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Obsah | Contents

Editorial 5

1. Studie a eseje | Studies and Essays

STANISLAV HOLUBEC – Introduction: Imagining the Future as a Culture of Defeat – Eastern and Central European Imagined Futures since 1945
Úvod: Představy o budoucnosti jako kultura porážky – východoevropské a středoevropské představy o budoucnosti od roku 1945 9

ANNA ELISABETH KEIM – World Unity as the Only Future for Modernity: Localising the World State Idea and Its Proponents in (late) 1940s Germany
Světová jednota jako jediná budoucnost modernity: nalézání myšlenky světového státu a jejich zastánců v Německu (konce) 40. let 20. století 17

LEJLA VESKOVIĆ – Two Futures Imagined in the Post-socialist Yugosphere
Dvě představy budoucnosti v postsocialistické jugosféře 45

ANASTASIA MITROFANOVA – The Future Seen from the Edge of Society: Contemporary Russophone Communist Sci-Fi
Budoucnost nablížená z okraje společnosti: současná ruskojazyčná komunistická sci-fi 75

ENIS SULSTAROVA – The Future of a Stalinist State: Albanian Science Fiction Literature during Communism
Budoucnost stalinistického státu: albánská vědeckofantastická literatura za komunismu 91

2. Diskuse a rozepře | Discussions and Disputes

PETR WOHLMUTH – “You have to do it with love... Oral history was something I was never paid for...” An Interview with Professor Alessandro Portelli (Sapienza Università di Roma)
„Musíte to dělat s láskou... za práci v oboru orální historie jsem nikdy neobdržel žádnou mzdu...” Rozhovor s profesorem Alessandrem Portellim 115

3. Recenze a reflexe | Reviews and Reflections

JIŘÍ ŠTAIF – <i>Modernizace na pokračování. Společnost v českých zemích (1770–1918)</i> (Pavel Himl)	133
MARTIN NODL – <i>Na vlnách dějin. Minulost – přítomnost – budoucnost českého dějepiscství</i> (Jan Horský)	140
DANIELA MYSLIWIEZ-FLEISS – <i>Die Fabrik als touristische Attraktion. Entdeckung eines neuen Erlebnisraums im Übergang zur Moderne</i> (Zdeněk Nebřenský)	155
E. MICHAEL GERLI, RYAN D. GILES (EDD.) – <i>The Routledge Hispanic Studies Companion to Medieval Iberia: Unity in Diversity</i> (David de Pablo)	161
Editorial Note	167
Upozornění redakce	170

TWO FUTURES IMAGINED IN THE POST-SOCIALIST YUGOSPHERE

Lejla Vesković

The paper aims to present two proto-utopias active in the contemporary Yugoslosphere. It takes two novels as the representatives of those two juxtaposed narratives – Saša Ilić's *The Dog and the Double Bass* and Peter Handke's *A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia*. Handke's novel is being treated as a representative of a nationalist realist literary tradition codified by Dobrica Ćosić marked by self-victimization and self-balkanization, the concept of genocide, elements of camp literature, orientalization and demonizing of the Other, theories of neo-pagan conspiracy, belief in the historical mission to be "antemurale Christianitatis" but also a belief of having a mission to revive decadent Europe with barbarogenius spirit. As I argue this tendency was strengthened by Emir Kusturica's foreword to the novel, whereas in the very novel only orientalization and balkanization can be recognized. Ilić's novel is treated as a representative of a socialist modernist tradition and the canon established by Krleža and especially Kiš. The common characteristics of the identified literary genre present in the novel are the revaluation of nationalist canon, criticism of the wartime past, struggle to overcome traumas of the wartime past, imposing question of guilt and responsibility for the bloody dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, advocating secular and cultural tradition of socialist enlightenment but also revaluation of the totalitarian practices of the former socialist regime, the evident influence of western popular culture, the reverberation of the former so-called "non-alignment policy" and also criticism of the class divided and profit-driven predominantly western system of values. Two mentioned homogenized narratives currently take turns in overtaking public imagination. Future will show which future will prevail.

Keywords: political imaginary, foundational and post-foundational paradigm of thought, dialectics of hyper, trans-utopianism, Peter Handke, Saša Ilić

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Introduction: Theoretical framework

The major concern in this article is to conjecture a possible political future related to the post-socialist Yugosphere, and obliquely to Europe, as it has been imagined in contemporary literature. To illustrate two antagonistic political proto-utopias that struggle for the hearts and minds of the common body collective, I will refer to the political imaginaries projected in Saša Ilić's novel *The Dog and the Double Bass* and Peter Handke's *A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia*. The foreword to Handke's novel, written by Emir Kusturica, entitled *Handke: The Apostle of Truth*, will also be considered, since taken together they represent one literary topos oriented at the hegemonic position in a given society. Therefore, for the speculation of the possible political future in the Balkans, two opposing blocks will be marked out – with Ilić on the one side and Handke and Kusturica on the other. It seemed justifiable to select specifically these authors because recently they have been most disputed in the public space, not only because Ilić won the prestigious NIN award for the best novel in 2019, and Handke won the Nobel Prize that same year. One can assume that those pieces of literature were so vehemently publicly discussed, owing to the fact that they have been recognized as places of self-identification of the two opposing centers of political power. Handke's novel has been additionally considered since it provides the position of the so-called Western gaze, which is taken into account in both Ilić's and Kusturica's supporters, especially since antagonistic blocks are aware that their chances at success in overtaking the future are conditioned on alignments with whoever is in power of the European cultural dominant. It follows that, with the introduction of the ideological effects produced in the selected writings of those three authors, we can get a direct insight into opposing political imaginaries relevant to the post-socialist Yugosphere, along with the broader European context upon which future Balkan political models are directly dependent. One more reason why it seems justifiable to select exactly these texts is that they all refer, in one way or another, to the traumatic and bloody disintegration of the common Yugoslav heritage. Evidently, juxtaposed visions of the future are concerned with imposing control over interpretations of the symbolic capital of the past. To achieve dominance, it seems that it is necessary to present one's position on major historical events as having always been, as cited in Buden, in accordance with "the general progressive aspirations of humanity,"¹ which usually equals Europe. That's exactly what will be observed in the analyzed texts:

1 BORIS BUDEN, *Zona prelaska – o kraju postkomunizma*. Beograd 2012, p. 20.

attempts to present concrete political positions as always being adjusted, the past like the future, to match the humanistic aspirations of progressive Europe. Hence, insight into the three selected texts provides not only visions about a better future but also arguments why each of the imagined futures is exactly the only legitimate successor of European progressive historical ends.

To delineate ideas or, more precisely proto-utopias, intertwined in the body text of the selected writings considered in the article, I will further rely on certain theoretical concepts introduced in the following books: *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* by Susan Buck-Morss,² *Post-foundational Political Thought* by Oliver Marchart³ and *Russian Postmodernism* by Mikhail Epstein et al.⁴

Buck-Morss suggests that the political content of art can be brought into view if one is able to define its political imaginary. Political imaginary does not mean solely logical discourse, worldview, or political logic. It is also a topographical concept in the sense that it is visually comprehensible, since it conveys not just the meaning of an abstract political terrain but also of concrete, the visual political landscape in which political actors are positioned. As it is a topographical term, Buck-Morss assumes that in order to shed light on a political imaginary one should identify its three icons: i.e., the common enemy, the political collective, and the sovereign agency that wages war in its name.⁵ If we apply this formula to the two major political systems of the twentieth century, we can easily mark out their political imaginaries. In the case of a capitalist model of mass sovereignty, an abstract enemy is a potentially hostile nation-state, and a mass-conscripted army is a collective body that is authorized to take over wild zones of power and wage wars over territories. In the case of a socialist alternative, sovereignty lies in the party that is legitimized to usurp power and wage wars against exploiting classes in the name of the working people. In the empirical part of this article, the focus will be put on exactly those three icons of political imaginary embedded, as it is postulated, in the body text of the target novels. Apart from the three already-mentioned icons of the political imaginary, it seems reasonable to add as

- 2 SUSAN BUCK-MORSS, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, Cambridge-London 2000.
- 3 OLIVER MARCHART, *Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*. Edinburgh 2007.
- 4 *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, (eds.) MIKHAIL N. EPSTEIN, ALEXANDER A. GENIS, SLOBODANKA MILLICENT VLADIV-GLOVER, New York-Oxford 2016.
- 5 S. BUCK-MORSS, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, p. 12.

part of the political imaginary the fourth icon – the figure of associates. Namely, as Oliver Marchart explicates, exactly as the naming of an enemy brings the collective into being, it is also assumed that the naming of associates can serve the same purpose, since people may “in their plurality *freely associate* within the public realm, motivated [...] by their care for the common”.⁶ Obviously social cohesion can be achieved, not only “through an external antagonism vis-à-vis an enemy,” but also by virtue of the deliberate and free associations of the actors in the political terrain out of their common care for the public good.

Further in the book, the author explains that the symbolic order of society can be based upon two fundamental paradigms of thought: foundational and post-foundational. It means that the political moment of society, which is conveyed using political imaginary, is grounded either in foundational or post-foundational logic. As Marchart explicates: “The term *foundationalism* can be used to define – from the viewpoint of social and political theory – those theories which assume that society and/or politics are ‘grounded on principles that are (1) undeniable and immune to revision and (2) located outside society and politics’⁷ (as cited in Marchart, p. 11). In most cases of political and social foundationalism, a principle is sought which is to ground politics from without. It is from this transcendent ground that the functioning of politics is claimed to be derived.”⁸ We may notice that major political systems of the twentieth century considered by Buck Morss (i.e., communism and capitalism) were grounded in the politico-philosophical order of foundationalism. In the foundational paradigm, a certain metaphysical figure (e.g., the dictatorship of the proletariat, historical progress, material happiness for masses) is usually appointed to a position of sole authority which can totalize and thus ultimately ground society. In case of the post-foundational political thought, on the contrary, metaphysical figures of the foundation are constantly exposed to interrogation. This does not mean that the post-foundational approach denies the existence, or necessity, of a ground. The post-foundational political worldview implies an increased awareness of the impossibility of the final ground due to its contingent and quasi-transcendental nature. For that reason, one can only witness the plurality of hegemonic at-

6 O. MARCHART, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*, pp. 40-41.

7 HERZOG DON, *Without Foundations. Justification in Political Theory*, Ithaca-London 1985, p. 20.

8 O. MARCHART, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*, pp. 11-12.

tempts that seek to ground society without ever being able to do so.⁹ It is important to highlight that anti-foundationalism is still a different concept from post-foundationalism. As Marchart points out, anti-foundationalism may imply a total absence of ground or “anything goes” postmodernist ground, whereas post-foundationalism solely attempts to weaken the ontological center without doing away with the foundation entirely. This paper argues that the major difference between the two antagonistic political imaginaries observed in the selected novels lies in their preference for society’s grounding foundations. It is presumed that Handke’s novel serves Emir Kusturica as a source of ideological ideas which justify grounding society upon a foundational politico-philosophical paradigm of thought. On the contrary, a novel by Saša Ilić proposes that political imaginary—or more precisely, the ontological level of the political—should be based upon post-foundational political thought as its improved alternative.

To further illustrate the instituting moment of society in the manner of either a foundational or post-foundational principle and especially to indicate the critical point of succession between foundationalism and post-foundationalism, which Marchart identifies as anti-foundationalism, I should for better clarification turn to theoretical concepts – dialectics of hyper- and trans-utopianism – introduced by Mikhail Epstein et al.

The author explains the dialectics of hyper as the common law of the whole of twentieth-century cultural development. The epoch marked by the dialectics of hyper started at the beginning of the previous century with the demand for a global revolutionary reevaluation of the overall tradition. The starting phase of revolutionary negation was induced by a shared belief that the overall reality was spoiled by the arbitrariness of cultural conventions and the residues of ideological illusions. Therefore, the whole realm of knowledge had to be purged of the ideological phantasm and laid on new grounds unspoiled by false consciousness. It was thought that reality could be cleared of ideological preconditioning only if it could be founded again on new authentic and elemental premises. However, once the essential fundament (e.g., dictatorship of the proletariat) has been raised to a position of a sole absolute and marked as a legitimate telos of modernist progress, it would grow to such a hyper-dimension that it would eventually transform itself into its own pseudo-quality. For that reason, Epstein et al. assert that the whole modernist, or foundational, paradigm of thought can be explained by simple dialectics which repeats itself regularly in various

9 O. MARCHART, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*, p. 7.

modernist projects: first, it starts with the revolutionary “super” phase, which inevitably leads, after the hyper-inflation of quality that has been proclaimed to be essential, into the “pseudo” phase, marked by the transformation of the proclaimed essence to its antithesis. If we take real socialism as an example, we may say that the doctrine of dialectical materialism placed the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat in a position of a modernist telos, proclaiming it to be the essence of historical progress (super phase). However, the pursuit of the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat, when forced into being the only allowed reality (hypostatized), gradually grew to a such hyperbolized dimension (hyper phase) that it transformed itself into its opposite meaning – a dictatorship of a single man (pseudo phase).

As Epstein puts it, “To a large extent, the first half of the twentieth century marched under the banner of numerous revolutions, whether ‘social,’ ‘cultural,’ ‘scientific,’ or ‘sexual.’”¹⁰ Global revolutions were part of the modernist project which “in the broader sense of the term ‘modern’ [was] a quest for and (re)construction of authentic, higher, essential reality to be found beyond the conventional, arbitrary sign system of culture.”¹¹ The revolutionary phase, or ‘super phase’ as Epstein labels it, was recognizable for its quest of the primal and ‘unspoiled’ quintessence regardless of how this once determined existence would eventually be defined. However, once this “essential” and irreducible quality of certain property has been hypostatized, a new phase of “hyperization” would emerge that would reveal in a new light the very nature of revolution – “as the force productive of hyperphenomena.”¹² This means that when these phenomena (e.g., pure sociality, pure materiality, pure sexuality, or pure revolutionarity) reach a certain utmost limit of quality that is the highest point of development, they would turn into their own antithesis and thus transform into pseudo sociality, pseudo materiality, pseudo sexuality, or pseudo revolutionarity. Jean Baudrillard was among the first to point to this inevitable transformation of super phenomena to their own pseudo quality once the limits of development have been transgressed by means of hyperization. Baudrillard observes that reality and images created in the mass media have been presented in such an aggrandized and minute detail that they turn into their own antithesis – a copy or simulacrum of reality which appears more real than its original. In Epstein et. al.’s words “this transition from ‘super’ to ‘pseudo’, from illusions of pure reality to the ironic realization of this re-

10 M. N. EPSTEIN, A. A. GENIS, S. M. VLADIV-GLOVER (eds.), *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, p. 23.

11 Ibid., p. 24.

12 Ibid. p. 44.

ality as pure illusion, accounts for the historical transformation of European and Russian culture in the twentieth century and can be described as the movement from modernism to postmodernism.”¹³

In this article, it is supposed that Handke's novel represents a symptom of this historical transformation from modernism to postmodernism, or from the foundational to the post-foundational paradigm of thought. More precisely, it can be regarded that the novel *Justice for Serbian* serves as a criticism of the state of “hyperization” that prompted the crisis of the modernist project and that may be said to correspond to the prevalence of the anti-foundational paradigm of thought. Anti-foundationalism emerges with modernist crises of legitimation marked by the awareness that the grand totalizing stories of modernity are discursive in character and thus mere arbitrary systems of signification. If we have in mind that the formation of postmodernism as a new cultural dominant is recognizable for its hallmark of “incredulity towards metanarratives” then it makes sense to claim that the two phenomena correlate to each other. In his largely discussed novel, Handke contends that media reports (*Le Monde, El Pais, Liberation, Zeit, Time, F.A.Z.*) about the role of Serbia in the Yugoslav Wars were unjust for Serbia due to their simulative character and inevitable production of simulacra. Novelists hold Serbia to be the last remaining realm unspoiled by the modernist crisis and thus capable of preventing the further disintegration of the Western foundational paradigm of thought into its anti-foundational state. However, the writer, in his lament over the dissolution of markers of certainty, misses to notice that Serbia itself was also undergoing the same modernist crises of foundational grounding of society characterized by yet another hyperization – the hyper-production of nationalism. Therefore, one must conclude that the hyper-nationalism of Serbia, and we may expend the phenomena to the whole Yugoslosphere, is unlikely to correct or redeem Western simulative hyper-reality. However, Emir Kusturica takes this false premise of Handke for granted and further transforms Handke's mere criticism of anti-foundationalism into a manifesto of the “foundational poetics.” Simultaneously, as an alternative to the political imaginary advanced in the poetics of Handke and Kusturica, Saša Ilić proposes a post-foundational politico-philosophical thought. In other words, instead of national and religious identity being the exclusive principle upon which society should be grounded, Ilić offers trans-utopianism as the more suitable figure for social cohesion.

13 M. N. EPSTEIN, A. A. GENIS, S. M. VLADIV-GLOVER (eds.), *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, p. 47.

Epstein et al. define trans-utopianism as the revival of what has been considered to be modernist dogmas: e.g., truth, universality, objectivity, originality, and utopia. However, the difference with the original meaning of those concepts conveyed at the beginning of the twentieth century lies in the fact that in their secondary emergence, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, they signalled the additional connotation of the prefix “trans.” The added prefix implies in itself the whole memory of the twentieth century – i.e., a lived experience that testifies that, to use Buck-Morss’s metaphor, the placing of any dreamworld at the position of the sole absolute will definitely turn the dream into a catastrophe. For this thesis, it would suffice just to remember the revolutionary terror or exploitation of natural resources as the legacy of the twentieth-century pursuit of utopias. The rebirth of utopia, as Epstein notes, was possible only “after its subjection to postmodernist’s severe scepticism, relativism, and its anti- or post-utopian consciousness.”¹⁴ For the most part, the author implies that the experience of the postmodernist carnivalesque approach to the modernist pompous claim at revelation or historic mission to reconstruct the society eventually helped purify modernist dogmas and prepared them for secondary consumption, but now without the postmodernist habit of hiding behind the quotedness of style. Therefore, trans-utopia after modifications of meaning affected by anti- and post-utopian consciousness no longer represents the aggressive social project “with claim to transforming the world, but [...] a new intensity of life experience and a broader horizon for the individual.”¹⁵

To conclude the theoretical part, we may sum up that the ontological level of the culture in the post-socialist Yugosphere is torn between, on the one hand, a lingering foundational paradigm for which Kusturica’s foreword is perceived as an illustrative manifestation and, on the other hand, the post-foundational paradigm advanced in Ilić’s novel as an alternative vision of the political future. In the foundational paradigm, the ethnic and religious aspect of identity is taken as the sole metaphysical figure that can ground society, whereas in the post-foundational paradigm trans-utopia takes the position of a quasi-transcendent and contingent metaphysical figure attempted at the partial grounding of the society.

14 M. N. EPSTEIN, A. A. GENIS, S. M. VLADIV-GLOVER (eds.), *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, p. 546.

15 Ibid.

1. Dissolution of the foundational markers of certainty in Handke's novel *A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia*

A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia is usually considered to be, in terms of genre, halfway between confessional prose, which is similar to a diary in style, and an essay. According to the claims of the first-person narrator, the principal cause of his artistic activism lies in the creation of the poetic text with a clear political purpose – a reconciliation of the warring nations. The action in the novel actually takes place simultaneously with peace negotiations held in Dayton, Ohio, in November 1995. Handke occasionally uses the symbolic potential of this event to motivate the esthetic and political *raison d'être* of his novel. The plot is rather simply crafted and primarily develops around a few characters gathered to act as guides for a novelist's weeks-long trip to Serbia. The author introduces them as Žarko R., "translator in his hours", and Zlatko B., "professional gambler" and "a painter of curious genre scenes." They all agreed to meet in Belgrade and then travel inland to Serbian – first to visit Zlatko's parents in Porodin, a village at the Romanian border, then to visit Žarko's former girlfriend and a daughter in Bajina Bašta, a small town at the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. The novel is divided into four chapters, which are organized by their itinerary – before the trip, part one of the trip, part two of the trip, and an epilogue. The course of the trip provides the author and his company with an opportunity to get to better know the country and hence present Serbia as an attractive destination famous for its heroic past, national cuisine, architecture, and nature.

However, the main interest of the novelist is not related to writing an adventure story. As it is supposed in this article, Handke's main concern is to provide a critical analysis of Western society that has lost its long-established values and to endow Serbia with a symbolic meaning of the last preserved remains of the European lost world. It is thus assumed that the novel aims to condemn the state of hyperization that was affecting Western discourse as the disintegration of the modernist foundational paradigm of thought was progressing. The author presupposed that Serbia was immune to similar processes and thus failed to notice that the same hyperization also heavily affected societies in the Balkans – the main difference with the West being in the quality type of the hyper property. In the West, the hyper-production of images transformed once known world to Handke into simulacrum, simulative, or false reality, whereas in the East, especially in the Balkans, the hyper-production of nationalistic ideology led to mutual attempts at the ultimate (self)destruction of once brotherly and united nations. As it has been explicated in the theoretical part, Handke's novel will be taken as a symptom of the modernist crisis of legitimation and thus as an apt

illustration of anti-foundationalism. Even though the famous writer strongly disapproved of the anti-foundational new perspective, his own manner of writing, to a considerable amount, exhibits the very dialectics of hyper he condemns. One may come to this conclusion by simply comparing the similarities between Handke's own style of writing and the media's new perspective, which the writer himself criticized. The contradiction of Handke's style – certain phenomena in media are being criticized only to be demonstrated shortly afterwards in the body of the text – reveals most likely the systemic affection of overall culture by anti-foundationalism.

To demonstrate the abovementioned claims, it seems reasonable to present how the novelist understands the new perspective in the publicist style he strongly disapproves of. The author's lamentation over the decadence and degeneration of the once noble profession of journalism has been provoked by an unfavorable review published in *Le Monde* of Kusturica's recently released *Underground*.¹⁶ The novelist's stream of thought related to his observation of the newest trends in journalism is cited as follows:

But the very worst that has yet been written against Kusturica's film was again in *Le Monde*, once one of my favorite newspapers. Disguised in its familiar solemn and distinguished form – scarcely a photo, densely set text, quasi-official columns – it now has become [...] a demagogic snoop sheet, and not only in cases like the illness of President Mitterrand, which was spread over the pages a year ago under the pretext of providing information, with a lust for death that is perhaps in keeping with the times but certainly is not contemporary. The newspaper does not describe its sujets any longer; [...] but instead, it gropes them – makes them into objects. Typical of the new perspective is the way that – once unthinkable in *Le Monde* – persons are initially characterized in terms of their exteriors, as was, just recently in a front-page column, an American art photographer: “a scheming, disinviting forty-year-old” (or something like that).¹⁷

In this lengthy passage, we can get, in a nutshell, what precisely the author accuses the contemporary media of. I believe that the author holds mass media communication as a reflection of a general state of affairs discernible in culture during the period of anti-foundationalism – described by Baudrillard as a simulacrum of reality. As we can see, journalism – and that implies the overall culture

16 PETER HANDKE, *A Journey to the River: Justice for Serbia*, New York 1997, pp. 7–11.

17 P. HANDKE, *A Journey to the River: Justice for Serbia*, pp. 9–10.

– has undergone a transformation from the position of a once dignified, solemn, and familiar-to-Handke profession to its new perspective, characterized by sensationalism, fixation on exterior attributes, the reification of “sujets,” and demagogic populism. While Handke’s assessment of his contemporaneity is clearly indisputable, I still want to raise doubts about the immunity of his poetics to the very conditions he condemns. It seems that Handke’s very poetical style is also largely marked by the processes of the “dissolution of the markers of certainty.” The author himself actually best proves this point with his own words: “Note well: This is absolutely not a case of ‘I accuse.’ I feel compelled only to justice. Or perhaps even only to questioning?, to raising doubts.”¹⁸ In this short quotation, we may detect postmodernist logic in essence. The novelist claims that he did not accuse as Emile Zola did; however, it is clear to the reader that it is exactly what he was doing, despite the fact that he claims the opposite. Further, he claims his dedication to justice only to formulate it quickly as a dedication to interrogating, doubting, and questioning, which is a postmodernist prerogative par excellence. The postmodernist relativism that engulfed the novel made itself known even at the level of the syntax of sentence structure. Namely, sentences are overwhelmed with linguistic markers, which point to a hypothetical situation, relativism, and uncertainty, such as subjunctive grammatical mood, elliptical clauses, or question words. As the grammatical structure is a reliable indicator of the existence of a stable cultural formation, Handke’s novel arguably exhibits a postmodernist ideological perspective (i.e., anti-foundationalism), even in its grammatical core.

However, the main issue raised in this article is that Handke’s obvious distrust in the possibilities of a truthful presentation of reality led the author to demonstrate the same “lust for death”, “demagogic snoop sheet”, “making sujets into objects,” and “characterization in terms of their exteriors” that are typical, as he claims, for *Le Monde* and the rest of the press. This opinion is illustrated by the following passage related to the author’s comments on images in media of Bosnian women imprisoned in the detainment camps.

The latter, it was not uncommon to see, didn’t exactly ‘pose,’ but they dearly had been shifted into a pose as a result of the visual or reported perspective: doubtlessly really suffering, they were shown in a pose of suffering. And during the years of war reporting, while continuously and really suffering, and no doubt more and more, they compliantly and visibly adopted the requested martyr faces and postures for the lenses and microphones of the international photographers and reporters, as in-

18 P. HANDKE, *A Journey to the River: Justice for Serbia*, p. 76.

structed, directed, signalled ('Hey, partner!'). Who can tell me I am mistaken or even malicious when, looking at the picture of the unrestrainedly crying face of a woman in close-up behind the bars of a prison camp, I see also the obedient following of directions given by the photographer of the international press agency outside the camp fence.¹⁹

From the excerpt, a reader gets Handke's point across according to which the media intentionally prefabricates reality by means of manipulation with "naked, market-driven facts and supposed facts." Since it is well known how media tends to distort the truth, the author expresses incredulity about the authenticity of the suffering displayed by the crying faces of women behind the camp fences. Even though scepticism is the driving force behind literature, one cannot but notice that the same forces of power influenced both the media style and Handke's poetics. The allegation that the suffering of Bosnian women is not worthy if it does not, per Handke's own comments for photographs in *El Pais*, follow "in the footsteps of Francisco Goya,"²⁰ I believe that too much resembles the very dehumanization Handke himself accuses the media of. I hold that the main reason behind the similarity between discursive practices of the media and Handke's poetics, which the author seems to be unaware of, lies in the fact that they both share the same ideological foundation. So exactly as media exploits reality to maintain an imperative of profit, the novelist presumably exploits the same reality to maintain the ontological primacy of the Western discourse. To prove this point, it is important to clarify Serbia's role in the novel, since it is considered to represent the main accent of the whole story.

The tale about Serbia begins with the author's incredulity in war coverage due to the oversimplified approach to the events and lightly taken determination between the "roles of attacker and attacked, of pure victims and the naked scoundrels."²¹ He believes that Serbia has received biased and unjust treatment in media reports and therefore decides to embark on a trip to see for himself what is going on. Even though Handke, led by modernist automatism, professes that he is searching for truth, one is becoming aware that the narrator is opting for something else. It soon turns out that the author's dedication to truth is not his main concern, especially since it starts to be obvious that his knowledge of the country's affairs is as oversimplified as the media coverage he despises.

19 P. HANDKE, *A Journey to the River: Justice for Serbia*, p. 20.

20 Ibid. p. 19.

21 Ibid., p. 18.

Handke himself actually realizes that his attempts to get a full-scale picture of the Balkans are in vain and therefore acknowledges with postmodernist resignation that “no one knows Serbia” or “what does a stranger know?” The fact that throughout the novel we detect limited insight into Serbian affairs most likely does not come as a result of the author’s insufficient research. I hold the opinion that Handke distorts images of Serbia purposefully because for him it does not represent a subject entity but rather a “sujet made into an object.” One gets an impression that Serbia is deliberately transformed into a symbol that can be manipulated when needed in order to improve or correct the self-image of the West. To clarify that point of view, I will refer to an illustrative segment from the novel where words which describe the real condition Serbia found itself in during Handke’s visit are bolded, how Handke perceives those circumstances are italicized, and finally words referring to the contrasting situation in the writer’s homeland are underlined:

Not a few reports have made fun, more or less mildly, of the indeed **ridiculous things with which the Serbian people, if they don’t belong to the local mafia, try to make a profit, from badly bent nails to painfully thin plastic sacks and, let’s say, empty matchboxes.** But there was also, it now turned out, much to buy that was *beautiful, pleasing, and – why not? – charming.*

But what I remember most vividly of such market life, noticeably affected by **a time of shortage** – and this applied not only to delicacies but equally to all the perhaps really almost useless stuff (who knows?) – was a *liveliness, something happy, light, vivacious* about the process of buying and selling (that elsewhere has become pompous and grave, mistrustful and half scornful) – a graceful finger dance back and forth over the market grounds, a dance of alternating hands. From the messiness, mould, and forced nature of mere business deals there arose there, in miniature, but in myriad variety, something like an *original* and, yes, *traditional pleasure* in commerce. *Pari passu* business dealings: the meaning of such a term was renewed here in this isolated country, as was, for example, the word “notions.”

*And I caught myself then even wishing that the country’s isolation – no, not the war – might continue; that the Western (or whatever other) world of goods and monopoly might continue to be inaccessible [emphases added].*²²

From this emblematic passage, we can grasp the main accent of the novel which helped shape its whole esthetics. As the bolded words indicate, the nineties in

Serbia were marked by “a time of shortage,” which was pretty serious, especially since people were trading in order to survive literary with trash – such as bent nails, thin plastic sacks, or empty matches. Even though it is not mentioned in this particular excerpt, the reader cannot but remember, as a proper addition to the picture Handke evoked, other typical scenes from the nineties, e.g., ethnic cleansing, refugees, detention camps, murdered and wounded civilians, deprivation from almost all basic necessities, rigged elections, plunder, mass dismissal of workers, and on top of all of that, a genocide. One way or another, the narrator refers to this reality of the nineties throughout the novel. However, despite the visible signs of extreme poverty, war, and isolation, the author still finds that trading with trash has something beautiful, pleasing, charming, lively, happy, light, and vivacious in itself. One cannot but ask how the such discrepancy between the real picture and its description could have appeared. I take the view that Handke never actually perceived Serbia as a real entity, but rather as a reservoir of symbolic images which have relevance only for the Western self-identity. As we can see from the passage, the trade in Serbia, taken as a metonymy for the whole culture, was attributed to qualities like being authentic, original, *primaeval*, or traditional. Whereas the same trading activity in the Western context acquires the form of a mere business dealing characterized by its pompous and grave, mistrustful, and half-scornful nature. One can assume that the author juxtaposes the alleged genuineness of Serbian culture to the implied fake and phoney character of the Western counterpart in order to counterbalance a process of metaphysical disenchantment of the Western foundational paradigm. Had he actually approached Serbia differently, he probably could have seen that both realms were affected by the same dialectics of the hyper – hyper-nationalism in Serbia and hyperreality in the West. However, in the context of the novel, Serbia has significance merely as a reservoir of symbolic images construed for the sake of correction, redemption, and altogether control of Western self-identification. Only in such an order of things could the author have wished for “the country’s isolation – no, not the war” to continue and “the Western (or whatever other) world of goods and monopoly” to remain inaccessible. Therefore, one might conclude that in the period of anti-foundationalism, the Balkans, and Serbia in particular, continued to be orientalized and essentialized in order to persist to play the role of the European Other. Since the self-image of Europe has changed, the presentation of the Balkans has also acquired slightly adjusted overtones. The Balkans, apart from its traditional backwardness and barbarism, has started to connote more positive meanings of genuineness, authenticity, and truthfulness. Nonetheless, despite the fact that Handke pleads for justice in the

title of the novel, the author himself probably did wrong to Serbia by neglecting its true reality.

When it comes to the explication of any future political imaginary that might be foreshadowed in Handke's novel, it seems that the novelist more likely lamented the possible loss of the existent foundational paradigm of thought, rather than attempting to a constitution of the new grounds for social cohesion. If we are still apt to define the political imaginary embedded in Handke's novel, we will have to determine its four icons, as Buck-Morss suggests, in order to get the topography of the political terrain, i.e., the collective body, the enemy, the associates, and the sovereign agency authorized to wage wars. With respect to the collective, it is easily discernible that the novelist predominantly perceives so-called Western society as the social collective at stake. Handke does not explicitly name enemies or associates of this body collective. Instead, he rather offers modernist dogmas – cults of individualism and absolute values – as the desirable metaphysical figures responsible for social cohesion. According to Epstein's concept of the dialectics of the hyper, it is the very mechanism of the foundational paradigm, not some external menace, that threatens its own existence. Therefore, it makes sense that Handke did not outright name enemies or associates. Yet, it seems probable that novelists endowed Serbia with meanings that are favorable for Handke's main concern – the preservation of the modernist status quo. Therefore, we may say that Serbia can be considered an imaginary associate of Handke's criticism of anti-foundationalism. Similarly, it can be also said that hyperrealism of the media is deemed as an adequate enemy figure. Even though Handke does not explicitly name the sovereign agency which has the legitimacy to wage war, in Handke's novel the position of an authority legitimized to wage wars for the interests of the collective is arguably reserved for the bourgeoisie intelligentsia – that is, for Handke himself. Handke is here in line with the typical perception of the role of liberal intellectuals, who, according to Stipe Šuvar, were expected to act as the "consciousness of the epoch" or as the "cultural messiahs" of their collectives.²³

Since the political terrain in Handke's novel is primarily concerned with the Western ontological level of the political, we cannot consider Handke's political topography as entirely relevant for the futures imagined in the post-socialist Yugoslphere. To get an insight into one of the possible political futures for Serbia, the Balkans, or even the whole of Europe, we turn to Kusturica's foreword as a valuable source of information.

23 STIPE ŠUVAR, *Politika i kultura*, Beograd 1980, p. 241.

2. Kusturica's Serbian world as a proposal of the future imagined in the post-socialist Yugoslphere

As previously stated, Emir Kusturica, a renowned director praised in Handke's novel, in his text *The Apostle of Truth*,²⁴ which has been used as a foreword to the Serbian publication of *A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia*, further elaborated and updated the political imaginary which in the novel has been merely hinted at. Even though Kusturica somehow voluntarily treats Handke's main ideas, one still can trace the logic that governs Kusturica's correlation between the two texts. The political imaginary that the director proposes is based predominantly on the principle of self-balkanization. The adopted strategy starts with the entire acceptance of the order of the things introduced in the novel and then continues with the subsequent adjustment of Handke's favoured political terrain. The novelist's intention to perceive through the deception of realities, to find its meaningful whole, and not to unravel the cause of the Yugoslav conflict is often repeated in the novel. He holds Serbia, consequently, as either a victim of the media's new style of bringing out fake stories, or as a symbol of the substance of the real. Obviously, Serbia is not included in the collective body Handke is concerned about. At any rate, Kusturica makes a crucial twist in Handke's political perspective. He agrees with Handke that Serbia is genuinely the real substance of Europe that Handke is looking for and further specifies that it is actually the Christian Europe Handke had in mind. That way, the director accepted for Serbia to be an essentialized entity and offered the further essentialization of Europe as a proposal of a joint political program based on the old "antemurale" myth according to which Serbia, or more precisely Kosovo, assumes the role of the bulwark of Christendom. Therefore, in line with the director's (mis)interpretation of the novel, Handke got engaged in the conflict directly on the Serbian side because he recognized the present-day endeavours of Serbia dedicated to the protection of European Christianity which is threatened the same now as in ancient times. With Kusturica's intervention, Serbia, or more precisely its southern province, from being the symbol of the substantial, authentic, or the real has been transformed into a "last resort of European Christian God." Hence, the old dichotomy between the West and its Serbian Other has been cancelled, and as its replacement, a new order of a Christian Europe has been introduced with its Serbian Other included. Serbia is now, as in ancient times, assigned an old

24 EMIR KUSTURICA, *Handke, apostol istine*. in: Zimsko putovanje do reka Dunava, Save, Morave i Drine ili Pravda za Srbiju. Beograd-Novi Sad 2020, pp. 7–14.

role of protector of the southern border from foreign, most likely the Islamic invasion. We may assert that for Kusturica's interpretation of Handke's novel the social collective amounts to the Serbian world fitted within Christian Europe, which is its ideological associate and ally. When it comes to identifying the enemy within political imaginary Kusturica proposes as "the picture of our future", the figure of the enemy is arguably most likely projected onto the invaders of different races and religions that might try to attack the southern border. So, the Other of Europe is now allocated to an antagonist religion or race. Furthermore, Kusturica determines one more abstract enemy, who "is showering us with a bunch of politically correct works, aimed at clearing the stage for the new world."²⁵ The director specifies a couple of times whom he has in mind as an interior threat to Christian Europe. Those are "phoney leftists in the neopagan circus who have transformed gradually into neoconservatives" and also "George Soros's protégées." As regards to the sovereign body as the last icon in the political imaginary, we may say, since we are dealing with political imaginary exposed predominantly in territorial terms, that it is most likely the mass-conscripted national army.

Still, it needs to be added that the ideological worldview Kusturica is rendering is not an invention. It is actually a rather long-lasting or even dominant cultural formation with a respectable history dating from the eighties. At this moment, it might be useful to bring up briefly the dialectics of the hyper that took place in the Yugoslosphere so that Kusturica's position can be related to the existing tradition. In the same manner as in Eastern Europe, the position of the main metaphysical figure, modernist telos, or utopian centre, was reserved for the idea of the proletarian dictatorship; in the context of socialist Yugoslavia, that position was held by the idea of permanent revolution. The idea of permanent revolution is used here in the sense it acquired from its relation to the Yugoslav experiment of self-management when, as Predrag Vranicki put it, "processes of self-management in all spheres of social life [were] the real permanent revolution of [the] time."²⁶ Vranicki expounds that the development of socialist societies might degenerate into the state of statist bureaucracy, which as a consequence may give rise to the worker's alienation – like the deformation of the capitalist way of production.²⁷ To avoid such deformity in socialism, Yugoslav Marxist philosophers, after splitting with Stalin, proposed a revolutionary

25 E. KUSTURICA, *Handke, apostol istine*, p. 11.

26 PREDRAG VRANICKI, *Samoupravljanje kao permanentna revolucija*. Zagreb 1985, p. 189.

27 P. VRANICKI, *Samoupravljanje kao permanentna revolucija*, p. 160.

reconstruction of classical Marxism-Leninism by placing the “focus on man, the individual human being, and his possibilities for liberation from various forces and conditions impeding his free, creative development.”²⁸ One may say that socialist self-management in Yugoslavia at the position of ultimate social ground placed the metaphysical figure of a man as being of praxis implying that the “essence of man is freedom or liberation via praxis.”²⁹ Social grounding based upon the idea, as cited in Gruenwald, of “*human being as the first, only and highest value* [emphasis O.G.]”³⁰ entails that all political, economic, and cultural forms of society must undergo processes of permanent revolutionary transformation until the final goal is achieved: universal human emancipation implemented alongside the humanization of both the individual and society. In accordance with the dialectics of the hyper introduced in the theoretical part, the idea of permanent revolution, once placed at the position of absolute, or sole authority, is expected to grow over time to such an aggrandized dimension that the overall reality will evaporate under the pressure of a totalizing ideology, and what will remain is the mere simulation of self-managing socialism. Observed regularity in the developments of foundational paradigms of thought compels us to conclude that it is only a matter of time until the society that institutionalized the idea of freedom is going to demonstrate its entrapment. Some authors like Branislav Jakovljević take the year 1968 and the student protests in Belgrade as the exact date when the pseudo quality of the idea of permanent revolution was exhibited; in other words, it was obvious in the course of the June 1968 demonstrations in Belgrade that socialist self-management was a mere simulacrum of the proclaimed communist agenda.³¹ Therefore, the crisis of modernist legitimization, or the foundational paradigm of thought, started as early as 1968. However, unlike in the Western discourse, the answer to these crises was not the postmodernist carnivalesque subversion of the modernist dogmas. In the context of the former Yugoslavia, it was not postmodernism that became the new dominant cultural formation. Or to use Marchart’s words, foundationalism as the dominant ideological perspective was not followed by anti-foundationalism. At the place of permanent revolution, it just placed ethnic identity as the new major metaphysical figure in the still foundational politico-philosophical paradigm of

28 OSKAR GRUENWALD, *The Praxis School: Marxism as a Critique of Socialism*, East European Quarterly, 15-2/1981, pp. 227–250, here p. 231.

29 Ibid., p. 242.

30 Ibid., p. 237.

31 BRANISLAV JAKOVljević, *Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia, 1945–91*, Ann Arbor 2016, p. 124.

thought. That way, unlike in Western discourse, Yugoslav society prolonged its modernity as a means to overcome modernist crises of legitimation. In the new circumstances, society as an abstract body has started to be imagined not as a community gathered around of idea of achieving communism in an undefined future, but rather as a collective homogenized by a common enemy epitomized in the neighbouring nations. The shift of the major metaphysical figure, from the idea of building communism to the ethnic identity, provoked the emergence of a whole new cultural formation – the so-called national realism. Baruch Wachtel has written about novelists who created a whole new canon upon which the new nationalist paradigm was grounded. In the context of Serbian literature, he considers, among others, authors such as Danko Popović, Vuk Drašković, Vojislav Lubarda, and Dobrica Ćosić.³² The pattern established in the literature of nationalist realism was recognizable for its distinct features, such as the victimization, self-balkanization, orientalization, and demonization of the enemy usually projected onto the collective of neighbouring nations, the mythologization of national history, the inclination towards conspiracy theories, and camp literature. The same idiosyncrasy may be noticed in a short foreword by Emir Kusturica. For instance, Kusturica victimizes the collective he represents by stating that Handke could not have found a nation in the whole of Europe that has suffered and faced so many difficulties as Serbia did.³³ To prove his point, the author enumerates all casualties of the Serbian people throughout history. As has been already pointed out, Kusturica also mentions a conspiracy theory related to the creation of a new world by neopagan leftist conservatives and Soros's beneficiaries. Furthermore, the director discredits the enemy he finds in certain Bosnian and Albanian critics who disapprove of Handke's poetics.

Even though one's right to demonstrate freedom of speech by asking for a broad public consensus around a preferred worldview, including Kusturica's, cannot be denied, it still must be mentioned that such historical concepts appear to be obsolete and inappropriate for the era after postmodernism. The reason why particularly this concept may be said to hamper historical progress is that it once again perpetuates a long-ago obsolete pattern which assumes that society has to be instituted solely on solid foundational grounds. The consequence is the circular repetition of the dialectic of hyper, either in the form of hyper-revolution or hyper-nationalism. The major flaw of foundationalism is its inability to

32 ANDREW BARUCH WACHTEL, *Breaking a Nation, Making a Nation: Literature and Cultural Politics in Yugoslavia*, Stanford 1998, pp. 197–227.

33 E. KUSTURICA, *Handke, apostol istine*, p. 10.

accept its contingent character and the quasi-transcendental nature of its main metaphysical figures – of both ethnic identity and permanent revolution.

3. Trans-utopianism – Ilić's solution for transcending foundationalism

In the beginning, it seems reasonable to first retell the plot in order to provide insight into the political imaginary which is the focus of the paper's interest. The novel opens with an introduction of the main protagonist, named Filip Isaković, who is heading by ship for treatment in a secluded mental hospital. On the riverbanks after arriving, Isaković, who is also a main focal point of narrative consciousness, right away witnesses the police investigation of a dead body, which signals that in terms of genre, at least partially, the novel will comprise elements of the detective story. As the subplot of the detective account unravels, the reader finds out that the two groups of patients attempted to escape the asylum and that in the course of events a woman, a migrant from Syria, drowned. The death starts to attract wider attention to the psychiatric institution, and it gradually becomes clear that clandestine experiments have been conducted in the hospital. The case of controversial human experimentation amalgamates the novel, in terms of genre and also with topics from science fiction. The science fiction subplot gradually reveals that the Serbian government and a pharmaceutical corporation from the Netherlands agreed to carry out a project, headed by Dr. Sabinović, which was aimed at erasing the traumatic memories of patients who participated in the Yugoslav wars. Isaković also starts to attend sessions with Dr. Sabinović, through which it becomes known how he ended up in a mental hospital in the first place. It comes to light that Isaković is a jazz musician who used to play double bass but has forgotten how to play after a nervous breakdown. His mental health problem was initiated, as things stand, with his experience of the war in Croatia. Later on, the mental distress persists as the hero fails to establish meaningful relations either with his wife or with his colleagues from the band. The protagonist's entanglement with two women – his wife and his trumpeter's girlfriend – brings into the novel elements of a romance. The love triangle – or more precisely, quadrangle – ends when his wife resolves to end their relationship and move to America. At the same time, a trumpeter decides to kick him out of the band and instead include his girlfriend Ena, a woman Isaković is in love with. The fact that he gets expelled by his longtime rival, and especially his awareness that Ena picked the trumpeter instead of him, seems to be the final blow that the hero was unable to withstand. During his stay in the mental institution, Isaković becomes a close associate of one more patient: Dr. Julius, who happens to be a psychiatrist himself. The reader learns that Julius's demise started with his attempts at medi-

cal treatments of the infamous Mira Marković, who was once first lady and herself an influential politician. Mira Marković is a historical figure who, along with Slobodan Milošević, was governing the regime in Serbia during the 1990s, and she was held to be an accomplice to the series of war crimes on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. It appears that her disease in the novel is directly caused by her involvement with the genocide in Bosnia, which she chooses to deny. The psychiatrist tries to alert the international specialists to the peculiar medical case he has personally observed. However, secret services manage to prevent him and subsequently put him in the mental hospital. The reader discovers that Dr. Julius was placed exactly in that hospital since it was a long time his home. His mother, once a nun, while at the service in the mental institution started a love affair with Dr. Dezider, another psychiatrist and Julius's father. Soon after the end of WWII, Dezider committed suicide following harassment by party officials, even though he himself was a dedicated revolutionary. Flavijana, a former nun and Julius's mother, died after imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp. Isaković's friendship with Julius, and especially his treatment with talk therapy instead of a brutal electroshock procedure, eventually helped Isaković to navigate his way out of mental illness. The two decided to run away from the hospital, but not before they unmasked the criminal misdeeds of a foreign corporation and state administration. However, during his escape attempt, Julius dies and Isaković has to carry on alone all the way to Genoa to find the truth about the death of Flavijana, as has been asked by his deceased friend. Living in harsh conditions as a migrant in Italy, Isaković faces two ways out – either he is going to entertain passengers on cruise ships, or he is going to play with his migrant friends in small clubs. He chooses the second option, which seems to be the incentive for his final convalescence. The novel ends with Isaković's new band performing the song "Libertad," which starts to sound like a contemporary "L'Internationale."

It is rather clear, even from this oversimplified presentation of the plot, that one major issue brought up in the novel covers the investigation of the rise of nationalism as a political ideology and the ensuing dissolution of Yugoslavia in blood. The author apparently intends to pose the uncomfortable question of Serbian guilt for war crimes. As one can see from the title of the article that Julius was preparing to publish, "Psychopathology of the ruling couple in the light of Shakespeare's drama," the major burden of responsibility is placed on the Milošević couple. Exactly as the crime of the Macbeths turned the general order of Scottish things upside down, it is assumed that the crimes of the Milošević couple, and the subsequent denial of Serbian involvement, transformed the whole country into a lunatic asylum. The narration in the novel is presented so that a direct connection is established between the actions of the ruling couple; the

wars in Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo; and the mental disorders of the individuals who participated in them. National wars, exactly as Buck-Morss explicated and as Ilić illustrated, produced “physical destruction of the material world” and “particular insanity triggered by centres of power.” To recover from the material, mental, and ethical impairment brought about by the war, society as a whole, as it is stated in the novel, must deal with the traumatic past. With his writing, Ilić managed to subvert old “dulce et decorum est” into, as the moral of the story about Đuri and Tibi teaches, a new saying that “for friends one should live and for Serbia in the nineties no one should have died.” As is clear from what has been said so far, Handke’s and Ilić’s perspectives on Serbia in the nineties are as different as the political imaginaries they opt to create.

Apart from the reevaluation of the traumatic past and the nationalistic canon, another thematic bloc the author varies in the novel is the criticism of the societies which are governed by strategies related to the optimization of efficiency and the maximization of profit. It is through science fiction subplots that the topic of the imperative of technological and scientific progress and its downsides, such as dehumanization and social alienation, is being discussed. The science fiction subplot conveys the message that the excessive dependence of scientific research on profit-driven corporations has deprived scientific knowledge of its humanistic perspective. Against a background of the forced oblivion of past traumas by means of chemical manipulation and technological processing, the novel offers as an alternative “the dangerous idea of confronting patients with real conditions in society that inflicted traumas in the first place.” As could be seen in the novel, not only in the realm of science did the profit reinforce itself. To the protagonist’s great distress, money matters have become deeply involved with the questions of art as well. Furthermore, one of the reasons behind the nervous breakdown of the main character, as is suggested, is the hero’s consent to compromise his art for the sake of profit. The genuine rehabilitation actually commenced at the moment when Isaković refused to make a concession when it comes to his understanding of what art is about, since, as he said, “jazz is not just business.”

It is not just nationalistic and capitalistic power centres that have been subverted in the novel. One line of events, especially that concerned with the destiny of Julijus’s parents, aims to reevaluate the communist past as well. The fact that Dezider, Julius’s father, who used to fight as a revolutionary for the new world of brotherhood and unity, commits suicide after the successful revolution in Yugoslavia does not speak favourably of the country. Due to the party and revolutionary terror that Dezider could not cope with anymore, he decided to take his own life. Still, it has to be remarked that the plot summary made it clear

that it was rather concrete opportunistic individuals among communists that one should blame, rather than true revolutionary fighters for freedom or their idealistic ideology. However, once it becomes evident that Julius's mother died as a consequence of her interment in a Nazi concentration camp in Croatia, one cannot but deem the couple as the victims of the twentieth century's two totalitarianisms: fascism and communism. Nevertheless, it is not just the terror of the Party that came under criticism and subsequent revision; new left policies have also been duly scrutinized in the novel. For the most part, the main reproach addressed at left-wing politics is concerned with their remoteness from the world and the reality of those they want to represent. The character of Ena, who is presented as the least likely to compromise her true self and is therefore trustworthy, complains that contemporary leftists would never forsake their privileges and "become shoemakers instead," as her grandfather did just to be closer to people whose interests he claimed to advance. Interestingly, a certain similarity between Handke and Ilić has yet to be noticed. It seems that exactly as Handke holds Serbia from the nineties to be able, with its alleged authenticity, to counterbalance Western dissolution to simulacra, Ilić portrays the character of Ena as being able to counterbalance, owing to her alignment with inner being Isaković's further personality disintegration.

Even though the novel leaves no illusions about the totalitarian practice of socialist order in the former Yugoslavia, still the poetics of the novel considerably resemble the tradition of socialist modernism, especially for its extensive reference to avant-garde tradition. One may even say that the metaphysical figure of trans-utopianism, which generates the novel's entire structure in its essence, represents merely a reproduction of socialist main fundamentals only now approached from the post-foundational point of view. According to how the structure of the novel is accentuated, it seems that Ilić intends to revive the metaphysical figure of a man as a being of praxis upon which rested the whole utopia of the Yugoslav experiment with self-management, and emanating from it the art formation of socialist modernism. This thesis is in line with Epstein's claim that "'trans phenomena' seek to come to self-expression in the form of repetition."³⁴ For the avant-garde art present in Ilić's novel, we may say that it is aware of its own "secondariness," but that, at the same time, it does not give up its objective of reimagining the utopian fundamentals of social grounds. However, the resurrection of utopia in Ilić's novel has relevance for society only as

34 M. N. EPSTEIN, A. A. GENIS, S. M. VLADIV-GLOVER (eds.), *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, p. 547.

a project aimed to bring in, in Epstein's words, "a new intensity of life experience and a broader horizon for the individual," contrary to the claims of historical avant-gardes at the total grounding of social foundations. The relationship between Julius's parents in the novel's structure may be taken as an exercise of the trans-utopian revision of the former socialist project. As already mentioned, Dezider is held for the essence of the revolutionary principle in its "trans" meaning. Once Flavijana came in contact with this principle, she was transformed into a more liberated version of herself. Therefore, she abandoned the service in the repressive Catholic institution and embraced a new, more individualized spiritual belief that does not need transcendental authority. Since her new faith, written in her prayer book, represents the philosophical rationalization of the trans-utopianism, I should quote it from the novel:

I believe in undeniable concreteness, in the unity of the spirit, the spirit without god, the spirit not transcendental but immanent to human thought, the spirit that gives meaning to all individual thoughts, the spirit that gives unity to the multitude and from which unity becomes.³⁵

Flavijana's credo got its visual representation in the form of her personal breviary, which looked like a dada painting: "a unique example of a montage of photographs, reproductions, newspaper clippings, and added notes to existing texts."³⁶ Romantic dialogue in the novel between Dezider and Flavijana is organized in the style of a shamanistic incantation, which is a clear intertextual reference to an avant-garde futurist aesthetic and its contrivance of trans-sense language. The case of nun Flavijana, who has embraced secular humanism and rejected religious dogma after an encounter with the principle of revolution embodied in Dezider, becomes the metonymy of the future metamorphosis the whole of humanity has to experience. It was Flavijana who, by means of her heritage in the form of personal belongings, posthumously kindled the revolutionary transformation of the character of the main protagonist. Only after contact with Flavijana's breviary was Isaković able to start creating art again. The implied rationale reads that exactly as Dezider provoked a necessary change in Flavijana, and exactly as Flavijana influenced Isaković's attitude to artistic freedom, we may expect that the music of Isaković will be able to spread further zest for (trans) revolution – that is, an intimate and personal form of revolution for each and

35 SAŠA ILIĆ, *Pas i kontrabas*, Novi Sad 2019, p. 94.

36 S. ILIĆ, *Pas i kontrabas*, p. 124.

every individual. Since Isaković's music contains in itself the seeds of revolution and taking into account that music holds together the structure of the novel, I may further conclude that Ilić's very literature may be taken as a nest of the political program preserved in the form of art for future generations.

It is worth mentioning that Ilić creates utopian images not just by evoking the past historical avant-garde like Russian Futurism, but he also endeavours to produce his futuristic projections better adapted to the "information age." As an example of (trans)futurist attempts in the novel may serve prose imagery of the aerodynamic intercity train heading to an unknown future exactly as Malevich's "Red Cavalry Riding" headed towards the October Revolution a century ago. Malevich's depiction of the red horsemen and especially the words added to the back of the canvas – "from the capital of the October Revolution, the Red Cavalry rides to defend the Soviet frontier" – were probably the reason why the painting was accepted as a eulogy of the Russian Revolution and the Red Army.³⁷ Since Ilić overtly exposes the intertextual link between the representation of the aerodynamic train from the novel and Malevich's red horsemen on the surface of the painting, it is obvious that the projection of the revolution occupies the central moment of the novel's political imaginary.

As the avant-garde imaginary leads the reader to ascribe its meaning to the anticipation of (trans)utopia as a future political project, repetition of the motif of revolution further explicates how that project should take place. The idea of the repeated or permanent revolution cannot but summon the whole politico-philosophical machine of Marxist humanism and Yugoslav socialist modernism and its idea of a man as a being of praxis. The modernist telos of the Yugoslav self-management was the necessity of constant revolutionary transformation of the state apparatus until society reaches the stage where its every member can live as a being of praxis – that is, as a creative being capable of realizing his/her freedom through his/her own activity. The ideological background of the need for permanent revolution initiated the emergence of a literary formation of socialist modernism, which, as its main interest, sought to further overcome the barriers of the social horizon by offering numerous optimal futurological projections for its collective. In his novel, Ilić relies heavily on the tradition of socialist modernism, which he invokes not only in ideological terms (the idea of permanent revolution) but also in terms of selected literary devices. However, notwithstanding the fact that Ilić's esthetics and ethics are deep-seated into the

37 The Virtual Russian Museum. (n.d.). https://rusmuseumvrm.ru/data/collections/painting/19_20/zh_9435/index.php?lang=en (accessed on 2 January 2021).

tradition created by Krleža i Kiš, it is still correct to say that *The Dog and the Double Bass* made its own contribution to the existing canon.

It could be said that it is through the reevaluation of the idea of permanent revolution that the novel opts to diversify the socialist canon. In its canonic form, the idea meant that society had to transform itself constantly within the already-determined framework of the socialist project headed by the political and cultural vanguard. Within the poetics of trans-utopianism, revolution does not have any longer institutional structure behind it, nor does it have the mission to enlighten the socialist collective. Revolution in the new “trans” terms becomes a mere attempt to live an individual life, as stated in Flavijana’s prayer book, in accordance with one’s “human thoughts that give unity to the multitude and from which unity becomes.” The revised principle of the revolution is best illustrated by the example of Isaković’s mental illness and his consequent recovery. In plain words, the major reason behind the hero’s mental disorder was the social order that repressed every aspect of his personality – be it the ethnic, professional, or relationship aspects of his personality. Once he had the right guide, in the figure of Dr. Julius, the hero realized that recovery was possible only by virtue of the multiple mini revolutions he had to initiate. A road to individual revolution implied that at first, the hero had to unmask oppression and afterwards reestablish relations on more dignified grounds, better suitable for a man as a being of praxis. Eventually, Isaković gets away from the abusive relations and puts an end to the practice of making compromises in matters of art. The novel finishes with the performance of the song “Libertad,” which celebrates the credo of the (trans) revolution (e.g., “never stop fighting for your freedom and the ones you love”, or “let my verses take you where the brave never cease to care”), but also, more importantly, raises the voice for the numerous migrants whose dead bodies (e.g., Asja Alassaf, from the beginning of the novel) got stranded on the banks of Europe’s southern borders. The collective performance of the song is additionally understood as a definite signal that the hero is probably going to overcome his hinted artistic crisis.

One more discernible thematic block employed in the novel must be touched upon. It is a sporadic reference to the divergent yet uniform South Slavic identity. The common identity is mirrored in the shared mutually understandable language, where every particular nation brings its peculiar cultural flavour to the unique South Slavic whole. With the word “sijalica” (light bulb), the author demonstrates South Slavic diversification, thanks to which for a single entity there are numerous language variants, such as *žarulja*, *lampadina*, *izzolam-*

pa, Gluhbirne.³⁸ This is rather contrary to the recently more present attitude of language purism, which insists on precisely delineated language territories. Ilić offers a different perspective according to which the present religious, ethnic, or language variants among South Slavic people should not be perceived as a bone of contention but as multiple options for a better choice. Apart from the similarities in terms of language, the author also points to the legacy of the shared Yugoslav culture that continued to exist even after the disintegration of the common country. It is clear that neither the author nor his hero think of the former Yugoslavia's cultural heritage as a foreign matter that has to be removed or purified. If we take into account that the main protagonist considers that his language represents a mix of South Slavic language variants and not only pure Serbian, we may say that the author perhaps sketches (trans)Yugoslavia as a possible political entity at the ontological horizons of the addressed collective body.

One still has to point to the paradox that the personal (mini)revolution Ilić proposes to a certain amount resembles Handke's search for the real. It is rather symptomatic of how the two imagine the real. For Handke, it is isolated Serbia in the nineties, whereas for Ilić it is attractive Ena in Victoria's Secret underwear – a brand that has come to symbolize the male perception of the ultimate female physical attractiveness. As has been previously stated, since Ena does not undergo any essential transformation of character but, on the contrary, promotes the change the main hero has to face, her persona should be taken along with Dezider as the embodiment of the principle of revolutionary advancement. However, the fact that the heroine is stylized in the spirit of the slightly exaggerated consumeristic perception of female beauty and sexuality imposes the impression that literature that holds itself to be a herald of revolutionary liberation is still unable to produce images of unhindered female emancipation from consumerism and patriarchy. It seems that gender roles come last in line for the (trans)revolutionary reevaluation and that literary canon probably needs at least one more mini-revolution.

Finally, when it comes to the explication of the political imaginary embedded in the novel *The Dog and The Double Bass*, again four icons introduced by Buck-Morsse must be identified. The topography of the political terrain proposed by Ilić consists of the following icons: its body collective (a single individual who is marked in terms of time by his/her attempts at mini revolutions, or in terms of space by the territory of the former Yugoslavia and more broadly by the European superstructure with open borders); the icon of the enemy (wild zones

38 S. ILIĆ, *Pas i kontrabas*, p. 112.

of power and oppression: national chauvinism, party terror, organized religion, imperative of profit in art, abuse of science); the icon of associates (oppressed individuals and classes); sovereign agency (there is no such agency that has the legitimacy to wage wars; it is up to individuals to freely associate out of care for the common good and the need to fight against mutual enemies).

If we consider how the political imaginary has been codified in the novel, it becomes clear that Ilić proposes a post-foundational paradigm of thought with the idea of trans-revolution as its main metaphysical figure. Marchart and Epstein posited that trans-phenomena are capable of transcending the well-known traps of foundationalism and of providing social cohesion on less repressive grounds. I guess that Ilić's novel might foreshadow the emergence of a whole new formation in the literary community of Yugosphere exactly as Krleža did a century ago.

Conclusion

From what has been said so far it seems that it is possible to provide an answer to the posed question from the beginning of this article which relates to deciphering ideological imaginary encoded in literature by means of the already discussed Buck-Morss formula. When it comes to the interpretation of the political moment in the representative texts – Kusturica's foreword to Handke's novel entitled *Handke – The Apostle of Truth* versus Ilić's novel *The Dog and the Double Bass* – we may say that the following contrastive icons have been identified: 1. body collective is divided between Kusturica's proposal of the so-called Serbian world against Ilić's perception that body collective should consist of single individuals marked in terms of time by their attempts at multiple mini revolutions, or in terms of space by (trans)Yugoslavia and more broadly by European substructure with open borders; 2. the icon of common enemy on Kusturica's side is projected on antagonistic religion, nation or race, whereas on Ilić's side in this hegemonic conflict wild zones of power (national chauvinism, party terror, organized religion, imperative of profit in art, abuse of science) are taken for the enemy figures; 3. the icon of common associate according to Kusturica's foreword is thought to belong to Christian Europe while according to Ilić's novel position of allies is ascribed to the oppressed individuals and nations; 4. the icon of sovereign agency legitimized to wage wars in Kusturica's text is linked to mass-conscripted religious or national army unlike in Ilić's text where such institutionalized agency does not exist, on the contrary, it is up to individuals to freely associate out of their care for the common good and need to fight against mutual enemies. Even though for now it cannot be said with certainty which side will emerge victorious in this war of ideas, it is still worth trying to identify ideological options

which might take hegemonic positions after the end of post-communism on the territory of the former Yugoslavia and hopefully, that way make a contribution to the clarification of our perspectives for the future.

Finally, if we doubt that escaping ideology is possible and we accept that if anyhow ideology can be most likely escaped by virtue of demystifying one's own ideological positions, then it seems appropriate to cite at the end inspiring words of Viktor Miziani which may serve as a display of the adopted ideological perspective in this paper:

“It is crucial that the problem of the universal be raised as a contemporary issue. I understand that it is a utopia. It is done completely consciously, yes, utopia is dead, so long live utopia. Utopia endows the individual with a more significant and a wider horizon.”³⁹

39 As cited in M. N. EPSTEIN, A. A. GENIS, S. M. VLADIV-GLOVER (eds.), *Russian Post-modernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, p. 546.