

**The body of the Female Folk Singer: Constructions of National Identities in Serbia after
2000**

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Abstract

In this thesis I analyze position of female body in the space of Serbian musical show business, popularly called *Estrada*. I see *Estrada* as a complex phenomenon; a culturally specific, market oriented social space which reacts to and interacts with processes of social, cultural and economic transformation of Serbian society at present. The body of a female folk singer is *Estrada*'s main representative. I use this body to explore how relationship between *Estrada* and Serbian nationalism, and how *Estrada* engages in construction of various national identities in Serbia taking as a historical reference year 2000 and official end of Slobodan Milosevic's era. To demonstrate the complexity of these identities, I explore the role of female singer's body in construction of two seemingly paradoxal identities; the national and the gay one. Finally, through the relationship of the singers with their female audience I continue to examine the limits of *Estrada*'s possible subversiveness for dominant patriarchal ideology.

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Introduction

In my thesis I intend to explore how the body of the female folk singer engages in construction of various identities in Serbia taking as a historical reference year 2000 and official end of Slobodan Milosevic's era. I want to show and explore complex relationship between popular culture and nationalism on the example of Serbian mainstream musical show-business popularly called *Estrada*, using the body of female folk singers. I take the body of the female singer as the center of my analysis, since it is implicitly present in all discourses that circulate around *Estrada* in Serbia, but still has been rarely directly addressed. The female body functions as metonymy for whole *Estrada*, and to it are ascribed many ideological assumptions I intend to explore. At the same time I will analyze which messages that body produces and sends out to Serbian public by its performance. I will claim that via body of the female singer one can read the changes in Serbian society that occurred after the year 2000, after Slobodan Milosevic was overthrown and Serbia officially entered the process of social and political transformations commonly named as transition.

Estrada is popular term for show business in Serbia, which is dominated by neofolk musical genre. Neofolk is the term that I use as all-encompassing for various *Estrada*'s subgenres: pop-folk, turbo-folk, newly composed folk music (NCFM)... *Estrada* gained its wider significance in the nineties, in the times of Milosevic's regime, when it became absolutely dominant in Serbian media, and entered in strong relation with politics, that is, with nationalist ideology propagated at the time. Many Serbian intellectuals and scholars claim that the neofolk music, with its massive dominance in media, participated in building of Milosevic's regime, and was an important part in promoting and maintaining ultranationalist climate in the country (Zarana Papic, Ivana Kronja, Eric Gordy, Milena Dragicevic-Sesic)¹.

¹ Papic, Zarana: "Europe after 1989: The Ethnic Wars, Fascizisation of Civil Society and Body Politics in Serbia", http://www.komunikacija.org.rs/komunikacija/casopisi/sociologija/XLIII_3/d01/html_gb, accessed: 13.5.2009 ; Gordy, Eric D.: *The Culture of Power in Serbia*, University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, c1999 ;

Female body on *Estrada* is seen as the tool of the regime, “‘Happy’ Serbian Woman's Body’, a plump body acting out permanent submission and joy over its sexual accessibility, [is supported] by a whole series of so-called ‘turbo-folk queens’ (singers), (...) [who] did not only have the objective to arouse tavern emotions and relax the clientele, but also to inflame and re-affirm pro-Fascist emotions”² But there is the other group of scholars, for example Branislav Dimitrijevic and Dusan Maljkovic, who read the female singers as having significant part in subversion of patriarchal moral and in connecting Serbia with the world; these scholars ascribe to neofolk music emancipatory and even avant-garde role³.

Again, these debates are mainly focused on the nineties and the role of *Estrada* in the time of Slobodan Milosevic’s regime, but the attention should also be paid to the changes that occurred after 5th of October 2000, when the regime in Serbia has been changed. With the political changes, Serbian nationalism has transformed as well, and so was the space of the show business. But these changes did not mean that nationalism, or *Estrada* really lost their significance. Hence is important to critically explore that later period, since in it *Estrada* still takes its part in the complex interplay of dominant ideology, politics and show business; the interplay which is strongly gendered. The body of the female folk singer is one of the most transparent manifestations of that interaction.

One important remark can be drawn to these debates that circulate around *Estrada*: while one part of the scholars focused mainly on political context of *Estrada*, the other group completely neglected that context, and was focused primarily on the text. I will situate myself in-between, and claim that *Estrada* is highly complex phenomenon, and that those readings do not

Kronja, Ivana: *Smrtonosni sjaj: masovna psihologija i estetika turbo-folka*, Tehnokratia, Beograd 2001 ; Dragičević-Šešić, Milena: *Neofolk kultura, publika i njene zvezde*, Izdavačka knjižara Zorana Stojanovića Sremski Karlovci, Novi Sad, 1994

² Papic, Zarana: “Europe after 1989: The Ethnic Wars, Fascisation of Civil Society and Body Politics in Serbia”, http://www.komunikacija.org.rs/komunikacija/casopisi/sociologija/XLIII_3/d01/html_gb, accessed: 13.5.2009.

³ Dimitrijevic, Branislav: “Global Turbo Folk”, <http://www.ex-yupress.com/nin/nin139.html>, accessed: 2.4.2009 ; Maljkovic, Dusan: Turbo emancipacija!, <http://blog.b92.net/text/1914/Turbo%20emancipacija!>, accessed: 2.4.2009.

necessarily exclude one another. I intend to show that *Estrada* cannot be seen as monolithic, unitary space, by drawing attention to its internal struggles. Therefore it is important to examine the role and the position of Serbian *Estrada* today, to analyze its complexity and see how *Estrada* handles challenging combination of problematic political heritage and actual social and economic transformations of Serbian society. Therefore, what I am interested in is what is happening in Serbia since the beginning of transition, especially with ‘wide masses of people’, exactly those who are considered to be main consumers of neofolk music⁴, and how *Estrada* relates to the transitional process. I will claim that the body of the female folk singer, equated through public, academic and common discourses with the whole of neofolk genre, and via that with ‘wide masses of people’, can function as the point in which the problems of ethnicity, class and sexuality intersect.

In the first chapter I will provide literary review of academic debates on neofolk, narrowing my focus to the female body as the center of my analysis. Female body turns out to be the battlefield between the opposed, as Ana Vujanovic and Tanja Markovic name them, emancipatory-enlightening and democratic-populist blocs⁵; and further, between civic and nationalist Serbia, urban and rural, high and popular culture. I will analyze in depth how the body on *Estrada* functions, and claim that performance of the female singer on the stage of *Estrada* is always the performance of certain identities; in my study I will explore some of these identities and show why they are important for Serbia in the period of social and political transformations known as transition. In the second chapter I will situate my views on the female singer’s body within a wider theoretical framework, using feminist theories on the body; that chapter will be another basis for further analysis in my research. I analyze female

⁴ Dragičević-Šešić, Milena: *Neofolk kultura, publika i njene zvezde*, Izdavačka knjižara Zorana Stojanovića Sremski Karlovci, Novi Sad, 1994

⁵ Markovic, Tanja and Vujanovic, Ana: “Mutations of Global Paradigms in Contemporary South-Eastern Europe: The case of the Serbian intellectual map in the field of mass and pop culture problematics”, http://www.stfx.ca/pinstitutes/cpcs/perspectives/vol2no1_files/Mutations.pdf, accessed: 5.4.2009

body on *Estrada* as the body on which cultural assumptions are not just written but also as something which writes out its meanings in the public space.

Thus, I will interpret the construction of female body on *Estrada* emphasizing that *Estrada* allows only those types of femininities that correspond to heteronormative and heterosexual understandings of gender, exactly those which according to V. Spike Peterson turn out to be the pillar of nationalism.⁶ That analysis will be the basis for my claim, which will follow works by Zarana Papic and Ivana Kronja for example, that female body serves as the homogenizer of national identity, in the chapter 3.1.

Further on, in the second chapter, I will deploy Donna Haraway's concept of a cyborg⁷ and Butler's politics of drag⁸ to analyse the female singer's body. This part will be followed by my analysis in the chapter 3.2, where I will explore how urban gay community sees female singer's body as suitable for camp and ironic appropriation, and how this same body can perform a subversive role in regards with Serbian nationalism.

Third chapter therefore focuses strictly on identities that female singer's body on *Estrada* produces. I will give two apparently paradoxical readings of female singer's body (body as an axis of the nation (3.1) and body as a reminder of a failure of Serbian nationalism (3.2)), in order to show *Estrada*'s complexity, and further, complexity of national identities in today's Serbian society.

In the fourth chapter I will strictly focus on intersection of gender and class and *Estrada*'s communication with working class female audience.

⁶ Peterson, V. Spike: "Sexing Political Identities: Nationalism as Heterosexism," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1(1), June 1999: 34-65.

⁷ Haraway, Donna: "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), pp.149-181.

⁸ Butler, Judith: "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in Linda Nicholson (ed.) *The Second Wave Reader. A Reader in Feminist Theory*, New York and London: Routledge, 1997, pp 300 – 315

1. Debates around Estrada

Estrada is the popular term for musical show business in Serbia, and it refers strictly to mainstream neofolk production. Neofolk is an all-encompassing term for various musical genres based on folk musical elements. As a musical genre it started in the early sixties, when “the neotraditional model of arranged folk song was institutionalized into a “new folk” music.”⁹ Neofolk is seen as commercialization of folk music, it reached high popularity during the eighties (the usual term used for the genre then was ‘newly composed folk music (NCFM)), and became absolutely dominant in Serbian media in the nineties, under the name of turbo-folk. Neofolk today can be defined as a hybrid mix of commercial electronic music, based on simple techno and dance rhythms, with various Balkan and oriental folk melodies.

The term *Estrada* itself signifies much more than the simple showbiz. The term provokes many associations and assumptions: *Estrada* is at the same time dazzling and dirty, shiny and full of mud; the space in which show business meets domestic affairs and altogether brings one very vivid and diverse public and media space. *Estrada* doesn’t exist outside of media; it is established through television, radio, internet web sites, magazines and music videos. And *Estrada*’s main representative is a female folk singer, constantly present in electronic and printed media, and who belongs to the mainstream music production.

Estrada had, without a doubt, a significant role in the construction of Serbian nationalism. With Milosevic’s uprising, neofolk with its various subgenres, among which the most prominent was turbo-folk, started to dominate Serbian media. Eric Gordy claims that this massive dominance of neofolk music participated in building of Milosevic’s regime. The regime succeeded to establish itself “by making alternatives to its rule unavailable”¹⁰, and one

⁹ Rasmussen, Ljerka V.: “Newly composed folk music of Yugoslavia”, New York: Routledge, 2002, p 3

¹⁰ Gordy, Eric D.: “The Culture of Power in Serbia”, University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, c1999, p. 2

of these was the musical alternative. Although *Estrada* functions as an open market and it has functioned as such both during the socialist era and afterwards, in the nineties, when during the Milosevic's regime *Estrada* gained the whole media space for itself, and this could not go without consequences. Cheery, high-energy music and lyrics speaking about love or joy of life clearly stood in contrast with socio-political situation at the time. Although *Estrada* has always tried to distance itself from the politics (the example of Ceca Raznatovic, wife of the notorious war criminal Arkan, who once said: 'I don't know what you are talking about, all of my songs speak about love'¹¹), it turned out that that apparent antipolitical character of *Estrada* is after all very political. Thus *Estrada* and female identities constructed on it cannot be seen as an entity separate and isolated from the wider social and political context. The overall influence of *Estrada* on political situation in Serbia, its role in the construction of national identities, and particularly its role in constructing normative masculinities and femininities in Serbian society, together with all the controversies around it certainly made *Estrada* a relevant topic to study.

Ana Vujanovic and Tanja Markovic identified two main academic positions in the discussions around *Estrada* and neofolk: emancipatory-enlightening and democratic-populist¹². In the following paragraphs I will present these two models and give a critical insight.

Markovic and Vujanovic summarize the emancipatory-enlightening position:

In brief, the idea of emancipatory-enlightening theoretical position and tactics points out that pop and mass culture in the Serbian context was an ideological apparatus, which served to the Serbian mainstream (state) ideology during the 1990s, offering cheap entertainment and oblivion to a wide audience. The emancipatory-enlightening platform insists on ideological aspects and functions of their triviality and usually focuses on the problem of identification and/or subjectivity through mass and pop culture.¹³

¹¹ *Sav Taj Folk* [All that Folk] TV B92, Serbia, 2004.

¹² Markovic, Tanja and Vujanovic, Ana: "Mutations of Global Paradigms in Contemporary South-Eastern Europe: The case of the Serbian intellectual map in the field of mass and pop culture problematics", http://www.stfx.ca/pinstitutes/cpcs/perspectives/vol2no1_files/Mutations.pdf, accessed: 5.4.2009

¹³ Ibid.

In short, those readings regard *Estrada* and neofolk as a part of Milosevic's authoritarian machinery, sometimes going so far as to claim that Milosevic and his regime invented neofolk in order to 'make people dumb' and easy to control. Markovic and Vujanovic further refer to Marina Grzinic, who recalls conclusions of Zarana Papic:

The emergence of the mass cultural phenomenon of woman singers of 'newly composed traditional folk music' and their construction of identities have to be seen through their active role in constructing the identities of the audience in ex-Yugoslavia and the 'nation' in post-Yugoslav Serbia. The phenomenon can be analyzed as a privileged carrier of messages in pre-war time and post-war Serbia and seen as the redefinition and homogenization of national identity, the denial of trauma in other part of ex-Yugoslavia, as well as of fascist tendencies in Serbia.¹⁴

Another prominent study of emancipatory-enlightening model is Ivana Kronja's book *Smrtonosni sjaj* [Deadly Splendor]¹⁵. Kronja concentrates on turbo folk music videos, identifying in them the aesthetics of "warrior's chic". Through analysis of videos, Kronja connects turbo folk with weapons cult, and glorification of crime and war aesthetics, reading the female singer as always positioned as the object, the award for the warrior. What follows from her conclusions is that turbo folk singers were by all means supporters of Milosevic's regime, serving as its important tool.

One of another attributes ascribed to *Estrada* and the genre of neofolk is primitivism, following the thesis introduced by some of Serbian intellectuals that the whole war was a conflict between the city and the village. In such established dichotomy urban / rural, *Estrada* is put on a barbarian, rural side. It is also expressed in a daily speech, where it can often be heard that 'only the peasants listen to that music'. That side of dichotomy is often expanded to

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Kronja, Ivana: "Smrtonosni sjaj: masovna psihologija i estetika turbo-folka [Deadly Splendor: mass psychology and aesthetics of turbofolk]"; Tehnokratia, Beograd 2001

everything that is actually not urban enough. Milena Dragicevic Sestic's study *Neofolk kultura, publika i njene zvezde* [Neofolk Culture, Audience and Its Stars]¹⁶ maps the audience of neofolk music within suburban and rural milieu, further marking neofolk audience as the people of simple lifestyles, habits and demands. Her study cannot escape depreciative tones towards rural masses and suburban masses, which is especially visible in the chapter in which Dragicevic-Sestic compares the results of a research done with neofolk fans and literature fans. It is not clear why exactly literature fans were chosen for comparison, and another dichotomy, high art – popular culture, simply screams from here. Dragicevic-Sestic sees neofolk fans as the members of 'neocomposed cultural model', defining them as the population that aims to reach better social status, and whose characteristics are "consumer orientation, fun, passivity, imitation and identification with their own referential group"¹⁷. Writing further about their engagement with the political situation in the state, Dragicevic-Sestic concludes the following:

According to researched orientation of values among members of elitist and neocomposed cultural models it is obvious that the main difference between them lies in the values of tolerance and orientation towards high standard of living in these two models. Tolerance, second on the list of values of members of elitist cultural model, is among the least important values among members of neocomposed cultural model. (...) Second, neocomposed milieu hasn't been traveling. Even if it was, it was done in the group of its own and for its own. It has not travelled in order to know *the other*. Therefore, the average member of neocomposed cultural model knows Croats and Slovenians from the army – and that's all. And having in mind what is stated above on tolerance, acceptance of different values and similar, it is clear why its image of Croats and Croatia as something 'ours' and at the same time 'foreign' enables involvement in war, destroying, defiance.¹⁸

Although Dragicevic-Sestic mentions the role of elites in building of nationalism and war climate, her conclusions actually point to the members of 'neocomposed cultural model', that is the neofolk audience, as the main bearers of nationalist kitsch.

¹⁶ Dragičević-Šešić, Milena: "Neofolk kultura, publika i njene zvezde [Neofolk culture, audience and its stars]", Izdavačka knjižara Zorana Stojanovića Sremski Karlovci, Novi Sad, 1994

¹⁷ Ibid, p 14, my translation

¹⁸ Dragičević-Šešić, Milena: "Neofolk kultura, publika i njene zvezde [Neofolk culture, audience and its stars]", Izdavačka knjižara Zorana Stojanovića Sremski Karlovci, Novi Sad, 1994, p194 - 195, my translation

All these analysis of *Estrada* and its dominant musical genre, done by emancipatory-enlightening theorists and scholars, are strongly grounded in a historical moment when they were written. Markovic and Vujanovic, commenting on emancipatory- enlightning position, further conclude:

Although some of the explained theses about mass and popular culture seem moralistic or just naïve in the contemporary theoretical sense, I plead that they should be considered first of all as political decisions. Certain numbers of theoreticians have chosen to reduce the theoretical complexity of their analyses, texts and public exposures. They have also used the more explicit platforms of critical social theory of previous generations in order to act politically in the very complex context of Serbia in the 1990s. This context needed not be left as ambiguous and uncertain but to be treated as terrifying without any doubt.¹⁹

But even if we accept the emancipatory-enlightening position of theorists as an ideological decision, its consequences still matter. This homogenizing view of *Estrada* reduces its complexity, assuming that only one certain national identity is constituted and promoted on the space of *Estrada*, and that all the representations of women on *Estrada* are the same in their features. But one of the consequences is also that the whole popular culture produced during the nineties in Serbia is seen somehow as neofolk, in this case usually called ‘turbofolk’. The documentary TV series *Sav taj folk* (“All that Folk”) just revealed that, by putting the complete mainstream music production in the nineties under the genre of ‘folk’²⁰. This reductionism does not just appear to be highly problematic (since ‘high culture’ manifestations have been also held at the time, and some subversive TV series produced with state’s money), but also this demonization of popular culture has its further importance. If it is claimed that the whole popular culture production was supporting Milosevic, popular culture is by that act at the same time dismissed and marked as backward; it turns out that the

¹⁹ Markovic, Tanja and Vujanovic, Ana: “Mutations of Global Paradigms in Contemporary South-Eastern Europe: The case of the Serbian intellectual map in the field of mass and pop culture problematics”, http://www.stfx.ca/pinstitutes/cpcs/perspectives/vol2no1_files/Mutations.pdf, accessed: 5.4.2009

²⁰ *Sav Taj Folk* [All that Folk] TV B92 Serbia, 2004.

othering of popular culture was the tool of opposition forces and civic intelligentsia for distancing from Milosevic's politics.

Of course, not the whole popular culture was marked as Milosevic's supporter. But the opposition who were engaged with the 'urban' forms of popular culture took for itself the high culture position. Eric Gordy describes how Belgrade's rock and roll musicians (*rokeri*) strongly dismissed neofolk from the very beginning. "Both in their antiwar political engagement and their defense of urban culture, Belgrade *rokeri* combined the (innate?) rebelliousness of rock and roll with a high culture opposition to neofolk vulgarity, associating architects of war with the culture of their political supporters."²¹ The attitude of Belgrade's rock musicians simply followed the civic elite. If we have in mind that the rock scene in Yugoslavia was highly gendered, and that the mostly male bands fostered strong image of masculinity, in the situation where they are claiming high culture position for themselves, it is hard not to notice misogyny haunting this position. Dichotomy high art – popular culture here gains the new importance. That division on "us" and "them" had its reflections in the field of gender, especially if we accept Andreas Huyssen's claim that the space of mass culture is coded as feminine, as opposed to masculine high culture.²² It turns out that the civic Serbia, coded its 'other' as female: the main enemy of civic Serbia turned out to be female folk singers.

Second bloc of theorists writing on neofolk culture is, as identified by Markovic and Vujanovic, democratic – populist. The theorists from democratic-populist corpus accuse their opponents of cultural racism. They are trying in their writings to point out that 'wide masses of people' are not bearers of main guilt for arousal of Serbian nationalism. Or, as Branislav Dimitrijevic claims: "it was the aspirations of Serbian Bourgeoisie that brought on

²¹ Gordy, Eric D.: "The Culture of Power in Serbia", University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999, p. 120

²² Huyssen, Andreas: "Mass Culture as Woman" in *Modernism's Other*. Indiana University Press, 1986, pp 44-62

Milosevic's ascend to power in 1987, and not Ceca or Dragana"²³. Dusan Maljkovic notices how the prevalent criticism of *Estrada* in Serbian public discourse, whether it comes from assumably 'left' or 'right' position, at first reads *Estrada* as social decadence and marker of 'decay of all values'²⁴. Maljkovic points out that both these discourses actually operate with high / popular culture dychotomy, and plead for elitist concept of culture which, according to Maljkovic „inevitably has racist implications and consequences (...) and implicates racist selection of people on superior and inferior type”, which is further coded through, for example, dychotomy of urban / rural.²⁵

In another article, Maljkovic states:

But what I am interested in is not the global reach of Serbian culture, but the questions of local politics, especially the question of emancipation of women and sexual minorities in Serbia. And I believe that the contribution of turbo folk in that field is remarkable. Just a superficial view on the turbo-scene reveals an incredible plurality of cultural codes and genres, gender and sexual alternative strategies, just as it does, of course, their equality. In turbofolk can coexist at large homosexuals and heterosexuals, transvestites and the “ordinary world”, openly erotic contents as present as the “Ortodox” moral codes. In that context, turbo folk is just a projection of a *liberal political concept* – with all the virtues and the faults – on the sphere of popular culture, neither better nor worse than the one that dominates on the West.²⁶

Both Dimitrijevic and Maljkovic, just as the representatives of the emancipatory- enlightening position do, constantly refer to the importance of turbo folk in the local context, and for both positions patriarchal society appears as the pillar of Serbian nationalism. Branislav Dimitrijevic identifies a subversive potential in certain neofolk lyrics, since some of them express: “resistance to the limits imposed by the patriarchal society, about possible emotional and economic independence of young women, and thereby [they might have] precisely the

²³ Dimitrijević, Branislav «Ovo je savremena umetnost»: turbo folk kao radikalni performans [“This is Contemporary Art!”: Turbo-Folk and Its Radical Potential], in Prelom, 2-3., CSUB, Beograd, 2002, p. 100

²⁴ Maljkovic, Dusan: “Kako upokojiti TV manijaka [How to kill *TV Maniac*]”, <http://www.gay-serbia.com/teorija/2003/03-02-14-kako-upokojiti-tv-manijaka/index.jsp>, accessed: 2.6.2009.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Maljkovic, Dusan: “Turbo emancipacija! [Turbo emancipation!]”, <http://blog.b92.net/text/1914/Turbo%20emancipacija/>, last accessed on 1.5.2009, my translation

emancipating role.²⁷ For the democratic populist theorists, there exactly lies the point of the greatest subversive potential of turbo folk – confrontation to the patriarchal values and their rejection consequently subverts Serbian nationalism, that is the ideology of exclusion of ‘the other’. It turns out that the oppressed minorities, typical ‘other’ of nationalism, can embrace neofolk female singers with delight. Many examples speak on that behalf, i.e. text *The Forgotten History of Serbian Folk avant-garde*²⁸, published on the biggest Serbian gay web portal in 2001, in which the authors analyze several turbo folk texts as emancipatory, anti-patriarchal, texts which freely express the female desire, and texts pleading for sexual freedom. Female folk singers are becoming typical Serbian gay icons, constructed as icons through the identification based on common threat to the pleasure, thus recalling Slavoj Žižek’s quotation Markovic and Vujanovic gave us:

Who is bothered by pleasure? Why is it so radically sanctioned? The root of racism is, therefore the hatred towards ones own enjoyment / pleasure”, Žižek quotes Jacques Alain Miller, who adds: “...Why does The Other always remain The Other? What is the cause of our hatred for his sole existence? It is the hatred for the pleasure of The Other. That would be the most generalized formula of the modern racism we are witnessing today: the hatred for the specific way another person finds pleasure .²⁹

Estrada opens new markets, as the true capitalist monster which every group of people sees as its potential target. But turbo folk is not only Serbian phenomenon, and it is present on the whole Balkan at least (as we can see on the example of cable TV *Balkanika*, which plays turbo folk music produced in all Balkan countries without difference), while at the same time the music is incorporating various musical motifs and influences – from MTV to Bollywood.

Serbian *Estrada* communicates with the world, or, as Rastko Mocnik says:

²⁷ Dimitrijevic, Branislav: “Global Turbo Folk”, <http://www.ex-yupress.com/nin/nin139.html>, last accessed on 2.4.2009

²⁸ Viva la Diva and Vlada T “Zaboravljena istorija srpske folk-avangarde [The Forgotten history of Serbian folk-avant garde]” *Gay Serbia* (Belgrade, n.d) Available online at: http://www.gay-serbia.com/kolumna/2002/02-08-14-folk_avangarda/index.jsp

²⁹ Markovic, Tanja and Vujanovic, Ana: “Mutations of Global Paradigms in Contemporary South-Eastern Europe: The case of the Serbian intellectual map in the field of mass and pop culture problematics”, http://www.stfx.ca/pinstitutes/cpcs/perspectives/vol2no1_files/Mutations.pdf, accessed: 5.4.2009

Turbo-folk is the only contribution to globalization from the space of former Yugoslavia. I think it now through the concept of periphery cultural industries, who must activate social potentials of that space in order to survive the crash with central global cultural industries (...) Listen just to *Halo Pink* show: I am sending the greetings to my brother in Sydney, and to the aunt in Philadelphia and at the same time the grandmother in Vranje. So, these people have lived in globalization for the last 40 years.³⁰

But it is ridiculous to believe that with Milosevic's fall, *Estrada's* engagement with politics also disappeared. Just as we can object to the emancipatory-enlightening theorists that they have reduced the whole complex phenomenon on its political (in the narrow sense of the word) aspect, we can object to the democratic-populist bloc that the daily politics has been left out from their analysis. One of the examples is the above quoted Dimitrijevic's sentence in which he puts together singers Ceca and Dragana, whose biographies tell a different story – while Ceca was involved with the regime and organized crime, Dragana was keeping herself at the distance from political events. Even more prominent example for reduction of political context in analysis of democratic-populist theorists is their common claim that neofolk singers were important contributors to reconciliation in former Yugoslavia and Serbian communication with the world.³¹ The question of reconciliation is taken here too recklessly – while *Estrada*, as the separate space, may reestablish connections on the space of former Yugoslavia, it is done for the purpose of creating a wider music market, while wider social and political circumstances, the unsolved issues of war crimes, refugees and so on still, speak the opposite.

I will take my position somewhere between those two, and examine the role and the position of Serbian *Estrada* today, to dissect its complexity and see how it works in a combination of problematic political heritage and contemporary circumstances.

³⁰ quoted in: Maljkovic, Dusan: "Turbo emancipacija! [Turbo emancipation!]", [http://blog.b92.net/text/1914/Turbo %20emancipacija/](http://blog.b92.net/text/1914/Turbo%20emancipacija/), last accessed on 1.5.2009, my translation

³¹ Maljkovic, Dusan: "Turbo emancipacija! [Turbo emancipation!]", [http://blog.b92.net/text/1914/Turbo %20emancipacija/](http://blog.b92.net/text/1914/Turbo%20emancipacija/), last accessed on 1.5.2009

What has been rarely noticed in all these debates is how the female body stands in between the two fires, in the middle of the two critical discourses on turbo folk. If mentioned at all, it is seen either as the tool for nationalist regime's manipulation³², or as a 'crack in the patriarchal society'³³. But the female body is constantly there, as a ghostly presence in academic texts and everyday speech, as the uncanny which inhabits the debates on popular culture and Serbian nationalism, as something on which all those debates fracture. The body which is present whenever someone mentions howling of the voice or shaking of the hips or another of its manifestations. The body of the female folk singer, exposed and expressive, appears as some sort of a threat to the culture. The female body turns out to be the battlefield between dualistically posed emancipatory-enlightening and democratic-populist blocs, civic and nationalist Serbia, urban and rural, high and popular culture. But the female body also constantly stands in the center of the stage. She sings, she drinks, she cries, she loves, she suffers; in short, she performs. Performance of the singer is always the performance of certain identities, and liberal character of *Estrada* enables a wide range of those identities.

So what is position of the female folk singer today, after all the changes that happened both within *Estrada*'s market and the Serbian nationalism? Is she the heritage of the regime which shows that nothing or little has changed, or is she the main signifier of the changes that occurred, or both things at the same time? As Milica Tomic said, "turbo folk is one of the names for Serbian trauma"³⁴. Analysis of the female body in turbo/neofolk gives us the insight into the consequences for the female body in traumatic and posttraumatic period in Serbia. It is important to see how that body functions, and in which ways, in order to pull out additional

³² Papic, Zarana: "Europe after 1989: The Ethnic Wars, Fascisation of Civil Society and Body Politics in Serbia", http://www.komunikacija.org.rs/komunikacija/casopisi/sociologija/XLIII_3/d01/html_gb, accessed: 13.5.2009. and Kronja, Ivana: "Smrtonosni sjaj: masovna psihologija i estetika turbo-folka [Deadly Splendor: mass psychology and aesthetics of turbofolk]", Tehnokratia, Beograd 2001

³³ Dimitrijevic, Branislav: "Global Turbo Folk", <http://www.ex-yupress.com/nin/nin139.html>, last accessed on 2.4.2009

³⁴ Tomić, Milica: "Intervencija u prostoru tabua [Intervention in a Taboo Space]", *Vreme*, no 546, 21. 6. 2001.

and maybe more insightful conclusions about that trauma: period of war, sanctions, isolations, destroying of others... and its consequences for the whole region.

It is easy to agree that *Estrada* is still the most open and developed market of contemporary Serbia. If that is the most developed capitalist space, then what is its position in today's Serbian economic and socio-political context? How does the singer's body balance between the open market and the domestic socio-political affairs, how does it pass the road from Milosevic's ally who negates its involvement in political life to the acceptance of liberal concepts such as human rights? I want to explore if the female folk singer's body can contribute to any emancipatory politics, or it is just another part of the dominant ideological apparatus?

Those question were addressed before by already mentioned Milica Tomic, Serbian artist who produced highly critical works against Milosevic's regime. In her work "This is Contemporary Art", Milica Tomic used concept of ready-made and invited folk singer Dragana Mirkovic to perform few her songs on Wiener Festwochen festival, starting the performance by pronouncing above mentioned title. Tomic's work aimed to open the questions about position of art today, the role of capital in contemporary art and art market. But still the main aim of the project was not, as Branislav Dimitrijevic says, „reevaluation of artistic practices, but exactly opening of a debate about one cultural phenomenon [turbo folk] that in Serbian context, as well as beyond Serbian borders, took important place not just in cultural, but also in political and ideological debates, when we talk about newer history of Yugoslavia”³⁵ Tomic's work, as she says, aimed at two directions: „dislocation of local [musical] genre to international scene, (...) and dislocation of popular culture in the field of contemporary art.”³⁶ Problematization of divide on high and low culture in Tomic's work here

³⁵ Dimitrijević, Branislav: «Ovo je savremena umetnost»: turbo folk kao radikalni performans [“This is Contemporary Art!”: Turbo-Folk as Radical Performance], in *Prelom*, 2-3., CSUB, Beograd, 2002

³⁶ Tomić, Milica: “Intervencija u prostoru tabua [Intervention in a Taboo Space]”, *Vreme*, no 546, 21. 6. 2001.

paved the path for critique of turbo folk that goes follows conclusions of Dusan Maljkovic, who argues that critique of turbo folk, in order not to fall into trap of high/low culture opposition, should follow the lines of critique of liberal capitalism.³⁷

The question of the body's engagement in nationalist processes and routes of capital can open a wider story about the process of transition in Serbia and the relationship between Serbian nationalism and the world. The body of the female folk singer, equated through public, academic and common discourses with whole neofolk genre, and via that with the whole Serbian popular culture and via that with 'wide masses of people' can function as the point in which the problems of ethnicity, class and sexuality intersect. The question gains the importance when we look at the context of transition which is mercilessly cancelling the benefits of the socialist era. Following Andreas Huyssen's claim that the feminization of popular culture in modernism was also the reflection of the fear of growing and uncontrollable masses³⁸, and applying that claim to Serbian contemporary context, the female folk singer easily gets associated with those 'uncontrollable masses', who are now usually the losers of transition, and a threat to the class of political and intellectual elite. It is important to see which identities the female folk singer produces, and explore them more in depth, in order to separate the critique of neofolk from the critique of the whole popular culture; to dismantle the equation which consequently enables for its audience/lower classes the position of less valuable, and creates the socio-political climate which normalizes and posits as inevitable the cancellation of free education, health care, dismissal of workers, but also, I argue, still enables othering of national, racial and sexual minorities. It is important to identify, analyze and explore these new identities, (and they are standing on a scale from subversion of nationalism

³⁷ Maljkovic: Dusan: "Kako upokojiti TV manijaka [How to kill *TV Maniac*]", <http://www.gay-serbia.com/teorija/2003/03-02-14-kako-upokojiti-tv-manijaka/index.jsp>, accessed: 2.6.2009.

³⁸ Huyssen, Andreas: "Mass Culture as Woman" in *Modernism's Other*. Indiana University Press, 1986, p 44-62

to its reinforcement) since they might tell us something more about transition, new social circumstances and transformations of Serbian nationalism.

Methodologically, I will provide socio-critical analysis of *Estrada* as a social institution, and I will focus on the gendered body on *Estrada*. Since I argue that in critical approach to *Estrada* one should take into account both socio-political context and analysis of text itself, I will combine literature on gender and nationalism, and feminist and queer film theory. As far as literature on nationalism is concerned, I will rely on some of crucial works in this field by Anne McClintock (nationalism and family), V. Spike Peterson (nationalism as heterosexism) and Joane Nagel (nationalism and masculinity). From feminist and film queer theory, I will deploy Laura Mulvey's concept of male gaze, and Jackey Stacey response to it, in order to support my claim that *Estrada* is constructed as patriarchal space which still might offer oppositional readings, which will be important for my further analysis of construction of feminine identities I give in the fourth chapter.

From queer film theory, I am taking Richard Dyer and Alexander Doty's remarks on the matter of gay authorship and spectatorship, as concepts that are another source of oppositional and/or subversive reading of mainstream texts. These concepts appear to be important for understanding how *Estrada* communicates with gay audience, and how gay audience finds in *Estrada* an important ally.

In order to support my socio-critical analysis of *Estrada*, in the 4th chapter I will do discourse analysis of various media texts, produced from year 2000 on. I will rely on video spots, TV shows, articles from tabloid newspapers, and other internet resources. I consider that inclusion of wide range of media is necessary, because *Estrada* spreads through all of them, and they all together create and maintain the world of *Estrada*. I found most of video materials on

YouTube, and a smaller number I got from friends. Images are taken from my personal archive, collected throughout the years of my interest in *Estrada*. From the enormous amount of material that I have investigated, I have chosen the most commercial ones that served to illustrate my points.

2. Female singer's body as a Cyborg

All dualistic presumptions that circulate around the body are reflected in the music show business as well. Barbara Bradby has noticed that the development of new technologies and

their incorporation into musical business casted out women from the authorship³⁹. As she claims: “there is an obvious way in which women have once again been equated with sexuality, the body, emotion and nature in dance music, while men have been assigned to the realm of culture, technology and language.”⁴⁰ Men got the realm of technology: they are producers, samplers, arrangers, people behind the machines, while women occupy the position of the simple performer. The neofolk genre, just as dance/house music Bradby writes about is strongly based on the use of those technologies. Samplers, rhythm machines, and new computer software is widely used in *Estrada*’s productions. Serbian *Estrada*, which has always followed recent musical trends and development of technology, seems to follow that gendered divide in musical business. If the woman is reduced to the position of the mere performer, then she becomes just but her own body and its manifestations – from the looks to the voice. The role of women in *Estrada* literally comes down to the presence and performance of her body.

The body of the female folk singer is not just the body of the woman which bears various cultural inscriptions, but a body that is in the first place represented in media. Many meanings are written on that body: “The body – what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body – is a medium of culture. The body, as anthropologist Mary Douglas has argued, is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body.”⁴¹ But at the same time, some meanings are also written by that media mediated body of the singer. That body speaks out its own narratives, cultural concepts and messages. One cannot avoid the question of what those

³⁹ Bradby, Barbara: Gender, Technology and the Body in Dance Music, *Popular Music*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (May, 1993), pp. 155-176 Published by: Cambridge University Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/931296>, accessed: 21.5.2009

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Bordo, Susan: “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity”, in Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (eds.) *Gender/body/knowledge : feminist reconstructions of being and knowing*, New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 1989, p 13

narratives are that the female body in *Estrada* speaks out, actually, what that body represents.

Annette Kuhn claims:

Representation, as I have suggested, sets in play certain relations of power through which, among other things, discourses around sexual differences and subjects in and for those discourses are ongoingly produced. In this sense, representation may be regarded, once more to adopt Foucauldian terminology, as a strategy of normalization. Representation participates in the various relations of power with which we are surrounded and in which we are always in one way or another implicated. Representation can be understood, then, as a form of regulation.⁴²

If we understand representation as a form of regulation, then the first thing that representation of female singer's body regulates is the one of gender, it proscribes certain norms of femininity, or to use Susan Bordo's formulation, her body is a certain "text of femininity"⁴³. The female body, as represented on Serbian *Estrada*, is always following traditional gender norms, and it constantly performs normative femininities. That body is always constructed as a typical female body with 'all the following attributes', as a well-known Serbian phrase says. *Estrada* allows only those types of femininities that correspond to heteronormative and heterosexist understandings of gender, exactly those which according to V. Spike Peterson turn out to be the pillar of nationalism.⁴⁴ Thus the body of the female folk singer on Serbian *Estrada*, and what it represents gains strong political inscriptions. While the body is seen as something that bears inscriptions of culture, it might, as S. Bordo says, "operate as a metaphor for culture."⁴⁵ But the representation of female body on *Estrada* has its political significance. I recall Moira Gatens here, according to whom:

⁴² Kuhn, Annette: "The Body and Cinema: Some Problems for Feminism", in Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (eds.) *Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997, p 204

⁴³ Bordo, Susan: "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity", in Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (eds.) *Gender/body/knowledge : feminist reconstructions of being and knowing*, New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 1989, p 16

⁴⁴ Peterson, V. Spike "Sexing Political Identities: Nationalism as Heterosexism," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1(1), June 1999: 34-65.

⁴⁵ Bordo, Susan: "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity", in Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (eds.) *Gender/body/knowledge : feminist reconstructions of being and knowing*, New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 1989, p 13

“This involves understanding ‘representation’ in the sense where one body or agent is taken to stand for a group of diverse bodies. Here we are considering the metonymical representation of a complex body by a privileged part of that body. The metaphor here slides into metonymy.”⁴⁶

Thus the female folk singer, that is, her body, has also become a metonymy for the whole neofolk genre and via that for most part of popular culture. I wrote about implications of that metonymic process in the first chapter. Through this metonymic process all aforementioned dichotomies that circulate in discourses on neofolk as urban/rural, high/popular culture are being highly gendered and therefore it is highly problematic to do an analysis of *Estrada* without using gender lenses. Prevailing political criticism of *Estrada* produced during the nineties mostly neglected wider theorizing of gender and through that process puts itself on the privileged side of following dichotomies such as culture – nature, male – female, mind – body, and consequently urban – rural. Recalling of the autochthonous nature reflected in traditional and rural lifestyles was the part of construction of Serbian nationalism and its isolationist politics⁴⁷, but the consequences of such positioning are that feminine again takes the other side of the divide, as ‘the other’.

A wider perspective on the body of the female folk singer might open various questions about seemingly very normative and rigid position of that body on the stage. For that analysis, I will borrow Laura Mulvey’s concept of male gaze⁴⁸. The position of the female star on *Estrada*’s stage and the way how the stage (instead of camera) is constructed, fetishizes her whole body and subjects it to the male gaze, partly by emphasizing specific body parts by TV camera.

Similar debates that followed Mulvey’s claim, objections to her theory and its rigid structure can be raised when the theory is applied on *Estrada*’s space. As Jackey Stacey asked, “How

⁴⁶ Gatens, Moira: “Corporeal Representation in / and the Body Politic”, in Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (eds.) *Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997, p 81

⁴⁷ Colovic, Ivan: “Politics of identity in Serbia”, New York: New York University Press, 2002

⁴⁸ Mulvey, Laura: “Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema.” In Patricia Erens, ed. *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, c1990. 28-40.

might a woman's look at another woman, both within the diegesis and between spectator and character, compare with that of the male spectator?"⁴⁹ Stacey found examples of woman-centered narrative in some of classical Hollywood movies. I find Stacey's concept of woman-centered narrative useful in analysis of *Estrada*, since the target audience of female folk singers are, above all, women. The female singer intentionally addresses female audience, and gets a response. Although the structure of the show doubtlessly objectifies the female singer, her personal narrative, transmitted through the song or interview might speak something completely opposite to society's patriarchal power relations, i.e. songs can address the problem of domestic violence, or celebrate women's independence and emancipation. *Estrada* exists as one of rare spheres in Serbian public life in which female voices are heard.

But is there the possibility of resistant reading of the body on the stage? Modifications of the body of the female singer and its practicing of normative femininities to a certain extent recalls Susan Bordo's observations on the body of an anorexic, and its possibility to enter the privileged male world.⁵⁰ As Bordo formulates it: "she has discovered this, paradoxically, by pursuing conventional feminine behavior – in this case, the discipline of perfecting the body as an object – to excess, to extreme. At this point of excess we might say that the conventionally feminine 'deconstructs' into its opposite and opens onto those values our culture has coded as male."⁵¹ Could we say something similar for bodily practices of some female folk singers? While the 'male' body certainly is not an outcome of bodily modifications, as in Bordo's example, still this female singer's excessive perfection and disciplining of the body may work in favor of deconstructing the "conventionally feminine".

⁴⁹ Stacey, Jackie: "Desperately Seeking Difference." In Patricia Erens, ed. *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, c1990. 365-379.

⁵⁰ Bordo, Susan: "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity", in Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (eds.) *Gender/body/knowledge : feminist reconstructions of being and knowing*, New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 1989, pp 23-4

⁵¹ Bordo, Susan: "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity", in Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (eds.) *Gender/body/knowledge : feminist reconstructions of being and knowing*, New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 1989, pp 23-4

The female singer's complete performance recalls Judith Butler's theory of performativity, where gender is seen as constantly performed, and the possibility of subversion lies there: there is always a possibility for the performance to fail. Butler sees drag as the example of that subversion⁵², and over-the-top performed femininity of the singers bears strong characteristics of subversive drag Butler writes about. As Branislav Dimitrijevic noticed, "the overall image of turbo-folk stars such as Jelena Karleusa, actually demonstrate how exaggerated stress on the construction of the female body as exclusively the object of male desire, ultimately poses a threat to that desire and press open cracks in the patriarchal social order."⁵³

The interventions on the body, especially plastic interventions, do not happen separately from the demands of the market. Folk singers are passing through the process of constant changing of their image, of constant bodily reconstruction, from one album to the next one. The postmodern folk singer's shattered body can be described with Susan Bordo's observation on Madonna's body. As Bordo says, each newly constructed body "has no material history; it conceals its continual struggle to maintain itself, it does not reveal its pain"⁵⁴. Here is possible to bring into play Donna Haraway's concept of a cyborg. One might regard the body of the female folk singer as "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction"⁵⁵, a synthesis of flesh and technological apparatus of the media. Digital technologies that are used in neofolk production directly influence and are connected to the female singer's body, through filtering, multiplication or some other interventions on the voice, or through modifying of the video spot. That female body, shaped by the whole

⁵² Butler, Judith: "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in Linda Nicholson (ed.) *The Second Wave Reader. A Reader in Feminist Theory*, New York and London: Routledge, 1997, pp 300 – 315

⁵³ Dimitrijevic, Branislav: "Global Turbo Folk", <http://www.ex-yupress.com/nin/nin139.html>, last accessed on 2.4.2009

⁵⁴ Bordo, Susan: "Material Girl" in *Unbearable weight: feminism, Western culture, and the body*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p 272

⁵⁵ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), p.149

production team of designers, surgeons and Photoshop masters, still stands in the middle of the stage, on the spotlight, with the presence and performance that cannot be avoided or neglected. Bojana Kunst, in her text *Cyborg and My Body*, introduces to us the example from the story by Villiers de L'isle Adam, in which a certain (male) scientist Edison constructs the female android as “the replacement for the moody and capricious Ms. Alicia Clairity”⁵⁶. We can easily draw a parallel between the scientist from the story, the constructor and producers’ teams of show business.

Besides the fact that Edison's creation could be interpreted as a confirmation of the creator's (that is, man's) power and authority (with the artificial woman symbolizing a perfect embodiment of patriarchal wish for a female being harmonic in structure, functional in its operativity, obeying, graceful, beautiful, and reduced in her perfection to some basic principles), there is another important aspect to consider. In psychoanalysis, it constitutes a part of »das Unheimliche«, with the female android symbolizing an image of threatening hybridity and the uncertainty it brings along.⁵⁷

Here we are brought back to the realm of traditional dichotomies such as mind/body and nature/culture. Masculinist domination of the realm of culture overflows here contemporary music production in the way that Bradby analyzed it while at the same time “inevitably classifying the female body to the domain of nature which strikes back whenever the demarcation line between life and non-life has been transgressed.”⁵⁸ The female android from L’Isle’s story, just as contemporary female singer, collapses the binary nature-culture. Kunst concludes:

The main supposition concealed in this understanding is that technology, or the history of it and that of science, is not really the matter of woman; even if regulated by force, woman inevitably carries the burden of the body, a part of unpredictable nature. The fusion of woman and artificiality, of woman and technology results in the birth of a ghost in the machine - and that ghost is actually her body.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Kunst, Bojana: “Cyborg and My Body”, 2001, www.kunstbody.com, last accessed on 9.4.2009.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Kunst, Bojana: “Cyborg and My Body”, 2001, www.kunstbody.com, last accessed on 9.4.2009.

⁵⁹ Kunst, Bojana: “Cyborg and My Body”, 2001, www.kunstbody.com, last accessed on 9.4.2009.

The female body here appears constructed, as Anne Balsamo would call it, as a hybrid case, “neither purely human nor purely machine ... [a body that] cannot be conceived as belonging wholly to either culture or nature; [it is] neither wholly technological nor completely organic.”⁶⁰ As Balsamo claims, “the cyborg image works well to foreground the radical materiality of the body, which cannot be written out of any feminist account.”⁶¹ This ghost in the machine disrupts dominant understanding of body as an object, the body whose, according to Elisabeth Grosz, constitutive role in shaping of thoughts, feelings, emotions and psychical representation⁶² is neglected; and it turns out that the cyborg body of the female folk singer speaks out these thoughts and emotions that, as I mentioned before, might confront the dominant patriarchal ideology. Ghost in the machine, certain agency that folk singer might have, to apply B. Kunst’s words:

The body in fact constantly confronts with its basic potentiality that paradoxically makes it as strong – as the body of someone or something. (...)The body becomes visible with contemporary fading of borders and instead of being weak, it on some special way becomes strong. With blurring the boundaries, contemporary hybridity, it gains the true visibility and reveals to us, problematizing the way of its representation. Now the body grasps and confronts with boundaries and traditional reduction in dichotomy and forces us to think hybrid and to constantly face the paradoxical, always following and relational constitution of our identity, to face the knowledge that there is no body as such. In other words, to paraphrase D. Haraway: now the need of its politics is revealed.⁶³

And what is then the body politics of the female folk singer? What are implications of looking at a female folk singer’s body as a cyborg? How can we talk about that body’s cyborg functions when we know that that body is not innocent, when it bears political responsibility and is accused for contribution to the building of Serbian nationalism? Does the recalling of

⁶⁰ Balsamo, Anne: “Technologies of the gendered body : reading cyborg women” Durham : Duke University Press, 1996, p 33

⁶¹ Ibid, p 40

⁶² Grosz, Elisabeth: „Promenljiva tela [Volatile Bodies]“, Centar za ženske studije, Beograd, 2005, p 30.

⁶³ Kunst, Bojana: “Simptomi tehno tela [Symptoms of Techno Bodies]” in: *TkH, magazine for theory and practice of performing arts*, issue no 3, Belgrade, April 2002, p 54. (my translation)

the concept of the cyborg contribute to *Estrada*'s distancing from that history? Does *Estrada* recognize a strategy which helps it to distance itself from the history and to wash its hands symbolically, when we know that cyborg is "completely without innocence"⁶⁴? As Haraway further states, "The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential."⁶⁵ Such a position is partly enabled by the fact that in Serbian society after 2000 it is not so easy to identify 'the main enemy' anymore, as it was the case with Slobodan Milosevic and his regime were the enemy was so clearly visible and present. Now *Estrada* got its chance to more visibly express and reflect complex struggles in Serbian society after 2000. "As a cyborg, simultaneously discursive and material, the female body is the site at which we can witness the struggle between the systems of social order"⁶⁶. We are coming back to the question of what is inscribed on the singer's body, and what that body speaks out. As Elisabeth Grosz says, "differences [between subjects] must in some way be inscribed on and experienced by and through the body", and for example one of those inscribed differences is the class difference.⁶⁷ Singer's transgression from 'natural' to a cyborg body also signifies the transgression to upper classes, and recalls the narrative of the escape: the trip from the mud of early live performances to music records and TV studios. The female folk singer on the TV screen appears as the fulfillment of the Serbian dream. This will be further discussed in the fourth chapter. Once again, to use Bordo's formulation, these "compulsive regiments of bodily 'improvement' (...) suggest that a *political* battle is being waged over the energies and resources of the female body".⁶⁸ The female singer's body, constantly present on the stage's

⁶⁴ Haraway, Donna: "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York; Routledge, 1991, p 151

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Balsamo, Anne: "Technologies of the gendered body : reading cyborg women" Durham : Duke University Press, 1996, p 39

⁶⁷ Grosz, Elisabeth: "Feminism and the Crisis of Reason" in: Linda Alcoff and Elisabeth Potter, *Feminist Epistemologies*, Routledge, New York and London, p 195

⁶⁸ Bordo, Susan: "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity", in Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (eds.) *Gender/body/knowledge : feminist reconstructions of being and knowing*, New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers

spotlight recalls Mary Russo's observation that "making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was of an exposure."⁶⁹ Further Russo says: "There is a way in which radical negation, silence, withdrawal and invisibility, and the bold affirmations of feminine performance, imposture, and masquerade (purity and danger) have suggested cultural politics for women."⁷⁰ The female folk singer clearly occupies this flamboyant position of extreme spectacles, spectacles that speak out certain politics. Once again, it turns out that as Barbara Kruger stated in her well-known art piece, 'the body is a battleground'. The body of the female folk singer, brought to us through technology, appears as the possible basis for constructions and reconstructions of various identities in local context. These identities are inseparable from the singer's body and its manifestations and representations. It is important to notice that the entire singer's body, even if it is a cyborg body, still functions within the context, and in following that line it produces contextual identities, on a wide scale from resistance to affirmation of prevalent ideologies and discourses in contemporary Serbian society. In the following chapters I will examine these identities.

3. Paradox of *Estrada*

The female body on *Estrada* is determined by local socio-political context, and appears as the basis for constructions and reconstructions of various identities in that context. These identities are inseparable from the singer's body and its manifestations and representations. In this chapter I intend to show how the bodies of the female folk singers may simultaneously speak out two different, even paradoxical stories. It might function at the same time both as

University Press, 1989, p 28.

⁶⁹ Russo, Mary: "Female Grotesque: Carnival and Theory", in Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (eds.) *Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997, p 318

⁷⁰ Ibid, p 319

the axis of the nation, and the reminder of a failure of Serbian nationalism. Through those two seemingly paradoxical meanings which reveal the complexity of *Estrada*, I intend to pose the question: what are the outcomes of these two seemingly confronted positions.

3.1 Female singer's body as homogenizer of national identity

It is important to repeat one more time, that *Estrada* is not an isolated Serbian phenomena, but it is included in global musical trends. It follows them, uses latest musical influences, accepts the latest technological innovations, and means of production, etc. Again I will recall Barbara Bradby's notions on gendered nature of contemporary music business, now relating it to the female singer's body as the site for the gathering of the nation.. The divide in which men are associated with production, technology, and the process of creation of the song ("the realm of culture, technology and language"), and women "equated with sexuality, the body, emotion and nature in dance music"⁷¹, when brought to context of contemporary Serbia, somehow corresponds with Anne McClintock's notions about time paradox of nationalism: it is invoking the glorious past and at the same time pursues the progress. McClintock claims that the paradox is solved through gender:

Temporal anomaly within nationalism – veering between nostalgia for the past, and the impatient, progressive sloughing off the past – is typically resolved by figuring the contradiction as a 'natural' division of *gender*. Women are represented as atavistic and authentic 'body' of national tradition (inert, backward looking, and natural), embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity. Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward thrusting, potent and historic), embodying nationalism's progressive, or revolutionary principle of discontinuity.⁷²

⁷¹ Bradby, Barbara: Gender, Technology and the Body in Dance Music, *Popular Music*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (May, 1993), pp. 155-176 Published by: Cambridge University Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/931296>, accessed: 21.5.2009.

⁷² McClintock, Anne "Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family," *Feminist Review* 44, Summer 1993, p 66

Authentic, natural female body is inevitable in nationalist narratives. As Ivan Colovic says, “nature is the great goddess of all political mythology altogether, not only Serbian.”⁷³ ‘Nature’ is uncorrupted by foreign influences, and therefore perfect for preservation of national identity.⁷⁴ As Flora Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis stated, one of women’s major roles in nationalism is to participate “in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and transmitters of its culture”⁷⁵. ‘Nature’ becomes the source of nation, and the female body its symbolic embodiment.

Further, an inherent part of the process of construction and homogenization of national identity is positioning of that identity in relation to the others. Ivan Colovic notices that “among the figures of contemporary Serbian political myth, an important place has once again been occupied by one evil divinity, a kind of fallen angel known by the name of the Rotten West or the Old Maid Europe”⁷⁶. *Estrada* has its role in constructing the West as the other of Serbian nation and it is manifested both through the lyrics and stage performance. We can find the perfect example in the songs that speak very precisely about certain geographical toponyms, like Europe, Balkan, Serbia, Kosovo. Songs describe Balkan/Serbia as passionate entity, full of life, pure feelings and spontaneous reactions (‘heart not made of stone’), as opposed to “the other”, the West. Words which are used to describe Europe are “them” or “the others”. On the level of pure physical experience and pleasure, Europe is stereotypically rendered as something artificial, cold and soulless, incapable of knowing the essence of life but capable of envying (‘The others can, as before, just to envy us’⁷⁷). As Colovic picturesquely describes, “facing this morally and biologically degenerate stands the robust

⁷³ Colovic, Ivan: “Politics of identity in Serbia”, New York: New York University Press, 2002, p 21

⁷⁴ Ibid, p 22

⁷⁵ Anthias, Flora and Yuval-Davis, Nira: “Introduction.” In Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias (eds.), *Woman-Nation-State*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), p 7

⁷⁶ Colovic, Ivan: “Politics of identity in Serbia”, New York: New York University Press, 2002, p 39

⁷⁷ Seka Aleksic – *Balkan*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YT3V2-adEts>, accessed 3.6.2009.

figure of Serbia, observing the monster before her with revulsion and shame”⁷⁸. Serbian nationhood is, through the song and singer’s performance, positioned as superior and special, strongly constructed around natural, pristine and authentic values. Through celebration and recalling of naturalness and natural forces, the quality of national life is redeemed too⁷⁹. That national life, national force, “the existential strength of the nation” is, as Colovic states, “reflected in its connection to the soil”.⁸⁰ National identity is being constructed through strong physical experience, experience lived through the body.

Female singer’s body on the stage, who in this setting symbolically represents the nation, is worshiped by nation’s individuals. The very body of the singer and her passionate performance here becomes the mediator between the other bodies of the nation with its territory, her body bears and represents both the spirit and the body (territory) of the nation; perversely recalling notion of *blut und boden*, she is becoming a symbolic axis around which Serbian imagined community gathers and constantly reinforces itself through ritualistic celebration of its mythical specificity. Strong connection with the soil and the nature defines Serbian national being as authentic, and puts it into nationalistic timeframe which always recalls deep rootedness in the past. Through such performed ritual, the nation constitutes itself as united and unitary, self-sufficient and self-satisfied in its isolation. Or, as the song simply says, “Who cares about Europe?”⁸¹

Parts of the most popular *Estrada*’s TV show, Grand Show, also function as another way of positioning in relation to West. Grand Show includes small musical acts of impersonation. What is impersonated are various moments, mostly from Western popular culture, such as

⁷⁸ Colovic, Ivan: “Politics of identity in Serbia”, New York: New York University Press, 2002

⁷⁹ Colovic, Ivan: “Politics of identity in Serbia”, New York: New York University Press, 2002, 22

⁸⁰ Colovic, Ivan: “Politics of identity in Serbia”, New York: New York University Press, 2002, 26

⁸¹ Stoja – *Evropa* [Europe], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvPjBeRvST0>, accessed: 3.6.2009.

Superman, Batman, black hip-hopper, or even robot⁸². Here we come back to the old story about nature and authentic national being: all those impersonations are part of the show which is called “Grand transformation”. The feature of something foreign is ascribed to them already in the title, something which doesn’t originally belong to the space of *Estrada* and Serbian (neo)folk song. Bringing the signifiers of Western culture together with national folk song, with something originally considered as ‘ours’, is presented on the stage through the genre of comedy, often through farce, where, through self mockery, what is actually being ridiculed is the West.

3.2 Female singer’s body and gay audience

However, just as she functions as a homogenizer of national identity, the same singer might as well speak out a quite different, even paradoxical message. As Wendy Bracewell noted, the reinforcement of patriarchal gender roles was the crucial part in construction of Serbian nationalism.⁸³ Following that line, it is not a surprise that activist minority groups, gay and lesbian groups above all, eagerly accept neofolk. As Jasmina Milojevic summarizes, “[gay and lesbian groups] are interested in turbofolk and its narratives that act subversively on existing social moral. They see turbofolk’s dismantling of patriarchal family as the chance for affirmation of their own interests, because for them such family is the enemy number one”⁸⁴

The symbolic role of the mother, (mother as a metaphor for the country) or the axis of the nation, through the same singer’s performance might be undermined and subverted. The same singer might at the same time function as a homogenizer of the nation, and fall out from a

⁸² Bora Drljaca and Era Ojdanic – Supermeni [Supermen], http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=19BF8EBD786FEEFA&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&v=1iRIMcloukQ, accessed: 3.6.2009.

Zorica Markovic as Mina – Sexy Robot, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5x-572xIAOg>, accessed: 5.6.2009.

Zorica Markovic – Mirno spavaj nano [Sweet dreams, mum], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cWAWIAG6X4>, accessed: 2.6.2009.

⁸³ Bracewell, Wendy: *Rape in Kosovo: Masculinity and Serbian Nationalism*, Nations and Nationalism 6(4), 2000: pp 563-590

⁸⁴ Milojevic, Jasmina: “Turbo-folk: World music ili postmoderni Vavilon? [Turbo-folk: World music or postmodern Babylon]”, http://jazzymcoyu.page.tl/Turbo_folk.htm?PHPSESSID=cc00b77590c88b0d0b417b3f3d5eb1b6, accessed: 2.4.2009.

patriarchal nationalist pattern that supports Serbian nationalism. It happens in that moment when the older or middle-age female body steps out from its proscribed place, when it starts to shatter its sexuality on the stage. It is important to note here that even when singers are young, their body is represented as at least ten years older. The age on *Estrada* is also connected with social status, and I will further discuss this in the fourth chapter.

Through this manifestation of sexuality, *Estrada* opposes the social order that by definition puts the taboo on the sexuality of older women. Another spot for gay identification opens up here, when we take into account well-known prejudice about death of gay sex life after entering thirties. But the connection between Serbian gay audience and *Estrada* doesn't end here. As I explained in the previous chapter, the female singer's performance recalls the characteristics of subversive drag Butler writes about.⁸⁵ Drag becomes the ultimate example of gender's performativity, of instability of gender roles. Drag is the parody of stable identities; and in a parodic manner it mocks them. The drag show, for Butler, is the deconstruction of essential identities. Performed femininity of the female folk singers, as Branislav Dimitrijevic says, "press open cracks in the patriarchal social order."⁸⁶ "Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but *gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself."⁸⁷ If gender is not original, natural, then the role of women as the bearer of national identity in nationalism becomes (visible?) as a pure construction, and as the outcome we are faced with a completely

⁸⁵ Butler, Judith: "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in Linda Nicholson (ed.) *The Second Wave Reader. A Reader in Feminist Theory*, New York and London: Routledge, 1997, pp 300 – 315

⁸⁶ Dimitrijevic, Branislav: "Global Turbo Folk", <http://www.ex-yupress.com/nin/nin139.html>, last accessed on 2.4.2009

⁸⁷ Butler, Judith: "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in Linda Nicholson (ed.) *The Second Wave Reader. A Reader in Feminist Theory*, New York and London: Routledge, 1997, pp 300 – 315, p 306

opposite reading of *Estrada's* female body: it here appears as a reminder of a failure of Serbian nationalism.

The body of the female folk singers resembles drag queen shows, and that feature is being recognized in the public discourse, since one might often hear in Serbian tabloid press and everyday speech that these female singers look like transvestites. Singer Jelena Karleusa here appears as the most prominent example, who even insists on that connection, in the video spot for the song “Slatka mala [Sweet little-one]”⁸⁸ in which shots of Jelena Karleusa are juxtaposed with images of three drag queens who are, suggested by video’s narrative, impersonating our star, Karleusa herself. Karleusa plays with associations of her body with transvestite body, underlying that with lyrics about “sweet little-one” who impersonates her: “She does everything just as me”. Karleusa intentionally addresses gay audience, intentionally builds the clear connections, and finally through that adds another meaning, or possible solution for her question from the beginning of the song. The sweet little-one “who lives from the scandals” may not necessarily be a woman.

The awareness of performance creates the clear link between female folk stars and gay audiences, moreover, many female neofolk stars have been constructed as gay icons. As Richard Dyer claims using the example of Judy Garland, gay icons and their construction, lead “to a discussion of the culture produced by gay men, thus telling us not about how gay men have been represented by the dominant media, but how gay men have used an image in the dominant media as a means of speaking to each other about themselves”⁸⁹. The whole process is being enforced through the audience’s awareness of invisible production team that

⁸⁸ Jelena Karleusa, “Slatka mala [Sweet little-one]”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XGrLCBZoQ>, accessed: 1.6.2009.

⁸⁹ Dyer, Richard: “Heavenly bodies: film stars and society”, Routledge, 2004, p x

stands behind the female folkstars, with the inexplicable feeling that, as Alexander Doty puts it, “some homosexual must have something with this”⁹⁰.

Here we might speak about readings of popular culture that characterize gay readings of popular culture. I will use A. Doty’s notions on gay film production to describe the process of the emergence of gay audience of *Estrada*. While claiming that *queering* of texts that belong to mainstream heterocentric culture is not just the product of inputting the queer content or appropriation by queer readers, Doty touches upon the matter of authorship, saying that straight people are not the only ones involved in the production of movies, TV shows or music videos.⁹¹ According to him, one of the aspects of gay film production is the “invisible” production, as Doty names it, production mostly associated with mainstream film, that includes gay people who without public knowledge about their sexuality were involved in the production of the texts. Richard Dyer as well claims that it “does make a difference who makes a film, who the authors are”.⁹² Dyer further claims that from that perspective both authorship and homosexuality are always some kind of performance. This performance supports the final performance of the singer, the star gets to represent the whole gay group that stands behind her, as the embodiment of their voice. Interplay between invisible gay pop production and gay consumers of popular culture, further constitutes what Doty calls “gay spectatorship”⁹³. In that way Dejan Milicevic through video spot introduced gay aesthetics in Serbian mainstream popular culture in the nineties, and Jelena Karleusa concluded in TV show *Piramida*, when while defending rights of gay population, literally outed half of her

⁹⁰ Doty, Alexander, “Gej moment na filmu”, <http://www.gay-serbia.com/art/2004/04-02-04-gej-momenti-na-filmu/index.jsp>, in: *Gay Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia*, izd. George E. Haggerty, New York & London, 2000, accessed: 2.3.2009. (my translation from Serbian)

⁹¹ Doty, Alexander: „Flaming Classics“, Routledge, New York i London, 2000, p 4

⁹² Dyer, Richard: “Believing in Fairies: The Author and The Homosexual”, in Diana Fuss (ed.) *Inside/Out*, Routledge, New York, 1991, p 185

⁹³ Doty, Alexander, “Gej momenti na filmu [Gay Moments on Cinema]”, <http://www.gay-serbia.com/art/2004/04-02-04-gej-momenti-na-filmu/index.jsp>, originally published in: *Gay Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia*, izd. George E. Haggerty, New York & London, 2000, accessed: 2.3.2009. (my translation from Serbian)

production and fashion team.⁹⁴ Female singers, such as Jelena Karleusa, Indira Radic, Seka Aleksić and others, further supported their newly created image of gay icons, not only because of their performance but also because of their autonomous public appearances such as interviews, in which they publicly support gay rights and the right to love.⁹⁵

Camp appears as the main strategy for gay reading of *Estrada*, as was strictly denoted by Viva la Diva and Vlada T., the authors of text “Forgotten history of Serbian folk avant-garde”. “Analysis of lyrics of folk music of eighties and nineties (...) [in our text] given on camp and selfparodic way (...) is a kind of postmodern re-reading of established contents and gives them new sense and value in social context.”⁹⁶ Camp is another crucial thing for gay appropriation of the singers and establishing singers as gay icons. Richard Dyer noticed, while writing on Judy Garland as a gay icon, that to Garland was ascribed “special relationship to suffering, ordinariness, normality, and it is this relationship that structures much of the gay reading of Garland”⁹⁷ Following these lines, common themes of neofolk songs, such as revenge, suffering because of love, woman who ‘stole’ a man, woman ‘rivals’, evoke typical gay parody of gender. Gay appropriation of neofolk songs simply follows Butler’s call upon playing with drag, and makes the answer to her question: “But what if Aretha were singing to me? Or what if she were singing it to a drag queen whose performance somehow confirmed her own?”⁹⁸

⁹⁴ “Piramida”, *TV Pink*, (Belgrade, 20 November 2008). <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ha5k-jHxcPY>, accessed: 4.6.2009.

⁹⁵ For example: Seka Aleksić – “Moj verenik voli meso [My Fiancée likes meat]”, http://www.balkanmedia.com/magazin/3306/seka_aleksic_moj_verenik_voli_meso.html, accessed: 1.2.2009 ; Jelena Karleusa – “Buntovna princeza u zemlji seljaka [Rebelious Princess in the Land of Pesants]”, <http://www.gayecho.com/interview.aspx?id=6829&grid=4481&page=2>, accessed: 3.4.2009 ; Indira Radic – “Podrzala bih svog gej sina [I would support my gay son]”, *Svet magazine*, Belgrade, 7 Feb. 2009

⁹⁶ Viva la Diva and Vlada T “Zaboravljena istorija srpske folk-avangarde [The Forgotten history of Serbian folk avant- garde]”, http://www.gay-serbia.com/kolumna/2002/02-08-14-folk_avangarda/index.jsp, last accessed on 15.5.2009.

⁹⁷ Dyer, Richard: “Heavenly bodies: film stars and society”, Routledge, 2004, p 188

⁹⁸ Butler, Judith: “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” in Linda Nicholson (ed.) *The Second Wave Reader. A Reader in Feminist Theory*, New York and London: Routledge, 1997, pp 300 – 315, p 312

The subversiveness of this position on Serbian nationalism lies in dismantling of traditional gender roles, and challenge to categories of hegemonic masculinity. According to Michael Kimmel, masculinity is being constantly constructed and reinforced through homophobia⁹⁹. When we talk about nationalist narratives we are certainly amidst a male and masculine field; all these narratives are, to use Joane Nagel's formulation, "written primarily by men, for men, and about men, and (...) women are, by design, supporting actors whose roles reflect masculinist notions of femininity and of women's proper 'place'."¹⁰⁰ If the certain aspects of female singer's body transgress masculinist imagination, and fall out of the proper scheme, if that body is shaped according to these notions, but over the edge so it subverts them as Dimitrijevic claims, if it allies with gay audiences and makes them visible, that body additionally disturbs that masculinity.

Since homophobia turns out to be one of constitutive elements of ultra nationalist parties and organizations, and bearing in mind that *Estrada* also contributes to homogenization of national identity, the question arises how it is possible that *Estrada* expresses so much supportiveness for gay issues. Paradoxality of *Estrada* also reveals the following question: to what extent gay identity excludes nationalism? The complex relationship between sexuality and national identity in Serbia complicates simple confrontation of above analyzed two functions of the body on Serbian *Estrada*. Also, such insight in *Estrada* disturbs the common thinking that in the country in which the nationalist project is defined as homophobic one, defined gay identity (out of closet) must be political, and by definition opposed to right wing nationalist forces. The question arises how these identities are merging, and what now becomes constitutive for national identity. *Estrada* as the developed market which follows dominant social currents and responds to them in order to constantly mark out new target

⁹⁹ Kimmel, Michael S.: "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity". In Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman, eds. *Theorizing Masculinities*. Newbury Park, Ca: Sage 1994, 119-142.

¹⁰⁰ Nagel, Joane: "Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21(2), March 1998: 242-269, p 243

groups, here shows a raster of possibilities. This paradox of *Estrada* and the questions that appear as its outcome suggest the chaotic clash of ideologies and standpoints which seem to characterize transitional Serbia after 2000.

4. 'As One Woman To Another' – folk singers and female audience

I tried to explain in the previous chapter how *Estrada* by sending wide range of messages, addresses and tries to balance between the most different audiences. Now I will come back on the one of my questions from the beginning, and that is how *Estrada* communicates with

‘wide masses of people’, those who are recognized as *Estrada*’s main consumers. This is also a point where the class issue comes into the picture, which would have also to be taken into account more extensively in a longer and more comprehensive analysis of the phenomena I am describing. Namely, majority of the people addressed by *Estrada* are also recognized as ‘the greatest losers of the transition’, that is, people who lost some significant social rights which were granted in socialism (secured job, medical insurance, long vacations, subsidized apartments, etc.) while they did not really profit from the benefits of transition due to very different reasons (low level education, loss of job, etc.). There is also a significant gender aspect of this situation, since women are the majority among ‘losers of transition’.

But in this thesis I am going to touch upon this problem only partly, focusing on the communication between female folk singers and their female audience, and on the messages female folk singers tend to articulate and transmit in that communication. In my analysis I want to go beyond usual reading that emphasizes only escapist function of *Estrada*, looking more closely into the way female singers perform their roles.

The messages that body of the female folk singer on *Estrada* sends out cannot be separated from their songs. Lyrics that are sung by the singers’ voice also are part of that package that produces the meanings. The song (music + lyrics) supplement the text that singer’s body speaks out. In a certain way, text of the song determines the reading of the singer’s body.

These songs bear strong characteristics of melodrama. Similar to melodrama genre, these songs tend to use plots that cause expression of strong emotions in the audience, often dealing with "crises of human emotion, failed romance or friendship, strained familial situations, tragedy, illness, neuroses, or emotional and physical hardship."¹⁰¹ Melodrama is focused on romantic plots and almost exclusively on domesticity, and it includes stereotypical,

¹⁰¹ Dirks, Tim: “Melodrama films”, <http://www.filmsite.org/melodramafilms.html>, accessed: 4.6.2009.

schematized characters, painted in black and white. The characters in neofolk song are simplified, emotions exaggerated, and the plot basically could be described as “true love is endangered by the interference of a third person.”¹⁰² Neofolk’s “essentially romantic aesthetics can be illustrated by its concentration on the unattainable state of emotional fulfillment. The affects invoked in pursuit of romantic love – forgiveness, friendship, togetherness and loyalty – are interpreted as values of broader interpersonal relations. Love sentiments often translate into self-reflection, revealing vulnerability, self-doubt and existential solitude.”¹⁰³ Melodrama is also considered to be ‘feminine’ genre. In a similar fashion, the target audience of female folk singers are, above all, women.

Now, historical melodrama “embodied different meanings for marginal audiences and so engaged tensions centered on class rather than merely disempowering or exploiting the poor by constructing them as middle class. Melodrama’s associations with the lower classes were strong from the outset, as was its tendency to function as an alternative form of cultural expression.”¹⁰⁴ Domesticity is the main space of melodrama, but however is melodrama strictly focused on domestic affairs, social context in it is strongly present, and it highly determines the problems of the characters. As Catherine Baker says about neofolk, calling upon Ivan Colovic, this musical genre also “emphasized ‘romantic motifs’ often ultimately connected to family life”¹⁰⁵ But in neofolk social criticism is not so evident as in melodrama. It still doesn’t mean that reflections on the society are completely left out. Ljerka Rasmussen says:

¹⁰² In original: “dvoje se vole, a treci im smeta”. Phrase is commonly used on dramaturgy classes to describe melodramatic plots.

¹⁰³ Rasmussen, Ljerka V.: “From Source to Commodity: Newly-Composed Folk Music of Yugoslavia”, *Popular Music*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (May, 1995), pp. 241-256, Cambridge University Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/853402>, last accessed on 5.5.2009.

¹⁰⁴ Leaver, Kristen: “Victorian Melodrama and the Performance of Poverty”, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25058463>, accessed: 3.6.2009.

¹⁰⁵ Baker, Catherine: “The concept of turbofolk in Croatia: inclusion/exclusion in the construction of national musical identity”, In: *Nation in formation: inclusion and exclusion in central and eastern Europe*, ed. Catherine Baker, Christopher J Gerry, Barbara Madaj, Liz Mellish and Jana Nahodilová, London: SSEES Publications, 2007 stranice!

This lack of manifest political leaning in NCFM [neofolk] texts indicates its capacity to 'give voice' to the individual rather than to assert audience solidarity through community filtered values of shared social origin, ethnic allegiance, or socio-cultural marginality. This is not to suggest that these themes are excluded from the function of music's communicative power. Initial attempts to group the songs that have the 'weight' of social commentary have just shown that oppositional stance of the genre is tenuous. Yet while a critical stance is not self-evident in verbal texts, NCFM's subcultural significance is easily revealed 'outside' the music, in the broader context of cultural differentiation.¹⁰⁶

Is it possible to read social reflections from female singers' neofolk songs, and how it can be done? Ljerka Rasmussen says about newly composed folk music, that is, neofolk music the following: "The social prose translates into personal poetics. Loneliness caused by unrequited love marks an individual's social withdrawal; in turn, social alienation and marginality are transmuted into emotional experiences."¹⁰⁷ And vice versa, emotional experiences echo social marginal position. In neofolk songs, the usual setting is enclosed, small space, the family circle or the smalltown surroundings. That world is strictly heteronormative, and usual topic of the songs is failed heterosexual relationship. As melodrama puts private affairs in the public space of the stage/screen, in a similar way neofolk song exposes ruined family and patriarchal relations on the public sight. The topics of the songs are pre- or post-family relationships, the song and its overwhelming emotions reveal that the ideal loving and caring heteronormative family is hard to achieve; 'the true love' is constantly pursued but never really reached.

What causes ideal of family to fail? The most common reasons are unequal emotions that two people feel for one another. But those emotions are not articulated in seclusion, separated from the outer world. It is perhaps most visible on the motif of *kafana*, a typical Serbian bar, which is today exclusively associated with suburban and rural areas, as the gathering place

¹⁰⁶ Rasmussen, Ljerka V.: "From Source to Commodity: Newly-Composed Folk Music of Yugoslavia", *Popular Music*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (May, 1995), pp. 241-256, Cambridge University Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/853402>, last accessed on 5.5.2009.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

typical for working class. Ljerka Rasmussen notices that *kafana* is somewhat of an essential setting of neofolk songs, “a key metaphor for in-group social space.”¹⁰⁸ Further, “the *kafana* is typically associated with male-dominated notions of carousing, competitive drinking, and mutual treating, along with the conversational unfolding of time.”¹⁰⁹ Public space of *kafana* is coded as male space, the privileged space, space which embodies Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick concept of homosociality¹¹⁰. She claims that formations that involve “men who desire a woman, (...) have an erotic component central to the bond between the rival males. Sedgwick suggests that the men symbolically give themselves to each other through the exchange of a woman.”¹¹¹ The female singer as the central figure in *kafana* is exposed to male desire, and serves to establish homosociality which serves as the force that strengthens patriarchal society. Homosociality reinforces patriarchal society which leaves women out of public sphere, out of access to money and power resources. Homosociality is implicitly present in neofolk songs. Protagonist of the song presents herself as ‘everywoman’ and frustration caused by moral and social restrictions is publicly articulated and manifested as disappointment in love. Simply, ‘Mr. Right’ doesn’t exist:

“[You tell me] Sanja you can’t do this, Sanja you can’t do that
And I thought I saw something new in you”¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Rasmussen, Ljerka V.: “From Source to Commodity: Newly-Composed Folk Music of Yugoslavia”, *Popular Music*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (May, 1995), pp. 241-256, Cambridge University Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/853402>, last accessed on 5.5.2009.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky: *Between men: English literature and male homosocial desire*, New York : Columbia University Press, 1985

¹¹¹ Mentxaka, Aintzane Legaretta: “A New Picture: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Between Men*”, *Irish Feminist Review* vol. 3, 1.12.2007.

¹¹² Sanja Djordjevic – Sanja, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIwqFCfG7OE>, accessed: 6.6.2009.

Men in this corpus of neofolk songs are cowards, cheaters, alcoholics, but still with privileged social status. Marginal position of woman provokes strong emotions in the song, on a wide range from suffering to despite:

“You have everything, and that’s why
I won’t be with you.”¹¹³

Songs further express dissatisfaction, resistance to controlling, through lyrics like “I am not your sexy robot”¹¹⁴, “go away and don’t come back”¹¹⁵, “you will get what you’ve deserved”¹¹⁶). Emotions are articulated through violence, such as breaking the glasses, or in the simple lyrics like “die!”, or “to hell with you!”. Calling upon violence in neofolk songs is at the same time expression of powerlessness and tool for revenge:

“Hey, If I was a man for just thirty seconds
You would, my dear, fall on the floor in the first round
For all those deceits and lies
You would get what your sinning soul deserves”¹¹⁷

Privileges are often articulated through excess behavior. In another song, Seka Aleksic sings: “If I was like you, I would break the glasses”¹¹⁸. But the female singer is not ‘like him’, so her excess behavior meets the public shame and condemnation; she thus becomes “marked”¹¹⁹ or “fallen”¹²⁰, in a smalltown setting which is another common motif in many neofolk songs. As Radomir Konstantinovic says, “The tyranny of the *Palanka* [provincial small town] is the

¹¹³ Stoja – O ne, ne, ne [Oh no, no, no], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPbLpnumVLw>, accessed: 2.4.2009.

¹¹⁴ Mina Kostic – Sexy Robot, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4Zq7qdv4Zg>, accessed: 5.3.2009.

¹¹⁵ Stoja – Idi, idi [Go away], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMKyIL2kwG8>, accessed: 1.6.2009.

¹¹⁶ Stoja – Moj zivot je moje blago [My Life is My Treasure], http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z0fRSdO_tU4, accessed: 2.5.2009.

¹¹⁷ Seka Aleksic – Da sam musko [If I was a man], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=778WOYGS1N8>, accessed: 7.6.2009.

¹¹⁸ Seka Aleksic – Opet [Again], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j05DjNJSLYQ>, accessed: 2.2.2009.

¹¹⁹ Viki Miljkovic – Obelezena [Marked], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Koa2-lPh6Ms>, accessed 3.4.2009.

¹²⁰ Elma – Gradske price [City gossips], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFmJPxNjrbU>, accessed 12.1.2009.

tyranny of public inspection, or the tyranny of this absolute publicity and the publicity of everything. If this always contains exceptions, an exception (...) is only acceptable only as scorned and ridiculed”¹²¹ That despise for the “fallen” singer means that ideal of love cannot be reached in her surroundings. Or, as Viki Miljkovic sings it in one of her songs:

“There is no love for me in this town
Here everybody knows that I used to be yours.”¹²²

To recall Simone de Bouvoire here in this specific context of neofolk songs: women there are “defined and differentiated with reference to man”¹²³. In neofolk texts, these men are willing to control, careless, and almost without the exception, they do not know how to love. In neofolk texts love appears as the medium for transmission of statements about social relations – heteronormative love is unreachable ideal, something that always fails. Gender inequality disables the possibility of everlasting love, which is still being constantly pursued in an enclosed circle. Despite simple and very personal plots, social relations echo in neofolk songs, or, as Ljerka Rasmussen said, “critical stance is not self-evident in verbal texts, NCFM’s subcultural significance is easily revealed ‘outside’ the music, in the broader context of cultural differentiation.”¹²⁴ That is, the world organized on traditional, patriarchal, heteronormative stances, in which love relationship is imperative, but at the same time the world in which “love is only one step before madness”¹²⁵. Again we are in the realm of melodrama – the relationship between two people is disturbed by the third party, and that third party is often the world – social order – itself. In female singer’s neofolk song it turns

¹²¹ Konstantinovic, Radomir, *Filozofija palanke* [Philosophy of Small Town], Nolit, Belgrade, 1991, p 20

¹²² Viki Miljkovic – Obelezena [Marked], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Koa2-lPh6Ms>, accessed 3.4.2009.

¹²³ Simone de Beauvoir, “Introduction”. *The Second Sex* (originally pub. 1949). In Linda Nicholson, ed. *The Second Wave. A Reader in Feminist Theory*. New York/London: Routledge 1997, 7-18 ili <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/de-beauvoir/2nd-sex/introduction.htm>

¹²⁴ Rasmussen, Ljerka V.: “From Source to Commodity: Newly-Composed Folk Music of Yugoslavia”, *Popular Music*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (May, 1995), pp. 241-256, Cambridge University Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/853402>, last accessed on 5.5.2009.

¹²⁵ Donna Ares – To mi nije trebalo [I didn’t need this], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=825E862-qvo>, accessed: 7.6.2009.

out that, to recall R.W. Fassbinder, “love is the best, most insidious, most effective instrument of social repression.”¹²⁶

Now, how does that social repression that I read out from the lyrics manifest itself on the female singer’s body? What is the female audience’s response to that body and the messages it sends them, both through songs and its bodily text? Neofolk songs have escapist function, they offer to the audience both temporary escape from dreary everyday life and a dream of that escape. The romantic utopia of neofolk songs is enforced with narratives on female singer’s personal escape from the social bottom. Those stories are also represented through female singer’s modified body. The change through which female singer’s body passes in the process of coming to *Estrada*, singer’s transgression from ‘natural’ to cyborg body, appears as climbing up the social ladder. The common place in female singers’ life narratives are stories about hard childhood and *Estrada* career that started in dirty local bars (Seka Aleksic, Slavica Cukteras, Tanja Savic and Radmila Manojlovic started their careers as the *kafana* singers); they are almost inevitable in singers’ biographies. These life stories are presented in romanticized narratives that easily might be expressed through the old Latin sentence *per aspera ad astra*. The hard trip from *kafana* on *Ibarska magistrala* to the record contract figures here as the metaphor for fulfillment of Serbian dream. And many times, the reminiscence on that dirty period of singing in *kafana* is present in the songs, always described as the period of hard work, suffering, unrest, and uncertainty:

“This is my last night in this town
I sing for all good people
And tomorrow, who knows where I’ll be
Let it be

What do you need the singer for, I am asking you in front of people
I haven’t brought the luck to myself, nor the others
What do you need the singer for, just a name without address
I live in my own world, I live from song.”¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Fassbinder, Reiner Werner: “Six Films by Douglas Sirk”, *New Left Review*, I/91, May-June, 1975

Reminder on a hard early beginnings represents singers as sharing common *schmerz*, destiny and problems with their female audience. The narratives further present female singers as ordinary and simple people, just like their listeners. This is also one of dominant tropes of global popular culture – the best example would be Jennifer Lopez singing “I am still Jenny from the block” on the peak of her popularity. The life stories bring them closer to the audience, they enable identification and eventually even tears, as it is the case with the story about Aleksandra Bursac’s father who was killed in the war in 1991, or the heartbreaking confession of one Radmila Manojlovic:

“My mother died three years ago, when I was 19, and of course it was very hard for me. Since then a new life started for me, I grew old in the period of one night, I wasn’t a child anymore, I didn’t have careless childhood. For the first few months I couldn’t hang out with people and I felt very bad. The only thing in which I could find myself was the song. Nine days after the funeral I had to sing in order to provide the money for different post-funeral ceremonies. People would come from everywhere and you have to provide them with drinks and food, that’s how it goes on the countryside. Nobody asked me whether I want to sing or not, I just had to.”¹²⁸

No matter how strong is insistence on these narratives, it is at the same time clear that the singers speak from clearly different class position today. Tabloids are interviewing them in their apartments, where the expensive interior design and furniture is emphasized. Fetishized parts of singer’s body are always followed by a certain trade mark, brand of clothes, shiny boots or skirts, bought in some appreciated boutique, or better in expensive European shops. Higher class is presented on the body, presented on TV screen. Uprising from the social bottom here becomes written and reflected directly on the body. While on the beginnings of their careers female singer’s bodies appeared as ‘natural’, as the career goes on their bodies visibly shift away from that image. A good example is the show *Zvezde Granda* [Stars of Grand Production], which started in 2004 as another local variation on popular reality show *American Idol*, with emphasize on neofolk music, and in which new stars were chosen

¹²⁷ Jana - Sta ce ti pevaca [What do you need the singer for?], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfAfh5Up5W8>, accessed: 5.6.2009.

¹²⁸ <http://zvezdegranda.blogspot.com/2007/07/ivotna-pria-zvezde-granda-radmile.html>, last accessed on 4.1.2009.

through the series of auditions from the thousands of applied. During the show and live performances that followed it, one of the ways for gaining the sympathy from the audience was insisting on singer's bodies as 'natural' and non-modified. Already on the second album the situation was different. The popular, cyborg body of the female folk singer, with each new modification moves away from its difficult beginnings; as Susan Bordo says, erases the history of that body and its pain¹²⁹, and actually testifies to its escalation on the social ladder.

The consequence is that *Estrada* doesn't actually disturb rigid structure of the society. Although it expresses or reflects class and gender inequality, at the same time it also reinforces it. Narratives that circulate around singer's body pose *Estrada* as the ultimate possibility of emancipation, but the remaining social setting remains intact. *Estrada* functions isolated from the rest of society, from the outer world. *Estrada* is the space on which everything is possible and anything goes, the space that functions according to different rules than regular Serbian society; it is a star society distanced and separated from everyday life, although stories about daily life are constantly present and recalled. The social order might be implicitly condemned through *Estrada*, but at the same time it is followed and remains undisturbed. In this sense *Estrada* and its stars offer rigid view of the world, in which the position of women is cemented and any form of stepping out is hard and almost impossible aim to be achieved. Possible tears that songs eventually provoke can happen, to paraphrase Fassbinder, not because of the fate of characters, but because of the social order, the world itself. And "changing the world is so difficult."¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Bordo, Susan: "Material Girl" in *Unbearable weight: feminism, Western culture, and the body*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p 272

¹³⁰ Fassbinder, Reiner Werner: "Six Films by Douglas Sirk", *New Left Review*, I/91, May-June, 1975

Conclusion

In this thesis I have analyzed complexities of Serbian *Estrada* and particularly specific questions related with the position of female singer's body as it is represented/represents itself in the public spaces of *Estrada*. I have examined some of the meanings produced by that performed body, and around it; also, I have explored how that body takes part in construction of national identities, and what are those identities. My starting point was that the existing analyses and academic works about *Estrada* tended to be one sided, that they focused strictly on political context in which *Estrada* operates, or ignored political context in their analysis. I tried to bring those two positions together, and explore how female body, as the main representative and metonymy of *Estrada* communicates with audiences in Serbia, and how it reacts on the changes of Serbian nationalism in the period of transition. I have shown how the body of female folk singer functions in the period from 2000 on, and how it provides a firm basis for the construction of very diverse identities, for example, on the one hand nationalist identity, and gay identity on the other.

Construction of these various identities further confirms my claim that *Estrada* cannot be read in a simplified way, and not just in academic analysis. The public space of Serbian culture also offer different readings of *Estrada*, which is probably most visible in relation of gay community towards *Estrada* and its female stars. The identification of two apparently confronted identities, nationalist and gay identity; rose a question at what extent do they mutually exclude each other, and opened a wider insight on complexity of transformations of national identities in contemporary Serbia. That chapter also opened the question of subversiveness of *Estrada*, on which I focused in analysis of the relationship established between female singer's and their female audience, which shows that *Estrada* offers

resistance to traditional patriarchal society, while at the same time keeps its escapist function. *Estrada* offers both reinforcement and subversion of dominant ideology by giving to various something of interest, in order to maintain the widest possible range of target audiences.

I have not quite managed to enter more profoundly into the analysis of the transition processes. Another question which would be important along this line is how *Estrada* engages in the processes of globalization, how it communicates with some dominant global music trends, particularly those which are imposed by global music industries like MTV for example. Further on, a possible research can be focused upon the question how the communication with global trends, beyond specific Serbian context, influences construction of identity within particular space of *Estrada*. I also think that intersections of class and sexuality can be analyzed more in depth across *Estrada*, on a much wider scale than I've done here.

All those issues demand further research. That research, I argue, should include not only theoretical, but also a practical side, being more audience oriented. Research of the audience, or rather, different audiences would certainly add new aspects to the analysis I have provided here, and would bring new insights into the problematic of *Estrada*, including the questions that I have raised. Such a research would shed more light on an important set of questions concerning how *Estrada* as culturally specific, market oriented social space reacts to and interacts with complex processes of social, cultural and economic transformation of Serbian society at present.

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