

“YOU CAN HEAR THE RIVER FROM HERE”: RIVERS AS SITES OF DISAPPEARANCE AND DISPLACEMENT

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MIRNA ŠOLIĆ

School of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Glasgow

This article considers how a hydrocentric perspective is used as a cinematic tool to articulate the entangled histories of migration, conflict, and deindustrialisation along the so-called Balkan route, offering a counter-hegemonic interpretation of violence against migrants and deaths across the 21st century Balkans. It does so through an analysis of two documentaries, Goran Dević's *On the Water (Na vodi, 2018)*, and Chris Krikellis's *Souls of a River (Seelen eines Flusses, 2022)*, which portray two distinctive riverscapes, the confluence of the Sava and the Kupa in the Croatian town of Sisak and the transboundary section of the Evros River between Turkey and Greece. Using a comparative approach, the article examines the aesthetic strategies through which each film reveals the effects of converging violent temporalities within their respective yet shared semantic registers. By doing so, it demonstrates how a complex sense of displacement is inscribed in attitudes towards watery places, while at the same also framing rivers as weaponised environments and human-engineered sites of death.

Keywords: post-war, Balkans, rivers, migration, cinema

In this article I examine how cinematic representations of rivers on the so-called Balkan route articulate the lingering effects of social and political transformations that shape individuals and communities alike.¹ My inquiry will address the following question: How does a cinematic focus on rivers contribute to understanding the effects of converging traumatic temporalities of the region, in particular, wars, deindustrialization, and migration? My research builds on the premise that, in the aftermath of violent and traumatic events, it becomes crucial to understand “how we define ourselves in relation to landscape; and how

¹ I am deeply grateful to the peer reviewers and the editors for their extensive and insightful comments and recommendations, which have significantly strengthened my narrative and provided valuable directions for the future development of my research on rivers.

we respond to others' sense of these complex attachments" (Berberich et al. 2012: 18), as such extreme situations intensify our affective relations with both other humans and the more-than-human world (Hediger 2012). While the ecocritical approach to conflict environments has begun to attract academic attention (e.g., Jameson 2009; Berberich et al. 2012; Hediger 2012; Belluc et al. 2025), post-conflict and post-traumatic environments remain largely underexplored. Whereas Hediger's arguments (2012) draw from affective relationships to places impacted by war experiences from elsewhere,² I focus on environments directly affected by conflict.

To investigate this question, I will examine representations of rivers in two documentaries, Goran Dević's *On the Water (Na vodi, 2018)* and Chris Krikellis's *Souls of a River (Seelen eines Flusses, 2022)*. Documentary cinema is particularly well-suited to conveying entangled temporalities (Huang 2019), which in this case are the overlapping and recursive violent narratives of the 21st-century global migrations, 20th-century military conflicts, and deindustrialisation. In both cases, this complexity is mediated through a hydrocentric perspective which destabilises "a sense of the world based on the apparent constancy of land" (Ryan 2022: 487; see also Chen 2013), and, in this context, challenges a fixed sense of belonging. Rivers contain "sensory, political and agentive power" (Hofmeyr et al. 2022: 303–304), which allows for the redefinition of violence as a process involving more-than-human world rather than representing a fixed political "event" (Navaro et al. 2021: 10). When it comes to representations of migration, I will examine how the hydrocentric perspective is used to convey the impact of rivers as "deadly liquids" (Heller and Pezzani 2017: 107), watery places turned into "silent partner(s) in boundary control" (De León 2015: 61; see also Schindel 2022; Teunissen 2025), sites of violence and death through rigid border regimes and the persistent violation of the human rights of people on the move.³ The notion of rivers as "deadly liquids" and weaponised landscapes equally resonates in post-conflict affective relations to the environment, where waterways continue to represent sites of loss, disappearance, and death (Šolić 2025). Finally, when it comes to representations of deindustrialisation, I will consider the hydrocentric perspective as an aesthetic strategy for rendering the affective intensities of ruination. I argue that the deceptive uniformity of water amplifies the affective impact on individuals and communities by concealing the anticipated visual register of ruination characteristic of deindustrialisation and austerity. In this article, I demonstrate how these temporalities converge to varying degrees in their semantic registers, resulting in a complex sense of loss and displacement that is manifested in attitudes towards watery places.

² Hediger refers to experiences of American war veterans following their return home.

³ The Kupa River is depicted as a weaponised border zone in Tiha Gudac's film *The Wire (Žica, 2021)*, where voiceover narration recounting the stories of anonymous migrants intersects with local perspectives on the erection of a fence along the river, as well as the border between Croatia and Slovenia. Much of this newly erected barrier – razor wire stretched along the transboundary section of the river – was constructed in response to the mass transit of migrants in 2015 and 2016, at a time when the Kupa marked part of the Schengen border.

Post-war and post-industrial temporalities overlap in Dević's portrayal of the Croatian town of Sisak from the perspective of the Kupa and the Sava, twenty-five years after the end of Croatia's Homeland War of Independence (1991–1995). Both rivers, with significant transboundary sections, are prominently represented in regional records of border-related deaths. The Sava is increasingly used as a crossing point along its transboundary Bosnian and Croatian section due to the deliberate securitisation of other crossings between the two countries, and violent pushbacks on land crossings along this longest external European border (Matejčić 2023). It is estimated that, over the last twenty years, dozens of migrants have died in these two rivers from drowning and hypothermia. Incomplete records suggest that more than sixty people have died in the Sava River and over sixty in the Croatian-Slovenian transboundary section of the Kupa, though the actual numbers are expected to be much higher,⁴ with the number of illegal crossings remaining unknown. Although Dević's film does not explicitly portray the significance of these rivers as weaponised waterways in the migration context, it situates the concept of rivers as sites of death and silent partners in violence within the context of overlapping post-war and post-industrial temporalities. As I demonstrate, it does so by subverting aquatic imaginaries that have been mobilised to support the ethnic and geographical aspects of nation-building, transforming rivers – traditionally the sources of patriotic identification and appropriation – into watery graves for those cast as enemies of exclusionary nationalist narratives. The hydrocentric perspective is simultaneously employed to convey interwoven testimonies of economic and social depravity and related marginalisation and outsiderism in the post-industrial world. In this way, *On the Water* unveils a diverse spectrum of local political and social circumstances, which in turn affect local attitudes towards migrants, including foreign workers and asylum-seekers (Potkonjak and Škokić 2022: 176).

In *Souls of a River*, the hydrocentric lens is employed to illuminate the mechanism and strategies of "migrant disappearability" (Laakkonen 2022), emerging from long-lasting impacts of intersecting violent contexts of 21st-century global migration as well as displacement following the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974. Coined by Ville Laakkonen, the term migrant disappearability "designate[s] a very particular form, and strategy, of disappearances" by bringing together "notions of border violence, border regimes, or visibility/invisibility" (Laakkonen 2022: 2), to demonstrate that migrant deaths and disappearances are outcomes of organised bordering practices at the local, national, and supranational level rather than misrepresenting them as "a random occurrence or an accident" (Laakkonen 2022: 2). In the film, 21st-century global migration and reverberations of post-1974 displacement emerge as pervasive and interconnected themes set within the Greek-Turkish section of the Evros River region, stretching for some two hundred kilometres before reaching the Aegean Sea. Accompanied by a local pathologist, Pavlos Pavlidis, Chris Krikellis explores intersections between the impact of the war on his family, in this way also implying the role of the river as a militarised area and "defence mechanism"

⁴ The data was extracted from the *4D Database – Deceased, Disappeared, Detained: Documenting Migrant Trail in the Balkans* (<https://4dtrail.wordpress.com/database/>).

at that time (Teunissen 2025: 697), and the violent consequences of migration in the 21st-century Balkans. As one of the key crossing points along the Balkan migration route, the Evros is considered “a zone of border death” (Forensic Architecture 2025; see also Duncan and Levidis, 2020), primarily due to drowning and hypothermia (Pavlidis and Karakasi 2019) and authorities-supported violence against migrants from both sides of the river (Forensic Architecture 2025). Between 2014 and 2023 approximately 74,454 individuals crossed the river (Teunissen 2025: 702), but due to restricted access to the border region as well as natural features influencing access and obscuring fatalities, it is difficult to estimate how many people drowned (Pavlidis and Karakasi 2019: 467).

ON THE WATER (2018)

In riverine cities and towns, rivers are often “central to the city’s identity and image”, while “reading a city through the river and its crossings reveals new understandings and tells different stories” (Watson 2023: 83). In the context of Dević’s socially engaged cinematography centred around Sisak,⁵ *On the Water* is a prominent shift from explicit representations of post-war and post-industrial localities to the town’s waterscape, subverting the notion of the river as “the uninterrupted ‘flow’ or ‘course’ of national history” (Cusack 2010: 2). In the case of Sisak, the theme is articulated through visual variations on the metaphor of being “sent downstream”, suggesting an alignment between the national history, the symbolism of rivers, and the dominant cultural narrative of the town’s mythological origins in the confluence of the Sava, the Kupa, and the Odra (the latter not featured in the film). The nation-building theme is explicitly conveyed through scenes of the “Celtic Night” celebration (Dević 2018: 01:12:55–0:18:00), a community and tourist event aiming to promote “a positive image” of the town (Grad Sisak 2012) and its heroic history. Symbolically conveyed in the closing scenes of the film, rafts carrying historical symbols downstream embody the town’s stoic character and a confident progression towards the future. Accompanied by the sound of the Croatian anthem, whose lyrics evoke the image of Croatia’s rivers as messengers of love for the homeland to the world,⁶ this moment reinforces the central role of rivers in the narrative of nationhood.

Yet, visually and aurally, this spectacle stands in stark contrast to the images of the protagonists, each scarred by that same history, either through post-industrial ruination or post-war traumas, rendered as solitary figures shrouded in darkness. In the film, they represent communities affected by the decline of the once-prominent centre of Yugoslavia and later Croatian industry, where the metaphor of being carried downstream signifies the reduction of subjects and their legacies to historical and political human waste (Bauman

⁵ Representations of social issues in Dević’s films are discussed in a chapter in Sanja Potkonjak and Tea Škokić’s book (2022: 167–179).

⁶ For the English language translation see Moore 2023.

2003). In this way Sisak mirrors the fate of other towns in Croatia's and Bosnia's border regions on the migration routes, where "violences born out of post-war and post-socialist (and more recently postcolonial) forces converge to produce new vulnerabilities and spaces of exclusion" (Hromadžić 2019: 115; see also Škokić 2023). The explicit depiction of physical ruination is visually replaced with the embodied experience of ruination of protagonists dwelling by Sisak's rivers, along with a relentless visual focus on the riverscape. In this respect, the film's hydrocentric perspective conveys a new ecological temporality, characterised by a disrupted relationship between people and places, collapsed boundaries between "waste and value", between illness and health (Dzenovska et al. 2025: 130). The cinematic focus on the urban rivers, with their urban character indicated very subtly, as a formative part of the cityscape instead of the natural world proliferating amidst derelict industrial sites, gestures towards the emergence of "a new form of an imaginary landscape where the current process of the decay of post-industrial ruins is fixed as permanent" (Potkonjak and Škokić 2022: 169).

As a permanent state, ruination is represented in snippets of protagonists' stories interwoven throughout the film, unfolding in rhythm with the river's flow and the changing seasons. They demonstrate that the river is no longer a "highly masculinised world" (Watson 2023: 88), given that traditional skills linked to mastering or controlling it (Watson 2023: 82–99) have largely disappeared. The male protagonists, former soldiers and factory workers, are instead presented as "redefined subjectivit[ies]" (Škokić 2023: 233; Dzenovska 2025), deeply affected, mentally and physically impaired, emotionally and spiritually troubled outsiders, who descend to the river in search of recovery and solace. An exception to this pattern is the story of a local solicitor (Marko Rafaj) which, framed in positive terms, highlights the starkness of the other destinies. First represented as a lone swimmer cutting across the length of the Kupa River in a wintry setting (Dević 2018: 00:00:47–00:01:37), the solicitor proudly displays his family legacy in Sisak, as an undisputed and linear organising point of his transgenerational life narrative. He trains his son (Matija Luka Rafaj) for athletic excellence that ultimately earns the boy an elite university scholarship abroad, reinforcing the idea of the flow as a linear and safe progression towards the projected future. Their interaction with the river is reflective of this: swimming its length regardless of weather conditions with a clear, purposeful aim, the river and the swimmers are portrayed as one. Visually capturing an undisturbed symbiosis with the water, aerial shots of the pair swimming (00:38:30) reinforce the ideals of strength, power, and confidence in the environment, regardless of social and political circumstances.

A radically different transgenerational father-son relationship that unfolds on the river lacks such trajectory of success, revealing instead "vulnerable and insecure postsocialist subjects who live in symbolic, but also physical ruins of their communities, towns, and societies" (Škokić 2023: 232). It follows a former – now disabled – steelworker (Damir Radašinović – Štakac), who makes ends meet by collecting driftwood flushed by the water. His son (Jurica Mihael Radašinović) clearly disregards his father as a masculine role model, and their interaction with the river suggests a history of traumatic disrupt-

tions. Their navigation and movement across the water depend on the location of the driftwood, symbolising the uncontrollable and unpredictable nature of the river, a variation on the metaphor of being carried downstream rather than mastering the currents, and suggesting a fragile prospect of hope (Dević 2018: 00:41:40). In contrast to the solicitor's firm grounding within an established family history in the city, the steelworker embodies memories of what once was but is no more – of Sisak as a former industrial town, with his presence on the river as a solastalgic response, "a form of homesickness on experiences when one is still at home" (Albrecht 2006: 35), further authenticated by a brief indication of defunct steelwork chimneys in the background. The chimneys are more like a monument to a once glorious past which is now carried downstream, and a story of loss beyond human control.

The unresolved war-time legacies, in particular the silenced history of war crimes against civilians, thread at multiple levels through a majority of the stories, foregrounding the river as a weaponised environment and an unacknowledged watery grave. A particularly poignant moment happens when a Serbian fisherman recounts how, following his return to post-war Sisak, he received a threat that his body would be "sent down the river" (Dević 2018: 00:13:30), but central to this thread is the story of the film's sole female protagonist (Stoja Trivkanović) symbolising an aftermath and a continuation of violent narratives represented by the unacknowledged, yet persistently present and unresolved disappearances. They reflect the strategies of authorities-supported repression and cultural practices of necroviolence outsourced to nature (De León 2015: 71), reminding of the weaponisation of the environment in violent authorities-supported interventions against migrants in order to "construct the myth of ethno-nationalism through geophysical confines" (Duncan and Levidis 2025: 2). The film features an image of Stoja Trivkanović descending to the river with three wreaths, which she releases into the current (Dević 2018: 00:55:07) as a personal act of remembrance of the summer day in 1991 when the members of Croatian special police forces executed her husband and two sons (Documenta 2013). The body of her husband was later found in the water, while the destiny of her children remains unknown. The scene visualises the metaphor of being "sent downstream" in a literal sense, sharply contrasting it with the narratives of victimhood and heroism underlining the official commemorations of war casualties and nationhood. It is in this case that a sense of internal displacement or rather unbelonging, is the most prominent – the reality that, when the war broke out, Stoja Trivkanović's family, as many other ethnic Serbs, had "nowhere to go", no other land to feel affiliation to, as violence, driven by Croatian and Serbian nationalist rhetoric, began targeting ethnic communities. The unresolved disappearance and the absence of the remains of the loved ones, framed within the exclusion from the official narrative of heroism and victimhood, is powerfully visualised in the final scenes of the film, when she is portrayed sitting alone by an empty table in her house as the sounds of the celebratory Croatian anthem can be heard from the outside (Dević 2018: 01:16:21).

The image of the river as a tangible space of death, as an unmarked, volatile grave, and as a rebuttal of "myths of national heroism and sacrifice" (Baker 2019: 231) is further

reinforced by the story of the disabled war veteran Rambo (Ivica Vračan – Rambo). His relationship with the river is ambiguous: the river appears as a shelter from the community of humans, a respite from the world he does not feel that he belongs to, but also from unresolved war-time trauma. Significant wounds on his body, in particular his face, demonstrate the persistence and embodiment of inflicted violence, reflecting how he returned from the war “half crazy”, just like many others (Dević 2018: 00:15:26), and how the war deprived him of family life, in this way making him incapable of forming meaningful relationships within the traditional, family-oriented society (Dević 2018: 00:37:50). Rambo’s military record, indicated by special forces insignia on his shabby military uniform, suggests “a problematic conflation of the veteran figure *with* masculinity” (Baker 2019: 241) and dominating ideals of masculinity in Croatian war-time and post-war public discourse. This is evident in the visual capture of his lifeless, disfigured body, resembling a corpse, in a coffin on the background of the commemoration of the fallen Croatian war veterans (Dević 2018: 00:54:30): he is portrayed as drunk and motionless in his boat as the commemorative wreath, in the colours of the Croatian flag, merging the ideals of statehood and war-time heroism, drifts away on the water. Rambo suggests acceptance of responsibility for war crimes and forgiveness as the only possibility of coming to terms with the persisting temporality of war-time violence and destruction (Dević 2018: 00:59:14). In the film, the theme of forgiveness appears first in relation to a homeless man, a former alcoholic previously convicted for murder, for whom the river offers spiritual purification and a possibility of belonging: he is baptised in the water (Dević 2018: 01:08:35) in a collective act of atonement. However, forgiveness and atonement do not appear to be a possibility for the other protagonists – and, by extension, their communities – who are encountered by the river as part of the ruined social and political landscape they are supposed to belong to.

SOULS OF A RIVER (2022)

In *Souls of a River*, migration and displacement are explicit narrative threads converging with temporalities of reverberating war-time loss and de-industrialisation. Krikellis returns to the region of his childhood to patch up an incomplete and fragmented story of the impact of the 1974 division of Cyprus on his family’s uprooting, his father’s traumatic war memories, death in exile in Germany, and transgenerational trauma. The resonance of the conflict throughout the Evros riverscape, “the residuality of violence, its afterlives and spillover effects” (Navaro et al. 2021: 8), shapes it into a site of multiple and intertwined histories of a heavily militarised border (Laakkonen 2022: 4). In this way, it underscores the infrastructure of “bordered riverscape” whereby the river becomes “a dynamic and interactive space where historical treaties and border policies are mediated and perpetuate systems of control, exclusion and violence” (Teunissen 2025: 706). The 20th- and 21st-century temporalities unfold through the filmmaker’s self-reflexive exploration of different

locations along the Evros and Pavlos Pavlidis's forensic approach to material traces, in particular the identification of drowned migrants and ascertaining possible causes of their death. The overlapping temporality of austerity, with Pavlidis serving as a long-standing witness, portrays the gradual decline of the region affected by economic depravity and, by extension, depopulation. While Krikellis perceives himself as "the seeker", and "the traveller, the collector of pictures of places" (Krikellis 2022: 00:46:47), suggesting that his aesthetic approach to disappearability is based on the exploration of temporalities embedded within landscapes, it is Pavlidis's rootedness in the environment that helps pinpoint explicit signs of absence produced by violent practices at multiple and overlapping levels. Through multisensory cinematic interventions, as well as the two focal perspectives – Krikellis's and Pavlidis's – "the river on the edge of the EU" (Krikellis 2022: 00:04:03) becomes a polysemic space embedding and memorising ongoing impacts of converging violent histories of the 20th and the 21st centuries.

The overlapping disappearabilities are first recognised in the pervasive sense of the Evros riverscape ambiguity, as a key aesthetic and meaning-making component of the hydrocentric perspective in the film, observed at different locations along the Greek–Turkish transboundary section of the river. The filmmaker depicts the Evros River region as an ambiguous space, "foreign to me and yet [...] familiar" (Krikellis 2022: 0:06:39–0:06:50), in this way displaying a sense of disorientation in the environment marked by absences and erasures. He is unable to trace his story within the place, including his hometown of Didymoteicho in northeastern Greece,⁷ where, amidst abandoned houses and derelict infrastructure, he surrenders to spectrality of worn-down façades and bare window frames, suggestive of the absence of people. Alongside mapping his own family's presence within the environment, tracing human imprints in the ambiguous Evros riverscape remains one of the key features of the film. The Evros River Delta, a designated nature conservation area famous for its ornithological diversity, is depicted as a vast, open expanse emptying into the sea, physically and metaphorically dominated by water. Its liminality is amplified by a perceived temporal dimension of the riverscape as the place where "time has stood [...] still" (Krikellis 2022: 00:59:33), suggesting the river's potential to serve as a portal to the past or even "*the past itself*" (Wylie 2007: 176), which the filmmaker attempts to trace through long and steady shots of ground and water surfaces.

At the same time, liminality is also a visual implication of the weaponised riverscape, with the Delta's volatile identity, its "interstitial condition between water and sediment" obstructing migrant crossings, but also making "river boundaries unstable in the eyes of international jurisprudence" (Duncan and Levidis 2020). Krikellis's meditative shots imply that the area is one marked by violent border practices, where hunting for animals has been replaced by hunting people, carried out by both the authorities and vigilante groups "to prevent what they understand to be an 'intrusion' of 'illegal aliens' ('Lathrometanastes')

⁷ Didymoteicho also features in the narratives of pushbacks to Turkey. See, for instance, Washington 2021.

into Greece" (Duncan and Levidis 2020). The explicit acts of violence in quick sequence intersperse throughout the film, conflating the narratives of militarisation and securitisation, suggesting their interdependence and simultaneity. For instance, a short sequence featuring a military base and the sounds of sirens dispersing birds, aurally transpose the filmmaker into the past, demonstrating a profound internalisation of the 1974 conflict, including dispersion/displacement of humans, which affects the filmmaker's family as well. Another example are explicit representations of border violence in documentary images of unrest escalating near the Kastanies–Pazarkule border crossing in the vicinity of the Arda River, a tributary of the Evros. The filmmaker disrupts the reflective narrative line by interpolating documentary footage from February and March of 2020, when thousands of migrants and refugees were caught in political altercations between Turkey and Greece, following Turkey's decision to open the borders to "exert political pressure on the EU over Syria" (Forensic Architecture 2020). What makes this footage powerful is its brevity, embedded into otherwise spectral landscapes. Introduced without any specific narratorial introduction, the shots point to intertwined temporalities of violence, profoundly embedded within the riverscape.

The cinematic rendition of disappearability is most notable in the representation of and focus on aquatic life. The footage of dense aquatic vegetation lining the Evros riverbanks, captured in long sequences of panning shots, suggests a metamorphosis of the human into the natural. This is a very subtle, spectral portrayal of the use of the more-than-human in the expulsion of humans, but also, on an ontological level, an eternally embedded presence of the disappeared into the cycle of life. This duality, both investigative and commemorative, is further amplified by the upright posture of plants, resembling human silhouettes lined up in a standing position, as if the souls of the drowned, separated from their decomposing bodies on the riverbed, and those displaced from the region, have transfigured into plant life, leaving a spectral imprint on the environment. Extreme close-ups intensify this atmosphere of spectrality by transforming the river's surface into a shimmering, almost animate stream of flickering lights in movement. Spectrality as a variation of disappearability is also amplified through meditative shots of horses and birds cruising across the desolate waterscape in continuous and fluid motion. Through the film's meditative poetics, the uninterrupted movement of birds, coupled with a subtle reference to parts of Evros having wildlife protection status (Ornithologiki 2025), evokes both the legal restriction of human mobility and the freedom of animal migration, held in tension within the same riverscape. In one of the closing scenes of the film, the motif of birds reappears, this time as illustrated by transparent plexiglass safety barriers along the Danube in Vienna, with the river implied behind them (Krikellis 2022: 01:17:02). Unlike earlier depictions, where motion suggested life in both its concrete and spectral forms, these imprints underscore a disjunction between representation and lived reality and stand as a testament to violent temporalities at the periphery of Europe.

The pervasive dominance of water is further amplified by auditory elements which, in the absence of human voices, act as spectral interlocutors contributing to representations

of violent histories. The sonic representation of the space reconfigures the remembrance of the anonymous disappeared as an affective response to the environment. The ability of the sound to amplify the movement and fluidity of nature and intensify its spectral qualities aligns with Tim Ingold's reflections on a deep correlation between perception, remembrance, and space: "To perceive the landscape is to carry out an act of remembrance, and remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past" (Ingold 1993: 152–153). The sound of off-screen ambient music is interwoven with diegetic sounds of flowing water and wind sweeping across the open, flat riverscape, rustling and swaying aquatic plants, and tree crowns, in this way intensifying the visual imagery of liquidity and movement, and amplifying the absence of disappeared human protagonists. Such a soundscape sustains the Evros's presence in the narration even when the river is only implied in conversation – "You can hear the river from here" (Krikellis 2022: 00:58:26) – reinforcing a sense of the river's constancy, while again hinting at a latent threat, reflective of a changed social environment for local communities and a weaponised landscape of the border area. Here it becomes apparent that the soundscape complements and expands the representational limits of the visual and allows for a transition into the spectral.

As the camera surveys the riverbanks through a slow succession of medium shots, traces of perishing human presence gradually emerge. A fragment of a faded red cloth, weathered by the elements and discarded on the riverbank (Krikellis 2022: 00:18:44), is a subtle sign of human presence in the riverscape, but also its transience and instability, an authentication of disappearability. Captured without verbal commentary providing a context, an interpretation, or emotional involvement, the discovered objects are presented as an expected, self-evident part of the riverscape, observed in passing, rather than unexpected discoveries. Shots of objects found around the river continue to occasionally appear throughout the film, as explicit reminders of invisible presence and invisible, yet parallel histories. However, when observed within the hospital setting, Pavlidis's forensic perspective allows for the re-materialisation of traces of human presence in the region. The objects are transformed into meaningful fragments of human identity, personal possessions linked to specific deceased individuals, thereby resisting anonymity. Unlike human bodies, objects possess a distinct capacity to withstand the forces of nature and assert a form of permanence against water, decomposition, and dissolution. Even for the pathologist, encountering objects in the environment, such as an empty backpack in an abandoned boat on the riverbank, triggers a sense of existential unease and prompts the question, "What am I doing here?" (Krikellis 2022: 00:39:40), mirroring the exploration of the relationship between belonging, space, and displacement in the filmmaker's life writing, as well as the existential doubt that any hope of meaningful communal life is possible.

In his role of an informal local guide and a travel companion, Pavlidis unveils the post-industrial ruination and depopulation as another variation of disappearability, linked to the economic austerity of the 2010s, which in turn influenced attitudes towards migra-

tion (Laakkonen 2022: 3). Empty hospital halls are visually rendered as places without humans, with barely distinguishable human voices and footsteps in the background indicating off-screen, spectral presence. A pervasive sense of loss dominates over Krikellis's and Pavlidis's journey through the northern region of the Evros, the place of their birth. Details of dilapidated houses, scarred by missing windows, crumbling balconies, and weathered facades, begin to dominate the visual field, powerfully reinforcing both the absence of inhabitants and the ongoing dissolution of the urban space, evoking a similar aesthetics to *On the Water* (Dević 2018: 00:46:40). In the village of Dikaia, Pavlidis identifies material remnants of his childhood, including a defunct bike repair station, with prices displayed in drachmas rather than euros, reinforcing the notion of time standing still (Krikellis 2022: 00:59:50), as if unaffected by political changes, and nature reclaiming the space. Images of wild nature taking over abandoned and derelict human dwellings and infrastructure (Krikellis 2022: 1:00:12–1:04:30) illustrate "ecological temporalities" of post-industrial landscapes (Edensor 2025: 44) and spectral relationality between the human and more-than-human realms. Surveillance-like framing and attention to detail function as investigative methods to document the slow process of disappearance. A panoramic shot of the entire region, with Pavlidis commenting on its beauty – "you can see it from afar and there is a sense of calmness here" (Krikellis 2022: 01:13:07) – conveys an ambiguous stillness, comparable to the condition of surrender, but also overlapping currents of violence, characteristic of the riverscape in general. The panoramic scene makes the narrator remember that the last images he saw before leaving as a young man were the sun, the air, and the sea (Krikellis 2022: 01:13:55), all of them adding to the spectrality of the environment. Simultaneously, a sense of calm also arises from the fact that, as Pavlidis reflects, "the villages are empty and no one is left" (Krikellis 2022: 01:17:07), a material confirmation of disappearability.

Similar to the representation of nature from below, drone footage contributes to the rediscovery of the presence of human memory within the environment. One particularly extended aerial shot of the ground surface (0:24:17–0:26:32) is accompanied by Pavlidis's verbal account of the forensic identification process, including challenges in tracing the identity of the deceased. Pavlidis describes this process as an attempt to make sense of the destinies of the disappeared, an activity often prevented by the lack of transborder collaboration. This is where the transboundary feature of disappearability as an intended outcome of violent bordering practices becomes "simultaneously an effect, an experience, and a strategy" (Laakkonen 2022: 3), extending violence beyond the act of dying by depriving the communal processing of grief (De León 2015: 71), and a healing acknowledgement of the passage from life to death. As an illustration of the film's characteristic visual-verbal pairings, this scene juxtaposes contrasting meanings produced by nature and the human presence. Surveyed by the drone, nature appears indifferent to the human destinies concealed beneath its treetops and across the long stretches of unidentifiable, rugged terrain, whose uneven texture suggests both inaccessibility and its own distinct temporality. At the same time, the indifference conveyed by the camera can again be interpreted in terms of a

“militarised view of physical geography”, turning “seemingly innocuous features” into “increasingly deadly” (Duncan and Levidis 2025: 3). Simultaneously, a forensic interpretation of identity, in this case illustrated by Pavlidis’s voiceover narration, redefines the limits of life and death in symbolic ways, attempting to transcend death through the enduring trace of DNA and making human memory within the landscape visible. This allows for what Jenny Adams, in her discussion of space and Holocaust experiences, calls “the integral role of landscape in the externalization of human memory, indicating landscape’s constructive and reparative potential in the creative response to exile, displacement and loss” (Adams 2012: 152). However, in this case it is not the landscape *per se* but rather the aesthetic act of representation that re-inscribes disappearances into the environment, integrating them within more-than-human temporality.

CONCLUSION

In *On the Water* and *Souls of a River*, a hydrocentric perspective is employed to examine how overlapping post-industrial and post-conflict realities characterising regions along the so-called Balkan route influence both repressive practices against migrants as well as local attitudes towards migration. Simultaneously, the hydrocentric perspective reveals how the enduring impact of past military conflicts, despite varying temporal distances from the events, continues to profoundly influence the protagonists’ sense of selves and their relationship with the environment in two distinct geographical, cultural, and historical regions of the Balkans. This is achieved through intertwined semantic registers: the same waterways that function as weaponised and lethal nature used in repressive practices against migrants resulting in disappearance and death, also become watery graves in the context of lingering war-time traumas. Here, water, which “resists the emplacing of memorials or the permanent accumulation of material evidence” (Struan 2023: 190), serves as a cinematic site of commemoration in the absence of public acknowledgement. In *On the Water*, this is conveyed through testimonies of mentally and physically scarred former war veterans and civilians, who must live with the reality that rivers, normally symbols of respite and escape from urban life, are also the unacknowledged site of war crimes. In *Souls of a River*, the hydrocentric perspective ties together multiple temporalities of migration and displacement, those arising from the past military conflicts still resonating across the region and ongoing global crises that remain lethal through the repressive bordering practices at the edges of Europe.

At the same time, the hydrocentric focus enables an aesthetic exploration of post-industrial ruination and austerity. In this respect, rivers offer a glimpse into what has been lost on land: sources of sustenance and survival, dignity derived from meaningful communal contribution and a transgenerational sense of achievement and belonging. In *On the Water*, the hydrocentric perspective suggests that there is no sense of stability and rootedness for outcasts and outsiders found by Sisak’s rivers – formerly productive mem-

bers of the local communities – embodying the ruination of both the urban space and its community. The substitution of explicit visual imagery of ruination with water implies that the consequences are now permanent and irreversible. In *Souls of a River*, haunted images of the depopulated Evros region suggest a destabilised sense of belonging, undermining both personal narratives of identity and collective hopes of future prosperity. Here, the watery world becomes a fluid archive of human absence and an aesthetic manifestation of the weaponisation of rivers within repressive and violent strategies of disappearability. Water is depicted as both a tangible and a spectral medium, one that absorbs and upholds the violent infrastructures of militarisation and securitisation. This is achieved through a visual emphasis on the ambiguous openness of space, but also textures, details, patterns, surfaces, and the soundscape, conveying and unsettling converging political and historical narratives. Both films underscore a reality in which, amidst overlapping violent narratives, “there is little sense of home as authentic placement, or as resting place” (Wylie 2007: 177) for communities caught within these processes, both local and people on the move. The entangled violent temporalities profoundly disrupt their sense of belonging and security within the environment – particularly with respect to the river – erasing their presence and existence, both physically and metaphorically.

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"ODAVDE SE ČUJE RIJEKA": RIJEKE KAO MJESTA NESTAJANJA I IZMJEŠTENOSTI

Članak analizira hidrocentričnu perspektivu kao filmsko sredstvo artikulacije isprepletenih povijesti migracija, sukoba i deindustrijalizacije duž tzv. balkanske rute, kao i protuhegemonijsku interpretaciju nasilja nad migrantima i smrti na granicama diljem Balkana tijekom 21. stoljeća. U središtu analize su dva dokumentarna filma – *Na vodi* Gorana Devića (2018) i *Duše jedne rijeke* (*Seelen eines Flusses*) Chrisa Krikellisa (2022). Filmovi prikazuju dva riječna krajolika: ušće Save i Kupe u Sisku te transgranični dio toka rijeke Evros između Turske i Grčke. U članku se komparativnim pristupom istražuju estetske strategije kojima navedeni filmovi – svaki na svoj način, ali posežući za dijeljenim semantičkim registrima – otkrivaju učinke preklapanja nasilnih vremenskih režima. Time se ukazuje na složen osjećaj izmještenosti upisan u odnos prema riječnim krajolicima, dok se istovremeno rijeke prikazuju kao naoružani krajolici i ljudskim djelovanjem proizvedena mjesta smrti.

Ključne riječi: poraće, Balkan, rijeke, migracije, film