Roland Orcsik
Szeged, University of Szeged, Hungary

Night Landscapes of Autopsia

This study explores the underground artistic project Autopsia from Vojvodina, examining its visual, textual and musical works within the context of ex-Yugoslav avant-garde, neo-avant-garde and postmodern art. The focus will be on Autopsia's latest project *Steel Books*, which are unique art objects that incorporate diverse cultural questions. *Steel Books* recontextualize ancient motifs of night and death, resonating with similar themes found in Baroque art and literature. Autopsia combines the Baroque method of *discordia concors* with postmodern eclecticism, but rather than celebrating the neoliberal 'free market' of cultural artefacts, it offers a critical perspective.

Keywords: Yugoslavia; canon; politicized underground art under socialism and post-socialism; baroque; spectacle; Autopsia.

Introduction

This study will present the artistic project Autopsia in the context of Yugoslavia's system of self-management. Self-management can be discussed from different points of view: economic, political and cultural. Since it's not the main subject of the study, the cultural and political aspects of Yugoslav self-management will be briefly presented.

Autopsia is a multi-media art project that includes music, visual arts, performance and literature. The study will show Autopsia's artistic strategy by analyzing one of their latest projects, *Steel Books*. My hypothesis is that Yugoslav art, culture and politics continue to influence and inspire Autopsia's work. However, Autopsia transcends, being merely an exotic representation that holds little relevance beyond its cultural base. Its strategy is paradoxical: while it emerged from the alternative political and cultural model of Yugoslavia, this does not limit its interpretation to only that geopolitical context. *Steel Books* will also be presented in the context of Baroque and postmodern literature, artistic book objects and Guy Deboard's theory of spectacle.

Politics and Poetics of excess

Yugoslav art was characterized by a lack of homogeneity, both within its institutional frameworks and in its non-institutional contexts. Similarly, Yugoslav politics

cannot be considered identical to the Stalinism of the Soviet Union. While the Soviet states were either rejecting Western art practices or adopting them only gradually (as seen with dissident art), Yugoslavia maintained a more open approach, albeit with its own forms of (self-)censorship. It is exactly for that reason that Yugoslav system cannot be interpreted as a totalitarian system (as opposed to states of the Soviet Union).[1]It was an ambivalent and contradictory system – insufficiently free, yet not entirely totalitarian. However, certain themes remained taboo, such as the People's Liberation Struggle and the cult of Tito. Similarly, we must differentiate between various periods of the Yugoslav system:politics before and after 1948 (after the split with Stalin, Yugoslavia underwent a significant transformation),[2]until Tito's death, and disintegration of Yugoslavia itself. After the split with Stalin, Yugoslavia establisheda self-management system of socialism. This specific path wasn't homogeneous; it evolved until the end of Yugoslavia and was often influenced by the specific state of affairs in different regions. Aleš Erjavec notes:

> In reality, social organization in the least-developed parts of Yugoslavia, where modern industrialization has not yet really taken hold, started to revert to the premodern state, while in the country as a whole, a complex system that was almost impossible to fathom caused decision making to become even more opaque and chaotic.[3]

We can conclude that Yugoslavia was contradictory, heterogeneous and sovereign in the context of the Cold War. It is undeniable that Yugoslavia differed both from the Soviet Union and the West, even though these entities were also heterogeneous. Márk Losoncz suggests that, within the framework of the Cold War, we can interpret Yugoslavia as a Lacanian excess: "Yugoslavia relates to what was something more in Eastern-European adventure, a utopian excess versus exhausted utopias, an alternative versus alternative hypermodernisations."[4]

By the end of the 1970s punk emerged in Yugoslavia as a subculture of industrial music and new experimental art, the cultural rebellion caused by dissatisfaction with existing institutions. This was a time when the domesticated rebels of Yugoslav generation '68 accepted cultural and political positions but were unable to change the system from within. The Yugoslav alternative culture of that period did not unconditionally embrace Western capitalism (which was the case in states of the Soviet Union, and one can sense that even today), it criticized both the Yugoslav regime and the Stalinism of the Eastern bloc. On one hand, it represented a leftist rebellion against

[1]Alpár Losoncz, *A hatalom (nélküliség) horizontja. Hommage à Új Symposion* (Újvidék: Forum, 2018), 103–42.

[2]Gerson S. Sher, *Praxis. Marxist Criticism and Dissent in Socialist Yugoslavia* (Bloomington, London: Indiana University Press, 1977), 151–93.

[3] Aleš Erjavec, "Neue Slowenische Kunst – New Slovenian Art: Slovenia, Yugoslavia, Self-Management, and the 1980s," in *Postmodern and the Postsocialist Condition. Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, ed. Aleš Erjavec (Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003),138.

[4] If not otherwise stated, the quote is my translation. "Jugoszlávia arra vonatkozik, ami a kelet-európai kalandon belül valami több volt, utópikus többlet a kimerülőben levő utópiákhoz képest, alternatíva az alternatív hipermodernizációhoz képest." Márk Losoncz, Összefüggő viszonyok, teremtő kapcsolatok (Újvidék: Forum, 2022), 600.

false socialism, although in Yugoslav '68th there appeared smaller elements of ethnicism, nationalism (e. g. some of the demonstrators in Zagreb, who later in 1970/1971 became Croatian nationalists).[5] Thus, we cannot characterize the alternative culture of Yugoslavia as homogeneous in political and aesthetic terms; rather, it was infused with different ideological narratives. Erjavec notes that Yugoslav art depended on the socio-political circumstances of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s:

> Since the late 1960s, Yugoslav artists have been well informed about cultural and artistic events, whether these came from capitalist, socialist, or Third World countries. In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the Yugoslav lifestyle started to change: a youth and underground culture developed in urban centers, and mass culture proliferated. […] A mixture of various genres, high and low, profane and elitist, characterized the 1980s. This was possible partly due to the autonomy that self-management offered to individual republics and their constituent parts.[6]

Of course, as we have already stated, Yugoslav alternative culture was not politically homogenous. Miško Šuvaković categorizes alternative art into two types: a conflict one and a non-conflict one. Both types share dissatisfaction with official art: "Alternative art is art rooted in critique, undermining, deconstructing and parodying the dominant art, culture and ideology of a given society"[7]. This is valid both for the criticism expressed in a direct, conflicting form (*NSK* and *Laibach*) and for a less direct, thus non-conflicting form (*invisible art* of Slobodan Tišma).

The Yugoslav pseudo-Gesamtkunstwerk group Autopsia emerged from both alternative strategies and their negation, the reworking of them. Autopsia's strategy is neither individualistic nor collective; it represents the strategy of the erased subject. According to Yugoslav conceptual artist Bálint Szombathy, Autopsia "does not promote the idea of provocation, but of ruse, not destructivity, but constructivity"[8]. The idea of a ruse is present in the game of deconstructing the representations of different ideologies. Autopsia's work can be interpreted as a montage, a construction, a composition of dismantled ideologies.

The alternative culture of punk rejects official cultural, artistic, political and economic models, embracing a "Do It Yourself" (DIY) ideology to create its own rebellious collages and montages. Yugoslavia was, in quotation marks, a DIY state; its system of "self-management" fostered a culture distinct from both the Warsaw Pact and the West. However, we have to understand it really with quotations marks, because that particular position was made possible by the Cold War, the rivalry between

---

[5] Nebojša Popov, "Junski sukobi 1968," *Pitanja* 3–4 (Zagreb 1988): 129. Losoncz, Összefüggő viszonyok, 176.

[6] Erjavec, "Neue Slowenische Kunst," 140.

[7] Miško Šuvaković, *Pojmovnik moderne i postmoderne likovne umetnosti i teorije posle 1950* (Novi Sad: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, Prometej, 1999), 23.

[8] "Nem a provokatív, hanem a leleményes, nem a destruktív, hanem a konstruktív elveket vallja magáénak." Bálint Szombathy, "A halál láttamoztatói," in *Extázis és agónia. Független zenei (h)arcterek*, ed. Zoltán Virág (Szeged: Fosszília, JABE, 2006), 62.

the Western world and the Soviet bloc. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia became an unnecessary pawn in the game of globalized capitalism. Ultimately, it was former Yugoslavs who contributed to its destruction by abandoning the principle of non-alignment almost overnight to embrace chauvinism and nationalism and by effectively becoming useful idiots of neoliberal capitalism.

(De)contextualization of fatherland

In "the beginning" there was punk, and punk created Autopsia. The first works of Autopsia were fanzines *Bank Rot* and *Prose Selavy* (1980), where their first visual and textual works appear. The group's first exhibition did not occur in major cultural centers, such as Belgrade, Ljubljana, Zagreb or Sarajevo, but rather on the margin of the cultural map of Yugoslavia: in Ruma, a small town in Vojvodina (1985). Born in Ruma, artists Ratomir Kulić and Vladimir Mattioni developed their interdisciplinary project *Verbum-program, which* was "more than an individual, less than a group".[9] Their theoretical concept had a significant impact on the creation of Autopsia. Despite these important references, the notion of 'fatherland' holds little relevance for Autopsia:

> *Autopsia* does not have a fatherland. It does not have any place or any system outside of itself. All social relations within which *Autopsia* operates might be anywhere in the world. *Autopsia*'s home is the world. The fatherland is a fictitious concept. *Autopsia* operates in reality, outside 'fatherlands'. It can produce a fatherland but cannot belong to it. The fatherland, the motherland – these are projects, abstract notions that have nothing to do with homelandness. It is only the homeland that is the place for the world of individuality, it is not an abstract product. The individual experience of the world cannot be shared with others.[10]

However, as one of the alternative Yugoslav art projects, Autopsia was and is possible exactly within the above-mentioned excess of Yugoslavia. Alexei Monroe notes that the cultural context of Autopsia is quite important:

> While Yugoslavia itself has never been the main subject of *Autopsia's* work, the numerous and unique Yugoslav influences and contradictions of the state it emerged in should be remembered, especially when we consider the sense of recent or imminent catastrophic loss and mourning that pervades so much of its work.[11]

The art of Autopsia is not only an implicit critique of the Yugoslav system and its ever more visible nationalistic feelers, nor is it an uncritical enthusiasm regarding Western

---

[9] Avantgarde Museum. "Verbum Program," https://www.avantgarde-museum.com/en/museum/collection/authorsverbumprogram~pe4563/, acc. on September 14, 2024.

[10] Roland Orcsik, "*Nachtmusik* / Dijalog sa Autopsijom," *Tema* 3–4 (March–April 2008): 52.

[11] Alexei Monroe, *Thanatopolis* (London, Prague, Berlin: Divus, 2016), 19.

pop-culture. The alternative art of Autopsia is an excess. But this excess is not only political, but it is also ontological, as stated in one of the slogans of Autopsia: "Our goal is death". This statement can be interpreted also as an allusion or a reworking of Kafka's aphorism: "Unsere Rettung ist der Tod, aber nicht dieser"[12]. In this case the death can be interpreted also as a "death of the author" (Roland Barthes), the emptiness of the center, dismembering of the meaning. Autopsia has used Kafka's sentence more than once, in quite different contexts, released from the ideology of "meaning".

The art of Autopsia cannot be easily classified into the category of conflict/non-conflict alternative art. It did not openly attack the Yugoslav system, but its aesthetics uses religious, as well as pop-cultural, or political symbols of Yugoslav culture, and deconstructs all of them. Dejan Sretenović is of the opinion *that Autopsia situates* itself outside 'high' and 'low' culture, outside 'mainstream' and 'alternative' culture.[13]

Visual, musical and textual works of Autopsia use symbols of industrialization of production, but in relation to official real socialism it is not only the attribute of 'the worker', but also the critique of capitalist consumerism. We can speak in the same way about the critique of the entertainment culture industry which plays a major role in consumerist societies. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the Western liberal culture of capitalism is an entertainment industry. This industry creates controlled consumerism. The new, the progress, the repetition, these are key concepts of culture industry:

> The fact that its characteristic innovations are in all cases mere improvements to mass production is not extraneous to the system. […] Nevertheless, the culture industry remains the entertainment business. Its control of consumers is mediated by entertainment and its hold will not be broken by outright dictate but by the hostility inherent in the principle of entertainment to anything which is more than itself.[14]

The motives of tools, therefore of industrial production, in the works of Autopsia point exactly to this repetition of senselessness of entertainment (which according to Adorno and Horkheimer is a part of work, because the entertainment is only a preparation for work, for self-repetition of the production). The death of meaning, death of the author, death of the ideas: information, communication, aura or a cult of originality is an illusion of social spectacle. According to Guy Debord the spectacle represents itself as an instrument of unification; however, this produces a false consciousness, a false image of the world, because it is "nothing else but an official language of generalized separation"[15] The works of Autopsia do not attempt to rehabilitate the meta-

---

[12] Franz Kafka, "Das vierte Oktavheft," https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kafka/oktavhef/chap04.html, acc. on September 14, 2024.

[13] Dejan Sretenović, "Autopsia ili o smrti i izbavljenju," in *Autopsia. Ogledalo uništenja / Mirror of Destruction*, (Beograd: Salon Muzeja savremene umetnosti, 2010), 11, n. n.

[14] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 108.

[15] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Radical Amerika and Black & Red, 1970), n. n.

physics of 'meaning' in a society where there is no such meaning. Its musical, visual and textual (bri)col(l)ages and montages bring to light breaks, fissures of ideological meta-narratives. Autopsia's artistic strategy is noise, eclecticism, absence of hierarchy between different contents, absence of a center. It's a critique of mainstream aesthetics, political ideologies and artistic strategies. In this sense, Autopsia's work is a mirror in which power is presented as a spectacle of centralization. Jacques Attali notes:

> The music of power no longer conveys information within a code. It is, like the ideology of the period, without meaning. The modern musician says nothing, signifies nothing if not the insignificance of his age, the impossibility of communication in repetition. [...] This ideology of non-sense is not without political ramifications. In fact, it heralds the ideology of repetitive society, the simulacrum of the decentralization of power, a caricature of self-management. All of music becomes organized around the simulacrum of non-power.[16]

Autopsia's works consciously position themselves outside both the margin and the center, serving as a critique of both ideological strategies. "Namely, what Autopsia deals with is the culture itself – it is the object of processing, and not the area to which the messages are directed."[17]

Nacht und Nebel

The motive of night is present in the works of Autopsia from the very beginning, as in following musical compositions:"Red Nights" (1984), "Kissing Jesus in the Dark" (1985), "Night of Annihilation" (1989), "Das Gesetz Des Tages Und Leidenschaft Zur Nacht" (1989), "Le chant de la nuit" (2005), "Radical Machines Night Landscapes" (2008), and so on. In many cases "the night" is a quotation, the title of the compilation "Le chant de la nuit" may point to Mahler's 7th Symphony or the 3rd Symphony by Karol Szymanowski. However,the primary context, original' conceptions are not of essential concern; instead the focus lies in the deconstruction performed by Autopsia.

In early poetic texts of Autopsia we often come across he motive of "night" and "darkness". But in the work of Autopsia the exact detection of the original source is not crucial, it is the method of collage, re-composition that is at stake:

> effect of the field
> darkness is without face
> triggering of bi-stabile multi-vibrator
> the abysses are rising

---

[16] Jacques Atalli, *Noise. The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 114.

[17] Dragan Ambrozić, "Autopsia Autopsiae," *Delo*12 (December 1988): 175.

> mirrors are wondering
> limit values
> logical structures
> enormous night
> dead walk
> atomic structure of matter
> negative reaction
> I remove the mask
> the pain bleeds
> temperature of crystal
> total losses[18]

Sometimes 'the night" is replaced by the synonym "the darkness":

> sun battery
> factor of goodness
> forbidden zone
> factor of stability
> blind for differences, clairvoyant for similarities
> darkness is without face

In these works, "night" and "darkness" become a metaphor for disappearing of the visible: darkening of the spectacle, subject, author, center, God, light, logos, etc. This disappearance is explicitly thematized in another poem:

> what wants to light, must burn
> and we all must disappear.
> those that we do not name by name
> our heart will recognize,
> when we stand in light.
>
> many a darkness is on earth
> many a cruel, blind misfortune –
> should it all be more clear,
> only one command helps:
>
> we ourselves must burn
> and while shining silently disappear.
> those who thusly the light increase,
> always companions find,
> those who stand by them.

---

[18] All poems are in manuscript, except where the first publication is noted.

While two earlier poems resemble a group of various quotations in different styles (technical, religious and poetic descriptions), this poem evokes a biblical-religious style ("light", "commandment").

A similar poem is "Apology of Death" (1980) which adds an apocalyptic atmosphere (judgement day, Armageddon) to everything:

> One who experiences the taste of blood
> Remembers it forever
> In the saddle must he sleep
> Spend the night by the fire
> With hate up to his throat
> With guard in the eye
> Death! You are the shield which gives shelter to us[19]

At first glance this part of the poem sounds perhaps as a terroristic prayer, but at the end the poem turns into an apocalyptic vision of an ominous war:

> Let the Heaven delight
> Let the Earth rejoice
> Let there be waves on the Sea
>
> (181)

The poem becomes a vision of world power, of the world darkness in which every light fades. However, the religious connotation is understood here as a quotation, as an element in Autopsia's machinery. The poem is not evidence of Autopsia's fidelity to any religion which advocates the idea of apocalypse. There is no salvation in Autopsia, no God, nothing saves the spectacular subject from the "mirror of destruction". According to Vladimir Mattioni: "The myth of Narcissus indicates that the subject is extinguished in the media of image. The image is, in a radical sense as it were, 'memorial' – evidence of death."[20] In Autopsia quotations are the means for the analysis of spectacle, we do not have their central sense, the meaning, there is no hierarchy. As Mattioni states:

> Autopsia is aware of diabolic symbioses, mythomaniac orchestrations, but its concept has nothing to do with mystical or occult nor with scientific-cognitive or political-pragmatic. Autopsia uses media containers as ciphers, and not as contents of entire cultural areas, reduced to media patterns.[21]

---

[19] Autopsia, "Apologija smrti," *Delo*12 (December 1988), 181.

[20] Vladimir Mattioni, *Auto opsis*, ed. Dragomir Ugren, (Novi Sad: Muzej savremene umetnosti Vojvodine, 2012), 10.

[21] Ibid., 10.

The night and the darkness of Autosia is a scene of a death of the subject. The title of the exhibition of Autopsia in Museum of Contemporary Art of Vojvodina in Novi Sad was: *Specus Oblivionis* (2012), that is, "the cave of the oblivion". The oblivion relates to the escape of an individual from his/her mortality, in a desire of the subject to negate, forget his/her death. And the motive of cave can be interpreted as a Plato's cave where an individual is captivated and condemned to watch images of shadows on the wall. Only when an individual, with the help of philosophy, frees himself/herself, then he/she succeeds in differentiating shadow from reality. But, in *Autopsia* the reality is self-destruction: the night of the destruction of the subject, the world devoid of the Platonic metaphysical light, the world of ideas, the world of perfection.

Memento mori – remember that you are mortal, that you are singled out from the crowd, that you have your own unsharable death. One of Autopsia's recent musical products, *Apophenia* (2018), also thematizes the night in which the contours of the subject disappear: "Night is falling. A voice comes to one in the dark. A voice with neither meaning nor destination."[22] Apophenia is a disease of the subject in which the subject sees his/her reflection in everything: in a constructed image, in the meaning, in the sense.

By the very fact that Autopsia is not a group, that there is no author, i.e. that it uses authorship as a function (Foucault), as a mask, points to the core of its (non) existence. Miško Šuvaković notes:

> The group *Autopsia* has from the very beginning worked with a fictional structure of a group while transforming joint work into a *productive platform* which does not display its internal organs. Thus *Autopsia*, as an operative platform, was founded on two essential regimes of activity: (1) on the regime of the construction of analogues cultural myth about *Autopsia* as a function of an author, and not on the personalized authorial team, which uses real names, and (2) on the regime of impersonal work – the function of an author is a cultural mechanism, and not the representation of primary subjectivity. The noun *Autopsia*, therefore, is not a brand or a *false name* (pseudonym), but a construction of "the function of the platform", which takes over and fictionalizes individual-authorial functions in the field of art activities.[23]

We should also consider the idea of Gavril Stefanović Venclović, a unique Serbian writer and priest the Enlightenment era. His poetic fragment[24] "Death and life in

---

[22] Bandcamp, "Autopsia," https://autopsia.bandcamp.com/album/apophenia-2, acc. on September 14, 2024.

[23] Miško Šuvaković, "Logika rekvijema," in *Instinktivne teorije* (Novi Sad: Zavod za kulturu Vojvodine, 2016), 169.

[24] It is debatable whether Venclović's poetic writings can be considered poems, because they are in fact parts of other scripts, and some are even translations and reworkings. That is why instead of "poem" here we use "poetic fragment". (On this topic see doctoral thesis: Milesa D. Stefanović-Banović, "Besede, slova i pouke na blagovesti u prevodu i preradi Gavrila Stefanovića Venclovića (PhD. Diss, University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philology, 2015), 27–30. Petar Milošević states that Milorad Pavić constructed "free verses" from these poetic fragments,

language stand" thematizes the problem of language, death and evil way prior to post-modernity:

> Rescue my soul
> From unjust mouths
> And from strangers spare your servant
> So he could remain blameless;
> And a taleteller nearly lingual,
> Almost in evil falls
> And death and life in language stand![22]

This determinacy through language is dissolved with the idea about God's existence outside of language. In Venclović's poetic fragment "The Night"[25], we perceive the twilight of the world, an apocalypse in which all human activity – and the language that has shaped the subject – is invalid, worthless:

> Striving and trying, until the sun went down,
> Until the twilight came
> And doors of life are closed.
> Because during night nothing can be done,
> Trade is over, booths are closed.
> After that, you know too well
> That there's nothing to buy from anyone,
> Nor there's a reason for that ...
>
> (109)

The text displays the downfall of human activity ("Trade is over, booths are closed"), after that there comes saturation, the feeling of emptiness.

Autopsia interprets the apocalyptic vision of Venclović in a following fashion:

> No matter how much the worldview of the Enlightenment endorsed the reason, the knowledge, the ethics and the aesthetics of the new era, opposing them to habits, customs and tradition, the foundations of the primordial link between divine love and human fear of the punishment because of the disobedience nevertheless remained intact.[26]

In the same text Autopsia presents the end of the world beginning in the Renaissance, when man positioned himself as the ultimate measure instead of God. But while the

---

"[…] but in original context these are paragraphs which belong to traditional genres of medieval literature (prayer, cry, letter, oration)." Petar Milošević, *Storija srpske književnosti* (Beograd, Budimpešta: Službeni glasnik, Radionica Venclović, 2010), 102.

[25] Gavril Stefanović Venclović, *Crni bivo u srcu. Legende, besede, pesme*, ed. Milorad Pavić (Beograd: Prosveta, 1966), 100.

[26] Autopsia, *Apocrypha* (Zagreb: UPI2M PLUS, 2013), 266.

biblical worldview, and thus Venclović, depict the world destruction through apocalyptic images, today's perspective focuses on the representation of that destruction in the media:

> There is no more a safe place for the retreat. The end of the world is imperceptible. Imperceptibility of the changes makes people indifferent, just like the group of Bengalimen at the banks of Brahmaputra is indifferent. Faith in salvation is unshaken and firm as ever.[27]

Is it exactly this faith in salvation that disables the subject to release himself/herself from his/her own false selfhood? Does destruction of the world depend on media representation? Is the representation of the destruction of the world identical to climate catastrophes? Is the apocalypse really the end, or just evidence of incapacity to create an alternative to catastrophic political and economic constructions? Mark Fisher states that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. What is capitalism? The destruction of all values: "Capitalism is what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics."[28]

Darkness of Steel

The thematic of darkness and night is also part of Autopsia's most recent projects, for example, in installations *Steel Books*, (from 2013 until today). Their dimensions are 43x35 cm, each "page" 8 mm thick, one book 80 kg of total weight. The first page contains cut out poems or aphorisms. The entire project evokes medieval theological and biblical books-objects, featuring illuminations, while also resonating the books-objects from the latter half of the 20th century. One of the first such books in modern art was created by American artist Edward Ruscha (*Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 1963). The book-object is often the analysis of its own media, the critique of culture industry, of production, of fetishism of the product.

Miško Šuvaković states that we can discern books-objects, books-works, books-documents and books-theoretical objects. Avant-garde books-objects experiment with form, with visuality, and neo-avant-garde books-theoretical objects analyze the medium of book and its, language, while postmodern books-objects play with quotations, they "disturb the limits between the book of an artist, the monograph and a catalogue"[29]. The postmodern book sees the book-object in constant media transformation.

Autopsia's project for *Steel Books* is in some way all of this and something entirely different. The very material of steel is not just a mere play with a form, not just a result of the analysis of media representation, not just evidence of media transformation.

---

[27] Ibid., 268.

[28] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 4.

[29] Šuvaković, "Logika rekvijema,"142.

The steel fits into Autopsia's visual works with tools of manual production. Here the 'manual' is of the essence, because such tool is not just a symbolic critique of production, but is also the emphasizing of the mastery, the skill of the worker. The artist is a worker-master, and not a spectacular star of media production of art and of the subject of an artists as a cult of consumption. This idea can be connected to the Hungarian constructivist Lajos Kassák's poem "The masters" (1918): "We are not scientists, nor pale, silver-tongued priests, / nor are we the heroes whom wild noise accompanies to the battle."[30] One of the early poems by Autopsia is "Masters on earth" (1983) in which the mastery is connected with apophatic theology, with the fire of negativity:

> Everything, which is flammable, in fire becomes fire
> And eternal light
> Masters on Earth guard the fire

The processing of matter, (work with matter, tools of masters), is also one of the goals of alchemy. Indeed, this goal is a transformation of matter into gold, and this gold can be spiritual as well. *Autopsia* also refers to Rudolph II who gathered various scientists of his era:

> Prague of that time was a huge research laboratory, which radiated the synergies of many arts. The similarity of pre-scientific systems of Rudolph's age with the principles of *Autopsia* is obvious. However, possibilities for any other similarities end here. For despite allusions and quotations *Autopsia* is concerned neither with alchemy nor with mysticism. It simply uses their iconographies in a rather special way. In hybrid conjunctions, it connects them with other components that have nothing in common with practices of Rudolphine age.[31]

Alchemy of *Autopsia* transforms the object, media, and art, into the death of the subject, representing, simultaneously, the artist's sacrifice:

> The artist is not the subjective agent of art. The artist is the sacrificial part of art. It' is also, finally, what disappears in art. […] if art is not something of the market, but is something against the force of universality of the market, the consequence is that the artist must disappear, and not to be someone who appears in the media.[32]

This thought is linked to the idea of Michel Foucault who sees the role of the author in the function of text: "As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing."[33]

---

[30]"Mi nem vagyunk tudósok, se méla, aranyszájú papok / és hősök sem vagyunk, kiket vad csinadratta kísért a csatába." Lajos Kassák, "Mesteremberek," in *Kassák Lajos összes versei* (Budapest: Magvető, 1977), 55.

[31]Autopsia, *Apocrypha*, 240.

[32] The text is on Autopsia's serigraphy *Anonymia*, Umělec, 2 (London, Prague: 2010), 101.

[33] Michael Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 102–103.

This game of disappearing is thematized also in poetic texts carved in *Steel Books*. Sometimes the motive of disappearing is evoked with Baroque thematic "life is a dream":

Treacherous mists ghostly circle around
Life becomes a dream
(Autopsia, *Steel book*, 2013)

This Baroque topic in Serbian poetry is linked to works of Gavril Stefanović Venclović. Death, dream, fog, shadow, night, destruction of the world, are frequent motives of his rather unique poetry for those times. Venclović also used a Baroque poetics of *discordia concors*, the unification of opposite categories[34], and this is, as we shall see, close to Autopsia.

In the above displayed "steel" poem it is essential to point out to the negation of visibility, to the idea of illusion. The mist, the spectre, the dream – all this points to insta-bility of knowledge, especially in the context of the iconic turn (Gottfried Boehm). The main characteristic of a subject representation is visibility, other senses have a smaller role in constructing their meaning. With its radical use of steel materials Autopsia, points out to tactility, i.e., to materiality which is also essential in alchemical (transformative)

---

[34] Jovan Deretić, *Istorija srpske književnosti* (Zrenjanin: Sezam BOOK d. o. o.,2007), 426. But let's add that, for example, Đorđe Trifunović negates Milorad Pavić's thesis that Venclović is an original Baroque writer, claiming that Venclović is rather and to a great extent a copyist and a translator.

perception of poetry. Steel as an element of the cosmos is of crucial importance: steel points to stellar essence of genesis and the existence of man and life on Earth. And the fact that human pre-existence is linked to stars, to cosmos, is an archaic idea.

In *Autopsia*'s poem "Masters on Earth" we encounter also the inevitability of a stellar origin of death:

> Star after star lights in eternal flame
> If you seek to escape that
> Your own foolishness deceived you
> Disappearing brings joy

Unlike Guy Debord who notes that the society of spectacle is captivated in the false culture of illusion, Autopsia states that darkness is essentially a true light:

There is nothing visible at al
Light became darkness

Disappearing brings joy
       (Autopsia, *Steel Book*, 2013)

Renunciation of the manipulative culture of spectacle brings poetic knowledge that light is darkness, and that disappearing of the subject brings 'joy in text' (to paraphrase Barthes). And that is also the negation of the representation as an illusion of the world.

The art and *Weltanschauung* of *Autopsia* is agnostic; an intellectual effort in the process of cognition relates to erasing one's own knowledge, one's own essentiality. In this process moral and ontological dualisms can no longer have a role on the stage of anti-spectacle. Every competition of the opposed categories, in politics-economy, the competition of market pseudo-values, is superfluous.

Truth and deceit no longer compete in representation
Because there is no representation anymore

We always see smoke as an image
(Autopsia, *Steel book*, 2013)

Smoke is a mobile, unstable, meaningless phenomenon, whose destiny is to only disappear. Smoke can be seen as an image, but we cannot catch it. This smoke can also be the smoke of sacrifice, the fire in which a false image or figure of subject burns:
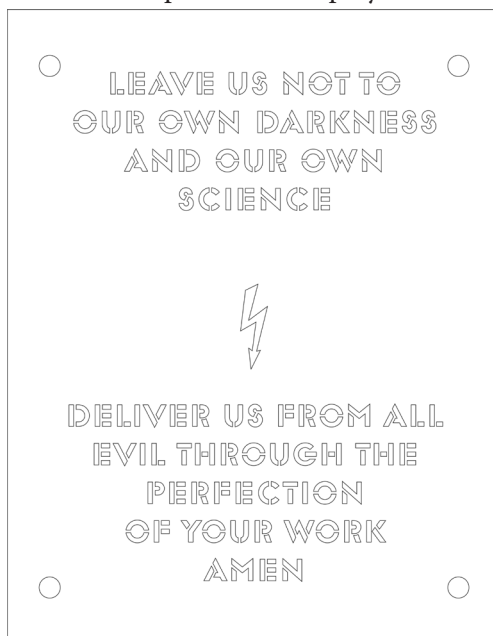

It is the victims on whom the world stands

Horrifying agony of constant perceptibility
(Autopsia, *Steel book*, 2013)

In the digital world, especially in virtual social media, existence is declared through perceptibility. Identity is linked to visual scenography of lies. Release from symbolic capital of perceptibility is possible through conscious renunciation of visibility. The art of Autopsia is a ritual of sacrificing the authorship, the artist. The sentence, "it is victims on whom the world stands", at the same time is a self-quotation, Autopsia uses it in many works, and even in various languages. Self-quotation is therefore a reflection of its own work, but since it is an art without an artist, self-citation is a mirror of self-destruction. Autopsia is a priestly name of the religion of death.

Some steel texts can be interpreted also as prayers to the God of death:

LEAVE US NOT TO
OUR OWN DARKNESS
AND OUR OWN
SCIENCE

DELIVER US FROM ALL
EVIL THROUGH THE
PERFECTION
OF YOUR WORK
AMEN

(Autopsia, *Steel Book*, drawing, 2013)

Thus, poetic writings of steel books can be interpreted as epitaphs, pastiche-prayers, and sometimes they are a postmodern play with quotation:

GIRUM IMUS NOCTE ET CONSUMIMUR IGNI IN
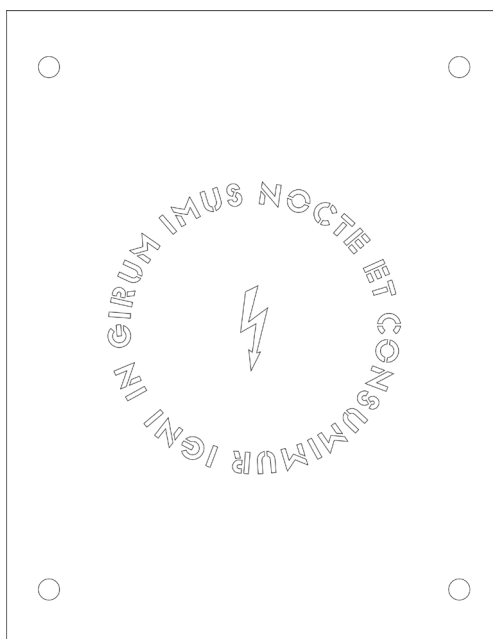
Latin quote is from Virgil's *Aeneid*, but at the same time it is also the title of Debord's collage film (1978). Therefore, this can be interpreted as double quotation. Virgil's verse contains those two basic motives which are essential also for *Autopsia*: night and death in fire. In the poem "Apology of death" we can find an allusion to Virgil's verse: "Death leads us on / Great peace have those who love its law [...] One who experiences the taste of blood remembers it forever / In the saddle must he sleep / Spend the night by the fire."[35]

In the work of Autopsia, however, Virgil's or Debord's authorship is not of relevance, because the quotation goes through media transformation. Hexameter turns into a visual poem, a circle with a symbol of lightning as a fire of death in the middle.

Lightning is a topos of Autopsia's works, we find it in many forms. There is a lightning in the middle of every steel book. Lightning is a visual (self-) quotation, it points out to a danger of an electric strike, in this regard it is a symbol close to *memento mori*, therefore it is an existential symbol of the mortality of an individual. lightning can also be the symbol of Tesla's research, in this regard it is more than the mortality of an individual, perhaps it is also the pointing out to ignorance regarding cosmic mysteries, and the fact that human knowledge is limited. Lightning is also an attribute of the Greek god Zeus, and also of similar deities in other ancient cultures. This archaic symbol is a cultural archetype and is always linked to vitality and strength, but also to divine punishment.

According to Alexei Monroe, lightning was used for the first time in punk culture by British industrial band Throbbing Gristle. After them many others used it when dealing with pagan, alchemical, apocalyptical and other esoteric themes, but it also points out to technological production, to systems of control.[36] Before Throbbing Gristle lightning was used by David Bowie who gave it numerous possible meanings. However, Autopsia does not relate to any meaning, but mobilizes this cultural archetype in the form of a question. What is lightning? If Foucault poses the question what is an Author, then Autopsia reshapes topic of lightning into a question: what is Death?

The joy of extinguishing the light

*Steel Books*are similar to other Autopsia-sworks: they are transnational, multilingual objects. They connect opposites via the Baroque method of *discordia concors*: religion with science, dream with life, disappearance with joy. All this becomes an apocalyptic anti-spectacle. While visual representation of apocalypse is often linked to spectacular displays of a possible catastrophe, Autopsia links the apocalypse to the connotation of the revelation, which is a lightning-like display of disappearance, but also of exhaustion of capitalism, the impossibility of return, the civilizational entropy. However, the disorder and aimlessness of this condition is not a catastrophe in itself, but the nature of things.

---

[35] Autopsia, *Apocrypha*, 181.

[36] Monroe, *Thanatopolis*, 37.

Through the fusion of elements of cosmic origin and immaterial poetry, Autopsia's alchemy creates the gold of disappearance. Collage, montage, polytonal, repetitive, electronic, dark ambient works of Autopsia are the mirrors of destruction, prohibition of memory (*damnation memoriae*), entrance into the cave of oblivion.

References

Adorno Theodor and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

Ambrozić, Dragan. "Autopsia Autopsiae." *Delo* 12 (December 1988): 174–79.

Atalli, Jacques. *Noise. The Political Economy of Music*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Autopsia. *Apocrypha*. UPI2M PLUS, Zagreb, 2013.

Autopsia. "Apologija smrti." *Delo* 12 (December 1988): 181.

Autopsia. "Anonymia" *Umělec*, 2 (February: 2010), 101

Avantgarde Museum. "Verbum Program." https://www.avantgarde-museum.com/en/museum/collection/authorsverbumprogram~pe4563/. Accessed on September 14, 2024.

Bandcamp. "Autopsia." https://autopsia.bandcamp.com/album/apophenia-2. Accessed on September 14, 2024.

Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Radical Amerika and Black & Red, 1970.

Deretić, Jovan. *Istorijasrpskeknjiževnosti*. Zrenjanin: Sezam BOOK d. o. o., 2007.

Erjavec, Aleš. "Neue Slowenische Kunst – New Slovenian Art: Slovenia, Yugoslavia, Self-Management, and the 1980s." In *Postmodern and the Postsocialist Condition. Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, edited by Erjavec, Aleš, 135–74. Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003.

Fisher, Mark, *Capitalist Realism*. Winchester: Zero Books, 2009.

Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?" In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 101–20., London: Penguin Books, 1991.

Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Radical Amerika and Black & Red, 1970.

Kafka, Franz. "Das vierte Oktavheft." https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/kafka/oktavhef/chap04.html. Accessed on September 14, 2024.

Kassák, Lajos. "Mesteremberek." In *Kassák Lajos* összes versei. Budapest: Magvető, 1977, 55.

Liotta, P. H. "Paradigm lost: Yugoslav Self-Management and the Economics of Disaster." *Balkanologie. Revue d' études pluri disciplinaires* 5, 1–2 (2001): 1–18. https://doi.org/10.4000/balkanologie.681

Losoncz, Alpár. *A hatalom (nélküliség) horizontja. Hommage à Új Symposion*. Újvidék: Forum, 2018.

Losoncz, Márk. Összefüggő *viszonyok, teremtő kapcsolatok*. Újvidék: Forum, 2022.

Mattioni, Vladimir. *Auto opsis*, edited by Dragomir Ugren, 7–13. Novi Sad: Muzej savremene umetnosti, Vojvodine, 2012.

Milošević, Petar. *Storija srpske književnosti*. Beograd. Budimpešta: Službeni glasnik, Radionica Venclović, 2010.

Monroe, Alexei. *Thanatopolis*. London, Prague, Berlin: Divus, 2016.

Popov, Nebojša. "Junski sukobi 1968." *Pitanja* 3–4 (March–April 1988): 55–102.

Orcsik, Roland. "*Nachtmusik* / Dijalog sa Autopsijom." *Tema* 3–4 (March–April 2008): 52.

Szombathy, Bálint. "A halál láttamoztatói." In *Extázis és agónia. Független zenei (h)arcterek*, edited by Zoltán Virág, 57–63. Szeged: Fosszília, JABE, 2006.

Stefanović-Banović, Milesa D. "Besede, slova i pouke na blagovesti u prevod u i preradi Gavrila Stefanovića Venclovića." PhD diss., University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philology, 2015.

Sretenović, Dejan. "Autopsia ili o smrti i izbavljenju." In *Autopsia. Ogledalo uništenja / Mirror of Destruction*, edited by Dušan Đorđević Mileusnić, Dejan Sretenović, 3–11. Beograd: Salon Muzeja savremene umetnosti, 2010.

Šuvaković, Miško. *Pojmovnik modern i postmoderne likovne umetnosti i teorije posle 1950*. Novi Sad: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, Prometej, 1999.

Šuvaković, Miško. "Logika rekvijema." In *Instinktivne teorije*. Novi Sad: Zavod za kulturu Vojvodine, 2016, 157–75.

Venclović, Gavril Stefanović. *Crnibivo u srcu. Legende, besede, pesme*, edited by Milorad Pavić. Belgrade: Prosveta, 1966.

Sher, Gerson S. *Praxis. Marxist Criticism and Dissent in Socialist Yugoslavia*. Bloomington, London: Indiana University Press, 1977.

Virág, Zoltán, ed. *Extázis* és *agónia. Független zenei (h)arcterek.*, Szeged: Fosszília, JABE, 2006.

Translated by Dušan Đorđević Mileusnić