

## MONTENEGRO BLUES: Does *Balkan Art* Exist?

by Srdja Pavlović (Edmonton)

### first publication

<sup>1</sup> Andrić, Ivo: *Bosnian Chronicle*.  
Transl. by Joseph Hitreck. New York:  
Arcade Publ. 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Rééit de mœurs de la Haute Alba-  
nie par P.H. Constant. In: *Revue des*  
*Deux Mondes* (Mars 1, 1881), p. 2.

Looking East from the North American shores of the Atlantic Ocean it seems that the contemporary western European cultural scene is slowly becoming flooded with cultural products originating from the Balkans. Numerous art exhibitions in Paris, London, Salzburg, Rome, and Amsterdam, and theatre performances in Vienna, Edinburgh and the Venice Biennale are gradually shaping (reshaping?) the western European sense of modern artistic expressions coming from the countries of the Balkan Peninsula. The organizers of these exhibitions and shows have announced *urbi et orbi* that what Europe is witnessing is nothing short of a birth of *Balkan Art*: the art that is a powerful visualization of suffering and alienation, and an attempt to search for new meanings and new identities.

It appears that many western European scholars and intellectuals, as well as theatre and art critics interpret *Balkan Art* as a vivid and emotionally charged account of life in a land of historical uncertainties, but most of all they talk about it in terms of homogeneity, thus resorting to easily understandable old Euro-centric categorization of a less known geo-political and cultural space. Within the parameters of such categorization all cultural creations coming from the Balkans are seen as manifestations of a somewhat exotic and distant entity. These creations radiate with passion and blood, and while deep down melancholic, their contents are nevertheless visually aggressive and captivating. The Balkans, therefore, has once again embraced Europe through its galleries and on the stages of its theatres, and from the big screens of the European movie houses articulated its pain, the absurdity of its geography and politics, and spelled out uncertainties of its multiple identities. Even though these are modern artistic expressions that emanate from individuality and diversity, it would seem that western Europeans have interpreted them in much the same manner the French Consul from Ivo Andrić's novel *Bosnian Chronicle* interpreted Ottoman Bosnia.<sup>1</sup>

Considering the fact that cultural contents (film, fine arts, theatre, music) of societies and peoples living in the Balkans were until very recently only a blur on a wide European horizon, and were seen as manifestations of an overall unhealthy atmosphere in the »zone of uncertainty«, this sudden and overwhelming interest of Europe in its long-overlooked backyard begs a few questions. Is there such a thing as *Balkan Art* and if there is, what are its main features? Could the Balkans be considered a homogeneous space, either cultural or otherwise? How legitimate is such a categorization? To answer, at least partially, some of these questions it is necessary to first revisit the issue of western European stereotypes of the Balkans, and only then, and through the magnifying glass of such stereotypes, attempt to analyze contemporary western European curiosity.

In 1881, after traveling through Montenegro and Albania as a Member of the International Commission to settle the boundaries in the region, Baron d'Estournelles de Constant wrote:

All these countries, not far from us, were then, and are still, unlike Europe, more widely separated from her than Europe from America.<sup>2</sup>

Such sweeping generalization seems to have remained for many people the point of departure in defining the Balkans. For many western Europeans the Balkans was not the landscape »painted with tea«, as the Serbian novelist Milorad Pavić portrayed it, but the land criss-crossed with borders and scarred with numerous twisted mountain roads of the armies and caravan trails.<sup>3</sup> These misconceptions were the product of the adherence to canonized western European historical discourse about the oriental *other*, and of the insufficient understanding of the regional specificities and the internal dynamics of historical processes in the Balkans.

Throughout the turbulent history of the region, political elites in various Balkan countries managed only to reinforce this stereotypical European vista. More recent events in the region did not bring positive changes in this respect. The end of the twentieth century in the former Yugoslavia was the time when the manipulated passions of ethnic nationalism awakened and old stereotypes of Balkan tribalism and bloodthirsty highlanders became reinforced once again. The region was seen as the rough landscape of grief. For many westerners the Balkans represent the European border of audibility. From this land of fratricidal murders, blood and belonging, and atavistic tribal passions, western Europeans listened at a distance to whispers of many voices of »disabled nations«.



3 Pavić, Milorad: *Landscape Painted with Tea*. New York: Knopf 1991.

4 Pavlović, Srdja / Debeljak, Aleš: *Gingerbread Hearts*. In: Pavlović, Srdja / Debeljak, Aleš (Eds.): *Studies in the Social History of Destruction: The Case of Yugoslavia*. Special issue. *Intern. Journ. of Politics, Culture and Society*. Vol. 17, no. 1 [New York] (Fall 2003), pp. 7-9.

5 Ibid.

The Balkans, however, is not only a mountainous peninsula in southeastern Europe, lacking the natural borders with western Europe. In the last two centuries of war and violently shifting borders under the pressure of Habsburg and Ottoman empires, amply assisted by the Western powers, the Balkans also became a convenient metaphor. It became a metaphor for a particular *forma mentis*, for a savage and primeval mentality, not subjected to the sway of modern reason, a mentality whose metastases can infest »healthy« civilization in the world of global capitalism. Balkanization of a given community is today predominantly a slur word, suggesting narcissistic fragmentation of large collectives into ever smaller splinter groups that assert themselves in bloodshed and cruel hatred, in cunning moralism of purity and in ritual evocation of ancient hatreds. »European« habits of life and mind are not immediately available in the Balkans.<sup>4</sup>

However, a marker setting apart the stable and orderly society from tribal passions is but an imaginary one. It can be moved around in keeping with the changing need of communities to make sense of their identity in flux, though the consequences of these shifts affect both sides of the divide.<sup>5</sup>

The artistic and cultural endeavors created in Montenegro are important elements that are slowly reshaping the aforementioned marker of separation. Their role in this process, however, is twofold and the end result is often a curious contradiction. They act as both modifiers of past misconceptions and as restorers of margins.

They are modifiers because, as far as materials, composition, structures, and performance techniques are concerned, such creations hardly differ from those presented throughout western European art scene. Their multilayered structure, their semantics and the adherence to multiple reference points, and, above all, their usage of contemporary artistic techniques indeed westernized such expressions in the region, thus partially diluting some of the earlier misconceptions about Montenegrin highlanders and the South Slavs in general.

Within the Montenegrin cultural scene, there are numerous examples of western influence such as the extensive use of Internet, video, installations, and performances. Among many rather curious artistic mixtures the most interesting one is a group of young musicians who call themselves *The Books of Knjige*. The literal English translation of this neologism is *The Books of the Books*. Aside from composing songs and performing them in front of live audiences, members of this band are prominent video-artists. The Western coloring of the Montenegrin cultural space is also clearly visible on the more general level of popular culture. Naturally, this westernization of the local cultural scene could be explained in more ways than one and analyzed according to several criteria. It could be approached as representation of a symbolic distancing from a traditional notion of homeland. Names of restaurants, cafés and clubs such as *The City Hall*, *Piccadilly*, *Soul to Soul*, *Mr. Good*, *Irish Pub*, and many others, seem for young Montenegrins to be a way of stepping out and away from the local parochial framework. These and many other examples of linguistic borrowings from the English language used to »grace« various local cultural events, seem to also manifest the desire to be recognized as a full fledged member of the »European family«. However, the visibility of these contemporary points of contact between the »two worlds« constitutes the outer limits of their modifying function.

On the other hand, the exchange of meanings and impressions with western European audiences, which is hoped for by the Montenegrin artists seem, more often than not, to end up in a *cul-de-sac* of cultural miss-communication. The thematic clusters depicted in the works of art from Montenegro often serve the purpose of reinforcing the existing western European stereotypes about the cultural content in Montenegro. It is the content and not the form that simultaneously attracts and alienates western audiences because the content is indeed, visually aggressive and demands full attention and an emotional investment on the part of a viewing public. The content is unavoidably pregnant with dark memories of exodus, ethnic cleansing, borders and boundaries, exclusion and inclusion, identity and self-recognition. For the most part, western Europeans do not concern themselves with such issues, except when it is absolutely necessary for them to display proverbial compassion with victims of unfortunate historical or political circumstances. It is, however, necessary to recognize and give due credit to western European foundations and non-governmental organizations for their activities in helping keep open the lines of communication between local artists and the outside world. Such efforts indicate that creative artists in Montenegro and in the Balkans in general are not, after all, the lost citizens of an imaginary country.



6 This is particularly visible in the plays recently produced by the Montenegrin State Theatre such as *Bokeški D-Mol*, *Jelena Savojska*, and *Krsto Zrnov*. Another example is the summer 2003 *Montenegro Music Festival*. The Montenegrin daily press even went on to transliterate the English title into *Montenegro Mjuzik Festival*, thus further highlighting the absurdity of the whole endeavor.

7 N.N.: U Gudurama Balkana: Reprezentativni Projekat Muzeja u Kaselu. In: Pobjeda. Section *Kultura* [Podgorica], August 15, 2003.

Many of the Montenegrin artists, on the other hand, view western Europe and a chance to exhibit their artwork or perform their plays there as the ultimate proof of the artistic value of their work. Such a notion is undoubtedly anchored in reality but the problem arises when the validity of the western European artistic judgment is being overemphasized and taken at face value. Being included in exhibitions at galleries and places such as *Arte in Guerra*, at Palazzo Reale in Naples, *Blood and Honey* and *TransArt* in Vienna, *Biennale of Venice*, *Le Monde de l'Art Gallery* in Paris, and participating at the *Edinburgh Theater Festival* carry more weight than any hometown exhibition or a theatre performance.

There is also another dimension to this urge to be seen by Europe. The reality of harsh economic conditions in Montenegro and the possibility to sell one's art abroad often results in various compromises in terms of thematic frameworks offered to the viewing public. Since the viewing public in western Europe is accustomed to think about the South Slavs and the Balkans within the aforementioned stereotypes and expect to see more of the same, the Montenegrin artists, musicians, film and theatre directors are inclined to provide in their works at least a hint of what is expected of them. To put it differently, local artists are aware that cleverly manipulated images of bloodthirsty tribal chiefs, the high resonance of the patriarchal logic of life in their plays, and the fascination with the mythologized past in their songs have acquired significant market value throughout western Europe.<sup>6</sup> Thus a local artist inevitably reinforces western misconceptions.

In the contemporary world of instant gratification (cultural and otherwise) making an emotional investment vis-à-vis a work of art created in Montenegro and the Balkans in general is seen by many western Europeans as somewhat of an imposition rather than an invitation to a dialogue, and as an opportunity to decipher the meaning of one's melancholy and passion. Such sentiment only reinforces the demarcation line between »us« and »them« despite the growing number of exhibitions of the so-called *Balkan Art*.

Since the potency of local artistic imagery and its regional and/or ethnic specificities are difficult to avoid, organizers often resort to misconstrued generalizations such as the one about the Balkans as a homogeneous entity, at least as far as art is concerned. The most recent example of such perception of the Balkans is the art exhibition put together by the museum in Kassel (Germany) and entitled *In the Balkan Gorges*. It features the works of 88 artists from twelve countries of eastern and south eastern Europe. It is interesting to point out that the selection of exhibits was completed in cooperation with a number of artists, art critics and museum directors from various Balkan countries, including Serbia and Montenegro. Aside from the Montenegrin Petar Ćuković, an advisory committee responsible for selecting the works of art included among others Škeljzen Maliqi from Kosovo, Dunja Blažević from Zagreb, and Branislav Dimitrijević from Belgrade. The exhibition prospectus emphasizes some of the features shared by all 88 artists such as the application of new techniques and technological innovations in their works and their effort to addressing anew questions about the status of the artist in a given society. According to the organizers these elements show that artists from south eastern Europe are fully integrated in a global artistic discourse.<sup>7</sup> Those who adhere to the post-colonial discourse would say that the European fascination with the *Balkan Art* represent a polished version of the old colonial attitude.

Thematic clusters such as war, exodus, displacement, identity, alienation, and transition are mistaken for common denominators of almost all works of art created in the Balkans. Two important characteristics, however, are being overlooked: a strong sense of regional and local specificities with regards to content, and the position of the individual artist with respect to the work of art. The local specificities indeed dissolve the thesis about the homogeneity of the Balkans as an artistic and geographic space (not to mention numerous other levels of heterogeneity that characterize this region). Even though an individual artist might not be visible in a particular work of art at a first glance, it is the power of his absence that is often being misinterpreted as the lack of individuality. The artist is indeed present but his presence is shrouded by the broader context of social change expressed through his/her work. This is the point where, in the minds of many westerners, art and politics meet and political or economic traumas (or the combination of the two) of many peoples from the Balkans are merged with individual artistic expressions. Naturally, the immediate political, economic and social environments of an artist are usually his first source of inspiration but it would be a mistake to consider it the only or the exclusive one.



For a western European observer it seems much easier to glance from a distance at these multicolored and vivid expressions of *angst* and then categorize them as confirmations of one's earlier views about eastern exoticism of the 'other' than to engage in a potent encounter with the reality of life and participate fully in cultural and social exchange.



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**Srdja Pavlović** specializes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural and political history of the South Slavs at the Univ. of Alberta (Edmonton/Can.). He is the co-founder and until 1996 worked as co-editor of the literary journal *Stone Soup* (London/UK) and is currently one of the editors for the multidisciplinary online journal *Spaces of Identity* (hosted by the Dept. of History, Univ. of Vienna). His scholarly and literary essays appeared in numerous journals and magazines in Britain, Canada, the United States, Austria, Hungary and in the republics of former Yugoslavia. He lives in Edmonton/Can.  
contact: [srdjapavlovic@yahoo.com](mailto:srdjapavlovic@yahoo.com)