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Music of the Others. Locating the (Turbo-) Folk Critique

Marina Simić*

In this paper I address dominant critical discourses of turbo-folk music in Serbia. I suggest that we see music and music related practices as constitutive rather than reflective of identification in order to find a more nuanced ways to understand common discourses of (turbo-) folk critiques and its roles. To that aim, I draw from my long-term fieldwork research in the northern Serbian town of Novi Sad to show how public discourses are played out in private spheres, and also how they are created in and through everyday life. I identify the “anti-folk scene” based on univocal aesthetic exclusion that encompasses people from various social backgrounds and social strata. In conclusion, it could be said that despite its huge popularity and public visibility, turbo-folk remains one of the most important examples of aesthetics of others/other aesthetics in contemporary Serbia.

Keywords: turbo-folk, Serbia, lines of disidentification

Introduction

Serbian folk singer Šaban Šaulić died in a car crash in February 2019. He received a state funeral in the Alley of Distinguished Citizens in Belgrade, and was the first folk artist to be buried there. His state funeral did not attract much attention until the death of Serbian poet Dobirca Erić, who died in March of the same year. Unlike Šaulić, he was buried in his native village of Donja Crnuća, where he spent most of his later life. Serbian president posthumously awarded the poet an award: Sretenjski orden trećeg stepena za naročite zasluge u oblasti književnosti, posebno pesničkog stvaralaštva. The public was outraged – a folk singer received a state funeral, the national poet did not. Few know that Erić, who was also a supporter of right-wing Serbian movements, also wrote lyrics for new folk songs, including one of the most famous from the veteran of Serbian new folk veteran Miroslav Ilić: the song “I used to love a girl from the city” – “Voleo sam devojkju iz grada.” He also wrote for more controversial artists, like Svetlana Ražnatović Ceca, the most famous turbo-folk singer from the 1990s and the widow of war criminal Željko Ražnatović Arkan. However, liberal and other public discourses focus on the fact that a state policy commemorated a folk singer and not a poet (although both were close to the state politics) in a long enduring anti-folk discourse that permeates various strata of Serbian society. In this paper my aim is not to investigate or challenge the concepts that have proved to be surprisingly homogenous and long lasting, but to describe how they were expressed ethnographically – not commenting on whether or not such opinions reflect some type of reality or another – and to understand the ways in which they became the main negative discourses of

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identification.¹ I suggest that we see music and music related practices as constitutive rather than reflective of identification in order to find more nuanced ways to understand common discourses of (turbo-) folk critique and its roles. To that aim, I will draw from my long-term research in Novi Sad that started with a year of fieldwork in 2005 and continued with frequent visits in years after my initial research about music and identification. Keeping that in mind, I will start with the usual anthropological approach and include an ethnographic vignette that may give us insight into the issue at stake.

Locating the (turbo-) folk critique

In the town centre of Novi Sad, there is a main square and main street with stylish shops, café, and bars that usually play some kind of “neutral music.” There are also many bars on both sides of the plaza where there is no music at all. In the area surrounding the town centre streets there are many places that play rock, house, electro, and similar styles of music. Most of them are located on Laze Telečkog Street and have English names, like Martha’s Pub and London, or Spanish names like Cuba Libre. There are also some places that play heavy metal and hard rock, the most famous being Dvorište, meaning “yard,” a small place that is quite hidden behind the Serbian National Theatre, or Izba (an archaic word meaning “shack”), where “alternative” people go-like NGO activists, art students, artists, musicians – and where I spent considerable amount of my time. Izba is located above the Novi Sad Student Centre of Culture; both places used to be state owned. However, with the collapse of the socialist Yugoslav state and massive privatization of state property, the building has now been rented out to a private tenant who for a while turned in to a place for rock concerts and exhibitions of all kinds.

One night of the many nights that I spent in Izba, I had a discussion about music politics. This time I was in all male company with some Exit festival team members, NGO activist and rock musicians. One of my interlocutors was for a short while a director of a local radio station in a town in Vojvodina where he banned folk songs on the radio, thinking that his colleagues would agree. He believed that people working in the radio station only played them because they were ordered to do so by previous editor, or because it was simply a habit. But one of his colleagues organized a petition to ask the radio to bring back folksy songs. He fired him for failing to turn up to work, but when the right-wing Serbian Radical Party came to power,² people in the town council hired him back and paid him his salary for the period he did not work. As he explained,

“People were terrified, they said: ‘you want to take our folk music from us.’ I couldn’t explain to them that that it is not folk music, that all the songs were written [and composed] by someone in the 1950s and 1960s, all that sevdalinke (a type of Bosnian song connected mostly with Bosniaks) and that “[There are] two paths leading from the water spring” (a song by Lepa Lukić, “Od izvora dva

¹ I deliberately use term identification instead of identity in order to emphasize process over the state of being.

² Serbian Radical Party is a right wing party that later largely lost its influence and seats in the Parliament, although it is still present in the public life.

putića”³ is only 15 years older than YU grupa [YU Group].⁴ But they hold to it stubbornly, “[There are] two paths leading from the water spring,” that is something ours, authentic.”

Another friend added,

“People think that turbo-folk is some kind of music genre, but that was only the point where they [folk singers in general] got hold of the media. Everybody thinks that Lepa Brena was the beginning [of folk music], but she was only able to play on radio and TV stations, while Šemsa Suljaković and Sinan Sakić were selling the same number of records, but they were not able to reach the media [both are new folk music veterans from the 1980s and frequent targets of ridicule].”

Finally, another friend mentioned the tavern Mali Beograd [Little Belgrade] in Klisa, one of the suburban neighbourhoods with a dubious reputation for its refugee population prone to folksy songs and other “newly composed kitsch,” where “people naked to their waists listen to abnormal music.” He was not really angry; he was more astonished by that fact and found it hilarious and exotic. In a self-exoticising manner he wanted to add to Voja’s point that there is huge variation in what we understand as folksy songs, some of them being more prominent in media, while others heard only in taverns such as Little Belgrade. Leo and I agreed, but Leo added that the problem is not Little Belgrade, but the unequal treatment of turbo-folk stars and rock bands – what is considered to be “normal” and what is not. He said, “A few days ago, a Gypsy brass band woke me up at 8am in the morning and that’s [supposedly] fine, but if I take my band [Obojeni Program]⁵ at 8am in the morning and start playing in the street, I will be arrested for sure.”

There are many closely interwoven issues within this small fragment of a conversation in the bar that became my meeting point in Novi Sad. The people with whom I worked were relatively young people who usually define themselves through what they are not – they are not ‘turbo-folk’ people, as they view liking that kind of music as indicative of poor aesthetic (and moral) values; they are not urban peasants, as they do not identify with a recent rural past; they are not ultra-nationalists, as that suggests to them poor moral and political judgment; they are not the older people who the old days, as that implies misplaced nostalgia to them. These negative identifications make it much harder to grasp what they are. These people do not form a ‘community’ or a coherent group, and

³ It is a view shared among Serbian scholars that the release of the recording by Serbian female singer Lepa Lukić in 1964 named “[There are] two paths leading from the water spring” (“Od izvora dva putića”), which describes a young woman in a rustic village whose love is ruined when her lover decides to move to the city, marked the beginning of the market history of Yugoslav *novokomponovana narodna muzika* (literary newly-composed folk music—new folk music) (Vidić-Rasmussen, Ljerka. 1995. *From Source to Commodity. Newly-composed Folk Music of Yugoslavia. Popular Music 14(2): 241-56*; Vidić-Rasmussen, Ljerka. 2002. *Newly Composed Folk Music of Yugoslavia*. London and New York: Routledge). As Vidić-Rasmussen explains, “the title of the song is highly symbolic of the divergence of Yugoslav folk music into continuing *narodna muzika* (folk; literary ‘people’s music’) and an emerging pop stream” (Vidić-Rasmussen, *From Source to Commodity*, 241).

⁴ One of the first Serbian rock bands. They played soft rock and sympathized with 1960s hippy ideals.

⁵ Obojeni program (Color Television) is the Serbian rock band from Novi Sad. It is also recognized internationally; it has regular tours in Europe and was the first band from Socialist Yugoslavia to be presented on MTV. All the band members are from Novi Sad and the first letter from their records in an acronymic play, making the word NOVI SAD.

the Bourdiean perspective that connects music and class cannot fully grasp the complexity of their position.⁶

In Serbia, people's self-ascription of culture is not differentiated neatly by level of education or 'class' position and people are able to claim appropriation of culture even if they have very little education. Spasić in a comprehensive sociological study amongst a wide variety of social groups showed that the scope of levels of 'cultural achievement' was very broad and separated from its formal links with levels of education, becoming more like a category of 'cultivation.'⁷ Cultivation was proposed to be a question of morality and civilization that was claimed by people with all levels of education – from those who did not finish primary school to those with university qualifications.⁸ The people with whom I worked in Novi Sad come from different social backgrounds; some of them have high cultural and social capital, while some of them would not usually be considered as having such. Some of them were heads of local NGO organizations and successful artists while others were failed students who were selling smuggled goods in the open market. Still, they were claiming high cultural capital based on their music taste. Thus, it seemed that my informants were trying to argue that new folk music, epitomized, for example, by Lepa Lukić's songs, was not specifically "authentic" Serbian music – at least not more authentic than Serbian rock 'n' roll – but the change in state policy managed to 'persuade' people that there was something more 'authentic' in Serbian new folk music than in Serbian rock. Furthermore, for my informants, new folk music, publicly marginalized in the 1980s, was not "really a problem," as an informant put it, but the "real problem" was rather the "uncontrolled spread of turbo-folk" that was equally inauthentic, but more "dangerous."⁹ Turbo-folk and its various new subgenres is the most prominent popular music in Serbia today.¹⁰ In order to understand its current predicament, I will briefly present the history of its emergence, critique it, and place it in the global context.

Some scholars date the arrival of new folk music to the 1960s, a time when music that was marked as 'traditional' became fused with contemporary European pop music, mainly due to the development of the Serbian radio and

⁶ Bourdieu famously suggests that "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (Bourdieu, Pierre. 2002. *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London and New York: Routledge, 6). 'Proper music,' according to Bourdieu, most clearly "affirms one's 'class'" (Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 18), and "fulfills a social function of legitimizing social differences" (Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 7); Simić, Marina. 2014. *Kosmopolitiska čežnja. Etnografija srpskog postsocijalizma*. Beograd: Centar za studije kulture FPN.

⁷ Spasić, Ivana. 2006. *Disinkcija na domaći način. Diskursi statusnog diferenciranja u današnjoj Srbiji*, in *Nasleđe Pjera Burdijea. Pouke i nadahnuća*, edited by Nemanjić, Miloš and Ivana Spasić. Beograd: Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju. Zavod za proučavanje kulturnog razvitka, 137-71; Spasić, Ivana. 2013. *Kultura na delu: društvena transformacija Srbije iz burdijevske perspective*. Beograd: Fabrika knjiga.

⁸ See also: Jansen, Stef. 2005. *Antinacionalizam. Etnografija otpora u Beogradu i Zagrebu*. Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek; Simić, *Kosmopolitiska čežnja*.

⁹ The issue of authenticity is an especially tricky one. New folk music and turbo-folk are both considered inauthentic for several interrelated reasons. Both are considered to be a departure from the "real" traditional music and contain "inadequate" mixture of Western popular music and Turkish, Islamic and Middle Eastern music influences in case of turbo-folk (Archer, Rory. 2012. Assessing Turbofolk Controversies. *Popular Music between the Nation and the Balkans. Southeastern Europe* 36, 178–207.)

¹⁰ The term is ascribed to the Serbian rock musician Rambo Amadeus and it is meant to be degrading.

record industries.¹¹ This development to a certain extent parallels that of other countries where a similar fusion between what was understood as ‘traditional’ and ‘Western’ music started to become more prominent with the development of the record industry and the inclusion of ‘traditional music’ into a more global music industry.¹² As Flores, writing about the idea of ‘popular culture’ in the mid twentieth century argues, the idea of popular music shifted its meaning from the ideas of “traditional, collective creativity, commonly called “folklore,” to the domain of the mass media, the “mass culture” of technical reproduction and industrial commercialization”.¹³ The dominant idea was that “the mediated culture *for* the people came to eclipse and replace, in most theoretical assessments, the expressive culture *of* the people which had been the object of knowledge of popular culture and folklore studies in earlier generations”.¹⁴ A similar idea, that with the development of new folk music, ‘inauthentic mass culture’ replaced ‘traditional’ (and thus authentic popular music), is echoed in the writing of many Serbian intellectuals, who see it as ‘degradation of good taste’.¹⁵ Vidić-Rasmussen writes about the very term ‘newly composed’: it implies “novelty, temporariness, bricolage and kitsch” and it is considered to lack “historicity, and aesthetic/artistic attributes”.¹⁶

Turbo-folk emerged in 1990s as the most popular genre of new folk music. It is usually described as a synthesised type of dance music based on different Balkan rhythms. As Vidić-Rasmussen explains, “*turbo folk* represents kitsch of

¹¹ This is not to say that the above authors argue for technological determinism; they are merely presenting the history of ‘Serbian popular music.’ Surely, if people were not interested in folk, it never would have become mixed with contemporary music, as these things need people to be motivated in order to happen, and those motivations are unlikely to be related to technology alone; Čolović, Ivan. 1985. *Divlja književnost*. Beograd: Nolit; Vidić-Rasmussen, *Newly Composed Folk Music of Yugoslavia*.

¹² See e.g. Turino, T. 2000. *Nationalists, Cosmopolitans, and Popular Music of Zimbabwe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹³ Flores, Juan. 2000. *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 17.

¹⁴ Flores, *From Bomba to Hip Hop*, 17-18; see: Fabian, Johannes. 1998. *Moments of Freedom: Anthropology and Popular Culture*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

¹⁵ Buchanan describes a similar situation in Bulgaria: Buchanan, Donna. 2006. *Performing Democracy. Bulgarian Music and Musicians in Transition*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press; Stokes for Turkey: Stokes, Martin. 1992. *The Arabesk Debate. Music and Musicians in Modern Turkey*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; Archer for the Balkans more generally: Archer, *Assessing Turbofolk*.

There are also “appropriate” ways of performing “folk music.” One is “staged folklore” that was officially supported during socialism; the other is “etno music,” that similar to the world music genre remakes folk music as “high art,” especially through performance of traditional Bosnian folk songs, known as *sevdalinke* (*sevdah* is the word of Turkish origin meaning “passion” or “lovesickness”) - for example Halka or Amira Medunjanin, which in Serbia were largely free from the political intentions of some of their promoters and performers (see Kozorog, Miha and Alenka Bartulović. 2016. *Sevdah Celebrities Narrate sevdalinka*. Political (Self-) Contextualization of *sevdalinka* Performers in Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Traditiones* 45(1), 161-79). In that sense, for my informants turbo-folk was not world music as it is suggested by some of its defenders (for details see: Višnjiić, Jelena. 2010. *Rekonstrukcija identiteta kroz turbo folk u Srbiji*. Magistarski rad. Fakultet političkih nauka, Univerzitet u Beogradu), but an inappropriate and inauthentic mix of traditional and Western popular music.

¹⁶ Vidić-Rasmussen, *From Source to Commodity*, 242; see also: Golemovoić, Dimitrije. 1995. Da li je novokomponovana narodna muzika zaista narodna? *Glasnik Etnografskog Instituta SANU* 44, 185-189; and: Dragičević-Šešić, Milena. 1994. *Neofolk kultura. Publika i njene zvezde*. Sremski Karlovci / Novi Sad: Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stanojevića.

the first order [which] is one point of consensus among its large and varied group of detractors”.¹⁷ Turbo-folk music is connected with ‘the rural,’ but contrary to the ‘real’ traditional music that is perceived as being undoubtedly and exclusively rural, turbo-folk and its predecessor, new folk music, are seen as impure contaminations of rural and urban. As Gordy writes, “although the music continued to be identified by its performers, promoters, and fans as “folk,” folk elements fell quickly out of the mix, to be replaced by the accoutrements of MTV dance culture as understood by Serbia’s peasants and peasant-urbanities”.¹⁸ Similarly, Collin describes turbo-folk as a “naïve reconstruction of the West seen on TV, mixed with the leftovers of rural life and dragged through the synthesising sound machine”.¹⁹ One of my informants, a former engineering student from working class, semi-rural family who was doing various odd jobs in order to support himself, told me that the music of turbo-folk stars like Jelena Karleuša, was just “stealing from” Shakira, Britney Spears, Gwen Stefani, Jennifer Lopez, and other female pop artists. In other words, turbo-folk artists were borrowing from Western music without being able to adequately appropriate it and remake it as their own.

This ‘kitschy hybridity’ of turbo-folk²⁰ is also a moral commentary about its performers and listeners. It is based on specific moral and aesthetic reasoning that my informants shared with established intellectual critics of the genre.²¹ In that sense, my informants were conflating the meanings of turbo-folk *genre* and turbo-folk *scene* that are usually “overlapped in the actual analysis” anyway.²² As Grujić explains that genre “means a set of historically developed patterns (conventions) of depicting certain topics in verbal sense and arranging them in musical terms. *Scene* includes the meanings of the *genre*, but it also contains some broader meanings, that of conditions of contextualization of a particular genre, as well as audiences’ response to that genre”.²³ These two aspects are difficult to distinguish, as there is no genre without the scene,²⁴ and unwillingly they both collapsed in these critiques of turbo-folk. However, it should be kept in mind that this is usually the case with critique of popular music more generally. Following that idea, it can be said that this is the study of the turbo-folk anti-scene, the non-public of turbo-folk genre, and their fight for social position and recognition.

¹⁷ Vidić-Rasmussen, Ljerka. 2007. *Bosnian and Serbian Popular Music in the 1990s. Divergent Paths, Conflicting Meanings, and Shared Sentiments*, in: *Balkan Popular Culture and the Ottoman Ecumene*, edited by Buchanan, A. Donna. Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 61.

¹⁸ Gordy, D. Eric. 1999. *The Culture of Power in Serbia. Nationalism and Destruction of Alternatives*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 133.

¹⁹ Collin, Mathew. 2001. *This is Serbia calling. Rokenrol radio i beogradski pokret otpora*. Beograd: Samizdat Free B92, 71.

²⁰ In some other contexts the ‘hybridity’ of world music is a highly valued quality among its listeners (Stokes, Martin. 2004. Music and Global Order. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33, 47-72). For more sociological analysis of ‘omnivore’ taste of contemporary European elite, that combine elements of previously ‘low’ and ‘high’ culture, see also: Peterson, Richard A. and Roger M. Kern. 1996. Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore. *American Sociological Review* 61(5), 900-7.

²¹ In recent years there are other voices that prise turbo-folk as emancipatory or even subversive, but they did not get wider prominence in public discourse and their ideas did not resonate much with my informants. See: Dimitrijević, Olga. 2009. The Body of a Female Folk Singer. *Constructions of National Identities in Serbia after 2000. Genero* 13, 5-41.

²² Grujić, Marija. 2012. *Reading the Entertainment and Community Spirit in Serbia*. Beograd: Institut za književnost i umetnost, 22.

²³ Grujić, *Reading the Entertainment and Community Spirit in Serbia*, 22.

²⁴ Confer for example the debate in: Kozorog, Miha and Dragan Stanojević. 2013.

Turbo-folk anti-scene: the lines of dis-identifications

There are two main closely connected lines of new folk and turbo-folk critique. The first is based on the idea of “pure art” that turbo-folk artists are considered to be failing to produce and turbo-folk listeners unable to appreciate; and the second is the understanding of poor moral judgment of turbo-folk performers and listeners. This dubious morality is twofold: it represents inadequate sexuality of women that is seen as “pornographic” and it is also considered to be close to nationalist politics both by direct connections between some turbo-folk stars and Milošević’s regime, and by more indirect connections that my informants assume between turbo-folk scene and politics.

Although the term kitsch has largely disappeared from contemporary cultural analysis,²⁵ it still features strongly in the critique of so-called mass culture theorists and other theoreticians that follow the legacy of the Frankfurt school. I will not go into the details of these analyses, but will just briefly refer to Adorno, as some of his ideas resonate with the explanations given to me by my informants. In Adorno’s interpretation, popular music as kitsch is understood as a kind of ‘staple diet’ of clichés that produces a parody of catharsis.²⁶ Adorno’s central argument was that music, through the manner of its composition, affects consciousness and serves as a means of social management and control.²⁷ My informants quite frequently connected the turbo-folk genre with such control, claiming that its music itself together with its lyrics served to “dampen people” who were then unable to appreciate real art and proper culture. As such it was inevitably an unethical art.

It is almost universally accepted that the high arts (music included) of European modernism presuppose the “great divide” as it is called by Huyssen, between modernism and mass culture, with mass culture as the discursive “other” of modernism.²⁸ Huyssen and Franklin argue that this opposition is based on the assumptions that modernist (high) art has a different function from ‘traditional’ art.²⁹ As Binkley, for example, assumes, art in ‘traditional’ societies was embedded in daily life “in which uncertainties, existential questions and a sense of the freedom and creativity of human action are bracketed by reassuring traditions and habits of thought which penetrate the deepest crevices of the quotidian”.³⁰ The main idea expressed here is that ‘pre-modern’ societies had ‘organic solidarity’ (although none of the authors above quote or mention Durkheim) and had art embedded in their everyday life, while

²⁵ Binkley, Sam. 2000. Kitsch as a Repetitive System. A Problem for the Theory of Taste Hierarchy. *Journal of Material Culture* 5(2), 131-152.

²⁶ Adorno, Theodor. 1976. *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*. New York: Seabury Press.

²⁷ Adorno, Theodor. 1984. *Aesthetic Theory*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

²⁸ Huyssen, Andreas. 1988. *After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*.

Basingstoke: Macmillan; for music see also especially: Born, Georgina and David Hesmondhalgh. 2002. *Introduction. On Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, edited by Born, Georgina and David Hesmondhalgh. Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, 1-57; Franklin, Peter. 2000. *Modernism, Deception, and Musical Others: Los Angeles circa 1940*, in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, edited by Born, Georgina and David Hesmondhalgh. Berkeley: University of California Press, 143-62.

²⁹ Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*; Franklin, *Modernism, Deception and Musical Others*.

³⁰ Binkley, *Kitsch as Repetitive System*, 135.

in modern society this is not the case. Binkley further concludes that kitsch has a similar aesthetic function in contemporary society. Thus, folk art in its various manifestations is not considered pure art because it is neither produced nor used for (pure) aesthetic enjoyment. This line of reasoning further develops into two interconnected lines of critique: first, that turbo-folk is a music of peasant-urbanities, who do not appreciate music for its aesthetic quality and second, that it is a commercialized form of music that is kitsch. In that sense, for many critics of new and turbo-folk music, this kind of music is not ‘an art’ in Kantian terms of disinterested judgment, but an inadequate distortion of art (music) in the hands of peasant-urbanities, who are considered to be unable to adequately adopt either western popular music or official national elitist cultural model, which has resulted in the production of kitsch as an application of their ‘traditional’ way of life to new circumstances.³¹ Due to its ‘passivity,’ the rural population adopted only the parts of popular culture that “fit into archaic patterns of folk culture” that are also considered to be anti-individualistic, passive, and prone to consumerism.³² In the specific circumstances of Novi Sad, my informants ascribe these “archaic patterns” of culture to rural immigrants, refugees, and other “peasants” – from “colonists” (mostly Serbs from rural area of socialist Yugoslavia) to the numerous Serbian refugees that fled to Novi Sad after wars in Croatia and Bosnia more recently.³³ These newcomers are not necessarily seen as passive, but rather as aggressive, vigilant (although not particularly self-consciousness) supporters and promoters of turbo-folk. Not only is their music choice considered to be kitsch, but it is also considered to be morally questionable. This morality includes not only the supposed nationalism of turbo-folk genre and scene, but the sexual morality of their female performers and listeners.

Svetlana Boym in her study of Russia in the 1990s, explains that kitsch was not merely bad art, “but also an unethical act, an act of mass manipulation.”³⁴ This Adornian idea of art is further connected with banality, lack of spirituality and sexual obscenity (*poshlost*).³⁵ There is no single word in Serbian that would encompass all of the above meanings (Russian ‘*poshlost*’ is usually translated to Serbian/Croatian as banalnost, trivijalnost, vulgarnost), but they are usually intermingled in Serbian usage. Oskar³⁶, a bass guitar player for two famous Serbian punk-rock bands in the late 1980s and 1990s, told me in one of numerous conversations – some of which I recorded, as he greatly enjoyed talking to my recorder – about “that primitivism,” this time in particular while we were having an early afternoon coffee in front of his tattoo studio:

“In the nineties, in the nineties when the war started, when that Serbian madness started, that worst fall (*posrtanje*), that was when *that* started. And

³¹ For critique of this position confer: Nenić, Iva. 2009. Roze kiburzi i /de/centrirane ideološke mašine. Preobražaji muzičke culture (turbo) folka. *Genero* 13, 63-80.

³² Dragičević-Šešić, *Neofolk kultura*, 126.

³³ For an analysis see: Simić, Marina. 2010. Locating Cosmopolitanism. Practicing Popular Culture in Post-socialist Serbia. *Der Donauraum* 50(3-4): 345-63.

³⁴ Boym, Svetlana. 1994. *Common Places. Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 15.

³⁵ Boym, *Common Places*, 15.

³⁶ All names of my informants are pseudonyms.

then from Palma [one of the first private, commercial TV stations] to Pink³⁷, of course, look, every day the whole day on Palma there were folksy songs, but not only folksy songs, but trash, trash, trash, trash and at 2 in the morning porno movies, man, to end it as it started, and you see what that is, I mean, you know, it was not a kind of porno, like, you know, a cultural one, but it was, I don't know how to describe that to you, it was almost animal sex, fuck it, the worst possible fucking (*trpanje*), um, B, C porno production, you know, home video, some idiots fucking each other, terrible, terrible, terrible, no law, no law, no censorship, just let it go, just poisoning the masses [...]"

This connection between turbo-folk and women's inadequate sexuality was noted in academic literature on turbo-folk that describes its genre and scene as reproducing a patriarchal model of sexuality and society.³⁸ For my informants this "inadequate sexuality" was constructed as "dubious morality" and quite literally inscribed to the body of the town itself. Thus, some of my informants told me that the small area between the newly built Dalton building and Futoška Pijaca that boasts many turbo-folk playing bars, pizza restaurants, and kebab (*ćevap*) houses, is a disgrace to Novi Sad. While I was there, at night it was full of dressed-up young people with loud music coming from the stereos – I could have easily recognized Ceca, Seka Aleksić, and other major turbo-folk stars. There were men resembling *Dizelaši* from the 1990s (the term is coined from fashion brand Diesel, understood to be their favourite shop) – young men who prefer to listen to turbo-folk and are engaged in mafia business (usually on a smaller scale) that secures them money for expensive, but tasteless, clothes (typically jogging trousers, or wide jeans and trainers with a top tucked into the bottoms) and jewellery. They were often accompanied by young women in high heels and extensive makeup, known as 'sponsor-seekers' (*sponzoruše*). Many of my informants were especially angry about these young women, *sponzoruše*. I was told that Spens, an area between the town centre and University campus near the *Spens* sport complex and one of the first shopping centres in Novi Sad, was especially well-known for its bars visited by *Dizelaši*; it is thus called "Thong Valley" (*Dolina tangi*; in Belgrade a similar area is called *Silicon Valley*, alluding to the silicon used in plastic surgeries). I heard several times that, "a blond woman driving a jeep – that means a whore." When I complained about these blunt assertions, I was usually met with incomprehension. I quickly learned that in order to be a rich and successful woman, you need to belong to the 'silicon culture,' as one of my informants called it, of newcomers, turbo-folk, and poor taste more generally.

Jansen explained that the "prototype of a newcomer from the village was always a man; although there were comments about excessive makeup, in this urban Orientalism the women who came from villages were mostly just an addition that confirmed the backwardness of gender relations in rural areas".³⁹ This fits well with the stereotypes of the new rich as tasteless primitives with certain elements of style, such as mobile phones, as a sure marker of their

³⁷ Pink refers to a private but close to the state regime private TV and radio station that plays popular music and supported Milošević, as well as the current government.

³⁸ Confer e.g. Kronja, Ivana. 2001. *Smrtonosni sjaj. Masovna psihologija i estetika turbo-folka*. Beograd: Tehnokratija.

³⁹ Jansen, *Antinacionalizam*, 125.

inappropriate cultural capital.⁴⁰ New rich women connected with turbo-folk were also of great concern for my informants. They were connected with turbo-folk singers who combined sexually illicit behavior with inappropriate sexual image promoted through their music.

Female singers dominate turbo-folk, while before the 1990s there were plenty of male singers, although the most famous new folk star from the 1980s was a female singer Lepa Brena, with whom the new commercialized era of new folk music begins. At the beginning of the development of the new folk music in the 1960s, female singers were quite rare and 'being a singer' was generally seen as an inappropriate profession for a woman. In that time, the record industry of new folk music was at its very beginning and most of the singers were performing in taverns - places of male entertainment. Consequently, female singers were regarded as a kind of prostitute.⁴¹ There are still many female new folk singers that perform in taverns in Serbia and neighbouring countries; their social status is similar to that of the prostitutes – very low. A female informant from a working-class background told me that her father had told her that he would kill her if she dared to touch a microphone (to become a singer).

New folk music reinforced the low status of women performing in *kafanas* (taverns), and similar ideas became attached to female turbo-folk singers, many of whom first started singing in taverns and at weddings. As Dimitrijević explains "public space of *kafana* is coded as male space, the privileged space of homosociality" in which women like *kafana* singers bring an erotic component central to the bond between male rivals, which serves as "the force that strengthens patriarchal society."⁴² However, my informants' dissatisfaction with the open sexuality of turbo-folk stars does not stem from the worries about the perpetuation of patriarchal norms. The label "tavern singer" (*kafanska pevačica – pevaljka*) remained the main insult 'to the honour' of a female singer; the term is still in use as a derogatory term for turbo-folk stars. A friend of mine, talking to me about a wedding he attended, told me that he first thought that the female singer who was singing on the occasion was just a "tavern singer." However, when he asked her to sing some of the *sevdalinke*, she performed them very well. This assured him that the singer was something like Esma, a world-music singer, and he concluded that she only sang at weddings in order to earn money.⁴³ The idea that folk singers have to work hard and

⁴⁰ Jansen, *Antinacionalizam*.

⁴¹ Silverman (2003) describes the case of the famous Macedonian Gypsy female new folk singer Esma Redžepova whose father allowed her to pursue her music career only when he was convinced by her future husband, an accordionist and folk music arranger from Radio Skopje, that he would "make her an artist" and never allow her to sing in *kafana* [taverns]. Indeed, she is today recognized as a world music singer and was invited to sing at Novi Sad's Exit festival on the main stage; Silverman, Carol. 2003. *The Gender of the Profession. Music, Dance, and Reputation among Balkan Muslim Rom Women*, in *Music and Gender: Perspectives from the Mediterranean*, edited by Magrini, Tullia. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 135; see also: Vidić-Rasmussen, *From Source to Commodity*; Dimitrijević, *The Body of a Female Folk Singer*.

⁴² Dimitrijević, *The Body of a Female Folk Singer*, 31.

⁴³ Generally weddings were understood as occasions at which someone could clearly manifest his/her cultural capital, in this case usually called "cultural level" (*kulturni nivo*). Thus, I heard several times that certain weddings were 'cultured,' while others were more 'peasant-like.' Thus, a member of an ethno band, with whom I spent some time, told me that they were asked to sing at a "cultured wedding," but refused, as they considered their music to be artistic and inappropriate for "carousing."

unwillingly perform at all kind of places and circumstances is part of a common *per aspera ad astra* narrative of many new and turbo-folk female stars like Lepa Brena, Seka Aleksić, Slavica Ćukteraš, Tanja Savić, and Radmila Manjlović.⁴⁴ They may embody dreams of social upward mobility fostered by some from their (female) audience (ibid), but for my informants their upward mobility was seen as social climbing typical of new rich. This was of great concern for many of my informants. I recall one evening in Cuba Libre after a night out in Bus, a bar near Spens that was hosting a Capoeira dance competition but was itself of dubious reputation among my informants, the following conversation about “people in Novi Sad” and their music preference:

Jovana (Spanish language teacher): “That’s because most people are in turbo-folk mood. [...] And you see what has been done in the town: Thongs’ Valley near Spens, here you also have a few café-houses (*kafići*)⁴⁵ in the town centre, Cyrillic is booming, and that’s it.”

Marko (IT engineer): “You should have seen those guys who came here when I went out [on Saturday night]. Some guys in leather jackets with huge necks [he showed how big the radiuses of their necks were] and some blond girls.”

Me: “I thought this was an urban place.”⁴⁶

Jovana: “Yes, but during the weekend here, I mean, you can’t, all the places are the same at the weekend. You know, last night, like it was in Bus, or Piping [club in Laze Telečkog Street that plays “commercial hip-hop”], during the weekend every place turned into that.”

Apart from usual racial commentary about newcomers and (turbo-) folk,⁴⁷ Jovana and Marko made a clear connection between turbo-folk and Serbian nationalism epitomized in the term “Cyrillic,” the official Serbian script.⁴⁸ In that sense, turbo-folk was again an inappropriate art – this time because it was connected with nationalism. It is not unusual that women’s bodies and

Similarly, music related to turbo-folk is called ‘wedding-music’ in Hungary (Lange, R. B. 1996. *Lakodalmas Rock and the Rejection of Popular Culture in Postsocialist Hungary*, in *Retuning Culture: Musical Changes in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Slobin, Mark. Durham / London: Duke University Press, 76-91) and Bulgaria (Rice, Timothy. 1996. *The Dialectic of Economics and Aesthetics in Bulgarian Music*, in *Retuning Culture. Musical Changes in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Slobin, Mark. Durham / London: Duke University Press, 176-99).

⁴⁴ Dimitrijević, The Body of a Female Folk Singer; Hofman, Ana. 2015. Music (as) Labour. Professional Musicianship, Affective Labour and Gender in Socialist Yugoslavia. *Ethnomusicology Forum* 24(1), 28-50.

⁴⁵ There is clear difference between *kafana* (tavern) and *kafić* (coffee house). The former is traditional place for socializing and entertaining and they are usually conceded with rural or semi-rural areas, while the latter is considered to be ‘the modern one’ and they are found in the urban settings, but the music played in them can be the same.

⁴⁶ I was referring to the usual connections between ‘urbanity’ and Western popular music, see: Simić, *Kosmopolitska čežnja*.

⁴⁷ See: Simić, *Kosmopolitska čežnja*.

⁴⁸ Serbian can be written both in Cyrillic and Latin script and people’s preferences are mostly completely random. Scripts used to be completely interchangeable and Jansen reports that when he asked people to write something down and then asked them which script they used, usually they could not answer the question (Jansen, *Antinacionalizam*). In the 1990s, the question of the script became important for building a Serbian national identity and differentiating between the Croatian/Bosnian language, which can be written only in Latin, and Serbian, which should be written only in Cyrillic.

sexuality serve both as sources for nationalist and anti-nationalist reconciliation.⁴⁹ For my informants there was no room for the camp of turbo-folk, or gender transgression of some of the turbo-folk stars that may open cracks in the patriarchal order.⁵⁰ In that sense my informants were consistently “modernist,” for them there were no “feminine and masculine arts” (as one of my informants told me complaining about women’s studies), only “pure” faceless aesthetics that should also be kept separately from politics.

The issue of politics of music became the critical focal point of many recent critiques of Serbian popular music and of turbo-folk in particular. Specific understanding of art (and music as art) in a Kantian discourse of “universal aesthetics” has long been the founding stone of European modernist art theory. Although challenged by contemporary art critique, in the classical art theory art should be separated from politics. This ideology of art has been transferred in the usual critical understanding of socialist art. Thus, some authors argue that not only has socialist art been highly politicized, but that “in the everyday, especially in the highly politicized and semioticized Soviet everyday, the aesthetic and the ethical are indistinguishable in the ordinary micropractices”.⁵¹ Similarly, Frigyesi writes that “in Hungary there had never been “free” and “noncommitted” art in the way it exists, for instance, in the United States.”⁵² She further argues that this was not a question of official ideology, although “the political establishment was always ready to exploit art for its own purposes”,⁵³ concluding that “as much as certain intellectuals would like to see what they regard as a healthy separation of culture and politics, such separation has not yet happened in Hungary and there is no sign that it will occur in the near future”.⁵⁴ Silverman, writing about Bulgarian music, asks rhetorically “what could be more apolitical than Bulgarian folk dance?” and answers in some length that “virtually all cultural phenomena in Bulgaria are in some way affected by politics.”⁵⁵ More specifically, folklore, with its strong ties to the past, plus its potential for manipulating the national consciousness, is indeed an important arena for government involvement”.⁵⁶ Although I agree with Silverman that ‘folk dance’ was part of the state political project in socialist Yugoslavia, as it was in Bulgaria, both statements are based on the idea that in socialism, everyday life – as well as ‘culture’ and art – was highly controlled by the state, making everyday life highly political. It seems to me that these arguments reify the socialist state and imply that everyday life in ‘capitalism’ is not political (although I agree that it might be less *explicitly* political).⁵⁷ I am more inclined to think that art is everywhere both aesthetically

⁴⁹ See: Jansen, Stef. 2010. Of Wolves and Men. Postwar Reconciliation and the Gender of International Encounters. *Focaal - Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 57, 33–49.

⁵⁰ Dimitrijević, The Body of a Female Folk Singer; Nenić, *Roze kiborzi i /de/centrirane ideološke mašine..*

⁵¹ Boym, *Common Places*, 158.

⁵² Frigyesi, Judit. 1996. *The Aesthetic of the Hungarian Revival Movement*, in *Retuning Culture. Musical Changes in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Slobin, Mark. Durham / London: Duke University Press, 57.

⁵³ Frigyesi, *The Aesthetic of the Hungarian Revival Movement*, 57.

⁵⁴ Frigyesi, *The Aesthetic of the Hungarian Revival Movement*, 58.

⁵⁵ Silverman, Carol. 1983. The Politics of Folklore in Bulgaria. *Anthropological Quarterly* 56(2): 55-61.

⁵⁶ Silverman, *The Politics of Folklore in Bulgaria*, 55.

⁵⁷ Confer the critique by Yurchak: Yurchak, Alexei. 2006. *Everything was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 11-14.

and ethically, and that this is not limited to the socialist period. Thus, at the beginning of the war in Croatia new folk music became an important element in building the new identity of the nation states. Similar was the case in Serbia. Gordy argues that the Serbian regime used new folk music in order to promote its nationalistic aims.⁵⁸ However, for most folk critiques, it is not only that there was folk music that was directly related to nationalist politics (which was actually very rarely the case), but more so that *estrada*, a mainstream music show business, was politically dubious on its own regardless of the particular political engagement of the artists.⁵⁹ More important than the direct engagement with politics was national, parochial outlook attached to folk generally and turbo-folk particularly that made rock not only global, but universal. Thus, on one occasion when I was sitting with two female friends in Martha's Pub on Laze Telečkog Street having a quick drink, I mentioned that the night before I had visited a party in Latino Bare near Spens that was a part of the "Study Better!" campaign by Exit festival that promoted implementation of the EU Bologna Agreement in Serbian universities. Commenting on that, a friend of mine, an editor at local TV station who later immigrated to USA together with her husband (who was also an occasional DJ) said that Exit was too "politicized" and that "the main story should be about music, and music is something that connects people, people go there because of good music that does not know any borders." I asked if music in general connects people, and whether that applied to turbo-folk as well, as I had recently seen people of mixed backgrounds (both Bosniaks and Serbs) in a wedding I attended in Sarajevo, dancing to turbo-folk from Serbia and Bosnia alike. She replied, "no, only good music. You know, primitivism is primitivism, they do not understand English, and so they have to listen to something they understand." This means that taste (like language) can be learned and my informants certainly considered it to be the case. However, in order for proper taste to be developed, they believed that state has to have firm cultural politics that support proper art. My informants believed that the current Serbian state lacked not only the means and will to promote proper music and art more generally, but also that its general cultural scene was helplessly commercialized in an uncanny connection of business and politics. This left my informants with very little room for self-expression and they were using various social strategies for carving out that space. Some of them were applying for various art and culture related grants through NGOs, while others like Nikola, who was working at various odd jobs after leaving his studies, still dreamt of a "total change of cultural scene in Serbia." The last time we met he told me that he was preparing for "a movement," a "kind of revolution," whose outline is not clear yet but that will include various events, like poetry and literary evenings, concerts and the like under the slogans "Stamp out the pink stain" and "Don't go where everyone else goes" (*Kud svi, tu nemoj i ti*). A few years later it seems that the revolution is still on hold, but that lines of dis-identification remain unchanged.

⁵⁸ Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia*.

⁵⁹ It is true that many turbo-folk stars were close to the Milošević's regime, but there were also rock musicians who were close to the nationalist politics, although not necessarily those of Slobodan Milošević.

Conclusion

Krims writes that “there is one commonality between many cultural studies works (like John Fiske, Ian Chambers and Lisa Lewis) and that of Adorno – that is that both “desire to locate liberatory force in expressive culture.”⁶⁰ This liberation is sometimes perceived quite literally as political liberation, while sometimes is understood in a more subtle way as “liberation of spirit.” For the people with whom I worked in Novi Sad, from various backgrounds and social positions, these liberatory forces are placed in various genres of non-turbo folk music that are considered to epitomize some kind of “trashy modernity” – an inappropriate local appropriation of modernity based on poor taste (from food, like *pljeskavice* to Jelena Karleuša’s grotesque appropriation of Shakira). Music is seen as “universal language” based on universal aesthetic criteria that are considered unreachable in turbo-folk genre. Various other types of music are able to include good and bad pieces, but not turbo-folk. New folk and turbo-folk music is thus seen as performing certain social roles and is appropriate for sociological analysis that is different from aesthetic analysis of art.⁶¹ In those analyses, new folk music and turbo-folk are not ‘an art’ in Kantian terms of disinterested judgment, but an inadequate distortion of art (music) in the hands of those who are considered to be unable to adequately adopt either western popular music or an official national elitist cultural model, which result in the production of kitsch. In that sense, turbo-folk and other types of new folk music remain one of the most important dis-identification strategies among the people with whom I worked. This “anti-folk” scene encompasses people from various backgrounds that belong to different social strata, but whose identification strategies are based on similar aesthetic exclusion. In that sense, turbo-folk remains one of the most important aesthetic others in contemporary Serbia.

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⁶⁰ Krims, Adam. 2007. *Music and Urban Geography*. New York / London: Routledge.

⁶¹ Čolović, *Divlja književnost*.

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