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The Politics of Forgiveness and Bearing Witness after a Genocidal War: Three Short Films from Bosnia-Herzegovina

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One way to distinguish short films from feature length films is to point out that they are shorter. There are also other ways to distinguish short films. Short films are non-commercial, allowing a greater degree of artistic freedom. Short films are like paintings, photographs, or poems in terms of their structure and content. They capture an unforgettable moment, share an epiphany, or depict the sublime. What perhaps is most poignant about short films is simply their desire to say something. They seek to influence their audience in a momentous way (Cooper & Dancyger, 2005)

Short films flourished as an art form in Eastern Europe. Zagreb Film is renowned for its short animated films with sharp, witty commentaries on modern social life. After the war from 1992-1995 in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the art form was sustained through the works of Ahmet Imamović, Slobodan Gulubović Leman, and Samir Mehanović. Their work serves a function within Bosnia-Herzegovina and the wider world. They recollect memories during the war. They place traumatic events from the war so as to disassociate without forgetting. They move viewers to a stronger sense of well-being, one that is neither denial nor fixation. The short films empower a deeply violated society.

The politics of forgiveness is a challenging concept. On the one hand, in its ideal form forgiveness is not the least bit political. Forgiveness justifies itself for its own sake. Forgiveness is pure. It is independent of instrumental reasoning where forgiveness would seek some end independent of itself. On the other hand, politics avoids forgiveness if it can. Politics holds others responsible for the consequences of their actions, maintains one's advantage vis-à-vis another, and anticipates the consequences of one's actions by making rational decisions based on such circumspection.

How then are we to understand this paradoxical phrase "the politics of forgiveness"? What is its structure? Its logic? First, this study presents a sociological argument as to what is meant by the politics of forgiveness and how such an oriented course of action is achieved whether in art or everyday life. Then, providing telltale examples of this argument through tight, exegetical accounts of three short Bosnian films made after the war from 1992-1995, the study accounts for the politics of forgiveness in its best sense.

Erving Goffman and the politics of forgiveness

Erving Goffman frames the study's account of the politics of forgiveness. First, to give some background, Goffman formulates two parallel types of impression management. One, he calls defensive measures where one takes measures to save one's positive standing in an interaction, to save one's face. A defensive measure might be an apology for some offense to another, or, on the reverse side, it might be a lie that conceals something that puts one in a bad light. The second, he calls protective measures, where one takes measures on behalf of not one's own but another's positive standing in a social interaction. One saves the face of another. Goffman calls this tact. A protective measure could be the conscious avoidance of an embarrassing topic for someone during a conversation, or it could be a deception that keeps another from knowing a fact that would be harmful to the other's well-being.

Then Goffman formulates a third and deeper type of impression management, deeper because it has to be reciprocal. This third type of impression management Goffman calls *tact regarding tact*. While the first two types of impression management, defensive and protective measures, are one-sided, tact regarding tact must be reciprocal. Tact regarding tact is where one takes a protective measure to save the face of another where the other is thereby influenced to save face by reciprocating the tactfulness of the other. In this way, tact regarding tact creates not only a positive standing for oneself and another, but a positive solidarity where two work collaboratively to save one another's face as well as to protect one another's face, keeping both in positive standing with each other as well as the larger community (Goffman, 1956).

Goffman's single example for tact regarding tact is pedestrian. If a secretary is to tell a visitor tactfully that the man he wishes to see is out, it will be wise for the visitor to step back from the inter-office telephone so that he will not hear what the secretary is being told by the man who is presumably not there to tell her. The visitor's tactful withdrawal protects the secretary, making it easier for her when she has to lie to the visitor. The visitor colludes with the secretary who will shortly have to tell him the man he wants to see is not in the office when he, in fact, is in the office (Goffman, 1956, 149-150).

While Goffman's example of tact regarding tact is mundane, the examples provided in this study are moral and high-minded, while still preserving the structure of tact regarding tact. The argument of this study is that the politics of forgiveness exemplifies the morally constructive and rationally enlightened practice of tact regarding tact.

Film 10 Minuta

“Deset Minuta” [Ten Minutes] is a short film that lasts ten minutes. The film by Ahmed Imanović was awarded Best Short Film of 2002 by the European Film Academy. The film opens with an Asian man entering a photo store in Rome and asking in broken English if the owner speaks English and if the owner can truly develop a roll of film in ten minutes as advertised on the billboard outside the store. The owner answers with an Italian accent saying, “Si, como like Al Pacino” and then “certo.” The Asian man

says in amazement that that must be a new world record, and the Italian owner answers, "It is the last technology. Of course. Trust me." The Asian man leaves his roll of film on the counter and steps outside to light a cigarette while he anxiously waits. Next to the photo store, a couple is sitting at a table talking gaily at an outdoor cafe, and people are entering and exiting the street at well-timed intervals.

The film then switches to Sarajevo during the war, occurring not so far away across the Adriatic at the same time. In the kitchen of a dark apartment, a mother is holding an infant child trying with a rattle to distract it from its crying. Her older son is sitting at the kitchen table reading a magazine. She tells her son to go fetch water, and the boy ignores her immersed in his reading. The frustrated mother scoots him out of the kitchen grabbing the magazine out of his hands and hitting him on the head with it. The boy, unbaffled, picks up the canisters and heads outside.

As the boy leaves, his father returns from the front line where he is a soldier protecting his family and community. They talk at the entrance to their apartment. The boy asks when is his father going to show him how to use the rifle. The father ignores him and tells the boy to be careful as he goes to fetch water because they are starting to shell again. As the boy skips down the stairs, his father's friend, who is coming up the stairwell, grabs him, picks him up, and pulls his ears before letting him pass.

As the boy goes out onto the court yard, he says hello to an elder woman on crutches, perhaps injured during the war, and then says hello to friends playing soccer in the play yard in front of the apartment complex. His playmates ask when he will come join them. The boy skips and jumps carrying two large water jugs taking a shortcut through an empty apartment window with graffiti on the walls.

A young woman is walking her dog onto an empty field beyond the apartment complex, and the young boy, named Memo, yells at her and says halt several times. The woman finally turns around and asks what. He says there are snipers where she is headed. She says leave me alone and proceeds to walk her dog outside the metal sheet barricades. The sense of fatalism frames the need to maintain a sense of normalcy.

The boy sneaks up on two soldiers playing chess behind a sandbag barricade in the courtyard; they are complaining about how short their leaves are. The boy attempts to take one of the soldier's gun, and the soldier grabs it back and asks the boy to get him a loaf of bread when the bread cart comes. The soldier offers a cigarette for payment. The boy says he wants the gun instead. The soldier moans and offers him two cigarettes calling the boy a hustler, noting that this will leave him with only one cigarette. The bread cart and water truck arrive. Shelling starts as soon as people gather for bread and water. The soldiers stand up from their sandbagged fortification and tell people to go quickly to the shelters. After getting a little water in his canister, dropping off a loaf of bread in the soldiers' trench, and racing past, the boy stoops down and starts back home. The soldier tries to stop him from going farther because of the shelling. We hear the woman's dog yelping on the field during the shelling. The boy races around a corner and across the play area to his apartment complex while a man leaps and races in front of him. The apartment building, where the boy lives, was hit by a shell. The woman with crutches sitting in the entrance taking cover attempts to prevent the boy from going up the stairs by putting one of her crutches against the

wall across the entrance hallway. The boy slips under and dashes upstairs. Just before he enters his apartment, his father's friend catches the boy and covers his eyes with his hands so that the boy cannot see inside the apartment. The boy breaks from the tight grip, goes to the apartment door entrance, sees his mother and his father covered with blood and dead, and hears his sibling crying. The film pans up to a clock on the apartment wall; it shows that ten minutes have passed.

The film quickly switches to a wall clock in the photo store in Rome, and one sees that the same ten minutes have passed in each place. The Asian man is buying his photos having been processed on time and stands outside looking at a photo of his family, his wife and two children, next to the Colosseum in Rome. These two "family photos" contrast, one positive and happy, one negative and tragic. This film technique is called shot reverse shot. The film juxtaposes the pictures of two families as if they might be looking at each other when, in fact, they are not. A possibility that is not a reality is created. A reality that should be a reality is unreal.

"Ten Minutes" depicts the sense of normality that sustained the social life of an urban neighborhood living inside a horrific siege. The normality was both real and illusory. The mother cooks dinner. The boy is engrossed in reading. The boy fetches water. The children play soccer in the courtyard. Friends tease each other. People greet each other warmly. Soldiers play chess. A woman takes a stroll with her dog. People worked to normalize their lives together when, in fact, their lives were not normal. The well-being of a community was maintained despite a vicious war against civilians.

The short film contrasts the Asian man, a tourist in Rome, anxious and worried to get his film developed, and the Sarajevo family, trying to pretend not to be anxious for the sake of each other and for the sake of themselves. The man in Rome is enmeshed in mundane matters, not aware of what he takes for granted while looking at his newly processed family photo and not aware of the fragility of life. In contrast, the family in the Sarajevo is embedded in life, the meaningfulness of life together, clinging to every minute they have and knowing how evanescent life is. Despite its vulnerability and instability, the community sustained itself as a vibrant community. The film wants the man in Rome to think about the family in Sarajevo. The film also asks viewers to identify with the man in Rome and see how he is unaware of the family in Sarajevo so as to become aware of the family in Sarajevo. When viewers both identify with and disassociate from the man in Rome, they show their tactfulness in response to the film's tactfulness toward them.

When the film starts with scenes in black and white of Rome and its famous Colosseum, viewers think that the opening scene in the photo store is shot in Rome. The scene, however is actually shot in Sarajevo on a street in the center of Sarajevo near the Catholic Cathedral. The street in Sarajevo looks like many streets in Rome. There is no difference visually between Sarajevo and Rome. The film imports the peace in Rome to Sarajevo. There, however, is a difference. There is a war in Sarajevo. The film also transfers the war in one place to another place. It exports the war in Sarajevo to Rome. This switching, first this transference and then this cross-transference, is the way in which the film bears witness. On the one hand, the war crimes occurring in Sarajevo and throughout Bosnia have no relation to life in Rome and the tourist having his film developed. Life in Rome is safe and peaceful. On the

other hand, before the war, life in Sarajevo had been no different from life in Rome. Sarajevo had been as safe and peaceful as any modern European city. The short film exploits the non-difference between Sarajevo and Rome to expose the difference. The non-difference between Sarajevo and Rome stands parallel to the difference between Sarajevo and Rome. Bearing witness is not about showing the difference that violence creates, as is often thought; bearing witness is about preserving the non-difference that violence cannot erase. Such is the logos that informs tact regarding tact, which must take for granted the non-difference between one and another.

The short film belies the orientalism with which many in Europe viewed the siege of Sarajevo as if Europe had no connection from which and with which to comprehend the siege. The short film confronts the shallow nature of the world's sympathy for people in Sarajevo during the war, a sympathy grounded in disconnection, and demands the world's empathy for people in Sarajevo, an empathy grounded in a sense of connection. Herein is the structure of tact regarding tact, bringing forgiveness and politics together, as an unlikely couple. This film was awarded Best Short Film of 2002 by the European Film Academy.

Film 42 1/2

We now turn to a second film, "42 1/2," by Slobodan Gulubović Leman. The film starts with an urbane man in a linen suit, wearing a bandana around his neck, buying shoes in a small shoe store in the center of Sarajevo. He tries on different sizes with the help of the shoe clerk and chooses size 42 1/2. His wife, who speaks German, looks at shoes standing next to the display wall. "Das ist schön," she says to her children. The man has one leg. After his purchase outside the shoe store window, the man departs from his family carrying his shoe box in a bag. As he starts down the street on crutches, his wife holding back her children looks at him disdainfully as he departs.

The scene switches to a man in the mountains living in a hut that has an open fire burning outside. The man's young daughter is sitting at a wooden picnic table eating watermelon. Her father smiles at her. The man goes inside and looks on a rickety shelf that has several bottles of plum brandy. He pulls down different bottles, takes a swig, swishes it around his mouth and spits it out onto the floor. Eventually, he selects a bottle that has 42 1/2 hand-written on its paper label. This man is missing a leg as well. He walks outside the hut on crutches and heads down the hillside. A wolf-like dog chained to a tree whines and barks as he walks away hopping on crutches. His wife, chopping wood for the fire with an axe, looks at him scornfully as he departs. Here again is the film technique shot reverse shot. The short film juxtaposes the pictures of two scornful wives as if they might be looking at each other while watching their husbands depart when, in fact, they are not. A possibility that is not a reality is created. A reality that should be a reality is unreal. We see the structure of tact regarding tact despite the absence of its content.

To the sound of a solo tuba, playing a slow march, the urban man walks up the steep hills of Sarajevo and the rural man walks down the mountain from Pale, each on crutches. The man from the city arrives first and waits sitting on a bench on a lookout above Sarajevo from where Serbian guns fired onto the city over the course of four years relentlessly. As the man from Pale approaches, he stumbles, almost falling, and

sits next to his friend. They talk about their crutches, and the urban man says his crutches are easier because they are lighter. He opens his shoe box and gives his friend a shoe, the wrong one at first. One needs the left shoe. The other needs the right shoe. The rural man puts on the right shoe, and it fits because the two men wear the same size shoe. The man from Sarajevo asks him why he does not wear socks. The man from Pale says so his feet do not stink. The man from Pale takes out his bottle of plum brandy, 42 ½ like the shoe size. The urban man takes out two shot glasses. They pour each other a drink and toast. Then they stand up holding on to each other without their crutches, hop up and down, and dance a jig, each possessing the other man's leg as if they were now one man with two legs. Separate, each is one legged. Together, they become two-legged.

As the rural man departs, he makes a joke asking his friend next time to bring a pair of flip flops. The word for flip flop, *japanke*, is also the word for Japanese women, thus a double-entendre or a joke. The urban man from Sarajevo swears at him. As the film ends with the sound of a solo tuba player, one man walking slowly up the hill, the other man walking slowly down the hill, a text appears on the screen saying that one man served in the army of the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the other in the army of the Serbian forces. Both are war invalids, and both are unemployed. The two men return to their wives and family.

“42 ½” exemplifies reconciliation. It shows how reconciliation is not only possible but necessary. The two men need each other for material as well as social reasons. Their culture, not their politics, insists that they need each other. One needs the other for a good shoe. The other needs the one for a good bottle of plum brandy. Their lives are better as well as happier when their need for each other is satisfied. Neither man can be whole, complete, while remaining a part. To be whole, to be complete, each needs the other to be satisfied.

Here again we see tact regarding tact in operation albeit in a different context. The logic of tact regarding tact is the logic of reconciliation; it is a logic that applies not only to two individuals, but also to two entities, two ethnic groups, or two communities. The organic solidarity that arises from the interdependence of differences is not only stronger but also better than the mechanical solidarity that arises from the melting pot of sameness (Durkheim 1984). Tact regarding tact creates not only a positive standing for oneself and another, but a positive solidarity where two work collaboratively to save the other's face as well as to protect the other's face, keeping each in positive standing with the other as well as the larger community.

In a collection of short stories titled, *Autoportret s torbom* [Self portrait with a bag], Semeždin Mehmedinović talks about Radomir Konstantinović. Mehmedinović is a well-known author and poet from Sarajevo; Konstantinović is a well-known Serbian philosopher, famous for his impassioned and penetrating critique of Serbian nationalism (2009). Although Mehmedinović never met Konstantinović and has only read his writing, Mehmedinović thinks of Konstantinović as a friend whose death he recently heard of and now mourns. At one point, Mehmedinović (2013, p. 68) cites a sentence from Konstantinović on friendship, “*Mislim na prijatelstvo kao na privilegiju (valjda najveću od svih privilegija)*” [“I think of friendship as a privilege (perhaps the greatest privilege of all privileges)”). The sentiment of friendship between

Mehmedinović, the Bosnian Muslim poet, and Konstantinović, the Serbian philosopher, is perhaps best described as tact regarding tact. Tact regarding tact is the art of friendship, each saving the other's face and giving the other face..

Film *Kako smo se igrali*

We now turn to the third and last film titled "How We Played," or "Kako smo se igrali," by Samir Mehanović. The film's location is a rural community in Bosnia-Herzegovina, near the beautiful, scenic Srebrenik Fortress, a well-preserved medieval castle dating from 1333, near Srebrenik, a town close to the city of Tuzla. The story starts with men praying on the balcony of a mosque and a young boy about ten years old kneeling in the middle in line with the men. When the young boy rises up from prayer, another young boy, his friend, walks through the wooden gate into the yard before the mosque, puts his hand to his mouth, and whistles to get his friend's attention. His friend on the balcony, named Ramiz, turns around and sees his young friend, named Stevo, beckoning him with a nod to come down and play. Ramiz gets up and leaves the older men praying. As they leave the mosque together, the boys take the shoes of the older men at the mosque entrance on the floor and run off with them, a childhood prank. The film switches to a three or four story school building where children are playing outside in the yard. Children are kicking a soccer ball in a group, and there is a scuffle between two boys, one being Stevo. A young female teacher, wearing large glasses, comes out the door ringing a bell commanding the children's attention who gather around her. She announces that school is closed, and they will hear back when school reopens. The children jump and shout for joy.

Then we see Ramiz and Stevo head up the hill of a wheat field with large haystacks toward the Srebrenik Fortress located above on an extremely steep hill top. The medieval fortress seems impregnable. A man in the field is harvesting wheat with a sickle, and the boys sit next to each other on the field far below the fortress, chewing on a piece of straw. We hear soft booms in the background, suggesting the methodic shelling of artillery. Stevo tells Ramiz stories about hidden treasures and pirates, and Ramiz doubts the veracity of what Stevo heard from his grandfather. Stevo then shares something he saw in a foreign film, and Ramiz again doubts him. Ramiz then has an idea and says maybe there is buried treasure in the fortress and invites Stevo to go up and search with him. They get up excited and run up the hill to the fortress. In the fortress, they sword fight with wooden sticks, fencing like pirates, on the high fortress walls and inside the medieval ruins. They look around and through a stone window where Stevo sees smoke rising on a far hillside, suggesting a burning home from shelling. The boys go into a stone room inside the fortress and find something that looks like a grave or a buried treasure. Stevo crosses himself because he thinks it may be a grave. They dig it up and pull out a blanket which is wrapped around a rifle. Ramiz pulls out the rifle first, lifts it up to his eye, looks down the barrel, aims it at Stevo, and pulls the trigger. A click is heard. The gun is not loaded, a relief to the anxious audience. Stevo then grabs the rifle, and they briefly wrestle with it. They break off and Stevo says to Ramiz, you know we are no longer friends. Stevo runs out the fortress onto the field below. Ramiz can be seen from the field afar standing alone high on the wall of the tall fortress, waving his arms up and down over his head, calling to Stevo to come back. A red sun is setting in the background. Stevo runs home.

The film then switches to Stevo's bedroom where he is having trouble sleeping because of noises outside. He has a dream where Ramiz and he are dressed as royalty in a medieval court opening a treasure chest that lights up and shines on their happy faces. On Stevo's bed there is a large stuffed clown. Stevo gets up, looks out his bedroom window, and sees a man with a gun dragging another man who is yelling, no, no, under his window. Stevo goes downstairs and sits with his father at the kitchen table. His father has a rifle and takes off his Chetnik hat, or *šajkača*, a prideful, national Serb symbol. The father puts the hat on Stevo's head and pulls it down. Stevo then reaches for his father's gun, and his father pushes it away. Stevo gets mad and takes the *šajkača* off his head and slams it on the table. The man's wife comes to the table and asks if her husband will eat. He says yes. She brings him a bowl of stew. He then shows her a list of names, names of Muslim neighbors in the village. She knows what the list means and she says, with objection, they are our neighbors. He slams his fist on the table. Stevo also sees the list and the name of Ramiz's family on the list. Stevo then gets up and runs out of the house to go to Ramiz's home to warn him that soldiers are coming to kill him and his family. As he walks briskly to Ramiz's house, he passes the corpse of a woman. He also passes a burning house that has the Serbian cross, four interlocking C's, a nationalist motto meaning, Only Unity Saves the Serbs, painted on its wall. Stevo reaches Ramiz's house and taps the window of Ramiz's bedroom. Ramiz opens the window and says what is up. Stevo yells, hurry, run, run, soldiers are coming to kill you. Ramiz, intrigued, thinks Stevo is telling another tall tale and asks for more information,. Stevo tells Ramiz that his father is one of the soldiers coming to kill him and his family. Cars pull up to the house, brakes squeaking. Ramiz shuts the window and goes inside, and Stevo runs quickly away. Four militia men wearing Chetnik hats and armbands and carrying pistols, one being Stevo's father, run up to the house and break down the door in a military type operation, one at a time ducking down low through the door. A woman's scream is heard, and shots are fired.

The camera then returns to Stevo who is now sitting in a field next to a haystack, crouched, hugging his knees up to his chest, shaking with terror, eyes wide open. The film ends. It needs to be noted now that the film started with a brief scene of the two boys on a wheat field, and Ramiz is standing on top of a tall pole with his arms spread out from his shoulders as if being crucified. Stevo is running across the field calling out Ramize, the vocative case for Ramiz, in an effort to find his friend, foreshadowing his friend's death.

The question with which the film leaves the viewer is what now will happen to Stevo? Will Stevo return home, put on his father's Chetnik hat, pick up a rifle, and bring violence to bear against non-Serbs? Will the trauma of this violence against his friend Ramiz at the hands of his father wreak havoc with Stevo's moral conscience, a conscience poignantly dramatized in his effort to save his friend? As a young boy, Stevo did the righteous deed and took a virtuous action even though it stood against his father's violent action against neighbors. Stevo went against the Serbian nationalist motto, Only Unity Saves Serbs; he acted according to another social principle. Stevo's moral conscience was stronger and more independent than his father's. Stevo choose to save not a Serb, but a non-Serb, his friend, Ramiz. Will Stevo now see himself as a traitor of the Serbian community? Will he become a Chetnik and wear a *šajkača* like his father? Who will support Stevo in a way that understands and

recognizes his brave and virtuous deed? The film's twist is that its focus is not on the trauma of those who suffered aggression but on the trauma of the aggressors' children. The structure of this twist is tact regarding tact. The film takes a protective measure toward Stevo, telling his story and keeping him in positive standing. Will the Serbian community show a reciprocal tactfulness. The film asks the Serbian community to take protective measures for its own sake toward non-Serbs rather than take defensive measures on behalf of itself. The film initiates the hoped for reciprocity by first taking protective measures toward Stevo, the righteous youth.

Historical trauma is an emotional and psychological wound for an entire community that results from forced relocations, destruction of cultural traditions, and genocide. The wound festers and is carried across generations. The wound lingers in the souls of generations. The result can be high rates of mental and physical illness and profound harm to families and communities. Historically catastrophic events such as genocide impact not just individuals, but a whole community. The historical trauma, moreover, is not just about what happened in the past but also about what is still happening (Pettigrew, 2018; Webster & Haight, 2002; Simon, Rosenberg & Eppert, 2000).

Healing for a community suffering from historical trauma comes through reconnecting with the compelling traditions and culture of the community so as to process the collective grief of past traumas. Cultural healing focuses on the goodness and beauty of a heritage, preserving the values of an abused community, which is what tact regarding tact cherishes. "How We Played" raises the tacit question of how historical trauma will be passed on to Stevo, whose community blindly committed egregious crimes not only against another community, but also against its own community, against close neighbors. Cultural healing comes from learning and appreciating not only the goodness and beauty of an ethnic culture but also the goodness and beauty of a national culture. Such is the invitation of Stevo's dream of medieval Bosnia, a heritage Stevo and Ramiz share. Such also is the reminder of the Srebrenik Fortress, the moving material culture of this well preserved castle from the country's romantic medieval epoch.

It will be difficult to heal Stevo's trauma. Stevo did nothing wrong but only what was virtuous. Stevo acted as a good human being, the finest human being. He attempted to save his friend, Ramiz. After witnessing the murder of Ramiz and his family by his father, Stevo is frozen with fear. Wherein lies the goodness and beauty of murder, crimes against humanity, and genocide? What will happen to Stevo? Who will protect him from an unjust punishment? The Serbian community? The challenge of sustaining Stevo's virtuous nature is formidable, but such is the goal of the film's tactfulness. Seeing goodness and beauty in another is the way in which one comes to see goodness and beauty in one's self. It is the logic and the principle of tact regarding tact.

Conclusion

These three films, while bearing witness, depict the pathos of the politics of forgiveness. They depict the purpose of bearing witness as the linking together of politics and forgiveness, an unlikely couple. The majesty of their art is that neither side of these dichotomies is compromised. The political action of bearing witness does not erase the moral need for reconciliation. Each side of the dichotomy is

strengthened in juxtaposition to its opposing side, given the dialectic of tact regarding tact. These films are precious and invaluable, moral and high-minded, for moving their society and the world to a better sense of well-being.

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