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December 21, 2011

The Jolie Doctrine: *In the Land of Blood and Honey*

by [Steve Macfarlane](#)



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In the Land of Blood and Honey

Directed by Angelina Jolie

The funniest thing about Angelina Jolie is the deep chasm between her on-and-off-screen lives. Setting aside *Beyond Borders* and *A Mighty Heart*—neither of which is exactly vérité—none of her prior vehicles betray the slightest interest in the murky vagaries of real-world geopolitics. *In The Land Of Blood And Honey* is her boldest artistic leap yet: as first-time writer/director, she aims to dramatize the intersection of the Bosnian Civil War's psychological and ethnic roots. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia became contested territory between blocs of Muslim Bosnians, and Christian Serbs (as well as Croats.) The contemporary term "ethnic cleansing" comes from efforts undertaken by the nationalist Serbian army against Muslims.

Anyway: Jolie's film concerns an impossible—you could even say "star-crossed"—romance between Ajla (Zana Marjanovic), a Bosnian Muslim painter, and Danijel (Goran Kostic), a Serb officer whose father is a ranking general in Milosevic's army. Her strongest gambit is affirming that the conflict warrants enough interest without the an aesthetic Hollywood treatment; aside from some godawful CGI-augmented explosions, there's very little onscreen to suggest that *In The Land of Blood and Honey* was bankrolled with studio money. (Don't forget: even Steven Soderbergh couldn't resist handing sixty seconds of *Che* to Matt Damon.) Many choices are technically scrupulous: makeshift military dormitories, Serbian rock-and-roll circa 1992, the use of rape as a political weapon.

After the war, Ajla remains in love with Danijel, but his cardboard sense of pride sees him stashing her in a special room in his barracks—where she ends up subject, nevertheless, to the same terrifying risks at the hands of his commandos as any other female prisoner. Uncertainty and fear cloud every scene, and the depiction of a curdling society is more than insistent. The movie has been shown in post-conflict areas, and purportedly gotten approval from survivors for refusing to paint the conflict in broad strokes. (That said, with screenings happening under the rubric of studios and think tanks, it's probably best not to take such feedback at face value.)

Nobody with half a brain will fail to feel bad for Ajla, or any of the other victims of atrocities onscreen—and maybe the film should be seen for that reason alone. But in 2011, is mere guilt enough to demand from historical fiction? With so much riding on the relationship of the two leads, Jolie's operatic idea of dramaturgy (usually toggling between grave whispers and shrieks) and thinly sketched-out characters tend to undercut, rather than buttress, her thesis of complexity—an argument which heats up at the expense of the real thing. This war in particular defies easy analysis, but mining the anguish of Jolie's Serbs and Bosnians for actual insight proves a repeated dead end. *In The Land of Blood and Honey* comes out artless at best, and patronizing at worst: a stronger

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by Steve Macfarlane

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testament to the director's passion than to the humanity of its actual characters.

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Steve MacFarlane...What world are you living in? Get off of your high horse, chill out and re-watch the movie...and this time, try to see it without your ego. I can hear your ego screaming all through your review. Why so scornful?

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Posted by **Serbia** on 12/21/2011 at 10:23 PM



Serbia -

It's true, I didn't think this movie was very good. Here's a proposal: when the DVD is released next year, you and I can get together with a couple of beers and try figuring out the cause of our disagreement.

smacfarl@hunter.cuny.edu

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Posted by **Steve Macfarlane** on 12/22/2011 at 2:25 AM

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