews (Chaudhuri 2014). Taking seriously cinema’s potential to communicate ideas and knowledge about atrocity crime and contribute to post atrocity transitions, I analyse Žbanić’s representations of three criminological categories: victims, perpetrators and bystanders. These three categories represent major actors in the drama of crime and the story of atrocity. In the relevant

subsections, Žbanić's work is put beside academic criminology on atrocity to identify common ground between both and the scope to use the former to drive development of the latter. In the next section, I introduce her atrocity films in the context of post-war Bosnian cinema and describe my approach to the analysis.

VIEWING JASMILA ŽBANIĆ'S ATROCITY FILMS

A major issue in the criminological study of film is the volume of data, making it possible to 'support almost any argument' by selecting particular films (Rafter 2007: 406). Even in a study of film related to one conflict, the problem of overwhelming data exists. Buljubašić and Maljević (2023) provide a list of over ninety films dealing with the 1992–95 war in BiH and related atrocities. These span from *Savršeni Krug/Perfect Circle* (1997) to Žbanić's *Quo Vadis, Aida?* (2020), and include multiple styles from Hollywood drama (*In the Land of Blood and Honey*, 2011) through to comedy (*Gori Vatra/Fuse*, 2006). A coherent strategy for selecting films is essential, with different strategies serving different research objectives. Delehanty and Kearns (2020) selected the 20 highest grossing films each year over 10 years to explore the consistency of representations of torture in popular cinema. Small *n* samples across time 'snapshot' changing norms (Hogan 2022). Comparison can expose different approaches to the ethics of atrocity filmmaking (Elander 2023), and studies of individual films allow a detailed exploration of criminological themes in mainstream cinema (Tzanelli *et al.* 2005).

By taking seriously one director's sustained attention to atrocity and its aftermath, I am able to simultaneously identify pervasive themes³ while compensating for the inevitable narrative incompleteness of individual films which only ever offer 'a limited exposure to the atrocities or events that took place over three and a half years of aggression' (Pettigrew 2016: 213–214). The 'totality' of atrocity is said to defy representation (Hirsch 2010: 4), but a body of work can still generate a multifaceted understanding of atrocity and its impacts. Jasmila Žbanić repeatedly returns to the problem of atrocity, and life after atrocity, taking seriously the weight of responsibility that the subject implies. She came to international attention when her first feature film, *Grbavica* (2006), won the Golden Bear award at the Berlin Film Festival. Three subsequent films deal with atrocity and its aftermath: *Na putu* (2010); *Za one* (2013) and Oscar-nominated *Quo Vadis, Aida?* (2020). Although certain plot resolutions point towards elements that Brown and Rafter (2013: 1019) would attribute to mainstream or conservative cinema,⁴ Yar (2010: 77) has argued that there is no strict dichotomy, and films mix mainstream and critical elements. Žbanić's films are praised for rejecting straightforward or official discourses around victimization. Focussing on everyday life in post-war contexts, she critiques local and international politics that generate conflict and stand in the way of recovery (Žarkov *et al.* 2019: 101–102). She situates her films in the context of her feminism and her opposition to the structures underlying violent conflict (Hurtes 2020). Although her films are specific in their context, she seeks to 'find the universal' which speaks to contemporary threats (Mouriquand 2021). Ultimately, attempting to pin down Žbanić's works as popular or public criminology, or as mainstream or critical, acts as a diversion where the films merit attention as *cinematic criminology* regardless of category.

Two scholarly papers stand out as engagements with Žbanić's films. Simić and Volčić (2014: 387) judge *Za one* to be of 'immense value' in terms of raising awareness in the face of denial and memorializing and raising empathy with victims who remain poorly recognized, legally and

3 See, for example, Rigoletto's (2012) identification of an 'Oedipal' theme in Bernardo Bertolucci's work as a critique of the relationship between Italy's Fascist past and present in *Il conformista* and *Strategia del ragno* (both 1970).

4 For example, by the end of *Grbavica*, the conflict between Esma and her daughter Sara is resolved; in the therapeutic setting of the women's centre, Esma opens up about her rape and enforced pregnancy; and Sara goes on the school trip, which was the trigger for the crisis in the relationship with her mother.

in terms of physical memorials. Nonetheless, they find it falls short of discomfiting audiences about troubling elements of the conflict and post-conflict situation: Western complacency and ethno-national stereotypes (Simić and Volčić 2014: 391). They also argue that by focussing on one ethnicized category of victims, the film does not address the challenge of bridging ethnicized divisions in post-war BiH, a point I return to below. De Pascalis (2016: 365) treats Žbanić's first three films as a trilogy. Unlike *Quo Vadis, Aida?* they occur exclusively in the aftermath of atrocity. Based on those films, De Pascalis (2016: 366) demonstrates how Žbanić brings attention to the horrors of war and its 'haunting' ongoing presence without recourse to 'the traditional pattern of aggressive cinematographic representations of violence'.⁵ This approach is key to the films' transformative potential. I add to the existing work on Žbanić's films by adding her latest work, framing them in criminological terms, extending the account of her representation of victims, and including her contributions on perpetrators and bystanders.

Each film was annotated as a table with timestamps and observations on narrative, dialogue, scene and soundscape.⁶ These annotations formed the data for analysis, and in references to the films below, the timestamps give the start of a scene or a particular phase of action or dialogue. Qualitative coding identified a range of features, including social aspects (e.g. work, sexualization, alcohol), emotional states, activities and traces of war, but ultimately the value of this phase lay in deep familiarization with the data rather than in any particular code or theme. This familiarity allowed me to move between the films and my knowledge as a researcher in atrocity criminology (e.g. Aydın-Aitchison *et al.* 2023) to identify and assess the 'implicit criminologies' in the former. Analysed in isolation, each work carries a major criminological theme. In *Grbavica*, it is the secondary victimization (see, e.g. Nĕmec 2022) experienced by Esmā as the mother of a child conceived in rape; Amar's turn to a fundamentalist form of Islam in *Na Putu* is indicative of how violence and identity interact (Bergholz 2016); in *Za one*, Kym confronts denial (Cohen 2001) and in *Quo Vadis, Aida?* the role of bystanders in atrocity (Hilberg 1993) is brought to the fore, primarily through the presence of the UN as the genocidal massacre unfolds. While each theme merits analysis in its own right, my purpose here is to consider the four films as one body of work. I focus on identifying cross-cutting themes recurring across multiple films. Following Hilberg's triumvirate of parties to genocide, and reflecting the main categories of actor in the drama of crime, I consider representations of victims, perpetrators and bystanders.⁷

ANALYSIS

Victims

Applying victimological typologies in divided post-conflict societies is complicated by collective dimensions of perpetration and victimization. Cycles of violence and structural inequality break down dichotomies of victim and perpetrator associated with constructions of the ideal victim (Álvarez Berastegi and Hearty 2019: 22). Nonetheless, a strand of atrocity victimology has still advanced from Christie's (2018[1986]) initial statement on the elements of the ideal victim. van Wijk (2013: 162–167) endorses the diverse elements of weakness, respectability and blamelessness, but adds four further factors related to the need to 'sell' the case to international media to gain recognition. These concern the conflict's complexity, duration and particularity concerning its fit with the values of newsworthiness, and its timing regarding competing demands for attention (van Wijk 2013: 168–170). Contrary to the literature following Christie,

5 There are conflicting views on this among Bosniak atrocity survivors, some feeling that it stops short of showing the crimes in their full scope, others recognizing that this can make 'seeable' what is otherwise unbearable (Mahmutović 2021).

6 I am grateful to Lejla Subašić, who was briefly involved in the project at the data collection stage, and who wrote the first draft annotation of *Grbavica*.

7 Other themes emerging from analysis not covered here include, seeing, not seeing and looking away, under a broader heading of denial and acknowledgement; transition and 'moving on'; and formal justice and impunity.

who emphasizes weakness in constructs of victimhood, [McConnell \(2020: 189, 244\)](#) presents dominant national narratives which elevate combatants' death and suffering as martyrdom at the expense of other groups' recognition. The idea of competition and recognized victimhood as a scarce resource is recurring in works on atrocity victims (e.g. [Bašić 2015: 26](#); [Golubović 2019: 1176](#)). In some of the most recent literature on the topic, this translates into an analysis of a global justice sector operating with market logic ([Schwöbel-Patel 2021](#)) and an analysis of the 'victim capital' that explains how different groups secure formal recognition and related benefits ([Barton Hronešová 2023](#)). I argue that *Žbanić* shows a strong victimological sensitivity. The four films include forms of victimhood unrecognized by formal institutions, demonstrate the agency of victims and survivors, and challenge narratives privileging military victims over others. Underlying this is *Žbanić's* approach of situating a micro-level story of the individual in a broader social context. Recalling [Simić and Volčić's \(2014: 395\)](#) reflection on the ethical and political challenges of achieving an inclusive recognition of all crimes and victims without providing 'rhetorical resources' to 'aggressors and instigators', I propose a contextually sensitive reading of the films that recognizes the universal beyond any (ethno-national) particular in *Žbanić's* protagonists.

[Barton Hronešová \(2023: 25\)](#) identifies four categories of victims with some degree of recognition in post-war BiH's uneven and multi-level structures of governance: survivors of sexual violence; survivors of torture and detention camps; the families of those remaining missing; and those with life-changing injuries, a category which includes the family of killed civilians. The right to return and restitution of property enshrined in Annex 7 of the [General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina \(1995\)](#) extends formal recognition to refugees and internally displaced persons. Finally, Brčko District passed a law in 2022 extending coverage of the status of Civilian Victims of War to children born as the result of wartime rape, and the government of the sub-state Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina has recently put forward a similar law ([N1 2023](#); [Vlada FBiH 2023](#)). These laws recognize the victim status of the living, as opposed to those who died. It was only 4 months after the release of *Grbavica*, a decade after the end of the war, that victims of wartime sexual crimes received their first legal recognition, and only in the last 2 years were victims' rights granted to any children conceived as a result of wartime rape. If Esma's daughter Sara remained in Sarajevo, she would have been around 30 years old before seeing a realistic prospect of legal recognition as a victim. In the meantime, the formal recognition afforded to women in Esma's position translated into a varying amount of financial support depending on their Canton of residence and in all cases fell below that awarded to military victims of war ([Amnesty International 2017: 37](#)). Victims in the four films cut across all six legally recognized victim statuses.⁸ In addition to individual victimization, the collective victimization of Bosniaks, recognized in international judgments on genocide at the International Court of Justice and the ad hoc tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, is represented in *Quo Vadis, Aida?* In the films, Amar uses the term genocide (*Na Putu*, 57:50), and Edina Bećirević's book *Genocide on the Drina River* is credited at the end of *Za one*, but beyond that the word is not used, possibly reflecting the limits of a term rooted in law.⁹

The films go beyond the limits of law in recognizing the suffering arising from war and atrocity. *Za one* is an explicit acknowledgement and memorialization of the Višegrad victims of rape¹⁰ and murder ([Simić and Volčić 2014: 391](#)). Sometimes, victimization is more implicit, such as in the case of Nadja, a war widow in the Wahhabi community in *Na Putu*. In the two Sarajevo-based

⁸ This paper excludes post-war victimization, such as child marriage (*Na Putu*: 1h 15m 00s) or the evident sexual assault on Jabolka by a German soldier (*Grbavica*: 1h 2m 26s).

⁹ International legal recognition of genocide in BiH starts and stops in Srebrenica.

¹⁰ To date, only two victims' rapes at Vilina Vlas have resulted in a conviction (*Prosecutor v Željko Lelek*, X-KRŽ-06/202, 12 January 2009).

films, *Grbavica* and *Na Putu*, we get a sense of the experience of living in the siege. It is peripheral when compared to a film like *Savršeni Krug*, set during the siege. Nonetheless, exchanges between Pelda and his mother (*Grbavica*, 47:00) and Luna and her friend Šelja (*Na Putu*, 1:20:05) touch on dependency on aid and (somewhat obliquely) the experience of bombing. In *Grbavica*, both Esma and Pelda represent disrupted lives that show the forms of loss or suffering that go unrecognized officially: Esma's studies and her path to qualifying as a doctor were blocked by the war (31:12), and Pelda gave up his studies in economics and lost the nerve to go back (45:37). He sees no future in the country and talks of leaving for Austria, something that is realized towards the end of the film (1:11:45). Their situations contrast to the material wealth and lifestyle of Saran, the nightclub owner and war-profiteer, and Puska, Pelda's wartime commander.

Žbanić's representation of multiple dimensions of victimhood extends to how characters deal with victimhood and survival. In *Grbavica*, Esma shows signs of the enduring trauma of her victimization in the detention camp. In one scene, we briefly see the scars on her back showing the physical dimension of this (27:00), but more often, it is the emotional element seen in discomfort and stronger reactions at key moments in the film. In an early scene, horseplay with her daughter Sara triggers a reaction when Sara pins her down. Her tone changes. She roughly shoves Sara off and sits up, taking deep breaths (4:15). Twice, seeing men's behaviour towards Jabolka, she flees the nightclub to take pills in the backroom. In the first instance, Puska pushes a cigarette towards Jabolka's breasts in a mock re-enactment of the kind of physical violence which accompanied rapes during the war (21:33; see e.g. [Remembering Srebrenica n.d.](#)). In the second, what starts as sexualized horseplay with a drunken soldier on the dancefloor seems to turn to sexual assault as Jabolka's screams shift from laughter to fear (1:02:26). In other scenes, Esma flees from a crowded bus where she is pressed up against a man (6:43) and has a panic attack when her boss backs her up against a wall (1:05:30). As well as medication, cigarettes (*Grbavica* 45:37) and alcohol (*Na Putu*, see below) feature as coping mechanisms. For much of *Grbavica*, Esma hides her victimization, and its consequences, as might be anticipated given some perpetrator constructions of the identity of children born of rape and wider social stigmatization of mothers and children ([Doubt 2000](#): 63). To secure a job, Esma denies having a child (2:20). Until the last scenes, she remains closed about her experiences when attending the women's centre, which offers financial and therapeutic support where the state falls short (compare 11:04 and 1:20:39). At the core of the film lies her effort to keep from Sara the truth of her birth. The film also shows Esma's perseverance, love and care for Sara, and elements of social solidarity. This maps on to the personal 'courage and coping skills of women who embraced their children' and the 'grassroots' activities against stigma absent from dominant narratives (see [Carpenter 2010](#): 63). By offering a complex and thick, socially situated, description of Esma and Sara's lives in post-war Sarajevo, Žbanić presents her audience with a rich and nuanced victimological account. In doing so, using film as a visual and narrative medium, her work compensates for gaps in knowledge of victim experience generated by testimony in criminal trials and their particular legal epistemology (see, e.g. [Viebach 2017](#): 66; [Rush and Elander 2018](#): 21).

The strength and agency of characters, including Esma, but also Luna and her grandmother in *Na Putu* and Aida in *Quo Vadis, Aida?* contrasts with more destructive or disruptive strategies employed by Amar in *Na Putu*, including his turn to alcohol, and elements of his religious transformation (see [De Pascalis 2016](#): 373 ff.). Amar's alcohol dependency leads to his suspension from his job at air traffic control (9:15) and stands in the way of his shared ambition of parenthood with Luna (18:30). His adoption of a fundamental form of Islam, after he re-engages with a friend from his wartime unit, brings him peace and helps him overcome alcoholism. Yet it estranges him from Luna and her family (e.g. 57:50; 1:12:00) and sees him endorsing polygamy and child marriage (1:15:00).¹¹ On the other hand, while we are left in no doubt about the pain

and loss carried by Luna (e.g. 1:29:00) and her grandmother (e.g. 52:40) in *Na Putu*, or Aida (e.g. 1:33:50), the women are seen as strong and active. In *Quo Vadis, Aida?* Aida's near-constant movement in the first part of the film and her determination to protect her family and the refugees from Srebrenica contrast starkly to the increasing fatalism of Karremans and other senior Dutch officers in the face of evident abandonment by the UN and step-by-step encroachments by Mladić and Republika Srpska armed forces. Her return to Srebrenica several years later,¹² her reclaiming of her apartment in an atmosphere of threat,¹³ and the resumption of her work as a teacher in the town all talk to her enduring strength and her survival.

The uneven recognition of particular forms of suffering tied to war narratives is present and critiqued in several films. In *Grbavica*, benefits available to children of shahids¹⁴ but not to children born of wartime rapes drive the story. Šelja, in *Na Putu*, directly attacks the privileging of the suffering of combatants over that of others. She says about Amar, and his growing association with a Wahhabi group as he tries to overcome his post war difficulties, 'and the rest of us don't have problems. It's only difficult for him. Amar was the only one in that war. The rest of us were having a party. That's it?' (33:40). Although not one of the two central characters, as a political journalist her voice carries weight. Her shows are endorsed in an earlier scene by Luna's grandmother (20:40), another strong character. Another face of the privileging of the suffering of combatants is seen in *Za one*, in the stark contrast between the lack of memorial to the murdered and raped civilians of Višegrad and the memorialization of the 'defenders' of the Republika Srpska (*branioci Republike Srpske*) in the town (39:00), or the gravestones with military imagery that Kym films in the Orthodox graveyard (43:00). Taken together, Žbanić's films visualize and criticize hierarchies which privilege and marginalize different forms of victimhood and suffering in a way that moves beyond the current translation of older scholarship on the ideal victim into more recent atrocity victimology. Furthermore, her use of narratives grounded in the micro-level of individual lives, but openly engaging the socio-political features of a post-atrocity context provide a model for identifying and explaining the features of enduring forms of victimhood. The idea of the inseparability of victimization and its aftermath, leaving a long tail of victimhood, is evident in calls for a narrative victimology (Pemberton *et al.* 2019: 398). Žbanić's films anticipate that work for atrocity criminology.

Considering Žbanić's work alongside the aims of transitional justice, Simić and Volčić (2014: 396) say of *Za one* that, '[m]aybe only a film that looked at stories of all women victims of rape, regardless of their ethnic belonging, could transcend the ethno-national lines of division and reach "the other" side'. They question the possibility of such an inclusive film. As Bosniaks, the victims in Žbanić's films all come from one side of those lines of division. Bosniaks were by various measures the most victimized (as a group targeted with genocide, and in terms of individual numbers attacked, displaced and killed), but some of the kinds of suffering and victimization that Žbanić portrays with such care were experienced by others. Engaging with this as a filmmaker or researcher is ethically and politically fraught (e.g. Golubović 2019). Žbanić seeks to 'find the universal' (Mouriquand 2021). Isanović (2021) argues this is achieved through a tendency to avoid Muslim symbolism, meaning that in the films, 'a victim is a victim'. To assess how far she achieves this through the (Bosniak) particular requires a full analysis of protagonists in terms of how they are ethnicized or universalized in her films, particularly in relation to their

11 Amar's turn to Wahhabi Islam and his estrangement from Luna symbolize social divisions in post-war BiH, specifically between secular Bosniaks and those emphasizing religious dimensions of identity. The final scene in which Amar calls to Luna to come back, and she replies 'You come back to me' (1:33:20) reflects diverging ideas of Muslim/Bosniak identity.

12 The reconstructed minaret places this at least 7 years later.

13 Implied by Joka's wife replying that it might not be a good idea when Aida requests they move out as soon as possible (1:28:25).

14 Although the term shahid has religious roots, its contemporary use is not bound to this and has secular applications.

victimhood. The films reflect a contemporary socio-political context in which some degree of ethnicization is difficult to escape but life is not framed only and always in these terms. For example, in *Grbavica*, the first scene locates the women's support centre in an ethno-religious context through song (0:31),¹⁵ while the factory where women come together to find money for Sara's trip shows no obvious ethnicized markers (e.g. 1:08:00). As a filmmaker, Žbanić provides viewers with complex constructions of characters and their lives in which universal and particular elements come together. The 'reading' of these will vary according to viewer. A final question can be transposed to film from Golubović's (2019: 1185–1186) research with Serb women who lived through the Sarajevo siege. In an ethnicized post-atrocity context, how are 'unwelcome' claims of suffering from those who do not neatly fit dominant narratives raised without feeding ethno-nationalist propaganda? Such stories play an important victimological role in challenging constructions of victimhood that exclude those who, even if only through ethnicized categorization, do not match an ideal associated with purity, innocence or respectability. These stories are not absent from cinema or other forms of art handling war and atrocity in BiH.¹⁶ As in research, so in art, knowledge is a collective product. Žbanić makes an important and critical victimological contribution to this through her films.

Perpetrators

A core problem of atrocity perpetrators and perpetration was captured by Durkheim in 1915 when he suggested that, from frontline soldiers up to leaders, those involved in atrocity were 'probably for the most part honest men who perform their daily duties conscientiously' (Durkheim 1915: 41). This 'ordinariness' of atrocity perpetrators has come to dominate scholarship with two corresponding effects. First, a shift to studying systems and processes of perpetration as sites of pathology (Ümit Üngör and Anderson 2019: 7), second to exploring the diversity of actors in these processes and corresponding differences in their rationale for participation (Smeulers 2023). While Žbanić's work is victimologically rich, the criminological strength of her work regarding perpetrators is less developed. Her condemnation of perpetrators implies little motivation for further inquiry: 'War is a banal platform for sociopaths and people blinded by power... As a feminist, I despise these structures.' (in Hurtes 2020). Simić and Volčić (2014: 391) suggest that a simplistic, 'cartoon-like' portrayal of 'evil and ignorant' Bosnian Serbs in *Za one* fails to challenge audiences to reflect seriously on the origins of violence, echoing Brown and Rafter's observations on commercial films with unambiguous heroes and absolute villains (Brown and Rafter 2013). Certainly, one would have to dig deep to find anything approaching the complexity reflected in criminological and other scholarship on perpetrators. However, the critique of a cartoonish portrayal of Serbs should at least be qualified by the interlude with the museum guide, whose dialogue with Kym gives the film its name. Likewise, we could take the lead from Kym's monologue in one of her video-journal entries, where she criticizes herself for viewing everyone through the lens of wartime atrocities (48:30).

In the first two films, perpetrators are largely implicit, introduced only through dialogue:

They raped me! In the prisoner-of-war camp. And you were born there! You're a Četnik bastard.
Grbavica (1:13:19)

What could I do? Stay in Bijeljina and watch those who killed my daughter walk free?
Na Putu (52:40)

15 *Al' je divna al' je blaga ova noć* [It is sweet, it is mild this night] sings of the birth of the prophet Muhammad.

16 *Savršeni Krug* (1997) portrays a multi-ethnic neighbourhood under siege; Priscilla Morris' novel *Black Butterflies* (2023) is centred on a Sarajevo Serb artist during the siege.

There are more mentions of perpetrators in *Za one*, including specific perpetrators who have been prosecuted. In a rare glimpse of formal criminal justice responses to atrocity, Kym listens to excerpts from the trial of Milan Lukić, and tells her mother of his crimes and his victims.¹⁷ Her mother asks a question at the heart of many inquiries into perpetrators: how people can be so cruel? But as Kym continues the account, her mother seeks to move on in what can be read as a comment on the limits of Western attention and empathy when it comes to atrocity: 'I'm sorry this is going to sound awful. It's our weekend' (22:30).

Perpetrators are directly portrayed in *Quo Vadis, Aida?*, Žbanić's only film including wartime scenes. Much of this fits her description of sociopaths and those blinded by power. Various scenes with Ratko Mladić show this, not least one of his final scenes when, accompanied by a television camera, he addresses a bus full of women, and one elderly man, destined for Kladanj in territory controlled by the BiH government:

You've heard about me, and now you can see me... I am here to save you. I gift you your life. I forgive you everything... I am sorry that it has come to this. But you should blame some of those among you. Not me.

Quo Vadis, Aida? (1:19:40)

Directly outside the bus, a young girl is pulled away by a soldier as her mother screams.

If most portrayals tend towards the othering of perpetrators as monsters, the character of Joka in *Quo Vadis, Aida?* offers more troubling reflections on atrocity in line with resemblance, familiarity and the criminology of the self (see Garland 1996: 461). From his first scene, Joka is callous and casual in his relationship with violence. He walks through Srebrenica with the attacking Army of Republika Srpska (VRS), carrying a list of names. When the town Mayor is brought to him, he simply says to take him away, upon which the Mayor is taken around the corner and, along with two women, is shot against the wall (8:30).¹⁸ Later, at the Dutch base, he is aggressive, domineering, sarcastic, threatening. Yet we see him again after the war. In a scene that takes the breath from Aida, he passes her on the stairs from her apartment, which he now occupies. He is carrying shopping bags, and we hear him off-screen calling to his child (1:28:25). In the final scene, as Aida's class perform on stage at the school, Joka's son is among them. Joka smiles as he watches the performance (1:37:40). These post-war scenes with Joka challenge any distancing of audience from perpetrators of atrocity. If not respectability, the scenes emphasize the same kind of domesticity that Chaudhuri (2014) saw in the role of 'the father' in *The Boy With the Striped Pyjamas*. Discussing the trajectory from neighbours to genocidaires, Tim Hayes (2021) writes that the film's power lies in representing perpetrators as 'entirely knowable citizens in normal social structures'.

Hasan Nuhanović has been critical of 'artistic liberties' Žbanić has taken which could change our understanding of the genocide (see, Mahmutović 2021). For example, Nuhanović contrasts the portrayal of aggression and arrogance on the part of Serb forces at the UN base with his own observation of the 'presentation of a civilized face' and acting like 'gentlemen who respect the Geneva Convention' while killing out of sight (S.H. 2020). Žbanić is not telling Nuhanović's story exclusively. Rather the story presented builds on her research, including interviews and documentary evidence (TIFF 2020: 2m ff). As such, a diversion from one account, even a

¹⁷ Lukić was sentenced to life imprisonment in July 2009 for crimes against humanity and war crimes. Prosecutors failed to include any sexual violence in the pre-trial indictment and an application to include additional charges was denied. Evidence on rape was heard regarding its effect on alibis but no judgment was passed on criminal guilt for these acts (*Prosecutor v Milan and Sredoje Lukić*, IT-98-32, 20 July 2009, para. 36–37).

¹⁸ Žbanić rejects conventional cinematic representations of war and violence (Hurtes 2020) and the gunmen are in the background as the camera's focus remains on Joka.

central one, is not necessarily an inaccuracy. Žbanić argues that her film ‘takes care of every fact’ even if it is not a direct cinematic replication of Nuhanović’s book (Chen 2021). Here, the question is of the criminological impact of particular directorial choices in the face of multivalence. Žbanić manages to convey something of that multivalence. Alongside the bullying arrogance, the barely credible façade of humanitarianism is maintained (the ‘civilized face’) through Serb offers of support for evacuation, false guarantees of safety (38:30), and distribution of food (46:30). The film captures different responses from hopeful acceptance (1:05:30) to recognition that it is all a show (54:55). On the other side, the Serb forces’ ‘swagger’, ‘confidence’ and cursing and ridiculing of Muslims in the film aligns with Klusemann’s micro-sociological account, built on ICTY testimony and video material from Srebrenica (Klusemann 2012: 477). Klusemann links this to the particular emotional dynamics of atrocity violence, with the resulting emotional dominance being directed as much at debilitating the ‘bystanders’ in the Dutch battalion as it is at paralysing the direct victims of the genocide (Klusemann 2012: 472, 475). Žbanić’s more limited focus on perpetrators is perhaps more echo of, rather than addition to, academic criminology, but still the cinematic approach allows a viewer to see multiple stories in one bigger picture.

Bystanders

Criminological accounts regularly extend beyond a dyad of victim and perpetrator, for example, the (absent) ‘capable guardian’ of routine activity theory (Cohen and Felson 1979) or the public in left realism (Lea 2010). Hilberg’s (1993: 195 ff.) history of the Holocaust as the Jewish catastrophe identified a category of diverse individual and collective bystanders who are neither victims nor perpetrators. Roles range from those who benefitted from the exclusion and murder of Jewish Europeans to those who proactively sought to protect them through publicity, lobbying or individual acts of rescue. Subsequent work on bystanders refined the focus to ‘passive spectators’ (Moerland 2022: 306) and their potential to disrupt atrocity (Vetlesen 2000: 521). When this potential remains unused, bystanders’ omissions are causally and morally relevant in facilitating the crime (Vetlesen 2000; Moerland 2022: 307). Vetlesen (2000: 520–521) distinguishes ‘passive bystanders’ from ‘bystanders by assignment’. The latter is a formal engagement, often linked to neutrality. Combined with proximity to events, this form of bystanderism is characterized by an increased potential to intervene in order to stop genocide (Vetlesen 2000: 521). As with perpetrators, bystanders are explored in less detail in Žbanić’s films, particularly the first three.

Za one features a dialogue between Kym and an academic, Edina Omerović, which raises the issue of bystanders as passive witnesses. Edina asks if it is possible to set alight a house filled with 70 people in the centre of a small town without anyone knowing it.¹⁹ The film credits Edina Bećirević’s *Genocide on the Drina River* (1:06:45, see Bećirević 2014). She wrote on visibility and bystanderism. This indicates a direct relationship between academic and cinematic criminology. In *Quo Vadis, Aida?* the imminent massacre of men by the VRS occurs on a compound overlooked by a family on their balcony (1:23:55). The unrealized potential to disrupt atrocity is implicit but suggests complicity. Neither film explores how such passive bystanderism is produced. Knowledge coupled with silence or denial suggests complicity after the fact of atrocity. A Serb interviewee in Višegrad noted that their neighbours had an interest in maintaining silence because they profited from what happened (Bećirević 2014: 130). Drawing on Michael Sells, Doubt (2000: 19–21) notes that the distribution of benefits was a key way of building complicity and binding people in a perpetrator community. This is glimpsed in *Quo Vadis, Aida?* when

19 Milan Lukić and others murdered at least 119 people in two incidents in June 1992, when men, women and children were barricaded in houses in Pionirska Street and Bikavac in Višegrad which were then set alight (*Prosecutor v Milan and Sredoje Lukić*, IT-98-32, 20 July 2009).

Aida returns to claim her apartment. Comparing this scene with the scenes before Aida's family flees the apartment (7:20 and 1:28:25), it is not just the space that was requisitioned. Various objects remain: a sugar jar, a wall clock, the TV set. These are gone when she later sits alone in her apartment (1:36:30).

In its entirety, *Quo Vadis, Aida?* exposes and indicts the 'assigned' institutional bystanderism of the UN and the Dutch Battalion tasked with protecting the Safe Area in Srebrenica.²⁰ Žbanić distinguishes between individual and institutional failings on the part of the UN, identifying in interview the youth of many of the soldiers, the greater responsibility of commanders, and the higher level of political influence of states (United Kingdom, United States and France) who put particular interests ahead of the protection of the population of Srebrenica (Mouriquand 2021). The local commander, Colonel Karremans, changes over time, but his disengagement is already signalled in the first scenes of the film. After reassuring the civilian authorities in Srebrenica that UN ultimatums imply consequences, he distances himself from responsibility: 'I am just the piano player'. (3:00) Two calls to the UN see him shift from an initial demand for air strikes (18:25) to pleading 'What should I do?' when he cannot reach anyone in the UN chain of command. This precedes his collapse in the face of Mladić's domination, allowing Joka and armed soldiers into the UN base, despite protests from his second in command, Major Franken (42:40). After a final encounter with Mladić at the gates of the compound (55:50), Karremans is not seen again, and is only heard calling, 'Leave me alone!' as Aida desperately knocks at his door. The greatest responsibility for the progressive abandonment of the people of Srebrenica is placed with the UN leaders away from Srebrenica. Still, it filters down to local commanders and soldiers to the point that they become complicit in genocide. The increased activity of UN soldiers as the VRS plan to expel and murder the civilians demonstrates this: the rolling out of tape to organize movement to buses (1:07:10), overseeing the departure of refugees and collecting any sharp objects, as if at airport security (1:08:00), and again at the compound gates (1:18:30). Our own ethical responsibility for this atrocity was there from the beginning of the film in the use of the original audio of the final broadcast from Srebrenica by Nihad Čatić:

Srebrenica is turning into a vast slaughterhouse...Will anyone in the world witness the tragedy?

Quo Vadis, Aida? (3:00)

CONCLUSION

Having set Žbanić's films alongside academic criminology, it is evident that they are strongest as examples of cinematic victimology of atrocity, including diverse models of victimhood and recognition of survivors' agency. They stand alongside academic criminology as a contribution, with an epistemology based on situating individual stories in their social context. These question the privileged status of combatants in a hierarchy of recognized suffering in a way that is not apparent in the transposition of scholarship on the ideal victim onto criminologies of war and atrocity: these are not victims that are weak in the classic sense, nor is the offender unknown, at least at a group level. Furthermore, the close focus on daily life after atrocity, particularly in *Grbavica* and the final scenes of *Quo Vadis, Aida?* can serve as a call to criminologists to use micro-level perspectives to further explore a long tail of victimhood, and its interaction with post-atrocity politics and institutions. Her films also align with and convey criminological knowledge of perpetrators and bystanders and pose questions to

20 This is another area where Nuhanović argues that Žbanić's departure from his narrative (see Nuhanović 2007) misrepresent events, here toning down the complicity of the UN (Mahmutović 2021).

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