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Women and War

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Traditional war films, be they feature or documentary, usually show soldiers fighting against their enemies. The main discussion then refers to the loss or gain of territory, to border movements, to the official status of a region and the like. In recent times, however, the unofficial realities of war have also gradually become issues of public discourse and media representation. New questions that have arisen so far include what wars mean to civil society and how civilians experience them. A mainly unasked question that has recently received at least peripheral attention addresses the role and the fate of women both as active players and as victims in war.

To study the fate of women one has to study their relational position in a patriarchal society, and I will do so in the course of this case study. In this chapter, I will concentrate on a documentary film chosen for its representation of the victimization of women in the war in Bosnia, and which had one of the largest TV audiences of all documentaries made in the Balkan region after 1989: Calling the Ghosts, made by Mandy Jacobson and Karmen Jelinčić (USA/Croatia, 1996). The film covers a very sensitive topic that usually falls into the category of the ‘unspeakable’ and is therefore often taboo. Despite the exponential increase of TV programmes within the last two decades dealing with history, including recent wars, the topic of rape as a war crime was more or less ignored on the ‘small screen’ until the end of 1993.

Though the focus of this book is on the ‘representation’ of history on television and the use of film languages, other chapters use a sociological approach, because the issues demand an interdisciplinary discussion and contextual knowledge. The main questions of this chapter are the following: What does war mean for the individual woman in the everyday war context, and what are the patterns of representation of women’s fates during the war in the films? Furthermore, the discussion will lead to the question of how – apart from the focus on individual fates – the construction of ‘collective victims’ is supported and shaped by the filmmakers, the channels distributing the documentary (e.g., TV) and also by institutions outside the film/media world as well.

One basic conclusion of the research work of the Belgrade-based non-governmental organization Women in Black is that during the war, violence
against women increased significantly, and not only in the ‘public war sphere’ but also in ‘private spaces’. Women in Black, whose main political goal in the 1990s was resistance to the war in Bosnia, push the borders of taboos when they publicly mention violence against women and children by their own husbands, fathers and sons, returning from the front. The abuse of women was silently accepted in the Second World War and long after its end. The conclusion of Women in Black is that militarism and violence in the family are connected. Staša Zajović, the founder of the group, further criticizes the West for the fact that, as she sees it, as soon as the West speaks about the protection of human rights in relation to the Third World and to the Balkans, they mean collective human rights – the rights of discriminated minorities. But nowadays she thinks it is more important to speak first about individual civilian rights in the region.

**Individual suffering versus the collective victim**

Though I agree with Zajović that the trend of collectivization is a preferred approach of the West when it considers Balkan societies, this tendency could be observed and was even maintained inside the former Yugoslavia, and is even representative of the Balkan region as such. The main collective group that experienced a revival in the masses and that was used as a ‘mediating force’ shortly before and during the war years when the collective Communist legacy had officially been put aside was the traditional patriarchal family. This kind of re-traditionalism, as the group Women in Black agrees, indirectly supported a national re-awakening. Communism had no longer any power to impede the values of patriarchal thinking and behaviour that manifested itself in the traditional patriarchal family. Still, what can be observed in many other films produced in the Balkan area constitutes a kind of paradox because this longing to be seen as an individual seems to derive not only from externally produced stereotypes and stigmatization, but also from a desire to free oneself from the collective forces inside the (former) Yugoslav/Balkan culture. The problem of ‘collectivist’ thinking is discussed further in the next section, which deals with *Calling the Ghosts*, the film that focuses on the victimization of (raped) women in war. Though this film reveals the experiences of women in war by showing their individual fates, it usually also places the female victims and male perpetrators in collective ethnic groups, thus making us once again aware that we need to explore the interdependence of regional, gender and national/ethnic identifications.

**Calling the Ghosts: Let’s play a game in order to survive**

Some decades ago, authors such as Brownmiller (1975) and Bergman (1974) (see Olujić, 1995) started to discuss rape as a tactic of terror in warfare, in relation to the First World War, the Second World War and the war in Vietnam. The difference, in the context of the war in the former Yugoslavia, is