

Re-rigging Othering: Subversive Infantilisation in Contemporary Bosnian-Herzegovinian Prose

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Abstract

In this article I put forward the concept of subversive infantilisation to designate a phenomenon in contemporary Bosnian literature, which by using a certain kind of childish outlook on the world undermines paternalistic and balkanist Western discourse on Bosnia and Herzegovina. By analysing primarily the portrayal of the role of mass media in a few literary texts, principally books by Nenad Veličković and Miljenko Jergović, I highlight the way in which these texts “re-rig” and by means of irony and exaggeration illuminate the problematic logic inherent in the subject position from which one represents the other. Textual characteristics of subversive infantilisation are contextualised further and seen as a discursive continuation of experiences of the 1990s war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Keywords: Subversive infantilisation, balkanism, Bosnian literature, Jergović, Veličković, Samardžić

Introduction

On 14 April 1992, with a voice void of everything save for the determination to deliver the latest news, the television reporter Senad Hadžifejzović confirmed to Bosnian-Herzegovinian viewers what they had feared would happen for some time: the outbreak of war, which would lead to the dismembering of the federation of Yugoslavia and put the Bosnian state in a political, social and ideological shock, which has not, even after two decades, eased off (see “Senad Hadzifejzovic - Rat Uzivo 1992-04-14”). However frustrating the slowness of the reconstruction has proven to be, the pace is unsurprising considering the complexity of the continuing conflicts, of which not only the fierce nationalist rivalry between the three major domestic factions (Bosniaks, Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs) is the problem, but also the involvement of the international community (or “the Western governments and multilateral institutions controlled by those governments” (Bose 2002:6)), which has added further layers to the core of the problem.

This constant state of enmity has made Bosnian-Herzegovinian post-war society burst with opposing narratives, explanatory models of varying sophistication, and a range of possible (or impossible) solutions proposed to ease the tensions. Consequently, contemporary Bosnian literature dealing with the 1990s war reflects and contributes to this intricate discourse in different ways, either by criticising or by reiterating reactive collective (nationalist) identities, historical narratives, etc.

The attention of the present article will be directed at literary texts experimenting with ideological alterations, and producing new, differentiated claims which set out from an attitude highly critical towards ideological grand narratives, be they Titoist, nationalist or, more recently, the capitalist ones induced by the international community in connection with the end of the war and protected in the course of reconstruction (Kazaz 2004:138). What interests me is a particular cultural implication of what has been conceived as a deep “resentment at foreign paternalism,” a paternalism that is widely considered to be repressive and imperialist in today’s Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hunt 2001:239). I propose the concept of *subversive infantilisation* to describe a particular way of responding to such paternalistic Western political involvement and the discursive foundation supporting it. I argue that the cultural phenomenon of subversive infantilisation deconstructs American and Western European discourse on Bosnia and Herzegovina by shiftily “re-rigging” – i.e. imitating yet displacing the inherent logic in the implied Western epistemic statements regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina. This re-rigging, I argue, can open up a way of thinking characterised by undecidability, which opposes absolute claims on, for instance, ethnicity and identity, and helps perceive possibilities in the world that do not yet exist, but which can be thought and potentially realised. This attitude of undecidability is especially important for a society impatient with the certainties of totalitarian narratives.

The Event of War

In a 2004 survey, Enver Kazaz listed major tendencies in Bosnian post-war literature, one of them being what he called “the infantilisation of narration” (*infantilizacija naracije*), which he observed in the works of a number of authors across the spectrum of ethnical affinity, such as Tvrтко Kulenović, Bekim Sejranović, Aleksandar Hemon, Fadila Nura Haver, Goran Samardžić and Alma Lazarevska, among others. Two other authors producing infantilised narrations are also mentioned, namely Nenad Veličković and Miljenko Jergović, whose books *Lodgers (Konačari)* and *Mama Leone*, respectively, will be addressed in the course of this article. In infantilisation, Kazaz sees the construction of narratives that, with the help of ironic and hyperbolic (sometimes litotetic) oversimplification, portray historical courses of events with the aim of undermining stiffened and simplified discourse on Bosnian-Herzegovinian society. Most often this is done from the perspective of the child, or the “naïve narrator” (Avdagić 2012:140), in a fashion somewhat reminiscent of works like Voltaire’s *Candide*, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or Imre Kertész’s *Fatelessness*. Although the use of the child’s perspective is not a literary convention unique to Bosnian post-war production, its frequent recurrence in this literature is remarkable and demands to be explained with attention to the contextual circumstances of Bosnia’s ideological transition. Another key characteristic of infantilised narration is its way of changing authorial focus from retelling historical grand narratives built on ideological dogmata to telling stories about individual experiences of everyday life, thus affirming perspectives on “the bare elements of human life” (Kazaz 2004:163, my translation). According to Stijn Vervaeet, who addresses Veličković’s *Lodgers*, the infantilisation of narration enables “the author to tell his sarcastic truth about the war or at least to pose some sarcastic questions about how the war is understood and represented by the nationalist opposing forces as well as by the TV-watching West and its prejudices about ‘the barbaric Balkans’” (Vervaeet 2010:8).

However useful the notion of infantilised narration is, I would like to somewhat redefine the contours of the concept in the hope of going beyond the original definition’s limitation to “authorial” truths and strictly text-inherent features. Using instead *subversive infantilisation* underlines, of course, the phenomenon’s critical stance, and may furthermore help to open up the dimension of social mobilisation shaped spontaneously (pre-subjectively) in response to the historical event of war as well as circulating ideological templates, both domestic and foreign. It is important to recognise that although subversive infantilisation is a phenomenon dependent on the space of discourse, it does to a large extent spring from the non-discursive experience of the event of war. Not least of all, the range of studies focusing on memory in Bosnian post-war literature has shown how es-

sential it is to see much of the aesthetic production as a result of a traumatic break in personal and societal history.

This break has led to an increased level of pessimism with regard to totalitarian narratives, which, according to Kazaz, is visible in the strong focus on “small stories, personal confessions, intimate autobiographical narratives and testimonies of ordinary people” that work to preserve the “autonomy of the individual against the totalitarian ethno-nationalistic model of society” (Kazaz 2012:85). Personal remembrance is opposed to ideologically encoded social memory. A similar observation is made by Branka Vojnović (2008), who also stresses that these first-person accounts should be seen as important witness accounts resulting from the authors’ need to formulate and psychologically deal with an event that radically disrupted the sense of personal belonging and made it impossible to turn back time and return to established concepts of identity. The witness, in the words of Sibylle Krämer, is someone:

who is present (in the flesh) at an event, perceiving it with his own eyes and ears and therefore able to give an account to those without access to the event. The witness is medium and messenger in so far as he transmits; that which he transmits is a perception, a bodily experience which he has to “translate” into public speech. (Krämer 2005:19)

Testimonies qua literary enunciations can have no hope of actually catching the present which was once experienced bodily (non-discursively), which is why Krämer stresses the necessity to understand them as translations of experiences into archived perceptions. The witness metaphor is telling if its dimension of violence is kept in mind. In his event theory the philosopher Alain Badiou (2009) stresses that the political event (as a break in history) forces those witnessing it to witness and furthermore demands that they testify, or at least position themselves in relation to it. Bodily inscriptions thus turn into a matter of knowledge.

The novelty of an event is expressed in the fact that it interrupts the normal regime of the description of knowledge, that always rests on the classification of the well known, and imposes another kind of procedure on whomever admits that, right here in this place, something hitherto unnamed really and truly occurred. (Meillassoux 2011:2)

One should see the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina as an event not only in the sense of a profound human tragedy, but also as igniting the questioning and ultimately the dismissal of naturalised ways of thinking about a wide range of issues. In the renunciation of the mythologies offered by domestic nationalist occultism and the deconstruction of the liberal discourse coming from the West, subversive infantilisation should be seen as a reaction to an event – or better yet as a mobilisation of those subjects, as Badiou would put it, “faithful” to the event; those acknowledging it as a break in the tradition of what is considered true (Badiou 2009:53). At the same time as the faithful subject is constituted, it keeps the implications of the event alive; implications that can further question old truths and tentatively propose new understandings. In this sense, subversive infantilisation

does not merely record experiences of war, but also claims political space and deterritorialises dominant epistemic discourse, making possible undecidable, not yet known epistemic possibilities.

Seeing as One is Seen

In the texts analysed in this article, the war is often the cause of disillusion and reevaluation of what was hitherto held to be true: the world reveals itself to be much more complex and a far more unsafe place than it had appeared at first, in childhood. It is not always the case, but for the most part the infantilising character of a text springs from the perspective of a first person child narrator, whose playful gaze on the world clashes, as soon as war strikes, with the “adult,” conventional way of understanding the surroundings. This type of child perspective is rather common in contemporary Bosnian literature and seems to be effective in posing questions about the complexities of post-war Bosnia. Not least of all, the frequent coming-of-age story, I argue, is often allegorically paralleled with the historical stages of the Yugoslav federation. If the child growing up in Yugoslavia prior to the war acts in a milieu characterised by social stability and personal care-freeness, the outbreak of the war entails the disillusionments coming with adolescence and the acute demand to reconsider many aspects of life that previously had been taken for granted. Vervaet argues that these texts

not only [try] to convey the experience of war but also [tend] to reflect on the ways in which war can be represented through literature and how the war experience often becomes a turning point in the life of people, influencing their understanding and framing of the past and its connections with the present. (2010:6)

One example of the event of war is found in Goran Samardžić’s 2006 novel *Šumski duh* (The Forest Spirit). In the first half of the book, the multi-ethnic narrator Kosta’s childish naiveté is portrayed with all its carelessness, creativity and joy. The second half, however, starts with Kosta’s homecoming to Belgrade after serving in the Yugoslavian military shortly before the war and his realising that his Serbian friends had changed while he was away:

My friends were no longer the same. They’d even gotten hold of a rifle, with an adjustable scope, and a pistol. We called them babies. I could ask them: “Where are your babies?”, and they would reply in concordance: “In a safe place, you Turk” (Samardžić 2006:85. My translation).

Never having been an issue earlier, Kosta’s differing ethnicity from the Serbian majority has now become a problem, excluding Kosta from his friends’ new games. Also new is the expansionist mindset of his friends: “To love and to protect our street corner alone was no longer enough for my friends. There was something drawing them yet further away. One could, it seemed, occupy oneself with just about anything, even with the love towards one’s own country” (Samardžić 2006:83. My translation). The sudden change in attitude reflects the quick spread

of nationalist discourse in Serbian society (as well as in other Yugoslav territories), and the weapons signify the gaining momentum of politicised militarisation preceding war. They also seem to point out a disturbing ambivalence in the adolescent transition: young men on the edge of adulthood playing with babies/guns. In its critical way of displacing the stereotypically masculine image of the brave warrior, this is one particular way of infantilising. The motif of children holding guns, and its function of displacing of stereotypes, can also be found outside the literary medium, for instance in the photography of Milomir Kovačević, who in a series called “Mali vojnici” (Small soldiers) photographed small children posing with real-life guns in the ongoing war. The most emblematic of these photographs is perhaps the one depicting a young boy with arms wearing a beret and a Mickey Mouse shirt (Kovačević 2012).

A different type of subversive infantilisation is found in Nenad Veličković’s novel *Lodgers* (2006), in which the reader follows the teenager Maja’s written account of her experiences during the siege of Sarajevo. As a first person narrator, she writes in diary form, not with the sole purpose of recording experiences, but perhaps primarily to make sense of what is happening around her, both for her own sake and for her readers’:

The war is being waged between Serbs, Croats, and Muslims. Davor says that the war is being waged because the Croats have Croatia, the Serbs have Serbia, but the Muslims don’t have Muslimia. Everyone thinks it would be right for them to have it, but no one can agree where the borders should be. Dad says that Davor is a dunce and that the war is being waged because the Serbs and Croats want to divide Bosnia and kill and drive out the Muslims. I don’t know what to say.

[...]

No! I don’t think I’ll be able to explain objectively and impartially to an average foreign reader why war is being waged. Probably, like all wars, it’s about taking territory and plunder. But I can’t think of a *probably* for why a city of half a million inhabitants should be bombarded day after day from the surrounding hills. Why would anyone (in our case the Serbian artillery) destroy houses, burn libraries, and shatter minarets and the poplars planted around them? (Veličković 2006:9. Italics in original).

Asking her family about the increasingly acute political situation, Maja is presented with different explanations for the causes of the war. Although the two accounts given by Dad and Davor differ on which side is to be blamed for the war, they share a certain schematic simplicity. At first sight, this might seem to have to do with the older family members’ attention to Maja’s age and her level of foreknowledge. But considering that their explanations clash and that their versions are very much rooted in Bosnian society – people do offer similar explanations, as do domestic politicians and foreign administrators – they can very well be seen as equivalent to epistemic statements that are more or less discursively archived. Maja, however, instinctively distances herself and takes an undecided stance: “I don’t know what to say.” She does, however, not merely settle with the illuminating comparison of domestic nationalist narratives. In the second part of the pas-

sage quoted, she addresses her implied foreign readers – something she does regularly and with an ironic sense of humour. On this particular occasion, foreign readers are asked not to expect a clear-cut explanation for the situation, or to buy into simplistic narratives – which they might very well do, Maja seems to suggest, if they are not forewarned explicitly.

A few pages later Maja again stresses the foreign subject's lack of knowledge about the war and its contextual circumstances: "A foreign reader might well ask who they [the different domestic factions] are and how they differ. Just as I might, for instance, wonder what the difference is between Boers and Pygmies" (Veličković 2006:17). What Maja does here is to adopt the implied discursive position of the Westerner, and then subtly displace the formal logic of the – again implied – statement that seems to accompany such a subject position. The statement (*l'énoncé*) as a component of discursive play is here understood, according to Michel Foucault, as an archived epistemic claim found in a single enunciation or in a set of enunciations:

[T]he statement, as it emerges in its materiality, appears with a status, enters various networks and various fields of use, is subjected to transferences or modifications, is integrated into operations and strategies in which its identity is maintained or effaced. Thus the statement circulates, is used, disappears, allows or prevents the realization of a desire, serves or resists various interests, participates in challenge and struggle, and becomes a theme of appropriation or rivalry. (2002:118)

By constructing a representation of the others (Boers and Pygmies) which is parallel to the Westerner's implied – seemingly poorly informed – representation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Maja appropriates a statement, or better yet, mimics a certain representational logic inherent in the portrayal of others. She positions herself in relation to Boers and Pygmies as would, in her mind, a Westerner do in relation to the different groups in Bosnia. Seemingly, she recognises foreigners' lack of knowledge of the Bosnian war situation as something natural and understandable: Bosnians are as other to Westerners as Boers and Pygmies are to her. She does not, however, appropriate the statement out of empathy, but rather illuminates and comments on the way the statement is constituted. What is targeted is the ignorance of local differences in the position of the "global" subject, i.e. the subject that perceives (the rest of) the world from a position of assumed privilege. In the parallel that Maja makes she is on the one hand a victim of the epistemic violence committed, and on the other hand a perpetrator making use of the very same logic in the representation of others. She both sees and is being seen. Her choice of others draws on colonial discourse: The term "Pygmy" is, of course, considered pejorative and lumps together different ethnicities persecuted throughout history, e.g. the Aka, Mbuti and Twa, on the basis of their relatively short height. The Boers are, in contrast, descendants of French, German and Dutch settlers who immigrated to South Africa in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In illuminating the lack of knowledge about others, Maja subtly

displaces the mimicked statement, hinting at the discursive circumstances in which the statement is articulated; the invisible subject position is marked out in what is sometimes called the “triangle of representation”. By highlighting the subject’s participation in the construction of the representation it is possible to draw attention to the contingent, rather than naturalised, character of a single representation or a particular discursive practice (Prendergast 2000:11). In the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, the authoritative statement is transformed from an “absolute dogma” to a “working hypothesis for comprehending and expressing reality” (Bakhtin 1981b:61).

In the act of subversive infantilisation, this sort of mimicking, displacing, and intentionally oversimplifying complex matters is highlighted, as already suggested, from the perspective of the child’s naïve play and generally childish uninformed outlook on the surroundings. Rather than being patronising or belittling, which is usually something associated with the term, infantilisation here entails play, spontaneity, and openness with regard to what may be the consequences of the naïve questions asked. Being a child, Maja is by design excluded from many aspects of social life. This is evident in that she hardly ever leaves the museum at which her family stays; all her anecdotes of what happens in different parts of the city are second-hand accounts of what family members or temporary visitors have experienced. This is not necessarily a deficiency, for what the perspective lacks in immediacy is balanced by how it benefits from fresh eyes and a sort of unconditional consideration. Her outsider position entails no real responsibility to the norm system of the adults, and her position as a child can be compared to the character type that Bakhtin called “the fool,” whose “right to be ‘other’ in this world” is based on the surroundings’ general acceptance of the character’s naïveté, which gives the character the possibility to express strange, even ridiculous, thoughts about social life. This dialectic outsider position enables a critical point of view, and the child as a character has the potential “to portray the mode of existence of a man who is in life, but not of it, life’s perpetual spy and reflector” (Bakhtin 1981a:161). The child, being someone who sees life “from below” and questions conventionality by turning naturalised views upside-down, is an ideal infantilising subject.

I believe that this outsider position is what ultimately makes readers forgive the young boy in the following scene from Miljenko Jergović’s *Mama Leone* from 1999. Sitting alone in the living room, the boy narrator finds a rather grotesque pleasure in watching news reports from the war in Vietnam:

I laugh whenever I see little slant-eyed mothers next to their little dead husbands on the TV. Saigon and Hanoi are the names of the first comedies in my life. I spell them out loud, letter by letter, laughing my head off. Those people don’t look like us, and I don’t believe they’re in pain or that they’re really sad. Words of sadness have to sound sad, and tears have to be like raindrops, small and brilliant. Their words aren’t sad, and the tears on their faces are too big and look funny, like the fake tears of the

clowns I saw at the circus. I'm just waiting for Mom and Grandma to leave the room so I can watch Saigon and Hanoi and have a laugh (Jergović 2012:62)

Images of the suffering Vietnamese in the 1960s do not affect the boy in the slightest; and certainly not in the way it “should”, in the way his grandmother is affected by the same images. His hyperbolic insensitivity even makes him suspicious of his grandmother’s sincerity: “Grandma loved the little slant-eyed mothers and pretended she understood them” (Jergović 2012:63). One is urged to ask why the boy is unable – despite the self-awareness of his anomalous feelings – to feel any empathy for the people depicted on the news, whose suffering, tears and language are questioned. Reasons for the apparent dehumanisation of the suffering other seem most likely to be found in the effects of the television medium, which fails to convey the immediacy of tragedy – the alienated reaction seems to depend on the logic of how the news report is constructed as a representation. This medial process of voyeuristic and imperialist possession of the depicted subject has been massively debated, for instance, by Susan Sontag in her seminal book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). It is indeed a frequent theme in Bosnian literature, where mass medial representations of the 1990s war have become emblematic for the general attitude of the international community towards the suffering in Bosnia. In *Lodgers*, for instance, Maja learns that soldiers defending Sarajevo have come up with the plan to injure or kill neighbourhood dogs in order to get the sympathy required to finally receive help from the international community:

In Germany, we could ask Granny, there wasn't a wealthy lady who didn't belong to a society for the protection of animals. In capitalism people didn't like each other. The less you liked your neighbour, the more you cared for your dog or cat. Just let ten ladies see Sniffy without legs and ears, and there'd be military intervention. (2006:105)

And here is another example discussing the role of media, from Semezdin Mehmedinović's book *Sarajevo Blues*, which addresses the Ferhadija Street Massacre on 27 May 1992, when 26 Sarajevans were killed and over a hundred people were wounded by artillery shelling as they stood queuing for bread.

Shots of the mass killing at Ferhadija circle the globe; pictures of the dead and massacred turn into an ad for the war. It doesn't matter that these people have names: TV translates them into its cool language, the naked image. The camera disembowels images of their psychological content to create information. And all the massacres that follow reproduce the same images. So the world can see what is going on here. But is this really possible when television sees right through the lack of compassion in human nature just as long as tragedy doesn't hit home? The sense of tragedy arrived with the body bags wrapped in the American flag, and not before then, not through TV reports from Vietnam. (1998:83)

Here, as in Jergović, the inability to mediate suffering is paralleled with American reactions to the Vietnam war, but what is perhaps more accentuated by Mehmedinović is the close tie between the Western attitude toward the suffering of the Bosnian population and the question of acting or not acting when presented with

information about atrocities taking place elsewhere. Among others, Thomas Keenan (2002) has addressed this matter quite directly, contrasting the international passiveness to the enormous amount of information available to governments and public opinion about the situation in war-torn Bosnia, and ultimately dismissing the humanist assumption that people are automatically moved to action if shown proof of human tragedy. With Badiou's event theory in mind, one is able to understand this sudden insight originating from the war as a "new truth," revealing what has always been the case, but not yet known.

What is interesting is that when the little boy narrator in Jergović addresses the Vietnamese tragedy, thereby raising questions of the logic of representation, he is also indirectly addressing the position of the Bosnian subject during the war, which was quite similar to the Vietnamese considering the situation in which one is being observed but not helped. Jergović lets the young boy assume the position of the passively gazing subject, and recreates a situation parallel to the scenario in which the Bosnian population appeared before a global audience for years. This staging, or re-rigging, is soaked in an exaggeration that functions as a way of drawing attention to the problematic subject position and the equally problematic logic of representing the other. The child's surprisingly uncanny laughter, infantilising the seriousness of tragedy, initiates the recognition of the dehumanisation of the people represented, be they Vietnamese or Bosnian. The global memory of the war in Vietnam functions as a support in articulating the memory of the Bosnian war experience, much like what Michael Rothberg (2009) has called multidirectional memory, which entails that memories of other atrocities, say the Holocaust or the war in Vietnam, contribute, by being borrowed, referenced or negotiated, to the way another tragedy is remembered and formed discursively. The process of multidirectional memory in this context is perhaps not primarily a matter of articulating a new narrative of one's own, which is what is emphasised by Rothberg, but of deconstructing Western attitudes.

The Balkanist Motivation

Up to this point, the position of "the West" – this complex metageographical category targeted in subversive infantilisation – has been somewhat taken for granted. As I have only hinted at, the presence of the West in these texts is to a large extent implicit, or subtly implied. This is especially true for the imagined Western gaze, which, however blind to differences within Bosnian society, is portrayed as relying heavily on the fundamental otherness of the Balkan subject. I would like to argue that the infantilising texts depend on the reader's familiarity with Western discourse on the Balkans. Without this level of foreknowledge, the young boy's alienated view of the televised suffering of the Vietnamese in Jergović's *Mama Leone* does not fully make sense; neither does Maja's attentiveness to foreign

readers' ignorance of the ethnic differences in Bosnia and Herzegovina in Veličković's novel.

As Maria Todorova (who, inspired by Said's *orientalism*, coined the term *balkanism*) and others have noted (cf. Goldsworthy 1998; Norris 1999; Wolff 1994), Western epistemic discourse on the Balkans has in large measure been handed down from generation to generation to a large extent unchanged for some 200 years. During these two centuries the Balkans have been associated with "industrial backwardness, lack of advanced social relations and institutions typical for the developed capitalist West, irrational and superstitious cultures unmarked by Western Enlightenment" (Todorova 2009:11-12). Bakić-Hayden reminds us that "violence in the Balkans has been not only a description of a social condition but considered inherent in the nature of its people" (Bakić-Hayden 1995:918). The region has in some sense been a mythological "point of no return" similar to Romanian Transylvania, or "a multicultural Babel that just might be chaotic enough to make peaceful co-existence an impossibility" (Karakasidou 2002:576). Gregory Kent suggests that the lack of political will on the part of the international community during the war sprang from the discourse of balkanism, influencing – at the same time being fuelled by – the massive media coverage: "This inherently quasi-racist, pseudohistoric perspective appears to have informed the structurally embedded linguistic preferences of news organisations, as well as, less subtle, more direct, but still somewhat opaque, aspects of falsely balanced reporting" (Kent 2003). Discourse on the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina regularly presented the violent determinism of the Balkan people as the sole cause of the destruction of Yugoslavia. When the political discourse, however, changed shortly after the genocide in Srebrenica in 1995 and started to focus on Serbian expansionist aggression, governments became more interested in participating more actively in the conflict resolution (Kent 2003). This interest did not become any smaller by the end of the war, and international involvement was stepped up with the beginning of the process of reconstruction.

Although the Western governments and institutions see themselves as the "flagbearer[s] of a vision of liberal internationalism in a place destroyed by competing particularist nationalisms" (Bose 2002:6), the international community must be regarded as a dominant player that actively participates in the power struggle (together with domestic ethno-nationalist groups), and that does so according to its own political and economic interests in Bosnia. The task of reconstruction has been described as a project to a large extent orchestrated according to the interests of foreign administrations, on many occasions resulting in what Sumantra Bose describes as "direct intervention in Bosnia's public life, especially through the person of the civilian head of mission who coordinates the multi-agency international effort, the 'high representative'", who has several times outright "dismissed elected Bosnian officials deemed 'obstructionist'" (Bose 2002:7).

Embedded in this structure, there is a balkanist notion of the Bosnian as deterministically infantile and incapable of structuring a stable society, which seems to justify a “helping hand”, or rather a colonial administrative organisation. Todo-rova stresses that balkanist discourse is a discourse on an “imputed ambiguity” rather than an orientalist “imputed opposition” (2009:17), and shows how the Balkans has had the status of “incomplete self” rather than “incomplete other”, meaning that people from the Balkans have been perceived less like the other than have, say, Turks or Arabs (2009:18). Historically, the self-perception constituted by intellectuals in the Balkans has indeed been characterised by a strong sense of in-betweenness, which has been manifested in different, often ambivalent ways in relation to the concept of European modernity; either as a lack (in comparison to the cultural capital of metropolises such as Paris and London), or as an asset (e.g. in not having any part in the imperialist machinery of modernity). The ambivalence has found expression in the emblematic metaphor of the *bridge* between civilisational horizons and stages of development, not least in Nobel laureate Ivo Andrić’s novel *The Bridge on the Drina*, which problematises the arrival of Austro-Hungarian modernity (bureaucracy, technology, ideas) in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Milutinović 2011).

It certainly has hegemonic consequences that the potentially productive concept of in-betweenness is replaced by incompleteness in today’s political discourse. The concept of incompleteness is key to understanding how the Bosnian population on the one hand can be dismissed as deterministically uncivilised, yet on the other be wilfully encouraged to transgress this determinism by affirming liberalist ideas in order to become complete selves:

The degree to which various countries, authorities, social groups and individuals have embraced the free market and democracy – always evaluated by those powerful who set rules of the game – has become a yardstick for classifying different regions, countries and groups as fitting more or less into the category of “us,” i.e. “(post)modern-Western-liberals.” (Buchowski 2006:464–465)

Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) calls this teleological narrative one of transition and emphasises European history as the yardstick: Western discourse excludes others from discursive equality by labelling other regions’ histories as examples of undeveloped and immature European histories. There is no doubt that the transition narrative plays a decisive role in many Bosnian discourses, not least the political one. Especially the European Union has become a symbol of the sought-after Western standard and has intimately appeared together with notions of modernity, civilisation and prosperity (Helms 2008:98). Bosnian society is constantly urged to transgress a number of negative labels (socialism, inefficiency, collective thinking, primitivism) in order to reach a set of good ones (capitalism, efficiency, individualism, modernity). Inherent in this notion of development, Linda Tuhiwai Smith says, “is the notion of progress. This assumes that societies move forward in stages of development much as an infant grows into a fully developed adult

human being” (2005:105). One might say that Bosnian society has been subjected to a patronising infantilisation ever since it parted from Yugoslavia and was encouraged to strive for progress and societal organisation according to liberalist values. The view of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a child state is made recognisable (or diagnosed) by way of subversive infantilisation, which inhabits and uses this very perspective to dissolve it from within.

Final Remarks

In the response to this infantilising view, manifested through subversive infantilisation, the matter of illuminating and deconstructing balkanist discourse goes beyond the West’s general attitude to Bosnia as well as the reluctance during the war to take action. It is in the end a way of addressing the acute social problems of today, which are at least partly caused by international involvement (primarily the effects of the Dayton Peace Agreement). If the West, by affirming the Bosnian’s culture-deterministic primitivism and inability to organise a functioning society, has been able to justify the West’s self-acclaimed guardianship over Bosnia and Herzegovina, subversive infantilisation functions as a means by which it is possible to attack the very root of the problem, namely the logic of the current configuration of balkanism. What is interesting is that the infantilising texts are not concerned with arguing against Western statements in the form of “Bosnia is X” by creating similarly propositional statements like “Bosnia is Y”. Neither is the point to target specific enunciations, say the Dayton Peace Agreement or even less particular representations in mass media. As I have tried to show, the idea is instead to highlight the logic by which the dominant assertions in these types of enunciations are created. The literary texts experiment, in other words, with the authority by which one can claim “X” in the first place. They challenge dominant means of representation, as Ania Loomba would say, by appropriating and inverting the statement “Bosnia is X” in order to show that its simplicity does not correspond to the complexity of Bosnian social reality and that the authority invested in the representations is conditional rather than self-evident (Loomba 2005:63). The question concerns the *how* of representation, including the aspects of delimitation and control of the field of representation.

As it does not propose any more or less explicit alternative explanatory models, subversive infantilisation is open-ended and presents no predetermined answers that would simply work as counterstatements to Western statements. There is no new ready-made image of war, history or culture, nor a new messianic ideology waiting to be established. Rather, subversive infantilisation affirms an attitude similar to the Derridean concept of undecidability, thus rejecting any such politics that is in one way or the other teleologically determined. It seeks to maximise “differences, allowing them to come to the fore and allowing them to continue to thrive, while at the same time not absolutely fixing such differences or ascribing

them to the identity of a particular group” (Calcagno 2007:34). Undecidability also “points to the desirability of being willing to question and challenge what is currently accepted as self-evident in our ways of thinking and acting, while at the same time refusing to specify how we should think or act otherwise” (Patton 2007:770). In the example of Veličković’s *Lodgers* given earlier, the narrator Maja does indeed question and challenge the way of thinking inherent in those simplified explanations for the war that are given to her by members of her family, but at no point does she propose an explanatory model of her own. Subversive infantilisation is in this light neither parasitic nor nihilistic – in the sense that it settles with producing rubble – and remains patient enough to let the aporia be the space for a yet-to-come.

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