Beyond Good and Evil? Popular Songs, Mathemes, and Bus Rides (Art and Transition in the Region of Former Yugoslavia)

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On 1 April 1995, celebrated Yugoslav (Bosnian, Serbian) director Emir Kusturica's film *Underground: Once Upon a Time There Was a Country* was pre-released in Belgrade, then the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In late May, the film premiered and received the Palme d'Or at the 1995 Cannes Film Festival. Less than two months later, more than 8,000 Muslim Bosnians, mostly men and boys, from the area of Srebrenica, Bosnia, were killed and about 25,000 civilians were forcibly displaced by the Bosnian Serb Army of Republika Srpska, unofficially backed by the Belgrade government, in what both the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Court of Justice later ruled to be an act of genocide. At the ICTY, then in its second year of existence, two Bosnian Serbs, Duško Tadić and Dragan Nikolić, had already been put on trial for crimes against humanity. This stream of events in which mass violation of human rights, judiciary proceedings, and creative practice coincided has an uncanny logic of its own. Based on the script written by Serbian playwright Dušan Kovačević, Kusturica's film relates a story of two friends, one of whom persuades the other to move to an underground compound during the Second World War and deceives him and his group that the war is still going on; they emerge out of the basement in the 1990s to see their country embroiled in (another) war. Executed in Kusturica's signature magic realist style, peppered with a hefty dose of farcical surrealism, and running for epic 170mins, *Underground* bespeaks the filmmaker's ambition to offer a large-scale mytho-historical panorama. The film was promoted in both national and international media as an anti-war drama and the Cannes jury's decision was based on this profiling. The media reports habitually reproduced the bleak, captivating images of war from the film's closure, although

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these images are subservient to a host of other themes in the narrative economy of the film. That the Cannes jury decided to focus on this aspect of the film is telling: what we appreciate or do not appreciate in an artwork, even when striving at objectivity, is always a symbiosis of the offered aesthetic content and our reception of it—what we wish to see in it, informed by personal and contextual vicissitudes. This is also the reason why the Cannes jury choice was immediately questioned. In the years to follow, an intense debate between filmmakers, philosophers, artists, public intellectuals and lay audience developed around the film, especially in French, Anglophone, and German press, and among the region's diaspora. The film's critics have objected to its alleged service as an apologist for Slobodan Milošević's politics (Srbljanović, 2001), for universalizing war violence and defusing accountability, as well as for catering to the Western liberal gaze while fuelling "the libidinal economy of Serbian ethnic slaughter in Bosnia" (Žižek, 1997: 38; cf. Lévy, 1996). Others have concluded that the film deliberately hyperbolizes these archetypal images in order to "[disarm] reactionary politics" (Ravetto, 1998: 56) and that the filmmaker's choices were informed not so much by affiliation (with Serbian nationalists) as disaffiliation (from Muslim Bosnian nationalists), or, perhaps, general personal and political disorientation (Iordanova, 2002; Bertellini, 2014). Meanwhile, *Underground* went on to become the most widely known and distributed film from the region, performing well at box offices and festivals worldwide, and acquiring new layers of meaning as the region moved through the transitional period. On his part, over the course of years Kusturica described the film variously as an "obituary" for the former country, an apolitical cinematic play, and, in an illuminating paradox, a strong attack on the Milošević regime (Gibbons, 1999). The meanings we attribute to artworks transform over time. So do the modalities of their operation, patterns of influence, and societal impact. This intrinsic mutability of art reception is especially pronounced in transitional societies,

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where such variegation often challenges prescriptive understanding of transitional justice processes.

Insofar as the tidiness of tools, operative modes, impact of practices, and theoretical conclusions is concerned, "transitional justice will always be both incomplete and messy", Katherine Franke opined in 2006 (2006, 813). The verdict still holds, and scholars have realized that such "incompletion" and "messiness" can be enabling, because it encourages us continuously to update our thinking and our practices in the field. To capture the "messiness" on the ground, understand it and respond to it in an agile and open-minded fashion, our inquiries often have to challenge or weaken inherited axiological hierarchies and paradigms. This article argues for the recognition of such "messiness" specifically in the area of the arts and transitional justice and for the development of hermeneutic and axiological thinking that befits this state of affairs. I have started this inquiry with the case of Kusturica's film because it offers a compelling example of just how "messy" the operation of an artwork in a conflict and transitional society may be—"messiness" herein being identifiable in patterns/modalities of operation, reception trends, as well as the artwork's impact on transitional society. Because it is in the very nature of art-making to evaluate normative discourses (including those underpinning concepts such as "good" and "evil", conflict and peace) against the lived realities, art-practices vitiate against our desire—and incorporated mandate—to produce an unequivocal and definitive assessment of the ethics and politics of artwork. The assessment of the role of art in such contexts must be therefore nuanced and multi-levelled, approaching the same artefact across time and from varied angles while appreciating the internal and external pressures that the workers-in-culture face. In this article, I scrutinize these hermeneutic challenges and the fluctuating sphere of art reception in relation to the environment of transitional justice and the region of the former Yugoslavia. Such framing allows me to gauge cultural texts against the context within which the competing discourses

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of conflict and just society-building have been regionally and internationally visible—here, since the establishment of ICTY in 1993—and therefore to appreciate the prolonged life/impact of artworks and art practices and the semantic variation in their reception. Whereas I believe that our understanding of the operation of art in transitional societies must move beyond the binary of "positive" and "negative" impact in all cases, I concentrate here on the art practices that evince the "messy" dynamics I seek to explore in the most palpable way: those performative activities that function in the "open", appeal to senses to create patterns of affiliation, and operate forcefully in limited time-spans, yet with the aspiration of generating long-term impact through societal take-up and repetition (Bahun, 2015: 160). The focalizing points of this inquiry are various types of regional popular music, where awareness of art's role as a contributor to transitional processes is often restricted, and performance and public space interventions of Serbian DAH theatre and pan-regional art and theory collective Monument Group, both of which address the challenges of transition intentionally. I have purposefully brought together artworks and practices that have been perceived, variously, as high or low art and as having positive or negative, and major or marginal, role in just society-building. Perhaps most importantly, all these art practices see themselves, or have asserted themselves at some point in time, as operating in the bottom-up fashion, exciting societal groups by creating embodied experiences, and thus being more intimately linked to the lived realities of transition. First, however, some clarifications are in order.

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Arts, Conflict, Society: Challenges of Interpretation

The arts (literature, film, visual art, music, theatre, dance, architecture, and other artforms) work with and develop symbolic forms crucial for our understanding of who we are, what our place in society is, who we might be, and what society could be. Numerous scholars, practitioners, and global policy-informing documents like the International Covenant on

Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights reiterate that culture vitally contributes to building and maintaining just societies. In particular, art has power to shape personal and group identities, and create new identities and new relationships (Kwon 2004); hence art practices are also a means to express the *nomos*—that set social narratives and interactions that, according to Robert Cover, locates and constitutes any legal system, or any system of social operation (1992: 144-45). These potentials stem from the inherently relational nature of art: while mostly seen and discussed as an individual's intellectual property, an artwork emerges only in relation and is defined by the relationships it establishes between human beings. Production, distribution, and consumption of art are inextricably linked to our capacity to generate, mobilize, and develop two relational cognitive-affective dispositions: "moral imagination" (Lederach 2005) and creative vigilance.

The activity of these dispositions peaks in the times of transition, a context that involves forced displacement of people, the legacy of atrocities and injustice, division of communities, and mistrust of both local and international governing bodies. Foregrounding the creative, nonlinear ways of interacting and expressing emotions and thoughts, art production complements productively the traditional modes of conflict resolution which tend to be centred on linear, rational forms of communication (Urbain, 2007) and ensures "meaningful public participation" in transitional processes (Ki-Moon, 2010, 9). As highlighted in the Article 14 of the UN Convention against Torture, and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the Draft General Comment on Article 14, engagement with art is particularly important in reparation and rehabilitation. The production and reception of art affords individuals and groups with an opportunity to engage historical traumata at the level of a catharctic public action, and under relatively protected circumstances of creative activity; it could be used for both therapeutic and documenting purposes. Artworks recognize, record, and memorialize past injustices and atrocities

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committed by abusive regimes in ways and with emotional impact that are unavailable to other actors. As such, they can provide a public platform to restore the dignity of individuals and groups, offering acts of moral and symbolic reparation and enabling the participants to re-vision themselves and their role in both local and wider communities through the enhancement of their creative thinking, conflict-resolution skills and problem-solving strategies. But artworks also bear witness to the challenges of transition, spot-lighting democratization conflicts, measuring satisfaction and evaluating transitional processes and mechanisms. They expose the commensurabilities and disparities between the general reading of the rule of law and its local perception, and the external and the internal practices in place to promote justice.

While art often functions as a catalyst for change and an important information and rehabilitation tool during conflict and transition, it also harbours potential to obstruct peace- and just society-building, or to impart ambivalent meanings to these processes (Bahun, 2015: 153-56). Furthermore, while artworks and art practices can gesture palpable social goals, they very often occlude, or even revoke, their connection to politics. This equivocality at the heart of the mode of expression that is vital for the development of our "moral imagination" is a challenge for scholars, practitioners and policy-makers alike. Some assumptions hinder our understanding of the dynamics at hand, and they are worth highlighting here. As with most preconceptions, their fault-line comes from weak engagement with the lived realities, human impulse to categorize before the assessment, and our unwillingness to wield categories/parameters subsequently. I will give only a few examples of specific relevance for my subsequent inquiry. Among the challenges relating to production, distribution, and reception, the foremost is the ingrained assumption relating to the division of art into "high" (often canonized and/or equalized with "elitist") and "low" (popular, uncanonical) artworks, art practices, and even artforms (for a critique, see Gans 1974 and others). This distinction,

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however viable or not it might be in aesthetics, is especially unhelpful when one tries to ascertain the lived experience of production and impact in a society in transition (Duda 2016); “on the ground”, the reception spectrum is more often than not marked by continuities. Similarly, the sharp division between the state-funded and the unsupported or non-governmentally funded practices, while informative, is somewhat at odds with the more complex reality of art funding and it ignores the intricate routes of reception across time. As such, it is no secure indicator of an artwork’s emancipative operation, although media often hurries to describe it as just such. The last set of assumptions is linked to one recalcitrant habit of thought: a belief that artistic practices and other social interventions function either from the grassroots/bottom or from the top, and that we can evaluate them on the basis of this distinction. In reality—and irrespectively of their self-fashioning—art practices can be instigated and fuelled by the impulses from the bottom and from the top simultaneously.

Faced with the lack of facile performance indicators, scholars have attempted to divide art products in transitional societies on the basis of purpose (promotion of a goal or pure expression; Epskamp 1999), and, problematically, the content of that purpose (i.e., whether they contribute positively or negatively to what is the assumed consensus about the aims of transition). Such approaches seem to be missing three key points. First, it is not only that “a great deal of art is created simply for expressive purposes” (Zelizer 2003: 65); rather, all art inherently has an expressive purpose alongside some other social goals and aspirations, and it is precisely through the interaction of these that art occurs. Second, all artworks and practices are amenable to both use and abuse in reception. Third, as my opening example evidences, the ascribed values and functions of an artwork change over time. A more refined model of evaluation, however, sees scholars pondering how direct, site- and conflict-specific representation of society an artwork offers. Here the lack of specificity is equalized with the evasion of accountability, and Kusturica’s *Underground* was criticised most convincingly

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precisely on that point. This is a sophisticated charge. Yet, to decry an artwork because of its universalizing tendency or because it creates some anthropological absolutes curiously disregards our more general insights into how art operates as indirect or creatively expanded mimesis (cf. Aristotle 2002 [c. 335BC]), and ignores the social and artistic merits of both, being specific and being universalizing, in the context of transition. All this density and convolution is unnerving for researchers and practitioners. To contain this complexity, scholars tend to either discount the significance of art practices in social processes or assert their positive value and sideline their potential negative impact on building and maintenance of just societies. I am keen to retain, and benefit from, this difficulty, though, and the following pages will read some select art practices with full awareness of their complicated and fluid operation in transitional society.

Popular Melodies

One of the aspects of Kusturica's film that made it uniquely popular with audiences was its soundtrack, performed mostly by the Boban Marković Orchestra, a Romani brass ensemble, to the music composed by Bosnian musician Goran Bregović, once the leader of popular Yugoslav ethnic-rock band *The White Button* (1974-1989; Ramet 2018). For the purpose of the film, Bregović recycled some of his less known tunes, used a few Romani melodies and children's songs, and composed new fusional songs, irreverently combining tempos as different as those of tango and čoček. The soundtrack confirmed and expanded Bregović's credentials as both a film composer and an ethnic music celebrity, prompting multiple covers by world music performers (Cesária Évora, among others). The *Underground* songs feature easy-to-memorize lyrics that mix the imagery of celestial bodies, love, hate, weaponry, and comically transposed calls to battle ("Tzigani! Charge! Boom, boom, boom,…"). It is not the lyrics, though, that made these songs popular and socially influential, but the seductive

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oompah rhythms and haunting melodies that spread across the region and beyond, conveying far and wide "the libidinal economy" to which Žižek objected in the film. In particular, the songs "Moonlight" (Bregović/Šaban Bajramović) and "Kalashnikov" (Bregović) became immediate hits, performed live or played in taverns, riverboat clubs, discotheques, at weddings and funerals, throughout the region. In such environments, the *Underground* songs, despite coming from a three-hour long arthouse movie, often shared the stage with a species of music that does not customarily get associated with "high art": turbo-folk. Tellingly, turbo-folk singer Dragan Kojić Keba made one of the most popular cover versions of "Moonlight".

Turbo-folk is a music genre that emerged in the 1990s Serbia and gained extraordinary popularity in the region; it combines techno/dance music rhythms with regional neo-folk tradition and auto-Orientalizing imagery, and occasionally parades as a species of fusionist world music. Many commentators have accused turbo-folk of embodying the values of Milošević's politics, and even actively obstructing conflict-resolution and transition (see, summarily, Kronja, 2001; Steinberg, 2004; Čvoro 2014). These critiques focalize around three assumptions: first, that turbo-folk performers have been complicit in war-crimes (e.g., Svetlana Ražnatović Ceca, the widow of war criminal Željko Ražnatović Arkan); second, that the genre flirts with Serbian nationalism through ethno-mythic symbolism in its lyrics; and, third, that its very soundscape promotes bellicose politics. There are some analytical and experiential limitations to each of these claims. While some turbo-folk musicians occasionally associate themselves with the nationalistic causes, it is worth remembering that a substantive majority have never done so and that popular performers change allegiances easily: for one, Jelena Karleuša, the singer whose 1995 debut album *Little Mirror* and visual profile helped to set the parameters of the genre, recently described herself as a "human rights activist, atheist, vegan" on her Twitter account (2018). Furthermore, the majority of turbo-folk songs feature banal and relatively innocent lines revolving around love-loss and sex,

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with no nationalistic undertones, so establishing direct links between these lyrics and warmongering proves difficult. Finally, whereas music has capacity to arouse emotions that surpass rational thinking, psychologists of music have found no correlation between the *type* of emotions expressed in music and the *type* of emotions elicited in the listener (Schubert, 1996); the same applies to turbo-folk beats. And here lies the additional catch: musically, turbo-folk is everything but static. Over time, it has transformed and branched into a myriad regional pop/rock-folk subgenres and syncretic singer-personalities, indirectly influencing even those who, like Croatian nationalist folk/heavy-metal singer Marko Perković Thompson, stand ardently opposed to Serbian cultural guidance.

It is only in this context of marked adaptability of the genre and its performers that one can understand the unique endurance and popularity of turbo-folk across newly established national borders. In a distinct development that some commentators interpreted as a resistance to the new national narratives, Serbian turbo-folk became a prominent undercover (and then overt) listening practice in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovenia already in the early 2000s (Gotthardi-Pavlovsky, 2014). Precisely by virtue of its auto-Orientalizing strategies, turbo-folk and allied genres have been seen as occupying a needed liminal space "located between (and often in conflict with) the imagined political poles of liberal pro-European and conservative nationalist orientations" (Archer, 2012: 178). Notably, turbo-folk concerts usually do not occasion public outcries or conflicts (Baker 2006). In fact, turbo-folk has reinvigorated wider attempts to fuse ethnic music and pop/rock expression, and has gradually led to a recasting of regional popular music as a pan-ethnic space, a circumstance that performers that blend folk and pop skilfully exploit. The renewed popularity of Neda Ukraden, a rBosnian singer of older generation who spent the war years in Serbia, has much to do with her profiling as one such pan-ethnic pop-folk icon. Ukraden's recent video clips regularly feature pan-regional locations, often in juxtaposition (e.g., the

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video of her turbo-folk song “In the Balkans” [2011/12]), and her songs re-visit the music idioms of various parts of the former country (her most recent hit-song, “Like Wine and the Guitar” [2018], adopts the form of the Dalmatian popular song). Ukraden is a symptomatic representative: the practice of straddling ethnic and cultural legacies informs popular music-making and listening in the region more than ever before. The multi-ethnic sounding or visual coding of a single performer signals publically that an individual may affiliate themselves with various ethnic identities and heritages. Because these are regionally coalesced, multi-ethnicity is presented and experienced here as the affirmation of the locality of the former Yugoslavia as a legitimate affiliation-site.

Scholars and audiences routinely contrast turbo-folk to urban rock, hip-hop and avant-garde music. These styles and their performers usually define themselves as opponents of mass-mediated nationalism and are perceived as more directly engaged with the nitty-gritty realities of transitional processes than other musicians (Baker 2006: 277). The emotional lyrics of Bosnian hip-hop artist Edo Maajka (Edin Osmić) criticize the failings of regional governments to provide legal and social conditions for reconciliation; one of his songs features as a motto of the Centre for Nonviolent Action’s training handbook for reconciliation workshops (CNA, 2012, 4). The songs of Bosnian bends like *Helem Nejse* and *Dubioza Collective* speak out about problems of transition such as “brain drain” and persistence of ethnic hatred. Croatian rock singer Damir Urban comments publically on the need for greater inclusivity, especially at the sites of democratization conflicts (e.g. his much-reported Facebook entry on Gay Pride parade in Split 2011). Serbian *The Belgrade Syndicate* released the politically charged song “The System is Lying to You” on YouTube during the period leading to the 2016 parliamentary election in Serbia, and achieved 5,000,000 views in less than a week (the song reached more than 38,000,000 views on three channels by July 2019). Yet, participant-observers have sometimes accused these performers of “abstracting”,

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"generalizing", and/or commercializing revolt (Pančić, 2016). Furthermore, while the lyrics can provide a platform for the articulation of dissenting ideas, their impact should not be exaggerated. Recent studies show that the primary reception channel in popular music is opened and maintained not by verbal content, but by sound (Johnson and Cloonan, 2008: 125). This reception dynamic has little to do with the style, melodic contour, timbre, or rhythm of a song, though; rather, what matters are sonority and the non-music context in which sonority is experienced (Regev, 2012).

Contexts of enhanced sonority and activities such as the concert or discotheque listening/dancing and singing in a protest group, when one experiences sound coming from multiple sources, trigger partial spatio-temporal disorientation we call "ubiquity effect". This embodied experience, psychologists and anthropologists of music agree, galvanizes human innate tendency to coalesce and synchronize with others (for a survey, see Finnegan in Clayton et al, 2003: 185-191). Such situations of enhanced sonority are often public and can be gauged through tickets sales and observers' reports, and thus also seem to be a tangible indicator of the influence of popular music on a group or an individual's approach to society-building. Significantly, though, observable long-term personal and social changes after music engagement occur where the participants' involvement is both active and repeated. It is therefore unsurprising that Serbian bands such *Darkwood Dub* and *Kanda, Kodža and Nebojša* played a prominent role during the student protests against the Milošević regime in the winter of 1996/1997 and the autumn of 2000. According to the participants, their songs, like Darkwood Dub's "System" (1997, with lines "I'm throwing stones on the system"), not only articulated the protesters' sentiments but also provided an aurally enhanced environment for them (Steinberg, 2004). Here the sheer repetition of certain sonorities in the context of power relations may become significant. One of the most prominent audio-aspects of the Belgrade 1996/97 protests was no popular song but the so-called "production of noise": on

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daily basis, the marching protesters and, in display of solidarity, members of public blew whistles and banged pans and pots. This use of noisemaking to demonstrate popular defiance to political decisions (also known as "*cacerolazo*"—lit. hitting pans) was not new: first recorded in Brazil in 1964, it was the dominant expression of dissent in Chile in the 1970s-1980s, and it would re-appear in many international protests in the 2000s. But it was in the 1996/7 Serbia that it acquired the most momentous audio-effect: the disharmonious, polyrhythmic sound coming from left and right, above and below, created a disquieting, affect-ridden soundscape and vitally contributed to the mobilization and construction of collective action.[1]

It is easy to celebrate such visible articulations of democratic dissent. One should be aware, though, that the urban rock/hip-hop/avant-garde performers and their political stances are less significant factors in everyday life of small towns and villages and among the populations beyond youth, and that collective music/noise production is unlikely to occur in rural areas, or as a habitual practice. If we want to assess the impact of popular music on societies in transition, we need to turn to the kind of music engagement that takes place in the context of non-musical activities that dominate the priorities of the individual concerned, John Sloboda (2010) argued. If this is true, then the most pervasive contributor to furthering tolerance in the region has been a more humble music genre, one that could be described as soft pop or, in the regional parlance, "soft notes". As a music style, it is particularly adaptable (it easily accommodates excursions into indigenous/folkloric, fashionable music utterances, and hard rock) and thus tends to be tolerated by the widest spectrum of population. This style travels well across technologies, and could be enjoyed via an old-fashioned radio in a village hairdresser's salon as well as on portable music devices while listeners undertake daily tasks

[1] This potential can be exploited commercially: the music festival EXIT (Novi Sad) came into being as part of student protests against the Milošević regime in 2000.

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such as driving a car, doing housework, exercising, or studying. Its performers, both new "stars" (Severina, Željko Joksimović) and former Yugoslav musicians who have been popular for a while (Oliver Dragojević, *Hari Mata Hari*, *Steam Roller*, *Bajaga and the Instructors*, and others), were the first to break the official and unofficial national embargos. Widely disseminated, their music continues to serve the re-emergence and fortification of economic, cultural and commercial ties in the region, even when flirting with the music ethno-legacies of specific national spaces as in the case of Serbian ethno-pop star Joksimović. The 2005 one-off-reunion concerts of Bregović's *The White Button* in Sarajevo, Zagreb, and Belgrade, saturated with and promoted through the affect-posture of Yugo-nostalgia, elicited a few antagonistic right-wing newspaper reports but no incidents; they were spectacularly successful in all three cities, attracting about 60,000 people in Sarajevo, 70,000 in Zagreb, and 250,000 in Belgrade (Volčič, 2007; Petrov, 2016). The success of regional performers (Joksimović, Croatian Doris Dragović, Bosnian *Hari Mata Hari*, and Serbian Marija Šerifović) at the Eurovision Song Contest in the period in which tele-votes dominated the overall score (1998-2009) may also serve as an indicator of the strong role soft pop music plays in fostering the imagination of co-habitation and pan-regional identity. These concert figures and cross-regional votes cast at international contests fuel commercial cooperation: the most recent record of Serbian pop-rock band *Bajaga and the Instructors* (*Ruckus in the Audience*, April 2018) is produced and distributed jointly by PGP RTS (formerly PGP-RTB), Serbia, and Croatia Records (formerly Jugoton), Croatia.

Perhaps the most widely accepted pop-music performer in the region is Serbian singer-songwriter Đorđe Balašević. Since the early 1980s, Balašević has enjoyed unparalleled popularity among people of different musical taste, ethnicity and social status (Mijatovic, 2004: 93; Jansen 2005: 251). His annual concerts in Belgrade, official records and bootleg recordings, and undercover listening to his music in the region during the 1990s likely

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contributed more to the cultural-political reorientation of the public sphere than the "sound" and "noise" of urban protests; for this service, Balašević was recognized as UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador in 1998. The singer-songwriter being associated in public perception with Yugo-nostalgia, his appearances outside Serbia have also had specific functions in transition conflicts. For example, the coincidence of his 2001 concert in Pula, Croatia, with the summer of nationalist protests against Croatian general Mirko Norac's trial for war crimes recast Balašević's concert into an explicit site of resistance to far-right revanchism (Sarač and Jelača in Baker, 2010: 207). Nevertheless, few fans would identify Balašević as a political musician. While many of his 1990s songs directly reference the Milošević regime, contemporary wars, and collective responsibility,[2] his opus comprises mostly ballads, affect-ridden, peppered with witticisms, and written from the perspective of an "ordinary" person. With the running time of four hours, Balašević's concerts feature a balance of his (often improvisationally updated) songs, personal monologues, and entertaining injunctions demystifying official ideologies. They often serve, the informers and participant-observers point out, as "therapeutic séances" (Gall, 2003), even "public purgatories" (Janjatović in Mijatovic, 2004: 93), and, for younger generations, guarantees of "emotional continuity with a past which is not theirs and which is 'forbidden'" (Jansen, 2005: 253). The musician's strategies for affect-rapport are directly opposed to those pursued by turbo-folk, hip-hop, and avant-garde rock artists: "It is easy to make a noise at the concert, but it is harder to make a silence", Balašević opined on the occasion of his 2015 concert in Sarajevo (*Sarajevo Times*, 2015). Silence *can* be sonorous and even more potent than noise, Balašević intimates, because it allows space-time for both emotional experience and cognitive reflection.

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[2] Cf. Balašević's songs "A Man with Moonlight in His Eyes" (1993), "We Are to Blame" (1993), and "Slobodane" (1992).

Balašević's fandom articulates the common identity typical of transnational networks and is thus a good example of post-Yugoslav transnationalism (Baker, 2010: 188-191 *et passim*). Nowadays, Balašević's songs are among the most frequently featured and listened to at the regional TV channels, dedicated YouTube channels, Facebook pages, and Yugoslav music blogs such as jugozvuk.blogspot.com and neveljaleploce.blogspot.com. Aimed at re-establishing and reinforcing the connections between the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav space, the Internet sites are the places where formerly Yugoslav "digital diaspora" creates a (transnational) home on a homepage (Pogačar, 2016). In such audio-situations, the experience of listening to popular music is individual (or small group), but it is projected as shared by others with similar values and judgements. Poised between the complex sentiment of Yugo-nostalgia and the pragmatics of shared musical taste, and between the activities of passive listening and active music engagement, indeed network-building, such individual-group experiences cannot be easily subsumed under categories and their impact is yet to be determined. As sites of simultaneous memorial petrification (sounding of an irretrievably lost country) and future-construction (building of a cohabitating community), they index both impossibilities and prospects for the countries of the region.

This juxtaposition of varied types of popular music and their reception in the region of the former Yugoslavia has yielded some insights of relevance for all transitional settings. Due to its capacity to speak to wide audiences and disseminate emotional and ideological messages broadly, popular music is bound to have prominent role in conflict and transitional societies. Yet, the multi-agent and multi-scale nature of music production, the factual and symbolic relations it establishes, the cultural frameworks to which its listeners belong, and temporal extension of the reception experience, make the popular musical text markedly polysemic. It is thus not wise to attribute to a specific genre, or a piece of music, or a musician, either the capacity to generate violence or the ability to engender positive social

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transformation; nor should the potential for both modes of operation in each piece of popular music be denied.

To recognise the polysemic operation of popular music is vital for an agile and responsive approach to the realities of transition. Yet, some scholars and practitioners might consider the whole discussion irrelevant to the field of transitional justice. Cynthia Cohen, for one, insists that, to be understood as a transition tool, an art practice must connect directly with other types of just society building initiatives (2005). While we may applaud or bemoan the role of popular music in transitional contexts, one is certain: the primarily aim of popular music is commercial and it is only on rare occasions that it intentionally associates itself with the toolkit of conflict resolution and transitional justice. So, in what follows, I would like to pose the counterpart question: what happens when an art practice emerges out of the *explicit* commitment to contribute to transitional justice processes in a society? Do the ethical, axiological, and political stakes and types of impact look less ambivalent?

Performed Monuments

Here I would like to attend to two distinct approaches to the intentional use of art in service of transition, one which adopts the articulated aims and mechanisms of transitional justice, and the other which contributes to the same general objective by contrasting, or challenging, the dominant modes of transition and reconciliation work. For this objective, I turn to performance art.

Theatre is an artform traditionally cherished in the region of the former Yugoslavia. Whereas this artform has been often deployed to promote nationalist ideologies (the fate of Kovačević's plays in the 1990s Serbia is exemplary in this respect), it is increasingly used as an expressive means to enact and give meaning to transitional justice processes—in different modes and with different targets. Most widely recorded, drama therapy and bilingual or

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multi-national performances (e.g., *Romeo and Juliet* by the Radionica integracije from Belgrade and the Qendra Multimedia from Priština) have been deployed to assist on-the-ground reparation and reconciliation (Zelizer 2003; Barnett and Skelton 2007: 147-234). Mainstream political theatre in Croatia, Slovenia, and Serbia—for example, Croat Oliver Frljić's plays—have criticized nationalist ideologies and warned against the rise of the political right. Avant-garde and experimental performances have expanded theatre-space to give embodied form to the local aims of transition, creating what Peter D. Rush has described as "corporeal sonority, a rhythm that places bodies on the line, an obligation that haunts and unsettles the narratives of transitional justice" (Rush and Simić, 2014: *vii*). Among the last cohort of initiatives, DAH Theatre (Belgrade) has attracted the most substantive international attention as a performance group dedicated to a sustained promotion of the values and mechanisms of transitional justice. Founded in 1991 by Jadranka Anđelić and Dijana Milošević (current artistic director) as a grass-roots alternative to official cultural-cum-political discourses, DAH Theatre has repeatedly professed their commitment to advancing tolerance, inclusivity, and accountability, and on-the-ground knowledge exchange, training and collaboration as strategic tools to develop and enhance moral imagination (Cohen et al, 2011: 23-44; Rush and Simić, 2014: 102). Since its inception, the collective has been subject to opposition and threats, but they have also acquired substantive funding and wide recognition. DAH Theatre has forged an eclectic yet distinctive performance style, marrying Eugenio Barba's notion of "anthropological theatre", documentary practices and materials, Bertolt Brecht's "alienation-effect" techniques, and the age-old use of theatre as a cathartic cure. Strongly oriented towards participation and capturing of an ordinary person's embodied experience, the group relies on the cognitive and emotional juxtaposition of disparate gestures, sounds, visuals, and testimonies, and the inter-sectional positioning of the

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performers and the audience to create a performance space where collective cognitions could be probed and transformed.

With this ambition, DAH theatre has often branched outdoors. The remarkably successful project entitled *In/Visible City* (2005-present) is an excellent example of such practice. First developed in 2005 with the aim to promote inter-ethnic tolerance in Belgrade, the project has been subsequently phased to several other towns in Serbia (Niš, Leskovac, Subotica, Vranje, Novi Sad, and Inđija), and, having received the European Union funding, to cities in other European countries (Republic of North Macedonia, Norway, Denmark, United Kingdom, and France). It features site-specific performances on public transportation, which put on display a shared, multi-ethnic history of the city in question through sounds and tales, to a mixed audience of the knowing and accidental participants—approving, disapproving, or indifferent[3]—and round-table discussions and workshops about inter-cultural tolerance in the city, involving contributors ranging from children to pensioners. Experimental theatre has often been accused of being both elitist and marginal. But *In/Visible City* uniquely manages to break the boundary between the avant-garde theatre-going audience and those who may not venture to a theatre-building. The project capitalizes on the citizens' desire to learn more about the history of their own home-place in order to teach them the merits of cohabitation; the DAH performances and discussions focus on the positive and enriching aspects of multi-ethnic living rather than inter-ethnic conflicts and contestations. Aimed to (re)create in the audience the sense of an intersectional identity, *In/Visible City* also incidentally empowers. During the performance on the route of bus 1 in Niš, one Romani passenger has commented: "Yes, I'm telling you, there are so many of us, Tzigani, here in Niš – we are not a *minority*!" (DAH Theatre)

[3] *In/Visible City* is advertised in the media and on street banners, so the audience includes not only those who chance to encounter it while riding on public transport, but also those who board a bus or a tram with an intention to see the performance. See Womack, 2016: 88-90.

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The most recent performance of *In/Visible City* happened on the route of bus 26 in Belgrade on 20 May 2018, as part of the EU activities to mark the European Year of Cultural Heritage; Sem Fabrizi, the EU Ambassador to Serbia, addressed the media at the first bus stop and subsequently took the ride. DAH Theatre treats art as the extension of the public sphere, whose role is that of a mediator and a necessary laboratory through which the inchoate possibilities of society to be just and inclusive (as described in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights) will be elicited and, hope is, embedded. This viewpoint is diametrically opposed to those of some other art collectives in the region, which apparently have the same grass-root concerns and serve comparable functions. These treat art as a counter-public sphere, offering a competing vision that should shatter us out of complacent espousal of any, including overtly benevolent, ideologies.

The collective Monument Group (architects, scholars, writers, and artists Damir Arsenijević, Milica Tomić, Pavle Levi, Ana Bezić, Jasmina Husanović, Jelena Petrović, Branimir Stojanović, residing in the region and diaspora), in existence since 2002, is a good example of this different approach. Faced with what they describe as the impossibility of erecting and naming monuments to the Yugoslav wars, the collective produces their own artistic and theoretical monumental discourse: interactive exhibitions, readings, open working meetings, performances. Their most widely known project, *Mathemes of Re-association*, comprising theatre performances, performed poetry, discussions, publications, and associated activities, scrutinizes the collusion of forensic science and "the doctrines of reconciliation"; the latter, they argue, eventuates in the erasure of the political subject and the reproduction of the condition of permanent warfare (Monument Group, 2011: 171-172). The project specifically targets the re-association of the remains of the Srebrenica massacre victims as undertaken by the International Commission on Missing Persons. The ICMP exhumed the bodies, identified majority of them by forensic analysis, and reburied them in accordance

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with what was believed, often without evidence, to be the victims' Islamic religious traditions. In Monument Group's opinion, the ICMP acted as a representative of a whole cluster of institutions and practices which perpetuate the ethno/religion-centric politics of memory and identitarian difference that was responsible for the genocide itself, and ignore both on-ground mixtures of identities and other types of subjecthood. In performances like *The Pythagorean Lecture* (performed internationally since 2009), where a polyphonic "lecture" is given by voices heard from behind a curtain at the back of an empty stage, and publications that they label "distributive monuments", the Monument Group reconceives the forensic case number assigned to an individual's remains as a "matheme"—the concept borrowed from psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Detached from the body, "matheme" is a symbol which can float across ethnicities, allow for intersectional identities, and the image of subject as a composite of objects, ideologems, and personal and group desires (Sheikh, 2014). In its flight from (ethnic) specificity, *The Pythagorean Lecture* is deliberately contentious. Yet, the collective construes "mathemes" not to attenuate or obscure responsibility but to demonstrate the possibility of political subjectivity. As their mission-statement "where the genocide was, shall the political subject be" suggests, this new revolutionary subject should emerge through self-exclusion from the discourses of nation, and, in particular, from what the collective perceives to be an imported "neoliberal" take on national identity.

Monument Group and similar initiatives (the Mostar-based Abart collective, the platform of self-education The Ignorant Schoolmaster and His Committees, and others) view the discourse and practice of transitional justice as an imposed, teleologically conceived, pathway to neoliberal democracy, free market capitalism, and the colonial transformation on non-European into European (EU) states (Petrović, 2012). To combat this link between neoliberalism and new nationalism, these art practices often revalorize the value system and aesthetics of the People's Liberation Struggle (the partisan movement) and the Yugoslavdom

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as material practices of transformation. This is not a Yugo-nostalgic resurrecting of the past, though. In fact, many members of New-Yugoslav/post-Yugoslav collectives have no direct experience of the former country; theirs is "post-memory" art (Hirsch 2012), espousing resistance-through-negation as such (Dedić, 2016). In terms of transitional justice, such postures are characteristic of bottom-up resistance to the perceived imposition of international TJ mechanisms. A coincidence of attitudes suggests, however, that this resistance is not only a minority elite's take on democratization. In the perception that they forge a new path between capitalist neoliberalism and atavistic nationalism, these art practices are surprisingly similar to the in-between positionality of turbo-folk which Archer (2012) highlighted. Such attitudinal location also situates these artistic collectives in opposition to what might appear otherwise to be their natural habitat: the values and tools of transitional justice, and alliance with the EU campaigns in the region, as pursued by DAH theatre.

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Beyond Good and Evil?

The activities of making, distributing, and receiving art are vital in the context of "transformative justice"—those judicial and non-judicial measures and practices across a system of laws and relations that aim at transforming the structures that brought about a conflict or violation of human rights in the first place. Yet, the operation of artworks as levers of transition is complex and, as the previous suggests, cannot be described fully with contrasting assessments such as "beneficial" vs "not beneficial" and "specific" vs "universal" to which reports and toolkits often resort. The changeable destinies and variegated reception patterns of the artworks/art practices under discussion here have also brought to the fore the vacillation between the bottom-up and top-bottom orientations of art-production. One can link all this multi-directionality to a charged polyphony of views on how transition in the

region of the former Yugoslavia should evolve, and how one should use the models and platforms offered by international community. It is this variability of positions that dynamizes the social sphere where conflicts are negotiated, unsettling easy binaries such as international vs. national, global vs. local, high vs. low, and offering multiple routes for conflict-resolution and just society building.

None of this is surprising, though. The key challenges in transition and conflict studies today revolve precisely around the need to intermix the top-bottom and bottom-top approaches and to promote closer understanding of the site-specific modes of thought, embedded paradigms, and behavioural habitus. The juxtaposition of art practices widely different in terms of expression, format, scope, reach, and ambition in this article elicited some surprising lines of correlation or contrast between them, an outcome that points to the need to adopt a more dynamic approach to categories and recorded behaviours. In particular, I argue that more attention should be paid to the issues of semantic duration and variegation in the life-course of artworks as well as to the variation in (sensorial, cognitive, and ideological) experience of their reception—an experience that involves complex and multi-layered networks of agents, power relations, and technological developments. Such recalibration of scholarly practice would entail the use of an expanded network of participant-observers to redress the top-down hermeneutics and imbalance in vocalization of views by the artists/organisers/external observers and the participants themselves. The key message, however, is the following. Balancing between cultural innovation and commercial reception, social iteration and social transgression, and porous to an unlimited variety of inscriptions by both consumers and producers over time, the artworks will never be purely “good” or “evil”. Their messiness is their strength, though. It articulates some basic truths about ourselves: that the human being producing and enjoying art is herself multidimensional, polyvocal, and open

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to transformation; and that it is this complex human subject that we consistently need to keep at the centre of our attention.

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