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Torture, maternity, and truth in Jasmila Zbanic's *Grbavica: Land of My Dreams*

by [Caroline Koebel](#)

The iconoclastic [1]

"Tell all the Truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —"
— Emily Dickinson[1]

[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

"People don't want to hear the bad news. Perhaps they never do. But in the case of Bosnia the indifference, the lack of effort to try to imagine, was more acute than I ever anticipated." — Susan Sontag[2]

Set some ten years into the aftermath of Slobodan Milosevic's onslaught in former Yugoslavia, Jasmila Zbanic's *Grbavica: Land of My Dreams* (2005)[3] does not examine how Esma (Mirjana Karanovic), the narrative's protagonist, coped with life in a prisoner of war camp for Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks).

"My belly grew. With her inside. Even then they came....In twos, threes, every day." [4]

It does not account for how she was able to sustain herself day after day of multiple gang rapes, to continue indefinitely, and lasting well into her pregnancy with the "bastard Chetnik"[5] daughter to whom she eventually gave birth. It does not detail Esma's liberation from the camp. Rather, *Grbavica* follows Esma as mother of a now pubescent daughter as she confronts her struggle to exist in the present. The film proposes that for Esma to have the possibility of a future, she must speak the truth of her past in all its inexorable trauma. And in the process, the film hoes the battleground between ethics and truth.

Should a mother protect her child from knowledge of its identity as product of rape by the enemy? How does deceit once conceived take on a life of its own? Can internal conflict be represented so as to evoke sympathy while resisting sentimentality and sensationalism?

Sarajevo, the city housing the once-internment camp neighborhood of Grbavica and the land "to which all roads return," contextualizes Esma's agony. It is riddled by tension between the living and the deceased, between peacetime and war, presence and absence, as evinced in details such as the small number of classmates attending the school reunion or derelict buildings become war monuments or ongoing exhumations of mass graves.

Sound of song: voice and melody so supreme that they transfix even beyond the language gap (Zbanic opts not to subtitle here). This solitary music unifies the scene of a group of women in repose atop a brilliantly colored and patterned handwoven carpet, themselves creating a fabric at once formless and structured, random and coherent, asymmetric and balanced. With the ease and sprightliness of Peter Pan's Tinkerbell, the camera[6] weaves amongst the trauma survivors at the Women's Center, the noninvasive optical inquisitiveness part of the scene's composite harmony. All eyes closed, the listeners — from a sole hand against the sumptuous textile, through hands resting on knees and other parts of the body, to hands holding faces tilted earthward, sunward, bent to the side, to a close-up on one figure — are within themselves. In synchrony with the camera's slow and steady movement towards her, one woman opens her eyes and concentrates her gaze outward. It's as if inner knowledge has reawakened her to the external world, or conversely, as if she has strengthened her resolve to hide parts of herself from others, in particular from her daughter (as the spectator soon learns).

The introduction's actionlessness belies the complex challenge to the spectator it constructs: to elicit empathy with the opening-eye woman, Esma, from a distance that does not flatten the character into a single-dimensional victim. In a paradox of vision, a certain blindness enables truth seeking. Of Bosnia, Sontag has written,

"Of course, it is easy to turn your eyes from what is happening if it is not happening to you. Or if you have not put yourself where it is happening." [7]

Grbavica's fictive experience (and characters) facilitates those viewers far removed from rape camps and genocide in imagining firstly such atrocities and secondly the existence today of individuals who have sustained them. The film makes palpable how living in the present and possessing the future after enduring extreme cruelty is a matter of process and fluidity.

Granted Esma's lack of *joie de vivre* as demonstrated by her (depressive) body language, *Grbavica* otherwise keeps physical marks of Esma's secret to a minimum (at her nightclub job she pops pills when others' sexual play is overly explicit and a shot of her undressing reveals scars crisscrossing her back). The most profound sign of Esma's captive past is Sara (Luna Mijovic) — at once material proof of torture and source of what vitality she possesses. Wracking Esma's nerves as her daughter ages is not so much that the offspring functions as evidence of trauma, but that one day increasingly close she will force a confession.

Sara seeks truth and her first general and then acute sense that her mother monitors this ideal is one of the film's key examples of a return (to self, to place, to origins) precipitated by advancement. Sara's truth-seeking leads her outward, amidst alien territory, away from the maternal, towards the horrific. In pursuit of the grisly yet inescapable truth of her conception, Sara concurrently experiences an inverse movement, one bringing her back to self. As evinced by a popular song, Sarajevo itself forms an identity map for Sara:

"Whenever I wander, I dream of you
All roads lead me back to you
I wait with much longing to see your lights
Sarajevo my love."

Finding Esma asleep, Sara gently covers her mother's hand with her own. Tight framing emphasizes their merger. The calm segues into an alert Esma, who — clutching the pillow upon which she had just been resting her head — chases her daughter through the apartment. The loose mix of shots accompanied by the sound of laughter — the scene's light tone — implies that the pillow fight is an oft-rehearsed ritual and an assurance that all will go according to script. When Sara, with her growing physical prowess, pins her mother down, Esma halts the play. This abrupt reaction is an early and poignant indicator in *Grbavica* of the protagonist's post-traumatic condition. Once again we study Esma's eyes for what they simultaneously reveal and conceal. Whereas the joyous beginnings of the scene feature both mother and daughter in full view, now the camera fixates on Esma. Sara is represented only by the hands she uses to immobilize Esma and by her mother's eyes looking up at her.

This exchange exemplifies how Zbanic scrutinizes the present for vestiges of the past, and how she conveys Esma's experience through an examination of signs of trauma and torture rather than through a representation of the acts themselves. Resisting the sensationalism and neat causality of flashbacks as plot device, Zbanic instead challenges the spectator to form a picture out of fragments, to visualize of her own accord, truth. Read as marker of the past this scene provokes and disturbs. The daughter, in overpowering mother, temporarily (and liminally) moves into position as father. Learning from the film as a whole, the spectator is able to see with hindsight that in Sara's eyes, "he" is a Shaheed,[8] a martyr, her mythical parent, while for Esma, "he" is the many who multiply raped her.

At Sara's demand to learn what she has from her father (a man not referred to by name), Esma finally concedes that she has inherited "her father's hair." Actually, Sara's hair resembles her mother's, while it is their eyes (blue v. brown) which differ greatly. In manufacturing this genetic feature, Esma buys herself time. Fitting that the scene is at a shopping mall; Sara is placated by the small yet symbolic act of consumption, but the fulfillment of her desire is short-lived. The return of her restlessness — her pursuit of something at once intangible and absolute — is near immediate. Sara's object of desire, what she anticipates as the concrete destination of her quest, is a state-issued certificate proving the status of her father as a martyr killed in defense of Sarajevo. She needs the death certificate for discounted passage on a school trip (the key circumstance that propels the narrative).

The document is intended by Esma to on one hand provide evidence for a worthy heritage to Sara and on the other conceal the tragic reality of her conception. The document does not exist and has never existed and it is the idea, or the mental picture, of the document that is so meaningful in shaping truth and self-identity. It is a father substitute and more. The death certificate phenomenon in its mutually negating states of absence and presence is analogous to Esma's greater dissociative relationship to the past. Sara's search for self is encircled by Esma's own re-emergence from fossilization in time.

Informed by the pillow-fight-made-weighty scene early on in the diegesis, mother and daughter in a late scene once again disturb the balance of power between parent and child through a physical and emotional battle of strengths. Here in the film's climax the scales of ethics and truth crash as Esma finally and decisively aborts the deceit she has carried forth. Incensed by Sara threatening her at gunpoint for "the truth," Esma knocks the weapon away and throws the girl down on the bed — overpowering Sara in an aftershock of how she herself was forced into submission. "You want the truth!" An over the shoulder shot inverts the position of the two in the earlier scene. Rather than studying Esma, the camera, close-up on her face, observes Sara, whose eyes look up at her mother's, brow wrinkled, mouth agape. Esma explodes,

"They raped me. In the prisoner of war camp. And you were born there!"

In the next shot, a medium profile of the two, Esma pins Sara while Sara grasps Esma's shoulders and the interlocked couple form a circle, creating ambivalence as they seem to move at once apart and closer. Occupying the aggressor's role, Esma, against a mute Christina Aguilera background image, screams,

"You're a Chetnik bastard!"

The *mise en scène* emphasizes the transitional nature of Sara's adolescence. While she wields guns and encounters boys and in effect intermixes the two (Sara's weapon belonged to her boyfriend's dad, a real Shaheed), Sara is ensconced by a world of pop stars.[9]

Moons and suns illuminate a beatific bedspread. "The truth" in this blasted cosmos is anything but pacific. Sara curls into fetal position, her reality turned inside out.

The patter of rain links Sara's bedroom as harrowing site of truth with the now familiar Womens' Center as place of vocal unfurling of Esma's self-revelation (accepting that the time has arrived for truth to be told, she tells the story of her agony). In contrast with *Grbavica's* opening, the first shot in this subsequent survivors support group scene is of a woman singing (earlier Hasiba Agic was heard, but not visually identified). In addition now her song, unlike before, is translated:

"When the blossoms are blooming
When the world is in repose
The soul aches with yearning
We parted long ago."

The camera again meditates on the individual parts comprising the whole (note the tripling of the scene's length) but instead of eyes closed as they listen, the women of diverse age and appearance are mostly open-eyed. Several figures in headscarves provide rare occurrences of reference to Islam (underscoring the largely secular lifestyle of multiethnic pre-war Sarajevo).

"These roses red
Are flushed with crimson
Blood and tears remain
To dying hearts
This heaven above us
Is but a shadowy veil...."

The majestic sound of the singer, as in the beginning, creates a sense of unity amidst the listeners.

"When our tears melt away
Even the desert can bloom
In a vision of paradise...."

At this point, the translation stops, but to unlearned ears the singer seems to repeat, "Allah." [10]

Acknowledging the Bosnian Muslim females whose husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers disappeared without trace or (re) materialized in mass graves, or who themselves were subjected to captivity, torture, and rape in the terror of former Yugoslavia, it takes scant effort not only to associate the women pictured here as survivors and mourners within the diegesis of *Grbavica*, but also to read them metafilmically as extras who in actuality play themselves. [11] In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Sontag reminds,

"Our failure is one of imagination, of empathy; we have failed to hold this reality in mind." [12]

With the extent of the ravages of Sarajevo and its people, these women in any case cannot be far removed by experience from who they perform.

Zbanic proffers a fictive cinematic construct to open stranger's eyes (yours and mine), to focus the truth of Sarajevo within a collective scope of vision. She adds credence to such a reading by locating the narrative in time contiguous with factual reality. At one point in *Grbavica's* diegesis there is background sound (untranslated) of a news broadcast of Sontag's death, which orients the film within the timeframe of December 2004. [13] The sense of *Grbavica* happening in historical time is heightened by the awareness of the fact that children conceived during the Siege of Sarajevo (beginning in 1992) are just becoming pubescent at this moment.

In an echo of the original scene at the Women's Center, the camera again finds and settles on Esma who, rather than opening her eyes in relation to the focus on her, now looks down, her gaze averted. The rain that continues from the previous few scenes envelops the tears she sheds, in addition to having foreshadowed her crying.

Cut to Sara looking at herself in the mirror, the camera behind, sharing her inquiry into image of self. Once daughter finally learns in "the truth" scene that the incontestable proof of her heritage, the certificate (only ink on paper after all), is her mother's invention, she attacks the part of herself Esma has identified as her father's: her hair. In shaving her head, Sara symbolically discards her paternity. This auto-destructive act (which, it should be noted, ultimately enables an affirmation of self) has broad resonance given that hair is cross-culturally recognized as a mark and symbol of feminine shame (and beauty and power).

Sara's cutting is reminiscent of Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) [14] when the French woman from Never's hair is shorn by local authorities in punishment for her love affair with the German soldier. She rekindles this past for her Japanese lover,

"They shave my head carefully till they're finished. They think it's their duty to do a good job shaving the women's heads." [15]

In the appendix to her screenplay, the film's writer Marguerite Duras adds,

"What remains of Riva, on this quay, is the beating of her heart. (Late in the afternoon it has rained. It has rained on Riva and on the city. Then the rain has stopped. Then Riva's head has been shaved...)" [16]

It is curious to observe the place of rain (and its attendant associations of cleansing and quenching) in relation to the hair scenes of both films.

Especially in light of Sara's subsequent action, it is possible to imagine that the earlier shopping mall exchange was another attempt by Esma to safeguard her daughter. Recall that she averted the obvious: Sara's eyes as referent of difference between them. Esma's construction of an alternate truth by using the synecdoche of hair and not eyes to connect child to parent is prescient of Sara's violence against self. Hair is a more resilient (and regenerative) target than eyes. Simultaneously, because the observant viewer notes already that Esma means "eyes" when she speaks "hair," the ridding of the hair has slippage with the gouging of the eyes. And the mythological-psychoanalytic-oedipal significance is at least sensed if not subjected to analysis. In effect, sight (or rather the potential of vision) must be preserved at all entanglements with truth.

Cut back to Esma at the Women's Center, keeping gaze averted from camera, now talking:

"And when they brought her, she was so tiny. And she was so beautiful. I had already forgotten there was anything beautiful in this world."

She explains to the group that first she had tried to miscarry, then to reject the child, but that upon hearing her daughter's cries through the wall her milk began to flow and she consented to a single nursing. It was this union that startled Esma into a re-embracing of the world, albeit partial and notwithstanding her disempowered reality within it. Years later in a classic feminist and postcolonial trope, Esma has arrived at "voice" with her new capacity to locate her horrors within language. Recall from earlier in this writing:

"My belly grew. With her inside. Even then they came....In twos, threes, every day."

Esma is a speaking subject. Her story can be known not exclusively through watching and examining her — through objectification — but through her own version of events. In "The Laugh of the Medusa" Hélène Cixous discloses the crucial role such expression plays in the oppressed subject's general animation,

"By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display — the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time." [17]

Whereas previously Esma seemed all eyes (imagine the initial scene at the Women's Center when Esma is the only one to look back at the camera), now her mouth becomes an orifice of agency. By telling truth, and not merely reflecting it via, for example, the fear expressed by her gaze, Esma becomes once again self-possessed. By exteriorizing her pain so intentionally, she returns to self, like her own daughter, a child of the city ("Sarajevo, my love"). Perhaps she will not re-embark on the path towards becoming a medical doctor she progressed along before the war, but she has certainly come out of hiding. Like a newborn, like in fact the revelation that Sara catalyzed in Esma upon birth, Esma embodies life force and exudes potential, not least importantly, to love and be loved.

Grbavica explicates a deep and complex bond between parent and child, mother and daughter, and shows how self-identity is co-determinant with that relationship. Esma and Sara wrestle with what they mean to one another, and this mutual arrival at a place of knowledge of the other's perspective affords the film's most significant resolution. The correlative outward and inward movement witnessed throughout *Grbavica* repeats in its closing scene. Head shorn, Sara is pictured in the rear window of the school outing bus as it pulls away from the crop of parents waving good-bye. Tears of joy spring to Esma's eyes as she recognizes in a hand raised by Sara a confirmation of their union. The gap between them closes as daughter is literally transported away from mother. No longer fearful of Sara's condemnation and revulsion, Esma can now actively identify as a torture survivor—uncloaked of the martyr's widow alter ego.

"We grew up together
City, you and I
The same blue sky gave us rhymes."

As Sara's voice melds with the others, the sense of identification with place is heightened.

"You have your songs and I sing them
I want to tell you my dreams
My pleasures and your happiness
Sarajevo, my love."

In explicating the subjectivity of exile, Edward Saïd speaks of the resentment exiles feel towards non-exiles:

"They belong in their surroundings, you feel, whereas an exile is always out of place. What is it like to be born in a place, to stay and live there, to know that you are of it, more or less forever?" [18]

Place as symbolic paternity ascends in *Grbavica* and serves a reconstitutive role. The truth mother and daughter reach is that they belong not in exile, but rather in "Bosnia, my wounded homeland, land of my ancestors...." When in an early scene of domestic quiet Esma reminds Sara that the poem's next line is, "[Bosnia] The land of my dreams," the child complains, "what a stupid poem." Esma's last words are,

"Write a better one, if you can...."

Notes

1. Emily Dickinson, "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—" in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Thomas H. Johnson, ed. (Cambridge, MA and

London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 792. First spied by author in 2007 on the New York City subway as part of "Poetry in Motion." See

<http://www.poetrysociety.org/motion/mapsite/pimpoems/newyork/nyindex.html>

2. Susan Sontag, "'There' and 'Here'" in *Where the Stress Falls* (New York: Picador, 2002), p. 324.

3. Jasmila Zbanic, *Grbavica: Land of My Dreams* (2005, Austria/Bosnia-Herzegovina/Germany/Croatia, in Serbo-Croatian with English subtitles, 90 min). Released on DVD in the United States by Strand Releasing in 2007. In an interview provided with the film's press kit, Zbanic states, "Etymologically, the word Grbavica means woman with a hump." See Deblokada Productions

<http://www.deblokada.ba/index.php?lang=en>

4. This and following quotes unless otherwise indicated are from the film, *Grbavica: Land of My Dreams*

5. Chetnik is used in *Grbavica* to refer to the Serbian invaders.

6. Christine A. Maier, Director of Photography.

7. Susan Sontag, "Why Are We in Kosovo?" in *The New York Times Magazine* (May 2, 1999). She continues,

"I remember in Sarajevo in the summer of 1993 a Bosnian friend telling me ruefully that in 1991, when she saw on her TV set the footage of Vukovar utterly leveled by the Serbs, she thought to herself, How terrible, but that's in Croatia, that can never happen here in Bosnia ... and switched the channel. The following year, when the war started in Bosnia, she learned differently. Then she became part of a story on television that other people saw and said, How terrible ... and switched the channel."

See <http://www.nbi.dk/~predrag/projects/SontagKosovo.html>

8. Shaheed, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is a Muslim martyr. "The Muslim who falls on the battlefield is called *Shahid*.. 'witness, martyr'."

9. Posters of Jennifer Lopez, Keira Knightley and others accompany the Aguilera.

10. Indeed as revealed by the director's interview in the press kit, Zbanic identifies the songs at the Women's Center as Ilahijas, "songs dedicated to God."

11. Take the director herself as a case in point: Zbanic states in the interview,

"Twenty-thousand women were systematically raped in Bosnia during the war. I lived 100 meters from the front line and was most afraid of this kind of aggression. Since then, rape and its consequences have become an obsession for me: I read and followed everything that was related to this topic. I still didn't know why I did this, or what I wanted to do with this. When I gave birth to my child, motherhood triggered a whole set of emotions in me — it shocked me completely. I started asking myself, what kind of emotional significance does this have for a woman who has a child who was conceived in hate. That was the moment I knew what I wanted from *Grbavica* and I wrote it — between breast feeds."

12. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 8.

13. According to her obituary in *the New York Times*, Sontag died on December 27, 2004. See

http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/28/books/28cnd-sont.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

14. Alain Resnais, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959, France and Japan).

15. Ibid.

16. Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, text by Marguerite Duras for the film by Alain Resnais trans. Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1961), p. 94.

17. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 4. (The University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 881. See

<http://links.jstor.org/pss/3173239>

18. Edward Saïd, "Reflections on Exile" in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 181-182.

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Writer-director Jasmila Zbanic reveals her debt to the neorealist movement in these and other scenes of people sorting through the rubble of their post-war lives: a rift between Sara and a schoolmate turns to compassion and, later, romance when they learn that their fathers were both martyrs, and Esma warms up to the advances of a stranger after she learns he is also waiting to find and claim his father's body. Zbanic avoids that film's guttersniping, but Grbavica lacks for the poetry that has made Vittorio de Sica's great *Two Women* a cornerstone of neorealism. One may posit a correlative between Esma's emotional state and the lack of pretense to the filmmaking, but Zbanic's gentle approach is more televisual than cinematic. Husanovic sees Zbanic's films (including Grbavica) as part of a "collective endeavor that renders art into a transformative model of communication and engages the subject in dialogue and reflection on the traumatic contents of Bosnian realities" (106). She believes that women's art imbues female victims with a power of speech that allows for the formation of a community of victims. This community develops a "new symbolic framework for the negotiation between silence and speech" that reduces marginalization at the hands of the metanarrative (Husanovic 109). "Torture, maternity, and truth in Jasmila Zbanic's Grbavica: Land of My Dreams." *Jump Cut* 51 (2009): n. pag. Web. Watch and Download Grbavica: The Land of My Dreams (2006) Full in Full HD and 1080 quality , Online Free no account needed Torrent and with English subtitles , the movie of , Adult , Drama , free Online streaming , with high quality 1080p 4K . watch more in sauflix . our webiste in repons of Where to watch and Download Grbavica: The Land of My Dreams (2006) and how to watch Download it free and online Torrent. A woman and her daughter struggle to make their way through the aftermath of the Balkan war. Writer : Jasmila Zbanic. How is this show ? 0. Create an account. Grbavica: The Land of My Dreams. 2007. METASCORE. Generally favorable reviews based on 21 Critic Reviews. See All. 71. USER SCORE. Your score has been saved for Grbavica: The Land of My Dreams. Would you like to write a review? Write a review. No, thank you. Review this Movie. There is a 75 character minimum for reviews. If your review contains spoilers, please check the Spoiler box. The power of "Grbavica" is not the arc of its story line, but the fullness of the world Zbanic creates. Read full review. 40. Russell Edwards. Central performance by Mirjana Karanovic is instantly endearing. Unfortunately, film coasts on thesp's ability to evoke sympathy and leaves her stranded in this yarn that's all setup and little payoff. Strand Releasing has acquired all U.S. rights to Jasmila Zbanic's "Grbavica: The Land of My Dreams," the winner of the Golden Bear at this year's Berlin Film Festival, from Match Factory Films. The film, Bosnia and Herzegovina's official entry for foreign language film Oscar consideration, is screening Tuesday night and Wednesday at AFI Fest. The deal was negotiated by Strand Releasing's Jon Gerrans and Match Factory's Michael Weber.