

# *Welcome to Sarajevo: a shallow look at war in the Balkans*

Stefan Steinberg  
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Currently on release in a number of European countries, Michael Winterbottom's *Welcome to Sarajevo* is a shallow film dealing with the war in the former Yugoslavia. The work is based on *Natasha's Story* by the English journalist Michael Nicholson, based heavily on his own experiences in the conflict.

The film's main protagonist is a British television journalist, Henderson, reporting on the war in Sarajevo in 1992. The opening scenes of the film show Henderson and his colleagues charging through the streets of that city hunting for sensational shots of blood and gore that can be sent back home for consumption. The more violence, the more pathos captured on film the better. In a street under siege from snipers Henderson witnesses how American 'star' reporter Flynn (played by Woody Harrelson) calmly assists a woman who has been shot. He feels that more personal courage on his own part is called for.

In a later scene Henderson and his crew risk their lives obtaining footage of a rocket attack on a populated market place. (To create the sequence, director Winterbottom used a hand-held Steadicam to film his actors. He then blended his material with documentary footage of an actual rocket attack. The final product thus contains documentary film of the wounded and horribly mutilated victims of the attack intercut with shots of Henderson and his film team. It is a remarkable achievement, but it does make one think of the cynical uses to which such technical tricks are put in *Wag the Dog*.) When the footage is sent back to Britain, however, Henderson's remarkable shots are relegated to second place on news broadcasts in favour of the really 'sensational breaking news'--the separation of the Prince of York from his wife Sarah Ferguson.

Henderson's dissatisfaction with what he is doing grows. In the course of his work in Sarajevo he reports

on the situation in an orphanage which is also under siege. Henderson promises one of the children, a ten-year-old girl, to help her flee the trauma and devastation of the war in Sarajevo. He promptly forgets his promise until the orphanage becomes a target for shelling, and evacuation of the children becomes the only option. He resolves to personally take responsibility for the child and smuggle her out as part of a UN convoy. Against the backdrop of the war, the rest of the story follows Henderson's return to Sarajevo as he attempts to ensure that he can legally adopt the girl.

The film raises a number of issues, and given its direct commentary on a significant contemporary event, it seems appropriate to evaluate its social outlook. One senses that Winterbottom wants to make an anti-war picture and a humanitarian one. The plight of those caught up in the horror of the Bosnian conflict is an entirely legitimate and praiseworthy subject. By using original footage of the war combined with his own to convey the devastation and misery of Sarajevo in 1992, he certainly induces a sense of shock in the spectator at the random nature of the violence which was unleashed. In a series of scenes the film depicts the struggle by ordinary people to continue with their lives, to salvage decent conditions and dignity for themselves and their families in the face of enormous odds.

But Winterbottom is more ambitious, unfortunately. Together with the footage of the war devastation, the film-maker has introduced documentary shots and brief statements from a number of prominent political figures. Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic is shown hypocritically promising to deal fairly with his opponents. He is promptly followed by a clip of former US president George Bush declaring that you 'cannot do deals with terrorists.'

A variety of prominent politicians and military leaders are shown explaining why the Western powers did not intervene more vigorously in the war, and the film's last word is left to the former envoy of the United Nations in Yugoslavia, Lord David Owen. In another scene the American veteran war reporter Flynn apologises effusively to Henderson for the fact that the US government did not make use of air strikes to accelerate the end of the war.

The conclusion of the film in this respect is perfectly clear--the Western powers failed to intervene vigorously enough at the peak of the fighting in 1992. Winterbottom's standpoint, unfortunately, reflects the views of the vast majority of commentators, film makers and intellectuals who, with regard to the events in the Balkans, have failed to grasp in a serious way the role played by the major powers in initiating and encouraging the war in the first place and in manipulating the various nationalist and communalist forces.

Furthermore, the director apparently wants to criticise the priorities of the commercially-orientated media--for example, the infatuation with the royal soap opera at the expense of the war in the Balkans. The points he makes are legitimate ones. But why has his film been greeted with such effusive praise from sections of the British tabloid press, such as the *Daily Mirror*, whose reviewer praised *Welcome to Sarajevo* 'as the most moving film since Schindler's List'?

The truth is that the media in Britain are prepared to overlook the film's criticisms because of their agreement with its main orientation. In 1992 the *Daily Mirror*, together with a number of other British tabloids, ran a campaign featuring the plight of babies and orphans wounded or maimed in the Bosnian civil war. For weeks on end pictures of helpless and wounded infants were splashed across the front pages. The press made use of these terrible images for its own cynical purposes, to pressure the government to intervene more rigorously in the Balkans in defence of British interests. A photograph can be heartrending, and yet be used to mislead; a film can be moving, and yet do nothing to shed light on a complex problem.

No doubt discussions are presently taking place in London, Paris and Washington about renewed intervention in the Balkans. Whatever the intentions of those who created it, *Welcome to Sarajevo* is a film

which lends credence to the official version of events.

Imperialist war in the Balkans and the decay of the petty-bourgeois left

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