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Muškarac koji mrzi žene posle mene postat ćeš ti: A Queer Feminist Analysis of Turbofolk

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Introduction[1]

The specter of turbofolk has haunted the territory of the former Yugoslavia for three decades, terrifying some and delighting many. The genre, which emerged in Milošević's Serbia in the gloomy nineties, has become the dominant musical style and sometimes lifestyle in all (including the more western) countries of the former Yugoslavia. A glance at the charts, the views on YouTube, the attendance at "folk" clubs and the associated festivals is enough to establish beyond doubt that turbofolk is *en vogue*. Apart from its popularity, turbofolk has also generated great, constant, and sometimes tiring controversies about its suitability, quality, consequences, and influence. The regional, as well as the broader academic community, has not been uninvolved in such discussions, which attempt to decipher its popularity and connotations and contextualize it in the broader social, economic and political processes in Serbia and beyond. It should be noted that this academic discourse on turbofolk is still relatively rare, given the popularity and prevalence of the phenomenon it deals with. It is precisely because of its popularity, controversy and lack of academic treatment that turbofolk is the perfect subject for my analysis.

The aim of this paper is to reinterpret a relatively old phenomenon in a new light. The starting point and common thread of this essay is the antinomy between the accepted and established popular representation of turbofolk as regressive, primitive, and patriarchal and the popularity of the same genre among queer people (and especially gay men) in the region. For this reason, I will analyze turbofolk from the perspective of

1 *After me, you will become a man who hates women.*

queer feminism, paying particular attention to the representations of sexuality and gender dynamics in turbofolk, as well as the social engagement of some of turbofolk's biggest stars. This work is particularly interesting due to the current socio-political moment in Serbia, as it was written shortly after the Europride week in Belgrade. This manifestation triggered heated debates about LGBTQ*+ issues in Serbia, and the recent public conflict between Seka Aleksić and Ana Nikolić is particularly interesting for this paper. The two are among the best-known stars of turbofolk, and in this conflict both tried to take the place of the more authentic and long-standing ally of LGBTQ*+ people in Serbia, which clearly points to a reciprocal relationship between turbofolk and queer people.

In this paper, I will first present the historical development of the genre and its main characteristics. Then I will address some of the most common criticisms voiced about turbofolk in order to create space for a new perspective. In the main body of the paper, I will focus on applying queer feminist analysis to turbofolk itself. The analysis will be based on consultation of existing academic texts on turbofolk, analysis of the visual content, reference to other texts dealing with this topic, and analysis of the song lyrics themselves.

A Geneology of Turbofolk

The emergence of turbofolk in the 1990s was preceded by the slightly older tradition of newly composed folk music (NKFM) in Yugoslavia. Newly composed folk music was created in the 1960s and reached its peak during its hyper-production in the 1980s (Archer, 2012: 180). Its characteristics are the mixing of traditional folk music from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Šumadija with new, world music trends. This primarily refers to the fusion of the traditional sound of the accordion with the new sound of the electric guitar and synthesizer, and the copying of promotional and visual models from Western Europe (Baker, 2007). This kind of musical trend was not supported by official politics in Yugoslavia because it was considered banal, *kitsch* and potentially nationalist (Morton, 2012: 1:56-2:03). At the beginning of the 1990s, the sound of NKFM was upgraded with the then extremely popular sounds of techno, dance music, and hip hop, which created turbofolk in its full glory (Baker, 2007). The song *200 na sat* by Ivan Gavrilović,[2] in which the sounds of the accordion and the global techno hit of the time are combined, is considered the first turbofolk hit (Đurković, 2002: 217, according to Baker, 2007: 2). The name of the genre was first coined by the rock singer Rambo Amadeus, who used the term to name a song from his album *Oprem dobro* (Grujić, 2013).[3]

Turbofolk became widely popular through the television channels (Pink, Palma, Happy) of newly minted media moguls such as Željko Mitrović (Lekić, 2022: 12:39-21:05).[4] Precisely because of this presence on television in Milošević's Serbia, turbofolk was attributed the political function of anesthetizing and passivating Serbian citizens and as a type of escapism from discontent, war, bombing, and economic sanctions. In this period, turbofolk was also associated with the criminal milieu and various mafia clans that financed the development of this genre to satisfy their own cultural appetites (Morton, 2012: 2:03-2:22). These two,

2 *[Driving] 200 KM per Hour.*

3 *I Buckle Well [To Stick It Hard to You].*

4 *Heroes of Vile Times.*

very unpleasant, stigmas that initially characterized turbofolk were embodied in the wedding of the then-young star of turbofolk, and today the "Serbian mother", Svetlana Ražnatović "Ceca" and the gangster and war criminal (leader of the notorious paramilitary unit "Tigers") Željko Ražnatović "Arkan". The state television (RTS) broadcasted the ceremony, and the media described the event as a "fairytale", which it certainly was in the context of the re-traditionalized Serbia. Admittedly, it would be wrong to observe turbofolk exclusively in this period because it has transformed in the meantime, especially after the change of government in 2000. Ties with the criminal milieu have weakened (if not disappeared), and careers are created in legal musical production houses that resemble those of Western Europe and the United States. Music and visual production have received a new sound and look that are fully in line with global trends ,while at the same time managing to preserve the folk element of the genre that makes it specific and authentic. New performers have entered the scene, promoting different, more liberal ideas, of which Jelena Karleuša is certainly the most famous. She is often described as the antithesis of Ceca from the 1990s. These changes opened up space for the export of turbofolk to neighboring countries (primarily Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) after 2000, but also created conditions for more subversive and transgressive elements in the genre.

The importing of turbofolk into the Croatian market in the early 2000s caused a moral panic

The importing of turbofolk into the Croatian market in the early 2000s caused a moral panic, multiple controversies and accusations against those who were suspected of using elements of the genre. Until then, only four genres were "allowed" in Croatia: Central European pop music, pop-rock, Dalmatian, and Slavonian fun-folk music (Baker, 2007: 3). The spread of "folk" clubs and their perception as places of violence and riotous behavior of young people, who visited them the most, caused a moral panic in society, as evidenced by a whole series of newspaper articles dedicated to this phenomenon. The outrage also took on a cultural-historical level. Thus, it was said that Croatia, as the bulwark of Christendom (or *Antemurale Christianitatis*), fell under the influence of *poturice* (a pejorative term for converts to Islam during the Ottoman rule), Oriental soundscapes and bazaar mentality (Baker, 2007). Tonči Huljić, who replaced the tambourine with an accordion, was singled out as the main internal culprit for this folklorization of the domestic public. Truth be told, a part of the Croatian music scene that was influenced by Huljić (the band Magazin with their album *Mislim pozitivno!*, Jelena Rozga with her album *Moderna žena*, Severina, etc.) truly did adopt elements of turbofolk, but in a very half-hearted, uncertain way.[5] In this sense, unlike Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia cannot boast of its own turbofolk stars. In the meantime, the relationship between Croats and turbofolk has stabilized, i.e., the patterns of that relationship have been repeated so many times that they have become predictable. Young people adore turbofolk (as shown by the Croatian billboard charts) and spend their weekends in "folk" clubs, while older people are disgusted by this and sometimes, in the absence of real news, write a few articles.

5 *I Think Positively!*, *Modern Woman*.

An *Apologia* of Turbofolk

Before we immerse ourselves in analysis of more recent phenomena, it is important to first refer to existing critiques in order to create space for new contributions to the topic. Turbofolk is burdened and in some way contaminated by a series of criticisms leveled against it. Some of them are more objective and fairer, while some do not try to mask their disdain for the genre. This segment of the work is also important because some feminist analyses of turbofolk (e.g., the gendered nature of it) will begin to be explored.

The most frequent criticism comes from academic circles and concerns the political context (Milošević's regime) in which turbofolk was created. Turbofolk is accused of distracting Serbian citizens from real problems, promoting warrior culture and reproducing traditional values. However, the situation is not as clear as it seems. Namely, on the other hand, turbofolk can be seen as the only channel of globalization and entry of the outside world into the rather isolated Serbia. Although reworked for the tastes of the domestic audience, turbofolk still introduced new trends in music, popular culture, and music production to Serbia. A good example of this is found precisely in the sounds of techno that could be heard in the 1990s. Furthermore, to reduce turbofolk to an exclusively musical branch of the Milošević regime would be wrong considering the fact that turbofolk survived the regime change after the 5 October 2000 democratic upheaval. Not only did it survive, but it also experienced a renaissance after it. Turbofolk also became one of the most popular (if not the most popular) musical genres in countries such as Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina that were victims of Milošević's foreign policy. It is true that it is mainly consumed by the younger generations who did not experience the war (or do not remember it), but it is hard to imagine that even they would adore a genre strongly associated with Milošević to such an extent.

Another frequent criticism, which is more dominant in public discourse, is that of turbofolk as low-quality junk. This criticism is easily dismissed with the proverb that states that there is no accounting for taste, but it should be dealt with in more detail in this paper because of the gender implications that are immanent in it. The hierarchy of high and low culture, as Bourdieu tells us, has little to do with taste and a lot to do with class. Culture is also marked by gender as much as it is marked by class. It is no coincidence that traditionally understood masculine attributes (creativity, innovation and uniqueness, active consumption, catharsis) are assigned to high, i.e., legitimate culture, and feminine (excessive emotionality, passivity, superficiality, etc.) to low culture. This same dichotomy is reproduced within the field of popular culture, where some genres (for example rock) are privileged as legitimate precisely because of masculine attributes, and some (pop, turbofolk, etc.) are viewed as worthless. It is in this context especially interesting that the characterization of turbofolk as tacky junk stems from the rock circles in Belgrade (Dimitrijević, 2009). From a feminist perspective, it is hard not to be skeptical of the predominantly male rock groups that attacked the predominantly female turbofolk singers at a time when the latter started becoming more successful and popular than them. All the more so since turbofolk is one of the rare areas of Serbian society in which women's voices can be heard (unlike, for example, politics), and which are also addressed mainly to women (Dimitrijević, 2009).

The next criticism concerns the characterization of turbofolk as Oriental soundscape, a legacy of the Ottoman conquests, primitive and barbaric. This kind of discourse was already mentioned in the context of turbofolk in Croatia, but it is interesting how it also appears in Serbia (mainly in relation to Islam). It is hard to escape the impression that this mindset

comes from auto-colonialism and Balkanism. Balkanism is a term coined by the Bulgarian author Maria Todorova in her book *Imagining the Balkans*. It refers to the discourse within which the Balkans are seen as an area of a lower level of civilization than Western Europe. Todorova got her inspiration for the concept from the works on orientalism by Edward Said. According to the author, the Orient is an external Other for the West, and the Balkans is an internal Other that refuses to be "civilized" according to Western standards (Todorova, 1997). The implicit goal of this approach to turbofolk is to abandon authentic elements of popular culture in favor of globalized, mostly American and British, music production. This is problematic on several levels. First of all, it remains unclear in what way American pop music is qualitatively better (or more civilized) than turbofolk. Are there any (significant) differences between Seka Aleksić's "Da sam muško"[6] and Beyonce's "If I Were a Boy"? Does Lepa Brena's "Robinja"[7] differ from Britney's "I'm a Slave 4 U"? Furthermore, when we discuss such 'civilizing' (and in fact the loss of authentic elements of contemporary pop music), we need to see what else is being lost. To begin with, the genre is lost, which in its broad oeuvre also contains songs with social themes, such as Coby's "Biseri iz blata"[8] or "Ausländer"[9] by Gazda Paja and THCF. Although these songs are not classic turbofolk numbers, they belong to the genre of trap folk. The overlap between audiences of the two genres is large, so they are relevant to the topic.

Turbofolk acts as a kind of social glue for the Balkan diaspora which helps transcend ethnic divisions

Coby's verses are strong in depicting poverty as a consequence of war's destruction, neo-liberal policies and the position of the Balkans as a (semi)peripheral region in global capitalism. The experience of being a guest worker in West and North Europe, well known to a large number of people from the Balkans, is uniquely captured in the song "Ausländer".

Such social issues, treated in a way specific to the Balkans, cannot be found in foreign music. It is not unimportant to mention the value that turbofolk has for the Balkan diaspora as a kind of social glue with the help of which they overcome ethnic divisions abroad (but also in the Balkans itself), maintain a sense of belonging and stay connected apart of themselves and their identities. This is a great example of how the connotations of the genre transformed from national(ist) to transnational by exploring the class dimensions of a common experience. Having explored the importance of turbofolk to the region (and beyond), I am left to explore the 'mysterious' importance of turbofolk to queer people and its subversive potential.

6 *If I Were Male.*

7 *Female Slave.*

8 *Pearls From Mud.*

9 *Foreigner.*

Queer and Feminist Aspects of Turbofolk

Some spectators were surprised when, at the Zagreb Pride Parade afterparty, the notes of some of the most famous turbofolk hits were played in a lip sync performance by the drag queen Entity. For those more familiar with the musical and aesthetic tastes of parts of the regional LGBTQ*+ community, this connection between queer culture and turbofolk was not news. Since its transformation after 2000, turbofolk has become one of the more attractive cultural milieus for queer people and especially for gay men. There are many reasons for this convergence and are just some of the elements I will analyze: the prevalence of strong, glamorous and independent women among turbofolk performers, the symbolism clearly intended for queer people, the camp value of the genre, and the social engagement of some of the main actors in the turbofolk scene.

Let us start with the most obvious queer element of turbofolk – its influential stars who unequivocally, explicitly and unapologetically represent the positions of LGBTQ*+ people in public. The most famous of them is certainly Jelena Karleuša, who was also the God-mother of Belgrade Pride Parade in 2017. Karleuša is known, among other things, for the influential public letter she published after the violence at Belgrade Pride Parade in 2010, which resonated more than the reactions of progressive politicians. It is important to add that the letter also addresses violence against women, misogyny, and the glorification of war criminals in Serbia. After 2010, Karleuša became a relevant and regular interlocutor on socio-political shows on the topic of queer people's rights. Her music video for the song "Slatka mala"[10] features three drag queens, something rarely seen even in the West in 2008. Her performance of the same song in 2010 in a packed Belgrade arena was a very clear sign of support for queer people. The prelude consisted of a techno beat over which Karleuša repeated the word "Liberta" louder and louder, obviously alluding to the importance of sexual freedom, while the big screens showed Karleuša taking a rainbow flag out of the washing machine and waving it. After this segment, six dancers in sailor outfits entered the stage, each waving their own rainbow-colored flag to the beat of the drum. At the moment the actual song begins, Karleuša comes on stage and sits on a large cake while four muscular, scantily clad dancers dance around her, looking like average go-go dancers in gay clubs.

Karleuša is probably the biggest (but certainly not the only) gay icon to come out of turbofolk. Indira Radić has publicly acknowledged the community, and she also refers to it in some of her work. In the video for the song "Pije mi se",[11] a kiss between two people of the same sex is seen in a music video for the first time in Serbia, and she dedicated her song "Upaljač"[12] to queer people. The song presents, in an extremely interesting way, the parallelism and hidden duality that queer people feel in the heteronormative world and especially in their romantic relationships. Seka Aleksić (who wholeheartedly accepted the title of a gay icon and who was recently very vocal in siding with the community after homophobic attacks over Europride), Nataša Bekvalac, Milica Pavlović, Relja Popović, Ana Nikolić and, most recently, Ceca have all spoken out in favor of marriage equality. Of particular note is the recent popularity of turbofolk singer Electra Elite, who is a transgender sex worker. Turbofolk opened up a space for her to make both transgender people and sex workers and

10 *Sweet Baby Girl*.

11 *I Feel Like Drinking*.

12 *Lighter*.

their issues visible. All these (and many other) public figures use turbofolk as a stage from which they demand equality and tolerance and help to change the public consciousness.

Another important element are the people who are involved in the production of turbofolk and are not its performers, like those mentioned earlier. Here we should draw on the theoretical contribution of Alexander Doty, who raises the question of the relationship of queer people involved in the creation of the work (producers, directors, photographers, cinematographers, copywriters, stylists, make-up artists, etc.) and who thereby address the queer audience in a coded way (Doty, 2000, cited in Dimitrijević, 2009: 27). An excellent example of this is Dejan Milićević, a photographer and video director responsible for a whole series of video clips for turbofolk songs, who inscribes his queer experience into the works he creates.

Because of the specificity of queer people's aesthetics and experiences, these details are not legible to the average heterosexual and cisgender person, but queer people perceive these messages very clearly. A good example of this kind of coded address to her queer fans is Mia Borisavljević's video for the song "Gruva gruva".[13] In this video, four men walk, dance and pose almost completely naked, dressed only in their underpants. This is not ordinary male nudity but a distinctively gay aesthetic – camp (Eurovicious, 2014). Their artificial (almost comical) moustaches, shorts with the Serbian flag motif, *opanci* (traditional Serbian footwear) and the glittery *šajkača* (traditional Serbian headwear), are all camp and are all things that her gay fans want to see. I do not want to say that there is no possibility that straight women enjoy this video (they probably do) but the subordination of classic sex appeal to this glittery aesthetic is a conscious decision. The point is that the men in the video are not just wearing a sexualized version of the national costume (as is the case with the female dancers), but they look like they have just come from Eurovision. The video is all the more subversive because it subjects national symbols (the flag, the *opanci* and the *šajkača*) as well as the traditional virility of the men in the video to a glittering, camp reinterpretation. Mia herself insists that she is proud that some people call her a gay icon, and this video was clearly a gift to her queer fans.

The next important element that needs to be explored in this paper is the concept and perception of the turbofolk aesthetic itself. We often hear, especially in academic circles, that turbofolk is just *kitsch*, but in the eyes of the average queer person it is actually camp. Camp is a sensibility that emerges in queer circles, and its perception mostly stays in queer circles. Susan Sontag wrote *Notes on 'Camp'* while living in San Francisco, meeting extensively with queer people, and frequently visiting bars and clubs where drag queens perform. To better explain what camp is and what it has to do with turbofolk, I will use the thesis that Sontag posits as camp theory in her essay *Notes on 'Camp'*. Camp is a sensibility, and its essence is the love of the unnatural, the artificial and the excessive. Camp is also what is considered bad taste and *kitsch* from the perspective of legitimate/high art. Camp likes androgyny, and the negation of personal sexual characteristics. The best camp is always naïve, camp that is unaware that it is camp, and does not want to become camp (Sontag, 2018). Turbofolk certainly meets all of these criteria (and many others I have not mentioned). Turbofolk and queer people are connected on the level of aesthetics, on the level of sensibility, on the level of conscious decision to resist the dominant demands of supposed high culture.

13 *It Hits, It Hits. Gruvanje* can refer to very loud music, but also to sexual intercourse.

Camp connects turbofolk and drag art, and Jelena Karleuša has made the same connection very consciously and explicitly with the aforementioned video for the song "Slatka mala". In this sense, it can be used to (un)consciously parody gender norms and roles, and it also becomes a space for subverting the traditional concept of the gender binary. Karleuša herself, aware of her artificial, excessive and unnatural hyper-femininity, calls herself "the best trans chick" and similar expressions that would allude to her being transgender. Turbofolk thus becomes a training ground for subversive mockery of expected gender expressions par excellence. This phenomenon is closely related to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Gender identity is something that needs to be constantly renewed through certain practices, behaviors and performances (Butler, 1990). The subversive potential lies precisely in the fact that the performance of femininity on the bodies of turbofolk singers is juxtaposed with drag queens, whereby the supposed naturalness of gender identity recedes and loses its power. This is especially true when this femininity is viewed in relation to a traditional masculinity of which homophobia is an integral part. The deliberate coalition of turbofolk singers with queer people completely collapses this established dynamic.

During its beginnings in the 1990s, turbofolk served to reproduce patriarchal and traditional values

It has already been mentioned that turbofolk, in its beginnings in the 1990s, served to reproduce patriarchal and traditional values, and that its main tool for this was the female singer's body. A paradigmatic example of this is Ceca's music video for the song "Volim te",[14] in which she takes a completely passive role, and the focus is on different parts of her anatomy (Višnjić, 2009: 53-4). On the other hand, turbofolk in its transformation becomes a means of resistance. The new turbofolk is characterized by an emancipatory doctrine based on women's liberation, independence, economic independence and the right to one's own body (Višnjić, 2009). By using their own bodies as an artistic canvas in combination with the performed songs, the turbofolk singers become carriers of all these emancipatory and subversive values and potentials. The lyrics of the song determine the way the singer's body is to be read. Turbofolk songs are very similar to melodrama in their characteristics: they evoke a strong emotional response from the audience with the fable, they address emotional crises (failed love affairs, betrayal, tragedy), they have schematized characters (e.g., an unfaithful husband) and they use black and white characterizations (Dimitrijević, 2009). It should also be mentioned that both genres are gendered, i.e., they are considered "female" genres because of their preoccupation with feelings and "female" themes and because of the dominance of female performers and audiences. A particularly important similarity is the way melodrama thrusts problems of the private sphere (mainly those caused by class positions and relations) into the public sphere through the stage or the screen, making it an engaged art form. In the same way, turbofolk puts the image of the failed family, love and patriarchal relations into the public sphere with the help of the stage or screen (Dimitrijević, 2009: 31). Fatal and tragic love themes in turbofolk songs become an enumeration of their misery and the misery of traditional, patriarchal and heteronormative expectations. The singer takes the position of every woman and articulates and manifests the frustrations

14 *I Love You.*

that are the result of moral and social restrictions in patriarchy in the form of disappointments in love (Dimitrijević, 2009: 31). Unrealised romance as a theme in turbofolk becomes a medium of critique of the social relations that postulate it as an ideal and at the same time make it impossible. The frequent motif of the third person destroying the ideal of love is actually a code for the heteropatriarchal social order (Dimitrijević, 2009: 34).

Conclusion

Turbofolk as a space of queer subversion and resistance will initially seem like a crazy idea to many. I hope that this work can at least partially contribute to changing the discourse and perception of the genre. The point of this paper is not to glorify turbofolk or to present it as the ultimate progressive and revolutionary genre, but to highlight the need to create nuanced views in the discourse on turbofolk. The analysis presented should also be related to postfeminism and popular feminism in order to better understand the limits and scope of the subversive potential described. I will have to leave this comparative analysis to another paper.

By the end of this paper, it is clear that there is reason behind queer people's attraction to turbofolk. From this genre come some of the most vocal allies of queer people in the region (besides the Serbian artists I mentioned, I would also like to highlight Maya Berović, who was the Godmother of the first Pride parade in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Severina in the context of Croatia), who are louder than most progressive politicians in defending the LGBTQ*+ community. In this genre, they recognise a camp sensibility that has its roots precisely in queer culture. This genre serves as a training ground for subverting gender roles and parodying patriarchal expectations. It serves as the basis for a coded text that can be read almost exclusively by queer people and through which they communicate with each other. In short, it contains everything that is hard to find in most other places in the homo/bi/transphobic environment.

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