



Norris, David A. (2013) Writing about war: making sense of the absurd in Mileta Prodanović's novel *Pleši, čudovište, na moju nežnu muziku* (Dance, you monster, to my soft music). *Modern Language Review*, 108 (2). pp. 597-618. ISSN 0026-7937

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Writing about War: Making Sense of the Absurd in Mileta Prodanović's Novel *Pleši, udovište, na moju nežnu muziku* (*Dance, You Monster, to my Soft Music*)

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Source: *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 108, No. 2 (April 2013), pp. 597-618

Published by: [Modern Humanities Research Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5699/modelangrevi.108.2.0597>

Accessed: 29/03/2013 06:59

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WRITING ABOUT WAR: MAKING SENSE OF THE
ABSURD IN MILETA PRODANOVIĆ'S NOVEL
PLEŠI, ČUDOVIŠTE, NA MOJU NEŽNU MUZIKU
(*DANCE, YOU MONSTER, TO MY SOFT MUSIC*)

War has been incorporated into narrative fictions for thousands of years. Tales of battles, heroic deeds, great victories and defeats are found in Babylonian literature, form the main subject of the *Iliad*, and frequently feature in the books of the Old Testament. They are central components in Arthurian legends, epic ballads, and medieval romances. Such depictions do not correspond to what is termed war literature in the modern sense. In earlier works, the emphasis often falls on the representation of heroism depicted in instances of individual combat, while the bigger picture of the struggle between opposing military forces is related through epithets or standard descriptions. Such stories of conflict hold at their centre a change in social and political power allegorically reflected on the small scale of competition between representative figures from different sides. In the nineteenth century, however, with the development of the modern novel form, the broad sweep of historical change is combined with depictions of the individual experiences of combat in the works of Walter Scott, James Fenimore Cooper, Stendhal, and Lev Tolstoi. Sometimes the emphasis is placed on the psychological and emotional responses of characters to their being involved on a level of organized violence beyond their comprehension, as in Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, while maintaining a sense of the wider theatre of war. The numerous conflicts of the twentieth century have spurred the traditions of war writing which began in the nineteenth century with its combination of the breadth of large-scale conflict and its significance for those caught up in its dizzying chaos. The First World War, the Second World War, the Vietnam War, and numerous other examples have produced shocking, controversial, and contested descriptions of the human experience of those conflicts. The first of these, beginning in 1914, is generally considered to have been a watershed in the fictive transposition of the experience of war to the printed page. James Knibb, in his article 'Literary Strategies of War, Strategies of Literary War', acknowledges the tradition of narrative fictions about war but with a special place reserved for those from the First World War, since 'they effect a rearticulation of that tradition, and eventually set in motion a radical disjuncture with it'.¹ Texts about the First World War draw on literary precedents about war, but the previous tradition is not adequate to the task of communicating that particular experience. This inadequacy of prior models has become a trait

¹ James Knibb, 'Literary Strategies of War, Strategies of Literary War', in *Literature and War*, ed. by David Bevan (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), pp. 7–24 (p. 10).

of war fiction in the twentieth century, as Walter W. Hölbling remarks when examining the work of modern American authors who ‘are—not unlike their literary predecessors after World War I—looking for new literary techniques, a new language, that would express the very specific and unsettling experience of the Vietnam War and its concomitant social and political events’.²

In this article I intend to examine the contribution of Mileta Prodanović’s novel *Pleši, čudovište, na moju nežnu muziku* (*Dance, You Monster, to my Soft Music*) to the issues which have dogged writers of fiction about war in the twentieth century. Therefore, the greater part of the discussion presented here concerns the text of this novel, and in particular those elements of its structure which articulate the necessary ‘new language’ in order to express ‘the very specific and unsettling experience’ of the Wars of Yugoslav Succession in the early 1990s. I shall begin with a few introductory remarks which examine some of the general issues relating to war fiction arising from the paradoxical position that the essential absurdity of war as an activity generates the imperative to produce narrative fiction about it. Then, I shall present some features of the events of those years which have been isolated as distinctive of this war before proceeding with my investigation of Prodanović’s novel and his incorporation of extremely dense and overlapping intertextual layers which are the hallmark of his work, and the language through which he chooses to represent the war’s chaos. I shall end with a postscript outlining how closely, if unintentionally, his prose reflects the experience and events of the war, bringing life and art in close alignment.

The activity and events of war follow no logical or rational path for those involved. The soldier on the battlefield and the civilian at home are not privy to the unfolding overall strategy of military and political leaders. In most wars the distinction between home and battlefield is a blurred line, while wartime policy is determined more by the unexpected course of events than advance planning. Kate McLoughlin in her book *Authoring War* expresses such ‘perceived senselessness of armed conflict’ as ‘primarily a result of the vast disparity between the military endeavour and the individual caught up in it’.³ Paul Fussell in his study on literature and the First World War, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, comments on a related aspect of war’s absurdity when he writes: ‘Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends.’⁴ Irony is here the

² Walter W. Hölbling, ‘The Impact of the Vietnam War on U.S. Fiction: 1960s to 1980s’, in *Literature and War*, ed. by Bevan, pp. 193–209 (p. 194).

³ Kate McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the ‘Iliad’ to Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 167.

⁴ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 7.

expression of the ultimate incongruity in the destruction of physical bodies for highly abstract notions. Death for the sake of freedom may provide a spirited rallying cry, but the measure of freedom in time of peace takes on a more nuanced and circumspect shape. As Fussell points out, Britain and France went to war in 1939 in defence of Poland's sovereignty, but 'that war managed to bring about Poland's bondage and humiliation'.⁵ At the end of the Second World War the demands to bring an end to hostilities forced Britain and the United States to accept Poland's place within the agreed Soviet sphere of interest, limiting Poland's freedom to choose how it might be governed. There is no logical connection between ends and means, between the intended goals communicated by leaders to the participants as reasons for going to war and the result which the slaughter appears to have actually accomplished.

This general irrationality applies to all instances of mass conflict in the modern world, such that writing about war in the twentieth century reveals an awareness that all wars are the same and all wars are unique. All wars are the same because they each follow the same essential structure. Elaine Scarry in her book *The Body in Pain* epitomizes the two necessary parts of conducting war: 'first, that the immediate activity is injuring; second, that the immediate activity of war is a contest'.⁶ Her concise summary of what war entails makes the point that in their very structure all wars are in some sense the same. Two sides come together in an intractable duel, the purpose of which is 'to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue, as well as to alter the surface, shape, and deep entirety of the objects that human beings recognize as extensions of themselves'.⁷ While the cause and the aim differ in each case of armed conflict, the basic means of pursuing war remain consistent. This paradox underlines one of the fundamental absurdities of war. In all, war is a ghastly activity that falls outside the normal limits of comprehension when human beings engage in unspeakable acts far in excess of any reasons put forward in order to initiate the course of events.

Narrative fiction about war counters to some extent war's illogical absurdity and senselessness in its search for order and meaning, even if that order and meaning are only at the level of what is necessary for the creation of a sustained narrative structure. Writing about war in the twentieth century concerns both an awareness that there exists a tradition of such writing and a realization that each war is unique. Fiction has to give some attention to concrete factors, which may include the geographical terrain where conflict unfolds, the ideological or national nature of the dispute, the assumed cause of hostilities, the technological apparatus available for use, or the shifting

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 63.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

alliances as forces align themselves during the course of the conflict. While artists find war a difficult subject as being the most extreme form of human experience, its very difficulty is partly the reason for its necessary articulation, as McLoughlin points out:

Yet, even as it resists representation, conflict demands it. The reasons that make war's representation imperative are as multitudinous as those which make it impossible: to impose discursive order on the chaos of conflict and so to render it more comprehensible; to keep the record for the self and others (those who were there and can no longer speak for themselves and those who were not there and need to be told); to give some meaning to mass death; to memorialise; to inform civilians of the nature of battle so as to facilitate the reintegration of veterans into peacetime society; to provide cathartic relief; to warn; and even, through the warning, to promote peace.⁸

However, although it is a story which has to be told for the sake of communicating something of the experience of conflict, narrating war is a risky and unpredictable undertaking, carrying within it certain dangers in whichever literary form or mode is chosen. Former soldiers in relating their experiences from the First World War in fictional narrative or in autobiography, for example, faced a dilemma between documentary-style and non-mimetic modes of representation: 'The chroniclers of the First World War found themselves torn between the impulse of integrating war into history and the impulse of demonstrating its radical otherness.'⁹ The problem is that, on the one hand, armed conflict, massaged into the rationalizing contours of a historical account, appears as the result of a natural flow of events, thus neutralizing its inherent madness. On the other hand, as a story so alienated from the familiar and everyday world, it loses the ability to communicate the potency of its terrifying consequences for those who were there. The translation of real wartime into fictional form raises the challenge for literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries of how to express such extreme destructiveness, or, as phrased by Margot Norris in her study *Writing War in the Twentieth Century*, 'how to make its inherent epistemological disorientation, its sense of experienced "unreality", real'.¹⁰ The principal ideas to be explored in this article relate to the above quotations from McLoughlin and Norris. They are: first, the need 'to impose discursive order on the chaos of conflict'; second, making 'its sense of experienced "unreality" real'. In other words, it is necessary not only to bring coherent order to bear on the fragments of the extreme experience of war, but also to make the absurdity of the events material and

⁸ McLoughlin, p. 7.

⁹ Evelyn Cobley, 'History and Ideology in Autobiographical Literature of the First World War', in *Troops versus Tropes: War and Literature*, ed. by Evelyn J. Hinz (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1990), pp. 37–54 (p. 53).

¹⁰ Margot Norris, *Writing War in the Twentieth Century* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 24.

palpable, to drag them into the emotional and intellectual horizons of those who were not there.

In the 1990s a large number of novels were written by Serbian authors about the Wars of Yugoslav Succession. David Albahari in his novel *Mamac* (*Bait*) juxtaposes memories about the chaos and cruelty of the Second World War in Yugoslavia with events from the 1990s.¹¹ Albahari is less concerned with producing a historical account in his contrasting of two periods of great internal crisis than with creating a novel in which, as Vladislava Ribnikar notes, 'Various historical realities rub up against one another, revealing numerous similarities and analogies.'¹² Vladimir Arsenijević, however, in *U potpalublju* (*In the Hold*) chooses to focus on the difficulty for the younger generation in Belgrade to comprehend the conflict of the 1990s in all its absurdity.¹³ Generally speaking, wartime conditions erode the usual codes which define the norms of behaviour and public morality, as Fussell notes: 'The atmosphere of emergency and the proximity of violence will always promote a relaxing of inhibition ending in a special hedonism and lasciviousness.'¹⁴ The atmosphere in Serbia's capital city captured by Arsenijević and others arises from the specific conditions at the time, which have been well documented by academics and journalists.¹⁵ In the Belgrade context, this erosion of civilized norms takes place in a historical period of unprecedented chaos. Young men are being killed in a cause which holds only the faintest connection to lived historical experience in the country that was Yugoslavia. The rhetoric of competing nationalist programmes replaces the common Yugoslav discourse of unity. The United Nations places the country under a crippling regime of international sanctions, banning all contact of virtually any kind and severing economic, political, cultural, sporting, educational ties. Entry into and exit from the country are possible only via a few road links with neighbouring countries. Poverty and isolation are coupled with the avaricious desires of a corrupt political leadership, now allowed to operate unfettered by any outside obstructions. In these conditions, criminals and mafia-style gangs take to the streets, working alongside the authorities designed in a previous world for the protection of law and order. Fear and chaos destroy the remaining traces of social cohesion, leading one sociologist to describe the consequences of

¹¹ David Albahari, *Mamac* (Belgrade: Stubovi kulture, 1996); David Albahari, *Bait*, trans. by Peter Agnone (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001).

¹² Vladislava Ribnikar, 'History as Trauma in the Work of David Albahari', *Serbian Studies*, 19 (2005), 53–81 (p. 67).

¹³ Vladimir Arsenijević, *U potpalublju* (Belgrade: Rad, 1994); Vladimir Arsenijević, *In the Hold*, trans. by Celia Hawkesworth (London: Harvill Press, 1996).

¹⁴ Fussell, p. 270.

¹⁵ For general discussion of these years see Tim Judah, *The Serbs: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), and Robert Thomas, *Serbia under Milošević: Politics in the 1990s* (London: Hurst, 1999).

events of the early 1990s in Serbia as the collapse of the city as a space of modernity and urban cultural identity.¹⁶

The rise of gangster culture in Serbia is a specific feature of the experience of that conflict. In their book on the subject, *Kriminal koji je izmenio Srbiju* (*The Crime that Changed Serbia*), Aleksandar Knežević and Vojislav Tufegdžić describe the general effect of this crisis in the following terms: 'In Belgrade you could see in a condensed form Chicago of the 1920s, Berlin and its economic crisis of the 1930s, the conspiratorial air of Casablanca from the 1940s, and the apocalyptic hedonism of Vietnam from the 1960s.'¹⁷ In their documentary examination of the situation, Knežević and Tufegdžić cite instances from the history of crises in the twentieth century. Some are references to times of war, and, more importantly, they all have obvious antecedents in the history of media culture, especially film. Their comparisons with Belgrade are generated by cinema images: classic Hollywood gangster films set in Chicago such as *The Public Enemy*, directed by William A. Wellman, 1931; *Cabaret*, directed by Bob Fosse, 1972, about a group of friends in 1930s Germany; *Casablanca*, directed by Michael Curtiz, 1942, starring Humphrey Bogart; cult films about the Vietnam War such as *Apocalypse Now*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, 1979. Their list of troubled times and places hits a nerve with a general public whose understanding of pivotal events in the twentieth century is driven by their access to images and information from the media, in this case film. The testimony of these journalists about those years is a reminder of the reasons given by McLoughlin for the necessity to articulate the human experience of war and the powerful impressions created by fictional war narratives. Astrid Erll remarks on the significance of such narratives for the production and persistence of historical knowledge: 'What is known about a war, a revolution, or any other event which has been turned into a site of memory, therefore, seems to refer not so much to what one might cautiously call the "actual events," but instead to a canon of existing medial constructions, to the narratives and images circulating in a media culture.'¹⁸ Novels, films, and other narrative fictions, in this view, are just as important as the documentary records left by journalists and academics for their contribution to understanding the course of this and other wars, for giving the conflict an acknowledged set of iconic images which serve to condense and convey the experience of that period. Prodanović's novel *Dance, You Monster, to my Soft Music* provides further

¹⁶ Sreten Vujović, 'Urbana svakodnevnica devedesetih godina', in *Grad u senci rata: ogledi o gradu, siromaštvu i sukobima* (Novi Sad: Prometej; Belgrade: Institut za sociologiju Filozofskog fakulteta, 1997), pp. 23–69.

¹⁷ Aleksandar Knežević and Vojislav Tufegdžić, *Kriminal koji je izmenio Srbiju* (Belgrade: Radio B-92, 1995), p. 3. All quotations from Serbian are translated by David Norris.

¹⁸ Astrid Erll, 'Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory', in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 389–98 (p. 392).

evidence of the productive nature of 'the narratives and images circulating in a media culture' through the complex system of intertextual references from which the world of his novel is created.

Mileta Prodanović (b. 1959, Belgrade) is a writer of fiction, essayist, and visual artist whose work spans three decades from the first exhibition of his paintings in 1980. His creative paths in the visual arts and in literature have assumed similar directions. He was soon recognized as one of the 'leading' young talents of the Serbian art world in the early 1980s.¹⁹ His artistic method was defined by the bold combination of intertextual references and highly metaphoric representations in the complex and multi-layered meanings of his paintings. By the end of the 1980s 'he had shaped his complex narrative of postmodern image/ambience, characterised by the predominance of the metahistorical collage, stressing the thesis that *citation is explicit cultural memory*' (emphasis original).²⁰ The significant point here is the emphasis placed on Prodanović's use of 'citation' in his work—that is, quotation or intertextuality. His painting became more politically engaged as a reaction to the wars and collapse of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. His 1996 exhibition 'Stance' ('Stanzas') marks a turning-point in his work 'in terms of a more openly political discourse'.²¹ Two years later in the exhibition 'Pohvala ruci' ('In Praise of the Hand') one of his installations, with the title *Birnam Wood*, contains a clear allusion linking President Milošević and his wife, Mira Marković, to the murderous and politically tragic lives of Shakespeare's Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. They are two devoted couples who destroy everything around them, including their countries and other families near to them. Prodanović was not to know at the time of his exhibition that the Yugoslav President and his lady would destroy themselves too: Milošević died in custody while on trial at The Hague, while his wife remains in exile. *Birnam Wood* blends together tabloid myths about the loving relationship between the President and his wife with Shakespeare's version of staged Scottish history to shape a highly evocative image of contemporary Serbian political life.

When discussing Prodanović's literary output, critics draw attention to both the level of political engagement in his work and his expressive use of literary style. Tihomir Brajović refers to his 'breadth of genres from parodic to anti-utopian' and at the same time to his 'concern with the causes and consequences of the intellectual and moral decline of Milošević's Serbia'.²² Vladislava Gordić Petković, writing about his short stories, remarks on how

¹⁹ Lidija Merenik, *Mileta Prodanović: biti na nekom mestu biti svuda biti* (Belgrade: Fond Vujičić kolekcija, 2011), p. 145.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

²² Tihomir Brajović, *Kratka istorija preobilja: kritički bedeker kroz savremenu srpsku poeziju i prozu* (Zrenjanin: Agora, 2009), p. 90.

‘he uses the fantastic to underline the grotesque in the political moment or historical order’;²³ while Nikola Strajnić emphasizes that in Prodanović’s fictional world ‘the irrational, the haphazard, the extraordinary is brought to the rational, the causal and the ordinary’ through his narrative strategy of realistically appropriating the strangest of events.²⁴ Prodanović’s concerns go beyond metahistorical collage, at least in the sense that the metahistorical imagination is linked primarily to an idea of history as ‘something we know we can’t learn, something we can only desire’.²⁵ The idea of history is just one of the potential semiotic sources on which his narrative fiction draws. In his fiction, historical and political themes are only ever equal to, if not subordinate to, the processes by which meanings are created, circulated, and exchanged. By the mid-1990s his literary output was aimed at evoking depictions of contemporary Serbian culture through a wide range of intertextual references and quotations from different media combined in dense narrative layers. His novel *Dance, You Monster, to my Soft Music*, analysed in the remainder of this article, is a prime example of this kind of text.

The main character in Prodanović’s novel is Marko, alias Vladimir or Miša, born shortly after the Second World War in Belgrade. His father, Radovan, is a Communist who fought for the Yugoslav partisans in the war but who takes Stalin’s side in the 1948 dispute between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. His ideological conviction leads him to try and leave the country and he is shot while crossing the border into Romania. Marko’s mother commits suicide four years later, leaving him alone with his maternal grandparents, who have little affection for the boy. He grows up wandering the streets of Belgrade, making friends with other boys living on the edge of the law. His behaviour becomes increasingly wild and he begins to commit minor crimes. Killing a policeman in a robbery which goes wrong, Marko is finally arrested and while in custody is taken under the wing of a senior member of the state security service, a former partisan and friend of his late father. The officer’s nickname is Stari (the Old Man, a colloquial term for ‘father’ in Serbian) and he arranges for Marko to leave Yugoslavia, despite his crime, even supplying him with a false passport and new identity. Marko continues his criminal career abroad, but he is also required to carry out political assassinations for the state security service now acting as his protector.

While living an opulent lifestyle abroad, Marko has affairs with two women, with Eva in Vienna and Laura in Florence. He fathers two children with his

²³ Vladislava Gordić Petković, ‘Žanrovske granice pripovetke: Isaković i Prodanović’, in *Mistika i mehanika* (Belgrade: Stubovi kulture, 2010), pp. 121–30 (p. 127).

²⁴ Nikola Strajnić, ‘Leptirova krila’, afterword in Mileta Prodanović, *Agneć: priče, parabole, bitter-sweet . . .*, 2nd edn (Belgrade: Stubovi kulture, 2008), pp. 305–08 (p. 307).

²⁵ Amy J. Elias, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. xviii.

lovers. At the beginning of the wars in former Yugoslavia he is recalled to Belgrade to lead a paramilitary formation over the border into Bosnia, continuing to serve the state security apparatus, which is now an institution of the new Serbia. From his stay in Paris he acquires the services of two brothers who become his loyal factotums. Returning with him to Belgrade, they become embroiled in the political and criminal circles in the city. One of them shoots Marko on the orders of the new chiefs of the state security service. After his death, it is discovered that Marko has bequeathed six works by the Swiss artist Paul Klee to the local museum in his father's birthplace, Dubrovica. The novel opens with the news of this generous and strange bequest, which caused a stir in the international media agencies based in Belgrade during the conflict in the region. The subsequent events of the novel are related from the point of view of different characters—Stari, Laura, Eva—and from Marko's perspective as he lies dying after being shot. The figure of Marko is presented in a different light in each variation of the story, and each portrayal of the character is underpinned by intertextual references to other narratives linking him to the founding myths of socialist Yugoslavia, to the documented records of the activities of criminals working for the state security service in the 1990s, to glamorous fictional characters from popular literature and film, and to the dark world of Dragoslav Mihailović's well-known novel *Kad su cvetale tikve* (*When the Pumpkins Blossomed*).

Marko's family background inscribes him in a circle of historical time, linking the crisis of the 1990s to the Second World War and the emergency situation in 1948, when the existence of Tito's Yugoslavia was threatened by a conflict, both ideological and pragmatic, with the Soviet Union. Stari tells Marko about his parents, their wartime activities, and what happened after the war while he was still a baby. Stari and Radovan fought together for the partisans and later they continued to work together, but now with responsibility for, as Stari says, 'different tasks'. Asking Marko if he knows where his name came from, he tells him that he was named after their commander, who had the conspiratorial name Marko. Speaking of him, Stari adds, 'Some think that he was a killer, some that he hatched some kind of plot in the government.'²⁶ Marko was the conspiratorial name of the partisan commander Aleksandar Ranković, an important member of Tito's inner circle during the war, who became head of the state security service, the UDBA,²⁷ after the war. The historian Stevan Pavlowitch describes his post-war duties: 'He was in overall charge of the security police, which exercised unrestrained power to arrest,

²⁶ Mileta Prodanović, *Pleši, čudovište, na moju nežnu muziku* (Belgrade: Stubovi kulture, 1996), p. 198. All further quotations will be followed by the page number from this edition in parentheses.

²⁷ Uprava državne bezbednosti or State Security Administration (the version in n. 34 below refers to a later incarnation of the same institution).

imprison and execute political opponents without police charges or trials.’²⁸ These are the enigmatic ‘different tasks’ of the state’s secret police to which Stari alludes in his story to Marko. Radovan, a staunch Communist, takes the side of Stalin against the leadership of the Yugoslav Communist Party in 1948. He resolves to leave the country for the Soviet Union, or at least some country friendly with the Soviet authorities—or, as Stari remarks to Marko, ‘He set off for where he thought it was paradise. Towards the Romanian border’ (pp. 198–99). Stari says that the secret police, discovering Radovan’s intentions, waited for him on the border, where he killed six of them before being shot himself. The affair mirrors an actual historical event from 1948 which Fred Singleton briefly describes in his history of Yugoslavia: ‘One prominent ex-Partisan, the former chief of staff, General Arso Jovanović, was shot while attempting to flee to Romania on 13 August.’²⁹ Stories about the partisan victory in the Second World War, the activities of the secret police, the role of Aleksandar Ranković, the crisis of 1948, and the death of Arso Jovanović are cardinal elements in the founding myths of socialist Yugoslavia, but here incorporated in the novel as part of Marko’s familial story. Marko, ironically, returns at the end of the novel to take part in the events which mark the end of the once united country.

Other connections between the establishment of the new state in 1945 and its demise in the 1990s are exploited in the novel through the naming of Stari. Josip Broz Tito was also known to his wartime associates by the nickname Stari. Prodanović’s character comments on his own name when he introduces himself to Marko, saying, ‘My name is Stjepan, they call me Stipe . . . And I think you could even call me Stari. Comrade Stari. Not because they call our Marshall that . . . that’s an accidental coincidence, but I can’t deny that I like it. That’s what they called me in the war, although I was not old then’ (p. 188). His name is not only a happy coincidence with a historical counterpart but also replicates his function in his relationship to Marko. Supplying him with false identity papers and sending him abroad to begin a new life, he is cast in the role of a spiritual father to the orphan Marko. Stari’s real name, Stjepan shortened to Stipe, is typically Croatian, and in this context calls to mind the name of the Croatian representative on Yugoslavia’s Presidency Council in late 1991, who also used the shorter form of Stjepan, Stipe Mesić. As acting President of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s he ‘declared that Yugoslavia ceased to exist’ amidst the military and political turmoil of the time.³⁰ In Prodanović’s

²⁸ Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *Serbia: The History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), p. 163.

²⁹ Fred Singleton, *A Short History of the Yugoslav Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 222.

³⁰ Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1995), p. 197.

vić's prose, Marko's surrogate father contains allusions both to the creator of Yugoslavia and to the herald of its demise. These references in Prodanović's novel are thickly interlaced with the historical myths of the Yugoslav regime. The historical record in this regard is less important than the suggestion by similarity and analogy which Prodanović's fictional prose introduces, akin to Albahari's narrative technique in his novel *Bait* as noted by Ribnikar. Marko and his father both work for the state security service, the son following in the footsteps of the father, their lives are governed by the times of chaos and political instability in which they live, and they are both killed by those claiming to be on the same side. Stari tries to explain to Marko the atmosphere of those times by referring to the big issues of that period in 1948 such as 'Country, independence . . . freedom' (p. 187). The absolute need to defend such abstract notions is revived in the political rhetoric of the 1990s in Serbia and from which Marko, unlike Radovan, is entirely estranged.

With his future secured by Stari, Marko, holding his new passport in the name of Miroslav Zlatanović, goes abroad, where some of his friends from the Belgrade streets have already been sent. The state will allow Marko to do as he pleases but he will be expected to carry out tasks as an assassin of émigrés opposed to socialist Yugoslavia. The manner of Marko's recruitment echoes stories documented by journalists and circulating in Belgrade in the 1990s about the role played by criminals in the Yugoslav security service. An officer employed in the service for twenty-five years, Božidar Spasić, was interviewed by Knežević and Tufegdžić for their book *The Crime that Changed Serbia*, which appeared the year before the publication of Prodanović's novel. Spasić spoke about the 'people from the underworld' who were hired to liquidate opponents of the state living abroad.³¹ He continues to admit: 'I issued 90 false passports, that was the number of good associates from the underworld. I also gave driving licences to the best of them.'³² The manner in which Marko finds his way into the service closely reflects the evidence of another interviewee from the state security apparatus, who tells the journalists: 'The Service recruited about 90% of its assassins from the ranks of the criminals. There were three basic methods of negotiating with them. I would call the first one blackmail: the police discovered that the criminal had done something he shouldn't have. It's pointed out to him that it will be forgotten if he carries out a certain task.'³³ Under the pressure of impending war and given the links which already existed between the state and organized crime, the support of those who were already involved in covert government activities was enlisted. After Slovenia's successful bid for secession from the Yugoslav federation in 1991, Vuk Drašković, leader of the Serbian Renewal Movement, called for the

³¹ Knežević and Tufegdžić, p. 239.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 241.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

creation of a Serbian Guard to defend the interests of Serbs in Croatia. The Guard was a paramilitary formation and, although it was not formally part of Drašković's SRM, the two were closely connected. Its first commander was Đorđe Božović 'Giška', while its main financier was Branislav Matić 'Beli'. Božović was a known criminal who had operated in Serbia and abroad, serving a six-year sentence in Italy: 'During his time in Western Europe he was reported to have worked for the SDB³⁴ carrying out covert operations against dissident émigrés.' Matić was a wealthy businessman with interests in scrap metal dealing: 'However, like his friend and colleague Giška, he was believed to be close to "underground" criminal circles in Serbia.'³⁵ Almost all such leaders of criminal gangs in Serbia were murdered: Matić lost his life on 3 August and Božović on 15 September 1991. Marko's fictional career recounted in Prodanović's novel bears close similarities to some of these documented events.

One of the most famous criminals associated with the state security service is Željko Ražnatović 'Arkan', leader of the paramilitary formation known as the Tigers and 'a criminal wanted in Europe for political assassinations and drug trafficking'.³⁶ Many aspects of Marko's career follow the contours of what has been reported about Arkan's career. In his study of the effects of the wars of the 1990s on the urban landscape of Belgrade, Prodanović has this to say about him:

The grave of Željko Ražnatović—Arkan, a criminal with a high position in the police/state security, an owner of cake shops and 'businessman', collector of art pictures and owner of a football club, a suspected war criminal, member of parliament and national hero, killed on 15 January 2000 in the hall of the Belgrade hotel 'Intercontinental'—is to be found in the prestigious New Cemetery. The grave can be seen as the final element in the construction of the identity (some might say 'image') of this important protagonist in political-police-war-criminal-fashionable-sporting life.³⁷

Prodanović's Marko does not own cake shops or a football club, but he is recruited by the Yugoslav secret police, leads a life outside the country as a professional criminal and assassin as required by the security services, and returns to lead a paramilitary unit in the war in Bosnia. He is also a collector of paintings by Paul Klee. Under the isolated conditions of Serbia subject to a regime of international sanctions from 1992 to 1995, such criminals became the new celebrities with their rich and luxurious lifestyles in direct contrast to the drudgery of daily routine experienced by most citizens. They were seen to 'have dared to take an unconventional and daring path in life' following

³⁴ Služba državne bezbednosti or State Security Service.

³⁵ Thomas, pp. 100–01.

³⁶ Woodward, p. 254.

³⁷ Mileta Prodanović, *Stariji i lepši Beograd*, 3rd edn (Belgrade: Stubovi kulture, 2004), p. 190.

which they were now 'equally daring in their patriotic commitment'.³⁸ Arkan in particular was singled out as 'the glamorised villain'.³⁹ He provided his fans with a calendar showing photographs of himself in 1994, while in the following year his marriage to the singer Ceca was a huge media spectacle watched by the whole country on TV and sold on video afterwards. For his wedding performance Arkan wore what looked like the uniform of a Serbian officer from the First World War. In the world of modern celebrities, real identities are exchanged for media constructions, blurring lines between factual documentary and fictional recreation. Prodanović's inscription of a circle of historical time deliberately plays on intertextual references to documentary, historic, mythic, and media sources, creating a succession of frames through which the character of Marko is projected. These references when combined in the context of his fictional world are ontologically equal to the others taken from entirely fictional sources and which are outlined below.

Prodanović's novel is permeated with references to characters and types taken from fictional worlds invented by others. His Viennese lover, Eva, one day receives notification of a large amount of money paid into her bank account. She realizes that this means that her lover from the past, Marko but whom she knew as Miša, is dead. She decides to tell her son, Martin, that his real father is not the man he believed to be his father, but an enigmatic foreigner. Eva knows very little about Marko, but she falls in love with him, describing him to their son in glowing terms as a very handsome man who was different from other men. Martin reacts angrily, and accuses his mother of imagining the whole affair with him, as if a piece of kitsch fiction. He says:

It's a pity that I haven't read those romantic novels which you can buy from kiosks, perhaps this would be closer to me . . . The ones about doctors and spies. And hospital sisters. As you can see, it all fits. I'm still not entirely sure this is *really* happening. To me. To us. I ask you again, are you retelling the story of some film which you saw on television yesterday, the day before? Something like this which left a big impression on you. (p. 111)

Arkan's image of a glamorized villain is reborn in Martin's reaction to his mother's admission of his paternity. A similar strategy is employed when Prodanović turns to the story of Marko's affair with Laura in Italy, except that the reference becomes a more elaborate evocation of a specific fictional character, James Bond.

The second chapter of the novel opens in Florence with Laura Rondi taking her little daughter, Ana, to school. Laura also discovers that a substantial sum has been deposited in her bank account, and at first she is at a loss to under-

³⁸ Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media* (London: BFI, 2001), p. 178.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

stand where it might have come from. Then she realizes that the unexpected gift of money could only mean that Vladimir, Ana's father and her lover, is now dead. She first met Vladimir—Marko under an assumed name—some years before by chance on a train going from Venice to Rome. She remembers their first encounter, when she was attracted by his appearance, although she could not guess his age. He reminded her of another ageless character from fiction, 'Dorian Gray: a man outside every generation' (p. 49). Prodanović uses the same reference in one of his short stories, 'Moj teča Bond, Džejsms Bond' ('My Uncle Bond, James Bond').⁴⁰ The narrator of this story hears that one of his aunts may have been romantically involved with a British liaison officer sent to Yugoslavia during the Second World War, Bill Hudson. On discovering that this same man may have been a model for Fleming's hero, the narrator begins to imagine that this potential uncle really is James Bond, but who 'like some relative of Dorian Gray, remained forever young' as the years rolled by.⁴¹ This quotation appears in a section of the story subtitled, in English, 'From Serbia with Love'.⁴² Prodanović often juxtaposes non-fictional and fictional types, like Hudson and Bond in this short story, throughout his novel. There are the pairings of Arso Jovanović and Marko's father Radovan, the gangsters who return to Serbia in the 1990s and Marko. In addition, there are the pairings of purely fictional types such as Marko and Bond. These doublings and redoublings of identity continue to multiply as the novel progresses, ultimately blurring any essential differences between historical figures and events and fictional ones.

Laura and Marko's first meeting is recounted as if a continuation of one of Bond's adventures, *From Russia with Love*. In this 1957 novel by Fleming, later filmed for the cinema screen, Bond is returning from Istanbul on the Orient Express with a secretary from the Soviet Embassy to Turkey, Tatiana Romanova. She has become Bond's lover and together they are transporting a valuable decoding machine which she helped him to steal. Their journey takes them through Belgrade and Zagreb, and they enter Italy on their way to Venice and further west. Arriving at Trieste, the two travellers in Fleming's novel see a marked difference between the sights of Italy and their journey through the Balkans: 'They gazed down at the holiday crowd. The sun shone through the tall clean windows of the station in golden shafts. The sparkling scene emphasized the dark and dirt of the countries the train had come from.'⁴³ In Prodanović's novel, Marko has travelled from Belgrade, following the same route as Bond and Tatiana, but with Laura waiting at the station

⁴⁰ Mileta Prodanović, 'Moj teča Bond, Džejsms Bond', in *Agneć: priče, sastavi, parabole, bitter-sweet . . .*, 2nd edn, pp. 163–91.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁴³ Ian Fleming, *From Russia with Love* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), pp. 177–78.

in Venice, from where the train turns south. This train looks to her different from the Italian ones, her thoughts echoing the words of Fleming's novel: 'The carriages were Bulgarian, Yugoslav, Greek, dirty, but still they were carriages of a sort' (p. 46). Laura sits with Marko alone in a compartment, where their affair begins as she takes the place of Tatiana. The location of their first meeting is typical of a James Bond story, in which travel, as Umberto Eco remarks in his study of Fleming's novels, is one of the 'archetypal situations'.⁴⁴ Laura leaves the train in Florence and Marko continues his journey to Rome, but they agree to meet again. The following weekend, he drives to Florence in an impressive car, a 1960s black Lancia, an expensive, prestigious vehicle of a type often associated with his fictional prototype. The relationship between him and Laura develops in ways akin to Bond's relationships with women. Laura organizes her life around his needs and desires, while Marko takes her away from her parents and puts her in a flat of her own. As Eco notes: 'Bond meets a woman who is dominated by him and frees her from her past, establishing with her an erotic relationship.'⁴⁵ Laura knows very little about Marko, who is often in Italy but also frequently absent travelling abroad as a businessman. He allows Laura into selected parts of his life without divulging the whole story, since, like the secret agent, Marko has secrets which he dare not tell.

There are further points of similarity between the two worlds inhabited by Marko and James Bond. They are both dominated by an authority figure: Stari brings Marko into the service and acts as his protector, while 'M' is James Bond's controller. Arranging Marko's missions, Stari assumes the role of 'M', who is described by Eco as 'the one who has a global view of the events, hence his superiority over the "hero" who depends upon him and who sets out on his various missions in conditions of inferiority to the omniscient chief'.⁴⁶ Bond, like Marko, has an ambiguous role as a state-sponsored killer with 'official legitimation to destroy the enemies of his country, (a "licence to kill")'.⁴⁷ However, Marko's morally ambivalent status is accentuated by a correspondingly ideological ambivalence. Bond kills from a sense of duty and in order to prevent crimes against humanity which are not 'directed towards individuals or individual communities, but rather towards entire nations, whole continents, and, often, the human race itself'.⁴⁸ The villains in the Bond stories are

⁴⁴ Umberto Eco, 'Narrative Structures in Fleming', in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), pp. 144-72 (p. 155).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁴⁷ James Chapman, *Licence to Thrill: A Cultural History of the James Bond Films* (London: Tauris, 1999), p. 30.

⁴⁸ Christopher Lindner, 'Criminal Vision and the Ideology of Detection in Fleming's 007 Series', in *The James Bond Phenomenon: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Christopher Lindner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 76-88 (p. 79).

intent on world domination, for which they are willing to initiate acts of mass destruction and use everything and anything to achieve their goals. Marko, on the other hand, kills individuals who represent the ideology of those Western political trends which Bond protects. In the end, on his return to Serbia in the early 1990s, Marko becomes part of a military machine implicated in crimes against humanity. In their study of the James Bond figure, *Bond and Beyond*, Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott see him as one of those popular heroes who 'break free from the originating textual conditions of their existence to achieve a semi-independent existence, functioning as an established point of cultural reference that is capable of working—of producing meanings—even for those who are not directly familiar with the original texts in which they first made their appearance'.⁴⁹ Prodanović taps into this rich seam of cultural reference-points, inscribing his character with ambiguous connotations from the world of James Bond.⁵⁰

Marko is not only linked to the glamorous signifying potential of James Bond, but also to Dragoslav Mihailović's novel *When the Pumpkins Blossomed*. Mihailović's narrator is a Serbian émigré living in Sweden, Ljuba Sretenović, recalling his youth in Belgrade and the reason why he left the country. His adolescent years are marked by poverty and a life on the edges of criminality. The novel is regarded as an example of the new, gritty realism in Serbian prose of the late 1960s, depicting a critical picture of urban deprivation in socialist Yugoslavia at odds with the rosy images of constant economic and social progress promoted by the regime. The narrator takes up boxing, joining a Belgrade club, where he falls under the influence of the local official from the Communist Party, a man called Perišić but more commonly known by his nickname Stari. He refuses to help when Ljuba's brother is arrested for allegedly taking Stalin's side in the 1948 dispute. Ljuba is called up for military service when he hears that his sister has committed suicide after being raped. He discovers the identity of the rapist, the leader of one of the local gangs, Stole Apaš, and resolves to kill him. On his discharge from the army, he finds Stole and beats him to death. For fear that the police are close to discovering the truth of his crime he flees the country, marrying and settling down in Sweden. He is homesick, but even when he receives dual nationality he is disturbed that he is not invited back to Yugoslavia. Feeling unwanted by his own country, he has only one hope, 'that at last some small, clever war breaks out'. This thought gives him some comfort: 'then they will definitely call me back'.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott, *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 14.

⁵⁰ In a strange coincidence of fictional lives, the British secret agent is on a mission in Serbia at the beginning of the latest Bond novel. See Jeffery Deaver, *Carte Blanche* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2011).

⁵¹ Dragoslav Mihailović, *Kad su cvetale tikve* (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1968), p. 141.

Some details from the novel *When the Pumpkins Blossomed* are repeated in *Dance, You Monster, to my Soft Music*. The protagonists of both stories are members of street gangs, on the edge of the law, who frequent the local dance halls in order to preen themselves in front of the girls. One of Ljuba's favourite venues is called the Zvezdino, where he meets a girl from Kragujevac who has come to Belgrade as a student, and as such she is a cut above the boys in Ljuba's acquaintance.⁵² Marko, recalling his youth, also remembers the dances at the Zvezdino and the 'girls from good families who like to flirt with the tough guys' (p. 180). Ljuba remembers that the boys all used to carry 'special knives in their pocket', while Marko also recalls the 'clothes which became a status symbol, motor scooters, and the first knives'.⁵³ The names of the boys in Marko's gang, Miki Orangutan and Drakče Dorčolac, echo the names of boys whom Ljuba knows, Mita Majmun (Mita the Monkey) and Dragan Stojiljković (called Draganče). Ljuba's brother, Vladimir, leaves Yugoslavia after his release from prison and goes to Italy; while Marko adopts the alias of Vladimir when he meets Laura on his journey through Italy. Finally, the war which Ljuba hopes for, which will provide him with the opportunity to return home, becomes the cause for Marko's controllers to recall him to Belgrade after many years living abroad.

The complex collage of discourses through which the character of Marko emerges combines the myths of socialist Yugoslavia with the darker world of Belgrade's urban reality, the ambiguous glamour of the criminal underworld with the new political class leading Serbia into war. These connections are almost surreal and at the same time emblematic of the conflict of the 1990s in its Serbian context. Prodanović's narrative technique and the range of his interlaced references reveal, as Hölbling remarks on the interests of American authors writing about Vietnam, that he is expressing not only the specific and unsettling experience of armed conflict but also the wider social and political events which form an inescapable part of that war. He is using already known narratives as cultural reference-points in order to produce iconic images of the 1990s in wartime Belgrade. His work is more than a reflection of an external reality, as Erll points out, it provides a framework in which to imagine and preserve those events: 'It is the patterns derived from the media cultures we live in, especially (albeit often unintentionally) from fictions, that shape our idea of reality and our memories.'⁵⁴ Prodanović saturates his novel with inter-textual references from varied sources, projecting their connotations onto the semantic level of his own work, adding to his fictional world their quality as

⁵² Ibid., p. 40.

⁵³ Mihailović, *Kad su cvetale tikve*, p. 59; Prodanović, *Pleši, čudovište, na moju nežnu muziku*, p. 180.

⁵⁴ Erll, p. 397.

narratives which have already contributed to shaping a general understanding of reality.

The two brothers whom Marko presses into his service while in Paris busy themselves all the time, such that they remind him of Disney's two chipmunk cartoon characters Chip and Dale, after whom he names them in Serbian as Tik and Tak. They arrange Marko's move back to Belgrade by renovating the house in which he was born, transforming it into a modern, hi-tech villa. Tak takes stock of what is happening in Belgrade and decides to go into the lucrative business of banking. Private banks became one of the iconic symbols of Belgrade life in the early 1990s, offering huge rates of interest on foreign currency deposits until the day that new deposits ran out and the interest could no longer be paid, causing the whole pyramid to collapse.⁵⁵ Tak's business venture is compared to that of the real corrupt businessman with connections in the highest level of government, Gazda Jezda, owner of the private bank Jugoskandik (p. 146). Tik is not so successful as a businessman and is almost killed for his debts. He owes money to one of the city's gangsters with the nickname 'Gumeni', whose men take him to a scrap metal yard similar to those owned by the real businessman Matić, where they intend to torture and kill him. Tik is saved at the last moment by the officer in the security services who has taken over Stari's position, but in return for his life he has to kill Marko. When Tik shoots Marko in his jacuzzi, the narrator remarks that since the killer did not know who Jean-Paul Marat was, the murder is not a quotation. He continues to point out that Tik, 'let's be honest, did not even know what a quotation is' (p. 168). This episode and the narrator's ironic comment draws further attention to the fundamental structure of the novel as a tissue of citations.

As he lies dying, Marko recalls scenes from his past. In the memories of his youth, he sees the streets of Dorćol, the town district where his friends lived. These images also contain references to the films which he and his friends would watch at the local cinema, in particular films 'about gangsters, the Chicago underworld of the 30s' (p. 177). He recalls the cellar where he and his friends used to meet: 'The gang used that cellar as a "hideout", a place for meeting and sitting together' (p. 179). The references to films about crime in Chicago during the 1930s and the cellar used by the boys allude to the 1938 film *Angels with Dirty Faces*, starring Jimmy Cagney. In fact, one of Marko's friends from that period even has the nickname 'Cagney' (p. 180). Cagney plays the role of Rocky Sullivan, a gangster returned to the rough streets of his childhood, where he meets a gang of local boys with a cellar hideout and who idolize him. One of Rocky's old friends, now a priest, is concerned at the influence Rocky has over the boys and wants to break the cycle of violence

⁵⁵ Such illicit activities are also called Ponzi schemes.

which the poverty of the streets generates. When Rocky is arrested for murder and sentenced to death, the priest asks his old friend to go to the electric chair pleading for his life so that he will not become a martyr to the boys. The gangster refuses. However, on his way to the execution chamber he breaks down, pleading not to be killed. The film links the novel to the documented events of the 1990s in Belgrade, in which criminals are the new celebrities and 'Arkan is identified as the inspirational role model for the younger gangsters'.⁵⁶ The result is a further deepening of the character of Marko in his fictional world by reference to two others who are not mentioned by name but who have a ghostly presence in the structure of Prodanović's text, Rocky Sullivan and Arkan.

One of the chapters in Prodanović's novel is narrated from the point of view of Đurica Rajaković, a local barber, whose story connects some of the source texts incorporated in the work. As a young boy, Đurica fell from a tree, after which he began to stammer. The other boys teased him mercilessly until Čolke, Marko's boyhood friend, took him under his wing. Čolke is another of Stari's protégés sent abroad as an agent of the Yugoslav secret service. After his recall to Belgrade at the beginning of the 1990s, Marko sent Tik to arrange for Đurica to visit him at home to cut his hair. The barber sets off on his first visit with trepidation, not knowing exactly where he is going, only that his mysterious customer lives in the elite part of town, Dedinje. He fails to recognize Marko from his younger days and tries to locate him in his contemporary social world. He mixes together information which he has gathered from overhearing the gossip of customers in his shop, from visions of luxury living seen in American soap operas, and from interviews he has seen with generals, 'who are seen more and more often on television' (p. 123). Even after he spots a camouflage uniform and muddy boots through an open door in Marko's house, he still cannot guess the occupation of his anonymous customer: 'And after lengthy consideration he did not know how to put together a whole picture of the unknown man' (p. 123). Đurica is certain only that Tik, who is with him during his whole visit, must be the brother of the man in whose bank he and his wife deposited all their life savings. A chair has been set up for Đurica to cut Marko's hair, to which he reacts in the following way: '*Like an electric chair*, Đurica thought, who had seen this machine in an American film, *all on its own in the middle of a room*' (p. 120, emphasis original). The chair prefigures the reference to the film *Angels with Dirty Faces* and Marko's murder in the same house. This episode introducing Đurica itself emulates a pattern of those on the periphery trying to make sense and give meaning to events and experiences from the war. The character makes use of information drawn from documentary, historical, neighbourhood, and

⁵⁶ Iordanova, p. 182.

media sources, which are meshed with the fictional and mythical sources spread throughout the novel enriching the connected layers of intertextual references.

Prodanović's narrator reflects on the precedents for war literature existent in the tradition of the literary form when he comments on the conflict in Bosnia at the beginning of the novel:

Someone has said that it is a 'postmodern war', a war composed of the very quotations taken from the history of world warfare: mass killings of civilians, sieges of towns similar to those in medieval times but using the most up-to-date weaponry, warfare by lies, hostages and their exchanges, tying enemy soldiers to facilities of particular significance to prevent their being bombed, oriental specialities with heads cleaved from their bodies, rape and camps. (p. 18)

His thoughts expressed here echo those of Elaine Scarry, at the beginning of this article, that the structure of war repeats itself each time. This repetition is behind a common trend in war writing towards intertextuality because of the similarity of extreme forms of experience, as noted by Kate McLoughlin, 'Likeness of experience has itself become a trope: a complex meeting of representation and reality capable of further exploitation. The result is that representations of wars—like the wars themselves—are often heavily intertextual (or interbellical).'⁵⁷ At the same time, McLoughlin also points out the paradoxical position of war fiction in her statement 'That each war differs from every other is beyond question.'⁵⁸ This tension between the general structure of armed conflict and the unique shape of each instance is magnified in Prodanović's novel. The historical context of the war as given in his narrative can be understood only amidst the totality of a semiotic system generated by the whole of cultural experience. And yet, this war produces consequences and runs a course which is unique. Its singularity sets it apart and, never having been seen before, is why the experience cannot be fathomed or understood. The horrors of events in which Marko takes part in Bosnia, briefly recalled as he lies dying (pp. 231–45), are individual episodes of the general effects of war enumerated at the beginning. But when articulated, and the victims of war are identified as human beings, these episodes become specific. Events such as the execution of civilians and their burial in mass graves with the help of a mechanical digger, Marko's discovery of severed heads looking like masks, the bartering of prisoners, set in and around places like Sarajevo and Višegrad with the presence of interpreters working for the international peace-keeping forces, create specific images of the war in Bosnia. The social and political circumstances which bring Marko to the front line offer a particular narrative shape which other wars do not possess.

⁵⁷ McLoughlin, p. 14.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

In conclusion, Prodanović's novel *Dance, You Monster, to my Soft Music* as an example of modern war literature to some extent confirms and amplifies McLoughlin's reasons for the necessary articulation of war in narrative fiction. His prose imposes a narrative or discursive order on events which otherwise are beyond comprehension. This act represents a record, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say a concretization, of particular images that will form the basis of the narrative of the war. The events are placed in a longer time-frame combining historical, fictional, and mythic discourses without endorsing the authenticity of one in particular. The author explores the distinctive conditions of knowledge in relation to this particular conflict and how signifying systems are activated which make the circumstances associated with war part of our horizons of expectations not in relation to 'actual events' but more in tune with 'a canon of existing medial constructions' as described by Erll. He accommodates the meaning of events relating to this particular war into the wider social and cultural patterns of reception. These dense patterns, in turn, draw attention to chains of events linking the main character to the war in Bosnia, to the political structures in Serbia promoting the country's involvement in the crisis, and to the wider mythic narrative of Yugoslavia. Marko and the other characters are part of the system of signification, forming and formed at the intersections of intertextual references, quotations of the already known. If not responsible for the cause of conflict, they are part of the meaning-making systems which surround and permeate the conflict, communicating the record of events and integrating them on the semantic level. These patterns of meaning are, in effect, Prodanović's 'new language' expressing 'the very specific and unsettling experience' of this conflict. His combination of sources offers narrative precedents for what is unprecedented—that is, this particular war with its specific course and events, communicating its essential unreality or absurdity as the reality of the human experience of war.

A subsequent event, the final reckoning for the war crimes trials in The Hague, could be appended as a postscript to Prodanović's novel, demonstrating the shaping of reality by patterns gleaned from fictional narrative, or the close proximity between art and life. On 20 July 2011 the last wanted Serbian war criminal from the conflicts of the 1990s, Goran Hadžić, former President of the Republic of Srpska Krajina, in hiding since July 2004, was arrested in northern Serbia. In an article the following day in the newspaper *Politika* it was maintained that he had returned to Serbia in order to claim a painting by Amedeo Modigliani entitled *Portrait of a Man*, which he had left in the care of a friend. The *Politika* journalist writes: 'It was established that the picture was bought by money from smuggling oil, in which, among other affairs, the former President of the RSK was involved during the wars on the territory

of Croatia and Bosnia.⁵⁹ In their investigation into Hadžić's whereabouts, the police had determined that he was running out of money and decided to wait until the fugitive tried to collect his painting in order to sell it. Although reference to Modigliani's painting was soon dropped, the story of his arrest bears an uncanny resemblance to the initial event in Prodanović's novel, when Marko's story begins with the unexpected appearance of Klee's paintings from his collection.

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⁵⁹ Dušan Telesković, 'Uhapšen Goran Hadžić', *Politika*, 21 July 2011, p. 1.