A Perfect Day: 24 hours in the Bosnian War

Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Fernando León de Aranoa; co-written by León de Aranoa and Diego Farias, based on the novel by Paula Farias

Spanish filmmaker Fernando León de Aranoa's new movie *A Perfect Day* deals with foreign humanitarian aid workers in Bosnia at the end of the civil war in the mid-1990s.

The film is based on the novel *Dejarse Llover* (Let It Rain) by Paula Farias, a physician and former head of Doctors Without Borders in Spain. León de Aranoa is a filmmaker with an antenna pointed in an interesting direction. His *Mondays in the Sun* (2002), featuring Javier Bardem, deals with a group of laid-off shipyard workers in northwestern Spain.

León de Aranoa sets his latest film in the midst of the devastation produced by the Bosnian War and its horrific consequences for the population. *A Perfect Day* is done with some intelligence and sensitivity.

Unhappily, however, in keeping with the general trend of contemporary filmmaking, the director restrains himself from saying anything urgent or concrete about the history or origins of the brutal conflict and the role of the great powers in particular in encouraging the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991.

A Perfect Day opens "Somewhere in the Balkans" in 1995 or 1996. The "somewhere" is presumably Bosnia and "a perfect day" is the 24-hour period in which the most elementary task facing the aid workers becomes a Sisyphean effort.

The initial scene shows the corpse of a man being hauled out of a well, where it has been thrown to poison the water—a common practice enabling profiteers to then charge the hard-pressed locals for drinking water. Aid worker Mambrú (Benicio del Toro) is directing the operation. "He didn't go hungry in the war," he comments, referring to the unknown dead man's corpulence.

When the aging, overworked rope breaks, finding a replacement consumes the energies of Mambrú's team, composed of the cynical, crusty American, "B" (Tim Robbins), local interpreter Damir (Fedja Štukan), French newcomer Sophie (Mélanie Thierry) and Mambrú's former flame Katya (Olga Kurylenko), now in charge of evaluating whether the fictional aid organization should remain in the country.

There are comic-bizarre elements to the hunt for a rope, in keeping with a certain style of Balkan filmmaking (and perhaps life). Mambrú and his crew attempt to sedate a vicious dog to obtain his leader, they have to deal with possible landmines laid under dead cows for foreigners who "bring war" and a shopkeeper who refuses to sell them rope because it is needed "for hangings."

The quintet also has to contend with the inept, complacent United Nations bureaucracy. Then there is the immensity of the country's destruction and the attendant numbing of the people—the orphaned, the hungry and the hopeless.

In the course of rescuing a young boy, Nikola (Eldar Residovic), from a few teenage bullies, Mambrú learns that the latter's parents have supposedly fled to another city, leaving the kid in the care of his impoverished grandfather. Mambrú surmises that the youngster's family was the victim of ethnic cleansing: "Before the war, Muslims and Serbs [together]—no big deal." In the wreckage of the boy's house, the aids workers find a photo of a happy family … along with something terrible.

Prisoners and refugees are indistinguishable. They meld into a jarring landscape of human suffering in a country whose infrastructure has been reduced to rubble. It prompts the question: is there any logic to putting out small fires when a volcano has reduced everything to ash?

A Perfect Day is a film illustrative of some of the current artistic and ideological problems. On the one

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hand, it sincerely attempts to place a human face on an inhuman situation. León de Aranoa shows genuine concern about human suffering. Del Toro and Robbins are appealing, as is most of the supporting cast.

On the other hand, the filmmakers are either overwhelmed by the circumstances or intellectually unable to tackle them. The film takes the easy and unattractive way out, focusing on the American and European characters, even their uninteresting personal lives, as a substitute for going deeply into the Balkan situation. Although it is far more sophisticated, *A Perfect Day* at times veers dangerously near the territory inhabited by films like *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (the Tina Fey film "about" the war in Afghanistan).

As part of that somewhat self-absorbed and trivializing process, and to the work's great detriment, the director scrubs out the particulars of the Bosnian conflict, consciously aiming to reduce it to a "timeless," universal story.

In an interview León de Aranoa states: "In my opinion, showing this absurdness [of war] is much more terrible than showing scenes of fights, and combats. War films are mostly focused on that. I decided to focus on that silent war which is more in the human behavior, and in the mind. All those strategies to make harm, like using mines, throwing corpses in the wells, blowing up houses so that people couldn't come back home after the war, gave me the chance to talk about human nature."

Elsewhere he told an interviewer: "We did not want to point fingers, we did not want to make a film of good and bad. The greatest enemy is irrationality in any conflict because the first victim is the reason."

Neither abstract human nature nor human irrationality set the Balkans on fire in 1991-92. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, German and American imperialism sponsored the break-up of Yugoslavia, making use of the reactionary communalist forces that had been breeding under the surface in the Titoist-Stalinist-ruled country. The implementation of severe austerity measures and the introduction of free market policies unleashed powerful centrifugal social tendencies. Foul roles were played by the various nationalist or ex-Stalinist forces and leaders, Milosevic in Serbia as well Tudjman in Croatia, Izetbegovic in Bosnia and Kucan in Slovenia. There was nothing inevitable about the bloody war that broke out.

When del Toro explains that Moslems and Serbs lived together at one point, he blandly goes on to say, "Then the war started." One wants to shout at the screen, "Tell us more! How did the war start? Who started it?"

León de Aranoa's film takes place when tens of thousands of UN forces occupied the country. The UN is neither a peacekeeper nor a force for good, but an imperialist agency that oversaw and policed the grotesque carve-up of the country—the disastrous result of the Pax Americana in Bosnia.

In the end, *A Perfect Day* helps promote illusions in "humanitarian intervention." This has become the calling card of pseudo-left forces aligned with the great power quest to recolonize large swaths of the world. The major complaint about the United Nations in the film is that it does not do enough. (At one point, Damir points to the UN insignia and exclaims, "United Nothing.") This jibes with the complaint of various intellectuals and ex-lefts in the early 1990s that the various powers and the UN were not intervening aggressively enough in the former Yugoslavia.

León de Aranoa (born in Madrid in 1968) belongs to the milieu of amorphous European artistic leftism that has emerged since the end of the Soviet Union. Well-meaning, humane, vague, intimidated by the discourse about the "end of socialism," this layer does not ask terribly much of its audience or of itself. One is not shocked to learn that León de Aranoa is making a documentary about the origin of Podemos, the Spanish pseudo-left party. About that project, he says, "I would like to change things. I want to see new possibilities for people to express their problems … and find new solutions."

A Perfect Day depicts the horrific aftermath of Yugoslavia's dismemberment. It never once asks—not once!—why the dismemberment took place and who benefited from it.

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