

**History and Remembrance in Three Post-Yugoslav Authors: Dubravka  
Ugrešić, Daša Drndić, and Aleksandar Zograf**

**by**

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*In the memory of my grandmother*

*Desanka Beronja*

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## List of Abbreviations

SW = Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings*. 4. Vols. Cambridge, Mass. And London: Harvard University Press, 1996-2003.

MS = Ugrešić, Dubravka. *The Ministry of Pain*. (trans.) Michael Henry Heim. New York: Ecco, 2006.

SON = Drndić, Daša. *Sonnenschein*. Zaprešić Fraktura, 2007.

AB = Drndić, Daša. *April u Berlinu*. Zaprešić Fraktura, 2009.

RS = Zograf, Aleksandar. *Regards from Serbia*. Atlanta: Top Shelf Productions, 2007.



## Abstract

This dissertation analyzes the multimedia works of three post-Yugoslav authors—Dubravka Ugrešić, Daša Drndić, and Aleksandar Zograf—against the historical background of Yugoslavia’s violent dissolution and the emergence of hegemonic nationalist narratives in Serbia and Croatia based, in large part, on the practice of historical revisionism, selective remembering of the past, and politically motivated myth-making. It argues that these works disrupt the dominant grammars of national memory by foregrounding rupture, fragment, and discontinuity, thereby refusing to structure the nation as a unitary and homogeneous ethnic community with a stable history. In this sense, these works also reveal the inherently constructed and fragmentary nature of national traditions, and hence their potential for transformation. Through a series of close readings, this study reveals these text as spaces of intersecting historical legacies—such as fascism, communism, and ethnic nationalism—that are critically recollected in the space of the present, as well as of emergent, textually and visually mapped geographies of immigration, exile, and transnational existence, appearing in the wake of Yugoslavia’s dissolution.

Drawing on the work of the Jewish-German philosopher Walter Benjamin, I view these works as textual and visual spaces of remembrance that gather the past, present, and the future into a critical constellation. By rejecting the unity inherent in epic narrative connected, in particular, to the historiography in service of nation-building, these works make visible both the radical historical breaks, losses, and uneasy continuities which, in turn, call for new cultural forms of memory. On the one hand, the aesthetic transformation of traumatic historical

experiences in these works allows for mourning and working through a difficult and blocked past. On the other hand, the recuperated and reworked, albeit fragmentary and unstable, past becomes a new ground for a critique of exclusionary nationalisms and the concomitant emergence of civic consciousness.

## Introduction

This dissertation examines the poetics of remembrance and loss in three post-Yugoslav authors: Dubravka Ugrešić, Daša Drndić, and Aleksandar Zograf. It focuses on five works produced as an aesthetic response to the collapse of the former Yugoslavia and the wars that ensued in its wake. I suggest we view these works as symbolic reactions to blocked mourning, more specifically, an attempt to symbolize the wartime loss of civilian lives, as well as the destruction of multinational spaces and common cultural heritage during the violent dissolution of the socialist state. Blocked mourning emerges here as a dominant paradigm of nation-building in Croatia and Serbia during the 1990s and a cultural condition against which these works should be read. The main features of blocked mourning are: 1.) a defensive, narcissistic image of the nation, which sees itself alternately as either victim or hero, 2.) an inability to mourn the losses of those who are constructed, within ethno-nationalist ideology, as constitutive national others, and 3.) selective remembering, which constructs the past in terms of a teleological narrative that necessarily culminates in an ethnically pure nation-state. The works examined in this dissertation represent a challenge to the dominant—victimological and heroic—grammars of national memory in Croatia and Serbia instituted in the 1990s and continuing into the present; they shatter what Walter Benjamin has called “the empty, homogeneous time”<sup>1</sup> of nationalist historiography by recovering lost cultural fragments, past commitments, and

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<sup>1</sup> *Illuminations*, p. 262

traumatic absences that open up history and collective memory to *symbolic reworking*. These memory works consequently acquire a political and collective dimension; they call not so much for a transformation of national identity, but for a deconstruction of the boundaries that constitute a given political and cultural community. Viewed as a symbolic and political practice, memory work and mourning introduce plurality, antagonism, and difference into the imaginary “we” of the nation in a way that makes visible its historical and present-day exclusions.

Set during or in the aftermath of a series of historical events that can be described as catastrophic—the Yugoslav wars and mass atrocities committed in its course, refugee crisis, the collapse of an ideological system and formation of new ones—the works Dubravka Ugrešić, Daša Drndić, and Aleksandar Zograf attempt both to witness catastrophic history as it is taking place and to preserve the traces of the past in the wake of destruction. While these authors occupy different subject-positions, employ different media, and significantly diverge in their approach to cultural memory, all of them foreground the fragmentary and incomplete nature of the past’s material archive, refusing to produce a single, authoritative, and unified narrative of history.

## **I. Identities, Historical Legacies, and Critical Geographies**

In contrast to the rest of Eastern Europe, where non-violent revolutions following the fall of the Berlin Wall secured a largely peaceful transition from state socialism to liberal democracy, Yugoslavia experienced a rise of ethnic nationalisms in its respective republics, eventually culminating in a series of brutal and drawn-out wars, the worst Europe has seen since WWII.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Yugoslav wars—consisting of a series of localized conflicts, namely, the Ten-Day War in Slovenia (1991), the Croatian War of Independence (1991-1995), the Bosnian War (1992-1995) and Kosovo War (1998-1999)—resulted in the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the creation of seven

The Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), a largely secular, multicultural welfare state with a ‘soft’ socialist system that incorporated elements of capitalism, thus quickly splintered into seven different, mutually antagonistic nation-states. After a period of virulent wartime nationalism in the 1990s, especially in Serbia and Croatia, all of the states have been gradually accepting the Western model of democracy and free market economy, although nationalism remains a prevalent and visible element in public life, as well as “very usable spare basis of legitimacy”<sup>3</sup> for national politicians and cultural elites. While this study does not purport to explain the causes of the wars, nor does it assume that art and literature can answer these questions, it does touch upon selective remembering and mythical national narration that prepared the ground for the destruction of the previously shared multicultural and civic spaces, which continues into the present.

As I mentioned earlier, I limit this study to three authors whose work is especially marked by memory work and mourning as politicized practices, namely, Dubravka Ugrešić, Daša Drndić, and Aleksanadar Zograf. While the works of these authors should not necessarily be taken as paradigmatic of contemporary Serbian and Croatian literature, nor are they united by a common poetic form, they do share a certain exilic sensibility, a desire to step outside of the interpretative context of the nation and a concomitant position of marginality vis-à-vis the dominant collective identifications. In all three authors, this ‘marginality’ is discursively performed within the works themselves and one of its main functions is to preempt and regulate their double reception ‘at home’ and ‘abroad.’ Marginality should be therefore seen as both a form of *situated knowledge*, *affective disposition*, and a *strategic maneuver* of a decentered and

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independent nation-states on the territory of the former confederation. According to independent reports, in the course of the wars, around one hundred and thirty thousand (130, 000) people died and around four million (4,000,000) were displaced.

<sup>3</sup> Dvornik, *Actors without Society*, p. 81

displaced subject in negotiating her identity outside of the categories offered by dominant ideologies and forms of social knowledge. In this sense, I concur with Amit Chauduri's definition of marginality as essentially an "experience of ambivalence"<sup>4</sup>—the knowledge that identity is a discursive and historical category that is frequently imposed from without, often in violent and totalizing manner, and only then retrospectively internalized in complex and contradictory ways. "Many of us know how to occupy such a position," Chauduri writes, "or to emerge from a tradition of individualism, of modernity, inflected by minority; and of minority not being a political certitude, but an experience of ambivalence."<sup>5</sup> Chauduri sees this ambivalence at work among the European secular Jew and *bhadralok*, "a bespectacled bourgeois that emerged (mainly in Calcutta; but also in the small towns of Bengal) in the nineteenth century."<sup>6</sup> Both of these historical individuals belong to groups that experienced historical oppression—anti-Semitism and colonial racism respectively—and were politicized as a result of this experience. "But, unlike today's post-colonial or proponent of identity politics," both the diasporic Jew of yesteryear and the *bhadralok* are "unsure of [their] identity" and, moreover, their "politics extend to a critique of [their] forbearers"<sup>7</sup>

In the (now former) Yugoslav context, this position was best represented by the half Montenegrin, half Hungarian Jewish writer Danilo Kiš—often described as 'the last Yugoslav author,'—who spoke of his own identity as "the drama of non-authenticity."<sup>8</sup> This drama of non-authenticity or permanent self-alienation was once a defining complex of the Central European writer, who was able to find the freedom from coercion, "the ideals of 'the open society'" only in

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<sup>4</sup> "Introduction," in Benjamin, Walter. *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (2009), p xi.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p ix.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p xi.

<sup>8</sup> "Variations on the Theme of Central Europe," p 13.

“language and, in literature, that ‘strange and mysterious consolation’ Kafka speaks of.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the disruptive and discontinuous history of Central Europe and the Balkans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more than anything else, has imposed this experience of self-alienation on the individual, time and again. In the first place, this has been a history of resurgent nationalist movements, or as Kiš puts it, those expressions of “collective and individual paranoia.”<sup>10</sup> In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the region has produced countless biographies, in which individuals changed states, nations, and political systems without ever moving from the spot they were born. Kiš gives us an image of one such individual in a short character sketch of a ‘typical’ Central European *apatride* in the interwar period, just as Hitler was preparing to invade Czechoslovakia (May 8, 1938):

I am a typical mixture of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, may it rest in peace: a Magyar, Croat, Slovak, German, and Czech all at once, and if perchance I started poking into my ancestors and submitting my blood under analysis—a very fashionable science among contemporary nationalists—I would find there, as in a riverbed, traces of Wallach, Armenian, and maybe even Jewish and Gypsy blood. But I do not recognize this analysis of spectral blood analysis, a science, among other things, of wholly questionable character, dangerous and inhumane, especially at this time and for these regions of ours—where this perilous theory of blood and soil creates only suspicion and hatred and where this ‘spectral analysis of blood and origin’ is executed in a very spectacular and primitive manner—with a blade or a revolver.<sup>11</sup>

There is a note of overwrought bourgeois gentility in Kiš’s text, an ironic thread of Imperial nostalgia that may sound dated to today’s ears. But it is precisely for this reason that this voice, speaking at a moment before a total catastrophe, echoes so eerily in the present. In the years that followed, as we well know, masses of people were completely stripped of their citizenship. Some were forced to relocate elsewhere, if they were lucky enough to be granted asylum. Others, less

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> “On Nationalism.” *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (May, 1996), p 13.

<sup>11</sup> “Apatrid.” *Skladište*, in *Sabrana dela Danila Kiša, knj. 13*, ed. Mirjana Miočinović. Beograd: Beogradski izdavačko-grafički zavod, 1995, pp. 214-15, my translation.

fortunate, were herded into concentration camps because, in the words of Hannah Arendt, “they were and appeared to be nothing but human beings whose very innocence [...] was their greatest misfortune.”<sup>12</sup> The writers and the comic book artist examined in this dissertation not only register this traumatic history as it repeats anew with the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, but also echo—each in his or her own way—Kiš’s distrust of identity.

This question of identity has been additionally tied to the shifting internal and external perception of the former Yugoslav countries in the new mental map of Europe. In turn, these symbolic and imaginary geographies of Europe’s southern and eastern peripheries have affected not only various national narratives and emerging identities, but also the regional frames of scholarship, including literary and cultural studies. Already in the mid-1990s, starting with Maria Todorova’s founding text, *Imagining the Balkans*, the discursive production of geographic labels, as well as the formation of civilizational hierarchies and mechanisms of ‘othering’ based on these labels—namely, the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and Central Europe—has itself become an important object of scholarship.<sup>13</sup> The course this scholarship has taken, such the collection of critical essays *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation* (2002), has most frequently been allied with the post-colonial critique and concomitant strategies of subversion aimed primarily (although not exclusively) at the imperial language used to construct Europe’s peripheries. As one of the editors of the aforementioned collection, Dušan Bjelić, makes clear,

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<sup>12</sup> *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p 295. For Arendt, this new type of ‘innocence’ invented by 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarian systems, Nazism and Stalinism, carries important philosophical implications. In a world where a person can be found guilty not for what they *they’ve done* but solely for *what they are*, responsibility—and with it, guilt and innocence—loses its meaning: “Guilt and innocence become senseless notions; “guilty” is he who stands in the way of the natural or historical process which has passed judgment over “inferior races,” over individuals “unfit to live,” over “dying classes and decadent peoples.” Terror executes these judgments, and before its court, all concerned are subjectively innocent: the murdered because they did nothing against the system, and the murderers because they do not really murder but execute a death sentence pronounced by some higher tribunal” (465).

<sup>13</sup> For an historical analysis of how the Balkan Peninsula came to be identified with negative and derogatory meanings, within a Western discourse of ‘Balkanism,’ beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, see Todorova, Maria. *Imagining the Balkans*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.



“instead of telling us what the Balkans are, [these critics] diverted the question of the Balkans into the problem of imperial language. They asked, ‘how do we know what we know about the Balkans?’” Thus, the shift has been to view “the Balkans” in its multiple—historical and contemporary—constellations: as a discursive regime of knowledge/power, a metaphorical-mythical *topos*, and a historical site of collective memory. Neither a stable analytical category nor a positivist, discreet geographical space, “the Balkans” emerges here as a set of articulations, subject-positions, and cultural texts that both produce and contest knowledge about the region. Notwithstanding these diverse attempts to normalize or make the Balkans into an object of subaltern or ‘queer’ discourses, there have been however very little changes in how the Balkans are approached in mainstream journalism, popular perception, or international relations. Moreover, what Milica Bakić-Hayden has termed ‘nesting Orientalism,’ namely, a process of identity construction within the historical Balkans through which ethnic groups define themselves as more ‘Western,’ and thus more culturally advanced than their neighbors to the east, continues to underwrite nation-building projects in all post-Yugoslav states.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, Slovenia and Croatia still frame their post-independence identities in opposition to the Balkans as a key source of negative identification, connected with cultural and economic backwardness, ‘primitive’ violence, and Oriental contamination. Thus, their national narratives are constructed in terms of an ‘exit’ from the Balkans and a ‘return’ to Central Europe, a term imbued with positive civilizational values, although their status as European countries remains ontologically insecure—a frequent source of anxiety and defensive posturing.<sup>15</sup> In Serbia, the

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<sup>14</sup> Bakić-Hayden, Milica. “Nesting Orientalism: The Case of Former Yugoslavia,” *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (winter 1995), 917–931

<sup>15</sup> See Lidstrom, “Between Europe and the Balkans: Mapping Slovenia and Croatia’s ‘Return to Europe’ in the 1990s” *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol. 27, No. 3/4, *Revisions of Nationality and Cultural identity in Contemporary Europe* (2003), pp. 313-329

relationship to the Balkans as a form of self-designation is more complex and ambiguous, ranging from outright disparagement to uncritical celebration of the Balkan identity as a source of vitality and authenticity, in opposition to Europe's purported coldness and penchant for rational calculation.<sup>16</sup> I have employed the post-colonial critique of Western 'Balkanist' discourses as a local, weak theory in this study, rather than as an overall theoretical framework.<sup>17</sup> Thus, my strategy has been to use these various labels in a provisional way, to place them under erasure, as it were, keeping in mind that the examined texts are both conversant with the critical discourses under question and productive of new strategies of self-representation. I am thus more interested in the literary text itself as "a space of intersecting historical legacies"<sup>18</sup> that are recollected in the present, as well as of emergent, textually and visually mapped geographies of immigration, exile, and transnational existence. "Thinking in terms of historical legacies," Todorova writes, "with their simultaneity and overlapping, and with their gradual waning effects, allows us to emphasize the *plasticity* of the historical process."<sup>19</sup> In this sense, the texts themselves have served as my guides in the exploration of different, Balkan, Eastern, and Central European historical legacies in the short 20<sup>th</sup> century—namely, fascism, socialism, and nationalism, and (most recently) neoliberalism—and their entanglement with the geographies, that is to say, various spaces that are in turn inflected by these legacies. Importantly, these works venture outside of the national space and national history, even as they contrapuntally evoke it, integrating exilic, diasporic, borderline spaces and temporary residencies into their rich texture,

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<sup>16</sup> See Čolović, *Balkan, teror culture*. Beograd: Biblioteka XX Vek, 2008, pp 113-119. A prime example of this pseudo-Romantic depiction of the generous and exuberant, though frequently irrational 'Balkan soul' can be found in the films of Emir Kusturica, where such vitality is attributed specifically to Serbs and Roma.

<sup>17</sup> For an example of a strong postcolonial approach to post-Yugoslav, and other post-communist literatures, see Kovačević, Nataša. *Narrating post/communism: colonial discourse and Europe's borderline civilization*. London: Routledge, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Todorova, "Learning Memory, Remembering Identity," p 15.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p 16, my emphasis.

such as Berlin (Ugrešić, Drndić), Amsterdam (Ugrešić), the U.S. (Zograf), and Trieste (Drndić). While these intricate geographical and historical links form a crucial part of what makes these works so compelling, original, and provocative, they also make them resistant to easy classification and placement into received traditions, canons, and national frameworks. As Azade Seyhan points out, “our critical terms for literary study are not adequate for an exploration of these transfigurations. The emergent literatures of deterritorialized peoples and literary studies beyond the confines of national literature paradigms have as yet had no name or configuration.”<sup>20</sup>

For this reason, I have chosen the term ‘post-Yugoslav’ instead of Croatian and Serbian, or any of the other available hyphenated labels, to designate these authors and their works. First of all, all three of the authors spent their formative years in Yugoslavia and therefore have a lived relation to the former state, as opposed to the younger authors from the region whose reception of the Yugoslav past resides in the realm of ‘post-memory,’ to use Marianne Hirsch’s term, and is necessarily mediated by their parents’ stories, texts and images, and evolving ideological frameworks.<sup>21</sup> Secondly, the return to the Yugoslav past in many ways structures the work of these authors, forming an ‘afterimage,’ a lingering (not necessarily idyllic) memory that appears in the wake of the original experience. Thirdly, by using the term ‘post-Yugoslav,’ I am arguing for an existence of a transnational post-Yugoslav literature and art that share certain thematic and formal concerns and that are, in some sense, continuous with art and literature that existed, albeit provisionally and tacitly, before the collapse of the common Yugoslav state. In this sense, I

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<sup>20</sup> *Writing Outside the Nation*, p 9.

<sup>21</sup> “Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (“The Generation of Postmemory,” p 107).

concur with Andrew Wachtel's recent assertion that "one way to prove that a Yugoslav literature must have existed is to show that a transnational post-Yugoslav literature does exist at present. The existence of such a post-Yugoslav literature should be powerful inductive evidence that in the comparatively palmy days of Yugoslavia a supranational Yugoslav literature must have existed as well."<sup>22</sup> In this regard, Wachtel singles out the works of Danilo Kiš as a transnational literary bridge, a totemic symbol of identification among contemporary writers from the region, such as Drago Jančar, Muharem Bazdulj, Aleksandar Hemon, and Svetislav Basara (none of which are examined in this study). While I have relied on Kiš in a similar manner, namely to articulate a critical anti-nationalist stance, unlike Wachtel, I am not suggesting a strong intertextual link—an anxiety of influence, as it were—between all of the works examined in this study and Kiš's oeuvre (except in the case of Daša Drndić). Rather, such a strategic and comparative approach can help us make cultural studies into a platform for what Gayatri Spivak calls 'critical regionalism,' which moves beyond nationalism and the nation-state as a primary framework of identification, belonging, and political solidarity.<sup>23</sup> Lastly, all of these works register the trauma of ethnic divisions, the violent fragmentation of the formerly shared civic and cultural space and its body politic into mutually antagonistic identities. Or to put it differently, they record the emergence of *new* and *recycled* symbolic and narrative formations, eagerly promoted by the new nation-states, which are radically discontinuous with the experience of the recent past. In this sense, one could talk about a "narrative rupture" forming around "a collective experience of a different *before*,"<sup>24</sup> which Stef Jansen repeatedly observed during his fieldwork in Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s. According to Jansen, this rupture "did not just serve as a

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<sup>22</sup> "The Legacy of Danilo Kiš in Post-Yugoslav Literature," p 136.

<sup>23</sup> See Butler and Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation State?*, esp. pp 77-86.

<sup>24</sup> "Antinationalism," p 1.

chronological narrative mechanism—it shaped the meaning of events, practices and situations and, despite its divergent interpretations, its ubiquity was a pervasive parameter in people's experiences of self.”<sup>25</sup> In a similar manner, the term ‘post-Yugoslav’ in this dissertation marks a temporal break in these works, a trauma that retroactively shapes the perception of both the past and the present, as well as the disjunctive and at times tangled relationship between the two.

## II. History and Remembrance

I have consciously used Walter Benjamin’s language of tradition, catastrophe, fragments, and non-synchronous temporalities, since this project—just as the works that it takes as its material—is written “under the sign of Saturn,” the sign of the brooding melancholic, as Susan Sontag would say of Benjamin. In this sense, it holds no spectacular hope for the future. “Time does not give one much leeway: it thrusts us forward from behind, blows us through the narrow tunnel of the present into the future.”<sup>26</sup>

The hard facts of the past cannot be altered; the past already happened. The dead cannot be brought to life; they cannot be resurrected through writing, art, public commemoration—since these are born of loss. Remembrance, which marks that loss, is the medium for inaugurating a radically uncertain and fragile future, not a restoration of the past. To think otherwise would be to engage in magical thinking. It would mean buying into the myth of redemption, the sublimation of the agonistic and deliberative space of politics into an otherworldly teleology or a deterministic history. Thus, in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” Benjamin transforms the myth of redemption into the “*weak Messianic power*”<sup>27</sup> of the *demos*, the responsible

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, p 117.

<sup>27</sup> *Illuminations*, p 254.

moment of individual remembrance and concerted action that draws its strength from the past, in the way a tradition is appropriated, read, and reconfigured in the light of present exigencies. “In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it,”<sup>28</sup> Benjamin writes in his “Theses.”

Nevertheless, Benjamin has frequently been criticized for indulging in idealistic theology or Leninist ‘decisionism,’ criticisms that have been rehashed with some force in the context of contemporary critical theory. With regard to the former criticism, it was articulated early on by Max Horkheimer, whose disapproval of Benjamin’s theology I have echoed in my previous comments: “Past injustice has occurred and is completed. The slain are really slain. In the end, your affirmation is theology. If one takes the lack of closure entirely seriously, one must believe in the Last Judgment.”<sup>29</sup> As Howard Caygill notes, “[f]or Horkheimer, doing justice to the past is to acknowledge that it and its injustices are irreparable and to be mourned; anything else is ‘idealistic’ and ‘theological.’”<sup>30</sup> Benjamin, however, counters this criticism by invoking *remembrance* as the unacknowledged ground of history, its very condition of possibility, which has subsequently been repressed in favor of history as a deterministic science:

The corrective to this line of thinking may be found in the consideration that history is not simply as science but also and not least a form of remembrance <*Engendenken*>. What science had ‘determined,’ remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make something incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into incomplete.<sup>31</sup>

How do we interpret remembrance here? The task is by no means easy. First of all, it seems that remembrance works both *alongside* and *against* history. Benjamin, in other words, acknowledges that history is indeed a science (though not only a science), which we may take to

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<sup>28</sup> *Illuminations*, 255.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Caygill, Howard, “Walter Benjamin’s concept of cultural history” in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p 94.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p 471.

mean that it is grounded in an empirical method, namely, the examination and arrangement of necessarily heterogeneous and contradictory sources. To push history wholly in the direction of remembrance, to deprive it of its empirical ground, would mean transforming history into a subjective, which is to say, egotistical venture. In this way, history would lose its object, its material character, its alterity vis-à-vis the present. By the same token, we are also told that remembrance can alter what history has determined. A concept of deterministic history, in other words, has to undergo a critique by way of remembrance.

Remembrance, in Benjamin's work, can be conceptualized as a *renewed* affective, experiential, and deliberative *relation* that we in the present establish towards the past. Through this relation, history becomes fundamentally *incomplete* and open to *reconfiguration*, since it involves putting "to work an experience with history—a history that is originary for every present."<sup>32</sup> As Uri Jacob Matatyaou has shown, Benjamin conceptualizes remembrance in terms of the demand that history places on us as a form of 'weak' and ultimately unrealizable narrative of redemption:

We might think of Benjamin's notion of redemption as a wound that never heals, a circle that never closes. Because time is never one with itself, the past holds out to the present, and the present opens onto the past, either an *eternal repetition* of the same, or an *unending reconfiguration*. Benjamin opts for the latter. Past and present return possibility to each other in moments of remembrance. Through memory, the past is given an affective resonance contemporaneous with the present. Remembrance as redemption reanimates politically enabling perspectives. Producing resemblances rather than identities rescues missed opportunities, lost chances that, when related to the present, redeem the marginalized, repressed, and forgotten.<sup>33</sup>

To close this circle would be to turn history into myth. In this sense, Benjamin emphasized the radical openness of history rather than its foreclosure into utopia, although the two remain

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<sup>32</sup> SW 3, p 262.

<sup>33</sup> "Memory—Space—Politics," p 134, my emphasis.

curiously intertwined. Utopia remains a historical desire, a promise of happiness, but never a realized form. By the same token, such a desire has to be restaged in the constantly changing present, aware of the difference which every new present carries in relation to the past.

This is important because there are many utopias and many pasts out there awaiting ‘redemption,’ as it were, some of which would be highly exclusionary and potentially violent were they to be used as a means for political mobilization. One needs only to remember the nationalist mobilizations that took place before the breakup of Yugoslavia, many of which involved utopian promises but delivered only catastrophes. In the first place, this was the messianic and utopian language of Serbian nationalism, the “anti-bureaucratic revolution” and the “awakening of the people” in the late 1980s, or its Croatian counterpart, the “spiritual renewal” and “realization of a thousand-year-long dream” of the Croats, orchestrated by Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman, respectively, but ultimately embraced by huge swaths of masses.

In this study I’ve attempted to open up these wounds of history, to go back to the sore points in the past in order to see what hope remembrance may have for the future. I’ve focused on texts that are antagonistically oriented towards nationalist publics and new grammars of collective memory, as the inheritance of the wars of the 1990s. In this respect, all of the texts are political. But they also cannot be reduced to their politics. They also point to the losses, missed opportunities, and erasures (which demand revisiting and working through), even as they reluctantly embrace “the realization that every repetition of history is also a moment when we can start over, a moment of opening towards the plurality of possibilities, rather than simply or necessarily an opportunity for another slaughter.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ramadanović, Petar. “Simonides in the Balkans,” p 362.



### III. Chapter Outline

The centrality and the persistence of the Yugoslav legacy is featured most prominently in Dubravka Ugrešić's novels—*The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1997) and *The Ministry of Pain* (2005)—literary works that have frequently been described as ‘Yugonostalgic.’ As is well-known by now, Ugrešić left Croatia in 1993 when she became a target of a media attack, in which she was accused, along with four other feminist authors, of anti-state activities, national treason, and labeled a ‘witch’ due to her firm and articulated anti-nationalist stance.

Yugonostalgia appears in Ugrešić's writings—in the first place, in her polemical essays—as a forceful ‘counter-memory’ not only with respect to the new national narration in Croatia, which constructs the socialist past as a source of exclusively negative identifications, the ‘prison house of nations,’ as the phrase goes, but also with respect to the loss of utopian horizons and the reemergence of politics of exclusion in the EU. While I address both of these issues in my first two chapters, my focus remains the historically situated poetics and politics of remembrance, a construction of the unique and non-totalizing experience with the past in the space of the present. The first chapter addresses how the remembrance of the socialist past in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1997), Ugrešić's first exile novel, emerges through the double context of commercialization and reification of communist experience in the post-*Wende* Berlin, Ugrešić's former exile residence, on the one hand, *and* the regime-sponsored destruction and vandalization of the common Yugoslav heritage in Croatia, on the other. I explore Ugrešić's fragmentary, disjointed, and highly intertextual poetics of remembrance through Walter Benjamin's concept of allegory, seen as a privileged trope of memory in the periods of historical change, disruption, and loss of stable and fixed meanings. The allegorical strategy consists of blasting the epoch of real socialism from the continuum of history and rearranging the fragments

of this devalued experience in a way that destabilizes the static and finalized image of the past, thereby opening it up to the future. By the same token, the work of mourning—the work of repairing a history gone to pieces and thereby recuperating and renewing certain political commitments from oblivion—is handed to the reader, who is asked to establish connections between different poetic fragments through her own textual paths and combinations.

In her second exile novel, *The Ministry of Pain* (2005), I see Ugrešić moving towards a more ambivalent relationship to the Yugoslav past, one that is more inflected by negative or frozen affect and overshadowed by the multiple traumas of identity loss, displacement, socioeconomic marginalization, and wartime atrocities. Notwithstanding these traumatic barriers, I argue, Ugrešić manages to stake out a precarious ground for the articulation of a critical post-national subject. By tracing the various thematic and intertextual threads in the novel—constellations of time and space, memory and affect—I arrive at a concept of a traumatic remembrance that produces difference with every return to the site of loss. In this sense, the Yugoslav past may still be recuperated for the project of radical democracy in the European context, but only if it is recollected in a plural, agonistic manner that is mindful of the negative and not just the idealized aspects of that inheritance.

There are, of course, other ways to read Ugrešić's exilic *oeuvre*. The central place nostalgia occupies in her work makes it a ripe candidate for a radical postmodern critique, which sees all elegiac backward gazing as “trapped within the nets of depression, the psychic price to be paid for a denial of a traumatic past that is part and parcel of [...] the modern project,”<sup>35</sup> namely, “fascism, Stalinism, colonialism, and imperialism.”<sup>36</sup> To be sure, one should be wary of any uncritically restorative projects, even the hybrid ‘self-management’ socialism, the Second

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<sup>35</sup> Mathy, *Melancholy Politics*, p 8.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*

World solidarity offered by Tito's non-alignment policy, or the soft nets of the welfare state which make 'Yugonostalgia'—in today's highly uncertain political and economic climate—so inviting. As long as these remain mere slogans—'Like a mother, with its Plan, the state takes care of every man;' 'When brothers unite—nothing can oppose their might!'<sup>37</sup>—they remain frozen in the realm of leftist melancholia, which produces "fashions instead of schools, cliques instead of parties, and agents instead of producers."<sup>38</sup> Ugrešić, however, has always one eye fixed firmly on the bygones and the other on the exigencies, weaving her texts "not out of a tangle of mere facticities but out of a numbered group of threads representing the woof of a past fed into the warp of the present,"<sup>39</sup> to use Benjamin's metaphor for materialist pedagogy. These constellations between the past and the present are disruptive, frequently piercing, and always critical of the *status quo*, at least judging by Ugrešić's negative reception in Croatia, followed by a delayed but uneasy reassessment of her work.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Ugrešić remains a good student of postmodernism, trained in literary theory and highly conversant with contemporary critical scholarship. In her novels in particular, the past loses its strictly referential character and is consequently transformed into "the play of the signifier,"<sup>41</sup> poetic language, and moments of aesthetic exultation "amidst bereavement."<sup>42</sup> In this sense, loss is acknowledged as being constitutive for the subject, the inevitable fall of presence into language, the allegorical postponement of meaning into an unknown future, while nostalgia is frequently undermined

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<sup>37</sup> *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, p 76.

<sup>38</sup> Scribner, *Requiem for Communism*, p 121.

<sup>39</sup> SW 3, p 269.

<sup>40</sup> The turning point, I believe is Andrea Zlata's *Tekst, tijelo, trauma* (2004), followed by Renata Jambrešić-Kirin's wonderful and much needed feminist and emphatic critique of politics of memory and belonging in Croatia, *Dom i svijet* (2008). It is significant, though hardly unsurprising, that the positive reevaluation and uneasy reintegration into national literature of Ugrešić's post-Yugoslav *oeuvre* took place within feminist scholarship.

<sup>41</sup> Mathy, *Melancholy Politics*, p 7.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*

through irony, *bathos*, and metatextual recognition of literary conventions and inescapable *clichés*.

Lastly, in the last ten years or so, we have seen a positive reevaluation of nostalgia, melancholy, and other practices of ‘countermourning,’ to use Sanja Bahun’s propitious phrase,<sup>43</sup> starting with Svetlana Boym’s useful distinction between ‘reflective’ and ‘restorative’ nostalgia.<sup>44</sup> More recently, Jonathan Flatley has demonstrated how ‘cognitive maps’ that make our social world legible and in turn shape our political commitments are themselves constituted by and through various affective investments. As he puts it:

[I]f we want to form politically agential collectives, this is most directly a question of moods, structures of feeling, and affects; anxieties must be overcome, alliances must seem not just logical but emotionally compelling. Insights about one’s political oppression are unlikely to motivate resistance unless they can be made interesting and affectively rewarding.<sup>45</sup>

Flatley places melancholy at the center of his discussion. Following in Benjamin’s footsteps, he sees melancholia not (only) as a depressive’s withdrawal from the world, but an aesthetic and political practice which, “even as it dwells on ruins and loss, is at the same time liberated to imagine how the world might be transformed, how things might be entirely different from the way they are.”<sup>46</sup> Yet a melancholy relation to missed moments and alternative pasts does not necessarily guarantee a politically progressive and responsible position, even as it stresses certain deficits in the present.

According to Benjamin, such relation to the past, to become ethical, has to arise out of empathy, an emotion which he inflects with the medieval term for melancholy, “*acedia*”: “It is a

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<sup>43</sup> See Bahun, Sanja. *Modernism and Melancholia: Writing as Countermourning*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, esp. pp 17-18.

<sup>44</sup> See Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001, esp. pp. 41-44 and 49-51, for the definitions of restorative and reflective nostalgias, respectively.

<sup>45</sup> Affective Mapping, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008, p 79.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p 37.

process of empathy whose origin is the indolence of the heart, *acedia*, which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly,”<sup>47</sup> he writes in his “Theses.” Colored with shades of dark brooding, slowness, and lethargy—the “listlessness of mind and body, to which a monk was exposed” (Gibbon, OED)—empathy crops up elsewhere in Benjamin’s writings, and is connected to the strenuous and frequently isolating labor of remembrance. It appears in his essay on Proust, in the metaphor of the fisherman who “casts his net into the sea of the *temps perdu*,” and whose sinewy and winding sentences are the muscles that exert “the whole enormous effort to raise this catch.”<sup>48</sup> Yet it is also a deeply political and therefore collective affect, enjoining of us to ally with “the struggling oppressed class itself [as] a depository of historical knowledge.”<sup>49</sup> I’ve attempted to foreground the central place Ugrešić assigns to social class in her writings by evoking the Benjaminian tropes of trash and historical debris—connected to the stigmatized ruins of real existing socialism, but also to those left behind in the storm of neoliberal progress. In this sense, the shift from national and ethnic identifications to class-based solidarity may indeed prove as the most effective way to challenge the nationalist consensus in the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere, something we may be already seeing with the recent anti-government protest in Bosnia.

The third chapter departs from the socialist heritage in order to examine a different constellation of ideologies, namely fascism and ethnic nationalism, and their unsettling persistence in the present. To this end, I have found Daša Drndić’s recent novels—*Sonnenschein*, 2007 (English translation, *Trieste*, 2013) and *April u Berlinu* (*April in Berlin*, 2009) a productive, provocative, and often unsettling site of analysis. Although Drndić has been

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<sup>47</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p 256.

<sup>48</sup> SW 2, p 247

<sup>49</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p 260.

publishing since the 1980s, her 1997 novel *Marija Czestochowska još uvijek roni suze ili Umiranje u Torontu* (*Marija Czestochowska is Still Shedding Tears or Dying in Toronto*) along with her move from Serbia to Croatia in 1993 represents a turning point in her career. Since then, Drndić has been publishing with assiduous regularity, producing a new novel every two years—each one thicker than the next—in the manner of Joyce Carol Oates in the U.S. context. All her novels, without exception, take the Holocaust as their major subject, exhibiting an impressive amount of archival documents, scholarly sources, witness testimonies, court transcripts and photographs, which appear alongside or are skilfully interwoven into fiction. I say “exhibit” with reason, since these novels are reminiscent of Holocaust museums; they employ a personal story (in the case of *Sonnenschein*, a fictional one) to give the reader a more comprehensive picture of history. According to James Young, the problem with such “docu-novels,” about the Holocaust—modeled on Antoni Kuznetsov’s *Babi Yar*—“is that by mixing actual events with completely fictional characters, a writer simultaneously relieves himself of an obligation to historical accuracy (invoking poetic license), even as he imbues his fiction with the historical authority of real events”<sup>50</sup> This criticism can also be applied to Drndić’s *Sonnenenschein*, a novel which dispenses with the plot in favor of historiographical discourse, even as it uses a fictional character as our main guide through history.

While I find these questions important for understanding the rhetorical and epistemic ambiguities inherent in Holocaust ‘documentary fiction’—by all accounts, a burgeoning genre—I am more interested in the ‘anti-historicist’ aspects of Drndić’s novels, namely, the way they establish jolting parallels and correspondences between fascist and nationalist publics, as well as the mass atrocities committed in the name of both ideologies. In other words, I am interested in

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<sup>50</sup> Young, James E. “Holocaust Documentary Fiction: Novelist as Eyewitness,” pp 76-77.

their political and aesthetic effects. In this sense, I am trotting the path cleared by Michael Rothberg's impressive and timely book, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, which has shown how critical memory practices can form constellations between diverse yet related experiences of historical oppression, such as the memory of colonial violence and the Holocaust. Commendably, Rothberg wants to challenge the "zero-sum game" conception of memory, and instead to demonstrate "the dynamic transfer that takes place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance."<sup>51</sup> Collective memory, in this way, need not be inherited or owned by a specific group, but can in fact cross national and ethnic boundaries and form unexpected connections between political struggles against various forms of oppression. Moreover, Rothberg's insight resonates with a larger movement in contemporary historiography that is moving away from viewing Holocaust as a unique *sui generis* event and situating it in the broader field of comparative genocide studies, a shift that has been accompanied by mounting controversies and accusations of "Holocaust (im)piety."<sup>52</sup>

Drndić's novels may be situated in this context, insofar as they bring together diverse memories and documents that testify to extreme forms of violence, both historical and current, or at least very recent. They ask the reader not only to make connections between different catastrophic histories, but additionally to make remembrance of those violently murdered in the name of ideology an ethical act in the present—as a form of historical debt that the present owes to the past. This is an admirable and much needed ethical and political project in the context of recent Balkan history, especially considering the precedence accorded to the narratives of

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<sup>51</sup> Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional memory: remembering the Holocaust in the age of decolonization*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009, p 11.

<sup>52</sup> Haig, Francesca. "Introduction: Holocaust representations since 1975." *Modernism/modernity*, Volume 20, Number 1, January 2013, p. 9.

national legitimization over prosecution of war criminals and mourning for civilian victims on all sides in the Yugoslavia wars. To this end, Drndić’s approach to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or “mastering the past,” has been to embrace the poetics of shock, even as—rather paradoxically—she ‘cites’ the (more distant) history of fascist movements and the Holocaust in order to *indirectly* comment on (more recent) ‘Balkan’ nationalisms and the mass atrocities committed under their aegis.<sup>53</sup> Here Drndić comes very close to Walter Benjamin’s figure of a chronicler who can cite the past in all its moments “without distinguishing between major and minor ones.”<sup>54</sup> The effect of these citations of bone-chilling transcripts and testimonies—as I pointed out—is to form unsettling resemblances between the past and the present moment.

In this sense, Drndić’s anti-aesthetic of collage and juxtaposition, used to capture the ‘totality’ of National Socialism, can be compared to more radical strains of exhibition culture in FRG after 1968, rather than to Sebald’s work, as it has been suggested by some reviewers; although both—arguably—represent different strains of Benjamin’s thought. As I argue in the chapter, Drndić “Holocaust collages” juxtapose the Nationalist Socialist “wish-images”—the

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<sup>53</sup> This iterability of the Holocaust in national narration and international relations has a rather complex and thorny history, both in Yugoslavia, shortly before its collapse, and in the West during the Yugoslav wars, where the memory of the Holocaust was invoked as a justification for intervention into the conflict. In the case of the former, the nationalist elites in the mid and late 1980s in Croatia and Serbia started selectively citing and circulating the narratives of national suffering and victimization (and instinctively comparing them to the Holocausts) in order to legitimate ethno-nationalist state-building projects, based on the perceived ‘accomplishment’ of Zionism in the case of Israel. As David Bruce McDonald puts it: “The apparent success of Jewish nationalists (again, however false a perception this may be) has encouraged other national groups to adopt the symbolism, imagery, and vocabulary of the Holocaust as a means to articulating their own nation’s past history of victimisation. In the case of Serbia and Croatia, Holocaust imagery and more general myths of persecution and victimisation were used by nationalist writers to restructure their historical ‘discourse’. Such reinterpretations of nationalist history allowed both sides to justify the often violent and illegitimate forms of statecraft they were pursuing” (Balkan holocausts? Serbian and Croatian victim-centred propaganda and the war in Yugoslavia. Manchester: Manchester University Press: 2002, esp. pp 54-63). In both Serbian and Croatian cases, the use of history and memory in these burgeoning discourses and performances of self-victimization to was highly selective, skipping over relatively long periods of peace and cohabitation and focusing exclusively on periods of antagonism, in particular, the divisive history of World War II. Thus Serb nationalists would cite the genocide committed by Croatian Ustašas in order to drive a wedge and sow distrust between the two national groups, while Croatian nationalists made the execution of collaborator armies in Bleiburg, Austria by Tito’s Partisan army into a privileged site of national suffering—a Croatian “Way of the Cross”—in the newly-created national mythology.

<sup>54</sup> “Theses,” p 254.



racially pure, idealized bodies and the sleek imperial monumentalism of the Third Reich—to its dark underside, namely, the extermination camps, the cattle cars, eugenics programs, and medical experimentation on live human bodies. In fact, they come very close to the groundbreaking exhibition on National Socialist art, *Kunst im 3. Reich. Dokumente der Unterwerfung*, held in Frankfurt in 1974, at least judging from a description offered by Jutta Held:

The exhibition [ ... ] aimed at a principle of collage to produce a shock effect in Benjamin's sense, with documentary photographs and eyewitness accounts of the extermination camps, slave labour and the war clarifying the political aims the artists and their work has served. Imagery of idealized women was confronted with Polish slave labourers, the reality of war with the heroic fighter in painting.<sup>55</sup>

Towards the end of the third chapter, I have designated this approach as 'belated' or 'secondary' traumatization, namely, the shocking confrontation with the reality behind the ideology's "wish-image." The question remains, however, to what extent can this shock aesthetic produce real political effect in a world saturated with shocking images and passive consumers of the same. Indeed, one of the many tragedies of Yugoslav wars was that the international community, at a certain point, knew full well what was going on—they could see a live feed of the Sarajevo siege on the television—yet they waited until the last chance to intervene, when the losses had reached massive proportions. By this I do not mean to place the main brunt of responsibility on the outside observers, but to suggest in this very local context of literary analysis that Drndić, and other advocates of the shock aesthetic, may place too much trust in *exposure* as a motivation for action and intervention. As Eve Kosowski Sedgwick has put it, rather elegantly:

What is the basis for assuming that it will surprise or disturb, never mind motivate, anyone to learn that a given social manifestation is artificial, self-contradictory, imitative, phantasmatic, or even violent? [...] How television-

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<sup>55</sup> "New Left Art History and Fascism in Germany" in *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left*. (ed. Andrew Hemingway). London: Pluto Press, 2006, p 202.

starved would someone have to be to find it shocking that ideologies contradict themselves, that simulacra don't have originals, or that gender representations are artificial?<sup>56</sup>

I would be the first to admit that it is hard for academics to keep up with television pedagogically or otherwise. However, I believe that some exposure is both needed and necessary, especially with regard to a nation's violent past that has been covered up or mythologized and thus rendered innocuous.

I have therefore attempted to elucidate Drndić's multidirectional approach to the Holocaust, to use Rothberg's term, which is at times implicit (*Sonnenschein*) and at other times more explicit (*April in Berlin*). On the one hand, I have tried to anticipate the critical reception of Drndić outside Croatia by pointing to this 'double context' and showing why such a radical reception of the Holocaust might be more unsettling or at least more resonant within a still predominantly nationalist public sphere. *Sonnenschein* surely stands on its own as a Holocaust novel, located outside the Croatian national space and therefore less insistent on drawing parallels with another complex, different, and more recent history of violence. As some critics have pointed out, this may have contributed to both its critical success in Croatia and outside it, albeit for different reasons. (Most recently, *Sonnenschein* or *Trieste* was last lauded by *New York Times Review of Books*). I have therefore situated both novels as being in part critical responses to historical revisionism in Croatia, which has had its heyday in the 1990s, but which is now starting to wane—or at least, it has become part of the public debate. My strategy, in this sense, has been to historicize the reception of the Holocaust in literature within the broader discourse about the Holocaust and World War II since Croatian independence, since Drndić's mixture of

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<sup>56</sup> Touching Feeling, p 141.

commemorative, documentary, essayistic, and fictional discourses—it seems to me—naturally imposes such an approach.

Considering Drndić’s polemical and at times highly accusatory voice, I have chosen the term ‘democratic pedagogy’ to describe the political effect of these works, following Adorno’s famous essay “The Meaning of Working through the Past.” Democratic pedagogy would be a process through which to recover moral and political autonomy in post-totalitarian or quasi-totalitarian societies and in the aftermath of mass crime. In this sense, it comes close to the notion of ‘collective responsibility’ as opposed to ‘collective guilt,’ a way to restore the subject as a thinking, judging and responsible citizen instead of a de-subjectivized part of an ethnic or racial collective, as in fascism and certain forms of nationalism. The flip side of collective responsibility would then be what Vlasta Jalušić, following Hannah Arendt, has called the ‘organized innocence syndrome:’

in becoming a part of the collective national (and not state) body in the mythical sense, one did not have to take on personal (= moral) and collective (= political) responsibility. One could attempt to merge into the organism of a larger community and remain “innocent” regarding its workings. Only this act of dehumanization, where everyone started behaving as innocent victims of inevitable processes, groupings, powerful “higher structures,” or, finally, dangerous others (neighbors) facilitated the crystallization of elements of tribal nationalism and the conditions for violent solutions into radical exclusion and violence.<sup>57</sup>

Jalušić sees this process of “organized innocence” at work already in the mid-1980s, starting with Serbian nationalist elites and the construction of a collective victim mentality, national myths based on selective remembering, and demonic constructions of (neighboring) Others through nationalist propaganda. However—and this is crucial and often missed point—this mentality of collective innocence, wherein unspeakable and illegal violence against civilians is

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<sup>57</sup> Jalušić, Vlasta. “Organized Innocence and Exclusion: “Nation-States” in the Aftermath of War and Collective Crime.” *social research* Vol 74 : No 4 : Winter 2007, pp 1185.

justified and normalized based on previous wrongs and unqualified identifications with wounded and therefore ‘innocent’ collectives, applies to all post-Yugoslav states and extends into the present, for example, “through ‘contextualization’ of crimes and their apologia in the context of the new state building.”<sup>58</sup>

I believe that these insights have important implications for the remembrance of the Holocaust and other mass crimes in the public sphere, through literature, art, and public monuments. That is to say, an excessive focus on trauma and victimhood may obscure other equally important aspects of these events which have to do with the loss of political rights and a pluralist civic space that made the extermination of (ethnic, racial, and sexual) others a possibility in the first place. Such acts of commemoration, which move away from the sublimity or the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust and fetishization of victimhood or difference,<sup>59</sup> acquire a futural dimension precisely as a continued and committed “care for the preservation of the common political space as a *space of equality*.”<sup>60</sup> This would mean, in the first place, placing the protection of rights of both citizens and non-citizens above any demands for national unity. But it would also mean recognizing the nation-state as a political institution that is open to transformation through continued civic engagement and fight against all forms of racism and exclusion. As Hannah Arendt has shown, the protection of human rights can be guaranteed only by the nation-state as a hegemonic political form in today’s world, and not by some appeal to abstract universality of all human beings.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, it would make sense to integrate the memory of past civic failures—that is to say, the failures of the state to protect all of its citizens

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<sup>58</sup> Jalušić, “Organized Innocence,” p 1174.

<sup>59</sup> This ‘postmodern’ reception of the Holocaust has come under criticism from Gillian Rose in her book *Mourning Becomes the Law*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

<sup>60</sup> Jalušić, “Organized Innocence,” p 1179, original emphasis.

<sup>61</sup> See *Origins of Totalitarianism*, esp. the chapter “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man,” pp 267-305.

or potential citizens—into the state’s current symbolic expressions.<sup>62</sup> This however cannot be done as long as commemorative practices remain narrowly ethnocentric and focused exclusively on the construction of collective victim identities. In the case of most if not all post-Yugoslav states, this memory of civic failure is still largely a ‘soft,’ textually produced memory rather than a ‘hard memory’ of monuments and museums.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps, then, a future task would be to translate some of the innovative strategies of ‘overcoming the past,’ such as Daša Drndić’s use of documentation, from the literary and artistic field into the ‘hardware’ of the post-Yugoslav states.

Finally, in the fourth and final chapter, I examine Aleksandar Zograf’s graphic diary *Regards from Serbia* (2007), as a record of Milošević’s rule in Serbia and its effect on everyday life. Using Benjamin’s concept of the “dialectical mage” as a site of political wakening, I examine how Zograf uses the comic book medium to construct a complex narrative that traces the shift from mythical to civic consciousness. In this sense, the non-violent overthrow of Milošević, the so-called ‘bulldozer revolution,’ in October of 2000, has a privileged place in the narrative as an instruction in democratic politics. Nevertheless, we do not see a clean slate or a new beginning for Serbia even after this event. Rather, Zograf catalogues the destruction of the infrastructure after the NATO bombings, the effects of the sanctions and the inflation on the country, and the seeping knowledge of mass crimes committed in the name of Serbia. I have

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<sup>62</sup> An excellent example of this “Places of Remembering in the Bavarian Quarter” in the Schöneberg district in Berlin, where anti-Semitic laws from the Third Reich are posted as visual and verbal signs on lamp-posts around the neighborhood. As Henry Pickford writes of this monument: “Whereas Benjamin sees a revolutionary (communist) potential in the mass audience’s self-correcting response to film, these signs recuperate the potentially liberal-democratic individual by inducing a critical, political awareness of the habitually used and thus largely invisible structures and institutions which make possible—and conversely, which may make impossible—everyday life in a modern society.” (“Conflict and Commemoration: Two Berlin Memorials.” *Modernism/modernity*, Volume 12, Number 1, January 2005, p 166-167).

<sup>63</sup> See Etkind, Aleksandr. “Hard and Soft in Cultural Memory: Political Mourning in Russia and Germany”, *Grey Room*, 16 (Summer 2004), 36-59.

attempted to show how *Zograf* deals with the violent past and its aftermath through an indirect, albeit critical manner. Moreover, I examined the central place the regime-controlled media was able to manipulate and mobilize the public for war. In this sense, *Zograf* reframes the symbols, images and narratives disseminated by Milošević's propaganda machine through humor, irony, and caricature, showing how the alternative comic book medium can become a site of subversion of nationalist ideology.

Indeed, in the last twenty years graphic narratives have “become part of an expanding literary field, absorbing and redirecting the ideological, formal, and creative energies of contemporary fiction.”<sup>64</sup> The growing number of critical essays on contemporary graphic novelists and comic book artists, such as Chris Ware, Ben Katchor, Alison Bechdel, Joe Sacco, and Daniel Clowes, in the American context, has indeed increased our awareness of the formal and thematic complexity of this hybrid form, which problematizes anew the gap between the text and image, the old and new media, tradition and its critical revision. Scholars have in particular foregrounded the thematic nexus forming around the representations of history and collective memory in graphic narratives, representations which open up new avenues of conceptualizing the past's relation to the present by imbedding marginalized and amateur archives into fictional and documentary narratives. Before gaining foothold in the mainstream publishing industry, academia and now museums, comics were indeed considered nothing more than discarded rags of mass culture, as ephemeral as the back of the newspaper in which they appeared and just as ready for the dustbin. Arresting one's gaze on the pages of contemporary comics and their visual archives thus means revisiting those missed encounters with history and reinterpreting those

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<sup>64</sup> Chute, Hillary L. DeKoven, Marianne, “Introduction: Graphic Narrative,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 52, Number 4, Winter 2006.

quotidian traces of the past which were too hastily overlooked before they disappeared altogether.

**CHAPTER 1:**  
**Souvenirs of Communism:**  
**Allegory and Mourning in Dubravka Ugrešić's**  
***The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1997)**

**I. Poetics of Trash**

*If only you knew from what rubbish  
Poetry grows...*<sup>65</sup>

-Anna Akhmatova

*Our junk has become art. Our junk has become history.*<sup>66</sup>

-Susan Sontag

The fragmentary form of Dubravka Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1997) owes much to the historical circumstances in which the novel was composed. Written in the span of five years, 1991-1996, while the author lived in Berlin as a “voluntary” exile from her war torn homeland<sup>67</sup>, the main subject of the novel is not so much the Yugoslav wars taking

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<sup>65</sup> *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, trans. Judith Hemschemeyer, Boston: Zephyr Press, 1997, p 414.

<sup>66</sup> *On Photography*, New York: Anchor Books, 1977, p 69.

<sup>67</sup> By now, much has been written on Ugrešić's decision to leave Croatia in 1993 after the publication of the infamous article titled “Croatian Feminists Rape Croatia” in the Croatian weekly *Globus*, which singled out five women intellectuals—Jelena Lovrić, Rada Iveković, Slavenka Drakulić, Vesna Kesić and Dubravka Ugrešić—as traitors to the nation. The controversy, known as “The Witches from Rio,” initially arose over the possibility that the International PEN Conference that was to be held in Dubrovnik in 1993 might be cancelled due to the critical voices of the five women, who were informing the Western readers of the nationalist and anti-democratic policies of



place in “Europe's backyard,” but the fate of exile and the difficulty of preserving memory, both individual and collective, in the times of violent historical change. Instead of confronting the horrors of war directly, the poetics of the novel absorb and refract the shocks and ripples of the Yugoslav wars from a proximate distance and transpose them onto the city of Berlin as a *mise-en-scène* of volatile and catastrophic modernity.

*The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* is therefore concerned with the musealization and curation of devalued and condemned cultural artifacts and memories in a way that opens up history to critical rewriting and reinterpretation. In other words, the poetics of the novel refuse to foreclose the archive of Yugoslav and, more broadly, Eastern European socialism and instead appropriate the mode of critical history that, following Walter Benjamin, gathers the past, present, and future into a critical constellation. As Howard Caygill notes, Benjamin’s concept of critical history

would be one capable of acknowledging the reserves of the past, but this would also be to acknowledge that the past can unsettle and disrupt the present. [...] The objects of the past, because they cannot be fully possessed, will always disrupt the efforts of the present to contain them within its categories or forms of narrative.<sup>68</sup>

Accordingly, *The Museum* should be seen as a counter-narrative that recodes the dominant modes of writing history by pointing to the ideological construction of history’s main actors and artifacts. In particular, Ugrešić suggests that melancholy and trauma, as an inheritance of historical rupture and discontinuity, define the Berlin cityscape as much as the narrator’s

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Franjo Tuđman, Croatia’s first president. The frenzy that arose around this case specifically targeted the five intellectuals both as women and as “ethnically suspect subjects” in the new “democratic” Croatia, causing what can be termed a contemporary media lynch, which ironically enough revealed precisely the deficiency of democratic discourse in the country. For more details about the case, including the historical documents translated to English from the media polemic which it sparked, see: <http://www.women-war-memory.org/index.php/en/povijest/vjestic-iz-ria>. Recently, Ugrešić herself has provided a scathing and shattering account of the intimidation she experienced upon the publication of the *Globus* article in her recent collection of essays *Karaoke Culture* (2011).

<sup>68</sup> Caygill, Howard, “Walter Benjamin’s concept of cultural history” in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 93.

“Yugoslav” biography, which the novel in turn mimics and embodies in fragmented, dialectical and photographic writing. Indeed the novel emerges as an *ad hoc* exhibition that illuminates two dialectically interrelated moments: on the one hand, the transformation and unification of Berlin into a neoliberal city, where the artifacts of real socialism are assimilated into the expanding culture industry; and on the other hand, the destruction of the institutions and objects of socialist modernism in the Yugoslav successor states, carried out under the aegis of ethno-democratic regimes.

The unified Berlin we find in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* has finally overcome Communism, dubbed at the time as the last ideology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and has assimilated itself into the new economic order of neoliberal capitalism, prophesied at the time as the last stage of history. Ironically, however, this Berlin can hardly cope with the burden of historical memory, which keeps surfacing on its streets as excavated rubbish of history, reminding the readers of Europe’s troubling past and the impossibility of coming fully to terms with it. Inspired by this image, along with a slew of other artists who have gathered on this trash heap of history—in order to organize it, capitalize on it, make sense of it, or make it into art—Dubravka Ugrešić constructs her own elaborate allegory of mourning for a lost epoch, whose artifacts, relics, and refugees reappear on the Berlin marketplace as commodities and museum artifacts. *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* functions as a suitcase-museum—a collage-novel composed of literary quotations, polemics, “verbal” and real photographs, cityscapes, diary entries, short stories, and other pseudo-autobiographical materials—a genre which defies national boundaries and places seemingly incompatible cultural artifacts and texts into semantically jarring juxtapositions.

Yet Ugrešić also explicitly targets the center of ideological production of selective memory by continuing the polemic in her collection of essays, *The Culture of Lies*. This renewed polemic continues to be directed at the nationalist policy the author has termed “the confiscation of memory,”<sup>69</sup> a policy whose implicit purpose was to erase and falsify the history and memory of the Socialist Yugoslavia in all its nuanced manifestations. As the Croatian anthropologist, Dunja Rihtman Auguštin, has noted, “[a]fter the fall of the Berlin Wall, the craze of renaming the streets and squares overtook the countries formerly under socialism. Already in the first days after the Wall itself was taken down, the statues of still reviled leaders were being toppled, eventually culminating in the process which Maoz Azaryahu has termed *Umbenennung der Vergangenheit*—renaming of the past.”<sup>70</sup> This process, which included the destruction of symbols and monuments of the previous regime, writing of monumental national histories, and fabrication of dissident biographies, took on a particularly violent form in the Yugoslav successor states, where nationalist rhetoric—especially in its Serbian and Croatian variants—was used to legitimate the new authoritarian regimes and silence any oppositional voices as unwanted remnants of the old order. The Berlin Ugrešić so faithfully “documents” in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* is littered with “walking museum exhibits,”<sup>71</sup> that is, refugees and exiles whose memories no longer flow back into the collective life of a given community, but remain buried in the dark corners of the private mind as painfully reminders of their former selves. As the contraband they smuggled across the borders of failed states, in their intensely private, illicit and unarticulated nature, these memories represent an objective record of traumas

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<sup>69</sup> See Ugrešić, Dubravka. *The Culture of Lies: Antipolitical Essays*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998, pp. 273-293.

<sup>70</sup> Rihtman-Auguštin, Dunja, *Ulice moga grada*, Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 2000, p. 37.

<sup>71</sup> Ugrešić, Dubravka. *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, trans. Celia Hawkesworth, New York: A New Directions Book, 1996, p 221: “All of us here are walking museum museum exhibits...’ says Zoran.”

caused by political and social systems with large stake in silencing certain forms of memory. Consequently, the novel's nameless narrator refuses to identify herself in terms of ethnicity, a site of traumatic difference and antagonism that has violently rent apart her homeland. Instead she maintains the melancholy and painful identification with the spectral and stateless Yugoslav collective scattered across Western European capitals.

The "museum" in the title therefore refers to recollection of lost time, the archiving of an epoch consigned to the trash heap of history. Yet, Ugrešić seems to tell us that no modern appendage whose function is to aid memory—that is, no writing, no recording, no archive, no photograph—can ever produce an epic narrative that would at once close off a certain chapter of history or biography. By expelling every *episteme* of linear and monumental history, and instead focusing on the *poetics of the everyday*, of Russian *byt*, as it were, Ugrešić has constructed a novel without a plot and chronology, in which, as Pierre Nora would say with a nostalgic smirk—"even the most humble testimony, the most modest vestige" is invested with "the potential dignity of the memorable."<sup>72</sup> This is consistent with Ugrešić's artistic project of redeeming the fragments of history consigned to the junkyard by endowing them with an artistic aura. Reflecting on the recent exhibitions by Christian Boltanski, Horst Hoheisel, Richard Wentworth, and Ilya Kabakov, all of whom have made the *aporias* of collective memory the main theme of their work, Ugrešić utilizes the ability of art to hold back the historical oblivion: "So human rubbish recycled into an art exhibit achieves the right to prolonged life, to ironic immortality."<sup>73</sup> Consequently, she implicitly inscribes herself into the secret tribe of artists—"the

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72 Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations*, No. 26, (Spring 1989), p 13.

73 Ugrešić, *The Museum*, p 232.

archelogs of the everyday”—whose poetic lineage she traces back to Gogol'. In the chapter titled “Poetics of the Album”, she writes:

The Russian branch of this tribe runs from Gogol to the avant-garde artists (who indeed only took Gogol with them on their famous 'steamship of contemporaneity'!) and the formalists who beat their heads against the everyday, *byt* (a word which means much more in Russian than its equivalents in other languages). The most bizarre literary figure in this secret tribe is the forgotten avant-garde writer Konstantin Vaginov. Through his novels stroll characters who dream of founding a Museum of the Everyday, *byt*, organizers of the society for collecting old and contemporary junk, collectors of trash, fingernails, matches and sweet wrappings, great synthesizers of the trivial[...]

Precisely through the Russian literary tradition of *byt* (Gogol, Russian avant-garde), Ugrešić finds a “literary loophole” by means of which she can smuggle trivia, *realia* and kitsch (communist souvenirs) into what is otherwise a high modernist text. Akin to the narrator of Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, Ugrešić undertakes a messianic project to transform “trash, (auto)biographical material” into the pearls of insight; yet Ugrešić’s narrator, in the very end, remains unsure if art can redeem the violence of history that has occasioned her exile.<sup>74</sup> Unable to choose which objects deserve the artist’s attention and which should be discarded as trash, Ugrešić’s poetics can be read as the “unconditional surrender” to the eventual dispersion of memory: the irrevocable entropy of time, history, as well as the human body. In this view, everything eventually reverts back to chaos, the seemingly ordered drawers of our memory, as well as the deceptive order of our present day. Witnessing the destruction of an entire ideology and way of life at the moment the novel was written, Ugrešić gathers the shattered fragments of

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<sup>74</sup> With Gogol, art was increasingly turning into a messianic project to redeem the fallen humanity. His religious zeal overshadowed his art and he was unable in the end to reconcile the demands of art with demands of religion. Hence, in *The Dead Souls* we are only left with the first part of what was to be a Russian *Divine Comedy*. Chichikov, in other words, remains in the lowermost regions of the divine order, unable to ascend to the heavenly regions promised by Christian redemption. Gogol seemed to have realized that the art of writing is much more connected to the black arts of alchemy, and playing the Devil’s game while all the time thinking he is involved in God’s work, he failed to transform primordial mud into gold. In *Dead Souls*, Chichikov remains a Homunculus instead of a fully developed Human made in the image of benevolent and perfect God.

the recent past and arranges them in a *constructivist collage*, where they form suggestive semantic relations with the “verbal snapshots” of new Berlin as experienced through exile's eyes. Part Two of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, suggestively titled “Family Museum”, perfectly reflects the poetics of trash. Appropriating the aesthetics of *byt*, the author inserts into the novel excerpts from her mother's diary, chronicling her progressing illness and premonitions of war. Thereby, Ugrešić offers an alternative history to the one presented by the nationalist regime in Croatia, which has consigned the souvenirs of Communism, even the most private ones, to the historical dump site. By focusing on the domestic life, on the relationship with her mother in particular, Ugrešić affirms the unique private sphere that existed in the socialist Yugoslavia, which made room for artistic and intellectual freedom, despite (and sometimes precisely because) of the ruling ideology. Not entirely bypassing the less savory elements of that ideology which gave a specific texture to the everyday life in Yugoslavia, Ugrešić attempts to salvage the individual meaning from the official, ideologically manicured, version of history. Putting together a series of *biographemes*<sup>75</sup>—contingent, revelatory, fiercely individual, and at times deeply vulnerable snapshots of a life, which perhaps a more traditional biography would discard— Ugrešić sketches a poetic portrait of her mother. This portrait also mirrors the author's own image in mother-daughter dialectic of identification and rejection: “When I recognize her in myself, when the images merge, the first picture chimes in me as well, that beginning, that kiss on the lips, her wide-open, slightly armed eyes in which was reflected my equally embarrassed gaze.”<sup>76</sup> These textual fragments, at once fantastical, symbolic, and psychologically suggestive, relate her mother's journey from her native Bulgaria to post-World War II Yugoslavia, the

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<sup>75</sup> For an excellent explanation of “biographeme”, a neologism coined by Roland Barthes, see Burke, Sean. *The Death and Return of the Author*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, pp. 38-39.

<sup>76</sup> Ugrešić, *The Museum*, p. 57.

author's own postwar childhood, ending in Ugrešić's eventual decision to leave Zagreb in the beginning of 1990s, uncannily paralleling her mother's initial displacement.

In fact, this entire chapter can be thought of as homage to her mother and to her literary influences: her real and imaginary genealogy. Perhaps the most discernible of these influences is Danilo Kiš, whose short story "The Encyclopedia of the Dead" describes a messianic text that contains the biographies of all those whom written history has passed over in silence:

After all — and this is what I consider the compilers' central message — nothing in the history of mankind is ever repeated, things that at first glance seem the same are scarcely even similar; each individual is a star unto himself, everything happens always and never, all things repeat themselves ad infinitum yet are unique. (That is why the authors of the majestic monument to diversity that is The Encyclopedia of the Dead stress the particular; that is why every human being is sacred to them).<sup>77</sup>

While both authors are engaged in a similar aesthetic and ethical project by insisting "on the subjective identity of the individual amidst the horrors of a history erasing the individual,"<sup>78</sup> Ugrešić primarily focuses on specifically female subjectivity, that is to say, on the inscription of the feminine *byt* into an overwhelmingly masculine historiography. Characteristically, she elevates a wartime recipe for caraway soup, a school primer, or the content of her mother's bookshelf into what the Russian Formalists would call "a literary fact", thus expanding the scope of aesthetic perception: "The titles of my mother's library are today a valuable source of information about the first postwar publications and translations, because my mother conscientiously bought every new book that appeared on the poor literary market after the war."<sup>79</sup> Yet, the author also makes clear that the completely truthful portrait of her mother can never materialize in writing. In other words, there is always a surplus in reality that cannot be

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77 Kiš, Danilo. *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*, trans. Michael Henry Heim, Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1997, p. 51.

78 Aleksić, Tatjana. "Disintegrating Narratives and Nostalgia in Post-Yugoslav Postmodern Fiction." In *Balkan Literatures in the Era of Nationalism*, Eds. Murat Belge, Jale Parla, Istanbul: Bilgi University, 2008, p. 5.

79 Ugrešić, *The Museum*, p. 80.

subsumed by poetic text, even the most ingenious: “I watch her through the glass, I think about her, I try to feel her core. I turn the ball round and over her face pass the shadows of Emma Bovary, Maureen O’Hara, Tess, Carrie...”<sup>80</sup> And while the stock of female heroines live their eternal lives inside these fictional worlds, the real mother is “destined to aging without true, strong emotions, to languishing, to a vague longing...”<sup>81</sup> Ugrešić painfully indexes the body’s materiality, its eventual decay, its less than ideal biography, but even this body remains symbolic and textual in the very end, though it has significantly expanded the repertoire of textual representation of the female body.

Here Ugrešić inscribes the mother into the symbolic language of literature and traces an alternative genealogy along the female line. This apotheosis of the mother-figure into literary order is facilitated by reference to a broader 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist and postmodernist literary tradition that legitimated alternative, open-ended narratives of history and identity. The excerpts of her mother’s diary are therefore montaged with quotes taken from high modernist and postmodern literature—Joseph Brodsky, Peter Handke, Borges, Meša Selimović, Isaak Babel, Viktor Shklovsky, and Georgy Konrad—thus creating a seamless conversation between high art and amateur art, the latter traditionally associated with feminine, “domestic” creativity. Seemingly trivial objects such as the Mother’s diary, the contents of her bookshelf, and her tastes in cinema, are inserted directly into the novel as fragments that bind the author both to her past and to her literary genealogy. There is a danger, however, that this process of binding fragments can itself shatter the coherency of history and preclude the possibility of meaning:

‘In the end life is reduced to a heap of random, unconnected details. It could have been like this or that, it’s absolutely immaterial. I wonder where is that point I can still take hold of before I slip into nothingness,’ asks my mother.”

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80 Ibid, p. 84.

81 Ibid, p. 85.



*'What memory has in common with art is the knack for selection, the taste for detail. [...]Memory contains precise details, not the whole picture; highlights, if you will, not the entire show. The conviction that we are somehow remembering the whole thing in blanket fashion, the very conviction that allows the species to go on with its life, is groundless. [...], maintains Brodsky.<sup>82</sup>*

This poetic device creates a suggestive parallelism between the two heterogeneous texts, both reflecting semantic fragmentation characteristic of modernist literature. An intimate rapport is established not only between high and low genres, such as novel and diary, but also between two semiotic levels: literary and documentary.<sup>83</sup> In other words, by montaging these two quotations that reside on opposite ends of the literary hierarchy, Ugrešić highlights the aesthetic function of an amateur creation, her mother's diary, and invests it with an artistic aura. At the same time, Ugrešić is alluding to the patriarchal construction of the literary canon by emphasizing the subversive potential of feminine traditions of domestic arts, such as weaving, sewing and scrapbooking, whose formal devices can be reappropriated towards both poetic and critical ends.<sup>84</sup> But this literary playfulness becomes dangerous in the author's hands. It creates rips and tears in meaning, fragmentation of semantic totality, often manifested in the text as a powerful *affect*: pain, melancholy, or outright silence, choking of semantic clusters under the weight of the exile's tears.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p. 51, original emphasis.

<sup>83</sup> Ugrešić, whose poetics are concerned with ludistic postmodernism that questions the boundaries between high and low art, was a student of Aleksandar Flaker at the Zagreb University. Flaker was one of the first critics in the former Yugoslavia who wrote seriously about genres of popular fiction. He produced a brilliant study, *Blue-Jeans Prose*, about the influence of J.D. Salinger and the American youth cult on the Eastern European prose in the sixties and seventies. For his insightful survey on popular literature of the thirties in Yugoslavia see Flaker, Aleksandar, "Što smo još čitali u tridesetim godinama," *Proza u trapericama*, Zagreb, 1976, pp. 330-338, my translation.

<sup>83</sup> Ugrešić uses the subversive character of domestic or feminine arts as literary device much more explicitly in her 1980s feminist novel *Steffie Cvek in the Jaws of Life*.

<sup>84</sup> Ugrešić uses the subversive character of domestic or feminine arts as literary device much more explicitly in her 1980s feminist novel *Steffie Cvek in the Jaws of Life*.

<sup>85</sup> For the transformation of affect into a literary text see Kristeva, Julia, *The Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, pp. 23-25. As Kristeva has aptly noted, all literary creation attempts to articulate the ineffable, to transpose *affects*—such as sadness and joy—“into rhythms, signs, forms” (23). Akin to psychoanalysis, literature possesses a therapeutic property that enables our reconciliation with the symbolic order through “the representation of the subject's battle with symbolic collapse”

## II. Benjamin's Allegory and *Ars Memoriae*

*The brooder, whose startled gaze falls on the fragment in his hand, becomes an allegorist.*<sup>86</sup>

-Walter Benjamin

As I will attempt to show, this constructivist form of montaging the fragments of the past with the fragments of the present is almost identical to Walter Benjamin's concept of allegory, seen by him as the most paradigmatic genre of modernity and a forerunner to avant-garde montage. As Beatrice Hanssen points out in her essay "Portrait of Melancholy (Benjamin, Warburg, Panofsky)," allegory was central to Benjamin's fusion of the visual and textual elements of culture into his theory of the "dialectic at a standstill":

For, in allegory and emblem—mnemonic techniques of cultural storing and storage—these two antithetical, antinomical traditions dialectically clashed, exhibiting a montage of icon and text, image and caption, figure and legend. No longer purely a rhetorical device but an emblematic image with caption, allegory as laid out in Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book, anticipated the dialectical image to be coined in the *Arcades Project* and the theses on the philosophy of history.<sup>87</sup>

In this section I attempt to illuminate the critical potential of allegory inherent in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, which shatters the deceptive totality of the present by enabling our encounter with a fragmented picture of the past. The constellation of poetic fragments we find in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* constitutes precisely such a temporal heterogeneity and

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(24). Therefore, from the point of view of psychoanalysis, literature is a culturally sanctioned space of symbolic indeterminacy characteristic of various forms of psychopathology. In Kristeva's words: "...literary (and religious) representation possesses a real and imaginary effectiveness that comes closer to catharsis than to elaboration; it is a therapeutic device used in all societies throughout the ages" (25). However, in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* this "therapeutic" property of literature does not lead to catharsis proper, that is, eventual sublimation of the loss that is occasioned by exile and forced immigration. Instead the novel dwells on the irreconcilability of different fragments and their inability to form a coherent narrative of "reality."

<sup>86</sup> "Central Park", *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2003, p 179.

<sup>87</sup> Hanssen, Beatrice. "Portrait of Melancholy (Benjamin, Warburg, Panofsky)", *MLN*, Vol. 114, No. 5, Comparative Literature Issue (Dec., 1999), p. 995.

disjunction that refuses the tyranny of the present to speak on behalf of the past. Here time and memory are not swept in the epic narrative that sublates and ultimately overcomes all antagonisms, past and present. Instead, the past intervenes in the present with its own claims and unmet demands, disrupting the illusory legitimacy of the present order. Following Azade Seyhan, allegory emerges here as “a palimpsest of memories that reshape traces of the past, of the contexts that shape cultural history, and of the stresses and crises to which history is subjected.”<sup>88</sup>

According to Benjamin, an allegorical work always tends towards entropy and dispersion of meaning. First, because the allegorist is radically cut off from the original context of the object's appearance, and secondly, as Samuel Weber points out, the allegorist encounters the past with “the loss of subjectively transparent relation to transcendence.”<sup>89</sup> Both of these arose as specific consequence of self-conscious modernity. The allegorist receives the messages and objects of the past as undecipherable shards and emblems that are washed up on the shore of the modern present:

If the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains dead but eternally secure, then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is unconditionally in his power. That is to say it is incapable of emanating any meaning or significance of its own; such a significance it has, it acquires from the allegorist.<sup>90</sup>

The allegorist, in other words, is caught up in the dialectic of culture, in which his numerous attempts to systematize and re-collect history in its epic totality are constantly thwarted by the inability to ground that order in some divine imminence. The pomp of allegory, its accumulation of dead things and hieroglyphic emblems with unclear or buried connections, often manifested as

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<sup>88</sup> “Allegory as the Trope of Memory: Registers of Cultural Time in Schlegel and Novalis,” in *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period*, ed. Jon Whitman. Leiden: Brill, 2000, p 447.

<sup>89</sup> Weber, Samuel. *Benjamin's -abilities*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 158.

<sup>90</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London: Verso, 1990, pp. 183-4.

rhetorical conceits, therefore emerge as an expression of mourning for unredeemed epochs, or what Benjamin in his *Theses* calls the “pile of debris” growing at the feet of the Angel of History. For Benjamin this loss of meaning and puzzlement before dead objects and texts of history necessarily produces melancholy, realized most fully in the figure of the brooder, apotheosized in Dürer's engraving, *Melancholia I* as a central emblem in Benjamin's *Origins of German Tragic Drama*.

The allegorical tendency in Benjamin is bound up with his negative theology, in which art becomes an index of unredeemed history in its failure to reach its messianic potential, to account for every individual death in its epic Hegelian sweep. As Howard Caygill notes in his essay “Walter Benjamin's concept of cultural history”, Benjamin turns Aby Warburg's interpretation of Dürer's engraving on its head in order to arrive at the broken dialectic of cultural history with explicitly theological undertones. In Warburg's view, art “sublimates the psychological tensions of an age into an image of harmony”<sup>91</sup> and paves the way for human liberation within culture as a transcendent plane of human experience. Here the threat of the superstitious and mythopoetic worldview—symbolized in the magic emblems in Dürer's engraving—is neutralized and sublated into the Renaissance figure of the artistic and intellectual genius.

Contrary to this view, Benjamin proposes an “antihumanist” interpretation of Dürer's engraving emphasizing its negative and unreconciled aspects, such as the dog and the stone, which figure “as emblems of natural and creaturely melancholy.”<sup>92</sup> As Caygill notes:

For Benjamin, only 'symbolic' art offers a possibility of reconciliation, and this under specific conditions. Consequently, for him the Dürer engraving does not

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91 Caygill, Howard, “Walter Benjamin’s concept of cultural history” in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 86.

92 Ibid, p. 88.

represent a moment of transformation—of myth into knowledge and knowledge into art—but a moment of tension and potential collapse. Allegory does not offer therapeutic consolation, but the spectacle of ruin and even...the *facies hippocratia* of the signs of death.<sup>93</sup>

Allegorical art bears witness to the human inability to reach transcendence and testifies to the constant failure to recover the lost reserves of the past through artistic representation and intellectual inquiry as privileged domains of culture. Hence, the brooding angel depicted in Dürer's *Melancholia I*, at whose feet the objects of labor and construction lie unused and emblems of knowledge remain incomprehensible to the human gaze: no permanent transformation of brute nature is possible either through work or knowledge. In contrast to historical materialism of Warburg school, in which the work of art is contemplated in the epic totality of history tending towards greater freedom and progress, Benjamin emphasizes the incompleteness of the artwork and its constructed nature. In this view, the allegorist as the paradigmatic figure of the modern artist snatches fragments of the shattered past—detritus and emblems—and arranges them in a constructivist montage that “create constellations between past, present and future.”<sup>94</sup>

According to Benjamin, this inability to impart meaning is consistent with the imperfect nature of human language and limits of historical inquiry, whose theological roots, at least in the baroque, are the “Fall of Man” and the subsequent loss of the transcendental plane of knowledge specific to modernity. In the dead object, which becomes a rune, the allegorist apprehends his own passing away and the passing of his entire epoch into mute and petrified nature, into future ruins and relics that become once again open to allegorical snatching. As Samuel Weber explains,

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93 Ibid, p. 87.

94 Ibid, p. 90.

The allegorist picks off where death leaves off with a nature that is historical in its passing away, and natural in its endurance and recurrence. Death is at work in allegory [...] as that which separates each thing from itself: from its essence, its significance, and above all from its name. [...] The possibility that 'each person, every thing, each relation can signify any other, arbitrarily' pronounces a verdict on the profane world [...]<sup>95</sup>

Devoted to the dead fragment, whose meaning eludes him, the allegorist mourns its passing away into insignificance and arbitrariness, a process made inevitable by the inability of the human language to impart total meaning. The allegorist's backward glance sees the trail of cultural objects as inventory of ruins, whose place in the epic narrative of history he cannot restore. And while he cannot locate its essence, or in Benjamin's words, christen it with "the blessed paradisaical language of [divine] name"<sup>96</sup> and thus redeem it in the messianic totality of history, he instead adorns the object in rhetorical profundity as a ritual of mourning. Consequently, allegory vacillates between the overabundance of meaning and complete meaninglessness, making it a destabilizing figure *par excellence*. As Jean Starobinski argues:

This doubling of meaning [in allegory] lends itself to a two-pronged interpretation: we can postulate that allegory represents abundance, that it reveals numerous "correspondences" which surround every real object, or even the countless sensible forms in which every ideal entity can be embodied. But a contrary argument is also possible: when we can no longer evaluate reality as such in our perception, it becomes necessary to supplement it with another meaning in order to prevent the dispersion of meaning itself, or even the eruption of complete meaninglessness.<sup>97</sup>

In a similar manner, Ugrešić's complex poetics in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* take on the appearance of allegory, in which fragments of time, frozen into semantically charged emblems and verbal photographs, strive towards the unity of narrative, but which in the end fail to impart some final judgment on the passing 20<sup>th</sup> century. This allegorical gesture, as we shall see, makes its appearance at the very beginning of the novel.

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<sup>95</sup> Weber, p. 159-160.

<sup>96</sup> Quoted in Caygill, p. 88.

<sup>97</sup> *La mélancolie au miroir: Trois lectures de Baudelaire*. Paris: Éditions Julliard, 1989, p 63-64 (my translation).

*The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* begins with a bizarre description of a dead walrus in the Berlin zoo. This textual fragment is juxtaposed with a yellowed photograph of three women on the preceding page, “[t]aken on the Pakra river (Northern Croatia) at the beginning of the century.”<sup>98</sup> The description of the scene is meticulous and objective, giving us exact names and dates, and informing us that we are faced with “a museum-display” or “an archaeological dig,” in front of which a nameless “visitor stands...more enchanted than horrified.”<sup>99</sup> The walrus, whose name we learn is Roland < fig. 2 near here>, and “who died on 21 August 1961 [...] (one week after the Berlin Wall was erected)”, is not an ordinary zoo dweller either, but a curiosity cabinet, whose stomach contains a random assortment of everyday objects he swallowed during his tumultuous lifetime: “a pink cigarette lighter, four ice-lolly sticks (wooden), a metal brooch in the form of a poodle, a beer bottle opener...a compass, a small car key...a little plastic bag containing needles and thread,”<sup>100</sup> among numerous other objects, equally random and seemingly insignificant. Ugrešić writes that the anonymous visitor “*knows* that their museum-display fate has been determined by chance (Roland's whimsical appetite)...but [she] cannot resist the *poetic thought* that with time the objects have acquired some subtler, secret connections.”<sup>101</sup> The display seems predetermined, its fate stitched together by poetic threads in the visitor's imagination. Moreover, this textual fragment, as the author informs us, serves as a blueprint of *how* we should read the rest of the novel: “The chapters and fragments which follow should be read in a similar way. If the reader feels that there are no meaningful or firm connections between them, let him be patient: the connections will establish themselves of their own

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98 Ugrešić, Dubravka. *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, trans. Celia Hawkesworth, New York: A New Directions Book, 1996, title page.

99 Ibid, p xi.

100 Ibid

101 Ibid, my emphasis.

accord.”<sup>102</sup> These fragments that frame the main text of the novel contain a myriad of associations, which would ideally be recognized by the reader of the novel and put together into a meaningful narrative. For example, the dead Walrus evokes the name of the semiotician Roland Barthes<sup>103</sup>, while the place name, Pakra river in Norther Croatia, alludes to the author's place of origin. Moreover, the presence of dates also acquires an additional significance by indexing the main dates of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the indeterminate beginning of the century, the erection of the Berlin Wall, and the fall of Communism at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rest of the novel essentially repeats this procedure, so that every fragment is nestled inside all the others, like Russian Matroshka dolls, all of which are potentially contained in the beginning fragment.

Brian McHale defines this procedure as one of the main strategies of postmodernist fiction, which has the “effect of interrupting and complicating the ontological 'horizon' of the fiction, multiplying its worlds, and laying bare the process of world-construction.”<sup>104</sup> For example, many of the prose poems in *The Museum* are self-referential and meta-textual, serving the poetic function defined by the Russian Formalists as defamiliarization (*ostranenie*) and “laying bare the device” (*obnazhenie priyoma*) of fictional construction.<sup>105</sup> Such is, for example, a short sketch of a Russian pebble collector in the fragment 21: “*Nanizivat', ya lyublyu*

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102 Ibid

103 As Matthew Goulsh notes in his article “Reading Dubravka Ugrešić Through Six Selected Sentences”: “The reader experiences a momentary semiotic temptation, given the walrus’s name’s evocation of Roland Barthes, but the stomach contents resist definitive signification, standing instead as an ideal open system: consistent, accidental, useless, giftlike, adhering to elusive logic and circumstance. Walrus becomes writer, positioned in opposition to closed systems, both literary and social.” (*Context* # 12, Urbana, Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003, on the web at <http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/article/show/250>)

104 McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1996, p 112.

105 The terms was coined by Viktor Shklovsky and reflected the avant-gardist idea that all art is constructed rather than organic—“the literary work is a sum-total of devices employed in it”—where “device” becomes “that basic unit of poetic form, the agency of 'literariness'” (see Erlich, Viktor, *Russian Formalism: History, Doctrine*, The Hague: Mouton Publisher, 1955, p 190). The metaphor of the walrus is perhaps the most powerful example of defamiliarization in the book, even though, as we have seen, this fragment also “lays bare the device” by becoming a metaphor for the entire text. Defamiliarization in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* is achieved through repetition of identical motifs in radically different contexts (e.g. the Berlin flea-market, and Richard's studio are both compared to the walrus).



*nanizivat*,' says Kira as though apologizing for something, and smiles the pale smile of a convalescent. / 'Threading, I like threading things.'<sup>106</sup> Needless to say, this is precisely how



**Figure 1.1: Roland the Walrus**

**Elephant seal Roland IV moved in to the Berlin Zoo in 1955. By the time he died in 1961, he weighed over a ton. He died from injuries sustained by swallowing a foreign object that had been thrown into his enclosure.**

Ugrešić constructs her novel, threading together different reality fragments, anecdotes, images, and personalities, into a fragile *bricolage* of exilic memory tied together by loose thematic threads. In the construction of her novel, Ugrešić appropriates the concept of montage from the historical avant-garde, but in a recognizably postmodern fashion, she uses it to destabilize the ontology of the text.<sup>107</sup> In other words, montage constantly “lays bare” its own construction, thus

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106 Ugrešić, *The Museum*, p 10. The quotation is in Russian, 'Threading, I like threading things.'

107 My guess is that Ugrešić appropriated this textual model from Danilo Kiš. Kiš calls this a “deductive turn” in prose, discovered by Borges, but originating with Baudelaire in poetry. “There is no doubt that the story, or more correctly, narrative art can be divided into that before and after Borges. And here I am not thinking about expansion of the field of reality (towards fantasy), but primarily about the very technique of narration; Maupassant-like,

demystifying the illusion of realism and organic totality of the artwork. As Peter Bürger has shown in his *Theory of the Avant-garde*, a montaged work of art “proclaims itself an artificial construct, an artifact. [...] The 'fitted' (*montierte*) work calls attention to the fact that it is made up of reality fragments; it breaks through the appearance (Schein) of totality.”<sup>108</sup> Ugrešić invites us to read these fragments as allegorical ruins, which would find their completion in the reader's imagination.

The allegorical character of *The Museum* is most visible at the text's beginning and end, which according to Yuri Lotman, are the most semantically charged elements of the text. Therefore it would be useful to do a reading of these parts in light of Benjamin's theory of allegory. The photograph of the three women and the text on Roland occupy a liminal space between the text and the paratext. These borderline objects that frame the actual text of the novel can thus be imagined as a miniature museum exhibit, material signs that disturb the borders between the trivial and significant, the fictional and the factual, the inside and the outside, life and art. As such, they disrupt the framework of fiction by converting fragments of reality into a system of signs and open it up for poetic play. For example, together with the text on Roland, the photograph of the three women can be thought of as an allegorical *emblem* composed of three parts: *inscriptio*, *pictura*, and *subscriptio*. The photograph of the three women is the *pictura*, which depicts “objects, persons or events, real or imaginary”; the information below the photograph is the *inscriptio*, “a short motto to introduce the *pictura*”; while the fragment with Roland the Walrus, can be thought of as the *subscriptio*, “a prose or a verse citation.” As Shapiro

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Chekhovian, O. Henry-like narration, which tended toward detail and which created its field of mythologies by induction, was replaced by Borges in what is a wizardly and revolutionary move by deduction. This is merely another name for narrative symbolism, whose consequence on the theoretical and practical plane are no less than those that were carried out by that same symbolism in poetry with the appearance of Baudelaire.” See *Djela Danila Kiša. Čas Anatomije*, Zagreb: Globus, 1983, p. 34, my translation.  
108 Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. M. Shaw, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 72.

points out in his book on Gogol and the heritage of the Baroque: “The *inscriptio* and *subscriptio* together were called the *scriptura*. The *scriptura* and *pictura* interact to convey an idea, sentiment, or concept, mainly for moralizing and for intellectual stimulation.”<sup>109</sup> This initial gesture on Ugrešić's part is essentially allegorical: it relies on a complex rhetorical conceit that combines arbitrary reality fragments to construct a poetic puzzle which the reader is asked to decipher. The potential answer to the puzzle can be discovered only by forming loose semantic connection between different elements of the allegory, that is to say, by uncovering the symbolic meaning beneath the literal and indexical sign.

The inscription underneath the photograph of three women <Fig. 3 near here> acquires hidden symbolic meanings that both subvert and enforce the literal and indexical image on the photograph: place, time, and absence of names. As Nebojša Jovanović has pointed out, the photograph of three women may be read as both an anagram and an allusion to Freud's “The Theme of the Three Caskets,” where the “three women” depicted on the photograph bathing in the Pakra river represent the Fates, Parkas of Roman mythology, or Moirae of the Greek. Because the mythical function of Parkas is to control human destiny, life and death, memory and forgetting, anamnesis and amnesia, Jovanović concludes:

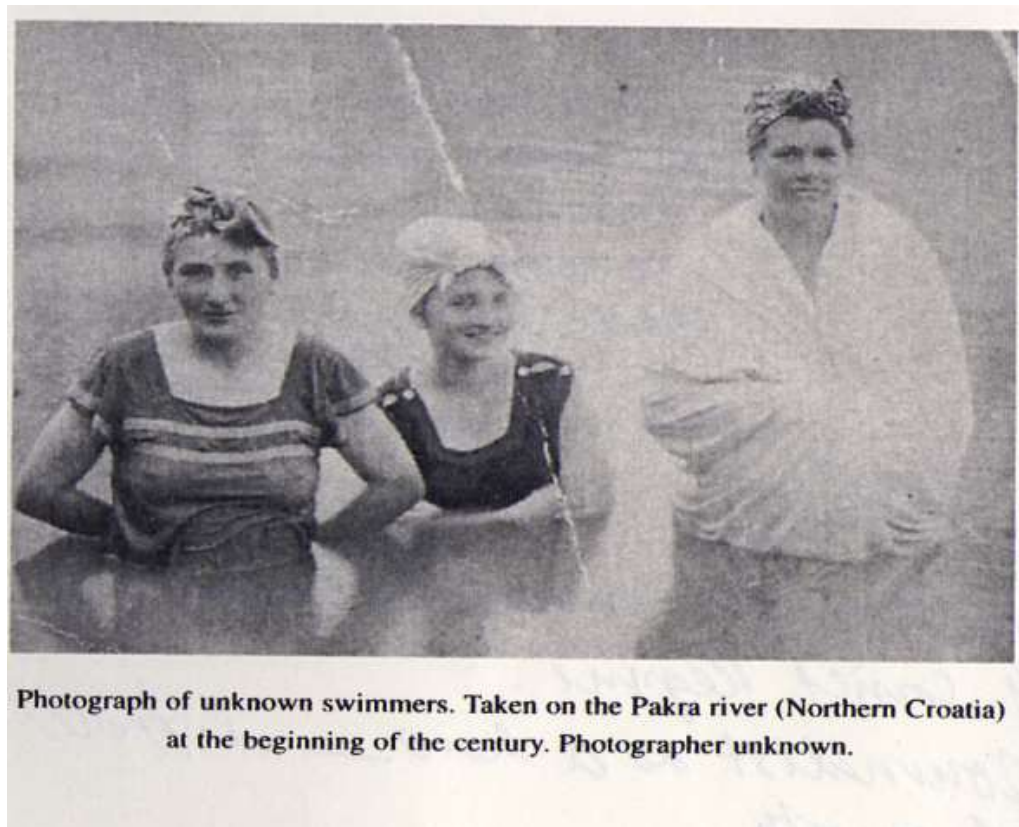
The Three Fates are then not only the mistresses of our Destiny, our Life, and our Death; they also rule over our *anamnesis*—they decide what we remember and from what materials we construct our own stories, which we then tell to ourselves and others as the truth about ourselves; and what elements will enter into the narrative of our identity, and how exactly out of these elements of memory we will build our future.<sup>110</sup>

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109 The description of the emblem is taken from Shapiro, Gavriel. *Nikolai Gogol and the Baroque Cultural Heritage*, University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University press, 1993, p 106.

110 Jovanović, Nebojša. “Motiv Tri žene u *Muzeju bezuvjetne predaje* Dubravke Ugrešić”, *Reč*, No. 74/20, 2006, p 111. (My translation).

The opening photograph therefore represents the allegory of time, which consigns memory to oblivion or, at least, to incompleteness. Moreover, the image is completely consistent with the allegory's use of classical elements, as exemplified in the figure of the Fates. This insertion of



**Figure 1.2: Title page, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1997)**

In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, the two fragments, the visual and the textual (i.e. the photograph and the fragment on Roland), occupy a borderline position between the text and the paratext, without being subsumed by the text's interiority or exteriority. Together they form an allegorical *emblem*, a practice which was especially prevalent in Renaissance and Baroque books, such as Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. While both the photograph and Roland enter into the rhetorical organization of the entire novel, they nevertheless remain indexes which point to the text's exteriority.

time, as the unconquerable element in human life, as well as the engine of human history, is precisely the cause of the ruin which we encounter on the next page—that of Roland the Walrus.

While art strives to conquer time and thus reach immortality and permanence in the flowing stream of history, time and death prove the more powerful of the two, ultimately destroying the vain human endeavors to make a permanent mark.<sup>111</sup> Time not only lays waste to entire civilizations, reducing them to rubble and ashes, but it also turns human memory into so much noise, so that the fragments of the past which we encounter transform into puzzles and enigmas. Their original meaning is forever lost on us. Ugrešić seems to suggest that while art and poetry cannot wholly recuperate what was once whole, it can reconfigure the shattered fragments into new meanings and conceptual unties. The allegory we find in *The Museum* invites us as readers to reinvest with new meaning what was shattered, to rearrange the bits and pieces that remain after the catastrophe—not through knowledge, but through *poesis*. Therefore, the central question the allegory poses is the meaning and function of art, or as the title of one chapter of the novel has it:

“*Was ist Kunst?*” Thus in one fragment of this chapter, a possible answer is given:

“*Was ist Kunst?*” I ask a colleague.

‘Art is an endeavor to defend the wholeness of the world, the secret connections between all things...’<sup>112</sup>

These new constructions, in one way or another, are replicated in every fragment, as well as in the connections between the fragments, which the reader is asked to establish. This fundamental

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111 Compare Miroslav Krleža's 1933 defense of autonomous art against socialist realist tendencies in Yugoslavia in his “Predgovor ‘Podravskim motivima’ Krste Hegedušića”, *Eseji, knj. 3, Sabrana Djela Miroslava Krleže*. Zagreb: Zora, 1963: “Beautiful things, therefore, last throughout ages; and through beautiful things, our worldly character and human tendency sustain themselves through time, so that it can outlive itself in its own reflections, to manifest itself beyond its grave, and to resist the laws of disappearance in time and in death. Overflowing with agitated ripples of fabric or with surfaces of bronze, marble, or wood, these beautiful things of life, like words memorialized in books and on gravestones, carry the traces of human hands and futile human labors through ages, so that the “eternally human in us,” or that rather “all too human in us” can be arrested in time. This mysterious and at the first glance unclear magic of beauty and artistic creation can only be imagined in time, and its fundamental and supreme inspiration from the beginning is the fear of everything that lives on the edge of extinction in temporal transience. If humans had no consciousness of death, there would be no art, and why man fears death is a question that is as human as the question of why man lives at all”

112 Ugrešić, *The Museum*, p. 161.

incompleteness of the novel essentially secures the openness of meaning and resists any closure of history.

The identical procedure of destabilizing the process of reading is employed in other chapters, most notably, in the chapter “Group Photograph,” where the motif of three women also appears. In a chapter titled “Group Photograph,” Ugrešić constructs a fantastical narrative in which an angel named Alfred visits the author and her female university colleagues before the Yugoslav war. The story is framed by a group photograph taken at a party shortly before the Yugoslav wars. The snapshot stands as a memento of friendship and solidarity between women of different ethnicities in Zagreb’s intellectual milieu. As the war progresses, however, each woman either chooses a clear side in the conflict or withdraws into emigration, often on account of the communal pressure to conform to the ruling wartime ideology. As is well known, Ugrešić herself had left Croatia in protest after publishing a scathing analysis of the cultural mechanisms that prepared the ground for violent, exclusionary nationalism, for which she quickly became a target of a media lynch in a Croatian newspaper. The story therefore contains recognizable autobiographical and documentary elements, confirmed, among other things, by the reference to the group photograph that frames the fictional narrative. Yet Ugrešić also inserts a clearly fantastic element into the story, thereby transforming it into a broader allegory about memory and forgetting. Namely, an angel materializes at the party where the photograph was taken and foretells—in jumbled quotations—of the oncoming catastrophe. The catastrophe undoubtedly refers to the dissolution of Yugoslavia, which produced a series of brutal and drawn-out wars, the worst Europe has seen since WWII. But in addition to the extreme violence towards the civilian populations, mass displacements and destruction of public and private property during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, the angel also alludes to what Ugrešić has elsewhere termed the

“culture of lies,” which provided the entire enterprise with an ideological justification. The angel—in other words—warns of the transformation of history into a myth by the ruling nationalist elites, more specifically, the myth of an organic, ethnically homogenous community that erases, destroys, and labels as false any aspect of tradition or history that does not fit into its own self-image. Ugrešić’s novel is an attempt to shatter this myth; it wants to recover the wealth of experience sedimented in the collective and individual memory, thereby contesting the official historiography whose aim was to throw Yugoslavia—and anything connected to it—into the “dustbin of history.”

On the mock-documentary level, this chapter also describes female solidarity among author's university colleagues that was destroyed by the oncoming war, the individual life paths of each woman, and their various political alliances during and after the war. While the author chooses exile, as a result of the media campaign against her anti-war stance, others stay behind, some enlist their sons, and one of them even wholeheartedly and publicly joins the nationalist war cry. The story contains a familiar device of *deus ex machina*, but Ugrešić uses it for literary play, only to finally expose it as a literary sham. For example, Alfred is able to organize the Tarot cards—another instance of allegorical emblems—in such a way as to produce a narrative of the events to come, but he can neither read nor interpret their content. In other words, Ugrešić offers us no divine access to truth, no final reading of history and biography, which (as the reading of Tarot cards, the main framing device of the chapter) is always open to interpretation and can therefore change at any given moment, any new reading.

Afterwards, two significant and symbolically charged events take place. First, the author takes a “group photograph” of the women with the Angel, but the next day, when she develops it, the photograph comes out as a blank. And secondly, the Angel gives to every woman, with the

important exception of the author, “a feather of oblivion.” We learn that the author, in her Berlin exile, keeps the blank photograph and the photograph of three bathers side by side on her window ledge, as a shrine to memory and forgetting: two sides of the same coin. Penelope's burial shroud, as it were. Because the entire novel can be thought of as a theoretical reflection on (auto)biography, on how we construct narratives of our lives, what we chose and what we leave out, the blank photograph is a reminder of the *aporia* of writing: the creative and radically unstable recollection that shapes this process. Whereas photographs, as Barthes tells us in *Camera Lucida*, are indexes, traces of light, writing possesses no such direct referent. The entire novel is precisely a search for such a stable referent, in which writing begins to appropriate Barthes' *punctum* (the wound) and the conciseness of a photographic image, resulting in what the author calls “verbal photographs.” All that remains, in terms of an exhausting literary game is to inscribe the wound of exile, the trauma of war, and loss of the communal space into writing, to take over the photographic *punctum* as a starting point for script. The index, almost by the logic of the autobiographical genre, as the author points out, is replaced by the affect—pain, as the most solid referent. As Ugrešić herself writes in a moment of theoretical lucidity that is characteristic of the entire novel:

There is only one thing both genres can count on (but they never count on anything because calculation is not in their nature) and that is the blind chance that they will hit upon the point of pain. When that happens (and it rarely does), then the ordinary amateur creation emerges victorious, on another non-aesthetic level, turning even the most splendid artistic work to dust.<sup>113</sup> Therefore, chance and pain become the two *topoi*—a trope and an affect—that subvert the closure of meaning and open up the text to the readers as a work of mourning. As Peter Bürger

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113 Ugrešić, *The Museum*, p. 28.



has shown, chance can be easily manufactured, but in its Utopian dimension and in its revolt against instrumentalized means-ends rationality, “only what chance reveals is immune against false consciousness, free of ideology, not stigmatized by the total reification of the conditions of human life.”<sup>114</sup>

The nationalist elites appear in the story as “lords of war” (p 193), “leaders oniromanths, interpreters of dreams, who will [...] disclose to them what they, the nations, have been dreaming for hundreds of years” (ibid). By leaving Croatia, Ugrešić—like many other expatriates and refugees from the former Yugoslavia—had exiled herself from this particular dream, refusing to accept the dominant interpretation of the past that is—after all— also her own. *Museum of Unconditional Surrender* is therefore the author’s attempt to interpret and repossess the past on her own terms, to gather and reconstruct the rags and shards of experience that have been violently discarded from the “dream” of the new, nationalist history. In it, the tradition—as a depository of collective and individual memory—is reconfigured anew as a free arrangement of poetic fragments. Viewed this way, tradition becomes open to inscription and interpretation, not as a past that grounds and permanently fixes one’s identity, but as a past that is continuously contested and reassembled by new forms of experience and new previously nonexistent subject positions.

### **III. The Communist Souvenir in the Global Marketplace**

*Allegorical emblems return as commodities.*<sup>115</sup>

-Walter Benjamin, “Central Park”

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114 Köler 1973, p 81 (quoted in Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. M. Shaw, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p 64.)

<sup>115</sup> SW 4, p 183.

*“I never pass by a wooden fetish, a gilded Buddha, a Mexican idol without reflecting: perhaps it is the true God.”*<sup>116</sup>

-Charles Baudelaire

By disrupting the hermeneutic approach to the organic artwork and emphasizing the process of construction rather than the finished product of art, Ugrešić propels her novel to “that domain where individual analysis of the work is essential.”<sup>117</sup> This gesture towards the reader—the decoder of poetic meaning (meaning which, importantly, eludes the novelist)—acquires historical and social significance. On the one hand, Ugrešić rejects the edict of nationalist ideology to create a mythology for the newly created nation state through literary production. On the other hand, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* signals the author's entrance into the global literary marketplace, where her past and her pain are exposed to the gaze of the literary public unfamiliar with the author's biography. By the same token, this gesture specifies the *kind* of reader the book demands: a devotee of the isolated fragment, or in Benjamin's terms, the melancholy lover of allegory.

In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, Ugrešić has appropriated the medium of photography, or more specifically the family album, as a governing principle of her fictional world-construction. Her poetics of the everyday reach a compromise between two poles—the artistic and documentary—focusing on the collecting of family photographs as a ubiquitous social and aesthetic ritual. Yet Ugrešić expertly obeys the rules of this elegiac genre only to subvert its documentary transparency by means of the metatextual commentary that immediately follows her first Berlin diorama. Ugrešić's critical and auto-referential commentary in the second

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<sup>116</sup> Quoted in Benjamin *SW I*, p 448.

<sup>117</sup> Bürger, p 72.

chapter, “Family Museum,” mediates between the immediate effect of the photographic image, its deceptive visual plenitude, as it were, and the critical reflection on the photography's narrative, semiotic, and constructed nature. This recognizably postmodern solution rescues the novel's narrative from the threats of picturesque lyricism on the one hand, and journalistic certainty, on the other. Here, a quintessential private archive guarantees a material connection with the lived past, however distorted, unreliable, and fragmented it may initially appear. Ugrešić snatches an individual life from the stream of time, and artistically fixes it as a museum exhibit against the backdrop of catastrophic and depersonalized history. What initially may appear as autobiographical narcissism—reflected in the author's endless fascination with the fragments and relics of her own and her mother's quotidian existence—in fact salvages private and spontaneous meaning from the jaws of nameless and triumphant history garbed in the ideological mantle of the age. Moreover, Ugrešić's shrewdness consists precisely in the dialectical apprehension of the private, trivial, and neglected memory traces as the inexhaustible site of the political, social, and historical meaning. The subjective mood of the novelist-hero—artistically realized in the form of lyrical fragmentation of experience into verbal snapshots—begins to reflect the selfsame fragmentariness of the social order that surrounds her. Here, the essentially arbitrary nature of photographer's framing of a reality fragment is elevated as the main poetic device of the novel and a vehicle for social critique.

The first chapter of *The Museum*, significantly titled in German “*Ich bin müde*”, opens with a view “framed” by the author's Berlin apartment window, whose curtains she opens “to reveal a romantic stage set.”<sup>118</sup> It is precisely on this Berlin picturesque stage set, whose artistic props are self-consciously exposed, that the author's chosen destiny of exile will unfold in front

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118 Ugrešić, *The Museum*, p. 3.

of the reader in static verbal images reminiscent of family albums, 19<sup>th</sup> century dioramas, or amateur scrapbooks. Susan Sontag has described the dual nature of photographic collections as “an exercise in Surrealist montage and the Surrealist abbreviation in history,”<sup>119</sup> at once participating in and transforming *the real* into picturesque, elegiac, and nostalgic kitsch of the yesteryear. She writes: “Photographs are, of course, artifacts. But their appeal is that they also seem, in a world littered with photographic relics, to have the status of found objects—unpremeditated slices of the world. Thus, they trade simultaneously on the prestige of art and the magic of the real.”<sup>120</sup> In the same way, Ugrešić projects her own melancholy onto the arbitrarily selected screen of history—in this case the temporary place of her exile, the post-Wende Berlin—but only to reveal that the condition of statelessness, political and social homelessness, has become the norm and not the exception. Just as Walker Evans documented the effects of the Great Depression among the Appalachian rural poor and Eugene Atget the legible shocks of industrialization on the deserted Parisian boulevards, Ugrešić arrests with her pen the subterfuge world of refugees and stateless persons—beggars, gypsies, emigrées, artists, prostitutes, and souvenir merchants—littering the “museumized” Berlin landscape at a particular historical instant.

We observe a similar trend, but in a substantially different context, in the late Soviet avant-garde, especially the authors who were part of the OBERIU group such as Danil Kharmis and Konstantin Vaginov, both of whom figure as the main intertexts in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. Vaginov, just as the heroes of his novels, were confronted with transvaluation of all old values that came with the October Revolution. Vaginov saw the old world die before his very eyes, and his characters reflect the anxiety for the new world of Stalinist

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119 Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*, New York: Picador, 1973, p. 68.

120 Ibid, p. 69.

Russia by collecting the fragments of old life in a vain attempt to put them back together into some sort of meaningful totality. As Ugrešić herself writes in one of her scholarly articles on Vaginov and Kabakov,

Amidst the complete destruction of the structured world of old values, at the time of social, political, and aesthetic changes, in the culture in which “crematoriums and burning are favorite topics” (Paperny 1985: 32)—the collecting of “trifles” (*čepuhi*) figures as an absurd and darkly humorous attempt to comprehend the reality in which, together with the everydayness, certain flowers are also disappearing” (*byt isčez—i opredelennye cvety isčezli*; Vaginov 1983: 74).<sup>121</sup>

The new system of values imposes itself as the absolute and only reality, destroying not only the prejudices of the past but also its cultural achievements, its flowers, as it were. With time, artifacts of the old world lose their meaning and shrivel up; they are violently ripped from their living cultural context and swallowed up by the meta-narratives of triumphant epochs and placed inside national museums, or in worst cases, destroyed or thrown away into the garbage. The collector or the allegorist, as we already stated, strolls around the garbage-dump of history, takes useless objects and turns them into collector's items, in hope that someday they will experience a renaissance. Anthony Anemone, in his article on Vaginov, makes the parallel between Benjamin's collector and Vaginiov's heroes explicit:

As the collapse of Rome meant the death of classical culture and religion and Europe's descent into the Dark Ages, so the October Revolution represented a threat to the Christianity and humanistic culture of Russia. The mission of those few surviving members of the intelligentsia in Soviet Russia, that is, Teptelkin and his friends, was clear. Like the monks of Medieval Europe, they would retreat from the secular world to the ivory tower of a metaphorical modern monastery. Where they would preserve the threatened legacy of Humanism in anticipation of a future Renaissance of culture.<sup>122</sup>

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121 Ugrešić, Dubravka “Avangarda i suvremenost (Vaginov i Kabakov: tipološka paralela)” in *Pojmovnik Ruske Avangarde*, ed. Aleksandar Flaker and Dubravka Ugrešić, Zagreb: Grafički Zavod Hrvatske, 1989, p 305, my translation.

122 Anemone, Anthony. “Obsessive Collectors: Fetishizing Culture in the Novels of Konstantin Vaginov”, *Russian Review*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Apr., 2000), p 258.

As Anemone further argues, Vaginov's, the focus on collecting also meant stripping the object of its use value and turning it into a “useless” art object, which in the historical context may be read as a gesture of political protest. Because the cultural policies of Stalin's Russia demanded both ideological conformity and partisan aesthetics from artists and other cultural producers, the independent artist almost completely disappeared from the Soviet Union and was transformed into Stalin's “court painter” akin to pre-19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, when art possessed a distinct ideological and religious function.<sup>123</sup> Needless to say, Ugrešić's novel presents us with a postmodern example of allegory, in which the objects—runes and fragments—of Yugoslav socialism are wrested from their organic context and placed in the post-unification Berlin, where they acquire new meanings the allegorist gives them. As we shall see, such a reading operates on multiple planes.

In a chapter titled “Priests and Parrots” in *The Culture of Lies*, Ugrešić uses a quote from Mandel'stam in order to critique the writers and intellectuals that have bought into the newly-coined nationalist propaganda and uncritically accepted the patronage of the new nation-states. The quote from Mandel'stam implicitly makes historical ties to the Soviet Union in the 1930's where, as already indicated, the old artist-patron relationships were once again restored, and the artist was forced to serve the dominant ideology. As Ugrešić makes apparent, in the post-communist system the intellectual was asked to denounce Yugoslavia as “a big lie:”

[T]hey dismantled the old symbols (the hammer and the sickle, the red star, the Yugoslav flag, the Yugoslav anthem, busts of Tito) [...]; they changed the names of streets, squares and cities; they moved into the same buildings (usually Tito's); they surrounded themselves with the same people [...] The Great Manipulators, *transformers*, dismantled the old one and built a new one out of the *same* pieces!<sup>124</sup>

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123 Ibid, pp 267-8.

124 Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, pp 39-40.

In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, Ugrešić opposes her collage to the political collage of “the Great Manipulators” in which history is ironically recycled in a palindromic manner. She rejects the ideological compulsion to build a new historical identity, to close off historical meaning by the nationalist meta-narrative. Instead, she evacuates the ideological content from the Communist souvenir and places it into an allegorical artwork, where, held secure by the Angel of History, it waits for redemption.

The allegorist, as we already said, essentially wants to redeem the world of lost objects, which in the baroque period is represented by the “fragment, a rune” of classical antiquity, seen in the light of triumphant Christianity as “the collapse of the physical, beautiful nature.”<sup>125</sup> “For the *eidōs* disappears, the simile ceases to exist, and the cosmos it contained shrivels up,”<sup>126</sup> Benjamin writes. In other words, allegory becomes a dominant genre in a period of historical cataclysms and disruptive changes, such as the transition from the Renaissance and Reformation to the Baroque Counter-Reformation, accompanied by the Thirty Years War: “Allegory establishes itself most permanently where transitoriness and eternity confronted each other most closely.”<sup>127</sup> Any triumphant period will try to justify itself as the eternal order of things, though as we know, its absoluteness is purely historical and thus ephemeral, transitory. Moreover, the period that succeeds and establishes itself as historically triumphant, banishes the emblems of the preceding period to a historical waste dump, where the allegorist snatches them up as mysterious runes and fragments. The same can be said for Baudelaire whose poetry bares the double stamp of Haussmann's restructuring of old Paris (i.e. failure of the Commune and the restoration of

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125 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 176.

126 *Ibid*

127 *Ibid*, p. 224.

monarchy) on the one hand, and the rise of the art market in which the work of art and other artisanal objects become fetishes in the hands of collectors:

But allegory in the nineteenth century was different from what it had been in the seventeenth. The key figure in early allegory is the corpse. In the late allegory, it is the 'souvenir' [*Andenken*]. The 'souvenir' is the schema of the commodity's transformation into an object for the collector. The *correspondances* are, objectively, the endlessly varied resonance between one souvenir and the others.<sup>128</sup>

Ugrešić, writing at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is deeply aware of marketability of both communist nostalgia and trauma in the late capitalist system where everything acquires an exchange value. *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* ironically parades as one of the commodities on the Berlin marketplace along with other communist souvenirs and traumatized refugees who, like Alaga, a Bosnian Gypsy, wear a mark of their misfortune—“*Ich bin aus Bosnien*”—in the hope that someone will exchange a few pfennings for the privilege of indulging their pity. Avoiding the spectacle of Berlin’s ostentatious memory industry in the newly remodeled Mitte district, Ugrešić focuses her attention on Berlin flea-markets in the former East as an allegory for the post-socialist condition:

The Berlin flea-markets are open museums of everyday-life, past and present. In Berlin flea-markets times and ideologies are reconciled, swastikas mix with red stars, everything can be bought for few marks. [...] In Berlin flea-markets east trades with the west, north with south, Pakistanis, Turks, Poles, Gypsies, ex-Yugoslavs, Germans, Russians, Vietnamese, Kurds, Ukrainians all sell souvenirs of a vanished daily life at the flea-market, that rubbish heap of history.”<sup>129</sup>

In the Berlin flea-market, Ugrešić offers us a microcosmic image of the contemporary global economy, with its deterritorialized labor, blurring of national borders, and post-ideological horizons. We can additionally read this passage as the author’s commentary on her own exile biography which is steadily declining in value after the fall of the dissident culture in Eastern

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128 Benjamin, Walter. “Central Park”, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2003, p 190.

<sup>129</sup> Ugrešić, *The Museum*, p 229.



Europe. Faced with a global literary market where different nationalities are competing for representation, Ugrešić sketches an ironic portrait of herself as a *colporteur* peddling her own nostalgic and most likely unwanted merchandise. In this manner, Ugrešić exposes exile as a reproducible and hence commodifiable genre, effectively removing the aura that still lingers around an exile's heroic biography.

Here the author also retains the traces of Walter Benjamin's *flâneur*, who embodies the historical moment in which the intelligentsia steps into the marketplace to look around. In his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin shows how the *flâneur* appropriates the mechanism of the market through his empathy and identification with the world of commodities: "*Empathy with the commodity is fundamentally empathy with exchange value itself. Flâneur is a virtuoso of this empathy. He takes the concept of marketability itself for a stroll. Just as his final ambit is the department store, his last incarnation is the sandwich man.*"<sup>130</sup> *In the Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, this empathy crops up in the narrator's frequent identification with émigrés and refugees, especially those who have nothing to sell but their own bodies or personal and collective traumas. Like Benjamin's *flâneur*, Ugrešić also favors the rejected and marginal sites threatened by extinction, where one can grasp "the genuine *historical image* as it *flares up* briefly"<sup>131</sup> before disappearing altogether. In this sense, the Berlin flea market represents the flip side of Berlin's booming memory and trauma industry <Figure 4 near here>. As Karen Till writes in her book *The New Berlin: Politics, Memory, Place*, "tourism landscapes are material and symbolic expression of the nation in a phase of late consumer capitalism. They commodify fears and fantasies of national haunting by imposing order on time (often to discipline ghosts)

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<sup>130</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eliand and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999, p 448.

<sup>131</sup> Benjamin, Walter, "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, p. 256.

and package a palatable and profitable identity through place.”<sup>132</sup> Ugrešić confirms Tills’s insight that for now the representations of collective traumas—whether in its pedagogic, moral, political, or therapeutic manifestations—cannot “exist outside...capitalist system of value.”<sup>133</sup>

Written in the twilight of the Communist idols, the experience of real existing socialism therefore returns to the Berlin marketplace as a reified memory, a souvenir:

By the Brandenburg Gate one can buy souvenirs of the age; a little piece of Wall in a plastic box, hammers and sickles, red stars, old Soviet medals. This small-scale trade is no longer carried out by Russian *émigrés* but by Pakistanis.

Pakistanis selling souvenirs at the place where Wall stood until a short time ago are the metaphoric heart of the end of the epoch.

A left-over Russian offers me little busts of Lenin.

He winks at me, saying: “Come on, buy a Daddy...”<sup>134</sup>

This passage also may be read as an ironic commentary on Ugrešić’s position as a post-dissident writer and intellectual, who is forced to sell her own communist past on the literary marketplace. The split between the Western consumer and the immigrant seller of Communist souvenirs is encoded in the semiotic structure of the text as identification with *émigrés* and refugees. This split produces a specific cultural code, which will be read differently by those who have undergone a similar experience as the author. In other words, the memories of everyday socialism—which now parade as commodities in the Berlin marketplace—will be fully decoded only by those who can place these relics in the context of living memory. They are the dormant seeds of individual and collective memory, painful synecdoches of a shattered lifeworld. Nevertheless, the Berlin texture in which these artifacts exist prevent the novel from becoming a mere inventory of dead effects. By juxtaposing the past with the present, Ugrešić holds up the mirror to the Western consumer of the Communist past, if only to point out the dangers of

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<sup>132</sup> Till, Karen. *The New Berlin: Politics, Memory, Place*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, p 196.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*, p 197.

<sup>134</sup> Ugrešić, *The Museum*, p 223.

aestheticization and reification of historical experience. All the more so, when the documentary trail of the twentieth century points to an endless roll call of catastrophes, wars, failed states and the lines of refugees and stateless persons they leave in their wake. Instead, Ugrešić embodied the rather recent historical experience of Western and Eastern Europe in the city of Berlin as a dialectical image of a permanent ruin. In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, Berlin becomes an archaeological dig in which almost every material object indexes the catastrophic modernity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As we shall see, this archaeological method is reflected in the highly intertextual character of the novel, where explicit quotation acquires the status of a surrealist found object.

The embedded or structural quotation is characteristic of *The Museum*, where every fragment contains not only the references to the fragments inside the novel, but also “palimpsestic” references to other works, especially to those at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Krlježa, Nabokov, Shklovsky), when Communism was just beginning to assert itself on the historical stage. The effect of this is the ironic flattening out of historical time (diachrony) and the disappearance of historical distance between modernist quotation from the beginning and postmodernist text from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, enabling the heterogeneous texts to communicate freely with each other without any interference. Time, in other words, becomes



**Figure 1.3: Thomas Hoepker, EAST GERMANY. Berlin, 1990.**

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, people gather chunks of the wall as souvenirs. © *Thomas Hoepker/Magnum Photo*

layered, while the text begins to resemble a cross-section of archaeological dig of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Berlin becomes an emblematic city, a surreal archaeological site. In other words, all the quotations in the text are taken from various guides to Berlin at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, they are written mostly by Slavic (Russian and Yugoslav) intellectuals, many of them fleeing the aftermath of the revolution, who have at one time or another inscribed the city as a liminal space between European and Slavic cultures, between East and West. The city confounds, as it were, any temporal and spatial category, thus becoming a metaphor for reparation of traumas and divisions that have scarred the European continent. Ugrešić gathers these quotes in the same way the collector snatches souvenirs from auctions and musty attics. As

in Benjamin's essay "Unpacking My Library", these quotes become the author's exilic bookshelf, which holds the fragments of a tradition destroyed by wars and revolutions: "To renew the old world—that is the collector's deepest desire when he is driven to acquire new things, and this is why a collector of older books is closer to the wellspring of collecting than the acquirer of luxury editions."<sup>135</sup> In Ugrešić's hands these quotations transform into emblems and enter into unexpected relationship and correspondences with the rest of the text.

For example, in *The Museum*, we find Miroslav Krleža's Russian travelogue quoted twice in the *Guten Tag* chapter. In 1925, the Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža's traveled, through Berlin, to the newly-formed Soviet Union in a role of an informal cultural attaché for the Yugoslav Communist Party, which at the time functioned as an illegal underground organization. He subsequently recorded his impressions of the Soviet Union in a travelogue titled *Izlet us Rusiju 1925 (Russian Excursion)*, which still survives as a fascinating record of everyday life in revolutionary Russia. Thus, in a chapter "Leninism on the Moscow Streets," Krleža's—a self-proclaimed atheist—paradoxically describes the ushering of Soviet modernity as a triumph of Leninist religion. The world is turned topsy-turvy, the streets of Moscow are carnivalized as a new deity makes an appearance, whose image in the form of a mass-produced commodity fills the public space:

Lenin is sold on the streets as a cufflink and a brooch for housemaids; he is a red star of the Communist Party in the buttonhole of a work shirt, a brand of cheap toothpaste, an advertisement for the formation of metallurgical trusts, a name of a locomotive or a newly-painted red streetcar[...] When a stranger arrives in Moscow, his first and strangest impression is that the entire city, in its dynamic movement of masses, carries a seal of an unreal shadow, which appears

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135 Benjamin, Walter. "Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting", *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 1986, p. 61

posthumously as a symbol in the same way Muhammed and Christ reappeared after their death. .<sup>136</sup>

In this fragment Krleža essentially described the rise of a new religion, with its idols, iconography, and its rituals. Ugrešić, on the other hand, describes the decline, its passing into fetish and fragment, where its emblems enter into a hierarchical connection with new Gods and deities of capitalism.

On Kottbusser Tor a spiteful wind licks posters where profiles of Marx, Lenin and Mao Tse Tung hang side by side. In front of the dazzlingly lit BMW shop Kudamm bare-chested young Germans take each other's photographs as mementos. ... An American Jew, a writer and homosexual, looks through the bars for male prostitutes and settles on a young Croat from Zagreb, who had turned up in Berlin escaping the draft. ... The coins thrown by passers-by thud dully on to a piece of dirty cardboard with *Ich bin aus Bosnien* written on it."<sup>137</sup>

As the baroque allegory consigned the Gods of classical antiquity to muteness, so the new global capitalism consigns the Gods of Communism and refugees from these fallen systems to the flea-market or a trash-dump. As Benjamin writes, baroque allegory "was designed to establish, from a Christian point of view, the true, demonic nature of the ancient gods."<sup>138</sup> *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* ends on an uncertain note with a passage that announces the new idols of capitalism. The image is poignant: JOOP fitness conglomerate that looks over the Europa Center, "which the Berliners call a 'soul silo.'" The narrator watches the Mercedes-star on top of the Europa center while exercising on a stair-master, significantly "standing on a spot" and "climbing stairs which lead nowhere:"

One-two. One-two. I bow to my angel of appeasement, the three-pronged star against the empty sky, I pay physical homage to the indifferent lord Joop. Sometimes I think that I ought to leave but I calmly refrain. I don't know where I should go if I left this glass bowl.<sup>139</sup>

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136 Krleža, Miroslav. *Izlet u Rusiju. Sabrana djela Miroslava Krleže*, Sarajevo: Oslobođenje, 1985, pp. 134-5, my translation.

137 Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, p. 105.

<sup>138</sup> Benjamin, *Origins*, p 222

139 *Ibid*, p 237-8.

Just as in Roland's stomach, the objects and names in particular are semiotically charged, but here Ugrešić gives them an additional religious connotation. However, such a religion is neither transcendent nor permanent; it is enclosed in a glass bowl—its heaven is artificial, the knowledge of the beyond impossible.

**CHAPTER 2:**  
**Transnational Spaces, Diasporic Times:**  
**Memory and Affect in Dubravka Ugrešić's *The Ministry of Pain* (2005)**

**I. Introduction: Imagining a Post-national Subject**

In the last chapter I argued that *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* allegorically recuperates the remnants of Yugoslav socialism that have been violently discarded from the “dream” of the new, nationalist history in Croatia. These remnants appear in the novel as the debris left in the wake of historical “progress,” as a shattered past that waits to be reassembled anew. The allegorical strategy here consists of blasting the epoch of real existing socialism from the continuum of history and poetically arranging the fragments of the past within the space of post-Wende Berlin, where they acquire potentially disruptive meanings. In line with Benjamin’s understanding of allegory, history in *The Museum* is essentially *spatialized*; it settles into an urban landscape of Berlin. The spatial dimension of allegory in the novel is additionally highlighted through the appropriation of visual media that rely on spatial, though not necessarily sequential presentation of content, such as museums, photography albums, scrapbooks, collages, gallery exhibitions, and aphoristic, fragmentary script. In *The Ministry of Pain* (2005), the author—closely following her biographical trajectory—returns to the questions of memory and forgetting in a new exilic space of Amsterdam.<sup>140</sup> *The Ministry* stages the drama of exile and

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<sup>140</sup> Ugrešić, Dubravka. *The Ministry of Pain*. (trans.) Michael Henry Heim. New York: Ecco, 2006; henceforth MP.



loss within different generic coordinates, evoking a more realistic and socially situated world of the 19<sup>th</sup> century *Bildungsroman*, albeit transformed into transnational and politically charged genre. This appropriation of realist strategies further suggests that the individual experiences of the characters in the novel are more firmly rooted in larger social, historical, and institutional contexts than in Ugrešić's previous novels; in this case, the experience of war, immigration, and precarity in the global neoliberal economies.

The novel is narrated by Tanja Lucić, a Croatian exile who lands a temporary position as a professor of Yugoslav Literature at the University of Amsterdam. Surrounded by other refugees from the former Yugoslavia, Tanja realizes that, along with her own overwhelming sense of loss, she will also have to confront the greater traumas of her students. "We had all of us been violated in one way or another," Tanja reflects in a characteristic passage. And continues:

The list of things we had been deprived of was long and gruesome: we had been deprived of the country we had been born in and the right to a normal life; we had been deprived of our language; we had experienced humiliation, fear and helplessness; we had learned what it means to be reduced to a number, a blood group, a pack. Some –Selim, for instance—had lost close relatives and friends. Their lot was the hardest to bear. And now we were all in one way or another convalescents (MP, p 51).

The Yugoslav wars, in other words, had left in their wake a mass of traumatized and shattered selves, reflecting the larger fragmentation of the country, its language(s) and its shared cultural space. Taking the symbolic role of a diasporic *Trummerfrau*<sup>141</sup> in the aftermath of a catastrophe, Tanja sees it as her task "to clear a path through the rubble" (MP 34) and thus to restore the fractured community through the shared work of remembrance. First, she organizes her class as a therapeutic exercise in Yugonostalgia, encouraging the students to narrate and share the allegedly painless memories of the socialist past. However the project soon backfires,

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<sup>141</sup> See Vedrana Veličković, "Open Wounds, The Phenomenology of Exile and the Management of Pain: Dubravka Ugrešić's *The Ministry of Pain*." (ed. Agnieszka Gutthy) *Literature in Exile of East and Central Europe*. New York: Peter Lang 2009, p 149.

unexpectedly triggering wartime traumas and interethnic resentments, thereby compromising the idealized object of nostalgia and eroding the hard-won sense of group solidarity. Experiencing this turn of events as a personal betrayal, Tanja restructures her course to reflect a more traditional academic curriculum and starts assigning Croatian novels of exile and homecoming, primarily as a way to create professional and emotional distance from her students. However, in the course of the novel, she slowly abandons her pedagogic position of superiority and begins to more closely inhabit the life of refugees, immigrants, and *sans-papiers*, a shift that parallels Tanja's loss of the academic position and a concomitant move from the center to the outskirts of Amsterdam. While the novel's title evokes lines of traumatized refugees waiting at borders, detention centers, or foreign embassies for a ticket out of the legal limbo of statelessness, Ugrešić also adds another connotation to this politically loaded metaphor. That is to say, "The Ministry of Pain" is the name of an S&M sweatshop where Tanja's students—who *have* managed to escape to the West—now work as illegals assembling rubber and leather gear for Amsterdam's affluent thrill-seekers. As several critics of the novel have pointed out,<sup>142</sup> it is this concern with the increasing economic, political, and cultural marginalization of already stigmatized immigrant communities—framed by the affluent Western Europe as the "children of

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<sup>142</sup> As several critics of the novel have noted, *The Ministry of Pain* harshly exposes the structural inequalities and exclusions that govern the new European order. In this sense, we can observe a significant shift in Ugrešić's work from preoccupations with the loss and critical recovery of the Yugoslav heritage to a broader concern with "transnational politics—especially identities fostered by neoliberal capitalism and the aftermaths of postcommunist transitions" (Kovačević, Nataša. "Storming the EU Fortress: Communities of Disagreement in Dubravka Ugrešić. *Cultural Critique*, Volume 83, Winter 2013, p 63) within the broader EU context. According to David Williams, the novel forcefully reveals the "cognitive dissonance [that] mars the East-West relationship," not only in terms of economic and sexual exploitation of postcommunist (and other) migrant workers by Western Europeans, but also in the maintenance of "the enduring division of 'the family of European nations' into favored sons and bastard outsiders" ('Europeans without Euros': Alternative Narratives of Europe's 'New Happiness.' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies*. Vol.2(1), 2010, p 7). Similarly, Nataša Kovačević, placing the novel alongside the recent protests against neoliberal measures within the EU, writes that "Ugrešić repeatedly grapples with identifying new structures of power and class formations that seem elusive and therefore absent, or at least benign when compared with old centralized forms of governance" (p 74).

post-Communism,” “the fallout of Balkanization,” and, less euphemistically, “savages”(MP p 52)—that largely underwrites Ugrešić’s second exile novel.

In this chapter, I analyze various diasporic temporalities in *The Ministry of Pain* and their relation to memory and trauma after the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia—the two coextensive themes that recur in Ugrešić’s post-1989 *oeuvre*. Specifically, I look at how Ugrešić engages different constellations of time, affect, and memory in producing a distinctly *transnational* and *diasporic* text,<sup>143</sup> which significantly departs from the Croatian and wider European *Bildungsroman*, where the main protagonist is anchored—anxiously but obsessively—to the national space. These constellations are foregrounded through various actions and affective dispositions taken up by the novel’s characters—such as *witnessing*, *speaking*, *hurting*, and *remembering*. By encoding these subjective modalities into a literary text, Ugrešić transforms perception into a site of political mapping of *the present moment*. Following Kia Lindroos’ extensive commentary on Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of history, I view this “shift towards the primacy of the present time”<sup>144</sup> as an approach to history that “emphasizes breaks, ruptures, non-synchronized moments and multiple temporal dimensions,”<sup>145</sup> over and against the chronological, causal, and linear time of historical progress, traditionally associated with national history. According to Lindroos, this shift should be seen as a *temporalization of politics*, “which

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<sup>143</sup> *The Ministry of Pain* dwells on the critical, spatial and temporal, interstices of two or more national cultures, articulating what Ayade Seyhan terms “an alternative space, a third geography” (*Writing Outside the Nation*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001, p 15). Through the different *topoi* of this third geography—such as the *national canon*, *language*, and *affect*—national memory is first evoked and then contested, disrupted, and recoded. If we accept the insight that cultural memory is the site where the nation—along with its exclusions, hierarchies, and silences—is reproduced, then *The Ministry of Pain* represents a radical intervention into dominant grammars of national memory and forgetting, exposing its latent antagonisms and shattering the conciliatory fantasy of national coherence. By mobilizing different constellations of gender, class, and unacknowledged trauma, the novel recalls those histories, testimonies, and memories that have been erased and that explicitly challenge the primacy of ethnic memory and national allegiances over other forms of identification, struggle, and solidarity.

<sup>144</sup> Lindroos, Kia. *Now-Time, Image-Space: Temporalization of Politics in Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History and Art*. Jyväskylä, Finland: University of Jyväskylä, 1998, p 13.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*

emphasizes the role of singular temporalities in both political and aesthetic experiences”<sup>146</sup> and which can potentially reconfigure the homogenous conceptions of the national space as well. “Benjamin's idea of politics,” Lindroos writes, therefore “implies an understanding of the political action as a field, which is essentially tied to present time and its plural temporal dynamics, as opposed to its homogeneous organization.”<sup>147</sup> In other words, these singular temporalities, resurging in the present moment, fragment and disrupt the nation as continuous and unitary object, recovering the traces of violence, historical oppression, and utopian horizons that have been overwritten by the totalizing narratives promulgated by the nation-state as a privileged gatekeeper of history, memory, and identity. As Susan Sontag has noted, “[n]ationalist movements are born with the knowledge of history as contested terrain; they recognize the writing of history and the constitution of memory as a means to political power.”<sup>148</sup> The type of politicized and oppositional writing, characteristic of *The Ministry of Pain*, presents then a direct challenge to the nationalist constructions of space and time by engaging nationalist ideology on its own alleged terrain of history and memory.

Indeed, as numerous theorists have pointed out, the emergent transnational and global structures have made it increasingly imperative to think beyond the nation-state as a naturalized framework of collective memory. Challenging us to theorize outside the nation, Anne Rigney consequently proposes a new set of questions that better correspond to new, emergent realities of globalization: “Is it possible for memory to become collective and yet be nonnational? What are the imagined communities that will succeed the nation-state? Are there specific forms of diasporic memory? Questions like these,” Rigney continues, “have been generating new debates

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid, p 11.

<sup>147</sup> ibid, p 12.

<sup>148</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. London: Penguin, 2003, 76–7.

around the dynamics of what has variously been called ‘transcultural’ and ‘transnational’ memory, along with new concepts for analyzing the dynamics of memory production outside national frames.”<sup>149</sup> I propose that *The Ministry of Pain* opens up avenues of examining the experience of memory and time under the conditions of transnational migration, the pressures of neoliberal capitalism, and in the aftermath of postmodern genocide, all of which contest and exceed the entrenched framework of the nation-state. This chapter is consequently divided into four subheadings corresponding to the actions and affective dispositions—*witnessing*, *speaking*, *hurting*, and *remembering*—which are figured as possible sites of collective memory of the critical post-national subject.

## II. Witnessing

*And closest of all, perhaps, is the past.  
All my features, all traces, all dates  
Have vanished into its morass:  
I am merely a soul born—somewhere.*

--Marina Tsvetaeva, from the epigraph to *The Ministry of Pain*

*The Ministry of Pain* is set in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars, or as Ugrešić puts it, quoting the Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska, when “all the cameras have gone off to other battlefields” (MP p 14). Consequently, the novel’s textual performance takes place within a specific historical horizon, namely, *after* a catastrophe. Here writing becomes a space of both witnessing to that catastrophe, albeit indirectly, through its reverberations outside of the space and time in which it occurred, and an attempt to reconstruct—out of fragments and pieces that

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<sup>149</sup> Rigney, Ann. “Transforming Memory and the European Project,” *New Literary History*, 43: 2012, p 617.

remain—a collectivity that was violently fractured by it. Initially, Tanja reiterates the therapeutic imperative on the collective level as the assembling of pieces of the shattered Yugoslav identity and restoring broken community ties, most notably, through her Yugonostalgic class exercises. But this project proves to be more difficult and problematic than it appears at the outset. First of all, Tanja herself is uncertain whether she is a therapist or a patient in this markedly hierarchical relationship. Indeed, we realize right away that her narration is shot through with depressive symptoms that take the form of spatial disorientation and dissociative behavior, affective disorders that are closely related to post-traumatic stress:

I'd be standing at a tram stop waiting for a tram, staring at the map of the city in the glass case, at the blue coded bus and tram routes that I didn't understand and that were of little interest of me [...] when suddenly, out of the blue, I'd be overcome by a desire to bash my head into the glass and do myself harm (MP 3).

Here, we have to ask ourselves, whether a therapist who is herself traumatized can help heal the traumas of others. Secondly, Tanja is constantly trying to negotiate the nature of her own loss with the potentially greater or—at the very least—qualitatively different losses experienced by her students, which begs the question whether recalling the past—as opposed to letting it go—is at all desirable;<sup>150</sup> all the more since the overpowering effects of trauma may end up blocking any possibility of a different future. In a characteristic moment of self-reflection, Tanja ponders this very predicament: “I realized I was walking a tightrope: stimulating the memory was as much a manipulation of the past as banning it” (MP 52). And finally, Tanja is not sure what particular collective she identifies with, or whether she belongs to any collective at all. The paradoxical feeling of intimacy and estrangement, which she experiences when visiting the locales inhabited by the Yugoslav diaspora, seems to be additionally conditioned by Tanja's specifically gendered perspective. Unexpectedly returning to a Bosnian café in Amsterdam full

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<sup>150</sup> Veličković, “Open Wounds,” p 139-140.

of “gloomy, tight-lipped” (MP 20) men, she is met, to her astonishment, “by long looks expressing nothing—not even surprise or indignation—at the sight of a *female invading male space*” (ibid, my emphasis). While she instinctively takes the same posture as the men in the café—“as if doing penance, instinctively drooping my shoulders a bit to fit in” (ibid)—thereby signaling an affective identification with their wounded masculinity, she concludes this train of thought with an ambivalent remark concerning her own “obscure desire to sniff out [her own] ‘herd’”: “not that I was ever certain it was mine” she comments, “or ever had been, for that matter” (ibid). As we shall see, this potential exclusion of women from the sphere of representation, as well as her ambivalence toward collective belonging of any sort, will also greatly complicate Tanja’s nostalgic relation to the Yugoslav past.

What is evident, however, from all these examples is a certain constellation of traumatic loss and an obsessive return to the memory of that very loss, a textual movement which constitutes a specific temporality of the novel as one of *traumatic repetition*. In fact, this loss is never truly overcome, in spite of Ugrešić’s generic closure in the novel’s epilogue, typical of the 19<sup>th</sup> century *Bildungsroman*<sup>151</sup> wherein Tanja and Igor, one of her students, end up in a semi-conjugal relationship—she, an international nanny; he, a builder of houses.<sup>152</sup> Even if we are not

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<sup>151</sup> Franco Moretti makes the argument that the dominant function of the 19<sup>th</sup> century canonical *Bildungsroman* was to symbolically reconcile the main protagonist with the existing social structures. “It is not enough that the social order is ‘legal’; it must also appear *symbolically legitimate*. It must draw its inspiration from the values recognized by society as fundamental, reflect them and encourage them,” (*The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London: Verso, 1987, p 16). In this aspect, the protagonist symbolically forecloses the trauma of originary loss through a successful narrative resolution. In Moretti’s words, “one must first and foremost [...] to direct ‘the plot of [one’s own] life’ so that each moment strengthens one’s own sense of belonging to a wider community” (ibid, p. 19). According to Morreti, marriage—which most novels of education end with—finally cements that symbolic bond of the individual with the wider community.

<sup>152</sup> Indeed, on the level of the plot, the author gives her protagonist the proverbial happy ending; the novel is wrapped up in an epilogue that unexpectedly and unconvincingly resolves the driving tensions of the plot. Ugrešić, in other words, self-consciously follows the rules of the *Bildungsroman* genre as a fossilized literary form, indulging the reader’s expectations. This metafictional element of the novel is foregrounded right at the beginning of the novel in a comment that precedes the text: “The narrator, her story, the characters and their situations you are about to read are all fictional. Not even the city of Amsterdam is wholly real” (MP unnumbered).

particularly troubled by this gendered division of labor, we find out that Tanja has not completely shaken off her angst, as evidenced by her bitter “Balkan litany” (MP p 255) spoken into the void of the Dutch landscape on the very final pages of the novel.<sup>153</sup> Moreover, if we consider the novel’s beginning as indexing the present of narration, that is to say, inasmuch as the structure of the novel is vaguely chiasmic, it is clear that Tanja is still in some sense coping with traumatic loss at the moment she begins her narrative. We can then therefore conclude that *The Ministry of Pain* is thoroughly haunted by trauma, exhibiting a temporality which I call post-traumatic.

Rather than relegating post-traumatic temporality to the status of a defunct compartment towards the past and future, as has been suggested by Dominic Capra,<sup>154</sup> I wish to explore the cognitive and political potentials of this temporality and hence trauma of itself as it is presented in *The Ministry of Pain*. My intention here is not to romanticize trauma, to transpose a socially conditioned pathology into the realm of “the real” and the authentic. Civilian victims of war, refugees, and combatants who suffer from post-traumatic stress obviously have an enormous stake in overcoming the symptoms that often make their life unbearable. Yet narratives that integrate post-traumatic symptoms into their literary form also perform an important role of recalling the unsettling memory of violence and mass crime that has been banished from the social and cultural realm. They do so precisely by recording the “*traces* of the unspeakable, the matters that official narratives cannot or will not recognize.”<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> For an insightful, albeit divergent, readings of the Balkan curses Tanja spews into the wind on the final pages of the novel, see Jambresic-Kirin, *Dom i svijet*, (2008), pp 120-21 and Kovačević (2013), p 78.

<sup>154</sup> He writes: “Indeed, in post-traumatic situations in which one relives (or acts out) the past, [temporal] *distinctions tend to collapse*, including the crucial distinction between then and now wherein one is able to remember what happened to one in the past but realize one is living in the here and now with future possibilities” (Capra, Dominic. “Trauma, Absence, Loss” in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Summer, 1999), p 699, my emphasis).

<sup>155</sup> Fritzsche, Peter. “The Case of Modern Memory.” *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (March 2001), p 113.



As pointed out by many critics, such narratives frequently exhibit the temporal structure of a *belated testimony* to a violent historical event, serving as indicators that the criminal past has not been fully acknowledged. They are a reminder that no ideological narrative can willfully and fully erase or sublimate the traces of collective violence left on bodies and psyches of those affected by it. In this sense, trauma exhibits the structure of belatedness or temporal delay—rather than repression—as demonstrated, most notably, by Cathy Caruth. What we then term trauma, according to Caruth,

cannot be defined by either the event itself – which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally – nor can it be defined in terms of a distortion of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significances attached to it. The pathology consists, rather, solely, in the structure of its experience, or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it.<sup>156</sup>

In the novel, this belatedness which constitutes a specific temporality of trauma becomes visible most trenchantly in post-traumatic symptoms, associated with the disruptive, haunting, and repetitive memory of wartime violence, a memory that is constantly displaced or triggered by other times and spaces than those in which it originated.

Taking the role of a therapist amongst the Yugoslav refugees, Tanja can therefore be seen as a *secondary witness* to historical violence, a skillful reader of post-traumatic symptoms, insofar as they appear legible, or insofar as they leave their trace on the language, the body, and the psyche of those directly affected by it. These symptoms are inscribed, first of all, on the physiognomies of Yugoslav refugees whom Tanja encounters around Amsterdam: “the strained melancholy in their features, a slight cloud on their brows, a barely visible, almost internal stoop” (MP p 14). According to Aleida Assmann, these corporeal traces should be seen as marks

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<sup>156</sup> Caruth, Cathy, “Introduction” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, (ed.) Cathy Caruth. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p 4.

of the “moral witness” whose body testifies to collective violence equally or even more authentically than the narrative of the testimony itself:

Since [moral witnesses] were directly exposed to violence, this violence has left its mark on their body and soul. The body of the tortured and traumatized man functions as an enduring stage of criminal violence, embodying at the same time the ‘memory’ of these witnesses, a memory which cannot be discredited in the same way as the verbal message of related by the speaker. The moral witness is not simply a vessel for the message, but the very vessel is the message.<sup>157</sup>

Ugrešić, however, remains more skeptical of the power of witnessing, especially its narrative instantiations. Among so much death and suffering, Tanja remarks, words lose their “power to shatter” (MP p 17)—since “nobody’s story was personal enough or shattering enough” (ibid). In other words, the circulation of horrific narratives and images within the global media, which had turned the Yugoslav wars into a televised spectacle, seems to additionally strip the testimony of its aura, producing a generalized, if not entirely reproducible account of suffering, lulling both the speaker and the listener into paralysis and numbing horror—without offering therapeutic relief or a concrete plan of action.

Tanja is therefore haunted by a story of a Bosnian woman “who is said to have memorized the story of her rape and repeated it whenever prompted to do so” (MP p 39). The woman’s testimony subsequently turns into a global news item, entering new interpretive frames and unforeseen contexts of reception. This is “a story” Tanja remarks, which is “by now several times removed from its content” (ibid). In part, Tanja explains this alienation thorough traumatic shock, which stunts one’s capacity for meaningful experience; but she also gives it an additional connotation, suggesting that trauma has entered the age of the mechanical reproducibility: “Reeling off the painful tale like a *machine* was her way of deadening the pain” (ibid, my

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<sup>157</sup> [Der Lange Schatten der Vergangenheit, Munchen: Verlag C.H. Beck oHG, 2006.] Quoted from Serbian translation, *Duge senke prošlosti*, Beograd: Biblioteka XX Vek, 2011, p 110.

emphasis). In this sense, Ugrešić guards against the appropriation of the victims' voices, which can easily be instrumentalized either by the mainstream media to produce a sensationalized story, or by the current political actors and interest groups to reinforce their own ideological and moralizing platforms.<sup>158</sup> As Renata Jambresic-Kirin has argued, exilic literature destabilizes and reflects upon the production of truth by the more authoritative victimological and juridical discourses, even as it integrates the fragments of the latter into its disjunctive narrative:

The voices of victims (voices with which perpetrators also happily identify), along with [the voices of] their acquaintances, advocates, and mentors make up an ambivalent, polyphonic, and scarcely comprehensible totality pertaining to the meaning of specific [historical] events, about which no consensus exists even among their direct participants. For this reason, the discontinuous, fragmented, and “inarticulate” personal story told by the “unentitled” exile can only serve as a footnote to the victimological, juridical or the historiographic text; this story, according to Ugrešić, is only a complex metaphor for the larger ‘human and literary failure.’ In other words, it is only a postmodern, literary offspring of Kundera’s recognizable form that semantically transposes the often confounding cultural and historical content of the East European experience to the Western public.<sup>159</sup>

Literary discourse can consequently be seen as an encoding of a complex, historically situated experience into a poetic text, one which not only evokes recognizable historical documents, but shapes those documents by reflecting on their affective and experiential potentials, as well as their conceivable contexts of reception.

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<sup>158</sup> Following Djurdja Knezevic, Aniko Imre suggests that even critically-oriented feminist groups are not immune to instrumentalization of victim's voices or the affective and communal appeal of nationalism. Commenting on certain feminist responses to the systematic rape of Muslim women by the Bosnian Serb military, Imre concludes that Eastern European feminisms in particular are ambivalently implicated in the exclusionary nationalist projects, even as they disavow more obvious forms of gendered violence: “Feminist narratives of rape became instrumentalized in nationalistic constructions of Serbian or Croatian ethnic identities, preventing coalitions among feminist groups who otherwise shared an antiwar stand. What Djurdja Knezevic calls “affective nationalism” of a specifically Eastern and Southern European kind energized “patriotic feminist” organizations in Croatia, among them lesbian groups such as Kareta (Knezevic 2004). These groups condemned the war but insisted on measuring and comparing on a national basis the victimhood assigned to women through rape, torture, and humiliation. They refused to communicate with antinationalist feminists in Serbia and elsewhere. The activism of Croatian patriotic feminists is an extreme expression of the ambivalence that characterizes postcommunist feminist and lesbian emergence (Imre, Aniko. “Lesbian Nationalism.” *Signs*. Vol. 33, No. 2, 2008, pp. 260.

<sup>159</sup> Jambresić Kirin, Renata. “Egzil i ženska autobiografska književnost 90-ih.” *Reč*. no. 61/7, March 2001, p 194.

As I've suggested, traumatic history in *Ministry of Pain* becomes shockingly embodied in the bodies and voices of refugees Tanja encounters in the defamiliarized space of the Netherlands. In one scene Tanja even visits the glass-encased courtrooms of The Hague tribunal in a vain attempt to get to the truth of mass crime, but all that remains with her in the end is the expressionistic image of a scream that breaks through this enlightened dramaturgy of justice: "I pictured the glass wall shattering into thousands of tiny slivers, the computer screens, the lights, the eyeglasses, the porcelain caps of people's teeth—all smashed into smithereens" (MP p 145). Taking into consideration the controversies that arose around the recent rulings of the ICTY, as well as the passivity of Dutch UN peacekeepers in the Srebrenica massacre, we can say that Ugrešić here uneasily translates the structures of responsibility and responsiveness across national boundaries.<sup>160</sup> Importantly, however, *The Ministry of Pain* does not propose a normative set of rules, rituals, and procedures for mourning that would satisfy the demands of what has been termed "transitional justice"<sup>161</sup>; rather, the novel testifies to the failure of finding a universal position to mourn, one that would give a full, or at least a more comprehensive account

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<sup>160</sup> The failure of Dutch peacekeeping troops to prevent the Srebrenica massacre resulted in the resignation of entire Dutch cabinet in 2002. The recent acquittals by the ICTY of Jovica Stanišić and Franko Šimatović, who in large part created, financed, and directed Serbian paramilitary troops in Bosnia and Croatia, and the Croatian Generals Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markač, accused of forceful expulsion of the Serbian civilians during the Operation Storm in Croatia's Krajina region, revealed the failure of international justice with respect to civilian casualties of war. As Eric Gordy, in his editorial for *The New York Times*, suggests, these rulings aimed to keep the difference between legitimate and illegitimate targets of war ambiguous, especially as powerful Western states have been engaged in ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. Clearer precedents could therefore compromise the international legitimacy of the present wars as well as future conflicts. To this, Gordy adds: "Some of this reasoning might look like an invitation to conspiracy theorists to look for sinister influences on the tribunal's decision-making. But no conspiracy is needed to explain that judges represent the states that nominated them to the tribunal, and that law is a conservative profession. To an outside observer it looks as though the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia was on its way to establishing groundbreaking precedent, saw what this implied, and jumped backward" (on-line: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/03/opinion/global/what-happened-to-the-hague-tribunal.html>).

<sup>161</sup> Dejan Ilić gives us a succinct explanation of transitional justice: "The recurring debates surrounding transitional justice at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were motivated by substantial political changes: societies around the world were liberating themselves from dictatorships and autocratic regimes and set before them the task to build a democratic form of government. Transitional justice is a unique understanding of justice in the period marked by political changes, determined by legal procedures in relation to the crimes committed by former regimes" ("Tranziciona Pravda kao politika kulture." *Reč* no. 79/25, 2009. p 66, my translation).

of the Yugoslav tragedy. As Vedrana Veličković has shown in her reading of the novel, *The Ministry of Pain* can only textually perform “the impossibility of writing embodied losses”<sup>162</sup> in its stubborn refusal to foreclose history. In this sense, fragments of testimony in the novel acquires an unsettling aura which they had lost through their circulation in the context of the global media, wherein the traumatized body in its shocking presence punctures the depersonalized image of the abstract and eternal victim. Throughout the novel we can therefore observe both the cognitive and affective possibilities of traumatic recognition as a form of literary and self-reflexive witnessing in the wake of a violent historical event. Moreover, it is precisely by holding on to her own pain, by refusing to completely forgive and forget, that Tanja herself comes to embody a potentially disruptive witness, someone whose second-hand testimony—presented here as the novel’s narrative—works against the fantasy of reconciliation and the cold and empty forgetting of the violent past.

### III. Speaking

*Nor am I charmed by my mother  
Tongue’s call, cajoling and creamy:  
I set no great store by the tongue that others  
Use to misconstrue me*

--Marina Tsvetaeva, from the epigraph to *The Ministry of Pain*

Tanja also describes the language of Yugoslav refugees and other immigrants as a corporeal, maimed, almost animalistic language that can only relate the simplest affects and gestures, such as pain, grief, and meaningful silences that render the traumatized body itself trenchantly visible as a testimony in its own right:

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<sup>162</sup> “Open Wounds,” p 151.

Not until I found myself abroad did I notice my fellow countrymen communicate in a kind of half language, half-swallowing their words, so to speak, and uttering semi-sounds. I experience my native language as an attempt by a linguistic invalid to convey even the simplest thought through gesture, grimace, and intonations. Conversation among my patriots seemed long, exhausting and devoid of content. Instead of talking, they seemed to be stroking each other with words, spreading soothing, sonorous saliva over one another (MP p 4).

While at first we may ascribe this impoverishment of one's native language to the common experience of immigration, Tanja gives it a more politically inflected meaning. Commenting on the separation of Serbo-Croatian into three different national languages, used to differentiate ethnic groups and to violently enforce borders between nations, cultures, and states, she sees this paucity of language in terms of linguistic scars left by the violence of ethno-territorial nationalism against a complex and nuanced symbolic structure built over time. Disrupted and repurposed by war, language consequently becomes a "common trauma" (MP p 39), a "weapon" that has been used to "curse, humiliate, kill, rape and expel" (p 35). Tanja's students, for this reason, prefer to speak in platitudes that "depersonalize the speaker, put a shield around him" (p 38), acting as sort of screen against traumatic memories; while some, like Igor, feel more at home in their acquired languages such as Dutch and English, devoid of the unconscious baggage of the mother tongue.<sup>163</sup> In fact, Tanja herself is unsure if such an invalid language "that hasn't learned to depict reality, complex as the inner experience of that reality may be, is capable of doing anything at all—telling stories for instance" (MP p 4).

Yet *The Mistry of Pain* can also be seen as an attempt to recuperate this fallen language; not only *aesthetically* by including it in a literary work, but also *politically* by figuring it as an emergent site of a still undefined post-national collective. The Croatian émigré critic Boris Buden, reflecting on his own work as a translator from Bosnian-Serbian-Croatian (BCS),

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<sup>163</sup> Julia Kristeva describes the acquired language of immigrants as a *prosthesis* in which the speaker's "unconscious shelters itself on the other side of the border" (*Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. L. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, p 31) and therefore keeps the potentially traumatic loss of the mother/motherland at bay.

conceives this new language as “the mother tongue of immigration,” placing it in clear opposition to the standardized national languages as sites of 19<sup>th</sup> century nation-building. According to Buden, the language of immigration is not simply a translation between two national idioms, which would result in depoliticized cultural hybrid, but rather a translation between two conflicting sociopolitical orders—between the old order of the sovereign nation-state and the new, potentially emancipatory order of globalization. As he puts it:

If immigration also has its own mother tongue, then it cannot take the form of a standardized national language, a language through which ethnic and cultural identities are articulated and which is created and reproduced by the sovereign nation-state. On the contrary, one can imagine the mother tongue of immigration only as a translation; not as a translation between two standardized national languages, but as a transition between two social orders, between the old social order of national sovereignty and the new social order which is being created on the former’s ruins and which is being articulated through the experience of globalization: in the new forms of sovereignty, in transnational public spheres, in the atypical forms of political solidarity and action, through the experience of all-pervasive deregulation, uneven development, and the permanent state of exception.<sup>164</sup>

Like Buden, Ugrešić is also reluctant to embrace globalization as a clear alternative to exclusionary nationalism. Instead she sees the new transnational realities as political experiences that need to be critically interrogated. On the one hand, globalization can actualize new forms of political solidarity that clearly transcends cultural boundaries, opening up the democratic space beyond the horizons of the nation-state. But turned into a prematurely embraced ideology, it can also nurture a vague and self-congratulatory feeling of cosmopolitanism, thereby concealing the class antagonisms operative in global neoliberal economies. While Ugrešić has explored the antinomies of globalization in a more detailed manner in her collection of essays *Nobody’s Home*,<sup>165</sup> *The Ministry of Pain* provides several essayistic interventions that point to the

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<sup>164</sup> Buden, Boris. *Vavilonska jama: o (ne)prevodivosti kulture*. Beograd: Fabrika Knjiga, 2007, p 251, my translation.

<sup>165</sup> See Ugrešić, Dubravka. *Nobody’s Home: Essays*. Ellen Bursać (trans.). Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2008.

persistence of structural inequalities despite (or precisely because of) the oftentimes mealy-mouthed rhetoric of multiculturalism within the EU. Thus, in a passage towards the end of the novel, Tanja satirizes the new language of European integration, which she sardonically terms “Eurospeak,” imagining a new class of upwardly mobile professionals who “will spruce up their applications with phrases like *Challenge is my propeller* and *Perfection is my ultimate goal* and jargon like *the contemporary self*, *the bastardization of our age*, *postcolonialism*, *marketization*, *recruiting tactics*, *sensitivity training*, and *contacts*” (MP p 237, original emphasis).

Significantly, Ugrešić includes corporations, governmental agencies, and the ostensibly oppositional academia in the production of this global newspeak.<sup>166</sup> As the novel implies, this emergent administrative sector—made up of a new class of horizontally and vertically mobile professionals—will inevitably insulate itself from “a nameless mass of slaves down below” (ibid); those, like Tanja’s students, who will have to eke out a living in the gray and black economies by selling their bodies and organs, or “rummaging in dustbins for food” (ibid).

Ugrešić’s protagonist and her students are presented here as transitional figures, unable to cash in on the new jargon of transnational culture that would make them part of the upwardly mobile Euro-elite: “We stood there with our mouths open a second too long and missed our chance to enter the new age” (MP p 237). While this closure of the future might seem rather premature if not outright paranoid, it does send a clear warning signal that the erasure of class from political vocabulary, especially after the collapse of Communism, can result in a potentially violent and eruptive return of the repressed, something we may already be seeing in the protests around the

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<sup>166</sup> Here Ugrešić echoes Rey Chow, one of the most trenchant critics of bad faith in the critically-oriented sector of the academia, calling for intellectuals to confront “the power, wealth, and privilege that ironically accumulate from their ‘oppositional’ viewpoint, and the widening gap between the professed contents of their words and the upward mobility they gain from such words” (*Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993, p 17).



EU and beyond.<sup>167</sup> The language of the immigrants Tanja encounters in Amsterdam, on the other hand, exposes the flip side of this sleek and euphemistic terminology of globalization, buzzing with positive affect. This other language, which we might call, following Boris Buden, *the mother tongue of immigration*, becomes, conversely, a depository of largely negative affects, a visceral archive of wounds embodying “the persistence of histories that cannot be wished away by happiness,”<sup>168</sup> to use Sara Ahmed’s phrase.

#### IV. Hurting

*For every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering, more exactly, an agent; still more specifically a guilty agent who is susceptible to suffering—in short, some living thing upon which he can on some pretext or the other, vent his affects actually or in effigy...*

--Frederic Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*<sup>169</sup>

*The Ministry of Pain* indeed testifies to the very real effects of the Yugoslav wars on the language, the bodies, and the psyches of refugees, as well as the continued marginalization of immigrants *tout court* in Western Europe. A community however that unites solely on the basis of a shared trauma, assuming a common victim identity, as Aleida Assmann points out, “obstructs the prospects of its own development and, secondly, it becomes insensitive to the experience of others.”<sup>170</sup> An identity locked up in trauma, in other words, can destroy the potential solidarity between various oppressed groups, inasmuch as post-traumatic symptoms—

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<sup>167</sup> Focusing on this half-mute language of pain and trauma that recurs throughout the novel, Nataša Kovačević suggests that Ugrešić is calling our attention to the legitimacy of the rising tide of protest in the EU, especially those, like the 2005 *banlieu* riots, that have been labeled as violent, inarticulate, and therefore outside of the civilized norm. According to Kovačević, “Ugrešić not only implies that noise must be heard as discourse, but that interlocutors must show respect and empathy for the singularity of enunciation that is alien to traditional forms of political discourse” (p 78).

<sup>168</sup> Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, p 159.

<sup>169</sup> Quoted in Wendy Brown, “Affective Attachments.” *Political Theory*, Vol. 21 No. 3, August 1993, p 401.

<sup>170</sup> Assmann, p 97

such as the aggressive forms of acting out and fantasies of continuous persecution—are not overcome.<sup>171</sup> Immigrants and refugees often maintain ‘wounded attachments’—in Wendy Brown’s phrase—to their respective ethnic group, which are in turn translated into chauvinistic and vengeful attitudes toward the populations of their host countries, including other immigrants. As Tanja points out more than once in the novel, her students often end up parroting the types of symbolic violence that has made them victims in the past. For example, many of them use derogatory terms for the inhabitants of the various Western European countries where they’ve immigrated, “like *Švabo* for the Germans, *Dačer* for the Dutch, and *Šved* for the Swedes” (MP p 18); while some continue to harbor deep resentments towards their former compatriots, voiced through excessive fixations on minor differences and contrived assertions of one’s own ethnic identity. Recent scholarship on the post-Yugoslav diasporas provides a useful label of *post-territorial nationalism* for this emerging phenomenon, “in which the nation is conceived as a global ethnic nation, irrespective of the people’s actual presence on the territory.”<sup>172</sup> Within post-territorial nationalism, political structures specific to Yugoslav successor states, such as ethnic apartheid and identitarian thinking, are therefore replicated on the global scale, so that the post-Yugoslav diasporas often end up maintaining rather than challenging the dominant ethno-nationalist ideologies of their respective homelands. Interestingly, those whose losses are the

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<sup>171</sup> The organization of a national community exclusively around a common trauma is especially evident in Israel, as it has been pointed out by several prominent historians, such as Peter Novick, Charles S. Maier, and Yehuda Elkana. In this context, Aleida Assmann summarizes Elkana’s argument: “Identity politics which rests on the semantics of victimhood can be seen more as part of the problem rather than its solution; or more precisely: as part of the posttraumatic symptom rather than its overcoming. On the example of the new Israeli identity, which is founded exclusively on the Holocaust as an experience of collective victimhood, Yehuda Elkana has propounded this damaging impulse in a very convincing manner, pointing to the ways in which this situation covers-up and represses important cultural values. Elkana’s point is not that the Holocaust should be forgotten; his point is that the Holocaust shouldn’t be the central axis of [Israeli] national identity” (Assmann, p 97).

<sup>172</sup> Ragazzi, Francesco and Balalovska, Kristina. “Diaspora Politics and Post-Territorial Citizenship in Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia,” *The Europeanization of Citizenship in the Successor States of the Former Yugoslavia (CITSEE)*, CITSEE Working Papers, Edinburgh, Scotland, UK: 2011, on-line [http://www.stis.ed.ac.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/108909/338\\_diasporapoliticsandpostterritorialcitizenshipincroatiaserbiaandmacedonia.pdf](http://www.stis.ed.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/108909/338_diasporapoliticsandpostterritorialcitizenshipincroatiaserbiaandmacedonia.pdf), last accessed December 6, 2013, p 2.

greatest—such as Selim, a student whose father was killed in a concentration camp run by the Bosnian Serbs—are often most likely to act out in an hostile manner, as evidenced by Selim’s behavior in Tanja’s classroom: “Selim couldn’t stand Boban’s Serbianisms, that was plain: when Boban talked in class, Selim would roll his eyes, take loud breaths and cough in his hand, and when Selim talked in class he went heavier on the Bosnianisms—I was sure of it—than he did ‘on the outside’” (MP p 37). Here, as elsewhere in the novel, Ugrešić lucidly dramatizes the deadlock of identity politics which transform the desire for the recognition of one’s pain into an aggressive gesture towards the other, thereby repeating the originary violence that had established this identity in specifically ethnic terms.

As Wendy Brown has argued in her anthological essay, “Wounded Attachments,” this type of identity politics operates subjectively through a specific expression of resentment, or colloquially stated, by “holding a grudge” which solidifies one’s wounded attachments to a particular group, without calling into question the ways in which this group is created *qua* political collective in the first place. Instead of delimiting it to the context of Second and Third World nationalism, Brown views resentment as the dominant political affect in late capitalism, which is constitutive of identity in the liberal framework as well. The trouble with identity politics, Brown suggests, is that it limits the political horizon to violent acts of retribution for the pain inflicted in the name of identity, whether in the past or present. In this sense, such politics not only reaffirm the deeply entrenched and exclusionary identities without offering a mechanism of transformation, but also prematurely paralyze any vision of the future that exceeds the identity’s tautological claim of “I am.” As Brown puts it:

Politicized identity thus enunciates itself, makes claim for itself, only by entrenching, dramatizing, and inscribing pain in politics and can hold out no future—for itself or others—that triumphs over this pain. The loss of historical direction, and with it the loss of futurity characteristic of the late modern age, is

thus homologically refigured in the structure of desire of the dominant political expression of the age—identity politics.<sup>173</sup>

How then does the novel *divest* itself from pain as a primary site of identity-formation in an attempt “to fashion a more radically democratic and emancipatory political culture”?<sup>174</sup> As the novel’s title implies, *The Ministry* certainly privileges pain as the dominant affect among immigrants and refugees, an affect which cannot be so easily wished away through assimilation, for instance, since immigrants are already stigmatized in the Netherlands and elsewhere in the “developed West” as threatening cultural outsiders.<sup>175</sup> Both Tanja and her students, in other words, are constantly re-experiencing in their minds the violence—whether symbolic or real—which had occasioned their immigration; and the memory of this violence provides not only an occasion to relive this pain, but also to reaffirm, through traumatic memory, one’s own wounded attachments. In this sense, Tanja is also liable to foreclose the horizon of politics to traumatic repetition which can neither see beyond its own pain nor envision an alternative future. “[T]here is only humiliation and the endless pain of memory,” (MP 215) she remarks at one point in the novel. The problem then might reside precisely in memory, which Nietzsche famously described as a sickness, advocating forgetting as an existential virtue—since excessive memory can quickly turn into a breeding ground for resentment. Ugrešić indeed gives Tanja the option of forgetting. Amsterdam with its straight, flat lines and vacuous horizons—a city built on the evanescence of sand and water—provides an apt metaphor for the antiseptic, numbing qualities

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<sup>173</sup> Brown 1993, p 406

<sup>174</sup> Ibid

<sup>175</sup> Indeed, as Jan Willem Duvendyke has recently argued, the anti-immigrant rhetoric has found a fertile ground across the EU. Referring specifically to the Netherlands, he writes: “Much of the public debate is infused with nostalgia: citizenship must help restore lost communities, while culture is closed, timeless whole carried by citizens who share its beliefs, norms, and traditions. It is not a community of fate but a normative community through which ties are sought” (*The Politics of Home: Belonging and Nostalgia in Europe and the United States*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p 93). Under the banner of culture as a new ideology, such reactionary discourses construct various others as immanent threats to the nation and its cultural integrity, thereby legitimizing exclusion and enforcing essentialized notions of citizenship and belonging. Accordingly, the nation and its culture are imagined as a home under constant attack from foreigners and perceived outsiders.

of forgetting in Tanja's mind; yet it also breeds angst in her, a feeling of conspicuous yet undefinable absence, "whose name and source" (ibid, p 29) she cannot define. Forgetting, then, does not do away with the pain; it only numbs it in order to make the unsustainable present more bearable. Accordingly, Ugrešić is reluctant to wholeheartedly embrace forgetting, especially since this would entail giving up one's leftist political attachments and with it the productive memory of socialism as potential resource for the future beyond identity politics. As Wendy Brown points out with respect to Nietzsche's praise of forgetting, "it is [...] possible that we have reached a pass where we ought to part with Nietzsche, whose skills as a diagnostician usually reach the limits of political efficacy in his privileging of individual character and capacity over the transformative possibilities of collective political invention."<sup>176</sup> Along similar lines, Ugrešić attempts to imagine a politics—and therefore a new collective that would be the subject of such politics—beyond forgetting, but also beyond the repetitive memory of pain as the privileged site of identity-formation. As such, the novel encapsulates a productive tension between the reparative work of therapy and remembrance, on the one hand, and the disruptive work of politics, on the other hand, guarding us against "the steady slide of political into therapeutic discourse, even as we acknowledge the elements of suffering and healing we might want to negotiate."<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Brown "Affective Attachments," p 406

<sup>177</sup> Ibid, p 407

## V. Remembering

*It is when the world within us is destroyed, when it is dead and loveless, when our loved ones are in fragments, and we ourselves in helpless despair—it is then that we must recreate our world anew, reassemble the pieces, infuse life into dead fragments, recreate life.*<sup>178</sup>

--Hanna Segal

Hanna Segal's formulation of the therapeutic imperative—to "reassemble the pieces, infuse life into dead fragments"—encapsulates how Tanja originally sees her own role vis-à-vis her students; but—as it has been suggested by Stephanie Young—it can also be applied to the novel as a whole, which functions as "an arbiter between trauma and recovery."<sup>179</sup> This recovery is not simply therapeutic, however; it is also deeply political since it attempts to reconstitute a radically new post-national collective on the embers and the ashes of the old one. Rather than reviving a lost community in some holistic manner, Ugrešić first interrogates the potential boundaries of this new transnational collective through Tanja's own ambivalent identifications. In this sense, Tanja is figured as a protagonist of a post-national *Bildungsroman* undergoing a sobering political education in the aftermath of a political catastrophe and in the age of shifting national boundaries.<sup>180</sup>

Ugrešić nevertheless privileges the socialist Yugoslav past over and against the nationalist and neoliberal present as a resource productive of a different future, one that could

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<sup>178</sup> Quoted in Flaherty, Alice. *The Midnight Disease: The Drive to Write, Writer's Block, and the Creative Brain*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004, p 60.

<sup>179</sup> Quoted in Kovačević, p 65

<sup>180</sup> Postmodern globalization, operating through unstable global markets, paradoxically enforces and fortifies collective identifications, thereby setting off reactionary forces, such as religious fundamentalism and exclusionary nationalism. As Catarina Kinvall points out, "nationalism and religion supply particularly powerful stories and beliefs because of their ability to convey a picture of security, stability, and simple answers. They do this by being portrayed as resting on solid ground, as being true, thus creating a sense that the world really is what it appears to be" ("Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security." *Political Psychology*, Vol. 25, No. 5, 2004, p 742).

potentially overcome identities constituted through pain precisely by reinstating the socialist and utopian horizon of politics. Yet this task also entails acknowledging the ambivalence of the desired past, its imperfect and fallen nature. Otherwise there is a danger of slipping into what Walter Benjamin has called leftist melancholia, “a mournful, conservative, backward-looking attachment to a feeling, analysis, or relationship that has been rendered thinglike and frozen in the heart of the putative leftist.”<sup>181</sup> Since there are several indicators that Yugonostalgia possesses some of these conservative attributes—not only in the posthumous revival of Josip Broz Tito’s cult of personality, but also in the less apparent refusal to question the deeply patriarchal foundations of the socialist collective<sup>182</sup>—Ugrešić guards herself against such melancholic fixation on the allegedly rosy and harmonious socialist past.

As I’ve argued in the previous chapter, in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* Ugrešić mournfully rearranged the objects of Yugonostalgia, engaging with the reified communist past in a playful manner that fundamentally transformed it into a resource for the future. Significantly, the narrator of *The Museum* steered clear of other exiles, immigrants, and refugees from the former Yugoslavia, observing them from a safe aesthetic distance, while addressing the reader of the novel as an undefined and desired Other who can partake in the work of mourning alongside her. In *The Ministry of Pain*, on the other hand, Tanja is thoroughly immersed in the Yugoslav diaspora in Amsterdam through her work as a teacher, so that aesthetic detachment—like the one we saw in *The Museum*—becomes increasingly impossible to maintain.<sup>183</sup> Tanja’s narration therefore oscillates between the “I” of the first person singular and

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<sup>181</sup> Brown, Wendy. “Resisting Left Melancholy.” *boundary 2*, Vol. 26, No. 3. (Autumn, 1999), p. 22. pp 19-27.

<sup>182</sup> See Knezevic, Djurdja. “Affective Nationalism.” *Transitions, Environments, Translations: Feminisms in International Politics*. Joan W. Scott, Cora Kaplan, Debra Keates (eds). New York: Routledge, 1997, pp 65-71.

<sup>183</sup> One consequence of this shift from aesthetic objects to political subjects is the greater difficulty of appropriating the past in the case of the latter. Against the current academic interest in the agency of objects and the desire to

the “We” of the first-person plural, traversing the purported singularity of identity categories such as “Eastern European,” “Balkan,” “Yugoslav,” “Croatian,” “woman,” “immigrant,” “post-colonial” etc. Moreover, in *The Ministry*, Ugrešić does not shy away from the more problematic, controversial, and potentially traumatizing aspects of the Yugoslav past, which were for the most part absent or effectively sublimated in *The Museum*. She even makes an extended reference to Goli Otok, a notorious Yugoslav camp for political prisoners, as well as frequent, largely disparaging allusions to Tito’s cult of personality, all of which thwart Tanja’s nostalgic desire to fully inhabit the prewar past.

Nevertheless, Tanja still maintains a strong attachment to the increasingly elusive and fleeting memory of Yugoslavia, which she tries to reconstruct by taking the role of a therapist in her classroom and engaging her students in an elaborate memory game. On the one hand, it is possible to view Ugrešić’s larger refusal to fully abandon Yugonostalgia as an example of an antagonistic mode of memory, in which “the memories of a certain group are presented as true, while versions articulated by the conflicting memory cultures are deconstructed as false.”<sup>184</sup> However, I would argue that Ugrešić here foregrounds precisely those critical, ironic, and self-reflexive modes of literature as a “medium that simultaneously builds and observes memory.”<sup>185</sup> Indeed, it is within this agonistic and destabilizing space of poetic play that Yugonostalgia can feasibly overcome the pitfalls of leftist melancholia, on the one hand, and the politics of resentment, on the other.

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escape anthropocentric thinking, the example of these novels tend to show that one will encounter more resistance, more affective uncertainty and volatility with living human subjects than with object that make up our environment.

<sup>184</sup> Erll, Astrid. “Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory.” *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (eds) Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008, 391.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid



As I mentioned earlier, Tanja's therapeutic role involves reassembling the pieces of the past that has been shattered by violence, a task which she performs in a communal setting by stimulating the instincts for play, memory, and imagination in her students. This reparative work also involves a potentially traumatic repetition of the past; but here it is the memory of the lost object that is evoked, a memory that, while producing that object in the very act of remembering, also alters it in significant ways. Turning to Miriam Hansen's analysis of traumatic repetition in Walter Benjamin's work, I read Tanja's play therapy of reassembling the fragments of Yugoslav memory as partaking in the potentially "utopian notion of repetition as difference, one that does not privilege traumatic experience as a primal event but makes it productive of a future."<sup>186</sup> In other words, seeing trauma exclusively as a primal event that constitutes and fixes identity would be to reiterate the inevitability of the politics of resentment, politics which cannot see beyond the accrued historical pain and the retribution for this pain in the present. In contrast to this, Hansen argues that "repetition in the mode of the 'yet-once-again' (it might work this time) is linked to the messianic idea of repairing a history gone to pieces."<sup>187</sup> Through the archive of multiple memories of Yugoslavia embedded in the novel, Ugrešić explores the potentials of Yugonostalgia in which a traumatic loss is transformed into a utopian principle. However, a desire for a repetition of the past also comes up against its own limits, inasmuch as that past—continuously restaged in the theater of memory—is revealed as imperfect and therefore in need of a new articulation which will better answer the demands of the present moment. Repetition, then, would not entail restoring the past to its original state—a futile and impossible task—but

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<sup>186</sup> Hansen, Miriam, *Cinema and Experience : Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011, p 194.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid*, p 195

taking the most ideologically uncontaminated pieces of this past as building blocks for an anticipated political construction to be realized in the future.

The communal archive of Yugoslav memories, composed of short essays written by Tanja's students, becomes precisely such a site of memory and play, repetition and difference. The archive appears in the first part of the *Ministry of Pain* and is given a distinct graphic layout that distinguishes it from the novel's main narrative. Reminiscent of another Yugonostalgic project, *The Lexicon of Yu Mythology*,<sup>188</sup> it functions as a *pseudo-documentary* intervention into the fictional world of the novel, which produces an *effect of reality* by invoking highly indexical objects and voices related to the Yugoslav past. The memories of Tanja's students, in other words, congregate around specific, historically verifiable common places, such as state holidays and parades, train routes, cuisine, and the national canon(s), presenting us with "a catalogue of everyday life in Yugoslavia" (MP p 49). Additionally, Ugrešić emulates regional dialects, urban and rural slang, as well as the idiosyncrasies of immigrant variants of BCS, metonymically and virtually restaging the polyphony of post-Yugoslav voices, a quality that is obviously missing from the English translation of the novel. Thus, while the novel is narrated principally in the first-person, privileging Tanja Lucić's Yugonostalgic perspective as the novel's main narrator and focaliser, these montaged excerpts introduce a radically *dialogical* element into the novel, whose function is to undercut the imaginary coherence of the Yugoslav archive, thereby depriving it somewhat of its nostalgic aura. In contrast to the *Lexicon of Yu Mythology*, whose contributors "swing from nostalgic to ironic modes,"<sup>189</sup> the archive presented in the *Ministry* displays a wider

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<sup>188</sup> *Lexicon of Yu Mythology* is a collaborative project conceived in 1989 by Ugrešić and the editors of the Zagreb-based *Start* magazine, who wanted to "compile a lexicon of Yugoslav popular culture" (Bošković, Aleksandar. "Yugonostalgia and Yugoslav Cultural Memory: *Lexicon of Yu Mythology*." *Slavic Review*, Vol. 72, No. 1, spring 2013, p 56) two years before the country itself disintegrated in a series of brutal wars.

<sup>189</sup> Bošković, p 55

range of negative affects, such as pain, bitterness, sarcasm, and resignation. This is hardly surprising considering that Tanja's students had all come of age during the Yugoslav wars, which hinders their idealization of the past they were not old enough to experience directly. Conversely, the contributors to the *Lexicon*, including Ugrešić herself, had for the most part grown up in the 1960s and 1970s, during the ascendance of what "historian Patrick Hyder Patterson calls 'the Yugoslav Dream,'"<sup>190</sup> buttressed by a strong welfare state, next-to-full employment, and relatively robust purchasing power. More importantly, these narrative excerpts also reveal distinctly gendered subject-positions, highlighting a set of concerns that is missing from the *Lexicon*, whose editors and contributors are mostly male. Gender and sexuality, in other words, explicitly shape various memories of Yugoslavia and their enactment in the present moment by pointing to the constitutive gaps and failures of the socialist project with regard to differences that fall outside the purview of class. Accordingly, while the archive undoubtedly reiterates a desire for a universalizing community of equals that is not fragmented along national and ethnic lines, it does not fail to interrogate the normative assumptions of the socialist collective founded in part on the abjection of women and sexual minorities.<sup>191</sup>

The first entry in the archive in many ways defines the overall project, presenting us with an image of "the plastic bag with red, white, and blue stripes" (MP p 47), in which the communist past and the postcommunist present come together in a constellation. This "proletarian swipe at Vuitton" (ibid)—as Ana, the student who composes the entry humorously remarks—represents the "luggage of petty thieves and black marketeers, of weekend wheeler-dealers, of the flea-market-and-laundrette crowd, of refugees and the homeless" (ibid p 48). The

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid, p 68

<sup>191</sup> For a detailed feminist analysis of community constructions in the Balkans see Aleksić, Tatjana. *The Sacrificed Body: Balkan Community Building and the Fear of Freedom*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013.

lowly bag can therefore be seen as a mark of all those who have been left out of the promise of happiness in the neoliberal economies following the collapse of real existing socialism, those wretched cosmopolitans and global nomads that constitute the new proletariat arising on the ruins of the former. Condensed into a poetic image, the plastic bag also dialectically recalls the past in the present moment, with its red, white, and blue stripes conjuring a “parody of the Yugoslav flag (*Red, white, and blue! We shall e’er be true!*) minus the red star” (p 47, original emphasis). Here Ugrešić presents the plastic bag as a parody of the original Yugoslav flag, setting up a semantic hierarchy in which the past—evoking the historical existence of a workers’ state—is privileged over the present moment. This memory of a prominent, albeit absent Yugoslavia state symbol can consequently be seen as an *afterimage*<sup>192</sup>—analogous to a photographic flash—that “remains in the mind after the ocular stimulus has occurred,”<sup>193</sup> as a past, in other words, that hauntingly lingers in the present, awaiting resurrection. While the afterimage in Baudelaire’s poetry, where it first occurs, serves to preserve a fleeting moment for eternity, giving it a distinctly theological grounding in the concept of the Christian afterlife; conversely, in Ugrešić’s formulation it becomes highly charged with secular and political meanings in which theology gives way to history.<sup>194</sup> The plastic bag, in other words, becomes an

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<sup>192</sup> Walter Benjamin coined the phrase “afterimage” in relation to Baudelaire’s modernist poetics, as a way to preserve memory against the onslaught of alienating, industrial modernity. As Meltzer points out, afterimage is based on an analogy to daguerreotype, an emergent technology at the time Baudelaire was writing his verses. Afterimage, in other words, textually replicates “the bright flash of light and a lingering vision—a kind of daguerreotype of which the iodine-sensitive silver plate is the mind” (Meltzer, Françoise. *Seeing Double: Baudelaire’s Modernity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011, p 86).

<sup>193</sup> Meltzer, p 85

<sup>194</sup> As Françoise Meltzer points out in his reading of Baudelaire’s “Á une passante” and Benjamin’s commentary of the same, the afterimage “projects the immediate past event into the future, and forges a visual memory onto the fragile anticipation of eternity” (Meltzer, p 86). The poet, in other words, will see the quickly disappearing widow once again, but only in eternal life. Thus, to the question posed in the poem “Will I never see you again save in eternity?,” Meltzer provides a very simple answer: “They will see each other...in death” (ibid). Meltzer consequently stresses both the metaphysical and technological (i.e. photographic) foundations of the afterimage as it is presented in Baudelaire’s poem: “Baudelaire translates the retinal image into an anticipated memory; indeed, one might say that at the level of the poem the experience is mourned for having been too rapid; but for the purpose of

identifying mark of the potentially new subject—the “nomads... refugees...and homeless” (MP p 48)—waiting to for their moment to appear once again on the world-historical stage. Ugrešić acknowledges that no such subject exists as of yet; and even if it does, then it is still deeply fragmented along cultural, ethnic, and national lines. Hence, the red, white, and blue plastic bag, although used by Poles, Czechs, Russians, Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, is claimed by none. Instead it is transformed into a prominent symbol of poverty and abjection, mirroring the civilizational and ethnic hierarchy of new Europe: “If I had asked the Poles,” Ana comments, “I am sure they would have said they got [the plastic bags] from the Czechs. The Czechs would have said, No, we got them from the Hungarians. No, the Hungarians would have said; we got them from the Romanians. No, they’re not ours, the Romanians would have said; they’re Gypsy-made” (ibid). In this contemporary version of “nestling Orientalism” and racialized poverty, “the Gypsies” occupy the lowest rung in the civilizational hierarchy of Europe. Like the Jews and queers, they embody “the foundational bearers of negative identification in the constitution of the modern nation-state.”<sup>195</sup> Yet it is precisely through their exclusion from national belonging that “the Gypsies” are figured here as the vanguard of a new social order, which could potentially succeed the nation-state. The entry therefore concludes with Ana’s own initiation into this imaginary post-national collective made up of refugees, immigrants, nomads, and the homeless, all of whom symbolically take up the plastic bag as their banner: “I was aware that by purchasing one of the bags I had performed a rite of self-initiation: I had joined the largest clan on earth, a clan for which the plastic bag with red, white, and blue stripes was colors, seal, and coat of arms

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its metaphysics, the poem needs such fleetingness” (ibid). In a similar manner, Ugrešić evokes this distinctly modernist trope to preserve a fleeting memory of the Yugoslav state from the accelerated temporal movement characteristic of modernity. But here the afterlife of Yugoslavia is conceived in secular terms, as a historical possibility, rather than metaphysically, through the notion of eternity.

<sup>195</sup> Bunzl, Matti. *Symptoms of Modernity: Jews and Queers in Late-twentieth-century Vienna*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, p ix.

rolled up in one” (MP p 48). Accordingly, the plastic bag also becomes a metonymy for this virtual museum of Yugoslavia, a sort of nomadic archive where other recollections, which exceed the national frameworks of collective memory, are stored as well. As I’ve suggested, here the traumatic loss becomes productive of difference and therefore of a more democratic formulation of a European polity.

This is not to say that all memories in the Yugo-archive sustain a nostalgic version of the past, even if this nostalgia is not “restorative” but “reflective”—to use Svetlana Boym’s terminology. Namely, the past in such instances is not merely replicated, but “opens up a multitude of potentialities, nonteleological possibilities of historical development.”<sup>196</sup> Indeed, we saw in the previous example how the playful and poetic aspects of memory are also productive of critical thought, serving as a springboard for new political investments by recalling the disruptive history of the class struggle. As I’ve mentioned earlier, however, the archive also contains openly antagonistic memories that directly challenge the Yugonostalgic production of the past even in its more critical variants, pointing to the problematic features of the socialist collective as a deeply normative, if not outright repressive community. In a sense, Tanja is aware of the possibility that not all of her students identify with the all too often empty evocation of ‘Brotherhood and Unity,’ which gathered the motley Yugoslav nationalities into a body politic; albeit a fragile one, as it turned out. Moreover, she acknowledges that the Yugoslav past may be attractive precisely because it has been stigmatized by the “ideologues of the successor states” (MP p 58), which would make Yugnostalgia no more than an impotent negation of the present. “Perhaps by stimulating the memories of the past I would destroy its halo” (ibid), Tanja reflects

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<sup>196</sup> See Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001, p 50.

at one point. “Or perhaps by attempting to reconstruct the past would end in no more than a pale imitation, thus exposing the poverty of the ‘baggage’ we deemed so powerful” (ibid).

The poverty of this baggage is subsequently exposed in the two concluding entries of the “Yugo-archive,” both of which reveal the largely unexamined, patriarchal norms that propped up Tito’s famous slogan of “Brotherhood and Unity.” Interestingly, Ugrešić has the two male students—Igor and Uroš—compose these entries, suggesting a discontentment among the new generation with the heroic and militaristic constructions of masculinity in Yugoslavia, constructions which were easily appropriated and replicated by the nationalist regimes that succeeded the socialist state. This is additionally confirmed by the short biographical sketches Ugrešić provides for the two students. Namely, Igor had escaped to Amsterdam to avoid being drafted by the Croatian army, whereas Uroš's father is a war criminal on trial in The Hague, a circumstance which ultimately drives his son to suicide halfway through the novel.

Igor’s entry on the anthology of Yugoslav poetry, “Horror and Horticulture,” is certainly the most sardonic toward and deconstructive of the Yugoslav ideal in the entire archive, and therefore deserves special consideration. Igor bases his censorious critique on the patriarchal cult of the national poet, who has historically stood for the *vox populi* throughout Central and Eastern Europe, even during socialism. He begins the entry with a sort of statistical overview of the nationalities represented in the anthology, where “[o]ut of 173 poets... 56 are Serb, 62 Croat, 40 Slovene, and 16 Macedonian” (MP p 71), with the Bosnian and Montenegrin poets subsumed under the offered categories. While this quantitative representation of “Brotherhood and Unity” sardonically parodies the uneasy persistence of and frequent manipulation with the unresolved “national question” during the existence of the socialist state, the entry reserves its most biting moments for the almost total exclusion of women from cultural production. “So I count up the

females,” Igor continues. “The Serbs have 1, the Croats 3, the Slovenes 2. That makes 167 guys and 6 gals. And of those 6, I was so browbeaten that she chose a male pseudonym” (ibid). The entry sustains this flippant tone throughout, switching to psychoanalytical persiflage in its derisive commentary on the poems and, by implication, on the patriarchal establishment of national literature as a privileged depository of cultural memory.

Firstly, Igor insinuates that the national canon is a deeply homosocial institution, in which the spiritual “Brotherhood” of male poets is founded on the abjection of women and the repression of homoeroticism. “Our poets,” Igor writes, “have a thing about dedicating poems to one another. Know what I mean? Like one guy chatting up another. Need I say more?” (MP p 72). As Branka Arsić suggest in her own reading of Balkan epic poetry, which served as the main literary base for Romanticism, here nationalism “manifests itself as a male homosocial bond that reacts in a panic against homosexual desire,”<sup>197</sup> wherein the national community is imagined precisely as a mythical and ambiguously desexualized brotherhood.

Even when women do appear in these verses, they are violently depersonalized, figured exclusively as mothers and/or as metaphors for the nation:<sup>198</sup> “Circa fifty percent of their output is about mama or the mamaland. Which kind of turns mamaland into mama. And vice versa” (ibid), Igor unequivocally states. The unsettling title of the entry, “Horror and Horticulture,” consequently derives from the conflation of the “pristine” national landscape with the

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<sup>197</sup> Arsić, Branka. “Queer Serbs“ in (eds) Bjelić, D. I., & Savić, O. *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002, p 267.

<sup>198</sup> Here Ugresic echoes Djurdja Knezevic in her analysis of gendered nationalism. Commenting on the systemic rape of Muslim women by the Bosnian Serb soldiers as well as other forms of violence committed against women during the Yugoslav wars, Knezevic sees the symbolic representations of gender within the discourse of nationalism as deeply implicated in the wider policies of ethnic cleansing: “Women are not considered as ‘only women’ but as personification of and symbol for the nation. When this is the case, women are not human beings or individuals. Male discourse denotes women as a group imbued with (imagined) characteristics similar to those of the nation. Phrases such as “mother nation” or “mother homeland” are examples of this point of view” (“Affective Nationalism.” *Transitions, Environments, Translations: Feminisms in International Politics*. Joan W. Scott, Cora Kaplan, Debra Keates (eds). New York: Routledge, 1997, p 65).



reproductive female body in the national canon, a metaphor that acquires its harrowing realization in the deeply gendered policies of mass rape and ethnic cleansing in the recent Yugoslav wars.<sup>199</sup> While at first glance such a fantastic parallel has the intended effect of a hyperbole, Ugrešić is in fact referring to the well-documented role of contemporary national bards in championing punitive violence as the epigone of heroic, masculine virtue shortly before the collapse of Yugoslavia.<sup>200</sup> This firmly established tradition that, arguably, originates in the more morbid variants of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic literary nationalism, was in large part maintained by the socialist state. In these Balkan spin-offs of the Gothic romance, the beloved motherland is always already lost, most frequently defiled by the dehumanized foe, so that the Romantic poet—in his mystical capacity to commune with the dead—is able to extract the vindictive message from the departed and exact the desired revenge on the phantasmatic enemies of the nation. For this purpose, an entire fulcrum of metonymical substitutions for the nation (such as the dead mother or beloved, deceased ancestors, tombs, their bones etc.) is mobilized in nationalist Romantic poetry. As Igor mockingly comments:

Oh, and then circa ten percent [of poems] is made up of these horror stories, I mean literally, graves and tombs and that shit. Man, it really traumatized me. I mean, our poets are a bunch of fucking ghouls [...] And just as I'm getting over it, what do I see but: *O mirrors of horror! Show scenes without gallows or noose! 'Blood! Blood!' screams my blood in this land of Croatians ill used* (ibid, original emphasis).

That these are not *simply* poetic tropes is shown by a series of incidents that preceded the outbreak of violence in Yugoslavia; such as the political spectacle made of the transfer of King

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<sup>199</sup> Ugrešić provides a more extensive commentary on the role of literature and, in particular, of literary tropes in the violent dismantling of Yugoslavia in her essay “The Realization of the Metaphor,” from her collection *The Culture of Lies* (1996).

<sup>200</sup> For a detailed historical account of the Serbian case, see Soso Dragović, Jasna . *Saviours of the Nation: Serbia's Intellectual Opposition and the Revival of Nationalism*. Montreal, Que.: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002, esp. pp. 177-195. For the other republics, see Miller, Nicholas, “Returned Engagement: Intellectuals and Nationalism in Tito's Yugoslavia,” in Cohen, Lenard J., and Jasna Soso Dragović (eds). *State Collapse in South-Eastern Europe: New perspectives on Yugoslavia's disintegration*. West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2008, pp. 179-200.

Lazar's bones to Kosovo in 1989, which Renata Salecl sees as designating "the new birth of the Serbian Symbolic community" and ideologically confirming "that Kosovo has always been the cradle of 'that which is Serbian;'"<sup>201</sup> or, similarly, the wild manipulation with the historical facts and number of victims in Jasenovac, the Ustashi-run WWII concentration camp, by the Croatian political and intellectual elites around the same time period.<sup>202</sup>

While it would be easy to confine these tropes to the resurgent nationalisms of the late 1980s and early 1990s, during which "the process of militarization, nationalization, and redefinition of national identities in former Yugoslavia"<sup>203</sup> took place, there are good reasons to believe that the frequently illiberal and patriarchal socialist state also did little to reconfigure the cultural foundations which it had inherited from the largely thwarted national movements of the previous century. As Renata Jambrešić-Kirin remarks, following the Sarajevo philosopher Ugo Vlaisavljević, the dominant mnemonic grammar of the Yugoslav state itself relied on the careful maintenance of the epic and highly masculinized Partisan myth, in which the enemy other was commonly figured "as a phantom, an evil doer, a monster, a demon, and, very importantly, a

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<sup>201</sup> Salecl, Renata. *The Spoils of Freedom: Psychoanalysis and Feminism after the Fall of Socialism*. London: Routledge, 2002, p 23.

<sup>202</sup> For a more comprehensive account of historical negationism in Croatia, especially with regard to the WWII and the National Liberation Struggle (NOB), see Barić, Nikica. "Antifašistička borba u Drugom svjetskom ratu u političkim interpretacijama hrvatskih predsjednika 1991-2006," in Kamberović, Husnija (ed). *Revizija prošlosti na prostorima bivše Jugoslavije: zbornik radova*. Sarajevo: Institut za istoriju, 2007, pp 211-235. In this context, Barić points out that many troubling proposals were met with a certain degree of resistance: "The greatest remonstrance and harshest criticism was elicited by Tuđman's conception, in the context of 'national reconciliation,' to commemorate the victims not only of the Ustashi camp but also those who had been the victims of Communist repression for their support of the Independent State of Croatia [NDH] on the site of the Jasenovac memorial complex, where the victims of the Ustashi regime already had a memorial. Tuđman's conception was condemned by many as a morbid attempt to 'mix the bones' of victims and perpetrators of the crimes" (Barić, p 214, my translation).

<sup>203</sup> Kahlina, Katja. 'Nation, State and Queers: Sexual Identities in the Interface between Social and Personal in Contemporary Croatia' in Anna G. Janasdatir, Valerie Bryson and Kathleen B. Jones (eds) *Sexuality, Gender and Power: Intersectional and Transnational Perspectives*. London: Routledge, p 32.

beast and an animal.”<sup>204</sup> The “multicultural” Yugoslav humanism was thereby founded in part on a heroic repression of its own violent past, which it fully and continuously projected onto the monstrous enemy other, in this case, the Germans and their collaborators.<sup>205</sup> In post-Yugoslav societies today, the violent return of the repressed can be observed in propagandistic revivals of collaborationist WWII narratives, accompanied by the equally macabre vilification of antifascists. Both systems however are founded, to lesser or greater degree, on the constitutive exclusion of women and sexual minorities from their collective political projects; although nationalism, in contradistinction to communism, sets up a decidedly more parochial notion of collectivity that privileges ethnic difference above all others. Through Igor’s polemical entry, Ugrešić is thus clearly engaged in literary ventriloquism, exposing the patriarchal foundations of national literature and its role in maintaining cultural system that represses individuality in favor of a docile and homogenous collectivity. At the same time, the entry points to the disturbing continuities between the past and the present. These haunting vestiges of the past not only compromise the narrator’s nostalgic longing and oftentimes erratic attachment to the lost national space; they also implicate nostalgia itself in an oppressive tradition, one that has to possessively define and regulate the maternal/national body.

Despite this forceful disavowal of the Croatian national tradition, Ugrešić nevertheless mobilizes its key texts in the polemical construction of her own novel. In this sense, the author engages in what can be termed *antagonistic intertextuality*, wherein the dominant values of the

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<sup>204</sup> Jambrešić Kirin. “The Politics of Memory in Croatian Socialist Culture: Some Remarks.” *Narodna umjetnost*, 41/1, 2004, p. 130.

<sup>205</sup> “The Germans and their collaborators were not only represented in the postwar popular production as violators of the rules of war, they were non-humans, steeped in crime, and that is why “unrelenting struggle to the very end using all available means and their extermination was the only way to victory”(Vlaisavljević 2003:70). Suppressed and denied, participation in the crime is the main reason why the victorious ideology was never able to separate the story of its birth out of the will of the people and their humane aspirations for a society of justice and equality from the story about ruthless four-year struggle with the enemy in order to survive” (Jambrešić Kirin, “The Politics of Memory,” p. 130).

national canon are transfigured through feminist, queer, and cosmopolitan interventions, like the one we saw in Igor's and Ana's entries and—as I will shortly demonstrate—elsewhere in the novel. In the words of Judith Butler, we can say that Ugrešić in the *Ministry*, “recites and restages a set of cultural norms that displace legitimacy from a presumed authority”—in this case, the Croatian national canon—“to the mechanism of its renewal.”<sup>206</sup> Literary canon, in other words, is a crucial site of national identification, a place where national memory is made and remade. The instrumentalization of the national literatures by the ruling political and cultural elites in respective Yugoslav republics shortly before and during the wars of the 1990s best illustrates this point. This strategy consisted in narrowing the manifold resources of the past to the singular articulation of a substantive and exclusionary ethnic nation as the *telos* of a much longer and patently less coherent cultural tradition. As Dejan Ilić has argued, the ethno-nationalist models of reception and transmission of key texts and objects, although entrenched in dominant cultural institutions, should not therefore be equated with the entirety of a cultural tradition:

A collection of elements offered by a culture, what we—in other words—conceive as tradition, is broader than the collection of elements out of which singular forms of identity are composed. What is more, this broader collection is neither homogenous nor coherent, despite the fact that the dominant model attempts to present and instantiate it in this manner. [Tradition] is neither isolated nor self-sufficient. Other cultures influence it, just as it exerts its own influence on other cultures. That is why it is both desirable and necessary to criticize the dominant model. Just as it is possible to change it.<sup>207</sup>

Notwithstanding the stated repudiation of the Croatian canon in the *Ministry of Pain*, recognizable elements of this tradition are clearly present in novel, not only in the explicit citations of the modernist poetic canon (Nazor, Matoš, etc.), but, even more strikingly, through

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<sup>206</sup> Butler, Judith. “Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism” in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogue on the Left*, (eds) Judith Butler et al. New York: Verso, 2000, p 41.

<sup>207</sup> Ilić, “Tranziciona pravda,” p 193

the evocation of motifs—such as exile, homecoming, and the tension between the collective and individual desire, tradition and innovation—specific to the European *Bildungsroman*, a genre historically underwritten by the often catastrophic nation-building projects in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>208</sup> Commenting specifically on the Croatian novels of homecoming she assigns in her class, Tanja notices an overall pattern of individuation stunted by the return to the confining and repressive national space:

We read two novels by K. Š. Gjalski, *Janko Borislavić* and *Radmilović*, both of whose protagonists had gone mad by the end of their lives; we read Vjenceslav Novak's *Two Worlds* and *Tito Dorčić* and M.C. Nehajev's *Escape*, all three of whose protagonists commit suicide; we read Krleža's *The Return of Filip Latinowicz*, which like others deals with the theme of exile. And while the protagonists in all the works fell isolated abroad, it is their return home that triggers their tragic death (MP p 169).

The *Bildungsroman*, seen as a literary paradigm of frustrated *national* identity formation, becomes here a site of critical intervention.<sup>209</sup> In other words, the author appropriates the highly

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<sup>208</sup> As the novel of education in which the main character eventually finds his “place in the world,” his cultural home, the *Bildungsroman*, according to Franco Moretti, can be seen as a deeply conservative genre of social compromise. As he has pointed out in his book *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, the genre itself arose as a response by the German nationalist intellectuals to the French Revolution and the threat it posed for the establishment of an organic national culture. In that sense, the 19<sup>th</sup> century *Bildungsroman* symbolically foreclosed the politically productive trauma of the revolution and gave rise to the depoliticized bourgeois cultural sphere within the national framework. This literary and cultural model was subsequently replicated by Slavic nations in Eastern and Central Europe, largely under the influence Herder and other German Romantics.

<sup>209</sup> The specific feature of these novels, as opposed to their earlier European variant, is the failure of a successful return to one's homeland, which leads to the eventual disillusioned and death of the main protagonist by suicide. This plot resolution reflects not only the socio-economic backwardness of the region, but also the political, semi-colonial circumstances of the nascent Romantic nationalism in *fin-de-siècle* Croatia. In other words, it is precisely the split between the idealized and internalized homeland and the homeland that the protagonist finds on his return that produces this disillusionment and eventual death. Having spent so much time abroad, where some degree of individuation was possible, the exile returns home to experience his symbolic erasure. This is precisely what Tanja experiences when she returns to Croatia on a short visit. Ugrešić's sharp observations about the current state of Croatian society turns into a scathing commentary on postcommunist transition, where issues of responsibility have been pushed aside while the population sinks into numbing oblivion by watching soap operas. Tanja finds this normalization of the Croatian society not only disorienting, but also deeply disturbing. All her emotional and moral outrage falls on deaf ears. However, instead of repeating the genre of the native's return, a genre which despite its critical edge had retained the faith in the homeland and national culture as something that exceeds the individual, as a sacrificial ideal, Ugrešić will instead settle her main heroine in the outskirts of Amsterdam where she will have to learn how to dwell within a new post-national community made up of immigrants and other *apatrides*.

ambivalent resources of the *Bildungsroman*, what Tobias Boes calls “formative fictions,” in an attempt to articulate a critical, albeit unfinished, post-national subject.<sup>210</sup>

Ugrešić destabilizes the nationalist underpinnings of the *Bildungsroman* through a transformative play of citations, most visibly, with August Šenoa’s *Branka* (1881), one of few novels of education with a female main protagonist. This highly sentimental novel tells a story of a naïve schoolteacher from Zagreb who leaves for the countryside, swept by the spirit of 19<sup>th</sup> century Croatian national revival, to instill the virtues of patriotic citizenship into peasant children. It is clear to anyone familiar with the novel, an essential part of the Croatian school curriculum, that Tanja is modeled, in part, on Branka’s character: “so taken with her calling that she performs her duties with great passion, and there is an idealistic streak to her nature, which makes her regard the reform and ennoblement of the souls entrusted to her as a sacred mission” (MP p 200). Yet modernization in *The Ministry* is not figured in terms of nation-building, and certainly not in terms of a civilizing mission, as implied in Šenoa’s passage; nor is the subject of modernization necessarily a national subject. Rather, Tanja is a character who has to undergo a traumatic experience of statelessness and immigration in order to destroy the illusion of a stable national home. These are experiences which her students are already well schooled in, although Tanja will not see this until the very end of the novel.

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<sup>210</sup> As Boes argues, the *Bildungsroman* remains wedded to the history of reception in which the concept originally emerged—namely, as an ossified and conservative genre tied to the German nationalist project. Critics of the *Bildungsroman* have generally refused to question this initial context of reception, so that each subsequent analysis of individual works merely confirmed the violence of the original definition. Recent interpretations of the classical *Bildungsroman*, however, have tried to counter this dominant trend by blasting the work from its original context of reception. Thus, *Bildungsroman* has been revived as a potentially revolutionary genre, “a universal marker of modernity, a literary response to changing times in which individuals have to secure their own place in the world rather than find it pre-given by tradition or inheritance” (Boes, Tobias. *Formative Fictions: Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Bildungsroman*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press: 2012, p 4). Ugrešić polemically exploits this basic ambivalence of the *Bildungsroman* in offering her own cosmopolitan variant of the genre.

Throughout the narrative, Tanja has been living through the lens of different genres, reading her life as a novel, fitting her experiences into the codes of Croatian literature, with its prodigal sons and failed *Bildungsromans*, its surplus of melancholy, and its obsession with the lost national space. All of a sudden, the heroine finds herself outside of this space, faced with a global multitude that require their own genres, their own symbolic expressions, their own political and social demands. Towards the end of *Ministry*, Ugrešić will quote an extensive passage from *Branka*, but only to differentiate her own project from Šenoa's. By this time, Tanja has already lost her job as a professor and moved to the outskirts of Amsterdam to live among the immigrants and the working poor of new Europe. Having wandered off into a sylvan clearing near Maurodam, she puts down for a moment the heavy baggage of the past and the pressing concerns of the present and indulges in a short-lived reverie. The passage that follows is recognizably of another, more innocent age: "the children swarmed around their teacher like bees, shouting as heartily as their voices would allow. The schoolmistress rose, placed her hat on her head, and made her way out of the wood through the crowd of cheering children like a fairy in a *fairy tale*" (MP p 245, my emphasis). Modernity and myth, the novel and the legend are dialectically fused in this *wish-image* of a harmonious national community. Here Šenoa allegorizes the Croatian nation in the figure of Branka—both a carrier of progressive republican values and a mythical creature of national folklore. The new epoch of national and bourgeois emancipation is further confirmed by the novel's connubial climax. The middle-class heroine in the end marries Count Belizar, a forward-thinking aristocrat, symbolically reconciling the historically antagonistic classes in order to preserve the fiction of greater national interest.

Walter Benjamin saw these utopian wish-images of modernity as the *fairy tales* of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which lull the political collective into a pacifying slumber. As Angela McRobie

lucidly puts it, “[t]heir dialectical character exists in the way they are, on the one hand, products of a class-divided society, but on the other they also look forward to a more equal society free from scarcity and conflict.”<sup>211</sup> Contemporary nationalism offers us precisely such a modern fairy tale, a wish-image that “totalizes a society into an inclusive whole,”<sup>212</sup> in an effort to mask the existing social and political antagonisms. As a favorite genre of Croatia’s wartime president Franjo Tuđman, this fairy tale was evoked more than once in his speeches. Its wishful thinking is perfectly encapsulated in Tuđman’s oft-repeated phrase “that newly-independent Croatia was *raj na zemlji* (paradise on earth).”<sup>213</sup> The narrator of *The Ministry of Pain*, on the other hand, sees things somewhat askance, outside the confines of national space. Stamped by the bitter experience of war and exile, she has matured and grown too shrewd for fairy tales. But there also exists another, more hopeful possibility. No longer completely “bound to the memories of yesterday’s clouds,”—to quote the late Lou Reed—perhaps Tanja is finally “set free to find a new illusion.”

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<sup>211</sup> McRobie, Angela. “The *Passagen-Werk* and the place of Walter Benjamin in Cultural Studies” in *Walter Benjamin: Appropriations*. (ed.) Peter Osborne. Taylor & Francis, 2005, p 308.

<sup>212</sup> Močnik, Rastko. “The Balkans as an Element in Ideological Mechanisms,” in Dušan I. Bjelić and Obrad Savić (eds) *Balkan as Metaphor Between Globalization and Fragmentation*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002, p 89.

<sup>213</sup> Williams, David. ‘Europeans without Euros’: Alternative Narratives of Europe’s ‘New Happiness.’ *Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies*. Vol.2(1), 2010, p 2.



## **CHAPTER 3:** **The Holocaust Archive and Democratic Pedagogy:** **Daša Drndić's *Sonnenschein* (2007) and *April in Berlin* (2009)**

### **I. Introduction**

On April 15, 2013, a temporary memorial appeared in the center of Petar Preradović Square, one of Zagreb's most populous urban spaces surrounded by public benches, lively open-air cafes, rustic flower stands, and an Orthodox church facing its north side. The interactive memorial, a wooden black cube about four meters in height and five meters in length and width, into which visitors were asked to enter, commemorated the anniversary of the organized escape of 750 prisoners from Jasenovac, the largest concentration camp administered by Croatian Ustašas, for Serbs, Jews, Roma, and antifascists on the territory of Independent State of Croatia (1941-1945), a WWII puppet state of the Nazi Germany. Indeed, one of the aims of this intervention was to transpose the memory of the camp from its original site<sup>214</sup>—located in a rural part of southeastern Croatia—and place it in the center of the capital in hope of informing the greatest number of citizens about this episode in nation's history.<sup>215</sup> Relying on the original

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<sup>214</sup> The re-opening of the Jasenovac memorial complex in 2006, which updated the “socialist” exhibition to include the names and nationality of the victims murdered in the Ustashi-run camp, is the most salient example of the new critical orientation towards national history in Croatia following the war of independence; although there are still quite widespread views coming from right-wing nationalists that attempt to minimize the nature and scope of Ustashi crimes.

<sup>215</sup> The facts concerning the escape from the camp on April 22, 1945 are displayed on the inside walls of the memorial. For the interview with the author of the pavilion, Saša Šimpraga, in which he discusses the concept behind the memorial, see <http://www.h-alter.org/vijesti/kultura/arhitektura-sjecanja-fotogalerija>.

architecture of the camp, the pavilion served both to authenticate the memory of the concentration camp, whose material traces haven't been preserved, and to inspire a performative act of recollection and identification in the present by inviting visitors to leave footprints on the dirt floor inside the cube's walled-up courtyard.

Notwithstanding several public acts of apology, memorial culture in post-independence Croatia has largely followed the ethnocentric model, focusing almost exclusively on the memory of Croatian victims, especially those killed in the recent war of independence.<sup>216</sup> The Jasenovac pavilion, on the other hand, introduced the uneasy constellation of traumatic memories that implicitly recalled Croatia's problematic relation to its historical others—namely, Serbs, Jews, Roma—groups whose historical experience of oppression has been excluded from national memory (and hence, nation-building) due to wartime and, more recently, postwar climate of xenophobic nationalism. Rather than representing a historically singular event from the past, the memorial transformed inevitably into a palimpsest that drew contentious memories of other, more recent events—such as the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s—into its orbit of meanings. For example, it could evoke the Ovčara prison camp near Vukovar, where in 1991 over 200 civilians and POWs of largely Croatian descent were murdered by Serbian militias following the withdrawal of the Yugoslav National Army (JNA); it could also conjure the forceful expulsion of Serbs by the Croatian army from the Krajina region during the Operation Storm in 1995, the largest exodus of a European population since the ethnic Germans were expelled from the Eastern provinces. Moreover, while aiming for authenticity and singularity, the pavilion in fact replicated ready-made and by now—arguably—normative models of Holocaust commemorative

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<sup>216</sup> See V. Pavlaković, "From Conflict to Commemoration: Serb-Croat Relations and the Anniversaries of Operation Storm," on-line: [http://www.academia.edu/855537/From\\_Conflict\\_to\\_Commemoration\\_Serb-Croat\\_Relations\\_and\\_the\\_Anniversaries\\_of\\_Operation\\_Storm](http://www.academia.edu/855537/From_Conflict_to_Commemoration_Serb-Croat_Relations_and_the_Anniversaries_of_Operation_Storm), last accessed May 2, 2013.

culture, particularly in the German context, such as Rachel Whiteread's *Nameless Library* (2000) or the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. This is evident not only in the “democratically” interactive aspect of the pavilion, which called on the public to momentarily remember the traumatic *lieu de memoire*, but also in the way it created a visible rupture in the urban fabric, namely, a dark, walled-in enclosure—a black hole of memory—amidst an otherwise lively public square designated for leisure and consumption.<sup>217</sup>

I have used the example of the temporary Jasenovac pavilion to demonstrate how critical processes of dealing with the difficult past necessarily rely on ready-made multimedia forms such as monuments, public performances, exhibitions, and interventions in public space. Combining the aesthetic of rupture with factographic presentation of historical documents, testimonies, and witness accounts, commemorative practices at once destabilize and reshape normative “grammars of national memory and identity”—to use Aleida Assmann's useful term—thereby allowing the viewer to critically position herself vis-à-vis a particular historical trauma. In societies with contentious and divided memories such as the post-Yugoslav, dealing with the difficult past can be a slow, uncertain, and oftentimes painful process that not only exposes dormant social antagonisms and power relations, but aims at transforming—through confrontation with unsettling otherness—hegemonic identity constructions that are taken as a given. Indeed, as Ann Rigney has recently argued, critical commemorative practices do not merely *reflect* the cultural mechanism of national memory production, but ultimately *redefine* those very mechanisms, which, in turn, makes possible different articulations of collective and

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<sup>217</sup> Indeed, the appropriation of this recognizable aesthetic suggests the desire of those who commissioned it—the Serbian National Council, a spokes-organization for the Serbian minority in Croatia—to bring commemorative culture in Croatia closer to the European, or more precisely, German model, which would provide it with additional legitimization as Croatia prepares to enter the E.U.

individual identity. There is no guarantee, however, that such a call to transformation of national memory and collective identity will ultimately be met with social consensus. Rather, a critical confrontation with a difficult past is necessarily involved in the broader field of social antagonisms, which is precisely what makes it part and parcel of the political struggle in pluralist democracies.

Following Rigney's media-based, constructivist approach to cultural memory, this chapter analyzes two "Holocaust novels," *Sonnenschein* (2007) and *April in Berlin* (2009), by the Croatian writer Daša Drndić, as examples of critical commemorative practices that have emerged in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. While it may seem odd, at first, to conflate the principally textual medium of the novel with a primarily visual medium of the monument, the case of Daša Drndić's highly experimental prose represents precisely such—oftentimes jarring and highly politicized—confluence of these two divergent forms. Spanning over three hundred pages each, both *Sonnenschein* (2007)<sup>218</sup> and *April in Berlin* (2009) rely on the aesthetic of radical montage to *absorb, recycle, and re-mediate* ready-made commemorative forms related to the Holocaust—such as monuments, lists of names, photographs, court transcripts, and witness accounts—into largely fictional narratives. My intention here is not to question the originality or, in fact, the historical accuracy of these fictional works, but rather to reaffirm—through a concrete example—Rigney's point "that cultural memory evolves, not just through the emergence of new memorial languages, but also through the *recycling and adaptation* of old forms in new situations," and that, "indeed, new [memorial] languages are themselves arguably just a more productive result of the same processes of recycling and

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<sup>218</sup> More than any other Drndić's work to date, *Sonnenschein* has garnered substantial critical praise both at home and abroad, winning the *Kiklop* prize, the most prestigious literary award in Croatia for a work of fiction, and more recently, *The Independent's* 2013 Foreign Fiction Readers Prize following its successful English translation under the new title *Trieste* (2012).

*bricolage*.”<sup>219</sup> Moreover, I argue that the appropriation, recycling, and remediation of the Holocaust commemorative practices in a changed historical context—namely, the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s—can create new politically charged meanings and forms of knowledge which both reconfigure and make relevant the legacy of the Holocaust in the present.

Both *Sonnenschein* and *April in Berlin* attempt to work through the European legacy of fascism while simultaneously evoking the more recent history of violent and exclusionary nationalism in the former Yugoslavia. In this sense, Drndić is very close to Lacoue-Labarthe in understanding the Holocaust as an event that “never ceases to haunt the modern consciousness as a sort of endless latent ‘potentiality,’ both stored away and yet constantly at hand within our societies.”<sup>220</sup> The refusal to depoliticize and foreclose the trauma of the Holocaust is precisely what makes *Sonnenschein* and *April in Berlin* emphatically “anti-historical novels,” focused on “that which stubbornly remains of history as its destructive inheritance.”<sup>221</sup> Combining fiction with extensive archival research, these novels construct a kaleidoscopic Holocaust collage which is meant to shock, disturb and traumatize the reader by bringing the past in close proximity to the present.

In *Sonnenschein*, Drndić tells the deeply unsettling story of Haya Tedeschi, an assimilated Italian Jew from Gorizia who has spent the last fifty years searching for her son Antonio, product of a brief love affair with a ruthless SS officer and onetime commander of the Treblinka concentration camp. Haya’s son, we later learn, was abducted from her at the end of the war as part of the *Lebensborn* project, one of numerous Nazi eugenics programs, and given to

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<sup>219</sup> Ann Rigney, “Plenitude, scarcity and the circulation of cultural memory” in *Journal of European Studies*, 2005; 35; pp 22-23, my emphasis.

<sup>220</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. *Heidegger, Art and Politics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, 77.

<sup>221</sup> Lukić, Jasmina. “Bol Pamcenja i bol zaborava: (anti)povijesni romani Daše Drndić, *Treća: časopis Centra za ženske studije*, 12 (2) 2010, p 23

an Austrian family, where he was “aryanized” and raised under the name Hans Taube. The meeting of the mother and son after fifty years of separation, however, never takes place within the bounds of the novel. There is no ostensible closure, no catharsis. Rather, the reader is barraged with the unending lashes of guilt as Haya almost objectively contemplates the horror of history in which she has played the part of a passive bystander. Here Drndić mobilizes the avant-garde strategy of montage that combines the visual and textual, fictional and documentary elements, disrupting the narrative with historical photographs and documents, Holocaust testimonies, literary quotations, and most jarringly, a list of around 9,000 names of the Jews deported or killed in Italy. Due to its unique visual layout and extensive use of historical documents, *Sonnenschein* can be imagined as a novel-museum, one which makes use of a compelling novelistic plot to systematically and “factographically” explore the totalitarian logic of Nazism and, more disturbingly, Europe’s continued obsession with the fantasized purity of national space and national identity, an obsession—it should be noted—that was most recently laid bare by the policies of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia.

The other novel I will be discussing in this chapter, *April in Berlin* (2009), takes this aesthetic of documentary montage even further. Dispensing with a traditional plot completely, *April in Berlin* offers a kaleidoscopic array of loosely connected stories, personal memories, photographs, urban sites, literary quotations, and the author's own essayistic musings on topics that include the Holocaust, nostalgia for communism in the East and West, and the manipulation of language by authoritarian regimes—all collected while the author-narrator stayed as a writer-in-residence in Wannsee Villa in Berlin. The reader here is asked to “walk” the winding and bombed-out roads of the totalitarian twentieth century, whose history has been written, erased and then again rewritten on the facades, monuments, and paving stones of Central European

cities such as Berlin, Vienna, Zagreb, Belgrade, and Budapest. Finally, the use of the Holocaust archive in both of these novels eerily rhymes—although it never fully coincides—with the more recent violence of Croatian and Serbian nationalism, which have also shaped this author’s biography, therefore producing temporal palimpsests of repetitive and catastrophic history.

It should be noted that Drndić’s continued, almost obsessive involvement with the negative inheritance of the Holocaust has a strong basis in her family history, since both of her parents took part in the antifascist resistance in Yugoslavia during WWII. Drndić attempts to rescue this antifascist pedagogy for the present, firstly by exposing contemporary forms of fascist thinking, and secondly by commemorating the victims of fascist violence. It is however the more recent experience of displacement, which Drndić underwent in the 1990s, when she moved from Serbia to Croatia, that endows this legacy of resistance and non-conformism with an explicitly autobiographical substance. Although Drndić has lived in Rijeka since 1992—with the exception of a disappointing emigration stint to Canada in the late 1990s, which resulted in two novels, *Marija Czêstochowska još uvijek roni suze ili Umiranje u Torontu* (1997) and *Canzone di Guerra* (1998)—she continues to occupy a political and poetic position of a permanent *apatride*, thereby distancing herself from fixed national frameworks, canons, and identities.

## **II. Official Commemorations of the Holocaust in Croatia and the Alternative Practices of Democratic Pedagogy**

The reception of the Holocaust in Croatia during the War of Independence (1991-1995) and continuing into the post-war period has been distorted by a strong revisionist current coming from the nationalist intellectual elites, and in particular the historical vision of Croatia’s first president and historian Franjo Tuđman. Along with the intellectual clique that rallied around

him, Tuđman was responsible for a largely positive reevaluation of the historical legacy of The Independent State of Croatia (NDH), a Nazi puppet state that existed from 1941 to 1945, as evidenced in the choice of recycled Croatian national symbols, currency, the manipulation of the number of victims murdered in Jasenovac, and his public pronouncements, such as the statement that NDH was a "milestone in Croatia's independence." As the Croatian historians, Goldstein and Hutinec put it:

In this context, the Ustaša-run Independent State of Croatia suddenly appears in a relatively positive light, in spite of its Nazi-fascist essence, its total political and military alliance with historical evil, genocide and other crimes which it committed (because it "was not only a creation of the fascists, but an expression of century-long longings of the Croatian people for an independent state"). In opposition to this, the weakness and guilt of both Yugoslav states, and especially the crimes committed in their name, are rendered absolute and are generalized to such a degree that they become arguments in favor of the rigid nationalist politics, and, when possible, the justification of Ustaša crimes or at least their relativization.<sup>222</sup>

Tuđman's more expedient goal was the unification and "reconciliation of all Croats," meant here in ethnic terms, historically divided between the Partisan communists and the collaborator armies during World War II, that is to say, between two historical legacies as sources of identification and national self-perception. This inauguration of the Croatian nation-state was propped up by a philosophical and political attitude that fetishized national independence as the absolute good—that is to say, above issues of democratic freedoms and human rights—and advocated an organic understanding of the state in ethno-national terms, as the home of the Croatian people/nation (*narod*), despite a long history of ethnic and national diversity within Croatia's historical borders.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Goldstein and Hutinec, "Neki aspekti revizionizma...", pp 188-189.

<sup>223</sup> See Dvornik, *Actors without Society*, pp 95-97. Dvornik states it quite clearly: "The determination of the identity of the state was in the source of the conflict from the Croatian side; according to the ideology of the HDZ and the prevailing collectivist-authoritarian type of widespread nationalism, it was set in ethno-national terms. Not only for



Since the time of gaining candidacy as an E.U. Member State, however, Croatia has been undergoing a process of europeanization and gradual distancing from Tuđman's revisionist legacy.<sup>224</sup> This is most evident in the new approach to the Holocaust—not only in the liberal, mainstream press, where WWI has become an almost daily topic for debate—but also on the level of official political visits to the sites of mass crime in the Second World War and antifascist resistance, such as the Jasenovac concentration camp turned memorial-complex. The gradual europeanization of Croatian memory related to the Holocaust seems to point to a compromise formation between the divided legacies of the Second World War, in which national independence is affirmed while the fascist legacy is rejected. In other words, the positive antifascist legacy is now interpreted in the new national key as always having been a struggle for Croatian independence, giving the Croatian state access to the symbolic capital and international legitimacy related to the existence of an antifascist resistance.<sup>225</sup> This version stands in sharp contrast to the official Yugoslav interpretation of antifascism as an international and revolutionary struggle against the domestic collaborators and fascist occupiers for the common socialist-communist state, crystalized in the monumental narrative of the National Freedom Struggle (NOB). The revision of antifascism and its predominantly communist character by the new nationalist and liberal elites is moreover highlighted by the wanton destruction of antifascist memorials during Croatia's "Homeland War" (Domovinski rat, 1991-1995), especially those

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the ruling party, but for the whole spectrum of opposition parties, it was an axiom that Croatia was a state of (ethnic) Croats. This attitude dominated politically in all public debates and in the parliament; it found its expression in the choice of the state symbols [...] and was finally sealed by the constitutional wording that proclaimed Croatia 'was established as the national state of the Croatian people'—the word 'people' standing for 'narod', which was clearly meant in ethnic terms" (97).

<sup>224</sup> See Radonić, "Standards of evasion: Croatia and the "Europeanization of memory"" in *Eurozine*, on-line: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2012-04-06-radonic-en.html>

<sup>225</sup> See Kuljić, "Anti-antifašizam," pp 56-61.

which represented the international or pan-Yugoslav aspects of the NOB.<sup>226</sup> On the other hand, the legacy of NDH, the fascist puppet-state, in the post-Tuđman era has been gradually if not contentiously made to fit the framework of negative national memory, as a dark spot in Croatian national history which has to be confronted and properly commemorated, rather loosely based on the German model of “mastering the past” (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.) The re-opening of the Jasenovac memorial complex in 2006, which updated the “socialist” exhibition to include the names and ethnicities of the victims murdered in the Ustaša-run camp, is the most salient example of this new critical orientation towards national history; although there are still quite widespread views coming from the far nationalist right that attempt to minimize the nature and scope of Ustaša crimes.

Recently it has been argued that the Holocaust, as the limit-event of 20<sup>th</sup> century history, has been going through a process of globalization.<sup>227</sup> While this shift in the reception of the Holocaust carries with it some positive consequences, such as the potential of a global moral consensus that another Holocaust or events similar to it ought to be prevented, there is also the risk of abstraction and decontextualization of the event or the set of events which—although prodigious in scope—has historical, local, and national specificities. Moreover, as the example of Croatia and the wider post-Yugoslav context shows the Holocaust already possesses a history of varied reception and representation, which complicates the idea of the Holocaust as a universal, transparent, and self-evident signifier. As Ljiljana Radonić has recently argued with respect to Croatia's case, the legacy of the multinational antifascist resistance has given way to the discourse of human rights and its almost exclusive focus on the victim, which aligns with Croatia's desire to appropriate the European (and American) model of dealing with the

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<sup>226</sup> Lešaja, *Knjigocid*, pp 35-51.

<sup>227</sup> See Levy and Sznajder, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2006

Holocaust. The danger of this model is that it has the potential to abstract the Holocaust as an external, metaphysical embodiment of evil, thereby locating it outside of its historical origin.

The literary field in Croatia, however, presents a more radical and heterogeneous confrontation with the Holocaust. Politically engaged and professedly anti-nationalist writers such as Ivana Sajko, Miljenko Jergović, and Daša Drndić have used the history of the World War II and the Holocaust to comment on the political climate and nationalist ideologies that prepared the ground and sustained the violent and exclusionary character of the recent Yugoslav wars, including the war for Croatian independence. In this way, their novels also aim to rupture and complicate the one-sided wartime and post-war narratives of national triumph and historical victimhood that have crystalized around the sacrosanct accounts of Croatia's "Homeland War." If not explicitly focused on the wars of the 1990s, novels such as Ivana Sajko's *History of My Family* (*Povijest moje obitelji*, 2009) and Miljenko Jergović's *Ruta Tannenbaum* (2006) evoke the post-war legacy of residual nationalism and cultural autism of a mono-ethnic state, conformism to the political and cultural *status quo*, politically motivated historical amnesia, and the normalization of hate-speech and intolerance towards the perceived others (Serbs, gays and lesbians, women, Bosnians, Roma, Albanians, and immigrants *tout court*). While this type of internal critique has left these authors open to the charges of *Nestbeschmutzung* (dirtying one's own nest), they have also garnered substantial critical praise from the domestic literary critics and picked up one or several of the major literary prizes in Croatia.

In this context Daša Drndić's prose represents perhaps the most radical instance of *littérature engagée* which deals with the Holocaust and its aftermath, combining fictional, documentary, and autobiographical elements in bone-chilling prose. Drndić's novels however are not restricted to Croatian history *per se*, but geographically encompass the former "belt of mixed

populations,” the imaginary Central Europe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In her 2007 novel *Sonnenschein* (English translation, *Trieste* 2012), Drndić summarizes her position on Central European history in an aphoristic, caustic manner that follows a feverish and ominous description of the fascist takeover of Italy: “Borders and identities, our executors. Married spouses that sow war, disorder and death” (*Sonnenschein*, p 57; henceforth SON).<sup>228</sup> The history of Central Europe—in Drndić’s novels—however is not told as an epic, unified narrative, since it is a story of changing collectives, shifting borders, movements of people, traumatic, nonredeemable and lingering absences, more often than not preceded by wars, revolutions, and other violent historical ruptures. Rather, her “patchwork” novels are composed of recovered fragments of history which, following Walter Benjamin’s method of destructive montage, use “citation without citation marks” in the hope that these critical constellations, “constructed from the rags of a tradition [will form] an image of the ‘oppressed past.’”<sup>229</sup> This poetic method of writing history negates classical plot structures, which imply chronological ordering of events and an epic unity of the past, present, and future, since, in Drndić’s own words, they cannot truly capture contemporary experience that is “crippled, maimed” (*April u Berlinu*, p 296; henceforth AB), in which “the particles of time... have unfastened from each other” (*ibid*). Moreover, Drndić herself writes from an articulated—political and poetic—position of displacement, thereby distancing herself from fixed national frameworks, canons, and identities. In her recent novel, *April in Berlin*, she writes,

To be naturalized means to domesticate oneself, to feel at home, but I don’t feel completely domesticated anywhere, I feel more *disjointed*, as if the vertebral disks of my spine have worn down (which they have), so that I can’t stand straight, I’m not rooted, encamped on any soil bounded by borders (AB, p 176; my emphasis).

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<sup>228</sup> All translations of Drndić’s novels are my own, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>229</sup> Fritsch, Matthias. *The Promise of Memory: History and Politics in Marx, Benjamin, and Derrida*. Albany, NY: CUNY Press, 2005, p 173.

*Naturalizirati se znači odomačiti se, osjećati se domaćim/domaćom, ali ja se nigdje ne osjećam posve odomaćenom, više se osjećam izglojbenom, kao da su se kuglični ležajevi moje kičme izlizali (što i jesu), pa ne stojim čvrsto, nisam ukopana, utaborena, ni na jednom granično oivčenom tlu.*

Drndić had spent a substantial part of her life in Belgrade before she returned to Croatia (more specifically, to Rijeka) in 1992, when the escalated war confirmed the inevitability of Yugoslavia's breakup. Or as she herself states in *April in Berlin*, she had left a “city gone crazy”/ “*poludjeli grad*,” only to return to Rijeka, “a small nervous space, wounded and dark”/ “*mali nervozni prostor, ranjen i mračan*” (ibid). And she adds, with the acerbic tone typical of the author, “[i]f I’d had where, I’d have moved away from that relocation as well”/ “*da imam kamo, i iz tog bih se preseljenja odselila*” (ibid).

Drndić's two recent novels can be seen as literary works that engage what Theodore Adorno has called “democratic pedagogy,” namely, “a manner of the way in which the past is made present; whether one remains at the level of reproach or whether one withstands the horror by having the strength to comprehend even the incomprehensible.”<sup>230</sup> Reflecting on the recently established post-fascist democracy in FRG, Adorno's essay is written with a political urgency that points to the eerie repeatability of National Socialism “*within* democracy”<sup>231</sup> rather than against it. As Adorno himself puts it, “the oft-invoked working through the past [...] has denigrated into its own caricature, empty and cold forgetting [...] due to the fact that objective conditions that engendered fascism continue to exist.”<sup>232</sup> The democratic pedagogy advocated by Adorno not only negates the posture of Heideggerian dignified post-war silence, but also exceeds the state-sponsored gestures of piety to the victims and political show of international reconciliation in favor of a more direct confrontation—which includes the sphere of artistic

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<sup>230</sup> Adorno, “The Meaning of Working Through the Past,” p 100.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid, p 90.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid, p 98.

representation—with the systematic and structural conditions that made the mass support of fascism possible. In the first place, for Adorno this means understanding and overcoming the psychological profile of the fascist personality as a depersonalized, unindividualized and weak ego that wants to retain the illusion of power by dissolving into an abstract mass. Secondly, Adorno points to the social precariousness of speculative capitalism that made hatred of democracy and the flight into mass society possible, whose foundations in West Germany moreover Adorno sees as more-or-less untouched at the time he was writing his essay. In this vein, he writes:

Fascism essentially cannot be derived from subjective dispositions. The economic order, and to a great extent the economic organization modeled upon it, now as then renders the majority of people dependent on conditions beyond their control and thus maintains them in a state of political immaturity. If they want to live, then no other avenues remains but to adapt, submit themselves to the given conditions; they must negate precisely that autonomous subjectivity to which the idea of democracy appeals.<sup>233</sup>

While this remains a larger problem that cannot be fully addressed in this chapter, I will point to the ways in which Drndić's novels try to recover the political autonomy of the subject through public speech that relies on politicized, unsentimental, and alienating memory of the Holocaust despite and even within the conditions of late capitalism and the increasing social precariousness that it produces and reproduces.

It was precisely the concerns outlined in Adorno's essay that drove the post-war West German writers, such as the Group 47, to make “*Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the Nazi past) part of their literary program and the basis of their political commitment to the democratic future.”<sup>234</sup> This also meant facing the political conformism, economic

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid, p 98.

<sup>234</sup> Mahlendorf, Ursula. “Confronting the Fascist Past and Coming to Terms with It.” *World Literature Today*, Vol. 55, No. 4, Entering the Eighties: The Mosaic of German Literatures (Autumn, 1981), p. 554.

opportunism, and post-war flight into silence of their parents' generation, and in that sense, owning up to the negative inheritance of National Socialism as part of both personal and national history. In a similar manner, Gordana Crnković in her review of Drndić's *Sonneschein*, singles out this novel from the contemporary Croatian literary production and places it in a wider European context of politically engaged literature written in the aftermath of the Holocaust. She writes:

The author delves into the subject matter of Nazi crimes and traumas of the children of both the victims and perpetrators in the spirit of Jasper's influential idea of metaphysical guilt, the idea that only art and philosophy can face the complex questions concerning the indifference of humanity towards (Nazi) crimes, and that humanity's relation to the Holocaust cannot be reduced to the work of idle legal institutions.

*U tematiziranje nacističkih zločina i trauma potomaka žrtvi i krvnika, siročadi povijesti, autorica se upušta u duhu Jaspersove utjecajne ideje metafizičke krivnje, ideje da se jedino umjetnost i filozofija mogu suočiti sa složenim pitanjima o ravnodušnosti čovječanstva prema (nacističkim) zločinima, i da odnos čovječanstva prema holokaustu nije moguće svesti na rad tromih legalnih institucija.*<sup>235</sup>

While Crnković rightly evokes Jaspers and his idea of metaphysical guilt, I argue that Adorno's concept of democratic pedagogy may better account for the political nature of antifascist literature, in this case, the novels of Daša Drndić, insofar as such works of literature enter the public and cultural sphere as a scandalous, even shocking act of political speech. Moreover, as both Crnković and Adorno suggest, this kind of politicized memory-work cannot be left to the formal, institutional politics and legal procedures—although those are necessary as well—since it acquires a more complex social, psychological and interiorized dimension through artistic representation.

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<sup>235</sup> Crnković, Gordana. "Dresura čovjeka" *Feral Tribune*. June 8, 2007, p on-line: <http://feral.audiolinux.com/tpl/weekly1/section3.tpl?IdLanguage=7&NrIssue=1133&NrSection=14>

At the time Adorno was writing his essay, his primary concern was the fragility of the postwar West German democratic institutions and the nascent public sphere, a concern that was predicated on the possibility of reversion to National Socialism which he already witnessed during the short and precarious existence of the Weimar Republic. It is almost superfluous to say that Daša Drndić's novels appear in a different historical and national context, although this fact bears repeating, since the more recent historical experience has also shaped this author's specific approach to the Holocaust. As Gordana Bosanac, a Croatian philosopher, has noted, in the ideological environment of 1990s Croatia “one did not acquire the social sense of identity through assimilation into a community, but through assimilation into a *specific*, predestined type of national relationship, in which nationality names and determines sociability [as such]”/ “*[s]ocijabilni osjećaj identiteta ne stječe se uklapanjem u zajednicu, nego uklapanjem u određeni, predestinirani tip nacionalne veze, u kojem nacionalitet imenuje i determinira socijabilnost.*”<sup>236</sup> The same can be said of the public sphere, in which “the language, symbols and the entire symbolic space was now a marked object of [nationalist] inaugural manipulations”/ “*[j]ezik, simboli i čitav simbolički prostor bio je sada naglašeni predmet inauguralnih manipulacija.*”<sup>237</sup> While Bosanac sees this ideological inauguration of nationalism as partially continuous with the authoritarian and narrowly ideological character of Yugoslav socialism and its rigid control of the historical narrative, she characterizes it as more violent and total in its scope: “the entrance of nationalism into the social system repeats all the maneuvers of [socialist-communist] inauguralism, itself becoming in fact one of its variants, only with a stronger and more massive use of symbolical power”/ “*[n]astup nacionalizma u društveni sustav ponavlja sve manire inauguralizma, postajući zapravo i sâm jedna od njegovih vrsta, samo s*

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<sup>236</sup> *Utopija i inauguralni paradoks : prilog filozofsko-političkoj raspravi.* Zagreb: KruZak, 2005, p 403.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid*, p 408.



*jačom i masovnijom upotrebom simboličke snage.*”<sup>238</sup> Drndić has assimilated this recent experience, inserting essayistic fragments on the ideological manipulation of language and other symbolic systems into her novels.

Hence a reader who has been a witness to the symbolic and political takeover of the public sphere by the Croatian and Serbian (or any other) nationalism, will find in the following passage from *Sonnenschein*—describing the wholesale nationalization of culture in fascist Italy—plenty that recalls the more recent history:

MINCULPOP is born, the Ministry of Popular Culture, and with it new dictionaries, orthographies, patriotism; the use of foreign phrases is banned, and they are replaced by Italian surrogates. Maxim Gorky is dubbed Massimo Amaro, but he is swiftly removed from the libraries and bookshops... (*Trieste*, p 47)

*Rađa se MINCULPOP, Ministrastvo popularne kulture, a s njim novi rječnici, novi pravopisi, novo domoljublje; zabranjuje se upotreba stranih izraza koji se zamjenjuju talijanskim surogatima. Maksim Gorki postaje Massimo Amaro, ali je hitro uklonjen iz biblioteka i knjižara...* (SON, p 56).

Indeed, the whole of *Sonnenschein* is written in this visceral present tense, bringing supposedly distant history closer to the present time. Here Drndić not only lists authoritarian and totalitarian propaganda tactics whose goal is to completely re-label and thus manipulate the givens of language and culture, but also exposes their absurdity, as in the humorous if not shortsighted maneuver of renaming Maxim Gorky into Massimo Amaro.<sup>239</sup>

These critical montages of historical materials in Drndić's novels, recalling both the violent methods of and mass consent to the fascist rule, do not catalyze mourning *per se*, national or otherwise; although they do in fact represent a continued attempt on part of the author to account for the multiplicity of individual destinies, to recount provisional stories and give names

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid, p 404. Ironically, the nationalist inauguration, as the case of both Tuđman and Milošević shows, was carried out “in large part by the individuals and whole cadres of those who had themselves carried out the socialist-communist inauguration” (ibid, p 409).

<sup>239</sup> Readers also may recall the more recent “Freedom fries” episode from American political life.

to gruesome and mind-boggling statistics. The main thrust of these novels however remains antagonistic, at times deeply resentful, and always political speech. It is a politics fueled by the anger at the repetition of violent and catastrophic history and the passivity and feigned ignorance of the masses that allowed such repetition to happen in the first place. In this sense, Drndić reserves the right to confront the reader with the cold and cruel facts of Nazi rule, and moreover to implicate not only the anonymous masses, but also entire nations and institutions—such as the Red Cross and the Catholic Church—into some of the most infamous lines of the vast Holocaust archive.

### **III. Inheriting the Holocaust Archive: *Sonnenschein* (2007)**

Out of all Daša Drndić's novels, *Sonnenschein* has received most critical attention, winning the most prestigious Croatian literary prize “Kiklop” in 2007. Since its publication, the novel has been translated into several European languages, including the recent English translation under the altered title *Trieste* (2011, British edition; 2014 American edition, trans. Ellen Elias-Bursać), garnering substantial critical acclaim. As in her other novels, here too Drndić uses the method of collating and montaging historical documents and intertwining them with a fictional plot, thus imbuing the narrative with “referential illusion,”<sup>240</sup> a novelistic method that was pioneered in Yugoslavia by Ivo Andrić. This historical method was elaborated into a programmatic poetic by Danilo Kiš in his collection of stories *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (*Grobница za Borisa Davidoviča*, 1976), which details the Stalinist purges of once-prominent revolutionaries through a series of loosely connected stories. In the post-WWII context marked

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<sup>240</sup> Wachtel, “The Legacy of Danilo Kiš in Post-Yugoslav Literature,” p 137.

by the recent experience of National Socialist and Stalinist totalitarianism, Kiš's novelistic method represented a pointed political and literary protest against ideologies which drew their legitimacy from the manipulation and fetishization of history. Kiš aimed at “estranging” official historical narratives by uncovering marginal sources in a manner that exposes the wholesale distortion of historical facts by totalitarian regimes. In this sense, Kiš's opus can be placed within the wider context of 20<sup>th</sup> century postmodernist meta-historical fiction that questions the dominant methods and procedures of writing history, including the ethnocentric and monocultural frameworks taken up by nationalist histories.<sup>241</sup> The style of Kiš's historical novels—especially in the *Tomb*—is cool-headed, objective, and detached, occasionally giving way to Borgesian displays of erudition and subtle, mocking irony. The vast amount of archival materials and historical references, whose sources are often obscured, an ethical view of literature as a form of protest against totalitarianism, as well as a pessimistic stance towards historical progress, indeed reveal Drndić's substantial debt to Kiš.<sup>242</sup>

Drndić's style, on the other hand, is anything but detached. Characteristic for all Drndić's novels—almost without exception—is a polemical, incendiary, and oftentimes intensely sardonic voice, which renders her novels virtually indistinguishable from one another, even when the narrator, as in *Sonnenschein*, is clearly set apart from the author. With each new novel, this

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<sup>241</sup> See Beganović, Davor. “O kulturnom pamćenju u djelu Danila Kiša,” pp 1-8; Beganović relies on Hyden White's critique of modernist historiography to situate Danilo Kiš's works in the broader postmodern genre of ‘historiographic metafiction’ (Linda Hutcheon's term): “In the entire effort of [historiography], which aims at uncovering the truth about reality, White recognized whose foundations are found elsewhere, most frequently in ideological and political ends [...] For example, such a political end is seen in the construction of a monolithic nation-state, in the creation of so-called *master-narratives*, whose purpose is the historical legitimization of that state. White was accused by his colleagues of historical relativism for pointing out the fictional character of written documents and thus the fictional character of historiography itself; but in the eyes of postmodern theorists he was given a status of a historian who managed to show a striking similarity between literary and historiographical representation—one of the central nodes of postmodernist theory and poetics, in which the works of Danilo Kiš can undoubtedly be inscribed” (p 1, my translation).

<sup>242</sup> Ibid, p 137-140.

stylistic monotony, combined with an obsessive return to the subject of Jews murdered in the Holocaust, produces a distinct impression of auto-pastiche, an endless torrent of invectives and accusations—directed at the perpetrators and bystanders—for allowing the mass crime to happen. In this sense, Drndić's style is more indebted to the Austrian “*Nestbeschmutzer*” authors such as Thomas Bernhard and Elfriede Jelinek, an indebtedness that comes with a unique appropriation of “the German and Austrian tradition in which the notion of historicity is saddled with the burden of the historical crimes of Nazism.”<sup>243</sup> In this case, this historical burden is imposed by the knowledge of a similar, or to use Derrida's term “differential” repetition of large-scale ethnic violence,<sup>244</sup> namely, the violent foreclosure of a previously pluralistic national community into an ethnically homogeneous body politic, which had reached its peak in the policy of ethnic cleansing in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s.

Her poetic “undertaking [...] to carry over the principle of montage into history”<sup>245</sup> has the effect of violently arresting the chronological flow of the narrative with a shocking display of archival photographs and documents, Holocaust testimonies, literary quotations, and most jarringly, a list of around 9,000 names of the Jews deported or murdered in Italy. Here, the reader

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<sup>243</sup> Schlipphacke, Heidi. *Nostalgia After Nazism: History, Home, and Affect in German and Austrian Literature and Film*. Bucknell University Press, 2010, p 38.

<sup>244</sup> For the concept of differential in Derrida, see Fritsch, *The Promise of Memory: Differential repetition, while occupying a transcendental condition in relation to languages and the discourses (including philosophy) in which histories constitute themselves, nonetheless cannot be isolated by the transcendental philosopher from languages and histories*. Rather, it can only be read, traced, and rediscovered in the always different contexts formed by languages and histories, thereby permitting us to account for the history of *différance*, iterability, the messianic promise, and so on. The originary condition is inseparable from what it makes possible, and therefore cannot be ‘isolated’ from it: it is not visible as itself—it has no ‘itself’—but only in its effects or traces” (p 66, my emphasis). In some sense, this means that eruptions of large-scale racial and ethnic violence (massacres, genocides, and mass expulsions) in the post-Holocaust world are always in some sense mediated by the Holocaust, at least in the West, as a privileged, that is to say, ‘originary’ event. At the same time, our knowledge of the Holocaust is itself mediated by traces, citations, iterations (i.e. testimonies, novels, histories, films, monuments, etc.) whose meanings are in no way unified, transparent, or self-evident.

<sup>245</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999, p 461 (N2, 6).

is being asked to unflinchingly confront the “vivid absences, losses, disappearances”<sup>246</sup> produced by the unstoppable juggernaut of “History” as it rolls towards the uncertain and trauma-laden present. The unique visual layout, the extensive use of archival documents and borrowed quotations is here used to systematically and factographically explore the totalitarian logic of fascism as a recent layer of European history. Refusing to consign this history to the past, the novel time and again highlights Europe’s continued obsession with the “purity” of national space and national identity, an obsession—it should be noted—that was most recently laid bare by the policies of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia.

Certain Croatian critics have noted this evocation of more recent history within Drndić's historical—but certainly not historicist—treatment of the Holocaust. Gordana Crnković, for example, in her review of *Sonnenschein* for the Croatian newspaper *Feral Tribune*, writes:

The misery of the unenlightened, those without the courage to resist, is the main theme of the novel, in which *it is not difficult to recognize direct allusions to our own present*, for example, by highlighting the slowness of justice that stands in appalling disproportion with the gravity of the crimes that were committed, or in the fragments about journalistic infamy, demographic campaigns, linguistic and orthographic purism or in the slogan 'Buy Italian.'<sup>247</sup>

Expanding on Crnković’s insight, we can say that Drndić’s treatment of the Holocaust in *Sonnenschein*—but also in her other novels—is either implicitly or explicitly mediated by the recent history of Yugoslavia’s collapse and its traumatic aftermath. While this aspect of the novel may be passed over by foreign critics due often veiled references to recent history, I argue that the confrontation with the crimes committed against civilian populations during the

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<sup>246</sup> Hahn, Daniel. “Trieste, By Dasa Drndic (trs Ellen Elias-Bursac): Tiny details that tell an immense story,” *The Independent*, 29 January 2012, on-line: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/trieste-by-dasa-drndic-trs-ellen-eliasbursac-6296084.html?origin=internalSearch>

<sup>247</sup> Crnković, “Dresura čovjeka,” on-line.

Yugoslav wars forms the political backbone of *Sonnenenschein*. At one moment in *Sonnenschein*, Drndić addresses her readers directly as potential bystanders:

Blind observers are “ordinary” people who play for low stakes. They play it safe. They live their lives unimpeded. In war and skirting war, these blind observers look away with indifference and actively refuse to feel compassion; their self-deception is a hard shield, a shell in which, larvae-like, they wallow cheerfully.

They are everywhere: in the neutral governments of neutral countries, among Allies, in occupied countries, in the majority, in the minority, among us. *Bystanders*. That is who we are (*Trieste*, p 84).

*Slijepi promatrači “obični” su ljudi koji igraju na sigurno, ziheraši. Oni svoje živote žele živjeti neometeno. U ratu i mimo rata, ti slijepi promatrači ravnodušno okereću glavu i aktivno odbijaju suosjećati, njihova samobrana tvrdi je štit, ljuštura unutar koje veselo se baškare kao larve.*

*Ima ih svuda. U neutralnim vladama neutralnih zemalja, među saveznicima, u okupiranim zemljama, među većinom, među manjinom, među nama. Bystanderi, to smo mi* (SON, p 96, emphasis in the original).

Indeed, Drndić arranges the documentary and archival material related to the Holocaust—including the court testimonies of both victims and perpetrators, propaganda materials, photographs of death camps and other sites of mass crime—in a manner that creates a visceral rift between the seductive Nationalist Socialist wish-image on the one hand, a kitschified picture of an organic and unified society, and its dark underside on the other, namely, the incomprehensibly violent, dehumanizing, and systematic appetite for destruction. The point is that in National Socialism, but in ‘tribal nationalism’ as well, everything which falls outside that ideologically lacquered picture, the myth of an organic community, had to be eliminated, whereby the public sphere—whose essential feature is plurality—in Hannah Arendt's words “evaporates together with the personality, and the result is the monstrous immorality of ideological politics.”<sup>248</sup> The documentary and poetic montages in Drndić's novels constitute an

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<sup>248</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p 249.

explicitly politicized, alienating archive of the Holocaust which compels the reader to make these constellations legible and relevant to the present, addressing him as a citizen of the democratic polity concerned for the survival of the public sphere.

*Sonnenschein* tells the story of the Tedeschi family of Jewish origins whose biographies simultaneously mirror the turbulent history of the border town Gorica/Gorizia/Görz located on the present-day Slovene-Italian border. First of all, this has been a history of wars, annexations, conquests, dramatic shifts in the demographic makeup and ideologies that have swept through this unassuming town of mixed Italian, Slovene, Jewish and German population. Through its river Soča, Drndić poetically writes, “[t]he muddy and bloodstained waters rise, but the rains do not rinse them clean”/ “[nj]ene blatom i krvlju zamućene vode rastu, a kiše ih ne uspijevaju očistiti,” while on its bottom “roll bones, which like a giant rattle, disturb its dreams” / “kotrljaju se kosti koje, kao golema čegrtaljka, remete njen san”(SON, p 16). On the rubble of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Gorizia survived as a contested town, engaged in an interwar dispute between Italy, Yugoslavia, and Austria, only to be annexed by Italy in 1920. The Second World War brought Italian fascist rule to Gorizia, but towards the end of the war (1943-1945) it was incorporated into *Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland* (Operation Zone of the Adriatic Littoral), a Nazi-occupied territory whose center was in Trieste. It was during this three-year period that the Nazis wiped out most of the Jewish population in Gorizia and the rest of the Northern Adriatic littoral. A former rice factory in San Sabba, a suburb of Trieste, which was turned into a Nazi extermination and deportation camp for the region, still survives as a notorious monument of that time, now transformed into a museum. Drndić even documents it in the novel, since the traumatic core of *Sonnenschein's* story will hatch out precisely out of this site and this historical period. This harrowing history of the town forms the important background against

which the sensationalistic and fictionalized story of a brief love affair between Haya Tedeschi, an apolitical Jewess, and Kurt Franz, a ruthless SS officer and commander of the Treblinka camp, will resonate into the present day.

At the beginning of the novel, we see an elderly Haya rocking in her armchair in Gorizia, while the “deep emptiness” around her “is piling up already stiffened corpses of the past” / “*gomila sad već ukrućena trupla prošlosti*” (SON p 7). She has been waiting for sixty two years for the arrival of her son—a product of a brief love affair with the SS officer Kurt Franz—who was abducted, we later learn, from her near the end of World War II and given to an Austrian family for adoption as part of the Nazi Lebensborn project. From this brief present-day snapshot (the year is 2006) we dive headfirst into the history of the Tedeschi family, most of which takes place from the First World War to the end of the Second World War. What is truly striking, given the historical circumstances, is that most of Haya's family had survived the Holocaust and the Second World War virtually unscathed; although they've arguably had to pay an altogether different toll with their conscience. The Tedeschi family, in other words, has a remarkable talent for assimilation and conformism to almost any sort of political or ideological system. In this sense, they belong to that class of “parvenus,” assimilated European Jews who wanted at all costs to distance themselves from the stigma of Jewishness through fervent assimilation. It was precisely this class of apolitical upstarts that Hannah Arendt opposed to the diasporic tradition of “conscious pariahs,” those who turned the experience of Jewish marginality into a basis for political engagement, social critique, and empathy with other oppressed groups.<sup>249</sup> Thus when the Italians annex Görz after World War I, Haya's grandfather quickly switches from his native German to the Italian cultural and linguistic paradigm. And later, when Mussolini wins Italy over

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<sup>249</sup> See Arendt, Hannah. “We Refugees” in (ed.) Robinson, Marc. *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile*. Winchester, MA: Faber and Faber, 1994, pp 118-119.



to fascism, her father quickly gets a membership in the Fascist Party and starts effectively hiding his Jewish background. Haya too is not that different from her family: “She has always been [and still is] somehow weightless, free of the heavy burden of mother tongues, national histories, native soils, homelands, fatherlands, myths, that many of the people around her tote on their backs like a sack of red-hot stones” / “*Bila je i jest nekako lagana oslobođena teškog tereta materinjih jezika, nacionalnih povijesti, rodnih gruda, domovina, otadžbina, mitova, koji mnogi oko nje poput vreće zažarenog kamenja nose na leđima*” (SON, p 57). History however ruthlessly and violently insists precisely on borders and identities, especially at this time in Europe. Moreover, as Haya now knows, and Drndić confirms, this is a history that has a tendency to repeat itself, sowing “war, great commotion and death” / “*ratove, veliku zbrku i smrt*” (ibid). During this time, Haya's family moves wherever the fascist government stations her father, a banker, first to Naples, then to the occupied Albania, and finally across Axis-occupied Europe back to Trieste and Gorizia. During this time, Haya is growing into womanhood for the most part oblivious to the horrors taking place around her, except for certain wartime shortages of luxury goods. In Gorizia, she works at a local shop, watches Nazi propaganda films and saccharine operettas with rapture, considers the communists resisters and other antifascists as the enemy, and flirts with the Nazi officers stationed in *Adriatisches Küstenland*; “meanwhile,” as Drndić reminds us, “neighbors are disappearing” / “[*u*] *međuvremenu susjedi nestaju*” (SON, p 121). In 1944 Haya finally meets Kurt Franz, an SS officer, and they have a brief love affair before he abandons her upon discovering her Jewish roots. Haya however is left pregnant and gives birth to a boy, who is mysteriously abducted from her towards the end of the war. What follows is Haya's postwar search for her son, her protracted historical and archival research, and her belated awakening from historical ignorance.

It is at this point that Drndić disrupts the narrative with an incomplete list of around 9,000 names of Jews deported or killed in Italy and countries occupied by Italy from 1943 to 1945, during the existence of *Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland (OZAK)* [Fig. 3.1]. The list spans around hundred pages, representing the most striking graphic feature of and the most avant-garde authorial intervention into this self-stylized “documentary novel.” The list is preceded by the overarching motto of the entire novel: “behind every name hides a story” / “*iza svakog imena krije se priča*” (SON, p 161). In the original Croatian edition, these pages are perforated, inviting the reader to tear them off if by some chance they happen to recognize one or more names on the list, thereby creating a palpable “absence” in the work. Although she opposes her anti-aesthetic to the “sleek” Holocaust memorials, Drndić in the end appropriates by now a common strategy for commemorating the victims by including the names of 9,000 Jews killed or deported in Italy during OZARK.

In this instance, Drndić’s poetics are highly indebted to the aesthetics of “counter-memorials” (*Gegen-Denkmale*) that have emerged in the context of German commemorative culture in the late 1970s and 1980s as a postmodern response to the Holocaust. According to this view, the Holocaust is seen as a sublime and incomprehensible historical rupture that defies figurative representation specific to more traditional monuments, and possesses “no narrative structure, only statistics.”<sup>250</sup> Figuration and narration are therefore abolished in favor of continuing historical research. More recently, Eelco Runia has restaged the postmodern argument of this negative sublime represented by the Holocaust in terms of the opposition between representation and presence, metaphor and metonymy, that is to say, between premodern and modern forms of commemoration. According to Runia, premodern

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<sup>250</sup> Pickford, Henry. “Conflict and Commemoration: Two Berlin Memorials.” *Modernism/modernity*, Volume 12, Number 1, January 2005, pp. 160.

Coen Mosè	Cogo Guglielmo Enrico
Coen Natan	Cohen Adolfo
Coen Nella Corinna	Cohen Alberto
Coen Nissim	Cohen Allegra
Coen Norina	Cohen Amelia
Coen Olga	Cohen Anna
Coen Oscar	Cohen Azzar
Coen Pacina	Cohen Caden
Coen Pirani Corrado Gustavo	Cohen Clarissa
Coen Pirani Liana	Cohen da Silva Giacomo
Coen Porto Amelia	Cohen da Silva Guido
Coen Porto Augusto	Cohen da Silva Renato
Coen Porto Vittorio	Cohen David
Coen Porzia	Cohen Eliakim Behor
Coen Rachele	Cohen Ester Stella
Coen Rachele	Cohen Estrea
Coen Rachele	Cohen Flora
Coen Raffaele	Cohen Giulia
Coen Rahamin	Cohen Giuseppe
Coen Rebecca	Cohen Isacco
Coen Regina	Cohen Isacco
Coen Regina	Cohen Isidoro
Coen Regina Fortunata	Cohen Ivonne
Coen Renato detto Monchino	Cohen Leone
Coen Renée	Cohen Lidia
Coen Rica	Cohen Manlio Emanuele
Coen Rica	Cohen Marcello Leone Mosè
Coen Romilda	Cohen Marco Nissim
Coen Sacerdoti Eugenio	Cohen Maria
Coen Sadok	Cohen Mazaltov
Coen Salomone Saul	Cohen Menahem
Coen Salva	Cohen Mosè
Coen Sara	Cohen Nissim
Coen Sara	Cohen Noemi
Coen Sara Rosa	Cohen Perla
Coen Saverio	Cohen Rachele
Coen Stella	Cohen Rachele
Coen Susanna	Cohen Raffaele
Coen Umberto	Cohen Rahamin
Coen Virginia	Cohen Rebecca
Coen Vittoria	Cohen Rebecca
Coen Vittoria	Cohen Regina
Coen Vittorio Angelo detto	Cohen Regina
Uccio	Cohen Rica
Coen Zaira	Cohen Roberto Samanto

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**Figure 3.1: *Sonnenschein*, page 186**  
**The List of 9,000 Jews killed or deported from Italy during**  
**operation OZARK.**

“[m]onuments are [...] idiosyncratic compounds of metonymical denotations and metaphorical connotations: they *say* something (connotation) about what they *stand for* (denotation).”<sup>251</sup> Yet,

whereas premodern, metaphorical monuments are primarily engaged in a transfer of *meaning*, modern metonymical monuments concentrate on a transfer of *presence*. This transfer of presence comes in many forms: from the incorporation of the original material (soil, wreckage, dust) in the monument to the naming of names—as in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the projected monument to the

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<sup>251</sup> Runia, Eelco. “Presence.” *History and Theory*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Feb., 2006), p 17, original emphasis.

victims of 9/11.<sup>252</sup>

One of the main device for transferring presence, or opening “a reality outside of text”<sup>253</sup> is therefore through the metonymical use of place-names, dates, ‘original materials’ and ‘authentic’ historical objects, *and* proper names. By incorporating a list of names into her text, Drndić thus asks us to step out of the world of fiction into something more ‘real’ and ‘authentic,’ which does not immediately offer itself to interpretation insomuch as it “insinuates that there is an urgent *need* for meaning.”<sup>254</sup> Through the metonymical use of the names, Drndić in a sense transforms the entire novel into a sort of modern Holocaust monument, pushing against the divide between literature and document, narrative and commemorative practice. But this is also a ‘document’ that demands a specific, almost ritualized emotional response to which every reader will attempt to access in a different way. Similar to W.G. Sebald's use of photographs, the specificity of the names in *Sonnenschein*, often grouped in families, can be seen as a “‘punctum’ (a snip, a little blemish, a pinhole),” which, as Runia suggest, is “a kind of ‘leak’ in time through which ‘presence’ wells up.”<sup>255</sup> In this sense, this is one of the places in *Sonnenschein* where we are indeed asked to mourn, not necessarily to read every name written down, but perhaps by scanning the pages to stumble upon one name or a cluster of names that will break the façade of fiction.

In this case, we are dealing with the expanded notion of the archival novel in which the archival base has gained a considerate autonomy with respect to the narrative. The insertion of such a list into the novel, in other words, is only partially motivated by the plot. This is because

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid, original emphasis.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid, p 20.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid, p 19.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid, p 16. The term ‘*punctum*’ was coined by Barthes in his *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981) to describe the affective power of photography--a photographic detail, an “accident which pricks, bruises me”(p 27)- as opposed to the *studium*, the social background which makes a photographic image, to some extent, classifiable and culturally legible.

the plot in itself is insufficient to answer the demands of Holocaust representation, that is to say, to comprehend the incomprehensible. On the other hand, the documents in the Holocaust archive also undergo a transformation. Now, along with the documentary and historical function, they gain an additional commemorative function.

After this momentous interruption, Haya's postwar narrative resumes in brief flashes, but most of the space is in fact taken up by assembled and skillfully montaged documentary fragments, such as the detailed description of the activities in the Nazi extermination camp in San Sabba, including the photographs of the present-day memorial site, and more strikingly, a “card-catalog” of the participants in the Operation T4 1943—a Nazi Germany's euthanasia program—stationed in Trieste during OZAK, made up mostly of brief biographical sketches of SS officers. This card catalog, supposedly made by Haya in 1976, is occasionally interrupted with court transcripts of Holocaust survivors and SS officers, giving a vivid picture of the degradation and dehumanization of the Jews in the camps, as well as trenchant snapshots of the SS guards' defense shields built against reality, as evidenced, among other things, in their euphemistic and clinical language. In the case of exonerated SS, or those who hadn't faced trial after the war, the pages of the novel are sealed. The reader is supposed to cut them open with a knife and therefore release the long-held secrets of their crimes into the light of day.

After this, Drndić gives us a more complete biography of the SS officer Kurt Franz [see **Fig. 3.2**], nicknamed “Lalka,” one of the commanders of the Treblinka concentration camp and an officers notorious among the prisoners for his extreme and ‘innovative’ methods of torture and dehumanization, often involving his dog Barry. Haya's search for her son, in other words, has brought her to the palpable “heart of darkness” of Nazi ideology, to which she is intimately connected; and here Drndić does not shy away from the details, bombarding the reader with one

shock after next. We also learn that Haya has been in correspondence with the Red Cross, whose slow bureaucratic machinery has located her son with some precision after sixty two years of

Barryju, o svom prekrasnom velikom mješancu nalik na bernardinca kojeg je morao ostaviti tamo u Poljskoj gdje je radio u jednom parku na rubu prekrasne šume, u blizini male romantične željezničke stanice, gdje nalazio se i zoološki vrt s fazanima i zečevima koje on, Kurt, inače zna majstorski pripravljeti jer između ostalog obučen je i za kuhara, gdje napravio je gomilu prekrasnih fotografija koje čuva u posebnom albumu naslovljenom "Schöne Zeiten", što značilo bi "Lijepa vremena", a ispod naslova dopisao je "Die schönsten Jahre in meinem Leben", odnosno, "Najljepše godine mog života", premda sad, dok je s njom, s Hayom, kaže, u to više nije tako siguran.

Iz albuma Kurta Franza, fotografije poklonjene Hayi Tedeschi u Goriziji 1944. godine



Kurt Franz na izletu s Hayom u okolici Gorizije, svibanj 1944.



Kurt Franz, listopad 1937.

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**Figure 3.2: *Sonnenschein*, page 136**  
Photographs of Kurt Franz, nicknamed "Lalka," a commander of the Treblinka concentration camp.

agonized waiting. Thus we're back at the spot where we started: Haya is rocking on her chair, with a "heap of broken images [sic]" (SON, p 396), repeating verses from Eliot's *Wasteland*, "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME [sic]" (SON, p 398).

In the next section, the point of view radically shifts to the first-person as we're introduced to Hans Taube/Antonio Tedeschi, an Austrian photographer who has recently learned that he has been living his entire life under a false name and identity. Hans discovers that he was adopted by his Austrian parents on his mother's deathbed and that his "real" name is Antonio.

His search for identity leads him to the discovery of Himmler's secret *Lebensborn* project for “the maintenance of the racial purity of the German nation” / “*očuvanje rasne čistoće njemačke nacije*” (SON, p 413), of which he is a product. Much of this section of the novel is spent on describing the scope and the postwar consequences of the *Lebensborn* project. First conceived as

U Lebensborn-domovima doslovno svaki predmet bio je obilježen malim runama nalik na munje koje sijeku – SS. Himmler je volio obilaziti “svoje kuće” kako bi se uvjerio da germanizacija podobne djece napreduje željenim tempom, a katkada bi prisustvovao svečanom obredu pseudokršćanskog krštenja pod nacističkom zastavom, pri čemu bi novorođenčad darivao svijećnjacima koje su pravili logoraši iz Dachaua.

Himmlerova ljubimica Gudrun, tatina “Puppi”, koja i danas oplakuje svog podjednako fanatičnog oca katolika koliko i fanatičnog oca rasista, osobno se uvjerila u kreativnost dachauskih zatvorenika kad nakon jednog posjeta tom logoru 1941, kao dvanaestogodišnjakinja, u svoj dnevnik zapisuje: *Danas smo obišli SS-konzentracioni logor Dachau. Vidjeli smo sve što se dalo vidjeti. Vidjeli smo obradene vrtove, vidjeli smo voćnjake, vidjeli smo krasne slike koje prave zatvorenici. I nakon svega, mnogo smo jeli... bilo je divno.*

Prilikom krštenja, oltar je bio ukrašen tkaninom s izvezenom svastikom, ispred oltara na jastuku je ležala beba, onda bi neki nacist čitao odlomke iz *Mein*



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**Figure 3.3: *Sonnenschein*, page 433**  
*Lebensborn* Orphanage.

the care center for the “racially and biologically indispensable expectant mothers whose duty is to birth racially and biologically indispensable sons of the homeland” (SON, p 413), *Lebensborn* later evolved to include the abduction of Aryan-looking children from the Nazi-occupied

territories and the establishment of orphanages for the ‘illegitimate’ children of SS officers [see **Fig 3.3**]. The project itself is a first-class demonstration of Nazi eugenics, propped up by the racist ideology of *Volksgemeinschaft* (racial community), an indispensable part of a larger movement in which, as Hannah Arendt has so aptly stated, “every idea, every value has vanished into a welter of superstitious pseudoscientific immanence.”<sup>256</sup> Hans/Antonio through his search for his roots meets other *Lebensborn* orphans, many of whom have become stigmatized and ostracized in the postwar period as a result of their Nazi parents, having grown up with virtually incurable traumas and a deeply shaken sense of identity. The *Lebensborn* project indeed gets at the very crux of the novel, which deals not only with the latent trauma brought on by the ideologies that enforce rigid borders and identities, but also the trans-generational inheritance of the difficult, confounding, and often debilitating stigma. *Sonnenschein* uncompromisingly negates the conspiracy of silence regarding the difficult past of one's own nation, a stance that arguably runs through all of Drndić's novels. Even more radically, the novel advocates divestment from any sort of *nationally* based affect or sense of communality, framing the nostalgic, sentimental notions of the national space (*Heimat, domovina*) in explicitly pathological terms. Drndić thus explicitly compares the “heavy burden of mother tongues, national histories, native soils, homelands, fatherlands, myths” to a viral, infectious disease; in other words, “these clusters of tuberculosis and syphilis germs, these elusive, invisible, and oh so infectious containers of putrescence” / “*ta nakupina tuberkuloznih i sifilitičnih bacila, te neuhvatljive, nevidljive, a tako zarazne kontejnere truleži*” (SON, p 57) have a tendency—it is implied—to quickly metastasize into fascism.

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<sup>256</sup> *Origins*, p 249.



The entire novel bears the mark of the political outrage and vocal unrest at the inheritance of such a violent yet skillfully manicured past, which is in this case so intimately tied to an entire life lived in a type of falsehood. The switch to the first-person narration moreover reveals Hans/Antonio as the novel's main narrator, whose moral authority is grounded in his critical relation to the generation of his adopted parents, described as former Nazi sympathizers and petty-bourgeois Catholic conformists. When we are introduced to Hans/Antonio he is already on a train to Gorizia to meet his biological mother. However the reunion never happens within the bounds of the novel. Instead *Sonneneschein* ends rather abruptly, in an imaginary dialogue between Hans/Antonio and Haya, where—at loss for words—they quote lines from Eliot's *Wasteland*. The final impression is one of uncertainty and despair at the wreckage of history, whose ghosts will continue to indefinitely haunt the present.

Drndić's novels are not focused on the epistemic status of history—a guiding concern of postmodern, 'historiographic metafiction,' to use Linda Hutcheon's term—which asks *who* is the privileged knower of and *how* do we arrive at the historical "truth." In other words, these kinds of questions, although provocative, cannot lay claim on the Holocaust as a historically exceptional event/archive, whose narration makes a normative demand to integrate victims' testimonies, even as it recognizes their epistemologically insecure status.<sup>257</sup> A failure to take the victims' memories into account would allow for unobstructed identification with the

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<sup>257</sup> For a discussion of Holocaust historiography and its relationship to postmodern skepticism regarding positivist history, see Eaglestone, Robert. *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp 137-173. With regard to the importance of testimony and memory in Holocaust historiography, Eaglestone singles out Saul Friedländer's method of integrating—through partial transference—victims' memories with historicist rigor as a possible program for future history: "The reintroduction of individual memory into the overall representation of the epoch implies the use of contemporaries' direct or indirect expressions of their experience" (Friedländer quoted in Eaglestone, p 188). Such a method, Eaglestone, writes "admits the importance of historical 'science' while also being aware of its limitations. It aims for a work of history to be open to the *non-verifiable* power of the works which foreground the world of the victims. It is to be written contrapuntally, made up of a mixture of voices, including that of the narrator historian's own, not seeking a final answer" (p 188 my emphasis).

perpetrators, thereby reiterating the original violence of dehumanization and eradication of difference through language and historical myth, that is to say, Nazi ideology. Drndić's guiding concern, on the other hand, seems to be the scandalous *inheritance* of the Holocaust addressed to the historical latecomers, which in this case transcends the national frameworks, thus becoming a transnational, European or even global historical burden, potentially implicating a wide array of past and present-day phenomena in the micro-politics of fascism.

This historical inheritance of the Holocaust in *Sonnenschein* can be conceptualized, following Peter Fritzsche, as an “archive of loss,” whose “point of origin... is *discontinuity*, which makes special demands on its users.”<sup>258</sup> The specificity of the Holocaust archive is fully revealed only when compared to the most common historical constructions of the archive in the West, which coincides with the rise of the *nation-state*, “reinforcing a common past within its borders and emphasizing the difference of cultural origins across its borders.”<sup>259</sup> Historically, the task of the heirs to the archive was to delimit, organize and constitute a legible common past, namely, a national history that would testify to the continuity and legitimacy of the nation and hence to secure its future. However, in the case of post-fascist Germany, “the experience of mass death and the Holocaust ended up creating dramatically divergent life stories that made it ever more difficult to hold onto the idea of a common German past or find shared memories among victims and perpetrators.”<sup>260</sup> This had enormous consequences for the archive of 20<sup>th</sup> century German history. That is to say, the Holocaust archive is not (and cannot) be housed solely in Germany, if only for the fact that Holocaust survivors are scattered around the world precisely as a result of violent displacement, exile, and deportations that took place during the Third Reich.

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<sup>258</sup> “The Archive.” *History & Memory* 17.1/2 (2005), p 16, my emphasis.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid*, p 18.

Consequently, the Holocaust archive, Fritzsche writes, “is plural, rather than authoritative; manifestly incomplete, rather than comprehensive; global, rather than local.”<sup>261</sup> Yet, I would argue, the rupture represented by the Holocaust archive with regard to national history cannot be limited solely to Germany. Indeed, as Tony Judt has so forcefully argued, the Second World War “left a vicious legacy”<sup>262</sup> of passivity, bystander mentality, and outright collaboration across the European continent and beyond. The inculpatory passage from his essay, “The Past Is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe,” bears quoting in full:

... most of occupied Europe either collaborated with the occupying forces (a minority) or accepted with resignation and equanimity the presence and activities of the German forces (a majority). The Nazis could certainly never have sustained their hegemony over most of the continent for as long as they did, had it been otherwise. Norway and France were run by active partners in ideological collaboration with the occupiers; the Baltic nations, Ukraine, Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, and Flemish speaking Belgium all took enthusiastic advantage of the opportunity afforded to settle ethnic and territorial disputes under benevolent German oversight.<sup>263</sup>

*Sonnenschein*, as already mentioned, conceptualizes the Holocaust as a European inheritance that evokes precisely the enduring trauma of “borders and identities” (SON, p 57), privileging the stateless and uprooted archive as the witness of 20<sup>th</sup> century history. Such an archive, in contrast to national historiography, is charged with a disruptive, provocative, and highly unsentimental power of negation.

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid, p 39.

<sup>262</sup> “The Past Is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe,” in *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, ed. Jan-Werner Muller, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p 159..

<sup>263</sup> Ibid

#### IV. Post-Traumatic Archaeologies: *April in Berlin* (2009)

*And finally, contemporary art [...] doesn't like classifications, categories, division into genres, types, styles; it likes the erasure of borders, conglomerates, patching up, gluing together, collages; it likes miscellany, plurality, grimaces, wonders, everything formless and in-between.*<sup>264</sup>

—Ryszard Kapuściński

*April in Berlin* begins with a citation from T.S. Eliot's "Love Song for Alfred J. Prufrock,": "Let us go then, you and I,/ when the evening is spread against the sky/ like a patient etherized upon a table;... Oh, do not ask "What is it?"/ Let us go and make our visit" (AB, 5, unnumbered) evoking, among other things, the modernist figure of the *flâneur*, but also the literary tradition as a repository of cultural memory—handed to us in a haphazard and fragmentary manner and waiting to be reassembled anew. The "you" is presumably the reader, whom Daša Drndić will take on a harrowing and digressive promenade through the various sites of mass crime scattered around Central Europe. This is dark literary tourism, to be sure, but one that is cloaked in a distinctively avant-garde aesthetic of shock, violence, and *Nestbeschmutzung*, joyfully desecrating all the sacred cows of order, progress, religion, and nationhood. "Poetry," as Danilo Kiš had written in a different context, "is [here] ugly like reality... ; while evoking it one can only mutter, ramble, bark and vomit."<sup>265</sup>

In his recent review of *April in Berlin*, Saša Ćirić gives a rather concise summary of this verbose and digressive novel, describing it as a "literary memorial" in its own right:

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<sup>264</sup> *Lapidarijum*. (trans. Biserka Rajčić) Beograd : B92, 2001, p 69, my translation.

<sup>265</sup> "Variations on the Theme of Central Europe," p 4.

This is a book of memory, more precisely a book of entwined memories, intimate and private, family memories and memories of friendships, and a book of information dug up and appropriated from various books, copied from commemorative plaques, from sidewalks and facades in Germany and Austria. By its very nature, this book is a type of atypical literary memorial, a cross-section of 'autobiography of others,' 'a history of the private life in prewar Yugoslavia, a diary of a 'non-national' (*apatrid*) and a diary of linguistic perplexities, a collection of autopoetic musings and an obsessive criminological directory. The book recalls the technology of mass crime, the [collective] psychology ... that allowed the crime to be committed, and the abuse of language whose consequences have survived... in the era that replaced Nazism.

*To je knjiga sećanja, tačnije knjiga umreženih sećanja, intimnih i privatnih, porodičnih i prijateljskih, i podataka iskopanih iz knjiga ili preuzetih, prepisanih sa spomen obeležja sa trotoara ili fasada kuća u Nemačkoj i Austriji. Samim tim, ova knjiga je neka vrsta atipičnog knjiškog spomenika, presek 'autobiografije o drugima', 'istorije privatnog života' poratne Jugoslavije, dnevnika 'apatrida' i dnevnika jezičkih nedoumica, zbirke autopoetičkih refleksija i opsesivnog kriminološkog podsetnika. Knjiga podseća na tehnologiju masovnog zločina, na psihologiju kolektivne... koja je dopustila da zločin bude moguć, na zloupotrebu jezika čije su posledice preživele i nastavile da žive i u doba koje je zamenilo nacizam.<sup>266</sup>*

The commemorative function of documents, artifacts, urban sites, and literary quotations in *April in Berlin* acquires even more autonomy than in *Sonnenschein*, where the documents testified to the veracity of the history depicted in the novel. Here, in front of the readers is a novel that has almost completely dispensed with a plot. There is no narrative progression, only a series of essayistic digressions: a kaleidoscopic array of loosely connected stories, memories, literary quotations, and author's own musings on topics that include the Holocaust, nostalgia in the East and West, the ideological manipulation of language, and literary friendships. *April in Berlin, in other words*, takes a form of a travelogue through the "dark" twentieth century, letting the historical traumas seep through the cracks in everyday life. The starting point of the tour is Berlin, "a site that has been most bloodied by history, the most painful of cities" (p. 380, quoting Gombrowicz), more precisely the Wannsee Villa, where the Final Solution was first discussed as

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<sup>266</sup> "KULT SEĆANJA," on-line: <http://www.booksa.hr/kolumne/kritika-71-dasa-drndic>

an official policy of the Third Reich and which has subsequently been turned into a commemorative site. The narrator, hardly distinguishable from the author herself, is staying there in a writers' residency program for a month, in her own words,

to enjoy in Berlin's unified and patched-up present, to sit through a performance of *Mother Courage*, to change a point of view for a bit, and instead of staring at the railway, the warehouses and the trash bins, to gaze at the boulevards, to promenade among the chestnuts and so on.

*Došla sam u Belrin da bih nakratko uživala u berlinskoj, spojenoj, zakrpanoj sadašnjosti, da bih odgledala jednu Majku Hrabrost, da bih bar nakratko promijenila vizuru, pa umjesto na željezničku prugu, skladiša i kontejnere, gledala prema bulevarima, šetala pod kestenima i tako dalje (AB, p 109).*

But the innocuous tour through the German capital soon turns into a rendezvous with the specter of traumatic History, here, as in W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, a sublime, overwhelming chain of catastrophes whose epicenter is the Holocaust. But whereas Sebald collects and reads the fossils of history with a melancholy and paralyzing knowledge of defeat, unearthing the memories buried under the surface of the superficially reconstructed postwar Europe, Drndić is more viscerally racked by the ghosts of the recent past. Once in Berlin, the narrator continues,

Like steam, History seethed from the lawns around the Wannsee Lake, from paved avenues, from monumental constructions, from luxurious department stores, at exhibitions, like velvet ribbons it danced in the breath of my conversation partners...

*Poput pare kuljala je Povijest iz berlinskih travnjaka oko jezera Wansee, iz asfaltiranih avenija, iz monumentalnih građevina, iz otmjenih robnih kuća, na izložbama, poput velurskih vrpca plesala je u dahu mojih sugovornika (AB, ibid).*

The space of the city is represented here as an interactive, living archive of the Holocaust, an archive that can be walked, appropriated, and cited, but never fully narrativized. Materialized in the architectural surfaces, voices, and bodies, history refuses to pass away, at least that “tangible and turbulent history that eats away at the gut, in front of which the present time dances the jig of the frenzied flies before the rain” (AB, p. 23). The author, once again, refuses to put up a barrier

between the past and the present. No chapter of history can be fully closed; no memorial can fully appease the guilty conscience. Imitating Berlin's more radical commemorative architecture, this patchwork novel performs interventions into the texture of everyday life, disrupting what the author perceives as the calm and forgetful surface of the European present.

Drndić composes her novel from multiple fragments, assemblages of objects and documentary materials, which do not coalesce into a coherent plot or follow a strict chronology. Time is “out of joint,” while history lies in ruins and needs to be reassembled like a puzzle whose pieces have been swept away in a catastrophe. For Drndić, these pieces of history reside on multiple, incompatible discursive planes: they are documentary and archival materials, family genealogies, second-hand accounts of the Holocaust, polemics, photographs, vernacular memories, commentaries on language politics in Croatia, on various nostalgias (Ostalgia, Yugonostalgia, nostalgia for the Third Reich), excerpts from Gombrowicz’s diaries, Berlin monuments, and personal names by the hundred. *April in Berlin* gathers these materials into *multiple and dispersed networks* of memory. The reader, in turn, is time and again faced with the traumatic remainder of the past which cannot be subsumed into the present ideological, social, or symbolic frames of meaning. Indeed, confronted with the violent and traumatizing shards of the recent past, the present crumbles as an ideological façade of normalcy, good taste, and civilization built on a suppressed collective crime.

Drndić explicitly juxtaposes her own radical poetics with what she sees as the sleek and understated exhibitions in the Wannsee Villa in Berlin and Jasenovac memorial-complex in Croatia, sardonically (and provocatively) comparing such memorials to ‘the final solution’:

The interior of the Wannsee mansion is cleansed of history, of that tangible and difficult history that eats away at the gut and in front of which the present time dances the jig of the frenzied flies before the rain. Similar to the exhibit at the memorial center in Jasenovac, the exhibition at the Wannsee mansion wants to

instruct and inform its visitors, never to disturb them, never to awaken in them the merry company of devils, those fallen angels of light, so that one leaves the villa without the need to pose questions, indifferently, without memory, since the memory offered by the exhibition is a faded memory, its rhythm is monotonous and its colors dull. The exhibitions at Wannsee is a *completed* exhibition, and every completed memorial closes off a story, offers a *final solution*.

*Vila na Wannseeu iznutra je očišćena od povijesti, one opipljive i teške povijesti koja razara utrobu, pred kojom sadašnjost pleše poput poludjelih muha pred kišu. Kao i postav memorijalnog centra u Jaesnovcu, izložba u vili na Wannseeu svoje posjetioce želi podučiti, informirati, nikako potresti, nikako u njima probuditi veselo društvo sotona, palih anđela svjetlosti, pa se iz te vile izlazi bez pitanja, ravnodušno, bez sjećanja, jer sjećanje koje izložba nudi istrošeno je sjećanje monotonog ritma i izbljedjelih boja. Izložba u vili na Wannseeu dovršena je izložba, a svaki dovršeni spomenik zatvara priču, nudi konačno riješenje (AB, p 23, emphasis in the original).*

While this passage can be interpreted as a demand for a more explicit and violent aesthetic of shock—to which Drndić is indeed prone, bypassing the curatorial practice that promotes “ecology of images” (Sontag's term)—I read this passage rather as an auto-poetic commentary that refers back to her own novels as radical neo-avant-garde museum exhibits of the Holocaust that disturb, defamiliarize, and involve her readers in a political, almost Brechtian manner.<sup>267</sup>

I appropriate the term “post-traumatic archaeology” to describe Drndić’s poetics in *April in Berlin*. This term is a slight modification of Alfredo Gonzalez-Ruibal’s concept of

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<sup>267</sup> Crnković in her review of *Sonnenschein* also points to this aspect of Drndić's prose: “Should it be at all said that we are dealing with a novel which does not aim at being liked at all costs; we are dealing with a postmodernism which is understood as the radicalization of the modernist conception of literature. In front of us is a text almost in the spirit of Brechtian aesthetic, which does not impel the reader to empathize with the characters, which uses outlandish procedures and emphasizes its artificiality, thereby overcoming its subordination to the documentary and historical materials, engendering universal meanings, and encouraging a critical relation between the reader and the delineated characters and the complex themes which the novel takes as its subject-matter. Although playful in the postmodernist fashion, even on the level of the graphic layout of the text and the book, with every new book Daša Drndić is more and more serious, thorough, more and more distant from the tastes of the post-cartesian generation.” “*Treba li uopće reći da se radi o romanu koji se ne nastoji po svaku cijenu svidjeti; riječ je o postmodernizmu koji je shvaćen kao radikalizacija modernističkog poimanja književnosti. Pred nama je tekst gotovo u duhu brechtovske estetike, koji čitatelja ne potiče da suosjeća s likovima, koji koristi i ekstravagantne postupke, ističe svoju artifičijelnost, time nadilazi podređenost dokumentarističkoj, povijesnoj građi, ostvaruje univerzalna značenja i potiče kritički odnos čitatelja i prema opisanim likovima i prema složenim temama koje se u romanu obrađuju. Premda postmodernistički razigrana, čak i na razini grafičkog uređenja teksta i knjige, Daša Drndić iz knjige u knjigu sve je ozbiljnija, promišljenija, sve udaljenija od ukusa postkartezijanskih generacija.*”



“archeology of supermodernity,” which he describes as “the archaeology of those of us who are alive [...] but also, more than any other, *the archaeology of trauma*, emotion, and intimate involvement.”<sup>268</sup> I remain sympathetic to Ruibal’s definition of supermodernity as the acceleration and intensification of modernization originating in the Second World War, whose key features are the “apogee and decadence of industrialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism, the world wars, the environmental crisis, and the heyday of globalization.”<sup>269</sup> Nonetheless, the exclusive focus on catastrophe such a stark definition of supermodernity implies neglects the potential moments of liberation in the historical record and reduces the complex and heterogeneous experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> century exclusively to its traumatic excesses. It seems to me that the concept of post-traumatic culture, proposed by Michael Rothberg, better describes the condition of living in the shadow of great historical catastrophes whose extreme embodiment is the Holocaust. Post-traumatic culture implies that historical traumas are oftentimes kept at bay; yet they uncannily permeate our present, both in the works of art and literature, everyday life, as well as in the official and alternative commemorative culture.<sup>270</sup> Moreover, the 20<sup>th</sup> century has truly taken the concept of trauma as its own. Indeed, trauma has left a specific therapeutic sphere, turning into a cultural condition, a cognitive framework that attempts to explain the inexplicable—namely, those dark spots in the historical record and human consciousness that complicate the narratives not only of one’s own history and culture, but of the self, and finally of the humanity as a whole.

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<sup>268</sup> “Time to Destroy: An Archaeology of Supermodernity.” *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (April 2008), p 248, my emphasis.

<sup>269</sup> *ibid*, p 247.

<sup>270</sup> See Rothberg, Michael. *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, esp. pp 103-104.

Post-traumatic archaeology is therefore one aspect of post-traumatic culture. It deals with the material remains of traumatic events in recent history. The main feature of post-traumatic archaeology is its interest in ruins, the abandoned, and the abject, that is to say, in those aspects of the *recent* heritage that cannot be subsumed into continuous and unproblematic narratives of modernity, nationhood, and technological progress. In contrast to history, post-traumatic archeology foregrounds the materiality of objects in a fragmentary state and often takes place in a highly charged ideological environment, in which there is no consensus over the event that transpired; but rather than suppressing the discontinuity, traumatic nature, and epistemological gaps that such work involves, it embraces a rhetoric based “on the acceptance of the inherently partial, fragmentary, and therefore uncanny nature of the archeological record.”<sup>271</sup> In this sense, post-traumatic archaeology involves not so much telling stories as creating a “strong sense of presence”<sup>272</sup> which testifies to the event’s taking place, but cannot be reduced “to social constructions and symbolic meanings.”<sup>273</sup> Drawing on Eelco Runia’s work, Gonzalez-Ruibal views this new archaeology as framing and foregrounding a metonymical presence of the past that in its affective, traumatic, and concrete materiality disturbs the continuity, coherence, and meaning of official historical narratives. It does so by transforming the “sublime object of ideology” into “the abject, tangible thing in itself.”<sup>274</sup>

Thus, the sublime Thing of Order and Progress can be shown to be in archaeological terms a quite abject thing, the ruins of a devastated village in the Brazilian Amazon; the sublime Thing that was the idea of Revolution can be shown to be a frozen Gulag in Siberia; and Development, a sublime thing of neoliberal global politics, may be no more than an abandoned steel container

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<sup>271</sup> Ruibal, “Time to Destroy,” p 251.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid, p 249

<sup>273</sup> Ibid, p 254

<sup>274</sup> Ibid, p 260

rusting in a forest in Ethiopia”<sup>275</sup>

According to Ruibal, this material strategy carries both therapeutic and political implications. By presenting the material remains of catastrophe, post-traumatic archaeology ‘commemorates’ historical traumas and makes them visible in the public sphere. In this sense, such commemoration may provide some closure to the victims, insofar as it demands proper burial for the dead and a proper cultural and commemorative space for those artifacts that have been suppressed from the historical and archeological record. On the other hand, it functions as a critique of the dominant ideology by uncovering and exposing material remains that forcefully resist and ‘desublimates’ the seemingly unproblematic narratives of order, progress, and nationhood.

Drndić’s poetics in *April in Berlin* are engaged in the “post-traumatic archeology” of the Central European city, in the first place of Berlin, but also, given the author’s native context, of Zagreb, Rijeka, Vienna, and Belgrade. The novel is littered with “found objects” and *ad hoc* collages of archival documents, such as the uncompleted picture book of buildings formerly occupied by Vienna Jews, reminiscent of Brecht’s *War Primer*. Here we are not dealing so much with the representation of the past, but with the obdurate presence of the past as a traumatic remainder—as an unmanageable archive, a site, a material object, or a living memory—scattered on the plane of the present. While the digressive and essayistic structure of the novel mimics the walk of the *flâneur* through the urban space, its patchwork nature and discursive use of found and recently unearthed sites of history give it a distinctively archaeological dimension.

This literary strategy comes into sharper focus when read against the rise of nationalism and accompanying historical revisionism in Croatia and Serbia to which the author, as an internal

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid

*émigré*, has been a witness in the past two and a half decades. Although a large part of the novel is spent on describing Germany's relation to its difficult past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*), as well as the unfinished process of de-nazification in postwar Europe, the novel's polemical thrust, I argue, is primarily aimed against nationalism as an ideology that survived the 1990s in Croatia and Serbia, albeit in a more normalized and genteel form. By unearthing those memories that would rather be left buried—in individual speech acts, literature, urban textures, and unmanageable and deterritorialized archives such as the internet—Drndić directly taps into the collective unconscious and destabilizes current constructions of the symbolic national spaces in the post-Yugoslav context.

Drndić radicalizes even further her critique of homogenization of the public sphere by performing virtual, literary interventions into the urban texture of European, and more specifically, Croatian cities. Taking her cue from Günter Demnig's urban intervention—golden “stumbling blocks” commemorating individual victims of the Holocaust [see **Fig. 3.4**—she proposes to scatter these same blocks across Croatia so that “the sparks of the past would flicker in many places, even in the villages, even when there is no sun, even during the moonless nights, the names of the returnees would flash” / “*u mnogim mjestima treperili bi žišci prošlosti, čak i u selima, čak i kad nema sunca, čak i noćima bez mjesečine, bljeskala bi imena povratnika*” (AB, p 238). She then goes on to enumerate the figures and names of the Jews who were deported to the concentration camps from various Croatian cities such as Zagreb, Osijek, and Rijeka, occasionally interrupting the list with the witness accounts of individuals whose families have been murdered in the Holocaust. The effect this produces is one of disruption in the familiar symbolic space of the nation by evoking the forgotten absence of a specific culture or population, where one previously existed, and recollecting difference which has been violently eradicated.

mi već imamo mnogo spomenika, ljudima ne treba kame-  
nije da bi se sjećali. Ima i stanara koji se bune, te kocke  
otežavaju prodaju naše imovine, kažu, a prošlost je proš-  
lost, nije sadašnjost.



U Wannseeu, u Wernerstrasse 7, našla sam kocke Enocha Belgarda, rodenog 1883., ubijenog 1944. u Rigi, Hansa Belgarda, rodenog 1913., ubijenog u Rigi, i Tane Belgard, rodene 1887., također ubijene u Rigi. Pred kućom u Wannsee Grüner Weg 15 svjetlucaju Else Ellendmann, rodna 1915., nestala u Piaski, i Peter Ellendmann, roden 1937., koji sa svojom mamom također nestaje u Piaski. Još sam ljudi našla u Wannseeu, u Wannseeu može se mirno hodati, nema gužve jer nema industrije, nema trgovina, nema žurbe, i ima mnogo vila koje štite gusto zelenilo, cvjetni grmovi i stoljetna stabla.

Izrada jednog kamena za spoticanje košta 95 eura.

Da bi pročitali što na njemu piše, hodači se moraju sagnuti.

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**Figure 3.4: *April u Berlinu*, page 237**  
Günter Demnig's urban intervention—golden “stumbling  
blocks” commemorating individual victims of the  
Holocaust in Germany.

Through such literary tactics, Drndić indeed aims at wounding the national pride and offending the bourgeois respectability which dictates, in a rather euphemistic phrase, that one should keep one's skeletons in the closet. Moreover, these avant-garde procedures cannot be easily placed in either the fictional or documentary domain; rather, Drndić “smuggles” the as of yet non-literary

elements, namely, the politicized art practices of urban interventions, into the aesthetic domain of *belles-letters*, transforming the latter into a podium for political speech.

Daša Drndić's *April in Berlin* adds to that corpus of post-Yugoslav novels—such as Dubravka Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, Bora Ćosić's *The New Tenant*, Saša Ilić's *The Berlin Window*, and Irfan Horozović's *The Anonymous Visitor in Berlin*—that appropriate Berlin's unsettling and jarring memory-scape to inscribe the collective and personal traumas of the recent wars into European public memory. Berlin in these novels figures as an open-ended urban interface, a radical architectural montage that confronts the viewer/reader with the heterogeneous historical layers, major scars and ideological divisions of the German and therefore European 20<sup>th</sup> century; from the ruins of the Third Reich and the remains of the Cold War division to the conciliatory though troubled unification following 1989, Berlin evokes a complex palimpsest of memory and history. As Andrea Zlatar has argued with respect to Drndić's previous novels, here too the reader is faced with a "virtual city" that generates "infinite textuality," breaking down the hierarchies between "the private and the public, the intimate and the commonplace, the internal and the external, personal and the collective."<sup>276</sup> This virtual city, in turn, interacts with the recent post-Yugoslav experience to generate even more complex palimpsests, urban interventions, and dialectical montages posed between different media, disciplines, as well as national and global memory cultures. Here, "a city is not uniformly written over, but locally, irregularly, opportunistically, erratically written over;"<sup>277</sup> as such, it offers an alternative conception of history, one that stresses discontinuity over continuity, the living presence of the past—often as a traumatic remainder—rather than its historicist foreclosure.

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<sup>276</sup> Zlatar, Andrea. *Tekst, tijelo, trauma: ogledi o suvremenoj ženskoj književnosti*. Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2004, pp 156-157.

<sup>277</sup> Runia, "Presence," p 9.

Drndić digs up heterogeneous and often traumatic layers of memory connected to the Second World War and the Holocaust, but rehearses them in the context of the present. Like other Croatian and broader post-Yugoslav women's writing, such as Irena Vrkljan, Dubravka Ugrešić, and Slavenka Drakulić, she uses autobiographic codes, personal memories, and archival materials in order to distance herself from monolithic national(ist) narration and other totalizing or ethnocentric narratives of history. History in her Berlin novel often appears in the guise of persiflage, internal monologue, and bitter polemics which lead the reader through the various "stations of memory" which don't stop at national borders and customs. This integration of the mundane and vernacular into a novel which flaunts its difficult form by appropriating the high modernist and avant-garde tradition typifies Croatian postmodernist fiction with a strong mooring in the feminist and anti-nationalist critique. As Renata Jambrešić-Kirin has argued, drawing on Linda Hutcheon's work:

The postmodern, philosophical, historiographical and belletristic disruption of 'realist' strategies for representing indisputable facts and unquestionable values is articulated as a resistance to the native 'culture of lies,' a space inhibited by wartime propaganda, but also by the outsider metropolitan discourse of engaged humanitarianism imbued with the prejudices about the Balkans. The novelistic combining of the fictional and the documentary, the autobiographical and the historiographical, according to Linda Hutcheon, is a constitutive mark of postmodernist historiographical fiction which contributes to its 'destabilizing and disturbing effect.'<sup>278</sup>

The postmodernist suspicion of master narratives, combined with its privileging of the fragment over organic totality, (individual) memory over (collective) history, and hybridity over the purity of genre and style, is characteristic of the decentered subject who feels discontented and uneasy within rigid linguistic, national and cultural boundaries.

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<sup>278</sup> "Egzil i hrvatska ženska autobiografska proza." *Reč*, no. 61/7, March 2001, p 184.

In particular, *April in Berlin* recalls the forgotten, transnational, and ‘bastardly’ tradition of modernist literary experiment that had found its place precisely in Central Europe, with its mélange of Slavic, Germanic, Jewish, and Ugric languages and cultures, with its interrupted, eclectic, and peripheral modernities. For Danilo Kiš, often referred to as the last Yugoslav writer, this tradition of Central Europe represented a phantom ‘nostalgia for Europe,’<sup>279</sup> albeit one that is ruptured by totalitarian violence and traumatic absence, in particular, the history of Stalinist repression and the almost complete eradication of the Jewish population in the Holocaust. Hardly a longing for the imperial and multicultural order of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Kiš’s definition of Central Europe, which Drndić implicitly adopts, is that of a broken dialectic of dispersion and unification, without a clear teleology. The hybrid literary and cultural tradition, which has been territorialized anew into respective national canons, becomes a sort of transnational *lieu de mémoire*. Cities (Zagreb, Vienna, Belgrade, Berlin, Budapest, Rijeka), poems, fragments of diaries, large excerpts of other novels appear with regularity throughout

*April in Berlin:*

This isn't my diary. It's not a travelogue, nor a novel. It's something in-between. It's crippled and maimed skipping through congealed time, through particles of time that have unfastened from each other, so they float through the underpasses of the present. Skipping in-between. April is a month that is in-between, Berlin is in-between, and Vienna, and Belgrade is in-between, and Rijeka. I am in-between.

*Ovo nije moj dnevnik. Nije ni putopis, ni roman. To je nešto između. To je šepavo, sakato skakutanje kroz zgusnuto vrijeme, kroz čestice vremena koje su se od sebe otkočile pa plutaju pothodnicima sadašnjosti. Skakutanje između. April je mjesec između, I Berlin je između, i Beč i Beograd su između, i Rijeka. Ja sam između. (p 295-6)*

These allusions, quotations, and cities also act as stations of pilgrimage, dialogue, identification, and unofficial, vernacular memory. *April in Berlin* foregrounds its hybrid and polyphonic form

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<sup>279</sup> “Variations on the Theme of Central Europe,” p 3.



through dialogue with Central European authors. The list of writers mentioned or explicitly cited in the novel are too numerous to be listed here, but they include, among others, Witold Gombrowicz, Thomas Bernhard, Erica Fischer, Danilo Kiš, Wisława Szymborska, Herta Müller, Bora Ćosić, David Albahari, Miroslav Krleža, Dubravka Ugrešić and others.

The presence of this literary tradition of Central Europe nonetheless points to an underlying historical continuity that overcomes the history of rupture and violence, albeit in the embittered, exilic, and dissonant voices of the writers renowned for their *Nestbeschmutzung* (dirtying one's own nest), such as the authors enumerated above. "The memory of a text," as Renate Lachmann has argued, "is its intertextuality. [...] Intertextuality demonstrates a process by which a culture continually *rewrites* and *retranscribes* itself, where culture is a 'book' culture, a semiotic culture, constantly redefining itself through signs."<sup>280</sup> Lachmann's notion of "culture" as a book culture, and memory as a(n) (inter)textual memory, allows for different notions of community to emerge based on a dialogue that aims to transcend space and time. Yet at the same time, this dialogue explicitly marks the temporal and spatial distance, that is to say, the loss of information, past horizons, and context such distance inevitably involves, and foregrounds the process of writing as *rewriting*. Drndić testifies to this virtual community through the frequent use of explicit intertextuality, alien utterances, in her novel, oftentimes to justify her own hybrid, essayistic and "anti-literary style." For example she cites Gombrowicz and his diaries, in an apostrophe typical of the author, to talk about the virtues of the experimental form:

Robert Perišić would say that she thinks she can insert whatever she wants into her neo-avant-garde prose model.

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<sup>280</sup> *Memory and Literature: Intertextuality in Russian Modernism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p 15.

Gombrowicz!

*[...] As far as excess is concerned, let me have a free hand. I stuff all kinds of things into this bag. Besides, art almost always speaks to me more intensely when it's being discovered in an imperfect, haphazard, and fragmentary way*

Rekao bi Robert Perišić, ona misli da u svoj neoavangardni prozni model može ubaciti bilo što.

*[...]Što se tiče viška, ostavite mi slobodnu ruku. U tu vreću trpam mnogo svakojakih stvari. Meni, uostalom, umjetnost gotovo uvijek jače govori kada se otkriva na nesavršen, slučajan i fragmentaran način (p 51, author's italics).*

Importantly, however, the pilgrim to these literary sites of memory is not a 'national' but a voracious reader, a feverish chronicler and an archivist who finds temporary solace in the dissonant and critical voices of its predecessors. The question *April in Berlin* constantly asks is not "Where are you from?" but "*Have you read...?*", "*Do you remember?*"

Insofar as *April in Berlin* embraces the (post)modernist Central European experience of discontinuity, or as I have described it, continuity in discontinuity, it also does so with respect to Croatian history and literary tradition which has recorded that experience; although such discontinuity has been largely denied and suppressed in the recent process of nation-building. The novel recuperates the fragments of vernacular and unofficial memory as an assertion of individual autonomy against the closed, collectivist, and essentialist understanding of national culture promoted by the ideology of nationalism and fascism. I therefore read Drndić's Berlin novel against the background of cultural destruction and erasure of memory, in particular the memory of linguistic and cultural *plurality* that has been repressed by the nationalist insistence on the *purity* of national culture, in the first place, the purity of language and speech.<sup>281</sup> Drndić

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<sup>281</sup> For a history and systematic overview of linguistic 'purism' in Croatian see Kordić, Snježana. *Jezik i nacionalizam*. Zagreb: Durieux, 2010. Kordić's book, when it came out, triggered a series of bitter polemics in Croatia, which pointed to the utmost importance of the 'language question' and its ties to the 'national question' in the minds of Croatian nationalists—namely, the prevailing idea that the boundaries of the state have to coincide with the boundaries of a language. What especially enraged Kordić's critics was the book's main argument that Serbian,

politicizes this memory firstly by engaging in a dialogue with Viktor Klemperer, a German-Jewish philologist who analyzed the influence of Nazi ideology on everyday speech in his *LTI: Lingua Tertii Imperii: A Philologist's Notebook*, and secondly, by inserting literary quotations by Serbian, German, Polish, Jewish and other authors. In this sense, *April in Berlin* assumes a place similar to that which Tatjana Jukić has recently ascribed to Danilo Kiš's *Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, not only for the Croatian literary history but for the post-Yugoslav tradition as a whole:

It recalls a cultural memory which forms around intimacy with different languages, memory which questions the very concept of a majority language in favor of language as a zone of indeterminacy; precisely this memory is at the root of everything that modern Croatian culture tries to determine as its own identity or its own history.

*Ona podsjeća na kulturnu memoriju što se formira oko intimnosti s različitim jezicima, memoriju kakva dovodi u pitanje uopće koncept većinskog jezika, u korist jezika kao zone neodredivosti; upravo ta memorija u podlozi je svega što moderna hrvatska kultura pokušava odrediti kao svoj identitet ili svoju povijest.*<sup>282</sup>

I would add that this “memory of linguistic intimacy” can be properly understood precisely as a memory that has been overwritten in the 1990s in an attempt to construct a monolithic and ideologically suitable national identity in times of war, but whose consequences extend into the present.

In other words, the process of top-down identity-construction, which had started in the 1990s, has had lasting consequences for Croatian national identity and the ideological space in which it is articulated. Moreover, it went largely unquestioned by the subsequent political and cultural elites, resulting in the ongoing “discrepancy between identity as a national program and

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Croatian and Bosnian were slight variations of the same polycentric language. Moreover, the polemics around Kordić's book indicate that the language question in Croatia still remains one of the most powerful taboos, indeed, the Holy writ of Croatian nationhood that can under no circumstances be brought into question. Since Kordić dared to do precisely that, she had to contend with the wrath of the entire nationalist establishment.

<sup>282</sup> Jukić, Tatjana. *Revolucija i melankolija: granice pamćenja hrvatske književnosti*. Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2011, p 48.

identity as a living collective reality”<sup>283</sup> characteristic even for the post-Tuđman era. As Katarina Luketić has aptly pointed out, this national identity

only appears to be fluid and abstract, since its content within the ideology of nationalism is indeed firmly fixed and required by all. In opposition to [this identity], our individual identity, the identity of each of us as it really is—shifting, full of inconsistencies and hybrid elements—has to be sacrificed on the altar of the homeland.<sup>284</sup>

Language, in particular, became one of the main ideological sites for the construction of Croatian national identity in opposition to the Serbian identity. Consequently, language was made into a national fetish, which purportedly embodied the Croatian national essence and confirmed the myth of the ancient Iranian (Aryan) ethnogenesis of the Croats, in opposition to the previously held theory of the common genetic origins of all south Slavs.<sup>285</sup>

While these racial theories did not necessarily survive the Tuđman era, the linguistic purism these reactionary and ‘organic’ theories of the nation attempted to justify did take root, especially as a way to perpetuate the state of siege, in which the invasive, foreign element was replaced by the Serbian language as such. The goal of linguistic purism was to make the Croatian language

all the more purer and distinct from the Serbian language, so that one was forced to use unpronounceable neologisms and archaisms, while the difference [between the Serbian and Croatian language] was emphasized by the *pretense of mutual non-comprehension*, that is, through the subtitling of [Serbian] films, the renaming of the childhood comic book heroes, the translation of official documents from one language to another, etc. The most radical example of the break with the Serbian culture was the thousands upon thousands of books printed in Cyrillic or by Serbian authors, rubbished by the sanctimonious librarians.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Luketić, Katarina. “Prošlost je naša budućnost” in *Zid je mrtav, živeli zidovi!: pad Berlinskog zida i raspad Jugoslavije*. Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 2009, p 104.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid, p 77

<sup>285</sup> Ibid, 89-91. Similar racial theories, with slight variations, emerged in Serbia as well. See Živković, Marko. *Serbian Dreambook : National Imaginary in the Time of Milošević*. Bloomington, IN, USA: Indiana University Press, 2011, pp 144-168.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid, pp 89-90.

Thus, at the beginning of the *April in Berlin*, Drndić, whose speech has been marked by her time spent in Belgrade, notes, “It will soon be seventeen years since they’ve started to correct her language” (AB, p 11). And while the history of bibliocide has been recently revisited in Croatia, with the recent publication of Ante Lešaje’s book, *Knjigocid: uništavanje knjiga u Hrvatskoj 1990-ih* (2012), there is still a widespread inability to mourn or even note this gaping absence in Croatia. *April in Berlin* therefore demands to be read against this recent and silent eradication of cultural memory. By insisting on the hybrid and “impure” nature of individual speech acts against the purified and “cleansed” linguistic standard, Drndić once again reconstitutes the public sphere as a necessarily heterogeneous and plural body politic that can responsibly possess and process its own past, instead of relegating it to the dominant ideologies and their appointees.

Drndić reasserts the memory of linguistic intimacy in the very title of the novel, *April u Berlinu*, using the Serbian word for the month of April (“april”), instead of the Croatian “travanj.” The novel additionally reassembles the networks of literary transmission and intellectual friendship that existed before the breakup of Yugoslavia, when such exchanges were possible without the backdrop of competing victimization and mutual suspicion that marks the discourses of Serbian and Croatian nationalism. Drndić stages these memories and encounters matter-of-factly, as part of the common history of the Yugoslav cosmopolitan intelligentsia, many of whom have left the region in protest of nationalist politics that resulted in a series of wars marked by ethnic cleansing campaigns, often under the threat of violence or excommunication from the national community. Thus we find out that the author had read Schulz and Bernhardt in the Serbian translation long before they were re-translated and ‘rediscovered’ in post-independence Croatia.

Although these memories may appear trivial, their power lies precisely in the way they stage an intimate encounter with a book or person as an assertion of individual autonomy against the pressure of a closed collective empowered and mobilized by the state. Perhaps the most powerful example of linguistic intimacy and shared history which the novel repeatedly recalls is the reproduction of Tadeusz Różewicz's poem "Posthumous rehabilitation" in Serbian translation. Różewicz's poem about our irredeemable duty to the dead, especially those who have been violently murdered in our name, is 'recited' by Nenad Dimitrijević, a Serbian professor of politics at the Central European University in Budapest, who has written several books about collective responsibility for mass crimes committed during the Yugoslav wars, directed primarily, but not exclusively, at the Serbian silence over Srebrenica. Różewicz's poem additionally rehearses Dimitrijević's argument—which includes not only cross-generational responsibility, but also the responsibility of those who have distanced themselves from the community in whose name the mass crimes have been committed. Poetry and philosophy here meet on the ground of commemorative ethics, staging a spectral tribunal in which the dead pronounce verdicts upon the living in the present moment:

"The dead remember/ our indifference/ The dead remember/ our silence/ The dead remember our words [...] The living are all guilty/ guilty are the children/ who offered bouquets of flowers/ guilty are the lovers/ they are guilty// guilty are those who escaped/ and those who remained/ those who said yes/ and those who said no/ and those who said nothing at all// the dead are taking stock of the living/ the dead will not rehabilitate us.

*Mrtvi se sećaju/ naše ranodušnosti/ Mrtvi se sećaju/ našeg ćutanja/ Mrtvi se sećaju naših reči [...] Krivi su svi živi/ kriva su mala deca/ koja su dodavala bukete cveća/ krivi su ljubavnici/ krivi su// krivi su oni što su pobegli/ i oni što su ostali/ oni koji su govorili da/ i oni koji su govorili ne/ i oni koji ništa nisu govorili// mrtvi prebrojavaju žive mrtvi/ nas neće rehabilitovati (AB, p 266).*

The poem is preceded by a description and a photograph of an *ad hoc* Holocaust memorial, which Dimitrijević had visited and included in his letter to Drndić, composed of forty pairs of

shoes from the 1940s scattered on the Danube bank in Budapest as a memorial to the Jewish citizens executed in 1945 by Szálasi's soldiers [see **Fig 3.5**]. Here Drndić reconstitutes the intimacy between different times, places, persons, and languages, but in the ethical space of mutual responsibility and opening up to the other, both the living and the dead, of which Różewicz's poem is a forceful reminder.

In *April in Berlin*, language is therefore both a site of ethics and responsibility and a site that is permeated with ideology and trauma. The former is most evident in Drndić's evocation of Victor Klemperer, a German-Jewish philologist who analyzed the influence of Nazi ideology in everyday speech in his *LTI: Lingua Tertii Imperii: A Philologist's Notebook*. Drndić inserts an entire essay that summarizes Klemperer's arguments, becoming, in turn, a document not only of the Third Reich but the influence of such ideologies in the present:

Klemperer explores how and to what extent the all-encompassing, manipulative language system, along with other symbolic systems, has poisoned the everyday thoughts and speech of ordinary people; accordingly, he is surprised by the speed at which the Nazi terminology has spread and by the readiness of the people to believe in the Nazi propaganda, especially those who aren't in fact declared Nazis [...] he shows how the official Nazi vocabulary has firmly "entrenched" itself in everyday communication, concluding, like Schiller, that this is speech which "thinks in your place." [...] He concludes: the Nazi use of language has outlived the Nazi regime.

*Klemperer istražuje kako i do kojih razmjera sveobuhvatni manipulativni jezični sistem, uz ostale simboličke sisteme, može zatrovati svakodnevno razmišljanje i govor običnih ljudi i zatečen je brzinom kojom se širi nacistička terminologija, ali i spremnošću naroda da vjeruje u nacističku propaganda, pogotovo onih koji zapravo nisu nacisti. [...] te pokazuje koliko se čvrsto službeni nacistički vokabular "ukopao" u svakodnevnu komunikaciju, zaključujući, poput Schillera, da je to govor koji "misli umjesto tebe." [...] Pa zaključuje: Nacistička upotreba jezika nadživjela je vladavinu nacizma (AB, p 35).*

Klemperer's book particularly singles out bureaucratic euphemisms, neologisms, and mystical or religious terminology resistant to argumentation peculiar to Nazi speech. However,

i ljudi su prostrijeljeni i bosonogi padali u zaledenu rijeku, neki još uvijek živi. Na tisuće Židova plutalo je lijepim plavim Dunavom, a na keju nigdje krvi, nigdje leševa, nigdje grobnica, čist i uredno obavljen posao.



I evo, gotovo šezdeset pet godina poslije, 15. lipanj 2009. osvanuo je s nizom svježe odrezanih, još krvavih svinjskih papaka koje su čuveni "nepoznati počinitelji" zataklili u Pauerove i Togayeve željezne peštanske cipele, u obući nevidljivih (ali *postojećih*) hodača. Na protest je došlo malo ljudi, piše mi Nenad Dimitrijević, promet je bio donekle usporen, a vozači nervozni i ljuti zbog zastoja.

Još dosta toga napisao mi je Nenad Dimitrijević iz Budimpešte, do 1991. Nenad Dimitrijević iz Beograda. U aprilu sam bio u Dubrovniku, napisao je, pa sam na IUC-u pričao o tome kako filozofi iz škole moralnog relativizma nastoje analitički rigorozno pokazati da bi bila "velika nepravda" Hössa i Eichmanna smatrati odgovornima za zločine koje su počinili. Ozbiljni profesori brane intelektualnu strogost ozbiljnoga filozofskog mišljenja. Njima je

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**Figure 3.5: *April u Berlinu*, page 264**  
**Temporary memorial to the Jewish citizens**  
**executed in 1945 by Szálasi's soldiers in**  
**Budapest. (*April u Berlinu*, p 264)**

Klemperer assumes an unproblematic and strictly referential relationship between language and reality, as well as its totalizing effect on human thought, which goes unquestioned in Drndić's novel.<sup>287</sup> Thus, I believe that Drndić's purpose here is not so much or at least not solely to highlight the larger philosophical point about the ideological effects of language, but to shock the

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<sup>287</sup> For a nuanced critique of Klemperer, see: Young, John Wesley. "From LTI to LQI: Victor Klemperer on Totalitarian Language." *German Studies Review*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Feb., 2005), pp. 45-64; Critics have pointed out that Klemperer's (often non-ironic) deployment of pathological metaphors to describe Nazi language (LTI) makes him liable to his own charges of ideological speech, thereby contradicting his argument. However, as Young points out, we should read Klemperer's argument more as a critique of the Nazi regime itself rather than (exclusively) the language which it used to indoctrinate people into Nazi ideology (pp 52-53). As Natka Badurina argues, Drndić does something very similar in her own writings; namely, she employs the language of blood, genes, and pathology, which is especially prevalent in racist ideologies, to implicate the perpetrators and their offspring into collective guilt for the crimes of fascism and ethnic nationalism. See "Kraj povijesti i hrvatski novopovijesni roman." *Slavica tergestina*, Vol. 14, 2012, pp 28-30.



reader by constructing—through linguistic purism—a historical constellation between Croatian nationalism of the 1990s and German fascism.

In this sense, *April in Berlin* is performing the work of “secondary” or “belated traumatization,” developed by the German theorist Jörn Rüsen. Writing in the context of postwar German collective memory, Rüsen views secondary traumatization as a historiographical, symbolic and narrative strategy of shock that prevents the Holocaust from becoming normalized, rationalized, aestheticized, covered up, and therefore removed from the public sphere. “Such an integration of negative, even disastrous and deeply hurtful, experiences into one's own identity,” Rüsen writes, “causes a new awareness of the elements of loss and trauma in historical thinking. New modes of dealing with these experiences, of working them through, become necessary.”<sup>288</sup> Drawing on Rüsen’s discussion of trauma and national narration, Todor Kuljić, a Serbian sociologist, writing in the context of memory politics in Serbia and Croatia, puts it this way: “we shouldn’t be afraid of shock therapy, we shouldn’t cover up the scenes of execution. ‘We should preserve the shards of broken glass so that we can get cut,’ as the German writer Klüger reminds us.”<sup>289</sup> This painful and repeated confrontation with the crimes committed in the name of one’s nation, which are for that very reason resistant to heroic semantics or self-victimization (namely, ethnocentrism), both Rüsen and Kuljić view as essential in the work of mourning and hence the unsettling painful exposure to otherness and difference.

By locating the more recent layers of the Croatian language in its fascist past, Drndić renders them into sites of secondary traumatization. She draws a jolting parallel between the Croatian nationalism of the 1990s and the mystical, organic, and pseudo-Romantic theories of

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<sup>288</sup> “How to Overcome Ethnocentrism: Approaches to a Culture of Recognition by History in the Twenty-First Century.” *History and Theory*, Vol. 43, No. 4, Theme Issue 43: Historians and Ethics (Dec., 2004), p 130.

<sup>289</sup> *Kultura sećanja: teorijska objašnjenja upotrebe prošlosti*. Beograd: Čigoja štampa, 2006, p 298.

the nation and society characteristic of Nazism and fascism. In particular, she explicitly brings Klemperer's book in relation to Croatian linguistic purism and its ideologues:

[...] it would have been great if Klemperer's book appeared in Croatia at the beginning of nineties when many copy editors, main editors and journalists, and even some writers, not to mention the ordinary people, glared at Tuđman's language decree and self-censored [their speech] *ad nauseam*.

*Bilo bi sjajno da se ta knjiga pojavila u Hrvatskoj početkom devedesetih kad su mnogi lektori, urednici i novinari, pa čak i neki pisci, o običnom puku da ne govorim, buljili u Tuđmanov jezični dekret I samocenzurirali se ad nauseam* (AB, p 34-35).

Drndić then goes on to enumerate different words that have been appropriated by Tuđman's regime in the 1990s from the military language of NDH (Independent State of Croatia), such as "stožer," "bojna," and "zdrug" (military staff, battalion, unit). *April in Berlin* is therefore a traumatic archeology of language, the confrontation with the broken shards of violent history, on which the reader can get cut. By foregrounding this negative heritage of NDH as a living sediment of the contemporary Croatian language, which has been reintroduced and destigmatized during the 1990s, the author jolts the reader into the consideration of disturbing continuities between the past and the present, between the old and the new order, especially since the Croatian (Central European and Balkan) historical experience of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity has been marked precisely by so many ideological breaks, ruptures, and discontinuities.

**CHAPTER 4:**  
**Chronicles of the Dream Nation:**  
**Aleksandar Zograf's *Regards from Serbia* (2007)**

*Collective identifications have to do with desires, with fantasies, with everything that is precisely not interests or the rational.*<sup>290</sup>

—Chantal Mouffe

*The history of the dream remains to be written...*<sup>291</sup>

—Walter Benjamin

**I. Introduction: Comic Subversions**

Visual media are often better suited to depicting the surreal, dreamlike, and subliminal elements in ideology, such as myths, symbols, and fantasies of omnipotence that bind individuals into powerful collectives. Cinema, undoubtedly, has amply contributed to what Walter Benjamin has termed the “aestheticization of politics,”<sup>292</sup> most notoriously perhaps in Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi propaganda films, but other, more subtle examples abound. It was precisely this inflated monumentality and sublimation of murderous ideology in film—although certainly not all

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<sup>290</sup> Mouffe, Chantal with Rosalyn Deutsche, Branden W. Joseph and Thomas Keenan, “Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension.” *Grey Room*, No. 2 (Winter, 2001), p 123.

<sup>291</sup> Benjamin, Walter. “Dream Kitsch: Gloss on Surrealism” in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Pt. 1*, translated by Rodney Livingstone et al, ed. Michael Jennings, Howard Eliand, and Gary Smith. Cambridge, Mass. And London, England: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005, p 3.

<sup>292</sup> See Benjamin, Walter. “Work of Art in the Age in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility,” in *Selected Writings. Vol. 3, 1935-1938*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott et al, ed. Michael Jennings, Howard Eliand. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, esp. pp. 120-122.

film<sup>293</sup>—that Benjamin juxtaposed to the subversive and playful quality of the cartoons, in particular, the Walt Disney productions of the 1930s. As Esther Leslie, in her essay “Mickey Mouse and Utopia” from her book *Hollywood Flatlands*, writes:

For Walter Benjamin... the cartoons depict a realist—though not naturalist—expression of the circumstances of modern life; the cartoons make clear that even our bodies do not belong to us—we have alienated them in exchange for money, or given parts of them up in war. The cartoons expose the fact that what parades as civilization is actually barbarism.<sup>294</sup>

Rather than dismissing cartoons as sadistic or overly infantile forms of entertainment, Benjamin instead invites us to imagine them as a playful, visual form of ideology critique, one which palliates the grim knowledge of the current social arrangements with a healthy dose of therapeutic laughter.<sup>295</sup> Making a time-leap to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I propose that we consider certain contemporary graphic narratives in the same light that Benjamin viewed cartoons, namely, as playful oftentimes “comic” subversions of violent and exclusivist ideologies and the mass media mechanisms that sustain them.<sup>296</sup>

The formal sophistication and the critical potential of graphic narratives have already been acknowledged by numerous scholars. Hilary Chute, in particular, has forcefully argued for

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<sup>293</sup> In fact, Benjamin championed the communist cinema of Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein for their utopian potential, transparent, “constructivist” style and engagement with the everyday life of the proletarian masses.

<sup>294</sup> Leslie, Esther. *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-garde*. London: Verso, 2000, p 83.

<sup>295</sup> More recently, Miriam Hanssen has pointed to what Benjamin saw as therapeutic potentials of early Disney cartoons and slapstick comedies, in particular, Charley Chaplin films. Hansen traces Benjamin’s critique of mass culture, from the early utopian techno-optimism to his eventual disillusionment with popular entertainment, when he realized that it could be easily instrumentalized by totalitarian regimes: “By articulating the repressed pathologies of technological modernity, [...] the Disney films, like American slapstick comedies, could work to preemptively diffuse, through collective laughter, an otherwise destructive potential. In other words, by activating individually based mass-psychotic tendencies in the space of collective sensory experience and above all, in the mode of play, the cinema might prevent them from being acted out in reality, in the form of organized mob violence, genocidal persecution and war” (*Cinema and Experience*, p 165).

<sup>296</sup> Indeed, scholars have already affirmed the importance of Walter Benjamin’s work for understanding the critical potentials of the comic book medium. Jared Gardner, in particular, has argued that “the comic form is ideally suited to carry on the vital work Benjamin called for generations earlier: making the present aware of its own ‘archive’, the past that is always in the process of becoming” (“Archives, Collectors, and the New Media Work of Comics,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 52, Number 4, Winter 2006, p 803).

the primacy of the ethical and political dimensions in the contemporary graphic narratives, especially in works that attempt to represent exceptional histories of armed conflict and large-scale human loss, but also those that deal with more commonplace accounts of trauma in largely autobiographical fashion. Critically acclaimed graphic novelists, such as Art Spiegelman, Marjane Satrapi, and Joe Sacco—to name just a few prominent virtuosos of the comic book form—have drawn our attention to unsettling histories that have either been censored or removed from circulation, while remaining skeptical about the consummate recovery of the past through the fallible—although oftentimes sole available—resources of memory and testimony. As Chute puts it:

The medium of comics can perform the enabling political and aesthetic work of bearing witness powerfully because of its rich narrative texture: its flexible page architecture, its sometime consonant, sometime dissonant visual and verbal narratives; and its structural threading of absence and presence.<sup>297</sup>

But while Chute foregrounds the modernist, self-reflective, and formally intricate quality of emerging graphic narratives, as well as their ability to take up weighty historical subjects, this chapter explores their roots in caricature, humor, and especially in the Surrealist poetics of the unconscious image, arguing that these are just as fundamental to the critical work of contemporary comics. In what follows, I will focus my analysis on Aleksandar Zograf's (aka Saša Rakezić) *Regards from Serbia: A Cartoonist's Diary of a Crisis in Serbia* (2007), one of the most fascinating, comprehensive, and critical first-person accounts of Serbia during the 1990s, when the country was swept into a violent nationalist movement by its authoritarian leader Slobodan Milošević, resulting in a decade-long international isolation.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Chute, Hillary. "The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis"" *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1/2, Witness (Spring - Summer, 2008), p 94.

<sup>298</sup> While I limit myself to the analysis of Zograf's *Regards*, there are, of course, other similar and equally compelling examples of graphic narratives dealing with the representations of armed conflict around the globe. Perhaps the most critically acclaimed graphic artist working in this genre is Joe Sacco, who has also depicted the

Zograf initially made a name with a series of comic strips, created during the sanctions in Serbia and collected under several titles, namely, *Life Under Sanctions* (1994) and *The Dream Watcher* (1998). Having already established himself in the international alternative comics circuit, he continued to chronicle the situation in Serbia during the NATO bombing campaign in the comic book medium, publishing it, along with an English-language e-mail correspondence between him and several authors from the American comix scene, in an album titled *Bulletins from Serbia* (1999). The different entries comprising a decade of work were later compiled into a more comprehensive album, *Regards from Serbia* (2007), featuring comic strips, e-mails, and comic book-style diary entries, published by Top Shelf Productions, a U.S.-based publisher of graphic novels and comics.<sup>299</sup> Encompassing the entire decade of the 1990s and beyond—from the internationally imposed sanctions to the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević following the U.S.-led NATO bombing campaign, and ending in the uncertain postwar aftermath—*Regards* depicts the everyday life in Serbia from a perspective of a socially marginal character who unexpectedly finds himself amidst surreal and catastrophic historical events. Although made up of heterogeneous, fragmentary, and anecdotal entries, composed during different moments of

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conflicts in the former Yugoslavia in his two albums *Safe Area Goražde* (2000) and *The Fixer* (2003), both set in wartime Bosnia. Sacco's work, however, differs from Zograf's in significant ways. Firstly, Sacco is not in the position of a native informer, so his albums critically foreground the perspective of a foreign observer trying to piece together a narrative from multiple sources. Even more importantly, Sacco is a trained journalist who conducts extensive on-site research before composing his albums, whereas Zograf bases his observations on his everyday experiences as a civilian during the war. In this sense, Zograf's *Regards* are more similar to another widely acclaimed autobiographical comic series, *Persepolis* by the French-Iranian author Marjane Satrapi.

<sup>299</sup> Some of the entries depicting the life under sanctions in Serbia were published previously in United States and in the United Kingdom. The second part of the diary is composed of an e-mail correspondence and comics focusing on the NATO bombing of Serbia. As Stijn Vervaeke notes, here "Zograf to a certain extent followed a general trend; apart from movies, diaries seem to have been one of the most popular genres to deal with the 1999 bombing of Serbia" ("A Different Kind of War Story: Aleksandar Zograf's *Regards from Serbia* and Tomaž Lavrič's *Bosnian Fables*", *Slavic and East European Journal* 55.2 (Summer 2011), p 163). The last part of the diary, depicting the last months of Milošević's rule and the aftermath of the regime change in Serbia, was created at the behest of Chris Ware and was published for the first time in the 2007 edition (*ibid.*).

heightened crisis in 1990s Serbia, the diary nevertheless exhibits a coherent narrative arc, one which culminates in what can be described as a political awakening from nightmarish history.

On the one hand, *Regards from Serbia*—aiming at a Western audience—clearly challenges the stigma and stereotypes attached to the Serbs in the global media, which facilitated and legitimized the often indiscriminate bombing of Serbian cities during the NATO bombing campaign and the loss of civilian lives it entailed. Thus, instead of a preface, *Regards* features a comic by Chris Ware, lampooning the stereotypical image of the Serbs in the Western media as “filthy, bloodthirsty, bigoted savages” (RS, p 7, unnumbered) and the U.S. as the well-intentioned savior superhero who has come to sort out the mess in the “backward” Balkans with its technological prowess. As Stijn Vervaeke has argued, Zograf’s critical amalgam of documentary and autobiographical forms in *Regards* “enables him to construct a counter-narrative, which is skeptical about the dominant local and international discourses regarding the crisis in Serbia during the 1990s.”<sup>300</sup> Following Vervaeke, we should view *Regards* as a narrative that uniquely crosses national boundaries and challenges dominant representations of the Yugoslav wars disseminated through global news networks and embedded reporting, mass media formats that have a tendency to dehumanize entire peoples as enemy populations and thereby erase any acts of civilian resistance against oppressive and authoritarian regimes.

The larger part of the narrative, however, is spent on depicting the spectacle of Serbian nationalism during the 1990s, which Zograf imagines as a collective dream or, alternatively, as a mass hallucination. Thus my primary goal is to analyze the ways in which Zograf uses the unique medium of comics to lampoon the regime’s visual rhetoric, namely, the fabricated monumentality and self-importance of the Serbian nation in large part responsible for the

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<sup>300</sup> “A Different Kind of War Story,” p 170.

catastrophic policies that led to three wars and massive losses of civilian lives. These comics, I argue, skillfully expose the manipulation of the state-run media during Milošević's regime and its role in creating a frightened, paranoid, and docile population through the creation of nationalist myths, victimological narratives, conspiracy theories regarding Serbia's historical role, and the constant production of threatening enemy "others." Combining documentary, autobiographical, and surreal dreamlike elements, the narrative of *Regards* traces the incomplete political awakening from this *nightmarish dream* of Serbian nationalism; it calls for a large-scale civic participation in public life and indicates the need for sober confrontation with the criminal past in the postwar period. While "encouraging the reader to imagine individual war experiences,"<sup>301</sup> *Regards from Serbia* also encompasses broader issues concerning the role of "symbolic politics" and mass media in constructing national collectives and sustaining violent and exclusionary ideologies. Consequently, we should view alternative graphic narratives as a potentially oppositional and counter-hegemonic media space, which challenge the prevailing ideological representations of armed conflict both on the national and global scale.

## II. Once a Punk, Always a Punk: Ruptures and Continuities

The wars in Yugoslavia came as a shock to many young people who came of age in the relatively liberal atmosphere of the 1980s, following the death of Yugoslavia's life-long president, Josip Boroz Tito. At the time, the alternative youth culture was at its peak, supported by a strong music scene inspired by Western pop forms, such as punk rock and new wave. Although these energetic subcultures formed more in parallel with the rigid political regime rather than against it, they managed to stake out a space for alternative modes of socialization,

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<sup>301</sup> Vervaeet, "A Different Kind of War Story," p 162.



based on common cultural references, a rebellious pop sensibility, cosmopolitan outlooks, and a pesky irreverence to the official political discourses of dogmatic communism and nascent nationalism. The discourse of liberalization after the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, was quickly co-opted by the nationalist leaders in the constituent Yugoslav republics, most radically in Serbia under Slobodan Milošević, leading to a series of prolonged wars in Croatia, Bosnia, and finally Kosovo.<sup>302</sup> The escalation of violence in the atmosphere of competing, mutually-antagonistic nationalisms left little room for alternative cultural forms, although they continued to exist on the margins by drawing on the energies of the 1980s subcultures. *Regards from Serbia* revives in part the punk sensibility of this nascent countercultural scene, most of whose members were not invested in the nationalist fantasies of their leaders, and certainly unprepared to put on a military uniform to fight in a destructive war.<sup>303</sup> In this sense, the playful and experimental cultural forms appear in the *Regards* as an afterimage against the backdrop of nationalist propaganda, pointing to the traumatic invasion of extremist politics into everyday life. In a highly ironic self-portrait, Zograf inserts himself in the middle of the conflict, with the Serbian and Kosovo forces violently colliding in his midst, while the NATO “smart-bombs” rain from the sky [see **Fig. 4.1**]. In his crumpled black suit and with dark circles under his eyes, he strikes a pose of civilian fear and confusion; his appearance is anachronistic with a touch of the surreal, a mixture of young Kafka and Joey Ramone.

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<sup>302</sup> Ivan Čolović describes the situation in the following terms: “...the ideologists and forgers of the new [Yugoslav] ethno-nations saw no problem in presenting the nationalist mobilization of their citizens as a democratic process of emancipation modeled on European political standards. However, the wars which the political elites of the former Yugoslav nations orchestrated and waged from 1991 to 1999 demonstrate how distant these leaders actually were from democratic and European values. The Serbian elite that gathered around Milošević pioneered in this” (“Sve je počelo u Srbiji?” in *Zid je mrtav, živeli zidovi!: pad Berlinskog zida i raspad Jugoslavije*. Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 2009, p 56, my translation).

<sup>303</sup> Valère Philip Gagnon, in his excellent book, *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s*, argues that the nationalist mobilization in Serbia resulted in “one of the most massive campaigns of draft-resistance in modern history.” “The figures for Belgrade are more than striking: according to the Center for Peace in Belgrade, 85 to 90 percent of the young men of Belgrade called up to fight refused to serve” (p 2).



**Figure 4.1: *Regards from Serbia*, page 90 (unnumbered)**  
 The World vs. Aleksandar Zograf, *Regards from Serbia*

As Miljenko Jergović—a renowned author from the region and Zograf’s friend—has put it, rather elegantly, on the back cover of Zograf’s new collection of comics:

In the eighties, [Zograf] belonged to that new-wave rock circle, the first whose more immediate stomping-ground stretched from Triglav to Gevgelija, and the

last whose broader homeland extended to London and New York. Although he didn't play the drums or the bass-guitar, nor was he mentioned in the lexicons of Yugo-nostalgia, Zograf—just as hundreds of thousands of young Yugoslavs—lived in a complete and ordered world, which was then destroyed.<sup>304</sup>

In the first part of *Regards from Serbia*, we witness precisely this destruction of a “complete and ordered world” as Yugoslavia spirals into a series of violent wars, while the fearful masses—drawn by Zograf with a Surrealist knack for the monstrous and sublime—orgiastically gather around their authoritarian and nationalistic leaders. Thus in one panel, he depicts people being swallowed by a giant gaping mouth, an image that perfectly encapsulates an infantile fantasy of oral incorporation into an all-powerful paternal authority (RS p 19). This need for authority—or rather, for an authoritative narrative of what is going on in the chaos of war—crops up in the frequent images of anonymous citizens glued to their television set or the radio, even as these were mostly controlled by the regime.

As an outsider, devoted to a marginalized and devalued medium, Zograf was able to critically observe and sketch the everyday life of the “dreaming collective,” taking part in its sufferings while remaining skeptical of its ideological allegiances and destructive fantasies. Jergović thus places Zograf in the company of “those few which, like Gombrowicz before him, were both tourists and émigrés.”<sup>305</sup> However, he continues: “True enough, his lot was not to physically emigrate from Serbia, Pančevo, Belgrade... but this, certainly felicitous occurrence should not be overestimated. If he indeed wasn't expelled from his own home, then Zograf is certainly expelled from his time.”<sup>306</sup> This state of internal exile has helped Zograf to stay critical of the master narratives regarding the situation in the former Yugoslavia. Instead of championing a particular side, Zograf records the marginal fragments of everyday life that fall outside the

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<sup>304</sup> Jergović, Miljenko, the back cover of Zograf, Aleksandar. *Tušta i tma*. Zagreb: VBZ, 2005, my translation.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid

<sup>306</sup> Ibid

recognizable media frames, thereby complicating the reception of spectacle produced by Milošević's regime as well as the Western construction of stereotypes about the Balkans disseminated through the global news networks.



**Figure 4.2: *Regards from Serbia*, page 13 (detail)**  
The artist at work

Encompassing an even broader set of references, Zograf's style is also in many ways indebted to the playful, irreverent, and largely autobiographical tradition of American underground comix represented by figures such as Robert Crumb, Art Spiegelman, and Kim Deitch. On the one hand, the limited albeit international publishing channels of alternative comics have allowed Zograf not only to bypass the closed media-system during Milošević's

rule,<sup>307</sup> but also to contest the global spectacle of the Balkan wars outside of Serbia. By weaving two or more media spaces into its narrative texture, *Regards* advertises itself as a transnational narrative whose limited circulation is made possible by the existence of a cosmopolitan community of readers, publishers, and authors gathered around underground comics.<sup>308</sup> Consequently, Zograf's use of a recognizable autobiographical form, which has been dominating alternative comics since the genre's inception, enables him to construct a playful and performative "I" that starkly diverges from the spectral image of "Serbs" both within and outside the Balkans. Moreover, by situating this "self" in ordinary contexts, even when these seem distant and exceptional to a foreign reader, Zograf facilitates the process of identification with his potential audiences and reframes everyday life as a space of political resistance. "This visualization of the ongoing procedure of self and subjectivity" in autobiographical comics, according to Hillary Chute, "constructs 'ordinary' experience as relevant and political, claiming a space in public discourse for resistance that is usually consigned to a privatized sphere."<sup>309</sup> Thus the opening strip shows the artist at work, drawing his comics [see **Fig. 4.2**]. He is quickly brought back to his own inner pursuits from the world of supporters of the regime and their opponents" (RS p 13) and a drunken war veteran shouting outside the window. On the level of the narrative, the panels straightforwardly depict a comic book artist as an apolitical subject, immersed in his imaginative craft and distracted by daily politics. On the visual level, however, the panels can be read as allegorizing the political potentials of graphic narratives, which occupy

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<sup>307</sup> Interestingly, *Regards* includes Zograf's extensive e-mail correspondence with mostly American underground comics artists during the NATO bombing of Serbia. These e-mails were composed in 1999, when the internet was just becoming available to large segments of the population in Eastern Europe. In this sense, the correspondence is a testimony to the potentials of new communication technologies and their impact on our reception of armed conflicts around the globe.

<sup>308</sup> See Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005.

<sup>309</sup> Chute, Hillary. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, p 141.

a unique position between caricature and document, the subjective and the objective, the autobiographical and the historical. Politics and public life inadvertently bleed into the narrative after all, on both the visual and textual level. In other words, Zograf continuously visualizes and embeds various forms of political discourse into everyday contexts—first only marginally, as background “noise;” but later, as the crisis in Serbia escalates, comics increasingly transform into a politicized medium through which the author can depict and critically negotiate his position vis-à-vis multiple players in the catastrophic events taking place right before his eyes. As Vervaeet has argued, “Zograf’s work lacks the systematic, research-oriented approach” present, for example, in Joe Sacco’s *Safe Area Goražde*. He relies on the inherently fragmentary and sequential form particular to the comic book medium. His “visual reports”—“consisting of a series of discrete episodes told in an anecdotal manner”<sup>310</sup>—are not meant to be strictly diagnostic, in the sense that they want to authoritatively explain the conflict in the Balkans to the outside observers. Rather, his goal is to place the chaotic events “onto paper, transform them in the little drawings” (RS, p 37), and by making himself the hero of his comic strip, to give us a sense of the lived history.

### **III. Dream Nation and its Discontents**

Dreams and fantastic visions in many ways define Zograf’s liminal aesthetics, a suggestive mixture of surreal, autobiographical, and documentary elements that is not only a unique feature of his graphic style, but—I would argue—a specific response to the historical situation in Serbia of the 1990s. In the catalogue for the 2002 exhibition of Zograf’s comics,

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<sup>310</sup> “A Different Kind of War Story,” p 164.

titled “Dreamtime/Wartime,” at the San Francisco Cartoon Art Museum, Chris Lenier pushes this convergence of history and aesthetics in Zograf’s work even further:

There are several points at which a regime fueled by ethnic hatred and propagandistic lies naturally meets up with the inverted logic of a sleeping mind, exhausted by troubled dreams. There is the quality to many of Zograf’s strips (most of them published outside his country, in the US and Europe) of someone explaining the details of a nightmare that has just shocked them awake - as if by putting that nightmare into words, they can discharge some of its oppressive force.<sup>311</sup>

Moreover, Zograf himself describes his comics using the language of visions and dreams, echoing in many ways the creative process championed by the Surrealists of releasing repressed unconscious images into the light of day:

I was always amused by the idea of letting dream-consciousness create products of art. I concentrated on the so-called ‘hypnagogic state’ -- it is a state we enter just before falling asleep, or when we wake up, and that’s when we see quick visual sensations which are different from the dreams during the REM period. Some theoreticians call this state a ‘twilight zone’ -- our consciousness sees something that is more like ‘slides,’ as opposed to the ‘film’ we experience in full dreams.<sup>312</sup>

Interestingly, Zograf locates the inspiration for his dreamlike images precisely in the hypnagogic “twilight zone,” the liminal moment between sleep and the awakened state. Additionally, he connects the hypnagogic state to the static image of the comic panel, a “slide” as it were, rather than to the moving image of cinema, an analogy he reserves for dreams in REM sleep. Moreover, while the hypnagogic image is descriptive of individual psychology, his comics suggest a broader application of this half-dreaming state to the national collective, where it acquires explicitly historical and political undertones.

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<sup>311</sup> *Dreamtime/Wartime: The Comics of Aleksandar Zograf*, a catalogue for Aleksandar Zograf’s exhibition at Cartoon Art Museum, San Francisco, 2002. Transcript available on-line: <http://www.aleksandarzograf.com/whois.html>

<sup>312</sup> Ibid

This evocation of dreaming collectives at particular moments of historical crises additionally recalls Walter Benjamin's concept of 'dialectical image,' described in the Convolute N of *The Arcades Project* as sites of awakening from nightmarish history. Indeed, as Susan Buck-Morss has noted, Benjamin envisioned the critical historian as a dream interpreter who awakens the sleeping collective from its historical slumber. Here the dream—in its historical and collective dimension—represents the political immaturity of a people, its domination by the ruling elites through ideological mystifications. This historical dream is dispelled precisely by taking hold of *dialectical images* “in which the humanity, rubbing its eyes, recognizes this dream precisely *as* a dream. It is at this moment that the historian takes upon himself the task of dream interpretation”<sup>313</sup> The dreamscapes and phantasmagorias, precursors of the contemporary societies of the spectacle, have their roots in commodity culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; for Benjamin, they are instantiated in the Parisian arcades and World Expositions, as well as in the concomitant emergence of mass media landscapes—composed of photography, advertising, and later, cinema—that fundamentally reshaped the experience of modernity. While these new technologies of visualization promised to release, as it were, the revolutionary energies of the oppressed masses, more often they ended up as tools in the hands of ruling classes, reproducing the dominant ideology in a more spectacular, phantasmagoric form. This was increasingly made clear to Benjamin with the rise of fascism in Europe, so that his later writings recapitulate the imagistic dialectic of history as a coin-toss: on the one side—revolution, on the other—fascism; or, in its affective dimension—elated utopianism, on one side, and melancholy defeatism, on the

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<sup>313</sup> Benjamin, quoted in Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989, p 261



other.<sup>314</sup> Benjamin's reliance on image—what he called “thought-image” [*Denkbild*]<sup>315</sup>—therefore provided an apt metaphor, as well as a philosophical method, for grasping the historical present in a flash—as a potential moment of *danger*, one which could quickly slide into a political catastrophe.<sup>315</sup>

Recently, however, Benjamin's historical method—due to its reliance on frequently destabilizing combinations of text and image—has found a fertile ground in comics scholarship. In a recent collection of essays, *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence*, Anthony Enns foregrounds the affinity between the comic book medium and Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image, which—akin to the visual-textual presentation of comics—carries over the principle of montage into history. In other words, dialectical images, like graphic narratives, combine *what-has-been* with *what-is* into a disruptive constellation, “where the past constantly collides with the present and the real constantly merges with the mythological.”<sup>316</sup> In this way, graphic narratives not only disrupt the chronological sequence of the historical narrative by offering up shocking juxtapositions of different historical presents; they also—in the words of Henry Sussman—reconfigure our perception by “compressing the telling socio-political anomalies of the moment” in a way “that stops readers dead in their tracks.”<sup>317</sup> The flash that accompanies the realization that the present social arrangement has

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<sup>314</sup> I am borrowing here Miriam Hansen's metaphor of gambling to describe Benjamin's view of new media technologies. See “Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema,” *October*, Vol. 109 (Summer, 2004), pp. 3-45

<sup>315</sup> This recoding of historical narrative into a dialectical image is perhaps most concisely expressed in “The Theses on the Philosophy of History.” As Benjamin writes in the 5<sup>th</sup> Thesis: “The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up in an instant when it can be recognized and never seen again” (*Illuminations* 255). The image of history acquires here a specifically temporal dimension, namely, one of fleeting *instant*. Further on, Benjamin reiterates this instantaneous temporality in a more unambiguously political manner in the 6<sup>th</sup> Thesis, stating that “[h]istorical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a *moment of danger*” (ibid, my emphasis).

<sup>316</sup> Enns, Anthony. “The City as Archive in Jason Lutes' *Berlin*” in *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence*. edited by Jörn Ahrens, Arno Meteling. Continuum, 2010, 49.

<sup>317</sup> *Around the Book: Systems and Literacy*. Fordham University Press, 2011 p 63.

been founded on a specific regime of truth and, moreover, that other more egalitarian social arrangements have been historically available to us—even as mere unrealized potentials—transforms the dialectical image into a site of political awakening.

Jared Gardner, in particular, has seen in Benjamin's uniquely imagistic categories of thought a productive lens for analyzing what he calls the new media work of comics. Echoing Benjamin's description of the dialectical image as well as Zograf's description of the hypnagogic image, Gardner states that "[c]omics chronicle the twilight world, the liminal space between past and present, text and image, creator and reader."<sup>318</sup> For Gardner, this liminal space is encapsulated most aptly by the gutter—the gap between the panels—which precludes narrative closure and therefore requires of the reader to make creative and imaginative connections between different images. Finally, he situates comics in a broader media archeology, placing their birth at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century alongside “the emergence of mass media empires of Hearst and Pulitzer”<sup>319</sup> and their revival at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in conjunction with the rise of the internet. Consequently, for Gardner, comics occupy a unique dialectical position in the present media landscape, one “that might be best suited to articulating the complex demands of the present new media age in relation to the media of the past.”<sup>320</sup>

Returning to Zograf, I want to suggest that his comics, created during the 1990s, depict a similar constellation of the media apparatus, a phantasmagoric ideology, and a dreaming collective during the Yugoslav wars, captured in a series of dialectical images as potential sites of political awakening. If the dialectical images remain curiously resistant to a fixed definition even among Benjamin scholars, this is because they involve a specific *mode of presentation* of

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<sup>318</sup> Gardner, Jared. “Archives, Collectors, and the New Media Work of Comics,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 52, Number 4, Winter 2006, p 801.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid, p 803.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid

historical material, one which is more akin to the polysemic language of art and literature—the palimpsestic weaving of myth and history, the past and the present—than to the more strictly analytical categories of thought. Thus, I hope that the legibility of dialectical images in Zograf’s comics will emerge through my own presentation and interpretation of them in conjunction with the history they attempt to grasp. This is not to say that the historical context in which Benjamin was writing can be so easily transposed to the Balkans at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, at the same time, a certain undeniable affinity does exist between the rise of fascism in the 1930s and the rise of Balkan ethnic nationalisms in the late 1980s and 1990s. Such parallel is perhaps most discernable in the articulations of democracy after the fall of communism as a specifically national and ethnic body politic, alongside the revival of the mythical and primordial cult of the people. Zograf’s comics demonstrate to what extent this cult had relied on the state-controlled media apparatus as a primary scene of mystification and ideological inculcation. Indeed, Susan Buck-Morss identifies the same mechanism at work in Benjamin’s writings on fascism, an ideology which patently disavowed technology while using it to create a spectacle of the “natural” unified nation: “Fascism appealed to the collective in its *unconscious*, dreaming state. It made ‘historical illusion all the more dazzling by assigning nature to it as a homeland.’”<sup>321</sup> And furthermore: “The psychic porosity of the *unawakened* masses absorbed the stage extravaganzas of mass meetings as readily as it did mass culture.”<sup>322</sup> As a parallel, we could mention the mass meetings that took place shortly before the fighting broke out in Yugoslavia, the most famous of which is Milošević’s speech in Gazimestan given on 28 June 1989, where he invoked the trope of Serbia as a “heavenly nation;” but we could just as well cite any number of Zograf’s drawings

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<sup>321</sup> *Dialectics of Seeing*, p 309 and 312.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid*, p 312.

showing a frightened, paranoid, and deindividualized mass parading prominent symbols as signs of unequivocal national belonging.

In a similar manner, Marko Živković, in his recent book, *Serbian Dreambook: National Imagery in the Time of Milošević*, notes that the “bizarre, outlandish, and strange ingredients of the national imaginary” in Serbia of the 1990s “could [...] be figured as the National Dream.”<sup>323</sup> The repertoire of fantasies, images, symbols, and myths—carefully selected from a wider national tradition and disseminated through the state-controlled media—was particularly effective in mobilizing the Serbian and other post-Yugoslav nations for war with their neighbors. Commenting specifically on the proliferation of conspiracy theories in Serbia shortly before and during the Yugoslavia’s violent dissolution, Živković observes that such paranoid narratives heavily relied on the psychological mechanism of projection, in which the spectral enemies of Serbia—evoked on the television, radio and the press—played an especially prominent role:

Most of [these narratives] featured the usual cast of Serbia’s enemies—Germany, the Communist International, the Vatican, and, of course, the “New World Order.” As these theories conveniently transfer the responsibility for the whole series of the last decade’s disasters (four lost wars, one of the world’s highest hyperinflations, Serbia’s pariah status, and so on) from Milošević’s regime to outside enemies, they have been actively promoted by the regime itself.<sup>324</sup>

Furthermore, this representational strategy effectively distracted the population from noticing the gross corruption orchestrated by the political and mafia elites who exploited the prevailing wartime lawlessness for their own financial gain. In this sense, Milošević’s regime can be seen as a paradigmatic example of the power of media spectacle in contemporary politics, a truism that has hardly gone unnoticed in the various scholarly and journalistic accounts of Yugoslavia’s violent dissolution.

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<sup>323</sup> Živković, Marko. *Serbian Dreambook : National Imaginary in the Time of Milosevic*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011, p 5.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid, p 207

Živković strategically deploys the trope of a dream to describe the surreal and contradictory workings of Milošević’s ideology. Yet as he acknowledges, this suggestive and long-standing metaphor is also liable to break down into a fundamentally unresolvable set of epistemic contradictions. In other words, if ideology operates like a dream, how can we distinguish with any degree of certainty the dream from the awakened state, false from true consciousness, illusion from reality?<sup>325</sup> Živković never truly resolves this long-standing paradox. Instead he proposes that we view dreams as “epistemological machines for modeling all sorts of different worlds, self-sealing paradigms, epistemes, or frames, as well as the traffic between them.”<sup>326</sup> He then extends this methodology to his primary object of study, namely, the Serbian nation during Milošević’s rule as instantiated in the fantastical and bizarre “national dreamwork.” I wish to return to this trope, since this is precisely how Zograf describes his graphic diary: as a sort of national dreamwork. In an interview Zograf states that his comics attempt to depict “a dream dreamt *en masse*,” referring to the phantasmatic draw of nationalism as a mass movement that swept Serbia and other Yugoslav republics in the 1990s:

I noticed that during wartime or a big turmoil people get obsessed with their collective position in the universe, and the conflict gains mythical proportions, even if it’s just ugly bloodshed that is actually going on. Then all these projections of “leaders” and “enemies” or national symbols suddenly get so vivid because a huge number of people focus on them. I had a feeling that it was something like a *dream dreamt en masse*, or a *hallucination observed by the collective mind*. So I tried to reflect that in some of my comics.<sup>327</sup>

Here Zograf sets up several oppositions that are explored and destabilized throughout *Regards*.

In the first place, he exposes the gap between the actual wartime violence (“ugly bloodshed”) and the ideological mechanisms that displace or sublimate this violence (“projections of ‘leaders’

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid, p 7-8

<sup>326</sup> Ibid, p 8

<sup>327</sup> Lenier, Chris. “Aleksandar Zograf: The Interview.” On-line at: [http://thehighhat.com/Marginalia/008/lanier\\_zograf.html](http://thehighhat.com/Marginalia/008/lanier_zograf.html)

and ‘enemies’) through the regime’s visual rhetoric. Indeed, *Regards* possesses the quality of half-dreaming state, where documentary realism fuses with the surreal, dreamlike and spectral elements of the nationalist ideology, forming a mythical and at times outlandish media landscape of Milošević’s Serbia. Zograf directly taps into the fantasies, projections, and defense mechanisms that are first disseminated by the regime’s media apparatus—a sort of dramaturgy of Great Serbia—and then appropriated by the collective as a way to make sense of the immediate political and economic crisis. As I mentioned earlier, the diary culminates in a moment of ambivalent awakening, where the national dreamwork, as it were, is exposed as an elaborate sham, but one which proved catastrophic for both Serbia and its neighbors.

Following Benjamin, the task of the critical historian would then be to expose, deconstruct, and unravel the national dream-work and, in this manner, to unclog the social realm of the mythical consciousness. Yet such a task is by no means simple or self-evident. Following in the footsteps of post-national critique, Mikhal Dekel writes: “For if we accept that the nation is a social imaginary institution, we also must accept that its dream-language, like any dream-language, is greatly more multifarious and opaque than any temptingly simple and neat line of inquiry—one that draws a straight, neat line from past to present—allows.”<sup>328</sup> Consequently, Dekel accounts for the nation's resistance to demystification in terms of “a shared social imaginary” that *unconsciously* binds disparate individuals into a collective national subject:

The nation, then, constitutes its members as citizens through its inscription in a shared social imaginary whose totality is at the same time outside of their grasp; it is perhaps that the nation *appears* transparent and knowable only to its most zealous members or to its opponents. This does not mean that one who stands outside the purview of a nation's social imaginary is not implicated by *a* national imaginary, by *some* national imaginary (even, and perhaps to a greater degree because of its supposed absence, in the 'postnational' West). Indeed, one of the

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<sup>328</sup> *The Universal Jew: Masculinity, Modernity, and the Zionist moment*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, p 16.

most glaring limitations of postnational critique has been that there *is currently no place outside the 'nation,'* any nation, with its specific set of exclusions, fantasies, privileges, and permitted/unpermitted discourse, from which to launch an 'objective' critique of the nation as such.<sup>329</sup>

While the last statement does not take into account the emerging transnational and migrant subjectivities as potential sites of postnational critique, Dekel's insight does in fact point to the possibility of one's limited implication in the national imaginary as having a critical stake in articulating a less violent, more inclusive and fluid form of national community. In other words, discourses which either essentialize or disavow the nation *tout court* fail to account for the fundamental *performativity* and *contingency* of national subject formation, which in turn depends on one's minimal implication in a national imaginary.

It is thus indicative that the opposition movement (*Otpor*) which finally ousted Milošević from power presented itself as an alternative, more authentic representative of the Serbian nation, usurping the hegemonic national signifier in the slogan: “Resistance! Because I love Serbia!” (*Otpor! Jer volim Srbiju!*). Even Živković, who maintains a clear anti-nationalist stance throughout, concludes his analysis of the mythomaniacal narratives in the 1990s Serbia with an ambiguous trope of political awakening from the dream of violent nationalism, thus recuperating the non-violent overthrow of Milošević as a more viable, open form of *national* democracy:

One of the main slogans of Milošević's national mobilization campaign in the late eighties was “Serbia has risen” (*Srbija je ustala*). The word, just as in English, can mean both to literally get up and stand straight or to get up after sleep. This “rise,” in retrospect, proved to be an “awakening” into a nightmare, a nightmare that, in its turn, required a very different kind of “awakening.” Urging this kind of awakening from the mythical narrative of the nation, a slogan from the 1996–97 anti-Milošević demonstrations in Serbia ironically suggested: “Serbia has risen—brew her some coffee!” (*Ustala je Srbija. Skuvajte joj kafu!*).<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> Ibid, p 17, original emphasis

<sup>330</sup> Živković. *Serbian Dreambook*, p 253.

Similarly, *Regards from Serbia*—using the multimedia language of graphic narrative—depicts these two ambiguous moments of political “awakening” as collective performative gestures. The first of these is the “awakening” of the Serbian nation from multinational Yugoslavia under Milošević's leadership, an awakening tied to the hegemonic project of Greater Serbia whose goal was to unite the Serbs under the same homogenous political territory irrespective of the demographic reality on the ground.<sup>331</sup> Zograf here shows the extent to which Milošević's ideological project involved the indoctrination of the Serbian population by the state-controlled media, resulting in a paranoid, almost entirely virtual “Dream Nation” cut off from the rest of the world. Zograf, like Živković, figures Serbia in this period as submerged in a nightmare of sorts. The second moment of “awakening” relates to the political changes in Serbia after 2000, in which the central place is given to the non-violent overthrow of Milošević, but also to the creeping knowledge of the atrocities committed by the regime. The overall narrative thus coalesces into a dialectical image involving several instances of a national collective in the making, from its articulations within Milošević's ideology to its gradual, albeit stunted, awareness of the legacy that Milošević had left behind.

#### **IV.     Chronicling the Dream Nation**

The first entry in *Regards* bears the title, “A Day in Serbia” and displays the exact historical date, “Saturday, April 24, 1993,” when Serbia was at the height of inflation and internationally-imposed sanctions, while wars raged in the neighboring Bosnia and Croatia. Yet

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<sup>331</sup> Indeed, it was precisely this rift between the demographic reality on the ground and ethno-nationalist ideological projects, whose goal was to homogenize the social and political space, which accounts for the extreme violence of the wars of Yugoslav succession. See Gagnon, *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s*, esp. pp 4-10.



regardless of the accurate historical index setting up the expectation of documentary realism, dreams, visions, and outlandish details seep into the texture of everyday life, transforming under the cartoonist's gaze into illuminating “signs” of history. A dead frog on the street evokes death and catastrophe; people in a store with empty shelves stare blankly into space, as if hypnotized; a child walks around in a military uniform. The commonplace, in other words, has been colonized by the militarized nationalism of the Milošević era, crystallizing in Zograf's diary into surreal visual fragments [Fig 4.3]. These visual fragments hint at the state of the collective; choice details evoke a larger picture of the social and political malaise—a state of war, fear, apathy, and scarcity—and, also, a desire to escape reality through ready-made myths, fantasies, and stereotypes, such as those offered by the media. While the individual panels provide us with snapshots of life in Serbia under sanctions, assembled together in the reader's mind they form a suggestive allegory of the political system, thereby pointing to a larger social totality that is masked by the regime's rhetoric of national emergency and call for unity. The drawings inside the panel are therefore not simple illustrations, reducible to the sequential narrative. Rather, they form visual rhymes with other panels, allow for non-linear readings, and through the expressive, hand-drawn lines and dramatic chiaroscuro, create a thick, palpable atmosphere. In these comics, the whole of Serbia seems enveloped in darkness, even when it is daytime. Further in the narrative, “Dark is the Night,” a Russian tune from the 1940s, becomes a soundtrack for the entire decade, reflecting the general “anger, melancholy, and despair” (RS, p 45).

These comics therefore depict a subject *in* history rather than outside it, while at the same time maintaining a critical distance from master narratives by focusing on the scenes on the streets that reframe and remediate the regime's deceptive rhetoric. Milošević, in other words,

relied on maintaining an ever-present enemy of Serbs who at different times took the form of either Serbia's historical others, such as other ethnicities in the former Yugoslavia and (even) the

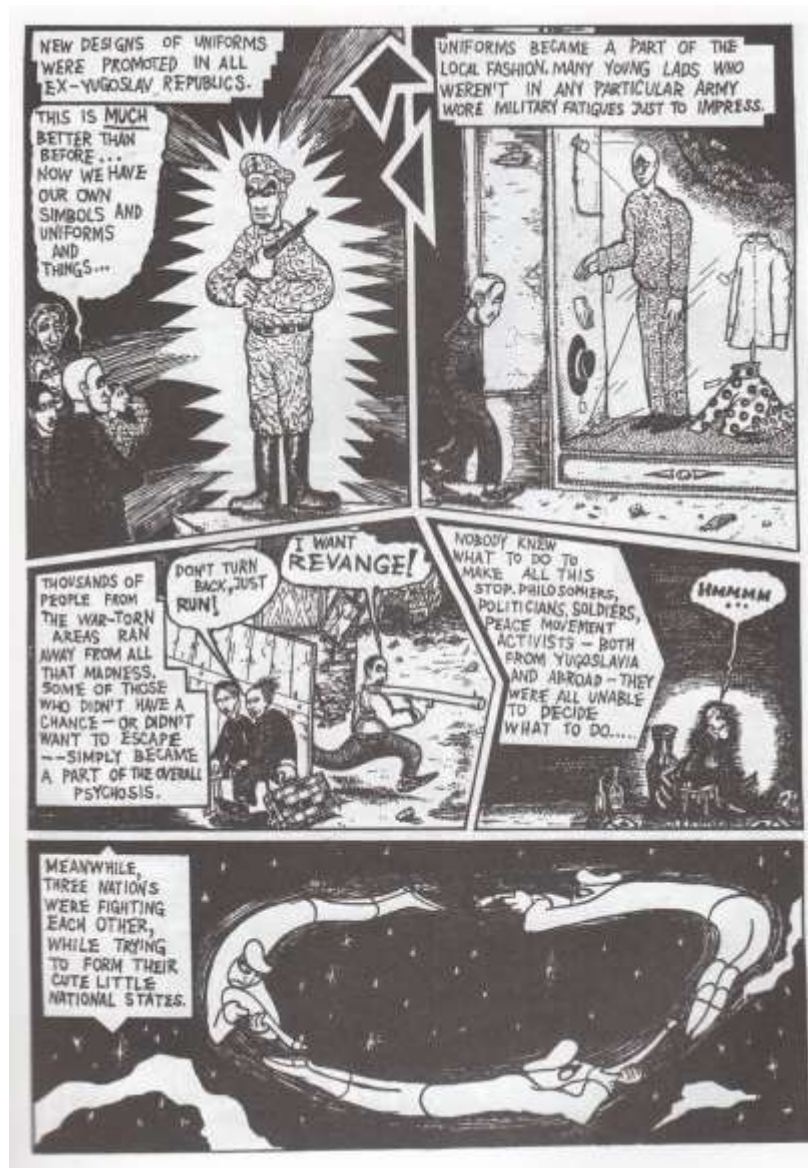
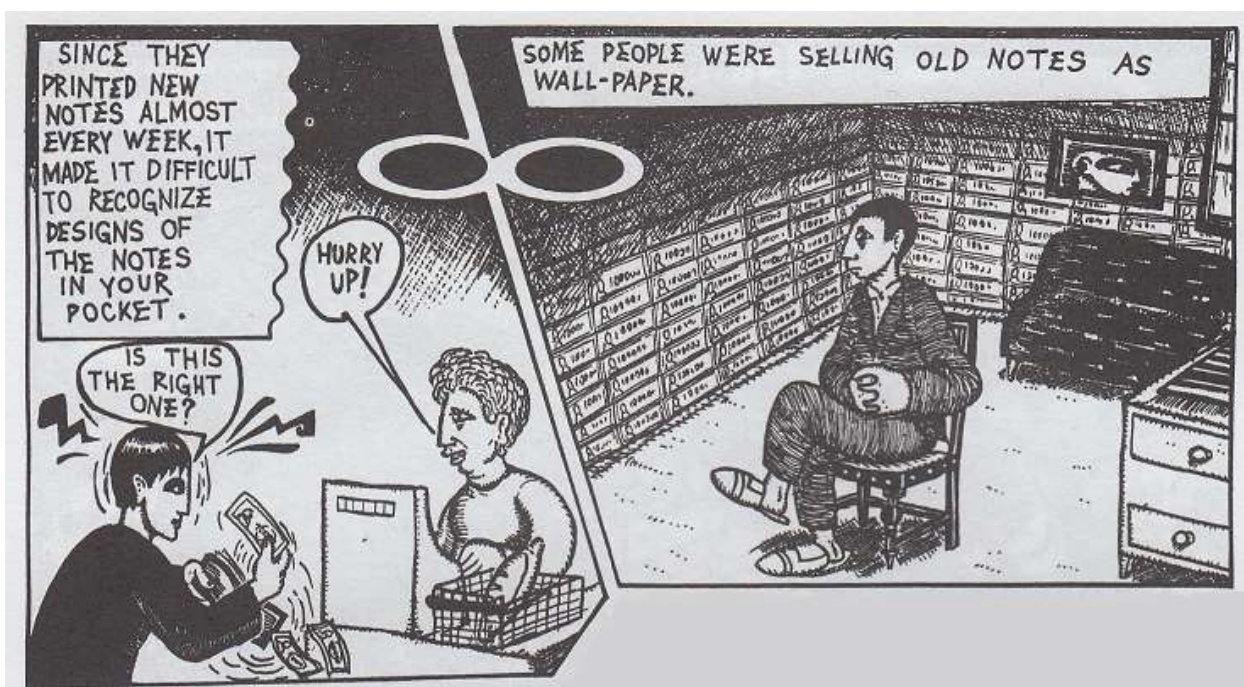


Figure 4.3: *Regards from Serbia*, page 39  
Militarization of everyday life

Germans, or an external power, such as the shadowy “New World Order” and “the West” *tout court*. This strategy confirmed the historical self-conception of Serbs as an *exclusive* historical

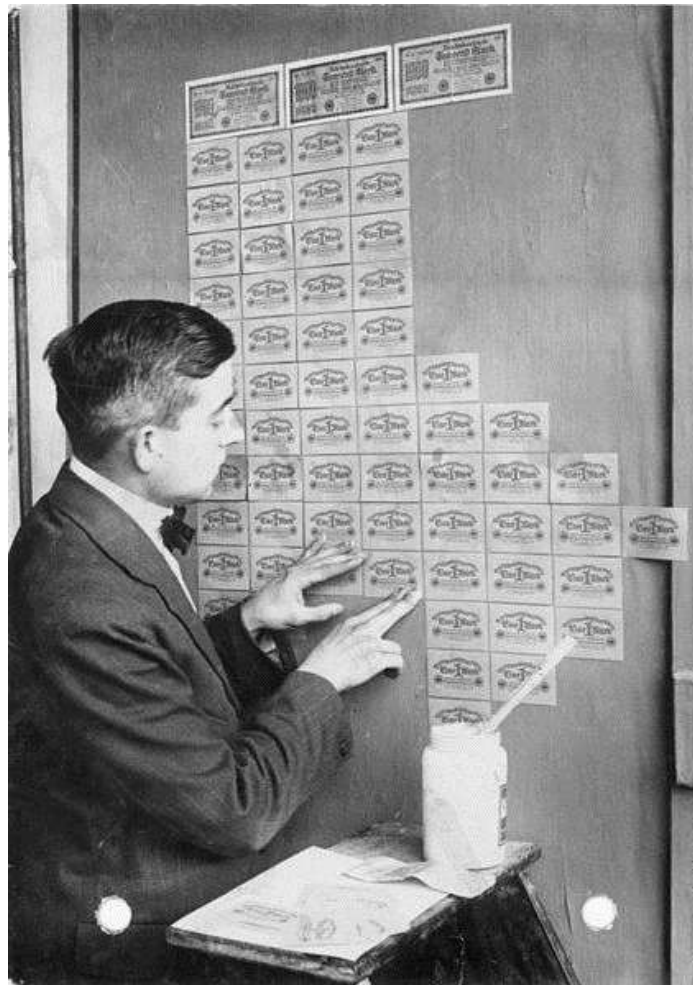
and present-day victim of “quisling regimes” and great powers, while rhetorically exploiting the West's punitive response to the regime—such as the sanctions and the international pariah status—to further consolidate this image. While Zograf points out the cruel ironies of the sanctions, which punished and further isolated the population while strengthening the regime, he also exposes the regime's blatant corruption and kleptocratic nature as the other side of the nationalist phantasm. With a critical perspicuity worthy of Brecht, Zograf depicts soldiers as smugglers and thieves trading their spoils with an opposing army. Much of the war is exposed as a corrupt and dehumanized business venture hiding “behind the mask of patriotism” (RS, p18).



**Figure 4.4: *Regards from Serbia*, page 41**  
Serbian Hyperinflation, *Regards from Serbia*

Black marketeers prosper in the state of general poverty and degradation, appearing on the streets of Belgrade as new social types, whom Zograf transforms into a Daumier-inspired caricature. The outsider humanitarian response fares no better; it is an extension of the war

industry, where certain actors stand to profit on the misery of the manipulated and disoriented collective.<sup>332</sup> The UN soldiers enjoy the lawlessness of the black market by hiring trafficked prostitutes from the former Eastern Bloc.



**Figure 4.5: Germany, 1923.**  
Banknotes used as wallpaper in Weimar.

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<sup>332</sup> There have been very few accounts of the conflict in Yugoslavia which focus on the economic and profit motives in war. The exception is Peter Andreas' *Blue Helmets and Black Markets: The Business of Survival in the Siege of Sarajevo* (2008). As Andreas shows on the example of the Sarajevo siege, the suspension of law in the conditions of war make a fertile terrain for the mushrooming of black markets, smuggling operations, and illegal or legal arms trade. Moreover, the war in Bosnia allowed not only by the expansion of the international aid relief industry on an unprecedented scale but also by their complex entanglement in the war economy.

Perhaps the most striking image of Serbia in the first half of the 1990s is the ten billion dinar bank note at the height of the greatest hyperinflation in history, which Zograf includes in his narrative as a symbol of the general instability and devaluation of daily life. Indeed, between October 1, 1993 and January 24, 1995 prices increased by 5 quadrillion percent. In another panel [Fig 4.4], he depicts a man sitting in a room with the wallpaper made of worthless banknotes. The scene recalls another familiar image of a man gluing Marks during the Weimar hyperinflation [Fig 4.5]. While Zograf does not explicitly draw a parallel between these two periods, the German hyperinflation is indexed in the annals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a traumatic event, etched in the European psyche and widely considered to have contributed to Hitler's rise to power and the emergence of fascism. Here then we encounter a dialectical image where the past and the present coalesce into a legible constellation, one which suggests historical repetition while marking the difference.

As Živković has noted, this instability of daily life in Serbia under Milošević “exhibited not just more or less deficient cognitive mappings but also something we might call the 'poetics of opacity,’”<sup>333</sup> namely, the proliferation of conspiracy theories, oblique and all-encompassing laments on the general state of things, and exaggerations of Serbia's role in world history. Perhaps one of the most frequent images that appears in *Regards from Serbia* is the surreal, orgiastic conglomeration of the crowds and the media apparatus, often depicted as an extension of the mass itself. In these early comics, the regime-controlled television and radio exhort the crowd, call out to it, penetrate its deepest fears, dreams and fantasies [see Fig 4.6]. Because so much energy was spent on mere survival in a deeply unstable but ultimately adaptive system, the bizarre narratives offered by the regime-controlled media could take root as simplified

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<sup>333</sup> Serbian Dreambook, p 215.

explanatory mechanisms in a confounding social reality. Thus, the first panel shows a mass running around helter-skelter, their confusion and chaotic movement represented by the expressive lines, and the people's panicked and somber expressions. The next panel switches to a man sitting by the television set, hypnotized by the disembodied mouth on the screen. The caption reads: "It all ended in apathy. People were just sitting in front of their TV sets swallowing the same old lies" (RS p 47). Yet it is the panel that follows this one that explicitly politicizes the media, showing it was the key component in the regime's maintenance of power through its ability to produce a phantasmatic reality. Showing a sniper protruding out of the two-dimensional television screen and aiming straight at the viewer, the panel is accompanied by the following caption: "Television was one of the best protected shields of the regime. During the peaceful protests in 1992, offices of the state's TV station were guarded by police troops dominated by snipers" (ibid).

Milošević's hold on power was strengthened not only by his ability to control and alter the political narrative at key moments, but also by saturating the media space with contradictory, kitschy, and sensationalized content.<sup>334</sup> The latter strategy can be described as a *spectacularization* of the nation in which the gradual unfolding of historical meaning becomes increasingly replaced by the frenetic rapidity of decontextualized images and paranoid explanations. While these images and narratives served as points of national identification for some, mobilizing largely disempowered elements of the Serbian society for war; in others, the flood of irrational content gave way to hardened cynicism and political apathy in the face of patent absurdity with no clear alternatives.

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<sup>334</sup> Perhaps the best example of this would be *turbo-folk* music—a formulaic, mass produced hybrid of traditional Balkan folk and Western electronica—that became extremely popular during the 1990s, generally associated with the new wartime mafia elite. See Gordy, Eric. *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999, pp 103-165.



Figure 4.6: *Regards from Serbia*, page 47  
 Depictions of the regime controlled Media.

Zograf's comics, indeed, acknowledge the impossibility of depicting the social totality of the time, or even producing a single definitive account of the events taking place. Vervaeke sees this foregrounding of the fragment in Zograf's work as suggestive of "the tangibility of traumatic reality...[that] resist being integrated into a single, overarching historical narrative."<sup>335</sup> Indeed, in these early comics, created when Serbia was under sanctions and going through one of the greatest inflations in history, the pages are not divided into sequential and geometrical panels. Rather, the page is split by semantically inflected gutters into jagged, chaotic shards, portraying a fragmented, hallucinatory, and confusing grasp of reality. Walter Benjamin famously commented on the new potentials of representing distorted and unconscious perception in live-action and animated film, but the same could be said of the comics, which in many ways share the visual language of cinema. He writes: "Many of the deformations and stereotypes, transformations and catastrophes which can assail the optical world in film afflict the actual world in psychoses, hallucinations, and dreams. Thanks to the camera, therefore, the individual perception of the psychotic or the dreamer can be appropriated by collective perception."<sup>336</sup> The medium of comics does not normally rely on a camera, but it does exhibit some affinity to the cinema in its use of techniques such as montage or in the imitation of camera angles for dramatic effects. Zograf's technique, on the other hand, makes use of *distortion, irony, caricature, stereotype, and grotesque*, devices closely related to animated film, to access the collective perception in the time of crisis. In a panel depicting a confused and disoriented crowd, Zograf provides the following commentary: "Everything was distorted and strangely warped. Maybe this whole nation was entering a different state of consciousness, or

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<sup>335</sup> "A Different Kind of War Story," p 164.

<sup>336</sup> "Work of Art in the Age in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility" in *Selected Writings. Vol. 3, 1935-1938*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott et al, ed. Michael Jennings, Howard Eliand. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, p 118.



some kind of a state of collective trance” (RS, p 53). This disorientation is subsequently exposed as being in part the product of the cynical and manipulative strategies of Milošević's regime, which relied on the power of the media to trigger buried fantasies of omnipotence and disseminate simplified explanatory narratives, displaying an incredible power of adaptation to new circumstances and a timely appropriation of oppositional politics. The regime moreover promoted escapist entertainment in the form of a new-fangled “turbo-folk” music deeply steeped in the patriarchal values of the wartime mafia elite, while it supplemented news analysis with conspiracy theory quacks who transformed politics into a morbid burlesque show.

By caricaturing and thus making visible the insidious relation between the masses and the media apparatus, Zograf provides a sort of immunization against these tendencies. He maintains an ironic distance from some of the more farfetched and paranoid narratives proliferating around Serbia at the time, including them into his comics as illuminating artifacts of the collective mind. In a comic strip, “All Against Each Other and God Against All,” he includes the images and narratives from the television, namely, the rants of the Serbian painter known as Milić od Mačve, who was given ample airtime on television to expound his pseudo-racist prophecies, in which “the Serbs would rebuild the European civilization from the ashes” (RS, p 48) after the oncoming apocalypse. It would be easy to dismiss these theories as the ravings of a madman, although they do illustrate to the full extent what Živković has termed the “deficient cognitive mapping” during Milošević-era Serbia. Beyond that, the power of these images resides in their fusion of disparate historical and ideological elements in forming a mythical picture of the nation. In this sense they truly represent the distortions of collective memory not only in their arbitrary quotations of the Serbian rural folk tradition, but also in their evocation of the mythical narrative structures that figure the nation in eschatological terms: that is to say, as undergoing a purification through war

and suffering, and ultimately coming out of it renewed in the guise of the savior. Zograf counteracts these images with ironic distance and absurdist laughter rather than in-depth critical analysis. Yet these strategies disrupt and reframe the politics of the regime precisely through biting irony, caricature, and outright quotation of the plainly absurd.

## V. Resisting the Western Gaze

Zograf's graphic diary abruptly stops in 1994 only to be picked up in 1999 during the NATO bombing campaign against Serbia, one of whose most frequent targets was Zograf's hometown of Pančevo. Despite the growing power of the opposition movement against Milošević, the NATO bombing campaign further consolidated Serbia's image as an international pariah. The campaign involved indiscriminate targeting of mixed-use infrastructure and resulted in gross civilian casualties while simultaneously strengthening the regime. *Regards from Serbia*, it should be emphasized, aims at an American, English-speaking readership. In this sense it is also a transnational text conscious of its role as a mediator between two hierarchically positioned cultural spaces: Serbia, a "peripheral" European country that came to negative prominence with the Yugoslav wars, and the U.S., the world superpower and unarguably the most prominent player in international affairs. It was during the Yugoslav wars, as Maria Todorova has argued, that the image of the Balkans as a seat of ancient ethnic hatreds was once again reactivated and disseminated in the Western media and the popular press, giving rise to the stereotypes of the Balkan peoples as half-civilized, tainted by the Orient, and thus resistant to modern democratic institutions. Expanding on Todorova's argument, Dušan Bijelić sees the main function of this pseudo-Orientalist discourse as constituting the West as a rational, civilized, and democratic subject against the Balkan half-civilized other. Thus for Bijelić "the Balkans' have functioned as

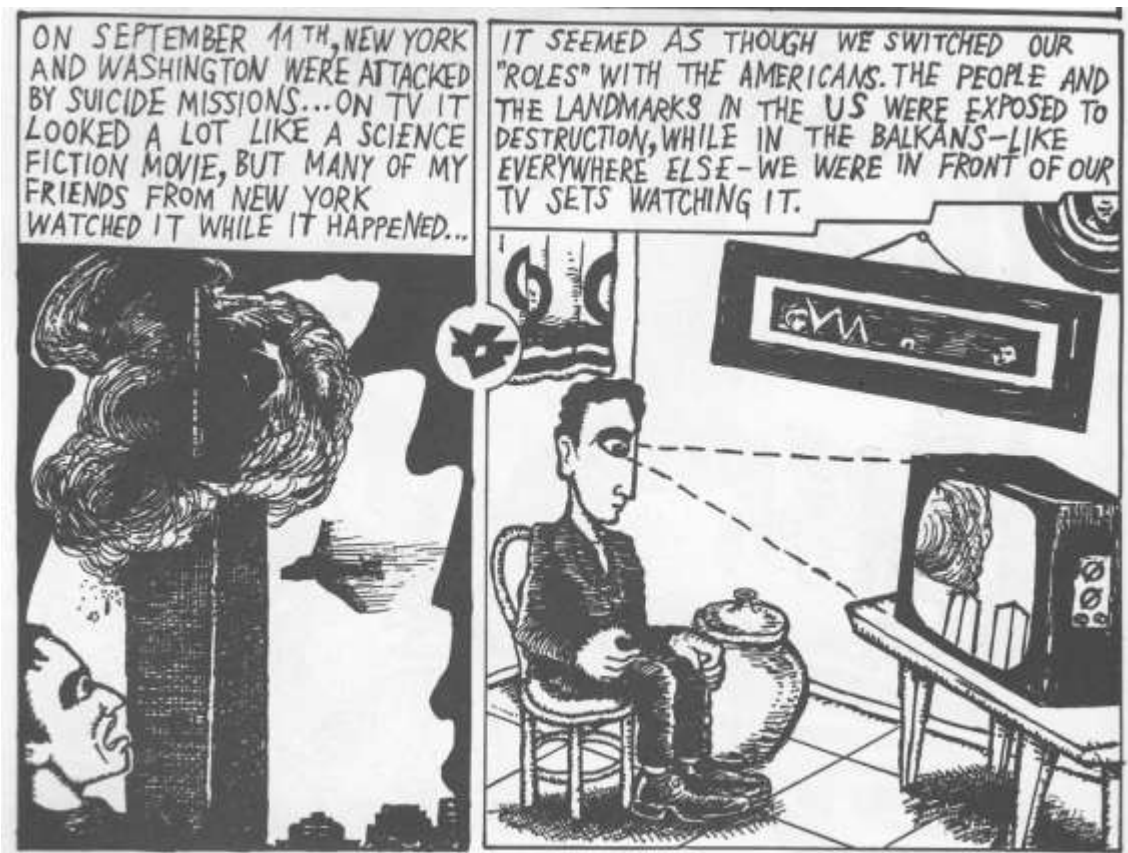
the fulcrum for Enlightenment Europe's self-image, or the means by which 'progressive' Europe projects its anxieties and hidden desires [...] onto those who constitute its antithetical periphery”<sup>337</sup> What could be labeled here as the Western gaze directed at the Balkans functions through an unambiguous hierarchy between the spectator and the image, but in a way that the very gaze produces and reifies the Balkans as a geographically discrete, collective, and knowable object. In this sense, entire populations—even those who had resisted the policies of their regimes—fall outside of the civilized, human norm, thus becoming vulnerable to indiscriminate violence under the guise of humanitarian intervention.

Zograf's diary uses several strategies that deconstruct or at least complicate the Western gaze. In what can be called a parodist strategy of overidentification, he fashions himself as a wild “Balkan boy,” an image obviously incongruous with the irreverent narrator who has been leading us through the absurdities of his daily life. Another effective strategy he uses is the reversal of the Western gaze, where the situation in the former Yugoslavia is viewed as contingent, liable to happen almost anywhere—even in the very heart of the developed democratic West. In the epilogue to the diary, this geographical estrangement is shown precisely as the reversal of Serbian and American roles after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center. In a panel depicting a (presumably Serbian) man rather blankly staring at a television set with the image of the smoldering towers [see **Fig 4.7**], Zograf provides the following caption: “It seemed as though we switched our 'roles' with the Americans. The people and the landmarks in the U.S. were exposed to destruction, while in the Balkans—like everywhere else—we were in front of our TV set watching it” (RS, p 270). Yet it is another comment, related to the escalation of the nationalist and populist rhetoric in the U.S. following the September 11 attacks, which becomes even more

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<sup>337</sup> Bijelić, I. Dušan. “Introduction: Blowing Up the “Bridge” in *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation*. Ed. Dušan I. Bijelić and Obrad Savić. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002, p 3.

critically piercing. The panel shows an angry crowd gathered around a leader-like figure and the following caption: “It turned out that, under threat, Americans reacted quite like the Serbs did, two years before when exposed to American bombers. They solidified [sic] and fell for populist sentiments” (RS, p 271). Zograf in the end deterritorializes the Balkans by showing how banal nationalism in various contexts can be set off by a crisis, whether real or manufactured. Indeed,



**Figure 4.7: *Regards from Serbia*, page 270 (detail)**  
A Serbian man watches the Twin Towers collapse.

the American response to September 11 attacks revealed the limits of the West as a post-national space against which the nationalisms of the second and third world are construed as atavistic and unenlightened. Here too, *Regards from Serbia* foregrounds the role of the mass media as a

mechanism of projection, distortion, and spectacle, which has supplanted analysis and narrative with the power of decontextualized images, myths, and sensationalized stereotypes.

## **VI. Frightful Awakenings**

Shortly after the end of the NATO bombing campaign, Zograf's diary switches its focus to the difficult legacy of Milošević's regime whose power was slowly waning. It is at this point that the dreamworld of nationalist phantasmagoria starts to recede, giving way to a clearer picture of the catastrophic policies that resulted in three lost, murderous wars, a destroyed economy and infrastructure, and a landscape littered with mass graves which, sooner rather than later, will have to be confronted by an already traumatized national psyche. In a diary entry for February 15, 2000, Zograf gives a succinct image of that which has been repressed by the collective: "an incident happened at an industrial plant in Romania, after which cyanide leaked into the river, causing the death of masses of fish in the neighboring Hungary and Serbia..." (RS, p 208). The drawing that accompanies the caption depicts a river bank flooded with dead fish, whose anthropomorphic expressions eerily suggest the lifeless gaze of a human corpse [see **Fig 4.8**]. Zograf further comments: "tons of dead fish, lying on the river banks, looked like an ugly scene coming out of the collective subconsciousness" (ibid). This image, a sort of screen-memory, can be seen as a compromise-formation transferred onto the collective at large, wherein the referent of the mass graves is simultaneously evoked and denied. On the one hand, the crimes committed in the name of one's collective, spurred on by a feeling of guilt, want to be given expression in the collective consciousness. On the other hand, a more direct representation of the mass crimes at this particular time could potentially further traumatize the recipient and block the information the image wants to relate. Indeed, Zograf has here chosen the right word, this is a

subconscious image rather than an unconscious one; it occupies the shadowy zone between a dream and an awakened state, to use Benjamin's politicized metaphor.



**Figure 4.8: *Regards from Serbia*, page 208 (detail)**  
An industrial catastrophe brings the repressed material to the surface.

suppressed by the regime, especially on the brutality of the Serbian army and police against the Kosovo Albanians, but also the revanchist actions by the Kosovo Liberation Army against the Serbian civilians. After the arrest and extradition of Milošević in 2001, Zograf relates a story of the mass cover-up of eighty-six bodies of ethnic Albanians killed by Serbian troops and dumped in the Danube during the NATO bombing campaign. The story was made public after the truck driver in charge of transporting the bodies spoke up as a witness, which led to other testimonies revealing the site of a mass grave near Belgrade. Here, Zograf sticks to the facts as reported by the independent media. Yet his illustrations are suggestive and subdued rather than explicit, weaving the visceral horror and the suppressed knowledge of the crimes into the normalized fabric of everyday life. Zograf zooms in on the back of the truck that carried the bodies, which

upon a closer inspection shows a clothed leg of a corpse dangling through a crack. In the next panel, a serene, practically pastoral landscape in the vicinity of Belgrade in no way reveals this as a site of a mass grave, where, as the caption points out, “probably hundreds of bodies were savagely thrown away in the dirt...” (RS, p 263). The visual report concludes with an image of the dejected, now-iconic narrator, Zograf, haunted by dark phantoms. The caption reads, “thousands of people are still missing on both the Albanian and Serbian side, and most of the bodies had probably had to be [*sic*] hidden someplace around us... (ibid). The state of war during the breakup of Yugoslavia was in large part prolonged by the proliferation of narratives that presented one's own national group as an exclusive victim, all the while dehumanizing and defacing other national groups both in the rhetoric of the nationalist regimes and in the state-run media, a discourse which was then reflected, reproduced, and finally normalized in everyday speech. Zograf's narrative, which up to this point had focused mostly on the suffering of the Serbs under an authoritarian regime and largely misguided punitive measures by the international community against it, here makes an explicit call for both personal and collective soul-searching. While the tyrant, Milošević, may be incarcerated and effectively out of power, the question remains: to what extent was the Serbian population implicated in the maintenance of the regime whose narratives and symbolic power held such sway, and by extension, in the cover-up of the mass crimes committed by that same regime? Zograf's diary offers no easy answers to this question, but it concedes that such questions will and ought to be asked in a post-conflict, post-authoritarian society. In this sense, there is no easy amnesty, no clean slate, even after the jubilant overthrow of the dictator.

Despite the uncertainty of Serbia's situation, Zograf still gives a central place in his narrative to the non-violent revolution that toppled Milošević's regime. This event is embedded

within the overall narrative progression of the diary as a turning point from the mythical to civic consciousness, figuring as an important scene of instruction in democratic politics. Beginning with the year 2000, Zograf's reporting becomes more linear, ordered, and focused on the external political situation, while the surreal elements slowly recede into the background. He begins to record the events in the street, such as the struggle between the opposition and the supporters of the regime, and integrates reports of the oppositional media into his narrative. The panels are no longer jagged and synchronous, but display a more ordered sense of chronology and temporality, indexing the events taking place in more or less rational narrative succession. In the entry for August 27<sup>th</sup> 2000, at the height of the demonstrations against Milošević, he observes: "my mind is still wandering—even though never before in my life have I been so much drawn to the 'objective,' outside world" (p 233). The following panel shows the narrator attentively listening to the radio and reading the newspaper; the next one picks up a typical scene on the street, a policeman armed with club is chasing a young protester in a t-shirt displaying the logo of the opposition (*otpor*). While in the 1990s, these opposition movements were marginal to the narrative, after 2000 they consolidate into its backbone. The masses, which had previously been depicted as a monstrous conglomeration of undifferentiated bodies coextensive with the regime, now start organizing into a legible body politic with its own symbols and non-violent methods of protest, exposing the repression of the regime and recruiting disenfranchised and formerly apathetic citizens in their ranks. During the rigged elections that resulted in the storming of the National Assembly in October 2000, the narrator himself joins the peaceful protests and the general strike that eventually ousted Milošević from power. He concludes the entry on October 5 with a fitting comment: "by the end of the day we realized that the Serbian people had [succeeded] in basically non-violent overthrow of the Milošević regime... it happened



organically, like some kind of mass-dream coming true...” (RS, p 238). One could also say a political awakening from a mythical slumber, but the metaphor of dreaming works precisely on this recursive ambiguity between the dreaming and awakened state, between a utopian wish-image and a dystopian nightmare. Zograf indeed places this event at the core of his narrative, where it points to a possibility of a different political and social order. But he also remains skeptical of the changes given more than a decade worth of catastrophic policies that made up the difficult and long-lasting legacy of the Milošević regime for Serbian society and the former Yugoslavia as a whole. From this point on, a question mark keeps hanging above the image of the masses, representing a future that is uncertain but open-ended nonetheless.

## VII. Conclusion

*Regards from Serbia* is indeed one of the most compelling, critical, and subtle narratives of the turbulent changes in Serbia following the breakup of Yugoslavia. Ironically enough, the graphic diary was more widely circulated in the U.S., for whose audience it was indeed made, than in Serbia, where it could have had equal if not greater resonance. As a recent monograph on Serbian independent comics puts it, this situation was the result of the policies of Milošević's regime and the elites appointed to manage cultural life in Serbia, which at the time was “dominated by the nationalistic model, in an autistic and closed media system.”<sup>338</sup> (Popović, p 12, my translation). The author of the introductory essay in the same monograph notes the irony of this situation: “With a few exceptions of dailies and literary magazines, the authorial independent alternative comics remain invisible for those outside its insider audience community within Serbian borders. At the same time, this cultural production is one of the most visible and

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<sup>338</sup> Popović, Aleksandra. “Uvod u nevidljivost” in Sekulić, Radovan and Popović, Aleksandra. *Nevidljivi strip: alternativni strip u Srbiji 1980-2010*. Beograd: Narodna biblioteka Srbije, 2011.

present art practices from Serbia outside of its borders.”<sup>339</sup> Saša Rakezić, the person behind Aleksandar Zograf, has worked to remedy this situation, co-organizing independent comic festivals, workshops, and exhibitions, which have put Serbia on the map of independent comics and drawn attention to its aesthetic and political potentials.

As I've attempted to show, the mixture of the fantastical, surreal drawings and documentary reporting made possible by Zograf's graphic diary as a popular albeit critical genre, has resulted in a complex visual archive of everyday life in Serbia during the 1990s and beyond. This unique archive has in turn made legible those aspects of history that are passed over by more traditional narratives and sociological analysis by attempting to represent the unconscious, the experiential, and the surreal within history and politics. While its value as a historical document will surely be disputed by more traditional historians, its pedagogic import as a form of popular historiography and visual journalism should be obvious enough. The fact that it makes room for humor, play, and irreverence during a turbulent time ought only to strengthen its position as a document of resistance to authoritarian control, for very often the inoculation against authoritarian impulses in a society comes precisely out of such comic tendencies. Walter Benjamin had already identified this subversive comic strain in interwar silent films and cartoons, especially in Disney and Charley Chaplin productions, foundational references in Zograf's pop cultural inventory. In his seminal essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” Benjamin writes of the impending danger of fascism, characterizing it as a “mass psychosis,” and subsequently recommending laughter as a possible preventative measure:

Collective laughter is one such preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis. The countless grotesque events consumed in films are a graphic

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid, p 7

indication of the dangers threatening mankind from the repressions implicit in civilization. American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic response of unconscious energies. Their forerunner was the figure of the eccentric. [...] This is the context in which Chaplin takes on historical significance (SW 3, p 118).

This passage indicates to what extent Benjamin had staked his claims on critical forms of popular culture as a preventive mechanism against fascism and other forms of political violence. Of course, as we now know and as Benjamin himself had feared, his hopes were dashed as the cruel dreamworld of fascist mass culture emerged against the old one, feeding precisely on collective myths, rituals, and fantasies. Zograf's diary also begins at the moment when the fantasies of violent ethnic nationalism—with their paranoid and narcissistic narratives—had already swept an entire country into a prolonged series of wars. In this sense, Zograf indeed cuts a Chaplinesque figure, one who parodies the ideological projections of the Milošević era, shattering them with macabre laughter and grotesque caricature. The cheeky narrator of *Regards from Serbia* simply does not fit into the delusional nationalist dreamwork of 1990s Serbia with his individualistic élan and irrepressible skepticism towards politics. Indeed, it is this passion towards the marginal, eccentric and quotidian elements within a tradition favoring epic monumentality that make Zograf's irreverent subversion legible.

## Conclusion

During the two years I spent in Zagreb, where I researched and wrote a large part of this dissertation, I changed several apartments around the city. My last apartment, located on the edge of the city's historic center, overlooked the Fine Arts Pavilion, an iconic symbol of architectural modernism designed by Croatia's renowned sculptor Ivan Meštrović in 1933. I had come to know the building as a gathering point for the Zagreb Pride march, when the white, unusually round, and classically austere building was suddenly decked out in rainbow flags, while an equally motley and festooned mass of individuals, equipped with drums, whistles and theatrical props, milled about in the blinding June sun, impatiently waiting to start their procession. Today the building houses the Croatian Association of Artists and serves as an exhibition space, but its unassuming appearance belies a volatile and troubling past, the shocks and cries of history that have assailed this part of Europe in the short 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Built as a symbol of Yugoslavism and a monument to Peter I, Yugoslavia's first king, at the outset the building was meant to showcase the power and prestige of the interwar regime that was increasingly becoming unpopular among large segments of the Croatian population. In the subsequent years of rapid regime changes—spanning the Second World War, the socialist Yugoslavia, and finally, the Croatian independence, also forged in a destructive war—the pavilion and the square in which it was located kept altering their name, function, and appearance in accordance to the needs of each new ruling regime and ideology. Thus when the Croatian fascists, the Ustaše, came to power in 1941 following the dismantling of Yugoslavia by the Axis powers, the pavilion was turned into a mosque in an effort to court the Muslim

population to their cause and legitimate the territorial pretensions of Croatian fascists in Bosnia. Following the victory of Tito's partisans in 1945, the minarets came down, the name of the square was changed to the Victims of Fascism Square—commemorating those tortured and killed in the nearby Ustaša prison—and the interior was transformed into a museum of the communist revolution, reflecting the manicured and monumental narrative of history as dictated by the single-party state.

The building functioned as a pedagogic site of the communist version of history for forty years, until the ideological system which it propped up was drained of its legitimacy by the internal political struggles, economic instability, soaring debts, and the rapid dismantling of real existing socialism throughout the Eastern Bloc. In 1990, the nationalists, headed by Franjo Tuđman of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), a party that had won the first multiparty elections in Croatia, made yet another intervention into the historical site. The city council changed the name of the square from the Victims of Fascism Square to the Square of Great Croatian Men, while the pavilion itself, which had previously housed a heroic and whitewashed version of the communist past, would now house an equally if not more monumental version of the national past, reincarnated from the ashes of authoritarian communism as the Pantheon of Great Croatian Men. There were even rumors that Tuđman, as the first wartime president of democratic Croatia, ultimately planned to make the building his mausoleum; a proposition that would have remained at the level of speculation were it not perfectly in line with Tuđman's project of building a lasting cult of personality, modeled on Josip Broz Tito, and placing himself as the centerpiece in the pompous dramaturgy of the new Croatian state. The lack of funds however put a halt to this plan, as often happens when contingency and pragmatic considerations impinge on unchecked authoritarian hubris. In 1993 the pavilion became once again the home of

the Croatian Society of Visual Artists, a concession made by the regime to the image of post-ideological democracy. However, the rebranding of the Victims of Fascism Square into the Square of Croatian Great Men, to fit the new narrative of national renewal after what was perceived as a forty-year long repression under an imposed communist internationalism, became a rallying point for progressive segments of the civil society who saw this gesture as a sign of dangerous historical revisionism, especially with regard to the values and legacy of antifascism. Indeed, the square and the pavilion were inextricably linked to fascist terror, which is also why the communist regime had made it a site of memory tied to the struggle against fascism and the remembrance of those who had suffered or been murdered under wartime fascist regimes. Notwithstanding the frequently selective approach to and rigid control of public history and commemoration under Yugoslav socialism, antifascism was one of the most ideologically uncontaminated pieces of the communist legacy. By overwriting this memory, the new regime was not only stoking new fears in the segments of the Croatian population which had historically been the target of fascist terror, triggering dormant historical traumas, but it was also erasing certain victims from the public space of politics and thus determining the character of politics to come. In other words, the society's enduring memory of those victims was the most powerful expression of the unprecedented violence of fascism. Once that memory had been safely removed, fascism could be de-traumatized, as it were, and smoothly reintegrated into the homogenous time of national history. But after continuous protests and pressure from the civil society actors throughout the 1990s, the name of the square was changed once again to the Victims of Fascism Square in 2000, which it remains to this day.

The pavilion and the square in their numerous ideological configurations embody the interplay between official history and individual remembrance, with the former term, more often

than not, dominating the latter. The nation-state had long been a gatekeeper of history, while the individuals have barely managed to stake out a space of representation with all the imbrications and ambiguities between the structure and subject, the public and the private that such an endeavor entails. On the one hand, the short narrative of the urban site in Zagreb I have provided stands as an allegory of traumatic history itself, where multiple ruptures stretched over time refuse to be unified into a singular object with an apparent and unambiguous meaning.

Ideological systems that rely heavily on philosophies of history, such as nationalism and communism, attempt to suture these traumatic gaps into a progressive narrative which overlays the doubts and uncertainties of individual experience, even as they organize and assemble fantasies of a collective future. Yet, as I tried to show in this work, everyday temporalities, affects, narratives, and memories keep resurfacing to challenge these frames of monumental history as ruins shored against the seemingly monolithic present.

In this sense, I have foregrounded the discarded fragment, the historical debris that keeps piling up against the forward movement of time, disturbing its unity and continuity. These are flashing images of those made mute by historical violence, whose muteness itself is a type of speech, a traumatic caesura in the incessant murmur of history. But they are also indexes of a utopian desire for alternative social arrangements, ones that would accommodate multiplicity, difference and play while striving beyond the nation-state towards a more universal horizon of politics. While the former crops up most strikingly in Daša Drndić's work in the afterimage of the Holocaust and its traumatic resonance during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, or in other instances of contemporary forms of ethnic cleansing, the latter, more hopeful historical trace appears in the afterimage of real existing socialism in Dubravka Ugrešić's work, or in the playful and ecstatic moment of the Bulldozer Revolution in Zograf's *Regards*. For now, however, they

remain merely flashes—moments of insight and resistance that uneasily translate into a sustained social practice.



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