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'The Song Has Kept Us': Soundscape of Belgrade during the NATO Bombing

Abstract. In this article I explore the sonic and music practices in the experience of the NATO bombing of Belgrade, focusing particularly on their role in the governmental apparatuses both of the NATO forces and of Milošević's regime. Drawing on affect studies, I discuss sound and music not only as text, but as sheer intensity, as a vibrational body and force. I argue that the sonic element of the experience of NATO bombing proved important as it provided the surface area, the somatic layer of the war machine, on which the apparatuses of governance could operate and effectuate the production of meaning.

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Scene 1.¹ Evening on the 24th of March 1999. Uncanny family atmosphere as the main 7:30 news of the Radio Television of Serbia reiterates the improbability of NATO pursuing military action against 'us'. The ominous sound of the siren interrupts the news broadcast and leaves the household with an unclear picture how to react and what to do, as the news presenters lower their view in order to read the just printed broadcast text.²

¹ The italicized 'scenes' which guide the reader into the sections of the article are personal memories of the author, penned down for this purpose in 2015. The paper was written as a part of the project 'Serbian Musical Identities within Local and Global Frameworks. Traditions, Changes, Challenges' (no. 177004/2011-2014) funded by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia. I thank Robert M. Hayden, Monika Milosavljević and the anonymous reviewer for their valuable comments. Misgivings remain mine alone.

² Ivana Spasić noticed that there is a pronounced lack of scholarship which would engage with 'detailed, systematic and minute research [...] of the *experience* of the [NATO] bombing'—the lack which this special issue strives partially to compensate. Ivana Spasić, O problemu dostupnosti 'privatnih' sećanja, na primeru bombardovanja Srbije 1999. godine, *Treći program*, no. 3-4 (2009), 143-144, 181-194, 182-183; cf. Krisztina Rác's article in this issue. However, every account of the experience of the NATO bombing inevitably has to cope with the fact that Serbian society at that moment was, as Spasić also notes, a 'stratified and heterogeneous, only partially integrated community of individuals and groups' (183). Bearing that in mind, it is necessary to stress that this article unavoidably presents a personal view, which I not only acknowledge, but also strive to capitalize on: exploring the sonic dimension of this experience,

'The war machine is exterior to the State apparatus.'³ The opening axiom of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Treatise on Nomadology* seems paradoxical to all of us who have experienced modern states as the perpetual makers and instigators of war. Furthermore, the modern institution of the sovereign state has fully and contentedly adopted the classical definition of itself as the bearer of the monopoly on violence,⁴ the fabric that wars are made of. Contrary to what might seem to be common sense, Deleuze and Guattari argued adamantly that the 'war machine' is irreducible to the state. State apparatus is here seen as the realm of (discursive) meaning, the social machine which overcodes the bodies and *affect*,⁵ reterritorializing them, in other words, organizing them and giving them sense and meaning which one can read or decipher.⁶ The sheer disarray of the war itself cannot be fully captured by the state nor engulfed by its mechanisms of inscribing the meaning. The potentiality of utter destruction of the nomadic war machine always escapes the limited potentiality of the state apparatus to overcode the bodies and affects produced in this disarray.⁷ War is thought of as the ultimate messiness and the uttermost potential of deterritorialization. North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) military operation against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, commonly referred to as the NATO bombing

besides written sources, I relied on my personal memories, as well as on in-depth interviews with the interlocutors from my micro-social environment, namely, the fellow members of my class at the Third Belgrade Grammar School (*Treća beogradska gimnazija*), where I attended the first grade at the time of the bombing. On methodological issues in discussing individual memories, cf. Anna Green, Individual Remembering and 'Collective Memory'. *Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates, Oral History* 32, no. 2 (2004), 35-44.

³ Gilles Deleuze / Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis, London 1987, 351.

⁴ Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, in: David Owen / Tracy B. Strong, eds, *The Vocation Lectures*, Indianapolis and Cambridge/MA 2004, 32-94.

⁵ *Affect* is a concept used in the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza and elaborated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari that places emphasis on bodily experience.

⁶ For the concept of overcoding and its relation to the (despotic and capitalist) state, cf. Gilles Deleuze / Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis 1983, 196-201.

⁷ I understand *body* as *res extensa*, an organic or inorganic material substance on the plain of radical immanence (in other words, the substance which is immanent only to itself). I understand *affect* as the intensity unleashed through (constructive and destructive) collisions of bodies, drawing both on Baruch Spinoza's definition of affect as 'affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections'. Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*, in: Edwin Curley, ed, *A Spinoza Reader. The Ethics and Other Works*, Princeton 1994, 15; and on Brian Massumi's equating affect with 'intensity' of Deleuzian ontology, cf. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual. Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham, London 2002. I also draw on literature which refers to affect as a non-personal thing (unlike the standard model of 'emotions'), a transmissible state of body and a social 'atmosphere'; cf. Sara Ahmed, *Affective Economies, Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004), 117-139; Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, Ithaca and London 2004; Ben Anderson, *Encountering Affect. Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions*, Farnham 2014.

of Yugoslavia in the Serbian media, can be thought of as a Deleuzoguattarian war machine. One can represent it as a highly computerized and digitalized war assault, the last intervention of the pre-drone era. Its complexity included precision navigation missiles and cutting-edge technology in deploying explosive materials on the ground. Nonetheless, its messiness was realized on the plane of immanence as bodies in disarray—the metal bodies of the planes, the inorganic bodies of the devastated buildings, the rusted bodies of antiquated bridge structures and vehicles, the human bodies of the victims. Finally, the *vibrational body* of sound and music, which is the prime object of my research. How did this messiness acquire any meaning? How did the apparatuses—both of the NATO alliance and of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia—manage to capture the smooth space of the war? In this article I argue for the importance of sonic and music practices, not only in the sense that the sonic element had vast importance in the experience of the NATO bombing (primarily in Belgrade), but also that it provided the surface area, the somatic layer of the war machine, on which the apparatuses of governance could operate.

This path of enquiry conditions us to discuss sound and music not only as text, but with reference to its sheer intensity, seeing it as a vibrational body and force. We should escape the 'linguistic imperialism that subordinates the sonic to semiotic registers' and be dissatisfied with the idea of sonic media which merely communicate meaning.⁸ In other words, music and sound can be asignifying, they not only transmit, but also destroy, deconstruct and recreate meaning in the moment of the vibrational event.⁹ The sheer force of the vibrational body can never be fully encapsulated by the semiotic models, as the intensity of the sound always escapes the processes of signification. However, this should not suggest that sound and music are inimical to meaning, nor that they do not acquire meaning once they appear on the surface of society. On the contrary, I will argue that the sound of the NATO bombing acted as the somatic body whose affectations were not only harvested by the social machines, but which was, at some point, also actively used by the apparatuses as an instrument of governing.

⁸ Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare. Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, Cambridge/MA und London 2010, 82.

⁹ Cf. Jacques Attali, *Noise. The Political Economy of Music*. Manchester 1985, 25; Dean Lockwood, *Spread the Virus. Affective Prophecy in Industrial Music*, in: Marie Thompson / Ian Biddle, eds, *Sound, Music, Affect. Theorizing Sonic Experience*, New York and London 2013, 119-131; Srđan Atanasovski, *Consequences of the Affective Turn. Exploring Music Practices from Without and Within*, *Musicology*, 18 (2015), 57-75, DOI: 10.2298/MUZ1518057A.

Sonic Warfare

Scene 2. *Few days have passed from the initial siren. I seem assured that the apartment, located in a five-storey residential building is safe enough to spend the nights in. This evening is different. For the first time the sonic vibrations are not far away, remaining just audible, they appear much closer, and can be felt as tremors on the windows, on one's skin. This was the night when military facilities in Rakovica were bombed for the first time and the vibrations and the sound in Vračar neighbourhoods peaked. I panic. I am resolved to go. My parents remain confused—to go where? Well, to go! There has to be a shelter, a place where one goes in danger. In the end, I am persuaded. Persuaded that I should accept this sound not as an ultimate signal for alarm, as it appeared to me, but as a—at least temporary—common part of my sonic experience of 'home'. As it will be, for some while.*

Starting from its experience of the Second World War, the threat of the ongoing Cold War, as well as the devastating 1963 earthquake in Skopje, socialist Yugoslavia enforced the military doctrine it called Total National Defence. This presumed the engagement and mobilization of the entire population in any potential war, and in case of a natural disaster, or any time demanding solidarity. This enforcement permeated the whole society as courses of Total National Defence (*Opštenarodna odbrana*) and Social Self-Protection (*Društvena samozaštita*) were taught at schools and universities, as well as practised in work communities. Elaborate leaflets entitled Civil Protection: Urban Population Self-Protection Reminder (*Civilna zaštita: podsetnik za samozaštitu gradskog stanovništva*) were widely distributed to every household. The socialization of the individual therefore became impossible without that same individual becoming aware that individual physical existence unfolded under the perpetual threat of utter destruction. The emblem of that awareness was a poster called Alarm signals – Procedures for Citizens (*Znaci za uzbunu – postupci građana*) which, almost uncannily, decorated nearly every public space, right down to waiting rooms in municipal health centres and the lobbies of banks (see Figure 1). The same poster was still omnipresent during the 1990s and may still be found even today in out-of-the-way corners of Belgrade's public institutions.

The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia began on 24 March 1999, a month after negotiations held in Rambouillet ended in failure because the government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia¹⁰ could not agree with representatives of the Kosovar Albanians, NATO, and Russia that Yugoslavia endorse the alliance's

¹⁰ Quite different from communist-party-ruled Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, founded in 1992, consisted only of Serbia and Montenegro, republics which did not choose to leave the joint Yugoslav state (unlike Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia). In that period, its government was strongly associated with Milošević's regime, who himself acted as the federation's president from 1997-2000. In 2003 this polity changed its name to the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro and finally ceased to exist with the secession of Montenegro in 2006.

position on Kosovo and concede to the possibility of holding an independence referendum in the region in the foreseeable future. By that point the possibility of bombing by NATO had been in the offing for more than six months and the NATO powers themselves were already outspokenly determined to take that step to try to force Milošević's regime to the concessions it was not otherwise willing to make. In order to curtail Yugoslavia's military and policing capacities, NATO was determined to act unilaterally, bypassing the UN Security Council where such a resolution would be blocked by one of two permanent members sympathetic to the Belgrade regime. However, for the citizens of Belgrade who were overexposed to RTS (Radio Television of Serbia), the inception of the NATO action came as a surprise.¹¹ The sound of sirens, which was to be 'emitted in continuous sinusoidal tone' for 60 seconds manifested itself as a disturbance to the order of citizens daily life's meanings. It appeared as the signifier of the impossible, an incomprehensible sound which falls out of the known and available systems of meaning. The sign-machine¹² produced by Milošević's regime was instantaneously shattered by the vibrational body of this ominous sinusoidal tone. The sign-machine of the antiquated Total National Defence and Social Self-Protection failed to effectively impose itself onto the bodies of the citizens, as only a negligible portion proceeded to 'open the windows, take down the curtains', 'take the personal kit for citizens' protection and timely-prepared things' and 'quickly and calmly proceed to the designated shelter', as recommended by the Alarm signals – Procedures for Citizens poster and the Civil Protection leaflets.¹³

The NATO campaign wrought havoc on Kosovo, both because of intensive bombardment with significant casualties and because of intensified ethnic cleansing perpetrated by Serbian forces. However, the mood in the capital Belgrade was quite different. The sonic was both the dross of war and an instrument of war. The citizens' daily lives were disrupted by frequent emergency notices, where sinusoidal tones took turns with flat tones, signifying the end of air raid danger. The two sound signs and their vibrational body, which were often colloquially referred to as 'Šizela' ('the freaked-out one') and 'Mirela' ('the calm

¹¹ With state-owned mass media being one of the key pillars of Milošević's regime, the mediascape, especially in terms of television programmes, was pronouncedly one-sided and consistent with the rhetoric of the governing parties. In 1999 the only two important independent electronic media too joined the unequivocal condemnation of the NATO campaign. Lenard J. Cohen, *Serpent in the Bosom. The Rise and Fall of Slobodan Milošević*, Boulder/CO 2001, 285. For further analysis of the role of culture and media in Milošević's regime, cf. Eric D. Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia. Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives*, University Park/PA 1999.

¹² Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines. Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, Los Angeles/CA 2014, 72.

¹³ *Civilna zaštita: podsetnik sa samozaštitu gradskog stanovništva*, Beograd 1978.

one'), can be looked upon as Latourian actants,¹⁴ in the sense of inorganic bodies or events which, through their autonomous agency, structured the social and natural reality of the urban. The sonic experience of the campaign thus constituted one of the major sources of the traumatisation.¹⁵ The relentless sonic 'alarm signals' marked the transfigured soundscape of the city announcing imminent danger and effectively structuring the rhythm of daily (and nightly) life. The signals would be followed by the nocturnal sounds of the heavy bombardment of military facilities and headquarters, political and governmental buildings both in the city centre and on its outskirts. The sonic violence used by NATO was indiscriminate, going into people's homes through their windows, telling them when to work, sleep; when to shelter. This sonic dross of war imposed itself as a form of rhythmical violent biogovernance acting on the bodies of the citizens.¹⁶ Smiljana Antonijević cites examples of internet chat taking place simultaneously with the bombing which show in minute detail the functioning

¹⁴ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford 2005.

¹⁵ This is not to claim that there were no casualties, and NATO's official term for them as 'collateral damage' was received with indignation. Particularly exposed in the media was the death of three-year-old Milica Rakić (died of a bomb fragment on the occasion of the bombing of a military facility in the outskirts of Belgrade), while the most notorious case was the death of sixteen workers at the Radio Television of Serbia when that public company's building was bombed on 23 April. The director of television, Dragoljub Milanović, was later found guilty of failing to evacuate the workers from the building, and the families of the victims say they believe that the workers served as scapegoats to bring international attention to the unjustified targeting of the NATO bombing campaign. Biljana Vasić, *Sto godina samoće*, *Vreme* 1131, 6 September 2012, <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1070972>. All cited internet sources were accessed on 1 February 2015, unless stated otherwise. During and after the bombing the public in Belgrade remained largely oblivious of the simultaneous crimes committed by Serbian government forces in Kosovo. The most reliable currently available reports on the casualties of the NATO bombing and simultaneous operations of Yugoslav forces are those provided by the Humanitarian Law Center in Belgrade; cf. their press release *Demystifying 'NATO Aggression and the Fight Against Siptar Terrorists'*, 1 September 2015, <http://www.hlc-rdc.org/?p=28616&lang=de>.

¹⁶ Cf. Patricia Ticineto Clough, *My Mother's Scream*, in: Thompson / Biddle, eds, *Sound, Music, Affect*, 65-71, 70. This sound material of the bombing was also recorded and used by composer Srđan Hofman in his piece *A Nocturne of Belgrade Spring 1999 (Nokturno beogradskog proleća 1999)* (1999-2000), for chamber ensemble, live electronics and audio tape. Seemingly fascinated by the sheer unfamiliarity of the sound which surrounded him and became part of his daily sonic reality, Hofman captured the unsignified quality of this sonic dross of war. Interestingly, in the review of the piece Hofman's fellow composer, Zoran Erić, discussed only the technical features of the work and referred to few universal aesthetic questions, completely ignoring the political context of the material situation in which the work was created and ending with the conclusion that *Nokturno* stands as a 'poem about the sound that does not exist when there is too much of it, about a silent scream, about a stagnant time, about a thunderous eruption without noise, about the loudest silence', Zoran Erić, Srđan Hofman, 'Nokturno beogradskog proleća godine 1999' za kamerni ansambl i elektroniku uživo, *Zbornik Matice srpske za scenske umetnosti i muziku* 26-27 (2000), 206-209, 209.

of the moment of experiencing the sonic intensity which is both frightening and 'out of the joint', with the interlocutors firstly gashed by the sheer intensity (typing 'it roars', 'woow!!!', 'what the fuck is this?!'), and secondly trying to determine the source of the sound as the first step to acquiring meaning, labelling the sonic event as it was being experienced.¹⁷

The 'sonic booms', also usually referred to as 'sound bombs', were, on the other hand, instruments of war. The NATO forces would employ this military device in the urban environment of Belgrade, a sonic effect of high-volume and deep-frequency caused by low-flying jets breaking the sound barrier. These were the moments when the sonic was no longer a collateral effect of the NATO bombing but a weapon of sonic warfare, defined by Steve Goodman as 'use of force, both seductive and violent, abstract and physical, via a range of acoustic machines' which is aimed to 'modulate the physical, affective, and libidinal dynamics of populations, of bodies, of crowds'.¹⁸ Sonic warfare uses sound as an event which circumvents the 'cognitive listening', as a phenomenon of immediate 'contact and displays' which provokes 'an array of autonomic responses' and 'a whole spectrum of affective powers'.¹⁹ Goodman particularly discusses the use of sound bombs by the Israeli air force in attacks on the Gaza Strip in 2005, as reported by international newspapers:

'Its victims likened its effect to the wall of air pressure generated by a massive explosion. They reported broken windows, ear pain, nosebleeds, anxiety attacks, sleeplessness, hypertension, and being left "shaking inside". Despite complaints from both Palestinians and Israelis, the government protested that sound bombs were "preferable to real ones". [...] the objective was to weaken the morale of a civilian population by creating a climate of fear through a threat that was preferably nonlethal yet possibly as unsettling as an actual attack. Fear induced purely by sound effects, or at least in the undecidability between an actual or sonic attack, is a virtualized fear. The threat becomes autonomous from the need to back it up. And yet the sonically induced fear is no less real. The same dread of an unwanted, possible future is activated, perhaps all the more powerful for its spectral presence.'²⁰

By employing such sound bombs the NATO alliance showed that it was thinking of the sonic not as a collateral effect of the war, but as a weapon. Sound bombs were used during daylight, when actual airstrikes were rare, in an attempt to weaken morale and to induce a climate of fear. Even more important to the argument I wish to advance here is that the sound, as correctly interpreted by

¹⁷ Smiljana Antonijevic, Sleepless in Belgrade, *First Monday* 7, no. 1 (2002), <http://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/920/842>.

¹⁸ Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 10; cf. Clough, *My Mother's Scream*, 68.

¹⁹ Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 10.

²⁰ Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 13-14. Cf. Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco, Epilogue. Ethnomusicologists as Advocates, in: John Morgan O'Connell / Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco, eds, *Music and Conflict*, Urbana, Chicago, Springfield 2010, 243-252.

the citizens, could not indeed be perceived as a collateral. It revealed to the people that they themselves—the surfaces of their bodies, their eardrums, the absent silence of their homes—were not bystanders of a ‘remote control conflict’ but were the actual targets, ‘victims’. The sound bombs presented an ultimate instrument of overcoding the soundscape of bombing, the instrument which unequivocally provided the ‘code’ for deciphering the sonic disarray of destruction as the assault against citizens which nurtured their sense of innocence.

From the Therapeutic Rock to the Signifying Voice

Scene 3. I am quite enthusiastic. I will make a banner to take with me to the concert. Many people come to concerts with names of their towns and the array of these signboards seems to represent the whole country in a fit of joint solidarity. I was born outside Belgrade. The town where I was born isn't even in Yugoslavia any longer. I will make a banner with the name of 'my' town. I switch on the computer and the small inkjet colour printer. I make a Word document and experiment with the 'Word art' templates provided by Microsoft Office. I figure out I can make the name of the town appear in the colours of the Yugoslav flag. I mount my improvised banner and carry it to meet my school friends. Instead of going to school we go to Trg republike to a concert.

(Epilogue) The signboard is still leaning against the wall of the apartment just near the computer. It is a trace of my body, made by me. A material trace produced by my body which is now clearly situated and interpreted as a part of an ideology which I now want to approach in a critical light. And my parents use it as a final argument to prove that I am 'now' wrong. As if my body has to remain righteous.

Four days after the bombing started, on Sunday 28 March, the city council of Belgrade organized an open air concert in the main city square (Trg republike). Surprisingly, the concert was laid down as a strictly rock music event, featuring the groups *Električni orgazam*, *Deca loših muzičara*, *Bajaga i Instruktori* and *YU grupa*, as well as musicians such as Dejan Cukić and Rambo Amadeus. The musical style of the groups ranged from pop/rock to funk and (post-) punk rock, most of which had gained popularity during socialist times in Yugoslavia. The surprise of rock music being deployed in such a manner is easy to explain: the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, the collapse of the socialist economy subsidizing music production and the vertiginous rise of belligerent Serbian nationalism in the 1990s favoured some and disfavoured other music genres. Folk music, with its subgenre of ‘turbo folk music’ belonged to the former, as it thrived in the private market and corrupted links between private, public and criminal spheres.²¹ Rock music belonged to the latter, as it remained virtually without

²¹ Authors such as Eric D. Gordy and Ivana Kronja argued that there were strong material links between turbo folk and Milošević's regime. Gordy specifically argues that turbo folk was endorsed by the regime and rock music was sabotaged in order to destroy cultural alternatives to the narrow-minded nationalistic worldview. Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia*;

financial resources and was left to dwindle after the glorious rise of the rock music scene of socialist Yugoslavia. Indeed, the musicians playing Belgrade's Trg republike on 28 March had often been seen as icons of the common cultural identity of the former Yugoslavia. *YU grupa* had actually had the longest career, and the one most clearly connected with the former Yugoslav identity. The second generation of Yugoslav rock was characterised by a mollified sound, often aligned with a seemingly depoliticised pop music. Such were *Bajaga i Instruktori*, whose popularity was particularly urban and Belgrade-based, as well as relying on the charisma of their frontman, singer Momčilo Bajagić Bajaga who was particularly masterful in interpreting emotionally charged rock ballads.²² However, among the performers present at the 28 March concert *Električni orgazam* were also a prime representative of the third generation of Yugoslav rock, having gained their popularity in the late 1980s. Renouncing any concessions to the folk element 'shepherds' rock', they built their image on an aggressive rock sound and often politically engaged lyrics criticising contemporary Yugoslav society. Openly dissident, they became part of mainstream Yugoslav rock, illustrating the purported openness of that state socialist society.²³ Thus, the 28 March concert in Belgrade presented the full kaleidoscope of Yugoslav rock which was fully incompatible both with the ethos of Milošević's regime and with the purport of the very initiative to organize public gatherings in spite of NATO air raids. The disconnect lay in the fact that the songs performed were mostly at least a decade old, and had originally represented the pro-Western values of Yugoslav socialist society. The incompatibility of the concert's programme with the ruling regime can be demonstrated further by a puzzling series of articles printed in the journal *Reporter*, published during the bombing. The series went so far as to link rock and roll music with satanism, illustrating the omnipresent rhetoric depicting the whole of Western-style culture as a malicious instrument of enslavement.²⁴

cf. Ivana Kronja, *Smrtonosni sjaj: masovna psihologija i estetika turbo-folka*, Beograd 2000. I do not support that view fully, for a number of reasons. First, the discourse against turbo folk is basically identical to the one used against so called newly-composed folk music since the late 1960s and championed by the intellectual elite and League of Communists policy bearers, which was actually the same social stratum from which Milošević's regime stemmed. Secondly, turbo folk as such did not stand as an official, state-sponsored representation of the nation. In fact it was largely absent from the state-controlled media and found its place on the burgeoning private market. However, it is clear that the rise of nationalism and, even more, economic crises and belligerent surroundings favoured the advance of turbo folk, promoting it as a sort of musical *Zeitgeist* of Milošević's era, cf. Milena Dragičević-Šešić, *Neofolk kultura: Publika i njene zvezde*, Sremski Karlovci, Novi Sad 1994.

²² Ivan Ivačković, *Kako smo propevali. Jugoslavija i njena muzika*, Beograd 2013, 328-337.

²³ Jelena Aranautović, *Između politike i tržišta: Popularna muzika na Radio-Beogradu u SFRJ*, Beograd 2012, 163.

²⁴ Saša Nedeljković, *Mit, religija i nacionalni identitet: Mitologizacija u Srbiji u periodu nacionalne krize*, *Etnoantropološki problemi* 1, no. 1 (2006), 155-179, 165; reprinted in Saša Nedeljković, *Čast, krv i suze*, Beograd 2007, 37-66.

Thus, the initial concert indeed seems to have been an 'erroneous event', which fell outside the semiotic systems which Milošević's government was trying to impose. By 'erroneous event' I understand here an event produced (in a way, immaturely) out of the sheer intensity of the experience in a certain situation which has not, or perhaps not yet, embedded itself in the specific semiotic apparatus. Thus, an erroneous event is one which enters into dialectical struggle with the level of meaning, instigating new processes of labelling and signage production. Indeed, this concert was particularly remembered because of the intensely affective atmosphere in which the musicians played despite warnings of air attack. As a truly surprising event, the concert articulated the feelings of fear of both performers and public at the gathering, thereby transforming them into a form of therapeutic defiance:

'Still unaccustomed to a war environment, in the shock of the first air alert, both the musicians and the large audience, assembled as it rained on the square, made one of the strangest rock concerts ever seen. Under the air raid they played with full passion, mixed with despair, anger, defiance, despondency. Pictures went around the world and astonished everyone. Despite everything, you could see a life which would not give in and that was strongly pulsating. "It was full of positive energy", said Dejan Cukić, one of the participants, "and the only one that I'm really pleased to remember. We are musicians, and in that condition on the brink of madness the only thing we could do was play. This has helped us, as we loosened the screws of the overwhelming tension, and the audience, which could relax at least for a moment and return to a semblance of normal life, which would raise them from the state of half-madness that struck us all." The miraculous atmosphere and sense of solidarity and community of the first concerts was succinctly described by Cane from *Partibrejkers* in his own particular style: "Everything's great, except this bombing!"'²⁵

However, the concert proved to be only the first in a series of daily events organised as the regime's governing apparatus swiftly moved to exploit the popularity of the performers and utilized them to banalize a highly charged political situation. It might not have been by accident that the most powerful mechanism to mobilize the citizens of Belgrade was indeed centred on sound and the sonic experience, in response to the sonic terror dealt out by NATO. Throughout the NATO campaign, the government pushed the idea that public concerts should be organized every day.²⁶ Besides the daytime concerts organised in the centre of Belgrade by the city council under the slogan *The Song Has Kept Us*, two ruling parties staged night-time concerts on two important Belgrade bridges, purportedly to serve as a living shield dispelling the danger of their destruction.

²⁵ Nebojša Grujičić, Priče u senci rata (3). Ko to tamo peva?, *Vreme* 443, 3 July 1999, http://www.vreme.com/arhiva_html/443/10.html.

²⁶ Besides open air concerts, concerts of classical music and opera performances were given too, during the daytime on different stages in Belgrade. Cf. Branka Radović, Umetnošću i muzikom protiv rata!, *ProMusica* 161 (1999), 4.

The exclusively rock music character of the concerts did not last, but neither was any musical selection maintained. As the programme slid into musical mishmash of mainstream material—including everything from military orchestras playing emblematic marches (such as *Marš na Drinu* by Stanislav Binički²⁷) to turbo folk performers—most of the musicians invited by the government to perform felt forced to comply.²⁸ While public support for the initiative began to wane, reflected in the dwindling numbers of visitors from day to day, the organisers tried to gather as large an audience as possible by bringing pop rock stars Zdravko Čolić and Đorđe Balašević to play on 11 April, which was Easter Day.²⁹

Although seemingly banal and innocuous, this musical mishmash was saturated with rhetoric portraying Belgrade, Serbia and Yugoslavia as the innocent victims of NATO terrorism. One of the most potent performances which conducted this process of overcoding people's affects on the open air concert was the declamation of 'Defiant Song' (*Prkosna pesma*), by children's poet Dobrica Ćirić and performed by the actress Ivana Žigon. She appeared at a number of these open air concerts, both during the day and in the 'night watches' on the bridges. Her recitations were transmitted repeatedly in television programmes (see Figure 2, a screenshot of the TV broadcast of her performance on the Brankov most in Belgrade).³⁰ In a way, Žigon grew to become the mascot of the public concerts and the citizen defiance of the air raids. The lines of Ćirić's song chimed perfectly with the narrative of the regime, which argued that Serbs were being targeted by the international community just because they were 'being themselves', standing up for justice and not respecting the doctrine of 'might is right':

I'm guilty that I am,
and I should not be.
Guilty for a long time

²⁷ Cf. Radović, *Umetnošću*, 4.

²⁸ Statement by Mira Škorić in the TV documentary *Sav taj folk*, directed by Radovan Kuress, Belgrade, Television B92, 2004.

²⁹ Having a somewhat paragon career to Momčilo Bajagić, both Zdravko Čolić and Đorđe Balašević rose to great popularity in the 1970s and 1980s respectively. They positioned themselves as seemingly apolitical figures and appealed to a wide audience.

³⁰ The video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcQFbhJGaGo>.



Figure 2. Ivana Žigon on Brankov most, freeze frame from the TV Pink broadcast available on YouTube.

that I stand upright
 and I look at the sky, instead of at the grass.
 I'm guilty that I dared against the injustice,
 I'm guilty
 that I celebrate my family patron saint again!
 I'm guilty of reading and writing in Cyrillic,
 I am guilty of singing,
 laughing and cursing.'

However, it was not the song itself which was enough to overcode the affective atmospheres of the open air concerts. I would argue that it was the figure of Ivana Žigon, her body, and finally her voice which was apposite in this process. Her interpretation of the song was characterized by employing her voice to its ostensive limits, ranging from soft declamation to intensive shouting. Žigon was exposing what Roland Barthes would call the 'grain of the voice',³¹ voice as bare materiality of the body which is at the same time recognized as the material trace of the body and becomes the 'other' to the body.³² Seemingly taking her voice to the point of self-injury, she deliberately exposed her physicality, producing her voice as 'sounding flesh', a potentiality going 'prior to any distinction between subject and object', creating a physical space of destabilized semiosis.³³ Žigon's shouting transformed the human voice into a medium which produced encounters between the carnal body of the performer and the carnal body of the audience, affective crevices which seemingly destabilize meaning only to become a vehicle through which the social machine can embed its discursive strategies.³⁴

Limits of Banality

Scene 4. *'Ja sam ja, Toni Bler [...] I really must stop singing this song inside my head. It disgusts me. Again, I don't only sing it in my head, I can hear it inside my head. And it's not only that I can hear it, I can actually feel the sweet visceral disgust of experiencing the grotesque voices which render the despicable characters which appear in it. I really have to stop singing it. Will it help if I start singing the original version? 'Ja sam ja, Jeremija [...]'.*

The emblematic songs which were repeated throughout the series of concerts were issued on a CD featuring the target logo that became the sign of this cam-

³¹ Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*, in: Stephen Heath, ed, *Image Music Text*, London 1977, 179-189.

³² Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, Cambridge/MA., London 2006.

³³ Felix Ensslin / Charlotte Klink, *Aesthetics of the Flesh. An Introduction*, in: Felix Ensslin / Charlotte Klink, eds, *Aesthetics of the Flesh*, Berlin 2014, 11. On the concept of flesh and self-injury cf. Ensslin / Klink, *Aesthetics*, 14-15.

³⁴ Cf. Srđan Atanasovski / Ana Petrov, *Carnal Encounters and Producing Socialist Yugoslavia. Voluntary Youth Labour Actions on the Newsreel Screen*, *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 6, no. 1 (2015), 21-32.

paigned of supposedly popular resistance. Published anonymously by an ad hoc label called 'Target records', the CD was sold widely on the streets during the concerts and reflected the concerts' repertoire. Just as in the first concert of 28 March, one notes the dominant presence of rock music from the former Yugoslavia, either left unchanged or adapted for this special purpose. The meaning of the old Yugoslav rock, which was perceived as cosmopolitan, was here placed into a new context to serve the purpose of banalizing the cause of Serbian belligerent nationalism. The songs present on the CD featured by then futile messages of Yugoslav identity, as the one built on youthful energy and cosmopolitan values (which was very much out of step with the ethos of Milošević's regime), such as *Igra roken rol cela Jugoslavija* ('The whole of Yugoslavia is dancing to rock and roll music') played by *Električni orgazam*. Some songs acquired different meanings in the changed context: the song *Avionu slomiću ti krila* ('Airplane, I'll break your wings') by former Yugoslav rock band *Riblja čorba* originally features a love theme (in which the 'breaking of the wings' of the passenger jet was used to express the protagonist's desire to be with his loved one). However the song's meaning was re-ascribed via allusions to the shooting down of enemy planes, reported in the media and widely celebrated. A special place was awarded to the song *Ringišpil* ('Carousel') by Đorđe Balašević, who wrote new war-themed lyrics to this popular love song from 1991. The original song, written in a formulaic and rather dreary singer-songwriter style, was structured as a call to a former lover to reappear and 'add some colour'. Balašević's alterations were mostly concentrated in the opening two stanzas, which set the protagonist's melancholic mood of 'it's all the same'. Indeed, Balašević used the song's exaggerated melancholia to depict the imminent danger of the war as a mere nuisance comparable to a shower of rain, thus using a love ballad as a means to dilute the seriousness of the precarious political situation. Other songs were added to the compilation, specially produced with banal, patriotic lyrics, such as *Ja volim svoju zemlju* ('I love my country'), produced by City Records and featuring an array of pop and folk singers, and *Samo sloga Srbina spasava* ('Only unity saves the Serbs'), featuring *Riblja čorba* and rock musicians Bajaga and Dejan Cukić. It is evident that this repertoire conformed to the idea of banal nationalism,³⁵ which is in fact anomalous, as Serbian nationalism was at that moment anything but banal. The banality put forward by these songs can thus be seen as a kind of therapeutic vehicle to transform the trauma of sound and fear provoked by the NATO bombing into complacency and stupor.

Another song which became the vehicle of this banalization was Predrag Živković Tozovac's *Jeremija*, originally published as an LP single in 1972. Tozovac's *Jeremija* was one of the folk songs issued in Serbia in the socialist period

³⁵ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, London 1995.

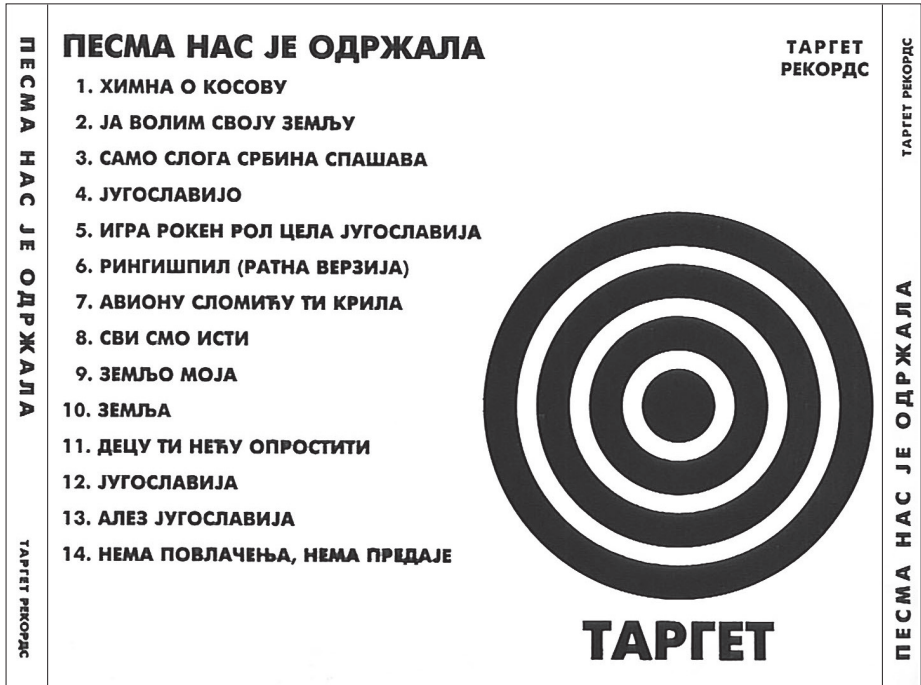


Figure 3. Cover of the CD *Pesma nas je održala*.

Dorđe Balašević, *Ringišpil*, first two stanzas, original version (1991) and war-time version (1999).

‘It’s been raining this morning since four or five,
the sky decided to flood the world
over the city for days
more of the same scenery.

Pouring rain,
but that’s his thing,
hey, it’s all same to me,
flat like the north of the Banat,
more or less,
both with and without rain.

Time drags like a freight train
Where should I go tonight to stick my nose out?
classic, bartender,
to the café ‘Macchiato’, so that [...]

The time goes by,
but that’s his style
and it’s all so shallow
like a brass plate.’

‘They’re beating this morning since four or five,
NATO decided to change the world
over the city for days
flight of the same rockets.

Pouring NATO,
but that’s his thing
hey, it’s all same to me
flat like the north of the Banat,
there’ll be war,
so be it, we end up the same.

Sirens trumpeting like a freight train
and there’s no one anywhere to stick the nose out
classics, come on,
another song, you fat guy from Novi Sad [...]

Sirens are trumpeting,
but that’s their style
and in Srem they brought down that flying saucer
An F18 in the orchard.’

which marked the resurgence of Serbian nationalism, drawing on narratives of Serbian greatness, in particular stories of the First World War in which the Serbian nation was victimised, decimated, but finally victorious in combat. The song, depicting an officer of the Serbian army of the First World War, incorporated not only themes but also regalia of the war into its visual representations. Namely, for the cover picture, Tozovac posed in the prewar uniform of the Kingdom of Serbia holding a rifle, and for the reissue, in a semi-comic twist he even mounted a heavy artillery piece. This time the performer was changed, as the song was adopted by the satirical group Index's radio theatre (*Indexovo radio pozorište*). The group evolved from a radio comedy programme led by Slobodan Bićanin, Dragoljub Ljubičić, Branislav Petrušević and others, which was broadcast weekly on Sundays, on the state-owned *Beograd 202* radio. Featuring a diverse comedy programme, the satirical sting of *Indexovo pozorište* often targeted Milošević's regime and current political paradoxes. However, as the NATO bombing proceeded, they put their humour to the service of ridiculing NATO's endeavours. Tozovac's *Jeremija* was adapted as *Ja sam ja* (following the opening line of the original song) and figures a procession of the political and media figures acknowledged as the protagonists of the NATO bombing: Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Jacques Chirac, Gerhard Schröder, Boris Yeltsin, Kiro Gligorov. After the success of the first song, *Indexovo pozorište* issued a sequel, called *Oni su oni*, featuring Jamie Shea, 'the Chinese', Madeleine Albright, James Rubin and Robin Cook.³⁶ The satire pointed at this array of characters is harsh and vulgar, depicting them as sexual and physical deviants and sadists. Again, the success of the song is not only due to its rhetoric. *Indexovo pozorište* exploit the repetitiveness of the musical structure, create a sort of *moto perpetuo*, a hurdy-gurdy theme, where they paste the characters one by one (one of the means by which this is achieved is a slight speeding up of the tempo along with over-repetition of the musical material as a backdrop for spoken introductions). At the end, they create grotesque and memorable vocal imitations of their target characters. *Indexovo pozorište*'s product was thus much catchier and more infectious than the original *Jeremija* song, and stayed longer in the sonic memory. Again, this was one of the instruments through which the banal justifications of the regime and the crude image of NATO as a criminal organisation, with its officials and the leaders of the Western states as a bunch of deviants, was embedded in the collective affective atmosphere of the NATO bombing.³⁷

³⁶ A third sequel was also issued (under the title *Mi smo mi*), after the end of the NATO bombing with political figures from Serbia: Vojislav Šešelj, Vuk Drašković, Zoran Đinđić and Slobodan Milošević.

³⁷ Evidence supporting the thesis that the music, that is, the particular features of *Indexovo pozorište*'s products played a role in the above mentioned codification of the NATO bombing is provided by the afterlife of the *Jeremija* song. Comparing Tozovac's performance of the song in concerts in the 2010s and its rendering by Goran Bregović in the same period, it

Selected stanzas of Tozovac's *Jeremija* and its parodies at the time of bombing.

<p>Predrag Živković Tozovac, <i>Jeremija</i> (1972): 'I'm me, Jeremija Last name Krstić, My village is Toponica My gun carriage is wooden, I served in the old guard, artillery.'</p>	<p>Indexovo ratno PVOzoriste, <i>Oni su oni</i> (1999): 'I'm me, Rubin James, I'm a spokesman for the State, Target of a villain They say that I'm afraid of guns, That I love male Marines, Story goes I touch them – fraudery. Well, OK, I love bullets, I hate guns, Hug me, men's arms, I'm drilled by the old guard, "ass-tillery".'</p>
<p>Indexovo ratno PVOzoriste, <i>Ja sam ja</i> (1999): 'I'm me, Tony Blair, I got lop ears. We British, like morons, Listen to what Billy [Bill Clinton] has to say And his destructive machinery. Me and Robin [Cook] like morons Do what Billy says, We're bastards, we'll end up in dogcatcher's hands.'</p>	

What remains after a war machine? A shattered plane of immanence, a destabilized regime of songs, sonic memories with which one is not sure what to do. There are limits to banalization. The social machine which effectively over-coded our affects into the virtuality of banal victimhood, the sign of target, was profoundly shattered less than a year and a half after the NATO bombing ceased. Looking back at the recent political history of Serbia, particularly the late Milošević regime and its aftermath, it becomes clear how important it is to understand how the technologies of overcoding sonic and other material events of this war machine operated. Firstly, it is possible to argue that the NATO bombing prompted Milošević's regime to overcode the minute aspects of everyday life more vigilantly and comprehensively than ever before, to extend its 'hoop of surveillance and terror over Serbian society'.³⁸ The techniques through which this overcoding functioned, however, mostly relied on loops of banalization, exhausting its myths to the limits where their meaning started to crumble, together with the regime's own prospect of staying in power. Nevertheless, these loops continued to be played in post-Milošević's Serbia, reaffirming the 'natural' bond between the banal nation and neoliberal capitalism. Finally, the simplified grotesque of the immediate interpretation of experiencing the NATO bombing in a way still obstructs Serbian society's attempts to explore the complex

becomes clear that some of the features introduced by *Indexovo pozorište*, such as speeding-up and voice timbre modifications have by now become inseparable from the song and have engraved themselves in the collective memory of both the performance and the audience.

³⁸ Spasić, O problemu dostupnosti 'privatnih' sećanja, 183.

political context of NATO's intervention. As much as the distorted grotesquery of *Indexovo pozorište's* interpretations remains embedded in the contemporary renderings of the *Jeremija* song, so do the well-trodden pathways of labelling and searching for signage in the disarray of this war machine remain ingrained in Serbian society's dominant interpretations of political reality.

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