Ognjen Glavonić: "There is no anti-fascism without hope."
The Serbian filmmaker on the weight of the past in the present and the importance of excavating its literal and metaphoric bones.
Interview conducted and translated from the Serbian by Aurora Prelević

The title of the film *The Load* (2018) is a double-entendre: in Serbian, the word *teret* connotes both cargo as well as burden, a literal and metaphoric weight. It is an unconventional road movie that follows a truck driver with undisclosed freight across a war-scarred terrain shrouded in mystery. The year is 1999, and he is driving from Kosovo to Belgrade during the Kosovo War (February 1998-June 1999), in those final three months when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) unleashed a campaign of aerial bombs upon the rump state known as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY, at this time consisting only of Serbia and Montenegro). The driver suspects but he does not know what his proverbial load contains; the viewer follows him on his journey to uncovering the disturbing truth. His burden becomes our own: an unsettling feeling follows the viewer through an intimate view of this recent and still unsettled history where conflict and crimes against humanity are wrought into the very landscape, punctuated by sparse dialogue, slow movements, and loaded silences.

The Load was created by Ognjen Glavonić, a writer and director from Serbia who came of age in the final throes of the Yugoslav Wars. His films take a strikingly contemplative and intentional approach to topics of high voltage and high tension around which public discourse can seem as roadblocked as the politics surrounding them. Although his expertise on the subject matter is the result of degrees' worth of meticulous, extensive research in primary and secondary source material, his cinematic language avoids the informative. Glavonić rejects the idea of filmmaking as pedagogy: instead, he transforms the unseen and the unsaid into a space of dialogue, engaging viewers in conversation about unspeakable elements from the troubled recent past. Glavonić also directed *Depth Two* (2015), an experimental documentary thriller that, for audio, uses almost exclusively archival footage from trial recordings of perpetrators and victims at the ICTY, concerning war crimes committed by the Serbian leadership during the Kosovo War. These eyewitness voices are set to the backdrop of landscape imagery of the sites of the crimes in question, a decade and a half later.

His films have been praised internationally: *The Load* premiered at Cannes and *Depth Two* at the Berlinale, both receiving various awards and recognitions at festivals all over the world. However, Glavonić has struggled at length to finance his films in Serbia and has faced heavy criticism and fierce attacks at home due to the themes they address, which remain controversial at best and silenced at worst in the dominant public narratives. Against this backdrop, Glavonić remains focused and committed to the possibility of change, among other things, encouraging the pirating of his films in Serbia, where it is all-but-impossible to view them.

In the political arena in Serbia, open critical dialogue on the violences, destruction, and atrocities of the 1990s are eerily coded in nationalism, divisive narratives, and denial. The recent past is still very much grounds for debate and dispute, and historical revisionism is rife; throughout the region, each post Yugoslav nation has its own narrative on what happened in the SFRY itself as well as in its demise. The current President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, has sat in the top echelons of power since the late '90s and began

his political career, notably, serving as Milošević's Minister of Information during the Kosovo War. Infamous for enacting repressive measures in the media at the time, his continued insistence on maintaining the narrative that Serbia is the forgotten victim of the Kosovo War contributes nothing but confusion to the lack of nuanced narratives with regards to a truly complex and protracted conflict that is arguably not yet over. Kosovo remains contested to this day: although it declared independence from Serbia in 2008, Serbia still does not recognize it. If nationalism seeks to provide easy answers to hard questions, then Glavonić's films reframe the whole narrative, pulling viewers out of the past and situating us in the present, demanding that we face our own ignorance, silence, and potential complicity.

In the following conversation, Glavonić speaks about excavating literal and metaphoric bones, truth and shifting value systems, finding the cinematic language with which to address atrocity, competitive victimhoods in the Balkans, the ambiguous nature of censorship enacted by governments who are disinterested in the work of accountability, inter-generational story and storytelling, anti-fascism and hope.
- *Aurora Prelević*

Aurora Prelević (**AP**): The themes that both of your feature-length films center upon, *The Load* and *Depth Two,* what are the roots of these projects?

Ognjen Glavonić (**OG**): It all started by chance. I was studying film at university when I first heard about mass graves in the suburbs of Belgrade, in Batajnica. I wondered why I was hearing about them for the first time almost ten years later. I read two newspaper articles written when these graves were discovered. The first one was a witness report given by a truck driver who was sent on a cross-country trip without being told what he was driving. The second article was about items belonging to those individuals exhumed from these pits, verifying that these were civilians, even children. I got the idea for *The Load:* It would be about a man whose actions are woven into a crime but who is not quite sure what he's involved with; a man who, through the indisputable evidence he discovers in his truck, learns the truth about his task and, in the process, about his country's regime, as well.

After three to four years trying unsuccessfully to fund the production of *The Load*, I confronted the fact that it might never be made. I had spent an enormous amount of time researching those mass graves, reading transcripts from the trials concerning these war crimes in Belgrade, at the specialized War Crimes Chamber of the District Court, and at The Hague, where the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was held. I discovered many stories that I felt were really powerful but different from the story I had already been working on. I didn't want to put them into *The Load*, but I wanted to put them into a film, and that's where the origin story of *Depth Two* started.

The key thing was the cinematic language: when I found the form with which to tell these stories, that's when I realized that I needed to make those films. I had tried to find funding from film funds and was denied. Then I tried the various NGOs, but no one had the budget to fund a feature film. But I met Sandra Orlović, then the Director of the Humanitarian Law

Center, who, in her work, was dealing specifically with that mass grave at Batajnica, working on an initiative to erect a memorial there. There is still no inscription of any kind, even if over seven hundred bodies, of which seventy-five were children, were found there. It's still an active military base with a shooting range, three hundred meters long, where the Special Anti-Terrorist Unit practice. We knew that we had a movie when we got the permits to film there: as with the visuals of the whole film, we shot exclusively empty spaces, just landscapes.

Originally, my idea was for a film about the refrigerator truck that floated up to the surface of the Danube near Kladovo on the border of Romania on April 4, 1999. These were in fact the first victims who were discovered and then transferred to be buried into those mass graves. This covert operation was referred to as *Depth Two* on official government-issued papers such as payments of per diems to hygiene workers who were hired to transfer the bodies, which in itself begs the question: what about *Depth One?* Or *Three?* That's why the film begins with Boško Radojković, the crime scene technician who first arrived on the scene.

AP: Why did you choose to use archival recordings in *Depth Two* as the only audio material?

OG: I wanted to film interviews with people but no one wanted to talk for the film: none of the people who participated in those crimes or who witnessed them agreed to talk to us. So the audio is taken from original recordings—we received three hundred and fifty hours of video material! It was a huge job, listening to it all and finding a storyline within. The Special Court in Belgrade told us that recordings don't exist—which is hard to believe is true—so everything you hear in the film was recorded at the ICTY. These trials were all televised in Serbia for years, and a lot of the spins that were made of this material were really preposterous, so it was a miner's labour to find material where you can sense the truth in it.

The first version of *Depth Two* was five hours long and included politicians, people who were lying. The editor, Jelena Maksimović, and I decided to throw all of that out in order to leave only those people who were there and who could say, *I saw this, I touched that, I did this, I received that*, who speak to really concrete things and their own experience. You can sense how these events impacted them.

We only recorded one individual, Marko Minić, who was present for the excavation at Batajnica: for six months, he unearthed human remains and catalogued all that was excavated such as clothing and other items. He was not a witness in The Hague because he was not invited to be one, but he wanted to talk, and so we recorded him.

The statements that you hear in the film are all recorded in different time periods so we had to put that all together in a way that forms one flowing story, and then to arrange it with the visuals. Those two levels, when you look at them together, create a third level of meaning, the level of the film in its entirety. Since the visuals don't illustrate what happened, nor the words being spoken, the viewer actually creates the film, or puts it

together in their mind—which, in the end, will stay with them longer than any image I am able to create.

AP: Your films ask of their viewers: what do these sorts of crimes require of us? What does it mean to take responsibility? Why is it at all important to talk about these things in public discourse? It's not so much about revealing the truth of what has happened in the past so much as demanding accountability. What are we going to do now, in the present, with these truths?

OG: In our country, war crimes are unfortunately always reduced to passing information or daily news. A lot of NGOs are dealing with them in depth, but they use a specific sort of NGO language, the language of a certain idiomatic terminology and I wanted to use the language of art and of doubt to address these same issues. I imagine *Depth Two* to be a different approach to the topic, a different sort of conversation about war crimes, where we can map out those crimes in their entirety from different angles, the mechanisms and hierarchy that made them possible. *The Load* is a film that follows one man throughout the course of a single day, one small screw in the architecture of large crimes. In the decade I spent working on these films, I realized how much rejection, ignorance, and silence there was in Serbia in relation to these stories. So *The Load* really became more about complicity. Silence and ignorance are the most violent parts of human society. The most visible, most tangible ways you can be complicit is to close your eyes, look away, keep quiet, pretend not to know, or not even really want to know. This isn't a film about those war crimes so much as it is about a society for whom those crimes do not exist since they remain unacknowledged. It's a story about the time that has to pass in order for some things to become known and to be accepted as the truth, to become palpable and visible.

The Load is a film about a guy who uncovers the truth. It's also my own story, because I am also guilty of not knowing, and I also needed to uncover the truth. I put myself, my memories of growing up at that time, in it so that it was no longer a historical account, but my story. Those crimes were hidden from me: I couldn't see them not only while they were happening but for a long time later, as well. *The Load* has those images that we *did* see: the NATO bombing, I'm somewhere in there with all those kids in the film, the different ways we dealt with it, ways we found to kill time when the power's out, when there's nothing to do, when you can't go anywhere. The story became less about our parents' generation and more about what one generation leaves the next. The main character could be my father, and they are the ones who are responsible for everything that happened at that time, and also responsible for not taking responsibility afterwards.

Those monuments to World War II, the story about the protagonist's father, that lost Yugoslavia that is strewn across the whole film, the remains of that country, society, civilization that is now abandoned, scattered, destroyed, obliterated, buried: the protagonist links those two eras together. You learn that he was the son of a Partisan who fought against fascism, raised within that system of values, and then, over the course of the film, he realizes that he is, in fact, now a part of crimes that are in and of themselves fascist in nature, and he must face this dilemma in front of his own son. The story is about the disappearance of a system of values, actually: is the truth valued today in our society, does

it have any inherent value at all? These are the issues that were important to me in *The Load*.

I invite you to join Vlada on the road, to pass through his dilemmas and choices, and, in that sense, to take some responsibility for it yourself. You become his accomplice through the film and my hope is that it helps give perspective on that position, and the ways in which you yourself may become one to those who perpetuate and enable such atrocities through silence, or passivity, or looking away. In *Depth Two,* collaboration and complicity are questions that I am dealing with, as well, and posing to you as you watch as well.

AP: In both films, was it at all important to you that the audience understands in some factual, informative, historical, concrete way *what happened*?

OG: In *Depth Two*, everything is clear. If you listen carefully, you can connect the dots. In *The Load*, the introduction situates you: a couple of sentences explaining when and where this is happening, who is at war with whom. But for me, the real questioning comes at the end of the film, when you start asking yourself, *what did this all mean?* When there is space for you to engage with the film that you just watched. I respect and honour the imagination, curiosity, and feeling sense of the audience; I invite you to activate the humanity in you so that you can come to conclusions for yourself.

What I wish for is that when you watch my films—whether in Canada, or Korea, or wherever—that you see something of your own in there, and that you see yourself in that film: your life, society, people, history, your place's secrets and problems, the issues that you are struggling with, not just some poor, miserable, far away Serbs and Albanians. Even though they are rooted in a very specific conflict, those films aren't just about Kosovo and that war, I want to ground you in these universal themes, giving you coordinates that help to reveal the mechanisms that lead to this sort of inhumanity, which is not at all inherent to any one people or place.

People are generally much more similar to each other than they wish to admit, that's how notions of nations or class arise: *I am not like that, they are like that*. Using film to propagate that sort of divisive thinking is a mistake and one that ideologically originates from the same position that those sorts of criminals take: to make people focus on one thing to humiliate the other, to feed the audience an easy opinion, encouraging the viewer to not question it.

If you banalize these things, or simplify them, you didn't contribute anything new to the conversation. A film isn't just a story, it's storytelling. You can't tell the truth in platitudes. Then it becomes just like nationalism: easy answers to complex questions. The power of art is in suggestion, not in disseminating information. A film is created in collaboration, in communication between those making it and the audience watching it. That way, you activate something in people, you don't treat them as if you are dropping stories from above.

AP: I like to call those reductionistic, divisive narratives competitive victimhood, which I see as a favourite sport throughout the Balkans: these victims cannot exist because these other victims exist, *ad nauseum*. The word for that in English is whataboutism.

OG: Yes, here we call that Balkan anti-thesis: *Sure, we committed crimes, but this is what they did to us…* While you are willing to acknowledge some things, there will always be that *but*. I wanted to avoid that line of thinking. I think that it's insulting to use any victim to, as you say, compete with others' victimhood.

Then again, when you *don't* do that, people may perceive your film for being rooted in the same structures that you yourself critique. My films are attacked in Serbia as traitor films that show evil Serbs and good Albanians. This is what people who haven't seen the films think that they are about—which, of course, they're not. As a filmmaker I just made the ammunition, but the weapons are not in my hands. The ruling political party that actually arose out of those same wars, the same people who participated in them and in those crimes, control the media. So my films are completely invisible in Serbia: the majority of movie theatres wouldn't show my films, and not a single television network was willing to air them. Mostly, if people here have heard of them it's because they heard attacks on them, and on me, when the films came out.

Anyone who decides to speak publicly about these topics deals with this; you remain without friends, solidarity is scarce, and work opportunities disappear. Nationalism is deeper than many things. These couple of hundred people who committed these crimes actually have a shield and an army of defenders in the society to whom they've managed to sell the story that by defending them, they defend their nation, people, country, state, society, but they actually just defend those couple of hundred murderers who are responsible for those crimes. This spin has succeeded here, it won the battle of narratives long ago: the truth lost its battle with nationalism.

AP: In *The Load*, there is a moment when Vlada finally sees: when he returns with the truck to Belgrade, a bright light from the top of an excavator truck shines through the window in the darkness. Neither he nor we see what we all know is there, but we do see the unmistakable signs of something that is literally being buried. If all of the information is available to us, we can get it, read it, watch footage from those trials, you can't really say anymore that these things didn't occur, even though many people still do. That moment when you see and you can no longer un-see, when you look and you can no longer look away—is that a choice? Do you think that Vlada has a choice?

OG: He suspects what he's carrying the whole time, though he doesn't want to know. He doesn't want concrete evidence. Because that would mean he would have to react; the truth always comes with responsibility. The truth about these crimes may be on the margins of our society: you won't hear about it in school, or on television, in the family, from your parents, in university, or in church. But you might, somewhere, come across something, and then the question arises: how will you react?

Those who make an enemy of me do not do so because they think that I am lying; they know full well that this happened. For some, the refusal to acknowledge it is cowardice, cynicism and hypocrisy; others choose not to speak about it just because they would have to move, do something, leave their passive position. Whatever the case, being silent about these things is a kind of complicity.

All those people who testified to participating in these crimes, these are people who said, *no, I saw that*—in spite of others who participated and chose to say, *this didn't happen* and who continue to live with this lie, for various reasons. Throughout the film, the truth is gradually revealed. Vlada sees it when he opens the truck the next day and smells this terrible smell. The truck is already emptied, but the remains of who was there are unmistakable: he realizes there were children, civilians, not soldiers. What to do with this information?

What can you do in a society in which the truth is of no value nor holds any power? Therein lies the tragedy. Or the potential for a change, revolution, rebellion.

AP: It's what you're not seeing that's telling you what happened and lends itself to a terrifying feeling.

OG: I think that both films fit into the mystery genre of thriller, they have that sort of plot, but they don't use those tropes. I use suspense and tension to activate something in you, to take you on a journey towards something in yourself. That you stay with these really slow films: there is something meditative in the rhythm and the quiet that is the method through which you observe. So that that tension comes from within you.

AP: I keep thinking about Hannah Arendt and the banality of evil. Vlada drops the truck off and picks it up again from this man that works in the pits who has the look of a dead man standing that reminded me of the archetype of Eichmann, the subject of Arendt's famous piece *Eichmann in Jerusalem* who was simply "doing his job." Wars are fought by hundreds and thousands of people each playing their part in the architecture of a collective violence. At the time *Eichmann* was first published iqn 1963, it was very controversial. Everyone was expecting a political theorist who was a Jewish World War II refugee to write about how these acts were exceptional for humanity, but she actually wrote the opposite: how it is in fact less common for someone to stand up against atrocity, to refuse to comply. The cowardly response is actually much more common.

OG: That's why it was so important for me in *Depth Two* to have each of these people testify with their stories of what they did and why they did it, whether it was because they were promised an apartment or because they wanted to steal gold teeth and gold chains, or because they were afraid that their families will be killed if they said no, that they themselves will be killed.

AP: These aren't films about the past at all, really, but about the present.

OG: It's true: *The Load* isn't about 1999, it's about today. And it isn't just about this one issue, either. It's not just that Yugoslavia fell apart in war and that's that, it's that a whole value system ceased to be relevant: that anti-fascism no longer has any worth. Through my films I struggle for it to not be this way, but those are really small steps. One makes something that, for now, no one will see, no one will even know about it, that is marginalized for the same reasons for which those crimes themselves are marginalized in the public discourse, but maybe in ten years, the situation will be different. It's about the present and for the future: it's important that those films exist.

It took us seven years to raise the minimum possible amount of funds to make *The Load*. Many people were not decently paid for their work on it; some were not even paid at all. This is actually another form of censorship, economic censorship: they won't give you the money to film in order to marginalize you. And then we were attacked, denounced, spat upon, and all manner of lies were written about the film. I started this work eleven years ago, and the situation here is the same today. You are aware that you are starting from the margins, that you are saying something blasphemous that many cannot hear, that you won't reach many people, but you are simultaneously aware that it *will* reach someone. I think that that small step can lead to curiosity and to questioning, which then spreads, increasing the number of people who are ready to talk, to strike at those lies. I know that things don't change overnight, but they can in time. You still have to fight for the truth: it's not pointless, it's not in vain.

AP: You mean to say that you have hope?

OG: There is no anti-fascism without hope. The majority of people don't have any hope because they don't think that they have any power. But if you don't have hope, you are admitting that you don't have power, and you're surrendering to that. I think that hope is having the faith that you have the power to change something. Anti-fascism can't exist without that.

AP: Leon Lučev is brilliant in the role of Vlada: what of himself did he bring to that role?

OG: Leon found a closeness to the project because he was in the war, and he has his own trauma from it. He was a soldier in Croatia in 1991-2 when he was 21-22 years old and he also speaks out against these same issues in his society.

I think a through line theme in all of my films is that my characters create and choose fiction to live in, instead of the reality that surrounds them. They are not ready to live in the present, let alone in the future, and for that reason they choose fiction, the past, lies. To live in the present, you have to live in reality. Reality doesn't exist without the truth, and without knowledge.

Those kids on the monument [Popina Monument Park in southern Serbia, on Vlada's road from Kosovo to Belgrade, commemorates an early Partisan victory in WWII] who steal Vlada's Sutjeska [a famous WWII battle and important Partisan victory] lighter, they don't know in that moment what it refers to, but maybe they'll know someday. All of those kids in

the film who are setting things on fire, stealing from their elders: they don't know who the Partisans were, but on that monument is inscribed, *When needed, repeat* [*Kad zatreba, ponovi me*]. It's a call to the next generation. That is the hope in *The Load*: those kids throughout the film might someday understand and rebel against injustice. Vlada's son is played by Leon Lučev''s actual son, Ivan. He doesn't have a clue about war or war crimes or what his father is doing, but he senses some need to rebel, maybe make a band.

AP: What were those flyers that fall from the sky that Ivan and his friends pick up in the film?

OG: That was NATO's propaganda, directed towards demoralizing the population and causing them to fear. Those are actual flyers that I kept and saved from that time. I wanted to also show the hypocrisy of those powers who are dropping bombs. It was important to me that it was the kids who grabbed them, because we were young, living through a war, and bombarded by all kinds of conspiracy theories and nonsense from all sides.

This bombing, in Serbia, has come to be observed out of its historical context. There is no need for that. We can judge those actions, to critique and attack them, without taking them out of context. It becomes an excuse for the government, a pretext for revisionist structures, that way. They do this so that they can comfortably tuck into the role that they are victims—that we are all victims—and that as victims, we can never be responsible for crimes against others. This is one really very banal game of, as you say, competitive victimhood that has been played here for thirty years. All of those people who hide behind the victims who were actually killed in the bombing are only using them to justify and to hide their crimes. Both atrocities can and *do* exist.

AP: What year were you born?

OG: '85.

AP: Me too. My whole childhood was spent constantly listening to and watching the news from afar but that bombing happened when I was 13. It was the first time that I felt like I really understood what was happening. But now, even after 20 years, I realize that I still do not fully understand, and narratives that lack nuance don't help anyone to do so. I know that paranoia is a consequence of every war and of every great destruction, the devolution and relativity of knowledge and thought comes with.

OG: That's what Danilo Kiš says about nationalism: it's an individual and a collective paranoia. It's also the result of provincialization. In the '90s there was such a breakdown of normal life here that people stopped doing anything that wasn't closely related to survival. When communication with the world became impossible—and not just with the world beyond your nation's borders, but the world within *you*—art quickly fell away. And art, I think, has the greatest potential for reflection and rebellion.

This propaganda is all noise designed to distract us from dealing with essential issues that have to be dealt with within oneself first. Fascism doesn't exist only in other people. I made

my films to show how that current exists in everyone and how it might express itself if the right climate presents itself. I wanted to make these films to snuff it out in myself and in order to learn how to speak freely about it. We need to constantly be working on this. Fascism wasn't defeated in 1945. It's the work, the everyday work, of being human.

Aurora Prelević was born in Canada to two Yugoslav immigrant parents and lives between Montréal and Belgrade. She holds an MA from the New School for Social Research in New York at the intersection of memory, performance, and gender studies and is a writer and translator. Her work centers grief, ancestry, trauma, and the body: she also makes performances, teaches somatics, and is a practicing herbalist. Aurora's work has appeared in *Guernica* and *The Believer,* among others, and she is currently working on a book of essays entitled, *My Country is the Most Beautiful of All: A Eulogy for Yugoslavia*.