

ECHOING THE BEATS OF TURBO-FOLK: POPULAR MUSIC AND NATIONALISM IN EX-YUGOSLAVIA

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Abstract: This paper discusses the popular musical phenomenon in the region of former Yugoslavia known as “turbo-folk” – also referred to as “the music of the war.” In the late 1980s and early 1990s, “turbo-folk” partly emerged from a postmodern mix of more readily accessible modern technologies (turbo – techno-pop beat) and the desire for “retraditionalization” (folk). Therefore, it could be seen as part of the occurrence of “the invention of tradition” in the process of re-constructing a group’s identity. This peculiar synthesis of transformed tradition combined with modernity could also be traced back to the communist-led social engineering and rapid urbanization, which, in fact, led to mass “ruralization” of the cities in Yugoslavia at the time. Noticeably more than any other music genre, “turbo-folk” has closely been linked to the expansion of nationalism, in which it played an important role in spreading the nationalistic discourse and “satisfying” the emotions of the masses. I argue that “Turbo-folk,” as a “form of identity,” continues to be closely related to the broader socio-political trends in the former Yugoslav countries.

Key words: former Yugoslavia; Serbia; turbo-folk; popular music; nationalism; identity formation

Introduction

This article was written as part of the “(Post) Yugoslav Identities Conference” that took place on the 26th and 27th of September 2008 at the University of Melbourne. At the conference former Yugoslavian identities were discussed from various angles. The conference presentations were divided into three thematic

groups: War and Reconciliation, Retraditionalization and Nostalgia, and Cultural Representations, Inclusions and Exclusions in Post-Yugoslav Spaces. In a way, this article encompasses all of these topics. Social reality is of a fluid, interconnected nature, and we, as human beings, experience it as an undivided continuum. But in order to make sense out of our daily lives we tend to cut it into pieces, like slicing a cake. It is through individual, thematic presentations that we can grasp certain problems, but it is particularly the collage of all of them that creates the body for a deeper understanding of post-Yugoslav identities. Thus, in the following, I will present my own fragment of how post-Yugoslav identities can be perceived through a music genre.

As the title of my article suggests – “Echoing the beats of Turbo-Folk: Popular Music and Nationalism in ex-Yugoslavia,” I have decided to deconstruct music, nationalism, and the invention of tradition and identity in the former Yugoslavia. Several authors have theorized the turbo-folk genre in the past, but mostly in the context of the socio-political situation in the former Yugoslavia (Gordy 1999, Ramet 2002, Wilmer 2002). In addition, several articles have been written that depict certain aspects of turbo-folk, often in its relationship to the regime (Hudson 2003, Kronja 2004). In this article, I would like to show a more complex approach towards theorizing the turbo-folk genre and draw attention to its various aspects and impacts upon society. Rather than viewing it strictly in the context of the political situation in former Yugoslavia in the first half of the 1990s, I will discuss turbo-folk in a broader context: as a socio-cultural phenomenon. I understand turbo-folk in the framework of Arjun Appadurai’s mediascapes, as landscapes of images distributed and spread by electronic media such as newspapers, magazines, television stations, and film-production studios (Appadurai 1996: 35).

turbo-folk, by some called “the music of the war,” is a popular musical phenomenon in the region of the former Yugoslavia. I would first like to draw attention to a few aspects of turbo-folk that I will further discuss in this paper.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, turbo-folk partly emerged from a post-modern mix of more readily accessible modern technologies (turbo symbolizes the techno-pop beat) and a desire for “retraditionalization” (folk). This peculiar synthesis of transformed tradition combined with modernity can be traced back to the Communist-led social engineering and rapid urbanization, which, in fact, led to mass “ruralization” of the cities in Yugoslavia at the time.

Considering the fact that many turbo-folk performers are women, I will also attempt to capture the role of the objectification of women and the

mechanism in which they come to embody the ideological discourse. More than any other music genre, turbo-folk has been closely linked to the expansion of nationalism and has played an important role in spreading the nationalistic discourse and “satisfying” the emotions of the masses. It became an effective tool of manipulation in the hands of different politicians; for this reason, turbo-folk is often labeled as “the rhythm of the Milošević era.” I will try to explore this link using the example of the marriage of Serbian pop queen “Ceca” (Svetlana Veličković) and Serbian paramilitary leader “Arkan” (Željko Ražnatović). Their marriage literally objectifies the complex relationship between the media, commodities and the world of nationalism and politics. Furthermore, I would like to argue that turbo-folk serves as a form identity at multiple levels and belongs to the genre of the “invention of tradition” in the process of constructing one’s identity.

The Rise of the Turbo-Folk Genre

It is not possible to clearly identify where turbo-folk as a music genre originated, yet we can trace its roots to a few different musical styles. I suggest that it was the combination of these styles that later gave birth to turbo-folk. Chronologically, the earliest origins, mainly of the Serbian tradition of turbo-folk, are to be found in the peasant tradition of folk singing and oral recitation. Songs and poems¹ have been well known media for preserving shards of history in the form of myths. According to Hudson, there are two separate sources of inspiration: “the traditional liturgical literature of the church and the peasant traditions of folk singing and the oral recitation of narratives in verse by illiterate and sometimes blind singers (*guslari*)” (Hudson 2003: 158). Moreover, *guslari* accompanied by their typical musical instrument – the *gusle* (a one-stringed, bowed instrument) would, according to Robert Hudson, “become the composers and keepers of the people’s history” (Hudson 2003: 158). Thus, we can see a strong connection between song, myth and historical event in this particular musical tradition. Many songs accompanied by the *gusle* (at least the more contemporary ones) are often inspired by actual historical events, but, when sung, they acquire mythical form.

Goran Tarlac, a Belgrade-based journalist, writes that: “*the rise of nationalism in the mid-1980s was accompanied by the restoration of the gusle*”

¹ Hudson notices that in Serbian both poem and song are referred to as *pesma* (Hudson 2003: 158).

(Tarlac 2003). It is not just a coincidence that this was the time of desire for retraditionalization as I will attempt to show later. Tarlac supports his argument on Ivo Žanić's statement (1998) that follows: "*On the eve of war, fiddling in Yugoslavia became like a press center with a reliable translation service that was in charge of translating the current political messages of Serb leaders into old epic images, and vice versa*" (Tarlac 2003). The *gusle* is still played today, even though it has been mostly abandoned or "exchanged" for other stringed instruments, most commonly the guitar (see Hudson 2003: 165-168). Still the use of the *gusle* represents a bridge between the contemporary and traditional. Guslari in the 20th century would sing of the contemporary events but they gave them the coating of time wrapped in the form of myth, for song was a type of a narrative – a means of remembering the past.

Mircea Eliade showed the unique notion of time connected to myth in his famous book *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Eliade 1954). He argues that the mythical time appears in periodical cycles that tend to re-enact the rebirth of the already established social organization (see Eliade 1954, 62-92). In its core, Eliade's theory proposes prolific assumptions but lacks to a large extent agency of the actors and inner diachrony of the social structure. In the contemporary world there is no clear distinction between mythological and post-mythological thinking; they both appear simultaneously. Yet there is a desire for imposing continuity to selected fragments of history so they can become part of the nationalistic myth that could be instrumentally revived and re-enacted. Čolović defines this process when he concludes that "*in some cases what was at stake really was an endeavor to seek and revive a connection with the distant past, to establish a continuity of certain ideas and projects from a contemporary perspective and for the sake of contemporary needs.*" (Čolović 2002: 13)

Parallel to the *gusle*, another musical genre – *narodna muzika* (traditional national music) was played. *Narodna muzika* was often from the beginning of the 1990s referred to as *izvorna muzika* (which means – authentic music). Turbo-folk itself emerged from *novo komponovana narodna muzika* (newly composed folk music) as a fusion of traditional folk music and a modern beat. Folk music as such was already popular during Tito's times and Tito himself liked this genre. Hence also *narodna muzika* became a good base for the birth of turbo-folk.

While the tradition of playing *gusle* established a strong link between myth, history and song, it was *narodna muzika* that led to understanding of song in terms of nationalism.

Helm explains: “*The acceptance or rejection of folk music as a basis for composition has been a primary question for many years in Yugoslavia – and in a way that is for Western composers perhaps hard to understand. Folk music was a factor in the nationalist and pan-Slavic movements of the 19th century, in which the regions of today’s Yugoslavia participated, and whose influence is still felt in many Eastern European countries. Over and above this, composers of the territories that constitute present-day Yugoslavia saw (and in some cases still see) in folk music a means of arriving at a ’national form of expression.’*” (Helm, 1965 :220)

Paradoxically the most important inspiration for turbo-folk came from rock ’n’ roll, even though it traditionally stood in opposition to the regime. Rock ’n’ roll was, similarly but more radically than the *gusle*, employed in political discourse but, more importantly, it was the rock ’n’ roll musicians that started combining traditional music with new influences. Sabrina Ramet argues that the first group to do so was Goran Bregović’s *Bijelo dugme* (White Button) and Bregović himself considers ethnic and folk music as the richest source of inspiration (Ramet 2002: 99).

In this brief introduction, we can see that turbo-folk emerged from a few different musical genres. The first source of inspiration comes from the tradition of playing the one-stringed instrument called the *gusle*. The songs accompanying the music were inspired by actual historical accounts, hence when sung they carried the form of myth. This became crucial during the time of retraditionalization before and during the war in the early 1990s in the former Yugoslavia, as Ivo Žanić’s statement reminds us. I suggest that the turbo-folk genre used a very similar technique, the fusion of the mythical and “objectively” historical, which can be also understood as a metaphor of its interconnection to both tradition and modernity.² Second, the genre of *narodna muzika* has shifted music – a medium preceding the birth of the nation-state, to the role of attribute or even indication of a nation-state. Therefore, music became a tool of nationalistic discourse and a means of stimulating such a discourse. Turbo-folk clearly drew upon this particular possibility. Third, an important role within the rise of the turbo-folk phenomenon was derived from rock ’n’ roll in the former Yugoslavia, since it started to increasingly combine modern musical influences with the traditional ones. Moreover, rock ’n’ roll

² The traditional can serve as a metaphor of a “mythical” mode of thinking characteristic for its cyclical concept of time, whereas modernity can be perceived as prevalently characterized by a linear concept of time (see Eliade 1954).

had effectively functioned as a mediator of political discourse in the former Yugoslavia even though it stood on the opposite side of the political spectre in comparison with turbo-folk. In the following part I will draw attention to the ambiguous position of turbo-folk between modernity and tradition, which will more closely explain the rise of this phenomenon in the context of the socio-political changes in the region.

“Turbo” and “Folk” – Aspects of Modernity & Postmodernity vs. Searching for Folklore & Tradition

Music can't simply be separated from society. Turbo-folk didn't just emerge as experimentation with different musical genres but, as I would argue, it emerged from the desire for retraditionalization that became strong particularly towards the end of the communist era and continued till the mid-1990s. This desire for retraditionalization didn't stay neutral but was used as a part of political discourse.

Retraditionalization is closely linked to the phenomenon of “ruralization” – a mass urbanization of Yugoslavian cities during the communist era. Bougarel notes that, in 1948, 73% of the total population was still living on farms; by 1981 this number had dropped to 27%. Bougarel further argues that *“Forty years of accelerated modernization and urbanization have shifted the traditional antagonism between town and countryside into the towns themselves, endangered the balance of the urban social system and broken the structures of the rural one”* (Bougarel 1999: 165). And it is this drastic shift from traditional to modern that opened up a space for the desire of retraditionalization and ended up in one of the biggest military conflicts of the 20th century.

It was logical that the sphere of musical taste didn't stay politically neutral after Tito's death. The new nationalist elite used the folk genre to gain support from rural and semi-rural bases. State-controlled media began to intensively play newly composed folk music that later emerged into dance-pop-folk referred to as “turbo-folk.” Despite the gap between urban and rural spaces, turbo-folk quickly occupied the cultural spaces in urban areas and dominated over rock 'n' roll. Turbo-folk didn't end up having the same status as rock 'n' roll. Whereas rock 'n' roll music was generally anti-regime (the communist one), turbo-folk became the new regime's powerful weapon. American journalist Adam Higginbotham reflects upon these processes and at the same time uncovers the power of state-held media when he writes:

During the eighties, Yugoslavia had been renowned for its vibrant countercultural rock scene. But with the war came music custom-built for a profiteering regime peddling ersatz nationalism to an isolated populace: “turbo-folk,” a brash, plastic mix of traditional folk and modern electro-pop beats. It became the house style of expensive new venues in New Belgrade, such as the Folkoteka, and the sound of the trashy new Milošević-sponsored television stations – TV Pink and TV Palma – which broadcast turbo-folk videos almost to the exclusion of all other music. (Higginbotham 2004)

Such a rapid establishment of turbo-folk was possible only due to the state media intervention and its monopoly over popular culture. Not everybody supported the rise of turbo-folk, but few alternatives were left. Gordy argues that “*Musical taste became an important signifier, not only of the distinction between urban and peasant culture, but also of orientation toward the regime, the war, and the environment created by the regime and the war*” (Gordy 1999: 105).

Official support of turbo-folk wouldn’t be sufficient, if turbo-folk didn’t already enjoy the support of the masses. Communism, with its solid influx of the rural population to cities, created a space for a later demand for turbo-folk. And as Gordy explains: it was these rural people, generally poor and working in rapidly developing industry, who never truly integrated into the city culture and whose music taste accommodated turbo-folk (Gordy 1999: 106). Moreover, as Hudson concludes, the political supremacy of Serbia was shaken to the grounds after the fall of the communist regime. Hudson writes: “*With the break-up of Yugoslavia and the growing sense of isolation, first in one conflict and then in another, with all the attendant horrors of identity politics, Serbia was banished from the so-called European mainstream. Popular music became important in furthering the cause of Serbian national identity, and as something to hold on to for a community that had lost its once privileged position both within Yugoslavia and in the international community. This Serbness (Srpsstvo) was found in some of the cultural elements of the past that were considered to be purely Serbian, as opposed to Southern Slav or Balkan. This was the cult of the folkloric.*” (Hudson 2003: 169).

Nevertheless, during communism, turbo-folk (neofolk) was still marginalized and its audience, as Gordy describes it, consisted of “peasants” (*seljaci*) and “primitives” (*primitivci*) (Gordy 1999: 108). But not long before the war broke out the position of turbo-folk and rock ’n’ roll suddenly became inverted. Turbo-folk shifted from marginalized towards mainstream as rock ’n’ roll diminished.

So in this part we can see that it was the hunger for the return of tradition in combination with new political visions that gave rise to “newly composed folk music” (*novokomponovana narodna muzika*) and turbo-folk. Moreover, we can trace the rise of the phenomenon in the context of actual socio-political change. Before I elaborate on the mechanisms of spreading the nationalistic discourse via music, I will take a closer look at the turbo-folk performers themselves; for the role of the individual, active creators should never be underestimated. Since most of the performers are women, in the next chapter I will analyze the performers in terms of gender issues – objectification of women in general.

The Observer's Gaze – Objectification of the Turbo-Folk Women

The turbo-folk music genre is not only a coincidental creation of the socio-economical situation in the former Yugoslavia, but has its own active creators – the performers. I argue that this relationship is truly mutual. Turbo-folk as a genre emerged from the socio-economic situation, but at the same time its creators played an active role while responding to such a situation and also it is they who have the power to reproduce the ideological schemes of turbo-folk on a larger scale.

This raises the question of the turbo-folk performers. Therefore, I would also like to pay attention to turbo-folk women and the problem of objectification of women as performers in general. It is true that amongst turbo-folk performers a significant role was filled by men, but I would argue it was mainly the women that appealed to larger audiences (as we will see in the case of Ceca in the following chapter) and they have embodied the ideological concepts that turbo-folk carried and has carried until present.

Distinctive to the turbo-folk genre are the techno-pop beat and the catchy, even cheerful melody. The lyrics are either romantically naive or play on male themes and associate with violence; at first innocent but profoundly biased at the same time. Double meanings are often included in the songs, which is typical of the turbo-folk genre. For example, Ceca sings in her famous mournful love song *Kukavica* (meaning both cuckoo and, in this case, coward): “*Hug me and go off on the road of cowards. My wandering eyes will follow you. Female heart tender as a little martin that dies of pain...*”

The female performers are slim and often blonde, wearing sexy, minimalistic pieces of clothing. The turbo-folk women glisten in the spotlights, with

mirror balls reflecting their fame, covered in jewelry, their height accentuated by high heels. But there is a “dark” side to this “fairy-tale realm”; thus I would like to critically examine the problems of the representation of the women in this world of pop-music.

As Pierre Bourdieu has noticed: “the perceived body is socially doubly determined” (Bourdieu 2001: 64). On one hand it is the physical aspects of the body that are a social product of various social conditions and on the other hand the bodily properties are apprehended through schemes of perception of the evaluating observers (see Bourdieu: 2001: 64). Therefore, the bodies as they appear already contain and adhere to a particular social structure. Hence, it is important to discuss the turbo-folk women partly as an embodied discourse of the ideas in post-communist Yugoslavia.

Women, as such, are according to Bourdieu being objectified; they are objects whose being is “being perceived” (Bourdieu 2001: 66). Hence, women are the objects of the gaze that is already socially determined; I argue that women in popular music, in this sense, can be understood as “maps” for reading “social landscapes”; the turbo-folk women themselves already mediate the ideologies of the genre.

Laura Mulvey in her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” theorizes women as objects in the context of feminist film studies (Mulvey 1989: 14-26). Mulvey analyzed the (male) gaze in relation to visual pleasure as women increasingly came to appear in film (Mulvey 1989: 14-26). And since music videos are an inevitable part of turbo-folk music, I find this concept very useful for explaining the role of the performers of this genre.

Mulvey argues that the world, from the gender perspective, is already biased and, in such a world, the pleasure of the observer is divided into an active male sphere and a passive female one (Mulvey 1989: 14-26). The woman becomes fantasy and an object of (male) gaze at the same time (Mulvey 1989: 14-26). Also for Mulvey, it is more significant, in this sense, what a woman represents rather than her taking action herself; she evokes love or fear in the male hero but, on her own, she isn’t granted much significance (Mulvey 1989: 14-26).

Therefore, women play an important role as the objects of gaze. Their performances are considered to be pleasurable and it is precisely for this reason that music videos and performances create a very felicitous gap for the reproduction of ideologies.

John Corbett pushes Mulvey’s theory further when he argues that, while music is played, the visual is often missing; and for him it is the lack

of visual stimulation that initiates desire (Corbett 1990: 84). Furthermore, Corbett argues: "*Recorded music, at once the site of intense pleasure and the producer of a similar threat of lack, is therefore constituted in its object-form as erotic-fetishistic, and the aural is mystified as 'something satisfying in itself.' The threat of absence, of loss, creates a nostalgia for the fullness of a mythical past; pleasure is inscribed in its memory – the gap*" (Corbett 1990: 85).

In my case, it is both the performances and the experience of music itself that helped in the mediation of turbo-folk's ideological message. It was both "visual pleasure" performed on stage and the fantasies behind the "seductive" voices of turbo-folk performers. And it is Corbett's last statement that brings us back to the core of the rise of turbo-folk; for the music is capable of creating "nostalgia for the fullness of a mythical past." In the next chapter I would like to focus on mechanisms of spreading the nationalistic discourse in which song became an indicator of political and national identity and in which the history (not coincidentally) was prescribed in the form of myth.

Spreading the Nationalistic Discourse

Oh, Serbia my mother, do not fear the war,
You'll always have two sisters
when your brother is no more,
these two sisters the world has not yet seen,
the Bosnian Serb Republic and the Serb Krajina!
The Serb nation is defended,
Serbs lands are protected,
by Arkan's heroes, warriors without fear,
These valiant boys, Serb volunteers! (Wilmer, 2002: 191)

In the previous part I have already concluded a strong connection between turbo-folk's link to politics and nationalism. In this section I would like to specify this relation and manifest it on the marriage of Serbian pop queen Ceca and paramilitary leader Arkan. I have also chosen to introduce this section with a song that praises Arkan in order to illustrate how nationalistic discourse penetrates the form of song. Moreover, even though this text doesn't exactly belong to the turbo-folk genre (songs typical for turbo-folk mostly do not contain such explicit images; it is rather the context that gives it political tone), it is a clear example of a song as a medium of various discourses and functioning on

mechanisms explained in the chapter above. These verses throw us into a realm of mythical presence – imagery of “heroes” and “warriors without fear.” Yet they are inspired by actual real-life individuals and reflect on the true historical event – the war in the beginning of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia. The words soaked with a solid dose of nationalism are calling for and informing about both political and military conflicts waged.

Despite the destruction and horrors of recent wars in former Yugoslavia, the nationalist Milošević’s rhetoric seems to be still in favor. One of the reasons is that it is maintained through various media from which one of the most significant is popular culture, particularly turbo-folk. The rhetoric of nationalism still remains hidden and grounded in daily experience from where it permeates ordinary lives. There was little possibility of escape from this subtle but firm propaganda because, as Gordy argues, the Serbian regime made other alternatives unavailable (Gordy 1999: 6).

What I found important about Gordy’s argument is the influence of the state on the rise of turbo-folk in an attempt to establish it as a mainstream musical genre. Even though I don’t believe it was only for the nation-state and political elites that turbo-folk celebrated such a great success, it is the nation-state that has the power to decide what is going to be played and what will become marginalized. Cloonen has argued that nation-states play an important role in the control and censorship of broadcasting (Cloonen 1999: 193). This was exactly the case with turbo-folk from the beginning of the 1990s to the mid 1990s when it lost the favor of the regime. This also shows how easily a nation-state can accelerate the spreading of nationalism amongst the masses.

Hence we cannot understand the rise of turbo-folk only through the involvement of the Milošević regime. If it weren’t for its appeal to the masses, it could never have become as successful. Therefore I argue that the success of turbo-folk was mutually stimulated by both the elites and the masses.

The relationship between the nation-state and the masses’ taste for turbo-folk isn’t as straightforward though. In order to show the complexity of this relationship, I will shortly introduce the example of the marriage of pop-Queen Ceca and paramilitary leader – Arkan. Many scholars have mentioned Arkan’s and Ceca’s marriage as an example of the interconnection between politics, nationalism and turbo-folk.

Ceca was born as Svetlana Veličković in the small Serbian town of *Žitorađa*. She started singing when she was five and at the age of ten was already performing all over the Balkans at weddings, hotels and *kafanas* (Stewart

2008: 221). At fourteen Ceca recorded her first album, *The Nagging Flower* that established her as one of the stars of turbo-folk (Stewart, 2008: 221). She was singing about the love and hard life of rural people. In an interview Ceca said: “*If I were American, I would definitely be singing country music. It is the same as Serbian folk – it speaks to the people.*” (Stewart 2008: 221)

In her late teens, Ceca slightly changed her style and started presenting herself as a sex symbol – wearing tight tops, miniskirts and performing seductive dancing on stage (Stewart 2008: 221). When the war broke out in the 1990s, Ceca’s career grew bigger – her records sold in the hundreds of thousands (Stewart 2008: 222). It was the time of the expansion of turbo-folk and Ceca emerged as the queen of this genre (Stewart 2008: 222). Ceca met Arkan – Željko Ražnatović at his training camp Erdut on October 11, 1993 (Stewart 2008: 223). He invited her to perform in order to celebrate his paramilitary group Arkan’s Tigers (Stewart 2008: 223). The Tigers, even though it was never officially admitted by Milošević, cooperated with the former Yugoslavian army forces and were responsible for ethnic cleansings in various places. Before Arkan became a paramilitary leader, he was already a well established gangster. Just for illustration, the Hague Tribunal had linked him to 24 counts of war crimes and apart from this, 177 countries had him on their criminal records with the United States placing a \$5 million bounty on his head (Stewart 2008: 9).

Ceca didn’t seem to care about Arkan’s controversial personal history. Later, when Arkan became a politician himself, Ceca supported him through performing for his Serbian Unity Party and encouraged the fans to vote for her husband. She even said, “*You can be as happy as me... ... just join the Serbian Unity Party.*” (Stewart 2008: 223)

About 16 months after they met they were married. In an interview with Adam Higginbotham for *The Observer* Ceca comments on their first encounter: “*He was very cute, very handsome and very masculine... ...I fell in love with him instantly. I respect people who are fighters, who succeed in life, who don't give up – because life is a constant struggle*” (Higginbotham 2004).

Arkan and Ceca’s wedding ceremony began in Ceca’s hometown and continued in Belgrade on February 19, 1995. It was broadcast on state television, an example of how the nation-state intervened in media broadcasting. There was also an official tape available, which Dina Iordanova insightfully characterizes when she writes:

The tape offers an edited version of the several acts of this glamorous wedding, during which the couple proves fit to handle such a hectic day and preserves composure throughout the marathon variety show it performs for its various audiences. For the 140 minutes duration of the tape the groom will change costumes three times, the bride, four. He will display wealth, stability, good looks, and humble reticence. She will display confidence, stability, beauty, and will dance, sing and entertain. For the peasants the couple will pose as villagers, honoring the tradition and even coming up with folklore elements invented especially for the wedding. For the fans of Orthodoxy and monarchy, they will perform as a royal couple. For the secular urbanites they will engage in an elegant civil ceremony. For global audiences they will stage an American-style gala dinner at a restaurant called *Intercontinental*. And for popular tastes there will be turbo-folk and belly dancing (Iordanova 1998: 8).

Iordanova's description captures the importance and thoroughness put into the choice of dress; it wasn't a coincidence that Arkan had three different robes and Ceca four. All of the different dresses are clearly indicators of identity and share striking resemblance to motifs typical for turbo-folk such as: nationalism, the desire for retraditionalization, a link to the actual history and nostalgia for the "return" of the mythical past. Therefore, what the bride and groom wear is an embodied statement of their identity on multiple levels.

"Before dawn. Orthodox mass is celebrated at the home of Arkan. He is cleanly shaved, wears a traditional Montenegrin costume and a massive golden cross on his chest. Men in tuxedos surround him. The priest refers to him as "voyvoda" (leader) as Arkan humbly kisses the cross," as Iordanova describes the morning before the ceremony (Iordanova 1998: 8). The scene evokes a strong sense of spirituality. The size of the golden cross Arkan wore made it clear that his religious (and in the Balkan case also national) identity was that of Orthodox Christian. Moreover, the Montenegrin costume Arkan wore is a regional variation of the Serb costume that was traditionally worn by the Serbs of Montenegro. His outfit didn't even miss the typical Montenegrin cap, which in itself is a symbol of a grief for the loss in the Battle of Kosovo.

As he got off the jeep at *Žitorađa* (Ceca's hometown), Arkan was holding a pistol in one hand and a Heckler & Koch machine gun in the other (Stewart 2008: 225). *"Folk music plays from loudspeakers and crowds fill up the streets, the surrounding balconies, and yards. Before being let in, the groom is to shoot an apple that hangs from the top of the three story house... ..He is then let into the house*

where he is intercepted on the staircase and has to pay off his way to the bride. A briefcase full of cash and gold jewelry changes hands and ends up with the bride's sister. Only then does the sister open the door to an adjacent room where Ceca, in a folk traditional costume, expects the groom. In a minute they go downstairs to the musical score of folk song melodies," writes Iordanova (Iordanova 1998: 9).

I suggest that this moment is a response to the desire for retraditionalization. Both Arkan and Ceca have already used this socio-political "clima" in order to gain the popularity of the masses. Through the choice of folk-motif clothes they embody the celebration of tradition; they have instrumentally used the tradition to emphasize and publicly reaffirm their identity at multiple levels.

For the ceremony at the Holy Archangel Gabriel, Arkan changed clothes for a World War I general's uniform and Ceca put on a white silk dress inspired by the movie *Gone With the Wind* (Stewart 2008: 226). The ceremony evokes a festive, but serious (almost sacred) ambience. An Orthodox ritual is performed. After the ceremony the celebration continues till late hours at a sleep gala party, where Arkan and Ceca promenade in luxurious robes. "*The guests will eat, drink, cheer, dance, and sing. Ceca's colleagues, other turbo-folk stars, will perform. Ceca herself will join the kolo soon. She is joyful and cheerful and readily dances while Arkan rarely leaves the table and stays reticent, looking on and smiling. The Gypsy musicians play a prolonged melody and Ceca sings for the guests while Arkan holds a little girl on his lap and sings along. The audience rhythmically sways and claps,*" writes Iordanova, skillfully depicting the scene (Iordanova 1998: 10). Moreover, Ceca chooses to sing Goran Bregović's song originally written for the film "Time of the Gypsies" (Iordanova 1998: 10). I believe that this is not purely coincidental, since I have previously shown that turbo-folk and rock 'n' roll relate more than they appear at first sight.

In any case, in the last summary we can see two other motifs related to the turbo-folk genre. Arkan's World War I general's uniform is a factual link to history but the rest of the context is rather that of myth. Their marriage is depicted as a fairy tale materializing before the eyes of Serbia.

In this short example we have seen the complexity of turbo-folk. Despite the genre presenting itself as being simple, popular entertainment, in reality it is wedded to larger socio-political processes: nostalgia for tradition mixed with MTV-style entertainment that reduces femininity to an object, masculinity and guns – the premonition of the war, organized crime and underground economies, nationalism and politics. Turbo-folk, whether explicitly or implicitly, became a celebration of all of these.

Turbo-Folk as a Form of Identity

In this section I would like to argue that turbo-folk can be perceived as a form of identity. And it is this point that takes us back to the *gusle*, because, as Bougarel has concluded, *gusle* hadn't just remained popular since the old times but were reinvented by the Academy of Science, literary circles and soccer fans (Bougarel 1999: 167). Therefore, like *gusle*, the 1990s so-called traditional identities weren't traditional but invented and this is especially true of turbo-folk. Turbo-folk lies somewhere between modernity and tradition; this is a combination that makes it not only genuinely postmodern, but also invented.

We can link turbo-folk to identities on several levels. First, I will mention turbo-folk as of a form of national identity in the case of Serbia. Hudson argues that the traditional song has been embedded in Serbian cultural identity and has been inspiring Serbian nationalism since the 19th century (Hudson 2003: 157). Turbo-folk with its link to traditional songs kept this feature, and many nationalistic motifs can be found in the lyrics. Hence, it is important to realize that the majority of turbo-folk songs don't have explicitly nationalistic content. It is the socio-political context in which they are produced (shown in the case of the marriage of Ceca and Arkan) that links them directly to the war and nationalism as Hudson has concluded.

Hudson links the nationalistic context of turbo-folk to ethnification when he writes that "*in the 1990s the stimulation of nationalism by popular and traditional Serbian songs involved a process of ethnification – a cult of the folkloric – in which popular music contributes to the estrangement, alienation and distancing of the Other*" (Hudson 2003: 157).

turbo-folk has also been employed as a signifier of political orientation. Listening to turbo-folk often means identifying oneself with Milošević's regime and the war or its refusal as the common expression states: "*Don't listen to the folk music – Die a natural death!*"

Nevertheless, we cannot forget that turbo-folk could appeal to one's individual identity, as in the case of younger generations that grew up listening to it and perceiving it through the romantic fantasies of fame, success and the world of money. And, as other scholars have concluded, turbo-folk became for the masses a space for escapism from the harsh reality (Gordy 1999: 135).

I find it particularly helpful to look at this phenomenon of romanticizing turbo-folk through Appadurai's concept of mediascapes. Appadurai sees mediascapes as the capability of electronic media to produce and disseminate

information which can be further effectively reproduced on a mass scale all around the world (Appadurai 1996: 35). But most significantly as Appadurai puts it: “(mediascapes) provide... ..large and complex repertoires of images, narratives, and ethnoscapescapes to viewers throughout the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of news and politics are profoundly mixed” (Appadurai 1996: 35). Furthermore, the influence of mediascapes is so significant that the lines between realistic and fictional landscapes intertwine so that the audiences might create imagined worlds at the level of individual romantic fantasies (Appadurai 1996: 33).

This is exactly the case with turbo-folk; as a medium, it was capable of creating fantasy worlds detached from the harsh reality and also generating a fictional space for the legitimization of the Milošević’s regime despite the horrors involved. Furthermore, it is crucial to realize, as Appadurai concludes, that media are capable of embodying large and complex repertoires of images, narratives, and ethnoscapescapes that can easily be reproduced to numerous audiences. As I have previously shown in the case of Arkan and Ceca, mediascapes, commodities and the world of news and politics mingle to such an extent that after some point it is nearly impossible to tell them apart.

Considering the given arguments, turbo-folk can be seen as part of the occurrence of “the invention of tradition” in the process of re-constructing a group’s identity. In the following section I am going to look more closely at turbo-folk as invented tradition.

The Invention of Tradition

“I’m looking in the sky, centuries passing by, for distant memories they are the only cures. Wherever I go, I come back to you again, who can take away from my soul Kosovo. St. Vitus’ Day like an eternal flame in our hearts, the Battle of Kosovo remains the truth. St. Vitus’ Day, forgive us God for all our sins, grant with heroism daughters and sons,” sings turbo-folk star Gordana Lazarević in a song titled *Vidovdan* (St. Vitus’ day). I begin this last section with a song that can be perceived as typical and characteristic of the turbo-folk genre, as I have previously portrayed it. This song recalls crucial moments of Serbian history and in a way is a marker of Serbian identity – “the battle of Kosovo.” At the same time it shows how turbo-folk reflects on historical events and transforms them into myth. Therefore, in this section I will try to explain the socio-political context hidden behind these superficially innocent lines and take a closer look at the

formation of tradition and its instrumental use to create something seemingly ancient but indeed contemporary at the same time.

As I have concluded, there are several aspects that connect turbo-folk to the genre of Invention of tradition. Eric Hobsbawm understands the tradition as something not of an ancient origin, but something more contemporary and often invented (Hobsbawm 1983: 5). According to Hobsbawm invention of tradition occurs “*more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which ‘old’ traditions had been designed, producing new ones to which they were not applicable, or when such old traditions and their institutional carriers and promulgators no longer prove sufficiently adaptable and flexible, or are otherwise eliminated*” (Hobsbawm 1983: 5).

The situation in the former Yugoslavia meets Hobsbawm’s definition very well. Hence, as many scholars argued, the fall of the communist regime was partly responsible for the upcoming war (Bougarel 1999, Ramet 2002). I would argue, following Hobsbawm’s concept, that rapid transformation of the society after the fall of communism created an opening for the rise of new regimes, for instance Milošević’s in Serbia. And the reason for this was that at the given moment the old patterns, internalized during communism, were no longer adaptable and flexible; they were eliminated and replaced by the discourse of increasing ethnification, neo-religious awakening and nationalistic passions.

Whereas certain authors characterize the conflict in the former Yugoslavia as an “ancient ethnic hatred” (see Gordy 1999: 3), Eric Gordy suggests that the nationalistic consciousness needed to be awakened (Gordy 1999: 3, 4). During the communist era, nationalistic discourse in terms of belonging to singular national unities wasn’t in favor and people often referred to themselves as “Yugoslavs.” Not everybody adopted the Yugoslav identity, but, as Gordy further states, Yugoslav identity could have indicated ideological views such as the communist “non-national” ideology or “mixed” ethnic background (Gordy 1999: 5). In this example I have attempted to show the contrasting positions of the two different regimes towards the issue of nationality; the communist one and Serbian Milošević’s.

Furthermore, Gordy characterizes Milošević’s regime as partly adapting the communist infrastructure; only later did the emerging national homogenization become necessary in order to maintain the regime (Gordy 1999: 5). Opposing ideological aspects of the communist regime needed to be eliminated according to Gordy, and therefore a dictatorship became an appealing form of state leadership (Gordy 1999: 5). Gordy’s main argument is that the

nation-state under Milošević created a social and cultural vacuum by making other alternatives unavailable (Gordy 1999: 5). I would suggest that what Milošević's regime brought was not an empty space (or as Gordy writes: a vacuum). Contrary to this, new social and cultural patterns emerged in order to reproduce the regime's ideology and turbo-folk was one of them. I am not dismissing the idea of unavailable alternatives; yes, they became increasingly unavailable, but I perceived them rather as an effect of dictatorship. After all, communism was a dictatorship as well and as a regime was already internalized in political structures of everyday life; therefore it remained appealing even when the shift of the regimes emerged.

Another important characteristic of invention of tradition is that of its symbolic nature and relationship with the historic past. Hobsbawm concludes the following characteristics: "*Invented tradition is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.*" (Hobsbawm 1983: 1) This is particularly visible in the case of Serbia and its self-perception as a "heavenly nation." Milošević adapted both nationalistic and populist rhetoric when he linked the notion of Serbian unity and Serbhood to the imagined landmark in the Serbian history – the "Battle of Kosovo." Historically, the Battle of Kosovo took place on June 28, 1389, the day of St. Vitus (*Vidovdan*), when the army of the Kingdom of Serbia under King Lazar was defeated by Ottoman armies. Nevertheless, I am more interested in the legend that surrounds this event. The story goes that King Lazar had a dream in which he was told that the Kingdom of Serbia was going to lose its earthly lands but it would gain the "heavenly" kingdom. Based on this event Serbians referred to themselves as a "heavenly" nation, and, deep in the mythology, there was the idea of long lost territories they had once dominated. *Kosovo polje* – the place where the battle was enacted had become a symbol of Serbhood.

That is precisely what launched the political career of Slobodan Milošević. On April 24, 1987, Milošević gave a speech at Kosovo Field where he reassured the crowds that Yugoslavia would not give up Kosovo (Cohen 2002: 108). Within the nationalistic myth it was not just a regular day in history; it was the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo Field. And Slobodan Milošević was not just another politician; he resembled the reincarnation of Prince Lazar himself and was about to change the destiny of Serbia yet again. He appealed

to the crowds when he called: “*First I want to tell you, comrades, that you should stay here. This is your country; these are your houses, your fields and gardens, your memories. You are not going to abandon your lands because your life is hard, because you are oppressed by injustice and humiliation... ..You should stay here, both for your ancestors and your descendants. Otherwise you would shame your ancestors and disappoint your descendants... ..Yugoslavia does not exist without Kosovo! Yugoslavia would disintegrate without Kosovo! Yugoslavia and Serbia are not going to give up Kosovo!*” (Milošević in Judah 2000: 29)

As Hobsbawm argues: “*However, insofar as there is such reference to historic past, the peculiarity or ‘invented’ traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition.*” (Hobsbawm 1983: 2) This is exactly the case of *Kosovo polje* in 1989; it was as if King Lazar had risen as an incarnation in Milošević: “history” was repeated once again and Serbia got the “chance” to re-establish its “ancient” kingdom; no longer was the kingdom only heavenly but with the upcoming war it intended to rebuild on the Earth’s surface.

Conclusion

In my essay, I have tried to show how something at first sight as innocent as pop-music mixed with a hint of traditional music can become a powerful weapon for manipulating the masses, spreading nationalistic discourse, supporting the process of ethnification and contributing to the war.

My main argument is that turbo-folk in the former Yugoslavia was part of the phenomenon of invention of tradition and furthermore was employed in constructing one’s identity. Identity was reinvented at multiple levels – national, ethnic, political and personal. But invented in this case doesn’t mean less “real”; there are multiple evidences of what Milošević’s regime was capable of; but since it is invented, it is possible to critically look at such processes and detach them from any possible primordialistic thoughts – simply stop perceiving them as inevitable. Therefore the phenomenon of turbo-folk offers a special insight into the problems of the recent war and the rise of nationalism in the former Yugoslavia. And last but not least, it shows us the dangerous potential of music as a medium of political discourse.

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