

Zoran Kurelić

Violence, Art and Politics

2015. Politička Misao. Pages: 214.

This “small and unpretentious book,” as its editor Zoran Kurelić calls it, is in fact a collection of papers dealing with the topics of its title, namely violence, art and politics. Thus the name of the book simply and honestly depicts what the reader will encounter among its 200 pages - a voyage through a multitude of social science approaches that explore, each in its own way, the relationship between at least two of these three concepts as they appear in cinematography, literature, media, politics, public rituals of commemoration, moments of state foundation and others. I have decided to take a closer look at three texts in the collection and engage them critically in this review, leaving others to the individual discovery of the reader.

In her paper “Memories in Conflict in Post-totalitarian Societies: Reflections from an Arendtian Perspective” Christina Sanchez Munoz explores the role of memory in the public sphere of democracies with a violent past. Even though she uses Spain as an example of one such state that experiences a clash of conflicting memories she could easily be talking about Croatia as well. In both countries, the (dis)agreement on a common narrative still takes center stage in the present discourse, and the manipulation of collective memories of shared historical events serves as an extremely powerful formative force of national identity and social cohesion. The narrative used to create and maintain a homogenous democratic population seems to require a rigorously selective process that seeks to weed out all of its inherent conflicts. Even in societies that value pluralism it seems that cohesion stems from an artificially created, monolithic narrative at its core. According to Hannah Arendt it supplies a framework for understanding past and future events and secures a stabile collective identity. Remembering is also important because it creates the so called banister of factual truth – a pluralistic public sphere open to a diverse array of testimonies allows truth to surface and serves as its support (48). The author distinguishes two models of memory: the *Romulus and Remus model* and the *Angelus Novus model* that often exist side by side

and compete with one another (52). The former represents the created, collective memory of how the republic was constituted. It is maintained through the performative and commemorative. It is important to note that even though the creation of a democratic state enables the existence of a plural public sphere, its narrative still rests on the suppression of memories that have the potential to corrode it. These memories include those of silenced and marginalized victims of the, often violent, process of state formation. It is here where the *Angelus Novus model* comes into play since it deals with the memories of victims and rests on witness testimonies that simultaneously sustain the plurality of the public sphere as well as provide a remedy for those who were victimized. However in countries that experience post-conflict transition there exists an even stronger tendency to create a "seamless memory" that will go unchallenged (54). Such a situation continues to marginalize certain testimonies branding those to whom they belong as 'the Other' and excluding them from the shared narrative. Munoz calls for the creation of a resilient, habermasian public sphere that is all encompassing, self-reflective and unafraid of loose ends and internal conflicts within its founding narrative as the only way for the creation of a truly cohesive society and state.

In "The Vulnerable and Helpless Family in Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook*" Jennifer Vilchez attempts to discuss the (non)traditional nuclear family in the West and the external pressures it is faced with. She uses the example of the horror film *The Babadook* and the lens of Adriana Cavarero's concept of *horrorism* to shift focus from those committing the 'violence' to those who are its victims. For Vilchez, "the family and households are spaces of vulnerability and helplessness," especially those of non-traditional families pressured by society to find a way to conform (177). The dynamic concept of the family has, with time, opened up to different interpretations but is still placed under many forms of social and political pressures if it deviates too far from what is considered to be the norm. This is evident – as core social and political concepts evolve in real time, norms, procedures and attitudes follow with delay. This lag causes anxieties and exerts 'violence' over those who find themselves outside the borders that define normality. It is also true that the horror genre has for decades been used to expose social complexities and tensions. However I am not convinced Kent's *Babadook* is the right example to substantiate the argument. Indeed the *Babadook* is not a real monster, but in my opinion it does not represent what

Vilchez wants it to – it is not an external evil, but an internal, psychological one. In this particular story the threat to this unorthodox family does not come from pressures without, but from the immense emotional trauma experienced by the mother at the moment of her husband's death that happens to coincide with their son's birth. The surviving members of the family are indeed victimized, but by the profound grief of Amelia that is unable to care for Samuel who in turn experiences an array of emotional and behavioral problems. Acceptance of the Babadook into her home at the end of the movie does not represent, as Vilchez asserts, "letting evil come into the home" in order to conform to social pressures, but a point of acceptance of profound loss and learning to live with the grief that it has caused. That being said, the issue of vulnerability of the non-orthodox nuclear family and the 'violence' experienced by its members in society that takes a while to catch up is an important one. The text is a valuable exploration of these issues and of how the horror genre channels them to the public by almost forcing them to experience by causing involuntary "emotional, mental and physical reactions" (181).

The last paper in the book - "A Little Red Bird Catches a Bug and a Megaworm" - is written by the editor of "Violence, Art and Politics," Zoran Kurelić. It explores the revolutionary element of David Lynch's films *Dune* and *Blue Velvet*. It is his assertion that through these two stories, the latter of which is Lynch's original creation, there is a focus on the exploration of Isiah Berlin's concept of positive liberty and its revolutionary role. Positive liberty understood a certain way can become the birthplace of totalitarianism in which freedom is seen as enabled through compliance to rules of 'the divine leader' (199). In *Dune* this persona is embodied by Paul Atreides and in *Blue Velvet* by Jeffrey. Both of them, in their own way, carry within them the potential for revolutionary action. They bring turmoil into a place where predictable events calmly unfold on the surface, whilst below it, powerful forces wreak havoc and they both do it as foretold by a prophecy or dream. With his analysis Kurelić separates himself from the stream of critics that see Lynch's message as a puritan one and, instead, labels him as an anti-conservative director who emphasizes the power of a revolutionary moment brought about by the willing Messiah that "will turn on the light in a hellhole" (213). Positive liberty is found in both films as a concept disruptive to the existing and agreed upon order, while the red bird present in both movies is its messenger, a sort of canary in the coal

mine. As a symbol of positive liberty, it is omnipresent as is the messianic potential of the main characters and the changes they are about to bring.

The motley assemblage of articles in "Violence, Art and Politics" presents us with a diverse set of approaches that span disciplines. Thus it is not a far reach to say that such a collection may vary in the degree in which its different sections succeed in appeasing the specific expectations of each reader. However, seen as a whole, the book offers something new in this publisher's repertoire and its cross-disciplinary character will satisfy those who don't mind the somewhat low level of cohesion between its parts. Pero Mrnarević's striking cover illustration is indicative of what awaits within. The Croatian motifs of the Alkar are purposefully drawn on top of each other and in places the motif overlap is so dense it colors the cover pitch black. Within the papers found in this book, its three main concepts and their sometimes loose and sometimes dense interaction is explored through a multitude of different lenses. These create an atmosphere filled with powerful moments of absolute clarity as well as those that open new questions, answers to which still lie in the puzzling dark, outside our grasp.

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