Politics, Nationalism, Music, and Popular Culture in 1990s Serbia

IVANA KRONJA
Linacre College, University of Oxford

The popular culture of Serbia during the Milošević era was strongly determined by its political means. So called 'turbo-folk' and 'dance' music developed at the time as a fascinating musical hyper-productive industry, which promoted the glamorous life-style of the new Serbian elite, which consisted of politicians in power, war-profiteers, businessmen, and criminals who supported the Milošević regime, together with female singers in 'pin-up style', the erotic queens of folk. The entertainment industry spread a problematic system of values, lifestyle and emotional sensibility which was systematically and manipulatively used to break up the morality and civil order of Serbian society for the sake of the Milošević regime's power. Providing a kind of cultural background and moral excuse for the entire new Serbian ruling elite formed during the 1990s, and forming an entertainment counterpart to the merciless ideological propaganda of RTS (Radio-Television of Serbia), this kind of music, its greatest stars and the visual style of their representation supported the spread of crime, disorder, and fear. This is the reason why this whole era of populist and nationalist politics, destruction and robbery throughout Serbia should be similarly called 'The Milošević' and the 'Turbo-folk era'.

We can assert with some confidence that our own period is one of decline; that the standards of culture are lower than they were fifty years ago; and that the evidences of this decline are visible in every department of human activity. I see no reason why the decay of culture should not proceed much further, and why we may not even anticipate a period, of some duration, of which it is possible to say that it will have no culture. Then culture will have to grow again from the soil.

T. S. Eliot, 'Notes towards the Definition of Culture', 1948.

The story of Serbia during the rule of Slobodan Milošević is the story of poverty, war, chaos, isolation, national chauvinism, despair, and fear; but if someone in the future were to look at the media programmes of the time, she or he would find a much content which seems quite the opposite: of wealth, glamour, self-confidence, rhetorics of power and instant success, together with the cult of crime and violence, loose sexuality, and the joy of consuming. This was the official picture of the times created by the media managers who worked for the Milošević regime, the picture of the ruling mass culture in Serbia of the nineties: its common denominator has been turbo-folk music, the most popular musical genre at the time. Turbo-folk ruled the hearts and minds of Serbia for over a decade, using the most powerful TV stations,
TV Palma and TV Pink, which had been established and controlled by people loyal to the regime, as its own channels of expression. This music, together with the very similar and unauthentic genre of dance invented at the notorious TV Pink and Marija Milošević’s (daughter of Slobodan Milošević) Radio and TV station Košava, provided a sort of cultural background and moral excuse for the whole class of the new Serbian ruling elite formed during the nineties, and made an entertainment counterpart to the merciless ideological propaganda of RTS (Radio–Television of Serbia). Using the power of the media to create opinions and make heroes out of people who would otherwise, if they did not join the regime, remain at the bottom of society and at the edges of moral consideration, the so-called turbo-folk popular music and culture became the official culture in impoverished 1990s Serbia. It has been systematically and manipulatively used for breaking up the morality and civil order of Serbian society for the sake of the power of the Milošević regime. Together with the regime’s political propaganda, this kind of music, its greatest stars, and the visual style of their representation supported the spread of crime, disorder, and fear. This is why this whole era of the politics of populism and nationalism, destruction and robbery across Serbia should be similarly called ‘The Milošević era’ and ‘The turbo-folk era’.

The case of turbo-folk in 1990s Serbia

The appearance of TV stations specializing in ‘folk’ popular music, such as TV Palma (1991) and TV Pink (1994), brought considerable changes to the Serbian musical and media scene, and to the cultural climate in Yugoslavia as a whole. The dominance of Turbo-folk, the most recent genre of Serbian ‘newly composed folk’ popular music, followed by the genre of ‘dance’ (since 1994–95), coincided with the period of social and economic crisis and civil war in the parts of former Yugoslavia. Financial difficulties in rock and pop music production, and a shortage of material to fill in TV programmes, as well as the general crisis, left an empty space for the new, simplified sound. Mladen Dinkić’s *The Economy of Destruction* (1996), criticizes the Milošević regime for the conscious production of hyperinflation in order to allow the personal usurping of citizens’ finances by Milošević and his nearest collaborators, Dinkić, until recently the governor of the National Bank of Serbia and Montenegro (since 2000), analyses the social context in which the ‘newly composed folk’ and turbo-folk popular music became the dominant musical and fashion model in the country. Writing on the causes and development of Yugoslav hyperinflation (1993–94), which was one of the greatest in the entire world’s economic history, Dinkić says: ‘In order to prevent social revolt, government intentionally stimulated the so-called “grey economy”: black market, smuggling, street peddlers, etc. […] As a result, “grey economy” proved to be a good shock-absorber of social discontents. But it resulted in the decay of moral values and other objective social values. Honesty became a vice, and dishonesty a virtue and a basic condition for surviving. This unavoidably caused the spreading of corruption and crime on a tremendous scale. It created a socially and psychologically degenerated society.’

'Turbo-folk' pop music proved to be another shock-absorber of social discontents, an amazingly efficient invention of the Serbian media under the rule of Slobodan Milošević. In the beginning of the nineties, the idea of turbo-folk music assimilated the following musical directions: the already existent newly composed folk music, the most popular branch of music entertainment in former Yugoslavia, which combined the elements of traditional folk music with more contemporary pop and rock music created under West European and American cultural influences, and its two new variants: turbo or techno-folk, as well as the newly composed nationalistic and patriotic war songs, which encouraged Serbian warriors in the civil war in Croatia and Bosnia (1991–95). Simultaneously, there appeared similar new Muslim and Croatian patriotic war songs. Since Serbia, at least officially, did not take part in the war, this patriotic music (sung by the popular Bajić brothers and other similar 'artists'), was allowed only a limited amount of time on television, so it was mainly performed on the radio. The best known station specializing in this kind of music was 'Ponos-radio' ('Radio-Pride') from Belgrade. In spite of this, the music sold enormously well, being recorded on pirate audio-cassettes. TV programmes were, at the same time, conquered by turbo-folk. This glamorously conceived national musical project aimed to divert the attention of the population away from the policy of poverty and war, and direct it towards the attractive and inaccessible image of the lifestyle of turbo-folk stars. The stars, who appeared on TV screens in glittering and luxurious costumes and drove the most expensive fancy cars in their music videos, were the objects of identification and adoration of the audience. Turbo-folk music and its media presentation became politically approved entertainment for the masses in the Serbia of the nineties, establishing an escapist 'pink, rosy culture' as a refuge from the gloomy reality.

In reference to the political function of turbo-folk, Dinkić ironically comments: 'In all that poverty and misery the people found enough energies to survive. Very often their grief found expression in popular songs. In this it was generously helped by the media, which supported newly composed folk music, suppressing discontent and any thought of revolt.' The political function of popular music was fulfilled first by 'kitsch-patriotism', or 'newly composed war culture', and then by the turbo-folk style and music, as a first-rate kitsch, even trash, aesthetic. The system of values which this music presented through its carefree contents, together with the 'grey economy' and criminalization of society, supported the decay of moral values in Serbian and Montenegrin society. The new system of values brought cruelty to interhuman relations, war profiteering, the cult of crime and weapons, the rule of force and violence, and political repression and conformism. It has also established the war-orientated, retrograde patriarchy, and the prostitution and commodification of women, at the expense of the abandonment of civic values: the legal state, marriage, family, education, and morals. Insistence on kitsch culture brought also the decay of aesthetic norms. Since good and beautiful, that is ethics and aesthetics, are also the key norms in a civilized society, their elimination from everyday life caused the destruction of the very concept of evaluation. Probably the best definition of turbo-folk would be 'porno-pop music', since it included many pornographic influences in its style for the above-mentioned purposes.

2 M. Dinkić, ibid., p. 256.
The way in which popular folk music in Serbia transformed itself into an established model of popular culture, dominant in the media, can be explained in various ways. First of all, it is a sign of social transition towards the consumer society, such as Western society, in which the media, particularly TV and cinema, play the dominant role in filling free time or leisure. This process is followed by consecration to the values of the ‘American dream’: fame, money, the Western way of life, and the star-system — the promotion of showbusiness stars, home-made and foreign, whose looks, wealth, and love affairs become a collective ideal. Home-made folk singers become a domestic variation of Western glamour, whose success requires adequate televisual presentation. This is found in music videos in the MTV manner, a TV genre recently discovered in Serbia which tries to follow all the fashionable trends. Music video fought hard to become the principal promoter of the style and system of values celebrated in the turbo-folk era. A new subcultural style of the nineties, known as warrior chic style (defined so by sociologist of culture Ratka Marie in 1996), found its expression in turbo-folk and dance music video. Warrior chic style, embodied by the nouveaux riches, gangsters, beautiful girls, femmes fatales, luxurious interiors, and fancy cars are the main elements of music videos that turbo-folk rests on.

The important role played by the glamorous music videos in spreading the popularity of the turbo-folk stars is reinforced by the singers’ frequent appearances on live broadcasts, entertainment and music programmes. A new musical direction, dance, which exists almost exclusively within the medium of television, was initiated by the break-through of popular folk music into the public sphere of the media. On the other hand, the expansion of turbo-folk coincides with the expansion of the mass media in Serbia. The television becomes a key factor in family and social life, exercising an enormous influence on the political choices and way of life of the majority of Serbian people.

The emergence of the turbo-folk and dance music and style is, essentially, the result of an encounter between the so-called newly composed popular culture in Yugoslavia which emerged with the development in the 1980s, under Western influence, of Yugoslavian — Serbian urban subcultures: punk, hippy, ‘make-up’ subculture of trendy youth, new wave, rock, and rave in the 1990s, and with the aggressive influence of entertainment mass and consumer culture of the Western type. This influence comes with American movies, TV serials, catwalk broadcasts of Western fashion designers, the mass importation and advertising of foreign goods, clothes and cosmetics, and so on. Media promotion of the new hybrid musical patterns and styles: such as folk-rap, folk-rock, folk-pop, turbo-folk, and dance, leads to a specific crisis of symbols used by the so-called ‘committed’, socially and/or politically subversive youth subcultures (rock, hippy, punk, and others), ultimately resulting in their assimilation into the mass, Neofolk culture. The urban subcultural scene in Serbia during the nineties went through a serious change. It is now dominated by the protagonists of notorious ‘warrior chic’ subcultures: the new rich, war profiteers, criminals, ‘sponsored girls’, ‘dieselmen’, war veterans, and drug dealers, who share the reversed system of values embodied by chauvinism, the cult of crime and violence, and hardcore eroticism, and who admire the beauties of western consumerism, covering themselves with golden jewellery and dressing in the
glamorous, ‘warrior chic style’ clothes. As a result, the original folk music is now almost forgotten, whilst the young are deprived of the chance to acquire the previous channels for expression of their own rebellion and creativity, and of the ability to form their own identity with the help of aesthetically valuable, good quality popular music.

The phenomenon of turbo-folk and dance music and style is a unique example of a full transition of subcultural products, opposed to the leading cultural norm. In this case, it was the newly composed subculture of 1970s and 1980s Yugoslavia (also termed the Neofolk culture by Milena Dragićević-Šešić in 1994). This was the predecessor of turbo-folk popular culture, a reaction against the ‘dogmatic educational’ and ‘elitist’ cultural model (dominant cultural models in former Yugoslavia), which combined with the aesthetically barren products of commercial mass culture, to create the leading cultural norm in Milošević’s Serbia. This is also a specific cultural phenomenon in the worldwide cultural domain.

The new youth subcultures and the political function of ‘turbo-folk’

The popular culture of Serbia during the Milošević era had been strongly determined by its political means. So called turbo-folk and ‘dance’ music developed at the same time as a fascinating hyper-productive musical industry, which promoted the glamorous lifestyle of the new Serbian elite. This consisted of war profiteers, businessmen, and criminals who supported the Milošević regime, together with pin-up stylized female singers, erotic queens of folk. Turbo-folk music, as the most popular music and media genre, followed by a very similar genre of dance, promoted a system of values, lifestyle, and emotional sensibility which closely corresponded to the ‘ideology of chaos’ which characterized the mafiatized, war-profiteering, and nationally chauvinist power of Slobodan Milošević’s era.

The invention of turbo-folk music had its predecessor in the development of the so-called ‘newly-composed’ popular folk music, a mixture of traditional melodies of domestic Serbian musical folklore and nineteenth-century urban songs with other musical influences, such as Russian ballads, pop and rock music, or popular Turkish and Greek melodies, while it promoted and maintained a corrupted version of the way of singing with Oriental ornamentation (due to the Turkish historical influence which dominated Serbia for about five hundred years), the ‘howling’ sound of so-called ‘thriller’ singing. Basically, ‘newly-composed’ folk music was pop music, which included (and corrupted) some traditional musical elements, and its lyrics expressed both a glorification of the traditional lifestyle and the advantages of a new, urban way of life. It attempted to symbolically cross the gap and bring relief to the first and second generation of migrants from villages to towns, who changed their way of life due to the industrialization of the country and modernization of post-war Yugoslavia. It was followed by the ‘newly-composed’

---

3 Serbian urban folklore music of the nineteenth century emulated the traditional musical folklore of Serbian villagers (who at the time formed the majority of the Serbian population); it was also influenced by the style of central-European music, and by Western influence coming from Croatia. This music had its own composers and lyricists, not rarely famous Serbian romantic poets such as Jovan Jovanović-Zmaj or Aleksa Santić, but it was composed ‘u narodnom duhu’, in the spirit of traditional folk music.
subcultural style belonging to young listeners of the music, as well as to their parents, a sort of naive and not very successful appropriation of trendy urban clothing and behaviour, and it went together with the ideology of consumerism, leisure, and the ‘American dream’ expressed in similar cultural products. Most of these, such as comics, posters, movies, and other sorts of entertainment were imported from the West, but some, such as domestic film comedies about ordinary people, were successfully produced in the country. This became a dominant cultural model and the most influential mass culture in the former Yugoslavia.

The occurrence of turbo-folk music and the corresponding subculture in the early nineties, just like the appearance of the ‘newly-composed’ or new folk music, was initiated by specific changes in social conditions. In the case of turbo-folk, these new social conditions were a reflection of a long-lasting economic crisis, of the civil war in Croatia and Bosnia, of a great number of war victims and refugees, of the country’s isolation brought about by the economic and cultural sanctions, and, last but not least, of the severe bombardment which NATO members directed against Yugoslavia in 1999. All these reasons caused the economic crash and total poverty of the population, disintegration of the country, and the crime wave. As has already been mentioned, the regime also actively supported the ‘grey’ economy and the criminalization of society, in order to prevent a social revolt and to enrich of the Milošević family and its closest collaborators, from loyal politicians to mafia bosses.

This tendency almost immediately found its expression in the youth subcultures of the 1990s. As the sociologist of culture Ratka Marić puts it, the place of politically subversive and socially conscious urban youth music subcultures of Serbia in the 1980s has been taken over by the ‘new debutants’. These young people ‘recognize their own chance and positively reply to a challenge of the society in despair and chaos, taking fast cash out of the situation which others can’t cope with’. Ratka Marić notices a multitude of new youth subcultures in the early 1990s, all of which she defines as ‘warrior chic subcultures’: among them are so-called ‘dieselmen’.

The name and characteristics of the subculture were firstly defined by the ex-Yugoslavian ethnologist Ines Prica. For further description and analysis of the ‘newly-composed’ subculture see: Ines Prica, Omladinska potkulturna u Beogradu — simbolicka praksa (Youth subculture in Belgrade — symbolical practise) (Etnografski institut SANU: Belgrade, 1991), and other papers by Prica related to the subject. See also: Ivana Kronja, ‘Potkultura novokomponovanih’ (‘Subculture of the “newly-composed”’), Kultura, 99 (2000).

Protagonists of ‘dieselmen’ subculture gained this nickname for wearing Diesel jeans low on their hips, with jumpers and tracksuit tops tucked inside the trousers, tightened with huge belts, and if possible driving fancy cars with turbo diesel engines. They were also easily recognized for wearing massive golden chains over clothes or on their bare chest, and having a very short haircut or even shaved heads. This intimidating appearance was combined with an aggressive attitude and rude behaviour. ‘Diesel girls’ also wore a lot of golden jewellery and a combination of evening and sport clothes: for example evening make-up, huge Versace sunglasses, and golden earrings with black body-T-shirt, tracksuit, and trainers. Many young criminals from the Serbian underground belonged to this subculture and practised this kind of style.
sponsored girls,\textsuperscript{8} criminals, ‘reketasi’ (debt collectors), thugs, mafia men, war veterans, and drug-dealers. All these new subcultures find their way of expression in turbo-folk and dance music, which combine the aggressive rhythms of hip-hop and techno music with the new folk sound. The violent social environment, war, poverty, and decay of moral values define the narrowed horizon of the world of warrior chic subcultures and the similar world of turbo-folk music: they are characterized by the atmosphere of temporary, ‘fast’, and ‘dangerous’ life, if not on the other side of the law, then at least within the musical subculture of turbo-folk which glorifies all the symbols of crime and violence. The description of the behaviour and appearance of the protagonists of warrior chic subcultures includes, for men, wearing fancy designer clothes, driving fast cars,\textsuperscript{9} an aggressive attitude, showing off and threatening with weapons, taking part in robberies and similar activities, and, for women, an arrogant attitude, stressing one’s own sexual appeal, using sexuality to get close to rich ‘tough’ guys and become their girlfriend. They both share glorification of the Western consumerist world, of luxurious wardrobes and foreign labels of clothes (Versace, Dolce & Gabbana, Nino Cerutti, Armani, Replay, Diesel), expensive perfumes, wearing large amounts of golden jewellery, visiting ‘hot’ clubs and cafes in town, praising expensive cars, and being connected to the media. A large amount of narcissism — expressed through the obsession with one’s own looks and a need to become important and famous and permanently present in the media, in tabloids, newspapers, on TV and radio stations — seems to be one of the central preoccupations of protagonists of turbo-folk and warrior chic culture, too. All these attitudes are, paradoxically or not, followed by a strong nationalist attitude, chauvinism, and self-sufficiency, approval of crime and violence and of the Machiavellian idea that the end justifies the means. They are followed by a strong sense of Serbian pride which has been, according to official media propaganda, threatened by all the enemies from the outside world, from Croats and Muslims to Americans and ‘domestic traitors’ as well, intellectuals and journalists who are ‘spies’ on the payment list of ‘the new world order’, which is intending to take away Serbian integrity.

The poor economic situation made greater investments in culture and education impossible and it disabled the continual cultural connections of the country with the world. These connections were additionally hindered by the recent sanctions, the war and defensive actions, and the extremely numerous police forces, all of which took up the greatest part of the budget that was anyhow reduced. The media close to the party in power were financially the strongest. They possessed the monopoly

\textsuperscript{8} ‘Sponsored girls’ were a notorious phenomenon among Serbian youth, before and after the fall of the Milošević regime: it meant that the girl had a lover, a young criminal, or a rich ‘businessman’ (which in these Serbian circumstances practically meant the same), who drove her around in his expensive car, bought her very expensive trendy shoes and clothes with foreign labels and then showed off her looks in the street, at the cafes, night clubs, gyms, beauty salons, shopping centres, and other prestigious venues where this new Serbian elite used to spend its time and practise its ways of social and cultural communication. This ‘sponsoring’ of the girls could sometimes, but not always, also become a sort of prostitution.

\textsuperscript{9} Usually sports cars with ‘turbo’ or ‘turbo-diesel’ engines — this is how the whole style and music, ‘turbo-folk’, including also the subculture of previously mentioned ‘dieselmen’, gained its name.
and the highest viewer ratings, and also the superior power to dictate the whole media scene, public opinion, politically desirable values, and ways of behaving. In order to accomplish all these aims, the media favoured turbo-folk music for the whole decade, which, apart from the effects just mentioned, also continues to bring them huge profits.

The crisis and huge suffering produced by the war caused a psychic destabilization of the population. Depression and hopelessness resulted in increasing numbers of people turning to superstition. Many prophets, 'healers', and fortune-tellers appeared, shamelessly commercially oriented, like Ljubiša Trgovčević, Kleopatra, and many others. The number of authentic clairvoyants and traditional healers among them is negligible. The lowering of both the standards of critical thinking and the sense of reality have made people susceptible to various soporific phenomena, from fortune-tellers to turbo-folk.

Political reasons are considered to be the main factors for the occurrence and survival of turbo-folk music and culture. Concerning this, the next question has to be answered: did someone construct a master plan in advance to mislead the population using turbo-folk music, consulting the leading political aristocracy in Serbia? Did turbo-folk appear in the early 1990s as the 'newly-composed war culture' and support the expansionist and nationalist politics of Serbian government, and in the late nineties misuse erotica for the erosion of moral values? Or could it be that turbo-folk music and subculture was just a phenomenon that appeared all by itself, but was supported by the leading structure when it recognized this music as a helpful ideological tool? The intellectual independent elite in Serbia maybe overestimated the political role of turbo-folk, since it is a very irritating phenomenon; it also might be that, on the other hand, our public did not take this phenomenon seriously enough. But what remains certain is the fact that every kitsch is also an ideological product *par excellence*. No matter what, this music became some sort of a 'state art'.

The case of turbo-folk singer Zorica Brunclik proves that. This folk singer became a member of Mirjana Milošević's party, JUL (Yugoslavian Left), one of the two ruling parties in the Milošević era, in the late nineties, as was often publicly announced. In 1999, the Serbian Minister of Culture Željko Simić, a member of JUL, signed and sealed a document which confirms the aesthetic values of music sung by Zorica Brunclik, claiming officially, in many flattering words, that she is a meritorious artist of the Serbian music scene. The document was attached to Brunclik's jubilatory CD celebrating twenty-five years of her showbusiness career. The music of Zorica Brunclik is usually considered as kitsch and trivial, but the minister rejects such judgments as given by the envious. This unique political certificate of the aesthetic contribution of turbo-folk music to Serbian society, issued one year before the fall of the Milošević regime, finally openly confirms what has already been visible: that the aesthetics of turbo-folk played a crucial role in the ideological indoctrination which was both produced by the regime and brilliantly served it.

---

Turbo-folk does represent entertainment for the crowd, yet it is not only a widespread and effective ‘entertainment for the poor’. It is also an amusement for the rich, for the new ruling class, wealthy refugees and rich Gastarbeiter^11 who all recognize their values in the newly-composed glamour as a symbol of status and power, as well as in the supposed connection between this kind of music and Serbian tradition.

What should be considered here is the fact that (as with many other transitional countries) all ex-Yugoslavian republics, especially those ones which were involved in the civil war, such as Croatia and Bosnia, went through similar processes of social disintegration and fell into chaos and poverty. They underwent the usurpation of power and state and citizen’s money by local politicians, a flourishing of crime and violence, and the decay of moral values. From government politicians, and their closest collaborators who monopolized the whole market and developed the ‘black’ or ‘grey’ economy, to minor criminals and the street subculture of violent youth, all representatives and active protagonists of this new age of chaos and despair shared and promoted the same system of values which has been described in the case of Serbia.

Conclusion

In Serbia of the nineties, turbo-folk was the culture of the new Serbian elite, becoming, with the help of the media, both a new elitist culture and a sort of ‘art’, approved by the state. This new Serbian elite consisted of, firstly, the Milošević family – his wife, Mirjana Marković, also a politician herself, and the founder of the JUL party, and their two children, Marija and Marko, who ran most of the major monopolized private businesses, such as the trade of oil and tobacco (on the black market because of the economic and political sanctions), and also all TV and radio networks, as well as discotheques and music production. Joining the elite were high-ranking politicians in the state-leading parties, run by Milošević and his wife (SPS — Socialist Party of Serbia, and JUL, Yugoslavian Left); the army and special police elite and the leaders of the paramilitary formations (such as Zeljko Raznatović-Arkan); together with so-called businessmen, the people close to Milošević who controlled the trade of various goods under suspicious circumstances, most of whom were at the same time bosses of the criminal underground. Also involved were media magnates, owners of the so-called ‘private’ TV and other media stations, but actually directly responsible to Milošević and financed by his and his wife’s parties, which used both media owners and businessmen to further

^11 German word for workers from foreign countries; a popular name for fellow countrymen working abroad, in Germany and other rich capitalist countries, used in Serbian and Croatian language — gastarbeiter. In ethnological literature it is described as a specific kind of subcultural model of Yugoslav guest workers temporarily employed abroad, or recently returned from abroad, from highly urbanized milieus, who possess, as ethnologist Ines Prica rightly remarks, ‘an unclear status and conflicted systems of value’ (Ines Prica, ‘O kritici novokomponovane narodne muzike’ (‘On Criticism of Newly-composed Music’), GEI SANU, xxxv (1986), 58). It is also characterized by the intensive consumption of ‘newly-composed’ folk music and turbo-folk, which offers gastarbeiter a life-saving union of idealized folk tradition and something modern, i.e. of modernized tradition, and therefore a salvation and solution of the identity problem.
enlarge their own money and influence by many suspicious means (for example they are suspected of laundering ‘dirty’ money from war robberies, armour and drug selling). Finally, there were entertainers like sportsmen and fortune-tellers. As the ‘crown’ or ‘decoration’ for this new masculine elite, the powerful men were surrounded by pop singers, the ‘queens’ of turbo-folk, usually highly eroticized in a ‘hardcore’ pornographic manner, with whom they appeared together in entertainment programmes — live broadcast shows on TV Pink in the latter half of the 1990s, such as the notorious, but extremely popular Maxi-Vision (Maksovizija), led by a populist entertainer, and former radio DJ, Milovan Illic-Minimaks.

Constant media propaganda, and visually attractive, lavish, erotic, and violent content, accompanied by similar lyrics, made turbo-folk music extremely popular, serving as a paradigmatic model of this new elite’s system of values. TV Palma, established in 1991, with its amateurish, simple kitsch visual design of music videos, was the first station to promote and advertise the turbo-folk sound. After 1994, it was followed by TV Pink and by other less influential local TV and Radio stations, which followed a similar commercial model. TV Pink, as the omnipresent and most influential television station in Serbia, dictated patterns of behaviour, dressing, and value systems, encouraging its audience to value luxury highly and turbo-folk stars, members of the above-mentioned new Serbian elite. The trash, kitsch aesthetics of TV Pink promoted a ‘pink’ viewpoint and lifestyle similar to the one shown in music videos. By 1999–2000, turbo-folk ended up imitating its own style, becoming a parody of itself and degenerating into banal eroticism, naked bodies, and complete immorality (this kind of degeneration was also obvious in the case of dance music). It seemed that no spectacle was going to pay off in a situation where both market and the audience were impoverished. But this was not the case. After the fall of the Milošević regime, and a short pause in broadcasting, TV Pink returned to the public sphere stronger than ever, adopting the new political agenda and promoting new leading Serbian politicians of a liberal persuasion. But, besides the change in the choice of politicians promoted, the system of values of this entertainment industry remains the same. And the debates surrounding the public role of TV Pink and the possible lustration of its owner, Željko Mitrović, continue in the Serbian public arena.

There are some voices in the Serbian public arena which claim that current political tolerance towards the visual messages and entertainment content of TV Pink, which are basically unchanged after 5 October 2000 (apart from the change in editorial politics on the news), proves the rule of democracy in Serbia. But it can only seem that the big public success of TV Pink and its collaboration with the new power in Serbia expresses the complexities and the identity crisis of the young and fragile Serbian democracy. How else would it be possible for the former collaborators of a dictator’s regime and the promoters of criminal values to be tragically misunderstood as the recent example of liberal values, public tolerance towards ‘cultural diversity’ and opportunity of expression for ‘minor cultural groups’? This ‘minor cultural group’, suddenly protected by some former or present NGO activists very close to the current political power, who just want to follow the ‘fashion’ of ‘inventing’ cultural minorities as an efficient way to achieve some extra Western funding for civil rights protection and democratic development (and therefore
achieve some personal profit for themselves), is actually the majority of Serbian people, and this ‘minority culture’ represented by TV Pink is in fact a mass, mainstream culture: statistics tell us that TV Pink is watched by at least seventy-five percent of Serbian people. Or is this attempt to ‘wash away the dirt’ from the name of turbo-folk and pronounce it only for an innocent ‘culture of ordinary people’ just the excuse for strengthening the insufficient political influence of the new elite, which inherited the former regime’s ingeniously efficient ways of ruling with the help of mass culture.

The sudden assassination of Serbia’s prime minister, Zoran Đindić, in March 2003, and the discovery that two of the greatest turbo-folk stars had connections with the criminal underground, have initiated the change in public attitude towards turbo-folk and TV Pink’s notorious legacy. Ceca Raznatović, widow of the notorious war criminal and underground boss, Željko Raznatović-Arkan is going to be charged for the illegal possession of large amounts of weapons and military and police equipment in her basement; Aleksandar-Aca Lukas has already been charged as one of the main drug-dealers for the Serbian showbusiness scene. After the first shock, the nation started to judge its former idol, Ceca Raznatović, in a more critical light. But after several months these two stars have been released from prison, although the investigation continues. Ceca’s fans celebrated the day of her release, and she has announced that she is preparing a new album. The rise and fall of Ceca has been part of a story of the conscious promoting of crime and violence, of intolerance and self-sufficiency by the mafiocratic Serbian elite during the 1990s. The switch in Serbian collective public consciousness considering turbo-folk culture and the former regime as a whole has only started a very painful but necessary process for the Serbian community, in which the dark glamour of crime should be abandoned and its horrible consequences soberly faced. This result can only be obtained by giving the media a role quite different from the one they fulfilled in the Milošević era.

Biographical Note

Since 2000, Ivana Kronja has been a lecturer in film and media theory and aesthetics at the Visual and Applied Arts College, Women’s Studies Center and BOSH (last two at MA level) in Belgrade. She is the author of the socio-cultural study: ‘The Fatal Glow: The Mass Psychology and Aesthetics of The Turbo-Folk Subculture’ (Tehnokratia, Belgrade, 2001) and co-editor of the Reader: The Experimental Cinema and the Alternative Film Tendencies (issued by Yugoslavian Film Festival of Documentary and Short Movies, Belgrade, 2002), also being active cooperator to the Festival since 2001.

Ivana Kronja has been a full-time Graduate visiting student at Linacre College, University of Oxford, UK (academic year 2002/2003), at OSI/FCO Chevening scholarship programme, working on her Ph.D. thesis in the field of the Avant-garde film aesthetics, gender, and body representation. She has also recently directed and produced a 42’ long experimental feature film Rat in the Kitchen (2003).
Copyright of Slovo is the property of Maney Publishing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.