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## NATION BRANDING THROUGH CINEMA: SERBIAN CANDIDATES FOR THE OSCARS

### ***Abstract***

*This text examines Serbian cinema and the impact it has on the positioning and development of the image of Serbia on the international scene. Given that popular culture and art have a significant influence on how the outside world perceives a particular nation, the fundamental ideas of applying the concept of nation branding by making use of cultural potentials are presented, seen through theoretical framework and the depiction of successful nations' implementation of nation branding. Film has distinctive characteristics that make it a great medium for constructing and enhancing an image. Additionally, film narratives can significantly influence how a nation is perceived internationally. When it comes to Serbia, it is concluded that there are several problems affecting the underutilized potential of cinema on the international level, and they concern the entire system of Serbian film industry, especially persistent political interference in the fields of art and culture.*

### ***Keywords***

*nation branding, cinema, Serbian image, The Oscars, narrative*

### **Nation branding and successful examples of using film in the process**

The application of branding principles to nations is a relatively new phenomenon, but it is becoming more prominent as nations face increased international competitiveness in both their home and external markets.<sup>2</sup> Nations

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<sup>2</sup> The text presents the conclusions of the research conducted in 2021 for the purposes of a master's thesis defended at the University of Arts in Belgrade, with the same title as this text, "Nation branding through cinema: Serbian candidates for The Oscars". Given that it was necessary to narrow down the research subject of the master's thesis, the focus of the analysis were Ser-

are putting more effort into developing their country brand as they recognize the importance of achieving the following goals: encouraging foreign investments, boosting tourism, increasing exports, attracting talent, higher education scholars and work force, (re)gaining international credibility, improving development of the nation (by fostering confidence, pride, harmony, ambition), raising international political power and influence, strengthening international relations and partnerships (Dinnie 2016:17). Another goal of nation branding that developing countries, such as those in Central and Eastern Europe, may strive for is to disassociate themselves from their previous economic and political system that existed prior to transition (Szondi 2007: 9); the latter being especially relevant for this paper. Rather than engaging in potentially expensive and superficial advertising campaigns, highlighting national culture represents a far more appealing and viable means of developing nation-brand for smaller or emerging nations with limited financial funds. Art, film, literature, music, language, cuisine or sport are examples of contemporary cultural representations that can have a major impact on how people see a country and, as a result, should be included in a nation-branding strategy (Dinnie 2016: 69).

The impact of films on people's perceptions of various things has been well established in literature. However, when it comes to nation branding, cinema has unique qualities, making it an excellent medium for it. Cinema's audiences are impacted by large, colourful moving pictures. The appeal of cinema can be positioned in the minds of audiences, which is important because, from the perspective of psychology, a brand's positioning is based on the construction of a highly attractive appeal (Hoffman and Novak 1996: 9). That is why nations and commercial organizations should invest strategically in cinema as a medium that reflects a country's qualities and characteristics in the form of vivid, moving pictures and presents them to audiences in a positive manner (Gupta et al. 2018: 723). Another important aspect is cinema's large-scale reach – films are easily accessible to anyone and people who do not have contact with any other form of art usually watch them. The power of film lies in the fact that it reaches a wide audience, younger audiences, and even people with fewer language capabilities (Herrschner 2015: 124). Cinema's proactive involvement in establishing and maintaining a nation brand has evolved throughout time and for international audiences, before they attempt to interact with a nation, cinema can help them gain a better understanding of its specific aspects, such as cultural norms held by its citizens, its architec-

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bian films that were official Oscar nominees. The analysis was primarily concerned with the narratives of these films and their influence on shaping Serbia's image abroad.

ture, its political, economic, and environmental conditions. According to the research done in 2018, cinema has the power to subtly communicate about a country's infrastructural, cultural, social, political, and environmental features through moving pictures, allowing viewers to form expectations about experiences the country may offer (Gupta et al., 2018: 731). A survey conducted in the United Kingdom showed that 8 out of 10 Britons acquire their holiday destination ideas from films, and one out of every five will actually undertake the "pilgrimage" to the site of their favourite film (Beeton 2005: 34). Furthermore, according to studies, over 80% of travel decisions to the United Kingdom are influenced by specific destinations that tourists have already seen in movies; for Paris, this figure is around 60% (Tamargo 2006: 14). In this paper the examples of Spain, New Zealand and South Korea will be presented.

Through an official state project to brand the Spanish nation called *Marca España* Spain rebranded itself at the end of the twentieth century, into a contemporary, competitive, and appealing nation by redefining itself according to a new, grand national narrative while at the same time deauthorizing the image of a regressive, traditional, religious, and impoverished country that was dominant during the previous two centuries. (Ulldemolins & Zamorano 2014: 20). Cultural industries played a significant role in this type of image creation. Contemporary Spanish film, more than any other area of cultural industries, was acknowledged as one of the most effective instruments for disseminating Spain's rebuilt identities and national image. In that context, Pedro Almodóvar, the most internationally recognized Spanish cinema director, has become one of the iconic figures of modern Spain (Mestre et al, 2008: 188).

New Zealand had to counter an image that has been strongly influenced by perceptions of distance, small size, and social discord – and it did so magnificently by repositioning itself on the global stage, which was pushed by the 1999 and 2003 campaigns "100% Pure" and "New Thinking New Zealand". Government and public institutions recognized that New Zealand cinematic potentials can play an especially important role in the global promotion of the new New Zealand brand. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (New Zealand, USA, 2001–2003) has become one of the most successful nation branding projects in history, resulting in significantly increased awareness for New Zealand as a tourist attraction and, as a result, financial and image advantages for the country (Yeoman & McMaho-Beattie 2011: 169).

The huge global success of South Korean film *Parasite*, becoming the first non-English-language film to win the Oscar for the Best Picture at the Academy Awards in 2020, marks a significant cultural achievement for the East Asian country, although it is not exactly a spontaneous and accidental event. South Korea was the first country to form a presidential board in 2009 to manage efforts to increase the country's image and brand. The phenomenal success of *Parasite* is just a crest of the Korean Wave (or *Hallyu* in Korean), a broad concept referring to South Korea's cultural policy and the export of its popular culture products to global cultural markets, ranging from K-pop, digital contents, computer games and television dramas to food, fashion, and language (Jang and Paik 2012: 196).

Through detailed analysis of the presented models, which differ in their level of development, location, history and other factors, several similar elements that were significant in their nation branding through film were drawn. One of the most important factors is the synchronized engagement of all stakeholders, i.e. a joint effort to achieve goals through coordinated activities with a common strategy and aim. In order to create effective campaigns, branding efforts or any other kind of promotion, a necessary condition is to have an established system in which each participant has its own tasks, assigned according to professional criteria. Another conclusion that was drawn is that the success of each of these films was part of a broader campaign or project, where the success of the film is a natural sequence of events and not a coincidental set of circumstances. Also, what turned out to be very effective and fruitful when it comes to the promotion of national cinema internationally, is the promotion of films with both historical and contemporary themes blended into an appropriate narrative. A very important factor concerning themes and narratives, is authenticity, originality and uniqueness. This is particularly emphasized in nations that have a rich history, tradition and folklore, and which can exploit them by giving them contemporary gloss. However, in order to achieve this, it is necessary for countries to invest in their creators, to provide them with quality education and professional development, international exchange and that there is a systemic investment strategy for the development of cinema and ancillary activities. In other words, the state should create conditions such that they encourage artistic freedoms and facilitate professional growth of its film/cinema workforce. This is a prerequisite of having quality cinema. This is important because for a nation's cinema to be branded, there must be a product worth branding. Only if there is such a product it makes sense to invest in a strong campaign and promotion with the aim of developing the brand. In this context, it is important that the state and its policies provide incentives for the private sector in order to support

culture and art. Strong and well-grounded cooperation between the state and its cultural industries sectors is, perhaps, a key factor in the development and progress of not only cultural sectors and their economies, but of the state itself.

### **Serbian image and nation branding initiatives**

*Serbia's challenge of positive recognition is exceedingly complex, considering not just the weight of the country's political history, but also a true lack of positive connotations within the region. Serbia's and the Balkans' poor reputations have created an image that portrays the region in an unfavourable light across Europe and the world. (Rogač Mijatović 2014: 115)*

Like other countries of former Yugoslavia, Serbia has faced demanding challenges of improving its significantly damaged image and reputation, but also of positioning the nation's brand on the international scene (Novčić & Štavljanin 2015: 266). Serbian governments have recognized the importance of implementing nation branding ideas and the state has implemented a systemic approach so as to establish a comprehensive strategic framework, national strategy, and platform with the goal of developing a strong nation brand that would reposition the country and change its negative image. However, it seems as if the undertaken campaigns have been without notable success in the nation-branding context. This is primarily due to the lack of deep comprehension of the idea of nation branding, which was often mistaken for the practice of *destination branding* for tourist purposes and ignoring many other potentials Serbia has to offer. Specifically, nation branding is the process of establishing a favourable image of a country in terms of investment, export, employment, and tourism, whereas destination branding is primarily concerned with establishing a good image among tourists (Novčić Korać & Šegota 2017: 81–83). In that sense, cinema was excluded as a part of an integrated campaign in which all relevant stakeholders should have been involved. Promotion of Serbian film abroad is almost exclusively the responsibility of the film crew themselves and *Serbian Film Center*<sup>3</sup> and, thus it is done ad hoc, without any strategic plan. However, what seems to be a shift for the better

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3 Film Center Serbia has a department of international relations and on their official website it is stated that its role is to “establish and develop cooperative efforts with kindred institutions abroad, such as foundations, festivals, markets, promoters, film buyers and reputable associations and individuals; the Centre supports and organizes festivals, promotions, conferences, publications and thematic screenings/round tables dedicated to promoting Serbian films at international festivals and other similar manifestations.”

are the projects of recent times, such as *Serbia Creates*<sup>4</sup> platform, which in the future could be the bearers of an organized and broad campaign for branding Serbia by way of both its cinematography and film industry.

### Serbian candidates for The Oscars

It is often said that the Oscar is not relevant anymore, that it is a political award, and further, that it lost its credibility. However, for all their shortcomings the Oscars did not lose publicity and still have a huge impact on how films will be positioned in a cinema repertoire and media. While there may be film awards that are more reliable indicators of a movie's lasting artistic value, only the label "Oscar winner" or "Oscar nominee" truly gives a picture a cachet with most people (Matthews 1995: 2). The Oscars and the whole concept of it is all about marketing, but nation branding is a marketing concept, too. Thus, the selection of a film to be the Oscar nominee is an ideal opportunity for nation branding, and the brand of the award itself, whether won or not, can serve as a great platform to promote a country's cinema and as a tool for sending an authentic message in global context.

For the purposes of the research mentioned earlier, an analysis of Serbian submissions for the Oscars was done, and it covered the following years and titles:

- 2006 *Tomorrow Morning / Sutra ujutru*, director Oleg Novković
- 2007 *The Trap / Klopka*, director Srđan Golubović
- 2008 *Tournament / Turneja*, director Goran Marković
- 2009 *St. George Kills the Dragon / Sveti Georgije ubiva aždahu*, director Srđan Dragojević
- 2010 *Besa / Besa*, director Srđan Karanović
- 2011 *Montevideo: Taste of a Dream / Montevideo, Bog te video!*, director Dragan Bjelogrić
- 2012 *When the Day Breaks / Kad svane dan*, director Goran Paskaljević
- 2013 *Circles / Krugovi*, director Srđan Golubović
- 2014 *See You in Montevideo / Montevideo, vidimo se!*, director Dragan Bjelogrić
- 2015 *The Enclave / Enklava*, director Goran Radovanović

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4 As it is stated on their official web presentation: *Serbia Creates* is a new way of positioning Serbia locally and internationally in ways that affirm the country's contemporary characteristics of creativity, innovation, and originality.

- 2016 *The Diary of a Train Driver / Dnevnik mašinovođe*, director Miloš Radović
- 2017 *Requiem for Mrs. J. / Rekvijem za gospođu J.*, director Bojan Vuletić
- 2018 *Offenders / Izgrednici*, director Dejan Zečević
- 2019 *King Peter I / Kralj Petar Prvi*, director Petar Ristovski
- 2020 *Dara Of Jasenovac / Dara iz Jasenovca*, director Predrag Antonijević

Considering that media and film critics are the ones who strongly influence the creation of the film's image in a society, Serbian Oscar nominees were analysed through the prism of foreign media and their reporting on these films<sup>5</sup> assuming that they reflect an unbiased opinion of neutral foreign audience. It is worth noting that many of these films, in addition to being official Serbian submissions for the Oscar, were screened and awarded at various festivals around the world, and in that sense, they had already gained considerable media attention. The second aspect of the research included an analysis of these films' narratives. Sources and references in the overall analysis of the narrative were literature about Serbian films, published texts by film theorists and academics, and semi-structured interviews with professionals from Serbian film industry.

In general, a review of Serbian selections for this prestigious award shows that there is a general tendency that the choice is less the result of the conscious selection by the jury of film experts, and more the consequence of the dire state of Serbian cinema in general. One of the recurring settings of domestic cinematography is mostly historical, more precisely – war periods, so there is a very frequent tendency to reach for traumatic history as a source of film narratives. It is most often related to the WWI, as the dominant environment, or to the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. The motives of Kosovo and Kosovo Albanians are frequently mentioned in several films. Although most films have a common theme, the attitude towards it varies. In some cases it is illustrative, in others critical and controversial.

Another issue refers to the target audience that these narratives and themes address. Serbian films, that we sent as our official representatives to a global event, are aimed exclusively at domestic audiences, and rarely at regional ones. They are historically important only for Serbia, the problems they deal with are not considered objectively and clearly enough not only for the

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5 Film audiences, film lovers and people who come into contact with foreign films most often find information about films via the Internet, and the most important sites in this regard, are IMDB and Rotten Tomatoes.

members of the Academy, but also for many other juries in the world (sometimes even in Europe). Most importantly, audiences around the world can not relate to them. War, misery, disturbing topics, socio-political problems, illness, pain and trauma are almost unavoidable topics in Serbian films. Even the films whose narratives only seemingly managed to distance themselves from the war periods carry within them the motive and hidden narrative of the ubiquitous trauma(s) in our society. The fact is that people in this region have indeed suffered a lot in the past, but it is also a fact that there are many other elements in our culture, history and heritage, (perhaps) more worthy of being our representatives on the international scene. It is not uncommon in post-Yugoslav cinemas that the newly formed countries engage openly in a 'fight for the narrative'. Given that film is the most potent art for showing traumatic experiences, countries are competing with each other whose narrative is the correct one, truer and more realistic. This is most obvious in the cinemas of Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, because the question of responsibility for participating in Yugoslav conflicts represents the subtlest field in which these three countries test the legitimacy of national narratives", film theorist Vesna Perić states (as cited in BBC 2021).<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, the influence of politics is still very strong in Serbian cinema which is reflected in the selection and the selection mechanism; it is obvious that during the previous decades a candidate whose narrative was close to the narrative of the regime in power was chosen for nomination. Opportunities were missed for some better and narratively more suitable films to be sent as our representatives, and thus gain publicity that might improve the image of Serbia. The hope remains that the new election mechanism will do better in the future, and that films will be chosen according to their artistic, creative value and the message they send, regardless of the political situation. What is noticeable is that very rarely during the period analysed, Serbian submission for the Oscar was a film with a clearly expressed critical attitude towards one's own nation, and these are precisely the films that are best accepted by foreign audiences and at international festivals. However, in order to have a better understanding it is worth mentioning the context of how these films were selected. In Serbia, there is not a well-clarified network of relationships in the film industry, because all these films are financed directly from the state budget. The most direct example of the state's influence in filmmaking is a recent example of the film "Dara of Jasenovac" from 2020, for which the president of the state declared himself the underwriter of the topic for the film,

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6 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-56244536> accessed on 22nd August 2022



a statement reported in all Serbian media. It is beyond doubt that there were far better films in the competition for the Serbian Oscar submission during previous years, both from the perspective of cinematography, and from the perspective of potential to send a message to the world about our society. It was obvious that the committee that selected the films favoured projects close to the regime in power. Unfortunately, in Serbia the climate which would enable politics-free cultural policy is rather unfavourable as it is the state, i.e. the regime in power, that must have a final say even in matters that exceed its competences.

Already mentioned film “Dara of Jasenovac” provoked violent reactions at the regional level. Given that there was a lot of controversy during the selection of this film for the Serbian Oscar submission, it is important to mention that local media resonated about how the law was not respected regarding the selection of this film and that it was accompanied by disparaging comments in domestic and foreign media. The film caused great divisions among people and polarization of opinion. Some say that it is Serbian nationalist propaganda, and others that it is important to talk about “something that was covered by the fog of oblivion” (Deutsche Welle 2020).<sup>7</sup> The narrative of the film “Dara of Jasenovac”, as a state project, served to support current political decisions and statements, giving them legitimacy through a picture of past events treated in a questionable way.

Serbian cinema, however, has its recognizable elements such as dark and often sarcastic humour, comic characters (simplified and stereotyped), creative directing solutions, specific atmosphere, etc. There are several elements that can define *Serbian style*, and if combined with authentic narratives they could be a good opportunity to represent the nation through film and its positioning around the world. Through the analysis of successful examples of nation branding through film, one of the factors for success is the authenticity of the cinema, and Serbian cinema has a good predisposition for that. What is important is that progress is being made in this sense and that Serbian cinema has become very diversified in recent years. New young authors with fresh ideas and different views are being given a chance to present how they see the world. How the world sees Serbia can change in that way, and additional interest in our art would provide those interested with a range of different directions, movements, styles, aesthetics. However, the changes that need to

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7 <https://www.dw.com/sr/dara-iz-jasenovca-film-koji-polarizuje/av-56833543> accessed on 22nd August 2022

happen are tectonic and require a transformation of the structure that has existed for decades.

## Conclusion

A successful nation's cinema requires the ability to support and invest in the growth of an industry, adequate funding and incentives, conditions that support authors' artistic freedom and growth, and support for professional advancement and international exchange. Unfortunately, the system in Serbia does not meet all these conditions and politics is strongly involved in art and culture, as well as in other fields. One of the basic postulates of the branding concept is that without a good product, the process of promotion and branding itself will not be worth it. That is why it is necessary to really make major changes, bring up difficult issues and resolve long-standing difficulties, in order to reach a much higher goal – to create a climate that is suitable for creation, artistic freedom, growth and excellence. For a nation to be branded through its cinema, there must be a good product to be used for branding and improving the image, and for that to happen there must exist an environment in which the artist will be free and able to express his/her artistry. From nation branding perspective, there should be a strategy that will be consistent and in accordance with clearly defined goals, adopted by all key stakeholders. Currently, such an approach does not exist at all, and it would be important to do so in the future making the best use of the potential of Serbian cinema on the international scene.

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## BRENDIRANJE NACIJE KROZ FILM: SRPSKI KANDIDATI ZA NAGRADU OSKAR

### Apstrakt

*Tekst se bavi kinematografijom Srbije i uticajem koji ona ima na međunarodno pozicioniranje i izgradnju srpskog imidža, iz perspektive marketinškog koncepta brendiranja nacije. Iznete su osnovne ideje primene ovog koncepta kroz korišćenje kulturnih potencijala, kroz teorijski okvir i predstavljanje prakse država koje to uspešno rade, s obzirom na to da popularna kultura i umetnost imaju značajan uticaj na to kako spoljni svet doživljava određenu naciju. Osim toga, film ima jedinstvene kvalitete koji ga čine odličnim medijem za izgradnju i unapređenje imidža. Takođe, narativi filmova mogu imati veoma značajan uticaj na oblikovanje imidža zemlje u međunarodnom okruženju. Kada je reč o Srbiji, konstatovano je da postoji niz problema koji utiču na nedovoljno iskorišćen potencijal kinematografije na međunarodnom planu, a tiču se celokupnog sistema organizacije srpske filmske industrije i izraženog uplitanja politike u oblast umetnosti i kulture.*

### Ključne reči

*brendiranje nacije, kinematografija, imidž Srbije, Oskar, narativ*

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