Towards a humanitarian cosmopolitanism

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A certain idea of cosmopolitanism, *an other*, has not arrived yet perhaps.
- if it has (*indeed*) arrived …
- …. then, one perhaps (has) not yet recognised it (Derrida 2001).

These closing lines in the essay *On Cosmopolitanism* recapitulate Derrida's concerns about the progress of ideas which conceptualise *cosmopolitanism* and its main promise—the celebration of human life, regardless of its form or geographical position. Derrida knows that the two united terms *cosmo* and *politics* carry a heavy burden of different theories and practices, next to indescribable in the format of a short essay. Thus, Derrida (2001, pp. 3-23) asks for the creation of 'cities of refuge', places that should have a legitimate separation from states, which will have the possibility of offering *hospitality* for the 'other'; those in need; asylums seekers in the European Union at the end of twentieth century, for instance.

In its most idealistic form, let me dare for a moment to generalise cosmopolitanism as a move towards the recognition and improvement of complex, but at the same time universal human rights, developed and applied in a world that celebrates both global diversity and global interconnectedness. And still, regardless of the magnetism of such an idea, cosmopolitanism remains a utopian project that is well beyond many forms of nationalism, or strategic alliances between nation-states. Many would argue that this form of 'utopian'

cosmopolitanism is losing its race with other aspects of global politics. The dominant public discourse on the possible interconnectedness of humans is reserved for neo-capitalism and radical monotheisms. It seems that humankind still has no 'equipment', as Foucault called it some time ago, as a 'medium of transformation of logos into ethos' (2005, p. 327).

Interconnected with questions about the 'other' are existing ideas of a new cosmopolitanism which come from contemporary thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben (1998); (2005); Judith Butler (2004); Leela Gandhi (2006) and Paul Gilroy 2004. In particular many theorists are engaging with issues of new forms of cosmopolitanism (which Gilroy suggests is a *planetary humanism*) as a complex contemplation of the diasporic mobility of bodies, cultures and images. The new cosmopolitanism addresses specificities and particularities in complex and competing global conditions, asking and seeking out questions about oppressions and subordinations. These authors turn their attention to how we might be able to live in more just worlds, account for differences, and not have recourse to hierarchies of oppression, or the reinscription of violence, as part of resistance and solutions to existing tensions and violence. If George Orwell and Franc Fanon were soldiers, writes Gilroy (2004), their contemporaries are:

> more likely to be useful in the different role of nonviolent witnesses taking a calculated risk in the interest of peace and other cosmopolitan goods which place war in the past as a way to solve human conflicts. (p. 89)

'It was only when subaltern figures', writes Said in 1989, 'like women, Orientals, blacks and other "natives" made enough noise that they were paid attention to, and asked in so to speak' (p. 210) that cosmopolitanism returned as a possibility. What is missing in Said's 'noise' and, as such, says much about the human ability to overlook the living conditions of another human being, is the almost universal heterosexual ignorance and, at times, extreme brutality towards sexual minorities. Simon During (2007, p. 15) suggests that the pluralism

of cultural studies is a space in which the 'voice of the other', [while often] 'marginal in the academy', allows and encourages the theorisation of the 'noise' of the subaltern subjects. This, he suggests, is visible in gender, queer and post-colonial studies for instance. Their initial experiences/positions as the other(s); their struggles for recognition and their dialogues and possible interconnectedness with those that preceded them or are considered as the prevailing contemporary thought, make an important practical and theoretical contribution towards a new cosmopolitanism.

This paper, however, is not just pursuing theoretic debates and issues in theoretic literature. The role of researchers urges us to bring theory into an applied context and, in this case, into the medium of film. Film and cinema are vast areas with many genres, sub-genres and paradigmatic lines of analysis. What this paper is interested in are films that can be read as actively engaged with questions of the new cosmopolitanism. Core to this is a curiosity and commitment to the pivotal place that visual culture holds in our world of rapid and simultaneous visual exchange. The potential of film for expressing the 'inexpressible', its possible affective power over the audiences, its pre-scriptwriting and post-screening collaborations with theoretic and practical elements that engage with the development and promotion of human rights, is the main consideration of this paper.

Douglas Kellner (1997) suggests that postmodern interpretation of film, for instance, involves the use of 'film theory, textual analysis, social history, political analysis and ideology critique, effects analysis, and other modes of cultural criticism' (p. 26). He continues by arguing that the analysis should not stop at the boundaries of the text or its intertexuality, 'but should move from text to context, to the culture and society that constitutes the text and in which it should be read and interpreted' (Kellner 1997, p. 26). While cinema has always been a propagandist tool, it also can be a tool for social good. Looking at a film as a tool for humanitarian intervention, the purpose is not to provide a reader with definite

and permanent answers or solutions to universal questions of human rights. Rather, it underlines the importance and dynamics of visual culture and image-making within the wider context of communicated concepts and interpretations. Rarely (but still), as Zizek (in Aloni 2004, pp. 24-30) suggests, 'history is full of miracles' (p. 28). As seen in the film *Grbavica* (Zbanic 2006), cinema can have an impact well beyond the intentions or dreams of the artist-film-maker, who may be making a film as a form of social commentary and intervention, without the express desire to excite mass rebellion or revolution.

The disintegration of the former Yugoslav Federal Republic and especially the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995) will be remembered, among others aspects, for the large number of women who were raped. In 1992, *Newsweek* journalist Roy Gutman reported the first instance of systematic sexual violence against women, which brought international attention to that aspect of the war in Bosnia. United Nations Security Resolution 820 in 1993 also mentions the use of rape in Bosnia, describing it as 'massive, organized and systematic' (Skjelsbaek 2006, p. 374). What is less well known is that, parallel to attempts to document these crimes for legal and humanitarian purposes, the estimated number was being used for political purposes (Skjelsbaek 2006). During the war this topic, culturally taboo within Bosnian society, was exploited as a tool of propaganda—the Bosnian War Government used the statistic of 50 000 sexually abused women in its effort to incite NATO military intervention in Bosnia and to negotiate the lifting of the UN embargo on buying weapons.

At that time, public discussion concluded that sexual violence towards Bosnian women on a mass scale was a planned project by the Serbian leadership and intended as a mechanism for the humiliation of the entire Bosnian nation. In the end, the actual number of abused women will never be known. Depending on the source, the number of women who were raped ranges from 14 000 to 50 000 (Olujic 1998; Nikolic-Ristanovic 2000; Skjelsbaek 2006). Shame and possible alienation from 'families and society keep many women silent' (Olujic

1998, p. 44). What is known, and is important to note, is that victims and perpetrators were from all military sides involved in the conflict. Most reports, however, underline the actuality that the majority of perpetrators were members of Serbian (ir)regular forces, and that most victims were Bosnian (Muslim) women.

The end of the conflict cast a veil of silence over this socially sensitive issue. In the case of the Bosnian Government, the suffering of women had ceased to be 'politically current goods' (Stojic 2006). For Bosnian society in general, significantly influenced by nationalistic preaching that favoured the return of patriarchy over gender equality, any insistence on keeping the issue of rape victims in the public arena was unacceptable. The visibility of victims would be a reminder of Bosnian men's incapability to protect their women/nation. The aftermath of this violence perpetrated against women played out in purely individual, often hidden ways within the emotional lives of the women. The dominant discourse of Bosnian society leaves the women, their stories and the aftermath of the war crimes as part of the private sphere of pain—despite the extent to which it occurred, which was so extensive as to be considered 'common' (Erceg 2006). In the years that followed, socio-economic support came only from two or three centres for traumatised women, supported mainly by feminist groups or other women's organisations. A similar profile emerges from within academia. In an attempt to summarise the recent scholarly reflections on sexual violence in conflicts, Skjelsbeak (2001) reviewed 140 texts on war rape from different academic disciplines. The papers, as Skjelsbeak (2001) found, were mostly motivated by sexual violence towards women in the Bosnian, and partly in the Rwandan conflicts. Without undervaluing the involvement of male academics on the topic, Skjelsbeak's analysis shows women wrote the majority of the texts.

The same is true within films about the reconstruction of Bosnia. *Grbavica's* narrative is located in the Sarajevan winter of 2005. As a young, female newcomer scriptwriter and

director, Zbanic offers a palette of interesting and moving characters, but the core of the story follows the complex relationship between sole parent Esma (played by Mirjana Karanovic) and her twelve year old daughter Sara (Luna Mijovic), who believes that her father is a fallen Bosnian war hero whose body was left on the battlefield and never recovered. Esma is a quiet person, obliged to work hard to provide a decent lifestyle for herself and her daughter. In contrast to her mother, Sara is a pre-teen tomboy, willing to play tough soccer games and fight with boys. A long desired and awaited extended school trip is an important issue for primary school students in Sarajevo. For the first time in their lives children are allowed to travel without parents. It is the first sign of freedom: of being an adult, of becoming independent. When the school offers to take pupils on the trip for free if they are the children of war heroes Sara is even more excited. After all, isn't she the child of a war martyr? However, when Sara asks her mother for the certificate, which the school requires, that proves her father was a war hero Esma keeps avoiding the issue. Gradually, Zbanic allows the viewers to understand that Esma was repeatedly raped during the war, and Sara is the consequence of that very crime. In the end *Grbavica* offers hope, but does not promise happy conclusions.

Together with the main story about Esma and Sara, *Grbavica* provides a picture of contemporary Bosnia. Zbanic sees and depicts people with difficult lives who deal with depression and criminality—and have dreams of escaping from such reality. In *Grbavica*, the masters in peace time are identical to those who ruled during the war. The film is set in postwar Sarajevo, a partly destroyed city, which can be read as a metaphor for the 'psychological damage of its inhabitants, women in particular, who have not yet overcome war traumas' (Pinto 2006). The use of Sarajevo and its winter as a 'supporting actor' fits intelligently as a metaphor for Esma's psychological condition. The winters in the narrow valley where Sarajevo is built are cold, and the city is covered by a mixture of dirty snow, fog and smog for three months every year. This natural lighting makes the colours of

the city more bleak and distant. In the winter, Sarajevo is an unpleasant place to be. The heavy fog cover creates the sense that humans and buildings are unapproachable and cold.

Certainly, besides Esma's emotional scramble, Sarajevo's winter is also a powerful symbol for the society's frigidity towards her concerns. Towards the end of the film, where Zbanic's narrative offers a certain level of hope to Esma and Sara, spring is on Sarajevo's door and the background suddenly becomes green, while buildings lose their uniformity. Their greyness is now confronted with bright yellow and blue. Grbavica is the name of the Sarajevan suburb where Zbanic's characters live, but she finds the real meaning of the word in the etymological dictionary of South Slavic languages which explains the word *grbavica* as 'woman with a hump'. That etymon is the key to her story. As a locally renewed cosmopolitan writer and cultural critic, Mile Stojic rhetorically concludes:

> 'Hump-backed women'? In the war raped girls and women, aren't they actually like camels with their humps? Don't they carry on their backs the forced pregnancy, their horrible destiny? (2006)

In February 2006 this debut feature film from young writer-director Jasmila Zbanic was announced as a winner of the Golden Bear at the Berlinale; Zbanic's film was a complete triumph. At the same festival, *Grbavica* was also awarded the festival's Peace Film Award and the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury—two awards that go beyond the aesthetics of film and whose focus is on cinematic representation that promotes human rights. In Bosnia, immediately after news of the film's success in Berlin, Jasmila Zbanic became a national hero. Unlike Australia, for instance, Bosnia-Herzegovina is a nation state without remarkable sport results. Achievements by Bosnian directors with films such as *No Man's Land* (Tanovic 2001) and its Academy Award for best foreign film in 2002, and Zbanic's *Grbavica* success in Berlin, gave the rare opportunity for this postwar, economically dysfunctional society to be

proud of itself. In less than a month Zbanic's film was seen by more than 180 000 viewers in Bosnia and Herzegovina. By Bosnian standards this is equivalent to audience numbers for the top three most popular films in the United States. Nevertheless, this national(istic) euphoria poses a paradox: Bosnian citizens celebrate the success of a film which admonishes them about a trauma embodied in real victims who still live among them, unacknowledged.

In 2006, when *Grbavica* was in the pre-production phase, the Bosnian nationalist elite represented by the right wing intellectual, writer, and occasionally professional politician Fatmir Alispahic (2005), questioned Zbanic's decision to offer Mirjana Karanovic a main role in the film. The 'argument' was about the 'immorality' of choosing a Serbian actress to play a Bosnian rape victim. 'By choosing that wench from Belgrade [Karanovic], Jasmila Zbanic humbled all raped Bosniak [Bosnian Muslim] women' (Alispahic 2005). After the BBF award for *Grbavica* and Zbanic's speech, Alispahic suddenly forgot his stance on Zbanic, written a year before. This time, as a columnist for the magazine *Saff*, Alispahic praised Zbanic, proclaiming that *Grbavica's* director had overgrown earthly life and had stepped into heavenly experience. 'It was God's will that provided her [Zbanic] with the festival star status and gave her the opportunity to express her patriotic and humanitarian pride' (Alispahic 2006).

The media attention that followed *Grbavica's* success and the widespread interest in experiencing Zbanic's story in Bosnian cinemas, helped several NGO women's organisations to collect 50 000 signatures and successfully advocate for the official recognition of women survivors of war rape as civilian victims of war. Soon after the petition reached government's officials, the Bosnian Parliament voted to recognise raped women as war victims and to provide them with financial help. Symbolically, *Grbavica* gained what Habermas, following Kant, described as the public sphere in its role as a founding institution of democracy, without which no concept of constitutional republicanism can exist

(Borradori 2003, p. 57). Ironically however, it seems that democratic representatives of the Bosnian State first needed to 'see' a survivor of sexual violence on the cinematic screen before they accepted her existence and legally protected her according to already established minimal standards of human rights.

With *Grbavica*, Zbanic revealed the destructiveness of the postwar marginalisation of these women. Her project showed that this profound crisis in their lives did not finish when the act of raping their bodies stopped. The consequences of violence will follow these women their entire lives. Yet crucially, it has been the survival of women like Esma and their courageous testimonies which have crossed the walls of patriarchy. The story of Esma speaks for all the untold, unrecognised and unspoken experiences of women.

Although it has been said that Bosnia-Herzegovina marked the first systematic use of rape as a 'weapon of war' and of 'ethnic cleansing', it is more likely that Bosnia was the first time such systematic violations were talked about and recognised. This awareness raising has been valuable. Rape has begun to be seen as a systematic attempt to extinguish the identity of women. The legacy of the rape of Bosnian women is the recognition of rape not only as a war crime and a human rights violation, but as a political act, discussed at the national and international level. However, this new recognition and appreciation of the extent and the meaning of war rape at a political, humanitarian and finally public level has been slow. Too many women continue to know the brutality, pain, anguish, shame and terror of the experience and its aftermath.

What remains to be seen is how far film, with its capacity to render such experiences visible and significant, can retain this new political power. On the one hand, as one of Britain's finest directors Ken Loach observes, 'film is only part of the noise that surrounds us' (cited in Radevic 2006). On the other hand, unlike other forms of popular art, the process of serious

film making is very expensive, and requires calculated decisions that go far beyond the purely artistic ambitions of the sole filmmaker. Zbanic's film*,* as a multi-national co-production, with a cast from all 'sides' involved in the conflict within the territory of former Yugoslavia, shows that art has the capacity to cross national/ethnic borders and to evoke significant reactions that may be a trigger for change, or at least dialogue towards progress. The similarity of experiences of physical and verbal violence over women's bodies, during and after conflict, may help all sides to understand the consequences of violence on women and society as a whole. Local and transnational examples of women's responses to war rape demonstrate their importance to survivors, practitioners, and policy makers, all seeking to address its causes and effects. Perhaps such examples may be steps on a path towards Derrida's cosmopolitanism, yet to come.

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