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REAL CRIMES AND SYMBOLIC MEMORY

1.

The famous Austrian writer, Thomas Bernhard has spent his entire career alternatively mocking and mourning Austria's Nazi legacy, which he, with his typical bluntness, once described as a pile of manure on the stage. In the plays and novels that Bernhard published during his last decade, he addressed even more ferociously the Austrians to disrupt the silence surrounding Austria's Nazi past. In his last novel, *Extinction* (1986) he dramatizes even more vividly that, what he previously defined as **herkunftscomplex** or a complex of descent, precisely how does one deal with "an unwanted inheritance"?

The speaker in this novel, Franz Josef Murau, has just received the news that his parents and brother have been killed in a car crash, leaving him the family estate. He feels nothing but resentment toward them and toward this estate, where his parents sheltered Nazis before and after the war. In his anger, he decides to write a book to be called "Extinction", whose purpose would be to "extinguish everything that Wolfsegg means to me, everything what Wolfsegg is, everything". But he also realizes that this cannot be done only in the literature but also literally, for which he does not have the courage. In spite of the fact that at the end of the novel he hands the estate to the Jewish community in Vienna, there is something pathetic in this individual gesture, because an act of charity alone cannot redeem Austria's pathology. The society never went under de-nazification, or emancipation through acknowledging the crimes.

2.

Although I do not share Bernhard's talent, or genius, I have easily identified with his frustration regarding the indifference of Austrian people to their negative legacy. For almost two decades I have been witnessing the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the wars and crimes that accompanied them, and finally the indifference with which people and government(s) of the republic of Serbia are trying to cope with, avoid and suppress the role Serbian Army, civilians and state officials had in it. Instead of confronting the crimes, and to punish the perpetrators, the state consciously and unconsciously works on a process of "active forgetting"(Nietzsche), creating a whole body of "involuntary memory". However, this involuntary memory, which Bergson and Benjamin interpreted as "memory through forgetfulness," is now emerging as a modest counterweight to a process of forgetting, which is constructed under a collective pressure.

In the best tradition of Nietzsche and Bergson, Benjamin situates virtually limitless field of experiential modalities between an event and its recollection. The split between conscious, voluntary memory and unconscious involuntary memory results from the split between individual and collective memory caused by secularization and individualization. Benjamin distinguishes between the products of "archival memory" or *erinnerung* (which denotes a fixed stock of singled out facts, an archive, where all past experiences have a fixed place); and "tradition", or *gedachtnis* (usually translated as "remembrance", which sees data flow together in a much less determined and controllable manner and which is presented as a continuous process within which memories can change place and form different connections). Benjamin sees tradition as a process, a constantly changing stream, into which new experiences are inserted.

My paper is thus focused on *remembrance*, or different symbolic modalities of remembering horrible events which those who mourn them did not participate personally, precisely how one non-governmental, anti-war organization -- the Women in Black, a Serbian branch of this feminist and anti-militarist international organization, remembers the execution of 8,372 Muslim civilians, in a Bosnian town, Srebrenica. This despicable crime was committed in ten days; men and boys of Muslim origin were systematically shot by Serbian soldiers between July 11 and 22, 1995 and then buried in various locations, some of which are still unknown. This is considered one of the worst crimes in the European history and what it makes even worse is that it happened in the midst of a globalized, fancy, developed, high-tech and mediatized Europe (by this I mean the use of satellite TV, internet and many other quick means of communication and transportation). Nonetheless, many days passed before the international community got full information about what happened, since there were no survivors, except women, girls and small children, who were deported much earlier. It is they who started to ask questions about their beloved fathers, sons, husbands, brothers and cousins, who stayed behind them in Srebrenica. Even if 15 years have passed, not all the bodies of all people missing have been found (in the mass grave there are about 4,000 people buried, and every year there is a ceremony of burying more bodies found and identified in the meantime); the main executor, general Ratko Mladic is still at large; and except the Memorial Park, there is no real monument raised for the victims.

Still, if it were not for infamous Ratko Mladic, who is the most wanted man in Europe, this crime would be completely forgotten. The only ones who mourn and commemorate the victims, aside from their families, are the Women in Black through their various performances, like, for example, their latest action "A Pair of Shoes, One Life" (July 11th 2010), in which they invited the citizen's of Belgrade to donate a pair of shoes, in order to collect 16,744 shoes to raise a symbolical monument in a form of a shoe-wall, which also recalled another action proposed by Bosnians themselves in Berlin, to build an eight meter high sign reading UN, made of shoes, entitled "The Shame Pillar".

According to Susan Sontag, to be a spectator of calamities taking place in another country, or a geographically distant place, is a quintessential modern experience. Awareness of the suffering that accumulates in a select number of wars happening elsewhere and then commemorating them through performances can be also a social construct. From the beginning of their existence, October 9, 1991, the Women in Black started this kind of nonviolent resistance, organizing about 700 peaceful actions on the streets of Serbia. Their first actions were conducted during Yugoslav wars (1991-1995, and then in 1998-1999, during the war in Kosovo and NATO bombardment of Serbia) and they continued to commemorate regularly, even after peace treaties, the important dates and victims not only of war crimes but also those who opposed Milosevic' regime for more than a decade: "Remembering and Marking important Dates in the History of the Non Violent Opposition to the Regime" in Serbia, is also one of their actions.

The Women in Black always protest in the open, on the streets and main city squares. Sometimes their actions include "Visits to Difficult Places or Visiting Places Where the Crimes Were Conducted in Our Name". They always wear black to symbolize their grief for all known and unknown victims of Yugoslav and all other wars. And they always stand in complete silence, explaining it: "We do not have words to express the tragedy that war provokes." In spite of the silence and non-violence, their protest is visible and has a strong impact on the passers by, which are never indifferent: either they are anguished, ashamed, irritated, or even mildly bemused. Sometimes people shout different insults at them and even try to attack them physically. They are always first

victims of any kind of riots and mass manifestations of ultra right wing activists and disappointed soccer fans. Thus all their actions are always conducted under strong police surveillance. This year, for example, an ultra right-wing organization cynically asked the citizens to come to their protest, "One Shoe, One Life," and take those exposed shoes for themselves, since there is a big economic crisis.

On the other hand, no matter how marginal their actions they had lead to some important decisions. On January 15th of this year, the European Parliament in Strasburg adopted a resolution, which officially proclaimed July 11th as a Day of Commemoration of the Srebrenica's Massacre Victims. The perseverance and determination of the Women in Black in enacting these performances of remembering recall Kierkegaard's notion of repetition. For Kierkegaard, repetition is not the simple reproduction of the past, but rather a mean of recollection into the future. Repetition is a way of interacting with memory, an act of remembering, or of re-remembering, with an eye for the future. As Slavoj Žižek puts it, this process involves a "repetitive movement of repeating the beginning again and again" through a process of future-oriented recollection that is fundamentally rooted in the galvanizing memory of the past history which becomes intrinsic to the present.

Daniel Cohn Bendit once said regarding the arrest of Bader-Meinhorf group in the 70s, that terrorism in Germany derived from the atmosphere of the 50's and the silence of that time about the war. Young Germans wanted to now what it had been like, and their parents said, why open old wounds? Only in 1963, at the trial in Frankfurt of the Auschwitz war criminals, did people begin to speak publicly about those crimes. Bader, Meinhorf, Esslin and others were saying, "We do not want to be silent like our parents." According to Cohn-Bendit this was a psychodrama of a kind, "a German psychodrama, in which both sides were reacting to Nazism."

3.

When I started this paper I wanted to write about the affective memories and intangible monuments created by the Women in Black for the victims of the Srebrenica genocide, but it also led me to the female side of the war that could be seen in many symbolic actions taken by many women through history, starting from Penelope and Antigone to George Steiner's *Antigonas*. It is as if women's role has been always to mourn, remember and recall, to create archives and commemorate. The female side of the war could be also found in the words of Simone Weill, who claimed that war and violence could turn anybody subjected to them into a *thing*, including women. ("The Iliad, or the Poem of Force", 1940). In 1938 Virginia Woolf published *Three Guineas*, her not-so-popular reflection on the roots of war, being aware of the advancing fascist insurrection in Spain, in a form of a belated replay to a letter of a lawyer friend, who asked her, "How in your opinion are we to prevent the war?" Actually, what she answered was that a dialogue between the two of them was impossible, albeit they belonged to the same educated class: the lawyer was a man, and she a woman. Woolf pointed out to an old dichotomy since the times of *The Iliad* that the war is a "man's game" and if the killing machine would have a gender it would be male. What the Women in Black are saying, is "We go out to the street, and with the presence of our bodies we express disobedience to all those who, either with arms or words, provoke war, hatred and violence." And their main slogan is: "Always disobedient to patriarchy, war, nationalism and militarism".

In spite of the large international network, the Women in Black are extremely marginalized group of 10,000 women around the world, without a real political impact on decision makers. All what is left to them is the language. Now I am coming back to the beginning of my presentation and Thomas Bernhard's Franz Josef Murau, who through

the words wants to destroy his material heritage, a Nazi shelter. But it is only through the words that he can condemn Nazi's atrocities because he has no any other kind of power, except the language. It is through the language he finds out about his family's accident and it is only through the language that he learned about Nazi's atrocities. In spite of the fact that he has not a first hand memory of all this he wants to destroy it.

In the contrast to a written account, which, depending on a complexity of thought, reference, and vocabulary, is pitched at a larger or smaller readership, the performances of the Women in Black are conducted without words, except the banners they carry and which contain simple messages potentially destined to all who are viewing them at the moment. The point of making these performances is to ensure that the crimes they commemorate will remain imprinted in people's consciousness. This is called remembering, but it is in fact a good deal more than that. Usually, the memory of war, however, like all memories, is mostly local. But for a war crime to break out of its immediate constituency and become a subject of international attention, it must be regarded as something of an exception, and represent more than the clashing interests of the belligerents themselves. During the war in Bosnia, all the eyes were turned to Sarajevo, meanwhile far crueler ethnic cleansing was committed in Srebrenica and its vicinities unbeknownst to the rest of the world.

No matter how intangible, there are innumerable opportunities to make use of the medium of performance in order to turn people's attention to other people's pain and suffering. I have already mentioned that performances of mourning may give rise to opposing responses, such as anguish, empathy, hatred, new actions and counter actions, or simply awareness. In spite of the fact that non-stop imagery (television, streaming video, movies) is our surround, when it comes to remembering; a performance may have a deeper impact. Thus, one cannot not to ask, what does it mean to protest suffering, as distinct from acknowledging it? The Women in Black are enacting our sense of the immediate past, because people present at their performances still remember very well what happened. Even if the passers-by would be clueless, they would understand that some kind of mourning is at stake. However, there is another danger, since their performances are considered "remembrances", that in a long run they could become "tradition". Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or withers. The question is thus what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated? If one feels that there is nothing "we" can do and neither do they, then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic. But it is the indifference that makes me sort of angry. The indifference that dulls any kind of feeling. Apathy, moral or emotional anesthesia is what prevails over a sympathy, which reflects our innocence but also impotence. All his life, Primo Levy struggled to keep the memory of Auschwitz alive aiming against the rising indifference. Zygmunt Bauman also pointed out at the meaning and danger of this moral indifference, which became particularly acute in our modern society, which is technologically efficient, rationalized and very ironic. Around the same time of the Srebrenica genocide, Derrida started his writings on memory and mourning, describing memory as an impossible mourning or mourning in default. Memory can never rescue the past through the reflexivity since there is no past in itself to be rescued. For Derrida, there is no past independent of the present, as there is no present independent of the past. Memory entails irony in its representation of the past, which for Derrida meant tolerance rather than insolence.

Paper presented at the Affective Archives Conference,
Performance studies international\ 01 #Italy,
Vercelli, Torino, 11\13 November 2011