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## **Between Two Worlds: Concert-giving and Rioting in the Post-Yugoslav Area**

**Abstract:** Starting in the late 1990s, some musicians from the territory of former Yugoslavia gradually embarked on the project of giving concerts in Belgrade, the capital of the former country. Others refused to perform in Serbia after the wars, which fuelled a negative attitude toward these musicians. In this paper I deal with the reception of those concerts, pointing to the ways they have become specific affective sites of memory. I focus on two major issues: the discourse produced in the concerts by the performers themselves and members of the audience and the discourse produced by various protest groups (which resulted in the organization of protests in Belgrade against performances by musicians who 'hate Serbs').

**Keywords:** concerts, memory, nationalism, nostalgia, reception

## **Introduction**

This paper deals with the engagement of present musical practices in the construction of discourses on the historical past. Analyzing the network of discourses connected to the recent concert performances of ex-Yugoslav musicians in Belgrade, I found my starting point mostly in the sociology of the past and in memory studies. To explain how memory is created, transmitted, and sustained, historians have identified various vehicles of memory, such as monuments, museums, history textbooks, and landscapes, and analyzed their forms, mechanisms, and functions in the lives of social groups.<sup>1</sup> Since memories are never formless, they come to us as narratives, images, textbook, pamphlets, and the like. These forms embody memories in socially recognizable ways. Sites of memory are thus defined as places where groups of people

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<sup>1</sup> Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse", *Representations*, 2000, No. 69, 127.

engage in public activity whereby they express “a collective shared knowledge [...] of the past, on which a group’s sense of unity and individuality is based”.<sup>2</sup> Here, I approach the concerts mentioned above as such a vehicle (or site) of memory. Being far more than a personal act, remembering is regulated by social rules of remembrance that tell us what we should remember and what we might and must forget, something that seems quite clear when concerts are discussed.<sup>3</sup> This leads us to the concept of collective memory and to issues in the role of concerts in creating such a memory, that is, in the processes of remembering and forgetting the past in order to (re)create and interpret the present. The process of remembering unfolds in a given community, defined by its history and constituted by its past, and therefore we may speak of a real community as a “community of memory”, one that does not forget its past. In order not to forget its past, the community engages in retelling its story, its constitutive narrative. Finally, the community engages in mnemonic battles – battles over the correct way of interpreting the past.<sup>4</sup>

In what follows, I discuss two relevant points: the discourse produced in the concerts by the audience and the performers themselves, and the discourse produced by the protest groups. I analyze how these two discourses construct two opposite ways of remembering the past. The latter was more extreme, disseminated on the Internet and in the media, and consequently resulted in the organization of political protests in Belgrade against the performance of musicians who ‘hate Serbs’. Regarding the organization of the concerts, the following should be remembered. Starting in the late 1990s, a number of musicians from the territory of former Yugoslavia gradually embarked on the project of performing in concerts in Belgrade, the capital of the former country. Among them, some had been rather popular in Serbia and continued to perform there regularly as soon as the wars ended. Other famous musicians, by contrast, adamantly refused to perform in Serbia after the wars, most prominently Oliver Dragojević, Tereza Kesovija, and Dino Merlin. In fact, all three had publicly declared that they were not planning to give concerts in Serbia at all. Their statements about refusing to perform in Belgrade ever again were frequently noted in the Serbian press, which generated a latent but clearly expressed negative attitude toward these musicians. However, Tereza Kesovija and Dino Merlin decided to give concerts in Belgrade in 2011, thus provoking fresh reactions, especially in the nationalist discourse, particularly, but not exclusively, evident in the case of Serbian extremist groups (*Naši, Dveri, and 1389*). The reactions against these particular musicians were fuelled by the fact that both of them supposedly promoted the discourse of hate toward the Serbs during the war, since both of them were directly affected by the war. Kesovija’s house in Dubrovnik was destroyed during the bombing of the city by the Yugoslav People’s Army, while Merlin participated in the fighting in Sarajevo.

My research included analyzing the press, the Internet forums, fan pages, and similar Internet sources, the performers’ own rather informative official sites, as well as those of the extremist groups. Regarding both discourses, the nostalgic and the nationalist, I analyzed written records, i.e. all sorts of written discourse propagated in the media. However, regarding the nostalgic discourse, in addition to their statements made beforehand, I paid extra attention to the discourse produced by the performers at the concerts themselves.

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<sup>2</sup> Jan Assmann, “Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität”, in: Jan Assmann and Tonio Hölscher (eds.), *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1988, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Jay Winter, “Sites of Memory and the Shadow of War”, in: Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Media and Cultural Memory*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2008, 61.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, “Social Memory Studies: From ‘Collective Memory’ to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1998, Vol. XXIV, 112.

In my research, I included two extremely provoking concerts, one by Tereza Kesovija, at the *Sava Centar* concert hall in Belgrade in January 2011 and the concert (as a matter of fact, three evening concert performances in a row, which further irritated the protest groups) given by Dino Merlin at the *Belgrade Arena*, a huge concert space, in November of that same year, although, from a broader perspective, the discourses that shaped the reception of these concerts were in fact much older and more complex than it might seem at first. Another event also belongs in this group – the concert entitled *Dive* (Divas), organized in May 2012 at the *Sava Centar*, where Gabi Novak and Meri Cetinić performed alongside Tereza Kesovija. The negative reactions were mild this time, even non-existent, in comparison to Kesovija's first concert, but her own discourse still clearly belonged to the nostalgic profile. However, I focus on Kesovija's first concert as well as Merlin's concerts in Belgrade, since they constitute representative examples of the issues I address here.

## Two Ways of Remembering the Past

Focusing on the concerts as sites (vehicles) of memory, I will now move to the question of the mnemonic battles waged over the *correct* ways of remembering the Yugoslav past and the *proper* ways of receiving the (musical) present. There were two mnemonic battles, clearly separated by their respective discourses regarding the concerts and ways of remembering the past: the discourse of Tereza Kesovija and her fans and the discourse of *Naši* and their supporters.

### The Case of Kesovija

The gist of the opposition to the idea of organizing a Tereza Kesovija concert in Belgrade was most poignantly expressed in an article entitled “Serbian Singers: Boycott Tereza!” published in *Kurir*, a tabloid Serbian newspaper, about a month before the concert.<sup>5</sup> The article not only expressed a negative attitude against the concert, but also an actual call to boycott it. Directly referring to the past, i.e. the war in which Kesovija was labelled as an “anti-Serb”, a number of singers (including Zorica Marković, Maja Nikolić, Nada Topčagić, and Bora “Čorba” Đorđević) appealed to the “moral feeling” of those considering to attend the concert and appealed to them (in an explicitly direct way, using offensive words against the Croats) to refrain from doing so.<sup>6</sup>

However, apart from this kind of comments and certain vague proclamations that protests would be organized on the day of the concert (which did not happen),<sup>7</sup> a positive reception of Kesovija's concert arguably predominated over the nationalist one and is certainly more representative of the narrative of the (positive) remembrance of the past.<sup>8</sup> At the core of the concert's positive reception was (Yugo)nostalgia – the supposed feeling of loss due to the

<sup>5</sup> D. Katić, “Srpska estrada: bojkotujte Terezu”, *Kurir*, 2010, December 17.

<sup>6</sup> The singers pointed to the alleged lack of “morality” in Serbia and stressed that everyone who intended to go to the concert should be ashamed, because that would mean that they had forgotten their past and everything that was done to Serbs. *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> However, one should note that there was both positive and negative reception simultaneously, which is especially visible on the forums, where (both before and after the concert) both kinds of reactions were evident.

<sup>8</sup> This conclusion is based on the interviews I made with members of the audience at the concert.

breakup of Yugoslavia, in which, according to this utopian image, everything was better than it is today.<sup>9</sup> In addition to this concept of nostalgia, there is also the idea of music as a transnational category, along with the idea of universal love connected with that *good old* Yugoslav music.<sup>10</sup> Some of the most typical examples illustrating the above include regular referring references to forgiveness and love, as well as arguing that the past should stay in the past and that the only important thing was that Kesovija was willing to give a concert in Belgrade.

In accordance with that nostalgic atmosphere, from the moment the concert was publicized, official comments in public (on TV, in newspapers) as well as unofficial ones (for instance, on Internet forums) started appearing, constructing a narrative about the concert, all the way from the announcement, to the concert itself, and then discussions about it afterwards.<sup>11</sup> Unlike their opponents (the propagators of the nationalist discourse), Kesovija's fans (as well as most of the official public discourse related to her concert) promoted the idea of transnational love (between people, for Kesovija and the memory of the former country), supposedly transmitted through music. Tereza Kesovija defended herself from negative reactions, in Serbia and Croatia alike, as well as from unpleasant questions about reasons that made her change her mind about performing in Serbia, by alluding to the *perfect* (mostly musical) past of Yugoslavia and referring to love as universal and omnipresent on the territory of the former country. The singer even alluded that there had always been love between Serbia and Croatia and stressed that during the war she had spoken "in affect" about the Serbs, and that now she was "bringing love".<sup>12</sup> Echoing Kesovija, members of the audience likewise commented on the *perfect* past characterized by love among the different nations of the former country and music that marked the whole of Yugoslav history. Singing, speaking, and crying were not the only ways Kesovija tried to express and transmit her message of love. In addition, her behaviour and overall posture onstage were rather affective, because she sang with frequent emotional sighs and pauses (staying speechless). Kesovija's performance could be construed as a presentation of an emotional woman who had suffered, who punished herself (for not sharing love through her songs), and then ended up speechless at the moment she felt love again. The concert lasted almost three hours and was filled with emotional comments, both onstage and in the audience.

In the days that followed, the press described and commented on the atmosphere at the concert in detail. Few of the headlines were neutral. On the contrary, most of them focused on Kesovija's "love discourse", pointing to the universality and transnational values of music: *Music for All Tastes, Evergreen Love Songs, Music that Cannot be Forgotten, Songs for Old Friends, Old Diva in Belgrade Again*, and countless variations thereof. The forums related to the concert offer further insight into the reception of this event, but likewise constitute a dissemination of this love discourse and a collective feeling of nostalgia. This included ignorance of the bad past and calls to forget and forgive, in posts such as the following: "Who cares what someone said a long time ago. Love and sing and forget everything that is bad in the Balkans"; "So what

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Monika Palmberger, "Nostalgia Matters: Nostalgia for Yugoslavia as Potential Vision for a Better Future," *Sociologija*, 2008, No. 4, 355–370.

<sup>10</sup> This transnational phenomenon has been discussed regarding the transnational musical figures (such as Đorđe Balašević, Momčilo Bajagić-Bajaga, and Ceca Ražnatović), which Katherine Baker interprets as having symbolic references in national ethnopolitical discourse in the process of identity construction. Cf. Katherine Baker, "The Politics of Performance: Transnationalism and its Limits in Former Yugoslav Popular Music, 1999–2004," *Ethnopolitics*, 2004, Vol. V, Issue 3, 275–293.

<sup>11</sup> One may reconstruct the narrative mentioned above by perusing the readers' comments to press articles announcing or reviewing the concert.

<sup>12</sup> Aleksandar Nikolić, "Tereza: U afektu sam pričala loše o Srbiji, sad nosim ljubav," *Blic*, 2010, December 17.

if Tereza said some bad things in affect, she was only nervous because her house had been destroyed”; “She came! That is the only thing we need to know!”; “The people of the Balkans, they were always like that... We hate each other and then we love each other, that’s normal for us”. Another group of posts includes comments that refer not to the past in the context of the war, but to a distant *happy* past, including the music that was popular at that time. These comments frequently imitate the discourse promoted at the concert, since many of them refer to the concepts of love, emotions, music, and tears, as in the following examples: *Tereza’s songs are the music of my life, I always cry when I listen to her; People, forget, sing, love! Only love and respect can save us, I was touched by Tereza’s love*, etc.<sup>13</sup> Thus, one may conclude that the conception of transnational love did in fact affect the audience, that is, the reception of Kesovija coming back, forming the imaginary construction that there had always been a collective feeling of love and then (after the war), nostalgia, transmitted, furthermore, through music recognized as *ours* and belonging to *our youth*.

### The Case of Dino Merlin

As I mentioned above, Dino Merlin’s return to Belgrade is a more pronounced example of the negative reception of concerts in the post-Yugoslav area, even though there were similar reactions to Kesovija’s concert as well. I will focus here on the nationalist discourse that accompanied Merlin’s performance in Belgrade.

Soon after the news of another former Yugoslav singer changing his mind and deciding to come to Serbia spread in public, harsh and even hostile comments appeared in the press and on discussion forums. Due to Merlin’s active role in the war in Bosnia, this time, the protest (unlike in Kesovija’s case) was serious and well organized and certainly more than just a verbal threat. In addition to reactions from Serbian singers, which included positive, negative, and even neutral views regarding the event, as well as from the general public, which expressed both joy and disapproval regarding the return of this Bosnian singer, there was a series of proper political protests and actions against Merlin. Namely, Serbian nationalist extremist movements, *Dveri*, 1389, and especially *Naši*, expressed their disapproval, not only in their written discourse promoted in the media, but also performed certain concrete actions that they believed would actually stop Merlin from coming to Belgrade. The movement *Naši* proudly took responsibility for the following actions that took place before the concert: a public burning of the flag of Bosnia and Herzegovina, putting up posters all over the cities of Belgrade and Novi Sad with Merlin’s picture and the message “Unwanted” (*Nepoželjan*) on it, writing graffiti with threats to Merlin, and, finally, organizing a real protest in order to send the singer the message to give up coming to Serbia. Their activities, concerns, and general attitude toward the event were clearly explained on the websites of these extremists groups, especially the one entrusted with preventing the whole event from happening – the “national movement *Naši*”. The actions mentioned above were thus publicly announced and formulated as calls for joined activities. Thus, the *Naši* website contained a programme of activities and concrete plans, detailing their intentions and reasons. In addition to the protests organized before the concerts, further riots were planned for the very day of the concert.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> These were readers’ comments on a review of Kesovija’s concert published in the daily newspaper *Politika*. See: “Tereza Kesovija u punom Centru ‘Sava’”, *Politika*, 2011, January 24.

<sup>14</sup> Information available at <http://nasisrbija.org/dino-merlin-undesirable/> on November 1, 2012.

Despite the fact that Dino Merlin gave not one concert, but three extremely well organized, completely sold-out, and undeniably successful concerts in the biggest concert space in Serbia (around 20,000 people each night), the extremists interestingly concluded that they had managed to prevent people from attending the event and succeeded in boycotting it. Even though the pressure was huge, both on Merlin himself and his fans, the singer did not comment much and certainly did not perform (like Kesovija) in an uncontrollably emotional way, touched by the atmosphere in the *Arena*. The concert was marked as a high-risk event and the whole organization, the behaviour of the audience and the performer alike, were subdued, neutral, superb in terms of the quality and organization, but looked less like an ex-YU reunion and more like a concert of a world-famous pop-rock star. There were hardly any signs of the love discourse promoted by Kesovija and her fans. The only exception, when Merlin used a potentially neutral universal narrative of love, was when he interrupted the concert to play a video showing two newborn babies (one in Belgrade, the other in Sarajevo), and announced that he was going to present each of them with a traditional gift (in both traditions, Serbian and Bosnian) – a golden coin (*dukat*), and then casually resumed the performance as if nothing had happened (and what happened was an act of sending a peace offering and a message that our offspring should live in a better world, whereas the ducats represented tokens of love and peace).<sup>15</sup>

The discourse constructed after the concerts followed a similar orientation, focusing on Merlin's success. Thus, unlike in Kesovija's case, the headlines referred to the number of people in the audience, the speed with which the tickets for all three concerts ran out, and the atmosphere of the genuine spectacle that took place at the *Arena*, with comments on the flawless organization of the event: *High Security Measures for Dino Merlin's Concert, The Second Concert Finished in Perfect Order, Dino Merlin Breaks All Records*. However, there were also some personal comments on Dino Merlin's performance, as well as the private segment of his visit to Belgrade. For instance, there were headlines that mentioned crying and applauding at the *Arena*, as well as Merlin's visit to old friends in Belgrade.<sup>16</sup>

The remarks after the concerts for the most part referred to his excellent singing and performance, as opposed to Kesovija fans' commenting on love and similar universal abstract ideas. Even though there were also comments about forgetting and forgiving, most referred to the actual concerts and their high quality. Moreover, there were negative remarks about the protests and nationalist movements and the "problems" of those for whom Merlin was a problem. In other words, the actions of the extremists were condemned. As opposed to Kesovija's love discourse, what was evident here was a discourse of a "good artist" who is also transnational and whose performance should be judged solely on the basis of his artistic merits and nothing else.<sup>17</sup> Thus, it seems that an entirely different kind of memory was created by Merlin's concerts.

<sup>15</sup> See Simonida Milojković, "Dino Merlin bebama poklonio dukate", *Blic*, 2011, November 25.

<sup>16</sup> See "Suze i aplauzi prve večeri Dina Merlina u Beogradskoj areni", *Blic*, 2011, November 25.

<sup>17</sup> All of the comments mentioned above were posted in connection to the online version of V. Pantelić, "Dino Merlin: Beograd za uspomenu", *Večernje novosti*, 2011, November 28.

## Conclusion

By analyzing these two discourses and their emotional concomitants related to the concerts, one can locate ways of remembering the past and mechanisms that enable these concerts to function as platforms for constructing divergent historical narratives, as well as channels for provoking dissimilar affective reactions, some of them expressed directly and verbally, others evident in unconstrained emotional expressions. Moreover, the concerts certainly function as specific political sites of memory and also help promote the construction of a certain kind of collective memory, i.e. certain a version of interpreting historical events. Thus, as I pointed out above, the concerts were involved in the processes of remembering and forgetting the past and (re)creating and interpreting it through the musical present within divergent memory groups that were also formed as a result of the concerts. From the perspective of construing emotions as political acts, I addressed the question of collective feelings of love and nostalgia, universality and transnationality, as well as feelings of hate and revenge motivated by the past, all of which point to the broader perspective of dealing with the question of how emotions work to secure collectives and how sensible worlds can be constructed by memory sites such as concerts.