Writing the Yugoslav Wars

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Introduction

I.

“The city seemed to me – and I described it so in the book – like a post-modern work, an object of art, a photograph or piece of cloth.” What is surprising about this sentence is that it describes a city under siege – broken, razed, and ruined – as possessing the mask of artistic creation. In Semezdin Mehmedinović’s *Sarajevo blues*, a volume of war writing that is at its core a work of testimony of survival during the modern-day siege of Sarajevo, there is a strong concern with the idea of the art of destruction. This collection expresses a conscious conflict between the pursuit of truthfulness as an ethical matter and the pursuit of an aestheticized representation of a besieged city. The ambiguity and tension exposed by the demands of the witness genre in the hands of an author with a propensity for figurative language point towards a fruitful line of analysis: how does war, either despite or because of its tragedy, become literary?

Beginning in 1991, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was torn apart by a series of violent conflicts. The long years of war resulted in many records of the tragic events produced by diverse observers and participants, but none are as discordant as the prose and poetry by literary authors who, in critiquing the war as a political and ideological cataclysm, also approached the event as an aesthetically constructive force. War literature in general confirms the radical power of violence to harness the human imagination and to enable artistic creation when so much of social, physical, and psychological existence is being destroyed. On the whole, war writing thrives on the contradiction that war is an event demanding trenchant assessment *and* an opportunity to suspend (or re-evaluate) commonly shared artistic values. In subsequent chapters,
I focus on the following query: what does the production of literature during war communicate about the values presumed to reside in art and aesthetics? To put it more directly: working with the assumption that violence is correlated to aesthetic transformation insofar as it shatters the known world and ways of perceiving it, what challenges are presented to literary forms of expression in the case of Yugoslavia’s dissolution? The assumption that historical rupture and social crisis beget formal innovation is a commonly accepted view, frequently foregrounded by scholars of war literature, and theorized most thoroughly in trauma discourses. The literary and artistic debates surrounding the two world wars – the two most devastating and widespread modern conflicts – exemplify this strongly:

In the early twentieth century, art responded to a great war so shattering that it required new forms of expression and engendered theoretical and institutional controversies over the priorities of aesthetics and pity. But when combat targeted civilians in World War II and regimes murdered entire populations of cities and communities, art – like the world itself – stood aghast. Bafflement over how to speak this magnitude of manmade violence was overtaken by bafflement over if one can speak, or should speak, the unspeakable at all. The artistic challenges posed by World War II were recognized as foundational ethical challenges to the functions and prerogatives of art itself.²

The implicit statement is that new aesthetic forms are coeval with new wars. But worth noting here is Margot Norris’s insight (given fuller articulation in her book) that the structure of each particular war – its technological prowess, its organization, its rationality – generates problems of form in the subsequent human articulation of its ethical and social repercussions. In the twentieth century, the magnitude of mass death demanded revised philosophical and aesthetic systems. In the later decades of the last century, one distinct quality that characterized the experience and awareness of distant wars was the immediately mediated knowledge of them. It is not the novelty of the mediation that matters here, but rather its processes, framing, and formatting. I frequently return to some of the implications that this accelerated media landscape has for the literary text.

Literary matters – whether of crisis or evolution – were just as central to writers experiencing the violent, tragic dissolution of Yugoslavia as were matters of testifying to the experience of war. This book is an investigation into how aesthetic and ethical factors – and the interdependence
between them – are crystallized by the tension between creativity and severity of war in the literary writings of three authors from the former Yugoslavia. The study considers questions of the amorality (or immorality) of producing art in a war zone, the consequences of aestheticizing horror or ruin, the banality of political aesthetics, the gross misappropriations of historical themes, and the solipsism of intellectual engagement. The authors discussed in this study – Semezdin Mehmedinović, Dubravka Ugrešić, and David Albahari – are all critical of the mechanisms of warfare, the economies it supports, and the ideological manipulations it enables. Their aesthetic challenge lies in confronting the war through the dimension of physical devastation and human casualties and in grappling with the symbolic logic – the suspension and deligitmization of pre-war values, customs, and behaviours – that maintains the military mechanism. The parenthesis of war was concomitantly a process (and the initiation) of nation-building that in large part involved discontinuity with the ideological values of communism and a discrediting of the very same. Yet the break between socialist Yugoslavia and its successor ethnorangeal states was by no means a clean, surgical cut. The early 1990s proved to be, above all, profoundly confusing in the grafting of communist legacies, styles of governance, and political structures onto the ostensibly democratic sovereign nations.

While examining these issues, this study reinstates the importance of literary form, style, and rhetoric in war literature – structures that are often sidelined by the ethical urgency of addressing and listening to a text’s social content, an urgency for the real that values literary expression that is factual, informative, and inflected by historical verisimilitude. Without diminishing the contributions of literary genres of witness, and without denying that some of the texts in this study function as such, the subsequent chapters consider how three writers from the former Yugoslavia – all of whom faced a metastasizing conflict and an entrenched collective crisis – end up discussing poetics, systems of representation, and technical-formal approaches. Their ruminations are by no means complacent or solipsistic exercises, relevant only to dynamics operating exclusively within literature. Rather, I read their reassessment of literary language, forms, and aesthetics as answering to the demands of social problems – a reading that is inspired by the ideas of literary creation as articulated by the Serbian-Jewish writer Danilo Kiš (1935–89). Literary form, writes Kiš, is

a discovery not just of literature as such but also a discovery of reality: reality is equally as unknown, equally a secret, as the literary form with which we
Kiš argues that writers give a frame and structure to reality rather than mimetically reproducing an “objective” external world. The act of creation – the engagement with form – raises its own theoretical questions about what constitutes reality and social conflict. Thus a contextual reading of literature – where an external, agreed-upon history sheds light on the text – is reductive because it leaves the representation of social reality unexamined. Kiš suggests that in the pursuit of a resolution to an aesthetic problem, the text processes other conflicts – whether ideological, social, or historic. Equally, I would add, these broader conflicts subsequently raise aesthetic concerns across different levels of the text, a relay that is then repeated. This book traces precisely these interactions between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic in Mehmedinović, Ugrešić, and Albahari’s prose and poetry. I focus on their distinct interpretations and images of social reality that present the war as a mediator between the divisive particularist logic of essentialized nationalisms and the globalist enterprises of late capitalism. Within this discussion, the study outlines possible ways of situating these literary responses to a national conflict within the international reverberations of postmodernism.

This brings us to something of an impasse between the demands of history and the dominant aesthetic paradigm of postmodernism. The wars in Yugoslavia reinstated the “real” through the destruction of bodies and places – but also injuring, maiming, exploiting of the very same. In Sarajevo blues, Mehmedinović writes about the obsession with materiality of the city and people’s bodies: the physical is an index of the real during the siege as much as the testimony of the survivor. Theoretically and academically speaking, the past few decades have also been characterized by a rise in the “aggressive desire for the real” in artistic practices, correlated to the rise in theoretical exegeses of trauma. Postmodernism, on the other hand, is marked by self-reflexive, pluralistic, hybrid aesthetic playfulness and – this is especially true of late socialist Yugoslav fiction – by its non-referential function. Thus, against this new horizon of war, writers with a poetic sensibility characterized by simulation and self-reflexivity have to heed the pressing matter of the “real,” in its various manifestations, and the politics and ethics with which they are entangled.
My study is in dialogue with some of the main arguments put forward by Michael Rothberg in *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (2000). Rothberg’s investigation covers non-contemporaneous theoretical and creative works that, he argues, demonstrate “the persistence of the question of realism ... as one of the central problematics forced back into view” after the Holocaust. Realism, he contends, is a particularly thorny dimension in the post-war period because of the rise of post-structuralist theories and their discrediting of mimetic representation. “Traumatic realism” is the term he proposes for the aesthetic practice of texts that challenge “the narrative form of realism as well as its conventional indexical function.” The focus of my study is less on identifying a literary-poetic paradigm of this kind. Rather, where our studies come into encounter is over the idea, as put forward by Rothberg, that “the analysis of literary, philosophical, and artistic responses to the Holocaust sheds new light on many familiar debates of the recent ‘theory wars’ about the status of postmodernism and the political implications of poststructuralist theories.” My study examines how this reckoning with aesthetic postmodernism occurs against a conflict taking place on the ruins of Yugoslav late socialism – a social, political, and economic system of particular references and histories.

When Rothberg writes of the post-war period and its “suspicion of questions of reference and a flight from the links between discourse and the materiality of history,” this claim has an entirely different resonance in the post–Second World War Yugoslav context. How and why those non-referential characteristics played out in the sphere of cultural and intellectual discourse in Yugoslavia has more to do with a prohibitive public sphere and a conservative, dogmatic model of literature than with a wholesale acceptance of post-structuralism. Furthermore, even though postmodernism is a theory of the global with international dissemination, it emerges from a specific centre of production, and its integration into a “peripheral” European, socialist space requires some explanation. As Rafael Peréz-Torres writes, “the postmodern valuation of difference – informed by poststructuralist thought – must come under scrutiny by ‘minority’ discourses.” The identity of postmodern poetics across the Yugoslav republics is shaped by distinct political, historical, and social relations that are not duplicates of Western capitalist democracies.

Another qualification about the relationship between the local and global must be addressed. In Rothberg’s study, “the postmodern engagement with the demands of Holocaust representation ... focuses on a recognition of the power of the image and the commodity.”
Television, for Rothberg, is “the medium most indicative of postmodernity” in its capacity to popularize knowledge, in production of copies of the real, and in its compression of spatio-temporal dimensions that allow a relativization of worlds. What is interesting about the break-up of Yugoslavia is that a local conflict was globally present because of technologies of mass communication. Yet these very same mediums often wrongly framed the conflicts as a civil war of “ethnic hatreds.” The perception of the region as populated by irrational, bloodthirsty peoples was part of the centuries-long problem of othering the Balkans in historical and cultural representation. The local is permitted to circulate globally but only within a very specific narrative that says more about the demands of Western political power – and the colonialism of representation – than it does about the conflict.

Another aspect of this tale is the role played by the silent, nameless victim – the counterpart to the image of the warmongering ethnic group (who are, in most cases, the Serbs). The figure of the victim, who is often portrayed as passive, female, or vulnerable, is the subject not just of media representation but of humanitarian aid discourses. Silent victimhood is constructed by using images of the body in pain as the index of the “real” with its markers of suffering and wounding. The medium instrumentalizes the local population without even letting them speak, thereby discounting or obscuring their political or social agency.

Importantly, however, the first order witness (and survivor) who writes about the war is also, in my study, a postmodernist. The postmodern aesthetic dimension is the present during the Yugoslav wars and not the mode of postmemory. This contrasts with Rothberg’s mapping of traumatic realist texts in which the postmodernist overwhelmingly tends to be the one who “attempts to negotiate between the demands of memory and the omnipresence of mediation and commodification.” Conversely, in witnessing and narrating the wars in Bosnia and Croatia, testimony happens under the sign of the postmodern and the sign of modern mass communications, complicating the relationship with the real event as the referent is often obscured by its almost immediate media simulations.

II.

The appearance of postmodern artistic practices in Yugoslavia was coterminous with late socialism – a rather complex and contradictory period of the country’s existence that was also, at times, its most depressing.
Parallel to declining material and social conditions, the 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of what is now referred to as populist literature whose aesthetic logic was easily transposed onto the national-ideological paradigm of the 1990s. Yet it was also a time when artistic manifestations of the postmodern became more riotous and extensive, impacting all mediums of cultural production even as Yugoslavia was hurtling towards its demise.

What are the particular features of this condition referred to as late socialism? In a poetry collection titled *Emigrant* (published in 1990), Mehmedinović writes: “No one knew what anyone was doing / which is usually the case/in a country of real-socialism. / Except, maybe, for that smuggler / With a golden watch on the bridge.” A description of endemic nothingness, of lives undirected and only purposed in between the lines of the law, somewhere beyond the pale of institutionalized socialism, the resigned tone of this poem matches the characterization of late socialism by Aleš Erjavec as an “ideological, political, and social vacuity of the ruling utopian doctrine … [that] held in its grasp the whole of the social field.” A key component of this vacuity, notes Miško Šuvaković, is that “the sign from the epoch of Realsozialismus, ‘actually existing socialism,’ has declined into a signified that has disappeared and a signifier that continues to exist as an institutional order, a historical trace, and a mimesis of a mimesis of a lost social phantasm.” That is to say, while the official language of utopia, of an equal and progressive society, was maintained institutionally and publicly, the forms of everyday experience – such as material conditions and social hierarchies – did not reflect the stated aims of the socialist project.

Social disenchantment and disaffection had been articulated as public dissent long before the Yugoslav union officially collapsed so destructively and spectacularly in the 1990s. That was the external, visible threshold of systemic failure that had been unspooling for decades. Short-lived protests and politicized cultural movements in the years of Yugoslav socialism had revealed the transformation of Tito’s revolutionary project into a stagnant bureaucracy. The iconic year for observing the root of the revolt, for a number of observers and critics, is 1968, when student protests in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Sarajevo dovetailed with their international counterparts – though how scholars interpret this period (it also saw the suppression of the Prague Spring) is rather different and dependent on political inclinations and sympathies. The rupture in the social landscape engendered by the student uprisings – that, broadly speaking, criticized from a Marxist position, the class bifurcations within
what should have been a classless society—pointed at structural inequalities and hierarchies that had become entrenched in Yugoslav real socialism.\textsuperscript{24} From that point on, multiple disappointments gathered pace over the years: the Communist Party’s staunch measures of repression that paralysed the student protests; immobilization of experimental and critical cultural production (ending the activities of Yugoslav “black wave” filmmakers); punishment of nationalist intellectuals affiliated with the Croatian Spring in 1971 (demotions, expulsions from the Communist Party); media censorship; and fiscal corruption that tainted the operations of large enterprises.\textsuperscript{25} The party’s repressive measures targeted both those with liberal and nationalist standpoints—both sides were voices of dissent. By the 1980s, the last decade of Tito’s Yugoslavia, “[t]he monolith of socialist ideologies fragmented on a daily basis,” writes Bosnian literary critic Enver Kazaz, adding that “the communal horizon was dominated by depression, melancholy, and decadence of the social system of values.”\textsuperscript{26} And so when Mehmedinović writes of a “poor poet” sleeping “in the fetal position” while “wrapped up in the national flag,” this image of a nascent birth (of the nation) is heavily ironic, written as it was in August 1989, the waning year of Yugoslavia—knowledge that transforms the flag into a shroud.\textsuperscript{27}

It is striking that in such a depressed climate, the dominant strain of postmodernism to gain ground was an aestheticized or ludic kind, manifest in metatextual, non-referential texts that had little connection with social discourses and commentary. Given the urgency of the social and historical circumstances of the 1990s, these poetic strategies and tendencies are predictably disrupted, ceding way to a literature that was more ethically oriented. What interests me about this moment is how ambiguities about postmodern textual practices themselves are thrown into relief as a result of the war order. Principal features of postmodern art, it turned out, could be linked to the methods by which political machinations were performed, by which war was waged, and by which it further promulgated itself (for instance, the ruse of simulacra and its power to insinuate truth). This is part and parcel of a broader problem: instrumentalization of culture by political and military factors that, at times, reveals culture’s own collusion with and perpetuation of discourses of power. I consider how postmodern poetics are not a route to be bypassed (in favour of other alternative stylistic avenues) but precisely the problem to be worked through, as compromised and as problematic as postmodern poetics might be.

The postmodern is a mode of representation of the local in global terms and not just a peripheral subset of artistic tendencies that are randomized
through cultural production. The experience of the war makes the shift to the postmodern as a social condition palpable − though this is not to say that the war is when the transfer occurred but more when it is foregrounded. My view dovetails with Erjavec’s proposition that “the socialist countries had actually entered the ‘hyperreal’ postmodern world” expressed through the over-ideologized social fabric of simulated ideals and values that bore no link to social and material experiences.28 Contrary to the essays in Erjavec’s edited volume Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition that zone in on the visual arts of “politicized postmodernism,” I explore a sample of practitioners of predominantly “uncritical postmodernism.”29 The spectre of the uncritical − uncharitably called by one scholar “self-absorbed literature” − is fascinating to study precisely because it does not have easy recourse to a grammar of critique to inhabit.30 Engagement through ethical poetics cannot be easily claimed by literary practices that had suppressed referential mechanisms, that had eschewed historical dimensions or depth, that had a delegitimized authorial (subject) status − all while propagating intertextual and citational models. Uncritical postmodernism does not position literature as entitled, in Dragan Bošković’s words, to “a redemptive power” that “solves the riddle of history” − all penned by an author who can “therapeutically prescribe adequate literary ideas, because the symptoms of our illness are self-evident.”31 Rather, at the meeting point of postmodern poetics and war, literature that relied on the ostensibly uncritical strategies does not assume the position of being the end result of critical and poetic thinking but problematizes itself anew. This is what I tease out in in the works of Mehmedinović, Albahari, and Ugrešić. Moreover, I also raise the possibility in the following chapter that the labels that circumscribe this type of cultural production (the playful, aesthetic, and apolitical) are produced in part by the academic reception of the postmodern − a discourse that did not meditate on how this literature landed ideologically.

III.

Though the wars in Yugoslavia confirm the end of the collective era constitutionally and systematically, late socialism is nonetheless present in the war writing. The texts I submit to scrutiny are zones where non-contemporaneous realities collide: the writers are immersed in treating, analysing, and absorbing the defunct signs of the (late) socialist period as much as they are attempting to interpret the war and to apply themselves
to the aesthetic challenge of the conflict. Importantly, war time does not displace the experience of socialism nor does it entirely supplant the authors’ concerns with the political utopia that is expiring right in front of them. There is something of a synchronous nature between the temporalities of late socialism, post-socialism, and wartime in the works under examination even though they are chronologically distinct.

In *Sarajevo blues*, a text I analyse in the second chapter, Mehmedinović writes of the many archival remnants of the socialist bureaucracy – undigested moments of political disappointment – that come to the surface in the debris of a destroyed city, a collision of contexts that is the source of some absurdity in the collection. By comparison, in Ugrešić’s essays the rhetorical gesture is more chiasmus than peristalsis of archival fragments. For her, political systems have the capacity to become inversions of one another and exist as outgrowths of past forms rather than embody newness and change. In Albahari’s post-socialist prose (novels and essays alike), there is a muted but deep sense of loss for a time that is utopian, forward looking, coherent in its outlook on the world: “The future is no longer what it used to be.” In a sense, this is a reading of socialist temporal organization after it disappears. Albahari’s established rhythms of family time – the prosaics of domestic ritual – expand so as to discover a relationship to the past and through this relationship access the well of historical and trans-generational trauma.

Very often these non-synchronous temporalities are present together, but they are not to be subsumed into one another. There are crucial differences between them: time of the political project and ideology versus time of suspension jostles with the time of the eternal present of military destruction. I do not wish to suggest that wartime is a non-politicized concept and outside of ideology, but I do suggest that it possesses a specific organization and scale (its actual formal principles are specific). Wartime, on the whole, tends towards the unending horizon. The duration of war is a distinct entity that cannot “turn to pre-war for self-definition as pre-war ... is too ineffably other,” writes Kate McLoughlin, with the consequence that conflict is rendered “an extended present.” Conventional means for measuring time in war are often irrelevant, whether they be the calendar of labour and rest or the academic year. Those artificial ends are exposed – why does it matter that a new year is beginning if life is still organized by the logic of military destruction? This notion of a continuous present, as I explore in the second chapter, conveys poignancy and melancholy given that what exists beyond this present is probable death.
moment that I call the amorphous historical present: there is an explicit lack of certainty and a lack of knowingness of ends in the literature I examine.

Important here is the conceit that these writers are of an era of certain global and aesthetic practices and united through it in diverse constellations that are not visible simply through content or even form. This approach helps me foreground the extension and development of aesthetic conversations and override the privileging of discontinuity and rupture (peace time vs wartime; socialism vs post-socialism). It accommodates porous boundaries in which one period bleeds into another, allowing my readings to focus on the interplay between late socialism and wartime. A tension is implicit in this interplay. On the one hand, responding to the challenge of representing violence, the authors register an immobilization of the mind in the face of stupefying and grotesque acts, the qualities of which are on (or beyond) the threshold of comprehension and inscription. On the other, the writers push back against this categorical response to violence – a response that is in close affinity with the effects of the sublime – because it suppresses the knowledge of the political event that preceded or structurally enabled the violence. To lose sight of this is to treat conflict and the violence as aberrations.

Overall, my study bucks the dominant trend of the post-war division of literary nationalisms in the post-Yugoslav context that has, in turn, led scholars to retrench behind new state borders for which there are theoretical, pedagogic, institutional, and political justifications. What we can often read about in popular and scholarly criticism are symptoms of the new, post-socialist national alignment in which literary history has become a contested terrain, rewritten in order to accommodate explicitly national (at times nationalist) agendas, and to give the new fledgling states cultural legitimacy. Approaches that prioritize political currents over and above scholarly measures of evaluation (e.g., literary analysis) have no doubt delayed a lucid assessment of literary production during the war.

Over the past two decades, the divisive political situation has also indirectly influenced attempts to establish a field of research of post-Yugoslav war literature or, more broadly, studies in culture and war. The classification of “war writing” has gained some currency, but only within Croatian and Bosnian literary conversations. Attempts by Croatian literary scholars to introduce the genre of “war writing” (ratno pismo) tend to perpetuate ethnic boundaries and promulgate singular visions of the war narrative, a step that can only end with an isolationist, monologic model devoid of polysemy. Yet while this cluster excludes on the basis of national and
cultural identity, it is inclusive in its embrace of all registers, such as high literature, serialized newspaper columns, war diaries, soldiers’ autobiographies, propaganda tracts, and non-fiction essays. In other words, this category suppresses function and affect, and flattens out distinctions between ideological perspectives. Thus this version of “war writing” is limited to an archival rather than an evaluative role, since it forecloses the possibility of understanding literary genealogies, influences, and typologies.

More noteworthy is the explanation and use put forward by Enver Kazaz. He positions “the phenomenon of war writing” of the 1990s as the continuation of a deeper literary history of Bosnian-Herzegovinian storytelling that has its roots in the Bosnian short story tradition of the early twentieth century. The practitioners of “war writing” during the disintegration of Yugoslavia produce material that, at its core, promulgates an anti-war stance: this literature is “ethically engaged, unambiguously oriented towards ... the frame of the victim who suffers or who has suffered the horror of war and war crimes.” This genre, however, can only exist within the parameters of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian literary genealogy since it foregrounds a very specific experience of the war that is direct and visceral. Indeed, this is reflected in Kazaz’s own definition of the poetics of “war writing” as the “poetics of testament.”

This concept has been taken up by Mirnes Sokolović, whose argument that the post-Yugoslav anti-war writing is a genre evolved out of the ethical demands of Danilo Kiš’s poetics is indebted to Kazaz’s work on the same theme. This version of anti-war writing is restrictive in its own way since it insists on the factional, testimonial, and autobiographical aspects of this genre to the exclusion of “pure poetry, [and] literature as a fictional and non-binding game.” While Sokolović does not define quite what he means by factional, it is possible to deduce that the qualities within its parameters are in opposition to aesthetic values. But if engaged, anti-war literature is one way to ensure the “deconstruction of the national-realist writer” – any writer who, in Sokolović’s article, participated in the “cruel national projects” of the 1990s – is this deconstruction only possible through the power of the factional? This critical approach forecloses on other literary strategies that do not come with the explicit treatment of the real. My position is that “reality” does not necessarily have to appear in a recognizable form in literature for that novel or poem to be about a relevant social event.

Yet these prevailing definitions of “war writing” are shot through with blindspots and exclusions, argues literary critic Nirman Moranjak-Bamburać, that then help reproduce the values of a dominant, but
mostly unconscious, masculinist discourse. This “quasi-natural masculine monopoly” of post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, she argues, defines and regulates social and gender practices within religious, national, and ethnic spheres.43 “War writing” can thus only be read, she adds, as the continuation of a literary history dominated by criteria that have been authorized by male critics.44 Ironically, however, “war writing” attempts to position itself as an alternative current, both politically and literarily. The genre, notes Moranjak-Bamburać, “vampirically” feeds on the premise of écriture féminin that it subsequently pushes into oblivion: it seeks to embody a marginal form of writing and to impersonate its values of deconstruction and decentring.45 Yet “war writing” cannot be seen as a form of difference since its existence is only enabled by unexamined and prevailing assumptions and norms.

By focusing on an overarching, supranational literary frame, this study does not favour one national literature over another; though, importantly, I try to avoid ahistoricizing the conditions of production, depoliticizing the implicit or explicit ideological convictions in the texts, and leaving unexamined the category of the postmodern itself. Yet I do open myself up to the critique that while I examine three writers from Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia this is to the exclusion of Slovenian, Macedonian, and Kosovar literature – a frequent problem in overviews of (post-)Yugoslav cultural production. The process of selection, as mentioned earlier, is fraught with duplicities that are both motivated (produced by political exigencies) and unintentional (each act of selection displaces other texts, authors, literary currents). Even if I were to avoid such omissions, no book could be definitely representative of the linguistic, national, ethnic, and cultural complexity of the war narrative in Yugoslavia. Ultimately, my criteria rest predominantly on how a text’s engagement with aesthetic issues is transformed into an ethical concern of representation, or of politics. I sought to include texts whose complexity towards issues of war and the culture of war exceeded the matter of the conflict itself and involved an examination of the literary-poetic dimension as it was responding to external circumstances (at times without direct reference to them).

IV.

Before delving into close literary reading of the texts in question, the first chapter lays out the significance of the postmodern for my project by contextualizing its appearances across discourses (theoretical and literary) within the former Yugoslavia. Specifically, I discuss the dominance of
ludic and apolitical postmodern strategies that prove, at first glance, ambivalent at best against a landscape of war. My intent here is not to chronicle the breadth of scholarly activity of the 1980s and early 1990s that contributed to the habituation of the postmodern. Rather, I scrutinize tendencies that are evident in the interpretation and dissemination of postmodern literature (in the region) and the consequences and aporias of these readings, which, I argue, overlap with the ambiguities raised by the literary works themselves. A case is made for the conceptual perceptiveness of prose and poetry ahead of the theoretical expositions.

The second chapter concerns the Sarajevo siege and Mehmedinović’s aesthetic of surfaces, which informs his wartime prose-and-poetry collection. I examine how the spectacle of warfare – from the ruins of destroyed buildings to pictures of bodily horror – becomes a source of creative pleasure and even inspiration for authors who transformed the destruction into verbal lyricism. I argue that this witness literature is primarily concerned with the ethical tensions faced by artists, for whom war represents both devastating trauma and artistic fulfilment. While military force was responsible for the widespread destruction of the city and its population, this force is the provenance of a fragile beauty in Mehmedinović’s collection. Such haunting and aesthetically pleasing scenes, as Mehmedinović is aware, actually suppress the trauma of loss. I read Sarajevo blues as an examination of the morality or amorality of art when faced with the value of human life in wartime.

The closing section of the chapter explores the concern with spectacle and aesthetics that is part of Mehmedinović’s broader obsession with visual modes of representation. The supremacy of sight is evident in the collection’s mimicry of a cinematic mise-en-scène. Yet a complication emerges for Mehmedinović as the Sarajevo siege grew into a global spectacle, visually documented by the international media in excruciating detail. In turn, the spectacle became commodified and therefore was transformed into a perversion of the plight it wished to communicate. I work through an anti-ocular critique put forward in Sarajevo blues by examining the limits of visual representation and its lack of credibility as a frame for knowledge of contemporary conflicts.

While the second chapter concentrates on vision and image, the third focuses on texts, speeches, and sloganeering – or more broadly, the language of popular politics that Ugrešić gathers under the category of kitsch. Examining her essay collection Kultura laži (Culture of Lies), I argue that the trope of kitsch, typically associated with the criteria of taste, can actually become part of a political strategy within the context
of war. For the author, state politics is a textual game based on the principles of “postmodern chaos in which all manner of citations are mixed” including citations from the museum of totalitarian regimes, citations from the broken Yugo-project, citations from the rubbish heap of fascism, citations from national history (which with each passing day become more ancient and celebrated), citations from the European dream … citations from the dusty ethno-museum.  

Politics, Ugrešić suggests, no longer has any substance or depth, no unifying ethics or ideals. Her essays work hard to convey the dismal ends of transposing aesthetic strategies to a political arena for the purposes of consolidating a nationalist ideology – even when the aesthetic in question is the debased aesthetic of kitsch. Why should the presence of aesthetics be so troubling in the political arena? Ugrešić claims that sentiment, passion, and illusion have no place in the system of political values because they sanitize a frightful power. Ugrešić’s *Culture of Lies* highlights the frequency of the phenomenon of aestheticized politics in Croatia during the early 1990s (with kitsch being her principal and most common example). In developing my argument, I trace the historical evolution of kitsch as a category of both mass consumerism and propaganda. In doing so, I draw on theories linking banality and political ideology that developed from studies on fascist and Nazi aesthetics and their socialist counterparts. I undertake an analysis of the very properties of kitsch that are crucial to its functioning, such as authenticity and synecdoche. I conclude that Ugrešić’s essays ultimately collapse the distinction between commodified and politicized kitsch. For her, this means that the possibility for irony in popular culture has been obliterated.

In the fourth chapter, I turn to the role of history in the works of Albahari, a self-confessed sceptic who “had developed a persistent denial of the meaning of historical writing and even history itself.” Yet his 1990s prose includes cryptic and oblique references to the war, couched in the conceptual register of disaster and chaos, rather than the historical specificity of ethnicities, politicians, and republics. These changes are accommodated not through a shift in Albahari’s poetics but a change in the temporal order. His prose no longer exhibits the constant present of daily routine but begins to layer other temporalities within the boundaries of the text. The bulk of the analysis is focused on two novels that are diametrically opposed to each other: *Snežni čovek* (*Snow Man*) and *Gec i Majer*
(Götz and Meyer). The first of these is a rather abstract narrative following a self-conscious narrator who has to face up to the fallacy of the postmodernist “end of history” thesis. By contrast, Götz and Meyer is a novel immersed in the archive of an episode of the Holocaust in Serbia. I focus on the radical differences between these two books in order to demonstrate the challenge to Albahari’s dehistoricized prose brought on by systemic upheaval and rupture.

The book closes with a consideration of the revived landscape of intellectual engagement during Bosnia’s years in the international spotlight and as the focus of charitable fundraising, crisis reporting, and public moral concern. While international writers used the mass media as a form of self-publicity that further propagated the newsworthiness of both themselves and the war, many public figures across the former Yugoslavia metamorphosed into apologists of nationalism and engineers of the conflict. Others became voices of opposition, dissent, criticism. This was certainly how much of Ugrešić’s career was framed in the decade after her departure from Croatia: her consecration in the international literary market came from her anti-nationalist, liberal, pro-European messages. A number of scholars – and Ugrešić herself – have subjected this circulation of her authorial persona to critique, foregrounding its cynical marketing strategies that bypass any actual reading of her work. The trajectories of Albahari and Mehmedinović are less public and less publicly touted as exemplary, but I foreground the ambivalences that are implicit in their work about the social, public role of a writer. This is particularly interesting in light of Albahari’s insistence on a model of writing in which speech begets speech without recourse to an originating voice (an author). In this final chapter, I am less interested in what they had to say politically than in how their ideas of authorship, together with reigning cultural myths of the author, reveal tensions and contradictions when read against the aesthetic-ethic engagement of their literary works. In developing my argument, I scrutinize their articulations of public engagement and the social role of the author as expressed within their literary works as well as in interviews, articles, and author’s notes.

This chapter also includes a discussion of how these writers responded to the ethical and moral obligations of the Western world as framed and justified by numerous intellectuals, from Susan Sontag and Bernard-Henri Lévy to Jean Baudrillard. As I do so, I draw on scholarship that has conceptualized intellectualist terms in recent decades, including Edward Said and Pierre Bourdieu. Yet the impression that this book ends with – the lasting impressions of the work of Mehmedinović, Ugrešić, and
Albahari – is the sense of being watched, the sense of being collectively maltreated or collectively perceived as victims. The discerning observations of the authors transform their work into a (literary) conversation with the global unseen, exceeding their local landscape of nationalist politics and internecine warfare.

As I was working on the first version of this manuscript in 2012, Bosnia observed the twentieth anniversary of the beginning of the war – an occasion of extensive official remembrance and much private reflection – against a background of profound disappointment with processes of transitional justice, neoliberal policies, endemic institutional corruption, economic stagnation and recession. It served as a reminder of my early obstacles in tackling the literary production of the Yugoslav wars of secession. In pragmatic terms, academic discourse did not offer a stream of past works with which my work could dovetail, particularly with regard to fiction (the cinema of the war years was much better served). But more important was the challenge and, admittedly, the intrigue of academically approaching a conflict – a civil war – still in the living memory of a significant part of the population. The signifiers of trauma and suffering episodically punctuate the veil placed over these post-transition countries. While the commemorations of 2012 did memorialize the events of the war – in the sense of marking the passage of time – later in the year, events at the International Crimes Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at The Hague underscored anew the vitality of the war’s afterlife. This book internalizes this precarious and unsettled moment: the temporal distance from the conflict and the inevitability of its ongoing hold on people’s lives. I write with the awareness that future anniversaries may produce new conversations and new optics that will survey this ruined landscape of war differently.