

ACCIDENTAL CELEBRITY? CONSTRUCTING FAME IN POSTWAR CROATIA

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Aim of this paper is to show different type of production of celebrity. Case of popular Croatian singer Marko Perković Thompson shows that unlike popularity in the west that is produced through the news about private life of popular persona, in Croatia avoiding of private life can lead to popularity.
Keywords: *celebrity, nationalism, victimhood, transgression, tradition*

Namen prispevka je prikazati raznolikost produkcije slave. Na primeru priljubljenega pevca Marka Perkovića Thompsona je razvidno, da se za razliko od priljubljenosti na zahodu, ki nastaja z novicami o zasebnem življenju, na Hrvaškem ta lahko utrjuje z izogibanjem razkrivanja zasebnosti.
Keywords: *slava, nacionalizem, žrtev, transgresija, tradicija*

After the war in the Balkans, one musician appeared that, at first glance, could hardly be labeled a celebrity. Although his CDs are even sold outside of Croatia and he is the only singer in Croatia that can attract more than twenty thousand fans at the largest soccer stadiums for his concerts, he is not conceived of as a media product. His name is Marko Perković Thompson. In contrast to celebrities that use media attention in order to maintain their popularity, Thompson is in constant opposition to the media. The media avoid his private life, the paparazzi do not follow him, and the public is unaware of any juicy details relating to his private life. Most of the time Thompson even accuses the mainstream media of avoiding his music in spite of his extreme popularity. To employ the definition and structure of celebrity as proposed by Turner (2004), Rojek (2004), or Cashmore (2006)—who claim that celebrity status has been transformed by making the private hidden part of a person's privacy into the ultimate celebrity commodity, sometimes even more important than a person's "special" talent or feature—one would be tempted to understand Thompson as a remnant of the old media production from late 1960s or early 1970s. This would go well with the popular understanding of the post-communist world as something transitional that is slowly discovering the media world of the advanced capitalist countries. However, of course, this would be an incorrect understanding of Thompson. By taking a look at the media products that survived on the market in Croatia, one would easily find that magazines and television shows that follow the lives of famous individuals have no financial problems and their number is even increasing. Moreover, in Croatian there has appeared the term *posvuduša* (roughly translated, 'everywherella'),¹ referring to a female that attends public

¹ I coined this term by combining the words *everywhere* and *Cinderella* because such girls are not simply interesting in being popular but also in finding a wealthy husband. It may be inappropriate to restrict the complex meaning of Cinderella in the fairytale only to a character that desperately wants to be married, but at least that is how she was represented in the Disney movies and has gained global recognition.

events in constant pursuit of media attention. This is exactly what is covered by Boorstin's (2012) definition: "well known for well-knownness." Thus, even when there is considerable knowledge and technology for celebrity production, the most popular person in show business in Croatia avoids it. Does this mean that Croatian audiences are different from others and that, despite all of the theories about popular culture, they have some genuine taste?

The musical style that Thompson produces is a mixture of folk and power metal, and this kind of music is certainly not the most popular, although ethnic rhythms and Balkan oriental sounds are popular in the hybrid style known as turbo-folk. However, there are no similarities between folk metal and turbo-folk, and even fans of metal music have found themselves on the opposite side of lifestyle and ideology from those enjoying turbo-folk. Thompson's fans are definitely not attracted to him because of his music or talent, but because of something outside of Thompson himself. This unknown material is the same as that found in contemporary celebrity: one cannot grasp the direct reason for a person's popularity; one is simply attracted to the celebrity's presence. This article examines this elusive material in order to further understand not just Thompson, but also the contemporary fascination with celebrities.

FOUNDATIONAL MYTH

It is necessary to begin with the story of how Thompson became what he is today. He was a soldier in the last Balkan war in the small village of Čavoglave, where, together with his friends, he established a small military formation that defended the village from attacks by the Yugoslav People's Army and armed volunteers. Before the war he was a waiter and an amateur singer and songwriter, but he never performed on stage. In 1991, during his days on the front line, he composed the song "Bojna Čavoglave" (The Čavoglave Battalion) and sang it together with his comrades. It is still unknown how song came to be played on the radio station in Split, but it instantly became a hit and soon Thompson was in Split together with his comrades recording the song in the studio and shooting a video spot. According to one story, Thompson himself brought the recording to the radio but, according to another, the recording simply spread among the soldiers and then started to be part of the musical repertoire in the inns and bars in and around the town of Split. Then someone from the Split radio station heard it at an inn and decided to broadcast it. The second version is what Thompson's fans believe is the true version. Through his version of the "foundational myth," he appeared as a person that is not in the race for glory and fame, but is just an ordinary guy like any other, but who is able to transform popular feelings and opinions into music.

In line with previous studies of celebrity, both stories can be understood as a product of specific management of two identities that every popular person has, regardless of whether he or she is a television, movie, or music star (Turner 2004; Marshall 1997;

Cashmore 2006). One is represented in the media, and another is a private one. It is the second identity that pops up as the focus of public interest. As all of the researchers mentioned agree, one of the main tasks of the celebrity industry is management of the private persona. Cashmore takes Madonna as an example of producing celebrity as a total product in which the private Madonna and the public one were merged, Turner, on the other hand, analyzes Big Brother and points to the hidden part of the people whose lives are under public assessment. Marshall takes a case of transformation of the representation of Tom Cruise's private life in order to enhance his celebrity status. The privacy of the celebrity is an organized product aiming to ensure the constant presence of the celebrity in media attention. However, these two stories of Thompson's beginning already show that his management of media attention does not focus on his private life. His "official" version of the story tries to erase interest in his private realm by aligning his private life with his public appearance. Thompson represents himself as an accidental celebrity. By accidental celebrity, I refer to the specific way of organizing a celebrity product that is currently spread throughout the global media in various talent shows and reality TV programs in which "ordinary" people pursue fame and media attention. These shows are based on the belief that "anybody can do it." Thus accidental celebrity refers to one way of producing a celebrity. However, in the case of Thompson, accidental is not just a good story for media attention but has an aura of "reality" to it. There were no producers, managers, lawyers, or experts—just an ordinary man with his friends. Taking Thompson's version of the story as plausible already produces a specific way of consuming Thompson's music.

Thus his fans do not perceive him as the product of media power or a force of the production business, but of the "people's" genuine voice. It is significant that the story of Thompson's beginnings became known and the focus of public interest in 2003, after Thompson had already gone through a substantial musical and personal transformation. Before 2002 Thompson was "just another" singer. He recorded four albums and experimented with different kinds of musical styles. At the beginning he used styles already established in Croatian pop music, which is known for importing and blending Greek rhythms, Mexican music, and Italian popular music. Because he did not have much success, he experimented further with ethno styles and rock. One song, "Vjetar s Dinara" (The Wind from Mount Dinara), which combined ethno music with nostalgic lyrics, was a success, but was not enough to enable him to have fifty thousand fans ready to attend his concerts. His experiments with public representation did not harm his profile afterwards. It could even be said that today his fans understand these early stages of his career as a result of Thompson's youth, naiveté, and submission to producers' advice and the music industry, and so after his changes he appeared to his fans as an even more genuine persona and as a winner over the forces of the celebrity industry. However, it would be wrong to think that it is possible to attract constant attention only through social media (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube). Marshall and Turner point out that one of the key points of producing celebrity status is transgression. In the movie industry, transgression is necessary: "The screen personality

must be denaturalized into a code of acting” (Marshall 1997: 106). In other words, to open up to new possibilities and roles in the movies, stars expose and regulate their personal life in the media as different from the one the audience has gotten used to in the cinema. The mechanism works in two different steps. One is to dig up something about the private life of the star as an extraordinary event, and the other step is to normalize the effect. Turner, for example, emphasizes this procedure as a way by which a celebrity makes a connection with ordinary people. Through transgression, he or she creates the possibility for the audience to restore social values and norms. They serve as an object of gossip through which, in everyday life, people reassert their belonging to the community, test their interpretation of normality, and renegotiate these values and norms. In the book *Fantastična bića Istre i Kvarnera* (Fantastic Creatures of Istria and the Kvarner Gulf), Boris Perić (2008) and I identified the same function of the fantastic creatures invented in folklore. They serve as a sign of a realm that exists outside of the symbolic order, or as a contingency of life that constantly threatens “normal” existence. Stories about them serve as a way to patch the inconsistencies of practices in everyday life. Inherent to fantastic creatures of folk tales and legends is transgression, and their function is to provide a social realm for articulation and to strengthen social norms and values.

One way to normalize transgression would be denial of events or giving a new explanation to them. Another way is to enhance the quality of performance through the logic that personal problems (e.g., addiction and divorce) do not affect the professionalism of the performer and, what is of importance later in this text, give a sort of aura of authenticity to the performing act, and produce new meaning of the music and the lyrics for the audience. A third way of normalization is that of a television host celebrity. Marshall (1997) points out that there is no clear-cut division between the television celebrity’s public and private persona. Normalization is produced by discussing the private events of the television star in the media itself as part of the public narrative. All of these mechanisms are at work in the case of Thompson, but what is different is his version of transgression. It is not that the private Marko Perković transgress anything; it is the celebrity representation or symbol of “Thompson” that does. Moreover, his transgression is of a specific political sort. It is possible to identify three different events that transformed Thompson from an ordinary singer in the first part of his career to the second stage, which included transgression as essential feature.

TRANSGRESSION AND NORMALIZATION THROUGH VICTIMHOOD

The most important event that boosted the transformation was the rise of the Social Democrats back to power after the death of Franjo Tuđman, the first Croatian president and the leader of the Croatian Democratic Union, in 2001. Although the Social Democrats came to power through a democratic election, many people interpreted this event as a restoration of communism. On the other hand, that event forced Croatian society to face

events from the Croatian War of Independence from a new perspective. Instead of simply celebrating victory, society had to deal with accusations by the international community and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) of atrocities by the political and military leadership committed during and after Operation Storm. The second event, allied with the first one, was Thompson's active involvement in politics during the protest by war veterans two years after the 2001 elections. The veterans gathered in Split to demand protection for the generals that had been accused of war crimes, and had been arrested and transferred to the ICTY in The Hague. The last event was his singing the fascist song "Jasenovac i Gradiška Stara" (Jasenovac and Stara Gradiška) at a concert in the town of Osijek. He sang this extremely disturbing song supporting the Ustaša's genocide of the Serbs at the Jasenovac concentration camp during the Second World War. At first Thomson denied the accusation, claiming it was a computer-manipulated setup, but later he admitted to singing the lyrics. Because of this song, all of the mainstream media avoided his music and video spots, and he is still not part of any important national television show and his music is rarely broadcast in the mainstream public media. Even today in the era of the reality show *The Voice – Najljepši glas Hrvatske* (The Voice: The Most Beautiful Voice of Croatia) the competitors do not perform his songs and he is not invited to participate in national network shows at the state-owned television station HRT. Interestingly, he is also not part of such events on private national broadcasting companies such as RTL or NOVA.

By publicly supporting the Ustaša movement, fascism, and death camps, he simply emphasized controversies that were already circulating about his public appearance and his concert audience. The news article on the portal Index.hr that discovered his public singing of the song "Jasenovac i Gradiška Stara" was thus titled "Thompson – domoljub ili fašist?" (Thompson: Patriot or Fascist?). However, instead of simply abandoning him as a marginal singer, suddenly the entire media space started producing more and more talk shows, exclusive media coverage, and expertise about the history of fascism in Croatia. The entire public discussion was organized around a topic that was, and still is, traumatic for Croatian society. Part of Croatian society opposed communism through alignment with nationalism. For them, communism was just another name for Serbian expansionism. Thus they understand the period between 1941 and 1945 as the last historical struggle against threats to Croatian independence and democracy, and believe that the Ustaša crimes against humanity from those times should be forgotten or dismissed. Another part of society in the same manner defends fragments of communist heritage (involving the struggle against fascism, social security, and industrialization) and is equally unprepared to admit the atrocities and democratic deficits that occurred in communist times. The split between these two groups is reflected in a range of different social spaces. Thompson, although all the time one of the key examples in these public debates, never took part in them; he communicated with the public only through occasional letters to his audience and press releases. Instead of offering an explanation for his actions, Thompson let others discuss them, consistently portraying himself as a naive anti-celebrity without media presentation skills. I attended a

few of his concerts and a striking fact was that in all the cases where I attended he started his concerts with obvious nervousness, as though he were not used to the stage. Only later did he relax, but still not completely.

In 2002 he released the album *E, moj narode* (Hey, My People), in which he completely abandoned any love lyrics or experimentation with musical styles. He remained heavily focused on the sound of ethno music, especially from his region but dressed up in heavy metal. This kind of hybrid style existed on his former albums but not as a trademark. From that point on, as Catherine Baker (2010) points out, he completely repressed his former career and invented Thompson as the band is known today. In those days he started inventing the new Thompson “foundational myth,” which was a product of the specific position Thompson held in public space, as an individual in constant struggle with the “forces of the evil” that have infiltrated Croatian institutions, media, and politics. His way of normalizing transgression was to represent himself as a victim. Marshall explained that television stars inscribe problems from private life into the media in order to become familiar to their audience. Thompson used the same strategy to represent his celebrity status as a product for everybody that feels restrained by the mainstream media discourse. Nobody knew anything about his private opinions and values.² The lyrics of the main song from the album might serve as a good explanation. In the song, he presented an image of himself as just another victim of history:

<i>Od vremena još od Krista</i>	Since the time of Christ
<i>Nova lica, scena ista</i>	New faces, the same scene
<i>Vražje sile se trude</i>	The Devil's forces make an effort
<i>Da nas ne bude</i>	To destroy us
<i>Antikristi i masoni</i>	Antichrists and Freemasons
<i>Komunisti ovi, oni</i>	Communists, and others
<i>Šire sotonske fraze</i>	Spreading their Satanic chants
<i>Da nas poraze</i>	To defeat us
<i>E, moj narode, e, moj narode</i>	Hey my people, hey my people

To be a victim is one of the strongest components of identification in the Balkans. The recent ethnographic account by Michaela Schauble describes such collective identification in the area of Sinj, a small town in the Dalmatian hinterland (not very far from the Čavoglave, where Thompson was born). Her book describes the ritual held by the pit where some of the Ustaša soldiers were killed without any trial by the communist government in 1945, immediately after the Second World War. By adopting Jeffry Alexander's

² More precisely, he stopped mentioning his private life, upbringing, personal memories, or political background. Before 2002 he used to talk about how his grandfather was in the Ustaša and his family had fought against communism. He started speaking only about Croatian unity and the heroism of war veterans.

interpretation, in which he claims that facing one's own trauma often results in refusing to recognize the trauma of the other, Schauble concludes that “[s]uch or similar dynamics of denial are to be found at various levels of private and public discourse in all parts of the former Yugoslavia” (2014: 152).

This specific voluntary self-victimization was not invented recently. This kind of discourse appeared in the sixteenth century and then was employed during the nineteenth century after the Balkans were liberated from Ottoman rule. The newly liberated societies represented themselves as *antemurale christianitatis* as border lands that had fought against the Ottomans for centuries. Self-portrayed as victims of a war that lasted for centuries, they expected something in return. During communist times, although the official international politics of Yugoslavia focused on the Non-Aligned Movement, all nationalists from the Yugoslav republics understood themselves as fighters against communism and for democracy. Thus in Croatia there still exist numerous public figures, historians, writers, and scientists³ engaged in a constant effort to interpret the fascist Ustaša movement from the Second World War as at least partly a democratic movement and not as the founders of a fascist totalitarian state that actively participated in the Holocaust, had racist legislation, and established death camps (see Rajković 2011). In case of the song *E, moj narode* (Hey, My People), Thompson situated himself as a fighter for democracy and a patriot, not as a fascist, through strong invocation of the *antemurale christianitatis* myth. However, to be completely successful he introduced the interpretation that the media and politics are still controlled by communists and liberals that are against Croatian independence, tradition, and Christianity. In his songs, war veterans became people that were betrayed by politics and the media. Instead of receiving as much symbolic recognition as they supposedly deserved, they faced a lack of public interest and attention for their achievements.⁴ Moreover, Thompson used the fact that the state administration transferred two generals to the ICTY and put one on trial at home as a clear sign of betrayal and ignorance. In the world that Thompson tries to build in his songs, such betrayal would be unimaginable. In that universe, soldiers are victorious in defending their country and therefore cannot be guilty of anything.

He not only successfully familiarized the audience with himself, but also succeed in transferring his celebrity representation into various media and genres, such as political talk shows and news that normally has nothing to do with the pop and rock singers. Driessens (2012) introduced the concept of celebritization as “meta-process involving changes in the

³ Due to the public debate on Thompson, two editors—a mathematician and another journalist—published the book *Thompson u očima hrvatskih intelektualaca* (Thompson in the Eyes of Croatian Intellectuals) in 2009. The book is a collection of interviews, essays, and short articles from newspapers written by academics to defend Thompson.

⁴ As with war veterans around the world, there are of course the same problems of reintegration back into society. A specific issue is disabled veterans. However, in this article I do not delve further into this issue; I address the war veterans as a specific subjectivity structure produced by Thompson.

nature of celebrity (or its democratization), and its social and cultural embedding (through its diversification and migration)” (2012: 653). He understands migration as a “process through which celebrities use both their relative autonomy as a public personality and their celebrity status to develop other professional activities either within their original field or to penetrate other social fields” (2012: 648). Taking his private life out of the picture, Thompson as a celebrity personality successfully gained this autonomy and migrated into various social fields, especially politics and religion. However, instead of the examples Driessens provides in his article, focusing on the migration of celebrities as a conscious and organized move in their careers, Thompson made his migration without organized effort (or at least people perceived it as such). Choosing to sing about the nation, war, and heroism, and especially transgressing the official discourse, he successfully migrated into other social fields “by accident.” He would say that he is just singing and that people find meaning and joy in his songs without his specific desire to entertain them. Thus, through migration, he expanded his “authenticity” and represented himself as the genuine voice of the people. In the case of Thompson, migration is not just a part of a career constructed in order to capitalize on former fame, as Driessens put it, but a process embedded in the construction of fame. Around his public representation, various social forces were established and gain the opportunity for articulation no matter whether they supported or criticized Thompson. As a celebrity, he functions as a kind of symbol through which any individual in society can represent himself or herself as a member of a specific group that shares a common worldview.

Another important gain for Thompson is de-contextualization of his celebrity representation. He cuts off dependency with political issues. Although the Social Democrats lost the election in 2003 and the right-wing Croatian Democratic Union returned to power, Thompson’s position did not change; the wartime generals were still in The Hague, war veterans felt insecure and abandoned, and the war itself was an increasingly distant past. The new government was preparing Croatia to enter the European Union and, instead of remembering and celebrating the war, official discourse was focused on reconciliation, regional cooperation, and human rights issues. In 2006 Thompson organized a huge concert in his village of Čavoglave as a counter-celebration of the wartime Operation Storm to rebuke the official one held in Knin (officially called Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day and Day of Croatian Defenders). The Čavoglave celebration attracted about fifty thousand people and became even larger the following year, when it reached one hundred thousand participants. After the success of these first two years, Thomson managed to turn his celebration in Čavoglave into an emerging tradition. Today Thompson likes to call it a folk party, a genuine voice of the people instead of the voice of politicians and the media, who are restrained by different interests and gather at the official celebrations such as the one in Knin. The major difference between the two celebrations lies in their objectives. Whereas the Čavoglave celebration is focused on victory and remembering the Croatian soldiers killed, its counterpart in Knin shows traces of remorse and sorrow for the civilian victims of the military operations.

In the case of the Čavoglave “folk party,” one can identify one more myth that surprisingly originated in its most popular form in Serbia before the dissolution of Yugoslavia. It was called the anti-bureaucratic revolution. It rested on the assumption that society is split between an authentic people’s voice and a foreign estranged political elite. Slobodan Milošević relied upon this in order to homogenize the Serbian people and mobilize them for war. Renata Salecl interprets one important part of Serbian nationalism and the anti-bureaucratic revolution as a mythical difference “between real men—workers, men of the people—and bureaucrats. In this mythology the bureaucrat is portrayed as a middle-class feudal master, a kid-gloved capitalist with a top hat and tie, ‘clean outside and dirty within,’ in real contrast to the worker, the man of the nation, ‘dirty on the outside, but pure within’. . . . Bureaucrats are not men because of their alienation from tradition and their betrayal of the heroic Serbian people” (1994: 23) Thompson presents himself as a genuine voice of the people, as a person that is constantly under suspicion from the political elite and avoided by the mainstream national broadcast companies (by the same token as Milošević used bureaucracy), an invented homogenous voice of the “real people of the nation.” In one of his last video clips for the song “Nema predaje” (No Surrender), Thompson used the same picture of the corrupted elite portrayed in suits with zombie masks that govern at their office desks while paying no attention to the poor, jobless, and sick citizens. The lyrics are even more suggestive:

*Dobivamo političke pljuske,
iskrivljuju povijest u tišini,
vodaju nas k'o u magli guske,
a pobjednici na margini.*

We are getting political slaps,
They quietly distort history,
They lead us like goslings in the fog,
And the victorious are marginalized.

On the other hand betrayal, mentioned by Salecl, is one of the keywords used by Thompson and war veteran activists. The political and media elites are portrayed as Yugoslav communists that hate Croatian independence or have some selfish interests. However, for betrayal to be operational something has to be betrayed and distorted. Naming the thing that is betrayed is always problematic in this kind of discourse. One name appears constantly, and not just in the case of Thompson, but in the entire political discourse of the right and far right in Croatian society: tradition.⁵ However, tradition operates as “floating signifiers,’ whose very identity is ‘open,’ overdetermined by their articulation in a chain with other elements—that is, their ‘literal’ signification depends on their metaphorical surplus-signification” (Žižek 1989: 96) What is important in the case of Thompson is that

⁵ For example, during the campaign that the conservative NGO *U ime obitelji* (In the Name of the Family) started against homosexual marriages, one of the main arguments was that such a thing is against the traditional family deeply embodied in Croatian society. The same argument was used by opponents of accepting immigrants from Syria, claiming that “those people” cannot adapt to Croatian values and traditions.

tradition does not have any meaning outside of the ideological field. To give any meaning to tradition, it has to be “quilted” or fixed to a specific meaning. Thompson’s operation of quilting tradition is a specific kind by making it an elusive and yet constitutive element of identification. His public transgressions in which he challenged dominant social values gave him the possibility to “un-quilt” the floating signifier “tradition” in order to represent it in a different discourse. Before Thomson rearticulated tradition, it was more or less seen as an obstacle in the process of post-communist transition in Croatia. There was a lot of interpretation of the “Balkan mentality” or communist legacy as a key problem of Croatian society in adjusting to democracy and the free market.⁶ However, Thompson reinvented tradition as something that was suppressed by different forces; as something that was hidden and has to be recovered. Locating tradition in this type of discourse was not his genuine invention; it was a part of a process of building a nation in the nineteenth century, when many intellectuals started the process of inventing the national narrative through folklore (see Burke 1978). Tradition served as an argument for national unification through the idea that no matter how different citizens are they still share some old unity expressed in tradition. In central European societies, this kind of tradition was understood as a core of national identity that survived over thousands of years, became scattered and fragmented, but was ready to be collected and turned into the cornerstone of a new independent state. Even the entire discipline of eastern European ethnology was founded on collecting and classifying this kind of tradition. Thompson’s excesses and transgressions should then be understood as a prerequisite for normalizing new ways of giving meaning to the concept of “tradition.” Through the operation of normalizing, tradition is “quilted” together with other elements and situated as a foundation for all values required in transitional society, such as democracy, individualism, and freedom of choice. Tradition in such discourse works as a long-forgotten and paralyzed past that has to be protected or animated in order to provide full development of society. The entire national narrative is then structured as struggle for tradition against various enemies. In such a way, Thompson describes the fascistic Independent State of Croatia from the time of the Second World War as a response to the supposed threat to Croatian tradition, and the responsibility for mass atrocities and death camps (such as Jadovno or Jasenovac) in this perverse argumentation is assigned to the victims themselves. To be faithful to tradition, one has to presuppose the Other that took it away and is constantly threatening to completely remove even the last traces of it. Because tradition does not have any positive content or literal meaning, these are provided by the Other (i.e., an enemy, such as Serbs, communists, western liberals, etc.). Introducing this kind of quilting involves pursuit of the Other, who gives existence to it through the constant threat to erase tradition. Žižek described this process in eastern Europe as a specific reflection of the Lacanian notion of

⁶ There is no need for examples here because such discourse can be found in every post-communist country, sometimes attached to specific geographical space represented as “destiny” and sometimes not. Perhaps the best general example can be found in Michał Buchowski’s article “The Specter of Orientalism in Europe: From Exotic Other to Stigmatized Brother” (2006).

“enjoyment”: “We always impute to the ‘other’ an excessive enjoyment: he wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our way of life) and/or he has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment” (Žižek 1997: 202). In Croatia after the war, the former Other (the Serbs) no longer represented a threat to national enjoyment and Thompson provided a narrative to identify a new threat to national identity: liberal values and secularism.

The protest by war veterans that started in the winter of 2014 in front of the Ministry of Croatian Veterans offers supporting evidence for this understanding of tradition and making it important. They invented the slogan “In 1991 against Yugoslavia, in 2014 against Yugoslavs!” The veterans are demanding a different kind of treatment of the war and their role in it—or, simply, they are demanding the truth of the war. The veterans perceive the treatment of the war in the schools and media as insufficient and as against the Croatian people. Those that publicly confronted them were accused of being deceived by the media or of being members of the former Yugoslav communist secret police (the UDBA). For them, the UDBA never ceased to exist and still operates against Croatian interests in some illegal and hidden realm where every important decision is made.

AUDIENCE RESPONSE

However, there is still the mystery of why exactly Thompson and not some other singer of patriotic and nationalistic songs (and there were dozens of them), more attuned to more popular styles than folk metal, became so popular. To answer this question, two different paths of argumentation are necessary. One is to examine the way in which turbo-folk became so popular in Croatia and the other is to analyze Thompson as a “subject of enunciation,” as proposed by the French linguist Oswald Ducrot (1988).

It is necessary to employ turbo-folk because, like Thompson, it is strange that music understood as a Serbian product and completely evicted from the media (like Thompson today) in the first days of war, never to return, has found a way to become one of the popular musical genres. This kind of music was listened to in Croatia during and after the war. Just a few years after the war ended, popular Serbian performers of turbo-folk started touring around Croatia and their concerts were crowded. Unlike Thompson, whose media popularity can be assigned to social media such as Facebook, Internet portals, and YouTube, turbo-folk stars were imported into Croatia through pirate recordings and later through TV channels from Bosnia and Herzegovina, signals from which reached Croatia. One aspect of consuming turbo-folk in Croatia is important, although it is of course a much more complex issue. It was not easy to publicly listen to turbo-folk because it was labeled enemy music and the enemy’s means of enjoyment. Those that could publicly listen to turbo-folk in Croatia during the war were individuals whom no one had the courage to confront. Such individuals were more or less people with war experience, warlords, local smugglers, and mobsters; essentially, people that used war for financial profit. Turbo-folk

appeared as a soundtrack of transgression, as a symbolic space for expressing power. Those that listened to it were untouchables, and going to bars with such music gave certain people the possibility to be identified as wealthy, powerful, and dangerous individuals. Because of such a place in the public imaginary, for a long time turbo-folk bars were connected with crime and nighttime shootings, which was not really the case, as Pavlovsky (2014) presented in his recent book about turbo-folk in Croatia. Nevertheless it was music that created the possibility for an individual to become a subject in a different discourse than that offered by the official cultural politics and to play with his or her identity: “Discovering, imagining and discarding identities is something that can be accomplished precisely without penalty through the practice of culture consumption” (Turner 2009: 102). However, as Žižek points out, using the case of identification in computer games, such consumption is not innocent:

The mystification operative in the perverse “just playing” of cyberspace is therefore double: not only are the games we are playing in it more serious than we tend to assume (is it not that, in the guise of a fiction, of “it’s just a game,” a subject can articulate and stage features of his symbolic identity—sadistic, “perverse,” and so on—which he would never be able to admit in his “real” intersubjective contacts?), but the opposite also holds, that is, the muchcelebrated playing with multiple, shifting personas (freely constructed identities) tends to obfuscate (and thus falsely liberate us from) the constraints of social space in which our existence is trapped. (Žižek 2000: 103)

Through his appearance, Thompson offered such space for transgression similar to those linked with turbo-folk. By attending his concerts, people could express themselves in a way that would be otherwise inappropriate. Moreover this misconduct was even shrouded by the lyrics of the song. There is nothing offensive or problematic in the lyrics itself, but through Thompson’s evocation of the Ustaša regime those lyrics were often interpreted, at least by part of his fans, as a hidden code that has to be deciphered. Even his early songs were thus reinvented again, such as the chorus of his early love song: *Grkinjo znaj, svemu je kraj / Zbogom mi više se ne vraćaj* ‘Greek girl, know, it’s all over now / Go away and never come back’, which many of his fans sing at concerts today as *Srbijo znaj . . .* ‘Serbia, know . . .’, giving new meaning to song (many of them would say the original one) in order to symbolically legitimize Thompson’s change. Reality is thus not situated in the performance, music, or lyrics, but in the silence behind it. The silence I am referring to here is what Oswald Ducrot (1988) defined as “later discourse.” In his structure of the speech act, the subject is divided into three parts: the physical person that speaks, the speaker, and the enunciator. The last one is of particular importance because it provides the speaker the possibility to take different positions in the speech act, as in the case of irony. However, the same split can be identified on the part of addressee; the one that is the target of the message. The message implies an ideal recipient, and one can either identify with such an ideal picture

or not. This process works through the concept that Ducrot named “later discourse” as the place of identification. It works as an identification point through knowledge that the addressee constantly employs to construct an ideal continuation of the message received (this is why Ducrot named it “later”). Renata Salecl (1994) connected Ducrot’s speech theory with the Lacanian concept of the ideal ego (which is different from the ideal picture that we create by ourselves) as a specific “symbolic space, a point of view from which we could appear likable to ourselves; in other words; to construct a ‘later discourse’ in such a way that it leaves the space open to be filled out by images of our ideal ego” (1994: 33).⁷ What Thompson really does is produce the place from which the community of his fans at the concert can perceive themselves as likable. At the concert, people constantly look around themselves and not just at the stage to reaffirm their sense of belonging to the crowd, with whom they supposedly share similar values and attitudes. Thompson’s symbolic universe is constructed around the constant battle between forces of good and evil that never ends. In this discourse, Croats devoted to traditional values are good whereas those that accept a foreign style and values are treacherous and in league with Satan. It is easy for his fans to fill the content of their particular everyday reality with such an image. People at the concert identify themselves as victims in pursuit of justice. Only during the concert can they feel that they are not alone in their daily problems and that someone can see and appreciate their struggle. Instead of being just victims, at the concert their life is transformed into something worthy of sacrificing. To use Agamben’s (1998) concept of sovereignty, people that were marginalized by the process of transition from communism to capitalism (which can also be roughly understood as a “state of exception”) and the war can be defined as “excluded” from the discourse of the elite, and at the concert they can find meaning in their life—transformed into a “life worthy of living.” The point from which they are seen as valuable is a story of eternity that goes beyond time itself, in which they are connected with the former national heroes that fought for the state and with Christians that were ready to sacrifice their lives for religion.

One of the fans wrote a letter to Thompson that he proudly presents on his website under the title *Ne okuplja nas ovdje Marko Perković Thompson. Ovdje nas je okupila ljubav prema Bogu i Domovini* ‘It is not Thompson that gathers us here. We are here due to our love for family and homeland’, showing what this later discourse is all about. The letter is on Thomson’s website because professor of music Eva Kirchmayer Bilić wrote it, giving academic musical legitimization to Thompson. Even Thompson himself used the same mechanism in his last hit, which is the love song “Samo je ljubav tajna dvaju svjetova” (Only Love Is the Secret of the Two Worlds), in which the subject as a fighter for love can gain victory over death presenting his quasi-personal experience as a heroic act with sublime

⁷ The best-known example of the difference between the ideal ego and the ego ideal is a driver in a sports car driving fast on an empty road. Who he is showing off for if the road is empty? Obviously to some instance that he imagines, to a point from which he looks adorable.

meaning. However, to turn back to Žižek, it is a false idea to understand the concert and the performance as the place where one can experience liberation from the constraints of social space. Contrary to expectations, people gathered at the concert go home in silence after the show and in small groups, as though the entire event were already forgotten. This fact supports the conclusion that Baker presented in answering whether Thompson is really fascist. Namely, she points out that fascism is considered a “foreign” ideology in Croatia and as such is not easily adopted by nationalists. The audience at his concerts and fans sometime use symbols of fascism as a way to express individual and group discomfort, but (as elections show) they are not ready to support any fascist public policy.

On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that the place where it is possible to transgress social norms might be not as innocent. This is linked to the last instance of Ducrot’s version of the speech act: surmise. Through it people can fantasize about their particular role in later discourse, and imagine themselves as successful. In the case of Thompson, due to his manner of using media space there is always the possibility for contamination of everyday reality with fantasy construction. It is therefore not hard to imagine possible violence directed toward people that publicly show discomfort with Thompson’s interpretation of reality.⁸

CONCLUSION

Through his acts of transgression, Thompson simply modeled his songs and appearance to fit media discourse. Thus, instead of becoming part of the celebrity and music news and shows, he became an object of interest of all kinds of news. He celebrified something that critics would still understand as serious journalism. Thus, he is a media product after all, but in an inverse fashion from those that are known from more common cases. Through the myth that he produced about himself as an ordinary guy that just appeared to have some talent, he is not very far from the celebrity from the talent show, but instead of the formally institutional form of talent shows that one can watch on various channels, he used the last Balkan war and history as a reality show—and, among other things, the war was a giant media product. Through various media representation and coverage of the war, a lot has been lost or remains unacknowledged. Therefore war veterans, especially those that are disabled, felt like the war almost did not happen and that what is publicly known about the war is more or less a lie. This is why they demand the “truth” about the war every

⁸ Just as I was finishing this text, right-wing parties won the parliamentary elections in Croatia. After that, great frustration was expressed on the streets and the new minister of culture proclaimed that the Ustaša soldiers were Croatian martyrs and heroes. Croatia was at the beginning of a process of revising history, trying to construct an official narrative from what Thompson was singing about. Thus Thompson’s production of later discourse really did induce a political outcome. It is interesting that all throughout this time Thompson neither supported nor criticized the new government.

time they protest. What Thompson provides them with through such a peculiar celebrity position is that kind of “truth,” but not as some real thing, but more as an empty place ready to be filled with their emotions and memories. The name for this empty space of reality and truth is one of the Lacanian object of the drive: gaze (Lacan 1998). It is a part of the visible area that has to be repressed in order to produce a meaningful picture (like the light itself, or the back stage of the theatrical play, or the technology used for shooting on a movie set). The problem of course is that when this back stage is revealed it starts to conceal the new object. The idea that there is a real gaze, and obsessive pursuit of it, can produce paranoid behavior such as belief in strong evil forces that prevent seeing the whole truth, as in the case of Thompson, or as constantly waiting for appearance of the true self of the inhabitants in the Big Brother house.

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NAKLJUČNA SLAVNA OSEBNOST? USTVARJANJE SLAVE V POVOJNI HRVAŠKI

Prispevek prikaže raznolikost sodobne produkcije slave na primeru priljubljenega pevca Marka Perkovića Thompsona, ki je začel pevsko kariero na bojišču. Leta 1991 je med spopadi na območju nekdanje Jugoslavije namreč branil vasico Čavoglave pred napadi Jugoslovanske ljudske armade in oboroženih prostovoljcev in takrat napisal pesem Bojna Čavoglave, ki jo je zapel s svojimi tovariši ter s pesmijo zaslovel. Po vojni je začel nastopati po stadionih in drugih koncertnih prizoriščih, kamor pritegne več deset tisoč oboževalcev – mediji pa ga kljub temu bolj ali manj ignorirajo. V nasprotju s slavnimi posamezniki, ki potrebujejo in izrabljajo medijsko pozornost, da bi ohranili priljubljenost, je Thompson z mediji v nenehnem nasprotju. Ti ne brskajo po njegovi zasebnosti in ne seznanjajo občinstva s podrobnostmi iz njegovega življenja. Iz njegovega primera je razvidno, da se za razliko od priljubljenosti na zahodu, ki se oblikuje tudi – ali celo predvsem – z novicami o zasebnem življenju, priljubljenost na Hrvaškem lahko spodbuja tudi tako, da se posameznik izogiba predstavljanju svojega zasebnega življenja. Razloge za to razliko lahko zasledimo v simbolni delitvi hrvaške družbe, ki jo lahko predstavimo z nizom opozicij: tuje proti domačemu, levo proti desnemu, ljudsko proti elitnemu, tradicionalno proti modernemu. Prehajanje med temi sferami pomeni neke vrste prestopke. Thompson pa s svojimi glasbenimi nastopi nenehno krši ta pravila in gradi svojo podobo brez podpore strokovnjakov za odnose z javnostmi. Kot pojasni prispevek, pevec deloma sicer je tudi medijski produkt, vendar v drugačnem smislu, kot bi to pričakovali. Mediji ga namreč ne prikazujejo kot izjemnega posameznika, temveč kot običajnega človeka, za katerega se zdi, da ima skoraj po naključju talent. To sicer pomeni, da ni daleč od slavnih osebnosti, ki se pojavljajo v televizijskih oddajah, kjer iščejo talente. Bistvena razlika pa je, da se Thompson ni udeležil teh oddaj; namesto tega kot lasten resničnostni šov izrablja zgodovino Hrvaške in nedavno vojno na Balkanu. Poslušalcem in gledalcem se predstavlja kot zagovornik »resnice«, pri čemer zna spretno zapolniti vrzeli in praznine v preteklosti s čustvi in spomini, ki jih izraža v pesmih. Tudi zato ga oboževalci ne dojemajo kot medijski konstrukt, temveč kot pristen glas ljudstva.

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