

## Dogs, Gypsies and Serbs

### The Gaze of the Dog

Jo-Fi was always there, at the foot of the couch, whenever an analytic session was about to start. Before her, it was Lun Yug, and after her, it was Lün – in any case, for the last ten years of Freud's practice with patients at no. 19, Berggasse, when entering the consulting room, one would have to face the gaze of his dog. Freud felt that dogs had a special sense that allows them to judge a person's character so accurately that he used them as an aid in assessing a patient's mental state. Some decades later, one of Freud's followers, Jacques Lacan, in a lecture addressing the rebelling students in Vincennes in the aftermath of the 1968 revolt, presented them his dog Justine, named after De Sade's novel, as his muse, and as the only person who, to his knowledge, actually knew what she was talking about. She didn't say anything in words, added Lacan, but by her behaviour: "she says something when she is anxious". From Freud to Lacan, anxiety was considered a signal one should never doubt, and dogs were considered never to take one person for another, due to their incapability for transference; so, if the behaviour of a dog showed traces of anxiety, the analyst had to respond to that in the session to come.

But, there was another characteristic of dogs Freud appreciated as much. "Dogs love their friends and bite their enemies", wrote Freud, claiming that they are, therefore, "quite unlike people, who are incapable of pure love and always have to mix love and hate in their object-relations". By the end of that decade, after the *Anschluss* of Austria, when he had no patients left, and no friends visiting him, he spent quite a lot of his time translating a book entitled *Topsy: the Story of a Golden-haired Chow*. It was a story of a dog dying of cancer, a disease he was himself struggling with, less and less successfully. Perhaps that was how Freud saw his fate at the time. He was, like many of his fellow citizens, left to be killed or to die like a dog. Even though he managed to escape, aided by princess Bonaparte, who in fact wrote the *Topsy* book, four of his sisters did not: Dolfi, Mitzi, Rosa and Pauli died in concentration camps over the next few years.

Bobby, "the last Kantian in Nazi Germany" – this is how Emmanuel Levinas called the dog he got attached to during his captivity in Nazi concentration camp no. 1492, near Hannover. In the essay published in 1975 under the title *The Name of a Dog; or, Natural Rights*, he wrote about his recollections of the times when the guards in the camp "stripped them of their human skins", turning them to subhumans, to "a gang of apes", denying any possibility for them to claim subjectivity, which was, in his Kantian conceptual framework, a necessary precondition for ethical relations. It was only Bobby, a stray dog wandering around the camp, who looked at them as he would look at any other human. He was the only guarantor of their subjectivities. "For him, there was no doubt we were men", wrote Levinas. So, it was Bobby's gaze that made them capable of surviving the camp years and retaining enough humanity to continue living after that.

The gaze of the dog in these examples is posited as a mirror of perception of a specific self, and its recognition as it is. As neurotic, in the first case, and as human, in the second. In both cases, that mirror is a corrective one. It can correct certain views because it is not distorted by desire. It is not effected by the desire of the analyst, which causes counter-transference, attributing to the self in view some features of other selves from analyst's previous life scenarios. It is also not distorted by the desire of the camp guards to distance themselves emotionally from detainees, to

make themselves able to perform their torture scenarios. It is a mirror showing someone's fully completed image.

### **The Gaze of the Gypsy**

"It has been brought to my attention," said Madonna on stage during her Bucharest concert in August 2009, "that there is a lot of discrimination against Romanians and Gypsies in general in Eastern Europe." Several thousand people in a crowd of approximately 60,000 fans at the concert immediately started booing. Why? It might be that they simply wanted her to shut up and sing, for the price of the tickets was so high that they expected a real spectacle all the way through, without any quasi-activist speeches. Perhaps she was booed for hypocrisy (for Gypsies are discriminated against not only in Eastern Europe – in many countries in Western Europe, they are subject to laws that limit their rights to stay and, therefore, to enforced deportations)? Or perhaps they were really racist?

Well, the answer is yes. To all three questions. In fact, one "yes" entails the other two, in any order of answering. The "shut up and sing" attitude is quite likely to be expressed by Madonna fans anywhere else, while, for instance, Manu Chao did include activist speeches in his performance in Bucharest in 2008, and was applauded for that by the audience attending that kind of event. The hypocrisy issue is closely linked to that. For instance, just before the confirmation of the accession of Romania to EU in 2004, the British tabloid press launched a large campaign, warning the readership of "hordes of refugees", and that "hundreds of thousands of East European Roma only waited the day of Enlargement to move westward", and for these "1.6 million poverty-stricken Gypsies", as one of them told its readers, *they would have to pay* (Madonna, who was based in London at the time, did not react to that). Finally, the racism issue arises from the first two – Romanians (as well as Hungarians, Slovaks, etc.) play a specific role in the present libidinal economy of group identities in EU. They are supposed to be the "racist other" to Western Europeans, to prove that not all EU citizens are equal (racists cannot be considered equal to enlightened democrats), and that Roma people should be repatriated to some of those countries. Why? Because, they, allegedly, ran away from the racists, not for other reasons.

But what about the "gaze of the Gypsy"? For the Western, enlightened part of this dichotomy, it marks the point from which they can see their actions towards *civilizing Eastern Europeans* as valuable and praiseworthy, as making sense. That way they appear as heroes fighting racism. For the Eastern, transitional part of this dichotomy, it marks the point from which they can see why they cannot enjoy the same rights as Western Europeans, even though they are guaranteed these rights in a formal, legal sense. That gaze reflects that they are fools, easily cheated. Roma immigrants in Western countries present themselves as nationals of, say, Romania, while they are, in fact, stateless, and criminal by nature (says the discourse that gets interpellated by that gaze), bringing also the non-Roma Romanians into conflict with Westerners, such as in Italy last year and this year, when even "neighbourhood citizen patrols" were formed to protect the local citizens from Roma and Romanians. Thus, the gaze of the Gypsy appears as the gaze of someone who steals enjoyment from East Europeans, preventing them from living as Westerners.

In Serbia, that mechanism is even operative within the framework of the public administration, as the case of the 2009 World University Games has shown. In order to present Belgrade as a

clean city, the City administration decided to destroy the Roma settlement next to the residential area for athletes. *Bellville*, as that area was named, was built for that occasion on a former garbage dump, from which the Roma used to pick up recyclable matter, sell it and live on the proceeds, which is why the slum was there. The cleansing did not fully succeed, due to the reaction of Roma, joined by both local and international cultural and social activists, spoiling a full enjoyment in the Games.

### **Gypsy Gaze and Dog Gaze Installed**

A two-channel video projection and a set of video frames make up the exhibition format of presenting the project by Zoran Todorović entitled *Gypsies and Dogs*. In the manner of other works of his which have no site-specific features in relation to the physical gallery space, this work is more a document of a research experiment, visualised in the video and photo format, than an object of aesthetic appreciation. It does not mean that these works appeal to the intellect rather than the senses of the viewer – on the contrary, one gets very physical sensations when facing them – but it is quite obvious that they were, in a way, displaced in order to meet the viewer. The artist always makes that visible. Posing questions on the format in which works are presented, with no aspirations to give any final answer to them, becomes, in that way, an integral part of his artistic practice.

The manifest content of this work consists of two discontinuous flows of images of everyday surroundings of dogs and Gypsies, wearing accessories with implanted micro-cameras, to generate images during their habitual activities. The latent content could be the passions and desires of the author of the work, obsessed with power structures and social roles, as well as technologies linking the former to the latter. The very mechanism of producing the footage from which both the video installation and the collage works came out is based on the practice that corresponds with Adorno's idea of blind filming. That means having no influence on what comes before the camera lens and how. Alexander Kluge, a former student of Adorno, described that mechanism, as suggested to him, when he was to make a nine-hour film about the student movement in Frankfurt, at the *Institut für Filmgestaltung*. Blind film, in Adorno's view, was to open up the possibilities of making something that does not serve capital, drive the audience into ideological submission and banalise human existence, and the suggested way to do it was to let the eye of the camera, not the eye of the director, deal with framing the content. In Todorović's work, the footage was then edited, and in that part of the production process the latent content had a chance to permeate the manifest one. The editing, in this case, was directed towards further fragmentation and, in the final result, the viewer does not face a gaze in which one can see a firm reality being constituted, but just an inchoate collection of glances, with an overlay of technically incorrect recordings.

What we get in this way is not really what one would fantasize about. These are not the missing links meant to make the experience of our immediate surroundings total by including viewpoints so far not accounted for. On the contrary, viewing these two juxtaposed sets of edited recordings is an experience of "going through fantasy", and it involves recognizing that there is nothing in these two gazes that could be fascinating. No well-hidden secret is revealed, except that there was no secret at all. But that does not mean that what we see is trivial. What we see is that the role these gazes have acquired was to cover up for something that is fundamentally lacking.

Relating that to the stories from the very beginning of the text, it means that there is a lack of instances that could provide guarantees of what someone's true self is, and so replace the search for one's own unknown knowing. In the second case, it means a lack of instances that could guarantee the humanity of any subject (including the guards) within the framework of the concentration camp. Finally, getting to the Gypsies, there is no hidden obscene enjoyment in the activities they practice, which is socially dangerous. If they beg for money, which is the main activity we witness in the footage, they don't do it due to being lazy, or not used to working, or because they enjoy acting as social parasites – they do it for the same reason some retired people, whose pensions are not high enough to buy both food and medicines do it – they have no other option within the given social setting.

### **Where do the Serbs get into the Picture?**

The Serbs were dealt with in another work, entitled *Warmth*. Proposed and made for the *Pavilion of Serbia* at the 53<sup>rd</sup> *Venice Biennial* in 2009, this work shared space with a set of video installations by Katarina Zdjelar entitled *But if you take my voice, what will be left to me?* The visual appearance of the work was quite simple – several sets of felt blankets put on cargo pallets, accompanied with small-size monitors, displaying the edited video footage of the process of gathering the raw material, sorting it, preparing it for the industrial process, and the actual process of producing the blankets. The only strange, even uncanny feature of this project is that the raw material for producing the blankets was human hair. It was mainly (supposedly) the hair of Serbian citizens, for it was gathered only from hairdressing salons in several towns in Serbia.

Even though it was realized as an installation of objects and video works, its main medium was human tissue recycling. As was the case with his previous work titled *Assimilation*, which dealt with processing aesthetic surgery waste into human food, this project also dealt with leftovers of ordinary beautifying practices. The difference was that, this time around, the process had additional implications, those of national representation. Namely, the institutional framework in which it was produced was the following: the *Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Serbia* commissioned and funded the project, while the *Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade* was its producer. The commissioner and curator was Branislav Dimitrijević, *Deputy Minister of Culture*.

The question of national representation could not be avoided. One could only decide upon how to answer it. Todorović's answer was that accurate representation is impossible. There could not be one artist or a set of artworks, even when juxtaposed with a completely different set, such as the work of Katarina Zdjelar (which was the solution proposed by the selection board) that could adequately represent the Serbian art scene of the moment, as well as Serbian culture and Serbian society in general. Thus, his solution was to produce not some kind of representation but pure physical presence of some matter that a considerable number of those who were to be represented is somehow related to. Hair was both the only easily accessible and legally acceptable container of that: this randomly gathered hair contained the DNA of a considerable percentage of Serbian nationals. With sufficient technical means to do so, one could read their data from this waste matter used for the installation. That is exactly what some research institutes do, and even trade in it.

But what does it have to do with *Gypsies and Dogs*? In fact, these two projects just show two different sides of the same thing. Avoiding representation, they simply foreground some material aspects of the existence of subjects they deal with. For that purpose, they used bodies as production devices. The bodies of Gypsies and dogs were used as carriers for the optical device that was to capture how they see their surroundings, producing video footage that was to be used to present their Gazes. The bodies of Serbs were treated as sources generating organic matter that was used to ensure their massive participation in cultural production and in representing cultural production. The author of the works thus presented himself as dealing with resource management, using these bodies as resources for image and installation production. On the other hand, the fact that signifiers such as *Dogs*, *Gypsies* and *Serbs* are attached to these bodies or, in the third case, merely could be attached to them, brought out the passionate attachments and fantasy frames these signifiers trigger off in the audience, in order to play them down.

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