

THE BODY OF A FEMALE FOLK SINGER: CONSTRUCTIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN SERBIA AFTER 2000

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ABSTRACT In this paper I analyze the position of female body in the space of Serbian music show business, popularly called *estrada*. I see *estrada* as a complex phenomenon; a culturally specific, market oriented social space that reacts to and interacts with the processes of social, cultural and economic transformation of the Serbian society at present. The body of a female folk singer is *estrada*'s main representative. I use this body to explore the relationship between *estrada* and Serbian nationalism, and how *estrada* engages in construction of various national identities in Serbia, taking as a historical reference the year 2000 and the official end of Slobodan Milošević's era. To demonstrate the complexity of these identities, I explore the role of a female singer's body in the construction of two seemingly paradoxical 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 against the dominant patriarchal ideology.

Key words: *estrada*, neofolk, female body, transition, nationalism, LGBT, melodrama, female audience

INTRODUCTION

In this text I intend to explore how bodies of female folk singers engage in the construction of various identities in Serbia, taking as a historical reference the year 2000 and the official end of Slobodan Milošević's era. On the example of Serbian mainstream music show business popularly called *estrada*, I want to show and explore the complex relationship between popular culture and

nationalism, using the body of female folk singers. I take this body as the center of my analysis, since it is implicitly present in all discourses that circulate around *estrada* in Serbia, but has still been rarely addressed directly. The female body functions as a metonymy for the whole *estrada*, and I intend to explore many ideological assumptions ascribed to it. At the same time I will analyze which messages that body produces and sends out to the Serbian public by its performance. I will claim that via the body of a female singer one can read the changes in the Serbian society that occurred after the year 2000, after Slobodan Milošević was overthrown and Serbia officially entered the process of social and political transformations commonly referred to as transition.

Estrada is a popular term for show business in Serbia, dominated by the neofolk music genre. Neofolk is the term that I use as all-encompassing for various subgenres of *estrada*: pop-folk, turbo-folk, newly composed folk music (NCFM), etc. *Estrada* gained its wider significance in the nineties, in the time of Milošević's regime, when it became absolutely dominant in the Serbian media, entering the strong relation with politics, that is, with the nationalist ideology propagated at the time. Many Serbian intellectuals and scholars claim that the neofolk music, with its massive dominance in media, participated in the building of Milošević's regime, and was an important part in promoting and maintaining ultranationalist climate in the country (Dragičević-Šešić 1994, Gordy 1999, Kronja 2001, Papić 2001). Female body in *estrada* is seen as a 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" (Papić 2001). But there is another group of scholars, for example Branislav Dimitrijević and Dušan Maljković, who read the female singers as having a significant part in the subversion of patriarchal moral and in connecting Serbia with the world. These scholars ascribe to neofolk music an emancipatory and even avant-garde role (Dimitrijević 2000b, Maljković 2008).

Again, these debates are mainly focused on the nineties and the role of *estrada* during the time of Slobodan Milošević's regime, but the attention

should also be paid to the changes that occurred after 5th October 2000, when the regime in Serbia changed. With the political changes, Serbian nationalism transformed as well, as did the space of show business. However, these changes did not mean that nationalism, or *estrada* really lost their significance. Hence it is important to critically examine that later period, since in it *estrada* still takes part in the complex interplay of dominant ideology, politics and show business; the interplay which is strongly gendered. The body of a female folk singer is one of the most transparent manifestations of that interaction.

One important remark can be made regarding the debates that circulate around *estrada*: while one part of the scholars focused mainly on the political context of *estrada*, the other group completely neglected that context, focusing instead primarily on the text. I will situate myself in-between, claiming that *estrada* is a highly complex phenomenon, and that those readings do not necessarily exclude one another. By drawing attention to its internal struggles I intend to show that *estrada* cannot be seen as a monolithic, unitary space. Therefore, it is important to examine the role and the position of Serbian *estrada* today, to analyze its complexity and see how *estrada* handles the challenging combination of problematic political heritage and actual social and economic transformations of Serbian society. What I am interested in is what has been happening in Serbia since the beginning of transition, especially with ‘wide masses of people’, precisely those who are seen as the main consumers of the neofolk music (Dragičević-Šešić 1994), also in the way *estrada* relates to the transitional process. I will claim that the body of a female folk singer, equated through public, academic and common discourses with the whole of the 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.

1. DEBATES AROUND *ESTRADA*

Estrada is the popular term for music show business in Serbia, and it refers strictly to the mainstream neofolk production. Neofolk is an all-encompassing term for various musical genres based on folk music elements. As a music genre it started in the early sixties, when “the neotraditional model of arranged

folk song was institutionalized into a ‘new folk’ music” (Rasmussen 2002, 3). Neofolk is seen as commercialization of folk music. Reaching high popularity during the eighties (the usual term used for the genre used then was ‘newly composed folk music (NCFM), it became absolutely dominant in the Serbian media in the nineties, under the name of turbo-folk. Nowadays neofolk 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.

Estrada does not exist outside of media. It is established through television, radio, internet web sites, magazines, and music videos. *Estrada*’s main representative is a female folk singer, constantly present in electronic and print media, belonging to the mainstream music production.

With the rise of Milošević, neofolk with its various subgenres, among which turbo-folk was the most prominent, started to dominate the Serbian media. Eric Gordy claims that this massive dominance of neofolk music participated in the building of Milošević’s regime. The regime successfully established itself “by making alternatives to its rule unavailable”(Gordy 1999, 2), and one of these was the music alternative. Although *estrada* functions as an open market and has functioned as such during both the socialist era and afterwards, in the nineties, during Milošević’s regime it gained the whole media space for itself, which could not go without consequences. Cheery, high-energy music and lyrics speaking about love or joy of life clearly stood in contrast with the socio-political situation at the time. Although *estrada* has always tried to distance itself from the politics (the example of Ceca Ražnatović, the 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”¹), its seemingly antipolitical character turned out to be highly political after all. Thus *estrada* and female identities constructed on it cannot be seen as an entity separate and isolated from the wider social and political context.

Ana Vujanović and Tanja Marković identified two main academic positions in the discussions around *estrada* and neofolk: emancipatory-enlightening

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

and democratic-populist (Marković and Vujanović 2004). In the following paragraphs I will present these two models and give a critical insight.

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 the ideological aspects and functions of their triviality and usually focuses on the problem of identification and/or subjectivity through mass and pop culture (Marković and Vujanović 2004).

In short, these readings regard *estrada* and neofolk as a part of Milošević's authoritarian machinery, sometimes going so far as to claim that Milošević and his regime invented neofolk in order to "make people dumb" and easy to control. Marković and Vujanović further refer to Marina Gržinić, who recalls Žarana Papić's conclusions:

"The emergence of the mass cultural phenomenon of women 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 parts of ex-Yugoslavia, as well as of fascist tendencies in Serbia" (Papić quoted in Marković and Vujanović 2004, 10).

Another prominent study of emancipatory-enlightening model is Ivana Kronja's book *Smrtonosni sjaj (Deadly Splendor)*. Kronja concentrates on turbo folk music videos, identifying in them the aesthetics of "warrior chic". Through analysis of videos, Kronja connects turbo folk with the cult of weapons, 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 Milošević's regime, serving as its important tool (Kronja 2001).

Another attribute ascribed to *estrada* and the genre of neofolk is primitivism, following the thesis introduced by some Serbian intellectuals that the war was a conflict between city and country. In such established urban/rural dichotomy, *estrada* is put on the barbarian, rural side, which is also expressed in everyday speech, where it can often be heard that “only the peasants listen to that kind of music”. Milena Dragičević-Šešić’s study *Neofolk kultura, publika i njene zvezde* (*Neofolk Culture, Audience and Its Stars*) maps the audience of neofolk music within suburban and rural milieus, further marking neofolk audience as the people of simple lifestyles, habits and demands (Dragičević-Šešić 1994). Dragičević-Šešić sees neofolk fans as 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” (Dragičević-Šešić 1994, 14). Writing further about their engagement with the political situation in the state, Dragičević-Šešić concludes:

“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 the elitist cultural model, is among the least important values among members of neocomposed cultural model. (...) Secondly, neocomposed milieu has not been traveling. Even if it has, it was done in the group of its own and for its own. It has not traveled in order to know *the other*. Therefore, the average member of the neocomposed cultural model knows Croats and Slovenians from the army – and that’s all. 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, destruction, defiance” (ibid., 194-195) .

Although Dragičević-Šešić mentions the role of elites in building 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.

All these analyses of *estrada* and its dominant music genre, done by emancipatory- enlightening theorists and scholars, are strongly grounded in the historical moment when they were written. Marković and Vujanović, commenting on the emancipatory-enlightening 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 number of theoreticians has 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 the 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” (Marković and Vujanović 2004, 10).

However, 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 in the space of *estrada*, and that all the representations of women in *estrada* are the same in their features. But one of the consequences is also that the whole popular culture produced in Serbia during the nineties is seen as somehow neofolk, in this case usually called ‘turbofolk’. The documentary TV series *Sav taj folk* (“All that Folk”) revealed precisely that, by placing the complete mainstream music production in the nineties under the category of ‘folk’. This reductionism does not only appear to be highly problematic (since ‘high culture’ manifestations have been also held at the time, and some subversive TV series produced with state funding), but this demonization of popular culture also has further importance. If it is claimed that the whole popular culture production was supporting Milošević, it is by that act at the same time both dismissed and marked as backward. It turns out that the *othering* of popular culture was the tool of opposition forces and civic intelligentsia for distancing from Milošević’s politics.

Of course, not the whole popular culture was marked as Milošević's supporter. But the opposition who were engaged with the 'urban' forms of popular culture assumed 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 involvement and their defense of the urban culture, Belgrade *rokeri* combined the (innate?) rebelliousness of rock and roll with a high culture opposition to neofolk vulgarity, associating the architects of war with the culture of their political supporters" (Gordy 1999, 120). The attitude of Belgrade's r'n'r 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 a strong image of masculinity, in the situation where they are claiming high culture position for themselves, it is hard not to notice that their position is haunted by misogyny. It is here that the dichotomy high art – popular culture gains new importance. The division between "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 the masculine high culture (Huyssen 1986, 44-62). It turns out that the civic Serbia, coded its 'other' as female. The main enemy of the civic Serbia turned out to be female folk singers.

The second bloc of theorists writing on neofolk culture is, as identified by Marković and Vujanović, democratic-populist. These theorists accuse their opponents of cultural racism. In their writings they are trying to point out that 'wide masses of people' are not the bearers of main guilt for the arousal of Serbian nationalism. Or, as Branislav Dimitrijević claims: "it was the aspirations of the Serbian bourgeoisie that brought on Milošević's ascent to power in 1987, and not Ceca or Dragana" (Dimitrijević, 2002a, 100). Dušan Maljković notices how the prevalent criticism of *estrada* in the Serbian public discourse, whether it comes from a seemingly 'left' or 'right' position, at first reads *estrada* as social decadence and a marker of "decay of all values" (Maljković 2003). Maljković points out that both these discourses actually operate within high/popular culture dichotomy, and plead for the elitist concept of culture which, according to Maljković „inevitably has racist implications and consequences (...) and implicates a racist distinction of people on superior and inferior type" (ibid.), which is further coded through, for example, the urban / rural dichotomy.

In another article, Maljković 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, homosexuals and heterosexuals, transvestites and the “ordinary world” can coexist; openly erotic content can be as present just as the “Orthodox” moral codes. In that context, turbo folk is merely a projection of a *liberal political concept* – with all its virtues and flaws – onto the sphere of popular culture, neither better nor worse than the one dominant in the West” (Maljković 2008).

Both Dimitrijević and Maljković constantly refer to the importance of turbo folk in the local context, just as the representatives of the emancipatory-enlightening position do, and for both positions the patriarchal society appears as the pillar of Serbian nationalism. Branislav Dimitrijević identifies a subversive potential in certain neofolk lyrics, since some of them express: “resistance to the limits imposed by the patriarchal society, the possibility of emotional and economic independence of young women, and thereby [they might have] precisely the emancipating role“ (Dimitrijević 2002b). For the democratic populist theorists, precisely this the point of the greatest subversive potential of turbo folk – confrontation with patriarchal values and their rejection consequently subverts Serbian nationalism which is the ideology of exclusion of ‘the other’. It turns out that the oppressed minorities, the typical ‘other’ of nationalism, can embrace neofolk female singers with delight. 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 Marković and Vujanović 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” (Marković and Vujanović 2004, 14).

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

“Turbo-folk is the only contribution to globalization from the area of the 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 clash with the central global cultural industries (...) Listen just to the *Halo Pink* show: I am sending greetings to my brother in Sydney, and to the aunt in Philadelphia and at the same time to the grandmother in Vranje. So, these people have been living in globalization for the last 40 years” (Močnik quoted in Maljković 2008).

Just as we can object that the emancipatory-enlightening theorists have reduced the whole complex phenomenon to its political (in the narrow sense of the word) aspect, we can also object that the democratic-populist bloc has left out the daily politics from their analysis. One of the examples is the above quoted Dimitrijević’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 a 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 the former Yugoslavia and to Serbia’s communication with the world (Maljković 2008). The question of reconciliation is taken too recklessly here – while *estrada*, as a separate space, may reestablish connections in the space

of the 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 testify to the opposite.

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 a tool for the nationalist regime's manipulation (Kronja 2001, Papić 2001), or as a "crack in the patriarchal society" (Dimitrijević 2002b). 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 some other of its manifestations. The female body (the body of the female singer, exposed and expressive) 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 the position of a female folk singer today, after all the changes that happened both within *estrada*'s market and the Serbian nationalism?

It is easy to agree that *estrada* is still the most open and the most developed market of contemporary Serbia. If that is the most developed capitalist space, then what is its position within 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 being Milošević's ally who negates its involvement in political life to the acceptance of liberal concepts such as human rights?

The question of the body's involvement 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 the 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 canceling 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 masses (Huyssen 1986), and applying that claim to the contemporary Serbian 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 in more 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.

2. FEMALE SINGER’S BODY AS A CYBORG

Barbara Bradby has noticed that the development of new technologies and their incorporation into music business cast out women from the authorship. 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” (Bradby 1993, 157). 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. Serbian *estrada*, which has always followed recent music trends and development of technology, seems to follow that gendered divide in the music 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” (Bordo 1989, 13). 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 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” (Kuhn 1997, 204).

If we understand representation as a form of regulation, then the first thing that representation of female singer’s body regulates is that of gender, it proscribes certain norms of femininity, or to use Susan Bordo’s formulation, her body is a certain “text of femininity” (Bordo 1989, 16). The female body, as represented in 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 understanding of

gender, exactly that which according to V. Spike Peterson turn out to be the pillar of nationalism (Peterson 1999). Thus the body of the female folk singer in 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 Bordo says, “operate as a metaphor for culture” (Bordo 1989, 13). But the representation of female body in *estrada* has its political significance. I recall Moira Gatens here, according to whom

“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” (Gatens 1997, 81).

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. Through this metonymic process all the previously mentioned 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. Recalling the autochthonous nature reflected in traditional and rural lifestyles was the part of construction of Serbian nationalism and its isolationist politics (Čolović, 2002), but the consequences of such positioning are that the 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 gaze (Mulvey 1990). 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 to *estrada*’s space. As Jackey Stacey asked, “How might a woman’s look at another woman, both

within the diegesis and between spectator and character, compare with that of the male spectator?” (Stacey 1990, 370). Stacey found examples of a woman-centered narrative in some of classical Hollywood movies. I find Stacey’s concept of the woman-centered narrative useful in the 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 a 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 recall Susan Bordo’s observations on the body of an anorexic, and its possibility to enter the privileged male world. 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” (Bordo 1989, 23-24). While the ‘male’ body certainly is not an outcome of bodily modifications, as in Bordo’s example, the female singer’s excessive perfection and disciplining of the body may still work in favor of deconstructing the “conventionally feminine”. 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 subversion (Butler 1997), and over-the-top performed femininity of the singers bears strong characteristics of subversive drag Butler writes about. As Branislav Dimitrijević noticed, “the overall image of turbo-folk stars such as Jelena Karleuša, actually demonstrates how exaggerated stress on the construction of the female body as the exclusive object of male desire, ultimately poses a threat to that desire and presses open cracks in the patriarchal social order” (Dimitrijević 2002b).

The interventions on the body, especially plastic surgery, do not happen separately from the demands of the market. The postmodern folk singer's shattered body can be described using 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" (Bordo 1993, 272). Here it 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" (Haraway 1991, 149), 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 intervention on the voice, or through modifying the video clip. That female body, shaped by the whole production team of designers, surgeons and Photoshop masters, still stands in the middle of the stage, in 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 Clair" (Kunst 2001). We can easily draw a parallel between the scientist from the story, the constructor and production teams in 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 (ibid.).

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 the 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” (ibid.). The female android from L’Isle’s story, just like a 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” (ibid.).

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” (Balsamo 1996, 33). 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” (ibid., 40). This ghost in the machine disrupts the dominant understanding of body as an object, the body whose, according to Elisabeth Grosz, constitutive role in shaping of thoughts, feelings, emotions and psychical representation (Grosz 2005, 30) 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 Kunst’s words:

“The body, in fact, constantly confronts the basic potentiality that paradoxically makes it strong – as the body of someone or something. (...) The body becomes visible with contemporary fading of borders and instead of being weak, it in some special way becomes strong. By 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 the boundaries and traditional reduction in dichotomy and forces us to think hybrid and to constantly face the paradoxical, always following the relational constitution of our identity, to face the knowledge that there

is no body as such. In other words, to paraphrase Donna Haraway: now the need of its politics is revealed” (Kunst 2002, 54).

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” (Haraway 1991, 151) 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 Milošević and his regime where the enemy was so clearly visible and present. Now *estrada* got its chance to express and reflect complex struggles in Serbian society after 2000 more visibly. “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” (Balsamo 1996, 39). 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 (Grosz 1992, 195). 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.

3. PARADOX OF *ESTRADA*

3.1 Female singer’s body as homogenizer of national identity

I will recall again Barbara Bradby’s notions of gendered nature of the contemporary music business, relating it now 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” (Bradby 1993, 157), when brought to the context of contemporary Serbia somehow corresponds with Anne McClintock’s notions of time paradox of nationalism: it is invoking

the glorious past while at the same time pursuing 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” (McClintock 1993, 66).

Authentic, natural female body is inevitable in nationalist narratives. As Ivan Čolović says, “nature is the great goddess of all political mythology altogether, not only Serbian” (Čolović 2002, 21). ‘Nature’ is uncorrupted by foreign influences, and therefore perfect for the preservation of national identity (*ibid.*). 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 to be transmitters of its culture” (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989, 7). ‘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 Čolović 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” (Čolović 2002, 39). *Estrada* has its role in constructing the West as the other of Serbian nation and it is manifested both through the lyrics and stage performances. 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 a 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 envy us”²). As Čolović picturesquely describes, “facing the morally and biologically degenerate stands the robust figure of Serbia, observing the monster before her with revulsion and shame” (ibid.). 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, too (ibid., 22). That national life, national force, “the existential strength of the nation” is, as Čolović states, “reflected in its connection to the soil” (ibid., 26). National identity is being constructed through strong physical experience, experience lived through the body.

Female singer’s body on the stage, in this setting symbolically representing the nation, is worshiped by the nation’s individuals. The very body of the singer and her passionate performance here become 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 the notion of *blut und boden*, she is becoming a symbolic axis around which the imagined Serbian community gathers and constantly reinforces itself through a ritualistic celebration of its mythical specificity. Strong connection with the soil and the nature defines the Serbian national being as authentic, and puts it into the 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?”³

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.

2. Cf. Seka Aleksić – *Balkan*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y T3V2-adEts>, accessed 3.6.2009.

3. Cf. Stoja – *Evropa* [Europe], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pv PjBeRvST0>, accessed: 3.6.2009.

As Wendy Bracewell noted, the reinforcement of patriarchal gender roles was the crucial part in the construction of Serbian nationalism (Bracewell 2000). Following that line, it is not surprising that activist minority groups, gay and lesbian groups above all, eagerly accept neofolk. As Jasmina Milojević summarizes, “[gay and lesbian groups] are interested in turbofolk and its narratives that act subversively on the existing social moral. They see turbofolk’s dismantling of the patriarchal family as a chance for affirmation of their own interests, because for them such family is the enemy number one” (Milojević, 2008).

The symbolic role of 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 the patriarchal nationalist pattern that supports Serbian nationalism. It happens in the 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 in *estrada* is also connected with social status, and I will further discuss this in the fourth section of this paper.

Another spot for gay identification opens up here, when we take into account the well-known prejudice about the 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 section, the female singer’s performance recalls the characteristics of subversive drag Butler writes about (cf. Butler 1997). Drag becomes the ultimate example of gender’s performativity, of the instability of gender roles. Drag is the parody of stable identities; and in a parodic manner it mocks them. Performed femininity of female folk singers, as Branislav Dimitrijević says, “presses open cracks in the patriarchal social order” (Dimitrijević 2002b).

“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 the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself” (Butler 1997, 306).

If gender is not authentic, natural, then the role of women as bearers of national identity in nationalism becomes (visible?) as a pure construction. As a result, we are faced with a completely opposite reading of *estrada*'s female body: here it appears as a reminder of a failure of Serbian nationalism.

The body of female folk singers resembles drag queen shows, and that feature is 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 Karleuša here appears as the most prominent example, who even insists on making that connection in the video for the song “Slatka mala [Sweet little-one]”⁴. In it the shots of Jelena Karleuša are juxtaposed with images of three drag queens who are, suggested by the video's narrative, impersonating our star, Karleuša herself. Karleuša toys with associating her body with a transvestite body, underlying that with lyrics about the “sweet little-one” who impersonates her: “She does everything just as me”. Karleuša intentionally addresses gay audience, intentionally builds the clear connections, and finally through that adds another meaning, or a 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.

Here we might speak about readings of popular culture that characterize gay readings of popular culture. I will use Alexander 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 (Doty 2000b, 4). According to him, one

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

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 also claims that it “does make a difference who makes a film, who the authors are” (Dyer 1991, 185). 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 the invisible gay pop production and gay consumers of popular culture, further constitutes what Doty calls “gay spectatorship” (Doty 2000a). In that way, the director Dejan Milićević introduced gay aesthetics in Serbian mainstream popular culture through videos in the nineties, and Jelena Karleuša concluded it in the TV show *Piramida*, when while defending the rights of gay population, she literally outed half of her production and fashion team.⁵ Female singers, such as Jelena Karleuša, Indira Radić (2009), 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.⁶

Camp is another crucial factor in the gay appropriation of singers and establishing them as gay icons. Richard Dyer noticed, while writing on Judy Garland as a gay icon, that to Garland was ascribed a “special relationship to suffering, ordinariness, normality, and it is this relationship that structures much of the gay reading of Garland” (Dyer 2004, 188). 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

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

6. For example, see 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 Karleuša – “Buntovna princeza u zemlji seljaka [Rebellious Princess in the Land of Pesants]”, <http://www.gayecho.com/interview.aspx?id=6829&grid=4481&page=2>, accessed: 3.4.2009.

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?” (Butler 1997, 312).

The subversiveness of this position against Serbian nationalism lies in dismantling the traditional gender roles, and posing a challenge to the categories of hegemonic masculinity. According to Michael Kimmel, masculinity is being constantly constructed and reinforced through homophobia (Kimmel 1994). 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’” (Nagel 1998, 243). 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 Dimitrijević claims, if it allies with gay audiences and makes them visible, such body additionally disturbs that masculinity.

Since homophobia turns out to be one of the 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 can there be so much support for gay issues in the *estrada*. Paradoxality of *estrada* also reveals the following question: to what extent does gay identity exclude nationalism? The complex relationship between sexuality and national identity in Serbia complicates simple confrontation of the two functions of the body in Serbian *estrada*, as analyzed above. Also, such insight in *estrada* disturbs the common thinking that in the country in which the nationalist project is defined as a homophobic one, the defined gay identity (out of closet) must be political, and by definition opposed to right wing nationalist forces. The question arises of how are these identities 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 groups, here shows a raster of possibilities.

4. 'AS ONE WOMAN TO ANOTHER' – FOLK SINGERS AND FEMALE AUDIENCE

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 are also part of the package that produces the meanings. The song (music + lyrics) supplements the text that singer's body speaks out. In a certain way, text of a song determines the reading of the singer's body.

These songs bear strong characteristics of melodrama. Similar to this 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" (Dirks 2009). Melodrama is focused on romantic plots and almost exclusively on domesticity, and it includes stereotypical, schematized characters, painted in black and white. The characters in neofolk songs are simplified, emotions exaggerated, and the plot could be basically described as "true love is endangered by the interference of a third person."⁷ 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" (Rasmussen 1995, 250).

Melodrama is also considered to be a "feminine" genre. In a similar fashion, the target audiences 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

7. In original: "dvoje se vole, a treći im smeta". Phrase is commonly used in dramaturgy classes to describe melodramatic plots.

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" (Leaver 1999, 443-444).

Domesticity is the main space of melodrama. However, while strictly focused on domestic affairs, social context is also strongly present in it, highly determining the characters' problems. As Catherine Baker says about neofolk, calling upon Ivan Čolović, this musical genre also "emphasized 'romantic motifs' often ultimately connected to family life" (Čolović 1985 185-6; Baker 2007). But in neofolk social criticism is not as evident as in melodrama. It still does not mean that reflections on the society are completely left out. Ljerka Rasmussen says:

"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" (Rasmussen 1995, 250-251).

Is it possible to read social reflections from female singers' neofolk songs, and how can it be done? Ljerka Rasmussen writes the following about newly composed folk music, that is, neofolk music: "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" (ibid.). And vice versa, emotional experiences echo a marginal social position. In neofolk songs, the usual setting is enclosed, small space, the family circle or the small-town surroundings. That world is strictly heteronormative, and the usual topic of songs is a failed heterosexual relationship. Just as melodrama puts private affairs in the public space of the stage/screen, so a neofolk song exposes

to public sight ruined family and patriarchal relations. 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; “true love” is constantly pursued but never really achieved.

What causes the 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. This is perhaps most visible in the motif of *kafana*, a typical Serbian bar, which is today exclusively associated with suburban and rural areas, as the gathering place typical for the working class. Ljerka Rasmussen notices that *kafana* is something of an essential setting of neofolk songs, “a key metaphor for in-group social space” (ibid.). Further, “the *kafana* is typically associated with male-dominated notions of carousing, competitive drinking, and mutual treating, along with the conversational unfolding of time” (ibid.). Public space of *kafana* is coded as male space, the privileged space, space which embodies Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of homosociality (cf. Sedgwick 1985). She claims that formations that involve men who desire a woman have an erotic component central to the bond between the rival males. 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” does not 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”⁸

Songs further express dissatisfaction, resistance to control, through lyrics

8. Cf. Sanja Đorđević – Sanja, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIwqFCfG7OE>, accessed:6.6.2009.

such as “I am not your sexy robot”⁹, “go away and don’t come back”¹⁰, “you will get what you’ve deserved”¹¹. Emotions are articulated through violent acts, such as breaking glasses, or in simple lyrics such as “die!”, or “to hell with you!” Calling upon violence in neofolk songs is at the same time expression of powerlessness and a 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”¹²

Privileges are often articulated through excess behavior. In another song, Seka Aleksić sings: “If I was like you, I would break glasses”¹³. But the female singer is not “like him”, so her excess behavior meets the public shame and condemnation; she thus becomes “marked”¹⁴ or “fallen”¹⁵, in a small-town setting which is another common motif in many neofolk songs. The small-town despise for the “fallen” singer means that ideal of love cannot be reached in her surroundings. Or, as Viki Miljković sings in one of her songs:

“There is no love for me in this town
 Here everybody knows that I used to be yours.”¹⁶

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

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

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

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

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

14. Cf. Viki Miljković – Obeležena [Marked], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Koa2-lPh6Ms>, accessed 3.4.2009.

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

16. Cf. Viki Miljković – Obeležena [Marked], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Koa2-lPh6Ms>, accessed 3.4.2009.

To recall Simone de Beauvoir here in this specific context of neofolk songs: women are “defined and differentiated with reference to man” (de Beauvoir 1989, xxii). In neofolk texts, these men are willing to control, they are careless, and almost without 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 unattainable 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” (Rasmussen 1995, 251). 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 away from madness”¹⁷. We are here once more in the realm of melodrama – the relationship between two people is disturbed by a third party, and that third party is often the world – social order – itself. In female singer’s neofolk song it turns out that, to recall R.W. Fassbinder, “love is the best, most insidious, most effective instrument of social repression” (Fassbinder 1975).

Neofolk songs have an 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 of 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 difficult childhood and *estrada* career that started in dirty local bars (Seka Aleksić, Slavica Ćukteraš, Tanja Savić and Radmila Manojlović started their careers as *kafana* singers); they are almost inevitable in singers’ biographies. These life stories are presented in romanticized narratives that might be easily expressed through the old Latin proverb *per aspera ad astra*. The difficult journey from *kafana* on *Ibarska magistrala* to the record contract figures here as a metaphor

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

for the fulfillment of the Serbian dream. And many times, the reminiscence on that dirty period of singing in *kafana* is present in the songs, always described as a 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, or the others
 What do you need the singer for, just a name without address
 I live in my own world, I live from song.”¹⁸

Reminder on the difficult early beginnings represents singers as sharing common *schmertz*, 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 the global popular culture – the best example would be Jennifer Lopez singing “I am still Jenny from the block” at the peak of her popularity. These life stories bring them closer to the audience, they enable identification and eventually even tears, as is the case with the story about Aleksandra Bursać’s father who was killed in the war in 1991, or the heartbreaking confession of one Radmila Manojlović:

“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 overnight, I wasn’t a child anymore, I didn’t have a carefree 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 had to provide them with drinks and food, that’s how it’s done in the country. Nobody asked me whether I wanted to sing or not, I just had to.”¹⁹

18. Cf. Jana - Šta će ti pevačica [What do you need the singer for?], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfAfh5Up5W8>, accessed:5.6.2009.

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

No matter how strong the insistence on these narratives, it is at the same time clear that the singers speak from a clearly different class position today. Tabloids interview them in their apartments, where there is emphasis on expensive interior design and furniture. Fetishized parts of singer's body are always accompanied by a certain trade mark, brand of clothes, shiny boots or skirts, bought in an exclusive boutique, or better, in expensive stores somewhere in Europe. Higher class is presented both on the body and the TV screen. Rising from the social bottom here becomes written and reflected directly on the body. While at the beginning of their careers female singers' bodies appeared as 'natural', as the career progresses their bodies visibly shift away from that image. A good example is the show *Zvezde Granda* [Stars of the Grand Production], which started in 2004 as another local variation on the popular reality show *American Idol*, with the emphasis on neofolk music, and in which new stars were chosen from among thousands of applicants through a series of auditions. During the show and live performances that followed it, one of the ways for gaining sympathy from the audience was insisting on the singers' bodies as 'natural' and non-modified. Already by the second album the situation was different. The popular, cyborg body of the female folk singer, moves away from its difficult beginnings with each new modification; as Susan Bordo says, it erases the history of that body and its pain (Bordo 1993, 272), and actually testifies to its elevation on the social ladder.

As a result, *estrada* does not actually disturb the 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 within which everything is possible and anything goes, the space that functions according to rules different from those of the regular Serbian society; it is a celebrity 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 a rigid view of the world, in which the position of women is cemented and any form of stepping out is

difficult and almost impossible to achieve. Possible tears that songs eventually provoke can happen, to paraphrase Fassbinder, not because of the characters' fate, but because of the social order, the world itself. And "changing the world is so difficult" (Fassbinder 1975).

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have analyzed the complexities of Serbian *estrada*, 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; I have also explored how that body takes part in the construction of national identities, and what those identities are. My starting point was that the existing analyses and academic works about *estrada* tend to be one sided, that in their analyses they either focus strictly on the political context in which *estrada* operates, or entirely ignore it. I tried to bring those two positions together, and explore how the female body, as the main representative and metonymy of *estrada* communicates with audiences in Serbia, and how it responds to 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 onwards, 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 in academic analysis. The public space of Serbian culture also offers different readings of *estrada*, which is probably most visible in relation the gay community has towards *estrada* and its female stars. The identification of two apparently confronted identities, nationalist and gay identity, posed the question of the extent to which they mutually exclude each other, and opened a wider insight into the complexity of transformations of national identities in contemporary Serbia. That section also opened the question of subversiveness of *estrada*, on which I focused in the analysis of the relationship established between female singers and their female audience, which shows that *estrada* offers resistance to traditional patriarchal society, at the same time maintaining its escapist function. *Estrada*

offers both reinforcement and subversion of dominant ideology by giving to various groups 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 of importance along this line is how *estrada* engages in the processes of globalization, how it communicates with dominant global music trends, particularly those imposed by global music industries such as MTV, for example. Furthermore, a possible research could be focused on the question of how the communication with global trends, beyond the specifically Serbian context, influences construction of identity within particular space of *estrada*. I also think that intersections of class and sexuality can be analyzed in more depth across *estrada*, on a much wider scale than I have done here.

All these issues demand further research. 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 problem 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 the complex processes of social, cultural and economic transformation of the Serbian society at present.

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Telo folk pevačice: konstrukcija nacionalnih identiteta u Srbiji posle 2000. godine

Olga DIMITRIJEVIĆ

Sažetak: U ovom tekstu, analiziram poziciju ženskog tela u prostoru srpskog *show business*-a, popularno nazvanog *estrada*. Estradu posmatram kao složen i kulturno specifičan fenomen, kao tržišno orijentisani društveni prostor koji reaguje na i u odnosu je sa procesima društvene, kulturne i ekonomske transformacije društva u savremenoj Srbiji.

Telo folk pevačice je glavni “predstavnik” estrade. To telo se analizira u cilju istraživanja odnosa između estrade i srpskog nacionalizma, i načina na koji je estrada uključena u konstruisanje različitih nacionalnih identiteta u Srbiji uzimajući kao istorijski početak 2000. godinu i zvaničan krah ere Slobodana Miloševića.

Da bih pokazala složenost ovih identiteta, istražujem ulogu tela folk pevačice u konstruisanju dva identiteta koji stoje u naizgled paradoksalnom odnosu: nacionalnog i *gay* identiteta. Na kraju, preko odnosa pevačica sa ženskom publikom, ispitujem granice moguće subverzivnosti estrade za dominantnu patrijarhalnu ideologiju.

Ključne reči: *estrada*, neofolk, žensko telo, tranzicija, nacionalizam, LGBT, melodrama, ženska publika