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Breakup of Yugo- slavia portrayed by Serbian alter- native comics scene – the case of Aleksandar Zograf

Belgrade often surprises its visitors with multiplicity of book shops that can be found at almost every corner. While there, one may expect that finding a scientific publication about the newest history of Serbia, which would explain the period of dissolution of Yugoslavia in unbiased way, should not be difficult. However, majority of historical publications available on Serbian market end their narration around year 1945 or shortly before the breakup of the Federation. Those describing later events, including history of the '90s, usually only briefly mention most important dates but avoid in depth description or analysis. Others openly manifest political outlooks of their authors, which makes them closer to journalistic writing than to scientific publications. During a conversation with one of the employees of the biggest academic book shop in Belgrade I naively asked why is it so difficult to find Serbian scientific books on the '90s in Yugoslavia while in Poland there is a wide choice of academic works about the transformation. He replied with a rhetorical question: "Maybe it's because you didn't have such a disgusting fratricidal war that kept the rest of the world simply entertained?". Surprised with these words I started wondering how the topic of the '90s is being presented, how the knowledge about that period is being transferred and how that time with its aftermath are being commented on. My attention was drawn to publications that commented the reality of the last decade of the 20th century in the most informal way – satirical ones.

These were materials whose authors used such forms of expression as column, satirical drawings published in press, song lyrics or comics. Within alternative narrations authors could present their opinions in far more honest way than it would ever be possible in a scientific publication. These genres do not claim to be serious and unbiased, therefore they are often allowed (or even expected) to break taboos like the newest history of Serbia. Also what is common for alternative narrations such as a very popular satirical book *Nacionalni Park Srbija* written by Dragoljub Ljubičić Mićko or comic book *Nikad se ne zna* created by Wostok, they demand their audience to have certain knowledge that would enable understanding the message of a text built of symbols, inside jokes, and simplifications. Readers from outside the „target group” would probably find it difficult to fully understand and even if they do, they would get an impression that certain text is not addressed to them but to some exclusive community whose members would understand it effortlessly. Nevertheless, alternative narrations prove that it is possible to take up the subject of the newest history of Serbia, even though they do it in a manner far from standards of academic discourse. At that point my attention was drawn by artists associated with Serbian alternative comics scene, particularly by Aleksandar Zograf whose works about life during and after war were published abroad and read by foreign audience even in '90s. Zograf and other alternative authors not only created a new direction in Serbian comics culture, but they also did capture significant part of history in their works (Pištalo 2009: 10).

Natalia Nowińska-Antoniewicz – socjolożka, doktorantka w Zakładzie Badań Kultury Instytutu Socjologii Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika w Toruniu. Zajmuje się problematyką uczestnictwa w kulturze, badaniem publiczności i polityki kulturalnej, kulturą alternatywną oraz sztuką zaangażowaną społecznie i politycznie – głównie komiksem i muzyką z obszarów byłej Jugosławii, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem serbskiej sceny komiksowej i muzycznej lat dziewięćdziesiątych. Ponadto jako badacz jakościowy brała udział w projektach badawczych: „Kultura jako dźwignia: podnoszenie jakości życia i redukcja nierówności społecznych”; „Efekt Bilbao czy kult Cargo? Nowe instytucje kultury jako aktywatory życia społecznego, kulturalnego oraz gospodarczego” oraz „W jakim czasie kultury żyją Polacy?”.

Serbian comic art and origins of alternative scene

Serbian comics have been evolving for a few decades and during 20th century was being popularized by several magazines regularly publishing works by

both Yugoslav and foreign authors. The main topics and trends of Yugoslav comic art did not differ much from what was popular on the comic market in Europe at the time. Apart from fiction stories, adaptations of literature, and superhero pieces, there were also comics inspired by history of Yugoslavia. The latter ones first appeared during World War II (for example *Ćira i Mira* by Branko Ćopić and Ivo Kušanić published from 1943 to 1945) and focused mainly on the life and fights of partisans. The last decade of 20th century in the Balkans brought the breakup of Yugoslavia and its hideous aftermath for newly formed states. On comics scene it resulted with significant change – Serbian authors focused mainly on current events such as war, dynamic changes in politics and economic crisis. Their works not only did ruthlessly express opinions on the new reality, but also showed clear fascination with the new avant-garde directions in art. Experimenting with new styles in comic art made its narrations relatively hard to understand for the mass public as the new works were becoming more complicated and metaphorical. In the meantime, due to economic crisis, many publishing houses went bankrupt, causing disappearance of comics from the Serbian market. The new comics went underground from their very beginning but at the same time they gained a completely new audience that was attracted by their new avant-garde style and had not been interested in popular comics before (Vladanović 2009: 67; Zupan 2009: 58–60). In these circumstances alternative scene of comics was born and Saša Rakezić, also known by readers as Aleksandar Zograf, is considered one of its founders.

Zdravko Zupan, Serbian cartoonist and comic art historian, finds fundamental difference between popular and alternative comics in topics taken up by artists representing those scenes and their attitude towards commenting current events with the usage of comics. During the past decades, comic artists had concentrated on entertaining and sometimes educating their audience, while the topic of current events was rather avoided. On contrary, alternative cartoonists mainly focused on using the medium of (usually inspired by avant-garde directions in modern art) comics in order to openly speak their minds about the new order in multiplicity of aspects. According to Zupan, reality of the '90s and artistic reflection upon their history became major motif of comic art by such artists as Aleksandar Zograf, Wostok, Simon Vučković or Miroslav Lazendić (116–117).

Imagine you were born Aleksandar Zograf...

The search for alternative narrations, that deal with the topic of the last decade of 20th century, made me look at Serbian comics scene from a new perspective. References to actual events were often presented in metaphorical and abstract way which to an „outside” reader would resemble of pure surrealism (Serbian alternative comics art was strongly inspired by surrealism). What significantly distinguishes Zograf from other artists, is the fact that the majority of his works is autobiographical and the main character is a drawn alter ego of the author (Popović 2002: 6). He presents his experiences, feedbacks and reflections on the reality of the '90s, but unlike other representatives of the scene, he does it in a way that is understandable also to audience from outside former Yugoslavia. What is more, while other artists were publishing their creations

in the home market and were only occasionally introduced to foreign readers, he was sending his overseas to American publishing houses and was often published simultaneously in Serbia and the United States. He commented on his publishing policy in an interview: “This was probably a historical first – a comic strip shuttled across the frontlines to be published in the country of «the enemy», while the bombs were still coming down” (Zograf 2006). The context of both publishing abroad and narration itself seemed to me more open to being understood by a foreign reader and made me look at Zograf’s comics as at a source of information about living in Serbia during the time of Yugoslavia’s dissolution.

This article focuses on works by Aleksandar Zograf collected and published in an anthology *Regards from Serbia: A Cartoonist’s Diary of a Crisis in Serbia* as an evidence that presents the reality of ‘90s in Serbia. During and after the war the author was sending his works abroad (mainly to the U.S.A.) where they were published and read by wide audience (Zupan 2007: 117). This way he was giving a specific insight on what life looked like in a country damaged by fratricidal war and its aftermath. Media coverage of that time did not include what Zograf calls “the truth of emotions”, while he made it the core of his narrations so that the western audience could acquire knowledge that was out of their reach otherwise. His works also present the problem of creating the image of Serbia in news and how it tended to be far from reality, especially when it came to showing everyday life of civilians during war (cf Simpson 2018). The reader is given opportunity to take a view on it from the perspective of the author who was one of Serbian civilians. Therefore as a researcher I decided to try to treat *Regards from Serbia* not as entertainment but as anthropological evidence that can enable us to understand the Serbian reality of the ‘90s (cf Pomian 2012: 605).

Comics as anthropological evidence

Comics as a genre are not commonly considered a source of knowledge, however social sciences do not see them as an exclusively entertaining product of popular culture but often analyze them equally with other texts of culture (Fiske 2010: 108–109). What is more, works by Zograf in many aspects resemble more of a specific documentary than fiction. Picturing the influence that ongoing events had on him (including his dreams full of terrifying flashbacks) is the main motif of the anthology. Obviously, the convention of the genre enforces the author to choose what should be presented and what should be omitted in order to create a comic narration (Szyłak 2009: 7–9). Therefore, he emphasizes what, according to him as a witness, is most important when it comes to understanding what living in Serbia under sanctions was like (Pomian 2012: 604–605). Not without significance is the way Zograf’s works were being distributed during ‘90s and who they were addressed to, apart from Serbian audience. All these aspects taken together lead to an assumption that his works can be considered a collection of social life documents, also known as testimony of the moment (cf Hatfield 2005: 150–151).

Social scientist while conducting fieldwork of such specific material as comics have to deal with multiplicity of symbols that need to be decoded for the message to become understood. All stylistic devices that comic narration



Picture 1 ,I think that this darkness around me can speak.. it dictates words to me. I'm drawing comics so you can imagine the world seen with my eyes. Hey! Can anyone hear me? Listen... Try to imagine what it would be like if you were born Aleksandar Zograf!!'

consist of, and historical circumstances of its creation, result in an insight into a very subjective world of the author's perception of reality and his reflections on it (McCloud 1993: 65–68). Comics as works of art created in certain cultural and social environments and often undertaking their interpretation (cf Czubał 2010: 16), what makes them eligible to become an object of interest for social sciences (pic.1).

Portrait of a society under sanctions

Zograf in many of his works focuses on reflections on the Serbian society – he presents everyday situations from the perspective of a witness or a participant what leads to expressing generalized conclusions on the nation and its changes caused by the breakup of Yugoslavia. *One day in Serbia*, the first comics in the anthology, was drawn in April 1993, when Serbia was being punished with economic sanctions, two years after the beginning of the war (Benson 2011: 239). It shows common problems, such as difficulties in finding basic food products or clothing. Also, it presents how the society, to a certain extent, grew accustomed and indifferent to the reality that was far from norms and standards known before (pic.2).

People around Zograf are hardly ever presented in groups – they all keep distance from each other while carefully observing but never openly sharing their thoughts and reflections. The latter ones often involve concern about others but do not cause any action. Everyone seems to become more and more distrustful towards others what Zograf explained in *Life under sanctions*. This narration begins with a very meaningful picture of five human figures who are blindfolded with brick walls (pic.3). It refers to the beginning of the conflict that started in 1991, when Slovenia and Croatia proclaimed independence. According to Zograf, as soon as the fights began, the concordant coexistence of several nations within one country consigned to oblivion. New divisions on the political map of the Balkans led to divisions in the society, that were fueled by radical politicians and new national leaders, even though for the major part of society the situation still seemed abstract. When in January 1992 the ceasefire was announced, Zograf and people around him hoped for the permanent ending of the conflict but soon another war started, this time in Bosnia. There were three sides involved in the conflict: Serbs, Croats and Muslims. Enemies did not differ from one another in any obvious aspect, what Zograf depicted by drawing three identical faces with short description of each nation's characteristics which lead the reader to conclusion that not only did all three sides of the conflict share the same ethnic roots but were also facing their own but very similar fears, obsessions and anger (Zograf 2011: 12) (pic.4).

Strict economic sanctions that were implemented against Serbia by The United Nations divided society even more as economical inequalities became deep and visible. Zograf showed it as a simple division between the rich, who supported the new regime and the politicians (or were politicians themselves), and the rest, who are equally poor and hungry. The first group of people was depicted as completely indifferent to the current events and their consequences for the rest of the society as none of its representatives experienced any changes in their own situation after the implementation of the sanctions (Zograf 2011: 15) (pic.5). The author placed himself in the second group, the one that in his eyes, was the most exposed to the negative results of the war and the sanctions. Poor people had to deal with such impediments as regular lack of electricity and heating for the majority of time, or limited public transport. Poverty enforced reorganization of everyday life, change of habits, and reevaluation of certain phenomena, for example standing in queues for food became a duty that every household had one person assigned for; those who had a view on nearby shops were considered lucky because they knew about deliveries first; mutual favors replaced the currency as inflation made

money valueless; fruit and vegetables were planted in every possible piece of ground. Another consequence of the worsening economic situation of the Serbian society was emigration, to which Zograf also paid attention in his works. Emigrants' attempts to adapt in new places were usually leading to the feeling of confusion and helplessness (Zograf 2011: 17–19). Migrations mentioned in comics also included those within former Yugoslavia. Zograf has the opportunity to observe those coming to Pančevo and he noticed two types of them: those who lost all their personal possessions and were unable to handle the situation well, and opportunists who found migration a good opportunity for achieving their personal economical goals. In the conditions of common poverty every symptom of growing wealthier was perceived negatively by the society (Zograf 2011: 19). Zograf described two most popular ways of fast enrichment – smuggling and prostitution.

The economic sanctions and poverty made also medicines an unaffordable and unavailable good, what caused ill ones lose hope in recovery. Such situation resulted in the growing popularity of alternative medicine methods, and self-appointed witch doctors taking the role of medics (Zograf 2011: 19–20). Furthermore patients isolated in psychiatric hospitals were left without access to treatment what caused deepening of their illnesses. Zograf notices ironically that psychiatric wards remained the last places where Serbs, Croats, and Muslims were able to coexist in peace as what used to be considered a norm, after beginning of war could be accepted only by the mentally disordered.

The revival of faith in traditional medicine was also one of the symptoms of increasing doubt in the world explained with rational reasoning. Incomprehensible phenomena were again explained with the use of mythological beliefs (Zograf 2011: 20–23). Zograf in his drawings also referred to Slavic mythology – the more his narrations described the atmosphere of uncertainty and fear felt by people, the more characters resembled traditionally imagined Slavic vampires¹. People pictured as similar to vampires felt as if they were half-dead what sometimes caused them to adopt most desperate strategies for survival. From mythical references, Zograf fluently moved to his reflection on the nature of the Balkan societies. According to him they constantly experience multiple contradictions, they function only between extremes in permanent perplexity. That, combined with difficult sociopolitical situation and news from front lines, led to collective psychosis. Peoples' helplessness and sense of insecurity along with propaganda in the media, were leading to gradual disintegration of the society. However family bonds were at that point stronger than ever – it was significantly easier to survive the crisis as having close relatives facilitated access to hardly available goods (Zograf 2011: 33–34).

After the end of the war the situation neither did improve for the society nor returned to its previous state. Postwar crisis in the end of '90s made people tired of constant awareness of the danger, even though by the end of the decade it turned rather into getting used to it combined with permanent despondency. The picture of the Serbian society presented by the author is shown from the perspective of a man who lived in it. Thanks to Zograf's observations presented in comics, the reader gets an opportunity to take a look at the social life in Serbia through the eyes of a man who experienced it himself.

1 Vampires in Slavic legends are half-dead whose main goal is to annoy the living. Vampires aren't dangerous but rather numb and mean. Old illustrations show them as repulsive, deformed, and dirty creatures (Vuković 2004: 160).



Picture 2 'All I could afford was a loaf of bread. A boy in a military uniform passed me by. It's horrible. How could anyone dress their kid like that?'

Media keeping society (in)sane and (un)informed

One of the most important elements of the narration is the depiction of the media coverage addressed to Yugoslav audience, as it strongly influenced their perception of the current events. Zograf described multiple attitudes and aspects of the media activities, among which he most frequently paid attention to both foreign media and their focus on showing as extreme picture of the conflict as possible, and Yugoslav media participating in the conflict by both broadcasting propaganda and supporting adaptation to the new conditions. Only few times did he portray particular events related to the media – mostly he concentrated on generalized overall reflection on the media activities and their impact on the audience. It is often presented how television would pick topics concerning the conflicts in order to manipulate



Picture 3 Life under sanctions. So they demolished the Berlin Wall but they've built new invisible walls...



Picture 4. But soon another war started – this time in former Yugoslav Republic in Bosnia. Three confused, furious and autodestructive nations were destroying each other. Serbs – Orthodox Christians, lost in their own historic frustrations. Croats – Catholics, desperately immersing into romantic nationalism. Muslims – of the same ethnic origins as Croats and Serbs, with similar to theirs mad obsessions

viewers in different post Yugoslav states. As an example of medial absurd, Zograf showed methods used by foreign reporters to dramatize their materials from front lines such as asking random people whether they suffer. Trivialization of war and its aftermath was causing the feeling that the world was not treating the problem seriously. Furthermore, the western media discourse did not bother to understand the complexity of it and seemed to prefer simple judgments on who was guilty. The local media, mainly women's press and radio, adjusted to the new reality under sanctions – they quickly noticed the audience's need for advice and support in coping with the crisis. Women's press avoided current political issues but promised to teach readers how to „stay healthy and sane until the next issue” (Zograf 2011:16; Blagojević 2006: 73–75). The radio, as the most popular medium, was keeping listeners up to date with the availability of certain goods and advices where to buy them or with fast changing exchange rate. Zograf says that the war and the crisis were clearly noticed by all media, but very few of them tried to stay unbiased

and avoid controversial topics. Apart from women's press, Pink TV², every source of information had its own opinion what combined with propaganda messages, was causing informational chaos (Blagojević 2006: 73). Milošević's regime did not censor the media too strictly, therefore the situation could be observed and analyzed by intellectuals, artists and other experts. Independent media had right to air material unflattering for the regime but the length of the crisis, the worsening conditions of living and too much information from multiple sources resulted in lack of attention. According to Zograf, media usually only deepened the state of social apathy and disinformation – he finds propaganda in the media greatly responsible for this as it was so omnipresent, it damaged people's ability to think critically. The society immersed in anomy, was sticking to new national leaders who were promising the confused ones at least some protection and security (pic. 6).

Zograf tells a story from his closest environment about how neighbors who were lacking alternative ways of spending time, were gathering to watch TV full of propaganda materials. He got an impression that they were doing it on purpose, just to receive an illusional proof that the situation was going to improve (pic.7), the war would end, and they as a nation would not be proclaimed the only guilty party. The foreign media at that time were showing war in the Balkans as something quite irrelevant that is taking place somewhere far away from the point of view of the global politics. The Serbs were usually shown as the bad and aggressive ones but likely to win (Zograf 2011: 14; 71).

Current events through Zograf's eyes

Even though Aleksandar Zograf was drawing a diary depicting life in dissolving Yugoslavia, he paid relatively little attention to introducing readers to the current events in politics and on the front lines. Mentioning particular historical facts is used only to give hint about the context and the chronological frames, and seems to be addressed mainly to the readers from outside the Balkans. The history in Zograf's narrations was placed in the background, especially in the first part of the anthology, which consists of longer comic stories. The second part is a collection of separate one-board comics, that refer to certain characters and events known from the political scene but not in a detailed way. The main message of the narrations remains clear and understandable because the author focused on other aspects of life in '90s and readers do not have to have in depth knowledge on that period in Yugoslavia. Nevertheless a reader who would like to better understand some choices of stylistic means or references, should be familiar with the political and cultural reality of that time. Zograf focused rather on reactions of the Serbian society to certain historical facts, or to the attitude of the media and the government towards them, but only the readers who know eg. Serbian politicians, would recognize some faces in his drawings. He did not pay as much attention to transferring historical knowledge, as he did to describing collective moods and emotions emerging as a reaction to the current events. Only events that had direct influence on civilians were presented in detail like the record inflation,

2 TV station created in 1994 which from the beginning was meant to stay away from any news and provide only entertainment.

the cancellation of license for merchandising Disney's products due to economical embargo or the places that were bombed by the end of the decade by NATO. Readers can see drawn reproductions of notes of 10 billion dinars, fake Disney comics created illegally by the local cartoonists, and remains of damaged buildings but such content is used in Zograf's narrations just by the way.

Life in new reality

Part of Zograf's works published in the anthology portrayed relatively short period (from 9th June 1999 to 22nd July 2001) after the end of the war and the bombings in great detail. The author concentrated on depicting the Serbian society facing necessity to cope with life in new reality after traumatic experiences. It was already deeply divided and very disappointed what was shown on the example of protests against Slobodan Milošević. Protesting people were feeling lost and furious – they were ready to fight for changes even though they did not believe in them anymore (Zograf 2011: 128). Leaving the past behind was not made any easier by the fact that material remains of the war were still very visible and influenced everyday functioning. Zograf claims that people were so tired that everyone was “trying to hide in their shell” by devoting to their own problems (*ibidem*). Atomization of the society was increasing along with the sense of chagrin because, despite the end of the bombing, hardly anything seemed to change for the better. The Serbs were forced to strive alone both for survival and to forget the recent events. In the first half of '90s the role of the family was significant in similar process, but in the second one most families were grieving over their relatives lost in the war, and bonds among living ones were breaking (Zograf 2011: 83; 87; 119).

The period of life after the sanctions in Zograf's works was presented as the time of the extremely difficult beginning of the political changes and attempts of achieving stability. Simultaneously, he showed the condition of the society that was devastated after a long lasting conflict and crisis, emotions and moods of people around him, their strategies of survival, and overcoming the trauma. The reader is here is given an insight in biographies and events, they would never be able to hear about otherwise from other sources such as international media hardly ever have been paying attention to that region after the end of the war.

Conclusions

While creating his comics dedicated to presenting life in dissoluting Yugoslavia, Aleksandar Zograf was taking the role of a native guide who introduces the readers (and the researchers) to the reality of his closest surroundings, what in Serbian comics culture was a new approach to creating a narration. He did not claim to be an unbiased source of information – on the contrary, he often admitted not to know everything, and to perceive certain events through his own emotions. Also, he was trying to enable his audience to view and understand his world, culture and experiences from his personal perspective, and being aware of the possible lack of knowledge about the '90s in Serbia on readers' side he tried to make his narrations as comprehensible as possible for everyone (at least to some extent) (Lanier 2009). Zograf explained emotions, moods with their influence on actions undertaken by people



Picture 5 'Those who were rich or close to the regime, didn't notice any major differences on a daily basis'



Picture 6 'As it usually happens, confused and nonplussed people followed the voice of their national leaders with relief. We'll protect you... but first put your battledresses on...'

Picture 7 'Contemporarily, you can always find escape and relief in the world created by media'

and their reactions to new reality. In his works he often engaged in a kind of a dialogue with his imagined reader and was encouraging him/her to imagine themselves living in the reality presented in the comics. *Regards from Serbia* can be treated as a source of information on how particular aspects of '90s in Serbia were perceived by their witness and participant. Zograf gives his readers insight into a piece of history and culture that might be completely foreign to them otherwise (Kunert-Graf 2018; Klug 2018).

Analyzing Zograf's works is not an easy task, mainly because of the elements of artistic creation that should be sometimes separated from the main message in order to be interpreted along with understanding why they were used at a certain point of the narration. Such task requires from a researcher more knowledge about the reality of living in Yugoslavia in '90s than is depicted in the anthology. Zograf was often giving the reader some hints that facilitate reaching for other sources of information like press articles or TV archives but at the same time he was using references that could be found

too hermetic (especially those concerning other artists of Serbian alternative comics scene) for a foreign reader to understand. Therefore, a researcher needs to have certain capital of knowledge in order to treat comics as evidence and a social reflector. Comics as a source of knowledge cannot function independently in case of research (Krajewski 2003: 30–31), what does not change the fact that if taken with proper precaution it can offer a new perspective and different kind of knowledge about many aspects of living in Yugoslavia in the last decade of the 20th century.

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