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Hana Selena Sokolović

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BACHELOR'S THESIS

THE ROLE OF HUMOUR IN BOSNIAN
CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICES

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**ROLE HUMORU V SOUČASNÉM BOSENSKÉM
UMĚNÍ**

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Abstract

Humour is often considered a means of self preservation. What is the position of humour in contemporary Bosnian art? The aim of this thesis is to show different approaches to humour, and how they can be used as an artistic tool to combat some of the ongoing problematics of the post- conflict society of Bosnia (Bosnia and Herzegovina). Humour has been a big part of Bosnian culture throughout its complicated and violent past, and continues to be a coping mechanism as well as a cultural strategy that helps address the problems of politics, ethnicity and identity and daily life. I will examine different artworks from Bosnian artists that deal with such social problematics and use humour in their work both explicitly and implicitly. From local to global, through the example of Bosnia, I will try to emphasise certain aspects, and their potential benefits, of the specificity of humour in visual contemporary artworks.

Abstrakt

Humor je často považován za nástroj sebezáchovy. Jaké má humor postavení v současném bosenském umění? Cílem této práce je představit odlišné přístupy k humoru a poukázat na to, jak tyto mohou být využity jakožto prostředek, jímž může umění vzdorovat přetrvávajícím post-konfliktním problémům Bosny (Bosny a Hercegoviny). V průběhu komplikované a násilné minulosti byl humor důležitou součástí bosenské kultury a dodnes je důležitým mechanismem a kulturní strategií vyrovnávání se s každodenními problémy politického, etnického rázu a identity. Práce prozkoumává umělecká díla vybraných bosenských umělců, která problematizují sociální témata a využívají explicitně či implicitně prvků humoru. Práce se přitom snaží zdůraznit přínos a specifickou humoru v současném bosenském vizuálním umění.

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1. Introduction

The focus of this thesis is to examine the position of humour through the examples of contemporary artworks by artists from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Each region of the world has its own peculiarity in the interpretation of reality. As a person of mixed nationality (Serb-Bosniak), I have experienced that the interpretation of reality in Bosnia contains something extraordinarily interesting, which is reflected to a great extent in the social use of humour, and distinguishes Bosnia from its neighbouring countries. What influences this interpretation of reality are the circumstances of the country's political history, its national identity and its current living conditions, which are of a highly complex nature. These are issues that scholars have dealt with extensively in terms of identity in post-war societies, post-war trauma, memory studies, etc. They represent an entrenched reality that contemporary Bosnians seek to confront, combat, and deconstruct in many ways and with many tools, among which humour often plays a particularly interesting role, making Bosnia an interesting case to study both art and humour.

The topic of humour is mostly mentioned by scholars in the more historical social context, but has not been given enough attention in terms of contemporary art practices and contemporary Bosnian artistic interpretation of reality. The first chapter will briefly introduce the reader to the question of what humour is, what possible purpose it can serve, its possible benefits (individual and social), and will examine some of the existing theories of humour in psychology and philosophy. The second chapter will look at the presence of humour using examples from the recent history of the war in Bosnia. It will serve as a basis for the reader to become familiar with the meaning of humour in the Bosnian society, in order to understand the context of humour in the artworks that will be analysed in the following chapters.

2. On humour

The phenomenon of humour has been subject of many different theories in fields of psychology, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, literature and art. There are plenty of studies on how we perceive and interpret humour, and numerous typologies and concepts about its viable social functions. Generally speaking, we think of humour as something funny that provokes laughter, positive emotions of amusement as the outcome. It is important to note, both for the purpose of this chapter, and for what I will later on be trying to explain, that humour is by all means a very broad topic. It would be impossible to universalise it and analyse it as a whole. In my opinion, each occurrence of humour should be looked at rather individually. A lot of academic literature already exists on each one of humour's numerous genres, sub-genres, forms, functions and purposes. I will be mentioning some of them in this chapter, however I will not necessarily be explaining them individually.

Solely in art does humour have so many roles, for example comedy, existing in theatre, television, movies, radio, stand-up, literature or any other medium with a humorous intention. Comedy is a very open genre, and it is often met and combined together with other genres, making it in a way a form of expression with endless possibilities. Some genres of comedy can be: parody, satire, anecdotal comedy, insult comedy, mockumentary, observational comedy, black comedy (or black humour), burlesque, character comedy, physical comedy, etc. Also, among the forms by which humour can be expressed are ridicule, irony, sarcasm, absurdity, cynicism, mockery, exaggeration, and wit.

In visual art, humour dates back to the European avant-garde Dadaism movement, in reaction to the violence of first World War, artists then rebelled against nationalist and colonialist ideologies by rejecting logic and social conventions. They embraced chaos, irrationality and absurdity through contemptuous ridicule. Soon after Dadaism, in a similar manner rose the Surrealism movement, with the aim to explore the unconscious mind and the world of dreams often using the "element of surprise" in visual artworks. In Contemporary Art as well as in Street Art, and Comics, dark humour and irony often serve as important tools for criticising the socio-political problems our modern world is faced with.

To be able to better define some of the characteristics of humour in visual art and how they can serve both the artist and the spectator, I would like to observe

few philosophy and psychology based theories that sought into the depths of humour, as such. Some of the most common theories based on psychological and philosophical observations of humour are: The superiority theory, the relief theory and the incongruity theory. Most occurrences of humour, as well as the examples I will be showing in this thesis, can be described by more than just one of the theories, which can often be juxtaposed and interlinked, when observing an artwork.

In the relief theory, humour expressed by laughter is seen as a homeostatic mechanism that physically relieves our body and mind from negative energy. In his book *Humour*, Terry Eagleton (2019) refers to Victorian philosopher Herbert Spencer's claim that "*mirth is caused by a gush of agreeable feeling which follows the cessation of unpleasant mental strain*" (Eagleton 2019: 10). He calls on Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* and his so called 'economics on humour' where jokes are seen as smacks on the superego, that allow us to release psychic energy that we invest in maintaining socially essential inhibitions, by relaxing our repressions when joking and laughing. Relief can therefore be physical, psychological, or both at the same time. It can also be reciprocal, felt by the person that is being humorous, and by the person that is laughing. Relief does not necessarily have to happen through laughter, it can also be a silent, intellectual type of relief. Terry Eagleton explains that laughter conveys a range of emotional attitudes such as being joyous, sarcastic, sly, raucous, genial, wicked, derisive, dismissive, nervous, cynical, knowing, smug, lascivious, embarrassed, hysterical, sympathetic, skittish, shocked, aggressive, relieved. These forms of laughter together with purely 'social laughter' or 'signs of high spirits' do not have to express amusement, and have little or nothing to do with humour. I think this is particularly important for visual artworks because they obviously don't always include a linguistic joke, and they also often exclude the physical presence of the person or artist insinuating humour. The relief and superiority theory are more focused on the mechanisms accompanying the humorous reaction, rather than defining the actual core of what we laugh at.

Superiority theory is mostly linked to ridicule, as its name suggests the emotional feeling of superiority towards the subject we are laughing at. However, this theory is not always a mere action of mockery towards the inferior subject, it can be a form of solidarity or an attempt to accept our own imperfections, that we have trouble accepting due to our fear of social criticism, for example. In this sense, our fear of social criticism can be linked with Freud's theory of relieving

ourselves of those same socially imposed inhibitions, and this can relate to superiority not being a negative feeling but rather a positive one, which can allow us to ascend our somewhat suppressed beliefs or feelings, more easily with the presence of humour. In contrast to the superiority and relief theory, the incongruity theory gives focus on the object of humour, and is the most popular one of all three theories.

"On this view, humour springs from a clash of incongruous aspects – a sudden shift of perspective, an unexpected slippage of meaning, an arresting dissonance or discrepancy, a momentary defamiliarising of the familiar and so on. As a temporary 'derailment of sense', it involves the disruption of orderly thought processes or the violation of laws or conventions." (Eagleton 2019: 67)

We laugh at something in a situation when the outcome differs from our expectations, when something is surprising or out of place.

"...while Immanuel Kant speaks of laughter in his Critique of Judgment as 'an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing.'" (Ibid.: 10)

Thus combining the relief theory with the concept of incongruity. Here 'Nothing' can be 'anything' as long as it refutes our primary presumption. We can also find amusement in incongruities with which we morally disagree, or which we find suspicious, insubstantial or dubious. On the other hand, our amusement in incongruities can sometimes be outbalanced by feelings of fear, disgust or pity, same as the fact that not all incongruities or 'contradictions' are necessarily funny, they can be disturbing or alarming. With this theory it can be said that it is based on the discrepancy between real things and abstract ideas, which in a manner can be seen as an aestheticization of real things. I will come back to this thought later on in the thesis when I will be writing about a specific visual artwork that suits this point of view.

In the social context, Terry Eagleton suggests that comedy can have "...a direct social utility, with its ability to repair misfortune, resolve conflicts, restore a degree of order and equipoise to a society pitched temporarily into disarray." (Ibid.:42). I find this notion to be particularly compelling because it implicates the potential of humour in terms of conveying social critique. Can humour play a role in addressing difficult political circumstances, can humour be political? – Humorous critiques through visual artworks may be direct, or subtle, but often heavily rely on the context. It's similar to the fact that linguistic jokes obviously rely on the understanding of the language in which the joke is being told.

Although some types of humour do not demand from us to be familiar with its context in order to find it funny, but to be able to spot the critique hiding underneath it often demands us having a bit more background knowledge about it. In the next chapter, I will bring the reader closer to the role that humour has in the Bosnian society, to give a base for the context of humour in the artworks.

3. Humour in Bosnia

In order to examine humour in specific art practices, it is important to first look at it from its geographical and historical perspective. Before I move on to Bosnia, I will briefly mention how humour played a big part in the culture of former Yugoslavia. As it was such a multinational state (Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia, Slovenia) people from all republics used humour as a way of mutual stereotyping, as well a means of social bonding. Popular culture was full of comedy and a lot of iconic movies and tv-shows from the time maintained their value and popularity nationwide even after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Jokes that use ethnicity and stereotypes around it as major joking matters continue to be used even today. Željko Pavić describes that an example of a positive stereotype from Serbs and Croats towards Bosnian's would be characterised as something like "*humour and life without stress*" (Pavić 2020:113). In terms of negative self-stereotyping, Bosnians would often make jokes in which they end up being primitive or stupid. Jokes can serve to unify, divide, ethnic, religious and national identities. They can also serve as boundary-builders between cultural identities. The identities of ex-Yugoslavian countries were so heavily perpetuated and destabilised by their complicated historical circumstances (their disintegration and the violent war that followed), which resulted in sudden needs for separate re-establishments of identities between the disunited, suddenly conflicted nations. The humour of that time is an interesting example of positive stereotyping, as well as for negative self- stereotyping, as the jokes around stereotypes often marginalised already socially marginalised groups. Yugoslavian people knew how to laugh at themselves and others around them, they built their social affiliations, ideas and beliefs with the help of humorous narratives and jokes, and as their identities changed, so did the humour. Srdjan Vučetić notes:

"Through jokes, ideas and beliefs about the self and others can be transmitted to the lives of ordinary people. Complex social and political relationships can turn into simple and crude us-versus-them stories." (Vučetić 2004: 25)

Here he mentions social jokes that are based on stereotypes and differences such as 'us-versus-them' or 'nation-versus-nation', jokes that narrate specific ideas or myths around specific identities. If these stereotypes were build upon jokes that relied on a specific kind of humour, so to say 'typical Bosnian humour' could these same stereotypes possibly be subverted, opposed or broken, with another kind of 'Bosnian humour'? (Ibid.)

There is a significant lack of thorough academic research on the topic of humour in ex-Yugoslav countries and in Bosnian culture particularly, probably because both identity and humour have a highly fortuitous and pliable nature. Another possible reason for this is the fact that Bosnia never had a national majority, and is still the most multicultural and multi- ethnical country of all ex Yugoslav countries, which slightly complicates the ways of setting research upon just one national identity. In regards to Bosnian humour, anyone from the region, who is familiar with Bosnian culture, or familiar with popular culture of Yugoslavia, would probably stand out it's humour as the most prominent one. Srdjan Vucetic wrote an important article *Identity is a joking matter: Intergroup Humour in Bosnia* where he examined the relationship of the so called "typical Bosnian jokes" with self-identification and the establishment of self towards social or political groups. He explained how joking relationships are social relations on the basis of which we construct social identities. The idea of "the Bosnian identity" portrayed in these jokes was mostly constructed by Bosnians themselves, the jokes were often seen as self-deprecating or used elements of self-mockery and irony in a way which has positively marked Bosnians with "*a capacity for self-reflection about their own identity*". (Ibid.:19)

Humour continued to be ubiquitous in everyday lives of Bosnians both during the siege and after the war. An example that has personally left a strong impression on me are the stories of Karim Zaimovic in *The Secret of Raspberry Jam* (Original Title: *Tajna Dzema od Malina*)(1997). He is considered to be one of the most talented writers from the wartime in ex- Yugoslav territory. During the siege he worked on radio ZID where he prepared and hosted a show called *Josif and his brothers* (1993-94). The collection of stories that he narrated were posthumously published in 1997 as a part of the above-mentioned book. The stories are ironic versions of conspiracy theories of the time, in which 'Raspberry Jam' becomes a sacred thing that holds the secret for the salvation of humanity. The stories blurred the lines between fiction and reality, often combining actual historical events with fictional ones such as huge monstrous genetically engineered rats invading the undergrounds of Sarajevo. The present reality of the war was being coloured with science fiction stories about fictional beings, shattering the image that wartime in Sarajevo was only a wartime and nothing more. Karim was 24 years old when he became a victim of a grenade falling on the building of the radio, from whose injuries he tragically passed away. In his last unfinished story, he predicted his own death. Listening to that show was an unforgettable war experience for many people, as they impatiently waited to hear Karim's voice

break the silence of the war and speak of a world of fiction, the occult, the absurd and the tragi-comic. Karim's stories are examples of unique storytelling with a presence of absurdity and irony. Their content is not primarily funny or satirical, but its unique personal textual syncretism, presents us with an imaginatively heartening talent, with remarkable scintillating wit. His stories remain as the most astounding and deeply tragical narratives of the profiling of war horror, also shedding light on the way how absurd events such as the war were being confronted with artistic expressions using forms of absurd in them.

In her article on memory studies *Monument to the international community, from the grateful citizens of Sarajevo: Dark humour as counter-memory in post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina* (2015) Anna Sheftel remarked this connection through her conversations about the war with Bosnian people. She pointed out the opinion shared by many Bosnians:

"What does it mean, after a war, a genocide, and over 100,000 casualties; after a country is completely divided and restructured upon ethnic lines; after over a decade of an experiment in democracy that remains shaky and uncertain; to still not know what the war, this thing that unleashed all this instability, was about? Such a confusion can only be described as absurd. " (Sheftel 2015: 154)

She then argues that the logical conclusion was to emphasize the absurdity and ridiculousness with humour to point out on the real seriousness of 'the actual absurdity of the war' she quotes Freud's explanation:

"nonsense humour consists in advancing something apparently absurd or nonsensical which, however, discloses sense that serves to illustrate and represent some other actual absurdity and nonsense" (Ibid.)

Another impressionable and important kind of counter-narrative during the wartime was also dark humour. Even though dark humour is by far the most noticeable and reoccurring in jokes, I will retell the example of an insert from television channel FIVA TV, filmed in 1993 during the siege in Dobrinja, a neighbourhood in the western outskirts of Sarajevo. The video is called *Microphone Bomb* (original title: *Mikrofon Bomba*) and it shows a man standing on a busy unpaved road in Dobrinja, he says that he will give his interlocutors a bomb instead of a microphone and see their reactions. As the first person approaches, a woman, obviously in a rush, he asks her:

Him: Hello, do you often cross this bridge?

Her: No

Him: Are you afraid of the shooting?

Her: I don't think about it anymore

Him: Please take a hold of the microphone, how many times have you crossed this bridge?

Her: About 20 times, I don't know, I don't count anymore

Him: What are you more afraid of, snipers or grenades?

Her: Snipers.

Him: Are you afraid of bombs?

Her: Bombs? I don't think about it, we've all become a bit casual to all this!

Him: Have you ever held a bomb in your hand?

Her: No

An interesting linguistic note about the word I translated as 'casual': in Bosnian, she uses the word 'oguglati', an invented (untranslatable) slang word that describes one's state of becoming immune to the misfortunes that systematically destroy one's life and from which one cannot escape. There are countless words similar to this (in the former language Serbo-Croatian, now divided into Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian) that all three cultures understand and share. Funny, ironic, simple words like this are used to express strong feelings, to put into perspective, or sometimes even relativize, humorously, quite serious matters.

Each of the following reactions of the people interviewed is striking, tragic, uncomfortably humorous, and tells a lot about the unique mentality of Bosnians, and the kind of spirit and attitude they have maintained even throughout the war.

Anna Sheftel explains that humour which is studied within the context of difficult politics or violence is usually regarded as a coping mechanism used during such experiences rather than after them. She quotes Payne's view on humour from her work on post-authoritarian memory:

"[Humor] tells truths about political affairs in a way that renders them funny. These truths percolate from below ... Humor speaks a truth silenced by official

channels. It raises a mirror on society that reflects an image very different from the one promoted by the old authoritarian order and its transitional successor. Humor cannot and should not replace politics; it adds to, enhances, and embellishes politics ... Ultimately, humour gives voice to individuals and ideas excluded from the official political discourse. It is a way of making trouble, doing politics, by other means: an alternative form of truth-telling. " (Ibid.: 147)

This idea raises the question of whether humour can play an important role in mediating political action and if it can support cultural resistance. A widely known example of big importance on this matter is the book "Sarajevo Survival Guide". A one of a kind at that time, with worldwide acknowledgement, this book can still be bought in the streets of Sarajevo today. The guidebook contains all the possible tips and advices on how to survive under any kind of disaster that a society can face. From tips on 'how to make French fries without potatoes' to how to escape sniper-fire" this book is also a form of parody on a touristic guide. Even though the book itself is of humorous nature, Sheftel pointed out Stephensen's comment that "the guide does not rely so much on its gallows humor to score points, but on the cumulative effect of the whole absurd gesture" She explains:

"The guidebook authors argue that there were, and continue to be, two reasons to make fun of life in wartime Sarajevo: to assert the spirit of the Bosnian people in the face of their annihilation, and, by taking things to their logical conclusion, to point out just how severe the siege, the war, and their consequences for contemporary understandings of humanity, were. They explicitly position the book as a weapon against violence." (Ibid.:148)

This book is one of the many projects of FAMA, an independent media company that was established in 1990 in Sarajevo, and is the first one of its kind in the region. It holds the world's largest independent collection of multimedia projects and artefacts with their focus on all the events, people, phenomena, concerning the Fall of Yugoslavia and the Siege of Sarajevo. It was established by prominent artists and journalists with the aim of forming an authentic educational platform about the region, by making as they call it 'a Bank of Knowledge' for mass usage.

"...FAMA projects: are documents of enormous value, deserving of wide distribution and promotion...The perspective they present are quite simply different from other documents of the war...By contrast they show a still vibrant culture. Its caustic, straight-faced humour and everyday factual information make Sarajevo and Bosnia more alive than can all the literacy essays put together..." (FAMA Web)

These examples demonstrate the importance of the role that humour has had in the history of Bosnian society in coming to terms with the past, in narrating and remembering the war and commenting on social structures. The strong positioning of humour directly in relation to trauma portrays the resistance and forbearance of Bosnians with the ability to 'laugh at their own tragedy', undermining and resisting stereotypical narratives of victimhood. We have also seen how humour can help make such issues more accessible, both in narratives of daily life and through different approaches to creative expression. Humour has a way of making difficult matters more approachable, somehow it's not as rigid as the standard narratives we're used to when talking about war, it also reflects that our past is not something that defines who we are, and by taking away the seriousness, hits right at the heart of the sameness between us (as we can all laugh but have not all experienced the same trauma), it shines a light on a subtle but strong reminder to continue our search for the love and fairness of life, which is a trait that many Bosnians have maintained even in the most difficult times.

Moving away from wartime history, in the next chapter I will show the work of an artist whose focus of work was always contemporary life in Bosnia. He belonged to the generation of 'FAMA' artists who created art and resilience during the war, commenting on the reality of that time, since then he has continued to focus his work on reflecting on the aspects of life in Bosnia.

4. Nedžad Begović: *Interventions on bird shit*

Nedžad Begović is a film director, writer and visual artist. He has created works in the fields of documentary film, animation, television, sculpture, painting and photography. His distinctive and often deeply personal documentaries about life in Bosnia during the war have won acclaim in 250 cities around the world. His other works also move between difficult topics from everyday life with Nedžad's specific way of interpreting the reality around him with a characteristic self-deprecating humour. Nedžad has a reputation as a positive artist who, even in the greatest gray of war, managed to colour the reality around him with his art. The fact that there has been no adequate support for local artists in Bosnia (both political and financial) hardly ever prevented him from continuing to create art, as an independent artist, he often shot his films by phone and engaged in experimental forms of art making. Although all of Nedžad's work would be interesting to examine for the purpose of this thesis due to his distinctive usage of humour and the topics he reflects on in his work, I will focus only on his most recent project, which belongs to the field of photography.

"The director describes his life as an artist in Bosnia with a corrosive and self-deprecating sense of humour, while dealing with irony the tragedies of the past." (EuroCinema web)

Interventions on bird shit also known as *Daily stuff* is a project he started in 2019, instead of a gallery his works are exhibited on his Facebook account, currently there are 718 photographs and they are ongoing, since Nedžad's goal remains to make one photo every day. All the photos are taken and manipulated with his mobile phone and show completely random details from everyday life. From used tissues, to paper bags and bird droppings to really any kind of trash from the streets, shapes on wood or concrete, shapes formed by silhouettes or shadows and so on. Nedžad found his inspiration in things from his surrounding that most of us wouldn't even notice, let alone find interesting enough to take a photo of. He then manipulated each photo in a very simplistic way by drawing on them with his finger, also using just his phone. Nedžad explained it as 'bird faeces' being the medium he used in this case is as legitimate as watercolour, tempera, stone, or bronze (Illustration n.1) In an interview for Glas Istine he said:

"My point was to show that we are living in (political) shit in our daily lives and that something is constantly pooping on us 'from above'. In such an environment, I looked for 'grains of spirit' and turned them to the 'cheerful' side,

so that everyday life would not overburden us. It is, in a way, my resistance to such an environment.” (Glas Istine web:2020)

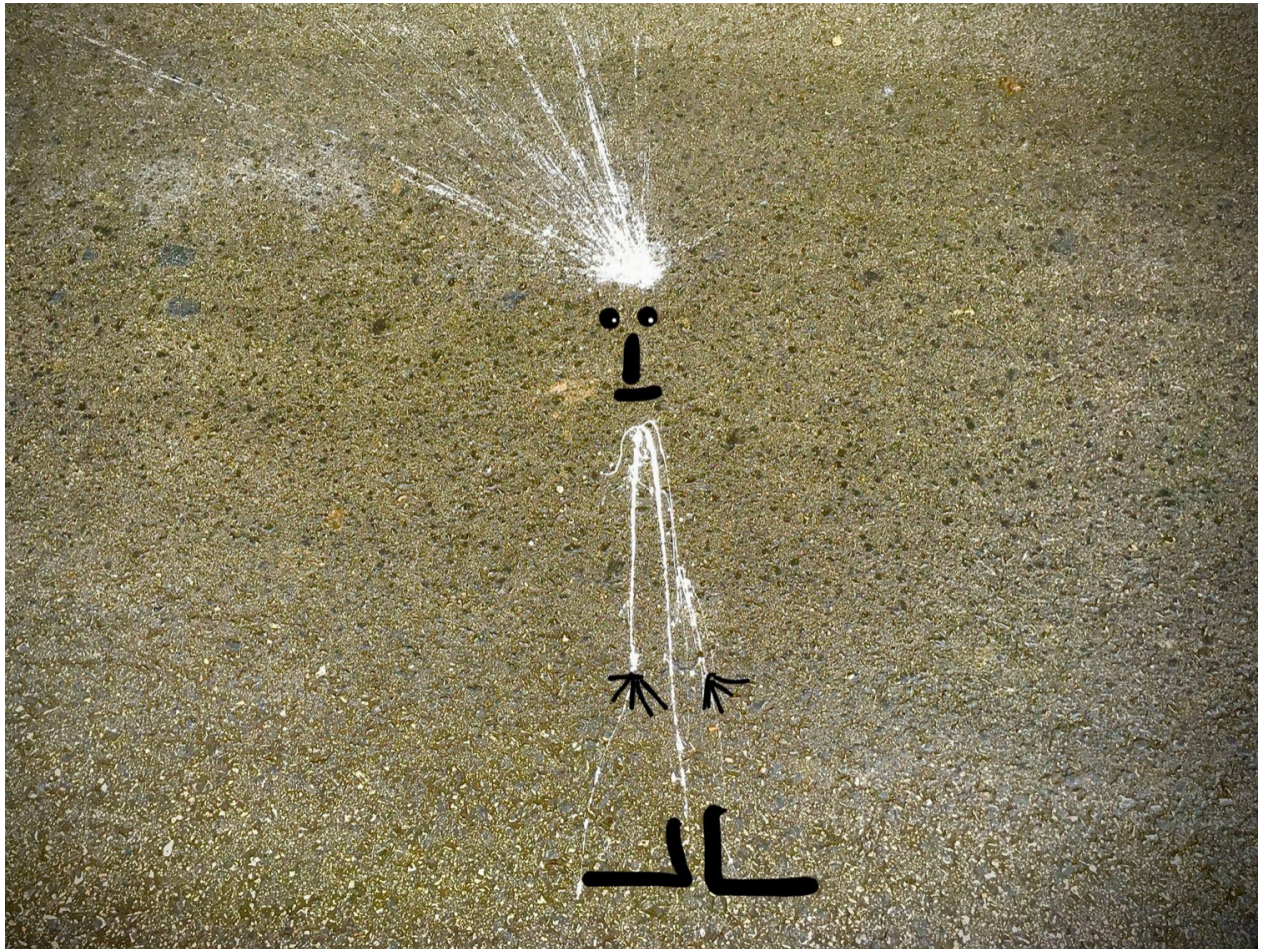


Illustration n.1

In the first chapter, I referred to the idea of how discrepancies between real things and abstract ideas can be humorous, referring to incongruity theory, with the notion that abstract ideas are aestheticizations of real things. Nedzad's 'aestheticization' or rather, an 'intervention' on such ordinary everyday objects, in other words, adds imaginary things somewhere where they don't belong or where others wouldn't necessarily see or imagine them. This makes the photos imaginatively funny, and also symbolically points out the weight of the fact that in a dysfunctional society where we are constantly being overwhelmed by negative things, we must make special effort to find the beauty in everyday things. If art would be considered as something beautiful, then it would be the duty of the artist to make something beautiful out of something ugly. It can also be seen as an act of resilience, as Nedzad pointed out, a need for a change of thought on our surroundings, with humour as the main tool in making something positive, as I already pointed out in the second chapter on Bosnian's ability to

use humour as their way of resilience or coping with the world around them. Looking back to the relief theory, it can also be the artist's way of maintaining creative energy, and sticking to the goal of making art, even if the environment is not a productive ground that encourages the creation of art and does not provide support for the artist. Relief through the usage of humour could therefore be felt both by the artist and by the spectator. In another interview Begović said that he once heard someone say that the artist's job is to fill the universe with art, adding that his leitmotif to do so has always been the bright side of life:

"I like to make people laugh, to spread positive energy, and that's a framework I don't want to go out of. Art gives answers to questions that no one has asked - so that's what I do" (Startbih Web:2019)

Nedžad's lively approach to the creative process introduces us to how an artist can use humour in an introspective way that offers us a different perspective on the world around us, as Eagleton noted, *"a momentary defamiliarising of the familiar."* (Ibid.) I would also like to mention that the fact that these artworks are published on social media instead of a gallery does not diminish their importance, but reminds us of how artists in Bosnia are forced to make compromises in order to make their art visible, often under experimental circumstances. The next chapter will show a more direct political example of artists who have attempted to address and confront precisely these problematic "circumstances" of the Bosnian cultural scene.

5. The Tač.ka Collective

Tač.ka was a group founded by young artists that emerged from the Academy of Arts in Banja Luka (Republic of Srpska). They actively produced art from 2007 to 2015 in Bosnia and internationally. Most of their work was based on multidisciplinary experiments in visual arts, institutional critique, cultural management and "art hacking". They addressed the questions of how artists can sabotage certain norms in a certain system, and wanted to problematise certain trends in contemporary Bosnian art.

In 2007, artists from Tač.ka visited the Venice Biennale festival and were startled by the fact that also that year Bosnian art was not represented at one of the most important events for contemporary art, making it the only country in Europe that did not have its own pavilion. They wanted to somehow address this problem, so they came up with an additional artistic project. They made a dot out of cardboard (Tač.ka means "dot" in Bosnian) and placed the dot next to some of the works of the most important artists exhibiting at the festival that year. They called the project *Imaginary Pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Illustration n.2) and documented the whole process. The idea was to point out the problems of Bosnian culture and somehow raise awareness that Bosnia was not present in the global contemporary art scene for years. When they returned to Banja Luka, they wanted to make an exhibition from the documentations of their Biennale dot performance, together with some other artworks from contemporary Bosnian artists. They found an empty building of a former military complex, and used it as a space in which the exhibition was installed. In the spirit of the 'missing country' from Venice Biennale, they wrote '*Bosnia and Herzegovina*' as the name of the pavilion at the entrance of the space. To make things even more ironical, they wrote the name of the country in Cyrillic. To understand this irony, one should know that the country is divided into two autonomous entities: Republic of Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Because they are divided by nationality, the two entities do not recognise each other and have been in constant conflict since the war. Cyrillic is the Serbian alphabet, not Bosnian. This provoked very negative reactions from the authorities of Republic of Srpska who then gave an ultimatum to Tač.ka to either take off the name of the country or else the exhibition would be cancelled. The two problems of the authorities were: if the name would be written in the Serbian alphabet (Cyrillic), then only the name of Republic of Srpska should be written (not Bosnia and Herzegovina), and the second objection of the authorities

of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina was that if it was the pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina, then the name could not be written in the Serbian alphabet. Instead of removing the whole name, Tač.ka then came to the idea to remove only some of the letters, which changed the name to "Bos i govna" which translates to "barefoot and shit" (Illustration n.3). After this, there was no request to remove or change the name despite its 'bad language', and the exhibition finally took place. This problematic of the exhibition highlighted the complexity of the political and cultural situation in the country, how the political parties hindered not only the taking place of a simple exhibition, but the whole functioning of the Bosnian cultural scene. Nevertheless, the exhibition was very well received and triggered a public debate on the problem of Bosnia's non-presence in the contemporary world scene, as well as a further discussion on the problems between the two entities. Over the course of two years, the cultural and political institutions tried to somehow solve the problem, but they did not succeed due to their disagreements and conflictual relations. In the meantime, the exhibition gained international recognition and was represented in Vienna, Trento, Verona and was awarded the best prize for contemporary art by ZVONO (Sarajevo Centre for Contemporary Art). However, in 2009 Bosnia was again not represented with a pavilion at Venice Biennale Festival. Once again, the members of Tač.ka continued their witty approach and visited the Biennale. They filmed themselves interviewing over 40 visitors and curators, asking them to "help find the Bosnian pavilion". Not only did none of them know that Bosnia was not part of the event, but most were desperately trying to find the pavilion and also confused Bosnia with Serbia and Montenegro. The artists then handed out flyers stating "Can you imagine the Bosnian-Herzegovinian pavilion at the Biennale?"

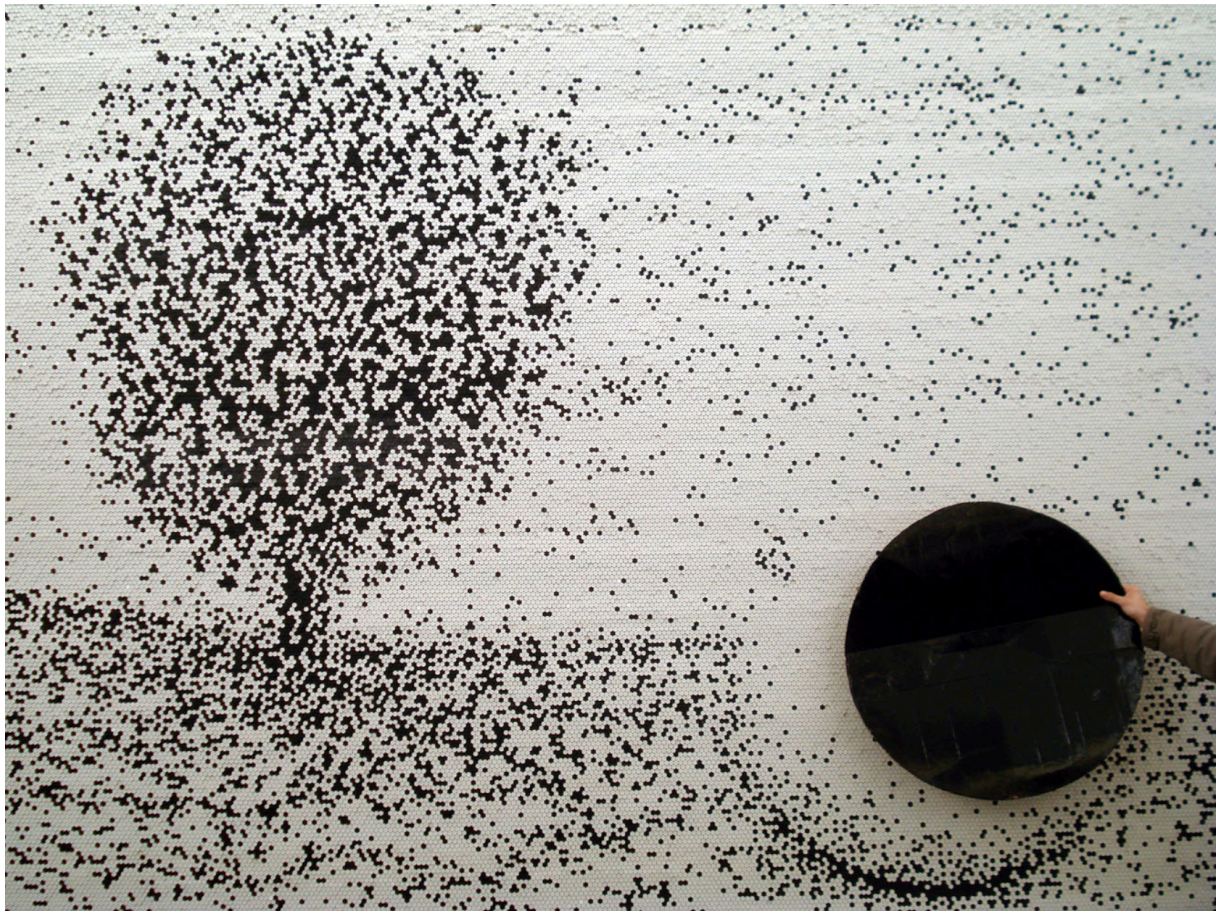


Illustration n.2

This situation reveals much about the position of Bosnia's culture, including Bosnia's position in relation to how it is viewed by the international community. The Sarajevo sculptor and installation artist Daniel Premec said in an interview, that "*Bosnia and Hercegovina is an observer in the international art scene, rather than a participant*" (Blackwood 2015: 22)

It also sheds light on the artist's ability to put such a problem up for discussion and how he does so, in this case through an intelligent, witty approach, and to continue to do so despite the constant obstacles the artist has to face in a dysfunctional society and the frustrations or humiliations this may cause him to feel.

Perhaps the only study that has thoroughly addressed the issue of art institutions in Bosnian society and their absence in the international art scene is Pooja Savansukha's *Art Institutions and National Identity in a Post-Conflict Society* (2015), in which she highlights the importance of art institutions as platforms that have the potential to play a continuous symbolic but important role in giving a post-conflict society space to deal with the problems of its national identity. She wrote about the importance of art and catharsis through art, noting:

"Where law may not be able affect peoples' imaginations, art can definitely open up a space where communities can discuss and negotiate national imaginations to hopefully arrive at a mutually consented new definition of an "imagined political community". (Savansukha 2015:9)

This "space" is exactly what the Tač.ka group was trying to achieve, and they persisted in their goal of bringing this problem up for discussion by confronting it through a humorous perspective. This was a small but very important step that might not have been possible without the inclusion of humour. This brings us back to the question of whether humour can play a role in mediating political action and whether it can support cultural resistance or communicate social critique. Eagleton has pointed out that humour in this sense has a direct social utility, which can be confirmed by Tač.ka's actions. Since they used means of mockery and ridicule in their creative actions, their example can also be related to superiority theory, but as I mentioned in the first chapter, not superiority with a negative intention, but superiority that is in the form of solidarity and can bring us an *"attempt in acceptance of our own imperfections"*, in this case the imperfections of our society with the remnants of its troubled past.



Illustration n.3

6. Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, we have seen how different approaches to humour served Bosnians as tools for their interpretation of reality, and that each occurrence of humour establishes a particular relationship with our environment. If living conditions in Bosnia could be described as "being kept alive in an international intensive care unit" (Blackwood 2015: 18), then the use of humour can be seen as a means of self-preservation, a tool for survival and coping with the surrounding circumstances. The presence of humour in the given artworks reflects two different ways in which the Bosnian artists deal with this reality: Nedžad's example is a more introverted approach, focusing on the artist's own relief from the reality of "daily life". Whereas, Tač.ka's approach is more extroverted and can be described as a politically "activist", humorous approach to the reality of the current political situation in Bosnia and the problems of the cultural scene. If we can conclude that the Bosnian's way of using humour could be considered as a means of survival and coping mechanism, the artworks then represent the purest form of fight against the circumstances that one is faced with.

The peculiarity lies in the fact that a society faced with such tragic circumstances, by the nature of its mentality and its unusual need for survival, has acquired this virtue as a sort of an emotional response, which could be seen as a complete opposite of what one would expect from tragedies, misfortunes and atrocities like the ones Bosnians have faced. If tragedies provoke deepest emotions of fear, humour, to an extent, can also be considered as an act of bravery. Bosnia established a virtue that in its own way is specific only to its territory. But when arguing about the so called 'Bosnian mentality' or rather, the 'Bosnian' tendency towards humour, one cannot forget that this also is a part of the everyday life and principles of communication between Bosnians. Therefore, faced with the permanent tendencies and threats of disintegration, since this country remains strongly divided both ethnically, religiously and geographically, it faces constant struggle for maintaining the permanence of its existence. Therefore, this situation prevents us from finding and constituting any undeniable proofs of the Bosnian way of humour, apart from the artworks that will forever remain as an indestructible document and testimony of this reality, that represent the humorous principles and coping mechanisms. The fact that it arose from the streets and as a simple way of communication, through everyday

narratives, jokes and leisure, might look seemingly superficial to some, but nevertheless this in my opinion is something quite extraordinary.

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