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Looking Awry: Reading Žižek in the Former Yugoslavia

Lucinda Cole

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(In affectionate memory of Vera Abrams)

"The object *a* is an object that can be perceived only by a gaze 'distorted' by desire, an object that does not exist for an 'objective' gaze."

—Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*

In the summer of 2000, about a year after NATO ended its bombing of Belgrade and the surrounding countryside, I found myself, a scholar of eighteenth-century British literature, on one of the few planes still flying into Yugoslavia. Having lived with an (anti-Milosevic) Serb for the past several years, I knew enough about Eastern Europe to distinguish between "Slovenia" and "Slovakia"; having co-taught a course on nationalism and multiculturalism, I knew much of the literature by Balkanists pertaining to ethnic cleansing. And having met a significant number of intellectuals associated with prodemocratic forces in Serbia, I knew enough about the citizens attacked by NATO to question the wisdom of these bombings. But in preparation for my trip, my first to Eastern Europe, I searched for writing I hoped could help me understand the region apart from this highly overdetermined political context. There wasn't much. Travel books on Eastern Europe generally excluded the countries that made up Yugoslavia and especially Serbia, since the United States had

imposed a travel warning at the outbreak of the Bosnian war. Moreover, very little had been translated apart from books which dealt with the issues most central to American foreign policy, like Slavenka Drakulić's *S.*, a novel about Serb rape camps. Even the "classic" reading — Yugoslav-produced partisan novels such as *The Poem*, travel narratives by Edith Durham and Rebecca West, Olivia Manning's *The Balkan Trilogy* — told stories about young men and women (mostly men) sacrificing their desires for the greater good. These antifascist partisan heroes were difficult to reconcile with the Serb soldiers of recent stories who, before raping a woman, carved crosses or Cyrillic letters on her chest, forehead, and back. And neither bore much resemblance to the Serbs I had met. So, suspicious of such motivated representations and determined to see for myself what had happened, I climbed on the plane in Boston with no book in my bag at all.

My political motivation was reinforced by a personal desire. People kept telling me that in Eastern Europe I would be forced to confront my own "American-ness," a confrontation I both expected and desired. In these few weeks, I hoped to be changed. That didn't really happen, though — at least not in the way I had foreseen. Certainly I experienced moments of estrangement. For the most part, however, I was seduced. As I look back through the photographs of myself in other peoples' homes, wearing dresses and shoes that looked decidedly out of place, surrounded by men and women who wanted me to like them and to return home with reports that Serbs aren't killers but honest, hardworking people like us, I see myself glowing in the position assigned to me, the role of the American brave enough not to hate the Serbs, maybe even romanticizing myself as a cultural ambassador to the war-torn East. Dubravka Ugrešić, an antinationalist writer from Croatia, writes beautifully, and somewhat bitterly, about the transitory and ultimately one-sided nature of such cultural encounters: "Eastern Europe was a different world from the West":

And that is why the *Westerner* loved her. He loved her modest beauty, her poverty, her melancholy and her suffering, her . . . otherness. He also loved his own fear, the quickening of his pulse when he travelled there, he was excited by that entry into the empire of shadows and reassured by the reliable exit-light: passport, embassy, credit card. . . . It was freedom from reciprocity. Eastern Europe was his secret, a mistress content with little. At home he had a faithful wife, order, and work. Like every mistress, Eastern Europe only strengthened his marriage.
(240-41)

Once out of Eastern Europe, having indulged in the defamiliarization it offered, I too fell quickly back into my usual routine. My lectures were simply strengthened by a better sense of detail.

A more subtle and lasting alteration, I now realize, derived less from facing cultural difference than from witnessing a different culture in the process of change, watching it transform itself, not knowing what the outcome would be. Politically, of course, things now seem to have resolved themselves, at least judging from a distance. Anti-Milosevic groups, marching on Parliament, suc-

ceeded in forcing democratic elections. Kosovo, hitherto under UN protection, held its own elections last month. Milosevic is on trial in The Hague. My personal life is also less dramatic, my Serb colleague and one-time partner having moved on, taking with him, alas, most of our books on Eastern Europe. During the summer of 2000, however, the lines between the personal and political were confused, as the people around me — individuals with real and sometimes painful pasts — tried to shape a future whose contours were unpredictable. By virtue of mere proximity I was able to see democracy in its birth throes and was forced to confront democracy's contradictions in a way other than purely theoretical. I don't mean to evoke with that phrase "other than purely theoretical" some radical distinction between "theory" and "experience" which gives priority to the latter. Quite the contrary. I mean to evoke what it felt like to be in a literally liminal state — "state" in the geopolitical sense of that term — with a passport, admittedly, but with no embassy and no credit cards and, as it turned out, at times no English-speaking company except, eventually, Slavoj Žižek's *Looking Awry*. Although I brought no books, my then-partner did, and I turned to Žižek after tiring of Yugoslav television, whose only English channel was about sports. While Žižek's 1992 text is subtitled "An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture," its goal is to explore the "impasse" of democracy, the ways in which the universal equalization promised by democratic law is based upon the exclusion of the right to enjoy, on the suppression of individual fantasy. It was a Slovene's doubt, then, and perhaps even his desire, that helped frame the questions I asked on this trip to what remained of Yugoslavia in the midst of its historical trauma.

1. Belgrade, Zrenjanin, and Novi Sad

Things began cheerfully enough. My ex-partner and I — I'll call him "Dragan" — were met at the airport by the editor of *The Belgrade Circle*, a manically productive politico whose nickname is "Buddy" and who responds to one's every other suggestion with an enthusiastic "Genius!" (*The Belgrade Circle* is a journal and loosely-organized group of writers who would probably describe themselves as "pro-Western," in the sense that they supported democratic laws and intellectual exchange.) Buddy insisted that, before unpacking, we go on what he called the first leg of "The War Tour." We drove past what I thought was the bombed-out former Communist Party building, though I later saw a picture of the same structure on an anti-NATO postcard, where it was described as a "Business Center." In the vicinity of the embassies, many of which were closed, we passed a long fence papered with dozens of *Otpor* posters, row after row of raised fists. ("*Otpor*," the name of the anti-Milosevic group later given credit for closing down the Serbian Parliament, means "Resistance.") Buddy asked us not to take pictures for fear of being either stopped or shot as we drove past the heavily-guarded house of then-President Slobodan Milosvic on either side of whose gate stood two armed boys. A black car came out as we passed and one of the boys appeared to make a joke. We moved quickly past the house of Arkan's widow which, because it was exposed to the

street, was surrounded by at least fifteen members of his Tiger Guard, all looking anxiously, or maybe menacingly, at the passing cars, all holding their fingers inches from their guns. ("Don't stare at them!" Buddy warned.) During this drive I felt a minor dissociation reminiscent of jet lag. Seeing the war from Buddy's '75 Buick was a bit like watching the first dress rehearsal of a play. The actors were dressed but had not yet mastered their parts. "They're all boys," I kept thinking, "and I like their berets."

That evening we ate at what was once a famous gathering place for progressive intellectuals but had recently been taken over by nationalist writers. When we started dinner, about 10:00 pm, there were nine at the table (four Americans, five Yugoslavs), eight of us smoking cigarettes, and the restaurant was almost empty. The architecture, the lights, the service, and the wine contributed to the feeling that we were in the middle of the world, that nothing bad could happen here, even though much of the evening was taken up by stories of the present company's survival of the NATO bombing. One woman, a law student, had made her way through the falling bombs to a dance club, determined, she said, "not to cower." Others had visited friends in the country. I was in love with everyone, even the gothic-looking female philosopher to my left who spoke only to the men all evening. This, I thought, was the "real" Yugoslavia and these the "real" Serbs in relation to which the boys in berets were a backdrop. Or these were the Serbs of the partisan novels, at least two of the present company having been beaten up by strangers thought to be members of the Milosevic posse. At the very least, this group embodied the spirit of Yugoslavia when it still could be considered "Yugoslavia," during the Tito years when Zagreb was a center of music and art, Ljubljana home to new intellectual movements, and Belgrade a meeting place for leftist and progressive intellectuals from Europe and the non-aligned nations. Or so I had been told. Though by the time we left, the restaurant had filled with men in business suits who looked at us disapprovingly and even threateningly, I was too preoccupied and tired to care.

The next day we spent the morning in downtown Belgrade, taking pictures of ourselves in front of the now-destroyed American cultural center, "NATO Killers" painted in black on the walls, then met Buddy at The Belgrade Circle offices. In fear that the repressive Law on Terrorism was going to be passed and their computers confiscated, Buddy and his staff were emptying the rooms. Later, we hired a taxi to take us to Zrenjanin, in the Vojvodina region of Serbia, and the home of Dragan's parents. I was nervous about getting in the taxi and, somewhat foolishly, asked the man Dragan hired if he had a good driving record. He said he used to teach in a driving school. About twenty miles north of Belgrade, we came across a cross-sectioned automobile, one of those tiny Yugoslav cars, with a man tumbling out the driver's side, obviously unconscious, decidedly bloody, probably dead. Two men were trying to pull him out of the wreck and off the road before the car was hit again. I asked "Shouldn't we try to do something?" and our driver reached for his cell phone which proved to be out of calling range. As we drove through glass and past the other spectators — maybe ten vehicles — I saw that everybody had a cell phone, even the farmers. Dragan noted the "peasants" looked like drug dealers, and laughed a little. Once we reached a store our driver called the police, just in case.

In Zrenjanin, the memory of the incident was crowded out by people hoping to make us feel welcome. Even the neighbors stood or sat in front of the apartment building to greet us. Dragan's son, who was born in the United States but spoke a broken Serbian, had been in Yugoslavia for the past few weeks and hugged us like only a Yugoslav does, long and close. I gave the women my gifts — mostly cosmetics and creams they could no longer get — and admired the crochet pieces on the table and chairs. Dragan's mother brought out a book on Tito where she kept her crochet patterns and showed them to me. The following morning, she gave me two pieces, both of which she had made, and I began to meet cousins and nephews. The nephews and one of their friends, who spoke a little English, took me to a peskara, a kind of beach, and taught me how to order the "good" beer, the beer with the deer on the label, at the little café ("Bambi pivo," they told me to say.) They joked that somebody had once found a dead horse in the water. When the café owner found out I was American, she switched the radio station to rock n'roll and insisted on fixing me a special treat, burak or fried dough filled with two cheeses, neither of which I recognized, though very much enjoyed. Within hours, I had a headache, was forced to bed, and woke up as ill as I'd ever been. That's why I picked up Žižek rather than touring the monasteries and bomb sites in Novi Sad, as we had planned. I couldn't go out — indeed, was doubled over at the thought of riding in a car — and reached for something familiar, in part to settle my stomach and in part to settle my nerves because whatever second skin I flew into Belgrade with had, within hours, fallen away. The crackers tasted metallic. The bedroom furniture seemed garish, like the set of an old porno film. The bath water looked dirty, though Dragan said it was simply colored by iron. Maybe I had been poisoned. The musicians on the variety show sported sinister mustaches. I could imagine them in the Tiger Guard's beret. And I couldn't shake the image of the dead or dying man lying halfway out his car, dripping on the road.

Very early in *Looking Awry*, Žižek attempts to illustrate the Lacanian concept of the real by analyzing *The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag*, a novel by Robert Heinlein. He quotes at length a scene in which two of the characters, Cynthia and Randall, have been told by Hoag that he has discovered some "minor defects" in the universe and they are to drive back home without opening the window of their car. They see a child run over and, although they remain calm and drive on, they lower the window of their car a little to tell a policeman about the accident. When they do, they see "no sunlight, no cops, no kid—nothing. Nothing but a grey and formless mist, pulsing slowly as with inchoate life" (14). For Žižek, this passage illustrates the Lacanian real, "the presymbolic substance in its abhorrent reality." (15)

Having just seen a dead or dying man on the road, Žižek's example struck me, in my present mood, as uncanny but still more unsettling was his discussion of "the place from which this real erupts: the very borderline separating the outside from the inside, materialized in this case by the windowpane" (15). From within the car and behind its closed windows, he continues, "the external objects are, so to speak, transposed into another mode. They appear to be fundamentally 'unreal,' as if their reality has been suspended, put into parentheses

— in short, they appear as a kind of cinematic reality projected onto the screen of the windowpane” (15). This addressed my sensation, when I was on the “War Tour” in Belgrade, of feeling untouchable and the outside, unreal. But the windowpane is only a metaphor for the way fantasy works. This barrier between real/reality is in fact the product of a retroactive projection, a fantasy of social reality “that can at any moment be torn aside by an intrusion of the real” (17). The dead or dying body on the road to Zrenjanin may have heralded this trauma for me, but I didn’t experience it *as* trauma until my illness, where it reappeared as part of a paranoid structure (“Maybe I had been poisoned.”)

And if I, having been in Yugoslavia for only three days, could experience so viscerally this minor breakdown, what must the Yugoslavs be feeling? Back home, I had talked to students about ideology, the symbolic order, and attempts to construct new national identities during changes of political leadership. Now I remembered that Ugrešić writes in *The Culture of Lies* about growing up under Titoism, an ideology of brotherhood and unity, surrounded by books and friends, then finding herself in a bomb shelter in the autumn of 1991, feeling “like an extra in a war film.” She offers the story of her neighbor, a senile eighty-year-old, asking her daughter “what’s on television tonight?” The daughter replied, “‘A war has started, mother.’ ‘Absurd, the film has started,’ said the old woman, settling herself comfortably in her chair” (4). Ugresic doesn’t comment on this passage, and I tended to skip over it, but now I thought I understood something more about the relationship between trauma and ordinary life. According to Žižek, “to maintain this barrier separating the real from reality is the very condition of a minimum of ‘normalcy’” (xx). From this perspective, although Žižek isn’t explicit here, when the symbolic order changes so violently and so rapidly, most people fall into a kind of disassociation which, to those outside of the trauma, looks like denial. Dragan’s parents, for example, could be regarded as “ordinary Serbs,” spending time with their family and friends, watching television, reading, and standing in line for milk. Like many of their generation, they had been young communist freedom fighters imprisoned in Fascist labor camps when they were fourteen. Having worked hard under Titoism, they rose in the party, and now supported Milosevic. When I asked Dragan’s father what he thought of Milosevic, he replied “He’s no Tito.” We didn’t discuss “Serb atrocities,” Dragan and his father having had violent political arguments in years past. I still don’t know what they knew. We celebrated Dragan’s mother’s birthday at the vikanica, the tiny house and garden by which they kept themselves fed a few miles out of Zrenjanin. So were these people heroes or killers? Dragan’s mother showed me a picture book of Croatia and the former Yugoslavia, where they used to have an apartment. Did this indicate the desire for some “Greater Serbia”? Or was she simply sad I wasn’t able to see the country that they helped to create and that was now destroyed? Should we blame persons in their condition for trying to live a “normal” life? The alternatives, as Žižek points out, are either psychosis or paranoia. After all, the paranoid will try to avoid the madness that comes from acknowledging the breakdown of the symbolic universe by positing “an Other of the Other,” some hidden force actually pulling the strings — as in conspiracy theories, as in right-wing fears of a “New World Order,” as in, I now realize,

George Bush's posse hunt for Osama Bin Laden.

And what was I in relation to their trauma and the dead bodies uncannily made present for me by the dead or dying man on the road? The German author Peter Handke was widely despised throughout Western Europe for writing a book about "ordinary people" in Serbia during the recent conflicts. Within hours of the NATO bombings, however, Jasmina Tesanovic, a writer in Belgrade, began via e-mail to distribute her account of survival during the bombings and, once published in the year 2000, *The Diary of a Political Idiot: Normal Life in Belgrade* was hailed as a "thoughtful and courageous book." Did Handke's self-described apolitical attention to people in the Serbian countryside really signify some neo-fascist sympathies? Did Tesanovic's representation of Serbian "indifference" constitute a protest against NATO's intervention, or a justification of Clinton's "humanitarian" war? And did my own disgust at the NATO bombings place me on the political left or right? I couldn't tell anymore. One of the television stations kept replaying an old documentary about the United States having been charged with war crimes — crimes in Cuba, crimes in Vietnam, crimes that were never answered.

The following day, we finally went on our excursion to Novi Sad, first visiting a Turkish fort. Pointing to some dilapidated cannons from God knows what war, Dragan joked, "These must be the guns we used to fight NATO." His nephew, a little shocked, replied "That's not funny," and meant it. Much of the day was spent visiting the bridges brought down by American bombs. I have a picture of myself on the remains of one of those bridges, sunbathers in the distant background, me overdressed and smiling guiltily.

2. The Road to Macedonia

I was relieved to be rejoined several days later with people whose political contours were more sharply defined. The Helsinki Institute had arranged a symposium in Macedonia intended to bring together students from Belgrade and from Kosovo to discuss and presumably resolve their differences. Like many NGOs, the Helsinki Institute was trying to promote a Habermasian model of civil discourse as an alternative to the seemingly endless violence. To focus on a younger generation was at least to create the possibility of a world in which nationalism wouldn't necessarily engender mutual extinction. In Belgrade we met up with Buddy, the law student, several kids from Otpor, many more whose political associations I never quite understood, and Zenja, a pierced and tattooed assistant to Sonja, who had organized the mission. Together we numbered about thirty-five. Somewhere in southern Serbia, the bus was to pick up a handful of ethnic Albanians. Others would meet us in Lake Ohrid, Macedonia. I knew the conversation would be mostly in what most people still called "Serbo-Croatian" so I took Žižek along. I must have read at least as far as "The Real and Its Vicissitudes" because I put a star and the comments "Serbia" and "cf. Tito" next to the following passage:

Herein consists, also, the fundamental lesson of Lacan: while it is true that any object can occupy the empty place of the Thing, it can do so

only by means of the illusion that it was always already there, i.e., that it was not placed there by us but found there as an “answer of the real.” Although any object can function as the object-cause of desire — insofar as the power of fascination it exerts is not its immediate property but results from the place it occupies in the structure — we must, by structural necessity, fall prey to the illusion that the power of fascination belongs to the object as such.

(33)

Shortly thereafter, I guess I fell asleep. By the time I woke, the flat agricultural land of northern Serbia had given way to the first hilly and then mountainous lands of the south.

We stopped for lunch in a town whose name I can't pronounce. The two-story restaurant, the only building I saw in this town, struck me as being vaguely Austrian, probably because of its uncharacteristic awnings against white stucco, and the many window boxes planted with flowers.



Buddy and Petar

Shortly after the waiters seated the last of our party on the terrace, which we pretty much fully occupied, and just when our table had been served drinks, a bearded and black-robed Orthodox monk appeared seemingly out of nowhere, selling copies of Marko, the Book of Mark. Marianna, the law student, tried to get rid of him, but Dragan invited him to sit. The monk introduced himself by his Christian name, Petar. At first the conversation was among Petar, Marianna, and Dragan about the Orthodox Church's role in the present bloodshed, with Petar assuming the line that he aspired to live like Christ, and Christ carried a sword.

He offered us a (much debated) history lesson about the role of Orthodox Christianity and the “original” Serbs. When he found out I was American, however, Petar turned to me and asked, in English, “So is it true Madeline Albright is a Jew?” I said yes, I believed so, and the conversation turned to the NATO bombing and whether or not it was part of a “Jewish conspiracy,” with Petar arguing pleasantly in the affirmative, the rest of the group trying to persuade him that no such conspiracy exists and that Jews should not be demonized, with Dragan quoting Mark. It reminded me of conversations I had had with some types of Christian students when I taught in Alabama, the difference being that Petar spoke six languages and was more familiar with the rules of civil debate, if not with the etiquette of multicultural discourse. I wondered whether members of both groups — fundamentalist and Orthodox Christians like Petar — would qualify as examples of Žižek's paranoiacs. Petar did finally admit, however, that he had never met a Jew, and promised that were he to encounter one, he'd keep an open mind.

My mention of race relations in the American South where I am from (if Kentucky is regarded as “South”) prompted a completely unexpected result. Petar, we discovered, had read *Gone With the Wind* at least seven times, the book having been given to him by his blessed, now-dead mother. He could quote entire passages at length, and did, sometimes offering opinions on the main characters but primarily on Scarlett O’Hara whom he pronounced as “a bad copy of her mother, who was a saint.” His investment in the novel first struck me as amusing, but the longer he went on the more I saw it as symptomatic. What better novel than *Gone With the Wind* to portray the loss of a nation, even the loss of a race, to the forces of history? What better novel to exemplify the nobility presumably inherent in fighting for a lost cause? Did Petar imagine himself as some Balkan version of Ashley Wilkes? Certainly he was a romantic and an intellectual. The folk poetry of Serbia draws an explicit relationship between the mother and the land, an equation replicated in contemporary nationalist rhetoric. Nationalist politicians speak of defending “Mother Serbia,” which is to posit it as a found object, as an originary object, as a bounded and empirical geographical space, even though both the fact and the nature of this space is precisely what is being contested. “Mother Serbia,” like Scarlett’s Tara, was the object-cause of Petar’s desire. If his animus against Scarlett took a peculiarly misogynist turn, that too was attributable to the illusory nature of the structure he passionately tried to maintain. Scarlett, in his words, was a “bad copy” of her mother, a degraded replica. As someone who could defend herself, as someone who fought for what she thought to be hers, Scarlett could never serve to ground his object of desire. Only Ellen, and maybe Melanie, could.

In the midst of his tirade against Scarlett, while making the claim that she only married her first husband because he was kin to Melanie, Petar fumbled over the husband’s name, admitting that he couldn’t remember it. Somewhat angrily, Zenja shouted from the next table, “Charles!” When everybody laughed, I realized that much of the terrace had been listening to our conversation, and that the great majority of them had also read *Gone With the Wind*. Zenja, however, had a more Marxist interpretation of the novel, seeing it as a commentary on early capitalist relations. Buddy suggested to Sonja that the Helsinki Institute sponsor a forum on Mitchell’s novel. Petar allowed us to take his picture, though he replaced his hat and moved his Coke from out of the frame, explaining apologetically that his superiors wouldn’t like it. Against Zenja’s objections, he rode with us on the bus to the next village, so she organized the singing of a communist song. Petar cried “No, no! Down with communism!” Her group replied: “Down with the Church!” It was strangely good-natured, I think — almost giddy — a parody of political action on a bus in the middle of nowhere.

The mood changed radically with our next stop, which was at no building at all but simply a fork on the highway. Three ethnic Albanians climbed on the bus, dusty from standing on the side of the road, waiting. We were now in Southern Serbia close to the contested borders of Kosovo, not yet in Macedonia, and one of the men, who had very kind eyes, pointed out to me and Dra-

gan where the fighting had been taking place. In this village, the police station had been attacked and two men killed. That farmhouse over there had belonged to his uncle but was now burned down. At the Macedonian border we were held up for over two hours, though everyone's papers were in order. Later Sonja told us that the Macedonian officials were suspicious about a bus carrying both Serbs and ethnic Albanians. Surely we were doing something wrong.

3. Ohrid

At Ohrid, I finished Žižek's book, though to do so wasn't my intention. The symposium organizers had originally thought the discussions would be conducted in English which, unlike "Serbo-Croatian," was regarded as a neutral language for Serbs and ethnic Albanians. After Dragan did his presentation and received no response, it became apparent, however, that most of the participants understood English as well as I did "Serbo-Croatian" — barely, or not at all. So unless a film was scheduled, I spent the days as a tourist in what must be one of the most beautiful places in the world. High in the mountains, accessible only by a terrifyingly winding road, Lake Ohrid is the size of a small sea, with beaches, waves, and a good number of so-called "Western" Hotels. Ours was the Hotel Metropol, featuring

saunas, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, a billiards room, basketball courts, and — just in case one missed the point — a large glass case in the hotel lobby protecting a headless torso in a Western-style business suit. Here I felt at home. Many inhabitants in this 200-room hotel were German families, but a favorite spot for K-FOR troops on leave, it also housed some French and English. I even heard an American, though I didn't speak. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner were served on a terrace at regular times of the day. My experience of these peace efforts, then, like my experience of the war, was mostly second-hand, and filtered through whoever saw fit to give me a report. Evenings, however, were different, especially at first, since Buddy made an effort to introduce to me to people I would never otherwise have met.

The Otpor kids fascinated me. None of them over the age of twenty-five, they spoke with the passion of youth, waving their hands, like most Serbs, but fixed by an intensity of focus which made their eyes glitter. One had been in the military and then left. One, who looked for all the world like Antonio Gramsci, had escaped the mandatory draft with the help of his mother, who fed the authorities when they came for him, giving her son time to climb out the window. We talked about the "actions" they had organized and performed. The



Otpor kids in Macedonia

raised-fist emblem of Otpor (a parody of the salute Milosevic developed during his presidential campaign) had at this point been banned in Serbia. One action involved groups of people in different parts of the city putting on Otpor T-shirts and walking through the streets, then donning an overshirt before the authorities came, at which point another group in a different section would take off their overshirts, exposing the T-shirts, and so on. Through artfully planned subversions of the nationalist symbolic order, they kept the authorities confused and frustrated. Dragan and I were presented with some of their bilingual political materials and one of their T-shirts. I promised to distribute their material upon my return and did, but only to a graduate-level art class. For a while I wore my Otpor button.

I had a long conversation about Roma nationalism, the desire to create a state without territory, with a Roma graduate student named Dan who, as a “gypsy,” definitely regarded himself as a Serbian minority. I asked whether the Roma really traced their roots to India, and was told that this assumption was created by a 1974 treaty whereby, for political reasons, India accepted the Roma as an national ethnic minority. Mostly, we talked about film, especially about the Bosnia-born director Kusturica’s *Black Cat*, *White Cat*, which was about the Roma and featured Roma actors. In making this film, a Balkan comedy, Kusturica had hoped to stay away from the political controversy generated by his earlier *Underground*. Dan had worked on the film as a kind of advisor, and had asked Kusturica to devote some of its proceeds to a fund for Roma students. He refused. Dan really didn’t hang out with the Otpor people, although he was respectful, and committed. I gave him my card and encouraged him to contact me should he continue his study in the United States.

On my second night at the Hotel Metropol, Buddy seated me next to an eighteen-year-old who, I believe, called himself “Tim,” although I may have misheard. Tim, an ethnic Albanian, grew up in Belgrade, where his father worked for the government. After Milosevic came to power, however, Tim’s father started having problems at work and was forced to leave, presumably because the government discovered that Tim’s grandfather had been a Nazi. His family moved to Pristina, in Kosovo (or Kosova, as Tim called it,) and Tim started in a new school. Upon mutual agreement of the two headmasters, one Serb and one ethnic Albanian, this school had two entrances, the southern one for ethnic Albanians, the northern one for Serbs. This was before the war in Kosovo, and at first Tim didn’t know which entrance he should use, but his identity was somehow decided for him by the names the Serbian boys called him. When the war broke out, he lived in a mosque with many other families for three months, then escaped across the border into Serbia to friends when it became clear his family might be killed. After several months, they decided to go back to Kosova, having determined that the war might go on indefinitely and that they’d rather die in a place that now felt like “home.” On the way back, their bus was stopped by Serbian police, who forced Tim and six other young men of fighting age off the bus while his mother, his father, and his younger brother watched. Tim saw his family looking at him through the window as the bus drove away. About a quarter-mile up the road, a military jeep pulled the bus over and instructed it to go back. Tim and three other boys, apparently chosen at random, were allowed to rejoin their families on the bus. The others, he assumed, were shot.

The ethnic Albanian “Tim” who, in his own words, “had already lived three lives,” embodied most effectively the spirit of this conference, its pedagogical purpose. Unlike most of the other kids, he ate meals with Serbs and ethnic Albanians alike. I asked him how he ended up here. He told me he had hated the Serbs for awhile, as had his father, who had “gone crazy” during the war. Tim’s brother, alternatively, acted “as though nothing had happened.” Rejecting both the paranoia of his father and the neurotic normalcy of his brother, Tim decided to make an effort for the sake of those boys, he said, who were left “standing on the road.” That he wasn’t shot himself was simply a matter of luck. His experience helped some of us understand the desires of many ethnic Albanians for an independent Kosovo, though this subject remained an ongoing source of tension. Our party one night took over an outdoor café in Ohrid proper, an ancient town whose tourist literature boasted of “forty churches.” When a particular song came on the radio, the ethnic Albanian women got up and danced, balancing a drink on their heads. Most of the Serbs smiled but looked tense. Buddy clapped his hands and shouted “Genius!!” Every morning I heard reports about what had happened the night before. A KFOR officer, for example, had found Serbs and ethnic Albanians at 4:00 in the morning, talking on the beach. He said, surprised, “But I just got through separating you guys in Pristina!” and everybody laughed. Most nights were like that, people (largely Serbs) out on the terrace until the wee hours, fighting about the World Bank. I’d never seen pleasure and politics so closely aligned. One night I found Dragan and Marianna down by the lake, Dragan explaining Goethe’s color theory while he directed Marianna’s gaze to the moon.

Pleasure and politics — this relationship, ultimately, is what Žižek’s *Looking Awry* is all about. And three days into the conference I had plenty of time for analysis, for writing notes in my journal, and for thinking about the relationships the Helsinki Institute was paying Dragan and the others to forge. So Žižek and I spent significant time together, drinking spritzers on the beach. Here’s what I learned. According to Žižek’s Lacan, social bonds or all intersubjective relationships are based on four discourses — the master, university, hysteric, and analyst. Needless to say, this conference, with its professors and students, its promotion of civil debate and mutual acknowledgment, its lectures on color theory and the moon, was structured by the discourse of the university. Towards the end of his life, however, as Žižek emphasizes in his analysis of democracy, Lacan tried to describe the outlines of a “prehistory,” a “certain psychotic kernel” evading the social bond (132). This is *jouis-sense*, a One existing outside the chain of the Other free-floating and permeated with enjoyment. Lacan calls this point *le sinthome* and argues it “functions as the ultimate support of the subject’s consistency”:

The point of “thou are that,” the point marking the dimension of “what is in the subject more than himself” and what he therefore loves “more than himself,” the point that is nonetheless neither symptom . . . nor fantasy.
(132)

It’s the fact of this “kernel of enjoyment,” in Žižek’s analysis, that exposes the paradoxes, and perhaps the impasses, of democracy. Every one of us “dreams his world,” or organizes his enjoyment in a particular politically- and cultural-

ly-inflected way. Dragan's parents had memories of Tito, Petar had his Balkan version of *Gone With the Wind*, and the Otpor kids their vision of a democratic Serbia. At issue in each specific case is a radically particular and largely unknowable object-cause of desire. Yet "the field of the universal 'rights of man,'" Žižek continues, "is based upon the exclusion of certain rights" including "the right to enjoyment; as soon as we include this particular right, the very field of universal rights is thrown off balance" (167). Formal democracy, in other words, is from his perspective "fundamentally 'antihumanistic,' it is not 'made to the measure of (concrete, actual) men,' but to the measure of a formal, heartless, abstraction" (164). From this perspective, the liberal utopia in which we all, in private, act out our concrete particularity, while in public observing and being protected by a neutral system of rules, is impossible. Žižek regards the "recent flare of nationalism" in formerly socialist countries as a case in point (162). Nationalism, in his view, is an attempt to fill out the abstraction offered by democracy with "concrete contents" and "all such attempts will succumb sooner or later to the totalitarian temptation," he writes, "however sincere their motives may be" (164).

What could Žižek's analysis portend for efforts like this one? I wrote in my journal that it was "encouraging" to see Serbs and ethnic Albanians entering into conversation, even though that conversation was "sometimes tense." Dragan told me that a guy from Kosovo admitted that if he saw the Serb to whom he was now talking walking on his street, the Serb would be shot. As Žižek argues, "What is at stake in ethnic tensions is always possession of the national Thing: the 'other' wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our way of life) and/or it has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment" (165). Maybe this is why the Albanian dance caused even the progressive Serbs to stiffen up a little, and maybe this is why the ethnic Albanian women felt compelled to perform it. Moreover, within the Serb contingent were definite fissures, since the "actions" of Otpor, almost a performance art, were at odds with the more traditional representational politics of some of the other groups. Even the leaders of this conference had serious disagreements. Sonja believed it was correct for the United Nations to bomb Serbia; Dragan that it was counter-productive; others that it was premature. And sometimes I wondered about the proliferation of NGOs during this past decade of the Balkan crisis. In the absence of a stable economy, jobs with American-sponsored NGOs, of which there were many, could by a cynic be regarded as the first step in Clinton's "humanitarian war." Yet what were the alternatives? Žižek, much like Laclau, describes the "postmodern" solution to the impasse of democracy as involving an "active forgetfulness," enacting a fetishistic split which he describes as follows:

I know very well (that the democratic form is just a form spoiled by stains of "pathological" imbalance), *but just the same* (I act as if democracy were possible). Far from indicating its fatal flaw, this split is the very source of the strength of democracy: democracy is able to take cognizance of the fact that its limit lies in itself, in its internal "antagonism": This is why it can avoid the fate of "totalitarianism," which is condemned ceaselessly to invent "enemies" to account for its failures.

(168)

What troubled me then and now is the conditional “can.” Democracy *can* avoid the fate of totalitarianism. Nothing guarantees such avoidance. But Buddy, Dragan, Marianna, Sonja, Zenja, Dan, the Otpor kids, and especially “Tim” were proceeding on the assumption that their efforts were helping to create the conditions for a nontotalitarian state. I admired them. And most of them, I reasoned protectively, especially “Tim,” worked at democracy under conditions more difficult than Žižek had ever experienced, the Slovene revolution having been bloodless and lasting ten days.

In contrast, I felt increasingly superfluous. As the week wore on, the conversations got more intense and the nights later. They were planning an action, I heard. The ethnic Albanians didn’t want to be involved. The ethnic Albanians would consider it, but disagreed with the plan. Nobody spoke English anymore, so I made friends with a puppy who lived on the beach. Every meal he’d come on the terrace and beg. Two nights before we were to leave, I formulated my own action: I’d take the puppy home. Why not? Stray dogs were treated brutally in the Balkans. Sonja thought we could give him Valium, hide him



“Otpor the dog”

under our skirts, and sneak him across the Macedonian border into Serbia. In Belgrade, we could pay a vet to give him papers and within two days he would be playing in my back yard, clean, inoculated, and well-fed. I intended to call him “Otpor” and he would constitute my little piece of Yugoslavia, would demonstrate to me that I’d been to this war-torn country and had done something good. The night before we left, I sneaked him into my room, removed most of several hundred sand burrs, and gave him a bath. He cried and peed in the hall.

The next morning, while others were taking pictures of themselves in front of the KFOR trucks — some with irony, some without — I walked down to the beach and found him just waking up, wagging his tail and once again fully re-burred. In the end I couldn’t take him away from his life on the beach, although I knew that once fully grown and no longer cute he’d probably be shot. Instead I gave Zenja, who was traveling in a separate car to Pristina, a dress she had pronounced “perfect” and climbed back on the bus.

4. Resolution

Jasmina Tesanovic concludes *The Diary of a Political Idiot* on June 12, the day the first NATO troops enter Kosovo, with a wish. “Nobody knows,” she writes, “what it really means for the future”:

The only way to stay calm is to take it as it comes, and to use what we know from our history. But with Russians coming from the North,

British from the South, soldiers of every color, like a Hollywood film, personally, I feel fine. I feel less isolated. Let them all come, let our histories mix — anything, as long as they don't build a wall.

(136)

I don't know what life is like in The Former Yugoslavia now, but I do suspect that a wall is the least of their worries (having been reintroduced to the international community). Shortly after the massive demonstrations in Serbia, the Otpor kids, I heard, were approached about doing a Guess Jeans commercial. The American Embassy has reopened, and business interests are once again deeply invested in the region. The Belgrade Circle has translated an astonishing number of English books into Serbian and Serbian books into English. The brilliant female philosopher who didn't turn to her right during dinner is now highly celebrated and teaching in the United States, and our own most celebrated female philosopher, at least of the poststructuralist variety, has befriended my former dinner companion, who arranges her speaking engagements in Belgrade. All this seems right, and was probably the looked-for outcome of Clinton's "humanitarian war," the memory of which has faded in the wake of Afghanistan and new UN actions in the Middle East. I try to keep in mind, though, what Žižek says about "the only possible psychoanalytic definition of sin: an intrusion into the fantasy space of the other whereby we 'ruin his dreams'" (155). I have resolved to go back to reading and writing about eight-

teenth-century literature, and only partly as a response to Dragan having absconded with the books on Eastern Europe. The truth is, global political investment, like universal love, is for me a mood of the moment, a context into which I must be seduced, a desire so immediate it makes me forget what I know. I can't help wondering, however, whether somewhere on a beach in the Former Yugoslavia runs a dog whose secret name is "Otpor," whether he's still greeting strangers, and whether he's being fed.



Road sign in Belgrade: "Right Way," "Wrong Way," and in spray paint, "You Choose."

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