

**“It’s nowhere special”:  
Representations of Eastern Europe in  
*Avengers: Age of Ultron*<sup>1</sup>**

**Katia McClain**

In the introduction to *Joss Whedon: The Complete Companion*, Robert Moore asks why Joss Whedon’s creations “resonate so strongly with his fans?” (15). One of the reasons he gives is, “Joss Whedon thinks we are smart” (17). Whedon challenged these smart viewers in the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Angel* (1999-2004) by turning television “on its head and inside out” making it “ready for new forms of narrative experimentation” (Lavery 181). He engaged them by creating “a fictional world of monsters and superheroes [that] gives us the chance to ask: what makes us human?” (Wilcox, “Much Ado” 12). “Working across a range of media...Whedon’s writing has helped to shape the popular aesthetic landscape since the late twentieth century” (Pateman, *Joss Whedon* 2).<sup>2</sup> But Whedon’s early works were set in fictionalized versions of the United States, mostly populated with American characters (Buffy’s British Watcher, Rupert Giles, being a notable exception).<sup>3</sup> How smart does Whedon think we are about other parts of the world? A caption early (00:02:51-53) in the 2015 film,

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**Katia McClain** received a Ph.D. in Slavic Languages and Literatures at UCLA and currently teaches at U.C. Santa Barbara. She does research in and teaches courses on East European folklore, science fiction, gender, marginalized populations, and representations in popular culture. She is a commentator on *Third World News Review*, currently airing at UCSB, where she reports the coverage of Eastern Europe in the mainstream media. She has presented papers on the Whedonverse at five *Slayage* conferences, including the inaugural one in 2004. Her essays “Angel vs. the Grand Inquisitor: Joss Whedon Re-imagines Dostoevsky” and “Representations of the Roma in Buffy and Angel” appear in *The Literary Angel* (eds. Amijo Comeford and Tamy Burnett, McFarland, 2010) and *Joss Whedon and Race: Critical Essays* (eds. Mary Ellen Iatropoulos and Lowery Woodall III, McFarland, 2017), respectively.

*Avengers: Age of Ultron* encourages us to explore this question for one region of the world.<sup>4</sup> The caption reads:

Hydra Research Base  
Sokovia, Eastern Europe

Eastern Europe did not play a large role in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Angel*. The few instances of representation from that region, however, were problematic. There is one “throw-away” line in the *Angel* episode “I Will Remember You” that offers a less than positive representation of one East European ethnicity, the Bulgarians. Buffy and Angel are conversing in Angel’s office, watched by Doyle and Cordelia. Doyle, who has not previously met Buffy, speaks to Cordelia (00:05:13-17):

Doyle: So that’s the Slayer.

Cordelia: That’s our Buffy

Doyle: Well, she seemed a little...

Cordelia: Bulgarian in that outfit?

Doyle: No, I was going to say hurt.

Although it is not clear why Buffy’s unremarkable outfit (a dark V-neck sweater, skirt, and boots) fails to elicit Cordelia’s approval, it is clear that looking “Bulgarian” is meant to be an insult.<sup>5</sup>

The portrayal of the Romanian Romani people in the Jenny Calendar arc in *Buffy* and *Angel* is more concerning. The narrative ignores the historical (and contemporary) oppression and struggles of the Romani people, and relies on old cinematic tropes of curses and vengeance. The representation of the Romani people in the shows “reinforces, rather than subverts, stereotypes” (McClain, “Representations” 138).<sup>6</sup>

Although, as Mary Ellen Iatropoulos points out, media products like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* are the “hard work of casts and crews of dozens, if not hundreds, of creative professionals” (“Of Whedonverse Canon”), Whedon clearly played an important role in creating the representation of Eastern Europe in those shows. Was his role similar in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, a Marvel Studios, Disney-owned

film adapted from the world of comics, originally authored by Stan Lee? Whedon himself makes that claim in an interview with Jonathan Bernstein in 2015. Before seeing the film, Bernstein questions how much of Whedon's authorial voice would survive in the Marvel world and asks him about the issue. He quotes Whedon, "You're subservient to the process and it can be very grueling, but we go in with an understanding that this is going to be a 'Joss Whedon Marvel film.' It's going to reek of my sweat and blood by the time it's done, so it doesn't feel it's in service of anything except the narrative, which is my own creation." Elsewhere, Whedon reported being "beaten down" by "conflicting with Marvel" (Van Syckle). In one interview, he talked about some of the cuts the studio forced him to make and complained about throwing out the "baby with the pond water" (Robinson). Therefore, viewers can expect Sokovia to represent some of Whedon's ideas about Eastern Europe, modified to an unknown degree by the executives and creative teams at Marvel and Disney.

Sokovia, of course, is an imaginary nation in Eastern Europe, just the latest in a long series of such nations created for literature and film. One of the earliest, Ruritania, is found in the British novel *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894) by Anthony Hope. Another, Syldavia and its neighbor Borduria, are found in the classic Belgian graphic novel by Hergé about the adventures of Tintin, *King Ottokar's Sceptre*, from 1939. More recent examples, Molvanía and Krakozhia, can be found in the satirical faux travel guide created by a group of Australians in 2003, *Molvanía: A Land Untouched by Modern Dentistry* (Cilauro et al.) and the 2004 film, *The Terminal*.<sup>7</sup>

The representation in literature and film of Eastern Europe, the Balkans in particular, has been discussed by many authors, including Milica Bakic-Hayden, Misha Glenny, Vesna Goldsworthy, and Andrew Hammond. The typical rendering of characters from Eastern Europe is usually reduced to two tropes. Eastern European characters are either "congenitally irrational and bloodthirsty mobs...or incompetent clowns" (Glenny).

Agatha Christie's imaginary country, Herzoslovakia, from *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925), provides a classic example of the violence trope. A character is asked whether he knows anything about the country. He

replies, “Only what everyone knows. It’s one of the Balkan States, isn’t it? Principal rivers unknown. Principal mountains, also unknown, but fairly numerous. Capital, Ekarest. Population, chiefly brigands. Hobby, assassinating kings and having revolutions” (6).<sup>8</sup>

Authors and directors have continued to rely on tropes while producing materials for an audience in the United States that knows relatively little about Eastern Europe. In 2013, *Buzzfeed* asked a sampling of Americans to fill in the names of countries on a map of Europe that showed only their outlines.<sup>9</sup> While the countries in what is typically called Western Europe (Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain) were usually labeled correctly, the participants showed much more confusion about the countries in Eastern Europe. On one map most of Eastern Europe is written over with the caption “Transylvania & the place Borat is from,” while the Balkans are captioned “No idea.” On another map, Slovakia is labeled as Poland, Hungary as “Middle Earth,” Romania as “Something with a ‘Z,’” and the Balkans as “What?” On a third map, Poland is labeled as “Poland, Maybe,” while the rest of Eastern Europe is labeled as “I am very sorry, you are all great.” One of the most telling examples can be found on a fourth map. After labeling four different countries as possible locations for Poland, the author of the map wrote over the rest of the countries of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, “War, War” (Burton).

The lack of familiarity with Eastern Europe invades even the most prestigious publications that possess research teams and editors. An article in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2016 shows similar confusion concerning the geography of Eastern Europe: “In December, a Bulgarian sex worker was found brutally murdered in a deserted parking lot at the harbor in Oslo. Her friends – also migrants from the Baltic States...” (Bazelon).<sup>10</sup> Bulgaria (along with its neighbors, Albania, Greece, the countries that composed the former Yugoslavia [Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia] and Romania) is a Balkan state, located in southern Europe, between the Black Sea and the Adriatic.<sup>11</sup> The Baltic States are Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, located in northern Europe, along the eastern coast of the Baltic sea. The confusion is, perhaps, not surprising, given the complex history of Eastern Europe. The three Baltic States were

republics in the USSR for varying periods of time in the twentieth century, while the countries in the Balkans were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire or the Ottoman Empire until these dissolved in the period between 1832 and 1914. During the Cold War period, between 1946 and 1991, some of the Balkan countries (Albania, Bulgaria and Romania) were part of the Soviet-aligned Warsaw Pact, while Yugoslavia was not. Some of the confusion for the typical American may also be connected to the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and the Soviet Union in December 1991, creating a host of new countries. However, some of the ignorance about Eastern Europe may be attributable to the representation that ensued during the Cold War period after World War II. Andrew Hammond suggests that “Cold War imaginative geography” pushed the view of “the region as an indivisible entity” (214).

Two articles in the *Los Angeles Times* show how, given the general lack of knowledge about the region, journalists may substitute the negative literary tropes for serious reporting. In the first, from 1994, Bulgaria is represented with descriptions reminiscent of Agatha Christie’s Herzkoslovakia:

Bound by the ‘Call of Blood’...Despite official claims of neutrality and horrible past defeats, Bulgarians are poised to defend their ethnic kind in Macedonia. Such fervor shows why the Balkans’ violent history is compelled to repeat itself. Dagger-wielding goatherds and vintners lugging 50-year-old hunting rifles stalk the Pirin Mountains, listening as they tend their flocks and truss denuded vines for the starting shot of a fifth ethnic bloodletting this century. (Williams)

While it was true that in the 1990s armed conflicts took place in neighboring Yugoslavia, the author of this article does not create a thoughtful narrative about the issue, but instead repeats the literary stereotype. In the second, a headline from 1996, the wife of the president of Yugoslavia is likened to a Disney cartoon villain: “The Cruella DeVil of Serbian Politics: Milosevic’s Wife is his Closest Ally” (Wilkinson). Again, there is no effort at a nuanced discussion of a

complex issue, but an attempt to evoke a negative reaction in the readers, based on tropes in popular culture.

The notion of “Eastern Europe” seems to be more about ideology than geography. Maps of Central and Eastern Europe show that Vienna is actually east of Prague (and two other capitals of Eastern Europe, Ljubljana and Zagreb). The idea of “Eastern” Europe often seems to be connected to the tendency to characterize the countries in the area as the non-Western “other” both in the late imperial period of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and during the Cold War period. As Maria Todorova points out, “By the beginning of the twentieth century, Europe had added to its repertoire of Schimpfwörter, or disparagements, a new one...Balkanization...a synonym for a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primate, the barbarian” (3). In the more recent past, “between the Cold War and the current ‘war on terror’, the Balkans formed one of the West’s most significant others, dominating prime-time television through a series of revolutions, economic crises, uprisings, wars and waves of asylum seekers” (Hammond 283). Besides Whedon (born in 1964), the president of Marvel Studios, Kevin Feige (born in 1973), and the chairman of Disney, Bob Iger (born in 1951), would likely have been exposed to this “othering” propaganda of the Cold War period.

What representation of Eastern Europe would be created for the imaginary country and people of Sokovia? Would the film challenge either of the literary tropes? Would the film create a Sokovia at all representative of any of the countries or ethnicities making up Eastern Europe?

First, history— is there evidence in the film that might tell us something about the history of Sokovia? A plaque on a statue shown in the film (01:59:27) gives us the dates 1789-1844. This is presumably an important time period for the country, perhaps when it was founded. However, since many East European nations were formed during the period of the break up of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, this evidence is inconclusive.

Next, location—where is Sokovia? The only clue comes about fifteen minutes into the film (00:15:20-25). Maria Hill says to Tony Stark:

“Sokovia’s had a rough history. It’s nowhere special, but it’s on the way to everywhere special.” That gives the viewer little help.

Some idea about the geography of Sokovia might be gained through information about shooting locations. Of course many films are shot on location, but in a very different place from where the story is set. For example, parts of the film version of *Evita* (1996), set in Argentina, were shot in Hungary.<sup>12</sup> While there was a significant amount of location shooting in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (in Bangladesh, Korea and South Africa), none of the Sokovia scenes were filmed in Eastern Europe. They were instead filmed in Aosta, Italy and the Hendon Police College in England. Although Italy borders on one of the countries of Eastern Europe, Slovenia, the creative team did not choose to film there.<sup>13</sup> Nor did they select Bulgaria, where many Western films have been shot. The selection of Italy seems to have come about after an Italian location, Fort Bard, was chosen for the filming of the Hydra Research Base. Executive Producer Jeremy Latcham explains, “We looked at 600 different locations at least before landing on Fort Bard...It was perfect” (Johnston 17). According to Supervising Location Manager Jamie Lengyel, “The Met Police Peel Training Centre at Hendon provided...an extraordinary city backlot location...Over a period of five months, we were able to take control over an unprecedented collection of redundant buildings, streets and real estate...to create and film our scenes at the heart of war-torn ‘Sokovia’, an Eastern European City” (Film London). Production designer Charles Wood explains the complications of filming at both Hendon Police College in England and in Aosta, Italy: “What you’re actually seeing [are] different locations shot by shot—you’re on in a street Italy [sic], then you round a corner and you end up in Hendon, this police training academy in London (Hendon Police College), which was disused at the time, and we had to make both of those locations work in tandem, and yes, we weren’t in an Eastern European location either” (Abrams).

Since no Eastern European country was used for filming, we must look to production design for clues to the representation of Eastern Europe in the film. A sign on a building at the Hendon Police College that said, “Peel House, Metropolitan Police, Working Towards a Safer London” was replaced with a symbol of an eagle rampant and a two-

word phrase in what is presumably Sokovian. (The use of language in the film will be discussed below.) The statue of Sir Robert Peel in front of the building was decorated with a beard to become a statue of what one would assume is a Sokovian leader. As Rhonda Wilcox (“Every Man”) points out in her article on public statuary in Whedon-helmed films, the statue seems meant to evoke Soviet-style statues of Lenin, ubiquitous in the Soviet Union during the Socialist period. As she also notes, the production team created a second statue, meant to evoke the famous Soviet statue of the worker and collective farmer created by Vera Mukhina in 1937. The statue appears in front of a wall decorated with a Socialist Realist style mural. Clearly, the statues and murals are meant to signal to the viewer that we are in a previously socialist country. Since Socialist Realist art appeared in most of the countries of Eastern Europe, this does not help us uncover which Eastern European country Sokovia is supposed to represent.

What about the people of Sokovia, shown in the film? Most Sokovians in the film are extras, appearing in non-speaking roles. They have dark brown to black hair and are costumed in outfits ranging from modern generic to those representing typical American film representations of Eastern Europe. For example at 01:42:44, the audience can see headscarves, long skirts, and fuzzy sheepskin vests. None of the production design choices point to any specific location or culture.

There are only two characters with significant roles in the film who are supposed to be Sokovian, the twins, Wanda and Pietro Maximoff (aka Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver). The two first become allies of the evil Ultron and then switch sides to join the Avengers in defeating him. Can these characters help us determine where in Eastern Europe we are? A young American actor, Elizabeth Olsen, was chosen to play Wanda and a young British actor, Aaron Taylor-Johnson, was chosen to play Pietro. According to an interview quoted in *Buzzfeed News*, Whedon said “that the only actor he wanted was Taylor-Johnson,” while Marvel executives suggested Olsen (Vary). Visually, the characters—one blonde, one brunette with pale skin—look like they could be from many European countries. The name Wanda is Polish, but Pietro is not East European. Maximoff could be a last name from any of the several Slavic



countries (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Bulgaria, Macedonia) that use –ov as an ending for last names. The English spelling of the name ending in “–off” is the transliteration style used by Russian immigrants to the US in the 1920s and 1930s. Again, this does not help refine the location of Sokovia.

Aside from the actors’ appearance not being linked to any specific part of Eastern Europe, there is a further issue that has been raised about their suitability for the roles. Referring to Olsen’s being cast in the role of Wanda Maximoff, one commentator notes, “in the comics, a lot of time was spent establishing Maximoff’s ethnic identity. According to canon, she is Magneto’s daughter, and is raised by a Roma family in Transia, a fictional European country...[B]ecause of her parents’ Roma ancestry, they are often persecuted and treated unfairly” (Abad-Santos). Since there is no reference in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* to the twins’ minority background, “there was some criticism when Olsen, was cast as the Scarlet Witch, who, in the Marvel comic books, is of part-Jewish, part Roma origin” (Harvey). For example, Julia, a fan writing in response to a column by Susana Polo on the *MarySue* blog, complained about the casting, saying, “Well done Hollywood, you’ve completely ruined another character minorities look up to.” It is concerning that the film changed the twins into generic East Europeans, missing an opportunity to give Jewish/Romani characters a major role in a Marvel film.<sup>14</sup> However, according to a journalist for *BuzzFeed News*, there is a more prosaic explanation for the erasure of the Jewish/Romani origin of the twins:

In the comics, Wanda and Pietro...debut in X-Men #4...The X-Men movie rights, however, are owned by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, whereas Marvel Studios is a subsidiary of the Walt Disney Company...[T]he creative worlds of Fox’s X-Men movies and the Marvel Studios movies remain strictly separate...As a result...Whedon was able to introduce two major characters into the MCU completely on his terms. (Vary)

Presumably, MCU executives approved the changes Whedon made to the characters.

Spoken language use might also be helpful in defining Sokovia's cultural space. However, Wanda and Pietro speak only English in the film. Their accents in English range randomly from those found in standard American Broadcaster English to something vaguely Slavic. The variation sometimes occurs in the same line (01:57:52-01:56:06), as when Wanda says to Pietro, "I can handle this [with a heavy accent]. Come back for me when everyone else is on board, not before [with a much lighter accent]." Again, the representation is unclear. This fits with what Lewis Call has pointed out, "the film craves a global feel, but has trouble imagining convincing non-American characters" (120).

Judging by the statues, wall art, and lack of attention paid to names and accents, Whedon and the rest of the creative team at MCU have created a place vaguely in Eastern Europe, suggesting that they don't think the audience in the U.S. knows enough about the diversity of Eastern Europe to notice. However, there are two other components of the film that do help us determine what part of Eastern Europe Sokovia is meant to represent.

The signage on the streets of Sokovia supports a more specific location within Eastern Europe. Most signs are written in the Cyrillic alphabet. In a scene during the destruction of Sokovia (01:48:34), Wanda pauses near a telephone booth that says **ТЕЛЕКОМ** (TELEKOM 'Telecommunication Company'). Later (01:49:28), there a giant sign reading **СУПЕРМАРКЕТ** (SUPERMARKET 'supermarket') with the letter **М** missing and the **К** askew, as the result of the battle. Finally (01:52:51), we see a sign for **РЕСТОРАН** (RESTORAN 'restaurant'). Of course, variants of the Cyrillic alphabet are used in several countries in Eastern Europe (Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia) and all of these words are found in multiple languages. However, there are a number of signs that narrow down the possibilities. At 1:37:40-41 Pietro runs through a Sokovian police station yelling for everyone to clear the city. A round plaque on the wall says **ПОЛИЦИЈА** (ПОЛИТСИЈА 'police'). In another scene (01:41:59), as the violence caused by Ultron starts to break the city, the name **Месарница Богдановић** (Mesarnica Bogdanovich 'Butcher shop Bogdanovich') is

clearly visible on a building. Two letters – one in each sign – are telling. It is only in the Balkans that there is a version of the Cyrillic alphabet uses the letters *j* and *ћ*. Several other signs narrow down the location even further. The sign placed on the Peel House says, **Градска Скупштина** (Gradska Skupshtina ‘City Assembly’). Late in the film (01:45:25/01:48:34) another sign, **Пошта** (Poshta ‘post office’), can be seen. Finally, the plaque on a statue mentioned above reads:

**Станислав** (Stanislav)  
**Први Лидер** (Prvi Lider 'First Leader')  
**Кнежевине** (Knezhevine '[of the] Kingdom')  
**Соковије** (Sokovije '[of] Sokovia')  
1789-1844

This suggests a specific location. Only Serbian uses that exact spelling for post office and City Assembly, as well as the grammatical ending on kingdom and Sokovia.

There are several places where words from other languages are used. In the background of an early Sokovian street scene in the film (00:04:16-18), an older Sokovian man is foregrounded, while a table behind him contains bags of *Ādažu čipsi*, a Latvian brand of potato chips, available in many countries. One street sign says, **Площадь** (Ploščad'), the word for city square in Russian. Finally, toward the end of the film (01:58:14) one of the people helping load people onto S.H.I.E.L.D.'s boats is wearing a jacket with an emergency services label (**Скорая помощь**, *Skoraja pomošč'*) in Russian. While the presence of a Russian street sign is puzzling, the presence of the Russian emergency personnel might fit in with the idea of the international community assisting in a rescue effort. Overall, of fifty-one relevant cases of legible writing, fifty were in Serbian.

The final clue is provided by Wanda and Pietro's tragic backstory, as revealed in a conversation with Ultron (00:38:36-00:39:34):

Pietro: “We were ten years old, having dinner the four of us and the first shell hits two floors below and makes a hole. It’s big. Our parents go in and the whole building starts coming apart. I grab her, roll under the bed and the second shell hits. But it doesn’t go off. It just sits there in the rubble, three feet from our faces. And on the side of the shell is painted one word.”

Wanda: “Stark.”

Pietro: “We were trapped for two days.”

Wanda: “Every effort to save us, every shift in the bricks, I think, this will set it off. We wait for two days for Tony Stark to kill us.”

This interaction reveals that in the recent past, Sokovia had undergone bombing with American weapons. If viewers are meant to draw a parallel between Sokovia and a real region in Eastern Europe, only one place was bombed by the United States since the end of World War II—the former Yugoslavia, especially Serbia. This strongly suggests that, despite the sloppiness in set design, names and accents, Sokovia is meant to evoke a specific place.

As mentioned above, the most frequent representation of the people of Eastern Europe and the Balkans makes them bumbling, backward peasants or bloodthirsty brigands. Neither of these representations is present in the *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. Instead the people of Sokovia, except for Pietro and Wanda, are almost cyphers. As a review of the film notes, they are “nameless, line-less, interchangeable” (Orr). They serve only as a backdrop for the battle of the great powers. They are the pathetic helpless ones that the West has decided to save, in a battle that nearly destroys them. In this, the film upholds a third trope. The people of the Balkans are always in trouble and they need Captain America to rescue them. The trope is weakened somewhat by the characters Pietro and Wanda, who, because of their anger towards Tony Stark, volunteer to become enhanced humans and fight first on Ultron’s side and only later on the side of the Avengers. However, the rest of the

Sokovian people are helpless victims of the battle, fleeing in terror while their city is destroyed.

Whedon and the creative teams at Marvel/Disney have created a superhero story analogous to a real conflict that occurred, in 1998-1999, during the break-up of Yugoslavia, a socialist state, consisting of six republics and two autonomous regions. A complex conflict in the area had been developing since the early 1990s, when the republics of Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia broke away from Yugoslavia. The autonomous region of Kosovo was trying to secede from Serbia. An armed group, the Kosovo Liberation Army, was created to fight the Yugoslav national army. The US Administration of Bill Clinton labeled one part of Serbia (its northern area with a Serbian majority population and a Socialist government) as evil and another (the breakaway Kosovo region with its Albanian majority population) as an innocent victim. The West embraced a striking ignorance of the cultures, history, and politics of this area of Eastern Europe, focusing solely on violence by the Yugoslav side (which it typically called “Serbian”). The US claimed that 100,000 Albanian men in Kosovo had vanished and might have been killed by the Serbians, a claim which was later proved to be greatly exaggerated (Steele). After attempts at negotiation failed, in January 1999, the US pushed NATO allies into a “humanitarian” bombing campaign to “save” the Albanian side. Failing to find much in the way of military targets, they bombed factories, bridges, radio stations, power stations, hospitals, markets, and schools (Dobbs, Norton-Taylor). Even the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the neighboring country of Bulgaria were bombed.<sup>15</sup> The casualty figures are disputed, but a Human Rights Watch report issued in February 2000 estimated that between 488 and 527 confirmed civilian deaths were caused by the Western bombing. The report noted that the Yugoslav government claimed much larger numbers and NATO claimed much smaller numbers than Human Rights Watch was able to confirm.

There is one final note connecting the imaginary Balkan country of Sokovia and the real Balkans. After years under UN-led administration, negotiations began in 2006 to determine Kosovo’s status. In 2008, Kosovo declared itself independent of Serbia. The US “played a prominent role in rebuilding Kosovo after the war, leading aid efforts

and providing 7,000 troops, more than any other country, to the Kosovo peacekeeping force” (Sullivan). An 11-foot tall statue, in the Socialist realist style described by Wilcox (“Every Man”) and not unlike the Sokovian statue in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, was raised in Kosovo in 2009. It depicts someone then considered a local hero: United States President Bill Clinton.<sup>16</sup> Since its independence, however, only 111 of the United Nations’s 193 member states have recognized Kosovo’s independence. A reporter for the *New York Times* recently found that many people in Kosovo “seemed weighed down by resignation,” some even saying, “We had a better life then; we had more opportunities” (Testa).

The film, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, shows the folly of a simplistic division between superhero “good” vs. “evil” and the harm a battle along those lines may bring to non-combatants. In particular, the story of the twins and the bomb marked “Stark” is a significant social comment. As Wanda (01:26:59-1:27:06) says, “Ultron can’t tell the difference between saving the world and destroying it. Where do you think he gets that?”

Too many literary and cinematic representations of Eastern Europe have been filled with stereotypes, inaccuracies and misconceptions, often coding Eastern Europeans as ignorant or bloodthirsty. While *Avengers: Age of Ultron*’s original description of Sokovia as “nowhere special,” maintains this pattern, the film actually undercuts the typical representation. By showing the arrogance of the “heroes” and the pain of the Eastern Europeans, the film shows that Sokovia and, by extension, actual Eastern European countries are special to the people who live there.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this essay was presented at SCW8: The Eighth Biennial *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses, University of North Alabama, Florence, Alabama, 21-24 June 2018. I thank Erin Giannini, Eve Bennett, Rhonda Wilcox, Shiloh Carroll, Hector Javkin and two anonymous reviewers for their editorial help.

<sup>2</sup> There are, of course, issues in the Whedonverse. As Mary Ellen Iatropoulos and Lowery Woodall point out, Whedon’s “often-problematic depictions of race and ethnicity...frequently reinforce the very social hierarchies and oppressive institutions they simultaneously challenge” (6).

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<sup>3</sup> For discussion of the representation of Britishness in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, see Pateman, *The Aesthetics of Culture in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Chapter 2, “Aesthetics, Culture and Ethnicity: ‘Silly, silly, British man’.”

<sup>4</sup> According to *Box Office Mojo*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* was released on May 1, 2015 and was in release for 161 days, with a domestic gross of \$459, 005, 868, less than the other Avenger films that had been released as of 15 June 2018: *Marvel’s The Avengers* and *Avengers: Infinity War*.

<sup>5</sup> For more on use of Bulgaria as a target of insult, see Deltcheva 1999.

<sup>6</sup> See also McClain “Jenny Calendar” and Beaudoin “Exploring.”

<sup>7</sup> Marvel Comics also had a faux East European country, Latveria. Up until March 2019, the rights to the name Latveria were held by Fox, not Disney (Lealos), so it could not be used in MCU/Disney films. The acquisition of the Fox Marvel properties by Disney at that time may change this in the future.

<sup>8</sup> For more details on the representation of the Balkans in Agatha Christie, see Stott 2016.

<sup>9</sup> A second exercise by *Buzzfeed* in Great Britain at the same time found a similar lack of knowledge of US states.

<sup>10</sup> *The New York Times* issued several corrections to the article online on May 22, 2018. They said, “And the article described Bulgaria incorrectly. It is a Balkan State, not a Baltic State.”

<sup>11</sup> The American television comedy, *Cheers*, gently mocked the confusion in an episode called “Teacher’s Pet” (3.16). In the episode, Coach teaches Sam geography by singing, “Albania, Albania, it borders on the Adriatic.”

<sup>12</sup> For information on the popularity of Budapest for Western films, see <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/budapest-hungary-film-industry>

<sup>13</sup> When I raised this issue at the SCW8: The Eighth Biennial *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses, Stacey Abbott suggested that there may have been mundane practical reasons to film in Italy, rather than any of the countries of Eastern Europe. Heather M. Porter suggested that Italy may have offered better filming incentives or that the dates of the filming (winter and spring 2014), during Russia’s conflict with the Ukraine, may have ruled out filming in Eastern Europe.

<sup>14</sup> For an interesting article on issues of Romani representation and Marvel comics, see <https://comicsalliance.com/peter-david-rromani-representation-new-york-comic-con/>

<sup>15</sup> The bombing of the Chinese Embassy was claimed by the US to have been a mistake. <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/17/world/chinese-embassy-bombing-a-wide-net-of-blame.html>. The anger among Bulgarians, when a NATO missile landed in their country is described here:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/apr/30/richardnortontaylor.kateconnolly>

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<sup>16</sup> An image of the statue can be viewed here:

<https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/photo/bill-clinton-statue-in-pristina-kosovo-royalty-free-image/458543267>



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