

Audience Impact of European Co-production: The Case of *Quo Vadis, Aida?*

Petar Mitrić, University of Copenhagen
Tamara Kolarić, Dublin City University

European co-productions are usually the most ambitious European films, combining multiple sources of financing and targeting both transnational audiences and critical acclaim. However, their success with audiences is often quite limited in terms of admissions. In this article, we investigate the sources of this audience challenge for European co-productions adopting the perspective centered on audience design. We look at what we define as “ideal European co-productions”—films of high artistic value with festival visibility, an “ideal script” and clear socio-cultural and political value. We identify, drawing primarily on literature in theatre studies, four different groups of target audiences for these films—average spectators, emancipated spectators, spect-actors and emancipated spect-actors—and offer a framework for understanding what mobilizes these audience groups to seek out and view films. We then use *Quo Vadis, Aida?*, a 2020 film by Jasmila Žbanić, as an in-depth case study to show how, in practice, a lack of strategy at both production and distribution stage can result in failing to reach the target audiences even for films that show significant audience potential and have well-defined socio-political goals. We end the study pointing to the limitations of our work as well as offering suggestions for further research and policy development.

Keywords

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Audience Design
Audience Activation
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INTRODUCTION

Co-producing has been a pivotal tool in European audiovisual policy since the end of WWII, fostering increased financing sources, broader release territories, and heightened production value, while facilitating a cross-national exchange of creative ideas and talent. Heavily funded by public subsidies, co-productions sustain numerous independent European production companies, ensuring high artistic freedom for European auteurs, elevating the volume of European production, and garnering festival awards (Hammet-Jamart, Mitrić, and Novrup Redvall 2018).

However, distribution reports reveal that the audience success of European co-productions remains constrained. With few exceptions, European co-productions seldom attract significant mainstream audiences, as viewers increasingly turn to US streaming platforms. The pervasive digitization and the enduring impact of the pandemic have only accelerated this trend in recent



years (Eskilsson 2023; Gubbins 2022).

Several evident political-economic factors contribute to this audience challenge. Chief among them is the lack of sufficient distribution and marketing support within the European independent film sector (Drake 2018). With a focus on supply rather than demand, European film funds often prioritize financing production over distribution, resulting in the overproduction of European films and market oversaturation. Another factor is the global unavailability of European films, even those with world sales agents attached. The dominant territory-by-territory sales and distribution model, intended to maintain film exclusivity and increase income through multiple territorial sales, paradoxically renders many films unsold and invisible. Additionally, the language barrier poses a significant challenge, as many co-productions are crafted in local European languages, limiting their connection with global audiences.

Yet, European filmmakers themselves may bear some accountability for the audience challenge. Depending heavily on public subsidies and facing few consequences for audience failures (especially if they perform well at festivals), filmmakers may prioritize catering to the taste of selection committees of public film funds and programmers of A-list festivals over reaching the average spectator. In this article, we explore the necessity for filmmakers to design an audience for their films and examine how the co-production status aids in reaching audiences. Our focus centers on a representative European co-production—*Quo Vadis, Aida?* (2020, hereinafter *Aida*) by Jasmila Žbanić. It serves as a paradigmatic and (possibly) generalizable European case, being a well-crafted and award-winning film co-produced by nine European countries, with the potential to reach a broader audience. Being directed by a Bosnian director and set in Bosnia, *Aida* has been a subject of studies within the fields of Balkan cinema and memory studies (Jelača 2021; Lovrić and Hernández 2022). However, we treat *Aida* as a European, rather than Balkan, co-production, as the audience challenge it illustrates is a European concern that equally impacts the entire European film industry.

Aida boasts wide European distribution, universal themes, high production value, and an Oscar nomination. However, official distribution reports indicate modest cinema attendance in Europe, totaling 178,000 admissions across nineteen release territories (LUMIERE).¹ Interestingly, during the same period, some other films attracted large audiences, both in ex-Yugoslavia (e.g., *Toma*, Dragan Bjelogrić and Zoran Lisinac, 2021, with almost 1.5 million admissions) and elsewhere in Europe (e.g., co-production *Another Round*, Thomas Vinterberg, 2020, with 3 million European admissions), suggesting that the pandemic, online releases, and piracy were not insurmountable obstacles.

Why did *Aida* experience low admissions, and why do many European co-

¹ The audience numbers for *Quo Vadis, Aida?* and other films by Žbanić come from the European Audiovisual Observatory's LUMIERE database, which collects data on admissions of the films released in European cinemas. Data by country can be accessed here: <https://lumiere.obs.coe.int/movie/88929>.

productions face similar challenges? By introducing the concept of the “ideal European co-production” and a typology of European audiences, this article delves into the sources of the audience challenge for European co-productions and explores the extent to which these challenges can be mitigated.

TOWARDS “THE IDEAL EUROPEAN CO-PRODUCTION”

Through an examination of the funding guidelines of European public film funds and comprehensive interviews and observations of the funds’ administrators concerning their funding policies, we have distilled a definition of “the ideal European co-production” as perceived by European policymakers.² As we discussed in a previous work (Mitrić and Kolarić 2021), these ideal European co-productions encompass specific elements. Foremost among these is their policy-driven nature. Official recognition as “official co-productions” is granted only after meticulous scrutiny by competent national authorities, ensuring alignment with the formal criteria outlined in co-production treaties.

Moreover, an ideal European co-production must strategically combine selective public financing, validating its cultural and artistic merit, with market-driven financing that underscores its audience potential. On the distribution front, it should secure nominations and, preferably, awards at A-list film festivals. While an ideal scenario involves combining festival accolades with box-office success, the latter is considered a bonus rather than an essential element. Importantly, regardless of its apparent commercial and entertaining nature, the ideal European co-production, even if borrowing from conventional genres and Hollywood narratives, must avoid being low-brow. It should always maintain some level of socio-political, cultural, or artistic engagement (Mitrić and Kolarić 2021).

From a creative standpoint, the crux of the ideal European co-production lies in having “the ideal script”. This script is built on meticulously researched or personally experienced stories, devoid of unnecessary localisms that might impede its transnational appeal. While adhering to prescribed dramaturgical conventions, techniques, and narrative forms, the film’s story must inherently possess clear socio-cultural value. This value should persist, even at the potential expense of the film’s marketability.

To foster an environment conducive to generating more ideal scripts, European policymakers have initiated various measures promoting what Mitrić has termed “international co-development”: the development of film scripts and projects transcending national borders. This international co-development at

² A longitudinal research on European co-production policy was conducted between 2012 and 2019 when the authors had access to the annual MEDICI workshops for the administrators of European film funds as well as to documents and personnel of individual public film funds like Eurimages.

the European level is nurtured through initiatives such as international training and networking programs, co-development funds, and co-productions markets (Mitrić 2020, 62–65).

WHY *QUO VADIS, AIDA?* IS AN “IDEAL EUROPEAN CO-PRODUCTION”?

Aida is the first film about the genocide in which the army of Bosnian Serbs killed over eight thousand Bosniak-Muslim men in the UN-protected town of Srebrenica in July 1995. The film uses the female gaze of the main character Aida, a translator in the Dutch-UN base who is desperately trying to save her husband and two sons from an unavoidable death after the Serbian soldiers enter Srebrenica. The Srebrenica genocide is officially the biggest war crime in Europe after WWII. *Aida* reminds us of its forgotten brutality, just as it problematizes the bureaucracy of international organizations and massive denial of the genocide among both ordinary people and elites in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska (the Serbian entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Aida effortlessly meets the above idealness criteria. It is a policy-driven, official co-production of nine countries made in line with the Council of Europe's Convention on European Co-production. The collaboration between the co-producing countries is visible both on-screen and off-screen. We hear and see Dutch and Bosnian actors on screen, while the film was shot by an Austrian cinematographer and edited by a Polish editor. The film also combines multiple sources of selective public funding for European co-productions with the market-driven financing from broadcasters, distributors, and the reputable sales agent. As for the distribution, *Aida* had an exceptional festival life that started with the premiere in the Venice official competition and ended with 43 nominations and 30 festival and other awards, including the award for the Best European Film, Lux Prize, two BAFTA and one Oscar nomination (IMDb). It had theatrical distribution in 19 European countries and VoD release on over 80 European streaming platforms (LUMIERE). Finally, even though *Aida* has the classical film narrative and Aristotelian dramaturgy (Janjić 2020), this conventional storytelling is disrupted by the film's distinctive form and style (e.g., with the surrealistic opening, the flashback scenes, and the disturbing open-ended closing scene) and the film's ideology (e.g., political provocation and the feminist standpoint view).

Aida's script is rooted in the true story of Hasan Nuhanović, a translator stationed at the Srebrenica UN base and one of the few male survivors of the genocide. In 2012, Žbanić's producer acquired the rights to Nuhanović's book, *Under the UN Flag*, with the intention of adapting it into a film. However, transforming the book into an ideal script proved to be a challenging journey for Žbanić. Initially planning to co-develop the script with Nuhanović, her early drafts sparked disagreements on the film's ideology, storyline, and form. Unfortunately, the collaboration came to an official end in conflict when the 3-year book option expired.

In an open letter and two interviews, Nuhanović critiqued Žbanić's script, characterizing it as a "construction" rather than a "reconstruction" of the Srebrenica genocide. He argued that it downplayed the responsibility of the Dutch peacekeepers and the brutality of Serbian soldiers. Nuhanović called for more emphasis on the local Bosniak soldiers defending Srebrenica and greater sympathy for the people of Srebrenica, who he felt were unfairly portrayed as "dirty Muslims" (Nuhanović 2019). He envisioned the film as a historical epic and thriller depicting an international conspiracy in a UN-protected zone betrayed by the international community (Nuhanović 2019).

Nuhanović also contended that the script's feminist standpoint distorted facts, highlighting that all ten translators in the UN base were men. He expressed dissatisfaction with a scene where Aida's husband addresses a woman with "what a stupid woman" ("ja, glupače") when she rationalizes his gullibility during their meeting with Serbian general Ratko Mladić. Since the character of Aida's husband is based on Nuhanović's killed father, he accused Žbanić of constructing his father's misogyny (N1 2019).

Having ended the collaboration with Nuhanović, Žbanić finished the script on her own. In 2017, the project was selected to participate in the *eQuinox Europe International Screenwriters Workshop*,³ a competitive European development program where participants work towards their ideal script in collaboration with renowned international script-doctors and other fellow-scriptwriters. The project was also selected for the prestigious Berlinale co-production market. The final version of the script that attracted the co-production financing was based on a rather minimalistic story of a woman who makes a series of wrong decisions due to her helplessness. Instead of offering a national, middle-brow war spectacle and a historical epic targeting primarily Bosniak mainstream audience, the film focuses on the universality of the Srebrenica genocide, motherhood, and family, which makes it relatable to transnational audiences.

Aida attracted production financing from eight countries in the form of co-production subsidies from the public film funds combined with support from public broadcasters as well as MGs and sponsorships. The Venice premiere, an Oscar nomination, and the best European Film Award (to mention only the most important accolades) officially confirmed *Aida's* idealness in the eyes of European public film funders and policymakers. Yet, while the critical accolades were many, there was no wide audience response.

3 See <https://www.equinox-europe.org/equinox-europe.html>.

A POSSIBLE TYPOLOGY OF TARGET AUDIENCES FOR EUROPEAN CO-PRODUCTIONS

Considering that most European co-productions are co-financed by public subsidies, they are expected to hold distinct cultural value for European citizens. European films obviously create a buzz by making box office successes, in which case their impact is easily quantified. However, when they are not blockbusters (and few of them are) their audience impact tends to be qualitative and difficult to track. For instance, the impact can be educational when films provide audiences with unconventional poetics or storytelling formats that people cannot see in Hollywood productions (Mitrić 2022). Likewise, European co-productions sometimes deal with controversial issues that trouble European societies and inspire discussions about them.

However, distribution reports reveal that many European co-productions simply do not reach audiences for various reasons. This lack of audience raises questions about the purpose of public subsidies for European cinema and the level of commitment European filmmakers have to cultivating audiences for their films. Constantly pressured to secure public financing, European filmmakers often deliver scripts and packages designed to satisfy the gatekeepers of European public film agencies rather than European citizens, who, to a large extent, finance European co-productions through their taxes.

The audience component is vaguely defined in the guidelines of public film funds' support schemes. While reaching the audience is considered a paramount goal, the available instruments and resources for studying and communicating with wider audiences remain scarce and conservative. With few exceptions (Freudendal 2024), film funds allocate no funding for audience design during the project development phase. They offer limited support for alternative distribution practices and establish few mechanisms for measuring the qualitative audience impact of European co-productions or for training filmmakers who fail to achieve this impact. In this section, we discuss how European filmmakers and policymakers can concretely incorporate audience impact into their understanding of the ideal European co-production, drawing on concepts from theatre studies.

We focus on specific traditions of engaged and political theatre because their audience impact is predominantly qualitative, cultural, and social-democratic, aligning with the policy goals of European public film funds and many policymakers. Content creators in socially engaged theatre activate their target audiences in two ways. One approach nourishes the Aristotelian traditions, connecting audiences with a play on primarily sensuous and emotional levels. The spectator begins the journey by identifying with a story's character, situation, or sub-plot, culminating in a healing catharsis by the end of the play. Another approach builds on the Brechtian traditions, viewing theatre as a space

for political activism that generates revolutionary ideas, allowing the spectator to interact with the content on a cognitive and intellectual level.

Among several of the pioneers of translating these theatrical traditions into film theory was the filmmaker and theoretician Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. In his study, *The Viewer's Dialectic* (1988), Gutiérrez acknowledges the dual nature of film, suggesting that a film needs both emotional and intellectual touchpoints with target audiences to create a lasting impact. Hence, he blends both the Aristotelian identification effect and the Brechtian alienation effect to define a successful film. To be impactful, a filmmaker first needs to immerse the viewer in the film's universe through good storytelling, a powerful visual style, and music. Once sensually and emotionally engaged, the viewer is more likely to discover the intellectual touchpoints and use them to generate ideas for actions (Gutiérrez Alea 1988; Shroeder 2016).

If a film lacks sensuous or emotional touchpoints with the viewer, average viewers may quickly lose interest and never discover its intellectual touchpoints [Fig. 1]. European co-productions should ensure they include both types, as they may attract more viewers and transition them towards discovering cognitive and intellectual touchpoints that a film offers. Ideally, the interaction with intellectual touchpoints then converts into critical interventions that viewers undertake in their personal lives or societies (Mitríć and Sarikakis 2016).

A meaningful engagement with intellectual touchpoints of many European co-productions necessitates viewers to embody what Jacques Rancière terms "the emancipated spectator", possessing a well-developed ability to think, communicate, observe, learn, and act in the world (Rancière 2011). The emancipated spectator can interpret and challenge artworks, recognizing and resisting ideology through spectating, comparing, and interpreting (Shawyer 2019, 45). However, according to Rancière, becoming an emancipated spectator seemingly demands a solid education and cultural capital, suggesting that many "average" spectators may struggle to connect with arthouse films and be their target audience. The essential problem with European film co-productions is that both film funds and filmmakers often limit the target audience to Rancière's emancipated spectators, neglecting the option of presenting their film stories in a way that breaks the arthouse niche.

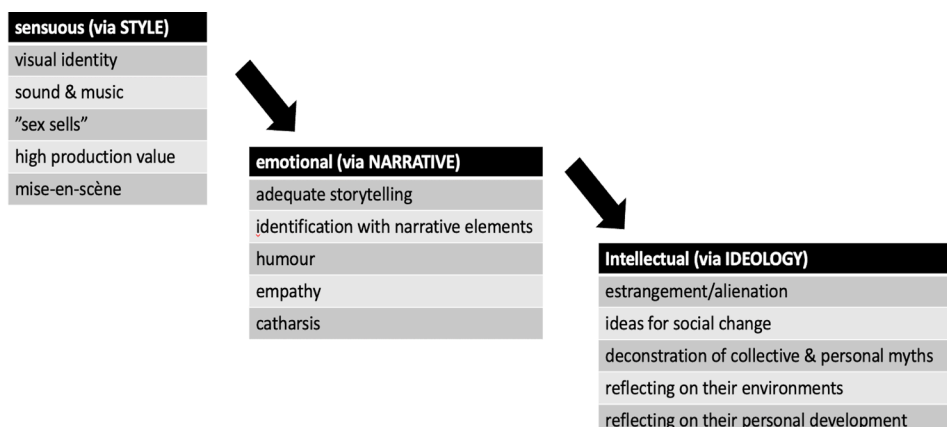


Fig. 1
Touchpoints between a
film and the spectator

The challenge of activating the average spectator was addressed by the theatre practitioner Augusto Boal through his concept of *theatre of the oppressed*. Boal shifted theatre performances from traditional upper-middle-class venues to locations in favelas, suburbs, and rural areas in his native Brazil, where average spectators could see and afford them. This sparked dialogues through which content-makers, peasants, and workers learned about one another's lives, establishing a common language for the critical investigation of their social realities. Boal insisted that theatre becomes popular when performances are produced simultaneously for and by the spectator (Coudray 2017). He coined the term "spect-actors" for participant-spectators who act by joining the stage to recreate situations from their oppressive social reality and generate ideas about how to impact them. On stage, spect-actors are guided and moderated by designated professionals (jokers), compensating for the average spectators' lack of theoretical and technical theatrical knowledge and middle-class consecration (Boal 1979).

Boal adapted his approach to diverse audiences, tailoring his theatre of the oppressed to individualist First-World contexts where oppression and violence are often covert and symbolic. This resulted in various new forms of his theatre targeting middle-class (emancipated) spectators who suffer from internalized forms of oppression, such as "loneliness", "fear of emptiness", and "lack of individual freedom", leading to depression and physical illness (Babbage 2018, 23). This demonstrated that theatre of the oppressed could trigger individual and intimate processes, not only broad social ones. Unfortunately, there is limited knowledge about the extent to which European co-productions may exert this type of intimate impact on their viewers. This is primarily due to the lack of resources for exploring such potential in a film story during the script development stage and undertaking more sophisticated actions to identify and reach target audiences outside festival circuits and arthouse cinema theatres.

In line with the aforementioned theatrical notions and practices, we propose four basic types of potential target viewers for European co-productions [Fig. 2]. The first type is the *average spectator* who views films solely as entertainment and escapism. To reach them, a European co-production must ensure a

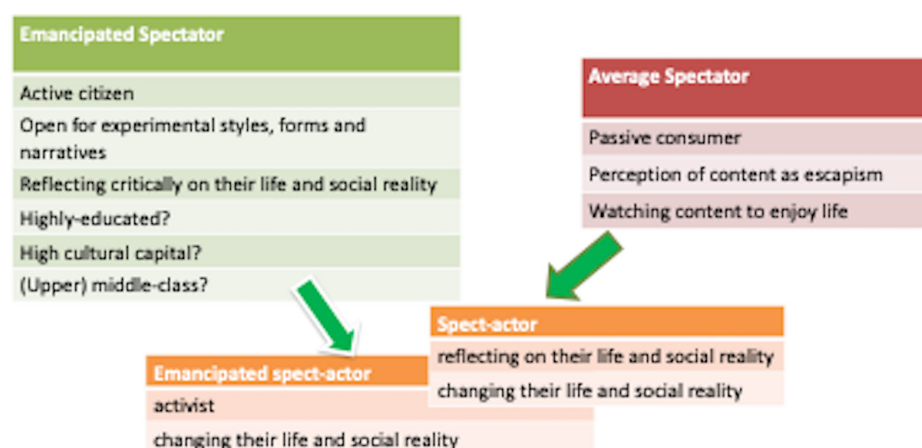


Fig. 2
The typology of target audiences for European co-productions

critical number of sensuous and emotional touchpoints, fostering strong self-identification, a sense of familiarity, empathy, or catharsis within the film's story-world.

The second type of viewer resembles Rancièrian *emancipated spectators*—well-educated viewers with high cultural capital and good training in consuming film as art. They enjoy sensuous and emotional touchpoints with every film, but their focus is on cognitive and intellectual touchpoints. They a priori expect a film to help them understand reality better, rather than escape it. They typically attend film festivals and serve as eloquent ambassadors within the public sphere.

The third and the most demanding type of viewer mirrors Boal's *spect-actor*. They are former average spectators who, impacted by a film, convert partly or entirely into active spectators. Boal's practice, as mentioned above, insists on exploring the workers' and peasants' potential to become *spect-actors* and discover the intellectual touchpoints despite their modest education, cultural capital, and a low appetite for high-culture. The filmmakers can prioritize researching the potential of average film viewers in a similar way.

This transformative spect-acting process is not limited to average spectators; it extends to emancipated spectators as well. It refers to situations where discerning emancipated spectators detect hidden forms of micro-oppression and Bourdieuan "symbolic violence" (Milović 2006, 254) thanks to a specific film. The process in which the emancipated spectator discovers this subtle oppression and consequently decides to "undertake individual interpretive acts that offer collective alternative realities" transforms the emancipated spectator into what Susanne Shawyer calls "the emancipated spect-actor" (Shawyer 2019, 42). Inspired by Shawyer, we use the same term to define the fourth type of target audience for European co-productions—*emancipated spect-actor* who decide to use their knowledge, skills, and networks to practice activism inspired by eye-opening intellectual touchpoints with a film.

An ideal European co-production does not have to be a catch-all film that necessarily attracts all four types of spectators. However, its makers should have a clear idea about the specific community of target viewers (regardless of its size), as well as a set of specific actions and techniques for researching and reaching that community. When a European co-production targets spect-acting as its audience impact, filmmakers must make an additional effort to give agency to the pre-established target viewer in the development, post-production, and exploitation of the film. This agency is achieved when the target viewer—whether farmers, workers, middle-class individuals, or emancipated spectators—is treated as an active participant in the process of making and disseminating a film (e.g., as consultants, co-creators, ambassadors, testers) rather than an under-researched recipient or an imagined construct.

WHO DID (NOT) WATCH *QUO VADIS, AIDA*?

Applying the audience typology outlined above to *Aida*, this section explores the reasons behind the film's failure to attract a broader audience despite its initial potential. *Aida's* classic narrative, Aristotelian dramaturgy, production value, dynamic plot, and universal themes, such as family and motherhood, promise authentic connections with diverse spectators worldwide. So, why has this film, seemingly relevant to many audiences at first glance, not gained a wider audience and spurred more social and political actions?⁴ Below, we argue that this is primarily due to how *Aida* fails to specifically address different potential categories of spectators identified—at times in storytelling and at times in the film's promotion.

Our methodology for analyzing *Aida's* reception is constrained due to the lack of access to the film's creative and distribution team, VoD revenues, and a larger sample of test audiences. Nevertheless, the data gathered from available distribution reports, press clippings, interviews, media debates, and two surveys conducted in Spring 2022 among representatives of average and emancipated spectators provide sufficient insights to initiate a debate on *Aida's* reception and, ultimately, whether a European co-production with insufficient audience impact should qualify as an ideal European co-production.

Naturally, the film's core *average spectators* are Bosniaks, Bosnia's Muslim community, considering that the Srebrenica genocide is their national *lieu du mémoire* (Nora 1989). The genocide unites Bosniaks around one joint narrative about their collective trauma, which at the same time celebrates those who dared to confront the ruthless Serbian army as well as condemns the racism of Dutch soldiers and impotence of the United Nations. Thus, Žbanić first approached the activist and genocide-survivor Hasan Nuhanović to understand first-hand what happened in Srebrenica in 1995 and how it affects the survivors 20 years later. Nuhanović further connected her with other genocide survivors who provided authentic insights and audience touchpoints (N1 2019).

The film ended up not particularly strongly capitalizing on these audiences. Conflicts around the script involving Nuhanović likely alienated those who felt themselves close to the national narrative that integrates Srebrenica as a place of national tragedy, and who expected a film that would endorse that kind of narrative, rather than a progressive feminist depiction of events which—while certainly not shying away from depicting the perpetrators—does so in a manner that is relatively restrained and efficient. Žbanić's initial choice

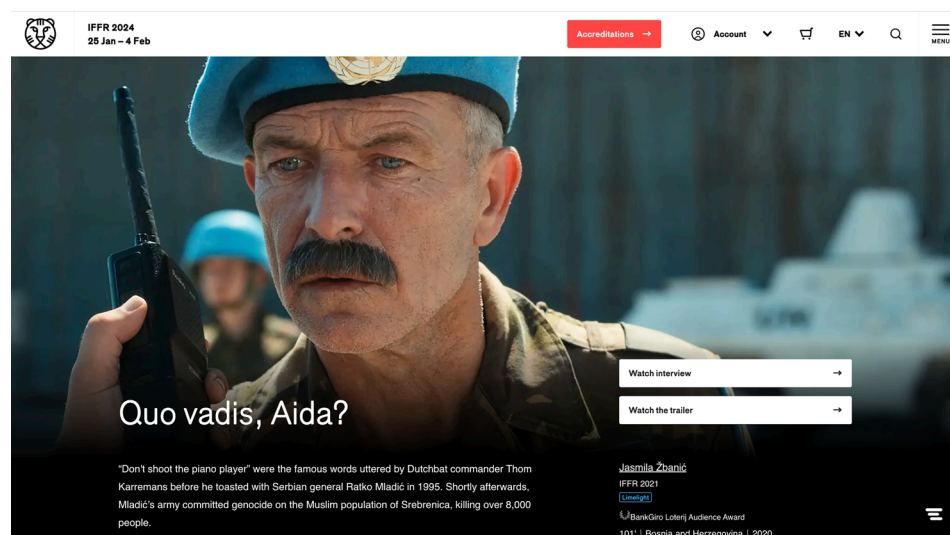
⁴ This becomes visible when comparing *Aida* to Žbanić's debut *Grbavica: The Land of My Dreams* (*Grbavica*, 2006) about war rape during the war in Bosnia and its present-day consequences. The film was credited as helping to push through legal changes that helped recognise—and compensate as such—rape victims as civilian victims of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina—an act that could partly be described as a consequence of mobilizing the already emancipated spectators into spect-actors, who have lobbied for this kind of change.

to build the film around the memoir of a real-life Potočari base translator capitalised on this understanding that the film will tell a "genuine" story of what had happened, offering a form of catharsis to those feeling in some way affected by the tragedy. But this may have also had a somewhat adverse effect: in 2019 Nuhanović himself publicly distanced himself from the (then not yet released) film, explaining in a lengthy Facebook post that the versions of the script he had read and consulted on departed significantly from his experience (Nuhanović 2019). There is an undeniable tension here between film as an artwork, film as a document and film as a means of contributing to a process of dealing with a difficult past. This tension was recognised by Žbanić, who in her public appearances simultaneously emphasized the difficulty of dealing with Srebrenica as "a huge trauma for all Bosnians" (Deblokada 2020, 13) and the hope that the film would contribute to "understanding, empathy and mutual solidarity between Muslim and Serb Bosnian nationals" (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2020), while also consistently stressing its status as a work of art, rather than a depiction of "truth" in some form. In other words, creating an ideal script came at a cost of alienating not only some prominent local voices for the story, but also potential "natural" viewers listening to those voices.

Žbanić has historically rejected the use of her cinema as a tool for building a sentimental, divided national narrative. Pavičić (2020) rightfully notes that her films have always been both activist and political and reflective of the nation, but they do not represent the radically victimisation-focused political narrative which has dominated the Bosniak public discourse. This makes Žbanić's film closer to the critical, active audiences, but has also made it unappealing to political leadership—which couldn't have found the film particularly useful for the national narrative (Higgins 2022). Žbanić's own public criticism towards both the ruling and opposition parties in Bosnia, as well as her explicit acknowledgement (in an interview given to Eve Ensler; NEON 2021) that she didn't want to engage in the political conflict over Srebrenica, but for the film to be "a part of reconciliation" (again stressing its activating potential) certainly didn't assist the film in finding its way to these audiences either. Finally, the feminist narrative does not align easily with the more passive role of women in not only Bosnian, but also other national narratives in the region. And so, despite what was deemed a successful domestic opening in the challenging time of the pandemic (Ljubčić 2020), *Aida* managed to gain only 11,757 theatre viewers in the domestic Bosniak market (LUMIERE)—not counting the viewers reached through national and regional streaming platforms. And as the viewers weren't many, even fewer of them were "activated".

The average spectators are also among the Dutch people who remember the responsibility that their government took for the genocide in 1995. *Aida* opened a limited public debate in the Netherlands. It was screened in the side programme *Limelights* at the (hybrid) 2021 International Film Festival Rotterdam. The festival page presented the film with a quote by the Dutchbat commander Thom Karremans, drawing attention to the film's relevance for the local context [Fig. 3]. The festival audience award gave it an initial boost with the

Fig. 3
2021 International Film
Festival Rotterdam page
screenshot, showing
the presentation of *Quo
Vadis, Aida?* with a quote
by Thom Karremans.



local audience, perhaps even beyond the festival-going spectators. It was then screened by the Belgian-Dutch distributor, Cinéart, to the Dutchbat veterans. Following the theatrical release, the national newspaper *De Volkskrant* ran an interview with Žbanić—and with the veterans themselves, who demanded an additional disclaimer to be added to the film, stating that some events have been fictionalised for creative and dramatic purposes. From their perspective, the film overstates the Serbian zealousness, which is in contrast with the perspective of the survivors, who claim that it is underplayed (Beekman 2021a). The same dialogue reoccurred along similar lines several months later in the same paper (Beekman 2021b), and in a public TV debate on the national broadcasting channel NPO1, which pushed the film into public discourse—as did the fact that its release coincided with a series of events titled *Srebrenica is Dutch History*. In a culmination of events, the Dutch Minister of Defense Kajsa Ollongren, in her speech delivered when awarding the Dutchbat members the Bronze Medal of Merit for their service in June 2022, referenced one of the veterans' quotes on the film from the abovementioned talk show: “Your first reaction is to be defensive, because of the past 25 years. But the film is not about Dutchbat. It's ultimately about the local people there.” All this—including the reframe of the discussion—resulted in just barely over 22,000 cinemagoers in the Netherlands. It shows primarily some limited audience design on part of the distributor, which resulted in modest admissions.

Many average spectators around Europe could hear about *Aida* (and where to watch it) in the mainstream media when the film received the Oscar nomination and the best European Film Award. By opting to present the story through the prism of one tragic heroine, a relatable “woman in the middle” trying to rescue her family (Janjić 2020), the film draws away from the specifically local Srebrenica experience. The strongest weapon in promoting the film to European spectators was its universality. Both the film's narrative and its press materials emphasized the dramatic nature of Aida's choice, stressing her universal dilemma and the difficult ambiguity of her choice that can emotionally connect with the ordinary viewer (Deblokada 2020, 7).

Žbanić was also aware that many target audiences would not be familiar with Srebrenica. Thus, it was necessary to both make clear what was happening and tell the story in a way that makes it relevant,⁵ relying first on emotional and then intellectual touchpoints: "The film must function for people who don't know it's [sic!] history. [...] Aida's drama and her emotions are the heart of this story. I want people to take away the feelings and questions the film raises" (Deblokada 2020, 18). The visuals for the film—e.g. the promotional posters all featuring some version of the main character in doubt (or sometimes, as in the French edition, in movement), with a stylised image of the crowds of people that the film singles her from—emphasized this identification through advertising the film as one about an ordinary woman acting in extraordinary circumstances [Figg. 4 and 5]. Yet a limited number of European spectators saw the film in cinemas (LUMIERE).



Fig. 4 and Fig. 5
Aida (Jasna Đuričić)
in *Quo Vadis, Aida?*.
Source: Deblokada

⁵ In the press kit, Žbanić mentions the test screening with film students of the Łódź Film School in Poland, many of whom had little or no knowledge of the genocide. It is, however, not clear how much, if any, of the film was modified as a result of these screenings (Deblokada 2020).

Aida's emancipated spectators emerged when the film premiered in 2020 at the Venice Film Festival and exponentially grew with every new award and nomination. The film won only accolades by all relevant critics and many emancipated spectators saw the film during its packed festival screenings. In the survey we conducted among 40 people from seven EU countries whom we identified as emancipated spectators due to their class, cultural capital and taste in film, everyone was extremely positive about the film. However, they all but one agreed that they would not see *Aida* more than once. They also were not surprised by low cinema admissions across Europe as "the film is too dark" for average spectators. Some commented that *Aida* "lacked an extra million Euro to become more audience appealing". They also concluded that *Aida* will be one of the "evergreen films" that collects audiences cumulatively over generations unlike many "one-month-films" that become forgotten after one month of their audience-hype".

Aida's core *spect-actors* were obviously in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska where the majority of population still deny or relativize the genocide and celebrate the war criminals who committed it (see e.g. Stojanović 2021; Stojanović and Kajošević 2021). However, the film apparently failed to acknowledge and tackle on the textual level the vast difference between the narratives on the Serbian and Bosniak side and offer a point of entry to the Serbian average spectator who is deeply embedded in the domestic narrative. *Aida* presents complex characters—starting from Aida herself—rejecting the collective martyrdom narrative. Yet the film still—even if it tries to give many characters identities that go beyond the national/collective, specifically to avoid collective blame and guilt and deny the viewer easy identification of "good" and "evil" along national lines—deals with a contested national topic in a way that makes the ascription of national roles inevitable. And while this is understandable—after all, genocide is a crime specifically targeting individuals due to their group membership—in the context of a strong narrative clash, it makes the activation of average spectators extremely difficult. Moreover, as the film's narrative is a fictionalised version of historical events, every departure from factuality of what had happened becomes an opportunity to question the narrative altogether as fraudulent and biased. This happens mainly because of the political context in which the film is being interpreted. On the one hand, widespread genocide relativization allows the media and political figures, including convicted war criminals, to contest the events that took place—a narrative that is supported by the political structures. Moreover, the insistence on collectivisation (rather than individualisation) of the crime continuously enables equalisation between the nation and the crime, thus making any mention of the crime an attack on the whole nation, something Žbanić is aware of and stands firmly against (Higgins 2022).

On the flip side, while the director's evident intention was to mobilize potential viewers, her effort to grapple with the relativization and control of the media discourse on Srebrenica by the Serbian government, leading to a public conflict with the Serbian public broadcaster RTS over the films screening, likely did not contribute to altering entrenched attitudes. Žbanić's public insistence

that the film was not being shown on RTS due to political pressure (a claim refuted by a press release from RTS described as "made up") (RTS 2022), and her assertion that "symbolically, the war will be over once the public service RTS stops being in the service of war-mongering propaganda" (N1 2022), can easily be co-opted by political discourse emphasizing a clear and collective "us-them" distinction. This is facilitated by simplistic media framing that selectively distorts information, often in service of the ruling elites (Sejdinović 2022). The ensuing public discussion, with predictable positions, resulted in entrenching rather than shifting perspectives.

While writing this article, we struggled to trace any cases of obvious spect-acting process among the average spectators in Serbia and Republic of Srpska. There is, for example, no record of teachers showing the film to their students, local television showing *Aida* despite all odds, or viral social media posts showing that the film made some Serbian average spectators reconsider their denial of the Srebrenica genocide. At the same time, there is a lot of evidence of people who either refused to watch a film or watched it only to discredit it. They found no touchpoints with *Aida* whatsoever.

Yet, we still do not know how many Serbian people (il)legally streamed the film and started a discrete spect-acting process, in the privacy of their rooms, towards questioning their denial. The scope and resources of our research are too limited to discover and track these intimate processes. However, in April 2022, we tested it on a sample of seven Serbian viewers from Serbia and the Republic of Srpska whom we identified as average spectators based on their education, class, media habits and cultural capital. Asked to watch *Aida*, they gave us three kinds of responses. Two respondents refused straight away to watch the film dismissing it as anti-Serbian propaganda. Four of them saw it, but their feedback was based only on shaming Žbanić for conscious ignoring of "the genocide that the Srebrenica Muslims had committed against the Serbs in 1993 before the Serbs took revenge in self-defence in 1995". One respondent watched the film but refrained from giving any feedback. We can only guess if their silence signalled some kind of discrete spect-acting process.

There are two possibilities for why *Aida* did not trigger a trackable spect-acting process among the average spectators in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska. The first is obviously external to the film and linked to extreme political pressures from the genocide-denying Serbian mainstream elite. Due to this pressure, Žbanić could not obtain the permit from the local Serbian authorities to shoot in Srebrenica. No distributor in Serbia or the Republic of Srpska dared to buy the film, while the headlines of the Serbian mainstream media massively dismissed the film as blatant anti-Serbian propaganda. It culminated with the aforementioned open conflict between Žbanić and the Serbian public service broadcaster when RTS refused to show *Aida* even after the Serbian actress Jasna Đuričić, who plays Aida, won the best European actress award in December 2021. Finally, the premiere of *Aida* coincided (accidentally or not) with the premiere of the Serbian national epic *Dara of Jasenovac* (Predrag Antonijević, 2021), which depicts the mass killings of Serbian civilians in the

Croatian concentration camps during WWII from the perspective of the little girl Dara [Fig. 6]. Dara easily created emotional touchpoints with the Serbian average spectators and likely distanced them even more from reflecting upon the crimes that Serbs committed. All this created a thick wall around Serbian average spectators that could have simply become impenetrable for the thought-provoking *Aida*.

Another reason for low spect-acting in Serbia could originate from *Aida*'s team. Žbanić used time and resources to talk to the genocide survivors. She even tried to co-write the script with one of them to facilitate more touchpoints with Bosniak average spectators. Likewise, she talked to Dutch soldiers who were in Srebrenica in 1995. In one interview (Kožul 2020) she acknowledged how the time she spent with them made her less angry with them as she realized that most of them were only 18 in 1995 and Srebrenica was their first stationing abroad. She translated this into the film by humanizing young Dutch soldiers, increasing the number of touchpoints between the film and Dutch (or West European) average spectators. However, there is little evidence that Žbanić and her team tried to research the hearts and brains of the average Serbian spectators who live in media darkness, were too young when the genocide happened, or have been raised and schooled by genocide deniers. Thus, we do not know if time spent with them would have generated fresh ideas about their touchpoints with a film about Srebrenica.

A tiny segment of emancipated spectators in Serbia turned into *emancipated spect-actors* when they decided to use their resources to motivate average Serbian spectators to watch *Aida*. This included a petition by the Belgrade-based Regional Academy for Academic Development to screen the film on

Fig. 6
Dara of Jasenovac.
Source: Cineuropa (via
Film danas production)



Serbian public broadcaster (ADD 2021). Few accomplished actors, filmmakers, former parliamentarians, and NGO directors advocated in public interviews for the film to be acknowledged rather than ignored, and a dialogue with Žbanić arranged. Yet all these initiatives spoke only to emancipated spectators, rather than activated the average ones. Only four screenings of *Aida* were eventually arranged in Serbia: in Novi Pazar, the centre of Serbia's Bosniak community, Novi Sad as part of the Autonomous Festival of Women, and in Belgrade for journalists (see Sejdinović 2022). These screenings, as important as they were, have likely reached an already knowledgeable or at the very least interested audience of emancipated spectators.

Finally, the authors of this article who grew up in Croatia and Serbia respectively during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, being exposed to anti-Bosniak propaganda, consider this article as their own act of (emancipated) spect-acting, which was inspired by *Aida*.

CONCLUSION

The most ambitious European films, aiming for both international audiences and critical acclaim, are typically co-productions. However, they frequently fail to appeal to a wider audience. In this study, we asked the question: why do European co-productions, and in particular those we label as "ideal"—films of high artistic value with festival visibility, an "ideal script" and clear socio-cultural and political value—fail at reaching their target audiences? Moving beyond the typical justifications such as cultural specificities, arthouse style, and high-brow ideology, we hone in on a perspective centered on audience design: the inability to, even when target audiences are accurately identified, develop and subsequently promote films in a manner that resonates with those audiences during the distribution process.

To demonstrate this, we developed a model for analysing the audience impact of European co-productions. We identified four types of target-audiences for European co-productions: average spectators, emancipated spectators, spect-actors and emancipated spect-actors. We then used *Quo Vadis, Aida?* as a representative and generalizable case study to demonstrate how and where the process of targeting different audience groups for the film failed. Our analysis showed that, despite the director's conscious intention to target specific audience groups to achieve identified societal impacts, a lack of strategy at both the textual and promotional levels, particularly noteworthy given the intricate socio-political context surrounding the film's production, distribution, and reception, frequently hindered its reach to the intended audiences.

Our analysis, however, was severely limited by the lack of access to the film's creative and distribution team, and by the lack of data to draw on. Information on VoD viewership remains unavailable, audience practices with regard to illegal film streaming under-researched. Our study thus points to the need for European filmmakers to devote more resources to researching the target

audiences and creating genuine touchpoints with them even during script development (for which they need additional financial and professional help of European film funds and distributors), as well as for more dedicated academic efforts to both theorise and empirically research film audiences' engagement with European films.

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