The (In)Visibility of Violence: Jasmila Žbanić's Post-war Cinema

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to discuss Jasmila Žbanić's *Esma's Secret* (*Grbavica*, 2006), *On the Path* (*Na Putu*, 2010) *and For Those Who Can Tell No Tales* (*Za one koji ne mogu da govore*, 2013) as a trilogy addressing the consequences of Bosnian War. The films are considered in the theoretical framework of women's cinema as world cinema, exploring their location in relation to globalization. The article hence analyses each film's aesthetic in light of influential feminist concepts and theories such as Rey Chow's age of the world target, Adriana Cavarero's horrorism and caring, E Ann Kaplan's trauma and Judith Butler's ethics. In these films the violated body is neither victimized nor considered as a natural being: each character is a biopolitical subject, geo-culturally located, and produced through processes originating from dynamics of power and responsibility, guilt and care.

Keywords: biopolitic, community, care, gender, horrorism, transnational cinema, trauma, violence, women's cinema, world cinema

Jasmila Žbanić's first three feature films assume a specific position in the scenario of contemporary Western women's cinema. Because of their aesthetic relations and narrative consistency, *Esma's Secret* (*Grbavica*, 2006), *On the Path* (*Na Putu*, 2010), and *For Those Who Can Tell No Tales* (2013)[1] can be regarded as a trilogy that explores the consequences of the Bosnian War in the everyday lives of citizens. In particular, the films address women's reactions to violence and horror, how the war affects their private and public relations, and how local and global communities can deal with past atrocities and the post-war scenario.

[p. 366] With its unique representation of war legacies, Žbanić's trilogy locates itself at the centre of one of the most problematic ideological knots produced by contemporary thought—namely, exposing human bodies to violence as a hermeneutic structure for configuring contemporary stories and history. The aim of this article is to address how bodies are affected by gendered violence of wartime past and of neoliberal present, as they are taken in the regulating strategies of postcolonial biopolitic. The narrative of violence substantiates contemporary identities and citizenships, and Žbanić's cinema focuses on its intricacies in a specific post-war condition, dominated by a tension towards "normalization".

Many feminist philosophers investigate the problematic representation of the subject and her/his body as part of the post-war space and community, because of its centrality in the actual configuration of identities. Rey Chow (1991: 109, 114–115) thoroughly examines the entangling of illusion and imagination in narrative cinema, as these elements are essential for recognizing the gendered desires this medium makes perceptible. Above all, cinema produces knowledge through the relation it posits between visibility and power (Chow, 2007: 189).

A specificity of Žbanić's trilogy is that it introduces the horrors of the Bosnian War in the dominant European imaginary without actually showing images of violence. In this way, she refuses to engage with the traditional pattern of aggressive cinematographic representations of

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violence. She creates a visual structure where the audience neither participates in the victimisation of the object of military fury nor hypocritically shares the position of the prey. Her characters are never filmed as targets: her cinema refuses to be part of an *episteme* which gives primacy to violence in all actions and emotions (Chow, 2006: 9). Žbanić proposes a new visual and experiential pattern: she reclaims the invisibility of the ferociousness of war as a valid way to narrate it, therefore granting agency to the films' protagonists. They are no longer targets, and demand their autonomous spaces. In Žbanić's world, the war is still present through the deep scars it left, but that is not the only lens through which to read everyday life and the relationships it produces.

In this way, her trilogy actively contribute to the remapping of European cinema vis-a-vis its "Other", the Eastern, which in recent years has vigorously problematized traditional definitions of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism (Mazaj, 2011). Žbanić's cinema then contradicts any "Balkanization" of Post-Yugoslav cinema (Jelača, 2016: 34; Todorova, 1997), articulating instead the cultural, political, and physical impact of violence on both communities and individuals.

The Location of Violence in Contemporary Women's Cinema as World Cinema

Žbanić's films locate themselves at an important crossroads between the experience of violence and war as a generalised global trauma and the extreme specificity of events that took place in Sarajevo (in the Grbavica neighbourhood in particular) and in Višegrad during the Bosnian War[2]. This explicit geopolitical intersection between local and global is one of the elements that characterises world cinema, along with the transnationalism of the production apparatus, which facilitates the films' participation in the main [p. 367] international film festivals in Europe and North America[3] (Murtic, 2015). In this context, the category 'world cinema' is not simply defined as cinema that opposes Hollywood and the mainstream (Nagib, 2006). Rather, it addresses the cross-cultural networks that produce new imaginative geographies and considers the circulation of knowledge and experience generated by globalisation (Avezzù, 2013: 98). In this sense, world cinema plays an essential role in the negotiation of national borders, considered as boundaries of cultural representation rather than the result of political agreements. Above all, world cinema challenges the validity and even existence of such national borders, especially when they are considered as given. Žbanić's trilogy highlights the impossibility of representing any 'natural' mirroring between culture, ethnicity, or nationality, even when she does not thematise their problematic.

While Žbanić's films are part of the global network produced by cinema (at an economic, cultural, political level), they still assign great importance to the local version of 'universal' issues regarding violence and war. They address the geopolitics of globalisation in its multiple spatialities. As Thomas Elsaesser notes:

> World cinema films feature contested spaces, which speak of aspirations to regional autonomy, which invoke apparently long-forgotten histories and memories […] across stories of journeys and discoveries, of everyday lives in harsh natural conditions or under difficult political circumstances. World cinema may deal with issues of Human Rights, explore diasporic identities, and engage in questions of heritage and cultural patrimony (Elsaesser, 2005: 508–509).

Within world cinema, women's films especially focus on human rights. The category of women's cinema is greatly debated, since it cannot be obviously reduced to the anatomy of a film's director. Veronica Pravadelli (2014) proposes, therefore, to consider women's cinema as a practice related to the complex configurations of women's identities and the multiple identifications available for female subjectivity. Regarding contemporary women's cinema, Pravadelli refers particularly to Alison Butler's discussion of the great number of 'overlapping practices and discourses' configuring it as a 'hybrid concept' (Butler, 2002: 2). Great importance is assigned to self-locating women's cinema as a 'minor' cinema 'infiltrating' the dominant language from a position of

disempowerment (Butler, 2002: 21). Women's cinema locates itself within a subversive culture, negotiating its discursive production as part of an 'affirmative project' (Butler, 2002: 21).

Such 'deterritorialisation' is also propositional, and women's cinema is radically transnational in its forms of production and distribution (White, 2015: 12–13)[4] as well as those of representation. Contemporary women's cinema programmatically disrupts any conventional idea of national belonging in its characters and spectators. In this sense, Žbanić's ability to narrate the most ordinary aspects in the lives of citizens and people (a teenager's desire to participate to a school trip, the attempt of a couple to have a child, a tourist's wish to enjoy her journey), aims at a blurring of the national and ethnic definition. At the same time, the violent past is just around the corner, ready to let biopolitics strategies to emerge.

In a neoliberal global scenario, human life is regulated by virtual corporations, depriving the subjects of their agency and powers. The resulting multi-layered and complex [p. 368] representation of life implies a gendered and located spectator, able to confront—and eventually recognise—a radical onscreen Other, and the specificity of its performance. Such rhetoric of location and recognition proposes a stratified identification with subjects and a problematic configuration of community. Inasmuch as women's cinema explicitly relies on feminist reflections on the relationship between women and their communities, it challenges the patriarchal configuration of 'nation-as-family' and disrupts the domestic paradigm, creating a site of resistance (Kaplan, 1997: 50)[5]. As such, women's cinema often addresses (explicitly, as in Žbanić's films, or implicitly) issues regarding women as a population and as sovereign autonomous subjects, part of the human rights discourse, struggling to become citizens of a global civil society (Grewal, 2005: 130).

Discourse on women's rights as human rights becomes particularly problematic when it intertwines with the transnational geopolitics of globalisation. Human rights in the contemporary world function as a technology of transnational governmentality (Grewal, 2005: 157); they produce new communities and organisations far beyond the tradition of international agreements based on public institutions (think about the community Esma created in order to survive in *Grbavica*). The intertwining of human and women's rights gives a specific power to Western NGOs, as they often reproduce the hegemonic geopolitics of globalisation (from the West to the Rest, as pinpointed with the character of Kym in *For Those Who Can Tell No Tales*[6]):

> The construction of the American woman as free and her non-white, non-western "sister" as unfree has been integral to the geopolitical-biopolitical link that was so important for American empire. At the same time, this link constructed the humanitarian self, bringing freedom through work in transnational NGOs. (Grewal, 2005: 170)

In such a delicate scenario it is essential to consider the negotiation of every position, between private gender identification (being a woman as a multifaceted experience), and belonging to an equally gendered public sphere – one that is politically and culturally located. In other words, what is at stake is the coexistence of the politics of location with the politics of experience[7]. The specificity of singular 'experience' as a subject-making instrument is what overcomes the difficulties implied by the category of 'women', at the risk of being considered biological and ahistorical. Moreover, the trilogy analysed in this article participates in reflections on the legacy of war crimes against women, radically erasing any hypothetical arbitrariness still imputed to feminist politics (Young, 1994: 722). Žbanić's films depict the network which relates private suffering with collective violence, individual stories and the production of a scarred community, hence highlighting the political and cultural oppression underlying physical aggression against specific subjects (Young, 1994: 718).

The women represented in Žbanić's cinema programmatically refuse to belong to any universal or national community where they would have no right to question any position or exhibit hostility toward the reality they are forced into. With their mere existence, these women constantly

remind us of the unspeakable atrocities of the war but do not pretend to posit their (fictional) experiences as 'authentic' or 'universal'. The common invisibility of their memories, even when they become public through verbal [p. 369] recollection, makes explicit the problematic 'limits of [Žbanić's] knowledge' and the complex position of her subjectivity within the gendered geopolitics of war (White, 2015: 182). In this way, the representation of violence through its invisibility and its consequences for the survivors unhinges conventional Western narratives about the Yugoslav wars (Phillips, 2013; Simić-Volcic, 2014; Helms, 2014), bringing the discourse back towards a global interrogation about the biopolitics of violence and strategies of resistance.

Grbavica's Secrets

Žbanić's first feature film revolves around the everyday lives of women and men deeply scarred by war[8]. Their experiences are set in Grbavica, a Sarajevo neighbourhood where the main character lives and where many outbursts of violence occurred during the siege. Specifically, it was the site of one of the Serb 'rape camps', whose existence has often been denied, or concealed, in public discourse about the Bosnian War. The film's protagonist, Esma, was held prisoner and repeatedly raped by the Bosnian Serbs paramilitary forces, and forced to give birth to her child in one of the camps. This is the 'secret' of the international title—one shared by many other women, like the ones she meets monthly at the Women's Centre. Esma had always told her daughter that her late father was a *šehid*—a Bosnian and Muslim war martyr—but when Sara asks for a certificate to receive a discount on the fee for a school trip, Esma is finally forced to reveal the truth.

What is at stake in the film is the evanescent difference between 'before' – dominated by horror, and violence against the helpless – and 'after' – pervaded by weak relationships, scarred by the legacies of war, where anything can trigger traumatic memories. Such a trajectory from one situation to the other is neither linear nor fixed, but always renegotiated by each character, from one sequence to the next. The film is based on a few visual and verbal dialectics, which are never stated as binary oppositions but still impose a new choice every time.

One main dialectic is the one between past and future; with the past haunting the present and producing an horrific continuity in gendered violence, even if with different declinations. As stated by Crnković (2014: 151), it is impossible to decide if Sara's future can actually be emancipated by the violence suffered by her mother and other women, differently perpetuated in the exploitation of sexuality for a living and dominating neoliberal Sarajevo. Most of all, the continuous eruptions of the traumatic past into the present exemplify the impossibility in completely dichotomizing the temporal layers that invade present times (Jelača, 2016: 82).

Then, there are the verbal descriptions of children and their fathers: these vary from the certified *šehid*'s son (like Sara's sweetheart Samir) to the *Chetnik* bastard—the unspeakable position represented by Sara. Such positions are not assumed decisively, since Sara switch from the first to the second throughout the film, and we do not know if Sara will ever tell the truth about her father to Samir and her other schoolmates. Esma lies to Sara about her father, and Sara lies to her teacher about her mother, saying she has cancer to avoid punishment. Similarly, Sara has probably avoided the truth when she describes her fight with Sabina, Esma's best friend, who stays the night when Esma has to work the night shift. The web of lies involves every character, as Esma tells her boss
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[Figure 1. Esma looks straight at the spectator, soliciting a relationship (*Esma's Secret*, Jasmila Žbanić, 2006)]

she has no family to take care of, to obtain a job as waitress. The continuous 'rhymes' throughout the film underline the difficulty of completely separating truth from falsehood when women have to deal with the complexities of post-war society.

These dialectics operating in the film are restated by its visual choices. In particular, many have noted the recurrence of sequences at the Women's Centre, at the beginning and end of the film (e.g. Crnković, 2014; Jelača, 2016; Keobel, 2009). The film opens with a long take of the bodies of various women, all with their eyes closed, as we hear an *ilahija*—Islamic vocal music dedicated to God. The shot ends when it frames Esma's face, and she opens her eyes, looking straight into the camera (Figure 1); a fade-out then introduces the film's title on a white background.

The women's still inexpressive bodies constitute the condition of development of the narrative, the background for the post-war community (Murtic, 2015: 112). Later, we see a session at the Women's Centre, with one woman narrating her story while another cannot stop laughing, and another expresses anger toward the centre itself and its coordinator, with the others as silent spectators. This sequence is particularly disturbing since it exposes the conflicting emotions produced by a major trauma that is both personal and collective. The participants' negative reactions to the anonymous woman's painful story show the essential 'unspeakability' of trauma and the obstacles involved in empathic 'sharing', which is a condition for healing (Kaplan, 2005: 37). The problematic idea of 'sharing' a common trauma is thus examined, as most of the women actually refuse to connect with each other. Hannah Arendt (1958: 441) suggested that 'horror, or the dwelling on it, […] cannot become the basis of a political community'. Even if they were not extermination camps, the rape camps in the Bosnian War were clearly places where the extreme horror of the systematic erasure of victims' subjectivity occurred.

This does not necessarily mean the women are completely detached from each other. As Adriana Cavarero suggests in her volume on contemporary horrorism, such radical violence still produces a form of community: it is the unpolitical 'community of death' where the body-reduced-to-flesh inhabiting the camp finds a way to bond with others through the common experience of passive exposure, of surrender to pain (Cavarero, 2007: 74). Such an opening to others' suffering is shown in the second sequence at the [p. 371] Women's Centre when Esma finally tells her story. Again, the sequence is introduced by an *ilahija*, but this time the camera shows a long close-up of the woman singing and then pans from one woman's face to the next as they all look away, silently moved by the music; the only other audible sound is Esma sobbing. Her tearful face is intercut with

a shot of her daughter, framed by a mirror in a close-up, as she starts to shave her head[9]. Then, we go back to Esma, who narrates her suffering, framed in one long, static close-up. The absence of editing during this shot underlines the protagonist's sudden willingness to confront and bond with the others. Throughout the film, shot/counter-shot patterns are used to signal tension—or even opposition—between characters, while fragmented and chaotic editing is reserved for the bodies aggressively dancing in the club where Esma works, mere instruments for the activation of (male) desire.

With this moment of bonding, Esma opens to the possibility of a new network of shared feelings with the other women—and with her daughter as well. In the final sequence, we see them framed together, as Esma goes with Sara to the bus stop where she will leave for her school trip. Here, a new shot/counter-shot underscores the residual tension between them as Sara still seems unforgiving. Sara steps onto the bus, and there is literally no hope for a new two-shot restoring their relationship. However, it is substituted with an intense point-of-view shot of Esma watching Sara, as the latter puts her hand on the window and looks directly at her mother (and at the spectator).

With its attention toward the difficulties implied in the roles of both mother and daughter, the film aligns itself with the tradition of feminist theory and women's cinema of the 1970s, when great importance was assigned to mother-daughter relationships within Western family culture (Pravadelli, 2009, 2014: 148–149). Such a deep affective bond is an instrument that makes the insuperable distance between them tolerable, often forming the mould for other female relations, even if it is far from being unproblematic. Because the mother has been able to repeat her trauma with the other women and her daughter, there is still hope that Sara could perform a similar sharing and activate a new healing process for both of them.

Sara leaving with her schoolmates underlines the possible restoration of the social fabric through new relations, even that within regulating institutions such as school. Starting from private experience, it is possible that a slow healing process diffuses throughout the whole post-war community, producing unprecedented bonds across gender, age, and cultural borders. The film ends with an image of communion and mutual recognition, initiating a trajectory towards new possible identities for the woman who suffered the war as well as the girl who was born from it.

Communities on the path

The intergenerational female bond proposed by *Esma's Secret* is too weak to be decisively achieved. The two subsequent films of the trilogy posit a new struggle to create a network among scattered subjects, whose bodies are divided between war's violence and neoliberal (re)productive biopolitcs. In particular, *On the Path* reflects on the emotional and erotic difficulties of creating a family, when its potential members have been deeply scarred by war. The relationship between Amar and Luna, their wish to have a child as a second chance for hope after the horror, and their physical difficulties in obtaining such

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[Figure 2. Luna controls her body's reproduction and the technologies of vision (*On the Path*, Jasmila Žbanić, 2010)]

a result are entangled with the problematic recognition of each other. The violence of war is in the background—a blind spot that still dominates everyone's life—while the film's visual rhetoric is part of the so-called 'process of normalisation' in Balkan cinema (Pavičić, 2010: 47–48). Indeed, the formal choices comprise a radical critique of the 'self-Balkanisation' of the 1990s, and it is part of the new tendency of Post-Yugoslav cinema of being 'transcultural and transnational in its themes and production alike' (Jelača, 2016: 38). Therefore, *On the Path*'s visual pace aligns with the hegemonic aesthetics of mainstream European cinema (De Pascalis, 2015).

The dialectic between an invisible past and a present full of contradictions reverberates again in the use of the protagonists' bodies. In particular, the film underlines how contemporary bodies are taken in strategies of regulation of life itself, which go far beyond any individuality. In the past, they were part of the horrific politics of war, indulging the gendered division between belonging to military forces or the civilian victims. In the post-war scenario the same gendered bodies are taken in the medical processes of artificial insemination in order to be part of the productive and reproductive community. The human body occupies the film's centre from the start, when Luna uses her mobile phone camera to record extreme close-ups of her face, hand, and torso (Figure 2).

Just after this scene, we see her miming safety procedures on an aircraft during her work as a flight attendant. The symbolic association makes explicit the relation between her body and her work practice involving care for anonymous others, while her lover, Amar, is an air-traffic controller, highlighting his power position as he checks over everything. Despite his symbolic position of control over the aircrafts where Luna works, she still manages the technologies of vision.

The film's gaze adheres to her reading and interpreting of the world through her ability to look. Moreover, Luna's job makes evident her physical mobility across multiple borders (Mazaj, 2011: 204). She has to feel comfortable with multiple cultures and to dominate different languages: the film narrative hence locates Luna in the position of 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' (Homi Bhabha, in Husanović, 2009: 102; Murtic, 2015). This form of postcolonial citizenship is a main instrument to survive to the war traumas for Bosnian feminists and gender activists. It proposes an ethical attitude towards the 'otherness' producing a community, a position of 'neighbourliness' in front of differences [p. 373] (Husanović, 2009: 110). This is also the only position available for

Luna to survive in the face of Amar's adherence to universal fundamentalism, based on oversimplification of global dynamics.

We perceive the entire narrative through Luna's body and sensations, while Amar is relegated to a visually subordinate position. This does not mean however they are part of a gendered narrative where the patriarchal order is simply reversed; Amar has a specific position in the narrative that is highly important because he represents the refusal of any autonomy or complex agency. Amar is actually an alcoholic, unable to control his body and use it efficaciously in the contemporary world. The only way he knows how to restore balance is to reach toward a religious community, like that of the Wahhabi Muslims, who use a wide set of rules to restrain their bodies.

In other words, the different modes of incarnation experienced by the main characters correspond to their differing abilities to reach for the other in an embodied relationship that should be based on reciprocal care (Mortari, 2006: 56). The 'embodied relationship' has been proposed in particular by Emmanuel Lévinas, and has been reinterpreted by many feminists, who focus on the idea of care as a complex relation involving human subjects. The necessity to engage with the palimpsest of losses and remains (Husanović, 2009: 105) constituting the experience of the survivors also implies a specific care bond as expression of feelings and relations.

The position expressed by Luigina Mortari, and referred to by Cavarero, is that the care bond involves a set of feelings, emotions and positions, all dependent on each other for their existence. In particular, the caring subject must be receptive, responsive, empathic, attentive, listening, actively passive, reflexive, available for feeling, and eventually competent—in the case of professional care (Mortari, 2006: 111–152). These adjectives do not refer to static qualities, one adding itself to the other in an ordinate sum. Rather, they are complex processes and experiences, involving many aspects of the psyche and the subject's emotions, with variable intensities and degrees of surrender to the other. The cure is thus a paradigmatic approach toward the other—a quality of being in the relation and creating a community. In this sense, Martin Heidegger explicitly associates the disposition to cure with the one to love, intended not as an expression of erotic desire (a blind urge) but as a positive recognition, a visibility of the other (Freeman, 2009).

The moment when Luna records her body and Amar's face while he is asleep with her mobile phone camera perfectly represents the recurrence of the idea of visibility as a disposition to look at the other; thus, the technological gaze is a medium for transmitting feelings and emotions without generating identification and adherence. Here, Luna's short films express the tension between looking and being looked at as a relation that generates shared feelings and sensations, but they do not convey sexual desire. She tries to create a romantic and sexual relationship with Amar based on the ability to care for the other's needs and to reciprocally mitigate the pain left by the experience of war. The intimacy expressed by her gaze makes Luna able to cope with the post-traumatic stress disorder still persistent in their lives as well, because the portable device she uses gives her the possibility to control every aspect of the images she produces.

However, Amar cannot share his suffering or empathise with Luna; he can only erase his past as a Muslim and Bosnian soldier, drinking away its darkest legacies. Eventually, his [p. 374] addiction is discovered, and to keep his job he is forced to avoid alcohol. When he casually meets a fellow soldier, he is fascinated by his strict adherence to the Islamic Wahhabi movement. Amar substitutes physical addiction with cultural dependence and embraces a religion that severely regulates every aspect of bodily life. This new version of Amar differs only superficially from the first: he still does not care for Luna and her needs, and he still refuses to share his experience as a soldier. His radical closure toward the other is an expression of the worst consequences deriving from the impossibility of sharing traumatic experience. He tries instead to erase the past and the painful complexity of war (substituting it with a simpler explanation of the conflict: as punishment from Allah because Bosnian Muslims did not respect the Qu'ran's precepts). Because of this position, and despite Luna's attempts to keep him close, he is progressively excluded by any community other than the Wahhabi.

In this way, the film explicitly critiques religions' dogmas and fundamentalist communities as refuge from traumatic past: they impede a meaningful healing for vulnerable subjects, giving them instead simple beliefs and superficial explanations. Because of his blind adherence to religious dogmas, Amar is especially rejected by the emotional circle around Luna—her friends and family—where relations are regulated by principles of communion and reciprocal sustainment; his religion, on the other hand, supplies a specific set of rules, violently governing every aspect of bodily life and its relations with others. The Wahhabi movement depicted in *On the Path* is an expression of violent censure against women's bodies, and the film visually lingers on the submission of women in a highly hierarchical, polygamous family structure.

Quite the opposite, Luna states her agency, including her losses and the past violence in a creative and productive process. Her visual interpretation of her desire through the use of the mobile camera, her ability to decide for her own body, the care she enacts toward her friends and family are expressions of her attempt to produce an alternative form of belonging and community (Husanović, 2009: 107). However, at the end of the film Luna does not take a final decision about her surprising pregnancy. *On the Path*'s (lack of) narrative closure attests to the impossibility of reciprocal recognition in the absence of proper emotional, sensorial, and affective sharing. Sexual closeness and everyday communion do not produce an actual community, while institutional regulation of the body only creates power asymmetries and the submission of one subject to another.

What Luna and Amar need is to 'move away from a "rhetoric of blame" to a shared responsibility' (Husanović, 2009: 111) towards the future, maybe represented by their unborn child. However, Amar's participation in a violent movement, based on simplistic oppositions, makes evident the difficulty of any reconciliation with the past: not all the subjects involved in the collective process of healing are eager to confess their responsibilities and mourn their losses. Such ethical resettlement is still to come, and the future is tainted by uncertainty.

Public and Private Responsibility—For Those Who Can Tell No Tales

Amar's inability to return Luna's gaze bars any possibility for an opening towards reciprocal care, represented instead by Luna's use of digital video recording technologies. Thus, Žbanić represents another woman, aware of the power of her gaze, in the last film [p. 375] of her trilogy. *For Those Who Can Tell No Tales* involves the whole Višegrad community in a problematic confrontation with violence and recognition. In continuity with *On the Path*, it can be regarded as intensifying the idea of the body as biopolitical tissue for the articulation of community (taken in between personal agency and institutional regulations), as well as the use of the digital camera as a medium for transmitting a private flow of feelings and sensations addressed toward other subjects.

The film is based on the actual experiences of the Australian performer Kym Vercoe and her journey as a tourist in Bosnia. Her play *Seven Kilometres North-East* concerns her discovery of the horrors that occurred during the war in the Vilina Vlas Hotel in Višegrad, where she had spent one night[10]. *For Those Who Can Tell No Tales* addresses, again, the difficulty to privately cope with Bosnia's violent past for both its citizens and the international community. The story is rather simple: Kym travels to Bosnia as a tourist during the summer. The guide-book she reads during her journey brings her to Višegrad, a small city with a rich history that provided the setting of Ivo Andrić's novel *The Bridge on the Drina*. During her night at the Vilina Vlas Hotel, she cannot sleep, and when she returns to Sydney she discovers the same hotel was a rape camp during the Bosnian War, where more than 200 women were killed. She decides to go back to Bosnia during the winter and retrace her journey. Back in Višegrad, she faces hostility from the police and various citizens. Finally, she performs a private ceremony in one of the hotel's rooms to mourn and remember the raped women.

Kym positions herself against the majority of the Višegrad community, which tries to erase the memory of violence and avoid blame. However, the viewer cannot lightly commit to her hostility against the people responsible for the violence: she is still a Western tourist, completely

detached from both Višegrad's communities and the experience of the conflict. She could be the trigger for a process of public remembrance directed at collective and personal healing, but she cannot be an active part of such a trajectory. She can only 'speak nearby', neither victimizing the women nor forgetting the violence (Trinh Minh-ha, in Musikawong, 2013: 200)[11]. As Jelača (2016: 45) pinpoints, the gaze of the outsider is also 'a device for unearthing suppressed truths about war crimes', eliding 'the more complicated aspects of local knowing and not knowing'.

Opposition against the people responsible is visually represented by Kym's problematic gaze, trained on the space around her. Kym walks the streets with her digital camera: during her first journey, she tries to capture the nostalgic aura of historical places (e.g., the ancient bridge) and the beauty of the landscape (Jelača, 2016: 45). The second time, she looks at ruins and at the sites of everyday life, interrogating the spaces as they yield only a few fragile traces of collective trauma.

Above all, her second journey is closely tracked by local authorities, hostile towards a tourist who raises questions about the violence the city was involved in. Kym's presence and her dismay over the erasure of trauma directly address issues of public and private responsibility and the way to engage with a mournful past, not forgetting at the same time the difficulties deriving from the potential trivialisation and historical detachment (Simić-Volcic, 2014: 391).

As for local institutions, Kym partially locates herself in the position of Antigone, who, in Judith Butler's perspective, points 'to that political possibility that emerges when the limits to representation and representability are exposed' (Butler, 2000: 2)[12]. Faced with
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[Figure 3. Kym and her camera interrogate the spaces of trauma (*For Those Who Can Tell No Tales*, Jasmila Žbanić, 2013)]

her exceptional situation, Antigone produces a 'law of the instant' (Butler, 2000: 10), a singular performance to address the 'rearticulation of the terms' of kinship and community (Butler, 2000: 24). However, Kym is neither related to the murdered women she mourns, as Antigone is to her brother, nor is she otherwise a part of their community. Her position does not fully align with Antigone's position, and through her camera and performances Kym uses a language that belongs to her (Butler, 2000: 82). Her feelings towards the victims of violence and her claim to assume a (public) position of recognition still cause us to reconsider the social and private ties as well as the laws producing the symbolic community. The fragility of her body, partly controlled and menaced by the male gaze of the authorities during her second trip, challenges the official erasure of the tragedy of the war, recalling through her presence the atrocities committed in the heart of the Višegrad community.

Her technological gaze pinpoints the void left by the rapes and killings, the terrifying absence of the victims' bodies and of their memory. She incarnates the need to cope with the past instead of erasing it—the need to acknowledge the existence of such violence and take responsibility before the local and international community. However, Kym's recognition of the victims does not configure them as a general category[13], and she does not pretend to be a part of them in the name of a shared femininity. Her mourning performance recognises both the deprivation of identity caused by using a number to identify the violated women and their specific individuation when she dedicates one flower to each of them. Since her performance is so distant from verbal configuration, Kym neither attaches a hypothetical identity to the unknown women nor claims to identify with them. At the same time, she does not detach herself from them: she cares for their individuality by taking care of the flowers she collects in private and public gardens.

Rejected by the Višegrad community during her second visit, Kym is only able to relate to a street artist she records during both trips. Kym is happy to show his dance performance to her fellow artists in Sydney since they can truly understand it because of their similar conception of art. The dancer hence embodies the hope for a new future that is conscious of the past. Giving Vercoe the ability to observe and narrate Bosnia from the outside, Žbanić creates distance from the violence, questioning the possibility for the perpetrators and their communities to testify about it without proper healing. Through [p. 377] Kym's body and experience, the director is able to show the new violence intrinsic in the mechanism of 'engineering a "forgetting" of traumas' that the 'dominant power group' inflicted on its victims (Kaplan, 2005: 67). At the same time, Kym is involved in the trauma: her mourning corresponds to her witnessing. To not testify about the rapes and killings would implicate her in perpetuating the trauma[14].

Kym consciously shares the idea of a vulnerable body with the women killed at the Vilina Vlas Hotel, beginning with the first night when she is unable to sleep. Such a suffering is the ultimate trace of the body as something that is constituted as a social phenomenon (Butler, 2004: 26). Kym's body is a medium for the transmission of traumatic history as something both private and public, as the production of personal suffering and collective shame. Awareness of the vulnerability shared by individuals is the only instrument for claiming a non-military political solution to the violence itself (Butler, 2004: 29). Violence against the subject is one of the relations performed in the creation of a community. Only the recognition of violence as a part of social and political relations can actually produce a new community after the war. The institutional denial of the rape camps—the refusal to recognise the actions that took place and share the shame and guilt—produces a veiled and literal expulsion of the witness from the social space and the public sphere. At the end of the film, after her private performance, Kym is forced to leave Višegrad and asked to never return.

Kym, however, has performed her duty: the city and its bridge, where thousands were killed, can now be represented by their reflection in the river's waters, as they have been recorded by Kym's camera. Moreover, Kym is able to dance with the performer, not recording him but sharing his space, his movements, his freedom. Finally, a chambermaid can find her flowers on the bed, and the bridge's ancient stones can again play a role in the visual flow, even if they are partially blurred by the snow. The past is reintegrated into the present as image and performance, not something naturally given but a cultural construction. With this finale, we fully understand why Žbanić refused to direct a documentary about Vercoe's experience: aesthetic distance was essential for producing vicarious witnessing. This practice of witnessing does not generate new violence but an ethical and political perspective on the atrocious events it accounts for. *For Those Who Can Tell No Tales* upholds the fragility of the ethical experience, neither allowing the erasure of violence nor assuming it is possible to simply identify with violated bodies from an outside position. It proposes a new perspective on the narrative of the war, granting a gaze to those who did not participate in the violence but are still deeply affected by it.

In conclusion, Žbanić's trilogy proposes three different ways for women (and sometimes men) to address the atrocities of the Bosnian War. Žbanić abandons any discourse about the

supposed inherent violence in the Balkan (male) identity, and refuses to victimise women as a universal category. Quite the opposite: she produces three specific paths through her characters' pain, investigating their difficulties in establishing personal and political relations. Above all, her characters' bodies are never considered as natural beings: Žbanić sees them as geoculturally located—as biopolitical products created through processes originating from power and responsibility, guilt and care

[1] Žbanić also made the film *Love Island* in 2014. However, it is a romantic comedy that does not share formal choices with the first three films, and for this reason it will not be analysed here.

[2] In this article, I will not directly address issues of trauma, since it has already been investigated by several scholars (e.g. Husanović 2009, 2015; Jelača 2016), to whom I will refer in my analysis.

[3] Maule (2014: 370) notes that in the global film market, festivals act as market makers and creative industries. As such, they are hugely important for the distribution of contemporary women's cinema.

[4] For the entangling of transnational feminism with contemporary cinema, see De Pascalis (2012).

[5] It is important to underline how Žbanić's trilogy does not challenge the 'received (cisgendered) notions of femininity and masculinity', even if it addresses the singularity of the gendered experience of its characters (Jelača 2016: 65).

[6] The discursive production of geopolitics and power has been theorised by, among others, Stuart Hall (1992).

[7] 'I refer to the historical, geographical, cultural, psychic, and imaginative boundaries that provide the ground for political definition and self-definition for contemporary U.S. feminists' (Mohanty, 2003: 106).

[8] *Grbavica*'s production and reception stories are discussed at large in Murtic 2015: 105-123.

[9] As Jelača (2016: 86), among others, underlines, her hair was the only feature that Sara took from her mother's rapist (i.e. her biological father). The act of shaving it all off is then an 'act of resistance', through which Sara 'attempts to create a radical break with the violent nature of her origin'.

[10] Information about the play and other aspects of the film's genesis is available in the international press book at http://deblokada.ba/?p=43.

[11] Many commentators have underlined the difficulty of coping with violence from outside the communities involved in a conflict (see Helms, 2014; Phillips, 2013; Simić and Volcic, 2014).

[12] It is interesting to note how the Bosnian War has been repeatedly associated with the classic narratives of the Theban War. See, for instance, the Italian film *Teatro di Guerra* (Mario Martone, 1998), in which a company from a small Neapolitan theatre wants to perform the Aeschylus tragedy *Seven against Thebes* in Sarajevo during the siege.

[13] On women as victims in the Bosnian War and their delayed recognition, see Helms (2006: 238).

[14] For the ethics of witnessing, see Kaplan (2005: 122–125).

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