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# Questioning the International: (Un)making Bosnian and Korean Conflicts, Cinematically

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## I. Introduction

The publication of UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali's *Agenda for Peace* at the height of post-Cold War liberal euphoria signalled the birth of international intervention and conflict resolution as key policy strategies and discursive frameworks underpinning the international system (Boutros-Ghali). Mobilising elite and popular confidence in international institutions and experts, international intervention generated hopes and aspirations for a more ethical and peaceful international order achieved through the resolution of conflicts and the global promotion of liberal peace. Rather than equate international intervention narrowly to military action sanctioned by the international community, we are interested more broadly in how the international has become a space of agency, solutions, and hope. We argue that this view of the international is a product of the triumphalist way the post-Cold War era of international politics was declared. As Aida A. Hozic reminds us, the beginning of international intervention shares its lineage with the emergence of "post-conflict" as "a novel geography populated with weak and failed states, ungovernable regions, outlaws, and pariahs, constantly needing and demanding the attention of the world's most powerful actors" ("The Origin of Post-Conflict" 3).<sup>1</sup> In other words, these seemingly benevolent liberal narratives have long insidiously worked to legitimise the West cast as the bearer of modernity *vis a vis* variously defined Others "who are just like us (global

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1. See also Bilgin, Pinar. "Thinking Past 'Western' IR?" *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2008, pp. 5–23; Campbell, David. *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*. Minnesota UP, 1992.

North), only weaker” (Barkawi and Laffey 346). The “weak”—the natives, the colonies, the periphery, the Third World, and the global South—are held responsible for problems of their own making while also being seemingly stripped of any meaningful agency. In these narratives, the international system is comprised of distinct spaces wherein solutions, knowledge, and agency are the prerogative of the Great Powers who inhabit the West/global North. Simultaneously, problems and conflicts to be tackled are displaced to the space of Otherness under various constellations of the East, the non-West, or the global South.

This paper grapples with the complexity of this post-Cold War international scene with a focus on two geopolitical spaces, Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) and Korea. These two sites have long served as “cases” that Western and Western educated experts like us can talk about, study, and act upon with little objection. International narratives invariably have framed the political situations in Bosnia and Korea as either a national/civil conflict (a problem of ethnic animosity or internal divisions) or an international problem (a case of humanitarianism and international security).<sup>2</sup> These narratives problematically pivot around the international community seeking solutions that install a “normal” socio-economic and political space wherein the framework of “conflict” perennially structures local histories, agency, and subjectivities. This paper does not examine mechanisms of this relegation, which would be the common route of research for critical studies of international politics. Instead we devote this paper to “moves beyond” by examining the mechanisms of being perennially relegated, and the labour that goes into refusing the status quo, one’s extinction, the erasure of alternative possibilities. If there is no way out, how does one live out the position of being constantly pinned down to the identity of the weak, the ungovernable, the periphery? What is the global and historical significance of these gestures?

We argue that Bosnia and Korea are sites with complex histories engendered and kept alive by specific experiences of conflict and by intimate “post-conflict” entanglements. By describing post-conflict as intimate, we point to how

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2. The literature on the two conflicts are vast but for widely-cited texts that demonstrates this framing, see Burg, Steven L., and S. Shoup. *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention*. M. E. Sharpe, 1999; Holbrooke, Richard. *To End a War*. Revised ed., Modern Library, 1999; Miliken, Jennifer. *The Social Construction of the Korean War: Conflict Possibilities*. Manchester UP, 2001; Cumings, Bruce. *The Korean War: A History*. Modern Library, 2010.

promises of transformations associated with declarations that the Cold War has ended produce everyday personal realities and subjective effects. Undergoing conflicts and surviving conflicts are messy experiences that produce complex, contradictory subject positions and desires for resolution and redemption even in the face of insurmountable obstacles and false promises. Here, we argue that the “post” in post-conflict and post-Cold War is not simply a designation for an end but rather a marker of the present ongoing Cold War contestations. Under contestation are political ideologies of communism and socialism or, more specifically, what they symbolise for different people. On one hand, we see efforts to make them absolute relics of history wherein Western liberal democracy and capitalism has won the day, and on the other, attempts to hold onto socialism, its promises, and the political gestures it engenders as valuable and viable alternatives to this triumphalist worldview.<sup>3</sup>

Bringing together Bosnia-Herzegovina and Korea under the unwieldy framework of postsocialism is to labour the point that a multitude of experiences and investments are caught up “in a halting but inexorable process of becoming-the-same as the Western countries on the other side of the Cold War divide: liberal, modern, normal” (Kovacevic 333). Here, we draw on the emerging dialogue between postsocialist and postcolonial scholarship developed in the field of cultural studies and anthropology that seeks to complicate existing frameworks for interrogating questions of power, hierarchy, and domination.<sup>4</sup> As Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery argue thinking between “posts” implies refusing a problematic notion of the international that “associates postcoloniality with a bounded space called the Third World and postsocialism with the Second World” (12). Post-Cold War as an analytical framework opens

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3. For a discussion of post-Cold War as analytical framework refer to the following works: Chari and Verdery; Tulbure, Narcis. “Introduction to Special Issue: Global Socialisms and Postsocialisms.” *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2009, pp. 2–18.

4. See Kovacevic; Cervinkova, Hana. “Postcolonialism, Postsocialism and the Anthropology of East-Central Europe.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2012, pp. 155–63; Bjelic, Dusan I., and Obrad Savic. *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation*. New ed., MIT P, 2005; Velickovic, Vedrana. “Belated Alliances? Tracing the Intersections Between Postcolonialism and Postcommunism.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2012, pp. 164–75; Wolff, Larry. *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment / Larry Wolff*. Stanford UP, 1994; Tlostanova, Madina. “Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial? On Post-Soviet Imaginary and Global Coloniality.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2012, pp. 130–42.

up opportunities to dig into alternative archives that foreground the complex, multidimensional, contingent, and messy nature of world(ly) reality-making and politics. Our “comparison” of BiH and Korea is not to erase peculiarities. Rather, it is an attempt to learn *creatively* from attempts to outlive conflict in the shadow of ongoing post-Cold war contestations and erasures, and to capture an alternative grammar of the international in the productive force of these undefeated attachments to living. It is an attempt to create.

Re-appropriating Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant’s thinking on desire and affect, we reformulate this complex international moment as an ambivalent, uneven, and incongruent affective scene.<sup>5</sup> We trace enactments of economic, political, and affective contingencies arising from the dissolution of socialism as a political alternative and form of life refracted in Bosnian and Korean cinema. Nostalgia is an important affective dimension of this moment that Maria Nikolaeva Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille call “postsocialist impasse.” This does not necessarily imply wishing communism and a communist stronghold back in government offices and politics. Contrary to popular connotations that suggest nostalgia is a naïve attachment to the past, postsocialist nostalgia is better understood as an orientation towards the future, for instance, an investment and attachment towards the possibilities, promises, and openings of socialism as a politico-affective alternative (Boym 13). It captures curtailed attachments to multi-directional political imageries that proliferated in the early twentieth century before various political networks and intellectual movements were absorbed into state-building or de-legitimised as contending public positions and voices. At the same time, postsocialist nostalgia also refracts variously enacted attempts to come to terms with the loss of belonging to a specific form of sociability and community that, during the Cold War, had a place in its own right in the international. Our point is that these are present, ongoing affective iterations directed at the future more than anything

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5. As discussed later in the paper Ahmed, Berlant, and various scholars working in literary and cultural traditions have conceptualised desire in broad terms to capture how desire is *for* an object but that desire is about acquiring objects only in the secondary because it works primary through sensations that objects facilitate. By thinking the international in terms of desire we are not concerned with pinpointing “what” the international “is.” On the contrary, we are interested in the *elusive* and *ambiguous* promises that the international engenders in the current post-Cold War moment for those inhabiting postsocialist “problem-spaces” like BiH and Korea. We are interested in the elusiveness of the international.

particularly or authentically historic.

In juxtaposing Korea and Bosnia, we propose viewing both nostalgia and erasure of socialism as two facets of the same contradictory affective process. In present day Bosnia, nostalgia is often expressed as a melancholic attachment to the bygone times of Yugoslav socialism, to what it was before the fall, when for instance mobility to Europe—of goods, culture, and people—was uninhibited because of Yugoslavia's non-aligned position, or when ethno-nationalist divisions did not incite conflicts because the checks and balances assured the different ethnic groups in the federal system of Tito's Yugoslavia, or so the story goes.<sup>6</sup> In the case of Korea, nostalgia as an investment and attachment towards a socialist future is perversely polarised as a result of the continued Cold War division of two separate states and spatialised systems of belonging. In the North, the statist variant of socialism is wholly where the future lies, and nostalgia is directed towards an international context when this was more widely shared. In the South, nostalgia for and attachment through socialism is aggressively under erasure. As a product of this symbiosis of erasure in the South *and* with Northern promises, nostalgia is to desire an extreme that is too complex to unpack in the context of this article.<sup>7</sup> By putting South Korean and Bosnian films in relation, part of what we seek to make visible is an erasure of alternative political histories and contentions in South Korean cinema. As we see later, postsocialist nostalgia as such is absent in any concrete political or historical form in the Korean films that we discuss. As blockbuster films, they work within the long established South Korean anti-communist

6. See Palmberger, Monika. "Nostalgia Matters: Nostalgia for Yugoslavia as Potential Vision for a Better Future." *Sociologija*, vol. 50, no. 4, 2008, pp. 355–70; Simmons, Cynthia. "Miljenko Jergović and (Yugo)nostalgia." *Russian Literature*, vol. 66, no. 4, 2009, pp. 457–69; Jansen, Stef. "Hope and the State in the Anthropology of Home: Preliminary Notes." *Ethnologia Europaea*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2009, pp. 54–60; Hozic, Aida A. "Travel for Ordinary Comforts." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2011, pp. 613–27.

7. For academic discussions of North Korean state view of international politics where we may read this nostalgia, refer to the following material: Smith, Hazel. "The Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Its Foreign Policy in the 1990s." *Renegade States: The Evolution of Revolutionary Foreign Policy*, edited by Stephen Chan and Adam Williams, Manchester UP, 1994; and Smith, Hazel. *North Korea: Markets and Military Rule*. Cambridge UP, 2015; Hughes, Theodore. *Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea: Freedom's Frontier*. Columbia UP, 2014; Kawashima, Ken C. *The Proletarian Gamble: Korean Workers in Interwar Japan*. Duke UP, 2009.

laws, politics, and culture that is at war with a socialist past and possibilities. If nostalgia is a positive form of reckoning with the sticky imprints of being rendered as objects, the erasure perceivable under the unwieldy framework of postsocialism is a sticky imprint in the negative form, the cost of outliving global hierarchy when socialism as an alternative is erased and made unspeakable.

The paper engages five films, namely: Park Chan-wook (박찬욱)'s *Joint Security Area* (공동 경비 구역 JSA, 2000), Danis Tanovic's *No Man's Land* (2001), Pjer Zajlica's *Gori Vratra/Fuse* (2003), Aida Begic's *Snow* (Snijeg, 2008), and Park Kwang-hyun (박광현)'s *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (웰컴 투 동막골, 2005). Interweaving films of different genres (blockbuster action and independent satirical drama) and contexts (Korean and Bosnian, Asian and European), we explore not only what these cinematic imaginations intimately tell us about their respective conflicts and post-conflict entanglements but also what they poetically hold out for our collective rethinking of our post-Cold War postcolonial international scene. Bosnian and Korean films from and about sites of conflict spotlight the creativity and poetry in the messiness of war, international intervention, and the world. By foregrounding fractured subjectivities and desires, states of impasses and dramas of adjustments to histories of loss, these visual knowledges dispel the liberal myth of rationalist language and problem-solving approaches. They interrupt understandings of international intervention and politics that are moored to the farce that the international community is engaged in a clear-cut, noble, and somehow aseptic business of making the world a better place. As we illustrate later, visual knowledges in Bosnian and Korean films gesture towards a new critical grammar for thinking, writing, and sensing the afterlives of conflicts, ones that startle our confidence as all-knowing subjects and demand attunement to intervals, foolishness, and slowness.

## II. Questioning the International from Cinematic Space

In her discussion of the history of cinema, Rey Chow writes:

By expanding and extending the possibilities of capturing movement, registering color, rewinding time past, and enlarging, speeding up, or slowing down the transitory moments of life, cinema was regarded first and foremost as an advancement, an overcoming of the limitations

inherent in human perception. (“A Phantom Discipline” 1387)

Through its aesthetic, plurivocal, multisensorial mediation, cinema affords us a productive entryway for sensing life that escapes human perception. Not only does this cinematic power make films important for students of international politics but our thinking about, or to be more precise, thinking through, these films seek to be cinematic, for instance, overcome the limitations of human perception. In a sense, our turn to “local” conflict films builds on international relations scholarship that variously dig into alternative archives, sites of history, and sources of knowledge: whether they be Daoist or Zen or other ideology as theoretical framework,<sup>8</sup> autoethnography as a method that engages critically with the inescapable violence of the academic gaze,<sup>9</sup> or posing a world-traveling eye on art and fiction in order to see hybrid worlds and the contributions of different others.<sup>10</sup> These creative efforts draw attention to and foreground the multiple worlds, contingency, and messiness of reality-making and politics that escape our perception if we accept the norms that discipline our understanding of politics. We want to push this body of critical research further in our cinematic engagement. Our mode of cinematic engagement with this multisensorial artefact seeks to be analogously contingent and move beyond rationalist readings of these films.

Furthermore, Bosnian and Korean cinema accompany an extra creative dimension from, as Rey Chow notes in the context of contemporary China, the specific historicity of being perennially rendered as objects of cinematic

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8. See Ling, L. H. M. “Worlds beyond Westphalia: Daoist Dialectics and the ‘China Threat.’” *Review of International Studies*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2013, pp. 549–68; Agathangelou, Anna M., and L. H. M. Ling. *Transforming World Politics: From Empire to Multiple Worlds*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2009; Chan, Stephan, and Peter Mandaville. *The Zen of International Relations*. Springer, 2016.
  9. See Dauphinee, Elizabeth. “The Ethics of Autoethnography.” *Review of International Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2010, pp. 799–818; Löwenheim, Oded. “The ‘I’ in IR: An Autoethnographic Account.” *Review of International Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2010, pp. 1023–45; Inayatullah, Naem. *Autobiographical International Relations: I, IR*. Routledge, 2010; Brigg, Morgan, and Roland Bleiker. “Autoethnographic International Relations: Exploring the Self as a Source of Knowledge.” *Review of International Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2010, pp. 779–98.
  10. See Sylvester, Christine. *Feminist International Relations: An Unfinished Journey*. Cambridge UP, 2002; Bleiker, R. *Aesthetics and World Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009.

gaze (“Framing the Original” 562). As films that fall within the “World Cinema” category, these conflict films bear sticky historical imprints from surviving the nexus of self/other and the West/the rest, for instance, what it takes to stay in circulation despite the changing demands on what they should signify. To remain in circulation as Other films, they would need to perform this Otherness for the Western(ised) gaze *and at the same time* produce signification for Oneself. We read these two international film scenes found under the “World Cinema” category as a complex desire to reclaim their respective localities as the primary subjects and makers of cultural history in this uneven cultural terrain.

We have used the word “desire” a few times in the paper. For us, desire is a conceptual conjunction of failure and of becoming. Berlant writes that desire is a theoretical concept that disappears as soon as you try to give it clarity, and yet, we turn to it in the first place because it is so immediate (*Desire/Love* 17–18). As a concept that fails, desire is a longing, a constant deferral, and a condition of living. Longing, to borrow from Ahmed, is a feeling that seeks to arrive at a different emotional state by attaching oneself to an object (*this*) that seems more stable and promises the achievement of a different (better) emotional state (*that*).<sup>11</sup> For Ahmed and Berlant, desire is not so much about the specific object that is desired. Rather, it is an array of affective states produced by and producing an amalgam of promises and fantasies that have shifting, enigmatic, and ambivalent destinations and objectives. By terming desire an “object/scene,” Berlant highlights the central mechanism of desire (attachment to object) and how the object of desire is more a scene, for instance, the vista/field that it creates, rather than a thing that we can point to, possess, control, or remove (*Cruel Optimism* 24). Desire fails because it is “both what promises us something, what gives us energy, and also *what is lacking, even in the very moment of its apparent realization*” (Ahmed 31, emphasis mine). It keeps us longing because when faced with its lack, with an obstacle in our way to fulfilment, we preserve the promises and the field of relations we project onto our objects.

Through the notion of “glitch,” Berlant tracks “objects/scenes” of desire in how desire fails. Berlant’s concerns pivot around cruel situations where an object of our attachment is an obstacle to our own flourishing, and yet, we preserve the attachment for how it offers a sense of continuity and what it

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11. See Ahmed.

means to keep on living regardless (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 24). Desire here is an affective positioning and orientation that sustains faith in the idea that adjusting as an individual/locality to larger social institutionalised practices and ways of feeling and being can secure one's well-being and location in the world. If desire is that which both impinges upon us and galvanises us, then following how desire fails can prove particularly productive in scenes of cruel, deadly, fantastical attachments, such as those engendered by the liberal promises of international intervention. The moments when desire fails could be the moments when fantasies loosen their hold on our imagination and provide strategies and language for surviving our objects of desire. These are glitches:

A glitch is an interruption amid a transition. I want to show how transactions of the body of the aestheticized or mediated subject absorb, register, reenact, refigure, and make possible a political understanding of shifts and hiccups in the relations among structural forces that alter a class's *sense* of things, its sensing of things. It involves encountering what it feels like to be in the middle of a shift and to use reconfigurations of manner amid the persistence of the body in the world to embody not the continuities of institutionalized history but something incoherent or uncongealed in the ongoing activity of the social. It is to see what is happening to systems of self-intelligibility through watching subjects getting, losing, and keeping their bearing within a thick present. It is to understand action that does not express internal states but measures a situation. (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 198, emphasis original)

Glitches expose the fraying contexts of good life fantasies yet also reveal the impasse as a thick moment of ongoingness, suspended belonging, and affective re-education from the loss of old sureties and fantasies. In stressing suspension, failure, and impasse, Berlant sees the political in fragile ordinary and mundane attempts to find one's bearings, to hang in there while stuck in the impossible condition of the present. Small adjustments, momentary absorptions, and re-orientation are both impinging and productive. In glitches we still sense an "undefeated attachment to living" and thus a potentiality for re-thinking new ways of (be)longing grounded in impasse and failure (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 267).<sup>12</sup> Staying attached is always a form of living. Being alive is always a form

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12. As Berlant uses the term, potentiality is a re-appropriation of conventional definitions

of becoming.

To sense glitches in the afterlives of Bosnian and Korean conflicts is to view questions of desire as inseparable from the sheer necessity of surviving the impossible condition of entrapment, the fate of being derivative, for instance, the relegation to a latecomer position in a geopolitical imaginary premised on the post-Cold War liberal triumph. In the sections that follow, we begin by first examining enactments of the impossible condition of entrapment in the respective conflicts. We then trace how conflicts construct, constrain, and create spaces and bodies far beyond the temporal period of conflict in the present post-Cold War juncture. Lastly, we turn our attention directly to glitches in an interrupted scene of desire. These are fleeting instances of suspension, delay, hiccups, blink-and-you-miss-it moments of post-Cold War impasse that reveal a potentiality for multiple worlds. Under contention—and under transformation and in flux—is the meaning, relevance, and future of socialism as a cluster of desires for alternatives.

### 1. Unending No Man's Land

No man's land, border area, and de-militarised zone are spaces of conflict that most immediately gain representation in popular culture such as films. While they are frontlines that separate two opposing militarised forces, they are also spaces that mobilise and enact a desire for togetherness and (re)union. In this context we examine Park Chan-wook's *Joint Security Area (JSA)*, a South Korean blockbuster film depicting the deadly effects of desiring the other across the enemy line for foot soldiers and Danis Tanovic's *No Man's Land (NML)*, which takes us to the battlefield of Bosnia-Herzegovina during the height of violence and animosity between two "opposing" ethnic groups.

While the two films differ significantly in genre (blockbuster versus independent) and plot (love versus animosity), both films express surprisingly similar critical narratives of their respective conflicts and the role of the international forces. Both films portray the division as arbitrary and the conflict as, if not exacerbated, then maintained by international incompetence or malice. *NML* enacts its damning critique by comically deriding the West

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of the political that imply a distinction between reality/potential. We see it as a way of thinking the present, the everyday, the mundane as situational, as the political that is constantly and continuously in the making.

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that perpetuates lies about the effectiveness of the international community. The joke in *NML* is that it is not funny. The international forces and media, their actions and attention were making the situation worse, not least because they create drama in ways that bring out the worst in the main Bosnian protagonist Ciki, whose anguish escalates into a desire to kill. Even the well-intentioned Western characters, the reporter, Jane Livingstone, and the UN peacekeeper, Sergeant Marchand, appear irrelevant to the conflict from Ciki's and his compatriots-cum-enemies' perspectives. If *NML* is a "historical" film that returns us to the height of fighting that has passed, *JSA* is set in the same contemporary period of normalised military border that maintains the fragile truce installed by the 1953 ceasefire agreement. *JSA* questions the neutrality of international forces and reveals two sides of this international farce: the impotent present day UN forces that maintain the ceasefire, enacted by the old, knowledgeable Swiss general who is ultimately powerless, and the villainous US military that can do whatever it wants including nuke the peninsula. International neutrality is either veiled impotence or aggression awaiting detonation.

The scene of desire emerging in these two films is the dramatic failure of narratives of redemption for those who are perennially relegated to object/problem position. Local lives are ultimately expendable in the name of keeping peace scripted by international intervention. In *JSA* as well as in *NML*, this expendability is deadly: out of the four soldiers implicated by the secret friendship that exposes the international forces as farces, only one, the North Korean lieutenant survives the encounter. The pool of blood that the closing credits scroll over prompts us to ask, what is the point of this war that nobody wants and nobody can end? Similarly haunting is the final scene of *NML* where the camera also focuses in on the man, Cera, sentenced to slow death, and zooms out to give a bird-eye's view of the man/the truth. The verdict, by camera, is that there is no solution, there is no out. It asks, what is survival if it is only as a dead man, a slow passing of time towards death in the god-forsaken spot one cannot move from or move about in? What is the point when we, our truth, truth that is us, can only become such through the mediation of the international bodies, system, and spaces that we can never be a part of?

*JSA* cinematically answers this final question by enacting the fantasy of *becoming* the international and changing the face of neutrality in one's own image. If the object/scene of failed desire in *JSA* is that even the most astute and committed neutrality fails, neutrality appears potentially useful only when the

local and the foreign intermix. In *JSA* the main face of the international force is Sophie, a biracial Swiss military lawyer, the daughter of a North Korean prisoner of war, and a Swiss woman. Here, Korean ethnicity, which is solely imagined from and for heteronormative men, fundamentally changes the composition of the foreign (female, whiteness, the West).<sup>13</sup> Through Sophie as the main face of the international, this figure allows the Koreans to somehow make claims to an international body as their own, yet maintaining the separation of us-Koreans and them-the-international. While on the surface this intermixing appears ambiguous, the ending reminds us it is ultimately impotent, and this impotence is deadly. *NML* enacts and brings into the frame the cruelty of this scene. It establishes a sharp contrast between Cera sentenced to death, literally “stuck” in an impossible position and the international subjects like Sergeant Marchand who can put their own failure and Bosnia behind and move away. If this contrasting fate is left for imagination in the Korean film, *JSA*, the Bosnian story in *NML* firmly brings this reality into the frame.

But part of this object/scene story is what the network of filmmakers, cultural producers, and institutions aspire to and achieve *through* their conflict stories as a particularly effective vehicle for gaining international visibility. In short, we need to examine not only what is in the frame but also how films as objects circulate, which, in our case, complicates any attempt to draw firm conclusions on the reconfiguring acts these films perform on the international stage. Praised for their political acuity in both academic circles and international media, these films are landmark productions that have worked to position Bosnian and Korean cinema internationally and are illustrative of how their respective conflicts propelled and continue to propel these local industries and cultures. *JSA* in the blockbuster genre is widely lauded as a film that started popular, economic, and critical success of South Korean films and has contributed to the Korean Wave (Berry 224). It brought to the world Park Chan-wook, the cinephile’s director who, on the back of the success that *JSA* garnered, has gone on to make internationally acclaimed *Old Boy* (올드보이, 2003) and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (친절한 금자씨, 2005) (Park). Analogously, Tanovic’s *No Man’s Land* won the epitome of Western acclaim, Cannes, and Oscar, in 2002 and is widely regarded as the film that put “Bosnian cinema was placed on the

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13. For an unpacking of how Korean ethnicity is conceived with men and heteronormativity at the centre, see Kim, Kyung Hyun. *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, Duke UP, 2004.

international map” (Zajec 164).<sup>14</sup> Tanovic’s international success and the rising prominence of the Sarajevo Film Festival started a new phase where “BiH film opened up to co-productions and became *a desirable*, sometimes *even an equal partner*” (“A Brief History of Bosnian Cinema,” emphasis mine).<sup>15</sup> As “films without a film industry,” as Špela Zajec puts it, the equality that international co-productions such as Tanovic’s *NML* signal an uneasy logic of “different but equal.” In both contexts, *conflict* works as a *medium* through which filmmakers from Bosnia and South Korea come to be counted as international, for instance, as serious, viable filmmakers with desires and stories of their own making. In other words, Bosnian and Korean conflicts provide access to object/scenes that compose the international both in what they enact on screen *and as mediums* that carry Bosnian and Korean bodies that express and/or work to reconfigure the international scene. Thus, surviving constant relegation to the object position of international intervention and longing for a more democratic and equal international scene remain intricately and irremediably entangled with Eurocentric gate-kept transnational diffusion and culture.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. Post-Conflict As Impasse

*NML* and *JSA* squarely remain within scenes of masculinist, militaristic, and heteronormative desire. To be brief, the male protagonists take centre stage as they fight, bond, reminisce, and even momentarily reconcile, while the female characters, the biracial lawyer Sophie and the investigative journalist Jane Livingstone, remain peripheral to the narrative despite being pivotal to the story. The narrow preoccupation and stage of the films become visible when seen in relation to a broader set of films that tell stories of conflict such as Pjer Zajlica’s *Gori Vatra* and Aida Begić’s *Snow*. Echoing *JSA* and *NML*, *Gori*

14. See Milas, Nataša. “Cinema of War and Peace: Bosnian Film from 1992 to the Present.” *KinoKultura*, special issue 14, 2012. [www.kinokultura.com/specials/14/milas](http://www.kinokultura.com/specials/14/milas); Bradshaw, Peter. “No Man’s Land.” *The Guardian*, 17 May 2002, [www.theguardian.com/film/2002/may/17/1](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2002/may/17/1).

15. See Kotecki, Kristine. “Europeanizing the Balkans at the Sarajevo Film Festival.” *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2014, pp. 344–66; Velisavljević, Ivan. “Initiating Regional Talents: 2013 Sarajevo Film Festival.” *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2014, pp. 371–77.

16. See Hozic, Aida A. “Between ‘National’ and ‘Transnational’: Film Diffusion as World Politics.” *International Studies Review*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2014, pp. 229–39.

*Vatra* and *Snow* show that fighting might be over but there can be no illusions about redemption through international intervention or help. These films dramatize the complexity of this disillusionment with a more eclectic mix of characters, viewpoints, and points of contemplation. Crucially, they bring into view various “victims” of conflict as multi-dimensional subject positions. This broadened out scene affords us a richer repertoire of complex and contradictory struggles for a more bearable life in the aftermath of conflict. Building on the theoretical discussions from earlier part of this paper, we want to show how these struggles are enlivened through the affective rubric of longing. In these adjustments and affective adaptations to impossible post-conflict conditions, we can begin sensing glitches: suspensions, delays, and re-entanglements that all variously reveal multiple ways of being in the world.

The plot in *Gori Vatra* unfolds in a civilian space several years after the Dayton Peace Accords. The slow provincial post-war life in a small Bosnian town is suddenly jolted into action by the news that then US President Bill Clinton has put the town under his personal protectorate and will pay a visit as a goodwill gesture. *Snow* also catapults viewers to a quiet remote rural village in Post-Dayton Peace Agreement Bosnia, where we encounter the painstakingly slow-paced lives of the women. *Snow* adds a starkly different gender focus: With the exception of an elderly man and a boy, the village is populated entirely by women who survived disappearances of their men during the conflict. This is a scene of women’s plight and loss but also of their resilience, attachments, hopes, and desires. In both stories, the outside world is a source of change and ticket to survival. In *Gori Vatra*, a town is tragically hanging onto hope, which is mostly self-produced, that the Clintons from America will save them. In *Snow*, a more sombre portrait contemplates the difficult choice ahead for the women between trusting a passer-by to help sell their handmade jam and pickles abroad, so that they can stay, or selling their homes to outside developers, evacuating the village, and seeking their future elsewhere.

*Gori Vatri* and *Snow* confront us with ambivalent dramas of adjustments in post-conflict as a time and space of impasse. In *Gori Vatra*, the fantasy of reconciliation is completely shattered. The town’s scheming mayor orchestrates a farce of local peace and progress for the “naïve fools of the international community,” for instance, President Clinton and his entourage. The least cooperative local, the town’s crazy fool blows himself up, making the hustle and bustle of the town’s transformation meaningless. The explosion exposes the fragility and fickle nature of international support and promises, and in

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the fragility, its farce. While the international envoys driving the affective investment in the international leave “the crazy town” behind, the locals languish at the site of implosion of the farce. Crucially, what also implodes are affective investments in progress, redemption, and a better life. Yet, the object/scene does not imply implosion as total annihilation and destruction of the desiring subjects; instead, it retains a longing for redemption as various characters improvise different ways to find composure in the face of crushed hopes and broken promises. For the mayor and his entourage who invested their energies and hopes in performing for the international fools, and for the clueless crazy inhabitants who somehow got caught up in the hustle and bustle, the drama of failure plays out as they resume their lives in post-conflict limbo.

One reading of glitch, the thick ongoingness that reconfigures the object/scene, in this universe of fools is through the local nostalgic bodies representing an inbetweenness in a post-conflict, postsocialist world where the promised transition to a “post” does not and cannot happen.<sup>17</sup> Nostalgia works as an attachment to continuous experiences of loss in the film: the loss of loved ones, the crushing of hopes, and the vanishing sense of belonging. Nostalgia signals a reckoning with damaged hopes and futures, and is a placeholder that keeps post-conflict life afloat while vulnerability, failure, and grief continuously work to pin local bodies and dreams down. As discussed earlier, a glitch is a moment of suspension while finding one’s feet in a situation that is overwhelmingly in flux. It is a spacing that provides a momentary entryway into the fraying context of fantasies that reify the notion of one solution, one progress, one international. Particularly interesting then is the nostalgic body of Faruk in *Gori Vatri*.

Faruk occupies a strange place of limbo. As the town firefighter he participates in the town’s preparation for Clinton’s visit, but he is also the son of the crazy old man who blew up his house and with it the town’s dream, and he understands his old man’s grief. In the final scenes of the film, Faruk announces to the ghosts of his father and his brother his decision to leave

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17. The rubric of longing is also variously enacted through the film soundtrack which includes both popular songs of the socialist era, as well as traditional music *sevdalinka*. As integral part of Bosnia’s popular culture, *sevdalinka* songs centre around languish, longing, and unrequited love. A reference to socialist culture, values, and identity is also visible in the film title, an explicit homage to a popular song that was 1973’s Yugoslav entry in the Eurovision contest.

troublesome Bosnia for Germany. This desire to get away to a foreign place is not a simple case of burying the dead and moving to a new place where the past, the ghosts, cannot reach him. This decision follows the explosion of his family home by his father, who is crazy with grief about his brother's disappearance during the conflict. The explosion in turn implodes the farce of redemption by the godfather America and the promise of progress. The objectives and motivations behind Faruk's decision remain elusive and ambivalent in the film. Rather than a grandiose scene of departure, the film closes with Faruk wandering in the woods near his destroyed family home. This is a scene of suspension, an unfinished action. Similar to how nostalgia works as a mode of survival in compromised conditions of existence, what matters in the desire to leave is not so much reaching a destination over there but staying attached to the promise that "going over there" holds. In other words, both scenes (trying to stay afloat through nostalgia or through the promise that leaving holds) reveal fragile adaptations and re-orientations in a time of imploded promises and shattered belonging. Faruk's body marks an undefeated attachment to being in the world. Desire to leave for an elsewhere (including the West) is an attempt to find one's bearings.

*Snow* begins its critique of the international community where *Gori Vatra* leaves off. In rejecting the international developer's buyout of the village, the women opt to live and work on what the land produces and find solace in togetherness. Desire for a better life in *Snow* finds hope in togetherness and rejects moving away from home. On the one hand, this stands clearly in contrast with the ending in *Gori Vatra* where Faruk leaves and thus appears to resist more directly the lies circulating in the international post-conflict object/scene. But on the other hand, the hierarchical, economic, and instrumental manner in which this rejection occurs maps a more ambiguous picture of what this resistance signifies. Alma, the main protagonist, is at the heart of this. She is the smart one of the village and is most closely aligned with the only (wise, old) male figure in the village. Her dream, which she shared with her now late husband, is to become a businesswoman trading in jams and pickles and to "feed all the world with our jam." Alma takes the whole village with her on her idealised quest because she believes that this is the only way they can survive and make it in the world. Thus, on one hand, this is a survival strategy, the better of two evils, to adapt and move forward or to be buried in the rubble stuck in the past and left behind. The village jam and pickle business then is a collective attempt under Alma's leadership to stay afloat and add up to

something while living in the remote village. However, the terms in which this dream can be fulfilled, for instance, trading with the outside world (yet keeping economic vultures out) collapses surviving into a familiar neoliberal logic that hard work, entrepreneurship, and resourcefulness will lift deserving subjects from poverty and exploitation. Faith in hierarchy is also at work. This narrative is about constant remedial work on the part of the villagers to catch up, to reach the decision and worldview that the smart, single-minded leader saw all along. The consensus appears inevitable and this inevitability is arrived at from a view that the world and people out there—the city people as Alma calls them—are uncaring, exploitative, utilitarian, and ruthless. In a way, the outside world is only viable for a strategic, profit-producing figure like Alma who is smart enough to see the value of staying together. In her strategic wisdom, Alma starkly stands in contrast to her peers. In short, the scene of “resistance” is ambiguous and complicit in what the characters outwardly seem to reject.<sup>18</sup>

*Snow* confronts us with an object/scene of impasse wherein ascertaining the “true” nature of desire and separating contradictory claims and aspirations in the scene are impossible. The figure of the charismatic, eloquent, beautiful Alma indulges us to read specific meaning into her aspirations and dreams as if these are ascertainable and coherent. But as the plot thickens and its aesthetics becomes denser, invested, and poetic, the film compromises and startles our confidence in our ability to read and make sense of the scene of desire.

### III. Creative Longings: How to Be a Fool

Films operate in a narrative medium. They are screens where fantasies and affective investments are projected as much as they are re-enactments of the worlds that we inhabit. Bosnian or Korean fantasies *create* the shared vision and narrative experience of the easily dislikeable developers and the farce of well-intended neutrality of Western political and military forces. They *create*

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18. For a conceptualisation of hope, as well as its intersections with longing and normality, see: Jansen, Stef. “Hope and the State in the Anthropology of Home: Preliminary Notes.” *Ethnologia Europaea*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2009, pp. 54–60; and Jansen, Stef. *Yearnings in the Meantime: ‘Normal Lives’ and the State in a Sarajevo Apartment Complex*. Vol. 15, Berghahn Books, 2015.

the weight that bodies located in such unequal spaces as post-conflict must bear. They are fantastical storytelling writhing from the (im)mobility and the divisions that conflicts produce.<sup>19</sup> We suggest that what weighs down these narrative enactments is also our gaze. Critical practice sanctions looking at these films and their narratives from up above and in ways that are not entirely different from, and in fact are part of, what the figures of the international world on the screen do. We read their situations and stories from afar making pronouncements about their world, their efforts, their limits, and their good (critical) practice.

As discussed earlier, Berlant defines a “glitch” as “an interruption amid a transition,” encountering what it feels like to be in the middle of a shift, a reconfiguration creating a fleeting delay in order to find composure (*Cruel Optimism* 198). In *Snow*, its slow camerawork dwells on the women’s mundane daily chores of weaving, making jam, brewing coffee, and singing children’s lullabies repeatedly *ad nauseam*. The sense of slowness, staggering time, and profound isolation are also achieved through a minimalist use of music and of the quiet landscape scenes of the ruined village overlooking a solitary valley. This sense of slowed down time is heightened by the sequence of Alma’s dreamlike prayer ritual of the walk to the water fountain, the (un)doing of the head scarf, the washing of herself to prepare for prayer that is edited to loop around twice in the film. As in a classic Greek tragedy, when the truth about the men’s disappearance in a mass grave is eventually revealed, the only possible solution is mourning and the burial of the dead. While the final subtext confronting viewers may be that the women are survivors who have buried their dead, the impossibly overwhelming sense of peace in the film is a peace that is affected in the slow movement and cinematography that exceed this final moment/message, if there is such a thing.

This peace in the repetitive meditative moments empties out the meaning and message about the specific conditions of the women, and in doing so achieve peace as an experiential momentary thing that extends beyond the

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19. Parenthetically, something that the Korean conflict in its sixth decade of fragile truce—no peace treaty was signed—highlights is how these experiences and contradictory desires live in the socio-cultural form beyond the corporal first-hand experiences as what Marianne Hirsch called “postmemory.” For an analysis of cinematic postmemory of the Korean division, see: Choe, Youngmin. “Postmemory DMZ in South Korean Cinema, 1999–2003.” *Journal of Korean Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2013, pp. 315–36.

meaning-laden remits of the film's plotline and story. As outlined above, this occurs mainly through the suturing work of the poetic visualisation of Alma who as the central character stands out from other women for her intelligence, her beauty, and the poetic rendering of her rituals. But the village grandmother at her weaving machine also serves as a comparable poetic figuration to Alma in the film. In stark contrast to Alma's prayer ritual outdoors, in movement, at dawn, the grandmother's weaving ritual is in her dark room, sedentary, in a dimly lit time. While the plot thickens in the village with the jilt of activities from Alma's jam and pickle business and the developers' visit, the grandmother quietly collects pieces of cloth left behind in various scenes—scarf that was a gift from a past lover, a bag that the developers brought holding toys for the children, and the tea cloth from Alma and her mother-in-law's house. Unlike the smart eloquent Alma, the grandmother barely speaks or is spoken to. When she is at the centre of a verbal exchange, she is duped by the developers and makes the mistake of signing their contract. She asks in disbelief if all have signed, and when told others have, the scene is striking in the ease in her decision to sign away the way of life that she has known and the smoothness of this scene. In short, the grandmother is not a figure of an older wise woman who counters the young ambitious Alma. Put differently, *nonna* is a wise woman who can be easily fooled, duped, and looked over.

The South Korean film *Welcome to Dongmakgol* provides an interesting perspective on the slowness and being fooled in *Snow*. In the mode of fantasy that is all too aware of the farce premise of fantasy, *Welcome to Dongmakgol* comically enacts alternatives to conflict and war by also turning to idyllic village tucked away in the mountains unaware of the ongoing war below. The logic of conflict and the line of division that creates opposing sides all unravel in the face of the villagers of Dongmakgol who are untouched and clueless about the unfolding Korean War. In this fantastical village, the dumbest, the simplest, and the most clueless are the freest—the village “crazy” girl, the clumsy good-natured boy and the village chief are all simple-minded folks uninterested in worldly matters beyond their most immediate everyday circle of encounters and pleasures. They are depicted as exemplary spirits that bring laughter, joy, wisdom, and, most importantly, freedom. Magical cinematic moments abound that are brought in or into climax by Yeo-il, the village crazy girl. Bursting onto the screen from unexpected corners Yeo-il with her giggles, “dumb” questions and a general air of stupidity leave a halo of brightness around the dumbfounding scenes she interrupts.

The scene of fools, delivered most impressively through the visual effect of the village crazy girl, exceeds the textual message of the film. It resounds with the notion that playing dumb consistently and persistently and even at gunpoint might be the only condition of power that will set us free. Yeo-il has many special powers: ability to move around without being detected, ability to communicate with inanimate objects like the grounded American bomber plane, ability to stand between gunpoints unaffected, ability to laugh under threat, and so on. These abilities are a condition, a state of being, that is played, performed, adopted, and feigned. Feigned because it is a becoming that hoodwinks us into accepting the not entirely convincing scene. The artificiality of the scene is always present in exaggerated form—a rain of popcorn, flying children, and other mid-air magical acrobatics of objects, people and animals, and crucially in the “unnatural” acting of Kang Hye-jung (강혜정) who plays Yeo-il. Kang’s acting is theatrical, which is further exaggerated by her cartoonishly perfect hair and cute costume. The film’s other-worldly figuration of dumbness turns the screen into a site for acting out the idea of *knowing* that privileges a mode of *not-knowing*.

Rather than an air of knowingness and an accumulative approach to knowledge, alternative ways of knowing what to do in *Welcome to Dongmakgol* is a matter of being without much substance. Being dumb and crazy allows suspension of normal conduct of affairs, of common sense-dictated encounters, and excuses one from investing in becoming a member of rule-abiding bodies. There is no deep philosophy or set of principles behind the position marking this entirely different constellation of desires and modes of being. They are messages without content, forms without message, and place-holders to mark possibilities, but possibilities here are devoid of any trace of politics and thus a means to collect and harness the longing. It may be important to lament this state-driven erasure in South Korean films as we do earlier in the paper but to return to Berlant’s formulation of glitch, “It is to see what is happening to systems of self-intelligibility through watching subjects getting, losing, and keeping their bearing within a thick present. *It is to understand action that does not express internal states but measures a situation*” (*Cruel Optimism* 198, emphasis mine). Surface level is exactly how film and experiencing the projections of fantasy operate. They are measures not of the “contents” of a subject or object to begin with but measures of a situation, a scene, what occurs between. To return to postsocialist nostalgia, it is a placeholder, a locus for practicing an art of emptying out, of no-thingness, of gracefully becoming

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a fool more than an ideological program that requires coherent ordering. Understanding, then, is an ability to be affected, and this long quote from Trinh Minh-ha serves us well:

We tend to focus on the event, the sound, the bubble, and what goes unnoticed is the always-there, the silence, the non-event, this vast surface of water from which bubbles come and go. Spacing is what allows one to face alterity in its omni-presence and absence. So to return to what I asked earlier, what's between two notes? What exists in a film, for example, between two images? What happens in the interval? The question mark is huge here, for every one of us would come up with a different response. It's a space of infinite possibilities. In other words, the interval is where we can ultimately say: 'I don't know.' (Trinh 21)<sup>20</sup>

What if the object/scene of conflict and international intervention is read through intervals, through infinite possibilities? What kind of (re)writing of the international would that be? How would it read, sound like, address, make visible, name, think? We suggest—and keeping the question mark as our punctuation of preference—cinematic thinking is a mode of thinking, writing, and being that stays in the level of relation without substance, without content, with no-thing.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This paper delved into Bosnia-Herzegovina and Korea conflicts as acute locations shaped by complex histories of conflicts and “post-conflict” entanglements with the promises of transformation ushered in by the post-Cold War liberal euphoria. Re-appropriating the language of desire, longing, and impasse, we have shown that this postsocialist moment is best understood as an incongruent and ambivalent affective scene. This language allows us to capture a myriad of narratives, images, and longings that gesture to multiple ways of being in the world foreclosed in the current post-Cold War international

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20. While Trinh Minh-ha writes here about documentary film, her artistic/academic work more profoundly is concerned with continuously displacing, disturbing, and challenging existing categories of film classification.

scene.

Cinema from these sites affords us a rich archive that spotlights creativity and poetry in this complex “post-conflict” condition and dispels the rationalist myths propping up problem-solving and liberal interventionist approaches. Bosnian and Korean conflict films project fantasies that are weighed down by being perennially rendered objects in the current post-Cold War imaginary. Our film reading foregrounds nostalgic attachments to histories of loss, ambiguous desires for progress, mobility, and normality as attempts that reconfigure the international. Understanding this reconfiguration benefits from rethinking the grammar of knowing. We have explored this through notions of glitch, slowness not-knowing, and playing dumb. On final accounting, we propose understanding the postsocialism that emerges from cinematic engagement of Bosnian and Korean conflicts as a measure of a situation, a concept of surface. It is a placeholder of things to come but in functioning as a placeholder and evidence of survival strategies, they are already there to “to-come.” We have suggested encountering conflict films as canvasses for dispelling the myth of the omniscient self and seeing creativity, as Trinh puts it, as a space of infinite possibilities. Our job as scholars may not most importantly be to fill this space but to keep it open for greater, pluralistic “locals” to populate, create, and thrive. Our task is to keep our punctuation marks inflected as question marks.

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## Abstract

This paper grapples with the complexity of surviving the perennial relegation to object positions in international politics and conflicts. It focuses on Bosnia and Korea as sites with complicated histories engendered and kept alive by specific experiences of conflicts and intimate “post-conflict” entanglements. Through a close reading of Bosnian and Korean films, we illustrate how “post-conflict” promises of transformation ushered in by declarations that the Cold War had ended create a particular post-conflict politico-affective scene. We term this scene “postsocialist” that makes visible how a myriad of narratives, images, and expressive iterations are resonant longings and orientations towards multiple worlds foreclosed by the triumphalist post-Cold War imaginary. Interweaving Bosnian and Korean films, we argue that nostalgia and longing are dramas of adjustments that create and reconfigure the international. Building upon the work on desire and affect by Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed, and Trinh Minh-ha, the paper proposes a new grammar for imagining, writing, and co-creating the international through a discussion of the case of slowness and being a fool in (post) conflict scenes.

**Keywords:** affect, cinema, conflict, post-Cold War, the international

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