

## NON-PLACE OF NOVEL IN SLOVENIA'S TRANSITION

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V prispevku s kritično-mimetičnega stališča opazujemo aktualne družbene procese v treh sodobnih slovenskih romani – *Popkorn*, Andreja Skubica, *Pasji tango*, Aleša Čara in *Čefurji raus!* Gorana Vojnovića – in pri tem upoštevamo različne teoretske pristope in modele: Augéjev model ne-mesta kot prostora brez identitete, Lotmanov model odnosa semiotičnega sistema in zunajjezikovnega okolja ter Benettov model odpora ter de Certeauov model strategije in taktike.

sodobni slovenski roman, ne-mesto, Augé, odpor, strategija/taktika

The subject of this paper is the critical-mimetic pattern of the contemporary Slovene novel that depicts current social processes. It deals with three novels: *Popkorn* by Andrej Skubic; *Pasji tango* by Aleš Čar and *Čefurji raus!* by Goran Vojnović. The methodological approach relies on Augé's concept of the non-place as a space which lacks identity, Lotman's concept of the relation between the semiotic system and extralinguistic reality, Bennett's concept of resistance and de Certeau's concept of strategy and tactics.

contemporary Slovene novel, non-place, Augé, resistance, strategy/tactics

### 1 Introduction

This paper will discuss three contemporary Slovene novels: *Popkorn* by Andrej Skubic, *Pseči tango* by Aleš Čar and *Čefuri raus!* by Goran Vojnović. All of them in different ways describe the contemporary reality of post-Communist Slovene society and liberal-democratic processes. We are dealing here with critical-mimetic works which reflect the symptomatic locations of social contradictions. We have selected these novels because we believe that those texts are show-pieces for the relation between literary and social structures. In Skubic's novel, we are interested in the connection between ideology and crime, and we explore the process of the semantic weakening of ideological patterns and the forming of history as a (hi)story – a narrative concept. Regarding the methodological approach, we use Lotman's concept of semiosphere – the relation between semiotic system and extralinguistic

reality, and Augé's concept of non-place as a space which lacks identity.

Čar's main hero, the young writer Viktor, is a typical »passive Slovene character« (Matajc 2006: 154) who finds himself in a whirlpool of an »unsafe world without conventions« (ibid.). We will deal with the aspect of the present time as some sort of a palimpsest, a place marked with traces of the past (Augé 2001: 74). Regarding Viktor's idea about the Park of Memories, we use Eco's concept of symbolic order with its immanent reversible processes and Derrida's concept of sign.

The last novel this paper deals with is *Čefuri raus!* by Goran Vojnović, which represents the narrative type that Helga Glušič describes as containing »the topic of a mal-adjusted young man haunted by the shadows of the past, the chaotic present and the uncertain future.« (Glušič 2002: 294.) Here we will emphasise the (anti)cultural practices

of a minority immigrant social group and the issue of assimilation by using Bennett's concept of resistance and the paradigmatic elements of »the poetics of the oppressed«.

## 2 Horror house

Skubic's novel *Popkorn* is about Valter Koren, a lucid thirty-year-old who represents the paradigm of the young entrepreneur in the post-Communist world of the new liberal democracy and free economy. His entrepreneurial idea about a museum of famous Slovene crimes and criminals, despite the fact that it seems bizarre or grotesque, dwells on issues of the past and the present, truth and ideology, private and public – the front and back of Slovene politics and its history. Koren's contradictory relation is symptomatic regarding the truth, which is affirmative when he tries to launch his entrepreneurial idea: »I'm talking about the truth! [...] we will show the facts how they really happened [...] we will bring reality to the present!« (Skubic 2009: 39), or absolutely relative in a scene involving a quarrel with a tourist during a sightseeing tour:

Oh, come on! It isn't true! You're on pins and needles because of the question of what is true and what is not... It's a matter of stories, everything is about stories. Look, the fact that the woman next door is a whore is not a story, it is a deduction like Sherlock Holmes... but what we want to sell here is definitely a story. And I am a master of that. That is my job. (Skubic 2009: 18–19, translation T. Z.)

The latter example shows that Koren treats history as narrative, a language construction. Historiographical reference to its object (historical facts) is absolutely arbitrary, similar to de Saussure's meaning of term and that is why it has the possibility of autonomous dynamism and internal development as Lotman describes in relation to the

reference between semiotic system and extralinguistic reality (Lotman 1998: 5). Koren's idea about the museum is the same because he »wants to sell the story«. Well, it is not important if the connection between facts and their representation is authentic or not, but it is important that the concept is attractive to tourists. However, regardless of Koren's treatment of historical topics, his idea of founding the crime museum seems like an attempt to construct a rigid flow of historical evolution, as if the syntagmatic axis rotates by ninety degrees and forms the simultaneous paradigmatic section of crime ideology in one place. Of course, it is clear that Koren manipulates historical facts and that he is led by the logic of profit, but there is another thing that he also represents – the resistance to accepting values of the global post-capitalist hyper-consumerist society:

[...] any moment now they will tear down Ljubljana Castle and build a multiplex and shopping mall there. We need to parry. Multimedia. We need an original horror house... That's what we need. Horror house. Gestapo methods, OZNA... if you have a group of Italian tourists, take them to *fojbe*, and then, when they are freaked out, show them the details of hostage executions from Italian prisons in Ljubljana. (Skubic 2009: 35–37, translation T. Z.)

We would now like to introduce the concept of *non-place*. Augé used it to label places like shopping malls, airports, trains, squares, hotel rooms, motorways, etc.<sup>1</sup> It seems that Koren's intention of founding the crime museum is in fact an act of resistance in Bennett's terms: »an inferior social group's defensive reference against the culture of power under the circumstances when power forms come from a source which is experienced as external and other.« (Bennett 2005: 225, translation T. Z.) It is important to understand the concept of power culture as

<sup>1</sup> Augé defines space as a more abstract concept than place. »The concept of space [...] we use to describe some extension, gap between two things or two points, or to some time interval.« (Augé 2001: 77), while place is defined by happening.

the power of consumerist culture and global concerns which are both *external* and *other*, so Koren is the part of an inferior social group against that kind of social processes. He finds in the museum of crime part of the national identity regardless of its negative content and the possibility of commercial manipulation. Therefore we can conclude that the museum of crime, or the horror house as Koren calls it, is some sort of semiotic space, a narrative form which represents an attempt of identification with space, in other words the act of standing up against the supermodernist increase of non-places (Augé 2001: 85–86).

### 3 Kardeljevo or The Park of Memories

Čar's novel title *Pseči tango* (Dog Tango) suggests a surrealist aura and linguistic detachment from the realistic model of narrative. His »virtuoso style and rich story-telling« (Glušič 2002: 294) act like a veil over extralinguistic reality, so Glušič compares some articles with Hieronymus Bosh's paintings. However, we will put aside linguistic topics and surrealist depictions, and take a look at the thematic layer which refers to Stremšek's scandals and family fights about the questions of Kardelj's historical role and the future of his monument, since those parts reflect the deep structure of Slovenia's social and political discrepancy which Kos calls the »Slovene disaster«. This refers to incidents during The Second World War, i.e. the conflict between Communists and anti-Communists, where it must be emphasised that the large majority of anti-Communists took action not because they wanted to serve Italian fascism or German nationalism, but in order to defend themselves against the Communist revolution (Kos 2004: 178–180). Let us look at an example from the novel:

Vladimir is the contractual owner of the plot of land with Kardelj's monument in front of the parliament and he threatens that he will melt the statue down into a bronze egg, and the other, Lojze, threatens that he will sue Vladimir if the statue is damaged.« (Čar 2002: 26.)

The present time is represented as a sort of palimpsest where the identity of nation, social groups or individual (re)forms itself continually through historical references, (Augé 2001: 74). Literature is a system which plays the social function of historical signs desemantisation (Nöth 2004: 523), for example:

He passed beside the nervous POP TV journalist and read the inscription on the board: *On behalf of the IO OF and CK KPS date 1st October, 1942. Edvard Kardelj – Kristof issued a secret order to Ivan Maček – Matija, the commander of Slovene partisans: execute all priests. Similarly, all officers, intellectuals etc., and especially kulaks and theirs sons.*« (Čar 2002: 64.)

Čar, like Skubic, tends to sift historical matter with a view to forming authentic history and the present. The most important personalities and central ideologies of Communism and national-liberation movement become the object of observation and they are moved to new semantic places in the frames of polyphonically structured democratic society. Viktor Viskas, the main hero of Čar's novel, like Valter Koren in Skubic's novel, offers some sort of solution. In other words, the journalist asked him the question: »do you agree that the statue of Edvard Kardelj should stay in front of the parliament [...] or would you prefer that it be melted down and turned into a statue of the beatified bishop Slomšek?«, and he replies that the statues had had their own life and that a great majority of them, sooner or later, had obtained the status of exile, so Koren says that he is in favour of establishing a Park of Memories: »[...] there we could put [...] all these things as [...] as a memory and warning of their transformation [...] our transformation.« (Čar 2002: 65, translation T. Z.) The metaphor emphasises the distinction between natural causality and symbolic order. That is, natural causality is a no-return process (it is impossible that a burning tree anticipates the bolt of lightning), while symbolic order is established by »the strategy of speech [...] and those rela-

tions are reversible« (Eco 2001: 113–114). However, there is one more important difference; it is possible to control natural phenomena, for example, to change the flow of a river, to build dams, etc., as opposed to symbolic order which is an out-of-control system and represents the process of continuous shifts of meaning, like Derrida's thesis of a sign which »constitutes presence in its absence« (Derrida 1971: 740). Absent matter cannot articulate its own truth, the same applies to Kardelj who is not in a position to talk about his real meaning and he cannot be connected to a polygraph. Hence, he is not a sign for himself, but for us – or, as Viktor says, he serves as a »warning for our thinking.«

#### 4 Football – the field of identity

The quotation from the previous Čar novel will serve us to show how intertextuality works in the contemporary Slovene novel. Čar's main heroes Viktor and Anita wanted to rent a flat; Viktor finds an advertisement and says:

»[...] apartment with two rooms for fifty Deutsche Marks plus expenses. In Fužine.«  
 »I'm not moving to Fužine«, she immediately replied.  
 »Why not?«  
 »Because Bosnians live there«, she said calmly.« (Čar 2002: 26.)

We can say that the word »Bosnian« has become the universal signifier for »the Other« and it can signify a Croat, Serb, Muslim, or even a Jew or Roma – the ethnicity is not important for the general signifier of »the Other«. However, the narrator and main hero Marko Đorđić is explicit about his ancestry: »My dad, Radovan Đorđević, is a Zvezda fan [...] He is from Bosnia, but he is a Serb.« (Vojnović 2009: 8.) We start from the national issue and the question of »the Other« since Marko Đorđić represents contra-cultural reality and a typical gestures of the minorities, including the iconography of belonging: sarma, football, fights between

fans, nostalgia for Bosnia, Serbia, and his indulgent cousins who give you anything you want (the only problem is that they usually do not have anything), patriarchal family, Slivovitz, alcoholism etc. All these motifs are paradigmatic alphabet of resistance and »the poetics of depressed people« (Bennett 2005: 229). The text on the cover of Croatian edition of Vojnović's novel says that Marko Đorđić is »a distant cousin of Hanif Kureishi and the main hero of his novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*«. It is important to emphasise one big distinction. That is, Kureishi's novel begins with the next words: »My name is Karim Amir and I am English by my ancestry and my education« (Kureishi 1998: 7), while Vojnović begins with: »I don't have a football team! [...] If I lived in Belgrade, I would support Zvezda and I would be their fan« (Vojnović 2009: 7). The narrative perspectives are clear: Kureishi is affirmative, while Vojnović is negative; Kureishi shows the aspect of assimilation, while Vojnović shows the aspect of maladaptation. We emphasise this since our standpoint is that Marko Đorđić represents »the historical and experienced gap between the location of home and the location of belonging« (Fortier 2008: 238).

We can also find some sort of Đorđić's social group closeness and its hard nucleus in the structure of novel. The novel is written as a kind of inner dialogue – every chapter starts with the question word »why« and the answers represent the hero's intimate (hi)story, but also the (hi)story of his social group. The space of the novel (extratextual space is cramped into the borders of the neighbourhood of Fužine) mirrors the space of Đorđić's consciousness and the text gives the impression of an adolescent diary. The reflection of the main hero tells us the story of his lack of adaptation and the impermeability of his social group. Marko Đorđić is the type of character that Lukàcs characterised as subordinate; he is in fact a non-hero whose intensity aspires to the periphery (Lukàcs 1968: 49). In view of this, Đorđić is similar to

the sceptical and nonconformist type of »jeans prose«, like Salinger's, Aksjonov's or Plenzdorf's heroes. His attitude to the question of assimilation is explicit:

[...] they ramble something on assimilation [...] They want ex-Yugoslavia workers to enjoy Prešeren and Cankar. Nonsense. As if they read their national poets. I'd like to be a football fan. But I can't. That's why my Slovene identity suffers. The same is true of the Čefur part of my identity. How can I be assimilated as a Slovene if I don't have my football team? It doesn't work like that. (Vojnović 2009: 10.)

This article suggests the form of resistance which Bennett qualifies as »conservative praxis committed to the defence of subordinate culture« (Bennett 2005: 225). We would like to emphasise that the conservatism of Đorđić's action relates to the preservation of subcultural and class-based elements which are represented as constituent elements of his immigrant's »ordinary« culture. Literature becomes a strategic enclave, a place for storing emotional energy against the environment of social actuality.

## 5 Conclusion

Regarding the aforementioned »strategic enclave«, we would like to refer to de Certeau distinction between the terms strategy and tactics. That is, de Certeau defines strategy as »a place which can be outlined as proper and can serve as a foundation for relating to dissimilar exteriority« (de Certeau 2003: 40), while tactics »cannot rely on something independent, nor the border which distinguishes žthe other' as a visible totality, the only place of tactics is the other's place« (ibid.). After considering three contemporary Slovene novels, it seems that literature is the particular act of resistance against social reality which »always reforms spaces to places, and vice-versa« (Augé 2001: 75). We would like to say that the critical-mimetic patterns of Slovenia's transition novel turn the extra-literary »layer of reality« – phenomenal reality

in Kant's sense and nominal reality which is transcendent to culture (Lotman 1998: 31) – into a place of identity where diachronic development and Augé's supermodernity processes become the elements of the synchronic system. That system is the intersection of the social and individual information and practices. However, the stability of the place of literature is dispersed in its consumption and reception, which again transforms the place of literature into the space of reading.

Skubic's, Čar's and Vojnović's novels represent the necessity which Glušič links with »intimate human misery, undependable consciousness about oneself, history and the present time, the social environment and its inspiring chaos« (Glušič 2002: 288). However, apart from that intimate level, the cited works are a critical reflection on the protean nature and global processes of the supermodern post-capitalist consumer society. Also, an important fact is that the new Slovene novel emphasises intercultural as one of the essential social issues. In the end, it seems that the contemporary Slovene novel offers some sort of rhetorical home filled with different narrative voices, languages and strategies which provide a place of identity within a world of hyper-production non-places.

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