

If the media surrounding the 1999 NATO air-strikes on Serbia and Montenegro consistently absolved Americans of any responsibility—both through the content and form of its representation of those events—Silva’s film, in contrast, refuses the conceit of innocence and demands instead a vigilant and implicated viewer. It’s as if the voices and images of *Balkan Rhapsodies* well up from the interstices of the official talk, reportage and punditry concerning the Kosovo war and NATO’s response, providing us with bits and pieces of other kinds of information—images of violence spun backwards, melancholic, alcohol-laced interviews with Serbian soldiers, a glimpse of the persistent shame of an American in Belgrade—that we as viewers must somehow be accountable to. The fragments, or “movements” as Silva calls them, send us outside of ourselves and the film and force us to question our ignorance rather than rest in our self-satisfied truths. In *Balkan Rhapsodies* there are no obvious heroes, there is no preordained denouement.

Silva has crafted a film that does not shy away from complexity. Serbian youth appear in the film as embodied individuals who are simultaneously ashamed of their history, yet proud of particular acts and moments of resistance, who are melancholic witnesses to a sobering past, yet awake to their complicity with a murderous regime and who are afraid to hope for too much, yet continue hoping for something better.

Silva eschews the linearity of much documentary film in favor of a meditation on the temporality of violence—and our way of knowing violence— which moves forwards and backwards simultaneously. What is left at the end of the film is not a sense of mastery over the events, but a series of fragmentary impressions, ideas and feelings that echo the bombed out buildings and rubble filled streets he portrays. Silva subtly contests the unchallenged authenticity and power of the visual image and of narrative—for example, by cutting away just as we were about to hear one expert’s rendition of the “truth” about the NATO bombings, or by including those candid moments before or after the “interview” starts. In one of the most tender scenes of the film, a subject who is variously described as an astronomer/philosophy student/student resistance leader says of the image she sees through Silva’s camera, “it is better to watch by eyes, not by camera.” Her words bring us back to the artifice and distance of the camera, refuse our entry into the illusion that we are in Belgrade or Kosovo with the filmmaker.

*Balkan Rhapsodies: 78 measures of war* deftly juxtaposes the everyday and the exceptional, the sublime and the horrific, into a film that challenges us to reconsider what we thought we knew about war, about humanitarianism and about our own good intentions. It challenges us as students and scholars of the humanities and social sciences to interrogate our own process of meaning making—how we come to know what we do about war, and especially how we come to know and consume the pain and suffering of others. *Balkan Rhapsodies* is a beautiful and disturbing film, a film whose afterimage should provoke us to think about war and humanitarianism in a more sophisticated, and ultimately more compassionate way.

by Lisa Stevenson, Professor of Anthropology, McGill University